

'Firsthand' versus 'Secondhand' Perspectives of Harm

Emphasising Teens' Firsthand Perspectives of Online Sexual Content

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Articles

Introduction

This article examines interview data from 24 Australian families, exploring how teens express perceived harms associated with online Sexually Explicit Material (SEM). For many teens, an encounter with SEM occurs prior to their first partnered sexual experience, often before their first

kiss (Crabbe et al. 1; Power et al. 11; Woodley et al., *Teen Perspectives* 2). Of relevance was how teens expressed the potential harms of online SEM. Specifically, this article examines the difference between instances of teens expressing perceptions of SEM via the perspectives of others (secondhand perspectives) in contrast with instances of teens citing their own encounters with SEM (firsthand perspectives). Through thematic analysis, the authors argue that when making claims about teen experiences, firsthand perspectives should be emphasised where possible, given that secondhand perspectives often reflect media effects. *Media effects* refer to exacerbated fears in relation to the impact of media, often in the context that certain types of media are considered highly influential in shaping views and attitudes towards certain social and cultural phenomena (Tsaliki and Chronaki 402). As such, the authors aim to distinguish between teens' secondhand perceptions of potential harms – especially when observably informed by external influences – and their firsthand accounts of harm informed by their direct encounters with SEM. It is firsthand perspectives that the authors argue can lead to more effective policies. Further, the authors discuss how the use of loaded language during interviews can influence participant responses, particularly when collecting data on contentious or sensitive subjects such as SEM.

Perceptions of Harm

The potential risks associated with SEM are often described as *harmful*. Harm signifies content (or an experience) that is damaging, and often resulting in negative long-term consequences (Banko et al. 132; Livingstone et al. 14; Spišák 130). Public discourse frames online SEM, especially pornography, as inherently harmful to young people who are positioned as more vulnerable than adults (Spišák 130). In existing research, articles that identified pornography as particularly damaging specifically use the term *harmful* (Crabbe et al. 2; Hakkim et al. 111), whereas studies positioning pornography with more nuance – or even stating that pornography is undeservingly cited as a source of harm – position SEM as *not harmful*, or even *acceptable*, while commenting how these media are misrepresented by anti-pornography activists (Binnie and Reavey 178; Ley 208; Lišková 41; McKee 22). These varying positions on pornography illustrate how potentially contentious subjects can result in polarising views.

The extent of harm caused by pornography, however, is unclear (Lim et al. 661); to justify investing resources into policies that restrict pornography, evidence of potential harms must be demonstrated, which, in turn, requires defining them (Banko et al. 136; Binnie and Reavey 179; Dwyer 516). What constitutes media as harmful is often defined as shifts in an individual's attitudes, behaviours, or values away from what is deemed healthy and/or appropriate by a culture or society. However, growing perceptions that pornography promotes sexual aggression and rape acceptance are perpetuated without rigorously proven causal links (Ferguson 28; Fisher 6; Mestre-Bach 1090) – links that even teens interviewed in the research had mixed responses to. Indeed, youth voices are mostly absent from such debates, with adult policymakers and stakeholders often deciding what is best on young people's behalf (Third, 2). Recently, of 1,272 Australians aged 15–29 surveyed, 17% believed pornography was not harmful, with 65% of users identifying that pornography was “harmful for some people but not everyone”, with harm being particularly contingent on the nature of the pornography being consumed (i.e., if violent) and how frequently pornography was used (Lim et al. 664); however, how harm is defined from a teen-centred perspective is often missing from greater discourse.

Methodology

This article draws on qualitative data from an ARC-funded research project aimed at collecting teens' and parents' perceived impacts from under-18s consuming sexual content. Specifically, this research addressed questions concerning how teens construct meaning around their encounters with SEM, and how their understandings might be influenced by public discourse. Data were collected from 49 semi-structured interviews with 30 teens (aged 11–17) from 24 Western Australian families between 2021 and 2023; this age range was nominated to collect perspectives from teen participants soon after their initial encounters with SEM. Parents were also interviewed separately. Of the 30 teens, 19 returned for a second-round interview approximately one year later to allow for minor semi-longitudinal insights into how their perceptions may have shifted. Teen participants were asked what sexual content meant to them, which resulted in a range of media, including: sexually explicit imagery and videos, sex scenes in movies, sexualised imagery in advertising, or dick pics and nudes; the term *nudes* is commonly used by teens to denote naked images taken and shared via digital devices, otherwise known as a form of sexting (Albury 713; Woodley et al., *Teen Perspectives* 1).

Ethics approval for the research with teens was given on the condition that parental permission was obtained first; parents first consented to be interviewed themselves, then gave consent for their child, before that child consented to their own interview. As such, researchers acknowledge the power dynamics present in adult-youth research and made efforts to create a safe environment for participants. Teens were interviewed in a space of their choosing (within the family home) and were advised they could withdraw from the interview at any time without needing to provide a reason. Given that encounters with SEM are a potentially sensitive topic that may cause discomfort, efforts were made to ensure participants felt comfortable in the discussion: confidentiality was assured, and teens were permitted to pass on any questions. As the age range of participants varied from 11–17, age-appropriate and respectful language was used that acknowledged the agency and insights of participants of different stages of development. Interviewers also adjusted their language and approach in response to differences in teens' socio-cultural positionalities. These adjustments often occurred at the beginning of interviews as teens were asked informally about hobbies or interests to build rapport.

Data from interviews were recorded, transcribed, and de-identified prior to coding via NVivo software. Thematic analysis was used to identify and explore key groupings of concepts; of relevance to this article, perceptions of harm were coded in instances where teens expressed negative consequences associated with pornography, ranging from feelings of discomfort to concerns about compulsive use. Research was conducted via a social constructionist framework that acknowledges there is no objective truth and that multiple interpretations of reality are equally legitimate as shaped by social and cultural contexts (Burr 6; White para 1); as such, teens' truths about their realities are valued.

Results

Generally, there was an observable delineation between teens expressing perspectives directly informed by external influences (or second-hand perspectives) and teens expressing perspectives informed by their own encounters with SEM (or first-hand perspectives). Secondhand perspectives were observable in four, often intersecting instances: (1) teens directly citing external influences – often parents and teachers, and, to a lesser extent, social media; (2) teens utilising formalised concepts or terminology that contrasted with their age-appropriate vernacular, and/or were unlikely to be intuited by teens without intervention; (3) teens expressing they had encountered pornography and conceded potential harms of such content,

while also asserting that they had not experienced such harms and/or did not feel that such harms were likely; (4) teens expressing potential harms while reporting they were yet to encounter pornography. Whether teens were honest or not about encountering pornography, instance four often occurred in conjunction with one of the previous three. Alternatively, firsthand perspectives were observable when teens expressed harms through age-appropriate vernacular, but more importantly, when in direct reference to their own encounters with SEM.

Regarding secondhand perspectives, (1) teens directly citing adults is evident when statements are prefaced with direct phrasing like: "basically what I was told by my parents or what I got from my parents having that sort of conversations with me would be ..." (Levi, age 12), as well as observable in less direct prefacing such as Heath's (age 14) response:

my mum seem[ed] more focussed on the impacts, how it can be really bad for people who are involved in production of pornography and stuff rather than it being like I feel like some other adults might have presented it a different way rather than focussed on the impacts on people involved in it and stuff and the actual impacts on everyone.

Similar to Heath's indirect phrasing – and while inquiring what is meant by *harm* – Levi responds to "do you feel like accessing or viewing this content [pornography] causes you harm in any way?" with:

it kind of depends on what you mean by harm. I haven't read any of the report like one of the things that annoys me is that whenever I want to do something or Mum says oh it's too old for you, da, da, da, da, she refers to reports like oh I read this, da, da, da, I read this, da, da, da. I don't read them and I don't understand them so I don't know what I consider harm but overall I'd probably say no, probably not.

Another indirect way teens are potentially informed by adults is when teens mirror the language of the interviewer's prompt. Although such prompts did often lead to firsthand perspectives, other times teens did not elaborate beyond such mirrored language. For example, when asked "do you think [online sexual material] tend[s] to be aggressive?", Nicola (age 17) responded, "they're aggressive, yeah" without elaborating further. Similarly, when asked "how did those [nude images] make you feel? Curious or disgusted or —", Nicola responded, "disgusted", only adding "I'm not sure" when asked to elaborate.

(2) Instances where teens did not cite external influences directly but expressed potential harms using formalised concepts or terminology are observable when Warren (age 17) shares concerns regarding overexposure: "dopamine ... you're getting your pleasure through watching it through your phone so that you're not going through your daily life trying to find dopamine through communication with women and stuff like that"; it should be noted that Warren added later in the interview that he heard the notion of dopamine from "the grapevine". Other formalised concepts of harm commonly reported by teens regarding pornography included: body issues, addiction, erectile dysfunction, and unrealistic representations of sex and consent. Teens' concerns around a lack of consent represented in pornography were expressed particularly frequently across all age groups and genders. This frequency, and the use of the term *consent* specifically, may align with recent initiatives for consent education targeted at teens, including the mandating of consent in the Australian curriculum (Woodley et al., *Mandatory Consent* para 3).

(3) Instances where teens asserted that they had encountered pornography, and conceded potential harms of this content, while also asserting such harms were unlikely, are observable when Thomas (age 14) was asked, “do you feel like accessing or viewing this content, either the first time or any other instances, have caused you any harm?”, and responded “no”; when prompted whether pornography has “the potential to cause harm”, Thomas only offers how these Websites have potential for hacking or spam.

Similarly, after Kelvin (age 13) offers a list of potential concerns regarding pornography, and is asked “bearing in mind these types of fears would you say your access to porn has harmed you [or others he knows]?”, he replies “no”, suggesting the concerns listed by Kelvin do not align with his own experiences.

(4) Instances of teens discussing potential harms associated with pornography, while also reporting that they were yet to encounter such content, are observable in the below excerpt from Chloe’s (age 12) interview:

Interviewer: So you’ve never come across any sexual content?

Chloe: No.

Interviewer: What about in things like books, magazines, advertising, TV? Anything like that?

Chloe: No, I haven’t seen any.

Interviewer: So having not seen any of it but knowing what it is, do you think they [porn] has the potential to cause harm if people were watching it —

Chloe: Yeah, I think that could, definitely.

While being adamant that she has not encountered pornography, Chloe later recited harms, suggesting she was not drawing on her own encounters with SEM. Instances of firsthand perspectives, where teens express harms while citing their own encounters with SEM, is observable in the below excerpt from non-binary identifying teen Max’s (age 12) interview:

Max: It did affect me. For a while then I just was scared I was going to come across another thing like that, I was going to come across that in real life so I was a lot more anxious about what I went about. I still am a bit more anxious nowadays about what I’m viewing online. So it didn’t harm me in a major way, it just —

Interviewer: It’s affected you in how you go about your online use.

Max: Yeah.

Interviewer: So you're a lot more cautious about what you click on.

Max: Yeah.

Teens also shared observations of how pornography had harmed their peers, for example in the below excerpt from Sienna’s (age 14) interview:

Sienna: [It] gets really frustrating ... I don’t know, I guess it just crushes your thoughts and things like really watching all that and it just becomes addictive to them.

Interviewer: What do you mean by crushing your thoughts and crushing success?

Sienna: Like it kills your brain cells watching it and things.

Interviewer: So dumbs you down —

Sienna: Yeah.

Interviewer: [as in] it 'brainwashes' you almost?

Sienna: Makes your whole world about that stuff. My friend, she's really obsessed with all that stuff like she'll just shout out these random things when she's eating lunch or whatever She'll just shout out Daddy or whatever and moaning and things.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that?

Sienna: Kind of weird.

Similarly, Lauren (age 13) reflects on how her peers emulate sounds heard in pornography after witnessing these peers accessing SEM at school:

Lauren: 'Cause like in the middle of class some kids will just start moaning and it's right out annoying like a lot of kids will just start —

Interviewer: From watching something?

Lauren: In general, like, I don't even understand it like they'll just start moaning —

Interviewer: As a joke?

Lauren: As a joke but they'll just start moaning and making sex noises in class and everything.

Interviewer: Does that happen quite often or —

Lauren: Once or twice a week.

Interviewer: Just to unsettle the teacher, is that what it's for?

Lauren: I don't know, they just do it with their mates and everything, I just find it very weird.

In laying out these examples, it is important to note that making a delineation between secondhand and firsthand perspectives does not suggest teens express themselves through a strict binary of either / or – often perspectives contained elements of both. Further, this delineation does not argue that secondhand perspectives are somehow incommensurate with a teen's encounters of SEM; rather, the authors argue that firsthand perspectives should be emphasised when making claims about teen perspectives.

Discussion

When interviewed in the research, teens expressed potential harms of pornography through a combination of firsthand and secondhand perspectives. As language is imperative in human research, the authors propose that when talking to teens about their experiences, to first ask them to define terms important to the research, such as *harm* and *sexual content*. Although this approach was adopted in this research – relying on open-ended prompts to encourage teen-centred definitions – avoiding loaded language can be challenging when discussing potentially contentious or sensitive subjects. This challenge notwithstanding, researchers were vigilant towards minimising the influence of leading questions or loaded language, as informed by prior research in this area. For example, in the EU Kids Online Study (Livingstone and Haddon 12), young people aged 9-16 were surveyed whether they were *bothered* or *upset* by accessing sexual images online. When alternatives to *harm* or *trauma* were used to collect data from the 24 Australian families, teens seemed more comfortable sharing direct encounters with SEM. What also became apparent was how negative consequences of SEM are often exacerbated in media and public discourse, as reflected by teens' positions on this material's potential for harm – even when adamant they were yet to have an encounter – congruent with media effects. Indeed, if teens have not viewed SEM themselves, attempts so discuss their perspectives

inevitably rely heavily on secondhand perspectives. Secondhand perspectives notwithstanding, this research aimed to identify a scope of teen perspectives in relation to SEM, even from those not choosing to avoid SEM.

Obtaining firsthand perspectives from teens, however, is not straightforward, not only because participants seldom attach a single meaning to an experience, but also because interviews as a medium do not necessarily grant direct access to a participant's experience (Silverman 77–78). Such challenges can be exacerbated by a lack of clarity around what might constitute *harm*, and to what degree; young people are often provided with blurry notions of harm and disproportionate risks (Spišák 130). Another consideration are the performativity and power dynamics inherent to interview research, where respondents may feel inclined to answer in ways that appease rather than challenge the perceived authority of interviewers. To ensure a range of perspectives were captured – and to mitigate, where possible, the interviewers' use of the term *harm* from skewing data – teens were also asked whether there could be any positives associated with viewing SEM; although the majority of participants answered “no”, some teens did identify a range of potential benefits.

The language used to discuss the harms of pornography (by teens and adults alike) is often contingent on the broader contexts in which it is discussed. Teens who are able to critically engage with media are less likely to internalise media messaging (Evans-Paulson et al. 3). As such, the researchers argue that using loaded language to inquire with teens about their experiences will prompt equally loaded responses, potentially impacted upon by media effects. The researchers do not suggest that teens are (or are not) keeping up to date with academia, activism, and/or public discourse concerning pornography, but that these channels inform the perspectives of parents, teachers, and policymakers that go on to shape teens' perspectives. In this way, adult perspectives of pornography become formalised and broadcast from top-down, rather than a bottom-up approach intuited by teens via their lived experience and direct encounters with SEM. For this reason, this research provides an important platform for teens to express themselves in relation to a topic they are not usually given a voice on, and thus considers the language used by researchers to capture such perspectives as paramount.

Conclusion

It must be acknowledged that the authors do not widely advocate for the consumption of pornography by teenagers, nor do the researchers believe that SEM has no associated risks – indeed, there were negative impacts reported by teens; rather, the authors aim to distinguish between teens' secondhand and firsthand perspectives of SEM – as the latter may lead to more effective policies. As teens inevitably draw on ideas and language offered by adults when discussing sensitive subjects, the researchers argue that firsthand perspectives be privileged when making claims about teen experiences. Although both secondhand and firsthand perspectives each offer insight in their own way, emphasis must be placed on the latter when designing policy on behalf of young people. Further, the researchers draw attention to the use of potentially loaded language or leading questions used to capture teen perspectives, suggesting that asking teens to define concepts through open-ended prompts can mitigate implications of judgment that may influence their responses. With this in mind, teens in this research were also asked if pornography had any potential benefits.

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