YOUNG PEOPLE’S PERCEPTIONS OF MEDIA CONTENT
A LITERATURE REVIEW
Young people’s perceptions of media content: a literature review

Office of Film and Literature Classification
Te Tari Whakarōpū Tukuata, Tuhituha
PO Box 1999
Wellington 6140

Phone 04 471 6770
Fax 04 471 6781
Email information@censorship.govt.nz
Web www.censorship.govt.nz

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Young people’s perceptions of media content
Foreword from the Chief Censor

New Zealand’s classification system is intended to prevent the injury to society that comes from the unrestricted availability of films, games and other publications. A key tool used by the Office of Film and Literature Classification to achieve this is the practice of assigning age-based restrictions to films and games.

Research into perceptions of the classification system has in the past often explored adults’ perceptions of the system and potential for harm from films and games, and found that many adults are concerned about the impact of content on younger people, particularly teenagers. Given that teenagers are the group most often affected by decisions of the Classification Office, it is important to engage with them directly and investigate their perceptions of both the classification system and the potentially harmful content which the system is designed to protect them from.

In this foreword, I am pleased to introduce you to a set of research reports that highlight the value and importance of engaging directly with young people. In this research we gave young people the opportunity to articulate their perceptions of the types of content they see as potentially harmful, and of the classification system which is designed to prevent this harm.

It is encouraging to see that young people support the concept of protecting audiences from potentially harmful content in films and games, even if at times they do not see themselves in need of that protection. At the same time, young people reported having been exposed, either intentionally or unintentionally, to content that they found undesirable, challenging or disturbing. They told us that they want to be able to make informed choices about the content they wish to view or, in some cases, avoid.

Unsurprisingly, our survey found that more 16 and 17 year-olds (43% and 39%) rated the classification system as 'a bit too strict' compared to 18 year-olds (24%). By the age of 18, age-restrictions no longer apply to young people’s viewing and gaming choices. However, those aged 16 and 17 are still restricted in their access to content by the classification system.

Young people in our study also felt that there should be more flexibility in the classifications, suggesting that the current system does not reflect the way young people mature at different rates and that they can sometimes handle and process restricted content at different ages. Participants said that there should be a way of differing 'mature' 16 year-olds (for example) from 'immature' 16 year-olds.

The titles in the research set referred to are:

1. Young people’s perceptions of media content: a literature review
2. Survey of young people’s perceptions of the classification system
3. Young people’s perceptions of the classification system and potential harm from media content: discussion group findings
Young people’s perceptions of media content

The literature review draws together findings from New Zealand and overseas to investigate what young people perceive the effects of media to be, what they think about content regulation, and what type of content concerns them. The literature review is unique in its focus on young people’s views. The findings of the studies included in the review in many instances reflect those of the Classification Office’s own research, of which this review is a component.

The survey presents the results of an online survey of 507 New Zealanders aged 16 to 18, in which respondents were asked about their perceptions and use of the classification system for films and games. The survey findings indicate that young New Zealanders are accepting of the idea of having restrictions on certain films and games, both for themselves and for those younger than them.

In our discussion group study, young people told us they actively select films or games with R16 or R18 classifications, because they feel emotionally ready and capable of viewing content with these restrictions. This reaffirms the intention of the classifications assigned by the OFLC to restrict availability of films to the point where there is unlikely to be any harm from viewing or playing (and no further). Young people also mentioned being disturbed by content they had seen prior to being old enough to handle it (and likely under the age of restriction), and expressed a desire for some kind of warning about content in films both for themselves and for those younger than them.

In discussion groups, young people also told us that although they feel they are on the whole mature enough to handle most types of content, they want to be able to make informed choices about films and games in order to view or avoid certain content. They feel the amount of information currently provided on descriptive notes is inadequate for them to make an informed decision about the content in a particular film or game.

Our classification system restricts young people’s access to content, and it is important that they are informed about both the reasons for classification decisions, and for the system under which they are made. It is hoped that by increasing understanding of the system, young people will be more inclined to comply with the classifications.

The purpose of this set of research is to explore the views of young people themselves about media content that may be considered harmful, disturbing or offensive, however, our responsibility is to assess the likely harm of material if made available to people of different ages, and the views of young people alone will never tell the whole story in this regard.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the young people who participated in this research for their contributions and for sharing their views and experiences with us.

I would also like to acknowledge the excellent work of the team at Colmar Brunton who conducted the online survey and the discussion groups, and analysed and reported on the results: Celine Yockney, Venise Comfort, Andrew Robertson, and Sarah Woollett.

Finally, I would like to thank the Classification Office staff involved in the research — Henry Talbot who researched and wrote the literature review, Michelle Baker who co-ordinated the qualitative component, and Kate Ward who oversaw the three components of the research.

Dr Andrew Jack
Chief Censor
Introduction

The purpose of this review is to investigate young people’s perceptions of, and response to potentially harmful or challenging content in media such as films, videogames and the internet.

In other words: what do young people identify/perceive the effects of media to be, what do they think about content regulation, and what type of content concerns them?

There is relatively little research that fits into this category. A number of sources have noted the need for further research in this area, and this literature review is unique in its focus on young people’s views.

The main body of the report is structured around the type of content being discussed: violence/horror, explicit/non-explicit sex, and other content. Additional sections cover young people’s views about classification and ratings systems, and provide an overview of media effects research relating to violent or sexually explicit content.

This review is part of a wider research project for 2013 exploring young New Zealanders’ views about media content and the classification system. It accompanies qualitative and quantitative research conducted by the Classification Office and Colmar Brunton.

Summary of main findings:

- Media content generally, particularly online content, is widely reported to sometimes concern young people.
- The extent, degree and manner of young people’s emotional and physical responses to content varies significantly depending on their age and gender, and the type of content.
- There are significant age and gender differences in young people’s views about the potential for media content to be harmful.
- In general, young people hold the view that content may be harmful for children, or those younger than themselves, but not harmful to people their own age or older.
- Furthermore, restricting content to those in their own age group is often seen as unnecessary, and
- Classifications or ratings tend to be a low-level influence on young people when choosing films and games.
- Young people tend to agree that media content has the potential to influence thoughts and behaviours.
Search strategy

A search for relevant research was conducted using:

- The Classification Office library database
- Reference checking of sources, particularly in existing meta-analytic reviews.
- Websites of media/classification authorities
- Internet search engines (Google and Google Scholar)

Some examples of search terms used:

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Such as: Ofcom, Australian Classification Board, BBFC, ESRB, IFCO, ACMA, PEGI, FTC, MDA.
Information about sources

This review explores the self-reported views of young people. This includes (but is not limited to):

- Public opinion research including the views of young people
- Academic research which includes self-reported views of young people

The views of older adolescents, roughly 15 to 18 years old, were the primary focus of the review. Most sources, however, cover a broader age range, and it has been necessary (and useful) to include these findings. Where possible, we have sought information which provides a basis for comparison between different age groups.

The publication dates of included sources range from 2001 to 2013, though our main focus was research published in the last five years. The research becomes less relevant beyond this time frame due to changes in media consumption patterns and in content — particularly in relation to the internet. However, relatively few studies exist which explore the views of young people, and so including less recent sources was necessary, and this also allows for comparisons over time.

Research previously published by the Classification Office was also used.

This is not a full and systematic review, and there are likely to be some useful resources that have been left out. Nonetheless, we are satisfied that our sources provide a sound evidentiary basis for analysis.

Our brief overview of media effects research on page 36 is not a comprehensive analysis of the evidence, but serves to situate our main findings within the broader scope of media research and is useful as a basis for comparison. There is a large (and growing) body of work concerned with the effects of media content on young people, and so our summary relies on recent, comprehensive reviews.

In total, around 150 studies were checked for relevance.
Young people’s perceptions of media content

**Violent, horrific or frightening content**

**Main findings:**

- Relatively little research has sought the opinions of young people about violent media content generally — particularly online content.
- Overall, young people tend to think that sexual content online is more of a problem than violent content online, however, violent content is associated with **higher levels of distress** amongst individuals.
- Children and younger adolescents are particularly affected by violent or frightening content. But older adolescents still report significant distress from exposure.
- The type of content that is distressing changes as people age, and negative reactions may be qualitatively different according to age of exposure.
- The interrelation of sexual and violent content is particularly distressing.
- Irish young people were more liberal regarding violence than sex with regard to age restrictions in films — yet considered violent or scary content to have the most impact or negative effects.
- Young people tend to think that they are personally mature enough to view such content, but others, particularly those younger than them may not be.
- On the internet, video-sharing sites (such as YouTube) and games are the formats most associated with violent content.
- Neurological changes during adolescence may be a factor in young people seeking out material likely to cause distress.

**Young people’s views**

Young people tend to think that they are personally mature enough to view age restricted violent content.

The research *Viewing Violence: audience perceptions of violent content in audio-visual entertainment* — produced by the Classification Office in conjunction with the Broadcasting Standards Authority — explored the ways in which New Zealanders perceive violent media content, and why they may hold such perceptions. To learn what young people thought about violent content, this qualitative study included in-depth interviews (n=18) and online bulletin boards (n=26) with 14 to 17 year-olds (Colmar Brunton, 2008: 19/115). The report identified the following as the ‘key issue’ for both adults and young people:

...while adults (teenagers included themselves in this category) did not feel they were likely to be harmed by viewing violent content, it was important to protect children from the harms associated with viewing age-inappropriate material. They considered this should be the main aim of any harm prevention strategies (2008: 34).

This finding is reflected in the American study *Caution, Animated Violence*: when a group of middle school students (aged 10 to 14 with an average age of 12), high school students (aged 14 to 18 with
an average age of 15), and college students (aged 18 to 22 with an average age of 20) were asked to assign ESRB\(^3\) ratings to specific violent games, discrepancies arose between groups. High school students tended towards more restrictive ratings than middle-scholarers, and college students tended towards more restrictive ratings than high-schoolers. Interestingly, the study shows the relative restrictiveness of the ratings assigned was also related to how often participants reported playing games, with more experienced players more likely to assign lenient ratings. For the younger group, the authors suggest this could be due to frequent gamers’ greater desire to play these games, but notes that the effect is also present in older age groups that may easily purchase these games, and therefore (as stated in their hypothesis) ‘it is likely that violence desensitization is at least partially responsible for the results’ (Becker-Olsen and Norberg, 2010: 4-5/14).

Research by IFCO (the Irish Film Classification Office), Adolescents and Film: Attitudes to Film Classification, included a survey of 1,045 secondary school students aged 12 to 17, with a mean age of 14. The research asked young people how specific content in films should be age-restricted, and found that young people generally had more liberal views about violence than sexual content or nudity. The majority thought that stylised violence (93%), realistic violence (62%), and violence seen as normal (62%) should be classified 12PG (restricted to people 12 or older unless accompanied by an adult) or lower\(^4\). However, only 38% thought that ‘violence rewarded’ should be classified 12PG or lower. Regardless of the type of violence depicted, the vast majority considered a 15PG (restricted to people 15 or older unless accompanied by an adult) or lower classification to be a sufficient safeguard. Note that the age range of participants is relatively broad (12 to 17 year-olds) and it is unclear whether responses from the older and younger groups differed significantly (Dublin City University, 2005: 9).

Young people tend to think violent content online is less of a concern than sexual content

Data presented in the study In their own words: what bothers children online? with the EU Kids Online Network came from the coded responses of 38% of the total EU Kids Online dataset (9,636 out of 25,142 people aged 9 to 16) who answered the question: ‘what things on the internet would bother you about your age?’ The research found that violent or aggressive content was the second most common concern identified by 9 to 16 year-olds (with 18% mentioning this challenge first; the most common concern was sexually explicit content, at 22%) (Livingstone et al. 2013: 3). 55% of the 9,904 children and young people who specified things that bother them their age online mentioned certain platforms or technologies — video-sharing sites such as YouTube were the most mentioned concern, followed by websites (2013: 6). Within this group, violent content was the most common concern associated with online games (with 39% mentioning this) and video-sharing sites (30%) (2013: 7).

Green et al. (2013) carried out a survey using this format in Australia for the report What bothers Australian kids online? Children comment on bullies, porn and violence. The sample was 400 children and young people aged 9 to 16, compared with 1,000 respondents for each of the 25 countries included in the European survey (2013: 2). These data come from the coded responses of 71% of the

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\(^3\) The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) is a non-profit, self-regulatory body that assigns age and content ratings for video games and mobile apps. The ESRB was established in 1994 by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) [information from: http://www.esrb.org/about/index.jsp].

\(^4\) The 12PG classification is now called 12A, and the 15PG classification is called 15A. [http://www.ifco.ie/website/ifco/ifcoweb.nsf/web/classcatintro?opendocument&type=graphic]
total survey dataset who answered the question: ‘what things on the internet would bother people about your age?’. This study found that violence (a category including ‘aggressive’ and ‘gory’ content) was the second most common concern for young Australians also, though a smaller proportion mentioned this challenge (12% compared with 18% in Europe) (2013: 5).

…but many find violent, horrific or scary content particularly distressing

Livingstone et al. (2013) did not ask directly how children and young people felt about challenges or risks online personally, but 12% of respondents who answered the question about things online that would bother people their age included this information unprompted. Of those who expressed an emotional response to violent content, the most common were fear (54%) or disgust (37%) (2013: 8). Livingstone et al. note that:

Violence receives less public attention than sexual material, but many children are concerned about violent, aggressive or gory online content. They reveal shock and disgust on seeing cruelty, killings, abuse of animals and even the news — since much is real rather than fictional violence, this adds to the depth of children’s reactions (2013: 1).

As with other material, violent content does not necessarily upset all or even most children and young people, but the impact can be significant for those it does upset. In earlier research, UK Children Go Online: final report of key project findings, Livingstone and Bober (2005: 21) note that most children and young people exposed to violent (or hateful) content say they don’t give it much thought (48%), but many indicated disgust (27%), and 16% expressed dislike for this content.

A survey of 1,673 New Zealanders aged 12 to 19 was conducted as part of John Fenaughty’s doctoral thesis, Challenging Risk: NZ High-school Students’ Activity, Challenge, Distress, and Resiliency, within Cyberspace (2010: 125). Fenaughty found that exposure to challenging non-sexual content online was relatively rare (reported by around one in ten participants), but that exposure was more likely to be associated with distress: 63.1% of those reporting exposure to non-sexual (mostly violent or aggressive) content associated this experience with distress. Overall (of the full sample), 6.8% reported such distress. Fenaughty cautions that the higher proportion of distress may reflect the nature of the question, in that it specifically asks about content that made young people ‘uncomfortable or upset’ (2010: 191). However, it may well be that violent content, as reported by young people, is simply more likely to be distressing — compared with unwanted exposure to sexual content, for example. Interestingly, while the survey question specified non-sexual content, more than half of respondents included sexual themes when describing this content. Fenaughty notes however, that:

…descriptions reflected the qualitative findings, demonstrating that such content was often marked by violent and gory themes...To the extent that particular forms of sexual content in cyberspace are conflated with violent content, distress from exposure to sexual content may reflect these elements as well (2010: 183).

In any case (and similar to findings from Livingstone et al. (2013) above), violent but non-sexual themes were common in both the survey (12 to 19 year-olds) and the focus groups (13 to 15 year-olds). These include violence towards people such as torture, death and injury; aggressive content such as bullying or intimidation; harm to animals (including news material); self-harm and suicide; and also supernatural, horrific or otherwise frightening content (2010: 100/155). These findings reflect earlier research from the UK (Ofcom, 2006) which is cited by Fenaughty (2010: 100):

Around one in five (19%) 12-15-year-olds (n = 764) in the UK also reported that they had ever encountered “...anything that they had found nasty, worrying or frightening on the Internet”.

...
Fenaughty also includes an interesting discussion about biological development during adolescence. He cites research by Galvan et al. (2006) which found that increased subcortical activity makes decision-making particularly difficult for young people, and less able to assess the consequences of their actions. Fenaughty suggests that this may have an effect on media use — such as being more likely to seek out and view material that increases fear and distress levels. He notes horror films and torture websites as examples of such media (2010: 18).

In films, violent, horrific or frightening content is considered to have a higher impact than sexual or other content

Regarding commercial film content, IFCO’s Adolescents and Film: Attitudes to Film Classification found that violent or scary films were considered to have the most impact on young people, and 43% of survey participants reported having seen a film that scared them and that ‘they wished they hadn’t seen’. Older participants were just as likely to report this as the younger group, though most were aged 11 to 13 when they viewed the film that scared them (Dublin City University, 2005: 10-11). In focus groups, older adolescents acknowledged that the impact of the film diminished over time, though ‘vivid memories’ of the experience remained for many. The report notes that:

Participants use critical skills to counter some of the effects of horror films. Through discussing aspects, such as acting or special effects, they can reassure themselves that films do not depict ‘real’ events (2005: 14).

Participants also thought such films were scarier when viewed at home, though young people seldom saw the films in cinemas due to the more comprehensive enforcement of age restrictions in that context.

The type of violent, horrific or frightening content that young people find upsetting varies with age

While both the younger and older groups in IFCO’s study thought violent and frightening content was more likely to be distressing or harmful in general, specific types of films were more likely to be concerning to older or younger participants. Generic ‘slasher’-type horror seemed to have a greater impact on the younger group, but for older participants:

...the most disturbing films are those that have a psychological impact—that ‘mess around with your mind’; that are ‘confusing’ or ‘disturbing’ (Dublin City University, 2005: 14).

While Livingstone et al. (2013: 11) found that concern about violent content or horrific content (including depictions of self-harm and suicide) declined with age, Fenaughty’s (2010: 125/192) survey found that exposure to challenging (largely violent or gory) ‘non-sexual’ content was likely to be distressing for both younger (aged 12 to 14) and older (aged 15 to 19) participants, suggesting that:

...experience, maturity, and any age-related increases in critiquing the authenticity or purpose of such media contents, did not correspond to a decrease in distress (2010: 191).

Fenaughty thinks this may represent a qualitative change in the nature of this type of exposure as young people age. Focus groups with 13 to 15 year-olds found that:

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...historical inappropriate content often involved accidental exposures to images of death and destruction, whereas later inappropriate content also involved communications with people who practiced self-harm...While forms of inappropriate content involving exposure to [fake] violence and gore may become less distressing, as young people age, this drop off in distress may nonetheless be obscured by other forms of inappropriate content (2010: 192).

Young males are more likely to be concerned about violent content online

Livingstone et al. (2013: 10) found that boys are more likely to report violent content as something that would bother people their age online, with 21% of boys reporting this compared with 16% of girls. They were unsurprised by the higher level of concern about violence reported by boys, as young males are more likely to be exposed to such content for entertainment (for example, playing games and watching videos online), and therefore more likely to consider it a bigger problem in general. Boys were also more likely to mention video sharing sites and online games as ‘content’ that would bother people their age. Green et al. (2013: 9) found a similar pattern in Australia, with boys more concerned about violent content (and content in general) than girls, who were more likely to be concerned about contact-related risks, rather than content.

Fenaughty (2010) found that three times as many males reported frequent exposure to challenging content of this nature compared with female respondents. He suggests this may ‘reflect gendered expressions of bravado’; in that adolescent boys may seek violent or horrific content in order to demonstrate how well they can ‘handle’ such material within their peer group. On the other hand:

...female participants may have simply possessed better skills for avoiding such exposures, or may not be as disturbed by some of these contents, as males (2010: 183).

This idea of male bravado is explored in Viewing Violence: for teenage boys, a common reason for watching horror films was to demonstrate how ‘hard’ they were to their friends; whereas girls were likely to find enjoyment in the experience by embracing the feeling of being scared, expressing their fear, and by comforting one another. In any case, few young people of either sex reported viewing such films alone (Colmar Brunton, 2008: 27).

Discussion

Assessing the relative impact of violent, horrific, or frightening content on younger and older adolescents is far from straightforward, and how content is perceived and understood plays an important and complex role. It may be true that, for example, a gory horror film will be particularly frightening for younger children compared with older adolescents, yet other more ‘adult’ content — that ‘messes with your mind’ — may have less impact than might be assumed on children and young adolescents, who are less likely to understand the potentially disturbing nature of such material. For example, Viewing Violence (Colmar Brunton, 2008: 16) states that younger teenagers (14 to 15) often lacked the critical analysis skills to understand the context of the violence in a clip, or did not understand the sexual nature of the violence. Further research into how younger and older adolescents perceive different kinds of violent, frightening or aggressive content would be valuable (as also noted by Livingstone and Das (2009: 5) about media content generally) as would research into the specific nature of content that older and younger adolescents find particularly distressing, as noted by Fenaughty (2010: 192).

Regarding online content in particular, research suggests that young people find violent and horrific content as distressing, or more distressing, than unwanted sexually explicit material; yet public concern, and research priorities, do not seem to be acknowledging this to the extent they arguably should. As Livingstone et al. (2013: 13) note:
The priority given by children to concerns over violent content should be heard and addressed by parents, teachers and policy makers, as should the negative reactions of many to the ready availability of pornography. Children’s comments reveal that violent content online goes beyond concerns with bullying to include much graphic and extreme imagery that disturbs or scares children.

Discussing reactions to challenging online content generally, Livingstone et al. (2011: 3) found that respondents who were ‘younger, lower in self-efficacy and sensation seeking, who do fewer online activities, have fewer skills, and who have more psychological problems’ were more likely to be upset by a range of online challenges, and were more likely to consider these to be harmful. In order to build resilience to the distress caused by such content, Fenaughty (2010: 206) calls for media literacy programmes to help young people critically assess content they are exposed to online.

Why, how, and to whom content (of various kinds) is likely to be distressing is a complex issue that goes well beyond age and gender, and further research is needed in order to understand — and help mitigate — such distress.
Young people’s perceptions of media content

Sexual content generally (non-explicit)

Research tends to focus on either explicit or non-explicit sexual content, and the following sections will deal with these types of sexual content separately. This distinction is important: the material referred to in each section is qualitatively different in fundamental ways — as is the purpose, intended audience, reception and manner of consumption.

Main findings:

- Research into young people’s views of non-explicit sexual content is relatively rare
- There is uncertainty as to whether non-explicit sexual content has a long-term impact on young people
- In general, reactions to sexual content tend to be neither particularly positive nor negative
- Females tend to have negative reactions or opinions, compared to males
- Non-explicit sexual content is not associated with a high level of distress
- Negative reactions may be qualitatively different according to age of exposure
- Young people interpret the meaning of sexual content in complex and highly variable ways
- Sexual content is seen as a source of information for many young people
- Young people may be likely to think that adults are more concerned about sexual content than other content, which may not be the case.

Young people’s views

Perceived longer-term effects on young people personally

On the perceived effects of sexual content in the longer term, focus group participants in IFCO’s Adolescents and Film: Attitudes to Film Classification claimed that sexual content in films had not caused them ‘any emotional concern or had a lasting impact on them’ (Dublin City University, 2005: 14).

It is interesting to compare this with Autobiographical Memories of Exposure to Sexual Media Content (Cantor, Mares and Hyde, 2003: 12-13), in which undergraduates (mostly aged between 18 and 21 with an average age of 19.7) reported on exposure to sexual content when younger. Overall, 91.6% of participants wrote about previous exposure to sexual content that affected their attitudes or emotions (79.1% mentioned films and the remainder described content on television). Of those who wrote about previous exposure and reported their age when exposed, 38.9% recalled an event between age 5 and 12, and 61.1% recalled an event between age 13 and 23.

They reported both positive and negative longer term reactions to specific instances of exposure. Almost 15% had continuing thoughts about the content, with a small number reporting negative thoughts, confusion, and reduced interest in engaging in sexual activity (2003: 15):

The duration of these effects was variable. Of those responding to the question, 30.6% said the effects ended shortly after viewing; 14.2% said the effects lasted less than a day; 12.7% said the effects lasted more than a day to less than a month; 3% said they lasted more than a month to less than a year; and 39.6% said they lasted either more than a year or an unspecified long period of time. Of those responding to this question, 32.5% said the effects of that they had seen were still with them at the time of the assessment (2003: 16).
The most common effects on attitudes and beliefs were ‘a reinforcement of pre-existing moral beliefs, and the realization that sex could exist without love’ (2003: 15).

Adolescents and Film: Attitudes to Film Classification also asked for young people’s opinion about what content they think is most concerning to their parents. Sex was chosen as the content of most concern to their parents, with 88% believing this, followed by violence (59%), drug use (58%), and offensive language (56%) (Dublin City University, 2005: 10). An accompanying study found that parents ranked sex in fifth place (Lansdowne Market Research, 2004 cited in Dublin City University, 2005: 10).

Young people’s understanding of sexual content is highly variable

Ninety-six children and young people aged 9 to 17 were interviewed for Buckingham and Bragg’s (2003: 7) Young People, Media and Personal Relationships. Qualitative data revealed that young people ‘sometimes found it difficult to identify the “messages” about sex and relationships’ in media content, and that the meaning they took from such material was highly variable. The report found that:

Children use media consumption as an opportunity to rehearse or police gendered identities; different styles of parenting also result in very different responses to sexual material, and very different ways of coming to terms with it. The media do not have an autonomous ability either to sexually corrupt children or to sexually liberate them (2003: 8).

Sexual content can be a source of information for young people

Evidence suggests that many young people consider sexual content in the media to be a source of information about sex and relationships. Participants in Buckingham and Bragg’s (2003: 7) study expressed a preference for media ‘such as teenage magazines and soap operas’ as this material was often considered to be more relevant, informative, and less embarrassing than talking with their parents — and they were generally critical of sex education in schools.

Buckingham and Bragg emphasise that young people ‘are not the naive or incompetent consumers they are frequently assumed to be’ and are often ‘highly critical’ consumers of media, a skill that develops with age and experience. The report notes that young people

...often rejected overt attempts on the part of the media to teach them about sexual matters, and they were sceptical about some of the advice they were offered (e.g. in problem pages or talk shows). They were particularly resistant to the use of drama to convey pre-defined moral messages (2003: 7).

A small number of respondents in Cantor, Mares and Hyde’s (2003: 15) retrospective survey reported ‘learning about reproductive biology, learning about pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, and learning about sexual behaviours’ from exposure to sexual content when younger.

Emotional and physical reactions to sexual content

Livingstone et al. (2011) asked about online sexual content generally, and found that 14% of the full sample (a dataset of 25,142 respondents aged 9 to 16) reported exposure to sexual material online. This is a broad category, and relatively little of the content reported could be defined as sexually explicit. 28% of those exposed to sexual content reported being upset by the experience (2011: 22), including 14% who were ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ upset. By comparison, 55% of those exposed to online bullying were ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ upset (2011: 30).

Cantor, Mares and Hyde’s study details young people’s response to sexual material as recalled by young adults. Both positive and negative emotions were described:
When specifically asked whether the experience overall was positive, negative, or both positive and negative, the largest group (46.1%) said it was both positive and negative; 29.0% said it was positive only, while 24.9% said it was negative only (2003: 16).

The most common emotions reported were ‘disgust’, ‘shock’ or ‘surprise’, mentioned by almost one quarter of respondents:

The remaining emotions were, in descending order: embarrassment, interest or curiosity, anger, amusement, fear, sadness, apprehension about being caught watching the program, happiness or pleasure, and guilt (2003: 15).

The most common ‘physical’ response to exposure was sexual arousal, reported by 16.8% (2003: 15).

**Negative reactions may be qualitatively different according to age of exposure**

Cantor, Mares and Hyde (2003: 16) found that the reported age of exposure was significant in how young people experienced this exposure:

The emotional reactions that were different in the two age groups (5-12 vs. 13 and over) were all negative, but of different sorts. Those more prevalent in the younger group seem to have centered around concern about what others would think—embarrassment, fear of being caught watching, and guilt. Those more common in the older group seem to have been a response to the content itself—disgust, anger and sadness, and the physical responses of nausea and crying. The enduring responses that differentiated the age groups all were more prevalent in the younger group... (2003: 17-18).

**Females tend to have a more negative response to sexual content**

Cantor, Mares and Hyde also found significant gender differences. Young women’s recollections of exposure to sexual content when younger tended to focus more on relational or narrative aspects, and were more likely to be negative; whereas young men were more likely to remember the physical aspects of sexual content and to have positive memories of the experience, such as sexual arousal (2003: 19). Interestingly, mentions of sexual arousal increased with age of exposure in males, and decreased in females (2003: 21). Young women were more likely to mention rape (33.3% of women compared with 18.4% of men), though males who did mention rape were more likely to recall having an intense negative reaction (2003: 24).

Livingstone, et at. (2011: 23) found that girls (and younger respondents) were less likely to be exposed to sexual content online, but more likely to be distressed by this exposure. While Buckingham and Bragg's (2003: 8) qualitative research found that:

Girls were more ready to express sexual desire in relation to media images than boys, for whom such responses may have seemed ‘politically incorrect’. Boys' responses to media images of men were often characterised by a form of insecurity or ‘homosexual panic’, which was sometimes reinforced by directly homophobic strategies on the part of parents.

**Discussion**

Reviewing the evidence about sexual content is complicated by terminology, methodology, and by research participants’ understanding of the subject matter being explored. Some reports use the term ‘pornography’, which clearly refers to sexually explicit material. Some refer to ‘sexual content’ in a general sense, yet the data indicate that explicit content is the primary focus. Furthermore, people’s understanding of what constitutes ‘explicit’ or ‘pornographic’ material varies significantly, particularly amongst children and young people. This makes discussion of quantitative data relating to sexual content somewhat problematic, particularly online material. This must be kept in mind if attempts are made to draw comparisons between young people’s response to sexual content on
mainstream films or television for example, which is highly unlikely to involve explicit sexual depictions. These complications highlight the importance of qualitative research into young people’s views about online content, most of which explore young people’s views about sexually explicit material specifically, and are addressed in the next section.
Sexually explicit material

Main findings:

- Research that explores young people’s views about sexually explicit content is rare, but less rare than for other types of content.
- Such research reveals nuanced and complex perceptions of positive and negative effects and responses. Females often report feeling inadequate about their body image, while males feel pressured to perform in ways they see in sexually explicit films.
- Many young people agree that sexually explicit content influences their own attitudes, thoughts and behaviours, and those of others.
- Young people tend to think that they are personally mature enough to view such content, but others, particularly those younger than them may not be.
- In general, reactions to this content are not particularly negative or positive, but can be very upsetting for a minority.
- Older adolescents are less likely to be distressed by explicit content.
- Females are less likely to be exposed, but more likely to report distress at exposure and to hold negative views about explicit content.
- Sexual material seen as violent is particularly distressing.
- Some young people report distress at content they accessed knowingly — research is unclear as to why.
- Some distress is related to parental disapproval or sanctions — but the impact of this is unclear.
- Some researchers suggest that young people’s reported concerns about online explicit content may be partly due to widely-reported public concern, and that the ‘problem of exposure’ may be overstated.
- Exposure is normative for males.

Young people’s views

To what extent does sexually explicit content concern young people generally? Do they think it is harmful?

Livingstone et al. (2013) found that sexually explicit content was the most commonly cited concern when children and young people (aged 9 to 16) were asked to name things that would bother people their age on the internet. 22% of those who answered the question mentioned this first. However the report notes that young people’s thoughts about explicit material online may reflect the ‘climate of anxiety’ about this issue, which is often covered in the news media (2013: 3). In the Australian study using Livingstone et al’s (2013) format, Green et al. (2013: 5) found that sexually explicit content was the second most common concern overall, after conduct-related challenges, but was mentioned first by a greater proportion of respondents (27%) than in the European study.
In a survey (n=934) produced by South Africa’s Film and Publication Board, *Report on internet usage and the exposure of pornography to learners in South African schools* (Chetty and Basson, 2006), 73% of 13 to 17+ year-old South Africans agreed that watching sexually explicit material ‘is harmful’. However the broad nature of the question and the limited option of answering ‘yes’ or ‘no’ make interpretation of the data problematic (2006: 32/69). While respondents were asked why they thought such content was or was not harmful, these open-ended responses do not appear to have been coded for analysis (or if they were these were not included in the final report). However, the report does state that:

Respondents were of the opinion that pornography exposes children to something which they are not emotionally ready for and indirectly encourages them to become sexually active at a very young age. Younger children (13-14 years) felt more strongly about the possible harmful effects, while older children who participated in the survey think that they have sufficient maturity and skills to handle exposure to pornography and therefore were less concerned (2006: 48).

The report also notes that 75% did not think it was acceptable to ‘watch pornographic films at home’, but that ‘only’ 58% agreed that viewing such material was ‘wrong’ (2006: 47).

Data from the Youth Internet Safety Survey — a national survey of 1,501 internet-using children and young people in the United States, aged 10 to 17 (with a mean age of 14) — was presented in Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak’s (2003) *The Exposure Of Youth To Unwanted Sexual Material On The Internet*. They found that while many young people were ‘personally unfazed’ by exposure to sexually explicit content, there was broad agreement (74%) that adults should be very or extremely concerned about such exposure. Interestingly, those who claimed not to have been exposed to such content were more likely to be concerned than those who had (76% compared to 65%), and so their concern ‘may be more based on preconceived notions rather than real experience’ (2003: 351).

An earlier report from the Kaiser Family Foundation (Rideout, 2001) found that 57% of 15 to 17 year-olds agreed that exposure to sexually explicit material online ‘could have a serious impact on those under 18’, and 41% agreed that ‘young people being exposed to pornography on the internet is no big deal’ (2001: 12). Note that respondents were given these two choices, and a ‘don’t know/refused’ option. A strong dichotomy was presented, and so it is hard to know whether a majority genuinely considered such content to have a ‘strong impact’. Furthermore, the term ‘no big deal’ does not lend itself to precise or considered responses.

The full sample of 15 to 24 year-olds were also asked about specific harms or effects of young people’s exposure to explicit sexual content online. The data show that concern about the impact of explicit material to under-18s increased with age — 65% of the full sample agreed it could have ‘a serious impact’, and that:

While a majority of respondents think seeing porn on the Internet encourages young people to have sex before they’re ready (59% agree, 32% strongly) they are closely divided on other possible harmful effects of online porn: whether it would cause young people to become addicted to pornography (49% agree, 50% disagree), promote bad attitudes toward women (49% agree, 50% disagree) or encourage viewers to think unprotected sex is okay (49% agree, 50% disagree) (2001: 12).

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6 The age category ‘17+’ comprised 19% of the total, the proportion of 13-14 and 15-16 year olds was 40% and 41% respectively (Chetty and Basson, 2006: 27).
Young people’s perceptions of media content

Retrospective views on impact of exposure

In *UK Children Go Online: Surveying the Experiences of Young People and their Parents*, Livingstone and Bober (2004: 32) found that of the 18 to 19 year-old internet users who went online at least weekly and had seen sexually explicit material anywhere (this was 70% of weekly internet users): 45% thought they had been too young at first exposure, 42% considered it ‘about the right age’, and 13% thought it would not have been a problem if they had been exposed to it earlier.

Chetty and Basson (2006: 31) found that 44% of respondents 17 or older, and 43% aged 15 to 16 reported ‘not being bothered’ when first exposed to explicit content online — this compares with just 29% of 13 to 14 year-olds. These findings may indicate that older participants — likely having been exposed to this content over a longer period of time — were less likely to recall being bothered at the time of first exposure.

Sexually explicit material and age restrictions

*Adolescents and Film: Attitudes to Film Classification* (Dublin City University, 2005: 9) found that 18% of 12 to 17 year-olds (n=1,045) thought that explicit content should be restricted to those 18 and over, and a majority (51%) thought a 15PG classification (restricted to people 15 or older unless accompanied by an adult) would be sufficient. It is unclear whether responses from the older and younger groups differed significantly.

Harmful to others, but not themselves

A recent wide-ranging review by Horvath et al. (2013), "Basically...porn is everywhere": A Rapid Evidence Assessment on the Effects that Access and Exposure to Pornography has on Children and Young People, found a general consensus in the relevant research that ‘young people are aware of the dangers of online pornography but feel that they have the necessary coping skills to deal with them’. However, as has been noted elsewhere in our own review, young people are likely to consider such material may be harmful to those younger than them, an idea commonly referred to by Horvath et al. as the ‘third person effect’. In any case, they point out that ‘only a handful of research articles report young people holding positive attitudes towards pornography’ (2013: 9). An example cited by Horvath et al. is a study by Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson (2010), in which young people in Sweden:

...reported having developed skills to deal with pornography in a sensible and reflective manner, but that younger people should be protected against exposure to it (Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson, 2010 cited in Horvath et al. 2013: 42-43).

Chetty and Basson (2006: 48) found that the perceived harms of explicit content lessened as young people matured — though the survey question asked about harm to people generally, as opposed to harm to people their own age or those younger than them:

Younger children (13 -14 years) felt more strongly about the possible harmful effects, while older children who participated in the survey think that they have sufficient maturity and skills to handle exposure to pornography and therefore were less concerned.

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7 The ‘15PG’ classification is now called ‘15A’.
Perceptions of sexually explicit content, and how it affects young people

Relatively little research asks young people how they use sexually explicit material, how exposure may (or may not) affect them personally, and how they perceive and understand such content. Outlined below are a number of examples cited in Horvath et al. (2013).

Sweden

For *Lust, love, and life: A qualitative study of Swedish adolescents’ perceptions and experiences with pornography*, Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson conducted 22 individual interviews and seven focus groups, from 51 participants (36 females and 37 males aged 14 to 20 years) in Sweden. Participants expressed:

...feelings of both normalisation and ambivalence towards pornography. They felt that it was a source of knowledge, information and sexual arousal, but also that it functions as a lens through which body ideals and sexual performances are viewed (Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson, 2010 cited in Horvath et al. 2013: 42-43).

For *Hercules and Barbie? Reflections on the influence of pornography and its spread in the media and society in groups of adolescents in Sweden*, Mattebo et al. conducted six focus group interviews with young people aged 16 to 19: three with females (n=17) and three with males (n=18). Participants felt that much explicit content could be seen as discriminatory towards women due to the gendered power imbalance on display, which is common to so much of this material. Participants thought this material conveyed a distorted reflection of the realities of sexual performance, sexual relationships, and body ideals (Mattebo et al. 2012 cited in Horvath et al. 2013: 43).

Ten young women and eight young men (aged 16 to 23 years) participated in interviews for *‘It’s everywhere!’ Young Swedish people’s thoughts and reflections about pornography*. Häggström-Nordin et al. asked participants specifically about the messages conveyed about women’s bodies in sexually explicit material. Young people expected this material to portray women as inferior to men, and that ideas about body image were part of this — for example that female actors tend to be small and thin, while male actors tend to be large and muscular (Häggström-Nordin et al. 2006 cited in Horvath et al. 2013: 39). Similar findings appear in *Lust, love, and life*: female actors in sexually explicit films were viewed by female participants (age 14 to 20) as representing ‘the ideal body type’, which had the effect of making participants feel less attractive themselves (Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson, 2010 cited in Horvath et al. 2013: 39).

Young males in this study also reported a sense of inadequacy — as they felt a pressure to perform sexually in a similar manner to male actors; both in aspects of sexual behaviour and in duration (Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson, 2010 cited in Horvath et al. 2013: 39). For the study *Experiences of and attitudes towards pornography among a group of Swedish high school students*, 718 students aged 17 to 21 (with a mean age of 18) completed an 89-question survey. This research found that young men felt that viewing sexually explicit films influenced their thoughts (sexual fantasies) and behaviour (performing acts inspired by such films) (Häggström-Nordin et al. 2009, cited in Horvath et al. 2013: 39).

Häggström-Nordin’s 2005 thesis (cited in Horvath et al. 2013: 37) included an analysis of quantitative research involving senior high school students (mean age 18 years). Häggström-Nordin found that 71% of those who had frequent exposure to explicit material thought it influenced their peers’ sexual behaviour, and 29% acknowledged an influence on their own sexual behaviour (Häggström-Nordin, 2005).
Discussing the research summarised above, Horvath et al. (2013: 38-39) noted young people’s desire for information to supplement, or in lieu of, formal sex education; when formal education is not found, they turn to pornography as a substitute.

**United Kingdom**

In a recent health survey in London, around half of the young people participating (age is unspecified) thought that sexually explicit material ‘affects relationships’ and thought the government should ‘limit accessibility of online materials’ (Mulley, 2013 cited in Horvath et al. 2013: 38-39). In another mixed method study of young people (again, age is unspecified), 80% of survey participants believed viewing sexually explicit material ‘affected the way in which they had sex’, and some focus group participants reported that this material gave them ‘new ideas’ about sexual acts they were eager to try (Cowell and Smith, 2009 cited in Horvath et al. 2013: 36). Mattebo et al. (2012) also found that this material was a source of knowledge or inspiration for some (cited in Horvath et al. 2013: 43).

**Emotional and physical reactions**

A summary of research into the reported emotional and physical effects of exposure (particularly unwanted exposure) is outlined below, and most of it concerns online content specifically.

Livingstone et al. (2013: 8) did not ask young people how they personally felt about challenges online, but 12% gave an example of an emotional response when asked ‘what would bother someone their age online’: the most common of these responses were ‘disgust’ (59%), ‘fear’ (25%), and ‘annoyance’ (16%).

Wolak et al. (2006: 34/36) found that 34% of the full sample of 1,500 internet-using 10 to 17 year-olds had been exposed to unwanted sexual content, and one quarter of this subgroup reported being very or extremely upset by the experience. In other words, just 9% of the full sample reported distress from this content. The survey also found that content that was perceived as violent was significantly more likely to be distressing than other sexual content — including content involving animals ‘or other strange things’.

Livingstone and Bober (2004: 31) found that of those who had been exposed to sexually explicit material on the internet (57% of the full sample of 9 to 19 year-olds): 14% didn’t like it, 20% thought it was disgusting, and 8% wished they had never seen it. However, 54% ‘did not think too much about it’, 7% thought it was interesting, and 7% enjoyed it. Respondents could give multiple answers to this question.

Of those who experienced unwanted sexual content exposure in the past year (29.3% of the full sample of 12 to 19 year-olds), Fenaughty found that 38.5% experienced distress, which made this the ‘second most distressing challenge by volume’ (2010: 190/193). Based on focus group findings, Fenaughty includes an interesting discussion about what these data may indicate:

> Distress may be associated with the actual content itself (e.g., particularly graphic material), and/or the fact that the content is often unexpected, and the shock of exposure can produce distress...Additionally, the focus groups highlighted that adult anger, and sanctions, about sexual content exposures, may also produce distress. Finally, a number of phase two participants said that particular types of sexual content were disturbing (in response to the “other inappropriate content” question). This suggests that for some participants, unwanted sexual exposure may not mean exposure to unwanted sexual content per se, but exposure to forms of unwanted sexual content (e.g., bestiality, sexual violence) (2010: 190).
In their national survey of people 10 to 17 years old, Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak found that of the 25% who had unwanted exposure to online explicit material, most had ‘no negative reactions’ (2003: 342). However, 24% reported being ‘very or extremely’ upset (2003: 346). Regarding this:

> It is important to note that this survey only addresses youths’ more immediate reactions to unwanted exposure. It is not designed to assess any long-term reactions or long-term feelings of distress (2003: 338).

The report points out that this finding challenges the ‘prevalent assumption that the problem’ is primarily about young people actively seeking such material (2003: 330). Interestingly, the research found that 13% of distressing exposure was a result of young people knowingly entering an explicit site:

> It is not clear to what extent it was some curiosity or just navigational naïveté that resulted in the opening of the sites in spite of the prior knowledge (2003: 342).

The Kaiser Family Foundation’s *Generation Rx.com: How young people use the internet for health information* (a representative telephone survey of 1,209 young people aged 15 to 24 in the United States) found that 55% of 15 to 17 year-olds who had ever used the internet, and had ‘ever accidentally stumbled across pornography online’, were ‘not too’ or ‘not at all’ upset by this — while 45% were ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ upset (Rideout, 2001: 12).

South Africa’s Film and Publication Board (Chetty and Basson, 2006) found that many South African high school students (42% of 13 to 17+ year-olds) ‘felt uncomfortable’ when watching sexually explicit films (this primarily refers to films on DVD); other feelings reported were self-consciousness (20%), embarrassment (15%) and anxiety (14%). On the other hand, 33% reported feeling excitement, and 6% were unaffected. 51% also indicated that they felt ‘more curious about sex’ after having watched explicit content (2006: 41). When asked ‘How did you feel when you first saw pornographic images on the Internet?’, 38% said they were not ‘bothered’ by it, 19% ‘thought it was interesting’, and 16% ‘enjoyed it’. In contrast, 32% thought it was ‘disgusting’, 18% ‘didn’t like it’, and 16% ‘wished they had never seen it’ (2006: 44/68). Note that these answers were options given in the survey itself, rather than coded responses. Participants could select multiple options (2006: 67-68). A similar question found that 39% were not bothered by looking at explicit images online (2006: 47). It should be noted that the research seems to be based on the assumption that sexually explicit material is harmful to children and young people⁸; while not discounting the validity of the data, some of the survey questions (arguably) tend to reflect this by a weighting of ‘negative’ optional responses.

The evidence outlined in this section is broadly similar to findings from *Safer children in a digital world: The report of the Byron Review*, a large study carried out by the UK’s Department for Children, Schools and Families. Regarding young people’s responses to explicit online content, the report (Byron, 2008: 50) states that:

> ...around half of the children sampled in a range of research studies are not especially bothered by such material: a minority (particularly boys and older children) actively seek it out: a sizeable minority do not like it, and do not wish to see it: children will typically report that they are distressed, disgusted, offended or bothered by sexually explicit material.

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⁸ The film board’s report states: ‘premature exposure of children to adult experiences is an unacceptable invasion of every child’s right to childhood innocence’, and ‘children have a right to be allowed to grow and develop in an environment that is not emotionally and psychologically toxic’ (Chetty and Basson, 2006: 8).
Older adolescents are less likely to be distressed by explicit content

A number of studies found that older respondents were less likely to be distressed by unwanted exposure to explicit content, including Wolak et al. (2006: 34), Fenaughty (2010: 148-150), Livingstone et al. (2013: 11), Livingstone and Bober (2004), Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak (2003), Chetty and Basson (2006), and Thornburgh, D. and Lin, H.S. Eds. (2002). The following is a summary of some of these findings.

Livingstone and Bober (2004: 31) found that of those internet users who go online at least weekly and who have come into contact with explicit content on the internet (57% of the full sample):

- 18% of 9-15 year olds didn’t like encountering pornography online compared with 8-9% of 16-19 year olds, and 25-28% of 9-15 year olds thought it was disgusting compared with 12-16% of 16-19 year olds.

Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak (2003: 346) found ‘a nonsignificant trend for younger youth, those younger than age 14, to be more distressed than those age 14 to 17’. Chetty and Basson (2006: 31) found that high school students’ reported discomfort when watching explicit films declined significantly with age: from 56% of 13 to 14 year-olds, to 35% of 15 to 16 year-olds and 33% of those 17 or older.

Qualitative research for Youth, Pornography and the Internet (Thornburgh, D. and Lin, H.S. Eds., 2002: 135) found that older participants in particular were not especially concerned by exposure:

- In general, there was a correlation with age – those in the 16 to 17 age bracket tended to be much less bothered by sexually explicit material than those aged 14 to 16.

Fenaughty (2010: 190) suggests some possible reasons for levels of distress declining with age:

- As this survey was a snap shot over a 12 month period, and as a third had already seen such content in this year, it is logical that by the time they are older, more young people may have seen such content, and may be relatively less shocked and/or distressed by it, thus accounting for age differentials in distress. Alternatively, if distress was produced because of fear of negative adult reaction, the decreased distress reported by older participants may reflect their increased ability to address problematic adult reactions...and avoid negative effects from sanctions.

Females are less likely to be exposed, but more likely to report distress at exposure

Wolak et al. (2006: 34) found that female respondents were less likely to be exposed, but more likely to be distressed by exposure to explicit content. Livingstone and Bober (2004: 31) found that female respondents were more likely to view this material negatively: 22% of females said they didn’t like it, and 35% thought it was ‘disgusting’ (the figure was 8% and 10% of males respectively). Rideout (2001: 12) found that female respondents were ‘much more likely’ to be upset (35%) than males (6%). However, in focus groups, Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak (2003: 346) found that ‘girls were not any more distressed than boys’.

Fenaughty (2010: 99/148-150) found that female participants were more likely to be distressed by this challenge: of those aged 15 to 19 who had been exposed to unwanted sexual content, 37.8% of young women reported distress, compared with 28.9% of young men (these findings were reflected in focus groups). When considering these data, it should also be noted that young men are more likely to be exposed to (both wanted and unwanted) sexually explicit material (2010: 148-150). Regarding purposeful exposure to sexually explicit content, Fenaughty (2010: 181-182) found that most male focus group participants were ‘willing to discuss such activity, even in front of their
Sexually explicit material

peers’, which ‘highlighted the normativity of this activity’, which is reflected in the quantitative findings:

Analysis of purposeful sexual content exposure revealed the largest disparities across age and gender for all the challenge categories. While very few females reported ever or frequently purposefully consuming sexual content in cyberspace, the near majority of older males (and a third of younger males) reported such experiences at least once a year (2010: 153).

He further notes that:

For some young men in the current study, consuming sexual content online was so common it was seen as an integral part of the Internet, and its non-consumption was viewed suspiciously by others (2010: 98).

In contrast, none of the female participants in these focus groups mentioned purposeful exposure (2010: 181-182).

Chetty and Basson (2006: 31) found pronounced differences in how male and female high school students (aged 13 to 17+) felt about explicit content. 62% of females reported feeling uncomfortable when watching such films, compared with only 26% of males. When asked if they ‘feel more curious about sex’ after viewing explicit films, 60% of males agreed compared with 40% of females. Regarding online content, 45% of males reported ‘not being bothered’ when first exposed, compared with 30% of females. Note that the question about explicit films asks about how young people feel while watching, and the question about explicit online content is retrospective, asking how they felt when first exposed to this content.

Females are more likely to view explicit material negatively

Chetty and Basson (2006: 32) also found significant differences in male and female participants’ views about the potential harm of viewing explicit content generally. 80% of females agreed that viewing pornography is harmful, compared with 65% of males.

In their workshop with young people (aged 16 to 18), Horvath et al. (2013: 19) found ‘marked differences’ in the male and female participants’ discussions. Young women discussed a range of material that ‘may or may not be considered pornographic’, and focused on the negative effects of explicit content in relation to their body image and sexual experiences. In comparison, males ‘moved very quickly’ to discussing genres of sexually explicit material familiar to them, and the positive aspects, and young men’s ‘need for’ this material.

In summarising the research, Horvath et al. note that young women are more concerned about the skewed gender relations and objectification of women that is depicted in explicit content (2013: 9), and that they find it more ‘socially distasteful’ than young men (2013: 34).

Discussion

Problem may be overstated

Livingstone et al. (2011: 23) suggest that while public concern about exposure to explicit content is justified, the ‘extent of children’s exposure should not be exaggerated, and nor should it be assumed that all children are upset or harmed by such exposure’. Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak (2003: 350) note that as the majority of young people are not particularly distressed by such content, exposure may be considered typically not to be harmful. However, they also acknowledge that this view can only be accepted due to the lack of evidence about ‘possible long-term effects on attitudes’. Youth, Pornography and the Internet (Thornburgh, D. and Lin, H.S. Eds., 2002: 135) suggests that ‘today’s
social environment’ is ‘more sexual’ compared with preceding decades, and that ‘much of the material that today’s adults sought as teenagers is much more freely available and is thus arguably much less of a ‘big problem’ than in the past’. Livingstone et al. (2011: 30) put it this way:

> While society may judge, on moral grounds, that children should not be exposed to sexual content, children are only upset by such exposure in a few circumstances, while in others such exposure may be pleasurable.

Insofar as this is true, such suggestions must be treated with caution. The purpose of our review is to explore the views of young people themselves about media content that may be considered harmful, disturbing or offensive, however, our responsibility is to assess the likely harm of material if made available to people of different ages, and the views of young people alone will never tell the whole story in this regard. Sexually explicit content may indeed be harmful, whether or not a young person exposed to such material believes this to be the case. This idea is explored further in our overview of media effects research, starting on page 36.

**Distress is related to parental disapproval or sanctions — but the impact of this is unclear**

When evaluating young people’s reported distress at exposure to explicit content, it is important to keep in mind that cultural and social norms may have a significant effect on young people’s responses. To put it simply, young people’s fear of being ‘caught’ viewing a horror film is unlikely to be particularly distressing, while the prospect of a parent becoming aware of a young person’s consumption of sexually explicit material may in many cases be mortifying. As noted earlier, Fenaughty’s (2010: 190) focus group participants indicated that adult ‘anger’ and ‘sanctions’ are related to distress; Cantor, Mares and Hyde (2003: 17-18) also discuss young people’s ‘fear of being caught’ (in relation to non-explicit content). Chetty and Basson’s (2006: 31) research found that most young people (78%) were concerned about their parents finding out that they had watched sexually explicit films — interestingly, this concern did not decline sharply with age (83% of 13 to 14 year-olds; 77% of 15 to 16 year-olds; and 71% of those 17 or older). This may help explain some of Chetty and Basson’s (2006) other data, for example: young people’s concern about parental reactions may have contributed to their reported feelings of ‘discomfort’, ‘self-consciousness’ or ‘embarrassment’. In any case, more research is needed to ascertain how much of an impact these challenges may have on reported distress levels.

**A minority tend to be very upset**

Public concern about online explicit material tends to focus on adolescent males, yet it is this youth demographic that tends to be the least distressed by such content. Livingstone et al. (2011: 23) summarise this issue:

> It seems that popular discourses centred on teenage boys’ deliberate exposure to sexual content makes it harder for parents and others to recognise the distress that inadvertent exposure may cause girls, younger children and those facing psychological difficulties in their lives.

A number of studies point out that those for whom this content is particularly distressing tend to be ignored in the public debate. As Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak (2003: 350) point out, ‘even a small percentage’ who become seriously upset by this material ‘represent a potentially large number of children’ due to the scale of exposure.
Issues with self-reporting

The report *Youth, Pornography and the Internet* (Thornburgh, D. and Lin, H.S. Eds., 2002: 135) suggests that:

...self-reporting can be questioned on the grounds that these teenagers would not have been likely to tell a group of adults about an abiding interest in sexually explicit material or about being upset by such exposure (it would be too “uncool” to do so).

This possibility is also noted by Livingstone and Bober (2004: 31):

There might be reasons why children claim not to be bothered by pornography when in fact they are bothered. There might be reasons why children claim to be bothered when they were not. Wanting to be ‘cool’ would account for the former source of error, and so one might be sceptical that as many as 54% claim not to think too much about encountering online pornography.

Discussing his findings in general, Fenaughty (2010: 198) notes that the interview setting of focus groups is ‘particularly prone to social desirability bias’; and that even in filling out an anonymous and confidential survey — such as was conducted for his research — ‘participants may nonetheless have been wary about volunteering non-desirable information...due to the impact such acknowledgements may have for aspects of their self-identity’.

Furthermore, Horvath et al. (2013: 20) note that ‘intention and deliberation is not always clear’, even for those intentionally viewing explicit content:

Ybarra et al. (2009) also explain how exposures may be unwanted but not necessarily involuntary (for example, their expectations regarding the X-rated material may have been different to the reality; “hard core” instead of “soft core” or a specific genre). Mitchell et al. (2003a, 2003b), Wolak et al. (2007) and Ybarra et al. (2009) recorded 13 per cent, 21 per cent and 17 per cent (respectively) of incidents where children and young people said they knew sites were X-rated before they entered the sites but found that these episodes were not otherwise distinguishable from other instances of unwanted exposure.

More research is needed in relation to young people’s perceptions of sexually explicit material

A number of sources mention the relative scarcity of research into young people’s views about sexually explicit content. The recent and wide-ranging literature review by Horvath et al. found that ‘few studies have asked children and young people directly about their sexual expectations in relation to their access and exposure to pornography’ (2013: 39), observing that ‘we do not yet have a clear picture of how young people themselves feel about pornography and pornographic materials, and what it is that they perceive when watching these materials’ (2013: 44). In 2003, Cantor, Mares and Hyde noted the contrast between the large number of studies investigating the impact of violence on children and young people, and the small number exploring the impact of sexual content. They point out the cultural hesitancy towards the idea of showing sexual content to young people (ie media effects research), and that ‘researchers face obstacles to even questioning children and adolescents about their sexual attitudes and behaviours’ (2003: 1). Livingstone and Bober point out that ‘it remains difficult, especially in a survey, to gauge the extent or seriousness of any consequences of exposure to pornography as a child’ (2004: 32). These issues were raised by other researchers such as Flood and Hamilton:

The exposure of children to sexually explicit materials is an issue of widespread community concern in Australia, yet there is not a single Australian study that focuses on the prevalence of this exposure or assesses its likely impact (2003: 129).
As they point out, their study was the first to do so in Australia. One problem noted by Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak is that:

...findings are somewhat hard to interpret without any comparative perspective. We do not know whether the levels of upset here are comparable to those experienced by common youthful events, like getting a bad grade, or represent a more serious level of trauma, like a minor assault or automobile accident (2003: 350).

Wolak et al. stated that:

In 2000, when the findings of the first Youth Internet Safety Survey were released, we noted there had been virtually no research about the impact on youth of viewing pornography, either voluntarily or — more relevant — involuntarily. There is still no research that sheds light on whether, how, or under what circumstances involuntary exposure to pornography may trigger adverse responses in youth (2006: 35).

Livingstone and Das stated that it is ‘perhaps surprising’ that there had been little empirical research about what children and young people themselves think about sexual content, considering that there is a high level of concern (amongst adults) about young people’s exposure to such material (2009: 14-15/19). Researchers also made recommendations for how such studies might be carried out. Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak commented that:

More research testing alternate techniques, such as experimental designs, in-person interviews, vignettes, and qualitative designs, will help inform the field as to the best methods for gathering these data (2003: 355).

And more recently, Horvath et al. advocated conducting research that ‘investigates what children and young people think pornography is and the content of what they describe as pornographic’, and:

...whether there are links between the pornography that children and young people are exposed to and/or access and their attitudes towards, aspirations about and feelings towards relationships and sex (2013: 11).

There are clearly a number of reasons why more of this research would be valuable. For example, Horvath et al. point out that ‘much of what we think the evidence is telling us may be inaccurate because it has been designed with adults’ concerns and understandings in mind’ (2013: 63), and that factors ‘such as sexuality and sexual identity...are largely ignored in present research’ (2013: 44).
Other content

Main findings:

- Research into young people’s views about content which is neither sexual nor violent is rare
- Depictions of self-harm or suicide online are not widely concerning to young people, but may be associated with a high level of distress — for some
- Young people in Ireland are highly concerned about drug depictions in films, but other studies show that in the context of online material, drug use is of little concern generally.

Young people’s views

Livingstone et al. (2013: 11) found that concern about online content such as self-harm, suicide, eating disorders, drugs, and racist or other hateful material was low overall amongst 9 to 16 year-olds, but that it increased with age. An Australian study using the same format (Green et al. 2013: 5) also found relatively little concern about this content amongst 9 to 16 year-olds. Fenaughty (2010: 55/100), however, notes that online content involving self-harm or suicide may be particularly distressing for some young people.

Adolescents and Film: Attitudes to Film Classification asked Irish young people how films containing specific types of content should be classified (Dublin City University, 2005: 4). When asked how different content should be classified in films, young people were most likely to indicate hard drug use as the content which should be given the highest restrictions: 10% thought such content should never be allowed in films regardless of the classification, and a further 34% believed such depictions should be restricted to adults (2005: 9). The report also found that offensive language in films was a minor concern — with 81% believing this content is acceptable in films classified 12PG (restricted to people 12 or older unless accompanied by an adult) (2005: 3).

Views about the influence of media content on thoughts and behaviours

Our report Young People’s Use of Entertainment Mediums was based on a survey of 460 students attending our Censor for a Day programme (run twice a year by the Classification Office). Most were 16 and 17 years old, and 12 (around 3%) were 18 or 19 (UMR, 2006: 6). We asked participants if they had ever viewed a film or game that had affected the way they thought or the way they acted, and students reported a wide variety of influential films and games: 64% acknowledged that the way they thought had been influenced, and 24% acknowledged an influence on the way they act. It should be noted that respondents were in an environment where the influence of media content was being discussed, and this may have encouraged respondents to report that a film or game had made them think or act differently (2006: 8).

The films mentioned as influential to the way young people thought (and to an extent how they act) were most often documentaries, or movies about social issues — for example, films by Michael Moore, and the 2004 film Crash (which dealt with issues of race in the US). Most students seemed to be reflecting on conscious thought patterns and ideas raised by narrative messages (2006: 8).
**Discussion**

Research into young people’s views of content such as drug use, self-harm and suicide, suggest that these issues are not of much concern. It must be kept in mind, however, that concern about a specific type of content is likely to be higher if:

- A person is exposed to the content often
- Exposure is accidental or unexpected
- Depictions are particularly intense or long-lasting (or there are other important qualitative differences in the type of content)

These points highlight the importance of the format or medium when assessing a person’s level of concern; and so it is important to distinguish a lack of concern about *depictions of drug use* (for example) from a lack of concern about *depictions of drug use on the internet*. Recognising this distinction may help to explain some of the seemingly conflicting evidence in these reports.

For example, it may be unsurprising that young people in Ireland considered depictions of (hard) drug use in *films* to be particularly concerning, as:

- Depictions of drug use in films are common, and so people are more likely to be exposed to this content
- Exposure to such depictions in a film may be unexpected
- Depictions in a film are often graphic/highly detailed, and may recur throughout a film (keep in mind that a person may often continue watching a film even when they are uncomfortable with the content — consider a teenage boy watching a horror film with friends)

By comparison, exposure to depictions of drug use online will be less common, people are less likely to be exposed accidentally, depictions are less likely to be highly detailed, and navigation away from this content is likely to be easy. The opposite would be likely if you were to compare sexually explicit material online and in films. It is relatively difficult for young people to access sexually explicit films, but exposure (both purposeful and accidental) is common online — and online depictions are likely to be more ‘extreme’ in nature.

More research is needed in order to gain a better understanding of young people’s level of concern about specific content such as drug use, self-harm and suicide. The difference that format or medium has on young people’s views is just one issue that complicates the evidence that is available.

**Perceptions about media influence**

More comprehensive research is needed in this area, particularly in relation to non-sexual media. Our research, *Young People’s Use of Entertainment Mediums* (UMR, 2006), showed that while many young people thought that media can influence people’s thoughts or behaviours, the examples they gave, such as documentaries, suggest that young people’s understanding of ‘media influence’ may be very different from that addressed by most media effects research.
Views about age restrictions and classification systems

Main findings:

- Research specifically about young people’s views of classification systems is exceedingly rare.
- Young people tend to think that they are personally mature enough to view restricted content, but others, particularly those younger than them may not be.
- Classifications becomes less relevant to young people’s entertainment choices as they mature.
- Disregarding age restrictions is common, especially for older adolescents.
- Adolescents report that classification decisions are not very influential when choosing films and games for themselves.
- It is likely that young women are more supportive of restrictions than young men.
- Adolescents are likely to think classifications are overly strict — many see no need for R18 equivalent restrictions on any content.
- However, most report general satisfaction with how systems work.
- Comparing views across countries is not straightforward, as the differences in these systems can have a significant impact on young people’s viewing choices.
- Playing restricted games, in particular, may be considered normative and part of youth culture.

Perceptions and use of age restrictions and classification systems

New Zealand

Fenaughty (2010: 101) notes that when discussing challenging or inappropriate content in focus groups with 13 to 15 year-olds, participants did not mention the age restricted classifications given to many of the film and game titles under discussion. When prompted, they did not seem to consider it important that their exposure to challenging content may have been, in part, a result of them not adhering to the legal age restrictions. When restricted classifications were discussed, some participants stated that they were personally mature enough to view such content and so they did not adhere to restrictions because of this. Fenaughty notes that these views are reflected in the findings of our Underage Gaming Research (UMR, 2005), a non-representative survey which found, for example, that 37% of participating 15 to 17 year-olds had played the games Vice City and San Andreas (from the Grand Theft Auto series), both of which are classified R18. The survey also asked if an age restriction on a game made participants more likely to play it, less likely to, or if it made no difference. Of those who had played at least one of the restricted games listed, 76% felt the classification made no difference to their choice, with 20% claiming that an age restriction made them more likely to want to play a game. Fenaughty notes that:

Together these data, combined with the qualitative analysis, suggest then that a number of young people in NZ do not view age-restricted material as inappropriate content per se (Fenaughty, 2010: 101).

We took a different approach in our research, Young People’s Use of Entertainment Mediums (UMR, 2006) — a survey of 460 high school students, most aged 16 to 17 (around 3% were 18 or 19). We asked for young people to rate the importance of various factors influencing their choice of films and games including: recommendations from friends, trailers on other videos or DVDs, who stars in the
Young people’s perceptions of media content

movie, and so on. Participants used a 0-10 point scale where 10 meant a lot of influence and 0 meant none at all. Follow-up research was conducted in 2010 with 524 students (UMR, 2010). The surveys found that 40% and 48% of young people (in 2006 and 2010 respectively) reported that they were never influenced by classifications when choosing games; and when choosing films, 22% in 2006 and 40% in 2010 reported never being influenced by classifications. When choosing games, just 11% and 12% (in 2006 and 2010 respectively) rated the influence of classifications highly (a score of 7-10). Influence was higher when choosing films: 21% and 16% (respectively) gave a score of 7-10 (UMR, 2010: 24).

Viewing Violence, our joint (qualitative) research with the Broadcasting Standards Authority found that older adolescents believed they were mature enough, and should be able to make their own choices about what they view, rather than having their choices limited by age restricted classifications (Colmar Brunton, 2008: 16).

Gender differences in New Zealand

While we do not have findings indicating a difference in how young people perceive the classification system according to gender, it is interesting to note that in our high school Censor for a Day programme, female students tend to apply higher age restrictions to films relative to male students. This is reflected in the views of adults also; for example, see What people think about film classification systems (OFLC, 2012) and Understanding the Classification System: New Zealanders’ Views (Colmar Brunton, 2011).

International

While there is relatively little international research into young people’s views of classification systems, and direct comparisons are difficult, evidence suggests that young New Zealanders’ use of and views about classifications are broadly similar to those of young people in other countries. The following outlines research from Ireland, Australia, and the US.

Ireland

A survey of 1,045 school students aged 12 to 17 (with a mean age of 14 years) was conducted for the research Adolescents and Film: Attitudes to Film Classification. Results showed that 59% of adolescents aged 12 to 17 had used the IFCO (Irish Film Classification Office) labelling system, and 74% of this group were generally satisfied with the system. Just 35% used the system to avoid exposure to challenging content, with younger adolescents (12 to 14 years) more likely to say this than the older group (15 to 17 years) (Dublin City University, 2005: 5). Interestingly, the report notes that the classification system seems to assist young people in finding films they think are suitable, though not in the way that is intended — a majority (65%) seek out content that is generally restricted (this rose to 72% of 15 to 17 year-olds) (2005: 3/5). Accompanying qualitative research (with 24 students participating) revealed that the classification system seems to work with ‘approximately a two-year slippage’, meaning, for example, that films restricted to people 18 and over will appeal to 16 and 17 year-olds (2005: 15).

As in New Zealand, we see that young people may consider classifications particularly useful only for those younger than themselves — 92% of Irish adolescents thought classifications were a good idea for those in younger age groups than their own, while just 40% thought that classifications were a good idea for their own age group. More than half felt that films in all age groups were sometimes or often classified too highly (2005: 5-6).

Again, as in New Zealand, viewing content restricted to older viewers was common. 95% of adolescents reported seeing restricted films when underage, with 57% seeing films classified 18
Views about age restrictions and classification systems

when they were underage (2005: 10-11). A majority of respondents considered the 18 classification to be unnecessary (2005: 9).

The qualitative research showed that some young people believed the classification system should stop being enforced, but most thought that a system for people under 12, or possibly 15 was important as by age 15 or 16 people had reached maturity (2005: 13).

Australia

Research for the Australian Government Attorney-General’s Department, Classification Decisions and Community Standards 2007 (Galaxy, 2008: 30), surveyed both adults and older adolescents. It found that 74% of 15 to 17 year-olds considered classifications are ‘about right’, with more thinking they were too strict rather than too lenient.

The report Classification Usage & Attitude Study found that 80% of 13 to 17 year-olds (from a representative sample of 398 young people) agreed that the Australian OFLC9 ‘has a good perspective on what kinds of movies/computer games are suitable for people of different ages’, and 82% agreed that there were ‘appropriate systems in place to limit children’s access to unsuitable movies and computer games’ (Newspoll, 2002: 28), the report goes on to note that ‘this positive attitude may well be a function of a desire for no additional measures to be implemented’ (2002: 29). Qualitative research, Community Attitudes Towards Media Classification and Consumer Advice, noted that ‘most of the 14 to 15 age group said that the age limit for M films should be 12 or 13, and not 15 years’ (Spratt, M., 2004: 17); and that ‘both the boys and the girls put forward the view that classification should be based on personal maturity’ (2004: 54).

While support for the system seemed strong, only 24% of 16 to 17 year-olds considered the classification system to be influential in their own viewing choices. This contrasts with the younger group (age 13 to 15), of whom 38% considered the classifications influential (2004: 20). A later representative survey by the Australian OFLC, Classification Study, found that 90% of 14 to 17 year-olds agreed (42% strongly agreed) with the statement that it is ‘useful to have classification symbols for movies and games’ (D&M Research, 2005: 32).

USA

Autobiographical Memories of Exposure to Sexual Media Content notes that just under 85% of the participants mentioned incidents of exposure to sexual content in films rated R or above, meaning they were under the recommended age to view the films at the time of exposure (Cantor, Mares and Hyde, 2003: 13). Of the respondents discussing an incidence of exposure that happened when they were under 13 years old, 76.2% described a film rated R or above (2003: 17).

Discussion

The differences in rating or classification systems used by different countries, and for different media, are particularly important when it comes to children and young people. Adults can and do view classifications as indicators of suitability both for themselves and others10, but in most cases

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9 The functions of the Australian Office of Film and Literature Classification are now carried out by the Australian Government Attorney-General’s Department and the Australian Classification Board.

10 See our research What people think about film classification systems (OFLC, 2012).
these systems do not, at least to any great extent, actually restrict the viewing choices of adults. The impact on young people however, is often significant — as are the differences amongst systems. Consider an example of a 14 year-old girl wanting access to a restricted game: in New Zealand it is illegal for anyone to supply the game to her, and so it may be quite difficult for her to get access to the game. However, if she were to move to Australia things would be quite different, if the game in question is classified MA15+, she would not be able to purchase the game herself, but a parent or guardian could legally supply the game to her. Furthermore, if she had turned 15 by the time she was in Australia, she would be able to legally purchase it herself. The point here is that differences that may seem minor to an adult can have an impact on young people, and so the differences in young people’s opinions of classifications have to be considered within this context.

Adolescents and Film: Attitudes to Film Classification found that while general satisfaction with the classification system did not vary according to the age of participants, it did vary significantly with their reported frequency of use of the system (Dublin City University, 2005: 5). One explanation for this finding may be that, if young people wish to view restricted content, and consider (from experience) that restrictions are generally unnecessary or unjust, they will simply try their best to ignore them — of course, this can be an issue for adults as well (with regard to banned films). In its qualitative research, IFCO found that:

Among older respondents, censorship often means that they cannot see films that they would consider important (dramatically, artistically) and which are being discussed by some of their peers...

Many respondents also felt an injustice at the fact that other countries have more lenient classification systems...Participants also expressed a sense of the ludicrous nature of classification [because] 15 year olds have ‘seen it all’ anyway and are not shocked by the contents of films for older age groups (2005: 13).

In Challenging Risk, Fenaughty (2010: 78) discusses the ‘cultural currency accrued from knowledge of gaming’ and its importance to many young people’s social lives. More specifically, Fenaughty is discussing restricted games — he notes, for example, that the R18 games in the series Grand Theft Auto were the most frequently referenced in focus groups, and that most participants claimed to have at least seen these games being played. He argues that:

To participate in peer discussions, even if only to have a negative opinion of the game or gaming...one must necessarily have some knowledge of gaming and/or the game/media in question. To the extent that gaming is popular, and particular games are popular, knowledge of these games is a requirement for social connection within these conversations.

It is important for content regulators, parents, and others to seek the views of young people and take them into account. Evidence suggests that classification systems may be more effective if the age restrictions applied, the manner in which they are enforced — and the stated reasons for these restrictions — were not considered to be unreasonable by a significant proportion of the young people they are designed to protect.

See Comparing Classifications (OFLC, 2013) for more information about different classification systems around the world.
Overview of media effects research

This section provides an overview of media effects research as a means of placing the findings of the main body of this review (young people’s views) within the context of the wider body of media effects research.

The available literature on this topic is vast and often highly contested, and this overview is not intended as a comprehensive analysis of the evidence. Rather, we have chosen four reviews/meta-analyses which together cover some of the salient issues and debates in this area. Note that the inclusion of these sources is not necessarily intended as an endorsement of their findings, which are subject to debate.

This section briefly covers the research methodologies employed, while noting some identified strengths and weaknesses. This is followed by summaries of evidence about the potential effects of sexually explicit content, and of violent content.

Information on sources used

The effects of sexual, sexualised and sadistic violence in the media: A review of the research literature (2011, UK)

Included for its:
- Focus on sexual violence, and sadistic violence specifically
- Robust analysis of how research into these areas relates to broader subjects of sexually explicit and violent material
- Strong critique of methodological issues and the state of media effects research generally
- Analysis of the relationship between media effects research and classification systems.

About the research

A literature review conducted by Dr Guy Cumberbatch for the BBFC (British Board of Film Classification). The focus of the review is ‘sexual, sexualised and sadistic’ violence, though it also comments on media effects research into other areas, such as (non-violent) sexually explicit material, and violent material in general. The report states:

Although this review focuses on publications in the last decade, it has been informed by a comprehensive analysis of earlier research. It appears to be unique in its goal to examine the research literature for signposts which might help refine guidelines for film classification (Cumberbatch, 2011a: 4).

"Basically...porn is everywhere": A Rapid Evidence Assessment on the Effects that Access and Exposure to Pornography has on Children and Young People (2013, UK)

Included for its:
- Practical focus on the possible effects of sexually explicit material on young people
- Wide research base and robust, up-to-date analysis
- Incorporation of research into young people’s views alongside media effects research generally.
About the research

A review by Miranda Horvath, Llian Alys, Kristina Massey, Afroditi Pina, Mia Scally and Joanna Adler, focusing on the effects of sexually explicit material on young people. The research was commissioned by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner (OCC) — a national organisation led by the Children’s Commissioner for England — as part of its Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups, in which ‘an emergent issue was whether accessing and viewing pornography can have an impact on children and young people’s expectations and attitudes towards sexual activity and relationships’. The report notes that ‘a narrow time frame was necessary in order to feed into the ongoing Inquiry. This precluded a full literature or systematic review and therefore a question-led REA [rapid evidence assessment] was conducted over three months’.12

The report states that ‘a few robust conclusions can be reached from this REA, but it is apparent that much more research is needed’ (Horvath et al. 2013: 6). 276 studies were included in the final review from a base of 41,000, and ‘initial findings were presented and discussed at a workshop with practitioners, policymakers, academics and members of the OCC team, and subsequently in a workshop with 16 to 18 year-old young people’ (2013: 12).

Harm and Offence in Media Content: a review of the evidence, second edition (2009, UK)

Included for its:

- Comprehensive overview of media effects research generally
- Detailed descriptions of methodological approaches and how they relate to one another.

About the research

By Andrea Millwood Hargrave and Sonia Livingstone. The review examines the risk of harm and offence in relation to media content. It also focuses various media formats specifically; for example television, the internet, and so on (Hargrave and Livingstone, 2009: 11).

Literature review on the impact of playing violent video games on aggression (2010, Australia)

Included for its:

- Evaluation of a controversial subject in media research relating to young people
- Design as a practical aide to inform classification policy in Australia
- Explanation and critique of media effects research relating to violent content generally.

About the research

This review was prepared by the Australian Government Attorney-General’s Department in order to assist ministers responsible for Australia’s National Classification Scheme in coming to a decision about the inclusion of an R18+ classification for videogames13.

12 An REA is a tool for synthesising the available research evidence on a policy issue, as comprehensively as possible, within the constraints of a given timetable (Horvath, et al. 2013: 16).

13 The Australian Classification Scheme has since been amended to include this classification.
Overview of media effects research

What is media effects research?

Hargrave and Livingstone (2009) explain what is meant by ‘media effects’:

Effects research is so-called because it positions the media as a cause and the individual’s behaviour as an effect of that cause (2009: 43).

The basic framework of most methodologies:

However, most theories do not pose mechanistic explanations parallel with physical processes; rather they develop models of psychological processes, combined with statistical (i.e. probabilistic) testing of directional (a → b) hypotheses derived from those models. Further, many theorists acknowledge the bi-directional nature of social influence (e.g. media exposure → aggression → media exposure choices) (2009: 43).

And the use of statistical analysis:

Media effects are generally identified through statistical comparisons (in experiments, between experimental and control groups; in surveys, between high and low exposure groups), a statistically significant finding meaning that the measured difference between the groups would not be expected by chance. The findings are thus probabilistic, and do not imply that each individual in the group is affected equally or even at all (2009: 43).

Limitations of media effects research generally

Hargrave and Livingstone (2009) provide a useful summary of some important methodological limitations:

Despite its vast size, it is widely acknowledged that the body of available research is less than ideal. Many studies are designed to identify correlations not causes. Possible confounding factors tend to be examined where convenient to measure (e.g. age, gender) while key factors may be neglected (e.g. parental mediation, personality, social inequalities, peer norms). Restrictions on research funding are evident in the plethora of studies with small samples and simple measures, and in the paucity of longitudinal designs and the lack of good replications (2009: 41-42).

But also note some positive aspects:

On the positive side, much of the research has been funded by public bodies, conducted by independent researchers, and published in peer-reviewed journals available in the public domain (2009: 42).

Cumberbatch (2011a) expresses concern about a lack of practical applicability:

The research is limited both in aims and methods. There is an absence of any applied imperative so that studies tend to accumulate theoretical rather than actual evidence of harm (2011a: 22-23).

In the samples commonly used:

Most effects studies use undergraduate students (mainly in psychology) earning course credits. This is a potentially major source of artefact (2011a: 3).

And how people’s opinions are measured:

Quite apart from this issue, participants who have strong views about issues such as violent pornography can only express their opinions through the constraints of the research method. For
example, measures taken such as Rape Myth Acceptance then become the only way of communicating an opinion and so generate their own source of artefact (2011a: 23).

Cumberbatch also noted that research was lacking which took into account people’s individual differences:

Although most of the effects research has been carried out by psychologists, it is surprising that individual differences tend to have been quite neglected...Undoubtedly, dispositions, traits and attitudes moderate media experiences. Despite this, experiments on pornography, for example, all seem to assume that the audience is homogenous - that viewers will be aroused by the material (rather than disgusted and made angry), that all viewers are heterosexual and so on. (2011a: 21).

**Summary of current evidence — effects of sexually explicit and violent content**

Cumberbatch (2011a: 2) notes that researchers’ focus has been on the effects of sexual and violent content — on the internet and in videogames. Cumberbatch summed up his views about the state of this research as follows:

The effects of sex and violence in the mass media have been a source of continuing controversy both within and outside academic communities. This has been true of each medium covered over the years and all of the issues investigated. Four decades ago claims began that ‘an increasing weight of evidence’ was accumulating on the harms caused by sex and violence in the media. Similar claims are made today and yet current disagreements are more adversarial than ever (2011a: 6).

Cumberbatch notes that the majority of empirical studies into the effects of violent, sexual or sexually violent content ‘claim some evidence of harm’, however:

...critics question what the evidence really shows, pointing out the limitations of the research endeavours both conceptually and in their own terms (2011a: 6).

**Violent content**

*Example: violence in videogames*

*Literature review on the impact of playing violent video games on aggression* stated that much of the research into violent videogames indicated ‘a small to moderate risk factor in later aggressive behaviour, at least in the short-term’.

It cautioned, however, that a ‘number of problems’ with these findings ‘reduce their policy relevance’, stating that: ‘there is mixed evidence as to whether VVGs have a greater impact on children’; ‘there is stronger evidence of short-term VVG effects than of long-term effects’; ‘the possibility that third variables (like aggressive personality, family and peer influence, socio-economic status) are behind the effect has not been well explored’; ‘researchers who argue that VVGs cause aggression have not engaged with or disproved alternative theories propagated by their critics’; ‘there is little evidence that violent video games have a greater impact than other violent media’; ‘In conclusion, research into the effects of VVGs on aggression is contested and inconclusive’ (Australian Government Attorney-General’s Department, 2010: 5).

Furthermore, the report noted ‘problems with the concept of “aggression”’ — critics have argued that ‘it is imprecisely defined and measured using unstandardised tests which may not apply in the real world’ (2010: 5).
The debate about violent videogames

The review suggested that ‘academic literature on the impacts of violent videogames can be characterised as a debate between two broad schools of thought: “causationists” and “critics of causationists”’ (2010: 6-7):

‘Causationists’ are those who see violent content in video games as the direct cause of effects in game players. Causationists have consistently argued that playing VVGs increases the risk that participants in laboratory and survey-based studies will behave, think and feel, more aggressively (2010: 6).

‘Critics of causationists’ focus on the impact of VVGs as being determined by context. They tend to look at the player’s interpretation of game content and a range of social, economic, cultural and even biological factors. In general, critics of the ‘causationist’ perspective come from disciplines such as cultural and media studies, sociology or ethnography, and tend to base their work on more qualitative measures. Recently however, psychologists such as Christopher Ferguson have used quantitative methods to reach differing conclusions about VVG effects (2010: 6).

The report points out the ‘highly contested nature of the literature’14:

The most important contribution made recently to this debate is a 2010 meta-analysis by a large number of causationist researchers.34 This meta-analysis is the most wide-ranging and comprehensive conducted so far...The authors conclude that VVG play is a causal risk factor for aggressive behaviour. Lead author Craig Anderson stated that this will likely be his last meta-analysis of the VVG literature, because of its definitive findings.37 Another researcher, L. Rowell Huesmann, also claims the debate has been effectively settled38 (2010: 14).

A critical commentary of the 2010 study casts doubt on these assertions.39 Christopher Ferguson and John Kilburn criticise various aspects of the causationists’ methodology [and] accuse causationists of inventing a ‘phantom youth violence crisis’. Causationist authors have defended themselves against these criticisms40 (2010: 14).


14 See also: Cumberbatch, 2011a: 6.
Different types of violence and the level of potential harm

The report stated that research was lacking into ‘the question of severity of violent content (eg, cartoonish violence vs realistic violence) and whether it has differing effects’:

Some studies appear to show games featuring cartoonish violence are just as harmful as games featuring realistic violence. It is not known whether socially acceptable violence (such as in the course of playing sports) has a different effect to antisocial violence (2010: 5).

Sexual violence

Effects on people in general

*The effects of sexual, sexualised and sadistic violence in the media: A review of the research literature*, states that ‘while the majority of studies claim some harm from mediated sexual violence, there are grounds for scepticism over the quality of the evidence and whether it shows cause and effect’ (Cumberbatch, 2011a: 2):

Internationally, recorded crime rates have fallen at a time of increased availability of sexually violent materials - especially through the internet. However claims of media inspired crimes are inadequately investigated (2011a: 2).

Cumberbatch also found that:

Many authors suggest that audiences will not all be harmed by sexually violent material, but that certain people might be - such as those who are predisposed to violence against women. If true, this would help explain the rather uneven evidence of harm in the existing literature (2011a: 11).

Research limitations

Cumberbatch found that:

The overriding deficiency in the research literature is that little attempt is made to differentiate between different kinds of content in different kinds of media (2011a: 4).

And that ‘there are major gaps in knowledge about sexual or sadistic or even graphic violence in the media’, including: ‘claims about media inspired/copycat crime’; ‘the impact of cultural varieties in films and in audiences’; and ‘media roles in the development of deviant thoughts’ (2011a: 2-3).

Cumberbatch recommended that the BBFC carry out more research into the opinions of UK audiences about ‘where to draw the line in terms of perceived harm and acceptability of depictions of sexual, sexualised and sadistic violence’ (2011a: 3).

Sexually explicit content

Effects on young people

Horvath et al. (2013: 7) found that ‘access and exposure to pornography affect children and young people’s sexual beliefs’:

For example, pornography has been linked to unrealistic attitudes about sex; maladaptive attitudes about relationships; more sexually permissive attitudes; greater acceptance of casual sex; beliefs that women are sex objects; more frequent thoughts about sex; sexual uncertainty (e.g. the extent to which children and young people are unclear about their sexual beliefs and values); and less progressive gender role attitudes (e.g. male dominance and female submission).
Is it harmful?

Cumberbatch (2011a: 10) cited reviews which challenge the idea that sexually explicit material is harmful: Diamond (2009) ‘completely rejected the idea that it supported concerns about pornography, concluding that sexually explicit material is ‘without evidence of harm’:

Two additional reviews commissioned by the regulator Ofcom had a narrower focus on the evidence of harm to minors from exposure to R18 sexual material. These comprehensive evaluations of the literature by Helsper (2005) and by Cumberbatch (in press)\(^\text{15}\) both concluded that there was no conclusive evidence of any deleterious impact.

However, Horvath et al. (2013: 7-8) found that ‘access and exposure to pornography are linked to children and young people’s engagement in “risky behaviours”’:

For example, young people who used pornography were more likely to report having had anal sex, sex with multiple partners and using alcohol and drugs during sex (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009). However, the majority of the research that has found this is cross-sectional and/or correlational, therefore causal relationships cannot be established.

Research limitations

Horvath et al. (2013) found limited evidence about ‘cultural or subcultural effects on young people’s attitudes and behaviours towards and stemming from pornography’ (2013: 9), further noting that:

Few papers reviewed for this REA – whether they were included or excluded – even began to consider the effects of pornography on children and young people who were: an ethnicity other than the majority for the country in which the research was conducted; a sexuality other than heterosexual; transgender; or anything other than able-bodied and with full capacity (relative to their development) (2013: 10).

Horvath et al. also found that:

- ‘Potential associations between pornography and pathological behaviour are not clear’.
- ‘Parameters and possible intersections between sexualised and violent imagery and pornography are contested and unresolved’.
- ‘Causal relationships between pornography and associated expectations, attitudes and behaviours are still to be elucidated’.
- ‘Problems with operational definitions of key terms made comparison challenging. These problems included limited knowledge of children and young people’s conceptions or understanding of pornography’ (2013: 9-10).

And note that there is insufficient research focusing on the content of sexually explicit material, and:

\[\ldots\text{whether there is anything particular about what children and young people are exposed to or access [and that] the issue is of utmost importance given claims that pornography has become more hard core, explicitly degrading and dehumanising, and with a greater focus on aggressive sexual activity}\ (2013: 8).\]

General discussion

There is a need for further research exploring young people’s views about media content

The relative lack of evidence about young people’s views about potentially harmful or challenging media content is identified as a research gap by a number of sources included in this review. For example, in *Challenging Risk* Fenaughty (2010: 209) calls for research exploring the views of young people about ‘which types of inappropriate content are experienced as uncomfortable or disturbing, and how did young people encounter such contents?’ He also notes that:

> The quality and type of distressing contents may evolve as young people age, suggesting that more research is required to identify what may be associated with distress among older students (2010: 206).

And Livingstone et al. (2013: 2) point out that:

> Although children are sometimes consulted in policy processes, there are few attempts to explore their perceptions in a systematic or comparative way.

The opinions of young people themselves need to be acknowledged and understood, so that a broad range of evidence is available for the promotion of sound and informed public policy to deal with concerns about potentially harmful media content. Concern about insufficient research applies to all types of media content that may be challenging or distressing to young people.

Further research into young people’s perceptions of rating and classification systems would also be valuable. Evidence suggests that playing age restricted games, in particular, may be a normative activity for young people, particularly teenagers. Strengthening voluntary compliance with age restrictions would require communicating to young people the reasons why restrictions are assigned. In order to do this effectively, understanding young people’s views is essential.

Why is there more research into young people’s views about sexual as opposed to violent content?

There are a greater number of opinion-based studies focusing on young people’s views about sexually explicit content, as opposed to violent or other types of content. One reason for this seems to be that, due to ethical concerns, researchers find it difficult, if not impossible, to study the effects on young people at the time of exposure to sexually explicit material (ie media effects research), and so research into young people’s opinions about the effects of this content is relied upon. Ethical approval is less complicated for researchers studying the effects of violent content on young people at the time of exposure.

Media effects and opinion-based research should be viewed as complementary

Horvath et al. (2013: 19) make the interesting point that those in their focus groups (16 to 18 year-olds) expressing the opinion that explicit content had no effect on children and young people ‘found it almost impossible to construct arguments that supported this view’ — suggesting that none of the participants genuinely believed it had no effect. This highlights the inherent difficulties of assessing what young people (or people generally) truly think about the issues being raised, or if a reasonably clear assessment of such views is even attainable. This problem certainly reaffirms the important place that both qualitative and quantitative analysis have in any understanding of such matters — but every minor difference in the context (including the time and place), sample construction, terms, phrases and questions raised — and of course the way in which researchers interpret and present
their findings — undoubtedly influences the final results. Such issues suggest that policy should not be formulated using opinion-based research alone. Traditional media effects research should also be considered, but unfortunately, finding answers in this way is no easier.

Much media effects research seeks to establish whether media content influences the way young people think, feel or act, though it is rare for young people to be asked for their own opinion about these matters. Data from research into the views of young people are not directly comparable to most media effects research — which is, by and large, providing different answers to a different set of questions; a distinction that may be overlooked. Each method should be thought of as complementary, if we wish to have a fuller understanding of young people’s relationship with media content. Opinion-based evidence shows that young people do not discount the idea that media content may be influential, or even harmful. In fact, our qualitative engagement with young people shows that young people do not generally question that content such as sex or violence may have an effect on people — particularly those younger than themselves.
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