YOUNG NEW ZEALANDERS VIEWING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Discussion group findings

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Foreword by Chief Censor Dr Andrew Jack

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. International research shows that repeated exposure to violent entertainment content leads to increased use of violence to resolve disputes, increases tolerance for violent behaviour, and reduces empathy for our fellow human beings. The research shows that the long term effects of such exposure on young people and children is particularly significant[1].

Given that there is real concern in New Zealand about sexual violence in wider society, it is perhaps surprising that to-date there has been no New Zealand research on the impact of sexual violence in entertainment media. For that reason I am pleased to introduce to you our most recent research report *Young New Zealanders Viewing Sexual Violence*. This research is important because it focuses on young New Zealanders, sexual violence and the impact of entertainment media in particular.

The young people we consulted had varying levels of understanding of what sexual violence is. This research shows that some young people have potentially harmful attitudes and misconceptions about the nature of sexual violence, while most did not demonstrate an ability to recognise and critically reflect on potential biases and myths about sexual violence perpetuated in entertainment media. The challenges involved in dealing with depictions of sexual violence were found to be particularly demanding for younger participants.

The young people who participated in the research clearly identified the harms which flow from depictions of sexual violence in entertainment media consistent with the international studies on violence generally.

The young people involved in the study generally supported age restrictions for depictions of sexual violence, particularly graphic sexual violence, and the research shows that young people want more and better information rather than less when making viewing choices. This conclusion is consistent with previous research into young people's views about the classification system in New Zealand[2], and with our recent survey of the wider public[3].

This report is the first component of our wider consultation project – talking with young people, NGOs, government officials, academics and others to explore the effects of sexual violence in entertainment media. The research provides solid data of real relevance about young Kiwis' understanding of sexual violence and the impact that it is having on our community. It will contribute to an improved understanding of the complex social drivers of sexual violence in New Zealand, and will provide an invaluable resource to help inform the entertainment content regulation law reform process announced by the Minister of Justice in August 2016. I accordingly commend this research to all those with an interest in the social impact of depictions of sexual violence in entertainment media in New Zealand.

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[1] Bushman and Huesman, 2006. "Short-term and Long-term Effects of Violent Media on Aggression in Children and Adults". *Archives of Paediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, Vol 160, April 2006.
[2] Colmar Brunton, 2013. *Young People's Perceptions of the Classification System and Potential Harms from Media Content: Discussion Group Findings*. Wellington, NZ: Office of Film and Literature Classification.
[3] Colmar Brunton, 2016. *Understanding the Classification System: New Zealanders' Views*. Wellington, NZ: Office of Film and Literature Classification.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose of the research

The Office of Film and Literature Classification (the Classification Office) is the government body responsible for classifying films, games and other publications that may need to be restricted or banned. Sexual violence forms part of the legal classification criteria, and the Classification Office has noticed an increasing prevalence of sexual violence in material submitted for classification. This has coincided with rising public awareness and concern about sexual violence in wider society. Sexual violence is a complex social problem and its depiction and impact on audiences is not well understood, particularly with respect to young people. While there is research into the effects of depictions of violence or sexual content on young people, the Classification Office could not find any data relating to sexual violence specifically. Note that this report is the first component of our wider research project in which we are consulting with NGOs, government officials, academics and others to explore the effects of sexual violence in entertainment media. Further reports of findings will be released in due course.

The Classification Office commissioned Colmar Brunton to carry out research to understand and explore the views of young New Zealanders (aged 14 to 17). In undertaking this research the Classification Office hoped to gather evidence about the impact of media representations of sexual violence, specifically on children and teenagers.

Our five core questions were:

- What do young people think 'sexual violence' is? What does the term mean?
- How are young people affected by sexual violence in the media? What are the potential harms?
- What things in entertainment media might mitigate these harms/impacts?
- Are there positive depictions of sexual violence that may have different effects on young people?
- What restrictions and warnings are appropriate for particular depictions of sexual violence?

Research objectives and methodology

This document reports the findings from four focus groups and one supplementary paired interview with young people. Participants were aged between 14 and 17. Groups were divided by gender and age. Each group was 1-2 hours in duration and was moderated using a semi-structured topic guide that expanded on our core questions.

Main findings and conclusions

Use of entertainment media

- The current research reflected the increased demand for video on demand services by teenagers and declining use of traditional media such as broadcast television or DVDs. This is in line with our recent representative survey[4].

Views about the meaning and perception of 'sexual violence'

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[4] See *Understanding the classification system: New Zealanders' views (2016)*
http://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/PDFs/research-public-understanding-2016.pdf

- Participants understood rape to be sexual violence, but there were differences in understanding of other forms of sexual violence, particularly non-physical behaviour and coercion.
- The older girls' group tended to be the most articulate and to have a clearer sense about the scope of sexual violence.
- Younger participants were more likely to associate the term with the use of physical force, but not with emotional, verbal or other sexually violent behaviour.
- Some of the boys expressed potentially harmful attitudes and misconceptions about the nature of sexual violence.
- With the exception of the older girls, most participants did not demonstrate an ability to recognise and critically reflect on potential biases and myths that may be perpetuated in entertainment media.

Learning about sexual violence from entertainment media

- Some participants said they learn about issues (including sexual violence) from entertainment media and that this impacts on their thinking.

Recognising sexual violence in entertainment media

- Older participants demonstrated the ability to recognise sexual violence and discuss issues about how it is portrayed in entertainment media in a reasonably sophisticated manner.
- Younger participants often lacked the vocabulary necessary to explain the sexually violent behaviour they viewed on screen.
- The research suggests maturation by age and life experience may be necessary before a young person is able to recognise that what they are seeing on screen is sexual violence, articulate this and understand issues around its portrayal.

Sexual violence on social media

- Participants had some awareness of sexual violence on social media but it is not evident from the research that it is a particularly common feature of their social media use.

The purpose of portraying sexual violence

- Older participants were beginning to think critically about why certain depictions are included in the content they view.
- The older girls in particular emphasised that sexual violence on screen could be appropriate if portraying realistic, victim/survivor-orientated experiences, and that they should not be included for otherwise gratuitous purposes.

How different audiences react to viewing sexual violence

- Participants demonstrated the ability to reflect on how their viewing choices might affect themselves. Older participants were generally more self-aware and critical than their younger counterparts.
- A core concern was whether or not the viewer understood the sexual violence on screen. Most of the participants suggested that younger viewers would be more susceptible to misunderstanding.
- Participants believed one of the key harms of viewing sexual violence is misrepresentations of, or inaccurate depictions of sexual violence.

Harms associated with viewing sexual violence

- The harms of viewing sexual violence that young people identified included: feeling bad, shock and upset, normalisation, perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, undue introduction to sexual violence, misrepresentation of sexual violence and its consequences, nightmares, negative impact on victim/survivors, and imitating or copying behaviour.
- While some participants said they were not personally affected by viewing sexual violence, they acknowledged that there could be negative or harmful effects on some viewers, particularly younger viewers.

Depictions that are more/less harmful

- Participants were asked to consider types of depictions that might be more or less harmful. The older groups indicated that this is very context dependent, however they did identify some features that may make a depiction more or less harmful – including explicitness, realism, suspense and how seriously the matter is treated. Younger participants were less articulate and detailed.

Depictions of sexual violence that have a positive effect

- The research revealed limited observations about positive effects. The older girls suggested a depiction may be positive if it addresses victim/survivor experiences, the emotional impact of sexual violence, and ways of coping with and overcoming trauma. The older girls were the only participants to suggest this.
- The older boys suggested the impact of a depiction and its positive or negative effect was always context dependent.

Gender differences

- The research revealed limited information about how the gender of perpetrators and victim/survivors of sexual violence may affect the impact of depictions.
- The older girls were more aware of problematic portrayals of sexual violence in less typical scenarios, for example violence perpetrated by a woman or against a man.
- The younger boys were less likely to look at depictions critically, and less likely to view sexual violence towards a male as a serious issue. The findings suggest that some depictions of sexual violence may be reinforcing potentially problematic attitudes.

Comedy and cartoon depictions of sexual violence

- There were stark gender differences on the issue of the use of humour, in particular the lack of empathy shown to victim/survivors by many of the boys when the depiction was framed as humorous. Only in the abstract did these boys begin to think more critically about the issues surrounding the use of humour. This clear difference may be related to gendered expectations of, and experiences of sexual violence.
- Both male and female participants eventually agreed that the use of humour in relation to sexual violence was inappropriate, but some did not believe this led to harmful effects on viewers.

Classification of sexual violence

- Despite their self-reported experiences of non-compliance, the research indicates that young people desire more and better information, rather than less, when making viewing choices. Participants generally wanted more specificity in the content warnings.
- A number of participants said it would be helpful to show warnings on screen before viewing commenced, in the style of broadcasting classifications.
- A warning for "rape scenes" was seen as desirable by the majority of participants.
- Participants generally supported age restrictions for depictions of sexual violence, particularly graphic sexual violence.

Young people's compliance with the New Zealand classification system

- Most participants expressed non-compliance with the classification system in one form or another, principally viewing higher restricted content. These participants identified a number of reasons for non-compliance including personal choice, ease of access (particularly to online content), lack of supervision or enforcement and industry non-compliance. They also demonstrated a lack of understanding about the legal requirements of restrictions and labels.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The Office of Film and Literature Classification (the Classification Office) is the government body responsible for classifying films, games and other publications that may need to be restricted or banned. The Classification Office has informally noted an increasing prevalence of sexual violence in material submitted for classification (a matter of concern to the FVPC Act), which has coincided with rising public awareness and concern about sexual violence in wider society. This led to the development of a research and consultation project that aimed to explore the effects of sexual violence in entertainment media, particularly relating to young people. This report focuses on findings from young people. Further reports will be published following consultations with other stakeholders.

The Classification Office developed five core questions as part of the research project:

- What do young people think 'sexual violence' is? What does the term mean?
- How are young people affected by sexual violence in the media? What are the potential harms?
- What things in entertainment media might mitigate these harms/impacts?
- Are there positive depictions of sexual violence that may have different effects on young people?
- What restrictions and warnings are appropriate for particular depictions of sexual violence?

Supplementary questions included:

- What language do young people use to talk about sexual violence?
- What is the 'scale' of sexually violent content (e.g. what is less harmful, what is more harmful)?
- What concerns do young people have about viewing sexually violent content?

The Classification Office also carried out a rapid review of research literature using our core questions, with a particular emphasis on young people's views about sexual violence in movies, games and television shows, and also the potential effects of this content on young people. While there is research into the effects of violence or sexual content on young people, the Classification Office could not find any reports relating to sexual violence specifically.

Research exploring young people's views about potentially harmful content in movies, games, etc. is rare. Our own research in 2013 (including both in a representative survey and focus groups) was notable for focusing on young people's views, and revealed that sexual violence was particularly concerning to young people. However this research did not go into detail about sexual violence specifically. While our literature review was conducted on a tight time-frame and was not intended to be comprehensive, the findings did suggest a clear gap in the literature in relation to young people's views about sexual violence in movies, games and television shows. This is what we have attempted to address with our 2016 research.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach – options considered

The Classification Office with Colmar Brunton investigated a range of different methodological approaches. Group discussions were selected as the most appropriate methodology for this research, as they allowed young people to interact and discuss their perceptions of the sexual violence in entertainment media and the types of harms they associate with it. It was suggested that individual interviews would not be the best approach as it could be intimidating for a young person to speak one-on-one with a researcher given the nature of the topic.

It was noted that there would always be potential for young people to give socially acceptable or biased answers in a group or an individual interview setting. It was hoped this risk would be mitigated by using senior and experienced moderators, by carefully wording the topic guide and probes, and by creating a safe environment for participants. This was assisted by setting expectations in the introduction and by monitoring comments and other cues to avoid bias.

However, it was apparent after the fieldwork was conducted that the group discussion format did not always yield the best data. There was a lack of useful information in the boys' groups in particular. As a result of these concerns, Colmar Brunton opted to conduct an affinity paired interview with two 16 year old boys to supplement the data.

Sample structure and participant sources

The following diagram illustrates the structure of the four focus groups. The groups were separated by gender due to the sensitive nature of some aspects of the discussion. Participants were also separated by age to acknowledge the significant developmental differences between older and younger teenagers.

	Age 14-15	Age 16-17
Male	1 Males aged 14-15	2 Males aged 16-17
Female	3 Females aged 14-15	4 Females aged 16-17

Each group was one to two hours in duration and comprised six to eight young people. Discussions took place in the evenings on 22 and 23 February 2016 in Auckland and Wellington. The supplementary affinity paired interview consisted of two 16 year old boys on 16 June and lasted approximately two hours, in Wellington. A semi-structured topic guide was used during all discussions.

Fieldwork process and techniques

A semi-structured topic guide was developed to explore the research objectives

The topic guide was structured as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Participants' definitions and descriptions
3. Spectrum of sexual violence
4. Depictions in entertainment media
5. Specific questions on depictions
6. Positive outcomes
7. Restrictions and notes
8. Wrap-up and debrief

Moderators were (largely) gender matched to group composition

Female moderators conducted the two sessions with girls and a male moderator conducted the two sessions with boys. A female moderator conducted the supplementary paired interview with the two 16 year old boys, with assistance from a male Classification Office staff member.

Audio-visual clips were used as prompts throughout the discussion

Care was taken to ensure the clips were age-appropriate to the specific group. The assignment of clips to groups were as follows:

The younger groups were shown clips from the following films and television shows

- *Glee* (classified M)
- *Family Guy* (classified R13)
- *Easy A* (classified M)

The older groups were shown clips from the following films and television shows

- *Family Guy* (classified R13)
- *Watchmen* (classified R16)
- *Jack and Diane* (classified R16)

Ethical Considerations

Triggering content and self-disclosure

Due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, advice was sought from specialist sexual violence agencies about the best approach to dealing with any issues that might arise – for example if content was triggering to any participants who may have experienced sexual violence in their own lives. It was determined that every group should have an appropriately qualified support person present who would be able to support participants if and where necessary, and to be available for a debrief after the sessions.

Gender sensitivity

It was identified that by splitting the groups by gender there was the potential to lose cross-gender discussion and interaction, however it was felt, on balance, that it was more important to ensure young

people felt comfortable making comments by assigning them to gender-specific groups given the nature of the subject matter.

LGBTI-inclusive

Colmar Brunton's approach to recruitment was to allow all participants to specify which gender identity they most identify with (as an open question asked as one of the screening questions). Participants were given the option to nominate their preferred gender identity and were allocated to the appropriate group based on their response. Any participants that did not feel comfortable with the binary identity of male or female were given the option to be interviewed in a paired interview setting if they wished. This approach meant that Colmar Brunton did not impose any gender-specific labels, and non-gender binary young people were given the opportunity to take part.

Notes on terminology

Throughout this report, the term 'young people' refers to the participants in the five groups, or to people under 18 in general depending on context. Any differences by group (for example by age or gender) are highlighted where appropriate.

Participants were given the opportunity to explain what they thought the term 'sexual violence' means. Their understanding of the term provides a framework for our analysis of findings.

DETAILED FINDINGS

How participants consume entertainment content

In order to understand the impact viewing sexual violence may have on young people, it is first necessary to understand young people's viewing habits. It was apparent that some participants did not watch broadcast television and did not have an interest in any specific genre of entertainment content. The boys' groups were more likely to mention playing video games than the girls' groups. The younger girls' group in particular suggested at a general decline in broadcast television viewing.

> *Some TVs aren't hooked up to an actual TV so we will just watch an old TV series.*

That said, all of the participants reported that they watch content online. While some streamed their content legally through legitimate streaming services operating in New Zealand, some mentioned streaming content illegally through websites or portals. In all groups there was general discussion about having unlimited access to movies and shows they wanted to watch when they want to because of the internet.

> ***Now with the internet, whatever you wanna watch, you can just watch so easily without any enforcement so it's like, there's no way to get caught or anything***

Most participants referred to examples of watching content that is legally restricted from them. Both of the younger groups discussed watching R16 and R18 content and older groups discussed watching R18 content.

> *[Male participant 16 years old] I think most people our age would have watched R18.*

Some participants said they watch content with their parents or family members, while others said that their parents do not watch content with them or supervise their content consumption.

> *I just say I'm going to go to my room, and then watch it there.*

The discussion about viewing habits in this research reflects other research conducted by the Classification Office regarding young people's viewing habits.[5] Both pieces of research reflect the increased demand for video-on-demand services by teenagers. This trend suggests that a more robust form of classification on the internet is required if young people are to be protected from harmful content.

The issues around unlimited access to content, lack of parental supervision and engagement with the content young people are viewing, and the ability to avoid enforcement is related to the compliance theme discussed from page 35 of this report.

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[5] *Understanding the classification system: New Zealanders' views (2016)*
http://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/PDFs/research-public-understanding-2016.pdf

Young people's views about the meaning and perception of 'sexual violence'

Participants were asked about the term 'sexual violence', how they defined it, or what they associated with the term. The responses go directly to answering our first core question. The girls' groups (and the older boys in the supplementary interview) were asked what they thought 'sexual violence' meant. The boys' groups were asked what associations they made with the term 'sexual violence'. The issue of different definitions and understandings of sexual violence was also discussed.

It was suggested, and later agreed upon by all participants in the older girls' group, that sexual violence was *anything obtained through violence or with no consent.*

> **Yeah, I mean anything with no consent is not sex, its rape in my opinion.**

The older girls discussed a range of terms associated with sexually violent behaviour from rape to sexual harassment. There was also a long discussion about how it was problematic that films romanticise violence in relationships, particularly stalking.

> *…take Fifty Shades of Grey, for example, you get the people who completely romanticize and think it's the ideal, you know, they'd like to have that and then there's some people who call it abuse…*
>
> *And it's a really, like, abusive relationship.*

The older girls identified a range of problematic tropes and behaviours such as

- presenting a character like *she's a challenge* and *being seen to be playing hard to get*
- people not getting what they want and resorting to violence
- persuasion to the point of forcing someone - *won't take no for an answer sort of thing*
- 'revenge porn' – *breaking down their reputations*
- gendered stereotypes that perpetuate harmful behaviour – *yeah especially in terms of characters, where they're considered a prude or, you know, over the top, like, you know, they're the good girls…*

The older girls agreed that sexual violence was an issue of power.

> *Yeah, I also think like what sort of positions of power you're in.*

Other comments were made suggesting that any person could be a perpetrator or victim/survivor of sexual violence regardless of gender, and that older generations may not have the same understanding as young people about what sexual violence is.

> *…the people especially in our age group at school and with sort of modernised thinking would get it. Although some of the older generations, but this is just a generalisation …*
>
> **Sexual assault is sexual assault no matter of the gender.**

Finally, the older girls believed that there were some issues with the perception of the term sexual violence:

> *I think it's just the connotations of the word 'violence' that just, cos, you know, in lots of media you'll see sexual violence in a way that isn't necessarily, you know, you can look at it and be like, ah, you know, that's cat calling that's a form of sexual violence, that's sexual harassment. I think*

> *it's just the connotations with the word 'violence' that just mean that are going to be on one end of the spectrum just completely and utterly extreme and horrible.*
>
> **I do clearly think the inclusion of the word "violence" puts it in a different perspective for a lot of people.**

The older boys' group made a number of associations with the term 'sexual violence', such as:

> *Abuse, inequality, stereotypes, police, drug use, alcohol.*
>
> *Abuse, rape, drugs, un-consensual sex.*
>
> *Rape, assault, vulnerability, weakness.*
>
> *Rape, stereotypes, the projection of women like on TV, comments on TV about women…*

When the matters raised were unpacked further the older boys identified a range of examples of what they believed sexually violent behaviour to be:

> *Could be like any part of a relationship, like if he is frustrated go screw with her and just mess her up, just do whatever he wants to her. And it can be the other way round as well like the girl can be doing it to the guy.*
>
> *Being taken advantage of through violence you know.*
>
> *If someone is weak in their mind then probably, it might be consensual, but it might not, they're not thinking along the same lines.*
>
> *It's like, using them as objects, they treat them more as objects, that's how it comes across.*
>
> **Like maybe if the guy in the relationship not thinking the woman is worth anything so he can just do what he wants to her.**

One of the younger boys made an interesting comment when shown the *Glee* clip:

> *I reckon it wouldn't be rape because he said yes so it can't be classed as not wanting it cause if he would have still gone and had sex with him then it would have been rape cause forced on, but he said yes…*

The younger girls also understood sexual violence as meaning the lack of consent, although without specifically using the term 'consent' (although some later suggested they knew what the term meant without providing a definition or explanation):

> *…touching where you don't want to be touched.*
>
> *…persuading them into having sex when they didn't really want to. That's bad because they should have their own say.*

One of the younger girls noted the issue of physicality as a dynamic in sexual violence:

> *And sometimes when they're kind of stronger than you it's kind of harder to get them off you.*

Younger boys presented a range of answers when asked what they associated with sexual violence. For example:

Sexual abuse and rape.

Taking advantage of people, rape and abuse.

Money, women dressed quite slutty, prostitution.

They agreed that peer pressure was associated with sexual violence, without expanding further on this. They also presented mixed opinions on what constituted sexual violence after being shown the *Easy A* clip:

Not sexual violence.

...that would be if he like slapped her or punched her or, like, yeah, that would be sexual violence. Or even just kissing and grabbing her.

…it's sort of like the beginning of sexual violence.

It could count as sexual violence.

In the supplementary older boys' group, participants identified sexual violence as doing something to someone without their consent. They used terms and phrases such as:

Abusive

…against that persons will

…persisting to do something after they've been told to stop

They also noted that it could be both physical and verbal and, when prompted, noted the impacts of sexual violence:

They'd probably make them feel bad and then ah, maybe like they are in a situation they can't get out of.

Can also have long term effects of feeling, like, lack of confidence and stuff.

One participant made an interesting comment about how he believed there was a difference between how the law defines sexual violence and (mis)conceptions of sexual violence:

I guess the law's sort of seen as, things depend, the law can't work like that so…I guess there could be maybe a situation where there was a misunderstanding or something and someone like… so the law makes them seem like they've done something wrong but they didn't think they did…

The older girls' group had the most in-depth discussion about what they understood sexual violence to be and how it was presented in entertainment content. They also identified some additional behaviours and stereotypes that none of the other groups associated with sexual violence. They tended to be more articulate than the other groups and to have a clearer sense of what sexual violence was. The older groups broadly demonstrated a more sophisticated understanding of sexual violence than their younger peers, although this margin appeared to shrink in the case of the older boys when compared to the

younger boys and younger girls groups. An interesting point of difference was the fact that the older boys' group appeared to best articulate their understandings of sexual violence within the context of relationships, compared to when they were asked to give a definition or associate sexual violence with other terms.

The comments of some of the boys may be indicative of potentially problematic attitudes about sexual violence, for example that saying 'yes' means that someone has consented to sex regardless of subsequent behaviour indicating they do not wish to have sex, and that someone forcing themselves on another person may be the result of a simple misunderstanding. Participants in the younger boys' group demonstrated other underlying biases and misunderstandings in their associations with sexual violence, for example associating it with "slutty" behaviour and "prostitution". However, participants in the older boys' group associated sexual violence with derogatory comments towards women, suggesting that their views about representations of women and sexual violence had matured with age.

As might have been expected, all participants understood rape to be sexual violence, however there were differences as to what constituted less conventionally understood sexually violent behaviour, particularly emotional or verbal manipulation and coercion.

The older girls' group was the only group who did not use the term 'sex' interchangeably with 'sexual violence', for instance they did not describe sexual violence as un-consensual sex or forced sex in the way participants in other groups did. They were also the only group to verbalise that the word 'violence' potentially had loaded connotations, although this could also be extrapolated from the discussion of other groups. For example, boys were more likely to associate sexual violence with the use of physical force rather than other forms of coercion or lack of consent.

All of this is interesting from a classification perspective and a wider research perspective. Broadly, the findings suggest that it would be undue to overestimate young people's understandings of sexual violence, particularly those under the age of 16. The language used around sexual violence is particularly important. It is useful to know that young people (generally) do not appear to have a particularly wide vocabulary on the matter; they appear likely to associate the term 'sexual violence' with physical force, but not emotional, verbal or other sexually violent behaviour. Furthermore, reflecting on, and being critical of potential biases and myths that may be perpetuated in entertainment media, may be outside the competencies of most young people.

Learning about sexual violence from the media

Participants made brief comments about how viewers may learn about sexual violence from the content they view. These comments speak to the issue of how media shapes understandings of sexual violence, and also how audiences might be impacted by viewing sexual violence. Importantly, the comments were not loaded with positive or negative connotations.

One of the older girls suggested that what the media portrays can have a normalising effect and provides social cues:

> *…because, you know, we do get cues about society from media*

One of the older boys noticed differences between himself and a peer that had unsupervised viewing:

> *He sees it, I've seen it like where he sees like stuff like this as like normal just cause he's watched it on TV and no one has sort of told him otherwise.*

The supplementary older boys participants also commented on the learning/messaging effect:

> *…it's like the only thing that they've seen, so that's all they know*

The younger boys recognised that a variety of social influences have an impact on their views: *it's like all around*. In particular they saw media influence as having a positive, effect such as preparing them for future challenges:

> *So you're ready to face like obstacles that you might come across, and could make you more mature and responsible.*

Conversely, one participant recognised a desensitisation effect which had impacted on his thinking:

> *…oh it is wrong, but since I have been watching it for so long it's normal, it's like what we see every day on TV. Kind of like real.*

Comments suggest that some participants believed they did learn about issues from the media and that this impacted on their thinking. Whether or not this learning/messaging effect is harmful is more likely to depend on the content and context of a film or game and is discussed later on in this report.

Understanding depictions of sexual violence: how sexual violence is portrayed and its impact

Recognising sexual violence in entertainment media

It is important to know the extent to which young people are able to identify sexual violence in entertainment media and how they understand these depictions.

Participants were asked if they could think of examples where they had viewed sexual violence. They were also shown clips and asked to explain what they saw and whether they thought the clips contained sexual violence.

The older girls identified a range of behaviours in entertainment content that they believed amounted to sexual violence. This led to more thoughtful discussions about how sex, consent, and sexual violence is portrayed. For example, they discussed the portrayal of inebriated characters in intimate contexts and how this presented challenges to the idea of consent:

> *…they can't consent fully because their brain isn't perhaps working the way that it would when it was sober and so, I think, even if one of, even if they were both, you know, completely wasted and both wanted to do it with each other, it still comes under the whole category of well neither of them could consent.*

They also noted how the lack of representation of contraceptive use throws up issues of consent:

> *…it's sort of a trope that it's really awkward to buy contraception so they don't or it's just like awkward to put it on or whatever. Like, so they don't.*

> *Or get carried away in the moment and don't have time to put a condom on. [Laughter].*

> *I mean, the thing is, like, are both the parties equally accepting of that?*

At one point in the discussion, attention was drawn to the relationship between masculinity, homophobia and sexual violence:

> *…there's something to do with the stereotype that a lot of straight men have of gay men that, you know, if I find, like if I find a gay man [laughter] if I, you know, and interacting with a gay man, he is going to rape me because whoa, that's what men do. To men, if a gay man wants to have sex with me because I am a man and gay men have sex with other men, [Laughter] he won't be able to control himself which I think just puts, you know, sheds some light on how men, I guess, think about some of the actions that they do.*

In these ways and others the older girls demonstrated that they were able to recognise and reflect on sexual violence and other complex issues in entertainment media. Some believed that the expectations a viewer had before engaging with content would often define what they would see on screen, including whether or not they were expecting a scene of sexual violence. When they were shown the clips they were also able to immediately and definitively identify sexual violence:

> *They literally just showed a rape scene.*

The older boys group identified that there was spectrum of sexual violence shown in entertainment content, ranging from extreme behaviour such as rape to other behaviour further down the spectrum:

> **…calling the woman a bitch and all that sort of stuff you know so it's a lower spectrum of wrong but still…**

The older boys also discussed the portrayal of inebriated characters in intimate contexts and that this did not excuse sexually coercive behaviour:

> *Screws up your thinking if you have too much.*
>
> *[Facilitator: Right.]*
>
> *You don't think about the consequences.*
>
> *[Okay.]*
>
> *Because your confidence grows.*
>
> *[Okay does it excuse that in any way?]*
>
> *No.*
>
> *[So if the next day you say sorry about that I was a bit drunk, does that work?]*
>
> *No.*

When the older boys were shown the clips they too were able to immediately and definitively identify sexual violence. Some candidly suggested that discussing viewing sexual violence was not something done in their households.

> *…not a normal conversation.*

The older boys in the supplementary interview also recognised some tropes common to depictions of sexual violence in entertainment media.

…it is usually committed by like bad people in a film, like evil people, so the audience gets the idea that, that this is not right

I can just think of it like being abusive and um, I suppose particularly against women…Yeah like the male being the strong figure in the relationship and the women being weak, like that's taken advantage of…

They suggested the subtlety of some depictions of sexual violence might be lost on some viewers:

Yeah, you might think that it's only sexual violence if its real extreme when in actual fact like something little might happen and you think oh that's ok cause it's not that bad compared to what you've seen.

The younger groups were less confident when identifying sexual violence in entertainment content. One of the younger girls discussed an example where the realism of a depiction proved to be a challenge:

It was a movie I don't know what it was called. I thought this was real life I was like damn, what.

Younger groups were shown less explicit examples of coercive behaviour and stumbled somewhat when trying to describe what they saw and finding the appropriate language to classify it:

Its harassment. It that the right word?

They were more confident when discussing issues of on-screen sobriety and consent:

Drinking or drunk or sober doesn't matter it's still wrong.

He might have been in a different kind of mind-set at that time but then you still can't pressure because he could have been like a bit sober.

The younger boys also struggled to describe what they saw and find the appropriate language to classify it:

[Glee clip] I can't really explain it.

Sort of trying to convince like peer pressure the other guy to do stuff with him but yeah he didn't really want it.

Because he was forcing the other guy to do what he wanted.

[Easy A clip] I don't know…she could have done something wrong, somewhere but from that he does look like a jerk.

It is encouraging that older participants had the ability to recognise sexual violence and discuss issues about how it is portrayed in entertainment media in a reasonably sophisticated manner. While they were not shown the less explicit examples of sexual violence in the sessions (*Glee* and *Easy A*), their discussions indicated that they would have had less difficulty talking about this content than the younger participants.

Younger participants had a more limited view about what could be considered sexual violence, and did not have the vocabulary necessary to explain the behaviour they viewed on screen. The participant that provided the example of thinking *this was real life* revealed that she was not in that case able to distinguish fictional depictions from reality. The comments of the younger boys group in particular reveal that these participants did not know how to describe what they saw on screen and that some were

beginning to form potentially harmful attitudes, including that victim/survivors may in some way deserve to be assaulted.

This is of concern from a classification perspective. This affirms the conclusion made earlier that we cannot over-estimate younger teenagers' ability to identify sexual violence in entertainment content or presuppose that a warning will enable them to confidently make good viewing choices, particularly if the language of the warning is complex. This difference between the groups suggests maturation/ delineated by age and life experience is necessary before a young person is able to recognise that what they are seeing on screen is sexual violence and understand issues around its portrayal.

Media case: sexual violence on social media

Social media is of interest to the Classification Office because, very occasionally, we classify publications lifted from social media platforms and have noted the increasing prevalence of young people accessing entertainment content online. Technological convergence means that traditional means of delivering entertainment content are evolving and it is important for the Classification Office to keep abreast of these developments.

In the younger groups and in the supplementary interview with the older boys, participants were asked if they had seen sexual violence depicted on social media. In the older girls group the matter came up naturally (albeit briefly) through discussion. One of the older girls believed that revenge porn (somewhat similar to that depicted in the *Jack and Diane* clip) would be picked up by and taken down by internet service providers.

The younger girls suggested that seeing violence and "slut-shaming" is more likely on social media than depictions of what they understood to be sexual violence. One participant, when asked if they had seen sexual violence on Facebook or the like, said *we are more likely to see it in real life*. One section of their discussion is particularly compelling:

> *There were guys I think skiting about getting girls drunk and having sex with them.*
>
> *[Facilitator] But do guys think it's funny to do that sort of stuff or do they think it's good to do that stuff?*
>
> *They get praised for it and we get called slut.*
>
> *Yeah.*
>
> *Because they get them drunk and then she doesn't know what she is doing.*
>
> *[Facilitator] So do you see discussion about that sort of thing on Facebook or other social media?*
>
> *Men are treated like gods ay? They're so stupid it is not even funny. Like they talk about it with their friends and like they talk to a girl and we are like you know you are just weird.*
>
> *When they try act hard in front of their friends and then when they go to the girls, oh no.*

The younger boys acknowledged that seeing some sexual violence content on news feeds on social media. The older boys in the supplementary interview believed sexual violence material was not something they commonly found on the internet.

In effect, it appeared that participants had some awareness of sexual violence on social media, but it is not evident from the discussion that it is a particularly common feature of their internet use or that they seek it out, or would reveal this in a group setting.

The responses of the older girls' group and the older boys in the supplementary interview could potentially be a cause for concern. There is a significant amount of sexually violent material available on the internet, whether it is intended for entertainment or otherwise. While this lack of awareness could be a product of their lack of exposure, it may also be the case that young people may not be able to recognise sexual violence material in online spaces. The belief that internet service providers are monitoring and removing revenge porn content is also inaccurate and may be a product of misinformation about New Zealand law and enforcement.

The responses of the younger girls suggest they are thinking about the inequities of sexually violent behaviour (in social media spaces) while not identifying it explicitly as sexual violence. It appears they identify the matter as one of sex and relationships but not as sexual violence, and this potentially identifies a need for better education at an earlier age given their exposure to and misinformation about these behaviours.

The purpose of portraying sexual violence

One of the concerns of the Classification Office is whether or not depictions of sexual violence are gratuitous. Although a highly contested matter, what *purpose* the depictions serves is a matter for consideration when making classification decisions. This purpose may be to shock, titillate, entertain or provoke thought.

Participants were not asked directly about whether or not depictions of sexual violence serve a purpose, however this did come up as a matter of discussion in the older groups.

All of the older groups recognised that there could be depictions that served a purpose, but showed scepticism about whether or not it was common for depictions of sexual violence to do so.

> *…It's telling a story that's like, a story that's worth telling about it. Like, if it's not just there for no reason.*

The older girls recognised, for instance, that sexual violence may be part of a character's development, or that it may be used to reflect real life experiences. They thought showing the experience of sexual violence from the victim's perspective and demonstrating how they overcame trauma was important. There was general group agreement that depictions of sexual violence should always be portrayed *appropriately* and that the overall effect will depend on the surrounding content and other context in the publication.

Some older boys also recognised that showing such scenes might be necessary for character development, foreshadowing or plot development.

The research did not provide a lot of information about what young people thought about the purpose of depictions of sexual violence. The older girls group emphasised, more so than the other participants, that the inclusion of such scenes be for reasons such as portraying realistic, victim/survivor-orientated experiences and that they should not be used for otherwise gratuitous purposes.

As the discussion was relatively unprompted by facilitators, this may indicate that older teenagers are beginning to think critically about why certain depictions are included in the content they are viewing. This is of some use from a classification perspective as it affirms the assumption that older teens are more likely to have the experience and level of psychological development necessary to think critically about depictions of sexual violence. However more targeted questions about purpose and gratuity of depictions of sexual violence would be beneficial in future research.

How different audiences might respond to viewing sexual violence

The research hoped to identify how different types of audiences might respond to viewing sexual violence. Questions posed aimed to capture young people's views on how it might affect them directly but also to reflect on how viewing sexual violence may affect other audiences such as those younger than themselves. The responses inform part of the wider research question about both the positive and negative impacts of viewing sexual violence.

The older girls' group mentioned that different audiences may have different perspectives on viewing sexual violence. The different audiences they discussed included themselves and other teenagers (younger and generally). They also recognised that the maker's intention was a consideration. For instance, one participant suggested that a filmmaker may intend to use sexual violence for shock or humour or to play on tropes. She explained her thought process:

> *…what I tried to get myself to do, is like, you know, what is their type of audience thinking? Will they be laughing at this? Will they think it's funny? How will they think it's funny?*

The older boys recognised that different age groups (and potentially genders) mature differently and that across these groups some may understand the sexual violence depictions portrayed, while others may not.

> *Depends if they're mature or not because some people are mentally mature at different ages. My cousin he's 8 but he is very immature and my sister is 6 and she is more mature than him so I would probably, I'd rather let the 6 year old watch it cause she'll understand it better than my 8 year old cousin.*

The older boys in the supplementary interview discussed the fact that sexual violence may affect individuals differently.

> *…it's hard to sort of draw a line and say this is what's right and this is what's wrong…Cause it just depends on the person viewing it and what the content is.*

> ***…depends on the person, their personality, what they, how they can handle watching things and how it affects them personally.***

They did acknowledge that younger groups may be more vulnerable and that even teenagers their own age may be naïve:

> *The older you are the more you are sort of, the more you actually know that that's not real.*

> ***So then people our age will be pretty naïve about the world and what could happen.***

The younger groups were less articulate about how sexual violence might affect different types of audiences other than themselves. Younger girls articulated reasons for why they sometimes had negative reactions to depictions of sexual violence, but did not extend this thinking to others, one participant insisting that if someone did not like it that they should simply refrain from watching. Younger boys expressed mixed views as to what was age appropriate and also noted that there may be a difference across gender.

> *If it was my little sister then probably not, but if was my younger brother I wouldn't really care.*

> *I think a lot of people just won't understand it [cartoon sexual violence] they would just laugh sort of thing.*

It is encouraging that all participants were at least self-reflective, identifying how their viewing choices might affect themselves. That the older groups were able to identify that those other than themselves may be affected differently is encouraging as it demonstrates a more critical and reflective take on viewing choices generally. This may be because, with age and maturation, they are more observant of such effects and personal changes upon maturation. It may also be because they are beginning to adopt more paternalistic attitudes that come with taking responsibility for those younger than themselves, such as siblings.

The responses also hint at one of the primary concerns of the research: likely harm. All of the responses reflect one core concern, that is, whether or not the viewer understands or may misread what is taking place. It was suggested that younger viewers are more susceptible to this. Participants in all groups generally believed that misrepresentations of, or inaccurate depictions of sexual violence can be harmful. This is noteworthy from a classification perspective and should be a key consideration when classifying sexual violence. This will be discussed further in the section below.

Harms associated with viewing sexual violence

The key concern when making classification decisions is likely injury to the public good. Identifying that injury in relation to depictions of sexual violence is a challenging task as such little research has been done in this area. The views of young people on this issue are important as they are the ones most likely affected by classification decisions on entertainment content that deals with sexual violence. All participants were asked directly what they thought the harms of viewing sexual violence were. At times it was also discussed spontaneously or prompted after viewing particular clips.

The older girls group discussed a range of potential harms including:

- Normalisation: *something can be more harmful if it's considered normal within the scope of the film*
- Persistent harmful messaging about sexually violent behaviour and consequences (particularly in teen films, targeted at them): *you see cases pretty much always in the media about, you know, this girl's got drunk at a party and these guys filmed her and they did stuff to her and, you know, it just becomes a massive thing because she can't get back at them*
- Negative impact on victim/survivors: *it would probably be uncomfortable watching most forms*
- Younger children imitating/copying behaviour and peer group influence: *just amongst their friends because they've seen it on Family Guy and Family Guy's funny and so it must be funny*
- Misunderstanding sexual violence or its consequences

- Use of humour (in certain cases): *So it's not portrayed as wrong, it's portrayed as humorous for being wrong*

Some participants even suggested that if they were made aware that there were "rape scenes" in a particular film, TV show or game then they would be unlikely to seek out that particular content.

The older boys' group did not clearly articulate what likely harms there were, but did acknowledge that they had been affected after watching an attempted rape scene from the *Watchmen* clip:

[Facilitator] that last scene has kind of disrupted the room a little bit. [Nodding]

The older boys in the supplementary interview had a very in-depth discussion about the effects of viewing sexual violence. They believed that audiences were shrewd to the realism of the depictions and that this mitigated the harmful impact to an extent. However one participant conceded that young people's understanding and worldview was limited:

I think they can distinguish what's real and what's not but I suppose like if that's all that we see then that's all that we'll know, and even if you're told and you completely understand that its wrong then it's still like the only thing you see…

They believed that those younger than them were more likely to be affected by depictions of sexual violence but continued to reflect introspectively and suggested that their own view was likely to change

It's mainly the fact that we're young and we don't really know anything, its taking advantage of that cause they are, whatever we see is sort of new, so like that's what we'll think the world is… maybe with a bit of age, a bit of wisdom you might come to see that things do actually impact on you and influence you but maybe you don't know that it's even having an effect…

When prompted further they discussed a range of specific harms including:

- Feeling bad
- Shock and upset: *shock people if they don't expect it definitely and they could be upset cause that's just, it's not, they might just sympathise with the victim.*
- Introduction to sexual violence through media: *if maybe they've never heard about it before and then they see it then that would be a bad way of learning about it, they wouldn't understand, wouldn't know they might not ask and then they'll think oh that's what people do or something, that's just normal.*
- Impact on victim/survivors: *like if you had been a victim of sexual violence and then you saw that then that would probably bring back something that you don't want, that you don't wanna remember and then you don't want it passed onto other people…*
- Misrepresentations of sexual violence and consequences: *some sort of sexual violence occurs and then everyone's sort of happy at the end of it, then you sort of, you might just think that everything will just fix itself but in real life it might not.*

They also acknowledged that there was a potential for certain depictions of sexual violence to plant ideas subconsciously or make a viewer naive as to the reality of sexual violence.

…if those bad effects aren't shown you might think that there are no effects.

They did not believe viewing sexual violence had any direct relationship to the increased likelihood of perpetuating violence:

> *It can be quite subconscious. You know like, you're not gonna see something then I'm gonna do that. But like you get in a situation then the fact you've seen it before maybe like gives you the idea.*

> *I think if they see it on TV, like it's just not gonna really make them go out, I guess if they look at the statistics of sexual violence like most people commit the crime not because they saw on TV cause like it's sort of felt the desire to commit…*

> **But I think the main thing is that no one's actually watching a movie thinking I'm gonna go learn about sexual violence.**

The discussion also hinted at one of the participants being somewhat jaded by the matter:

> *…a film's a film, it's not real, it's not reality, like, if there's sexual violence, I don't think it will really affect anyone to be honest, I think that they won't really feel much emotion about it because nowadays everything's just violence, sexual violence, everything's shown now, everything's become the norm but I think, like when people hear personal experiences and stuff that's when they really start to realise…*

The younger girls' group did not appear to be prepared to identify any harm to themselves but did articulate likely harm to younger viewers:

> *They won't understand what's happening.*

> *Nightmares maybe.*

They asserted they believed themselves to be old enough to decide what content to watch irrespective of whether or not it featured sexual violence.

The younger boys were more likely to acknowledge harm although they lacked the clarity and articulation of their older peers. One participant used the example of American teens and gun culture to try to explain how media affects individuals:

> **…do stupid things. Damaging your like. It changes our perspective. Yeah. It's like if you, like our perspective of. [Facilitator: Sexual violence?] Yeah in the real world.**

While some participants insisted they did not believe they were personally affected by viewing sexual violence, all participants acknowledged there may be some effects felt by certain viewers (whether because of age or experiences) and that this could be negative or harmful. The debate amongst the young participants reflects the same debate held at adult and academic levels as to media effects. It is encouraging that young people are able to reflect on the issues and conclude on the matter in similar ways. It is also encouraging to see more introspective thinking on behalf of older teens as to harm, and how their views on the matter may change over time.

All agreed viewing sexual violence could disturb or upset some people, although why this was harmful was not elaborated upon. While some groups identified more harms than others, the harm all groups recognised was misunderstanding or misrepresentation of sexual violence and how this could influence

the thinking of viewers in harmful ways. As discussed earlier, findings suggest that this concern should be a priority for the Classification Office in undertaking classification decisions. The research would benefit from young people being asked what specific misunderstandings or outcomes they have in mind when suggesting this is a harmn and how this might be linked to real world views and behaviours.

What types of depictions are more/less harmful?

One of the core research questions is whether or not certain types of depictions of sexual violence are perceived as more/less harmful compared to others. This goes to the extent, manner and degree to which a particular depiction deals with sexual violence – matters required to be considered by the Classification Office when making classification decisions. Participants were asked a variety of questions regarding this, and their responses were unpacked and elaborated upon throughout the discussions.

The older girls suggested that the depiction in different contexts, and to what extent the behaviour is presented as normal, were likely to have different effects on the audience. Features they believed changed the effect of a depiction were discussed:

- Violence and torture made the depiction worse (compared to jokes or behaviour such as unwanted touching)
- Sexual abuse of children made the depiction worse
- Realistic depictions versus cartoon depictions were considered more impactful, because *it reflects real life*
- Explicitness of depiction and where the victim was defenceless were considered more impactful
- length of scene and build-up would have a higher impact
- Lighting and focus that prevented a viewer from looking away, or at other parts of the scene increased intensity
- Nonchalance of people's reactions to violence was considered problematic
- Mormalisation of women as victims was considered harmful
- Rape jokes made at the expense of a victim/survivor were considered to be tasteless.

After watching the *Watchmen* clip, one participant suggested the perpetuation of common misconceptions about sexual violence made the scene more harmful:

> ***…he's challenging the idea that ah no you don't really mean no***

And after watching the *Jack and Diane clip*, one participant suggested that acknowledging the experience as rape was good, although the cavalier attitude of the characters made the scene as a whole more harmful:

> *It's good to see that someone acknowledges it and like, that would also acknowledge it in the mind of the viewers and they would know that they just watched a rape scene. But, it doesn't change the fact that it is brushed off and it is played like those sites are glorified and that sort of thing.*

Another participant suggested the clip reflected reality, although they did not expand on whether or not this was more or less harmful:

> *Like, this is what's happening, guys are going around filming them raping girls and then this is sort of a continuous thing which it is in real life and, you know, it's something that unfortunately lots of girls have to deal with.*

The older boys' group discussed how suspense and build-up increased the impact of the depiction. They suggested that impact was likely to be increased where you could relate to real characters but when the depiction was a cartoon it was more light-hearted and less impactful. For instance, when comparing the *Family Guy* clip to live action depictions, one participant said:

> *Cause you can kind of see the people that are real and you can and like kind of relate to them but like I don't know like the Family Guy thing still feels a bit like cartoonish you know.*

The older boys in the supplementary interview repeatedly emphasised that a depiction's impact was very dependent on genre and context, however they listed a range of features that reduced the harm of the depictions:

> *[Facilitator]: so we've got quite a few examples there, it's actually okay to show sexual violence if it's taken seriously, they've got a way of fixing it, encourages people to stand up for themselves and that whole sort of awareness type of thing…[Respondents]: Yeah, yep…*

They also suggested they assumed a lower classification meant the depiction would not be very explicit. When discussing video games they suggested there might be an unconscious effect taking place because of the medium:

> *I suppose for some people it will be, you might feel as though you're doing it, cause you're controlling the person and you might sort of feel bad about that cause you're sort of the person responsible in a way but at the same time you know that you're just sort of playing a video game.*

Younger girls suggested that rape was the worst kind of sexual violence depiction to view. Some participants suggested watching rape left them feeling sad and disturbed. When asked why, one participant suggested:

> **Oh other people could have like experienced it and not liked it.**

The younger girls also suggested that cartoon depictions were problematic because animation could create the expectation that nothing bad will happen to characters.

> *It is a cartoon so you would think it would be appropriate because it's a cartoon…*

Conversely, younger boys thought cartoon depictions were less problematic and even humorous.

> *…so it's kind of like, it's funny even though it's not really real, it's impossible…*

> **Yeah cause it's a cartoon it's not really real so you can kind of laugh to it. If it was real it would be a bit off.**

They appeared to believe when a depiction was layered with physical violence, nudity and offensive language, this increased the overall impact.

When asked what the worst type of sexual violence depiction was, one participant said:

…like real bad stuff, would make you feel bad if you witnessed it.

The responses have provided some information on what young people think makes a depiction more or less harmful however this is limited by the complexity of the question. The older groups identified it is very context-dependent while also broadly identifying some features that make a depiction more or less harmful, of which there was a reasonable amount of cross-over across the groups. These factors included explicitness, realism, suspense, and how seriously the matter is treated.

The younger groups were less articulate on the matter and did not identify in the same level of detail as to what made a depiction more or less harmful. This is interesting from a classification perspective as it shows a higher order of critical thinking and awareness based on age when thinking about viewing sexual violence, which is one of the considerations when making classification decisions.

Can depictions of sexual violence have a positive impact?

Another of the core questions of the research is whether or not certain depictions of sexual violence may have a positive impact on the viewer. Some depictions may be of high merit, serve an educative purpose, raise awareness or inspire positive change. Our research seeks to understand if these effects eclipse any harmful effects resulting from viewing sexual violence.

When asked, the older girls group believed viewing sexual violence could have a positive effect where it was orientated around the victim/survivor's experience, particularly if it dealt with the emotional impact of the experience, and portrayed the victim/survivor coping with trauma and overcoming adversity. Interestingly, one of the participants suggested she believed humour could be used in a positive way in association with sexual violence, but also acknowledged that it was not often used successfully.

The younger girls thought depictions could influence behaviour in both positive and negative ways. One participant said:

> *because it can give other people more ideas of doing it because the stars are doing it…but then they also show it so they can stop too, like if you look at it different ways.*

The older boys' group and younger boys group were not asked about the positive effects of viewing sexual violence and the matter did not come up unprompted in their discussions. However in the supplementary interview with older boys there was a strong focus in the discussion about how context and perception changed the effect on the viewer. For instance, they believed showing the victim/survivor dealing with trauma could have both negative and positive effects depending on the surrounding context and the perception of the viewer. They also suggested that education as opposed to entertainment content was more likely to lead to positive change:

> *I guess it's good that it's acknowledged and not just pretending like it doesn't happen at all but I don't think showing it in TV shows is an effective way of doing that, if you want to achieve that I guess mainly through education would be the best way, cause TV shows, unless it was some sort of educational documentary.*

The research allows us to draw some conclusions on whether young people believe there are any positive effects to viewing sexual violence. The research is limited by the lack of comparisons that can be made across groups and the fact that there is no comparative discussion on the difference between harmful and non-harmful depictions of sexual violence.

The older girls' group suggested only a limited type and manner of depiction is likely to be positive, one that addresses victim/survivor experiences, the emotional impact of sexual violence, and coping with and overcoming trauma. The difference between the older girls and younger girls' group is particularly interesting. While the younger girls appear to acknowledge that there may be positive effects from viewing sexual violence, their understanding is much less nuanced and sophisticated than their older peers and the lack of articulate discussion affirms this difference.

The gendered difference between the older girls and older boys' responses is also noteworthy. Without more in-depth discussion it is impossible to give reasons as to why the older girls believed a positive effect was only likely in a narrow band of circumstances compared to the older boys who believed it was always context-dependent. It is also impossible to draw conclusions as to why the older boys appeared to believe fictional presentations did not have a high impact compared to, as they suggested, real life disclosure. This perhaps suggests that these participants may be desensitised to fictional portrayals of emotional distress and trauma.

Does gender make a difference?

How gender is represented in depictions of sexual violence is one of the many factors that the Classification Office must consider as part of the examination process. Two of the clips used in focus groups depicted sexual violence by a male towards another male (*Glee* and *Family Guy*), and some of the groups discussed how the gender of a perpetrator or victim/survivor may affect how depictions of sexual violence are understood by audiences.

Sexual violence by males towards males is often played for laughs in entertainment media and is often not taken seriously in a wider cultural context. One well-known trope involves jokes about prison rape, for example. When shown the *Family Guy* clip, the laughter in the boys' groups (particularly the younger boys) should be considered within this cultural context. The younger boys did not seem to find the depiction problematic. When asked if it would be funny if the scene had involved the rape of Meg (the teenage daughter character) there was initially general agreement that it would still be funny. However when asked if it would be funny if the mother character was assaulted some of the younger boys changed their opinions:

> *[Facilitator] Okay, what if it was Lois? Would that be funny?*
>
> *I don't know, not as much.*
>
> *[Facilitator] Not as much? Why isn't it as funny?*
>
> *It's a woman.*
>
> *It's just wrong, it would just seem wrong, not fair.*

When explaining why a hypothetical depiction of Lois being assaulted would not be as funny as the male character Peter being assaulted, some indicated this was about a power imbalance inherent in violent actions by men towards women:

> **When it's a man getting it he can fight back, but when it's a lady…**

Some of the older boys also seemed to find the *Family Guy* clip funny, however, when asked, one of the boys indicated that the same scene involving Lois would not be funny:

> *[Facilitator] So you guys that found it funny: if it was Lois, the mum, would it be as funny?*
>
> *Probably not.*

The older girls' group expressed more nuanced opinions and demonstrated an awareness of the relationship between gender and sexual violence on screen, and the implicit or explicit messages often conveyed by depictions of sexual violence that do not involve more typical male violence towards women and girls.

Older girls noted the tendency of entertainment media to make light of sexual violence directed towards males, and to reinforce the idea that men are always available for sex:

> *…I think what's shameful in our society is that when in media you see a woman sexually abusing a man, lots of the times, it's seen as something, like, "the man" as manly and, you know, it becomes a comedic sort of thing …*
>
> *Yeah, it's like ah you know you should want this – you're a guy – you know all guys like sex…You know, there's sort of undertones that there's something wrong with the person when, you know, if you really think about it, or you don't even have to really think about it, this person doesn't want to have sex or have anything to do with this person so it shouldn't matter any way.*

On a more positive note, the idea was expressed that young people today are more aware that sexual violence is serious and can happen to anyone, regardless of gender:

> *Yeah. I think that a lot of sexual assault against men is treated like a joke when it shouldn't be and to be honest, I think in a lot of modern feminism and even just modern age thinking, like the next generation is very, sort of, sorted on, like it can happen to everyone, everyone is equal. You should all have a chance to complain and be in control of your own body.*
>
> *Yeah it's not about gender.*

They noted that people's differing reactions towards depictions of sexual violence, depending on the gender of the victim, was problematic:

> **And just how people react to it. There like, is a difference in terms of like there shouldn't be a difference in how people react to it.**

The research has provided relatively little information about how the gender of perpetrators and victim/survivors of sexual violence may affect the impact of depictions, and how these depictions are understood by audiences. What we have found is useful however. Unsurprisingly, the older girls were more aware of problematic portrayals of sexual violence in less typical scenarios, for example violence perpetrated by a woman or against a man. The younger boys in particular were less likely to look at depictions critically, and less likely to view sexual violence towards a male as a serious issue.

From a classification perspective, these findings provide support for the idea that younger teens are generally less capable of understanding the sexual politics at play in depictions of sexual violence, and that some depictions may be reinforcing potentially problematic attitudes, such as that sexual violence towards men is not something to be taken seriously. On the other hand, older teens are more likely to have the experience and level of psychological development necessary to think critically about depictions

of sexual violence – for example by considering the context of cultural norms which downplay the seriousness of sexual violence towards men.

It would be useful to explore young people's views more fully, for example about depictions of sexual violence perpetrated by females, and about representations of a spectrum of queer or transgender characters in relation to sexual violence.

Media case: comedy and cartoons

Supplementary to the issue of harm, the Classification Office is interested in whether certain characteristics of depictions of sexual violence make a depiction more or less impactful, and why. A particularly interesting characteristic concerns the use of humour versus the use of a more serious tone in the portrayal of sexual violence, and animated versus live-action portrayals of sexual violence. All of the participants were asked about these specific characteristics, prompted by the use of the *Family Guy* clip, which portrays sexual violence in association with humour and is animated. The older boys in the supplementary interview were also asked about the association of sexual violence with humour, without reference to the *Family Guy* clip, as they were not shown the clip in their session.

All of the participants eventually agreed that the use of humour in relation to sexual violence was inappropriate, but some of the participants did not believe this inappropriateness was necessarily bad or led to harmful effects on viewers.

The older girls' group universally considered the clip to be tasteless and offensive. None of the participants appeared to be amused by the clip or how it portrayed sexual violence. In the ensuing discussion they expressed concerns about the normalisation of gendered stereotypes in comedies, took issue with comedy that sought to make fun of victim/survivors, and generally admonished the clip and its use of humour. It did not appear that they believed the animated nature of the depiction reduced its potential to negatively impact viewers. At another time one of the participants did suggest that humour could be used in a positive way in association with sexual violence, but also acknowledged that it was not often used successfully.

The younger girls did not find the clip amusing either. Some suggested they found it disturbing, in particular the voyeurism of the clip, the degree of violence and the association with bestiality. The nature of their discussion suggested they did not believe any of the comedic devices used were humorous. One of the participants suggested the reason it was not funny was because:

> *…other people could have like experienced it and not liked it.*

The older boys' groups took a much more sympathetic view. Many laughed while watching the clip and, while they agreed it was not *appropriate*, still believed it was humorous and that this redeemed it. They found the distress of the male victim (the victim's reaction) particularly funny. They later conceded that if the victim/survivor had been a female character it may not have been funny. One participant suggested that laughter could be a cathartic response but did not impact on whether or not the viewer believed the behaviour was right or wrong:

> *…it's something awkward like that you wouldn't really know what to do, first like you laugh and you know where it's going but like obviously you know that it's not the right thing to do*

Overall they believed that because it was animated and thus *unrealistic* its overall impact was reduced. The older boys in the supplementary interview were shrewder to the issues surrounding the use of humour, suggesting:

> *Yeah especially like someone that might have actually experienced something, people will realise that it's not actually funny at all*

It should be noted that this comment was made outside of the context of viewing the *Family Guy* clip.

The younger boys, while not as articulate on the issues as the older boys, agreed that the clip was funny and enjoyed its use of 'dry humour'. There was little further discussion on any other effects related to the use of humour and animation.

The most notable point of discussion is the stark gender difference on the issue of the use of humour, in particular the lack of empathy shown to victim/survivors by many in the boys' groups when the depiction was framed as humorous. Only in the abstract did they begin to think more critically about the issues surrounding the use of humour. The extremity of this difference may be more symptomatic of gendered expectations of and experiences of sexual violence.

This has important but challenging implications from a classification perspective. New Zealand's classification system does not account for gender when making classification decisions, yet it appears there is a significant issue to be addressed as to how young New Zealanders respond to comedy in association with sexual violence based on their gender (irrespective of age).

Classifying sexual violence and compliance issues

As young people are directly affected by restricted classifications, an important focus of the research is to obtain their views as to how sexual violence should be classified and other aspects of classification such as labelling and public information. This also relates to the issue of compliance. Young people have suggested non-compliance is common, however if the classification system better reflected the views and values of young New Zealanders this might foster a higher level of compliance.

How sexual violence should be classified

The participants were asked what their views on classification were, how they thought sexual violence should be classified, what restrictions should apply and what labels should be used, including the terms to be used on the label. This was asked both in the abstract and after clips were viewed and discussed.

All participants believed there was some likely harm from viewing sexual violence and all participated in the discussion about how sexual violence should be classified. However it is important to note that they did not see a relationship between this and their admissions of non-compliance with classification restrictions.

The older girls' group believed there was a role for classifications and that these would be particularly important for survivors:

> *I think it would be important to people who had been, you know, survived sexual violence, because for some people it could be, like, uncomfortable watching some form.*

They believed that classification should be determined by particular context of the depiction:

> *I mean, it will come down to the explicitness, like, the extreme media of the scene shown a bit. Like is it a discussion of it? Is it sort of implied in someone's background? Is it actually shown, you know?*

Some hinted at there being a role for a label that indicated the depiction was a positive one but did not know how to frame this further.

Of the specific clips they thought the *Glee* clip was classified appropriately because of background, context, expectations and intended audience:

> ***…there's nothing really explicit and it's not sort of overtly sexualised or even implied that anything else would have happened afterwards***

However they believed the *Family Guy* clip (and the series broadly) needed clearer restrictions and a sexual violence warning:

> *But, then you have got episodes where it's stuff like that which should probably have a better rating.*

> *I think what happened is like, with the warnings, they sort of make a difference between sex scenes and violence and they don't put sexual violence on. So, because there will be a difference between violence and sexual violence and sex scenes.*

Some suggested being warned about sexual violence meant they would choose not to watch a particular film or TV series. They thought it was necessary for extreme and explicit sexual violence to be R18:

And I think cause it's such a real, in your face situation that could easily happen to us, it makes it all the more sort of horrifying and therefore unwanted and just disgusting. It's like you don't even see anything, that should be enough to put R18, for me.

One participant believed the term violence had a loaded connotation and appeared concerned as to how this would be perceived by others:

Like, I think it's just the connotations with the word "violence" that just mean that are going to be on one end of the spectrum just completely and utterly extreme and horrible.

And another participant also suggested that there needed to be a separate label for depictions of rape:

…cause it's just so much different…

Participants in the older boys group suggested that classification needed to be more conservative suggesting only implied sexual violence should be allowed at R16 and anything more graphic should be R18:

…implied sexual violence… like off screen, so like you see the beginning of it and then it cuts away before it goes like real hard.

There was general agreement that there was a lack of specificity that needed to be addressed in the classification system. Participants suggested they would prefer more classification of content, for instance, episode by episode:

We kind of stuck with the same rating system but we just, we think it's good but people who judge the films are not doing the job as good as they should be. For instance they should be more specific when they're doing ratings say when you say sexual violence they should say if there's a movie that's going to show like some girls get raped it's going to be very intense they should say intense sexual violence scenes in this movie…

[Facilitator: More specific things?]

Pretty much.

[More specific, so more words?]

Yeah.

And with series each episode, I think they do it now but each episode should be rated different so maybe if it's Breaking Bad one episode could be yeah, then another episode could be R18.

The older boys in the supplementary interview suggested that restrictions and labels were good measures for future viewing choices:

Yeah I guess, if you've watched them before then you know what to expect and you think it's R18 and when you see the label in future you know either like that's something I'd like to watch or it's not, you know whether you can handle it or not for future

Despite some division in the group, the younger girls also took a conservative view of classification. One participant suggesting sexual violence should not be shown on television at all:

> *So if someone got raped, it's supposed to be upsetting anyway…we don't need to have a discussion about it, they just shouldn't put that on TV.*

They also suggested that there needs to be appropriate content warnings before programming:

> *If its harassment you know put a whole thing, say like a big X, I don't know put it on Facebook and say the X means bad or something.*

They also suggested there should be a specific warning for depictions of rape.

Like their older counterparts, participants in the younger boys group suggested that rape should be R18 and desired more specificity in content warnings:

> ***…instead of just saying for mature audience sort of write what's in it like graphic content including violence and rape, rape and drug use and stuff like that***

The resonant themes from the discussion were that younger people wanted more classification and more specificity in the content warnings. Many suggested having warnings before viewing commenced. They generally took a conservative view of the classification of sexual violence, particularly graphic sexual violence.

Young people's compliance with the classification system

An important classification issue, particularly since the uptake of the internet and its dominance as the medium of choice for teenagers in New Zealand, is compliance – whether or not New Zealanders are abiding by the classification system and its rules relating to restriction. Another issue is whether or not New Zealanders are using the classification labels to help make viewing choices for themselves and their families.

Participants were asked about whether or not they complied with classification restrictions and whether or not they used classification labels. This prompted discussion regarding sub-issues about compliance and enforcement, particularly what information guided their viewing choices as an alternative to the classification system.

All participants identified having viewed content that was restricted beyond their age group, some knowing that this was the case, others indifferent to the classification and labels:

> *I recently got into* Orange is the New Black *which I know is R18.*

The older girls' group discussed that they believed the restrictions are not enforced and that they are mere warnings/guidelines:

> ***It's more of a warning than anything. It's not like it's actually physically enforced.***

However their understanding of enforcement is countered by their own recalled experiences of not being able to attend certain films at cinemas because they were underage.

They noted that use of classifications was different according to medium (DVDs versus online services):

> *Because like, we do, we are aware where just everything's on the internet and so a lot of times you sort of watch the trailer or you might, like, look at a review and that will, you know, you're more*

> *looking at that for an indication. Whereas like, if you go into the DVD store and I still experience it sometimes and you're just sort of searching for something random, you'll pay more attention to that.*

> *I mean you can put sort of age preferences on Netflix…*

They suggested that restrictions were likely to indicate the type or style of the publication, for instance, how much action or violence is in a film. One participant suggested that she did not pay attention to the classifications unless they applied to a genre that might make her uncomfortable:

> *…but, then when, I'm watching a horror movie or whatever then I start to pay attention to what it says…*

One participant discussed that they decided as a family what was age appropriate rather than following the restrictions or labels:

> *Like, for example, my younger brother has just turned 12 and already he's seen R16 films that my Dad's let him watch because, you know, Dad and I've watched them and we've sat down and watched them and thought okay…*

The older boys' group participants generally agreed it was inappropriate for a younger person to be playing R18 video games:

> *…to the degree it would obviously change the way the kid thinks, like he is not mature enough to know that that's like the right and wrong thing to do, so that's why you shouldn't be able to play the game…*

They too discussed anecdotes of themselves and others avoiding classification compliance:

> *…he's watched it on TV and no one has sort of told him otherwise.*

They also compared the classification system to the system of broadcasting standards, suggesting the latter was *loose*:

> **The TV show rating systems are much more loose than the film rating systems cause on TV you just see either, it's either usually just "this is approved for audiences" or "this is adults only" it's not like anything specific…**

The older boys in the supplementary interview noted the lack of enforcement and suggested the internet does not offer information about restrictions and labels:

> *There's no sort of, like enforcement… I guess it's just more used as a bit of a guideline for parents but then like if someone wants to watch something it's pretty easy just to watch it.*

They suggested this ease of access meant that the higher restrictions had lost currency:

> *So that the difference between R16 and R18 doesn't really have an effect, cause if you, if you are 16 then the chances are you'll just as easily be able to access things that are R18…*

They believed most people their age had already viewed R18 content and that generally young people started to view restricted content at least two years before they were legally allowed to. They believed

individuals were able to make their own viewing choices irrespective of classification. When asked about those younger than themselves they took a slightly more conservative view:

> *Yeah, it'd probably be like, you wouldn't want to show it to anyone you don't think would understand it or interpret it incorrectly, I suppose that also depends because people like mature differently, some people would be like young and real mature and some people would be like older and not mature, just because you're a specific age doesn't really, it's sort of different for different people…*

The younger girls' group were the strongest advocates for individuals being able to make their own viewing choices irrespective of classification.

> *[Facilitator: So why bother having ratings if nobody is going to pay attention to them?]*

> *Well because that's their problem, not ours.*

> *Well if you look at it and you think it looks disgusting then don't watch it.*

Some of the younger girls suggested that classifications and labels no longer apply or, if they do, only to inform parents and to be used for younger children. Some said they completely ignore the restrictions and labels instead suggesting they use other means of deciding what to view:

> *It doesn't like pass through my mind about the rating, if it looks good I will watch it…*

> *It looks real cool.*

> *If it looks cool you have got to watch it…*

> *Watch the trailer or something, you kind of just have to get an idea of what the movie is before you actually watch it or not watch it.*

One participant suggested that a viewer would be able to find out about sexually violent depictions from viewing a trailer:

> *Because in most, in all the movies if like sexual violence was in it they would have that in the trailer so people would know*

The younger boys' group provided anecdotes as to how they avoided restrictions:

> *I just say I'm going to go to my room, and then watch it there.*

> *Oh it depends like before I turned 16 if I wanted to go to an R16 movie I would buy a ticket for another movie and walk in to that. Just I would take notice.*

They were the only group to provide particular reasons as to why gaming was different from other mediums, and therefore why there was less compliance with classification:

> *It's your own actions really.*

> *And it's like computer graphics so it's not even real.*

> **Because it's like it's done by you, you're controlling everything and like you're taking charge.**

And, like the older boys, they too observed that broadcasting standards were more relaxed:

> *Usually like on TV or something at a certain stage like say after like 9 o'clock it would come up with an ad saying like now it's going to sort of like for example, yeah like M or something and then it doesn't, it will just say it before the start of the movie it doesn't usually come up like a symbol or sign or something it won't do that all the time.*

That all of the participants expressed non-compliance with the classification scheme is of much concern to the Classification Office, as it should be to all those concerned about young people's access to restricted content. The participants identified a number of reasons for non-compliance including personal choice, ease of access (particularly online), lack of supervision or enforcement and industry non-compliance. These reasons for non-compliance are all in respect of enforcement gaps outside of the key responsibilities of the Classification Office, however the lack of understanding young people demonstrated about the legal requirements of the restrictions and labels suggest there is a requirement for better and more targeted information about the classification system specifically for young people.

There was little discussion by participants about the negative effects of non-compliance or benefits of compliance. Exploring the motivations behind compliance and non-compliance may help the Classification Office engage more effectively with young people on these issues, and so further research may be of benefit.

Issues with methodological approach and subject matter

Although a number of methodological approaches, their limitations and other externalities were carefully considered when designing the research, the Classification Office recognise that there were a number of limitations with the methodology adopted. Some of these limitations were due to the subject matter, others were related to the focus group format, and others due to the participants' age and inexperience.

The core issues with the methodological approach adopted were identified by the Classification Office as:

Recruitment of young people who consume entertainment content in traditional ways

> *[Facilitator] Do you watch TV, watch movies?*
>
> We don't have a TV *[younger boys' group participant].*

Focus group structure

The length of the focus group sessions may have been beyond the stamina of the young participants, especially given the difficulty of the subject matter.

The group dynamic allowed dominant personalities to take over and stifle parts of the discussion. This was most apparent in the younger girls' group. Group-think effects and participants being led also featured at times.

Facilitation

There was some difficulty in yielding responses from young people.

> *[Facilitator] Any others?*
>
> *I think …*
>
> *Like … [Laughter].*
>
> *Younger Girls Group Participants*

At times language and terms were used that were unfamiliar to young people.

> *[Facilitator] Like is this something you have ever thought about before you came to a focus group?*
>
> *I didn't even know what it was until I came to this [younger girls' group participant].*

Due to the difficult subject matter and young age of the participants, experienced youth facilitators may have been better able to facilitate discussion and derive answers from the groups. Specialist facilitating skills and knowledge of the subject matter may have also led to improved outcomes.

Colmar Brunton provided an additional list of limitations they identified at the conclusion of their involvement with the research. These included:

- Verbal discussion is difficult for some young people, particularly those who don't have communication/analytical strengths.
- There was a reluctance on behalf of participants to converse widely and in depth in the group environment, with a diverse mix of other teens and on this subject.

- Some of the subject matter/questions were beyond some of the participants' ability and they were not able to reflect on and articulate/answer in any detail. This did allow for some insight which assisted the research.
- The subject matter was difficult for younger, less confident, immature participants and/or participants that have not been exposed to this type of content.
- The clips of sexual violence (despite being carefully chosen and being a suitable rating for the age groups based on their classification) were too extreme for some of the participants. The more extreme clips closed the discussion down, rather than opening it up.
- Some very specific questions were to be answered in detail, and this level of detail, or following a thread of thought with one individual, was not well suited to a group environment. This and other instances indicated that in some cases the research questions would be better suited to individual or paired interviews.