YOUNG NEW ZEALANDERS VIEWING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

STAGE 2 RESEARCH REPORT

Discussions with service providers working with young people

YOUNG NEW ZEALANDERS VIEWING SEXUAL VIOLENCE – STAGE 2 RESEARCH REPORT

Office of Film and Literature Classification

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Contents

FOREWORD

It is a privilege to bring you the second in a series of three research reports on how depictions of sexual violence in entertainment media are affecting young people and shaping the future of our society.
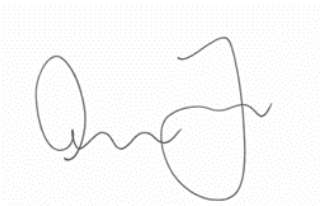
I want to start by saying a big thank you to the specialists and front-line practitioners working with young people that gave so generously of their knowledge and time. This report attempts to draw together the common threads of diverse, challenging yet always stimulating and hopeful discussions on how attitudes to sexual consent, gender roles and coercion are being shaped by modern media.

One of the key lessons is the need to support our young people, particularly teenagers, to become savvy consumers of media. Emerging from this phase of research is a vision of a generation who are able to recognise the one dimensional depictions of sexual violence that are increasingly common across all forms of entertainment media and who have the confidence to call them out.

Government has made it a top priority to tackle sexual violence and much has been achieved. Yet, as this research suggests, there exists a greater opportunity to prevent sexual violence in all its forms by better equipping young people and their families with the information and tools that they need to counter the sometimes negative effects of entertainment media.

Young people have deeper and wider access to entertainment media than ever before and, for the most part, this is a good thing. But it is a double-edged sword. In their efforts to boost profits and market share, entertainment media can often resort to exploitative and sensationalised portrayals that can be accepted uncritically by developing minds.

Our children should have the widest possible access to entertainment, to support their personal growth, explore their identity and develop a sense of connectedness with the world around them. Yet we can't allow harmful depictions of sexual violence in entertainment media to go unchallenged – making sexual violence in our community more common, and normalising an acceptance of this behaviour amongst our sons and daughters. As a society, we need to find the right balance.

Dr Andrew Jack

Chief Censor

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background, research objectives and methodology

Sexual violence is a complex social problem affecting our communities and causing significant, ongoing harms. The way in which sexual violence is presented for mass consumption in entertainment media may have a negative impact on people's attitudes and behaviour, and thereby contribute to an environment in which sexual violence is more likely to occur. If this is even a possibility then it must be acknowledged and addressed.

We know from previous research that sex and violence in entertainment media can have a negative effect on young people in particular[1], however the impact of *sexual violence* specifically is not well understood – and the impacts are potentially significant. It is therefore vital that we find out more about the topic, and this is why we have made sexual violence our research focus for the past year[2].

The Classification Office has a very specific role in reducing harm that may be caused by media content. However we do not work in isolation, and the research undertaken for this report recognises this. There are many organisations, both government and non-government, that work to prevent harmful attitudes and behaviour, to understand these attitudes and behaviour, and to help those who are dealing with the consequences.

We consulted 46 participants from 20 different organisations including NGOs, government officials, academics and others, to explore the potential effects on young people of exposure to sexual violence in entertainment media. Four workshops were held, grouped around location and area of expertise, each approximately three hours long. Short video clips from films and television shows were shown to participants to prompt discussion.

We are pleased that this research project has been able to bring people together who are working on the front line to limit the harms of sexual violence in our community. It was made clear to us by participants that such opportunities are all too rare, and this benefit alone would have made the project worthwhile. Bringing these people together and harnessing their experience and expertise has been invaluable for our own understanding of sexual violence, and their enthusiastic participation and willingness to discuss sensitive and sometimes controversial issues around sexual violence has helped shine a light on a problem that is often misunderstood.

Main findings

Findings presented in this summary include views expressed by multiple individuals across different workshops and appeared to reflect a general consensus or agreement amongst the majority of individual participants. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the participating organisations or of the Classification Office. These are the views of adults who work with or have a special interest in the

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[1] Archives of Paediatric and Adolescent Medicine 2006; 160:348-352. Bushman, Huesmann, *Short-term and Long-term Effects of Violent Media on Aggression in Children and Adults*
Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication (August 2016), Ward, Erickson, Lippman, Giaccardi, *Sexual Media Content and Effects*
[2] See the report of findings for the first stage of the research project: http://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/news/latest-news/research-sexual-violence-yp-groups-2016.html

health and development of young people, not the views of young people themselves. The first round of research into the perceptions by young people of depictions of sexual violence, undertaken with Colmar Brunton, is available here: http://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/news/latest-news/research-sexual-violence-yp-groups-2016.html.

Our next round of research will explore young people's views in depth and will be released in the next few months.

Issues identified with depictions of sexual violence

Participants identified a variety of issues relating to the depiction of sex, relationships, and sexual violence in entertainment media. First and foremost is the perception that most media depictions do not reflect the realities of sexual violence, which is often portrayed in such a way as to reaffirm problematic and false beliefs – for example that sexual violence is based solely on sexual desire and frustration, that sexual violence can be a way to establish intimacy, and that rape is something perpetrated primarily by strangers.

Participants are worried that predatory behaviour is often normalised or even glamorised on screen, and some depictions were perceived to normalise rape or present it as consensual sex. Another issue often commented on was that depictions (particularly in comedy) are often homophobic or misogynistic, and tend to minimise, trivialise, and otherwise make light of sexual violence and its impact – particularly on male victim/survivors.

Participants were concerned that depictions often focus on an extreme act of physical violence – perhaps for shock value or to drive a plot forward – which is then presented as having little or no lasting effect, and in this way disregards the victim/survivor's experience.

There was general discomfort by the fact that sexual violence is being deployed so commonly in films and television shows purely for the purpose of entertainment, and furthermore that some depictions seemed to eroticise sexual violence for the purpose of titillating (and potentially even sexually arousing) an audience.

Participants were not only concerned about depictions of sexual violence, but also by the perception that media has a powerful role in promoting and normalising particular ideas about sexual relations, romance and gender. Participants generally believed that media helps to shape how young people see the world – and that the messages they receive from media may have the effect of making sexual violence in our community more likely or accepted.

Impact on young people exposed to depictions of sexual violence

Participants generally agreed that depictions such as those outlined above may influence young people's understandings and beliefs about sex, relationships and sexual violence, and that this potentially has negative flow on effects for young people's attitudes and behaviours. As young people's minds are still developing, along with their social skills and belief systems, participants thought that young people were more likely to accept media uncritically and to use it as an educative tool.

As mentioned above there was an overriding concern about the way sexual violence is used for the purpose of entertainment. The potential for desensitisation, normalisation, and the presentation of

victim/survivors as dehumanised, is perceived as likely to have negative effects on young people's attitudes to sexual violence.

Aside from the potential effects on young people's attitudes and behaviour, participants were also concerned that stronger, more violent depictions, are likely to be disturbing, frightening and distressing for young people – and may lead to anxiety and fear, particularly in young women and girls. Further to this, there is the distinct harm of depictions of sexual violence triggering victim/survivors emotions and experiences of past abuse and trauma.

Mitigating the harms of exposure to depictions of sexual violence

One way of mitigating the harms of exposure would be to change the nature of the depictions to which young people are exposed to. Participants were clear that not all depictions of sexual violence were necessarily harmful or problematic – and some may in fact be beneficial in certain circumstances. There was a call for more positive, realistic, and diverse narratives dealing with sexual violence – those that prompted discussion, had constructive underlying themes, and made viewers reflect on their own beliefs. Such depictions could potentially have educational value if presented in the right context, and to some extent provide a counterweight to problematic depictions that participants believed were far more common in entertainment media.

Outside of the media itself, participants expressed a range of views about how to limit the potential harms of sexual violence on screen. A common theme is better and more comprehensive education – about sex and relationships, and about interacting with media in a positive and informed way.

Participants generally thought that the current classification system played an important role in providing guidance and protection to young people, and that it makes a useful contribution to broader strategies to reduce the harms of sexual violence in our communities. They acknowledged that young people were potentially being exposed to a variety of harmful content online and saw classifications as a key tool in mitigating the potential harms of exposure – at least by providing a level of warning and information to support young people's viewing choices. At present, online, on demand content providers (such as Netflix and Lightbox) are not covered by either the film classification or the broadcasting standards systems, and participants generally agreed that content regulation laws should be extended to cover these increasingly popular streaming services.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The Office of Film and Literature Classification (the Classification Office) is an independent crown entity 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.

For more than a decade, research into media effects has found that exposure to violent and/or sexualised media can negatively influence human attitudes and behaviours. One study conducted in 2006 combined the results of 431 previous studies involving 68,463 individual participants (both children and adults) and concluded that exposure to media violence is associated with more aggressive behaviours, thoughts, and feelings, as well as reducing behaviours that could help others[3]. The study also noted that the effects of exposure are particularly enduring for young people and children. In 2016, the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication published a review of 153 separate empirical studies and content analyses published from 2000 – 2015 and concluded that heavier exposure to sexualised media (including pornography) influences sexual behaviour and also strengthens beliefs in gender related sexual roles and strengthens adversarial beliefs (such as the sexual double standard)[4].

Closer to home, Nicola Gavey (a trained clinical psychologist and Professor at the University of Auckland) has researched and published extensively on the links between sexualised media, sexual coercion and misogyny[5].

Yet the Classification Office is aware of little if any research that seeks specifically to understand the impact of media depictions of sexual violence on young people. This report is the second component of a wider Classification Office research project that seeks to give young New Zealanders, and front line agencies and practitioners, a voice to describe the effects of depictions of sexual violence in mainstream media. Further reports on our findings will be released in due course.

In the earlier stages of this research project, the Classification Office commissioned research agency Colmar Brunton to explore the views of young New Zealanders aged 14 to 17. The results can be found here: http://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/news/latest-news/research-sexual-violence-yp-groups-2016.html.

The third and final stage of the research involves in-depth interviews with young people from around New Zealand. The different methodological approach, and a greater number of participants, will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of young people's views about depictions of sexual violence, and will fill in some gaps from the original focus groups with young people. The third report will be published later in 2017.

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[3] Archives of Paediatric and Adolescent Medicine 2006; 160:348-352. Bushman, Huesmann, *Short-term and Long-term Effects of Violent Media on Aggression in Children and Adults*

[4] Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication (August 2016), Ward, Erickson, Lippman, Giaccardi, *Sexual Media Content and Effects*

[5] See for example *Out of Sight and Out of Mind: Detachment and Men's Consumption of Male Sexual Dominance and Female Submission in Pornography,* Antevska and Gavey. Men and Masculinities 2015. Vol 18(5).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research initiated by the Classification Office centred on five core questions:

1. What do young people think 'sexual violence' is? What does the term mean?
2. How are young people affected by sexual violence in the media? What are the potential harms?
3. What things in entertainment media might mitigate these harms/impacts?
4. Are there positive depictions of sexual violence that may have different effects on young people?
5. 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?

METHODOLOGY

Following the results from the first stage of the research project, the Classification Office gathered together practitioners who work with young people in the field of sexual violence prevention, education, treatment, and research. The Classification Office welcomed 46 participants from 20 different organisations across government, non-government, charitable and academic sectors.

Organisations represented included:[6]

Vibe	STOPDemand
Sexual Abuse Prevention Network	Wellington Rape Crisis
InsideOut	The Collaborative Trust
START Healing	Victoria University of Wellington
298 Youth Health Centre	University of Auckland
New Zealand Prostitute's Collective	University of Otago
Salvation Army	University of Waikato
Te Poutama Ārahi Rangatahi	ACC
Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse	Office of the Children's Commissioner
NZ Police	Department of Corrections
Q-topia Social Support Group for Queer Youth	TOAH-NNEST: Te Ohaakii a Hine Te Ohaakii a Hine – National Network Ending Sexual Violence Together

In a series of workshops with external facilitators, each approximately three hours long, relevant video clips from mainstream entertainment media were shown to prompt discussion. Notes written by participants during the workshops were also collected. The workshops were designed around the

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[6] The views and opinions expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any agency, organisation, institution or government department listed here.

discussion of five core research questions (see 'Research Objectives' above), although there was space for participants to discuss sexual violence in entertainment media outside the boundaries of these questions.

Workshops were facilitated by: Dr Sue Bagshaw (MB BS (Lond) FACSHP MRCS LRCP), senior lecturer in adolescent health in the Department of Paediatrics, Christchurch School of Medicine, and primary care doctor specialising in adolescent health; Fiona McNamara, Sexual Abuse Prevention Network General Manager, Wellington; and Eleanor Butterworth, Wellington Rape Crisis Manager.

This report documents the discussion of participants in these workshops. Some of the participants wished to remain anonymous, and as such we have preserved the anonymity of all participants.

Entertainment media examples

The clips shown in the workshops were extracted from the following films and television shows:

Criminal Minds: Season 10 Episode 17	The background of a case in which a male perpetrator had been raping and killing female victims. The perpetrator assaults a female victim but is interrupted and caught.
Family Guy: Season 8, Episode 11 (Dial M for Murder)	A man is raped by a bull at a rodeo event, and this is interjected with a discussion between a female journalist and a talking dog. The discussion was derogatory of women.
Jack & Diane	A drugged teenage girl is sexually assaulted by several boys/young men, who film the act and post it online
Jim Jefferies: Freedumb	A stand-up comedy act featuring extensive rape jokes
Orange Is The New Black: Season 3, episodes 10 &12	Scenes from two different episodes. A young woman named is raped twice – once in a flashback by a man known to her, and later by a prison guard.
Outlander: Season 1 Episode 16	The lengthy scene shows some sadistic cruelty and a man raping another man.
The Vampire Diaries: Season 1 Episode 3	A teenage girl in bed with a male vampire who had bitten her. The vampire tries to dominate the girl in what is presented as a romantic situation.

See Appendix A for more detailed information about the clips.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DETAILED FINDINGS

VIEWS ABOUT THE MEANING AND PERCEPTION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Participants' views about the term 'sexual violence'

The predominant perceptions of sexual violence that emerged from the discussions were:

1. Sexual violence covers a broad range of behaviours and includes any kind of unwanted sexual advance, comment, or exposure.
2. Sexual violence is culturally specific, reflecting cultural context and norms.
3. Issues of power, dominance and control are fundamental to an understanding of sexual violence.
4. Sexual violence is not just physical – it can also include emotional, psychological and other forms. These can extend to a target engaging in sexual behaviour only because they feel they have no other choice, and to someone invalidating the sexual identity of another.
5. The effects of sexual violence are multi-layered and include all types of pain, damage, and trauma.
6. Misconceptions about sexual violence result from everyday social attitudes that normalise and minimise sexual violence.

Many participants agreed that there are core features of sexual violence. However one participant, with years of experience working in sexual violence prevention, noted that definitions have shifted over time. The example given to support this was that sexual dominance (for example BDSM) was once largely perceived as sexually violent behaviour, whereas these days being sexually dominant – or submissive – is more acceptable and mainstream (as long as both parties consent).

The participants in another group raised concerns that focusing on sexual violence could potentially overwhelm messaging about healthy sexuality, or what are generally considered acceptable and good sexual experiences.

Overall, participants agreed that the term 'sexual violence' could be confusing to people of all ages, as the behaviours it describes do not necessarily involve either sexual activity or physical violence.

How young people understand sexual violence

Participants generally agreed that young people's understanding of sexual violence is not a well-explored area and is difficult to measure. There was a general consensus that any study of this sort would require talking directly with young people and asking about specific behaviours, rather than sexual violence as a concept. It was agreed that young people should be given the opportunity to express themselves on these issues in the right space.

Several participants noted that young New Zealanders' understanding of sexual violence is complicated by their definitions of 'consent' and 'sex'. Although consent may be discussed more openly by young people today, some participants thought that this did not necessarily mean that young people have a good understanding of the concept. Some participants suggested these limitations could be related to young people's inexperience with sex and intimacy. One participant suggested that without context, cultural resources, or personal experiences, young people face the challenge of figuring out for themselves "is

that what everybody does? Is this weird, or harmful, or legal?" This is particularly complex when coupled with cultural norms and imperatives that define what 'success' looks like to a sexually active adolescent.

One participant stated that (in their work with victims of sexual violence) they were increasingly dealing with young people who had "warped/skewed" views and beliefs about what constituted a healthy sexual relationship. Furthermore, several participants thought that young people often have a limited understanding of the motivations behind sexual violence. Given the complexity of the subject and its relationship to consensual sexual activity, they thought that many young people perceive sexual violence as being driven solely by sexual desire. Using this framework, young people did not address issues of power, dominance, and control.

Young people's views on sexual violence are also likely to be expressed differently based on their experiences and context. As one participant suggested, we need to be careful "not to put them all in one category". It was agreed by some participants that a young person's view is constructed by what the particular young person brings to the table. Their family upbringing, the region they live in, friendship groups, and a background of abuse are all features which would impact their understanding of sexual violence.

One participant suggested that young people who have experienced sexual violence may demonstrate a more sophisticated understanding of the issue when compared to those who have never experienced sexual violence. Young people who have not personally experienced sexual violence were perceived by some participants as thinking sexual violence is not something that affects them.

Others agreed that gender and gender identity were likely to be an important factor. Their experiences working with groups of young people suggested that girls tend to have a somewhat more sophisticated understanding of sexual violence than boys. Queer and trans-identifying young people were seen to be more open-minded about sex, yet felt the need to be particularly cautious/careful with regard to sexual violence. One point repeated across the groups was that boys pick up on – and clearly resent – the fact that, as males, they are more likely to be presented as perpetrators of abuse whereas girls/females are more likely to be presented as victims.

Overall the discussions identified some core characteristics in young people's understanding of sexual violence:

Their understanding is inherently limited

Many participants discussed, firstly, that children (those under 13 years of age) are generally unlikely to have any knowledge or understanding about sexual violence because they are less likely to have experienced sexual intimacy and relationships. Additionally participants generally agreed that any young person without a clear understanding of consent was unlikely to have an understanding of sexual violence. An example given was that children may be less aware of how alcohol influences consent. Participants felt that young people would be unlikely to draw on personal experiences, and that sexual violence was a topic not generally discussed at school or at home.

They are likely to learn about sexual violence from the media they consume

Most participants tended to agree that entertainment media has some impact on a young person's conception of sexual violence, but that the extent of that impact is not well understood.

"For young people that have no other scripts or behavioural menus where they can select what sort of behaviour is appropriate…media becomes a cultural resource as you develop into adolescence, lacking other scripts about appropriate behaviour. There could be nefarious influences coming from not only pornography but prevailing media…Media depictions give young people scripts for patterns of behaviour."

For some young people, depictions of sexual violence in entertainment may be the first exposure they have to sexual violence. One participant suggested that much of what we see and learn about sexual violence, particularly what sexual violence looks like, is based on media scripts. They noted that rational and critical engagement is often dispensed with in entertainment media, which packages complex relationships into easily accessible stereotypes. Entertainment media, they indicated, is laced with thrilling and titillating depictions of potentially problematic scenarios.

They are less likely to recognise sexually violent behaviour for what it is and are more likely to believe sexual violence only relates to physical acts

Most participants agreed that young people's understanding of sexual violence was limited to extreme physical violence, such as rape. Therefore participants felt that young people were less likely to recognise other forms of sexual violence, and would not have the concepts and vocabulary necessary to name these other forms. Some of the academic participants said they omit the use of the term 'sexual violence' entirely in their work with young people as it "sets the bar too high in terms of being able to seek help". Instead, when asked about 'sexual violence', young people will identify or look for physical harms. For instance, one participant said that the young people they worked with didn't want to call a particular behaviour violent even when their own descriptions were of rape. They also struggled when questioned further, providing justifications such as "It was my boyfriend… I love him…it wasn't rape."

Some participants suggested new technology and the behaviour it facilitates have normalised a "new courtship", which involves certain practices such as "sexting", "dick pics" and the solicitation of self-produced sexual imagery. Coupled with young people's limited grasp of the scope and consequences of their actions, these participants thought young people's ability to recognise sexual violence was being further compromised. These new courtship practices were often perceived by participants as leaving young people uncertain about what they are genuinely comfortable with. It was stated by many participants that young people do not regard this behaviour as non-consensual, even when it is unwanted. Some participants suggested this is best demonstrated by young people's relationship with social media and reality television, which blurs the distinction between real life and fiction and makes it difficult for young people to tell the difference.

Their beliefs are often based on myths and misunderstandings

Participants described a range of myths and misunderstandings about sexual violence they believed young people were likely to hold. These included:

- Rape is only committed by strangers. Sexual violence is done by bad people and happens when you are vulnerable, for example drunk, alone, in the dark.

- The perpetrator is completely aware of what they're doing. Only monsters engage in harmful behaviour, not people you love or care about.

- It won't happen to me…sexual violence only happens to vulnerable people.

- Sexual violence is physical, and only involves physical violence.

- Only women are victims of sexual violence.

- Sexual violence is a normal part of any culture.

- Sexual violence damages you for life. People can tell if it has happened to you.

Participants qualified this by suggesting that these myths and misunderstandings are not held exclusively by young people but people of all generations.

THE CURRENT MEDIA LANDSCAPE, SOCIETAL ATTITUDES AND CHANGING MEDIA USE

Issues impacting how sexual violence is depicted in entertainment media

Participants discussed the media landscape generally and how sexual violence fits within it. Many participants said it was common for the media to deal with sexual violence in graphic and extreme ways (giving audiences a blanket impression of what sexual violence is), and agreed that most depictions in entertainment media did not reflect the realities of sexual violence. As one participant said, "it puts sexual violence experience into a consumable package, capitalising the effects of sexual violence. This is the reality of our world. It showcases the mindsets that exist and is a reflection of attitudes in the world."

Many participants also expressed concern about social media and the perceived prevalence of distorted gender representations and dominant social attitudes that normalised sexual violence. They also discussed a perceived rise in popularity of people seeking fame online through extreme behaviours. Many participants further agreed that social media and streaming services such as Netflix had usurped more traditional mediums such as television. "With on-demand, iPads, watching TV or playing games, parents don't really know. Kids can watch anything but you don't have lots of shows showing other effects [of sexual violence]."

Most participants also agreed that pornography is now a tool young people use to explore and educate themselves about sex.

The impression the majority of participants had was that depictions of sex and gender are often problematic. Even "innocuous" media (such as Disney movies) could be seen to promote and normalise particular ideas about romance and gender, and this has an influence on young people's way of seeing the world.

Several participants noted that narratives involving sexual violence are often laden with jokes, homophobia and misogyny. For instance, "the repetition of normative masculinity overcoming women's will (kids are exposed to this from an early age) in order to achieve its ends, it's really harmful and it's everywhere". One participant noted that this has a direct impact on young people's behaviour:

> *"When guys play video games, running around shooting and killing people, these teen boys will cat call 'haha I raped you'. The dialogue they're using, it's a term they use when they win, overpower, dominate, beat someone, in the playground, in games et cetera. It's not about sexual contact it's about dominance."*

Further to this, many participants noted the lack of positive, realistic, and diverse narratives which were inclusive of people of colour or queer relationships. When those demographics are depicted in entertainment media, they are often not empowering representations.

News media was also perceived by some to be a problem. Participants claimed that "even the way the news presents sexual offending, big stories create sensationalism" and that "news headlines will tell you 'stripper assaulted' – the issue framed with her as a sex worker rather than the fact that someone crossed her boundaries when she was assaulted."

The New Zealand television show *Shortland Street* was repeatedly referred to as one of the only series with examples of sexual violence that were not consistently problematic.

The influence this mediated experience could have was described by one participant:

> *"My suspicion with young people exploring sexuality is that they do have knowledge, because how we consent to sex is how we consent to a bunch of different social interactions. Young people do know, but there's this cultural noise that tells them all sorts of other things – for example messages that boys pursue and girls say no – that gets in the way. So they feel like they don't know, and don't listen to instincts they know."*

Public acceptance of problematic attitude towards sexual violence?

Some participants suggested that most New Zealanders are unlikely to discuss the effects of sexual violence in the media because they do not generally have an awareness or understanding of the topic – and because there is a normalisation of misogynistic cultural norms.

Regarding people's lack of understanding, one participant noted, "It's recent to use the term sexual violence; it doesn't come naturally and people flounder. I think we're going to get there but at this moment in time it isn't embedded in New Zealand's language, because if it's not violent it's not sexual violence". As another participant said, "It's like the ongoing jokes about *Deliverance* and prison rape."

After watching a scene of Jim Jefferies' stand-up comedy, one participant stated, "This represents a strong mind-set. We (adults) watch this stuff in our leisure time. This is dominant in popular culture, these are dominant cultural lessons". Another participant talked about how attempts to minimise violence and blame victims had resonated with them: "[Jefferies] minimises it…you can hear the aggression in his voice, and then he makes out that he's a nice guy. The conflicting messages reminded me of when I worked at the refuge – this is the hardest type of person for a client to get away from."

Workshop video clip: *Jim Jefferies Freedumb*
https://vimeo.com/209660850/6099591f2b
Warning: contains extensive jokes about rape

Other participants suggested that "some parents are equally challenged, completely accepting about some of those attitudes and behaviours" and that "not all kids and parents would have the vocabulary to articulate these issues, it depends what your attitudes about it are. Someone could equally say 'well that's her fault [that a character was subject to violence]'". Another participant suggested that it was a "bit of a privileged scenario to think of thoughtful parents sitting down and having that discussion, whereas other parents might say 'See that's what happens, you better watch yourself'."

Some participants suggested that this perceived normalisation and lack of understanding allows problematic beliefs about sexual violence to go unchallenged. As one participant suggested, "you can't but get a certain percentage of the population that go on to develop beliefs and behaviours that are unacceptable". Of the social attitudes that normalise sexual violence generally, often referred to as rape culture, participants made statements such as "[it is part of a] pattern of the ambivalent relationship we have as a society with sexual violence"; "It can't stem from one thing, there's many contributing factors"; "It's 'acceptable' to make rape jokes and jokes about gender. All those are building blocks"; "[sexual violence in the media] increases these attitudes, creates an environment that is able to flourish"; "There's little discussion on this. Parents need to have discussions with their kids."

Generational differences and increased access

Many participants agreed that there were differences between how older and younger generations engaged with entertainment media. There was general agreement that "TV content nowadays is different to our era, and so is the ability to access it". Many participants discussed the fact that the access we all (but particularly young people) now have to media is unprecedented. They noted that this expanded reach also corresponded with an increase in the amount of content available. One of the primary concerns of the participants was that this had led to a "disconnect" between older and younger generations. Some suggested, "We grew up in a different era so we're [unaware] of what's online...kids can outfox parents when it comes to technology". Others affirmed that there was a "naivety of parents of what is online and what kids are watching – not like our era."

Some participants noted that older generations grew up with television schedules that broadcast more adult content from a set time in the evening, and noted that families might still be viewing together at this time – however even in these more 'traditional' media spaces participants felt there was often a reluctance to discuss confronting material, with sentiments expressed such as, "Shit, should I turn this off?"

A number of participants noted that parents have trouble monitoring and enforcing their children's viewing. They suggested that dealing with these issues was difficult in light of generational differences such as technological change. This was summarised well by one participant:

"There's an extraordinary amount of naïvety amongst the parent community, they are really naïve about what's going on online. We grew up in a different era, parents are trying to navigate and manage but there's a real disconnect there, and kids come across stuff accidently. For dads, when I was 14 what I saw as pornography didn't do me harm, but what you can access now is completely different."

Workshop video clip: *Criminal Minds*
https://vimeo.com/209662078/2620dfb59e
Warning: depicts sexual violence

Another participant suggested that adults do not want to come across as prudish and out of touch, a sentiment shared across their group. Furthermore, genres participants once saw as safe, such as cartoons, now contained adult content, challenging people's ideas about suitable genres for young people.

Online viewing has also fundamentally changed young people's relationship to the media:

"Media is so pervasive, accessible and immediate. Reality TV blurs lines. So those depictions are available, you can send them not just access it, it's easy to send pics around. It's a confusing world. Imagery of fictional rape is one thing but then playing around on the internet you find true depictions. Footage of actual rape can be found online."

A number of participants believed that young people's understanding of sexual violence was being skewed by their increased access to content. One participant observed, "In my work, they point to the media where they say this is what they're watching. This must be where they are getting their ideas from". Another said, "It's quite challenging for us, as adults, to appreciate the world that kids are growing up in today" and that this must be impacting on young people.

PROBLEMATIC DEPICTIONS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

A significant proportion of the discussions were dedicated to participants' concerns about how sexual violence is depicted in entertainment media. While they indicated that some depictions dealt with issues of sexual violence in a balanced way (or even in a positive way, which is discussed later in this report), they said it was much more common that entertainment media featured at least one but more likely a combination of problematic characteristics. They said that, on balance, such depictions contributed directly to the problem of sexual violence in our communities.

Depictions of sexual violence often include myths and false beliefs about sex and relationships

Participants broadly agreed that some of the most problematic depictions of sexual violence were those that normalised or presented rape as consensual sex. This extends to the cultural belief that people can be subjected to sexual violence and then come to enjoy it, or that it can be a way to establish intimacy.

Another variation participants identified was sexual violence being portrayed as romantic or loving. This connects with further problematic beliefs, for example that experiencing pleasure during an act of sexual violence means the act could not be considered sexual violence. Participants strongly disagreed with these beliefs, asserting that "just because your body might react in a certain way doesn't mean it's consensual" and that "pleasure in sexual violence doesn't mitigate the damage."

Many participants suggested that the most pervasive myth surrounding sexual violence is the belief that sexual violence cannot occur within relationships – the idea being that if a person is in a relationship or has consented to sexual activity in the past, then consent is implicit and cannot be withdrawn. The thought process behind this justification of sexual violence was described by one participant as, "She didn't put up a fight. They've had sex before, there's a thing between them. If you consent once you consent forever after that."

Workshop video clip: *Vampire Diaries*
https://vimeo.com/209661942/63df682550
Warning: depicts a young woman being attacked during sex

One participant asserted that it was common in their work dealing with sexual offenders for offenders to justify their behaviour in line with the cultural beliefs described above. In one particular exercise, where offenders were asked to write letters to their victims, the participant observed that it was common for offenders to say that they loved their victim, that the victim was complicit in the 'so-called' sexual violence, and that there was nothing malicious in the offender's behaviour.

A significant problem identified by participants was entertainment media's presentation of male sexuality in the context of relationships. Some participants expressed the idea that male sexuality is often presented in the media as dominating, coercive and predatory, and that this promotes the idea of masculinity representing strength, aggression and violence. Participants also noted that female sexuality and women's roles within relationships are often presented in a similarly one-dimensional way. Participants were concerned that these gender stereotypes affirm the presumption that gendered power dynamics must exist in all relationships, and that an element of power and control is natural in relationships. One participant stated that entertainment media provided viewers with the impression that "romance is still about the coital imperative and male domination. Coitus becomes sex. It's completely unrealistic…there's no warm up, you're thrown into sexual activity."

Some participants noted that depictions of queer relationships are often highly problematic. This was perceived to be a result of a traditionally homophobic entertainment media, which has historically presented queer relationships as violent, dangerous and frightening.

Another type of media depiction participants repeatedly expressed concern about was the glamorisation and normalisation of predatory behaviour, seen in media cultural phenomena such as *Twilight* and *Fifty Shade of Grey*. The discussion of *Fifty Shades of Grey* raised issues about sadomasochism, kink, and consent. A number of participants agreed that the identification of kinky sex with sexual violence was another way of punishing women for sexual self-expression.

Depictions of sexual violence perpetuate a variety of other harmful stereotypes

While the list below is not exhaustive, participants brought up a range of other stereotypes that misrepresent the realities of sexual violence. Examples include:

- Victim/survivors consistently being presented as being weak and pathetic (and often not seeking help) and perpetrators being presented as strong and dominating.

- Highly gendered representations (discussed in part above) such as female passivity indicating consent; the masculine ideal of overcoming a women's will; single and sexually active women deserving punishment; and the paradox of a women's response to trauma (where women are presented as hurt and upset but forgiving, or as taking violent revenge.)

- Male rape is often presented as acceptable or humorous. Male victims can be blamed for violence (especially as a result of effeminacy) and are therefore expected to take responsibility for any sexual violence perpetrated against them. In particular, depictions of prison rape can give the impression that it is an acceptable form of punishment for incarcerated men, who 'deserve' this treatment because of their criminal past. It is often portrayed as an inevitable feature of life in prison.

Lack of detail about the impact of sexual violence on victim/survivors, and a focus on the perpetrator and physical acts of violence

Several participants agreed that it is typical for sexual violence to be presented as having no effect or no lasting effect, or, alternatively, to simply disregard the victim/survivor's experience entirely. "Media presentations may show [acts of] sexual violence but not the ongoing impact of it. The next day everything carries on with the rest of the plot", said one participant, "there's lots of stuff you don't always see."

Many participants described a recurrent theme in popular crime dramas where "there's only a dead victim, there's no drawing-out of the impact on their family or their life. The focus is on the perpetrator and catching him so now we can all relax". "It's clinical. The cops say the victims were sexually assaulted when they're actually dead. It was a bit more than sexual assault. The victims are dehumanised. It minimised their experiences, they were just being viewed as objects". By contrast, the clip from *Orange Is The New Black* was seen as a positive depiction by some participants as it "has a narrative arc, a story that gives us emotion, that's relatable…the story follows an arc around forgiveness and the perpetrator apologises after she explains how it makes her feel. One of the most traumatic things you see, one of the most realistic, is in the way that it's dealt with in terms of how she's experiencing it. It demonstrates how revenge is not an adequate response". Participants generally agreed that it would be positive for more stories such as these, to appear in entertainment media.

Depictions can titillate an audience, eroticise sexual violence and present it as entertaining

A number of participants noted that entertainment media often depicts sexual violence as just another form of sex. *Game of Thrones* was an example organically raised by participants in relation to this issue. Many saw the sexual violence in the series as gratuitous and unnecessary, that the overarching fantasy of the series gave showrunners permission to dress up these depictions in raunchy and titillating ways. As

one participant said, "they're not there to drive the plot". Rape scenes can be presented as thrilling and exciting, inviting the viewer to find the assault titillating and edgy. Some participants further noted that sexual violence was often presented in romantic settings or eroticised with other filmic devices, confusing the top-line message that the conduct was bad or harmful.

Depictions tend to minimise, trivialise and otherwise make light of sexual violence and its impact

Many participants noted that sexual violence can be depicted as a joke or comedic device, that sexual violence and the issues surrounding it are trivialised, and that a perpetrator's actions and the damage they cause are often actively minimised. Participant discussion was prompted by the Jim Jefferies clip. As participants said of the stand-up routine, "it makes light of rape, trauma, symptoms and abusive dynamics", "belittles trigger warnings and people's experience/trauma" and promotes the view of "I can essentially say something, say whatever I like, but it's a joke, it's just a joke, if I label it as a joke". A number of participants noted that Jefferies' views were not uncommon, and that a lot of comedy is about sexual violence, particularly about male rape, prison rape, and female perpetrators. Several participants thought that, according to entertainment media, "male rape is humorous. It minimises male sexual abuse, which is already socially unacceptable, and makes it extremely difficult for victims to seek help and support."

Many participants thought that comedians and the adult cartoon genre were largely responsible for perpetuating and normalising this sort of "misogynistic" humour, particularly shows that featured laugh tracks and live audiences that indicated approval with laughter:

> *"With an audience laughing, it's not just the group thing, it's the applauding, because when you applaud in a situation like that it's a signal of agreement. Applauding is 'I'm on board with what you're saying'. Then he (Jefferies) flips and he really challenges those that want to hold him to a higher standard, saying that it's okay to make fun of rape and rape victims but it's not okay to stand up and advocate for those people, and again that's very concerning."*

The effect of this was significant, as one participant said:

> *"If you have had an experience of rape, your trauma has just been turned into a joke. You're the butt of the joke."*

Moreover:

> *"How would you feel if you had been raped, after watching this? Would you feel okay about getting help?"*

Workshop video clip: *Family Guy*
https://vimeo.com/209660837/a4ac96b3d7
Warning: depicts sexual violence

Some participants suggested that messaging around sexual violence was made even more problematic when placed in the context of cartoons, as they are particularly attractive to children and young people: "The cartoon nature of the *Family Guy* series means it doesn't seem real. Viewers are removed, they switch off. This is part of the risk, an alibi of sorts, that the event is comical and not real life". One participant noted that adult cartoons are specifically designed so there is not a lot of time for viewers to process content, even when the intention is satire or parody.

Depictions can glamorise and actively endorse sexual violence

Many participants noted that popular entertainment media that features sexual violence can, by default, glamorise or endorse sexual violence with little contrary messaging. As one participant highlighted, "it's hard for youth to buck the trend and say no to watching it when everyone else is. Saying no is uncool. Youth are susceptible to trends, peer pressure and popular culture", also "it carries this groundswell, this is trending, this cult following. You're out if you're not up with the play. For young people to put their head above the parapet – for them to say this is off – this is really difficult to do. They don't want to be seen as uncool. It's not just the rating (classification) you're contending with but with popular culture."

Depictions can end problematically and feature no critical or reflective elements

Several participants noted that it was normal for entertainment media representations of sexual violence to have no consequences for the characters involved. "It shoves the issue under the rug, time to move on". Thus, perpetrators are not often depicted as being held to account. Other participants pointed out that, alternatively, perpetrators can be shown as receiving 'justice' in the form of violence or murder, often with no depiction of the judicial system, and even then not in a way that reflects reality. "In reality the perpetrators aren't always caught."

Parallel to this, there are narratives that depict sexual violence as just another crime, without exploring the complexity of sexual violence and its effects. Participants suggested that sexual violence could be used as a form of shorthand to avoid building complex or nuanced characters. In other words, a character who commits rape is shorthand for 'bad guy'. As one participant suggested,

> *"I have a thing about media that intends to make something a bad thing by showing you a bad thing, without any context around it. When you just show that you are just reproducing and reinforcing. Entertainment may make you think critically but it doesn't necessarily open discussion. It's easy to just watch that, take it as it is. It just reinforces ideas and normalises them."*

Depictions often deal with complex ideas in problematic ways that may contradict each other

Entertainment media can often swing between shocking content and confusing messaging about sexual violence in an attempt to throw viewers or to be subversive. Some participants stated that this makes it harder for viewers to recognise sexual violence and to recognise it as harmful. This was perceived as especially problematic when sexual violence was associated with humour or romance, with the romance genre perceived by some to often blur the lines between coercion and consent. As one participant suggested, if a depiction is "really shocking it's easy to object to the image. Those smaller steps are more permissible and easier to get comfortable with. Rape is 'objectionable' but in comedy or cartoons people are more comfortable with it, it's less challenging". Another participant suggested that comedic entertainment media that tried to be 'clever' about cultural myths or beliefs relating to sexual violence, often fell short of representing anything interesting or meaningful in the process.

AUDIENCE EFFECTS

Some participants in the academics' workshop expressed awareness of a "fractious debate about direct effects and social effects on large numbers, and this is hard to reconcile". Participants in the academics' workshop emphasised that, in their view, experimental research design would struggle to account for the myriad of factors that may influence a viewer and that it was therefore difficult to isolate the direct effects of viewing sexual violence across a diverse population. In other words, these participants thought it was not realistic for media effects research to provide conclusive statistical evidence demonstrating a direct causal link between media depictions and real-world behaviour. As one participant said, "we can't say there are direct and predictable effects coming from the nature of the content itself, but when you look at how people engage with media content, social devices, scripts and expectations, there are possible themes that can be expressed on a social level."

Nevertheless, many participants across the workshops stated their belief that problematic media depictions can and do contribute directly to the problem of sexual violence in our communities.

Some of the studies that are based on assessing the observed and reported effects of violent and sexualised content across large numbers of participants are cited at the beginning of this report.

IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE

Overall, participants generally believed that the cultural myths and misrepresentations of sexual violence in the media were more harmful when consumed by young people. One participant stated that "movies tell young people a lot about how we as a society make sense of sexual violence – casual sexual violence rather than depictions that come with narrative structure that they can make sense of". Some participants indicated that entertainment media helped shape the development of core beliefs, morality, and sexual identity. Therefore, entertainment media was imbued by participants with the power to normalise the use of violence to meet sexual needs, glamorise violent sexual practices, and reinforce antisocial sexual practices. As one participant said, "The glorification of violence to meet sexual needs is very confusing to young people developing their sexual identity."

Many participants were concerned not only with young people internalising problematic beliefs from media representations, but that they were also actively learning about sexual violence from

entertainment media. As one participant put it, "viewing the material a lot is your education on sexual violence. It educates you in a certain way what sexual violence is."

Another participant put it this way:

> *"How we see and learn what sexual violence is, it's often like a plot point where there's a cis [gender], white, young, attractive woman who gets her drink spiked and then down an alleyway there's sexual violence and that's how we learn, how we know what it looks like, rather than that it can be all around us, involving people we know…There's ambiguity because we're not sure what consent is. Until you know what consent is, you can't say what sexual violence is."*

However, as noted by another participant "it depends on the experience [young people] bring to the depiction as well as 'norms' gleaned from peers, family et cetera". Participants acknowledged that there are many ways that young people's beliefs and attitudes towards sexual violence are shaped and influenced, and that entertainment media was one important factor.

Workshop video clip: *Jack & Diane*
https://vimeo.com/209660688/6b2ae67d22
Warning: depicts a realistic sexual assault on a teenage girl who has been drugged

Developing harmful beliefs based on misrepresentation of sexual violence and its consequences

Most participants were concerned about the messages the media transmitted. Therefore it makes sense that they were also concerned about the harms to young people who internalised these messages. As one participant said of the sexual assault depicted in *Jack & Diane*, "It's dangerous. It would give ideas, it's instructional: get a girl drunk, pull her underwear down and ejaculate on her. It's shown as if she likes it. Some [young people] would see past this, that it's wrong, but to others it would seem exciting and instructional. For some it would normalise and encourage". However, participants generally agreed that young people were more susceptible to internalising harmful media messages about sexual violence rather than engaging with them critically or rejecting them outright:

> *"Kids think 'this is normal'."*

> *"That perspective becomes learned."*

These participants felt that the harms to young people posed by media messages about sexual violence extended to the development of problematic beliefs and attitudes. Perceived harms to young people's sexual development and expectations, as expressed by participants, included:

> *"Sexual interactions are influenced by cultural and gender ideals, what you're supposed to do and what you're supposed to ask for. Beliefs such as 'You don't need to ask' and 'because you're a woman you will have anal sex with me', instead of 'Do I need to talk to her about it?'"*

> *"Boys would think they can use physical strength against others."*

> *"It's your fault…if you'd complied this wouldn't have happened to you. Victim-blaming…"*

> *"There was no clear negative outcomes for the boys in Jack & Diane. I'd be more inclined to make it R18. The young offenders we work with, they got to do what they wanted and consent wasn't an issue for them. I'd be reluctant to let them watch it."*

In response to *Jack & Diane,* one participant described how young people might internalise negative tropes when the depictions of sexual violence more closely matched their reality:

> *"It's really tangible for young people because this is real, this is normal-looking online, this kind of stuff…that whole thing around what's the real world and what they can relate to, this is so real. This actual scenario is really possible, being embarrassed, the lack of consent that we know is a problem for young people particularly when there's drugs and alcohol involved. Getting drunk enough and doing what the hell they want. She doesn't kick him off. The consent issue becomes even more problematic."*

Young people struggle to challenge content

Some participants suggested that media representations of sexual violence were so pernicious because they thought that young people lacked the confidence and social tools necessary to challenge problematic messaging. This was perceived as especially true because these participants felt that young people's peers – and the broader culture in general – perpetuated myths about sexual violence, leaving young people "trying to figure out how to make sense of the world, how to act in the world, there's peer pressure for teens."

Many participants thought that young people struggled to call out sexually violent behaviour or even identify it as harmful. This was considered to be especially true in group contexts, particularly regarding comedy content. These participants stated that "if you challenge this, you're regarded as uncool, not funny, no sense of humour, somehow earnest and not fun". One participant suggested that "comedy is hard to challenge. The rationale is 'settle down it's just a joke' but regular exposure, washing over, would be a building block". Others stated that comedy that involved sexual violence "wouldn't encourage people to front up. It's kind of saying get on with it, no big deal" and that "it's hard not to laugh when you're around your peers."

Young people lack socio-cognitive skills

Participants generally believed that young people lacked critical cognitive skills and development, and that this was critical in understanding why media messaging impacted so strongly on young viewers. Furthermore, these participants believed that adolescents did not always have the capacity to anticipate potential consequences. Participants stated that young people "watch others model behaviour" and "have no concept of reason and consequences. They don't have the reasoning to understand the impact of that action."

Many participants questioned whether young people noticed or picked up on the subtleties of the media they viewed, particularly in group/peer contexts. "Young people don't read in to it, analyse it like we are now. They may miss the subliminal messages of power and control", said one participant. "There's a lot of innuendo in there, if you were too young for that information then you may well not know what was going on". Some participants thought that, in terms of complicated media content, "you'd want someone

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there to talk about it. It does require drawing the dots as to why these things are happening. It requires some abstract thinking."

Workshop video clip: *Outlander*
https://vimeo.com/209661280/6bed1fb9c2
Warning: depicts graphic sexual violence and sadistic cruelty

Shock and disturb

A harm recognised by members of all workshop groups was the disturbing, scary, upsetting and distressing effect of watching sexual violence, and the ensuing trauma an individual may experience. Participants themselves expressed revulsion, trauma, emotional disturbance, and disgust in response to the clips shown in the workshops, all of which were taken from mainstream films and television shows.

Triggering

An almost universally recognised harm discussed by participants in workshops was the triggering effect that viewing sexual violence can have on victim/survivors of sexual violence. 'Triggering' in this context describes the experience of viewers as having intrusive, negative responses to the content they are watching. For example, depictions of sexual violence may trigger a viewer to recall or relive real life experiences of past abuse and trauma. Participants suggested many aspects of a depiction could be triggering, especially when the depiction glorified or endorsed the behaviour, or if the harm and trauma experienced was minimised.

Referring to the perceived trivialisation of rape in some media depictions, such as the Jim Jefferies routine, one participant said:

> "If I watched this as a youth, and I'd been raped, I'd feel like I couldn't admit to it. There's a sense of shame – others laughing – it would tempt me to minimise my own feelings."

Another commented:

> "If I was a young person and I'd had an experience of rape or sexual assault and I was sitting in an environment where that material was being played and the people around me were laughing or being entertained by that, that would increase my sense of shame or my desire to minimise my own feelings towards it. If I hadn't disclosed that, I wouldn't be encouraged to do so. It's certainly very triggering in terms of potential harms."

Changes victims' own belief system

In addition to the participants' discussion of how media narratives of sexual violence can impact on individuals and communities in general, participants discussed how victim/survivors in particular could be affected. Participants gave plenty of examples, with one suggesting that "if there are narrow views of sexual violence, what it means or looks like…it reinforces that their experience didn't count. It might make victims discount their own feelings and experiences."

Another participant identified Jefferies' statement "it wasn't the worst rape" as a claim often heard by those working in the treatment sector, despite the fact that no matter the degree of the violence, all victim/survivors may be seriously affected. "I learnt in my job a long time ago the act itself is quite irrelevant to how people feel. The circumstances and the ongoing impact matters so much more". Some participants also suggested that problematic depictions of sexual violence can increase a victim/survivors' fear regarding who is safe, making them think "is there something wrong with me?"

Further harms of exposure to depictions of sexual violence

Participants produced a list of harms associated with viewing sexual violence in addition to those mentioned above.

Concerns were raised about the desensitisation of young people to sexual violence, and the inferred connection between sexual violence and sexual pleasure. For example, participants indicated that "the thrill threshold is incrementally pushed out" and that "repeated viewing begins to link sexual violence to sexual gratification."

Participants also expressed concerns about potential harms to sexual relationships, for example that media depictions of sexual violence "can/might lead to problems with sexual functioning/intimacy/relationships" and an "inability to develop 'normal' long-term relationships."

There were some who thought that media representations of sexual violence had the ability to influence individuals to participate in sexual violence themselves, especially because some media messaging was perceived by participants as validating the perpetrators of sexual violence.

Others worried that these same representations led to anxiety for some viewers:

> *"For young women, it can make it seem scary and vulnerable to be female. For young people, it can make the world seem a dangerous and scary place. This is part of reality but it can make it seem more common than it actually is."*

THE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM, CLASSIFYING AND COMPLIANCE

Participants generally agreed that classification systems were necessary and that a single system covering all mediums was preferable. Some participants called for a balanced approach to policy in this area. As one participant put it, "let's not eliminate exposure but let's make sure we have a balanced approach. Be aware that exposure to sexual violence in media can be both developmental (healthy) and problematic."

A classification system based on age was seen as problematic by some participants, given that young people develop emotional and intellectual maturity at their own pace. Comments included "who says there is a magical age" and that "ages are ambiguous – people develop at different stages". Many participants agreed with the statement that "I don't think teenagers need to be protected from sexual violence depictions so long as it says 'this is what it is and this is harmful'."

Some participants noted the paradox with classification and age restrictions, pointing out that "society says 16 year-olds can have sex, but some kinds of sex you shouldn't be watching, you're only allowed to watch certain sex". However, participants tended to agree with or even support higher classifications for the content they were shown. Many participants praised the detailed analysis of the Classification Office

in some of the written classification decisions that were shared during workshops. Participants often suggested that comprehensive warnings were important regardless of whether something was classified as restricted or unrestricted.

Several participants said they liked reading the official Classification Office decisions as this allowed them to see the full picture of the types of content that were highlighted, and clarified the decision-making process. Some participants suggested that better access to the Classification Office's decisions would be useful when making personal viewing choices. Others were so impressed they suggested that they wanted the reasons to be read to audiences before film screenings, making statements such as "I want someone to read that to me" and "Bravo – can that be read out before the programming?"

Participants also discussed the classification process itself. One question a participant suggested should be asked during the classification process is, "Does it give permission for people to minimise the harm of rape?" Other participants felt that the classification process would benefit from considering whether the depiction of sexual violence was glorifying, titillating, educational, and whether issues were left unresolved.

Most participants indicated they would oppose changes to the law that would limit people's access to detailed content information before films were viewed. These participants thought that the Classification Office had an educational role in the community, and it was almost unanimously agreed that a classification system was a necessary element of broader strategies aiming to reduce sexual violence.

Language in classification decisions and descriptive notes

Despite support for classification, a number of participants disagreed with the language used in descriptive warning notes on classification labels and in written classification decisions. It was suggested that 'sexual violence' was not a particularly useful term because it confused so many people, particularly young people. Participants suggested that more people were familiar with the term 'sexual abuse' or, alternatively, that descriptions of the act/behaviour could be used in descriptive notes. For example, different labels could warn potential viewers about rape, violation, control, or harassment.

Some participants went so far as to suggest the inclusion on labels of statements such as "trivialises rape" or "may be triggering to people who have experienced sexual assault", and thought that thematic issues such as homophobia or racism should also be noted. These participants agreed that any language that minimises sexualise violence should be avoided. Other participants were concerned that referring to young people as "children" in classification decisions may be interpreted as condescending by young people. Many suggested using simpler and more youth-centred language.

Furthermore, participants generally agreed that although a singular message was unlikely to cater to everyone, the Classification Office should try to avoid alienating youth through the use of formal or inaccessible language in classification decisions and descriptive notes.

Many participants agreed that the term 'sexual violence' can be confusing to people of all ages, as it doesn't necessarily involve either sexual activity or physical violence.

Compliance

Participants were generally sceptical about young people complying with classifications. Some participants said outright that "whether it has guidance or not, no one pays attention anymore…they [classifications] can be a bit of a magnet for kids who are 'going to be a bit naughty'" and that "parents may see the rating but often R18 means nothing. Kids have R18 games, *Grand Theft Auto* for example, everyone has it."

Some discussed the fact that the internet made compliance extremely difficult to enforce, despite efforts and interventions by governmental and non-governmental organisations. On the issue of digital convergence and the current policy adopted by government, one participant suggested that "the government doesn't want to go to great lengths to do anything. If the government gives [classification responsibility] to the BSA (Broadcasting Standards Authority), it makes it easier for them. It's a cheap and smooth amalgamation of the gaps in existing legislation. But the BSA complaints process activates only after a complaint is made, there's no prior screening before it's distributed". Other participants argued that the BSA model was not sufficiently targeted at young people or how they consume content, stating that "you shouldn't just get rid of ratings just because content is elsewhere. Not that many young people are going to see particular broadcast television shows but they are seeing a lot of expansive content and user-generated content."

The majority of participants thought that the current classification system should be maintained despite the difficulties surrounding compliance and enforcement. One participant suggested that fewer barriers in the way of young people accessing objectionable and explicit content did not make this behaviour okay or unproblematic. Another followed this up by suggesting that "unexpected exposure has significant impact. It's upsetting when they aren't warned about it… Ratings and notes are useful…they can make decisions about whether they want to view it. People want more information to know what's coming". None of the participants suggested classification alone was sufficient to deal with the issues facing young people's media choices, but most agreed there was a 'mismatch' between the problem and current levels of intervention, given the high level of exposure young people have to entertainment media and the potential for harms to increase with ongoing exposure.

MITIGATING HARMS

During workshops, participants were asked specifically what they thought would reduce the harms related to young people viewing sexual violence in entertainment media. Participants suggested a range of ideas, including:

- A television watershed at 9pm.

- More consumer information about classification, in conjunction with social resources to guide media engagement.

- Parental education on the potential harms of being exposed to potentially harmful material.

- Supporting parents to be more comfortable in talking to young people regarding sexuality, power and intimacy, and encouraging young people to be active viewers, conscious of what they were watching.

- An information campaign on staying safe – one for kids, one for adults/guardians, launched through social and mainstream media.

- Information on where parents can get safety nets with classification tools turned on.

- Providing young people with other ways of getting better information about sexuality.

- Fostering more honest conversations within public forums regarding sexual violence, enabling public discussion and problem-solving.

Providing notices about support services

Many participants suggested that when dealing with potentially triggering materials, content providers should be required to include notices that direct viewers to appropriate support services they could easily access should they need to. The nature of this would be, as one participant suggested, "if you are watching this and having a reaction, this is where you can go."

Several participants suggested differing variations of providing information about what the notices could direct viewers to – including support services, helplines, or a centralised website that referred users to other services. Notices could appear at any point, i.e. the beginning, middle or end of the content, during advertising or in credits sequences. Notices could be embedded into the content by the content producers themselves, or sponsored by government agencies and other organisations.

Without being wholly prescriptive, some participants suggested potential notices such as:

- "Parental guidance required."

- "Cartoon with sexually explicit material."

- "Contains sexual violence and scenes that may be disturbing."

- "Information about naming it as a rape scene."

- "This programme shows (or implies) male rape and depicts it as humorous."

- "May be triggering to people who have experienced sexual assault."

- "Sensitive material. Audience laughing reaction may have triggering effect."

Overall, in response to having read the official written decisions of the Classification Office, participants tended to agree with the sentiment that "long warnings would bring consent education into homes."

Education

Most participants agreed that better educational resources would help audiences make better viewing choices for themselves and others. They also suggested that there could be some educational value in certain depictions of sexual violence, but that the context in which they were presented would be important.

Some participants suggested it would be useful for clips of problematic media examples to be shown in schools in order to develop young people's critical awareness. This strategy would also provide young people with an opportunity to discuss the issues presented in a safe and supportive space. Proponents of

this approach suggested that it could help young people "learn about sex, intimacy and relationships in a useful way". One participant advocated for such a curriculum as follows:

> *"Schools could definitely use it as a vehicle to talk about issues of consent – the visual appearance of consent or absence of it. What does it mean to fight back or say yes, what are the realities of it. Most schools won't deal with this. The conversation it would generate would be useful – more beneficial than watching at home. It's unlikely to be shown in schools, which is crazy because most kids are watching that. It could be a good discussion tool for issues of consent."*

Most participants argued that the success of pre-existing healthy relationship/sexual education programmes that are run in some schools, such as ACC's Mates & Dates, clearly illustrate that young people are open-minded, willing and able to discuss representations of gender, ethnicity, consent, the modern day pressures to participate in a highly sexualised culture, and even to criticise current sexual violence public awareness campaigns.

One participant suggested that the decades-long "moral panic" around young people accessing or being exposed to pornography has fundamentally shifted the conversation about sex education. Other participants agreed that fears about the harms associated with pornography had forced sex education into territory where educators felt uncomfortable, unsafe, and unable to act. The reality, some participants suggested, is that young people are often "conservative and well-behaved" and that "not all kids are constantly searching for porn."

Many participants thought that young people required more safe spaces to have conversations about sex and relationships. As one participant argued, current models are "not equipping young people to recognise and react appropriately to incidents of sexual violence". In general, participants suggested it was unacceptable that young people were made aware of sexual violence and its consequences from entertainment media. As one participant noted, "real stuff is happening to teenagers all the time". In order to safely navigate this "real stuff", the majority of participants agreed that there needed to be comprehensive information about sexual violence incorporated into the curriculum – because in the absence of good education about how sexual violence and consent should be interpreted, seemingly innocuous media representations can send dangerous messages.

Positive depictions

Participants often struggled to pinpoint exactly what constituted a 'positive' or helpful media depiction of sexual violence, and many participants were reluctant to be specific. However, participants generally agreed that depictions that prompted discussion about sexual violence, invited critical thought, had constructive underlying themes, and made viewers reflect on their own beliefs, were more likely to be positive and/or useful. As one participant reflected,

> *"If it shows [sexual violence] is uncool, damaging, and the costs, I think it can be very powerful. It can definitely be used to challenge the status quo, rape culture, perceptions of what's acceptable behaviour such as taking advantage of a drunk woman at a party…equipping kids with terms for that situation and skills for fending that behaviour off. It's happening in their lives, not just in the movies, in our lives, it's part of what is going on."*

A few participants suggested the most positive depictions were those that showed a "strength-based model of intimacy" or "representations of authentic intimacy and ones that invite critical reflection e.g. "showing consequences."

In general, participants supported the representation of positive sexual experience, rather than simply prohibiting the negative ones. One participant specifically suggested that if young people have examples of good/consensual sex then they can compare these to examples of sexual violence: "Young people are likely to be affected by sexual violence differently if they are not or have not been shown good/appropriate sex. So if they have visions of good sex, they might respond differently to visions of sexual violence."

Participants identified various media messages and themes that could be considered broadly 'positive', including:

- Showing how to respond to sexual violence and empowering young people to speak out against sexual violence, whether they see it or experience it. This could include the media depictions where victims speak out strongly after experiencing sexual violence, and not being silenced or shamed by it. Media could also provide representations of other people intervening and stopping what is happening when they see forms of sexual violence occurring.

- Challenging social norms such as females as victims, men as perpetrators, violence in relationships or queer relationship violence. This could include the media providing different examples of sexual violence so that people may recognise their own experience as abusive. Participants also called for less heteronormative content/contexts.

- Media providing realistic content about the impacts of trauma, for example that there is no 'normal' reaction to sexual violence and that "pleasure in the course of rape doesn't lessen the violence". This could include clear depictions of the emotional, legal, physical, and social impact of sexual violence, given that adolescents don't always have the capacity to infer potential consequences.

- Showing positive responses to victim/survivors in which help works well. For example, after sexual violence incidents it can be helpful and encouraging to disclose it. The production of content that ensures the person who has been hurt is being supported and believed. This means media need to create more content that depicts empathy and awareness toward victim/survivors.

- Creating media content that privileges the stories and voices of victims who have made strong stands and about those who have intervened when they witnessed sexual violence. This could include showing potential victims being powerful and escaping dangerous situations, not just becoming victims.

- Better messages to be directed at males rather than focusing on females as victims. Clear dialogue around ethics and consent in sexual behaviour. For example, young people clearly understanding that "I can be drunk and it's still rape."

Overall, participants thought that media depictions that disrupted harmful cultural myths were beneficial. One participant said, "If you have a society that tries to limit the vision of sexuality, then sexual violence is likely to follow because there are not a range of visions of sexuality…they are not getting any visions of young people learning or having a good time, so it's much more harmful". It was emphasised that there

needs to be a balance, a weighing-up in the presence of an abundance of negative depictions and an absence of positive depictions.

CONCLUSION

After the four workshops and reviewing the data collected, there are conclusions that the Classification Office can draw about the way that adults who work closely with young people perceive the effects of sexual violence in entertainment media on this key demographic.

Overall, participants thought that young people were indelibly shaped by the portrayal of sexual relationships that they saw in the media, and voiced concern about many of these depictions. Participants felt there was a lack of positive messaging in entertainment media aimed at youth that challenged problematic beliefs such as those about female victimhood, the nature of consent, and 'stranger danger'. These themes closely overlap with their concerns around the ways in which sexual violence is represented in entertainment media, including the perpetuation of negative stereotypes about both victim/survivors and perpetrators. Because young people were perceived as having lower socio-cognitive skills, the adults we spoke to thought that young people were more likely to accept media uncritically, and use it as an educative tool.

Participants suggested several actionable solutions that had the ability to mitigate the negative effects of poor media portrayals of sex and sexual violence in general. First and foremost, participants called for comprehensive sex education in schools that taught teenagers explicitly about consent, sexual violence, and the qualities of un/healthy relationships. This included the creation of safe spaces that allowed teenagers to communicate with each other and with trusted adults about their own experiences of sex and relationships.

Participants also articulated clear opinions on the Classification Office and the current classification system. One frequently heard opinion was that the current classification system needed to be extended to online streaming services. Furthermore, although our adult participants were sceptical about the extent to which young people complied with classification guidelines, they felt strongly that the content notices that accompanied ratings were of high importance in terms of signalling content to young people. Many participants said that these notices should be both more detailed and specific. Because there was a general consensus that young people were confused about the meaning of 'sexual violence' already, participants thought that naming specific behaviours (for example 'rape', 'attempted rape', 'unwanted touching') would further help young people make appropriate viewing choices.

The insights offered by adults who work closely with young people are useful in that they indicate discomfort with how the media portrays sex and sexual violence, and the potentially harmful beliefs that these portrayals continue to feed.

The final stage of our current research project focuses on the experiences and opinions of teenagers themselves about depictions of sexual violence in media. We believe the findings of this current report are useful and important; however when the next round of research is released it will be interesting to identify differences between the way adults perceive young people and how young people perceive themselves.

APPENDIX

The following audio-visual clips were used as prompts throughout the discussion:

Criminal Minds: Season 10, episode 17 **(Season 10 DVD classified R16: violence, sexual violence and content that may disturb)**

The American crime drama series follows a team of FBI agents who use criminal profiling and behavioural science to solve crimes. This episode deals with a murder investigation in which the killer, inspired by the BDSM practices in a popular erotic novel, sexually assaults and strangles his female victims to death. The clip shows the agents discussing aspects of the case as well as flashbacks to the crimes. Forensic photos show dead women tied to bedposts in their underwear and rope marks on their skin. Snippet flashbacks show the victims struggling and screaming while the killer restrains and then strangles them. There is a reasonable level of detail and some focus on the victims' distress. The killer is shown leading a double life as a family man. As he attacks, restrains and strangles his next victim, his teenage daughter enters the house and eventually walks in on her father lying over the unconscious woman. The killer chases his daughter outside and is apprehended.

Family Guy: Dial M For Murder **(Season 8 DVD classified R13: violence, offensive language and sexual references)**

The American adult cartoon sitcom follows the middle-class Griffin family and their anthropomorphic pet dog, Brian. The series exhibits much of its humour in the form of cutaway gags that often lampoon American culture. The scene shown is set at a rodeo event. A talking bull indicates that he is going to sexually assault Peter Griffin, the show's father character. The scene then cuts to Brian casually talking to a journalist who is writing a piece about the habits of teenage girls. Brian says that he loves teenage girls because "they haven't turned into bitches yet". We then see the bull talking to Peter after the assault has occurred. The bull stands above Peter and orders that they see each other again, while Peter cowers on the ground. *Family Guy* ratings range between M, R13 and R16.

Jack & Diane **(R16: violence, sexual violence, offensive language and sex scenes)**

The American coming-of-age romance drama follows two teenage girls, Jack and Diane, as they become inseparable friends and then gradually lovers. One of the issues they face together is how to help Diane's sister, Karen, who had recently been sexually assaulted. In the scene shown, Chris (a mutual male friend) finds an online video of Karen being sexually assaulted on an adult website after apparently being drugged at a party. Two teenage boys implicitly masturbate and ejaculate over Karen as she lies semi-conscious on a mattress, and this is filmed by another boy. The clip ends after Jack and Chris discuss whether what they saw was rape.

Jim Jefferies: Freedumb **(R18: offensive language, sexual material and other content that may offend)**

Jim Jefferies is an Australian stand-up comedian who specialises in insult and observational comedy. The clip is a segment of a recent performance in which Jefferies satirises the accusations of rape faced by Bill Cosby. Jefferies makes extensive jokes about Cosby as a rapist and of rape in general. His version describes in reasonably strong detail what happened to the women involved, while pretending to play down the seriousness of the matter, e.g. "He used to drug 'em and finger them a bit...As far as rapes go,

they weren't the worst rapes now, were they?" and "If someone drugged my drink I would take it as a compliment". Despite Jefferies' disclaimers, the material makes fun of rape culture. It would likely be extremely offensive to some people and is capable of upsetting others, particularly women who have been subjected to any form of sexual violence.

Orange Is The New Black: Season 3, episodes 10 &12 (R16: violence, sexual violence and offensive language)

The American comedy drama series is set in a women's prison where inmates must learn to survive and overcome numerous struggles. The clip shows scenes from two different episodes. A young woman named Tiffany is raped twice – once in a flashback by a man known to her, and later by a prison guard. Both rapes are implicitly shown but still impactful, with a focus on Tiffany's face and emotional expression. Urged by an inmate friend to seek revenge, the two women drug the guard and plan to rape him with a broomstick, however Tiffany realises she has no rage in her to act so violently.

Outlander: Season 1, episode 16

Based on a series of novels, the series follows the adventures of Claire, a British nurse who travels back in time to 18th Century Scotland. She marries Jamie, the dashing Highland warrior, and becomes embroiled in the Jacobite risings. This episode shows an imprisoned Jamie being beaten, tortured and raped by the sadistic Captain Randall. Randall is determined to 'break' Jamie to submission and continues to rape Jamie to the point of his climax. The scene contains a significant level of detail and is harrowing to watch. In the aftermath, Jamie struggles to deal with his trauma and guilt over the assault, and the effect this has on his relationship with Claire.

The Vampire Diaries: Season 1, episode 3 (Season 1 DVD classified R13: violence and drug use)

Based on a series of novels, the American supernatural drama television series follows a group of teenage characters living in the fictional town of Mystic Falls. Vampires, witches and werewolves interact with humans and contend with relationships and attacks from other supernatural entities. In the scene shown, malevolent vampire Damon has just bedded human Caroline and bitten her. Caroline wakes in the morning somewhat dazed and confused about the bite mark on her neck. As she tries to creep out of the room, Damon suddenly confronts her and prevents her from leaving. There is a struggle before Damon shoves Caroline onto the bed. Smelling the blood on her pillow, he bares fangs and lunges toward her. All seasons of *The Vampire Diaries* have been classified R13 with notes for horror and violence and some low-level sexual material.