

Pornography

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Harm, childhood and appropriate media content: an ongoing debate

We live in an era of contested conceptualisations of childhood. On the one hand, the commercial imperative of contemporary capitalism has expanded into marketing for and to children. On the other hand, the predominant view of childhood as a natural, universal and biologically inherent period of human development, imagined as an age of innocence where the child is vulnerable to the threat of deviant sexuality, means that we experience a nervous dialectic in which children are held to be ‘naturally’ innocent yet, at the same time, implicated in dangerous sexuality. This means that rather than seeing them as humans going through a complex and contradictory maturation process, we posit children as inherently pure, yet easily corrupted by exposure to explicit image material (Kleinhans, 2004, p 72).

However, the assumed harmful influence of pornography on children goes back to a long and still ongoing tradition of media effects, and has been exacerbated with the advent and unprecedented proliferation of online pornography. Children need to be protected from harmful content, which includes pornographic content. We live, the argument goes, in a culture saturated and depraved by uncontrolled sexuality, in which childhood innocence is debauched by media and consumer culture within which the availability of sexual information to children is rarely treated as positive. Alongside a growing acceptance that young viewers interpret pornography in complex ways and claims that media ‘effects’ are simplistic and overly deterministic – especially when pornography is also seen as having desirable effects, as in the case of challenging restrictive sexual norms and offering positive expressions of non-heterosexual sexualities – there is a need to be cautious about the harmful effects associated with pornography¹ (Flood, 2007). The ubiquity of children’s encounters with internet pornography has been discussed by various researchers and institutions, in different national

1 contexts (Freeman-Longo, 2000; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001;
2 Thornburgh and Lin, 2002; NetRatings Australia, 2005; McKee et al,
3 2008; Ey and Cupit, 2011; among others).

4 There is a grey area on the public agenda that covers child
5 sexuality and child pornography, which are, however, separate issues.
6 The confusion is further confounded because public discussion of
7 pornography often conflates three areas that are quite distinct: child
8 abuse images (the depiction of children in sexually explicit contexts),
9 'grooming' (adults trying to lure children into sexual activity online) and
10 online pornography (adult pornography that children and teens may
11 access on purpose or by accident) (McKee et al, 2008). The interest in
12 this chapter is online pornography since, despite considerable academic
13 interest in the possibility that accidental exposure to sexually explicit
14 material may harm children, there has been very little direct research
15 in this area for ethical reasons (Heins, 2001; Helsper, 2005). Helsper
16 (2005) argues that there is no conclusive empirical evidence of a causal
17 relationship between exposure to over-18² material and the impairment
18 of mental, physical or moral development in minors.

19 Nevertheless, the extent to which pornographic websites are
20 experienced as problematic for young people and their families is
21 unclear, since the link between risks, incidents and actual harm is
22 genuinely tenuous: not all risk-taking results in worrying incidents,
23 not all worrying incidents result in actual or lasting harm (Livingstone,
24 2009). Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone (2006) show that many
25 questions about harm are difficult to address because research provides
26 evidence based on the balance of probabilities rather than on irrefutable
27 proof. In fact, what is at stake is the likelihood of risk rather than of
28 inevitable harm.

29 Media representations across Europe affect perceptions of the
30 prevalence of risk by envisaging the online world as hazardous to
31 children, and by focusing public attention disproportionately on risks
32 – as evidenced by a content analysis of news coverage in 14 of the 21
33 countries participating in *EU Kids Online I* (Haddon and Stald, 2009).
34 Thus, the media contribute to the proliferation of public anxieties that
35 can easily escalate into moral panic (Cricher, 2008; Tsaliki, 2011). That
36 said, it is worth noting that concerns about pornography are relative
37 in the sense that pornography is a bigger issue in some countries
38 than others³ and, therefore, media representations vary. Also, what was
39 regarded as obscene in one era may be considered as culturally valuable
40 in another, and vice versa (McKee et al, 2008, p 4)⁴ and, in this sense,
41 what exactly constitutes pornography remains relatively vague.
42

Looking into the online activities and behaviour of representative samples of a thousand children per country aged 9–16, across 25 European countries, the *EU Kids Online II* network found that less than a quarter (23 per cent) had encountered sexual images, online or offline. The greater frequency of older children and teenagers (compared to younger children who encounter more online risks) means that it is this group that has most such experiences; 14 per cent had encountered sexual images online, mostly as a result of accidental pop-ups rather than deliberately, 12 per cent encountered them on television, video or film, and 7 per cent did so in magazines. Also, it is older teenage boys (13–16 years) who are more likely to have seen online sexual content (24 per cent). Of all those exposed to sexual content online, about one third (32 per cent) were bothered by it, which translates into only 4 per cent of the total population of children. Among those few who reported being upset, 16 per cent were ‘very upset’ by what they saw, 28 per cent were ‘fairly upset’ and 41 per cent were ‘a bit’ upset. In all cases, the majority coped well and got over the experience immediately. National variation in the incidence of exposure to sexual content online is considerable, as may be expected, ranging from 34 per cent of children in Norway, followed by Finland and Estonia (29 per cent), Denmark and the Czech Republic (28 per cent), Sweden (26 per cent), Latvia and Slovenia (25 per cent), and Italy (7 per cent). Only a small minority of children in Europe who have encountered sexual content online were bothered by the experience, with percentages of self-reported harm below 10 per cent in all the countries surveyed, with the exception of Estonia (14 per cent) (Livingstone et al, 2011).

The *EU Kids Online* network contextualises the relationship between risk and harm, whereby risk does not necessarily result in harm, although harm cannot occur without the incidence of risk. This chapter mainly focuses on research on children’s experience of risk.⁵ In our case, this refers to the risk of exposure to online sexual images. We explore the factors that may determine this exposure and ask which children are more likely to be harmed by such an experience.

Following the theoretical approach taken in Chapter 12 of this volume, we formulate hypotheses regarding the factors that influence the incidence of experiences of online sexual images, arguing that these factors are mediated by practices of use and risky offline activities. Thus the first hypothesis is a *usage hypothesis*, which suggests that the proliferation of private internet usage by children is positively correlated with the likelihood of exposure to online sexual images. The second hypothesis is a *risk migration hypothesis*, that since the boundaries between the online and offline are increasingly blurred, children’s

risky experiences may occur online as well as offline, so that those children who encounter more risks offline will be likely to encounter more risks online. In order to identify what makes some children more vulnerable to harm than others, the third hypothesis assesses the factors that affect the probability of harm (again, see Chapter 12). This *vulnerability hypothesis* argues that among those children who have seen sexual images online, those reporting resulting harm are more likely to be vulnerable due to psychological and demographic factors. We present the method used, followed by a presentation and discussion of our findings.

Method

In order to test our hypotheses related to risk, we employed the dependent variable ‘seeing sexual images’,⁶ calculated as exposure to sexual images online or not, among all children aged 9–16 who use the internet (values 1/0 respectively). For the vulnerability hypothesis (for those children who encountered sexual images online and self-reported feeling bothered⁷ by the experience), we focused on the two dependent variables, ‘intensity of harm’ and ‘duration of harm’.⁸

Following the finding that older teenage boys are more likely to encounter online sexual images, we included the independent variables age (9–16) and gender,⁹ in addition to parental level of education, as demographic predictors, and also restrictive mediation.¹⁰ In the case of parents’ level of education, we expect that children from a higher educational level home background will be more likely to encounter online sexual images because they will be better equipped and connected (digitally) by comparison with children from lower educational level households. We also expect that children with fewer parental controls will be more likely to encounter online sexual images. We included sensation-seeking (‘I do dangerous things for fun’, ‘I do exciting things, even if they are dangerous’) and self-efficacy (‘I am confident I can deal with unexpected problems’)¹¹ as psychological predictors. The rationale is that we expect that, while children who are high sensation-seekers may be more likely to encounter online sexual images, the likelihood of them feeling *upset* by such encounters will be lower among children higher in self-efficacy.

We used logistic regression analysis to determine the direct effects of the independent variables ‘private practices of use’ and ‘engagement in any risky offline activities’, on children’s online exposure to sexual images.

Private practices of use include:

- 'Private devices of use': this was calculated from the responses to the question 'Which of these devices do you use for the internet these days?', offering eight response options (own PC-desktop; own laptop that can be taken to own room; PC shared with others in the family; laptop shared with others that cannot be taken to own room; mobile; games console; TV; other portable device). We assume that children using devices that allow private access to the internet will be more likely to encounter sexual content online because they will be free of adult monitoring. This variable was turned into a binary variable by estimating the options 'own desktop', 'own laptop', 'mobile' and 'other portable device' as means that allow *private* use of the internet, and the options 'PC shared with others in the family', 'laptop shared with others', 'games console' and 'TV' as means that allow *non-private* use of the internet (where 1 is private use and 0 is non-private use).
- 'Private places of use' was calculated from the responses to the question 'Where do you use the internet these days?'. It offers eight response options as follows: 'own bedroom/other private room' and 'when out and about, that is, via a mobile, Blackberry, iPod etc' as allowing for *private* use of the internet; other places, such as 'living room/other public room at home', 'school/college', 'internet café', 'public library', 'other homes', as allowing for *non-private* use of the internet (where 1 is private use and 0 is non-private use); as in the case of private devices of use, we assume that children accessing the internet in private places of use will be more likely to experience online sexual images.
- 'Engagement in any risky online activities',¹² which was turned into a binary variable (1 when any these activities occurred, 0 for no activities); we assume that children practising risky online activities will be more likely to experience online sexual images.

Risky offline activities¹³ was included as another independent variable.¹⁴ We assume that children who engage in risky activities will be more likely to have seen online sexual images.

Results and discussion: encountering online sexual content

Of those children ($n=22,875$, not weighted) aged 9–16, who reported having and not having seen sexual images anywhere (offline or online), only 5,907 (not weighted) of them were routed on to the question regarding *online* sexual content (see Table 13.1).

Table 13.1: Children who have seen sexual images in the past year, anywhere and online

	Have you seen sexual images anywhere in past 12 months?	Have you seen sexual images on websites in past 12 months?
Yes	5,302 (23%)	3,228 (14%)

Base: All children aged 9-16 who use the internet.

A regression analysis for seeing sexual images among 9- to 16-year-olds (Table 13.2) shows that having private devices for internet use is not a statistically significant predictor of exposure to online sexual images, contrary to our prediction.

The regression analysis shows that our remaining expectations are supported. We found that the more children engage in risky online activities, the more online sexual images they see; the same applies for those engaging in risky offline activities. Also, more boys rather than girls experience sexual content online, and children who have more self-efficacy about their ability to cope with unexpected situations online and sensation-seekers encounter more online sexual images, which is not a surprising result. In our view, this is evidence of children’s resilience when encountering online sexual images, and it should be taken into account when weighing alarmist claims about children being at risk from sexual content online. Encounters with online sexual images increase with age – which is also not surprising since explorations of sexuality, and hence pornography, are part of growing up, and will inevitably increase as children’s internet usage abilities increase. Finally, the regression analysis shows that children accessing the internet in private places of use encounter online sexual images; the children of more highly educated parents are more likely to

Table 13.2: Regression analysis for seeing sexual images

	B	SE	Wald	df	Sig	Exp(B)
Gender (0 = female)	0.30	0.04	50.66	1.00	0.00	1.35
Self-efficacy (1-3)	0.32	0.05	46.28	1.00	0.00	1.38
Sensation-seeking (1-3)	0.45	0.04	130.97	1.00	0.00	1.56
Age child (9-16)	0.14	0.01	139.90	1.00	0.00	1.15
Parents’ education (1-7)	0.09	0.01	36.20	1.00	0.00	1.09
Restrictive mediation (1-3)	-0.47	0.05	91.73	1.00	0.00	0.63
Private places of use (0/1)	0.17	0.05	10.75	1.00	0.00	1.18
Private devices of use (0/1)	-0.03	0.06	0.33	1.00	0.56	0.97
Risky online activities (0-5)	0.29	0.01	402.20	1.00	0.00	1.34
Risky offline activities (0-5)	0.32	0.02	217.11	1.00	0.00	1.38
Constant	-5.11	0.24	459.91	1.00	0.00	0.01

Base: All children aged 9-16 who use the internet.

encounter more online sexual images (perhaps also as a result of a more advanced and nuanced understanding of sexually explicit material); and less restrictive parental mediation results in children seeing more online sexual images. It appears, then, that while the usage hypothesis is partially supported, the risk migration hypothesis applies to both the online and offline worlds.

Our findings about harm arising as a consequence of seeing sexual images online show that we need to be careful about making sweeping claims. First, the number of children and teenagers self-reporting that they were ‘bothered’ by sexual content is low. Table 13.3 shows that only 870 young people reported having been upset, to various degrees, by online sexual images – with only 15 per cent of children who saw online sexual images (or less than 1 per cent of all the children in the survey) feeling ‘very upset’ by it; 57 per cent of children who saw sexual images online (or 2.5 per cent of all children) were either ‘not at all’ or ‘a bit’ upset by the experience.

Table 13.4 shows that the majority of those who saw online sexual images (93 per cent), recovered either immediately or in a few days; only 7 per cent (or 52 out of all children) took longer to recover.

Table 13.5 shows that for intensity of harm, among all the predictors, level of parental education plays no role as regards the discomfort the child might experience. On the other hand, the younger and lower in self-efficacy the child, the more likely that seeing sexual images will be upsetting; girls also are more likely to be more upset by online sexual images than boys. Parental level of education is not statistically significant.

Age and parental level of education are not statistically significant in the case of the duration of effect of harm; girls and children with less self-efficacy feel upset for longer after exposure to online sexual images (see Table 13.6).

Table 13.3: Intensity of harm from seeing sexual images

Thinking about the last time you were bothered, how upset were you?	Freq	% ^a	% ^b
Very upset	156	15	0.62
Fairly upset	283	28	1.00
A bit upset	431	43	2.00
Not at all upset	138	14	0.55
Total	1,008	100.00	

Notes: ^a Of children who have seen online sexual images.

^b Of all children.

Table 13.4: Duration of harm from seeing sexual images

Thinking about this time, how long did you feel like that for?	Freq	% ^a	% ^b
I got over it straight away	489	63	2.00
For a few days	236	30	1.00
For a few weeks	38	5	0.15
For a couple of months or more	14	2	0.06
Total	777	100.00	

Notes: ^a Of children who have seen online pornography.

^b Of all children.

Table 13.5: Regression analysis for intensity of harm from seeing sexual images

Linear regression predicting being upset by seeing sexual images online (0-3)	B	SE	Beta	t	p
(Constant)	1.29	0.16		8.15	0.00
Gender (0 = female)	-0.18	0.03	-0.11	-6.39	0.00
Age child (9-16)	-0.07	0.01	-0.16	-8.54	0.00
Self-efficacy (1-3)	-0.10	0.03	-0.05	-3.09	0.00
Sensation-seeking (1-3)	0.06	0.02	0.05	2.80	0.01
Parents' education (1-7)	0.00	0.00	0.00	-0.19	0.85
Restrictive mediation (1-3)	0.21	0.03	0.12	6.34	0.00

Notes: $R^2=0.08$; $n=3,385$

Base: All children aged 9-16 who use the internet and have seen sexual images online.

Table 13.6: Regression analysis for duration of harm from seeing sexual images

Linear regression predicting length of being upset by seeing sexual images online (0-4)	B	SE	Beta	t	p
(Constant)	0.50	0.15		3.31	0.00
Gender (0 = female)	-0.17	0.03	-0.12	-6.58	0.00
Age child (9-16)	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	-0.74	0.46
Self-efficacy (1-3)	-0.14	0.03	-0.09	-4.84	0.00
Sensation-seeking (1-3)	0.05	0.02	0.04	2.26	0.02
Parents' education (1-7)	0.00	0.00	0.00	-0.19	0.85
Restrictive mediation (1-3)	0.21	0.03	0.13	6.71	0.00

Notes: $R^2=0.05$; $n=3,162$

Base: All children aged 9-16 who use the internet and have seen sexual images online.

Overall, our research shows that few children are vulnerable in the sense that among children who have seen sexual images online, few report being harmed by the experience. The findings lend some support to the vulnerability hypothesis that age (younger), gender (girls) and self-efficacy (lower) play the strongest roles in predicting which children report among harm. Therefore, although we would argue that claims about the ‘devastating’ effects of online sexual images to young people are overstated, it is also noteworthy that those children who are more vulnerable offline also appear to be more vulnerable online.

Conclusion

Our focus in this chapter was to address the social anxiety around children and teenagers’ encounters with adult pornography, and in particular online sexual images. The *EU Kids Online* survey shows that from this chapter’s sample of children who use the internet (out of the total 25,000 children surveyed), only a minority (about 6,000) encountered these. These findings confirm empirically what cultural studies-oriented approaches have been arguing for some time – that social, policy and academic concerns regarding the impact of pornographic content on young people are seriously overstated.

There are some policy-related implications from our findings. First, there is nothing new in young people trying to access adult sexual material – they have always tried to do this. The difference is that instead of trying to access it from print material belonging to parents, relatives or friends, or material found in parks and on the high street, for example, children are finding it on the internet. The comparative lack of censorship and control of the circulation of this material on the internet, and the ease with which pornography has come out from ‘under the bed’ and ‘onto your screens’, is causing concern. The perceived powerlessness to monitor children’s behaviour, accompanied by mounting social pressure to contain child sexuality, are contributing to a media alarmist and sensationalist culture. This is fed largely by conservative approaches to legal action and social policy (Kleinhans, 2004; Paasonen, 2007).¹⁵

Recent research on young consumers of pornography (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; McKee et al, 2008) shows that young people are capable of expressing strong personal opinions without feeling intimidated, powerless or maimed for life by the experience of pornography. Furthermore, it seems that children and teenagers are well aware that not everything they see in the media is true or should be accepted: they often challenge media representations. Ethnographic

research shows that experiences with online pornography are rarely traumatic for children and teenagers; they are more likely to be part of a rite of passage or educational, in relation to their own bodies and giving their partners pleasure (McKee et al, 2008, p 164; Buckingham and Bragg, 2004).

What do these findings tell us? Perhaps in a culture engulfed by sexually explicit representations we should opt for filtering software for primary school-aged children (who have limited online research capacities). This would not be suitable for older children with the capability to bypass any protection. It would be unlikely to curtail the type of sexual information older children find on the internet. Perhaps age-appropriate uses of the internet should be advocated. More significant, however, would be discussion of what is considered appropriate in relation to pornography, with parents and educators, which would need to be part of a larger sex education programme. As McKee et al (2008) argue, as with other media, pornography does not exist in a social vacuum; hence, children educated and brought up in a cultural climate where assault and harassment are wrong and where men and women are social equals, will acquire values and attitudes to pornography, and refuse to accept denigrating pornographic representations of men and women as a given. Ultimately, this implies building resilience and a critical stance among young people.

Notes

¹ Within this particular context, what constitutes harm from pornography is neither clear nor consensually accepted; overall, such claims of harm, made by adults in relation to children, may involve several things, from encountering any sexuality at all or particular representations of it, to the long-term effect on children's perceptions of the social world. None of these accounts can be easily measured by this survey; the same applies for children's readings of such encounters, for which an ethnographic approach is needed, something to be dealt with in *EU Kids Online III*.

² What is classified as over-18 material changes over time and across national contexts.

³ See, for example, Paasonen et al, 2007, p 16, on Finnish debates on porn.

⁴ Look, for example, at how connotations around young children's images have changed since the 1950s and 1960s. An image that once seemed tender is now terrifying because it reads as explicitly erotic. At the same time, however, the sensitisation process to child porn also forces us to eroticise children (Kleinhans, 2004, p 79).

⁵ Here we see children's experience of online pornographic material as a socially constructed risk; how the children themselves view it, and whether they actually consider it a risk is something to be followed up using ethnographic methods.

⁶ See key variables in the Appendix at the end of this book for variable description.

⁷ A qualitative follow-up analysis could broach the question of online porn experiences in a different frame, whereby children are not asked if such encounters bothered them, but what they found interesting or extraordinary.

⁸ See key variables in the Appendix at the end of this book for variable description.

⁹ A binary variable, 1 for boys/0 for girls.

¹⁰ The average level of restriction applied by parents, ranging from 1 ('can do this anytime') to 3 ('can never do this'), was taken across six activities (listed under restrictive mediation in the Appendix at the end of this book).

¹¹ See key variables in the Appendix at the end of this book for variable description.

¹² See key variables in the Appendix at the end of this book for variable description.

¹³ See key variables in the Appendix at the end of this book for variable description.

¹⁴ Also a binary variable – 1 if any of the above options have occurred, 0 if not.

¹⁵ The American Psychological Association report, for example, has been widely cited as an authoritative source on the sexualisation of children; see Buckingham et al (2010) for a critique.

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