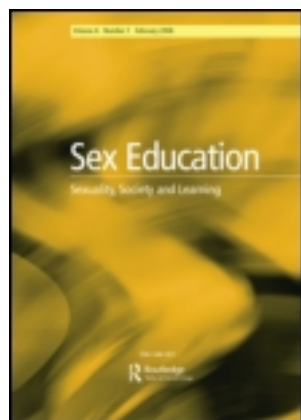


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Playing with porn: Greek children's explorations in pornography

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This article draws on the research findings of the Greek Kids Go Online project and the EU Kids Online I network research on children and online technologies in Europe, funded by the European Commission Safer Internet Programme, 2006–2009. It explores the experiences of young people aged between 9 and 17 with pornographic texts online, and parental perceptions of these, examines the broader sexual cultures of young children and teenagers, and argues that public concern about the harmful effects of pornography on young people needs to be put into context.

Young people, the Internet, 'harm' and 'risk'

Pornography is often characterized as a corrupting flood, something that we need to protect young people from (Maddison 2010). Assumptions about the harmful influence of porn on young people stem from a tradition of 'media effects' that has been recently revitalized by concerns about the proliferation of online pornography. It is only since the late eighteenth century that childhood has been seen as a distinct period in its own right, and it was not until the introduction of compulsory education and the ban on child labour in the early twentieth century that it became widely regarded as a time of innocence, fun and play. Media developments have often been portrayed as a threat to this notion of childhood. In the sixteenth century, it was argued that popular songs were dangerous for children because they presented criminals as heroes. In the nineteenth century, Thomas Bowdler claimed that Shakespeare's plays would corrupt young girls' minds (Barker and Petley 1997/2005, 6). Some theorists have suggested that print technology may have been responsible for the emergence of a distinct 'youth culture' in industrialized societies (Eisenstein 1979). Similarly, television has been described as responsible for the 'disappearance of childhood' (Postman 1982/1994) because it made sexual knowledge directly available to children and superseded books as the primary means of communication. Once it became the primary deliverer of information and entertainment to young people, the gradual acquisition of knowledge required in learning to read was brought to an end (Messenger Davies 2004). Developments in media have also been accompanied by a democratization of family relations. Both have challenged the view of children as passive and innocent creatures who need to be protected and worked to promote a view of young people as autonomous, streetwise and able to stand up for themselves (Buckingham 2000).

Yet a debate concerning the exposure of young people to potentially 'harmful' or offensive media content continues, despite the fact that evidence of harm from media use

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is inconclusive. Far from being greeted as valuable educational tools, new media technologies have been treated with suspicion by many parents and educationalists. It has been argued that computers pose health hazards, create developmental problems, stunt the imagination, isolate children from the adult world (Alliance for Childhood 2000 cited in Livingstone 2003, 154), and provide a haven for pornography and paedophiles. Evidence from the EU Kids Online project (Haddon and Stald 2009) suggests that press coverage distracts attention from the potential benefits of the Internet to focus public attention disproportionately on the risks. The media promote a notion of the Internet as a scary and sinister place, the access to and use of which needs to be regulated and controlled (Livingstone and Bober 2006).

We live, the argument goes, in a culture saturated and depraved by uncontrollable sexuality, in which childhood innocence is debauched by media and consumer culture. Pornography, in particular, has been singled out for concern, with arguments including religious and moral objections on the grounds that it corrupts societal values, feminist criticism that pornography objectifies women and encourages male violence, and child welfare concerns that it affects children's sexual and emotional development (for discussions, see Malamuth and Impett 2000; Boyle 2000; Malamuth, Addison, and Koss 2000; Waskul 2004; Attwood 2004, 2010). The availability of sexual information is hardly ever treated as a positive thing. Buckingham and Bragg (2004, 4) have suggested that children are used in a 'politics of substitution' whereby invoking fears about children's welfare provides a powerful means of manipulating public attention. In this way, campaigns against pornography become campaigns against child pornography and children's access to sexual knowledge, and that access is presented as evidence of a more general permissiveness exemplified by increased violence, drug use and criminal activity amongst the young.

The terms 'harm' and 'offence' are increasingly used in discussions of media and content regulation, gradually replacing 'taste and decency'. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Soanes and Stevenson 2004), harm signifies 'material damage, actual or potential ill effect' whereas offence corresponds to 'an act or instance of offending; resentment or hurt, something that outrages the moral or physical senses'. 'Harm' is generally perceived to be observable by others, regardless of whether it is acknowledged by the individual concerned, and thus to be reliably measurable. 'Offence', on the other hand, tends to be perceived as something that is subjectively experienced and therefore difficult to measure (Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone 2006, 15).

However, the extent to which pornographic websites are experienced as problematic for young people and their families is unclear (Sutter 2000). As Livingstone argues:

the link between risks, incidents and actual harm is genuinely tenuous: not all risks taken result in worrying incidents, not all worrying incidents result in actual or lasting harm. Just as with television's effects, some of the questions asked of the internet seem impossible to 'answer' in any simple fashion: does inadvertent exposure to pornography produce long-term harm, does playing violent games online make boys more aggressive . . . , is the internet changing the way children think and learn? This assertion does not suit the policy agenda, of course, neither does it satisfactorily account for the media's role – however minor, however context-dependent – in the reproduction of harmful or exploitative representations and practices. Hence, while remaining critical of the ways in which questions of harm are framed in public and policy discourses, this issue must be reframed so as to remain firmly on the research agenda. (2003, 157)

As Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone (2006) have shown, many questions about harm remain difficult to address because research offers evidence based on the balance of *probabilities* rather than on irrefutable proof. They have called for multi-method, long-term, cross-media research on a diverse range of audience and user groups, arguing for the

search for simple and direct causal effects to be replaced by a risk-based approach that takes into account a wide range of factors. Many of these are culturally specific; for example, national traditions of content regulation, approaches to parenting, and frames for judging content and offence. What is at stake is the likelihood of risk rather than of inevitable harm; in fact, current research indicates that it is 'vulnerable' audiences that are more susceptible to being negatively affected by various media.¹

Based on existing research across 21 European Union countries, seeing online pornography is the second most common risk (encountered by four out of 10 teenagers) after giving out personal information and followed (in order) by seeing violent or hateful content, being bullied online, receiving unwanted sexual comments, and meeting an online contact offline (Livingstone and Haddon 2009). Research across Europe also shows that the range of benefits and risks experienced by young people using the Internet are positively correlated, which means that an increase in opportunities goes hand in hand with an increase in risks, and *vice versa* (Livingstone and Helsper 2008). The same goes for skills; the more experienced and skilled users are, the more likely they are to encounter opportunities and risks compared with less competent users. In other words, young people with good Internet skills take up more opportunities online and are thus exposed to more online risks. There is also a chance that seemingly 'inappropriate' content may create positive opportunities for young people, becoming a source of information and contributing to the process of actively developing their own values and beliefs (Byron 2008, 26).

This finding – that what is harmful or beneficial is far from clear, since risks and opportunities go hand in hand and even responses perceived as 'negative' may have 'positive' consequences for children's learning experiences (Buckingham 1997/2005, 35) – is borne out elsewhere. For example, children may be distressed by images of disasters or conflict in the news, but such experiences are, arguably, part and parcel of becoming an informed citizen. Children's fiction may play on 'negative' responses such as fear and sadness in order to prepare children to overcome fears experienced in real life (Buckingham 1997/2005, 34). Similarly, although online sexual activities are usually portrayed in terms of danger, they may also offer options for actively seeking sexual pleasure and exploring sexualities, and gay young people may find it easier to come out to family and friends thanks to online support (Doering 2001). Academics, policy-makers and parents alike need to acknowledge the ambivalence of interacting with all kinds of media and the complex relationship between 'distress and delight' embedded in media consumption.

Kids go online: research in the United Kingdom and in Greece

The ubiquity and availability of sexually explicit material online has grown exponentially in recent years and there is growing international interest in the consequences of young people's encounters with it. One of the key findings of EU Kids Online I was that young people's use of the Internet continues to grow, with the most striking rise taking place among younger children; 60% of 6–10-year-olds were online by 2008, 34% of them using their own computer (Livingstone and Haddon 2009).

In the UK Kids Go Online project, focus groups of young people were used as a way of ascertaining harm. Acknowledging that exposure to porn could be deliberate or accidental, the research tracked the incidence, response and consequences of exposure, showing that coming into contact with pornography is commonplace. Among 9–19-year-olds who go online at least once per week, 57% have encountered online pornography, mostly

accidentally; 38% have seen a porn pop-up advert while doing something else, 36% have found themselves on a porn site by mistake, and 25% have received pornographic spam via email or instant messaging. Responses to online porn vary; 54% claim not to be bothered by it, 14% claim not to have liked it, and 28% of 9–15 year olds say they felt disgusted by having seen it. Fifty-six per cent of those who encounter porn say they leave the site as quickly as they can, while 31% say they look at it, 7% tell a friend, 6% tell a parent or teacher, 7% click on the links and 5% return to it later. Age plays a significant role in determining when young people encounter porn: 21% of 9–11-year-olds, 58% of 12–15-year-olds, 76% of 16–17-year-olds and 80% of 18–19-year-olds have encountered online pornography.

Greece is a country with low Internet use and a relatively low rate of 'risky' behaviours amongst young people. Six per cent of teenagers smoke cigarettes once per week compared with 13% in the United Kingdom, 16% in Germany, almost 13% in Spain and 7% in Sweden. Ten per cent have been drunk once or twice, compared with 31% in the United Kingdom, around 18% in Germany, 10% in Spain and 16% in Sweden. Four per cent use cannabis, compared with 35% in the United Kingdom, 19% in Germany, 31% in Spain and less than 5% in Sweden. Twenty-two per cent of 15 year olds have had sexual intercourse compared with 38% in the United Kingdom, 28% in Germany, 16% in Spain, and 28% in Sweden.²

Official statistics show that, in Greece, 67% of 10–11-year-olds and 78% of 12–15-year-olds were using the Internet in 2008. On a weekly basis, almost one-half go online, with younger children slightly heavier Internet users (47%) compared with older ones (43%). This trend is reversed if we look at daily Internet use, with only 16% of 10–11-year-olds online compared with 41% of 12–15-year-olds. Gender differences are disappearing; on a daily basis, boys are slightly heavier users than girls (39%:33%), but girls are heavier users on a weekly basis (46%:43%) and slightly outnumber boys in overall use (76%:70%) (Greek Observatory for the Information Society 2008). This corroborates trends found elsewhere suggesting that Internet use increases with age, and that differences in Internet access and amount of use between girls and boys are decreasing (Livingstone 2009; Livingstone and Haddon 2009).

The GR Kids Go Online project (*Children and the Internet in Greece: Opportunities and Risks* [Παιδιά και Διαδίκτυο στην Ελλάδα: Ευκαιρίες και Κίνδυνοι]) was designed along the lines of the original UK study (Livingstone and Bober 2005) and involved a survey of 9–18-year-olds in Attica,³ followed by a number of interviews examining young people's Internet use. The survey was questionnaire based, using a translation of the original UK questionnaire,⁴ and conducted at 24 schools across Attica.⁵ The schools, spanning the last three grades of primary education (*dimotiko*), the three grades of lower secondary (*gymnasio*), and the three grades of upper secondary education (*lykio*), mirror the socio-demographics of the prefecture of Attica.⁶ The fieldwork was carried out at schools by teams of undergraduates supervised by a team of post-graduate students. Formal consent to take part in the survey was sought from a parent for younger children, as is the usual procedure in Greece, and only those pupils with permission took part in the project; for older teenagers, informed consent was obtained. In total, 627 pupil questionnaires⁷ were collected between February and April 2009 from schools in Attica and another 148 were added,⁸ bringing the total up to 775. A parent questionnaire was also handed out in the classroom, and pupils were asked to return them for collection by researchers. Parents were asked to state their availability for an in-home, face-to-face interview with and without their child. Twenty in-home interviews were conducted with parents and children.

The EU Kids Online network found that older children and teenagers are more likely to experience more online risks – and more pornography – than younger ones, a finding borne out by the Greek study. Amongst older teens there is no difference in the rate of accidental encounters with porn between young people who use computers in the privacy of their bedrooms and those who use computers in more public places. However, 43% seek out porn in their bedrooms compared with 22% of teens who do not have a computer in their room. Amongst the 10–14-year-olds with computers in their rooms, there is no difference in the rate of encounters with porn by accident or on purpose.

Gender also plays a significant part in encountering online porn. Boys are more likely to seek out content that they regard as offensive or violent, and to access pornographic content or be sent links to it. Girls are more likely to be upset by offensive, violent and pornographic content (Livingstone and Haddon 2009). In the Greek study, 44% of older boys (and 28% of girls) had accidentally come across online porn while 56.5% (and 11% of girls) went looking for it. Thirteen per cent of younger boys went online looking for porn (and 4% of girls), while 40% (and 27% of girls) encountered it by accident. Sixteen per cent of older boys (and 2% of girls) reported that they used their mobile phones to exchange sexually explicit material.⁹

The frequency of encounters with pornography is also gender dependent with older boys showing a strong preference for exploring it across different media, especially on a more regular basis: 64% of boys (and 14% of girls) had frequent encounters with porn on the Internet, 36% (and 16% of girls) on television, 40% (and 6% of girls) on DVD, 29% (and 9% of girls) in magazines, and 40% (and 1.5% of girls) on their mobile phones. Although very few older girls had encountered porn frequently, quite a few had done so one to four times: 44% (and 33% of boys) online; 43% (and 38% of boys) on television; 30% (and 30% of boys) on DVDs; 32% (and 40% of boys) in magazines; and 11% (and 27% of boys) on their mobiles. Younger boys were more likely than girls to encounter porn offline, although frequent encounters were not widespread in this group.

Risk-taking is positively correlated with age. Older teens and boys are more open to risky behaviour, with more older boys than girls reporting that they ‘often do risky things because it’s fun’ (36%:25%). Having siblings or being an only child also impacts heavily on the adoption of risky conduct, with 44% of older only children admitting to liking ‘doing risky things for fun’ as opposed to 27% of teens with siblings. Older boys are more likely to engage with porn they encounter: 25% (and 5% of girls) checked a link; and 47% (and 11% of girls) opened and looked at pornographic files they were sent. Fifty-eight per cent of older girls erased explicit files without further exploration compared with 20% of older boys. Older teens did not feel any need to discuss their encounter with adults (only 3% of older boys and none of the girls), while 11% of boys (and 13% of girls) confided in their peers.

Younger children are less interested in sexually explicit material than older teens, and many delete inappropriate content without bothering to look at it further (40% of boys, 57% of girls). Very few boys pursue it any further: 14% went on to check a link and 20% opened up and looked at pornographic files they had been sent. Younger girls were more likely to inform an adult about this kind of encounter, whereas younger boys tended to share this information with their peers.

Forty-four per cent of older boys (and 35% of girls) reported that they did not think anything of porn, 25% (and 6% of the girls) found it interesting, and 4% (and 20% of girls) felt disgusted by it. Only 2% of boys and 8% of girls wished they had never actually seen pornography, suggesting that pornography is not necessarily deemed harmful by young people themselves. Sexually explicit content provoked stronger negative reactions from

younger children, girls especially. Fifty-seven per cent of younger girls (and 40% of boys) wished they had never seen pornography, while 3% (and 20% of boys) reported liking what they saw. Sixteen per cent of boys found it interesting, compared with 3% of girls.

Parental attitudes, worries and strategies of mediation

Parental attitudes towards children's Internet use have only recently started to attract academic interest. There is considerable variation in adult Internet use across countries: in Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Iceland and Norway, almost all young people who go online have parents who are well acquainted with the Internet, but in Greece, Cyprus and Portugal parents do not generally use the Internet (Hasebrink et al. 2009). Given that parents in Greece can be considered 'digital immigrants',¹⁰ and the predominant 'risk-averse' culture promoted by the Greek press, it is useful to examine parental views regarding the Internet and their offspring's experience of pornography, as well as parental regulation and control.

The higher the parent's level of education, the more positive their attitude towards the Internet; when asked whether the Internet helps improve performance at school, only 16% of high school graduate parents of older teens agreed compared with 73% of parents with postgraduate experience. The majority of parents surveyed believed that their children were not missing out by not using the Internet; 88% of high school graduates, 100% of parents with vocational education, 96% of university graduates, and 75% of those with postgraduate education.

The situation with the parents of younger children was rather different, however, showing that attitudes regarding the value of Internet use by young children in Greece are gradually changing. Quite a few parents believed that the Internet might help their children at school, regardless of educational background; almost 50% of high school graduates and those with postgraduate education, and around 40% of those with vocational and university education.

Given the choice between the Internet, DVDs, television and magazines, and asked where they thought their children encounter pornography, more than one-half of the parents of older teens, regardless of educational background, suggested the Internet. The same applied to parents of younger children; 65% reported being worried that their children might encounter sexually explicit images online, with the exception of those with postgraduate education (24% of them). Yet almost all of the parents of older teens rejected the notion that their own children had encountered pornography, regardless of educational background (all parents with vocational, university and postgraduate education, and 88% of parents with high school education); the same applied for parents of younger children, where all of them denied any such encounter.

Most parents of older children did not employ filtering software to block their children from accessing pornographic sites: only 15% of parents with high school education, 23% of parents with vocational background, 35% of university graduates, and none of the parents with postgraduate education were using any filtering at all. This may be because parents believe their teenage children are able and mature enough to cope with this kind of material, because they think that it is not their place to use filters, or because they do not have the necessary computer literacy to employ filters. This is not so in the case of parents of younger children, where the percentage using filters has increased significantly – one possible reason being increased parental awareness of Internet-related risks: twice as many high school graduates employ filters, 67% of those with a vocational background and 57% of parents with postgraduate background.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the porn practices of young children and teenagers in Greece in order to make more sense of their broader sexual cultures and the ways in which Greek parents respond to them, and in order to contribute to the ongoing discussion regarding the notion of harm in relation to contemporary media culture and its consumption. Talking about sex in relation to children and teenagers is a taboo issue, given the preconception of children as 'innocent' and asexual; any discussion with children pertaining to pornography is equally taboo. A view predominates that children need to be protected from harmful content – and sexual and pornographic content is more often than not seen as falling within this category. The ubiquity and availability of online sexually explicit material has been seen as exacerbating media harm and offence.

Yet as I have shown, there is no particular reason for concern regarding young people's exposure to sexually explicit content. Although teenage girls are not as interested in pornography as boys, they do not see themselves being hurt by it, and any claims about the harmful effects of pornographic content on young teenagers should be made within this in mind. Reactions to pornographic content also follow expected gender lines, with more interest from boys and disgust from girls. Despite feelings of disgust, however, only a tiny minority of older teens wished they had never seen such content, indicating that 'inappropriate' content is not necessarily deemed harmful by young people themselves. Younger children are not as interested in sexually explicit material compared with older teens, a fact that problematizes the public concern about the supposed harmful effects of pornography on younger users: for the most part, very few younger children pursue their encounters with porn any further. Younger girls tend to inform adults about a pornographic encounter, whereas boys tend to share this information with their peers.

It is possible, then, to conclude that while a small number of young people are clearly offended by porn that they encounter, there is no evidence to suggest that they are harmed by it. However, the fact that sexually explicit content provokes stronger negative reactions as far as younger children are concerned suggests an area of concern. Greek parents are not Internet savvy and media-rich bedrooms allow unmonitored encounters with pornographic material, and here it seems that more active parental mediation (talking to younger children about online risks and content) or restrictive mediation (setting rules) (Lobe, Segers, and Tsaliki 2009) and filtering is needed.

Given the ubiquity of pornographic material online, the debate regarding young people's encounters with it, and the impact it may have on their emotional, sexual and cognitive development, will continue; this article, the first of its kind within the Greek context, is intended as a contribution to this ongoing discussion. More research is needed to shed light on the complex relationship between harm and offence and between the opportunities and risks encountered by young people when online. We need to treat young people as streetwise, active decoders of media messages and contents with sophisticated patterns of use and coping strategies, instead of adopting patronizing attitudes that present them as quintessentially innocent and naïve; and, to that end, we need to develop complex methodologies where the opinions and perceptions of young people and their parents are taken into account. The forthcoming research findings of EU Kids Online II will enhance our understanding of children's online activities and the impact this might have by providing a methodologically rigorous, cross-national comparative account of online risks and vulnerabilities. Taking into consideration that activities are not always clearly delineated as either beneficial or as harmful, and that the same activity might within a certain context be beneficial but harmful within another, we also need to consider specific

users, their environment, and the fact that the way we contextualize benefits and harms depends on shifting social norms and cultural values.

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Notes

1. For discussions of vulnerable adults, see Fisher and Barak (2001), Sullivan and Beech (2004), Cooper et al. (2004), and Wolak, Finkelhor, and Mitchell (2005). For discussions of vulnerable children, see Sutter (2000) and Livingstone and Bober (2005, 2006). The forthcoming research findings of EU Kids Online II (2009–2011) will be a valuable contribution to our understanding of vulnerability.
2. These figures of young people who smoke cigarettes, drink, use cannabis and have had sexual intercourse are taken from the UNICEF Report on Child Well-Being 2007. This covers most European Union countries, plus Switzerland, Iceland, the United States, Japan and Canada.
3. Attica was chosen because it is the largest prefecture in Greece, with around 40% of the national population, as well as the main bulk of economic activities and political decision-making in the country.
4. The questionnaire had been previously revised and approved by the Greek Institute of Education, and formal permission to access schools was granted by the Ministry of Education. Two sets of questionnaires were compiled, one targeting ages 10–14 (first and second grades of *gymnasio*) and one targeting ages 15–18 (third grade of *gymnasio* and the three grades of *lykio*). Both questionnaires carried a detailed section on mobile phone practices.
5. These schools are: *Dimotiko* (primary education): 1st Cholargos; 2nd Nea Ionia; 1st Ayia Varvara; 3rd Argyroupoli primary school; 72nd Athens (Thisio); Leontio (patissia) (multiple cohorts to make up for two schools who decided not to take part in the survey). *Gymnasio* (lower secondary education): 3rd Ayia paraskevi; 3rd Nea Ionia; 1st Koropi; 1st Ayia Varvara; 3rd Argyroupoli; 2nd Elefsina; 40th Athens (Grava complex); Leontio (Patissia). *Lykio* (upper secondary education): 3rd Ayia paraskevi; 3rd Nea Ionia; 1st Koropi; 1st Ayia Varvara; 3rd Argyroupoli; 2nd Elefsina; 40th Athens (Grava complex); Leontio (Patissia).
6. Along the way, we discovered either that some schools were not working out (e.g. in one case, the Principal was hesitant about granting us permission to conduct the survey on the grounds that the school had been overexposed to surveys and schooling was disrupted too often to allow it to happen again), or that we did not collect the number of questionnaires we expected. We made up for the 'loss' by accessing additional cohorts of pupils in the school units that were more open to our research.
7. The age breakdown of the questionnaire is as follows: 348 questionnaires for ages between nine and 14 (fourth, fifth, and sixth grades of *dimotiko* and first and second grades of *gymnasio*) and 279 questionnaires for ages 15–18 (final grade of *gymnasio*, and fourth, fifth and sixth grades of *lykio*).
8. In addition to the schools in Attica, a school in Crete and another one in Kos joined us.
9. Due to ethical considerations, and following the recommendation of the Greek Institute of Education, some issues were not raised with the younger participants; this was one of them. The same applies in all cases where there is no mention of younger participants.
10. According to Eurobarometer 2008 (European Commission 2009), Greek parents are among the laggards in Internet use across the EU45. Eight per cent of them are not Internet users (EU27: 16.4%), and just 20.9% use it on a daily basis (EU27: 31.9%). Only one-half are aware that their children are Internet users, when equivalent parental awareness in Estonia is 93% and in Romania 69.5%. The fact that one-third of parents in Greece do not impose any restrictions on their children's online conduct may be further proof of parental ignorance of online risk.

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