



# Young adolescent men's perspectives on risks and harmful impacts of pornography use

new media & society  
2025, Vol. 27(5) 2492–2512  
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DOI: 10.1177/14614448251333735  
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## Abstract

Pornography use is often considered harmful, but what constitutes such harm is frequently vague and driven by adult perspectives about risk. This study aimed to explore how adolescents themselves understood harm and risk from pornography use. Thirteen male adolescents, 14 to 15 years old, were interviewed using in-depth interviews to understand their perspectives of risk and harm. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify three pertinent themes: pornography is risky and harmful, especially to naïve consumers; pornography is not harmful to me, because strategies of control can be used; and generational disparity, where differences between adult claims of harm and personal experiences were questioned. We propose adolescents' concern for others' wellbeing over their personal risks be considered as showing compassion. We conclude that adolescent perceptions of risk and harm are nuanced and insightful, and that adolescents can engage critically with pornography content to manage potential risks and harm.

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## Keywords

Adolescence, compassion, harm, men, pornography, resilience, risk, teenager

## Introduction

Adolescents' ease of access to online pornography, combined with their positioning as a developmentally sensitive age group, has raised concerns about the negative impacts of their pornography use (Behun and Owens, 2019). Negative impacts are often framed as risks for anticipated harm which demand social-political interjection (cf. Attwood et al., 2018a). Harm and risk from pornography use have been explored in relation to psychological, physical and moral damage, with the underlying assumption that these can be meaningfully determined (Vertongen et al., 2022a). However, considerable debate exists concerning what harm and risk from pornography use means (Kohut et al., 2020). Risk is often framed a-contextually where access is claimed to be inherently dangerous (Chronaki, 2013). In contrast, harm can be considered as a social process that is constructed through contemporary norms and standards about what sexual practices are acceptable (Attwood et al., 2018a; McKee et al., 2020; Peterson et al., 2023). Research in Cultural Studies has raised the importance of youth perspectives (Chronaki, 2013) and the consideration for how harm and youth (e.g. vulnerable and problematic) are framed within society (Buckingham and Chronaki, 2014; Mulholland, 2013; Tsaliki and Chronaki, 2020).

Although investigating effects from pornography use is important, current findings have been inconsistent, and criticised for being overstated and driven by conservative social-political agendas (e.g. Attwood et al., 2018a; Kohut et al., 2020; Tsaliki, 2022). Others highlight the long-standing problem of harm being framed within moral paradigms that blame contemporary media and culture for corrupting youth (Buckingham and Jensen, 2012; Egan and Hawkes, 2013; Mulholland, 2013). Risk frameworks embedded in psychosocial deficit models that focus on cause-and-effects are contested by those who raise questions about how youth and risk are constructed within society (see Tsaliki and Chronaki, 2020, for an overview of these debates). How society and media talk about youth and pornography raises anxieties that 'construct under 18s as always "at risk" of being harmed' (Tsaliki and Chronaki, 2020: 8). This construction of youth and risk is often framed around Eurocentric moral standards that hold juxtaposing positions for youth and caregivers alike. Youth are considered responsible for their choices but also as naïve consumers at risk, resulting in tensions about who holds responsibility and control (and power) over how youth are turned into appropriate 'moral' citizens (e.g. Buckingham and Jensen, 2012; Egan and Hawkes, 2013; Tsaliki, 2022). In addition, what is considered as pornography in research is inconsistent, with diverse content treated as homogeneous and with little knowledge about the content viewed or how it is interpreted (Chronaki, 2013; Kohut et al., 2020; McKee et al., 2020).

Irrespective of the limitations, numerous claims from an effects perspective have been made about harm and risk in relation to individuals, others and society. For instance, harm has included negative emotional responses (Efrati and Amichai-Hamburger, 2019; Lim et al., 2017; Spišák, 2016), excessive pornography use (Efrati, 2020), normalising

behaviours such as sexting (Giordano et al., 2022; Stanley et al., 2018) that are connected to self-harm (Wachs et al., 2021), permissive sexual attitudes (Baams et al., 2015; Doornwaard et al., 2015), a moral decline in society (Efrati, 2020), ongoing prejudices against women (Coy and Horvath, 2018), sexual exploitation of others (e.g. Rostad et al., 2019; Stanley et al., 2018), being less likely to use condoms (Wright et al., 2020) and creating a reality grounded in pornographic scripts (Pearson et al., 2018) through the ‘pornification’ of society. Harm has also been linked to individual vulnerabilities, such as pre-existing mental health challenges and adolescents developmental naïveté, that are argued to increase negative effects from pornography use (Behun and Owens, 2019; Efrati and Amichai-Hamburger, 2019; Giordano et al., 2022).

In contrast, pornography has been constructed as a form of entertainment (McKee, 2012), leisure (McCormack and Wignall, 2017) and as having benefits (McKee et al., 2021; Peterson et al., 2023). Benefits have included youth exploring their sexual identity and gaining a sense of belonging through viewing material showing similar sexual orientations (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Attwood et al., 2018b, 2021; McCormack and Wignall, 2017), providing a source of sexual information and promoting communication about sexual matters (Carboni and Bhana, 2019; Doornwaard et al., 2017; Goldstein, 2021; McCormack and Wignall, 2017; Peterson et al., 2023), providing a form of humour or entertainment (Attwood et al., 2018b; Goldstein, 2021; Healy-Cullen et al., 2022b; Mulholland, 2015; Vertongen et al., 2022b), satisfying sexual pleasure and curiosity (Attwood et al., 2018b; Doornwaard et al., 2017; Lofgren-Mårtenson and Månsson, 2010; McCormack and Wignall, 2017; McKee et al., 2021; Mulholland, 2015; Vertongen et al., 2022b), as a form of distraction and boredom relief (Healy-Cullen et al., 2022b), as enhancing social image among peers (Lofgren-Mårtenson and Månsson, 2010) and as validating diverse body shapes (Davis et al., 2020). However, any positioning of pornography as a form of entertainment or a source of information for youth triggers outrage due to proposed concerns about harm and societal corruption (Egan and Hawkes, 2013; Vertongen et al., 2022a).

These varied opinions lead to conflicting views about what material is harmful and how harm occurs in youth and youth culture, as these are embedded in educational discourses of ‘sexual respectability’ (Allen, 2006, 2011) and through numerous publications warning society of dangers from pornography (e.g. Barton’s (2021) book on how pornification and raunch culture is ruining our society). Adolescents are expected to navigate conflicting ideas about what it means to be sexual beings and to make ‘good’ judgements when these matters are embedded in social norms that favour particular sexual activities as ‘good’ (Byron et al., 2021; De Ridder, 2017; Peterson et al., 2023). Consequently, pornography research that focuses solely on risks and harms has been criticised for failing to consider that sexual activity is not innately risky (Allen, 2011; Lamb et al., 2018; McKee et al., 2021), for disregarding adaptive aspects of adolescent sexuality that limit alternative narratives (Garland-Levett and Allen, 2019; McClelland and Fine, 2014; Tsaliki, 2022), for excluding contextual considerations (De Ridder, 2017) and for downplaying adolescent agency in understanding and critiquing pornography content (Cooper et al., 2023; Meehan, 2023; Vertongen et al., 2022a).

When adolescents’ own perceptions about pornography use are explored, they have been found to both differ from and overlap with adult perceptions of risk (Doornwaard

et al., 2015; Healy-Cullen et al., 2022a, 2022b; Mulholland, 2015; Willoughby et al., 2018). For example, adolescents have reported seeing violent pornography, being upset by the content and raising concerns about its negative impacts (eSafety Commissioner, 2023; Green et al., 2020; Henry and Talbot, 2019). However, youth have also described the notion of harm as being vague and pornography as an unimportant part of their lives (Spišák, 2016). Youth have been described as savvy consumers who are capable of critically assessing its content (Healy-Cullen et al., 2022a). This is in direct contrast to adult concerns about the negative influence pornography has in shaping adolescent sexual development, underpinned by fears that young men may re-enact harmful sexual behaviours (Mulholland, 2013).

Any discrepancies between adult and youth perceptions about pornography are commonly attributed to adolescents' distorted perception of reality (e.g. Lo et al., 2016; Wright, 2014; Wright et al., 2023) or emotional indifference about their pornography use (Olmstead et al., 2023). For example, the third-person effect is held to occur when negative media effects are overestimated for others and underestimated for oneself (Wright et al., 2023). Because adolescent lives are saturated with sexualized media, including pornography scripts, this is considered to become their new reality and render them incapable of knowing what is appropriate. It is frequently assumed that these 'distortions' (as determined by the dominant culture) should be challenged as they fail to align with contemporary norms and with sexuality programmes that privilege hetero-normative relationships. This incapacity to know what is appropriate or the possibility of re-enacting harmful behaviours has been contested by authors who argue that these social-political discourses and systems deny young men as positive and genuine sexual subjects (e.g. Allen, 2006; Meehan, 2023; Tsaliki and Chronaki, 2020). Discourses supporting adolescent opinions that differ from their caregivers are demarcated as praising youthful defiance of adult authority or as disregarding the risks put forward by 'alarmist public commentary' (Buckingham and Chronaki, 2014: 309).

Others have raised concerns that projecting adult notions of harm and negative judgement of pornography use onto youth can create shame (Lamb et al., 2018), an experience some young adults (Dawson et al., 2020) and youth have reported (eSafety Commissioner, 2023). Similarly, Spišák (2016) found youth were bothered more by the blurry notions of harm than the pornographic content, highlighting the importance of adolescents self-determining what pornography use means.

### *Research approach*

A growing alternative approach to the risk and deficit perspective on pornography use is to conceptualise sexuality from a positive developmental framework, allowing adolescent strengths to be considered alongside their pornography use, and adopting a youth-centred method that allows youth to directly articulate their own experiences and concerns (e.g. Boislard et al., 2016; Dawson et al., 2020; Lamb et al., 2018; McKee et al., 2023; Meehan, 2023). Positive developmental frameworks challenge the focus on deficits that need correcting, instead emphasising adolescents' strengths, adaptability and diversity (Shek et al., 2019). Such frameworks regard adolescents as active agents who have preferences and proactively make choices in determining outcomes, both of which

have been described as protective factors (Shek et al., 2019). This moves away from models that accentuate harmful effects from pornography through the provision of instructional guides and is supported by youth who refute being passive recipients (e.g. Doornwaard et al., 2017; Healy-Cullen et al., 2023; Scarcelli, 2015).

We employed these principles in seeking to understand how adolescents make sense of their experiences with sexuality, treating sexuality as an expected part of being human and entering adulthood (Tolman and McClelland, 2011). Therefore, while the socialisation of sexuality is constructed through peers, media, norms and culture, of which youth are both recipients and influencers, young people are acknowledged as engaging with contemporary technologies from their own viewpoint. This approach challenges adolescent perceptions as distorted, and instead explores the specific understandings held by adolescents themselves, treating these as legitimate and informative accounts of their experiences (Lobe et al., 2008). Furthermore, sexuality is regarded as fluid and embedded in contemporary norms (e.g. Attwood et al., 2018a; McKee et al., 2023), making it important to consider findings within their context.

Framed by these principles, the aim of this study is to explore adolescent perspectives of risk and harm from pornography use through a youth-centred approach that positions them as experts in their own world and experiences. Adolescents are agents in the construction of risks and harms, albeit these are embedded in societal standards that typically portray pornography as indecent and dangerous. Given both negative and positive experiences with pornography use have been observed, adolescents were given space to share both aspects.

### *Study context*

New Zealand can be considered a relatively liberal society, in that the Ministry of Education (2020) provides progressive guidelines that promote openly discussing sexuality and the inclusivity of sexual diversity within education settings that respond to changing social climates (see Garland-Levett, 2017, for a critical review of the guidelines). Pornography use among New Zealand youth is reported as common (Henry and Talbot, 2019). They report engaging with pornography for pleasure and to gain understandings of sexuality and have proactively critiqued content (Healy-Cullen et al., 2022b; Henry and Talbot, 2019; Vertongen et al., 2022a). However, while tolerance or acceptance is encouraged in contemporary New Zealand society, pornography is still considered outside norms of decency. Health and physical education are compulsory for young people 14 to 15 years old (year 10) and covers human reproduction, respect, sexual relationships and societal influences on sexuality while upholding the human rights of all people in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2020). These programmes are often delivered with the aim of inoculating youth against the entrapments of pornography and grounded in dominant assumptions about sexuality and sexual health that control the narratives of youth (Garland-Levett, 2017; Garland-Levett and Allen, 2019; Meehan, 2023). Alongside this, public safety programmes have surfaced, such as the Government pornography awareness campaign, and online advice services, such as NetSafe and The Light Project, provide information about the risks and how to talk with youth about pornography use.

Younger teens are considered more susceptible to harm from pornography due to their immaturity, which is considered to compromise their ability to engage in complex decision-making and self-regulate. New Zealand studies that have explored youth perspectives on pornography have included older adolescents (e.g. Healy-Cullen et al., 2022b) or adults reflecting on their youth (e.g. Taylor, 2021), leaving a gap in our understanding of how younger adolescents interpret what is risky and harmful about pornography. This study explores how younger male adolescents talk about harm from pornography use and how pornography use can impact on self, others and relationships. Key interview topics included negative and positive aspects from viewing pornography (for self and others), how watching pornography influences how young men think about sex and sexuality and how it shapes ideas about sex and sexuality.

## Method

### *Procedure and participants*

Ethical approval for the project was obtained from the University Human Ethics committee and, given the cohort involved, included a clear risk management protocol. Due to the scant research with this younger cohort, adolescents 14–16 years of age were recruited. New Zealand teenagers have also been engaged in sexuality education in year 10 (age 14–15) as advised by Ministry of Education guidelines. To maximise participation, all genders and sexual orientations were sought to participate, but only young men who were willing to discuss pornography and gain parental consent responded. Participants were recruited over a 10-month period through Facebook, a peer sexuality programme and a school counsellor. The lead author or school counsellor provided participants information through group presentations. Consent was obtained from participants and their parents, and where necessary, from the school Board of Trustees and Principal. Interviews were conducted by the lead author in a private room, either at the school or the university, according to participants' preference. Ethical reflections, including consideration of power imbalances (Knight et al., 2018), were discussed within the research team throughout the research project. Power imbalances and barriers for youth participating in studies about pornography are inherently present due to their age and stigma associated with pornography. Power imbalances were addressed through using well-established strategies such as respecting adolescents' position of authority and agency as recommended by Lobe et al. (2008) youth-centred guidelines. Care was taken to avoid imposing adult perspectives onto their experiences, which is important given how adolescent and adult perspectives can differ (Doornwaard et al., 2017; Healy-Cullen et al., 2022b). Interviews followed a conversational style based around an interview guide, and were audio recorded. The interviewer provided a definition of pornography at the beginning of interviews to open the topic as acceptable for discussion and to avoid placing this burden on adolescents. All participants were interviewed twice, 1 to 2 weeks apart, with total interview times ranging from 82 to 120 minutes. An interpretative summary of the first interview was shared before the second interview. This summary provided the opportunity to collaboratively reflect on the researcher's interpretations and to extend ideas from the initial interview. The summary

also acted as a springboard to show the trustworthiness of the researcher and provided an important bridge between the two interviews.

Thirteen male participants self-selected for the study based on their willingness to discuss pornography. Twelve participants were aged 15 years, and one 14 years. Participants identified as New Zealand European (8), Māori (2), East Asian (2) and South Asian (1). Nine identified their sexual orientation as heterosexual and four identified as bisexual, gay or undecided. All participants were enrolled in State-owned schools, with 10 from a same-sex school and three from co-ed schools. Participants were from middle-income families, actively engaged in school and extracurricular activities and self-reported to be average to above average academically. They described having good peer relationships and communication with parents, although not necessarily around sexual issues. No participants reported having had sexual intercourse, but some had initial physical experiences, such as kissing. All participants had viewed pornography providing them with direct experiences to comment on. Pornography use ranged from daily viewing to no longer viewing, with participants describing fluctuating patterns of use across time. Many participants described being introduced to pornography through their peers when aged between 11 and 13 years. All participants had viewed pornography on their own and about half experienced peers sharing in-person or through online posts at the time of the interviews. The content viewed varied between participants, from nudity to full sex to occasional unpleasant material that was viewed unsuspectingly or through curiosity. Most material was accessed from various free mainstream adult porn sites. All participants, except one, had attended educational presentations about the effects of pornography.

## Analysis

Audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim with items of interest, field notes and observations recorded while collecting and analysing data. All participants were identified with pseudonyms. We abstracted themes using Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis guided by principles of flexible and open coding to emphasise interpretative depth. Themes were actively constructed through an in-depth immersion with the data and repeatedly listening to audio recordings as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021). Researcher positionality is an important consideration as it can influence data collection and how themes are constructed (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2021; Holmes, 2020). Reflexive memos regarding researcher assumptions and beliefs about adolescents, sexuality and pornography were kept during interviews and theme development. The lead author is a middle-aged heterosexual woman from clinical psychology, and the two co-authors are heterosexual men. We held an open-minded position about pornography so that opinions could be shared freely without judgement and considered sexuality as being fluid and normal for adolescents who hold agency in determining their preferences and choices.

We identified dominant themes based on duplication within, and across, transcripts, and mapped relations and interactions between themes. We explored how themes related to contemporary understandings about adolescent pornography use and harm during theme development, noting points of similarity and difference. Risk was considered as

the possibility of harm, and harm as the negative outcome or damage that arises. Themes were reviewed to ensure all findings were well grounded in the data and to ensure adolescent perspectives were meaningfully represented. We discussed themes and interpretations in an iterative process until they were agreed by all authors, which produced three themes on how these young adolescent men perceived risk and harm from pornography use.

## Findings

All participants considered harm from pornography use as a possibility and how harm is understood to be varied and complex. The three themes, discussed below, were the following: risky and harmful for others, especially naïve consumers and performers; not harmful to me, with harm considered possible but unlikely, and with harm to themselves being unknown, ambiguous, or short-lived; and generational disparity, where differences between adult claims of harm and personal experiences were questioned.

### *Risky and harmful for others*

The adolescents in this study described numerous possible risks from pornography use to others through the consumption and production of pornography. Pornography was considered both risky and harmful – to the naïve consumer, to pornography performers, and to society.

*Risks to naïve consumers.* All participants were worried about others who were more naïve due to either insufficient knowledge about pornography or their immaturity. Concerns for others naïveté were repeatedly expressed in terms of others being ‘innocent’, ‘gullible’, ‘younger’, ‘uneducated’ or predisposed to uncritically copying pornography. For example, Adam stated, ‘I guess it is the type of person you are if they are gullible and believe the stuff and if they were another personality then they might like (copy) it’. Participants explained how others can be manipulated if they are uneducated, as in Bruce’s comment:

They tell you the facts and you know expand on it way more so you are more educated so you have more information, and you are more educated before you make your decisions, if they’re not educated about this topic as other people, they would be more easily manipulated in a way, I guess.

Concern was unequivocally expressed about the risks from violent pornography. For example, Sam drew attention to the concern for younger people if they thought violence was normal:

If there is violence in the porn then that’s what people will think you do, younger people might see that as sex and see that as normal, like everyone enjoys that, they’re not going to say no to it, and there is no consent as well so like you don’t have to ask you can just do it and they will be into it immediately, in the video they enjoyed it so people in real life might enjoy it too. They

haven't been taught yet so if they go to porn that could influence their perspective on sex and what it is, cause they might not know that it is fantasy, they might know it is actors but not understand it is fantasy and not real. . .

The participants' concern for others mirrors findings that connect individual vulnerabilities to the negative effects from pornography use (Behun and Owens, 2019; Efrati and Amichai-Hamburger, 2019; Giordano et al., 2022). Adolescents have reported learning about sex from pornography (Wright et al., 2023) and as less likely to use condoms (Wright et al., 2020), which emulated the participants' concern that naïve consumers could copy the negative aspects of pornography. Participants were clearly concerned about vulnerable viewers who were uninformed about pornography and did not think children should access pornography.

*Risks to performers.* Performers were considered to be at risk both from participating in the production of pornography and from being the target of social judgements. For example, Nick reflected on the mental health of performers and the burden of social media judgements that can lead to suicide:

Yeah, cause there's a problem, with safety around the actors and stuff but not just with mental health, STI's, there was an actor who was killed recently because she refused to do a scene with a gay guy (yeah, I remember seeing that) yeah August Ames. I remember because it was like a massive story and she had cited health reasons because they hadn't tested the person. . . she committed suicide, yeah.

Similarly, participants shared concerns about the exploitation and abuse of performers. For example, Bradly discussed how the performers were treated:

They do big, long shifts essentially, I believe, those guys are going through like torture so why should I be experiencing this while they are going through torture and that's horrible, we got taught more about the females umm so them being just thrown around by males and that to me did not rest very easily, that's bad.

Like other participants, Bradly recounts how he understands pornography as being both unrealistic and viewing it as a learning opportunity about what to avoid.

*Risks to society.* Risks to society were where pornography could reshape society through changing expectations and perceptions about sexual practices (Coy and Horvath, 2018; Pearson et al., 2018). Participants were concerned about pornography being disrespectful to women. For example, Nick described the problems with 'objectifying' women: 'I wouldn't describe myself as a feminist but the word a lot of them use is objectified when they become tools for umm pleasure tools, that's when it becomes a big problem'. Similarly, Bradly wondered about how women would see themselves represented in porn:

I think nowadays at my age that lots of the girls love their respecting women's rights and things not necessarily feminists but like they have this big sort of thing that women are just as good so I think them seeing that would conflict with their opinions, which would make

them turn it off and go bugger that, which I think there is nothing wrong with that at all. I think they would find it disrespectful.

Leo was disapproving of information seen online that portrayed pornography as empowering:

Some of that stuff when feminists say it makes women empowered but if you watch then maybe not so. . . I saw a video, it's really odd they have a lot of really weird stuff on [Buzzfeed] where they had like porn stars talking about their experiences and they were acting like it was really really empowering, like pornography for women is a really great thing but when you are watching it, from another point of view where you can judge it from another side, then it's like are you sure about that, I was pretty angry when I heard that because I thought it was complete bull crap, that's not how it really is, I think that is where adults kind of have it right.

Other concerns were expressed as to how pornography affected people's expectations about sex and influenced dating websites. For example, Phil spoke of how others might solely seek sex because pornography only shows sex without relational components:

I feel like more people see it and they want to have it in real life so they would want to get into a relationship just for that whereas not for anything else. . . that is the problem with pornography is that it is just sex and that's where you start to debate whether or not if tinder or any of those dating apps where you know people are just using it for like sex is right or wrong and are like that from porn.

Some participants offered solutions that typify recommendations for making pornography safer (e.g. McKee et al., 2023), such as considering how pornography is produced and assisting viewers to determine whether pornography aligned with healthy sexual practice. For example, Adam suggested producers consider the content they make but then decided that they were unlikely to do this, and shifted attention to viewers being selective about the material to help prevent abusive material being made:

If it is the good type of content then the porn stars probably won't have to go through the harmful stuff which would be better for them and everyone else it would stop young kids watching the harmful stuff and thinking it is okay, yeah

Overall, the adolescent perceptions of risks for others from pornography use were consistent with harm frameworks that focus on the negative impacts to adolescents' wellbeing and the undermining of societal norms (e.g. Efrati and Amichai-Hamburger, 2019; Pearson et al., 2018, 2023; Rostad et al., 2019). Findings show youth are capable of critiquing pornography content and negotiate perceived risks through proactive choices (Healy-Cullen et al., 2022b), similar to the current participants.

### *Not harmful to me*

All participants pushed back against the idea of pornography causing personal harm as this narrative did not correspond with how they viewed themselves personally.

Participants attributed this lack of personal harm to being in control of their viewing. They described strong reactions and at times feeling disturbed after viewing pornography but not ‘damaged’ or ‘tainted’. Personal harms from pornography were framed as, ‘I don’t think it harms me’ and ‘disturbing does not mean I am harmed’.

*I don’t think it harms me.* While the participants expressed some concern about risks, such as corrupting their minds and becoming addicted or out of control, they mostly did not believe they experienced these harms from pornography use. Instead, personal harm was refuted, and any negative effects were ambiguous or irrelevant, a finding that is reflected by others (e.g. Carboni and Bhana, 2019; Healy-Cullen et al., 2022b; McCormack and Wignall, 2017; Naezer, 2018; Spišák, 2016). For example, Ivan described their personal risk as follows:

I don’t really see risk in it, it’s just if you dig deep enough then there is probably a risk in it but I kind of don’t know. . . I have no idea I just don’t think it is harming me or any of my relationships or having an impact on my life, so I guess it is okay.

Ivan evaluated the impact on their day-to-day functioning to determine their risk, similar to Efrati’s (2020) recommendation for using negative impact on daily functioning to signify problematic pornography use. The participants also attributed absence of harm to being knowledgeable about porn, remaining in control of their use, understanding its performative aspect and avoiding risky material. For example, Dan stated, ‘Me, I don’t think it would affect me because I know it is fake and I’ve learnt that it’s not what you do in the real world’, while Sam talked about controlling their pornography use to prevent ‘bad’ outcomes after talking with their father:

[Dad] just wanted me to know it is not real, it’s fake and they are just actors and I know that, and he was just clarifying that to make sure I knew. He just said to make good choices when I go through about what to watch. . . at the start I watched it a lot and then I started to use it less, you know too much is bad and I don’t want to watch it too much or it could become an addiction. . . it’s not who I want to be so I just want to slow it down and it’s better that way and that’s what works for me.

And Beau, like other participants, used images and titles to predict and avoid unpleasant material: ‘I’ve seen it, but I didn’t open it I could tell it was going to be disturbing’. All participants stated they proactively avoided risky content and emphasised the importance of remaining in control of their use.

*Disturbing does not mean I am harmed.* Participants indicated that pornography can be disturbing, akin to previous findings (e.g. Henry and Talbot, 2019; Spišák, 2016, 2017). Participants described some content as disturbing, but this was considered to offer learning opportunities or of discerning better ways to navigate the websites to control the content viewed. For example, Jack explained,

There have been a few times when something has come across and that I aah think this is really disturbing and I shouldn’t be looking at this, after it I definitely felt guilty in that I hadn’t been

able to click out of it and get rid of it and that the curiosity in me had taken over and I definitely felt there that I had made a mistake but by doing that I did realise that this stuff is out there and I need to be more careful.

And similarly, Sam commented,

Ahh yeah fisting that is disturbing but other than that no just fisting because that is argh, I see it as painful and not what I want to do, some people might like that but me personally no so no I just stayed away from it and didn't watch is again.

Participants highlighted how they used their own judgement and preferences based on what type of person they were to avoid upsetting material. They described their discomfort as short-lived and as holding personal responsibility for managing potential risks through their choices. When asked whether disturbing meant harm, they did not think they were the same thing. For example, Beau described it as being similar to hearing disturbing news that you might think about but then forget:

Like disturbing, I guess disturbing could be counted as harm, but I feel like, if like it was really disturbing it can be harmful but it's more like just hearing disturbing news and that's not harmful. . . yeah but that doesn't last too long, it doesn't really last too long for me anyway.

Consequently, equating disturbing or upsetting to harm needs to be carefully considered; disturbing content may be harmful although it does not necessarily lead to harm. Furthermore, young people have reported feeling shame when adults focus solely on harmful effects (Dawson et al., 2020; Spišák, 2016), which reinforces the perspective that pornography use is shameful.

### *Generational disparity*

When adolescent perspectives about harm do not align with adult concerns, then their perspectives have been questioned and reframed as deficits, commonly with the assumption that they underestimate the risks (e.g. Behun and Owens, 2019; Wright et al., 2023). The adolescents in this study expressed doubt about their insight into the negative effects of pornography use because they did not experience the negative effects suggested by adults. There were clear discrepancies between their experiences and what they had been warned about, and not experiencing the harm and risk proposed to be found in online forums and media by adults led to ambiguity and concern. For example, Clint described his ambiguity:

They [adults] talk about addiction and how they lead you into depression or stress and stuff, sometimes I think about that but I don't see it taking place, sometimes just how it could happen. . . I am just saying like maybe I could have had them [negative effects] so I would be like maybe addicted but I don't know I'm addicted. . .

Furthermore, the adolescents raised concerns about being judged negatively by adults and considered adult perspectives to be one-sided and undeserved. Nick describes an experience when being taught about porn by an educator:

They showed us a bunch of videos and told us why porn was bad, like the lady came around and she assumed that everything was bad, all of it was bad but she specifically assumed that we all watch the stuff on the far hard core side, and so we were sitting in these groups and she came around and she said, we were supposed to organise what is normal and what is not normal, it was ridiculous it was like lesbians would enjoy it if a straight male joined into their relationship and obviously not and one of them was like women enjoyed being spat on and hit and it was just noo, yeah, and I said like what are these, it's ridiculous and she told me I wouldn't understand as a white male.

Other participants expressed similar concerns about adults thinking the worst of them and suggested that adults should take a more balanced perspective. For example, Zak shared,

I think they [adults] only see the bad part and think that is all we are watching and that is contaminating our minds and that's from their perspective and not everyone it like that, it is only a few people. . . for me I haven't seen them [adults] to look at both sides and adults could look at the positive as well.

Participants also wondered whether adults thought young men suddenly changed and became vulnerable because of their hormones. For example, Leo thought, 'adults think puberty is like this crazy wild journey and everything changes (and) all teenagers are sex crazy and addicts that watch porn constantly whereas I don't think that is the case', while Bradly shared how preposterous they found the idea that their values would disappear because they turn 13: 'you don't just suddenly the second you turn 13 that half of them turn into bad arses and their brain melts'. This was followed by the suggestion that they were capable of learning from 'mistakes' and could self-govern their pornography use decisions.

Most participants wanted to hide their pornography use from adults and found conversations with adults difficult because of anticipated negative evaluations, one-sided conversations and the assumption they were doing something abnormal. For example, Jack expressed concerns about being 'cast out':

I think even just acknowledging that it's there and its normal and you won't be cast out of society if this is what you do, I think an acknowledgement by teachers that this is a normal response for sexual development would be helpful.

Knowing about potential risks and harm from adult perspectives was used by these participants to evaluate whether they were experiencing any such harm, but they considered this needed to be balanced by recognition of adolescent capacity to understand the shortcomings and risks of pornography, as has been identified by other young adults (Dawson et al., 2020) and youth (De Ridder, 2017; eSafety Commissioner, 2023; Green et al., 2020).

## Discussion

The most important finding from our research relates to how adolescents position themselves in relation to harm from pornography use. There was a clear difference between

experiencing personal harm and potential harm for others. This discrepancy of considering greater harm for others but not personally being harmed has been framed in effect models as a deficit, such as through the third-person effect (e.g. Lo et al., 2016; Wright, 2014; Wright et al., 2023). This framing of youth as underestimating negative media effects upon themselves has been contested as problematising young men and denying them subjectivity as positive sexual subjects in society (Allen, 2006, 2011; Tsaliki and Chronaki, 2020). Stepping outside the dominant harm and risk perspective raises concern that adults and policy makers are not protecting youth from the proposed perils in society (Buckingham and Chronaki, 2014; De Ridder, 2017). We could reframe the young men's perspectives in this study as being distorted or reflecting poor judgement due to the social saturation of pornography discourses. However, reinterpreting adolescent understandings to align with dominant adult viewpoints is problematic and narrows debate about alternative perspectives (Garland-Levett and Allen, 2019; McClelland and Fine, 2014; Tsaliki, 2022). For this reason, the adolescent perspectives expressed in this research were considered to hold legitimacy rather than being challenged on generational discrepancies, presumed naïveté or lack of awareness through the claimed pornification of society.

Using a youth-centred perspective, we propose here an alternative understanding that considers adolescent perspectives conceptualised through a positive developmental framework that acknowledges adolescent agency and compassion for others. Agency within healthy sexual development frameworks includes the ability to negotiate one's sexuality while caring for partners, among other ideas (Cooper et al., 2023; McKee, 2012). The current participants clearly showed concern and care for others, especially for inexperienced consumers. Compassion is a valued human quality that is core to social connectedness (Goetz and Simon-Thomas, 2017; Peterson, 2017) and the formation of healthy sexual connections (e.g. Dawson et al., 2020). Yet, the notion of compassion is largely absent from the narratives about young men who use pornography.

However, the young men in this research articulated compassion and concern for others, which was expressed in a desire to protect others and to relieve distress. They noted this especially for younger or vulnerable cohorts, who could be exploited or harmed by pornography. Sharing information about pornography was often put forward as an important step in safeguarding others. Their awareness of distress intersected with their perceptions of what was good or bad based on their moral values and judgements of what was good. All participants considered viewing 'hard porn' or 'abusive porn' as condoning the exploitation of others and this motivated them to avoid this material. This was captured repeatedly through their expressions of 'feeling bad' for the performers and their concern for naïve youth who might unknowingly copy such material. Although compassion is largely seen as a positive state promoting caring for others, it can also hold negative aspects when people apprehend the distress caused to others that can transform to compassionate anger (Peterson, 2017). This anger was evident through the young men expressing anger about 'porn stars' being exploited within the industry. Likewise, negative adult judgements were considered unreasonable and a possible threat to wellbeing, as expressed in Clint's comment that 'my generation have easy access and adults judge us for this'.

Consideration for how adults frame risk was raised by the current participants. The discrepancy between the harm they had been forewarned about by adults and their personal experience led these young men to wonder what this disparity meant and at times resulted in self-doubt. Similarly, vague and blurry notions of harm have raised more concern for youth than pornography content (eSafety Commissioner, 2023; Spišák, 2016). Participants perceived adult conversations focused solely on risks and harms as judgemental and as marginalising their perspectives. Adults were held to underestimate adolescent capacity to understand the shortcomings and risks of pornography. This suggests that this adult focus on harm can lead some youth to experience shame and self-doubt, an outcome noted by others (Dawson et al., 2020; Lamb et al., 2018; Spišák, 2016).

The participants understood that viewing pornography was common but they claimed to be knowledgeable about risks, understanding pornography's performative aspect and remaining in control of their use. While the young men embraced messages about harm portrayed by media, school systems and peers through stating their knowledge on this topic, they equally challenged how they personally experienced harm. This complex standpoint supports the notion that younger adolescent men can critically appraise their experiences and concerns about pornography as found for older youth (Boislard et al., 2016; De Ridder, 2017; Doornwaard et al., 2017; Goldstein, 2021; Healy-Cullen et al., 2022b; McKee et al., 2023; Spišák, 2017). Furthermore, we would argue, in line with others (e.g. Attwood et al., 2018a; McKee et al., 2020), that the conceptualisation of harm from pornography use evolves with shifting norms and practices that are simultaneously constructed by adolescents who both aligned with adult perspectives of harm and disputed the meaning of harm. Therefore, we need to be cautious about how differences between adult and youth perceptions of harm are stated to avoid youth perspectives being positioned as distorted and wrong.

We also caution how harm is generalised when participants compassionately share concerns for others. When harm is raised about others, as it was by the current young men, it is frequently generalised in research studies to harm for all youth. For example, examining the participant quotes in Walker et al.'s (2015) study reveals that their concerns were mostly about others and not directly related to themselves, yet the researchers concluded that harm was evident for all. Findings with the young men in this study contradict this perspective. Consequently, it would be useful for future studies to pay greater attention to how harm is communicated, and whether general concerns about others translate into personal experiences of harm. If we continue to homogenise harm as relevant for all through deficit models, then we will continue to perpetuate the counterproductive harmful narrative around youth and pornography.

Finally, our participants reflected several robust qualities that have been associated with higher levels of thriving, such as showing restraint and compassion, and taking responsibility for their decisions (e.g. Holt et al., 2021; Shek et al., 2019). It is likely participants in this study were confident about sexual matters as evident by their willingness to obtain parental consent and discuss their personal experiences. This willingness to participate could mean that they are less troubled by their experiences with pornography. Consequently, further exploration of other, potentially more vulnerable

cohorts who have been identified as being at greater risk from pornography use (Efrati and Amichai-Hamburger, 2019) is needed. Likewise, exploration of young women's understanding of pornography is important given the different gendered social expectations around sexual practices (Coy and Horvath, 2018), such as avoiding sexual openness and expressions of pleasure (e.g. Attwood et al., 2021; Scarcelli, 2015) and that young women first view pornography at an older age (Lim et al., 2017). Such factors influence both young women's willingness to participate and their perspectives on harm. The lack of sexual experience among the young men in this study also meant we could not explore any relationship between their pornography viewing and sexual activity. In New Zealand, 16 years is deemed the age of consent, with sexual debut for 14 to 15 years being considered early and associated with negative health outcomes (Lim et al., 2017). How harm and risk are understood and function within these different cohorts clearly needs further exploration.

In short, we propose youth perspectives that express concern for others while considering themselves as unharmed can be understood as a function of both compassion (expressed concern for others) and agency (harm is minimised due to being in control and self-determining how they engage with pornography). Importantly, this narrative requires adults to support the legitimacy of adolescent perspectives as being functional accounts of their experiences rather than considering them as distorted perceptions of reality that can lead to harm. We recommend moving away from a deficit framework to a positive development perspective that contextualises how risks and harms around pornography use are managed and understood. This does not ignore discussing harm but allows a bottom-up approach that complements existing strengths-based sexuality and porn literacy programmes that attribute agency to youth while acknowledging that how porn literacy is delivered and what works for whom need further exploration. Adolescents' concern for the wellbeing of others over their personal risks can be framed as compassionate and adaptive to healthy sexual practices rather than as a deficit, a distortion or a form of denial. Adult perceptions of risk can be considered within a balanced perspective that recognises adolescent strengths and abilities to manage risks and harms, and to engage critically with pornography content. This is supported by the current findings which demonstrate the importance of acknowledging both young adolescent men's perception of harm as nuanced and meaningful and their ability to engage in critical analysis of pornography.

### **Acknowledgements**

We acknowledge the adolescents who shared their experiences and their parents and caregivers for supporting their courage.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**


The author(s) declared the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: We confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere. A formal ethics review was undertaken through Massey University Ethics Committee and approved. No conflicts of interest were identified.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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