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To cite this article: Siobhán Healy-Cullen, Tracy Morison, Kirsty Ross & Joanne E. Taylor (2022) How do youth, parents, and educators use discursive sexual scripts to make sense of youth engagement with internet pornography?, *Porn Studies*, 9:4, 445-463, DOI: [10.1080/23268743.2022.2125898](https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2022.2125898)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2022.2125898>



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Published online: 17 Nov 2022.



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How do youth, parents, and educators use discursive sexual scripts to make sense of youth engagement with internet pornography?

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore how culturally available sexual scripts are drawn on to make meaning of young people's engagement with internet pornography (IP). We draw on a version of sexual scripting theory developed by feminist discursive scholars to perform a critical thematic analysis of 24 interviews with parents, educators, and young people. We identify three main scripts commonly drawn on by participants to make sense of youth engagement with IP, namely: a script of harm, a heterosexual script, and a developmentalist script. These scripts, often interweaving with one another, were deployed in various ways, firstly, as 'risk talk' and, secondly, as 'resistant talk'. While both adults and youth engaged with dominant ('risk') and alternative ('resistant') talk, adults primarily positioned youth within 'risk talk'. We show how alternative 'resistant talk' disrupts common, scripted ways of accounting for youth engagement with IP in a way that demonstrates more nuanced sexual subjectivities – particularly among youth – than the traditional media effects paradigm acknowledges. Importantly, our findings show how, within discursive restraints, essentialized gender constructions can be resisted to position youth as agentic sexual subjects.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 November 2021
Accepted 14 September 2022

KEYWORDS

Sexual scripting theory; sexual citizenship; youth agency; internet pornography; young people

Sexual socialization is a complex, lifelong, developmental process involving many social actors (Ndabula, Macleod and Young 2021). Increasingly, with the rise of the internet and growing digitalization, online media play a considerable role in this process (Naezer and Ringrose 2018). In particular, internet pornography (IP) is a significant part of the contemporary bricolage of cultural resources available for young people to learn about sex, construct sexual identities, and navigate sexual experiences, desires, relationships, and practices (Scarcelli 2014).

As a result, there has been much concern regarding the possible impact of IP on young people's sexual development. The existing scholarship has primarily investigated the potential negative effects of IP viewing. In this vein, numerous media effects studies

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seek to demonstrate causal or correlational relationships between young people's engagement with IP and a range of negative behavioural or attitudinal outcomes. This scholarship has been critiqued for failing to question the common-sense assumption on which it is based: that 'exposure' to IP is inherently and inevitably harmful to young people. Based on this view, media effects research takes an uncritical harms-based perspective, which at the same time focuses on individual-level effects without contextualizing these. This work fails to consider the role IP plays in young people's lives and often fails to engage with the very people their work concerns: young people themselves. (See Owens et al. [2012] for a review and discussion of this scholarship.)

Consequently, some scholars have called for context-sensitive research into the specificities of youth engagement with IP that includes young people's neglected perspectives (Goldstein 2020). Research of this nature can help support young people's sexual socialization in ways that are relevant and meaningful, and recognizing their agency to navigate digitalized social contexts (Spišák 2016; Attwood, Smith and Barker 2018). Such work seeks to locate youth accounts within their social context. To this end, it is important to also consider parents and educators as highly influential adults tasked with providing sexuality education (Scarcelli 2014), as we do in the work we present in this article.

Accordingly, some researchers have begun investigating how young people make sense of IP vis-à-vis their own cultural realities, and navigate potentially conflicting or partial sources of meaning (for example, Spišák 2017; Ashton, McDonald and Kirkman 2018; Taylor and Jackson 2018; Goldstein 2020). A fruitful avenue of inquiry has been the development and application of Simon and Gagnon's (1986) sexual scripting theory to understand the meaning and significance of sexual content available to young people through the media (for example, Kim et al. 2007; Spišák 2017). Building on Simon and Gagnon's (1986) later development of their theory to capture the role of the socio-cultural context in shaping sexual development, some scholars have developed scripting theory in a way that 'removes scripts from inside the heads' of speakers 'and relocates them as interactional and social resources' (Frith and Kitzinger 2001, 228). The value of this conceptualization of scripting theory is that it not only situates this ongoing process in the social context, but also understands sexual sense-making as an ongoing process that is active, relational, and enmeshed in the power relations that are (re)produced in cultural conceptions of sexuality (Beres 2013).

From this perspective, sexual scripts are implicated in the process of sexual socialization. To help make sense of social and sexual relations, people draw on sexual scripts, defined as 'culturally familiar, established ways of speaking about sex within a particular context' (Morison, Macleod and Lynch 2022, 2) or shared cultural resources delineated by prevailing cultural norms, values, and expectations regarding sexuality (Jackson and Scott 2010). For example, according to the dominant heterosexual script, men are 'naturally' more sexually voracious than women (Kim et al. 2007). This sense-making process involves the (inter)active interpretation and negotiation of culturally available sexual scripts, which establish the limits of possibility and acceptability regarding sexuality. Yet, at the same time, these scripts can be 'interactively reworked, negotiated or contested' (Jackson and Scott 2010, 815). For example, the dominant heterosexual script has been challenged and given rise to a new permissive sexual script, which allows women's expression of sexual desire (Brown-Bowers et al. 2015). In this way, it

is possible to connect sexual socialization to the (re)production of and resistance to cultural norms and power relations.

Our study is informed by this understanding of sexual identity construction as an active process informed by broader sexual scripts and an array of (potentially contradictory) social meanings about sex and gender that young people encounter in other media and as part of their daily lives (Aggleton et al. 2019; Goldstein 2018). Accordingly, we understand IP as part of the wider discursive landscape in which young people's sexual identity construction occurs. In the present study, we sought to investigate how young New Zealanders themselves understand and make sense of youth engagement with IP, focusing on how they negotiate broader notions about youth IP viewing within a 'pornified' cultural context that at the same time largely problematizes youth sexuality and constructs pornography as inherently harmful to young people (Mulholland 2015; Aggleton et al. 2019). We employed sexual scripting theory, as described earlier, to explore how young people, caregivers, and educators draw on culturally available scripts and to what effect (Frith and Kitzinger 2001; Beres 2013; Morison, Macleod and Lynch 2022).

Our research contributes to an emerging international body of critical research that adds nuance and complexity to discussions regarding responses to youth engagement with IP. In contrast to the prevailing harm-oriented and effects-oriented research already mentioned, a growing body of qualitative and mixed-methods research has emerged in recent years that locates IP as part of wider socio-cultural and discursive contexts (Goldstein 2020). Work in this area is multidisciplinary and draws on a range of critical theories (for example, Attwood 2005; Taylor and Gavey 2020). This critical scholarship rejects the dominant research focus on the harmful effects of IP on youth. Rather, IP is viewed as neither inherently harmful nor emancipatory, but as requiring the meaning to be ascribed by context and viewer (Calder-Dawe and Gavey 2013).

Departing from the dominant focus on what IP does to youth to consider what they do with IP and why, most of this research engages youth (older adolescents) on their perspectives and experiences of negotiating IP and its meaning and significance in their lives (Attwood 2005; Attwood, Smith and Barker 2018; Goldstein 2020). Taken together, findings from this literature paint a complex picture of varied youth engagement (Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson 2010; Ashton, McDonald and Kirkman 2018; Goldstein 2021), the purpose of engagement (e.g. information, entertainment, exploring desire) (Scarcelli 2014; McCormack and Wignall 2017), experiences, and views of IP (Scarcelli 2015; Spišák 2016). IP is consistently shown to be a significant resource for sexual meaning-making outside traditional or formal spaces (Scarcelli 2014). Youth report finding IP entertaining and influential, at the same time as being critical of its portrayals (Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson 2010; Spišák 2016, 2017; Attwood, Smith and Barker 2018). Where formal sexuality education is lacking or risk-orientated, IP is shown to act as a site of sexual empowerment and agency, albeit in highly gendered ways (Taylor and Jackson 2018; Ashton, McDonald and Kirkman 2020; Goldstein 2020).

There is comparatively less research, critical or otherwise, on adult understandings of youth encounters with IP (Livingstone and Bober 2004). Research with parents largely focuses on correlating parenting styles with youth IP engagement, often seeking to determine how parents can regulate such engagement or mitigate potential negative effects

(Tomić, Burić and Štulhofer 2018; Zurcher 2019). Qualitative research suggests that parents generally view their children's involvement with IP negatively. Several studies have found that, as with sexuality in general, parents are hesitant, fearful, nervous, and/or embarrassed to discuss the subject of IP with their child (Martellozzo et al. 2017; Zurcher 2019). Unsurprisingly then, research in several contexts indicates that parent-child discussion of IP is uncommon and/or inadequate (Gesser-Edelsburg 2018; Barbovschi and Staksrud 2020; Davis et al. 2021). Barriers to parental engagement include poor technological competency or digital/media literacy and limited knowledge (real or perceived) regarding their children's internet use (Davis et al. 2021; Page Jeffery 2021). There may also be cultural differences. For instance, studies in Brazil and the Middle East report that parents express restrictive and paternalistic attitudes towards youth IP viewing, especially among girls (Gesser-Edelsburg 2018; Barbovschi and Staksrud 2020), while research in Australia and New Zealand reports that parents express interest in developing constructive ways to converse with youth about IP (Davis et al. 2021; Healy-Cullen et al. 2021a, 2021b).

Educators have been found to hold similar views on the issue to parents. For instance, in a UK survey, educators commonly considered that schools should teach about the potential harms of IP (Baker 2016). Similarly, in a Swedish focus group study, some educators emphasized the issues that could arise due to problematic ideals and norms conveyed in IP and the need to educate adolescents to enhance awareness, understanding, and critical thinking regarding the content (Mattebo et al. 2014). Additionally, some teachers (and parents) support school-based initiatives, such as porn literacy education, as shown in Healy-Cullen et al.'s (2021b) New Zealand study. Nonetheless, broaching the topic of IP in the classroom is seen as challenging, requiring training, resources, and school community support (Albury 2014; Baker 2016; Ollis 2016).

To date, no research has concurrently examined youth, parent, and educator understandings of youth engagement with IP. Such knowledge is crucial, as how parents and educators – who are tasked with the sexuality education of youth – understand youth engagement with IP will shape their response to educational interventions. In this article, we present findings from interviews with 14 adults (educators and parents) and 10 young people. Our findings demonstrate how stakeholders account for youth engagement with IP by drawing on common sexual scripts, namely: a developmentalist script, a heterosexual script, and a script of harm. These scripts worked together to produce the dominant 'risk talk' (theme one), positioning young people as 'duped' by IP. This risk talk was actively renegotiated through 'resistant talk' (theme two), which constructs alternative, agentic positions for young people.

Methodology

The data presented in this article are derived from a larger mixed-methods project about school-based 'porn literacy' education carried out with students, educators, and parents in the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand (see Healy-Cullen et al. 2021a, 2021b). The design of the qualitative component (semi-structured interviews) was informed by the insights gained from an initial exploratory online survey (see Healy-Cullen et al. [2021a] for the findings).

Data collection

We used a school-based recruitment strategy, seeking permission from 249 high schools to recruit students (aged 16–18 years), educators, and caregivers (guardians or parents). Nine schools agreed to forward an invitation to participate to these three groups. At each school, the invitation to take part in the online survey was circulated and, at the end of the survey, survey respondents were invited to indicate interest in participating in an individual interview. The schools ranged in type (co-educational/single-sex, religious/secular, public/private), location (rural, urban), and decile grouping, thereby providing a diverse range of views. We recruited 14 adults (one educator, seven parents, and six who were both educators and parents) and five young people. Due to this low response among youth (which may be related to the topic), we used peer referral to recruit five more young people. The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1.

The first author conducted in-person semi-structured interviews from August to November 2019. Participants were invited to share their understandings of youth engagement with IP, including what they believe constitutes IP; reasons why youth view IP; whether adults should respond in any way, why and how; and their thoughts on formal education about IP. We used the interview techniques summarized in Table 2 to avoid discussion of personal experiences and, rather, elicit understandings of the topic more generally (e.g. using findings from the survey as stimulus material to prompt further discussion). This approach was motivated by the sensitive nature of the topic, which could potentially lead participants to feel shy, embarrassed, or as though they could get into trouble for their disclosures.

Table 1. Interview participants' characteristics.

Cohort	Pseudonym	Age (years)	Gender	Ethnicity	
Young people	Kate	17	Female	Pākehā & Māori	
	Amelia	16	Female	Pākehā	
	Belinda	18	Female	Pākehā	
	Danielle	18	Female	European	
	Liane	17	Female	Pākehā	
	Avery	16	Male	Pākehā & Asian	
	Tristian	16	Male	Asian	
	Adam	17	Male	Pākehā	
	Frank	18	Male	Pākehā & Māori	
	Anthony	18	Male	Pākehā & Māori	
	Adults	Tim	46–55	Male	Pākehā
		Diane	36–45	Female	Pākehā
		Marie	46–55	Female	Pākehā
		Jessica	36–45	Female	US American
Willow		46–55	Female	Pākehā	
Ava		36–45	Female	Pākehā	
Aidan		36–45	Male	Pākehā	
Naomi		46–55	Female	Pākehā	
Polly		46–55	Female	Pākehā	
Gareth		36–45	Male	Pākehā	
Liam	26–35	Male	Pākehā		
Raymond	46–55	Male	Pākehā		
Mia	46–55	Female	Asian		
James	46–55	Male	Pākehā		

Note: Pākehā is an Indigenous term for non-Māori New Zealanders.

Table 2. Interview techniques.

Technique	Purpose	Example
Discussion of survey findings	Icebreaker, generate discussion, probe	'Why is it so taboo for females to watch porn but considered "normal" for males?' This exemplary quote from a youth participant captured a common theme about gendered expectations in the comments section of the student survey. This survey respondent's question was used as a probe for further discussion Results of the top five reasons for youth IP viewing given by student and adult respondents were graphically provided to participants for discussion
Discussion of how to define IP	Elicit own/alternative understandings of what IP is and its purpose	How would you define IP? What are your thoughts about the definition used in the survey [probe: disagreement/agreement]?
Story completion (youth only) Story completion	Generate discussion, probe	A fictitious youth's first encounter with IP – what might they be thinking/want to ask? A fictitious announcement of porn literacy as part of national sexuality education curriculum

The same interview guide was used across groups as well as standardized vignettes and prompts for the story completion exercise conducted with young people. These were used flexibly, with a view of the research interview as a site for the co-construction of meaning in which participants' accounts are inevitably shaped by situational dynamics, interactional complexities, and power relations between researcher and researched. We therefore engage with our data reflexively, considering the role played by these situational dynamics and our own social locations (Hesse-Biber 2014).

Data analysis method

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2012) approach to thematic analysis, which comprises six iterative phases: familiarization with the dataset through repeated reading; generating initial codes; constructing preliminary themes; refining themes through comparison with coded extracts and the entire dataset; naming and defining themes; and generating the narrative report of the findings. We took a critical deductive approach to analysis, which entails a theory-driven process of interpretation in which researchers explore underlying conceptualizations, assumptions, and ideologies shaping the text (Braun and Clarke 2006).

After coding and classifying the data according to themes, we interpreted the resulting thematic structures using sexual scripting theory (as explained earlier). We were interested in the range of scripts being used and shared by youth, caregivers, and educators, rather than the scripts used by each group, as we were not taking a perspective that youth scripts were necessarily different to scripts used by parents, educators, or those who were both parents and educators. Thus, we focused on the overall organization of talk concerning repeatable and detectable scripts drawn upon, the negotiation of the subject positions provided by various scripts (e.g. innocent child, passive victim), and the implications of particular ways of speaking about youth engagement with IP

(Morison, Macleod and Lynch 2022). To ensure rigour, we utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006, 96) 15-Point Checklist of Criteria for Good Thematic Analysis Process.

Analysis and discussion

Our analysis highlights the ways participants draw on common sexual scripts when accounting for youth engagement with IP, namely: a developmentalist script, a heterosexual script, and a script of harm. All participants drew on these scripts in varying and interweaving ways. In particular, the developmentalist script featured as a dominant script prominently and repeatedly drawn on as a central explanatory discursive resource across the dataset – as in wider public talk. These scripts work together to produce two overarching themes. The first, 'risk talk', largely reiterates the dominant public framing of IP as harmful to youth, evidenced by frequent references to news articles and documentaries on its damaging consequences. Risk talk features across the dataset and represents the overriding way in which youth engagement with IP was spoken about.

These dominant constructions of youth are challenged and disrupted to varying degrees in the second theme, 'resistant talk'. Resistant talk was evident across the dataset. However, although all participants drew on alternative scripts to the dominant developmentalist, heterosexual, and harm scripts, resistant talk was more common in the data generated with youth participants. We discuss each of these themes in turn in the following section.

Theme 1: risk talk

Risk talk constructs young people's engagement with IP as invariably bearing negative consequences. This talk was predominantly informed by a script of harm, which intersects with familiar and powerful scripts about young people's sexual development. Participants positioned youth as innocent children susceptible to harm on account of being unable to be discerning of IP, and this construction of risk was gendered. We discuss each of these instances of risk talk in turn.

Youth as innocent children susceptible to harm

Youth were commonly positioned as not yet adults and so incapable of discernment and decision-making in their own best interests. It is their developmental status, therefore, that renders them inherently 'at risk' of the harms of IP. In this talk, the harm script intersects with a developmentalist script to construct youth 'as inherently deficient and risk prone due to their developmental status' (Morison and Herbert 2020, 88) and thus requiring adult protection. This construction is illustrated in the following extracts:

Extract 1

Diane (mother): The internet's got a lot to answer for when it comes to young people, it's taking their innocence away. [...] they could put a word in to the internet and it all pops up anyway. So, either way, their innocence is taken. So, it's the sooner you start [having discussion with youth about IP] the better. [...] We can't protect our children from the internet anymore unless we make them aware of what's right and what's wrong.

Extract 2

Gareth (father, educator): ... there is probably another whole level of people with [...] issues because of their exposure to porn and their understanding of what an appropriate relationship is, and an appropriate sexual relationship, isn't what I guess society would probably deem it is, because they've got their ideas, their education, from pornography [...] Because if we leave it to kids to do their own research, which they will, what they uncover may well not meet what we would say is a healthy relationship or healthy sexual activity.

Cohering with extant literature, speakers draw on the harm script in these extracts to construct IP as a cause of psychological 'issues' (Extract 2), attributed to 'early' and/or 'unhealthy' sexualization (Spišák 2017). The dominant Western association of youth with innocence – and thus with sexual purity, naïvety, and ignorance – is evident in these extracts (Robinson 2013). Depicting young people as being 'exposed' to IP (Extract 2) positions them as passive, unagentic viewers, rather than agentic consumers of IP. This positioning supports the depiction in Extract 1 of IP as *'taking* their innocence away' (emphasis added). This positioning is supported by a developmentalist script (note how the speakers explicitly refer to 'children' or 'kids') which renders young people as lacking capacity to discriminate between 'real' sex and media representations. Accordingly, they cannot be trusted to act in their own interests or on their own behalf (e.g. 'do their own research'; Extract 2). Parents are therefore positioned as needing to 'protect our children from the internet' and 'make them aware' (Extract 1; emphasis added) of 'what's right and what's wrong' (Extract 1) or 'healthy' and unhealthy (Extract 2). The need for adult intervention in the form of educating youth was common across the data. For example, Danielle, a student participant, explained that porn literacy could involve 'teaching kids that maybe they shouldn't do some of those things that are in it, the more like violent kind of stuff or whatever'.

These examples illustrate a common concern that youth will re-enact the 'wrong' or 'unhealthy' sexual activities observed in IP. This assumption was common across the data, as is more clearly shown in the following extracts:

Extract 3

Willow (mother): ... we're probably quite permissive for some violent movies and things, whereas typically we're a bit more careful with the sexual content. Just because of the way that people can imitate that. Whereas violence, I suppose they can imitate that too, if they've got the tendency.

Extract 4

Ava (mother): Because you'd kind of imitate it [IP], right, if you've seen that [...] if you don't know what else to do? ... And I think that is this scary thing and why I think it is so important to be literate about it, just that they haven't had the real-life experience, so they don't actually know the difference ... And I think that's probably the thing that could cause a lot of problems.

This common construction of young people and dominant societal understanding of media consumption as harmful is informed by social learning theory (Goldstein 2020). As evident in these extracts, the potential for young people to reproduce undesirable behaviours is constructed as necessitating 'careful' parental responses: monitoring media content (Extract 3), and ensuring youth are 'literate' (Extract 4). In Extract 3, the

construction of 'sexual content' as requiring special parental vigilance and control rests upon the notion of 'early' sexual exploration as particularly detrimental to childhood innocence (Robinson 2013). In line with this view, in Extract 4 IP is rendered an undesirable sexuality educator for young people who are sexually naïve and credulous ('haven't had the real-life experience', 'don't ... know the difference'). Their sexual innocence thus renders them particularly vulnerable and at risk of 'a lot of problems' from viewing IP. Accordingly, participants commonly supported the need for adult intervention, despite differences in understandings of what negative consequences might arise (e.g. addiction or sexist views) and how to mitigate these (e.g. censorship or education), as we have also shown elsewhere (Healy-Cullen et al. 2021a).

Gendered risk

Although youth in general are depicted as passive, developmentally vulnerable, and, therefore, prone to being fooled by IP, specific gender-related factors were deemed responsible and different negative consequences were predicted for women and men. Constructions of risk therefore intertwined with gendered understandings of sexuality informed by a powerful and ubiquitous Western sexual script, vis-à-vis the heterosexual script, identified in Kim et al.'s (2007) and Tolman et al.'s (2007) US research. This script, as we show, delineates culturally appropriate relational and sexual practices based on gender.

Young men's IP viewing was construed as motivated by a natural sexual drive (i.e. desire). Participants maintained, for instance, that 'boys are maybe a bit more wired to [pause] being sexually active or being interested in that [IP]' (Aidan, father) and that 'the male has a visual mind' (Avery, student). Accordingly, male engagement with IP and other sexualized media/entertainment was commonly construed as signifying 'normal' masculine development and even a 'rite of passage' (Liane, student), in line with wider understandings of men's explicit enjoyment of sex as integral to heterosexual manhood, as also identified in other research (Allen 2006; Scarcelli 2015; Taylor and Jackson 2018).

At the same time, the assumption of a voracious male sex drive, combined with unprecedented access to IP, is widely regarded as the foundation for men's proclivity to 'pornography addiction' (Stoops 2017). For instance:

Extract 5

Aidan (father): I guess with our boys growing – and thinking back to how I grew up and how I learned and what we were exposed to – but now that you have a device, and you can just do it [watch pornography] anywhere. [...] Yeah because I guess there's also the theme that comes under that is the addiction, that possibly some kids get hooked on that.

Here, Aidan distinguishes between what he was 'exposed to' as a youth and contemporary young men's easy digital access to IP – which he presumes they will seek out – invoking the 'common-sense' public understanding in which addiction is fuelled by easy access (Stoops 2017). Likewise, our participants construed the supposed 'primal' (Adam, student) nature of men's interest in IP as predisposing them to harm, particularly IP addiction. This particular risk was either spoken of generically or specifically as a risk to boys. No similar mention was made in relation to girls, and the notion of female addiction to IP was even

explicitly rejected, for instance by Mia (mother, educator) who stated: 'I would be very surprised if they [her daughters] were addicted by it [sic] or they were looking for it because they enjoy it'. Moreover, the risk was depicted as compounded by adolescent male sexuality, as the following extract illustrates:

Extract 6

Avery (student): And one of the things that tears young guys up the most, myself included, is, like, sexual thoughts. They're not great. Um, I mentor a couple of guys and they're just like, 'Oh, I saw porn and it's absolutely destroying me. I'm addicted now. I'm not sure how to stop.' And it's just got a negative impact on like their lives.

Avery's positioning of young men (Extract 6) coheres with a wider cultural assumption of IP as a male vice (Stoops 2017). His reference to young men's struggle with 'sexual thoughts' is informed by the developmentalist script, which renders adolescent masculinity as 'subject to powerful sexual urges fuelled by "raging hormones" that they find difficult to control' (Richardson 2010, 740). The adolescent male thus goes from being sexually driven – the construction of 'normal' male sexuality given by the heterosexual script – to being sexually compelled, due to the developmental stage. The developmentalist and heterosexual scripts therefore work together to construe the problem as located in 'the boy brain' (Raymond, male parent educator) and, ultimately, to render adolescent male sexuality especially risky. This danger is emphasized in Extract 6 by the extreme terms ('tears ... up', 'destroying') used to describe 'the impact' of IP on young men.

Following the heterosexual script, young women are positioned as less interested in sex than young men, since female sexuality is not centred on physical gratification but 'more sentimental ... It's the emotion as well' (Kate, student). Accordingly, resonating with other research with young women in New Zealand and Australia, explanations for female engagement with IP often centred on female responsibility for ensuring male pleasure in heterosex (Brown, Schmidt, and Robertson 2018; Ashton, McDonald, and Kirkman 2020). For instance, Belinda (student) maintained that a woman 'doesn't get much out of it [IP] but she has to put work in for the guy'. This construction aligns with the heterosexual script's prescription that women 'should be sexual objects and should please their male partners' (Tolman et al. 2007, 84.e10).

In line with this construction, young women are positioned as indirectly harmed by IP due to the ways that it negatively affects young men, as shown in the following extracts:

Extract 7

Ava (mother): I read an article about some of the stuff that it [IP] does ... You know that it has already affected, you know like, with just, like, expecting woman to be shaved all the time and to have anal sex and, you know, things that they might not necessarily be comfortable with, and just to think of it as a real norm.

Extract 8

Avery (student): From what I've seen, males think that porn is good because it's all about pleasing the guy; and to be honest like some of the stuff that the woman do to men, most guys are like 'I'd like that' while a girl might be like 'I don't want ever to give that' ... I think also females, like I said earlier, are sort of tricked into believing almost that their sole purpose in life is to give pleasure to the man and not vice versa. ... like, talking to a couple of girls I know, they said that they would google how to give blowjobs and stuff so

that they could please their boyfriend. I'm like [breathes deeply] 'Right, please slap me in the face if I turn into a guy like that!'

These extracts invoke broader public discussion of harmful media effects, as evident in Ava's description of what IP 'does'. Young men are depicted as largely accepting of, or even duped by, idealized portrayals of sexuality and bodies in IP, while young women are portrayed as striving to attain these ideals to please men. Hence, young women are positioned as vulnerable to unrealistic and normalized body ideals (shaving 'all the time') and male pressure or coercion to engage in unwanted sexual practices. Likewise, Avery depicts young women as engaging in practices depicted in IP even if they 'don't want to' because they are 'tricked into believing' that they must prioritize and ensure male sexual gratification. Young men are therefore positioned as a risk to women: 'some boys might get the idea that they should be expecting certain things from a girl' (Danielle, student) and young women might be 'pressured to do things *that the boys see on pornography*' (Willow, mother; emphasis added). Thus, young women are positioned as hapless victims of 'the boys' who are harmed by IP, a subject position that is particularly evident in Avery's comment about girls being 'tricked' (Extract 8).

At the same time, the construction of young men as a risk is associated with the common depiction of them as 'simple creatures' (James, educator), more likely than young women to be taken in by IP and thus prone to uncritically imitating 'unhealthy' behaviours or developing sexist attitudes. For example, Adam (male, student) explained that 'girls know this kind of stuff, but boys will just watch it and like, "Oh yeah. This is kind of what's normal" [...] Boys probably need a bit of help'. This remark illustrates how although all young people were construed as needing to be educated about the 'difference between pornography and ... actual real life' (Ava, mother), different gendered risks and concomitant responses were envisaged. For young women, intervention is commonly construed as needing to focus on 'keeping safe' (Willow, mother) from coercion and unwanted sexualization and addressing 'addiction and things like that' (Anthony, student) for young men. Furthermore, young men were also depicted as needing to learn 'what does consent mean' (Mia, mother educator) and being taught to hear or accept a woman's refusal. Maria (mother) put this gendered distinction thus: 'sex happens to women so sort the boys out'. Accordingly, the harm script – which supports a simplistic understanding of media effects – works together with the heterosexual script to undermine the agency of both young women and young men in particular gendered ways, which we elaborate on further in our Conclusion.

Theme 2: resistant talk

Resistant talk captures instances of resistance to the construction of youth as vulnerable and unable to navigate the porn–tech nexus and, to a lesser extent, challenges gendered constructions of risk. Instances of resistance to the heterosexual script were evident across the dataset but, for the most part, adult talk tended to draw more on the harms and developmentalist scripts, while the opposing positioning of youth as critical and savvy consumers of IP was more common in young people's accounts. We discuss each of these instances of resistance in turn.

Resisting the position of 'innocent little child'

While risk talk, founded upon the dominant construction of childhood innocence, was most common, participants did resist notions of risk and position youth in more agentic ways. For example, educator Naomi stated that 'I think that's our role as educators is to give them the tools to make informed decisions. Not telling them what those decisions should be', positioning youth as capable and potentially smart decision-makers and rejecting the didactic approach common to risk talk. Although instances of resistance were evident in all participants' talk, it was more prominent in youth's talk. This pattern could be understood as related to the stake that participants themselves have in the ways of constructing youth and adulthood and how these may disempower/empower them as members of these groups.

In resisting deficit constructions of youth, student participants instead positioned adults as the ones lacking, specifically lacking cultural nous in the contemporary digitalized world, and therefore out of touch with and unable to grasp their realities. This rhetorical strategy of inverting stigmatizing attributions has been noted in other research in which speakers who belong to a marginalized group rework their difference in positive ways to 'turn the tables' on the dominant group (Morison et al. 2016). The depiction of adults as socially naïve and out of touch resonates with international research showing a disconnect between what adults believe young people should do in relation to intimate relationships and sexuality, and what they actually do (Jearey-Graham and Macleod 2015; Martellozzo et al. 2017). In this regard, Jearey-Graham and Macleod (2015) refer to a 'discourse of disconnect'. This discourse is evident in the following quotes and works to reverse attributions of ignorance that typically discredits young people:

Extract 9

Adam (student): I think it's a bit more nuanced than just looking at it as an entirely harmful thing. Teenage boys especially, being rebellious, aren't really up to listening to that type of thing ... like, 'Oh no my innocent little child can't be watching this!' And you go in there with your like big stick diplomacy and you basically say, 'No, you can't be watching this, it is absolutely terrible. We will lock you out of it, put the parental controls on the Wi-Fi.' That type of thing is just not helpful.

Extract 10

Siobhan: [Presenting figures from survey] This is young people's perspectives versus what parents/educators think. So, I was pretty surprised at the top five of young people's reasons!

Tristian (student): Actually, if I'm being honest, I'm not. [Author: No?] No! [Laughter] Because most people view porn for gratification anyway and, of course, I know that from friends and what they do. I think if they [parents] think that their children are watching porn, it would rather be for curiosity, rather than actually gratifying themselves to it.

Extract 11

Liane (student): There weren't any conversations [about IP with adults]. I did get caught once. That was like your typical 'You shouldn't do that. You're getting grounded. I'm taking away your computer privileges.' that kind of thing. And it's like 'Oh, OK I'm not supposed to watch that? Cool.' Just like a blanket ban kind of thing without any context. It was like OK ... and I still watched it.

Here, resisting being positioned as ignorant – an ‘innocent’ ‘child’ – participants instead ascribe these attributes to adults. Parents are rendered mistaken and naïve about the harmful nature of IP and youth’s reasons for viewing it. In response to the interviewer’s surprise, Tristian adopts the position of informed insider (‘I know’), positioning parents as the actual dupes who would rather ascribe innocent motives to their children’s IP viewing (‘curiosity’) than view them as sexual beings. Likewise, Adam disputes the common (adult) view of IP as ‘entirely harmful’ and wholly negative (‘terrible’), instead positioning himself and other youth ‘as active and savvy social actors in the online space’ (Keen, France, and Kramer 2020, 867). This construction of parental ignorance coheres with international findings indicating that youth view IP as part of a mundane repertoire of everyday media practices and that they are more adept at navigating IP than adults believe (Goldstein 2020, 2021).

In this vein, parental responses to their children’s IP viewing are characterized as overreactions, based on parental ignorance and thus ‘not helpful’ (Extract 9). Parents are consequently positioned as unable to provide meaningful support. Rather than youth’s vulnerability, the lack of relevant dialogue (‘weren’t any conversations’; Extract 11) between youth and adults is constructed as problematic. In this way, youth participants resisted the position of innocent, asexual subjects whose access to IP should be controlled by adults.

Resisting gendered risk talk

Despite the wide deployment of the harms script by adults, there was resistance to the heterosexual script in the ways some adults recognized that women view IP: ‘I mean girls watch pornography too’ (Liam, parent, educator) and ‘Girls watch porn [laughter]’ (Naomi, educator). However, this resistance was more prominent in instances where youth participants resisted the gendered positions prescribed by the heterosexual script. Among the participants, all of the young women and some of the young men questioned the proscription of IP viewing for young women, as shown in the following extracts:

Extract 12

Adam (student): ... it’s definitely this big kind of [...] culture that there are quite enforced stereotypes. For a male it’s fine if you watch porn most of the time, whereas as [for] a female it’s like, ‘Why are you doing that? You’re a female. You shouldn’t be doing that!’ type of thing. [...] I can’t give you a reason for its existence in the first place. Well, I could, but it’s like an hour-long rant on sexism! [Laughter]

Extract 13

Liane (student): I think [...] this is my personal experience it’s more normalised for guys to watch it [...] because it’s just boys being boys, normal teenagers, and yadda-yadda. But um if girls watch it, it’s like ‘Oh they watch porn that’s so gross!’ and it’s like, like a double standard. If a guy watches it [...] he’s just trying to get it up, but if a girl watches it, she’s, I don’t know, like a whore or [pause] dirty.

The speakers question the gendered characterization of IP viewing as normal male behaviour but aberrant for young women and indicative of failed femininity (‘gross’, ‘dirty’, ‘whore’; Extract 13). Adam describes these gendered positions as ‘enforced stereotypes’ and ascribes these to ‘sexism’. Liane, like the other young women in our study and

those in Spišák's (2017) Finnish study, challenges the sexual 'double standard' supported by the heterosexual script that suggests IP is only for the male realm. Young women also frequently resisted the notion that they are vulnerable, passive victims to men's porn-informed advances, as evidenced in the following extract:

Extract 14

Danielle (student): Yeah, they've got those ideas in their head where they're like 'oh let's have a threesome'. And it's like, 'no, like no!' [laughter]. Like that kind of thing where they just kind of exp-, they just think like 'oh why not, I saw it in porn, that'd be cool'. And it's like, 'yeah no'.

In this way, young women frequently perpetuated the notion that they are tasked with navigating unrealistic sexual expectations from young men who have been 'duped' by IP. Thus, although women did not challenge the heterosexual script that construct men as the keen 'pushers' of sex and women as gatekeepers, they did resist the notion that they are uninterested in IP and unagentic gatekeepers, as evident in Danielle's dismissal ('And it's like, "yeah no"'). At times, this extended to an agency that foregrounded female pleasure, with young women demonstrating their understanding that women should 'understand what they should be getting in terms of sex, like compared to porn' (Amelia, student). Indeed, some of the young women also recognized the pressure their male counterparts might feel 'to live up to like those expectations as well, to like please like the girl' (Belinda, student). In this way, young women often demonstrated a keen awareness that young men and women face different pressures, but that these pressures can be agentially navigated.

There was some resistance among young men to the gendered risk that positioned them as uncontrolled, duped IP viewers. In line with previous findings, participants – particularly young men – sometimes negotiated a more agentic position by positioning others as naïve or susceptible to the harms of IP, but not themselves (Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson 2010; Goldstein 2020). For example, when discussing the vignette about a fictitious first encounter with IP (see Table 2), Anthony (student) said 'I guess they [other young men] kind of see it, or just take it for granted, or just believe it'. In his way, young men positioned themselves as exceptions to the rule – as savvy and not duped – while still supporting the dominant harm script and developmentalist script. In claiming agency by utilizing the common script of harm and using it to their own ends, young men paradoxically reinforce an ultimately disempowering script. This is shown in the following quotes from two young men, one identifying as gay and the other as Christian:

Extract 15

Tristian (student): It's not something I do. Most people talk about porn and they make jokes about the type of porn they watch. They talk about, you know, things I don't particularly want to say but, but they talk about the types and the categories they watch and blah, blah, blah. They don't talk about how if it's good or bad. So, I don't think I could talk to them about the actual effects of it.

Extract 16

Avery (student): I have tried to put blocks and stuff on my phone and stuff. So, I don't actually have a browser on my phone. So, I can't accidentally, or on purpose access it ... I take the Bible literally ... if you look with lust with a young girl, you're actually committing adultery with her.

In these extracts, both speakers draw on the script of harm to support opting out of what would otherwise be considered socially sanctioned masculine behaviour among their peers (Taylor and Jackson 2018). Tristan talks about the potential 'effects' of IP, while Avery refers to spiritual harm. Returning to Extract 8, Avery also carves out an alternative positioning to 'a guy like that' (i.e. who expects women to focus on male pleasure), which further perpetuates the construction of other men as risk. These rhetorical devices can be seen as attempts to resist – within discursive constraints – dominant constructions of masculinity (Meenagh 2021). The resistance to the position of young men as '... the culprits. You know, the porn sinners' (James educator) was minimal, however, and this relative silence among young men demonstrates the difficulty in escaping this position.

Conclusion

Participants drew on dominant and alternative constructions of how youth engage with IP. We identified 'risk talk' (theme one) and 'resistant talk' (theme two), within which youth were positioned. This talk is supported by three interweaving scripts: the harm, heterosexual, and developmentalist scripts.

A risk-focused and highly gendered construction of youth engagement with IP was dominant and evident across the dataset; young people in general are depicted as developmentally incapable and vulnerable, as well as susceptible to risks based on gender. Hormone-driven young men are positioned as easily duped by the misrepresentations of sexuality in IP and so positioned as at risk, especially to addiction, but also as a risk to female counterparts. Correspondingly, young women are positioned as hapless victims, either indirectly (through attempts to please men) or directly (through coercive male behaviour). Ultimately, as other scholars have also noted, the sexual agency of both young women and young men is undermined (Chronaki 2019).

However, resistance to gendered positions is evident in resistant talk that constructs alternative, agentic positions for young people (Chronaki 2019; Spišák 2020). Resistance to dominant, gendered constructions of youth sexuality was more common in young people's talk. Our findings are, however, more nuanced than adults engaging in 'risk talk' and young people countering with 'resistant talk'; dominant and alternative constructions are to varying degrees evident in all participants' talk. This coheres with previous New Zealand-based research which shows, for example, that support for harms-based scripts is salient across youth, parents, and educators (Healy-Cullen et al. 2021b).

Resistant talk offers important insights for the question of how to respond to youth engagement with IP. As documented elsewhere, this talk paints a more complex picture of youth sexual subjectivities than the dominant construction of young people as 'innocent little children', and challenges prevailing gendered constructions that establish a sexual double standard for engagement with IP (Spišák 2017; Chronaki 2019). Nonetheless, we also noted a lack of alternative, more empowering sexual scripts, as evidenced by the difficulty in constructing alternative gendered identities in relation to IP. Although many participants acknowledged problematic gendered constructions, they still drew on the dominant heterosexual script and its essentialist notions of gendered risk. This too has implications for engaging with young people on this topic.

To help generate alternative scripts that support youth sexual agency, feminist scholars advocate participatory approaches modelled on the critical consciousness-raising of

Freirean dialogical pedagogy as part of comprehensive sexuality education. Participatory approaches aim to create reflective spaces in which 'young people can be active participants in shaping their own lives and the extent to which they conform or resist gendered scripts' (Carmody and Ovenden 2013, 794). Youth are thus equipped to negotiate broader issues regarding sexuality and empowered to question, reflect, and act upon sexual scripts that support inequitable power relations (Quinlivan 2018; Calder-Dawe and Gavey 2019).

Such approaches to sexuality education with youth have been successfully attempted by Jearey-Graham and Macleod (2017), who piloted 'sexuality dialogues' in South Africa, and Goldstein (2020), who ran small-group discussions on pornography in Canada. Approaches of this kind make space for alternative more empowering scripts (i.e. away from deficit constructions of youth sexuality), which our sexual scripting framework illuminated. Further research is required to investigate how such approaches may be received by various stakeholders – including parents and teachers – and implemented in various contexts, among diverse students.

If we are to take young people's voices seriously, as equally legitimate to those of parents and educators, we must recognize them as active cultural consumers and legitimate sexual citizens who have relevant knowledge and the agentic potential to navigate the porn-tech nexus (Spišák 2020).¹

Note

1. School deciles indicate the proportion of students drawn from low socio-economic communities in New Zealand schools (with 10 as highest). No schools ranked 2 or lower participated.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express particular thanks to the schools and participants who took part in this research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Data availability statement

Data available on request from the authors.

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