Turning a blind eye: How online pornography can shape young people's understandings of sexual consent, sex, sexuality, and/or gender

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Abstract

This thesis examines the ways young people understand what they may have learned about sex, sexuality and/or gender from engaging with online pornography, as well as how pornography may have shaped their understanding of sexual consent. Based on an exploratory, narrative enquiry approach, this thesis illuminates the lived experiences of two young men in Aotearoa New Zealand – Sung-Ho and Billy – and how their engagement with online pornography shaped their understanding of sexual consent, sex, sexuality, and/or gender. Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and journal entries were used to collate rich empirical evidence. A queer sex-positive feminist theoretical framework was drawn on to examine how participants thought about and reflected on their learnings and understandings of sexual consent, sex, sexuality, and/or gender from online pornography. This framework was supported by two theoretical concepts: Gavey's (2019) cultural scaffolding and Butler's (1990) performativity. The convergence of queer and feminist frameworks and theoretical concepts enabled me to contextualise participants' subjective experiences with greater attention to how they are influenced by, and attempt to resist, notions of hierarchy.

My analysis of participants' experiences and understanding of pornography revealed that they did not perceive to have learned 'anything' about sexual consent from their engagements with online pornography. However, participants reflected on how, as teenagers and young adults, they thought of sexual consent as not requiring conversation or communication before or during engaging in sexual acts with others. Because online pornography was where participants received the majority of their sex education, this suggests that its influence may have been that it reinforced and further normalised pre-existing notions of consent. In relation to how online pornography may have influenced their conceptualisations of sex and identity, my conversations with participants illuminated how they learned that sex was purely physical and that their sexual performance should reflect that of professional actors. Furthermore, participants situated their experiences with pornography as complex, nuanced, and gendered.

I concluded that participants' understandings of sexual consent, sex, sexuality, and gender seemed to be influenced by online pornography in ways that reinforced and further normalised already existing cisheteronormative discourses.

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Chapter one: Why pornography?

The aim of my research was to examine the ways young people think about and understand what they may have learned about sex, sexuality and/or gender from engaging with online pornography. Also of interest was how online pornography may have shaped their understandings of sexual consent. In this chapter I discuss my experiences of growing up in a culture which positions masculinity (men/masc folx) as superior and femininity (women/femme folx) as inferior, as well as my experiences of sexual assault as a teenager, and how these social and cultural injustices have shaped my overall direction in academia and in life. I also discuss the relevance and significance of my research, and provide an outline of my thesis structure.

Why pornography and consent? A background to the research

When reflecting on my childhood, what comes to mind are the multiplex of ways I was socialised to believe that because I was a girl, my voice, interests, and actions were inherently inferior to those of boys and men. An example of one way this occurred is how I grew up frequently hearing boys (and sometimes girls) I went to school with, as well as grown men in various contexts, insulting others using phrases such as "you [insert any action] like a girl", "stop being such a girl/pussy", and "you're such a girl", among other things. Another example is when playing games with my younger siblings; I would instruct them as to what they needed to be doing and when. Because of this I was frequently given the denigrating label "bossy-boots". This also happened at school if I ever dared provide instruction, even though boys who then did or said the same thing were praised for being "natural leaders".

Due to how pervasive this explicit and implicit messaging about gender was in my life, I began distancing myself from my 'girlness' around the age of 7 or 8. Examples of ways I did this include beginning to actively reject 'girly clothes', hating the colour pink, I increased my interest in sports and fitness, as well as pretending nothing bothered me (emotionally). This was because the more I was associated with activities, traits, and behaviours which were considered 'masculine', the more highly regarded and accepted I was among peers as well as adults. While this worked to an extent (I did not, at least, get mocked for being 'too girly' like some other girls in my classes), boys at school still seemed to get kicks out of transgressing my consent. This looked like squeezing, slapping, or pinching my butt (or my singlet strap) while I was looking away or otherwise unaware, and on telling them to go away they would laugh. I also saw these boys doing similar things to other girls. However, when they were reported to adults their behaviour was mostly shrugged off as ‘boys will be boys’.

Upon entering high school, being associated with masculinity was no longer accepted as social currency me. Instead, girls were now expected to perform their femininity, such as giving ourselves elaborate hairstyles and caking our faces in make-up, as well as sitting in groups chatting instead of playing tag on the field. The focus on our appearances became integral to our perceived likeability. This was also when my body started being overtly sexualised by others (particularly older boys and men) in the form of wolf-whistles and other unwanted sexual attention. It was not long after starting high school that my girl-friend told me she had been raped by a boy at a party she had attended, and I myself endured sexual assault at the hands of my then-boyfriend. My girl-friend and I were just 14.

This pattern continued throughout most of my teen years, through which I experienced more sexual harassment and abuse from boys and men, and sat with and listened to girl-friends who had or were suffering similar. Almost completely parallel to this were the boys, who frequently joked with each other about paedophilia and rape, and trivialised what felt like all possible transgressions of women’s boundaries, bodies, and trust. I remember asking the group of boys who would sit behind me in class to stop joking about rape, every single day for an entire year. I repeatedly explained how distressing it was for me to hear (which was no easy feat), but they continued.

Among these jokes and trivialisations was the topic of pornography, which all the boys seemed to enjoy and make a big deal of. Pornography was talked about, even among adults, as though watching it was a ‘rite of passage’ for boys to becoming sexual – a welcoming into manhood, of sorts. However, each time I was shown, or saw, a scene from pornography I felt sick to my stomach. It always seemed as though the men in the videos were just doing what they wanted with and to the women, who appeared to have no other say in the matter (or strangely asked for more). Looking back, this seems to mirror the sexual interactions my girl-friends and I had or were having with men at the time, although I did not realise this connection until years later when talking and researching about pornography and gender in one of my university papers.

Because of my history of injustice at the hands of men, I had a clear idea of what I wanted to study at university: psychology, sociology, human geography, criminology, and gender studies. I wanted to learn everything I could about why people behave the ways they do, particularly people who hurt others and those who experience trauma and mental illness. I was also keen to know where my place was in helping to change some aspects of society and culture in Aotearoa New Zealand. By the time I completed my undergraduate degree I was well-versed in many social (in)justice issues and felt particularly impassioned to tackle gender and racial inequity. As such, I decided to complete a secondary teaching diploma, as teaching is where I saw (and continue to see) my various traits, skills, and knowledges being most impactful.

In this diploma I undertook a small independent research paper for which I chose to explore how teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand were approaching the topic of pornography with their students. This unveiled how lacking sexuality education is in general, but particularly regarding topics of pornography and consent. I found this was mainly because teachers lack the resources as well as confidence to approach these topics with students, which reflects the education they received when training to be a teacher. As I had learned throughout my undergraduate degree how problematic pornography can be for young people, as well as the ways it can support and reproduce aspects of rape culture, I decided it was worth investigating further. Hence, I enrolled in a Master of Education, funded via scholarship from the University of Auckland, with the aim of examining the ways young people think about and understand what they may have learned about sex, consent, sexuality and/or gender from engaging with online pornography, as well as how pornography may have shaped their understanding of sexual consent.

In doing this research project, my hope is to become a teacher who is able to educate students effectively, competently, and appropriately about critical issues surrounding sex, pornography, and consent. I also hope to help inform those who produce education curricula as to what needs to be rigorously addressed in relationship and sexuality education programmes, as well as add further weight to arguments of those already contending that government policy needs to support the mainstreaming of education about sex, online pornography, and consent throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. Predominantly driving this is my want, need, and hope for social and cultural change. I want girls, young women, and other minoritised folx to grow up in safe environments where boys and men do not feel entitled to violate or take advantage of their bodies as countless women have had to endure long before and after me (often in silence and without support). One way I see this happening is via mass compulsory education of young people – particularly children, boys, and young men. As such, this desire for change is what has provided me the tenacity to carry out this at times disturbing and distressing research. The relevance and significance of my research is further outlined below.

Relevance and significance of my research

To date, the research community has predominantly focused on pornography's negative effects on the psychologies of individuals and their behaviours. One result of this is that the extent of harm, and which type of pornography is responsible for it, have been, and continue to be, hotly contested (Bridges et al., 2010). Comparatively, very few studies have sought to document what people may learn from pornography and what this may mean for their wellbeing and relationships with themselves and others (e.g., Keene, 2019). This is particularly true for young people, although research in this area has been steadily gaining traction since various bodies of research have found online pornography to be their primary source of sex education (see Lim, et al., 2017; Pearson, 2018; Talbot et al., 2018; Watkins, 2018).

So far, what has been elucidated by previous research is that 77% of young people in Aotearoa New Zealand had seen online pornography by the age of 17 (Talbot et al., 2021). Furthermore, Crabbe and Corlett (2018) revealed that although young people often claim to understand that pornography is, to an extent, fictional, they still seem to apply what they see depicted in online pornographic videos to their sexual interactions in real life. Harrison and Ollis (2015) build on this by reporting that, internationally, 59% of young people who had watched pornography within the last six months had then tried to re-enact something they had seen with a sexual partner. This is problematic because what young people commonly see is aggressive and violent behaviours within sex routines, particularly towards women (Talbot et al., 2018). As such, Crabbe and Corlett (2011) question whether repeatedly engaging with pornography can undermine young peoples' ability to safely engage in sexual relations with others. However, research exploring this is limited, particularly in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. My research is therefore important, as I seek to explore in-depth how pornography has shaped young people's understandings (and experiences) of consent, sex, sexuality, and gender.

A note on terminology

Definitions of ‘pornography’ have always been complicated due to its highly political nature. Thus, despite more than four decades of debate and scholarship, attempts to define pornography remain contested and therefore inconsistent within literature. As such, I left it up to participants to define what pornography meant. However, each participant related that for them pornography referred to visual depictions in the form of sexually explicit videos. Because of this I found Tarrant’s (2016) definition most appropriate:

> *Pornography* refers to visual depictions that are intended to sexually arouse the viewer, such as still photos, magazines, adult cable television channels, or VHS movies. Today, pornography is more likely to mean online video; and in the future, technological changes may again shift how these visual depictions are delivered to the consumer. (p. 3)

With regard to terminology, I have decided that ‘pornography’ (as opposed to ‘porn’) is most likely the best suited term, as it signals a “more scholarly…approach” (Williams, 2014, p. 34). Thus, ‘pornography’ has been used throughout this research, with the exception of interview excerpts which are presented verbatim. However, I have made use of both “online pornography” and “pornography” seemingly interchangeably – particularly in chapter two. This is reflective of the inconsistency of the existing literature, and is therefore an issue for much pornography research. It should therefore be understood that throughout chapter two, “online pornography” symbolises that the relevant research has been exclusive to online pornography. Where “pornography” is stated is reflective of the related research being nonspecific. I acknowledge that this is less than ideal considering this thesis explicitly explores the role of ‘online’ pornography as it relates to young people. However, majority of people today and over the last decade have predominantly engaged with pornography via the internet due to its increasing ease of access (Peter et al., 2015). Further, many popular online pornography sites include clips from pornography movies within their repertoire (Crabbe & Corlett, 2018). In this way, the research I draw on which does not specify “online pornography” is still relevant to this thesis.

One phrase I also use in specific ways throughout this thesis is “online (heterosexual) pornography”. The reason ‘heterosexual’ is placed in brackets is to signify further information in a way that highlights the context without removing the possibility that what I am saying could also be relevant in other areas/genres of pornography. The same applies for (hetero)sex, (cis)gender, and (mainstream) pornography.

Thesis overview

This thesis sought to examine the ways young people think about and understand what they may have learned about sex, sexuality and/or gender from engaging with online pornography, as well as how pornography may have shaped their understanding of sexual consent. Specifically, I sought to answer two research questions: 1. *What do young people learn about sex, sexuality, and/or gender from online pornography?* 2. *How might young peoples' engagements with online pornography shape their understandings of sexual consent?*

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 provides context for this research by reviewing extant literature that explores pornography in the lives of young people, both in Aotearoa New Zealand, and internationally. This chapter frames current issues debated within pornography scholarship which are relevant to this thesis. Chapter 3 looks to outline the queer sex-positive feminist theoretical framework used throughout this thesis, which draws on concepts of Gavey's cultural scaffolding and Butler's performativity. Chapter 4 provides explanations of the chosen methodology used in this research, which was a qualitative, exploratory, narrative enquiry. An outline of ethical matters is also provided. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the lived experience of two young men, Sung-Ho and Billy. Here I analyse their experiences with online pornography and related learnings about sexual consent using concepts of cultural scaffolding, performativity, and discourse. Chapter 6 also seeks to elucidate reasons why online pornography can be such a pervasive issue in young people's lives. This thesis concludes with Chapter 7, where I summarise the key findings this research has to offer the field of research in Aotearoa New Zealand and more broadly.

Chapter two: Pornography's ills, intentions, and impacts: A review of the literature

Introduction

There is a plethora of scholarly literature across multiple disciplines that focuses on pornography's ills, intentions, and influence. Research on pornography's impact on men's sexual behaviour, and young people more generally, is becoming increasingly common.
In this chapter, I begin my exploration of how and what young people learn about sexual consent from online pornography by considering the ways young people have increasing access to online pornography and the frequency at which they are engaging with it. Also discussed here are the types of content young people engage with, which poses questions about what they may learn from pornography about sex, sexual consent, sexuality, and/or gender. Next, I examine the relationships between pornography, violence against women, and misogyny/sexism, as a means to understand how pornography may influence young people's sexual expectations and behaviour, including their understanding of sexual consent. I then draw on scholarship to demonstrate how young people's engagement with pornography can impact their sexual development, before concluding this chapter with a discussion on the importance of, and need for, adequate and appropriate sexuality education in schools and communities.

Accessibility, frequency, and content

Pornography is becoming increasingly accessible to young people due to the recent proliferation of unmonitored, internet-enabled technology, such as tablets, smartphones, and other portable devices (see Goldstein, 2020; Hald et al., 2014; Lim et al., 2016; Mellor and Duff, 2019; Peter et al., 2016; Talbot et al., 2018; Terán et al., 2020; Weber et al., 2012). One impact of this is that people are engaging with pornography at much younger ages (Hald et al., 2014; Mellor and Duff, 2019; Štulhofer et al., 2019; Talbot et al., 2018; Terán et al., 2020; Watkins, 2018). This phenomenon was illustrated through the first nationally representative quantitative study to explore the role that pornography has in the lives of young people in Aotearoa New Zealand (Talbot et al., 2018). Talbot and colleagues conducted an online survey with 2071 young people aged 14-17 years. The authors found that one in four (27%) young people in Aotearoa New Zealand first saw pornography before the age of 12, and three in four (77%) had seen pornography by the age of 17. Talbot et al. (2018) also found that 15%

of youth watch pornography regularly (i.e., monthly, weekly, or daily), most of whom start around the age of 14. International research suggests that similar trends are occurring around the world (Goldstein, 2020; Štulhofer et al., 2019).

Alongside this growing accessibility, Talbot et al. (2018) share a concern that there are increasing amounts of violence being depicted in online pornography. This means young people exposed to pornography are more likely to be engaging with more violent content than in previous years. For example, Talbot et al. (2018) found that 69% of young people in Aotearoa New Zealand have seen violent and aggressive behaviour in online pornography (as romance and affection are generally absent) and 72% have seen non-consensual activity (the majority of which is a man dominating another person). The researchers also reported that 61% see these two types of pornography *often* (although this data was not given a specific frequency).

What is important to underline here is that online pornography is currently the *primary source* of sex education for over 70% of young people (Lim, et al., 2017; Pearson, 2018; Talbot et al., 2018; Watkins, 2018). This means that young people are turning to pornography to learn about sex and sexual behaviour, and are then taking this knowledge and applying it to real life interactions with others (Talbot et al., 2018). As these scholars have argued, this is concerning and raises important questions. For instance, if young people are seeing violent, aggressive, and seemingly non-consensual sex in pornography *often*, what does this mean for what young people – particularly young men – are learning about their sexuality and the roles and responsibilities they have when engaging in sexual activities with another? And what are they learning about sexual consent? Given that young people are one of the most susceptible audiences to sexually explicit content (Love et al., 2015; Owens et al., 2012), the influence pornography may have on their understanding of sex and consent (as well as gender, sexuality and relationships) is potentially problematic. One such issue is the relationship between the consumption of online pornography, misogyny, and sexual violence.

Pornography, misogyny, and violence against women

Concerns about violence and aggression portrayed in pornography and the influence this may have on levels of sexual violence and abuse towards women continues to be the foci of much research into pornography (Keene, 2019). Although this research remains contested, there is enough strong evidence to suggest that the relationship between pornography consumption and violence against women should not be dismissed (see Hilton et al., 2011; Wright et al., 2016). In the context of this thesis, it is important to understand how men and women are portrayed in online (heterosexual) pornography – especially in relation to violence and aggression - and how this may impact young people’s sexual socialisation.

Over the last decade, violence and aggression in online pornography has become commonplace: 88% of all scenes in online pornography depict physical aggression, with 48% including verbal aggression (Crabbe & Corlett, 2018). Interestingly, this aggression - which ranged from spanking to non-fatal strangulation (Keene, 2019) - was almost always directed at women, of whom were typically shown to be willing recipients (Crabbe & Corlett, 2016; Lim et al., 2017; Willis et al., 2020). Crabbe and Corlett (2018) state, however, that even in scenes that were not sexually aggressive or degrading in themselves, the language used suggested there is still a desire for them to be degrading. Examples of this language include “she’ll get what she deserves”, “she’ll get what’s coming”, and “look at this b*tch” (Crabbe & Corlett, 2018, 00:07:17). Tranchese and Sugiura (2021) also reported that women are frequently named or referred to as “wh*re”, “cum-dumpster”, “fuck-hole”, “sl*t”, “bukkake”, and “c*nt”, among other things (p. 2713). In this way, men in pornography are repeatedly positioned and framed as aggressive woman-dominators who cannot be stopped (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021). It is perhaps unsurprising then that Peter and Valkenburg (2016) found a significant association between young men’s pornography use and perpetration of sexual violence towards, and sexual victimisation of, women. The significance of this association was greater than the findings of Hald et al. (2010), and similar correlations were also reported by Malamuth et al. (2012), Miller et al. (2019), Pearson (2018) and Wright et al. (2016). Although reasons why this relationship exists between pornography consumption and sexual violence are numerous and complex, it seems likely that it is, at least in part, because most online (heterosexual) pornography depicts, eroticises, and normalises men perpetrating sexual aggression and abuse towards women to increasing extremes (Talbot et al., 2018; Tranchese & Sugiura, 2017).

From a feminist perspective, this abundance of curated violence and aggression against women by men points to a misogynistic culture within society that not only shapes, but is also shaped by, pornography (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2017). One way this misogynistic culture is seen to shape pornography is in the ways the porn industry curates content based on what is currently most popular amongst consumers (Crabbe & Corlett, 2018). The amount of aggressive and violent pornographic content directed at women that has consistently increased over the last two decades (Crabbe & Corlett, 2018; Tranchese et al., 2017) speaks to how consumers collectively shape the narratives depicted, which (re)produces and (re)circulates misogynistic pornographic content. How pornography then in turn shapes this misogynistic culture throughout society is evidenced in the ways it expands aggressive and violent repertoire beyond the domain of pornography. For example, Tranchese and Sugiura (2017) demonstrate how pornography popularises, through websites such as Urban Dictionary and Reddit, "new terms and associated images that degrade and objectify women (e.g., meat-hole, fucktubes, cum swapping, money shot)" (p. 2713). It is important to note that although pornography did not invent this language, it uses it heavily, and undoubtedly contributes to the normalisation of these degrading and objectifying terms in everyday linguistic exchanges between people, and beyond. Therefore, pornography can be understood as "both a perpetuating and innovative practice of misogyny" (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2017, p. 2713). Additionally, because language is a cornerstone to culture, identity, and action (Nunan et al., 2010), this makes pornography a particularly potent cultural institution.

There is also research that suggests pornography does not perpetuate misogyny or violence. Research undertaken by Speed et al. (2021) included a section which focussed on whether pornography consumption predicted sexist attitudes. Their findings suggest that the relationship between pornography consumption and sexist attitudes is weak at best, and the conclusion they came to was "pornography is more about the sex than the sexism" (p. 11). However, the four questions used to measure participants' attitudes around sexism lacked depth, as they only asked about traditional gender roles; one example of which was whether participants thought women should stay at home whilst men go to work. While such ideas around gender roles still exist today, the simplistic nature of these questions meant their research was unable to capture, for example, implicit sexist attitudes and how they can present through micro-aggressions and micro-interactions. Moreover, Speed et al. (2021) did not ask participants about their understandings of, or attitudes toward, sexual consent. This is a significant limitation of their research, as asking about sexual consent may have elucidated how participants understood and perceived power dynamics between themselves and others; aspects which are fundamental to the existence and perpetuation of sexism (DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016). Speed et al. (2021) also failed to consider the everyday language their participants used around sex and women/femme folx, as well as what they commonly hear in pornographic videos, and whether they thought this was an issue. Had they asked about this, participants' capacity to critically consider how everyday language can impact how people think and behave (Gavey, 2005; 2019), as well as recognise the gender politics within pornography, may have been revealed. As such, Speed et al. (2021) research lacks criticality as they do not acknowledge sexism, as a power structure, is more complex than whether or not an individual thinks a woman's job is in the kitchen. In short, scholars should be wary of using this research as a means to support or refute claims about pornography's impact on sexist attitudes, and should examine this research through a critical lens.

On a related note, some academics have rightly pointed out that pornography is not the only institution perpetuating problematic sociocultural dynamics, and that attempts to frame it as such are rooted in anti-sex politics (Coleman, 2014). Porn advocate Nina Hartley states (in Coleman, 2014), that "a culture gets the porn it deserves, the porn that people who grew up in a [rape] culture think is sexy due to their conditioning" (p. 8). Hartley also states that pornography is just one aspect of a wider culture which creates and supports the conditions for sexual violence and rape to occur, as most people learn about consent long before they begin watching pornography. This argument is also shared by Marshall et al. (2017), Rodenhizer et al. (2019), and Speed et al. (2021). As such, these scholars strongly contend that removing pornography from society would not change rates of men's sexual violence against women, and that more rigorous prosecution of sexual violence and rape is necessary to effect such change (Coleman, 2014). While this is a valid critique of research that places heavy blame on pornography for men's sexual violence against women, Wright et al. (2016) and Hilton et al. (2015) argue that it is highly likely that online pornography contains enough violence, and enough explicit degradation and objectification of women, that higher levels of consumption reinforce sexist and misogynistic attitudes and elevate the likelihood of sexual harassment and aggression to occur against women (by men). Although it should be acknowledged that it is also likely that said behaviours and attitudes are shaped by more than just pornography. It is, therefore, critical for researchers to continue to interrogate the ways pornography can be problematic for young people. For example, future research should continue examining the ways pornography can shape expectations around sex and sexual practices.

False expectations: The influence of pornography on young people's sexual and social lives

Exposure to pornography can shape young peoples' sexual expectations, practices, and techniques when engaging in sexual activities (Harrison & Ollis, 2015). Crabbe and Corlett (2011; 2018; 2021) also found similar in that their participants (particularly their male participants), reported that pornography had created false expectations around what sex is meant to look, sound, and be like. An example they provided was how a common sex act depicted in (heterosexual) pornography is men ejaculating onto women's faces, which is always received enthusiastically by the latter. A few young men in Crabbe and Corlett's (2021) report spoke to how they learned from pornography that this particular sex act was normal and enjoyed by both parties. However, on trying it in real life these young men discovered (to their dismay) that the women they were with did not enjoy this, but felt humiliated and degraded because of it. It is important to point out here that the act itself is not wrong, but the ways it was carried out – the young men did not ask their then-sexual partners if receiving facial ejaculation was something they wanted or would enjoy. In other words, there was an absence of consent. Unfortunately, this is not isolated or uncommon when it comes to young peoples' (particularly young men's) understandings of their roles and responsibilities around sexual consent (Crabbe & Corlett, 2011; 2018; 2021). What this points to is the power pornography can have in shaping young people's perceptions around what is normal or expected when it comes to engaging in sex and sexual behaviours.

This is perhaps unsurprising when considering research which has explored the ways pornography normalises and naturalises 'extreme' sex acts which would otherwise remain on the fringes of mainstream sex practices (i.e., anal sex, deep throat, double penetration, fish hooks, non-fatal strangulation, among other things) (Crabbe & Corlett, 2018; Keene, 2022; Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021). However, evidence that young people are perceiving such acts as normal and expected in the context of sex in real life suggests a possible lack of discernment between what is real and what is fantasy. One reason for this could be that many young people have often not yet experienced sex in real life. For instance, Talbot et al. (2018) found that more than 60% of New Zealand young people had not had sex before they were 16, meaning prior to this age the majority of young people build their knowledge around what sex can look, sound, and be like from the various media they may consume (including pornography and other sexually explicit material), as well as what they see and hear from the people around them (Goldstein, 2020).

Building on this are the ways perceived peer norms may reinforce young people's lack of understanding around what is real and what is fantasy in pornography. For example, Vogels et al. (2018) explored the ways viewing oral sex in pornography can influence the frequency at which people engage in these behaviours in real life, as well as the extent to which this relationship was mediated by perceived peer norms. What they found was that the frequency at which people viewed certain behaviours in pornography increased the frequency at which they engaged in this behaviour themselves. Furthermore, the more frequently someone was exposed to a behaviour in pornography the more likely it was that they perceived their peers to be performing at higher rates than they did. This creates a 'perceived peer norm' which can increase the level at which a certain sexual behaviour is thought to be common practice in real life. What this may mean for young people is that their lack of discernment between reality and fantasy in pornography is being further complicated by the potential for perceived peer norms to arise around the kinds of sexual behaviours they think their peers are engaging in.

This above idea, however, is contended by McCormack and Wignall (2017) who explored how young men perceived their engagements with pornography to have impacted them. The conclusion they reached was that pornography only had positive impacts on participants in that it provided sexual gratification and relief from boredom, among other things. However, interesting to note is the way McCormack and Wignall (2017) seemed to take at face value that their participants had only experienced pornography in positive ways, and did not examine their perceptions more deeply. For example, participants were not asked about how pornography may have impacted the quality of their sexual interactions with other people nor were they asked about their sexual satisfaction in general. Instead, questions focused on participants' frequency of consumption, how they accessed it, and why they watched it, among other things. Another limitation of McCormack and Wignall's (2017) research is the failure to examine the idea that just because someone does not perceive something has caused them (or others) harm, does not mean it has not been harmful, or that harm does not exist. This is where it can be helpful for researchers to situate individuals' experiences within cultural and/or social contexts, and analyse them through various critical frameworks, as I have endeavoured to do in this thesis. This is one way to develop a better understanding of how and why people think, perceive, and behave in the ways they do (Gavey, 2005; 2019).

It seems plausible that online pornography's problematic representations of sexualities and general disregard for sexual consent may undermine young peoples' ability to be in safe sexual relationships with others. As Stathopoulos (2013) discuss, the effect of repeated engagement with pornography may undermine the ways which young people (particularly young men) understand their rights and responsibilities when it comes to asking for consent, as well as their (otherwise complex) ability to read verbal and non-verbal cues of consent. Stathopoulos (2013) also posits that this may be as pervasive as it is due to a lack of discourse that challenges the dominant cultural ideas around what sex, sexual consent, and relationships look, sound, and feel like. Because of this, most current online (mainstream) pornography is inherently problematic – possibly even dangerous – for young people to be engaging with.

Is the short-term pleasure worth it? How pornography can hinder young people's sexual development

One way pornography can negatively impact sexual development is through the unrealistic portrayals of sexual bodies and acts curated by, and seen in, pornography (Malamuth et al., 2012). Such depictions can decrease young people's self-esteem and increase anxiety around sexual performance (Crabbe & Corlett, 2011). Crabbe and Corlett (2011) explain that those who engage with pornography often believe that what they are seeing is what sex is supposed to look and be like, and thus feel inadequate in comparison to performers on the screen. Part of this is because the body parts of those in pornographic videos are often exaggerated and edited specifically for a curated pornographic aesthetic (Crabbe & Corlett, 2011). For example, the average size of a man's erect penis is 5.8 inches, whereas in pornographic videos the average size is 8 inches; 85% of women depicted in pornography have had breast implants and other body modifications such as hair removal and labiaplasty (Lemma et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2017; Malamuth et al., 2012). Such representations of sexual bodies can affect how young people perceive and feel about their own bodies and sexualities (Crabbe & Corlett, 2011), which can influence how they present themselves and behave when engaging in sexual activities with others (Watkins, 2018). In this way, it seems likely that young peoples' capacity to explore their sexual bodies and sexualities may be negated by their engagement with pornography, which can impede their sexual development.

Relatedly, the intent of pornography is to elicit sexual arousal and short-term sexual pleasure (Pearson, 2018). However, the effects of long-term pornography consumption on young peoples' sexual development can be harmful (Pearson, 2018). For example, engaging with pornography can, over time, make it difficult to become sexually aroused without added stimulation, as the more pornographic videos one watches, the more they will need increasingly extreme pornography to become sexually aroused (Pearson, 2018). Goldstein's (2020) research explicitly illustrates this through one of their participants who states "if you watch porn you're used to getting off by yourself, or whatever. Once you're with a woman it doesn't feel the way it looks [in porn]…you might not be as interested or as aroused…you can't even get hard" (p. 66). Interestingly, young people who watch pornography even monthly will likely experience this reduction in sexual satisfaction (Pearson, 2018). Love et al. (2015) suggest that this is because the brain becomes reliant on the intense stimulation provided by pornography in order to become sexually aroused. Thus, because young people's brains are still developing at significant rates (which makes them particularly susceptible to sexually explicit content (Hilton et al., 2015; Owens et al., 2012)), and there is evidence that consuming pornography shapes neural pathways differently to experiencing sex in real life (Love et al., 2015), the effects pornography can have on young people's sexual development are increasingly problematic, and at times, debilitating (Crabbe & Corlett, 2018; Lemma; 2021). This underlines the need for both adults and young people themselves to be aware of how consuming pornography can impact their development and wellbeing. One significant opportunity for young people to learn about pornography is through formal educational experiences in schools and communities.

The importance of sexuality education in schools and communities

An important question to explore is why young people engage with pornography and continue to do so. Some common explanations include that young people are often ignorant of the potential harms of pornography, a genuine curiosity about sex, sexuality, and sexual behaviour, a desire to experience sexual pleasure, and, that they often have trouble ceasing their pornography consumption (Stathopoulos, 2013; Talbot et al., 2018). Another explanation is that pornography, particularly online pornography, plays a key role in sex education; young people are turning to pornography to learn about sex due to a lack of quality sex education available elsewhere (Lim et al., 2017). For example, schools in Aotearoa New Zealand have traditionally taken a 'risk and prevention' approach to sexuality[1] education which focuses almost exclusively on preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Ferfolja, 2016). While it is important for young people to understand the risks (and benefits) that come with engaging in sexual behaviours, 87% of young people in New Zealand reported that their experience of sexuality education at school was not at all useful (Talbot et al., 2018), and 60% of young people who had received some form of sexuality education at home had also found it particularly unhelpful (Farré et al., 2020). Furthermore, Farré et al. (2020) reported that only 24% of young people had talked with their parents about pornography, even though 75% had viewed pornography and had experienced some negative consequences from it. What the above discussion highlights is a need for readily available, high-quality sexuality education to be provided within school, home, and community contexts.

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[1] The Aotearoa New Zealand Ministry of Education states 'sex education' is 'sexuality education' in the New Zealand curriculum.

One scholar who advocates greater access to informed and appropriate education about pornography is Goldstein (2020). Goldstein's (2020) research examined the Canadian education system regarding how sex[2] education was being taught throughout Canada. It seems Canada's pedagogical and curriculum approaches to sex education is like that found in Aotearoa New Zealand; mostly absent, or inadequate, and rarely includes education about consent and pornography (Ferfolja, 2016). Goldstein (2020) explained that when sex education did include pornography, the focus was on media literacy (i.e., increasing young people's awareness about how media is produced and advertised) and teaching critical thinking skills (for an example of this, see also Dawson et al., 2019). Goldstein (2020) argues, however, that focusing on media literacy is a top-down approach, meaning the teacher is positioned as the giver of knowledge, emphasising 'correct' interpretations of pornography with the hope that students will then be more likely to avoid engaging with the 'unhealthy behaviours' portrayed in sexually explicit medias (including pornography). Goldstein (2020) suggests that while this approach has led to increasing students' knowledge about the legality of making and consuming pornography, it does not necessarily enable students to make 'good choices', nor does it tend to negate any negative effects pornography may have on sexual behaviours and attitudes. Furthermore, Goldstein links this top-down approach to neoliberal values found in broader society (i.e., personal responsibility and self-governorship). This is apparent in the ways it shifts the responsibility to recognise and deconstruct potentially harmful sexual texts back onto the students, and ignores "the fantastical, psychical, affective and somatic elements of engaging with online pornography that complicate any notion of educating young people about it in a linear way" (Goldstein, 2020, p. 61).

Furthermore, a top-down, teacher-directed approach to education about pornography also assumes that all young people respond to and engage with pornography the same way (Goldstein, 2020). However, young people are not a monolithic category. Rather, their engagements with and responses to pornography are often complex and nuanced and thus require pedagogical and curriculum approaches that reflect and support this (Stathopoulos, 2013). Moreover, Goldstein (2020) explains that, although important, simply highlighting the potential harms of pornography will not adequately address the cultural inequities that are recirculated and reproduced by its texts. Instead, discussions around power, gender relations, sexual negotiation skills, and consent must be central to all pornography education programmes, inside or outside of the classroom. As such, education about pornography must be sex-positive (i.e., non-shaming and non-stigmatising) and grounded in social justice theories such as critical race theory, feminist theory, and queer theory, among others (Goldstein, 2020). This way, education can empower students to make decisions from an informed place as well as mitigate the potential damage to young people's wellbeing that pornography can create. Goldstein (2020) thus encourages those who develop curriculum and pedagogy to utilise discussions around desire to help young people gain an awareness of the complex interwoven factors in a person's life, community, and/or nation that may influence or shape wants, needs, attitudes, and/or behaviours.

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[2] The Canadian education system uses 'sex education' for their school curriculum.

It is important to mention, however, the common barriers that schools and curriculum developers come up against when attempting to introduce sex-positive pornography education into curricula. Such opposition commonly comes from the public and is often rooted in anti-pornography truisms. An example of this includes the discourse that often arises around how talking with young people about sex and pornography will encourage them to consume it at younger ages as well as cause young people to engage in sexual activities earlier than they otherwise would have (Goldstein, 2020). However, Goldstein (2020) contests this discourse by illustrating that when young people can make choices from an informed and supported position, their choices are more likely to be 'good'. Furthermore, Talbot et al. (2018) explicitly found that teaching young people about sex and pornography will not encourage them to engage in either of them at younger ages. Because of the fear this discourse seems to create, however, one of the main ways to introduce pornography education into schools is currently via a sex-negative approach (Goldstein, 2020). This approach positions sex as 'bad' and 'unnatural' unless occurring within heteronormative, monogamous, private spheres (Dodge, 2021). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this approach to sexuality education has been found to be unhelpful as it can increase the risk of harm to young people (Fox et al., 2018; Goldstein, 2020). Davis et al. (2019) explains that community members' perceptions of their children, their own experiences with pornography and technology more generally, combined with low involvement in school-based sex education curriculum, often means their ability to address the issue effectively was compromised. Thus, maybe if community members also had greater access to accurate information about sex-positive pornography education, conversations about educating students could shift from 'if' to 'how soon can it start'.

Chapter summary

Young people are accessing online pornographic content more easily because of the recent proliferation of unmonitored, internet-enabled technology. This is concerning because of the increasing amounts of sexual violence and aggression being depicted in pornography, which have become the primary source of sex education for 70% of young people in Aotearoa New Zealand. From a feminist perspective, what this curated violence and aggression against women by men points to is a misogynistic culture within society that not only shapes, but is also shaped by, pornography. Although pornography is not the only factor in society which perpetuates problematic sociocultural dynamics, it remains important to interrogate the ways pornography can shape young people's sexual expectations, practices, and techniques.

A lack of discernment between what is real and what is fantasy is also apparent for many young people, as they tend to perceive the sexual behaviours and routines in pornography as realistic portrayals of what sex is like in real life. This can be further reinforced by the presence of peer norms, and has, in some cases, made their real life experiences of having sex for the first time traumatic. Online pornography may hinder young people's sexual development, decrease young people's self-esteem, and increase their anxiety around sexual performance. Furthermore, the effects of long-term engagement with pornography can be harmful to young people, as it is easy to become reliant on increasingly extreme pornography to achieve sexual arousal. This can negatively impact young peoples' sexualities. In light of the ways pornography tends to negatively impact young peoples' wellbeing and development, explanations for why they continue to engage with it include genuine curiosity about sex, sexuality, and sexual behaviour; sexual pleasure; an absence of knowledge about the potential harms pornography can have, as well as a need for adequate sexualities education which to date has not been readily available or accessible elsewhere.

Finally, although this chapter has problematised the role pornography may play in young people's lives, my intention was not to draw causal or even correlational links between pornography engagement and negative behavioural or attitudinal changes, nor was it to add to simplistic pro or anti-pornography discourse. Rather, the aim was to interrogate the ways pornography may be problematic for young people and the areas in which they require guidance. What still remains unclear, and is yet to be explored in-depth with young people in Aotearoa New Zealand, is how sexual consent is interpreted when depicted in pornography. As such, this thesis specifically examines the ways young people think about and understand what they may have learned about sex, sexuality and/or gender from engaging with online pornography, as well as how pornography may have shaped their understanding of sexual consent.

Chapter three: Research and theoretical lenses

Introduction

In this chapter I explain how I use sex-positive queer feminist theory to examine the ways young people think about and understand what they may have learned about sex, sexuality and/or gender from engaging with online pornography, as well as how pornography may have shaped their understanding and interpretation of sexual consent. With this theory I employ concepts such as cultural scaffolding and performativity to analyse the role of pornography in my participants' social and sexual lives. First, I explain feminist theory and how it supports my research. Next, I explore the sex-positive approach to feminism and the role of queer theory. Finally, I provide an explanation of sex-positive queer feminist theory and discuss how feminist and queer theories will be used together to inform my research and discussion, while also recognising its functions and limitations.

Feminist theory

Feminist theory views the social world in ways which highlight the structures that create and support injustice, inequality, and oppression. It provides a framework for structural-material analyses of how systems of power and oppression interact along lines of gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality, and (dis)ability, among other things (McLaughlan et al., 2006). In doing this, feminist theory advocates for equality and justice, as well as inclusion of diverse identities (McLaughlan et al., 2006). Since feminist theory emerged from the women's rights movement it has come to dominate understandings of gender and sexuality (Showden, 2012). Because of this, feminist theory has been largely used, critiqued, and expanded upon by scholars over time. Considering my research examines the roles pornography may play in young people's lives, in regards to what is being learned about sexual consent, sex, gender, and sexuality, feminist theory is a well-founded and appropriate framework on which to base some of my analysis. One scholar who draws on feminist frameworks to examine issues of gender and sexuality in relation to pornography is Gavey (1993; 2005; 2019).

Gavey utilises a feminist sociocultural framework to analyse the shared gendered cultural norms, patterns, and power relations that shape normative (hetero)sexuality. Gavey focuses on the epidemic of sexual violence against women by men, particularly how normative (hetero)sexuality creates the conditions for sexual violence to occur. To explain this further, Gavey (2005) developed the concept of 'cultural scaffolding': the familiarised and normative sexual dynamics that exist within (hetero)sexual relationships which make sexual violence easier to perpetrate and harder to address. Within this concept there are various intersecting discourses and norms about gender and sexuality, such as the common belief that men have an overwhelming sex drive while women are more asexual and view sex as a means to an end (i.e., relationship maintenance and/or reproduction) (see Palmer, 2018). As explained by Palmer (2018), the cultural expectations of sexual needs and desire shape the ways men and women relate to each other, how individuals behave, and how they interpret others' behaviours. This can have a myriad of negative material consequences:

> First, it supports the prevalence of rape by fostering attitudes that lead individual men to rape and by making it easier to deny and disguise rape as ordinary sex. Second, much consensual sexual activity that does not constitute criminal victimisation is nevertheless constrained by repressive social expectations and beliefs. (p. 7)

To further detail how this cultural scaffolding unfolds, Gavey employs a Foucauldian social constructionist approach. This allows for a deeper analysis of discourses of sex and gender that produce and circulate the ways constructions of heterosex can create the necessary conditions for sexual violence to occur. Interestingly, Gavey suggests pornography is one of the discursive fields which prescribes, enacts, (re)produces, and circulates normative (hetero)sexuality, and thus contributes to the cultural scaffolding of sexual violence against women by men. In this way Gavey's concept of 'cultural scaffolding' works well for my research as it provides a key feminist concept on which to base my analysis into the role of pornography in young people's lives.

Using feminist theory alone can be problematic, however, as historically some feminist theorists have taken 'sex-negative' approaches to issues surrounding pornography. Dodge (2021) describes the sex-negative perspective as one that only qualifies sex acts as 'natural', 'normal', or 'good' if they occur in a heteronormative, monogamous, private sphere. Such a narrow framework neglects to acknowledge sexual pleasure, focusing instead on the risks and dangers of sex (particularly for women and girls), which increases responsibilisation and shaming of women, girls, and minoritized folx' sexual experiences, expression, and desire (Dodge, 2021). Further, 'anti-pornography' truisms (e.g., pornography harms women; pornography corrupts shared values of decency) which some feminist theories and theorists have used to dominate scholarly and public debates around the (im)morality of all pornography in society (Goldstein, 2020), are bolstered by sex-negative perspectives

(Dodge, 2021). It is not my intention to add to simplistic, binary pro/anti sex/pornography arguments. Instead, I aim to use a more nuanced, flexible, and critically-informed approach – hence adopting a 'sex-positive' feminist theoretical framework.

A 'sex-positive' feminist theory

The 'sex-positive' perspective I have applied to feminist theory aims to detach shame and stigma from sex and create space for diverse and positive understandings of consensual sex, sexual desire, and expression (Dodge, 2021). Fahs (2014) claims:

> Sex-positive feminism has, in many ways, turned upside-down the notion of the once highly-dichotomous public/private, virgin/whore, and deviant/normal... it has laid the groundwork to depathologise sexuality, particularly for women, minorities, people of colour, and sex workers. (p. 268)

Moving forward with this approach seemed fitting for my research into the roles online pornography may play in young people's sexual and social lives. It allowed for deeper, fuller, and more authentic understandings of young people's engagements with pornography, particularly around what young people may have learned about sex, gender, and/or sexuality from online pornography, as well as how pornography may have shaped their understanding of sexual consent. As the researcher, using such an approach enabled me to promote open-mindedness, egalitarianism, and inclusivity throughout my research and analyses. Furthermore, using a sex-positive feminist framework emboldened my understandings of the complex relationship between culture and action and worked well with Gavey's concept of 'cultural scaffolding' with regard to the role of pornography in young people's lives.

Advocating for a sex-positive feminist framework is Queen and Comella (2008). Queen, as an activist, helped to pioneer the sex-positive feminism movement which problematised and confronted the issues around women being told what they should (or should not) do with others in terms of sexual relations. Queen and Comella's (2008) scholarly work claimed that the point of creating a sex-positive feminism, as opposed to just 'sex-positivity', was to create a space within feminism that is comfortable with (and for) diverse and alternative communities and sexualities. Using a sex-positive feminist framework means those with minoritized sexual identities have space to figure out and define their own eroticism and sexuality/ies. This is particularly important to my methodology and analysis of evidence, as I did not want to find myself inadvertently contributing to the 'othering' of sexual identities, practices, and/or desires that fall outside normative understandings of (hetero)sexuality.

Although a sex-positive feminist framework is able to provide robust explanations for the phenomena my research is seeking to explore, there are still valid critiques to consider. The most important critique for this research is that even a sex-positive feminism may not adequately or appropriately consider the local, specific, and non-universal ways identities are coded, learned, and performed by individuals. In other words, sometimes feminist theory's top-down explanations for how culture shapes normative identity are limited in that its focus on global contexts and structures means it neglects to interrogate the ways day-to-day interactions between individuals and communities can also shape identity which can then shape and re-shape culture. Moreover, some feminist theorists make invisible any individual efforts to resist or subvert various forms of oppression, as it locates power within structures that are seemingly beyond individual reach or control. To address these critiques I have attempted to 'queer' sex-positive feminist theory. How I have converged these two seemingly incompatible theoretical lenses is explained in the sections below.

'Queering' sex-positive feminist theory

Queer theory first arose in the early 1990's with the aim of challenging and subverting the ways (hetero)normative identities are constructed and maintained, and to deconstruct social hierarchies and inequalities (Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). One way queer theory does this is by analysing and critiquing the discursive constructions and linguistic exchanges that produce and reproduce socially established norms at the local level. It is from this that queer theory challenges and refutes essentialist and binary understandings of identity, and instead argues that identity is fluid and brought into existence via performative activities and discourse. This framework was helpful for my research as it meant I was able to analyse the subjective experiences of young people regarding how pornography may have shaped their understandings of gender and/or sexual identity/ies. Shams (2020) states that subjectivity, in Butler's theorising, came about in critique of essentialist notions of identity. For Butler, subjectivity accounts for how the ways one behaves or presents can either further stabilise or destabilise identity categories (Shams, 2020). In this way, 'queering' sex-positive feminism has filled some of the gaps that were left unaccounted in my research.

Important to note, however, is the oppositional framework writers and activists often use when debating whether queer theory or feminist theory is 'better' or more helpful. Contrasts and antagonisms arise between queer interests of study into how discourse constructs identity at the local level, and feminist interests in structural analysis of concepts such as patriarchy and capitalism and how they shape identity. The main issue feminist and queer theorists have is with the conceptualisation of gender and sexuality and their relationship to each other. As stated by Richardson et al. (2006)

> For the majority of feminist writers, to refute the primacy of gender is to fail to capture the structural presence of gender as a social division that shapes women and men's lives and ultimately shapes sexuality. For queer writers this fails to capture the significance of sexuality, in particular homosexuality as 'a whole cluster of the most crucial sites for the contestation of meaning in western culture'. (p. 2)

This argument between queer and feminist theorists can be unhelpful, however, as both local and structural analyses, cultural expression and material life, are important to consider when enquiring into matters of social inequality and oppression. These issues can intersect at different points of time and at varying levels. Thus, it seems more appropriate to search for new ways of articulating the mutual projects that queer and feminist theories share (i.e., challenging and deconstructing social hierarchy, inequality, and oppression).

Showden (2012) suggests that a sex-positive feminist queer theory could potentially provide solutions to the various problems within each theory and also offer a sustained challenge to the epistemological split between queer and feminist frameworks. To detail this, Showden (2012) uses the example of prostitution both as practice and subject of policy:

> Prostitution needs a specifically feminist policy framework because, as queer theorists have pointed out, feminism assumes a certain heterosexual orientation toward the world. And while queer theory's challenge to this assumption is important, prostitution is largely a heterosexual problem. A theoretical framework sufficient for contending with prostitution's ills (and limited promises) ought to be a framework that foregrounds the problems that arise from many current practices of heterosexuality, but that can cope with sexuality in a multifaceted way, and be cognisant of the dangers, and not just the benefits, of using the dominating powers of the state to regulate human sexuality. (p. 5)

It seems plausible here that Showden's suggested theoretical framework may also work for my thesis, as my research into online pornography also requires a feminist framework due to pornography being a largely heterosexual 'problem'. However, as Showden (2012) further suggests, a theoretical framework which can appropriately and adequately foreground the issues that arise from the current practices of heterosexuality, and also cope with sexuality in a multifaceted way, is also required. Hence, I have adopted Showden's convergence of feminist and queer theories in an attempt to sufficiently analyse the role of online pornography in young people's lives. However, this needed to be done in a way that interweaved the two frameworks without one approach subtending or subordinating the other. This was important for my analysis of the subjective experiences young people have with pornography from structural, cultural, and local perspectives.

Another scholar who contested the sex (queer theory) / gender (feminism) split was Judith Butler (1994). Butler argued that queer theorists should deconstruct the sex binary and 'queer gender' from within feminism, as this would hold feminism accountable for its heterosexism. As noted above, however, much of queer theory was instead developed in opposition to feminism. Butler's theorising around sex and gender is still worth revisiting in this sense however, not only because her theory of performativity has been foundational in queer theory, but also because (building on Foucault) she "employs a performative and productive model of power as discursive, subjectifying, and flowing in capillary relations between people and institutions" (Showden, 2012, p. 8). This is one framework Butler has provided around how (hetero)normative identity is coded, maintained, and reproduced.

In further explanation of this, Butler (1990) stated that gender is not so much an identity as it is a constitutive performance of expressions which are coded through gendered lenses. Examples of such expressions include how one dresses, walks, talks, and moves through space, among other things. In other words, "if gender is performative, then it follows that the reality of gender is itself produced as an effect of the performance" (Butler, 2004, p. 218). It is important to note that this notion of performativity does not require consciousness on the part of any one person, but is the result of various gender and sexual norms which in some ways condition legible expressions onto subjects (Butler, 2009). In this way, Butler (2009) states that the underlying motivation to perform gendered expressions is to "sufficiently conform to the norms that confer recognisability" (p. iii). Vying for recognisability (and by extension, social power) is how (hetero)normative notions of hierarchy are maintained and reproduced at the local level: via the performative effect of repeated expressions of 'self' as (cis)gendered and heterosexual, and therefore normal or natural. As such, Butler's notion of performativity works well for my thesis as it provides a strong but flexible framework from which to analyse my participants' knowledges and understandings of sex, sexual consent, gender, and sexuality, as well as their pornography consumption habits. Furthermore, the concept of 'performativity' also provides further explanation around how Gavey's 'cultural scaffolding' can take place at the local level. This is where this concept fits well within Showden's queer sex-positive feminist theory I have employed.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined feminist and queer theories in relation to how they each support my research and have been joined together to create a queer sex-positive feminist theory. I have predominantly drawn on Gavey's notion of cultural scaffolding and Butler's theorising of performativity, both of which provide the necessary frameworks and language for further discussion. As outlined in chapter one, my research aims to examine the ways young people think about and understand what they may have learned about sex, consent, sexuality and/or gender from engaging with online pornography, as well as how pornography may have shaped their understanding of sexual consent. A convergence of queer and feminist frameworks and concepts will allow me to contextualise and make sense of participants' subjective experiences more deeply and with greater attention to how they are influenced by, and attempt to resist, notions of hierarchy and oppression within their lives.

Chapter four: Research methodology

Introduction

In this chapter I explain the qualitative methodology and methods I selected for this study. I begin by highlighting the research design and approach in terms of why they made sense for this thesis. Participant selection is then described, followed by the ways I collected evidence using sex-positive feminist perspectives. I then focus on my analysis of evidence (i.e., discourse analysis), ethical matters such as confidentiality and transcription, and my positionality as a researcher.

At the beginning of my research, my initial focus was on what online pornography may teach young people about sexual consent. This soon shifted to examining the ways young people think about and understand what they may have learned about sex, sexuality and/or gender from engaging with online pornography, as well as how online pornography may have shaped their understanding of sexual consent. The reason for this shift was that it is difficult to examine in-depth and understand an issue such as sexual consent without also examining how it intersects with constructs of gender, sex, and sexuality. As such, my research aims to highlight my participants' lived experiences via narrative enquiry, underpinned by a queer sex-positive feminist theory.

An exploratory qualitative research design and approach

To address the proposed research questions, I employed an exploratory qualitative research design. Exploratory qualitative research seeks to explore new information about subjective phenomena experienced by participants (Ingraham, 2013). This is particularly helpful when limited research has been undertaken in the relative area (Ingraham, 2013). Furthermore, such an approach enables researchers to examine the lived experiences of participants in order to gain greater insights into an existing problem (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Ingraham, 2013). Thus, using this methodological approach made sense for my research, as research exploring the roles of online pornography and young people in Aotearoa New Zealand has been minimal. Furthermore, research about online pornography has predominantly included exploratory qualitative approaches in an attempt to investigate how pornography consumption effects various aspects of humanity (in particular, sexual behaviour and psychology) and why these effects are apparent. It appears there has been a paucity in research investigating how pornography may shape young peoples' understandings and interpretations of sexual consent.

Therefore, it seemed necessary to utilise an exploratory qualitative design in order to continue building and strengthening foundations for deeper understandings around this and for future research.

I also drew on the qualitative narrative enquiry method as I suspected participants would have unique experiences and stories about their engagements with pornography. As explained by Punch and Oancea (2014) and Ingraham (2013), narrative enquiry aims to represent human experience and explore, in-depth, the meanings people attach to their experiences. Using this method was facilitative of this research as it allowed participants to speak to how they perceive pornography to have influenced their learning about, sexuality, and/or gender, as well as how pornography may have shaped their understanding of sexual consent. Furthermore, Chase (2005) suggests that using narrative enquiry allows the researcher to focus on participants' oral and written stories, and that this gives depth to explorations around how they express emotions, thoughts, and interpretations, as well as how their voices may be "constrained or enabled by other social forces" (Ingraham, 2013, p. 219). In this way, using the narrative enquiry method drawn from the work of Ingraham (2013), provided a wider, as well as deeper, range of information for my research, and made the empirical materials obtained richer in detail.

Empirical materials

As my research asked for subjective information around learning and interpretation, some recommended research methods included a combination of questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and journal entries. The same participants were called on for each method of empirical material collection. These methods facilitated my overall exploratory narrative enquiry as they each allowed for participants' stories to come to the surface by providing diverse ways for participants to express their thoughts, perceptions, and reflections. This was important in exploring my overall research question about the knowledges and understandings young people gain from pornography about sex, sexual consent, gender, and sexualities, as these topics require a large amount of self-reflection as well as an ability to language subjective experience. In this way, my chosen theoretical framework also facilitated this by supporting both specific and subjective experiences participants had, as well as the material-cultural resources they drew on to language their thoughts and reflections. Overall, the methods I chose worked well for this thesis well as they enabled me to answer my research questions to the level of depth, understanding, and thought required for such an important and nuanced topic.

The first method for material collection I used was a questionnaire. Questionnaires are an efficient way of obtaining large amounts of information quickly (Punch & Oancea, 2014). The questionnaire was made up of 15 questions which attempted to gauge participants' initial thoughts and understandings (Kraus & Rosenburg, 2017). Indicative questions included were: How often do/did you typically watch pornography each week/day/month? Can you remember if/when sexual consent was communicated in a porn video you watched? If so, please explain what this looked and/or sounded like; and how often do/did you witness sexual consent being communicated in porn videos? (All the time, Most of the time, Some of the time, hardly ever, Never). The purpose of the questionnaire in this study was to both inform the semi-structured interview questions, as well as give participants a chance to articulate their experiences and thoughts in a non-threatening way before engaging in the interview and journaling processes. This facilitated participation, discussion, and in-depth answers across the empirical materials collection period. For example, both participants completed the questionnaire during their first interview. I chose to structure it this way because I wondered if participants would benefit from being able to ask questions about certain topics the questionnaire included and engage in discussion about them. Interestingly, one of the participants was someone who thinks out loud. This meant I had the privilege of hearing their thought processes around how they were going to answer questions, meaning the information gauged was even more in-depth than I had anticipated. It also meant this participant and I talked more deeply about various questions than otherwise would have happened, and I was able to ask questions that most likely would not have otherwise been touched on. This approach to participant questionnaires seems to be novel, and overall worked well for this project.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews with both participants. I drew on Galletta et al. (2013), as they suggested that for semi-structured interviews, the researcher should be the instrument while participants are the players. This highlights both the participant-led aspect of semi-structured interviews as well as the reciprocal relationship this interview style allows for between interviewer and interviewee. In this way, although some questions were designed and structured by myself as the researcher, the interviews mostly followed, intuitively, what the participant spoke of. This provided space for participants' own narratives, thought-processes, and lived experiences to arise (Galletta et al., 2013). Due to their flexibility, semi-structured interviews can also be an effective means to explore how someone constructs their reality (Punch & Oancea, 2014), and in this way aligned strongly with my narrative enquiry and exploratory qualitative study design. This method worked particularly well for one participant who had autism, as I was able to be flexible with regard to questions and structure to better fit their needs. For example, a lot of my pre-prepared interview questions were open-ended, which this participant found difficult. I therefore adapted questions to first be closed-ended (e.g. "Do you think it would have been helpful for you if somebody had talked to you about pornography when you were a child?"), and then followed-up with related open-ended questions to garner more detail (e.g. "How do you think having nobody to talk to about it impacted you?"). This provided this participant with more initial structure which helped them stay focused, but also enough freedom to be able to provide in-depth explanations and bring up thoughts and reflections they had in the moment.

Participants were invited to engage in individual interviews (they also had the option of a focus group, but neither chose this). Interviews ran for around an hour, sometimes more (one participant's first interview was almost three hours). Three interviews were offered either on University of Auckland Epsom or City premises, or in a safe, public space, once a week. This worked well for all participants, particularly with the interviews being paced one week apart. This allowed time to reflect on previous interviews, both for myself and participants, which facilitated the flow of the following interview as it was easy to build on previous conversations and expand into new territories. Questions asked during interviews were mostly open-ended in order to encourage more in-depth answers from participants. All interviews were voice-recorded from the point of receiving verbal consent and transcribed by myself (the researcher).

A journal with reflective prompts (see Appendix E) was provided as an option for participants to use in their own time and/or during interviews. This meant participants were able to utilise another avenue in which they could communicate (privately) their thoughts and unpack meanings they had given their experiences. Participants seemed to find this helpful as they sometimes found writing easier than speaking. The journals also proved productive for my research as participants' answers to the prompts elicited more information or explanation to what had been discussed in interviews. For example, one of my participants at times felt too much shame and discomfort to speak with me in person about the more intimate details of their experiences with pornography, so for them the journal made communicating easier. This is not to say our interviews were unhelpful, but that the journal facilitated the depth at which they were able to self-reflect and communicate in a way that worked for them. This is reflected by Denzin and Lincoln (2013) who suggest journaling is an effective way to obtain more in-depth information as it develops, as participants can write and reflect without the potential time and social pressures that may otherwise be present.

Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, I began searching for any discourses present in participants' discussions that could be used for analysis. Doing this alongside the data collection process (instead of afterwards) meant participants' experiences and my angle of vision were present in the data I collected, which helped to set up my analyses for discussion. Using discourse analysis aligned closely with my endeavour to understand what young people learn from online pornography, especially the meanings participants had applied to their often complex lived experiences. As Johnstone (2018) explains:

> Calling what we do "discourse analysis" rather than "language analysis" underscores the fact that we are not centrally focused on language as an abstract system. We tend, instead, to be interested in what happens when people draw on the knowledge they have…knowledge based on their memories of things they have said, heard, seen, or written before, to do things in the world: exchange information, express feelings, make things happens, create beauty, entertain themselves and others, and so on… Discourse is both the source of this knowledge…and the result of it. (p. xviii)

In this research, I drew on the discourse analysis used by Antevska and Gavey (2015); one that identified shared patterns of meaning, knowledge, and language among participants' conversations. Antevska and Gavey (2015) also used discourse analysis to further contextualise interview discussions in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. This discourse analysis seemed most appropriate for my research as it allowed me to include the sociocultural contexts participants came from and experienced in my analyses more broadly. It also aligned well with Gavey's notion of cultural scaffolding, for which discourse is central. As such, using this type of discourse analysis helped to elucidate how participants drew on 'common knowledge' to make sense of their identities, experiences, and/or knowledges. For example, one participant stated, "it's because I am a man that I have a natural desire for kink". Here there is a direct link between their sexuality and their gender. This discourse was labelled by Hollway (1989) as the male sexual drive discourse, which reflects the notion that men are biologically driven to pursue and desire sex (from women). Other discourses found were those around social constructions of gender (i.e., men are independent where women are social), as well as speaking about sex as a physical act, which also links to discourses around normative masculinity.

Participant selection and recruitment

For the current research, criterion sampling was used to select five to six participants via advertisements which were displayed around the University of Auckland premises and on Facebook community pages based in Auckland. Five or six participants seemed appropriate for this study as it meant the data collected could be examined broadly as well as in-depth. With regard to selecting these participants, criterion sampling is useful for quality assurance, as it helps researchers identify participants who are appropriate and information rich (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Examples of criteria that participants needed to meet for this project included that participants needed to have watched online pornography (those who had not watched pornography were not able to provide relevant information), and participants needed to be 19-24 years of age. I selected this age range because I thought they may be the most willing and able to participate my research, as participants needed to be able to dedicate around five hours of their time in total across the study's duration. However, although my study originally had five participants, due to COVID19 restrictions and related knock-on effects, in the end only two participants completed the research. This meant my analyses were not as broad as originally planned for. However, having fewer participants meant I was able to explore more in depth the rich experiences and thoughts provided by them. In this way, having two participants turned out to be a strength.

Ethical matters

Before I began my research, I received ethics approval from the University of Auckland's Human Research Ethics Committee. I firstly considered interviewing young men aged 16-19 who were attending programmes for rehabilitation within an organisation which works primarily with sex offenders. Although ethics approval was received for this research (after minor amendments were made to the original application), the organisation was not able to support my research at the time. I then refocused my research on interviewing young people aged 19-24 who had grown up in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, for which I also received ethics approval after submitting appropriate amendments (see Appendix A).

Informed consent was obtained by potential participants being provided a ‘participant information sheet’ (see Appendix B), and then signing a participant consent form (either before arriving at the first interview, or at the beginning of the first interview if the participant was unable to access an internet enabled device beforehand) (see Appendix C). Participants were asked for verbal consent at the beginning of all additional interviews. Participants were also made aware they were able to withdraw from the research at any time.

Confidentiality was important for this research, particularly given the stigma that can be present when talking about sex, sexuality, sexual consent, gender, and pornography. In this way, ensuring empirical materials remained confidential was a key aspect in motivating participants to engage with the research, and in ensuring the study remained ethical and did not harm participants. Thus, to ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in place of participants’ names when reporting findings, and any voice-recordings were destroyed once they had been transcribed into writing. Furthermore, any identifiable information provided by participants that was written about in this thesis was generalised. For example, if a participant was a part of a group or organisation this was talked about broadly and not tied to any specific town, institution, or name. Transcripts were protected, anonymised, and stored on a password-secured device owned by the University of Auckland.

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, to ensure participants were safe during the interviews it was made clear that they were free to leave and/or they could stop the interview for a break at any time. To further facilitate their wellbeing, sex-positive feminist perspectives were drawn on to ensure interviews were supportive of participants. This meant there was emphasis on developing trust and rapport between interviewer and interviewee before asking any difficult questions, as well as ensuring questions and discussions were not shaming of participants’ sexual experiences and engagements with online pornography (Wodda et al., 2018). Using sex-positive feminist perspectives also meant emotional engagement and openness were required from the interviewer (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Before interviews I briefed participants, and provided space to debrief afterwards. For example, to ‘brief’ participants I asked them to situate how they were feeling that day/moment on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being really not good and 10 being amazing). From there I let them know what the interview might centre around and asked whether they felt okay with that or if there was something else they would like to talk about instead (in relation to pornography/sex/gender/sexuality). The way I helped participants to ‘debrief’ was by checking in with their mental and emotional state (i.e., “Some of those discussions were really heavy and I’m wondering how you’re feeling in your body right now?” and “is there anything you want to tell me or mention before we finish?”). I would then follow up with asking participants how they planned to take care of themselves once they had returned to university or home. This briefing/debriefing process meant participants were able to begin and leave interviews (hopefully) feeling more grounded and secure in their wellbeing. This may have made it easier for them to participate and then continue with their plans for the day.

With regard to my positionality as a researcher, my being a young cis-woman asking young cis-men about their thoughts and experiences with pornography may have impacted how participants’ answered questions. My hope, however, is that having built rapport with participants before moving into the topic of pornography helped to negate this. Furthermore, I explicitly stated on the advertisement that my pronouns were she/her, so potential participants would have known they would be talking with a woman (cis or otherwise) before choosing to participate. If I was a cis-man, however, both the participants and data collected may have been quite different.

Chapter summary

Throughout this chapter I have provided an overview of the qualitative, exploratory, narrative enquiry methods used to understand young people regarding how their learnings about sex, sexuality, and/or gender, as well as how they understand sexual consent, may have been shaped by their engagements with online pornography. Additionally, ethical matters such as confidentiality and consent were addressed. The following chapters will present, analyse, and discuss the key findings from this research, using both the queer sex-positive feminist theoretical framework outlined in chapter three, as well as the chosen methods described in this chapter.

Chapter five: Sung-Ho

Introduction

In this chapter I present the personal experiences and reflections of Sung-Ho, one of the participants in this study. I begin by introducing Sung-Ho in regard to his background, everyday life, and engagement with pornography. I then examine the key ideas and conversations that characterised Sung-Ho's responses when talking about pornography, consent, sex, and/or sexuality. Next, I analyse Sung-Ho's knowledge and experiences using the frameworks of Gavey's cultural scaffolding and Butler's performativity to contextualise and make sense of his (at times retrospective) understandings of sex and sexual consent, alongside his engagement with online pornography.

Sung-Ho

Sung-Ho met me in a busy café for his first interview. As we sat down, the first thing he exclaimed to me (very loudly) was that he has autism and likes the pornography he watches to be "hot and spicy". In that moment I questioned my decision to hold our interview in such a public space. Everyone around us had taken a second-look, and I wondered in what ways I could uphold his dignity. I realised that even with all of my careful planning and preparation, I had not considered the possibility of a participant being neurodivergent. Nonetheless, I rallied myself and said "okay that's helpful to know, thank you for telling me that". From there we got to know each other a little better before continuing with the topic of pornography.

At the time of the interviews (in August/September 2021), Sung-Ho was a 23 year-old straight cisgender South Korean man (pronouns: he/him). He was born in South Korea but his family moved to Aotearoa New Zealand when he was two years old. Sung-Ho then grew up in a city-suburb and was the only child in his family. When asked about his childhood, he described it as insecure, lonely, helpless, and difficult due to the abuse he endured from his parents and the bullying he experienced at school by both staff and students. He cut them all out of his life when he was 18, though the trauma of his experiences is still very much with him. Over the last couple of years Sung-Ho has been receiving therapy, which he has found helpful. He also participates in a social club for neurodivergent people where they chat, eat food, and sometimes play games. This has been a positive experience for Sung-Ho, and he looks forward to attending each week. In his everyday life Sung-Ho has a difficult time socially and emotionally, both in person and on social media, as people still tend to bully him a lot. He said this is because he has autism and people “do not understand”. What I perceived Sung-Ho to have meant by this is that neurotypical/allistic people are often ignorant around what it means for someone to have autism, and it is this lack of understanding that leads them to exclude and make fun of him. Overall, Sung-Ho came across as intelligent, thoughtful, open-minded, and resilient, although he was sometimes troubled and confused by other people and his past experiences.

The conversations Sung-Ho and I had about his engagement with pornography were sobering. Sung-Ho started watching online pornography at age 7. In talking about his early relationship with pornography, Sung-Ho described it as “too intense for me to forget and walk away from. I wanted to see it again and again, as well as some different variations, e.g., different positions. I became addicted”. When asked about the type of pornography he saw at such a young age, Sung-Ho described it as sexually and physically violent. However, this seemed normal to him at the time as that is what he was experiencing from his parents. As he came into his late teens, Sung-Ho learned that the kind of pornography he enjoyed watching was called BDSM (bondage, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism); sexual activity that involves, for example, receiving pain or pleasure via spanking, whipping, tying a partner up, among other things. To this day, BDSM pornography is still a big part of Sung-Ho’s life, although his understanding of it has increased and developed over the last few years (much of which is due to receiving therapy as a young adult, as well as his own in-depth exploration of the theory behind it). Some key conversations Sung-Ho and I had about what he learned from pornography about sexual consent, sexuality, sexual desire, and gender will be explored and discussed in the next sections[3].

Turning a blind eye (to violence and non-consent)

Sung-Ho and I talked at length about consent. What came to light was that although Sung-Ho has a complex understanding of consent today, he did not know what it was until he was a young adult.

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[3] It is important to point out that Sung-Ho has autism and that the ways he uses his voice and body language sometimes differs from that of neurotypical/allistic people. Because of this, I needed to be mindful that I did not view and interpret his responses and characteristics through a neurotypical/allistic lens alone. It should therefore be noted that my observations and interpretations may not have fully captured Sung-Ho’s experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

> **Sung-Ho**: Yes, I had no idea what the concept of consent was.
> **Sam**: And this was in relation to BDSM porn?
> **Sung-Ho**: Yes, but also anything – if you're doing an activity with someone else they both need to be consenting.
> **Sam**: Do you know when you first learned about consent?
> **Sung-Ho**: It probably took me a couple of years.
> **Sam**: Okay, how old were you?
> **Sung-Ho**: 21 or 22.
> **Sam**: So before then you didn't understand consent?
> **Sung-Ho**: Yeah, I took it too lightly.
> **Sam**: Mm.. before you learned about consent and you were watching BDSM pornography.. I'm wondering if you ever thought it was abusive?
> **Sung-Ho**: Yes, I thought it was like punishment, but now I know it's not real. It was difficult for me to realise, especially because I was abused so many times there's only a thin line between the two [BDSM and abuse]. I thought abuse was normal, I couldn't imagine it being a staged play… I didn't think there was consent, I didn't know consent existed and I thought it was normal to do that. I asked myself why they would film it because it's evidence against them, but it was a turn on when I watched it, [so] I just forgot about that.

A few things are noteworthy from this conversation with Sung-Ho, perhaps the most obvious being that Sung-Ho's history of prolonged abuse meant he was unable to realise that non-consent is not normal. However, the fact that Sung-Ho wondered why people would film and make public what he perceived to be extreme violence against women suggests there may have been, however subconscious, an acknowledgement that what he was seeing was unethical or illegal. The ease of access to this (perceived) illegal behaviour, however, may have further normalised and naturalised the absence of consent for Sung-Ho as it posed no challenge to his experiential learning. Furthermore, considering Sung-Ho started watching violent pornography (outside of the BDSM context) from such a young age (as well as experiencing childhood abuse), the psychological and relational implications of this may have been severe. I did not explore this directly with Sung-Ho, however, as I believe it would have been unethical to ask about any potential illegal behaviours. I was acutely aware of the psychosexual conditioning he has experienced, which may have been further complicated by his autism. I also did not ask Sung-Ho to speak to this as I did not want to trigger any post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. I thought that perhaps his normalisation of nonconsent may have been in part what allowed Sung-Ho to turn a blind eye to the violence in pornography and instead enjoy the sexual gratification he received from consuming it.

Adding to this conversation were my observations of non-verbal behaviours/cues and tone of voice that I recorded in my interview notes. In conversations with Sung-Ho I noticed that his general tenor when talking about the violent pornography he would watch was mostly nonchalant, although his facial expressions and body language communicated that his memory of it continued to be enthralling and exciting (e.g., his eyes would light up, his eyebrows would lift, and he would shift forward in his seat a little). It is important to note here that although Sung-Ho reads his past engagement with violent pornography within a consensual BDSM framework now, this was not the case when he was younger. From this it may be further understood that Sung-Ho experienced a disconnect between the violence he was watching and physiologically responding to, and the humanity of the female performers.

In order to begin contextualising Sung-Ho's experiences of disconnection, Butler's (1990) concept of 'performativity' is apt and useful. Butler contends that identity is not fixed, but performative, in that people enact social norms and conventions in ways that construct their subjectivity and sense of 'self'. These constructions are always being influenced by a history of scripts and codes that govern ideology (Butler, 1990). From this it can be understood that individuals may either enact social conventions in ways which support an oppressive status quo, or in ways that resist social norms in attempt to subvert notions of hierarchy and oppression. For Sung-Ho, it could be postulated that his early attraction to violent pornography was a resilient attempt at resisting the abuse and oppression he was experiencing in real life. In this way, Sung-Ho would have been 'performing' he who watches over and enjoys violence (against women as a socially subordinate subject). This, in his own way and within the bounds of his material circumstances, may have allowed him to resist the dominating figures of his parents and those who bullied him, and instead enact dominance. From here it may also be helpful to further contextualise Sung-Ho's dismissive attitude towards violence in pornography within the framework of cultural scaffolding.

Interestingly, it appears that 'turning a blind eye' to violence in pornography (particularly violence against women) may be a common theme for men who regularly consume it. For example, Antevska and Gavey (2015) carried out empirical research in Aotearoa New Zealand, with the aim of exploring "the nature of men's pornography consumption, as they understood it, in their/our cultural context" (p. 4). One of their findings was that men’s discussions of violence, particularly violence against women, within (heterosexual) pornography were characterised by detachment and nonchalance. One example of this was that the majority of men in their study justified their or others’ consumption of what appeared to be the tying up, whipping, and group rape of a young woman by up to thirty men. The justifications these men used were centred around the young woman’s (assumed) personal choices in that she had given consent. When asked about other violence they had seen in pornography, numerous men gave truncated “just is” responses (p. 16). When discussing this phenomenon, Antevska and Gavey (2015) stated that in general there was no critical consideration from the men beyond the face-value of what they saw in pornography. In other words, men’s recognition of male dominance over women in the pornography one watches does not necessarily prompt the need for ethical accounting. As such, the nonchalance, or ‘turning a blind eye’, demonstrated by Sung-Ho and the men in Antevska and Gavey (2015) may speak to the inability (or unwillingness) of some men to interrogate the gender politics that exist within (heterosexual) pornography.

Gavey’s (2005; 2019) concept of cultural scaffolding provides some explanation for why this may be. A core tenet of cultural scaffolding is the dominant and normative discourse surrounding social, cultural, and structural phenomena (Gavey, 2005; 2019). Thus, to contextualise men’s apparent nonchalant attitudes, it is necessary to draw on discourses which privilege cisgender and heterosexuality and their relative status in Aotearoa New Zealand. One potent discourse here seems to be that men are active sexual subjects, the initiators, and even aggressors in (hetero)sexual relations, whilst women are passive recipients of (hetero)sex acts (Gavey, 2019). This discourse implies the value and scripts associated with notions of hegemonic masculinity (see Connell, 2005; Holland, 1998). As such, what is contended here is that “heterosexuality is not, as it appears to be, masculinity-and-femininity in opposition: it *is* masculinity” (Holland, 1998, p. 11). With this understanding, Gavey (2019) explains that within normative notions of heterosexuality and heterosex, women’s eroticism, sexual pleasure, and desire are not understood or positioned as their own entity, but framed from within the lens of men’s eroticism and sexuality. In this way, men (and often women themselves) are socialised to perceive women’s roles in (hetero)sex as being to satisfy men’s wants, needs, and desires. Although men are not a monolithic group, turning a blind eye to violence against women in pornography (and other sexually explicit media) is, in some ways, fundamental to their (hetero)sexuality. This may partially explain why some men, like Sung-Ho, are able to view men’s dominance of women in (heterosexual) pornography as fun and/or normal, and dismiss the ever-present absence of consent in the pornography they consume.

“I’m not vanilla!”

This section aims to analyse and discuss the ways Sung-Ho understood his sexual desire for BDSM pornography in relation to his gender and sexuality. To do this, Gavey’s notion of discourse and how they relate to the cultural scaffolding of sexual violence is drawn on, which highlights the cultural resources Sung-Ho used to make sense of his sexual desire, gender, and sexuality. To explain more specifically how these cultural resources became available to Sung-Ho in the first place, Butler’s notion of performativity is also employed. This helps to elucidate, at the local and specific levels (which inform the cultural and institutional, and vice versa), how discourse lays the foundation for the cultural scaffolding of sexual violence and rape of women by men to occur.

Throughout our interviews, Sung-Ho often reminded me that he is “not vanilla!”, meaning the pornography he enjoys is “kinky”, “hot and spicy”, and “not boring!”. An example Sung-Ho provided was that he likes to watch a man spanking a woman while she lies across his lap. The tone of voice he used each time he brought this up suggested that enjoying “kinky” pornography was something he likes about himself and is proud of. While there is nothing inherently problematic about this, Sung-Ho’s eagerness to make sure I understood that he is “not vanilla” was intriguing. ‘Vanilla sex’ is a colloquial term used to refer to sexual behaviours and practices considered to be ‘conventional’ or ‘non-BDSM’ (Simula, 2019). Simula (2019) further explains that the term ‘vanilla’, as used by BDSM participants, often carries “strong pejorative connotations, e.g., boring, unfulfilling, stereotypical, conforming, mindless” (p. 211). In this context, Sung-Ho’s language and eagerness makes sense. However, when explaining his enjoyment of “hot and spicy” pornography, Sung-Ho claimed “it’s because I am a man that I have a natural desire for kink”. Here, Sung-Ho connects his sexual desire to his gender identity, suggesting that although desiring kink may be “natural”, there are also other factors that influence Sung-Ho’s attraction to it.

To elucidate this, it is necessary to first highlight some discourses that commonly shape understandings of (cis)gender and (hetero)sexuality. Gavey (2019), who draws on Foucault, states that discourses are used as cultural resources to provide “frameworks of meaning and practice that guide us on how to be normal members of our culture” (p. 7). One powerful discourse here is that men are biologically driven to desire and pursue sex (Jeffrey et al., 2020), which Hollway (1989) originally labelled the ‘male sexual drive discourse’. As Gavey (2019) explains:

> The male sexual drive discourse – irrespective of any biological imperative that may or may not accompany it – exists as a social/cultural force. At that level it is capable of helping to shape our experiences and understandings of ourselves, and the ways we act in the world. (p. 7)

From this perspective, it seems as though Sung-Ho draws on this discourse to make sense of his gender, sexuality, and related desire for BDSM pornography.

Underpinning the male sexual drive discourse are binary constructions of gender, which rely heavily on traditional notions of masculinity (men) and femininity (women). Examples of this include (but are not limited to): men are competitive where women are docile; men are logical where women are hysterical; men are physical where women are emotional; and, men are aggressive where women are passive. This aligns with the ways Sung-Ho conceptualised his gendered self, examples of which are stated above, as well as the ways he referred to himself as “more computer machine than human”, “more logical than emotional”, and “extremely aggressive”. For Gavey, these constructions of gender as difference, combined with the discussed normative discourses, act to normalise and naturalise the unequal power dynamics existing in heterosexual relations. In this way, Gavey suggests the groundwork for sexual violence against women by men to occur is laid, and this is how the cultural scaffolding of such violence takes place. This is not to suggest that Sung-Ho would sexually harm another, but that his understandings of how his sexual desire relates to his gender and sexuality has been, and continues to be, shaped by dominant, normative notions of (hetero)sexuality and (cis)gender. It is the presence of these notions which helps to pattern cultural norms and ideals that make sexual violence easier to perpetrate and harder to address.

To explain this more specifically, Butler’s concept of performativity is helpful. As explained in chapter three, Butler (1990) contends that gender is not an identity as much as it is a constitutive performance of expressions coded through gendered lenses. Furthermore, as Namaste (1994) argues, these performative expressions are informed by existing (and often binary) social constructions of gender and sexuality. In this way, gender is produced as the effect of this performance and is enacted to confer recognisability, and, by extension, social power (Butler, 2009). Therein, Sung-Ho understands his gender and related sexual desire in the ways previously described as this is what he has seen repeatedly performed by the people around him. For example, Sung-Ho's parents would physically and emotionally abuse him as a young child and teenager, and his male peers in school would "put rocks inside socks and hit me". Sung-Ho also spoke to how his male peers would "go crazy" whenever the topics of sex, pornography, and/or women were talked about. It seems, then, that what Sung-Ho may have learned from these experiences, combined with other existing social constructions and discourses of (cis)gender and (hetero)sexuality, is that performances of dominance over somebody else, as well as a drive to be sexual with women, each confer masculinity and therefore relative social power. Considering Sung-Ho's history of abuse, it makes sense that this notion of social power would feel particularly integral to his life and wellbeing. As such, this discourse became available to Sung-Ho as a cultural resource at the local, specific level, which in turn provides explanation for how Sung-Ho may have come to understand his sexual desire for BDSM pornography as being related to his (cis)gender and (hetero)sexuality.

Interestingly, the BDSM pornography Sung-Ho engages with seems to mirror how he understands his gender and sexuality. For example, the male performers are predominantly positioned as dominant and with sexual desire (comparatively the women are framed as submissive and satisfying the men/audience). This has obvious links to the male sexual drive discourse as well as other related norms and ideals surrounding (cis)gender and (hetero)sexuality (e.g., the dominance/submissive trope inherent to most scripted (heterosexual) pornography). As such, what this points to is that the pornography Sung-Ho engages with has not (yet) posed a challenge to his (normative) understandings of (cis)gender and (hetero)sexuality, but has instead reflected and reinforced them. However, considering Sung-Ho started watching violent pornography (outside of the BDSM context) as a child, it could be that this has also informed his sexual desires and reported notions of gender and sexuality, suggesting a cyclical relationship. Some scholars, including Gavey and Senn (2014) suggest that pornography, as a discursive text, can produce as well as maintain and recirculate dominant and normative notions of identity (see also Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021). In this way, BDSM pornography contributed to the cultural scaffolding of Sung-Ho's understandings of sexual desire in relation to gender and sexuality at local and cultural levels.

Chapter summary

In this chapter I have outlined the journey Sung-Ho and I undertook from questioning what he meant by “hot and spicy” pornography, to analysing and discussing the ways his conceptualisations of consent, sexual desire, sexuality, and gender have been shaped by the people around him, the (rape) culture he grew up in, and pornography (both outside of, and within, the BDSM context). What came to light here was that because of his history of abuse, as well as how the cultural scaffolding of certain discourses are potent to social and cultural constructions of identity, Sung-Ho was able to ‘turn a blind eye’ to the violence against women he saw in pornography. Furthermore, it seems Sung-Ho utilised various discourses around gender and sexuality as cultural resources to make sense of his sexual desire for BDSM pornography in relation to his (cis)gender and (hetero)sexuality. Through Butler’s notion of performativity, the ways cultural resources may have become available to Sung-Ho in the first place was made clear, which in turn provided a potential explanation for why he understood his sexual desire for BDSM pornography being because of his maleness and (hetero)sexuality. Finally, I discussed how BDSM pornography both reinforced, as well as informed, Sung-Ho’s conceptualisations of sexuality and gender. Discussed throughout the following chapter are Billy’s experiences with and knowledges from online (heterosexual) pornography.

Chapter six: Billy

Introduction

In this chapter I present the personal experiences and reflections of Billy. I begin by introducing Billy in regard to his background, everyday life, and engagement with pornography. I then employ Butler’s concept of performativity and Gavey’s notion of cultural scaffolding to examine the key ideas and conversations that characterised Billy’s responses when talking about pornography in regard to sexual consent, sex, sexuality, and gender. Examples of this include how pornography creates an unattainable (hetero)sex aesthetic; the ways pornography can shape understandings around (hetero)sex as a purely physical act; and how the discourses around sexual consent that pornography (re)presents is often subliminal and therefore not easily recognised. I then examine some of the conditions which may set up pornography to be an increasingly dangerous activity for young people to be engaging with on their own.

Billy

Billy undertook his interviews over Zoom. Initially I felt nervous about hosting an online interview as I was aware that conversations around pornography, sex, and consent can quickly become personal; I wondered if a certain depth of conversation could be reached safely. It soon became apparent, however, that Billy was in no way held back by being on video, as our first interview lasted almost three hours! Billy is a gifted story-teller and seemed comfortable holding the microphone. He appreciated being given the opportunity to speak to and reflect on his experiences with pornography, sex, and consent, as they were not typical topics of conversation for him. Before beginning our discussions however, we took some time to get to know each other.

At the time of the interviews (in August/September, 2021), Billy was a 24 year-old bisexual cisgender Pākehā man (pronouns: he/him). He was born in South Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, where he was raised semi-rurally alongside his older brother. Billy described his childhood as good in that he grew up around peers and adults who he, for the most part, had strong and trustworthy relationships with. He found school quite challenging, however, due to his more extroverted personality and enjoyment of being in the spotlight, as it meant he “faced criticism from every direction all the time”. Since then Billy has “learned not to listen to the haters”, and has been more able to accept himself for who he is. Over the last

12 months Billy has been studying at university and working as a music tutor. Working with young people brings him a lot of joy and social connection. Billy also participates in an orchestra, which also provides him with a sense of community and pleasure outside of his work. Overall, Billy came across as clever, deep-thinking, funny, and open-minded.

The conversations Billy and I had around his engagement with pornography were interesting. Billy first saw pornography at the age of 12 with his friends while on holiday.

> **Billy**: We used to go motorbike riding and fishing and all sorts of stuff. I remember going downstairs one time and they were on a little 2G phone, it was old school, and they had like a website of the best French nude magazines and they'd play all these covers of this magazine.. I remember being fascinated but like not really engaged too much.
> **Sam:** Was this with your Dad's friends?
> **Billy:** Nah my mates…there's like an extra bedroom at the back and they were just hanging out there and like, I noticed that they were missing so I went looking for them and yeah. After that there was a boy on my street, he was a couple of years older…whenever we were hanging out he was definitely in charge and like, what was happening was in his control. I remember him encouraging me to go online and having a look at stuff and like I was obviously interested.. and I thought that was exciting and we would watch it together almost like excited thinking we were doing something naughty and then yeah I think it was at that point I started watching it.

What this excerpt highlights is that Billy's first exposure to pornography was not one that he sought out for himself, but rather something he was shown and encouraged to engage with by his peers. When asked about what kind of pornography he used to watch of his own volition, Billy highlighted PornHub as the main site where he would engage with "main dashboard content". Upon starting high school, however, Billy started specifically seeking out heterosexual teen categories. At this point Billy's relationship with pornography became fraught, as it seemed to simultaneously alleviate and create feelings of anxiety; it provided distraction, but he could not stop watching it. Furthermore, Billy noted in his questionnaire that while pornography acted as an agent for the release of sexual and emotional tension, it also increased his sex-drive and feelings of aggression. It was only after Billy had left school that he started exploring differing types of pornography. This was when he realised he was bisexual. As he came to terms with his bisexuality, the type of pornography he watched shifted from predominantly heterosexual to almost entirely homosexual/gay pornography. This shift provided Billy the opportunity to question the types of pornography he had been engaging with, and reselect those which supported his health and wellbeing more positively. Gay pornography continues to be the main type of pornography that Billy engages with today, and he now describes his relationship with pornography as healthy and more manageable. Some key ideas that arose from our conversations about pornography will be explored throughout the following sections of this chapter, including discussions on consent, sex, sexuality, and gender.

The ‘pornographised’ aesthetic of sex

Many young people experience an awkward and/or uncomfortable conversation with their parent(s)/caregiver(s) about sex; specifically, the ‘mechanics of sex’. In our conversation about this, Billy stated the message from his parents was simply “don’t get anyone pregnant, wear a condom, and don’t get an STI”. This is also the message most public/state secondary schools preach in their (often singular, if at all existing) sex education class(es) (Ferfolja, 2016; Goldstein, 2020), which most young people find unhelpful (Talbot et al., 2018). What is largely absent from these discussions with young people is dialogue around sexual pleasure, as well as appropriate and diverse information about sex, consent, and sexualities. For Billy, this meant that online pornography was one of his first introductions to sex-as-pleasure, and it also became his first template for how to have heterosex. Some learnings Billy gained from this are reflected in our conversation below:

> **Billy:** Like there’s an aesthetic to porn, that’s the priority. You look at porn and like they [the performers] look good, they don’t sweat, they’re not smelly, the sex isn’t messy or awkward, and like, how they fuck is choreographed, right, so it looks good for the camera, um, and so you kind of have an idea about what sex looks like and so I think I internalised that like when you’re having sex in the sense that like maybe you feel uncomfortable if it’s not aesthetically like what porn looks and sounds like… sex looked and was performed a certain way with certain processes, and for me yeah that created a sense of anxiety around not being good at it or not even being able to do it and ejaculating too soon and stuff… It was difficult to know where the aesthetics stopped and the realities of sex began.. I had to unlearn parts of what I was shown and try base it back in reality again so that it felt real, you know?

> **Sam:** Yeah that makes sense, especially because you watched porn before experiencing sex in real life, I imagine that might have impacted a lot of things for you.
>
> **Billy:** I guess that's why they try keep it away from young people because the chances of them being mature enough, or in the right mind-space of being able to deal with it appropriately isn't that high.. which is sad. I don't know. I guess it comes down to what parts of it someone takes on as real and what they don't, having that distinction…I'm not sure how many young people are able to distinguish between what is specific to the porn aesthetic and what is real sex without having experience or education.
>
> **Sam:** Yeah, that's a good point.

What is evident here is that heterosexual pornography taught Billy that sex looks, and is performed, a certain way. What arose from this for Billy was a sense of performance anxiety due to his thinking that what he was seeing in pornography was a realistic portrayal of sexual behaviours and practices. This meant that when Billy went to have sex for the first time, he expected it to be a clean, scentless, and fantastic experience. Given his worry around ejaculating too quickly, this suggests Billy also thought he had to last as long as the porn performers, which is, for most people with penises, impossible without pharmaceutical assistance (Malamuth et al., 2012). Interestingly, as identified in chapter two, similar expectations were found in Crabbe and Corlett's (2011; 2018) research which explored young peoples' engagement with online pornography in terms of how it may impact their expectations around sexual behaviours and practices. One aspect reiterated by their male participants was that the preconceptions pornography had created for them about what was 'normal' and what young women wanted meant their experience of having sex for the first time ended up being very different from almost everything they expected and thought to be normal. According to Talbot et al. (2018) and Watkins (2018), this is more common for people who are exposed to pornography before experiencing sex in real life. Although, it should be noted that pornography can also influence peoples' expectations around what is accepted and normal in sexual relations long after experiencing sex for the first time (Keene, 2019). As such, Billy is far from alone in his experience of thinking that the sex acts and routines portrayed in online pornography were realistic, and therefore normal and expected.

A pattern here seems to be that it is predominantly young men who are influenced by pornography in this way. For example, Keene (2019) and Crabbe and Corlett (2018) discussed how young women reported that the men in their lives often wanted to try things they had seen in pornography, and that it was obvious when engaging in (hetero)sex with them that their sexual routines and behaviours had come from pornographic videos. These young women responded differently to pornography in that they often tended to feel obligated to engage in these (hetero)sex acts when asked, rather than entitled to receive/perform them (Crabbe and Corlett, 2016; Keene, 2019). What this may speak to is that the type of pornography most people engage with (otherwise known as 'mainstream pornography') is produced for a straight cis-male audience (DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016). For example, Sostar et al. (2015) contend that mainstream pornography "operates within hegemonic norms of gender (cis-identified), sexuality (heteronormative), and commerce (capitalist, free enterprise)" (p. 199). This may explain why young people are influenced by pornography in the ways described, as the pornography they predominantly engage with often centres dominant and normative notions of men's eroticism and (hetero)sexuality whilst simultaneously positioning women as subservient to, or satisfying, their desires (Gavey, 2005).

One way to make further sense of this is by employing Butler's framework of performativity. To explain, constructions of masculinity and femininity are developed over the course of childhood (Gåden, 2012), long before most people engage with online pornography for the first time (see Talbot et al., 2018, for more information). What Butler (1990) argues is that this development of masculinity and femininity occurs via the performative effect of repeated gendered expressions which in effect become dominant and normative discourse. In other words, people enact gendered norms and ideals in order to be recognised as normal and natural, and thus avoid social ostracism. This construction of masculinity and femininity is said to be closely related to constructs of heterosexuality, as well as power and subordination (Connell, 2002). From this it could be argued that the (cis)gender and (hetero)sexual dynamics young people are faced with when they first engage with pornography are already somewhat normalised and naturalised in their everyday lives. In this way, young people – particularly young men – are primed to perceive these (cisgender and heterosexual) dynamics as normal, natural, and accepted.

Moreover, engagement with pornography is often expected of young men and can even be experienced as a kind of ‘rite of passage’ to being sexual (Speed et al., 2021). For example, Billy stated that when he was at high school, all boys were expected to be watching pornography or risk being “mocked” (read: ostracised) for being a “pussy”. In this way, it seems young men receive a certain social reward for engaging with pornography – a reward which signifies their masculine status among their male peers. This could mean that young men perform the act of engaging with pornography in order to confer masculinity, which may explain why it has been, and continues to be, such a common activity amongst them. For instance, Crabbe and Corlett (2018) found that the vast majority of young men are actively engaging with pornography by age 17, if not younger. This may (also) be linked to the ways pornography often frames and positions men in (hetero)sex as dominant, in control, and agentic where women are commonly positioned as passive recipients of men’s desires (Gavey, 2005; 2019), as their perceived social status is reflected and reproduced. As such, this may inspire men to want to perform what they see in pornography with their partners. This is not to suggest men necessarily want to have dominance over women/others in real life, but that the normative scripts of (hetero)sexuality that pornography portrays may lead men (and sometimes women) to believe that the (hetero)sex acts depicted are normal and expected. Hence, as experienced by Billy, a ‘pornographised aesthetic of sex’ is adopted as a model for what sex should look, sound, feel, and be like. Following this, Billy and I talked about the ways he has been trying to ‘unlearn’ this. The following section centres on this conversation.

A process of unlearning

The ‘pornographised aesthetic of sex’ is something Billy talked about not only as explained above, but also with regards to his learning that sex was a “purely physical act” in that “the sex in pornography seemed to only be about the physical acts of sex”. This meant that Billy did not realise there was also an emotional component to engaging in sex and has only recently been attempting to (re)connect with himself and others in that capacity:

> I’m putting a lot more energy into making my sexual experiences more personal lately, being present the whole time.. before I was just carrying out an action, a process, and I wasn’t actively trying to be involved in feeling that emotional connection as well as physical, so that’s something I’m figuring out.

What Billy is speaking to here is an area of sex and sexuality that online pornography is (currently) incapable of encompassing. Pornographic videos are filmed and produced for the screen, meaning they cannot elicit the emotional connections that can otherwise occur when engaging in sex in real life. What this points to is the disconnect that can arise between the physicality and the emotionality of sex when pornography is predominantly used as a model for what to expect in sex. As Billy stated, "pornography takes various physical acts of sex, ramps them up and intensifies them, and makes them the focal point of sex routines". As such, throughout his teen years Billy:

> ...did not grasp the amount of connection you feel during sex that is outside the physical, and I think that was because porn was my primary influence. I think that's why I was so confused when my experiences didn't match my expectations as I thought it was only physical. It was through having more sex in real life that I have grown a better relationship with sex and my sexuality.

What this speaks to is the process of unlearning and relearning that Billy has only recently started to undertake. From this, Billy is hoping to get to know his eroticism and sexuality/ies through a more emotional lens, and he wants to experience intimacy and connection at deeper levels, both with himself and with other people in sexual ways – something he acknowledges pornography has "really messed up".

One way to begin unpacking this is by utilising Gavey's concept of cultural scaffolding. As explained in chapter five, central to cultural scaffolding are the dominant and normative discourse surrounding social phenomena (Gavey, 2005; 2019). Drawing from earlier explanations of the ways (mainstream) pornography operates within hegemonic norms of (cis)gender and (hetero)sexuality, the discourse pornography uses thus relate to these constructions of identity (Hall et al., 2019). For example, in previous sections and chapters within this thesis, various social constructions of gender have been outlined in relation to discourse and pornography (e.g., the notion that men are physical where women are emotional). These also apply here in terms of how they pattern (cis)gender and (hetero)sexuality. However, another discourse that (heterosexual) pornography heavily draws on is the conflation of sex with penile penetration (of the vagina), which Gavey (2005; 2019) labels 'the coital imperative'. Gavey (2019) argues that the coital imperative "reinforces gender relations of power through which women's (and men's) choices and control in heterosex are compromised" (p. 8). This is because the coital imperative positions penetration as the main (and sometimes only) event in heterosex, which is true for almost all heterosexual pornography (Gavey, 2005; 2019).

This follows what Billy experienced from pornography in that physical acts of sex (namely penetration) were centred and intensified, which told him that sex was “purely physical”. From this it seems there was no room for Billy to explore other (more emotional, relational, or intimate) ways of engaging in sex, as no other representations were made available to him (socially, culturally, nor within mainstream pornography). This is possibly also true for the men in Crabbe et al. (2018) and Keene’s (2019) studies, who, for the most part, seemed primarily focused on re-enacting the physical acts they saw in pornography. Perhaps they, too, were unaware that there could be more to sex (and identity) than what is (re)presented in (heterosexual) pornography. In this way, (heterosexual) pornography contributes to the cultural scaffolding of cisgender and heterosexuality as power structures which act to normalise and naturalise the privileging of men’s sexual pleasure and desire over that of women. In my view, it was this that Billy was trying to “unlearn” and break away from in order to get to know sex, as well as his sexuality, more intuitively, emotionally, and sexually.

Figuring out sexual consent

The conversations Billy and I had about sexual consent were illuminating. One aspect that stood out to me was the apparent ease with which Billy spoke about how he conceptualised and experienced sexual consent as a teenager. What came to light from this was that, even though Billy “knew intuitively that consent was important” when engaging in sexual relations with somebody else, he still had to figure out what consent looked, sounded, and felt like on his own as a teenager:

> I had to figure a lot of stuff out around consent and stuff on my own, like at first with sex and consent it was just speculative, I’m like what is it, what are you doing, and I think it was like if they want to have sex with you like, how do you know? You don’t really think about having a serious conversation.

What is interesting here is that as a teenager Billy did not think to have a conversation about consent before, during, or after engaging in sexual relations with someone. This may speak to his ignorance of the importance of such dialogue, and it could also reflect a potential lack of knowledge around how to engage in conversation about consent in the first place. Like Billy, participants in Stathopoulos's (2013) study also spoke to the ways they engaged in sex acts with others, and how asking for consent was not something that they thought about doing. For example, one participant spoke about ejaculating on a young woman's face without asking her if that was something she wanted or would enjoy. Because of this, the young woman felt humiliated and degraded. Furthermore, participants in Crabbe and Corlett's (2018) study, which reported via short film findings from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Northern Europe, suggest a similar trend. Of particular note was an interview with a young man who described a scenario where he "tried doing anal but she didn't like it, so I tried making her give me a blow job – didn't like it, so I blew all over her but she didn't like that either" (00:24:43). What is obvious from both of these studies is that these young men, similar to Billy, did not realise the importance of asking for consent.

It is important to note here that Billy, as well as the participants in Stathopoulos (2013) and Crabbe and Corlett (2018), were, at the time, learning about sex from online pornography. As explained in the previous sections of this chapter, these learnings are almost entirely centred around men's eroticism and the physical aspects of sex alone. Additionally, online pornography is becoming increasingly recognised for is its potentially problematic depictions of sexual consent (Fried, 2020). When asked about what he may have learned about sexual consent from pornography, Billy told me "I don't think I learned anything about consent from pornography". This was surprising, as I thought Billy (as reflective and deep-thinking as he was) may realise a connection between the ways he had learned about various sex acts and routines from pornography and his experience of not realising the importance of having conversations about consent. More surprising still, however, is that this is common – young people often seem to think they do not learn anything about sexual consent from pornography, even though pornography (re)presents various, and often problematic, discourse around sexual consent (Willis et al., 2020). Willis et al. (2020) elucidated examples of some of these discourses in pornographic films, including: 'explicit verbal consent is not natural', 'women are indirect where men are direct', 'sex can happen without ongoing communication', 'lower-order behaviours (e.g., non-penetrative activities) do not require explicit consent', and 'people receiving sexual behaviours can consent by doing nothing'. The idea that young people are seemingly unable to recognise any learning about sexual consent from these discourse in pornography may speak to how subliminal this messaging can be. This also highlights the possibility that such discourses are perceived as normal or natural, which shores up questions about where else young people may learn about sexual consent and consent more generally (consciously or otherwise).

One way to make sense of the messaging described above is to employ Gavey's cultural scaffolding, through which dominant and normative discourse surrounding sexual consent in (western) culture can be elucidated and contextualised. For example, a widely endorsed discourse here seems to be that communicating consent verbally is not normal (Curtis & Burnett, 2017). Reasons for this include the just-as-common discourse that asking for consent can ruin the mood (Foubert et al., 2006), as well as social norms that suggest people should not talk about sex (Curtis & Burnett, 2017). What this may reveal is that young people are implicitly encouraged to rely on non-verbal cues of consent. This can be problematic for a number of reasons, one of which is provided by Billy, who stated "it was so, so easy to misread sexual behaviour and get it wrong". Building on this is Gavey (2019) who suggests other discourses around sexual consent can be communicated through the various misogynistic constellations of victim-blaming, dehumanizing jokes and comments, and trivialising depictions of rape present in both pornography and wider society. For example "the rape jokes, the slut-shaming, the rape myths…the locker room banter" (Gavey, 2019, p. 228; 231), each of which act to stoke a (heterosexual) gender order which privileges men and subordinates women. Billy stated that he "grew up hearing a lot of victim-blaming and slut-shaming messages in school, at home, and from wider media and society", and that "there was definitely a double standard around how boys who had sex were treated compared to girls, but I didn't recognise that until way later". Gavey (2019) suggests that these discourses undermine (young) people's capacity to understand their rights and responsibilities when it comes to asking for (and giving) consent. It is in this way that these discourses, which seem to render consent ambiguous, lay the foundation for sexual violence to occur and thus become the cultural scaffolding of rape culture. Pornography's contribution to this is in its maintenance, (re)production, (re)circulation, and further normalisation of these discourses.

"Everybody's watching it but nobody's watching it"

Although my central foci is the role pornography plays in the lives of young people and what they may learn about sex, consent, gender, and sexuality, I want to take a step back and examine some of the conditions which may set up pornography to be an increasingly dangerous media for young people to be engaging with on their own. I consider this to be of importance in understanding certain aspects of my participants' experiences with and knowledges from pornography as it adds a deeper layer of context to the findings discussed within this chapter and in chapter five. This will be one of the goals this section works towards, starting with the experiences Billy had with his parents and peers around his pornography consumption.

Billy and I spoke in-depth around the influence his parents and peers had on his engagement with pornography. One thing that came to light from this was the shame that seemed to permeate conversations about pornography throughout Billy's teen years. Illustrating this is the conversation Billy and I had around his parents discovering he had been watching pornography, which led to talking about how it was spoken about in school.

> **Billy:** My mum found some porn in my (internet) history.. I thought I was deleting it but I wasn't.. so like there was a conversation we had to have… I was just completely like ahh I'm doing something terrible I'm going to get told off! The way they dealt with it was by telling me it was something I didn't need to do, but that they understood why I wanted to and that it was normal but at the same time they were saying to me I shouldn't be watching it.
> **Sam:** Sounds like it was confusing.
> **Billy:** I just took it like I was being told off and I shouldn't do it again, that if I'm going to I need to keep it a secret.
> **Sam:** Do you think they were trying to, by saying "it's okay but don't watch it", do you think they were trying to avoid shaming you?
> **Billy:** Potentially, but not navigating in a way that made sense to me… It made me not want to talk about it, because even though they were trying to be understanding it still felt shameful and like I shouldn't be doing it.. there was no conversation around the reasons I shouldn't watch it.
> **Sam:** Sounds like they didn't really know how to have that conversation with you.
> **Billy:** Yeah for sure.
> **Sam:** Like, they didn't have the tools to address it in the way that you needed
> **Billy:** Yeah in the way that I needed I think and because like everyone else is talking about porn at school around me you know it was just this thing that had so much weight.. you know, it just felt like something that you could but couldn't talk about.. it's confusing!
> **Sam:** Everybody's watching it but nobody's watching it!
> **Billy:** Yeah!! Yeah, there're a few things like that! We have these private and public preferences that they talk about and things that they hide but we all know we're hiding.. it's strange!

> **Sam:** Mm. What was the general idea being portrayed when you'd hear about pornography at school? What kinds of things were said about it? What was the tone of conversation? If you can remember..
> **Billy:** Well in school it was like if you're a boy you watch porn or you're a pussy type of thing. I don't remember it ever being talked about individual times watching it, though, there was too much shame.. we'd talk about it with enough candidness where we could talk about porn, but to then go on and admit that you were doing it yourself and finding pleasure from it.. that's a level of personal information and I think it was talked about like it was a secret but also a bit of a joke, kind of laughing it off but knowing we're doing it.. being too explicit would break the illusion, so we had to talk about it in a certain way.. I never knew how others were actually feeling about it or experiencing from it. Conversations were mostly around what we watched, strategies, what happened.. but you'd always have to uphold some manner of jokey-ness, otherwise if you put across like you enjoyed it too much you'd be seen as a creep..
> **Sam:** It's awkward being a teenager, isn't it?
> **Billy:** Yeah, super awkward!

Alongside the shame Billy experienced from conversations about pornography with his parents and peers, what this passage of conversation highlights is the whirlpool of multifaceted discourses he received about watching pornography. For example, throughout high school Billy often heard the message "if you're a boy, you watch pornography or you're a pussy". As such, all the boys in his school seemed to watch and talk positively about pornography. What this conveyed to Billy was that he should also be watching and talking about pornography in order to maintain the approval and acceptance of his male peers. However, talking about pornography with said peers was only acceptable when approached in impersonal, objective, and light-hearted ways (a phenomenon also found by Keene, 2019), which communicated to Billy that his personal experiences with, and real feelings about, pornography were shameful. This was reflected when Billy stated "if you put across like you enjoyed it too much you'd be seen as a creep, like you weren't supposed to enjoy it". On the other hand, Billy's parents had told him he "didn't need to be doing that" and that he "shouldn't be watching it", which Billy took to further affirm that his pornography consumption was shameful and wrong.

Interestingly, although sometimes oppositional in language, each of these discourses had the effect of shutting down opportunity for authentic, honest conversations around what Billy was feeling and experiencing from his engagements with pornography (e.g., increased performance anxiety, increased feelings of aggression, increased sex-drive, and negative perceptions of sex, among other things). What this affirms is how potent discourses can be in shaping the ways people think and behave, as Billy felt it was necessary to maintain secrecy around his pornography habits. This ultimately meant he was alone in trying to make sense of and manage the information he was receiving (from pornography) about consent, sex, sexuality, and gender, as well as the damaging effects it had on his wellbeing and relationships.

It is important to realise that many young people experience shame about their pornography consumption and struggle to ask for help with managing their consumption (Crabbe & Corlett, 2011). In the previous chapter, for instance, Sung-Ho stated that it would have been helpful for him to have had an adult talk with him about pornography in "non-shaming and appropriate ways" when he was a child and teenager. Also illustrating this was Talbot et al. (2018), who found that young people are asking for more support, guidance, and high quality education around their engagements with pornography, as they often have difficulty managing the sometimes disturbing content they see. For example, young people reported that sometimes they could not stop watching it, or it negatively altered their perceptions of sex/other people. However, like Billy and Sung-Ho, these young people did not have access to readily available and/or approachable safe spaces, or people, to ask questions and express their concerns. It instead seems that by the time they received help or guidance (if at all), their perceptions (and experiences) of sex, sexuality, and their wellbeing had already been negatively impacted in ways discussed throughout this chapter and chapter five. This is why, in this thesis, I have examined the conditions that can set up pornography to be potentially harmful to young people. What has come to light is that young people often experience anguish around pornography in isolation. As such, young people need to receive more appropriate, high quality, and effective support with, and education about, online pornography in order to mitigate the ever increasing risk of harm; at this point it would be negligent to deny this.

Chapter summary

Throughout this chapter I have discussed Billy's experiences and knowledges surrounding online pornography. Of particular interest were the ways Billy learned about sex and sexual consent through online (heterosexual) pornography. This included the example of how Billy carried a lot of performance anxiety and false expectations into his first experiences of sexual relations because he, alongside many other young people, thought the pornographised aesthetic of sex portrayed in pornographic videos was realistic. Butler's performativity was used to make sense of this, which surfaced ideas around young men being primed to perceive the sex acts and routines in pornography as normal and accepted. Furthermore, Billy's engagement with pornography also impacted how he conceptualised sex in general, as pornography taught him sex was purely physical. Billy is now attempting to unlearn the heteronormative routines of pornographic sex, and instead connect with a sexuality he enjoys. This was contextualised using Gavey's cultural scaffolding, which helped to elucidate the ways certain discourses, such as the coital imperative, may lead young people (particularly young men) to think sex is a primarily physical act.

In our conversations about sexual consent, Billy claimed he did not learn anything about it from pornography. However, after examining various normative discourse surrounding sexual consent within western culture, what came to light was that there is a cultural scaffolding of consent as being ambiguous, which lays the foundation for sexual assault to occur and ultimately acts to perpetuate rape culture. Lastly, I discussed how Billy was left alone to manage the (often negative) effects online pornography had on his wellbeing and his perceptions of sex and sexuality. This highlighted the need for more adequate and appropriate support, guidance, and education around what young people in general see and hear in pornography in order to mitigate the risk of (otherwise likely) harm.

Chapter seven: Conclusion

My experiences of sexual violence, my understanding of sociocultural structures that normalise and perpetuate this violence, as well as my questioning of the role pornography may play in this, were the catalysts for this thesis. I began this thesis with a reflection on some experiences of abuse at the hands of boys and men. This provided context for my (often rage-fuelled) passion for social justice. I was, and still am, deeply interested in why people – particularly those who harm others – behave in the ways they do. I also continue to be intrigued by the ways pornography may contribute to this, particularly with regard to young people and sexual consent.

After engaging with copious amounts of scholarly works on young people and pornography, as well as the potential correlations between pornography consumption, misogyny, and sexual violence (against women), sex/sexuality education approaches, and various theories used to understand possible impacts pornography can have for young people, I noticed a few key themes. First, that pornography is currently the primary source of sex education for young people (e.g., Lim, et al., 2017; Pearson, 2018; Talbot et al., 2018; Watkins, 2018). Second, young people are often troubled by what they see in pornography, which can negatively impact their wellbeing if they do not receive effective and/or appropriate support or guidance (e.g., Crabbe and Corlett, 2011; 2018; Goldstein, 2020; Stathopoulos, 2013; Talbot et al., 2018; Watkins, 2018). Third, sex/sexuality education does not often include pornography and consent in curriculum (e.g., Goldstein, 2020). Fourth, contention between scholars who attempt to elucidate the harms of pornography (e.g., Boyle, 2010; McGowan, 2017; Tranchese and Sugiura, 2021; Willis et al., 2020; Ybarra, 2011), and those who aim to highlight potential positive impacts (e.g., Eaton, 2017; McCormack and Wignall, 2017) or contest that harm may not exist (e.g., Speed et al., 2021) is rife. Additionally, due to this dichotomy, much of the literature can be categorised into ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ approaches to pornography, which often exacerbates ‘moral panic’ in communities when conversations about pornography surface (e.g., Davis et al., 2019). As such, I was motivated to explore the roles pornography can play in young peoples’ sexual and social lives, particularly in relation to how sex, sexual consent, sexuality, and gender are depicted and what young people may learn from this. To guide my examination I formulated two research questions:

> *What do young people learn about sex, sexuality, and/or gender from online pornography?*
> *How might young peoples' engagements with online pornography shape their understandings of sexual consent?*

To be able to examine this research topic as deeply and effectively as I could, I chose to utilise qualitative, exploratory, narrative enquiry methods, which were underpinned by a queer sex-positive feminist theoretical framework. By engaging in semi-structured interviews, as well as making use of questionnaires and journaling, I was able to sit with and help participants share their knowledges, experiences, and stories around their engagements with pornography in ways which supported their safety and authenticity. When transcribing and analysing participants' interviews I drew on a discourse analysis method, as this allowed me to realise patterns between responses, as well as how participants' thoughts and reflections could be connected to their social and cultural experiences. In this way, I was not attempting to construct 'truths' about pornography, but to understand and make further sense of the roles pornography played in participants' social and sexual lives. Converging queer and feminist theories further strengthened and added depth to this understanding as it allowed for local, specific, social, cultural, and structural analyses to take place.

It is important to acknowledge that, due to its short-term and qualitative nature, my research was not able to fully express the complex realities of participants' relationships to pornography. This thesis was also unable (nor did it attempt) to completely capture the multifaceted layers of participants' socialisation and life experiences which may have shaped their perceptions, thoughts, and reflections around pornography, sex, sexual consent, sexualities, and gender. What this thesis speaks to is that there is no universal 'truth' to the ways pornography and other phenomena can impact and influence people's lives. However, what this research suggests is an idea of what *could* be true for *some* young people growing up in the wake of an ever-increasing access to internet-enabled technologies in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Also important to consider are the ways the structure of the questionnaire and journal, as well as how I guided interviews, have brought about my research findings. Had I selected alternative methods, such as focus groups, my results and conclusions may have been quite different. However, the purpose of my research was to provide participants' voices with a platform to be heard. Furthermore, although my research originally managed to garner five participants, the impact of COVID19 meant participation dropped to two. At first I thought this would negatively affect results and analyses, especially with regards to diversity. However, considering the wealth of discussion my participants provided, the small participant number became a strength; I was able to analyse and discuss findings in more depth and with greater attention to detail. With regard to the discussions I had with participants, my positionality as a young cis-woman may have impacted my results as the interviews were with young cis-men. However, I am hopeful that the rapport I built with Sung-Ho and Billy helped to bridge our differences in identity and support their sense of confidence and safety throughout interviews.

Overview of research findings

Online pornography is currently the primary source of sex education for young people (Talbot et al., 2018). Unfortunately, it is a very poor source of education (Crabbe & Corlett, 2018) and young people are often troubled by what they see (Talbot et al., 2018). Interestingly, young people will commonly state that they understand online pornography is fake, but then go on to describe the ways their engagements with it have shaped their experiences and expectations (Crabbe & Corlett, 2018). From this it seems clear that online pornography can play a large role in young peoples' social and sexual lives. As such, throughout this chapter I will present the key findings from my research around what participants learned about sexual consent from online (heterosexual) pornography, as well as how their engagements with this pornography influenced their understandings of sex, sexualities, and/or gender. These findings will be situated, as in previous chapters, within the wider sociocultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

How did participants think about and understand what they may have learned about sex, sexuality, and/or gender from online pornography?

The increasingly aggressive nature of much online (mainstream) pornography remains a key concern for those researching into pornography (Crabbe & Corlett, 2018; Keene, 2019). Key here is that this increasing aggression, at least within heterosexual pornography, remains highly gendered in that most aggression is targeted at women, by men (Keene, 2019). What is revealed throughout the discussions in this thesis is that participants' experiences with, and knowledges from, online (heterosexual) pornography are complex, nuanced, and, unsurprisingly, cisheteronormative.

Findings in this area were interconnected. For example, the ways pornography may have shaped participants' understanding of sexuality also had an influence on the ways they conceptualised sex and/or gender, or vice versa. This reflected the ways (cis)gender and (hetero)sexuality are constructed in close relation to the other (Connell, 2002). On the other hand, however, participants' experiences and knowledges were quite different. Findings are therefore presented as such, beginning with Sung-Ho.

Sung-Ho explicitly linked his (hetero)sexual desire for BDSM pornography to his (cis)gender identity. This suggested that what influenced Sung-Ho's attraction to BDSM pornography was more complex than 'natural desire'. In exploring this more deeply with Sung-Ho, what came to light was that he conceptualised gender in binary terms. For example, Sung-Ho perceived himself as "more logical than emotional", as well as "extremely aggressive", which are closely linked to traditional (albeit still potent) notions of masculinity. The pornography Sung-Ho engaged with also reflected this understanding, as the male performers were typically the ones in control and with sexual desire, where the women were positioned as satisfying men's (or the audiences) desires. This highlighted the 'male sexual drive' discourse as a cultural resource Sung-Ho had drawn on to make sense of his (cis)gender, sexual desire, and (hetero)sexuality. Whether Sung-Ho learned this from the pornography he engaged with or elsewhere is unclear. However, what is apparent is that pornography did not provide Sung-Ho with any differing narratives.

Billy, on the other hand, was less conscious of what he may have learned about gender and sexuality from his engagements with online pornography. Although, interestingly, the ways pornography shaped Billy's understandings of sex and sexuality were also highly gendered. For example, Billy stated that because the sex depicted in pornography is predominantly focused on the physical aspects of male performance and pleasure meant he then understood sex and his role in sexual routines in this way. Because of this, Billy did not realise there was also an emotional component to sex, which had a negative impact on Billy's sexual relationships, both with himself as well as others. These ideals around sex that pornography depicts can be linked to dominant and normative masculine ideals which privilege physicality and action over the more (traditionally) feminine notion of emotionality. Furthermore, Billy also believed that what he saw in pornographic videos was realistic and portrayed what was expected of him (and others) during sex. This meant Billy experienced heightened sexual performance anxiety, as well as a skewed perception of what was accepted and normal. What was most concerning here was that this also had an impact on how Billy understood sexual consent, which will be explained in the section below.

How did online pornography shape participants' understandings of sexual consent?

Despite the decades-long debate around the validity of studies which attempt to link pornography consumption to sexual violence, there still remains a scarcity of research which has examined potential relationships between pornography use and understandings of sexual consent. Considering sexual (non)consent is fundamental to sexual violence, this surprised me. I had rather thought that, at least for those who consider pornography to be harmful, such research would have been obvious. However, this remains a key gap in the literature, which is where this thesis has contributed original findings. Explained below are my findings around how online pornography may have shaped participants' understandings of sexual consent.

Sung-Ho and Billy experienced online pornography differently to one another. For example, Sung-Ho watched "violent and aggressive" pornography as a young child and teenager, whereas Billy engaged with "main dashboard content" from the age of twelve and throughout his teen years. Both types of pornography acted to reinforce their pre-existing conceptualisations of sexual consent, however. For Sung-Ho, this was the idea that nonconsent was normal and natural, whereas for Billy it was the notion that consent was ambiguous, somewhat unintelligible, and less of a priority.

Sung-Ho's long history of abuse meant he did not learn about consent until he was a young adult. Because of this Sung-Ho spent his childhood and teen years believing BDSM pornography was "like punishment", and that this perceived abuse (and in turn, the abuse he was receiving in real life) was normal and accepted. This normalisation of nonconsent seemed to be one thing that allowed Sung-Ho to turn a blind eye to the violence he was seeing in pornography and instead enjoy the sexual gratification he received from it. However, as illustrated by Antevska and Gavey (2015), attitudes of nonchalance towards violence (against women) in pornography is common for men who regularly consume it.

Billy, on the other hand, knew as a teenager that sexual consent was important. What Billy found difficult was interpreting implicit, non-verbal cues of consent accurately. In this way, Billy had to figure out what various cues of consent looked, sounded, and felt like on his own, as initially he did not realise cues of consent could be implicit. This lead to some difficult experiences for Billy, because even though his consent-reading skills improved over time, a lot of his initial sexual interactions with others easily went wrong. What this illuminated was that implicit communication of (non)consent had not been modelled or taught to Billy prior to his initial engagements in sexual acts with other people. Because of this, implicit communications of (non)consent were ambiguous and somewhat unintelligible for Billy, and it took conscious effort to learn about them. Furthermore, Billy also did not understand the importance of having conversations about consent before, during, or after engaging in sexual acts with somebody else, which highlighted how Billy thought of such conversations as unnecessary or unimportant. What Billy's experiences may point to is a wider cultural undervaluing of consent-based communication and/or sexual practices, which, as noted earlier, online pornography reflects and reproduces to its viewers.

Interestingly, both Sung-Ho and Billy thought they did not learn 'anything' about sexual consent from their engagements with pornography. What this suggests is that because the pornography they were engaging with was (in some ways) reflecting their subjective realities and what they thought to be normal with regard to sexual consent, the discourse around sexual consent, or nonconsent, that pornography (re)presented was subliminal and therefore invisible. This meant Sung-Ho and Billy were unable to challenge their ideas around what sexual consent looked, sounded, and felt like until they were either presented with differing information, or had consciously figured it out for themselves. In this way, the pornography they were engaging with did not act as an adversary, but rather a reinforcer of pre-conceived notions of sexual consent. This is concerning considering Sung-Ho thought nonconsent was normal and accepted, and Billy initially did not realise (non)consent could be implicitly communicated. From this I argue that online pornography contributes to the undermining of young people's – particularly young men's – otherwise complex capacity to interpret others' implicit, non-verbal cues of consent accurately. It is important to note, however, that it is difficult to know where and how young people learn to conceptualise sexual consent in the first place, and exploring this was beyond the scope of this research. However, what I suggest is that online (heterosexual) pornography plays a role in shaping young people's understandings of sexual consent; namely that it does not challenge the dominant and normative discourses around it, but instead reflects and (re)produces them. As such, throughout the following sections the findings of this research will be discussed and made sense of within the broader social, cultural, and structural contexts.

Concluding discussion

As with most phenomena, it is important to consider wider social and cultural contexts. It is within these contexts that the ways people think, perceive, speak, and behave can be shaped, maintained, and reproduced. Whilst Sung-Ho's and Billy's experiences and knowledges were discussed and situated within some broader sociocultural contexts throughout chapters five and six, they were analysed individually. What still needs to be considered are the broader contexts which make sense of their experiences and knowledges *together*. As such, the following sections will contextualise the key findings of this research within the cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Heterosexual pornography as normative masculinity

Throughout our conversations about pornography, constructions of normative masculinity were consistently at the fore of both Sung-Ho's and Billy's narratives. As Butler (1990) explains, this is reflective of a society in which structures are founded on, and maintained by, binary constructions of gender which privilege masculinity over femininity. Currently, online (heterosexual) pornography is a powerful cultural institution within Aotearoa New Zealand which relies heavily on normative and binary constructions of masculinity and femininity (Gavey, 2005). Because of this, the discourses it (re)produces are highly (cis)gendered and, because of its mass popularity, can quickly become mainstreamed throughout society. Given that Sung-Ho and Billy's engagements with pornography influenced them in the ways described in the previous sections, what is important to consider here is how pornography is typically curated, who produces it, and for what audience. Much of this is answered by Crabbe and Corlett (2018) as well as Keene (2019), who reiterate that the majority of online heterosexual pornography is produced for men, by men. Statistics on Australian users of Pornhub (one of the most commonly trafficked pornography websites across the world), show that more than 70% of consumers are men (Pornhub, 2021). This overrepresentation of men acts to skew 'mainstream' pornography to depict what men typically want to see over that of women. However, whilst this provides *some* context for why mainstream pornography produces the content that it does, this does not justify the increasing aggression and degradation being curated – the vast majority of which is targeted at women, by men (Crabbe & Corlett, 2021). If anything, this problematises what heterosexual men are typically perceiving as sexually desirable. Central to this might be the ways normative masculinity is constructed within (heterosexual) pornography, as well as within Aotearoa New Zealand society and culture, and how the two intersect.

In order to examine this, it seems prudent to explore the discourses around heterosex that are (re)produced socially, culturally, and by online (heterosexual) pornography itself. Two such discourse are explained and discussed within chapters five and six: the male sexual drive discourse, and the coital imperative discourse. Another potent discourse here which has not yet been mentioned is termed by Hollway (1989) as the ‘permissive discourse’. Such discourse assumes women also have ‘natural sex drives’, the same as men, and are promised as much sexual liberation. Although this may appear to be a positive step forwards for women, this affirmation of women’s sexuality is a façade. This is because the permissive discourse continues to centre men’s sexual interests, meaning women’s sexuality is still viewed and understood through a male gaze and is thus perceived as a ‘masculine sexuality’, instead of being thought of as its own entity (Gavey, 2019). For example, as described by Segal (1983):

> Women, we have been told, were ‘free now as ever before’, yet the underground press was alive with sexist porn imagery of women as ‘chicks’, all c*nts and boobs, ‘happily’ screwed every which way by the steely cock of the urban guerrilla. The ubiquitous symbolism of male conquest and female submission, built into almost every image of heterosexuality, depicted a strange ‘liberation’ for women. (p. 30)

This kind of imagery is still celebrated within online (heterosexual) pornography today at ever-increasing levels (Crabbe & Corlett, 2021). For example, female performers’ sexual boundaries and bodies are being pushed to higher limits and extremes than has been seen before (e.g., deep throat, triple penetration, anal, and fish hooks, among other things) (Crabbe & Corlett, 2021). These acts are also often combined with degrading and dehumanising language (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021). In this way, the permissive discourse, as (re)presented in online (heterosexual) pornography acts to encourage men’s sense of entitlement to women’s bodies, while simultaneously creating parameters within which women are expected to want sex (with men) most of the time (Gavey, 2019). As such, the expectation is being put on women to desire and participate in (hetero)sex in the same ways as men. Examples of this are provided by Crabbe and Corlett (2021) and Keene (2019), as some of the women they interviewed spoke to feeling obliged to desire sex (with their male partners), as well as participate in the pornographic sex acts their male partners wanted to re-enact. Therein, online (heterosexual) pornography maintains and perpetuates the permissive discourse, similar to that of the male sexual drive discourse and the coital imperative discourse. Illustrated here is how masculine notions of (hetero)sexuality are bolstered and (re)produced by online (heterosexual) pornography.

An absence of resistance to dominant portrayals of sexual consent

Discussions about sexual consent and online pornography with Sung-Ho and Billy exposed the weight of this research as they illustrated how difficult it was for them to learn healthy ways to express, as well as interpret, sexual consent. Crucially, these young men were left on their own to figure out for themselves what sexual consent looked, sounded, and felt like. This had a myriad of negative social and sexual impacts on their lives, as relationships (sexual and otherwise) were compromised. However, as Gavey (2019) discusses in her book ‘Just Sex?’, this is to be expected within a culture which does not prioritise or even take seriously notions of consent, particularly that of women. In this way, because pornography reflects and (re)produces the culture in which it is situated (Coleman, 2014), it also does not make sexual consent a priority. What this points to is that the lack of guidance Billy and Sung-Ho received around sexual consent whilst growing up has discursive, cultural, and structural roots.

Considering pornography is a cultural institution, it makes sense to first speak to the ways potentially problematic discourses around notions of sexual consent are deployed within its texts. Some of these discourses were discussed in chapter 6 (see also Willis et al. 2020). These discourses, among others, seem to encourage young people – like Billy and Sung-Ho – to rely on implicit, non-verbal cues of consent which are not always obvious to them. The ways these discourses are deployed in pornographic videos can be seen in the ways sexual acts and pleasure are depicted. For example, Crabbe and Corlett (2018) report that when a hardcore (heterosexual) pornography scene is being filmed, the female performers are required to act like they enjoy and want what is happening. If these women display or communicate experiencing pain, displeasure, or discomfort, the scene has to be filmed again. In this way, pornography does not realistically depict the myriad of ways consent can be given or denied. Rather, it models consent as implicitly always granted (by women, to men). This portrays the idea that sex (and consent) can occur without ongoing communication.

Relatedly, many BDSM pornography videos found on mainstream pornography websites do not portray the context of consent that is, in real life, central to BDSM practices (Simula, 2019). Because of this, communication of consent can be perceived by viewers (subconsciously or otherwise) as unimportant or purposefully ignored. This is where BDSM videos on mainstream pornography sites can inadvertently support the idea that explicit verbal consent is not natural. It should be noted, however, that this is not an issue inherent to BDSM pornography, as some pornographies (e.g., queer and feminist) produce BDSM videos with stronger emphasis and modelling of healthy consent practices and communication (Mondin, 2017). Considering the above, what seems apparent is that most online mainstream pornography does not model consent as an important and/or ongoing process of explicit and implicit communication.

Important to examine here, then, are the ways these sexual consent discourses in pornography, combined with those existing in wider society, act to (re)produce and (re)circulate dominant and normative understandings of consent. One discourse which has been potent throughout Aotearoa New Zealand in recent years is ‘yes means yes / no means no’ (Hakvag, 2009). This discourse suggests that consent needs to be verbal as well as explicit. Additionally, although this may seem like a progressive message, in reality it centres debates of ‘consent versus nonconsent’. Such rhetoric is contentious as it ignores the ways behaviour can be impacted by social norms, socialisation, and/or inequality (Hakvag, 2009). For example, men’s capacity to say ‘no’ might be impacted by the presence of social norms which suggest they should always be ready for sex. Similarly, women’s ability to communicate consent at all is often compromised by looming fears around whether it is safe to do so in the presence of a man who may harm them (Gavey, 2005). Moreover, Sandoz (2021) suggests that centring the need for explicit verbal consent shifts the focus from whether someone is ‘willing’, to whether and how a ‘yes’ can be received. In this way, receiving consent can become a matter of coercing someone to give in and say yes (Sandoz, 2021). This is how the discourse of ‘yes means yes’ can conflate coercion with consent, which in the context of heterosex, means a woman’s ‘no’ is constantly called into question (Gavey, 2005). Perhaps a more appropriate line would be ‘no means no / yes means maybe’. As it stands however, the discourse of no means no / yes means yes builds on the misogynistic constellation of discourses highlighted in chapter six. Together, these discourses act to culturally undermine sexual consent – particularly that of women – in ways that render one’s authentic willingness to consent as unimportant, ambiguous, and somewhat unintelligible.

To combat this, one desired outcome for young people may be that they engage with pornography which models healthy communication of sexual consent and desire (e.g., queer feminist pornography – for more detail, see Ryeberg (2015)). This would at least provide counter-narratives to those that dominate online mainstream pornography. However, for this to be effective young people must first know that different pornographies and consent narratives exist. Further, an understanding of what 'healthy consent' in relationships can look, sound, and feel like is also necessary – something which young people, particularly young men, often have trouble discerning (Crabbe & Corlett, 2011; 2018; Goldstein, 2020). This is why I advocate for mass compulsory sexuality education for young people, of which *must* include the topics of consent and pornography. However, as previously highlighted, young people are often left alone to figure out and manage what they are seeing in and experiencing from online pornography.

As such, combining all normative sexual consent discourse discussed throughout this chapter, as well as those around heterosexuality, heterosex, and cisgender (particularly that of normative masculinity), I contend that online mainstream (heterosexual) pornography, as a discursive field, does not challenge heterosexist understandings of gender or sexuality, nor does it empower individuals to resist or subvert normative notions of identity. Rather, it (re)inforces and (re)circulates cisheteronormative structures and ways of being. In addition, I also argue that online mainstream (heterosexual) pornography contributes to the cultural scaffolding of rape culture, in which sexual violence is easier to perpetrate and harder to address.

Concluding statement

This thesis, to my knowledge, is the first to provide insight into how online pornography may shape young peoples' understandings of sexual consent. New insights are also provided into how young people in Aotearoa New Zealand think about and understand what they may learn about sexual consent, sex, sexuality, and/or gender from online pornography. The findings from this research highlight how critical it is for mass, compulsory, comprehensive, and complex discussions about pornography and consent to be happening within sexuality education curricula. Furthermore, given the global paucity of research into how online pornography can shape young peoples' experiences and knowledges, particularly regarding sexual consent, this thesis serves as an important foundation for future research. Future research should focus on how young people interpret sexual consent when depicted in pornography, as well as how they learn about (sexual) consent more generally.

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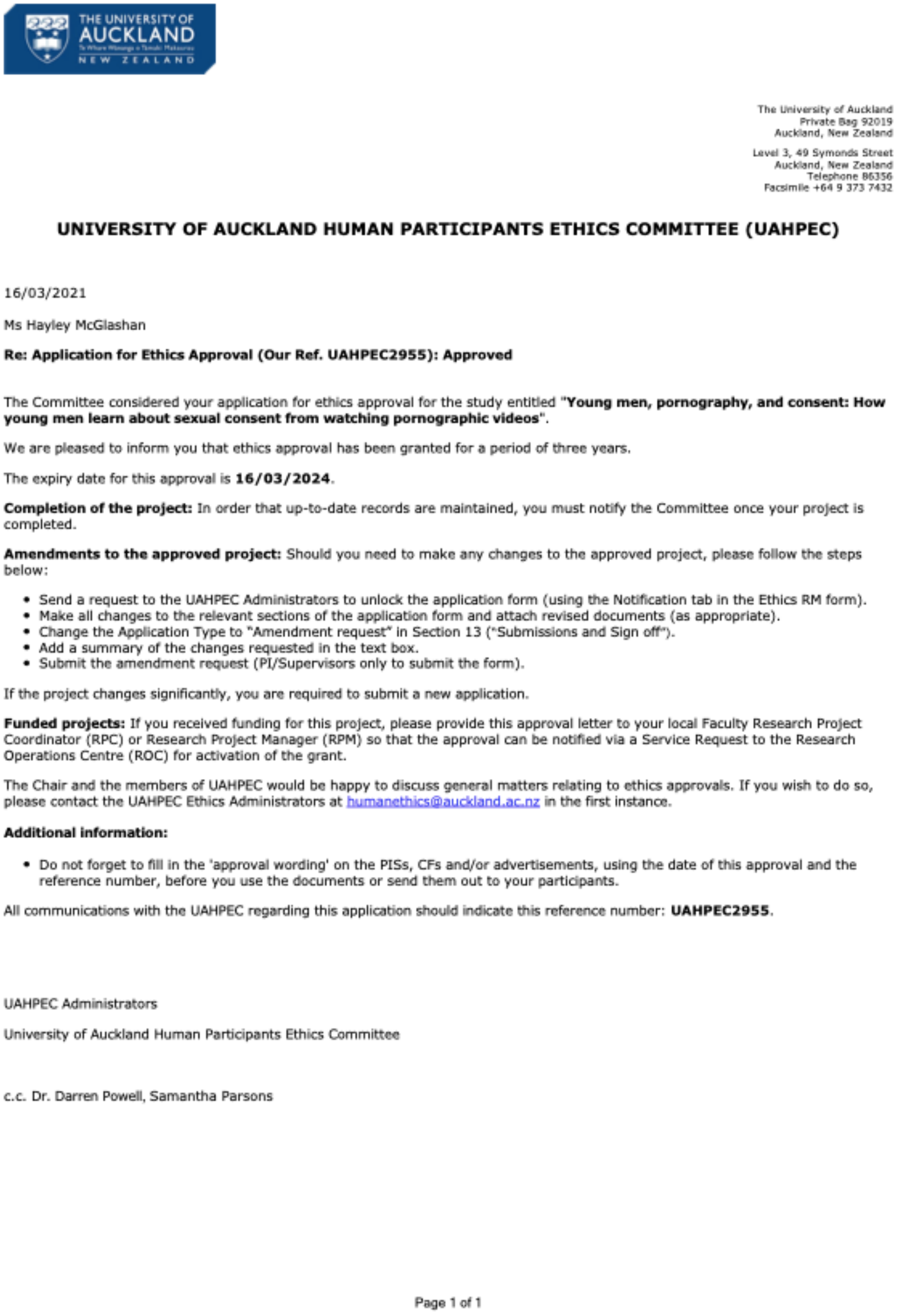
APPENDIX A: Ethics Approval



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UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE (UAHPEC)

16/03/2021

Ms Hayley McGlashan

Re: Application for Ethics Approval (Our Ref. UAHPEC2955): Approved

The Committee considered your application for ethics approval for the study entitled "**Young men, pornography, and consent: How young men learn about sexual consent from watching pornographic videos**".

We are pleased to inform you that ethics approval has been granted for a period of three years.

The expiry date for this approval is **16/03/2024**.

Completion of the project: In order that up-to-date records are maintained, you must notify the Committee once your project is completed.

Amendments to the approved project: Should you need to make any changes to the approved project, please follow the steps below:

- Send a request to the UAHPEC Administrators to unlock the application form (using the Notification tab in the Ethics RM form).
- Make all changes to the relevant sections of the application form and attach revised documents (as appropriate).
- Change the Application Type to "Amendment request" in Section 13 ("Submissions and Sign off").
- Add a summary of the changes requested in the text box.
- Submit the amendment request (PI/Supervisors only to submit the form).

If the project changes significantly, you are required to submit a new application.

Funded projects: If you received funding for this project, please provide this approval letter to your local Faculty Research Project Coordinator (RPC) or Research Project Manager (RPM) so that the approval can be notified via a Service Request to the Research Operations Centre (ROC) for activation of the grant.

The Chair and the members of UAHPEC would be happy to discuss general matters relating to ethics approvals. If you wish to do so, please contact the UAHPEC Ethics Administrators at humanethics@auckland.ac.nz in the first instance.

Additional information:

- Do not forget to fill in the 'approval wording' on the PISs, CFs and/or advertisements, using the date of this approval and the reference number, before you use the documents or send them out to your participants.

All communications with the UAHPEC regarding this application should indicate this reference number: **UAHPEC2955**.

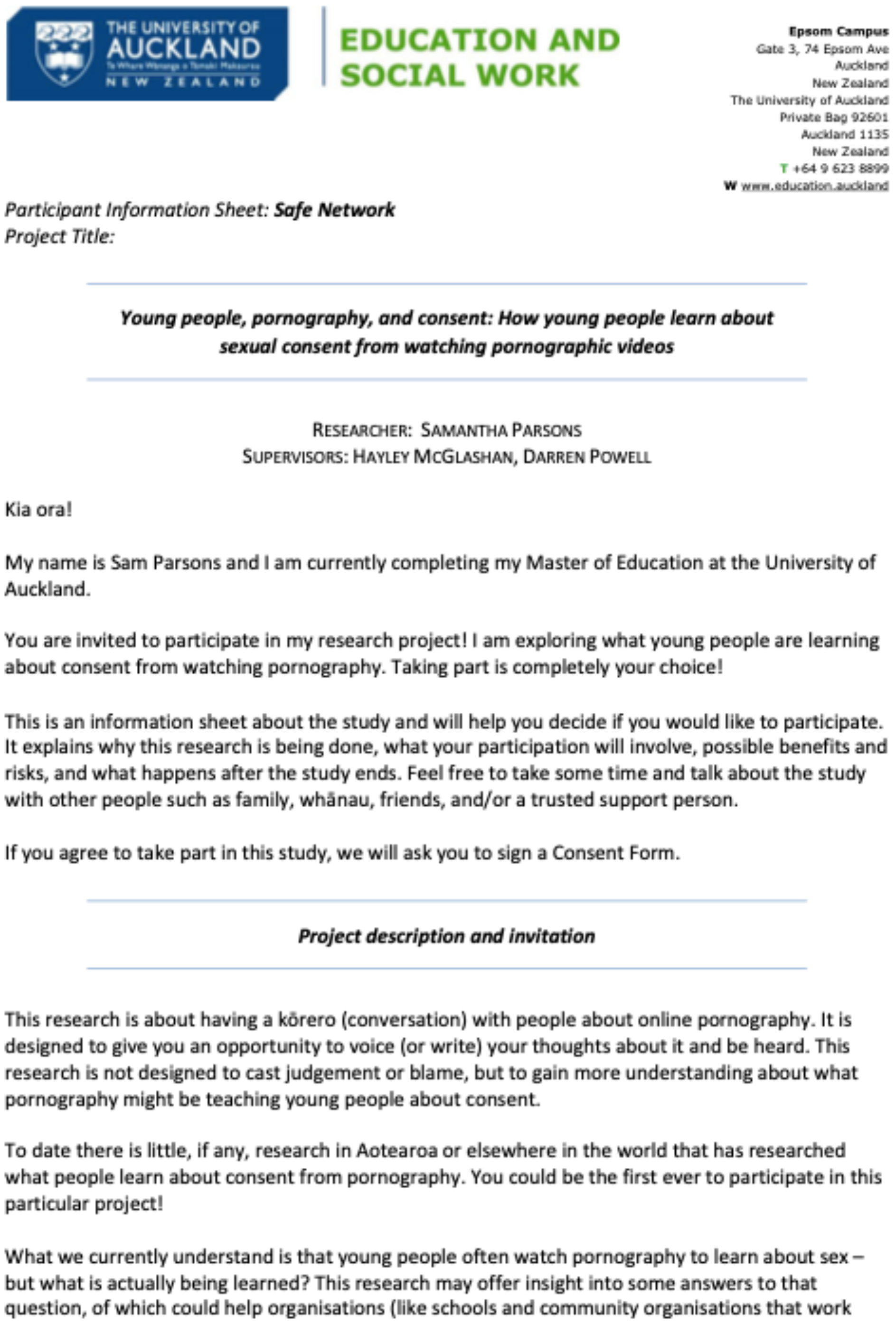
UAHPEC Administrators

University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee

c.c. Dr. Darren Powell, Samantha Parsons

Page 1 of 1

APPENDIX B: Participant information sheet



EDUCATION AND SOCIAL WORK

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Participant Information Sheet: ***Safe Network***
Project Title:

Young people, pornography, and consent: How young people learn about sexual consent from watching pornographic videos

RESEARCHER: SAMANTHA PARSONS
SUPERVISORS: HAYLEY MCGLASHAN, DARREN POWELL

Kia ora!

My name is Sam Parsons and I am currently completing my Master of Education at the University of Auckland.

You are invited to participate in my research project! I am exploring what young people are learning about consent from watching pornography. Taking part is completely your choice!

This is an information sheet about the study and will help you decide if you would like to participate. It explains why this research is being done, what your participation will involve, possible benefits and risks, and what happens after the study ends. Feel free to take some time and talk about the study with other people such as family, whānau, friends, and/or a trusted support person.

If you agree to take part in this study, we will ask you to sign a Consent Form.

Project description and invitation

This research is about having a kōrero (conversation) with people about online pornography. It is designed to give you an opportunity to voice (or write) your thoughts about it and be heard. This research is not designed to cast judgement or blame, but to gain more understanding about what pornography might be teaching young people about consent.

To date there is little, if any, research in Aotearoa or elsewhere in the world that has researched what people learn about consent from pornography. You could be the first ever to participate in this particular project!

What we currently understand is that young people often watch pornography to learn about sex – but what is actually being learned? This research may offer insight into some answers to that question, of which could help organisations (like schools and community organisations that work with young people – such as those in the mental health and wellbeing sector) provide the education that young people need and want in this area. Would you like to be a part of that?

I am looking for up to 8 young people between the ages of 18-24. To participate you must have seen/watched pornography at least once before. Please read this information sheet in full before deciding about participating.

What would participation involve?

During this research you will be asked to fill out a questionnaire, answer some questions in a journal, and take part in three interviews OR focus groups (on University of Auckland premises) with the researcher.

Interviews will happen once a week, therefore the study will take place over 3-4 weeks and will require around 4 hours of your time in total across these weeks (including writing in the journal).

QUESTIONNAIRE:
The questionnaire will have 25 questions, of which will mostly be around personal details such as age, gender, sexuality, culture, ethnicity; background information such as the type of area you grew up in (rural, town, city), your relationship with your parent(s)/caregiver(s), and some questions around consent. It will also ask questions about your past pornography use, such as the frequency at which you would watch it, why you may have continued to watch it, how pornography may have influenced your understanding of sex and sexuality, and how pornography may have influenced your understanding and/or interpretation of consent.

JOURNAL:
In your journal you can write down any thoughts or reflections you may have about consent and pornography – sometimes it can be easier to write things down than speak them!

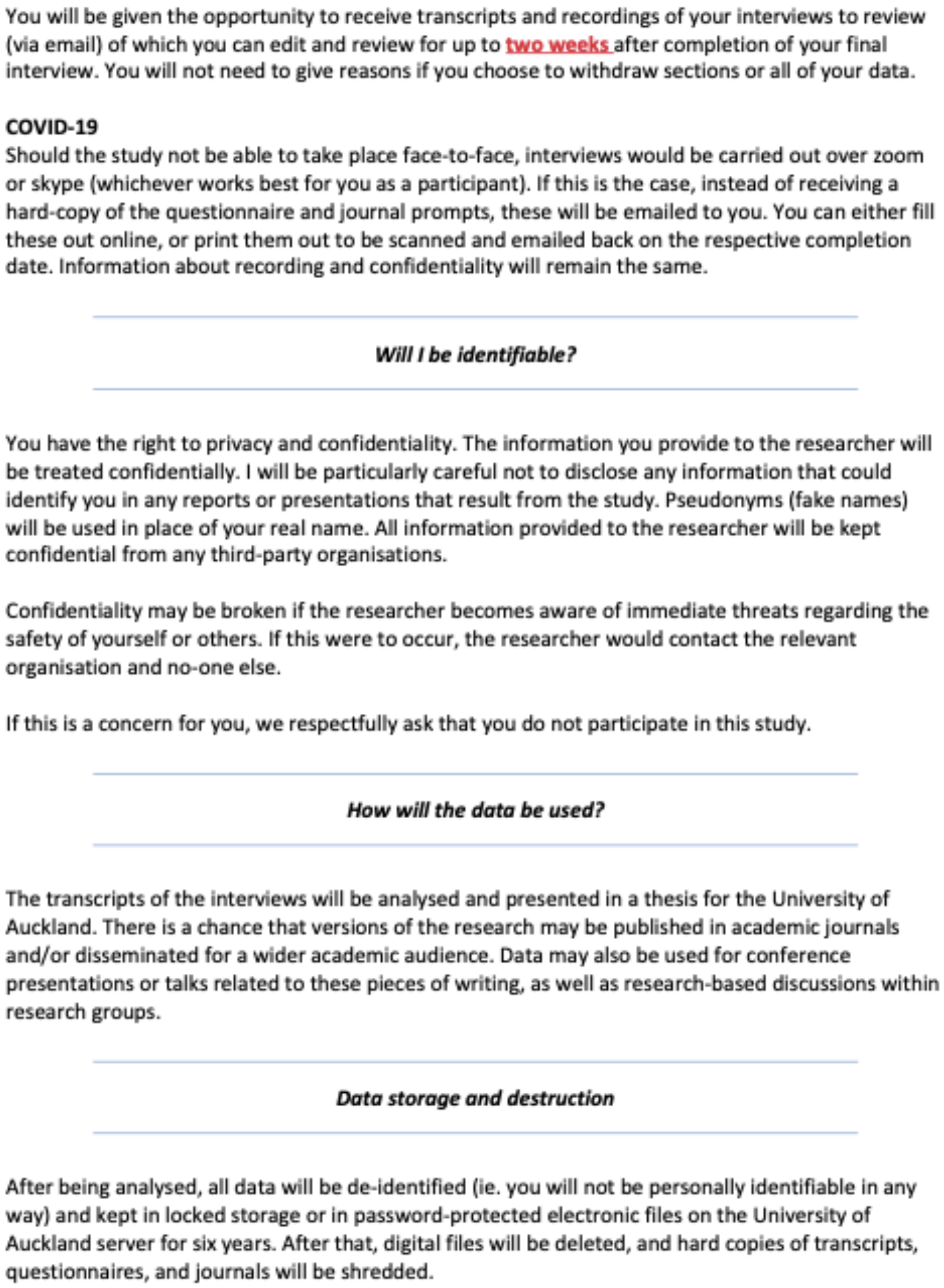
INTERVIEWS:

- During the first interview you will fill out the questionnaire, have opportunities to ask questions about the study, get to know the researcher (and other participants if in a focus group) and vice versa, receive your journal and talk about what to expect in the remaining interviews.

- The second interview will be focused on kōrero about your thoughts and reflections around what pornography may have taught you (and/or others) about consent and how this may have influenced your/other's understandings of consent in real life.

- The third interview will be the conclusion of the study, which will include handing in your journal, finishing off any discussions from the previous interview if needed, chatting about what we have talked and thought about over the last few weeks, and going over what happens from there.

Please allow 1 hour of your time for interviews. Interviews will be audio-recorded and then transcribed (written down). This audio-recording can be turned off at any point during the interview should you wish.



You will be given the opportunity to receive transcripts and recordings of your interviews to review (via email) of which you can edit and review for up to **two weeks** after completion of your final interview. You will not need to give reasons if you choose to withdraw sections or all of your data.

COVID-19

Should the study not be able to take place face-to-face, interviews would be carried out over zoom or skype (whichever works best for you as a participant). If this is the case, instead of receiving a hard-copy of the questionnaire and journal prompts, these will be emailed to you. You can either fill these out online, or print them out to be scanned and emailed back on the respective completion date. Information about recording and confidentiality will remain the same.

Will I be identifiable?

You have the right to privacy and confidentiality. The information you provide to the researcher will be treated confidentially. I will be particularly careful not to disclose any information that could identify you in any reports or presentations that result from the study. Pseudonyms (fake names) will be used in place of your real name. All information provided to the researcher will be kept confidential from any third-party organisations.

Confidentiality may be broken if the researcher becomes aware of immediate threats regarding the safety of yourself or others. If this were to occur, the researcher would contact the relevant organisation and no-one else.

If this is a concern for you, we respectfully ask that you do not participate in this study.

How will the data be used?

The transcripts of the interviews will be analysed and presented in a thesis for the University of Auckland. There is a chance that versions of the research may be published in academic journals and/or disseminated for a wider academic audience. Data may also be used for conference presentations or talks related to these pieces of writing, as well as research-based discussions within research groups.

Data storage and destruction

After being analysed, all data will be de-identified (ie. you will not be personally identifiable in any way) and kept in locked storage or in password-protected electronic files on the University of Auckland server for six years. After that, digital files will be deleted, and hard copies of transcripts, questionnaires, and journals will be shredded.

Can I withdraw from the research?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate at any time, including *after* agreeing to participate.

The student researcher can remove you from the study at any time if they think this is necessary. However, only you as the participant can consent to having your data removed.

What are the benefits of taking part?

I hope to offer you a space where you feel supported and safe enough to share your thoughts and reflections about pornography. People often do not get the chance to talk about things like this, but it is important to do so – particularly for young people! I hope you will find this kōrero interesting and informative; your views may be expanded, affirmed, or safely challenged through discussions about this important topic.

Your participation in this research may offer perspectives that could help us see potential impacts of pornography and how it shapes understandings of consent in real life!

Upon completion of the study a written summary of the results can be sent to you via email. If you would like to receive this summary, please provide your email address at the bottom of the consent form.

Are there any risks involved?

The main risk for this study is that it may be difficult and/or upsetting for you to talk about pornography.

This research is not designed to be invasive of personal details or past experiences, but it will ask you to think about and reflect on what you may have learned about sex, sexuality, and sexual consent from pornography. If you feel that talking about consent and pornography in this way would be distressing for you, participating in this study may not be for you. Should you wish to participate, you can be provided with a resource sheet of mental health organisations and hotlines who can offer information, resources, and support should you need. I (the researcher) am also able to provide support and can advise where to get help, if/when needed.

How to volunteer to participate:

Thank you for taking the time to read this information and for your interest in this study. If you would like to volunteer to participate, to find out more, or ask any questions about this study, please email me at:
Sam Parsons spar875@aucklanduni.ac.nz

Alternatively, you can contact either of the supervisors of the project, Hayley McGlashan, Email: h.mcglashan@auckland.ac.nz Phone: 09 373-7999 ext 48810, or Dr. Darren Powell, Email: d.powell@auckland.ac.nz Phone: 09 373-7999 ext 48647
or the Head of the School of Curriculum and Pedagogy. Dr Katie Fitzpatrick, Email: k.fitzpatrick@auckland.ac.nz Phone: 09 373-7599 extn 48652

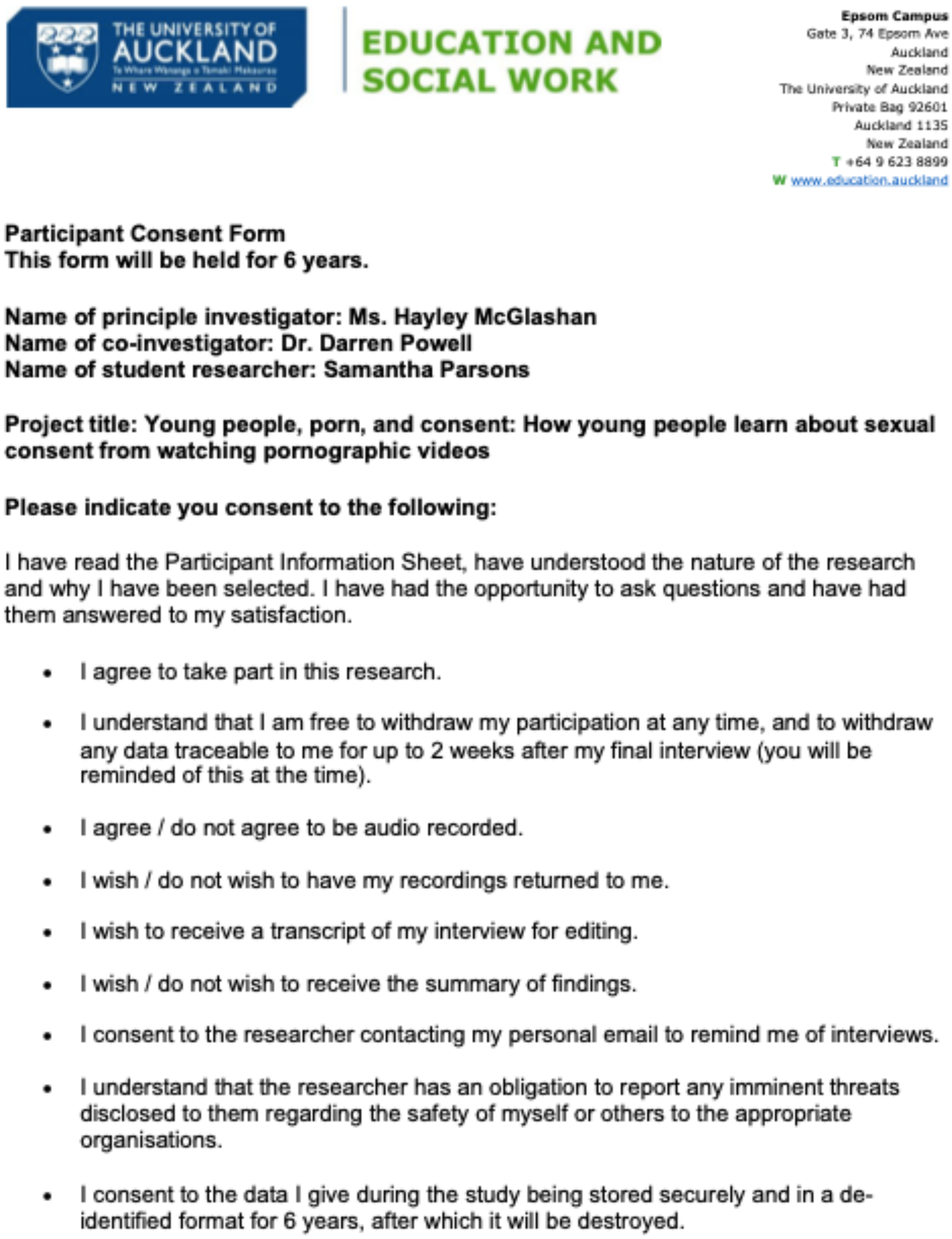
If you need mental health support, contact any of the following at any time (24/7):
The Lowdown: free text 5626
Youthline: free text 234 or ring them at 0800 942 8787
Talk to a trained counsellor at **Depression Helpline**: 0800 111 757

If you need cultural support, please contact:
Te Aho Tapu Trust: 09 820 0045 (only available during the day)
Te Aho Tapu Trust can facilitate access to cultural support, Hapu and Iwi services.

For any queries regarding ethical concerns, you may contact the Chair, University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, University of Auckland, Office of the Vice Chancellor, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 09 373-7599 extn 83711. Email: ro-ethics@auckland.ac.nz.

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 22/06/21 for three years. Reference Number: UAHPEC2955

APPENDIX C: Participant consent form



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Participant Consent Form
This form will be held for 6 years.

Name of principle investigator: Ms. Hayley McGlashan
Name of co-investigator: Dr. Darren Powell
Name of student researcher: Samantha Parsons

Project title: Young people, porn, and consent: How young people learn about sexual consent from watching pornographic videos

Please indicate you consent to the following:

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, have understood the nature of the research and why I have been selected. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree to take part in this research.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time, and to withdraw any data traceable to me for up to 2 weeks after my final interview (you will be reminded of this at the time).
- I agree / do not agree to be audio recorded.
- I wish / do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.
- I wish to receive a transcript of my interview for editing.
- I wish / do not wish to receive the summary of findings.
- I consent to the researcher contacting my personal email to remind me of interviews.
- I understand that the researcher has an obligation to report any imminent threats disclosed to them regarding the safety of myself or others to the appropriate organisations.
- I consent to the data I give during the study being stored securely and in a de-identified format for 6 years, after which it will be destroyed.

Declaration:

Name: ________________________________

Signature: _______________________ Date: ___________

I wish to receive a summary of the study's results once finished: Yes / No

If yes, provide your email: ____

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 22/06/21 for three years. Reference Number: UAHPEC2955