Article

The intimacy effect: Girls' reflections about pornography and 'actual sex'

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Abstract

Drawing on an online survey that was conducted as part of the media education aware-ness campaign of a Finnish online youth club, this article explores girls' conceptions of the difference between pornographic representations and 'actual sex'. As a result of the analysis, the greatest detachment between these two occurs concerning intimacy. Thus, this article will explore the pervasive influence of the notion of romantic intimacies, which provides the ideal for 'normal' relationships, sexual encounters and 'good sex' for the girls who participated in the survey through the concept of 'the intimacy effect'. Like narratives of sexual storytelling in general, the survey dataset helps to trace connections between the personal and the societal. The dataset also draws attention to the ties between social relations and the cultural forms that mediate how these relations are set in motion, and to how certain cultural norms are forcefully influencing girls' everyday life.

Keywords

Girls, intimacy, norms, pornography, sex

> Porn gives a twisted impression of sex. It's [porn] an act and often also over-the-top. Sex involves so much more, and it's supposed to be real, shared intimacy with some-body meaningful and close. (Emma, 17)[1]

The quoted passage above is drawn from the responses of an online survey. It was conducted as part of the media education awareness campaign of e-Talo

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(e-House),[2] a Finnish online youth club, in September 2015. The campaign aimed to inform young Finns that they can anonymously and in confidence contact trained youth workers in matters regarding pornographic representations of sex. By way of research cooperation, e-Talo staff wanted to gather information on how young people perceive pornography. The results of the survey have been utilized in media and sex education activities within the organization.

Emma, quoted above, was one of the 98 underaged[3] survey participants, aged 12 to 17. She describes 'actual sex' being 'so much more' than sex seen in pornography. This definition is underpinned by widely expressed notions describing pornographic representations of sex as artificial and false. As if resisting highly visible narratives that depict adolescents as incapable of distinguishing pornographic representations from 'actual sex' (see for example Dines, 2010; Paul, 2005), Emma underlines the notion of sex being 'so much more' than sexual practices seen in pornography. A similar understanding was shared by the majority of underaged survey participants who articulated their feelings concerning pornography. This chant-like reiteration of 'actual sex' being 'so much more' attracted my attention, making me want to explore what kind of elements this 'more' might entail. By carefully contextualizing the research dataset, this article asks how the underaged female respondents distinguish between pornographic representations and actual, lived sexual experiences (Jackson and Scott, 2007: 98). I argue that the greatest detachment between pornographic representations and notions of 'actual sex' within the survey occurs in relation to the notion of intimacy.

The essential research concept applied in this study emerged from the dataset itself, as the notion of intimacy was regularly mentioned in the majority of the open-ended responses of underaged participants. I understand 'intimacy' as a publicly mediated concept repeatedly defined by practices assumed to generate affective and binding qualities of relationship (Berlant and Warner, 1998; Jamieson, 2012: 291). Jamieson (2012: 291–292) refers to Simmel, when she formulates intimacy as 'voluntary, mutual and exclusive participation, what each shows or gives *only to the other*'. The notion of exclusiveness is at the heart of the notion of intimacy, as widely reiterated in the survey responses.

I developed the concept of 'the intimacy effect' to describe how perceptions of intimacy emerge from and work in the dataset as an orientation that foregrounds certain modes of relationships and sexual encounters over others (see Kasulis, 2002). 'The intimacy effect' is then descriptive of processes of negotiation vis-a-vis cultural imagery, gendered social assumptions, norms and expectations. The sexual narratives within the dataset are socially mediated, reflexively constructed and connected to cultural scenarios that are reworked in everyday sexual practices as forms of 'doing intimacy'. As such, 'the intimacy effect' is tightly bound to normative notions of gender, love, sex and relationships, and the ways of doing them (see Plummer, 2003: 12–13).

In what follows, I examine how expectations of intimacy connected to personal sexual encounters are narrated in the responses of underaged survey participants. I explore the pervasive influence of the notion of romantic intimacy, which provides

the ideal for relationships and sex (Jamieson, 1998; Petersen, 2004). Like narratives of sexual storytelling (Plummer, 1995) in general, the dataset helps to trace connections between the personal and the societal. In addition, it draws attention to the links between social relations and the cultural forms mediating how these relations are set in motion.

Public debate on pornography and the perspective of girls

Pornography is often considered to be one of the significant sexual risks for youth online, involving potentially adverse consequences (e.g. APA, 2007; Dines, 2010; Dines et al., 1998; Flood, 2007, 2009; Livingstone and Mason, 2015; Mattebo et al., 2014; Papadopoulos, 2010; Paul, 2005; Shapiro, 2005; Tydén and Rogala, 2004). Pornography is then routinely claimed to harm adolescents' sexual attitudes, expectations and beliefs in both academic and public platforms. In this framework, pornography is understood as a powerful corruptive force that causes widespread and far-reaching threats such as risky sexual behaviour, poor mental health with reduced self-esteem and self-objectification, degraded peer relationship functioning, restricted choice of professional aspirations and increased sexual aggression (Flood, 2007, 2009; Shapiro, 2005; Skrzydlewska, 2012; Tydén and Rogala, 2004), which obviously pose risks to adolescents' wellbeing.

Concerns over the impact of different kinds of media content on young people are critically examined in order to go beyond the dominant presumptions about the supposed ill effects of sexual media (see for example Attwood et al., 2018; Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; Knudsen et al., 2007; Mulholland, 2013; Nielsen et al., 2015; Spišák, 2016, 2017; Spišák and Paasonen, 2016; Tsaliki, 2011, 2015, 2016). For example, Buckingham and Bragg (2004) conducted the first systematic account within cultural studies about children's understandings of sex, intimacy and sexuality concerning media. According to their findings, children are competent consumers of media with a range of critical skills and perspectives when interpreting sexual representations. They also argue that the impact of the media depends heavily upon the contexts of use, particularly in the family. As they note, 'The media do not have an autonomous ability either to sexually corrupt children or to sexually liberate them' (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004: 241). In addition, as Bragg and Buckingham (2009) later claim, research in this field has focused on providing evidence about the harmful effects of media and consumer culture, implying that the causes of anxiety rest beyond and outside of young people's own choices and desires.

Indeed, childhood has, since the late 18th century, been recurrently understood as a time of innocence, with conceptualizations of the child as asexual, pure and incorrupt (see Carlson, 2012; Kincaid, 1998). The notion of childhood innocence as in need of protection legitimizes protective adult interventions for safeguarding children from the corrupting force of sexuality (Egan and Hawkes, 2010; Jones, 2011; Spišák and Paasonen, 2017). As Egan and Hawkes (2010) point out, such concerns are not solely characteristic of the contemporary moment. Panics, fears

and anxieties regarding the sexual child have a distinguished history, and parallels can be drawn between current concerns and earlier attempts to manage children's sexuality (for discussion, see also Carlson, 2012; Egan, 2013; Jones, 2011; Tsaliki, 2016). Such contributions that go beyond the dominant presumptions about the supposed ill effects of sexual media make evident how the debate on 'the sexualization of childhood' (Attwood, 2009; Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; Egan, 2013; Egan and Hawkes, 2009; Mulholland, 2013; Tsaliki, 2016) is socially constructed. This is also the approach that I have adopted in this article. The questions and research perspective guiding my study are grounded in the recognition that we need to form a more informed and contextualized understanding of how young people develop their sexual identities and how this intersects with experiences of sexual media. My premise is that more information on young people's preferences for sources, contexts and contents of sexual information and guidance will benefit research, education programmes and policy interventions.

While the cultural role and status of pornography have been intensely debated in the course of the 2000s, there are tensions in identifying its various, allegedly mainly adverse, outcomes, causes and effects. Furthermore, these debates mostly lack the perspective of young people (Attwood et al., 2018; Buckingham and Chronaki, 2014: 305; Spišák, 2016, 2017; Tsaliki, 2016). This shortcoming is noteworthy, given how the young are considered as being at particular risk due to online pornography. This article commits to making survey respondents' voices heard through excerpts. The quoted passages have been translated from Finnish by the author to respect their stylistic specificities.

Research design and ethical and contextual considerations

The call for survey participation was shared in the news section of the e-Talo website and its social media channels (Facebook, Twitter). It included a brief description of the purpose and aims of the study, emphasizing the anonymity of participation. The survey aimed to help the e-Talo staff to be better informed about how young people make sense of sexually explicit media content. The call stressed that participants could stop the survey at any point they wanted to and that their submissions were not saved unless they completed the whole survey. No rewards were offered in return for participation.

The survey was carefully designed so that participants with no recent experiences of pornography only saw the first three demographic questions (Q1: Age, Q2: Gender identity and Q3: Sexual identity) and two or three multiple-choice questions depending their answers,[4] as the overall principle was to not introduce them to anything they did not disclose themselves. Those respondents who reported having seen portrayals of sex within the recent month and who selected pornography as being one of the media sources were introduced to additional questions about pornography.[5] Thus, the number of questions shown in the survey depended on the answers given by the respondent, with the maximum number of questions being 11.

Due to the sensitive nature of this study, which aims to examine how minors make sense of various sexual practices, I carefully consulted available ethical guidelines (e.g. Buchanan, 2004; Laaksonen et al., 2013; Livingstone et al., 2013). However, I decided not to directly obtain informed consent for participating in the study, or parental research permits, as the survey was conducted entirely anonymously with no personal data archived. The decision to not collect documentation of parental research permits was further motivated by the aim of respecting the adolescents' rights to privacy. Parents knowing that their offspring wished to contribute to a survey on sexual media could have caused unwanted consequences by compromising the privacy of the participants' Internet use (see also Nielsen et al., 2015). The survey has been conducted with full ethical clearance from the e-Talo staff, and the University of Turku ethics board has approved the uses of the dataset. Guidelines for responsible research conduct were carefully followed throughout, and the participants were offered the possibility of contacting a sexual health expert anonymously via e-Talo's chat services in case they wanted to discuss the issues covered in the survey with an adult. e-Talo reported that no such requests were made during our research collaboration.

Given the limited size of the survey dataset, the sample is not representative, and the results afford no generalization concerning youth and pornography in Finland. It is also important to note that those who voluntarily participate in sex-related surveys may be more sexually experienced and have better sexual esteem and more progressive sexual attitudes than their peers. In addition, online surveys lack close contact and interaction between interviewer and respondent, limiting the possibilities for in-depth probing. At the same time, the dataset offers insightful personal accounts of girls' experiences of sexually explicit media of the kind that could have been difficult to disclose in an interview.

The survey was open from 7 September until 28 September 2015 and elicited a total of 167 contributions from young Finns aged 12 to 30 years. There were 98 underaged respondents, aged 12 to 17, of which 32 (33%) reported having watched pornography. These responses are analysed and the results reported in this article. The survey dataset suggests that minors aged 14 and older are more likely to explore pornographic content voluntarily, whereas minors aged 13 and younger have remarkably fewer experiences with pornography. This finding is in line with the studies reported by Buckingham and Chronaki (2014: 306), who stress that 'there is a little evidence that very young children are accessing online pornography to any significant extent'.

As part of the ethically sensitive drive of this study, I decided to collect the data of the respondents' gender identity via an open-end question (Q2: How would you describe your gender identity?). This gave the respondents freedom to define and articulate their gender experience in their own words. One hundred and fifty-nine contributors identified as female, six as male and two as non-binary. Given the small number of male and non-binary respondents, only the replies from participants identifying as underaged and female were analysed. Although I specifically asked for contributions from all young people and avoided gendered terms

(the Finnish language does not have gendered pronouns), I mainly received answers from girls. Similar existence of gender bias in online survey response behaviour has been noted and reported in several studies (see Smith, 2008). Furthermore, it is justified to focus on girls as they are believed to be at particular risk from sexually explicit content (APA, 2007; Papadopoulos, 2010; Skrzydlewska, 2012). It is essential to explore the premises of this common belief critically and to listen to what the girls themselves have to say.

In their own words: Differences between pornography and 'actual sex'

The respondents who reported recent experiences with pornography were asked to describe what pornography is, in their opinion, as pornography is an elusive concept (Amoroso and Brown, 1973; Kohut, 2014). Much of the public but also academic debate on young people and pornography does not usually differentiate between different kinds of pornographies, different sets of sexual imageries and varieties of the generic convention. The inconsistency in conceptualisations of pornography is striking. What counts as pornography changes over time and varies among specific groups of people (Kendrick, 1996; Kohut, 2014; McKee et al., 2008: 3–7). As my work firmly commits to listening to what young people have to say about this topic, I am following the definition they have formulated in my research dataset. They define the term 'pornography' explicitly as professionally produced or user-generated sexual representations. These representations contain graphic depictions of unsimulated sexual acts such as masturbation and oral sex, as well as vaginal and anal penetration, with full frontal nudity in close-up or extreme close-up shots focused on genitals. This is the understanding I have adopted throughout this article when talking about pornography (for discussion about Finnish and Nordic porn history and representations, see Paasonen, 2015).

Furthermore, the respondents who reported recent experiences with pornography were asked whether they found differences between pornographic representations of sex and embodied sexual encounters. As exemplified in the following quotes, a clear difference between the two was identified: 'Porn is over-acted and in real life sex just doesn't go the way the porn videos suggest. I think that in real life no parent is fucking a nanny or invites a pizza delivery guy to the bedroom...' (Lisa, 16); 'Porn is produced, there's no room for feelings, and it doesn't give a truthful impression about sex' (Katrina, 16); 'Porn is sort of a fantasy; people are arranged to weird and nearly impossible positions in order to produce visually compelling images. Porn is acted, and pleasure those actors portray may not be real' (Olivia, 16).

Proceeding from an understanding of pornography as being part of 'business' and 'consumerism', and as such 'produced', 'fake' and 'exaggerated', these girls highlight elements that they see as fundamental differences between sexual practices in pornography and 'actual sex'. The responses suggest that teenagers are well

aware of stereotypical representational and narrative conventions linked to mainstream pornographic productions (see Tsaliki, 2016 for discussion).

In the context of Finnish formal sex education, sexual encounters are framed as ideally something occurring between two (heterosexual) people romantically linked to one another (Anttila, 2012; Honkasalo, 2013; Yesilova, 2001). As one widely used health education schoolbook notes, 'People do not usually rush into heated intercourse on the spur of the moment' (Lehtinen et al., 2010: 74). Another explains that 'One can get most out of sex with a trustworthy long-term partner' (Immonen et al., 2010: 163). In this framework, pornography and online platforms are conceptualized as threats to adolescents' sexual development, and as threats to sexual culture in general (Honkasalo, 2013: 18). As yet another health education schoolbook for 13–16-year olds states, 'One learns to be a good lover through discussion and by getting to know one another's sexuality, not through pornography' (Hannukkala et al., 2012: 138).

As noted in studies on Finnish sex education guides for adolescents (see for example Anttila, 2012; Honkasalo, 2013; Yesilova, 2001: 194), the Finnish model of 'healthy' sex involves emotional closeness, safety and responsibility. Pornographic representations, in contrast, put the definition of 'the real' under threat, as they are not seen to represent sexuality 'truthfully'. As Berlant (2011: 685) notes, '[I]n love the inconvenient appetites must be given their genres'. Thus, sexual practices seen in pornography must be labelled as 'fake', or as a downright swindle that can lead to unwanted consequences in (future) relationships. According to Driscoll (2002: 150), '[s]ex education is the institutional dissemination of knowledge about appropriate sexual behavior and identification'. As such, it operates as a powerful discourse and a dominant, normative regulatory framework structuring social relations and understandings of them. Through formal sex education, seemingly private and personal decisions concerning relationships and sex become connected with public discourses that are shaped by (and that in turn shape) the most public of institutions.

In debates about pornography, adolescents are typically understood as being susceptible to its 'forceful' pedagogy (Albury, 2014; Spišák and Paasonen, 2017). These debates often dismiss young people's ability to negotiate, question, challenge and resist sexually explicit representations. They also disregard the complexities of the interactions between representations and the relationships that young people are working through. It seems that concerns over the sexual lives of the young are based more on the premise of harm connected to 'sexualization' (Attwood et al., 2018; Mulholland, 2013; Spišák, 2016, 2017; Spišák and Paasonen, 2017; Tsaliki, 2016) than on empirical evidence. My dataset shows that the respondents do not treat pornographic representations as indisputable guides to sexual behaviour, contradicting concerns that adolescents use pornography straightforwardly as a 'sex manual' (Rothman et al., 2015). The respondents do not view pornography as 'actual sex'.

On the one hand, given the degree to which the survey respondents refer to the stereotypical representational and narrative conventions of mainstream

pornography, they seem to have a somewhat limited understanding of the genre (see also Tsaliki, 2016). Amateur porn and sex blogs, for example, have altered how graphic sexual intimacies are portrayed, blurring the boundaries between the real and the representational (see for example Hardy, 2009). On the other hand, the responses seem to challenge the assumed link between young people's uses of pornography and their notions of personal sexual encounters (Albury, 2014; Hald et al., 2013; McKee, 2010). When asked whether they identify differences between pornographic representations of sex and embodied sexual encounters, the respondents often described pornography as something that depicts anonymous, brief and casual 'no strings attached' sex between two or more strangers: 'People who do porn don't usually know each other. Typically one gets paid for doing porn' (Sofia, 14); 'Porn is just fucking for money' (Lily, 16); 'Porn is banging without feelings' (Ellie, 17).

In the dataset, sexual practices seen in pornography become conceptualized as commercial, promiscuous and fake forms of sexuality. In contrast, the ideals of 'actual sex' are strongly associated with non-commercial and committed couple sex. Perceptions of pornography as 'banging without feelings' suggest that, for the underaged female respondents, personal sexual encounters should entail an element of strong positive emotional attachment.

Recurrent accounts of intimacy permeate the dataset to such a high degree that one starts to wonder about the significance of this striking repetition. In what follows, I explore more closely the premises of sex and expectations of intimacy sketched out in the survey as examples of 'the intimacy effect' in operation.

The intimacy effect

When asked whether the survey respondents found differences between pornographic representations of sex and embodied sexual encounters, they firmly juxtaposed sex as something that happens between people who have affectionate feelings towards one another with pornography as a product of a commercial media industry. This resulted in normative and stereotypical conceptions of both pornography and 'actual sex': 'Sex is more affectionate than porn' (Mila, 13); 'Porn is hardcore and it is made up of things being planned ahead. Sex itself is more intimate. Porn makes sex look heartless and unemotional' (Sofia, 14); 'Porn includes people who don't know each other or who don't even necessarily like each other. Sex belongs to the intimate relationship' (Ella, 17).

In the dataset, 'actual sex' – as something 'more' – is tightly connected to the notion of intimacy. According to Jamieson (2012: 291), intimacy is often assumed to involve 'strong positive emotional attachments, such as love, and a very particular form of "closeness" and being "special" to another person, associated with high levels of trust'. Kasulis (2002: 28, 29) defines intimacy as 'the intimate bond that is achieved and depends on both parties' continued consent and commitment'.

I interpret the notions of intimacy within the dataset as products of a mediated world-making project. The survey compellingly demonstrates how intimacy

becomes publicly framed by emphasizing a particular form of closeness, committed couple sex and strong positive emotional attachment. As such, the notions of intimacy become a normative framework deeply bound to the respondents' conventional notions of love, relationships and sexuality (see for example Berlant, 1998: 281–282; Jamieson, 1998: 106–135; Petersen, 2004: 91–100).

Given the widespread concern over promiscuous youth devouring ubiquitous pornographic representations (see for example Best and Bogle, 2014), it is fascinating that the survey respondents connect sex exclusively with intimate, long-term relationships: 'Sex is an intimate event between two people' (Ella, 17); 'Sex is closeness and love' (Mia, 17); 'Sex is deeper, more intimate and highly personal' (Emma, 17); 'Actual sex is more emotional than porn. People do porn just to become famous' (Mila, 13); 'Sex is intimate as sex in porn is emotionless' (Eva, 16); 'Sex is intimate and so much more than mere intercourse' (Lily, 16).

The dataset suggests that *the very ideal of intimacy* plays a crucial role in defining 'good' relationships and sex in contrast to graphic representations of sex. The contributors reiterate normative views of sex as part of romantic and affectionate relationships, and as such expose a huge gap between pornography's assumedly forceful and 'bad' pedagogy (Flood, 2009; Tydén and Rogala, 2004) and youngsters' personal accounts where pornographic representations are for the most part detached from notions of 'actual sex'.

According to Berlant (1998: 282), 'intimacy builds worlds'. In the dataset, intimacy qualifies as an important element in shaping understanding of relationships. As such, it becomes a normative framework for comprehending and organizing views about sex and relationships. Looking at the particular impact on 'the intimacy effect' emerging from the survey, I argue, similarly to Berlant (1998) and Shumway (2003), that intimacy, as a publicly shared narrative, shapes personal experiences and ideals of desired relationships. As the survey respondents explain: 'In pornography, sex is scripted for actors to play. Actual sex is more intense, more intimate and highly personal' (Anna, 17); 'Because of porn, sex is not understood as an act of love anymore' (Cecilia, 16).

The intimacy effect produces variations but at the same time excludes others entirely. The discourse of intimacy, spread around sex and relationship education, self-help books about relationships and popular media products, describes how relationships work. In the dataset, the conceptions of 'real life' sex feature pronounced elements of traditional intimacies (Plummer, 2003: 9) as one dominant plot. Romantic love and committed couple relationships count as a 'life' (Berlant, 1998: 286) also among young people identifying as queer.

The survey responses stress the importance of 'the normative emotions on which good life worlds' (Berlant 2011: 686) are built. Prevalent notions of romantic love reveal and reinforce gender-specific assumptions about how individuals should conduct themselves (Petersen, 2004: 91). In a Baumanian sense, choices connected to relationships and sex are socially patterned and as such make evident the active role of normative cultural conventions connecting sex to expectations of intimacy. As explained by Shumway (2003: 3), '[t]he discourse of intimacy makes emotional

closeness, rather than passion, its Holy Grail'. Indeed, in the dataset, intimacy, rather than sexual passion or pleasure, featured as the fundamental element of 'real life sex'.

As Tsaliki (2016: 125–128) shows, young people's talk about pornography is fundamentally gender talk about pornography and its relation to intimacy. The intimacy effect is tightly bound with the role of gendered ideologies of love and intimacy in coupledom. Duncombe and Marsden (1993) talk about the gender division of 'emotion work' in intimate personal relationships. They see 'emotion work' as gendered, socially regulated and managed intimate behaviour. According to Duncombe and Marsden, girls become trained to be more emotionally skilled in keeping relationships harmonious and in cultivating togetherness. According to their findings, women hold relationships together by doing crucial emotion work. Duncombe and Marsden emphasize intimacy as work entailing various forms of emotional action, rather than merely 'being'. In the dataset, the intimacy effect impacts the ways in which the respondents invest in hegemonic notions of good 'life' and desired relationships.

Pornography: A tool to do intimacies with

In the survey responses, the reiteration of intimacy as a central principle of 'actual sex' creates a sense of detachment and distance towards pornography. By way of reiterating notions of intimacy, girls marked themselves as clearly separate from the images they reported to have recently encountered and consumed. At the same time, when asked whether they find some benefits or positive and/or negative outcomes to pornography use, they described pornography as a beneficial source of frank sexual information that can improve sexual functioning and reduce anxiety associated with sex (McKee, 2010). Intriguingly, the respondents detached representations of sex seen in pornography from the concept of intimacy, while nevertheless considering pornographic representations as beneficial tools to *do intimacies with*: 'Porn provides audiences with information of how sex ''goes'' so that the first time is not that awkward if one is not that aware of one's body' (Sofia, 14); 'Porn is acted sex that puts together arousing things for certain niches. Porn could be ''a tool'' for masturbation or sex but it's not similar to reality' (Katrina, 16); 'I mainly consume porn that is linked to my own fantasies. Porn helps one to know oneself and one's desires. It might also spice up a relationship' (Emma, 17).

The respondents think that pornography may offer valuable sexuality information and support that can increase their self-knowledge in ways that formal sex education has not been able to achieve. Some respondents also reflected on porn's possible beneficial impact in becoming acquainted with one's sexual desires and as a pleasurable tool for exploring sexual fantasies. This suggests that the respondents think that pornographic representations can offer the possibility of becoming more savvy about sex and different kinds of bodies, and of developing and improving understanding of self, sex and relationships (McKee, 2010).

Ambivalences and complexities in interpreting pornographic images are nevertheless apparent. Older respondents in particular describe porn as beneficial material for solo-sex and as possibly affording more fulfilling sexual experiences, while at the same time reiterating the dominant notion that porn consumption can harm relationships: 'Porn might harm those in a relationship. And it [porn] could damage people's understanding of sex. Not just kids' but adults' too' (Ella, 17); 'Sometimes it [porn] is disgusting and hideous. More often it nevertheless arouses and "helps" when masturbating. . . . It is a normal thing, and fairly good thing as well, as long as you don't take it as real life' (Katrina, 16); 'You might learn to know yourself and your desires. Porn might also spice up intercourse in relationship. However, you might also think that it [intercourse] happens just like that, it is easy, you wouldn't have any problems etc.' (Stella, 17).

Thus, sexual practices seen in pornography are certainly seen as affording specific kinds of information on anatomy, sexual techniques and positions, as well as on the possible ways of behaving during sex. At the same time, the respondents acknowledge the undesired impact that pornographic representations may have on some individuals, and do not consider pornography as a straightforward guide for sex.

Conclusion

The survey responses explored in this article show that cultural notions of intimacy, rather than graphic representations of sex seen in pornography, are central to moulding adolescents' ideas concerning 'actual sex'. The intimacy effect, firmly linked with culturally shaped notions of romantic love, relationship and sexuality, plays a crucial role in defining 'good' relationships and sex. The respondents reiterate normative views of sex as being part of committed couple relationships, while mostly detaching pornographic representations from personal, embodied sexual behaviour.

Berlant (1998: 282–283) argues that intimacy involves the relation between public and private spheres:

> intimate lives absorb and repel the rhetorics, laws, ethics, and ideologies of the hegemonic public sphere, but also personalize the effects of the public sphere and reproduce a fantasy that private life is the real in contrast to collective life.

Following this notion of intimacy as a private-public nexus, I read the dataset's narratives of 'actual sex' as products of a mass-mediated sense of intimacy. They grippingly illustrate how intimacy becomes publicly framed and organized through educational efforts emphasizing the process and project of heteronormativity, committed couple sex and strong positive emotional attachment. These can be seen as specific versions and applications of governance in intimate choices. The respondents' expectations of intimacy can therefore be conceptualized as socially grounded decisions over the control of one's relationships and erotic experiences (see Plummer, 2003: 14).

In this article, I have shown how some Finnish young women describe differences between representations of sex in pornography and everyday personal sexual practices, and the kinds of thoughts and sensations that graphic representations of sex evoke. As such, the dataset sheds light on adolescent voices and opinions that should be recognized in the debates on young people, pornography and sex (see also Attwood et al., 2018; Rinkinen et al., 2012; Scarcelli, 2015; Spišák, 2016, 2017; Spišák and Paasonen, 2017) in order to contextualize them and to be respectful of the complexities of young people's thoughts on sexuality and representation.

As young people today do engage with a mass of sexual media content, it is essential to dig deeper into those crucial contextual distinctions that young people address in the context of sexually explicit media. In order to better understand the meanings that pornographic representations carry, and how young audiences perceive the representations with which they engage, my work generates new knowledge about how Finnish pre-teens and teenagers make sense of pornographic content, shedding light on the diverse and complex forms of learning connected to pornography by turning the focus from the narrative of sexualisation's certain ill effects towards the personal accounts of adolescents' experiences with pornography. In order to critically rethink the knowledge produced and disseminated around the youth, we need to focus on adolescents' experiences. There is a particular need for qualitative research that offers insights into the personal experiences of pornography use among minors. Such research helps to unpack 'the epistemological foundations guiding the argument on sexualisation' (Egan and Hawkes, 2009: 292) and critically evaluate diagnoses of sexualisation as they are deployed in academic, public and policy discourses. My work that examines the patterns of personal porn use as canvassed in the research dataset is one step in this direction.

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Notes

1. I have added aliases to the excerpts to more clearly indicate to the reader which submissions I drew upon.
2. e-Talo is a place that adolescents and young adults can visit whenever they need adult support in issues around puberty, sexuality, relationships and self-esteem. e-Talo follows gender-sensitive youth work methods. All communication between e-Talo workers and adolescents is anonymous.
3. The age of majority in Finland is 18.
4. Q4: Within the recent month, have you seen portrayals of sex in the media? Please tick a suitable box (Yes/No). Those who answered Yes to Q4 saw Q5: You mentioned that you

had seen portrayals of sex in the media within the recent month. Could you please tick all the suitable media sources where you saw portrayals of sex. Q6: Could you please tick all the suitable sources where you have received sexual information?

5. Open-end questions varied from what pornography is (Q7), what kind of pornography the respondent consumes (Q8) and does not like to consume (Q9), whether the respondent finds differences between pornographic representations of sex and embodied sexual encounters (Q10) and whether the respondent finds some benefits or positive and/or negative outcomes to pornography use (Q11).

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