

## THE DIGITAL WORLD OF ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY: ‘PORNOGRAPHY’ AND ‘YOUTH DIGITAL INTIMACIES’

Young people today are participating in and navigating a sexualised digital media landscape. The two most prominent aspects include ‘pornography’ – which is sexually explicit material consumed by individuals – and the production and exchange of personal sexual content (for example, messages, images and recorded or live videos), which is often colloquially referred to by adults as ‘sexting’. Digital media has made sexual content ubiquitous and easy to access and produce, which contrasts with the situation for previous generations whereby a more deliberative approach to seeking out such content was required. Digital sexual content (both consumed and produced) is a normalised, almost mundane part of day-to-day life for young people online. Anyone – young or old – can access, consume and participate in sexualised digital media practices, but it is particularly important to consider young people’s perspectives and experiences because it forms part of how they learn about and experience sex and relationships as developing individuals in the contemporary digital era. In this article, I draw upon findings from studies conducted with young people to explore how we may wish to understand and respond to the realities of contemporary youth digital sexual culture, in all their complexity and heterogeneity.

### ***Pornography***

Research suggests that young people perceive pornography as ‘everywhere’; part of society and hard to avoid (Mattebo *et al.*, 2012; Mulholland, 2015). Evidence suggests that most young people will eventually access pornography, although rates of and motivations for doing so vary among youth (Martellozzo *et al.*, 2016). Sometimes, young people intentionally and deliberately seek out online sexual content; other times they may come across it accidentally, or may be sent it by peers or adults. Legally, young people are not meant to access pornography and sites are required to prove that their visitors are 18 or over through age-verification. Whether or not this requirement is an effective barrier is debatable. It is also important to complicate our understandings of *where* pornographic content can be found. The word ‘pornography’ may bring to mind websites such as Pornhub or Redtube where individuals can easily and quickly access free pornography. We must, however, also appreciate that sexualised digital media is more ubiquitous and diffuse than this.

OnlyFans, for example, is an online content subscription service where subscribers pay to access media content produced by others. The platform has become notorious for hosting sexually explicit content. While young people claim that teenagers are rarely using OnlyFans to share their own sexual content, it is apparent that a small minority may be doing so and, regardless, young people may access OnlyFans, or become aware of it because some celebrities and ‘influencers’ promote their accounts in their mainstream social media profiles (Setty, unpublished).