minds over media

Watch carefully. Think critically.

BREAKING DOWN PORN

A Classification Office Analysis of
Commonly Viewed Pornography in NZ

Helping New Zealanders to understand, analyse, evaluate and create media.

Minds Over Media is an educational initiative from the Office of Film and Literature Classification.

Contents

> **⚠ CONTENT WARNING:**
> This report contains references to pornographic content and is recommended for mature audiences.

Introduction from the Chief Censor

Lots of New Zealanders watch porn.

We don't know exactly how many of us watch it, or how often. But it is undeniably popular. Per capita, we are 13th in the world for frequency of visits to the biggest online site, Pornhub. That site recorded over 33 billion unique visits last year – and that is just one commercial site out of hundreds of thousands of commercial sites on the net.

Given how popular porn is today, it is remarkable how little we really know about it. The research most cited about what porn contains is 10 years out of date – a lifetime in digital content terms. Meanwhile, our 2018 study, _NZ Youth and Porn_, put it beyond doubt that our children and teens often see it.

As we found in our earlier study, the simple fact that in the digital age children and young people can routinely access a limitless array of graphic, 'R18' adult pornography online is not something to be ignored. I have heard commentators claim that there is no problem here, that 'kids have always seen porn', or alternatively that there is nothing that can be done 'because the internet'.

Looking away from this issue just isn't good enough. Many of the young people responding to our survey recognised that porn wasn't for kids, and many recognised that porn had the power to shape sexual attitudes and behaviours. Some expressed real concerns about what that might mean for them and their relationships. Many noted that porn was a primary source of information for them about sex.

Given that reality, we felt it was time to get some sense of what was contained in the porn that New Zealanders were actually viewing. This report contains our assessment of nearly 200 pornographic clips that were most popular with New Zealanders on one large site.

This can only represent a snapshot in time of popular videos on one site, reviewing all of the videos uploaded to Pornhub last year alone would take one researcher more than 100 years. Nonetheless, it represents an up-to-date assessment of current popular pornographic content, and is the first study looking at what New Zealanders are commonly watching.

The results will be surprising and challenging for both sides in the porn debate – to both those who would condemn all porn as degrading and harmful, and to those who see all porn as harmless erotic entertainment. What we have found is not a simple, good vs bad story. Porn is complicated, much like human sexuality.

A key finding is that New Zealanders seem to prefer not to see violence, aggression and degradation in porn. Violence and aggression was found in 10% of the videos. While many would observe that this is 10% too much, and I agree, this level is much lower than that indicated in various international studies, some of which are dated enough to be reliant on porn content on physical media such as DVDs.

The treatment of consent in these clips is problematic. Some 35% of the clips assessed contained some non-consensual behaviour. Often the videos with this content would start with a reluctant partner, usually the female, who starts out saying 'no' to sex but whose initial

resistance is overcome through insistence and subtle pressure by the male. The actress is then portrayed as enjoying the sexual contact – female pleasure was notable in 99% of the videos. For most adult viewers the contrived, unrealistic 'porny' narrative is evident. But for young people, or people inclined to coercion, the repeated theme of 'no' becoming 'yes' could very easily be problematic.

Related to this issue is the surprising popularity of 'step-porn', with nearly half of the titles of clips assessed indicating family 'step' relationship sex. This isn't just a Kiwi thing, as it appears that 'step-porn' has become a major trend in popular pornography internationally, and it could well be that major online porn providers have found that this narrative is a simple and expedient way to introduce a 'taboo' element to an otherwise simplistic porn narrative. Again, for most mature viewers these scenarios appear obviously fake and contrived. For others, such as teens in the process of forming their views on sex and sexuality, the fantasy aspect of this content may be much less clear.

The fact that commercial online porn sites use social media style 'big-data' analytics to watch what people are watching and to curate and generate their content, means that what is popular today may not be popular tomorrow. The 'step-porn' theme that is popular today could be replaced by who knows what next week. What we can say is that New Zealanders viewing content on one popular site seem to prefer to watch mutual enjoyment over aggression and violence, but that we also consume a significant amount of porn that eroticises sex within blended family units, and which can portray consent as 'flexible' with insistence and persuasion ultimately being rewarded.

We know from our research so far that many New Zealand kids and teens will have seen these sorts of clips. The way this material treats consent and family relationships, the relative lack of affection, disregard of safe-sex practice and so on emphasises the simple fact that adult porn is a terrible product for young people to be drawing on to shape their views on sex. And yet they are doing exactly that.

We can't look away any more. We know that young people are looking for a better narrative around sex than porn. Let's do the right thing, step up and have some brave conversations with them.

Ngā mihi nui,

David Shanks
Chief Censor

Acknowledgements

Key stats

196 videos and **46** hours of data

3% showed condom use

46% of videos were about 'step/family fantasy'

10% of videos showed physical aggression

29% showed some form of affection

35% contained some non-consensual behaviour

Why did we do a content analysis?

Modern digital technology has made pornography freely available to almost anyone with a smartphone or internet connection – including children and young people.

It is clear from local and international research that young people are using pornography as a way to learn about sex, and it can have impacts on attitudes and behaviours – especially for young people who are exploring their sexuality and beginning to have sex.

People often talk about behaviours or activities that are common in 'mainstream' or popular pornography, with a focus on things like aggression and consent. However, there are very few systematic studies about the content of porn – especially online porn. The methodology and findings vary widely in the few studies there are.

This lack of up-to-date and relevant evidence matters, because we can't have an open and informed debate about porn if we don't know what people are actually watching in a porn industry that has changed dramatically in the past decade.

This report gives us an indication of the type of pornography that is popular amongst New Zealand viewers according to Pornhub. It's not about the content of pornography more generally.

These findings don't say anything about people who view porn often versus more casual viewers, or individuals who seek out and view more 'hardcore', aggressive or extreme material.

'Step porn' is popular in New Zealand

Forty three percent of videos were categorised as 'Step Fantasy' by Pornhub.

It is clear that none of these videos actually depict real family members, rather, they are commercial videos using the taboo of sex with (adult) stepsiblings or stepparents as an erotic fantasy. The stories tend to be highly contrived and unrealistic, more often involving sex with 'stepsisters', 'stepbrothers' or 'stepmoms'.

While it's impossible to know without further research, the popularity of this content is unlikely to indicate a widely shared desire amongst New Zealanders to engage in sex with family members.

Nonetheless, the content of these videos is problematic. Videos in this category were more likely (42% vs 35%) to involve some form of non-consensual behaviour. Even when consent is clearly established and given without pressure or coercion, the narratives tend to raise problematic issues around power dynamics and inappropriate sexual behaviour within a family context.

Aggression is not a common feature of most popular videos

Mainstream pornography is often considered aggressive, and so this was one of the key areas we focused on. We found that one in 10 videos contained some aggressive behaviour.

For our analysis we coded separately for physical aggression and for verbal aggression. For physical aggression we looked closely for a broad range of behaviour that could be coded as aggression if there was apparent hostility or intent to cause pain or discomfort, or when an act was shown to cause distress or otherwise have a harmful impact on the other performer.

The majority of videos did not involve any of these potentially aggressive behaviours. While most of the sex depicted in these videos would not be described as soft or gentle, it also could not fairly be described as violent or aggressive.

Viewers prefer consensual behaviour

These findings suggest that New Zealanders prefer pornography depicting behaviour that is consensual, however a significant proportion of popular videos (35%) do contain some non-consensual behaviour acted by performers in the context of sexual fantasy.

Non-consensual activity was broadly defined and included: explicit verbal cues, requests to stop, signs of resistance, attempts to avoid, or evident unhappiness with the situation.

We included any signs that sexual contact was not welcome, including situations where someone is initially reluctant but is subsequently 'convinced' or changes their mind as a result of pressure from another person. In other words, videos where 'no' becomes 'yes' were coded for non-consensual behaviour.

Even within the 35% of videos that contained non-consensual behaviour, the great majority focused on mutually enjoyable sex, and did not focus on force or coercion. 'Rape porn' is not popular.

Nonetheless, any non-consensual behaviour is highly problematic. Many of these popular videos – notably those in the 'step fantasy' genre – involved narratives where people are pressured to agree to sex, or 'tricked' into sex without their knowledge. Other examples included spying, or initiating sexual activity while someone is sleeping.

What does this mean for young people?

These findings are consistent with our nationally representative survey of 14-17 year-olds undertaken in 2018 – _NZ Youth and Porn_. While that research showed that young people saw aggressive or non-consensual material at some point, it showed they did not see this often. Considering the high level of public anxiety around pornography, this may be welcome news.

On the other hand, this analysis confirms that the content in pornography – even popular or 'mainstream' porn – is not a healthy way to introduce young people to sex.

Messages around consent are highly problematic. It's important to keep in mind that young people are increasingly aware of consent issues and most videos are presented in a highly unrealistic way. However this won't necessarily be understood by children and younger teens – particularly if they haven't had access to comprehensive education about healthy relationships.

Porn does not show the lead up to what's seen on screen – it's also unlikely to show the types of intimacy that many people take for granted as part of a fulfilling sexual relationship. Crucially, it doesn't show the open communication and consideration necessary to have mutually enjoyable, safe, and consenting sex.

How can we help young people deal with pornography?

Too many young people do not have the information, support and tools to process and understand pornography, to deal with sometimes negative consequences of seeing pornography, or to avoid seeing it in the first place. Some young people are struggling with issues around their pornography use, and they need support.

Young people tell us they want more and better information on sex and sexuality. We know that young people are turning to pornography as a way to learn about sex, and simply telling them not to is not a solution. Rather, when young people are learning about sex and relationships, pornography should be a part of the discussion. Education provides an opportunity for a counter-narrative to pornography that can reach a wide number of young people.

The Classification Office is facilitating a more cohesive and collaborative approach via the work of the inter-agency Pornography Working Party, which includes representatives from the Classification Office, Netsafe, Ministry of Health, Department of Internal Affairs, Ministry for Women, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Education, ACC, and New Zealand Police. Initiatives are underway involving various agencies, and the Classification Office is working on resources to be rolled out over the next six months.

The big picture

The porn landscape

It is common knowledge that a few large tech firms dominate social media, search engines, and online entertainment. Less well known is the market dominance of online porn by Mindgeek, a Canadian company that operates many of the world's largest, most visited porn websites – including Pornhub.

Transnational platforms like Pornhub use similar approaches to well-known big tech firms to maintain people's attention, including:

- Big data/AI – state of the art analytics and algorithms drive the big porn platforms, allowing more personalised content to be recommended to individuals.

- 24/7 influence – the sites are always on, always a few clicks away on your phone and ever changing.

- Social elements – 'Popular in New Zealand' is a homepage section on Pornhub, and comments and likes foster a sense of community.

Pornhub's own data[1] gives a sense of the massive scale of activity on the site. In 2018 there were:

- Over 33 billion visits, an average of 92 million every day

- Over 30 billion searches, or 962 searches every second

- Over 4.7 million videos uploaded, equivalent to 115 years of content

- Over 12 million gigabytes of data transferred every day

- Over 63 million messages shared amongst users of the site

Pornhub contains a vast amount of content featuring a mix of 'homemade' user-generated videos alongside more traditional commercial productions. Some content creators are producing material in line with current trends to maximise views, while others produce niche content catering to smaller audiences.

According to Pornhub, the average age of adult viewers in New Zealand is 39, and we're ranked 13th in the world (per capita) for page views on their website. Pornhub is also popular with women – 39% of these viewers are women, well above the world average of 26%.[2]

So we know people are watching porn. However, there is very little research about what they're watching today.

One of the most commonly cited studies[3] found that 88% of pornography contains aggression – but this study is almost a decade old and uses a sample of the best-selling and most rented DVDs from 2004-2005. This lack of up-to-date and relevant evidence matters. We can't have an open and informed debate about porn if we don't know what people are actually watching.

This report is about the *most popular* porn, not about *all* porn

This report gives us a snapshot of what is popular porn in New Zealand. It does not provide an analysis of all the porn that's available online. This analysis provides some insight into what New Zealanders are seeing when they log on to watch Pornhub.

Our analysis also provides a snapshot in time of the viewing habits of New Zealand adults using Pornhub – it is not about videos that are popular with young people, which may follow quite different trends. Nonetheless, preliminary findings from our ongoing research programme suggest that Pornhub is by far the most popular site amongst young people. There is no evidence to suggest that young people tend to seek out more aggressive, extreme or otherwise problematic content than adults.

These findings don't say anything about people who view porn often versus more casual viewers, or individuals who may seek out extreme or aggressive material. We know there is aggressive pornography on Pornhub. We also know that Pornhub is one of only hundreds of thousands of sites online. We know that some of those sites specialise in illegal and abusive videos.

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1   Pornhub releases its data periodically, under the 'insights' section of their website: https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2018-year-in-review

2   See https://www.pornhub.com/insights/new-zealand

3   Bridges, A. J., Wosnitzer, R., Scharrer, E., Sun, C., & Liberman, R. (2010). Aggression and sexual behavior in best-selling pornography videos: A content analysis update. *Violence Against Women*, 16, 1065–1085. doi:10.1177/1077801210382866

How this relates to our youth research, and why it's important

Last year we released the first stage of our *NZ Youth and Porn* research and further research is underway, which will be released next year. This separate analysis was done to get a picture of what is commonly watched in New Zealand. If we don't talk about porn in a way that makes sense to young people who actually have experience of porn, then we'll be talking past them, not with them.

The findings of this analysis are consistent with what young people told us about behaviour they see in our earlier research.

Methodology

Why Pornhub?

Pornhub is one of the biggest and most popular porn sites both internationally and in New Zealand. Out of the top 50 websites used on a daily basis in New Zealand, visits to Pornhub currently rank it higher than any other porn site (according to independent lists from web traffic analysis companies Alexa[4] and SimilarWeb[5]).

Recent qualitative research by the British Board of Film Classification[6] suggests that Pornhub is the most popular site for accessing porn amongst 16-18 year olds. As noted above, preliminary results from our own qualitative research suggest that Pornhub is the most popular site amongst young New Zealanders – overwhelmingly so.

Pornhub has featured in content analyses in recent years, partly for the ease of accessing data in specific ways, eg by country or date, and partly because Pornhub itself regularly releases analytic information about what and how people from different countries are using the site.

What we did

After a review of pornography content analyses we chose a recent paper by Eran Shor and Kimberly Seida (2018)[7] as an initial template for our coding criteria – in other words, the information used by our analysts to determine things like consent, aggression, and behaviours seen in porn. We then added to and amended these to ensure we were getting the information we needed. While there are similarities between the two studies, they have different aims and methodology, and we did not attempt to gather directly comparable data.

We know there is a huge variety of content out there, including on Pornhub itself, but we wanted to look at content that people are most likely to view. On 13 September 2019 we harvested the URLs for the top 200 most viewed videos in New Zealand over the past year, using the options on Pornhub. Due to double ups and some videos being disabled or removed before analysis, the final dataset was 196 videos.

We used Google Forms to input data. Two media analysts from our classification team did the primary data entry, one male and one female. Following input, the team met with the research lead to discuss any issues or uncertainties.

Auditing and quality checking process

We viewed 196 videos adding up to **46 hours** of content.
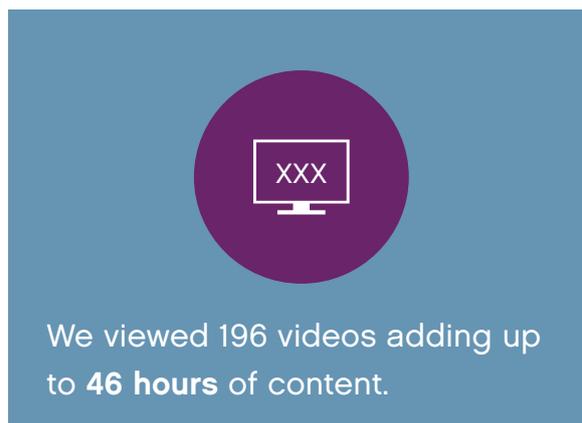
The full dataset was then given to another staff member for an audit of 10% of videos. There were further checks for consistency as part of the final analysis and reporting. The data entry and analysis involved four Classification Office team members, including two women and two men. Altogether the project involved viewing just under 46 hours of Pornhub content for the initial analysis alone.

Kris Taylor, a researcher at the University of Auckland, provided initial help with the set up and provided a quality check at the analysis and reporting stage to ensure our interpretation and presentation of the data was fair and accurate. He also provided expert advice and assistance relating to international content analysis research.

Limitations

This research represents one approach to analysing a sample of popular videos from a single website, and doing the same analysis on another popular website may reveal significant differences.

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4   See updated statistics at https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/NZ (retrieved 19 November 2019)

5   See updated statistics at https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/new-zealand (retrieved 19 November 2019)

6   See page 4 of the BBFC's report:
     https://bbfc.co.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/BBFC%20Research%20into%20Children%20and%20Pornography%20260919.pdf

7   Eran Shor and Kimberly Seida (2018): "Harder and Harder?" Is mainstream pornography becoming increasingly violent and do viewers prefer violent content?. *The Journal of Sex Research*, DOI: 10.1080/00224499.2018.1451476

There may be errors or inconsistencies amongst some individual videos, however we are confident following the auditing process that this margin for error would have no substantial impact on the findings.

A more significant limitation is that other researchers could use different criteria and therefore get different results – even if they looked at the same sample of videos. This is especially true with content like consent and aggression. Our approach to categorising aggression and consent is based in part on recent research and is also informed by the Classification Office's decades of expertise in classifying pornography for the commercial market in New Zealand. We aimed to be as clear, objective and transparent as possible. However no coding or analysis process is perfect. Other researchers will no doubt bring different perspectives to how we've assessed these criteria.

Pornhub has proven to be a useful and relevant website to use for this type of analysis. Future studies could look at larger and more comprehensive samples, comparisons between popular sites, and trends over time.

Any analysis of controversial subjects like pornography carries a risk of personal biases in how content is viewed and understood. While to some extent this is inevitable, we mitigated against this risk by involving staff of different genders, cultural backgrounds, and sexual orientations.

The analysis relies upon Pornhub's aggregation of most viewed videos by New Zealanders within a given time period. Alongside other studies that have relied on Pornhub's analytics, we have considered the question of how accurate these are. However, there is no evidence to suggest Pornhub is providing inaccurate analytics. Shor and Seida commented on this in the report for their own Pornhub content analysis *Harder and Harder*:

> ...we conducted short interviews with past and present employees of PornHub, who reassured us that this is not a concern for the owners and that the operators and programmers of the Web site do not habitually manipulate these figures. Furthermore, even if that were the case (ie that Web sites would manipulate figures), we see no clear reason why this practice should coincide with certain contents (eg deliberately altering figures downward for more aggressive videos). [ref *Harder and Harder*]

None of the 196 videos we assessed depicted sexual interactions between men. It appears that Pornhub separates these videos into PornhubGay. A different search can be undertaken for the most popular gay videos.

What's hot on Pornhub

What types of video are popular?

Where do clips come from?

'HOMEMADE' **28%**
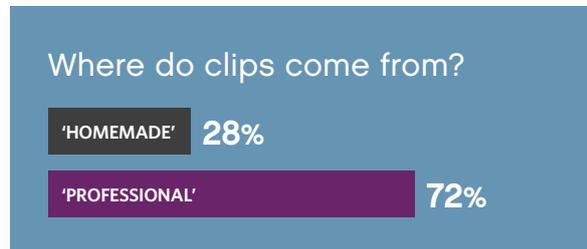
'PROFESSIONAL' **72%**

Similar to YouTube, content uploaded to Pornhub includes commercial or 'professional' content, and user-generated or 'homemade' content. Uploaders are encouraged to use a category that best fits their content, but – again, like YouTube – there's no clear line between 'professional' and 'homemade'. In general, the 'professional' clips are studio productions with high quality equipment and professional performers, and they will often involve some form of (usually very contrived and unrealistic) narrative. 'Homemade' content is more likely to feature 'regular-looking' people who aren't professional performers, and to be filmed on simple equipment. New Zealanders are much more likely to view 'professional' content.

Average of length of clips:
14 minutes and 4 seconds
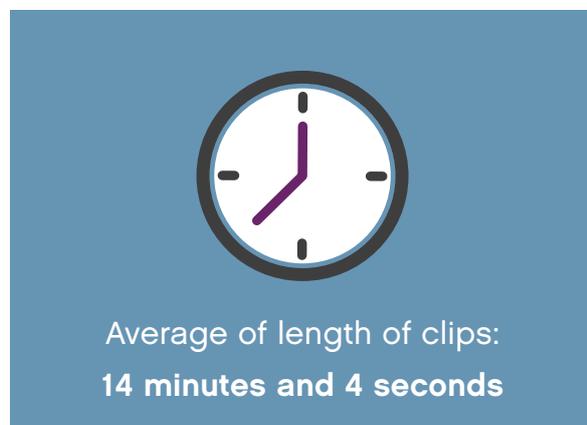
Popular videos average just over 14 minutes. It's common for these to have a clear and basic narrative. According to Pornhub's data, New Zealanders spend an average of 10 minutes and 30 seconds per visit[8].

The great majority (85%) of popular videos involve just two people having sex. Ten percent involve three people, and 5% depict 'group sex' with four or more people. Videos almost always involved heterosexual sex (97%), while 9% involved two women, and 9% involved bisexual activity.

Safer sex?

Condoms were used in only **3%** of videos with vaginal or anal intercourse

Condom use is rare in popular videos. Just 3% of videos showing penetrative sex also showed condom use. Not only are condoms rarely used, but around a quarter (26%) of videos depicted a male ejaculating in a woman's vagina or anus.

Pornography is about sexual fantasy rather than sexual education. Adults will understand this is not modelling safe sex but this may not be so clear to young people.

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8   See https://www.pornhub.com/insights/new-zealand

'Step porn' is popular in New Zealand

Most common categories in popular videos

Category	Percentage
HD (high definition) Porn	98%
Popular With Women	83%
Pornstar	72%
Teen	56%
Babe	48%
Hardcore	45%
Step Fantasy	43%
POV (point of view)	42%
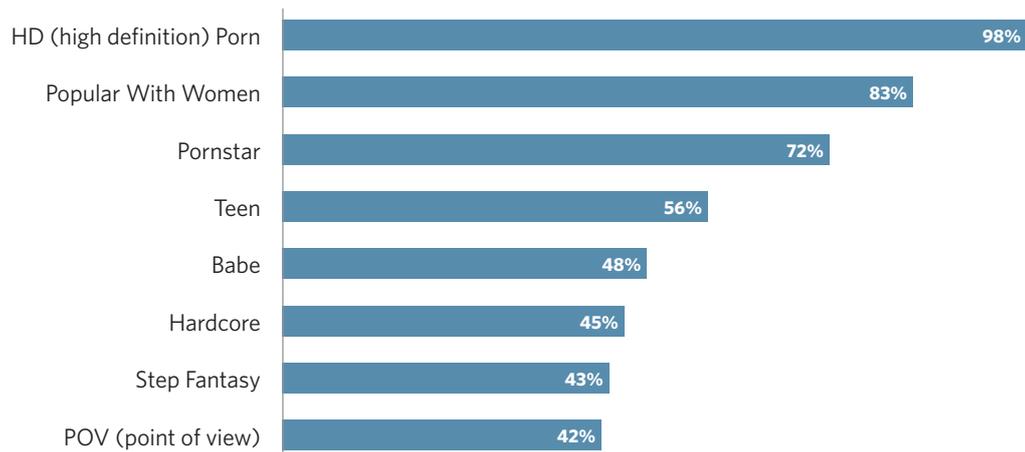
Each video is assigned a number of categories on Pornhub according to its content. People can use these categories to search for other similar content they might want to view. The chart above doesn't show 'the most popular categories' on Pornhub (you can find those here[9]), but it does show the categories that are most common amongst popular videos.

Close to half (43%) of videos were included in the 'Step Fantasy' category, and an analysis of video titles (see below) shows that 46% indicated 'step' or family sexual activity (this is sometimes referred to as 'fauxcest'). Interest in 'Step Fantasy' porn is common around the world and is not uniquely popular in New Zealand. In 2018, 'step mom' was the 4th most searched for term globally.

It is clear that none of these videos actually depict real family members, rather, they are commercial videos using the taboo of sex 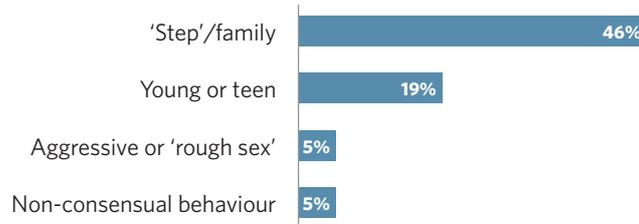with (adult) stepsiblings or stepparents as an erotic fantasy. The stories tend to be highly contrived and unrealistic scenarios, more often involving sex with 'stepsisters', 'stepbrothers' or 'stepmoms'. Pornography has long taken taboo situations and coupled these with otherwise unremarkable sexual scenarios (think 'the plumber', 'the pizza man', or 'the experienced older woman next door'). In other words, it provides a narrative shortcut to establish erotic tension in a scene.

Nonetheless, the content of these videos is highly problematic. Videos in this category were more likely (42% vs 35%) to involve some form of non-consensual behaviour. The narratives tend to raise problematic issues around power dynamics and inappropriate sexual behaviour within a family context. While adults may have the framework to understand this as erotic fantasy – much like the plumber or the pizza man – young people (and especially children) may not have the experience to do so.

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[9] See https://www.pornhub.com/insights/new-zealand

Analysis of titles in popular videos

Category	Percentage
'Step'/family	46%
Young or teen	19%
Aggressive or 'rough sex'	5%
Non-consensual behaviour	5%

'Popular With Women'

Aside from 'HD (high definition) Porn', the most common category in popular videos is 'Popular With Women' (in 83% of videos). According to Pornhub[10], "The category used to house content that was marketed towards women, rather than content women have actually enjoyed." Popular With Women now better reflects the diversity of content viewed by women, and so a wide range of content is now included in this category. According to Pornhub, women make up 39% of viewers in New Zealand, and the wide application of the Popular With Women category suggests that women and men may share an interest in much of the same popular content. There are differences though. According to Pornhub, women (worldwide) are more likely to view 'romantic' porn than men, however they're also more likely to view 'hardcore', 'rough sex', and 'double penetration'[11].

'Teen' porn

'Teen' is also common with 56% of videos tagged this way. In mainstream pornography websites, 'teen' or 'young' generally means adult performers who appear to be relatively young, for example people 18 or 19 years old. None of the videos in our analysis appeared to show people under the age of 18.
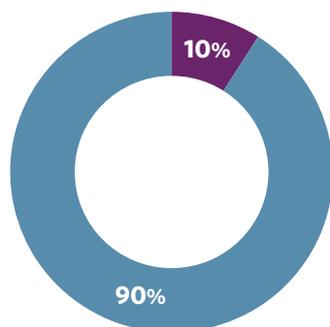
[10] See https://www.pornhub.com/insights/popular-with-women
[11] See https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2018-year-in-review

Aggression in popular videos

Physically aggressive behaviour in popular videos

- ■ Aggression
- ■ No aggression

10%

90%

Mainstream pornography is often considered aggressive, and so this was one of the key areas we focused on. We found that one in 10 videos contained some aggressive behaviour.

For our analysis we coded separately for physical aggression and verbal aggression. For physical aggression we looked closely for a broad range of behaviour that could be considered aggressive, for example pinching, slapping, hair pulling, or rough handling of any kind. Different behaviours could then be coded as aggression if there was apparent hostility or intent to cause pain or discomfort, or when an act was shown to cause distress or otherwise have a harmful impact on the other performer. In other words, when looking for aggression, we took into account the behaviour and attitude of the person showing aggression, and the person subject to aggression. Where there was any doubt, we coded the behaviour as aggressive.

The majority of videos did not involve any of these potentially aggressive behaviours, and when they did, it was not necessarily done in an aggressive way. For example, many videos included some form of 'spanking' that was generally light and playful rather than hostile or intended to cause pain. While most of the sex depicted in these videos would not be described as soft or gentle, it also could not fairly be described as violent or aggressive.

Considering the generally held view that aggression in porn is common, the relatively low levels of aggression came as a surprise to the research team. There are various potential reasons for this, including differences in the way aggression has been coded or defined in previous studies, and differences in the type of samples used.

For example in the recent study by Shor and Seida[12], 36.8% of a random sample of videos were coded for 'physical aggression', however physical aggression was seen in only 12.9% of the most viewed videos. We know that a lot of pornography does contain aggression, but this tends not to be a common feature of more popular videos.

Can aggression be consensual?

4.7% of videos showed aggressive behaviour that was consensual

When checking for signs of aggression, pleasure, and consent in videos we are acknowledging that these are largely commercial productions depicting people who are performing a role and following a script.

Aggressive behaviours can be a part of consensual sexual activity. For example, dominance/submission role play may involve pain within a sexual context that is mutually consented to and enjoyed. Taking this into account, we checked whether the aggression we saw in popular videos appeared to be consensual.

As explained more fully on page 20 of this report, the criteria for 'non-consensual' behaviour was broad and included verbal and non-verbal cues – this includes explicit

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[12] Eran Shor and Kimberly Seida (2018): "Harder and Harder"? Is mainstream pornography becoming increasingly violent and do viewers prefer violent content?. *The Journal of Sex Research*, DOI: 10.1080/00224499.2018.1451476

forms of non-consent such as requests to stop or signs of resistance, and also less explicit signs that indicated unhappiness with what was happening.

We found that non-consensual aggression was present in 5.3% of the full sample of 196 videos. In these examples the aggressive act did not appear to be consented to or enjoyed by the other performer. Furthermore, of the full sample, 4.7% showed aggressive behaviour that appeared to be consensual and pleasurable.

Aggression is almost always directed towards women

Relatively few videos contained physical aggression, however all of these depicted aggression from a man towards a woman. Two videos also depicted physical aggression by a woman towards a man, and one showed aggression by a woman towards another woman.

We also coded for aggression towards men or women or colour, however this did not reveal any significant differences. In the full sample, two videos depicted any aggression towards a woman of colour.

Verbal aggression and derogatory language

3% of clips contain verbal aggression or abuse

9% of clips contain derogatory language of some kind

In addition to physical aggression we checked for verbal aggression or abuse, meaning name calling, yelling, threatening, or swearing abusively. We found that verbal aggression is even less common than physical aggression – present in only 3% of the videos. We also know that language in porn can be derogatory (eg words like 'slut') even when it's not used aggressively, so we also looked for any of this language regardless of context. This was more common with 9% of videos containing some form of derogatory language.

Example of non-aggressive use of derogatory language

A woman is interviewed by/talking to the cameraman before they engage in sexual activity. She says to him, "How did you know I was a slut?"

Acts typically seen in porn

Act	Percentage
Vaginal intercourse	92%
Masturbation	75%
Fellatio	74%
Spanking	35%
'Deep-throat' fellatio	33%
Cunnilingus	30%
Facial ejaculation	21%
Throat holding	13%
Hair pulling	8%
Anal intercourse	4%
Slapping	4%
Choking	0.5%
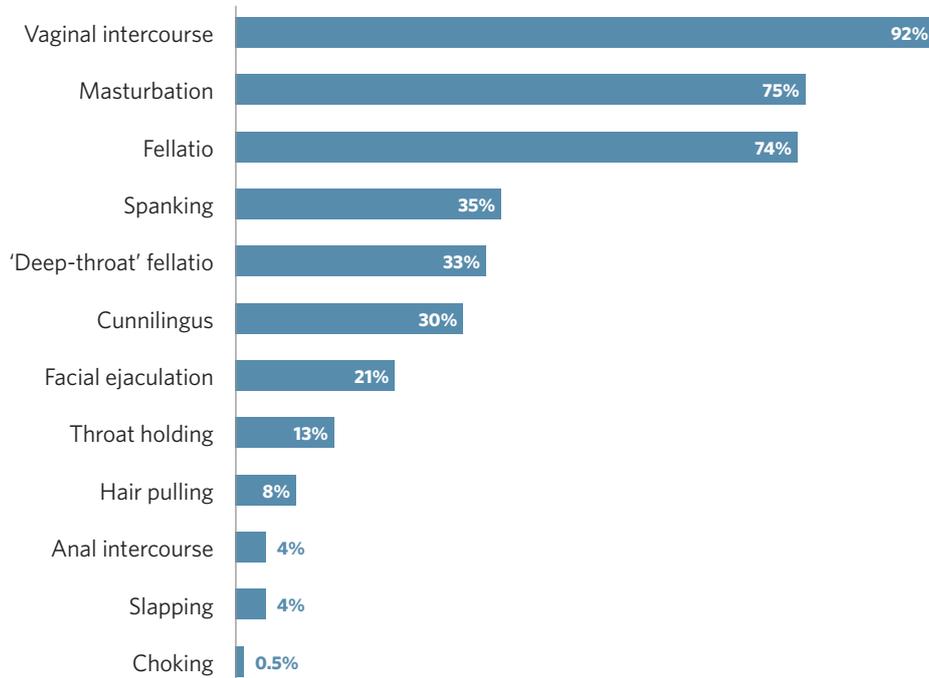
What acts are typically seen in porn?

While the narrative of popular porn often involves taboos of some kind, the majority did not depict a wide variety of sexual acts. Of the 22 behaviours we coded for, only three were seen in the majority of clips: vaginal intercourse, masturbation and fellatio.

We looked closely for behaviours that are sometimes associated with aggression, for example 'deep throat fellatio'. While this act can be aggressive if done forcefully or for an extended period of time, this was not a common feature of the videos in our sample.

Throat holding, 'choking' or 'breath play'

One of the most risky activities that can be seen in pornography is known as 'choking'. Sometimes referred to as 'breath play', this involves a person placing a hand or hands over a partners throat and obstructing their breathing or blood circulation. While this activity can be pleasurable for some when done with care, it carries significant risks.

It is important to distinguish choking in a consensual sexual context from strangulation as a form of violent assault. Nonetheless, even in a consensual context choking can be potentially dangerous and even life threatening if not done carefully.

By its nature, this activity is inherently aggressive according to our criteria, regardless of whether it is depicted as consensual.

Only one of the 196 videos in our sample contained 'choking'. In this video, pressure was applied to two women's throats in a way that clearly restricted blood flow (however it did not appear to restrict their ability to breathe). While clearly aggressive, this scene was also depicted as consensual and pleasurable for the performers.

A further 13% percent of videos involved one performer holding or placing a hand over the throat or front of the neck of another performer. In the great majority of these videos this was brief and without significant pressure, did not involve any apparent hostility or discomfort, and was clearly consensual.

The brevity and lack of pressure apparent in most of these videos suggests that performers are conscious of not making their partner uncomfortable or putting them at risk of harm. While this may be true, it may not necessarily be clear to the viewer. In other words, while these videos were not considered to involve 'choking', they nonetheless may give the appearance or impression of choking for viewers. Considering the serious risk of harm posed by the activity, it is concerning to see it depicted even in a minority of popular videos.

Does porn show mutual pleasure?

Do they seem to enjoy it?

Females show pleasure in **99%** of clips

Males show pleasure in **96%** of clips

Popular videos almost always show both male and female pleasure – for example moaning, heavy breathing, smiling, climax, etc. While videos that do not depict mutual pleasure can easily be found on Pornhub and other sites, this was not at all common on the popular videos we looked at.

Nonetheless, mutually enjoyable sex is fairly often depicted as following some form of non-consensual behaviour, which is a highly problematic message (as outlined in more detail on page 20). Also, depictions where performers are always shown to enjoy sexual acts may give young people unrealistic expectations of how pleasurable these activities are in real life – without the experience and preparation required by the performers.

## Affection in porn

29%
showed some form of affection
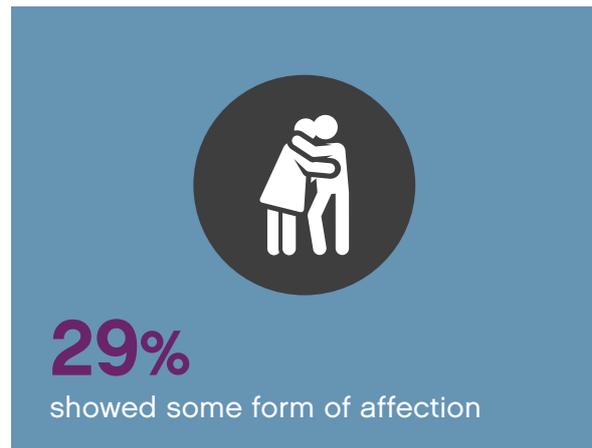
A common criticism of pornography is that it does not show affection, let alone love or romance. We found this to be largely true of the most popular videos, with under a third (29%) showing some form of affection. Displays of affection could include kissing, embracing, soft touching, compliments etc, and always in a consensual and non-aggressive context.

While people will often seek this kind of intimacy while having sex, findings suggest that most viewers do not commonly seek this out in pornography.

Non-consensual behaviour in popular videos

Non-consensual behaviour in popular videos

35%

65%

■ Contains some non-consensual behaviour
■ Does not contain non-consensual behaviour
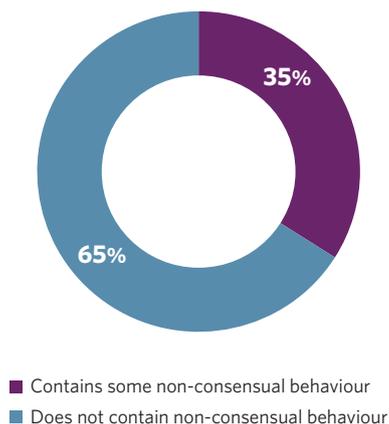
In addition to non-consensual aggression (see page 16), we looked for <u>any</u> signs of non-consensual activity. This was broadly defined and included: explicit verbal cues, requests to stop, signs of resistance, attempts to avoid, or evident unhappiness with the situation.

We included any signs that sexual contact was not welcome, including situations where someone is initially reluctant but is subsequently 'convinced' or changes their mind as a result of pressure from another person. In other words, videos where 'no' becomes 'yes' were coded for non-consensual behaviour.

These findings suggest that New Zealanders prefer pornography depicting behaviour that is consensual, however a significant proportion of popular videos (35%) do contain some non-consensual elements acted by performers in the context of sexual fantasy.

While there were some non-consensual elements in these videos, mostly the focus was on mutually enjoyable sex. Forced sex and coercion tended not to be popular amongst New Zealand viewers. If viewers wished to view content of that nature they would be able to find it easily both on Pornhub and on many other websites.

Nonetheless, as noted above, any non-consensual behaviour is highly problematic. Many of these popular videos – notably those in the 'step fantasy' genre – involved narratives where people are pressured to agree to sex, or 'tricked' into sex without their knowledge. Other examples included spying, or initiating sexual activity while someone is sleeping.

The variety of scenarios depicted are contrived and very unrealistic. Adults may have the framework to understand this as erotic fantasy exploring taboo narratives, as discussed earlier in relation to Step Fantasy porn. Young people (and especially children) may not have the experience to do so.

What do young people see in porn?
A comparison with our 2018 research

These findings are consistent with our nationally representative survey of 14-17 year-olds undertaken in 2018 – *NZ Youth and Porn*. We asked regular viewers of porn (those who saw it at least monthly, weekly or daily) about the types of behaviour they see in porn:

NZ Youth and Porn, 2018

"When you look at porn, how often do you see this?"

Romance or affection: **22%**

Any activity or behaviour that looks like one of the people doesn't want it or like it: **19%**

A woman being pressured into having sex when she doesn't want to: **19%**

Any violence or aggression: **16%**

% of regular viewers who see this behaviour at least half the time.

Just 7% said they saw 'any violence or aggression' 'always' or 'most of the time'. In total, 16% saw this 'at least half the time'. This suggests that it's relatively uncommon for younger viewers to seek out this content.

Likewise with consent. We asked young people if they had seen "any activity or behaviour that looks like one of the people doesn't want it or like it", and 8% saw this 'always' or 'most of the time' (19% saw this at least half the time).

Young people are seeing non-consensual and aggressive behaviour in porn, and this is a problem. But it's unlikely that most of them see this often, so it's important to keep this in perspective.

This analysis also fits with the major concerns young people expressed about the impacts of porn – not that porn encourages sexual violence or aggression, but that it can have negative impacts on sexual beliefs, expectations and behaviour in more nuanced ways.

Conclusions

If these popular videos reflect what young people are watching, they may not be seeing aggressive porn as often as was previously thought. Considering the public anxiety around young people's access to pornography, this may be welcome news. On the other hand, this research confirms that the content in pornography – even popular or 'mainstream' porn – is not a healthy way to introduce young people to sex.

Porn is *not* good sex education

Our research has confirmed that many young people look to pornography as a form of sex education. Almost three quarters of regular viewers said they used porn to learn about sex. This is understandable considering that young people are naturally curious about sex.

It can be difficult to find practical information about the topic. Education in school – if they receive it – might talk about sex, but it often doesn't answer all the questions young people have. This is one reason why it's unlikely young people will stop viewing porn simply because adults tell them to.

This is a problem. Pornography is made by adults and for adults. This content analysis shows that even the most popular or 'mainstream' content can be highly problematic from the perspective of young people learning about sex, sexuality and respectful relationships. And the younger someone is, the less information and experience they have to understand the fictional scenarios commonly shown in porn.

Messages around consent are highly problematic. It's important to keep in mind that young people are increasingly aware of consent issues and most videos are presented in a highly unrealistic way. However this won't necessarily be understood by children and younger teens – particularly if they haven't had access to comprehensive education about healthy relationships.

As noted in this report, some acts seen in porn can be risky or painful if tried without experience and preparation. Porn does *not* show the lead up to what's seen on screen – it typically doesn't show condoms or lubrication, or other necessary preparation for what the performers are

doing. It's also unlikely to show the types of intimacy that many people take for granted as part of a fulfilling sexual relationship – like laughing, caressing, kissing or cuddling. Crucially, it doesn't show the open communication and consideration necessary to have mutually enjoyable, safe, and consenting sex.

How should we help young people deal with porn?

These issues require an approach that is both collaborative and integrated, involving regulation, education, and tools and information for New Zealanders.

EDUCATION

Young people tell us they want more and better information on sex and sexuality. Education provides an opportunity for a counter-narrative to pornography that can reach a wide number of young people, however inconsistent implementation of health and sexuality education at a local level can present significant issues for responding to this need.

Programmes that could be described as 'porn literacy' are being rolled out around the world. Ideally, these programmes should teach young people to critically analyse pornography as part of a broader programme about consent, relationships and sexual violence prevention.

TOOLS & INFORMATION

Too many young people do not have the information, support and tools to process and understand pornography, to deal with sometimes negative consequences of seeing pornography, or to avoid seeing it in the first place. Some young people are struggling with issues around pornography, and they need our help

We need to ensure that support and resources are available for families, health professionals, schools, and (most importantly) for young people themselves. The ongoing *NZ Youth and Porn* project is providing us with necessary insights and data to tailor resources that are relevant to diverse audiences in the New Zealand context.

REGULATION

The Classification Office's _NZ Youth and Porn_ research found that a majority (71%) of 14-17 year-old New Zealanders think that online pornography should be restricted in some way for children and teens (such as filtering content or age verification). Any technical or legal fixes are only ever going to be partial solutions – but regulation does provide options for limiting access to young people (especially children) who may be vulnerable. Our research also shows that young people are much more likely to first see pornography by accident, rather than looking for it themselves.

RESEARCH

The Classification Office is currently working on follow-up research to the _NZ Youth and Porn_ survey, involving interviews with young New Zealanders. Going beyond the numbers, we will learn more about the complex relationship many young people have with pornography, and the impact this might have on relationships. Having an in-depth understanding of young people's experiences with pornography means we can tailor information that resonates with them.

The Classification Office is undertaking this research project with youth health and development organisation The Collaborative Trust, and our final report is due to be released in the first quarter of 2020.

WORKING COLLABORATIVELY

The Classification Office is facilitating a more cohesive and collaborative approach via the work of the inter-agency Pornography Working Party, which includes representatives from the Classification Office, Netsafe, Ministry of Health, Department of Internal Affairs, Ministry for Women, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Education, ACC, and New Zealand Police. Initiatives are underway involving various agencies, and the Classification Office is working on resources to be rolled out over the next six months.

For practical advice on how to talk to young people about pornography visit our website.

www.classificationoffice.govt.nz

If you, or someone you know, needs mental wellbeing support, or advice
call or text 1737 anytime, for free, for support from a trained counsellor.