

“I see it everywhere...” young people’s exposure to sexual content in social media: a qualitative study of Australian adolescents’ social media use

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9 **“I see it everywhere...” young people’s exposure to sexual content in social media: a**
10 **qualitative study of Australian adolescents’ social media use**

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31 **“I see it everywhere...” young people’s exposure to sexual content in social media: a**
32 **qualitative study of Australian adolescents’ social media use**

33 **ABSTRACT**

34 **Background:** Surveys suggest over 40% of young people 13-16 years have seen some
35 form of sexual content online in the past 12 months. There is little research exploring the
36 pathways through which exposure occurs or descriptions of such content. While there is
37 much public concern regarding exposure to sexual content, Australian students receive
38 little or no education on mitigating the impact of sexual content online.

39 **Methods:** We conducted focus groups with high school students in an aim to discover
40 young people’s experience of exposure to sexual content in social media. In this paper we
41 describe these pathways to sexual content exposure, the nature of the sexual content young
42 people are exposed to and their views about this exposure.

43 **Results:** Focus groups found that exposure to sexual content through social media
44 occurred through networks of ‘friends’ or followers, or paid-for advertising. Content
45 ranged from subtle messages/photos to explicit pornographic pictures/videos. Young
46 people described much of their exposure was unwanted.

47 **Conclusions:** Exposure to sexual content, no matter the scope and intensity, is almost
48 unavoidable among young people who use social media. Utilising this information to
49 educate young people on mitigating the impact of sexual content, rather than trying to
50 prevent young people from viewing it, could be a more effective approach.

51

52

53 **Keywords:** Young people; adolescent development; social media; sexual content;
54 pornography

55 **BACKGROUND**

56

57 Using social media (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter) has become part of modern
58 day adolescence (O’Keeffe 2011, Common Sense Media 2012). Smartphones and easy
59 access to the internet makes digital communication a part of daily life in many countries
60 (Livingstone 2005, Steinberg 2005, Wolak, Mitchell et al. 2007, Australian
61 Communications and Media Authority 2011, Green L 2011, Livingstone 2011, O’Keeffe
62 2011, Common Sense Media 2012). Studies from the United States, United Kingdom and
63 Australia show that up to 97% of young people are active on some form of social media,
64 many across several social media sites (Australian Communications and Media Authority
65 2011, Livingstone 2011, Common Sense Media 2012). More than a third report using their
66 main social networking sites several times a day (Common Sense Media 2012). A 2013
67 survey found almost all the Australian young people surveyed had used a social
68 networking site (97% of 14-15 year olds, 99% of 16-17 year olds), 62% accessing social
69 media daily (Australian Communications and Media Authority 2011).

70

71 Social media creates the potential for young people to be exposed to high levels of sexual
72 content. But its individualised and private nature means that control by authorities (e.g.
73 schools, parents) can be difficult. Studies in the United States, United Kingdom and
74 Australia, show a third to a half of young people have been exposed to some form of
75 sexual content online (Livingstone 2005, Wolak, Mitchell et al. 2007, Green L 2011).
76 Young people’s exposure to online sexual content comes at a time when, developmentally,
77 they are beginning to recognise sexual feelings and develop their own individual value
78 systems (Steinberg 2005). Many will be actively exploring their sexuality (Rissel, Richters
79 et al. 2003).

80 There is concern that online sexual content may influence young people’s behavioural and
81 social norms, body image and expectations of sexual activity, in a potentially harmful way
82 (Brown 2009, Holloway, Dunlap et al. 2014). Cross-sectional surveys suggest an
83 association between adolescents’ exposure to sexual content, specifically pornography, and
84 less progressive gender norms, changes in sexual norms, earlier age of first sexual
85 intercourse and greater sexual risk-taking (Brown and L'Engle 2009, Watchirs Smith, Guy
86 et al. 2013, Marston and Lewis 2014).

87

88 It has been widely considered that young people intentionally seek sexual content online,
89 but recent literature shows that much of the exposure may indeed be classified as
90 accidental or unsought (Livingstone 2005, Prichard, Spiranovic et al. 2013, Livingstone,
91 Kirwil et al. 2014). A more complex understanding of the various pathways that lead
92 young people to view sexual content in social media is explored in this study, such insights
93 being important to inform the development of interventions to educate and safeguard
94 young people.

95

96 **STUDY AIMS**

97

98 Against the background described above, this study aimed to: (1) describe the pathways
99 that lead young people to encounter sexual content in social media; (2) describe the nature
100 of the sexual content young people see and explore young people’s reactions and views
101 around this exposure.

102

103 **METHODS**

104

105 We used purposive sampling to target government (public), religious and private schools
106 in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia and contacted school principals through an
107 introductory email. Researchers followed up schools that expressed interest and
108 introduced the study to students during a school assembly or via teachers during class.
109 Interested students were asked to pick up an information pack containing study
110 information for themselves and parents, and a parental consent form. We obtained explicit
111 written consent from parents and verbal consent from adolescents. Ethics approval was
112 obtained from the NSW Department of Education through the State Education Research
113 Approvals Process (SERAP), the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics
114 Committee, University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Committee, and from
115 individual school principals.

117 **Participants**

118
119 A total of 68 young people aged 14-18 years participated. Slightly over half (54%) of the
120 young people were male (**Table 1**). Schools (n= 4) were selected from four diverse areas
121 of Sydney New South Wales, in an effort to capture a mix of cultural and socio-economic
122 backgrounds and included government (public), independent (private) and religious
123 (private) schools.

125 **Data collection**

126
127 We conducted 11 single gender focus groups (six to eight students each) between March
128 2013 and May 2014 across four high schools. They took place in schools during lunch
129 break or class time, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. Each focus group consisted of

130 students from the same grade level. Researchers encouraged participants to lead
131 discussions, assisted by open-ended prompts (**Table 2**) and allowed participants to raise
132 new topics of interest. As the research progressed, we reviewed the emerging data, and
133 modified prompts and topic guides to further explore new areas of inquiry.

134

135 **Data analysis**

136

137 We analysed focus group findings using a constructivist grounded theory approach (19) in
138 an effort to create an understanding that was grounded in young people’s experiences (19).
139 We utilised an iterative process of transcribing, line-by-line coding of focus group
140 transcripts and developing a focused code framework. We used memos to diagram and
141 map where associations and comparisons were made across groups. This process involved
142 discussions between two of the authors (LL, JMS) which lead to a shared interpretation of
143 young people’s interactions with sexual content in social media.

144

145 **RESULTS**

146

147 **Significance of social media in the lives of young people**

148

149 Knowledge of young people’s exposure to sexual content in social media cannot be fully
150 explored without understanding the importance that young people place on social media
151 relationships and how their social media interactions occur.

152 It was not uncommon for participants to report having thousands of friends/followers on
153 social media sites such as Facebook. Friends/followers were older and younger (if their
154 age was known at all), from different schools, cities and countries.

155 *I have two thousand friends now....a lot of them I don’t know. (Boy - Grade 10)*

156 *...the goal would be to get 1,000 followers...So you are able to get more likes....*

157 *(Girl - Grade 11)*

158 Participant’s social media networks comprised: a small number of close friends; people
159 who were known to them but not considered close; people who were friends of friends
160 who they may or may not have met in person and; finally, people they did not know and
161 had never met.

162 *Yeah like I would have my close friends and I would have friends and I would have*
163 *acquaintances (Girl - Grade 9)*

164 *Sometimes a stranger adds you [as a ‘friend’ or follower on a social media site]*
165 *and if you know of them and might not know who they are - so they are not*
166 *strangers – they are acquaintances (Boy - Grade 9)*

167 Young people in our study, especially girls, described the number of friends/followers as
168 an indicator of how popular they were perceived to be. More friends/followers also meant
169 more ‘likes’ on the content (photos, messages) they posted. Having positive feedback or
170 ‘likes’ on photos they posted was considered very important to participants.

171 *You just don’t get the ‘likes’ unless you have hundreds of friends and so you just do*
172 *(Girl - Grade 10)*

173 *...the average is one thousand likes on a photo on Facebook...it’s like a virtual*
174 *popularity... (Girl - Grade 9)*

175 *And a lot of people feel like I don’t have enough likes in this photo I should delete*
176 *it (Girl - Grade 11)*

177 Participants spent many hours a day on social media, interacting with their friends and
178 posting content to social media sites. For many, not having access to social media for more
179 than a few hours was unacceptable

180 *....literally, I’m checking it [Facebook] all the time...I’d say maybe a hundred*
181 *times a day on the weekend. (Girl - Grade 11)*

182 *You want to know what is going on in the world before going to bed. (Boy - Grade*
183 *8)*

184

185 **Pathways to sexual content exposure**

186 **i. Paid advertising**

187 Much of the sexual content that young people saw was inadvertent, in that it came through
188 paid advertising. Young people described seeing sexual content in popup advertising or in
189 the sidebars of social media sites when they were searching for music, watching videos or
190 logged into Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. Adverts with sexual material ranged in
191 content from nude photos to graphic pornographic photos and links to pornographic
192 videos.

193 *(Sexual) Images, videos, dating sites and when you ever download music and you*
194 *go onto the websites and they are all down the sides (Girl - Grade 10)*

195 *I see it everywhere, sexual innuendo, you see a housewife and you click on this*
196 *link – just everywhere (Girl - Grade 10)*

197 Advertisements often offered a link to another site where more sexual material could be
198 viewed. Young people reported seeing these adverts across several sites and described

199 them as intrusive. Although they may not have been interested in viewing the material
200 advertised, the imagery was not without consequence for them, as many described feeling
201 uncomfortable, or irritated when seeing these adverts.

202 *I see advertisements [of a sexual nature] and it’s everywhere and they just pop up*
203 *and you ignore them (Boy - Grade 9)*

204 *It’s really uncomfortable and you feel you are trying to download music or*
205 *something...and its [sexual content] just on the side. (Girl - Grade 9)*

206 **ii. User generated content**

207 While paid for advertising of a sexual nature is usually easily identified as an
208 advertisement and often requires the user to click on a link to view further content, young
209 people also saw sexual content directly in their social media ‘newsfeed’ or page. By its
210 very nature, social media content is a direct result of sharing among networks where their
211 friends/followers or friends/followers of friends/followers post or share content. As with
212 paid for advertising, young people said that much of the sexual user-generated content they
213 saw was inadvertent, reporting that they saw it when not explicitly seeking it out and
214 many expressed that they felt little control over what they saw.

215 *It’s easy to view sexually explicit stuff (on social media) and you don’t have to go*
216 *out of your way, it will come to you (Boy – Grade 9)*

217 *On Facebook you have no control of what you are seeing. (Boy - Grade 9)*

218 *There is some pretty hard-core stuff like bestiality like how it just pops up because*
219 *someone on some page just puts it up and a friend will comment on it and then it*
220 *will pop up into your newsfeed (Boy – Grade 12)*

221 Sexual photos and/or videos of peers, celebrities or strangers were described within all
222 focus groups. These photos or videos ranged from sexually suggestive - people with their
223 clothes on, as well as nude and nearly nude images or videos, to those that young people
224 described as ‘pornographic’ including photos and videos depicting sexual acts.

225 *I’ve seen it sometimes, some of my friends like these older boys like a year above*
226 *that share like these over 18 adult videos... (Boy – Grade 10)*

227 *...and she used to post photos, like naked photos on Facebook it was very obvious*
228 *that she was naked but she’d be underneath a bedsheet (Girl – Grade 9)*

229 *...there’s a lot of porn that comes up and they have these things called gifs...like*
230 *moving pictures ...and those ones are usually porn just straight out pornographic*
231 *stuff and you see it coming up everywhere... (Girl - Grade 9)*

232 Many young people, especially girls, described scenarios where they were asked to share
233 sexual photos of themselves through sites such as Facebook and Snapchat.

234 *...and say maybe on Snapchat...people, random people that you are not sure of will*
235 *ask you for sexual photos” (Girl - Grade 8)*

236

237 **Gender makes a difference**

238 While both girls and boys reported seeing all forms of sexual content across social media
239 sites, there were some differences in the explicitness of the content described. Girls most
240 commonly described photos of women in sexual, provocative or suggestive poses than
241 more explicit content involving full nudity.

242 *There was one group on Facebook that everyone keeps liking and is called the*
243 *most fucked up videos you have seen and all the guys, not only guys, but it comes*

244 *up as really inappropriate photos of girls getting undressed and dancing and really*
245 *stupid things...(Girl – Grade 8)*

246 *...I have never seen it [full nudity] on an Instagram; I’ve seen [girls] ridiculously*
247 *push up their boobs. (Girl – Grade 11)*

248 While boys also described seeing a range of sexual content in social media, much was
249 sexually explicit or pornographic.

250 *..there was a page [on Facebook] for my school, specifically of naked girls...”*
251 *(Boy – Grade 9)*

252 *I notice on Twitter, still, naked photos of chicks and on Tumblr there is as well...*
253 *(Boy – Grade 12)*

254 *A friend of mine, like a guy, was [looking at] Instagram and there was just a nude*
255 *there and he was like, yup, that’s what’s on our Instagram... (Girl – Grade 11)*

256 Boys in general, but specifically in the older grades, reported sharing sexual material with
257 their friends by way of passing around an image on their phone, sending it in a text or
258 posting it on social media. Girls were far less likely to do so, reporting that they felt
259 embarrassed by the images and uncomfortable engaging with sexual content with their
260 peers.

261 *“I know like a lot of guys if they got [nude] pictures [of a girl] they wouldn’t send*
262 *them to their friends but they would show their friends and sometimes it is their*
263 *friends who are the irresponsible ones who go on their phone and send them to*
264 *their phone and sometimes it is not even the friend and it is just the friend being*
265 *cool to say he has photos” (Boy – Grade 12)*

266 *“This weekend I went back home and had my friend showing me all of these videos*
267 *he took of him and random chicks” (Boy – Grade 12)*

268 *“I have a friend who recently broke up with his girlfriend and during their*
269 *relationship to express their love they would send those types of photos and he*
270 *saved those photos and was like ‘look at this stupid bitch’ and sent me the*
271 *photos...it was gross” (Girl – Grade 10)*

272

273 **Wanted and unwanted exposure**

274 Both girls and boys reported that much of the sexual content they saw on social media was
275 not actively sought out. Many girls across all grades and some boys in the younger grades
276 characterised sexual content appearing on their social media pages as uncomfortable or an
277 annoyance, others described actively ignoring it or becoming desensitised to it.

278 *“... (If you see sexual content on social media), You scroll past and look at other*
279 *stuff. You don’t think about it” (Boy – Grade 9)*

280 *‘Yeah and then you’re just like where’s this come fromit’s like an awkward*
281 *situation...” (Girl - Grade 11).*

282 *I have to keep a locked door now because if my Mum walks in and I’m just*
283 *scrolling [through Facebook] it’s all just there. (Girl - Grade 9).*

284 Several young people, mostly girls, across focus groups, described knowing about or
285 viewing the hashtag #aftersex on Instagram where people uploaded (supposedly) post-sex
286 photos or comments. Some of those who actively sought out the hashtag reported that they
287 did so because they were curious after hearing about it from friends.

288 *Also on Instagram there was the hashtag (#) aftersex selfie so if you go on (that)*
289 *hashtag on Instagram there was like three hundred thousand (followers) and it was*
290 *on the news about it...” (Girl - Grade 10)*

291 *Everyone was talking about it [(#) aftersex] so I wanted to take a look. I know it’s*
292 *bad but it was kinda funny, stupid but funny. I mean who would do that? (Girl –*
293 *Grade 11)*

294 *I saw these posts the other day and ‘I just had sex with my boyfriend blah blah’*
295 *and all in year 7 and 8they just want to come across as mature but seriously*
296 *why would you share that? (Girl - Grade 10)*

297 Boys in the older age groups were candid about viewing sexual content, specifically
298 pornography, and reported that social media was not their preferred medium if you wanted
299 to view pornography.

300 *“If going looking for it [sexual content] all you would be looking for is hot chicks*
301 *and not naked chicks. If someone wanted to look for porn it wouldn't be through*
302 *social media. There are other places.” (Boy – Grade 12)*

303

304 **Understanding why young people share sexual content**

305 Young people’s exposure to sexual content on social media was primarily through
306 friends/followers in their networks sharing content. When we asked them to describe why
307 they thought this content was shared, both boys and girls talked about some sexual videos
308 or photos as ‘disgusting’ but ‘funny’ and this classification made it easy to share.

309 *Someone just likes it (sexual content) and they think it’s funny but then you are*
310 *weirded out by it but they have a different opinion on it but it will still come into*
311 *your newsfeed and you can’t stop that” (Boy – Grade 10)*

312 *...most people in our age group or in our grade would share [sexual content they*
313 *thought was gross but funny] with everyone or most people have seen that kind of*
314 *thing before and they would be ‘oh ya whatever’” (Girl – Year 8)*

315 One video in particular, which was described in several focus groups as a girl eating a used
316 tampon, was given as an example in several focus groups.

317 *For instance it was really bad but the whole tampon thing was going on and was*
318 *really disgusting but a lot of us just laughed it off in the end and ‘that is really*
319 *disgusting why would somebody do that ha ha’ and then moved on” (Girl - Grade*
320 *8)*

321 Girls who used social media to follow their favourite celebrities reported that sexual
322 images or videos of celebrities posted on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram,
323 and Twitter will often go ‘viral’ - meaning that they are spread rapidly and often globally
324 to millions of people through social media.

325 *And this crazy posted Kim Kardashian sex ad and someone liked it and it was on*
326 *top of my news feed” (Girl - Grade 10)*

327

328 **CONCLUSION**

329

330 This study investigated young people’s experience of sexual content within social media,
331 specifically considering the pathways to exposure. To our knowledge, ours is the first

332 qualitative study to describe the pathways through which young people under 18 years of
333 age are exposed to sexual content specifically through social media, including the nature of
334 the sexual content they encounter and their views on this exposure.

335 Results reflect current literature which establish young peoples’ social experiences online
336 and offline social as “mutually constituted” (Collin 2011, Pascoe 2011, Evers, Albury et al.
337 2013), and highlight the importance young people place on social media interactions and
338 the prolific nature of social media in their everyday lives (Boyd 2007, Smith, Liu et al.
339 2016). Young people interact with their, often vast online network to download, upload,
340 create and share ideas (Holloway, Dunlap et al. 2014) in the form of text, images or videos
341 (Smith, Liu et al. 2016). Our results suggest that by its very nature, social media and young
342 people’s patterns of usage make it a particularly efficient conduit for viewing sexual
343 content.

344 It is the nature of these social media networks which create or limit opportunities for
345 sexual content to be viewed. While there is often little control in viewing pop-up
346 advertising of a sexual nature, user generated material is different. The more
347 friends/followers a young person has, the more social interactions they engage in, the more
348 likely they will be exposed to sexual content shared within these networks. If online social
349 networks comprise of friends/followers who are interested and share this material amongst
350 their network then this content will be viewed more often. This may explain why our
351 results showed that boys in older grades at school were more likely than girls see more
352 sexually graphic material on social media.

353 While for ethical reasons, we did not specifically ask if young people were intentionally
354 searching for sexual content in social media, we did solicit information about how they felt
355 when they did see it and also what they did when they encountered it. In line with findings

356 from Wolak et al, 2007, many of our participants described this sexual content as
357 unwanted, describing it as an annoyance that they scrolled through and ignored. Others,
358 mainly girls or both girls and boys in the younger years felt that it was ‘disgusting’ and not
359 something they wanted to see. It is interesting to note that although they were aware that
360 they could do this, very few young people described officially reporting sexual content that
361 they found upsetting to sites such as Facebook which through its company policy would
362 delete certain sexual images (www.facebook.com/communitystandards#nudity).

363 Another option for young people, if they are upset by a sexual image or post on social
364 media which was shared by a friend or follower is to unfollow or delete that person from
365 their social media site. Although we did not ask specifically if they had ever done this,
366 only a few participants spontaneously described deleting friends as a reaction to them
367 sharing content they were upset about, possibly due to peer pressure to keep the high
368 number of friends or to avoid hurt feelings.

369 A valuable insight produced through this study is that most young people described
370 viewing sexual content which had been shared by friends, friends of friends or followers;
371 few described themselves sharing (or liking) sexual content. This is reiterated in Marwick
372 and Boyd’s 2014 paper on young people and privacy in social media which found that
373 while young people have control of what they choose to post on social media, they have
374 little control over what friends post or share (Marwick and Boyd 2014). One interpretation
375 of these findings could be that young people see themselves as passive participants when it
376 comes to certain types of content on social media, but this seems in contrast to other
377 literature which describes a usually careful and deliberate decision making process around
378 what young people post and share online (Boyd 2007, Byron, Albury et al. 2013). While
379 the purpose of our study was to understand the context and experience of exposure to
380 sexual content generally, more research into how young people mitigate sexual content

381 shared by friends would be valuable as would be the voices of young people who do share
382 sexual content.

383 When we asked them to describe why they thought this content was shared, both boys and
384 girls talked about some sexual videos or photos as ‘disgusting’ but ‘funny’ and this
385 classification made it easy to share. This finding supports recent literature suggesting that
386 content classified as humorous was noted by young people as a way to avoid stigma and
387 therefore made the content easier to share (Byron, Albury et al. 2013).

388 This study represents a sample of young people across cultural and socioeconomically
389 diverse areas of Sydney but was limited to those attending schools in a large urban centre
390 and therefore may limit generalizability to young people in other areas of Australia. We
391 did ask young people to describe the nature of the sexual content they saw on social media
392 but we did not explore a definition of the term specifically, due to ethical constraints on
393 questions/ prompts. Young people may have had differing interpretations of the sexual
394 nature of content they viewed or shared. Even though we were limited in the directness of
395 our questioning, a key strength of this study was participation of young people aged from
396 14 years. Including young adolescents in a study on such a sensitive topic is important
397 factor in capturing the range of experiences of young people, some of whom were
398 presumably not yet sexually active (Rissel, Richters et al. 2003).

399

400 **KEY MESSAGE**

401

402 Our findings raise awareness of young people’s high levels of engagement with social
403 media and the ubiquitous nature of sexual content. It allows for a more informed
404 understanding of how young people’s social media engagement leads to their interactions

405 with sexual content even while it is not directly sought out. This is important information
406 for those who support young people: parents, policy makers, educators and clinicians who
407 can utilise this to educate and communicate with young people in an environment does not
408 judge or shame young people.

409 Harm-minimisation communication and education approaches, which acknowledge that
410 exposure to sexual content is inevitable but which do not try to prohibit social media use or
411 seek to prevent exposure, could be more helpful for young people. Understanding that
412 social media is important to young people and yet exposure to sexual content will happen
413 may lead to more realistic and engaged education and awareness programs. Young people
414 should feel safe to ask questions and share their experiences with informed educators and
415 parents.

416

417 **DISCLOSURE STATEMENT**

418

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420

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425

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491 **Table 1**

492 Number of focus groups and participants by school grade, age and gender

Grade in school (by focus group)	Age	Number of focus groups	Number of participants	Gender	
				Male	Female
Grade 8	13-14	2	13	46%	54%
Grade 8/9	13-15	2	17	47%	53%
Grade 9	14-15	2	11	55%	45%
Grade 10	15-16	2	11	55%	45%
Grade 11	16-17	2	11	55%	45%
Grade 12	17-19	1	5	100%	0%
Total		11	68	54 %	46%

493

494 **Table 2**

495 Summary of interview questions

1. How would you name and describe social media?
2. What are the most popular social media sites and why?
3. Can you share examples of photos, videos or messages that you have seen on social media that your parents might be concerned about?
4. Can you describe some of the sexual content young people would see on social media?
5. Could you share examples of situations where young people you know have seen some form of sexual content on social media? What social media sites they might see this on?
6. How common is it for young people to see sexual content on social media?

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