





# Girls' experiences of cellphone porn use in South Africa and their accounts of sexual risk in the classroom

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## ABSTRACT

Violence remains a persistent challenge in South African schools, prompting investigations into underlying risk factors and mitigation strategies. However, an under-explored aspect of this violence is the potential link between the consumption of Internet porn *via* cellphones among girls and boys, and girls' risks to sexual violence inside the classroom. To address this gap, we used focus group discussions with 14–17-year-old South African girls to examine their experiences of porn access *via* cellphones and their accounts of sexual violence at school. The study illuminates the nuanced ways in which the girls experience risks and express agency. First, the girls illustrate a link between sexual harassment and boys accessing porn on their cellphones during class. Second, the findings show how girls negotiate their sexual agency and safety through contesting sexual violence. Third, there are conflicting views about porn: while some girls admitted liking and viewing porn, others objected to it as harmful and degrading. Finally, this study offers crucial insights into strategies to create safer school environments and gender equality by drawing attention to the intersections between cellphone porn consumption, sexuality, and girls' negotiations of sexual agency amidst sexual risk in the classroom.

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## Introduction

Gender and sexual violence directed towards women and girls remains prevalent in South Africa despite numerous efforts and interventions to address these actions (Ellsberg et al. 2015; Meinck, et al. 2016; Moletsane 2018; Mphaphuli and Smuts 2021; National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide, South Africa, 2020). Such violence permeates all spheres of society, including schools (Bhana, Singh, and Msibi 2021; Ellsberg et al. 2015). The culture of sexual violence and harassment in and around schools has led scholars to argue that South African girls are not free,

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and that many girls are fearful that they would experience violence both in and out of school (see, for example, Ngidi 2022). Despite numerous interventions, heteropatriarchal understandings of gender and sexuality continue to constrain girls' capacities increasing their vulnerability (Moletsane 2018). The growth of the Internet, combined with increasing online engagement—often *via* cellphones—has created new avenues for girls' sexual expressions and sexual risk (Janak, Bhana, and Lakhan 2023). In the last decade or so, the emergence of inexpensive smartphones, easy access to the Internet, and the growth of social media platforms, have collectively shaped how young people connect to and experience gender, sexuality, and schooling (Maes and Vandebosch 2022). This has been exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns.

Worldwide, approximately one in three Internet users is a child, and this proportion is estimated to be even greater in the Global South (Livingstone et al. 2018). In South Africa, most cellphone users are young people from age 9 upwards (Martin 2023), a pattern that is evident even within economically impoverished contexts (Ghai et al. 2022). Access to smartphones has created new ways for young people to express sexuality however the concomitant access to a variety of online content has also produced new ways through which the expression of sexuality is hindered especially for girls (Janak et al. 2023). One Internet-based sexual risk relates to how porn use can reproduce sexual objectification of women and girls (Willis, Bridges, and Sun 2022). Recent research indicates that porn is commonplace on the Internet and that smartphones are popular devices through which it is accessed (Massey et al. 2021). By foregrounding girls' perspectives on porn, this study investigates the potential link between porn use on smartphones among boys and girls, and girls' risk of sexual violence in the classroom. Specifically, we consider the under-studied area of cellphone porn use among young people at school as it relates to sexual victimisation, and agency among girls.

### ***Victims and/or agents: young people and porn***

Our understanding of porn is informed by Spišák's (2020, 1253) definition which is as follows:

[Porn includes] any 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.

Research on porn use among young people across diverse contexts reveals the existence of two contrasting narratives: young people as victims, and young people as the active consumers of porn. The dominant discourse is concerned with young people as victims. This discourse is associated with potential hazards, risks, detrimental effects, and wide spectrum of unfavourable consequences linked to young people viewing pornography (Mulholland 2015; Tsaliki and Chronaki 2020). For example, the consumption of porn by young men has been implicated in diminishing their capacity to make decisions conducive to healthy sexuality. It is argued that their inability to exercise control over their sexual impulses can potentially

result in risks for women and girls (Borgogna et al. 2022; Naezer 2018; Zhou et al. 2021). Research linked to this dominant discourse appears to be geared toward cautioning the public against porn consumption in order to mitigate the presumed adverse impacts on individual wellbeing, relational dynamics, and familial harmony (Peter and Valkenburg 2016). This caution often derives from a morally conservative view of sexuality, wherein the creation, distribution, and consumption of porn are seen as morally reprehensible (Grubbs and Perry 2019) and likely to undermine committed intimate relationships (Hastings and Jones 2023). This narrative further contends that the consumption of sexual media content by young people may potentially foster the normalisation of adversarial sexual attitudes, cultures, and behaviours, including sexual objectification and sexualised violence against girls (Willis et al. 2022). Consequently, within this discourse, porn is positioned as a moral transgression, eliciting strong disapproval due to its presumed facilitation of practices that perpetuate the subjugation and sexual victimisation of women, girls, and femininities. Additionally, proponents of the dominant discourse assert that the consumption of porn is a gendered phenomenon aligned with masculine constructs and boys' or men's behaviours, with girls and women being cast as passive, innocent, and susceptible to the sexual and pornographic proclivities of boys and men (Artz 2012).

In contrast, a more critical view of porn challenges the tenets advanced by the dominant discourse and suggests that young people are active agents who engage creatively and critically in the consumption of porn, navigate their consumption, and make decisions and interpretations regarding pornographic content (Attwood, Smith, and Barker 2018; Peterson et al. 2023). This critical perspective argues that young people do not merely absorb porn as a blueprint for actual sexual behaviour, nor do they interpret it as a definitive guide dictating their sexual conduct, beliefs, attitudes, desires, and intimate experiences (Bhana 2023). Spišák (2020) has noted that young people possess the agency to differentiate between pornographic depictions and real-world sexual encounters, consequently attributing diverse meanings to their exposure to porn. Mayeza's (2022a) research accentuates the educational potential of porn, particularly in contexts where school-based comprehensive sexuality education is stigmatised or forbidden, and where there exists an exacerbated taboo surrounding the topic of queer sexuality.

Furthermore, porn can be harnessed as an instructional tool to facilitate student-centric approaches to sexuality education within classrooms (McArthur and Francis 2021). McArthur and Francis (2021) advocate for the pedagogical utilisation of porn to foster discussions that foreground young individuals' perceptions, experiences, discourses, and inquiries regarding porn and sexuality. Spišák's study of Finnish teenage girls' perspectives and encounters with porn aptly exemplifies the critical discourse on porn, as conveyed by one participant in their study: 'Porn helps one to know oneself and one's desires. It might also spice up a relationship' (2020, 1257). Thus, the critical discourse underscores that porn consumption is not confined solely to male behaviour; rather, it asserts that girls also engage in porn consumption, imbuing it with distinct meanings. However, due to heteropatriarchy, girls' experiences of, and the meanings attached to, porn include victimisation.

## ***Heteropatriarchy and the production and normalisation of the sexual violation of girls***

Heteropatriarchy describes a fusion of dominant toxic heteronormative ideologies, gender roles, attitudes, and practices that produce risks for girls, women, and femininities (Mphaphuli and Smuts 2021; Shefer 2016). Dominant gendered and sexual discourses, unfolding in different spaces, in which male power, sexual entitlement, and violence against women, girls and femininities are seen as normative aspects of heterosexual relationships and interactions, exemplify heteropatriarchy (Bolton et al. 2023; Ngidi and Mayeza 2023). For instance, school-based research on young people and gender relations within the South African context shows how girls experience sexual harassment and abuse from boys due to heteropatriarchy and other toxic ideologies concerning gender and sexuality (Mayeza, Bhana, and Mulqueeny 2022; McArthur and Francis 2021). McArthur and Francis (2021, 15) demonstrate how South African teenage schoolboys (especially, those stereotyped as ‘troublesome’ and who may be ‘up to no good’) viewed porn on their smart cellphones in the classroom, even when the teacher was present. These boys watched porn videos in class and then mimicked sexual scenes (e.g. reproducing sounds associated with female porn stars during sexual acts) to arouse entertainment and laughter in class. In doing so, these authors argue that boys disrupted the silence surrounding porn in the classroom while also unsettling the power of the female teacher (McArthur and Francis 2021). In other words, these boys expressed heteropatriarchal masculinity through cellphone porn use in the classroom. Drawing on heteropatriarchy as a theoretical tool, we consider boys and girls watching porn in school as a behaviour commonly associated with troublesome boys’ expressions of heterosexuality.

While our approach to the analysis is fundamentally alert to how girls are oppressed and marginalised due to the cultural climate of heteropatriarchy, it also recognises that it would be too simplistic to theorise girls’ positions as solely victims who do not have the capacity for agency. Rather, we theorise that girls possess the capability to exercise agency, allowing them to counteract the oppressive and violent heteropatriarchal masculinity exhibited by boys within educational settings and online. For example, in their research on sexual capacities and constraints among South African teenage girls, Janak et al. (2023) illustrate how girls’ interactions with social media platforms provided affordances to negotiate their sexual agency. This engagement disrupted traditional notions of passivity and subservience within the heteropatriarchal cultural contexts in which girls’ sexuality is heavily regulated. Specifically, the research identified instances where girls narrated how they expressed their ‘sexiness’ by donning revealing attire, like ‘bum shorts,’ taking selfies, and sharing these on social media as a means of seeking revenge against boys who had previously avoided them, aiming to entice these boys with their alluring and sexually provocative images in order to win their hearts (Janak et al. 2023, 957). These instances illuminate girls’ sexual capacities and their ability to feel and become sexually desirable.

## **Methods**

In this qualitative study, we draw on girls’ narratives of vulnerability and agency in the context of using cellphone porn in classrooms. The participants were teenage

girls aged between 14 and 17 years, who all participated in a larger 1-year-long ethnographic case study that examined their vulnerability and agency in the context of sexual violence in and around the school. The larger study utilised various participatory visual methods (e.g. photovoice, drawings, and collages) and focus group discussions to examine girls' perspectives on sexual violence. The present paper focuses specifically on selected data about porn which emerged in the focus group discussions conducted as part of the larger ethnographic study. The setting of the study was a high school situated in KwaMashu Township, on the far outskirts of Durban, South Africa. Established between 1955 and 1966 to accommodate Black Africans forcibly relocated from areas closer to Durban's inner city, KwaMashu is a prime example of structural violence engineered by apartheid (The Township Renewal 2014). KwaMashu is characterised by high rates of gendered contact crimes, including sexual violence against girls (Ngidi and Mayeza 2023).

The second author used availability sampling to recruit teenage girls in Grades 8 to 10 (aged 14 to 17) who were interested in sharing their perspectives on vulnerability and agency regarding sexual violence in and around the school. The study drew on the support of a Life Orientation (LO)<sup>1</sup> teacher, who assisted in identifying girls who were interested in sharing their perspectives and experiences (either as victims or witnesses) of sexual violence in and around their school. For the purposes of the study, we focus on perspectives shared by 12 teenage girls across three non-structured focus groups. The small number of focus groups and the small sample size impose limitations in terms of the generalisability of the findings developed in this paper. We elaborate on this and other limitations later in the paper.

Recognising the potential barriers that might exist in discussing sensitive topics, particularly related to porn, sexual behaviour, and violence, and to create a safer environment for the girls to openly share their narratives and discourses of sexual risks, we enlisted the support of an experienced young black African female research assistant who facilitated the focus group discussions. The selection of a research assistant with a similar demographic profile to the participants was driven by the understanding that shared experiences and cultural nuances can play a crucial role in creating safe, open, and non-judgemental focus groups. Her recruitment was therefore a strategic decision aimed at fostering a more empathetic, non-threatening environment for girls to share their narratives and to encourage them to express themselves more candidly and engage in discussions about sexual risks.

The focus group discussions took place on the school premises in one of the Grade 10 classrooms. Each focus group lasted approximately 60 min, was conducted in IsiZulu (the local language in KwaMashu), and was digitally recorded with permission from the participants. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and then translated into English. To mitigate the prospect of losing or distorting the participants' meaning-making and views during translation, both the first and second authors, as first-language IsiZulu speakers, read both the IsiZulu and English transcripts several times until both were satisfied with the accuracy of the translations. Member-checking was also used as a strategy to further strengthen the trustworthiness of the data. To do this, the second author enlisted six of the participants to read the IsiZulu transcripts to check for accuracy and verify that perspectives were captured accurately. Translation into English only occurred once the participants had verified the transcripts.

Prior to conducting the study, written permission was granted by key gatekeepers, including the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Basic Education, and the school's management. Detailed study information letters and informed consent forms (in IsiZulu) were given to potential participants who were asked to share these documents with their caregivers for consideration. Participation in the study depended on participants' availability and willingness to be in the study as well as the submission of the caregivers' signed informed consent forms.

Before data collection, participants were made aware that their participation was voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. To minimise the risk of psychological harm, a registered social worker was enlisted to provide support for participants who might experience distress resulting from participating in the study. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, we have used pseudonyms to identify the participants.

Our approach to analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006, 87) thematic analysis process, which involved becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, and defining and naming themes. In the following section, we present three key themes around porn, sexual risk, and agency, which emerged from the analysis process.

## Findings

### ***Girls' experiences with boys' consumption of porn inside the classroom: sexual harassment, illicit touches, and sexual negotiation***

A discourse strongly present in the data was that porn influences sexual behaviour in ways that produce negative outcomes (e.g. sexual harassment) for girls. Girls' vulnerability to sexual harassment was generally perceived as linked to boys' being less capable of regulating their sexual desires and impulses when (or after) consuming porn. For example:

Luyanda: As girls, we know how to control our feelings, we can control our sexual desires and behaviours. With boys it's different because they can't control their sexual desires or impulses. When boys are watching porn in the classroom, you can find yourself being touched inappropriately.

Participants indicated that boys are troublesome as they can behave in problematic ways, such as sexually harassing girls, demanding sex from them, and assaulting them, and girls said that this was largely because boys watch pornographic videos on their smart cellphones in the classroom:

Sihle: At school in my class, there is a boy that I am [sitting] close to, and I always see him watching porn videos on his cellphone.

Buhlalu: So, you will find boys watching porn in class, and in their group; one of them has tried to approach me to do it [sex] with him.

Kusasa: They [boys] watch porn and then come and sit with us. I am sure when they watch porn, they get aroused. You see them trying to start touching us inappropriately

and I would reprimand them that they must not do that because I don't like to be touched in that way.

Girls often associated watching porn in class with the behaviour of troublesome boys, but, as Kusasa continues below, boys and girls also watched porn together and became sexually aroused in class.

Kusasa: If we are watching porn together, we end up being horny. I am not saying something sexual has happened. But in that situation, you just lose your mind, and you don't even hear what the teacher is teaching. What helped that day was when the teacher started to see that we were distracted by something, and he asked what was happening. I am grateful that he noticed before something happened between us.

While boys and girls watching porn together may lead them to being sexually aroused and to engaging in (possibly consensual) heterosexual activity in class, the data do not suggest that this activity has happened. However, it is important to highlight that girls and boys do watch porn together in the classroom and that both may become sexually aroused by doing so. However, it is the girls who seem to be exposed to the risk of sexual harassment and being touched inappropriately.

However, our data shows that, with exposure to porn and violence in the classroom, girls have learned to express their agency through being able to critically assess and reduce potential sexual risks amidst potentially sexually violent boys who have been aroused by porn. In this context, girls negotiate their safety by engaging in actions or behaviours aimed at protecting themselves from potential harm or unwanted advances in situations where they may feel threatened or unsafe. For example, Kusasa would explicitly reprimand boys, instructing them to stop their attempts to inappropriately touch her. Kusasa thus emerges as an active agent able to use reprimands both as a deterrent and a preventive measure against sexual harassment and illicit touching.

### ***Girls watching porn: agency and limitations***

The data also showed that girls watch different types of porn on their smart cell-phones at school, including same-sex porn videos involving women:

Mbali: I am not shy about watching it and I don't have any problems controlling my feelings when watching porn on my cellphone in class. I like to watch videos of women fingering each other but the thing that is different about us [girls who watch porn] is that we don't touch boys or other girls inappropriately in class because of watching porn.

Khanya: I like watching porn.

Sihle: I do watch porn and I will not hide that. But I watch it when the boys in class are watching it.

Unlike boys, girls like Mbali who watch porn position themselves as better than boys in relation to managing their ensuing sexual impulses and desire. The strong sentiment expressed throughout the data was that girls would generally not engage in sexually harassing behaviours against boys (or other girls) in the classroom as a result of watching porn at school. However, Thando (below) was of the view that

viewing porn, irrespective of gender, was harmful because of its capacity create sexual urges:

Thando: Why are we only talking badly about boys who watch porn? Girls should also stop watching porn. It is not good to watch porn at school because as boys and girls, we end up craving sex and some of us are not able to control our urges to have sex.

While boys are viewed as sexually impulsive and girls as seen as sensible in controlling their desires, Thando contends that even girls can defy the norms around feminine sensibility. Instead of attributing uncontrollable sexual behaviours solely to boys, Thando suggests that both genders may struggle with self-control within the context of porn. Thus, according to Thando, objections to viewing porn inside classrooms stem from concerns for both boys and girls to manage their sexual impulses. Thando draws our attention to girls' sexual impulses and thus moves us beyond a gendered discourse of sexual behaviour which links girls with passivity.

While girls generally distanced themselves from the behaviours associated with sexual harassment, one girl who liked watching porn noted the sexualisation of boy-girl relationships based on male sexual entitlement and girls' risk:

Khanya: If I were a boy, and a girl asked me to check whether her skirt's zip was closed or asked me to help her tuck her shirt into her skirt—if I were a boy, I don't want to lie, I would just touch her private parts, and I would do it intentionally. What are her intentions of even asking me [as a boy] to help her with her skirt?

In the comments above, Khanya recognises that there are limits to relationships with boys so far as seeking assistance from boys in checking on a girl's zip or assisting with tucking in a girls' shirt. Bodily touching, as Khanya suggests, creates risk for girls and increases the possibility of the expression of male sexual entitlement. There is an acute awareness therefore that despite their agency, girls live in a heteropatriarchal context where gendered vigilance is required when it comes to seeking help with skirts, zips and shirts. Khanya's analogy reinforces masculinity as impulsive and sexually predatory while illustrating girls' critical awareness of sexual risk.

In Khanya's narrative, and the specific question she raised, the would-be victimised girl would be blamed for the boy's sexually inappropriate behaviour. However, her analogy may be open to interpretations beyond victim-blaming. For example, Khanya may also be signalling girls' agency in how they send messages about their sexual desires (e.g. inviting a boy to tuck her shirt into her skirt) that they are not able to articulate openly because of heteropatriarchal gender norms and expectations.

This points to the complex ways through which agency is expressed by girls. Compared to the girls who were more conservative in their views on porn, some of the girls in this study were 'freer' in their thinking and therefore were more likely to admit to (and like) watching porn (e.g. Sihle, Khanya, and Mbali). By watching different types of porn videos, girls challenged normative discourses about femininity in which girls are denied sexual agency. However, when they expressed their agency by watching porn with boys they exposed themselves to potential victimisation and sexual harassment by their male classmates with whom they shared an interest. Khanya highlighted girls' vulnerability to sexual victimisation at school as well as how this



vulnerability was induced not only by porn but also by an overall heteropatriarchal climate in which girls are sexually objectified.

### ***Girls opposing/addressing porn use and sexual violence at school***

While the data in this study suggest that both boys and girls do consume porn at school, some girls emerged as opponents of porn use among learners.

Sthabile: As girls, we must not watch porn with boys in the classroom because boys often touch us when we watch porn with them in class.

Concerns around porn being used at school included the finding that when girls and boys watched porn together this could lead to sexual arousal and potential risk.

Misa: I don't like porn; it just disgusts me when I see some of the boys and girls watching it in class. The other learners enjoy watching porn, but, for me, porn is disgusting, and I don't like to watch it. I think it is understandable if it is the adults who are watching porn in their private spaces.

Misa's words suggest here that she has a negative view of porn use among young people at school. She expresses disgust at the idea of watching porn in class and believes that it is not appropriate for young people to engage with sexually explicit material at school.

Girls against porn also demonstrated agency when they advanced possible solutions to porn use and violence against girls at school.

Mandisa: I remember at school when our teacher said that while we are in class there are learners who are busy doing inappropriate things, including watching porn on their cell-phones. It is true that boys do watch porn in class while the teacher is teaching. I just wish that the internet would just jam or crash when they are watching porn because porn harms society. It is morally wrong to watch porn and I don't like seeing young people watching it. Boys, especially, watch too much porn. When you ask them why are they watching it, they say they want to learn different types of sex styles ... The porn that boys watch contributes to girls being raped.

Mandisa's narrative of young people's engagement with porn above is underpinned by moral convictions and perspectives that depict porn as troublesome and potentially hazardous. She suggests that restricting access to the Internet is a possible strategy to reduce access to porn *via* cellphones. While porn use by young children is illegal in South Africa, the widespread availability and easy accessibility of online porn *via* cellphones and other technological devices means that younger children may still be able to access porn (Geldenhuys 2022).

However, reasons for opposing porn use at school went beyond morality, with some girls arguing that it was distracting from learning and teaching processes:

Sthabile: I also believe it is very wrong to watch porn when we are at school because the teacher is busy teaching, and we are not paying attention.

Sthabile's disapproval of viewing porn at school underscores a perspective that views such behaviour as a distraction to learning and achievement in an educational environment.

The girls who opposed porn use also acknowledged that interventions addressing porn use and violence at school should not be restricted to the school environment but should also engage the broader community.

Kusasa: I would like to say that as girls we can create groups in our schools and communities that will enable us to give support to each other as young women. In that way, we can find possible ways of protecting ourselves from being sexually abused by boys, we can give each other tips on avoiding porn and being raped. Who knows, maybe boys will also join these groups, so the rape of girls in South Africa would stop.

Kusasa's thoughts suggest that, in order to be effective, interventions to address porn use and boys' sexual violence against girls at school must recognise that violence at school is connected to the cultures of violence that exist beyond the school gates. She further suggests that interventions must involve both girls and boys as active participants in discussion and plans towards solutions. Taking our cue from the ideas presented here, we elaborate on what form these interventions might take below.

## Discussion

In South Africa, social norms remain deeply influenced by the heteropatriarchy and sexism that shape understandings of gender and sexuality, and thereby impact attitudes, behaviours, and power relations, contributing to the prevalence of sexual violence in schools (Bhana et al. 2021). The widespread availability of Internet porn has made it easier for young people to access sexually explicit material (Massey et al. 2021). This can have a range of consequences for young people. For example, some of the young girls in this study talked about watching porn and becoming aroused, stressing the importance of sexual pleasure. However, more negative effects included how porn can shape young people's sexual practices and attitudes in ways that produce sexual harassment and rape, as practices that disproportionately affect girls (Zhou et al. 2021). Indeed, within this study, various forms of sexual violence against girls (e.g. sexual harassment, illicit touches) were strongly linked to porn use by boys who failed to respect girls. Using rape culture as a conceptual tool, Mayeza (2022b) has theorised the root factors underpinning the prevalence of sexual violence in South Africa as being the various normalised heteropatriarchal norms, cultural beliefs, and social systems by which men and boys are allowed power over girls and women. Rape culture normalises sexual violence, including victim-blaming and non-consensual behaviours, perpetuating gender inequitable power dynamics. Boys' presumed uncontrollable sexual drive within heteropatriarchal norms places girls in constant self-surveillance and vulnerable positions at school.

Several girls in this study spoke negatively about young people's consumption of porn at school. Some of the girls' ambivalence, negativity, and disgust towards porn and towards girls and boys who watched porn at school may also be linked to the gendered social pressure faced by girls to conform to heteropatriarchal gender norms and social expectations. By invoking a morally-based discourse of disgust (Scarcelli 2015), the girls who disapproved of porn were able to effectively position themselves as 'good or sensible girls' who complied with the dominant cultural scripts concerning

sexual behaviour, as well as the norms, rules, and expectations of a respectable femininity.

However, negative discourses about porn use may also be underpinned by ‘pornophobia’—a phenomenon by which the use of pornographic material is viewed negatively due to moral and cultural negativity towards it (Carter 2023). According to the girls in this study, one of the negative discourses around porn use among boys was the violence it engenders against girls. Some girls also spoke negatively about watching porn in class by arguing that it disrupts both learning and teaching.

There are various interventions that schools could develop to mitigate the problems around the consumption of cellphone porn among girls and boys during school hours. These might include putting restrictions on cellphone use in class, developing learner-centred critical porn literacy and sexuality education programmes as part of LO classes, as well as building collaborations between the school and other relevant stakeholders to address porn and violence at school.

Restricting cellphone use in class will require the school code of conduct to emphasise clear policies regarding cellphone use during school hours and to ensure that learners are aware of the policies and the consequences for violations. In line with this is implementing a reporting mechanism where learners, teachers, or other staff personnel can report instances of inappropriate cellphone use. This would create a collaborative approach to monitoring and enforcing a school’s cellphone policies.

We also recognise that LO classes can be used by the school to address learners’ experiences around porn and sexual risk in the classroom. Specifically, we recommend the development of critical porn literacy as part of LO sexuality education. In this context, critical porn literacy should be characterised by a learner-centred approach to sexuality education that includes both boys and girls. Girls’ accounts and concerns about porn use among school learners, and the vulnerabilities experienced by girls at school must be taken seriously as is a focus on heterosexual expressions of masculinity. Critical porn literacy classes need to encourage critical thinking and discussion to help young people make informed decisions about their exposure to porn. Girls’ narratives about boys touching girls inappropriately when watching porn together highlights the need for critical porn literacy and sexuality education to address consent and respecting boundaries. Learners need to be taught to practise self-control and make responsible decisions regarding their sexual behaviour. Both boys and girls need to be aware of the potential negative effects of porn consumption, and for the schools to provide critical porn literacy and sexuality education programmes that address these issues.

Therefore, critical porn literacy and sexuality education classes could be used to encourage discussions about both positive and negative aspects of porn. For example, critical porn literacy and sexuality education class discussions about porn will need to highlight how porn often does not reflect ‘real life’ situations (Mayeza 2022a). Such classes must also discuss how porn and sex can provide pleasure for both women and men. Another important task is for LO programmes to educate learners to be able to recognise victim-blaming and recognise it as another serious form of gender and sexual violence experienced by girls.

While interventions confined to schools may offer short-term solutions, they may not adequately address the underlying factors perpetuating sexual violence. Therefore, it

is crucial to acknowledge that interventions addressing porn use and violence at school must not be restricted to the school environment. Effective interventions need to involve engagement with the broader gender and sexual norms that characterise South African society. A contextually aware approach to interventions is essential, recognising that addressing issues within schools necessitates a simultaneous examination and transformation of the overarching heteropatriarchal norms and cultures shaping South African communities. To effectively address these issues, there is a need for collaboration across sectors, involving schools, families, communities, caregivers, and policymakers in gender transformative interventions.

### **Limitations**

While this study provides valuable insights into addressing the challenges of porn, cellphone use and sexual violence in schools, there are several limitations. Despite having enlisted the services of an experienced young female research assistant to facilitate the focus group discussions with the girls, violence and porn are sensitive, controversial and taboo topics, especially when they concern children and young people. This sensitivity set limits on the issues it was possible to explore in a focus group context. Supplementing focus groups with individual interviews or another method of data collection could have enhanced the quantity, quality and richness of the data available for analysis.

Furthermore, the generalisability of our findings is limited. The experiences and perspectives shared by participants do not represent the views and experiences of other girls in the same or other schools. Thus, while our study provides valuable insights into girls, porn and violence, these may not be relevant to different settings and contexts. Future research should aim to overcome these limitations by studying the topic using larger and more diverse samples, drawing on multiple sources of data, and using more robust analytic techniques to enhance the reliability, validity and generalisability of the findings.

### **Conclusion**

Schoolgirls' accounts of Internet porn consumption *via* cellphones among learners at a school in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa reveal how heteropatriarchy limits girls' capacities to negotiate and express their sexual agency while also increasing their vulnerability to violence perpetrated by boys.

Most of the girls in this study positioned themselves as capable of controlling their sexual desires and behaviour when viewing porn online, and exercised self-surveillance to manage their sexual feelings and behaviour. Boys, by contrast, were generally perceived by girls in the study as less capable of managing their sexual feelings when and after watching porn, which could result in harassment directed towards girls. In South Africa, heteropatriarchal norms have normalised the assumption that boys cannot control their sexual desires which renders girls vulnerable to sexual violence at school. However, girls' vulnerability to

victimisation was not only caused by boys, since some girls too engaged in victim-blaming directed towards their peers.

Conflicting views about porn were expressed in this study: while some girls admitted liking and viewing porn, others objected to it as harmful, degrading and disgusting. Girls who spoke about being opposed to cellphone porn use at school offered different reasons for their opposition. For some, their objection was premised on concerns about experiencing sexual harassment and rape from boys who used porn in the classroom. Others were concerned about how using porn in the classroom interferes with teaching and learning activities. We conclude by making the call for LO sexuality education classes to more directly address issues around porn and teach young people about when and under what circumstances it may be appropriate to watch it.

## Note

1. LO is an interdisciplinary learning programme which is compulsory for all learners in South African high schools. The LO curriculum covers various topics including physical, social, sexual and emotional well-being and development. Among its objectives, LO aims to promote gender equality, inclusivity, nonviolence, and healthy lives. Sexuality, sex and relationships education also forms part of LO (Mayeza and Vincent 2019).

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