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abstract

While conducting interviews about sexuality with a sample of 28 young people, aged 16–17 in an African township in Durban, one of the girls said, “Don’t call me weird, but I normally watch porn and stuff”. Instead of discounting the views of young girls as indecent and irresponsible, this Briefing shows how African girls express their sexual agency and desires by giving meaning to pornography in a context where sexuality education is limited or absent. Many of the girls in the interviews talked about pornography as an educational tool, as evident in statements such as “just watching how people do their thing teaches you how to do it in the future”, and “it gives you experience”. Others talked about its pleasurable capacities, “to relax and have some fun when I’m watching”. The girls in this study refer to pornography as “hardcore” based on which explicit sexual acts, both oral and penetrative, are visible. They access such pornography through the Internet, their cellphones and through videos, often through a peer network. In the context of widespread debates about pornography as both oppressive and democratising, this Briefing considers how girls situate their sexualities within pornography and the implications for sexuality education.

keywords

Sexual education, pornography, sexualities, sex, young people

When young African girls were interviewed in a study about sexuality, many made references to pornography. The girls argued that in the absence of information about sex, pornography was an important arena in and through which they learnt about sexuality and enacted their sexual pleasures. Whilst the girls did not claim to have any sexual relationships, pornography was viewed as a source of sexual education and pleasure and through which their sexual impulses could be realised. Familiar understandings of pornography often position women as subordinated and victims of male sexuality. In this Briefing, it is suggested that girls’ understandings of pornography offers insights into the construction of erotic feminine sexual identities. The girls’ responses challenge outmoded views about African girls’ docility in relation to sexuality. Seeking pleasure through pornography is in their view, an assertion of their sexual desires and agency, implicitly expressing a critique of sex education programmes that dismiss the sexually explicit content of pornography as harmful. Young people in the study have chosen to invest in it as a means of uncovering the information about sex that is withheld from them by society. While conducting interviews about sexuality with a sample of 28 young people, aged 16–17 in an African township in Durban, one of the girls said, “Don’t call me weird, but I normally watch porn and stuff.” Instead of discounting the views of young girls as indecent and irresponsible,
this Briefing shows how African girls express their sexual agency and desires by giving meaning to pornography in a context where sexuality education is limited or absent. Many of the girls in the interviews talked about pornography as an educational tool, as evident in statements such as “just watching how people do their thing teaches you how to do it in the future”, and “it gives you experience”. Others talked about its pleasurable capacities, “to relax and have some fun when I’m watching”. The girls in this study refer to pornography as “hard-core” based on which explicit sexual acts, both oral and penetrative, are visible. They access such pornography through the Internet, their cell phones and through videos, often through a peer network. In the context of widespread debates about pornography as both oppressive and democratising, this Briefing considers what girls’ comments reveal about their sexualities and the implications for sexuality education programmes.

Sexuality education programmes as they are currently taught in schools often focus on health dangers and reproduction, highlighting abstinence only.

One way in which to understand the comments that young women make about pornography is to invoke the debate about pornography as a site through which women’s sexual objectification and subjugation is reproduced (Boyle, 2000). Raithel (2011) sees pornography as sexual violence and claims that it redirects sexual energy in ways that are addictive, making it very dangerous. Within this debate, pornography undermines the building of healthy sexual cultures (Jensen, 2007). Watching porn can be considered a means through which girls actively participate in cultures of subordination where women are not only complicit but actively promote their own oppression and sexual violation.

In contrast, the girls’ investment in pornography in this study represents a challenge to the familiar understandings of African female sexuality. Reddy (2004), for example, has argued that in the context of danger and disease, African female sexualities are often represented in the domain of pain. Reddy’s work does not contribute to the pornography debate but situates African female sexuality within familiar notions of pain and suffering without greater consideration of pleasure and desires. The young girls in this study, however, make provocative claims about their sexual agency and desires in/through pornography. Their comments may help put to an end, adult claims of sexual innocence. Sexual innocence situates young people within discourses of purity and ignorance advocating abstinence. Such views, as Bhana (2008) argues, have prevented a comprehensive sexuality education programme from being developed, particularly in the context of disease and danger.

The participants’ comments about the place of pornography in their lives can also be read as an indication of their desires and pleasures in the construction of their sexual identities. More than two decades ago Michelle Fine (1988) noted the missing discourse of desire in sexuality education programmes that function to reproduce sexual innocence rather than as acknowledgement of young women’s sexual capabilities. There has been much focus in South Africa on the vulnerabilities that young women face, as Reddy (2004) and others have noted (Bhana, 2011; Jewkes and Morrell, 2011). Whilst this remains a justifiable concern, there has been less emphasis on the pleasurable means through which young women’s desires, aspirations and sexual imaginations are enacted. Whilst this Briefing does not intend to recommend pornography as an educational tool for sexuality education programmes, it reflects that girls themselves relate positively to pornography and the erotic elements of sex and sexuality that are foregrounded. Sexuality education programmes as they are currently taught in schools often focus on health dangers and reproduction, highlighting abstinence only (Morrell et al, 2009). In such a conceptualisation, female sexualities are rendered docile and passive recipients of male sexuality, on the one hand. On the other hand, sexualities are often seen as a means through which men and boys jockey for power and male sexual prowess is assessed through sexual conquests. In this context, young women in particular are often considered victims of patriarchal sexuality. In other words, male sexuality is endowed and legitimated with power, and not
demonstrating sexual prowess results in insubordination. Women and girls, on the other hand, have to demonstrate sexual docility and innocence as demonstrations of sexual desire and interest lead to scathing attacks on their reputations. When young women are not considered legitimately sexual, sexuality education programmes cannot offer sexual knowledge and information that recognises the existence and legitimacy of their sexual agency. Allen (2006) argues that failure to recognise young people as sexual beings increases the erotic deficit within sexuality education programmes.

The girls in this study are situated within a backdrop of increasing “pornographication” in South Africa. Pornographication as Attwood (2006:82) suggests is conceived as “sexual discourse, economic and cultural exchange and sexual practice.” Many scholars have argued that children and young people are enmeshed within the sexual, social and economic practices through which they forge meanings of their identities (Evans et al, 2010). Mainstream media, music videos and the emergence of a more heavily sexualised culture abound in South Africa’s media. Changes in technology have come alongside changes in sexual and gender relations. There are conflicting views about the effects of technology on women’s sexuality. Buiten (2007) notes how the media for example continues to portray normalising discourses which are misogynistic. Evans et al (2010) note that the “technologies of sexiness framework” highlights both the ways in which women’s agency is complexly enabled and disabled in relation to technology. For African girls in this study, pornography has become increasingly visible; all the participants recognised television, videos, Internet, music videos and cell phones as spaces through which pornography could be accessed.

Methods
This Briefing is based on a larger research study conducted with young African township boys and girls in the greater Durban area, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Twenty eight township girls and boys aged between 16 and 17 comprised this study, which attempted to investigate how young people contextualise sex and sexuality. The specific focus of the study was to understand how young people give meaning to sexuality, and relationships in the context of disease and danger. Other work undertaken in this study focuses on boys’ and girls’ meanings of sexuality. In this Briefing the particular focus is on two single-sex girls’ focus group interviews. Whilst boys featured in the broader study, the specific focus in this Briefing is on the view elaborated by girls only.

The girls brought up the issue of pornography and the discussion was further investigated in the groups. The interviews, recorded with the participants’ permission, were conducted privately in a classroom at the school. Pseudonyms are used throughout this study. The participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality and the option of withdrawing at any time. The interviews allowed the girls freedom of expression as a group to voice their thoughts and opinions. In the discussion the girls spoke openly about boys, boyfriends at the school where the girls are located and how they see themselves, what they wished for, their desires and passions. The interview process sought to facilitate a focus that was youth-centred in which young people were able to express themselves and lead discussions in areas that they themselves have selected as important (Bhana and Pattman, 2011). Ethical clearance to carry out the research was obtained from the Ethics Committee at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Old enough to be told about sex
Unlike familiar understandings that render young girls asexual, the participants in this study expressed their agency and expressed the view in the discussion that girls should be told about sex:

“Thembi: Some girls go through to puberty as early as 9, so even 9 years I think you are old enough. After all, girls who are 9 years also get pregnant so I think...”
that a person who is 9 years old is old enough to be told about sex.

**Beauty:** Some parents find it hard to talk to their kids about sex. So pornography will be a better idea... Cos kids of this generation... they are grow too fast, ja, I think they will understand cos even if they are not told about sex they just know what sex is.

**Thembi:** It should be educational..... I think it shouldn’t be mainly about porn but about sex education. Maybe by experiencing from their friends so you cannot say they shouldn’t know about sex cos they will know at some stage.

**Interviewer:** So what have you learnt from pornography?

**Zama:** Just watch, learn how it’s done.”

The inability of (parents and teachers) to talk about sex constitutes a part of the conceptualisation and regulation of young peoples’ identities.

Thembi understands the context through which young girls, even at age 9 become pregnant. In the South African context where rape and sexual coercion amongst young girls is rife (Jewkes et al, 2006), there is recognition that young girls do need to be told about sex. The emphasis placed here is on the educational merit of sexuality education. However, in the absence of sex education pornography is advocated as a way to “watch and learn”. Beauty says that it is difficult for parents to talk to their children about sex and in the absence of effective sexuality education, pornography is deemed to be a “better idea”. The inability of (parents and teachers) to talk about sex constitutes a part of the conceptualisation and regulation of young peoples’ identities. Discussion about sex is avoided and discouraged as the dominant notion of sexual innocence takes precedence (Allen, 2005; Renold, 2005). Despite an environment where parents cannot talk about sex to their children, sexuality is seen as something that young people will “know at some stage”. Research in South Africa has shown that expressions of sexuality constitute a major social resource amongst young women in talk about love, boys and boyfriends (Bhana and Pattman, 2011). Knowing about sex is not seen as taboo amongst young girls in this study. They perceive that pornography is a site of sexuality education in the absence of an effective sex education programme that teaches young girls about what they really want to know about, that is, the erotics or pleasure of sexuality and sex.

**Pleasurable porn**

All the participants stated that they had watched porn either on television, Internet and or cell phones or with out shame that they did so for the pleasure capital:

“**Interviewer:** Where do you watch porn?

**Beauty:** Sometimes on TV and on my cell phone.

**Zama:** On my PC and cell phone.

**Precious:** On the Internet and stuff.

**Thembi:** Cell phone...

**Interviewer:** Why?

**Beauty:** I find it relaxing... it’s how I de-stress by watching pornography...

**Precious:** To relax and have some fun, ja, I’m watching...

**Zama:** Just watching how people do their thing teaches you how to do it in the future. . .

**Thembi:** I learned how women get excited when they have sex they scream, I don’t know why automatically or what ladies must scream... almost every porn I watch ladies must scream.

**Beauty:** Guys do it too.

**Thembi:** I only listen to the ladies scream

**Beauty:** Oh come on! It’s the pleasure.”

Whilst pornography is often situated within the domain of indecency and social prohibition, the girls here transgress the boundaries of reputable femininities and highlight that they perceive that the pleasure of pornography is associated with “de-stressing”, “relaxing” and “fun”. The sexual climax of the “screaming” ladies in the videos they view become a central point of discussion as the girls try to project and imagine their own sexual capabilities. Beauty has apprehended that the screaming is linked to the “pleasure”, the erotic that is forbidden knowledge in sexual education. Thembi has gleaned from what she has seen that women “get excited” in a desexualised environment both at home and school, about the sexual act and sexual pleasure, that are placed outside of the boundaries of youth’s permissible sexual
experience (Allen, 2006:74). Pornography becomes the means through which the girls learn about the sexual act, the forbidden sexual excitement and pleasures on which pornography sells itself, and inevitably also through which their own young sexual identities are therefore being formed.

The girls said that they were aware that watching porn could increase the opportunities for sexual activity to occur and they were cautious about their vulnerability.

**Beauty:** It’s best if you watch it alone  
**Interviewer:** It’s best if you watch it alone without a partner because it excites both of you.  
**Thembi:** I have watched it with male friends  
**Interviewer:** And?  
**Thembi:** And nothing happened. We just watched it and commented afterwards and stuff…  
**Beauty:** I once watched it with my boyfriend – it was kind of uncomfortable so we just switched it…we were getting turned on so we were afraid we would do something…”

Pornography was both entertainment and pleasure but the girls were aware that they were enhancing a vulnerability to sexual activity which may be wanted or unwanted. Beauty thought it best to watch it alone as it “excites both of you”, whereas Thembi stated nothing happened. Beauty, on the other hand, invokes the possibility of both pleasure and the danger of a vulnerability to have sex is clear. An active female sexuality is evident as she admits to being aroused but is also able to resist sexual activity.

**You don’t want to be blank, you have to know the moves**

An important reason why young women invested positively in pornography in the study, despite its moral devaluation and the notion of indecency that accompanies it, was not wanting to be found ignorant in relation to sex, and to have knowledge and information in case they are not good enough when it comes to the real experience of sex:

“**Beauty:** Nowadays, like girls at our age they normally…and guys they normally talk about sex and stuff, so you don’t want to be blank or left out. You have to know something: the moves and stuff.  
**Thembi:** I don’t do it but I know it, how they do it, the moves and stuff.  
**Thembi:** Just to get knowledge and stuff about it, take precautions and stuff.  
**Beauty:** Basically…to gain more experience…  
**Precious:**…cos you know that it is happening, so it will happen to you.  
**Beauty:** Eventually we will get to learn about the sex terms and stuff so you know about it. Just to be aware and…about what is going on…  
**Zama:** I’ve become much more knowledgeable.  
**Interviewer:** In what way?  
**Zama:**…about the moves, the many styles.  
**Other participants:** wheelbarrow style, dog style, classic…  
**Precious:** I’ve learnt how a woman gets a man in her and there’s some other video made for biology it explains further on what is happening in the woman’s vagina when the body…their muscles and the man… and stuff… all the excitement the woman feels….  
**Beauty:** It is porn but educational at the same time.

Young girls’ expression of interest in sex and desire meant preparation for life.
is increased. The discussion amongst the girls is consistent with Allen’s (2006) findings. What the girls really want to know is knowledge about sex “stuff”, sex terms, real bodies, sex styles, vaginal information and sexual excitement.

Such information, as they illustrate, can only be received in their current contexts from pornography, pointing to the deficiency of sex education programmes at school and at home. Measor (2004) has also noted how pornographic material is an important source of sexual knowledge because it provides explicit details about sex, bodies and pleasure that young people want to know about. As Beauty states, “it is porn but educational at the same time”. Conflating pornography with education is a means through which young girls make claims to the missing discourses of desire (Fine, 1988) and erotics in young people’s sexuality education programmes, as Allen has argued (2005).

Conclusion
When Beauty stated, “Don’t call me weird, but I normally watch porn”, she situates pornography within the realm of indecency whilst contravening the boundaries of an acceptable femininity by stating that this is something she does “normally”. Pornography offers to the young girls information and education that is enfleshed and explicitly detailed and sexualised. In the absence of information and education about such details, pornography’s power is elevated and constructed as sexual. In contrast, many educational programmes in South Africa are based on reproduction and ABC (abstinence, be faithful and condomise) of HIV education programmes, counselling messages relegating what young women really want to know to the realm of the forbidden. Through their investments in pornography, the girls show their desires and acknowledge their status as sexual agents. In a context of high rates of gender violence and HIV, a focus on the victimisation of girls remains important: however, it does not allow for comprehensive understanding of female sexualities that include passion, desires and erotics. Pornography provides an avenue where such desires can be recognised and young girls invest in it as it fulfils a desire left empty by ineffective education information and knowledge.

It is impossible for me to conceive of a sexuality education programme that uses pornography particularly as it remains, notwithstanding the girls’ views, also one that is steeped in unequal gender and sexual relations. However it’s potential exists in use within sex education programmes that allow young people themselves to interrogate it for its potential good or/and harm. Making pornography visible will certainly help to reduce its forbidden appeal and in some way reduce its destructive power. Sex education programmes must take heed of the sexual desires, wants, and needs of young people framed by erotic appeal as it should also take seriously the gender and sexual inequalities that reproduce gender insubordination.

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References


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