



OFFICE OF FILM
& LITERATURE CLASSIFICATION
Te Tari Whakarōpū Tukuata, Tubituhinga

LISTENING TO YOUNG NEW ZEALANDERS

A case study of the Office of Film & Literature Classification's
Young New Zealanders Viewing Sexual Violence research project



PHOTO: Anton Darius | Sollers

MAKING IT HAPPEN

A summary from the Chief Censor David Shanks



“In 2017, my Office (OFLC) had the privilege of researching the views and habits of young New Zealanders around a particularly sensitive topic – viewing sexual violence in entertainment media.

Our research team travelled the country and sat down with young people to hear their voices. We were invited into their homes, their schools, their hang-outs – wherever the young people felt most comfortable – and talked to them at length about their views.

This case study helps to answer one of the most common questions we are asked by other agencies attempting work in this space: “How did you manage to engage so many young people on such a sensitive topic?”

The simple answer is “it wasn’t easy”.

The project was broken into three phases. In Stage 1 we worked with groups of between 6-8 young people and these consultations were largely facilitated by contracted researchers. While yielding useful data, we identified significant challenges limiting the usefulness of this approach.

The second stage of research explored the views of those who work with young people in the fields of sexual violence prevention, education, treatment and research in a series of workshops.

After these first two stages of research, it became clear that we needed to explore young people’s views about this topic in more depth and outside of a group discussion setting. In Stage 3 we decided to interview young people in paired groups where the participants were friends or at least known to each other. We also saw it as real value in consulting a more diverse group of young people – and in ensuring we had facilitators who were skilled at connecting with young people on their level.

It is our hope that the insights gained and lessons learned from our research will better inform simple steps we can all start to take as parents, educators, counsellors or regulators in this space.

We also hope this project case study assists other agencies, organisations and individuals to improve their engagement with young people.”

[The Office of Film & Literature Classification](#) (OFLC) is the government body responsible for classifying entertainment media and other material that may need to be age-restricted or banned.

We have an important role in protecting young people from media-related harm. By harm, we mean the likes of young viewers being shocked, triggered or disturbed by something they’ve watched, developing unhealthy attitudes about sex, experiencing decreased empathy or increased aggression, or being encouraged to imitate dangerous or criminal behaviour.

As our classifications can affect young people’s viewing choices, we are conscious of the need to consult with young people in order to truly understand what **does and doesn’t affect them**.

Project mandate:
To understand young New Zealanders' views and habits around viewing sexual violence in entertainment

In 2016 we embarked on a major research and consultation project, [*Young New Zealanders Viewing Sexual Violence*](#).

We had noted an increase of sexual violence in publications we were classifying. Many of these publications were aimed at young people or otherwise appealed to them – popular games and shows such as *Grand Theft Auto*, *Orange is the New Black*, and *Game of Thrones*, for example.

We were also aware of the growing social concern about sexual violence, indeed amongst young people, and the demand for education around sexual consent.

How should we tackle depictions of sexual violence from a classification perspective?

We wanted to understand what young people thought about these depictions of sexual violence in entertainment media. Do they know what sexual violence looks like? Do depictions of sexual violence disturb them, or affect their attitudes or behaviours for better or worse? How do they 'process' such material? Can depictions of sexual violence have a positive impact?

While there is research into the effects of viewing sex and violence on young people, we couldn't find any research specifically relating to *sexual violence*. So we decided to do some research for ourselves.



Game of Thrones

Three-phase approach:
Consultations with young people and service providers working with them

Our project took a three-phase approach:

- 1) Group interviews led by professional facilitators
- 2) Workshops with professional agencies working with young people
- 3) Paired interviews with young people, led by OFLC staff and expert facilitators when required.

All of our workshops and interviews followed a semi-structured topic guide. Discussions were based around five core questions:

1. What do young people think 'sexual violence' is? What does the term mean?
2. How are young people affected by sexual violence in the media? What are the potential harms?
3. What things in entertainment media might mitigate these harms/impacts?
4. Are there positive depictions of sexual violence that may have different effects on young people?
5. What restrictions and warnings are appropriate for particular depictions of sexual violence?

Phase 1: Using a professional research agency

We commissioned Colmar Brunton to facilitate group discussions with young Kiwis aged 14-17 in Wellington and Auckland. Each session involved six to eight participants, split by gender. Discussions took place in the evenings and were around two hours long. Age-appropriate clips from mainstream films and TV shows, depicting a range of relationships and consensual and non-consensual sexual behaviours, were shown to facilitate discussion. Some clips dealt with rape.

This research generated adequate but not robust findings, which can be found in our Phase 1 [report](#).

Limitations observed, lessons learned

It was apparent after this fieldwork that the group discussion format did not always yield the best data. We identified several areas in which the methodology failed us:

- The time and length of the group sessions may have been beyond the stamina of the young participants, especially given the difficult subject matter
- The group dynamic allowed dominant personalities to take over and stifle parts of discussion (most apparent in the younger girls' group). 'Group-think' and participants being led occurred. Some were reluctant to converse in the group environment, with a diverse mix of others (strangers), and on a sensitive subject
- Some of the language used was unfamiliar to participants. Some of the younger or less-confident

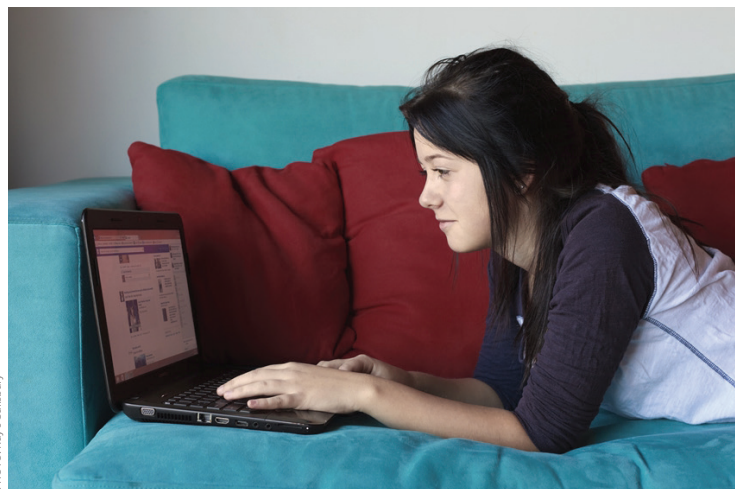


PHOTO: Roy / Salisbury

ones struggled to articulate what sexual violence was, or were uncomfortable talking about it amongst strangers.

- It was apparent that some participants had not been exposed to sexually-violent content before. While clip content was legally age-appropriate, some of it was too extreme for some participants, and this tended to close discussion down.
- Experienced youth facilitators may have been better able to lead discussion and derive answers. Specialist knowledge of the subject matter may have also led to improved responses.

We concluded that individual or paired interviews would be more appropriate for the sensitive nature of this research.



PHOTO: Matheus Ferrero

Phase 2:

Discussions with service providers working with young people

We then held a series of workshops with NGOs, government officials, academics and others working with young people in the fields of sexual violence prevention, education, treatment, and research. We wanted to explore the professionals' point-of-view on the potential effects that mediated sexual violence could have on young people.

We consulted 46 professionals from 20 different organisations. Four workshops were held, grouped around location and area of expertise, each approximately three hours long. Short video clips from films and television shows were shown to participants to prompt discussion. The results of these workshops can be found [here](#).

We are pleased that this research project was able to bring people together who are working on the front line to limit the harms of sexual violence in our community. It was made clear to us by participants that such opportunities are all too rare, and this benefit alone would have made the project worthwhile. Bringing these people together and harnessing their experience and expertise has been invaluable for our own understanding of sexual violence, and their enthusiastic participation and willingness to discuss sensitive and sometimes controversial issues around sexual violence has helped shine a light on a problem that is often misunderstood.

Phase 3:

Interviews with young New Zealanders

Learning from the shortcomings of phase 1, we decided to interview young people in paired groups where the participants were friends or at least known to each other. We also saw it as imperative to consult a more diverse group of young people.

Methodology

We conducted 24 paired interviews with 48 young people from around New Zealand, including rural areas. Participants were split by age and gender, 13-15 and 16-18. Participants represented a variety of ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds. Two interviews were conducted with survivors of sexual violence, with counsellors present. One interview was conducted with LGBTQI youth, facilitated by the head of InsideOut, a rainbow youth support agency. Refreshments were provided, and participants were paid a flat fee for their time.

Interviews were conducted in gender-matched pairs, led by two OFLC representatives of the same gender as the participants. The OFLC facilitators were chosen for their empathy and listening skills, their affinity with young people, and their ability to delve deeper when appropriate.

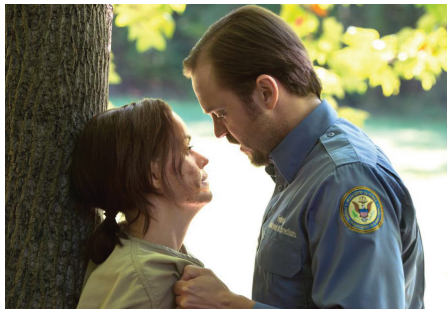
In order to better communicate with the boys' groups, we recruited a youth facilitator – a mature and energetic 17-year-old in his final year at high school – to co-facilitate their interviews. This strategy proved successful: the boys had a facilitator whom they could better relate to, and this generated better responses.

Interview structure

Each interview was one-to-two hours in duration and again used clips and a semi-structured question guide.

We began by building rapport and trust. We explained the role of the OFLC, and asked questions to open discussion and allow facilitators and participants to get to know each other. In particular we asked participants about their media consumption: favourite games/films/TV shows, social media sites used, what they liked and didn't like, had anything they'd watched adversely affected them, where and how they consume media, and did their parents take an interest in what they watch.

Next we showed them age-appropriate clips from mainstream films and TV shows. Scenes depicted a range of scenarios depicting consensual and non-consensual



Orange Is the New Black

behaviors within sexual/intimate relationships. Some clips implicitly depicted rape.

In some cases we sensed that the content, although technically age-appropriate, was making the participants uncomfortable. In these cases we paused to

check that participants were alright and to give them a break. We used our discretion and chose not to show further clips that may have been triggering.

We then invited participants to talk about how the clips made them feel and what they thought about the relationships shown: were the relationships realistic? Good or bad? What would they do if a friend was in that situation?

Discussion then led to sexual violence: what did participants think sexual violence is? Is it talked about at school or with their parents? Have they seen similar

depictions before? Can depictions of sexual violence be positive? Would they like to be warned about sexual violence in something they were considering watching, and if so, how would they like to be warned?

Finally we asked participants to classify the clips, to assign a rating and a descriptive note, considering how the clip made them feel, and whether or not they would be happy for their younger friends or family members to see the content. We stressed that there were no right or wrong answers, and that unrestricted ratings were totally acceptable if the individual felt that a restriction was unwarranted.

Ethical measures and specialist support

We purposefully avoided recruiting young people through schools, as we were concerned that teachers may only select their star pupils to participate. Instead, we recruited via national and regional youth centre networks, agencies working with young people, and other networks.

We also enlisted the help of professional youth agencies START Healing and InsideOut to recruit for the survivor and LGBTQI pairings.

All participants were given a letter outlining the purpose and format of the interview, as well as a privacy/consent form to be signed by participants and their parents/guardians prior to interview. Most interviews took place in participants' homes or in the youth agencies' offices – spaces of their choosing and where they would feel most comfortable. Participants were given the opportunity to withdraw at any time, and were offered pastoral support where necessary. At the end of each interview, participants were given contact details of help agencies, and invited to contact us for follow up if desired.

The survivors groups were not shown the clips depicting rape, as advised by their counsellors at START. These interviews took place at the START offices, with the counsellors present.

KEY FINDINGS

The key findings from this research are published in our Phase 3 [report](#).

Rewarding young participants

We realise that young people are motivated by rewards and the knowledge that their efforts will help others. Participants were paid a flat fee for their time. We gave them a 'letter of participation' which they could use alongside their CVs. We also sent them copies of the published report, so they were able to see their quotes published and how they had contributed to an important piece of social research.

How did our young participants feel about the process?

Young people like and want to be heard. Our participants said they enjoyed participating in the research for it provided them with a safe space to discuss their media consumption, and the mediation of sexual violence and the effects that it had on them. Their overwhelming positivity of this experience demonstrates that young people are willing and able to critique and discuss complicated subjects if provided with the right environment.

Below is some participant feedback on the best aspects of the workshops:

I liked talking about things and just having discussions because it made me really think about the things I watch and whether I actually felt uncomfortable or not watching them.

I enjoyed watching the clips and then discussing them. I also enjoyed having facilitators that were very nice and that I felt confident answering their questions...this workshop really helped me and I will definitely use these tips in future.

We could say anything without feeling judged. Felt as though my opinion was relevant. Felt comfortable

talking and expressing opinions. Interviewers were friendly. Thank you for the opportunity.

Feeling welcome and as though my opinion was valued. I could say exactly as I thought and had plenty of opportunity to voice my opinions. Everything was well organised and ran smoothly. I really enjoyed the discussions and was glad I could participate.

The incredibly open and validating discussion around issues discussed (LGBT, sexual violence) and a safe place to communicate ideas. Questions were clear and easy to understand, and interviewer was easy to interact with.

Consultations with young people work

We realise that the relatively small number of young people we spoke to is far from a truly representative sample. However, the project still gave us valuable insight into the ways in which young people view sexual violence, and proved a successful model for future research with young people (or indeed adults). The use of media examples was useful to initiate discussion and encourage young people to think critically about the content they consume.

The experience has also been invaluable in informing the way in which we classify publications containing sexual violence. We now have a solid, grass-roots understanding of what kinds of content adversely affects young people, and what content is more likely to have a positive message. We now have a truly informed benchmark for what sort of content we need to age-restrict, and what we don't. This research will help us construct clear, meaningful and detailed warning information for viewers in relation to sexual violence in particular.

Next steps?

Supporting young people to become informed and resilient media consumers

We learned that young people are willing and able to talk about their media use and the concerns they have about content, but they are often unwilling to approach adults about this, or do not think adults are willing or able to provide guidance. We are currently working with other agencies and exploring ways in which these conversations can be encouraged at home and in schools, in ways that resonate with young people and the adults who care for them.

Ultimately, we as a government organisation – an organisation that exists to protect and inform New Zealanders – cannot make fair and reasonable decisions that affect young people without consulting with them on a regular basis, to understand what matters to them and what does in fact harm them. As young people are the most likely to be affected by our classifications, we realise it is vital to keep talking to them and we will continue to do so. In fact, we have continued to consult with young people about other popular and controversial publications such as the Netflix series [13 Reasons Why](#) and several [electronic games](#).



13 Reasons Why

