AN INVESTIGATION INTO HOW YOUNG LGBTQ+ PEOPLE COPE WITH THE POTENTIAL HARMs ASSOCIATED WITH SEXUALLY EXPLICIT INTERNET MATERIAL.

This thesis is submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Professional Doctorate of Counselling Psychology (D Couns Psych) in the Faculty of Humanities 2019

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Abstract

An investigation into how young LGBTQ+ people cope with the potential harms associated with sexually explicit internet material.

Ross Nathan Phillips (University of Manchester, UK)

Background

In the last decade there has been an increase in research into the effects of sexually explicit internet material (SEIM) on adolescent development. In particular there has been a focus on how this material can negatively influence attitudes and promote unhealthy behaviours. However, at present there is very little literature on how young people protect themselves from these potential harms, and no existing literature on how young LGBTQ+ people develop resilience to this material.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore how young people cope with the potential harms of SEIM and promote their own resilience. Nine individuals aged between 15 and 18 took part in the study. All were recruited from a specific LGBTQ+ group within a UK based non-governmental organisation. The transcripts of the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings

The analysis of the data led to the identification of eight major intrinsic assets that young people utilised to mediate the potential harms of SEIM (e.g. ‘awareness of SEIM’ and ‘personal experience’) and seven major extrinsic resources (e.g. ‘education’ and ‘community experience’). Furthermore, although many of the coping strategies might apply to all youth communities, it was notable that the young people in this study described resilience processes that are likely to differ in emphasis and nature from those of their heterosexual peers. This was primarily due to their particular pre-existing relationship with hetero-normative pornography, and the journey of sexual reflection they went on prior to coming out.

Conclusions

An ecologically informed humanistic understanding of young LGBTQ+ people’s experiences of SEIM is presented. This suggests that working to bolster existing resilience strategies that account for both intrinsic needs (self-esteem, empowerment, and awareness) and broader extrinsic ecologies (families, friends, and communities) should form a large part of supporting individuals to navigate SEIM. Such an approach will help to enhance individuals’ existing strategies, prove transferable to offline settings, and arguably transcend any particular nuances afforded by gender identity or sexuality.
Declaration

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Glossary of Terms

SEIM  Sexually Explicit Internet Material

YP  Young Person / Young People

LGBTQ+  Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Queer

SCT  Social Cognitive Theory

DSMM  Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model

TA  Thematic Analysis

RF  Risk Factor

VF  Vulnerability Factor

PF  Protective Factor

BDSM  A sexual practice which incorporates Bondage, Dominance, Sadism, Masochism.

(S&M)  BDSM

NSFW  Not Suitable For Work

Fandom  A subculture of people dedicated to a common interest.

Snapchat  A timed exposure picture sharing online application.

Tumblr  A micro blogging website that general hosts countless 'fandoms'

Reddit  A social news database, web content rating, and discussion website.

PornHub  A popular pornographic video sharing website.

Redtube  A popular pornographic video sharing website.

AI  Artificial Intelligence
CHAPTER 1: Introduction

This chapter sets out to briefly introduce the topic of study and then reflect upon the background and significance of the research. The study will first offer a positioning statement before acknowledging the motivations that led to its conceptualisation. To conclude, I will define three key terms that will be used throughout the document, and provide an overview of the research structure.

1.1 Positioning Statement

At the time of writing this thesis I am a 33-year-old bisexual cis male trainee Counselling Psychologist. I am a trained multimedia designer and media producer, and have worked in various related fields. For the last nine years I have been focused on a career in mental health with a particular focus upon trauma and working with young people. This has led to my present employment as a senior practitioner in a third sector service supporting male victims of sexual abuse. This role, and this research, has subsequently led to a secondary focus upon the various dimensions of sexual trauma, and I have recently begun studying an MSc in Psychosexual Therapy to follow this interest.

1.2 Introduction to the Study

This study sets out to gain a deeper insight into how young LGBTQ+ people cope with the harms associated with sexually explicit internet material. The thesis stems from my experiences as a practitioner working with sexual trauma, and my background working in multimedia design. The choice to focus on young people was made because of my belief that they are the most informed about modern technology and online culture. Similarly, the focus upon young LGBTQ+ people is due to my wish to involve an under
represented social minority group, who I felt had rich insight into the online sexual environment. The aim of the research was to gather information on how we can best support and empower young people to care for themselves in an online world full of potential threats.

1.3  **Background and Significance of the Study**

Children are growing up in a rapidly changing digital environment which is believed to enrich both their social and educational experiences. In fact, recent research suggests that within the UK 53% of 3 to 4 year olds and over 90% of 12 to 15 year olds are active online on a daily basis (Livingstone et al., 2017). However, despite the potential of the Internet to educate, entertain, and provide social environments, children are also increasingly susceptible to harmful content, exploitation, and abuse. According to the NSPCC’s Net Aware Report (2017) 1 in 4 young people aged between 11 and 18 reported negative experiences with graphic sexual media, and 60% of the 1,700 participants also noted that they felt social media platforms should do more to protect them. Yet, this same report goes on to note that while many online social platforms exist with age restrictions, normally 13+, 66% of young people admitted using the sites before the age of 13. This contradiction appears to highlight the innate issue faced by child protection services. Essentially, that no matter what these services do to reduce exposure to harmful material, young people will find a way around it. It is my belief that we cannot protect young people from all the harms of the Internet, nor should we. Instead the merit of this research is that it aims to understand how we can help young people face up to the risks, and hopefully thrive.

1.4  **Defining the Key Terms**

Within this section I will define the key terms that I used throughout the study, and outline my reasons behind their selection. I will also reflect upon
my use of language and personal writing style within the study. A glossary of the key terms used throughout this document can also be found on page 8.

1.4.1 SEIM

The nature of online sexual media can be characterised and represented in many ways. For example, am I referring to specific pornographic feature films or the websites dedicated to exhibiting them? Am I referring to ‘homemade’ or amateur material shared on social networks? Or am I referring to artistic representations of nudity displayed on niche online platforms? On top of that you then have the confusion over the nature of the exposure to this material, was it deliberate and sought after, or accidental? SEIM refers to Sexually Explicit Internet Material, which for the purpose of this study was taken to mean any contact with online material that the participants define as sexual in nature. This includes, but is not limited to, specific pornographic websites, applications, media databases, social networks, and more.

1.4.2 LGBTQ+

Many terminologies are used to refer to people who identify as a ‘sexual minority’, or simply as not heterosexual. In fact, there are even various acronyms to represent the population found throughout literature, modern media, and across various cultures, such as LGT, LGBT, LGBTQ+, LGBTQIA, LGBTTQQIAAP. As a result of these terms being used so widely, they can be misleading, especially when employed within research. This is particularly worthy of note when reflecting upon historic literature where certain identities have been under-represented in practice, while still being referenced within the acronym (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). The letters of the full acronym refer to: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Ally, Pansexual. For the purpose of this study I have chosen to use the LGBTQ+ acronym,
because that’s the format the participants of the study felt best represented them.

1.4.3 Young People/Person (YP)

As with the previous two key terms, YP are represented in many different forms throughout the literature. In fact, there is quite a lot of overlap between the following terms: children, adolescents, young people, and even young adults. For example, according to English law a YP is anyone up to the age of 18, while the World Health Organisation uses the term to cover the age range of 10 to 24. However, this research is being conducted within the UK, with a participant group that ranges from 16 to 18, and which references historic behaviours and attitudes. As a result, I have chosen to use the term to refer to anyone under the age of 19. This allows the term to not only characterise the participant group, but also their past selves as well.

1.5 Thesis Overview

This study sets out to explore the research question: how do young LGBTQ+ people perceive their own ability to cope with the potential negative implications of SEIM exposure? In order to address this question in a clear and structured manner the work is presented over nine chapters. The aim of the present chapter is to provide a very brief introduction to the study and an explanation of the motivations that lay in its conception.

Chapter Two summarises the existing literature relevant to the research topic by focusing on four key areas. First, it provides an overview of Counselling Psychology and the theoretical and professional positions which influenced the literature review and the research strategy. The chapter then goes on to consider how sexual behaviours and attitudes exist online, and what negative ramifications might exist for YP as a consequence of
exposure to this material. Finally, the chapter considers resilience theory and several models of resilience often associated with adolescents and risk.

In Chapter Three I present the methodology of the present study. This includes the research design and epistemology, before a rationale will be provided for each step of the analysis procedure.

Chapter Four is the first of three brief reflective chapters that aim to reflect upon key areas of the research process. Specifically, this chapter focuses upon the research progression and the circumstances that led the study to adapt and make certain concessions. As a result, it discusses the external conditions that forced the study to evolve and what this meant for the research design and my engagement with the research.

In Chapter Five I present the findings of the study. This chapter focuses on answering the research question, and is broken down by the different assets and resources that YP appear to make use of to cope with SEIM.

Chapter Six is the second of the three brief reflective chapters. Here I reflect upon the interview process and analysis. Once more the objective of the chapter is transparency, and to highlight some of the key influencing factors behind how the findings are displayed.

In Chapter Seven I present the discussion, the primary focus of which is to address any gaps in the knowledge base and reflect upon the unexpected outcomes. To do this the chapter first discusses some of the insights that appear unique to young LGBTQ+ people, before reviewing the resilience models which acted as the theoretical backing of the coding manual. Following this, I reflect upon other conceptualisations of resilience that may fit the findings better, before acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of this piece of research and making recommendations for future studies.
Chapter Eight is the last of the reflective chapters, and focuses upon the struggles I had condensing and filtering the data. It notes some of the areas I was not able to reference in the study, and also acknowledges some of the ways my motivation for the topic may have hindered the research progression. This chapter concludes by reflecting upon some of the principles and frameworks that guided the study, the aim being to acknowledge how the findings may have changed how I perceive them.

In Chapter Nine I present the conclusion of the thesis. Here I provide a brief overview of the topic before reiterating my recommendations for future research.

1.6 Chapter Summary

In this first chapter I aimed to provide a very brief introduction to the following thesis. The aim was to explain how the research topic came to be, and offer insight into some of the key terms that will be used throughout. Finally, I outlined the structure of the thesis.
CHAPTER 2 : Literature Review

The chapter aims to amalgamate and critically analyse the relevant literature (Randolph, 2009). However, it was conducted and written prior to the analysis because of the time constraints and external circumstances that the research had to contend with. This means that the following chapter is free of the influence of the findings, and contains a narrative derived from the previous literature. This had several consequences that will be reflected upon in detail throughout the three reflective chapters, any holes within the knowledge base will then be addressed within the Discussion Chapter.

The chapter includes four main sections; first, I offer an overview of Counselling Psychology to acknowledge the theoretical and professional positions that have influenced the literature review and overall study. I then review the existing knowledge on how sexual attitudes and behaviours are represented online. Here, I recognise some of the conflicts within the literature before detailing a definition and context that the study will adhere to. In the third section I look at the potential negative ramifications of exposure to these forms of media for YP. In this section I recognise the existing knowledge and consider some of the moderating and mitigating factors. This subsequently leads onto the final section in which I introduce our present understanding of resilience in the face of risk. Once more this section presents the wider knowledge before focusing on what previous research has found regarding how resilience forms in adolescents.

2.1 The Positioning of the Current Study

The purpose of this section is to acknowledge the lens that shaped the literature review and introduce the principles behind the current study. It will first introduce the theoretical and professional characteristics of
Counselling Psychology, before considering what that means for a study focused on the thoughts and behaviours of YP.

### 2.1.1 Counselling Psychology

Counselling Psychology is a distinct profession and division within the field of Applied Psychology. According to Woolfe (1990) it came into development because of three key perspectives within the general field. These were: a developing need to facilitate the wellbeing of individuals rather than respond to sickness and pathology; a growing distrust of the medical model style of professional/patient relationship; and finally, an increased awareness amongst practitioners of the significance of the helping relationship. At its core Counselling Psychology moves beyond the traditional medical model and towards that of a relational approach rooted in humanistic values. The perspective of Humanistic Psychology can be summarised by five core principles (Bugental, 1964):

1. People are more than the sum of their parts.
2. In order to understand someone, you must consider how ‘they’ see themselves, and what their relationship is with reality.
3. People are conscious, which means not only are they aware, but they are also aware of this awareness.
4. People have free will and therefore have the power to make their own choices, but with these choices comes great responsibility. Personal agency is the humanistic term for the exercise of free will.
5. People seek things intentionally, and aim to make their mark on the world by setting goals, expressing creativity and by seeking meaning.
Essentially, within the humanistic philosophy there exists the belief that people are unique, and because of this they have individual perspectives and relationships with reality. Bugental argues that by dehumanising people with a label, or an assumption, we not only ignore the greater part of who they are, but also limit our ability to understand their perspective. Subsequently, within this philosophy there is also an understanding of the limitations of scientific methodology and an emphasis upon qualitative research, which argues that understanding the objective reality is less valuable than understanding an individual’s unique perspective, and how they in turn understand the world.

The humanistic approach has been applied to relatively few areas of psychological research compared to other approaches. A possible reason for this lack of academic impact lies with the fact humanism deviates from the traditional scientific perspective in its approach to the study of humanity (Rennie, 2004). From the humanistic perspective a scientific approach is seen as dehumanising, and unable to capture the richness of a human experience (McLeod, 2015). In fact, originally the humanistic movement could be interpreted as believing that free will is in direct opposition to the deterministic laws of science. However, this view is partially a reflection of the time, as at this point there was a movement to reject scientific psychology, such as the behaviourist approaches. Nowadays humanistic research gives pride of place to the human perspective, meanings and actions, and is strongly governed by an ethical framework that both respects individuals, and seeks to improve the state of humankind (Plummer, Lewisbeck, Bryman, & Liao, 2018).

The choice to include a section on the nature of Counselling Psychology, and in particular its humanistic values, was made in order to explain the guiding motivations behind the research. This not only influenced how I approached the field of research, but also how I prioritised certain literature, and the framework of the literature review. Centrally, the thought is that only through acknowledging the unique perspective of an individual or
group are we able to truly understand their objective reality. But also, that as researchers we have a responsibility to not only increase our understanding, but also to try and effect positive change. The following section discusses how Counselling Psychology approaches research with YP.

2.1.2 Young People

Counselling Psychology is driven by the value of respecting people’s individuality, no matter the age of the individual, and the need to acknowledge that everyone deserves to have their perspective recognised. However, the perspective of children and adolescents are rarely the primary focus of studies. Instead research is often conducted with the caregivers, educators, and the stimuli that surrounds a YP. This would appear to contradict many of the humanistic values at the heart of Counselling Psychology, but in reality, it is most likely due to practical restrictions rather than any deliberate oversight. Research with YP is considered to be research with a vulnerable population, and as a result there are many logical barriers that must first be crossed. In the past these restrictions appear to have deterred many researchers. However, in recent decades this has begun to change, with more and more research focusing on the lived experience of children and adolescents outside of clinical environments.

The world today is saturated with media; media that fearmongers and plays on insecurities and base impulses; media that sets out to grab our attention through shock tactics and seduction. It is in this world that a child must develop and it would be impossible to ignore given that the nature of modern technology makes this media so readily available. A good way of understanding the effect of context on a YP’s development is by considering Bronfenbrenner's (1992) Ecological Systems Model. Although often referenced as a model of child development, it is sometimes presented as a “theory of human development in which everything is seen as interrelated and our knowledge of development is bounded by context, culture and history” (Darling, 2007, p.204). Bronfenbrenner stresses the importance of
studying an individual in the context of multiple environments so as best to understand their development.

Within Bronfenbrenner’s theory, inherent qualities of an individual and their environment interact to influence how they will grow and develop. The model organises context into five levels of external influence. In the early 2000s it was renamed the ‘bioecological systems theory’ to emphasise that an individual’s own biology is a primary influencing factor. The theory states that conflict or change in any one area will reflect upon the others. An illustration of the model can be found below in Figure 1.0.

![Figure 1.0: Illustration of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, slightly adapted to incorporate the seeming significance of the online influence.](image-url)
Nancy Darling (2007) suggests that Bronfenbrenner’s greatest legacy is not just the model above, but also three domains that are only recently being explored by developmental researchers. First, the central force in development is the active person: I have the power to shape, provoke and react to my environments. Second, “a fundamental premise of ecological system theory is its phenomenological nature” (Darling, 2007, p.204): what I believe is real, and therefore has real consequences. Third, although different individuals will interpret and value environments differently, there are distinct developmental processes and outcomes that can exist within experienced and objectively defined ecological niches. Therefore, it would seem that the only way to truly understand someone’s developmental influences is to understand not just their perspective, but also their interpretation of the environments in which their perspective exists, and the power they attribute to that perspective. However, this was a theory of the early ‘90s, prior to the dominant influence of the Internet, the emergence of social media, or the prevalence of online gaming. Although it has been adapted in recent years, is it sufficient to understand the dynamics of a modern existence?

There is a general consensus within the literature that the Internet has taken a prolific role in the development of humanity (Anderson, 2005; van der Hof, van den Berg, & Schermer, 2014). Not only does it educate and influence, but it also allows people the opportunity to experiment with their identities and practice social skills. In fact, it has so much invaded our lives that a review of popular culture sees it referred to as a parenting tool, an educational tool, and a socialising tool. In reality it is so complex, and offers so many opportunities and influences, that it is nearly impossible to describe the role it can take in a YP’s development. But what is clear from the research is that it does have an extremely significant presence (Livingstone, 2003; Ševčíková & Daneback, 2014). However, this has yet to be reflected in Bronfenbrenner’s legacy. Should the Internet have its own system of influence – the cybersystem, or should micro aspects of an online life exist according to their individual significance, aspects such as online gaming, the online avatar and the influence of Wikipedia. This is important to
consider because it illustrates the weight of the Internet’s influence, and how unique micro aspects of its use, such as gaming, can have their own developmental influence. Historically we have given pride of place to the influence of religious organisations, playgrounds and day care facilities, but is this true in the present world?

While the effects of the Internet are still being explored, certain assumptions can be made. First, that it is developing at such a rate that researchers and policy makers struggle to keep up with it; second, that it offers both opportunities and threats; and third that the experts on its use are the younger generations (Livingstone, 2003). It appears that each new generation is so in tune with technology that they understand it innately, and as a result they constantly seem to be making use of it in new and innovative ways (Hanley & Reynolds, 2009). What this appears to signify for research is that while it was once considered a priority to value the perspective of YP, it should now be considered a necessity to incorporate their lived experience (Hanley, Winter, & Burrell, 2019). Only in this way can we truly understand the technology, let alone its significance, or its influence, or its role within a YP’s ecosystem.

2.2 How is Sex Portrayed and Expressed Online?

This section sets out to acknowledge how sex and nudity are presently represented online. It then critically appraises the literature that has sought to explore the effects of this portrayal, before finally introducing Social Cognitive Theory and considering the role of deficient self-regulation in online pornography use.

2.2.1 Internet Pornography

Over the last two decades the nature of media, and media access, has evolved beyond our ability to predict. With this change has come the
development of free, easy-access pornography based websites, whereby within several seconds someone can go from Google to extremely graphic sexual content (Livingstone & Bober, 2004a; Young, 1998). In fact, not only has the way we access this material changed, but so has the nature of the media itself, and the way in which technology allows you to interact with it (Ybarra, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2009). Essentially, pornography and the nature of its consumption no longer exists in the same form as it did when we first started researching its effect. It is important to note that although there is a long history of research into the effects of pornography, this has predominantly related to traditional material and manners of media consumption (Malamuth & Check, 1985). By comparison, there is relatively little research that focuses on how these findings may have evolved, or mutated, with the changes in technology and societal values (Attwood, 2002).

2.2.2 Online Sexual Environment

In a world where the majority of individuals now own multiple devices, and have access to the Internet 24/7, it is important to see exposure as more than just seeking out pornography, but also as a part of everyday existence. NSPCC’s Net Aware Report (2017) indicated that 1 in 5 YP have seen sexual content, with 1 in 3 having been exposed to violent and hateful content online. In the case of today’s internet culture, factors of a YP’s exposure might include easy access to pornographic videos, highly sexualised popular culture and also an online society of ‘expressive nudity’ (Doornwaard, Bickham, Rich, ter Bogt, & van den Eijnden, 2015; Doring, 2009). Furthermore sexual exposure may exist in a YP’s online social culture, with recent literature noting the relatively recent emergence of online sexual bullying (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000; Mishna, McLuckie, & Saini, 2009). This refers to sexual solicitation and harassment and may include sexual shaming, receiving unwelcome sexual media, being introduced to extreme sexual concepts, or being asked to do something sexual. This seems to be reflected in the literature where there is a growing motivation to investigate the potential risk factors that these exposures can
have on adolescent development (Livingstone & Bulger, 2014; Peter & Valkenburg, 2010).

### 2.2.3 Problematic Use and Pornographic Addiction

Internet pornography use has become increasingly common in Western cultures (Doring, 2009; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2005). In fact, recent literature has begun to note the emergence of excessive internet pornography use and the rise of pornographic addictions. However, pornographic addiction does not exist within the DSM-5 largely because it does not fulfil the clinical diagnostic criteria for a label of ‘addiction’. Essentially, the consequences of the behaviour do not appear severe enough to justify an official label. Nevertheless evidence does appear to suggest that individuals can experience detrimental life consequences as the result of pathological pornography use (Grubbs, Volk, Exline, & Pargament, 2015; Hald, 2006). However, the literature is weak, conflicted, and lacks data to support many of its findings. It also appears to solely consider ‘consequences’ in the terms of an adult, and does not consider that the nature and severity of consequences may differ with YP (Rogala & Tydén, 2003; Sirianni & Vishwanath, 2016).

The term ‘problematic pornography use’ has developed to refer to media consumption that results in relatively benign to extremely problematic consequences, and refers to ‘use’ that creates interpersonal, vocational, and/or personal difficulties (Grubbs et al., 2015). The conceptualisation is based upon prior research within the domain of hypersexuality, and in keeping with this some researchers appear to consider internet pornography compulsion a subset of hypersexual behaviour. This literature suggests that, consistent with proposed diagnostic criteria, individuals may be able to perceive severe and diverse consequences, but also experience a perceived lack of control and compulsivity. Not only does this result in direct consequences, but it is also associated with the significant psychological distresses noted in addiction. As with the addiction literature, there appears evidence to suggest that there is a propensity for some individuals to self-
label as addicted. Furthermore Grubbs and colleagues (2015) suggest that “there appears to be a link between perceived addiction to internet pornography and indicators of poor mental health” (p.85), such as depression and isolation. This link appears consistent with previous research into hypersexuality that has found a reliable association with poor psychological functioning.

2.2.4 Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Media Attendance

Several theories have been developed to understand the relationship between media processing and learnt behaviour, however the most widely referenced and well-founded appears to be SCT (Bandura, 1991). This is a multi-faceted theoretical framework that considers the unique way in which individuals acquire and maintain behaviours, while also considering the social environment in which they perform these behaviours (LaRose & Eastin, 2004). The model holds a significant role within the research on modern pornography consumption, as it has been adapted in recent decades to understand media attendance. It also offers a way to examine the needs that individuals seek to fulfil, and has been seen within the literature as a way to explain the processes behind media addiction.

According to the self-regulatory mechanism of the SCT, people monitor their actions (Observation Stage), judge them in accordance with their moral and individual standards (Judgement Stage), and react by deciding whether the behaviour is gratifying or punishing (Self-Reactive Stage). According to Bandura (1991) it is when the media use is unregulated that issues arise. Deficient self-regulation is defined by LaRose and Eastin (2004) ‘as a state in which conscious self-control is diminished and individuals are no longer in a position to judge their actions and react to the consequences of them’ (p.363). Sirianni and Vishwanath (2016) suggest that this can be the result of habitual behaviour when the judgement and self-reactive stages of SCT fail. With habitual media use, the ability to observe and identify your behaviour is diminished, which can lead to deficient self-regulation, whereby the ability to control or disengage from a behaviour is weakened.
Essentially, as online pornography use becomes more of a repetitive and relied upon behaviour, individuals will become less conscious of the consequences of its use. Furthermore, as the judgement and self-reactive processes breakdown, individuals may no longer be able to accurately judge the behaviour in a social context; i.e. identify what is ‘normal’ consumption, what is socially acceptable, or what the appropriate feelings are to have towards their present consumption (LaRose, Lin, & Eastin, 2003). However, deficient self-regulation can also perpetuate habitual medial use. For example, sexual gratification from a specific media encounter may trigger further searches for similar media in the future, wherein the individual may no longer actively consider the behaviour or the consequences of the behaviour. Figure 1.2 illustrates how this framework can be used to understand how online pornography use can lead to negative consequences.

![Diagram illustrating the pathway of deficient pornography use based upon the framework discussed by Bandura (1991).](image)

Figure 1.2: Diagram illustrating the pathway of deficient pornography use based upon the framework discussed by Bandura (1991).

As well as corroborating the conclusion that deficient self-regulation predicted negative consequences, Sirianni and Vishwanath (2016) noted the
influence of social needs, which were not only a result of deficient self-regulation but also predicted negative consequences. The study identified two primary social motivators: to establish offline sexual relationships, and also to maintain already established offline sexual relationships. This sits with Doring's (2009) view that the Internet is a means to identify, pursue and experiment with potential sexual partners. Sirianni and Vishwanath (2016) took this further and considered the behavioural consequences of these social needs. Specifically, they considered the motivations behind sharing sexually explicit user-generated content, their theory being that to form personal connections individuals share this content to mediate distance and emotional barriers. While these media gratifications are initially under conscious control, they soon become repetitive as deficient self-regulation takes over. What this appears to illustrate is that “the fast paced synchronous environment of the Internet not only enables on-going relationship formation via online pornography use, it attenuates the thought process and weakens the ability to evaluate detrimental consequences that occur from the media consumption” (Sirianni & Vishwanath, 2016, p.31).

While researchers have criticised pornography addiction studies for their poor experimental designs and limited methodological rigor, there does appear to be evidence which suggests that engaging with pornographic material can become habitual through deficient self-regulation (as seen in Figure 1.2). The consequences of habitual engagement can be significantly problematic, including temporary lapses in judgement (cognitive incongruities), however presently not enough to warrant a clinical diagnosis of addiction. While the rationality of this is questioned in the latest research (Grubbs et al., 2015), the literature appears to agree that the greater the dependence a user feels towards pornographic media, the greater effect it will have upon the user’s attitudes and behaviours. Furthermore Cooper and Colleagues (2004) suggest that there may be predisposing factors that can help explain why some people appear more likely to exhibit sexually compulsive behaviour. These are vulnerability factors such as anxiety, depression and social isolation, which are likely to make users more susceptible to the effects of the material. What this appears to highlight is
that while the nature of pornography addiction is still questioned in the literature, the presence of variables which alter the trajectory of the effect appears assured. The following section discusses whether the age of the user could potentially be one of these vulnerability factors.

2.3 How can Exposure Affect an Adolescent’s Healthy Sexual and Relationship Development?

This section sets out to explore what the current literature considers to be the effect of online pornography exposure for adolescents and YP. First it will establish a model from which online pornography can be understood, then it will look at how these mediums can influence attitudes and behaviours. Finally, it will consider how media is processed and present a framework from which it is possible to see the role of individuality.

2.3.1 Sexually Explicit Internet Material (SEIM)

Despite being relatively young, the research into the effects of online pornography has had to face many complications and subsequent challenges. This is primarily because of the constant evolving nature of pornographic media, how it is displayed, and how users interact with it. This has meant that at times the literature has appeared confusing and conflicting. It seems logical to assume that a large part of this is because the findings of the different studies relate to different types of pornographic exposure (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010); i.e. the effects of exposure to user-generated sexual material may differ from exposure to professionally developed pornographic features. The result of this is that there appears to be many interpretations of ‘online pornography’ within the literature (Sabina, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2008; Ševčíková & Daneback, 2014). Furthermore, there is the complication of the nature of the exposure itself: was it deliberate and sought after? was it accidental but enjoyable? or was it accidental and offensive? This illustrates that the field of research is complex, and as a result it is difficult to draw correlations between studies. Subsequently the field of research presently
appears so dispersed that studies cannot validate each other’s findings to a sufficient enough degree in order to give clear insight into this phenomenon.

Some studies address these difficulties by making use of specific templates of exposure, SEIM in particular has received widespread attention (Peter & Valkenburg, 2014; van Oosten, 2016). This is likely due to the fact that most studies interpret SEIM to refer to the purposeful search for, and then viewing of, sexual material; thereby making it easier to draw causality data from (Doornwaard et al., 2015), i.e. it is much simpler to see the correlation between attitudes/behaviours and purposeful exposure to SEIM, in comparison to accidental exposure to SEIM, which is considerably harder to assess and understand. Having said that, it is worth noting that evidence exists which suggests that the rate of accidental exposure is increasing (Flood, 2009; Wolak et al., 2007), while the rate of deliberate consumption of SEIM appears to vary (Doornwaard et al., 2015; Livingstone & Bober, 2004b). This variation is thought to be as the result of moderating factors such as gender, social and cultural attitudes, and socio-economic backgrounds (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006; Sabina, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2008).

### 2.3.2 Attitudes and Behaviours

It is clear from a review of the literature that pornographic material can, and does, affect behaviours and attitudes (Doornwaard et al., 2015; van Oosten, 2016). This seems especially true with adolescents who appear more susceptible due to less lived experience (Peter & Valkenburg, 2014). The most notable research comes from Peter and Valkenburg whose numerous SEIM studies have found attitudes of permissive sexuality, sexual uncertainty and the perception of females as sex objects (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011). However, it is the effect of SEIM upon behaviour that seems to produce the largest amount of research, this is likely because it is easily identifiable. The strongest evidence appears to be the effect upon sexual risk-taking and uncommitted sexual exploration.

High risk sexual behaviours, according to Brown and L'Engle (2009),
include having ‘multiple partners, using substances during sex, and engaging in anal sex’. Braun-Courville & Rojas (2009) further suggest that early exposure to SEIM can produce a lack of adherence to sexual health principles. Additionally, greater engagement with SEIM appears to result in more positive attitudes towards uncommitted sex (Peter & Valkenburg, 2008). There is also evidence to suggest significant interactions with SEIM can result in sexual harassment and sexual preoccupancy, and affect sexual satisfaction (Brown & L’Engle, 2009; Peter & Valkenburg, 2008, 2009). However, these studies do appear to acknowledge evidence of significant variables that can moderate and mitigate the effects of SEIM, the most well researched appears to be gender.

2.3.3 Gender Differences

Previous literature has considered gender to be a distinctive variable in the use of, and subsequent effect of, SEIM (Flood, 2009; van Oosten, 2016). The theory behind this is that genders are socialised towards different sexual scripts, with many studies noting the effect of a ‘sexual double standard’. This is where a set of socially developed norms denote how ‘we’ as a society react and perceive certain behaviours, such as promiscuity, sexual attractiveness and what is sexually socially acceptable (Mesch, 2009; Ward, 2003). These socialisation messages not only shape society’s norms and perceptions, but they may also influence an adolescent’s choice of SEIM and subsequently how they process it and the ensuing effect (Doornwaard et al., 2015). This has been thought to explain why male adolescents access SEIM more often than females, as it has generally portrayed a more male socially acceptable image (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007); i.e. SEIM often includes male sexual dominance, female subjugation and male sadism (Mesch, 2009). It may also explain why studies have found that SEIM results in greater sexual uncertainty in female adolescents, as the content of the general media may contradict a positive female sexual script and therefore not result in a truly congruent experience (Peter & Valkenburg, 2008; van Oosten, 2016).
Previous research in this area has considered SEIM use to be a static behaviour, and not a dynamic feature that can shift across a developmental life span (Willoughby, Young-Petersen, & Leonhardt, 2017). In fact it appears that only two studies have begun to consider this idea (Rasmussen & Bierman, 2016). This might explain why there appears to be discrepancies between different studies regarding the strength of gender as a variable. Flood (2009) suggests the effect of gender appears relatively small and has been decreasing in past decades. This appears to align with changes in society and technology, i.e. as sexuality becomes more acceptable, and pornography becomes more easily accessible. The theory behind this is that due to the wide range of SEIM now available, adolescents are being exposed to media which does not conform to their expected socialisation, and they are therefore being educated in the wider perspective of social standards (Doornwaard et al., 2015). However, the gender variable is still evident, with much of the literature suggesting that this is because of the congruency an adolescent feels with their SEIM exposure. The greatest proportion of SEIM often shows a male dominant culture, so it is logical to assume that this might result in sexual uncertainty in female adolescents. But if we consider SEIM use as a dynamic developmental trajectory, rather than as a static feature, there is the implication that the greater/wider an adolescent’s experience with SEIM, then the less likely they are to have restrictive sexual scripts. On the other hand, the less exposure an adolescent has, and therefore the less experience with ‘wider material’, the more likely they are to feel that SEIM is not a fair representation of the views or values they ascribe to themselves or their life. Perhaps a simple explanation for the confusion and inconsistencies within the latest literature is that the research has been conducted with population groups who have developed wider ideas of what is acceptable, and have less strict gendered sexual scripts.

A weakness within this literature is that the concepts of gender, attraction, and sexuality are often confused. Many studies appear to reference gender roles, and in that incorporate ‘traditional’ sexuality concepts (van Oosten, 2016). As we know there is a lot more to an individual than just their gender, and it seems unjust to reference congruency without first
considering what might make that up. At the time of this research there have been only a few international studies which have considered SEIM in relation to the LGBTQ+ community, and many of these have focused on a single population group, i.e. gay American males. However in recent years there have been several valuable studies which have taken a wider perspective; these appear to find that just as someone’s relationship with their gender and sexuality can be individualistic, so can their relationship with media (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015; DeHaan, Kuper, Magee, Bigelow, & Mustanski, 2013). The following section considers individuality and how that relates to media processing.

2.3.4 Individuality and Media Processing

Several theoretical models exist that attempt to explain the interaction and influence of media upon attitudes and behaviours. Traditionally the literature has seen media exposure as a dynamic process, where a bi-directional influence exists between media use and its effect (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011). This is seen to be a reciprocal relationship that reinforces the interactions between media selection and a person’s behaviour. However, recent studies have noted that with sexualised media there appears to be a greater degree of individual susceptibility. As a result, traditional models have been adapted to try and explain not just the effect of individuality upon media choice, but also the role it plays in the media’s effect (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011; Papadopoulos, 2010; Ward, 2003). This area of literature appears hindered by a lack of agreement concerning the terminology, the conceptual roles of the various processes, and their subsequent outcomes. A study by Valkenburg and Peter (2013) reviewed many of these perspectives and developed the ‘Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model’ (DSMM) as a way of trying to explain why some individuals are more susceptible to the influence of media, and how in turn that effect can be enhanced or counteracted. The model distinguishes three types of susceptibility to media effects: dispositional, developmental and social susceptibility (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).
Dispositional susceptibility is defined as all the dimensions of the individual that predispose the media exposure, these include but are not limited to: gender, sexuality, personality, cognitions, values and beliefs. Some of these elements are stable constructs, however some are more transient, and the literature seems confused on whether this is significant. Afterall, most stable traits evolve over time due to environmental influences, and transient characteristics can be deeply significant, such as the effect of trauma upon an individual’s mood (Liotti, 2004). Within the DSMM both stable and transient traits of an individual are considered a factor in media selection and effect.

“Developmental susceptibility is defined as the selection, use and responsiveness to, media due to cognitive, emotional, and social development” (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013, p.277). This stage of the model is of particular significance for this study because it suggests that the influence of media is the strongest in childhood and early adolescents, when development is at its most poignant. The theory being that in later life development is easily confounded with life variables that are more likely to dictate media use, for example health problems, parental responsibilities, work stresses. As a result, YP are more developmentally susceptible to media because they have less determining life challenges.

“Social susceptibility is defined as all social-context factors that can influence an individual’s selective use of and responsiveness to media” (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013, p.227). In line with the Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) discussed earlier, these social contexts can be perceived as the micro (interpersonal context: friends), the meso (institutional context: school), and the macro (social context: cultural norms). However as also noted earlier, the issues with this framework is that it doesn’t fully factor in the role of the cyber existence in modern development. This social context can play an equal part in the micro, with online friends; the meso, with social networks; and the macro, with meme culture. It is worth noting that because the literature has not caught up with
the facets of an online existence, the ways in which it may influence social susceptibility can only be theorised about.

The DSMM also distinguishes ‘three media response states’, all of which originate from previous conceptual models: cognitive, emotional or excitative. Within this framework, media response states are seen as mediators between media use and media effect. While previous models have conceptualised these states as moderators (Bandura, 1989), Valkenburg and Peter (2013) state that although they can have a moderating effect, it is only when they represent a pre-existing trait-like tendency to respond to media in a specific way, i.e. there is a prior template or disposition towards a certain response. According to the DSMM a cognitive response state refers to the extent to which an individual attends to, and invests thought to comprehend, the media’s content. Included within this are concepts such as “cognitive absorption, reality perception, the cognitive dimensions of empathy (i.e. perspective taking), and counterarguing” (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013, p.228). While an emotional response state refers to all effectively valenced reactions to media content, i.e. emotional responses to storylines, characterisations and underlying messages. Sympathy and empathy are also considered to be emotional response states. Finally, an excitative response state refers to the degree of psychological arousal in response to the media. Historically many models have considered this an element of emotional response, however the DSMM regards it as an independent, although interactive, media response state.

This section of the literature review sets out to explore why it appears that some adolescents are more susceptible to the effects of SEIM. It does this by presenting the DSMM, a framework that sets out to explain the processes that exist between media exposure and media effect. It also discusses the notion of media response states, a framework for understanding how variables can affect how the media is processed, and how that in turn can dictate the effect of the exposure. While the concepts have been supported by many theoretical models, they have predominantly been measured in
observational and experimental settings, and so while the DSMM goes a long way to provide clarity it does not yet appear comprehensively reliable. While the present literature appears to be investigating what makes someone susceptible, this appears to come from a place of assuming a negative outcome. Yet it seems that casual use can relieve sexual guilt, increase sexual openness, and improve sexual education (Kanuga & Rosenfeld, 2004). This is an effect of SEIM that hasn’t truly been explored in much of the literature, and only appears to be hinted at, and then theorised about. This is most likely because the threats of the medium are of greater concern, and therefore have attracted the most amount of attention. However, its existence suggests that while susceptibility factors appear certain, there may well also be protective processes at work attempting to dictate the way the material is processed.

2.4 How do Young People Cope with Risk and Harm?

This section seeks to explore the literature on resilience and resilience theory, with the aim being to detail how factors of an adolescent, or their environment, can interfere with the expected outcome of risk exposure. First it will acknowledge the background of the theory and explore how it has evolved within the literature over the last two decades. Then it will consider how resilience develops within an adolescent, before introducing several of the most prominent models of resilience. The section ends by considering some of the unique resilience and risk processes most often attributed to an LGBTQ+ identity.

2.4.1 Coping with Harm, Dealing with Risk

From the earlier sections of the literature review it appears that the period of adolescence is full of vulnerability and susceptibility where a YP tends to encounter many unavoidable and painful hardships in the process of their development, expression, and social interaction. This is only compounded by the nature of the modern world and the development of technology that
allows new risks and dangers to manifest. Ideally an adolescent will adapt to these challenges, maintain optimum mental health, and exercise individuality congruently. However, the literature, logic, and simple observation suggest that this is rarely the case, and it appears clear that adolescence is a period of development with wide reaching repercussions for many individuals. Nevertheless, some YP appear to weather the storm better than others. This is not to say that they miraculously avoid hardships, given the nature of today’s society that would appear to be impossible, instead it suggests that they have a greater ability to recover from adverse conditions (Bolton, Hall, Blundo, & Lehmann, 2017).

The term resilience is associated with the ability to bounce back from harm, and appears to have come out of the study of why some people thrive despite risk and hardship. The theoretical underpinning is often credited to the early work of Werner in 1982, and later on with his colleague Smith (Werner & Smith, 1992). The theory initially appeared to garner attention because it coincided with a paradigm shift in perspective, away from pathological clinical models and towards a more strength based approach premised upon highlighting internal and environmental resources and competencies (Bolton et al., 2017). The study by Werner and Smith in 1992 is the empirical foundation that founded the enquiry into resilience, and is seen as seminal because it helped us understand how positive characteristics can interact to defend an individual against risk. This aligns well with the humanistic perspective at the heart of this research because it honours the belief that people can constructively grow given the right environmental stimuli.

Although the initial theory quickly came to prominence, the field of research has experienced some significant criticisms in later years. This appears predominantly due to the lack of a universal definition and confusion over its overall conceptualisation (Bolton et al., 2017). In fact, one of the most wildly acknowledged misconceptions appears to be the allusion that resilience is a personality characteristic specific to an
individual, rather than a variable process (Davidson et al, 2005). This appears to have resulted from a sense of disparity in the literature in regards to terminology, which has mostly centralised around the use of the terms ‘protective factor’ and ‘vulnerability factor’ (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2015). These at times have appeared synonymous with positive and negative personality characteristics, and the confusion seems to have added to the appearance and subsequent criticisms that resilience is perceived as an innate characteristic (Davidson et al 2005).

Figure 1.3: A illustration of the linear resilience pathway.

While some research has referred to resilience as a static state, or as an individual trait, much of the modern literature refers to resilience as the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding negative trajectories associated with a risk (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 2016; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Luthar and Colleagues defined it as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaption within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar et al., 2015, p.453). It also appears clear that this process is multifaceted, involving the temporary interaction of risk factors (RFs), vulnerability factors (VFs), and protective factors (PFs) to cultivate resilient or non-resilient outcomes. My understanding of this has been illustrated in Figure 1.3. Within this conceptualisation a RF refers to an event of adversity or condition of vulnerability (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) that is likely to lead to a negative outcome for an individual. PFs and VFs are the catalysts for change within this process that can influence the trajectory of a risk (Bolton et al., 2017). PFs are generally considered in the terms of assets and resources. Assets refer to positive factors that reside within the individual, such as a strong self-concept or self-efficacy, while resources are external
positive factors, such as parental or educational support (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). VFs can also be considered in terms of assets and resources, however when faced with adversity these factors lead to greater maladjustment. For example, a VF asset might be sexual confusion or low self-esteem, while a VF resource might be an abusive relationship or exclusion at school. In further acknowledgment of the multifaceted nature of the resilience process the literature has also changed the way it perceives VFs and PFs over the last decade. Instead of seeing them as separate influences the literature now appears to suggest that they exist at opposite ends of a continuum (Muller, 2009; Rew & Horner, 2003). This has played a significant role in how recent models have been developed to understand the various resilience processes.

2.4.2 Adolescent Resilience and Resilience Models

In the last decade the research into resilience appears to have focused on the process that VFs and PFs go through to enact change in an individual (Howard et al., 2016). As a result, many different models of resiliency have appeared, each specific to different factors of an individual and/or a risk. Included in this are several that focus on how resiliency develops in children and adolescents, with more appearing periodically as resilience theory is applied to new contexts and new harms (Martin, 2002; Rew & Horner, 2003; Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2014). However, three particular models are worth highlighting because of the clarity they offer and the prominence they have within the literature. These are the compensatory, protective and challenge models and they were initially developed to explain how promotive factors “operate to alter the trajectory from risk exposure to negative outcome” (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005, p.401). Figure 1.4 shows an illustration of these processes and each will be discussed individually below.
As noted by the illustration, within a compensatory model of resilience a PF originating from an alien origin (not directly linked to the risk factor) counteracts the risk factor in a direct manner, mitigating the expected outcome of the risk. Although the outcome is the direct result of a PF, the effect is independent of the impact of the risk factor. For example, a child may be born into an impoverished environment, but a significant caregiver could offset that risk by promoting warmth and security.

A protective model of resilience occurs when protective assets or resources moderate or reduce the effect of the risk on negative outcomes. This has...
been noted to occur in several ways and as such the protective-reactive and protective-stabilisation sub-models have been developed. Within a protective-reactive model a PF diminishes, but does not completely remove, the relationship between a risk and an outcome. For example, the relationship between sexually explicit material use (risk factor) and sexual risk-taking behaviour (an outcome) may be reduced in adolescents exposed to comprehensive sexual education (protective resource), compared to those who have not. Alternatively, within a protective-stabilisation model a PF neutralises the effect of a risk altogether, such as if the adolescent in the example above had a positive sexual relationship (protective resource), then they may not engage with risky material in the first place. However, because of the nature of the protective-stabilisation model it is hard to identify when a PF is in effect as there is no identifiable risk trajectory or outcome.

Another sub-model that has been suggested is the protective-protective model. This was initially posited by Brook, Whiteman, Gordon and Cohen (1986), and refers to when one PF enhances the effect of another to produce a different outcome than a risk would suggest. For example, a positive romantic relationship (protective resource) may enhance the effect of positive self-esteem (protective asset) to protect an adolescent from harmful social interactions (risk factor). This model does not appear to have been explored as much within the literature, most likely because it is hard to examine and draw data from an indirect process. Thus far the model has only been justified in populations known to be at clear risk, such as an LGBTQ+ adolescent’s risk of social marginalisation.

The final model worth noting is the challenge model of resilience. Within this perspective the risk itself is assessed in terms of low, medium or high levels and the association between a RF and an outcome is curvilinear (Zimmerman et al., 2013a). In the challenge model, RFs and PFs are seen as the same variable, and how they are interpreted is dependent upon the level of exposure. For example, an adolescent who has experienced little peer conflict may not be prepared to cope with online harassment. Alternatively, an adolescent who experiences too much conflict may find it debilitating and lead the youth to seek social isolation. However, a YP who has
experienced a moderate amount of conflict might have enough experience to not only cope with further conflict, but also thrive within the circumstances. Some areas of the literature have also suggested that continued or repeated low levels of risk exposure can be considered in terms of inoculation if it includes a developmental focus. The idea being that repeated exposure could prepare an adolescent to better handle more significant risks in the future. The inoculation model is similar to the challenge model in that it points to an advantageous effect that some risk exposure can have. Yates et al described this model as an ongoing developmental process that teaches individuals throughout their lives how to best mobilise assets and resources to deal with adversity (Yates, Egeland, & Sroufe, 2003). Essentially, the theory states that as YP are exposed to incremental risk they learn how to cope, and in turn thrive, despite the risks they face.

### 2.4.3 Resilience Amongst LGBTQ+

The hardships associated with LGBTQ+ identities are well documented, particularly the psychosocial impacts of social marginalisation and exclusion (Asakura, 2017; Haas & Drescher, 2014; Shaw et al., 2012). Past research has noted significantly higher rates of psychosocial outcomes than their hetero-normative peers, and this has included greater chances of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicidal intent. This is often associated with the hostile social environments that LGBTQ+ youth have to contend with, these are characterised by physical, psychological and verbal abuse (Asakura, 2017; Pallotta-Chiarolli & Rajkhowa, 2017). Llan Meyer’s ‘Minority Stress Model’ attributes elevated rates of mental disorders and suicidal behaviour in this group to greater exposure to prejudice, discrimination, and victimisation as well as to internalisation of negative social views (Meyer, 2003a). Family rejection is also highly associated with suicidal risk in LGBTQ+ youth.

While the risks associated with an LGBTQ+ identity at first appear clear, there is an intrinsic disparity within the literature due to the significance given to Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual identities (LGB). Considerably less
information is available about the experiences of trans youth, and even less on those who identify as non-binary or gender fluid. While there may be a great deal of commonalities amongst these identities as a result of the collective challenges they face, there are some risks, and therefore some resilience processes, which may be unique. Furthermore, as with their hetero-normative peers, each generation of LGBTQ+ youth will face new challenges as the environmental context surrounding them changes. For example, the youth of yesterday might not have had to contend with the online social pressure of the youth of today. What this suggests is that while we can certainly be assured of a great deal of the hardships this group have to contend with, it would be flawed to assume we understand enough.

Over the last decade resilience research has built upon the risk-focused earlier literature to identify factors and processes that can assist the LGBTQ+ youth in overcoming or coping more effectively with risk. These are best detailed in Ann Masten’s book ‘Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development’ (2014), wherein a “variable focused analysis of quantitative data sets allowed discrete protective factors of the LGBTQ+ individual and their social environment to emerge” (Asakura, 2017, p.522). Once more the studies referenced in this text predominantly focused upon LGB identities, however a lot of the findings appear to be applicable to any youth experiencing harm as a result of their sexual and/or gender identity. For example, the studies noted that while many PFs are advantageous to any and all adolescents, such as school connectedness and social support, they might have a greater significance for LGBTQ+ youth due to the likelihood that these individuals will be exposed to greater hardship. The findings also indicate that some resilience resources are unique to an LGBTQ+ adolescent; these were identified across family, peer, school and community contexts. Within the family context, familial acceptance of a gender or sexual identity was noted to protect against suicidal behaviours and promote positive mental health in LGB and trans youth (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010). While in the peer context, social integration with other LGBTQ+ adolescents was found to play a significant role in psychosocial wellbeing, diminishing feelings of judgment and promoting
acceptance of gender and sexual diversity (Mustanski, Newcomb, & Garofalo, 2011). In the school environment, exposure to inclusive anti-bullying policies has been associated with a reduced risk of suicide within LGB youth (Hatzenbuehler & Keyes, 2013). Additionally involvement with ‘Pride’ events and the LGBTQ+ community across offline and online communities has been found to promote positive mental health (DeHaan et al., 2013). Several qualitative studies have also recently identified that access to social media and engagement with activism has unique resilience resources for adolescents questioning their gender and sexual identity (Singh et al., 2014; Snapp, Watson, Russell, Diaz, & Ryan, 2015). This appears to align with the adage that harm is fostered in isolation, but within communities we find healing.

2.5 The Rationale of the Current Study

Adolescence can be a time of great adversity, containing countless challenges that can define how a YP will grow and develop. Many of these are now occurring online as the significance of online behaviours and identities take greater prominence in modern culture. However, there is presently very little literature on how YP respond to these online risks, especially if they identify as part of a social minority group. Given the absence of research examining these phenomena, it is hard to identify the best way to support YP to overcome these online threats.

The latest developmental literature suggests that it is particularly hard for a YP to navigate their own sexual and gender identity in today’s online culture, especially when you consider the antagonising and conflicting narratives that are perpetrated throughout social networks. Not only is direct exposure to pornographic material now a daily occurrence for YP, but sexual attitudes and behaviours also appear to be constantly perpetrated across various social platforms, whereby they appear less apparent and have potentially more significance. Today’s LGBTQ+ youth are faced with an
environment that appears not only highly sexually challenging, but also due to a heteronormative focus, highly skewed against them.

While there has been a recent push to understand online sexual content and the effects of exposure to this material in the literature, the majority appears to focus on the threat it presents and the potential harm that it can cause. Yet, the trajectory between exposure and harm is not that straightforward or linear and there appears to be a sense that it can present opportunity for healthy sexual development. This would align with several of the resilience models which appear to consider risk a necessary challenge that allows someone to develop protective characteristics.

This study seeks to understand how YP keep themselves safe from the harms associated with SEIM. The aim is to identify the variables that YP themselves believe interfere with the potential risk trajectory of this material. This will then allow me insight into how these variables might interact with each other, in line with what the resilience literature has suggested. The choice to focus upon LGBTQ+ YP was made because they appear disproportionately underrepresented in the resilience literature, and because their perspective on sexual content, and an online existence, appears unique and highly significant. The following research question seeks to distil these objectives.

Q1: How do young LGBTQ+ people perceive their own ability to cope with the potential negative implications of SEIM exposure?

2.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter set out to critically review the literature pertaining to adolescence, sexually explicit media, resilience, and the hardships faced by an LGBTQ+ youth. It did this from the perspective of Counselling
Psychology, which values the perspective of the individual and the belief that an adolescent’s voice should be at the forefront of research. As a result, it reflected upon the modern ecology that a YP develops within, and considered how congruence plays a role in how they respond to SEIM. The aim of this chapter was to illustrate the need for research on the resilience processes that YP, who do not have a heteronormative sexual and/or gender identity, employ. The following chapter will establish the research methodology of the study.
CHAPTER 3 : Methodology

In the previous chapter I highlighted that there are recognisable gaps within the SEIM literature in regards to the perspective of YP. In this chapter I present the research design and discuss the epistemological vantage point that determined and directed the research methods. I will begin by revisiting the aims of the study and present the research question, before exploring my ontological and epistemological positioning. I will then discuss the selected design, qualitative thematic analysis, in relation to recruitment of the participants, data collection, data analysis, and the ethical considerations of the study.

3.1 Revisiting the Research Aims

Previously I noted that Counselling Psychology is underpinned by a set of values rooted within humanism and existentialism (Cooper & McLeod, 2012). It is a relational approach that is concerned with a person’s subjective perception and understanding. As outlined in the rationale, the overarching purpose of the current project is to account for the YP’s perspective in the SEIM literature. Specifically, it sought to investigate how YP cope with the negative implications of SEIM, and so the following research question was developed:

Q1: How do young LGBTQ+ people perceive their own ability to cope with the potential negative implications of SEIM exposure?

A discovery orientated approach, a qualitative design, was used to answer the proposed question (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This is due to how well it fits with the philosophy at the heart of humanistic psychology, and because it holds individualism at its core, allowing for the ability to challenge pre-existing knowledge (Tilley, McLeod, & McLeod, 2015). This seemed an
essential component when accounting for a perspective that has not previously been adequately explored, and which revolves around a very individual and personal set of online behaviours, attitudes, and risks (Rennie, 1994).

3.1 Ontology & Epistemology

In this section I explore and outline the ontological and epistemological positions of the research project because the commitments of the researcher are one of the key factors in the methodological decision-making. Furthermore, as noted by Whelen and Burman (2011), it is important for a researcher to clarify their position in relation to key values (such as perceptions of reality, knowledge, and truth) because of the implications these positions have upon our research.

3.1.1 Critical Realism

The ontology of the research is aligned with the perspective of critical realism, which perceives facts, especially in the social realm, as dependent upon our beliefs and expectations (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Bhaskar (2014) describes the ontological position as a notion of reality that consists of three domains: the empirical, the actual and the real. The empirical reality refers to that which we can observe, while the actual reality is broader and refers to that which transpires independently of the researcher. The real reality refers to mechanisms that are produced by different events and other ‘surface phenomena’. According to critical realism the task of research is to explore the real reality and how it relates to these other two realities (Bhaskar & Danermark, 2006; Danermark, 2002). Essentially the idea is to investigate and identify the relationships and non-relationships, respectively, between what we experience, what actually happens, and the underlying mechanisms that make up our behaviour (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).
Critical realism is distinguished from other stances due to the emphasis it places upon notions of deeper dimensions of reality (Archer, Bhaskar, Collier, Lawson, & Norrie, 2013). However it does share some similarities with positivism, such as a focus on the objective world, patterns, generalisations and the need to find causalities (Ponterotto, 2005). It differs in that it believes that it is not possible to reduce experience to observable behaviours and facts, instead it acknowledges the unobservable mechanisms which produce the phenomena that other stances seek to measure. As with many qualitative approaches its interest lies with synthesis and context, but it also strongly emphasises the objective nature of reality (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

3.1.2 Epistemic Contextualism

The research epistemology is situated within contextualism, which maintains that features of a context shape our understanding of knowledge, and that behaviour cannot be understood outside of the context in which it occurs. It recognises that both the researcher and the participant are both conscious beings, interpreting and acting upon the world around them within a network of contextual meanings. Features of a context may include cultural values, as well as the motivations and past experiences of the participants.

A paper by Parker (1994) brings contextualism and social realism together, stating that all accounts have a degree of subjectivity because all individual accounts are grounded in social practices. A critically realistic stance on contextualism does not discount or devalue any account, as positivism might, for being less persuasive or relevant to the research. The belief being that all experiences are interpretations derived from individual contexts, and that all interpretations equally add to our understanding of behaviour. However, it does note the particular strength of triangulation, which holds that by collecting multiple perspectives we build a more comprehensive understanding of knowledge. In regards to the present study, this means the research takes the stance that to best understand resilience in the face of
SEIM it is important to gather data on the context of the SEIM exposure, as well as how a participant generally invests online, and the influence that ‘real world dynamics’ have upon their online behaviours.

This stance was felt to be an essential element of the study, because of the focus on the individuality of an online existence and the importance of acknowledging what transpires beyond an individual’s perspective and conception of their own behaviour (Dunn, 2012). To do this, the study aimed to acknowledge the reciprocal relationship that the participants have with their social environment, because social structures can highlight aspects and mechanisms that lie behind an individual’s conscious understanding of their own actions. (Ponterotto, 2005; Rennie, 1994). This was reflected in the openness of the research question, as well as the interview schedule, which incorporated a focus on the behaviour of others, online social structures, and group dynamics.

3.2 Participants

This section describes the eligibility criteria and the recruitment procedures for the participants. This is followed by a brief reflective summary of the research process, and an account of the socioeconomic position of the facilitating therapeutic service and the demographics of the participants.

3.2.1 Partner Organisation

The research was conducted alongside 42nd Street, a charity that supports YP in Greater Manchester aged 11-25 with their emotional wellbeing and mental health. They offer a range of therapeutic support services that encourage YP to have a voice, access opportunities to learn, and develop new skills and creative outlets. As well as individual support, the service runs regular therapeutic groups, projects, and activities. They deliver their services at their Manchester city centre location, in community venues, at
arts and cultural centres, and in educational establishments. This is all with an aim of communicating that these support options exist, and to make their service more accessible.

Specifically, the research was facilitated by the Q42 group, a peer support group of LGBTQ+ YP who were commissioned to work on a digital project by the National Lottery. This was an important factor of the research design because the group was made up of individuals with various different sexual and gender identities, who have self-professed technological/internet proficiency. The group met weekly for roughly two hours and was led by a therapist within the organisation. The sessions often involved guest speakers from other services who attended to educate and share their different knowledge and skillsets. The design and nature of the group helped facilitate the recruitment by providing access to key informants, while also providing a safe space that safeguarded the overall process.

3.2.2 Eligibility Criteria

Yin (1994) notes that the use of ‘key informants’ is often the critical component that defines the success of a research project. This refers to people who not only provide insight into a specific subject matter, but who can also suggest sources of corroboratory or contrary evidence. At the outset, the study sought to recruit ten YP aged between 13 and 15. This number was aimed for because it was felt to be enough to provide a rich in-depth analysis, whilst also being respectful of the practical restrictions of the therapeutic service in which the research is based. Participants were not restricted by gender, sexuality or any other identifying characteristics. This age range is important to consider because it is below the age of adulthood and therefore below the legal age for access to ‘adult’ sexual material (Livingstone & Bober, 2004b). This was initially felt to be a necessity because of the focus on irregular exposure, whether deliberately sought out or unintentionally found. The literature highlights that adolescents above the age of 16 have more regular exposure and are therefore more likely to have established patterns of interaction (Flood, 2007; Sabina et al., 2008).
Regular exposure was seen to create a complication for the study because the focus is on understanding how resiliency develops, which wouldn’t be easily identifiable if patterns of behaviour have already been established. Within the SEIM literature this period of development is also the most contentious, with Ofcom identifying it as a particularly worrying period due to the lack of online safety education (Buckingham, Burn, & Cranmer, 2005). It seemed, therefore, that this is an area of the literature that would best benefit from further exploration. However, unfortunately it was not possible to recruit enough participants of this age range and as a result the research design was amended to include 16 to 18 year olds. This decision was made first to provide enough interviews to develop a comprehensive analysis, but second because the dynamics and nature of the population group was felt to offset the concern of habitual patterns of behaviour. With this decision I also took the opportunity to amend the ethical procedures as it was felt that YP who are 16 and over do not require parental permission to consent, in order to participate.

### 3.2.3 Recruitment Procedure

Recruitment took place between March 2018 and July 2018 at the city centre location of 42nd Street. The project leader of the LGBTQ+ group was approached for advice on recruitment and helped co-ordinate the recruitment process (Hanley & Winter, 2016). Data was gathered in the following way:

Step One: The project leader discussed the research objective, procedures, and my purpose with the group. At this point he handed out the information sheets and consent forms. Examples of these can be found in appendix A and B.

Step Two: Participants were given the opportunity to highlight their interest and consent to be interviewed. This was over a couple of weeks, so that the
initial participants had the opportunity to reflect and consider the implications of their agreement.

Step Three: Due to the difficulty I expected to find recruiting participants, purposeful snowball sampling was used. This strategy was chosen to help recruit from a population that was known to be avoidant and insular, while also open the study up to discovering characteristics about the population group that had previously been unknown (Noy, 2008). This process started when I first visited 42nd Street and interviewed the initial interested participants in a private and secure location, adjacent to the group space, during their fortnightly ‘producers workshops’. This was the space allocated to the Q42 group whereby visiting speakers would attend to teach, advise and help develop the different digital projects. It was decided by myself and the project leader that only two interviews could be conducted at each session, this was so as not to disrupt the visiting speakers. Subsequently with each interview there was more interest, as knowledge about the research and interview process was shared. As a result, I returned every fortnight to the group to repeat the interview procedure.

3.2.4 Participant Demographics

Q42 is a digital project funded by Children in Need and developed within 42nd Street to combat isolation and loneliness felt within the young LGBTQ+ community. It aims to foster online and offline friendships, explore and develop creative ideas, and design and produce new digital media to connect, build, and advance the community. The group meets every fortnight and involves anyone identifying as LGBTQ+ between the ages of 13 to 18. Group sizes vary depending on factors such as school schedules, community factors (proximity of Pride), and media influences. The present project is aimed at building a digital space for young members of the community to meet, talk and grow friendships in a safe setting. The website for the project also sets out to offer creative opportunities that allow the YP’s talents to be fully expressed
Although there appears to be a rapidly growing cultural acceptance of diverse sexual, romantic and gender identifications, oppression, discrimination and marginalisation of the LGBTQ+ community still persist (Pallotta-Chiarolli & Rajkhowa, 2017). The participants of the study can be identified as “vulnerable youths”, a term coined to describe those who have a greater likelihood of becoming socially excluded (Coles, 1997, p.81). The participants are vulnerable because they are from a particularly at-risk community, one which comes with a largely stigmatised identity. The literature notes that YP who are struggling to sort out their ‘authentic self’ in the face of social expectations and pressures, can experience higher levels of depression, anxiety, and substance misuse (Heck, Croot, & Robohm, 2015). Discrimination has been noted to take many forms, including social rejection, emotional and physical bullying and sexual assault. As a result of these factors the research also shows us that YP who identify as LGBTQ+ have an increased risk of suicidal ideation and self-harming behaviour because of chronic stress and diminished mental health (Milton, 2015; Pallotta-Chiarolli & Rajkhowa, 2017). Furthermore, within this population there are a number of other identities that are seen to make the participants potentially more susceptible to social pressures, this can include factors of faith, race and age (Pallotta-Chiarolli & Rajkhowa, 2017). Homophobia is still commonplace and YP who experience same sex desire, and who identify as anything other than heterosexual, can experience additional confusion and isolation (Valentine, Butler, & Skelton, 2001). This is especially worth noting because the study is focused upon resilience in the face of exposure to sexual material. This is a sensitive topic because of the way society frames YP as asexual or innocent, not to mention the specific laws which are meant to restrict their involvement with this material.

Clearly there are risks when working with vulnerable YP, especially around a subject that potentially highlights stigmatised behaviours and attitudes, however there is an additional danger in homogenising YP as a social category. According to Valentine, Butler and Skelton (2001) this is a common mistake that can lead to methodological and ethical dilemmas. This
presented a challenge for the study because the participant group defined themselves partially by their social circumstances, and the initial worry was that this would present a challenge for recruitment and influence the research findings. However, if anything, the nature of the group resulted in greater investment because of how they identified, i.e. research into sexual material was well suited to a group whose nature was defined by their sexual interests.

3.4 Data Generation

3.4.1 Interview Process

The qualitative data was collected through the use of nine semi-structured interviews with YP recruited from 42nd Street, see Table 1 for a summary of the participants’ information. This method provided the opportunity to explore attitudes and behaviours that cannot be directly observed. Importantly it focuses upon collecting rich and detailed information about how a participant experiences, understands, and explains events in their lives. The emphasis of this study is upon how YP cope with SEIM, for this purpose the research focused on the perspective of YP, as they are the ‘key informants’ on their exposure. Interviews allow insight into how YP think and behave online in a way that other methods would struggle to capture. Researching online experiences can provide a challenge for some research methods because of the very secular, private and individual nature of that existence. In the past the literature has settled for quantitative methods because they allow us to see risks, and measure the effects of exposure to sexual material (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007; van Oosten, 2016). However, because the aim of this study is to explore how YP perceive their own ability to cope, this method was found lacking because it does not offer enough rich insight into an individual’s perspective. Furthermore, the previous literature led the project to expect unknown but easily identifiable resilience processes, and subsequently a strategy was necessary that was innately investigative.
Table 1: A table of participant information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender:</th>
<th>Sexual Identity:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Trans Male</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>A-Sexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bi-Sexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Trans Male</td>
<td>Bi-Sexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Non-Binary</td>
<td>Pan-Sexual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although interviews can take a variety of formats, semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study because they are well suited to an exploration of complex and sensitive issues (Barriball & While, 1994). Semi-structured interviews are constructed with a degree of organisation, but also flexibility, that allows the researcher to maximise on the opportunities offered to enrich the data (Carruthers, 1990). The style allows a researcher to subtly probe for more information and greater clarification by responding to the individual participant’s presentation. The second reason for this choice is because it provides a deeper understanding of social contexts and has been noted to be the best suited to an investigation of new phenomena (Fylan, 2005; Wengraf, 2001).

The interviews were kept to thirty minutes to be respectful of the commitment the YP were making in choosing to participate. I understood that the interviews were occurring at a time in the week assigned to peer
support, in which these YP worked upon specific creative projects. As such, thirty minutes was felt to be enough time to get rich and valuable data, but not too long that it interfered with the group’s dynamics. A fifteen-minute de-brief was offered at the end of these sessions should a participant require it, the template of which can be found in Appendix C. The semi-structured format revolved around six open-ended questions that were used to guide discussion while also invoking rich data. When developing the interview schedule it was important to design questions that were sufficiently specific to summon relevant responses while also being considerate of the vernacular and communicational styles of the YP (Rabionet, 2011). Not only was the research at risk should the topics appear unclear, it also had the potential vulnerability of appearing incongruent to the YP’s perspective (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011). As a result of this concern, the first five questions were designed to explore the context of YP’s online attitudes and behaviours. The aim being to not only gather an understanding of their online exposure, but also to establish a setting from which the final question could respond to. The sixth question was specifically designed to explore the YP’s protective processes and understanding of online safety. Altogether the questions aimed to illicit an understanding of how the participants behave online, what their attitudes are towards SEIM, and subsequently how they keep themselves safe from its negative effects. The interview schedule can be found in Appendix D.

3.4.2 Transcription

After the interviews were recorded on a digital recorder, the session was uploaded and transcribed by a third party. The choice to use a third party transcriber was made for practical reasons that had additional benefits for the research trustworthiness. My dyslexia was always going to be a factor that had to be strategised for, and this was especially true with the transcription process (Jordan, McGladdery, & Dyer, 2014). Although appearing to be a straightforward task, transcription involves close observation of data and repeated listening that can prove difficult for a dyslexic mind (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). A large body of research exists
which acknowledges that dyslexics often have deficits in visual perception, reading ability and sensory processing, and although there is still much debate over the functional causes of these effects, their existence is certain (Deacon, Parrila, & Kirby, 2006; Mortimore & Crozier, 2006). In fact one theory suggests that the dyslexic mind has a tendency to interpret data differently because the mind compensates for these difficulties through behaviours such as skim reading (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2005). Therefore, the use of a transcriber not only removes the need to engage with a process which is notably difficult for a dyslexic, but also removes the chance of misinterpretation of the different dimensions of the audio communication. The use of a professional transcriber was reflected in the ethical approval of the University of Manchester and in the consent forms.

In thematic analysis, transcriptions do not generally need the same amount of detail as they might with other forms of analysis, such as critical discourse analysis or grounded theory. This is because the functionality of the speech is not critical and it would not aid the analysis (Wood & Kroger, 2000). As a result, many researchers do not follow a set template or transcription method. Instead opting to choose a neutral style whereby what is included is defined by the research goals. However transcription choices are reflections of both the implicit and explicit assumptions of the transcriber and are therefore a potential liability of the trustworthiness of the dataset (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005). One way to avoid a researcher’s a priori assumptions influencing the dataset is the use of a professional transcriber, another is the use of a clear transcription method.

This study used an amalgamation of naturalism and denaturalism in the transcription style. Often these two methods are thought of in terms of a continuum, although because they correspond to divergent perspectives on language they have different implications for research (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). Naturalism refers to a style of transcription in which every utterance is accounted for in as much detail as possible and therefore considers language to be a representation of the real world. Within a denaturalised
style the focus is on a verbatim depiction of speech, removing the idiosyncratic elements such as pauses and stutters. This method considers that within speech there are meanings and perceptions that are constructs of reality and that by not including them, the data can be seen without a filter (Oliver et al., 2005). As noted previously, thematic analysis offers the research a degree of flexibility when it comes to transcriptions (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), as a result I chose to include elements of both styles. Each transcript included all the different methods of communication that could be heard over the recording, including speech, laughter, pauses and changes in tone.

The choice to make use of this multidirectional style was based on the need to incorporate the communicational idiosyncrasies of the participants. This was partially because of the importance of acknowledging context when conducting research with YP (Hill, 2006). As Hill, Siegelman, Gronsky, Sturniolo, and Fretz (1981) point out, the style in which someone talks and the non-verbal cues they use can often reflect the context of a conversation. Secondly the choice was made because of the importance of acknowledging the multiple dimensions of expression, i.e. changes in tone, laughter and even pauses can be used to add, and even change, the meaning of a conversation. By including these features in the transcript, I am not only seeing what the YP wants to say, but also the information that may be hidden by the way in which they say it. This is a valuable resource that I felt would hinder an analysis if it were to be removed.

As previously noted, all the interviews were transcribed by a third party. Although this meant the initial familiarisation was not gathered through the transcription process, it also meant that the transcription would be less influenced by the researcher’s *a priori* assumptions. Upon completion of the transcription I familiarised myself with the data, checking the transcript against the original audio recording for accuracy, and prepared the data for analysis. This meant numbering the lines of the interview transcripts and highlighting the interpretative features using the review function of
Microsoft Word (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The review process allowed key features of the data to emerge, and informed the direction the analysis went in. A detailed account of the analysis is provided below.

3.5 Data Analysis

In this section I will discuss the analysis procedure and how sense was made out of the interview data. Firstly, I will introduce thematic analysis before presenting a rationale for its use. Then I will discuss the thematic process and how the trustworthiness of the analysis was achieved.

3.5.1 Thematic Analysis

The term ‘thematic analysis’ has had numerous incarnations since it was originally introduced by physicist, historian, and philosopher Gerald Horton in the 1970s. Most of these have not reached the recognition and wide use of counterparts such as grounded theory or interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). However, in 2006 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke proposed a theoretically flexible approach to thematic analysis that is ideally suited to critical psychology; it is this version that the study adheres to.

Thematic analysis is most often described as a “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). It is an approach that does not dictate theoretical assumptions, direct research questions, or require specific methods of data collection. Thematic analysis can be seen as a stand-alone method that fulfils most of the functions of grounded theory, but without being bound by theory. As a result, Braun and Clarke argue that it is adaptable to a wide range of theoretical frameworks, from constructionism to critical realism. However thematic analysis has been criticised for being too simple a technique, with some literature noting that it does not provide the depth of analysis that other methods can. It also seems to not be as credible in the field of
psychology as methods such as IPA and grounded theory. However thematic analysis is flexible, straightforward and accessible, and because of this it has started to develop the ‘brand recognition’ of other approaches.

Thematic analysis is suitable for a wide range of research interests and theoretical perspectives, and it was chosen to answer the research question for various reasons. First, because it is well suited to an exploration of new phenomena, such as SEIM exposure. This is a relatively unexplored area of research, where the focus is on a constantly evolving and un-chartable environment. Second, it is a flexible approach that does not have a pre-existing theoretical framework and so can be applied to various epistemological approaches. In my study I used thematic analysis from a critically realistic perspective that is based within contextualism. The aim therefore is to focus upon acknowledging “the ways individuals make meaning of their experience, and, in turn, the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings, while retaining focus on the material and other limits of ‘reality’” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.9). Third, thematic analysis is a method that can organise and describe data with minimal alteration or interpretation. According to Sandelowski and Barroso (2003) all qualitative methods exist upon a continuum which dictates the degree of transformation the data goes through in the analysis process. Descriptive approaches, such as thematic analysis, employ a relatively low level of interpretation compared to other methods (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). As a result the approach allowed the study to prioritise the voice of the YP, which could potentially be lost through the filters of theory and interpretation that other approaches might employ (Clarke & Braun, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

3.5.2 Theme Identification

Thematic analysis involves the identification of themes through the ‘careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice and Ezzy 1999, p.258). It seeks to recognise patterns within the data that in turn become the categories for analysis. Within thematic analysis there are primarily two ways of
identifying themes or patterns in data: an inductive or deductive approach. The main difference between the two being that a deductive approach is aimed at testing a new theory, while an inductive approach is concerned with what theory might emerge from the data itself (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This study is focused primarily on exploring resilience in the face of a new phenomenon, however it also values the context of the young participants, as a result a hybrid approach was taken. This was based upon the model by Braun and Clarke (2006), which allows not only the incorporation of a data-driven inductive approach, but also a deductive template of codes. This approach complimented the overarching research strategy by making use of an inductive approach to prioritise the perspective of the participants, and a deductive template to explore and validate the resilience processes that the literature led me to expect.

Thematic analysis is often considered in the form of a series of phases, where becoming familiar with the data is the first task (Appendix E). As mentioned previously, the review process involved exploring and summarising the transcripts before identifying the key points within the texts. This generated a series of potential codes that were reflected upon as I became more and more comfortable and familiar with the data. According to Boyatzis (1998) a ‘good code’ is one that captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon.

In the second phase I began to identify the preliminary codes and document where and how patterns occur. This happened through the process of data reduction, where the data is broken down and condensed into smaller more workable categories, based upon the theoretical underpinnings that informed the research question. For example, I initially coded protective and vulnerability processes, before breaking this down further into individual themes. Prior to the coding process a coding manual was developed to manage the data, and provide a clear trail of evidence for the credibility of the study. The template was developed *a priori*, based upon the research question and the theoretical concepts of resilience acknowledged by Fergus.
and Zimmerman (2005). Three broad code categories formed the code manual, these were: compensatory, protective and challenging. Table 1 shows how the codes relating to theories of resilience in YP were written and identified, these followed the template of Boyatzis (1998).

- The code label.
- The definition of what the theme concerns.
- A description of how to know when the theme occurs.
- A set of worked examples was also included for clarity.
Table 2: Manual of codes developed based upon models of resilience noted in Fergus and Zimmerman (2005).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Worked Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Model 1: Compensatory</td>
<td>A protective factor counteracts the risk factor in a direct manner but from an alternative origin</td>
<td>Something unrelated directly affects the potential outcome.</td>
<td>“Well I’m in a relationship, so thankfully it’s not a thing at the moment. But you know, we look out for each other about that kinda stuff.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Model 2: Protective</td>
<td>Protective assets or resources moderate or reduce the effect of risk on negative outcomes (Zolkoski &amp; Bullock, 2012)</td>
<td>The young people make use of protective factors to reduce or moderate the potential risk.</td>
<td>“Well yeah, but I’ve got blocking software to make sure I don’t see that sorts stuff, unless I want too.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Model 5: Challenging</td>
<td>Risk is not seen as purely harmful instead it is assessed in terms of context (low, medium or high levels) and the opportunities it presents (Zimmerman et al., 2013).</td>
<td>The potential risk is not seen to warrant concern as the ‘present’ protective factors are seen as enough to</td>
<td>“Yeah, I understand it can be harmful, but it’s not for me at the moment. I keep myself safe and talk to mates about the weird stuff, but it does help me prepare, you know?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the third phase, relevant data extracts were sorted according to the overarching themes that began to emerge. Boyatzis (1998) notes that a theme is “a pattern in the information that at a minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon” (p.161). These were subsequently reflected upon as the relationships between codes, subthemes and themes began to become clear (Appendix F).

The fourth phase involved looking at how the themes support the data, and in turn how these fit within the overarching theoretical perspective of resilience in YP. It was essential at this point to also assess what might have been missing, and so at this stage I went back to the data and investigated further. From this, data driven questions began to emerge and it became important to assess what this said about the data, and/or my perspective of it (Appendix G and H).

As a result, the final phase involved ‘refining and defining’ the themes and potential subthemes before reporting upon them (Appendix I). As noted by Smith (1992) it often becomes necessary to reject or reform some of the codes as the analysis responds to inductive insights. From this process a unified story began to emerge, and it was possible to see which themes offered meaningful contributions to our understanding of YP’s resilience to the potential negative implications of SEIM.

### 3.6 Trustworthiness

Due to the lack of instruments with established metrics about validity and reliability, qualitative research has often been criticised for a lack of reliability (Morrow, 2005). As a result it is a subject often discussed, however as noted by Loh (2013) these debates are often convoluted and unproductive due to each perspective being derived from a different epistemological and ontological paradigm. He goes on to note that these
conversations are often akin to “micropolitics”, having being used as a staging ground from which individuals and organisations can further their own interests. However, this section does not set out to offer an extensive overview of the topic, instead it simply aims to acknowledge the context in which this research sits. As such, it seems important to highlight that the contextual contentions that follow are specific to this research study. The following section discusses trustworthiness, a term used by qualitative researchers to establish that the research study’s design and findings are credible, transferable, confirmable, and dependable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

In thematic analysis is it fundamentally important that I remained close to the actual experiential accounts of the participants to maintain credibility. As the researcher, my primary role was to act as a conduit of the participants’ reflections. However, one of the criticisms of qualitative approaches is that they require too many layers of interpretation, and that data can pass through several filters before it is reported. Shaw (2001) warns of the danger of this and notes that there is a need for researchers to not only be aware of what they are conveying, but also to account for their own narratives. This has been acknowledged in a number of ways, first with the positioning statement in the introduction. This aims to highlight my own personal perspective and experience with the subject prior to the research. The second is through the three brief reflective chapters that discuss my thoughts in relation to the research design, analysis, and data. Here I own my personal narrative and attempt to establish transparency. These chapters were informed by the reflective diary that I maintained throughout the analysis, an example of which can be found in Appendix J.

While the researcher’s perspective is valuable, it is important to maintain balance and as Shaw warns, safeguard against the distractions of my personal narrative. To do this I employed several techniques to reduce the impact of my stance. First, to limit the effect of my a priori thought processes, I developed a coding manual and used an external transcriber.
Second, I made use of audit trails, a qualitative strategy to establish confirmability of a research study’s findings. The aim of this was to describe how I collected, analysed, and condensed the data in a transparent manner. The evidence of which can be found in the reflective chapters. Third, I conducted coherence checks with my academic supervisor, the aim of this strategy was to seek confirmation and make sure the findings were transferable. Fourth, I presented the research design and early findings at the Division of Counselling Psychology Conference in 2018 in an attempt to verify my initial insights, evidence of which can be found in Appendix K.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

There were a number of ethical issues to consider and address within this study. What follows is an outline of the ethical process the study has undergone, and a brief account of the procedures that were developed to account for these issues. Prior to commencement the thesis was approved by the University of Manchester’s Research Ethics Committee, it also complied with the Health and Care Professions Council (2014) and The British Psychological Society's (2009) ethical research requirements.

The study was initially proposed as part of a 5,000-word research proposal that was submitted to the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology, before being presented to the University of Manchester’s Research Ethics Committee. The research was identified as high risk and was required to go through several editorial procedures before being approved in the September of 2017, one year after it was initially proposed. Unfortunately, due to the procedural restrictions and the time it took to gain ethical clearance, unpredictable circumstantial events occurred which meant the research had to align with a new partner organisation. The ramifications of this are considered in the first Reflective Chapter.
When conducting social research, it is important to consider the potential impact participation may have. This was particularly important for this study because of the additional vulnerabilities and susceptibilities associated with YP, and those who identify as LGBTQ+. Not only was it key that I acknowledge the potential psychological distress that the investigation could cause, but also the concern that any of the participants could divulge something that may require action on my part. In order to address these risks and the insights of the Ethics Committee, as well as to respond to the challenges that the literature notes for researchers who work with YP, the following procedures were developed.

The aim of the recruitment procedure was to introduce the research in a non-abrasive manner and in a way that was not only respectful of the individual members, but also the group dynamic. As a result, the Q42 facilitating staff member recruited the participants and provided them with information sheets and consent forms two weeks prior to the interviews. This was felt to be an important feature because it introduced the research in a familiar setting and in a method of communication that they were accustomed to. It also gave the participants time to consider the research and their involvement in the interviews, assuring that their participation was voluntary and valid. At this point they were also informed that they had the right to withdraw without providing a reason, at any point. Not only was this felt to be ethical, but it was also felt to empower the participants and promote investment in the process. No incentives were provided to participate in the research.

Whilst maintaining confidentiality was a priority, it was also important that the participants understood the limits of this in regards to disclosure. With this in mind interview sheets and consent forms were designed to be considerate of YP’s communicational style, but clearly acknowledged the limitations of confidentiality in line with the 42nd Street’s policies regarding disclosure of child protection concerns. Although clearly written in these forms, these policies and procedures were discussed with the participants
prior to conducting the interviews. This was to ensure that they had understood and to provide another opportunity for them to withdraw should they wish. A copy of both forms can be found in Appendix A and B.

The research set out to be mindful of the perspective and competencies of YP and as such the interviews were conducted on 42nd Street’s premises and lasted no longer than thirty minutes. An additional fifteen minutes was reserved at the end to debrief the participants and address any concerns that may have arisen in the process, a copy of which can be found in Appendix C. These choices were made so as not to be too taxing for the participants or the partnering organisation, whilst still providing enough time to gather valuable data. The debrief procedure also allowed a third opportunity for the participants to ask any questions they might have about the research, confidentiality, and their anonymity. As noted previously, the greatest care was taken to conceal the identity of participants within the data, this included no identifiers in the interview recordings and all data being encoded and password protected.

As well as aligning with 42nd Street’s Safeguarding Policy, the study also followed their Code of Conduct and Health and Safety Policy. As a result, a clear and straightforward set of protocols existed should a participant disclose abuse or illegal behaviour, as well as if there was an accident or emergency scenario. This process, and the protocols, were designed and adhered to, to limit risk and provide a safe and ethical environment in which research could be conducted.

3.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter I presented the methodology of the study. This initially included a review of the research question and an introduction to the philosophical positioning of the study: a critical realistic and contextualist approach. I then went on to discuss the research process before presenting a
rationale for the use of thematic analysis and reviewing the coding process. Finally, I discussed the ethical considerations and limitations relevant to the study. The following chapter will reflect upon the research progression and design.
CHAPTER 4 : Reflections 1

This is the first of three short chapters which seek to reflect upon key elements of the research process. This chapter focuses upon the research progression and how unavoidable circumstances led the research project to develop in unexpected ways. The objective is to detail these changes for the sake of transparency and account for what they meant for the research findings in line with the trustworthiness processes discussed previously. As the study went through several incarnations before settling on the version discussed in the methodology, the chapter will conclude by acknowledging the chronology of the research study, and reflect upon how external pressures, and ensuing concessions, not only affected the research strategy, but also my own perspective and potential interpretation of the data.

4.1 Research Progression Reflections

This research project set out to understand the resilience processes that appear to protect YP from the potential risks associated with SEIM. To best address this objective the study sought out a community with a notably vulnerable population; this is because it was felt that these YP would already have proven resilience processes that would be clearly identifiable. The secondary objective of the research was to give a voice to an often-underrepresented group, and as a result, the study initially aligned with a local youth project that supports the most disadvantaged and vulnerable YP in the Moss Side area of Manchester. This is an area with high levels of deprivation and a reputation for gangs and violence. A recent funding application by the service highlighted several of the most serious risk factors that the population contends with. These include: over 50% living in poverty, significant mental health issues, risk of radicalisation, grooming for sexual exploitation or into gangs, poor academic achievement, and low self-esteem. In 2016 to 2017 they worked with 542 different YP, over 90% of which were of Black or Asian Minority and Ethnic (BAME) heritage. The
same funding application discussed above highlighted some of the recent and future challenges that the service would be facing, these include:

- Complex identity issues related to heritage, sexuality and gender.
- An increase in sexual activity at young ages.
- Significant rise in racism, especially Islamophobia.
- An increase in ‘significant’ gang violence.

Although an area with a rich history and a community that offers both support and diverse experiences, it is in a constant state of socioeconomic flux, and clearly contains many challenges for YP. Since the terrorist bombing of the Ariana Grande concert on the 22nd of May 2017, Moss Side has seen significant increases in fear and racist related crimes. In September 2017 an 18-year-old by the name of Sait Mhoob was stabbed to death in a mass brawl in Moss Side. Three other teenagers were hospitalised in the fight, with one suffering life-changing injuries. The killing of Sait came hours after ten men and one 14-year-old boy were convicted of murder and manslaughter following the violent death of Abdul Hafidah in Moss Side in May 2016. What this hopes to illustrate is just how fraught the lives of YP are in Moss Side, with many acknowledging that they are now self-isolating, and living vicariously online, because they fear for their own life. Furthermore, recent events would appear to indicate that not only is this an area with a highly vulnerable population, but that the issues facing YP here are intensifying.

While I had hoped that the research would be facilitated by this youth project, and was set on recruiting from this population, there were various circumstances outside of my control that made it a non-viable option. This was most notably because of the turmoil within the Moss Side community at this time, and the subsequent threats the community centre itself was facing. Additionally, my ability to adapt the study to these circumstances was
limited due to the restrictions that had been placed upon the research by the university’s ethics panel. However, I wanted to be respectful of the loyalty the organisation had shown me, and sought to work with this population group because it felt like being listened to and empowered was exactly what they needed in this time of strife. As a result, I made repeated concessions and continually extended the recruitment timeline in the hope that a period of stability would occur whereby the research strategy could be enacted. Upon reflection, my own hesitancy to move on was a mistake, and although it was based upon dedication to the community, it resulted in a significantly delayed project. Eventually, after 6 months of patience, between the months of September 2017 and March 2018, the timeline got extended beyond reasonable expectation and I was forced to respectfully sever my ties with the youth centre and search for a more consistent and reliable setting to conduct the research.

I then had the difficulty of aligning with a new facilitating service. This was tricky and time consuming, not only because it required considerable networking, but because it felt important to me that the eventual service echoed the principles and motivation that instigated the research. I was concerned that it could be perceived as controversial to give YP a voice in this subject matter, and so I felt it a necessity to align with a service that not only shared my outlook, but also had faith in the principles behind what I set out to achieve. Through the advice of several respected academics, practitioners, and third sector administrators I was put in touch with 42nd Street and found a service that not only respected the perspective that motivated this research, but also provided me with the support and resources to conduct the research. Once I was fortunate enough to be allied with 42nd Street, I then needed to concede on certain elements of the research design and made the decision to further stretch out the interview process over 5 months, so as not to disrupt the group’s dynamics. Overall, this meant that the research project was extended by an entire year. While this certainly impeded the research, there were also some secondary benefits which were unexpected. The following section aims to reflect upon the weaknesses and strengths of this process and the effect it had on me.
Although the events were understandable, they did delay the research, and this led to several issues for myself and the research design. First, the need to postpone led to significant stress and strain for me as the researcher. This affected my engagement with the project, and led to an initial lacklustre attitude toward networking and seeking out a second facilitating service. In fact, upon reflection I think my passion for the research was significantly affected by the situation and led to some resentment that lasted until I met the Q42 group. Second, because of the delays I ended up conducting the literature review prior to the analysis. This was done out of desperation and a need to feel productive, while also appearing a wise use of the postponement. However, it meant that the literature review had to adapt with each change of circumstance and ended up reflecting a wider perspective of the field of study than is ideal for a project of this size. There were also issues surrounding expectations and presumptions which will be addressed in the next Reflective Chapter. Third, the need to adapt the research design to accommodate a new population had many practical implications. Primarily this meant returning to the University of Manchester’s Ethics Panel to amend the application, and increasing the scope and specifications of the literature review to include a focus upon LGBTQ+ factors. While I had a personal understanding of the topic, it was not an area I have ever conducted research into, and so becoming familiar with the material became an unexpected responsibility. While I initially felt that this endangered the study, I soon realised that it offered an opportunity in the form of an unbiased perspective. However, it was time consuming and presented many unexpected challenges, such as understanding the history of LGBT terminology (Kates, 2013; Milton, 2015), the cultural and situational divide in LGBT research (DeHaan et al., 2013; Meyer, 2003a), as well as the BPS’s guidelines for working with sexual minorities (Shaw et al., 2012).

While the circumstances were originally perceived as a significant setback, they also led to some unexpected benefits and opportunities, most notably in regards to the scope of the research. The time spent trying to recruit and
liaise with the youth project allowed me to become considerably more familiar with the literature, and after a while it became clear that the scope of the project was too broad. In fact, I think if it had continued down this path the results would have lacked substance and, upon reflection, I feel I would have had to interview three times the number of participants in order to account for the diverse perspectives of the initially proposed population group. This not only would have been impractical for a research project of this size, but it would also be in breach of the ethical restrictions set out by the university. The realignment therefore presented the opportunity to adjust the research design to target a more specific and concentrated population group.

Initially I set out to explore the effects of SEIM with YP recruited from an impoverished and vulnerable setting. The objective was to explore how YP who have a notable template for coping with risk, protect themselves from negative online influences. To do this I set out to recruit a sizable selection of YP from various backgrounds within the community, this was to establish a fair representation of the general populace. However, in many ways the issues faced by the community as a whole, which made them the ideal participants, were the very issues that prevented the youth project from facilitating that research. From this, I learnt of the importance of contextual stability when conducting research, and so I sought out a facilitating service that provided access to key informants but within a reliable and consistent environment. Aligning with 42nd Street not only met these goals, but their encouragement and faith in the principles that initially shaped the research refreshed my enthusiasm for the topic and offset a lot of the discord I had acquired over the year.

To align with 42nd Street, the research strategy had to make certain concessions. Most notably repositioning the focus upon young LGBTQ+ people, however it also meant evolving the scope of the study to be respectful of the new population group, and as such the decision was made to recruit fewer participants. While I was initially hesitant to scale back the
participant group, it ended up being advantageous because the group offered a truly unique and informed perspective. This was not only because they were knowledgeable about, and skilled in, technology, but also because they were already predisposed to reflect upon themselves and sexual material. Essentially, good fortune led me to find a population group of key informants that were ideally suited for research into SEIM. This in turn led to data which was not only rich in regards to the research question, but also reflective in regards to related extrinsic concerns, such as how sex is taught in school and how pornography played a part in some coming out experiences. Although certain concessions had to be made, i.e. reducing the participant size and stretching out the interviews over the summer, the outcome was a research project that was felt to be more robust, in-depth, and offered more disseminatable data.

4.2 Chapter Summary

This reflective chapter sought to acknowledge the concessions that the research design was forced to make, in response to several unavoidable circumstances. The aim was to recognise how the research evolved, and reflect upon what this meant for the methodology and my perspective as the researcher. As a result, the chapter discussed the original facilitating service and the struggles it faced, before acknowledging what conducting the research with 42nd Street meant for the research design and my perspective as the researcher. The next reflective chapter will occur after the Findings Chapter, and will focus upon the interview process and the analysis.
CHAPTER 5 : Findings

This chapter directly answers the research question: how do young LGBTQ+ people perceive their own ability to cope with the potential negative implications of SEIM exposure? Subsequently, eight key assets and seven key resources are identified and described in turn. Demonstrative quotes from the transcripts are used to provide real world examples, while illustrations have been rendered to show the way these variables appeared to present.

5.1 Assets Young People Make Use of to Cope with the Potential Harmful Effects of SEIM.

As noted previously, assets are *factors of the individual* that play a role in how someone might respond to a risk. They have previously been conceived as either protective or vulnerability factors, depending on how they influence the expected risk trajectory. Eight main assets were identified in the analysis and will be described below one at a time. However, many of these variables presented in complex fashions, which appeared to indicate that they are more dynamic than has previously been reported.

The figure below (Figure 2.0) lists all the key assets and was developed to clearly illustrate the findings. In the illustration each asset sits upon a continuum, and its position upon it dictates how aligned that asset is to a protective or vulnerable process. Solid lines were used to show a reliable relationship with a process, and dotted lines were used to indicate where there was the suggestion of a relationship but where it could not be confirmed; i.e. where the participants indicated that they imagine a variable having this effect, but have no experience of it themselves. Grey lines were simply used as a framework to illustrate the axis point and provide context. While some of the variables appear solely aligned with one end of this
spectrum, others appear more nuanced, and so the illustration was
developed to offer greater clarity into this insight.

![Figure 2.0](image)

**Figure 2.0**: An illustration of the eight key assets discussed by the participants of the study

### 5.1.1 Asset 1: Awareness

The theme of awareness refers to how familiar a YP is with the risks and
nature of SEIM. This was noted to be both a PF and VF because while most
participants felt that they were in a more defensible position if they were
forewarned, two participants noted that awareness could also promote
greater engagement with the material due to it igniting curiosity.

Participants 4 and 9 also indicated that awareness of the material, and the
harms associated with it, mitigated the feelings of fear that kept them
initially safe. Although this process was discussed by a third of the
participants, and deserves note, it was discussed in such a way that it
referred to others and not themselves. As a result, although it was a well
coded vulnerability, it was considered more ethereal than its protective
counterpart, as reflected by the quote below.
Respondent: One, don’t believe everything you see in porn, 90% of the time it’s exaggerated for the fun of it... Two, educate yourself properly before you consume porn... Three, if porn makes you uncomfortable, try and research your platform’s guidelines, how you can block it etc... Four, just be wary that the internet is a big place and sometimes you’ll fall down a rabbit hole. But the important thing is to look after yourself before anything else, like... don’t do things because your friends think it’s cool, like, don’t go and look at porn because you feel like you’re weird for not doing it. At the end of the day you need to put yourself first and your own health and safety first. And five, understand that porn culture can be a big thing, it can be quite a dangerous thing, it can try and influence you to think you have to be a certain way, but you don’t.

The quote above also illustrates how the theme of awareness appears to relate to some of the other significant themes. In fact, it was most prominently associated with the fear YP felt towards SEIM, how the SEIM itself was presented, and how motivated the YP is to interact with SEIM. This appeared to be related to how multi-natured exposure to SEIM can be for a YP. For example, several participants discussed the role of porn bots: AI software that acts as a marketing tool for porn, prostitution, and dating websites. As noted in the quote below, this awareness, and the subsequent empowerment that comes from the ability to make a choice for themselves, appears to play a role in compensating for any potential harms related to exposure to graphic sexual depictions.

Respondent: It doesn’t bother me because I’ve kind of become desensitised to them... ‘cause as I said, I grew up with the internet...and I’ve watched how these bots have evolved and come to be really...so I’ve seen...OK, so I’m expecting those, I now know what their opening messages look like as well...I know what their user names are normally like...I know what their profile pictures are normally like...if I come across them, I come across them, so be it. There’s not really much I can do to stop them from initially finding me. A lot of what I can do is after they find me, I can report them.

With more explicit material, such as specific feature films, the participants noted that awareness of the heteronormative depiction of sex promoted avoidance. Furthermore, as these depictions contradicted their world views and sexual identities, they noted a greater likelihood of distress upon
exposure, and a worry over the negative educational values that this material might impart upon the next generation of YP. One of the central insights that came out of the interviews, and which subsequently shaped the research, is that there is a growing movement within young LGBTQ+ youth to seek out more niche forms of media, and communities, that appeal to their sexual identities. This appears to be in retort to the mass heteronormative material and attitudes ingrained in the Internet, which nearly all of the participants noted to be excluding of a ‘true’ LGBTQ+ lifestyle. The most widely discussed were the mediums of fan fiction, self-made content and Tumblr blogs.

Respondent: OK...well, within the group because it’s...LGBT...focus group of people who are not...represented in society...at all...we find that any other people who are not represented in society, so that often comes into like kink and fetish...they’re more accepting than vanilla straight people...

Interviewer: OK...that's your normal...

Respondent: ...yeah, because they’re more used to people being like ‘eurgh! What’s that?’ And we get the same reaction for us being LGBTs so...it’s kind of community within that, and then people...feel less weird about exploring stuff that they’re into...

5.1.2 Asset 2: Personal Experience

Following on from the theme of awareness was the theme of personal experience, this related to the role personal history played in interfering with the risks associated with SEIM. Unsurprisingly this was a strong theme referenced in every interview, and although it showed signs of being both a PF and VF, it was majoritively seen in a protective manner. The unsurprising insight was that as the participants interact with SEIM they better learn how to differentiate between what is harmful and what is not, they then become accustomed to it and learn how to better manage situations out of their initial control, such as accidental exposure.
Respondent: Yeah because I’ve been through it while…first got on…first got on Tumblr when I was like 10, which is against the guidelines but they’re not really…enforced, and then I’ve learned through that… I’ve gone through the generations of it being like ‘oh, you can block stuff now…oh you can make sure if it’s got spoilers or porn in the tags it won’t show up at all.’ So I’ve gone through that as it’s…as the websites have updated…which…going through that gives you more knowledge about it…

Additionally, it seems that the more a YP interacts with this material the more confident they feel in their own sexual identity and appear to have a greater sense of empowerment in their choices to interact with it, subsequently inoculating themselves to some of the harmful effects of SEIM exposure, such as sexual confusion. Even negative experiences appeared to act in a protective manner, with them providing key information on what not to do and challenging the negative effects of fear and ignorance. As one participant put it, “online bad experiences are inevitable, but the more you experience them the more able you are to deal with them”.

Respondent: No, there’s no…there’s no sign of it, so…by…the only way to protect ourselves is to personally try and educate ourselves which we shouldn’t have to do…because it should be a thing that…oh…before a scene starts, we use a safe word for this or…we’ve discussed previously…limits and whatever…and…there’s no real way to protect yourself apart from experiencing lots and lots of porn…but then that’s a harmful thing in itself...

As noted previously the role of self-generated material is an aspect of modern SEIM, and one of the harms that YP have had to contend with is receiving material on social networks that they have not requested. In the interviews it became clear that YP perceived the creation and sharing of ‘nudz’ to be a part of online culture, however during the analysis, relationships between themes emerged that suggest some unexpected protective processes. One such process was the interaction between personal experience and self-esteem. In this case, several of the participants noted that the creation of this material was used to gather positive regard from others, in turn building up their own confidence in their appearance.
Unexpectedly the analysis suggested that this gratification was sought not just from potential romantic partners, but also from their social group. In fact, one participant suggested that receiving this material from friends diluted the harmful effects of material shared by strangers. As the quote below illustrates, self-generated material not only appears to facilitate both protective and vulnerability processes, it appears highly individual.

Respondent: So…things like…nudes…and porn…you don’t share porn and you don’t… really… share nudes, but if you have a person in your friendship group who’s very…you’ve probably talked to this person… they’re very sharing and very confident with their nudes, they will show you all their nudes…which means that some people in the group might feel uncomfortable, but like…you will tell that person but they will still probably want to show them because they’re like… ‘but I look so good! Look at my butt!’ And you’re like, ‘OK, cool.’

The theme of personal experience also appeared to have a significant association with the resource theme of direct personal influence. This finding refers to the role that past personal relationships have played in influencing a YP’s attitude towards SEIM. This finding was discussed by several participants, and appears to exist as both a PF and VF, depending on the nature of the previous relationship. Previous research suggested that the past romantic experiences of participants would play a key role in the prevalence of the risk, and the findings of this study would appear to further confirm this. However, as shown in the quote below, participants also noted the protective role these experiences could have, with several noting the positive education they gained from their partners, and also the safe environment which allowed them to healthily explore the material.

Interviewer: how do you think you develop that attitude? That knowledge?

Respondent: Right…it was from having a…sexual and emotional relationship…who…I had someone as a dominant, and at the time I was very new and inexperienced and had no idea what I was doing, but enjoyed what I was doing so kept doing it which was not safe because I didn’t understand the consequences of not using safe words and properly educating myself and talking about limits…but then…spending time with
someone who was a bit older…and…knew what they were doing and was very experienced into what they were doing, taught me to have these conversations with people.

5.1.3 Assets 3 and 4: Attraction and Lack of Attraction

Initially these factors were considered to be two opposing elements of a continuum. The idea being that the more attracted a YP was to the material, the more resilient they would be to any potential harmful influences it might have. However, the inductive analysis suggested a more complex multidimensional relationship, as both factors showed signs of protective and vulnerability processes. As a result of this, how attracted, or not, the YP was to the material was coded separately.

5.1.3.1 Attraction to the Material

Interviewer: OK. How often do you come across nudity and nakedness?

Respondent: Pretty often, mainly for the…because I use…reference art…there’s often nudity in that to…show proportions and stuff like that and then the occasional…written…written nudity and sex stuff.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit about that?

Respondent: …like fan fiction which…it’s something I read quite often, it’s…it’s…I don’t actively search it out, but if a story I like does have it in, then I don’t really mind, I either skip past it or I just…slowly read through it and just think, ‘oh… OK’.

As seen above, engaging with material that they are attracted to was perceived by participants to be less harmful than being exposed to material that was incongruent with their sexuality, or displayed harmful content. However, several participants also discussed habitual interactions with this material and how over time they may become more susceptible to its harmful influence. Although suggested at by two participants, there was a lack of certainty in this finding because it was more commonly mentioned in reference to a friend’s behaviour rather than their own, as seen in the quote below. As a result, although it appears clear that being attracted to
material can make a YP vulnerable to the harmful risks of SEIM, there was not enough evidence in this analysis to be conclusive.

Respondent (Continued) ... but then...especially like...once you kind of delve into a little bit of like...kinks or fetishes or even slight things...again, the thing of well it speeds up and speeds up and then you've gone too far. I've had friends that have...refused to use Tumblr and refused to even like...have...like watch porn or have sex for a while just to let them like...be able to like...concept severity of some things because they knew they got in too far.

5.1.3.2 Lack of Attraction to the Material

Unlike attraction, a lack of attraction to SEIM was not straight forward because it appeared to interact with more variables. Most commonly the participants associated it with vulnerability during their earliest exposure experiences. However, they went on to note that this process did not last long as the harmful effects appeared to dilute with familiarity. Vicarious factors were also often associated with this finding, such as their parents’ reaction if the YP’s search history was exposed, as can be seen below

Respondent: ...I...can tell you that when I was younger it used to make me very uncomfortable for it to just appear like that ’cause I mostly used my computer and stuff around my parents and if it had just come up, I would just be, like, so terrified they’d think I’d been looking at something I shouldn’t be...as I’ve got older, it’s been less of an issue for me....I can just comfortably say, ‘oh, that’s just a thing that happens, it just came up,’ and go through it. I feel like for younger people it’s a little more influential...especially as these sort of people who...like provide porn can sometimes get in touch with people...and...try and ask them to do stuff...for their blog...

As the quote above corroborates, the opinion seen in the majority of the historic literature is that unexpected exposure can have greater harm than deliberate exposure because of the participating shock factor. However, the participants of this study imply that how attracted they are to the material, and also how experienced they are with it, can moderate this potential harm. The example used by three participants was the graphic sexual depictions
used in pornographic adverts on streaming sites. In these cases, participants noted that the lack of attraction to the heteronormative depictions meant that they didn’t feel any effect from the exposure. This is illustrated in the quote below where the participant appears to imply that not being attracted to the material immunises them to its effects.

Respondent: Yeah, essentially, but weirdly enough it’s all heterosexual…it’s never...homosexual porn, it’s always heterosexual...from pirated websites, Tumblr...

Interviewer: What’s that like for you then?

Respondent: It doesn’t really...it has no effect on me now to be honest...like it doesn’t raise any feeling or anything like that...because...I don’t know...that’s not for me.

Interviewer: So because it doesn’t interest you...

Respondent: Yeah ...I’m kind of just numb to it

All the participants appeared to believe that the mass-produced heteronormative pornography held the greatest harm, and that niche LGBTQ+ material is less likely to proffer unhealthy sexual messages.

5.1.4 Asset 5: Fear

As noted earlier, the theme of fear appeared to hold a significant role for every participant, and for the most part it appeared to act in a protective capacity. Most of the participants noted that fear of the potential harms associated with SEIM meant that they restricted their interaction with the material, until a point where they felt they could confidently manage it. Additionally, this fear led them to educate themselves on the technology that facilitates their exposure, such as how to make use of governance programs, and also on the ethical implications of the material. For example, several participants discussed the morality of certain taboo narratives such as incest or blackmail. While more practical ethical observations were also made, i.e. it being impossible to know the age and willingness of the
participants, especially when the material is likely to be produced in
countries with different cultures and laws. However, the process that this
variable went through to interact with the risk of SEIM was not clear, in fact
different fears appeared to interact with SEIM exposure differently. For
example, the fear of interacting with SEIM and it reflecting upon their self-
esteeem and self-worth was so significant that it initially appeared to
dissuade two participants from engaging with the material at all. While this
is illustrated in the quote below, it was also contradicted by another
participant who felt that it was his fear of not understanding sexual
behaviour that motivated him to engage more significantly with SEIM.

Respondent: Yeah, but that almost reaches the side of like...sort of...like
body issues and sort of insecurities because you see all these people
having...like great sex and you don’t...you’re not having any great sex and
it’s like... ‘ooh, why am I not? Because of my... I must not look good
enough.’

Interviewer: So there’s a real negative side of it, where it reflects upon
your...feeling of self, your self-worth, your self-esteem?

Respondent: Yeah...

A limitation of this finding was that all the participants discussed it
retrospectively, i.e. the fear was something they experienced when they first
interacted with the material, or even prior to that. As a result, it’s hard to be
certain of how this factor truly acted because the participant’s perspective is
likely to be influenced by how they remember those early years. Another
limitation is that although fear was a strong theme throughout the
interviews, it was actually rarely in reference to the risks and harms of
SEIM, instead it most often related to corresponding worries. Predominantly
this related to the fear that their sexuality, or sexual behaviour/attitudes,
might be revealed should their SEIM use be exposed. In regards to this,
participants discussed blackmail as the result of self-generated material and
exposure through corrupted technology such as viruses, and simply
someone overseeing their internet use. In fact, several participants noted that
the fear of their sexuality being exposed was more disabiling than the fear of
any harm related to SEIM use. As seen in the quote below, the finding appears most significant prior to the participants revealing their sexuality, however the participant also notes that a sense of this continued even after that point, perhaps signifying the echo of some shame related to that experience or their identity.

Respondent: ...because all of those pop-ups made my mum have like horrible reactions to the fact that her child was seeing these things...so...

Interviewer: So it was actually your mum’s reaction which was more traumatic for you?

Respondent: Yeah, more than mine because it was sort of just there like...OK, that’s a thing...and obviously when you’re a kid, you want to know what’s happening so you can learn about it, and that would be it. It’s like...it’s not something that I would have a look...because people...parents are in this sort of notion where...if their child sees sexual based content, they have to...they think they need to educate them...which is fine, I’m fine with education, but when you’re at such a young age, it sort of scars you...so...well, obviously it scarred me. So I sort of stay away from things like PornHub and all that and my libido’s pretty low...

5.1.5 Asset 6: Motivation

The motivation of YP to interact with SEIM was a strong theme referenced throughout all the interviews, and for the most part it was considered to be a PF by the majority of participants. The YP’s belief being that they were better able to handle any potential harms if they were the ones who sought out the SEIM. However, this was by participants who referenced their own motivation and agenda when engaging with the material. Alternatively, two participants referenced the behaviour of others and there were signs that seeking out this material could lead to greater vulnerability.

Respondent: Yeah...I think...PornHub is like a separate issue by itself because you don’t go on PornHub looking for anything but porn, you would have to purposefully go onto PornHub and I understand why some teenagers do look for porn because you know...it...it helps with puberty, it does...I understand looking for porn, I just think they should be educated on why porn isn’t realistic...at least if they’re going to go into looking for porn, they should know why that’s not a reflection of real life and why you
shouldn’t do it exactly as porn says you should do it.

As suggested by the quote above, the thought is that in seeking out the material YP might allow their natural protective attributes to slip, and therefore not be in as good a position to defend against harm as they might if the exposure was unexpected. However there appeared to be a limitation in the theme’s conceptualisation, in that the motivation to engage with the material and an awareness of what the material entails do not necessarily align. A good example of this was the participant who discussed initially seeking out SEIM to explore and learn about his own sexual preferences, however he freely noted that he had no awareness of what that SEIM might entail and subsequently found himself in a vulnerable position.

Respondent: I don’t really know because…it’s taken me…for me personally, someone who…like doesn’t particularly watch vanilla stuff, it’s taken me…until only recently to understand that safe words were a thing which is very important considering that that could have put me at a lot of risk...

Interviewer: Why do you think it’s taken you that long?

Respondent: Because they’re not talked about in mainstream porn. There’s no such thing as a safe word in mainstream porn.

The motivation of the YP was a theme that appeared to interact with several other assets and resources, most prominently the nature of the material and community influence. In fact, it appears the agenda, and subsequent motivation might differ across media platforms, i.e. the way a YP responds to the harmful influences in literature is suggested to differ from the way they respond to it in feature films. This is especially true when you consider the media referenced earlier in the chapter that reflects a particular set of identities, ideals, and ethics that relate to the LGBTQ+ community.

Respondent: ... like if one of us has found a new fandom and we want the others to get into it, we’ll show them the blog that we find humorous or the...one...that we like the art the most of and if there’s porn, we’ll be like,
'oh yeah, there, that's included in there, so if you want to read it for that, go ahead or…'

As seen above participants also noted that the way they engaged with these media platforms differed too, with several participants also referencing daily engagement with certain comics or fan fiction stories because they regularly update their content. This subsequently appears to have led to the participants following and collecting countless comics and stories, with several participants classifying this behaviour as habitual and noting certain ‘moderate’ consequences, such as being late for school, avoiding social interactions, and missing meals. While this media attendance occasionally appeared to revolve around SEIM, the participants most often referenced the storyline and the characters as being the instigating factor. However, this in turn was shown to lead to unexpected exposure as seen with the quote below.

*Respondent: It depends ‘cause personally I will change fandoms pretty quickly from like...TV shows to games, like Pokémon...and...depending on what blogs you follow, some of them will have their own occasional weird spouts where they might just post...like for example, Pokémon might just post Pokémon porn without warning or reason.*

The finding that the motivation to engage with the material is a factor of a YP’s resilience to its potential harms appears clear, however it also appears filtered through factors such as the how frequently the YP engages with it, the nature of the media, and the agenda behind the motivation. This suggests that the theme is more multifaceted than it at first appears, and that once more the factor should be seen within the context of the individual.

5.1.6 Asset 7: Empowerment

The strongest finding found across both assets and resources was the theme of empowerment. This refers to how the YP themselves can take active control and challenge the potential harms of SEIM. This was also one of the
few findings that appeared to exist as purely protective, with no signs that it could put a YP in a more vulnerable position. Part of the reason empowerment was the most extensive finding was because it had significant relationships with many of the other factors found in the analysis, these can subsequently be broken down by how they apply to the individual and how they apply to the community.

Respondent: It’s more so...I tend to...learn my...like I go out actively seeking out how to do things...it’s...just the way I’m hardwired in life, I like logical stimulation so I go out to find these things, see issue, how do I fix issue? And...I found this out like when I was like 11...because...

Interviewer: So pretty early on you identified where the threat could be and how to defend against it?

Respondent: Yeah and when I find like new apps, I figure out what does it have against it? Is it just against the rules to: a point where people won’t want to post it? In vain of getting banned? Like Instagram, they have a very strict policy against nudity...like you’ve got semi-nudity, like underwear modelling and all that...which in itself is quite advertised, but... when it comes to the explore page, it tends to be what you most like, so if it comes up a lot on your explore page, it’s what you’ve been liking really more so than anything. It’ll come up the odd time, you can’t stop that one because...it tends to be popular stuff, but for the most part...it’s down to what you’ve hit like on.

Regarding how empowerment applies to the individual, as seen in the quote above, a common interaction was found between empowerment and technology use. Here the participants felt that their knowledge and skill with online platforms not only put them in the best position to control their exposure to SEIM, but also meant they were in a better position to adapt to future risk. Another factor which interacted with this finding was the role of education, however only education derived from personal and social learning, and not education related to school. The participants noted that it was their own experimentation with technology and media platforms, that allowed them to learn how best to handle exposure and prolonged risk. The participants noted that an understanding of the technology, and confidence in their own ability to adapt to it and the harms that it may cause, was not just empowering, but also appeared to minimise the fear and feelings of
threat that SEIM invoked. Below is a quote that not only illustrates this, but also highlights the need to de-stigmatise the interactions between YP and SEIM.

Respondent: I think...it should be taught that you should be aware...of what can happen on the internet, like you know viruses and stuff like that...what to do if you end up getting one, but then it’s...it’s alright to be curious and to kind of like...explore the thing because if...particularly...I think, if somebody’s struggling with their sexuality and they don’t quite know how to...you know...I don’t know...anything...if they look at things that respond to their sexuality, maybe...you know, maybe gay porn or something like that, it might...actually help them just be a bit more confident with themselves...so if you’re completely restricting it...it’s not good, but if you say, ‘OK, this can happen, be careful, but feel free to explore,’...I think it’s a lot healthier, like open mindset

As noted, the finding of empowerment also had strong extrinsic relationships with resources such as education and community. This also corresponded with the theme of ethics and the moral implications of online behaviours and pornographic material. This was an inductive theme that will be discussed further on, but is worth acknowledging here because it appeared to act as a catalyst for certain findings. This refers to the participant’s feelings of social responsibility to teach their friends, family, and the next generation of YP how best to handle online threats. The theme was identified by seven of the participants and is best illustrated by the quote below. The participant went on to suggest that not only did supporting one another minimise the feeling of isolation on the Internet, but also provided a healthier atmosphere to explore the non-extreme material.

Respondent: Definitely, like there’s...like in the past there’s been a blog where we’ve all been like ‘ooh...this has...really cute art,’ and then one of us, when we’ve just been on a scrolling spree, will go down into like their past blogs and likes and it’ll get...strange very fast, like there was one where it was full on beastiality, not like furries or anything like that, so all of us immediately all blocked it and then we sent messages to the...people that we’re friends with online who like this blog but didn’t know about that and was like ‘just warning you there’s this stuff on this person’s...’
5.1.7 Asset 8: Humour

Another finding that appeared to be purely protective in nature was the role humour seems to have in minimising the effect of exposure to harmful SEIM. The finding appeared heavily related to resources such as personal friendships and community influences, and although only explicitly referred to in two of the interviews, it was referenced by the majority of the participants. The complication with this finding is that it primarily interacted with specific types of SEIM. This refers to specific niches of media platform such as Tumblr posts, GIFs, and Instagram feeds. Although these are free of harm in their own right, they can contain extreme content that is created for alternative intentions, such as humour or political activism.

Respondent: ... I know there was this big phase of meme humour where it was...like obviously people having gay sex, but their faces they’d make of it and like...yeah, and they’d make like a caption, but not actually showing you body parts...so...

Interviewer: So it’s actually using material, but for a humorous kind of...or attempted humorous I should say!

Respondent: Yeah, basically...yeah...using it for...using stuff like...gay porn as a humorous way...which I don’t know it’s either a good thing or a bad thing because I guess if someone’s sort of sharing it...then it kind of exposes more people to like LGBT communities, but I don’t know if that exposure is good exposure or bad exposure, because it kind of forces you to acknowledge that the people...these people exist...

As seen in the example above SEIM in the forms of GIFs is the platform most often referenced in the interviews, and specifically related to stills taken from graphic homosexual pornography overlaid with a contradictory comic message. The participants noted that this material was fairly prevalent amongst their social group and several interviews noted some of the harms associated with it, such as self-esteem issues, body dysmorphic thoughts, and even sexual relationship concerns. However categorically the participants discussed how they believed that the humour challenged these potential harms, and this will be discussed later in the Discussion Chapter.
Respondent: Not really, like if we...find...like say a comic that we really like but it’s very porn centric, we’ll be like...still cute, but there is a lot of porn and we’ll probably chat about how ridiculous some of the situations are.

This was also another variable which appeared to differentiate across various media platforms, with the participants noting it being a regular part of webcomics, as seen above, but rarely a factor in either fan fiction or the more extreme feature films that are available on pornographic websites. However, as noted previously, the different platforms of media interact with YP and their community differently. For example, many participants discussed sharing GIFs and webcomics with friends, but fan fiction appeared to be a more intimate entertainment, and all of the participants implied that explicit pornography consumption only occurred privately. This would seem to imply that the defining characteristic which appears to decide whether humour is a factor of a YP’s resilience, is the level of intimacy and privacy they experience with the material.

Interviewer: OK, is it something you’ve talked to friends about?

Respondent: Oh yeah, we...like...occasionally...we’ll be like, ‘oh...we’ve found this really cute blog where the art’s really good but there is quite a lot of porn on it...’ and then we’ll just scroll through normally laughing at the proportions and laughing at the situations that the characters find themselves in.

5.2 Resources Young People Make Use of to Cope with the Potential Harmful Effects of SEIM

As noted previously, resources are variables that relate to the broader ecology of the individual. Eight of these were identified by the participants of the study as factors which interfered with the risk trajectory of SEIM exposure. The illustration below (Figure 2.1) lists these key resources and once more considers them upon a continuum whereby how protective and/or
vulnerable they make the individual exists at either end. Unlike with the assets illustration, there are no dotted lines to indicate suggestive processes as each of these factors appeared assured by the participants of the study. Two variables were coloured blue to differentiate them from the rest because they appear to have been equally likely to facilitate a protective or vulnerable process, and as such appeared to act in a mediatory capacity. As with the previous section, these factors will be discussed one at a time.

![Resources Diagram]

**Figure 2.1**: An illustration of the seven resources.

### 5.2.1 Resource 1: Education

Education was found to play a strong role in how YP respond to the risks associated with SEIM, having been identified throughout all the interviews. However, it was a complex finding as many of the participants discussed different perspectives and experiences of education. It would be easy to assume that the participants would see their education as somewhere on a continuum between a positive and negative experience, however that was rarely the case in these interviews. Instead the factor appeared influenced by where the education took place, how invested in it they were, and how it related to other factors, such as motivation and empowerment. For the most part the participants discussed how education played a protective role in
how they interacted with SEIM, however there were also significant indications of it inciting greater curiosity and further explorations, as such it also appeared to have vulnerability characteristics. In the few cases where this was discussed it appeared that it was the context and source of the education that was the key catalyst in how the YP were likely to respond. This is illustrated by the example below, where a participant compares the manner in which BDSM information is communicated via traditional pornography to Tumblr blogs.

Respondent: Yeah and...especially with, like BDSM type stuff and porn, you don’t know if they’re using safe words, you don’t know if the person has had like a thorough conversation, what they’re OK with and what they’re not OK with...and what like...the soft limits and hard limits are...which is very important, especially with bondage type stuff. But then on Tumblr you can directly interact with them and be like, ‘oh, do you use safe words? Have you got to the point where you’re comfortable not using them? Have you had a conversation about it? Have you discussed your limits?’

Interviewer: You can verify that?

Respondent: Yeah, you can ask...and then also, but that educates you as well... to be like, oh this is how this person has the conversation, so then if the person has a partner or someone that they’re having sex with, then it makes it easier to have that conversation...that person increases trust and communication... and it personalises it...

This variable was also seen to interact with several other factors, including the resources of community and personal influences, as well as the assets of empowerment and personal experience. As noted earlier in the chapter, one of the inductive findings was the significance of empowerment and how YP appear to find resilience through choice, active control, and through helping others. In fact, the role of educator was particularly significant, with many of the participants discussing the pride they took in supporting others within the community about issues such as online threats, sexual behaviours, and gender roles. However, several participants also noted that they suspected this was only applicable to the LGBTQ+ community, and is not likely to be found in heteronormative culture. As illustrated in an earlier quote one participant took this further by discussing how the online LGBTQ+
community and the fetish community were inheritably linked because they were both micro communities defined by sexual narratives. Their belief was that this led young LGBTQ+ people to be exposed to potentially greater harms, while also providing them with the most appropriate education on how to both challenge this, and become inoculated against it. What appears clear from this finding is that the role of education is multifaceted, and while for the most part it is seen as protective because it empowers a YP, it can also lead to greater vulnerability by inciting curiosity and potentially leading to false confidence, as seen in the opinion below.

Respondent: Yeah…that’s always been a big worry for me as an adult now, thinking about me…as a much younger person, when I was like 12 or 13. I was a lot more influenced by the internet and the things that I saw…and…for young people like seeing that and not really understanding it…because porn gives you a very unrealistic view of sex, and I don’t think young people should see that and think that that’s how sex is. Like it’s just some sort of perfect thing that exists…mostly for the satisfaction of men…because…it like…The things that I’ve seen have always been like very…sort of rough and…like you can clearly tell the girl is faking it…and I wouldn’t want like a young girl to see that and go, ‘oh…that’s how sex is,’ ‘cause it isn’t, it’s…not like that at all.

5.2.2 Resource 2: Nature of the material

The nature of the SEIM was a strong finding that was proven to have equal protective and vulnerability characteristics. The theme refers to how the material is being represented, and includes reference to the medium it is displayed in, such as if it’s a feature film, e-comic, or literature, as well as the inherent characteristics, for example: is it professional or amateur? is it explicit or suggestive? does it appeal to a specific community, interest, or perspective? Finally, the finding also refers to the medium in which the media is displayed, whether that be on a specific pornography website, a general social network, or specific micro niche platform. All of these individual characteristics changed the nature of the SEIM, and in turn appeared to change how a YP perceived the potential risks associated with it; this then influenced how protected or vulnerable the YP was to harm. As a result, the resource appears to act in a mediating capacity.
Respondent: Hmm. We just tend to stick away from porn, not really our thing. Some enjoy the odd fan fic every here and there, but again there’s sort of a minor difference between like say an erotic novel and porn, like with erotic novels, it’s a case of...some could consider it porn, but for the most part it’s just another story, in a sense, it’s just a more extreme romantic novel. I mean just look at 50 Shades of Grey, that’s one of the most popular erotic novels and it’s now got 2 movies...yeah...

Previously in the chapter I discussed how many of the assets appeared to change depending on the nature of the material and this also appeared true for many of the resources. The analysis highlighted significant relationships between the nature of the material and factors such as technology, community influence and the experience of others. In regards to how it interacted with technology it appears that due to the way different forms of media are hosted, and the different ways technology allows a YP to control their exposure, the risks and subsequent PFs differ considerably. For example, several participants discussed online comics and the way the websites that host this media tag explicit content not only so that it’s possible to see what contains sexual content, but also the specific nature of that content. Alternatively, Tumblr, a micro blogging website, which also uses the tagging system appears to put a YP at greater risk because their ‘intelligent search’ technology cross-references tags and can expose someone to material they do not wish to see. However, several participants also noted that the nature of this platform was innately protective because it facilitated communication between the material producer and the consumer.

Respondent: ... I come across a lot of it on Tumblr...like... ‘cause I do a lot of photography stuff, sometimes it’ll just come up under the tags and stuff, but pretty much every single tag that you go through has like these porn blogs that just tag loads of different tags and then it comes through....I’ve seen it on Facebook a few times, but Facebook has this like video...that is...this filter thing where you have to like press ‘uncover video’ for it to actually show up ‘cause it says like... ‘this might be sensitive content’ or something like that.
The media most often discussed by the participants was e-comics and fan fiction, two specific micro entertainment platforms which appear to have a great appeal to young social minorities. This seems to be because the media is easy to produce and as a result represents a large degree of perspectives and interests. Regarding what this means for potential harms of SEIM, participants discussed how the media platforms that hosted the material, and the media itself, were safer due to them signposting potential risk and involving sexual representations that are respectful of an LGBTQ+ identity. Furthermore, several participants discussed how the lack of an excluding environment in these platforms made them feel more comfortable with even more extreme storylines, as seen in the quote below which discusses the platform this media is hosted upon.

*Respondent*: Well especially the thing of like...LGBT porn is more made for straight people than it is for...gay people and then queer friendly porn is very uncommon, to the point where...the only time where I’ve ever heard it talked about...or I have seen it is on Tumblr...

However, vulnerability characteristics were also associated with this material and how it is hosted. First, because the rarity of the material appears to instigate greater sharing of it, but second the participants noted that just because the material was respectful of their sexual identities, that doesn’t necessarily mean it involves healthy sexual depictions. For example, many of the participants discussed how even in the comics that depicted good representations of diverse sexual and gender identities, there was still a habit to depict the physical form in a way that can lead to low self-esteem and thoughts related to body dysmorphia. This is illustrated in the quote below whereby a participant discussed their reaction.

*Respondent*: ...just remember...that no matter...how many times you see...plus size women, Black women...Asian women, women with pubic hair, no matter how many times you see them being fetishized...in porn...remember...that...if you are any of the things, if you’re big, if you have small boobs, if you have very, very large boobs naturally, as I do and have done since I was 13, which is a...I hate them...if you don’t shave,
whether it’s for aesthetic reasons or...because you get razor burn really easily, those things do not make you a fetish and you can still be beautiful without being fetishized for them.

5.2.3 Resource 3: Experiences of Others

The experiences of others played a significant role in all but two interviews, and more often than not, it was identified as a PF. However, there were strong signs that it could also lead to greater vulnerability depending on the nature of the other’s experience. For the most part this factor referenced the experiences of known individuals and was gathered first hand, but it was also interesting to note that many participants discussed experiences that they knew ‘someone’ had had, but who they themselves couldn’t identify. As illustrated below, their stories appeared like anthropomorphic social memes and often seemed related to some horror story from an online experience. While this finding could appear similar to the community influence resource, it does differ in that the experience of others involved specific educational messages, whilst community influence related to general community support.

Respondent: Yeah, I feel like...yeah, because...I remember there was this big thing about porn quite a while ago where it was...this woman...this man who was obsessed with porn and this woman obviously loved him and wanted to fulfil his needs and would re-enact porn videos but they got weirder and weirder until her life was absolutely in danger and she had to break up the relationship...and he went crazy and he had to get arrested...

With this finding it also became clear that the positive or negative nature of the experience didn’t necessarily align with a protective or vulnerability process. Instead the way that the experience of others interacted with the YP seemed to relate to the message that was taken from it. This was most prominently seen in the participants’ attitudes towards ‘horror stories’. In a very similar way that Grimm fairy tales were used to teach people how to be wary, online horror stories teach YP how not to behave and how best to protect themselves. However, one participant did discuss how being
oversaturated with these stories can have a socially hindering effect. The following two quotes were made by this participant in reference to the stories that they had heard, and the effect it resulted in.

*Respondent: Yeah…and I know a lot of people where it’s gone really wrong for them and people have screenshotsed them and shared it and it’s gone horribly wrong and in places like Kik...which is another social media app...they tend to...again, it’s sort of like...that person can keep what they want.*

*Respondent: Yeah...yeah. Just...that was a little bit kind of...made me a little bit self-conscious because people were like, ‘how can you have never watched this?’ I was like... ‘I don’t want to!’*

One of the central differences between this resource factor and the community influence factor was how it interacted with the resilience processes of YP; i.e. community influence appeared to compensate for risk, while the experiences of others appeared to challenge the nature of risk and potentially led to inoculation. This will be reflected upon in greater detail in the Discussion Chapter, however, it is worth noting here to explain why these two factors were analysed separately.

### 5.2.4 Resource 4: Community Influence

The community influence theme refers to the finding that a significant factor in YP’s resilience to SEIM is their involvement in online and offline communities. These affiliations were seen to both protect a YP from harm, and also make them more susceptible depending on the nature of the community. In regards to offline communities this entails specific social groups, such as the Q42 group from which the participants were recruited, but also larger socio-economic groups like the LGBTQ+ community of Manchester. While online communities include those specific to the different social networks such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram, as well as micro cultural groups specific to certain fandoms, interests, and beliefs. It
is worth mentioning that in both cases the participants discussed positive feelings from being associated with these communities and this was found to act in a protective manner. A clear factor in this was the role inclusion had upon the YP’s self-esteem. This appears especially true of this participant group because, as several participants noted, they are a group made of up individuals who have experienced exclusion due to their gender and/or sexual identity.

Respondent: erm ...I think it’s very difficult because it’s like we have a very sex positive group...and open conversations about sex...and say we see something that is especially weird, ‘oh my this was very weird, what do you think about it?’ And in a group that’s monitored by an older person that can be like, ‘that’s not healthy...don’t do that, that’s not healthy.’ So porn is...puts ideas into your head that makes you question things that you think...is that OK? Is that healthy? Is that normal? Which...if left unanswered, obviously we have the benefit of being with older LGBT people who are gonna be like, ‘no! That’s not good! That’s not OK!’ But for people...that...are LGBT that say don’t come to this group or don’t have...very sex positive friends or parents or people that they can talk to, it kind of lets them progress and think that certain things in porn are normal...

The most distinctive protective factor appeared to be the thought process that SEIM risk was diffused through engagement within a community; i.e. their involvement in a community allows them a space to discuss exposures, and challenge the potential harm of this experience. This was most evident within the Q42 group and with peers, however there was also the suggestion of seeking out advice and support from older and more experienced individuals in the LGBTQ+ community. The process was not noted as strongly within the online communities related to specific media (fandoms and web comics), however in these cases the design of the technology and the community values aligned to restrict a lot of the risk associated with SEIM. This finding will be reflected upon in more detail in the technology resource section and later in the Discussion Chapter.

Interviewer: OK, so you actually take an active presence in warning, not just your own mates, but the community?
Respondent: Yeah, ‘cause most of our friends on the internet are all interested in the same stuff and the stuff we talk about in person also goes out to the internet friends...who...will be like, ‘oh, this blog’s kind of ridiculous...it’s also funny. Yeah, it’s just typical, oh we don’t think you’ll like this... if you want to go through it, go through it, but we’re just quickly warning you there’s a bit of this...and a bit of this.

Although involvement in the communities was highlighted as being a significant PF, there was also several vulnerability processes connected to the finding. Two in particular deserve recognition, the first being that involvement with these groups appears to promote greater engagement with SEIM. This looks to be universal across all the communities discussed, however the finding is more prevalent with the online communities where sharing media is a core component of the technology and social interaction. However greater exposure does not necessarily correspond to greater potential harm. Although, several participants suggested that they were more vulnerable to material because it was shared by community members, and therefore hadn’t necessarily been vetted. Two participants also noted that even within micro communities it would be possible to have something shared that didn’t align with their values or preferences, as every community has outlying members whose principles do not correspond with the group.

The second vulnerability process connected to the community influence resource was the suggestion that there is a tendency for those involved in online micro communities to cross-pollinate with other social groups of this type. This is illustrated in the quote below and was discussed by six participants, with several noting particularly strong connections between LGBTQ+ youth communities and those dedicated to explicit sexual interests. One participant theorised that this association was due to both groups being social minorities defined by their sexual identities and that this appears to facilitate connectiveness. Another participant discussed being motivated to explore more extreme sexual behaviours after the challenge of understanding their own sexual identity. The suggestion being that involvement with sexually explicit online communities actually helped the
participant feel more comfortable in their sexual preferences. In this case, although there are strong signs of a potential SEIM related risk, the community involvement actually reduces the likelihood of harm related to emerging sexual identities.

Respondent: OK...well, within the group because it’s...LGBT...focus group of people who are not...represented in society...at all...we find that any other people who are not represented in society, so that often comes into like kink and fetish...they’re more accepting than vanilla straight people...

Interviewer: OK...that’s your normative...

Respondent: ...yeah, because they’re more used to people being like ‘eurgh! What’s that?’ And we get the same reaction for us being LGBTs so...it’s kind of community within that and then people...feel less weird about exploring stuff that they’re into...

Interviewer: So...if I understand you properly, it’s easier for the LGBT community, especially the young LGBT community, to work alongside or work adjacently with the fetish community because people are more accepting...

Respondent: Yeah because it’s in the same like...thing, we’re both kind of seen as weird and freaks and we don’t really fit in with society...in similar ways...LGBT in similar ways to the fetish community, so that makes it very easy for us to kind of explore that and not have a stigma against it because they’re there for us and so we’re there for them. It’s like...you accept me, I accept you, let’s chill!

5.2.5 Resource 5: Personal (Direct) Influence

Personal relationships were also found to influence how a YP interacted with SEIM, and how they handled the risks associated with it. This predominantly referenced romantic and/or sexual partners who influenced the YP’s attitudes and behaviours in a way that reflected their relationship. The variable was found to have equal protective and vulnerability features across all but one interview. However, this exception may be due to the participant’s identity as asexual, and therefore not someone influenced by sexual feelings or their associations. Primarily, the strength of this variable appeared due to its role as a source of education, and the experimental role these relationships facilitated. As a result, it is unsurprising that the factor
was seen in connection with the education, empowerment, and personal experience factors. Participants discussed how these relationships not only encouraged sexual exploration but also fostered a protective environment that diffused any potential harms associated with SEIM use. Furthermore, it was suggested that it offered participants a resource that challenged their awareness of SEIM and forced them to reflect and reconsider previous attitudes. Significantly three participants noted the reparative nature of these relationships, and discussed how romantic relationships had healed some of the harms associated with previous traumatic experiences. Most commonly this appears to refer to re-education after inheriting unhealthy behaviours or attitudes from historic SEIM exposure, as seen below.

*Respondent: ...at first...I thought that’s how it should be, but then obviously as I got older...and I was able to actually have sex and...have someone there to go through it with me...I understood that it’s not that simple or easy...and...now as an older person, it just doesn’t sit well with me.*

Throughout the interviews there was equal findings to support the significance of both a healthy and unhealthy personal relationship upon a YP’s resilience to SEIM. However, both types of experience interacted very differently, with healthy relationships being associated with PFs such as self-esteem, empowerment, and good education; while unhealthy relationships are associated with vulnerabilities such as low self-esteem, fears, and a lack of awareness. What was interesting to note was that the influence of these relationship experiences extended many years beyond the end of the relationship. This was evident across four interviews with the participants discussing the ‘seminal’ attachments that had influenced their attitudes towards romance, sexual behaviour, and pornography. This was probably best exemplified by the participant whose healthy relationship taught them how to engage with their BDSM interests in a safe and trusting way, this subsequently put them in a stronger and more resilient position when engaging with this material online in later years. This is also illustrated by the participant below, who discussed how a close friendship led to sexual awakening.
Respondent: I wouldn’t say necessarily dangerous, again, even with a lot of...erm...BDSM porn... because I know somebody who runs it, again, good friend of mine, I don’t know how we became friends before that question comes up! All I know is we’ve been friends for a few years now...great guy, great chap...I think it was over actually Ukip that we met, it is mad how we met... but even on his blogs and all his posts, he keeps like a link that actually...teaches like...the best way to do BDSM is...consensual, keep it consensual, keep it calm, if the partner gets too hurt, in a sense...stop...that’s why the safe words exist.

Interviewer: So even on a blog that’s dedicated to extreme sex...there’s a safety feature?

Respondent: Yeah, I think he’s like one of the only ones that does it.... ’cause BDSM blogs aren’t something I actively seek out mind you...

5.2.6 Resource 6: Technology

The role technology plays in keeping YP protected or vulnerable to the effects of SEIM was a strong, reliable and unsurprising finding given the way the material is hosted. Interestingly there were equal findings of both processes in the interviews, with the technology design and use being discussed by all the participants. It was also the most widely related factor, with a connection to nearly all the other assets and resources, most prominently education, empowerment, community influence and the nature of the material. As a result of these insights it appears, similarly to the nature of the material variable, that technology acts in a mediatory position.

Respondent: Yeah, because most...young people, either way...like...the internet isn’t actually that difficult, a lot of adults make it seem like this difficult thing to grasp. But the young people, they know, they’ve been on the internet for their entire life, mostly, they know how it works.

While many of the characteristics of this finding have been discussed in relation to the other factors, certain processes still deserve further note. First, all the participants discussed how their knowledge and use of technology could limit the amount of accidental exposures, dilute the
significance of subsequent exposures, and also allow them to adapt to greater challenges of this nature in the future.

Respondent: I just...I kind of accept it until it gets to a certain point where it becomes...too strange or too dark, then I’ll just block that...blog and then...any time it shows up, post...put like 'I don’t want to see this...' like for on Tumblr, you can...block certain posts.

Second, although all the participants appeared to imply technological proficiency, nearly all also noted that due to the rate of technological advancement and the nature of the ‘corrupted web’ there was only so much they could do pre-emptively. Several participants went on to note that the majority of the ways they learnt to keep themselves safe happened retrospectively. In fact, only two participants noted proactive motivation to use technology to keep themselves safe prior to initial exposure. In these cases, both participants noted formal education in technology from young ages prior to puberty.

Respondent: It’s more so...I tend to...learn my...like I go out actively seeking out how to do things...it’s...just the way I’m hardwired in life, I like logical stimulation so I go out to find these things, see an issue, then how do I fix issue? And...I found this out like when I was like 11...

Third, the rate of exposure and the subsequent risks of harm appear heavily dependent on how a YP uses online platforms, which in turn seems dependent on factors such as their sexuality, relationship status, and involvements with social minorities. In fact, the participants noted they were more likely to be susceptible to the risks of SEIM than their peers because they spent more time online, and were more likely to be reliant on online platforms for their entertainment and social interactions.

Respondent: ...I think...probably Tumblr and Snapchat are the worst for it...probably because...Snapchat I have heard there’s quite a lot of...I’ve got quite a few like gay friends who are quite horny all the time, so are like,
‘send nudes!’ and popping up trying to be all seductive and…and…objectifying and I’m like, ‘no, go away’…

Fourth and finally, the participants noted that while many of the well-known platforms are designed to limit exposure, many of the other ways that YP interact online do not include these safeguards. The most common example offered by the participants was streaming TV and films where explicit sexual advertisements were often a part of the website. However, participants did note some exceptions to this, such as platforms dedicated to some specific niche media (i.e. fan fiction). In these cases, the community aspect of the platform often appears self-policing and proactive in clearly advertising what each piece of media contains. As noted earlier it seems that when a YP feels in control of their exposure their vulnerabilities appeared to minimise.

*Interviewer: So it’ll have a ‘not suitable for work’ tag or something like that?*

*Respondent: Yeah or there’ll be...it’ll say ‘trigger warning: it’s got this in it’....like even for things like...abusive slurs, if there’s any chance it’s in there...the people on these websites know... ‘yeah, we have to put this in, otherwise we’re not going to get people reading.’*

### 5.2.7 Resource 7: Multiple Accounts

Although clearly a factor of how YP use technology, the role of multiple accounts was felt to be a significant finding because of its distinct resilience process. It refers to having specific accounts on certain platforms to engage with pornographic or risky material. These are removed from a YP’s mainstream accounts and allows them to interact with the material without the worry of corrupting other aspects of their online interactions, such as social networks, tracking data, and/or gaming networks. In this case the periphery risks of SEIM exposure are removed however the risks associated with the impact of SEIM still persist. However, several participants noted that they felt better able to handle incongruent and harmful material if they chose the exposure.
Respondent: But because I’m professional...as we kind of put it right now, I actually use 2 different accounts!

Interviewer: OK.

Respondent: So like to keep it completely separate, so there’s no like...not even slightly any time at all...

Interviewer: So you’re actually able to compartmentalise the different...

Respondent: Like I keep them very separate...

Interviewer: OK.

Respondent: Because I don't want like...my friends or something seeing what I look at because even though it’s not exactly like super terrible material...it’s like, it's still porn!

Furthermore, two participants noted that an account specifically for this purpose allows them to tailor the technology to only expose them to material they wish to see. The participants who made use of this method also made use of other technological safeguards, including blocking software, VPNs, and smart search filters in their other accounts. This factor appears to illustrate the key role of empowerment in the resilience process, and further highlights how factors such as education, experience and awareness can interact with technology to challenge the potential harms associated with SEIM.

Respondent: I know that I’ve had multiple personas online...

Interviewer: Which is quite normal?

Respondent: It’s normal, yeah, I...like...before...I knew I was trans I had about 3 different blogs with different names and...basically different characters to try and figure out...who I was...and then eventually I found one and then deleted those and put them into one.
5.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter set out to answer the research question: how do young LGBTQ+ people perceive their own ability to cope with the potential negative implications of SEIM exposure? Eight assets and seven resources were highlighted, and then discussed in relation to one another, illustrating the complex multi-dimensional protective processes that appear to play a part in SEIM use. In the Discussion Chapter the study sets out to take this a step further, first by reflecting upon some of the additional insights which came out of the findings and then discussing them in relation to the previous literature.
CHAPTER 6 : Reflections 2

The second of the brief reflective chapters seeks to link the findings and the discussion by continuing to account for the evolving nature of the research project. It does this by acknowledging my own reflections upon the interview process and the analysis. Again, the objective of this chapter is transparency and a need to highlight some of the key influencing factors that played a decisive role in how the data was interpreted.

6.1 Researcher Reflexivity

A researcher’s perspective is inherently involved in how a research project takes shape, and while some research studies may try to limit this in an attempt to remove bias, Malterud (2001) writes: "Preconceptions are not the same as bias, unless the researcher fails to mention them" (p. 484). The following chapter seeks to acknowledge my preconceptions in an attempt to maintain trustworthiness.

This research project set out to honour the perspective of YP dealing with a modern risk that was known to affect their wellbeing. Its origin came out of my years of volunteering at Childline and a postgraduate degree in the Psychology of Education, both of which taught me the importance of considering a YP’s empowerment and education in the design of interventions. However, the reflective process of this study forced me to consider some of the wider influences that played a large part in why this particular risk was chosen to focus upon, and why accounting for the perspective of YP was so important to me.

"A researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate
The first question seems the easiest to answer; prior to a focus on psychology and education, my background was in multimedia design and it was here that I first developed a fascination with the concepts of an online culture. In particular I was interested in how the Internet provided social opportunities that the offline world did not. While I never pursued this curiosity beyond my undergraduate degree, the thought process sat with me up until I started volunteering at Childline and experienced the way online interactions were able to support and influence YP. However, while there, I also noted significant trends in the support we were asked to offer, most prominently this appeared to focus around the mental health ramifications of unhealthy romantic relationships and risky sexual behaviour. At this time, it seemed to me that a lot of the distress that the YP were discussing came from fear and ignorance, but also a feeling that they lacked the ability to influence their own world. Subsequently, when I was conceiving this research project it was of paramount importance that I not only created a project that nurtured the perspective of YP, but which also informed us how best to educate and support them with their sexual education.

These principles reflected upon the design of this study in many ways, but an important example was the choice to make use of semi-structured interviews so that I could adapt to the knowledge, experiences, and reflections of the participants. However, perhaps naively, I wasn’t prepared for how much the interview process would educate me, and how much this would then reflect upon subsequent interviews and the analysis. This was most prominent in my understanding and approach to certain media platforms, web comics, fan fiction, online sexual communities, and even specific online and niche media terminology. In fact, upon reflection I feel like the first few interviews didn’t generate as many rich insights because I adhered too strongly to an interview schedule that reflected my own understanding of modern technology and not a YP’s. The simplest example
being that I initially focused too heavily on what I perceived to be the prominent social networks, however in large part due to that prominence, they appeared ‘unfashionable’ to the participants and this line of enquiry was not at all relevant to the investigation. As the interview process developed, I incorporated more of a focus on the platforms that previous participants recommended, interestingly these focused on creative outlets and micro communities based upon specific interests.

As noted previously, the extended timeline of the research study led me to conduct the literature review prior to the analysis. This had several ramifications which have been reflected upon throughout the study as they have become relevant. However, it also led me to have some expectations which appear to have influenced how I approached the analysis. For example, I felt strongly that I would be able to identify clear resilience processes, as discussed by the Fergus and Zimmerman study (2005). As a result, I approached the data with this in mind and sought out the variables that appeared to influence the potential risk trajectory, initially finding ten assets and eight resources. However, although most were purely protective in nature, or at the very least had strong inclinations of protective features, three variables were purely identified as increasing a YP’s vulnerability: low self-esteem, a lack of awareness of SEIM, and bad education. They were not included in the findings because they did not initially appear relevant to a study that set out to explore protective processes. Upon reflection I think this was a mistake, and it was made because I adhered too strongly to a preconceived notion of resilience and what was meant by the term protection. The literature had shaped my perspective to expect a series of variables that exist upon continuums and act in linear and logical ways. So, it does not feel as though I initially gave these three factors the respect that they were due. It was after I was challenged to defend my thought process during the coherence checks that I saw the error in my perspective, and realised that it was not just an issue of my expectations, but also the emotional journey I had been on with this research that cultivated some stubbornness. Simply put, for this research to defeat all the challenges it faced I had to be strong willed in my beliefs, and although this helped the
research cope, it also meant I was not as open to inductive findings as I could have been. This has been addressed within the Discussion Chapter, whereby new insights into the findings are acknowledged, resilience theory is re-examined from an enlightened perspective, and the limitations of the overall study are further reviewed.
CHAPTER 7 : Discussion

The primary focus of this chapter is to address any gaps in the knowledge base following the literature review. To do this, the chapter will first consider what aspects of SEIM use appears unique to LGBTQ+ YP, before reflecting upon whether the adolescent resilience models are well suited to interpreting these findings. Following the deficiencies highlighted within this framework, the chapter will go on to discuss other conceptualisations of resilience before acknowledging the strengths and limitations of this piece of research. The chapter will conclude by making recommendations for future research.

7.1 Unique to an LGBTQ+ Identity

The study set out to find out how young LGBTQ+ people keep themselves safe from the potential harms of SEIM, however there were also many valuable insights into this group’s perception of online risk, reactions to heteronormative culture, attitudes towards self-generated material, and their experiences of secondary and vicarious trauma. The following sections seek to expand upon these insights and discuss them in relation to recent literature. This sets the foundation from which the second part of the chapter considers the viability of the different conceptualisations of resilience, i.e. how valuable they are at helping us understand how young LGBTQ+ people respond to SEIM.

7.1.1 Perceptions of SEIM and Risk

Every participant of this study discussed the frequency of their SEIM exposure, and while one presented differently, the rest discussed routine interactions that often occurred over hours, several times a day. Interestingly, the nature of these exposures appeared to be perceived
distinctively depending on the nature of the material, the type of media, and the outcome of the exposure. This resonates with a study by Willoughby and Busby (2016) which found that factors such as gender, religious attendance, relationship status and patterns of pornography use, can affect how someone perceives sexual media. So far, there does not appear to be a study that has considered how the variations of sexual and gender identity may alter the course of this discussion. This was important to reflect upon because it became clear that the participants did not necessarily agree with what should be classified as sexual, explicit, or harmful. For example, one participant noted that he regularly interacted with extreme sexual material for his own pleasure, but actually perceived the way sexual attitudes and behaviours were treated on Snapchat to be vastly more harmful. As seen in the quote below, the participant went on to discuss the sexual aggressive behaviour of ‘gay teen culture’ and noted several consequences, including it having an effect upon his social behaviour, anxiety in school, and body image. In this case, the harms associated with pornography were known, and because of that the participant appeared to feel protected against them. However, he noted that he was not prepared for his experiences with sexuality on social networks, and this appears to have had more significant consequences (Moran, Salerno, & Wade, 2018). As noted throughout this study there is presently very little literature on the different ways SEIM can exist across modern platforms, however this example indicates that the material itself may not be the greater concern, but instead it is the attitudes and culture that surround it which may be worth investigating. The effects of these interactions across the different formats will be discussed further down in relation to secondary trauma.

Respondent: ...I think...probably Tumblr and Snapchat are the worst for it...probably because...Snapchat I have heard there’s quite a lot of...I’ve got quite a few like gay friends who are quite horny all the time, so are like, ‘send nudes!’ and popping up trying to be all seductive and...and...objectifying and I’m like, ‘no, go away! ‘Cause I don’t like you!’

Another example of variations in the perceptions of SEIM, was the participant who discussed interacting with pornographic webcomics first
thing every day. In their opinion, while there were some consequences to this behaviour, because they were prone to being significantly late for school, the motivation, and therefore the harm, came from the storyline and not the SEIM. In fact, the participant did not perceive the media to be of any risk, only the habit. Although this example discusses a behaviour and consequence not directly related to an LGBTQ+ identity, its prominence within the youth culture makes it worthy of discussion. As noted in the literature review there is a considerable history of research upon the addictive properties of sexual behaviour and pornographic consumption, and in the last decade this has expanded to consider the role of SEIM (Grubbs et al., 2015; Sirianni & Vishwanath, 2016). However, not much is known about how this applies to adolescents, nor the effects of the different styles of media, i.e. will habitual use be more likely with explicit features, literature, or webcomics?

Previously I noted that one of the participants differed in how they perceived and reacted to SEIM exposure, this participant identified as asexual. Asexual individuals can still experience attraction, but have no sexual feelings or desires. Subsequently, his attitude towards exposure notably differed, as did how he interacted with the material and how he perceived the potential harms and consequences associated with it. Interestingly, like his peers he noted that exposure to explicit material was a daily event, however in his case it was not because he sought it out, and he noted only neutral or negative experiences. His perspective offered an insight into the wider representations of SEIM than his peers, and this appeared to be because he felt more sensitive to the harms of ‘casual’ exposure due to his lack of sexual desires or interest. The participant offered a good example of this in the form of routinely illegally streaming television shows from abroad. To do this the participant accessed sites that hosted the streaming links, however, in order to access this safe material more often than not you have to engage with an advert for 20 seconds or more. This is a fairly common advertising strategy that YouTube makes use of, however due to the fact the illegal hosting sites are abroad and unofficial, the adverts appear to be always related to pornography, ‘legal’ drugs, or prostitution.
websites (Burghart, 2018; Ruberg, 2016). When discussing the consequences of these experiences the participant noted that it made him feel awkward and generally distressed. He also went on to note that they appeared to present a very unhealthy depiction of women and the role sex has in global society, which in the past had evoked significant fear in him (Klaassen & Peter, 2015). As noted early on in the chapter the participant noted that these exposures had their greatest effect when he first started streaming, and that now he had some experience with it he felt somewhat inoculated against it.

This section sought to illustrate just how much young LGBTQ+ people differ in how they perceive SEIM. This not only seems to be true upon recollection, but also at the time of the initial and subsequent exposures. While this observation does not contradict the present literature, it does highlight that SEIM exposure is by no means a linear process and seems just as susceptible to individual variables as the resilience processes, which will be discussed further on in the chapter. Therefore, perhaps how someone responds to SEIM should be perceived as more of a complex matrix, whereby SEIM exposure and a YP’s resilience to it are seen within a wider context.

7.1.2 **Heteronormative Sexual Culture**

An important theme in the findings was how much the LGBTQ+ YP felt in opposition to their heteronormative peers. It was touched upon in general topics such as how sexuality is portrayed in advertisements and the history of sexual legislation. However specifically, and perhaps more significantly, in regards to the risks associated with SEIM and how sexual attitudes and behaviours exist on social networks. It was also heavily associated with how sexual education is taught in schools, and the ethical violations within the pornography industries. While much of this discord would appear logical, it would not necessarily be associated with YP. It is also worth noting that there exists very little literature on the subject and so although the theme was suspected it has not been substantiated until now. The following section
discusses how this factored into sexual education, due to its prominence within the interviews, and the literature regarding congruence and inherited sexual scripts.

As noted previously, one of central discussion points within the interviews related to education, and how the risks of SEIM have been communicated to the participants from their schooling. Unsurprisingly, a consistent criticism of the teaching was that it was strictly heteronormative in nature. This meant that it focused on sexual behaviour between a man and a woman, included strict gender roles, and even included gendered fears, such as ‘only women have to deal with abuse’ and ‘all men are predators with only one thing on their mind’. It appears that this has had a number of effects upon the participants of this study, which in their perspectives made them more vulnerable to harm. According to the participants, these experiences left them feeling confused, de-valued, and uneducated because it was incongruent with their own sense of self, which in turn motivated them to seek out confirmation of their identity through the Internet (Albright, 2008; DeHaan et al., 2013). However, because they did this without guidance and support, many participants appeared to have distressing experiences in their journey of self-discovery. In fact, several participants hinted that early on in their sexual awakening they deliberately exposed themselves to “straight people porn” to understand what they weren’t, and get a sense of what they were missing. These findings support the earlier work of Subrahmanyan and Greenfield (2008) that noted that YP engage with this material to develop and explore their constantly evolving sexual self. One explanation for this process is proffered by sexual script theory and is discussed below.

While originally a social learning approach to understanding sexual behaviour, sexual script theory transformed into a social constructionist framework under the influence of feminism, gay and lesbian studies, self-psychology, and new developments in sexual theory across cultures. It suggests that our sexual behaviours are the result of our interactions with sexual templates/guides in childhood and early adolescents (Berger, Simon,
These influences are thought to originate from cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts, and are heavily impacted by the stages of development and sexual media (Štulhofer, Buško, & Landripet, 2010; Wiederman, 2015). These scripts help us develop a set of attitudes which form our sexual self, a belief system about how someone should behave, and how our sexual self may be perceived by others. According to Arrington-Sanders and colleagues (2015) SEIM exposure during critical periods of development, “where sexual patterns and practices are first learned and reinforced” (p.600), may lead to greater engagement and investment in the viewed behaviours. This would appear to explain why adolescents who experience SEIM earlier on in their development are more than likely to engage in sexual behaviour within two years of exposure, compared to those who are exposed later on (Brown & L’Engle, 2009; Peter & Valkenburg, 2009, 2016). Additionally this group are also much more likely to engage in oral and anal sex, compared to their peers who engaged with SEIM later on in their sexual development (Peter & Valkenburg, 2014; van Oosten, 2016).

While there appears to be little literature on the role of non-heteronormative SEIM derived sexual scripts, a study by Arrington-Sanders and colleagues (2015) investigated the role of SEIM in the sexual development of same-sex attracted black adolescent males. They found that this group principally made use of SEIM as a tool of education to learn about sexual organs and their function, the mechanisms of same gender sex, and negotiate their own sexual identity. However, they also noted secondary motivations, such as:

- To determine their readiness for sexual activity.
- To learn about sexual performance, and their roles and responsibilities.
- To understand how sex should feel or not feel.
Presently there appears to be very little literature on the influence of incongruent sexual performance scripts, and yet it was something hinted at in all the interviews. In particular it was identified in the following variables: lack of an awareness of SEIM, low self-esteem, and the role of bad education. While these findings were noted as a valuable insight into the complexity of resilience processes, they were not referenced in the earlier chapters because they lacked any protective attributes. Instead they will be discussed in greater detail later on in relation to the previous literature on resilience theory. However, the presence of these variables would appear to indicate the significant role of the wider heteronormative context upon the attitudes and actions of LGBTQ+ YP towards SEIM.

7.1.3 Self-Generated Material and Counter Culture

One of the most reliable discussion points within the interviews was the role of self-generated material within an online existence. This initially focused upon Snapchat and sexually explicit selfies, as it appeared to be the most prominent format for potential risk. This is suspected to be because the harms associated with it are presently well discussed throughout the general media (Moran et al., 2018) and the idea of having ‘your selfies leaked’ is a fear shared by all the participants. However, the most poignant finding turned out to be the positive role of fan fiction, online comics, and microblogs which appeared to hold significant prominence because of their ability to produce fair representation of sexual and gender identities. Furthermore, this ethos appears to apply not only to the media, but also how it is hosted and the communities it fosters; i.e. the majority of the media hosted upon these platforms adhere to a set of ‘regulations’ that do not restrict expression, but promote awareness and respect. In fact, the majority of these platforms appear to be policed by the community itself, with members making sure that all the material clearly states what it contains, what it might trigger, and where it has come from. Many of the participants of this study noted their own role within these platforms and the value of the community aspect to their general wellbeing. According to them it would appear that due to the niche nature of this media and the platforms which host it, YP are able to experience sexual representations that not only appeal
to their identities, but also allow them to explore new concepts in relative safety and with the support of a likeminded group. Furthermore, it appears that due to the security and transparency measures these platforms make use of, there is less of a chance of unwanted SEIM exposure. It is worth noting that while there is a significant degree of literature on the history of pornographic comics, and some on the psychological impact of them in recent decades, there is very little which considers the role NSFW webcomics have upon LGBTQ+ YP (Miller, 2019; Wood, 2015).

While there is little literature on the way sexual attitudes and behaviours exist on the various different online platforms, some studies have found some indicative findings that may shed a light on some of the participants’ experiences, such as a study by Moran and colleagues (2018) which looked at Snapchat as a new-age tool for sexual access. They unsurprisingly found that while men were more likely to use the app to search out a mate and request naked images, women were predicted to be more likely to share images with a partner and continue to do so to keep them interested. This would appear to align with the experiences of the participant who noted the sexual aggressive demands he received for sexual images while on this app, from other gay men. It also aligns with another participant’s experience of sharing images with her lesbian partner and their friends. Although in this case the implication was that the images were not sexual and were instead more related to beauty and self-esteem, and subsequently resulted in a positive sense of empowerment. However, the study by Moran and colleagues (2018) is rather limited in its findings, and does not consider the interplay of gender and sexuality. As a result, the use of Snapchat as a medium of SEIM and as a tool of sexual expression between sexual identities appears uncorroborated at present.

7.1.4 Vicarious Risk and Secondary Trauma

During the analysis it became clear that my previous understanding of the potential risks associated with SEIM was not sufficient for this population group. There were in fact many secondary and vicarious risks that previous
literature had not led me to expect (Doornwaard, Bickham, Rich, ter Bogt, & van den Eijnden, 2015; Peter & Valkenburg, 2010, 2014). This, I suspect, is not because of a fault in previous SEIM research, but instead because of the lack of a focus upon LGBTQ+ YP, as many of these circumstances appear unique to this group.

The term ‘secondary risk’ refers to situations that are indirectly associated with online sexual material but may be a direct consequence of it. For example, the YP whose coming out experience was triggered by a family member accessing their search history, or the YP whose relationship ended due to online infidelity. The relationship between SEIM and coming out was a particularly prominent theme that came up in most of the interviews. While it was never the intention of this research to explore first disclosure experiences, it is interesting to see how much the participants associated it with SEIM. This appeared to be for one of two reasons, first because being caught to interact with this material could lead to forced exposure, and second because the material appears to be able to facilitate self-acceptance, and allow young LGBTQ+ people to model coming out to people in the ‘real world’. Although the connection was unexpected, it is not surprising given how many of the participants referenced a type of sexualised media that is respectful of the various sexual and gender identities, and appears to often incorporate social platforms. As noted by Legate and colleagues (2012), LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to be open about their gender and sexual identities in environments that they perceive to be autonomously supportive. From what the participants have discussed it appears that although these platforms showcase explicit content, they are also free of discrimination and harassment and promote acceptance and inclusivity. As a result, it makes sense why these environments might support people to explore not only their sexual self, but also allow them to reconnoitre what coming out might be like (D’Augelli, 2002; Juster et al., 2013). The growing body of literature on coming out suggests that revealing the reality of your identity promotes self-integration and personal empowerment, and is a sign of self and social acceptance (Corrigan & Matthew, 2003; Legate, Ryan, & Rogge, 2017). In fact, positive experiences with social and family
networks has been shown to act as a PF against many negative health outcomes (Rothman et al., 2012; Vaughan and Waehler, 2009), while negative reactions have been associated with elevated levels of internalised sexual stigma (ISS).

The concept of vicarious risk was also reflected upon by many of the participants. In some cases, this directly related to SEIM and referred to fears about another’s habitual use of the media, and/or someone in the participant’s life who perpetrated unhealthy sexual scripts that they had learnt from this material. However, the participants mostly discussed their concern for other members of the Q42 group, and how explicit material might affect their wellbeing. While these fears reflected their own thoughts and feelings about their own SEIM use, it seems significant that there was a ‘collective concern’ for one another in this regard, not just because of SEIM, but also because of anything connected to sexual behaviour and identity. This appears to align with the previous literature which noted that LGBTQ+ individuals are hyper aware of the negative sexual stereotypes, and thus anticipate the impact of these stigmas on others (Baiocco et al., 2016; D’Emilio, 1986). Furthermore, it seems that because the participants are collectively developing an understanding of their sexual selves, it has created a close bond whereby the experiences of one reflect upon the group. The potential second-hand experience of risk was most notable in relation to online sexualised behaviour, in particular, sharing naked selfies on Snapchat, sexual activity with strangers via webcam, and meeting up with people that they had met online. It also became clear that these risks had a reciprocal role within the group, with several sharing horror stories that their friends had experienced, as if it were their own history. While this initially might appear as though it places the participants in a more vulnerable role, and it clearly can, it was also noted to have a protective capacity as it educated the participants about online threats (Doring, 2009).
7.1.5 Ethical and Moral Insights

One of the more subtle, yet pervasive, themes that came out of the findings was how young LGBTQ+ people felt towards the pornography industry and their awareness of how society views sexual media, sexual behaviour and fetishes. Although previous literature had led me to suspect that the topic might be touched upon (Attwood, 2006; Goldbach & Gibbs, 2015), it hadn’t prepared me for the fervour within the participants’ opinions. In particular they referenced the moral issues of certain pornography narratives, the issues with age-verifying the performers, cultural insensitivity, and the fetishization of different genders, sexualities, and minorities. While it was a strong theme, and certainly interesting when coupled with some of the other insights, it didn’t directly relate to the research question and so was not incorporated into the Findings Chapter. However, it is worth reflecting upon because it aids our understanding of how young LGBTQ+ people perceive the context of their exposure and the implications of interacting with this industry. Interestingly, being aware of these factors appears to dissuade habitual SEIM use from forming, however further research is required to substantiate this insight.

The most common topic was the role of pornography narratives, in particular the role that these had in educating the sexual expectations of young LGBTQ+ people. The participants noted the aggressive and dominating role of masculinity, the subordinate role of femininity, and the storylines which often involved subjugation, coercion, and/or assault (Hald & Štulhofer, 2016; Štulhofer et al., 2010). It appears that while the participants could identify the fictional nature of these narratives, there was an awareness that constant interactions with the material could lead to perpetuation and possible dependency. This aligns with the previously discussed Social Cognitive Theory Model of media attendance (Bandura, 1991), and possibly further validates it as a model for understanding the relationship between media and modelled behaviour. In fact, the participants seemed to imply that these narratives affected their judgement and could
lead to them no longer being able to accurately judge their preferences in the context of other sexual experiences (LaRose et al., 2003).

*Respondent:Porn is…it’s fiction, that’s what it is, it is pleasurable fiction that was designed…like I enjoy it as a queer, yeah, I’m non-binary, but you know, female bodies…I still enjoy it and I know lots of women who enjoy it and I know lots of gay men who enjoy it and lots of queer and straight women who enjoy it, and I know lots of non-binary people who enjoy it, but it was definitely designed for straight cis men.*

An interesting observation made by two participants was that because of the way that the material was hosted on certain websites, such as PornHub or Redtube, it was impossible to know the context of the media (Ruberg, 2016). In particular they noted how impossible it is to know how old the participants were and/or how willing they were to genuinely perform, especially when you consider the narratives which this material often perpetuates. As noted in the previous paragraph, popular narratives often include an element of conquest, such as blackmail, and participants implied that because they couldn’t always understand how fictional the material was, there was an element of them which always believed they were somehow participating in something real by viewing it. Both participants noted their horror at this and discussed how it led to significant distress and concern for the wider community (Egan & Parmar, 2013). However, their awareness of this observation was noted to act in a protective capacity, and meant that they could avoid material with these narratives. It was also interesting to note that while the participants felt it was a reliable issue within heteronormative pornography, in regards to LGBTQ+ material it was most often found with transsexual focused media (Heck et al., 2015). This also played a part in their concern that SEIM often included the fetishization of different minorities, sexualities and genders.

*Respondent: I think…obviously the big one, porn is fiction, you do not have to act like that and no one else does either, that’s the big one for me…be…very wary of what kind of porn you’re watching because obviously some of it is very ethically wrong…there is…I’m not like…there are a lot of
sex workers and porn stars who really enjoy their job and do it because they like having sex and they found a way to make money off it and go them, but obviously there are...

Interviewer: The other side.

Respondent: The other side of it where there is non-consensual stuff, there are...literal children and teenagers and it's very important to...stay away from that stuff.

Another notable observation that the participants made was that there presently appears to be a movement within the exhibition sites, such asPornHub, to highlight culturally insensitive sexual material (Pallotta-Chiarolli & Rajkhowa, 2017). This, and the clear fetishization of these cultures, was felt to influence negative attitudes and behaviours, and one participant noted the concern that this was not just a consequence of political attitudes, but might actually be fuelling them as well. Specifically, the participants noted the present fashion to include hijab wearing pornography actors in some form of subjugation (Byers, 1996). While this was the only culture to be reflected upon explicitly, others were also hinted at. Although not a strong observation, the fact it was a discussion point highlights the depth of social consideration the participants appear to have, and that plays a part in the protective nature of their SEIM awareness.

Respondent: ...another issue I have with porn is like the fetishization of trans people in porn and the porn industries... whole shemale... and chicks with dicks sort of thing...that...those are like literally names of categories...and...cis people will tend to consume this porn as a way to outlet their fetishization of trans people... and that really doesn’t sit well with me, I don’t think that’s an OK thing to do.

The final observation to make is one hinted at in all the paragraphs above: the fetishization of genders, sexualities, and minorities. This was an extremely strong theme noted by all the participants, even by the one participant who did not wish to go into this subject further. In particular, the participants reflected upon the fetishization of their own identities, and how this played into their own SEIM use and wider lives. However, there was
also some consideration for identities not included in this particular participant group. Most commonly referenced was the heteronormative focus on lesbian sexual behaviour (Rogala & Tydén, 2003), the hyper masculinity narratives found in gay material (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015), and the dehumanising depiction of trans people in all the material focused upon them. Once more the participants noted the unhealthy education that this gave to people such as them, but also how it negatively affected their self-esteem, general community engagement, and enhanced relational fears (Lo & Wei, 2002). Interestingly, this was also one of the few themes where the participants discussed how their identities were being presented to their heteronormative peers (Landripet & Štulhofer, 2015). In particular, two participants noted how depictions of lesbian sexual behaviour negatively educated straight men and led to social expectations and harassment.

Respondent: Yes…I know for a fact that it’s treated by some as fact... ’cause I’ve had plenty guys...try and use certain tricks on me... which... don’t... work!

The above section sought to acknowledge and reflect upon the ethical and moral awareness of the participants, in regards to SEIM exposure and use. While it goes beyond the scope of this study to compare these insights to the participants’ heteronormative peers, I think it’s fair to note that due to sexual and gender sensitivity, LGBTQ+ YP are more than likely to have a greater sense of ethical awareness and empowerment towards SEIM. While this awareness was often seen to focus on negative insights, it appears to lead to protective processes whereby the participants use this awareness to not only avoid certain material, but also reduce the impact of the narratives within the material that they do engage with.
7.2 Adolescent Models of Resilience

The following sections seek to discuss the findings in relation to resilience theory, and the various different definitions and conceptualisations that exist within the literature. First, it will cast a critical lens over the adolescent resilience models that informed the coding manual, before retrospectively considering the definition of resilience that the study initially adhered to. The final section briefly applies the findings to various other conceptualisations of resilience, with the aim being to identify alternative explanations for the outcomes.

7.2.1 Adolescent Resilience Models

In the literature review I introduced several models of adolescent resilience which have been used historically to understand how YP adapt to risk. They were a valuable resource that influenced how I approached the methodology, and because they showed clear processes they acted as the basis of the coding manual. However, as discussed in the reflective chapters, the literature review was conducted prior to the analysis and so the appropriateness of these models for this client group was previously unknown. This section seeks to reflect upon how informative these templates were and acknowledge the ways that adherence to them may have hindered the research.

7.2.1.1 The Protective Models of Resilience

As illustrated in Figure 3.0, a protective model of resilience is believed to occur when protective assets or resources moderate or reduce the effect of the risk on negative outcomes. According to the literature this can occur in several ways and so the protective-stabilisation and protective-reactive sub-models were developed. Within the illustration below the dotted lines demonstrate the potential risk trajectory, while the solid lines show how the PFs intercede to minimise or neutralise the effect.
Figure 3.0: An illustration showing the findings in relation to the protective models of resilience
Within a protective-stabilisation model, a PF neutralises the effect of a risk and results in no consequence. Historically this process has been hard to identify because it is hard to examine a process with no outcome (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). This has been reflected in the findings with few participants discussing PFs that have eliminated risk altogether. One explanation for this might be the ethos that it is impossible to eliminate all the risks associated with SEIM, this was well discussed by the participants of the study. However, this is not to say that there were no factors that appeared to neutralise the potential harmful effects of SEIM, only that the association is questionable. Three factors appeared to act in a way that could be associated with the description of the protective-stabilisation process: empowerment, technology, and a lack of attraction.

Respondent: Yeah, essentially, but weirdly enough it’s all heterosexual…it’s never...homosexual porn, it’s always heterosexual...from pirated websites, Tumblr...

Interviewer: What’s that like for you then?

Respondent: It doesn’t really...it has no effect on me to be honest...like it doesn’t raise any feeling or anything like that...because...I don’t know...that’s not for me.

As seen in the quote above, one participant noted how their lack of interest in heteronormative pornography meant that it had no harmful effect upon them. Although a clear finding, it was contradicted by the majority of the other participants, who noted the substantial harms they received from the harmful gender and sexual representations found in this material. Several theories could explain this contradiction, for example the participant was the oldest, and so could be the most comfortable in their sexuality, or the most inoculated to the harms of incongruence due to their experience with harmful exposure (Legate et al., 2017).

The role of technology also had conflicting findings, with two participants stalwartly defending its ability to block any potential risk, while the others felt that nothing could reduce the potential harms of an online existence
completely. However, the two participants were technologically proficient and this appeared to be a large part of their identity, as such, perhaps their vehemence was due to an unwillingness to let go of their role within the Q42 group. When probed about the nature of their technological prowess, both referenced only certain platforms and types of media and seemed to avoid discussing unexpected exposure and pornographic advertising. On the whole, the participants appeared to believe that technology can moderate the potential negative influences of SEIM, but it does not yet appear certain whether this applies to all forms of media equally (Doornwaard et al., 2015). This is because the participants appeared to suggest that the influence of technology appears to differ not only across media platforms, but also across social networks. Perhaps suggesting that the technological culture differs in these places as well (Anderson, 2005; Snapp et al., 2015).

Within a protective-reactive model a PF diminishes, but does not completely remove the relationship between a risk and an outcome. Naturally, this process was observed across the majority of the interviews, with the participants highlighting eight variables that they felt reduced the potential harms associated with SEIM exposure, but that did not remove the potential risk completely. Four assets (fear, personal experience, empowerment, and awareness) and four resources (technology, community influence, the experience of others, and personal relationships) appeared to align with the protective-reactive template.

It is hard to criticise this particular model because it describes the process that the research set out to document, i.e. what factors do YP make use of to keep themselves safe from the potential harms associated with SEIM? Especially when you consider that nearly universally the participants acknowledged that it would be impossible to eliminate all the potential risks associated with any online interaction. Instead it is valuable to reflect upon how they discussed the diminishing effect of these variables. For example, nearly all the previously identified variables had no role in the initial SEIM exposure, instead their significance appears to accumulate with time and
further exposures. The exception to this was fear, which as shown in the
quote below, appeared to have its strongest effect initially and then reduces
as exposure repeats.

Respondent: ...I...could tell you that when I was younger it used to make me
very uncomfortable for it to just appear like that, ‘cause I mostly used my
computer and stuff around my parents and if it had just come up, I would
just be like so terrified that they think I’d been looking at something I
shouldn’t be...as I’ve got older, it’s been less of an issue for me....I can just
comfortably say, ‘oh, that’s just a thing that happens, it just came up,’ and
go through it. I feel like for younger people it’s a little more influenced...

As previously indicated, a significant weakness of this model is that it lacks
insight into the long-term consequences of risk and resilience; i.e. does the
protective process continue with age or exposure? This was particularly
limiting given how often the chronological aspects of a protective process
were discussed by the participants. A good example of this is found in how
the participants discussed the educational role of the resources, such as
community influence, the experience of others, and personal relationships.
In particular, how social memes, horror stories, and others positive
experiences helped them handle their initial SEIM exposure and the
subsequent interactions with this material (Craig et al., 2015; Snapp et al.,
2015). They went on to note that they believed that the value of these factors
was continuous, and that they benefited from the moderating effect, so long
as they retained memory of the education, and kept up to date with the
different sources of influence (DeHaan et al., 2013; Doring, 2009).
However, this is not accounted for by the protective model, and so while it
does offer an interesting way to view the immediate resilience response, it is
too simplistic and linear to account for some of the dimensional and
individual aspects seen within the findings.
7.2.1.2 The Compensatory Model of Resilience

Within the compensatory model of resilience, a PF *counteracts* the risk factor in a direct manner, which in turn mitigates the expected outcome of the risk. It differs from the protective models in that the PF originates purely from an alien origin and is not directly linked to the risk factor (Zimmerman et al., 2013b). Figure 3.1 illustrates this process and highlights ten variables that appeared to act in this manner.
Figure 3.1: An illustration showing the findings in relation to the compensatory model of resilience.

The Compensatory Model Findings

Compensatory Factors

Assets
1. Attraction
2. Lack of Attraction
3. Humour
4. Empowerment
5. Personal Experience

Resources
1. Personal (Direct) Influence
2. Community Influence
3. Technology
4. Experience of Others

Vulnerability Factors
1. Nature of the Material
As with the protective model, the compensatory model does little to explain the processes discussed in the findings. Appearing once more to be a simplistic illustration of a reactive process, with little acknowledgement of the long-term effects, or consideration of the dynamic interactions of various variables. However, the broad conceptualisation meant that the analysis was able to identify several variables that appeared to act in this manner, and interestingly, their role appears to develop with repeated exposure. The variables all relate to the participants’ present beliefs and future behaviours, and seemed to only be present after the initial exposure. In fact, the findings seem to indicate that YP adapt and develop compensatory processes to restrict repeated exposure to material that they identify as harmful; factors such as technology and community influence were most often discussed in this way (Zimmerman et al., 2013b). It also appears that they develop compensatory factors to reduce the risk associated with prolonged interactions based on their sexual preferences (Mustanski et al., 2011). Intrinsic factors such as humour, empowerment and attraction were found to be the most significant features involved in this process.

The nature of an LGBTQ+ identity was also seen to impact many of the factors involved in the compensatory process. This was most prominent with the following variables: empowerment, attraction, lack of attraction, personal influences, and community influences. Participants discussed how their sexual and gender identities made a significant impact on their interactions with SEIM and as a consequence, also on the ways they protect themselves from harmful and distressing experiences (Lingiardi, Nardelli, & Drescher, 2015; Meyer, 2015). For example, several participants discussed how their initial exposure to heteronormative pornography was distressing because it occurred at a point where they were not assured in their identities, it therefore led to greater confusion and stress. However, upon understanding themselves better they found that knowing what they found attractive, and what they didn’t, empowered them to take control of their exposure. Subsequently empowering them in their choices, but also helping them challenge the unhealthy messages that incongruent material was presenting (van Oosten, 2016). While the participants appeared not to feel
that this eradicated the potential risks of SEIM completely, they did note that it reduced the overall impact suggesting a compensatory process.

It is worth noting that an inherent issue exists within the model which limited the analysis and potentially weakened its validity. This refers to the fact that within the compensatory model a PF must not directly relate to the risk. However, it isn’t always easy to identify what classifies as a direct relation, especially when you consider the various different incarnations of SEIM and the myriad of risks associated with it. As a result, some of the variables have a more precarious link to the compensatory process than others. For example, while a YP’s ability to find humour in SEIM exposure is a clear indirect protective factor, their attraction to the material appears vaguely direct. However, this variable was included because it appears to relate to the YP’s sexual identity, which although associated with SEIM use, is not necessarily directly correlated. In summation, this model does offer some valuable insights into the evolving nature of resilience and how a variable can interact to offset a potential risk, but again, it is simplistic and was not easily applied to the participants’ experiences due to issues within its conceptualisation.

7.2.1.3 *The Challenge Model of Resilience*

Of all the resilience templates discussed in the literature review, the challenge model would appear to be the most applicable to this population group because it is inherently based around how an individual perceives a risk. Within this perspective, PFs and VFs are considered as the same variable, and how they are interpreted is dependent upon the levels of risk exposure and the subsequent outcomes. The risk is assessed in terms of low, medium or high levels, with medium being considered to be the ideal set of circumstances to promote resilience (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Figure 3.2 illustrates this model and clearly notes the variables that were found to play a part in the process. Although this model perceives PFs and VFs to be the same variable, they were separated in the figure to highlight how they
appeared to interact from the participants’ perspectives. Several factors exist in both categories to show the continuum they appear to be upon.

*Figure 3.2*: An illustration showing the findings in relation to the challenge model of resilience
Following the findings of the study, an innate weakness appears to occur in how the model frames and measures risk, i.e. is it the rate, quantity, or significance of the risk exposure that defines the level? This isn’t clear within the literature and as such it was hard to reflect upon within the analysis (Zimmerman et al., 2013b). However, there were clear signs within all the interviews that YP do not perceive SEIM exposure to be purely negative, and that they see exposure to harmful sexual depictions as an opportunity to develop new skills and knowledge. In fact, of all the processes discussed, this conceptualisation appears to be the most applicable because it shows a process of adaptability towards risk, as well as the individuality of risk exposure.

An example of which is the suggestion that low risk exposure has the potential for significant long-term harm due to the pervasiveness of consistent exposure to certain types of SEIM, such as pornographic advertisements, heteronormative sexual messages, and sexualised ‘childhood’ media. In this context low risk refers to a low rate of ‘significant’ SEIM exposure. Participants discussed feeling overwhelmed by depictions that presented a version of sexuality incongruent with their identities. However, they once more noted that they were more sensitive to these messages earlier on in their adolescence, a period where their sexual identity was less assured. One participant noted becoming numb to these depictions after a while, however others noted that it still reflected upon their self-esteem and body issues. Although this was not a strong finding, many of the participants discussed the sexual culture of the Internet and the harms associated with it for their social group (Ruberg, 2016), suggesting at a pattern of low risk but with significant negative outcomes which align with this model (Zimmerman et al., 2013b).

While the role of low risk exposure was only tenuously discussed, high risk was a prominent discussion point for the participants, with each interview containing at least one experience of a traumatic incident with SEIM exposure. In these cases, the link between high risk and substantial negative
outcomes appears clear, with the most common discussion points being emotional distress, receipt of unhealthy sexual messages, body dysmorphia, and psychological trauma (Burns & Mahalik, 2008; Rothman, Kaczmarsky, Burke, Jansen, & Baughman, 2015). As to what defines high risk for YP it appears clear that it is not frequency of exposure, although that was associated with habitual use by four participants. Instead it appears to refer to the significance of the exposure, most commonly this appeared to refer to the initial exposure to graphic sexual content, and then each subsequent first encounter with new extreme sexual representations (Peter & Valkenburg, 2014).

As noted in Figure 3.2, many of the identified assets and resources were found to play a part in ‘challenging’ the potential harms associated with exposure, and as expected, many of the PFs and VFs appeared interchangeable in this capacity. In fact, many participants noted how historically understood VFs, such as low self-esteem, acted in a protective manner when coupled with other factors, such as the influence of a romantic partner. What appears clear is that at a certain level of exposure variables interact to influence how a YP responds to SEIM. In fact, throughout the interviews there were clear signs that the participants believed this to be an evolving process, and that with each exposure YP are afforded a greater ability to develop resilience (Gahagan & Colpitts, 2017; Rew & Horner, 2003). The participants even discussed the benefits of distressing experiences on their long-term wellbeing, with several accounting for moments in their past that, although challenging, had presented them with new tools to handle situations in the future. The most common VFs associated with these historic learning scenarios were the influences of a community and the role of bad education. Both of which were highly associated with the participants’ earliest reactions to SEIM and an example can be seen below.

Respondent: …I never really spoke to my friends about porn, or sex, or relationships or...really anything like that...but for me, when I was younger...I used to think that there was something wrong with me because I
didn’t find porn satisfying, it just didn’t really seem appealing to me… I looked at it and it just sort of… I don’t know, it felt like I shouldn’t be looking at it… and for a little while after I got over the initial awkwardness of looking at porn… I sort of felt like I had to be like that… which sort of led to a period in my life where I’m sort of like… thinking that when I have sex, I have to do it exactly like that… but… thankfully once I got down to it… I had someone actually like… guide me through the steps so I was like, ‘oh, OK, this makes more sense!’

In summation, the challenge model appears to be more applicable than the other models at conceptualising the protective process that YP experience in their interactions with SEIM. This appears to be because of how much more it respects the variability of not just risk exposure, but also risk adaption. Yet, it still appears too linear, and there are aspects of SEIM that contradict how the model has been used to explain resilience processes in the past. The findings suggest that this is to do with how resilience develops and responds to risk over time, especially throughout adolescence, and also how it adapts specifically to the different variations of SEIM. What follows is a discussion about how the YP of this study discussed their adaption to the risks associated with SEIM.

7.2.1.4 The Inoculation Process

The term ‘inoculation process’ has been used to describe how individuals who are exposed to incremental risk learn how to cope, and in turn thrive, despite the adversity they face (Oldfield, 2012; Yates et al., 2003). It is often associated with the challenge model and so was referenced in Chapter Two, but did not influence the coding manual because it does not lend itself to a specific framework. However, it was a strong finding of this study, and so would appear to deserve greater acknowledgment than it has thus far received.

The process is based upon the belief that risk exposure can have advantageous results, and as noted previously, this aligns with how the participants saw their exposure to, and interactions with, SEIM. The literature suggests that this process develops through repeated low levels of
risk exposure and this was evidenced in how the participants discussed their reactions to online sexual culture throughout their adolescence (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). A good example is seen below, in which a participant discusses his interactions with ‘porn bots’ (aka basic artificial intelligence software that uses explicit material to further its programmed agenda).

Respondent: It doesn’t bother me because I’ve kind of become desensitised to them... ’cause as I said, I grew up with the internet...and I've watched how these bots have evolved and come to be really...so I’m expecting those, I now know what they’re opening messages look like...I know what their user names are normally like...I know what their profile pictures are normally like...if I come across them, then I come across them.. so be it, there’s not really much I can do to stop them from initially finding me. A lot of what I can do is after they find me, I can report them.

As the literature suggests, and as shown above, the inoculation process can form after repeated low level exposure to SEIM risk, however contrary to the literature it was also found to occur with medium levels as well. Notably, participants discussed distressing moments of exposure that challenged their beliefs and understanding, but in turn forced them to reflect upon the material and make choices about their sexual selves. This could be argued to be the developmental focus that the literature suggests is required for the process to form (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Haase, 2004). However, it is worth noting that each of the medium risk examples proffered by the participants was associated with an experience directly related to their sexual minority identity. While there appears to be evidence that more significant (medium) prolonged risk can also lead to a sense of inoculation, it is worth noting that this finding was identified in LGBTQ+ YP’s relationships with heteronormative SEIM, as such it may not be generalisable. Overall, the inoculation process was most often associated with the assets of empowerment, awareness, and personal experience, which all appeared to significantly reference factors associated with sexual behaviour and an LGBTQ+ identity.
7.3 Resilience Re-Addressed

Within the literature review Luthar and Colleagues’ definition of resilience was offered as the conceptualisation that informed this research. According to them resilience is: “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaption within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar et al., 2015, p.453). The reason for this is that the framework has significant empirical support, perceives variables to be salient and contextually defined, and considers resilience to be innately multidimensional. Furthermore, this conceptualisation has previously been applied to minority youth cultures and was felt to be respectful of the risks and protective processes associated with SEIM. However, this conceptualisation has some limitations which are now more evident following the findings of this study. First, the definition suggests that resilience can only form in the face of great hardship, and yet the participants of this study provided various examples of positive or neutral experiences of SEIM exposure that prompted healthy adaption. For example, various participants discussed how they saw incongruent sexual material as unthreatening because it did not align with their sexual self, and yet it still encouraged them to seek out support via the LGBTQ+ network. Secondly, the definition assumes that resilience must result in positive adaption, and yet several participants discussed how some of their protective behaviours actually appeared to do them greater harm in the long run. Social isolation in response to unwanted sexual attention on social media was one example of this. Furthermore, the findings of the study highlighted that, on occasion, the aim of the adaptive process was a neutral response to risk (i.e. neither positive or negative change following exposure). This was a strong theme within the findings and mostly referred to heteronormative depictions of sexual behaviour that the participants thought of as unavoidable, but which they eventually became inoculated against.

While it appears clear that resilience can be a responsive process, it also seems that resilience does not progress in a linear fashion as this conceptualisation has implied. Instead, the findings of this study suggest
that it can form in response to positive, negative, or neutral stimuli and as a result it involves various different degrees of relative successful adaption. Perhaps then, a better definition would be “the developable capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, and failure or even positive events, progress, and increased responsibility” (Luthans, 202, p.702). However, this description implies that ‘coping’ with a risk means returning to a state prior to the exposure and it seems to ignore an individual’s ability to thrive in spite of it. Several participants of this study discussed how negative experiences with BDSM and fetish narratives prompted them to seek out education on the subject, in turn allowing them to make active decisions about whether it was a behaviour they wished to cultivate. Furthermore, the description seems to suggest that resilience can only form retrospectively and therefore cannot develop through foresight. Yet, the participants discussed the significance of horror stories, social education, and the experience of others at informing their own protective processes, so it appears that neither conceptualisation fully encapsulates the processes found within the findings. Instead, resilience would appear to be a dynamic process whereby an individual learns how to function in ‘response’ to a perceived challenging event. The following section seeks to reflect upon some of the other theoretical perspectives of resilience to consider what additional insights might be gathered from the findings, and highlight areas that could do with further investigation.

7.3.1 Alternative Conceptualisations.

Another conceptualisation, obtusely referenced in the literature review, was that of Garmezy’s (Garmezy, 1991). This perspective acted as the theoretical foundation on which the adolescent models of resilience, discussed in the previous section, were based. According to his definition, resilience is “not necessarily impervious to stress. Rather, resilience is designed to reflect the capacity for recovery and maintained adaptive behaviour that may follow initial retreat or incapacity upon initiating a stressful event” (Garmezy, 1991, p.418). The perspective took an ecological view of resilience, which aligned with Bronfenbrenner’s systems theory and
was the first piece of research on this subject to identify the importance of interventions at various levels of the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Darling, 2007). Garmezy was also the first to describe the processes that variables go through to interfere with the trajectory of a stressor, and as a result he developed the earliest versions of the compensatory model, the protective vs vulnerability model, and the challenge model. However, this research was conducted in the 1980s and early 1990s and never involved YP from micro-social cultures. As a result, it only ever focused on wildly generalisable processes and variables, which might explain the issues identified in the previous section. The research design of this study was informed by the conceptualisation of these models discussed by Fergus and Zimmerman (2005), who applied them to the latest research on risk, and who also identified several of the weaknesses discussed previously.

Interestingly, both perspectives seem to place a particular significance upon parental factors, which was not something identified within the findings of this study. In fact, parental influence only appeared to play a vulnerability role within the majority of the participants’ perspectives. This may be unique to the risks associated with SEIM and how YP cope with them, because the literature would appear to highlight the significance of parental influence in many other forms of risk, including substance use, violent behaviour, and risky sexual behaviour. An explanation for this might be the online privatism alluded to within the interviews and the wish to not involve parents in any form of sexual discussion. As noted, only one participant discussed perceiving their parents to be a healthy source of sexual education, however in this case, the parents were both medical professionals and one was even a gynaecologist. The perceived expertise, and subsequent comfortability, perhaps explains the disparity found with the other participants. This example seems to suggest that this conceptualisation of resilience, similarly to the frameworks, might not be best suited to the factors of an online existence, however it does highlight the significance of a systemic approach to resilience.

In a paper inspired by a 2013 plenary panel, Ann Masten wrote that “resilience refers to the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully
to disturbances that threaten the viability, the function, or the development of that system” (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014, p.4). This perspective expands upon the other discussed definitions in that it refers to a greater idea of resilience, one which can be applied across various systems including, but not limited to, the interpersonal level and the societal level. According to this definition, collaborative coping and adapting is an innate part of the process as different systems interact to offset potential risk. For example, a young child’s ability to grow and adapt is partially based in their attachment to a primary caregiver. Here, the various systems of the child, including at the biological and behavioural levels, interact with the systems of the caregiver, and even societal systems, to learn, grow, and develop into the best version of themselves to handle potential harm. Masten goes on to note that our self-regulation skills are vitally important for adapting, and that much of resilience, especially with children and adolescents, is embedded in close relationships with other people (Masten, 2014a, 2014b). In many ways this perspective mirrors the findings of this study, most notably in the significance given to the social variables, but also in the way that the participants discussed the ways the lives of the Q42 group interacted with one another to defend themselves collectively. This was evident in how they educated each other about online threats, interceded in unhealthy online relationships, and even in how they signposted one another to healthy and congruent sexual material.

In a latter paper Masten also discusses the significance of the mastery motivation system in learning and resilience (Masten, 2014b). The idea being that we take great pleasure and find motivation out of interacting successfully with an environment. This is particularly interesting when you consider the strength of the empowerment variable within the findings, and the significance that the participants ascribed to their own ability to control their interactions. Upon reflection this was also when the participants were the most animated in their discourse, perhaps suggesting at evidence of the system in their interaction with, and perceived dominance over, SEIM. However, a limitation of a more systemic perspective of resilience is that
little is known about online systems, or how they interact with other aspects of the individual, their relations, or their context.

In the literature review I proffered Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory as a framework from which we can perceive the lives of YP (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, 2009) and asked several questions about its validity in a modern world. In particular I asked if we gave enough credit to the role of the ‘cyberworld’ and wondered if the model should be adapted to respect the significant amount of time YP spend online. As such, I incorporated the avatar self into the microsystem to point out the significance of online personas; and the online world into the ecosystem to show the role of social networks. These adoptions were simply to illustrate how the model might be modified in the future, and were not intended to be specific recommendations. However, having now undertaken the research I feel I significantly underestimated the role the online world plays. So much so, that I am not sure if a single ‘cyberworld’ partition does enough to illustrate how meaningful the participants found their online existence to be. The second core domain that came out of Bronfenbrenner’s research states that what an individual believes is real, has real consequences. From the interviews it appears clear that YP believe that their online experiences are real, and hold very real consequences. In fact, there were several incidences where the participants gave prominence to the online world over the offline world, and actually described online protective processes that have offset potential ‘real world’ harms. The most notable example of this being how online friendships groups and fandoms offset the harm of homophobic bullying in school.

The findings clearly suggest that elements of an online existence affect various systems within the framework, from the microsystem to the macrosystem, and there also appears to be evidence of various interactions with other traditional zones of influence, i.e. online schooling, or online peer groups. In fact, the perspective and presentation of the participants led me to believe that elements of the cyberworld might permeate the majority of the
systems. This, in turn, led me to consider whether it would be best to adapt the framework to incorporate a cybersystem instead. In Figure 4 it is possible to see two potential ways the framework could be adapted to incorporate these thoughts. The first illustrates the cybersystem idea, where an online ecosystem interacts equally with all other elements of the YP’s reality. The second seeks to illustrate how a partition might be put into place showing the hierarchy of various online influences.
Figure 4.0: Two Illustrations of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, further adapted to incorporate the seeming significance of the online influence.
While it seems possible to adapt the framework to incorporate elements of a YP’s true modern ecosystem, it goes beyond the scope of this study to truly investigate it properly. Instead, the study would like to recommend that future research be undertaken into this subject, as it appears clear that the cybersystem has prominence in the lives of YP, and a modern framework would aid all manner of research into developmental influences. In regards to a systemic perspective of resilience this seems particularly important given that while some of our capacity to cope comes from our inherent potential, much appears to come from what we learn from the world around us, and today, much of this learning appears to exist online.

This section sought to reflect upon how resilience conceptualisations need to adapt to accommodate the online environment and the risks associated with it. However, the findings also noted several processes that appear unique to the risks associated with SEIM. The following section sets out to acknowledge some of the most prominent and consider which conceptualisation works best to understand these processes.

7.3.2 SEIM Adaptive Functioning.

A paper by Irina Roncaglia (2019) suggested that one way to avoid some of the conceptual issues with resilience theory, but still investigate a resilience’s process, is to work backwards: first focus on the nature of the threat, before considering how people respond to it. From the findings it was clear that the various different incarnations of sexual material involved different protective processes that seemed to attract specific variables. For example, when discussing erotic web-comics the participants often discussed it being an individual pursuit that was explicit in nature, potentially more addictive than other mediums, and involved fantasy depictions of sexual behaviour that the group were not sure were healthy. Although, all of this was discussed within the social group and they even highlighted the risks of certain material when recommending it. Furthermore, the group felt so invested in this form of the material, and its ability to display congruent sexual depictions, that they empowered one of
their number to produce the material themselves. This was the only form of this material to involve this protective process, and while reliance upon the group and the greater LGBTQ+ community was found with other forms of SEIM, the promotion of healthy media was only found in this regard. The discerning factor here appears to be how the participants perceived the opportunity verses the threat of the material. Erotic web-comics appear to have various benefits and are socially acceptable within their group, as a result they appear not to invoke stress in the same way as other material. Edward Sarafino described stress as the result of an individual feeling like they do not have the necessary assets or resources to meet the demands of a situation (Sarafino, Caltabiano, & Byrne, 2008). Perhaps, therefore, the reason why the participants felt better able to handle the potential threats of this material is that they felt that they had enough resources to adapt to it. Given that it was the social acceptance, positive depictions, and empowerment factors that differentiated this version of SEIM from the others, it would be logical to assume that these resources are what the participants felt were necessary to adapt successfully. This would align with Masten’s conceptualisation, as not only is a significance placed upon social connectiveness, but also on the individual’s motivation to choose and control their exposure to a risk (Masten, 2014b).

A notable theme within the interviews was how the participants communicated with the online environment and interacted with the protective variables to keep themselves safe. It was especially interesting to note how this was an individual process, whereby each participant negotiated with the different platforms to put themselves in the best position to benefit from SEIM exposure. This aligns with Unger’s (2004) conceptualisation of resilience which places an emphasis on an environment’s capacity to facilitate growth. The theory notes ‘seven tensions of resilience’ which includes: access to the material resources, relationships, identity, power and control, social justice, cultural adherence, and cohesion (Shean, 2015). In particular this theory has merit with the findings of this study because many of the identified variables would fall into one of these seven categories. It is also interesting to note how it
appears to mirror many of the cultural and empowerment themes that were noted in relation to an LGBTQ+ identity. What gives this theory greater credence is that it has been applied to various cultures, and seems adaptable to unique social minority factors. In particular, the theory appears to respect local knowledge and argues that resilience interventions should be imparted across various residing environments, which aligns with the recommendations of this study and will be discussed in the following section.

From the above sections it appears clear that many of the most prominent conceptualisations of resilience struggle to adapt to the risks and coping processes that originate from, and exist in, an online environment. However, some perspectives, such as Masten’s, appear to do better than others because they consider coping with a risk to be a versatile process that involves various variables unique to the individual, their environment, and even the risk itself. Yet, it is Unger’s conceptualisation which appears to best encapsulate the dynamics of the participant group, seemingly because it factors in the complexity of the individual, takes a decentralised perspective of resilience, and values not just cultural relativeness, but also atypical coping variables (Ungar, 2003, 2004, 2011). Essentially, this conceptualisation can be applied to online processes, is considerate of the systemic context of exposure, and appears to be open to unusual variables that appear unique to young LGBTQ+ people. According to Ungar, there needs to be “less focus on predetermined outcomes to judge the success of growth trajectories and more emphasis on understanding the functionality of behaviour” (Ungar, 2011, p.8). This aligns with both the findings and ethos of the study, because a key observation has been that research defines risk, resilience, coping and threat, in a very different manner to how these ideals are perceived by young LGBTQ+ people.
7.4 **Strengths and Weaknesses**

7.3.1 **Strengths**

This study set out to explore how a certain population of YP protect themselves from the potential harms of SEIM. In particular this has meant highlighting the key variables and noting how they appear to interact with the individual to change the effect that the media has upon them. This is an area of research sparsely explored, with most of the existing literature being international and focused upon general YP and not specific to social and/or sexual minorities (Doornwaard et al., 2015; Peter & Valkenburg, 2010, 2014). As a result, one of the key strengths of this research is that it provides a new and unique perspective on modern young LGBTQ+ online culture. This has not only meant a greater awareness of how young LGBTQ+ people cope with online risks, but it also provides valuable insight into the various media platforms and online communities that they interact with; in particular, several niche forms of media, their appeal to this specific community, and the ways that these platforms have developed to raise awareness of the potential harms of SEIM.

While the significance of social communities is well founded throughout psychological literature, we have yet to fully understand how these relationships play out online (DeHaan et al., 2013; Sonia Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). In the past we have assumed that there is a great deal of mirroring between online and offline interactions, with disassociation playing a key role in allowing connections to be formed quicker and more intensely online, while also potentially with greater fragility (Leibert & Archer, 2006; Mishna, McLuckie, & Saini, 2009). In the literature review I asked the question: do we give the role of these online communities enough credence in the lives of YP today? According to the lives of the participants of this study, we do not. In fact, while all of the participants noted that their online existence held great significance for them, several also noted that in many ways it dictated the way they responded to the offline world as well. Most reliably this appeared...
to be in reference to their online existences being a source of education, exploration, and experimentation, especially for sexual behaviour and gender identities. Therefore, a strength of this research is that it has clearly established how significant an online existence is in today’s modern society, while also highlighting that SEIM contains many opportunities for YP, as well as potential threats.

Finally, a significant strength of the study is that it has established a foundation from which future research can develop. This will be discussed further down in the chapter; however, it is worth noting that this study set out to explore a relatively modern set of circumstances that have previously had very little research conducted upon them. Furthermore, the behaviours existed within an online environment that we have only recently begun to theorise about, and from which we have very little practical research on due to the ethical implications of research with this population group. On top of that, this research was conducted with a minority group that has rarely been referenced in this area of the literature. As a result, this study highlights several areas which would benefit from further enquiry.

7.3.2 Weaknesses

In many ways this study set out to explore a new phenomenon, and this reflected upon, and potentially limited, many different areas of the research design. The most significant of which is that it captures a single point in time. This is significant for two reasons: first, because the online environment is constantly evolving and so this study can only really conceptualise an element of the overall experience; and second, because a participant’s understanding of SEIM, technology, and risk can only apply to how they have existed previously. From a simple observation of how technology has developed over the last decade, it appears clear that it is impossible to predict the challenges YP may face in the future (Doring, 2009). While the limitation was inevitable for a study of this type, future researchers should seek to incorporate longitudinal studies to better capture how attitudes towards this material, and the associated risks, develop. It
could be argued that this type of design is impractical due the evolving and unpredictable nature of technology (Feinstein et al., 2013; Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). However, at the very least it would allow the findings of this study to be corroborated, and would offer the opportunity to observe how the community resources that this population group make use of, adapt to support their needs (Bronfenbrenner, 2009)

As reflected upon and acknowledged previously, the study had to react to external circumstances by completing the literature review prior to the analysis. This had several ramifications, but a key conceptualisation restriction came from how the coding manual was informed by certain models of resilience, which turned out to be not as relevant to the population as the literature had led me to believe. The impact of this has been acknowledged and reflected upon throughout the study, and while it could be considered to be a weakness, it actually presented the opportunity to refute the previous literature and provide some valuable insight into how YPs cope with online risks. That being said, it did limit the study initially as it influenced me to think in terms of linear processes that are outcome orientated and which turned out not to be suited to this population group or this phenomenon. As noted in the previous section, Unger’s conceptualisation appears to be the most applicable to the risks associated with SEIM and the most respectful of the dynamics within this population group. However, this insight would benefit from further research.

An issue with researching resilience is that it is hard to draw in depth conclusions about an intrinsic process, especially when the data is drawn from an inherent perspective (Ussher et al., 2016). The limitation was predicted early on in the project’s design and it was initially going to be dealt with by the inclusion of an extrinsic perspective, i.e. a second participant group was going to be made up of youth workers. Unfortunately, the University of Manchester’s Ethics Committee felt that this was not a necessity and would potentially distract and complicate the procedures. Instead, the interview schedule was adapted to promote more generalised
reflections, with the aim being to motivate the YP to consider the protective practices that they, their social group, and their community makes use of (DeHaan et al., 2013). Although this strategy appeared to be partially successful, the findings are still felt to be weakened by the lack of an extrinsic perspective. Future studies may wish to incorporate comparison groups, especially in light of the significance found in a systemic perspective of resilience.

For the most part, the dynamics of this particular participant group were seen to be a fantastic opportunity that provided a rich insight, however during the analysis procedure it became apparent that there was an inherent limitation within the group due to it containing so many different sexual and gender identities. In fact, each participant identified differently and this meant that although the findings are felt to be representational of general LGBTQ+ youth, it is hard to know whether it is a fair representation of the specific identity groups (Meyer, 2003b; Shaw et al., 2012); i.e. does the perspective of the single cis female lesbian represent all cis female lesbians? As a result, future research will need to further corroborate the findings of this study.

7.4 Implications for Future Research

A clear insight from this research is that LGBTQ+ YP, by comparison to how their peers are represented in the literature, appear to be in a more informed and more resilient position. This appears to be because of the challenges they faced with their own sexual identities, and also because of factors such as their relationship with the wider LGBTQ+ community and the respectful nature of the material they are interacting with. This would appear to imply that this population group is a valuable resource to inform research, education, and policy on how we can best support and protect the next generation of internet users. The following section seeks to indicate some of the implications this has and make some recommendations for how this information could be disseminated.
From the onset of this study it was clear that research into the effects of SEIM is distinctly lacking. In fact, at first glance it might appear that only a few psychological researchers around the world are concerned with the role SEIM is having upon global society and our collective experience, and these subsequent studies appear to be restricted by methodological similarities that constrain the lens of their findings; i.e. they are predominantly quantitative and, in many cases, based upon the same data sets (Doornwaard et al., 2015; Peter & Valkenburg, 2010, 2014; van Oosten, 2016). However, as noted in the earlier chapters the reality is a little more complex, as there appears to be plenty of research that touches upon this field but for whatever reason does not make that explicit. For example, research into resilience towards minority stress in LGBTQ+ minorities (Meyer, 2003a), social support networks for LGBTQ+ young adults (Snapp et al., 2015), and the interplay between online and offline identities within LGBT youth (DeHaan et al., 2013). Therefore, the first recommendation of this study is that the effects of SEIM should be given greater prominence within the wider fields of research, because it clearly has a more significant and innocuous role than research presently gives it credit for.

One of the fundamental strengths of this study has been the identification of the unique protective processes that young LGBTQ+ people make use of to keep themselves safe from the potential harms of SEIM. This is an area fairly untouched within the literature and although the findings of this study appear robust, they are still unsubstantiated and would benefit from further exploration. However, this study does present a foundation from which future research can explore the phenomenon. The second recommendation is that future research take a more positivist approach. While it is understandable why past literature has focused on the vulnerabilities of this group, the findings of this study suggest that recent changes in societal attitudes, coupled with the development of the Internet, which allows niche interest groups, social minorities, and questioning personalities to meet, have presented opportunities which have not only led to greater resilience,
but also significant empowerment and wellbeing. However, this attitude is not presently reflected in the literature.

A strong theme found throughout the findings related to the nature of SEIM and how it marginalised and misrepresented an LGBTQ+ sexual lifestyle. This material is easily available and appears to play a significant part in educating micro and macro levels of society. The YP of this study noted that it led to a deep sense of incongruence which interfered with their wellbeing, coming out experiences, body image, sexual behaviour, gender identities, and relationships. In my opinion the YP who participated in this study are correct: this material is not going anywhere and there is nothing we can do that will restrict exposure completely. Instead what this research hopes to establish is that it is vitally important that we maximise on the protective processes that YP naturally employ. This appears well illustrated by the participants who, although notably vulnerable and susceptible to the negative effects of this material, have found a way to stay safe and apparently thrive. Perhaps then, we need to start considering how this group challenge the risks associated with SEIM and emulate them. Subsequently, a particularly invocative recommendation is seen in the quote from my reflective journal below:

“Develop material which offers respectful representations of gender, sexuality, and the various different attitudes and behaviours associated with sexual activity. This recommendation is based upon the idea that SEIM is readily available and there is only so much we can do to limit exposure when young people want to seek it out. Instead, why don’t we aim to limit the harm of this material by developing material that is not only a fair representation of people, but is also educational? As this seems to be what motivates a lot of young people to engage with the material initially. Perhaps the Government could offer incentives for pornography agencies who produce material which fits these criteria?”

One of the key motivations behind the study was to understand the role education has played in keeping YP safe from the potential harms of online sexual material. This was clearly reflected in the interview schedule, and so it was unsurprising that so much data was collected on YP’s experiences of
school and community information gathering. What is also unsurprising is that the participants of this research categorically found their schooling in this area to be lacking, misinformed, and in many cases harmful. In fact, as noted earlier in the chapter, some experiences of formal schooling in regards to sexual behaviour were noted to be significantly traumatic as the result of the participants’ sexual minority status. In this case it appears that not only did the participants feel let down because they weren’t being taught anything relevant to themselves, but they also felt at risk within the educational setting because they were being exposed to an experience that was incongruent with their sense of self. The following recommendations were constructed based on the insights of the YP who took part in this study:

- Ask YP how they wish to be educated and supported on this subject.
- Be willing to learn from the YP as they are the experts on the opportunities and threats associated with an online existence.
- Incorporate greater insights into the diverse sexual and gender identities.
- Do not put the onus on heteronormative experience.
- Empower YP by teaching them to reflect upon their experiences and learn from them.
- Discuss the importance of community support and signpost where YP can find different communities, not just for their identities but also for their sexual interests.
- Inform YP about the various incarnations of SEIM, and make sure they are aware of the different harms associated with them, including the innocuous effects.
- Do not teach this subject in a way that implies all sexual experiences are harmful. Instead take a stance of neutrality that allows for an equal discussion of both the positive and negative sides of sexual
attitudes and behaviours, and subsequently how these play out online.

There have been many criticisms of the way sexual education is taught in the United Kingdom, and in many ways, this seems indicative of policy and the ‘protective procedures’ that are based around the concept that it is better to restrict exposure than prepare YP for how to deal with it (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). This is reflected in many recent movements, from the online social hub Tumblr’s restrictions on any form of sexual expression, to the British Government’s latest attempt at suppression: a ‘porn ban’ which came into effect on July 15\textsuperscript{th} 2019. This means that all IP addresses will require age verification to access what has been classified as adult content. However, there are numerous problems with this, from an inability to police content providers, to there being many simple work arounds that anyone could employ. In fact, many of them are already in use by YP as methods of illegally streaming TV and films from abroad, and if anything, this ban will just encourage more YP to explore illegal behaviour. Furthermore, this ban does not apply to giant social juggernauts such as Reddit, Twitter or Facebook, who are expected to govern themselves as though they are countries in their own right. In brief, this policy is impracticable, potentially impossible to enforce, creates a greater culture of risk, and is not based upon any academic evidence.

Subsequently, this study recommends that the voice of YP be at the forefront of any future decisions or policies made to protect them. The findings of this study show that they are more informed about the technology and risks than we are, and that they are in a better position to adapt to any changes in these areas. Furthermore, they are in a strong position to defend themselves already, as they display a willingness to seek support and the empowerment to enforce restrictions on exposure themselves. However, this is based upon YP who are educated about the risks of SEIM, feel empowered in their own decision making, and who have a safe place where they can seek unbiased support. The participants of this
study were fortunate in that regard, they participated in a group that supported one another with their interests, education, and safety, and which was facilitated by someone who could guide them when they sought him out. The effects of this were noted throughout the study and as a result my final recommendation is fairly simple: instead of seeking to restrict their access to this material, let’s collaborate with them to provide tailored education and a type of support which empowers them to feel able to make choices. Whether this be through direct educational and therapeutic interventions, or on a grander societal policy level it doesn’t seem to matter, because at the moment it appears we are doing more harm than good.

7.5 Chapter Summary

The aim of this chapter was to discuss the findings in relation to the literature and address any gaps in the knowledge base. In particular it sought to identify what processes appear unique to an LGBTQ+ identity, and whether the conceptualisation of adolescent resilience was appropriate for this type of risk and population group. It soon became clear that it was not, and so the chapter explored various other perspectives of resilience before settling on Ungar’s (2004) as the most applicable to these circumstances. Finally, the chapter acknowledged the strengths and limitations of the research, before making recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 8 : Reflections 3

The third Reflective Chapter seeks to consider some of the limitations in my own perspective and acknowledge the impact this has had upon the study. In doing this I hope to further highlight how the narrative of the research was influenced by circumstance, as well as the unique perspective of the YP who participated in the research. The following sections will reflect upon the study’s structure, the richness of the data, and the humanistic values that guided the research and that at times conflicted with the original conceptualisation of resilience.

8.1 Post Discussion Reflections

Throughout various chapters I have acknowledged the impact of having conducted the literature review prior to the analysis. This not only led me to have certain expectations about the data, but it also influenced me to make use of certain frameworks within the analysis. The majority of these consequences have been reflected upon at the appropriate places throughout the study. However, the Discussion Chapter presented a different challenge because it was innately about the holes in the literature base, and this not only highlighted issues within the resilience literature, but also how much my own personal identity came into the narrative. To be clear, the discussion was re-addressed more than any other chapter simply because I struggled to find congruence with its content. The final construct is actually the result of me taking time away from the material and reading literature that only appeared to peripherally relate to the subject.

8.1.1 Structure and Narrative

Initially I thought that the Discussion Chapter would revolve around the adolescent resilience frameworks, and that these would act as catalysts for new insights into the literature. However, it soon became clear that these
models were inadequate and could not encapsulate all that the participants discussed. The subsequent crisis and confusion that this led to highlighted how distracted I had been by my expectations, and how removed I had become from the guiding principles of the research. For example, upon reviewing the reflective journal it became clear that I had been attempting to direct the data into the linear pathways of these models, rather than allowing the data to dictate the protective processes. This was most evident in my attitude towards the VFs that the participants occasionally discussed (low self-esteem and bad education). At first glance these appeared a hindrance as they were not involved in any protective processes and so they were not included in the findings, as they did not inform the research question. However, when considered through a different conceptualisation of resilience, such as Masten’s (2014a), they have significant value because they help shape the context of the risk and therefore the resilience process. The outcome of this was that I needed to revisit the resilience literature, not only to highlight the weaknesses with the original conceptualisation that I adhered to, but to also reflect upon the various other perspectives that offered some insight into my observation. On the whole this extended the timeline of the research study, again, but I feel ended up being a more significant and critical discussion.

The Discussion Chapter’s final narrative was shaped by the process discussed above. First, I discussed the insights that appeared unique to a LGBTQ+ identity, because empowering this perspective was always the central goal of the research. Then I acknowledged and cast a critical eye over the adolescent models of resilience, because although they were found to be deficient, they still held great prominence in the research process. Third, I re-addressed resilience theory and mined the literature for a perspective that fit with the findings of the study. I question whether I gave this section enough significance within the chapter, however upon reflection I think that my need to write more here is the result of annoyance that I didn’t consider the data from this perspective sooner. Finally, the chapter ended with the strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations section. This took some bravery to write as some of the recommendations, although
grounded in the perspective of the YP, conflict with many of the attitudes around YP and SEIM held by educators, policy makers, and parents.

8.1.2 Data Driven

One thing I could not have predicted was how much rich data this study would collect. As a result, I had a significant issue choosing which elements to include, especially in terms of the quotes from the participants. This was almost certainly because I sought to respect and value the perspective of each participant, and subsequently found it hard to illustrate an observation with one piece of evidence over another. Additionally, some of the best quotes, in my opinion, were not used because they didn’t fit within the overall narrative, an example of this can be found below.

Respondent: I just have a really good anecdote about that. I had someone message me once who I’d never met…I had no idea who they are, so I can’t expose anyone…who messaged me offering to pay me money…I mean…everyone’s into something, it’s fair enough, everyone’s into something, but asking me to pretend to be a lamp and I was just like…’no!’ Like…as in stand up with no clothes on…so obviously under 18, that’s not OK because it’s child pornography, said no anyway…but…he was offering to pay me some money to take a picture of me…with no clothes on with a lampshade on my head! And I was just like…that’s the weirdest one I’ve got. I’ve had like people asking for pictures of my feet…I mean…if you’re into that, cool, I’m not, I’m under age, no thank you!

However, upon reflection I wonder if my attachment to certain quotes is not about the information they contain, but because they tap into some of the original motivation behind this piece of research, i.e. the need to give YP’s voices and experiences a presence within the literature. Unfortunately, the scope of this piece of research restricts the inclusion of all the participants’ wisdom. But I suspect certain elements of this experience will reflect upon my research and practice for a considerable while. Such as the quote below, in which one of the participants sought to list all the elements of online safety that she wished the even younger members of the Q42 group to know.
Respondent: 1) Don't believe everything you see in porn, 90% of the time it's exaggerated for the fun of it... 2) educate yourself properly before you consume porn... 3) if porn makes you uncomfortable, try and research your... platforms guidelines, how you can block it... the sort of system that can be available or even look for what you can download onto your computer 'cause you can get like add-ons and stuff that filters this stuff... 4) just... be wary that... the internet is a big place and sometimes you'll fall down a rabbit hole, but the important thing is to look after yourself before anything else... don't do things because your friends think it's cool, like don't go and look at porn because you feel like you're weird for not doing it. At the end of the day you need to put yourself first and your own health and safety first... and... 5) understand... that... porn culture can be... a big thing, it can be quite a dangerous thing, it can try and influence you to think you have to be a certain way, but you don't...

While it was not possible to include all the insights of the participants, I feel like I have done a good job at diluting them down into the recommendation section of the Discussion Chapter. However, upon reflection I am now aware of how disruptive the pressure I felt to honour the participants’ perspectives has been. Not only did this play a part in many of the challenges that delayed the research, but it also took a significant toll upon my wellbeing. I suspect that this is partially responsible for why it took me so long to realise that I was making a mistake by adhering to the resilience models. Essentially, I was resistant to any idea that might make it harder to disseminate the perspective of the participants, as I felt that linear models would be the best way to effect change. However, they proved inadequate and required re-examining, which is when it became clear that the conceptualisation opposed many of the humanistic principles that motivated the research in the first place. While this was disheartening and prompted some lethargy, I feel that the final study is better off for it.

8.1.3 Humanistic Values

In the final part of this reflective chapter I wish to acknowledge the humanistic principles that influenced the research design and overall narrative structure. While it has played a significant part of the previous chapters, it has not been explicitly reflected upon since the literature review.
The reason for this is that the perspective of the participants, and the subsequent findings, were honoured above all else, and this meant that certain concessions were necessary in regards to discussion points. This is in line with the core principles at the heart of humanistic psychology, and which played a large part in the motivation to research this subject. In particular, the five principles discussed in the Literature Review Chapter (Bugental, 1964):

1. People are more than the sum of their parts.
2. In order to understand someone, you must consider how he or she see themselves, and what their relationship is with reality.
3. People are conscious, which means not only are they aware, but they are also aware of this awareness.
4. People have free will and therefore have the power to make their own choices, but with these choices comes great responsibility.
5. People seek things intentionally, and aim to make their mark on the world by setting goals, expressing creativity and by seeking meaning.

Upon reflection these principles influenced the research in more ways than I had originally considered, and it is now obvious why I eventually found so many issues with the models of adolescent resilience. While these frameworks aligned with the first, second, and third principles, their linear nature and outcome orientation appears to ignore YP’s free will and ability to cope in atypical ways. Additionally, the original conceptualisation of resilience would appear to be in stark contrast with the fifth principle which highlights the significance of the goals that YP set for themselves, yet the frameworks predispose an understanding of ‘positive adaption’. The confusion that this conflict led to delayed the timeline further and required me to re-approach the findings having considered some alternative conceptualisations (Masten, 2014a; Ungar, 2004). While frustrating, it ended up being deeply beneficial, as the eventual narrative honours the
original motivation and appears to be a true representation of the participants’ perspectives. For example, I had not considered how the fifth principle would appear and yet one of the most interesting findings was the significance of self-generated sexual material and the meanings that YP associated with it, such as fair representations of physicality, gender, intimacy and many more. Nor had I considered the role of responsibility, and yet a reliable theme was the need to protect others, disseminate knowledge, and develop the LGBTQ+ community.

With this research I sought to give YP a voice, the idea being that the best way to support them with SEIM is to empower them to protect themselves. While this is in line with the principles above, it predisposes two things: first, that YP require empowerment to cope better with SEIM and second, that SEIM exposure leads to unhealthy outcomes. Now that I have conducted the research, I realise the error with this perspective. While I still stand by the stance that it is better to empower YP to look after themselves than to dictate how they should behave, I reject the idea that they need others, necessarily, to empower their protective processes. The findings clearly show that these YP are already empowered in how they cope with SEIM, not just individually, but also within various areas of their ecosystem. Furthermore, the assumption that SEIM results in a negative outcome now seems simplistic, restrictive, and naive. In fact, as noted within the previous chapter, it turned out to be a mistake to consider resilience processes in terms of outcomes at all. Bugental argued that by dehumanising people with a label, or an assumption, we not only ignore the greater part of who they are, but also limit our ability to understand their perspective (Bugental, 1964). Given the credence given throughout the findings to an online identity, I think this lesson should also be extended to technology and the way we interact with it, i.e. we should not make assumptions about its effects. A good example of this pitfall, and how it was addressed, is that I never considered the value YP might find in artistic representations of SEIM, and it took me a few interviews to see its significance. While I soon adapted the interviews to be open to this conversation, my assumption and focus on the harms associated with SEIM
led me to be ignorant of what the first two participants were suggesting, i.e. that these forms of SEIM can be empowering and were not felt to be harmful, instead they appear to have helped them develop healthier sexual selves.

A challenge for any piece of research is to own the influence of the researcher, and that was no different with this study. As seen above, my motivations and passion for the subject were at times a hindrance, and they had to be accommodated for at various points within the process. Furthermore, the fact I identify with this population group almost certainly played a role in how I approached the recommendations. To address this, I kept exhaustive reflective notes and sought to be as transparent as possible throughout the narrative. Upon consideration, I feel that this strategy was successful up to a point; where it failed was in how I accounted for the influence of the research upon my own perspective and wellbeing. While the humanistic principles guided the research design, and provided a way to perceive the participants, my mistake was in not applying this same perspective to myself. This research study encountered many challenges that were impossible to predict, and on occasion this has been overwhelming and certainly affected how I engaged with the literature, data, and discussion. If I could revisit how I approached this study I would treat myself with more compassion and not constantly antagonise myself to complete it. While the passion for the subject probably helped me adapt to these challenges, it also played a part in how I treated myself throughout the process, and I suspect this is why I found working out a central narrative so difficult. While the fifth principle certainly explains a lot about the findings, it could also have provided me with a valuable insight and warning.

8.2 Chapter Summary

The final reflective chapter sought to further acknowledge how my own perspective, passion, and context influenced the research design and eventual narrative. As a result, it considered the narrative and structure of
the discussion, the richness of the data, and some of the issues I found with the conceptualisation of resilience and the humanistic principles. It ended by acknowledging some of my own personal learnings from conducting this research.
CHAPTER 9 : Conclusion

This piece of research set out to understand how young LGBTQ+ people keep themselves safe from the potential harms associated with SEIM. It sought to not only identify some of the key PFs, but also to explore the ways that these variables interfere with the potential risk trajectory. This objective was informed by Luthar and Colleagues’ definition of resilience, and the models of adolescent resilience discussed by Fergus and Zimmerman (2005). The study identified eight key assets and seven resources which appear to play a significant role in how young LGBTQ+ people cope with the harms associated with SEIM. While this conceptualisation was initially informative, it proved ineffective at explaining the protective and vulnerability processes associated with online risks. In particular it struggled to adapt to some atypical resilience variables that appear unique to how LGBTQ+ YP interact with online sexual material. As a consequence of this, the study readdressed the resilience literature with the intent of identifying a conceptualisation that would best suit the findings.

One of the most significant observations of this research is how important it is to consider a YP’s resilience systemically. However, this in turn highlighted how little is understood about online investiture and its relationship with other traditional ecosystems. While it was hardly surprising that an investigation into online threats would highlight the significance of online resources, it was interesting to note how much the various systems interacted according to the participants. In fact, several dynamic and symbiotic relationships were found to exist between certain online and offline variables, in particular: interpersonal relationships, community resources, and education. Additionally, the findings appear to suggest that the significance of online situations are on the rise, with the participants noting that they appear to be giving more credence to them as they get older. While it would appear that this is due to the increase in social practices, this is unsubstantiated, and so it requires further investigation.
Many of the observations of this study appear unique to how a young LGBTQ+ person perceives, and then responds to, SEIM. In fact, it would appear that not only does this population group experience additional harms on top of the previously reported ones, but they are plagued with unique vulnerability processes that relate to the fetishization of their lifestyle, online bullying, a sexually heteronormative environment, and a sexually aggressive social networking culture. This in turn seems to complicate how YP come to terms with their own gender and sexuality, and in some cases their coming out experiences. While it would be easy to assume that this population is more susceptible to harm because of this, the reverse was actually found to be true. The participants discussed how the challenges they faced actually prompted them to develop just as many unique protective processes, such as closer bonds to online and offline communities, which not only provide sexual education and support, but also prompt them to challenge aspects of SEIM that they had previously not considered. In many ways it actually appears that because of the inclusionary nature of a social minority status, and the association between sexual identity and sexual behaviour, this group feel more able to communicate about the risks and harms of SEIM than the literature suggests their heterosexual peers are.

Another key observation is that it appears that the different versions of SEIM prompt different protective processes, most likely because the harms associated with them differ as well. This is particularly interesting because it hasn’t been acknowledged previously within the literature and could also be unique to an LGBTQ+ lifestyle. While this was seen with sexual advertisements on social networks and with explicit pornography platforms, it was most notable with online erotic literature and comic books. In these cases, not only have the developers built unique safety features to highlight the harms, but the YP themselves appear to generate material to express their own sexual interests and depict more congruent sexual imagery than they would find elsewhere. As a result, another recommendation of this research is that we support the production of safer sexual platforms that
appeal to sexual and gender minorities. In this way not only can we provide a healthier and safer environment, but it could also be a way to empower YP to educate themselves, and others, about the harms associated with various aspects of SEIM.

As a consequence of the two observations above, it became necessary to reject the initial conceptualisation of resilience in favour of one that was more systemic and respectful of the variables that appear unique to this population group. Several were addressed in the discussion after the adolescent models of resilience were critically appraised in light of the findings. While, for the most part, it goes beyond the scope of this study to identify an ideal conceptualisation of resilience, it would appear that there is considerable merit in the perspectives of Masten (2014a) and Ungar (2004). In the case of Masten, resilience is perceived to be a dynamic system whereby individuals do not withstand or cope with risk, but instead adapt to accommodate it. The limitation of this perspective is that it has yet to be applied to an online environment and so struggles to explain some of the protective processes that appear unique to the cybersystem. Although Ungar’s perspective shares this criticism, it appeared much more in touch with the perspective of the participants in regards to both SEIM and their social minority status. In fact, it was the only conceptualisation that appeared to reflect the processes related to social justice, cultural adherence and identity.

From this research it appears clear that YP today are growing up in an environment fraught with new technological risks and temptations that no other generation has had to deal with. As a result, it would be logical to assume that traditional methods of protection and education are not going to be sufficient. This research set out to explore how we can support YP with this very unique risk. However, it would appear that not only are YP already handling it better than the literature is reporting, but that the best way to support them is not to repress their exposure, but to instead work with them to further the strategies they are already employing. Simply put, a YP who
feels congruent in their sexual nature, empowered to manage their own exposure, and who is involved in a healthy community that supports them with the unexpected, appears to be in the most resilient position to handle a variety of online harms. As a result, our responsibility is to develop better online social resources for education and support; foster more diverse, brave and appropriate sexual education in schools; and promote the development of sexual material that is inclusive and respectful of all sexual and gender identities, behaviours, and ideals.
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APPENDIX

A. Participant Information Sheet

An investigation into how young people cope with the risk of exposure to online sexual content.

Participant Information Sheet

As part of my Doctoral Thesis in Counselling Psychology I’m looking into the effects of online sexual material, and how young people keep themselves safe from it.

Before you decide to participate it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

Who will conduct the research?
Ross Nathan Phillips, Trainee Counselling Psychologist at the University of Manchester

Title of the Research
An investigation into how young people cope with the risk of exposure to online sexual content.

What is the aim of the research?
The aim of this study is to explore how young people cope with seeing pornographic material. More specifically the study looks to see how people keep themselves safe in face of harmful sexual media.

Why have I been chosen?
You have been asked to participate because you are in the age group I am interested in.

What would I be asked to do if I took part?
• If you decide to take part you would be invited to be interviewed for about 30 minutes
• If you agree I would ask you to read and sign the consent form.
• We can stop at any time, and you do not have to give a reason.

What happens to the data collected?
The interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed. The data will be kept confidential and anonymous. This means that no one will know what you have told me, except if you tell me that you or someone else is at risk of harm. If I am concerned that you or someone might be at risk of harm then I will discuss this with the service workers at 42nd Street.

How is confidentiality maintained?
• All the data will be kept anonymous.
• All the data will be kept on a secure portable drive.
• Only the researcher, supervisor and data transcriber will have access to the data.

What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?
It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw without giving a reason. As this will be written up as a piece of research, you will have to tell me you want to withdraw your interview within two weeks of taking part.

Will I be paid for participating in the research?
There is no payment for taking part in this research.

What is the duration of the research?
The research involves meeting for one interview lasting approximately 30 minutes.

Where will the research be conducted?
The research will be conducted in 42nd Street.

Will the outcomes of the research be published?
The findings from the research will be published in a thesis report to be assessed by the University of Manchester. The findings may also be published in psychological journals and/or presented at relevant conferences.

Contact for further information
Researcher contact information:
Ross Nathan Phillips
Email: Ross.Phillips@manchester.postgrad.ac.uk

Research supervisor contact information:
Dr. Terry Hanley,
Email: Terry.Hanley@manchester.ac.uk
Phone: 0161 275 8815

What if something goes wrong?
If you have any concerns or queries do feel free to contact me, or my research supervisor using the contact information above.

If there are any issues regarding this research that you would prefer not to discuss with the researcher or her supervisor, please contact the Research Practice and Governance Co-ordinator by either writing to 'The Research Practice and Governance Co-ordinator, Research Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL', by emailing: Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk, or by telephoning 0161 275 7583 or 275 8093.
B. Participant Consent Form

An investigation into how young people cope with the risk of exposure to online sexual content.

CONSENT FORM

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the consent form below:

1. I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above study and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

3. I understand that the interviews will be audio recorded.

4. I understand that my name will not be attached to this research.

5. I agree that any information collected may be passed to the research supervisor.

6. I agree that any data collected may be published in academic books or journals, without my name attached.

I agree to take part in the above project

Name of participant ___________________________ Date __________ Signature __________

Name of person taking consent ___________________________ Date __________ Signature __________

Name of Guardian/Parent ___________________________ Date __________ Signature __________
C. De-Brief Procedure

Debrief Procedure: (Based upon Stallard & Salter’s 2003 study entitled ‘Psychological debriefing with children and young people following traumatic events’.

- Firstly I just wanted to say thank you for your involvement in this interview.

- I was curious to see how you look after yourself and keep yourself safe while online.

- Was there anything we chatted about that you found difficult?

- If there was anything you found troubling about what we’ve spoken about today, that maybe you do not feel comfortable sharing with me, perhaps you might feel comfortable talking to one of the social workers. Or if you’d rather talk to someone anonymously I’d recommend Childline, they are always around to talk too 24/7.

- Do you have any questions about what we’ve spoken about today?

- Again, thank you for your participation in my research. If you have any questions you can ask me now, or you can contact me at ross.phillips@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

- How do you feel about ending the interview here?
D. Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule: Young People

Introduction:
- General introduction to the interview process.
- General explanation of the research direction.

Q1: If it’s okay, I’d like to start by talking a little about what you use the internet for, what sites you go on, what apps you might use, that sort of thing, are you okay with that?

Q2: How often do you come across nakedness while you are online?
   What sort of apps/site?

Q3: Do you ever see weird or strange sexual stuff online? If so, what do you do when this happens?

Q4: What can you tell me about online porn?
   Is this something you’ve searched for?
   Is this something you talk to your friends about? And if so, what do you discuss?

Q5: How do things like this affect you, or your friends?
   If this were to happen again, how do you think you might react?

Q6: a. Has anyone ever spoken to you about online safety?
   b. What sort of things do you think would be important to learn about?
   c. If yes, what did you find useful?

Conclusion:
- Thank you for talking to me today, I really appreciate you taking the time.
- Summarise answers, specifically referencing how the young person behaves online/support structure.
- I was just wondering if you had any further thoughts…
E. Familiarising & Identifying Key Points
F. Overview of the Preliminary Codes
G. Inductive Themes

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I. Refining and Redefining the Themes
J. Reflective Journal Screenshot

Interview 5 - August 2018

Preliminary thoughts: Today's group was focusing on getting ready for class. As a result, the group were excited and easily distracted. Roughly 20+ students in attendance.

Interview: Only 1 interview was conducted due to how excitable the group was.

Participant: 18 year old Jordan, Bi Sexual, who has recommended her GF as another participant. I'm unsure if their relationship status should matter.

Reflections: The participant was notably passionate about the topic, which was fantastic, but very hard to manage. My worry is that the least outgoing person stood out, and spent a lot of time focusing on the ethics of the pornography industry.

- Honestly, very impressed by her awareness, reflective process, and insights.

However, it is interesting to note how often ethics has come up in these interviews.

- Age of participants
- Cross-Culture Values
- Blackmail
- Intracl narratives

P.T.O
This email contains important information about your submission for the Division of Counselling Psychology Annual Conference in Newcastle Gateshead (6-7 July 2018)

Ref: 740

Thank you for your submission An investigation into how young people cope with the exposure to sexually explicit Internet material as an Oral Presentation Research. I am pleased to inform you that your above submission has been accepted as Part of Symposia.

A draft programme showing the day and time of your presentation will be available to download at www.bps.org.uk/DCoP2018. Due to time pressure on the timetable we may not have been able to allocate the time you requested. Please note that only the first author is listed on the programme timetable. All authors will be listed in the book of abstracts.

You are encouraged to register your attendance as early as possible. Please note there is no automatic registration of presenters and that all presenters do therefore need to register. Full instructions on how to register, along with details of the delegate fees can be viewed online. Please note that early bird registration rates apply until 14 May and all rates include 20% VAT.

If you are presenting at the conference, but you are not currently a DCoP member, you will qualify for a lower registration fee than is published for non-members. You will be asked when registering if you have a presenter discount code, you will need to tick "Yes" and enter the following discount code.

Code: DCPJ18PR

If you are a DCoP In-training member or a student (concession) member of the Society, then you will not need to use this code. The in-training and the concession rates are priced lower than the DCoP presenter rate. If you are unsure which rate you qualify for please call the conferences team 0161 252 9555.

There is a useful Presenter/Poster Presenter information document that can be found on our conference website that outlines AV included, Press Centre information and other important information.

If there is anything further you would like to know please don't hesitate to contact me. It would be helpful if, in any correspondence, you quoted the reference number given at the top of this email.

Kind regards

Hollie Etheridge