they make out of them, and how these contribute to the formation of ethical or sexual identities (e.g. Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; Tsaliki, 2011; Chronaki, 2014). Finally, from a perspective that balances the two approaches, other researchers work within a frame of research that examines potential risks and opportunities in children's online experiences (Livingstone *et al.*, 2011; Mascheroni and Ólafsson, 2014).

What is the research on the topic?

Effects paradigm

The majority of studies within the effects tradition are based on developmental (Boies *et al.*, 2004), cognitive (Peter and Valkenburg, 2006, 2007, 2008) and clinical psychological theories (Cline, 1994).

Sexual content in this paradigm is framed as a negative aspect of children's media use. For instance, studies suggest that sexual content potentially affects children's attitudes towards romantic relationships or commitment (e.g. Braun-Courville and Rojas, 2009). They also suggest that there is a possible correlation between violence and sexual content (e.g. Valkenburg and Soeters, 2001).

Some researchers have assumed potential effects on boys' attitudes towards the female body (the "objectification" paradigm), which has frequently been a common argument between effects researchers and feminist analysts (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004). This kind of research has been extensively criticised (e.g. Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; Livingstone and Bober, 2005; Bale, 2010; McKee, 2013).

Social constructionist approach

Within the social constructionist paradigm, children's experiences are considered as cultural practices.

the perspective of three major variables of online use: age, gender and class.

Livingstone and Bober (2004, p. 29) found that more than half of the studies' participants who go online at least once a week say that they have encountered sexual content. Some say they have found it accidentally, whereas only a handful says they have deliberately visited such a site. Age differences, especially between the youngest and the oldest age groups, are also reported, as the older the children are, the more experiences with sexual content they have had. UK Children Go Online also identified differences regarding the medium where content was encountered: more children report seeing such material online than in other media.

Along similar lines in terms of research design and data collection, Tsaliki gathered data about Greek children's patterns of online use. Her findings indicate that access to sexual content is influenced by gender and age. According to the project report, the number of children who have had experiences with sexual content online is low. Notably, 13% of boys aged 10–14 and 4% of girls of the same age seem to have deliberately had such experiences (Tsaliki and Chronaki, 2012, p. 43). Moreover, most children within this age group have had such experiences in media other than the internet, which indicates that some of the concerns about how dangerous the internet might be for young people is possibly overstated (Tsaliki, 2011).

As it transpires, all three approaches feed research and public agendas with different kinds of findings and arguments. However, in all three, researchers comply with overarching principles regarding the sensitive and ethically challenging nature of the topic. We will not go into further detail regarding the matter at this point, as it has already been addressed by this network's activity (Lobe *et al.*, 2007).

In what follows, we briefly present the EU Kids Online findings from all 25 European countries, and then move to a cross-comparison between the EU Kids Online and Net Children Go Mobile findings from specific countries. Our aim is to offer an overview of what we now know about children's experiences with sexual content online, and what recommendations can be made on a policy, research and educational level.

EU Kids Online evidence

There is an overall classification of children's experiences in risks and opportunities within this paradigm, and a further classification of those two kinds of experiences regarding children's position within them (content, contact, conduct) (Hasebrink *et al.*, 2009, p. 8).

According to this classification, encounters with sexual content online are considered a potentially risky experience, also enabling the probability of harm for the child. The experience is examined in relation to where it took place, how many times it did, its actual nature (what exactly was depicted in the representation encountered), and whether the child felt harmed by it (Livingstone *et al.*, 2011).

Table 1: Risks relating to children's internet use (*exemplars only*)

	Content Receiving mass-produced content	*Contact* Participating in (adult-initiated) online activity	*Conduct* Perpetrator or victim in peer-to-peer exchange
Aggressive	Violent/gory content	Harassment, stalking	Bullying, hostile peer activity
Sexual	Pornographic content	"Grooming", sexual abuse or exploitation	Sexual harassment, "sexting"
Values	Racist/hateful content	Ideological persuasion	Potentially harmful user-generated content
Commercial	Embedded marketing		

23% of 9- to 12-year-olds have encountered sexual content in the last 12 months, either online or offline;

among the most popular media where children encountered sexual content, the internet ranks almost as high (14%) as television, films or videos (12%);

it is predominantly older teenagers, 15–16 years old, who report having had such an experience (36%), rather than younger children, 9- to 11-year-olds (11%);

there is no significant difference between boys and girls, either when it comes to younger (15% vs 13%) or to older children (33% vs 28%);

there is no significant difference regarding the experience, in what concerns children's socio-economic status (SES); however, it seems that higher SES children have had more experiences with sexual content, possibly because of their increased media ownership and advanced digital skills.

Overall, experiences with sexual content appear to be a rather complex issue. EU Kids Online has provided the European agenda with recent, robust and representative data about children's experiences. In this way, it offers a rigorous mapping of the phenomenon, creating space for more research, primarily of a qualitative nature, that will seek to fill emerging questions of how and why different groups of children respond to experiences with sexual content in particular ways. However, there is still a need for more research of a qualitative nature, something that EU Kids Online III has initiated since 2013.

EU Kids Online qualitative study

Network researchers have recently conducted a qualitative study aiming at understanding the ways in which children perceive notions such as risk and harm, and how they engage with issues about particular incidents that have been classified as risky in public and academic discourse (e.g. bullying, sexual content, stranger danger, sexting; see Smahel and Wright, 2014).

Table 2: Children's references to risky experiences

	Coverage of the topic within

of sexual content are culturally loaded concepts, and it
looks reasonable for researchers and participants alike

48% have seen sexual content and 28% were upset by it, while in the UK, 24% have seen sexual content and 24% were upset by it. Again, compared to how many children encountered sexual content in both countries, the proportion that report being bothered in Denmark is considerably less. This difference could be attributed to the more liberal perception of sexual content in the country in relation to the UK. Similarly, although fewer children report such encounters in Italy and Ireland, more report being bothered by such content (26% and 38%, respectively) (Livingstone *et al.*, 2011, p. 56). This is, perhaps, due to the dominant construction of sexuality within the Catholic culture in these countries.

To be more precise, recently in the UK there has been considerable political and non-governmental organisation (NGO)-driven campaigning about pornography's potential harm on children (Topping and Georgieva, 2013). Such alarmed voices have not emerged for the first time. Instead, they have been feeding an ongoing public debate regarding children's sexualisation. As a result, anti-porn policies have emerged, making it understandable why children might report less experiences of sexual content. This might be because of increasing parental mediation, new regulatory developments in the UK, the banning of online pornography unless closely monitored, or simply because of how children engage with such information and regulate their sexual conduct accordingly.

Another set of variables that both Net Children Go Mobile and EU Kids Online projects examine concern the media through which children access sexual content.

Accessing sexual images

The degree of explicitness of the images seen vary according to the medium. For example, these might be personal photos, mainstream pornographic videos, advertisements for sex services or depictions of sex, and love or romance as appearing in popular HBO series and movies. Taking this into account, Net Children Go Mobile found that younger children report acquiring most of their experiences in sexual content on television, films, video-sharing platforms (varying from, for example, YouTube, to mainstream pornographic Tube-like platforms), on social networking sites or by pop-ups.

Table 5: Net Children Go Mobile (2013): Ways in which children have seen sexual images, by age

%	Age				
	9-10	11-12	13-14	15-16	All
In a magazine or book	2	1	5	8	4
On television, film	6	6	13	17	11

Such evidence could also possibly inform current and emerging sex education curricula, especially when it comes to countries that have no organised sex education.

Finally, we need to consider how public accounts of children's sexuality influence children and parents' approach to sexuality itself. Children's experiences with such media content are, to a large extent, shaped by the way sexuality is publically discussed and regulated.

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