

**Submission
No 3**

**INQUIRY INTO IMPACTS OF HARMFUL PORNOGRAPHY
ON MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, AND PHYSICAL HEALTH**

Name: Mr Jarryd Bartle

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Submission to the Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a short submission on the potential impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health.

I am a Lecturer in Criminology and Justice Studies at RMIT University, where I teach subjects related to policing, professional ethics, and forensic studies. My professional background includes legal practice as a criminal lawyer and policy consultancy work. I was admitted to legal practice in 2015 and later established a private consultancy, focusing on literature reviews and evidence-based policy advice concerning the regulation of ‘vice’ including illicit drugs, pornography, and sex work.

This short submission addresses the conceptual framing of ‘harmful pornography’ as outlined in the inquiry’s terms of reference. It is crucial to note that there is limited causal evidence to support consistent harms associated with pornography consumption. As such, any policy approach towards ‘harmful pornography’ must be informed by a comprehensive understanding of the current evidence base .

‘Pornography’ should be viewed as a genre of media, often catering to the ‘male gaze’, designed to create an exaggerated and stylised sexual spectacle. It is important to recognise that pornography frequently has little connection to actual sexual activity, functioning instead as a form of ‘adult entertainment’.

Pornography is a common target for moral panic, particularly for its use of boundary-pushing scenarios, taboos, fetishes, and sadomasochistic power dynamics that challenge social norms and expectations. Whilst it is clear such content is not suitable for children, efforts to empirically establish pornography as a direct cause of individual or societal harms have produced mixed results at best.

It has been established that there is an association between adolescent exposure to pornography and a lower age of sexual initiation,¹ as well as some limited indication that pornography may serve as an informal source of sexual education for young people.²

¹ Pathmendra P, Raggatt M, Lim M, Marino J, Skinner S Exposure to Pornography and Adolescent Sexual Behavior: Systematic Review J Med Internet Res 2023;25:e43116 : <https://www.jmir.org/2023/1/e43116>

² Litsou, K., Byron, P., McKee, A., & Ingham, R. (2020). Learning from pornography: results of a mixed methods systematic review. *Sex Education, 21*(2), 236–252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2020.1786362>

However, the limited research in this space is not entirely negative, for example Hakkim et al. (2022),³ found that pornography use by young people can also be a healthy exploration of sexuality, leading to better levels of sexual comfort and self-acceptance and reduced levels of anxiety, shame, and guilt over sexual behaviour.

Whilst, much has been written in popular media regarding the speculated harms of young people's exposure to pornography, but there is very little solid empirical research demonstrating such harms.

Amongst adults, current research reveals varying associations between pornography exposure and issues such as body image,^{4 5} and stereotypical beliefs about gender,⁶ although these findings are not consistent across studies. In terms of violence, Mestre-Bach et al. (2024),⁷ in their systematic review found that the evidence regarding a causal link between pornography use and violence remains inconclusive, with studies on pornography's role in intimate partner sexual assault or coercion offering mixed results at best. An earlier systematic review by Ferguson and Hartley (2020),⁸ highlighted similar uncertainties and noted that research in this field frequently suffers from methodological limitations.

Overall, the most recent systematic reviews of existing research provide a mixed picture of pornography's potential impact on consumers. The most honest summary of the current state of the research was put succinctly by Australian researchers McKee et al (2022) in their book '*What Do We Know About the Effects of Pornography After Fifty Years of Academic Research?*':⁹

Although we can identify thousands of pieces of academic research about pornography's 'effects', surprisingly little of it explores relationships between various aspects of healthy sexual development and consumption of pornography... Much of the relevant research we identified on the relationship between consumption of pornography and aspects of healthy sexual development misinterpreted correlation as causality.

While pornography, like all forms of media, remains open to social critique, the evidence underpinning framing pornography as an urgent public policy concern is mixed at best. It is therefore essential that any future legislative or policy initiatives concerning pornography be

³ Hakkim S, Parsa AD, Arafat SMY, et al. Pornography—Is It Good for Sexual Health? A Systematic Review. *Journal of Psychosexual Health*. 2022;4(2):111-122. doi:10.1177/26318318221088949

⁴ Paslakis G, Chiclana Actis C, Mestre-Bach G. Associations between pornography exposure, body image and sexual body image: A systematic review. *Journal of Health Psychology*. 2022;27(3):743-760. doi:10.1177/1359105320967085

⁵ Raine, G., Khouja, C., Scott, R. *et al.* Pornography use and sexting amongst children and young people: a systematic overview of reviews. *Syst Rev* **9**, 283 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-020-01541-0>

⁶ Raine, G., Khouja, C., Scott, R. *et al.* Pornography use and sexting amongst children and young people: a systematic overview of reviews. *Syst Rev* **9**, 283 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-020-01541-0>

⁷ Mestre-Bach, G., Villena-Moya, A., & Chiclana-Actis, C. (2024). Pornography Use and Violence: A Systematic Review of the Last 20 Years. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 25(2), 1088-1112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231173619>

⁸ Ferguson, C. J., & Hartley, R. D. (2022). Pornography and Sexual Aggression: Can Meta-Analysis Find a Link? *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 23(1), 278-287. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838020942754>

⁹ McKee, A et al (2022). *What Do We Know About the Effects of Pornography After Fifty Years of Academic Research?* (1st ed., Vol. 1). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003232032>

grounded in a balanced, evidence-based understanding of its actual effects on individuals and society.

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on this Inquiry. Please let us know if I can assist further in this important policy space.

Yours sincerely,

Jarryd Bartle