

**Submission
No 13**

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

Organisation: Burnet Institute
Date Received: 30 October 2024

Parliament of NSW Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health

Submission from Associate Professor Megan Lim, Burnet Institute

This submission briefly summarises relevant research conducted by the Young People’s Health Research team at the Burnet Institute, Melbourne. It includes findings from multiple research studies, using a range of methodologies and samples, conducted over the past decade. Published research is cited in the document. Data from as yet unpublished research is also included.

For more information about these studies, please contact Megan Lim –

Terms of Reference

(a) age of first exposure to pornography and impacts of early exposure to pornography

The Sex Drugs and Rock’n’Roll study has surveyed young people about pornography since 2014.¹ Approximately 1000 young people aged 15-29 in Victoria are surveyed annually. Our research shows that the median age of first exposure to pornography varies by gender. Accidental viewing usually occurs at a younger age than intentional viewing.

	Men/boys (n=264)	Women/girls (n=572)	Non-binary young people (n=120)
Median age			
Accidental viewing	11	11	10
Intentional viewing	13	14	13

Table 1: Median age of first pornography viewing (unpublished data: SDRR 2024 study)

Younger age of first viewing has been associated with sexual behaviours. We conducted a systematic review that synthesised evidence from 19 studies.² We concluded that there is a relationship between early age of pornography viewing and earlier age of first sex. However, it is unclear whether this is a causative relationship; other factors may cause both early pornography viewing and early sexual behaviour (e.g. early maturation and family contexts). There was insufficient evidence to look at other sexual behaviours.

Our 2015 SDRR survey of young people in Victoria showed that more frequent pornography viewing was associated with ever having anal intercourse and recent mental health problems.³ Younger age at first pornography viewing was associated with younger age at first



sexual contact and recent mental health problems. As a cross-sectional study we cannot determine whether pornography is a cause of these outcomes or merely correlated with them.

(b) media by which pornography is accessed and circulated

We have not investigated this question specifically; however, young people in our studies have noted that pornography is available via multiple routes, including social media.

(c) impacts on body image

Some men and women in our 2016 sample reported feeling that their bodies did not look as good as those in pornography.⁴ This usually referred to muscularity, thinness and body hair, rather than directly to sexual characteristics (e.g. breast or penis size).

‘. . . I started to compare myself and think I wasn’t perfect or desirable for any guy. I thought I was gross and no one would want me. . . .’ (20–24 years, heterosexual woman)

However, many remarked that with maturity and experience, they were less affected by comparisons between their own and pornographic bodies. Some reported that being able to see a large number of bodies allowed them to recognise the diversity of human appearances.

‘. . . Became more aware about body types and how there is such a variance in normal. . . positive body image.’ (20–24 years, bisexual woman)

(d) the relationship between pornography use and respect and consent education

Depictions of the consent process are usually lacking from pornography – see our evidence based website resource <https://www.thegist.org.au/topics/enthusiastic-consent-and-communication> for further information. Helping young people understand how pornography differs from other sex is an important part of consent education. However, our [research](#) also showed that young people require further information about sex and relationships.⁵ They need to know what to do, not just what not to do.

(e) the production and dissemination of pornography, including deepfake or AI-generated pornography

Not investigated.

(f) the impact of exposure to violent and/or misogynistic pornography on children, teenagers and young adults

In both a systematic review of 23 content analyses⁶, and a survey of young people⁷, our research shows that mainstream pornography commonly displays gender inequity. Men’s pleasure is significantly more common than women’s pleasure. Extreme acts of violence were relatively rare. However, more subtle behaviours, such as spanking, were common. Dominating and violent behaviours were nearly always directed toward women. We also found that younger participants (aged 15-19 years compared to 20-29) more frequently



reported seeing women's pleasure, violence toward women which appeared consensual, and violence overall.

(g) impacts on minority groups including but not limited to First Nations, CALD or LGBTIQ+ people and people living with disability

Our research shows that people who identify as LGBTIQ+ are more likely to view pornography frequently and from a younger age.³ One possible reason for this has been described in our qualitative research.^{4,5} Because this group is less well served by mainstream school sex education, they need to look elsewhere (including pornography) for relevant and inclusive information.

"Porn was the reason I found out that I'm attracted to people of various sexes and genders. It also got me comfortable seeing genitals of all descriptions, which actually helped a lot with anxieties around sex." -Female, 18-19

"[Porn influenced me] Positively by illustrating same-sex intercourse with males (never instructed at school)" – Male, 18-19

Our education program, [The Gist](#), is designed to be relevant to young people who have experienced disrupted education or who are engaged with support services⁵. This group is our focus as they have less access to relationships and sexuality education through schools.

(h) the effectiveness of any current education programs about use and misuse of pornography, and how these may be improved

Further evidence is needed to understand how education can address the potential harmful impacts of pornography.

We have developed an [evidence](#) based program that aims to educate young people about sex and relationships in the context of pornography use.⁵ The Gist (<https://www.thegist.org.au/>) includes a [website](#) and face to face program. Unlike other pornography education programs that focus on problems with pornography, The Gist delivers an ethical, inclusive program that positions real life relationships and sex in the context of widespread pornography use. It is designed specifically to reach marginalised young people with inconsistent school attendance. In 2023, we conducted a pilot of The Gist at 10 education and youth services in Melbourne and regional Victoria. The evaluation showed that The Gist content was highly relevant to the sexual health needs of students, and inclusive of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. Overall student knowledge scores showed a statistically significant increase from pre- to post-program. Students gave very positive feedback about the program.

"Loved the classes and wish they share this out with other schools and teach them about consent". – Student

The Gist is currently seeking funding to deliver the program to more young people.



(i) the effectiveness of current restrictions on access to pornography and consideration of any need to improve these

There is very minimal current restriction on access to pornography in Australia. Children and young people report no barriers to access.

Parents and teens generally support porn blocking technologies as a first line of defence for preventing young children from accidentally encountering porn.⁸ But they are less confident about the effectiveness of these solutions to prevent intentional viewing.

There are technological options available to individual families, however, our research shows that parents rarely use these.⁸⁻¹⁰ Reasons for non-use include not believing they are needed, not knowing how to use them, belief that children can easily bypass them, and a preference for open discussions with children instead of restriction.

Our 2023 (unpublished) research with young people shows that a majority (58%) support the concept of age assurance technologies to restrict access to pornography. However, they had significant concerns about its implementation. They were extremely concerned about privacy of their information and did not trust government or pornography websites with their information. They also did not believe that age assurance would be effective – “People will always find a way to get around access restrictions.”

(j) the resources and support currently available to parents and carers to educate children about pornography, and how these might be improved;

Our research with parents shows that parent’s preference for responding to pornography use is education and open discussion instead of restriction.⁸⁻¹⁰ Many teenagers also reported wanting this information from their parents.

Despite this preference, our survey of over 1000 Australian parents found that 45% had ever spoken to their child about pornography.¹⁰ Barriers to speaking about pornography were a fear of ‘sparking curiosity’ and potentially encouraging their children to seek this content out. Parents also lacked knowledge and confidence to initiate these conversations.

When parents did speak to their children, the most common discussion topic was that pornography is not reality. However, young people may require more information/context than this. Young people report being very aware that pornography is fantasy but lacking practical alternative information about what real sex should be like.

Parents have expressed a need for materials to support age-appropriate conversations with their children.



(k) any other related matters.

For further information about this research and other ongoing work, please contact:

A/Prof Megan Lim
Head, Young People's Health Research
Deputy Program Director, Disease Elimination
Burnet Institute

References

1. Eddy S, Douglass C, Raggatt M, Thomas A, Lim M. Trends in testing of sexually transmissible infections (STIs), sexual health knowledge and behaviours, and pornography use in cross-sectional samples of young people in Victoria, Australia, 2015–21. *Sexual Health*. 2023;20(2):164-172.
2. Pathmendra P, Raggatt M, Lim MS, Marino JL, Skinner SR. Exposure to pornography and adolescent sexual behavior: systematic review. *Journal of medical internet research*. 2023;25:e43116.
3. Lim M, Agius P, Carrotte E, Vella A, Hellard M. Young Australians' use of pornography and associations with sexual risk behaviours. *ANZJPH*. 2017;41(4):438-443.
4. Davis AC, Temple-Smith MJ, Carrotte E, Hellard ME, Lim MSC. A descriptive analysis of young women's pornography use: a tale of exploration and harm. *Sex Health*. 2020;17(1):69-76.
5. Davis AC, Wright CJ, Murphy S, et al. A Digital Pornography Literacy Resource Co-Designed With Vulnerable Young People: Development of "The Gist". *J Med Internet Res*. 2020;22(6):e15964.
6. Carrotte ER, Davis AC, Lim MS. Sexual Behaviors and Violence in Pornography: Systematic Review and Narrative Synthesis of Video Content Analyses. *J Med Internet Res*. 2020;22(5):e16702.
7. Davis AC, Carrotte ER, Hellard ME, Lim MSC. What Behaviors Do Young Heterosexual Australians See in Pornography? A Cross-Sectional Study. *J Sex Res*. 2018;55(3):310-319.
8. Turvey J, McKay D, Kaur ST, Castree N, Chang S, Lim MSC. Exploring the feasibility and acceptability of technological interventions to prevent adolescents' exposure to online pornography: qualitative research. *JMIR Pediatrics and Parenting*. 2024.
9. Davis AC, Wright C, Curtis M, Lim MS, Hellard M, Temple-Smith M. Not my child: Parenting, pornography, and views on harm reduction. *Journal of Family Studies*. 2021;27:573-588.
10. Lim M, Johnson E, Raggatt M. Parents' attitudes and response to their child's pornography consumption in Australia: cross-sectional survey. *Sexual Health*. 2024.