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

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Submission to the Inquiry into the Impacts of Harmful Pornography on Mental, Emotional, and Physical Health

Intro

This submission explores the damaging effects of pornography, addressing multiple intersecting terms of reference. It will focus on (C) body image, (D) the relationship between pornography and consent, (E) the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and deepfakes, and (F) the unrealistic portrayals of "normal" sexual behaviour. Additionally, it will draw connections between pornography and behaviours associated with coercive control.

As a female, I have experienced the harmful narratives pornography can create. Growing up, my family and social circle rarely discussed sex and the education in my school was heavily influenced by heteronormative ideas and male anatomy; the teachers were awkward and uncomfortable, and their own biases were ingrained in their teaching methods and understanding, making it hard for students to ask questions and not feel judged. Curiosity leads students to the internet for answers. I vividly remember my first encounter with pornography at age 14: a sleepover with friends, where we watched a video sent through a chatroom. In it, we saw a woman subjected to aggression—hair-pulling, slapping, being spat on and multiple men treating her with blatant disrespect. In our shame and embarrassment of what we witnessed, we all laughed and sheepishly closed the window—silently, Interpreting this as "normal" or acceptable behaviour in intimacy, which also shaped our views of what's expected of women in relationships. This portrayal of sex lacked intimacy and demanded control. That control was not earned or shared; it was male-dominated for male pleasure. This power imbalance is often depicted in pornography, and the woman deserves punishment, not pleasure, a "bad girl" whose enjoyment of certain acts only emphasises her subjugation. Objectifying women in this way distorts the perceptions of consent - often which are absent in pornography - as well as suggesting voicing discomfort would *"ruin a mood"* or provoke anger and more aggression.

From a young age, women are taught to internalise these harmful messages ; they are upheld through *'slut shaming'*, internalised misogyny and the structural injustice of the inherently patriarchal political and social norms that are enforced by a judicial system (Giraldi and Monk-Turner, 2017; Miller 2017, Young 2011). This injustice makes it difficult for women to be heard, seen and believed when disclosing sexual abuse. The messages in pornography reinforce a double standard: to be respected in public, a woman must act one way, yet in the bedroom, she is expected to fulfil a different role, both of which require obedience.

Reflecting on these portrayals, I now realise how much heteronormative and often violent depictions distorted my peers and my understanding of healthy, respectful relationships, blurring lines around consent and normalising sexual abuse, violence, and 'slut-shaming' in our school, the numerous (6812 and counting) accounts submitted to Teach Us Consent's

website illustrates the prevalence and scope of this behaviour young people face and demands for urgent action in consent education and support systems. Objectification of women in pornography shapes both male and female perceptions of sexual relationships, normalising a dynamic where women's needs are secondary, and consent is dismissed through coercion or inciting women to fetishise rape. The National Plan (2022) provides an alarming statistic: 1 in 5 women have experienced sexual violence by the age of 15. Women do not fetishise rape but rather feel its imminent presence daily, well before the legal age of consent. Viewing misogynistic and violent content as a form of education is a dangerous misstep that cultivates unrealistic relationship expectations and contributes to a rise in sexual harassment and domestic violence.

Brown and Engle (2009) find that early exposure to pornography, especially for boys, is associated with less progressive gender attitudes, permissive sexual norms, and sexual harassment behaviours. According to the Our Watch report, 48% of boys are exposed to pornography by age 13, shaping their views on relationships well before they have real-world sexual experiences. With the ease of explicit content so easily accessible in the digital age, how we interact with pornography has been transformed. Unlike magazines that required some imagination, platforms like OnlyFans, virtual reality headsets, AI- girlfriends, and "gonzo" content can be accessed through "tube sites" that are user-generated (Maas et al., 2023). While it creates diversity in body image and behaviours, sexualities; the content, if illegal or abusive, becomes difficult to regulate and remove. The consequences of neglecting harmful narratives in pornography can lead to unrealistic ideas towards consent, respect, and women.

Impacts on Body Image (c):
The eSafety Commissioner (2021) reports that teens spent an average of 14.4 hours online weekly in 2020. This rise in digital engagement, increased hyper sexualisation, and pornography filtering through social media intensifies body image issues and concerns. The Butterfly Foundation reports that 90% of young people have concerns about their body image. This damaging thinking is fuelled by algorithm-driven platforms promoting idealised beauty standards subconsciously through social posts and media content (Miller, 2017; Ahmed, 2020).

The eSafety Commissioner (2024) found that Young men face a complex environment shaped by digital communities that influence their perceptions of body image and sexual performance. These unrealistic standards of masculinity create feelings of inadequacy and performance anxiety, which negatively impact adolescents' body image and sexual confidence (Quadara, El-Murr, and Latham (2017); these insecurities can then lead to harmful interactions compounded by jealousy and entitlement, setting the foundation for harmful behaviours and patterns, many similar to those outlined in the red flags of coercive control.

For young women, the pressures manifest differently. Social media encourages them to present themselves in specific ways. Their bodies and lives are something to be judged and consumed (Ahmed, 2020; Weinstein & James 2022). Posting images can often attract unwanted attention. A 2021 eSafety Commission report found that 35% of females, compared to 26% of males, reported being contacted by strangers. This contact can include inappropriate messages, unsolicited explicit images, and stalking. Such dynamics, driven by a culture of blame and misogyny, uphold systematic gender imbalance and allows victim blaming, 'slut shaming' by implying in some way she 'asked for it' or 'tempted' the

perpetrator (Phipps et al., 2017 and Ringrose & Renold, 2012). This cycle of online objectification can make young women feel as though their bodies are no longer their own (Ford, 2023).

Pornography further complicates this issue for women. Women in porn usually lack autonomy over their bodies and have their bodies idealised, they endure shaming and degradation; they follow the rules and are punished in accordance with the dominant partner, often male. This harmful message illustrates that only certain body types and behaviours are sexually desirable; compliance and male gratification are portrayed as the measure of sexual participation and gratification. Bodies outside this fall into the realm of fetish. Mourikis (2023) argues that porn habits that fetishise individuals based on race or body type are oppressive and perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reduce People Of Colour to mere body parts, reflecting colonial and white supremacist practices. The toxic influence of these standards is especially damaging for marginalised groups, including women of colour and individuals with disabilities, who are rarely represented in mainstream pornography, contributing to low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and mental health challenges for people within these marginalised groups, educating that these oppressed groups are no longer people, but fantasied objects that deserve to be treated specific ways in sex.

The Relationship Between Pornography Use and Respect and Consent Education (d):

Today's digital landscape creates easier access for pornography consumption as well as acting as a tool that can instil harm (image abuse) and manage tracking without the use of malware (through social media apps such as Snapchat). While platforms such as Only Fans liberate people, this empowerment of sex work still faces significant backlash that decreases the value of women who partake in it. Research consistently shows that pornography distorts perceptions of relationships, intimacy, and gender roles, severely impacting how individuals understand consent. The lack of intimacy and the visual representation of what is "good" sex is depicted not by intimacy but by one where people are ejaculating and moaning; pair this with content that portrays women as subservient—sexually submissive to men, being harmed, and seemingly "enjoying" it (Leigh and Crabbe 2017) its a cocktail of harmful behaviours. Earlier exposure to this content without adequate counter-education is damaging as it establishes neural pathways that create unrealistic expectations and reinforce harmful stereotypes of dominance and objectification (Connell, 2002).

Maree Crabbe in the Excellent Life podcast with Andrew Leigh (2017) quotes a study of 50 of the most popular pornographic videos found that 88% of sales included physical aggression, and 48% of sales included verbal aggression. That aggression is overwhelmingly directed towards women, this early and repeated exposure to violent pornography is linked to psychological and social impacts that are linked to increased sexual harassment perpetration among young males, with media reinforcing these harmful attitudes (Brown & Engle, 2009). Chanel Contos (2022) discusses how acts like sexual choking have become normalised in mainstream porn. Therefore, the amount of consumption leads to desensitised to the level of aggression not only in sex but in general. This setting of unattainable standards for both men and women in pornography pressures women to engage in acts they may find uncomfortable while encouraging men to pursue these behaviours without prior communication or respect for boundaries.

For many, pornography is sought out to learn about sexuality. However, most mainstream content does little to portray mutual consent or female pleasure. Instead, it promotes coercive and often violent scripts that teach harmful ideas about intimacy and relationships (Maas et al., 2023). Research shows that viewers of violent pornography often adopt more rape-supportive attitudes and are more likely to experience or perpetrate sexual violence than those who seek out content centred on female agency and pleasure (Maas et al., 2023). Even platforms like PornHub have felt the pressure to delete large amounts of content, especially those that include coercive acts or portray women as minors (Cox, 2020), highlighting the ethical responsibility of these digital spaces in fighting against sexual exploitation, but also the complexities of how to monitor and remove the content.

Sex, like relationships does not often start as aggressively. Consent, initially established, can be overlooked. Pornography plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of consent and intimacy, often promoting power dynamics where male dominance and female submission are expected. Young men with unrestricted access to porn internalise these distorted narratives, fostering unrealistic expectations of relationships and further entrenching a culture of exploitation. Recent findings indicate that choking during sex is increasingly normalised, often regarded as 'normal' behaviour. Many young people report a troubling lack of consideration for consent, with actions frequently taken without asking if it's okay (Contos 2022; Hone 2024). Research by Quadara, El-Murr, and Latham (2017) shows how these portrayals hinder young people's understanding of consent, leading them to believe aggressive sexual acts are not only acceptable but universally desired. The Australian Government's *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (2022)* highlights how media-driven power imbalances keep fuelling violence against women. When this is paired with the normalisation of aggressive and violent behaviours in pornography, the foundation for harmful behaviours is undeniable (Giraldi and Monk-Turner 2017). When men start to expect the aggressive acts they see on screen in their relationships, it can lead to frustration, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy when reality does not measure up (Sommet & Berent, 2023). Men who frequently consume objectifying media often show higher levels of hostile sexism and treat women as objects rather than equals (Kohut et al., 2016; Wright & Tokunaga, 2016). This kind of media twists the idea of intimacy, pushing the false narrative that all women want and enjoy the aggression portrayed in porn (Quadara et al., 2017). Figures like Andrew Tate only add fuel to the fire, endorsing behaviours that undermine gender equality and mutual respect (Sparrow 2024). Tate's message is emblematic of a culture that normalises exploitative behaviours, framing women as objects and encouraging young men to view relationships through a lens of control and submission.A recent study done by Tomorrow Woman found that 42% of female students feel unsafe due to toxic influencers, with nearly a third reporting significant harm and safety concerns at school. Shutting these harmful views before they educate young people in the harmful actions based on patriarchal views and benevolent sexism.

Production and Dissemination of Pornography, Including Deepfake or AI-Generated Pornography (e):
Sexual exploitation spans a disturbing range of abusive behaviours where those in power use coercion and manipulation to gratify their own needs at the expense of vulnerable people. Acts like trafficking, prostitution, and digital abuse are all devastating forms of this exploitation (UNHCR). As technology advances, so do the methods of exploitation—mainly through pornography and image-based abuse—targeting and harming young people's sense of safety and self-worth.

One incredibly distressing form of this abuse is image-based exploitation, where intimate photos or videos are shared without the subject's consent. According to the eSafety Commissioner (2021), 11% of respondents had been victims of this violation, with young women aged 18-24 facing the highest risk. The rise of AI has deepened this crisis, giving way to the spread of "deepfake" pornography, where people's images are manipulated into explicit content without their consent. A disturbing example of this involved a teenage boy from Bacchus Marsh Grammar, who circulated AI-generated explicit images of 50 of his female classmates (Alder, 2023; Morris, 2023). This and other incidents, like the deepfake images made of female teachers at Salesian College and students at the Hunter School of Performing Arts (Morris 2023), illustrate the depth of harm caused when digital manipulation denies victims any control over their images. AI-powered alterations blur the line between fiction and reality, stripping people—often young women—of their sense of security and self-worth. With a legal system that is constantly one step behind victims experience more trauma and shame than the perpetrators. Confronting sexual exploitation in our digital era means combining preventive education, legal reforms, and technological solutions to dismantle the toxic narratives spread by exploitative media and harmful online influencers and harsher sentences for people that commit these image based abuse. Society must face the role that sexual violence plays in reinforcing power imbalances, especially as these dynamics are increasingly evident in coercive control within intimate and family relationships (InFocus, 2022).

Suggestions

Many narratives in pornography lack consent, and when used as an informal means of education, they can lead to harmful behaviours not only in intimate relationships but also in reinforcing outdated gender roles. By eroticising violence against women, these narratives promote certain ideals about bodies and suggest that "good" sex must include a climax. This upholds subordinate roles and implies it is acceptable to treat individuals differently based on age, gender, sexual orientation, or race. The absence of female voices encourages women to remain silent in uncomfortable situations, potentially leading to victims of sexual abuse feeling compelled to keep quiet. This silence grants perpetrators the freedom to argue that their actions were acceptable or to fail to understand why their behaviour was wrong, non-consensual, or harmful. My story is not one in a million but one of millions, as someone who has been impacted by the harmful effects of pornography. I am asking for cultural change by providing the social framework required for mitigating the effects of this social crisis. To combat the negative impacts pornography has on people's well-being, I propose several key actions. First, introduce an elective class each semester for open, age-appropriate discussions on sexuality, covering boundaries, consent, the influence of substances on decision-making, and how to navigate the digital world safely and fairly. In primary school, this could mean teaching basic anatomy and introducing the concept of boundaries (e.g., respecting someone's choice not to be hugged). In high school, cover consent in depth, stressing that it must be continually renewed, while also addressing the impacts of alcohol, drugs, and peer pressure; topics like aggressive pornography, body image, digital literacy, the risks of sharing or altering nude images, and consent in the digital era should also be included. At the university level, expand current initiatives, such as the University of Newcastle's online consent quiz, by adding links to support services for both victims and perpetrators.

By taking these steps, we can empower young people to engage critically with sexual content, offering a counter-narrative to mainstream pornography that redefines intimacy as a matter of respect and genuine connection.

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