

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

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IT'S TIME
WE TALKED

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harmful pornography on mental,
emotional, and physical health**

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About *It's time we talked*

It's time we talked is a violence prevention initiative aiming to address pornography's harms to young people.

It began in 2009 after one of its founders, Maree Crabbe, observed the increasing role of online pornography in shaping young people's sexual imaginations, expectations and experiences. At the time, Maree was a community worker in regional Victoria working with young people on sexual violence prevention, sexual diversity and the prevention of sexually transmissible infections. In schools and community settings, young men in particular spoke of the ways that the pornography they were watching promoted ways of thinking about and having sex that were violent towards women.

Fifteen years later, funded almost entirely through philanthropy and fee-for-service work, *It's time we talked* has:

- developed a range of resources, including education resources for use with young people in schools and other settings, parent education resources, and professional learning resources;
- advocated with governments and the community sector, across Australia and internationally;
- conducted professional learning with thousands of teachers, youth workers, health workers and other professionals in Australia and around the world;
- engaged in public discourse through the production of two documentary films (broadcast in Australia and internationally), written articles and other media appearances.

It's time we talked is based on best practice violence prevention frameworks and grounded in rigorous academic research. The initiative has also conducted scores of interviews with young people, professionals who work with young people, and people working in the pornography industry.

The voices of young people – including young women, LGBTQ people, Aboriginal young people, and autistic young people – feature strongly in the work and help to tell the story of how industrial online pornography harms children and young people. We have included some written excerpts from our interviews in this submission.

The voices of young people can be seen and heard in the various resources that *It's time we talked* has developed including:

- [resources](#) for a 'general' audience;
- [resources](#) designed to mitigate online pornography's harms to autistic young people; and
- [resources](#) developed with communities in the Northern Territory for use in schools and community settings there (see the discussion of point 10 from the inquiry terms of reference below for more details).

In recent years, *It's time we talked* noticed in interviews with young people that sexual strangulation was becoming a normative part of their sexual encounters.

“There’s definitely violent practices like choking and slapping which are almost seen as vanilla now, especially choking. Choking is very mainstream.” Young women, aged 18

“We’ve accepted that in sexual encounters it’ll probably happen. They won’t ask first.” Young woman, aged 18

Young people themselves and the academic literature suggest that industrial online pornography has been the most significant influence on this cultural shift of sexual strangulation into the mainstream.

“Because that’s what they’re seeing in porn, [they think] ‘Okay, I see rough positions, she must like that. I see choking, she must like that.’” Young woman, aged 22

In response to the normalisation of sexual strangulation – a practice that medical experts say cannot be performed safely – *It’s time we talked* has developed a public campaign to draw attention to its harms. The [Breathless campaign](#) only recently received its first small philanthropic grant.

Understanding industrial online pornography

Definition of pornography

In this submission, we define “pornography” as referring to any material depicting a person engaged in sexually explicit conduct, whether real or simulated, which typically includes portrayals of nudity and/or various sexual acts.

Pornography includes a diverse range of material. This submission will focus particularly on the kind of pornography to which most children and young people are exposed: free, widely available “mainstream” online content, the vast majority of which is targeted at a male heterosexual audience. It is content that is largely produced and distributed by the global pornography industry.

What is contemporary pornography?

Grasping industrial online pornography’s impacts on children and young people requires understanding the nature of the content itself.

Mainstream, contemporary pornography is no longer a naked or semi-naked image in the magazines that marked the advent of the modern commercial pornography industry. Today, pornographic content is a vast array of graphic, moving imagery, often depicting extreme close-ups of breasts, genitals and sexual activity (Tarrant 2016, Séguin, Rodrigue et al. 2018). It may be pre-recorded or live-streamed (Tarrant 2016).

Despite what can seem like a vast and diverse array of instantly accessible content catering to any sexual taste, curiosity, or proclivity (Ogas and Gaddam 2011), the most popular, free, online pornography to which children and young people are most exposed tends repeatedly to depict a range of concerning themes, including:

- **gendered aggression and degradation:** various content analyses have found significant levels of aggression – such as spanking, gagging, choking, slapping, spitting, hair-pulling and verbal abuse – in the most popular pornography (Gorman, Monk-Turner et al. 2010, Klaassen and Peter 2015, Carrotte, Davis et al. 2020, Fritz, Malic et al. 2020). This aggression is overwhelmingly directed towards women who are almost always depicted as enjoying or being indifferent to the aggression (Fritz, Malic et al. 2020). It is important to note that these content analyses stand in contrast to that undertaken by Australian academic Alan McKee who, because of the definition of ‘violence’ he used, rendered the violence in mainstream pornography almost invisible. McKee found violence in only 2% of scenes; vastly lower than other analyses (McKee 2005).
- **gender stereotypes and inequality:** pornography that portrays sex between men and women commonly depicts men as dominant, in control, and aggressive while women are depicted as subservient to men’s desires (Gorman, Monk-Turner et al. 2010, Klaassen and Peter 2015). Often inequalities between men and women are reflected and reinforced by age differences, with women much more likely than their male counterparts to be young (Willis, Canan et al. 2020). This gender stereotyping and inequality is replicated in gay male pornography through depictions of a dominant, hypermasculine character with a more feminized, submissive character, who, like women, is often also a target of aggression (Burke 2016, Young 2017, Seida and Shor 2021).
- **non-consent:** not only does pornography regularly fail to portray any negotiation of sexual consent (Willis, Canan et al. 2020), it also commonly depicts overtly non-consensual behaviours. (Talbot 2019). Sometimes, a lack of consent is key to how a pornographic video is promoted. A UK study which analysed over 131,000 titles from the home pages of the most popular pornography websites found that 1 in 8 titles described behaviours that constitute sexual violence: for example, forced sex, hidden camera, sex with someone who is asleep or drunk, and incest themes (Vera-Gray, McGlynn et al. 2021).
- **incest or ‘family’ themes:** the most popular, mainstream pornographic content often portrays sex between family members, including between parents and children, and siblings. For example, one study found incest or ‘family’ themes in 46 per cent of the most popular pornography videos (Talbot 2019) and another found incest themes in 11 per cent of pornography video titles (Vera-Gray, McGlynn et al. 2021).
- **childlike themes:** mainstream pornography often includes content depicting sex with someone who is, or appears to be, very young. This may be content produced with young adult performers who have been dressed or groomed to appear young, for example, by wearing school uniforms or children’s pyjamas, or by playing roles that emphasise their youthfulness, such as a youthful babysitter or school girl (Dines 2009, Jensen 2010, Peters, Morrison et al.

2014). The language used in pornography also highlights the prevalence and popularity of content featuring young performers. “Teen” is a prominent category on mainstream pornography sites. “Teen” is also the most common word in pornography titles (Vera-Gray, McGlynn et al. 2021), and is routinely listed as among the most searched terms (Pornhub 2019, Miller and McBain 2022). It can be very difficult for viewers to assess accurately the age of those depicted in online pornography and it is important to note that despite its illegality, in addition to childlike portrayals of young adults, child sexual abuse material may also be found on mainstream pornography sites (Kristof 2020).

- **racism:** most performers in mainstream industrial pornography are white, and those who are not are often referred to by their ethnicity and depicted as adhering to racist stereotypes such as an aggressive Black man or a submissive Asian woman (Zhou and Paul 2016, Willis, Canan et al. 2020, Miller and McBain 2022).

The prevalence of these themes is not accidental. Rather, the content that is available for free on mainstream pornography aggregator sites is carefully curated to attract and maintain viewers’ attention because, like other parts of the online ecosystem, the pornography industry profits from viewer engagement. The online pornography industry maximises viewer retention through the use of bots and sophisticated algorithms to direct viewers to novel and often more extreme content. (Johnson 2020). The result is the production and promotion of content that reflects and reinforces inequalities and, often, violence (Bridges 2019, Johnson 2020).

Much of what is conveyed through mainstream contemporary pornographic content is contrary to the principles that underpin healthy relationships and sexuality – such as respect, equality, safety and consent.

“They want to see screaming and yelling and very hard f*cking and sweating and just like, you know, you have to destroy the girl.” Anthony Hardwood, pornography performer

“That’s why rough sex and strong sex work: because it’s incredible to look at. As human beings we want to see stuff like that.” John Stagliano, pornography director/producer

“It’s certainly very common to see some sort of violence, whether it’s physical or just verbal violence. And it’s portrayed as really sexy.” Young man, aged 24

“Effectively, anything that is illegal in real life, any person that it would be illegal for you to have sex with in real life, there’s a whole porn category about it.” Young woman, aged 24

Responses to the terms of reference

(1) Age of first exposure to pornography and impacts of early exposure to pornography

Most Australian children are exposed to pornographic content by the age of 15, with many first seeing it when they are considerably younger (eSafety Commissioner 2023, Crabbe, Flood et al. 2024). A national study of 15-20 year old Australians found that almost half of boys have seen pornography by the age of 13 and almost half of girls have seen it by the age of 15 (Crabbe, Flood et al. 2024).

Online pornographic content can be accessed easily, freely and anonymously through the kinds of internet-enabled devices commonly used by children, including phones, tablets, computers, and gaming devices (eSafety Commissioner 2023).

“On your phone, laptops whatever’s got internet you can find porn on there.” Young man, aged 18

“I ended up finding out what porn was through this game.” Young women, aged 20

Although children of any gender or age may see pornographic content unintentionally or deliberately, most children’s first exposure to pornography is unintentional: through an accidental encounter or when they are shown or sent pornography without their permission (Tsaliki 2011, Martellozzo, Monaghan et al. 2016, Henry and Talbot 2019, eSafety Commissioner 2023).

“Even when you’re not looking for it you find it on the internet.” Young man, aged 18

Children are more likely to seek out pornography actively as they grow into adolescence (eSafety Commissioner 2023). Children seek out pornography for a range of reasons, including because they are curious, for sexual arousal, to learn about what may be expected of them during sex, due to pressure from peers, for entertainment, to address boredom, and for sexual exploration (Horvath, Alys et al. 2013, de Souza 2023, eSafety Commissioner 2023).

Boys and young men are more likely than girls and young women to see pornography both intentionally and accidentally, and to view it more often (Horvath, Alys et al. 2013, Martellozzo, Monaghan et al. 2016, de Souza 2023, eSafety Commissioner 2023, Crabbe, Flood et al. 2024). Significant numbers of young men in particular report viewing pornography frequently (Crabbe, Flood et al. 2024). In an Australian study of 15-20 year olds, over half (54 per cent) of young men reported viewing pornography weekly or more often and one in six (16 per cent) reported viewing it daily (Crabbe, Flood et al. 2024). This contrasts with 14 per cent of young women reporting weekly viewing and 1 per cent reporting daily viewing.

Children’s perceptions of pornography also tend to be highly gendered, with boys and young men much more likely than girls and young women to report feeling positive about pornography (Flood 2010, Horvath, Alys et al. 2013). Although children of any gender or age may find pornographic content upsetting, confusing or distressing, girls and younger children are more likely than boys and older children to report feeling upset by the pornography they have seen (Smahel, Machackova et al. 2020).

“Some of the things you can find on the internet are disgusting and horrible and just something that you feel like no human would want.” Young woman, aged 16

“I remember I couldn’t get it out of my head, and I was upset for a while and yeah I remember I was quite distressed by it.” Young man, aged 16

(2) media by which pornography is accessed and circulated

Highly compact and mobile technology enables children to access pornography anywhere, including at home, school, the home of a friend or partner, or on public or private transport (eSafety Commissioner 2023). The most common context for seeing pornography is alone and at home (Horvath, Alys et al. 2013, eSafety Commissioner 2023, Crabbe, Flood et al. 2024).

Children may be exposed to pornographic content through a dedicated pornography site – including any of the highly-ranking pornography aggregator sites that provide access to a plethora of free sexually explicit content with almost no warnings or barriers designed to limit or prevent children’s access. But they may also be exposed through the feed or messaging functions of social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook or X (formerly Twitter), or via a search engine, video chat website, gaming site or text message, or being shown by someone else (de Souza 2023, eSafety Commissioner 2023).

(3) impacts on body image

Pornography is contributing to defining what *looks* normal and desirable.

Pornography is one of very few contexts in which young people can see other people naked. For many young people, the bodies in pornography may be the *only* bodies apart from their own that they see unclothed. The extreme close ups that are common in pornography make it possible to view in intricate detail, body parts that are usually covered. This novelty of access to naked bodies may increase pornography’s influence on young people’s perceptions of what bodies – and particularly genitals and breasts – should look like (Goldsmith, Dunkley et al. 2017).

Although pornography does include diverse body types (Smith 2013) – arguably more diverse bodies than any other media genre – much pornography contains images of young, thin, conventionally attractive women, often with small labia (Dubinskaya, Dallas et al. 2022, Maki, Vernaleken et al. 2023), and men with very large and perpetually erect penises (Morrison, Harriman et al. 2004). Both men and women often have no or highly manicured pubic hair in pornography (Goldsmith, Dunkley et al. 2017, Dubinskaya, Dallas et al. 2022, Maki, Vernaleken et al. 2023).

Young people report learning about human bodies and anatomy through pornography (Robb and Mann 2023). They report contradictory feelings about the bodies pornography represents; often critiquing the unattainable standards of the bodies they see but also describing comparing them against their own bodies and feeling inadequate in contrast (Smith 2013, Peter and Valkenburg 2016, Doornwaard, den Boer et al. 2017, de Souza 2023). Some young people also

describe feeling reassured by seeing more diverse bodies being sexual in pornography (Ashton, McDonald et al. 2019, Marques 2019).

The removal of pubic hair has become a standard practice among young women (Stone, Graham et al. 2017), and some young men. There is some evidence that pornography has contributed to this fashion if not through direct consumption, then through pornography's influence on partners' expectations or simply on cultural norms (Ramsey, Sweeney et al. 2009, Stone, Graham et al. 2017).

Pornography use is associated with higher levels of self-objectification, and with body dissatisfaction, insecurity and anxiety in both young men and young women (Goldsmith, Dunkley et al. 2017, Johnson, Ezzell et al. 2019, Maheux, Roberts et al. 2021, Farina 2022). It is also associated with higher expectations of partners – in terms of their partners' attractiveness and sexual performance – particularly among men (Goldsmith, Dunkley et al. 2017). The self-image of heterosexual young women is impacted not only by their own exposure to pornography, but also through their male partners' pornography use. Women report higher levels of feeling inadequate and objectified by male partners who are heavy pornography users (Tylka and Van Diest 2015, Kohut, Fisher et al. 2017).

The rates of interventions such as labioplasties, breast augmentations and anal bleaching have grown dramatically in recent years (Hustad, Malmqvist et al. 2022), with some drawing links between these procedures and the pervasiveness of pornography (Sorice-Virk, Li et al. 2020) – though the relationship with pornography may be indirect.

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

Pornography use is critically relevant to sexuality and relationships education, including education on themes such as respect and consent.

Much of what is conveyed through mainstream contemporary pornography is contrary to the principles that underpin healthy relationships and sexuality. Yet for many children and young people, pornography has become a default sexuality educator. It is shaping their sexual imaginations, understandings, expectations and experiences, with significant consequences for their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their partners (this is discussed further under points 6 and 7, below). On average, Australian young men see pornography 3 years before their first partnered sexual experience, and young women see it 2 years before theirs (Crabbe, Flood et al. 2024). Often, they are seeing pornography before they have kissed or touched the skin of an intimate partner. So, pornography's shaping of arousal patterns and of sexual understandings is often occurring without the kind of counter-reference points they may develop from interpersonal sexual experiences.

Children and young people need education that supports them to navigate relationships and sexuality that are safe, respectful, consenting and mutually pleasurable. To do so effectively, that education must address the real-world influences that shape young people's sexual understandings and experiences –

including pornography, as well as other influences, such as social media, and their partners and peers. We cannot expect young people to evaluate pornography's depictions and influence critically if we do not support them to develop the relevant skills (Crabbe and Flood 2021) (this is discussed further under point 8, below).

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

The increasing ease with which sexual imagery can be produced and disseminated raises a whole range of challenges for children and young people's wellbeing.

Like many adults, some young people create and share sexual imagery as part of their sexual exploration and expression. Although this practice holds risks, some of which are substantial, it is not inherently harmful when both creator and receiver engage in it respectfully and consensually. However, it may be difficult for young people (or anyone) to discern what is genuine sexual exploration and expression and what is a performance of norms and expectations conveyed by a partner or peers and/or influenced by the global pornography industry. It is also not possible to be certain that an intended recipient will keep the imagery private. And where the relationship occurs only online, it can be difficult to determine whether the relationship is genuine or exploitative, a difficulty that is now increasingly exploited by criminal elements that trick young people into creating sexual imagery with the intention of extorting them for money, more images or sexual contact (eSafety Commissioner 2021).

Some young people are drawn to the possibility of creating sexual imagery for profit. They need [support](#) to critically analyse the nature of the industry and to understand the risks, including the legal risks.

The most significant harms associated with the production and dissemination of pornography is when they occur without consent. Image-based abuse includes pressure or coercion to create sexual imagery, the production or dissemination of sexual imagery without the consent of someone who is depicted, or threats to disseminate sexual imagery. The imagery may be real or fake imagery developed using deepfake or artificial intelligence.

Developments in technology now make it possible to develop highly realistic 'deepfake' sexual imagery of someone with very little technical expertise and only minimal imagery depicting that person. The technology makes the non-consensual production and dissemination of sexual imagery easy. The technology is usually used against women and there are increasing reports of the production and circulation of sexual deepfake imagery of young women, including of young men creating explicit deepfake imagery of their female classmates. The emotional, social and mental consequences for victim survivors can be enormous.

The development of deepfake technologies and the total disregard for victims' wellbeing shown by those who profit from them point to the need for legislation that seeks to prevent the production and distribution of image-based abuse and to hold the perpetrators and enablers to account.

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

As detailed above, free industrial online pornography often depicts aggression directed towards women or the 'feminine'. Distinguishing between the free, easily accessible mainstream online pornography that most children and young people will come across and that which is 'violent and/or misogynistic' is to a significant extent a category error; more often they are the same thing.

That said, it can be difficult to separate pornography's potential impacts on children and young people from other influences that shape their understandings and experiences. Families, peers, cultural context and broader society, and of other forms of media such as social media, television, films, video games and advertising play a role in children and young people's development (eSafety Commissioner 2023).

Notwithstanding the complexity, there is evidence that contemporary pornography is impacting on children and young people in a range of ways. While some claim that pornography doesn't harm children (McKee 2010) or focus on the potential for it to contribute positively to young people's sexual socialization and experiences (McKee, Albury et al. 2008, Attwood, Smith et al. 2018), such a position downplays important negative influences, particularly concerning gendered inequalities and violence (Antevska and Gavey 2015) and ignores a wide body of research that demonstrates pornography's association with a range of harms.

Pornography has become a key source of information and education about sexuality for many young people. In research from around the world, young people report that pornography has impacted on their and others' sexual attitudes and behaviours (Tydén and Rogala 2004, Häggström-Nordin, Tydén et al. 2009, Mattebo, Larsson et al. 2012, Martellozzo, Monaghan et al. 2016, Doornwaard, den Boer et al. 2017, Office of Film and Literature Classification 2018, Our Watch 2020, de Souza 2023, Robb and Mann 2023).

"When boys start having sex they imagine porn and like everything that goes on in porn." Young woman, aged 20

Young people often convey an awareness that pornography's depictions are unrealistic or unhealthy and express some concerns about how it might shape some people's expectations of bodies, gender roles and sex (Smith 2013, Doornwaard, den Boer et al. 2017, Office of Film and Literature Classification 2018, Our Watch 2020). However, while users' accounts of pornography's impacts on them provide important insights into their perceptions and experiences, users' self-reflections should not be viewed as the final answer to the question of pornography's effects (Crabbe and Flood 2021).

Pornography use is associated with a range of harms. It is:

- predictive of more sexualized, sexually objectifying and stereotypic gender views of women (Brown and L'Engle 2009, Peter and Valkenburg 2010, Peter

and Valkenburg 2011, Hald, Malamuth et al. 2013, Wright and Funk 2014, Wright and Bae 2015);

- associated with risky sexual behaviours (Lim, Agius et al. 2017), including sexual strangulation (Wright, Herbenick et al. 2021);
- associated with a range of violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours (Malamuth, Addison et al. 2000, Wright, Tokunaga et al. 2015), including teen dating violence (Rostad, Gittins-Stone et al. 2019), sexual solicitation perpetration (Chang, Chiu et al. 2016), sexual harassment (Kennair and Bendixen 2012), and sexual violence (Bonino, Ciairano et al. 2006, Brown and L'Engle 2009, Ybarra, Mitchell et al. 2011, D'Abreu and Krahé 2014, Stanley, Barter et al. 2018, Ybarra and Thompson 2018);
- associated with dating violence victimization (Rothman and Adhia 2016); and
- an important contributor, according to young people, to girls' and young women's experiences of painful, unpleasant or coerced sex (Marston and Lewis 2014, Rothman, Kaczmarsky et al. 2015).

“My boyfriend when I was 16 wanted to watch pornography with me and I initially found that quite alarming...It parlayed into him slapping me or pushing me really aggressively against walls with a hand on my throat... I definitely picked up the idea that I should be submissive to that.” Young woman, aged 24

Pornography use can have a range of other physical, psychological, social, and emotional impacts on children. For example, it is associated with sex without a condom (Tokunaga, Wright et al. 2020) and can impact on children's perceptions of their own and other people's bodies, including higher levels of self-objectification, body dissatisfaction, insecurity and anxiety (Tylka and Van Diest 2015, Peter and Valkenburg 2016, Doornwaard, den Boer et al. 2017, Goldsmith, Dunkley et al. 2017, de Souza 2023, Robb and Mann 2023). Young women in particular often report concerns about pornography's depictions of gender stereotypes and how these impact on expectations that women's role is subservient to men and that there is an obligation on women to prioritise men's pleasure in sexual encounters (Mattebo, Larsson et al. 2012, Rothman, Kaczmarsky et al. 2015, Ashton, McDonald et al. 2019, Litsou, Byron et al. 2020, Tholander, Johansson et al. 2022, de Souza 2023). Young women's concerns that their male partners have transferred the objectification of women in pornography on to them are supported by a significant body of research that finds repeated exposure to pornography is related to viewing women as sex objects, including among adolescents (Peter and Valkenburg 2009, Omori, Zhang et al. 2011, Ward, Vandenbosch et al. 2015, Wright and Tokunaga 2016).

In our own interviews, young people repeatedly report that pornography is impacting negatively on their experiences of sex and relationships.

“There's a normalization of sex acts that push beyond people's limits.” Young woman, aged 23

“Like if you're not okay with being choked and slapped – and these are considered standard sexual acts – that's something that I then think puts a lot of women in that position where if they're not comfortable with those certain things, they're not

necessarily totally open about saying that because they don't want to seem like a prude or they don't want to seem like they're boring." Young women, aged 22

Finally, there is an emerging body of evidence that children and young people's exposure to mainstream online pornography is linked to their engagement in harmful sexual behaviours. There is a change in both the pattern of harmful sexual behaviours (for example, a decrease in the time between first experimenting with harmful sexual behaviours and engaging in penetrative acts) and in the type of person practicing it. Whereas previously children displaying harmful sexual behaviours often were mimicking abuse they themselves had suffered, there is increasing evidence that children without those experiences of abuse are engaging in harmful sexual behaviours as a result of the pornography they have seen. When we interviewed Professor Simon Hackett, a global expert in harmful sexual behaviours based in the UK, he explained that:

"Reports around children's harmful sexual behaviours have exploded over the past few years. It's clear, from the reports about those children and young people that exposure to pornography is a key driver of that behaviour and accounts for a significant proportion of the increase in the referral rates that we're seeing." Professor Simon Hackett

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

There is limited research investigating the ways pornography's influence may be experienced differently by different groups, but existing literature and anecdotal evidence indicate that its influence may be amplified for some already vulnerable or marginalized groups.

LGBTQ young people

For gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans and queer young people, pornography can take on another layer of significance compared with the experiences of cisgender heterosexual young people.

Growing up in contexts in which same sex and trans desire and relationships are often invisible – and often also viewed negatively – many LGBTQ young people describe pornography as providing a space in which their sexuality or gender identity is represented.

They often note and lament the absence of access to relevant information in relationships and sexuality education – at school, home, among their peers, and in other forms of media (Arrington-Sanders, Harper et al. 2015, Harvey 2020). This contrasts with pornography, where young people can easily and anonymously access content that, to some extent, portrays their sexual and gender identity openly and in explicit and intricate detail (Arrington-Sanders et al, 2015).

As such, pornography can play a significant role in a young person exploring their sexual or gender identity – which likely contributes to why, on average, young people from sexual and gender minorities first see pornography younger than other young

people and also consume it at higher rates (Bóthe, Vaillancourt-Morel et al. 2020, Miller, Raggatt et al. 2020, Robb and Mann 2023).

Young people often describe using pornography as a means of self-discovery, exploration, and for determining their interests and attractions (Arrington-Sanders, Harper et al. 2015, McCormack and Wignall 2017, Bóthe, Vaillancourt-Morel et al. 2019, Harvey 2020, Widman, Javidi et al. 2021). Some young people report being shown heterosexual pornography by family members aiming to encourage interest in heterosexuality and discourage same-sex sexuality (Arrington-Sanders et al, 2015).

Young people talk about learning from porn and re-enacting what they've seen (Arrington-Sanders et al, 2015; Harvey, 2020). In various studies, LGBTQ young people describe how they have used porn to learn about sexual roles, the mechanics of sex, sexual performance scripts such as what sounds they should make, sexual activities and techniques, and models for how sex should feel (Harvey, 2020; McCormack and Wignall, 2017; Arrington-Sanders et al, 2015).

They often express concerns about the unrealistic nature of the depictions, and the pressure this can create (Harvey, 2020). They also report that it does not reflect their experiences and practices (Harvey 2020). Some describe how LGBTQ pornography's reproduction of heterosexual norms left them feeling confused, wrong or dirty (Harvey, 2020, p45; McCormack and Wignall, 2017). Young gay men often report that the gender stereotypes commonly depicted in gay male pornography create expectations or demands for them to conform to one or the other of these roles and left them feeling limited and vulnerable.

"I think what young gay men are learning is you've got to have sex like this. It's got to be rough. It's got to be with a daddy or whatever." Young man, aged 27

"Those types of porn categories do influence what you seek out in sex." Young man, aged 24

"I'm constantly asked this question, I'm constantly evaluated on that question, 'Are you a top or a bottom.' Because people will make assumptions about what's going to happen and who's going to be the one in power." Young man, aged 27

Similarly, the limited ways in which trans people are represented in pornography and the levels of aggression directed towards them, can negatively impact not only on a trans person's own sense of self, but also how they are perceived and expected to be by others (Zoe Belle Gender Collective 2021).

"I didn't feel great about myself after watching it... It gives the impression like 'Oh, this is how people see you or will see and treat you if you were like ever to get close to someone. Or even just from a stranger on the street, like this is how the world views you.'" Young trans woman, aged 20

First Nations and CALD young people

There are numerous ways in which pornography's influence may be amplified for First Nations and CALD young people, including if they have limited access to

relationships and sexuality education that is tailored to their cultural contexts and needs. They may also be disproportionately impacted by the racism in pornography.

As discussed, pornography commonly depicts racist stereotypes. There is also evidence that the ethnicity of performers is a factor in determining the porn that young people seek out (Rothman et al, 2015; Arrington-Sanders et al, 2015).

If young people seek out pornography with performers who they feel better able to identify with, then young people from ethnic groups that are fetishized and stereotyped in pornography are more likely to be exposed to those depictions. And sexual script theory suggests that this will increase the likelihood of them being influenced by these portrayals.

Some young people report that pornography's racist stereotypes make them feel self-conscious, disgusted or victimised (Robb and Mann, 2023, p22). Young people we have interviewed also describe how porn's racism impacts on them through their own exposure to it, but also through its impacts on others.

"It kind of creates this illusion that you have to be like this if you're this specific colour and you have to be like that if you're that specific colour." Young man, aged 18

"White men have this like fetish for small Asian women and they think that they're like docile and submissive. It's called 'yellow fever.' That's what people call it." Young woman, aged 18

"It feels diminishing to be fetishized." Young woman, aged 19.

Neurodivergent young people

Autistic young people are significantly overrepresented among young people who have engaged in harmful sexual behaviour and there is widespread concern among the therapists and other practitioners who work with them that pornography's influence is contributing to this phenomenon and to an increased risk of sexual victimisation.

Several factors can amplify pornography's impacts on autistic young people, including a tendency towards literal interpretations (including of media), lack of access to age and developmentally appropriate sexuality education, challenges interpreting facial and body cues, pressure to keep up with peers, and, for many, an elevated comfort using technology which, combined with challenges with social interactions, can lead to extended periods spent online. Autistic people's [monotropic cognitive style](#) can also interact with the 'attention economy' business model of online pornography to make them more susceptible to developing compulsive patterns of pornography use that negatively impact their engagement with school, work, sleep and relationships.

"That was the hard bit trying to refrain from those videos because wherever you go on your phone it will always come up like out of nowhere because it's just trying to grab your attention and bring you back to that stage again... Every time I saw videos like that it just really triggered my mind." Autistic young man, aged 28

“I work with young people who are masturbating five or six times a day. And good on you, if you can masturbate five or six times a day and ejaculate, that's great except, this is impacting on their lives. They can't leave the house because they've got to wank to porn five or six times a day. They're losing friends. They can't go to work. And they're suffering. They're really, really suffering through this.” Jodi Rodgers, sexologist and counsellor

These factors may also be relevant for young people with other forms of neurodivergence, such as ADHD.

Pornography's impacts on autistic young people are discussed in more detail in the resources developed through the [Porn Is Not the Norm](#) project.

Young people living with disability

Like other young people, young people living with disability have a right to make informed decisions about their bodies and relationships, and to be free from violence and abuse. Pornography's influence may impact negatively on these rights.

There is enormous diversity among the experiences of young people living with disability and the differences between them can impact on the ways and the extent to which they experience pornography's influence. There is a need for research investigating their experiences. Drawing on anecdotes from young people and the professionals who work with them, we would like to raise five themes worthy of further research and reflection:

- ❑ Young people living with disability are at substantially higher risk of sexual violence victimization. Pornography's normalization of gendered aggression, coercion and non-consent may increase this risk of victimization, for example, when a partner or another person in a young person's life has been influenced by pornography's sexual scripts and imposes those expectations on them.
- ❑ Young people with an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment may have greater difficulty than some other young people differentiating the fantasy of pornography's depictions from reality, and consequently be at increased risk of sexual violence victimisation and/or perpetration.
- ❑ For some children, young people and adults, exposure to mainstream pornography acts as a gateway to exposure to child sexual exploitation material and other illegal sexual content. Anecdotal evidence suggests that neurodivergent young people and young people living with disability may be at particular risk of this pathway, perhaps due to difficulties with understanding age and laws pertaining to age and sex (Dubin, Henault et al. 2014).
- ❑ Young people living with some types of disabilities may face particular barriers to establishing intimate relationships and be more inclined to turn to pornography as a means of sexual fulfilment. In such circumstances, a young person's right to sexual agency, sexual expression and to be free from violence may be compromised by the influence of an often misogynistic and homophobic industry.
- ❑ Pornography depicting people living with disability may provide a welcome representation of sexuality that is often absent from other media and outside

of the public imagination, but also contribute to the fetishization and degradation of people living with disability (Ebrahim 2019).

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

Research into the effectiveness of education programs about the use and misuse of pornography is a relatively new field. However, it is supported by a small body of literature on the effectiveness of educational interventions among young people focused on sexual portrayals in media (Pinkleton, Austin et al. 2008, Pinkleton, Austin et al. 2012, Pinkleton, Austin et al. 2013, Scull, Kupersmidt et al. 2018), and a far smaller body of work assessing interventions focused on pornography in particular (Vandenbosch and van Oosten 2017, Rothman, Adhia et al. 2018, Rothman, Daley et al. 2020). There is a need for far more research into the effectiveness of existing education programs on this issue and on how to adapt the most effective programs for use in different education settings, with different audiences, and to address emerging themes.

Based on existing evidence about effective practice in sexuality education, violence prevention, and media literacy education, Crabbe and Flood (2021) developed a practice framework for school-based education to address pornography's influence. The framework outlines 14 elements:

- A whole school approach
- A robust conceptual framework
- A tailored approach
- Based in sexuality education
- Builds student competencies
- Age-appropriate and sequential delivery
- Participatory teaching and learning approaches
- A safe, inclusive, supportive learning environment
- Sensitivity to inequalities of gender, sexuality and race/ethnicity
- Skilled, well-equipped staff
- Active engagement of parents as partners
- Development of community partnerships
- Support across the school organisation, culture and environment
- Regular evaluation and review

Some existing education programs could be improved by aligning with these elements. For example, some programs are not underpinned by a robust conceptual framework, are not sensitive to inequalities, do not engage parents as partners, and/or involve brief educational sessions, sometimes delivered by external providers who do not have ongoing relationships with the school. Government can play a key role in supporting schools to implement education to address pornography's influence, and in resourcing and supporting robust evaluation of program effectiveness.

School-based education programs can also be complemented and strengthened by parent education programs and campaigns in the broader community.

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

Their widespread exposure to pornography indicates that existing restrictions on children and young people's access to online pornography are largely ineffective and inadequate.

Filtering technology implemented in homes and schools

The primary existing methods for restricting access are through the implementation – by parents, caregivers and schools – of filtering and controls. Such strategies can play an important role in a broader system of approaches but alone, they are inadequate against the pervasive, industry-backed promotion of online pornography. Challenges to their effectiveness include:

- a lack of parental awareness about pornography's harms to children
- a lack of parental awareness about the technologies available to prevent or limit exposure
- low levels of digital and technical literacy, comfort and confidence among parents, and consequent actual and/or perceived parental difficulties with installing and managing filtering and parental control technologies
- time and financial barriers
- the assumption – and sometimes reality – that young people will be able to circumvent parental controls
- the potential for children and young people to use alternative methods for accessing the internet, such as data on a phone plan.

Regulation

There is growing awareness around the world of the need for government regulation to help prevent children and young people from being exposed to harmful online content. The community increasingly recognises the harms associated with children and young people's largely unfettered access to harmful online content – including the often violent, misogynistic pornographic content that is freely and widely available to anyone online – and that the pornography and technology industries have not and will not self-regulate. Governments are the only stakeholders that can implement and enforce regulations that protect privacy, security and safety. Democratic countries around the world are taking steps to introduce various forms of safety-by-design and age assurance measures to prevent children's exposure to pornographic content. In Australia, we look forward to the results of the age assurance pilot currently being conducted by the eSafety Commissioner.

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

It's time we talked has developed a range of resources to support parents and carers – and also professionals – to prevent the harms associated with children and young people's exposure and access to online industrial pornography.

Most of *It's time we talked's* resources focus specifically on equipping the adults in children and young people's lives to understand and address pornography's

influence. The resources to support a 'general' audience can be found [here](#). These resources include [parent tip sheets](#), a variety of [professional learning resources](#), and [a secondary school package](#) with a 480-page manual which articulates a whole school approach, and incorporates curriculum, policy, and other support materials.

The [Porn is Not the Norm](#) project includes resources for use with parents, teachers, and other professionals to support them to navigate online pornography's harms with the autistic young people in their lives. *Porn Is Not the Norm* was developed with autistic autism expert, Associate Professor Wenn Lawson. We also conducted interviews with autistic young people. The *Porn Is Not the Norm* project was a response to the overrepresentation of autistic young people in cases of harmful sexual behavior and the link between this and their exposure to and consumption of online pornography. The resources include [professional learning](#), [parent education](#), [parent tip sheets](#), and [a resource package](#) with activities for use with autistic young people.

It's time we talked has also worked with local communities to develop resources that are tailored to their communities and take a broader approach to gender-based violence prevention and media literacy education. In these resources, pornography is only one of several themes explored.

For example, we developed a resource package called [Talking Respect](#) in collaboration with services and young people in the Northern Territory. The *Talking Respect* resources address themes such as social media, healthy relationships, relationship violence, sexual pressure and consent, gender stereotypes and jealousy, as well as pornography. The broader themes all connect with the issue of pornography and provide a suitable context for discussion of the more challenging themes.

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