

# Age verification roadmap consultations: Round 1

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May 2022



eSafety conducted targeted consultations with stakeholders for the development of the Age Verification (AV) roadmap between November 2021 and April 2022.

These targeted consultation sessions allowed for close examination of the evidence submitted in response to the call for evidence and to gain insights from industry and experts.

eSafety's consultation process was focused on exploring the evidence that will support the development of recommendations that are holistic, viable and proportionate.

The following are high-level, anonymised summaries of the consultation sessions held between November 2021 and February 2022, and appear in the order of each consultation date. Summaries of the remaining consultations will be published separately.

The summaries in this document represent a variety of views that were discussed by stakeholders during the consultation sessions and summarises them into key themes.

The views and opinions in these summaries are those of the stakeholders and do not reflect eSafety's position.

They are an important contribution to informing the next phases of consultation and the development of the AV roadmap.

More information about the roadmap is available [on our website](#).

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# Adult industry: International stakeholder group

## Consultation group overview

**Stakeholders:** International adult industry website providers.

**Consultation date:** 17 November 2021.

**Overview:** These stakeholders (First stakeholder and Second stakeholder) discussed age verification and assurance in practice and implementation, as well as social media platforms.

## Age verification and assurance in practice

### First stakeholder

- This stakeholder has found that there are many proposed age verification or assurance options, and many factors need to be considered when adding additional layers of protection to avoid creating greater harms.
- They noted that measures which create too much friction will deter customers or users from accessing compliant sites. They emphasised that this could create incentives for users to follow the path of least resistance and access alternative adult sites, which are non-compliant with any age assurance regulations. It may also be less secure for users, as well as less ethical in the production and distribution of adult content, and is more likely to contain harmful content.
- They explained users must be able to trust that their data is secure and will not be used improperly, and likewise, platforms must be able to trust the age verification or assurance providers are approved by the regulator. The stakeholder recommended age verification or assurance providers should be vetted by the regulator to ensure their data is secure and is not shared without consent. The stakeholder encouraged the development of international standards, regulation and certification.
- This stakeholder noted difficulty in engaging with the broader adult industry and tech industry on a variety of trust and safety issues. They believe that other players in the tech industry have a key role to play to ensure that adult sites' efforts to prevent children and young people from seeing pornography are successful, and do not create unintended consequences. For example, if there is a change in user traffic patterns away from sites, which require some form of age assurance and towards those without access

restrictions, they highlighted that search engine algorithms could end up listing non-compliant, harmful sites in their top search results. Accordingly, the stakeholder expressed that there must also be requirements for search engine providers in order to achieve desired outcomes.

- The stakeholder's current age assurance measures include:
  - Terms of Service which state users must be 18+.
  - The application of Restricted to Adults (RTA) meta tag, supplied by the Association of Sites Advocating Child Protection (ASACP). This ensures registered sites are blocked or filtered by internet service providers (ISPs), search engines or when parental controls or filters are activated on devices or internet connections.
- The stakeholder felt that parents are responsible for the primary prevention of underage access to adult content through filters, parental controls and communication with their children, as they are able to directly mitigate access at home. However, the stakeholder acknowledged that many parents have a limited awareness of the available technology and how to implement it. They believe this should be an integral element for inclusion in the AV roadmap.

## Second stakeholder

- This stakeholder expressed commitment to preventing children's access to pornography but noted that complying with regulations across jurisdictions globally is challenging as a business.
- The stakeholder reported the following measures currently in use:
  - The site contains a warning that the content is for adults only. The site also contains instructions to parents on how to block the site.
  - 'Restricted to Adults' (RTA) labelling and meta tagging, which stops the site showing up on search engines (if a 'safe search' or similar filter is applied).
  - The provider does not offer an app, as major app stores do not permit pornography, so the site is only accessible through browsers. Given that safety tools are available to block sites with RTA labelling and meta tagging, the provider suggested these measures should be sufficient to prevent children from viewing the content.
- The stakeholder observed that some social media apps are hosted by app stores and available for download by under-18 users, despite allowing explicit adult content under their Terms of Service. They also noted that RTA labelling does not apply to apps.
- The stakeholder highlighted a lack of awareness and skills for use of parental controls.

- They felt that tech companies often avoid collaborating with pornography companies and this stigma prevents the sharing of useful tools (for example, tools to detect and remove child sexual exploitation and abuse material).

## Implementation

### First stakeholder

- This stakeholder noted that age assurance should be cost-effective for all platform sizes and able to scale to large traffic volumes. They noted that the adult market is very diverse, and that a small independent producer would be less likely to have the budget or resources to implement technological solutions to reduce children and young people's access to pornography.
- The stakeholder suggested the introduction of a blacklist/whitelist model operated by the regulator, which ISPs reference to block or allow access to sites based on compliance with regulations. Other companies within the internet ecosystem could also act as a point of access enabling restrictions, such as operating system (OS) developers, browser operators, or device manufacturers. They also noted that other enforcement methods such as payment blocking can play a significant role in enforcing compliance with regulations.

### Second stakeholder

- The stakeholder believes the cost of compliance is very high. They are concerned that while overarching European regulation merely requires some form of age verification or assurance, countries can make local laws which prescribe specific technology – resulting in many different compliance measures.
- They noted the frequency of age verification checks for users impacts both the cost for the company as well as the effectiveness of the measure. Asking for checks too frequently may drive users away, but less frequent checks (for example, one check per month) leaves opportunities for children to use an adult's device to access content.
- They stated that the current range of technological solutions are too expensive for the stakeholder's business model. They would prefer to see a variety of solutions available and felt this would be better both for business and for consumer choice. In this stakeholder's experience, document verification was the most expensive form of age verification.
- This stakeholder does not want to collect and process user information in house, as they feel it is too costly and presents a high risk of creating 'data honey pots'.

- The stakeholder is concerned that consumers would move toward using non-compliant sites to avoid sharing personal information.
- The stakeholder raised concerns about legislation applying only to pornographic websites and not to social media or other sites. They would prefer to see rules applied to all services where this type of content is available. In their experience, there is adult content on many social media sites, but limited warnings, filtering, or due diligence in checking uploaded content.

## Social media platforms

### First stakeholder

- This stakeholder believes measures should be applied to a wide scope of platforms and services, as pornographic content can also be found on social media and other non-adult sites. Again, the stakeholder raised concerns that if measures only apply to adult sites, explicit content may migrate to unregulated sites.
- The stakeholder observed that social media services currently take different approaches to adult content. While some do not permit adult content and make efforts to detect and remove it, others allow this content under their Terms of Service and make no effort to moderate it.
- The stakeholder also observed that children and young people's engagement on social media services presents a variety of risks beyond access to adult content, including exposure to hateful and violent content. They expressed the view that, despite these risks, many social media services do not verify their users' age.



# Adult industry: Australian stakeholder group

## Consultation group overview

**Stakeholders:** Australian-based adult industry.

**Consultation date:** 18 November 2021 and 11 February 2022.

**Overview:** This stakeholder group discussed age verification and assurance and the adult industry in Australia, the risks associated with new technological measures, current 'age-checking' practices, language and definitions and provided recommendations.

## Adult industry in Australia

- Stakeholders highlighted the Australian-based adult industry is different to the international adult industry. Producers are often:
  - women
  - members of the LGBTIQ+ community, and
  - operate independently.

These factors should be considered, to ensure measures are not solely designed to regulate larger, international websites and companies.

- Stakeholders indicated production of paid/subscription-based content was more common than free 'tube' sites<sup>1</sup> in the local industry. A paid model already requires more checks and barriers before users can access content (for example, age verification through credit cards).

## Current 'age-checking' practices

- Stakeholders noted there are already using existing technological solutions to control access to adult content. Stakeholders shared examples of current industry practices. This included:

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<sup>1</sup> A 'tube' site refers to a site which is free to view and relies on user-uploaded content, rather than the operator uploading content.

- **Sites complying with guidance from the Association of Sites Advocating for Child Protection (ASACP).** These sites have home or index page warnings that indicate the site contains adult content and also use meta tags<sup>2</sup>, which allow their sites to be blocked if parental filters are active on devices.
- **Many sites have paywalls**, requiring credit card details for page access and payment. Payment companies check for meta tags on sites.
- **Sites also often have features which make it difficult for users to download and share videos outside of the protection of the paywall.** Producers can blacklist users and ban IP addresses that share content to other sites. This can prevent the content from being seen outside the paywall/age gate.
- **Stakeholders reiterated it is industry standard to use the ‘Restricted to Adults’ meta tags**, which allows search engines and safety software to identify sites containing pornography.

## Risks associated with new technological measures

- Stakeholders in this group felt there should be explicit measures to prevent age assurance or technology companies from storing users’ data. Stakeholders were concerned about the influence of large, international adult industry members who may have a commercial benefit to collect and sell user data.
- Stakeholders said that the use of third-party age assurance services (that is, assessments conducted by a party other than the site or platform hosting the content) also raises risks for sex workers by giving third-party providers significant power of their businesses. For example, they noted major payment processors already impose, and enforce, certain policies that can be challenging for adult content providers to navigate and comply with, resulting in legal content and business activity being blocked. The adult industry has very few avenues to review third parties’ decisions or feed into their policies and would welcome further opportunities for engagement.
- Stakeholders pointed out that many adult content producers and sex workers operate as micro-businesses or sole traders, and may have limited technical expertise and financial resources to apply new requirements. They felt that it is unfair and onerous to expect them to implement complex technological solutions.

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<sup>2</sup> Site owners can include information about their site in ‘meta tags’ in their website HTML code. These tags are not visible to users on the site, but filter software and search engines can read them and identify that the site is for adults only.

- Stakeholders identified the following risks from their perspective in applying age verification measures:
  - **The potential for scope creep and interference with legitimate access to adult content and sex education material.** Stakeholders raised that measures which are designed to prevent children and young people from accessing pornographic content could, unintentionally prevent access to educational material. They also expressed measures which restrict access to these sites could be employed to block types of legally permissible adult content from adults on other moral or religious grounds. ,
  - **The over-collection of information** – that is, stakeholders felt the implementation of child protection measures may lead to the collection and storage of private data (name, address, date of birth) when it is only necessary to record an age attribute (such as ‘over 18’).
  - **Concerns with the potential use of facial recognition or analysis technology for the purpose of assessing age.**
    - Stakeholders noted when platforms verify uploaders, often they do not provide users with information about the third-party company processing their information, nor how their data is assessed or stored.
    - They raised that artificial intelligence (AI) biometric technologies can present issues with ethnic and racial biases.
    - They highlighted that children and young people may not be aware of, or consent to, their data being collected and used for the purpose of other AI-based age estimate technology, such as key-stroke pattern analysis.
    - They emphasised that there would need to be substantial trust and transparency requirements for any third-party assessment tool.
  - **Data surveillance of users** – they raised that both consumers of content, as well as performers and sex workers may be at risk of being tracked, stalked or abused if their personal information is made publicly available.
  - **The logistical and financial impost of compliance**, which they felt would likely have a disproportionate impact on smaller local producers.
- Stakeholders suggested that:
  - placing age-barriers around moderate pornographic content produced by compliant sites could deter users and instead funnel them to fringe or extreme sites, or sites which host content that is not ethically produced.

- a reliance on content moderation to reduce children and young people's access may have unintended consequences. For example, they stated that AI moderation on platforms is often imprecise and over-moderation tends to disproportionately affect marginalised people and communities, such as sex workers.
- measures to address adult content online often come at the expense of sex workers' safety and their ability to work.

## Challenges of a global ecosystem

- Stakeholders highlighted the local industry works within the Australian legal framework; however the policies of large social media services are based on laws and settings in other jurisdictions, which often negatively impact the local adult industry. They recommended that services should adhere to the legal settings of each jurisdiction they operate within.
- Stakeholders shared specific challenges they have encountered in their dealings with social media services. They expressed concern that these issues may worsen should age verification requirements be introduced:
  - **Difficulties with social media companies** – stakeholders find it difficult to engage with social media companies.
  - **Being de-platformed** – adult content producers and sex workers have been de-platformed from social media or other digital platforms, despite working within the Terms of Service for platforms.
  - **No warning** – stakeholders reported receiving no advance warnings from services to changes in Terms of Service or moderation practices. These changes can have significant impact on how they conduct their business practices. Notice of changes would enhance their ability to comply.
  - **A gap in service reporting processes** – services also offer limited means for reviewing decisions. Stakeholders felt that they are subject to arbitrary or vexatious complaints but have minimal options for challenging those complaints.
- Some stakeholders would like to see a liability introduced for poor moderation practices, as well as best practice guidance on content moderation with input from the adult industry.

## Language and definitions

- Stakeholders reflected on the importance of terminology and how it will frame the issue and AV roadmap report:
  - They felt that using the term ‘exposure’ misses the behavioral triggers involved in seeking access to adult content online. Stakeholders also felt that it has the potential to stigmatise pornography as something inherently negative, in the same way that society talks about being ‘exposed’ to disease.
  - They preferred ‘accidental’ viewing or exposure as a term, which reduces the stigma around adult content producers and does not position pornography producers as preying on children.
  - They sought greater clarity around the type of content which would be captured by any regime, particularly on social media platforms. Stakeholders recommended that the report must define pornography and what content is intended to be covered under the AV roadmap.

## Recommendations

- Stakeholders felt that improving sex education was a preferable way to address the issues associated with young people accessing pornography.
  - Stakeholders advised that young people have the right to privately explore their own sexuality, and measures that are education-based would be preferable. They expressed that current porn education contains anti-sex work messaging, which may stigmatise sex workers.
  - Stakeholders suggested that eSafety could play a role in producing educational materials, such as resources for navigating adult content, relationships, and targeted content for people with diverse sexual and gender identities.
  - Stakeholders noted that the harms of pornography are contested and suggested greater clarity was required on the definition of pornography, the harms the AV roadmap seeks to address, the relevant age groups, and how success would be measured.
  - Stakeholders suggested curriculum development should be informed by engagement with children and young people. They highlighted that sex workers should also have a role as stakeholders and collaborators in education development, not perpetrators.

- Stakeholders felt that parental controls and family filters may provide a more targeted response. There were concerns about blocking sites at an internet service provider (ISP) level, noting this could censor whole domains. If ISP-level measures were to be considered, stakeholders felt they should be opt-in measures for consumers rather than automatic.
- Concerns were canvassed on regulatory responsibilities falling on ISPs and private companies (such as banks), which may lead to limited recourse for appeal for smaller industry members. Stakeholders felt that accountability measures for ancillary service providers should be made explicit in the AV roadmap.
- Stakeholders expressed that the current regulatory framework was problematic, particularly the reliance on the National Classification Scheme, which was seen as outdated. They suggested postponing implementation of the AV roadmap until after the classification review is completed.
- Stakeholders suggested:
  - **More could be done to strengthen existing technologies, such as parental controls and search filters.** They suggested government should provide financial support for low-income families to purchase filtering software, as well as provide more educational resources for parents to support the installation and use of such technology. Stakeholders felt that increasing parents' digital literacy would provide them with greater agency and choice over how they raise their children. Stakeholders also expressed that these technologies are less intrusive on people's online activities.
  - **The AV roadmap should consider a tiered, proportionate approach to best practice** and enable industry to choose the most suitable age assurance methods (based on their size and other risk factors). Search engines already have the means to identify adult sites. They felt this could be leveraged more effectively.

# Academics: Australian stakeholder group

## Consultation group overview

**Stakeholders:** Australian academics.

**Consultation date:** 26 November 2021.

**Overview:** This stakeholder group discussed age verification and assurance in a wider context, young people's access to pornography and education.

## Wider context

- Stakeholders expressed that the AV roadmap development process should consider and provide recommendations for the wider socio-political context. In particular, they drew attention to regulatory regimes affecting the pornography industry, the criminalisation and licencing of sex work, as well as attacks upon LGBTIQ+ communities. Examples of relevant factors raised by stakeholders included:
  - **The pending review of the classification system** – stakeholders highlighted that the current classification scheme prohibits consensual fetish content and therefore has the potential to censor queer and differently-abled sexual practices.
  - **The discriminatory policies of financial institutions in relation to pornography and sex work** – stakeholders expressed that these policies can prevent the sale of much independent sexual content and thereby place workers in economic precarity.
  - **The introduction of religious discrimination legislation** – stakeholders spoke about the way that these laws may be seen to sanction discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people.
  - **Efforts to limit gender diversity in education** – stakeholders advised this impacts the availability of comprehensive, culturally relevant sex, consent and relationship education.
- Stakeholders highlighted the inconsistency between the age to access to pornography (18) and the age of consent to sex (which varies across states and territories but is

consistently under 18). They felt that the age of consent could be used to guide the age of access to online pornography.

- Stakeholders observed platforms and services have a role to play and can set the tone and norms for content by improving upon individual government approaches. They felt this could be achieved by taking guidance from relevant international human rights instruments which encompass sexual rights obligations pursuant to the rights to health, expression and non-discrimination. They stated more could be done to demonstrate and uphold contemporary community standards, including queer, feminist and sex-positive approaches to sex and sexual content.
- Stakeholders highlighted age verification or assurance measures (including age estimation), which use bio-analysis, can collect significant amounts of data from users, including young people. They held significant concerns in relation to young people being able to consent to providing this information or withdrawing access to it.
- In terms of current practices to limit unintentional access, stakeholders noted that ‘age gates’ (where a site or service asks a user to enter a birthdate or confirm their age) can be effective barriers by creating a point where a decision must be made to access the content. Even though a user may provide a false answer, stakeholders noted the user must make a conscious decision to do so – which can prevent young people from stumbling upon content unintentionally.
- Stakeholders pointed to the need for a regulatory framework that encourages the decentralisation of internet infrastructure, ends financial discrimination by banks and payment processors, and prevents discriminatory platform Terms of Service. They felt this could prevent pornography tube monopolies from forming, and consequently enable independent pornography providers to flourish.

## Access to pornography by young people

- Discussion on the impact of pornography on young people and how young people access pornography focused on the following themes:
  - **Stakeholders emphasised that non-consensual exposure to pornography is a discrete issue**, which is already addressed under the law, including through a variety of criminal offences. They noted that there could be better enforcement of existing laws, for example, in relation to pop-up advertisements.
  - **Stakeholders pointed out the problem in talking about ‘exposure’ to pornography as if it is inherently harmful**. They noted that a distinction is



often made between children's 'accidental' and 'intentional' access to pornography. They felt it is more meaningful to discuss access to pornography pre-puberty versus post-puberty. In their experience, pre-puberty access tends to occur as a result of stumbling upon the material. Their research demonstrates that where this experience results in harm, that harm often stems from the subsequent negative reactions of trusted adults (such as anger or shame) as opposed to the material itself.

- **Their evidence shows that it is common for young people to seek out sexual material post-puberty, and that this behaviour is not harmful.** They highlighted research showing that young people want information on how to have pleasurable sex and there is a gap in mainstream sex education for this material.
- **Stakeholders pointed to a recent interdisciplinary literature review, which found no evidence of harm as a result of post-pubescent viewing of pornography.** They noted that some research categorises sexual adventurousness as a type of harm associated with pornography, but emphasised this is based on a narrow and potentially discriminatory definition of healthy sexual activity. They pointed to the need to avoid heteronormative, ableist and kinkphobic assumptions about behaviour, and to more carefully examine the label of 'unrealistic' sexual activity.
- **Stakeholders expressed that whole categories of sexual activity should not be deemed inherently harmful merely because they carry a risk of physical harm.** They identified a lack of education and support available to inform and guide safe behaviours as a key factor contributing to the risk of physical harm.

## Education

- The importance of improving and expanding sex education was also discussed by stakeholders:
  - **They noted that pornographic content can be educational, including content which models and depicts consent and safe practices.** In particular, they emphasised that pornography can be validating and affirming for LGBTIQ+ people. They expressed the current restrictions within the classification system, and the criminalisation of production in some jurisdictions, limits the availability of content which explores these themes.

They felt resources being spent investigating mandatory age verification could be diverted to address these issues instead.

- **Stakeholders stated young people can be savvy, critical consumers when accessing pornographic material if they are properly equipped to do so.** They felt the focus should be on the systems and environments supporting young people.
- Stakeholders highlighted that education measures could:
  - **address** both digital literacy and sex, relationship and consent education
  - **explain the social, cultural, historical value of pornography**, and include information about its regulatory and labour frameworks. Stakeholders noted that discussions about working conditions can help humanise performers and challenge harmful norms, such as expectation of access to women's bodies, as well as encourage consumers to support independent producers and sex worker rights
  - **include resources** which equip adults to have supportive and helpful discussions with the young people in their lives without shame or stigma
  - **be co-designed by young people** and youth-centred for the adults in their lives. Stakeholders noted recent experience with this particular model and that it had been effective.

# Children and young people's wellbeing: International stakeholder group

## Consultation group overview

**Stakeholders:** International academia, advocacy and youth wellbeing groups.

**Consultation date:** 24 November 2021.

**Overview:** This stakeholder group discussed age verification, the impact of access to pornography by young people, technological solutions and responsibility, and education.

## Pornography and young people

- Stakeholders advised that research in this field is highly contested, and it is unlikely a consensus will be reached on pornography's impact on young people.
- Stakeholders observed that differentiating between 'accidental' and 'intentional' access to pornography is not necessarily helpful. They felt the use of the term 'intentional' may invite blame and stigma, while 'accidental' may not reflect realities of teen culture in relation to sexuality and pornography use.
- Stakeholders noted it can be difficult to measure the adverse outcomes of exposure to pornography as there are ethical challenges involved in researching young people's relevant experiences.
- Stakeholders recommended that the AV roadmap could consider different approaches to age assurance and access to material based on age, highlighting differences in what is appropriate for a 15 to 16 year old compared to what is appropriate for a 10 to 11 year old.
- Stakeholders reflected on the various scenarios through which young people may be exposed to explicit content outside of visiting pornography websites (for example, through online chat services, older students or siblings, or website pop-ups). Accordingly, they called for a multi-layered approach to the AV roadmap, looking at all likely means of exposure.

## Technological solutions and responsibility

- Some stakeholders expressed the view that stringent age verification controls should be imposed alongside educational measures. These stakeholders felt that system-level controls are more likely to be effective at preventing children and young people's access to pornography.
- Stakeholders supported the promotion of parental controls and filtering, but believed that reliance on these measures alone would not be sufficient. They emphasised that these measures currently exist but have not been effective in mitigating children and young people's exposure to adult content to date.
- Stakeholders highlighted technological solutions should reflect the nuanced nature of content and how content circulates on the array of apps and services that children and young people use.
- Stakeholders discussed the importance of creating friction in the user experience for children and young people seeking to access adult content. They emphasised that creating boundaries – even those that can be easily overcome, for example, by entering a false birthdate – can help children understand the context of what they are accessing and that it is not meant for them.
- Stakeholders raised developments in the United Kingdom calling for minimum standards for age assurance technology, including for the technology to be privacy preserving. They felt that similar considerations should inform the development of the AV roadmap within the Australian context.
- Stakeholders suggested internet service providers (ISPs) could play a role in implementing measures to block access to content or assessing the age of users.
- Stakeholders highlighted parents who are less familiar with these issues, and less comfortable using technology, can be more restrictive of their children's internet use due to fears of online harms, including exposure to inappropriate content. They noted this can result in children and young people missing out on beneficial educational content and social interactions, and emphasised the importance of a balanced approach.

## Education

- **Stakeholders suggested that digital literacy and pornography education should start from approximately 11 to 13 years old.**
  - They advised health, sexuality and relationships content should be compulsory in school curricula.

- They highlighted the benefits of education delivered by third parties in the school context.
- They expressed resources should be free and scalable, and suggested eSafety could play a role in their creation and/or distribution.
- **Stakeholders stated that children and young people need help contextualising what they see online and building resilience to confronting content.** They saw these skills as a key element of violence prevention, enabling young people to critique the representations of men, women, power, and pleasure in pornography.
- **Stakeholders highlighted that education measures should be co-designed with young people** and/or consider the views of young people.
- **Stakeholders felt that attentive and positive discussions are most effective in communicating with young people about sex and pornography.** They identified honest and open engagement as critical for educators and parents to assist young people transitioning to adulthood.
- **Stakeholders also suggested that educational programs should provide more information** about health risks (for example, physical injuries) and legal risks (such as, the criminal offences that may apply to the distribution of explicit images) of sexual or intimate activities.
- **Stakeholders suggested that government should offer training and resources** to parents, carers, educators, frontline health workers, social workers and trusted adults in children and young people's lives.

# Children and young people's wellbeing: Australian stakeholder group

## Consultation group overview

**Stakeholders:** Australian advocacy and children and youth wellbeing groups.

**Consultation date:** 29 November 2021.

**Overview:** This stakeholder group discussed age verification and assurance, pornography education in school-based settings, as well as safe digital platforms for children.

## Pornography and young people

- Stakeholders shared their experiences working as educators and advocates who speak about pornography with children, young people and schools. They have:
  - received requests for content from primary schools and reported a growing demand for sessions in boys' schools;
  - observed an increase in reports from teachers and students of peer-to-peer sharing of pornography in school environments (for example, showing porn videos on the school bus);
  - responded to frequent requests from girls asking for help in negotiating boundaries and seeking advice on sexual assaults they have experienced at school (for example, groping or up-skirting);
  - perceived that a culture of pornography is normalised among young people. For example, students watching content on laptops at school; and
  - identified that many people do not have an awareness of the extent of harmful pornographic content that is available online.

## Digital platforms

- Stakeholders emphasised that online spaces should be safe for children and young people to explore and express themselves. They felt there was scope to improve regulation of large technology companies, so they provide a safer experience for young users.

- Stakeholders recommended a range of measures, including better access to parental filters and more robust content moderation on social media services, particularly in relation to recommendation algorithms, which they felt may serve up inappropriate content to young users.

## Educating in a school-based setting

- **A holistic approach** – stakeholders expressed that a whole of school approach to pornography education is beneficial but should be structured by age-appropriate bands of content. In their experience, schools are eager for external support to build awareness and critical thinking around pornography and respectful relationships. In addition to third-party presenters, stakeholders stated that schools need support to have the right procedures, policies and staff resources in place to prevent and address incidents in a timely way.
- **Third-party presentations** – stakeholders observed that third-party presenters may be able to share their own experiences with pornography more openly (compared with teachers) and this can encourage a more open dialogue with students.
- **Student-led learning** – stakeholders highlighted the benefits of student-led learning strategies. For co-ed and sister/brother schools, they felt this gives students opportunities to work together and relate to each other outside of a party context.
- **Resource support for teachers** – anecdotal reports from teachers highlight that they feel inadequately prepared and resourced to discuss pornography with students, and are in need of support to personally process trauma, while also guiding students.
- **Upskill support workers** – stakeholders noted that marginalised young people are more likely to have bad experiences online. They felt that residential care, youth and allied health workers should be upskilled on online safety issues, the signs that a young person may be having negative online experiences, and how to respond.

# Safety technology: Australian stakeholder group

## Consultation group overview

**Stakeholders:** Australian age verification technology providers, safety technology providers, and internet service providers.

**Consultation date:** 30 November 2021.

**Overview:** This stakeholder group discussed age assurance and verification and safety technology, technical intervention and risks, education and resources, and privacy.

## Age verification and assurance in practice

- Stakeholders were supportive of a holistic, multi-layered approach to the AV roadmap. They agreed that all segments of the online ecosystem have a role to play in enhancing children and young people's online safety and restricting their access to online pornography.
- Stakeholders raised there are many features and elements of social media and gaming apps that can have health implications for children and young people beyond pornography, and that government should also consider acting on these matters.
- Stakeholders also noted there are no 'silver bullet' protective measures. They emphasised that all measures can be circumvented in some manner, and that it will be difficult to get participation from all sites and services online that could contain pornography.
- Stakeholders advised there are effective filtering programs available, but consumer demand and uptake of these programs appears to be relatively low. They suggested this could be due to a lack of interest, awareness or understanding of how to activate such programs, or possibly the associated cost. Stakeholders also raised that some parental controls are easy for young people to remove once they are over 13.



## Technical intervention recommendations and risks

- Stakeholders proposed the AV roadmap should look up and down the stack, including websites, device manufacturers, operating system developers and internet service providers (ISPs), and consider different levels of intervention at each layer.
- Stakeholders supported device level filtering. They advised device level filters can reduce privacy concerns and the number of actors required to implement compliance measures.
- Stakeholders said device developers need to be effectively engaged in the roadmap process to ensure parental controls and age restrictions are being applied effectively.
- Stakeholders raised there are gaps that could be addressed with existing technology – such as implementing filters on devices provided to children in school settings and imposing restrictions on public Wi-Fi.
- Stakeholders highlighted the impact of developments by device and operating system manufacturers. They warned that unilateral decisions from major companies regarding privacy and encryption settings could undermine the effectiveness of some filtering systems and age assurance interventions.

## Education and resources

- Stakeholders advised there are existing resources provided by ISPs and telecommunications companies to support parents in creating safer online environments for their children. For example, they pointed to filtering programs and resources on how to use them and how to report illegal content. Stakeholders believe these resources could be better promoted to the public.
- Stakeholders suggested an online hub could be established as a ‘one-stop-shop’ for parents to access information and online safety tools or programs.

## Privacy

- Stakeholders noted that trust is critical, and that any technological measures should be privacy preserving and data minimising. Stakeholders also preferred third parties to hold age assurance data, rather than adult websites.

- Stakeholders suggested that the focus should be on age assurance, not age verification, measures. They noted that only the 'over-18 attribute' is important for purposes of restricting children and young people's access to online pornography, not the user's identity or specific age.
- Stakeholders considered biometrics-based solutions (such as facial recognition or analysis) to be highly problematic for individual privacy.
- Stakeholders advised obtaining consent from a child, to process age determination data, is very complex and would differ based on jurisdiction. They advised this would be challenging for international sites and services to implement.

# Safety technology: International stakeholder group

## Consultation group overview

**Stakeholders:** International age verification technology providers, safety technology providers, and internet service providers.

**Consultation date:** 30 November 2021.

**Overview:** This stakeholder group discussed age verification and safety technology, including standards and frameworks, existing and future challenges, trust and privacy, as well as current and potential solutions.

## Standards and frameworks

- **A 'technology neutral' standard** – stakeholders advised that work is underway on an international standard for age assurance technology. The standard would be 'technology neutral' and could be used to assess existing and emerging technologies.
- **Interoperability** – stakeholders stated that interoperability is crucial across national ecosystems and frameworks. They believe that mutual recognition of national standards should be a focus of regulators.
- **Adopted by users** – stakeholders noted that trust is critical for the adoption and success of age assurance and verification technologies by users. They suggested that a mechanism or resources be established by government, for consumers to confirm that service providers are legitimate, can be trusted and meet government's minimum standards.
- **European Union project** – stakeholders shared information on the European Union's EU Consent project, noting the project aims to develop an interoperable network of age assurance providers where the provider will be certified to a specific standard.

## Existing and future challenges

- **Individual identity information** – some stakeholders felt it was not appropriate to use individual identity information to access pornography sites as this may not be the most privacy-preserving or data-minimising approach.

- **Public awareness** – stakeholders acknowledged the challenge of public awareness and educating people on what age assurance and verification tools are, how to use them, and which tools are safe and reliable.
- **Data disclosure** – stakeholders suggested increased data disclosure may lead individuals to attempt to evade compliance measures. They suggested that this could lead pornography users (and potentially children) to access non-compliant platforms, which may host more extreme and harmful content.
- **Permissions and content filtering** – stakeholders flagged challenges in some services allowing users who are 13 and over to access their platforms, while also permitting content that may be inappropriate for those young users under their Terms of Service. They recommended greater exploration of content moderation and filtering on such platforms.
- **Risks to children and young people** – stakeholders noted the importance of embedding a children's rights lens and considering the risks to children and young people from product features at a granular level. Stakeholders suggested that all content that is age-rated should be age-gated in some way, to create experiences online that are age appropriate and safe.
- **Costs** – stakeholders reflected that in other spaces, such as online gambling which follows Know Your Customer (KYC) regulatory requirements, business models were able to adjust for the additional costs of verifying users. Stakeholders noted that this may not be the same for all pornography sites – some of which are small scale businesses. Despite this, stakeholders observed that the cost of age verification and age assurance had decreased significantly over time, and that this trend would likely continue as the age assurance tech industry grows.
- **Small businesses** – stakeholders suggested that small businesses operating pornography websites under a particular revenue threshold could be given access to age assurance solutions for free or at a lower subsidised cost.
- **Digital rights** – stakeholders suggested that a perceived imbalance between user privacy, safety and security enhances aversion to adopting and accepting child protection measures. They submitted that the digital rights of both children and adults need to be actively promoted and explained in relation to any technological solutions recommended under the AV roadmap.

## Current and potential solutions

- **Stakeholders highlighted that there are age assurance technologies which operate entirely on individual devices.** They explained that this allows age estimation/assurance to occur on a device, or a device's internet browser, preventing an individual's underlying data from moving across different servers. This assists apps or services accessed on that device in gauging the user's age attribute.
- **Stakeholders explained that identity verification is not necessary for age verification** because age attributes can be decoupled from identity information. Stakeholders suggested that this can be achieved through vectors of trust such as 'zero knowledge proofs'.
- **Stakeholders suggested there may be an opportunity for re-usable digital IDs,** specifically those that allow people to selectively share age attributes only.
- **Stakeholders noted that if interoperable measures are introduced,** then consumers who have already done age checks for other reasons, such as purchasing alcohol, could re-use that age check to access adult content.

## Trust and privacy

- Stakeholders advised that enabling choice for consumers is critical for building trust in age assurance measures.
  - Stakeholders suggested that a prerequisite for establishing user trust is to ensure there are 'no surprises', meaning there should be transparent disclosure and explanation about why the age assurance or verification measures are in place, how they work and how data is processed and/or stored.
  - Stakeholders noted that the average person may be more likely to engage with information that is available on the platforms and services they frequently access, rather than seeking out information on a government website. They proposed that information on regulatory requirements, platform safety measures and age assurance or verification certification details should be shared by platforms and services.
- Stakeholders discussed that many age assurance or verification solutions that rely on government ID are appropriate for use cases such as gambling or purchasing alcohol. However, stakeholders acknowledged that accessing pornography is a very different user experience (for example, tube sites often do not require accounts or payments).
- Stakeholders noted that companies interested in using age assurance technologies still hold concerns about providing data to third parties.

