

Questions, doubts and hopes.

Young people's attitudes towards age assurance
and the age-based restriction of access to
online pornography



September 2023



eSafety acknowledges all First Nations people for their continuing care of everything Country encompasses — land, waters and community. We pay our respects to First Nations people, and to Elders past, present and future.

Questions, Doubts and Hopes

Young people's attitudes towards age assurance and the age-based restriction of access to online pornography

The eSafety research program

The purpose of the eSafety Commissioner (eSafety) is to help Australians have safer and more positive experiences online.

The eSafety research program supports, encourages, conducts and evaluates research about online safety for Australians. We do this so that:

- our programs, and policy and regulatory functions, are evidence-informed
- robust, citizen-centred evidence on the prevalence and impact of online harms is available to stakeholders
- the evidence base on what works to prevent and remediate online harms continues to grow.

eSafety research is available at: [eSafety.gov.au/research](https://esafety.gov.au/research)

For enquiries about the eSafety research program, please contact: research@esafety.gov.au

Content warning

The following report contains discussions about sexuality relating to young people. It also contains mentions of unhealthy ideas about consent, gender and sexual practices. Please consider if reading this report is right for you at this time.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the young people who participated in this research and gave their time to contribute to a greater understanding of young people's encounters with, perspectives on and attitudes towards online pornography.

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About this report

In September 2022, eSafety carried out mixed methods research into young people's attitudes towards online pornography and age assurance. A key aim of the project was to explore young people's lived experiences with online pornography. The research was conducted from 19 to 21 September 2022 by means of a survey of 1,004 young people aged 16–18 and six focus groups with a total of 32 young people aged 16–18. It is part of a larger project in response to the Australian Government's request to eSafety to develop a roadmap for age verification and complementary measures to prevent and mitigate potential harms to children from online pornography (the Age Verification Roadmap).

This is the second of two reports in eSafety's **Young People and Pornography** research series. Our first report, which examined the prevalence of young people's encounters with pornography, their perspectives on it and their support needs around it, is available [here](#).

This current report contributes to the evidence base on young people's attitudes towards the age-based restriction of access to online pornography and age assurance, including but not limited to age assurance tools. It starts by examining young people's perspectives on the age-based restriction of access to online pornography. It then explores their views on age assurance approaches.

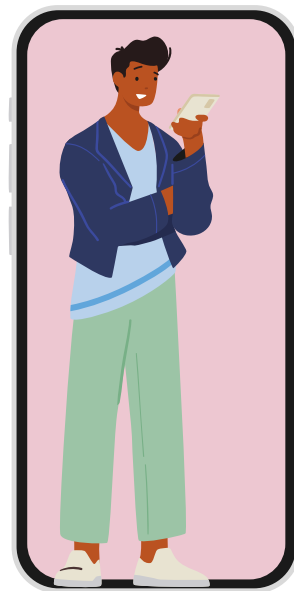
While the young people we surveyed were generally in support of age-based restriction of access to online pornography for people under age 16, their perspectives varied. The participants in our survey were most concerned about the regulation of unintentional encounters with pornography. In addition, when it comes to intentional access to pornography, they thought that the responsibility for age restriction and for implementing age assurance tools should fall predominantly on the pornography industry. However, they expressed doubts that age assurance tools could succeed in restricting underage access to online pornography, and they also had concerns around privacy and data security.



Key findings

Young people's perspectives on age-based restrictions on accessing online pornography

- **Young people are generally in favour of the regulation of online pornography for people under the age of 16.** Young people were generally in favour of online pornography being restricted by age. One in three (33%) young people thought that those aged under 16 years should be restricted from encountering online pornography, and 31% thought that those aged under 18 should be restricted from accessing online pornography. Overall, young people in our survey and focus groups appeared to be accepting of age-based restrictions centred on the age of consent, with one in two (50%) young people surveyed agreeing that the age of consent should be the age when people can access online pornography.
- **Perspectives on which age groups should be restricted from accessing online pornography differed according to sexuality, gender, disability and prior experience of encountering online pornography.** For example, LGB+ young people were more likely than straight young people to think that those who are younger than the age of consent should be able to access online pornography (25% vs. 13%); young women were more likely than young men to think that the age of consent should be considered in young people's access to online pornography (55% vs. 44%); young people with disability were more likely than people without disability to think that those who are younger than the age of consent should be able to access online pornography (22% vs. 14%); and young people who had encountered online pornography were more likely than those who hadn't encountered it to think that people below the age of consent should be able to access online pornography (19% vs. 6%).
- **Young people's personal experiences likely impact their opinions regarding age restriction for accessing online pornography.** Nearly 4 in 10 (39%) of the young people surveyed who hadn't seen online pornography thought that



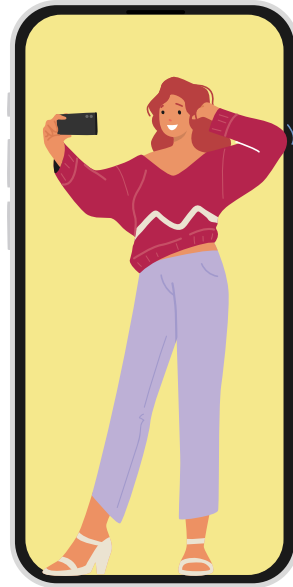
only those aged 18+ should be able to access it, compared to 18% of young people who had seen online pornography. The same percentage (39%) of young people who first saw online pornography at age 17–18 thought that access to online pornography should be based on the age of consent, compared to 19% of young people who first saw online pornography before age 13.

- **Young people are most concerned about the regulation of unintentional encounters with online pornography.** Young people in our focus groups thought there should be restrictions on online pornography that young people encounter unintentionally, suggesting that restricting unintentional pornography viewing would be beneficial to young people.
- **Young people consider some existing mechanisms to be appropriate for restricting young people's access to online pornography (e.g. child-safe settings, content moderation, blocking age-restricted content).** Nearly half (48%) of young people surveyed thought child-safe settings on computers, mobile phones or social media accounts would be an appropriate way to restrict access to online pornography.
- **Many young people think that the pornography industry is fully responsible for restricting intentional access to online pornography based on age. However, they also recognise that other actors have some responsibility.** Six in 10 young people (60%) thought that the pornography industry is fully responsible for age-based restriction of access to online pornography. A large proportion of the young people surveyed thought that parents, guardians and carers (83%), social media or gaming platforms (82%), internet search engines (81%), government (75%), schools (64%), the police (61%), and telecommunication providers and internet service providers (55%) are at least partly responsible for restricting underage access to online pornography.



Young people's perspectives on age assurance

- **Young people think that age assurance would be of limited efficacy and have concerns about its implementation.** When asked about age assurance, young people suggested it would be of limited efficacy. In particular, they suggested that young people would be able to bypass the system. The young people in our study also had concerns about privacy and data security, related to processes and tools used for age assurance. However, when asked to choose, young people thought that age verification methods based on identity documents (e.g. a driver's licence) and age screening (e.g. date of birth) would be the most appropriate for allowing age-based access to online pornography.
- **Despite concerns about their effectiveness, young people think that pornography sites, dating sites and social media services should use age assurance tools to restrict underage access to online porn.** Nearly 6 in 10 (59%) of the young people surveyed thought pornography sites should use age assurance tools, 41% thought dating sites should use them and 40% thought social media should use them.



Methodology

This project was submitted as part of the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) approval process. Ethics approval for the project was received from Bellberry Ethics Committee on 26 August 2022, ID 22CeSC117. eSafety collaborated with Professor Bronwyn Carlson and Madi Day of Macquarie University's Department of Indigenous Studies to review the methodology and instruments for cultural safety and to ensure that questions were worded in a culturally sensitive manner.

The study was comprised of two phases: an online survey, followed by online focus groups.

Informed consent to participate in the survey and/or focus groups was sought directly from the participants.

Online survey

We conducted a 15-minute online survey with young Australians aged 16–18 years. Participants were asked about their encounters with online pornography, their perceptions of it, and their views on age-based restrictions of access to online pornography and age assurance tools.

A total of 1,004 young people participated in the survey. This sample included young people with disability (n=228), those who speak a language other than English (LOE) at home (n=247), those who are LGB+ young people (n=219), trans and gender-diverse young people (n=31) and First Nations young people (n=31). The numbers of First Nations youth and trans and gender-diverse young people are too small to provide for separate analysis and were not separated out of the main data collected. For more information on the limitations of this research, see our methodology report [here](#).

Online focus groups

The qualitative phase of the research comprised six one-hour online text-based focus groups of Australian young people aged 16–18, with a total of 32 participants. Questions asked in the focus groups aimed to complement the survey findings, adding depth and nuance and drawing out young people's opinions on online pornography and age assurance in their own words.

The focus groups were made up of 12 sixteen-year-olds, 11 seventeen-year-olds and 10 eighteen-year-olds. There were 15 women, 11 men, 4 non-binary young people, 1 trans man and 1 demiboy in the focus groups. Nineteen focus group participants identified as straight, one as gay, three as queer, five as bisexual, and one each as pansexual, asexual, demisexual panromantic and questioning.¹

The full methodology report is available on the eSafety website at [eSafety.gov.au/research](https://esafety.gov.au/research).

A note on key terms used in this report

Throughout this report, we use the acronym 'LGB+' to refer to our findings relating to sexually diverse young people. We use the acronym 'LGBTIQ+' (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer and more) to refer to broader research relating to gender- and sexually diverse young people.

We use the term 'young people' to refer to our sample of 16- to 18-year-olds.

We use the term 'age assurance' as an umbrella term which includes both age verification and age estimation solutions. The word 'assurance' refers to the varying levels of certainty different solutions offer in establishing an age or age range.

In this report, 'age verification' means measures that determine a person's age to a high level of accuracy, whereas age estimation technologies (which can involve the use of biometric data) provide an approximate age to allow or deny access to age restricted online content or services. An example of age verification is the use of physical or digital government identity documents to establish a person's age.



¹All research participants were asked to select or write in the gender and sexuality terms that they identify with. Many of these terms are used in complex and contested ways by gender- and sexually diverse people, and we didn't ask any participant to expand on what their chosen gender or sexuality identity term means to them. In line with best practice, we have used the terms provided by participants in reporting our findings.

Young people’s perspectives on age-based restriction for accessing online pornography

Our research found general support for age-based restriction of access to online pornography, with most young people agreeing that those under the age of 16 should not be encountering online pornography. Findings indicated that young people think that the pornography industry should have full responsibility for age-based restriction of intentional access to online pornography, but also recognise that other actors must take some responsibility.

What do young people think about age-based restrictions for accessing online pornography?

Young people think that access to online pornography should be restricted by age

Just 4% of young people in our survey thought that access to online pornography should not be restricted by age, indicating that most young people think there should be age-based restrictions placed on access to online pornography. This included young people who encountered online pornography regularly (i.e. once a month or more). However, of the young people surveyed, those who saw pornography daily were more likely (13%) to think that pornography should not be restricted by age.

Young people think there should be restrictions on the online pornography they see unintentionally

Young people in the focus groups expressed a keen interest in the restriction of pornographic content that could be encountered unintentionally online, particularly by children.

 **Yes, younger children shouldn't be exposed accidentally.**
(Straight woman, 18)²


I think there should be restrictions on certain safe sites and social medias and what they're allowed to show.
(Queer non-binary young person, 18)

Make it illegal for websites to put advertisements for porn on websites that may be accessed by young children under 16.
(Straight woman, 16)



‘Young people in the focus groups expressed a keen interest in the restriction of pornographic content that could be encountered unintentionally online, particularly by children.’³

While there was acknowledgement in the focus groups that porn accessed both intentionally and unintentionally could have negative impacts, young people didn’t give much detail on the genres or types of deliberately accessed porn that could be restricted. Some young people in the focus groups did, however, express their belief that restricting unintentional pornography viewing would be beneficial to young people.

 **I think when it's on sites that people are specifically searching for, it is nowhere near as dangerous as when it gets sent out unconsensually [sic].**
(Bisexual woman, 17)

Preventing accidental access more is probably a better idea, although it might be equally hard to implement.
(Straight man, 16)

This emphasis on restricting unintentional pornography viewing aligns with our findings, detailed in our report *Accidental, unsolicited and in your face. Young people’s encounters with online pornography: a matter of platform responsibility, education and choice*, about the high rates at which young people see online pornography without meaning to, and the distress and discomfort this causes them (eSafety Commissioner 2023). Young people’s perspectives on what kinds of online pornographic content they believe should be restricted would be a productive area for future study, as more data is needed on this vital aspect of the discussion around age assurance.

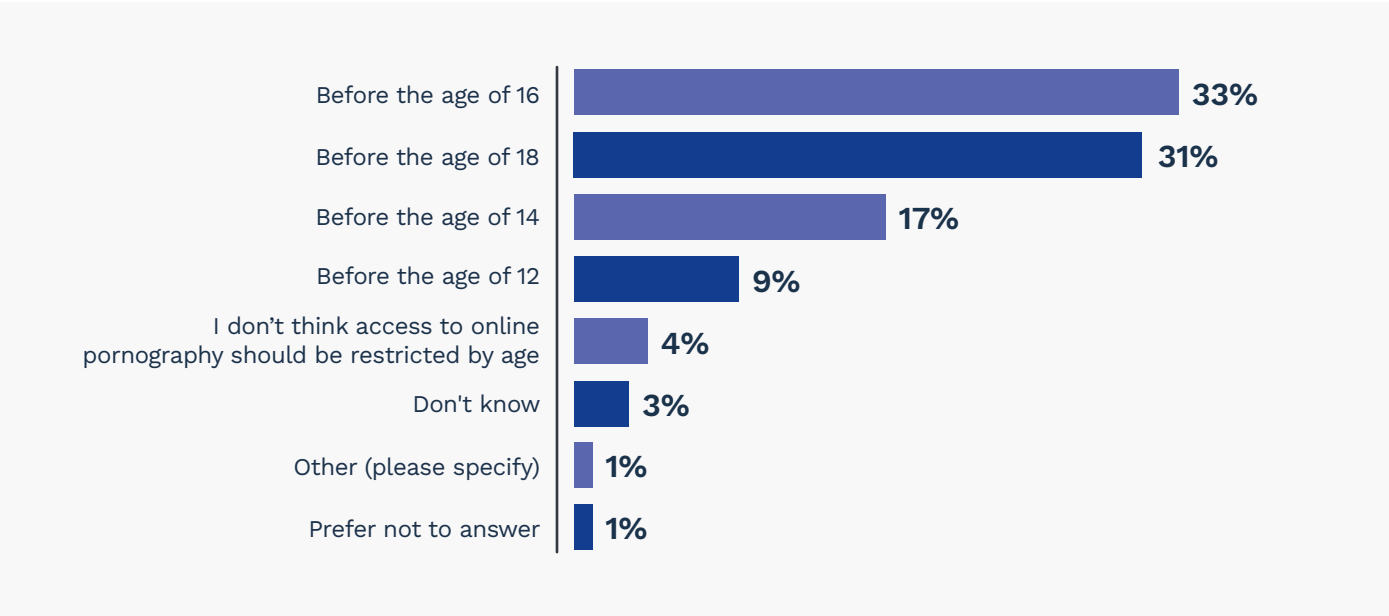
² All quotes have been edited for spelling and grammar.

³ ‘Children’ was used colloquially in the focus groups with no clear age reference for who each participant considered to be a child.

Most young people thought that those under 16 should be restricted from accessing online pornography

When asked at what specific age young people should be restricted from accessing online pornography, there was no general consensus among the young people surveyed or who participated in focus groups. However, most (65%) of the young people surveyed agreed that young people should be restricted from seeing pornography before either age 16 (33%) or age 18 (31%) (Figure 1). Further, of the young people surveyed, 17% thought that the specific age before which young people should be restricted from accessing online pornography should be 14 years, while 9% thought it should be 12 years, and 4% thought there should be no age-based restrictions at all.

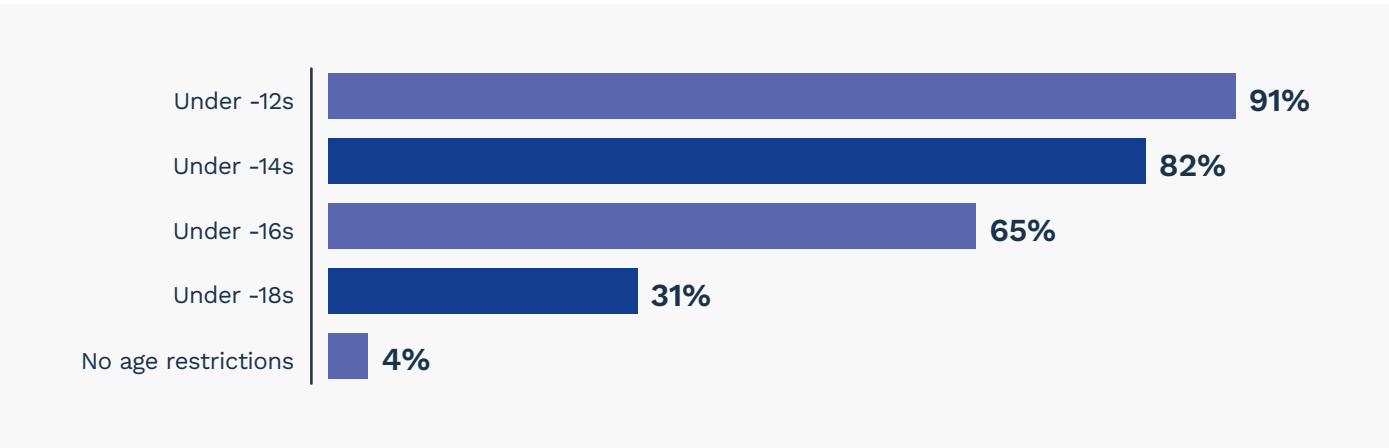
Figure 1. Before what age should young people be restricted from accessing online pornography?



(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)


Overall, when considering what age groups young people think should be captured within age-based restrictions for accessing online pornography, the majority of survey participants agreed that under-12s (91%), under-14s (82%) and under-16s (65%) should be restricted from accessing online pornography (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. What age groups should be included in online restrictions for accessing online pornography? (Cumulative percentages)




(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)

There were also a wide range of perspectives shared in the focus groups, with some young people agreeing that under-16s should be restricted from viewing online pornography.

-  **Maybe 16? Just because that sounds like a mature enough age.**
(Bisexual woman, 16)
- I don't think that teenagers under the age of 16 should be viewing pornography.**
(Straight woman, 16)
- I say 16.**
(Questioning man, 18)

However, other focus group participants thought it would be most suitable, and most realistic, for only those in younger age groups to be restricted from viewing online pornography.

-  **Sixteen would be ideal, but to be realistic probably 13 or 14.**
(Bisexual woman, 16)
- Maybe like under 10 or something.**
(Bisexual woman, 17)
- Probably younger than 13 should be completely restricted.**
(Straight woman, 16)



Additional analyses of the survey data found that perspectives on which age groups should be restricted from accessing online pornography differed significantly according to age, sexuality, gender, disability and prior experience of encountering online pornography. In addition, whether or not a young person has seen pornography appears to impact their opinions regarding access (Table 1).

Age

Sixteen-year-olds were more likely than other young people surveyed to say that young people should be restricted from seeing pornography before age 18 (39% vs. 31%), and were less likely to say that young people should be restricted from seeing pornography before age 16 (27% vs. 33%).

Sexuality

LGB+ young people were less likely than straight young people to say that young people should be restricted from seeing pornography before age 18 (18% vs. 35%), and were more likely to say that online pornography shouldn't be restricted by age (7% vs. 3%). This finding may reflect the inconsistent delivery of LGB+ specific content in young Australians' sex and relationships education, which may lead LGB+ young people to seek out information via pornography and thus to see it as a resource they may need (Böthe et al. 2019; Bradford et al. 2019; British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) 2020; Ezer et al. 2020; Fisher et al. 2019; Jones and Hillier 2012; Litsou et al. 2021).

Gender

Young men were more likely than young women to say that young people should be restricted from seeing pornography before age 18 (37% vs. 29%). In comparison, young women were more likely than young men to say that young people should be restricted from seeing pornography before age 16 (38% vs. 25%).

As found and described in our first report (eSafety Commissioner 2023), young men who encountered online pornography were more likely than young women to encounter it intentionally, more often, and on pornography sites. In comparison, young women were more likely to encounter online pornography unintentionally, and via social media. Prior encounters with online pornography may contribute to young people's perspectives of online pornography and age restriction, and this finding may reflect differences between young men and women's experiences and encounters with online pornography. However future research is required to determine whether and why this may be the case.

Disability

Young people with disability were less likely than young people without disability to say that young people should be restricted from seeing pornography before age 18 (34% vs. 24%), and were more likely to think that online pornography shouldn't be restricted by age (8% vs. 3%).

Research has indicated that there are many barriers to young people with disability accessing comprehensive sex and relationships education (McDaniels and Fleming 2016; Michielsen and Brockschmidt 2021). Young people with disability may find their sex and relationships education lacking in representation of their experiences, lacking in support for their particular needs or generally lacking from their education. Therefore, for some young people with disability, online

pornography may be perceived as a resource that fills gaps in their sex and relationships education. More research on how Australian sex and relationships education meets the needs of young people with disability is required.

Prior encounters with pornography

One in two **young people** (52%) **who hadn't encountered online pornography** said that young people should be restricted from seeing pornography before age 18, compared to one in four young people (25%) who have encountered online pornography.

Young people who had encountered online pornography were more likely than young people who hadn't encountered it to say that those under age 16 (35% vs. 25%), those under age 14 (20% vs. 9%) and those under age 12 (11% vs. 3%) should be restricted from seeing online pornography.

Table 1. What age group should be restricted from accessing online pornography (by current age, sexuality, gender, disability and prior encounters with online pornography)?

	Total (%)	Age (%)			Sexuality (%)		Gender (%)		Disability (%)		Encountered online pornography (%)	
		16 yrs	17 yrs	18 yrs	LGB+	Straight	Men	Women	Yes	No	Yes	No
Those aged under 18	31	39↑	28	28	18↓	35↑	37↑	29	24↓	34↑	25↓	52↑
Those aged under 16	33	27↓	36	38	39	32	25↓	38↑	38	32	35↑	25↓
Those aged under 14	17	16	19	16	18	17	17	17	19	16	20↑	9↓
Those aged under 12	9	7	9	11	12	8	12	7	8	9	11↑	3↓
I don't think access to online pornography should be restricted by age	4	5	3	4	7↑	3	4	4	8↑	3↓	5	2
Other	1	0	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Don't know	3	5	3	2	4	3	4	3	1	4	3↓	6
Prefer not to answer	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	0
Column n	1,004	338	333	333	219	771	356	614	228	745	751	202

(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)

Note: Multiple comparison correction: False Discovery Rate (FDR) (p=0.05);
↑ significantly higher than comparable sub-groups; ↓ significantly lower than comparable sub-groups.

There was a great deal of discussion within the focus groups about the challenges of putting an age cap on pornography access, which may begin to explain the varied perspectives offered by survey participants. Some young people in the focus groups struggled to determine an exact age, and many suggested that it depended more on developmental readiness and maturity than on age and commented that these aren't always directly related. A few also noted external influences such as family and friends as variables that could influence when an individual was or wasn't ready to view pornography.

I believe there isn't an appropriate age, and instead whenever the brain has developed enough to understand it, which occurs at different rates for different people.
(Straight man, 18)

It really depends on personal maturity, and people mature at different rates. Loosely, perhaps 14+, but really there's no way to reinforce that and there may easily be 12-year-olds more mentally mature than some 16-year-olds.
(Asexual non-binary young person, 18)

It also varies depending on gender, family and culture, so putting a figure [on it] isn't really realistic.
(Bisexual woman, 17)

Focus group participants also shed light on the perspectives of young people who don't agree with an age restriction for accessing online pornography. They spoke about age restrictions as contributing to the stigma of pornography and as limiting freedom of choice. In this sense, young people in the focus groups can be understood as asserting their rights to make decisions about their sexual explorations or making a claim for autonomy over their sexual development (Jiang 2019; McKee et al. 2010).

It's such a hard one, because do the restrictions just add to the stigma and shame?
(Queer non-binary young person, 18)

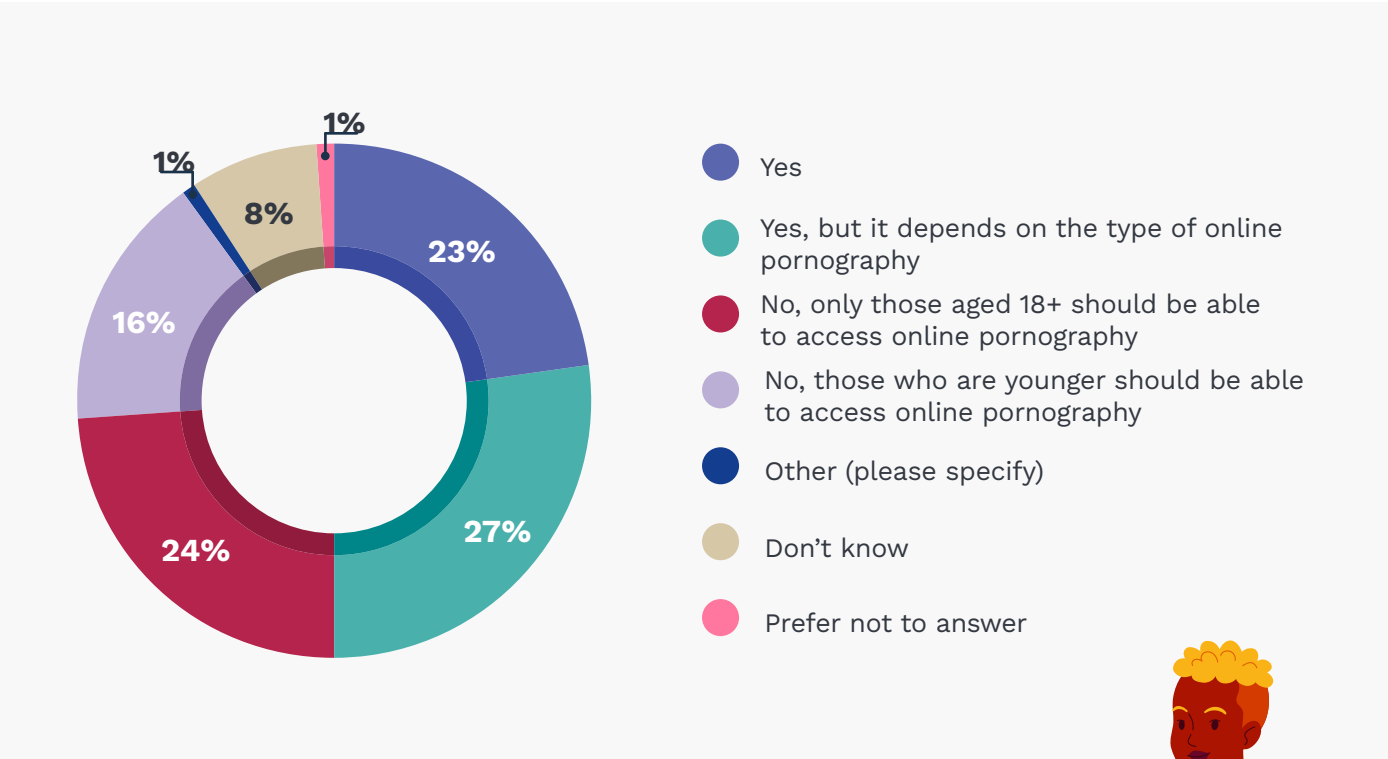
I think as long as people are educated, different ages should be able to access it.
(Straight woman, 16)

One in two young people think that the age of consent should factor into whether young people can access online pornography

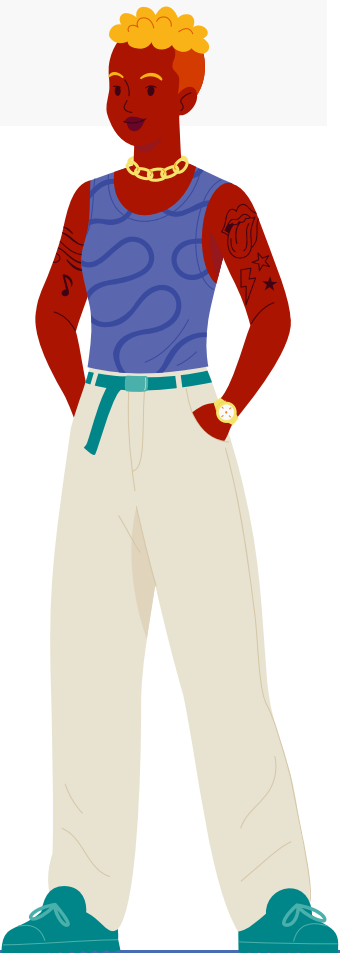
One in two (50%) young people in our survey agreed that the age of consent (defined as 16+ years) should be considered in young people's access to online pornography. However, just over half of this group (54%) said that it was dependent on the type of online pornography (Figure 3).

- One in four (24%) young people surveyed thought that only those aged 18+ should be able to access online pornography.
- At the other end of the spectrum, just 16% of young people surveyed thought that those who are younger than the age of consent should be able to access online pornography.

Figure 3. Should the age of consent be the age when people can access online pornography?



(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)



Additional analyses of the survey data found that perspectives on whether the age of consent should be considered in young people’s access to online pornography differed according to gender, sexuality and disability (Table 2).

- Young women were more likely to think that the age of consent should be considered in young people’s access to online pornography (yes, OR yes but it depends on the type of content) compared to young men (55% vs. 43%).
- LGB+ young people were less likely than straight young people to think that only those aged 18+ should be able to access online pornography (13% vs. 26%).
- LGB+ young people were more likely than straight young people to say that those who are younger than the age of consent should be able to access online pornography (25% vs. 13%).
- Young people with disability were more likely than young people without disability to say that those who are younger than the age of consent should be able to access online pornography (22% vs. 14%).

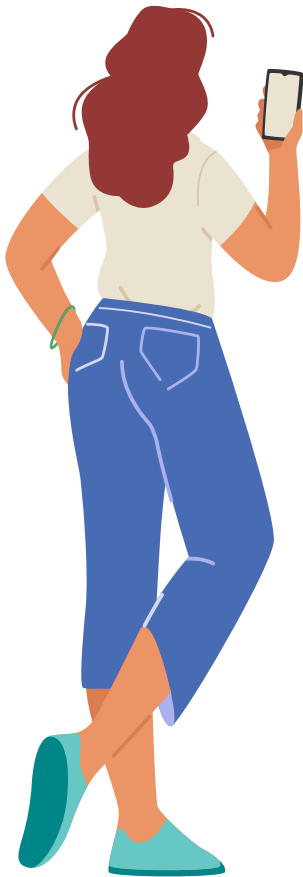



Table 2. Should the age of consent be the age when people can access online pornography (by current age, sexuality, gender, disability and prior encounters with online pornography)?

	Total (%)	Age (%)			Sexuality (%)		Gender (%)		Disability (%)		Encountered online pornography (%)	
		16 yrs	17 yrs	18 yrs	LGB+	Straight	Men	Women	Yes	No	Yes	No
Yes	31	19	25	25	20	24	22	24	21	24	23	24
Yes, but it depends on the type of online pornography	33	28	24	30	32	26	21↓	31↑	30	27	30↑	20↓
No, only those who are 18+ should be able to access online pornography	17	28	22	21	13↓	26↑	27	22	19	25	18↓	39↑
No, those who are younger should be able to access online pornography	9	16	17	14	25↑	13↓	17	15	22↑	14	19↑	6↓
Other	4	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	1
Don't know	1	7	11	7	8	8	10	7	6	8	8	9
Prefer not to answer	3	2	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1
Column n	1,004	338	333	333	219	771	356	614	228	745	751	202

(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)
Note: Multiple comparison correction: False Discovery Rate (FDR) (p=0.05);
↑ significantly higher than comparable sub-groups; ↓ significantly lower than comparable sub-groups.

When focus group participants were asked whether access to online pornography should be guided by the age of consent, there was some agreement among participants that this made sense.




It should be to 16+ because [if] the legal age to have sex is 16, then why not [make it 16] to watch it?
(Bisexual woman, 16)

Because 16 is the age of consent and they should be considered mature enough to make decisions like this.
(Bisexual woman, 16)

Young people’s personal experiences of accessing online pornography play a role in forming their opinions regarding whether consent should factor into being able to access online pornography

Examination of the data showed that young people’s personal experiences likely impact their opinions regarding access to online pornography. More specifically, whether or not a young person has seen pornography and/or the age at which they first see online pornography appears to impact their opinions regarding whether the age of consent should factor into access.



‘[Y]oung people’s personal experiences likely impact their opinions regarding access to online pornography.’

- As shown in Table 2, young people who had encountered online pornography were more likely than those who hadn’t encountered it to say that those who are younger than the age of consent should be able to access online pornography (19% vs. 6%).
- Young people who hadn’t encountered online pornography were more likely than young people who had encountered it to say that only those aged 18+ should be able to access online pornography (39% vs. 18%).
- Two in five (39%) young people who first saw online pornography at age 17–18 said ‘yes’ (i.e. that access to online pornography should be based on the age of consent), compared to one in five (19%) young people who first saw online pornography before age 13 (Table 3).
- Of those young people who had seen online pornography, those who first encountered it before age 13 were significantly more likely to say that those who are younger than the age of consent should be able to access online pornography (25% vs. 19%).




Table 3. Should the age of consent be the age when people can access online pornography (by age of first encounter with online pornography)?

	Age (%)				
	Total (%)	17–18 yrs	15–16 yrs	13–14 yrs	<13 yrs
Yes	23	39↑	25	24	19↓
Yes, but it depends on the type of online pornography	30	24	31	27	32
No, only those aged 18+ should be able to access online pornography	18	27	20	20	15
No, those who are younger should be able to access online pornography	19	6	13	18	25↑
Other (please specify)	2	0	1	3	1
Don’t know	8	3	10	8	7
Prefer not to answer	1	0	1	1	1
Column n	751	33	173	251	294

(Total sample, unweighted, base n=751; total n=1,004; 253 missing)
Note: Multiple comparison correction: False Discovery Rate (FDR) (p=0.05); ↑ significantly higher than comparable sub-groups; ↓ significantly lower than comparable sub-groups.

One focus group participant reflected upon their own experience of seeing pornography at a very young age, which informed their perspectives regarding at what age they think young people should be able to access online pornography.



I think around 13–14 is the better age to start discovering it. Personally, I didn't properly get into the subject of sex until I was 16. I wasn't ready when I was younger and the people trying to educate me, no fault of their own, really just made me more afraid and embarrassed. Mentally, I wasn't ready until I grew up more. I first encountered online porn when I was around 11, which is why I think 13–14 is more appropriate, as encountering it at that age really did negatively impact me as a child.
(Queer non-binary young person, 17)

Young people may be more accepting of age-based restrictions based on the age of consent


When young people’s perspectives on which age group should be restricted from viewing online pornography were compared with their perspectives on whether the age of consent should be considered in allowing access to online pornography, there were some interesting findings.

- The majority (81%) of young people who said that the age group below which young people should be restricted from accessing online pornography is 16 years were consistent and agreed that the age of consent (i.e. defined as 16 years) should be considered in allowing young people to access online pornography.
- Almost one in two (49%) of those who said that young people under age 14 should be restricted from accessing online pornography agreed that the age of consent should be considered in allowing access to online pornography.
- One in three (33%) of those who said that under-12s should be restricted from accessing online pornography agreed that the age of consent should be a factor in accessing online pornography.
- Nearly one in five young people (17%) who said that pornography should not be restricted by age said that the age of consent should be considered in young people’s accessing online pornography.

It is difficult to interpret these findings from the current survey data alone; however, they do indicate that the language used may impact upon young people’s acceptance and consideration of proposed age restrictions. First, framing age restrictions around the age of consent may provide some young people with a rationale that makes sense to them. As described above, this appeared to be the case for some focus group participants.

 **Yeah, 16, just cos it's the age of consent, so it kind of makes sense.**
(Straight woman, 17)

Second, the use of the phrases ‘allow access’ versus ‘restricted from accessing’ may impact how young people think and feel about age restriction. For example, there may be a negative language connotation of the use of the word ‘restrict’ compared to the word ‘allow’. Further, some focus group participants expressed that ‘restricting access to’ online pornography seems impossible. Therefore, the question ‘Should the age of consent be the age that people can access online pornography?’ may seem like a question with a more achievable answer to some young people. However, this is hypothetical and requires further research.

 **I don't think it can be restricted.**
(Straight woman, 16)

I ... see no conceivable way porn could really be restricted.
(Asexual non-binary young person, 18)

But no restriction will ever stop young teenagers.
(Straight man, 17)



Third, when considering young people’s perspectives on restriction, some young people may consider the phrase ‘restrict access’ to apply to online pornography that is intentionally and actively sought out. Insights from focus groups suggest that some young people interpret the restriction of online pornography in this light, with several suggesting that there should not be age assurance because young people will still search for online pornography, regardless of age restrictions. However, this warrants further investigation.

No. Kids will find it when they want it. Probs at like 13 or 14.
(Straight woman, 16)

I think any age is okay when the curiosity comes about.
(Straight man, 17)

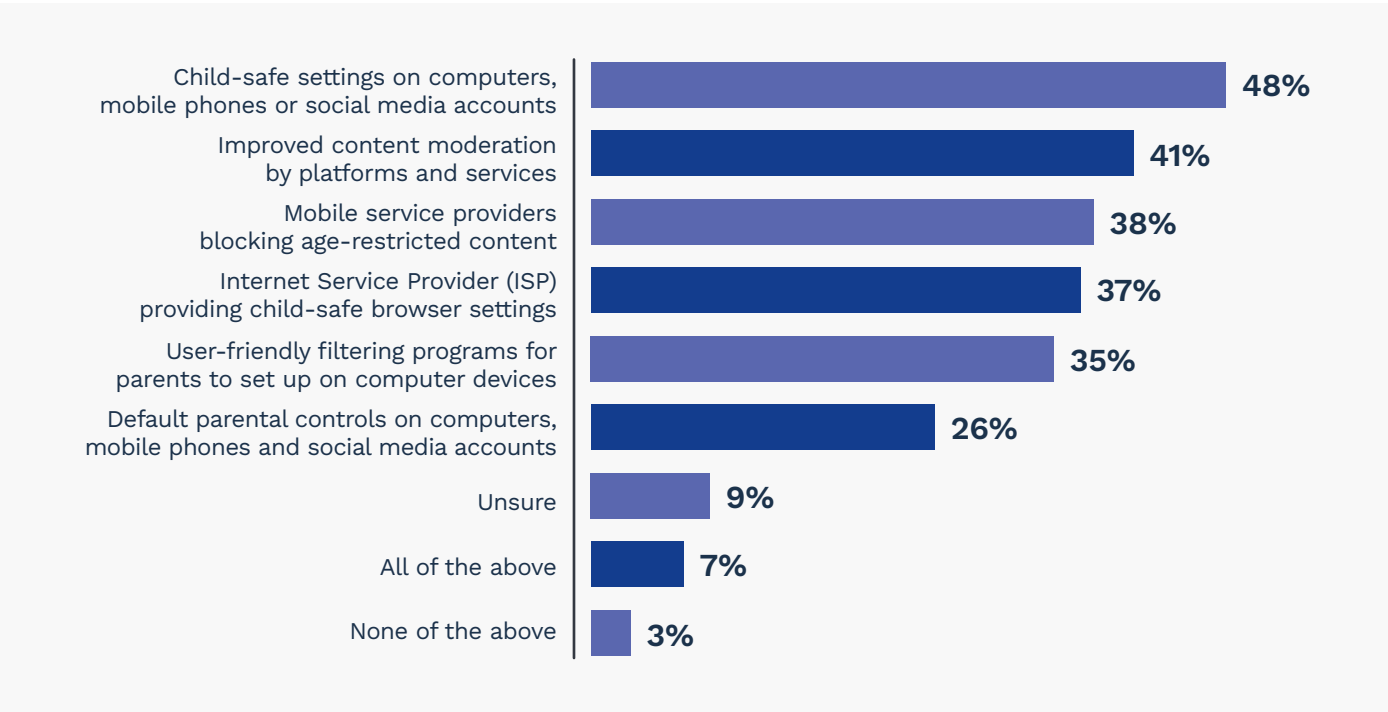


Young people think there are existing techniques that are appropriate for restricting access to online pornography

Findings from the survey indicate that there are existing techniques that young people think may be useful in restricting access to online pornography.

- Almost one in two (48%) young people surveyed thought child-safe settings on computers, mobile phones or social media accounts would be an appropriate way to restrict access to online pornography (Figure 4).
- Around two in five young people thought that improved content moderation by platforms and services, mobile service providers blocking age-restricted content (38%) and internet service providers (ISPs) providing child-safe browser settings (37%) would be appropriate.

Figure 4. What other ways do you think would be appropriate for restricting access to online pornography?



(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)

A few focus group participants noted that their homes had firewalls and ad blockers in place that reduced the amount of online pornography they saw. One participant suggested that having verified accounts could be useful in restricting access to online pornography, and that they had seen the benefit of this through their use of YouTube.

Maybe having to have a verified account on like Google or something. I know these can be easily made, but sometimes they are good at making sure the account is verified. YouTube has a good system. Lots of things are restricted based on my account.
(Straight woman, 16)

Content moderation was described by several focus group participants as being a useful tool in restricting pornographic content. One focus group participant elaborated by saying that the benefit of content moderation is that restrictions aren't placed on individuals.

Better moderation is always beneficial, and this will probably come as algorithms improve over time.
(Straight man, 16)

The content itself should be monitored and verified, rather than restrictions [placed] on the viewer.
(Straight woman, 18)



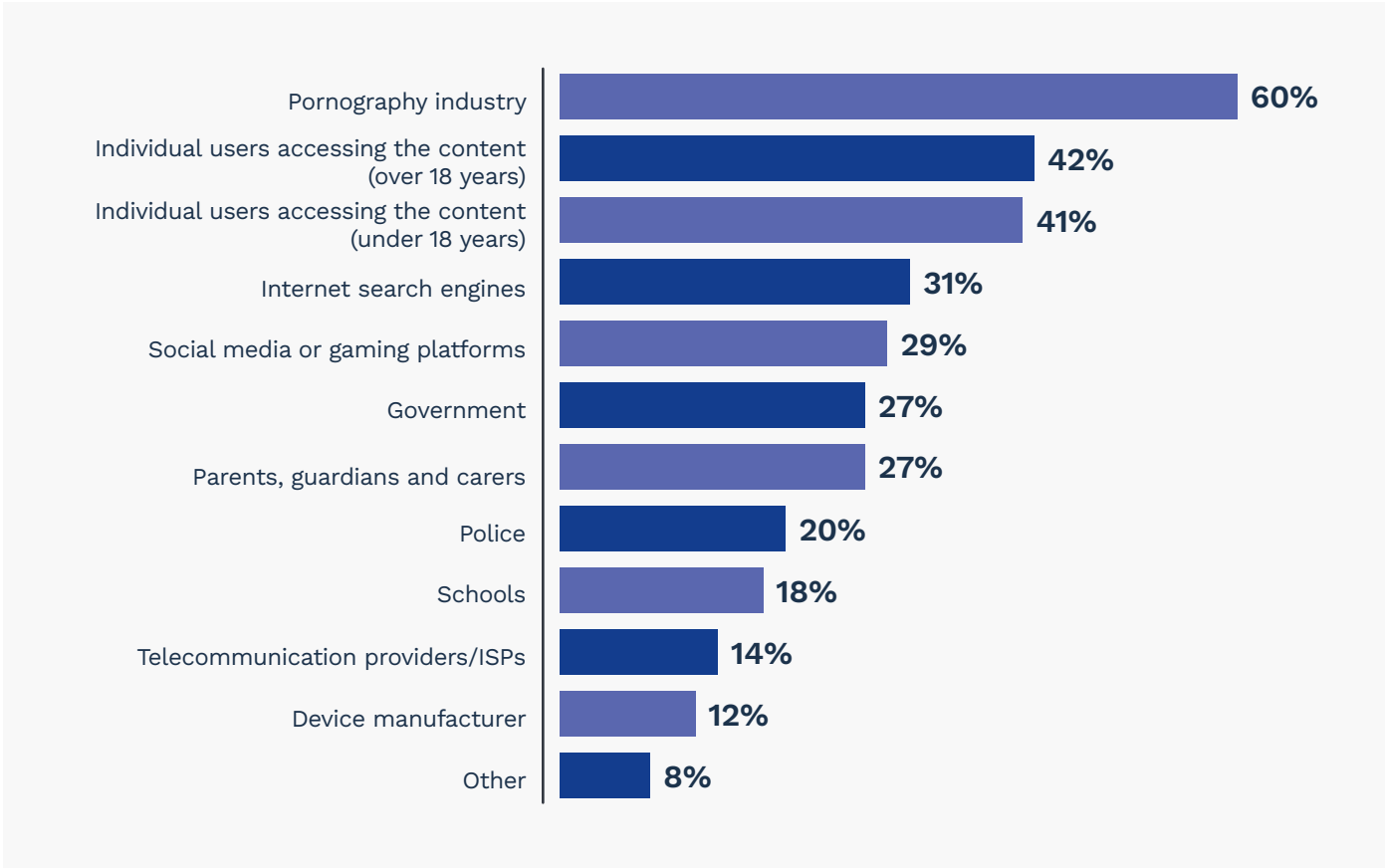
Who do young people think is responsible for age-based restriction of access to online pornography?

Young people think the pornography industry holds the onus of responsibility for age-based restriction of access to online pornography

When asked who is responsible for restricting underage access to online pornography, survey responses indicated that young people place the onus of responsibility on the pornography industry (Figure 5). It is important to note that this finding and the language used (i.e. ‘underage access’) suggests that survey respondents were thinking about who is responsible for restricting intentional underage access to online pornography. Future research should frame the question using broader language to understand perspectives on the onus of responsibility for protecting children and young people from unintentional exposure to online pornography.

- Three in five (60%) young people thought that the pornography industry is fully responsible for restricting underage access to online pornography (Figure 5).
- Two in five young people thought that individual users accessing content (under 18 years = 41%; over 18 years = 42%) are fully responsible for restricting underage access to online pornography.

Figure 5. Proportion of young people who think each group is fully responsible for restricting underage access to online pornography



(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)

In addition, a large proportion of young people in our survey thought that parents, guardians and carers (83%), social media or gaming platforms (82%), internet search engines (81%), government (75%), schools (64%), the police (61%), and telecommunication providers and ISPs (55%) are at least partly responsible for restricting underage access to online pornography (Figure 6).

Similar findings emerged from the focus groups, where participants also focused on placing responsibility for restricting access to online pornography on websites where that content appears, and to a lesser extent on the government and parents. In the focus groups, the discussion wasn't limited to underage access but was structured around regulating age restriction and online pornography.

Restrict the websites and the creators of the content, not the people consuming them.

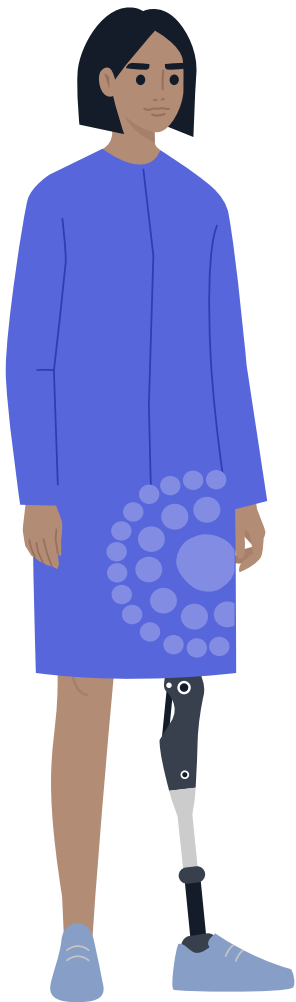
(Queer non-binary young person, 17)

It should be Google's responsibility because they allow all of these websites and ads on Google in the first place.

(Straight man, 16)

Government, the websites and parents.

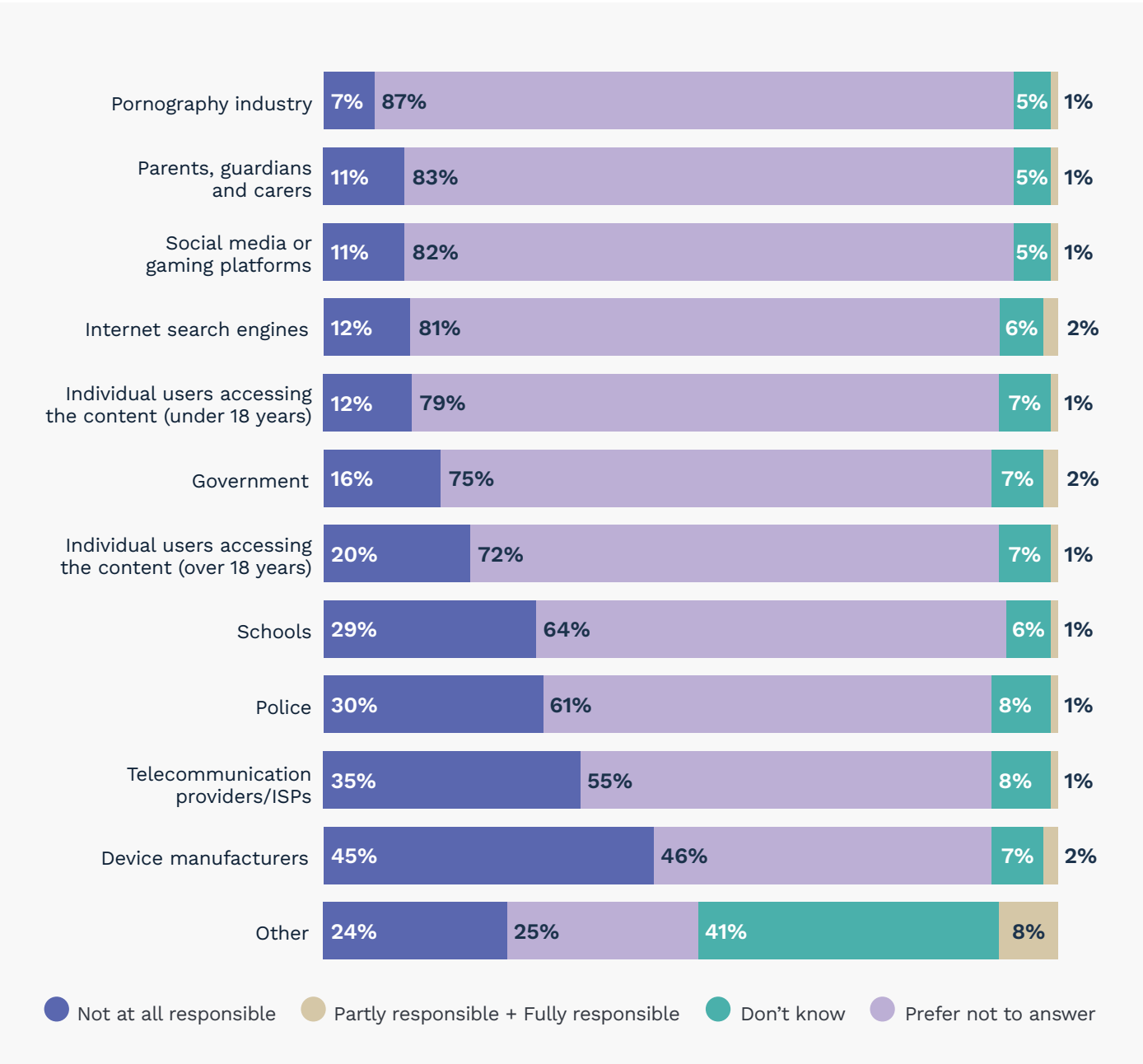
(Bisexual woman, 16)



Less responsibility was placed by young people in our survey and focus groups on device manufacturers, ISPs and the police (Figure 6).

- Almost one in two (45%) young people surveyed thought that device manufacturers had no responsibility for restricting underage access to online pornography.
- Around one in three young people surveyed thought that telecommunication providers and ISPs (35%) and the police (30%) had no responsibility for restricting underage access.

Figure 6. Proportion of young people who think each group is fully responsible for restricting underage access to online pornography



(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)

Young people's perspectives on age assurance

Young people think that age assurance tools for accessing online pornography are likely to be of limited efficacy, and they have concerns about privacy and data security. Even so, young people thought that pornography sites, social media services and dating sites should use age assurance tools to restrict underage access to online pornography.

What do young people think about age assurance approaches?

Young people think that age assurance tools based on identity documents and age screening are most appropriate for accessing online pornography

Close to one in three young people thought that ‘providing an official government document e.g. a driver’s licence’ (35%) and ‘stating your year of birth’ (30%) were appropriate ways for people to provide evidence that they are of a legal age to access online pornography (Figure 7). One in five (20%) young people were ‘unsure’ of the appropriate ways to provide evidence.

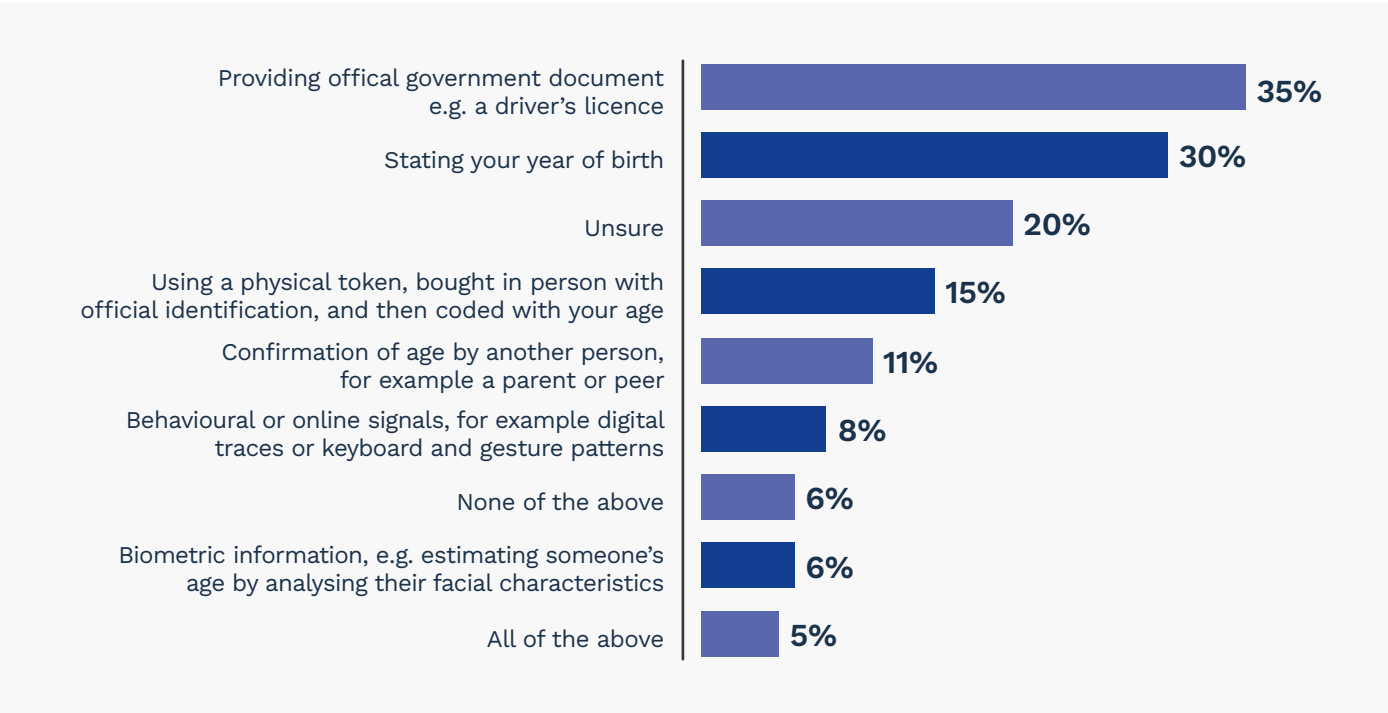
Some young people in focus groups agreed that some form of ID would be reasonable to use as an age verification tool.

 **Driver’s licence sounds the most reasonable.**
(Gay trans man, 16)

A code could be good that is unique but can't be tied back to your identity. Like, there is no record of who owns that code, but you have to provide ID to get it.
(Bisexual woman, 16)




Figure 7. Which of the following ways are appropriate for a person to prove they are of legal age to access online pornography?



(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)

Young people have multiple concerns about age assurance tools

Our qualitative research found that most young people were sceptical of age assurance, saying that it would be impossible to enforce.

 **Young kids have this thing for bypassing technology fast, so whatever we do will probably be vain efforts if this 'young person' tries to do it.**
(Straight man, 17)

I feel like even though it is possible it will reduce their access to it, [it] can't ever really be 100% effective. [It's] kind of like how people drink underage because they can get drinks off someone else or get fake IDs, etc.
(Straight woman, 18)

It's very hard to restrict ALL types of porn, especially with this 'cool' technique called lying.
(Demisexual panromantic demiboy, 18)

- In addition, most (91%) of the young people surveyed had concerns about the specific age assurance tools or processes suggested.
- Just 4% of the survey respondents indicated ‘I don’t have any concerns about these processes’ (Figure 8).
 - Three in five (63%) of the young people surveyed were concerned about the ‘privacy of personal information’.
 - Approximately three in five (58%) of the young people surveyed were concerned that ‘people could lie or bypass the [age assurance] system’.

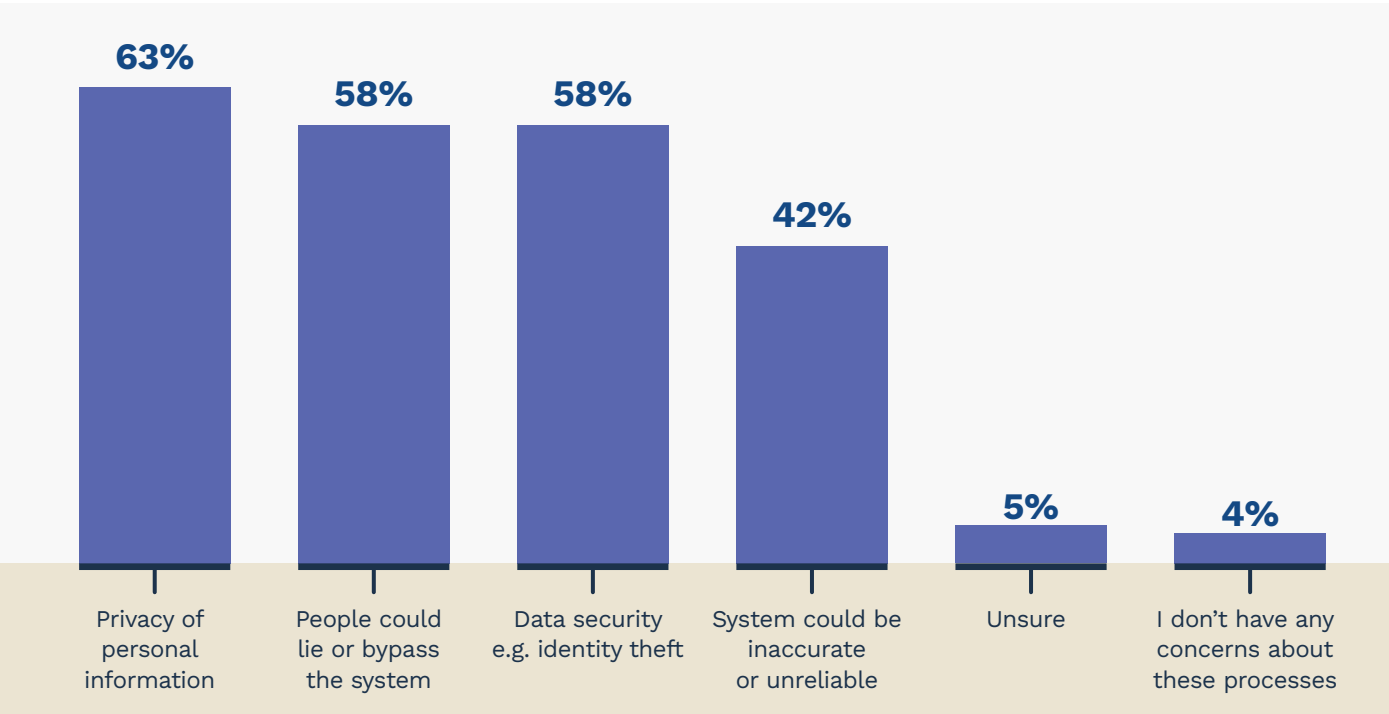
Privacy also emerged as a key concern among focus group participants, who were presented with the specific age assurance tools (shown in Figure 8). Participants suggested that the age assurances tools would pose a serious threat to privacy.

I can't think of any way the restriction could be implemented without massive privacy concerns. Even if some super strict ID verification processes were needed, there would be mirror sites popping up without the same requirements.
(Asexual non-binary young person, 18)

Idk. I feel like if this worked the government would essentially know that you are watching porn and that's a big no-no and strikes concerns with personal surveillance.
(Straight man, 17)

This is stuff I would read about in a dystopian novel.
(Queer non-binary young person, 17)

Figure 8. What are your concerns, if any, about these processes?



(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)

Focus group participants also described how people would work hard to bypass age assurance tools by lying or conducting illegal activity, with some noting that it could incentivise young people to seek out pornography and incentivise industry to provide alternative access points.

I think restrictions on pornography consumption will have no effect. People will find ways to bypass it.
(Straight man, 17)

It's almost impossible to [impose age assurance tools], due to VPN and anonymous surfing.
(Queer woman, 16)

If someone were to regulate and censor pornography sites, too many illegal sites will constantly be created, and pornography published for them, to keep up.
(Straight man, 18)

Many young people surveyed were also concerned about ‘data security, e.g. identity theft’ (58%) and the reliability and accuracy of the system (42%). These concerns were also reflected in focus group discussions.

This is like opening so many doors to data breaches, [it's] terrifying.
(Queer non-binary young person, 18)

If someone leaks the info or hacks it, it will be extremely problematic so it can't be restricted.
(Bisexual woman, 16)

I don't know how an algorithm would be able to tell. If it was manual, then human error would occur eventually.
(Straight man, 16)

It was also expressed in the focus groups that these measures would be embarrassing and unpopular. While many saw this as a good disincentive, a few others saw it as adding further stigma to an already stigmatised activity. A few participants also suggested that age assurance could produce inequity – for instance, for people who were unable to afford to buy a token.

I don't think people would be comfortable. especially considering that many porn sites seem pretty dodgy. Also, being on record for accessing porn would make people uncomfortable, in my opinion.
(Bisexual woman, 17)

Using a physical token is really awkward and no one will do this unless they are desperate, so it could work.
(Straight woman, 16)

All of these either would make the stigma around online porn so much worse and so much more invasive or could so easily be worked around there's no point to them even being there.
(Queer non-binary young person, 17)

Only a few focus group participants saw benefits to age assurance tools. Primarily, they noted that it would ease the fears of eligible (i.e. of-age) consumers that what they were doing was illegal.

While young people in the focus groups didn't see much value in the age assurance possibilities we presented to them, some did suggest alternative ways of engaging with pornography viewers. These weren't restrictive; rather, they reinforced the ideas that young people had been discussing about sex-positive pornography education and their right to make informed decisions, as detailed in our report *Accidental, unsolicited and in your face. Young people's encounters with online pornography: a matter of platform responsibility, education and choice* (eSafety Commissioner 2023).

Perhaps instead of a 'YOU MUST BE 18+ to VIEW THIS CONTENT', the popup could be changed to something with less stigma encouraging discussion instead of taboo. (Asexual non-binary young person, 18)

I don't think access should be allowed for everyone, but at the same time restricting it is so difficult that educating people is probably the best option.
(Straight man, 16)

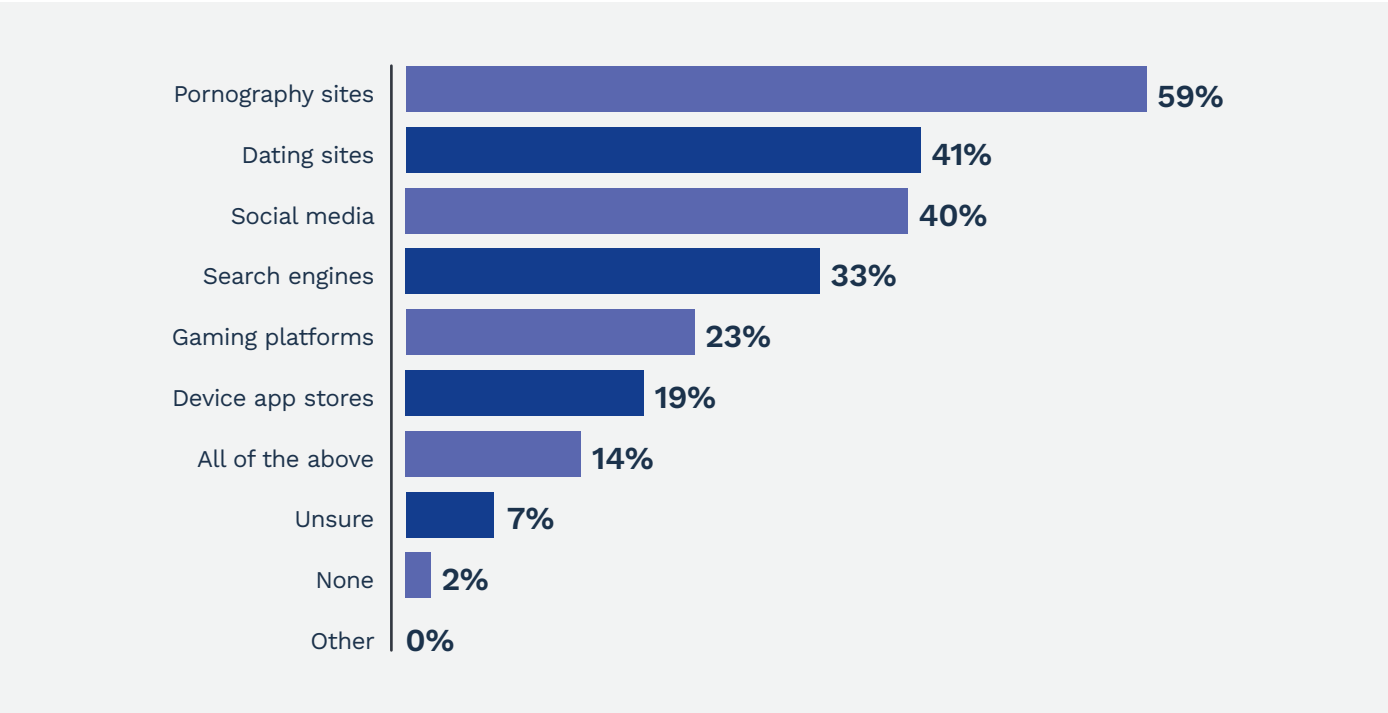
I just feel that if someone is intentionally watching porn [when they are] under 18, they know what they are watching and shouldn't be restricted, although they should be educated on why the porn industry produces unrealistic standards.
(Bisexual man, 16)

Who do young people think should be responsible for implementing age assurance tools?

Young people think that pornography sites, dating sites and social media services should utilise age assurance tools to restrict underage access to pornography

When considering who, in addition to pornography sites, should implement age assurance processes or tools, two in five young people thought dating sites (41%) and social media (40%) should use them, and one in three (33%) thought search engines should use them (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Which services do you think should use age-assurance processes or other tools to restrict underage access to online pornography?



(Total sample, unweighted, base n=1,004)



Discussion: What do we know about young people's perspectives on age assurance?

Consistent with emerging research conducted in the United Kingdom and in New Zealand, our research found general support among the young people in our survey for age-based restriction of access to online pornography (British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) 2020; Martellozzo et al. 2016; Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) 2018). Only a small minority of young people didn't think there should be any age-based restriction on pornography. Further, young people were particularly supportive of the age restriction of content that could be encountered unintentionally online, particularly by children (British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) 2020). This suggests that many young people would support age-based restrictions even if it meant that their own access to online pornography would be restricted.



'[O]ur research found general support among the young people in our survey for age-based restriction of access to online pornography.'

Young people's emphasis on restricting unintentional encounters with pornography aligns with our findings about the high rates at which young people see online pornography without meaning to, and the distress and discomfort this causes them (eSafety Commissioner 2023). Young people's perspectives on what kinds of online pornographic content they believe should be restricted would be a productive area for future study, as more data is needed on this vital aspect of the discussion around age assurance.

When considering which age group should be restricted from seeing online pornography, there was a general consensus among survey participants that young people under the age of 16 should not be allowed to access online pornography, and our research indicated that the age of consent would be more accepted by young people as the age when young people can access online pornography. However, we found that those who had not encountered pornography and those who had first encountered it at age 17–18 were more likely to agree that access to online pornography should be based on the age of consent, compared to those who had encountered it and those who had seen it prior to the age of 13. This indicates that young people's lived experiences may impact the age at which they believe young people should be able to access online pornography. Similarly, many focus group participants suggested that developmental readiness was more important than age in determining whether a young person should be able to access online pornography.

Some young people consider existing mechanisms that restrict young people's encounters with online pornography to be appropriate for restricting access to online pornography based on age (e.g. child-safe settings, content moderation, blocking age-restricted content). While these mechanisms are not consistently applied across households, platforms and websites and can be circumvented by motivated young people, when applied they may be effective in preventing young children from encountering online pornography (British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) 2020).

Available research suggests that young people think that using age assurance tools to restrict access to online pornography is likely to be of limited efficacy (Martellozzo et al. 2016), particularly for 'older more determined teenagers' (British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) 2020, p. 56). Consistent with this, most young people in our focus groups didn't see age assurance tools as useful in restricting access to online pornography. They were of the opinion that age assurance tools wouldn't always prevent young people who wanted to watch pornography from accessing pornographic content. In particular, study participants expressed the view that young people would be able to bypass age assurance tools and they voiced concerns about privacy and the security of assurance tools.

For young people in the focus groups, age assurance wasn't seen to be as important as education for supporting young people who encounter online pornography. Additionally, some participants saw age assurance as having the potential to stigmatise sexual exploration and emphasised the right of young people to make informed decisions about their sexuality (Jiang 2019; McKee et al. 2010). Further discussion of young people's perspectives on the importance of education and choice when it comes to online pornography can be found in our report *Accidental, unsolicited and in your face. Young people's encounters with online pornography: a matter of platform responsibility, education and choice* (eSafety Commissioner 2023).

Our previous study confirmed that many young people who intentionally seek out online pornography encounter it on pornography sites (eSafety Commissioner 2023; Thurman and Obster 2021). In recognition of this, the majority of young people indicated that the pornography industry should bear the weight of responsibility for age restriction and age assurance. When asked who should be implementing age assurance tools, young people thought that pornography sites, dating sites and social media services should be using them to restrict underage access to online pornography. However, young people also recognised that the restriction of access to online pornography would require a wider approach, also involving individual users, parents, guardians and caregivers, social media or gaming platforms, internet search engines, government, schools, the police, and telecommunication providers and ISPs. This reflects our findings that while young people do have intentional encounters with online pornography, and do encounter online pornography on pornography sites, they also have unintentional encounters, which are occurring on other platforms, particularly social media platforms and search engines—places that they hold responsible for preventing these unwanted encounters with pornography.



Implications

This research found that young people were overwhelmingly in favour of age-based restrictions for online pornography (91%), with 59% supporting the use of age assurance tools on pornography sites.

Our findings suggest that many young people view the age of consent to sex (16, in most Australian states and territories) as a logical minimum age for permitting access to online pornography. However, the suggested age of access differed depending on participant gender, sexuality, disability, and previous online encounters with pornography.

Young people who participated in our study saw unintentional encounters as more concerning than intentional access to online pornography and believed that this should be addressed by search engines, websites and digital platforms. Participants also felt that the pornography industry has the highest level of responsibility for implementing age-based restrictions. Parents/caregivers, search engines, and social media and gaming platforms were also identified as partially responsible.

Just under half (48%) of participants surveyed viewed existing child-safe settings and content moderation tools available on devices and social media accounts as an appropriate way to restrict access to pornography. However, more effective content moderation was encouraged by focus group participants to reduce unintentional encounters.

Young people had diverse perspectives on age assurance tools. Generally, they believed such tools would have limited efficacy and posed concerns for privacy and data security. However, when asked which age assurance methods should be applied to viewing online pornography, providing official identification was the highest rated option.



Reducing children's unintentional encounters with online pornography

eSafety's **Young People and Pornography** research series has identified high rates of young people encountering online pornography without intending to, which causes them distress and discomfort (eSafety Commissioner 2023). Young people have also shared their belief that unintentional encounters, particularly for young children, could be harmful. Unintentional encounters include viewing pornography in pop-up and sponsored ads, in content that surfaces on search engines or by typing in the wrong web address, and in content shared by social media connections or by recommender algorithms.

This suggests the following:

- Online services must have strong, effective strategies to prevent young people seeing online pornography unintentionally.
 - Search engines and messaging apps can play an important gatekeeper role in reducing children's access to this content – for example, through default safe search filters, warning messages and the blurring of explicit content.
- If a service doesn't allow pornography, this should be clearly set out in the terms of service or community rules, and such terms or rules should be enforced.
 - This requires services to have accessible and effective mechanisms for users to report pornography they encounter on the service, as well as proactive content detection tools.
- If a service does allow pornography, it should put in place effective safeguards to prevent younger users and those who don't wish to see pornography from encountering this content.
 - This requires robust age assurance measures to accurately capture the age of users in a way that doesn't compromise their privacy, coupled with age-appropriate safety features enabled on accounts by default so that pornography isn't recommended to, or accessible by, younger users.
 - It also requires user empowerment features to enable users to identify the types of content they do and don't wish to see, and to alert the service if they are being served content they don't like.
- The online industry should continuously improve tools and practices to prevent unintentional encounters with online pornography. It should also raise awareness of existing measures that young people and their parents/caregivers can choose to apply at the device level, network level, browser level or account level.

Age-based restrictions for online pornography

Most young people surveyed (91%) thought that access to online pornography should be restricted by age. Just under a third (31%) thought the minimum age for access should be 18, in line with the current classification regime in Australia. However, another third (33%) thought the minimum age for access should be 16, and one in two (50%) thought the age of consent to sex (16, in most states and territories) should factor into whether young people can access online pornography, although a majority (54%) said that this should depend on the type of pornography involved. Fewer participants thought that the minimum age for access should be 14 (17%) or 12 (9%).

Perspectives differed according to gender, sexuality and disability. For example, LGB+ young people were more likely than straight young people to think that those who are younger than the age of consent should be able to access online pornography (25% vs. 13%). Our survey data indicated that LGB+ young people were also significantly more likely than straight young people to encounter pornography at a younger age, and to think there were some positive effects (i.e. Very positive or Positive, or Both positive and negative) of online pornography on young people learning about sex and exploring their sexuality (60% vs. 48%). Some studies have found that sex education in Australian schools doesn't meet the needs of LGBTIQ+ young people (Ezer et al. 2020; Fisher et al. 2019; Jones and Hillier 2012). Others have found that young gay men and transgender young people find information in online pornography that was missing from their formal sex education (Bradford et al. 2019; Litsou et al. 2021).

This suggests the following:

- Framing age restrictions around the age of consent may provide a clearer rationale for young people, as it aligns the age one can have sex with the age one can view online content depicting sex. This alignment could also be beneficial as online environments evolve and become increasingly immersive, given that the distinction between viewing online content and having a virtual sexual experience may become less clear. The government could consider this as part of the ongoing review of Australian classification regulation and upcoming review of the *Online Safety Act 2021*.
- It is possible that some young people believe younger teenagers should be able to access online pornography in order to learn about sex and sexuality. This may indicate that the current sex and relationships education available in schools doesn't reflect the diverse sex and sexuality information needs of all young people. To reduce the reliance that some young people have on seeking sex education from pornography, all young people should have access to high-quality, comprehensive, respectful relationships education, that addresses the needs of gender- and sexually diverse young people.

Parties responsible for restricting access

Sixty per cent of young people surveyed thought that the pornography industry is fully responsible for restricting underage access to online pornography, while two in five young people thought that individual users (under 18 years = 41%; over 18 years = 42%) accessing content are fully responsible and 27% felt parents are partially responsible.

Less responsibility was placed on device manufacturers, ISP providers and the police for restricting underage access to online pornography. Almost half (45%) of the survey participants thought that device manufacturers had no responsibility, while approximately a third (35%) thought that telecommunication providers and ISPs had no responsibility.

This suggests the following:

- The pornography industry should do more to prevent underage access.
 - As of June 2023, only one of the top five most accessed pornography sites from Australia asks users their age before serving them with free content. No age assurance steps are taken to confirm the stated age. Sites where content is paywalled provide greater barriers (Similarweb n.d.).
 - Many pornography sites are meta-tagged as 'Restricted to Adults', but this is only effective to prevent underage access if filters are enabled to recognise the tag and block the content. Parents/caregivers require support to understand, access and apply such tools.
 - When advertising or posting content on social media, members of the pornography industry should follow applicable content policies and appropriately tag their accounts and content to prevent it from being served to underage accounts.
- Young people may not be fully aware of the various controls and capabilities up and down the 'digital stack' that could help prevent underage access to online pornography, such as ISP- and device-level filters, and parental controls at the network, device or account level. Increasing public awareness among young people, parents/caregivers, and the broader community may alter perspectives on who has a role to play in helping to restrict access. The online industry should seek to improve awareness of its tools so that young people and their parents/caregivers can apply measures appropriate to their circumstances.

Contradictions in the impact of age assurance tools and participant preferences for verification using official identity information

Nine in ten (91%) young people surveyed had concerns about the specific age assurance approaches suggested during the research process. Specifically, 63% were concerned about the ‘privacy of personal information’ and 58% were concerned that ‘people could lie or bypass the [age assurance] system’. Focus group participants also noted the ease of misstating one’s age using an age self-declaration process.

Young people in our study also queried whether age assurance tools would add further stigma to an already stigmatised activity, and whether these tools could restrict online activities for people who cannot afford to use the tools or don’t have access to the identity documents required.

However, when asked which age assurance methods were most appropriate for accessing online pornography, the highest response (35%) from young people surveyed was to use official government documents (e.g. a driver’s licence). eSafety’s separate survey of Australian adults yielded similar findings (eSafety Commissioner 2021).

This suggests the following:

- The preference for use of identity documents may reflect that young people are more familiar with this option, given its common use as part of in-person age checking practices. It may also reflect high trust in the accuracy of these documents. Lower acceptance of other options may reflect lower familiarity with and/or lower trust in their accuracy. Education, raised awareness, and the ability to utilise different options may help to increase familiarity and trust.
- Privacy protections are also key to trust. Any age assurance measures should be data minimising, privacy preserving and secure. Again, education and increased public awareness are an important component.
- Young people identified barriers to inclusion – for example, where users don’t have access to identity documents. This points to the importance of consumers having a choice among multiple options for confirming their age that suit their needs, circumstances and preferences.
- Age assurance measures that are well understood and trusted, and which offer a range of options, can also help to avoid the unintended consequences highlighted by young people, such as feelings of stigma and efforts to circumvent restrictions.
- Implementing a range of complementary measures up and down the digital stack can also serve to promote privacy and choice, reduce unintended consequences and increase effectiveness. However, even a multilayered technological approach won’t be 100% effective at preventing access in all circumstances. Educating young people about online pornography and respectful relationships is therefore an important part of a holistic approach to preventing and mitigating harm.



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