Young people and pornography
methodology report

Introduction

This report outlines the methodology used for eSafety's Young People and Pornography research series. The research is based on survey and focus group research conducted in September 2022. Findings will be published in a series of publications in 2023.

The research was conducted to explore young people's current perspectives on online pornography, and their attitudes towards age assurance, by examining their lived experiences with pornographic content encountered online. This research contributes to the evidence base for the development of eSafety's age verification roadmap and extends prior work conducted in the Australian context.

The objectives of the research are:

- to examine and provide insights into the lived experiences of young people in relation to their encounters with, and ideas about, online pornography
- to examine what support young people want in order to feel safe and prepared to navigate encounters with online pornography and to mitigate any potential harms that arise from these encounters
- to examine what young people think about age restriction and age assurance.

The research was conducted from 19 to 21 September 2022, with a survey of 1,004 young people aged 16–18 and six focus groups (n=32) with young people aged 16–18.

eSafety understands the impact of researchers' intersecting experiences of power and marginalisation on our research and analysis. The team that authored this report is made up of cis-gender women of European and Asian heritage. Identities represented in the team include queer women and those with disability. Our team has expertise in quantitative and qualitative methodologies, online harms and safety, and the lived experiences of young people.

Ethical considerations

Various steps were taken to address ethical considerations during project development and recruitment. The 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 Maddi 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.

Recruiting most participants directly, rather than via their parents or carers, was a key requirement for this project. Recruiting via parental or carer referral could prevent the participation of many young people, given the sensitive and personal nature of the research topic. Young people in out-of-home care, who are not close with their parents, carers or guardians, and those who don't feel comfortable discussing subjects such as online pornography with their parents, stood to be excluded from this study if contact via parents was the main form of participant recruitment.

In accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Guidelines, only mature minors were accepted into the study as participants. To ensure they could make an informed decision about study participation, and to ascertain their suitability to take part as mature minors, participants were asked their age, followed by two pre-screening questions.

Steps were taken to reduce the risk of harm to participants, to ensure that their best interests were served, and that the research conducted provided for participants' safety, emotional and psychological security, and wellbeing [1]. Informed consent to participate in the research was obtained for study participation by providing information about the kinds of questions participants would be asked and by explaining the potential risks of participating In addition, a protocol was developed to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all participants in case of distress during study participation. More specifically, help-seeking/self-support information was made available to participants throughout the study.

The study

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

Online survey

The 15-minute survey consisted of 40 questions covering topics including:

- demographics
- whether they have encountered online pornography
- age when they first encountered online pornography
- locations where they encountered online pornography
- who they were with when they encountered online pornography
- how they encountered online pornography
- their responses to encountering online pornography
- their attitudes towards online pornography
- preferences on sources of support and information
- views on age-restricted access to online pornography
- views on who should be responsible for age-based restrictions on access to online pornography
- views on age assurance and verification technologies or processes.

Survey sample

A total of 1,004 young people participated in the survey. The sample included young people with disability (n=228), those who speak a language other than English at home (n=247), those who are LGB+ (n=219), trans and gender-diverse young people (n=31), and First Nations young people (n=31) (Table 1).

A non-probability-based online panel provider (Octopus Group) was used to recruit survey participants for this project. The survey was conducted Australia-wide, covering all states and territories, including regional and metropolitan locations. Survey participants included young people who are attending formal education as well as those who are not. It included those who are attending high school, university, or vocational training (TAFE), and those who are working or seeking employment.

Table 1. Survey respondents: Key demographics

	Number of young people (n)	% of sample
Aged 16 years	338	34
Aged 17 years	333	33
Aged 18 years	333	33
Men	356	35
Women	614	61
Trans and gender-diverse	31	3
LGB+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual and more)	219	22
First Nations	31	3
With disability	228	23
Speak a language other than English at home	247	25
Total sample size	**1,004**	

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. Questions asked in the focus groups aimed to complement the survey findings, adding depth and nuance and drawing out young people's opinions on and experiences of online pornography in their own words.

Topics covered included:

• views about what pornography represents

• views on what content should be restricted to various age groups

• what young people believe they need in order to feel empowered to navigate sexual content online

• perspectives on age assurance and verification technology.

Focus group sample

A total of 32 young people aged 16–18 participated in the six focus groups. The focus groups were made up of 12 sixteen-year-olds, 11 seventeen-year-olds and 10 eighteen-year-olds (Table 2). 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/heterosexual, one as lesbian/gay/homosexual, three as queer, five as bisexual, and one each as pansexual, asexual, demisexual panromantic and questioning (Table 3)[1].

Based on participants' expressed preferences, one focus group consisted of LGBTIQ+ young people only, and another consisted only of heterosexual young men (Table 2). Four focus groups were not categorised according to gender identity or sexuality (Table 2).

Participants in three of the focus groups were recruited through a market research recruiter company (Q&A), while participants in the other three groups were recruited directly from their participation in the online survey. The focus groups were run by members of the eSafety Research Team through an online platform (VisionsLive). Participants' participation in the focus groups was pseudo-anonymous.

Table 2. Online focus groups: Characteristics

	Number of young people (n)	Composition	Recruitment
Focus group 1	5	Mixed	Not survey
Focus group 2	6	Mixed	Not survey
Focus group 3	5	Mixed	Not survey
Focus group 4	5	LGBTIQ+	Survey
Focus group 5	5	Heterosexual men	Survey
Focus group 6	6	Mixed	Survey
Total sample size	**32**	**32**	

[1] All 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 did not 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.

Table 3. Online focus groups: Participant demographics

Participant sexuality	Number of young people (n)
Heterosexual/Straight	19
Homosexual/Gay/Lesbian	1
Queer	3
Bisexual	5
Asexual	1
Pansexual	1
Demisexual Panromantic	1
Questioning	1
Participant gender	
Woman/Female	15
Man/Male	11
Non-binary	4
Trans Man	1
Demiboy	1
Participant age	
16 years	12
17 years	11
18 years	10
Total sample size	32

Analysis

Octopus Group hosted the survey, collected and cleaned the survey data, and provided eSafety with raw data as well as descriptive analysis. eSafety checked and analysed the data further using Q Research software. Findings were checked and confirmed by a second eSafety researcher using SPSS Statistics software.

Focus group transcripts were thematically coded using the research software Condens. A coding framework was iteratively developed following Braun and Clarke's (2019) method for thematic analysis[2].

Limitations

- Online panels are technically convenience samples. 'Non-probability-based sampling' means that not everyone has an equal chance of being selected to participate in the research. Results may be subject to a range of biases when compared with results from research using probability-based sampling. Although it is possible to control for demographic skews using quotas, controlling for psychographic skews arising from differential approaches to participation attraction is more problematic. However, it should be broadly noted that there is no perfect sampling approach for humans. A random digit dialling telephone approach is generally regarded as best practice in the development of true probability samples. However, this approach is complicated by a range of factors, including the prevalence and usage of mobile phones and landlines, and further by issues such as social desirability in responses – particularly relevant for this study, in which participants were asked a range of sensitive questions.

- Qualitative findings reported from this research should be read with the understanding that they emerged from young people who had chosen to participate in the research. As a result, the findings may be slightly skewed towards those who are more comfortable talking about online pornography, as well as towards those who may have more experience of this topic.

- Due to the nature of an online survey, we cannot be sure whether there is a reticence to report experiences of some encounters with online pornography by young people. For example, even though the survey was anonymous, some young people may feel more comfortable reporting accidental/unintentional encounters with pornography than deliberate encounters.

- Specific survey findings for First Nations and trans and gender-diverse young people were not separated out in the main data collected. This was due to the small sample size for each group, which is an inherent challenge in statistical analysis. For example, even though we were able to recruit close to a nationally representative proportion of First Nations young people as part of our sample (3%), this was too small a number of participants in a 1,000-person sample to provide separate findings for this cohort. As a result, our findings are unable to reflect the experiences of these groups. We know that both cohorts are highly likely to experience online harms, and we acknowledge that reaching larger sample sizes, as well as doing research specifically with marginalised and at-risk groups, is a priority for eSafety Research. Specialist recruiters, as well as alternative recruitment strategies, will be considered for future studies.

- This research does not contribute to the literature on the harms that may be associated with young people encountering online pornography. The focus of the study is not the impacts and effects of seeing online pornography. As such, our research cannot claim to represent a full, long-term picture of young people's experiences with online pornography.

Note to the reader

Percentages in the tables and graphs may not add to 100% due to rounding or because respondents were able to give more than one answer to some questions. The base sizes shown in the tables and graphs use unweighted data.

Key terms used

Intentional encounters (with online pornography)	encounters that are voluntary and purposeful
LGB+ young people	survey respondents who described their sexual orientation as 'gay', 'lesbian', 'queer', 'unsure/questioning', 'asexual' and 'I use a different term' (included pansexual, demisexual, panromantic, bisexual, asexual, omnisexual)
LGBTIQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer and more
Online pornography	defined for survey participants as: 'Textual, visual and audio-visual sexually explicit material that is primarily intended to sexually arouse the audience. This can include representations of images of nudity or semi-nudity, implied sexual activity and actual sexual activity that is uploaded, accessed and shared via online platforms. This does not include the sending or receiving of nudes or nude selfies, also known as sexting.'
Trans and gender-diverse young people	survey respondents who described their gender as 'trans man', 'trans woman', 'non-binary', 'I use a different term' or 'unsure/questioning'
Unintentional encounters (with online pornography)	occur when individuals inadvertently and/or accidentally come across online pornography
Young people with disability	were identified by the question: 'Do you experience any physical, mental, emotional or other conditions, challenges or disabilities that restrict your everyday activities and/or participation in society that have lasted, or are likely to last, for at least six months?'

Works cited

[1] NHMRC, 2018. National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). Canberra: NHMRC.

[2] V. Braun & V. Clarke, 2019. Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 11(4), pp. 589–597.