Being a young man online

Tensions, complexities and possibilities

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Australian Government | eSafetyCommissioner

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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.

Content warning

This report contains discussions about online practices and content that are at times harmful, abusive and violent. It also mentions unhealthy ideas about consent, gender and sexual practices. Please consider if reading this report is right for you at this time.

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About this report

In 2023, eSafety collaborated with researchers from Deakin University and the Queensland University of Technology to conduct a qualitative study into the online experiences of young men. The project explores the influences and motivations that shape and inform young men's online experiences.

The project comprises two parts:

Part 1: an engagement with young men to explore their online experiences (the study)

Part 2: an engagement and consultation with a range of expert practitioners working with young men on the topic of healthy, positive masculinities and manhood to share findings and enrich the study's evidence base.

This report presents Part 1 of the research.

For the study, 25 online focus groups and 25 follow-up individual interviews were conducted with 117 young men[1] aged 16–21 years. This group of participants was recruited to reflect the diverse backgrounds, identities and lived experiences of young men in Australia today. The research aimed to understand what it is like to be a young man interacting with today's online world. The study took a youth-centred, strengths-based approach in exploring young men's online experiences relating to their identity, sexuality and social connections. It found that young men are navigating complex and often contradictory online experiences, and that the resulting emotional states range from feeling liberated to suffering anxiety, from enjoying intimacy with others to feeling wary of them, and from having a sense of connection to experiencing harm. Across many of these domains and dynamics, young men are conforming with, confronting and challenging social and cultural expectations of manhood and masculinity.

In the current social landscape, understanding the online experiences of young men has become increasingly important. Recent years have seen an intensification of popular attention and media debate over men and masculinities. Discussions have proliferated about how young men are socialised, the harms that some of them experience and engage in, and the ways in which their lives are constrained by social ideals of manhood (Flood, 2017). In response, a field of community programming and health promotion focused on men and/or boys is developing rapidly in Australia (Keddie et al., 2022).

There is also increased policy attention focused on how to foster healthier, more gender-equitable lives for men and boys and people of all genders, including an emphasis on 'healthy masculinities' in the **National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032**. This interest has been matched by widespread community support for engaging men and boys in positive change (Flood, 2020).

Simultaneously, there has been both progress and its reverse (regression) on issues of gender equality in Australia. While a movement towards greater gender equality is underway, there have been uneven advances in the domains of paid work and care, as well as signs of resistance and backlash to social progress around women's rights and gender equity (Coumarelos et al., 2023; Evans et al., 2018).

This study was conducted against the backdrop of increased recognition that rigid and harmful gender norms are an underpinning driver of gender-based violence (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022; OurWatch, 2019). Gender-based violence is recognised as being disproportionately experienced by, and harming, women, girls and LGBTQI+ people (**eSafety Commissioner, 2023a**; UNWomen, 2022). However, rigid and harmful gender norms also harm men and boys in direct and indirect ways. Initiatives aimed at challenging gender norms and promoting healthier forms of masculinity are commonly framed as measures that address violence against women and children. While this is a vital component of addressing gender-based violence, it is also vital that initiatives aimed at helping young men

1. In this report, we use the term 'young men' to refer to the full cohort of participants. However, we acknowledge that the 16- and 17-year-olds who participated in this study would be considered boys or children under the *Online Safety Act* and the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

safely and positively engage with masculinity have the direct aim and value of improving their health and wellbeing. This is especially critical in a cultural context where young men feel they lack status and power in their lives and struggle to see the structural power and privilege they also hold (Burn-Murdoch, 2024; Reeves, 2024). The impetus for this study is therefore to build the evidence base on young men's experiences online, with the intention of developing meaningful interventions in this space.

As such, this study explores how young men are growing up and grappling with what it means to be a man today. In a social environment where ideals of manhood and masculinity are intensely contested, young men are faced with the challenge of negotiating conflicting social conventions and gendered expectations as they develop their sense of themselves and of their place in the world.

Adolescence is a developmental stage during which young people's capacities evolve rapidly, and when self-exploration and discovery are central preoccupations.[2] It is clear that the young men in this study are looking to both the online and offline worlds to help them carry out the key developmental processes of developing their identity (including but not limited to sexual identity), negotiating peer and intimate relationships, navigating body image, forming their own value systems and turning towards future economic independence (NSW Health, 2014). The near-compulsory status of the internet means that these processes can be informed by more input than ever before and may even be transformed, for better or worse, when conducted in the digital landscape (Crone & Konijn, 2018; Nesi et al., 2020).

The online experiences of young men in this study highlight the central place that ideas about gender have in their lives. Their discussions suggest that notions of what is considered normal and natural for men within a heteronormative culture can empower, limit and harm young men. Young men's reflections on this reveal their ability to recognise how men who strive to enact masculine stereotypes can harm others and themselves. Simultaneously, their reflections indicate that many see living up to masculine ideals as an antidote to feelings of powerlessness and alienation in their lives. Similarly, as young men in this study describe their experiences online, they demonstrate both a propensity for thinking critically about what they see online and the ways that this can profoundly impact them and their worldviews. The findings in this report explore these gendered tensions and complexities that characterise young men's online experiences.

By capturing the voices and experiences of young men, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of their journeys, aspirations and challenges as they navigate the personal and political landscapes of adolescence, manhood and contemporary society in the digital age.

2. Development is a culturally inflected process. Experiences such as immigration, connection to minority ethnic communities and cultural practices, various family forms and expectations may all impact how young men experience development (Keller, 2020).

Key findings

For young men today, the internet is a place where they can explore and express their identities, including what it means to be a man.

The process of identity formation is a central aspect of adolescent development. The findings in this report suggest how profoundly this process is being informed and shaped by new and emerging online environments, as well as by complex and evolving ideas about what it means to be a man.

As young men today are one of the first generations to reckon with this intersection of factors, their online experiences are marked by tensions, complexities and possibilities.

This report offers a chance to uncover young men's beliefs, behaviours and influences at a time when their online lives are widely discussed and debated but their voices are often unheard.

Young men shape and express their identities online

Being online allows young men to express themselves freely.

- Young men utilise online tools and strategies, such as adopting a level of anonymity or pseudonymity, to express themselves online without fear of judgement.
- They also recognise that anonymity and cancel culture[3] are sometimes fraught and difficult-to-navigate concepts that can be used to restrict expression and generate harm online.
- Young men value the freedom that the internet offers them to explore, experiment and represent themselves, including in ways they wouldn't be comfortable doing in offline environments.

Self-expression online can be fraught for young men.

- As they grapple with how to represent themselves as men online, many young men avoid making emotionally vulnerable posts and struggle with being unable to meet rigid and stereotypical masculine ideals around body image.
- Young men are also critically aware of the ways that the posts they see online are carefully constructed and that these often don't reflect life offline.

3. 'Cancel culture' is 'a contested term that can imply a way to hold people accountable, a tactic to punish others unjustly, or a mix of both' (Vogles et al., 2021). It can also be understood as 'a way of behaving in a society or group, especially on social media, in which it is common to completely reject and stop supporting someone because they have said or done something that offends you' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024).

Engaging with online influencers is a key way that young men shape their identities.

- Many young men actively seek out influencer content associated with self-improvement and male empowerment, which they find inspiring and motivating.
- Other young men criticise the messages of male empowerment influencers for promoting a narrow ideal of what it means to be a man.
- Young men are critically aware of the ways that recommender systems and algorithms can shape the content they are influenced by online.

Andrew Tate[4] is a key influencer figure in many young men's worlds.

- Whether they embrace his messages, reject him or are ambivalent, engaging with Tate and his ideas is a central way in which some young men are shaping their identity as men online.

Young men explore their sexuality online

Young men are cautious about sharing intimate images online.

- Intimate image sharing has become a common practice and expectation among young people. While some young men said they enjoy the practice, some also spoke of the pressure they feel to send sexual images.
- They are aware of the harms that can occur when images are sent or shared non-consensually, and of how these harms can be different for men and women. A number of young men noted that women experience greater stigma and repercussions as a result of sharing intimate images.
- Young men expressed that trust and in-person connection were important to them when it came to sharing intimate images online.

4. Andrew Tate is a controversial American–British media influencer whose content ranges from 'general motivational videos aimed at inspiring men to take on a physically healthy lifestyle, to more dangerous content that is explicitly misogynistic, homophobic, sexist and conspiratory' (The Man Cave, 2023, p. 3).

Young men are critical of online pornography.

- Online pornography is a pervasive presence in the lives of young men, and they often encounter it without actively seeking it out.
- They often experience negative impacts because of their encounters with online pornography, including feelings of shame and a lack of self-control.
- Young men indicate they are aware that pornography is generally not a good model of gender equality, consent or respectful relationships. They are also concerned about the impacts of online pornography on younger men and boys.

Young men access and navigate social connections online

Young men connect with friends online.

- Online apps and platforms are important means through which young men maintain their friendships, reconnect with old friends and make new friends.

- Being online also allows young men to deepen their friendships and to share thoughts and feelings they might not otherwise share.

Young men find support and acceptance in online communities.

- Young men connect with communities online based on shared interests, experiences and identities.
- Young men value being part of online communities because of the sense of belonging and acceptance these can provide.
- Being part of an online community gives young men a source of valuable support during tough times and the opportunity to support others in their community.

Key findings

Young men both experience and perpetuate harm in online communities.

- Young men see online communities as places where abuse and negativity are common and normalised, noting that racism, sexism and transphobia, among other forms of prejudice and discrimination, can flourish in these spaces.
- Some young men pointed out how the way in which certain platforms are structured, or a culture of ‘bandwagoning’[5] in some online communities, exacerbates harm.
- Some young men described being negatively and personally affected by the harms that can occur in online communities, while others saw things like aggression and discrimination as an inherent or expected part of being online and said they weren’t particularly impacted by these things.

Online gaming communities are a significant source of both connection and harm for young men who engage in them.

- Young men who participate in online gaming find social connection in these spaces.
- For some young men, harmful behaviours that occur in gaming communities, such as racism, sexism and aggression, are an outcome of online gaming communities being frequented much more by men.
- Some young men describe online gaming communities as places where it is considered normal to respond to abuse by retaliating in kind.

5. The term ‘bandwagoning’ is taken to refer to the collective practice of joining in on something because it is popular. In this report, we take it to refer specifically to the collective practice of joining in on directing hate or abuse towards someone or something because others are doing so.

Methodology

This project is a qualitative study that sought to explore the online experiences of a diverse range of young men across Australia through a series of online focus groups and individual interviews.

Participants and recruitment

Recruitment of the 117 young men was supported by the recruitment agency The Human Network Market Research Service. The participants were aged 16–21 years. Young men under 18 years received permission from their parents/guardians to participate in the study. All the participants identified as men and were fluent in English. Fourteen identified as having disability. Further demographic details of the sample are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic makeup of participants

Age	No.	Sexual identity	No.	Employment	No.	Ethnic identity	No.
16	21	Straight	90	Students	93	Culturally and linguistically diverse	49
17	13	Gay	9	Working part- or full-time	20	First Nations	4
18	22	Bisexual	11	Self-employed	1		
19	22	Queer	2	Unemployed	3		
20	22	Asexual	1				
21	17	Unsure/ questioning	2				
		Prefer not to say	2				

All the young men were allocated pseudonyms. They all participated in an online focus group interview. Twenty-five young men were selected (one from each focus group) for a follow-up online interview. (See the Appendix for further details.)

Methods

Online focus groups

The study involved online focus group interviews with the young men (25 focus groups, each with four or five young men). To ensure that the questions, interview style and language for the interviews were as relevant to the participants as possible, the research team recruited and consulted four youth researchers from the Centre for Multicultural Youth (Victoria). These youth researchers participated in an initial in-person workshop with the research team, including an eSafety representative. In the workshop, we discussed the research questions and developed a set of sub-questions and prompts around the key research questions. (See the Appendix for further details.)

The youth researchers led the focus groups with a member of the research team present.

Focus group interviews lasted approximately two hours. Participants were grouped according to age, with young men aged 16–18 and 19–21 grouped together.

Online individual interviews

The youth researchers conducted follow-up interviews with 25 young men. The interviews generally lasted one hour and were conducted via Zoom. The research team and the youth researchers determined the interview schedule following several focus group interviews and generally explored themes arising from the focus groups. (See the Appendix for further details.)

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed via Zoom. The transcripts were then checked and corrected for accuracy.

Further details of the study's methodology can be found in the Appendix.

Positionality

The authors of this report understand that researchers' intersecting experiences of power and marginalisation impact on our research and analysis. As is the case for all research, the lived experiences of the authors and the inherent biases that these carry have influenced research design, methodology, data analysis and data presentation. We acknowledge the influence of our identities and experiences on the study, despite our best efforts to consciously mitigate this.

The authors and researchers behind this report include cisgender men and cisgender women, Anglo Australian men and women, an Asian Australian man, a Vietnamese man, a queer woman, queer men, straight men and straight women.

Limitations

- As the first part of a two-part research project, this report reflects the experience-informed perspectives of young men in Australia. The report is designed to be read in isolation but should also be considered within the broader findings of Part 2. Further, as a qualitative research report, the findings presented here should not be read as being representative of the Australian population. This is in keeping with the aims of online qualitative research, which is to draw interpretations and insights, as opposed to quantifiable data or descriptions (Ferreira & Scaraboto, 2022).
- In the context of contemporary debates and issues relating to men's behaviour online and engagements with ideas about masculinity online, this research has viewed data predominantly, though not exclusively, through a gender lens. This means that other focus areas such as mental health and wellbeing are not foregrounded in this report.
- The study was designed to include a wide range of participants in order to reflect the diverse identities, sexualities, backgrounds and lived experiences of young men in Australia. Focus groups were conducted online to widen the geographical spread of participants without requiring facilitators to travel. However, this strategy may have made participation inaccessible to some young men – for instance, those who are not confident with spoken English or who don't have reliable internet access.
- The study lacked the scope to consider in detail the ways that young men's intersecting experiences of gender, sexuality, race, class, disability and more relate to their online experiences. It includes the voices of young men from a range of backgrounds and life experiences; however, the primary intention of this study was to be exploratory. Future eSafety research will consider how to examine the specific online experiences of young men who are part of marginalised cohorts.
- The data informing this report was collected in 2023. That year saw issues relating to young men's online activities receive high levels of media attention. When the online influencer Andrew Tate was charged with rape and human trafficking by a Romanian court in June 2023, it sparked intense media and online discussion about Tate and other online male influencers. Young men's discussions in interviews and focus groups are likely to have been coloured by this context.
- As is often typical in research settings, the implied power dynamic between researchers and participants may have influenced the content the young men felt comfortable discussing. In particular, the findings of this research study relating to pornography suggest the young men in the focus groups and interviews may have felt unable to express any potentially positive experiences they have had with online pornography. Given the high rates of consumption of pornography among young Australian men (eSafety Commissioner, 2023b), it was surprising that few young men expressed positive attitudes or experiences when discussing this topic.

Young men shape and express their identities online

The young men in this research study were actively engaged in shaping and crafting their identities online. They describe being online as a place where they can relax, have fun and learn things, and where they can express themselves freely. Young men described using the tools that digital environments offer to create spaces where they could express themselves freely. However, many participants discussed how the process of representing themselves as men online could be stressful and fraught. Pressures to look a certain way and to present certain forms of masculine success impacted the young men in this study and their sense of self.

Along with expressing and representing themselves online, study participants described exploring and shaping their sense of self through engaging with online self-improvement content and male empowerment influencers such as Andrew Tate. They expressed nuanced perspectives and engagements with male influencers online, ranging from disinterest to enthusiastic adoption to strong criticism. It appeared that whether they were connecting with or rejecting the messages of male influencers, engagement with this content was a key way that young men crafted their identities online.

Being online allows young men to express themselves freely

Young men in this study described online spaces as often allowing them greater freedom to express themselves than they experienced offline. For some, the internet was a place where they had the freedom to experiment with their identity or to voice opinions without fear of judgement or embarrassment.

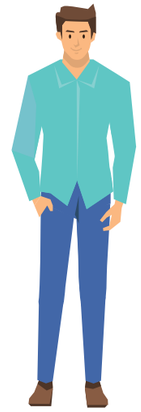
> I think the people [who] are maybe inhibited in person or [who] have their guard up a little bit [may] feel a bit freer on the internet to express themselves a little more – [to] be a bit more loose.
>
> – *Geoffrey (20, gay, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

> I feel like [you] can be more open and experiment with stuff online.
>
> – *Campbell (18, bisexual, young man with disability)*

> I'm a lot more conservative in my day-to-day life as opposed to when I'm online ... I feel more comfortable [sharing] opinions that other people may not like and it's not anything racist or outrageous. It's just, I can actually say what I'm thinking as opposed to being more concerned [about] what do they think, you know?
>
> – *Franklin (21, straight)*

For many young men, freedom to express themselves online was a result of careful and strategic deployment of online tools and functions such as anonymity and curating who can see what they post.

> [W]hen you're anonymous on the internet ... you don't need to worry about embarrassing yourself ...
>
> – *Brendan (20, straight)*



> No one's gonna post something bad or, yeah, negative about me ... [The people] I have on there [are] people I can really trust.
>
> – *Lleyton (16, straight)*

Some of the young men spoke about using their anonymity online to express themselves through potentially harmful behaviours – often framing these as lighthearted or fun.

> I did have like an alt[ernate] TikTok, and Twitter account. It's just soccer opinions, a bit of trolling. I kind of take the mickey a bit. Just get people angry, [to] get a bit of a laugh out of it ... It's pretty funny to get them upset.
>
> – *Ned (17, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

> So I have an alt[ernate] account on that Discord, for example, that I just kind of use to lightly mess with people, just for fun ...
>
> – *Miles (16, straight)*

However, young men were also critical of how some people used the ability to be anonymous online to harm others.

> I mean, there's a lot of assholes in real life and everyone can access the internet … Yeah, people are definitely more comfortable with being assholes to other people online if no one knows who they are.
>
> – *Lionel (20, straight)*

> People can create [social media] accounts where they don't have any actual personal information tied to them … [B]ecause of that, they can really just kind of spew a lot of hate.
>
> – *Chen (18, gay, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

While young men were conscious of the potentially harmful ways in which people could express themselves online, they simultaneously defended their right to express themselves freely online. In particular, many young men discussed how cancel culture was limiting what they could say and do online. Others recognised the difficulties of finding a balance between restricting harmful content and supporting free speech.

> [W]e should both be able to, you know, argue with each other … but I do think that sometimes it goes a bit far, like when people accuse someone of being malicious when they actually just didn't know, they didn't understand … [I]t's everyone's job to kind of educate them and help them understand.
>
> – *Brodie (20, bisexual)*

> I dislike [cancel culture], [b]ecause it doesn't allow free speech.
>
> – *Franklin (21, straight)*

> I feel like everyone these days is a little bit too sensitive on the internet … I thought cancel culture used to be something good … [N]ow it's just like people can't say stuff …
>
> – *Maxie (21, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Similarly, a number of young men in the study expressed that freedom to use the internet in the ways they wanted to, including the freedom to express themselves, was one of the key elements of a positive online experience.

> I'd say the freedom to use it, the way that I want to use it – like, whether it's communication or entertainment.
>
> – *Manny (18, straight)*

> [T]he freedom to express yourself online without, like, other people coming in and ruining the moment.
>
> – *Theo (18, straight, First Nations)*

Young men's discussions of how they express themselves online indicate that they value the freedom the internet offers them to explore, experiment and represent themselves. A sense of freedom in these domains is likely to be especially important for young men in middle and late adolescence (typically aged 14–21 years), when developing identity is a central concern (NSW Health, 2014). Young men's experiences of representing themselves online suggest that their explorations of identity can manifest in ways that may be liberatory and/or potentially harmful.

Expressing and exploring identity online can be a fraught process for young men

While young men spoke of the freedom they felt to explore and express themselves online, they also mentioned the pressures they felt when representing themselves as men online, especially in relation to posting on social media.

Some young men in this study distanced themselves from what they considered to be the predominantly feminine practice of posting online.

> Not many guys post just photos of themselves, just like looking nice or in nice clothes, which is something that the female-presenting people in my friend group do a lot.
>
> – *Felix (20, bisexual)*

> I feel [that] posting yourself is more like a feminine thing to do.
>
> – *Matteo (16, straight)*

Further, some young men in the study drew on harmful stereotypes of women as attention seeking, to explain the perceived motivations of women and girls for posting online.

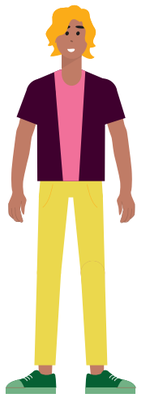
> Women like the attention part of social media more than men do.
>
> – *Jase (20, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Yet these reflections were sometimes situated within a wider critical reflection by the young men that women and girls may experience certain social and cultural pressures to post certain content online. These critical reflections on social pressures included an acknowledgement of the restrictive ideas about beauty for young women online and a care and concern for how it can impact someone's self-worth.

> [F]emales will have to have the perfect shot or whatever and then like the comments and validate that … I wouldn't say ego … But I feel like sometimes females post for the validation of others.
>
> – *Campbell (18, bisexual, young man with disability)*

> I think there's a lot of pressure from social media for girls – like, lots of really intense beauty standards … [T]hen I think that sort of leads to them posting in ways that sort of show them [fitting] that beauty standard as much as they can … I don't think that [there] is as much of it for men, and I think it can be sad sometimes to see how overwhelming it can be and how it can really affect people's self-esteem.
>
> – *Oliver (21, queer)*

Similarly, some young men reflected on the ways that vulnerability isn't traditionally valued for men, and how this impacts their self-expression online. Some expressed anxiety about being judged and explained that this meant they avoided posting online or expressing themselves openly when they did so.



> [W]e don't post publicly … [I]t's really judgemental and especially being a young man, putting up a vulnerable story, you're just gonna get people laughing at you or criticising you.
>
> – *Tariq (19, straight)*

> It would be nice to have [the ability to be vulnerable] without fearing the repercussions, the consequences … because if a guy does post something vulnerable, he's seen as weak.
>
> – *Jase (20, straight)*

> Oh, I would definitely say there is, you know, a fear of being judged sometimes … Well, sometimes I think I just don't even want to deal with it. [I] don't even comment [on] anything.
>
> – *Kyle (18, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Young men also described masculine body image standards as a source of stress around how they crafted their identities online. Many said that comparing themselves with photo and video content related to men's fitness or bodybuilding affected them negatively.

> … definitely seeing, you know, people posting their gym pictures and stuff, and [you] can get quite bummed down and you start comparing your progress to them.
>
> – *Hugh (20, straight)*

> I go to the gym fairly frequently … you see a tiny bit of progress in 2 years. And then you see a photo of someone who's lived in the gym their whole life, who's absolutely ripped and great physique …
>
> – *Kenneth (21, straight)*

> [W]hen guys post a lot of, you know, gym selfies, that kind of stuff … [it] can sometimes make you feel a little bit like shit … a little bit self-conscious.
>
> – *Daniel (19, gay)*

Young men's discussions indicated that these masculine body standards and unrealistic body image ideals can create pressure to look a certain way, which affects how they present themselves online. Image-based pressures can be especially impactful on young people during puberty and adolescence (Frost, 2003; Jones & Smolak, 2011; Webb et al., 2017).

> I didn't post because, you know, there'll be a big pimple here and I was like, 'Yeah, I can't put that out there – that's terrible. Disgusting.'
>
> – *Jamie (16, First Nations)*

> [O]n Instagram, posting just feels like it has to be perfect to post … me at my best.
>
> – *Ari (19, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Similarly, some young men in the study described feeling pressure to present themselves online as successful financially and in terms of major life milestones. These markers of social and financial achievement are often associated with narrow stereotypes of successful manhood and, in the case of financial independence, can be a key developmental concern in late adolescence (NSW Health, 2014). The young men described how social media could be an environment based on comparison and competition, where individuals strive to showcase their achievements.

> I find it hard to distance myself from the fact that it is kind of a highlight reel, so like their highlight really is just way better than mine … I feel like so much of society today, because of the internet, is just like a competitive game for the best pictures, the best videos, looking the best and all that sort of thing.
>
> – *Brodie (20, bisexual)*

> [T]here was a point where life was kind of like a competition and … you wanted to show people that you were doing these things.
>
> – *Daniel (19, gay)*

> … kind of a 'look at me' … [you] judge yourself … you compare [yourself with other] people to … it could be like, 'Oh, yeah, look at me, I'm doing this degree' [or] 'I'm having a baby' – like, you know, 'I've got my life on track'. That's when you compare yourself, you know: that's not me.
>
> – *Tyler (20, bisexual, young man with disability)*

For many young men, the comparison and competition associated with representing themselves online, and seeing other people's curated online identities, impacted their self-esteem. Adolescents typically have a strong need to follow the norms of their peer group (Crone & Konijn, 2018). When they are unable to do so because they can't meet the ideals established by their peers online, young men describe feeling sad and insecure.

> [A]lthough I consciously am aware that people obviously don't post the shit parts of their lives … [there's a] sadness I get from seeing someone do something awesome – and that's me being brutally honest.
>
> – *Franklin (21, straight)*

> My biggest insecurity at the moment is money … you know, when I see … friends, my age or younger than me, moving out and actually, you know, being able to get jobs … that's probably the biggest thing that I see online: *Look at … where I am.*
>
> – *Kieran (19, straight)*

The pressure to present themselves according to these physical and social ideals of manhood meant that for some young men in the study, posting online was a taxing activity that could create an emotional toll.

> [For] most of the people in my [friendship group], a lot of effort goes into deciding what you're putting up there or, like, how you present yourself for your image.
>
> – *Jacob (21, straight)*

> [T]he energy and just the momentum to stay happy … and trying to be perfect … that you want to only pull out the best moments in your life.
>
> – *Chen (18, gay, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

However, young men's understanding of the effort that goes into crafting their own online identity was reflected in their critical awareness of the curated nature of other people's self-representations online.

> [W]hen you travel yourself, there's obviously some amazing bits, but … there's a lot of lower points that people don't post.
>
> – *Mike (20, straight)*

> I think everyone's trying to look a certain way and everyone's projecting something on to the internet, otherwise people wouldn't be on the internet.
>
> – *Geoffrey (20, gay, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

> Yeah, I know some people who literally attend events just for that one good picture … like people always wanna show up the good parts of their life but it's unhealthy to compare it to other people['s] lives].
>
> – *Maxie (21, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

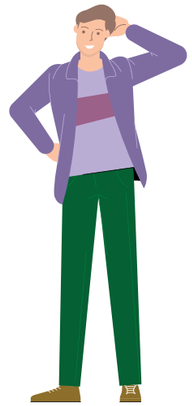
Despite understanding that standards of physicality and life success on the internet aren't always realistic, young men in this study were substantially impacted by these ideals. This highlights the degree to which young men's self-esteem throughout adolescence is highly dependent on interpersonal influences, such as what they see their peers posting online (Crone & Konijn, 2018; Thomaes et al., 2011). Moreover, these findings underscore the negative impact that pressures to fit into dominant models of masculinity can have on young men's self-worth (Piatkowski et al., 2021). While the internet offered many young men an opportunity to express themselves freely and positively, insecurity and pressure to conform meant that young men crafted their identities online in ways that could be anxiety provoking and exhausting. Their engagement with influencer and self-improvement content also significantly impacted both their online and offline identities.

Online influencers impact how young men shape their identity

The young men in this study described the influencer content they consumed and encountered as a factor that could shape their sense of self. They spoke about actively seeking out content associated with self-improvement and male empowerment as a way to become the best version of themselves. Echoing the pressures young men associate with representing themselves online, much of the self-improvement content they engaged with was underpinned by desires and beliefs about masculinity and manhood in the form of physical appearance and financial success. Young men's discussions also revealed a critical awareness of the ways that algorithms can shape the content they are influenced by online. Young men in the study demonstrated an ability to think critically about the influencer content they see, but their discussions also highlighted how appealing the messages of online influencers can be.

For many of the study participants, being online is an opportunity for general self-improvement, a means to 'better yourself'. Influencers – individuals on social media with social influence – were an important source of self-improvement and inspiration.

> I think [influencers are] good … a player called Kobe Bryant … talks about a lot of … practical, real-world solutions to issues and problems you might face or run into. And you know, moving forward, understanding that things would be difficult … But the important thing is to, you know, keep trying that kind of stuff.
>
> – *Majak (21, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*



> [S]ome of the values they try and impart, like basic discipline, trying to be what a man should be, I would say that is actually slightly good.
>
> – *Maxie (21, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Young men's engagements with influencers were often focused on self-improvement or empowerment via the development of idealised ways of being masculine, specifically through the topics of physical fitness, body image and personal finances.

> David Goggins is a guy that I listen to when I'm running a fair bit as well … [I]t's those sort of guys … putting into practice every single day and finding motivation every single day … that's something I want to get into.
>
> – *Kenneth (21, straight)*

> It's a funny story. I got a bad haircut, and my crush rejected me, so I was like, 'What the hell?' you know. 'Am I [not] desirable or something?' I did a bit of research on how do I, you know, make myself better? … [T]hey had a lot of new terms … like 'looksmaxing'[6] … showing the standards that you have to fit to … Just the casual things: hitting the gym more, doing more exercise and feeling good about myself.
>
> – *Bairam (18, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

6. Although terms such as 'looksmaxing' have their origins in harmful online communities, such as the incel communities of the 'manosphere' **(Luu, 2023)**, this and other terms are increasingly normalised in young people's contemporary lexicon. Therefore, their use isn't necessarily a reflection of someone's engagement in such an online group.

> [S]ince I started following him [Andrew Tate], I've made probably three times more money than I did before. I'm in the best physical shape I've been in in my entire life and I just kind of have a better perception of the world.
>
> – *Warren (18, straight)*

However, not all young men in the study engaged with male influencers in this way. Some expressed criticism of influencers for being inauthentic and for having a narrow focus on what it means to be a man.

> I basically don't follow influencers. I think most – 99% – of them are fake … [They] just do it to get payment, recognition … [I]t makes me think, these idiots are just wasting their life trying to follow somebody non-genuine.
>
> – *Dev (19, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

> [Male influencers] just don't necessarily represent what being a man is all about. [They don't] actually necessarily represent what you should be striving to be as a person, you know? [I]t's not promoting emotional kind of sensitivity or an understanding of, you know, your mental health.
>
> – *Felix (20, bisexual)*

Significantly, young men expressed a critical awareness of the ways that algorithms shape the content they see, engage with and are potentially influenced by. They spoke about the way that algorithms could enrich their online experience – especially when they were able to influence the content they consumed through personalised tailoring.

> I feel like, to be happy, I just try to consume the content that I would personally want to actually watch … so I try to do this with my digital algorithm … I try to filter as much as possible all stuff that I find negative, so I won't end up with a bad experience.
>
> – *Chen (18, gay, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

> [T]he feed I see is tailored to my interest. That's a positive experience for me. Also, I just prefer to see stuff that makes me feel good about the world.
>
> *Duong (19, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

While some study participants described the tailoring of content as positive, many young men described the potentially negative impacts of online algorithms, including encouraging and reinforcing harmful beliefs. These negative consequences were often discussed in relation to driving harmful ideas related to gender – a further reflection on the young men's critical awareness.

> I think it perpetuates some pretty negative ideologies. [S]exism is a pretty key one. [For example,] if Andrew Tate is your role model, it's concerning. I think it would be pretty easy to pick that up as a role model, whether you want to or not, if you watch that kind of content and you accept that as the norm, you know. [T]hat's not something that you're necessarily in control of … [Y]ou don't start watching Andrew Tate and be like, 'Oh, I want to think this way.' It's just something that happens the more content you consume.
>
> – *Felix (20, bisexual)*

> I just get a lot of random stuff. It's, like, in-between gaming and then, right-wing stuff because of course when you look at the comments on something, the algorithm thinks you like it [and will send you more]. It's kind of annoying.
>
> – *Scott (16, straight)*

Young men also saw algorithms as creating 'echo chambers', where users' existing beliefs weren't challenged. This is especially significant given the important influence of their peers, such as the people whose content young men see online, in shaping their opinions (Crone & Konijn, 2018). Some young men in the study expressed concern for boys and younger men online and how their perspectives might be limited by the work of algorithms.

> Yeah, I look [out] for a lot of younger people … Because the algorithms, you might see stuff that kind of affirms your own voice instead of challenging you and that can kind of lead to [narrower] perspectives.
>
> – *Christian (17, straight, young man with disability)*

> The internet is mainly your own source of news. You're getting fed content by an algorithm that's designed to keep you on, [and] you can kind of get into like a bit of a rabbit hole … [Y]ou aren't exposed to the other perspective, because you're only being fed content from that perspective.
>
> – *Charlie (19, straight)*

While some young men in this study found engaging with self-improvement and male empowerment influencers beneficial, others found this content limiting and problematic. Many of them noted that the content they were influenced by was shaped by algorithms in potentially harmful ways. Despite this, engaging with or rejecting the messages of male influencers online was a significant way that young men in this study shaped their sense of self. Nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in young men's discussions about the controversial social media figure Andrew Tate.

Case Study: Andrew Tate

Andrew Tate is a well-known and controversial American–British media influencer. Tate's online content ranges from 'general motivational videos aimed at inspiring men to take on a physically healthy lifestyle, to more dangerous content that is explicitly misogynistic, homophobic, sexist and conspiratory' (The Man Cave, 2023, p. 3). In January 2023, Tate was arrested by Romanian authorities on allegations of human trafficking.

In 2022, an Australian poll of 1,374 young men found that when asked if they knew of Andrew Tate:

- 92% answered yes
- 35% agreed that he was relatable
- 25% agreed that they look up to Tate as a role model (The Man Cave, 2023).

Young men in our study expressed a diverse array of perspectives and engagement when it came to Andrew Tate and his male empowerment content. As outlined below, some participants considered Tate an important source of inspiration for general self-improvement and narratives about masculinity and manhood (including being someone who could help shape how they expressed themselves as men). Others said they were uninterested in Tate, or were critical of him and his messages of male empowerment and explicitly rejected his content as harmful.

For several young men, Tate's positive influence was related to his impact on their sense of self.

> I haven't watched heaps of [Andrew Tate's] stuff, but, like, from what I've seen, [he] has inspired me in setting ways to just become a better person all around.
>
> – *Manny (18, straight)*

> I haven't watched every single video, but the occasional few [I've watched have] given me maybe a bit more confidence.
>
> – *Drew (16, straight, young man with disability, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

> I'm quite supportive of lots of things [that Tate says] … Just being the best version of yourself is stuff that I've started to live by.
>
> – *Warren (18, straight)*

Many young men specifically endorsed Tate's male empowerment discourses. Some felt that he makes points about women, and gender more broadly, that have otherwise been unsaid or silenced. Others viewed Tate as a good advocate for men, and said they thought that society has been too focused on female empowerment.

> I've watched a lot of this stuff and … I agree with most of it … [T]his … guy's putting out so many opinions on things that haven't been said in ages because of feminist movements and everything … [H]e's the only one speaking out about this sort of male stuff that's not spoken about.
>
> – *Brenton (21, straight)*

> [Andrew Tate is] try[ing] to instil traditional human male masculinity into today's generation of men … [H]e protects his partner, you know, all the good stuff as well … [B]ut in terms of the whole equality thing, I think the whole social movement has gotten a little extreme and it's essentially the women's empowerment movement – they're trying not exactly to replace us, but kinda.
>
> – *Jase (20, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Other young men in the study were less critical of the rise of feminism and of moves towards gender equality, but appreciated Tate's message in a social context where young men have few positive role models.

> There aren't many strong male role models for younger men growing up. Feminism is getting popular and stuff. It's getting quite strong ... [T]hat's cool. That's very cool. I, you know, love to see that stuff. However, there's been a large focus away from masculinity And I think Andrew Tate [has] an important role in reminding us, you know, [about] what we should try [to strive] towards ...
>
> – *Nico (18, straight, young man with disability, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

In response to the public criticism of Tate, some young men spoke in his defence, arguing that his views have been unfairly misrepresented in the mainstream media.

> I don't know how [the media] are able to get away with it to the extent that they do. [H]e's just completely different to the way they show him ... I think a lot of this stuff is taken out of context ... like some of the stuff [where] people say that he's been misogynistic.
>
> – *Manny (18, straight)*

> Well, he's been painted a bad guy in the media ... [W]hen you look into him, he does a lot ... [H]e encourages men and all that ... I'm pretty sure he has some charities that he does as well, which isn't really out there, because it would [take the focus] away from what the media has been pretty much posting about him.
>
> – *Theo (18, straight, First Nations)*

> He is very controversial again, but then what happens is they'll take that one clip from him ... that particular controversial line, and then they'll extrapolate it to something very big.
>
> – *Isaiah (21, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Other young men viewed the public criticism of Tate as a misrepresentation of his messages, which they saw as reflecting a general censoring and silencing of themselves personally, as well as of men more broadly, both online and offline.

> No one else has been saying this. Everyone else has been silenced ... [T]his bold guy [is] just changing the course of the entire internet, right ... [A]nd the narrative that Tate is playing is a different narrative to what these companies probably want.
>
> – *Tariq (19, straight)*

> [I]n normal life, especially, it's kind of [like] I have to shut my mouth, because I'm quite supportive of lots of things [he says].
>
> – *Warren (18, straight)*

In contrast, just as some of the young men in the study were critical of male influencers more broadly, so too were they critical of Tate.

> Specific people and personalities – so, influencers – kind of stir shit and act out and say outrageous things to get attention. People like Andrew Tate – perfect example ... The things he says make me so uncomfortable. It's just gross, and it's for attention and it gets the attention of the media.
>
> – *Felix (20, bisexual)*

Some young men suggested that Tate uses his controversial status and sexist views for financial gain, as a way to generate clicks, views and revenue. Their comments demonstrate a critical approach to Tate and his messaging.

> [B]y [being] all controversial and saying things that usually people don't say, you will stir up the pot, you will get lots of views, likes, comments … Tate's not just doing this for fun. I mean, he has something to sell his audience. So, of course, he's gonna be controversial, get people on. And eventually get more sales.
>
> – *Tariq (19, straight)*

> [H]e also knows that when people [are] getting mad and criticising him, he's making money for that.
>
> – *Henry (16, straight)*

In this study, young men's rejection of Tate's content ranged from casual disinterest to extreme criticism. Some young men expressed disagreement with and criticism of his messaging about women.

> Tate's justifications for cheating on his partners as not 'cheating' but 'exercise', his focus on how much money he's got and how many girls he's been with, and his alleged trafficking. I don't really wanna consume his content.
>
> – *Jase (20, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

> [H]e really wants to be a loving father and he really respects the women in his life, but [he] also runs a freaking [human] trafficking ring … [H]e's going on about how he doesn't own anybody, but he's getting arrested for literally owning and stealing money off of webcam models.
>
> – *Lionel (20, straight)*

> I think I remember seeing a clip of him saying, like, men are better than women … I can see sometimes that men treat women unequally, [but] I don't see why – we're all people. I've seen many clips [that] have been saying that [men] are better than women … I think it's just a bit stupid.
>
> – *Tristan (18, straight)*

Several of the young men who were critical of Tate expressed concern about the negative impact of his ideas and online narratives on boys and men younger than themselves. This concern reflects young men's understanding of the power of online influencers to shape individual and social ideals in ways that can be harmful.

> [I]t definitely targets, like, 13-year-olds who [are] growing up on the internet … [T]hey're figuring [out] 'What does it mean to be a man?' And then there's this guy who's really very cool. He's like, you know, destroying all the feminists, or he goes on a podcast … [H]e was taking advantage of all these impressionable young people who may [need] another male role model in their life … I definitely get why people get sucked into it.
>
> – *Vincent (21, straight)*

> [I]t's really easy to be, like, convinced, and [to] kind of be manipulated – for younger generations, especially. Just like: 'That is the right thing to do, and that should be the way you should be' …
>
> – *Ren (19, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

The young men in this study expressed a diverse array of perspectives and engagement when it came to Andrew Tate and his content. While some considered him an important source of inspiration who could help shape how they expressed themselves as men, others rejected Tate and his content as harmful. In the context of what some young men see as a lack of positive male role models, engagement with the likes of Tate – whether that be to support, question or reject his ideas – appears to be a key way that young men shape their identities online and beyond.

Summary

The young men in this research self-consciously manage their expressions of identity online and actively curate online spaces where they can express themselves freely. The ways in which they describe crafting their self-expression online reflect key developmental processes of middle and late adolescence, including developing identity, navigating body image and considering financial Independence (NSW Health, 2014). The freedom offered by online environments that enable a level of anonymity or pseudonymity can allow young men to express themselves in ways that can be liberating and/or harmful for themselves and others.

Young men's discussions about expressing themselves online suggest that online representation can be highly gendered. This colours the anxieties and pressures around body image and financial success that young men face as they navigate their identities as men online.

For some young men, male influencers and their discourses on male empowerment are powerful sources of inspiration for various forms of personal improvement. However, dissenting opinions among the study participants highlight their diversity of perspectives, revealing criticisms and concerns about the authenticity and impact of influencers and a critical awareness of why influencers deploy certain messages, as well as the ways that recommender systems and algorithms shape who and what influences them online. The tensions that characterise young men's explorations of identity online are echoed in their online explorations of sexuality.

Young men explore their sexuality online

Young men's discussions about sharing intimate images online and encountering online pornography suggest that they exercise a high level of caution when exploring their sexuality online. Across both contexts, young men reflected on the broader social and cultural expectations and influences that create gendered differences and diverse impacts for young men and young women. Importantly, regardless of the context, the young men's reflections in this study contrast sharply with stereotypes of young men as being emotionally detached from sexual intimacy online.

Young men are cautious about sharing intimate images with others online

The young men in this study largely expressed caution around the sharing of intimate images online.[7] Their discussions revealed an awareness of the gendered nature of sharing intimate images online, as well as of the harms that can occur when unsolicited images are sent or images are shared non-consensually. While the young men did not address or describe this behaviour as abuse, their discussions often related to instances of sexual harassment and image-based abuse. They also expressed that trust and in-person connection were important to them when it came to sharing intimate images online.

Some of the study participants reflected on gender differences in how shared images are perceived and received.

> Let's take my school, for example. [I]f there was a leak of a boy's photos – it's happened, right – people would probably laugh at it. [There] might be a bit of bullying, or just teasing for a while, but people generally get over it. [B]ut when [it's] a female … it tends to be a lot more intense … I would say it's more detrimental for a female than [it] is [for] a male.
>
> – *Nathan (17, straight)*

> I'd be pretty happy [if I received an unsolicited pic] … [If] a girl sends an unsolicited photo, a lot of guys are gonna start messaging that girl. Whereas if a guy is known for sending an unsolicited photo, that guy'll be known as a creep for the rest of his life.
>
> – *Omer (17, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

7. Commonly known as '**sexting**', sharing intimate images online can be a way to express yourself sexually and to build intimacy between **consenting** adults, but only if everyone agrees about how and when it happens. It's the individual's choice as to whether or not they want to receive or send nude content, but it's important that it's an informed decision and is done safely and respectfully. If someone shares – or threatens to share – an intimate image or video of a person without their consent, it's called '**image-based abuse**'.

For other participants, age was a significant factor in the sharing and receiving of intimate images. Some of the young men spoke about age in terms of being the recipient of an intimate image, while others discussed it in terms of potential repercussions because parents or carers considered the sharing of intimate images to be inappropriate.

> I mean [receiving intimate photos] also kind of depends on age as well. If they're, like, the same age as you, it's better than someone who's [a lot] older than you.
>
> – *Miles (16, straight)*

> I did do it last year, but it's probably not something that I'd do again. I was pretty stupid. It just got me and this girl in a lot of trouble and it wasn't worth it … [I]f your parents find it or something, you know, you just get in trouble.
>
> – *Jordan (16, straight)*

Some young men discussed their discomfort with receiving unsolicited intimate images, as well as the pressure this then created to reciprocate or respond.

> That's a very exposing way of being flattering, if that makes sense. Yeah, especially to someone that you might have only met once, or might not have met at all … But it's … like, 'Well, okay, you sent one, now here's the pressure for me to send one' … and then it's like, if you don't send it, where do you go from there, right? Yeah, [I'm] pretty against it, to be honest.
>
> – *Kenneth (21, straight)*

> [I]f you're not necessarily interested in that person or that kind of stuff, it can feel very confronting … I suppose you just kind of ignore it and move on, considering how common it is, especially in the gay community.
>
> – *Daniel (19, gay)*

> [T]here's definitely a sort of a judgement, I guess, about someone sending that sort of stuff unsolicited because, like, you're not just gonna be in the middle of a conversation with someone and whip your tits out in the middle of the street. So why do you do it in the middle of a conversation on Instagram?
>
> – *Jamie (16, First Nations)*

The young men also spoke of the risks associated with sharing intimate images, with some reflecting on friends' experiences of having their images shared without their consent.

> A pretty big incident, that my school wasn't aware of, but I think some girl in Year 10 sent … an intimate to a guy and that got screenshotted and then that was spread like wildfire. Number one [piece of advice] is probably just don't put your face in any [intimate photos].
>
> – *Omer (17, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

> [Y]ou just gotta be really careful … cause it's so easy to spread these days – and yeah, it [happened to] one of my friends. Someone sent him a few videos and he thought that he'd send one back and she took a screenshot and sent it everywhere. Yeah, it's crazy, but he put trust in her. She just broke it.
>
> – *Lleyton (16, straight)*

While a few of the young men in the study said they felt comfortable and confident about sharing intimate images online, many of them noted that this required significant trust.

> Obviously, trust plays a big part in it … I'm hesitant to do it [until I] definitely know I can trust that person.
>
> – *Lucas (18, straight)*

> I just think you have to be really careful when you do that … [T]he type of relationship you have with that person, and can you really trust them?
>
> – *Toby (16, straight)*

In addition to feelings of trust, the young men also reflected on the importance of in-person connections alongside online intimacy.

> I just feel as though you're not connected physically, so why should you physically show yourself online?
>
> – *Ari (19, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

> I feel like doing this sort of thing online is just not the same as doing it in real life … It feels really fake to be all intimate online … I feel like it's much more meaningful to do that in person …
>
> – *Eugene (19, straight)*

> I wouldn't engage with [it] until there is a long-term relationship and, you know, with someone that I am really comfortable with. That level of intimacy is more with a future in mind.
>
> – *Kieran (19, straight)*

Considered against stereotypes and research on young men's carelessness with sharing intimate images online (Ringrose et al., 2021), the young men in this study spoke of the importance of trust, intimacy and in-person connection when sharing intimate images with others online.

Further, young men's reflections on intimate image sharing spoke to their understanding of the different impacts for young women compared to young men (Weinstein & James, 2022). However, while young men in the study were able to identify some gender dimensions to this issue, they were exposed to many pressures and harms themselves. Importantly, they may also not have had the tools or education to understand that the non-consensual sharing and receiving of intimate images constitutes abuse and harassment.

Young men are critical of online pornography

Much like their reflections on intimate image sharing, the young men in this study expressed views about online pornography that are more nuanced, considered and complex than the stereotypes about young men and their online expressions of sexuality would suggest. The study participants primarily shared concerns and criticisms relating to online pornography. Online pornography was a pervasive presence in their lives, they said, and they often encountered it without consenting to see this content. They also reflected on the various negative impacts of their encounters with online pornography, including creating problematic perceptions of women and consent, and distorted views of intimacy and respectful relationships.

The young men described online pornography as almost impossible to avoid, and often as something they encountered outside of pornography websites, including on popular social media platforms.

> [W]hen I'm on social media, especially TikTok, I'm scrolling and [I'll] see a video of an OnlyFans model trying to promote that page on TikTok … It's like I could have seen videos of animals playing with each other and then I see that, and it just comes up like out of the blue … It's the same sort of thing on Instagram … And it's kind of there to push people into watching that content.
>
> – *Lucas (18, straight)*

> [P]ornography [is] kind of bleeding itself into all facets of the online space … Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat … [T]he algorithm really pushes that towards young men. Like, I know that, speaking from experience, because every time I'm on social media … [i]f something comes up in my reels, like a woman showing herself sexually, I always press 'not interested' But I've done that several times, but I still get recommended those videos.
>
> – *Ibrahim (18, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

> I think it just comes down to the, you know, [what] the internet is these days. You've got everything everywhere.
>
> – *Quinn (20, straight)*

Many young men described their consumption of pornography content as difficult to control, sometimes as compulsive or addictive, and often as having negative impacts on other parts of their lives. In particular, some linked their early encounters with feelings of addiction to online pornography. The young men discussed feelings of shame and struggles with self-control.

> But I think when you're young, you don't know the impacts. So that's sort of a desensitising. Getting kind of, I guess, addicted to it because some people do it a lot, man, and when you're a kid it's hard to self-control and, you know, you're doing it in your room or you're doing it away from everyone, so no one else knows.
>
> *– Brendan (20, straight)*

> I've kind of always seen it as negative, even though I was addicted the whole time … [L]ike most addictions, you want to stop, and you feel ashamed every time, but you can't … [N]ot feeling able to stop is a very, very shameful and a real crap mental spot to be in.
>
> *– Kieran (19, straight)*

> [T]here really isn't any benefit to [online pornography). And you know after you've watched it, you just feel terrible. [Y]ou feel good watching it, but then it's just like immediate regret afterwards … It takes a toll on you over time, and that's why a whole lot of young men have anxiety and depression around all this stuff as well, because they really don't have a realistic expectation and understanding of what a relationship is.
>
> *– Jordan (16, straight)*

Some of the young participants in this research felt their experiences of online pornography had desensitised them, dulling their emotional reactions to explicit content.

> I wanted to talk more about porn, specifically, and how that plays a role in the desensitisation because a lot of people nowadays … have struggles with porn addiction and I feel like that itself has a big impact on the way we perceive content. And yeah, there's a lot of unsolicited stuff that you see scrolling through which is mostly just advertising and all the main pages that post photos of, like, these chicks … I guess definitely desensitising … [I]t's so accessible and it's such a common subject when it really isn't that important. Life shouldn't be that.
>
> *– Jamie (16, First Nations)*

Young men spoke about unintentionally encountering online pornography at an early age as an especially negative experience.

> I first encountered pornography at 11 years old.
>
> *– Jamie (16, First Nations)*

> Unfortunately, I was one of those victims, because I did see it on social media, you know. I got curious and then it's taken me six years and just now I've been able to get over it. But the point is, that's how much of a toll it takes … It really can be a bit of [an] addiction.
>
> *– Jordan (16, straight)*

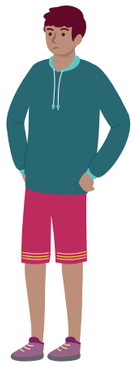
> [T]he way it affects your brain is just like any other drug, so it's very toxic.
>
> – *Ibrahim (18, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

A few young men in the study also expressed concerns about the impacts of encountering online pornography not just on their minds, but also on their bodies.

> [I]ssues of intimacy … Yeah, like I know people that have issues getting erect in terms of sex because [they are] so desensitised to it.
>
> – *Lucas (18, straight)*

Several young men described pornography as negatively impacting their perspectives on women. In particular, they saw online pornography as a key driver of men's objectification of women.

> [I]t makes you view them more as a sexual object rather than a human being … I think a lot of people grow up with it, and then they end up not having total respect for women, as just regular people at the end of the day.
>
> – *Nico (18, straight, young man with disability, culturally and linguistically diverse)*



> [Pornography] just really alters expectations of, you know, what women should be … [A]nd, you know, obviously, it's all scripted and … fake.
>
> – *Jordan (16, straight)*

> [Online pornography] alters a lot of your perspectives on women as well. The second you see one, your first thought is, what would she look like with her clothes off – instead of, you know, that's actually a person. I think it's the whole reason behind the objectification [of women] in today's society.
>
> – *Omer (17, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

A few young men identified that online pornography doesn't present good models of consent. They expressed concerns about how the lack of consent shown in online pornography might impact young men's behaviour towards women.

> [T]he whole porn industry has also kind of warped minds of what especially young men expect … I have so much experience of talking to my younger sister who's now only just turned 15. Saying things like, 'What do I do? Some guy's just sent me a photo. How do I respond?' … And it seems like this really weird level of not understanding and lack of consent as well.
>
> – *Trevor (17, bisexual, young man with disability)*

> I don't think a lot of men understand it because they only, they just watch. [A]nd [it affects] their idea of what consent is, because there's no consent in porn and so they don't have that real concept of it.
>
> – *Jesse (18, straight)*

> [I]t's sad, but [women are] obviously made to look like [they are being] forced and that's what appeals to a lot of guys who do watch porn – someone who's submissive and in a bad position. So, to a lot of guys, it's very appealing and that's obviously what they [are] aiming for and [the women] are acting but at the same time a lot of men don't know that.'
>
> *– Ibrahim (18, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Much like other issues raised in the focus groups, the young men were especially worried about younger men and boys and the ease with which they can access pornography (including via social media). They speculated that boys younger than them could develop unrealistic views of sex as a result of seeing online pornography, including before they were old enough to understand what they were seeing.

> I think the biggest thing is when you get younger kids who are on TikTok … [They perceive] what they see on the internet as normal.
>
> *– Nate (18, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

> [I]t's coming into younger generations and it's like some people don't understand … and they sort of like take it the wrong way and think it's real life and how it works.
>
> *– Lleyton (16, straight)*

> [I]t's terrible for your brain, your development, especially, you know, at [an early] kind of age … [Y]eah, that's not what you need when you're still developing and learning concepts about the world.
>
> *– Jordan (16, straight)*

While the young men in the study overwhelmingly spoke negatively about online pornography, they also noted some positives or benefits, or expressed more neutral perceptions.

> I think it's something that most males [and] most females have engaged with before. Some openly admit [it]. Some don't openly admit [it]. I don't think it's a massive problem, unless it becomes like an addiction.
>
> *– Ned (17, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

One gay young man reported that online pornography helped him to understand his sexuality.

> Before I had seen gay porn … the only kind of attraction I had to guys was just pure attraction. [I]t wasn't necessarily anything sexualised until, yeah, I had seen it and then it just kind of – things made a lot more sense. Things became a lot more clear. [Y]eah, I suppose it just changed my point of view … [I]t was empowering to know who I was and [to] understand things a little bit better.
>
> *– Daniel (19, gay)*

Overall, young men's insights into the ways that pornography isn't a good model of gender equality or of respectful relationships, and their reflections on how consuming online pornography affects their feelings of self-worth, are significant. These findings reflect a more critical response to pornography's content than some studies among young men have found (Antevska & Gavey, 2015).

Summary

The young men in this research highlight the caution with which they navigate sexual intimacy and sexual expression online. Their experience-informed perspectives on sharing intimate images and on encountering online pornography indicate that exploring sexuality online is characterised by concern, lack of control and even harm for many young men. The study participants also recognised the gendered double standards for men and women when it comes to sexual expression and exploration online. Their discussions about intimate images and online pornography push back against many of the stereotypes of what young men value and how they feel about sex, sexuality, intimacy and relationships in the digital age.

Young men access and navigate social connections online

The young men in this research spoke about the central role that connecting with friends and communities online plays in their lives, especially in terms of their sense of belonging and of acceptance. Online connections not only enhanced young men's social lives but served as a source of support during challenging times. However, alongside these positive aspects, young men also recognised online communities as spaces of harm and abuse.

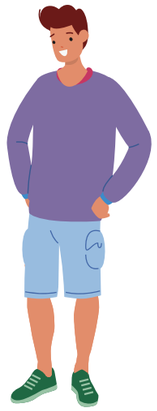
Study participants described the negativity and hostility they can encounter in these spaces as being very wide ranging, including general verbal abuse, racism, sexism and transphobia. Many saw the design of certain platforms as contributing to division, negativity and hostility in online communities. Their mix of positive and negative experiences reveals the complexity of navigating online connections for young men.

Young men connect with friends online

Our study participants told us that online apps and platforms can play an important role in maintaining their relationships with friends, reconnecting with old friends and forming new friendships.

Young men in the study also described connecting with friends through reacting to their online posts as one of the most positive aspects of being online.

> But there is a lot of good that comes out of that group, and then I guess, for me I mean on a superficial level, like validation on a photo that you post is always nice to hear.
>
> – *Kenneth (21, straight)*



> I think most of the people who commented [on my post), well, it was also quite a lot of people privately messaging me and stuff … I liked it, because … when people ask me how it's going, it sort of tells me that people care about what I'm doing.
>
> – *(Henry, 16, straight)*

For a number of the young men in the study, being online allowed them to develop and deepen their friendships. Often, this took the form of bonding over shared interests such as discussing football games with mates via Instagram or Facebook groups or playing online games together.

> I play games quite a lot with my friends. [I]t's really our primary means of doing things together because none of us really particularly likes hanging out physically. [W]e prefer to just play games together.
>
> – *Nathan (17, straight)*

> [M]ainly for me, sports, particularly AFL, football. Especially on Instagram and Facebook. I'm in a lot of groups and stuff where a lot of [the]conversation revolve[s] around games … So that's probably a community that I feel like I'm definitely part of.
>
> – *Nate (18, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

For some young men in the study, connecting with friends in online environments such as group chats fostered deeper relationships with them.

> I find out a lot more about [friends] personally in private chats, more than what they've told me in the past.
>
> – *Omer (17, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Young men also described being able to reconnect with old friends through the internet.

> I've been able to reconnect with friends, like really old friends who I'[d] lost touch with.
>
> – *Dev (19, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

> [B]eing online actually allowed me to reconnect with some of the people from my school that I didn't talk to for a while … [T]hat was a pretty positive experience online.
>
> – *Julian (19, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Being online also enabled young men in the study to make new friends. Some discussed the value of being anonymous or separated from their offline worlds for connecting with new people. In particular, for some young men, online spaces offered a sense of joy through facilitating connections with likeminded people or people they wouldn't have met otherwise.

> [S]earching for people that are more like you and you can chat to them … [that] can help brighten your day.
>
> – *Lleyton (16, straight)*

> [W]ell, a positive experience online for me is when I found someone to connect with what I'm doing, whether that be like 'Hey, I agree on this, viewpoint', or 'Hey, we both like the same game, or this character in this game', or anything like that.
>
> – *Yuri (18, bisexual)*

> I feel like if you're having a positive conversation with someone that you might not usually have and that's only facilitated through social media … I feel like that's rewarding.
>
> – *Campbell (18, bisexual, young man with disability)*

Other young men said that online connections allowed them to share deep thoughts and feelings they might not share otherwise, especially because there was a perceived lack of judgement and more flexibility to express themselves online.

> It's easier to talk to people online than it is to talk to them face-to-face. And then, obviously, [it's] easier to make friends with them … Maybe [in real life, people] don't wanna be friends with someone who isn't like, the nicest looking. Whereas just in text, that's not something you can see.
>
> – *Miles (16, straight)*

> I don't find it embarrassing … [L]ike, you're not gonna meet them ever, you know … None of your friends are gonna know, so if you tell them deep stuff, it relieves your feelings … relieves the stress … And it's not gonna come back up to you again.
>
> – *Danveer (18, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Similarly, young men in the study described connecting with friends online as allowing them to share in and celebrate others' successes. These experiences highlight young men's caring for their friends and contrast sharply with masculine ideals of competitiveness and individualism.

> I like seeing people achieve goals. Someone, [I] went to school with … always wanted to be a pilot and then a few weeks ago posted a photo of him in a cockpit and you know, everyone knew he was the pilot kid and it's kind of nice to see a genuine Instagram post.
>
> – *Vincent (21, straight)*

> … things that make me have a positive experience, like if I see … someone that I know … on Instagram [looking] like they're doing really well for themselves or like they've [had] a great holiday or whatever. That makes me feel good.
>
> – *Benito (20, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Young men's discussions about their experiences of friendship online indicate that being on the internet offers them important opportunities for meaningful social connection. While ideals of masculinity often include notions of emotional detachment, stoicism and self-reliance (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021), the young men in this study presented a more complex picture of online connection that often defied or ran counter to these norms.

Young men find connection, acceptance and support in online communities

In addition to one-to-one connections, young men in the study described connecting with communities online based on shared interests, experiences and identities. Their discussions revealed the importance of these online communities for providing them with a sense of belonging, acceptance and support.

Many young men described the positive connections they had formed through being part of online communities based on a variety of shared interests, including outdoor activities and popular culture.

> … a mountaineering club at [his] university through Facebook Messenger [that had] led to a lot of really really cool experiences and trips over the past two, three months.
>
> – *Felix (20, bisexual)*

> … a group focused on costuming in a space Western television series 'The Mandalorian': … that sort of community, everyone there really enjoys that and everyone [is] there to help out …
>
> – *Kieran (19, straight)*

For several young men, connecting with online communities was an important source of feeling safe and accepted.

> If I'm accepted by a group, like a specific group chat, I would feel really good … [Y]ou kind of feel accepted because that's like, you know, your group of people … [T]here's no judgement … [Y]ou're into the same things [and] feel like you kind of have a purpose.
>
> – *Toby (16, straight)*

> I really yearn for that feeling of acceptance. [M]y big thing is just feeling like I belong in a group, like in a friend group.
>
> – *Eugene (19, straight)*

Young men who were part of LGBTIQ+ communities described this feeling of safety and acceptance as being particularly important.

> For me, it's more about feeling safe and accepted. So, yeah, honestly, just places that aren't really fuelled with as much hate. [L]ike, it can be as simple as some video, someone saying, oh yeah, 'Goodnight, everyone.' … [J]ust things that feel like, no matter who you are, you're accepted and cared about in that moment.
>
> – *Trevor (17, bisexual, young man with disability)*

> I identify as gay, so I kind of find that easier to connect with the community that I am also in, you know. [T]here's a big gay community where I live, so it kind of helps you keep that connection to them at the same time, especially through Instagram.
>
> – *Daniel (19, gay)*

A few of the young men in the study noted that being part of an online community provided them with valuable support during tough times, as well as giving them the opportunity to support others in their community.

> Having a nice community [where there are people] you can talk to or joke around with and, like, being supportive when something goes wrong.
>
> – *Finn (16, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

> [W]hen you're going through some stuff, it's always nice, you know, knowing these people [are] around and knowing you have those connections … so you've always got people you can talk to straight away.
>
> – *Hugh (20, straight)*

> I think it's good to give other people the advantage that I didn't have … I didn't have anyone really teach me programming, I more self-learned. But … being able to help other people, you know, makes me feel good. It's [a] good feeling.
>
> – *Kyle (18, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

In their discussions about participating in online communities, participants in the study openly expressed a desire to belong and to feel like they belong. Indeed, developing strong and meaningful peer relationships is an important developmental task in adolescence (NSW Health, 2014; Nesi et al., 2020). This demonstrates the importance of social acceptance and emotional connections for young men's online experiences. Being part of online communities enabled them to access this connection and acceptance and offered supportive networks that could go beyond physical boundaries (Weinstein & James, 2022). Despite gender norms for men often idealising competitiveness, individualism and emotional stoicism, the young men's experiences of connecting with online communities suggest that they recognise the value of social connections and emotional support.

Young men both experience and perpetuate harm in online communities

While online communities were a source of connection, acceptance and support, the young men in the study also highlighted online spaces as places where they and others both experience and perpetuate harm. They described the harms that can occur in online communities, including their participation in harmful behaviours, the factors that they believe contribute to causing these harms, and the ways they managed the potential for harm in online communities. This was especially the case for online gaming communities, which is expanded upon in a case study below. Across all online environments, harmful behaviour ranged from general abuse and toxicity to personal and targeted abuse and discrimination.

Young men described online communities as places where abuse and negativity were common and normalised.

> [I]t used to be somewhere where you could safely share your opinions and stuff. But nowadays … you just get attacked for [what] you're saying … [T]here's definitely other communities that I've avoided joining for similar reasons, where it's just quite a lot of arguments in those communities.
>
> – *Henry (16, straight)*

Others noted that racism, sexism and transphobia could flourish in online communities. This hate speech and abuse impacted young men either through witnessing it or because the content spoke directly to their identities and self-worth.

> I find it especially in fandom stuff. I'm talking like Star Wars and Marvel pages. There's a lot of racism and sexism in there. I just don't engage or think, like, 'You're the worst.' Because nothing good can come of that, and I just scroll [and] forget about it.
>
> – *Vincent (21, straight)*

> I feel like me being trans … [it's] a lot of feeling like my identity seems to be debated upon and it can be really distressing to see it a lot. Sometimes it seems like I just need to take a break away because the only thing I'm seeing is negativity and people saying that they don't agree with fundamentally impossible things to change about myself.
>
> – *Trevor (17, bisexual, young man with disability)*

Some study participants took a different perspective on collective negativity online, reflecting on experiences where individuals with similar struggles online inadvertently reinforced negative feelings related to mental health and depression.

> On Twitter, there's … a very, very large eating disorder community and in a way you can kind of see that, you know, th[is] form of self-harm is itself an addiction. And being able to interact with so many people that have the same feelings … where they're idolising certain things and yeah, [all] banding together in a negative way.
>
> – *Jamie (16, First Nations)*

> I used to be part of a Discord server and there was this page on mental health and because sometimes I like giving people advice and trying to help out … there were so many messages [from] people, you know, who were self-harming. They were venting [about] how depressed they were, you know. [I]t's like no matter how much you help, they're still in that dark place. And that kind of can take a toll on you because you know you can't do anything about it. It's out of your control.
>
> – *Toby (16, straight)*

Young men in the study saw certain features of their online communities as responsible for enabling and exacerbating the harms they encounter there.

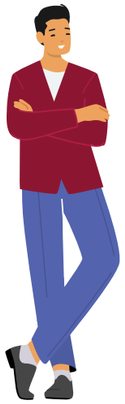
> Reddit's design tends to amplify negative content because people are more likely to engage with it when they are upset or passionate about a particular issue … [It] can overshadow positive content …
>
> – *Maverick (19, prefer not to say)*

Other young men noted that some online communities had cultures of 'bandwagoning', where individuals come together to express often negative and divisive views, amplifying one another's sentiments.

> I mean a good example of [bandwagoning] is probably, you know, Andrew Tate. [For a] lot of people, all of their opinions about him are probably formed by, you know, what other people think.
>
> – *Kyle (18, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

> I feel like social media has given people an idea that they have a right and the need to commentate on everything, like trans people. I think it's a perfect issue because you've got people who [have] never met a trans person and, you know, they're just piling on and going on with absolute bullshit … [F]rankly, it doesn't even make sense to me … why you feel you need to comment on something that doesn't even affect you at all.
>
> – *Geoffrey (20, gay, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Young men in the study discussed dealing with harmful experiences in online communities in a variety of ways. Many participants spoke of limiting or altering their presence in these online spaces and communities.



> I kind of do take a break, every once in a while, from the internet just because I'm tired of seeing ... really strange and negative things and it makes me feel just kind of tired of seeing it and it's upsetting to see.
>
> – *Jesse (18, straight)*

> I used to play games with voice chat as well. But back then I sounded a lot more feminine because my voice hadn't dropped yet and ... I kind of got a whole bunch of shit just for [sounding] like a girl ... So I haven't been as active in those online gaming communities anymore.
>
> – *Trevor (17, bisexual, young man with disability)*

While some young men described being negatively and personally affected by the harms that can occur in online communities, others saw aggression and discrimination as a part of being online and said they weren't particularly impacted by these things.

> Normally, [the post] starts off like at least [it] isn't going to be that much, but you'll quickly find in the comments ... a lot of hate and whatnot. So, I stay away from that mostly now.
>
> – *Maverick (19, prefer not to say)*

> [T]here's a lot of negativity online, but I mean, that's to be expected ... I just let it be. I can't change them, so why should I try?
>
> – *Simon (19, asexual)*

> I don't know who this person was, but he was really bashing me hard. [B]ut, I think, yeah, over time, it kind of was like, I didn't really take it personally.
>
> – *Mack (19, unsure/questioning, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Young men in the study discussed dealing with harmful experiences in online communities in a variety of ways. Many participants spoke of limiting or altering their presence in these online spaces and communities.

Case Study: Online gaming

Online gaming communities are often associated with young men. However, it is a pastime increasingly common among all Australians. Recent studies have found that:

- 94% of Australian households have a device for playing video games (IGEA, 2023)
- 85% of 8–17 year-olds play online games (eSafety Commissioner, 2024)
- 95% of men aged 18–34 play online games, while more women and girls are playing than ever before (48%) (IGEA, 2023)
- in 2021, 15–24 year-olds were the largest share of video game players in Australia, with the majority playing on a game console or their phone (Statista, 2023).

As was the case for other online communities, gaming communities were places where some young men in the study could connect with friends.

> [L]ike extended friends so you have a server that has about 60 on and off people … pretty much every night though, just like anywhere from like 2 to 6 or 7 people in a voice channel just talking, hanging out playing games together.
>
> *– Ari (19, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

> It has [a] really big, friendly community … [It] is just a really wholesome, really good way of connecting for me, and also in getting into other games as well.
>
> *– Phil (16, straight)*

However, young men also noted that online gaming communities could be sites of harm and abuse.

> People will [trash-talk] like as close to the 'n' word as possible without actually breaching the game's terms of service … [Y]ou can just tell that this player is going to be … abusive, toxic, whatever. It's something I'm unfortunately used to, playing a lot of competitive online games.
>
> *– Ari (19, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Young men who participated in online gaming attributed some of the harms that occur in these spaces to the competitive culture of online gaming communities.

> I think everyone's a little bit exaggerated … everyone's a little over-passionate about wanting to win.
>
> *– Eugene (19, straight)*

The young men also reflected on how the competitive nature of online gaming communities had influenced their own past behaviour in negative ways.

> People start talking shit about you, your ego gets hurt, you wanna [have] some kind of high ground on them and that's when all that kind of stuff just happens.
>
> *– Maxie (21, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

> I got my account permanently banned [because] I was a bit too toxic.
>
> – *Scott (16, straight)*

> … and then I was, like, 'Oh, what am I doing?' I actually punched a monitor because of this video game that I lost.
>
> – *Kristian (21, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Some young men also suggested that harmful behaviours such as aggression, racism and sexism were more likely to occur in online communities that were mostly made up of men (such as gaming communities).

> I think it's because the gaming community is predominantly young males … [It's] very competitive, and sometimes you let out that frustration through hurtful comments.
>
> – *Franklin (21, straight)*

> [I]t's a very male-dominated thing. I would say that's why it's racist and sexist as well.'
>
> – *Scott (16, straight)*

Some participants described online gaming communities as places where it's considered normal to respond to abuse by retaliating in kind.

> [Y]ou kind of go in with the assumption that people are gonna be aggressive and you kind of just match it immediately.
>
> – *Devon (21, straight)*

> [E]veryone else is doing it. [Y]ou have to retaliate.
>
> – *Henry (16, straight)*

In contrast, one young man who participates in gaming communities described choosing to engage in more positive ways, despite competitive cultures that may fuel harmful behaviours.

> [O]ver the years I've just lost that kind of desire to be, you know, like the absolute best when I'm playing an online video game and it's [now] much more around the social aspect and enjoyment.
>
> – *Kristian (21, straight, culturally and linguistically diverse)*

Summary

The young men's engagement with online communities reflects the central role these spaces play in fostering connection, belonging, acceptance and emotional support. Their discussion revealed a richer picture than harmful stereotypes about being a man often promote, such as the rejection of vulnerability and ideals of competitiveness, individualism and emotional detachment. At the same time as young men found connection, acceptance and support in online communities, many also found online spaces to be negative and hostile.

Some participants described online communities, such as male-dominated gaming spaces, as arenas where harm and abuse are common and are even accepted as normal. While young men in the study reflected on the harms that others can cause in online communities, some also spoke of engaging in these harms themselves. Whether they were accepting or critical of negative behaviour in online communities, the emotional intensity they describe as characterising these spaces indicates young men's thoughtful understanding of how emotions can escalate harmful ideas and actions (Keddie & Bartel, 2021). These tensions in young men's experiences of connecting with others online indicate the challenges they face in the digital age, where their drive to connect is often met with potentially harmful social contexts.

Conclusion

The findings detailed in this report paint a complex picture of what it is like to be a young man online. The discussions and stories of young men in this study reveal that the online experiences of young men are characterised by dualities of freedom and anxiety, intimacy and caution, connection and harm. In navigating these tensions, young men grapple with what it means to be a man in the digital age, and variously conform with and act in opposition to harmful masculine ideals.

Conclusion

This report reveals that while young men want to express their identities freely online, they also experience anxiety and pressure to be seen as the best version of themselves. Whether it was their emotional vulnerabilities, their physicality or their financial and life goals, young men are navigating social expectations about what it means to be a successful man today. In doing so, they are carrying out age-appropriate processes of developing self-identity in a context in which young men feel – and are told – they have very few positive role models. The findings in this study about the importance of online influencers to young men highlight the need for young men to have access to compelling positive role models online.

In contrast to conventional ideas of what young men value when exploring sexuality online, young men in the study express concern about the content and effects of online pornography. Some demonstrated an awareness that pornography can be a poor model of intimacy and gender roles. There is a growing evidence base showing that seeing online pornography is near ubiquitous (Ballester-Arnal et al., 2023), including among young Australian men (eSafety Commissioner, 2023b; Lim et al., 2017; Miller & Stubbings-Laverty, 2022). The tensions between young men's criticisms of online pornography in this study and the evidence of young men's high rates of engaging with this content suggest that young men could benefit from support and opportunities to discuss and explore their sexual desires, sexuality and intimate expressions through sex-positive, gender-equitable frameworks.

Online social connections emerged as a key source of support and belonging for young men in their adolescence. Whether it was through interpersonal friendships online or large communities, young men found connection, acceptance and emotional support online. However, young men also recognise that the online communities they engage in can be misogynistic, heterosexist, homophobic, transphobic and racist spaces. Given the strong influence peer groups can have on adolescent opinions and decision making (Crone & Konijn, 2018), future work should look to fostering online cultures of acceptance and positive emotional wellbeing, while challenging notions or expectations of masculinity that discourage emotional vulnerability and help-seeking (Keddie & Bartel, 2021; Keddie, 2020).

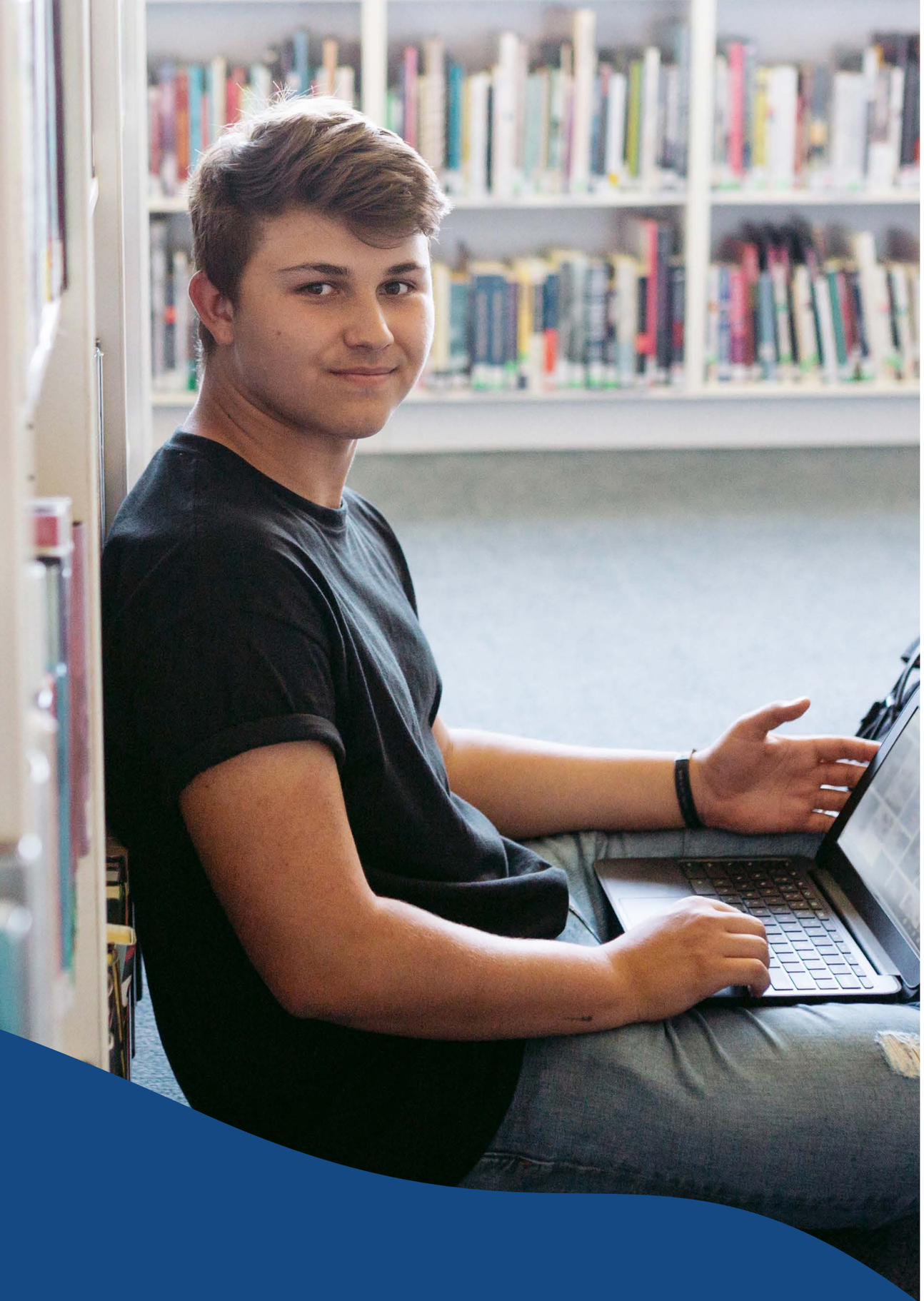
Young men in this study demonstrated a high capacity for reflection about their behaviours and experiences online, and an ability and desire to think critically about the content they encounter. Similarly, many reflected on the potentially harmful nature of gender norms, especially around masculinity. This capacity for critical reflection presents an opportunity for stakeholders to harness and build young men's critical thinking skills, and to support them to have positive experiences online and to develop their identities, sexuality and connections online without pressures from harmful gender norms.

However, young men's behaviours and experiences online suggest that, despite – or even alongside – their capacity for critical awareness, there is a strong pull towards accepting and reinforcing potentially harmful ideals about what it means to be a man. Young men in this study describe engaging in direct and indirect harm through behaving aggressively online, dismissing the impact of verbal abuse, and reinforcing or even embracing sexist ideas. This was especially the case in the context of young men seeking belonging through participating in online communities and in seeking role models through male empowerment influencers. It is likely that young men are experiencing feelings of isolation and disempowerment in their own lives, despite the structural power men may hold in society (Burn-Murdoch, 2024; Reeves, 2024). Young men could benefit from support to address their experiences of isolation and personal disempowerment, as well as strengths-based, empowering education about the causes of gender inequality and the benefits of gender equality.

As outlined at the start of this report, this study is set against a policy landscape that largely situates discussions on the issue of young men and masculinities in relation to Australia's epidemic of family, domestic and sexual violence against women. Alongside this, there is increasing attention to the harmful impact of misogynistic and sexist online spaces, communities and influencers on young men's beliefs and behaviours – particularly towards women and girls. While the discussion of men and masculinities is critical to preventing and addressing forms of gender-based violence, there are other important dimensions to add to this discussion. Specifically, this report underscores the imperative of understanding initiatives aimed at promoting healthier masculinities as having the direct aim of improving the health and wellbeing of young men.

This study contributes to the growing body of research shedding light on what it's like to be a young man online today. This is a field of study that is limited by the lack of rigorous studies linking young men's online experiences and behaviours, their engagements in certain online environments and the impacts of these engagements. From Andrew Tate, to online pornography, to gaming communities, this study highlights the complex influences and issues that young men are navigating online today. However, young men's online experiences are rarely depicted in ways that reflect the nuances, tensions and depth with which young men in this study discussed their identities, sexuality and social connections online. Further robust, strengths-based research in this field should take place to build upon the voices and experiences of the young men in this report.

The report's findings highlight the complex challenges and opportunities young men must negotiate as they explore their identities in the digital landscape. The existing and developing skills and emotional capacities they demonstrate as they navigate the tensions of what it means to be a man online can be leveraged and fostered by all practitioners working with young men to increase their resilience to harmful messaging and behaviours online. Practitioners across education, research, policy, practice and industry should work individually and together to delve deeper into nurturing young men's health and wellbeing, as well as their capacity for compassion, empathy and critical thinking. Part 2 of this project will consist of engagement and consultation with a range of expert practitioners working with young men on the topic of healthy, positive masculinities and manhood. Through these consultations, and by asking expert practitioners to reflect on the findings in this report, we will capture further insights and develop in-depth implications for relevant stakeholders.



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Appendix

Methodology

The project gained ethical clearance through Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (DUHREC) on 4 July 2023, Project ID: 2023-176.

The methodology for Part 1 sought to respond to the following research questions:

- What role does the online world play in the lives of young men and boys?
- What are the key influences driving young men and boys' online identities?
- How might the identities and personas of young men and boys differ between online and offline worlds? And between different spaces online?
- What are the key influences driving young men and boys' online behaviour and beliefs?
- What motivates young men and boys' online behaviours?
- Under what conditions do young men and boys feel good online / feel accepted online / feel connected to others online / feel purposeful online?

All the young men participated in a focus group interview.

Twenty-five young men were selected from each focus group for a follow-up interview. These 25 participants were selected on the basis of their high and thoughtful level of engagement in the focus group interviews and their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. Selection was also mindful of recruiting a diverse sub-sample. This sample included two young men aged 16, four aged 17, six aged 18, six aged 19, four aged 20, and three aged 21. Of the 25 young men interviewed, fourteen identified as straight, seven as bisexual, one as queer, one as gay, one as transgender, one as unsure/questioning, one participant preferred not to say, no participants identified as asexual. Two interview participants identified as First Nations. Four identified as having a disability, nine identified as being from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. Eighteen identified as students, four as working either part-time or full-time, two as unemployed, and one as self-employed.

The first section of the interviews offered participants the opportunity to introduce themselves and included an ice-breaker activity where the young men were asked to share the last TikTok or online video that made them laugh. This was followed by a brief overview of the study and its ethical protocols. The interview questions then prompted participants to discuss:

- which social networking sites they used and why
- other social media they used
- who they connected with most online
- what they mostly did online
- what motivated them to go online
- what motivated them to go offline
- what drew them to particular online spaces or communities
- when, why and how they might use anonymous identities or personas online
- when, why and how they post online
- their general thoughts about posting
- whether they thought their online posting differed from that of their female friends
- their thoughts about sharing intimate images online
- their thoughts about online influencers such as Andrew Tate
- their thoughts about how their behaviours and beliefs might be shaped by their online experiences
- how their online experiences impact on their wellbeing and self-esteem
- what it means to have a positive experience online.

Given their broadness, these questions opened up discussion on a range of different topics, which meant that some topics that were raised and explored in some focus groups weren't raised and explored in others. The youth researchers took a participant-centred approach in encouraging discussion when the members of the group expressed particular interest in topics such as the toxicity of gaming culture) while being mindful of sticking to the interview questions overall.

In the initial in-person workshop, the youth researchers devised a few creative activities to support engagement – for example, a mobile phone activity where participants were asked to talk about their recent posts and posting activity, and an Instagram activity where participants were asked to respond to a scenario in which men rated a girl's appearance. While promising, these activities didn't elicit data that provided insight in relation to the research questions, so they were only used in some of the initial interviews.

Follow-up interviews were conducted by the youth researchers with 25 young men via Zoom. These interviews generally lasted one hour. The interview schedule for these interviews was devised by the research team and youth researchers after several focus group interviews had been conducted. The first section of these interviews involved thanking the participants for their involvement in the focus group and reiterating the aims and ethical protocols of the study. After this introduction, the interviewer asked the young men what they remembered about the focus groups, any issues they thought were important and if they would like to talk more about these issues in relation to their online experiences. In response to some of the themes that arose in the focus groups, the remaining questions invited participants to discuss their biggest concerns about the online world for young men, safety and comfort online, thoughts about algorithms and the curation of content, thoughts about the idea of young men as being active and critical (not passive) users of social media, thoughts about feeling affirmed or validated online, thoughts about authenticity online, and thoughts about misinformation.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed via Zoom. The transcripts were then checked and corrected for accuracy and lightly edited for accessibility.

Organising the data

The data from the focus groups was coded and organised around the six research questions, in a lengthy iterative process that identified themes as they emerged upon reading the transcripts. Coding was directed and managed by the lead researcher and involved all of the research team. The coded data was then summarised and reorganised to illuminate the various (dominant, recurring but also less dominant) themes that appear in this report.

The data from the individual interviews was analysed to enrich and provide more depth to the key themes arising from the focus groups.