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Youth and Pornography in Australia
Evidence on the extent of exposure and likely effects

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Note: This publication includes descriptions of certain sexual activities and sexually explicit language that may disturb or offend some readers.

However, we believe that it is important for readers to press on when reading becomes difficult. The debate on pornography in Australia needs well-informed citizens and this includes awareness of some of the more disturbing material that is freely available to children on the Internet.

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Preface

The research reported here was motivated by a concern that young people are being exposed to a wide range of pornographic material, some of it of a violent and extreme kind, and that this exposure may be having long-lasting detrimental effects on some young people and on society at large. In particular, the Internet has in recent years seen a proliferation of pornographic content of a disturbing kind. This material is easily accessible to children.

Public debates over pornography in Australia, as elsewhere, have tended to be dominated by, on the one hand, moral conservatives who seem to many to find sex itself distasteful and, on the other, civil libertarians who appear unwilling to concede that some forms of pornography may cause psychological damage to individuals and give rise to wider social problems.

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However, responsibility for the views in this paper rests entirely with the authors.

Summary

Children have always sought out sexually explicit material but doing so today is easier, quicker, cheaper and more anonymous. While the system of video classification is designed to exclude those under 18 from viewing pornography, there are virtually no age-related barriers to pornography on the Internet. Children can spend hours wandering online through a vast array of free images and movie clips much of which would be prohibited on video. They can be drawn or coerced into viewing material they have no desire to see through 'pop-ups', 'mousetrapping', spam emails and manipulation of search engines. Yet despite the scale and possible consequences of this social problem, it has received almost no public attention.

Exposure of youth to pornography

For this study, Newspoll was commissioned to carry out a special survey of 16 and 17-year olds to determine the extent of their exposure to X-rated videos and Internet pornography. Younger individuals could not be interviewed for ethical reasons.

When asked whether watching X-rated videos is widespread among boys of their age, five out of six boys (84 per cent) and the same percentage of girls said that it is. When asked whether watching X-rated videos is widespread among girls of the same age, only 4 percent of girls agreed. Boys overestimate girls' use of pornography, in that 15 per cent of boys believe that watching X-rated videos is widespread among girls.

The fact that most 16-17 year-old boys and girls believe that watching X-rated videos is widespread among boys suggests that watching these videos is considered to be normal or at least common behaviour among boys. The normalising of this activity may give pornography consumption a high degree of social tolerance and acceptability within youth culture.

Respondents were next asked: 'Have you ever watched X-rated videos yourself?' If the respondent agreed then they were asked: 'How often would that be?' The results are shown in Table S1. Just under three-quarters (73 per cent) of boys report that they have watched an X-rated video themselves. One in twenty watch them on a weekly basis while more than a fifth watch an X-rated video at least once a month. Over half of those who watch these videos do so only occasionally. The perception that watching X-rated videos is widespread amongst 16-17 year-old boys therefore proves to be accurate.

Among girls, only 11 per cent report that they have watched an X-rated video and all of those who have done so say that has been less often than once every two to three months. The 15 per cent of boys (and 4 per cent of girls) who believe that watching X-rated videos is widespread amongst 16-17 year old girls are clearly wrong in their assessment.

Boys and girls follow different paths to exposure to pornography. Typically, girls watched pornography only once, because a boyfriend or somebody wanted them to or because they were curious, and then did not watch again. The majority of boys are also exposed to pornography for the first time through the encouragement of others, but it is more likely to be by male friends.

Table S1 Exposure to X-rated videos among youth (%)

	Boys	Girls
<i>Total</i>	73	11
Every week	5	0
Every 3 to 4 weeks	16	0
Every 2 to 3 months	11	0
Less often	40	11

Totals may not add due to rounding.

The survey also asked young people about their exposure to ‘sex sites on the Internet’. Only 2 per cent of boys and girls said they never use the Internet. A third use it every day and 84 per cent use it at least once a week. Nearly nine out of ten 16-17 year-old boys (88 per cent) believe that looking at sex sites on the Internet is widespread among boys of the same age, and girls have a similar perception of the extent to which boys look at Internet sex sites (83 per cent). Among 16-17 year-old girls, only seven per cent believe that looking at sex sites on the Internet is widespread among girls of the same age. As in the case of X-rated videos, a substantially higher proportion of boys (16 per cent) believe that looking at Internet sex sites is widespread amongst girls.

Young people’s exposure to Internet pornography may be deliberate or accidental. Respondents to the survey were first asked, ‘When using the Internet yourself, have you ever seen sex sites accidentally or when you didn’t mean to?’ They were then asked how often the accidental exposure had occurred. The results are shown in Table S2.

Eighty-four per cent of boys and 60 per cent of girls say they have been exposed accidentally to sex sites on the Internet. It is fair to conclude that anyone who uses the Internet extensively has a high probability of coming across sex sites when searching for something else or being sent pornographic links or images via e-mail.

Respondents were then asked, ‘Have you ever searched for or looked at sex sites on the Internet on purpose?’ The results are shown in Table S3.

Nearly two in five 16-17 year-old boys (38 per cent) have searched the Internet for sex sites. Only four per cent say they use the Internet for this purpose on a weekly basis, but over one fifth of boys (22 per cent) access Internet sex sites at least every two or three months.

Among girls, only two per cent say that they have deliberately sought out Internet sex sites and all of those have done so only very occasionally. The figure of two per cent of girls who have *deliberately* sought out sex sites stands in stark contrast to the 60 per cent of girls who have had *accidental* exposure to explicit sex on the Internet. Internet users who have no interest in sex sites therefore find it difficult to avoid seeing the images displayed on these sites.

Table S2 Accidental exposure to Internet sex sites among youth (%)

	Boys	Girls
<i>Total</i>	84	60
Every week	24	7
Every 3 to 4 weeks	22	6
Every 2 to 3 months	11	11
Less often	27	36

Table S3 Deliberate use of Internet sex sites among youth (%)

	Boys	Girls
<i>Total</i>	38	2
Every week	4	0
Every 3 to 4 weeks	7	0
Every 2 to 3 months	11	0
Less often	16	2

The fact that teenagers view X-rated videos more than Internet sex sites is surprising as access to the Internet is much easier than access to X-rated videos. However, only a third of homes are connected to the Internet. In addition, there may be an element of self-censorship among young people, as Internet sex is known to feature extreme and ‘deviant’ sexual practices, which some young people find disturbing or offensive. In addition, it may be felt that since X-rated videos are officially approved for adult use it is acceptable for those who see themselves as near adulthood to view them.

The figures in our study are likely to understate the true incidence of pornography consumption among youth. Although the telephone survey was anonymous and confidentiality was guaranteed, some respondents may have been reluctant to admit to these activities or concerned that their anonymity would not be protected.

What young people see

In seeing X-rated videos or Internet pornography, children and adolescents are exposed to explicit images of a wide range of sexual acts. Most pornography centres on images of women’s bodies and of male-female sexual activity, and most is directed at a heterosexual male audience.

A typical X-rated video shows a series of scenarios, each lasting for anywhere from a few minutes to half an hour, with common practices including kissing, sexual

touching, masturbation, fellatio, vaginal intercourse, anal intercourse and cunnilingus. Typical practices depicted in X-rated videos also include ‘double penetration’ (where two men simultaneously have vaginal and anal intercourse with the one woman), one woman kneeling between two or more men and practising fellatio on each in turn, and one woman engaged simultaneously in vaginal or anal intercourse with one man or two men and fellatio with a second or third man.

Two additional sexual practices have become staples in X-rated videos. It is standard practice in heterosexual pornography for the male partner to withdraw from intercourse or fellatio before orgasm to ejaculate onto the body or face of his female partner. These are commonly described as ‘cumshots’, while the sub-genre ‘facials’ refers to images of men ejaculating onto women’s faces and women’s faces covered in semen. Male-female anal intercourse is a second, almost mandatory, inclusion in pornographic depictions of heterosexual sex. While anal intercourse is routine in representations of heterosexual sex in X-rated videos, Australian studies suggest that this is a minority practice.

Across the myriad of pornographic images and texts, there are common classificatory schemes for types or genres of content. Among X-rated videos, there are series focused on particular sexual practices, sexual participants, body parts or other aspects of sexuality. On the shelves of an adult store, one can find videos focused on ‘teens’ and young women, ‘new’ or ‘amateur’ female participants, anal intercourse, fellatio, male ejaculation or ‘cumshots,’ breasts, buttocks, ‘lesbian’ sex, Asian and black women, voyeurism, large penises, multiple male partners or ‘gangbangs’, pregnant women, ‘fisting’ (the insertion of the hand into the vagina or anus), men over 50 with young women, female underwear, gay male sex, and a range of other categories. Internet pornography includes all these categories, but also goes beyond them to include genres of violent and fetishistic pornography which are illegal in X-rated videos.

A distinction needs to be drawn between ‘mainstream’ pornography (in commercially available X-rated videos) and the proliferation of violent and extreme material on the Internet. While violent and degrading depictions of women in particular are evident in some X-rated videos, they are widespread in Internet pornography. Themes of sexual violence are common in the stories and images circulated in Internet newsgroups. There is little systematic research on the extent of violent content in pornographic websites. Nevertheless, one can easily find portrayals in Internet pornography that embody forms of violence and themes of subordination and degradation. Perhaps the most pervasive form of degradation of women is the common use of derogatory language to describe the women pictured and the sexual acts done to them. Some websites list groups of pictures as follows: ‘Fatties getting fucked,’ ‘Pissing sluts and skanks,’ ‘Ethnic Asian whores,’ ‘Ethnic black bitches,’ and so on.

Furthermore, there are three types of Internet pornography that focus on non-consenting sexual acts – rape, bestiality and ‘upskirts’ websites. Videos featuring these would be ‘Refused Classification’ and banned from sale or hire by the Office of Film and Literature Classification.

A recent study analysed 31 rape-focused websites. There is no way to tell if the sites show images of actual rapes or staged depictions. The victims are usually tied with rope or other restraints, a weapon is shown being used, and typically the victim’s face

is depicted as screaming or expressing pain. Half the rape sites describe the victims as young, using such terms as ‘young’, ‘teen’, ‘schoolgirl’ and ‘lolita’. Accompanying text accentuates the violent nature of the images depicted or available for a fee, using such language as ‘rape’, ‘torture’, ‘abuse’, ‘brutal’ and ‘pain’. All these websites are accessible without paying for the images, and without verifying one’s age.

Bestiality refers to sexual activity between human beings and animals, and it is easy to find at least a handful of sites which offer free photographs and movies of women (and occasionally men) engaged in masturbation, oral sex or intercourse with dogs, horses, snakes and other animals.

‘Upskirts’ refers to photographs taken such that the viewer can see ‘up the skirt’ of the woman pictured. Some photographs on ‘upskirts’ sites are clearly posed for the camera, but other photographs appear to have been taken illicitly, without the woman’s knowledge. A similar ‘peeping Tom’ genre on the Internet centres on images of women undressing, showering, toileting, naked or having sex, again apparently taken illicitly through windows or using hidden cameras.

One sexually explicit genre that has attracted more public attention and concern than any other, child pornography, is not visible on the ‘public’ domain of easily accessible websites. The genre of ‘teen’ pornography (boasting ‘barely legal’ and ‘youngest teens on the net’) is an important and easily available one, but true child pornography is only accessible through highly secretive networks.

Effects of exposure to pornography

What is the likely effect of exposure to pornography on children’s attitudes, values and behaviours? There is very little direct research evidence to help answer this question, mainly because of ethical difficulties associated with research on exposure to explicit sexual material among individuals below adult age. In one of the few studies, a survey among 522 African-American females aged 14 to 18 found correlations between viewing X-rated movies and the following: holding more negative attitudes towards using condoms; having multiple sex partners; and, engaging in sex more frequently. A study of 275 Canadian teenagers with an average age of 14 found a significant correlation between boys’ frequent consumption of pornography and their agreement with the idea that it is acceptable to hold a girl down and force her to have intercourse.

On the other hand, a wide range of studies has been conducted among young people aged 18 to 25. One of the most important areas of social concern has been the impact of pornography on men’s sexual behaviour towards women, and particularly male sexual aggression or rape. One major study integrated the findings of a broad range of research and concluded that there is consistent and reliable evidence that exposure to or consumption of pornography is related to male sexual aggression against women. This association is strongest for violent pornography and still reliable for nonviolent pornography, particularly when used frequently.

In experimental studies, adults show significant strengthening of attitudes supportive of sexual aggression following exposure to pornography. These attitudes are measured by scales designed to measure ‘rape myth acceptance’, ‘sexual callousness’, ‘adversarial sexual beliefs’ and ‘acceptance of interpersonal violence against women’.

These centre on beliefs that blame the female victim for rape and justify sexually assault. Such attitudes correlate with behavioural sexual aggression, and have other anti-social effects such as failure to report rape and unwillingness to support victims.

A second cluster of studies examines correlations between the use of pornography in everyday life and aggressive attitudes or behaviours. An analysis of eight studies involving 2020 participants found that there was *not* a significant, reliable relationship between the amount of pornography use and attitudes supporting sexual aggression, although the study did not distinguish between the effects of nonviolent and violent pornography. However, studies among men in the general population find significant associations between the use of at least certain forms of pornography and levels of sexual aggression. Men who use hardcore, violent or rape pornography, and men who are high-frequency users of pornography, are shown to be significantly more likely than others to report that they would rape or sexually harass a woman if they knew they could get away with it.

Although it is not the only source of sexist and violence-supportive imagery and ideas, pornography clearly plays a role in helping foster the kinds of attitudes and values which may predispose some men to rape women. Overall, the evidence lends some support to the concern expressed in the 1980s slogan ‘Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice’.

Several studies suggest that in assessing the likely meaning and impact of young people’s exposure to pornography, we need to consider the nature of this exposure – the type of material involved, the duration and intensity of viewing and the context (whether voluntary or involuntary, and whether solitary or collective). Several variables have been shown to moderate the impact of pornography, including the individual’s cultural background (e.g. emphasising gender equality or inequality), their home background (sexually permissive or restricted), their personality characteristics and dispositions, the viewer’s current emotional state (angered or not), and the environment in which exposure occurs. In particular, men who are at higher risk of sexually aggressive behaviour also show the strongest negative effects of exposure to pornography, particularly to materials combining sex and violence.

Effects on young people

In our view, the research literature’s documentation of significant associations between adult use of certain types of pornography and sexual aggression is of real concern. It is likely that similar relationships exist among teenagers: that consumption of pornography, particularly high frequency use or consumption of violent portrayals, is associated with sexually aggressive attitudes and behaviours. This association may be particularly strong for the four to five per cent of 16 and 17-year-old boys in our study who watch X-rated videos and view Internet sex sites every week.

Regular consumption of pornography, and particularly violent pornography, therefore is a risk factor for boys’ and young men’s perpetration of sexual assault. In addition, it may foster greater tolerance of this behaviour by others. This is particularly important given that young women are three to four times more likely to be subject to sexual and physical violence than older women and young men aged 15-25 are responsible for more sexual assaults than older males.

There are three other potential impacts on children and young people of exposure to pornography that should also be considered. First, depictions of sexual behaviour may be emotionally disturbing to the young person who encounters them. They may be shocked, troubled or disturbed by premature or inadvertent encounters with sexually explicit material. A recent Australian survey found that 53 per cent of children aged 11-17 had seen or experienced something on the Internet they thought was offensive or disgusting. The respondents said that they felt 'sick', 'yuck', 'disgusted', 'repulsed' and 'upset'.

Second, young people may be troubled or disgusted by images or accounts of non-mainstream behaviours, just as adults may be, given that the range of sexual activity found on the Internet is broader than the range found in 'mainstream' society.

Third, young people exposed to images of non-mainstream sexual behaviours may be more likely to accept and adopt them.

Sexual behaviours involving rape, bondage, sadomasochism, transsexuality, urination, defecation, and bestiality are widely regarded as harmful, immoral or unethical in and of themselves, and indeed some are criminal offences, and their portrayal may incite, eroticise and give legitimacy to such behaviours. There is not yet a body of evidence with which to assess with any certainty whether young people exposed to eroticised images or accounts of bondage, bestiality and so on are more likely to adopt these practices than young people who have not viewed such material, but it seems highly plausible that this is so.

In conclusion

While further research is needed to draw definitive conclusions about the impacts on children of exposure to pornography, in our view the evidence available provides grounds for serious concern about exposure of children to particular types of pornography, notably pornography involving violence and extreme behaviours. More concerted action to minimise exposure of children is therefore warranted.

The starting point should be the minimisation of involuntary exposure to pornography. A second goal should be the minimisation of children's consumption of violent pornography and pornography showing non-consenting sexual depictions (such as rape, bestiality, 'upskirts' and images of children).

The situation may be less clear-cut with respect to depictions of other 'non-mainstream' sexual practices such as sex involving multiple partners, bondage and sadomasochism, transsexuality, urination and defecation, although certain extreme behaviours such as coprophilia and amputee sex are clearly disturbing in themselves. OFLC guidelines prohibit portrayals of these themes in films and videos and, in our view, if these are considered unsuitable for adults then children should certainly not be exposed to them.