

SUBMISSION:
INQUIRY INTO ONLINE AGE VERIFICATION

AUSTRALIAN CHRISTIAN LOBBY



25 October 2019

Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
spla.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Australian Christian Lobby welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Online Age Verification. Our submission is attached.

Please feel free to contact me should you require any further information or clarification. I would also request an opportunity to speak to the committee regarding our submission. Thank you.

Yours sincerely,



Wendy Francis
Director | QLD & NT

Introduction

The Australian Christian Lobby welcomes this inquiry into Online Age Verification.

The ease of access to hard core pornography and online gambling has been an issue on which the ACL has campaigned for many years. It is vitally important to protect children from online predators. Statistics show that 44 per cent of Australian children between the ages of 9 and 16 report they have encountered sexual images online.

It is encouraging that online age verification is now the subject of a Federal government inquiry.

Initial exposure to pornography may be accidental on the part of the child, but this is a lucrative occurrence for those who are part of what is a multi-billion dollar industry.

While many may argue that it is the responsibility of parents to ensure the safety of their children, the advances in online technology have exceeded the rate at which parents can maintain effective safeguards. Most children now have access to personal computers and laptops which are often mandated by the schools they attend. Many children are also more technologically competent than their parents. Further, children and young people are able to access the internet from many public locations which may or may not have filters. Further, items such as alcohol and gambling advertisements are part of the sporting culture and as such there is a constant inducement for viewers of online sport to participate in such activities.

Online age verification protocols are one way of assisting parents to monitor online exposure to harmful content.

Children deserve to be protected from predatory acts both online and off. Currently, online gambling customers must verify their age within 14 days to continue using an account, but an age verification process is not required to access online pornography. This is of huge concern with research showing that viewing pornography can traumatize children and young people, and negatively influence their attitudes to sex, sexuality and relationships.

Recommendations:

That Age Verification processes be implemented to protect children from online pornography, gambling and alcohol advertising and purchasing sites.

That the Age Verification processes implemented must protect the identity of the user and cannot be accessed by pornography sites.

Age verification ought to be part of a comprehensive cyber safety policy that protects children from online pornography.

Children adversely affected by online adult material

Children are exposed to many, mostly unintentional, situations where they may view adult only content online. In relation to alcohol, the Alcohol Advertising Review Board identifies that an average 15-year-old Australian child could be exposed to alcohol marketing through Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, billboards, on public transport, at the supermarket, on television, and in the cinema ... all in one day.¹ This is also true of exposure to gambling and pornography. Studies show that the viewing of advertising of alcohol at sporting events has real life consequences in terms of fuelling drunkenness and in the increase of fatal brawls.²

It is essential to have some form of age verification for accessing online sites which is effective. Some sites, such as those selling alcohol, require the viewer to acknowledge they are over eighteen, but the simple click to agree requires no actual verification. This is also the case with some of the more extreme pornography sites. Such acknowledgements may serve as a warning but are not an effective means of avoiding accidental or even determined attempts by the underaged to access these sites.

Children are often more skilled than their parents and guardians in their abilities with online technologies but do not have the maturity to make appropriate decisions about access to inappropriate sites. The need to protect children is noted by the Australian Psychological Society:

Despite their ability to effectively use online technologies, children and young people still need protection from content that exploits their immaturity and could harm their development. Viewing highly sexualised or violent pornographic material has many risks for children's psychological development and mental health, by potentially skewing their views of normality and acceptable behaviour at a crucial time of development.³

Access to pornographic material by children is having devastating consequences. There has been an increase in the occurrence of child-on-child sexual assault.⁴ The rise in sexual related violence has also been measured in research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in their report, *The effects of pornography on children and young people*.⁵

Pornography eroticises violence towards women and girls and is linked to the early sexualisation of children. The average age of first exposure to pornography is 11, often happening accidentally. One in 10 children under the age of 10 have seen pornography which can include violent porn, bestiality and child pornography.

Pornography and addiction

Research by numerous behavioural scientists shows that the consumption of pornography can lead to addiction, with similar neurological processes to those observed in substance addiction.⁶ Children are more vulnerable to these changes on account of the more immature development of their brains.

¹ <http://drinktank.org.au/2019/05/alcohol-advertising-is-impossible-to-escape-for-aussie-kids/>

² <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/alcohol-advertising-in-sports-fueling-drink-culture-according-to-study>

³ <https://www.psychology.org.au/inpsych/2015/april/sampson>

⁴ <https://www.familyzone.com/au/families/blog/child-on-child-sexual-assault-on-the-rise>

⁵ Quadara, A, El-Murr, A, Latham, J (2017) ; The effects of pornography on children and young people: an evidence scan (Research Report) Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

⁶ Hilton, D.L. (2013). Pornography addiction - a supranormal stimulus considered in the context of Neuroplasticity; Socioaffective Neuroscience & Psychology 2013, 3: 20767

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Pornography contributes to children being both victims and perpetrators of sexual violence

Pornography sexualizes children and puts them at risk, both the risk of being assaulted and the possibility that they become perpetrators of sexual violence, either in childhood or as adults. It is essential, and urgent, that we take action to protect them.

The AIFS report on the effects of pornography addresses the role of pornography in relation to sexual violence, particularly in relation to women and children. It addresses the question of whether pornography has a causal attribution to sexual violence:

The growing evidence base on preventing violence against women and children by addressing its underlying determinants or conditions invites us to look at:

- *the messages mainstream online pornography generates about gender, equality and (hetero)sexuality; and*
- *how these messages might shape the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of children and young people in forming respectful, equitable romantic/sexual/intimate relationships.⁷*

The report shows that there are serious effects on children from viewing pornography especially in terms of the increase in victimisation and perpetration of sexual violence involving children and young people. The reports summarises these effects:

Box 1: Sexual violence

Victimisation

- *People aged 19 years and under make up 60% of all sexual assault victims. Girls and young women aged between 10 and 14 years experience the highest rates of sexual violence in Australia.*
- *Twenty-nine per cent of all male sexual assault victims are aged between 0 and 9 years.*

Perpetration

- *Sexual assault offences perpetrated by children and young people aged between 10 and 19 years old increased by 36% from 2012 to 2014.*
- *Girls and young women aged 10-17 years made up 58% of all recorded offences committed by females from 2012 to 2013.*
- *Boys and young men aged 10-17 years old committed 16% of all recorded sex offences from 2012 to 2013.*

Sources: ABS, 2014 & 2015; Warner & Bartels, 2015; CASA Forum, 2016.⁸

These figures are alarming and show a clear correlation between the exposure of children to violent pornography and the subsequent behavioural changes leading to an increase in the numbers of children becoming perpetrators of sexual violence.

⁷ <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/effects-pornography-children-and-young-people-snapshot>

⁸ Ibid.

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In a two-year period, sexual offences perpetrated by children and young people aged 10-19 years old increased by 36%. Boys and young men aged 10-17 years committed 16% of all recorded sexual assault offences.

The report expressed concern with problematic sexually violent themes in pornography which may shape young people's attitudes to sexual violence as acceptable:

- *studies show a strengthening of attitudes supportive of sexual violence and violence against women.*
- *Evidence of an association between consuming pornography and perpetrating sexual harassment for boys and sexual coercion for college men.*
- *Adolescents who consumed violent pornography, at follow-up were six times more likely to have been sexually aggressive compared to those who had viewed non-violent pornography/no pornography.*
- *There is a range of intersecting risk factors that increase the likelihood that male consumers of pornography will perpetrate sexual aggression or have a predisposition towards sexual aggression.*⁹

Pornography as a contributor to child-on-child sexual assault

Exposure to pornography is identified as a factor in the increasing reports of children sexually assaulting other children.¹⁰ There are a number of cases reported in overseas newspapers¹¹ and there have been a number reported in Australia, but they are no longer available on internet searches. In the UK, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children claims such reports are made "thousands of times each year" and that it is seriously on the rise.¹²

Not tackling issues of exposure to pornography for children can have serious traumatic impacts on them and it can affect their future relationships as adults.

The AIFS report makes the following observations:

An important implication arises from this: the harms associated with pornography consumption need to be considered at both the individual and collective levels.

At the individual level, there are a range of risk factors associated with consuming pornography that make some males more "predisposed" to sexually aggressive behaviours, such as hostility towards women, lower intelligence, antisocial tendencies and a higher interest in impersonal sex and domination (Malamuth & Huppin, 2005; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2005):

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ https://www.stopitnow.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/do_children_sexually_abuse_other_children_0.pdf
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/10/09/number-child-on-child-sexual-assaults-almost-doubles/>

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-43884776>

¹² [ibid](#)

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When examined in the context of multiple, interacting factors, the findings are highly consistent across experimental and nonexperimental studies and across differing populations in showing that pornography use can be a risk factor for sexually aggressive outcomes, (Kingston, Malamuth, Fedoroff, & Marshall, 2009, p. 216)

At the collective level, the three issues listed above essentially create an "echo chamber" for the sexual socialisation of children and young people, particularly males.

Young people support restrictions on pornography

Young people themselves are aware of the harms of pornography and concerned that it is too easily accessible. Four-fifths of teenagers in the UK responded in a study that it was too easy for young people to accidentally see pornography online.¹³

The vast majority of young people surveyed in New Zealand (2018) agree that porn shouldn't be accessible to kids. 71% indicated that it should be filtered, blocked or that some sort of age restriction should be implemented to limit access by people under 18.¹⁴

Further, young people themselves perceive the damage caused by pornography:

- 72% say 'pornography leads to unrealistic attitudes to sex' and 70% agree that 'pornography can have a damaging impact on young people's views of sex or relationships'.
- Two-thirds of young women (66 %) and almost half of young men (49%) agree that 'it would be easier growing up if pornography was less easy to access for young people'.
- Almost eight out of 10 young women (77%) say 'pornography has led to pressure on girls or young women to look a certain way'.¹⁵

Age verification offers protection to children

Most children first see pornography by accident. The mandating of age verification processes can prevent that from happening. If a child stumbles across a site that has age-verification controls in place, they will be prevented from seeing content which isn't appropriate for them.

Age-verification is one way to help parents address the issue of online safety.

Age verification must protect privacy of those providing ID documents.

¹³ Parker, I. (2014). [Young people, sex and relationships](https://www.echildhood.org/the_facts): The new norms. IPPR. as quoted at https://www.echildhood.org/the_facts

¹⁴ Office of Film and Literature Classification. (2018). [NZ Youth and Porn](https://www.echildhood.org/the_facts): Research findings of a survey on how and why young New Zealanders view online pornography. Wellington, NZ: Office of Film and Literature Classification. As quoted at https://www.echildhood.org/the_facts

¹⁵ Op.cit. Parker

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It would be unacceptable for adult sites to retain any identification of users. There are already programs developed to protect the privacy of those providing ID documents. Age verification should happen in such a way as to protect the privacy of those that provide their ID documents.

Age verification systems work by way of a user registering an account with a salted one-way hash. A “salt”, in cryptography, is random data which has a one-way function that hashes data. This data may be a password. A user can register an account using an email address and password, both of which are protected by a salted, one-way hash. The user verifies their email address and then chooses an age verification option from a 3rd party provider, which could include options such as Mobile SMS, Credit Card, Passport, or Driving Licence.

The details required to prove their age are registered into the site of the third-party age verification provider. The third party will then pass back either a pass or fail to the first site. Due to the intentional separation of the site and its providers, the site cannot see nor store any of the age verification data.

Alternatively, in order to protect the privacy of those providing ID documents, age verification could be the responsibility of the Internet Service Provider or NBN company. Age verification ought to be a part of a comprehensive cyber safety policy that protects children from online pornography.

Conclusion

This submission has argued that pornography and other adult sites cause serious damage to children. Exposure to pornography causes an increase in the sexual objectification of persons, especially women. It also contributes to the increase in sexual violence amongst children and young people and this behaviour continues into adulthood.

It is the obligation of government to assist parents in protecting their children from this type of harm, both in the interest of those children and to promote a society which fosters respect.

The Australian Christian Lobby strongly supports the implementation of age verification measures for all online adult sites.

We believe that Australia has an opportunity to lead the world in this regard and become the safest place in the world for children to be online. What an enviable reputation for our nation to aspire to.

About Australian Christian Lobby

Australian Christian Lobby's vision is to see Christian principles and ethics influencing the way we are governed, do business, and relate to each other as a community. ACL seeks to see a compassionate, just and moral society through having the public contributions of the Christian faith reflected in the political life of the nation.

With more than 170,000 supporters, ACL facilitates professional engagement and dialogue between the Christian constituency and government, allowing the voice of Christians to be heard in the public square. ACL is neither party-partisan nor denominationally aligned. ACL representatives bring a Christian perspective to policy makers in Federal, State and Territory Parliaments.

acl.org.au