



IMPACTS OF PORNOGRAPHY

Reviewed September 2025 by Professor Alan McKee,^a Dr Zahra Stardust^b and Dr Giselle Woodley.^c

Summary

- Pornography is a diverse medium, depicting a wide variety of bodies, sexualities and sexual practices;^{1,2} that porn consumers overwhelmingly prefer porn depicting mutual pleasure,³ and that pornography can play an important role in healthy sexual development and exploration.
- Most pornography is not designed to provide relationships and sexuality education. Without appropriate alternatives, pornography can fill the informational vacuum and become young people's main source of information about sex.⁴
- Young people of all ages require evidence-based, age-appropriate relationship and sexuality education and media literacy education.¹ This should include non-stigmatising discussions about consent, pornography, and negotiating with intimate partners.
- Evidence-based policymaking and service-delivery require ideological transparency. Australian politicians, policy-makers, educators and service-providers must ensure that responses to pornography do not advance ideological agendas that undermine the safety and rights of sex workers, women and LGBTQI+ people of all ages.

Background

Recent media and political discourse on pornography features characteristics of a 'moral panic,' where pornography is framed as an increasing 'social problem' that disproportionately impacts young people, and requires unevidenced legislative and policy 'solutions.' While analysis of academically rigorous research presents a more realistic picture,^{3, 5-10} much Australian public debate has uncritically promulgated anti-porn ideologies in its responses to online safety, sexuality and consent education, and gender-based violence.¹¹ These ideologies create barriers for young people talking to trusted adults about sex,¹² as well as driving stigma and discrimination towards sex workers.¹³

Recommendations

- Invest in comprehensive, age-appropriate relationship and sexuality education and media literacy education for all years in all Australian schools, with training in boundary setting and respect for others. This should include non-stigmatising discussions about consent, pornography, and negotiating with intimate partners.
- Develop accreditation mechanisms to ensure that relationship and sexuality education adheres to appropriate guidelines.
- Develop, expand and make freely available non-stigmatising relationship and sexuality education and media literacy education resources for young people and their parents and carers. Existing examples include Sexual Health Victoria's *Talking About Sexual Content Online Without Shame or Stigma*.
- Avoid expansion of legislative and regulatory measures that mandate untested and privacy-invasive technologies (such as the *Online Safety Act 2021* Industry Codes and Standards and *social media age restrictions*), and redirect investment towards education for young people, parents and carers.
- Resource national sex worker engagement for co-design and co-delivery of non-stigmatising porn education for young people, adults and family, domestic and sexual violence (FDSV) organisations.

What does the research tell us?

A recent meta-analysis of thousands of pieces of research on pornography shows that people who consume pornography are also more sexually adventurous - that is to say, more open to reporting casual sex, anal sex, group sex, kinky sex and a range of other sexual practices to researchers when asked. This is not to say that consuming pornography causes people to be more sexually adventurous - the literature has not identified this. The meta-analysis did not support many of the most common urban myths about pornography, such as pornography consumption leading to violence against women or non-consensual sexual practices.⁹

This is supported by an earlier (2020) meta-analysis of research from the 1970s onwards which found no relationship between mainstream pornography consumption and real-life sexually aggressive behaviour, while links between 'violent' pornography and sexual aggression were inconclusive.⁸ Research has also found that there is no correlation between pornography consumption and understandings or practices of sexual consent,⁷ and no correlation between pornography consumption and nonegalitarian attitudes towards gender.⁶

Pornography is a diverse medium depicting a wide variety of bodies, sexualities and sexual practices; and evidence shows that porn consumers overwhelmingly prefer content that depicts mutual pleasure.³ There is no evidence to suggest that pornography increasingly depicts 'aggressive' behaviours, nor that pornography consumers prefer content that depicts aggression.³

It is worth noting that much of the public concern about 'violence' in pornography stems from a misunderstanding of the consensual nature of BDSM and other kink or fetish practices.¹⁴ In an analysis of popular online pornography consumed in Aotearoa New Zealand, nearly all videos depicted both male and female pleasure. While some popular porn did depict non-consensual or coercive behaviour, the vast majority of this subset still depicted mutually enjoyable sex. About 10% of popular pornography contained elements of verbal or physical aggression, about half of which was clearly depicted as consensual.⁵ Pornography that depicts consensual, mutually enjoyable sexual practices, including BDSM, reflects the diversity of human sexuality, and can facilitate education and exploration.

While pornography is not designed to function as relationship and sexuality education, it is also not automatically harmful to healthy sexual development.¹⁵ Pornography ends up functioning as de facto sex education when schools and parents fail to provide comprehensive, age-appropriate relationship and sexuality education.

Framing pornography as a 'crisis' increases shame and stigma, preventing honest conversations. While there is widespread rejection of adopting clinical frameworks to categorise pornography as a 'public health crisis',^{16,17} or as an 'addiction',¹⁸ those who self-identify as experiencing 'pornography addiction' tend to be white, married, wealthy men with higher levels of religiosity, who express 'shame, guilt and fear that their pornography viewing habits will be discovered'.^{16,18}

Both young people and adults may be impacted by compulsive online behaviours, including gaming, gambling and shopping. Any person in online or real-world spaces may be vulnerable to a 'host of social influences that breed intolerance for gender and sexual diversity and equity'.¹⁶ Describing pornography as exceptionally harmful, or as an 'addiction', deters help-seeking behaviour and genuine understanding of online risks and harms.

Representation of diversity

As a medium that reflects diverse bodies, sexualities and sexual practices, pornography has historically functioned as an essential part of healthy sexual development for many LGBTQI+ people.¹² Conversely, anti-porn and other 'harmful content' tech initiatives have a disproportionate negative impact on LGBTQI+ creators, advocates and educators.^{19,20}

Evidence-based porn literacy

Recent policy, regulation and public debate has focused on young people's access to online content, and the need for 'porn literacy' and 'porn education.' Education on sexually explicit materials is important, within the context of both age-appropriate relationship and sexuality education, and within age-appropriate media literacy. However, pornography education must



avoid perpetuating stigma and stereotypes towards sex workers and people with diverse sexualities, and should be based on reliable evidence.

Centring young people's perspectives: Research indicates that when asked questions about pornography, young people will discuss both their own experiences and others' perspectives (e.g. the opinions of parents and other adults). If researchers avoid using loaded terms like 'harm' or 'trauma', young people are more likely to discuss their *own* opinions and experiences.²¹ This highlights the need to ensure that young people's self-identified needs are centred in the porn education and research targeted towards them.

Dismissing pornography as 'unrealistic': There is a tendency for pornography education to describe pornography as 'unrealistic', to describe heterosexual, 'vanilla' sex within monogamous relationships as 'healthy' and 'realistic', and present pornography as an object to be avoided, not engaged with.¹ This approach to pornography education stigmatises LGBTQI+ young people and young people with emerging diverse sexual interests, inhibits young people from developing skills in porn literacy as a subset of media literacy and leaves them unequipped to critically engage with porn within the broader media environment.²² Porn literacy and relationship and sexuality education programs should be mindful to provide evidence-based and harm reduction information on BDSM, acknowledging risks without stigmatising kink practices or promoting abstinence.²³

Porn education without sex work stigma: Prominent porn literacy materials regularly promote misinformation and stigma against porn performers, making unevidenced claims about the bodies and health of sex workers. For example, one well-publicised resource currently promoted in schools and endorsed by Victoria Police's Sexual and Family Violence division includes claims that:

- 'Porn bodies are not normal.'
- 'Porn sex is not safe sex.'
- 'Porn performers regularly catch sexually transmissible infections, find it hard to maintain relationships...and can end up with serious and lasting damage to their bodies.'²⁴

These statements are inaccurate, offensive and deeply stigmatising:

- Porn is incredibly diverse, and represents diverse bodies. We don't say the bodies of movie stars or football players are 'not normal' - so why would we say this about porn performers?
- Porn productions are workplaces, usually with very high safety standards largely driven by worker demands. Productions implement a range of safer sex strategies, including condoms, transparent STI/BBV testing or biomedical prevention options.^{25,26}
- Sex workers in Australia consistently maintain low rates of STIs. Stigmatising populations that *do* have higher rates of STIs is not acceptable, and nor is fearmongering about damage to bodies. This language is disturbingly similar to anti-gay rhetoric that warns about the imagined long-term harms of gay sex.^{27,28}

Porn performers as consent and sexual educators: Stigmatising approaches to pornography also function to exclude sex workers from contributing to the design and delivery of porn literacy education and relationship and sexuality education. Porn performers and other sex workers have long developed practices, frameworks and models for negotiating iterative sexual communication and consent.²⁹ Across the globe, sex workers have been at the forefront of delivering grounded relationship and sexuality education to both adults and young people, in traditional learning environments and erotic and artistic forums.^{30,31} Relationship and sexuality education and porn education co-designed and co-delivered by sex workers can encompass 'behind the scenes' examinations of pornography. This demystification assists in situating porn as a media product, produced as labour and involving consent and labour rights negotiations, allowing young people and adults to develop holistic 'porn literacy' that reduces sex work stigma.

Hidden agendas: risks of ideologically driven policy

Evidence-based policymaking requires transparency about stakeholders' broader ideological positions. Many prominent anti-pornography or porn-critical organisations and spokespeople operate with agendas that extend far beyond pornography



concerns, harbouring deliberately concealed positions on abortion access, sex work, gender-affirming care and safety for LGBTQI+ people in order to gain access to otherwise progressive spaces.³²

In the United States, members of an anti-porn lobby group with links to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism) have been active in campaigns against marriage equality.³³ In the United Kingdom, anti-pornography activist Jule Bindel has a 'long record of public transphobia.'^{34,35} International organisations such as Exodus Cry and the National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE), previously known as Morality in Media, have documented links with both evangelical Christian³⁶ and far-right groups.³⁷

In Australia, one 'pre-eminent' pornography researcher has expressed in blog posts that sex work 'is incompatible with gender equality.'³⁸ Registered charity Collective Shout describes itself as 'non-partisan', but stridently campaigned against the decriminalisation of sex work in Victoria, claims that individuals cannot validly consent to participating in sexual breath play (also referred to as sexual choking), campaigned to end a partnership between the National Breast Cancer Foundation and a popular lingerie chain on the grounds that it 'objectified women and sexualise[d] breast cancer detection',³⁹ and led a campaign that resulted in video games with sexual content and LGBTQIA+ game creators being deplatformed.^{19,40} Collective Shout's founder also has documented links to anti-abortion activism and religious affiliations that she refuses to discuss publicly.⁴¹⁻⁴³

Without critical engagement, politicians, policy-makers, educators and service-providers risk advancing harmful ideological agendas in educational resources, policy responses and service delivery. This undermines evidence-based approaches to complex social issues and compromises the rights of women, LGBTQI+ people of all ages and sex workers to be safe in the community and fully participate in public life.

Notes

- A** University of Sydney, Chief Investigator for Australian Research Council Discovery grant 'Improving digital sexual literacy in Australia.'
- B** Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, Queensland University of Technology.
- C** Edith Cowan University, Researcher for Australian Research Discovery Project 'Adolescents' perceptions of harm from accessing online sexual content.'

References

- 1 Byron P, McKee A, Watson A, Litsou K, Ingham R. Reading for realness: porn literacies, digital media, and young people. *Sex Cult.* 2021;25(3):786–805, 794. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09794-6>.
- 2 Isador G. Porn stars tell us why representation gets everyone off. *Vice*. 19 Apr 2018. Accessed 10 Sep 2025. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/porn-stars-tell-us-why-representation-gets-everyone-off/>.
- 3 Shor E, Seida K. 'Harder and harder'? Is mainstream pornography becoming increasingly violent and do viewers prefer violent content? *J Sex Res.* 2019;56(1):16–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2018.1451476>.
- 4 Litsou K, Byron P, McKee A, Ingham R. Learning from pornography: results of a mixed methods systematic review. *Sex Educ.* 2020;21(2): 236–252. <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/rest/bitstreams/a0cdc6b2-0667-47f1-ab08-0578036a8cc0/retrieve>.
- 5 Office of Film and Literature Classification Te Tari Whakarōpū Tukuata, Tuhiuhinga. *Breaking down porn: a classification office analysis of commonly viewed pornography in NZ*. Wellington, NZ: Office of Film and Literature Classification; 2019. Accessed 19 Aug 2025. <https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/resources/research/breaking-down-porn/>.
- 6 Kohut T, Baer JL, Watts B. Is pornography really about 'making hate to women'? Pornography users hold more gender egalitarian attitudes than nonusers in a representative American sample. *J Sex Res.* 2016;53(1):1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2015.1023427>.



- 7** McKee A, Litsou K, Byron P, Ingham R. The relationship between consumption of pornography and consensual sexual practice: results of a mixed method systematic review. *Can J Hum Sex.* 2021;30(1):e20210010. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.2021-0010>.
- 8** Ferguson CJ, Hartley RD. Pornography and sexual aggression: can meta-analysis find a link? *Trauma Violence Abuse.* 2022;23(1):278–287. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838020942754>.
- 9** McKee A, Litsou K, Byron P, Ingham R. *What Do We Know About the Effects of Pornography After Fifty Years of Academic Research?* 1st ed. Routledge; 2022. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003232032>.
- 10** Mestre-Bach G, Villena-Moya A, Chiclana-Actis C. Pornography use and violence: a systematic review of the last 20 years. *Trauma Violence Abuse.* 2023;25(2):1088–1112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231173619>.
- 11** Pony M. Porn, queerness and moral panic: the new old sex wars. *Archer Magazine.* 25 Mar 2025. Accessed 19 Aug 2025. <https://archermagazine.com.au/2025/03/porn-moral-panic-new-old-sex-wars/>.
- 12** Dawson K, Nic Gabhainn S, MacNeela P. Toward a model of porn literacy: core concepts, rationales, and approaches. *J Sex Res.* 2020;57(1):1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2018.1556238>.
- 13** Scarlet Alliance. *Briefing Paper: Sex workers and family, domestic and sexual violence.* 30 Jun 2025. Accessed 23 Sep 2025. <https://scarletalliance.org.au/library/briefing-paper-sex-workers-and-family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/>.
- 14** McKee A. Methodological issues in defining aggression for content analyses of sexually explicit material. *Arch Sex Behav.* 2015;44:81–87. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-013-0253-3>.
- 15** McKee A. Does pornography harm young people? *Aust. J Commun.* 2010;37(1):17–36. <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/41858/>.
- 16** Sullivan R, Webber V. Porn not to blame for public health issues. *The Conversation.* 1 Nov 2017. Accessed 24 Sep 2025. <https://doi.org/10.64628/AAM.6rquq4s4n>.
- 17** Rothman EF. *Pornography and Public Health.* Oxford Academic; 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190075477.001.0001>.
- 18** Ley D, Prause N, Finn P. The emperor has no clothes: a review of the ‘pornography addiction’ model. *Curr Sex Health Rep.* 2014;6(2):94–105. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11930-014-0016-8>.
- 19** Dugas P. Thousands of games have been censored from major platforms, with LGBTQIA+ creators caught in the crossfire. *The Conversation.* 5 Aug 2025. Accessed 24 Sep 2025. <https://doi.org/10.64628/aa.kcfcyt5rg>.
- 20** Joseph C. Instagram’s murky ‘shadow bans’ just serve to censor marginalised communities. *The Guardian.* 8 Nov 2019. Accessed 19 Aug 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/08/instagram-shadow-bans-marginalised-communities-queer-plus-sized-bodies-sexually-suggestive>.
- 21** See HW, Woodley G. ‘Firsthand’ versus ‘secondhand’ perspectives of harm: emphasising teens’ firsthand perspectives of online sexual content. *M/C Journal.* 2024;27(4). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.3077>.
- 22** Albury K. Porn and sex education, porn as sex education. *Porn Stud.* Jan 2014;1(1–2):172–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2013.863654>.
- 23** Woodley G, Jaunzems K. Minimising the risk: teen perspectives on sexual choking in pornography. *M/C Journal.* 2024; 27(4). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.3088>.
- 24** It’s Time We Talked. *What’s the Issue.* 2021. Accessed 10 Sep 2025. <https://itstimewetalked.com/young-people/whats-the-issue/>.
- 25** McFarling UL. Why the porn industry has a lot to teach us about safety in the Covid-19 era. *Stat News.* 8 May 2020. Accessed 10 Sep 2025. <https://www.statnews.com/2020/05/08/porn-industry-model-for-reopening-amid-covid19/>.
- 26** Eros. *Production Standards for Adult Media.* Sep 2019. Accessed 10 Sep 2025. <https://www.eros.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Eros-Adult-Standards-combined-1.pdf>.
- 27** Diggs JR. *The health risks of gay sex.* Corporate Resource Council; 2002. Accessed 11 Sep 2025. https://www.massresistance.org/docs/issues/laramie_project/downloads/healthrisksSSA.pdf.



- 28** Sciambra J. Born to bottom; or *God didn't make me gay*. 23 Jun 2017. Accessed 11 Sep 2025. <https://josephsciambra.com/born-to-bottom-or-god-didnt-make-me-gay/>.
- 29** Stoya. If you don't want to, say no: a porn star's guide to sexual consent. *The New Statesman*. 22 Jan 2014. Accessed 12 Sep 2025. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/01/if-you-dont-want-say-no-porn-stars-guide-sexual-consent>.
- 30** Stardust Z. Lessons in sex: Porn performers and sex education. *Archer Magazine*. 26 Jun 2018. Accessed 12 Sep 2025. <https://archermagazine.com.au/2018/06/lessons-sex-porn-performers-sex-education/>.
- 31** *Doing It Podcast*. Explicit sex ed and diversity in porn with Lina Bembe and Anarella Martinez. 29 Apr 2020. Accessed 12 Sep 2025. <https://doingitpodcast.co.uk/transcripts/sex-school-hub-transcript>.
- 32** Boulton C. Antiporn Agendas: Feminism, Internet Filtering, and Religious Strategies. In: Comella L, Tarrant S, eds. *New Views on Pornography: Sexuality, Politics, and the Law*. Praeger; 2015. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798400691317>.
- 33** Allen S. 'Porn kills love': Mormons' anti-smut crusade. *The Daily Beast*. 20 Oct 2015. Accessed 12 Sep 2025. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/porn-kills-love-mormons-anti-smut-crusade/>.
- 34** Bindel J. Without porn, the world would be a better place. *The Guardian*. 25 Oct 2014. Accessed 12 Sep 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/24/pornography-world-anti-porn-feminist-censorship-misogyny/>.
- 35** Minou CL. Julie Bindel's dangerous transphobia. *The Guardian*. 1 Feb 2010. Accessed 12 Sep 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/feb/01/julie-bindel-transphobia>.
- 36** DeVille C. An anti-porn leader is accused and the media's silence is deafening. *Rolling Stone*. 11 Nov 2023. Accessed 20 Aug 2025. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-commentary/anti-porn-leader-mike-bickle-sexual-misconduct-exodus-cry-media-silence-1234875782/>.
- 37** Cole S. The crusade against Pornhub is going to get someone killed. *Vice*. 13 Apr 2021. Accessed 20 Aug 2025. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/anti-porn-extremism-pornhub-traffickinghub-exodus-cry-ncose/>.
- 38** Flood M. Men: paying for sex is incompatible with gender equality. *XYonline*. 24 Feb 2017. Accessed 24 Sep 2025. <https://xyonline.net/content/men-paying-sex-incompatible-gender-equality>.
- 39** Kelly C. Honey Birdette defends breast cancer advertising campaign. *Ragtrader*. 18 Dec 2024. Accessed 12 Sep 2025. <https://www.ragtrader.com.au/news/honey-birdette-defends-breast-cancer-advertising-campaign>.
- 40** Ketterling J, Gordon K, Therrien C, Guajardo A. Censoring video games with sexual content suppresses the diversity of human desire. *The Conversation*. 14 Aug 2025. Accessed 24 Sep 2025. <https://doi.org/10.64628/aam.p7yc6u3m7>.
- 41** Summers A. There is no such thing as a pro-life feminist. *The Age*. 21 Jan 2012. Accessed 20 Aug 2025. <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/federal/there-is-no-such-thing-as-a-pro-life-feminist-20120121-1qba0.html>.
- 42** Wilson J. When it is ethical to disclose your religion. *ABC*. 15 Feb 2012. Accessed 20 Aug 2025. <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/when-it-is-ethical-to-disclose-your-religion/10100798>.
- 43** Morton R. Is this Australia's most controversial feminist? *Mamamia*. 18 Jan 2012. Accessed 20 Aug 2025. <https://www.mamamia.com.au/melinda-tankard-reist-feminism-and-being-pro-life-can-you-have-all/>.

