

KOOYOORA

Creating safe organisations

Fact sheet: Pornography:
Understanding Its Influence on
Individuals, Relationships, and
Society



Introduction

Pornography is a pervasive part of modern media, with significant implications for individuals, relationships, and society. This educational material is designed to help you understand what pornography is, its potential impacts, and how to critically engage with its messages. By fostering awareness and critical thinking, we can promote healthier relationships, gender equality, and respectful communities.

What is Pornography?

Pornography refers to sexually explicit media primarily intended to sexually arouse its audience. It includes videos, images, literature, and animations that depict sexual acts or nudity. Like other forms of media, pornography conveys messages about sex, relationships, gender roles, and masculinity and femininity. However, it often reflects and reinforces harmful stereotypes and social norms.

Category	Examples of Pornography	Examples of What is NOT Pornography
Movies/TV Shows	Explicit adult films or videos created with the primary intent to sexually arouse viewers.	Mainstream movies or TV shows with non-explicit romantic or sexual scenes that serve a narrative purpose.
Photography	Explicit images of nudity or sexual acts intended to arouse.	Artistic or educational nude photography (e.g., fine art, anatomy textbooks).
Literature	Erotic novels or stories written to sexually stimulate readers.	Romance novels or literature with non-explicit depictions of intimacy.
Online Content	Adult websites featuring explicit sexual content.	Health or educational websites discussing sexual health or relationships.
Advertisements	Explicit ads using nudity or sexual acts to arouse and sell products.	Ads that use suggestive themes but remain non-explicit (e.g., perfume commercials).
Art	Explicitly sexualised art created to arouse.	Classical or modern art depicting nudity or intimacy for cultural, historical, or artistic purposes.

Category	Examples of Pornography	Examples of What is NOT Pornography
Educational Material	Explicit content marketed as "educational" but designed to arouse.	Genuine sex education resources or materials aimed at teaching anatomy, consent, or relationships.
Comics/Animation	Explicit adult comics or animated content designed to arouse.	Non-explicit comics or animations with romantic or suggestive themes.

Key Australian Statistics on Pornography

1. High Exposure Rates

Research by *Our Watch* reveals that young Australians are exposed to pornography at high rates, both intentionally and accidentally.¹ This exposure is facilitated by the widespread availability of internet-connected devices, such as smartphones, tablets, and computers, making access to pornography easier than ever before.

- **Intentional Exposure:** Many Australians actively seek out pornography, often out of curiosity, peer influence, or as a means of exploring their sexuality.
- **Accidental Exposure:** Accidental exposure is also common, particularly among younger Australians, who may encounter pornography through pop-up ads, social media, or shared content from peers.

Implications:

- High exposure rates mean that pornography is shaping the sexual attitudes and behaviours of Australians, often without critical reflection or guidance.
- The normalisation of pornography in media and culture can desensitise individuals to its potential harms, such as the reinforcement of harmful gender stereotypes and unrealistic expectations about sex and relationships.

2. Age of First Exposure

Many Australians report being exposed to pornography during adolescence, with young men more likely to encounter it earlier than young women.¹ Research suggests that the average age of first exposure to pornography is around 13 years old, though some children are exposed even earlier.

- **Gender Differences:** Young men are more likely to seek out pornography intentionally, while young women are more likely to encounter it accidentally.
- **Developmental Stage:** Adolescence is a critical time for identity and relationship development, making early exposure to pornography particularly influential.

Implications:

- Early exposure to pornography can shape young people's understanding of sex, relationships, and gender roles, often in ways that conflict with healthy and respectful relationship norms.
- Without proper guidance, young people may internalise the harmful messages in pornography, such as the objectification of women and the normalisation of aggression

3. Use as Sex Education

Despite recognising its limitations, 60% of young Australian men and 41% of young Australian women use pornography as a source of sex education.¹ This statistic highlights a significant gap in formal relationships and sexuality education, leaving many Australians to turn to pornography for information about sex.

- **Why Pornography is Used:**
 - Lack of comprehensive sex education in schools or at home.
 - Curiosity about sex and relationships.
 - Accessibility and anonymity of online pornography.
- **Limitations of Pornography as Sex Education:**
 - Pornography often portrays unrealistic and harmful depictions of sex, such as a lack of consent, communication, or emotional connection.
 - It rarely addresses important topics like safe sex, mutual respect, or the emotional aspects of relationships.

Implications:

- The reliance on pornography for sex education underscores the need for comprehensive, evidence-based relationships and sexuality education in schools and communities.
- Educators, parents, and faith leaders have a critical role to play in providing accurate and respectful information about sex and relationships.

4. Normalisation of Aggression

Studies show that pornography often depicts aggression, with 88% of scenes in popular pornography containing physical aggression, almost always directed at women.² This aggression includes acts such as slapping, choking, and gagging, as well as verbal aggression like name-calling and derogatory language.

- **Portrayal of Aggression:**
 - Women are often depicted as enjoying or consenting to aggression, which can blur the lines between consensual and non-consensual acts.
 - Aggression is frequently eroticised, sending the message that violence is a normal or desirable part of sexual relationships.
- **Impact on Viewers:**
 - Regular exposure to aggressive pornography can desensitise viewers to violence and reinforce harmful attitudes, such as the belief that women enjoy being dominated or degraded.
 - Research has found links between pornography consumption and increased acceptance of violence against women, as well as higher levels of sexual aggression among frequent users.³

Implications:

- The normalisation of aggression in pornography contributes to broader societal issues, such as gender inequality and violence against women.
- Addressing these harmful messages requires a multi-faceted approach, including media literacy education, advocacy for gender equality, and support for respectful relationships.

Impacts of Pornography

1. On Individuals

- **Mental and Emotional Health:** Frequent consumption of pornography can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, and disconnection, particularly for those whose values conflict with its content.
- **Unrealistic Expectations:** Pornography often portrays unrealistic depictions of bodies, sexual performance, and relationships, which can lead to dissatisfaction and distorted self-image.
- **Addiction and Dependency:** Excessive use of pornography can lead to compulsive behaviours, impacting daily life and relationships.

2. On Relationships

- **Distorted Perceptions of Intimacy:** Pornography can create unrealistic expectations about sex and intimacy, leading to dissatisfaction in real-life relationships.
- **Erosion of Trust:** Secretive consumption of pornography can damage trust and communication between partners.
- **Gender Dynamics:** Pornography often reinforces harmful gender stereotypes, such as male dominance and female subservience, which can negatively impact relationship dynamics.

3. On Society

- **Gender Inequality:** Pornography frequently depicts women as objects for male gratification, reinforcing attitudes that devalue women and perpetuate gender inequality.
- **Normalisation of Violence:** The frequent depiction of aggression in pornography normalises violence, particularly against women, and can influence societal attitudes towards gender-based violence.
- **Impact on Young People:** Adolescents exposed to pornography during critical developmental stages may internalise harmful messages about gender roles, consent, and relationships.

4. On People Engaged with Religious Organisations

- **Conflict with Spiritual Values:** For individuals involved in religious organisations, pornography consumption often conflicts with spiritual teachings and values, such as purity, self-control, and honouring the sanctity of relationships. This conflict can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, and spiritual disconnection.
- **Barrier to Spiritual Growth:** Struggles with pornography can create a sense of unworthiness or failure, making individuals feel distant from their faith community and God. This can hinder spiritual growth and participation in religious practices.

- **Strain on Community Relationships:** Within religious organisations, the stigma surrounding pornography can make it difficult for individuals to seek help or discuss their struggles openly. This can lead to isolation and a lack of support from the community.
- **Challenges for Religious Leaders:** Leaders within religious organisations may face unique challenges in addressing pornography, as they are often seen as role models. Struggles with pornography can impact their credibility, confidence, and ability to guide others spiritually.

Examples of Impact:

- A church member may feel unworthy to participate in ministry roles or leadership positions due to their struggles with pornography.
- A religious leader may experience internal conflict and fear of judgement, preventing them from seeking help or addressing the issue within their community.
- Faith communities may struggle to create safe, non-judgemental spaces for open discussions about pornography, leaving individuals feeling unsupported.

Implications:

- Religious organisations have a critical role to play in addressing pornography by fostering open, compassionate, and non-judgemental conversations.
- Providing spiritual guidance, counselling, and resources can help individuals reconcile their struggles with their faith and find a path toward healing and growth.
- Leaders can model vulnerability and accountability by addressing the issue openly, creating a culture of support and understanding within the community.

Critical Messages in Pornography

Pornography often conveys harmful messages that can shape attitudes and behaviours. These include:

- **Rigid Gender Roles:** Men are portrayed as dominant and aggressive, while women are depicted as submissive and eager to comply.
- **Objectification of Women:** Women are often reduced to their body parts and depicted as objects for male pleasure.
- **Normalisation of Aggression:** Physical and verbal aggression is frequently depicted as normal or even desirable in sexual relationships.

How to Critically Engage with Pornography

1. **Understand Its Purpose:** Recognise that pornography is created for entertainment and arousal, not education or realistic depictions of relationships.
2. **Question Its Messages:** Reflect on how pornography portrays gender roles, consent, and intimacy. Ask yourself: "Is this realistic? Is this respectful?"
3. **Seek Alternative Resources:** Use reliable, evidence-based resources for sex education and relationship advice. For example:
 - *Our Watch:* Resources on respectful relationships and gender equality.
 - *Australian Government's Respect Matters Program:* Tools for promoting respectful relationships in schools and communities.
 - *1800RESPECT:* Support for those affected by violence or seeking advice on healthy relationships.

Practical Tips for Addressing Pornography

For Individuals

- Reflect on your values and how they align with the messages in pornography.
- Seek support if you feel pornography is negatively impacting your mental health, relationships, or spiritual wellbeing.

For Couples

- Openly discuss the role of pornography in your relationship, including any concerns or boundaries.
- Focus on building trust, communication, and mutual respect.

For Communities

- Promote media literacy to help individuals critically analyse the messages in pornography.
- Advocate for gender equality and respectful relationships through education and outreach programs.

For Religious Organisations

- Incorporate Teachings on Healthy Relationships by using sermons, Bible studies, or faith-based workshops to teach about God's design for relationships, intimacy, and respect. Highlight the contrast between these values and the messages in pornography.

- **Provide Spiritual Support and Resources:** Offer resources such as prayer guides, scripture readings, or faith-based counselling to help individuals align their actions with their spiritual values and find healing.
- **Equip Leaders to Address the Issue:** Train religious leaders to understand the impacts of pornography and how to address it sensitively and effectively within their communities. This includes recognising signs of struggle, offering support, and guiding individuals toward appropriate resources.
- **Engage Families and Parents:** Provide resources and workshops for parents to help them guide their children in understanding the messages in pornography and aligning their choices with their faith.

New age verification/assurance laws

Australia has recently implemented new age verification and assurance laws aimed at protecting children from accessing inappropriate online content, including pornography. Here are the key points:

1. **Age Verification Requirements:**

- Websites and platforms hosting adult content, such as pornography, must verify users' ages to ensure they are 18 or older.
- This applies to various services, including pornography websites, R18+ gaming platforms, and adult messaging services.
- Verification methods must comply with Australia's privacy laws, and platforms are responsible for managing these systems.

2. **Scope of the Laws:**

- The regulations extend to search engines, social media platforms, app stores, and even AI systems capable of generating explicit content.
- For example, search engines must blur explicit content by default for users who are not logged in.

3. **Penalties for Non-Compliance:**

- Companies failing to comply with these laws face significant penalties, with fines reaching up to \$49.5 million AUD.

4. **Privacy Concerns:**

- Experts have raised concerns about the potential risks to user privacy, particularly regarding the storage and handling of age verification data.
- There is a call for better data protection measures to ensure that sensitive information is not misused or leaked.

5. **Implementation Timeline:**

- The new codes came into effect on March 9, 2026, following earlier measures introduced in 2025, such as a ban on under-16s creating accounts on age-restricted social media platforms.

6. **Broader Goals:**

- The laws aim to replicate offline protections in the online world, ensuring children are shielded from harmful content.

- The eSafety Commissioner emphasised the importance of shifting responsibility for safety onto platforms profiting from user engagement.

These measures represent a significant shift in how Australians interact with online content, balancing child safety with privacy concerns¹

Resources for Further Support

- **Our Watch:** www.ourwatch.org.au
Provides research and resources on preventing violence against women and promoting gender equality.
- **1800RESPECT:** www.1800respect.org.au
A national support service for those affected by sexual, domestic, or family violence.
- **Relationships Australia:** www.relationships.org.au
Offers counselling and support for individuals and couples.
- **Australian Government's Respect Matters Program:** www.education.gov.au/respect-matters
Resources for promoting respectful relationships in schools and communities.

Conclusion

Pornography is a powerful medium that reflects and shapes societal norms about sex, relationships, and gender roles. By understanding its impact and critically engaging with its messages, Australians can make informed choices that align with their values and promote healthier, more respectful relationships. Whether as individuals, couples, or communities, we all have a role to play in fostering a culture of respect, equality, and dignity.

References

1. Our Watch. (2020). *Background paper: Pornography, young people and preventing violence against women*.
2. Bridges, A., Wosnitzer, R., Scharrer, E., Sun, C., & Liberman, R. (2010). *Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update*. *Violence Against Women*, 16(10), 1065-1085.
3. Australian Government. (2023). *Respect Matters Program*.

Additional Resources

Professional Support and Counselling in Australia

1. Relationships Australia
 - Website: www.relationships.org.au
 - Description: Provides counselling and support services for individuals, couples, and families dealing with relationship challenges, including the impact of pornography.
 - Features: In-person and online counselling, workshops, and resources.
2. 1800RESPECT
 - Website: www.1800respect.org.au
 - Description: A national support service for those affected by sexual, domestic, or family violence. Offers resources and counselling for individuals impacted by pornography-related issues.
 - Features: 24/7 phone and online counselling, educational materials, and referral services.
3. Head to Health (Australian Government)
 - Website: www.headtohealth.gov.au
 - Description: A mental health resource hub that connects Australians to support services, including counselling for addiction and relationship issues.
 - Features: Online resources, helplines, and access to local mental health services.
4. Sexual Health Victoria
 - Website: www.shvic.org.au
 - Description: Provides education and counselling on sexual health, relationships, and pornography's impact.
 - Features: Workshops, online resources, and professional counselling.
5. The Resilient Families Program (Our Watch)
 - Website: www.ourwatch.org.au
 - Description: Focuses on preventing violence against women and promoting respectful relationships. Offers resources for addressing gender inequality and harmful media messages.
 - Features: Educational programs for schools, families, and communities.

Educational Tools and Media Literacy in Australia

1. eSafety Commissioner (Australia)
 - Website: www.esafety.gov.au
 - Description: Provides resources for parents, educators, and communities to promote online safety and address exposure to harmful content, including pornography.
 - Features: Guides for parents, online safety education, and tools for reporting harmful content.
2. Respect Matters Program (Australian Government)
 - Website: www.education.gov.au/respect-matters

- Description: Offers resources for schools and communities to promote respectful relationships and address issues like pornography and gender inequality.
 - Features: Lesson plans, teacher training, and community engagement tools.
3. NAPCAN (National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect)
- Website: www.napcan.org.au
 - Description: Provides resources for parents and educators to address pornography exposure among children and promote healthy development.
 - Features: Workshops, online resources, and community programs.
4. Parentline Australia
- Website: www.parentline.com.au
 - Description: A confidential counselling and support service for parents and carers, offering advice on how to address pornography exposure with children.
 - Features: Phone counselling, online resources, and parenting guides.
5. Kids Helpline
- Website: www.kidshelpline.com.au
 - Description: A free, confidential counselling service for young people aged 5–25, offering support for issues like pornography exposure and its impact.
 - Features: 24/7 phone and online counselling, as well as resources for parents and educators.