UKCCIS
UK COUNCIL FOR **CHILD INTERNET SAFETY**

Middlesex University London

The Impact of Online Pornography on Children and Young People

Aims

This research was commissioned by the NSPCC and Children's Commissioner (OCC) for England to explore the feelings and experiences of children and young people aged 11-16 relating to online pornography[1].

Key Findings

Who has seen online pornography?
- Just under half of children surveyed reported seeing online pornography:
  - At 11, the majority of children had not seen online pornography (28% of 11-12 year olds).
  - By 15, children were more likely than not to have seen online pornography (65% of 15-16 year olds). Almost all of this group (94%) had seen it by age 14.
- Boys actively searched for pornography (59%) more than girls (25%) of those who answered the question.
- Whether intentionally or not, 59% of males continued to see online pornography after first viewing in comparison to 40% females.
- Children were as likely to see pornography for the first time via 'pop ups', as to search for it deliberately or be shown it by other people.

What do young people say that they feel?
- On first viewing pornography, young people reported a mixture of emotions, including curiosity, shock and confusion:
  - The top 3 options selected were: curious (41%), shock (27%) and confused (24%).
  - Shock and confusion subsided on repeated viewing, whether or not pornography was deliberately sought out.
- Younger children were less likely to engage with online pornography critically than older children, and were more likely to report feeling upset by what they had seen.
- Just over half of boys (53%) who had seen pornography thought it was 'realistic' compared to 39% of girls.

Some children want to act out the pornography they have seen:
- A higher proportion of the older cohort reported that online pornography had given them ideas of wanting to act out sexual practices (21% of 11-12 year olds; 39% of 13-14 year olds; 42% of 15-16 year olds).
- Boys were more likely to want to copy activity they had seen (44% compared to 29% of girls).

Sexting:
- Young people's definition of 'sexting' is textual, not visual.
- The vast majority of young people had not taken naked selfies.
- 36% of children who had taken nude or semi-naked self-photographs (49/135) reported that they had been asked to show these images to someone online.
- Although numbers are low, there was also a relevant significant gender difference. Girls reported sharing images after being asked to (22/37), whereas boys reported sharing images without being asked (67/96).
- There was limited knowledge of how to remove online images of themselves.

---

[1] In this study, pornography was defined as images and films of people having sex or behaving sexually online. This includes semi-naked and naked images and films of people that they may have viewed or downloaded from the internet, or that someone else shared with them directly, or showed to them on their phone or computer.

How do young people perceive pornography?
- o 50% of the sample agreed or strongly agreed that online pornography "led me to believe that sexual activities should be enjoyable for everyone involved" (54% of boys answering the question and 45% of girls).
- o 44% agreed or strongly agreed that online pornography "led me to believe that sexual activities should be safe for everyone involved" (54% of boys answering the question and 30% of girls).
- o 49% agreed or strongly agreed that online pornography "led me to believe that sexual activities should be agreed by everyone involved" (55% of boys answering the question and 35% of girls).
- o Most young people thought pornography was a poor model for consent or safe sex and wanted better sex education covering the impact of pornography.

Methodology

The methodology the research team designed was divided into 3 key stages:

1. An online discussion forum and four online focus groups segregated by age with 34 children and young people (aged 11-16) from across the United Kingdom (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) to inform the design of the survey and identify emerging issues.
2. An online survey with 1001 children and young people (aged 11-16) across the United Kingdom.
3. Six online focus groups segregated by age and gender with 40 children and young people (aged 11-16) from across the United Kingdom to provide more in-depth information about elements of the online survey findings.

The sample was representative of the four nations of the UK, and included boys and girls.

Policy Context

This research highlights an important issue which affects large numbers of children growing up in the digital age. There is a vast quantity of adult content, some of it extreme[2] or violent in nature, which is easily accessible to children. They are as likely to find pornography accidentally through pop ups, social networking sites etc. as actively searching for it or to be shown it by others. It is important not just to limit access, but also to build resilience in children to its potentially harmful effects when they do see it. This can limit the potential damage of exposure on children's relationships, behaviour and attitudes to sex. Furthermore, young people who participated in the research highlighted variability in formal education provision (PSHE/SRE) and quality in relation to online pornography. Addressing this variability in safe, multi-faceted ways may enhance young people's abilities to challenge and engage with pornography as critical consumers.

RH#114 has been produced by Dr Elena Martellozzo for the UKCCIS Evidence Group

---

[2] 'Extreme' being illegal in the UK