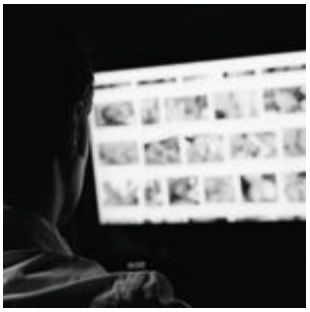
THE RELATIONSHIP RECESSION

Pornography

November 2026






CSJ The Centre for Social Justice

This report contains some explicit content, including descriptions of sexual acts and sexual violence.

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About the CSJ

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions. The CSJ's vision is to give people in the UK who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five "pathways to poverty", first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report Breakthrough Britain. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the landscape of our political discourse by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in Government thinking and policy. For instance, in March 2013, the CSJ report It Happens Here shone a light on the horrific reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. As a direct result of this report, the Government passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015, one of the first pieces of legislation in the world to address slavery and trafficking in the 21st century.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners, and policymakers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises, and other grassroots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2026 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

Foreword

When pornography has become as ubiquitous in our world as it is today, we have to ask: are we comfortable with the impact it is having on our society?

Should a young boy's perception of women and how to behave with them sexually be shaped through porn, before he's reached puberty? Should teenage girls be questioning whether to allow their boyfriend strangle them during sex after seeing similar depictions online?

Sites like OnlyFans generate $7 billion a year, popularising to young girls that adult content creation is an easy and frictionless way to earn a living. It is not surprising, then, that more than two and a half million young people have considered using OnlyFans themselves, despite these same sites promoting the objectification and monetisation of, and sense of entitlement to, women's bodies.

The impact of pornography in today's digital world is widespread, yet algorithmically precise. Over decades the industry of pornography and its hypersexualised subsidiaries have proliferated within our culture, hidden in plain sight on our social media feeds. They have set dangerous trends in the sex lives of young people, depleted the mental health of those struggling with addiction and contributed to once unfathomable crimes both online and in the real world.

Since I first spoke publicly about how porn shaped and damaged my life – from childhood to adolescence and adulthood – I have heard countless brave testimonies from people of all ages, backgrounds and cultures. All have had different points and periods of exposure; their lives, relationships and families destroyed to varying degrees by a medium that hijacked who they were. Those people have had no option but to pick up the pieces of what's left of their own wrecked lives – alone, isolated and shameful. In reality, a multi-billion-dollar industry has been allowed to rip through our cultural fabric, with no regard for the individuals, values and relationships it has steamrolled.

Porn isn't going anywhere. On the contrary, its popularity is increasing – sharply. Through Artificial Intelligence, its potential harm is multiplied. That is why I welcome this report from the Centre for Social Justice. The questions it raises regarding pornography's effect on relationships matter deeply to me and – I would hope – everyone it reaches.

As a father, I think about children and young people growing up with access to a world that I was first exposed to before smartphones existed. We have a responsibility to help them understand what they could encounter, and the impact it can have on their lives. I hope this moment triggers those conversations, not just between parents and children, but with partners, friends, and those who can offer support. This report provides a foundation of evidence to show pornography's influence over young people today. Only by acknowledging this and fully appreciating the damage porn can do, can we better build appropriate protections and – crucially – prevention.

I know how difficult it can be to start these conversations. I also know that speaking openly – without judgement – can change the direction of a life. You don't have to have been addicted to pornography for thirty years to want better for our children, the safety of women and girls, the minds of men and boys, and society as a whole. It's about time we put that collective will into real, robust action.



Ore Oduba
Television Presenter

The Relationship Recession – The Problem

The UK is currently experiencing a persistent and meaningful decline in the relationships between young men and women.[1] 50 years ago, most men were married by their 25th birthday. Today, as a young man approaches 25, he is 26 times more likely to live with his mum than his wife. In England and Wales, there are now around 3.7 million fewer married people under 30 than in 1976, despite the greater number of young people. The number has fallen from 4.5 million to approximately 790,000.

The CSJ's Lost Boys work revealed a growing chasm between the sexes, and while the chasm is deepest in our poorest communities it is a trend being felt right across the country, and indeed the world. The question is, why now, and why does this matter? What material conditions have changed that have influenced these difficult-to-quantify shifts and what is their impact on individuals and society? These questions represent the core of our new work examining the 'relationships recession'.

The Centre for Social Justice exists to put social justice at the heart of British politics. Ultimately, the question of the relationship recession cuts to the core of much of our work. Our research on tackling loneliness, family breakdown, crime, addiction, work, education, fertility, and more, all contain a golden thread – the importance of relationships. Indeed, the greatest predictor of a long, happy, healthy life is the quality of our relationships. If young people are struggling to both make and maintain relationships with the opposite sex, then this is a major cause for concern.

The following numbers help explain how the problem is playing out as we embark on a major inquiry into Britain's relationship recession.

1. **Homes:** More young people (aged 20 to 34) are staying at their parents' homes, and for longer. In 2008, 20 per cent lived with their parents. By 2015 it had risen to 25 per cent, and in 2025 it sat at nearly 30 per cent (28.7 per cent). These numbers also hide a clear gender imbalance: for those between the ages of 20–34 years, fewer than one quarter of young women were still living at home (22.3 per cent), compared to over one-third of young men (34.9 per cent).[2] In 2018–20, nearly half of 25- to 34-year-olds in the bottom income quintile lived with their parents, compared with around 2 per cent of those in the top quintile.
2. **Marriages:** Marriage has declined remarkably in recent decades. The rate of men and women who are married by the age of 30 is down 90 per cent over the last 50 years. For those in their early twenties it is down over 97 per cent.
3. **Sex rates:** Fewer people are having sex, and those that are having sex are having it less frequently. In October 2019, 68 per cent of 16–24-year-olds described themselves as sexually active. The most recent data puts this number at 44 per cent.

1 All references for the problem statement can be found in the original problem statement at The Centre for Social Justice, The Relationship Recession, centreforsocial-justice.org.uk/library/what-is-the-state-of-relationships-in-the-uk

2 Ibid.

4. **Fertility Rates:** The Total Fertility Rate in England and Wales is at a record low of 1.39 children per woman. The average age to become a mother has increased from 23 in the 1970s to 31 in 2025.
5. **Spaces to meet:** The environment for meeting others in public is thinning. The number of pubs has fallen by 29 per cent since 1990; over one quarter of late-night venues have disappeared since the pandemic; one in four young people do not drink at all, a figure which was one in seven in 2017; the percentage of young people (aged 16–29) who work from home tripled from 2019 to 2022 (from 6.3 per cent to 21.3 per cent) – with half of them saying that this work makes it harder to build relationships with colleagues; there are 1000 fewer youth clubs today than there were 15 years ago.
6. **Meeting in person:** Young couples now meet their partner 'out and about' at a quarter of the rate of their grandparents' generation – from one in five couples to one in twenty. Combining those who met their current partner through work, mutual friends, or while 'out and about', the rate has halved from 60 per cent for those over 60 to 32 per cent for 18–29-year-olds.
7. **Isolated teenagers:** In 2001/2, nearly two in five (39 per cent) 15-year-olds spent time with friends in the evenings on most nights of a typical week. This proportion has now halved to just 17 per cent today. The proportion of 15-year-olds spending every evening out with friends was 13.5 per cent in 2002 and is now 1.9 per cent – a decrease of 86 per cent. On the weekend, one quarter of 15-year-olds spend 6+ hours awake in their bedroom.
8. **Political alignment:** Political polarization appears to be rising in younger people. Contrary to some popular belief, this is not due to men shifting right while women shift left. Rather, both have shifted leftwards, though women to a much greater degree than men. A recent study of 32 European countries found that, in the UK, "men are moving towards the left, but women are moving at a faster pace towards the left, causing the gap to grow".
9. **Breakup advice:** Analysis of over 1.1 million pieces of relationship advice on Reddit over 15 years showed an increase of advice to end the relationship from 31 per cent to nearly 50 per cent. Most of the corresponding decline came from the categories of "Communicate", "give time / space", and "compromise" which went from a combined total of 55 per cent to 31 per cent.
10. **Diverging online experiences:** The online dating market is incredibly lopsided and breeding discontent. The overall ratio of online daters is two men for every one woman. Over half of women (54 per cent) feel overwhelmed by the volume of messages they get. All the while nearly two thirds (64 per cent) of men feel insecure from a lack of them. Algorithmic silos continue to feed men and women different content bubbles, another barrier to shared experiences.
11. **Worsening wellbeing:** One quarter of 17–19-year-olds in the UK had a probable mental disorder in 2022, compared to one in ten in 2017. 43 per cent of 16–29-year-olds reported high levels of anxiety. Taking courage, making yourself vulnerable, and instigating a relationship is more difficult for young people who have these additional barriers.

Modern life is more complex than ever. Housing, social media and technology, political ruptures, spiritual disenfranchisement, a climate crisis, the cost of living, even the instability of old institutions such as marriage and the family seem to be creaking under the pressure of the modern world. All these and more undoubtedly play a role in why it feels hard for young people today.

But we will look at four areas that we think are of particular concern and are currently under-priced: pornography, online dating, relationship expectations, and learning and earning.

Executive Summary

This report contains some explicit content, including descriptions of sexual acts and sexual violence.

The Relationship Recession

The UK is currently experiencing a persistent and meaningful decline in the relationships between young men and women. Today, as a young man approaches 25, he is 26 times more likely to live with his mum than his wife.[3] In England and Wales, there are now around 3.7 million fewer married people under 30 than in 1976, despite the greater number of young people.[4] The CSJ's Lost Boys work revealed a growing chasm between the sexes. It is one that is often deepest in our poorest communities.

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to focus on a specific concern: what impact is pornography having on young people's relationships? CSJ polling has found that two thirds of 18–24-year-old men and women believe that the widespread availability of pornography is bad for men, and that it is undermining relationships between the sexes (70 per cent of women and 62 per cent of men).[5] Pornography is a significant and growing influence in the lives of young people. It is also something that contains significant disparities by gender and could therefore be feeding friction between men and women.

The Numbers

The average age of first encountering pornography sits between 12[6] and 13[7] years old. One quarter of children will encounter it before the age of 11. Low-income children were 50 per cent more likely to have encountered pornography by age 11 than their non-deprived peers.[8] But qualitative evidence suggests many children encounter it around the ages of six or seven.

A 2022 YouGov survey found that half (49 per cent) of men aged 18–29 watched pornography at least weekly, compared with around one in seven (14 per cent) women of the same age.[9] One quarter of young men watched daily or most days, compared with two per cent of young women. In 2025, over

3 'The Relationship Recession', CSJ, *The Centre for Social Justice*, n.d., accessed 2 November 2026, centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/what-is-the-state-of-relationships-in-the-uk.

4 Ibid.

5 'Lost Boys', *The Centre for Social Justice*, n.d., accessed 10 August 2026, centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/lost-boys.

6 'Dignify Main Report 2023-24.Pdf', n.d., accessed 7 September 2026, img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/9625190e-030a-43c2-8658-061178121cf2/Dignify%20Main%20Report%202023-24.pdf

7 ''A Lot of It Is Actually Just Abuse'- Young People and Pornography', *Children's Commissioner for England*, n.d., accessed 8 September 2026, childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography.

8 '"Sex Is Kind of Broken Now": Children and Pornography', *Children's Commissioner for England*, n.d., accessed 25 September 2026, childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/sex-is-kind-of-broken-now-children-and-pornography.

9 'How Often Do Britons Watch Porn?', accessed 8 September 2026, yougov.com/en-gb/articles/42945-how-often-do-britons-watch-porn.

half (53 per cent) of therapists who work with men with addiction said they noticed a rise in pornography addiction in the previous year.[10]

Nearly one in twenty people (4.69 per cent) in the UK are at high risk of compulsive sexual behaviour disorder, which can include problematic pornography use.[11] This is higher than comparable addiction rates to things like gambling, alcohol, and drugs.

In the UK, 19 per cent of students said that they or a friend had interacted with AI to have a romantic relationship.[12]

A combined £5.4 billion was spent on OnlyFans in 2024. Since 2019, the number of creators on OnlyFans has multiplied 14 times, from under 350,000 to over 5 million. One in six young people (18.1 per cent) aged 18–34 have considered uploading their own content to OnlyFans or a similar site in the past year. This represents more than 2.7 million people.[13]

The National Consequences

A combination of 21 studies showed that greater pornography use among men is associated with poorer sexual function and satisfaction. They also reported higher sexual dysfunction rates. This study also showed that women reported higher psychological distress.[14]

Academic research from Jacobs et al. found that individuals who began masturbating to pornography at younger ages reported significantly higher rates of erectile dysfunction and higher scores on measures of problematic pornography use.[15] Data from the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal) showed a one third increase in the rate of younger men (16–34) who reported trouble getting or keeping an erection from 1999 to 2012, from 5.8[16] to 7.75[17] per cent. More recent research in 2018 found that of over 3,000 men aged 18–39, 29.3 per cent had either mild, moderate, or severe ED.[18]

There are also significant concerns about attitudes towards women and girls. In 2025, the British Board of Film Classification found that one in three adult pornography users had been exposed to violent or abusive content online in the past three months.[19] One study found that one in eight titles shown to first-time users on the first page of mainstream pornography sites described sexual activity that constitutes sexual violence.[20]

10 'BACP Mindometer 2025', accessed 9 September 2026, bacp.co.uk/about-us/about-bacp/bacp-mindometer.

11 Beáta Bőthe et al., 'Compulsive Sexual Behavior Disorder in 42 Countries: Insights from the International Sex Survey and Introduction of Standardized Assessment Tools', *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* 12, no. 2 (2023): 393–407, doi.org/10.1556/2006.2023.00028.

12 Elizabeth Laird, *Hand in Hand: Schools' Embrace of AI Connected to Increased Risks to Students*, n.d.

13 There are 15,052,783 people aged 18–34 in the UK (ONS). 18.1 per cent of this = 2,724,554. 'Population Estimates for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland – Office for National Statistics', accessed 2 November 2026, ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2025.

14 Shahla Shafaati Laleh and Aysu Yıldız Karaahmet, 'Gender Differences in Pornography Use and Sexual Health Outcomes: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis', *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 23, no. 3 (2026): qdag021, doi.org/10.1093/jsxmed/qdag021.

15 Tim Jacobs et al., 'Associations Between Online Pornography Consumption and Sexual Dysfunction in Young Men: Multivariate Analysis Based on an International Web-Based Survey', *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance* 7, no. 10 (2021): e32542, doi.org/10.2196/32542.

16 Catherine H. Mercer et al., 'Sexual Function Problems and Help Seeking Behaviour in Britain: National Probability Sample Survey', *BMJ* 327, no. 7412 (2003): 426–27, doi.org/10.1136/bmj.327.7412.426.

17 Kirstin R. Mitchell et al., 'Sexual Function in Britain: Findings from the Third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-3)', *The Lancet* 382, no. 9907 (2013): 1817–29, doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(13)62366-1.

18 'Prevalence, Comorbidities, and Risk Factors of Erectile Dysfunction: Results from a Prospective Real World Study in the United Kingdom', doi.org/10.1155/2022/5229702.

19 BBFC, '1 in 3 Adult Pornography Users Exposed to Violent or Abusive Content Online, with Majority Backing New Legislation to Prevent Publication of Harmful Content', 23 June 2025, bbfc.co.uk/press-releases/1-in-3-adult-pornography-users-exposed-to-violent-or-abusive-content-online-with-majority-backing-new-legislation-to-prevent-publication-of-harmful-content.

20 Fiona Vera-Gray et al., 'Sexual Violence as a Sexual Script in Mainstream Online Pornography', *The British Journal of Criminology* 61, no. 5 (2021): 1243–60, doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azab035.

Pornography is certainly not the only cause of these trends. In most cases, the evidence establishes an association rather than direct causation. Nevertheless, even comparatively small effects become meaningful when reproduced across millions of people.

The Personal Consequences

Personal consequences range from secretive pornography use and feelings of shame or inadequacy, to altered sexual scripts and concerns over whether watching porn constituted cheating.

Secretive use of pornography in a relationship is associated with lower sexual satisfaction and greater sexual shame. Partners being aware of pornography use was generally associated with more positive outcomes, particularly among women.[21] Directly engaging with sexual content creators was seen as cheating by 57 per cent of women, compared with 37 per cent of men. For those who wouldn't call this cheating, the next most common position people took was that doing this was "not harmless, but it's not cheating". Taking these together, nearly nine out of ten women agreed that engaging with this kind of sexual material constituted harmful and/or cheating behaviour, a position over seven in ten men agreed with.[22]

The prevalence of pornography also raises a difficult question: how do we teach consent in a culture that never says no? Recent research suggests that 44 per cent of those aged 16–21 agreed that "girls may say no at first but then can be persuaded to have sex." The same study found that one third agreed that some girls "pretend they don't want sex when they really do."[23] Furthermore, a study of 4,564 adolescents in five European countries, including England, found that boys who regularly watched pornography had 2.2 higher odds ratio of being a perpetrator of sexual coercion.[24]

So What?

One of the harms of watching pornography is the deeper relational damage to trust, intimacy, and communication. The simplest and most powerful solutions are therefore those best implemented by individuals and couples themselves. The report recommends a range of solutions targeting individuals and couples, parents, health providers, government, and educators.

21 Yishu Li et al., 'Pornography-Use Patterns and Psychosexual Well-Being: Cultural and Gender Differences among Partnered Young People in China and the UK', *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 4 January 2026, 1–15, doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2025.2599255.

22 YouGov, 'Section 4: Cheating in Relationships', accessed 14 October 2026, yougov.com/en-gb/articles/55371-section-4-cheating-in-relationships.

23 '"Sex Is Kind of Broken Now"'.

24 Nicky Stanley et al., 'Pornography, Sexual Coercion and Abuse and Sexting in Young People's Intimate Relationships: A European Study', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 33, no. 19 (2018): 2919–44, doi.org/10.1177/0886260516633204.

Top Pornography Polling Findings

As part of this research into the Relationship Recession the CSJ conducted a poll with Whitestone of 2106 UK adults.[25] The poll contained questions relevant to all four upcoming reports. Some of the top findings concerning pornography and relationships are explored below.

1. One in six young people (17 per cent) aged 18–30 have considered uploading their own content to OnlyFans or a similar site to make money in the past year. Across all ages around one in ten have considered OnlyFans (nine per cent).
2. Nearly half of adults have never discussed it with a partner. 47 per cent of adults have never discussed with any partner whether either of them uses porn, and only 16 per cent have done so in the past year. Among people currently in a relationship, just 26 per cent have any explicit agreement about porn use. 30 per cent haven't discussed it and simply assume their partner shares their views, and another 17 per cent admit they don't know what their partner thinks.
3. There's a large generational gap in how couples handle it. Only 8 per cent of 18–24s in relationships rely on an unspoken assumption, compared with 43 per cent of over-65s. More than half of young couples (55 per cent) have an explicit agreement of some kind, compared with 17 per cent of the oldest group. The single most common agreement among 18–24s is that neither partner will use porn (23 per cent).
4. The gender gap in heavy use is about six to one. 27 per cent of men watch several times a week or more, compared with just 5 per cent of women. Overall, 59 per cent of men report some solo use, against 17 per cent of women.
5. Young users feel much worse about it. Among 18–24 users, 34 per cent often feel guilty, 33 per cent often feel it conflicts with their values, and 27 per cent often feel ashamed. Among 55–64 users, the same figures are 3–6 per cent. Distress was generally more common among younger users and declined steadily with age on most negative measures.
6. Despite that, most users mainly report positive feelings. 59 per cent often feel satisfied and 58 per cent often feel relaxed, while only 8 per cent often feel upset. The most common negative feeling is fear of discovery: 17 per cent often worry about people finding out, and nearly half (45 per cent) feel this at least occasionally.
7. Men and women see the effect on relationships in opposite ways. Overall, people are evenly split: 7 per cent say porn has had a positive effect on their relationships and 7 per cent a negative one, while 32 per cent say it's had no effect. Men lean positive (10 per cent vs 6 per cent negative), and women lean negative (8 per cent vs 5 per cent).
8. Young people pretend to be more accepting than they are. 13 per cent of 18–24s say they've made their views on porn sound more accepting than they really are when talking to others. That's

25 Whitestone surveyed 2,106 UK adults online on 26 and 27 October 2026. Data were weighted to be representative of all adults. Whitestone is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

roughly double the share who made their views sound less accepting (7 per cent). Across the whole population, both figures are only 3–4 per cent, so this attitude is concentrated among the young.

9. Some people hide their discomfort from partners. 4 per cent avoided telling a partner they were uncomfortable with that partner's porn use. 2 per cent went further and told a partner they were fine with it when they weren't. Both figures roughly double among under-35s, at 5–7 per cent.
10. The creator economy and AI porn are small but concentrated among young men. Nationally, about 1 per cent each have paid a specific creator, exchanged sexual messages with a creator, or made porn using AI. Among men aged 18–30, 8 per cent have paid a creator and 8 per cent have messaged one.

Introduction

When asked if they were worried about the impact of pornography on young people, just eight per cent of Gen Z – those born between 1997 and 2012 – disagreed and only two per cent strongly disagreed.[26] CSJ polling found that 70 per cent of 18–24-year-old women and 62 per cent of 18–24-year-old men believe that the widespread availability of pornography is bad for men. Similar proportions said the same about its impact on women, and that it is undermining relationships between the sexes.[27] Clearly, we need to talk about porn.

It is not difficult to list the negative aspects of pornography. They include the negative externalities produced by the industry, like instances of abuse, trafficking, or unclear consent; the normalisation of extreme behaviours or proclivities, such as the infantilisation of female porn stars (or the so-called 'barely legal'), particularly rough or extreme sexual acts, or incest porn; and the near-universal availability of pornographic material, particularly for young children for whom it is entirely inappropriate. On top of this, many experts now believe that pornography can be addictive.

But the purpose of this report is to focus on a specific concern: what impact is pornography having on young peoples' relationships?

Of course, these impacts do not exist in isolation. A young couple where pornography is a cause of concern will likely suffer the negative effects of a multitude of issues, including in communication, body image, or trust. But the chief concern and focus of this report is to assess the impact of pornography on the relationships between men and women.

It is also worth noting that, as much as this report may be relevant to individual relationships, we seek to explore general trends. As a starting point, we assert that Gen Z has been raised on porn. To suggest that this has had no impact on this cohort's desire and ability to couple up would be absurd. The question is to what extent, and in what ways, has porn influenced young peoples' understanding of sex, intimacy, and relationships.

Many of the impacts of pornography on an individual or couple will be subtle. Many people who watch porn may suffer no ill consequences at all. Most may be able to maintain healthy relationships. Most will not become abusive, extreme, or addicted. Nevertheless, when millions of young people are starting and sharing romantic relationships, these general trends will be present across the population. Unfortunately, it is also usually the case that the more vulnerable will be the worst affected.

26 'FFS Productions', accessed 29 September 2026, ffsproductions.com.

27 'Lost Boys'.

The Numbers

This section will outline the relevant figures on the prevalence of pornography across a range of indicators. The key take away from this is that porn is actively influencing young people's intimate lives. Sex, and sexually explicit material, has always been present to varying degrees in nearly every culture. The key difference is that our culture has allowed it to creep out from specific, siloed, and generally safeguarded, areas of society and into the pockets and bedrooms of children. It is perhaps no surprise that the conversation around the impacts of pornography has boomed in recent years as those who grew up with it begin to step into public life.

Age of exposure

The average age of first encountering pornography sits between 12[28] and 13[29] years old. One quarter of children will encounter it before the age of 11.[30] Our own qualitative data from UK youth charities indicate that for many, the first experience comes at a significantly younger age, around six or seven, and it is likely slightly younger for boys than girls. This is partly because boys are more likely to have porn presented to them via social media algorithms, partly because they will be shown it by their peers, and partly because they are simply more prone to looking it up themselves (the main reason pupils gave for first encountering pornography was 'curiosity', followed by 'by accident').[31]

Interestingly, three quarters of parents of children thought that their child would not have seen porn online, but over half of the children of those parents had in fact seen it.[32] This disparity was particularly acute for girls, whose parents were more convinced that their girls would not intentionally seek out pornography.

Regularity of consumption

While it is difficult to say with certainty how regularly different ages and genders watch pornography, younger ages and men were more likely to view porn. A 2022 YouGov survey of over 4,000 people found that half (49 per cent) of men aged 18–29 watched porn *at least* weekly, compared with around one in seven (14 per cent) women of the same age.[33] Looking at more regular consumption, one quarter (25 per cent) of young men watched porn daily or 'most days', compared with two per cent of young women.

28 'Dignify Main Report 2023-24.Pdf', n.d., accessed 7 September 2026, img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/9625190e-030a-43c2-8658-061178121cf2/Dignify%20Main%20Report%202023-24.pdf

29 ''A Lot of It Is Actually Just Abuse'- Young People and Pornography'.

30 Ibid.

31 Dignify, 'Dignify', Dignify, accessed 8 September 2026, dignify.org/research.

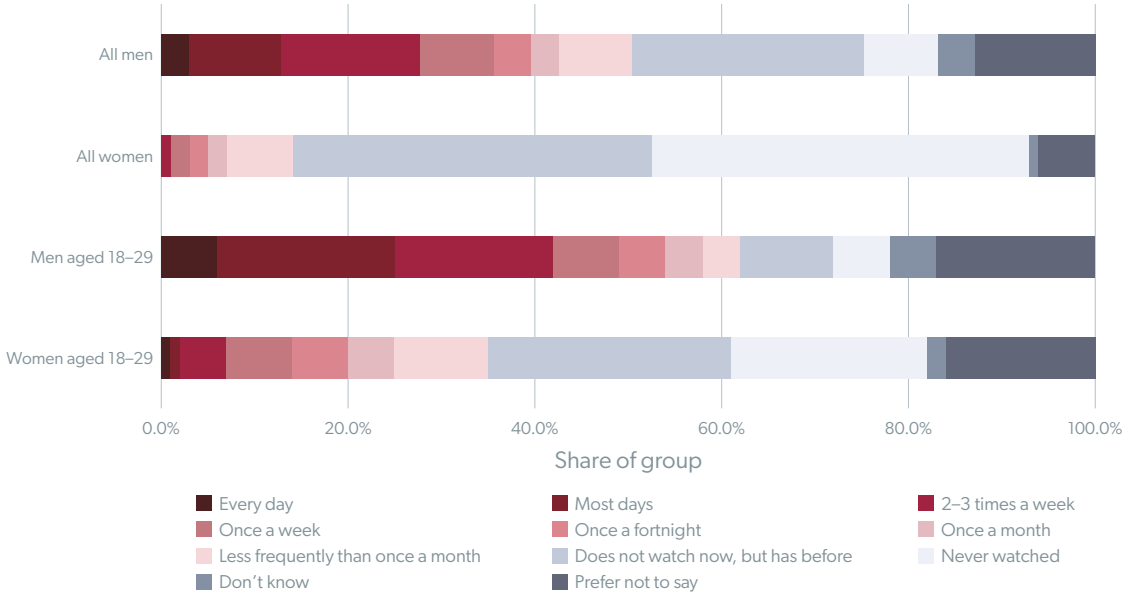
32 'BBFC-Young-People-and-Pornography-Final-Report-2401.Pdf', n.d., accessed 8 September 2026, revealingreality.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/BBFC-Young-people-and-pornography-Final-report-2401.pdf.

33 'How Often Do Britons Watch Porn?'

The most common categories for young men to be in were watching porn "most days" (19 per cent) and watching porn "two or three times a week" (17 per cent). The most common categories for young women were "I do not watch porn, although I have seen it before" (26 per cent) and "I have never watched porn in the first place" (21 per cent). For the young women who did watch porn, the most likely frequency was "less than once a month" (10 per cent), or "once a week" (7 per cent).

Men made up 72 per cent of those who watched pornography in 2024.[34] The average time per month spent on pornographic sites is also about 75 per cent longer for men than women, with men averaging 1hr 44m and women averaging 1hr.[35]

Figure 1: Share of each group watching porn by reported viewing frequency



Source: YouGov, How Often Do Britons Watch Porn?

The impacts of deprivation

The impacts of poverty on pornography are most clearly seen in the age and length of exposure.

The Children's Commissioner found that low-income respondents (those on free school meals) were 50 per cent more likely to have encountered pornography by age 11 than their non-deprived peers (32 per cent compared to 21 per cent).[36]

The most striking finding regarding the length of exposure was that respondents from the lowest social grade spent significantly more time watching pornography in a month than respondents from households of the most populous social grade (C1). The difference between these groups was a statistically significant two hours per month. The difference was substantially larger between those from the lowest and

34 *Online Nation 2024 Report*, n.d.

35 Ibid.

36 '"Sex Is Kind of Broken Now"'.

highest graded households (three hours and 48 minutes), though the analysis did not test whether this relationship was statistically significant.[37]

Addiction rates

Nearly one in twenty people in the UK are at high risk of compulsive sexual behaviour disorder (CSBD), which can include problematic pornography use. An estimated 4.69 per cent of the UK have high-risk CSBD.[38] CSBD was introduced into the International Classification of Diseases in 2022 by the World Health Organisation. It is characterised by "repetitive, poorly controlled engagement in sexual impulses, urges, and behaviours (e.g., pornography use)." To be diagnosed, sexual behaviours should result in "clinically significant distress, neglect of responsibilities, interests, and health, and cause significant impairment in critical areas of functioning."[39] On top of this, individuals with CSBD typically find little to no satisfaction from their sexual activities and often fail to decrease or stop their behaviour. The majority (85 per cent) of those who are categorised as having CSBD have never sought treatment.

In 2025, over half (53 per cent) of therapists who work with men with addiction said they noticed a rise in pornography addiction in the previous year.[40]

For perspective, this rate sits at a similar level to other more widely recognised addictions in the UK. For example:

1. **Gambling – 2.7 per cent** of UK adults score as "problem gamblers" on the Problem Gambling Severity Index.[41]
2. **Alcohol – 2.7 per cent** of UK adults scored 16 or above on the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test, indicating either harmful levels of drinking or probable alcohol dependence (though 18 per cent of adults drank at 'hazardous' levels or above).[42]
3. **Drugs – 6.7 per cent** of people aged 16 to 64 years showed signs of drug dependence (this mostly relates to an increase in adults reporting signs of dependence on cannabis). Only 2.0 per cent of people aged 16 to 59 years (around 680,000 people) were frequent drug users in 2025.[43]

In a relationship

According to recent research from LADBible nearly 4 out of 5 (79 per cent) young people in a relationship watch pornography. This was marginally higher than the rate for those who were single (76 per cent).[44]

37 Neil Thurman and Fabian Obster, 'The Regulation of Internet Pornography: What a Survey of under-18s Tells Us about the Necessity for and Potential Efficacy of Emerging Legislative Approaches', *Policy & Internet* 13, no. 3 (2021): 415–32, doi.org/10.1002/poi3.250.

38 Beáta Bőthe et al., 'Compulsive Sexual Behavior Disorder in 42 Countries: Insights from the International Sex Survey and Introduction of Standardized Assessment Tools', *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* 12, no. 2 (2023): 393–407, doi.org/10.1556/2006.2023.00028.

39 Ibid.

40 'BACP Mindometer 2025'.

41 'Gambling Survey for Great Britain – Annual Report (2024): Official Statistics – Problem Gambling Severity Index', Gambling Commission, accessed 9 September 2026, gamblingcommission.gov.uk/manual/gambling-survey-for-great-britain-annual-report-2024-official-statistics/gsgb-annual-report-2024-problem-gambling-severity-index.

42 'Chapter 5: Alcohol: Hazardous, Harmful and Dependent Patterns of Drinking', NHS England Digital, accessed 9 September 2026, digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/adult-psychiatric-morbidity-survey/survey-of-mental-health-and-wellbeing-england-2023-24/alcohol-dependence.

43 'Drug Misuse in England and Wales – Office for National Statistics', accessed 9 September 2026, ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/drugmisuseinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2025.

44 'FFS Productions'.

AI

In the UK, 20 per cent of boys aged 12–16 know someone with an AI 'girlfriend' or 'boyfriend'.[45] Recent French and American polls have indicated similar trends with young people. In the US, nearly one in three young adult men (31 per cent) and one in four young adult women (23 per cent) reported that they have chatted with an AI boyfriend or girlfriend. Of this same cohort, young men were more than twice as likely to view AI pornography than young women (27 per cent vs. 12 per cent respectively).[46] In France, nearly one third (31 per cent) of men under 35 would say that they would use AI for pornographic or romantic purposes, compared with 11 per cent among women of the same age. This poll also found that AI was integrating itself into non-online dating: most young adults were willing to use AI for things like sex education (67 per cent), sex advice (58 per cent), or relationship purposes (70 per cent).[47] It is likely that the experience of young adults in the UK is similar.

More seriously, in 2025 the Internet Watch Foundation saw over 260 times more AI-generated child sexual abuse videos than the previous year – the number increased from just 13 cases to 3,443.[48] Two thirds of this content was category A sexual abuse.

Reasons to watch

There are many reasons for watching pornography, the most common is to be aroused. However, one study highlighted that the second highest ranked reason young men gave for watching pornography was dealing with emotional factors – i.e., stress (which was cited by 50 per cent of respondents), and 40 per cent even cited boredom.[49] We now live in an age where bored or stressed pre-teens resort to pornographic content for anaesthesia and escapism.

Pornography platforms – Pornhub and OnlyFans

According to Ofcom, on average, every day, 7.8 million visitors from the UK are accessing adult services that have deployed age assurance. Age assurance is now a legal requirement for adult sites so it is likely that the number of visits is greater as smaller, unverified sites are slower, or unwilling, to implement age assurance, and the top ten adult websites together account for only one quarter of the overall market.[50] For comparison, the ten biggest grocers in the UK cover 96.5 per cent of the entire market.[51] This is important to recognise as any legislation or attention given to pornography platforms will likely miss the majority of online pornography. (In fact, the top 100 visited pornography websites hold just over half – 56 per cent – of the total market share).[52]

45 Male Allies UK, Boys and Bots Research, maleallies.co.uk/boys-and-bots.

46 Brian J. Willoughby et al., *The Rise of Romantic AI Companions and AI Sexualized Media Among the Rising Generation*, n.d.

47 'AI and Sex, from Attraction to Addiction… Observatory of the Sexual Uses of AI – Ifop Group', 26 January 2026, ifopgroup.com/en/article/ai-and-sex-from-attraction-to-addiction-observatory-of-the-sexual-uses-of-ai.

48 'AI-Generated CSAM Video Trends | 2025 IWF Data & Insights Report', accessed 14 October 2026, iwf.org.uk/annual-data-insights-report-2025/video-insights/ai-generated-videos.

49 Tim Jacobs et al., 'Associations Between Online Pornography Consumption and Sexual Dysfunction in Young Men: Multivariate Analysis Based on an International Web-Based Survey', *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance* 7, no. 10 (2021): e32542, doi.org/10.2196/32542.

50 'Online Nations Report 2025', n.d., accessed 10 September 2026, ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/online-research/online-nation/2025/online-nations-report-2025.pdf?v=409837.

51 'Food Statistics in Your Pocket', GOV.UK, accessed 30 September 2026, gov.uk/government/statistics/food-statistics-pocketbook/food-statistics-in-your-pocket.

52 'Online Nations Report 2025'.

Pornhub is the largest pornography service in the UK with a market share of 6 per cent.[53] The site is held by a company called Aylo, formerly MindGeek, which also owns multiple other large pornography sites. It was bought by Ethical Capital Partners in 2023.[54] In total, there were over 130 million average daily visitors to Aylo's portfolio of companies. Over 36,000 search terms have had to be banned on these sites.

While it is impossible to get an accurate estimate of how much money the pornography industry generates, estimates put the global value of the industry at $88 billion.[55]

We include OnlyFans here as its growth in both attention and revenue in this sector has been remarkable. OnlyFans is an Internet content paid subscription service. It is most widely known for its sexually explicit content. Content on the platform is user-generated and monetised via monthly subscriptions, tips, and a pay-per-view model. Creators are paid 80 per cent of these fees, with 20 per cent going to OnlyFans itself.

Since 2019, the number of creators on OnlyFans has multiplied 14 times, from under 350,000 to over 5 million.[56] OnlyFans models are overwhelmingly female and young (84 per cent were women and 86 per cent were between the age of 18–24).[57] Men made up the majority of the viewership at almost an identical rate (87 per cent). The average OnlyFans model makes £97 a month. The top 1 per cent of performers made an average of £3,000 a month.[58]

A combined £5.4 billion was spent on OnlyFans in 2024. To illustrate the success of its economic model one only needs to look at its revenue per employee. As it only had 42 members on staff in 2023, it managed to generate $31 million in net revenue per employee.[59]

53 Ibid.

54 'ECP and Aylo Reflect on Past Year', ECP, accessed 16 September 2026, ethicalcapitalpartners.com/news/ecp-and-aylo-reflect-on-past-year-.

55 Research and Markets ltd, 'Digital Adult Content: Market Forecasts, Key Monetisation Models & Emerging Technologies 2021–2026', accessed 2 November 2026, researchandmarkets.com/reports/5732233/digital-adult-content-market-forecasts-key.

56 'OnlyFans Statistics 2026: 40+ Key Numbers & Trends', 1 March 2026, desirely.co/en/blog/onlyfans-statistics.

57 Ibid.

58 'OnlyFans Statistics 2026 – Number of Creators & Top Earners', Statistics Only Fans, accessed 10 September 2026, ofstats.net.

59 'Breaking Down OnlyFans' Stunning Economics', MatthewBall.Co, accessed 2 September 2026, matthewball.co/all/fansprofitandloss.

The National Consequences

There are, of course, multiple reasons why some of the following trends have occurred; pornography is certainly not the only cause. However, it is likely it will be a significant influence. In most cases, the evidence establishes an association rather than direct causation. Nevertheless, pornography is now sufficiently prevalent, particularly across the younger generation, that even comparatively small effects become meaningful when reproduced across millions of people.

Rates of Erectile Dysfunction (ED)

Evidence indicates a relationship between early exposure and pornography-related erectile dysfunction. Academic research from Jacobs et al. found that individuals who began masturbating to pornography at younger ages reported significantly higher rates of erectile dysfunction and higher scores on measures of problematic pornography use.[60]

Data from the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal) showed a possible increase in erection problems for young men between 1999 and 2012. The rate of those who reported trouble getting or keeping an erection from 1999 to 2012 rose from 5.8[61] to 7.75[62] per cent.[63] More recent research in 2018 found that of over 3,000 men aged 18–39, 29.3 per cent had either mild, moderate, or severe ED.[64] While this data is relatively old now, the new NATSAL is due to be released shortly (November 2026) and should give a more up to date picture on this.

Sex rates are down

The relationship between young people (those between the ages of 16–34) and sex is complicated. Broadly speaking, between 1999 and 2012, the biggest changes were among those who reported having no sex in the last month and those who wanted to have more sex than they were (which both increased), and those who had sex ten times or more in a month (which decreased).[65]

60 Jacobs et al., 'Associations Between Online Pornography Consumption and Sexual Dysfunction in Young Men', 2021.

61 Mercer et al., 'Sexual Function Problems and Help Seeking Behaviour in Britain'.

62 Mitchell et al., 'Sexual Function in Britain'.

63 These estimates are not directly comparable. Natsal-2 (1999–2001) measured erection problems lasting at least one month in the previous year among sexually active men aged 16–44. Natsal-3 (2010–12) used a threshold of at least three months; the figures cited here concern sexually active men aged 16–24 and 25–34. The differences in age coverage and measurement mean these figures cannot establish a reliable trend over time. While not identical this could indicate that the problem is growing both in duration and at younger ages.

64 'Prevalence, Comorbidities, and Risk Factors of Erectile Dysfunction'.

65 Kaye Wellings et al., 'Changes in, and Factors Associated with, Frequency of Sex in Britain: Evidence from Three National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal)', Research, *BMJ* 365 (May 2019): l1525, doi.org/10.1136/bmj.l1525.

Young men and women experienced similar reductions in the frequency of sex. The growth in complete sexual inactivity was greater among women – particularly those aged 25–34. However, young men remained less likely to have had sex recently and more likely to say that they wanted it more frequently.

Again, the decline in sexual activity cannot be solely ascribed to pornography, and the authors of the BMJ analysis of the NATSAL data were not able to directly measure its impacts. But they did note that, "should frequency of sexual contact serve as a barometer for general human connectedness, then the decline might be signalling a disquieting trend."[66] As such, whether pornography is a direct or indirect influence, the decline in sex rates is probably playing a part in the wider relationships recession.

In addition to this, the trend of delayed sexual experience begins early. The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey gives a long-running, school-based series for 15-year-olds. In 2002, 36 per cent of boys and 40 per cent of girls had reported experiencing sexual intercourse. By 2022 the rates had declined by over 40 per cent for both sexes: the rate for boys was 21 per cent and for girls it was 22 per cent.[67] To be clear, we are not advocating either for or against these changes in early sexual experience. At a basic level it is an important change to note in the sexual lives of teens.

Masturbation rates are up

Data suggests that those who are not having as much sex as they want to masturbate more than those who are. As a society, we are masturbating more.[68] It could therefore be the case that, as noted in the previous section, fewer young people are happy with the amount of sex they are having. The increase in masturbation rates (at least once in the past month) among men was concentrated in the youngest age group: 73.2 per cent of 16–24-year-old men reported past-month masturbation in 1999–2001, rising to 82.6 per cent in 2010–12. Among women of the same age the figure remained very similar, shifting from 34.2 to 37.1 per cent.

More masturbation was particularly common among those experiencing sexual dissatisfaction. The rate of masturbation increased by nearly 50 per cent for sexually dissatisfied women, from 31.2 to 44.9 per cent. The same impact for men shifted their rate from 63.4 to 81.9 per cent. Natsal-3 data also showed that one of the biggest disparities between those who masturbate at least once a month and those who did not was due to 'anxiety about performance'. Nearly half of women who were anxious masturbated in this timeframe, compared to one third who were not (47.6 per cent vs 36.3 per cent). For men, the gap was over 15 percentage points for those who were anxious versus those who were not (84.8 per cent vs 68.4 per cent). The authors of this study suggested that "the availability of pornography may have altered the patterns of masturbation frequency between 1999–2001 and 2010–2012."

This is not to suggest that masturbation is a social ill. The concern is to do with displacement: solitary sexual activity could be replacing intimate relationships. And the impact is more pronounced in those who are currently the most dissatisfied and anxious.

66 Ibid.

67 Dr Sabina Hulbert et al., *HEALTH BEHAVIOUR IN SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN (HBSC):*, n.d.

68 N. Fischer et al., 'Trends in Masturbation Prevalence and Associated Factors: Findings from the British National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles', *The Journal of Sex Research* 63, no. 4 (2026): 498–509, doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2025.2555053.

Lower sexual functioning

Twenty-one studies, involving over 130,000 participants, showed that male pornography users demonstrated significantly lower sexual function and sexual satisfaction than female users. They also reported higher sexual dysfunction rates. On the other hand, women showed higher psychological distress. Overall, the authors found that greater pornography use among men is "associated with poorer sexual function and satisfaction", and that greater emotional vulnerability displayed by women occurred "despite lower engagement".[69]

Attitudes towards women and girls

There is a significant and growing volume of literature concerning the impacts of pornography consumption and negative attitudes and impacts towards violence against women and girls. Again, while this cannot be proven to be causal, there are concerns regarding the association between these two factors. As we outlined in our Lost Boys State of the Nation report, recent years have shown worrying trends:

1. The Institute for Addressing Strangulation, established in 2023, has highlighted that over a third of 16–34-year-olds reported being strangled or choked at least once during consensual sex (this compared to 16 per cent of 35–54-year-olds and 3 per cent of those aged 55+). This shows an 11-fold increase in the prevalence of strangulation in sex across one generation. Men were twice as likely as women to have strangled or choked a partner.
2. Increasing numbers of female teachers and pupils are reporting sexual harassment from male pupils in school. The extent of this has resulted in multiple parliamentary reports from The Women and Equalities Committee.[70]
3. Campaigns such as Everyone's Invited – a charity dedicated to exposing and eradicating rape culture – have grown in advocacy as over 50,000 individuals have submitted survivor testimonies.
4. Similar movements to Everyone's Invited are becoming commonplace in other nations, such as Australia[71] and Germany.[72]
5. Over half of Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE) is now child-on-child (where the perpetrator's age was known). Historically, it was estimated to account for a third. The most common age of a perpetrator was 14–15 years old and in over 9 out of 10 cases the victims knew the abusers. Males accounted for nearly nine in ten perpetrators (86 per cent). There were 122,768 CSAE offences in 2024, six times the 20,000 recorded in 2013.[73]

In fact, the Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Crimes Report stated that:

69 Laleh and Yıldız Karaahmet, 'Gender Differences in Pornography Use and Sexual Health Outcomes'.

70 'Lost Boys'.

71 Collective Shout, 'Sexual Harassment of Teachers Report', Collective Shout, accessed 21 September 2026, collectiveshout.org/shot-report.

72 *Speak Studie Veröffentlichungen und Informationen*, 30 May 2021, speak-studie.de.

73 'National-Analysis-of-Police-Recorded-Child-Sexual-Abuse-and-Exploitation-CSAE-Crimes-Report-2024-for-England-and-Wales-Totality-3-V2.Pdf', n.d., accessed 21 September 2026, vkpp.org.uk/assets/National-Analysis-of-Police-Recorded-Child-Sexual-Abuse-and-Exploitation-CSAE-crimes-report-2024-for-England-and-Wales-Totality-3-V2.pdf.

> *"In child-on-child abuse, there are notable contextual factors, including the increasing accessibility of violent pornography and the ubiquity of smartphones, which can shape attitudes and peer dynamics. These influences interact with wider gender norms and inequalities, and are particularly visible in cases where boys commit offences against girls."*[74]

In 2025 the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) found that one in three adult pornography users had been exposed to violent or abusive content online in the past three months. Over half had expressed concerns about the levels of violence.[75] One study analysed over 150,000 unique snapshots from mainstream pornography sites over six months and found that "*one in eight titles shown to first-time users on the first page of mainstream porn sites describe sexual activity that constitutes sexual violence*". Within the category of sexual violence, the authors had the headings of: *"sexual activity between family members; aggression and assault; image-based sexual abuse and coercive and exploitative sexual activity"*.[76]

74 'Group-Based-Child-Sexual-Abuse-and-Exploitation-Data-12-Months-of-Data-from-January-December-2024-December-2025.Pdf', n.d., accessed 21 September 2026, hydrantprogramme.co.uk/assets/Documents/Group-Based-Child-Sexual-Abuse-and-Exploitation-Data-12-months-of-data-from-January-December-2024-December-2025.pdf.

75 BBFC, '1 in 3 Adult Pornography Users Exposed to Violent or Abusive Content Online, with Majority Backing New Legislation to Prevent Publication of Harmful Content'.

76 Vera-Gray et al., 'Sexual Violence as a Sexual Script in Mainstream Online Pornography'.

The Personal Consequences

Individuals and couples will use pornography differently in and out of relationships. It is worth clarifying the purpose of this section of the report. It is not a reflection of any individual's or couple's unique circumstance or relationship; it is not dating advice – there are many more appropriate books, resources, and people who are well equipped to support individuals in this space; it is not encompassing of every relationship type and nor are these impacts inevitable – some enjoy the use of pornography and feel that they personally benefit from it; it is not to cast blame or stigmatise; and it is not to suggest that relationships cannot heal and flourish after problematic pornography use.

The primary aim of this is to try to understand how pornography may be impacting young people in relationships. There is no way that this can be an entirely representative exercise. But the proliferation of pornography in the lives of young people has been explosive. For example, even though nearly half of young women (47 per cent) do not watch pornography at all, it is safe to assume that when they enter a relationship with a young man, he probably will.

This next section focuses on some specific challenges couples may face when growing up in a culture weaned on pornography.

Is watching porn cheating?

There is a near universal consensus on some actions that constitute cheating. Having sex with someone else, sending someone naked photos, and using a dating app while in a relationship are widely regarded as unfaithful behaviour – 94, 82, and 80 per cent of people agreed, respectively.[77] Only between one and two per cent of people disagreed, with the remainder responding that they 'Don't know' or 'Prefer not to say'. Pornography presents a potentially more complex picture: the (at least) two people involved in the act are separated by a space (a screen) and potentially time (previously recorded videos). Also, given its widespread nature, one could expect our culture to be more permissive of watching pornography. After all, LADBible's recent poll found that around three-quarters of those in a relationship watch pornography.[78]

This does not seem to be the case, particularly for women. 57 per cent of women saw "directly engaging with sexual content creators" as cheating, 20-percentage points ahead of men (37 per cent). For those who wouldn't call this cheating, the next most common position people took was that doing this was "not harmless, but it's not cheating" (37 per cent of men and 29 per cent of women). Taken together, nearly nine out of ten women agreed that engaging with this kind of sexual material constituted harmful and/or cheating behaviour, a position over seven in ten men agreed with. It is worth noting that the wording of this poll could be interpreted to only mean engagement such as messaging or paying to watch sexual

77 YouGov, 'Section 4'.
78 'FFS Productions'.

content creators, which some may view as distinct from watching pornography, where you often do not have to create an account or pay to watch videos. However, we were happy to use these numbers as this activity still represents a person fulfilling a sexual desire through an online performer, thus making it a useful and recent proxy to simply 'watching pornography'.

The troubling dilemma, then, is that two problematic things are happening at the same time: someone in a young couple's relationship is likely to be watching pornography *and* these young people are also likely to consider this behaviour as actively harming their relationship.

Notably, every relationship is flawed in some way; there will be no couple where one partner does not hurt the other- be that through selfish, greedy, lazy or angry behaviour. These are challenges even in the most committed relationships. The person who is most able to support you to thrive is also most able to do the opposite. A healthy relationship relies on good communication where selfish, greedy, lazy or angry actions can be discussed and worked upon together. The real issue with pornography is that it is so often unspoken and hidden away. Unfortunately, this does not immunise the relationship against its effects. It sweeps under the rug an activity that is hurting the relationship. For most people, a partner watching pornography represents an abuse of trust and an act of unfaithfulness.

Academic studies support this. Secretive use of pornography in a relationship is associated with lower sexual satisfaction and greater sexual shame (though the authors of this study of over one thousand partnered individuals could not prove the direction of these effects).[79] More positively, partners being aware of the use of pornography in a relationship was generally associated with more positive outcomes, particularly among women. This is key as it highlights the importance of communication and trust, even if pornography consumption does not necessarily stop. A separate survey of 3,750 people in committed relationships in the US found that 20 per cent of the couples had reported conflict around pornography, and around one in four men said they actively concealed their use.

Researchers foresaw this incoming friction between our evolved sexual ethics and technological innovations. David Buss noted that "our evolved standards of sexual morality may clash with cultural innovations, as when an individual must decide whether viewing pornography, purchasing increasingly realistic sex dolls, or using advanced virtual reality sex technology constitutes infidelity to a long-term mate."[80] It is time we had a proper conversation regarding couples' perceptions of pornography, and whether it constitutes unfaithful behaviour.

Consent

A porn star will never tell you no. They will perform for however long you desire, and in whatever way you ask. In your world, they exist for your pleasure. Of course, on their end, it is normally a commercial enterprise, but what they are selling is arousal. And you can pick whatever arouses you.

Young people can separate different aspects of their lives; they can game and watch TV without re-enacting violence or behaviours they may watch. However, clearly, what someone watches regularly over years of development will impact how they think and view the world and other people.

79 Li et al., 'Pornography-Use Patterns and Psychosexual Well-Being'.

80 David M. Buss and David P. Schmitt, 'Mate Preferences and Their Behavioral Manifestations', *Annual Review of Psychology* 70 (2019): 77–110, doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010418-103408.

This raises a tricky question: how do we teach consent in a culture that never says no? Entitlement, escalation, and aggression are all potential psychological responses to regular pornography consumption. This is especially true in an algorithmically driven online market. As any sexual impulse or urge is met as and when it is felt, years regularly watching pornography can train the psyche to expect release when urges arrive. Again, this is not to say that people will act on them aggressively or antisocially in real life. But it will certainly make resisting urges, thinking empathetically, and reacting in emotionally healthy ways harder. When millions of individual decisions are influenced like this – remembering that there are nearly 8 million British visits *a day to a regulated* pornography site[81] – it is likely to start stacking the results in a way we do not want them to go.

Below are some recent and worrying findings to illustrate what this might mean in practice.

The Children's Commissioner recently found that 44 per cent of those aged 16–21 agreed that "girls may say no at first but then can be persuaded to have sex." This was endorsed more strongly by those who had seen pornography – 54 per cent of girls and 41 per cent of boys. The same study found that one third agreed that some girls "pretend they don't want sex when they really do." Agreement was again higher among those who had seen pornography: 30 per cent of exposed girls and 41 per cent of exposed boys, compared with 21 and 29 per cent among those who had not.[82]

Last year, the Institute for Addressing Strangulation found that among over 2,000 people who had been strangled during sex over one quarter said the most recent occasion had not been agreed beforehand. Among those who had strangled a partner, 12 per cent said it had not been agreed in advance.[83] This is a worrying mismatch.

A study of 4,564 adolescents in five European countries, including England, found that boys who regularly watched pornography had 2.2 higher odds ratio of being a perpetrator of sexual coercion.[84]

Men and women are rightly concerned by gendered violence, particularly sexual violence, in the UK. Pornography must be a part of the conversation.

Pornography, sexual access, and commitment

The academic Jean Twenge has argued in her book, Generations, that because fewer young people are living with partners, "to have sex, more have to go find sex". Now, in the age of later marriage and Tinder, "normies [those who are not "Instagram-beautiful"] are instead at home on their phones."[85]

When it comes to dating, the average young person today considers the usual amount of time to wait before having sex to be one month.[86] If sex acts as a motivating factor in pro-social behaviour towards the other sex, then it could be the case that quick access to sex is actually having adverse side-effects by allowing some – not all – individuals to access sexual intimacy, not commit, and promptly quit after achieving their aim.

81 'Online Nations Report 2025'.

82 '"Sex Is Kind of Broken Now"'.

83 Harriet Smailes et al., *Strangulation During Sex in the UK*, n.d.

84 Stanley et al., 'Pornography, Sexual Coercion and Abuse and Sexting in Young People's Intimate Relationships'.

85 *Generations* (2025), page 290. simonandschuster.co.uk/books/Generations/Jean-M-Twenge/9781668076750.

86 YouGov, 'Section 1: The Relationships Landscape in the UK', accessed 24 September 2026, yougov.com/en-gb/articles/55368-section-1-the-relationships-landscape-in-the-uk.

Young people's desire for life and love has not diminished, despite their apparent 'failure to launch' along the traditional steps of adulthood. As with finding work or owning a home, slower uptake or 'worse' outcomes for young people do not indicate a shift away from valuing these things. Rather, for many, the old expectations that these things are achievable seems untrue. So it is with pornography and relationships. Just because it looks like less sex is being had and fewer relationships begun, it is not for lack of trying. With the aforementioned rise of so-called "low-cost sexual gratification" or "cheap sex" activities – pornography, hook-ups, and masturbation – one could expect that the desire that young people have for committed relationships or marriage has declined. In the case of young men, one study found that "pornography use was robustly and linearly associated with a higher likelihood of wanting to be married."[87] Our own polling also found a clear difference between pornography viewing for those who were single and looking for a relationship versus those who were single but not looking for a relationship. Those looking for a relationship were nearly twice as likely to watch porn several times a week (31 per cent) compared to those who were not (17 per cent). Far from young men watching pornography because they do not want to build a relationship, this activity simply acts as a poor substitute for craving emotional and physical connection.

Pornography-induced Trauma

With a significant minority of children now encountering pornography at younger ages (more than one quarter of UK children see it by 11, though there is a surprising volume of qualitative evidence showing that a number of children see it around the ages of six or seven),[88] there is a risk of pornography altering child and adolescent sexual development.

Recent research in the field of child and adolescent mental health has discussed the possibility of re-framing encountering pornography as a young child as a traumatic experience. The authors have suggested that "victims faced with the eroticisation of violence are subjected to contradictory, incomprehensible, and sometimes inexplicable forces, which can lead to a traumatised sexuality with negative consequences in interpersonal relationships."[89] Framing the impacts of early exposure to pornography as traumatic then leads to three symptoms of trauma to explain possible consequences: isolation, coercion, or dissociation, the second of which we outline below. Understanding early exposure to pornography as a potentially traumatic experience could give us a more helpful explanation into how it affects children at different ages, thus paving the way for more suited legislation and therapeutic interventions.[90]

A coercive response could involve attempting to overcome the impacts of trauma through aggression or self-control. This might appear as one tries to control their own opposing emotions to protect themselves and avoid any further related type of humiliation.[91] Waterman et al conducted a longitudinal study of middle and high school students, who averaged age 13 at the beginning of the study. They found that "sexual harassment perpetration among adolescents who had viewed pornography in the past 6 months were 2–3 times greater than the odds of sexual harassment perpetration from adolescents who had not viewed pornography." The rates of sexual assault perpetration were, though less common overall,

87 Samuel L. Perry, 'Does Low-Cost Sexual Gratification Make Men Less Eager to Marry? Pornography Use, Masturbation, Hookup Sex, and Desire to Be Married Among Single Men', *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 49, no. 8 (2020): 3013–26, doi.org/10.1007/s10508-020-01793-w.

88 'Lost Boys'.

89 Mar Alvarez-Segura et al., 'Impact of Pornography Consumption on Children and Adolescents: A Trauma-Informed Approach', *Frontiers in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 4 (September 2025): 1567649, doi.org/10.3389/frcha.2025.1567649.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

between 4–14 times greater for the children who had watched pornography in the past six months. This led the authors to conclude that watching pornography may cause adolescents to *"develop world views that are more accepting of sexual aggression through the use of pornography."*[92]

Further research also shows worrying trends about pornography exposure, especially at younger ages. A 2026 systematic review and meta-analysis of 19 studies found that problematic pornography use – not general use – was correlated with anxiety at (r=.16) and depression at (r=.24). The anxiety association was also stronger in samples of younger people (under 25s) (r=.22).[93]

Altered sexual scripts and a poor sex educator

Simon and Gagnon's sexual script theory suggests that frequent exposure to sexually explicit material can impact young people's understanding of sexuality and the development of their sexual scripts.[94] Recent polling has borne this out in various ways as we see young people misunderstanding the nature of sex and intimacy. The widespread and constant availability of pornography has changed what is expected, and when. The BBFC, for example, found that boys were much more likely to agree than girls that "Sex in porn is very similar to what sex is like in real life" (20 per cent vs. 4 per cent).[95]

On top of this, analysis of 3,419 men under the age of 35 found that 91.4 per cent of pornography viewers had skipped to the "best parts of the videos" that they watched.[96] Pornography will never be a good sex educator in much the same way that a relationship with an AI companion will never be the same as one with a human: there is no compromise, challenge or requirements placed on the individual – no expectations or demands. Pornography as practice for intimacy is a terrible teacher, especially when over nine in ten viewers skip to the part they want to. It is not hard to see how this lack of patience or inability to skip in real life might poorly equip men to positively impact women's sex lives when, as the saying goes, foreplay starts at breakfast.

In our own conversations for our Lost Boys reports we spoke to various charities and youth workers who see how this is impacting young people on a daily basis:

We spoke to Grace Foundation, who exist to transform young people's lives through holistic education, concerning their Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) work. Their boys group sessions begin with an RSE Support Worker dispelling rumours and reinforcing truths, fielding questions like the average penis size and the normal length of time for sexual intercourse. The specialist teacher, Luke, told us that in two and a half years of running these sessions, many of the boys thought it was true that "it is common to ejaculate on a woman's face after sex". These are boys who have learnt sex from porn and, according to their education, know the right answers. They, and their partners, are in for a horrible shock when they engage in sexual activity, and it is not their fault. It is all they know.[97]

92 Emily A. Waterman et al., 'Prospective Associations Between Pornography Viewing and Sexual Aggression Among Adolescents', *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 32, no. 4 (2022): 1612–25, doi.org/10.1111/jora.12745.

93 Jia Yang Tan et al., 'Association Between Self-Reported Pornographic Consumption Habits and Anxiety and Depression: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis', *Journal of Clinical Medicine* 15, no. 13 (2026): 5030, doi.org/10.3390/jcm15135030.

94 W. Simon and J. H. Gagnon, 'Sexual Scripts: Permanence and Change', *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 15, no. 2 (1986): 97–120, doi.org/10.1007/BF01542219.

95 'BBFC-Young-People-and-Pornography-Final-Report-2401.Pdf'.

96 Tim Jacobs et al., 'Associations Between Online Pornography Consumption and Sexual Dysfunction in Young Men: Multivariate Analysis Based on an International Web-Based Survey', *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance* 7, no. 10 (2021): e32542, doi.org/10.2196/32542.

97 'Lost Boys'.

Shame and body image issues

For many young people, themselves or their partners watching pornography can make them feel both objectified and inadequate. Due to the widely recognised perception of women in pornography films, it is not hard to see how this might translate to a young women's thoughts about how young men, or her partner, will be thinking about her. For young men the feelings, though less common, often revolve more around insecurity about the size of their penis or muscles. Among male pornography users aged 18–30 in our survey, 35 per cent often felt guilty about their use. A systematic review of 26 studies confirmed this. The authors found that the frequency of pornography exposure was associated with poorer body image and sexual body image, impacting both men and women.[98]

There are also issues concerning feelings of inadequacy where sexual desires (something shared exclusively in most romantic relationships) are met by a porn star and not a partner. On a relational level it can be extremely difficult to communicate and relate well to a partner, or a potential partner, when one knows that they can choose whatever type of virtual sex they want, with whoever they want, whenever. One 18-year-old girl, Aoife, told the BBFC that,

> *"Boys expect that [looking attractive] from you as standard if they watch porn. They expect you to look and act sexier than you are and will compare your body to them [girls in pornography videos] … Sometimes I worry I don't look or act sexy enough during sex."*[99]

98 Paslakis G, Chiclana Actis C, Mestre-Bach G. Associations between pornography exposure, body image and sexual body image: A systematic review. *Journal of Health Psychology*. 2022;27(3):743–760. doi:10.1177/1359105320967085

99 'BBFC-Young-People-and-Pornography-Final-Report-2401.Pdf'.

So what?

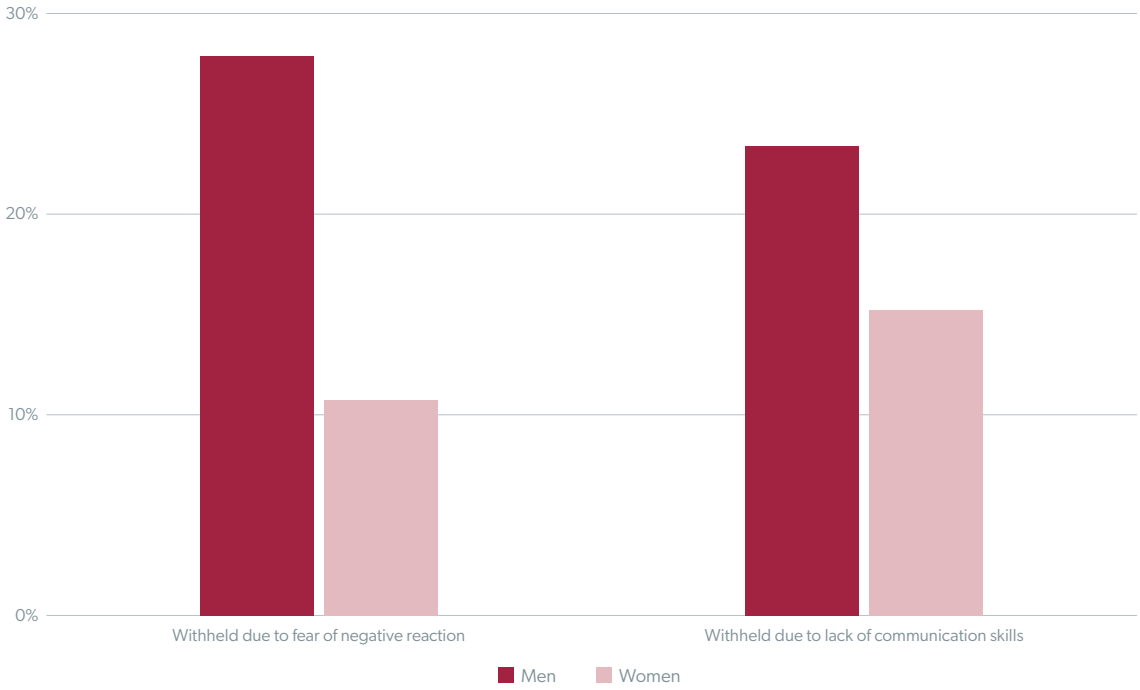
Currently, pornography is meeting people where they are at. As a society we need to get there first and be both a more significant and more regular influence.

1. Younger couples need to communicate expectations

One of the harms of watching pornography is the deeper relational damage to trust, intimacy, and communication. The simplest and most transformational solutions are therefore those that are best implemented by individuals and couples themselves.

A US survey from 2021 measuring attitudes to pornography in couples found that around a quarter of men reported hiding or withholding their pornography use from their partner because of either a fear of their partner's reaction or not knowing how to communicate about it, as seen in Figure 2.[100] (Fortunately, this also suggested that most couples in this sample were comfortable discussing it). The percentages for women were smaller but still significant. This study also found that less than a third of couples agreed that their partner would react negatively if they disclosed engaging in pornography to him or her. However, men were nearly twice as likely as women to report this fear of negativity.

Figure 2: Percentage of partners hiding personal pornography use from their partner



100 'National Couples and Pornography Survey 2021', Wheatley Institute, 8 November 2021, wheatley.byu.edu/national-couples-and-pornography-survey-2021.

29 per cent of women who were dating worried about their partner being more attracted to pornography, and a similar proportion were worried that their partner thought about pornography during sex. On top of this, almost 1 in every 3 women who were dating agreed that they were worried that their partner was withholding some details about their pornography consumption.

Ultimately, a healthy relationship needs healthy communication.

2. Harmful pornographic content, that is illegal to distribute in physical formats, should also be treated as illegal content on online platforms.

It was highlighted in the 2025 Independent review into pornography, *Creating a Safer World – the Challenge of Regulating Online Pornography*,[101] that there is a stark contrast in the availability and content of online and offline pornography. It is very tricky for a child to access offline pornographic content. It is not tricky at all to find it online. On top of this, the safeguards, provided chiefly by Ofcom and the BBFC, are much weaker in the online world. This recommendation should act as government's regulatory 'North star' regarding adult content online.

3. The NHS England website should contain information on pornography consumption, and relevant signposting to support.

Currently, NHS England does not have a designated page to discuss pornography. As a trusted health institution this will be the first port of call for many people initially looking for support and information. NHS Scotland is a good example of what this could look like.[102] Organisations such as The Lucy Faithfull Foundation[103] and the Naked Truth[104] also have good advice and support service options and are a good place to begin signposting to.

4. GP consultations should include a question regarding regular pornography consumption

Given that a significant number of young people today are regular watchers of pornography, if concerns around issues such as ED are raised, GPs should be equipped to ask a simple question about pornography consumption. They should then also be aware of different levels of support that are available, from online accountability groups, services that filter online content, or other appropriate in-person support.

5. Widen access to addiction support

As the best way to tackle this is personal and relational, government should support the wider roll-out of self-help tools, software, and community support groups. Currently, online tools exist to support fellowship groups like AA, track images on screens, or filter adult content. These often cost money, generally through monthly subscriptions. If we, as a society, begin to recognise pornography as a form of addiction, and something that can be actively harmful to an individual, couple, and wider society,

101 Baroness Bertin, *Creating a Safer World – the Challenge of Regulating Online Pornography*, n.d.

102 'Pornography', *NHS Inform*, n.d., accessed 30 September 2026, nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/sex-and-relationships/pornography.

103 'Adult Pornography', *Stop It Now*, n.d., accessed 30 September 2026, stopitnow.org.uk/module-chapter/adult-pornography.

104 'Naked Truth Project', accessed 30 September 2026, nakedtruthproject.com.

upfront investment in memberships to online support schemes should be offered to those struggling to control their usage. This should be signposted and offered in conjunction with recommendations 3 and 4, through the NHS or relevant social prescriptions. Wider knowledge of currently available private services, such as the Laurel Centre,[105] which offers tailored therapy and counselling for pornography and sex addiction, would be helpful.

6. The role of parents

Due to the early exposure of children to pornography, this is something that parents cannot afford to ignore. This is especially relevant for parents who have bought their children a mobile phone; web blockers and content filters for children can be helpful, but most young people are tech natives and are able to find their way around them. Given that smartphone use is ubiquitous in childhood now (88 per cent of children aged 3–7 now go online,[106] and 97 per cent of 12-year-olds own a mobile phone)[107], parents must act as the first line of support and defence for their children. A broader cultural conversation is imperative. And more conversations between parents and children regarding this topic must happen as children step into the Wild West of the online world.

Greece offers a useful model for what a practical tool could look like. Its "Kids Wallet" application, launched in May 2025, allows parents to block applications, set limits on their use, and establish schedules for school hours or bedtime. Parents register using their government credentials and link the controls to the device their child uses.

Importantly, Kids Wallet also holds digital proof of the child's age. This provides another mechanism for applying age restrictions beyond simply asking children to enter their date of birth.

7. One Government department should make pornography its priority

Part of the problem with pornography is it is not held accountable by one specified government department. Clear policy ownership and responsibility across Whitehall on pornography needs to be decided, with one department having oversight on pornography policy. We recommend that this sits under the Ministry of Justice's team tackling Violence Against Women and Girls.

8. Sex Education curricula must cover the harms of pornography.

There should be greater depth and clarity in the delivery of relationships and sex education, enforced by Ofsted, to ensure that children and young people receive evidence-based education on how the pornography industry works. This should include the health harms of pornography, including the risk of addiction, the messages about women and sexual relationships that pornography communicates and the impacts these have on perceptions and behaviours, and how to take back control and seek support if needed. Current teaching can be haphazard and often fails to fully cover all these risks, leaving students unable to make properly informed decisions about pornography.

105 'Sex & Porn Addiction Therapy & Counselling | The Laurel Centre', accessed 30 September 2026, thelaurelcentre.co.uk.

106 *Children and Parents Media Use and Attitudes Report 2025–6*, n.d.

107 'Government Launches Crackdown on Mobile Phones in Schools', GOV.UK, accessed 22 October 2026, gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-crackdown-on-mobile-phones-in-schools.

9. Ban under-18s from using virtual private networks (VPNs).

Access to pornography was restricted in 2025, following the continued failure of sites hosting pornographic content to stop children accessing it. These restrictions largely worked. Pornhub reported an initial 77 per cent drop in visits to its site,[108] and Ofcom have since fined multiple companies for failing to "use highly effective age assurance to prevent children from readily accessing that content."[109]

However, because different countries have differing levels of online protections for children, these restrictions can be easily bypassed using a VPN. There are certainly good reasons for the use of VPNs – security, for example – but they are also a clear loophole for young people to access deeply inappropriate and harmful content.[110] And, as the social media ban for under-16s waits to be enacted, young people might well use them for this too.

Ofcom has outlined seven different potential methods of age verification.[111] They argue, *"In the UK people are familiar with having to prove their age in the offline world to buy age-restricted goods like alcohol and tobacco. Age checks to access online pornography are just the same. It will help stop children from encountering pornography online, in the same way that a child should not be able to simply walk into a shop and buy a pornographic DVD or magazine."* It is now easy for companies and individuals to safely verify age online without risking personal data.

108 'Pornhub Says UK Visitors down 77% since Age Checks Came In', BBC News, 31 October 2025, bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgkz3m3re1zo.

109 'Ofcom Fines Porn Company £1.35m for Not Having Age Checks', Www.Ofcom.Org.Uk, 23 February 2026, ofcom.org.uk/online-safety/protecting-children/ofcom-fines-porn-company-1.35-million-for-not-having-age-checks.

110 'VPNs Top App Store Charts as UK Age Verification Kicks In', BBC News, 28 July 2025, bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn72ydj70g5o.

111 'Age Checks for Online Safety – What You Need to Know as a User', Www.Ofcom.Org.Uk, 26 June 2025, ofcom.org.uk/online-safety/protecting-children/age-checks-for-online-safety--what-you-need-to-know-as-a-user.

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