Should Australia demand rigorous online age verification?

What they said…
'Young adults should not be coached in disrespect [for women] or misogyny by online influencers … I understand parents want to protect their kids from harmful material online'
Australia's prime minister, Anthony Albanese

'No one has devised a mandatory age verification system that isn't a deep affront to civil liberties, a huge privacy threat and creates a vast trove of data for identity thieves…'
Crikey commentator, Bernard Keane

The Issue at a Glance
On May 1, 2024, the Australian National Cabinet (comprised of all state premiers and the federal prime minister) recommended a trial of technologies that would allow online pornography providers to verify the age of those accessing their material.
https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-01/national-cabinet-meets-to-address-violence-against-women/103789304

This is one of several measures intended to reduce the incidence of violence against women in Australia. Exposure to pornography is considered a contributory factor in encouraging violence against women.

A year before, in March 2023, the Australian eSafety Commissioner submitted a 'roadmap' on online age verification to the Australian Government. It proposed that any online service provider that poses a risk of exposing children to pornography should adopt measures to prevent children gaining access. https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/consultation-cooperation/age-verification The proposed trial of possible technologies to achieve this did not go ahead.

Australia's growing concern regarding the murders and assaults against women has strengthened interest in online age verification. The effectiveness of the technologies involved, and their possible adverse side effects remain subjects of debate.

Background information
Much of the information below has been taken from the Wikipedia entry titled 'Age verification system'. The full text can be accessed at
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_verification_system

Age verification systems
An age verification system, also known as an 'age gate', is any technical system that externally verifies a person's age. These systems are primarily used to restrict online access to content classified, either voluntarily or by local laws, as being inappropriate for users under a specific age, such as alcohol, tobacco, gambling, video games with objectionable content, pornography, or to remain in compliance with online privacy laws that regulate the collection of personal information from minors.

Age verification increased substantially in 2023-2024, with the passage of the U.K. Online Safety Act, a new French online age verification law, laws in eight US states including Texas

and Utah, and proposals at the federal level in the US, Canada, Denmark, and the European Union to impose age verification on some forms of online access.

Forms of age verification
Birth date
The most basic form of age verification is to ask a person to input their date-of-birth on a form. However, this depends on an honor system that assumes the truthfulness of the end user (which can be a minor who fraudulently inserts a valid date that meets the age criteria, rather than their actual birthdate). This type of verification is generally ineffective.

Credit card verification
More sophisticated age verification systems require people to provide credit card information. However, this depends on an assumption that credit card holders are adults. In the United States minor can sign up for credit cards. Additionally, a minor may still attempt to obtain their parent's credit card information or acquire the credit card information of another cardholder and fraudulently use that. In 2005, Salvatore LoCascio pleaded guilty to charges of credit card fraud. One of his schemes involved using credit card-based age verification systems to charge under-age users for access to adult entertainment websites.

Federated identification
MindGeek, a major operator of porn websites, operates an age verification provider known as AgeID. First introduced in Germany in 2015, it uses third-party providers to authenticate the user's age, and a single sign-on model that allows the verified identity to be shared across any participating website.

Face recognition
The Australian government has proposed the use of facial recognition to allow the would-be user's face to be compared to official identification photos such as those on a driver's licence.

Zero-Knowledge Proof
Zero-Knowledge Proofs verify a person's age without disclosing their identity, either to the receiver, such as a business, or the verifying entity, like a government that issues a passport.

Knowledge
The adult-oriented video game franchise Leisure Suit Larry presented players with trivia questions that, in the opinion of franchise creator Al Lowe, a child would not know the answer to.

Online services
Several online services provide an age verification service, some of which can be integrated into websites using an API (an interface that allows two applications to talk to each other).

Online age verification in Australia
In March 2023, the Australian eSafety Commissioner submitted a 'roadmap' on online age verification to the Australian Government for consideration. It was proposed that any online service provider that poses a risk of exposing children to pornography should have in place measures to prevent children gaining access. Tools should not be prescribed – but any potential technological tools should meet strict safety and privacy standards, be certified, and independently audited. The role of filtering and parental controls should also be considered. https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/consultation-cooperation/age verification In the event

Australia did not proceed with a trial of these proposals. https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/consultation-cooperation/age verification

On May 1, 2024, the Australian National Cabinet (comprised of all state premiers and the federal prime minister) recommended that the former proposed trial of age verification assurance technologies go ahead. This was part of several measures intended to reduce the concerning incidence of violence against women. Exposure to pornography is considered a contributory factor in encouraging violence against women. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-01/national-cabinet-meets-to-address-violence-against-women/103789304

Online age verification in other countries
The United Kingdom
As of March 2024, UK regulations require online operators to conduct age verification before consumers are allowed to access or purchase age-restricted or 'harmful' content. Gaming and gambling, dating and adult entertainment, and retail are among the industries and organisations in the UK that are required by law to carry out mandatory verification checks. Any organisation that publishes adult content must take sufficient measures to check that an individual is not below the age threshold to access that content, typically through verification of the customer's age/date of birth. https://www.experian.co.uk/blogs/latest-thinking/guide/what-is-age verification-regulation/

In May 2024, the UK government announced it will require age verification for users of social media. Social media firms will be required to introduce robust checks, including the use of photo ID such as passports, to identify children using their sites and protect them from harm online. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, which require users to be at least 13 years old, will be expected to use the checks to enforce the age limits. https://amp.theage.com.au/world/europe/uk-laws-will-force-age verification-for-social-media-users-20240508-p5h030.html

The United States
Age verification laws in the U.S. have emerged as a response to concerns about minors' access to adult content online. First enacted by Louisiana in 2022, such laws mandate that websites hosting substantial adult content must verify that users are over 18 years old, typically through government-issued ID. Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia and Wisconsin have since introduced similar laws.

These laws state that if a website's material is deemed 'harmful to minors' it must implement state-approved age verification methods. For example, Louisiana utilised a digital driver's license app for age verification, setting a precedent other states have followed. Failure to comply can lead to legal liabilities, including the possibility for civilians to sue for damages. https://www.expressvpn.com/blog/us-age verification-laws/

Internet information
On May 8, 2024, The Age published a news report titled, 'This country wants to kick under-13s off social media. Will Australia do the same?' The report refers to the United Kingdom's decision to require age verification for children under 13 attempting to access social media.

The full text can be accessed at https://amp.theage.com.au/world/europe/uk-laws-will-force-age verification-for-social-media-users-20240508-p5h030.html

On May 8, 2024, biometricupdate.com published an opinion piece by Dan Yerushalmi titled 'Redefining online safety: The evolution of age verification laws' The comment explains the need for online age verification and how some of the issues associated with e overcome.
The full text can be accessed at https://www.biometricupdate.com/202405/redefining-online-safety-the-evolution-of-age-verification-laws

On May 8, 2024, Ofcom published an article titled 'Tech firms must tame toxic algorithms to protect children online.'
The article sets out more than 40 steps that services must take to keep children safer online. These include sites and apps introducing robust age-checks to prevent children seeing harmful content such as suicide, self-harm and pornography and filtering out or downranking harmful material in recommended content.
Ofcom is the United Kingdom's regulatory body for telecommunications.
The full text can be accessed at https://www.ofcom.org.uk/news-centre/2024/tech-firms-must-tame-toxic-algorithms-to-protect-children-online

On May 7, 2024, The Guardian Australia published a comment by Peter Lewis titled 'Could Labor use Australia's fears over crime and online safety to power internet regulation?'
The opinion piece examines the set of influences currently operating in Australia that could enable the government to strengthen internet regulation.
The full text can be accessed at https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/commentisfree/article/2024/may/07/could-labor-use-australias-fears-over-and-online-safety-to-power-internet-regulation

On May 3, 2024, SBS published a news report titled 'An expert warns age verification for porn "doesn't work"'. The report gives the views of Vanessa Teague, a cryptographer from the Australian National University, who argues that adult content providers and web sites will not co-operate, and users will use alternative VPNs.
The full text can be accessed at https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/an-expert-warns-age verification-for-porn-doesnt-work/nt3qltrwi

On May 2, 2024, The Conversation published a background and opinion piece by Paul Haskell-Dowland titled 'Australia will trial "age assurance" tech to bar children from online porn. What is it and will it work?'
The article explains the Australian decision and discusses its likelihood of success.
The full text can be accessed at https://theconversation.com/australia-will-trial-age-assurance-tech-to-bar-children-from-online-porn-what-is-it-and-will-it-work-229184

On May 2, 2024, Crikey published a comment by Bernard Keane titled 'Age verification won't work, but idiot verification is doing fine in the male violence debate'. The comment argues the system the Australian government intends to trial is ineffective in protecting children, will threaten privacy and civil liberties and drive adult site users toward more extreme material.
The full text can be accessed at https://www.crikey.com.au/2024/05/02/age verification-labor-pornography-male-violence-against-women/

On May 1, 2024, ABCNews published a report titled 'The federal government has given an online age verification pilot the green light. Here's what we know about it' The report outlines the reasons for the government's decision and how it may try to implement online age verification.
The full text can be accessed at https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-01/what-we-know-about-the-governments-online-age-verification-pilot/103791418

On May 1, 2024, Innovation Aus.com published a detailed report titled 'Online age verification pilot gets green light'. The article outlines the nature of the intended age verification trial and the background to the decision.
The full text can be accessed at https://www.innovationaus.com/online-age verification-pilot-gets-green-light/

On April 24, 2024, news.com.au published a report titled 'Michelle Rowland says social media age verification checks a "live issue" being worked through as AFP, ASIO weigh in' The article presents the views of spokespeople for the Australian Federal Police and ASIO that online age verification is necessary, including for social media.
The full text can be accessed at https://www.news.com.au/technology/online/social/michelle-rowland-says-social-media-age-verification-checks-a-live-issue-being-worked-through/news-story/3f77b8ab1a05180465a1c542a45b1cc1

On April 16, 2024, Scientific American published a background and comment piece tiled 'Online Age Verification Laws Could Do More Harm Than Good'. The piece outlines the threats to privacy and security that online age verification can represent.
The full text can be accessed at https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/online-age verification-laws-privacy/

On April 3, 2024, Xtra* published a comment by Nneka Ewulonu titled 'Why you should worry about age verification laws'
Ewulonu argues that these age verification laws are means of reducing access to queer content online. https://xtramagazine.com/power/politics/age verification-laws-264335

On March 29, 2024, The Kansas City Star published a comment by Tyler Curtis titled 'States pushing age verification for social media are risking everyone's data security' The article details the data security risks posed by current attempts to age delimit access to social media.
The full text can be accessed at https://www.kansascity.com/opinion/readers-opinion/guest-commentary/article287167915.html

On February 8, 2024, euronews.com published a comment by Ella Jakubowska and Viktoria Tomova titled 'The sledgehammer approach of age verification tools won't make the internet safer'. The authors argue that the age verification processes being employed are unlikely to be effective in protecting children yet may succeed in limiting the access of young and adult users to valuable information.
The full text can be accessed at https://www.euronews.com/next/2024/02/08/the-sledgehammer-approach-of-age-verification-tools-wont-make-the-internet-safer

On January 14, 2024, The Conversation published a comment by Azfar Adib titled 'Canada should not fall behind on implementing safety measures for children online'. The comment addresses the need to protect children and suggests the form of online age recognition that Canadians appear to find the least intrusive.

The full text cane be accessed at https://theconversation.com/canada-should-not-fall-behind-on-implementing-safety-measures-for-children-online-220353

On November 21, 2023, Innovation Files published a comment by Daniel Castro titled 'Protecting Children Online Does Not Require ID Checks for Everyone'. Castro suggests methods other than conventional age verification that could be used to limit children's access to the Internet.'
The full text can be accessed at https://itif.org/publications/2023/11/21/protecting-children-online-does-not-require-id-checks-for-everyone/

On October 10, 2023, Fast Company published a comment by Jeff Sakasegawa titled 'Should kids be subjected to age verification?' The opinion piece supports age verification online in part to protect them from sexual predators.
The full text can be accessed at https://www.fastcompany.com/90963518/should-kids-be-subjected-to-age verification

On October 4, 2023, European Digital Rights published a position paper titled 'Online age verification and children's rights'. The position paper argues that measures being taken to protect children from access to harmful material online are likely to infringe their right to access legitimate information.
The full text can be accessed at https://edri.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Online-age-verification-and-childrens-rights-EDRi-position-paper.pdf

On December 6, 2023, Newsweek published a comment by Teresa Huizar titled 'To Keep Kids Safe, the Internet Needs a Bouncer at the Door'. This opinion piece, which focuses on social media rather than pornography sites, stresses that age verification is needed to protect children from abuse and sextorion (sexual exploitation online).
Teresa Huizar is the head of The National Children's Alliance, America's largest network of care centres for child abuse victims.
The full text can be accessed at https://www.newsweek.com/keep-kids-safe-internet-needs-bouncer-door-opinion-1849397

On August 29, 2023, eSafety released a report it had submitted to the Australian federal government in March 2023. The report is titled 'Roadmap for Age Verification (and complimentary measures to prevent and mitigate harms to children from online pornography)'
The full text can be accessed at https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/consultation-cooperation/age-verification

Australia should demand rigorous online age verification

1. Those under 18 need to be protected from exposure to adult material
Opponents of those under 18 being able to access pornography claim that early exposure to adult material is harmful in a variety of ways.

Many studies have indicated the damaging effect that exposure to pornography can have on young people. An article published by the US Institute for Family Studies in April 2024 summarised the supposed negative effects. It claimed, 'Pornography proves to be especially detrimental to children and adolescents. According to many researchers, early exposure to pornography is connected to negative developmental outcomes, including a greater acceptance of sexual harassment, sexual activity at an early age, acceptance of negative

attitudes to women, unrealistic expectations, skewed attitudes toward gender roles, greater levels of body dissatisfaction, rape myths (attributing responsibility for sexual assault to a female victim), and sexual aggression. Children's brains are not equipped to process the adult experiences depicted. Early exposure to pornography also increases the likelihood that depression and relationship problems develop.' https://ifstudies.org/blog/what-happens-when-children-are-exposed-to-pornography The American College of Paediatrics has published a paper which similarly concluded, 'Negative effects include mental disturbance and unrest for the young school age child, including acting out and violent behavior. Because of its harmfulness to children, pornography must never be used as a tool to teach children human sexuality. For older adolescents and young adults, pornography teaches a false narrative regarding human sexuality and how men and women form healthy sexual relationships. This makes it more difficult for young men and women to form authentic, stable relationships.' https://acpeds.org/position-statements/the-impact-of-pornography-on-children

Research has indicated the harm that access to pornography can cause to young children. A submission made to the Australian Human Rights Commission by the lobby and research group eChildhood commented on the adverse effects on children of online pornography. It stated, 'Pornography has become an educator, grooming tool and a significant contributor to the scripting and programming of a child's sexual and relational development online; as well as a source of trauma for young children due to the nature of pornography.' https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-02/53.1_echildhood_.pdf It has been suggested that online pornography introduces children to human sexuality prematurely and in a way that can be distressing. Caroline Giroux, a psychiatrist, and an Associate Clinical Professor at the University of California, wrote in a paper published on December 7, 2021, in the Journal of Psychiatry Reform, 'Unlike erotic scenes in a movie or nude sculptures in a museum, pornography generally involves a power dynamic, humiliation, and a distortion of the reality around body and sexuality. In my opinion, it is a form of sexual trauma… [which] like witnessing a car accident or parental domestic abuse can be traumatic for the observer.' https://journalofpsychiatryreform.com/2021/12/07/early-exposure-to-pornography-a-form-of-sexual-trauma/ Some academics have claimed that exposure to pornography on the internet can result in the premature sexualisation of young children who may then act out aggressive sexual behaviours. Professor Freda Briggs, AO, warned that online pornography was affecting the behaviour of some children, making them sexually violent toward other children, imitating the adult behaviour they had seen. In her submission to the 2016 Senate inquiry into the harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the internet, she drew links between pornography and child sex abuse, paedophilia, and child-on-child sexual abuse. https://professionals.childhood.org.au/prosody/2016/07/melinda-tankard-reist/

The Australian Institute of Family Studies has issued a paper expressing concern that the sexual attitudes and behaviours of adolescent Australians are also being negatively affected by pornography. In a 2017 'research snapshot' it stated, 'In the absence of other information, pornography can be the main source of a young person's sex education. The use of pornography by adolescents is associated with stronger permissive sexual attitudes (e.g., premarital sex, casual sex). There is some evidence that exposure to pornography can increase the likelihood of earlier first-time sexual experience, particularly for those adolescents who consume pornography more frequently. Pornography can influence a young person's expectations about sex, for example what young men expect their partners to do and vice versa. It can shape sexual practices, with studies finding that young people may try performing common sexual acts seen in dominant hetero pornography … Gaps between

expectations and reality can produce "sexual uncertainty" about sexual beliefs and values and may also be related to sexual dissatisfaction, anxiety, and fear. The content of pornography may reinforce double standards of an active male sexuality and passive female receptacle.'
https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-snapshots/effects-pornography-children-and-young-people

2. Viewing pornography has been linked to sexual and physical abuse of women
One of the major reasons effective age verifications is wanted before accessing pornographic online material is that exposure to pornography is believed to encourage violence against women. Many social commentators argue that young people need to be protected from material which promotes gendered violence.

There is long-standing and widespread agreement among Australian psychologists that pornography depicts sexual relations in a way that contributes to violence against women. In the April 2015 issue of the Australian Psychological Society Journal, Emma Sampson and Heather Gridley noted, 'A fundamental concern about the harmful impact of pornography is the predominance (and increase) of sexual aggression and violence, the overwhelming majority of which is towards women. Research has found that almost 90 percent of scenes in pornographic videos portrayed physical aggression while nearly half contained verbal aggression, and that almost all (94 percent) showed the aggression perpetrated against women. Of equal concern is the depicted response from women to this violence, with most acts of aggression (9 in 10 in a recent study) being met with a neutral or a positive response by the women depicted.' https://psychology.org.au/inpsych/2015/april/sampson

A range of Australian researchers have demonstrated a connection between behaviour enacted in pornography and violent and controlling behaviour toward women. Our Watch is a non-profit organization established to help policy makers protect women and children from violence. Their 2020 report stated, 'Men are often depicted as aggressive, controlling, and dominant in pornography. These types of depictions of men have been identified as consequences of sexist and stereotypical ideas about masculinity that may increase the probability of violence against women. In contrast, women in pornography are often depicted as submissive, eager, and willing to comply with the demands of male characters…Results from Our Watch's survey suggest a link between pornography consumption and the view that men should be 'in charge'. For example, young people who watched pornography on a more regular basis were more likely than others to believe that women should learn to obey men, and that things tend to be better when men are in charge.' https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/20022415/Pornography-young-people-preventing-violence.pdf

Our Watch's independent studies and their research analyses have linked pornography with violent abuse of women. The organisation has stated, 'Condoning of violence against women is another of the identified drivers of such violence. The condoning of violence against women can be through justifying, excusing, trivialising, or downplaying it. These representations occur frequently in pornography, in which portrayals of violence are highly gendered – that is, violence is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men and directed towards women.' Referring to overviews of research linking pornography with violence, Our Watch has noted, 'Content analyses have revealed frequent aggression, non-consensual behaviour and multiple forms of violence towards women in pornography. These include physical aggression (e.g., hitting, slapping, gagging) and verbal aggression (e.g., name-calling). The frequency and eroticisation of such depictions may normalise and condone violence against

women, in sexual relationships and more generally. Pornography may encourage these views and/or reinforce them where they already exist.' https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/20022415/Pornography-young-people-preventing-violence.pdf

Similar conclusions regarding the causal relationship between pornography and violence against women have also been drawn in the United States. The Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society is a research center at Harvard University that focuses on the study of cyberspace. In a unit titled 'The Language of Violence in a New Context: Pornography and Cyberspace' the centre cites the Report of the US Attorney General's Commission on Pornography which states, '[C]linical and experimental research. . .[has] focused particularly on sexually violent material, [and] the conclusions have been virtually unanimous. In both clinical and experimental settings, exposure to sexually violent materials has indicated an increase in the likelihood of aggression. More specifically, the research shows a causal relationship between exposure to material of this type and aggressive behavior towards women.' https://cyber.harvard.edu/vaw00/module5.html

The US Attorney General's report further claims, 'Sexual violence is not the only negative effect reported in the research to result from substantial exposure to sexually violent materials. The evidence is also strongly supportive of significant attitudinal changes…These attitudinal changes are numerous. Victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence are likely to be perceived… as more responsible for the assault, as having suffered less injury, and as having been less degraded as a result of the experience. Similarly, people with a substantial exposure to violent pornography are likely to see the rapist or other sexual offender as less responsible for the act and as deserving of less stringent punishment…The evidence also strongly supports the conclusion that substantial exposure to violent sexually explicit material leads to a greater acceptance of the "rape myth" in its broader sense – that women enjoy being coerced into sexual activity, that they enjoy being physically hurt in sexual context, and that as a result a man who forces himself on a woman sexually is in fact merely acceding to the "real" wishes of the woman, regardless of the extent to which she seems to be resisting…' https://cyber.harvard.edu/vaw00/module5.html

3. Current online age verification methods are not working
Supporters of stricter online age verification claim huge numbers of young Australians between the ages of 13 and 18 are currently accessing adult material online.

Under Australian law, someone under 18 who watches pornography has not committed an offence. However, it is illegal to show such material to someone under 18. It is also illegal to view pornography if those in the video appear to be under 18.
https://www.defendingyou.com.au/2022/09/21/porn-is-it-legal-to-watch-it-in-australia/
Pornography in Australia is classified under a rating system which imposes age restrictions on the material. This applies to print and film material and includes material distributed online. The Online Safety Act 2021 regulates online content in Australia. The Act empowers a regulator called the eSafety Commissioner to take down online content deemed harmful or unsafe for Australians. Uploading pornography online must follow the regulations regarding online content in Australia and producers must ensure all X 18+ content is behind a restricted access system. https://www.sydneycriminallawyers.com.au/blog/pornography-laws-australia

The current restricted access system aims to limit the online exposure of children and young people under 18 to pornography and other age-inappropriate online content. Commonly

employed methods involve displaying an adults-only warning, requiring a user to input their date of birth, or requiring a user to scan or mail a copy of an identity document. The Age Verification Providers Association (AVPA) has claimed that these initial methods are easily evaded and are not adequate in circumstances where legislation imposes age restrictions. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Social_Policy_and_Legal_Affairs/Onlineageverification/Report/section?id=committees%2Freportrep%2F024436%2F72614

Despite existing restrictions, pornography in all forms (print, pictures, and videos) is widely viewed by young people in Australia. A 2024 online survey of 1,985 young Australians aged between 15 and 20 found exposure to pornography was reported by 86 percent of male and 69 percent of female participants. Most exposure occurred when participants were alone and at home, regardless of gender. Young men were more likely than young women to seek out pornography and to view it frequently, with over half (54 percent) of male participants reporting weekly use compared with 14 percent of female participants. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1326020024000104#:~:text=Among%20all%20young%20people%2C%205.7,respectively%20(see%20Figure%201).

Many critics of Australia's online age verification systems claim that they offer no serious protection against those under 18 accessing pornography. In 2023, the Australian eSafety Commissioner issued a report noting that 73 percent of Australian adolescents aged 16 to 18 have seen online pornography. 33 percent first viewed the material when they were less than 13 and 50 percent began viewing the material between the ages of 13 and 15. Of these, 70 percent accessed pornography websites and 35 percent viewed pornography on social media. https://theconversation.com/australia-will-trial-age-assurance-tech-to-bar-children-from-online-porn-what-is-it-and-will-it-work-229184#:~:text=Some%20of%20the%20data%20in,between%20ages%2013%20and%2015 10 percent of those surveyed indicated they had first viewed pornography before they were 10. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-01/what-we-know-about-the-governments-online-age verification-pilot/103791418

4. Robust age verification processes benefit online content providers
Supporters of strict age verification methods online argue that they benefit the adult content provider. Being required to adopt more effective age verification measures can benefit adult content providers in ways that weak age verification processes do not. They help to protect the reputation of the adult services providers, prevent claims for repayment of false credit card charges, give accurate client base information and prevent conflict with regulatory bodies.

Effective age verification processes help adult content providers avoid reputational damage. Those accessing adult products online expect providers to act responsibly and monitor the age of their client base. Referring to the British situation, Ben Rossi, writing for Information Age, noted that the general community has lost tolerance of online content providers who do not accept the same obligations they would have in the non-digital world. Rossi notes, 'Online businesses are beginning to realise that they have the same responsibilities to prevent children from using services, accessing content, or obtaining products that are age-restricted, as businesses that operate in the real world. For too long "a lack of parental control" has been used as an excuse for children gaining access to inappropriate goods online. One would have little sympathy for a merchant on the high street selling whisky or cigarettes to children on the grounds that their parents were not there to stop the transaction.'

https://www.information-age.com/why-age verification-matters-online-businesses-2142/
Robust age verification methods help businesses meet the expectations of their adult audience and so avoid the reputational damage that comes from using inadequate technologies.

Adult-content sites also run the risk of chargebacks if they are not able to accurately identify the age of site users. Providers that do not use effective age verification have to make restitution to wrongly charged credit cardholders and so suffer damage their brand. Age verification provider ShuftiPro has warned, 'Often children use the identity cards of their parents/elders to buy goods online. In such cases, if a business does not use identity verification it might end up losing its credibility and will also face penalties.' https://shuftipro.com/blog/age verification-does-your-business-need-it/ As tech entrepreneurs DevX have explained, 'Improper age verification processes can lead to minors using their parents' credit cards, digital IDs, or even government-issued IDs without consent to purchase products or services online. In turn, parents may request chargebacks for such transactions.' https://www.devx.com/browsers/the-importance-of-secure-age verification-in-online-transactions/

Another advantage that strict age verification processes supply is accurate customer information. This can lead to better customer relations and the opportunity to improve the product and expand the user base. The verification solutions consultants VeriDas have explained, 'Age verification can help businesses to understand their customer base better. By collecting age-related data, businesses can gain insights into the preferences and behaviours of different age groups, which can be used to tailor products and services, improve marketing efforts, and ultimately increase revenue.' https://veridas.com/en/what-is-age verification/

Finally, effective age verification methods assist producers of adult products by reducing the risk of conflict with regulatory bodies and web hosts, which can result in various penalties. In some jurisdictions, businesses can be held liable for the actions of minors who access age-restricted content or services. https://veridas.com/en/what-is-age verification/ Age verification provider ShuftiPro has warned online producers of adult content of the consequences they face, stating, 'Several businesses are unaware of the significance that age verification holds for their business. UK gambling firms paid £19.6m in penalties due to money laundering and under-age gambling conducted on their platforms.' https://shuftipro.com/blog/age verification-does-your-business-need-it/ Since 2016 Britain has been increasing the penalties applied to online producers and distributors of adult materials that do not comply with age verification. Among the first penalties applied was to allow advertisers to withhold payment from online businesses that did not meet their age verification requirements. https://www.information-age.com/government-takes-pornography-companies-age verification-demands-866/ Poor age verification processes can lead to legal action, and the loss of licences or permits needed to continue to operate. https://www.devx.com/browsers/the-importance-of-secure-age verification-in-online-transactions/

5. Age verification methods can be made secure
Those who support age verification systems argue they can be made secure, so they are not a major risk to users' privacy or the security of their online data and identity.

Australia's eSafety Commissioner, Julie Inman Grant, has recommended that Australia use a double-blind tokenised approach. The system would involve anonymised digital tokens, issued by a third-party provider (the age assurance provider) who is accredited to securely

receive and verify personal data. The token could then be presented as proof of age without a person ever having to hand over personal information to the porn site. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-07/screenshot-age verification-for-porn-open-ai-search-threat/103809476 The eSafety Commissioner has explained what the system involves. She noted, 'This is where age-restricted websites do not know the identity of a user, and the age assurance service provider does not record which sites a user visits.' The Commissioner further explained, 'An electronic token can be produced once a person's age is verified or estimated by an age assurance provider. Rather than providing a user's specific age, tokens can be limited to confirm whether a user meets a minimum age requirement. This allows the online service to confirm age requirements are met without viewing or collecting users' personal information. The system can be designed so the token is stored in a user's digital wallet or browser and may be reused for a period of time, when trying to access age-restricted services requiring the same level of assurance. This can serve to reduce friction for users and to reduce the regulatory burden for age-restricted services.' https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/Roadmap-for-age verification_2.pdf

The eSafety Commissioner also recommended to the Australian Government other services which could undertake age verification while protecting user privacy and data security. One of these is a similar system developed in France. The French data regulator, Commission Nationale Informatique & Libertés (CNIL), in partnership with cryptography researchers, has developed and released an open-source demonstration of a zero-knowledge proof of age exchange. Models like this allow only the age attribute to be shared and shares neither information about the user's identity with the age-restricted service nor information about the nature of the age-restricted service with the provider of the age attribute. The Commissioner suggested, ' This may mitigate concerns about user privacy, and in particular concerns about tracking users' online behaviour.' https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/Roadmap-for-age verification_2.pdf

The eSafety Commissioner noted that the digital communications industry is moving toward 'an internationally defined age token and the provision of multiple accredited [verification] options for consumers to select their preference for proving their age.' The Commissioner also observed that the proof of age token could remain with the user within a digital wallet. https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/Roadmap-for-age verification_2.pdf

Australia already has an Identity Verification Service. Enacted into law in 2023, this service enables automated disclosures of personal information to a specified person via the Document Verification Service or the Face Verification Service. Identity verification services are used by government departments and businesses – such as credit card providers and power companies – to combat fraud and identity theft. The Identity Verification Services use encryption and authorisation procedures approved by the Australian Signals Directorate to ensure data protection, security, and confidentiality. https://www.idmatch.gov.au/privacy-and-security The security processes used by these services could also be used by age assurance service providers.

Australia should not demand rigorous online age verification

1. Age verification is difficult to implement and has a significant failure rate
Critics of online age verification argue that the principal verification methods being proposed all have major flaws. These methods are not able to guarantee that many under-age users will

not continue to access potentially damaging material and they are likely to inconvenience legal users.

Australia has considered three types of data to allow Internet users to offer proof of age. The first is identification through government issued identity documents. The main identity documents proposed are drivers' licences and passports. This can be done in two ways. The most administratively easy is through supplying information contained on the identity document, such as the person's driver's licence number or the expiry date on the licence. https://tinyurl.com/3baf8arc The major problem with this is that a minor (someone under 18) could obtain this information from a parent's licence or a fraudulent third party could sell on information from another person's stolen licence or passport. https://www.theverge.com/23721306/online-age verification-privacy-laws-child-safety

A second method suggested is that rather than print-data from the card being used as proof of age, facial recognition technology could be used to match the Internet user's real-world face with the image on the government-issued document. https://tinyurl.com/3baf8arc However, critics maintain that the system is flawed and is likely to result in users being denied access because the facial recognition software has failed to match the stored image accurately with the face of the Internet user. The American Civil Liberties Union has noted that 'Face recognition is generally problematic; it is often inaccurate and has differential error rates by race and gender.' https://www.aclu.org/news/privacy-technology/three-key-problems-with-the-governments-use-of-a-flawed-facial-recognition-service Changes in appearance as the subject ages can also result in failures to match. Studies have shown that recognition fails to be reliable if there is more than a five-year age difference between the subject in the image and the real-world person. https://au.pcmag.com/security/95825/humans-have-a-natural-defense-against-facial-recognition-aging

People legally entitled to access pornography or other age-restricted online material could also be excluded because they do not have a driver's licence or a passport. https://www.theverge.com/23721306/online-age verification-privacy-laws-child-safety It has been suggested that less high-status forms of government issued ID (such as keypass cards) could be used; however, critics have argued that they would be even less secure.

A third method that has been considered is 'age estimation'. This involves estimating or predicting a user's age without reference to government-issued identity documents or other databases. One example of this is Yoti's Age Scan product, which involves a user submitting a facial image from the camera on their phone. As Yoti notes, 'The user does not have to register to use the service and does not have to provide any information about themselves. Therefore, no identity document need be presented. The user simply presents their face in front of the camera.' https://tinyurl.com/3baf8arc The age estimate generally takes under two seconds to produce. However, critics are concerned that the technology is not sophisticated enough to discriminate between a mid-teen and a late teen. This level of discrimination is necessary if the technology were being used for an age verification test. https://www.theverge.com/23721306/online-age verification-privacy-laws-child-safety

Another form of 'age estimation' involves monitoring the user's online behaviour. Australia's eSafety Commissioner has explained, 'How an individual interacts and engages online leaves traces that can be utilised to identify whether they are an adult or a child. For example, a handle or username, image tags, hashtag usage, gesture patterns, web history, content interaction, IP address, location data, device serial number, contacts – all can be used to

measure what age-bracket that you might fall under.' https://tinyurl.com/3baf8arc
Independent studies indicate that these age estimates are 90 percent accurate
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277930254_Detecting_the_Age_of_a_Person_throu
gh_Web_Browsing_Patterns . Critics note that a 10 percent failure rate is a problem to the
extent that it would allow many under-age users to access suspect sites and would also block
many users who should legally be able to access pornography.

2. Age verification can be avoided through VPNs
Many of those opposed to age verification online argue the move is a waste of government
and administrative effort. They claim the requirement to verify the user's age can be easily
sidestepped by adopting a VPN (virtual private network) which can make it appear that the
user is based in a country or legal jurisdiction which does not require rigorous proof of user
age.

Countries that seek to impose stricter proof of age requirements on Internet users accessing
pornographic material demand website hosts remove any site that does not have the required
method of age verification. A web host is also known as an Internet Service Provider or ISP.
If any website host refuses to do this, the country can then prohibit the host from providing a
service within its national borders. However, critics note, Internet users can easily avoid this
process by using a VPN.

A VPN is a virtual private network. It adds anonymity to users when they connect to web-
based services and sites. A VPN hides the user's actual public IP address. This makes it
difficult for the web host to recognise the user's location.
https://www.proofpoint.com/au/threat-reference/vpn This means that the web host cannot be
held responsible for not applying the age verification requirements that apply in a particular
country. Widespread use of VPNs would make it almost impossible for Australia to enforce
its proof of user age regulations.

Shoshana Weissmann, writing for RStreet in an article published on August 29, 2023,
explained, 'Obviously, age verification laws would force Internet Service Providers to
identify the age of their users in each specific area - Utah's laws apply to residents in Utah,
Arkansas' laws apply to residents in Arkansas, U.S. law would apply to U.S. residents, and so
on. But people can use VPNs to get around age verification by making their web traffic
appear as though it originates in a jurisdiction outside the law's reach.'
https://www.rstreet.org/commentary/age verification-laws-dont-exempt-vpn-traffic-but-that-
traffic-cant-always-be-detected/

Typically, Internet users will choose a VPN in a country which allows them to avoid some of
the barriers to Internet use which apply within their own country. Iceland is a popular country
to locate a VPN server if the user is in the northern hemisphere. AVG.com notes, 'Iceland …
has strong net neutrality laws, equal access to the internet, minimal restrictions to online
content, limited self-censorship, and a culture that promotes digital freedom…Very little, if
any, content is blocked in Iceland – and by extension, an Iceland VPN. Content restrictions
are limited to copyright infringements.' https://www.avg.com/en/signal/best-vpn-server-
locations-to-use

VPN use in Australia is already widespread. A recent article published online by The
Canberra Times noted, 'VPN usage increased significantly in Australia between 2020 and
2024 where percentage usage increased from 25.1 percent to 27.1 percent This growth has

been facilitated mainly by an increasing awareness of issues related to online privacy, data retention issues, and accessing geo-restricted content. Industry reports indicate that Australians are using VPNs at a rate of 20 percent more than before, indicating a greater need for data protection and digital privacy.' https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8581443/7-surprising-stats-revealing-australias-vpn-surge/ Bernard Keane, in an article published by Crikey on May 2, 2024, claimed that online age verification could be easily avoided in Australia. Keane stated, 'People will just use a VPN to route around Australia's censorship requirements, which is what people currently do to access torrenting sites ostensibly blocked by the Australian Communications and Media Authority's mandatory "blacklist".' https://www.crikey.com.au/2024/05/02/age verification-labor-pornography-male-violence-against-women/ In an article published on August 31, 2023, Digital Rights Watch similarly noted, 'Many of the current approaches to AV (age verification) are relatively easily bypassed, for example, by use of a Virtual Private Network (VPN).' The article concluded that the proposed Australian measures were likely to do no more than inconvenience adult Internet users while not protecting those under 18 from restricted content. https://digitalrightswatch.org.au/2023/08/31/campaign-win-against-age verification/

3. Age verification can threaten the privacy and security of Internet users
Critics claim that implementing age verification for pornography raises significant privacy concerns. Requiring individuals to provide personal information, drawn from identification documents or credit card details, could lead to potential data breaches or unauthorised access to sensitive information.

All the proposed online age verification methods carry significant security and privacy risks. In an article published by Scientific American on April 16, 2024, Lauren Leffer stated, 'Currently the most widely adopted methods of digital age verification involve users sharing sensitive information such as facial scans, official ID cards or banking particulars with third-party companies—details which, in the process, inevitably get linked to individual data on pornography consumption. This poses obvious opportunities for hacking, theft, and extortion.' https://tinyurl.com/t4fhmhuu The same point has been made by The Electronic Media Foundation in an article by Jason Kelley and Adam Schwartz published on March 10, 2023. Kelley and Schwartz argue, 'Age verification systems are surveillance systems. Mandatory age verification, and with it, mandatory identity verification, is the wrong approach to protecting young people online. It would force websites to require visitors to prove their age by submitting information such as government-issued identification. This scheme would lead us further towards an internet where our private data is collected and sold by default.' https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2023/03/age verification-mandates-would-undermine-anonymity-online

The age verification methods being applied around the world threaten individual privacy. Kelley and Schwartz, writing for The Electronic Media Foundation have noted, 'Once information is shared to verify age, there's no way for a website visitor to be certain that the data they're handing over is not going to be retained and used by the website, or further shared or even sold. While some age verification mandates have limits on retention and disclosure of this data, significant risk remains. Users are forced to trust that the website they visit, or its third-party verification service, both of which could be fly-by-night companies with no published privacy standards, are following these rules.' https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2023/03/age verification-mandates-would-undermine-anonymity-online Through age verification, users' identities are linked to the use of pornography sites. This leaves users exposed to potential threats of public embarrassment or

even extortion. Such sensitive information could, for example, be sold on or hacked and used against commercial or political opponents. Giacomo Lev Mannheimer a Research Fellow at the Bruno Leoni Institute has warned about the dangers of Britain's Online Safety Act which is another government attempt to prevent those under 18 accessing pornography. Mannheimer sees these new regulations as endangering user privacy and their free access to the adult entertainment of their choice. He states, 'The age verification mandate within the Online Safety Act poses a significant threat to privacy and user freedom by creating a database linking individual identities with adult content consumption… Improper regulation of adult content undermines the internet as a hub of unparalleled freedom … Policymakers must strike a balance by tackling illicit activities while safeguarding user privacy [and] free expression…' https://iea.org.uk/media/pornography-age verification-threatens-user-privacy-says-new-report/

The age verification processes being proposed also threaten users' data security. Opponents argue that age verification methods involve users exposing their sensitivity identity data, such as facial images and passport and driver's licence details, and so leave them vulnerable to fraud. This is already a major problem worldwide. In 2021, nearly 42 million Americans became victims of personal data fraud, losing $52 billion. https://medium.com/@fucingbreeds/risks-of-traditional-age verification-methods-and-the-rise-of-privacy-innovations-f63e81412ede The personal information obtained through the different online age verification methods can be used by cyber criminals to open credit accounts, make large purchases and cause havoc in the financial lives of the users whose online identities have been compromised.

When users' online identity data has been compromised, this exposes them to other inconveniences. John Reynolds, the vice president of the online security consultants Aleo, has warned, 'The more information available online about you, the more likely you are to be subject to tracking services that follow your activity across the sites and services you use, as well as solicitation from unwanted contacts. The private information on your ID, such as your birth date, could even be used to help hackers guess your online passwords or the answers to your security questions, which could lead to other negative consequences.' https://aleo.org/post/dont-risk-identity-fraud-to-play-that-video-game/

4. Age verification can lead Internet users to access more extreme material
Opponents of age verification to prevent young people from accessing harmful online material argue that many internet users will sidestep the requirement by accessing sites that do not comply with the law. This is concerning because these non-complying sites are likely to carry more explicit and violent material.

One international pornography provider told Australia's E-Safety Commission, 'Measures which create too much friction will deter customers or users from accessing compliant sites…this could create incentives for users to follow the path of least resistance and access alternative adult sites, which are non-compliant with any age assurance regulations. It may also be less secure for users, as well as less ethical in the production and distribution of adult content and is more likely to contain harmful content.' https://tinyurl.com/4avw2btv

Commenting on the possibility of young users being led to more dangerous sites, Bernard Keane, writing for Crikey on May 2, 2024, explained, 'Put simply, if you make it harder to access regular porn sites, users, including kids, will just go somewhere else much worse. The censors, the media and the regulators will be responsible for that perverse outcome.'

https://www.crikey.com.au/2024/05/02/age verification-labor-pornography-male-violence-against-women/ The same point was made in Submission 219 to the federal government's 'Inquiry into age verification for online wagering and online pornography'. The submission writer stated, 'The hassle may drive users to more unregulated and illegal environments.' https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-3038649923/view Similarly, RMIT cyber expert, Matt Warren, has warned that a poorly thought-out response could see children drawn to the dark web (an unregulated section of the internet) exposing them to more harmful material like child pornography. Referring to the dark web, Warren noted, 'Society norms wouldn't apply there because they're not regulated or policed.' Warren further warned, 'If people go on the dark web to look for pornography, they may be drawn into other areas as well in terms of drugs.' https://www.news.com.au/technology/online/internet/experts-warn-age verification-for-porn-sites-could-be-unworkable-push-kids-to-the-dark-web/news-story/70cd0f58b4b5288b7ea38da1b9e79c59

In August 2023, the Australian government rejected a previous proposal to place age restrictions on online access to gambling and pornography. The government stated, 'It is clear from the roadmap at present, each type of age verification or age assurance technology comes with its own privacy, security, effectiveness or implementation issues.' https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/aug/31/roadmap-for-age verification-online-pornographic-material-adult-websites-australia-law Included among these issues is the possibility of internet users, including children, being diverted to more extreme pornography sites because these do not require age verification.

These reservations have been expressed in other countries where age verification processes are being put in place for those accessing pornography. Michael Stabile, director of public affairs at the US Free Speech Coalition, has stated, 'My greatest fear when I looked at [these bills to implement age verification] was that this is…going to push kids to more and more dangerous sites.' https://mashable.com/article/what-are-age verification-bills-porn-louisiana-utah The same point was made in a recent backgrounding briefing paper prepared for the British government which is also considering online age verification. The paper states, 'There is also a risk that both adults and children may be pushed towards ToR [software used to access to the dark web] where they could be exposed to illegal activities and more extreme material.' The British Open Rights Group campaign also noted the government had 'shot itself in the foot; with the age verification policy because it would force more web users underground'. The campaign's legal director Myles Jackman said that avoiding age verification by using illegal, underground sites would increase the risk of people accessing the kind of 'extremist' and 'hate speech' material Home Secretary Amber Rudd was trying to restrict and make it more difficult for the security services to monitor users. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-42577460

5. Educating children and adults about respectful sexual relationships and the danger of pornography is more effective than online age verification
Critics of age verification to access pornographic and other potentially dangerous or harmful sites claim education is likely to be more effective than age embargos in protecting people from harm. Many social commentators argue that education in respectful sexual relations and information about the limitations of pornography are vital because age verification is no protection once adults are legally able to view this material.

Most young Australian males regularly view pornography. A 2017 study found that 99 per cent of men aged between 18 and 30 reported accessing pornography in the last year. Many

were habitual consumers, with 39 per cent reporting that they watched pornography daily. A further 46 per cent reported accessing pornography weekly. That means 85 per cent of men were accessing pornography at least once a week. https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/we-need-to-talk-about-pornography

Research has suggested that the unrealistic scenarios presented in online pornography can have harmful effects on young men's sex lives. A report published on March 23, 2021, in Trends in Urology and Men's Health stated, 'Overall, men who use porn more often tend to report less satisfaction with their sex life. The use of porn may potentially reduce sexual satisfaction due to real-life partners not living up to the idealised images seen online, disappointment if a partner does not want to recreate pornographic scenes [and] disappointment stemming from the inability to obtain the range of sexual novelties seen in porn with a real partner.' https://wchh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/tre.791 The same report also noted, 'The risk of ED (erectile dysfunction) appears to increase with the number of pornographic films viewed in the preceding year, and problematic use of online sexual activities…was associated with lower erectile function and lower overall sexual satisfaction.' https://wchh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/tre.791

It has further been claimed that online pornography not only reduces many men's satisfaction with their sex lives, but it also creates unrealistic expectations of how female partners should be treated and the sexual experiences they are likely to enjoy. This can lead to the abuse of women within relationships. In August 2022 the Beyond Silence project began. It is a study undertaken by the Australian Research Council which gives women a safe forum in which they can record their experiences of sexual abuse by a partner. Many respondents have reported an apparent link between sexual violence and other mistreatment and their partner's use of pornography. https://www.saferfamilies.org.au/beyond-silence Many women commented on being forced to watch pornography and claimed it acted as a model for their sexual interactions with their partner. One woman stated, 'I think porn is a massive issue … that … impacts the way that women are treated, especially young women going in and feeling like that's how you should be treated in relationships.' https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/special_reports/3311

There are those who argue that rather than simply using age verification to try to physically block young people from accessing pornography, schools should include discussion of the limitations of pornography in their sex education programs. Of the 29 states in the United States which mandate sex education, only five include pornography literacy. One of the most comprehensive is 'The Truth About Pornography: A Pornography-Literacy Curriculum for High School Students Designed to Reduce Sexual and Dating Violence.' The course is an initiative of the Boston Public Health Commission and was offered online during COVID lockdowns. Students are never shown porn in the program, but instructors talk candidly about the history of pornography and obscenity laws, sexual norms, and gendered double standards, and the research on pornography and its compulsive use. The curriculum also includes sessions on healthy relationships, the unrealistic sexual scripts portrayed in pornography, and sexually explicit selfies. A pilot study found that after taking the class students were less likely to see pornography as realistic or a good way to learn about sex. https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/03/teaching-porn-literacy

An Australian study on pornography education has stated, 'Pornography education usefully may be implemented in a variety of contexts, including in school curricula, parental socialization, community settings, mainstream and social media, and social marketing

campaigns. Evidence from the related violence prevention and health promotion fields suggests that the use of multiple, reinforcing strategies across a range of settings will support the effectiveness of pornography education initiatives.' https://itstimewetalked.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Crabbe-and-Flood-School-based-education-to-address-pornographys-influence-A-proposed-practice-framework-pre-print-edition-2021.pdf In Australia, the Respectful Relationships program is at the centre of attempts to address the impact of pornography through education. Respectful Relationships is a set of evidence-based resources promoting the development and maintenance of healthy relationships of all kinds. The resources are for use in and beyond sexuality education classes. All Victorian government schools are mandated to deliver the Respectful Relationships curriculum as recommended by Australia's recent royal commission into family violence. Other schools in Australia may use this curriculum resource; however, they are not required to do so.

Experts claim that we need a multifaceted approach to informing the population about the dangers and limitations of pornography, working within schools, parent groups, supplying information on mainstream and social media and through government-funded public information campaigns of the type used to address a variety of public health issues. Ideally, this education should be mandated in schools.

Further implications

Some critics of age verification as a means of protecting children and adolescents from the harmful effects of online pornography suggest that support for such centralised measures indicate that many parents are not actively guiding their children's development within the digital world. The most recent Essential poll released by The Guardian Australia found that 79 percent of respondents support enforcing online age verifications for pornography and gambling sites and 76 percent support enforcing age verification for social media. https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/article/2024/may/07/australia-esafety-law-changes-age verification-social-med This seems to suggest that parents do not feel able to monitor their children's exposure to the online world.

Virtually all Australian children have access to the internet within their own homes. The eSafety parent survey showed that 96 percent of Australian parents have some sort of internet connection in their home. https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-07/eSafety%20Research%20Parenting%20Digital%20Age.pdf 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics data showed that 97 percent of households with children under 15 had access to the internet, with an average of seven internet-connected devices in each household. https://tinyurl.com/2569k9py

With this level of internet connection by families, it is likely that many children have been exposed to problematic material or had negative experiences online. In 2016-17, 14 percent of connected households with children aged 5-14 stated a child had been exposed to inappropriate material and 5 percent of these households stated a child aged 5-14 had been subject to cyberbullying. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/industry/technology-and-innovation/household-use-information-technology/latest-release It is probable that in many other households' problematic internet experiences had occurred but without parents' knowledge.

As indicated by a recent eSafety survey, the rated parent concerns about online risks to their children were 38 percent concerned about exposure to inappropriate content (other than pornography), 37 percent concerned about contact with strangers, 34 percent concerned about

online bullying, 33 percent concerned about exposure to online pornography, and 31 percent concerned about their children developing an internet addiction. https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-07/eSafety%20Research%20Parenting%20Digital%20Age.pdf

However, what is even more concerning than the areas about which the surveyed parents were worried, is their responses to questions about how they manage their children's exposure to the internet. Though 78 percent stated that that they took an active role in monitoring what their child does online, the figures dropped dramatically when parents were asked about their ability to respond to negative online experiences. Only 46 percent were confident to deal with any cyberbullying that their child might face. While only the same percentage knew where to go to get help for their child's online safety issues or felt confident to deal with the online threats that their child could face. https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-07/eSafety%20Research%20Parenting%20Digital%20Age.pdf

The above data indicates that less than half of Australian parents know how to assist their children if something goes wrong online. Joseph Scaramucci, a US expert in human trafficking law enforcement has urged that parents become more informed and more actively involved in the online lives of their children. He advises this because of his awareness that even pre-teens can avoid filters and age verifications in their eagerness to explore the web. Scaramucci has urged that parents 'Foster open and honest conversations with children about sexuality and pornography. Provide age-appropriate information about healthy relationships, consent, and the potential harms of pornography.' https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-age verification-pornography-websites-texas-wont-stop-scaramucci-oxxoc/ Scaramucci seems concerned that parents help their children establish a set of attitudes about sexuality and pornography that will make them less likely to seek it out and more aware of its negative impacts.

In Australia, however, recent survey data suggests that parents would like this role to be taken on by schools. Parents wanting more sex education delivered within schools includes parents agreeing that more information be given to students about the nature and the hazards of pornography. In an article published by The Conversation on April 4, 2023, Jacqueline Hendriks, Research Fellow and Lecturer at Curtin University, wrote, 'Interestingly, [parental] preference [shown within recent survey data] was for more sensitive lessons, such as reasons to engage/not engage in sex, safer sex practices, sexting, contraception, and pornography to start in years 7 and 8. This is an important finding,' Hendriks notes, 'as we know many schools hold off on delivering a lot of their sexuality education until years 9 and 10, as guided by the Australian curriculum.' https://theconversation.com/australian-parents-want-schools-to-teach-more-sex-education-topics-and-teach-them-from-an-earlier-age-202441

Clearly, many countries, including Australia, are coming to recognise the need to guide children through the online world, including that of sex sites. What is currently lacking is consensus around how this is best achieved.