

YOUR IMAGE BELONGS TO YOU

YOUNG PEOPLE, SOCIAL MEDIA AND IMAGE AUTONOMY

An exploratory study on preventing image-based harms

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KEY TERMS

Bodily autonomy

Bodily autonomy is the ability to freely make decisions regarding one's own body and life, without coercion or violence (1).

Deepfakes

Deepfakes are fake photos, videos or audio that depict a real person doing or saying something that they did not do or say, created using artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, including generative AI (2, 3).

Gendered violence

Gendered violence is any form of physical or non-physical violence or abuse enacted against a person or group of people because of their sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression.

Generative artificial intelligence

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) describes models of AI software that produce 'novel content such as text, images, audio, video and code in response to prompts' (4 p. 3).

Image autonomy

Image autonomy is a term coined by CEO of Body Safety Australia Deanne Carson in 2018 (5). Image autonomy is defined as the right of an individual to make informed decisions about participating in a photo or video, having informed consent about how their image may be used or altered, and how it may be shared. Image autonomy is a strengths-based approach to taking, creating, altering and sharing images, which recognises children's agency, right to participation and respect for the rights of others.

Image-based harm

This term is used throughout the report to describe harmful sexual behaviours, gendered violence or other types of abuse that are enacted by taking, artificially generating, and sharing or threatening to share images of a person or people. This term also captures the consequences and ill-effects for those whose images are taken, created and shared. We use this term to refer to harms enacted against both children and adults.

Manosphere

The manosphere refers to diverse websites, social media accounts, chat forums and other online communities formed as backlash to the perceived threat of feminism, feminists and women (or people of any gender who are seen to disrupt rigid gender norms and ideas of 'natural' patriarchal power). The manosphere can include spaces where issues such as men's health and wellbeing are discussed, but these may include or overlap with forums where participants' resentments or sense of disenfranchisement are aired in ways that promote or feed into male supremacist and misogynistic views (6-9).

Primary prevention

Primary prevention seeks to stop family violence, violence against women and other forms of gendered violence from occurring in the first place by addressing their underlying drivers. This requires changing the social conditions that give rise to this violence; reforming the institutions and systems that excuse, justify or promote it; and shifting the power imbalances, social norms, practices and structures that maintain it (10 p. 6).

Recommender systems (social media algorithms)

Recommender systems, or content creation systems, are ‘systems that prioritise content or make personalised content suggestions to users of online services’ such as social media sites (11 p. 3). These systems rely on complex algorithms that employ machine learning to process large amounts of user data and feed users content tailored to their perceived interests. Colloquially, they are often referred to as simply ‘the algorithm’ or ‘social media algorithms’.

Respectful relationships education

Respectful relationships education (RRE) is a core component of the Victorian Curriculum and of primary prevention of gendered violence. RRE takes a whole-school approach to modelling respect, consent and equitable relationships, and teaching children how to build healthy relationships, resilience and confidence. RRE within schools has been identified as an important component of primary prevention of gendered violence within national primary prevention framework *Change the story* (12) and the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032 (13).

Technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviours (TA-HSBs)

Harmful sexual behaviours are sexual behaviours exhibited by children and young people under the age of 18 that are inappropriate for a young person’s age or stage of development, or that are sexually exploitative or harmful. When these behaviours occur in a digital setting, they are referred to as online or technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviours (14).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

‘Your image belongs to you’: *Young people, social media and image autonomy* presents findings from an exploratory study that considers new avenues for practice, policy and research on what might help or inhibit children and young people to be safe online.

In this study, Body Safety Australia and Respect Victoria spoke with specialised facilitators who deliver respectful relationships education to thousands of children and young people in Victoria each year. We used their insights to investigate two overlapping research questions:

1. How can respectful relationships educators’ observations about how children and young people talk about social media, gaming, online safety and image sharing help us to understand how to prevent image-based harmful sexual behaviours, including AI-generated harmful sexual behaviours?
2. In what ways might social media algorithms be understood as a contributing factor to gendered violence enacted by children and young people?

‘Your image belongs to you’ makes three important, new contributions to primary prevention research and practice evidence. First, it introduces the concept of image autonomy – the idea that every person, no matter their age, has the right to decide how their image is taken and shared – into policy and research literature. Second, it explores how social norms modelled by adults may influence how children perceive respect and consent for image taking and sharing. Third, it examines the role of social media algorithms and algorithms on other online platforms as mechanisms that contribute to the likelihood and occurrence of technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviours (TA-HSBs) enacted by children and young people.

Methods

This research was an exploratory qualitative study jointly led by Body Safety Australia and Respect Victoria. It draws on two focus group discussions with respectful relationships educators – specialist practitioners contracted by schools to facilitate respectful relationships and consent education in classrooms. Participants had worked as respectful relationships educators for between nine months and seven years at Body Safety Australia.

We asked participants about their observations of how children and young people in Victorian classrooms talk about gender, social media, and harmful images generated by their peers using artificial intelligence (AI) programs and apps. Participants were also asked to share what they have observed of how peer, teacher and school community interactions and dynamics shape attitudes towards use of AI-generated images and image sharing.

Key findings

The report presents three key findings from the analysis.

1. Children, young people and adults do not appear to understand the concept of image autonomy

Educators in the focus groups shared that many young people think it is normal for their image to be captured and shared without their consent, because these practices have been commonplace throughout their life: for example, parents or family members sharing candid photos on social media platforms. These established norms can create barriers for educators in talking to students about image-

based autonomy and consent in the context of online safety and addressing TA-HSBs.

*If you say, 'Your image belongs to you', even from grade 3, they're debating you and they're saying, 'No it doesn't, because my mum posts photos of me all the time and that bath photo of me, I hate it, but ... this person is sharing it.'*¹

Social media platforms appear to influence understanding of image autonomy, as they incentivise high volumes of image sharing. The broad range of online content that children consume can contribute to poor understanding of image autonomy by normalising the prolific sharing of day-to-day life and modelling the non-consensual sharing of a child's image for profit. This helps to maintain a widespread belief that children don't have a right to say no to participating in photos or videos.

It's just so popular [with kids]. That it's adults who have a family [vlog] ... that's their entire form of income ... filming their family. It really normalises the whole [idea that] as children ... family can do whatever with our image.

2. Exposure to gender norms, stereotypes and misogyny across online platforms may influence young people's behaviours in the classroom

Children's and young people's exposure to harmful gender norms, stereotypes and misogyny across social media, gaming and adjacent platforms appears to influence their attitudes and how they behave towards their peers and teachers in the classroom. The educators in the focus groups had had different experiences with how often children brought up famous manosphere influencers such as Andrew Tate in the classroom, but most agreed that it was very common for boys to use gendered meme language they had been exposed to through the platforms used for streaming games,

such as Discord, Twitch and YouTube. Many of them had observed boys using manosphere language such as 'sigma' and 'alpha' – terms that have been popularised within manosphere culture as a way to class different types of men within a perceived hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity – during classroom discussions.

I feel like when I was in school, we all kind of used the same meme language, but they, yeah, you've got 'slay, baddie' [from the girls] and then you've got 'rizz Ohio sigma' [from the boys], like completely different gendered relationships with memes.

Children's and young people's online activities appeared to influence how they resisted the messages of gender equality and consent education. This appeared to be exacerbated by examples of victim-blaming discourses in the media surrounding high-profile sexual assault and domestic violence accusations or court cases.

Focus group participants observed that many children and young people seem to overestimate their understanding of how algorithms work, and the level of control that they have over the content they are served by different platforms. This can make it challenging to engage students in critical reflection about the limited content choices they are afforded from social media algorithms and what that means for their agency as they navigate online spaces. Young people's belief that they curate their own online experience can also mean that young people, especially boys, blame themselves for being served harmful content. These dynamics highlight the need for digital literacy programs to take on a more comprehensive approach to teaching young people about algorithms.

When you start talking about the manosphere stuff, interestingly, you do get some ... boys in the classroom ... who kind of take a deep breath once you name it, that it's algorithm based, and they're like, 'I thought I was the problem ... I'm not trying to get that content, but it just keeps coming up' ... It's like

¹ All quotes are from Body Safety Australia respectful relationships educators who participated in the focus groups.

[they're] carrying some sense of guilt or shame around [consuming] that content.

3. Young people's attitudes about image sharing appear to be shaped by the combined influences of harmful gender norms and poor understanding of image autonomy, and the actions of parents and other adults around them

Focus group participants observed that TA-HSBs and related harms are viewed by many students, particularly boys, as less serious than physical harms. This tendency to minimise online harm and its impacts may combine with students' and caregivers' inattention to image autonomy and online exposure to harmful gender norms to heighten the likelihood of children enacting TA-HSBs using images.

I feel like boys generally are less aware or interested in the tangibility of the risks of online harms, because they're not literally physical harm. And I feel girls are more aware of emotional harm, and the way that emotional harm physically harms them. Boys are like, 'Well, it's online, it can't hurt me', you know, 'That bullying online is not real', 'No one's gonna punch me in the face, 'cause they're online ... just log off. Just block, delete', whereas the girls seem aware of the innate harms of non-physical, like, internet violence.

In addition, focus group participants observed how the widespread normalisation and use of

generative AI to create fake images may complicate the process of teaching young people about image autonomy.

At the same time as AI coming in, we're so far away from understanding that if someone is included in an AI image in whatever capacity, that that's also part of something that deserves autonomy and dignity. Like, we're not even there with real pictures.

Implications and future research directions

'Your image belongs to you' offers several implications from these findings:

- I. Image autonomy may be a protective factor for image-based harms.
- II. Social media algorithms may drive children's and young people's resistance to prevention of gendered violence by serving polarising and misogynistic content that reinforces gender norms and stereotypes.
- III. Adults appear to have a vital role in the prevention of TA-HSBs enacted by children and young people using images.

The report also highlights the importance of valuing and amplifying the expertise of primary prevention practitioners in evidence-building efforts, and suggests priority directions for future research. These include the need for engaging with children and young people directly, as well as further research into image autonomy, to expand how we think about primary prevention and online social lives and influences, and to understand the role of intersecting forms of structural discrimination in driving TA-HSBs between children and young people.

**'YOUR IMAGE
BELONGS TO YOU',
EVEN FROM
GRADE 3, THEY'RE
DEBATING YOU,
SAYING,
'NO IT DOESN'T'.**

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

'Your image belongs to you': Young people, social media and image autonomy presents findings from research exploring what is known about the role of social media and recommender system algorithms (which we refer to throughout the report using the common shorthand of 'algorithms')² in norm building, online misogyny and gendered violence, including harmful sexual behaviours enacted by children and young people under the age of 18 towards a peer or younger child. The research uses insights from focus group discussions with Body Safety Australia respectful relationships educators,³ as well as academic and grey literature,⁴ to explore two interrelated questions:

1. How can respectful relationships educators' observations about how children and young people talk about social media, gaming, online safety and image sharing help us to understand how to prevent image-based harmful sexual behaviours, including AI-generated harmful sexual behaviours?
2. In what ways might social media algorithms be understood as a contributing factor to gendered violence enacted by children and young people?

This research is exploratory and scoping in nature. It seeks to use the knowledge and extensive practice expertise of a small, specialised group of practitioners to rapidly identify current issues in prevention practice and present future directions for research.

The online world is often framed as a static setting where people spend time and then exit to participate in 'real life'. This distinction is not borne out by the closely intertwined nature of many people's uses of online platforms with

other aspects of their lives. This simplified frame risks obscuring the role of online technologies in actively driving the spread of misogynistic, homophobic and transphobic messages, and building or reinforcing norms about gender equity and violence. This includes harmful sexual behaviours enacted in both online and offline settings (15).

To fully harness opportunities to leverage change that will help to prevent those harms from being perpetrated, we need to closely examine the many facets, intersections and applications of digital technologies and spaces, and their influence on social lives and dynamics. The purpose of this report is to contribute to collective efforts to better meet this challenge of understanding effective mechanisms for the prevention of peer-enacted image-based harms by children and young people.

This report introduces the concept of 'image autonomy' into research literature. The term 'image autonomy' was coined by Body Safety Australia CEO Deanne Carson in 2018 and means the right of an individual to make informed decisions about participating in a photo or video, having informed consent about how their image may be used and altered, and how it may be shared. Image autonomy is a strengths-based approach to taking and sharing images, which recognises children's agency, right to participation and respect for the rights of others. It is a central tenet of Body Safety Australia's advocacy and work with children, parents and teachers. This is the first time this conceptual frame from practice experience has been translated into a research report. It is an important contribution to prevention literature, providing a new protective factor to consider and

² See page 4 for a definition of recommender systems (social media algorithms).

³ The findings discussed in this report do not directly represent the views or experiences of children and

young people, but rather the observations and views of adults who work with these cohorts.

⁴ Grey literature is research published outside of commercial or academic publishing.

further explore, with the potential to prevent technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviours (TA-HSBs) in children and adult-enacted image-based abuse.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of key concepts used throughout the report and the ways that they are discussed in policy, practice and academic literature. We explain current concerns in prevention of technology-facilitated gendered violence with a particular focus on preventing harm for children and young people, and define primary prevention of gendered violence frameworks used in Australia. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the research approach used in this study. Chapter 3 discusses findings from focus group discussions with respectful relationships educators about their observations of how themes in Chapter 1 play out among children and young people in Australian schools. In Chapter 4, these findings are then used to present implications and considerations for future research, practice and policy effort in prevention of image-based harms for children and young people. It highlights the need for carefully designed research that safely centres the voices of children and young people.

While ‘children’ and ‘young people’ are not formally delineated categories of age, in this report we use the terms children and young people to refer to people under the age of 18. We recognise that gender is a spectrum and not a binary construct. We specify and use quoted language where research participants or resources used to inform this report discuss the experiences of non-binary children and young people. Research participants did not discuss the different experiences of transgender and cisgender children and young people in great detail. As such, we use the words ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ to refer to binary cisgender and transgender children and young people. The need for further research and practice development that considers the different experiences of trans and gender-diverse young people in the context of preventing image-based harms is discussed in Chapter 4.

Context

This research was prompted by an increasing number of reports of boys who were students in Victorian schools using artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to create nude and sexually explicit images of girls who were their peers, and circulating the images on social media (16, 17). Media reporting indicates this is a widespread global issue, with reports of the same abuses happening in the UK, the US and Spain (18-20). This abuse is termed ‘deepfake abuse’ or ‘AI-generated image-based abuse’ in the literature. The proliferation of this abuse sheds light on the rapidly evolving issue of technology-facilitated gendered violence enacted by young people towards other young people. This violence is enabled by ongoing technological innovations. As identified in Our Watch’s respectful relationships education (RRE) blueprint, schools are being increasingly called on to prevent and respond to peer-enacted TA-HSBs, including those enacted using generative AI (21).

TA-HSBs enacted by children and young people towards a peer or younger child is a growing area of concern for primary prevention,⁵ both with regard to understanding harm and identifying how to take effective action (22, 23). Image-based harms using technology encompass a range of behaviours including capturing, sharing or threatening to distribute an intimate image without consent. Recent research indicates that early adolescence (12–15 years old) is the most common age group for displaying harmful sexual behaviours, including TA-HSBs such as non-consensual sexual image sharing (15). As recommended in the literature, this report refers to these behaviours as TA-HSBs when enacted by children and young people. This terminology recognises children’s social, cognitive and sexual development; positions these behaviours as occurring in contexts that are distinctly different to adult-enacted harms; and identifies the need for child-focused prevention and response (15).

⁵ See page 3 for a definition of primary prevention.

National frameworks for violence prevention

Prevention of gendered violence in Australia is underpinned by Our Watch's *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia* (12).

Change the story describes how four specific manifestations of gender inequality drive men's and boys' use of violence against women and girls, and gendered violence:

- condoning of violence against women
- men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence in public and private life
- rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity
- male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control (12).

Change the story also describes how other social and interpersonal factors influence the likelihood of men's and boys' use of violence (12). Termed 'reinforcing factors', these do not predict violence on their own but may increase the likelihood of men's and boys' use of violence and harm in different contexts where the gendered drivers are present. Reinforcing factors include resistance and backlash to prevention and gender equality efforts, and factors that weaken prosocial behaviour, including alcohol consumption and gambling (12).

Advancements in technology have enabled new ways to perpetrate gendered violence, including technology-facilitated stalking, sexual violence and harassment, digital dating abuse and image-based abuse (including deepfake abuse) (3). These forms of violence and abuse present new challenges for prevention, and practitioners have grappled with how to conceptualise and conduct prevention across online spaces. As part of the essential actions that *Change the story* calls for to address the social context that enables violence against women, it highlights the importance of increasing 'critical media literacy among children, young people and adults, including building skills to engage respectfully in an online environment' (12 p. 64).

This is an important component of preventing gendered violence, and it is critical to think about online spaces and networks as places in which to conduct prevention activity. However, it is also useful to consider how digital platform infrastructure itself, such as algorithms, which have been shown to reflect and reinforce pre-existing social biases (24), might also be a contributing or reinforcing factor to the likelihood of perpetration of violence. This complicates how we think about the online world as both a setting for prevention and as a reinforcing factor of gendered violence that has an active role in establishing and reinforcing norms, attitudes and behaviours.

Additionally, this research supports the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse (2021–2030) (25). The National Strategy highlights that there are significant gaps in policy, education and research in how to prevent, identify and respond to harmful sexual behaviours enacted by children and young people. This report explores new avenues for prevention to support workforce capability and community-level strategies to address TA-HSBs.

Young people and social media

Young people can have rich online lives, engaging in a wide range of online platforms, activities and networks for entertainment, play, learning and socialising. Australian research suggests that, overall, children and young people report more positive than negative perceptions about the internet, and many have had positive experiences on social media, including finding support, connection and belonging (26, 27). For young people with disability, the internet can be a 'great equaliser' which can enable them to take part in activities without the structural barriers they may encounter in the physical world (28 p. 6). The online world is also a source of critical health information, a place for young people to be themselves and to seek emotional support and social connection, especially for young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or gender diverse, with intersex variations, queer or questioning, or asexual (LGBTIQ+), and those with disability (28, 29).

Many young people are also aware that online spaces can be harmful, and report having negative experiences themselves. These include being bullied or discriminated against; being exposed to negative, inappropriate or distressing content, including discussion or depictions of violence, drug use, self-harm or disordered eating; and finding themselves ‘doomscrolling’⁶ (26, 27). Research suggests that much of this time spent online is driven by ‘fear of missing out’ – a constant urge to be online and check social media – which keeps many young people on social media even when they want to disconnect (30).

Young people consume content both actively, by searching out content that reflects their existing interests, and passively, through their social media algorithms (7). Research by anti-bullying social enterprise Project Rokit suggests that young people are broadly aware of how online and social media algorithms shape their online experiences, and how algorithms reinforce the distribution of racist, sexist, controversial and harmful content (27). Its survey of Australian young people found that the majority believe they have a strong understanding of how social media chooses to show them content, but they would like to learn more about how online algorithms work and how they filter triggering content (27). While many children who have had negative online experiences report being empowered and knowledgeable about how they could take action to address the behaviour or seek support, research by the eSafety Commissioner indicates this is typically limited to them telling their parents, blocking distressing content or blocking online bullies (26). Project Rokit’s research found that while 3 in 5 young people reported that they feel that they are in control of the content they see online, a similar proportion expressed a desire to ‘reset their algorithm’ and ‘start fresh’ (27 p. 16). This suggests that young people are interested in exercising agency and taking more control over their online experiences.

Understanding the ability of social media algorithms to influence norms

The design and broad reach of social media infrastructure, including algorithms, means that it can have a powerful influence on shaping and reproducing gender and other norms. Algorithms are a critical component of many online services and platforms, including social media. They draw on large quantities of data collected from users – including demographic information, likes, comments and dwell time (how long a user hovers over an image or video) – and use machine learning techniques to present content that may be relevant and of interest to specific users (11). At their most fundamental, they are needed to organise vast and constant streams of data into useable information and content. Algorithms can be optimised for different purposes, such as maximising user engagement and time spent on the platform, presenting users with content tailored to their interests, or diversifying the content shown to users (11). These algorithms can help people find new ideas, activities, products, services, artists and entertainment, and can help social media creators and online businesses to reach broader audiences (11).

However, several scholars argue that while algorithms may appear to users to be neutral technologies driven solely by user-generated data, they are in fact created by individuals and businesses that hold their own biases, prejudices and beliefs about how the world should be ordered, and they have been found to be trained on sexist and racially biased data (24, 31, 32). Gender inequalities and lack of diversity within organisations also influence decisions about content moderation, user experience and technological developments (33).

Economically, social media companies have business models that capitalise on the commodification of user data and social interactions, with the aim of maximising shareholder profits (33). These economic and

⁶ ‘Doomscrolling’ refers to the act of spending large amounts of time passively scrolling through online

content on social media, in particular negative news and social media content.

organisational factors ultimately drive how different technologies, particularly algorithms, are developed. In practice, this means that algorithms are designed to push content that is likely to generate high engagement – and therefore high profits. This is often content that ‘embod[ies] dominant social values’ and reproduces and amplifies pre-existing gender norms and racial inequalities (24, 31, 33 p. 220).

Online misogyny, the manosphere and algorithms

Misogynistic content has proliferated across social media platforms, and studies suggest that algorithms are more likely to amplify this content to boys than to girls (34, 35). This content forms a significant component of the ‘manosphere’, a network of online communities that promote anti-feminism, misogyny, and hatred of trans and non-binary people (6-9). Manosphere content typically defines success in terms of financial dominance, dominance over other men who are less stereotypically masculine, and most explicitly, dominance over women (36). Research suggests that manosphere content often appeals to boys’ and young men’s insecurities including body image, dating and mental health, and can then become a pathway to more extreme content (37). Boys and young men also report being interested in the motivational advice for achieving relationship and financial success, often reporting it to be entertaining, motivating and engaging (38).

Other research shows that algorithms on video platforms YouTube and TikTok actively push misogynistic, manosphere and violent content (such as videos of school shootings) onto young male users, sometimes in violation of their own content policies (6, 8, 39). These studies use dummy social media accounts set up as male users of different ages to examine how quickly different types of content are pushed to children and young people. They examine how this varies depending on whether the content is sought out and engaged with (via liking, commenting, following and/or subscribing), or whether the account only seeks out neutral expressions of masculinities (i.e. sports and gaming) or non-gendered content such as cooking or animal videos. These studies have consistently found

that all accounts were fed ‘manfluencer’ (men who promote extreme, regressive masculine ideals, such as Andrew Tate), anti-feminist and other extremist content regardless of whether users sought it out (6, 8, 39), sometimes within two minutes of viewing (39).

Survey data collected by the eSafety Commissioner indicates that 80% of 8–12-year-old children had used at least one social media service since the beginning of 2024 (including 68% of this age group having used YouTube and 31% having used TikTok) (40). This suggests that children and young people are likely to be exposed to manosphere content at increasingly younger ages. We discuss the *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024* (41) and its possible implications for children and young people in the next section.

Manosphere content is often presented as entertainment through humorous forms such as memes, parodies or inspirational content, an approach that masks and serves to normalise hateful and violent misogynistic ideologies (6). Analysis of how teen boys navigate Andrew Tate’s content suggests that Tate’s videos are often characterised by surreal wind-up or shock humour, which creates a competitive dynamic that differentiates boys who do or do not ‘get’ the joke, and creates hegemonic power structures where boys who can endure being teased are afforded social currency and power (9). Tate’s content also generates shock and anger through promoting sexism and misogyny, frequently making outlandish claims that deliberately incite controversy and outrage. Tate benefits from this utilisation of the ‘attention economies’ of social media algorithmic structures, whereby controversial, polarising, humorous and shocking content is more likely to receive engagement from people who disagree (9).

The significant increase in misogynistic online content has wide-reaching effects. Research suggests this ‘micro-dosing on highly toxic content’ has a ‘potent indoctrination effect’, with sexist and misogynistic ideologies ‘seeping into [boys’] everyday interactions’ (6 p. 4). A UK survey found that children exposed to such content were five times more likely to see physically hurting another person as an acceptable behaviour (34). Other research suggests young men who consume manfluencer

content are more likely to display increased misogynistic attitudes, including being mistrustful of women's reports of sexual violence (42).

Even simply joining the manosphere by making a post or comment in misogynistic Reddit forums has been found to increase behaviours associated with extremist ideologies, including fixation on feminist discourse and anger towards women (43). Research suggests that while this online misogyny is emblematic of a wider cultural problem, it is exacerbated by social media algorithms and other online algorithms that amplify these beliefs to increasingly broader parts of the population (6). Internet Matters suggests that online misogyny has a tangible impact on shaping and reinforcing norms in young people around non-consensual image sharing between peers (37).

Young people, AI and deepfakes

Young people are often at the forefront of adoption of new online technologies. A 2024 survey of teenagers and their parents/carers in the US found widespread use of AI, with 7 in 10 teenagers reporting using at least one type of generative AI tool including search engines, chatbots, image generators and video generators (2). Children's use of generative AI sits within a broader climate of increasing generative AI use, with Google survey data from 2024 indicating that half of Australians report having used generative AI in the last year (44). The most reported reason for AI use by young people was to help with homework (2). However, young people also reported using AI to create content as a joke or to tease another person (2).

Generative AI is often used to create deepfakes – fabricated photos, videos or audio that depict a real person doing or saying something that they did not actually do or say (3). Deepfakes can be created for a range of reasons, such as to spread misinformation, for political stunts, or for entertainment; however, evidence shows their creation and the ways that they are shared and deployed may be gendered. Early research into deepfakes found they were most frequently created to depict sexually explicit images of women and girls (45, 46). One 2023 study found

that deepfake sexual imagery made up 98% of all deepfake videos online at the time of the research, and that almost all subjects of the images were women and girls (99%) (47). Some recent studies have found that younger teenage boys (45) and men (48, 49) have reported significantly higher rates of deepfake creation or threats to share deepfake images. Research into the prevalence of gendered violence and TA-HSBs enacted using generative AI is ongoing.

'Nudifying' apps – technologies that remove the clothes from people in uploaded photographs and videos – have proliferated since the first free AI bot was launched in 2020 (50). These apps are overwhelmingly trained on images of women and girls, and often do not work on images of boys and men (51). A 2023 analysis by advocacy group My Image My Choice found that there were hundreds of readily accessible nudifying apps and AI chatbots (many accessible through the social media app Telegram), at least 40 dedicated deepfake sites, and over 300 mainstream websites incorporating deepfake abuse along with manuals for creating such content (46). Some nudify platforms are also used to create deepfake child sexual abuse material (52). These deepfake sites have organised communities, with users requesting and encouraging different types of images to be created. This has created a type of 'deepfake economy' that can facilitate social bonding and radicalisation of users and that generates significant income for some creators (46, 53). These websites are easily accessible through search engines, and Google search drives most traffic to them (46). Currently, there is very little empirical data on children and young people's use of nudifying tools and other deepfake generators.

Legislative changes in Australia

In response to increases in the creation and distribution of sexually explicit deepfakes, the Australian Government established the *Criminal Code Amendment (Deepfake Sexual Material) Act 2024*, which targets the creation and non-consensual dissemination of sexually explicit material created or altered using generative AI. This Act relates to material depicting adults; the

creation, possession and sharing of child-related content such as artificially generated child sexual abuse material is already criminalised under the *Crimes Act 1958*. However, the creation of this material is still prevalent and there remain considerable challenges for those who have experienced this abuse to report it, and for police to investigate and prosecute offenders (54). The changes to the Criminal Code are intended to work in concert with new protections set out in civil legislation. The Online Safety Amendment (Digital Duty of Care) Bill 2024 places the onus on online platforms to proactively protect users from harm (55). This amendment to the *Online Safety Act 2021* intends to hold platforms to account by enforcing civil penalties for failing to undertake risk assessment and risk mitigation obligations that consider the best interests of children in decision-making. Platforms will be required to publicly provide annual transparency reports that include metrics about access to the service by children.

In addition, the Social Media Minimum Age Act seeks to delay exposure to social media harms for young people, by enforcing a legal requirement for users to be a minimum of 16 years of age to have a social media account (41). As with the Digital Duty of Care obligations, this regulation holds digital platforms and providers to account and formalises their obligation to protect end users from harm.

The Social Media Minimum Age Act has been subject to greater public debate than the Digital Duty of Care or the amendments to the Criminal Code to address deepfake abuse. In consultations with the eSafety Commissioner, industry subject matter experts, parents and children voiced concern about the likely effectiveness, safety and implementation of age assurance technologies using biometric and personal data (56). Similarly, subject matter experts expressed concerns that there may be unintended consequences for children and young people as a result of implementing age restrictions on recognised social media platforms. These might include driving users under 16 to more underground and less regulated online spaces or causing distress for vulnerable young people when they lose access to established online communities on platforms mandated to enforce age-restricted access (56).

Nature, prevalence and harms of peer-enacted image-based harms and deepfake nudes

Estimates of the prevalence of peer-enacted TA-HSBs exhibited by children and young people vary. A survey by the eSafety Commissioner found that 1 in 6 teenage girls aged 15–17 had had intimate or sexual photos or videos (nudes) shared online without their consent (15%) (57). The Australian Childhood Maltreatment Study found that for the 7.6% of people who had experienced some form of image-based abuse under the age of 18, it was most likely to have been enacted by an adolescent they were in a romantic relationship with (23%) or another known adolescent (49%) (23). The experiences of pre-adolescent children are not well established in the literature, despite findings that of those experiencing harmful sexual behaviours enacted by another child (or young person under the age of 18), 45% were between the ages of 10 and 14 at the time (58). Girls and gender diverse young people are more likely to report experiencing harmful sexual behaviours (15). More than 1 in 10 adolescents have reported experiencing sextortion (that is, blackmail involving threats to distribute intimate material) in their lifetime, with more than half being victimised before the age of 16 (59). Two in 5 of the adolescents who experienced sextortion reported that the material was digitally manipulated (59).

Within this context, use of deepfakes has emerged as a new and distinct TA-HSB. While data on the experiences of children and young people is emerging, research shows that deepfake technologies are increasingly pervasive across the population. Thorn found that 6% of adolescent respondents reported they were the target of a deepfake nude (45). A nationally representative UK study found that 13% of 13–17-year-olds had had an experience with a deepfake nude, either having sent or received an image or video, having encountered one online, or having used a nudifying app or knowing someone who had used a nudifying app (51). Boys (7%) were twice as likely as girls (3%)

to have used a nudifying app or know someone who had used one (51).

Understanding the factors that motivate and drive peer-enacted forms of TA-HSBs in young people is a developing field of research, particularly in relation to AI-generated images. Thorn found that only 2% of young people self-reported having created deepfakes (45). Of these, 74% created images depicting a girl or woman, and 1 in 3 created material of another young person under the age of 18. Respondents cited several reasons for creating the deepfake imagery, including revenge, sexual curiosity, pleasure-seeking or influence from peers (45).

TA-HSBs enacted using images cause significant harm to the subjects of the images, including negative mental and physical health outcomes, reputational damage and negative impacts on relationships with others (22). Non-consensual image sharing is normalised for teenagers, and the sharing of nudes of teenage girls acts as a form of homosocial currency, wherein boys can obtain power and status with their male peers by competitively proving their heterosexuality (60, 61). This research demonstrates how having their nudes shared non-consensually has a tangible impact on girls' social lives at school, with many facing verbal harassment from their peers and social isolation. Having an offline relationship with the peer who enacted the harm impacts some young people's capacity to report – one study found that 15% of young people who experienced a form of image-based harassment did not report their experience because they knew the person (60).

As an emerging field of technology and research, the impacts of experiencing deepfake victimisation are currently not well established in empirical research literature. Anecdotal reporting and case study publications suggest deepfake abuse can cause serious harms, with those who have experienced it reporting emotional, physiological, relational and professional impacts (50). This can include fear for their safety, reputational damage despite not having been involved in the activities depicted in the deepfake, mental health issues, suicidal ideation, feelings of violation and powerlessness, ongoing

uncertainty around who has seen or might see the images (including friends, family and employers), and impacts on their relationships (50, 62). There are also consequences for women's and girls' online participation – women have reported withdrawing from social media and other online spaces due to humiliation and fear of ongoing abuse (62), while teenage girls have reported limiting their online activity to reduce the chance of nude images being created of them in the first place (63).

The expanded uptake and availability of AI technologies and the ways they are used to cause harm has coincided with increasing concern about the proliferation of harmful misogynistic and discriminatory messages on social media platforms and other online forums. In particular, there are concerns about the ways that such content is spread to large audiences, including children and young people, via algorithms (8). Interrupting TA-HSBs requires multifaceted approaches across all levels of society (12). Interventions with young people in education settings are widely recognised as a critical element of this collective work (12). The need for child-focused research, prevention and response towards TA-HSBs is urgent (15). However, conducting safe and ethical research with children can take substantially more time than conducting research with adults. In response, this research interviewed respectful relationships educators who provide incursions to children across Victorian schools and early childhood settings, to explore potential avenues for further prevention efforts with children and young people.

These themes form the context in which children and young people navigate their developing self-expression, gender identity, intimate relationships, social development and burgeoning digital identities in schools. They inform the behaviours and dynamics that Body Safety Australia educators observe when teaching respectful relationships and consent education in Australian classrooms, and these are explored in this report.

**THERE AREN'T A LOT OF
CONVERSATIONS AROUND
CONSENT AND CONSENTING
PRACTICE OF IMAGE TAKING
AND SHARING.**

**IT'S SURPRISING TO THEM
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**IT'S LIKE AN ENTRY POINT
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HAVING TO ASK.**

CHAPTER 2

STUDY METHODS

Study design

This research was a qualitative exploratory study using two focus group discussions with respectful relationships educators. It was designed to elicit conversation about how they have observed children and young people in Victorian classrooms talk about gender, social media, and harmful images generated by their peers using AI programs and apps, as well as the ways that peer, teacher and school community interactions and dynamics shape attitudes towards use of AI-generated images and image sharing.

Participants' observations from their work in classrooms provided a rich source of ethnographic data that they then contributed to the study in the focus group discussions. Body Safety Australia fosters a culture of continuous learning, sharing experiences from practice and prioritising peer-to-peer skills building across the organisation. This is particularly relevant for educator staff who need to ensure their classroom references and approaches remain salient for young people, even in the context of rapidly changing cultural trends. This commitment to gathering and sharing information through observation, debriefing with peers and senior staff, and formal professional development inputs is normally aimed toward improving classroom practice and addressing emerging issues or problems. It also provided an ideal context to channel the educators' collective practice expertise and culture of building shared knowledge as participant-researchers in this study.

Body Safety Australia and Respect Victoria jointly led the research. Both organisations contributed primary prevention expertise to the project. Body Safety Australia contributed additional expertise on RRE, the role and impact of rapidly changing technologies on the experience of violence and abuse enacted by

children and young people, and implications for prevention work in classrooms. Respect Victoria led the literature review component of the research, and Body Safety Australia led the design and facilitation of the focus groups. Both organisations undertook the qualitative analysis and interpretation presented in this report.

The Victorian Department of Health and Department of Families, Fairness and Housing Human Research Ethics Committee approved all aspects of the research (115818/DOH-2025-466716).

Study participants

Respectful relationships educators are specialist practitioners contracted by schools to facilitate respectful relationships and consent education in classrooms. They play an important role in the prevention of gendered violence and harmful sexual behaviours exhibited by children and young people. These educators teach children, families, teachers and other school staff about children's right to bodily autonomy and respect for the rights of others. For younger children, the discussions are typically grounded in the physical space, such as teaching consent for hugs and kisses with relatives. As children grow and become increasingly engaged in online spaces and technology, this discussion centres increasingly on consent and respect for others within online and digital contexts.

Respectful relationships educators must be up to date with current online trends, platforms and discourse, and the ways that they shift and change, sometimes in a matter of weeks or days. These educators frequently draw on what is popular online at any given time, to engage children and young people and ensure that messages are relatable. Their time spent in classrooms with young people talking about consent, technology use, gender norms,

misogyny and violence lends them a unique practice perspective for research to draw on.

Education staff at Body Safety Australia work with children and families across early childhood, primary school and secondary school settings. This means that Body Safety Australia educators engage with children from their pre-school years (ages 3–5) through to young people in their final year of secondary school (ages 17–18). Specific contact hours within education settings vary on a weekly basis. In the 2023–24 financial year, Body Safety Australia staff delivered 737 programs to children and young people, 199 to parents and caregivers, and 119 professional development programs to teaching staff (64).

This breadth of knowledge is combined with an organisational culture of sharing contemporary observations from work in classrooms and with school communities and reflexive practice development at Body Safety Australia, which is described above. The focus group participants were therefore able to draw on a wealth of practice observations; these were distilled during the discussions facilitated by the research team, and the findings from these discussions are presented in this report.

Eligibility and recruitment

Eligible participants were Body Safety Australia staff who had been employed as RRE program facilitators for at least six months on 24 February 2025, with experience working within Victorian primary and/or secondary schools.

Body Safety Australia recruited participants individually to participate with an invitation email sent by Body Safety Australia’s administrative staff to avoid staff feeling pressured or coerced to participate. Ten of the cohort of 15 individuals employed as educators were invited to participate in the study. The remaining five were not approached, as they were newly recruited to Body Safety Australia in February 2025 and were still undertaking onboarding training. Participants were provided with a Participation Information and Consent Form and plain language statement, which they returned to the lead researcher at Respect Victoria if they consented to participate.

Nine staff in total participated in the focus group interviews. Staff were assigned to one of two focus groups based upon their availability during standard hours of work.

Participation was voluntary, and focus group discussions were conducted during participants’ normal working hours. Participants did not receive remuneration for their involvement in the research, other than their ordinary wages.

Focus group participants

Participants had been working for between nine months and seven years as respectful relationships educators at Body Safety Australia. Six participants were cisgender women and three were transgender or gender diverse.

At the time of the study, participants were employees of a well-recognised organisation and part of a specialised and small field of practitioners delivering RRE within many school and early childhood settings in Victoria. The nature of their field of work meant that participants were at a higher risk of being identifiable by participating in the research than a standard classroom teacher. The research team therefore decided to not report on demographic data other than gender and length of tenure with Body Safety Australia, to minimise the risk of any individual participant being identified in this research report.

Table 1: Length of work experience with Body Safety Australia

Time range	Number of participants
6–7 years	1
2–3 years	2
1–2 years	4
6–12 months	2

Table 2: Type of employment when the study was conducted

Type of employment	Number of participants
Full-time	3
Part-time	3
Casual	3

The focus group participants had a range of experiences working with children and young people from as young as three in early childhood settings to 17- and 18-year-olds in upper secondary school. Body Safety Australia is engaged to provide more RRE programs to children between the ages of 8 and 12 in middle and upper primary school (years 3–6) than they are to early childhood/early primary and senior secondary classes. As a result, participants were more likely to draw upon examples and reflections related to their experiences with middle and upper primary students and their families during the focus group discussions.

Data collection and management

The two focus groups were held in March 2025. Discussions lasted approximately two hours and were based on a semi-structured discussion guide designed to elicit conversation about educators' observations, views and experiences with RRE program delivery in schools (see Appendix A). Staff were invited to reflect on what they have observed about:

- how children discuss gender and gender inequality
- how they express sexism and misogyny in the classroom
- how they talk about social media algorithms, the taking and sharing of images (including intimate images), and use of generative AI.

The focus groups were not designed to collect information about individual schools or students.

Discussions were held face to face in a private meeting room at the Body Safety Australia office during office hours.

Examples and reflections shared related to what participants observed in Victorian primary schools during their entire duration of employment working as an educator for Body Safety Australia. Most of these centred upon observations and experiences from the past year of delivering programs to children and parents; however, the three participants with three or more years of experience also drew upon earlier observations from delivering RRE programs.

Analysis

The discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, de-identified and stored on a secured server. Transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 15 for analysis. Body Safety Australia led the thematic analysis (65), using an inductive semantic approach to identify emerging themes from the discussions. Kate Hepworth (Body Safety Australia) developed a preliminary codebook using these themes. She then revised this in a second round of coding, noting decision-making in the codebook and eliminating superfluous codes. Hazel Donley (Respect Victoria) reviewed, verified and revised codes and data. Hepworth and Donley then collaborated to group codes into themes for analysis, and to write up the analysis into a final report of findings. This was periodically verified by the chief investigator of the study at Respect Victoria and by members of the Body Safety Australia and Respect Victoria executive during two project governance group meetings.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this research that should be considered when reading this report. As the focus groups were held with respectful relationships educators, not students, the thematic analysis and interpretation focuses on educators' observations of how students discuss image sharing, social media usage, online gaming and generative AI in the classroom, and the ways they express misogyny and sexism.

The researchers did not talk directly to children and young people. This was due to the time and resource limitations and rigour of ethical considerations required to talk to children in research, particularly about sensitive issues such as misogyny and technology-facilitated gendered violence. This research examined the observations and perspectives of a small group of RRE practitioners from Body Safety Australia and is therefore not reflective of a full range of experiences of RRE educators or of children and young people. Due to the small sample size of this study, the findings should be viewed as exploratory and not confirmatory.

**AND THE
WORLD'S FINE
WITH IT.**

**SO IT'S HARD TO
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CHAPTER 3

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three key themes related to the prevention of TA-HSBs enacted by children and young people towards other children and young people emerged from the focus group discussions:

1. Children, young people and adults do not appear to understand the concept of image autonomy.
2. Exposure to gender norms, stereotypes and misogyny across online platforms may influence young people's behaviours in the classroom.
3. Young people's attitudes about image sharing appear to be shaped by the combined influences of harmful gender norms and poor understanding of image autonomy, and the actions of parents and other adults around them.

This section discusses each of these key findings in turn. We explore the role of image autonomy as a novel concept, including how social norms modelled to children, both in person and online, may influence how children perceive respect and consent for image taking and sharing. Through exploring educators' observations of children's and young people's use of online platforms such as social media and gaming, we seek to understand how social media algorithms may be understood as a contributing factor to gendered violence enacted by children and young people. Lastly, we discuss how the understanding of image autonomy and the influence of gender norms and observed online behaviours intersect to shape children's and young people's image-sharing practices.

Key finding 1: Children, young people and adults do not appear to understand the concept of image autonomy

The focus group participants shared that most children, young people and adults do not appear to understand the concept of image autonomy – the idea that every person, no matter their age, has the right to decide how their image is taken and shared. Educators reflected that many children do not recognise they have a right to determine when and how other people take their photo, as well as if and where they share it with others. This appeared to be influenced by two things: adults in their lives taking photos of them without consent, and the normalisation of sharing vast amounts of personal and identifiable images on social media.

Parents and carers influence how young people share their images

Educators in the focus groups spoke about how they regularly introduce children to the concept of image autonomy when teaching respectful relationships and consent programs. They reflected that they often teach image autonomy as an extension of bodily autonomy and as an example of asking for consent, but that primary-school-aged children were often challenged by, or resistant to, being told that they have a right to say no to having their photo taken or shared online. They observed that this was typically because the adults around them do not model or practise image-based consent.

If you say, 'Your image belongs to you', even from grade 3, they're debating you and they're saying, 'No it doesn't, because my mum posts photos of me all the time and that bath photo of me, I hate it, but ... this person is sharing it.'

Non-consensual image taking and sharing is highly normalised in children's lives, with children growing up with their image constantly taken and shared (online and in private message threads) from the moment they are born (66). The focus group discussions highlighted how common it is for children to have their picture frequently taken and shared without their consent by the adults in their lives, including their parents, caregivers and teachers. Educators in the focus groups reflected that the normalisation of sharing images without consent makes it very challenging and complex for them to discuss image-based abuse or harm.

And the world's fine with it. So it's hard to get them to care if no one around them cares.

Technologies for taking and sharing images have evolved significantly over the last two decades; however, public awareness of the safety and wellbeing risks of sharing children's images online has been slower to catch up. Many people have come to see social media as an extension of the traditional family photo album, as well as a way to connect with other parents and normalise aspects of parenthood (67). Research from 2018 estimated that parents share around 100 photos and videos of their children to social media every year (66), and most parents are motivated to share for positive, not malicious, reasons (68). Many parents are not conscious of the serious risks that sharing their child's image online may pose, including sexual exploitation and identity theft, as well as future emotional distress and a non-consensual digital footprint (67).

Beyond the home environment, early childhood services staff are constantly taking photos of children and visitors to the service, including the respectful relationships educators, for documentation and communication with parents.

When you go into early learning centres and every second you're doing your job, they're taking photos of every kid doing every activity, including you, never asking you ... We don't

have even a 5% understanding that we own our own image on a wider scale.

They suggested that, in some cases, children are not resistant to strangers taking their photo because of how normalised it is by adults in their lives.

They're very much just like, 'Adult is taking my photo, that's safe, because at kindergarten adults take our photos, our parents take our photos'. So children will go, 'That's exactly how it works'. And even when you sometimes prompt, like, 'Ohh, if we don't know [the person taking the photo]?' or, 'Should they ask?', it's ... kind of, 'Eh, not so much'.

The focus group participants reflected on how challenging it is to connect the idea of consent to taking and sharing photos and videos, compared to talking about consent for touch.

[There are] not a lot of conversations around consent and consenting practice of image taking and sharing ... it's surprising to them to hear when we say, 'You should ask your friend's consent before you take that photo or upload their photo' ... It's like an entry point to that for them, because they've never even thought about having to ask.

The educators discussed how conversations with older children about image sharing were more often focused on the legality of the behaviour, rather than the ethical or moral implications.

And then similarly when you get to older year levels, and they're really fixated on the law across the board, both when you're talking about consent and the online space. There's a lot of, like, 'Well, it's not illegal to take someone's photo on the street without asking ... [or] your friend's photo without checking', and that's where their line is drawn for ethics, [it] is at the law.

Educators in the focus groups suggested that adults taking and sharing images of children without their consent can be disempowering for children. Further, adults not seeking and respecting children's consent for image sharing is likely to influence children's own attitudes towards sharing images of their friends and peers, including feelings of apathy with regard to

obtaining or providing consent. They reflected how when young people did talk about consent for image sharing, they tended to focus on the idea of being a good friend and making sure that your friend does not look bad on social media, rather than the risk of image-based abuse and associated harms.

In my first-hand experience [teaching] girls, the conversation of images is more about permission to upload images of your friends. Not that you've altered them but that you need permission to put them up, because what if your friend looks 'fugly'.

Overall, the focus group discussions indicated that children were generally resistant to learning about the idea of consent for photos, because it was contrary to what they had seen modelled by the adults in their lives – that is, that obtaining consent for image sharing is optional, arduous or unnecessary. Disregarding the need to gain consent in these contexts feeds into the broader normalisation of violence, which is a critical target of prevention work.

Social media infrastructure incentivises high volumes of image sharing

The design and dynamics of social media platforms – in particular, how algorithms determine what types of content are popular or 'go viral' – likely contributes to young people's lack of understanding of image autonomy. Many platforms build popularity, and therefore users and income, by normalising and incentivising the constant sharing of photos and videos of oneself and others. Educators in the focus groups discussed how family vlogging content, popular across YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, are shaping young children's attitudes towards image sharing.

It's just so popular [with kids]. That it's adults who have a family [vlog] ... that's their entire form of income ... filming their family, and so it really normalises the whole [idea that] as children... all family can do whatever with our image.

They spoke about how they frequently heard young people talking about viewing content from well-known social media accounts that feature children and their parents, citing examples such as vlogs documenting a child's toilet training or trips to medical appointments. In many cases, these accounts have been monetised through brand partnerships and other advertising. Research analysing the monetisation strategies of such content found parents use their children as 'concealed commodities', both as props and to 'embod[y] idealised notions of childhood for brand visibility' (69 p. 1).

The educators observed that these vlogs, along with other 'day in the life' and 'kidfluencer'⁷ content, appeared to be very popular among children and young people they work with. They reflected that this content conveys an implicit message that anyone can commodify images of everyday life, for financial success or social cachet, and that some children seemed to aspire to this.

They're increasingly online, but their online experiences are striving towards an audience, and public consumption, through their photo taking and video sharing. Which obviously creates risk.

The proliferation of this content communicates and normalises the idea that a person can film, upload and then create wealth from broadcasting their life, including family life. They discussed how it is common to come across primary-school-aged children whose families create content, and that children with the highest number of followers typically shared their accounts with a sibling or parent.

⁷ A child influencer, colloquially referred to as a 'kidfluencer', is a child or young person under the age of 18 who has a large online following and features in child-centred social media content. These children

rarely control the social media account. Parents typically have a critical role in creating content and encouraging their child to create and grow an online platform and following (70).

Participant 1: *I have worked with young children whose families do have social media accounts, who are 8 years old and have viral Instagram accounts etc. This is relevant in our workplace.*

Participant 2: *That happens to me so often, when we do the stand-up sit-down game. 'If you have an account that has [less] than 200 followers, then sit down', and you go up in numbers, and 70% of the children that are the last standing up are like, 'Yeah, I share it with my older brother, I share it with my mum'.*

The educators observed that many girls had significant social media followings while still in primary school, particularly those already involved in creating mother–daughter social media content.

Mums and daughters making content together are some of the most popular [social media] accounts in the schools that we work [in] ... the children who have their accounts with their parents who are doing it to churn and get more viral as a combined account.

The educators shared that young people of all genders often referred to 'day in the life' content by adult content creators (people who make intimate and/or sexual material on subscription sites such as OnlyFans) who have accounts on social media sites that are accessible to minors, such as Instagram and TikTok. The educators stated that they were not against adult content creators, but expressed concern at how

OnlyFans-related content contributed towards shaping young people's perception of how success could be achieved through images posted online. Recent research examining the impact of such content on adolescents' psychosocial development indicates that many adolescents exposed to ads and other promotional OnlyFans content on adjacent social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok perceive the platform to be an 'attractive employment alternative' for women (71). Exposure to this content appears to influence beliefs and attitudes towards gender roles and sexuality, including what is desirable and profitable (71).

The broad range of online content that children consume appears to contribute to poor understanding of image autonomy by normalising the prolific sharing of day-to-day life and modelling the non-consensual sharing of a child's image for profit, maintaining the idea that children do not have a right to say no to participating in photos or videos. Much of this family vlogging content is unregulated and goes against the principles of agency, right to participation and safety set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (72). The focus group participants described the gendered nature of how children access and participate in this content; this is explored in more detail in the next section. These gendered dynamics are important to attend to, as they illustrate potentially impactful points to interrupt drivers of gendered violence.

**OFTEN THAT RESISTANCE
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'I DON'T QUITE TRUST
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BUT I'M NOT GONNA
START THIS INTO A
DEBATE'.**

**THEY'RE OFTEN JUST NOT
GONNA ENGAGE WITH ME
AND THERE'S LITTLE EYE
ROLLS ABOUT THE
GENDER EQUALITY STUFF.**

Key finding 2: Exposure to gender norms, stereotypes and misogyny across online platforms may influence young people's behaviours in the classroom

This section discusses: the intersection between gender norms and children's online activity; the influence of gendered online lives on their offline lives; and the role of social media algorithms in exposing children to harmful messages and exacerbating resistance to prevention work. This includes misogynistic attitudes and behaviours, and content that is not necessarily sought out by users but served to children and young people via algorithms.

The educators reflected that many children and young people appear to have a limited understanding of just how influential algorithms are in shaping the content they are exposed to online, even where students may believe themselves to have a sophisticated, technical understanding of how algorithms are deployed by different online platforms. Participants discussed how, together, these dynamics can inhibit children's and young people's critical reflection about content they consume and how it comes to them, sometimes creating a false sense of control.

Children's online activity is driven by, and reproduces, gender stereotypes and gendered patterns of behaviour

Almost all children are socialised into a gender binary from birth, even as recognition of a more representative spectrum of gender identity and less restrictive norms and expectations about gender roles have become more widespread (73). The educators shared how they believe the same patterns of socialisation are replicated and may even be amplified in children's and young people's consumption and engagement with online content and social spaces.

How children talk about gender changes as they age

When asked about how children typically discuss gender in the classroom, the educators observed that younger children (up until years 3–4, ages 8–10) often held seemingly contradictory attitudes that simultaneously supported and challenged gender stereotypes. These children would often voice opposition to certain gender stereotypes, and name them as both harmful and outdated, while also adamantly reinforcing other gender norms and stereotypes.

I do think there's also a bit of a dissonance experienced by those young people; they're capable of saying, 'No, no, no, boys can wear whatever they want. Girls can wear whatever they want. Girls can play sport. Boys can play with Barbies', and they acknowledge that those gender stereotypes are harmful, that they exist. They typically name that they're outdated ideas from the past or 'the olden days'. And yet in those same classrooms, they'll also share [more stereotypical] perspectives where they're like, 'Oh no, but the girl has to be the one who looks after the boy', or 'Girls have to be skinny' or 'Boys have to be the one in control', so they still have those ideas, while also resisting them.

The educators observed that attitudes toward gender seemed to be more aligned with traditional norms among older age groups, from years 4, 5 and 6 (ages 9–12). This is consistent with research that shows that endorsement of regressive gender stereotypes and roles increases as children age (74).

Dynamics of gendered engagement with online spaces and content

Research also shows that children's play with games and toys – an important part of their learning and socialisation – is 'highly conditioned by gender stereotypes' (74). Patterns of play,

including the types of toys and games as well as the dynamics of such games (e.g. caring actions or competitiveness) are typically driven by, and reproduce, such stereotypes. This pattern of differentiated play appears to extend to the online world as technologies for online gaming, socialisation and play have developed.

Educators in the focus groups observed that there were gender differences in the kinds of content that boys and girls talked about interacting with. They observed that while younger children appeared to have more homogenous online activities (e.g. YouTube Kids), their online activities appear to become increasingly gendered over time. Year 3–4 (children aged 8–10) appeared to be a developmental period when gendered differences in online activity become more pronounced. The focus group participants reflected on how from this stage of primary school, girls are on social media more frequently, whereas boys are more frequently engaged in online gaming and adjacent content such as watching gaming streams.⁸

The educators suggested that these gendered differences in the ways children consume content and socialise online also translate into children's and young people's aspirations for financial success and fame online. They shared that, in their experience, boys were more likely to talk about streaming games on YouTube and Twitch, and aspiring to be a successful gamer or YouTuber. In contrast, girls were generally more likely to discuss aspiring to have a large following on social media apps such as Instagram and TikTok. This gendered pattern of online activity is reflected in other research, which indicates that girls are more likely to report having used social media sites such as TikTok, Instagram or Pinterest at 10–12 years old, while boys are more likely to report use of gaming sites such as Steam (a gaming platform with social media features), Reddit (a discussion forum platform for a wide range of topics including gaming), or Twitch (a video live-streaming platform) (75).

Online gaming central to socialisation but can be avenue to harmful messages

Gaming is a popular form of socialisation, entertainment and play for many young people. This may reflect that parents are more attuned to the risks associated with social media use above those associated with gaming.

The focus group participants shared that primary school children are using online games and adjacent platforms such as YouTube and Twitch as social media to connect and socialise with peers and other users. This widespread use of online gaming is consistent with the eSafety Commissioner's findings that 89% of young people aged 8–17 played games online, with most reporting that gaming was a fun and positive experience (76).

The main thing that I see upper primary school kids connecting on is games and YouTube, video games and, like, Roblox. Their main media that we talk about is gaming.

Educators in the focus groups observed how children were often excited to engage with them about their gaming experiences, as some had had their creativity and skill disregarded by the adults in their lives. This reflects other research that shows that the majority of young people (58%) think their parents have negative perceptions about gaming, and young people want adults to better understand the positive outcomes of gaming, such as creativity, having fun and connection with others (76).

I think also, because things like Minecraft ... are genuinely games that require skill and talent, and you could do incredible things on it, and for a lot of kids who are really good at it and who are really creative on it, they've maybe had that creativity and that knowledge dismissed by other adults for so long that [they're] just really excited that someone's interested in it.

⁸ Gaming streams are a form of online content where people broadcast themselves playing video games to an online audience, often live.

The participants also found it important to acknowledge the strengths of gaming spaces as not only socially important for children but also places where children could express creativity and required skill. Research has found that most children and young people who play games want the adults in their lives to play games with them and better understand why games are a positive part of their online lives (70).

Research shows that many young people, especially boys, use their knowledge or prowess in a specific game as a form of social currency, as well as a form of social cohesion with their peers (77). This often happens online, within the ecosystems that surround gaming, such as YouTube videos and other gaming streams, blogs, forums and other platforms. These ecosystems enable players to share skills, and they play a critical role in identity formation and social cohesion by fostering a sense of belonging (77). Educators in the focus groups indicated that young people were heavily engaged in these ecosystems, with primary-school-aged children frequently sharing, in discussions of their online behaviours, that they were content creators. We further discuss the risks of children engaging in this form of content creation in the next key theme.

[In] primary school, especially, they're obsessed with watching other people game, which is bizarre to me. A lot of the time in year 6, they've started their own accounts on YouTube, where they're filming themselves doing games, and other people will be watching them and they'll have 200 subscribers. So I think gaming people and influencers on YouTube seem to have massive influence.

While gaming forms a large part of young people's online entertainment and socialisation, especially for boys, it can also expose them to manosphere content, in particular, harmful misogynistic messaging (78). Some online multiplayer games have developed into pathways to increased exposure to manosphere and violent extremist content. Frequently, this occurs outside of a game itself, in the communities that surround gaming, such as through streaming and online communication platforms such as Discord. For young children

and particularly boys, these communities are entry points into misogynistic, racist and other extremist ideologies (79).

At the time of writing, the extent to which the Social Media Minimum Age Act, to be implemented in Australia from 10 December 2025, will impact these gaming-adjacent spaces is currently unknown. Online multiplayer games and gaming-adjacent platforms and services might be directly impacted by the Act, in the same way that other social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram will be. Websites for streaming games, such as Twitch and YouTube, will ban under-16s from having an account, yet content that does not require the user to log in will remain accessible to those under the age of 16. Standalone messaging apps, including Discord, as well as some games such as Roblox, may not be entirely exempt from the ban. This means that young people may be exposed to extreme and harmful ideology regardless, signalling the limitations of the preventative impact of this legislation.

Gendered online lives influence children's language

The educators discussed how they observed stark gendered differences in both the online content children discussed and the language they used in the classroom. They reported that girls and boys often repeatedly used meme language they had heard online in content that was either targeted towards or popular within peer groups for their gender.

It's like the literal content that those words are coming from is more geared one way or the other, like The Rizzler [the TikTok persona of a young boy] ... that content is largely not of interest to young girls, and so the words that are used in that content, and the Skibidi Toilet [an absurdist YouTube video series] content, is not so much being consumed by the girls.

Educators in the focus groups had had different experiences with how often children brought up famous manosphere influencers such as Andrew Tate in the classroom, but most agreed that it was very common for boys to use gendered meme language they had been exposed to

through the social media platforms used for streaming games such as Discord, Twitch and YouTube. Many of them had observed boys using manosphere language such as ‘sigma’ and ‘alpha’ – terms that have been popularised within manosphere culture to class different types of men within a perceived hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity (80) – during classroom discussions.

I feel like when I was in school, we all kind of used the same meme language, but they, yeah, you’ve got ‘slay, baddie’ [from the girls] and then you’ve got ‘rizz Ohio sigma’ [from the boys], like completely different gendered relationships with memes.

However, observing the dynamics of the conversations these words were used within, the educators suggested that younger boys appeared to be using language they had heard in online gaming spaces without necessarily understanding what it meant or connecting it to an ideology or manosphere rhetoric.

[Terms such as ‘alpha’,] to them, it’s literally just sounds ... From my understanding ... the boys that say the internet slang words to me more because they think it’s funny, humour to try and get me to say those things. It’s not in my understanding coming from, like, ‘I understand where alpha and sigma come from as manosphere terms, and this is as part of my quest to be a better man’.

The educators discussed the importance of adults educating themselves on different online trends circulating in these online spaces, to notice if and how boys are being influenced by that messaging.

And so I think there’s a need to stay on top of those different trends in terms of what they mean about the kids’ exposure, whether it is something that is age appropriate or isn’t age appropriate, whether it’s something that is a dangerous idea that’s come up ... I think it’s why I struggle with ‘alpha’ and that type of thing that kept on coming up. Because I’m, like, is this like ‘alpha men’, Andrew Tate? ... Is this a misogynistic thing, or is this a different thing? ‘Cause ‘alpha’ exists in so many different spaces now.

While this language use may not be concerning at face value, research examining the role of these online gaming ecosystems found that they were an entry point to radicalisation, including to misogynistic views and violent extremism, because they can normalise radical content through repeated exposure to this content alongside a community that provides a sense of social cohesion and belonging (79). The findings of our research reinforce the need to further investigate the role of language as an entry point to misogyny.

Resistance to gendered-violence prevention work is exacerbated by multiple factors

Considered together, the discussions presented so far in this section suggest that children’s and young people’s incidental and unquestioning engagement with harmful gender norms in the context of socialising, creating and consuming content online is having a significant impact on their social identities and attitudes. The focus group participants described how these influences are playing out in classrooms, noting that they encountered many expressions of resistance to conversations about gender inequality in teaching RRE from students, and that this resistance was common. They described how pushback to discussing gender stereotypes tended to increase in later primary school, in years 5–6 (ages 10–12).

I think that from the early learning level up to about grade 3–4, you typically see children, young people, [are] resistant to gender stereotypes and really proud about their perspective around ‘anyone can be whatever they want’. And then you start to see shifts at that grade 4, 5, 6 level, where they become more rigid in those stereotypes or more vocal about what is expected of them and those around them.

This was echoed by another participant, who described what the increased resistance looked like for educators in upper-primary classrooms:

[You] start to see that shift around year 6, when you can tell that there's some resistance from boys in the room, and often I haven't had as much direct pushback, often that resistance is quite quiet and there's this, kind of like, 'I don't quite trust what you're telling me about gender norms, but I'm not gonna start this into a debate'. There's often just, they're just not gonna engage with me and there's little eye rolls about the gender equality stuff.

The educators discussed how they had experienced considerable resistance from secondary school boys while teaching RRE. They reflected that this resistance appeared to have shifted, from reversing the problem and framing men as the true victims of gender inequality, to denial of the privilege and power afforded to the male gender entirely.

What I find fascinating, in the past couple of years in secondary, which has been quite different [from] when I first was doing this work, boys in particular would say 'I'm not talking about it at all, it's all ridiculous', or it was very much coming from a, 'Well, I'm the real victim'. It was [a] very 'them as a victim' kind of conversation around gender, that they were actually in a powerless position because in heterosexual relationships, girls hold power over sex, therefore actually in gender, they [boys] are powerless. What I find interesting now, in the past couple years, is that they want to debate [the idea] that gender doesn't create any power imbalance. So it's not so much that they're talking about them being victims anymore, they want to be very clear that gender doesn't affect power or relationships, or it doesn't give [any] advantage at all.

These tactics of resistance described by the educators are characteristic of denial of gender inequality, one of the most common forms of backlash and resistance (81). Educators' observations that boys demonstrated

considerably more resistance to RRE are consistent with findings from the National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey (NCAS), which shows boys and young men aged 16–24 have significantly poorer attitudes towards gender equality compared with girls and young women the same age (82).

The educators reported that some of this resistance seemed to be directly driven by content boys had seen online. Children and young people appear to be exposed to content that drives or reinforces gendered violence and resistance to prevention activities including RRE. This includes content that reinforces gender stereotypes, promotes misogyny and excuses or endorses gendered violence. Some content serves to make light of sexual violence or sexism, generally introduced into classroom discussions to derail the conversation. Other content reinforces more direct backlash to gendered violence prevention, such as by reinforcing sexual violence myths.

Influence of *Depp v Heard* celebrity defamation trial

Educators also shared that students' exposure to victim-blaming discourses about high-profile cases of intimate partner violence made teaching RRE difficult. They discussed how, when asking questions about safe and equitable online relationships, students regularly wanted to discuss cases of high-profile, controversial figures accused of gendered violence, and other prominent media cases concerning sexual violence, domestic violence and child sexual abuse. The educators observed that children were informed of these cases through social media, peers or at home, as opposed to through traditional media outlets.

Several educators spoke to the significant impact that the widespread coverage of a defamation trial between actors Johnny Depp and Amber Heard in 2022⁹ had on their capacity to teach

⁹ *Depp v Heard* was a defamation trial between formerly married actors Johnny Depp and Amber Heard that was broadcast live over social media. After Heard published an opinion piece in 2018 where she named herself as a survivor of domestic abuse, Depp

sued for defamation and made counter-allegations of intimate partner violence against Heard. Heard became the target of considerable online misogynistic backlash; other commentary highlights that it is difficult to conclude from publicly available evidence

RRE. The case was livestreamed on social media and promoted by algorithms that prioritise polarising content to generate views (and therefore revenue). This helped to position the trial as fodder for misogynistic, alt-right and manosphere social media users to shape public opinion through disinformation (83). At the time, educators stated, it was frequently raised by children and young people during RRE classes to ‘disprove’ or deny discussions of gender inequalities and reinforce myths and misconceptions about gendered violence.

That snippet of time [during the Depp v Heard trial] made teaching consent impossible. It didn't matter how much you tried to ground the conversation in empathy, how much you tried to push them to go further. It just gave permission for those loud voices in the room to be really dominant about men's rights and about masculinity in particular, and it just drove every single conversation, and the really hard part about it was it was being colluded by the teachers in the room so often.

Influence of teacher attitudes on resistance to RRE

The educators noted that the classroom teachers also used critiques of Amber Heard to challenge the positions of the Body Safety Australia staff, encouraging resistance from students. Online commentary and reporting about the case seemed to embolden some teachers to reject aspects of the RRE curriculum about unpacking power imbalances, privilege, intimate partner violence and inequality.

Sometimes the teacher will want to name, 'But what about false rape allegations?', and they would be introducing [that idea] into the classroom. And then [the teachers] were literally [asking] 'What about Johnny Depp and Amber Heard?' Like they wanted to challenge us.

When teachers introduced these positions, they reinforced the credibility of disinformation about the believability of people who have experienced violence, and they falsely equated the reactive

use of force with reciprocal violence from a person who was being abused by a primary aggressor. It made it harder for the RRE educators to disrupt the sexist commentary that children were seeing online about the trial. This, the educators suggested, could make it more difficult to help students, and particularly boys, to critically reflect on the harms of other misogynistic online material.

Boys' consumption of manosphere content makes peers and teachers feel unsafe

The educators discussed the impact that boys' consumption of manosphere content – and their translation of that content into their classroom attitudes and behaviour – has on the girls who are their peers. They shared that girls often do not feel comfortable raising their concerns and feelings of discomfort or unsafety resulting from sexism and misogyny in front of the boys who are their peers.

It [manosphere content] comes up very heavily from girls as a massive point of anger and frustration at their peers. But they won't often name that until the boys aren't in the room.

This is supported by research showing how manosphere content and associated male supremacist ideologies have infiltrated Australian classrooms (36). Interviewing women working as teachers, they found that this content has emboldened boys to be openly misogynistic and sexually harass their peers and teachers, impacting the psychological and physical safety of their female peers and women teachers, and in some cases, this causes teachers to resign and girls to withdraw from classes (36).

This situation presented a key challenge for the RRE educators: how to navigate this resistance safely, to know when and how to address resistance directly, and how best to minimise the potential for harm for all students in the room. This may include young people who are trans

shared during the defamation trials that Heard was the primary aggressor in her former relationship.

and gender diverse, or young people who have experienced sexual violence and harm.

Yeah, it's even the 'There are only two genders' kind of stuff, where it's, like, those are obviously the ideas that they've seen online, and then you have to navigate holding that conversation and getting them where you need them to go, acknowledging that there's also queer kids, trans kids in the room.

Children appear to have limited knowledge of how social media algorithms shape their online experiences

The focus group participants suggested that many children and young people have an overestimated sense of their understanding of how algorithms work, and the level of control that they have over the content they are served by different platforms. This can make it challenging to engage students in critical reflection about the limited choice they are exercising through their navigation of online spaces.

The educators observed that, in general, children and young people appeared to have some understanding of algorithmic curation – how social media algorithms influence the content they consume. They reported that children seemed to know that algorithms on social media platforms will circulate content that is similar to content they had previously viewed, liked, shared and commented on.

They [secondary school students] know about it, on the kind of surface level of 'If I watch lots of footy videos, I'll get lots of footy videos'.

The older they get, they have maybe more of an understanding of the algorithm. This idea of, 'Oh, I'm building my algorithm'.

This is consistent with the findings of several studies that indicate young people are broadly aware of how their interaction with social media content influences the frequency of being shown this content (27, 84). However, the educators suggested that some young people demonstrated an overconfidence in their ability

to influence, and therefore be less susceptible to, these algorithms.

They sometimes talk about, 'I understand the algorithm; therefore, it doesn't affect me, because I get it', [or] 'I know how the algorithm works; therefore, I'm smarter than the algorithm'.

This appears to be a common phenomenon, with research suggesting that many young people use platform features such as filtering, liking and sharing to make use of their 'algorithmic power' to 'train' their algorithm to show them content they want to see more of (84). This is supported by Project Rockit's research that found 60% of young people surveyed felt that they were in control over the content they see online (27). Others argue it is important to consider that platform developers may build these features into a platform's design to give users a false sense of control over their online experience (84).

The educators observed that young people seemed to be less aware that social media algorithms actively push them content based on their gender, regardless of whether they interact with it. For girls, this was often beauty standards.

They [girls] kind of think ... that it's not something that impacts them in that space ... They'd be like, 'Well, I can just block stuff I don't like', and so the idea is that you just, if you don't like something, you can get rid of it ... There wasn't an understanding of algorithms except for when things become about beauty standards, and everyone's kind of like, 'Ohh yeah, we [do have] those beauty standards [pushed] on us.'

Similarly, boys typically did not understand that algorithms push deliberately polarising content, such as manosphere content, to increase engagement.

They are generally across the board pretty shocked when you start talking about manosphere stuff, and how if you're watching football content and gaming content, all of a sudden, Andrew Tate type stuff is there; that is often a surprise to them.

Research shows how controversial and radical content, particularly manosphere content, is

served to boys who have viewed more innocuous general interest content such as gaming videos, sports and mental health content (39). Educators in the focus groups spoke to how, when they named this in RRE sessions, this was novel information for young people. One educator noted they had observed a sense of relief in some boys when this was named. They noted that some of the boys seemed to blame themselves when misogynistic content was served to them and felt a great deal of shame as a result. The educators had heard some boys share that they believed that there was something intrinsically wrong with them that was leading to this content appearing on their feeds.

When you start talking about the manosphere stuff, interestingly, you do get some responses by boys in the classroom ... who kind of take a deep breath once you name it, that it's algorithm based, and they're like, 'I thought I was the problem' ... And they were like, 'I'm not, I'm not trying to get that content, but it just keeps coming up' kind of vibe. Uh, and it's like [they're] carrying some sense of guilt or shame around [consuming] that content.

Once we talk about algorithms, it's kind of an entry point for them to be like, 'Ohh yeah ... this is what I've seen and that's why I saw it' ... Whereas they're not willing to tell us to begin with that that content is in their feeds, because they think it's their fault.

Consistent with the findings of extant research, the observations made in the focus groups highlighted the need for digital literacy programs

to take on a more comprehensive approach to teaching young people about algorithms. This highlights the importance of digital media literacy education for young people that addresses both the content and design of social media platforms, and that is capable of engaging with and responding to a range of perspectives and experiences of young people.

These gendered differences in how children and young people adopt language and concepts from the content they consume online suggest several critical considerations for the primary prevention of gendered violence. First, they illustrate some of the ways that the gendered division in children's online play and socialisation serves to reproduce gender stereotypes and gendered ways of behaving in the classroom. Second, they highlight the broad value of parents, carers and educators taking an interest in children's online worlds, to both build connection between generations and ensure children and young people stay safe online. Children are often eager to talk about and share the games and activities that they find exciting and interesting with the adults in their lives, which provides an opportunity for relationship building. Spending time playing online together also provides an opportunity for adults to monitor and encourage critical reflection on harmful gender norms, including language children might be adopting because it is in the zeitgeist. While regulation of social media platforms is critical, limits and gaps to these policies identified by participants in this study suggest that it is not a replacement for active teaching and parental and social correctives to harmful messages about gender.

WHEN YOU START TALKING ABOUT THE MANOSPHERE STUFF, YOU GET SOME BOYS WHO KIND OF TAKE A DEEP BREATH ONCE YOU NAME IT, THAT IT'S ALGORITHM BASED. THEY'RE LIKE, 'I THOUGHT I WAS THE PROBLEM ... I'M NOT TRYING TO GET THAT CONTENT, BUT IT JUST KEEPS COMING UP'. IT'S LIKE [THEY'RE] CARRYING SOME SENSE OF GUILT OR SHAME AROUND [CONSUMING] THAT CONTENT.

Key finding 3: Young people's attitudes about image sharing appear to be shaped by the combined influences of harmful gender norms and poor understanding of image autonomy, and the actions of parents and other adults around them

This section looks at educators' observations of young people's attitudes towards image sharing and peers who share intimate images, and explores how children's perceptions of image-based harms, as discussed in the RRE classroom, are gendered. It also discusses the role of adults in naming harms, and shaping children's and young people's perceptions of harm. We then discuss how this reinforces existing regressive attitudes towards those who have experienced sexual violence and applies them to image-based harms, including those enacted using generative AI. In doing so, we identify gaps in the prevention of TA-HSBs.

Gendered perceptions of online risks and image-based harms

The focus group participants talked about the gendered nature of how children perceive harmful or risky online behaviours. They reflected on how children's initial responses to educator prompts about what 'online safety' looked like were often related to physiological and individual psychological factors, such as avoiding eyestrain or 'addiction' to a device or platform. However, when educators had the opportunity to explore different dimensions of online safety with students in more depth, gendered patterns of attitudes and behaviours emerged. For example, children in primary school often raised the risk of financial extortion or scamming (referred to by children as 'catfishing') as opposed to other forms of harm that are more likely to impact girls and women, such as image-based abuse in the context of intimate partner violence (85).

[The boys are] big on the word 'catfish' as well. They're always like, 'They could be catfishing you! They could be scamming you for your money!' And those are the two threats.

The educators reported that some boys talked in ways that indicated an inflated confidence in 'outsmarting' people online who might be trying to extort or exploit them, indicating a poor understanding of the types of online harms that young children can experience.

I'm reminded of a classroom I had where there was, like, three or four 'invincible' boys, who during the whole online conversation were very, like, 'I can handle anything'.

Some of the educators observed that boys were more likely than girls to talk with humour or pride about engaging in riskier behaviours in online spaces, such as sharing photos and videos of themselves to a public audience. For example, they reported that boys would sometimes boast to their teachers that they had hundreds of followers on YouTube, while girls were more likely to hide that they had a high follower count on social media platforms such as Instagram.

I think girls tend to have a bit of more of an idea of their risk of sexualisation and sexual harm. Because they have experienced it, or they belong to a world where they are sexualised, so their understanding of risk is a little bit more grounded in that ... whereas the boys kind of laugh that off or joke about it all.

These observed differences are bolstered by research by the Children's Commissioner for England, which found there were gender differences in the ways that boys and girls worried about being targeted by people abusing

deepfake AI technologies (63). It found that girls were acutely aware of the threat of these technologies and feared being targeted in a similar way to fearing the threat of sexual violence in a public place. In contrast, boys needed to understand the reason someone would target them using such technologies (for example, as retaliation after a fight) in order to see it as a potential threat to worry about (63). This supports the idea that girls are more likely to understand the connection between online and offline threats to their safety (63).

These gender differences in perceptions of online and offline harms appear to derive in part from differences in perception of physical and non-physical harms, and the misinterpretation of abuses perpetrated 'online' as meaning that they do not occur 'in real life' (86). The educators discussed how boys in secondary school were more likely to downplay the impact of bullying and abuse that happened online.

I feel like boys generally are less aware or interested in the tangibility of the risks of online harms, because they're not literally physical harm. And I feel girls are more aware of emotional harm, and the way that emotional harm physically harms them. Boys are like, 'Well, it's online, it can't hurt me', you know, 'that bullying online is not real', 'No one's gonna punch me in the face, 'cause they're online ... just log off. Just block, delete', whereas the girls seem aware of the innate harms of non-physical, like, internet violence.

A similar pattern was observed among younger year groups. There appeared to be gendered differences in how younger boys and girls perceive the severity of physical versus emotional bullying, with girls more likely to identify that non-physical bullying is also hurtful. One participant reflected on a debate in a year 1 classroom about whether students thought a boy laughing at another boy using the toilet was an example of an unsafe behaviour.

[The boys said things like] 'Ohh, it's not harm, because you're not actually touching their body', whereas the girls were like, 'Yeah, but you're teasing them and you're being mean'.

And ... they're, like, 'But I'm not touching him. I'm not touching him'.

Boys' reportedly poor understanding of possible negative outcomes from non-physical harm, including those inflicted online, reflects broader community perceptions of violence and abuse. The latest NCAS found that, overall, young Australians are more likely to correctly identify physical forms of violence as violence against women or domestic violence compared to non-physical forms such as image-based and text-based abuse (82). Young women are more likely than young men to view these non-physical forms of abuse as violence (82).

These perceptions of online, offline, physical and non-physical harms impact how respectful relationships educators teach image autonomy and consent.

I think that translates if we go into the secondary school space when we start having consent conversations, there's an understanding of the harm of sexual violence when it's contact violence. Yeah, but what that looks like in terms of online violence, whether that's nudes being shared or sextortion experiences or editing images etc. The understanding of the harm of that looks very different.

The role of adults in actively shaping and reinforcing how children understand online harms and prevention

The educators discussed how, in their experience, parents may unconsciously perpetuate misconceptions about online harms, which can inhibit more productive conversations with their children around how to address or mitigate risk of harm. Several of these myths replicate longstanding, inaccurate ideas about who perpetrates sexual violence and child sexual abuse in general, such as that online grooming is always perpetrated by an adult stranger, or that sexual exploitation is not as much of an issue in Australia as it is elsewhere (87, 88).

If they [children] talk about the risks of other people taking their image and doing nefarious things with that image, their conceptualisation of that risk is some stranger hiding in a bush taking photos of them. Not the idea of someone online coercing them or grooming them to take photos and upload photos or their peers editing their photos etc. It's this kind of stranger danger mythology that translates into images.

The focus group participants observed that some children lack an understanding of why online safety rules exist in the first place. Unlike other types of safety where dangers are more actively named, such as road safety, many children believed they had online safety rules at home because their parents did not trust them or were 'mean'. Participants articulated mixed observations of children being able to name online harms, and rarely if ever named peer-enacted harms. Participants observed that when grooming behaviours from an adult are acknowledged by children and young people, it is often within the framing of a stranger 'acting suspicious' online with no clear end goal. The participants reflected on how it is significantly more challenging to then introduce and discuss the prevalence of peer-enacted harms.

One of the most common safety practices that children were able to name was taking an abstinence approach to technology in response to harm. The focus group participants reflected on how strategies taught to children in how to deal with online harms were to 'block, delete and move on'. However, in reality, it is not as simple as just logging off for children, particularly if the harms they are experiencing are being enacted by their peers. Many young people who experience TA-HSBs also know the other young person offline, which impacts their capacity to seek help for the problem (60, 89).

Broadly, the focus groups agreed that children and young people were often concerned about an adult's response to harms being a form of punishment: having their devices being removed or their access being limited. Participants expressed that if a teacher attempted to police conversations about social media by deeming it inappropriate or something that children should not be doing, it disrupted their capacity to have

any further discussion about social media with the young people in that classroom. Educators in the focus groups linked this experience to concerns for how the upcoming social media 'delay' legislation may compound the challenges of delivering prevention education, in creating further barriers for younger people to seek help for online harms.

They're kind of excited to share their online world, because maybe they're not used to adults caring about it at all. Which I think is a big part of why their online worlds are so misunderstood; it's kind of a shutdown thing that adults don't want to know about.

Victim blaming and double standards of image autonomy

The educators reflected on how the social norms that drive and reinforce gendered violence emerged in secondary school classroom conversations when discussing image-based abuse. Students in these classrooms tended to have more open conversations about sexting and nudes, and tended to openly express victim-blaming attitudes, including views that minimised image-based harms. The educators spoke to the misogyny expressed by students of all genders towards girls who had experienced image-based harms after consensually sharing nude images of themselves.

'If she's gonna be stupid enough to send me that image, then she deserves to suffer the consequences of that act' was the wording that [a boy] used.

Victim-blaming attitudes appeared to be highly prevalent. This is consistent with NCAS findings that 18% of young people aged 16–24 agreed that 'If a woman sends a naked picture to her partner, then she is partly responsible if he shares it without her permission', and that young men were more likely than young women to hold these attitudes (82).

The educators noted that these victim-blaming attitudes lead to young people actively resisting messages in RRE on where and how those experiencing TA-HSBs can seek help, such as using the Take It Down website, a free service that helps remove nude or sexually explicit

photos and videos from the internet if they were taken before a person turned 18 (90). The educators observed how young people viewed this kind of resource as only applying to girls who shared their image in the first place.

I get a lot of that from girls in high schools as well. I'll be like, 'OK, here's a website that can help you take down images of you naked if you're under 18', and they'll say, 'Why did they send it in the first place?', 'If they just hadn't sent it in the first place, we wouldn't be in this situation' ... and the rest of the room is quite hesitant to defend themselves against that, because then you're the kid that would have sent the nude. And so I think that this intense social shaming around that, it's very girl-driven as well in my experience.

Educators in the focus groups noted that they observed significant victim-blaming attitudes at the secondary school level, which were presented to justify the recipient using that image for malicious purposes. In contrast, the participants observed that conversations rarely exemplified boys' culpability in sharing a nude image, either of themselves or someone else, without consent.

I think it was so, like it is such blinkers on, that it would be a girl sending a nude ... I think there isn't as much an idea that there was a gendered element. It's just that a girl sent an image, that's slutty behaviour, like, 'Don't do that' and so [they're] like, 'Why are you showing us this [Take It Down] website? Suffer the consequences' ... So there wasn't even a reflection on the requesting of it, or the boy involved at all.

Similarly, the educators reflected that there appeared to be a gendered dimension to perceptions of the victim blaming when comparing the experiences of boys being 'sexorted' with girls having their nude images shared non-consensually.

I find it fascinating ... the conversations we're currently having in [the] sector around sextortion, and that that's very much always driven by conversations around boys being catfished by people pretending to be women and sending photos and then being extorted out of money, and ... even though there is

shame that's being played on because of sextortion ... there's not the, 'Well, they're silly sluts' conversation ever happening there, [it's] 'They were tricked, they were manipulated.'

This is supported by the literature, which shows that, in general, boys may be rewarded socially (through the pride and status they receive from other boys) for enacting TA-HSBs using images, while girls are often shamed for choosing to share nude images of themselves (60). This reflects a double standard regarding image autonomy. In essence, boys are celebrated by their peers for violating another person's image autonomy, while girls are shamed by those same peers for practising their own image autonomy.

Some young people trivialise TA-HSBs enacted using generative AI

While the educators observed that the topic of TA-HSBs enacted using generative AI was not frequently discussed in the classroom, in general, young people in secondary schools seemed to be broadly aware of the issue of AI-generated deepfakes. The educators observed that young people might say that students at another school in their local area were creating deepfakes of each other. However, they often seemed reluctant to name them as something they had seen at their school or had any experience with personally. Many of the educators in the focus groups speculated that the behaviour was happening more frequently than was openly discussed in the classroom.

There are also obviously distinct incidences around misogyny and gendered violence, and AI and image sharing that get blown up in the media... So then, when you come into other spaces where they are behaving in the same way and showing those same attitudes, they just immediately name drop the school [from media stories]. Almost as deflecting, like... 'Well, they're worse!'

However, the educators observed that boys often trivialised the impact of TA-HSBs – involving both real photos and AI-generated images – by framing it as humorous or as not

real harm. While they observed that it was not common for students to talk about having used AI apps to create nude images of people they know, there had been instances where boys joked about creating and sharing fake nude photos of their male peers, minimising the sexual nature of the behaviour. One participant reflected on how a group of male secondary students had joked about creating a deepfake of a friend but were quick to defend their behaviour, saying they did it because it was 'funny' but that it was not 'gay' to make naked photos of another boy.

Educators in the focus groups reported that some children justified their belief that generative AI deepfakes were harmless, due to their confidence in being able to identify that something was made using AI. Emerging from discussion around children's and young people's perception of AI, the focus group participants noted that deepfakes typically were discussed as humorous, rather than as violent or abusive.

When we tell them that it's illegal to create fake nudes of your friends, and you see some of them being [awkward], because they've done it as a bit [of a joke], because they think it's funny, and then they [say], 'Well, you can't tell that it's real', and it's maybe a defensiveness thing because of again that tangibility thing. It's not real harm, because it's not a real photo.

Educators in the focus groups observed that some young people did not take TA-HSBs enacted using generative AI seriously because they believed that people 'can tell it's not real'. The perceived 'fake' appearance of generative AI as a justification for its use to manufacture harmful images is concerning when recent studies have shown most adults (66%) were unsure of their capacity to detect AI (91). This gap will likely only increase over time, as generative AI becomes more sophisticated at replicating realistic images.

They seem to be very adamant that like, 'Oh, I can tell that's [an AI-generated image] fake' ... They can tell it's fake, and therefore it's fine. They're removed from the idea that creating a nude image of someone is bad morally, because 'I can tell that this isn't real because the hands are wrong.'

Moreover, research from Internet Matters indicates that whether an AI-generated nude image looks real or not is not the only factor that young people, especially girls, worry about when thinking about being targeted by these technologies (51). The study found that, in general, young people thought it would be worse to have deepfake nudes made and shared without their consent, compared to having a real nude image shared without consent. This was attributed to concerns about anonymity of the person creating and sharing the image and a lack of autonomy over the image being created, as well as fears that people would believe the image is real (51). That is, just because a deepfake might not look real does not mean it does not cause distress, anxiety and fear in the person experiencing image-based abuse.

Widespread use of generative AI makes image autonomy harder to teach

Regardless of personal experience with observing children's and young people's discussions of generative AI, the focus group participants were largely concerned with the increasing normalisation of AI as light-hearted, frivolous and disconnected from harm. The extremely low effort and low skill level required to produce a generative AI image proves a significantly lower barrier to entry than other technologies, such as Photoshop, that may have been used for similar purposes in the past.

I think a lot of [my concern] is just how we've normalised AI as something so silly and so playful, and just you just play around with it, and you just kind of do silly little things. And I think, therefore, it's a lot easier for kids to fall into, in my head, 'Oh silly, look, naked, naked friends', and like, the casualness and the ease with which we've just kind of accepted this.

The widespread use of AI has implications for embedding the concept of image autonomy in young people's lives. The educators reflected how the surge in AI-generated images makes teaching the concept of image autonomy increasingly difficult.

And so, at the same time as AI coming in, we're so far away from understanding that if someone is included in an AI image in whatever capacity, that that's also part of something that deserves autonomy and dignity. Like, we're not even there with real pictures.

And where [do] we draw the line then, like, I think we [could] draw the line at, 'Don't make naked images of your friends' ... kind of like, this is illegal, you know, deepfakes are illegal ... But if we actually wanna be embedding

anything about autonomy over anything to do with your image and anything to do with your identity and who you are, then we have to get much earlier and be saying, 'Don't make images of your friends at all on AI' and then we're going much earlier.

This highlights the importance of teaching image autonomy from a young age, prior to or alongside young people's exposure to technologies for taking, creating, manipulating and sharing images.

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CHAPTER 4

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research has sought to explore what respectful relationships educators' observations about how children and young people talk about social media, gaming, online safety and image sharing can tell us about prevention of image-based abuse, including AI-generated image-based abuse. It has also sought to understand how social media algorithms might be understood as a contributing factor to gendered violence enacted by children and young people. Due to the limited nature of the data, collected from a small group of specialist practitioners, we propose the following implications as areas where future thought leadership and research might focus.

Implications of these findings

Drawing on the research findings, we discuss three implications:

1. Image autonomy may be a protective factor for image-based harms.
2. Social media algorithms may drive children's and young people's resistance to prevention of gendered violence by serving polarising and misogynistic content that reinforces gender norms and stereotypes.
3. Adults appear to have a vital role in the prevention of TA-HSBs enacted by children and young people using images.

Image autonomy may be a protective factor for image-based harms

In line with existing gendered violence prevention frameworks, it is critical to determine the social norms that underpin and reinforce violent behaviour enacted through images, to understand what factors drive children and young people to create harmful images of their

peers using AI, as well as enact or condone other forms of image-based harms. For image autonomy, this may be examining if there is a link between children's and young people's attitudes towards, and knowledge of, image autonomy that may contribute towards children's and young people's understanding of image-based harms. The findings of this research suggest that building awareness of image autonomy with children, young people and adults may contribute opportunities to gain new insights towards the prevention of image-based harms, including TA-HSBs enacted using generative AI.

Image autonomy was a consistent theme throughout the focus group discussions and presents a key element of Body Safety Australia's practice that is under-represented in research. These discussions made clear that RRE educators were observing that from the beginning, in early childhood, children are taught that their image does not belong to them and that they have no agency over if, when, how and by whom their image is taken and shared with others. These messages are often implicitly reinforced by content they encounter online, or more explicitly at home when children have their image shared on their parents' social media.

Participants reflected that many children and young people believe that it is normal for adults they trust to not ask for consent before capturing or sharing photos or videos of them, or even to share images without their consent. The vast majority of these images likely contain content that is not harmful in and of itself. However, the normalisation of image sharing without inviting and obtaining permission by the adults around them may be foundational to how children and young people consider their own image-sharing practices with peers as they grow older.

Research participants agreed that the established social norms around image taking and sharing with children appear to drive children's resistance to conversations about

consensual image practices. Recognising that image taking and sharing practices have evolved with the emergence of social media and related technologies, it is important to consider how these social norms are changing alongside technologies, and where there are opportunities for prevention efforts to reshape norms that may be doing harm.

Social media algorithms may drive children's and young people's resistance to prevention of gendered violence by serving polarising and misogynistic content that reinforces gender norms and stereotypes

Taken together with the literature, analysis of the focus group discussions suggests that, while not causing gendered violence on their own, social media algorithms may contribute to gendered violence by driving and reinforcing children's and young people's resistance to prevention efforts such as RRE programs in schools. This appears to be due to the proliferation of misogynistic content, as well as content that reinforces gender norms and stereotypes.

As the educators reflected, 8–10 years of age was frequently observed to be a pivotal point of change in the RRE classroom in children's understanding and adherence to gender norms and encountering gendered content online. This highlights an additional consideration to understand middle primary as a potentially vital stage of young people's life for embedding prevention of gendered violence activities. Additionally, this may also be a critical point in children's lives to understand and map their concept of image ownership and implement prevention education that supports respect and agency for images.

Resistance to gendered violence prevention work was observed at a greater frequency in upper primary and secondary school children and young people. Citing examples such as the *Depp v Heard* trial, the educators in the focus

groups reflected how misogynistic online discourse mobilised some young people to actively resist and challenge conversations about consent and respectful relationships. In some cases, this resistance was reinforced by teachers who were observing the educators' facilitation, demonstrating how the online messages that children hear can be unknowingly reinforced by adults in their offline interactions.

The role of gaming ecosystems was a significant focus of the focus group discussions and indicates emerging considerations for prevention. Particularly for primary-school-aged children, who were less consistently on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, gaming served as a primary way children engaged in play, communicated with friends and had fun online. YouTube was similarly identified as highly popular, which is consistent with research that shows YouTube is the most popular service for children under 13 (40). Yet this was also a way in which children were observed to be encountering and being normalised to manosphere language through memes and humour. This also has implications for the implementation of the Social Media Minimum Age Act. Platforms such as Discord, unless it is also included in the restrictions, may serve as a way that young people still encounter algorithmically driven content, even if they are not actively on social media. Children will still be able to access content on YouTube that does not require a user to be logged in, and therefore may be less likely to be redirected to the algorithmically moderated YouTube Kids platform. As a result, they may still encounter harmful content including misogynistic or otherwise discriminatory material, which may not fall under the platform's definition of age-restricted content (92). These findings highlight the fundamental importance of digital media literacy as a protective factor against TA-HSBs (15). Education for children and young people that addresses both the content and design of social media platforms will help enable them to critically engage with harmful or unrealistic representations being presented to them online.

This signals the need for a multifaceted approach to preventing the harmful content children and young people may encounter

online. At a structural level, the prevention sector must work alongside social media platforms to manage regulation and reform. Policy and legislative efforts that impact children, including the Social Media Minimum Age Act, must be informed by the rights of the child, safety by design principles, and gendered violence prevention principles. Prioritising safeguarding approaches, legislative and regulatory action must allow children and young people to participate in online spaces while supporting them through education to build their capability to critically engage with content online.

Adults appear to have a vital role in the prevention of TA-HSBs enacted by children and young people using images

The focus groups reflected on the vital role that the broader school community has in shaping children's perspectives on image autonomy, online safety and gender norms and stereotypes. Consistent with recommendations from Our Watch's RRE blueprint (21), engaging with parents, caregivers and school staff is a critical component for the long-term success of RRE and other primary prevention efforts.

The findings in this report highlight the need for increased access to education and training for adults, including parents, caregivers, teachers and adults in the broader community. This guidance should use a strengths-based and rights-based approach to children's sexual development, which builds adults' confidence to model and have age-appropriate discussions with children about sexual behaviour, digital literacy and online harms (15).

Building this confidence also includes building adults' understanding of the contexts and environments in which children enact TA-HSBs towards other children using images. The focus group participants identified that, in their experience, many parents' understandings of online risk and harm was not often grounded in technology-facilitated abuse and violence. There is also an observed lack of knowledge of, or apprehension about discussing, peer-enacted harms with children and young people when the

harm involves sexual or nude imagery. Further education, resources and support for parents and caregivers may enable them to more confidently navigate discussions of online safety, consent and TA-HSBs with the children in their care.

Future research directions

Engaging with children and young people directly

This study was exploratory in nature and has presented implications for prevention that indicate future directions for research. Firstly, it is critical that the implications discussed are investigated further through engaging with children and young people directly.

The Australian National Research Agenda to End Violence against Women and Children 2023–2028 (ANRA) identifies children and young people as a priority population for research into preventing domestic, family and sexual violence, as people who have experienced violence in their own right (93). The ANRA highlights the importance of centring the voices of children and young people in research when they are still children, in order to design systems and services that are appropriately tailored to their needs (93). More research is needed on children's experiences of technologies, social media and gendered violence, and how this affects their own attitudes and behaviours. In further investigating and understanding the experiences of children and young people, it is critical that further research seeks to explore how the intersections of race, gender and disability drive how children enact TA-HSBs using images.

It may be valuable to further investigate younger children's attitudes towards, and experiences of, TA-HSBs. As identified in the focus group discussions in this report, children aged 8–12 were observed to hold gendered attitudes, have established online lives, and possibly already be resistant to messaging around consent for image taking or sharing. This may be a critical period of children's development to investigate further in prevention. Consistent with the literature, which shows young people aged 12–15 are the most

common age group for displaying harmful sexual behaviours and 10–14 most commonly the age children experience TA-HSBs (15), effective prevention likely needs to start at an earlier stage to address these harms.

With this in consideration, it may be useful to consider the need to adapt existing Victorian primary prevention frameworks for a child-specific model. Harmful sexual behaviours, including TA-HSBs, occur within the context of children's cognitive, social, sexual and physical development; adult-perpetrated violence occurs within different contexts (15). As a part of the ongoing development and improvement of new and existing frameworks, the role of technologies – including the use of generative AI and online spaces – should be continuously and rapidly revisited to ensure prevention remains effective and at the forefront of children's needs and experiences.

In addition, efforts to work directly with children and young people to build on the current understanding of effective prevention should be complemented by understanding the role of parents and caregivers in effective prevention with children, particularly when it comes to image autonomy.

Further research into image autonomy

Image autonomy is a novel concept in research, practice and policymaking. Further research is needed to examine the relationship between children's and adults' understanding of image autonomy, their attitudes towards TA-HSBs and image-based abuse, and their enactment or experience of these behaviours. This must be led by awareness raising and practice exploration of image autonomy and its importance beyond the existing scope of Body Safety Australia's practice.

As identified in the Implications section, *'Your image belongs to you'* finds that there are promising indicators that image autonomy may prove a protective factor against TA-HSBs in children and young people. This signals the need for robust empirical research on image autonomy to evaluate if and how it may serve as a factor in

violence prevention frameworks, considering the social and environmental factors that influence the effectiveness of image autonomy as part of broader prevention efforts. This may include creating an understanding of, and mapping, developmentally appropriate image autonomy practices for children by age and stage.

In addition to comprehending children's and young people's understanding of image autonomy, it is important that there be further research into adult understandings of image autonomy. As identified in the focus groups, parents do not model image autonomy to children and young people. Further research may seek to understand how social norms and technological contexts inform adults' ideas about image sharing and online safety, how image autonomy is or is not modelled by adults, and how these factors contribute to children's and young people's attitudes towards consent for taking, editing or sharing images.

This is consistent with the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse (2021–2030), which indicates that responses to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse must engage the whole community (25). In addition, the National Strategy and *Change the story* identify parents as a main influence on children's gendered socialisation (12, 25).

To begin addressing this research gap, Body Safety Australia is undertaking a research project working with young people aged between 13 and 17 to better understand how they perceive and experience image taking and sharing with their peers, with the aim of developing a prevention program to address TA-HSBs enacted using images, including those created using generative AI. The project aims to create a better understanding of young people's experiences and the social norms that young people are observing and experiencing with their peers, as well as to inform the development of a tool for adults to respond to a young person's disclosure of image-based abuse.

Further work to expand how we think about primary prevention and online social lives and influences

This research has highlighted the need to reconsider the framing of 'online' in primary prevention spaces and frameworks. There is an important and growing body of research literature that focuses on understanding how gendered violence and related harms are perpetrated and experienced online, and ways to respond to support people who have experienced violence and deter or punish people who have used violence. However, to date, there has been relatively little research that explores the multifaceted dimensions of action that might be taken to prevent these harms before they occur, particularly with relation to children and young people.

This report has started to explore the role of online spaces as potential sites for preventative action and highlights the need for more research on the role of algorithms as a potential contributing factor to gendered violence. Further, our findings suggest that research that seeks to understand further how children view and understand algorithms may support the ongoing development and improvement of age-appropriate media literacy programs.

The focus group discussions highlight that the role of gaming spaces and their surrounding ecosystems also require further investigation. Platforms adjacent to gaming spaces, such as Discord and YouTube, may act as a space where children and young people experience and access content that typically circulates on social media platforms. This is of note given that some gaming and chat platforms may be exempt from the Social Media Minimum Age Act, and if so may effectively circumvent some of the protections for minors that the age restrictions are intended to provide. This highlights the fact that legislative and policy action must be

complemented through providing effective critical media literacy for children, young people, parents, families and school communities, as well as the crucial importance of resourcing access to help-seeking when children and young people experience harms online.

Parents play a crucial role with their children in supporting the prevention of online harms. Future research should explore the barriers to online safety education for adults to strengthen community-level prevention education for both adults and children.

Further work to understand intersecting forms of structural discrimination in technology-assisted harm

This research provides limited insight into the intersections between sexist and misogynistic drivers of technology-assisted harm and those rooted in racism, ableism, classism, colonialism, heteronormativity and cisnormativity. The links between each of these forms of discrimination are well established in other research and practice literature (94-96). In particular, the overlap between misogynistic online content and white supremacist, anti-transgender and religious extremist radicalisation are well established (97, 98), as is the explicit ableism that is described by people who have experienced online hate (99).

More research is required that explores how and to what degree children and young people are exposed to these various types of discriminatory content and discourse, alongside the misogynistic content that is the focus of this report. There is also a need for evidence that helps to build more nuanced policy and practice understanding about the effects of children's and young people's exposure to racist, ableist, transphobic and homophobic material on their behaviour towards peers, including regarding TA-HSBs enacted using images.

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APPENDIX A

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Introduction and welcome

- [Kate Hepworth, focus group facilitator, to commence introduction to project]
- Acknowledgement of Country
- To begin with, I'm going to explain a short overview of the research project so that we all have a shared understanding of why we're here today. I'll then provide some more detail about what we're hoping to ask you to discuss. If you decide that you no longer want to participate, you're very welcome to withdraw and you don't owe anyone an explanation as to why – it's really important that everyone participates because they want to, not because they feel they have to.
- This focus group will ask questions about your experiences, observations and views as respectful relationships practitioners. To clarify, your delivery of any and all Body Safety Australia programs is respectful relationships education (RRE) work.
- Specifically, we will ask about what you've observed about attitudes about gender norms expressed by young people and adult members of school communities, and your views on what these attitudes might tell us about the influence of social media and internet algorithms. The aim is to create a foundational resource that can advocate for future work in the primary prevention space that is timely, effective and centres the needs of children and young people.
- You don't have to have experienced a disclosure from a child about AI-generated image-based abuse to contribute. In this discussion we will ask you about:
 - what you have observed about attitudes towards gender norms expressed by young people in teaching RRE
 - your views on what these attitudes might tell us about the influence of social media and internet algorithms
 - reflections on the use of generative AI and how this impacts RRE programs.
- To clarify, when we are asking questions about AI in this session, we are predominantly interested in the forms of AI that can be used to enact image-based abuse – for example, deepfakes and nudify apps, rather than text-based AI tools such as ChatGPT.
- We expect the sessions to go for two hours maximum including short breaks.
- You do not have to respond to any question you are not comfortable answering and may request to take breaks or step out any point. Participation is voluntary so you may withdraw at any time. If you do participate, you are under no obligation to divulge any information or opinions if you are concerned it will jeopardise your standing at work.
- [Hazel Donley, Respect Victoria co-investigator, to introduce herself]
- Before we set the expectations of the session, can we please go around the table and everyone introduce yourselves, including name, pronouns and your role.
- Before we begin, we need to set some ground rules.

Setting expectations of session

- [Kate to provide Participant Information and Consent Form to potential participants ahead of time to screen out anyone not

comfortable in participating, but this will be reiterated]

- This session will be recorded and transcribed for analysis. Once transcribed, the recordings will be deleted for your privacy.
- We ask that within the session, you avoid referring to specific details relating to a school or person that could be identifiable. For example, please avoid referring to a school or student by name or details of an event that otherwise may be identifiable.
- We also ask you to refrain from sharing personal disclosures of violence, abuse or harm in this session. If the conversation that we have today surfaces a need to discuss emotional or psychological wellbeing, including in relation to your own experiences of related issues, please reach out to EAP, helplines or talk to your manager or CEO about other ways we might support you.
- [Explain limits of privacy and confidentiality within the session:]
 - No individual participant will be able to be identified in the final report and we will make every effort to redact any potentially identifiable information or comments about a participant, school or specific child.
 - This is obviously a small, specialised cohort of practitioners and there is a small chance that people who know you and your work really well might be able to guess at your identity. If you are worried that is a possibility, please speak to Kate or Hazel and we will work with you to make sure that your privacy is protected.
 - The recording and transcription of the sessions will be available to Respect Victoria for review.
 - Direct quotes from the session may be included in our final report but will not be attributed in ways that will allow identification of individual participants.
 - You are asked to keep any and all contributions from the session

confidential. Your responses to any component of the session, or choosing not to participate or respond to any question will not impact your standing at work.

- Everyone's input or opinion is equally valid regardless of role, tenure or experience.
- Kate will lead the discussion and may need to interrupt or redirect the conversation to ensure everyone can speak if they have something to say, or if discussion going off track.
- Hand up if you would like to respond directly.
- Hazel may interject to receive clarification on a statement, e.g. description of program details, clarifying Body Safety Australia language, etc.
- Hazel and Kate may make notes for follow up questions or points that require further elaboration throughout the session.

- [Ask participants to communicate any other expectations or guidelines that they would like in place before we begin that have not been covered]
- [Ask participants if they have any questions on the information shared so far]

During session

- [Proceed through questions in discussion guide]
- [If group is starting to flag in energy/enthusiasm between established breaks, suggest a short decompression break]
- [If participants are interrupting, talking over one another etc., interject to remind them of ground rules]

Discussion questions

Gendered attitudes

- Can you tell me about how you have observed students talk about gender when you are teaching RRE?

- What does this look like in different settings? For example, across age groups, geographic areas, cultural or socio-economic settings?
- Does it vary depending on the space or students?
- Do children and young people express sexism or misogyny in the classroom? If so, how?
- How do their peers typically respond?

The digital world

- What apps or platforms do children and young people discuss using to share images/videos?
- How do they talk about how they use these platforms?
- Have you heard children and young people talk about *who* they communicate with on these platforms in the context of your work? For example, their schoolfriends, other young people they have met online, or other people they do not know?
- What can you share from these observations?
- How do children and young people respond to your discussion of online/social content in RRE?
- What are some of the common themes that come out of these discussions with students?
- Who are the key social media figures/creators that you use as examples when you teach RRE?
- Who are the key figures that *students* name in discussions?
- Have you observed gender differences in the way that students discuss their use of technology or social media?
- How often do you have to address discussions of inappropriate content (i.e. violent videos/images, pornography and other age-inappropriate content)?
- Do children and young people talk about barriers that prevent them from discussing

what they are seeing and doing online with parents, teachers or other trusted adults?

Taking images, sharing images and AI

- What have you observed about children's and young people's understanding of protecting their own safety around taking and sharing images, including of their face?
- What does this look like when taking/sharing images of their friends/peers?
- Has this changed over time?
- Do children and young people talk about using filters when taking and sharing photos of friends/peers?
- If so, how do they talk about it?
- What have you observed about children's and young people's understanding of how social media and internet platforms curate the content that they consume?
- For example, do some students understand that algorithms are programmed to provide content that they are likely to engage with, even if they use less technical language to describe how this happens?
- Do you ever need to adapt the way you discuss social media and online engagement because of internet trends, memes or viral challenges? Can you give some examples of what that looks like?
- How often do you observe students using generative AI to create harmful images in schools?
- Is it still relatively uncommon, or do you expect to see or hear of it being used in most classrooms?
- Do students raise discussion of the use of AI when you are delivering RRE programs?
- How prevalent are these discussions?
- Do you think that the frequency of students/teachers raising AI as an issue has changed in say, the past five years?

Parents, carers and teachers

- What are the key questions or concerns that you address with *teaching staff* around use of social media, AI or image sharing in schools?
- What are the key questions or concerns that you address with *parents* around the use of social media, AI or image sharing in schools?

Additional reflections

- Given your experience in RRE program delivery, what are your concerns about AI-generated image-based abuse in schools?
- What kinds of extra support would you value to enable you as a practitioner to deliver RRE in schools?

Suggested probes

- How might this discussion look differently when working with older/younger year levels?
- In your experience, is there a gendered difference to how this is perceived?
- How prevalent are discussions of this nature?
- Is this specific to certain settings, or something that you experience across different settings?
- Have you observed changes over time?
- Can you tell me more about _____

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