Exploring youth preferences: age verification methods for online safety

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Background:

With the increasing availability of online pornography, children and young people in Australia have unbridled access to sexually explicit content. Globally and in Australia, there are growing efforts to minimise the impacts of pornography on young people, including regulating pornography access through mandatory age verification methods. This study investigated young people's attitudes and preferences towards age verification processes to access pornography.

Methods:

Cross-sectional online survey completed by a convenience sample of young people aged 15-29 years, living in Victoria, Australia. Logistic regression analysis examined associations between socio-demographic characteristics and acceptance of four age verification methods: personal ID upload, credit card verification, parental monitoring or facial scanning/face ID. A descriptive qualitative content analysis was conducted on the open text responses.

Results:

794 people completed the survey (55.0% identified as a woman, 9.3% as non-binary, median age 23 years). Overall, 94% of participants had ever viewed pornography (median age of first accidentally viewed pornography 11 years; intentionally =13 years). Around 60% supported mandatory age verification to access online pornography. The median age at which participants thought viewing pornography should be permitted was 16 years (SD 1.73). Half of the sample (49.5%) supported personal ID upload as an age verification mechanism, followed by credit card verification (28.4%), parental monitoring (18%) and facial scanning (17.0%). None were supported by a majority of participants. Four key concerns were identified in the qualitative analysis: privacy and security considerations, impacts on sexual development, inefficacy and workarounds, and the need for alternative approaches.

Conclusion:

Our findings indicate that participants broadly support the introduction of age-based restrictions for online pornographic content. However, participants in our study remained unconvinced by existing age verification strategies, with none of the four suggested methods considered acceptable by most people. Further qualitative and co-design research is needed to provide more innovative and acceptable age verification options.