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Submission to the NSW Parliamentary Enquiry on the Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health

This document is intended as formal contribution to the inquiry by the parliamentary committee to exempt of harmful pornography on mental, emotional and physical health.

The submission is being made by The Shia Muslim Council of Australia (SMCA), an umbrella organisation which currently represents 35 member organisations from the 8 states and territories in Australia. This is a preliminary submission due to the restricted timeframe and we would welcome the opportunity to present a more detailed submission in the future.

Executive Summary

- We assert that all forms of pornography are harmful.
- We urge government to make producers and distributors of pornography legally liable for minors accessing pornography.
- We urge the government to review the code of conduct and ratings guidelines for television, streaming services and social media applications to reduce the risk of the slippery slope towards intentional or unintentional exposure to pornography.
- We urge the government to empower parents to take the lead in protecting their children harmful exposure to sexualised content and to allow them to preserve their cultural values.
- We refer to shared values across the major religions which emphasise modesty and self-discipline and specifically the Islamic values of modesty and chastity, which seek to create communities that are safe sexual harm and sexual exploitation.

Opening Notes

The SMCA voices strong concern over the accessibility and impact of pornography on Australians, especially children and young people.

We assert that all pornography is harmful and reject the distinction of harmful vs non-harmful pornography. What is sometimes termed “soft porn” often leads to escalation and consumption of violent and aggressive pornography.

The risk of addiction is very high, and the addiction is often extremely harmful. The risk of addiction is increased because pornography is now unfortunately very accessible on hand-held devices, including to children and teenagers.

In Australia, research provides several quantitative insights into the effects of pornography, especially on younger audiences (1,2). A significant survey found that 44% of Australian children aged 9-16 had encountered sexual images online within a month prior to the study. Among these, 16% reported seeing explicit sexual acts, and 17% encountered images of genitalia. This work underscores the extensive negative effects that early exposure to pornography can have on mental, emotional, and social well-being, shaping harmful perceptions and behaviours that can persist into adulthood.

We present the following key points for your consideration as part of this preliminary submission:

1. Undermining Respect and Consent Education: Exposure to pornography, especially violent or degrading content, fosters attitudes that are contrary to respect and consent. Studies indicate that pornography often portrays interactions devoid of mutual respect, normalizing aggression and undermining young people's understanding of healthy relationships. For instance, research by reveals that frequent exposure can lead adolescents to accept gender stereotypes and objectification, which are deeply embedded in much pornographic material (1,2, 3). This is particularly troubling for young males who, as studies suggest, are more likely to seek out and view pornography, thereby internalizing behaviours and attitudes that contradict educational efforts around consent (1, 2).



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2. Legal Measures Against Production and Distribution: To mitigate these impacts, it is imperative that the production and distribution of all forms of pornography, including deepfake and AI-generated content, are made illegal and subject to high penalties. The psychological risks associated with pornographic exposure are well-documented. For instance, exposure is linked with risky sexual behaviours and the early initiation of sexual experimentation (1,2,3). Implementing stricter legal frameworks (e.g. age verification) around pornography will serve as a protective measure, reducing access and shielding young people from the adverse developmental consequences associated with these media.

Current measures to restrict underage access to pornography are inadequate, as evidenced by the statistics on exposure of young people to pornography, both unintentionally and intentionally. It is imperative that the legal burden of responsibility for the harmful effects of pornography is placed on those who are profiting through its production and distribution. Producers and distributors of pornography must be incentivised to protect children by being made legally liable and open to facing substantial penalties for minors accessing this content.

3. Impact of Violent and Degrading Content on Relationships: Research highlights that violent and degrading pornography profoundly shapes young viewers' perceptions of women and romantic partners. Studies reveal that such content can instil sexist attitudes, leading some young males to view women as objects and tolerate, or even expect, aggressive sexual behaviour (2, 5). This distortion of healthy relationship dynamics can erode trust, empathy, and respect in personal relationships, resulting in long-term relational challenges, partner dissatisfaction, and even heightened divorce rates later in life (5).

4. Insufficient Support for Parents and Caregivers: There is a significant gap in resources available to parents and caregivers for educating children on the risks associated with pornography and the importance of cultural values. Many current resources unintentionally promote early exposure to sexual content under the label of "self-discovery," potentially leading children toward harmful experiences without a balanced, well-informed perspective (4,6). We recommend expanding resources that



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empower parents to preserve their cultural values, support parental rights, and emphasize the importance of delaying children's exposure to sexual content. These resources should facilitate open discussions and promote critical thinking around media consumption, with a focus on understanding the internet's influence and fostering respectful, healthy relationships.

We also recommend that the content rating for television and streaming sites be reviewed as children are frequently exposed to indecent material and at least partial nudity through content which is not classified as pornography and sometimes classified as suitable for children to consume. A review of the ratings guidelines for media content is an essential part of slowing the slippery slope towards pornography exposure.

Furthermore, we recommend that social media applications become legally obligated to screen content, including advertisements for indecent content including partial nudity and sexually suggestive images, as this is also another method through which children are then intentionally or unintentionally accessing pornography.

5. Consistent Theme withing major World Religions: While cultural perspectives vary, a common thread across major religions is the promotion of modesty, self-discipline, and respect within sexual matters, often viewing pornography as misaligned with spiritual well-being and ethical behaviour. Each tradition emphasises these values as pathways to a life of integrity, compassion, and deeper connection with the divine or spiritual goals. There is a consensus that major world religions consistently promote modesty and delayed sexual exposure, especially for younger individuals, viewing pornography as potentially harmful to spiritual and ethical well-being (7). These shared values underscore a desire for integrity and connection with the divine, shaping individual behaviours and community norms.

6. The Islamic Perspective: In Islam, pornography is regarded as contrary to the fundamental values of modesty and chastity. Modesty and chastity are emphasized as a vital virtue that uphold individual dignity and sanctity by promoting respectful dress, behaviour, and interactions. Acts of intimacy are inherently private. Exhibitionism and



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using sexual acts for profit go against modesty, and are ultimately harmful to society as a whole.

Pornography, however, undermines these principles by objectifying individuals and encouraging actions outside the ethical boundaries Islam establishes for sexuality. The Quran underscore the importance of guarding one's modesty and maintaining chastity, forming a pathway toward closeness to Allah.

Concluding remarks as part of this submission

The SMCA urgently calls for reforms to protect the Australian community from the harmful impact of pornography and unhealthy sexual exposure. We also advise the government to adopt a balanced approach in schools that respects and upholds children's cultural and religious values, fostering harmony and unity within our multicultural society. Through legislation that limits its distribution, supports parental guidance, and a commitment to preserving parental rights, we can work toward a society that prioritizes the healthy development and well-being of our youth.

Ref:

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3. Peter, J. and P.M. Valkenburg, Adolescents and Pornography: A Review of 20 Years of Research. *J Sex Res*, 2016. 53(4-5): p. 509-31.
4. <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/Pages/inquiry-details.aspx?pk=3067#tab-termsreference>
5. Campbell, L. and T. Kohut, The use and effects of pornography in romantic relationships. *Curr Opin Psychol*, 2017. 13: p. 6-10.
6. Bordoloi, M., I. Durkin, and A. Aggarwal, Effects of Pornography on Youth: A Review. *Mo Med*, 2024. 121(3): p. 195-197.
7. Perry, S., & Whitehead, A. (2019). Only Bad for Believers? Religion, Pornography Use, and Sexual Satisfaction Among American Men. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 56, 50 - 61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2017.1423017>.