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Abstract | This study presents the findings from a large survey of people living in Australia ($n=9,987$) who had used mobile dating apps and/or dating websites in the previous five years. Across the entire sample, 12.4 percent of respondents reported receiving requests to facilitate the sexual exploitation of their own children or children they had access to. Requests included asking for sexual information about children or for sexual images or videos of children, asking to meet children in person or asking for children to perform sex acts over webcam.

The paper highlights the need for additional safety features to be embedded in mobile dating apps and dating websites to protect vulnerable users and to prevent the sexual exploitation of children.

The sexual exploitation of Australian children on dating apps and websites

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Introduction

Mobile dating apps and dating websites can be used to create opportunities to develop and pursue social, romantic and/or sexual relationships (Gillett 2018; Paat & Markham 2021). However, there appears to be a link between the use of dating apps and technology-facilitated sexual violence victimisation (Choi, Wong & Fong 2018; Pooley & Boxall 2020; Powell & Henry 2019; Wolbers et al. 2022), with women (Albury et al. 2019), ethnically diverse people, individuals identifying as LGBTQIA+ and those with a disability at higher risk of being subjected to these forms of abuse (Albury et al. 2019; Henry & Powell 2018; Powell, Scott & Henry 2020; Wolbers et al. 2022).

While there is some emerging evidence about the prevalence and nature of dating app and website facilitated sexual violence (see, for example, Wolbers et al. 2022), little is known about the extent and nature of child sexual exploitation occurring on these platforms. Given the staggering amount of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) reported by mainstream social media and other platforms (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children 2022), it is crucial to investigate whether similar forms of exploitation are occurring on dating apps and websites. This includes CSAM produced by parents or guardians, who may be groomed to provide these materials to people they meet on these platforms.

CSAM produced by parents and guardians

Some CSAM cases involve parents or guardians producing material of their own children and distributing it to others online, or making their children available for abuse to people they have met online. In 2009, over a third (35%) of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's Child Victim Identification Program database comprised materials produced by parents and relatives of the victims (Lanning 2010). Men comprise the vast majority of adult offenders responsible for the creation and distribution of CSAM, with one estimate ranging from 82 to 98 percent, depending on whether the offending involved one or more perpetrators (Seto et al. 2018).

A recent study conducted by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection (C3P 2017) involved a survey of CSAM victim-survivors who were asked about the characteristics of the abuse they were subjected to and the abusers. Most of the perpetrators (those who sexually abused the victim and/or recorded the abuse) identified by respondents (82%) were either immediate or extended family members of the victim, and 38 percent were the victim-survivor's biological father. In most cases the CSAM had been produced in the child's own home.

Another study involved the analysis of cases reported in Australian media or legal databases where parents/guardians had been prosecuted for producing CSAM of their children (Salter et al. 2021). The authors identified three 'types' of parental CSAM producers: the male offender who forms adult relationships and exploits his own children; the male offender who forms a relationship with a woman and exploits her children or gains access to children to abuse by other means; and the biological mother who produces CSAM of her own children for men she knows (sometimes a partner) either online or in person. That study indicated that individuals who are approached by other adults online under the guise of romantic relationships may be at risk of being groomed for the purpose of sexually exploiting their children. Certainly, qualitative research has indicated that individuals seeking to pay for live streamed child sexual abuse accessed these victims by communicating with adult traffickers over dating and social media websites (Napier, Teunissen & Boxall 2021). Although the victims in that study were predominately located overseas, it is possible that potential child victims in Australia may also be targeted for sexual exploitation through their parents or carers who use dating apps and websites.

Current study

There is limited empirical research exploring the prevalence and nature of child sexual exploitation occurring on or being facilitated by dating apps and dating websites. The current study aimed to fill this knowledge gap by measuring the prevalence of dating app/website users receiving requests from other users to access their children or other children they know for sexually exploitative purposes.

Methodology

This study was conducted as part of a larger research project examining the prevalence and nature of online and in-person sexual violence facilitated by dating apps and websites, as self-reported by people living in Australia (AIC Human Research Ethics Approval: P0320A.A). A survey was administered to almost 10,000 people living in Australia who reported that they had used a mobile dating app or dating website in the previous five years. The survey was conducted by Roy Morgan Research Solutions between 23 June 2021 and 9 August 2021 using its Single Source panel and panels managed by PureProfile and Dynata. The survey was sent to men, women and non-binary members of these online panels aged 18 years and over. Proportional quota sampling, and a non-probability sampling method, was used. Quotas were based on the Australian adult population stratified by sex, age and usual place of residence, derived from data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The Single Source survey, which is recruited through a rigorous cluster-sampled, face-to-face survey approach, was conducted first and was used to calibrate the quotas for the external panels to account for the age and gender-related propensity for using a dating app or dating website in the past five years.

The survey took respondents an average of 13 minutes to complete. The overall completion rate for the survey—the proportion of total invitations ($n=185,840$) sent to panel members that resulted in completed surveys—was 5.4 percent; however, this does not consider the additional eligibility criteria for the survey. When adjusted, the estimated completion rate was 6.3 percent. Overall, 75.5 percent of respondents who opened the invitation, passed the screening process and read the consent form went on to complete the survey.

Respondents were asked a series of questions about their sociodemographic characteristics, the nature of their dating app/website usage (eg frequency of use, reasons for use, types of apps and websites used) and their experiences of sexual aggression, harassment and violence while using these apps. A copy of the survey questions is available in Wolbers et al. (2022). Nine respondents were removed due to erroneous and nonsense responses, resulting in a final sample of 9,987 respondents.

Measures of child sexual exploitation

The focus of the current study was on adult respondents receiving requests from people they had met through a mobile dating app or dating website to facilitate (arrange, assist) the sexual exploitation of children they had access to (hereafter referred to as 'requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation'). This does not imply that respondents were perpetrators, but rather that these requests were attempts to have the respondent facilitate the exploitation of a child. Specifically, respondents were asked about their experiences of someone:

- asking them to provide images of their children or other children they had contact with;
- pressuring them to provide sexual images of their children or other children they had access to;
- asking to meet their children or other children they had access to before the respondent felt it was appropriate;
- asking them questions of a sexual nature about their children or other children they had access to (eg if their children had their period yet, their breast size); and
- offering to pay respondents for photos/videos of their children or other children they had access to, or to have these children perform on webcam.

Respondents were also asked about the target of the requests they had received: specifically, whether the request to facilitate child sexual exploitation was in relation to their own children (ie biological, adopted or stepchildren), younger family members, younger friends, or other children they had access to (eg students).

Sample demographics

As shown in Table 1, there was a fairly even split between male (50.0%) and female (49.3%) respondents, with less than one percent identifying as non-binary (0.7%). Three-quarters of the sample were between 18 and 44 years of age (78.0%; see Table 1). Almost a third (33.7%) of the respondents reported that they were living with children at the time of completing the survey. Over three-quarters of respondents (80.2%) lived in major cities, 17.3 percent lived in regional Australia and 2.1 percent lived in remote areas. Approximately eight percent of respondents identified as First Nations.

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of survey respondents (n=9,987)

	<i>n</i>	%
First Nations ^a	778	7.8
Living with children	3,361	33.7
Gender		
Man	4,992	50.0
Woman	4,924	49.3
Non-binary	71	0.7
Age		
18–24	2,092	21.0
25–34	3,471	34.8
35–44	2,220	22.2
45–54	1,161	11.6
55–64	636	6.4
65+	407	4.1
Usual place of residence^b		
Major city	8,008	80.2
Regional	1,731	17.3
Remote	211	2.1

a: Denominator includes 126 respondents who did not provide their Indigenous status

b: Regional classification calculated using the respondent's postcode and concordance with the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018); denominator excludes 37 respondents who did not provide a response

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Results

Requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation

Overall, 12.4 percent ($n=1,237$) of respondents said they had received at least one request for facilitated child sexual exploitation involving their own children or children they had access to.

Approximately one in 10 respondents (9.4%, $n=939$) indicated that they had been asked by someone they met on a dating app/website to provide photos of their own children, other children they had access to (eg if the respondent was a teacher at a school), or younger friends or family members aged under 18. Although asking for photos of children generally is not inherently exploitative, possession of non-illegal material depicting children may be indicative of a sexual interest in children (Taylor, Holland & Quayle 2001). This is supported by the current data, as close to half of the respondents who said they had been asked for photos of their children or children they had access to said that they had also been pressured to provide sexual photos of the children (48.5%, $n=455$; 4.6% of all respondents).

Further:

- 8.4% of respondents reported that someone they had met on a dating app/website requested to meet their children (or those they had access to) in person before it was appropriate ($n=838$);
- 7.7% of respondents said someone they had met on a dating app/website had asked questions of a sexual nature about these children ($n=765$); and
- 7.1% of respondents said someone they had met on a dating app/website had offered payment for photos/videos of these children or to have them perform on webcam ($n=704$).

When broken down by gender (excluding non-binary gender respondents due to the small sample size), chi-square analysis showed that men were statistically more likely than women to receive requests to facilitate child sexual exploitation involving their children or children they had access to (see Table 2). Of note, significantly more men than women (10.0 vs 6.8%) reported being asked by other dating app/website users to let them meet their children (or those they had access to), receiving questions of a sexual nature about these children (9.7% vs 5.5%) or being offered payment for photos/videos of these children or to have them perform on webcam (9.1% vs 5.0%).

Table 2: Requests for sexual exploitation of children by people met on dating apps/websites, by respondent gender identity and type of request ($n=9,916$)					
Type of request	Men		Women		Chi-square (χ^2) ^a
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	
Someone on a dating app/website asked the respondent for photos of children ^b					
Yes	11.2	561	7.6	374	38.51***
No	88.8	4,431	92.4	4,550	
Someone on a dating app/website pressured the respondent to provide sexual images of children ^b					
Yes	5.7	286	3.4	167	31.07***
No	94.3	4,706	96.6	4,757	
Someone on a dating app/website asked to meet children ^b before it was appropriate					
Yes	10.0	500	6.8	335	33.18***
No	90.0	4,492	93.2	4,589	
Someone on a dating app/website asked the respondent questions of a sexual nature about children ^b					
Yes	9.7	486	5.5	273	61.61***
No	90.3	4,506	94.5	4,651	
Someone on a dating app/website offered the respondent payment for photos/videos of children ^b or to have them perform on webcam					
Yes	9.1	455	5.0	246	64.01***
No	90.9	4,537	95.0	4,678	

***statistically significant at $p<0.001$

a: All chi-square tests had $n=9,916$ and one degree of freedom

b: Respondents could select whether these children were their own children, other children they had access to, friends (aged under 18 years) or family members (aged under 18 years). Respondents could select multiple responses and therefore percentages may not total 100

Note: Table percentages and significance tests exclude non-respondents and non-binary respondents (due to small numbers)

Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

It is important to note here that the gender of the individuals requesting facilitation of child sexual exploitation was unknown; only the gender of the person receiving the request was reported. To interrogate the findings described in Table 2 further, the gender cohorts were disaggregated by the sexual orientation of the respondent. Respondents who did not self-identify as heterosexual (eg lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual etc) were categorised as LGB+ for the purposes of this analysis. The resulting sexual orientation variable comprised two categories: heterosexual and LGB+ (see Table 3).

As shown in Table 3, the cohort of respondents who reported the highest levels of facilitation requests were LGB+ men. For example, 18.0 percent of these men said they had received any request for sexual exploitation materials of their own children or children they had access to, which decreased to approximately 14 percent for heterosexual men (13.7%) and LGB+ women (13.6%). Only 8.9 percent of heterosexual women said they had received any request. This pattern was also found for each individual type of request, with a greater proportion of LGB+ men receiving such requests compared to other respondent cohorts. LGB+ men were significantly more likely than heterosexual men to receive any request for sexual exploitation of their own children or children they had access to, as were LGB+ women compared with heterosexual women (Table 3).

	Men (%)		Chi-square (χ^2) ^a	Women (%)		Chi-square (χ^2) ^b
	Heterosexual	LGB+		Heterosexual	LGB+	
Any request	13.7	18.0	9.43**	8.9	13.6	17.56***
Asked for photos of children ^c	10.2	14.9	13.95***	6.4	10.8	19.4***
Pressured to provide sexual images of children ^c	5.0	7.7	8.73**	2.8	5.5	16.4***
Asked to meet children ^c before it was appropriate	9.0	13.6	14.5***	5.8	10.1	20.5***
Asked the respondent questions of a sexual nature about children ^c	8.6	14.4	24.31***	4.6	8.7	23.78***
Offered payment for photos/videos of children ^c or to have them perform on webcam	8.3	12.6	14.07***	4.1	8.0	23.56***

statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, *statistically significant at $p < 0.001$

a: All chi-square tests had $n=4,908$ and one degree of freedom

b: All chi-square tests had $n=4,873$ and one degree of freedom

c: Respondents could select whether these children were their own children, other children they had access to, friends (aged under 18 years) or family members (aged under 18 years)

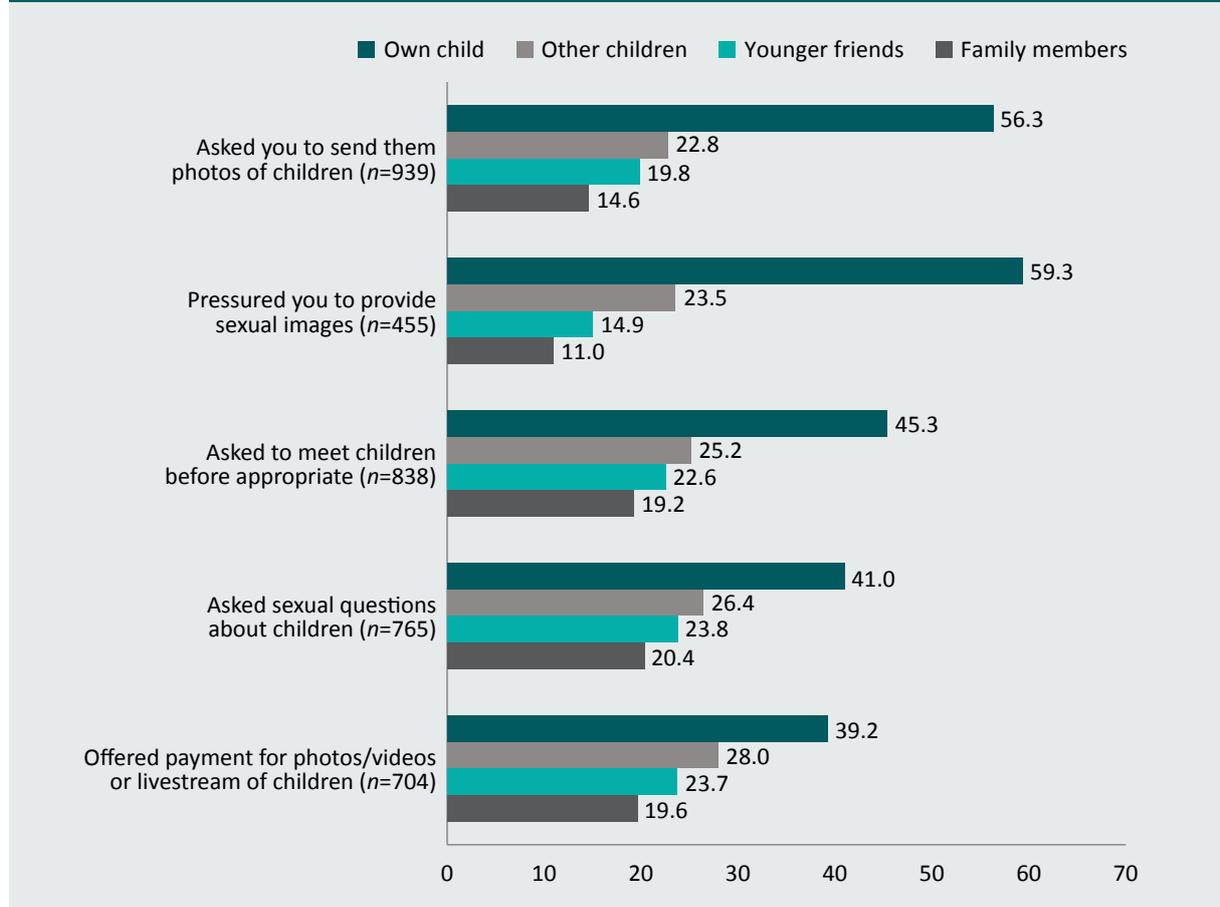
Note: Table percentages and significance tests exclude non-respondents and non-binary respondents (due to small numbers)

Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Target of the request for facilitated child sexual exploitation

As indicated in Figure 1, larger proportions of respondents reported that requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation had involved their own children (ie biological, adopted and stepchildren) compared with other children they may have had access to (eg students) and younger friends or family members. Of respondents who received requests to provide photos of children ($n=939$) and those who reported being pressured to provide sexual images of children ($n=455$), over half reported these requests were directed at their own children (56.3%, $n=529$; 59.2%, $n=270$ respectively). This pattern remained consistent across the other types of requests for facilitated child sexual exploitation included in the survey, where interest in the respondents' own children was more common (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Relationship of child target to respondent who received requests for child sexual exploitation by someone on a dating app/website (%)



Note: Respondents could select multiple options for each question, hence the percentages for each question do not total 100

Source: AIC Mobile Dating Apps and Sexual Violence Survey 2021 [computer file]

Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first studies in Australia and internationally that explores the use of mobile dating apps and dating websites to facilitate child sexual exploitation. Overall, one in eight respondents (12.4%) received at least one request from someone they had met on a dating app/website to provide CSAM or access to their children (or children they had contact with) for sexually exploitative purposes.

Respondents' own children were the targets of these requests more often than other children the respondents had access to (including other family members). This was anticipated, as recent research has found that substantial proportions of both CSAM offenders (C3P 2017; Seto et al. 2018) and child sex trafficking offenders (Cole 2018) are the parents or extended family members of victims. However, there were still large numbers of respondents who indicated that requests were directed towards other children they had access to. It may be that respondents who received requests to facilitate child sexual exploitation had communicated the fact that they had children (or access to children) to other dating app/website users, either in their profile's information or photos or through conversation. Future research is required to understand if the offenders issuing these requests are simply impetuous and opportunistic (Powell, Casey & Rouse 2021) upon learning of the presence of children, or if results suggest more purposeful, protracted and predatory behaviour.

A finding from this study which requires additional unpacking was that men were more likely to receive these requests than women. This was unexpected given previous research has found that women who produce CSAM of their own children tend to do so at the behest of a current or potential male partner, while men tend to instigate CSAM production (Salter et al. 2021). However, the study also found that male respondents who self-identified as LGB+ were more likely to receive requests compared with heterosexual men and heterosexual and LGB+ women. On the face of it, this could suggest that, consistent with previous research, LGB+ men were being approached by other men to facilitate access to sexual exploitation materials.

However, our ability to comment on the gender of perpetrators of facilitation requests is limited for two reasons. First, we did not ask respondents to provide information about the gender of perpetrators. Second, even if this information was provided it would not be possible to verify its accuracy. It is possible that some of the perpetrators requesting facilitated child sexual exploitation were 'catfishes': individuals using a false identity (eg pretending to be women or LGBTQIA+ men) to obtain exploitative images or have contact with children from men online (McCosker et al. 2019). Such individuals may be seeking financial benefits through sextortion (eg Beck 2021), or seeking new CSAM for their own private use or to share with others (Wortley & Smallbone 2012). This aligns with existing evidence that online child grooming offenders may conceal aspects of their identity to ingratiate themselves with their targets, such as giving a falsified age and/or identity (de Santisteban et al. 2018). Similar tactics have been observed among romance scammers who defraud users of dating apps/websites for monetary purposes (see, for example, Coluccia et al. 2020; Kopp et al. 2015).

The ability of perpetrators to seek access to CSAM or children through online dating platforms is in part facilitated by the characteristics of these platforms. In particular, most mobile dating apps and dating websites do not require individuals who set up new accounts to provide evidence that they are who they say they are—meaning that users can create any kind of avatar they want. However, in 2021 Tinder introduced a voluntary feature where users could provide a valid ID to verify their identity. Once verified, Tinder places a blue tick on the user’s profile, communicating to others that the user is not a catfish. Future research should examine in detail the demographics of individuals who request CSAM from people on dating apps/sites. It would also be valuable to compare the levels of child sexual exploitation occurring on sites that incorporate such safety features and those that do not.

These findings indicate that LGB+ men are vulnerable to receiving requests to facilitate access to sexual exploitation materials of their children or children they have access to. This is consistent with other research which has found that individuals identifying as LGBTQIA+ are more likely to report experiencing sexual harassment, aggression and violence on mobile dating apps and dating websites than heterosexual individuals (Albury et al. 2019; Anderson, Vogels & Turner 2020; Wolbers et al. 2022). These research findings have been attributed to a range of factors, including differences in the way that LGBTQIA+ communities use online spaces compared with heterosexual communities which may increase their risk of experiencing online harms. Specifically, it has been suggested that some online platforms are used as safe spaces by LGBTQIA+ communities for social support and to connect with others (GLSEN, CiPHR & CCRC 2013; Ybarra et al. 2015), which may increase opportunities for these harms to occur. Alternatively, it has been suggested that LGBTQIA+ communities are targeted by other online users because of their perceived vulnerability and their sexuality (Gómez-Guadix & Incera 2021). To better protect vulnerable users of online dating platforms, more research is needed to identify the reasons for their increased risk.

This said, the current study did not determine whether respondents fulfilled requests and solicitations for child sexual exploitation. Future research should explore the characteristics of individuals who respond to requests for these materials. This information is essential for identifying users who may be vulnerable to online grooming and requests for child sexual exploitation, which could in turn inform the development of awareness raising campaigns among dating app/website users, as well as safety mechanisms within online dating platforms. Specifically, stringent and well-equipped reporting functions should be incorporated into apps and websites, and the benefits and drawbacks of blocking should be considered, as user blocking capability can allow perpetrators to easily become hidden from their victims, thus avoiding detection (see Wolbers et al. 2022). It is also important to determine if material is being distributed on the platforms themselves, as more investment in CSAM detection and removal technology, such as PhotoDNA (Langston 2018) or artificial intelligence based web crawlers (eg Project Arachnid; C3P 2021), may be required.

Finally, awareness raising initiatives should be developed to target mobile dating app/website users, warning them to be wary about sharing any information about or images of children with other users on these platforms. This is because the results of this study demonstrated that close to half of users who share any images of children are then pressured to provide sexual images of these children. This may be assisted by preventative/warning messaging, which has shown promise in reducing the online distribution of CSAM (Prichard et al. 2022). This could be expanded to include not only warnings about the illegality of distributing such material but also messaging for dating app/website users about the severe and lifelong harms posed by sexual exploitation to the children in question.

Conclusion

This study has important implications for understanding the risks and potential harms associated with the use of mobile dating apps and dating websites. The findings suggest that adults who use dating apps/websites are at substantial risk of receiving requests to facilitate child sexual exploitation. In particular, LGB+ men appear to be vulnerable to receiving these requests. Therefore, it is important for dating apps/websites to provide users with avenues for reporting people who have attempted to groom them for child sexual exploitation, and to implement increased warnings and safety measures for users.

This paper's unique insight into the concerning problem of child sexual exploitation occurring on dating apps and dating websites is an important resource for government policymakers concerned with regulating these platforms. It is also an important resource for the dating apps/websites themselves in ensuring their users are safe and that their platforms are not used for child exploitation.

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URLs correct as at August 2022

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