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Abstract | This study investigated the risk factors for dating app and website users receiving requests from other users to facilitate child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA). It did so by analysing data from a large survey ($n=9,987$) of dating app and website users residing in Australia.

Dating app and website users who were younger, lived with children, were Indigenous or had a health condition (ie disability) were more likely than other users to be asked to facilitate CSEA. Further, respondents who were more frequent or active dating app/website users, who paid for the dating service or who linked their social media account to their dating profile were also more likely to receive requests for CSEA. These findings can assist online dating companies to implement new features and education messages that protect users and their children from harm.

Risk factors for receiving requests to facilitate child sexual exploitation and abuse on dating apps and websites

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Introduction

Online dating provides increased opportunities for people to meet potential partners and is the most popular way couples meet (Rosenfeld, Thomas & Hausen 2019). It has particular benefits in improving dating accessibility for individuals from sexual minorities (Castro & Barrada 2020) and people who have a disability (Santiele Martino & Moumos 2022). However, there are risks associated with using dating apps and websites, including being vulnerable to antisocial behavior such as deception, discrimination or aggression (Castro & Barrada 2020). Recent research has found that offenders use dating apps and websites to target potential child and adult victims.

Celebrating
50 years

Levine et al. (2022) scraped and analysed user reviews written by adults and children of 289 social interaction apps (including dating apps) from Apple and Google stores, to identify sites where:

- child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is shared or offered;
- children receive sexual requests from adults;
- children are acting sexually or sharing sexual content; and
- adults act inappropriately towards other adults (sexually or in a sexual harassment/abuse context).

The authors found that 100 of the 289 apps had reports of child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA). They also found an alarming rise in the number of users reporting CSEA on these apps, from less than five reports per month in 2011 to over 80 per month in 2021 (Levine et al. 2022).

There is growing evidence that child sex offenders use social media and dating apps and websites to target potential child victims (Cale et al. 2021; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2021). Offenders also use these platforms to find adults or young people who will facilitate commercial exploitation of children in the form of live streamed sexual abuse (Napier, Teunissen & Boxall 2021). Two qualitative studies focused on CSAM offenders who were parents and/or in relationships found evidence that single women with children are sometimes groomed on dating apps by men with a sexual interest in children (Salter et al. 2021; Salter, Woodlock & Dubler 2022). Over the last decade, there have been anecdotal reports from law enforcement that offenders have used online dating to meet women with children for the purpose of sexually abusing these children, in Australia (Doorley 2015; Guest 2012) and in Germany and the United States (Montgomery County Sheriff's Office 2022; Ruiz-Puente 2019). Furthermore, an analysis of data from a national human trafficking hotline in the United States found that some children and adults who were struggling with a range of issues (eg financial, shelter, substance dependence) used dating apps and websites to seek out people who could send them money or gifts in return for CSAM or access to children (Polaris 2018).

Given this evidence that CSEA is occurring on social interaction apps, including dating apps, it is important to investigate the risk factors for being groomed for CSEA in this environment. Firstly, evidence suggests that having access to children (online or in person) is fundamental to CSEA and child sex trafficking (providing access to children for the purpose of sexual exploitation and abuse in exchange for money). For example, in a survey of 150 adult survivors of CSAM offending, 42 to 67 percent identified their biological or adoptive parents or step-parents as the primary perpetrators (Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2017).

Similarly, research has found that perpetrators in child sex trafficking cases, including internet-facilitated child sex trafficking cases, are commonly family members of and others known to the victim (Cole 2018; International Organization for Migration 2017; Thorn 2023; Wells, Mitchell & Ji 2012). For example, in a survey of 260 domestic child sex trafficking survivors in the United States, half (50%) reported they had been trafficked by either a family member (17%) or a non-family member who they knew (33%; Thorn 2023). Furthermore, Wells, Mitchell and Ji (2012) found that, in the United States, a quarter (26%) of internet-facilitated child sex trafficking cases involved abusers who were family members or acquaintances of the victim. However, no quantitative research could be located that examined whether dating app or website users with children are at increased risk of being groomed for CSEA.

While other studies have focused on the characteristics of CSEA offenders (see Thorn 2023), and the methods they use to approach potential child victims online (see Powell, Casey & Rouse 2021), few have focused on the online dating environment. Particularly, there is little information available on which adults on dating apps or websites are most vulnerable to being approached online for CSEA of children they have access to.

This paper expands on findings from a recent survey of 9,987 Australian dating app and website users that found 12.4 percent of respondents had received requests for CSEA from other users (Teunissen et al. 2022). These requests were received by a larger proportion of men than women, and the requests most often related to the respondent's own child rather than other children they had access to, such as young friends or family members (Teunissen et al. 2022). The aim of the present study was to examine the factors that increase an adult dating app or website user's vulnerability to being groomed by other users for CSEA of children they have access to.

Method

This study was conducted as part of a larger research project examining the prevalence and nature of online and in-person technology-facilitated sexual violence occurring via dating apps and websites, as self-reported by people living in Australia (AIC Human Research Ethics Approval: P0320A.A). We developed a survey administered to 9,996 adults (18+ years) living in Australia who reported that they had used a dating app or website in the past five years (see Wolbers et al. 2022 for full methodological details). Nine respondents were removed from the sample due to illogical responses, resulting in a final sample of 9,987 respondents.

The mean completion time for the survey was 13 minutes. Respondents answered questions about:

- their sociodemographic characteristics—age, gender, sexual orientation (classified as either heterosexual or lesbian, gay, bisexual or other non-heterosexual identity, hereafter referred to as LGB+), Indigenous status, language spoken most often at home, whether they have a long-term restrictive health condition or disability, and whether they live with children;
- their dating app or website use—frequency of use, types and number of apps or websites used, information included on their profiles and whether their profile was linked to their social media accounts); and
- whether they had received requests to facilitate CSEA.

For a full list of survey questions used, see Wolbers et al. (2022).

Facilitated CSEA requests

The focus of the current and preceding study (Teunissen et al. 2022) is individuals being asked by dating app users to supply either CSAM or access to children for sexual exploitation and abuse, or both (referred to as requests for facilitated CSEA). Specifically, adult respondents were asked whether individuals they had met on a dating app or website had ever:

- asked for photos of their children or other children they had access to;
- pressured them to provide sexual images of these children;
- asked to meet these children before it was appropriate ('appropriate' was the word used in the survey, so this relies on the respondent's subjective sense of what was appropriate);
- asked questions of a sexual nature about these children (eg breast size, whether they had their period); or
- offered payment for photos or videos of these children or to have them perform on webcam (Teunissen et al. 2022).

It is important to note that answering yes to these questions did not indicate that respondents had facilitated this abuse. Rather, it indicated that another individual had attempted to groom the respondent to facilitate the sexual exploitation of a child they had access to.

Results

Demographic characteristics of the 1,237 respondents (12.4%) who received at least one request for facilitated CSEA, as compared with the full sample ($n=9,987$), are displayed in Table 1. A total of 939 respondents had been asked to provide images (sexual or not) of their own or other children. Of these:

- 48.5 percent (4.6% of entire sample; $n=455$, $V=0.68$) reported being pressured to provide sexual images of their children or children they had access to;
- 71.4 percent (8.4% of entire sample; $n=670$, $V=0.73$) reported the individual asked to meet these children before it was appropriate;
- 69.1 percent (7.7% of entire sample; $n=649$, $V=0.74$) reported being asked questions of a sexual nature about these children; and
- 63.2 percent (7.1% of entire sample; $n=593$, $V=0.71$) reported being offered payment for photos, videos or live streams of these children.

The Cramér's V coefficient values presented above suggest a strong to very strong relationship between being asked to send photos of children and each of the other types of requests to facilitate CSEA.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the full survey sample and respondents who received requests to facilitate child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA)

Variables	All respondents (<i>n</i> =9,987)		Received a CSEA request (<i>n</i> =1,237)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Age				
18–24	2,092	21.0	198	16.0
25–34	3,471	34.8	424	34.3
35–44	2,220	22.2	438	35.4
45–54	1,161	11.6	139	11.2
55+	1,043	10.4	38	3.1
Gender				
Man	4,992	50.0	733	59.3
Woman	4,924	49.3	498	40.3
Non-binary	71	0.7	6	0.5
Sexual orientation^a				
Heterosexual	8,237	82.5	935	75.6
LGB+	1,613	16.2	247	20.0
First Nations^b	778	7.8	445	36.0
Language other than English most often spoken at home	863	8.6	140	11.3
Long-term health condition^c	1,155	11.6	534	43.2
Live with children	3,361	33.7	821	66.4
Frequency of dating app/website use^d				
More than once an hour	1,065	10.7	343	27.7
Approximately once an hour	1,047	10.5	317	25.6
Several times a day	2,747	27.5	298	24.1
Several times a week	3,454	34.6	212	17.1
Once a week or less	1,484	14.9	61	4.9
Information included in dating app/website profile^e				
Contact information/name/age/date of birth/location/geotags	7,862	78.7	982	79.4
Sexuality/sexual desires/connection type sought	7,433	74.4	831	67.2
Hobbies/music/interests/work industry/religious views/political views	8,251	82.6	659	53.3
Linked dating app/website account to other social media accounts	5,276	52.8	1,086	87.8
Paid to use a dating app/website (eg subscriptions)	3,940	39.5	935	75.6

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the full survey sample and respondents who received requests to facilitate child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA)

Variables	All respondents (<i>n</i> =9,987)		Received a CSEA request (<i>n</i> =1,237)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Number of apps/websites used				
One	3,747	37.5	326	26.4
Two	2,484	24.9	254	20.5
Three	1,717	17.2	195	15.8
Four	846	8.5	125	10.1
Five	517	5.2	125	10.1
Six or more	676	6.8	212	17.1
Mean number of apps/websites used (<i>SD</i>)	2.6 (2.4)		3.9 (4.3)	
Frequency of communication on other platforms with people respondents met on dating apps/websites				
Very often	1,779	17.8	438	35.4
Often	2,071	20.7	295	23.9
Occasionally	3,048	30.5	276	22.3
Rarely	1,843	18.5	150	12.1
Never	1,246	12.5	78	6.3

a: Denominator includes 137 (1.4%) respondents (*n*=55, 4.5% of those who received a request) who did not provide a response

b: Denominator includes 126 (1.3%) respondents who did not provide a response; equal to 12 (1.0%) of those who had received a request to facilitate CSEA

c: Only includes long-term health conditions that restrict everyday activities or conditions that mean respondents require help or supervision with everyday activities (see Wolbers et al. 2022)

d: Denominator includes 190 (1.9%) respondents (*n*=6, 0.5% of those who received a request) who indicated they did not know

e: Denominator includes 23 (0.2%) respondents who did not provide a response; 1 respondent (0.1%) who indicated they received a request to facilitate CSEA did not provide a response. A total of 64 (0.6%) respondents provided an 'other' response; of these, 4 (0.3%) indicated they received a request to facilitate CSEA

Note: Percentage totals may not equal 100 due to rounding and missing data. CSEA=child sexual exploitation and abuse. *SD*=standard deviation

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

A logistic regression was conducted to determine which demographic and behavioural factors were associated with higher odds of a respondent receiving a request to facilitate CSEA (Table 2). A single logistic regression model provided better model fit against both Akaike and Bayesian information criteria than examining demographic and behavioural factors in separate models. The adjusted odds ratios represent the odds of receiving a request to facilitate CSEA compared with the odds of not receiving such a request, all other independent variables remaining constant. An odds ratio of 1.0 indicates equal odds of receiving and not receiving a request to facilitate CSEA, and an odds ratio of 2.0 indicates twice the likelihood of receiving a request.

Table 2: Logistic regression results

Variables	OR	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
Age (vs 55+years)				
18–24	2.41	<0.001	1.57	3.67
25–34	1.90	0.002	1.27	2.90
35–44	2.12	<0.001	1.41	3.20
45–54	1.65	0.029	1.05	2.59

Table 2: Logistic regression results				
Variables	OR	p	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
Gender (vs man)				
Woman	ns			
Sexual orientation (vs heterosexual)^a				
LGB+	ns			
First Nations (vs non-Indigenous)				
	3.07	<0.001	2.49	3.77
Language other than English most often spoken at home (vs English)				
	1.43	0.01	1.12	1.84
Long-term health condition (vs none)				
	3.46	<0.001	2.86	4.18
Live with children (vs do not live with children)				
	2.90	<0.001	2.47	3.40
Frequency of dating app/website use (vs once a week or less)				
Several times a week	ns			
Several times a day	ns			
Approximately once an hour	2.24	<0.001	1.59	3.17
More than once an hour	2.07	<0.001	1.46	2.94
Information included in dating app/website profile (vs did not include information)				
Contact information/name/age/date of birth/location/geotags	0.77	0.01	0.63	0.94
Sexuality/sexual desires/connection type sought	0.81	0.02	0.68	0.97
Hobbies/music/interests/work industry/religious views/political views	0.39	<0.001	0.33	0.46
Linked dating app/website account to other social media accounts (vs have not linked)				
	3.09	<0.001	2.52	3.79
Paid to use a dating app/website (eg subscriptions) (vs have not paid)				
	2.22	<0.001	1.85	2.66
Number of apps/websites used (vs one)				
Two	1.36	0.01	1.09	1.69
Three	ns			
Four	1.40	0.03	1.04	1.88
Five	1.92	<0.001	1.39	2.65
Six or more	2.17	<0.001	1.65	2.86
How often respondent communicates on other platforms with people met on dating apps/websites (vs never)				
Rarely	ns			
Occasionally	ns			
Often	ns			
Very often	1.48	0.02	1.06	2.06
Constant	0.03	<0.001	0.02	0.04

a: Non-binary/gender diverse respondents were excluded from the analysis due to small sample size

Note: OR=odds ratios; ns=non-significant at $p < 0.05$. Wald $\chi^2(28)=1,602.81$, pseudo $R^2=0.36$, $p < 0.001$, area under receiver operating characteristic curve=0.87, $n=9,484$

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

Factors associated with risk of receiving a request

Several factors, including specific demographic characteristics, were linked to greater odds of receiving a request to facilitate CSEA. Younger respondents were more likely than older respondents to receive requests to facilitate CSEA. Those aged 18 to 24 ($OR=2.4, p<0.001$), 25 to 34 ($OR=1.9, p<0.01$), 35 to 44 ($OR=2.1, p<0.001$) and 45 to 54 ($OR=1.7, p<0.05$) all had significantly greater odds of receiving a request compared with those aged 55 or over. Indigenous respondents were over three times more likely than non-Indigenous respondents to receive a request ($OR=3.1, p<0.001$), as were respondents who had a long-term health condition (ie disability) compared with those who did not ($OR=3.5, p<0.001$). Furthermore, respondents who reported speaking a language other than English most often at home were more likely than respondents who spoke English at home to receive a request to facilitate CSEA ($OR=1.4, p<0.01$). Lastly, those who reported living with children were almost three times as likely to receive a request as those who did not live with children ($OR=2.9, p<0.001$).

Certain online dating behaviours were also linked to greater odds of receiving a request to facilitate CSEA. Respondents who linked their social media accounts to their dating profiles, and respondents who paid to use dating apps or websites were significantly more likely to receive a request to facilitate CSEA than respondents who did not engage in these behaviours ($OR=3.1, p<0.001$ and $OR=2.2, p<0.001$, respectively).

Compared with respondents who used only one dating app or website, those who used two ($OR=1.4, p<0.001$), four ($OR=1.4, p=0.025$), five ($OR=1.9, p<0.001$) or six or more ($OR=2.2, p<0.001$) had significantly greater odds of receiving a request to facilitate CSEA. In addition, compared with respondents who used dating apps or websites once a week or less, those who used them approximately once an hour ($OR=2.2, p<0.001$) or more ($OR=2.1, p<0.001$) had approximately twice the odds of receiving a request.

Respondents who included specific details in their dating profiles (eg identifying information, information on sexuality, hobbies/interests) had significantly reduced odds of receiving a request to facilitate CSEA compared with those who did not include such information (Table 2).

Despite more men than women receiving requests to facilitate CSEA, and more LGB+ men than heterosexual men receiving these requests (and similarly for women; see Teunissen et al. 2022), neither gender nor reported sexuality significantly influenced the odds of receiving a request to facilitate CSEA.

Predicted probabilities of receiving requests

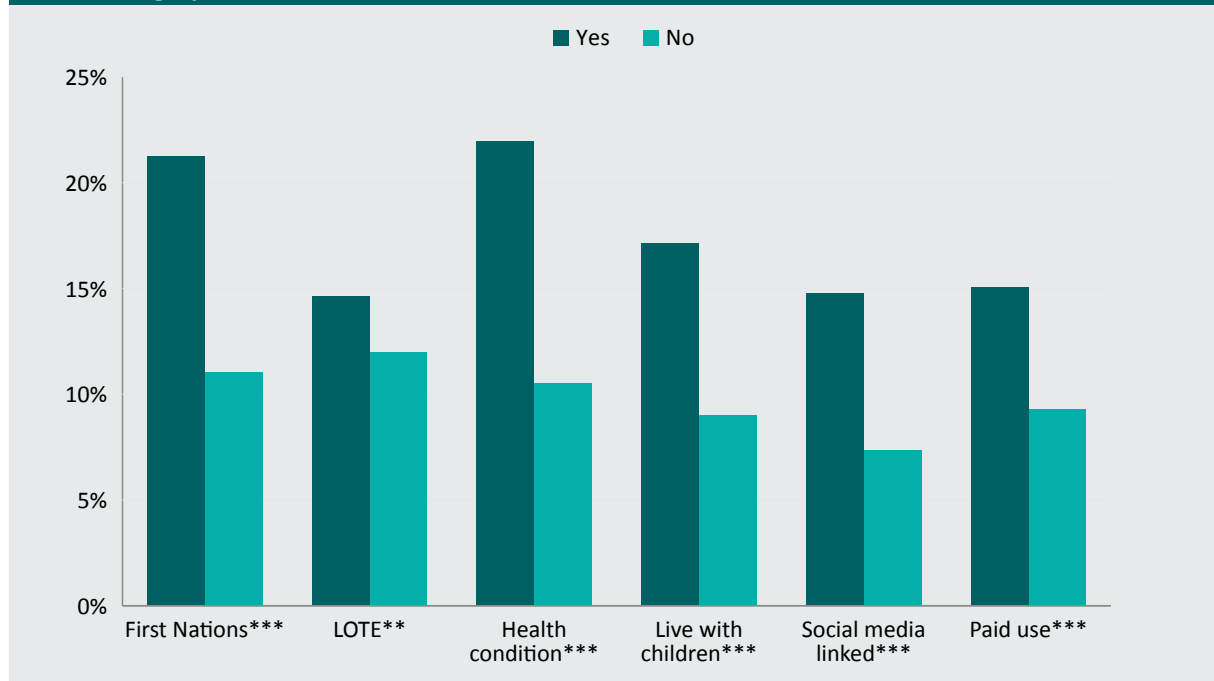
Variables with significantly higher odds ratios after controlling for other variables in the logistic regression were subsequently examined using marginal analysis (Williams 2012) to obtain predicted probabilities (Muller & MacLehose 2014) of receiving a request to facilitate CSEA. ‘Marginal effects’ indicate the probability that a respondent with specific characteristics will receive a request, and are not prevalence estimates. (See Teunissen et al. 2022 for prevalence estimates.)

All marginal effects were significant, demonstrating that when controlling for other factors, the respondents more likely to receive a request to facilitate CSEA were:

- younger respondents;
- Indigenous respondents;
- those with a health condition;
- those who speak a language other than English most often at home;
- those living with children;
- those who linked their social media accounts to their dating profiles; and
- those who paid to use dating apps or websites.

In fact, all of these groups of respondents other than those who speak a language other than English most often at home were approximately twice as likely as their counterparts to receive a request of this nature (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Predicted probability of receiving a request to facilitate CSEA by selected sociodemographic characteristics (%)



Statistical significance of marginal effect (the discrete change from the base level—that is, the difference between ‘no’ and ‘yes’) is denoted by ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. See Mize, Doan & Long (2019) for more detail

Note: $n = 9,948$. LOTE=language other than English most often spoken at home. ‘Health condition’ refers to long-term conditions that restrict everyday activities or conditions that mean respondents require help or supervision with everyday activities. Controls included all variables listed in Table 2

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

Additionally, respondents aged 18 to 24 years were significantly more likely to receive a request to facilitate CSEA than respondents in all other age categories except 35 to 44 years (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Predicted probability of receiving a request to facilitate CSEA by age group (%)



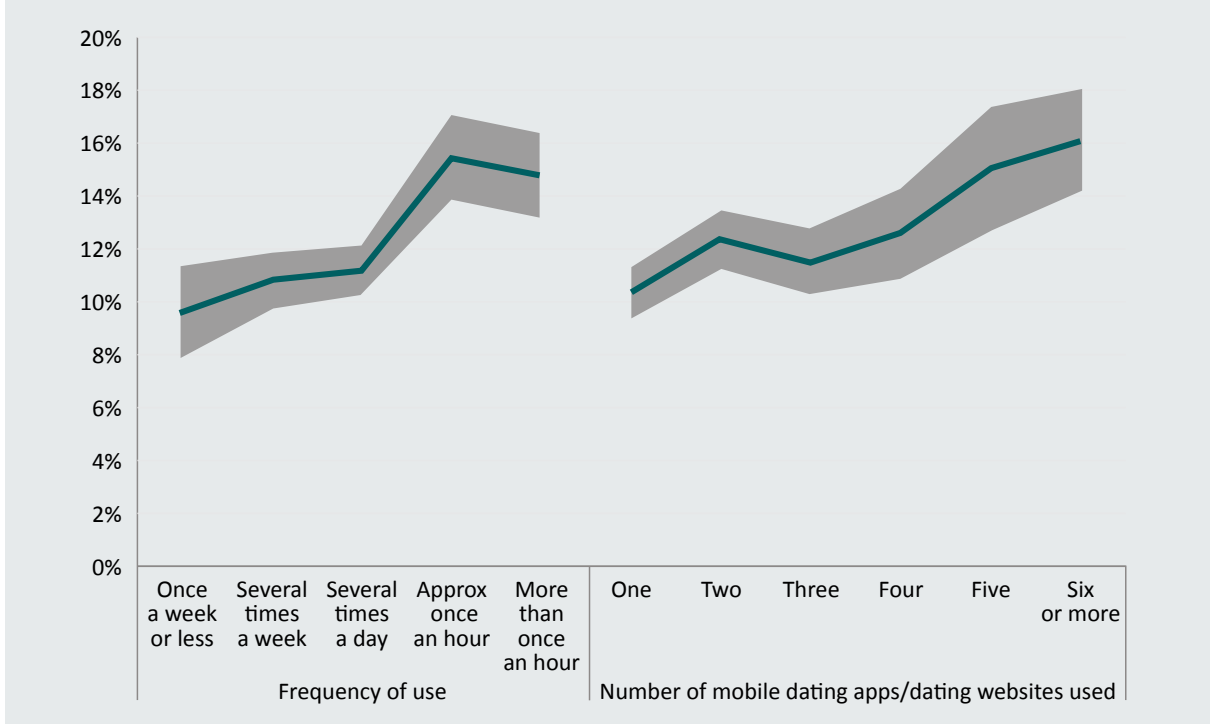
Statistical significance of marginal effect (whether respondents in the four youngest age categories had a significantly different predicted probability of receiving a request than those aged 55+) is denoted by * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Note: $n = 9,484$. Shaded bands depict 95% confidence interval. The predicted probability of 18–24 year olds in receiving a CSEA request was significantly greater than the probabilities of those aged 25–34 years ($p = 0.043$), 45–54 years ($p = 0.015$), and 55+ years ($p < 0.001$), but not those aged 35–44 years ($p = 0.306$). Comparisons of predicted probabilities were computed using Stata's 'margins' function (Long & Freese 2014)

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

Respondents who reported using six or more dating apps or websites, and using them once an hour or more, were significantly more likely to receive a request to facilitate CSEA than respondents who used four or fewer apps or websites, and those who used them less often (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Predicted probability of receiving a request to facilitate CSEA by frequency of use and number of dating apps or websites used (%)



Note: $n=9,484$. Shaded bands depict 95% confidence interval. The predicted probability of receiving a request among respondents who used six dating apps/websites was significantly greater than the predicted probability among those who used four ($p<0.01$), three ($p<0.001$), two ($p<0.01$) or one ($p<0.001$), but not significantly greater than the predicted probability of those who used five apps/websites. The predicted probability of receiving a request among respondents who used dating apps/websites approximately once an hour was significantly greater than the probabilities of respondents who used dating apps/websites 'several times a day' ($p<0.001$) or 'several times a week' ($p<0.001$). Comparisons of predicted probabilities were computed using Stata's 'margins' function (Long & Freese 2014)

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

Discussion

This study investigated which dating app or website users are most at risk of being asked by another user to facilitate CSEA. It did so by analysing data from a large survey of dating app and website users residing in Australia. The study found several factors that were associated with an increased likelihood of an individual receiving requests to facilitate CSEA:

- being younger;
- living with children;
- being an Indigenous Australian;
- having a long-term health condition (ie disability);
- greater use of dating apps or websites (in number of apps or websites used or frequency of use);
- communicating often with people on other platforms whom they met via dating apps or websites;
- paying a subscription for premium dating services;
- linking social media accounts to their dating profile; and
- being asked to send non-sexual photos of children the respondent had access to.

Demographic characteristics

The study could not investigate why respondents who were Indigenous or who spoke a language other than English at home were more likely to receive requests for facilitated CSEA than other respondents. It is possible that the co-occurring adversities these populations experience, such as poorer educational, employment and health outcomes (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019; Khatri & Assefa 2022; Osborne, Baum & Brown 2013) increase vulnerability to this type of offending. People with a disability are also found to have disproportionate rates of substance use problems (Chapman & Wu 2012) and much lower rates of employment than individuals without a disability (41% vs 73%; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020), which may contribute to disadvantage and increase the risk of victimisation among this group. The findings from the present study support those of other research, including that individuals from ethnic minorities are more likely to experience CSEA (Thorn 2023), and that people with disability are more likely to experience sexual violence as adults and children (Centre of Research in Excellence in Disability and Health 2021; Lund & Vaughn-Jensen 2012).

Another interpretation of the results is that people with specific demographic characteristics are more likely than others to use dating apps or websites, thus increasing their risk of receiving CSEA requests. This could explain the association between age and the likelihood of being asked to facilitate CSEA. For example, in the United States people aged 18 to 29 are more likely to use dating apps or websites than older age groups (McClain & Gelles-Watnick 2023). Factors such as having a long-term health condition could hamper efforts to meet new people in person and increase the appeal of online dating. Consequently, such individuals may be more active or frequent users of dating apps and websites—factors that this study found were associated with an elevated risk of being asked to facilitate CSEA. This could partly explain why individuals with a long-term health condition were more likely to receive such requests. Future research should explore the reason for this finding, and why Indigenous Australians are also more vulnerable to receiving requests to facilitate CSEA.

Living with children was also found to be a risk factor for receiving requests to facilitate CSEA on dating apps and websites, supporting qualitative research showing that male offenders seek single mothers on these platforms to access their children for sexual abuse (Napier, Teunissen & Boxall 2021; Salter et al. 2021; Salter, Woodlock & Dubler 2022). However, in the present study gender was not a significant predictor of receiving requests to facilitate CSEA. In fact, more men than women received such requests. This highlights the importance of further research examining CSEA perpetrators on dating apps and websites and why they may target men.

LGB+ respondents were found to be more likely to receive requests than heterosexual respondents in a prior bivariate analysis of the present sample (Teunissen et al. 2022). However, being LGB+ was not identified as a significant risk factor in the logistic regression analysis in the current study. Evidence suggests that LGB adults are twice as likely as heterosexual adults to have ever used dating apps and websites (Anderson, Vogels & Turner 2020). It is therefore possible that, after controlling for frequency of use and number of apps or websites used in a large regression model, being LGB+ is less of a risk factor than it appeared to be in isolation, and these behavioural attributes are more salient risk factors.

Online dating behaviours

Four online dating behaviours were associated with greater likelihood of receiving a request to facilitate CSEA. Using more dating apps or websites, using the apps or websites more often, and communicating frequently with other users on other platforms may increase vulnerability to receiving requests for CSEA. Some dating apps scan conversations for abusive messages and disallow image sharing within conversations (eg Tinder 2020), so offenders may move the conversation onto platforms with greater privacy features to avoid detection (Bowles & Keller 2019). It is also possible that conversations occurring on other (non-dating) platforms are more overtly exploitative and hence associated with increased risk when used at a higher frequency.

A fourth online dating behaviour found to be associated with greater likelihood of being asked to facilitate CSEA—paying for premium subscriptions to dating apps or sites—can allow users to edit GPS location and enhance filtering of potential matches (Bumble nd; Grindr nd; Tinder nd). On the one hand, such features may help to prevent harmful interactions. On the other, people willing to pay for online dating services may use these apps or websites more often, a significant predictor of receiving CSEA facilitation requests. Additionally, people who have been victimised on dating apps or websites may seek improved security and protection by purchasing such subscriptions, which may explain why payment for dating services was a predictor of receiving facilitated CSEA requests.

Online dating behaviour and associated risk may also differ according to the app used. For example, Castro and Barrada (2020) found that Grindr and Tinder users had very different styles of in-app communication, with the former characterised by quick conversations focused on immediate sexual encounters, and the latter by longer conversations. Future research should determine whether the risk of receiving requests for facilitated CSEA differs across dating apps and sites.

The study found that those who included additional information in their dating profiles (such as contact information, hobbies, sexual desires and their religious and political views) were significantly less likely than other respondents to receive a request to facilitate CSEA. This was a counterintuitive finding, especially given that those who linked their social media profiles to their dating profiles had a greater likelihood of receiving a request. It would be expected that making more personal information available online would increase the individual's vulnerability (eSafety Commissioner nd). It may be that users who include more information on their profiles are treating these online dating ventures more seriously and may screen other users on these platforms with greater scrutiny, thus reducing their likelihood of being groomed for CSEA.

Importantly, the findings indicate that being asked for any images of children (including non-sexual images) was a notable risk factor for receiving requests for facilitated CSEA, emphasising the heightened risk of this seemingly innocuous behaviour.

Important to note, however, that many of the explanations discussed here are speculation and hypothesis. Future research should seek to provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms linking certain online dating behaviours and increased or reduced risk of receiving a request for facilitated CSEA.

Implications for online dating companies and users

Findings from the current study should be incorporated into user education and safety features offered by online dating companies to protect users and their children from harm. For example, users should be discouraged from sharing images of or information about children, and dating service providers should prevent users from linking their dating profiles and their social media accounts (eSafety Commissioner nd). Online dating companies should develop guidance and education specifically tailored to vulnerable communities to ensure they have the resources and ability to identify, rebut and report requests to facilitate CSEA.

Limitations and future directions

A limitation of the survey is that it did not ask respondents about the individuals who asked them to facilitate CSEA or about the interactions between respondents and these individuals. Therefore, it is unclear whether the individuals making these requests are employing a scattergun approach (targeting multiple users at once) or grooming specific dating app or website users over an extended period. Future research can seek insights into how connections were initiated, how long the parties had been communicating before the requests were made, and whether respondents had met in person or formed relationships with the people initiating CSEA requests. Research could also investigate the frequency with which dating app or website users receive CSEA requests and whether the recipients report the request, ignore it or comply. It will also be useful to determine whether and how individuals are forced or coerced to comply with such requests.

Despite its limitations, this is the first study to examine risk factors for receiving requests to facilitate CSEA on dating apps and websites. The study has important implications for online dating companies and the government bodies that regulate them for the purpose of protecting children from harm.

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