Supporting young men online

Understanding young men's needs, the pull of harmful content and the way forward

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Australian Government | eSafetyCommissioner

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Content warning

This report contains discussions about online and offline practices and content that are at times harmful, abusive and violent. It also mentions unhealthy ideas about consent, gender and sexual practices and raises issues related to misogyny, gender-based violence, sexual violence, domestic violence and violent extremism. Please consider if reading this report is right for you at this time.

Suggested citation

eSafety acknowledges all First Nations people for their continuing care of everything Country encompasses — land, waters and community. We pay our respects to First Nations people, and to Elders past and present.

Contents

About this report

This report represents the second part of eSafety's research project 'Young Men Online', which explores what influences, motivates, shapes and informs young men's online experiences. The first report in this project, ***Being a young man online: Tensions, complexities and possibilities ('Part 1')***, shared young men's accounts of being online. This companion report examines the broader context of young men's[1] lives and maps opportunities for supporting young men to have safe, positive online experiences. Specifically, we sought to understand eSafety's role in supporting young men to have positive and healthy online experiences related to manhood and masculinities. To do this, eSafety consulted with a range of expert practitioners who work with young men on the topic of positive and healthy masculinities and manhood.

In Part 1, we heard from 117 young men about their experiences, beliefs, behaviours and influences in online spaces. The report found that their online experiences were characterised by the tensions, complexities and opportunities inherent in their developmental stage, by evolving public conversations about gender, manhood and masculinity, as well as by the ever-changing nature of the internet. Young men made it clear that they value the internet as a space for exploring and expressing their identities, sexualities and relationships.

In this second study ('Part 2'), expert practitioners validated and extended the findings in Part 1. They noted that contemporary discussions about male privilege and men's role in society can leave some young men feeling defensive, disenfranchised and uncertain about how to behave. They highlighted that many young men are exploring pushing boundaries while also experiencing isolation and loneliness. Together, these factors mean that many young men are responsive to online content, creators and communities that are based on harmful ideas about what it means to be a man. Practitioners also observed that algorithms and recommender systems play a significant role in promoting these harmful ideas. However, they also recognised that many of the young men they work with display empathy, are curious about how to become a good, kind man, and have critical thinking skills. We heard from practitioners that these strengths can be fostered to support the development of positive and healthy online experiences related to manhood and masculinities, and that a range of opportunities exist for eSafety and concerned stakeholders to act in this space.

For some time now, young men's experiences and behaviours online have been the subject of increasing public discussion and attention. This has been driven in part by growing concern across Australian society about young people's access to social media, and to online pornography more broadly. Indeed, shortly after we spoke with practitioners for this study, the federal government announced its intention to introduce age-of-access limits for social media (Prime Minister & Cabinet, 2024). In addition, interventions against gender-based violence are increasingly seeking to engage men. There has been a growing recognition of the high rates of gender-based violence in Australia and of the ways it can be enabled by online tools and manifest online. Men's perpetration of harm online, and the role of the internet in encouraging ideas that support gender-based violence, have become a central part of public conversation.

This report contributes to these conversations, addressing an evidence gap around why young men are drawn to harmful ideas about masculinity online. Holding men to account for the harms they cause is central to addressing gender inequity and gender-based violence in Australia. In light of the depth and breadth of existing work in this area, our report provides a deeper exploration and focuses on understanding young men's social

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1. The language used in this report, and by some practitioners, often frames discussions about healthy and positive masculinities in terms of a male/female binary. While young people experience, and identify with, genders across a broad and dynamic spectrum (Ouliaris, 2021), the findings in this report are focused on the experiences of the young men known to the participating practitioners.

context and the reasons behind their engagement online with harmful ideas about manhood. In doing so, the study provides the deep understanding of young men's lived experience that is essential to developing effective interventions.

The findings detailed in this report emerge from both the wider social context in which the study took place and the specific expertise of the practitioners we spoke with. The study is based on the observations and reflections of practitioners working with young men to support their development of positive and healthy masculinities. This means that, like the research team for Part 1, practitioners take a strengths-based approach with the young men they work with. Practitioners in the study worked with boys and young men from primary school age upwards. As such, it takes a broader view than Part 1, which focused solely on the experiences of young men aged 16–21.

Most practitioners in the study were working with young men on the topic of gender-based violence. They also worked to support young men who had experiences of the justice system (e.g. in juvenile detention), adversity or trauma in childhood, domestic and family violence, unemployment, homelessness, and gang-related violence. We also spoke with practitioners with a specific expertise in working with First Nations young men and culturally and linguistically diverse young men. Together, the practitioners have worked with thousands of young men in Australia and have many decades of experience.

In collecting the reflections and observations of practitioners working with young men, this report gives context to young men's online experiences, increasing our understanding of their behaviours, vulnerabilities and strengths online. Drawing on practitioner expertise, the report provides next steps for eSafety in tailoring its activities and resources to support more positive and healthy masculinities and online spaces for young men.

Key findings

Young men can be empathetic and curious, and can think critically

Practitioners hold the young men they work with in high regard. Without shying away from the harmful ideas and behaviours those young men can engage in, practitioners saw and celebrated the empathy they have for each other, their curiosity about how to become good, kind men, and their critical thinking skills. While not all the young men they worked with demonstrated these strengths, the practitioners' observations point to the potential for leveraging young men's existing strengths to support their development of positive and healthy masculinities.

Young men are feeling defensive, disenfranchised and uncertain

Practitioners in this study observed that the young men they work with are only ever told how *not* to behave and, hence, do not have a sense of male privilege. They note that messages about male privilege and women's empowerment can reach young men who have not learnt about the history of women's oppression or of how gendered privilege functions in society and who do not understand that it can co-exist with other forms of disadvantage. Practitioners also reflected that public discussions about men and their role can focus on telling men what *not* to do, often leaving them feeling uncertain and confused about how to act. Young men who feel defensive, disenfranchised and uncertain may seek validation and guidance online.

Young men want to push boundaries *and* find social connection

It was common for the young men whom practitioners work with to be both pushing boundaries and experiencing loneliness. Practitioners spoke with us about how the young men they work with are seeking to explore and assert their independence and to take risks. These developmentally typical desires likely make provocative online content highly appealing. Additionally, practitioners saw many young men experiencing high levels of isolation and loneliness, indicating that finding a sense of belonging is another key motivator for many young men online.

Algorithms and recommender systems push harmful content onto young men

Practitioners noted that even when content relating to positive and healthy masculinities is available online, it is often overshadowed by harmful content. They pointed to algorithms and recommender systems, and the companies that create them, as the source of this. Practitioners shared their observations that the machine learning systems that dictate what young men see online seem increasingly to be serving them pornographic content, as well as content that contains harmful ideas about what it means to be a man.

Harmful online content, creators and communities can appeal to young men

Practitioners observed that there is a lack of positive role models online who provide young men with guidance in developing positive and healthy masculinities. They note that content, creators and communities that are based on harmful ideas about manhood and masculinity may step in to fill this void, often appealing to young men's needs for validation, guidance, boundary pushing and belonging.

Implications and opportunities for eSafety

We heard from practitioners that there is an important role for eSafety in supporting young men to have safe and positive experiences online that can help them to develop positive and healthy masculinities. They especially highlighted eSafety's role in bringing about proactive and systemic change. That is, eSafety's engagement with the tech sector allows us to advocate for a better online environment for young men in a way that practitioners themselves cannot. In the final part of this report, we provide next steps for eSafety and concerned stakeholders to support young men to have more healthy and positive experiences as they navigate masculinity and manhood online.

Methodology

The data for Part 2 of this project was captured through in-depth interviews and a research workshop with 16 expert practitioners, including representatives from seven organisations and three independent practitioners. The expert practitioners included youth educators, advocates, consultants and public speakers, peer-to-peer outreach workers, facilitators, men's health researchers and youth mental health support workers.

Two practitioners asked to remain anonymous in this report. Practitioners who consented to be named included:

- Daniel Principe, a youth advocate and educator who has worked with over 45,000 young men across 275+ schools

- Jesuit Social Services, a social change organisation that has worked with men and boys since 1977, engaging 12,326 participants across employment programs, suicide support and counselling, school re-engagement programs, youth justice support, mental health and/or substance abuse support

- Jeremy Donovan, an Indigenous artist, musician, speaker and consultant working with First Nations young men

- Movember, a leading men's health charity, funding more than 1,250 men's health projects in the past 20 years

- R4Respect, a peer-to-peer outreach organisation that has reached more than 500,000 young people online and more than 6,000 face-to-face since 2017

- ReachOut, an online mental health support service for young people that has over 20 years' experience

- Richie Hardcore, an educator, speaker and activist working internationally

- South East Community Links, a community-led organisation that has delivered tailored programs and services for more than 50 years to help young people who are experiencing disadvantage

- The Man Cave is Australia's leading preventative mental health charity for teenage boys and their communities, reaching more than 80,000 boys since 2014.

Further details about the methodology can be found in the appendix.

Positionality statement

The authors of this report understand that researchers' intersecting experiences of power and marginalisation impact on our research and analysis. As is the case for all research, the lived experiences of the authors and the biases inherent in these have influenced research design, methodology, data analysis and data presentation. We acknowledge the influence of our identities and experiences on the study, despite our best efforts to consciously mitigate this. The authors and researchers behind this report include cisgender women, Anglo Australian women, a woman of colour, a queer woman and straight women. Youth researchers and reviewers for this project included two young men from Sudanese and South Sudanese Australian backgrounds and one young woman from an Indian Australian background.

Terminology

The language used in this study refers to 'positive and healthy masculinities'. The terms 'healthy' and 'positive' are contested among practitioners and in the masculinities literature (Barry et al., 2020). Due to a lack of consensus, we have continued to reference 'positive and healthy masculinities' throughout this report and welcome further interrogations of these terms.

Limitations

- This report can be read in isolation but should be understood within the broader context of the study project and as an extension of Report 1. For context and readability, it refers to some of the themes and findings in the first report but does not recount them in detail.

- The sample size for this part of the study was kept intentionally small, as we sought in-depth insights and implications, rather than data that could be quantified. While the practitioners in this study have worked with thousands of young men, their breadth and depth of experience is not equivalent to a representative sample of young men or, indeed, of practitioners working with young men. Caution is therefore advised when generalising these findings to all young men in Australia.

- The practitioners in this study were selected for their expertise in working with young men, and specifically on the topic of positive and healthy masculinities. As a result, their expertise often raises the gendered nature of young men's adolescence and passage to manhood, including discussions on young men's mental health, physical health and socio-economic context. While the data is also analysed through a gendered lens, this is not to suggest that other discussions or lenses on young men's personal, familial or political experiences are invalid.

- Some of the themes that emerged in the data and are discussed in this report relate to gender (in)equalities and young men's experiences of gender-based violence. While many of the practitioners in this study were working with young men directly on these topics, they were not selected for their expertise in these areas. The findings here should be read in that context and not be seen as necessarily representative of practitioners who may work within family, domestic and sexual violence support services or in the women's safety sector, for example.

- The study was designed to include practitioners who work with young men from diverse cohorts. However, it was not able to capture the expertise of practitioners who have a dedicated focus on working with young men with disability or LGBTQI+ young men. While data also often references young men broadly, we recognise that they are not a homogenous group and that future interventions should recognise, celebrate and consider their diversity and intersectionality.

> I was speaking to a young boy [aged 17] over the weekend who is going through lots of stuff, including feelings of isolation and worthlessness in his life. But when I had the opportunity to speak to him one-on-one for the first time, I felt that he valued the time I spent with him listening to his story. He didn't share much of his personal stuff – he is not going to school and seems so lost and confused – but when I took the time to listen to him, his face lit up. I could [see] hope on his face.
>
> Boys and men are eager to talk about their issues. They are only waiting for people to listen to them without any judgement and to show they really care.[2]

2. Quotes have been edited for length and clarity.

Young men's contexts: Factors influencing their behaviours online

In Part 1, we heard from young men that they were navigating a range of both harmful and beneficial experiences online, and in doing so were variously conforming with, confronting and challenging social and cultural expectations of manhood and masculinity. In the second part of the study, practitioners affirmed that these findings resonated with their observations and interactions with young men and gave further context to what young men had told us in Part 1.

Practitioners described the young men they work with as frequently encountering multiple, often inconsistent, messages about manhood and masculinity. In this section, we detail practitioner observations about how the young men they work with react to and are impacted by:

- public discussions about male privilege

- public conversations about men telling men how *not* to behave

- personal experiences of boundary pushing and loneliness.

Importantly, practitioners in this study reflected on how the young men they work with feel about, interpret and receive messages about manhood and masculinity. The feelings that practitioners observe among young men are not always reflective of the reality of gender inequalities. However, these feelings and perceptions are real for the young men experiencing them and are important factors shaping their online experiences, engagements and behaviours.

Young men do not feel like they have male privilege

There is a broad observation among practitioners that young men today are encountering certain messages in popular culture and media about the idea of male privilege that do not align with their own experiences or understanding of the world. As one practitioner commented, many of the young men they work with are encountering messages about empowering women and girls, without having an understanding of the history of women's oppression.
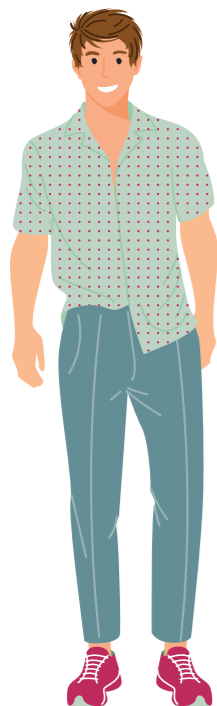
> " Young men at the moment are stuck in a very weird time. They don't understand the reason for the rise of feminism in the past – the history behind it. And they're turning against that. They're turning against what they're seeing (for example, a focus on women's empowerment). What we see as positive, they see as negative. They see it as a deficit for themselves.
>
> – *The Man Cave* "

Practitioners reflected that the rise of narratives about women's empowerment and men's structural privileges has occurred at a time when young men's understandings of privilege often do not align with their personal experiences. As many of the practitioners told us, for the young men they worked with, their individual experiences were often marked with hardship and disadvantage.

> " Many, many men feel, you know, that society is going to show you gender pay gaps. It's going to show the safety that men have in comparison to women. But if you do and you ask a young man if he feels privileged, he will very clearly tell you 'no' …
>
> – *Movember* "

> " When your dad is violent, or you've never met your dad or you're poor or your best mate killed himself or you got jumped on the way home from school, you don't feel privileged.
>
> – *Richie Hardcore* "

It follows that several practitioners observed feelings of disenfranchisement and defensiveness among the young men they work with when it comes to discussions about male privilege and gender-based violence, respectively.

> I genuinely think it is this insecurity … So many boys are not doing as well as girls. And there's people who are documenting this in different ways when it comes to work and school and university achievements. And so, they do feel disenfranchised, and they feel that they're carrying the weight of the privileges of past generations.
>
> – *Daniel Principe*
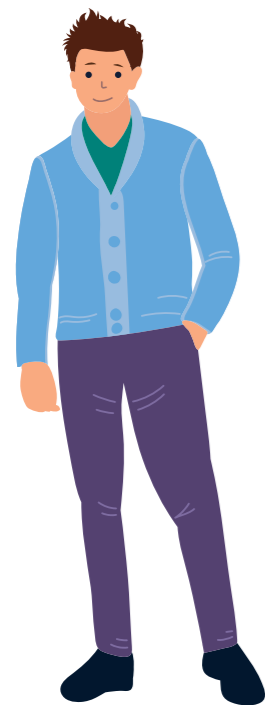
> I do get some feedback, more in respect to [conversations about] domestic violence because we talk about domestic violence as a gender issue. And many young men see that as an attack. They see that as an attack against all men.
>
> – *Anonymous practitioner 2*

It is understandable that the young men practitioners work with do not always feel themselves to be privileged. Social privilege, such as the ways in which society is structured to give men advantages and authority over women, is typically understood as being invisible to those that it benefits (McIntosh, 1988; Wu & Dunning, 2020). Privilege can be best thought of as intersectional, with different aspects of experience and identity overlapping to create an individual's specific experiences in the world (Crenshaw, 1989). For instance, young men from lower socio-economic backgrounds, or who are part of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, may experience class- or race-based discrimination and disadvantage that is highly visible to them, and gender-based privileges that are either invisible to them or feel minor in comparison to the discrimination they face. Practitioners' emphasis on the lack of male privilege the young men they work with feel suggests that these young men have not been given the tools to recognise, understand and accept how privilege functions in society and how it can co-exist with experiences of disadvantage.

Practitioners also described how, alongside these tensions, for some of the young men they work with, discussions around women's empowerment and the role of men can create conflicting and confusing narratives about how young men should behave.

> What's coming up in the media … about women's voices being amplified and how are guys supporting that? … And also about the LGBTQI+ community using their voice … Like, what's the best way to do that? And what can't you say? What can you say? And they're probably wrestling with all of that at the moment and [with] how to be.
>
> – *Anonymous practitioner 1*

> That uncertainty leads to a certain amount of inaction … There's a fear around, well, should I be standing up for my female friend if she wants to stand up for herself, for example? Even as experts in this space, we're still grappling and trying to understand all of these really big topics. How can we expect a 14-year-old, while he's navigating his own ideals, gender identity and values … to have all the answers?
>
> – *Movember*

In the next section of this report (p. 31), we outline practitioners' reflections on how feelings of defensiveness and lack of clarity about how to behave may make some young men receptive to online content, creators and communities that validate their feelings and provide guidance on how to behave.
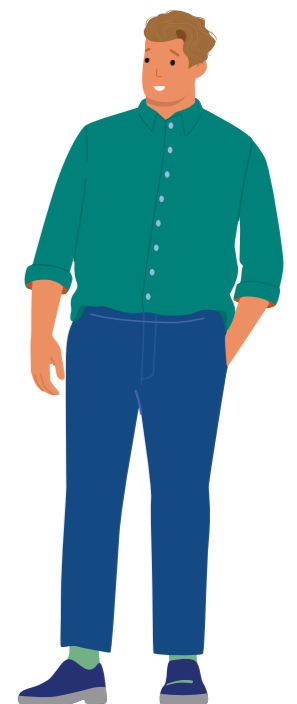
Young men feel that they are only told what *not* to be

Practitioners reflected that many of the young men they work with feel they are frequently being told what kind of man they should *not* be, but without being given guidance on the kind of man they *should* be.

> All society is telling [young men] is this: be better, don't harm, don't do this, don't do that.
>
> – *Movember*

> I think we did a good job, quite rightfully, post MeToo, of talking about sex and consent and rape culture and rape myths and all of that and toxic masculinity ... But we haven't really done a good job yet of holding up what's healthy masculinity or what the alternative looks like.
>
> – *Richie Hardcore*
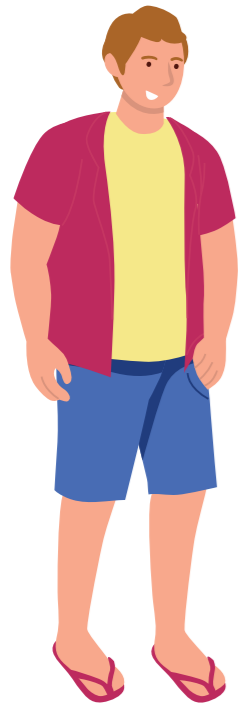
Practitioners observed that the public discussions about issues such as male privilege and gender-based violence can also be perceived by young men as focusing *only* on directing them away from harmful behaviours. Practitioners agreed that these kinds of public discussions can leave young men feeling uncertain about what positive and healthy behaviour might look like and fearful of acting incorrectly and of being 'cancelled'[3] online. One practitioner pointed out that the focus on telling young men what not to do can even diminish the effectiveness of strategies designed to address gender-based violence and misogyny.

3. To be 'cancelled' within 'cancel culture' can be understood as having attention, presence, time and money withdrawn from you on the basis of your offensive 'values, (in)action, or speech' (Clark, 2020). 'Cancel culture' can also be understood as 'a way of behaving in a society or group, especially on social media, in which it is common to completely reject and stop supporting someone because they have said or done something that offends you' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024).

> We're talking a lot about what not to do. But really, I think that young men are also not sure about what to do ... There's such a focus on, you know, the potential consequences and cancel culture and all of these kinds of things – that uncertainty, then – or fear, really – around being labelled ...
>
> – *Movember*

> And it's why we're seeing a lot of prevention tactics not work[ing] because they're being told where they went wrong, rather than being shown how to do something better.
>
> – *Anonymous practitioner 1*

Practitioners see the young men they work with encountering public discussions about men and their role without being given guidance on alternative ways of being a man. Their reflections echo the accounts of the young men observed in Part 1, who felt there was a lack of male role models available to them. These findings indicate that a desire or a need for guidance might motivate young men's behaviours online, as we discuss in the following section of this report (p. 31).

Young men want to push boundaries

Practitioners observed that as well as navigating public discussions about men and male privilege, the young men they work with are often negotiating their own developmentally appropriate desires to assert their independence from social ideals and expectations. Practitioners generally agreed that these young men are exploring pushing boundaries and taking risks in all aspects of their lives. Risk taking is an important part of adolescents' processes of developing identity and social and psychological competence (Best & Ban, 2021). Significantly, taking risks and pushing boundaries enables young people to build the resilience that is needed to deal with danger and risk in life (Best & Ban, 2021).

> ❝ Boys want to take risks. Not even boys ...
> Teenagers – adolescents – want to take risks.
>
> *– The Man Cave* ❞

Some practitioners spoke about how important pushing boundaries through edgy banter[4] was to the young men they work with. 'Edgy banter' is language, closely associated with 'lad culture', that young men are often disciplined for because it can be socially divisive, inappropriate and offensive (Buglass et al., 2020). The line between edgy banter and bullying or harassment can sometimes be a fine one, with young people drawing on a variety of highly contextual communication cues and social rules to determine the difference (Buglass et al., 2020).

For many of the young men practitioners work with, it was important that they could see and use edgy banter online. This was illustrated by one practitioner's experience of young men rejecting language that failed to be edgy. The practitioner described how the young men she worked with told her they would never use a particular online mental health forum because the site was 'too welcoming' and 'too vanilla'.

> ❝ They especially picked up on it [the forum] being moderated by people who were just trying to make them feel good and they didn't really want that. So, it's like someone's posting up about something that's stressing them, [and the moderators respond with] 'Oh, thank you so much for sharing. How wonderful! Welcome!' and [the young men] were just like 'no'.
>
> *– ReachOut* ❞

4. 'Banter' is 'similar to joking or teasing' and is generally understood to be a humorous and fun activity between friends (Buglass et al., 2020). Edgier banter is likely to include less socially acceptable and more provocative communication. While edgy banter can be socially beneficial, in some instances it may act as a precursor to or an excuse for bullying (Buglass et al., 2020).

For these young men, that forum felt too much like an artificial, curated 'safe space' where they could not be authentic or have fun. It follows that, in this study, practitioners highlighted that young men's desire to push boundaries with edgy banter should be a key consideration when designing positive online content for young men and engaging them in offline services and communities.

Practitioners' comments highlighted a tension they observed between young men often feeling a lack of guidance in public conversations about men and at the same time being likely to reject or rebel against some forms of guidance in favour of taking risks and pushing boundaries. This tension reflects the complexity of young men's motivations online and indicates the appeal that role models and guidance that push boundaries might hold for many young men, as we discuss in the next section of the report (pp. 31–40).

Young men are experiencing loneliness and isolation

Practitioners observed high levels of isolation and loneliness among the young men they work with, with one practitioner describing seeing a 'loneliness epidemic' among young men.

> ❝ Boys, once they hit their early 20s, feel like they don't really have any friends.
>
> *– Daniel Principe* ❞

> ❝ We find that a lot of people actually, even though they have people around them, don't have someone they can actually talk to.
>
> *– ReachOut* ❞

Young Australians today are experiencing loneliness at high rates (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024). While young men with disability and LGBTQIA+ young men are reported as being at a heightened risk of experiencing loneliness, research indicates that young women in Australia are experiencing loneliness at similar rates to young men (ReachOut, 2023; University of Melbourne, 2023; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024).

One practitioner noted that the young men he works with can often identify how ways of being stereotypically masculine (e.g. being strong, competitive, stoic and not speaking about feelings) can lead to loneliness.

> Ultimately, the question [we ask] is what is this person missing out on if they feel like they have to achieve a stereotype that's not even achievable for anyone? And [young men] give us answers that always have to do with loneliness. Like, they're missing out on happiness, [on] being themselves and [on] being authentic. And they're missing out on deeper connections.
>
> *– Anonymous practitioner 1*

In Part 1, young men told us they were seeking out and finding community connection online. That report discussed how this drive for belonging aligns with the prioritisation of peer relationships that comes in late adolescence (Nesi et al., 2020; NSW Health, 2014). Practitioners' observations of the loneliness experienced by young men further explains their desire to connect socially online, validating and extending our finding in Part 1 that young men are seeking connection and a sense of belonging online.

Summary

The practitioners we spoke with in this study affirmed and extended the findings in Part 1 about the complexities young men face online. They reflected that many of the young men they work with are receiving often complex and contradictory messages about manhood and masculinity from a variety of sources, including public discussions about men, while navigating personal experiences of wanting to push boundaries and feeling lonely. Practitioners reflected that encountering and negotiating these messages can leave young men feeling disenfranchised, uncertain about how to behave, seeking to push boundaries, and in need of belonging and connection. While the feelings practitioners observe among young men are not always reflective of the facts of gender inequality (i.e. male privilege), they provide essential insight into the contexts that contribute to young men's online behaviours. In the next section, we discuss practitioners' observations that young men's needs for validation, direction, edginess and belonging are often being met by harmful content, creators and communities online.

> Today I ran a school holiday workshop, and we discussed masculinity. A young man shared that his grandfather never hugged him and insisted that it was only permissible to give each other handshakes. The young man explained how his grandfather was a product of his environment, but that he was wrong. He explained that for him and his friends, they knew that it was important to be able to give and receive physical affection, and it wasn't unmanly. It was a cool little moment that reflected generational change for the better.

Young men's needs in adolescence are being met by harmful online content, creators and communities

Practitioners that we spoke with for this study discussed how easily harmful online content, creators and communities could meet young men's needs for support, guidance, validation, edginess and belonging (see pp. 19–29). It was the perspective of most practitioners we spoke with that online spaces rarely offer young men positive role models and readily offer harmful ones.

There is a lack of positive role models online

Practitioners highlighted a lack of positive role models for young men online. Their discussions validated the findings in Part 1, where young men told us they feel there are very few positive role models available to them.

> I don't think there is a space or anyone influential out there who's really role modelling the behaviour that young men need. There's never been a male influencer that I've been able to be, like, 'Oh, why don't you look at this person instead of Andrew Tate?' It's unfortunate when they [young men] look up to sports players and then, like, weeks or months later, a DV [family and domestic violence] case will come out. I just don't think there's enough positive male role models online.
>
> *— R4Respect*

> '[Young men] listen to something … They're not sure about it, and then they hear a lot of reinforcing voices. So, it seems like there's definitely a lack of positive male leadership in the social media space because positive social media influencing doesn't pay. It isn't popular.
>
> *— Anonymous practitioner 2*

Some practitioners speculated that the dearth of positive role models online may be driven by the lack of traction that positive content gains online, disincentivising creators from making this kind of content.

> There's a need for healthier male role models online … If you could get a bunch of cool Gen Z kids talking about important, meaningful things, great. But that doesn't really get 'likes'.
>
> *— Daniel Principe*

We heard from many practitioners that young men need not only positive voices and alternative influencers, but also relatable role models, both on- and offline. As one practitioner noted, young men deserve and need diverse role models in their lives.

> There's so many opportunities in workshops where guys will get up and talk about how much they're thankful for their mum or their sister or their nonna. It's wherever we go. There's always that softness and the respect that they're paying to the women in life 99% of the time. How do we bring about role models that can come in all shapes and sizes and different people and different identities, not just that male role model, which is definitely needed?
>
> *— Anonymous practitioner 1*

Practitioners' reflections suggest that even when content, creators and communities online are presenting positive and healthy ideas about manhood and masculinity, these are being drowned out by harmful role models. We heard from practitioners that in the absence of diverse and positive role models in young men's online spaces, the young men they work with are left to seek out material online that meets their needs but often find only sources that promote harmful ideas about being a man.

Harmful online content, creators and communities appeal to young men's need for validation, guidance, edginess and belonging

Practitioners in this study observed that harmful elements online are readily meeting the needs for validation, guidance, edginess and belonging (see pp. 19–29) among the young men they work with. They pointed out that, for these young men, online content, creators and communities that validate their feelings of defensiveness and disenfranchisement can be especially appealing. As one practitioner noted, online materials and spaces that offer young men validation are often based on ideas about manhood that are neither positive nor healthy.

> I think if you're an angry young person who feels excluded, there are dominant cultural narratives that give you a space to belong in. And for people who, for whatever reason, might feel aggrieved, that idea of masculinity, of being tough and stoic and violent, [is appealing]. And I think that's kind of some of the appeal of [people like] Andrew Tate, right?
>
> – *Richie Hardcore*

As described earlier (p. 24), practitioners also observed that the young men they work with appear to be grappling with how to become men, with no clear guidance except for being told what not to be. In light of these pressures, practitioners highlighted that the appeal of so many harmful influencers and communities online is the straightforward advice they present to young men.

> *This person's being direct, clear and giving me actionable steps to follow to help me get a result that I feel that I need, rather than being told what I shouldn't be.* That really clear direction, I think, is what young people are looking for at a time when things can be really, really confusing ... These social media influencers are giving them really simple solutions to things that are really complex. Young men who are going through an exploration of their identity and their sexuality, and even, like, financial literacy, are seeing [for example, the message that] if you get fit, your mental health problems will go away. Or, you know, [that they can get what they want by doing] these things that are really simple.
>
> – *The Man Cave*

> These boys tell us, 'But, Miss, he tells us how to be rich. He tells us how to be wealthy. He tells us how to be confident. He tells us how to be articulate. He is also someone who is respected and has a lot of women and girls.'
>
> – *South East Community Links*

In addition, many practitioners discussed how online influencers were speaking to young men's desire to test societal boundaries through controversial content. This included an online culture that was idealising the loneliness and isolation many young men are experiencing.

> We look at predominantly the biggest meme, you know, icons that are shaping them ... the Sigma meme ... And it loses all meaning because now it just means cool because [*sarcastically*] obviously being a lone wolf, a reclusive, you know, a sociopath, is cool ...
>
> – *Daniel Principe*

> "
> If you look at the kids who like Andrew Tate … they're [often] the kids who are least likely to be picked for the football team.
>
> – *Richie Hardcore*
> "

The practitioners we spoke with affirmed the findings in Part 1 that online content, creators and communities could provide young men with a sense of belonging and identity. The belonging that young men in Part 1 found being online was not always based on harmful ideas about being a man. However, practitioners emphasised how harmful online content, creators and communities can play on young men's feelings of isolation and loneliness, even amplifying and weaponising those feelings, to offer a sense of belonging that, as one practitioner noted, often comes with a price attached.

> "
> Much of the online content plays to fairly foundational needs around belonging and creating a sense of self. And it just happens that the sense of self that it's playing off is a sense of self that ostracises others. There's clear in- and out-groups, and it's not just men to women; it's also men to other men … And if you can get some sort of sense of identity and sense of self, some young men will engage in that kind of building of group camaraderie through sexism.
>
> – *Jesuit Social Services*
> "

> "
> [Young men] derive a sense of community and connection from these [online] places. And, obviously, identity formation takes place. The issue with this is that there is an underlying uncertainty which, you know, snakes its way through, which is focused on [the idea that] you can never be enough … [Influencers] tell you that no one can help you and there are no solutions and you need to harden up and get it together. And then they try and sell you shit. And it's like [they are saying], 'No one else can help, but I can' and 'I hear your suffering'…
>
> – *Movember*
> "

In addition, some practitioners noted that the internet can provide a sense of self and belonging for young men that is based on ideas they already hold, some of which may be healthy or neutral and others harmful.

> "
> [Young men] could be following influencers because [they are] motivating them or making them feel good. But they could also be following them because it's someone who makes them feel less alone, as they hold similar values or perspectives that they are unable to express in the real world.
>
> – *ReachOut*
> "

> "
> I can see where there are influences towards perpetrating domestic violence which are coming from online. Or at least, a culture of acceptance towards certain attitudes towards domestic violence and women that men may have. They can find other people who agree with them, and they can link in with them and they can be reassured.
>
> – *Anonymous practitioner 2*
> "
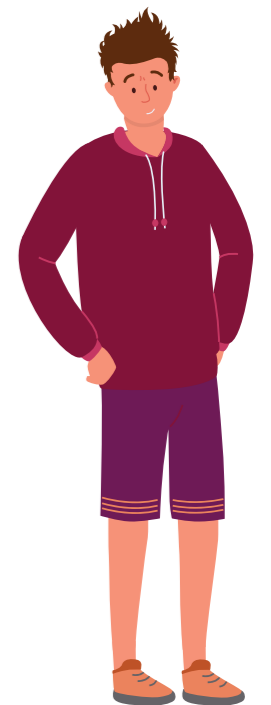
Significantly, practitioners' discussions indicate that while many young men are responding to harmful content online because it fulfils important needs, these harmful ideas do not exist in a vacuum. As one practitioner's comments suggested, young men's families and communities are likely to provide them with ideas and values around manhood that may confirm or contradict what they see online.

> Some people are going to tell you that every 14-year-old is just completely malleable and plastic to the content that's going on. But they're not that stupid. They've got home lives and they've got values [that are also influencing them].
>
> – *Movember*

Similarly, some practitioners expressed doubt that young men always completely agree with the ideas of the communities and influencers they connect with online.

> Every time we do research, there is a significant difference between the social pressures men feel to adhere to those ideas and the extent to which they personally endorse those ideas themselves. And in an online environment, I think that's heightened even more.
>
> – *Jesuit Social Services*

> I actually think it's peer pressure more than anything. That would be my suspicion. I'm not convinced that many of them are sweet on Andrew Tate.
>
> – *Daniel Principe*

Practitioners' reflections suggest that the need to belong and to align with peers is sufficiently strong among some young men that they will publicly endorse or perpetuate certain harmful ideas in order to maintain a sense of connection or belonging, despite not fully believing in those ideas. Their reflections also suggest that it may not always be the ideas themselves that young men are attached to, but rather the sense of validation, direction, edginess and belonging that they find online. This points to potential interventions for redirecting where these needs of young men can be met.

Summary

In our first report, we heard directly from young men about the meaningful, positive and fulfilling social connections and opportunities to explore self-expression that being online affords them. In that report, we also found that young men can find a sense of self and belonging in harmful ideas disseminated online about manhood and masculinity. The practitioners we spoke with corroborated and extended these findings. They pointed to the ways that harmful content, creators and communities can provide some young men with validation for their feelings of disenfranchisement, as well as for the boundary pushing and sense of connection they need at this time in their lives. They also spoke about how online content, creators and communities that are based on harmful ideas about what it means to be a man can provide young men with the straightforward, actionable advice that many are seeking. However, practitioners in this study noted that forces larger than online content and influencers are also responsible for impacting young men's online experiences.

> " I had an amazing experience in a workshop a few weeks back where a highly popular, stereotypical young man was affirming a non-binary student for their courage in telling their story. As he was affirming and celebrating his classmate, he stopped himself mid-sentence and said: 'I'm so sorry but I've completely forgotten to ask what your pronouns are. What are your pronouns?'
>
> I was pretty emotional having seen this play out in the room. It was so moving to see such courage in the room and [such] awareness from this young man. "

The 'unfair fight': Algorithms and recommender systems push harmful content to young men

For practitioners we spoke with, it was not only online materials and spaces that are implicated in the harmful ideas about manhood that some young men connect with online. Practitioners pointed directly to algorithms, recommender systems, AI, big tech and social media companies as contributing to young men's engagement with harmful masculine ideals online. Some also explicitly highlighted the interaction of algorithms and recommender systems and online pornography. Algorithms and recommender systems are a set of computing instructions that determine what a user will be served online based on a range of factors, such as the information they give platforms (e.g. their age) and their behaviour on a platform, such as liking or following content. Importantly, practitioners were conscious that it is not only algorithms and recommender systems that make harmful ideas about masculinity appealing to the young men they work with; young men's underlying needs and ideals contribute as well.

Algorithms and recommender systems

Like the young men we spoke with for Part 1, the practitioners in this study were keenly aware of the ways that algorithms and recommender systems can shape what young men see online. Practitioners saw algorithms and recommender systems as powerful, unknowable, uncontrollable forces that narrowed what young men could do and see online. As one practitioner's comments indicated, social media recommender systems can hide different viewpoints or ideas that are not aligned with a person's existing opinions or understanding (eSafety, 2022).

> Boys are being inculcated into a form of content that they have no control over, and parents have no control over it and teachers have no control over it ... This is an algorithmic problem, I think, fundamentally.
>
> – *Movember*

> I think that back when I began on Facebook and Instagram, the opportunity to see varied content was real ... I think that [now] there is really limited variety that young men are saying they see ... If you went to a [higher socio-economic] school, you know, in inner-city Melbourne, you're gonna only see a certain type of people, engage with them and connect with them. I was really hoping that social media would break down those boundaries. But I think you still end up with a very specific base of content.
>
> – *Movember*

Practitioners specifically identified algorithms and recommender systems as forces that can not only narrow what young men see online, but also push harmful ideas about manhood and masculinity onto them. Indeed, recommender systems can give disproportionate reach to harmful content posted by a minority of users (eSafety, 2022).

> The other thing you touched on as well in [Part 1] that we're seeing more and more is the algorithmic biases that, especially on YouTube, [promote] that toxicity or toxic male influential figures.
>
> – *The Man Cave*

> It's a reversion to traditional norms that I'm concerned about. We [practitioners] keep talking about this diversity of masculinities, but what social media is doing is algorithmically locking us into a reversion to the main[stream] in some ways. And so, lots of young men who may have had multiplicitous views of themselves are cutting them away in order to fit a mould, which is so problematic. Despite [online spaces having] so much content, so many different people, so many different voices, there's just no real diversity [in what young men are seeing online].
>
> – *Movember*

However, practitioners in the study were aware that algorithms are not the only way in which harmful ideas about masculinity online influence some young men. They note that there are underlying social ideals at play that make young men receptive to these ideas.

> "
> I think we need to get to the underlying factors that are driving young men into these places. We've spoken about the fact that many of these guys don't come in with homophobic and misogynistic ideals, but they all leave with them. And so how do they get such a shift? Something is going on that is really connecting with an underlying belief system that we cannot shy away from and say it's just content or an algorithm. It's there. It's their everyday life that is being matched and heard.
>
> – *Movember*
> "

Practitioners spoke about attempting to work with or infiltrate the algorithm to redirect the content that young men see towards positive and healthy sources. Despite an apparent lack of creators modelling positive masculinity online, organisations and individuals such as the practitioners in this study are trying to get messages about positive, healthy masculinities to young men online. However, a lack of transparency from big tech about how their algorithms work makes realising these goals a major challenge for practitioners.

> "
> It's hard for us to break through that algorithm to reach a wider audience. A lot of that is due to the social media platforms.
>
> – *The Man Cave*
> "

> "
> I wish there was a way we could change the algorithm of the world [and] push positive content towards them [young men]. [I wish] there was a way to filter out all the misogyny and the anti-feminist behaviour.
>
> – *R4Respect*
> "

When asked about eSafety's role in supporting young men to develop positive and healthy masculinities, practitioners were emphatic that they wanted eSafety to focus on structural issues to do with holding the online industry accountable, including for how their algorithms function.

> "
> When it comes to systemic change ... for me it's about what the government can do. *I* can't do systemic change ... Those systemic levers are things like consequences for internet providers, the big stick of regulation ... eSafety can do things no-one else can do.
>
> – *Daniel Principe*
> "

The practitioners we spoke with for this study reflected that the young men they work with face a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to accessing diverse and positive ideas about masculinity and manhood online. Their discussions indicate that algorithms and recommender systems are, along with the underlying needs and ideals that make the content they serve up appealing, a significant barrier to young men's development of positive and healthy masculinities.
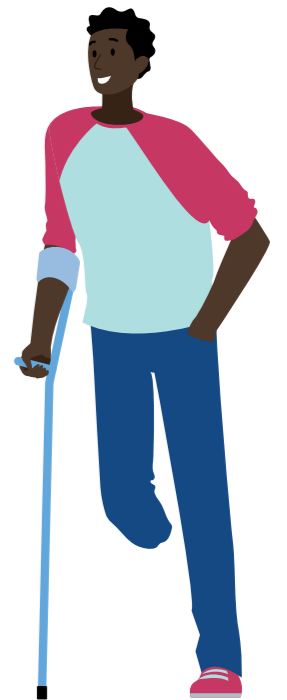
Online pornography

For some practitioners, young men's ability to develop positive and healthy masculinities online is hindered by algorithms and recommender systems directing them to pornography which may be harmful. They reflected that a major challenge facing practitioners working in the positive masculinities space is how to support young men to develop and explore their sexualities without the influence of potentially harmful ideas about women, consent and sex that can come from some forms of widely accessible online pornography. These reflections confirm our finding in Part 1 that online pornography is highly present in young men's lives, and that some young men can be very critical of this content.

As prior eSafety research has shown, a high proportion of young people are encountering pornography unintentionally online (eSafety, 2023). Drawing on their work with young men, practitioners note that algorithms and recommender systems, as well as other AI and machine learning systems, are increasing the frequency with which young people are seeing this content.

> " The reality of, like, sex bots and AI in their spaces is such an unfair fight. I have Year 5 and 6 boys saying that they're [seeing pornography pop-ups, AI pornography and sex bots online].
>
> – *Daniel Principe* "

> " I've seen the way this is increasing and how much [online pornography] is in [young men's] faces on a daily basis.
>
> – *Jeremy Donovan* "

Many practitioners observed that young men's ability to critically consume this content varies. While they see some young men they work with recognising that pornography may not be an authentic or valuable depiction of sex, other young men may be more receptive to taking away sexist and misogynistic messages from certain pornographic content.

> " There are some young people who are able to cast a critical eye over the content they're receiving, whether that's violent pornography or whether it's, like … You point specifically to Andrew Tate, and they know it's performative … But there are some young people who swallow it.
>
> – *Jesuit Social Services* "

> " I asked them this really simple question: 'What is missing from [online] pornography?' They said things like consent or respect, the rest of their relationship, emotional connection, what activities they like to do outside of sex.
>
> – *Daniel Principe* "

Practitioners were strong advocates for respectful relationships and comprehensive sexuality education that could equip all young men to explore their sexuality in a safe and positive way. For some, this could be an alternative to online pornography being used by young men as sex education. For others, there is room to make consent education more effective for young men.

> " How do you give young people sexual education that's meaningful and accounts for a normal interest and desire to explore their sexuality that doesn't propagate sexist and harmful ideas about sex?
>
> – *Richie Hardcore* "

> " [Young men are] really feeling the pressure to obtain consent, but [some] are not actually being taught how to also give consent themselves … They're actually not being taught how to say 'no'. And they want to be taught that. That's something they want to be taught: how we can move consent to an empowerment-based model that's, like, developed by men for men, or or at least by men for boys.
>
> – *The Man Cave* "
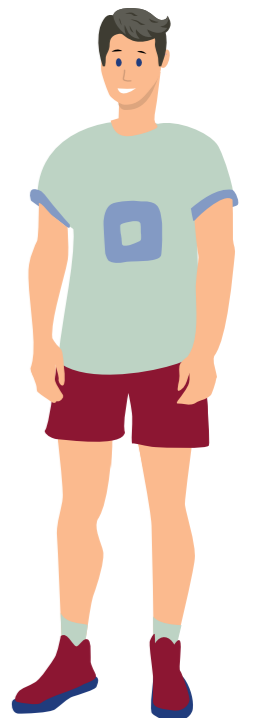
However, while practitioners hold respectful relationships and comprehensive sexuality education in high regard, they place responsibility for the impacts of online pornography on young men squarely on the shoulders of the online industry. Some practitioners suggest that critical thinking and other educational interventions may not be enough to divert young men from harmful ideas when they are faced with an onslaught of content driven by algorithms and recommender systems that are designed to keep them watching.

> "
> You can recognise [pornography] as harmful or not beneficial for you, but still be struggling with its consumption.
>
> – *Daniel Principe*
> "

> "
> The consumption of [pornographic or influencer] content, regardless of [whether] it's passive or active, is still going to have a significant impact. So, I don't know how much onus should actually be on you [as a young person] to have to regulate that for yourself and know when those harms are arising.
>
> – *Movember*
> "

While not all practitioners saw the machine learning–driven proliferation of online pornography as a key challenge for young men's development of positive and healthy masculinities, most agreed that algorithms and recommender systems, and the companies that design them, play a substantial role in directing young men towards harmful ideas about manhood online.

Summary

The practitioners we spoke to for this study saw algorithms and recommender systems as pushing harmful ideas about manhood and masculinity onto the young men they work with. Their discussions validated our findings in Part 1 that young men are conscious of the role that algorithms play in shaping what they see online, including the pornographic content that is commonly served up on their feeds. Practitioners expressed that it is both young men, and those working to support their development of positive and healthy masculinities, who are in an 'unfair fight' against algorithms and recommender systems that can narrow what young men see online and hide content that models ways of being a man that are not harmful. Importantly, practitioners' concerns about the role of algorithms and recommender systems were not independent of their discussions about the role of young men's needs and ideals in making them receptive to harmful online messages about how to be a man. Alongside their concerns, practitioners shared with us their observations of empathy, curiosity and critical thinking among the young men they work with. In doing so, they indicated the strengths among young men that can be leveraged to support their development of positive and healthy masculinities.
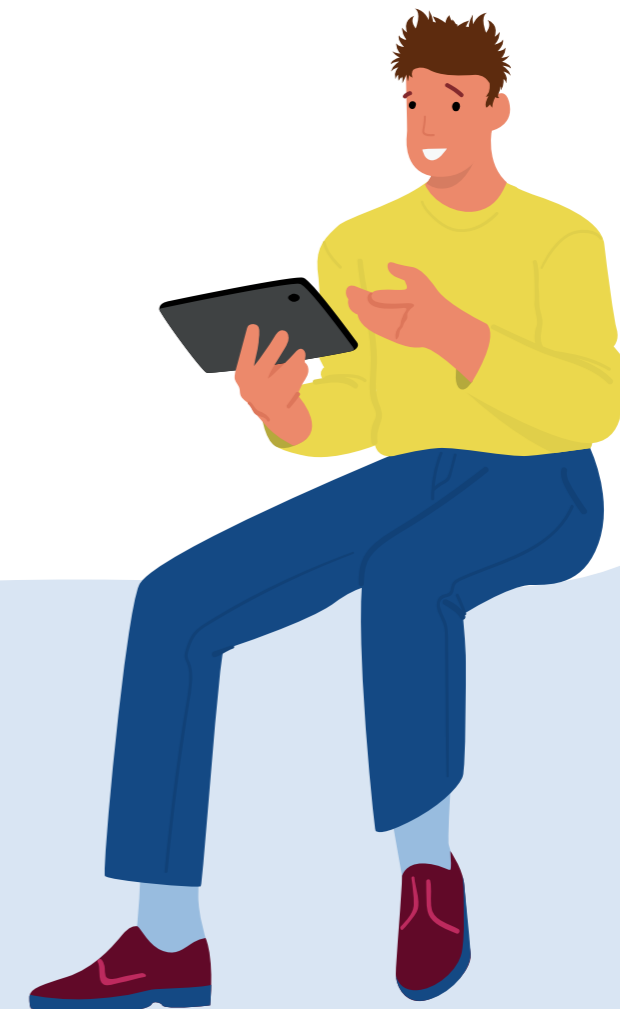
Additional findings: Young men are experiencing sexual extortion

In this study, we primarily sought to validate and extend the findings in Part 1. While discussing young men's sexuality and their intimate image sharing, some practitioners spoke about financial **sexual extortion** (sometimes referred to as 'sextortion' or 'sexploitation') and the commonplace nature of this online harm for young men. While the findings in Part 1 did not explore sexual extortion, practitioners commented that the young men they work with are experiencing this form of image-based abuse and thereby facing the risk of sexual extortion as they live their lives online.
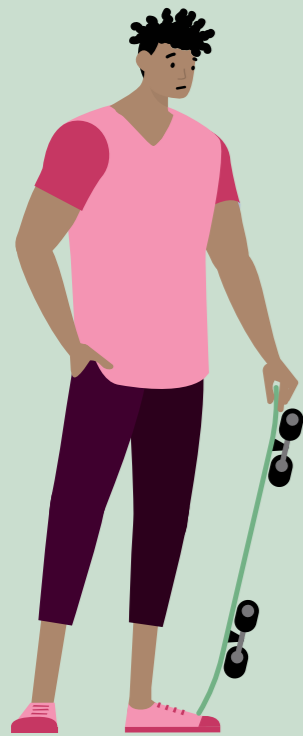
> "I've had boys come and tell me that they've been, you know, arguing with predators at 3:00 in the morning, trying to get their nudes back ... No other generation has faced [this] ... Outside of mental health, loneliness and suicidal ideation, this is the biggest thing that young boys would navigate.
>
> *– Daniel Principe*

> "I guess for me it's very easy to focus on the things that I see every day, which are [online] pornography and sextortion. They're the two biggest conversations that I have with young teenage boys.
>
> *– Jeremy Donovan*

The practitioners' reflections are echoed in eSafety's image-based abuse reports,[5] with the number of sexual extortion reports rising from 432 reports annually in 2018/19 to 6,187 reports annually in 2022/23 – an increase of 1,332% (eSafety Commissioner, 2024). While sexual extortion can be financial (where money is demanded) or non-financial (often demanding further explicit content or sexual engagement), data from the image-based abuse reporting scheme indicates that reports of financial sexual extortion are predominantly made by young men and boys. While it is likely many young men's experiences go unreported, the high number of sexual extortion reports points to the concerning rates at which this online harm is being experienced. This data also suggests that the rates of sexual extortion have increased, alongside growing awareness of the harm it causes and of eSafety's reporting scheme.

In both interviews and the research workshop, practitioners raised the need for more community education about sexual extortion. This included the importance of finding ways to reach those young men who are being exploited but are not coming forward to report their experiences. Practitioners noted that while young men need to be supported to avoid and get help around sexual extortion, it is unrealistic and unfair to place responsibility for avoiding it on them alone.

> "I've had a couple of clients who have been [sexually exploited online], and [the sexual exploitation] creeps up on [them] ... I think that putting the onus on the individual to find ways to [avoid it is unfair].
>
> *– Movember*
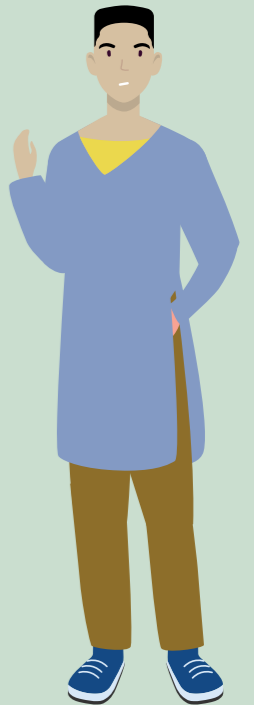
The practitioners, along with research and reporting evidence, point to the significant impact that financial sexual extortion can have on the wellbeing of young men. Many of the opportunities for supporting young men to develop healthy and positive masculinities that we discuss in the final section of this report (pp. 65–75) apply to the challenge of sexual extortion.

eSafety has committed to build upon our existing Image-Based Abuse Scheme and extensive range of relevant resources as follows:

- We will develop the evidence base on sexual extortion through assessing the prevalence of sexual extortion among Australian teenagers, including when it involves AI-generated images.

- We will continue to facilitate removal of reported material posted by those perpetrating sexual extortion and seek opportunities to act against those identified within Australia perpetrating sexual extortion.

- We will seek out opportunities to collaborate with law enforcement, financial services and other stakeholders to disrupt sexual extortion being committed against Australians and continue to provide an evidence base to inform organisational and governmental efforts in relation to sexual extortion.

- We will work with school sectors (through the National Online Safety Education Council) to support help-seeking and to enhance awareness of available resources and reporting pathways. In addition, we will support national and jurisdictional curriculum authorities to ensure that online safety education is addressed in curriculum updates, and we will partner with developers of Respectful Relationships Education and Consent Education to share insights, resources and strategies to prevent and respond to sexual extortion.

For more on this issue, see **Dealing with sexual extortion | eSafety Commissioner**.

5. eSafety helps remove serious online abuse and illegal and restricted online content. For more information on what can be reported to eSafety, and how, visit **https://www.esafety.gov.au/report-online-harm/summary-table-of-what-you-can-report-and-how**.

> "My experiences recently have been that boys have so much love for each other; they want to show this, but they also want to have fun and [to] lean into appropriate banter. Providing boys with the space to be vulnerable and also to be messy/to make mistakes is so powerful. I'm constantly reminded that boys are so emotionally intelligent if we can encourage the people around them to promote acceptance and opportunities to 'bounce back' instead of being 'cancelled'.

Young men can be empathetic, curious and critical thinkers

Drawing on their experiences of working with young men, practitioners in the study observed that young men are often empathetic, are curious to learn about positive, healthy ways of being a man, and can be skilled critical thinkers. They observed that not all young men demonstrated these qualities, or demonstrated them to the same degree. However, the strengths that practitioners see in many of the young men they work with are indicative of the potential to nurture in, and to teach, them skills such as empathy and critical thinking. In the final section of this report (pp.65–75), we discuss these and other opportunities for supporting young men to develop positive and healthy masculinities.

Young men are empathetic

Practitioners in our study reflected that many of the young men they work with show a great capacity for empathy. One practitioner described how young men's empathy can be built through the content they engage with online.

> [T]here is such an inherent warmth and empathy [in] many of them. Even when they're ripping on each other. The banter [is] coming from a place of love, and many people don't see that.
>
> *– Movember*

> [T]hey do have a capacity for empathy when I create this space for them to analyse things and express concern. I definitely see that as a real positive about the internet and what they're exposed to.
>
> *– Daniel Principe*

Another practitioner noted that it can be hard to see young men's empathetic qualities without understanding their banter and teasing or looking beyond the facades they may be trying to project.

> There's often a loving, nurturing and caring side to the young men that I work with. I firmly believe that underneath the surface, underneath the mask of the facade that they might be trying to put on [in order] to fit in, there are supportive, nurturing, caring intentions that they want to show.
>
> *– Anonymous practitioner 1*

In particular, most practitioners emphasised that in their work they saw young men express a great deal of care and empathy towards other young men.

> There's just so many beautiful examples I've [seen] over the last three and a half years where someone will get up and talk about their life experience, or about a hardship, or losing someone, or their version of anxiety. And maybe, yeah, with a bit of emotion or real weight and – not [just] their mates – people in the room getting around them, supporting them and holding space, and being able to really support one another ... They celebrate each other like nothing I have ever seen before. And they will let their mates know that they do love them, and they're not afraid to show that when they're given the chance.
>
> *– Anonymous practitioner 1*

Young men are curious about positive and healthy ways of being a man

We also heard from practitioners that many young men they work with want to learn how to be the kind of man who is a good, kind person. While young men themselves would be unlikely to use the phrase 'developing positive and healthy masculinities', the ways they are seeking guidance indicate that this is precisely what some are engaged in.

> [T]heir ability to be open and their willingness to learn ... There's so much opportunity to have a good chat ... The young boys are always so willing to learn and to understand other people's perspectives. And when we talk about, you know, having empathy for women, or kind of understanding – like, unpacking – the queer community, a lot of the time they just don't know. So, just holding space for them to be like: 'Let's talk about it.' They're always so willing to absorb all the information we're pushing towards them.
>
> *– R4Respect*

> " I think in some senses I do see this apathy. I see a disenfranchisement, especially for boys, and at the same time, if I want to point to a strength, what I see is that boys want to know how to improve themselves, how to be better.
>
> — *Daniel Principe* "

Practitioners' observations reinforce the findings from Part 1 that young men are interested in understanding what it means to be a good man today, and that they are often looking for role models online. As we have detailed throughout this report, practitioners agreed that the young men they work with are very often seeking role models to guide them, and some reflected that some of these young men are interested in finding guidance on positive, healthy ways of being a man.

> " I think there is a hunger among young men to find role models. I genuinely think that, irrespective of their backgrounds, young men do like positive voices.
>
> — *Richie Hardcore* "

> " And at least what we've seen on our channels here is that there is a strong desire for something different, a strong desire for connection, expression and identifying themselves in a new way and having actual healthy, different role models to be able to connect with and to battle that algorithm and potential influence that's there as well.
>
> — *The Man Cave* "

Young men are thinking critically

Drawing on the deep and frequent work they do with young men, practitioners observed that they often saw evidence of young men's capacity for critical thinking. They described encountering and interacting with some young men who are thoughtful about what they see online and who are well equipped to navigate the contemporary information landscape. Practitioners reflected that numerous young men they work with display a depth of insight and social analysis that speaks to their capacity for critical thinking. Importantly, practitioners noted that not all young men demonstrate these strengths. Furthermore, as previously described (see p. 49), critical thinking in itself is not enough to overcome the persuasive power of algorithms and recommender systems. However, that so many of the young men practitioners work with possess critical thinking skills indicates the potential for supporting more young men to develop and use critical thinking while online.

> " Young people are a lot more critical than anyone assumes they are. They're smart and they think about things and they're, like, 'Why am I seeing this [online]?' ...They do think about things and consider what they're trusting or what they're not trusting ... Being critical thinkers and being really considered is a big strength ... I think [that] rather than assuming they're very easily influenced, we need to have the assumption that they're not.
>
> — *ReachOut* "

> " Young people are a lot more critical in these spaces than we think they are. They are smarter and more adept at navigating these spaces on the internet than we are, or their parents.
>
> — *The Man Cave* "

> "
> I would say it's like [young men's] level of insight – their analysis – is actually incredible. I'll put a picture up and I'll ask the boys to identify what this represents when we treat a woman this way and boys in Year 7 and 8 will say 'objectification'. And I'm, like, 'I wanted you to say that, but how did you even know what that is?' I didn't know what that was until well into my university days. I love seeing their insights. Their analysis is really top-notch. I never doubt that.
>
> – *Daniel Principe*
> "

For one practitioner, this critical insight among young men extends to an awareness of how algorithms shape what they see online, echoing the findings in Part 1 where many young men demonstrated algorithmic literacy.

> "
> The algorithms thing has come up a lot in our research. [Young people talk] about how the algorithm dictates what you see and that there's benefits to that, but there's also a lot of negative comments about it. So, that's something that young people are aware of.
>
> – *ReachOut*
> "

Some practitioners saw young men's online participation as a key space where they could exercise their critical thinking skills, through accessing information to inform their views or by strategically connecting with others and expressing themselves online.

> "
> I think we sometimes view young people interacting with the world through the internet as a negative thing. But we forget how agile and critical they are in doing that, which I see play out a lot in terms of how young people create communities and express themselves through technology and through digital platforms as well. I think the job here is for us to catch up to them.
>
> – *The Man Cave*
> "

> "
> Some [boys and young men] obviously find good, healthy role models and find a place to at least explore outside of some limited ideas [online] … Some of them have been critical of [Andrew] Tate on their own, of their own volition, because they've gone and looked into things. So, again, [we come] back to the fact that some of them can go and do their own research and use the internet to create their own identity and opinions outside of other people.
>
> – *Daniel Principe*
> "

Summary

The practitioners in this study hold young men in high regard. Practitioners' observations of young men's empathy, curiosity and critical thinking validated and extended the findings in Part 1. Specifically, practitioners affirmed that young men often have a propensity for critical thinking and often look online for positive guidance and role models. These strengths were not framed as existing prior to or independent of young men's participation online, further reinforcing the findings in Part 1 that being online has the potential to be positive for young men.

We know from our findings in Part 1 that some young men hold harmful views and enact harmful behaviours online. We also know, from the findings discussed earlier in the report (pp. 19–40) some of the factors that can make some young men more vulnerable to harmful online messages about what it means to be a man. For practitioners working in the positive and healthy masculinity space, understanding how young men come to hold harmful ideas and enact harm is essential. The expert practitioners participating in this study placed emphasis on understanding young men's lived experience, and on seeing and celebrating their strengths, as a key entry point for prevention and intervention. Their insights provide us with clear markers of the skills and capacities of young men that can be fostered and built on to support their development of positive, healthy masculinities.

"

We recently ran a workshop with a group of boys. During the workshop, one of the boys shared, 'I just realised I was wearing a mask for so long I forgot who I was and I feel ready to put it down and learn who I am.' This gives me hope, as it reminds me of my experience of growing up. Seeing young boys begin shifting at such a young age inspires me [to look forward to] what the future has to bring.

"

Best-practice principles for working with young men

This list details what best practice looks like when working with young men, as articulated by practitioners in interviews and as developed and agreed upon at the workshop.

Take a strengths-based approach and celebrate young men and boys and what they do well

Embrace, embody and model empathy

Be hard on institutions and generous with individuals

Tailor language to the community and cohort you are working with

Take an intersectional approach to the work

Call young men in, rather than calling them out[6]

Take a positive attitude towards the internet, alongside discussing risks and harms

Avoid alarmist narratives

Have a robust set of ideas, statistics and data behind your work

Be peer led

Take care of your facilitators

Engage face to face

Provide tangible skills and tools for young men to take into their lives

Build young men's emotional literacy

6. 'Calling out' is often synonymous or associated with cancel culture. Being 'called out' or being 'cancelled' often involves having attention, presence, time and money withdrawn from you on the basis of your offensive 'values, (in)action, or speech' (Clark, 2020). Whereas 'calling in' is more reflective than reactionary and it invites opportunity for deeper and collaborative meaning-making, to find a mutual sense of understanding across difference (Tufts University, 2024).
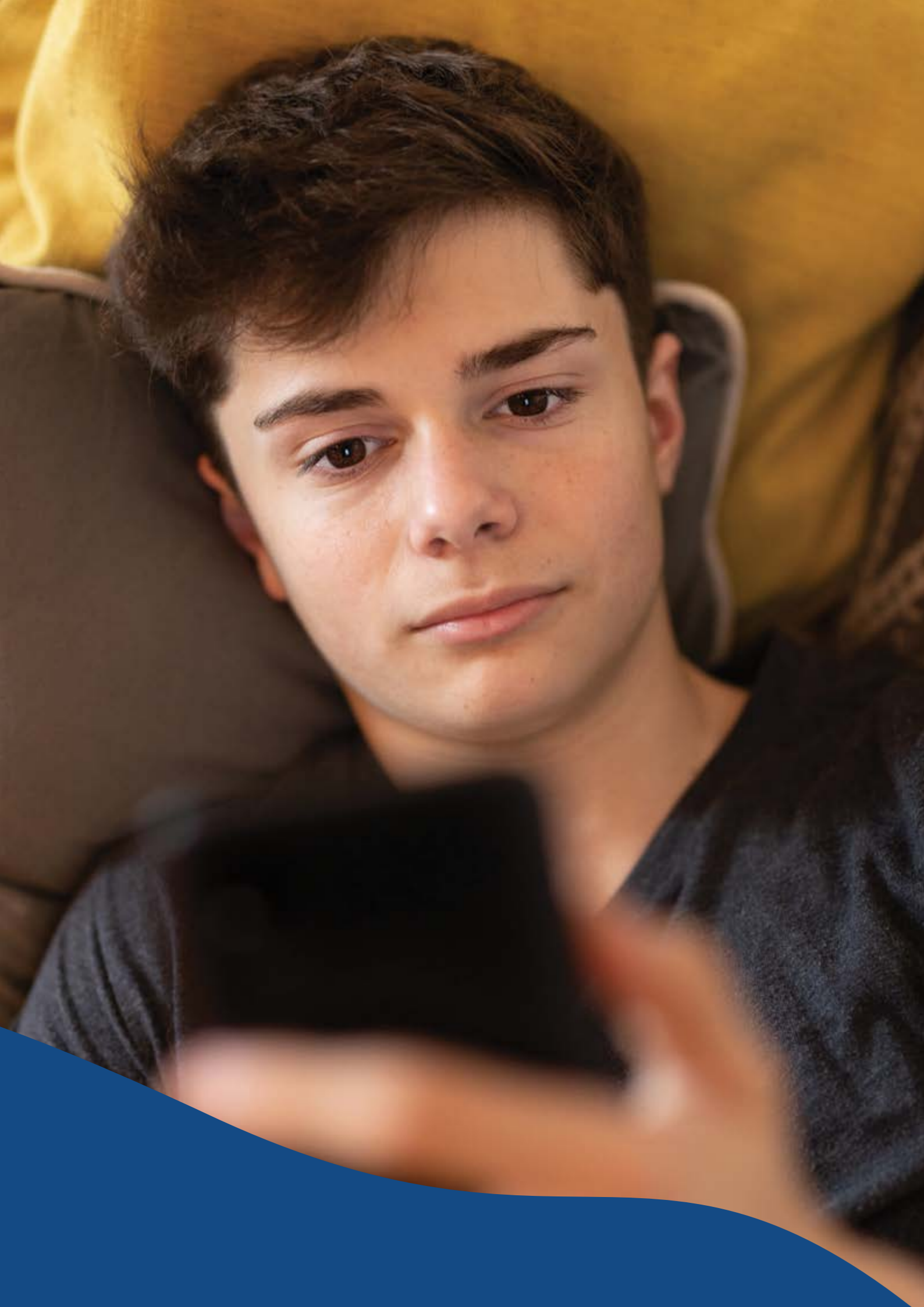
eSafety's next steps to support young men online

The aim of this research was to understand the role of eSafety in supporting young men's online experiences. We heard from practitioners that eSafety has an important role to play in supporting young men to develop positive and healthy masculinities and in ensuring that their online experiences are safe and beneficial. As noted earlier, practitioners' insights highlighted that initiatives to support young men should balance understanding and acknowledging their harmful online enactments and ideas about masculinity, alongside celebrating their strengths and capacity for positive change. Even amongst the challenges of emerging technologies and harms, practitioners were hopeful about the capacity of young men to develop more positive and healthy masculinities.

Since eSafety was established in 2015, children and young people have been a priority group for online safety. From this, eSafety has developed an extensive suite of dedicated resources and research on young people's experiences online. eSafety also has a focus on those Australians who are disproportionately at risk of experiencing online harm, such as First Nations people, culturally and linguistically diverse people, people with disability and people in the LGBTIQ+ community. In recognising that young men are not a homogenous group, and following the call for governments to 'support efforts to redefine masculinity and engage men effectively' (DFSV Commissioner, 2024), eSafety will tailor its existing resources and activities to incorporate a positive and healthy masculinities lens to support young men online.

Key findings from Reports 1 and 2:

- Being online can be positive for young men, allowing them to express themselves, connect socially and develop their critical thinking skills.

- Young men are interested in learning how to become good, kind men, and can be empathetic and think critically.

- Young men are feeling defensive, disenfranchised, uncertain, rebellious and lonely.

- Harmful online content, creators and communities can appeal to young men by meeting their needs for validation, guidance, edginess and belonging.

- Algorithms and recommender systems push harmful content onto young men.

Meeting young men where they are at: Addressing young men's contexts and strengths

We heard:

Being online can be positive for young men, allowing them to express themselves, connect socially and develop their critical thinking skills.

From this:

eSafety will leverage our existing networks to equip providers with evidence-based messaging and advice relating to young men's online experiences.

This includes:

- Collaborating with the national curriculum authority (ACARA) and jurisdictional curriculum authorities to ensure that critical thinking and social and emotional learning skills are leveraged in the design and delivery of online safety in the F-10 Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum in addition to algorithmic literacy via the ACARA Curriculum Connections.

- Offering **professional learning** for educators and **webinars for parents/carers** on the risks and rewards of recommender systems, including how algorithms and AI are influencing how children and young people experience the online world.

- Working with eSafety's National Online Safety Education Council (NOSEC) to ensure it has the most current research and recommendations in order to support young men's online experiences.

- Working with educators, parents and carers, and communities to support help-seeking and enhance awareness of reporting pathways for young men's sexual extortion.

- Through our existing Trusted eSafety Provider (TePs) program, bringing the expertise of healthy masculinities practitioners to TePs' established community of practice.

We heard:

Young men are interested in learning how to become good, kind men, and can be empathetic and think critically.

From this:

When updating and developing our online resources, eSafety will use language that acknowledges and harnesses young men's strengths, in ways that speak with them, not about them.

This includes:

- Depicting young men in caring, supportive 'leadership'-type roles with others.

- Updating our existing **young people** webpages to include content for young men about the structural and gendered drivers of privilege, alongside the ongoing nature and impacts of gender inequality.

Filling the void:
Addressing young men's needs

We heard:

Harmful online content, creators and communities can appeal to young men by meeting their needs for validation, guidance, edginess and belonging.

From this:

eSafety will support initiatives that provide positive and respectful online spaces and role models – in ways that resonate with and engage young men.

This includes:

- Considering peer or direct education programs that work with boys and young men, via our **Preventing Tech Abuse of Women Grants Program**.

- Producing guidance for parents/carers and families about the positive influence online spaces can play in young men's lives.

- Working with stakeholders to address the challenge of young people sharing videos of crime online.

From this:

> eSafety will work with curriculum authorities, ACARA (national curriculum authority), practitioners and young men to distribute messaging that is co-designed to meet their diverse needs as they navigate adolescence online.

This includes:

- Leveraging **eSafety Youth Council** insights and co-design processes for higher levels of youth engagement with our existing resources, such as:
  - **Sexting and sending nudes**
  - **Online dating**
  - **Someone is threatening to share my nudes**
  - **I'm being pressured to send nudes**
  - **I've been called out**
  - **Deal with sexual extortion**

Taking on tech:
Addressing young men's challenges

We heard:

> Algorithms and recommender systems push harmful, and often pornographic, content onto young men.

From this:

> eSafety will continue leveraging our regulatory powers and stakeholder relationships to guard against harms that children and young people, including young men and boys, experience online.

This includes:

- Sharing best practice and encouraging services to adopt a Safety by Design approach, including encouraging technology solutions that take into account the needs and expectations of young men and provide safeguards around their exposure to online pornography.

- Ensuring that services comply with their obligations in relation to Class 1 material (such as child sexual abuse material) under codes and standards that apply to a range of services, including certain generative AI services such as some 'nudify' services.

- Implementing future codes developed by industry (and any standards developed by eSafety) in relation to children's access to Class 2 material such as pornography, including through implementing measures that prevent Class 2 material from being promoted to young men and boys through algorithms or recommender systems.

- Using our transparency and accountability powers, where appropriate, on a range of harms to ensure that services are meeting the government's Basic Online Safety Expectations (BOSE) and uplifting safety practices.

eSafety will work with global regulators and the tech sector to reduce content that promotes harmful gender norms or masculinities to young men.

This includes:

- Encouraging industry to adopt a Safety by Design approach, including to identify and mitigate risks related to recommender systems and their amplification of harmful content.

- Coordinating with the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-based Online Harassment and Abuse and the Global Online Safety Regulators Network to promote understanding of the evidence base and good practices around reducing online content that promotes harmful gender norms and masculinities, including educational, programmatic and regulatory approaches.

eSafety will expand our current training for frontline workers, parents/carers, educators and other key sectors regarding the role of algorithms, recommender systems and AI companions in targeting young men with harmful content.

This includes:

- Designing training for parents/carers and educators on the impacts of algorithms and recommender systems for young people.

- Creating targeted training for frontline workers, parents/carers and educators to combat the harms of generative AI specifically, such as the proliferation of pornographic content, nudify apps and AI companion chatbots.

- Collaborating with the Australian Department of Education, education sectors (through eSafety's National Online Safety Education Council) and ACARA to ensure they consider the impact of online pornography on young men.

Preventing youth radicalisation and violent extremism

We heard:

Young men are feeling defensive, disenfranchised, uncertain, rebellious and lonely.

We heard that some young men are feeling defensive and uncertain in response to ideas about women's empowerment and male privilege. These feelings have been linked in other studies of young men to terrorist and violent extremist content and youth radicalisation (Meger et al., 2024), alongside a noted rise in youth radicalisation in Australia and calls for 'whole society' approaches to combat the threat posed to children and young people by online extremism (CTP, 2024).

From this:

eSafety suggests positive steps forward for concerned stakeholders.

This includes:

- Calling in (not calling out) young men when discussing topical conversations, including discussions on gender-based violence.

- Building the evidence base on online masculinities and potential links to youth radicalisation and extremist content.

- Leveraging young men's strengths in empathy through embedding curricula with literature, media and resources that feature women and girls as protagonists.

Beyond online safety:
Further supports for young men

This research also identified that many needs and supports for young men require holistic, whole-of-society approaches. Accordingly, the following recommendations are a guide for government, non-government, research and community responses and collaborations.

- Develop targeted initiatives for young men from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, First Nations young men, young men with disability, LGBTQIA+ young men, and young men with adverse or traumatic life experiences.

- Invest in innovative and co-designed initiatives, both online and offline, that address young men's loneliness and isolation.

- Support help-seeking for young men, including through:
  - destigmatising emotional vulnerability
  - laddering emotional literacy skills through unpacking feelings of shame, frustration, anger and regret
  - promoting reporting pathways with strengths-based messaging.

> " Speaking at a regional high school, I addressed on stage a broken masculinity and the way men are projecting attitudes online that don't meet the true values and responsibilities that should come with masculinity ... One of the students said [that] hearing a man talk with such vulnerability and strength about all the things that affect us in our lives gave him the strength to believe in dreams and a better life. "
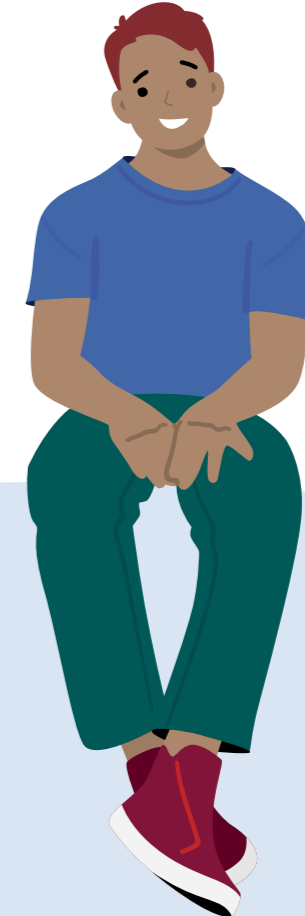
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Appendix

Methodology

As a Quality Assurance study, this part of the project did not require ethical clearance through a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). In keeping with the principles of ethical conduct in research, all participants were given research information forms and were not engaged until they had signed a consent form. Participants were given the option of being named or remaining anonymous in the final report.

Participants sample and recruitment

Recruitment of the participants was conducted by eSafety, first via email outreach and then with some follow-up phone calls. To select the practitioners, four key criteria were considered.

1. It was deemed essential for practitioners to have 'on-the-ground' experience of working with young men aged between 16 and 21 years in Australia.

2. We sought practitioners working with young men on topics around masculinities and manhood.

3. We wanted practitioners who were working with young men from a place of positivity and strength, championing young men's potential while acknowledging the need for both collective and individual responsibility.

4. We sought expert practitioners who both worked with and represented a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, including First Nations, to ensure that the diversity of young men in Australia could be represented in the study.

A list of practitioners was narrowed and refined, resulting in 16 expert practitioners who participated in the study. In total, seven different organisations are represented and three independent practitioners.

Online interviews

The first part of this study involved online interviews with expert practitioners. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were facilitated by eSafety, with one eSafety representative leading the interviews and at least one other eSafety representative observing. Interviews were conducted between May and June 2024. Interview transcripts were shared with participants following the interview.

In-person research workshop

To extend the data collected via online interviews, eSafety convened an in-person research workshop with the expert practitioners who participated in the interviews. The workshop was held in July 2024 and lasted three hours. The in-person workshop was designed by eSafety researchers and facilitated by youth researchers from the Centre for Multicultural Youth, with eSafety representatives also present. In advance of the workshop, eSafety also asked each practitioner to share a 'hopeful anecdote': the last story or experience they had with a young man that made them feel hopeful. Some of those hopeful anecdotes are shared in this report.

After the workshop, findings were discussed with eSafety researchers and youth facilitators. Once written into a draft report, findings were shared with expert practitioners and reviewed by young men from the Centre for Multicultural Youth.

Data analysis

Interview transcripts were uploaded to the research software Condens for coding and analysis. eSafety researchers coded the interviews following Braun and Clarke's (2019) method for thematic analysis to create emergent themes, which were then reanalysed and reordered to create a hierarchy of themes and sub-themes. Preliminary analysis and thematic coding of the interviews informed the creation of activities for the research workshop. Following the workshops, data collected in the form of artefacts, audio transcriptions, and notes from scribes was then uploaded to Condens for further coding and analysis.

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