

Written evidence submitted by the British Board of Film Classification (MISS0007)

Executive summary

The BBFC is the non-governmental, not-for-profit independent regulator of film and video in the UK, and the independent regulator, on a voluntary, best-practice basis, of content delivered via the UK's four mobile networks.

In its then role as Age-verification Regulator under the Digital Economy Act, the BBFC carried out in 2019 research into children's access to online pornography. This research looked at whether exposure to pornography had negative consequences for young people, including effects on body image.

In qualitative interviews conducted as part of the research, many young people reported that pornography had a negative impact on their body image. In the accompanying online survey, 29% of young people agreed that "I feel bad about my body when I see how people look in porn." 35% agreed that "I worry what other people think of my body because I don't look like the actors you see in porn."

Our research supports the growing body of evidence that early exposure to pornography can have a damaging effect not only children's body image, but their mental development and relationships in the long term. The BBFC supports the introduction of mandatory age-verification for online pornography, so that such material can be rightly restricted to adults only. Our research indicates broad public support for such measures, with 83% of parents in favour.

The BBFC welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Women and Equalities Committee Inquiry into Body Image, and would be happy to discuss any of the issues raised in our submission with the Committee.

1. About the BBFC

The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) is the non-governmental, not-for-profit independent regulator of film and video in the UK.

The BBFC is also the independent regulator, on a voluntary, best-practice basis, of content delivered via the UK's four mobile networks (EE, O2, Three and Vodafone).

The BBFC operates a transparent, trusted classification regime based on years of expertise and published Classification Guidelines. The BBFC conducts regular large scale public consultations to ensure that the standards enshrined in its Guidelines accurately reflect societal standards and parental expectations. The BBFC's primary aim is to protect children and other vulnerable groups from harm through classification decisions which are legally enforceable and to empower consumers, particularly parents and children, through the provision of content information and education, enabling families to choose content well, wherever, whenever and however they view it.

In response to public demand for parity of age ratings online and offline, since 2008 the BBFC

has worked with video on demand (VOD) services to provide trusted age ratings for content available for download and streaming. Some of these platforms also provide control mechanisms which allow parents to make available to their children only content with an appropriate age rating for them.

2. Age-verification for online pornography

In February 2018, the BBFC was designated as the Age-verification Regulator under Part 3 of the Digital Economy Act (DEA). It would have been our responsibility, once the legislation entered into force, to ensure that commercial pornographic content accessible to UK consumers was placed behind effective age-verification controls in a way that secures that the material is not normally accessible to under 18s.

In October 2019, the UK Government announced that they would not introduce age-verification under the DEA, and instead the child protection aims of the legislation would be met as part of its broader online harms strategy.

As part of its role as the Age-verification Regulator, the BBFC carried out research into children's access to online pornography. This research looked at whether exposure to pornography had negative consequences for young people, including effects on body image. The research included an online survey of 1,142 parents and their children (aged 11-17), 36 qualitative interviews lasting 2-3 hours with 16-18 year olds, and four focus groups of parents, each with six participants. The full research report is available on request via the [BBFC website](#). Please note that it contains graphic sexual content and pornographic language.

3. Pornography and body image

A key finding from this research was that many young people in the qualitative study felt that pornography had a negative impact on their body image. This was true for both boys and girls, though some of the boys said they thought pornography created greater pressures around body image for girls than it did for boys. This is covered in depth in the full report, on pages 51 and 52, which includes specific examples of where pornography has influenced young people's feelings about their genitalia, body shape and pubic hair.

In the focus groups, parents — in particular, mothers — were anxious about any pressures their daughters might feel about their body image. This largely centred around the potential impact on their mental health should their daughters feel worried about their body shape, but also extended to concern that boys would have unrealistic expectations about what the “average” woman looked like. One father, for example, chose to sit down with his son and talk about the unrealistic portrayal of the female body in pornography. This followed an occasion when his son said he wasn't attracted to what the father described as “normal women with normal bodies” on the television programme *Naked Attraction*.

In the online survey, 29% of young people agreed that “I feel bad about my body when I see how people look in porn.” There was no difference between boys and girls. 35% agreed that “I worry what other people think of my body because I don't look like the actors you see in porn.” Again, there was no difference between boys and girls.

Nevertheless, a few young people in the qualitative work felt that pornography had made them more confident in their bodies. For example, finding actors and actresses “who look like” them, and helping them to see that certain part of their bodies are normal.

Both young people and parents acknowledged a range of other factors and saw pornography within the context of a broader landscape. For example, parents across the focus groups cited TV programmes such as *Love Island* and imagery from social media, with models and ‘influencers’ on Instagram a particular concern. Some mothers also expressed concern about the influence of models seen on online shopping sites, who they claimed wore revealing outfits.

4. Recommendations and conclusion

Early exposure to pornography can have a damaging effect not only children’s body image, but their mental development and relationships in the longer term.

The BBFC supports regulatory initiatives to make the internet a safer place, and particularly the focus on the need to protect children from potentially harmful material online. It is our experience, and supported by research, that parents and other caregivers expect and prefer protections offline to be replicated online. For example, that material intended for adults should be restricted to adults only, as it would be in a shop. Our research and outreach has also demonstrated that children themselves want protections in place online from inappropriate content. 56% of 11 to 13-year-olds agree with the statement “I want to be locked out of websites that are for 18+ year-olds.”

The introduction of age-verification remains a vitally important child protection measure, and one with broad public support. 83% of parents agree there should be robust age-verification controls in place to prevent children from seeing commercial pornography online.

There are several viable age-verification solutions ready to be deployed, including innovative methods that are light-touch while being necessarily robust. These solutions do not require that personal data be shared with pornographic websites in the process of verifying age.

Further, the BBFC believes that age-verification has wider application online beyond commercial pornographic services in the interests of protecting children's rights by safeguarding them from harmful content which can impact on body image. There are also a number of proportionate options that could be considered to address harmful content on social media sites, including pornography and other material that can be detrimental to children’s body image and mental health, such as pro-anorexia and self-harm content. For example, age-verification could be applied at account level and could be monitored by the platform.

18+ is not the only threshold that could be imposed on social media. Twitter and the majority of other popular social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) state that they require users to be at least 13-years-old. However, a 2016 survey by the BBC found that more than three-quarters of children aged 10 to 12 in the UK have social media accounts, despite the notional age limit. In principle existing age-verification solutions could be adapted or new solutions developed to verify users are aged 13 or over at the point of registration.

In the absence of age-verification for now, the BBFC would encourage parents to have frank and honest conversations with their children about the types of content they might see online, including pornographic content, and the impact this could have on their body image and mental health more broadly. In our qualitative research, very few young people reported having spoken about pornography with their parents. This contrasted with 60% of parents in the online survey who claim to have spoken to their children about online pornography at least once or twice.

The BBFC will work with the Government to ensure the forthcoming Online Harms Bill meets its child protection aims, and we would welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence on any of the above to the Women and Equalities Committee.

May 2020