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Abstract | This study examined the sexual exploitation of children on dating apps, and their revictimisation as adults. Findings showed that, from a sample of 9,987 Australian dating platform users surveyed, 8.8 percent had used these platforms while under 18 years of age. Of these, 59.3 percent reported receiving at least one sexually exploitative request from another dating platform user who knew they were under 18.

Respondents who were victimised on dating platforms while under 18 were more likely to be revictimised as an adult through online and offline sexual violence. They also experienced a greater number of harms. These findings highlight the risks associated with underage dating platform use, the potential for revictimisation as an adult, and the need for these platforms to implement additional safety measures to reduce access among children and adolescents.

Sexual exploitation of children on dating platforms and experiences of revictimisation as an adult

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Child sexual abuse (CSA) is experienced by millions of children globally, with rates reported in Australia among the highest in the world (Stoltenborgh et al. 2011). Recently, a nationally representative survey of 8,500 Australians found that 28.5 percent (37.3% of females, 18.8% of males) experienced sexual abuse prior to the age of 15 (Mathews et al. 2023). CSA victimisation, described as a 'situation in which a child is involved in a sexual activity with an adult who has responsibility, trust or power over the child' (Brown 2022: 4), is consistently associated with harmful short- and long-term impacts. These include (among others) mental illness and suicidality, low self-esteem, substance use problems, eating disorders, academic performance difficulties and sexual maladjustment (Chen et al. 2010; Fletcher 2021; Putnam 2003).

Recent community estimates suggest that we are yet to understand the full scale of the problem and may have previously underestimated the prevalence of CSA. In a survey of 13,302 Australians, Brown (2023) found that 0.8 percent had intentionally viewed child sexual abuse material (CSAM) within the previous 12 months, while 3.6 percent reported that they viewed it by mistake. Research conducted in the United States by Finkelhor, Turner and

Colburn (2022) found that, of the 2,639 respondents, 15.6 percent reported experiencing online sexual abuse before they were 18, including image-based sexual abuse (including misuse of images and threats or pressure to obtain images, 11.0%), non-consensual sexting (7.2%), online grooming (5.4%), revenge pornography (misuse of sexual images to intentionally hurt or humiliate the victim, 3.1%), sexual extortion (threats to disseminate sexual images to obtain money, additional images, or other sexual activities, 3.5%), and online commercial sexual exploitation (providing sexual services for rewards, 1.7%). In addition, 7.2 percent of respondents had self-produced CSAM.

Recent evidence has suggested that social media platforms are used to access child victims for online grooming, for live streaming of CSA, and for coercing children to self-produce CSAM (Brown 2022; Joleby et al. 2021; Napier, Teunissen & Boxall 2021). Emerging findings suggest that offenders also use dating platforms as a means of accessing children through their parents or carers (Napier, Teunissen & Boxall 2021; Teunissen et al. 2022). However, there is little research into whether children themselves are using these dating platforms and, if they do, whether they experience abuse and exploitation. This study analyses data from a large survey of adult dating platform users which asked retrospective questions about dating platform use when respondents were under the age of 18.

Exploitation of children on dating platforms

Tinder launched in 2012 and was initially available to under 18s, but restricted underage users from matching with adults. However, in 2016 users under the age of 18 were banned due to reports of adults posing as teens to have sexual contact with children (Robinson 2016). Despite attempts by dating services to restrict users under the age of 18 from accessing their platforms (eg Grindr nd; Tinder nd), evidence suggests that children still use them, creating opportunities for offenders to interact with and ultimately abuse and exploit children (Hart 2023; Huang et al. 2023; Murphy 2018). For example, a representative survey of 2,002 children aged between nine and 18 in the United States found that 17 percent of respondents were using dating platforms such as Tinder, Grindr, Hinge and Bumble (Thorn 2021). An Australian qualitative study of 'adult-based platform' (ie dating platform) use by adolescents identified a range of motivations for young people using such platforms, including improving social skills, entertainment, finding relationships or hook-ups, and economic gain (Hart 2023).

Early research into online pathways towards criminality and victimisation among adolescents found that a large proportion of interactions were episodic, occurring occasionally and irregularly, and likely to resolve themselves (Brewer et al. 2018); however, there is little research focusing on exploitation of underage users of dating platforms. Huang and colleagues (2023) surveyed 2,595 seventh-grade students from 30 middle schools in Taiwan, finding that 15 percent of respondents reported using online dating apps in the previous year. These respondents were also more likely than non-dating app users to have experienced online sexual harassment (eg receiving unwanted sexual messages or threats to post respondents' private pictures online). In the Australian context, Hart (2023) documented a range of experiences of exploitation, including underage sex with adults, and illicit drug and alcohol use. However, it is unclear whether there is a relationship between experiences of exploitation among underage dating platform users and other forms of victimisation. Together, these findings suggest that, despite the efforts of dating platforms, there may be considerable use among children and subsequent opportunity for exploitation by offenders.

Sexual revictimisation

Research suggests that the impacts of CSA are related to subsequent sexual revictimisation (Pittenger, Huit & Hansen 2016). A longitudinal study by Papalia, Mann and Ogloff (2021) found that victim-survivors of CSA were more likely to be sexually revictimised before the age of 35. A systematic review of research into links between CSA and future victimisation reported a relationship between risky sexual behaviour, particularly in adolescence, and revictimisation in adulthood (Scoglio et al. 2021). Further, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021) reported that, among victim-survivors of CSA in Australia, 18 percent of men and 43 percent of women had experienced sexual assault later in life, meaning that these victim-survivors were five and three times more likely to be revictimised, respectively, than people who had not experienced CSA. Evidence suggests that experience of CSA can disproportionately predispose an individual to sexual revictimisation (Pittenger, Huit & Hansen 2016). With regard to online dating, platforms allow blocking and reporting of other users to prevent revictimisation (Gillett 2023), but do little to prevent patterned abusers who may continue to abuse others (Lee 2023).

The current study

Given the limited research into the risks and potential ongoing harms associated with children accessing dating apps and websites, which we refer to collectively as dating platforms, this study aimed to address the following research questions:

- Among adults who have ever used a dating platform, what proportion used them while under the age of 18?
- Were respondents who used dating platforms while under 18 at greater risk of future victimisation as adults, including harms that occur either online or offline, and harms from multiple individuals?
- Were respondents who experienced sexual exploitation requests on dating platforms while under the age of 18 at greater risk of victimisation as adults?

Methodology

The current study is part of a larger body of research examining the prevalence and nature of sexual violence occurring on, or as a result of, dating platforms. In 2021, the Australian Institute of Criminology conducted a survey of 9,987 Australians, with a sample representative of the age, gender and geographic distribution of the Australian population. Respondents were excluded from the study if they had not used a dating platform in the previous five years (see Wolbers et al. 2022 and Teunissen et al. 2022 for full sampling methodology and definitions). The survey contained questions focusing on the respondents' sociodemographic characteristics, dating platform use, and experiences of sexual violence emerging from the use of dating platforms (see Wolbers et al. 2022 for the survey questions). The current study focused on adult respondents who reported using dating platforms while under the age of 18, to consider whether these individuals were more likely to experience sexual violence as adults (after meeting someone on a dating platform), and whether they experienced a greater number of harms from individual or multiple dating platform users.

Measures

Dating app facilitated sexual violence

Dating app facilitated sexual violence (DAFSV) included online and in-person sexual violence, aggression and harassment perpetrated by individuals whom respondents had met on a dating platform in the past five years. DAFSV is separate from child sexual exploitation requests received by respondents who had used dating platforms when they were under 18 years. Online sexual violence included any form of sexual harassment, abusive or threatening language, image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) and stalking that occurred online. Offline sexual violence included in-person sexual assault and coercion, reproductive and sexual-health related abuse, in-person IBSA, and in-person stalking. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had experienced either or both of online and offline DAFSV from one or more individuals they had met on a dating platform. They were also asked to indicate whether they had experienced one or multiple forms of online and/or offline DAFSV (eg a respondent may have experienced online and in-person IBSA, and online stalking).

Child sexual exploitation

We then focused on respondents who reported using dating platforms while under the age of 18. These respondents were asked about individuals they had met on those platforms, who knew the respondent was under 18, and whether they had:

- asked the respondent to send sexual photos/videos of themselves; and
- offered to pay the respondent for photos or videos of themselves or to be on webcam for them.

Respondents who answered 'yes' to either question, or both, were counted as being victimised through receiving a child sexual exploitation request.

Matchmaker was one of the first dating services, beginning operation as a bulletin board system in 1986 (*Hollywood Reporter* 17 July 2000 363: 46; Online Personals Watch 2020). As this was 35 years prior to the collection of survey data in the present study, respondents who were aged 52 years when undertaking the survey would have been 17 years old at the release of the first dating service. It is therefore unlikely that people aged over 50 could have used dating services similar to modern dating platforms before they were 18. Consequently, any respondents who were aged 50 years or over when undertaking this survey who said that they had used dating platforms under the age of 18 ($n=14$) were included in the group who had not used dating platforms while under 18. These 14 individuals were therefore excluded from analyses relating to child sexual exploitation on dating platforms.

This survey examined static demographic and experiential measures. In other words, the demographics and experiences of the respondent were reported as they were at the time of the survey. It is therefore important to note that, given our questions on historic use of dating platforms, demographic characteristics (eg gender, sexual orientation) may have changed between initial use and the time the survey was completed.

Limitations

The survey design asked respondents whether the perpetrator had known that they were underage at the time, but we did not ask how they knew that to be the case. As a result, it is possible that these answers contain an element of speculation. This survey measured child sexual exploitation by asking respondents if they had received requests for sexual images or payment for sexual images/webcam sessions when they were under 18. However, it did not ask whether respondents adhered to requests, and we are therefore unable to report the proportion of respondents who refused. Similarly, this survey did not ask respondents the platforms on which they received these requests.

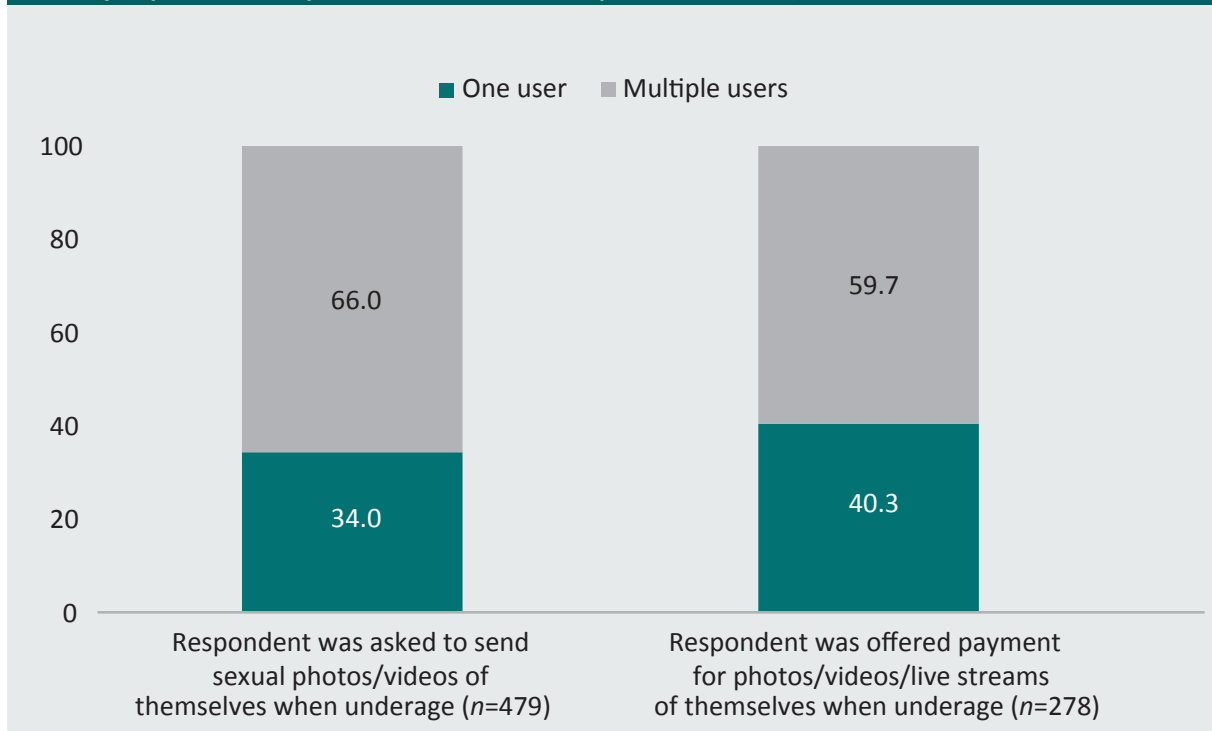
There were other forms of victimisation which we were unable capture in this survey, including attempts to meet children aged under 16 years in person (the relevant survey question related to children aged under 18 years). The present analysis also excluded respondents who had not used a dating platform in the previous five years. While the reason for not using these platforms is unknown, it is possible that childhood victimisation could play a part, which may affect the incident rate of revictimisation. Finally, this survey did not capture information on the perpetrators who made child sexual exploitation requests, including whether they were also under the age of 18.

Results

Experiences of underage dating platform victimisation

Approximately nine percent ($n=883$, 8.8%) of respondents indicated that they had used a dating platform while under the age of 18. Of these, 59.3 percent ($n=524$, 5.3% of the full sample) said that they had received a sexually exploitative request from another user or users who knew they were under 18. Among underage platform users, 54.3 percent ($n=479$, 4.8% of the full sample) were asked by another user for sexual photos or videos of themselves, of whom 66.0 percent ($n=316$) were asked by multiple dating platform users (see Figure 1). Separately, 31.5 percent of respondents who had used a dating platform while under 18 ($n=278$, 2.8% of the full sample) had been offered payment by another user for photos, videos or live streams of themselves, and 59.7 percent ($n=166$) had received this offer from multiple dating platform users who knew they were under 18.

Figure 1: Respondents who used dating platforms when under the age of 18 and experienced sexually exploitative requests from one or multiple other users (%)



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

Of the 479 respondents who were asked for sexual photos or videos of themselves, 50.7 percent ($n=243$) were also offered payment for photos, videos or live streams of themselves by one person or multiple people. Pivotal, respondents who were asked for this content by multiple other users were also more likely to be offered payment by multiple other users. Of the 316 respondents who were asked for sexual photos or videos of themselves by multiple other dating platform users, 37.9 percent ($n=120$) were also offered payment for photos, videos or live streams of themselves by multiple users.

It should also be noted that almost two-thirds (65.4%) of respondents who used dating platforms while under 18 reported being asked by another user to meet in person. In Australia the age of consent is 16 or 17, depending on the jurisdiction (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2021), and voluntarily meeting another user in person cannot be defined as child sexual exploitation or abuse. Hence this variable was excluded from analysis, as it was not possible to determine whether these face-to-face meetings were requested when the respondent was aged 15 or younger.

Respondents were divided into three groups to compare their DAFSV experiences:

- respondents who did not use dating platforms while under 18 years old ($n=9,104$);
- respondents who used dating platforms while under 18 but did not receive a request for child sexual exploitation ($n=359$); and
- respondents who used dating platforms under 18 and were victimised by receiving a request for child sexual exploitation ($n=524$).

The sociodemographic characteristics of the sample, disaggregated by victimisation group, are displayed in Table 1. Respondents who reported using dating platforms while under 18 were fairly evenly distributed between women (51.3%) and men (46.9%), with 1.8 percent identifying as non-binary. Most respondents who used dating platforms while under 18 identified as heterosexual or straight (72.7%) and were aged between 18 and 24 years at the time of the survey (57.5%). Notably, 18.0 percent reported having a long-term health condition, and 17.4 percent identified as First Nations.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics by use of dating platforms as a child, and victimisation				
	Dating platform use and victimisation group			
	Full sample (N=9,987) n (%)	Did not use as a child (n=9,104) n (%)	Used as child but not victimised (n=359) n (%)	Used as a child and victimised (n=524) n (%)
Gender***				
Man	4,992 (50.0)	4,578 (50.3)	192 (53.5)	222 (42.4)
Woman	4,924 (49.3)	4,471 (49.1)	157 (43.7)	296 (56.5)
Non-binary	71 (0.7)	55 (0.6)	10 (2.8)	6 (1.2)
Age***				
18–24	2,092 (20.1)	1,584 (17.4)	211 (58.8)	297 (56.7)
25–34	3,471 (34.8)	3,219 (35.4)	98 (27.3)	154 (29.4)
35–44	2,220 (22.2)	2,111 (23.2)	41 (11.2)	68 (13.0)
45–54	1,161 (11.6)	1,147 (12.6)	9 (2.51)	5 (1.0)
55+	1,043 (10.4)	1,043 (11.5)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Sexual orientation^a ***				
Heterosexual	8,237 (82.5)	7,595 (84.6)	283 (80.2)	359 (69.6)
LGB+	1,613 (16.2)	1,386 (15.4)	70 (19.8)	157 (30.43)
Health condition***				
	1,155 (11.6)	996 (10.9)	34 (9.5)	125 (23.9)
First Nations^b ***				
	778 (7.8)	624 (6.9)	31 (8.6)	123 (23.5)

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding. Significant χ^2 test at *** $p < 0.001$ between dating platform use and victimisation groups (groups were not compared with full sample). 'Victimised' means the respondent received a child sexual exploitation request on a dating platform when they were aged under 18

a: Excludes 137 respondents who did not provide a response

b: Excludes 126 respondents who did not provide a response

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

Experiences of revictimisation

Two research questions focused on online and offline DAFSV that occurred in the five years prior to completing the survey. Because respondents aged 24 and under could have used dating platforms during this five-year period while under the age of 18, they were excluded from our analysis of revictimisation. This exclusion criterion served two purposes. First, it reduced the risk that respondents could double-count an experience as both victimisation under the age of 18 and online or offline DAFSV. Second, it ensured that the experiences of online and offline DAFSV reported occurred subsequent to any victimisation as a child.

To investigate sexual revictimisation via DAFSV, a series of logistic and negative binomial regressions were employed. These analyses used demographic and behavioural controls to consider whether the likelihood that experiencing online or offline revictimisation (or both) as an adult differed between those who did not use dating platforms as a child, those who did but were not victimised, and those who did and were victimised. These analyses also included the number of online and offline DAFSV harms experienced as covariates.

Respondents who used dating platforms under the age of 18 but did not experience childhood victimisation, and respondents who did not use dating platforms as children, were roughly equally likely to experience victimisation as an adult. However, respondents who were victimised on dating platforms while underage were significantly more likely to experience online ($OR=8.2$, $p<0.001$) and offline ($OR=4.6$, $p<0.001$) forms of DAFSV. When compared with those who did not use dating platforms as children, they also experienced a rate of online DAFSV 42 percent higher (incidence rate ratio (IRR)= 1.42 , $p<0.001$) and an offline rate 72 percent higher ($IRR=1.72$, $p<0.001$).

In addition, respondents who were victimised as children were significantly more likely to experience an online form of DAFSV harm from multiple people ($OR=1.7$, $p<0.01$); however, this result did not translate to experiencing offline harms from multiple people. Respondents who were victimised as children were also 17 percent more likely than those who did not use dating platforms as a child to experience DAFSV involving multiple people ($IRR=1.17$, $p<0.05$).

Table 2: Results of regression models analysing experiences of online and offline DAFSV and number of harms experienced

	Experienced any online DAFSV ^a			Experienced any offline DAFSV ^b		
	OR (SE)	p	95% CI	OR (SE)	p	95% CI
Dating platform use						
Did not use as a child	–	–	–	–	–	–
Used as child but not victimised	1.05 (0.24)	0.837	0.67, 1.65	0.72 (0.16)	0.133	0.47, 1.11
Used as a child and victimised	8.24 (4.24)	<0.001	3.01, 22.58	4.58 (1.04)	<0.001	2.94, 7.15
	Number of online DAFSV harms experienced ^c			Number of offline DAFSV harms experienced ^d		
	IRR (SE)	p	95% CI	IRR (SE)	p	95% CI
Did not use as a child	–	–	–	–	–	–
Used as child but not victimised	1.03 (0.09)	0.770	0.86, 1.21	0.76 (0.12)	0.077	0.80, 0.99
Used as a child and victimised	1.42 (0.10)	0.000	1.25, 1.62	1.72 (0.12)	0.000	1.39, 2.12
	Experienced online DAFSV harm from multiple people ^e			Experienced offline DAFSV harm from multiple people ^f		
	OR (SE)	p	95% CI	OR (SE)	p	95% CI
Did not use as a child	–	–	–	–	–	–
Used as child but not victimised	1.19 (0.28)	0.458	0.75, 1.89	1.10 (0.35)	0.757	0.60, 2.04
Used as a child and victimised	1.72 (0.36)	0.009	1.14, 2.59	1.20 (0.22)	0.312	0.84, 1.71
	Number of online DAFSV harms experienced from multiple people ^g			Number of offline DAFSV harms experienced from multiple people ^h		
	IRR (SE)	p	95% CI	IRR (SE)	p	95% CI
Did not use as a child	–	–	–	–	–	–
Used as child but not victimised	1.03 (0.11)	0.784	0.83, 1.28	1.01 (0.20)	0.977	0.68, 1.49
Used as a child and victimised	1.17 (0.09)	0.041	1.01, 1.36	1.14 (0.12)	0.189	1.94, 1.40

a: $n=7,419$, LR $\chi^2=1,471.82$, $p<0.001$, pseudo $R^2=0.17$, AUROC=0.77

b: $n=6,439$, LR $\chi^2=1,536.43$, $p<0.001$, pseudo $R^2=0.18$, AUROC=0.76

c: $n=7,476$, LR $\chi^2=2,341.60$, $p<0.001$, pseudo $R^2=0.06$

d: $n=7,476$, LR $\chi^2=2,119.62$, $p<0.001$, pseudo $R^2=0.11$

e: $n=5,309$, LR $\chi^2=427.22$, $p<0.001$, pseudo $R^2=0.06$, AUROC=0.67

f: $n=2,421$, LR $\chi^2=292.2$, $p<0.001$, pseudo $R^2=0.09$, AUROC=0.69

g: $n=5,309$, LR $\chi^2=705.76$, $p<0.001$, pseudo $R^2=0.03$

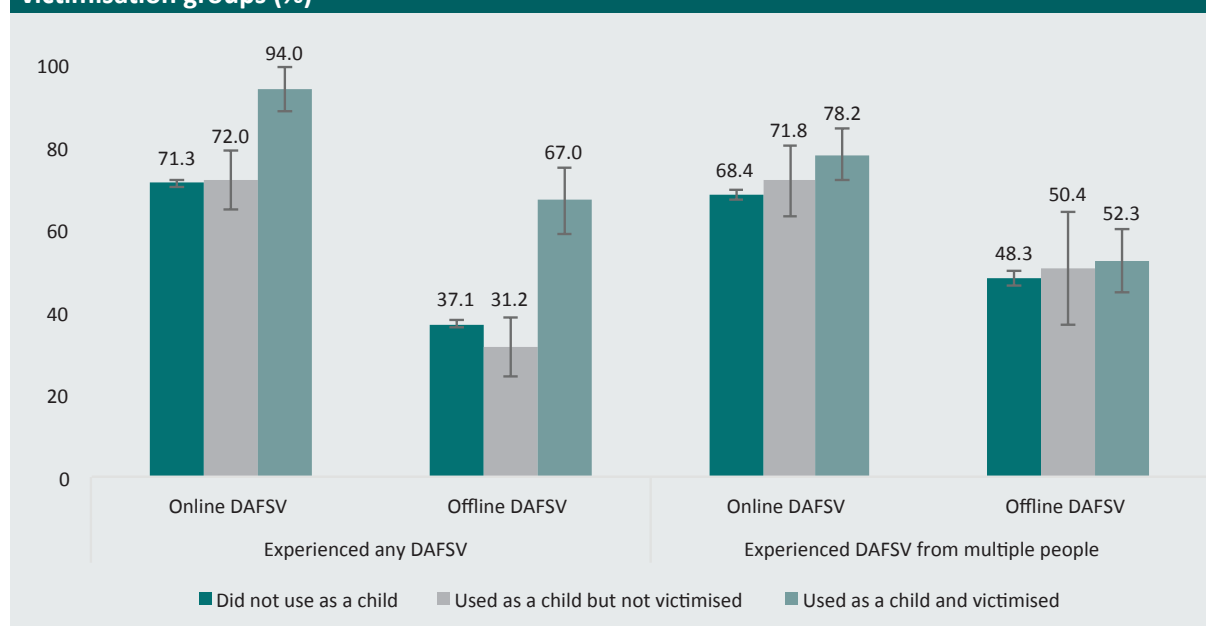
h: $n=2,421$, LR $\chi^2=453.23$, $p<0.001$, pseudo $R^2=0.06$

Note: Models exclude non-binary respondents (due to small numbers) and respondents who did not indicate whether they used dating platforms as a child. 'Did not use as a child' was the reference category for all regression models. All likelihood ratio (LR) tests had 31 degrees of freedom. OR=odds ratio, IRR=incidence rate ratio, SE=standard error, CI=confidence interval, AUROC=area under receiver operating characteristic curve. Did not use as child $n=7,520$, used as child and not victimised $n=148$, used as child and victimised $n=227$

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

Following each regression model, marginal analyses were conducted to determine the predicted probability of experiencing an online and offline form of DAFSV (and experiencing these harms from multiple people; Figure 2). Findings suggested that, even after controlling for the demographic and behavioural factors associated with experiencing online and offline DAFSV (Teunissen et al. 2024; Wolbers et al. 2022), nearly all respondents who used dating platforms while underage would go on to experience online DAFSV (94.0%, 95% CI=88.7, 99.3), while two-thirds would experience offline DAFSV (67.0%, 95% CI=58.7, 75.2). Additionally, of respondents who were victimised while underage and later experienced an online or offline form of DAFSV, 78.2 percent (95% CI=71.8, 84.7) and 52.3 percent (95% CI=44.7, 59.8) respectively reported experiencing at least one of these harms from multiple other users.

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities of experiencing DAFSV across dating platform use and victimisation groups (%)

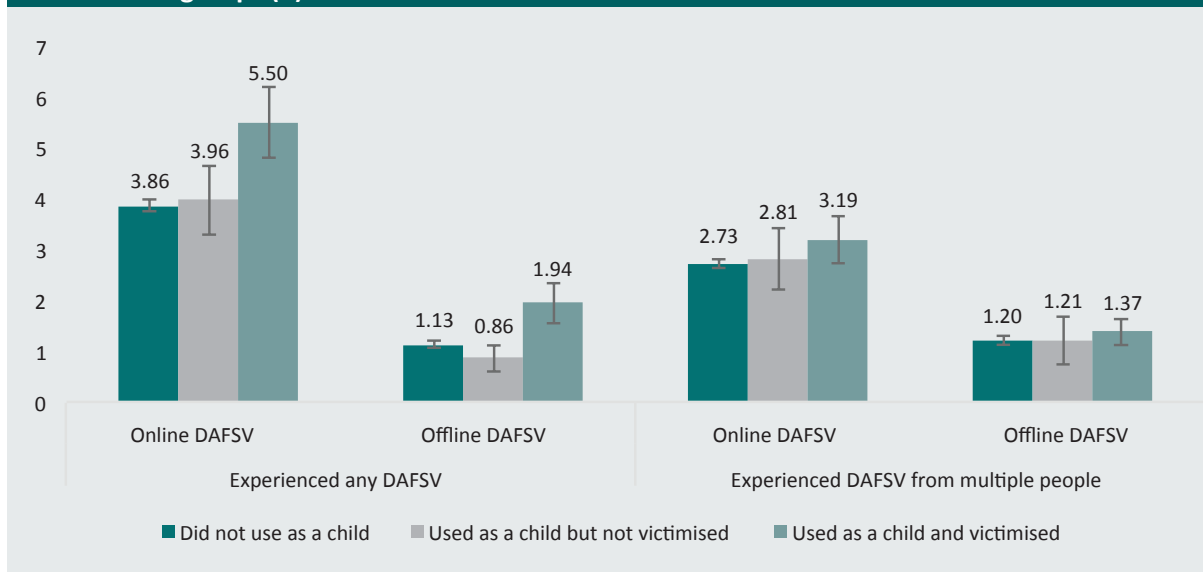


Note: Error bars depict 95% confidence intervals. Excludes respondents aged 18–24 years

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

Respondents who used dating platforms while under 18, and were victimised, experienced more forms of online ($n=5.5$, 95% CI=4.8, 6.2) and offline ($n=1.9$, 95% CI=1.5, 2.3) DAFSV (Figure 3). Further, these respondents experienced more online ($n=3.2$, 95% CI=2.7, 3.7) and offline ($n=1.4$, 95% CI=1.1, 1.6) forms of DAFSV from multiple people.

Figure 3: Predicted number of forms of DAHSV experienced, by dating platform use and victimisation groups (n)



Discussion

Almost nine percent of respondents said that they had used dating platforms while under the age of 18. Of these underage users, almost 60 percent said that they received a sexually exploitative request from another dating platform user or users who knew the respondent was under 18, and more than half were asked to send a sexual photo or video of themselves. It was also more common for underage dating platform users to receive these requests from multiple users compared to one user. While there are few benchmarks against which to compare these findings, they broadly align with those of Huang and colleagues (2023), who found that 15 percent of seventh grade children in Taiwan had used online dating apps in the last year, and that this group were more likely than non-users to have experienced online sexual harassment. Notably, over 50 percent of respondents who used a dating platform while underage were aged between 18 and 24 years at the time of the survey. One possible explanation for this is the stigma previously associated with online dating among older age groups (Gibbs, Ellison & Lai 2011).

When considering online sexual victimisation more broadly (not necessarily involving dating platforms), between 15 and 16 percent of children have been found to experience various forms of sexual victimisation online (Finkelhor, Turner & Colburn 2022). When comparing this to underage dating platform users, we found that 59.3 percent experienced sexual victimisation. It is possible that underlying situational factors influence the higher incidence of sexually exploitative requests reported by underage dating platform users in the present study. In other words, research considering generalised online sexual victimisation (ie not focused specifically on dating platforms)

may report lower rates because the opportunities for online engagement to form intimate and sexual relationships are significantly lower. However, the nature of dating platforms is salient—they are designed to facilitate (at a minimum) text-based engagement with the intention of forming intimate relationships. It is also possible that some offenders may specifically use dating platforms to target children for sexual exploitation, just as some target adults on dating platforms to exploit children in their care (Napier, Teunissen & Boxall 2021; Teunissen et al. 2022).

Close to a third (31.5%) of respondents who used dating platforms while under 18 had received a request for photos, videos or live streams of themselves in exchange for payment, suggesting a notable demand for generating online CSAM on these platforms. This places the responsibility on all dating platforms to incorporate safety features, such as filtering intimate content or blocking potentially offensive content (Flynn et al. 2023), and to raise awareness of these features among users. Two-thirds (65.4%) of underage dating platform users received a request to meet in person from another user who knew the respondent was under 18 at the time. While the survey did not capture the exact age of respondents when this occurred, it is likely that some of these respondents were under 16 years at the time. These findings are similar to those from an Australian survey of 3,651 children, in which 12 percent of respondents reported meeting individuals offline who they first met online (19% of 14–17 year olds; 10% of 11–13 year olds; 6% of 8–10 year olds; eSafety Commissioner 2022).

Revictimisation

Although dating platform features, such as blocking and reporting, protect users from revictimisation (Gillett 2023), there is limited evidence of the effectiveness of these approaches on recidivist abusers (Lee 2023). Respondents who received sexually exploitative requests on dating platforms while under 18 were significantly more likely than others to experience online and offline DAFSV. They were also more likely to experience online and offline DAFSV from multiple people. These findings are pivotal as they demonstrate that, not only was there a notable rate of people under the age of 18 using and being victimised on dating platforms, there may be continued harms associated with this victimisation. These findings align with previous research suggesting that childhood sexual victimisation is strongly associated with an increased risk of sexual revictimisation (Pittenger, Huit & Hansen 2016; Scoglio et al. 2021). In totality, underage sexual victimisation on dating platforms may represent an important intervention point to reduce the likelihood of revictimisation as an adult.

Implications

Despite dating platforms typically having policies prohibiting underage use, a considerable proportion of people under the age of 18 are not only using them but being victimised on these platforms. This included the sexual exploitation of children, and making financial transactions in exchange for CSAM. Pivotaly, exploitation of underage individuals on dating platforms increased the likelihood of online revictimisation by more than eight times, while the likelihood of offline victimisation increased by more than four times. These findings demonstrate the significant and continued impact of exploitation of underage people on dating platforms.

There are two potential avenues for reducing these victimisation rates. The first relies on tech companies both to make it more difficult for children to access dating platforms, and to detect users who seek to exploit them. In October 2023 Tinder announced it was piloting identity verification for users in Australia and New Zealand, which includes age verification using a drivers licence or passport (Tinder 2023). However, this feature appeared to be optional and people could still use the app without verifying their age. At the time of this study, age verification was not a mandatory feature for Australian users of many popular dating platforms. However, these findings offer a strong argument for the use of age verification on dating platforms. Aside from age verification, this study emphasises the importance of dating companies proactively detecting sexually exploitative requests, investigating and acting against the perpetrators.

The second approach focuses on increasing knowledge among dating platform users and their caregivers. The findings of this research point to the need for education and awareness directed at parents and carers, including the potential uptake of parental controls. Education could also target children who may use dating platforms, raising awareness of the risks associated with these platforms, including the risk of later revictimisation. It should be acknowledged that it is unlikely that proactive action by tech companies will successfully exclude all underage users from their platforms. As a result, the optimal avenue for reducing risk appears to be a combination approach, involving tech companies regulating their platforms with a focus on victimisation of underage users, and grassroots education and prevention approaches aimed at young people and their caregivers.

Future directions

This survey was not able to ask follow-up questions on whether respondents complied with the sexual exploitation requests they received on dating platforms, but this is an important direction for further study. Future research could examine the proportion of requests that resulted in the production of CSAM. Future studies could also consider the platforms on which these requests occurred and whether a proportion of these requests involved the purchase of CSAM. Finally, little is known about the perpetrators of sexual exploitation of minors on dating platforms. There is a need for research considering the demographic characteristics and behaviours of perpetrators and any trends in the characteristics of the exploitation that they perpetrate.

Conclusion

This study found that almost one in 10 dating platform users started using these platforms before they were 18 years old, and that most underage users had received sexually exploitative requests from other users. Additionally, dating platform users who were victimised as children were significantly more likely than other respondents to be sexually revictimised online and offline as an adult. These findings support the calls for tech companies to take further steps to prevent people aged under 18 from accessing their services, and for the development of tailored education and prevention programs for children and their caregivers.

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