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Abstract | Drawing on a survey of 13,302 online Australians, this study examines the characteristics and behaviours of respondents who viewed child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and fringe or radical content online, or both.

In the past 12 months, 40.6 percent of respondents had viewed fringe or radical content and 4.5 percent had viewed CSAM. Among respondents who viewed CSAM, 64.7 percent had also viewed fringe or radical content, while 7.1 percent of those who viewed radical content had also viewed CSAM.

Respondents who viewed only CSAM or only fringe or radical content were similar to one another. Respondents who viewed both were more likely to be younger and male and had higher rates of criminal justice system contact and diagnosed mental illness. Their online activity, including the platforms used, also differed.

The overlap between viewing child sexual abuse material and fringe or radical content online

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Introduction

In recent years, online dissemination of radical material by extremist groups has increased, resulting in exposure to a wider audience (Broadhurst et al. 2017; Droogan & Waldek 2018). Simultaneously, the growth of the internet and related technologies has increased the availability of child sexual abuse material (CSAM; Holt et al. 2020; WePROTECT Global Alliance 2021; Westlake 2020). Access to both types of content has proliferated in recent years; however, they have typically been viewed as separate problems involving different people. This study examines the characteristics and behaviours of Australians who access either CSAM or radical content online and compares them with individuals who access both.

The problem of radical content online

Radical content accessed through online domains is an important risk factor for radicalisation (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation 2023; Wolfowicz, Hasisi & Weisburd 2022) but not necessarily a standalone cause (Gill et al. 2017), resulting in a recent focus on how exposure occurs and who is at the greatest risk (Cubitt & Morgan 2024; Wolbers et al. 2023). Platforms with less moderation, such as 4chan, 8chan and Telegram, allow greater reach and accessibility of radical content (Hassan et al. 2018; Nienierza et al. 2021), with encrypted communication also supporting peer-to-peer sharing (Nuraniyah 2019).

Recent research has shown that a large proportion of computer users are exposed to online content they describe as fringe, radical or extreme, a significant minority of whom intentionally accessed the content (Cubitt & Morgan 2024). Exposure to this type of content, especially when it is intentionally sought, is associated with extremist attitudes and behaviours (Hassan et al. 2018; Wolfowicz, Hasisi & Weisburd 2022). The internet is an important component of modern radicalisation pathways, with up to 60 percent of extremists found to have radicalised primarily online or to have had considerable online engagement with radical content in combination with offline influences (Hamid & Ariza 2022; Kenyon, Binder & Baker-Beall 2023).

Content detection and removal, account suspension, identity validation and counter-narrative approaches have been supported by government agencies, and implemented by the private sector, to reduce the proliferation of radical content online (Wolbers et al. 2023). However, the problem persists, on mainstream social media platforms as well as those featuring less moderation (Cubitt & Morgan 2024).

Online child sexual abuse material

CSAM is also widely available online (Broadhurst 2019; Westlake 2020). While it is a significant problem on the darknet (Johnson & Patel 2019), CSAM is also found in indexed content on surface web search engines (Westlake 2020); searches for adult pornography (Morgan & Lambie 2019); peer-to-peer networks (Wolak, Liberatore & Levine 2014); and image boards, file-storage sites and widely used social media sites (Brown 2022). While internet relay chat and email were once common methods for privately sharing CSAM, encrypted messaging apps have become popular for sharing content (Balfe et al. 2015; Bursztein et al. 2019; Brown 2022). Among the pathways into CSAM offending, the first exposure is an important point in the onset of offending (Hunn et al. 2023; Wortley & Smallbone 2012), with impulsivity and risk-taking behaviour an established contributory factor (Seto & Ahmed 2014).

International estimates of the prevalence of viewing CSAM have ranged from 2.2 percent to 4.6 percent of adults having ever seen such content (Brown 2023). In Australia, Salter et al. (2023) estimated that 2.5 percent of men had ever viewed CSAM. Using a narrower definition, Brown (2023) estimated that 0.8 percent of all adults (and 1.1% of men) had intentionally viewed CSAM in the previous year.

There is growing acknowledgement of a nexus between CSAM and radical online content. For example, in January 2023 a member of an online neo-Nazi group was sentenced in a United Kingdom court for possessing CSAM (see <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-64404704>). In September 2023, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation released a public service announcement warning of violent online groups involved in child sexual extortion, with CSAM being produced and shared with other group members (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2023). Further, in early 2024, the Global Network on Extremism and Technology noted that there may be an intersection between terrorism, violent extremism and child sexual exploitation (Argentino, Barrett & Tyler 2024).

Despite the fact that a large proportion of both CSAM and radical content exists on the surface web and social media, to date there has been no research into individuals who engage with both radical content and CSAM. This research was prompted by observations from law enforcement and terrorism professionals that there may be individuals prone to accessing both types of content online (Argentino, Barrett & Tyler 2024; Federal Bureau of Investigation 2023), as well as separate consultation with law enforcement and academia undertaken by the authors. Using a large-scale survey of Australian internet users, this study examines the characteristics and behaviours of respondents who viewed CSAM and fringe or radical content online, with a focus on respondents who viewed both types of content.

Method

Sample

This research uses data from a large sample of online Australians surveyed about their political and social beliefs ($n=13,302$). Conducted by Roy Morgan Research in late 2022, the survey was sent to panels of individuals aged at least 18 years who had voluntarily joined to receive incentives in exchange for completing surveys. Participants were first recruited from Roy Morgan's Single Source survey panel, which uses a cluster sampled, face-to-face survey approach. Proportional quota sampling ensured that the sample was reflective of the spread of people living in Australia, while the data were weighted by age, sex and usual place of residence. Additional random iterative method weights were applied to ensure representativeness of the sample by education level, internet and social media use. Quotas were based on the Australian adult population stratified by age, sex and usual place of residence, based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023) population data. The raw completion rate for invitations sent to this panel was 7.1 percent. The survey took respondents an average of 23.8 minutes to complete. Poor quality responses and duplicates were removed from the final sample.

Respondents were asked whether, in the last 12 months, they had seen political, ideological or religious content online that mainstream society or the government might describe as fringe, unorthodox or radical (referred to as 'fringe or radical content'). This included online messages, posts, or discussions; videos they had watched, shared on bulletin boards, or attached to text or email messages (excluding fictional films); and books, magazines, articles, or other written material, downloaded to print or received attached to a message such as an email. These may have included political or religious content such as speeches, sermons, manifestos, policies, ideas or information designed to influence respondents' views on world events towards an identifiable ideology or issue. The content may have been viewed intentionally or unintentionally. They were also asked whether, in the last 12 months, they had encountered online sexually explicit material of people who are or look under the age of 18. Using the same dataset, Brown (2023) focused specifically on those who had not only viewed CSAM but done so intentionally. The present study includes all who had viewed CSAM in the previous 12 months, regardless of whether it was intentional. The choice was made to include those who accessed each type of content both intentionally and unintentionally for analysis. This was for several reasons: to ensure that the groups analysed were similar; to acknowledge that viewing these types of content can occur for many reasons, some of which may be situational; and to allow inferences to be made in relation to the totality of the sample, rather than only a smaller subset.

Based on their responses to these questions, respondents were categorised into one of four groups:

- respondents who said they had not viewed CSAM or fringe or radical content in the 12 months prior to the survey;
- respondents who said they had viewed CSAM but not fringe or radical content (CSAM only group);
- respondents who said they had viewed fringe or radical content but not CSAM (fringe or radical content group); and
- respondents who said they had viewed both CSAM and fringe or radical content (overlap group).

Respondents who did not answer one or both questions about viewing CSAM or fringe or radical content were excluded from the comparative analysis; however, they are included in the overall prevalence estimates.

Analytical approach

The analysis proceeded in two stages. The first stage involved bivariate analyses exploring the differences between the four groups in their demographic characteristics, regular use of the internet and online platforms, reported criminal justice contacts as a juvenile and as an adult, and diagnosed mental illness. We note that, while we asked about regular use of platforms, we did not ask whether respondents accessed any type of content on these specific platforms. Rather, these questions related to their regular online activities. Each of the three groups who viewed one or both types of content were initially compared with respondents who had viewed neither type of content. Next, the CSAM group was separately compared with the fringe or radical content group and the overlap group. Finally, the fringe or radical content group was compared with the overlap group.

Chi-square tests of association were used to measure the statistical significance of any differences observed between groups. Because this study uses weighted survey data, we report an *F* statistic rather than the χ^2 value. More specifically, the Pearson's chi-square statistic is turned into an *F* statistic with non-integer degrees of freedom by using a second-order Rao and Scott (1984, 1981) correction. The Rao and Scott correction is used when survey weights are applied to a complex sample with the intention of improving representativeness of the population studied. Where a χ^2 value reports on unweighted data, and in this case may produce a false evaluation of statistical significance, the reported *F* statistic is corrected for the weighted data and therefore more reliable in this circumstance.

Limitations

While the sample is large and representative of the spread of the Australian population according to key demographic characteristics, caution should be exercised in generalising the results to the wider population. Caution should also be taken in interpreting group membership. While we provided guidance to respondents to help them determine whether they had viewed fringe or radical content online, including specific examples, respondents may have had different ideas about whether the content was fringe or radical. In this study, individuals were categorised into one of four groups based on whether or not they had viewed CSAM and/or fringe or radical content; however, we did not ask the extent to which content was viewed. This meant it was not possible to assess whether prolific consumers of either type of content were different to those who view it less frequently. We also did not examine intentionality in this analysis, which means we do not know whether CSAM or fringe or radical content were viewed accidentally or on purpose. Nor did we ask those who viewed both types of content which was their primary interest and which was secondary. This limited our ability to draw inferences about the intention of the overlap group in viewing both types of content. Further, we did not ask about any other types of content sought. It is possible that these individuals viewed a suite of content types and we were only able to observe two. Finally, some respondents may have been reluctant to share information about the content they had viewed. Given the proportion of the sample who responded 'Don't know' or 'Prefer not to say' when asked whether they had viewed either CSAM or fringe or radical content, it is likely that some respondents preferred not to provide this information.

Results

Viewing CSAM or fringe or radical content online

Overall, 39.9 percent of respondents ($n=5,304$) said they had viewed either CSAM or fringe or radical content online in the 12 months prior to the survey. About a third of respondents (35.8%) had viewed fringe or radical content but not CSAM ($n=4,768$), 1.1 percent of respondents ($n=150$) had viewed CSAM but not fringe or radical content, and 2.9 percent of respondents ($n=386$) said they had viewed both types of content. Around one in six respondents (16.4%, $n=2,176$) did not answer at least one of the questions, and for each group these respondents are reported as 'unknown' in Table 1.

The majority (64.7%) of respondents who viewed CSAM had also viewed fringe and radical content online. Conversely, relatively few respondents who had viewed fringe and radical content online had viewed CSAM (7.1%).

Table 1: Respondents who had viewed CSAM or fringe or radical content in the 12 months prior to the survey (%)

		Viewed fringe or radical content in the past 12 months			Total
		Yes	No	Unknown	
Viewed CSAM in the past 12 months	Yes	2.9 ($n=386$)	1.1 ($n=150$)	0.5 ($n=60$)	4.5 ($n=596$)
	No	35.8 ($n=4,768$)	43.8 ($n=5,822$)	11.8 ($n=1,569$)	91.4 ($n=12,159$)
	Unknown	1.9 ($n=247$)	1.0 ($n=135$)	1.2 ($n=165$)	4.1 ($n=547$)
	Total	40.6 ($n=5,402$)	45.9 ($n=6,105$)	13.5 ($n=1,795$)	100.0 ($n=13,302$)

Note: Unknown includes respondents who said they did not know or preferred not to say

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia 2022 [computer file]

Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

Respondents who viewed either one or both types of content were significantly different from respondents who did not across almost all demographic variables. The CSAM ($F=3.9$, $p<0.05$) and overlap groups ($F=21.1$, $p<0.01$) were significantly younger than those who viewed neither. Among those who viewed fringe or radical content, the spread of ages was significantly different to those who did not view either type of content. These respondents were significantly more likely than the group who viewed neither type of content to be under 35, or over 65 years ($F=5.9$, $p<0.01$).

The overlap group was also significantly younger than the CSAM ($F=3.3$, $p<0.05$) and the fringe or radical content ($F=14.6$, $p<0.01$) groups, with a higher proportion of respondents aged 18 to 34 years (40.7% vs 29.7% and 28.5%, respectively). Compared with the group who viewed neither type of content (44.8%), the CSAM (54.8%) and fringe or radical content (53.2%) groups were both significantly more likely to be male ($F=7.7$, $p<0.01$ and $F=28.1$, $p<0.01$ respectively), while the overlap group featured the highest proportion of male respondents (63.5%; $F=28.2$, $p<0.01$). Each of the CSAM group (4.3%; $F=3.8$, $p=0.05$), the fringe or radical content group (2.6%; $F=5.9$, $p<0.05$) and the overlap group (7.5%; $F=40.6$, $p<0.01$) featured a higher proportion of Indigenous respondents than the group which viewed neither type of content (1.9%).

There were relatively few differences between the four groups in terms of employment, education and income. More than one in five respondents (21.4%) in the overlap group had a history of military service, significantly higher than those who had viewed neither type of content (7.4%; $F=21.4$, $p<0.01$) and the fringe or radical content group (9.8%; $F=22.4$, $p<0.01$).

	Viewed neither CSAM nor fringe or radical content (n=5,822)	Viewed only CSAM (n=150)	Viewed only fringe or radical content (n=4,768)	Viewed both CSAM and fringe or radical content (n=386)
Age				
18–34	25.6	29.7	28.5	40.7
35–64	50.6	56.7	47.5	44.4
65+	23.8	13.6**	24.1***	14.9***xx
Gender				
Male	44.8	54.8	53.2	63.7
Female	55.1	44.0**	46.2**	35.4***xx
Indigenous	1.9	4.3*	2.6**	7.5***xx
Annual income (\$)				
0–18,200	11.5	15.1	11.6	13.8
18,201–45,000	24.2	18.2	24.3	25.3
45,001–120,000	43.2	40.9	43.3	40.1
120,001–180,000	8.8	10.3	10.3	10.4
180,001+	3.4	7.4	3.6**	3.5*
Highest level of education				
High school	32.7	37.1	28.0	28.7
Vocational	24.5	24.5	28.2	31.5
University	38.3	38.4	43.1**	39.2
Current relationship	64.3	63.2	63.1	62.8
Employed	62.6	73.8**	62.3	64.6
Military service	7.4	12.5	9.8**	21.4***xx

For comparisons with respondents who did not view either CSAM or fringe or radical content, ** $p<0.01$ and * $p<0.05$.

For comparisons with respondents who only viewed CSAM, ** $p<0.01$ and # $p<0.05$.

For comparisons with respondents who only viewed fringe or radical content, ** $p<0.01$ and * $p<0.05$.

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia 2022 [computer file]

Internet use

All three groups who viewed one or both types of content spent significantly more time on the internet for personal purposes than the group who had not (CSAM 4.1 vs 3.4 hours: $F=2.2$, $p<0.01$; fringe or radical 3.8 vs 3.4 hours: $F=3.3$, $p<0.01$; overlap 4.6 vs 3.4 hours: $F=4.6$, $p<0.01$). The same was also true of time spent on the internet for work purposes (CSAM 3.4 vs 2.9 hours: $F=7.2$, $p<0.01$; fringe or radical 4.1 vs 3.4 hours: $F=2.4$, $p<0.01$; overlap 4.1 vs 3.4 hours: $F=5.1$, $p<0.01$). The overlap group spent the most time online for both personal and work reasons. There were important differences between groups in whether they used certain platforms frequently, defined as at least weekly use. The group who viewed neither type of content were the least likely to frequently use all platforms other than Signal. There were some differences between the CSAM group and those who viewed neither CSAM nor fringe or radical content, with the CSAM group more likely to frequently use TikTok (24.7% vs 13.6%; $F=12.8$, $p<0.01$), Twitter (14.7% vs 8.8%; $F=5.2$, $p<0.05$) and Reddit (9.9% vs 5.6%; $F=3.9$, $p<0.05$). This group was the most likely of all four groups to frequently use TikTok, with almost one in four using the platform at least weekly.

When compared with respondents who viewed neither type of content, the fringe or radical content group were more likely to frequently use all platforms other than WhatsApp and WeChat. The only difference between the CSAM and fringe or radical content groups was the frequent use of TikTok, with a larger proportion of the CSAM group using TikTok at least weekly (24.7% vs 16.2%; $F=6.4$, $p<0.05$).

There were important differences between the overlap group and other groups in the platforms used. Fifty-six percent of respondents in the overlap group used Facebook at least weekly, a smaller proportion than in every other group (neither content: 62.0%, $F=4.1$, $p<0.05$; CSAM: 66.6%, $F=4.4$, $p<0.05$; fringe or radical: 66.9%, $F=15.8$, $p<0.01$). More than one in five of those in the overlap group (21.9%) used TikTok at least weekly, significantly more than in the groups who viewed neither (13.6%; $F=17.1$, $p<0.01$) or fringe or radical content (16.2%; $F=6.8$, $p<0.01$). A similar proportion of the overlap group used Twitter at least weekly, which was also higher than among those who viewed neither type of content (8.8%; $F=62.1$, $p<0.01$) and fringe or radical content only (15.3%; $F=9.8$, $p<0.01$).

Importantly, the use of encrypted communications differed between the groups. The proportions of overlap group respondents who used Discord and Telegram weekly were roughly double that of respondents from the fringe or radical content group (Discord: 12.8% vs 6.6%, $F=16.7$, $p<0.01$; Telegram: 6.3% vs 1.9%, $F=103.0$, $p<0.01$). The overlap group used Signal at four times the rate of the CSAM group (4.4% vs 1.1%; $F=4.24$, $p<0.05$) and nearly twice the rate of the fringe and radical group (4.4% vs 2.9%), although this difference was not statistically significant. Frequent use of Discord was more than three times as common among the overlap group compared with respondents who did not view either type of content (12.8% vs 3.7%; $F=58.7$, $p<0.01$). While the remaining platforms were accessed less frequently, the proportion of respondents active on them was higher among the overlap group than among those who engaged with neither type of content or fringe or radical content only.

Table 3: Internet use by respondents, by group

	Viewed neither CSAM nor fringe or radical content (n=5,822)	Viewed only CSAM (n=150)	Viewed only fringe or radical content (n=4,768)	Viewed both CSAM and fringe or radical content (n=387)
Internet hours for personal use	3.4	4.1**	3.8***	4.6**xx
Internet hours for work	2.9	3.4**	3.1***	3.8**xx
Platforms used at least once per week (%)				
Facebook	62.0	66.6	66.9**	56.3**xx
Messenger	40.6	42.7	47.7**	45.2
WhatsApp	25.6	24.6	27.3	25.8
TikTok	13.6	24.7**	16.2***	21.9**xx
Twitter	8.8	14.7*	15.3**	21.8**xx
Reddit	5.6	9.9*	10.7**	14.4**xx
Discord	3.7	6.1	6.6**	12.8**xx
Telegram	1.5	1.9	3.1**	6.3**xx
Signal	2.1	1.1	2.9**	4.4**#
WeChat	0.9	1.2	1.2	2.4**xx
Rumble	0.2	0.8	1.0**	2.4**xx
4chan	0.1	0.7	0.6**	2.6**xx

For comparisons with respondents who did not view either CSAM or fringe or radical content, ** $p < 0.01$ and * $p < 0.05$

For comparisons with respondents who only viewed CSAM, ## $p < 0.01$ and # $p < 0.05$

For comparisons with respondents who only viewed fringe or radical content, ** $p < 0.01$ and * $p < 0.05$

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia 2022 [computer file]

Contact with the criminal justice system

A higher proportion of the fringe or radical content group (3.7% vs 2.8%; $F=6.3$, $p < 0.05$) and the overlap group (10.5% vs 2.8%; $F=56.8$, $p < 0.01$) reported having been arrested, charged, summonsed, convicted or found guilty of an offence (ie contact with the criminal justice system) as a juvenile compared with respondents who had seen neither type of content. The overlap group were more than twice as likely as the CSAM group (10.5% vs 4.6%; $F=4.2$, $p < 0.05$) and almost three times as likely as the fringe or radical content group (10.5% vs 3.7%; $F=33.1$, $p < 0.01$) to have had contact with the criminal justice system as a juvenile. Similarly, the proportions of the CSAM group (11.1%; $F=4.4$, $p < 0.05$), fringe or radical content group (8.9%; $F=18.6$, $p < 0.01$) and overlap group (17.8%; $F=59.3$, $p < 0.01$) who had contact with the criminal justice system as an adult were significantly higher than for the group who had viewed neither type of content (6.5%). The overlap group had the highest proportion of respondents with an adult criminal history—double that of the fringe or radical content group (17.8% vs 8.9%; $F=27.8$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 4: Contact with the criminal justice system as a juvenile or adult, by group (%)

	Viewed neither CSAM nor fringe or radical content (n=5,822)	Viewed only CSAM (n=150)	Viewed only fringe or radical content (n=4,768)	Viewed both CSAM and fringe or radical content (n=387)
Juvenile delinquency	2.8	4.6	3.7**	10.5***#xx
Adult offending	6.5	11.1*	8.9**	17.8***xx

For comparisons with respondents who did not view either CSAM or fringe or radical content, ** $p < 0.01$ and * $p < 0.05$

For comparisons with respondents who only viewed CSAM, ## $p < 0.01$ and # $p < 0.05$

For comparisons with respondents who only viewed fringe or radical content, ** $p < 0.01$ and * $p < 0.05$

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia 2022 [computer file]

Self-reported diagnosed mental health disorders

Respondents were asked whether they had ever been diagnosed with a mental health disorder. The overlap group had the highest rate of diagnosed mental disorders overall (58.5%; $F=101.1$, $p < 0.01$), followed by the CSAM group (47.9%; $F=15.4$, $p < 0.01$) and then the fringe or radical content group (39.4%; $F=58.9$, $p < 0.01$). This pattern held for all types of disorders other than psychotic disorders.

Among the overlap group, 58.5 percent reported they had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder, compared to 47.9 percent of the CSAM group ($F=4.4$, $p < 0.05$), 39.4 percent of the fringe or radical content group ($F=47.5$, $p < 0.01$) and 31.8 percent of those who viewed neither type of content ($F=101.1$, $p < 0.01$). Of note, the rate of diagnosed psychotic disorders in the overlap group was six times greater than in the CSAM group (6.8% vs 0.9%; $F=5.6$, $p < 0.01$), and four times greater than in the fringe or radical content group (6.8% vs 1.7%; $F=32.9$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 5: Self-reported diagnosed mental health disorder, by group

	Viewed neither CSAM nor fringe or radical content (n=5,822)	Viewed only CSAM (n=150)	Viewed only fringe or radical content (n=4,768)	Viewed both CSAM and fringe or radical content (n=387)
Any diagnosed mental health disorder	31.8	47.9**	39.4***	58.5***#xx
Depressive disorder	19.8	35.5**	24.6***	35.3***xx
Anxiety disorder	21.3	32.4*	27.0**	38.4***xx
Psychotic disorder	1.5	0.9	1.7	6.8***#xx
Personality disorder	1.9	6.1**	2.7**	8.6***xx
Substance use disorder	3.5	6.9*	4.9**	9.9***xx
Other psychiatric condition	4.5	14.5**	6.2***	13.8***xx

For comparisons with respondents who did not view either CSAM or fringe or radical content, ** $p < 0.01$ and * $p < 0.05$

For comparisons with respondents who only viewed CSAM, ## $p < 0.01$ and # $p < 0.05$

For comparisons with respondents who only viewed fringe or radical content, ** $p < 0.01$ and * $p < 0.05$

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia 2022 [computer file]

Discussion

This research has shown that there is a considerable overlap between people who view CSAM and who view fringe and radical content online. In particular, the majority of people who view CSAM also view content they described as fringe or radical. The profile of this overlap group also differed from that of respondents who viewed either one or neither type of content. Respondents who viewed both types of content were more likely to be younger and male, to have had contact with the criminal justice system as juveniles and adults and to have been diagnosed with certain mental illnesses. There were also important differences in their online behaviours and the platforms they used.

Conversely, respondents who viewed only CSAM or only fringe or radical content were relatively similar to one another. Respondents who viewed fringe or radical content tended to be older, used the internet less often for work and personal reasons, were less likely to use TikTok and were less likely to report having ever been diagnosed with mental health disorders such as depressive, anxiety, personality or substance use disorders.

The implications of viewing these types of harmful online content extend beyond the consumption of the content alone. Cubitt and Morgan (2024) found that, among those who had seen fringe or radical content, 29.1 percent had encountered a group promoting extreme, fringe or radical views online, 6.9 percent reported becoming a member of a group, and 12.7 percent reported sharing fringe or radical content with at least one other person, commonly on mainstream social media platforms. Further, being a member of a group promoting fringe or radical content was associated with increased sharing of that content with other internet users. Respondents who view fringe and radical content online and share that as part of an online group may, given the overlap observed here, be facilitators of other types of content, including CSAM.

Implications for prevention

Most research and intervention approaches relating to either online CSAM or fringe or radical content do not consider co-occurring access to other types of content. This research has shown that, within a 12-month period, 65 percent of respondents who viewed CSAM had also viewed fringe or radical content, and seven percent of those who accessed fringe or radical content also viewed CSAM. Whether respondents had intentionally or unintentionally viewed one or both types of content was unclear—it could be that where one type of content was sought, the other was also present. However, it could also be that a large proportion of the sample were seeking both types of content, particularly those who were looking for CSAM online. Regardless, these findings have important implications for intervention approaches seeking to address access to problematic online content.

Prevention activities designed to disrupt access to online content tend to focus on the platform hosting the content or the format of the content itself. For example, common approaches to combat access to online CSAM include intervention messaging, content removal, peer-to-peer monitoring and messaging campaigns (Hunn et al. 2023). These approaches are similar to those designed to prevent access to fringe or radical content (Wolbers et al. 2023). While the tactics for prevention and disruption have been similar, the platforms or internet users targeted have differed depending on the content. This research has shown that the people who viewed CSAM and who viewed fringe or radical content were, in fact, relatively similar. The profile of respondents who viewed both types of content was different, and this may help guide efforts to target this high-risk group.

A central assumption underpinning prevention approaches is that individuals who access CSAM only access CSAM, and individuals who access fringe or radical content only access fringe or radical content. Disrupting access to specific types of content is therefore thought to reduce future access and downstream offending. However, the presence of a group who view both CSAM and fringe or radical content online, and who are meaningfully different from those who view only one type of content, is important. Prevention strategies may be more effective and reap wider benefits when they target both types of harmful content, the platforms that host both types or the internet users who seek them.

Separately, it is also possible that the treatment needs of individuals who access either CSAM or fringe or radical content may be different to those who access both. For example, our findings suggest those who accessed both types of content may experience more diagnosed psychiatric conditions and a more diverse range of them. Treatment interventions for CSAM consumers are different to interventions for those who radicalise, and those who access both types of content may need different treatment again. Further research should be undertaken to inform psychosocial intervention and prevention approaches for those who access multiple types of harmful content.

Directions for future research

These findings also have implications for the insights that can be gained by using different methodologies to research online environments. For example, emerging research into online fringe or radical content has focused on platforms known to contain extreme content, such as Telegram (Vergani et al. 2022), Twitter (now X; Froio & Ganesh 2019) or Gab (Jasser et al. 2023). The same is often true of research on access to CSAM, which has focused on platforms such as Omegle (Salter & Sokolov 2024) or the darknet (Ngo et al. 2024). While these studies are important to our understanding of these online environments, the characteristics and behaviours they analyse are specific to those platforms (including the particular users who post or actively engage on them). This study suggests that engagement with online platforms hosting CSAM or fringe or radical content may be more complex. Individuals who view this content may not specialise in the platform they use to access it or seek only one type of content. Future research should aim to take a broader focus and not view these types of content, internet users and platforms in isolation from one another.

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