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Adult Users' Attitudes to Age Verification on Adult Sites

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Executive Summary – Adult Users’ Attitudes to Age Verification (AV) on Adult Sites

Introduction

The adult users’ attitudes to AV research was undertaken by Yonder Consulting on behalf of Ofcom. The main objectives of this study were to understand adult internet users’ past experiences with AV methods online, and their attitudes towards these different methods in general as well as in the specific context of accessing pornographic content online.

The insights drawn from this research will inform relevant aspects of Ofcom’s work on AV under the Video-Sharing Platform (VSP) regime. This research will help to guide Ofcom’s engagement with adult VSPs regarding their AV measures. It will also contribute to Ofcom’s understanding of the wider context for AV on adult sites.

All views expressed in this report are those of the research participants rather than of Ofcom.

Methodology

This research was a mixed-method quantitative and qualitative study, conducted with a sample of UK adults aged 18+.

The first phase was a quantitative online survey which took place between 22nd March and 10th April 2022, amongst a sample of 2,158 internet users. These respondents were recruited from Yonder’s proprietary online panel ‘YonderLive’, comprising around 150,000 panellists from across the UK. The gender breakdown of the sample was skewed towards men in order to reflect the main profile of X-rated adult site/app users. This targeted approach allowed us to better understand the attitudes towards AV by users of these sites.

The survey was followed by a qualitative phase which took place in July and August of 2022. This involved in-person focus groups (4 x 90 minute sessions in London and Manchester in total) and individual online in-depth interviews with participants recruited from across the UK (12 x 45 minute sessions). Participants were recruited via a recontact sample from the AV survey and through ‘free-finding’ methods. Individuals were selected based on their self-report of having seen or not seen online pornographic content at any point in the past.

This executive summary highlights key findings from both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research study. It should be noted that findings throughout this document are based on participants’ claimed behaviour, and therefore may not be completely representative of their actual behaviour.

The concept of AV was not technically defined to participants, the phrasing of ‘proving age online’ was used instead. If AV terminology was referenced by participants, it was a subjective interpretation by the individual.

All data and significant differences in this summary are analysed at the 95% confidence interval. For a detailed breakdown of the sample design, weighting, significant differences, net definitions and overall methodology, please refer to the accompanying technical report.

Key Takeaways

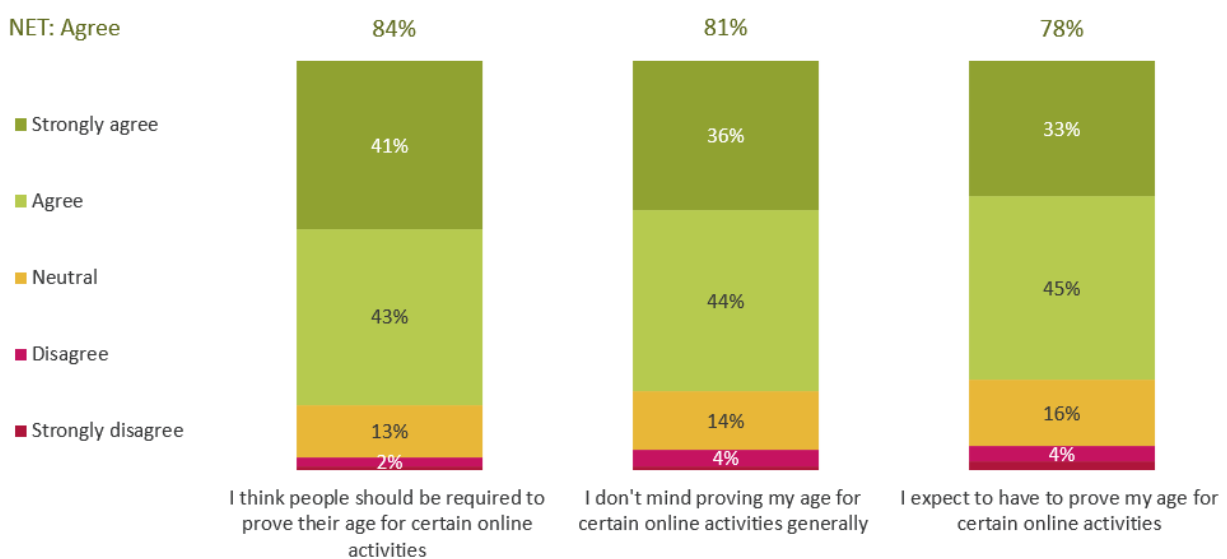
- On the basis of this research, there is broad **support from adult users we surveyed for AV measures** to prevent under-18s from accessing online pornography.
- AV measures are **accepted** where they are **expected**. For example, participants said that they accept the requirement to verify their age whilst purchasing alcohol online or participating in online gambling.
- There is **greater willingness** to verify age to access online pornography if **creating an account or subscribing** to a creator to access content. Using a credit card is the preferred means of AV for paid access to pornography.
- Participants have serious concerns about how user data may be processed and/or stored during AV processes to access pornography. This is reflective of a very **low level of trust** in the data privacy practices of adult sites.
- Privacy concerns could be addressed by **increased transparency** about how user data would be used, stored, and deleted; a **choice of methods** to verify age; and potentially independent third-party providers performing the age check, rather than the porn sites themselves.

Key Findings

Attitudes towards AV in general

- Overall, our survey shows that AV is generally accepted for online activities where it is expected.
 - From a personal perspective, most participants (81%) said they do not mind proving their age online in general, with a majority (78%) agreeing that they would expect to need to do so for certain online activities (figure 1).
 - When asked to think about wider society, over four in five participants (84%) agreed that other people should be required to prove their age for certain online activities (figure 1).

Figure 1. Attitudes towards AV in general



Source: Adult Users' Attitudes to AV on Adult Sites Survey 2022

Q6. In general, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Base: All respondents (2,158)

- When participants were asked to think about the most recent occasion when they had to prove their age online, again, most didn't mind (85%) and expected (75%) to do so.
- Those who had seen online pornographic content previously were more likely to expect to prove their age for certain online activities (81%), compared to the overall sample (78%).
- Overall, participants reported they would be more likely to agree to online AV when buying alcohol (84%), applying for age related discounts (83%), buying tobacco (81%) and gambling (83%) than when accessing pornographic content (68%), (figure 2).
- Women (77%), 35–54-year-olds (72%), 55+ year-olds (73%) and those who had not seen online pornographic content before (77%) were more likely to agree to AV for accessing pornographic content online than the overall sample (68%).

Figure 2. Likelihood (Net: 7-10) to agree to prove age for different online activities



Source: Adult Users' Attitudes to AV on Adult Sites Survey 2022

Q7. In general, how likely are you to agree to prove your age online for the following activities? Sliding scale was used from very unlikely to very likely (0-10)

Base: All respondents, excluding those who said I would not do this activity (statements from left to right - 1,779/2,015/1,520/1,274/2,059/2,080/1,389/1,363/1,857/1,950)

- In offline settings, people often give little thought to AV.**

- In the qualitative research, participants said they were familiar with AV offline due to the frequency with which it is required and expected, such as for buying alcohol, tobacco and accessing nightclubs.
- Interacting briefly with another person offline face-to-face means no data would be permanently retained – although participants admitted that even when their ID was scanned electronically in an offline setting (e.g. to gain entry to a nightclub), they gave little thought to whether their data was retained.

"You get asked for it all the time – cigarettes, alcohol, clubs. I expect it." Male, age 18-34

"It's to prove that I'm old enough to purchase something that is restricted for children or young adults."
Female, age 55+

- Compared with other age-restricted activities such as buying alcohol or gambling, people are generally less sure about how harmful online pornographic content is for those who are underage.**

- In the qualitative interviews, participants expressed that they are accustomed to being able to access online pornographic content without restriction.
- Notably, if asked for AV for buying products such as alcohol or tobacco, or to gamble, participants claimed they would be unlikely to go elsewhere, but they said they would likely go to other sites to access pornographic content if asked to verify their age.

"I just feel like with gambling you could lose a lot of money very quickly, I don't think there's really anything wrong with watching a bit of porn." Male, age 18-34

"I'm an adult, I do sort of feel like I should be able to do what I like but I understand that they're trying to protect kids." Female, age 18-34

- Despite AV being seen as more of a hassle when online than offline, people believe it is an important requirement for certain age-restricted products.
 - Qualitative interviews found that online AV is considered more intrusive in the moment than in-person offline AV, where it feels like more of a ‘quick check’.
 - All participants understood however that AV is a way to protect others, especially children, from potentially harmful content.

Attitudes towards AV in the context of accessing online pornographic content

- Overall, the majority of people agree that AV should be required for accessing pornographic sites (table 1).
 - The strength of agreement varies by the type of platform: participants were more supportive of AV on pornographic sites (80%), followed by social media (75%), then search engines (65%).
 - Specifically in the context of dedicated pornographic sites, women (87%), 55+ year-olds (88%) and those who had not seen online pornographic content before (87%) were the most supportive of the need for AV for accessing pornographic content.

Table 1. Support for AV when accessing online pornographic content

	On a dedicated pornographic site	On social media	On a search engine
Total	80%	75%	65%
Men	77% ↓	72% ↓	61% ↓
Women	87% ↑	83% ↑	76% ↑
Age 18-34	74% ↓	66% ↓	60% ↓
Age 35-54	78%	74%	64%
Age 55+	88% ↑	84% ↑	70% ↑
Seen online pornographic content	77% ↓	71% ↓	61% ↓
Not seen online pornographic content	87% ↑	84% ↑	75% ↑

Green and red arrows indicate significantly higher or lower statistical differences to the total average

Source: Adult Users’ Attitudes to AV on Adult Sites Survey 2022

Q11. In general, do you think internet users should be required to prove they are aged 18 or over when attempting to access pornographic content online?

Base: All respondents who were comfortable about answering questions about online age checks in the context of pornographic content (2,016); Men (1,500); Women (507); Age 18-34 (589); Age 35-54 (789); Age 55+ (638); Seen online pornographic content (1,329); Not seen online pornographic content (639)

- This sentiment is consistent with the qualitative interviews, where women and those who have not seen online pornographic content before believed that AV should be a priority in order to protect children.
 - Older women with children were particularly supportive due to the potential impact that they thought online pornographic content could have when viewed at a young age.

“It’s important to protect children from pornography whilst they’re still young. This could really affect how they think about sex and relationships in the future.” Female, age 35-55

- However, in the qualitative sessions, young male users expressed some scepticism about the effectiveness of online AV for pornographic content users.
 - Young male participants (18-34) said they thought AV could be circumvented easily, especially by teenagers.
 - Some participants also expressed concerns that children might end up in 'darker' areas of the internet when looking for alternative sources of pornographic content online where AV is not required.

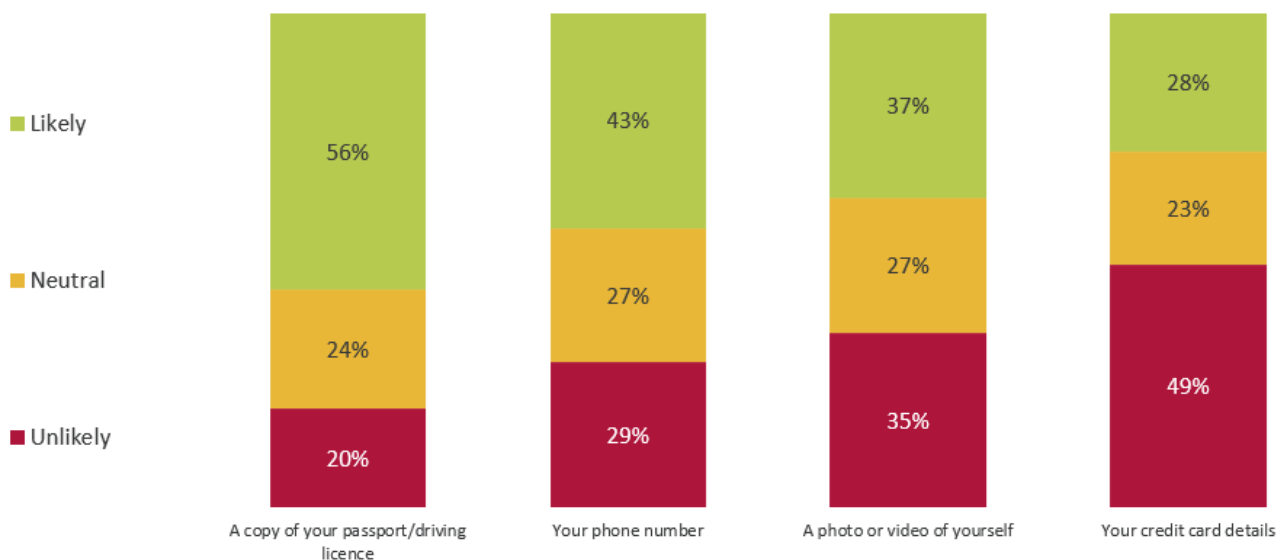
"If a teenager wants to look at some porn they will find a way to. When we were at school we'd always be sharing ways of getting around parental filters and things like that." Male, age 18-34

"With the sex industry, the more things are regulated the more things get pushed underground." Female, age 35-55

Likelihood and preferences to use different AV methods in general and in the context of accessing online pornographic content

- In general, people are least likely to use their credit card details to prove their age and would prefer to use other, more familiar methods.
 - Over half (56%) of participants said they would likely use a copy of their passport or driving licence to prove their age online. In contrast, only 28% of participants reported they would be likely to agree to use their credit card details for AV, (figure 3).

Figure 3. Likelihood to use AV methods generally online



Source: Adult Users' Attitudes to AV on Adult Sites Survey 2022

Q8. In general, how likely are you to agree to use the following methods to prove your age online?

Base: All respondents (2,158)

- Those who had previously proved their age online were more likely to claim they would prove their age online using all the different methods surveyed: passport or driving licence (62% vs 48%), phone number (49% vs 35%), photo/video of themselves (43% vs 29%), and credit card details (33% vs 21%).

- In the specific context of accessing online pornographic content, users' comfort level with using different AV methods varies according to context. If possible, they would generally choose not to use their credit card.
 - Participants who had seen pornographic content online before reported they were least comfortable being asked to prove their age via their credit card details when not paying for content (20%), followed by a photo of themselves (21%), their passport or driving licence photo (26%), and their phone number (29%).
- However, if users are already paying to access online pornography, using a credit card to verify their age is the preferred AV method.
 - Regardless of having seen pornographic content online before or not, participants were most comfortable using their credit card details to verify their age if paying for content (42% and 30%) (table 2).

Table 2. Net: Comfortable (very comfortable and comfortable) using AV methods to access pornographic content online

	Seen pornographic content online	Not seen pornographic content online
Credit card details, when <u>paying</u> for content	42%	30%
Phone number	29%	23%
Photo of passport or driving licence	26%	27%
Photo or video of yourself	21%	17%
Credit card details, when <u>not paying</u> for content	20%	13%

Source: Adult Users' Attitudes to AV on Adult Sites Survey 2022

Q15. How would you feel about being asked to provide each of the following to prove your age to access pornographic content online?

Base: All respondents who had encountered or accessed pornographic content online (1,329)

Q16. How would you feel about being asked to provide each of the following to prove your age to access pornographic content online? We understand that you may not have experienced this personally, so please base your answers on what you think you might do.

Base: All respondents who had encountered or accessed pornographic content online or who preferred not to say (687)

- Our qualitative interviews found that providing credit card information is seen to be less personal than providing a photo, but also that the sharing of financial information when not using it for an actual purchase seems risky. Participants claimed they would feel more comfortable sharing credit card details to actually purchase restricted content rather than to just access it.

"If I'm not making a purchase, I'm giving away financial information unnecessarily. I wouldn't feel happy about that." Female, age 55+

"I don't understand why they're asking for my credit card unless I'm paying for something, why do they want it?" Male, age 18-34

- **Face scanning is deemed to be the least intrusive method, but there are concerns about its practicality and the accuracy of the technology.**
 - The qualitative sessions revealed a face scan is particularly acceptable to those who claim to be active on social media and the internet because they recognise that images of themselves are already on the internet.
 - However, participants who thought they looked younger than their actual age expressed some concern that they might 'fail' the AV check and be denied access despite meeting the age requirement.
 - Older women were sensitive to their age being estimated and the results being shared with them, suggesting a lack of understanding about the technology, since face scans for AV do not necessarily estimate a specific age.
 - There were concerns about the practicalities of the scan and whether there would be any human intervention involved in verifying their picture. The prospect of human involvement in the verification is disliked due to concerns about being judged for appearance.

"I assume that a human needs to process these pictures – I don't love the thought of that." Female, age 55+

"I'd worry it would estimate my age wrong. I can look 16 depending on my hair and glasses." Female, age 18-34

- **There is greater willingness to complete AV for pornographic content online if creating an account or subscribing to content.**
 - In the qualitative discussions participants said that accessing paid content feels like a different user experience compared to accessing free content. It implies the user has already decided to commit their details and to leave a lasting connection between themselves and a site for the purposes of subscription.
 - Similarly, if the user is already at the point of deciding to make a purchase on a site, using a credit card for AV is much more acceptable as they were prepared to share their payment details anyway.

"I suppose people might feel more comfortable with this as they're already prepared to make the commitment." Male, age 18-34

Concerns around AV in the context of accessing online pornographic content

- **The biggest concern people have is about the requirement to share their personal details online and the potential consequences of being associated with having seen pornographic content if their information was leaked.**
 - Data protection (52%) and sharing personal information (42%) were the biggest concerns for participants who had previously seen pornographic content online about proving their age to access this type of content (table 3).

Table 3. Concerns if proving age online to access pornographic content, among those who had seen this type of content before

	Total
I'm worried my data will not be protected	52%
I don't want to share my personal information online	42%
I think children can easily get around the age check	28%
I don't think the age check is accurate and/or reliable	15%

Source: Adult Users' Attitudes to AV on Adult Sites Survey 2022

Q17. What, if any, concerns do you have about having to prove your age in order to access pornographic content online?

Base: All respondents who had encountered or accessed pornographic content online (1,329)

- Our qualitative sessions found some participants were concerned that AV would leave a 'trace' linking them to the viewing of pornographic content and therefore leaving them open to fraud or blackmail. This concern is heightened when thinking about providing a passport or driving license as the data on these is very personal.
- They were concerned about how their data could be used if it were leaked, especially a photo, as this would make it harder to 'explain away' the connection with a pornographic site. Female participants and those who had not seen online pornographic content said they would feel embarrassed if they were associated with pornographic sites.

"I'd be worried about my identity being linked to a record of what I've watched." Male, age 18-34

"The issue with a photo and selfie is it's just harder and harder for me to explain that away if it was leaked or something." Male, age 35-54

"I'm already paranoid enough as it is about people looking at me through the webcam." Male, age 18-34

- **Trust in the practices of pornographic sites is very low, with those who use them tending to have the least trust.**
 - Male participants said they understand the mechanics of pornographic sites, and so they automatically suspect a lack of accountability and regulation, and therefore risk.
 - Some female participants and those who had not seen online pornographic content expressed mistrust because of their association of pornographic sites with spam and pop ups.

"When I think of porn sites, I definitely associate them with pop ups and dodgy websites." Female, 18-34

- **Participants felt that if they were asked for AV, such as photo ID or a credit card in order to access pornographic content, it could be an interruption and a hassle to provide and might lead them to go to a site where AV is not required.**

"If I wasn't expecting it [AV] I would probably just abandon the whole thing." Female, age 18-34

Mitigating concerns around AV in the context of accessing online pornographic content

- People are most encouraged by having a choice of available AV methods (75%), assurances about the use of their personal data (71%) and clarification as to why AV is needed (68%).
 - Those who had seen pornographic content online claimed to be more likely to be encouraged to use AV by most measures surveyed compared to those who had not seen pornographic content online (table 4).

Table 4. Net: More likely to use general AV methods as a result of specific measures.

	Total	Seen pornographic content online	Not seen pornographic content online
Being able to choose what method to use to prove your age	75%	79%↑	72%
Assurances that your personal data will be deleted after the age check and not used for any other purpose	71%	75%↑	68%
Information about why an age check is required	68%	69%	68%
Information about how your personal data will be processed, shared and stored	64%	68%↑	62%
Information about how the age check system works	63%	66%↑	61%
Information about how accurately / reliably the age check system can verify your age	58%	62%↑	56%
Being taken to a different, independent website to prove your age	39%	43%↑	37%

Green arrows indicate significantly higher statistical difference compared to those who had not seen pornographic content online

Source: Adult Users' Attitudes to AV on Adult Sites Survey 2022

Q9. Would the following make you more or less likely to prove your age online? Net: 7-10 (More Likely)

Base: All respondents (2,158); Seen pornographic content online (1,329); Not seen pornographic content online (639)

- The qualitative research re-affirmed findings that having a choice of method is appealing, as it allows people to feel they have autonomy to choose the method they are most comfortable with.

“You might be looking at an adult site, but not have your passport or driving licence to hand so it would be nice to have a choice of options.” Female, age 35-54
- Attitudes to independent AV companies vary. Our survey shows that those who have seen online pornographic content before are unlikely to feel more comfortable verifying their age to access pornographic content through an independent AV company (table 5).
- However, attitudes are different when using a passport or driving licence to prove their age. In this case, people report they are more likely to verify their age by submitting such documents to an independent AV provider (table 5).

Table 5. Net: Comfortable (Very comfortable and comfortable) with using different AV methods versus an independent AV company among those who had seen online pornographic content before

	When asked about AV in general	Using an independent AV company
Credit card details, when <u>paying for</u> content	42%	41%
Phone number	29%	30%
Photo of passport or driving licence	26%	30%↑
Photo or video of yourself	21%	22%
Credit card details, when <u>not paying</u> for content	20%	22%

Green arrows indicate significantly higher or lower statistical differences compared to using general AV

Source: Adult Users' Attitudes to AV on Adult Sites Survey 2022

Q15. How would you feel about being asked to provide each of the following to prove your age to access pornographic content online?

Base: All respondents who had encountered or accessed pornographic content online (1,329)

Q19. Imagine you were asked to complete an age check to prove you were over 18 before accessing a pornographic site online. You are informed that the site uses an age checking service provided by an independent company... How would you feel about being asked to provide each of the following to prove you were over 18?

Base: All respondents who were comfortable about answering questions about online age checks in the context of pornographic content (2,016); Seen online pornographic content (1,329)

- **Providing more detail about independent AV companies leads to independent AV being better received, especially among women, older men and those who have not seen online pornographic content before.**
 - After being shown examples of AV operated by independent AV companies in qualitative interviews, participants felt reassured that they would have strong protections against fraud and data leaks (as it is in such companies' best interests to maintain data security).
 - Some participants liked the idea of creating one account which could be linked to any site and used as AV, as it would mean having one trusted point of contact.
 - Additionally, they said they would like to see the AV process embedded within the pornographic site instead of being taken to a separate website, otherwise they might abandon the process.

"I probably feel more secure giving it to an actual company that deals with AV rather than a company that is an adult site that deals with all and sundry." Female, age 35-54

- **Young men remain sceptical due to concerns that their data could be used or sold without their consent.**
 - This scepticism from young men (18-34) was driven by a fundamental anxiety around data being shared, sold or used without their consent.
 - They questioned how independent AV companies would ultimately make money and suggested that they might end up selling or using their data regardless.

"Contracts get made and broken all the time, how do we know we can trust them?" Male, age 18-34

"Ultimately, it's still a private company. They've got to make their money somehow." Male, age 18-34

- **Different measures can be put in place to mitigate some of the concerns people have around AV online.**
 - Within the qualitative sessions participants identified a few principles which, if followed, they felt would increase the likelihood of people agreeing to complete AV:
 - Having a quick and frictionless method.
 - Using an independent provider and ideally a popular or common one, meaning a user would already have verified their age with that provider before.
 - Having reassurance that users' data is not being sold to any third parties or being used for anything other than for AV purposes.
 - Offering a choice of AV methods so users feel in control.
 - Providing transparency regarding who is involved in the process e.g., artificial intelligence or human.