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For an assessment of the means and provisions to combat children's exposure to pornographic content

Committee Opinion¹

Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media

Rapporteur: Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, Austria, Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media welcomes the report by Mr Dimitri Houbron (France, ALDE) on behalf of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, on the assessment of the means and provisions to combat children's exposure to pornographic content, and fully agrees with its analysis and recommendations.

2. The committee wishes to refer to [Resolution 2001 \(2014\)](#) and [Recommendation 2048 \(2014\)](#) "Violence in and through the Media", and the related report. These texts provide useful food for thought also for the present report when it comes to the impact of media violence, including sexual violence, on the behaviour of individuals, in particular children, who have increasingly easier access to pornographic content in an often-unregulated internet environment.

3. The committee proposes two amendments to the draft resolution, with a view to drawing attention to sexual violence on the internet, video games, social media platforms as well as virtual environments, and to encouraging the development of anonymous complaint and reporting mechanisms, also complemented by a code of conduct, safe internet programmes and possible forms of content moderation, where appropriate.

B. Proposed amendments

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 1 of the draft resolution, after the last sentence, insert the following words:

“, due to a largely unregulated internet environment which enables the dissemination of pornographic content and content portraying sexual violence”.

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 6.6 of the draft resolution, insert the following paragraph:

“develop, in dialogue with the private sector – in particular mobile operators, global digital platforms, companies operating in the gaming market, designers and tech service providers – a framework conducive to the roll out of internet programmes, video games, social media platforms, as well as virtual reality environments which guarantee safe usage especially by children, including: the adoption of

1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 15077](#), Reference 4507 of 7 May 2022. Reporting committee: Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development. See [Doc. 15494](#). Opinion approved by the committee on 21 April 2022.



stringent codes of conduct aimed at avoiding children's exposure to pornographic content; forms of content moderation with human intervention, as purely automated solutions might be unable to identify the risks for children; anonymous complaint and reporting mechanisms; co-operation mechanisms between the private sector and law-enforcement authorities to fight effectively against illegal pornographic content;”

C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Stefan Schennach, rapporteur for opinion

1. As well documented in Mr Houbron's report, it is far too easy to access adult-only content with insufficient age recognition and regulation systems, especially in a largely unregulated Internet environment in which extreme violence, including sexual violence, can be perpetrated anonymously via online media, targeting fictional characters or human beings. This can all be especially damaging and traumatising for children and young adults.

2. I would like recall [Resolution 2001 \(2014\)](#) and [Recommendation 2048 \(2014\)](#) “Violence in and through the Media”, as well as the corresponding report which remains relevant to the present analysis. Insufficient regulation of the online environment enables easy and fast dissemination of pornography and the amount of new content uploaded every minute makes it virtually impossible to moderate extreme sexual violence online.

3. Interactive computer games, social networks, chat rooms, search engines, online shopping and the universal accessibility of those media via smartphones have created infinite exposure for children to adult-only and often extremely violent content. Violence may also be insidiously conveyed through mainstream media, for example in the depiction of the hyper-sexualisation of children. This is the ratio for amendment A.

4. A growing number of children today own smartphones or other internet-connected devices and have personal social media accounts, including in the developing world. Pop-up advertisements are the most common source of pornographic content that reaches children, especially teenagers. Other common routes for accessing pornographic content include video and photo-sharing sites or new social media that are created every day.

5. We must pay special attention to virtual reality environments, such as the metaverse, where users can interact online in a three-dimensional, multi-sensory way, that can affect the minds and bodies of children through potentially violent and pornographic content and sounds. Unwanted images and contacts can become even more intrusive and difficult for parents to control. Some metaverse applications even allow children to enter virtual strip clubs with 3D avatars simulating sex, with no or little moderation. Children can also experience grooming behaviours, racist insults, and rape threats.²

6. According to the latest Global Threats Assessment Report by the WEProtect Global Alliance, 1 in 3 (34%) respondents to their global survey, were asked to do something sexually explicit online that they were uncomfortable with during childhood. In addition, the Internet Watch Foundation saw a 77% rise in child 'self-generated' sexual material from 2019 to 2020 and the pandemic has further exacerbated this phenomenon. Research indicates that abuse in virtual and augmented reality can be far more traumatic than in other digital worlds due to the multisensory nature of the environment in which it is propagated.³

7. To address safety in a comprehensive way as the metaverse emerges, public authorities need to partner with internet operators, the gaming industry, designers and tech service providers, as well as with academia and civil society. All stakeholders must carefully consider the safety of children's minds and bodies, not just looking at profits or sales. Digital platforms need specific terms of service for immersive environments, based on how this technology interacts with children's brains and cannot simply apply rules from existing social media. Governments should also consider ways to incentivise safe behaviour on these platforms as part of a safer and healthier digital future for the younger generations.

8. Cybersecurity is also an issue to consider, as some violators may spur children, in particular teenagers, to visit pornographic websites, lure them into believing that they would become “influencers” or “celebrities” and have them share their personal data, making them vulnerable to becoming a victim of blackmail and extortion.

2. [“SHOCKING: Metaverse app allows kids to visit strip clubs, view simulated sex”](#), The Post Millennial, 22 February 2022.

3. [“Safety in the metaverse: what are the risks and challenges?”](#), World Economic Forum (weforum.org), 14 January 2022.

9. While artificial intelligence and software-based verification tools can assist law enforcement, as stressed in the report, trained content moderation could lead to an additional identification of non-consensual imagery or explicit sexual violence. Member States could consider supporting some forms of content moderation, where appropriate, in particular in relation to virtual reality environments, as purely automated solutions might be unable to identify the risks for children.

10. Member States should also consider supporting the development of anonymous complaint and reporting mechanisms, and self-regulation in the form of stringent codes of conduct aimed at avoiding children's exposure to adult content. They should also seek to reinforce co-operation of law-enforcement authorities with the private sector, to effectively fight the dissemination of illegal content. These are the ratio for the recommendations put forward with amendment B.

11. Finally, via its General Rapporteur on Science and Technology Impact Assessment, the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media intends to investigate the risks, challenges and human rights implications of emerging technology, such as virtual reality, augmented reality and immersive technologies. The committee would like to associate the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development in this endeavour, with a special focus on the psychological and physiological aspects of immersive technology on children and youth.