

The untold harm of 'nudify' apps: Community perceptions

An applied research project in partnership with the
University of Queensland and ICMEC Australia

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This study

This study explores public awareness, perceptions, and attitudes towards 'nudify' apps, by surveying university students about their awareness and perceptions of risks, harms, consequences, and effective prevention strategies, highlighting absent legal safeguards, and contribute to the paucity of research regarding AI-child sexual abuse material (CSAM).

Background

The rise of GenAI has led to the development of 'nudify' apps that digitally strip clothing from images, leading to a surge in GenAI CSAM and gendered violence^[1]. Developed on open-source models that bypass regulatory safeguards, these apps are easily accessible and unregulated and are increasingly linked to peer-to-peer abuse, sexual extortion, and image-based abuse^[2]. Reports of AI-CSAM have increased globally, highlighting an urgent need for effective prevention. However, despite their prevalence, public knowledge and legal safeguards remain limited^[3]. This project seeks to address these gaps by exploring public awareness, perceptions, and their broader social impact.

Research questions

1. What level of awareness do university students have of 'nudify' apps?

2. What do university students believe to be the consequences of 'nudify' apps?

3. What do university students believe are preventions against 'nudify' apps for students?

Methods

This study used a mixed-methods, cross-sectional survey to explore university students' awareness, perceptions, and attitudes towards 'nudify' apps. Employing a primarily quantitative approach allowed for broad, generalisable insights regarding awareness, acceptability, and potential harms, while qualitative responses provided depth and context into participant perspectives^[4].

Data was collected anonymously via a 10-minute Qualtrics survey, combining close-ended, open-ended, multiple choice and Likert scale questions to capture both scope and nuance^[5]. Ethical safeguards included informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity due to the sensitive nature of the topic in accordance with UQ Research Data Manager. Data was securely stored and managed complied with National Research Ethics standard^[6].

Findings



Figure 1: "Why do you think people may use these apps?"

The 224 respondents were asked to describe why they believe people may use these 'nudify' apps.

Figure 1 displays common words, 'blackmail', 'revenge', 'fantasy', and 'bully', used to describe the perceived reason individuals may be using these apps. Collectively participants believed the biggest long-term risk of 'nudify' apps is 'the normalisation of digital sexual violence' (205), followed by 'privacy invasion' (144). Shockingly, 'increased bullying' (102) was the lowest rated risk. Many participants raised the concern that the purpose of these apps were for the production of CSAM and paedophilic behaviours, however, did not raise the issue of peers using it to harm other peers.

42%

of the 224 participants acknowledged they had no prior knowledge of 'nudify' apps.

Analysis demonstrated that as respondents age increased, their awareness of the app decreased.

58%

of participants aged 18-24 reported prior awareness of the apps.

This supports the idea that recent high school graduates exhibit greater familiarity with 'nudify' apps.

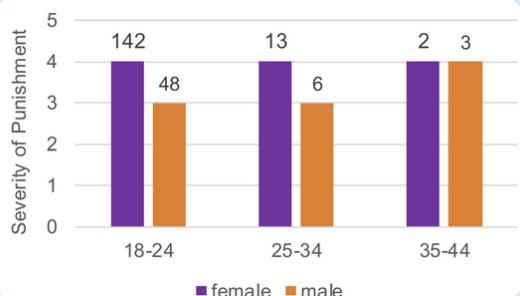


Figure 2: "How serious do you think the legal consequences should be sharing manipulated images by age?"

Figure 2 demonstrates that across all age ranges, females believed that there should be serious punishment for an individual who shares GenAI manipulated images without consent, whereas on average, males only believe there should be moderate punishment for perpetrators, except male participants aged 35-44 years who believe there should be serious punishment. The gendered difference in responses was hypothesised based on the literature sourced.

77%

of participants agreed they would support awareness campaigns on the risk of AI 'nudify' apps

For the participants who selected 'Maybe' or 'No', they reasoned that awareness campaigns would increase the knowledge of these apps and influence curiosity in young people to use them.

Solutions that participants deemed effective if implemented included, education campaigns to both students and parents/authority figures, stricter legal consequences, age verification and a blanket ban of the apps.

References

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“

[I am] a victim of the app... it is disturbing, distressing and laws need to be put in place to stamp this out from a young age"

Participant 097

Discussion

The responses from participants indicated a general lack of awareness and understanding of the harms and consequences of AI 'nudify' apps. While participants demonstrated a clear recognition of the predatory and exploitative purposes of these apps, there was limited acknowledgement of the risks that emerge when the perpetrators and victims are peers. Participants expressed caution when providing recommendations for future harm-reduction strategies, understanding that with increased public awareness of the apps, it could inadvertently escalate the usage.

However, this was balanced with the belief that targeted educational campaigns and initiatives for specific stakeholders could serve as a strong preventative measure.

Implications for policy and practice

Further research to be explored:

- Survey of 12-17-year-olds to understand their perceptions and possible experiences of these apps.
- Survey of parents, educators, individuals in positions of authority in education sector, and their perspectives and awareness.
- Victim interviews to provide statements to inform educational and awareness campaigns/resources.

Recommendations

Based on participant responses, relevant literature and current understanding of this landscape we recommend the following risk prevention and harm protection strategies:

Corporate responsibility

- Corporations who are responsible for creating these apps are to be banned in Australia.
- Remove the easy accessibility of these apps i.e. off the app stores.

Educational campaigns

- Victim storytelling and impact statements to educate students.
- Educational resources and information for educators, parents, and individuals in authority positions.

Data poisoning images

- Technology that modifies pixels to distort images when placed in AI models - a protective response.

Education and awareness is vital to combat this issue that's already knocking on Australia's front door.