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February 18, 2021

Jason Citron  
CEO and Co-Founder  
Discord  
444 De Haro Street, Suite 200  
San Francisco, CA 94107

### **Re: Discord named to 2021 Dirty Dozen List**

Dear Mr. Citron,

We are writing to inform you that the National Center on Sexual Exploitation is placing Discord on the 2021 Dirty Dozen List—a campaign that names 12 mainstream contributors to sexual exploitation and abuse.

We are deeply concerned with the exploitive and sexually explicit content facilitated via Discord's platform—in particular Discord servers being used to view and distribute child sexual abuse materials, hardcore pornography, and non-consensually shared pornography. Additionally, we are concerned with the rampant number of adults grooming minors for sexual abuse online and Discord's lack of robust safety features which allows such abuse to thrive in the environment of Discord.

Given Discord's growing popularity among minors due to the booming popularity of collaborative games like *Fortnite*—and the pandemic forcing millions to rely on virtual ways to connect—your company has experienced skyrocketing growth. With this acclaim comes a serious social responsibility to address these problems and to make your platform a safe environment. And in today's culture, where sexual harassment and assault are rampant, corporations such as Discord have a renewed corporate responsibility to refrain from normalizing or promoting material that promotes sexual exploitation.

While Discord has made minor improvements to their safety settings and filtering options, the filter settings can be easily altered or bypassed, and Discord thus far has failed to take sufficient proactive steps to protect its minor users with no available parental controls.

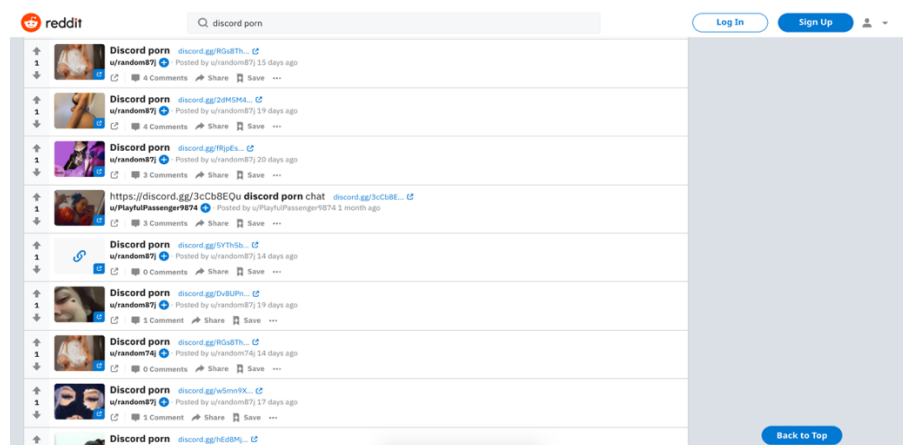
This is an egregious betrayal of parents' trust, who reasonably expect that safety settings will reliably protect their children. Discord also relies heavily on user reports and third-party bots to moderate content within servers, which is laughable given the nature of many of these exploitative and abusive servers and those that frequent them.

We believe that not only can Discord take steps to effectively combat these issues, but your company could stand to become an industry leader in child safety policy and content moderation to ensure Discord remains an open, safe, and exploitation-free community. The National Center on Sexual Exploitation encourages Discord to make the following improvements:

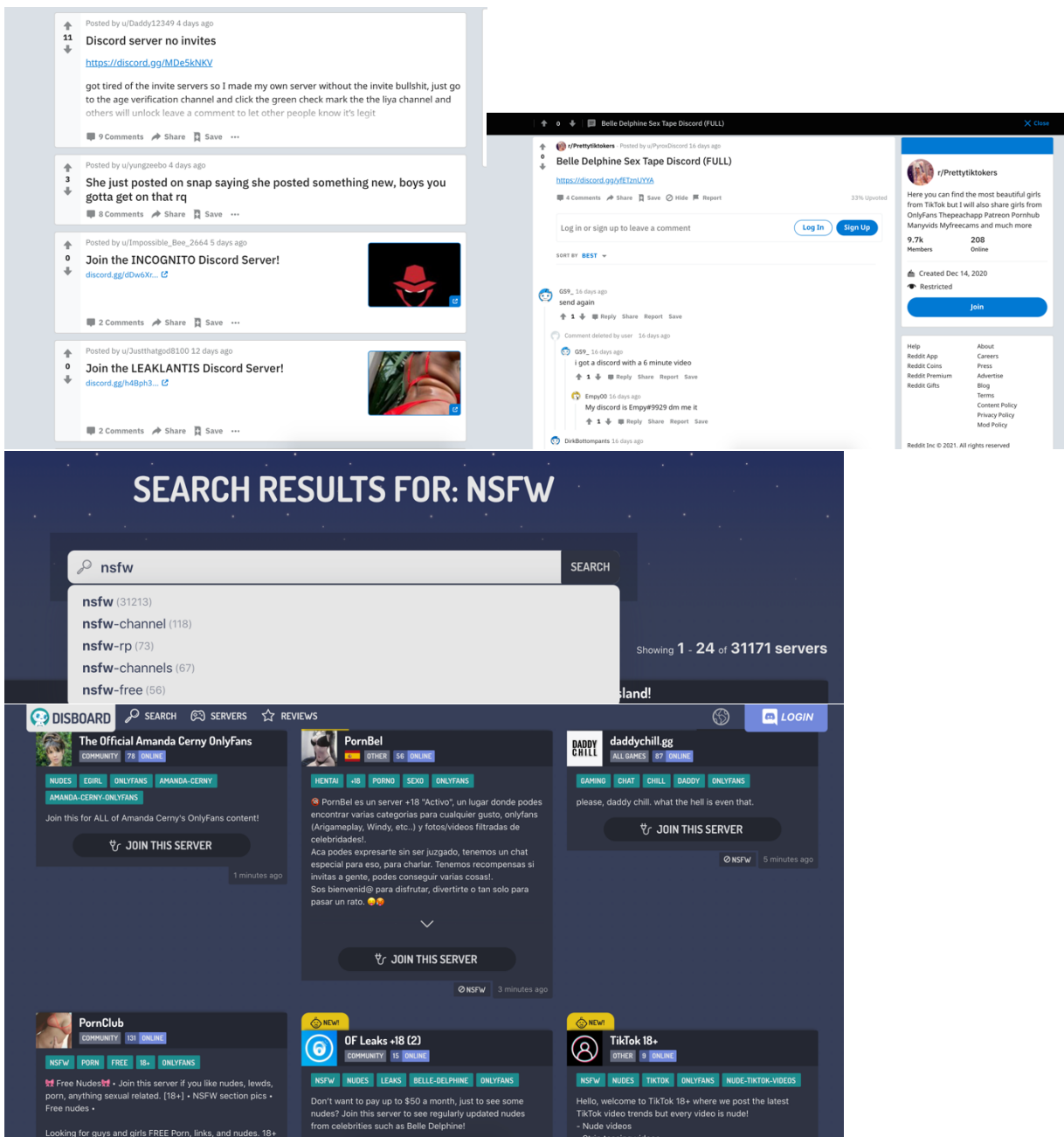
1. Develop and implement lockable parental controls, so parents have control in order to monitor and streamline their child's experience on Discord and ensure basic safety is being met.
2. Automatically default minor-aged accounts to the highest level of safety and privacy available on the Discord platform.
3. Automatically ban any minor-aged account from joining servers that contain NSFW content, not just age-gate NSFW channels within open servers.
4. Develop and implement moderation strategies that proactively detect and remove pornography—especially in regard to servers dedicated to trading hardcore and non-consensual material.
5. Provide education to all users and parents on the potential harms and risks associated with exploitation and abuse on Discord and feature prominent reporting processes on all forms of Discord's interface.

### **Sexually Exploitative and Abusive Content on Discord**

With the expansion of Discord's brand to include more than just gamers, your platform has opened its doors to predators and abusers and is allowing them to settle comfortably within Discord's servers. Pornography trading—often including illegally-obtained, non-consensual, and even child sexual abuse material—is rampant on Discord. Discord made international news just a few months ago, when one server revealed over 140,000 images of women and children had been widely shared and distributed. Many women have reported their images were stolen—either hacked from personal accounts or leaked from paid sites like OnlyFans—and then mass-shared on Discord.<sup>1</sup> Links to pornography servers are scattered throughout other sites, drawing more and more users to exploitative content through Discord.



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFFDYrVwmwE>



Despite Discord’s policies on paper that prohibit the sexualization of minors and sharing non-consensual explicit content, it is clear Discord’s current practice is not preventing these problems from arising on a mass scale. Currently, there are over 31,000 servers that contain tagged NSFW content—and it’s safe to assume many of these servers are rife with exploitative and abusive material. Pornhub, the online pornography tube site, even hosts its own official, verified server on Discord despite the growing legal issues surrounding MindGeek and the exploitative content hosted on Pornhub, including child sexual abuse material.<sup>2</sup> No longer will companies be able to claim ignorance or avoid accountability—Pornhub and other MindGeek sites

<sup>2</sup> Watson, Aurora. “Pornhub Discord Is Here” <https://www.pornhub.com/blog/7651> (Accessed January 27, 2021).

hosting this horrific cache of abuse are under investigation by the Canadian House of Commons Ethics Committee.<sup>3</sup>

By allowing non-consensually recorded and/or shared pornography to proliferate on Discord, your company joins the ranks of companies like MindGeek—who have profited from rape, abuse, incest, misogyny, and egregious child abuse.

Especially given our society's struggle to cope with the impacts of multiple forms of sexual abuse and violence and the popularity of your platform with minors, Discord's choice to allow pornography on their servers is a dangerous one. Child sexual abuse, adult sexual exploitation,<sup>4</sup> racially-motivated sexual violence,<sup>5</sup> sexual assault on college and university campuses,<sup>6</sup> sexual trafficking of women and children,<sup>7</sup> and incest<sup>8</sup>—these problems have not emerged from a vacuum, but flourish within the context of unprecedented access to hardcore pornographic material. Adult, hardcore pornography—with its raw, brutal, debasing, violent and hate-filled themes—exacerbates the deeply entrenched social ills mentioned above and unleashes devastating impacts at the individual and societal level.

The harms of pornography are well documented. For instance, a growing body of neuroscience reveals that adults are developing addictions to pornography as pornography hijacks the brain's reward center in a way similar to drug addiction.<sup>9</sup> A nationally representative online survey of 3,000 people reveals that nearly half of young people (ages 13-24) actively seek out pornography weekly or more often.<sup>10</sup> This is especially troubling given that research shows that adolescents are more susceptible to forming addictions than adults because the dopamine neurons in their nucleus accumbens (i.e. the brain's pleasure center) are much more

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<sup>3</sup> The National Center on Sexual Exploitation. "The Canadian Parliament's Hearing Taking on MindGeek Executives." <https://endsexualexploitation.org/articles/the-canadian-parliaments-hearing-taking-on-mindgeek-executives/>

<sup>4</sup> Bryce Covert, "Women in Baltimore Public Housing Were Forced to Trade Sex for Basic Repairs." Think Progress (January 9, 2016), <http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2016/01/09/3737612/baltimore-housing-sex-settlement/> (accessed February 4, 2017); Melissa Farley and Anne Cotton, et al. "Prostitution and Trafficking in Nine Countries: An Update on Violence and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder." *Journal of Trauma Practice* 2, 3/4 (2003): 33-74.

<sup>5</sup> Victoria Olive, "Sexual Assault against Women of Color." *Journal of Student Research* 1 (2012): 1-19; Gabby Bess, "Notre Dame Tutor Accused of Forcing Student into 'Racially Motivated' Sex." *Broadly*, (November 2, 2015), [https://broadly.vice.com/en\\_us/article/notre-dame-tutor-accused-of-forcing-student-into-racially-motivated-sex](https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/notre-dame-tutor-accused-of-forcing-student-into-racially-motivated-sex) (accessed February 4, 2017); Associated Press, "Keller Teen Accused of Racially Motivated Sexual Assault of Teammate in Idaho High School Football Locker Room" (May 25, 2016), <http://sportsday.dallasnews.com/high-school/high-schools/2016/05/25/texas-teen-accused-racially-motivated-sexual-assault-teammate-idaho-football-locker-room> (accessed February 4, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> The White House Council on Women and Girls. *Rape and Sexual Assault: A Renewed Call to Action*, (2014), [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/sexual\\_assault\\_report\\_1-21-14.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/sexual_assault_report_1-21-14.pdf) (accessed January 9, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Polaris. 2014 Statistics, <https://polarisproject.org/sites/default/files/2014Statistics.pdf> (accessed January 9, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> David Finkelhor & Anne Shattuck, "Characteristics of Crimes against Juveniles," *Crimes Against Children Research Center* (2012), [http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV26\\_Revised Characteristics of Crimes against Juveniles\\_5-2-12.pdf](http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV26_Revised%20Characteristics%20of%20Crimes%20against%20Juveniles_5-2-12.pdf) (accessed February 4, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Simone Kühn and Jürgen Gallinat, "Brain Structure and Functional Connectivity Associated with Pornography Consumption: The Brain on Porn," *JAMA Psychiatry* 71, no. 7 (2014): 827-834. Ji-Woo Seok and Jin-Hun Sohn, "Neural Substrates of Sexual Desire in Individuals with Problematic Hypersexual Behavior," *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience*, (November 30, 2015). Porn Study Critiques, "Current List of Brain Studies on Porn Users, (September 29, 2015) <http://pornstudycritiques.com/current-list-of-brain-studies-on-porn-users/> (accessed February 4, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Barna Group, "The Porn Phenomenon: A Comprehensive New Survey on Americans, the Church, and Pornography," (2016).

active and have an exaggerated plasticity in response to addictive stimulus.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it can be said that a propensity for addiction is more strongly “hardwired” into the adolescent brain.<sup>12</sup>

A recent survey found that 27% of young adults report first viewing pornography before puberty.<sup>13</sup> This is alarming given that Internet pornography consumption by adolescents is associated with risky sexual behavior (that can have profoundly adverse effects), such as anal and group sex, hookups, multiple sexual partners, and substance use during sex.<sup>14</sup>

Today, pornography is pervasive - and it is damaging countless lives. Its role in shaping the attitudes and behaviors that fuel the crisis of sexual assault on college campuses, sexting, revenge pornography, sex trafficking, child sexual abuse, compulsive pornography consumption, and more is clear. As a result, our nation is now suffering from a public health crisis fueled by the widespread distribution of adult, hardcore pornography. The term “public health crisis” is used to broadly define both physical and social problems—from cigarette smoking to bullying—and it unequivocally applies to pornography because pornography is a serious, harmful problem that affects individuals and groups beyond their capacity to correct alone.

### **Why does Discord continue to allow this content on their platform? Especially given the millions of children who currently use your app?**

This problem is clearly beyond any individual parent, school, or person to take on. Protecting kids online and ensuring abuse and exploitation are not taking place requires accountability and effort from every facet of society—including corporations like Discord.

### **Sexual Grooming on Discord**

Discord prides itself as a company and platform that treats others and the community with respect and keeps itself as “a safe and friendly place for everyone.”<sup>15</sup> However, in addition to Discord’s troubling association with hosting and normalizing exploitative explicit images, Discord has facilitated a space for sexual grooming by abusers or sex traffickers, leaving it anything but a safe and friendly place for minors. These abusers and traffickers know minors are on Discord, and utilize the platform to engage with minor users through mutual servers and direct messaging.

Grooming is more than adults simply talking online with children. Research shows just how dangerous this open contact from predators to vulnerable minors really is—one study found that predators who actually made contact with child victims are more likely to use the Internet to locate potential sexual abuse victims and engage in grooming behavior.<sup>16</sup> Groomers use a variety of tactics to gain the victim’s trust, including

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<sup>11</sup> Frances E. Jensen with Amy Ellis Nutt, *The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Survival Guild to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Barna Group, “News Conference on Barna’s New Study: ‘The Porn Phenomenon,’” (January 15, 2016) <https://www.barna.org/blog/culture-media/barna-group/porn-press-conference#.VrS9OrSJndI>, (accessed February 4, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Debra Braun-Courville and Mary Rojas, “Exposure to Sexually Explicit Web Site and Adolescent Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors 45 (2009): 156-162.

<sup>15</sup> “Discord Transparency Report: Jan—June 2020.” <https://blog.discord.com/discord-transparency-report-jan-june-2020-2ef4a3ee346d> (Accessed January 27, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer A. McCarthy, “Internet Sexual Activity: A Comparison Between Contact and Non-Contact Child Pornography Offenders,” *Journal of Sexual Aggression* 16, no. 2 (2010): 192, doi:10.1080/13552601003760006.

using pornography as a tool to manipulate the child into believing the sexual abuse is normal. One study noted:

“Indeed, part of the grooming process is the normalisation of sexual activity with children and breaking down inhibitions. Offenders use child pornography to teach children how to masturbate, perform oral sex and engage in sexual intercourse. Sometimes, blackmail is also involved, usually at the later stage, after the child has been exposed to some sort of pornography, or after the child has performed sexual favours. The saturation of the Internet with such material may serve to ‘normalise’ this behaviour and probably makes it easier to objectify children as sexual artifacts.”<sup>17</sup>

Here are just a few examples of children being groomed and abused through Discord:

- A 12-year-old girl was groomed for over two months and manipulated into leaving her California home in the middle of the night by a 40-year-old predator.<sup>18</sup>
- Two teenage boys were found in a sex trafficking ring where the traffickers used Discord to contact the victims.<sup>19</sup>
- A 22-year-old man was arrested when a 12-year-old girl he had been talking to on Discord disappeared with him in a car.<sup>20</sup>
- Several predators groomed a 12-year-old boy by sending him explicit messages and even calling him over a period of six weeks, before his mother found out and deleted Discord.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly Discord can be counted among the technological advances propelling predators’ access to minors. This fact is greatly concerning as sexual harassment and assault continues to become more rampant in society. Even more disconcerting is the potential role Discord is playing in the facilitation of child abuse and sex trafficking.

We hope that facts like these will cause you as much concern as they do us. As the creators and guardians of Discord, you are responsible for its culture. You are responsible for setting the tone of its online environment, for regulating that environment, and doing your utmost to ensure that it is not a forum for wide-scale sexually explicit content or a hunting ground for predators to roam. In this regard, we strongly believe you are falling short of doing all that could be done to mitigate against the use of your platform in ways that foster and perpetuate sexual harms.

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<sup>17</sup> Raphael Cohen-Almagor, “Online Child Sex Offenders: Challenges and Counter-Measures,” *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 52, no. 2 (2013): 196, doi: 10.1111/hojo.12006.

<sup>18</sup> Morse, Dan. “With Children Stuck at Home During Coronavirus Shutdowns, Online Sexual Predators Can Swoop In”. (February 5, 2021). [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/coronavirus-lockdown-child-exploitation/2021/02/04/90add6a6-462a-11eb-a277-49a6d1f9dff1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/coronavirus-lockdown-child-exploitation/2021/02/04/90add6a6-462a-11eb-a277-49a6d1f9dff1_story.html)

<sup>19</sup> Crawford, Liz. “Online Gaming App ‘Discord’ Used to Lure Teens into Trafficking, Experts Say”. (January 2019). <https://www.wtsp.com/article/news/crime/online-gaming-app-discord-used-to-lure-teens-into-trafficking-experts-say/67-3de008b7-d792-4a33-9fe6-8ae02977899f>

<sup>20</sup> Brewster, Thomas. “Discord: The \$2 Billion Gamer’s Paradise Coming To Terms With Data Thieves, Child Groomers And FBI Investigators” (January 2019). <https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2019/01/29/discord-the-2-billion-gamers-paradise-coming-to-terms-with-data-thieves-child-groomers-and-fbi-investigators/?sh=7c1152623741>

<sup>21</sup> Flood, Rebecca. “Mum Shares Sick Messages Online Groomers Sent her Nine-year-old as she Warns Other Parents to Know the Signs”. (June 15, 2020). <https://www.the-sun.com/lifestyle/985453/mum-share-sick-messages-online-groomer-send-son-warning-signs/>



## Safety Features on Discord

Although we acknowledge Discord has recently increased safety measures and updated the community guidelines, it largely continues to operate in a way that fails to properly protect its users.

By default, all accounts are set to allow any user to be direct messaged from anyone in the same server as them, which is concerning given the evidence of grooming taking place regularly through Discord servers. Additionally, the settings that direct who can add a user as a friend are automatically set at the minimum levels of safety upon account creation. Discord's "safe direct messaging" feature, which is said to scan messages for explicit content, is also set by default to only scan messages from strangers, not friends.

NCOSE tested these safety features for a user account with the age set at 13 years old. All the features were by default, **not** set at the highest levels of security. This is an easy fix on Discord's part and is expected in doing your due diligence to protect minor users.

Additionally, if Discord refuses to ban pornography and NSFW content from their platform altogether, then minors should not only be age-gated from viewing the material in tagged channels, but any account under the age of 18 should be banned from joining any server that contains such content. Using the fake 13-year-old account, we were able to join and interact with other users on several porn-dedicated servers, even when content was locked on individual channels. Given the copious research pointing to the harms of pornography and the ability for adults to contact children in mutual servers, it is only logical that Discord prevents this from happening in the future.

The primary appeal of Discord for many users is their ability to create their own experience, whether that's using Discord to play video games, discuss hobbies, or have close control over choosing which followers to interact with. So why does Discord refuse to empower its users with the best ability to safely create and produce content? Such a solution would only serve to benefit Discord users' experiences and Discord's brand as a whole.


Major corporations such as Omni Hotels, Marriott International, Hilton Worldwide, Walmart, Facebook, and others have eliminated or are eliminating sexual exploitation from their business models. This is Discord's invitation to do likewise, and in so doing to assume a leadership position within the social media sector.

We hope Discord will rise to this challenge and meet with us to discuss ways by which it can become a corporate leader in the fight for a world free from sexual exploitation. Please contact us at [public@ncose.com](mailto:public@ncose.com) or at 202.393.7245.

Respectfully,



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Dawn Hawkins  
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