

Adults' negative online experiences

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eSafety research program

The eSafety Commissioner (eSafety) supports, encourages, conducts and evaluates research about online safety for Australians. The eSafety research program tracks trends, collects, analyses and interprets data and uses this to provide an evidence base for the development of eSafety resources and programs. eSafety also works closely across agencies and internationally so that its research program can proactively identify and explore online safety issues.

This research is part of a series of eSafety reports about adults' online experiences. The first of these reports was entitled *Online hate speech. Findings from Australia, New Zealand and Europe*, released in February 2020. Together, the two reports provide a comprehensive exploration of the range of negative online experiences that adults currently face online.

For any enquiries relating to the eSafety research program, please contact research@esafety.gov.au

Overview

Online, we all face the prospect of having or witnessing any number of negative experiences. Traditionally, these behaviours have been defined in particular ways. Terms like ‘technology-facilitated abuse’ and ‘cyberbullying’ are a product of this. When considered together, these definitions tend to subsume each other by referencing the same kinds of behaviours. For the purposes of clarity, this report avoids definitional pitfalls associated with the use of terminology and instead focuses on the detailed actions of individuals through the lens of the personal, bystander or perpetrator experience.

Building on results from eSafety’s Youth and digital dangers report in 2018, this research shows that building digital resilience is an important, life-long challenge — one that cannot, and should not, be confined to children and teens. In Australia, most adults will have to deal with a negative online experience with some groups, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and those identifying as LGBTQI+, more likely to face challenges online, including abuse, threats of violence and hate speech.

Notably, this report shows a strong synergy between having a negative online experience and behaving negatively towards others online. This points to a need for further research about reaction and retaliation, and the role these play in influencing and shaping adults’ online behaviours and responses.

This research highlights that adult negative online experiences are more likely to occur at the hands of a stranger or someone the target is unable to identify. It also shows that, in most cases, those targeted choose to ignore the situation or take informal action such as blocking the perpetrator or seeking advice from family or friends rather than reporting to the website or authorities like the eSafety Commissioner. Overall, most Australian adults are comfortable with how they resolve a negative online experience, with the majority reporting a satisfactory result.

The research further shows that adult Australians are quite resilient in the face of online setbacks with most reporting no negative impact in response to an online experience. While this is true, a sizeable minority (4 in 10) report mental or emotional stress, financial loss, relationship problems or reputational damage as a result of an online experience. Furthermore, the impact a negative experience has depends on a person’s background which in turn increases the chances of them being the target of more serious online issues. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and those identifying as LGBTQI+ are more likely to be targets, with the majority (6 in 10) reporting adverse impacts as a result. By contrast, older Australians are least likely to be affected by their negative online experiences and any experience is less likely to be serious as they have lower levels of online activity. This finding highlights that certain groups within the general Australian population need additional support to help them navigate what can be, at times, a confronting online environment.

To further explore the issues identified in this report, eSafety will release additional research covering Australian adults’ digital confidence and information needs. This is the final report in the eSafety’s series on Australian adults, set to be released later this year.

Research highlights

Personal negative online experiences

- 67% of Australian adults had a negative experience online in the 12 months to August 2019. The range of experiences are diverse, covering repeated unwanted messages or online contact, scams, security breaches such as viruses through to hate speech and abuse.
- The most common negative experiences for Australian adults were:
 - repeated unwanted messages (44%)
 - attempted scams over the phone asking people to enter details into their computers (32%)
 - having their computers infected with a virus or malware (17%)
 - being a target of hate speech (14%)
 - having things said to you to provoke a response or argument (13%).
- Certain groups within the Australian population are consistently more likely to have a negative experience than others, for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Depending on the issue, people identifying as LGBTQI+, those speaking a language other than English at home and people living with a disability also had higher than average negative online experiences.
- The types of activities undertaken online also provides some insight into the possible situations where certain groups are more likely to have a negative online experience than others. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (46%) and people identifying as LGBTQI+ (45%), are significantly more likely to post comments online in response to others.
- Reflecting the widespread use of these applications and technologies, Facebook was the most commonly noted platform for negative online experiences (those received, witnessed and perpetrated), followed by email and SMS/MMS.
- When Australian adults recalled their negative online experiences:
 - 45% thought it had been carried out by a stranger, 29% reported that they did not know who did it
 - 60% reported no effect while around 25% experienced mental or emotional distress-this was significantly higher for those identifying as LGBTQI+ (45%) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (38%)
 - around 58% did not react in any way
 - for those that took action, the top three activities were blocking the person/account who did it (36%), speaking to family/friends (32%) and reporting to the website or social media company (30%)
 - financial gain was thought to be the most common reason for their experience (40%), while 22% of those targeted online were unable to identify any motive and 15% put it down to fun/amusement.

- Adult Australians' negative online experiences tend to begin and remain online with only 21% reporting that their experience was connected in some way to offline life events.

Witness to the negative online experiences of family, close friends and colleagues

- Just over half of Australian adults (51%) were bystanders to a negative online experience of an adult family member, close friend or colleague in the 12 months to August 2019.
 - Around 70% of people who witnessed a negative online experience took no action.
 - 37% thought that what they had witnessed did not have a negative impact on those that experienced it, whereas 31% felt that this had caused mental or emotional stress.
 - Where people did take action, the most common action was to talk about it to their family and friends (49%).

Behaving negatively online towards others

- Around 12% of adults were estimated to have behaved negatively to someone online in the 12 months to August 2019. Around 95% of these people were also the target of a negative online experience. This was in line with eSafety's youth research. This showed that 20% of online young people aged 8-17 behaved negatively to others online (90% of these being targets of negative online experiences themselves).
- The top three most cited perpetrator behaviours included repeatedly sending someone unwanted messages (50% of perpetrators), calling someone offensive names online (37%), saying things online to provoke or start an argument (35%).
- Those targeting others online did so for a range of reasons including to express their opinion (20%), for fun or amusement (18%) or to embarrass or shame someone (16%).

Findings

As Table 1 shows, 67% of Australian adults aged 18-65 had a negative online experience in the 12 months to August 2019. The top five most common experiences were, receiving repeated unwanted messages or online contact (44%), attempted scams (32%), virus or malware infections (17%), hate speech (14%)¹, having things said to you to provoke a response or start an argument and being sent unwanted inappropriate content such as pornography or violent content (13% respectively). When excluding repeated unwanted messages and attempted scams, 47% of adults had a negative online experience. Taking into account the different sample sizes, target populations and reporting time periods, these findings were largely in accordance with eSafety's recently released report, *Covid-19, impact on Australian adults' online activities and attitudes* which examined adult online experiences during the first few months of the initial Covid-19 restrictions, which found that 4 In 10 Australians had a negative experience online from March to May, 2020².

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and people identifying as LGBTQI+ were more likely to be the target of negative online experiences than any other group in Australia in the 12 months to August 2019. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders recorded the top response for 16 of the 17 negative online experiences identified in the survey in comparison to those identifying as LGBTQI+, who recorded the second highest response for 12 of the 17 experiences. Except for attempted scams, older Australians, specifically those aged 50-65, were least likely to be the target of negative online experiences such as hate speech, abuse, threats, misuse of personal information, etc. Older Australians are more likely to engage less online and are less likely to engage in activities which potentially could expose them to greater online risks in comparison to other groups. This is further explored in table 7.

¹ The term 'online hate speech' based on the question: 'Have you received digital communication that offended, discriminated, denigrated, abused and/or disparaged you because of your personal identity/beliefs (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, etc.)?'. For more information refer to eSafety's report: Online hate speech. Findings from Australia, New Zealand and Europe available at [esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/online-hate-speech](https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/online-hate-speech)

² Office of the eSafety Commissioner (2020) *Covid – 19 impacts on Australian adults' online activities and attitudes*. Accessed at <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/covid-19-impacts-australian-adults-online-activities-and-attitudes>

Table 1: Adults' negative online experiences

Negative online experience	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Repeated unwanted messages (including phone calls and texts) or online contact	42%	44%	41%	44%	40%	44%	48%	49%	50%	57%
Attempted scam over the phone – asking to enter details into computer	32%	34%	31%	26%	30%	41%	36%	34%	37%	40%
Device/computer infected with a virus or malware	17%	20%	15%	20%	17%	15%	23%	25%	20%	35%
Hate speech ³	14%	15%	13%	20%	13%	9%	30%	18%	19%	32%
Things said to provoke a response/ start an argument	13%	14%	13%	20%	13%	8%	26%	14%	20%	34%
Sent unwanted inappropriate content (e.g. pornography or violent content)	13%	14%	12%	17%	12%	10%	25%	16%	16%	34%
Money stolen through online fraud (misuse of credit cards)	11%	12%	10%	13%	10%	11%	13%	15%	17%	22%
Being called offensive names	11%	12%	10%	18%	10%	5%	26%	13%	18%	29%
Your personal information used in a way you did not like	10%	11%	9%	15%	9%	5%	16%	15%	15%	25%
Tracked electronically using technology to monitor your movements without consent	10%	11%	9%	13%	10%	6%	16%	15%	13%	21%
Accounts accessed without consent, including hacking	9%	9%	8%	10%	9%	6%	20%	11%	14%	21%
Lies or rumours spread about you	8%	8%	7%	13%	7%	2%	17%	11%	13%	25%
Received threats of real-life harm or abuse	8%	9%	6%	12%	7%	4%	16%	12%	12%	23%
Threats to share private photos of you online or electronically	7%	8%	6%	10%	7%	3%	13%	10%	10%	22%
Someone pretending to be you online	7%	7%	6%	10%	6%	4%	8%	10%	10%	22%

³ See note 1 above

Negative online experience	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Private photos/videos of you (nude, semi-nude, sexual) shared electronically or online without your consent	4%	5%	3%	7%	4%	1%	9%	8%	6%	16%
Had a private photo or video of you (nude, semi-nude, sexual) taken without consent	4%	5%	2%	7%	3%	1%	8%	7%	5%	15%
Other	3%	5%	3%	2%	3%	4%	3%	3%	6%	7%
Base: Adults aged 18-65	3,737	1,808	1,916	1,396	1,208	1,133	252	953	567	198

Note: top results for each activity are highlighted in green. Experiences occurring in the 12 months to August 2019. *Spoke a language other than English at home.

Sources of negative online experiences

When thinking about their negative online experiences, Australian adults overwhelmingly felt that a stranger (45%) was most commonly responsible for their experience, while a further 29% did not know who was responsible (see Table 2). This was consistent for all key population groups.

Table 2: Top 10 sources of negative online experiences

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 30	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Stranger	45%	43%	48%	44%	48%	45%	46%	41%	41%	45%
Don't know	29%	30%	28%	23%	27%	38%	24%	28%	32%	18%
Friend you know personally/ in real life	6%	6%	7%	11%	6%	3%	8%	10%	9%	13%
Myself/my own actions	6%	7%	6%	8%	6%	4%	7%	8%	6%	9%
Someone else	5%	6%	5%	4%	6%	6%	8%	4%	5%	3%
Acquaintance	5%	4%	5%	7%	4%	3%	9%	5%	6%	8%
Family member	4%	4%	5%	6%	4%	2%	9%	6%	7%	12%
Ex-partner	4%	3%	5%	7%	4%	1%	8%	5%	4%	12%
Friend you know only online	4%	5%	3%	5%	3%	3%	4%	6%	6%	5%
Partner	3%	4%	2%	5%	3%	1%	3%	5%	4%	8%

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 30	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Work colleague or ex-work colleague	3%	4%	1%	9%	5%	3%	1%	1%	3%	2%
Base: Adults aged 18-65 who had a negative online experience	2,533	1,268	1,258	977	775	781	202	673	443	160

Note: top results for each activity are highlighted in green. In the 12 months to August 2019. *Spoke a language other than English at home.

Negative online experience channels

The technologies and apps most used tend to be the most common channels for negative online experiences. A similar percentage of people experienced something negative online on Facebook (30%), via email (28%) or through SMS/MMS (27%). As highlighted in Table 3, Facebook, as a channel for negative online experiences, was significantly more common among the young (those aged between 18 to 34), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and those identifying as LGBTQI+. A reflection of the fact that these groups are more likely to use social media than older Australians, in particular, those aged 50 to 65. Other social media services also featured prominently as channels for negative online experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (Snapchat 21% and Instagram 20%) and those identifying as LGBTQI+ (Instagram 15%). Older Australians aged 50 to 65 were more likely to have had a negative online experience via email than others, in line with being the target of attempted scams or repeated unwanted communications where strangers gain access to email addresses via a range of methods such as phishing⁴.

Table 3: Top 10 negative online experience channels

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Facebook	30%	28%	33%	41%	31%	19%	40%	34%	35%	49%
Email	28%	30%	26%	21%	31%	32%	22%	27%	27%	23%
SMS/MMS	27%	27%	27%	25%	28%	27%	20%	28%	23%	29%

⁴ 'Phishing is a way that cybercriminals steal confidential information such as online banking logins, credit card details, business login credentials, passwords/passphrases, by sending fraudulent messages (sometimes called 'lures'). These deceptive messages often pretend to be from a large organisation you trust, to make the scam more believable. They can be sent via email, SMS, instant messaging or social media platforms. They often contain a link to a fake website where you are encouraged to enter confidential details.' www.cyber.gov.au/acsc/view-all-content/threats/phishing

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Other website	11%	12%	11%	9%	13%	11%	8%	12%	10%	10%
Instagram	8%	7%	8%	17%	5%	1%	15%	11%	9%	20%
Chat app (Instant messenger, WhatsApp)	6%	6%	6%	10%	5%	3%	9%	9%	7%	10%
Snapchat	5%	5%	5%	12%	3%	0%	7%	7%	5%	21%
Twitter	3%	4%	2%	5%	3%	1%	8%	5%	4%	7%
Online/discussion board/forum (Reddit, etc)	3%	3%	2%	4%	2%	2%	6%	3%	3%	5%
Dating site/app (OKCupid, Tinder)	3%	3%	2%	4%	2%	1%	10%	4%	4%	7%
Other	3%	4%	3%	3%	4%	4%	7%	3%	5%	0%
Base: Adults aged 18-65 who had a negative online experience	2,533	1,268	1,258	977	775	781	202	673	443	160

Note: top results for each activity are highlighted in green. Relates to most serious experience. In the 12 months to August 2019. *Spoke a language other than English at home.

Respondents were also asked whether what they experienced was connected in some way to offline events. Only around 21% of Australian adults reported that this was so. This shows that adult Australians' negative online experiences tend to begin and remain online.

Impacts of negative experiences

Most Australian adults were not affected by their negative online experiences. Around 60% of those surveyed reported no negative impact. Older Australians aged between 50 to 65 were significantly more likely to feel this way, likely a reflection of the fact that they are less likely to be exposed to the more serious online experiences such as abuse, threats of violence or hate speech in contrast to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and those identifying as LGBTQI+. Where there was some impact, the most cited was mental or emotional stress (25%) (see Table 4). However, nearly 6 in 10 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and those identifying as LGBTQI+ who had a negative online experience reported a negative impact from their experience, typically mental or emotional stress (38%).

Table 4: Top five ways Australian adults were affected by negative online experiences

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
No negative impact	60%	62%	58%	53%	59%	67%	42%	53%	51%	41%

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Mental or emotional stress	25%	22%	27%	29%	26%	20%	45%	26%	33%	38%
Financial loss	9%	9%	8%	10%	9%	7%	12%	11%	11%	13%
Relationship problems with family or friends	6%	6%	6%	9%	7%	3%	14%	9%	10%	15%
Reputational damage	6%	6%	6%	9%	6%	3%	12%	7%	9%	12%
Base: Adults aged 18-65 who had a negative online experience	2,533	1,268	1,258	977	775	781	202	673	443	160

Note: top results for each activity are highlighted in green. In the 12 months to August 2019. *Spoke a language other than English at home.

Responses to negative online experience

Overall, most Australian adults felt comfortable with how they went about resolving a negative online experience. Around 62% reported that they resolved it to their satisfaction. Moreover, mirroring the reported lack of impact, most Australian adults chose not to do anything about their negative online experiences. Around 58% of them responded in this way with men significantly more likely than women to have let things pass (62% versus 54%). In avoiding action, the most common reasons cited by people included preferring to just ignore it (62%), thinking that it was not serious enough (24%) and not knowing what to do (15%). This was closely followed by not thinking that anything would change (14%).

Actions taken after negative online experiences

For those who decided to act, the three most common actions were blocking accounts (36%), speaking to family and friends (32%) and reporting what happened to the website or social media service (30%) with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and those identifying as LGBTQI+ most likely to take some form of action. Table 5 outlines the 10 top actions by adult Australians after a negative online experience, noting a distinction between formal and informal avenues for seeking help, and highlighting self-help responses.

Table 5: Top 10 Actions undertaken after a negative online experience

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Blocked the person/account who did it*	36%	32%	39%	39%	39%	31%	45%	34%	36%	46%
Spoke to family/friends^	32%	27%	36%	40%	35%	23%	42%	39%	34%	56%

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Reported it to website or social media service#	30%	29%	31%	39%	31%	22%	42%	36%	34%	54%
Changed privacy setting*	23%	23%	23%	29%	26%	15%	35%	24%	26%	23%
Changed username/ password/login details*	23%	20%	25%	21%	24%	23%	27%	20%	27%	16%
Ignored/didn't engage*	20%	19%	21%	21%	20%	19%	26%	18%	13%	11%
Reported it to another organisation#	15%	14%	15%	8%	13%	22%	6%	16%	17%	4%
Searched online for how to deal with the issue*	13%	14%	13%	15%	13%	12%	11%	19%	10%	16%
Deleted post/comment(s)*	13%	14%	12%	9%	17%	13%	12%	13%	14%	9%
Other	12%	13%	11%	5%	10%	20%	13%	10%	18%	11%
Base: Adults aged 18-65 who had a negative online experience	1,060	483	572	412	312	336	90	268	206	76

Self-help*

Help from informal networks^

Help from formal networks#

Note: top results for each activity are highlighted in green. Responses in relation to the most serious negative online experience in the 12 months to August 2019. *Spoke a language other than English at home.

Perceived motivations

People who took some form of action were asked to suggest what the motivating factor may have been behind their negative online experiences. Adult Australians' most common response was that it had been for financial gain (40%). Attempted scams were the second most common negative online experience, a possible factor in the prevalence of this perceived motivation. As Table 6 shows, this was particularly the case with older Australians (those aged 50 to 65). They were significantly more likely than those in younger age cohorts to cite this as a reason for their experiences (55% versus 28% for those aged 18 to 34 years). Other factors cited included fun/amusement (15%), to harass (13%) or to embarrass/shame (13%).

Table 6: Top five reasons for most negative online experience among people who acted

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Financial gain	40%	42%	38%	28%	36%	55%	36%	36%	37%	27%
Don't know	22%	19%	24%	23%	24%	18%	16%	23%	17%	18%
Fun/amusement	15%	15%	14%	18%	16%	10%	30%	15%	16%	22%
To harass me	13%	13%	14%	18%	14%	8%	22%	14%	17%	21%
To embarrass/shame me	9%	8%	10%	12%	9%	5%	17%	11%	12%	14%
Base: Adults aged 18-65 who took action in response to a negative online experience	435	224	211	181	139	115	19	109	40	16

Note: top results for each activity are highlighted in green. In the 12 months to August 2019. *Spoke a language other than English at home.

Activities undertaken online

The types of activities undertaken online also provides some insight into the possible situations where certain groups are more likely to be exposed to a negative online experience such as abuse or hate speech. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (46%) and people identifying as LGBTQI+ (45%) are significantly more likely to post comments online in response to others (Table 7).

Table 7: Activities undertaken online

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Online banking or paying bills	88%	88%	88%	90%	91%	83%	92%	88%	84%	85%
Messaging/ text chat	74%	69%	79%	80%	77%	66%	81%	77%	72%	73%
Online bookings (tickets, hotels, flights)	70%	69%	71%	70%	75%	65%	76%	73%	56%	61%
Online buy/ sell or auction sites	67%	67%	68%	69%	73%	60%	74%	65%	69%	70%
Post/ comment on social media sites	64%	55%	72%	72%	67%	53%	74%	64%	62%	67%
Stream TV, movies or other video content	62%	62%	62%	75%	65%	46%	76%	64%	58%	63%
Access news	60%	63%	58%	58%	64%	60%	70%	64%	57%	50%

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Video calls/ chats	39%	36%	42%	51%	42%	25%	49%	49%	32%	43%
Post comments in response to other people's comments	36%	31%	40%	43%	36%	29%	45%	37%	42%	46%
Multiplayer Gaming	17%	22%	12%	29%	14%	7%	29%	19%	17%	27%
Post comments on news sites in response to articles	15%	14%	15%	19%	15%	9%	22%	20%	13%	19%
Blog or create websites with your own content	8%	9%	8%	12%	8%	4%	16%	12%	8%	11%
Online dating	7%	8%	5%	11%	6%	4%	22%	8%	7%	11%
Other	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%	4%	2%	1%	4%	2%
Base: Adults aged 18-65	3,737	1,808	1,916	1,396	1,208	1,133	252	953	567	198

Note: top results for each activity are highlighted in green. In the 12 months to August 2019. *Spoke a language other than English at home.

Bystander witness to negative online experiences

The data shows that there were fewer people who reported witnessing something negative online than those who had experienced it themselves. Table 8 highlights these results.

Among Australian adults, just under half said that they had not witnessed anything negative online in the 12 months to August 2019 (51% witnessing an experience). Where that was the case, the most common single type of negative experience witnessed by people included the receipt of repeated unwanted messages (28%), hate speech (25%) and scams (22%).

Table 8: Witness to negative online experiences of adult family members, close friends and colleagues

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Repeated unwanted messages or online contact**	28%	29%	27%	30%	27%	28%	36%	36%	36%	45%
Hate speech ⁵	25%	23%	28%	26%	28%	21%	53%	24%	26%	42%
Attempted scam over the phone – asking for them to enter details into computer	22%	22%	23%	23%	21%	23%	34%	23%	26%	32%
Device/computer infected with a virus or malware	19%	19%	18%	21%	18%	17%	28%	24%	24%	32%
Had money stolen through online fraud (including misuse of credit cards)	14%	12%	15%	17%	12%	12%	20%	16%	17%	27%
Had things said to provoke a response, start an argument	12%	11%	13%	18%	12%	7%	25%	14%	17%	32%
Accounts accessed without consent, including hacking	11%	11%	12%	15%	11%	8%	20%	13%	15%	25%
Were called offensive names	11%	11%	11%	17%	11%	6%	29%	13%	16%	27%
Someone pretended to be them online	10%	9%	11%	15%	7%	7%	17%	13%	14%	24%
Was sent unwanted inappropriate content e.g. porn or violent content	9%	10%	9%	15%	8%	5%	22%	11%	10%	26%
Lies or rumours spread about them online	9%	9%	9%	14%	10%	5%	19%	12%	14%	28%

⁵ Bystander's online hate speech was established using the question – Other than anything targeting you, in the last 12 months, how many times, if ever, have you seen or been exposed to a digital communication that targeted someone else or a group because of their race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, etc?. For more information refer to Online Hate speech. Findings from Australia, New Zealand and Europe available at esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/online-hate-speech

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Their personal information was used in a way they did not like***	7%	7%	7%	11%	6%	4%	16%	11%	11%	24%
They received threats of real-life harm or abuse	7%	7%	6%	11%	5%	3%	15%	9%	9%	21%
Someone electronically tracked their location or monitored their movements using technology without their consent	6%	7%	6%	10%	5%	4%	14%	10%	9%	19%
Threats to share their private photos online or electronically	6%	7%	5%	11%	5%	2%	11%	8%	7%	22%
Their private photos/videos (nude/semi-nude/sexual) were shared online or electronically without consent	4%	5%	4%	8%	3%	2%	10%	6%	6%	18%
Had a private photo or video of themselves (nude/ semi-nude/sexual) taken without consent	4%	4%	3%	7%	3%	1%	9%	6%	5%	17%
Other	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%	4%
Base: Adults aged 18-65	3,737	1,808	1,916	1,396	1,208	1,133	252	953	567	198

Note: top results for each activity are highlighted in green. Witnessed experiences of adult family members, close friends or colleagues in the 12 months to August 2019. *Spoke a language other than English at home. **Including text or phone calls. ***For example, identity shared online.

Impact of witnessed negative online experience

Approximately 37% of bystanders to a negative online experience thought that what they had witnessed had no negative impact on the person targeted (Table 9). Older Australians aged 50 to 65 were significantly more likely to feel this way than those younger in age (48% versus 31% of people aged 18 to 34). This figure was lower than when the same question was asked of themselves. Recalling Table 4 for example, around 60% of people reported no negative impact from their own most serious negative online experience. Mental or emotional stress (31%) was the most cited impact reported by bystanders.

Table 9: Top five impacts of negative online experiences according to bystanders

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
No negative impact	37%	41%	35%	31%	34%	48%	25%	36%	34%	27%
Mental or emotional stress	31%	28%	35%	34%	33%	27%	41%	27%	37%	30%
Don't know/can't say	15%	14%	16%	14%	15%	16%	16%	16%	15%	16%
Financial loss	12%	12%	13%	14%	13%	10%	14%	13%	11%	15%
Reputational damage	9%	8%	9%	12%	10%	5%	16%	9%	10%	15%
Base: Adults aged 18-65 witnessing a negative online experience	1,928	923	997	770	585	573	166	543	343	139

Note: top results for each activity are highlighted in green. Witnessed experiences of adult family members, close friends or colleagues in the 12 months to August 2019. *Spoke a language other than English at home.

Witnessed sources of negative online experiences

The most commonly cited source of negative online experiences according to bystanders was a stranger (36%). As shown by Table 10, this was closely followed by not knowing who did it (33%).

Table 10: Top 10 Sources of witnessed negative online experiences

Sources of witnessed negative online experiences	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Stranger	36%	34%	38%	37%	36%	35%	38%	35%	32%	34%
Don't know	33%	35%	32%	25%	31%	44%	35%	30%	36%	26%
Friend you know personally / in real life	9%	9%	8%	12%	10%	4%	10%	11%	10%	14%
Family member	7%	7%	8%	10%	8%	4%	10%	8%	9%	11%
Ex-partner	6%	6%	7%	8%	6%	4%	6%	7%	6%	10%
Friend they know only online	6%	7%	5%	9%	5%	4%	5%	7%	9%	9%
Acquaintance	6%	6%	5%	7%	7%	3%	7%	5%	9%	8%
Partner	5%	6%	3%	7%	5%	2%	5%	6%	7%	12%
Prefer not to say	4%	4%	4%	5%	3%	3%	1%	6%	2%	6%
Work colleague or ex-work colleague	4%	5%	3%	7%	4%	1%	4%	5%	6%	7%

Sources of witnessed negative online experiences	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Base: Adults aged 18-65 witnessing a negative online experience	1,928	923	997	770	585	573	166	543	343	139

Note: top results for each activity are highlighted in green. In the 12 months to August 2019. *Spoke a language other than English at home.

Communication channels for witnessed negative experience

Like their personal experiences, people who had witnessed a negative online experience of an adult family member, close friend or work colleague reported that this happened most on Facebook (38%), email (24%) or SMS/MMS (23%) (Table 11). Those witnessing something on Facebook were significantly more likely to be younger (49% for those aged 18-34 compared to 27% for those aged 50 to 65 years). Again, this likely reflects the fact that younger people are more likely to use social media. Older Australians were significantly more likely to witness something negative via email than younger adults (28% for those aged 50-65 compared to 19% for those aged 18-34).

Table 11: Top 10 channels for witnessed negative online experiences

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Facebook	38%	35%	41%	49%	38%	27%	57%	40%	37%	55%
Email	24%	26%	23%	19%	27%	28%	17%	23%	22%	17%
SMS/MMS	23%	23%	23%	20%	28%	22%	17%	26%	23%	21%
Other website	13%	14%	13%	12%	15%	13%	13%	12%	11%	15%
Instagram	10%	10%	10%	19%	8%	3%	15%	13%	11%	21%
Chat app (Instant messenger, WhatsApp)	7%	7%	7%	10%	7%	3%	11%	11%	6%	6%
Snapchat	6%	7%	6%	13%	4%	1%	5%	9%	6%	18%
Other	5%	5%	5%	3%	3%	7%	6%	4%	9%	1%
Twitter	4%	4%	3%	6%	4%	1%	5%	6%	4%	7%
Dating site/app (OKCupid, Tinder)	3%	4%	3%	6%	2%	1%	9%	5%	4%	6%
Base: Adults aged 18-65 witnessing a negative online experience	1,928	923	997	770	585	573	166	543	343	139

Note: top results for each activity are highlighted in green. Witnessed experiences of adult family members, close friends or colleagues in the 12 months to August 2019. *Spoke a language other than English at home.

Responses to witnessing something negative online

The overwhelming majority of people who witnessed something negative online did not do anything about it. Only around 30% of adults Australians reacted in some way. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were significantly more likely to do something about what they witnessed (49%). The main reasons cited for not acting was the belief that those who had experienced something negative online had handled it themselves (39%). Women were significantly more likely than men to say that this was the case (45% versus 33% for men). The next most common reasons cited were that people just ignored it (22%) or that it was not their place to do anything (16%).

Bystander actions after witnessing a negative online experience

Among the minority of bystanders who took some form of action in response to a negative online experience, the most common action was to speak about what they saw with their family or friends (49%). As Table 12 shows, the next most common action was to make a report to the website or social media service where the incident happened (35%) followed by blocking the person or account that did it (29%). Table 12 distinguishes between different types of help-seeking behaviour — self-help and those that who obtained assistance from formal or informal networks.

Table 12: Top 10 responses to witnessing something negative online

	Gender			Age			Cohort			
	Net	Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Spoke to family/friends [^]	49%	46%	51%	53%	49%	43%	56%	53%	47%	52%
Reported it to website or social media service [#]	35%	33%	37%	43%	35%	25%	39%	39%	32%	55%
Blocked the person/account who did it [*]	29%	24%	32%	27%	34%	26%	29%	27%	25%	28%
Changed privacy settings [*]	18%	17%	19%	21%	14%	18%	23%	20%	19%	12%
Changed username/password/login details [*]	18%	19%	17%	17%	17%	19%	21%	14%	21%	14%
Contacted the police [#]	16%	16%	15%	20%	14%	13%	20%	18%	20%	28%
Searched online for how to deal with the issue [*]	13%	15%	12%	16%	11%	12%	10%	16%	14%	11%
Ignored it/ didn't engage [*]	11%	12%	10%	12%	10%	9%	10%	11%	11%	2%
Deleted posts/comment(s) [*]	8%	8%	8%	6%	11%	8%	10%	7%	5%	1%

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Other	8%	9%	7%	3%	7%	14%	9%	4%	13%	7%
Base: Adults aged 18-65 who took action	587	265	318	246	177	164	49	188	127	69

Self-help*

Help from informal networks^

Help from formal networks#

Note: top results for each activity are highlighted in green. Witnessed experiences of adult family members, close friends or colleagues in the 12 months to August 2019. *Spoke a language other than English at home.

Behaving negatively online towards others

Just over 1 in 10 adults (12%) were estimated to have behaved negatively towards others online in the 12 months to August 2019. The top three behaviours included sending repeated unwanted messages to someone (50% of those behaving negatively online), calling someone offensive names (37%) and provoking or starting an argument online (35%).

A significantly higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (30%) and those identifying as LGBTQI+ (21%) reported behaving negatively online towards others. A number of findings from the adult survey provide additional context to this higher level of incidence within population groups:

- Around 95% of adults who behaved negatively report that they were also the target of a negative online experience. This is consistent with findings from eSafety's youth research: State of play—youth, kids and digital dangers, which was published in 2018. Those behaving negatively online can be motivated by provocation and reaction. Interviews with adult survey participants bore this out.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and those identifying as LGBTQI+ are significantly more likely to be the target of certain online behaviours than others, including being called offensive names, hate speech, having things said to them to provoke an argument or having lies or rumours circulated about them online. Experiences which could lead to provocation and reaction.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and those identifying as LGBTQI+ are also more likely to engage in online activities such as posting comments in response to other people's comments online and commenting on news articles.
- Relationship problems (whether familial, friendships or personal) are also likely to influence these online behaviours, a factor explored in more depth in Table 15.

This highlights the complex dynamics experienced by at-risk groups who are the target of negative online behaviours and ongoing need for further research into this area to continue to support at-risk Australians on the internet.

Table 13: Experiences of people behaving negatively online in the 12 months to August 2019

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Behaving negatively online	12%	14%	10%	11%	15%	7%	21%	19%	17%	30%
Base: Adults aged 18-65	3,737	1,808	1,916	1,396	1,208	1,133	252	953	567	198
Type of negative online behaviours										
Repeatedly sent someone unwanted messages**	50%	49%	51%	54%	47%	56%	46%	60%	52%	67%
Called someone names	37%	34%	33%	47%	40%	21%	55%	35%	38%	55%
Provoked /started an argument	35%	36%	34%	46%	37%	20%	35%	36%	40%	54%
Deliberately infected a device/computer with a virus or malware	34%	35%	33%	40%	34%	32%	22%	46%	34%	42%
Spread lies or rumours spread about someone	27%	29%	23%	35%	29%	12%	18%	32%	28%	45%
Threatened to share private photos of someone	26%	27%	25%	27%	30%	12%	23%	32%	27%	42%
Threatened someone with real-life harm or abuse	25%	27%	23%	22%	29%	13%	27%	27%	20%	48%
Used someone’s personal information in a way they did not like***	25%	28%	20%	25%	28%	14%	26%	31%	25%	42%
Electronically tracked someone’s location or monitored their movements without their consent	25%	25%	24%	27%	26%	21%	27%	31%	30%	41%
Accessed someone’s online accounts without consent (including hacking)	25%	26%	23%	31%	28%	11%	17%	29%	26%	39%
Sent someone unwanted inappropriate content e.g. porn or violent content	24%	25%	23%	26%	26%	16%	18%	31%	22%	39%
Pretended to be someone	24%	25%	22%	22%	26%	16%	27%	28%	28%	41%
Stole money through online fraud (including misuse of credit cards)	23%	23%	24%	26%	26%	12%	23%	27%	26%	42%
Hate speech	23%	24%	22%	26%	26%	13%	22%	28%	28%	40%
Took a private photo or video of someone without consent****	23%	27%	18%	31%	26%	9%	18%	30%	21%	39%

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Shared private photos/videos (nude/semi-nude/ sexual) of someone online or electronically without their consent	21%	23%	19%	30%	24%	6%	22%	28%	24%	39%
Other	8%	7%	10%	12%	7%	12%	4%	7%	15%	12%
Base: Adults 18-65 behaving negatively online	482	273	203	269	128	85	52	200	120	62

Note: top results for each activity are highlighted in green. In the 12 months to August 2019. *Spoke a language other than English at home. **Including phone calls and texts, or online contact. ***Sharing their identity online, for example. ****Nude/semi-nude/sexual e.g. via a webcam.

Communication channels for behaving negatively online

Facebook was noted as the most common channel for people behaving negatively online — similar to those who either had experienced or witnessed something of this nature. Around 43% of those who behaved negatively online used Facebook to do it. Also common was the use of SMS/MMS (21%) and Instagram (17%). As Table 14 also shows, Instagram was significantly more common among adults aged 18 to 34 as opposed to older adults (24% versus 4% of those aged 50 to 60). Older Australian adults were instead significantly more likely to have used email (28% versus 12% for those aged 18 to 34). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Snapchat was the second most cited channel (30%).

Table 14: Top channels for behaving negatively online

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Facebook	43%	44%	43%	47%	41%	37%	61%	41%	40%	56%
SMS/MMS	21%	20%	23%	20%	21%	23%	11%	23%	25%	18%
Instagram	17%	19%	14%	24%	12%	4%	12%	15%	17%	22%
Email	16%	16%	15%	12%	14%	28%	7%	17%	26%	12%
Snapchat	14%	15%	12%	22%	8%	0%	14%	19%	11%	30%
Twitter	8%	9%	6%	10%	7%	4%	3%	7%	9%	12%
Other website	8%	8%	7%	7%	10%	7%	8%	8%	3%	6%
Chat app (Instant messenger, WhatsApp)	8%	8%	7%	9%	6%	5%	16%	7%	12%	6%
Video streaming sites	7%	9%	4%	9%	5%	4%	2%	8%	10%	8%
Other	7%	4%	10%	3%	6%	18%	0%	6%	10%	2%
Base: Adults behaving negatively online	482	273	203	269	128	85	52	200	120	62

Note: top results for each activity are highlighted in green. In the 12 months to August 2019. *Spoke a language other than English at home.

Targets of negative online behaviour

Strangers were the most common targets for people acting negatively online (27%). This was followed by perpetrators not knowing who they were targeting (19%) and friends that they knew in real life (15%). However, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and those identifying as LGBTQI+, family members were also significant targets (25% and 22% respectively) as were partners in the case of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (20%), highlighting the role stresses within relationships play in influencing online behaviours. Table 15 highlights the top 10 targets of people's negative online behaviours.

Table 15: Top 10 targets of negative online behaviours

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
Stranger	27%	26%	28%	28%	27%	24%	43%	24%	28%	33%
Don't know	19%	20%	19%	13%	17%	37%	7%	23%	20%	7%
Friend you know personally/in real life	15%	16%	14%	16%	16%	12%	23%	13%	18%	17%
Family member	14%	12%	16%	16%	11%	13%	22%	11%	20%	25%
Partner	11%	11%	10%	14%	11%	3%	8%	8%	15%	20%
Acquaintance	10%	9%	11%	15%	5%	6%	7%	11%	14%	17%
Ex-partner	9%	11%	8%	13%	8%	2%	8%	12%	5%	8%
Friend you know only online	7%	7%	7%	7%	10%	5%	6%	5%	8%	7%
Work colleague or ex-work colleague	7%	7%	6%	9%	6%	3%	3%	8%	10%	13%
Prefer not to say	7%	6%	7%	8%	7%	5%	0%	8%	2%	9%
Base: Adults behaving negatively online	482	273	203	269	128	85	52	200	120	62

Note: top results for each activity are highlighted in green. In the 12 months to August 2019. *Spoke a language other than English at home.

Motivation for behaving negatively online

Respondents identified a diverse range of motivations underpinning their decision to behave negatively online to someone and these were generally consistent across different population groups. Expressing one's opinion (20%) was the most common reason Australian adults cited as acting negatively online, followed by fun/amusement (18%) and to embarrass or shame (16%). There was some variation for different population groups. For adults identifying as LGBTQI+, the top motivating factor related to seeking to gain a competitive advantage in an online game (34%). This is consistent with these adults having the highest level of participation in online multiplayer games as 29% (see Table 7). A desire to

control the person (23%) was also significant motivating factor also for these people. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders behaving badly online, the desire to punish or get back at someone (20%) and the desire for financial gain (20%) were also significant drivers of behaviour.

Table 16: Top 10 reasons for behaving negatively online

	Net	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		Male	Female	18 – 34	35 – 49	50 – 65	LGBTQI+	LOTE*	Disability	Indigenous Australian
To express my opinion	20%	18%	22%	26%	16%	8%	18%	16%	22%	28%
Fun/amusement	18%	21%	15%	21%	17%	12%	24%	16%	26%	28%
Don't know	16%	13%	20%	14%	16%	22%	12%	21%	15%	11%
To embarrass/shame them	16%	16%	15%	17%	15%	13%	22%	14%	15%	25%
To gain a competitive advantage in an online game	15%	16%	10%	18%	0%	0%	34%	15%	25%	0%
To harass them	13%	14%	13%	12%	17%	12%	13%	10%	14%	15%
Financial gain	12%	13%	12%	12%	14%	13%	8%	15%	15%	18%
To control them	12%	13%	11%	16%	8%	8%	23%	13%	15%	21%
To punish/get back at them	12%	11%	12%	15%	9%	7%	14%	10%	15%	20%
No reason	10%	10%	10%	7%	10%	16%	2%	12%	8%	5%
Base: Adults behaving negatively online	482	273	203	269	128	85	52	200	120	62

Note: top results for each activity are highlighted in green. In the 12 months to August 2019. *Spoke a language other than English in the home.

Conclusion

This report highlights that negative online experiences, whether personal or witnessed, are relatively common among adults with the range of experiences broadly covering unwanted contact or content, scams and fraud, cybersecurity breaches and exposure to aggressive online behaviours. For many adult Australians the sources of their personal or witnessed negative online experiences are unknown reflecting the opportunity for anonymity in the online world. Findings also suggest that a person's age, background and the types of activities undertaken online are likely to increase the chances of experiencing online incidents and negative impacts as is the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and adults identifying as LGBTQI+. However, these groups are not passive in terms of their reactions. They are more likely to respond in kind and to take some form of action such as blocking, talking to family and friends or reporting an incident to a social media service or website. Research findings also show a strong link between being a target online and using negative behaviours online towards others. This highlights the complex dynamics experienced by at-risks groups who are the target of negative online behaviours, the issue of provocation and reaction, and the diverse motives behind these behaviours. This is an area for further investigation in any future research relating to adult online behaviours and digital resilience. This report also did not explore adult self-perceptions of confidence in dealing with negative online incidents. This critical issue will be examined in the final report in this series about adults online which will provide key insights into adult digital confidence, literacy and online safety information needs.

Methodology

This report is based on a national survey of 3,737 Australian adults aged 18 – 65 as well as six in-depth interviews. Survey and in-depth interview data were gathered between July and September 2019. Respondents were drawn from the online consumer panels. Quotas were set for location, age and gender. To reflect the overall population distribution, results were weighted to Australian Bureau of Statistics population data.

