

# Protecting LGBTIQ+ voices online: resource development research

## Qualitative report

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# List of terms

Term	Plain language definition
Cissexism	A belief or attitude that being cisgender (that is, a person whose gender identity is aligned with that which they were assigned at birth) is more natural, healthy or superior to transgender or non-binary ways of being.
Cyber abuse	Behaviour that uses technology to threaten, intimidate, harass or humiliate someone – with the intent to hurt them socially, psychologically or even physically.
Cyberbullying	Cyberbullying is the use of technology to bully a person with the intent to hurt or intimidate them.
Heterosexism	A belief or attitude that the world is heterosexual and that all customs and behaviours conform to this and that alternative views are less natural, healthy or superior.
Intersectional groups	Hate or harassment experienced as several different forms of discrimination at once. For example, people might post abusive comments criticising a particular person for being a lesbian and a woman.
Lateral abuse	Abuse directed at one's peers rather than adversaries.
Non-binary	Any gender identity which does not fit the male and female binary spectrum.
Online hate speech	Any hateful posts about a person or group based on their race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability or gender.
Transgender	Anyone who internal experience of gender does not match the sex that they were assigned at birth.
Unconscious bias	A belief or attitude experienced by an individual of which they are not themselves aware.

Attribution in quoted text reflects participants' self-identification.

# 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.

For any enquiries, please contact [research@esafety.gov.au](mailto:research@esafety.gov.au)

eSafety recognises the details reported here in qualitative research represent lived experiences. This report discusses issues that some people may find distressing and it includes abusive language.

If you or someone you know is at risk of immediate harm, please call Triple Zero (000). For counselling and support, please contact:

<b>1800Respect</b>	1800 737 732
<b>Lifeline</b>	13 11 14
<b>Beyond Blue</b>	1300 22 4636

# Overview

To support Australians most at risk online, eSafety develops targeted strategies, resources, programs and communications. Our Protecting Voices at Risk Online statement, released in 2020, identifies those individuals and communities demonstrated to be most at risk, along with priority areas for program development.

Previous research has shown that people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTIQ+) are at greater risk of cyber abuse. In 2019, eSafety research found that 30% of this group experienced online hate speech which is more than double the national average (14%)<sup>1</sup>.

This research was conducted to better understand LGBTIQ+ adults' level of awareness and experience of cyber abuse. In particular, it was designed to help appropriately tailor resources and strategies to address cyber abuse targeting LGBTIQ+ adults. Specific lines of enquiry included identifying gaps and perceived needs to help develop resources to address cyber abuse. The research design included a literature review, discussion groups with community health and advocacy organisations and in-depth interviews with adults of different sexual orientations and gender identities.

The research found that the experiences of participants ranged from scams and dismissive comments to systematic harassment and exclusion in apps and on social media. Despite these negative experiences there was a lack of consensus among the research participants about where boundaries lie between what is and is not appropriate to say online – particularly in apps used for casual sex.

Lateral abuse – abuse between members within a community – was mentioned infrequently in the literature but described by all research participants as a regular feature of the LGBTIQ+ community. Participants perceived a hierarchy of privilege from the least disadvantaged (typically cis male gay men) through to the most disadvantaged (typically transgender people and bisexual women). Participants suggested a range of reasons for lateral abuse. Common themes included feeling threatened, a lack of empathy, competition for scarce funding and resources, and legacy grief from lived experiences of discrimination throughout their lives.

Importantly, while examples of outright cyber abuse and lateral abuse are relatively easy to identify, low-level micro-aggressions were considered harder to recognise and often not called out until a situation escalated. All participants supported the need for cyber abuse resources and acknowledged that eSafety plays a significant leadership role – to raise awareness, work with the technology industry to set a positive tone in online platforms, build resilience and encourage empathy.

This research provides valuable information about Australian LGBTIQ+ adults' experiences and challenges when engaging online. It is part of a broader research program which will be used to support the development of resources and strategies that address cyber abuse targeting LGBTIQ+ adults.

Readers should note that some language and verbatim comments contained in this report may be confronting.

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<sup>1</sup> Adult online safety survey. (2019). The eSafety Commissioner. [esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-01/Hate%20speech-Report.pdf](https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-01/Hate%20speech-Report.pdf)

# Key highlights

## Awareness and understanding of key terms

Findings from this research illustrate that participants do not always have the language to describe harmful online conduct. This is important when communicating with LGBTIQ+ community members to effectively deliver suitably tailored resources that encourage positive online behaviours and provide appropriate support.

Cyber abuse resources for LGBTIQ+ adults need to be mindful of:

- abuse originating outside the community
- the within-community nature of lateral abuse
- the compounding impact of intersectional identities (e.g. race, religion or gender).

## Cyber abuse

The term 'cyber abuse' was well understood by all participants from community health and advocacy organisations (service providers) but only about half of the individual LGBTIQ+ community members (service users). Participants' level of unprompted understanding varied widely, from a basic appreciation of online harassment to a detailed understanding of the targeted nature of cyber abuse with intent to harm. Many service user participants mentioned bullying in discussions about cyber abuse, possibly reflecting media coverage of school and workplace bullying. When prompted with the eSafety definition of cyber abuse, all participants confirmed the description was what they expected, and it provided more detail than they were able to spontaneously describe.

## Lateral abuse

In contrast, the term 'lateral abuse' was not well understood by service providers or service user participants. Few spontaneously mentioned the within-community nature of minority-on-minority fighting and abuse. Even when prompted with the eSafety definition understanding remained very low, with confusion about the words 'peers' and 'adversaries', and the relationship between these terms. Once explained, all participants understood the concept – many of whom had already described their lived experiences of this behaviour. Participants spoke of a hierarchy of privilege from the least disadvantaged (typically cis male gay men) through to the most disadvantaged (typically transgender people and bisexual women).

## Experiences of cyber abuse and lateral abuse

The literature review found little research focussing on cyber abuse among LGBTIQ+ Australian adults. Participants believed abuse came from perpetrators feeling threatened, a lack of empathy for others' struggles, competition for scarce funding and resources, and legacy grief from lived experiences of discrimination throughout their lives. It is important to note that while examples of outright cyber abuse are relatively easy to identify, participants felt that low-level micro-aggressions were harder to recognise and often not called out until a situation escalated.

Throughout the research, comments and discussion reflected the diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations within the LGBTIQ+ community. While generally celebrating differences, participants also attributed negative online behaviours to this same diversity – often seen as lateral abuse.

Participants considered those most vulnerable to cyber abuse and lateral abuse are those who are otherwise already marginalised – including racial or ethnic minorities, and people without support networks. Specific to the LGBTIQ+ population, transgender and bisexual people and those with intersectional identities (such as race, religion or gender) were highlighted as most at risk of cyber abuse and particularly lateral abuse.

Despite an appreciation of the issues, participants did not always have a shared view about appropriate online behaviours and where boundaries exist between what's appropriate to say, and cyber abuse. These boundaries were least clear with apps used for casual sex where profile photos are, themselves, often intimate images. In this scenario, there is some assumption that people choose to use the platform for sex and that boundaries are more 'flexible'.

Participants described varied experiences when reporting online abuse. Many who reported their experiences to a technology platform claimed they did not receive a response while those who dealt with an online community organiser generally achieved a more successful outcome.

## Online safety resources and leadership

The research highlighted eSafety's significant leadership role and importance in partnering with community health and advocacy organisations. All participants supported the need for cyber abuse resources tailored to LGBTIQ+ adults.

Participants noted that resources need to raise awareness of key online safety issues and develop users' skills in navigating and responding to negative online behaviours. Resources should normalise appropriate online behaviour (and identify what isn't appropriate behaviour) as well as highlight the personal and legal consequences of cyber abuse for those experiencing it and for perpetrators.

Two priority groups within the LGBTIQ+ community were identified in the research: youth and those from otherwise marginalised groups e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, those from a minority race or religion and those with a gender diverse identity.

Some sensitivities may exist in groups within the LGBTIQ+ community (especially gay men) where non-consensual sharing of images (image-based abuse) is accepted, and sexual commentary is considered normal and part of the within group culture. In these instances, eSafety's position may not always be aligned with some normalised behaviours within these groups. Other sensitivities may exist in groups within the community where an individual's LGBTIQ+ identity is counter to their racial or cultural expectations, which could be potentially dangerous for them.

## Next steps

A key take out from this research is that any resources and messages developed for the LGBTIQ+ community must cut through the undercurrent of lateral abuse, perceptions of privilege and lack of recognition of others' struggles that almost all participants described as characterising the community.

To develop and deliver content tailored to LGBTIQ+ adults as they respond to cyber abuse, eSafety will collaborate, and partner, with trusted and credible community health and advocacy organisations.

This research will be used as part of a forthcoming co-creation workshop with LGBTIQ+ community organisations and stakeholders to develop appropriate cyber abuse resources.

Ultimately, resources and messages need to stimulate honest conversations, and as described by one participant 'if it doesn't end up in a conversation it fades quite quickly.'

## Detailed findings

This report highlights findings from 12 in-depth interviews with service providers and service users. Select insights from a literature review and three discussion groups with service providers are included for additional context.

### Role and level of activity in the community

In order to identify potential barriers to providing assistance for online safety issues, service provider participants were asked what they considered their role to be and how active they were in the community. The research showed that most considered themselves to be very active but only a few considered themselves to be active in providing online safety support. Participants explained that their role focussed on advancing the health and wellbeing of the LGBTIQ+ community. Sometimes this focussed on a specific group of community members such as transgender people while at other times this was a broader remit of working with recognised intersectional groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or Asian gay males. A small number of providers described their work in higher risk scenarios such as sex-on-premises venues. Service provider participants explained that their clients are involved in the LGBTIQ+ community to varying levels. This is reflected in the volume of clients (up to approximately 10,000 each year) they see across in-person visits and at various events and health promotion activities. People generally choose to be active in the community in response to facing barriers or challenges and to seek support for change.

‘We come together to make change and support each other so I work with many thousands of people. Transgender people use all the regular platforms ... often we are the first trans person we meet so we converge in online spaces to connect and help each other.’

Queer man of trans experience, 45-54 years

All service users reported being active in the community but only a few considered themselves very active in terms of advocacy, posting and responding online. Participants often explained that their work or interest areas specifically involved the LGBTIQ+ community (e.g. sporting club or organised pursuit) and this meant that they were more actively engaged than they might otherwise have been.

‘Pretty embedded in the community in Victoria in terms of sport ... but not super extroverted myself – I don't really go out at all.’

Non-binary, 25-34 years

‘Really a bit isolated – I kind of isolate myself. More involved in the social side of the club rather than the rest of the [LGBTIQ+] community.’

Gay man, 35-44 years

Many of those with a focus on the LGBTIQ+ community sought limited additional online contact beyond what was required for their particular interest area. Certainly, these participants

maintained a strong online presence but generally it was a relatively conservative one and their use of technology platforms was geared to support their area of focus.

'Pretty strong social media presence online as part of my business. LinkedIn and Facebook and Instagram mainly for work.'

Bisexual female, 35-44 years

'In the ... club I post stuff all the time. In the other groups I mostly observe.'

Gay man, 35-44 years

'I have Instagram but don't use Facebook ... used to have it about 8 years ago and deleted it because I had all these imaginary friends online that I didn't talk to. I now have it for work and to host events but not as a personal social platform.'

Non-binary, 25-34 years

## Awareness and understanding of cyber abuse

### Unprompted awareness

To understand unprompted awareness levels of cyber abuse, service providers and service users were asked what came to mind when they heard the words 'cyber abuse'.

Cyber abuse as a term was recognised by all three service provider participants and five of the nine service users. Service providers generally demonstrated a good understanding of the term and provided reasonably well-articulated descriptions, emphasising the targeted and deliberate nature of abuse delivered online. Awareness was also very high within each of the three group discussions with service providers. It is worth noting that one service provider immediately raised the potential lateral nature of cyber abuse.

'The first thing I think of are TERFS (trans exclusionary radical feminists) – so violence from within our own community, especially trans experience with violence coming from the cis heterosexual and LGB cis communities.'

Queer man of trans experience, 45-54 years

Among the service user participants who had heard the term 'cyber abuse' before the interview, most explained that they were familiar with the term through work diversity training or from media coverage of issues including trolling, cyberbullying and hate speech. While participants may have heard the term before the interview, their level of unprompted understanding of cyber abuse varied widely, from a basic appreciation of abuse delivered through an online channel, to a more detailed understanding of the intersectional nature of this abuse.

'I guess people providing abusive commentary through a social media platform.'

Bisexual female, 35-44 years

'Anything that would make people feel or have a negative experience ... based on a number of factors such as colour of your skin, religious beliefs, gender identity or political leanings.'

Gay Asian man, 35-44 years

## Prompted awareness

Given the exploratory nature of this research and that some participants were not familiar with the concept of 'cyber abuse', a definition was read to gauge participants' prompted reaction and levels of understanding. The definition below was read to all service provider and service user participants.

'Cyber abuse is behaviour that uses technology to threaten, intimidate, harass or humiliate someone – with the intent to hurt them socially, psychologically or even physically<sup>2</sup>.'

All participants confirmed that this definition matched their expectations, but that it provided more detail than they were spontaneously able to describe. A few participants highlighted aspects of the definition which were a surprise – in particular, the physical nature of being hurt through cyber abuse.

'Hadn't thought of the physical safety element ... but aware of this when posting on online ... I'm mindful in case it is likely to incite some personal threats (I have kids) or if there is a physical threat.'

Bisexual female, 35-44 years

## Cyber abuse experiences

This research looked at cyber abuse experiences in a number of ways including how often it occurred, actions in response, groups perceived to be most at risk of cyber abuse, and its occurrence on social media or dating apps.

'We live in such an echo chamber in social media and people can't be bothered with conflict resolution. So many hateful comments and people saying things that may be hurtful but that wouldn't be said to someone face-to-face.' Service provider

## Frequency

<sup>2</sup> [esafety.gov.au/key-issues/adult-cyber-abuse](https://esafety.gov.au/key-issues/adult-cyber-abuse)

All participants were asked if their clients or they themselves had experienced cyber abuse. As expected, all service provider participants confirmed that their clients had experienced cyber abuse. All service user participants also confirmed they had experienced cyber abuse personally, however, a few were quick to clarify their experiences were at the lower end of the severity continuum (in terms of the eSafety definition) and more aligned with online scamming, phishing or people just being generally dismissive.

'I've been very fortunate so far... I've had a few comments that went viral, but responses were more dismissive (e.g. like things becoming too PC) than being aggressive about it.'

Bisexual female, 35-44 years

Other participants' experiences, however, were clearly in line with the eSafety definition of cyber abuse including elements of using technology to threaten or intimidate and with the intent to hurt. When speaking with participants representing Asian, and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people and communities, it was generally racism that featured in their experiences of cyber abuse.

'Yeah, I think I have definitely ... on the dating apps it can be passive or more aggressive racist comments. My profile says I was born in ... and someone messaged me – 'you're not from ... you're a stupid chink' or 'no Asians' or 'where you really from?''

Gay Asian man, 35-44 years

'You quite often experience people on dating sites asking what your nationality is and as soon as you mention you're Aboriginal, they'll come back and say 'oh that's disgusting', 'okay not interested', block you or abuse you, or even say I'm assuming you live in a free house!'

Gay Aboriginal man, 35-44 years

Many participants highlighted concepts relating to a 'lack of filter' in online environments and how people can be more deliberately hurtful or unintentionally blunt online. In the cases of being deliberately hurtful, participants described the ability for perpetrators to 'hide behind their screen'.

'People can be quite hateful in their speech ... more subtle but emboldened by the presence of the screen to separate you from the other person.'

Gay man, 45-54 years

'There comes with a platform some felt anonymity that it's not really from you to them (it's just said) and takes away the personal connection. In person you might not like someone and think in your head 'you're a [expletive removed]' but you don't say it out loud because it's not nice ... the filter is different when you are online.'

Lesbian, 45-54 years

## Actions in response

Participants were asked how they responded to cyber abuse including whether they reported the incident to a relevant authority. Some participants stated that they reported the cyber abuse to the dating site, technology platform or online community organiser. Participants who contacted a dating site or technology platform generally claimed they did not receive a response while those who reported the abuse to an online community organiser generally described a more successful outcome – with the perpetrator being removed from the group. These experiences were echoed more strongly in group discussions with service providers – possibly reflecting their advocacy role and that they have exposure to the broader LGBTIQ+ community. Participants representing Asian, and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples, in particular, described a loss of trust and faith in systems or operators because people don't realise their unconscious bias and privilege – this means they don't understand that by not addressing racism they are part of the problem.

'Didn't hear anything back from them [social media platform] of course. Other people have seemingly gone to the ends of the earth to get in touch with a real person and for the most part just received auto-messaging.'

Gay Asian man, 35-44 years

'I blocked it and reported it. When there were more people experiencing the same thing, we escalated it within the committee, and they were very quick to act and get someone to ask the person to leave.'

Gay man, 35-44 years

'A lot of our mob have lost faith in reporting ... what's the point – any reply will be a white person responding to the allegations and therefore from a white perspective, which quite often is not the same as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person'.

Gay Aboriginal man, 35-44 years

In response to their experiences, participants discussed making subtle changes to their behaviour. This included asking more questions, being more attuned to warning signs/requests for personal information or implementing more formal terms of engagement if moderating online groups or clubs. Some participants talked about blocking the offending person and maintaining an appropriate perspective. Participants generally recognised the value of effective monitoring, including rapid identification, polite notification when content doesn't comply with terms and conditions, requests to offending people to remove posts and, if not removed, content being swiftly deleted by the moderator. One participant highlighted the importance of online communities notifying members that content has been deleted and why, as part of an education process.

## Groups most at risk

Participants were asked who they felt was most at risk of cyber abuse and their responses highlighted disadvantage and associated vulnerability. Both the group discussions and in-depth interviews showed that isolation, identifying with a minority group or having a lack of awareness and understanding of other people were indicators of a person being more likely to experience cyber abuse.

### Isolation and minority groups

LGBTIQ+ community members who are isolated were identified as being at increased risk for cyber abuse due to a lack of support and reduced awareness of warning signs for cyber abuse. This was particularly relevant during the periods of COVID-19-related lockdown, when isolation was experienced widely. More impressionable people and minority groups were also identified by participants as potentially lacking support and being vulnerable – including those who are only just 'coming out'.

Previous research highlighted the intersectional nature of abuse and harassment within the LGBTIQ+ community and that specific groups experience abuse and harassment differently. For example, the literature review identified people with a disability, people of colour, transgender and non-binary people, and bisexual women as being at increased risk of abuse, in differing ways.

'Oh, you know the same groups who are already feeling marginalised as is – women, people of colour, people with less access, opportunity and privilege, CALD and immigrants, trans youth, Aboriginal people.'

Gay Asian man, 35-44 years

'If [you are] isolated all the time then you are not as alert or [if you are] ignoring warning signs you might miss the cues. This 'isolation' also pans out in terms of different LGBTIQ+ groups who may have less support around them or being judged for who they are and needing to rely more on cyber than face-to-face contact.'

Lesbian, 45-54 years

### Lack of awareness and understanding

In group discussions and during in-depth interviews participants identified those who are less understood as being particularly exposed to cyber abuse. Vulnerable groups were noted to include people who are HIV positive and those who are transgender. Participants explained how important education is in helping to dispel myths about vulnerable groups and noted the role education plays in helping to enforce the law. Participants felt that people who perpetrated cyber abuse did so due to ignorance or maliciousness. Ignorance was seen as being driven by a lack of exposure, of not knowing people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations and being influenced by a limited range of media.

'I think that ... the less diverse you are and less exposure (cultural, identity, sexual) you have, it makes you more prone to cyber abuse. Diversity and inclusion make a difference.'

Lesbian, 35-44 years

Importantly, a few participants acknowledged how some people are simply adversarial online and that they seek (and essentially receive) validation for their inappropriate behaviour.

'And then there are just some people who like to argue and be adversarial. I'm not sure how you cure that when there is essentially a validation to being adversarial and controversial and you'll be rewarded through interaction and reaction in the threads of a conversation that you started.'

Gay man, 45-54 years

While participants felt outright cyber abuse is easy to identify, low-level micro-aggressions and nastiness were described as harder to recognise and, at times, not called out until a situation escalated. This shows the continuum of risk and how seemingly lower risk incidents can escalate into targeted cyber abuse.

## Cyber abuse experiences on social media and apps for dating/casual sex

For this research, participants were also asked about their experiences of cyber abuse when using apps for casual sex and dating.

In group discussions and in-depth interviews about these platforms and apps there was a lack of certainty in describing what is appropriate to say online and where boundaries exist. Participants described 'what is appropriate' being as 'long as a piece of string', in some cases coming down to the user's personal preferences and the type of platform being used.

'In broad terms if someone is putting someone down in a way that's hurtful that's straight up wrong.'

Lesbian, 45-54 years

'In an app in a one-on-one conversation, the boundaries are where the conversation leads and judging this as the conversation continues.'

Gay man, 35-44 years

Boundaries were least clear when the apps were used for casual sex – with participants often describing the profile photos used within these apps as intimate images. There was an assumption that people chose to engage with these platforms/apps for sex and that boundaries were more 'flexible' relative to mainstream social media platforms. The literature review identified previous research, including past eSafety studies, which found people who had

experienced image-based abuse were more likely to have engaged in the same behaviour themselves.

'With gay men there is a culture of sharing photos ... You'll see men sharing this is who I hooked up with last night and sharing a photo. Goes back to intent. There would be many who wouldn't be aware that they are doing anything wrong with on-sharing [without consent] a dick pic for example.'

Gay man, 45-54 years

## Lateral abuse

To establish an understanding of lateral abuse, service providers and service users were asked what came to mind when they heard this term and the reasons why they thought that it occurred within the LGBTIQ+ community.

In this research lateral abuse was defined as 'abuse directed at one's peers rather than adversaries'. Participants described a range of reasons and emotions driving why people engaged in lateral abuse.

'I've seen a lot of cis genderism, racism, ableism, classism unaddressed within the LGBTIQ+ community and a hierarchy of privilege with cis gay men at the top and trans and bi people at the bottom.'

Queer man of trans experience, 45-54 years

## Unprompted awareness

Lateral abuse as a term was recognised by only two of the three service provider participants and only two of the nine service users. Participants who had heard the term before described it well, spontaneously mentioning the within-group nature of minority-on-minority fighting and abuse among peers.

'It's abuse within the minority or underrepresented groups. For example, TERFs being violent towards trans women. One group within our 'alphabet mafia' to another. I have not seen it discussed but seen it happen a lot especially in the trans exclusionary space with a lot of in-fighting between LGBTI groups of people trying to be gate keepers of specific communities.'

Non-binary, 25-34 years

Participants who hadn't heard of lateral abuse before the interview were not able to accurately describe the term. This was despite having provided detailed examples earlier in their interviews of personal experiences with this form of abuse. This highlights the importance of language and tailoring communications to be effective.

'Never heard it before ... don't know ... are you abusing people of the same level rather than someone who is at a different level to you?'

Gay Asian man, 35-44 years

'Lateral abuse is abuse that changes from being online to in-person.'

Transgender female, 55-64 years

## Prompted awareness

Given the exploratory nature of this research and that most participants were not familiar, in an unprompted sense, with the concept of lateral abuse, a definition was read to gauge participants' prompted reaction and levels of understanding. For the purpose of this research, eSafety used the definition to read to all service provider and service user participants.

'Lateral abuse is abuse or violence that is directed at one's peers rather than adversaries.'

This definition was only moderately well received and understood. The main points of confusion related to use of the words 'peers' and 'adversaries', in particular the perceived relationship between the two and that, as mentioned by a couple of participants, 'they can be the same' (which is the defining feature of lateral abuse).

'Sounds confusing ... I'm not understanding what peers and adversaries are ... not sure how peers work? Violence is quite a strong word – I think domestic violence immediately.'

Gay man, 45-54 years

'Think it's accurate but probably comment on the language is whether its accessible to a layperson, sounds like an academic term and not as accessible as cyber abuse. 'Adversaries' is the sticking point.'

Lesbian, 35-44 years

'That makes more sense in our beautifully diverse community of LGBTQIA+! Definitely did not expect it to mean that. I'd describe this behaviour as ignorant bigotry ... friendly fire. There are layers there that are hard to define or articulate in a clear way but there is internalised self-hatred there also.'

Gay Asian man, 35-44 years

Once explained, all participants understood the term lateral abuse, many of whom had themselves described first or second-hand experiences earlier in the discussion. These examples generally involved racism or aggression towards transgender people and bisexual women. Notably, throughout this research, participant comments reflected the diversity of the LGBTIQ+ population. Often these comments were made to celebrate diversity, however, the lived experiences of individuals, particularly those of minority populations, is very different. There was some discussion in the literature that people present comments such as 'No fats, no fems, no

Asians' as simply their 'preference' as if they are justifying their position. The perpetuation of lateral abuse in the LGBTIQ+ community meant that there were often no safe spaces for affected people.

Most participants explained lateral abuse was commonplace within the LGBTIQ+ community and that a hierarchy exists from the least disadvantaged (typically cis male gay men and lesbians) through to the most disadvantaged (typically transgender people and bisexual women). Participants highlighted how it would be good for those with relative advantage to share some of that privilege.

'Most cis queer are either not antagonistic, don't care or don't know – I'd prefer a neutral position over an antagonistic position, but a supportive ally would be best. The issue with cis gay white men is often a complete lack of interest in releasing some of their privilege. Privilege sometimes breeds blind spots and not needing to see the issues. But I see cis gay and lesbian people as having had their own struggles too.'

Queer man of trans experience, 45-54 years

Even within a minority group population such as Asian gay men, participants noted a clear hierarchy.

'If you come from east Asia (Japan, Korea and to a lesser extent China) you are the 'good Asians' ... but if you are a little brown (south Asia) you are 'not so good'. At an event ... it is very cliquish, Asians who look a certain way behave differently to others [Asians] based on how they look. There is this tacit understanding that because they come from a certain country they came here as professionals versus others on boats.'

Gay Asian man, 35-44 years

The literature review identified little previous research in lateral abuse. Where it was discussed, it was often in the context of race and sexual identity (in particular to transgender women or bisexual women). Anti transgender sentiments featured strongly in comments and examples of lateral abuse during the group discussions and in-depth interviews.

'Comments that you are just ... experimenting ... just wanting to share in the rainbow – can be from partners and from other members of the community. Voices of the TERFs is getting louder and maybe because the trans movement voice is getting louder also.'

Bisexual female, 35-44 years

## Why people engage in lateral abuse

Participants described a range of reasons and emotions driving why people engaged in lateral abuse. Common themes included:

- People can feel threatened by what they don't know and lack a willingness to understand others.

'Many lesbians are so anti men that they can't understand it and that if you are interested in women how could you like men. This is also the same for bisexual men who are almost entirely excluded from queer spaces and the queer community as if they don't have legitimacy to be there'.

Bisexual female, 35-44 years

'Within the gay community there is a confluence of factors ... if we identify as a cultural minority or have a disability it seems that it means it is okay that we can be discounted within our own community. Never experienced racism more so than in the gay community.'

Gay Asian man, 35-44 years

- Another common theme was competition for scarce resources.

'The fact that we are having to constantly fight for our right to be seen and validity. There are also people within our community who feel very strongly about specific views about what they are and who they are and how they exist and their place ... we can't just 'be' and this can create lateral violence.'

Non-binary, 25-34 years

'Communities attack each other rather than coming to gather for a joint cause. There are finite resources, and we compete amongst ourselves rather than coming together to seek more funding. Bringing each other down in the community.'

Gay man, 45-54 years

- There is a legacy grief and traumatic emotions from lived experiences of discrimination throughout life.

'We've all gone through [expletive removed], feel oppressed and some people take pleasure in putting other people down. Misdirected anger from being oppressed ourselves ... a lot of people I encounter have some sort of damaged background, whether that be failed relationships or unwelcoming family and friends, and they tend to direct their anger back [through online abuse] at people who they consider inferior to them in their peer group.'

Gay Asian man, 35-44 years

An interview with a man from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples described a lack of understanding and knowledge in some parts of their community regarding sexualities and identities and what that looks like from their perspective. This is possibly most pronounced in the transgender space.

'Many in the Aboriginal community don't realise they are automatically excluding [their] mob because they don't fall neatly within men's and women's business. In this way they carry their

own privileges of being straight or cis gendered and don't recognise there are a whole group of people who aren't being supported'.

Gay Aboriginal man, 35-44 years.

## Resources

During the group discussions and in-depth interviews, participants were asked about what is needed to help address cyber abuse. Responses included education and awareness raising, the importance of setting a 'tone' on technology platforms and users developing resilience.

'Cyber abuse is a very complex matter and eSafety is in a position to do [something about] it but needs to work with a lot of other agencies and community groups because the abuse is more prevalent within some aspects of the community. There is no umbrella LGBTQ+ community and this myth is perpetuated by Mardi Gras and Midsumma, but they happen once a year ... our communities are fractured, and we don't always agree ... but we should be able to agree that we need to keep ourselves safe – physically and mentally.' Service provider

## Desired resources and topics

In the final part of the group discussions and in-depth interviews, participants were asked about the resources they need to help address cyber abuse experienced by LGBTQ+ adults.

Participants were unanimous in their support for cyber abuse resources to normalise what is appropriate online behaviour (and what isn't) as well as communicating the consequences for those experiencing it and legal consequences for the perpetrator. In the case of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, language is particularly important and can be very different to that used by those that do not identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Resources should have English used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples embedded in them, use creoles, images, artwork and pictures and for this reason are ideally tailored at a local (or at least regional) level.

'Aboriginal people need to hear from their mob telling them what's appropriate and not appropriate or offensive and that what they hear daily offends and puts them in a trauma space. It is important to remember that there isn't the level of trust with the white community where there are queer and racial overlays to discrimination and abuse'.

Gay Aboriginal man, 35-44 years.

'Need to share real life scenarios and stories and put a human element to it ... and let non-queer Aboriginal and white community know and understand. Our own mob in addition to the white community don't realise the damage they do.'

Gay Aboriginal man, 35-44 years

## Education and awareness raising

All participants described the importance of education and awareness raising activities in one way or another, with specific interest in the definition (and language) of cyber abuse, how it differs from cyberbullying and what are considered acceptable/unacceptable behaviours. Participants noted that resources should include information on how to report cyber abuse, how to seek assistance and emphasise that people experiencing cyber abuse are not alone – there is help available. One participant highlighted how informal, honest conversations about cyber abuse are valuable in helping people review online behaviours and raise awareness of their own actions.

‘Facilitate the bully and the bullied. I think self-awareness, impact of own behaviour on others. I wish young people had opportunities to have really open and honest conversations about what is going on under the surface. We are all craving connection under the surface ... [consider] forums to bring the topic to the table ... to bring the issue to light ... what are we doing to support people regarding online abuse ... make it part of the conversations.’

Gay Asian man, 35-44 years

‘Needs to be spoken about to normalise what's not right and that a conversation is important. And if it happens to you it's alright and that there is no stigma.’

Lesbian, 45-54 years

Consistent with the literature review findings, the group discussions and in-depth interviews also highlighted the value of workplaces and the powerful role they can play in raising awareness and inclusion. This is because workplaces can set behavioral expectations and cultural norms of appropriate behaviour. Participants explained the importance of addressing apathy and ambivalence towards cyber abuse.

Most participants identified the need for communications to be focussed on online safety, appropriate online behaviours and the law. How to safely manage personal information was considered a basic but important digital strategy, alongside resilience and coping skills. Many of the existing eSafety Women cyber abuse resources<sup>3</sup> were seen as broadly appropriate to the LGBTIQ+ audience, notwithstanding a lack of focus on intersectional identities and transgender people. Messaging targeted to those experiencing cyber abuse, the importance of seeking help and links to mental health resources were also emphasised by the participants.

‘Main message to communicate would be a safety [mindset], [a measured] response and if you feel threatened don't respond rather than continuing to try to diffuse it, and never give your details out or telephone number out if it's not quite right.’

Gay man, 35-44 years

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<sup>3</sup> [esafety.gov.au/women](https://esafety.gov.au/women)

## Setting a tone

There was a broad expectation among participants that technology platforms have a valid role to play in online safety. Participants mentioned they could do more to clearly communicate expectations of conduct, to role model appropriate behaviour through effective moderation and to create responsive complaints reporting mechanisms. Safety by Design<sup>4</sup> is an eSafety initiative that encourages organisations to put user safety and rights at the centre of the design, development and release of online products and services. In this way safety is systematically embedded into the culture and operations of organisations and platforms. It emphasises accountability and enables more positive, civil and rewarding online experiences.

‘Partnerships with the big tech companies where the abuse is occurring to build better safeguards in their platforms to ensure better safety.’

Gay Asian man, 35-44 years

‘I would love to see that there were easier reporting mechanisms ... and more protections around that ... feeling like you had more safety and not be the target from some unknown person.’

Bisexual female, 35-44 years

For transgender or gender diverse people, the design of forms was called out as an initial safety hurdle for users to navigate. One participant explained that this reflected an existing layer of systemic cis sexism in the way the internet exists e.g. male and female only in administration forms leading to the feeling, even from the start of a form, that the transgender or gender diverse user does not exist.

‘... if they can't use their affirmed name on a form or platform, they are at risk of being outed or being bullied by those who are trans phobic ... puts them in vulnerable situations and already unsafe when they enter the online space.’

Non-binary, 25-34 years

A few participants identified value in communicating messages about acceptance and treating people with decency. The importance of mindful language use and education which is fully inclusive was also mentioned.

‘Consider your language ... Trans women ARE women. Maybe the better language, the language I have used in the past is all self-identified women, non-binary and gender diverse folk.’

Bisexual female, 35-44 years

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<sup>4</sup> [esafety.gov.au/about-us/safety-by-design](https://esafety.gov.au/about-us/safety-by-design)

'I guess reiterating that rainbow people do belong online and that they do have a space there. Similar messages for business to encourage diversity and if their online content and spaces aren't representative of the diversity of our community (which includes rainbow people) they are potentially inviting abuse and harassment from homophobic and trans phobic ... they have a role in creating a space that is inclusive.'

Non-binary, 25-34 years

## Resilience

The coping skills to deal with, and respond to, cyber abuse was raised as important by a few participants. This did not appear to be offered as an excuse for instances of cyber abuse but rather in recognition that difficult people exist online (and in person) and that skills to respond to these situations are empowering.

'I think resilience is very important because we are never going to control the behaviour of others ... good to know how to respond to hurtful comments and not take it personally ... know when it's abuse and when to switch off and who they can contact for assistance.'

Gay Asian man, 35-44 years

## Target audiences and sensitivities

Two tiers of LGBTIQ+ community members were identified by participants as the target audiences for cyber abuse resources: youth and those from otherwise marginalised groups e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and people from a minority race or religion, or gender diverse identity. It should be noted that focusing resources on one group to the perceived exclusion of another, may worsen lateral abuse and perpetuate a lack of recognition of other groups' struggles. Many participants explained how cis male gay men enjoy significant privilege and a heritage of activism over the last 30-40 or so years (when many of the existing community health organisations were formed as part of responding to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s) while other groups remain relatively disadvantaged. Some cis gay male participants did caution that the broader LGBTIQ+ community should not be forgotten.

'Trans people will have a different set of concerns to gay men or gay women and being sensitive to that is important. 'Inclusive communication' does sometimes err now to some of the minority groups (e.g. transgender people) and it is important not to forget or exclude the broader community in the communications.'

'I think it's natural ... minority groups have a voice now and it bounces in one direction then the other ... we did it badly for so long and now it's bounced back. Biased to those groups because they haven't had a voice for so long.'

Gay man, 35-44 years

Some sensitivities emerged from the discussions, and were evident in the literature review, that are important to consider when developing resources and communicating with the LGBTIQ+ community. These include:

- Cultures within the LGBTIQ+ community (especially gay men) where there is an established sexual emphasis characterised by non-consensual sharing of images and related commentary that is accepted and considered normal. In these instances, eSafety's position may not always be aligned with some normalised behaviours within these groups.
- Lateral issues associated with race and gender/sexual identity, including some cultures where a LGBTIQ+ identity is particularly dangerous for the individual and against their culture's expectations.

Ensuring resources are developed in an inclusive way and communicating in an inclusive manner (to highlight similarities and bring the LGBTIQ+ community together) are important considerations in developing appropriate cyber abuse resources for this community.

# Conclusions

The research shows that cyber abuse resources need to include the following.

## Education and awareness raising

This helps people understand exactly what cyber abuse and lateral abuse are (and are not).

Resources need to highlight eSafety as a trusted government organisation and focus on:

- Specific examples of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour to clarify targeted actions and help to normalise acceptable online behaviours.
- Correct use of inclusive language e.g. 'self-identified women' (while being mindful to not 'dilute' overall messaging).
- Examples that encourage people to be aware of their own ignorance, maliciousness and unconscious bias.
- An understanding that there is a continuum of risk for cyber abuse and lateral abuse, and that low-risk contexts can escalate into cyber abuse.
- Developing an understanding of the importance of being actively positive and affirming (rather than ambivalent).

## Skills development

Resources that encourage skills development ensure that people develop a capacity to interact online in a safe and positive way and respond appropriately to cyber abuse. The focus of content could include:

- General digital literacy including technical strategies for remaining safe online – such as interactive guides and tools.
- Information on resilience including coping strategies for dealing with cyber abuse and responding to different online scenarios.
- Explicit detail about actions bystanders can take, providing examples of what should be done in different scenarios including appropriate language and strategies to engage safely themselves.

## Clarity around the law and eSafety's remit

This important element should be communicated so people are clear how cyber abuse and lateral abuse are addressed in legislation and policy. Content could include:

- The principles underlying current laws. This could also include an emphasis on the consequences of cyber abuse.
- Information which recognises differing groups' struggles (within the LGBTIQ+ community).
- Education about LGBTIQ+ adults' options if they experience cyber abuse or lateral abuse including information on how to report and seek assistance. This should reassure those experiencing cyber abuse that they are not alone and there is help available.

## Tailoring and deployment

- Resources should be developed for a range of delivery approaches including digital and in-person.
- Resources should be tailored to people with different identities as far as possible while balancing perceptions of relative privilege, including gender (especially transgender), sexuality, disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status.

# Methodology

## Overview

This research was designed and conducted by the Research, Data and Evaluation, and Diverse Communities sections at eSafety. Participants were recruited using contacts from stakeholder consultations, community health and advocacy organisations, and personal and professional networks. This technique was fit-for-purpose in order to balance timelines and budget. Data saturation against themes and research objectives was achieved.

The research began with a literature review of domestic and international materials published in English from 2015 to 2020. Outcomes from the literature review informed development of a discussion guide to use in:

1. Three group discussions conducted via Zoom with community health and advocacy organisations (ACON, Thorn-Harbour Health and Pinnacle Foundation). Group discussions were held between 18 November and 7 December 2020.
2. In-depth interviews (n=13) with community health service providers (n=3) and LGBTIQ+ adult service users (n=10) via MS Teams (n=10), telephone (n=2) and Skype (n=1). Service providers included community health organisations. Service users were LGBTIQ+ adults who may have accessed support from service providers, though no screening was imposed for this. In-depth interviews were conducted from Thursday 17 December to Wednesday 23 December 2020 and on Friday 26 March 2021.

Incentives were not provided and on average, discussions were approximately 55 minutes in duration. Permission was sought from participants to record the interviews (where possible on the interviewing platform) for analysis only and this was granted in all instances. Recordings were deleted at project completion. There were no indications of distress during the interviews and no request for help lines. The achieved sample design for the in-depth interviews is shown below at Table 1.

*Table 1 Achieved sample design for in-depth interviews*

Gender/sexual orientation	Service <u>provider</u>		Service <u>user</u>			Total
	NSW	VIC	NSW	VIC	QLD	
Lesbian	1			1		2
Gay man		1	1	2		4
Gay Asian man			1	1		2
Bisexual				1*		1
Transgender	1		1 *			2
Non-binary				1		1
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person					1	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3</b>			<b>10</b>		<b>13</b>

\* Interviews undertaken with participants in regional locations.

Participants were asked to confirm their understanding and agreement to participate in the research as described in the plain language statement and informed consent form. The

documentation was read to participants where required. All aspects of this research were undertaken in compliance with the Privacy Act 1988 and Australian Privacy Principles, the Research Society Code of Professional Behaviour, and Privacy (Market and Social Research) Code 2014.

## Analysis and interpretation

The following terms are used in this report to provide a qualitative indication and approximation of the size of the participant sample that held particular views.

- Most: refers to findings that relate to **more than three quarters** of participants.
- Many: refers to findings that relate to **more than half** of the participants.
- Some: refers to findings that relate to **around a third** of participants.
- A few: refers to findings that relate to **less than a quarter** of participants.

## Discussion areas

### Awareness and understanding of cyber abuse

- When I say the term 'cyber abuse' what do you think of and what do you understand it to mean?
- Have you heard this term before today? If yes, where have you heard it/in what context have you heard it?
- I'm going to read out how eSafety defines cyber abuse ... What are your reactions to this definition?

### Experience with cyber abuse

- Have (**IF SERVICE PROVIDER:** your clients) (**IF SERVICE USER:** you) ever experienced cyber abuse?
- Did (**IF SERVICE PROVIDER:** they) (**IF SERVICE USER:** you) report it? Why/why not?
- What groups do you think are most at risk of cyber abuse? Why?
- What is your (**IF SERVICE PROVIDER:** clients') experience with using apps for relationships or casual sex?
- What is your (**IF SERVICE PROVIDER:** clients') experience with social media platforms generally?
- Where are the boundaries with what to say or post online?

### Lateral violence and abuse

- Thinking about cyber abuse as we have discussed it, do you think (**IF SERVICE PROVIDER:** your clients) (**IF SERVICE USER:** you) may have ever done it? If yes, would you feel comfortable telling me about what happened?
- When I say the term 'lateral abuse' what do you think of and what do you understand it to mean?
- Have you heard this term before? If yes, where have you heard it/in what context have you heard it?
- I'm going to read out how eSafety defines lateral abuse ... What are your reactions to this definition?
- Have (**IF SERVICE PROVIDER:** your clients) (**IF SERVICE USER:** you) ever experienced lateral abuse or violence? If yes, would you feel comfortable telling me about it?
- What groups do you think are most at risk of lateral abuse? Why?
- Who would you say are the main groups involved in committing lateral abuse? Why?

## Resources

- eSafety would like to understand what kind of resources are needed to help address cyber abuse as experienced by people identifying as LGBTIQ+ including reducing its incidence and severity.
- Thinking back to those examples of cyber abuse you talked about earlier, what resources do you think are needed/would help address it?
- Who is the target audience?
- What are the main messages to communicate?
- Are there any particular sensitivities to be aware of/relevant to consider in the development of resources?
- Who should the messages come from? **PROMPT FOR ESAFETY**
- What are the most effective methods to engage with the LGBTIQ+ community?
- When do you expect eSafety to intervene? In what capacity?

