



Young people and gaming

Methodology report

February 2024



eSafety acknowledges all First Nations peoples for their continuing care of everything Country encompasses – land, waters and community. We pay our respects to First Nations peoples, and to Elders past, present and future.

Introduction

This report outlines the methodology used for eSafety's online gaming research. The research study took a mixed-methods approach and comprised two phases: focus groups and a home diary study, conducted in August 2023, followed by an online survey of young people, conducted in September 2023.

The study aimed to build on our understanding of young people's experiences of online gaming and to provide an updated evidence base to inform the development of appropriate online safety information for young people and their parents and carers. It also aimed to assist eSafety in fulfilling its regulatory responsibilities relating to cyberbullying on online gaming platforms.

A total of 2,024 young people living in Australia, and their parents or carers, participated in the survey, including 1,799 young people who had played online games in the past year. An additional 43 young people took part in the focus groups and diary study.

eSafety understands the impact of researchers' intersecting experiences of power and marginalisation on our research and analysis. The team that authored this report is made up of cis-gender women of European heritage. Identities represented in the team include parents, queer women and those with disability. Our team has expertise in quantitative and qualitative methodologies, online harms and safety issues, and the lived experiences of people at risk of online harms.

Ethical considerations

This project was submitted as part of the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) approval process. Ethics approval for the project was received from Bellberry Ethics Committee on 10 August 2023, ID 22CeSC084.

Study materials were reviewed by Dr Rhett Loban of Macquarie University's School of Education for cultural safety and relevance to gamers. Dr Loban's research interests include culture, game-based learning and virtual reality. A Torres Strait Islander with connections to Mabuyag and Boigu, he led the development of Torres Strait Virtual Reality, a game used at the University of New South Wales to teach about Torres Strait Islander culture and knowledge.

Professor Daniel Johnson of QUT and the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child reviewed the study materials, key findings and conclusions for alignment with the latest research into young people and online gaming. Professor Johnson's areas of expertise include media psychology, video games, wellbeing, human-computer interaction and questionnaire design.

Steps were taken to reduce the risk of harm to participants, to ensure that their best interests were served and that the research conducted provided for participants' safety, emotional and psychological security, and wellbeing (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018). Informed consent to participate in the research was obtained for study participation by providing information about the kinds of questions participants would be asked and by explaining the potential risks of participating. In addition, a protocol was developed to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all participants in case of distress during study participation. More specifically, help-seeking/self-support information was made available to participants throughout the study. Informed consent to participate in all activities in the study was sought from both parents and the children and young people themselves. All potentially sensitive questions in the survey gave young people the option not to answer.

The study

The research study comprised two phases: qualitative focus groups and a home diary study, followed by an online survey of young people.

Focus groups and diary study

The qualitative phase of this research comprised four one-hour online text-based focus groups with young people aged 14–17, two 90-minute in-person focus groups with young people aged 12–13 and a diary study with young people aged 8–11. All participants played video games online with others and played at least once a week.

Questions asked in this phase of the research informed the survey development and complemented the survey findings, adding depth and nuance and drawing out young people's experiences of playing video games online in their own words.

Diary study

A diary study is a qualitative method that gathers insights about user behaviours, activities and experiences in their own words, contextualised within participants' everyday lives. The objective for the diary study was to capture insights into the online gaming experiences of younger children in a way that would be accessible to them. Young gamers aged 8–11 were sent a paper-based workbook with a series of activities to be completed at home. Activities included prompts to:

- ask their parent, or another trusted adult, to help them record a voice note of them describing their favourite game and why they like it
- list the bad things that can happen when playing online games
- indicate who they play online games with
- make a collage to represent what they like about gaming (accompanied by a written explanation or audio recording)
- use emojis to represent how gaming makes them feel (accompanied by a written explanation or audio recording).

Participants were provided with a workbook, pencils and other necessary equipment.

Focus groups

The objective for the focus groups was to explore young people's online gaming experiences in depth. Four one-hour online text-based focus groups were conducted with young people aged 14–17, and two 90-minute in-person focus groups were conducted with young people aged 12–13. In-person focus groups were run for 12–13 year-olds to ensure that the gamers in this age group could participate fully. In-person focus groups were longer than online focus groups to accommodate ice-breaker activities, breaks, and interactive question-and-answer formats. All focus group discussions centred on the following:

- why young people game, and what it means to them
- how gaming makes young people feel
- the risks and negative experiences young people face when gaming, and the impacts of these
- the benefits young people associate with gaming
- how young people respond if they experience harm while gaming online
- what proactive strategies young people employ to stay safe online while gaming
- what young people want adults in their lives to understand about gaming.

Online survey

The purpose of the survey was to investigate the prevalence of different types of gaming activities, interactions and experiences, both positive and negative, among young people in Australia and strategies used to help them stay safe while gaming. The 20-minute survey consisted of 13 questions for parents and carers and 54 questions for young gamers.

The survey questions for parents and carers included:

- child demographics
- whether their child had played online games in the past year, who they had played with and how long they usually spent gaming per day (if their child was aged 8–12)
- rules and practices used to support their child to game safely
- their feelings about their child playing online games.

The survey questions for young people included:

- whether young people had played online games in the past year
- young people's online gaming activities, including how long they usually spent gaming per day (if aged 13-17) and interactions with other people
- motivations for playing online games
- benefits young gamers associated with gaming
- positive and negative experiences while gaming
- impacts of negative experiences while gaming
- responses to negative experiences while gaming
- barriers to taking action or seeking support in relation to negative gaming experiences
- proactive strategies used to stay safe while gaming
- young gamers' views on whether enough is being done to make online gaming safe for them
- additional demographics (gender and sexuality).

The survey instrument was cognitively tested with 10 gamers aged 8–17 to ensure they were able to understand the survey questions and response options.

Throughout the survey, young people were asked to think about the 'past year' when answering the questions. They were also asked to include any experiences or interactions they may have had with other players in gaming forums, chat rooms or streaming platforms, as well as in online games.

To reduce respondent fatigue, follow-up questions about responses to, and the impacts of, negative experiences were only asked for up to three types of negative gaming experiences per participant.

Some questions and specific response options were only asked of teen gamers (aged 13–17) – for example, where cognitive testing indicated that younger gamers may not understand them, or where the questions/options related to more complex concepts such as sexuality. Where applicable, this is indicated in footnotes or in the base descriptions accompanying figures and tables.

Focus group and diary study sample

A research panel provider (Q&A Market Research) was used to recruit focus group and diary study participants via their parents. All participants played online games with others and played at least once a week.

A recruitment screener questionnaire was used to ensure that a range of young people participated in the qualitative elements of the study, including in terms of age, gender, geographical location, cultural or language background, disability and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity.

A total of 34 young people participated in focus groups (21 online, 13 in person). Focus groups were divided by gender, and participants were given the option of sharing a gender other than girl or boy with researchers; however, none did so. Fifteen focus group participants were girls (9 online, 6 in person) and 19 were boys (12 online, 7 in person).

Participants were given the option of sharing more information about their sexuality with researchers. Of the 20 who did so, one young man and one young woman identified as bisexual, one young woman identified as lesbian and one young woman identified as queer.

Nine diary study workbooks were received from participants: five boys and four girls (three 8-year-olds, one 9-year-old, four 10-year-olds, and one 12-year-old).

Survey sample

A total of 2,024 young people, as well as their parents and carers, participated in the survey. Of these, 1,799 were identified as gamers who went on to complete the full survey.

A non-probability-based online panel provider (Octopus Group) was used to recruit survey participants for this project, with young people recruited via their parents. The survey was conducted across Australia. Quotas were set based on 2021 Census data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a; 2021b) to ensure the sample was representative of young people aged 8–17 in Australia in terms of age, gender, geographical location and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity. As Table 1 shows, the final sample was sufficiently representative in terms of these key variables without the need for weighting.

Table 1: Survey respondents: Key demographics

Participant demographics (provided by parents)	Population (8-17 yrs)	Sample %	Sample n
Gender by age			
Male aged 8–11	21%	21%	427
Female aged 8–11	20%	18%	374
Male aged 12–14	16%	16%	326
Female aged 12–14	15%	15%	303
Male aged 15–17	14%	14%	289
Female aged 15–17	14%	14%	290
Gender diverse (any age)	Unknown	1%	15
State/territory			
NSW	31%	32%	642
Vic	25%	25%	501
Qld	21%	21%	424
WA	11%	11%	217
SA	7%	7%	143
ACT, Tas, NT	5%	5%	95
Unknown (e.g. invalid postcode)	-	0.1%	2
Location			
Greater Capital City Statistical Area	66%	66%	1,344
Not GCCSA	34%	33%	676
Unknown (e.g. invalid postcode)	-	0.2%	4
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people			
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	6%	7%	137
Neither	94%	93%	1,887
Total sample	Young people aged 8–17	100%	100%
			2,024

The survey sample also included young people with disability (15%: n=307) and those who spoke a language other than English at home (13%: n=254).

The demographic information provided in Table 1 was provided by parents and carers. Young gamers were also given the option to answer questions about their gender and sexuality. Nine in 10 gamers (90%: n=1,613) chose to share their gender identity. Of these gamers, 1% (n=16) identified as trans or gender diverse and an additional 3% (n=55) identified as a gender that differed from that indicated by their parent or carer. Just over 8 in 10 teen gamers (82%: n=762) chose to share their sexuality. Among these gamers, 10% identified as LGB+.

Analysis

Focus group transcripts and diary study workbooks were coded thematically using the research software Condens. A coding framework was iteratively developed following Braun and Clarke's (2019) method for thematic analysis.

Octopus Group hosted the survey, collected and cleaned the survey data, and provided eSafety with raw data. eSafety checked and analysed the data using Q Research software. Findings were checked and confirmed by a second eSafety researcher, with constructed variables being verified using SPSS Statistics software.

Apparent differences between subgroups of young gamers who participated in the survey – such as boys and young men, and girls and young women – were tested for statistical significance using Q Research Software and only reported on when the difference was statistically significant (as indicated by arrows in relevant data tables).

In cases where only a sub-set of gamers were asked a question, the results may have been 're-based' on all gamers, to provide an accurate incidence of behaviours or experiences among young gamers. Each table and figure in this report includes a description of the base used for analysis purposes.

Free text survey response questions were coded thematically by a member of the eSafety research team and verified by a second member of the team.

Young people who indicated that they identified as trans or gender diverse (n=16) were asked how they would like to be included for the purpose of analysis – as a boy or male, as a girl or female, or as non-binary.

Limitations

- The findings detailed in this report are reliant on self-reported data. This means that the gaming-related harms and benefits noted in the report are based on participants' experiences and perceptions as they have shared them with us, as opposed to independent observation or assessment. Related to this, if gamers have become used to aggressive cultures in the context of certain games, they may not recognise aggressive or bullying behaviours as problematic, which could lead to underreporting (McInroy & Mishna, 2017). Although the survey instrument used for this study did not explicitly ask respondents if they had 'negative' experiences while gaming, this may have been inferred given the context of the response options and the knowledge that the study was being conducted by the eSafety Commissioner.

- The survey sample was sourced from an online panel of people who have agreed to be invited to participate in online research on a variety of topics, which is technically a convenience sample. Results from convenience samples may be subject to a range of biases when compared with results from research using probability-based sampling. Although quotas were used to control for demographic skews, controlling for psychographic skews arising from differential approaches to participation attraction is more challenging.
- This research draws primarily on research with young people, with reference to data drawn from three or four survey questions asked of their parents and carers, as described above. The study did not include a comprehensive mixed-methods investigation of the experiences and attitudes of young gamers' parents and carers.
- This research focuses on harms that are covered by eSafety's functions and powers under the *Online Safety Act 2021*, including abusive behaviours and exposure to harmful content while gaming online. We note that young gamers may also be exposed to other types of harm that are not identified in this report, such as fraud, scams, malware, viruses and age-inappropriate gambling content. Similarly, the study did not investigate 'internet gaming disorder' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Research into psychological harms and online gaming is best conducted by an agency or institution with the requisite clinical expertise to design and conduct this research in a robust and safe manner.
- Specific survey findings for trans and gender-diverse young people were not separated out in the main survey data collected. This was due to the small sample size for this group, which is an inherent challenge in statistical analysis. As a result, our findings are unable to reflect the specific experiences of young trans and gender-diverse gamers. This report also does not discuss young people's online gaming experiences as they relate to their experience of disability, the language they speak at home or their First Nations identity. Future reports separating out data into demographic subgroups will be considered based on any significant differences identified during further analysis.

Note to the reader

Percentages in data tables and figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding or to question formats that allowed multiple answers to be given. Tables and figures may not include response options such as 'prefer not to answer', 'don't know', 'another reason' or 'none of these'.

Key terms

LGB+ young people: survey respondents who described their sexual orientation as ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, ‘queer’, ‘bisexual’ or ‘asexual’, or who said ‘I don’t know’, ‘I’m still working it out’ or ‘I use a different word’.

Online game: a video game played online.

Parents and carers: parents, carers, guardians, co-parents, or any other adult with parent-like responsibilities for a child.

Trans and gender-diverse young people: survey respondents who described their gender as ‘trans boy’, ‘trans girl’, ‘non-binary’, ‘sistergirl’ or ‘brotherboy’, or who said ‘I’m not sure’ or ‘I use a different term’.

Young gamer: young people aged 8–17 who have played online games at any time in the past year, on any device. In addition, the term ‘child gamer’ refers to a gamer who is aged 8–12, and ‘teen gamer’ refers to a gamer who is aged 13–17.

Young people: describes young people aged 8–17 years (unless otherwise specified).

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