Tipping the balance

LGBTIQ+ teens' experiences negotiating connection, self-expression and harm online

Aussie Kids Online

June 2024

Australian Government | **e**Safety Commissioner

Acknowledgement of Country

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

Acknowledgements

The eSafety research program

The eSafety Commissioner (eSafety) helps Australians to have safer and more positive experiences online. The eSafety research program supports, encourages, conducts and evaluates research about online safety for Australians. We do this so that:

- our programs, and policy and regulatory functions, are informed by evidence
- robust, citizen-centred evidence on the prevalence and impact of online harms is available to stakeholders
- the evidence base on what works to prevent and remediate online harms continues to grow.

eSafety research is available at: **eSafety.gov.au/research**

For enquiries about the eSafety research program, please contact **research@eSafety.gov.au**

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Content warning

This report contains discussion of online sexual harms, including image-based abuse, sexual exploitation and sexual extortion, non-consensual sexual communication and pressure to share sexual images. Please consider if reading this report is right for you at this time.

Contents

About this report

For LGBTIQ+ teens in Australia, the internet can be a place both of meaningful connection and harmful interactions, of expansive self-expression and distressing content. LGBTIQ+ teens navigate online environments that are at turns welcoming or hostile, affirming or heteronormative. In doing so, they build online worlds where they can connect with people like them, access support, expand what they know about the world and express themselves creatively.

This report is the fourth in a series that draws on the findings of the 2021 Aussie Kids Online survey, which explored the online experiences of over 3,500 children and young people in Australia. The survey findings show the complex and at times contradictory online experiences of 305 LGBTIQ+ young people aged 14–17 who took part in the larger survey. The findings detailed in this report confirm and expand on what is already known about the substantial social and emotional benefits that LGBTIQ+ young people can experience from being online, including peer support, ongoing friendship, and having a place where they can hang out with other people their age.

However, while LGBTIQ+ teens can be resourceful and resilient as they negotiate mixed experiences online, homophobic and transphobic hate speech, harmful content, and risks to their safety and security may jeopardise their access to positive online experiences. Name calling, threats of violence, and messages aimed to harass or embarrass are directed towards LGBTIQ+ teens at higher-than-average rates, with potential impacts on their confidence and self-esteem. Some of LGBTIQ+ teens' online behaviours also carry a risk of grooming, image-based abuse and other online harms which, if realised, can have significant negative impacts on their lives. It follows, then, that many LGBTIQ+ teens have a nuanced attitude towards the internet, embracing the connection and community it offers, while being wary of the harm it can cause. This report details how LGBTIQ+ teens navigate the risks and benefits of being online, and the experiences that can tip the balance between the two one way or another.

Teens who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer and more have distinct online experiences based on their specific contexts, patterns of internet use and identities. In this report, we consider LGBTIQ+ teens as a group, capturing their shared strengths and the shared risks they face online. Close attention is paid to gauging the impact of the young people's online experiences, measuring their perceptions of the internet, identifying the benefits of going online and noting their reactions to negative online incidents in the past 12 months.

Findings from this research will inform eSafety's ongoing programs and initiatives that support LGBTIQ+ Australians to have safer online experiences.

This research also aims to contribute to the international evidence base on children's internet use and is eSafety's fourth publication as a member of Global Kids Online.

List of terms

Cisgender	A person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex they were identified as having at birth. That is, someone who is not trans or gender diverse.
Heteronormative	This term describes a worldview, often not consciously held, that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality. Implicit in this worldview is the idea that gender is a binary concept and that it is normal and natural to be cisgender.
Heterosexuality	Sexual or romantic attraction felt by men exclusively towards women, and by women exclusively towards men.
Intersex	Intersex people are born with physical or biological sex characteristics (such as sexual anatomy, reproductive organs, hormonal patterns and/or chromosomal patterns) that are more diverse than stereotypical definitions for male or female bodies.
LGBTIQ+	An acronym used for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex or queer, as well as others who identify as same or multigender attracted or gender diverse but who use a wide range of different identity terms. In this report, we include teens who are questioning their gender and/or sexuality.
Sexual exploitation	Actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, power or trust, for sexual purposes, including but not limited to profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another.
Sexual extortion	Also known as sextortion; a form of blackmail where someone threatens to share a nude or sexual image or video of another person unless they give in to their demands.
Transgender	Anyone whose gender doesn't match the sex they were assigned at birth. In this report, we include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Brotherboys and Sistergirls when we use the term 'trans' or 'transgender'.

Key findings

For LGBTIQ+ teens, the internet offers a space where they can hang out, have fun, explore, and express themselves safely and, often, anonymously. In a world in which differences can be both celebrated and shunned, online spaces can offer connection with others in the LGBTIQ+ community, which enables support, learning and friendship.

However, the digital environment isn't without risk, with the survey finding that LGBTIQ+ young people are more likely to have negative online experiences than Australian young people overall. Many LGBTIQ+ young people possess a level of digital literacy that enables them to respond to these experiences quickly and effectively, though the impact of negative online experiences can be significant.

LGBTIQ+ teens have mixed feelings about the internet

- Our survey found that it was more common for LGBTIQ+ teens to express mixed feelings when describing the internet (41%) compared to the national average (28%), for whom positive, negative and mixed feelings were more evenly split. This indicates that while LGBTIQ+ teens enjoy the benefits of going online, they acknowledge the potential harms of online spaces.

The benefits for LGBTIQ+ teens of being online

LGBTIQ+ young people spent more time online to learn about the world and share their interests

- LGBTIQ+ teens were more likely to spend 7 hours or more of their spare time online during weekdays (28% compared with 18%) and weekends (44% compared with 35%) than the national average.

- LGBTIQ+ teens were more likely to visit news sites (59% compared with 47%) and discuss social and political problems (38% compared with 21%) than the national average.

- LGBTIQ+ teens were much more likely to have shared their interests or hobbies (58% compared with 41%), created and posted video or music content (29% compared with 23%) and to have shared a blogpost or story online (29%, compared with 21%) than the national average.

LGBTIQ+ teens use the internet to hang out with friends and to meet new people

- Over three-quarters of LGBTIQ+ teens used social media sites daily (76%, compared with the national average of 67%), with most LGBTIQ+ teens having a presence across multiple platforms.

- LGBTIQ+ teens were much more likely to have used the internet to make new friends (37%), compared with the national average (25%).

- Over half of LGBTIQ+ teens (51%) had used the internet to connect with someone who had a different background from them, compared with the national average (31%).

LGBTIQ+ teens are much more likely to seek support and look for health information online

- Just over 1 in 3 LGBTIQ+ teens sought emotional support online (36%, compared with the national average of 18%).

- Just over 4 in 10 LGBTIQ+ teens (42%) searched for mental health information at least once a week (compared with the national average of 20%). The same proportion (42%) searched for physical health information at least once a week (compared with the national average of 26%).

- The internet is an important source of sexual health information for LGBTIQ+ teens, with 31% looking for it online at least once a week, compared with the national average of 15%.

LGBTIQ+ teens are very likely to feel more comfortable being themselves online than in person

- Over half of the LGBTIQ+ teens surveyed said they found it easier to be themselves online than when they are with people in face-to-face situations (51%, compared with the national average of 40%).

- LGBTIQ+ teens were more likely than the national average to have discussed different matters when online (53%, compared with 38%), including private things they don't talk about face-to-face (45%, compared with 27%).

The challenges and risks for LGBTIQ+ teens of being online

LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely to engage in risky activities online

- LGBTIQ+ teens were twice as likely to have sent sexual messages as the national average (26%, compared with 13%), or to have posted a sexual message where others could see it (15%, compared with 7%).

- Two-thirds of LGBTIQ+ teens had received a sexual message (63%, compared with the national average of 48%), while 16% had shared naked pictures of themselves online (compared with the national average of 7%).

LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely to have had a potentially hurtful or nasty interaction online

- Eight in 10 LGBTIQ+ teens (80%) had seen potentially harmful content in the past year (compared with the national average of 63%), including sites showing hate messages (60%, compared with 42%), self-harm (41%, compared with 26%), and drug-taking (50%, compared with 38%).

- LGBTIQ+ teens were much more likely than the national average to have been treated in a hurtful way online (67%, compared with 56%).

- LGBTIQ+ teens experienced hate speech at twice the national average rate (31%, compared with 15%), while 1 in 4 had been threatened with physical harm while online (25%, compared with the national average of 16%).

- LGBTIQ+ teens were more likely to acknowledge that they had treated someone badly online (38%, compared with the national average of 29%).

LGBTIQ+ teens are strongly affected by hurtful or nasty online experiences

- LGBTIQ+ teens were more likely than the national average to have reported feeling helpless or without power (33%, compared with 28%), and to report mental health issues stemming from a hurtful or nasty online experience (33%, compared with 24%).

- Three-quarters of LGBTIQ+ teens said they had experienced conflicts with loved ones because of the time they spent online (75%, compared with the national average of 68%).

- They were also more likely than the national average to have gone without sleeping or eating due to the time they had spent online (65%, compared with 51%), and to have suffered a drop in school grades (64%, compared with 53%).

LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely to take some form of action when they experience something negative online

- LGBTIQ+ teens were found to be more likely to report a hurtful/harmful experience to social media platforms (31%, compared with the national average of 24%), to close their social media or gaming account (28%, compared with 19%), and to report the issue to eSafety (9%, compared with 6%).

Methodology

In 2021, eSafety commissioned research to explore the opportunities and risks that the internet presents for all Australian children, including those who identify as LGBTIQ+. For the purpose of this research, LGBTIQ+ teens include those who identify as:

... lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer. The '+' reflects others who identify as same or multigender attracted or gender diverse but who use a wide range of different identity terms (Hill et al., 2021). The term also includes those who are questioning their sexuality and/or gender.

The research was conducted from July to September 2021 and comprised a national online survey of over 3,500 young people aged 8–17, along with their parents or carers.

The survey was an adaptation of the Global Kids Online questionnaire,[1] and was conducted in two parts:

- In an initial 10-minute parent/carer survey, parents and carers were asked key demographic questions regarding their income level, language spoken at home, location, and whether their child had a disability or difficulty. They were then asked about their perceptions of their child's online activity and internet use, and their awareness of their child's negative online experiences.

- In a 20-minute youth survey, children aged 8–17 (as identified by their parent/carer) were asked for more detail about their digital skills, online activity, internet use, exposure to harmful content, and any negative experiences they may have had on the internet. Only young people aged 14–17 (n=1,349) were asked if they identified as LGBTIQ+. Those who so identified are the central focus of this report.

An additional 'booster' group of (n=61) LGBTIQ+ teens was added to augment the LGBTIQ+ sample size (n=244). In total, the LGBTIQ+ teen sample comprised 305 young people aged 14–17 who specifically identified as LGBTIQ+ or who, when asked, responded that they were not sure or were undecided. Without a definite response, the latter teens (n=76) are regarded as questioning their identity. Because this definition of LGBTIQ+ teens differs from that used previously in this series, there may be some discrepancies in the figures reported between publications. Typically, these differences are minor, amounting to 2 or 3 percentage points.

While Aussie Kids Online is a paired survey instrument, only findings from the youth section of the survey are presented in this report. Because the parent/carer survey didn't ask questions about their child's gender and/or sexual diversity, digital parenting practices could not be linked to the LGBTIQ+ identity of young people in the study. In addition, while the

1. Global Kids Online, *Tools for Researchers*.

61 LGBTIQ+ teen participants in the booster group were given the youth survey to fill out, their parents or carers were not given the corresponding parent/carer survey to complete.

Among the LGBTIQ+ sample are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (n=34), those who speak a language other than English at home (n=81), those who have experienced disability or difficulty for 6 months or longer (n=158), those who are from a low socio-economic background (n=77) and those who live outside of a capital city (n=57) (Table 1). Many of these demographic features overlap in individual participants.

Table 1: Youth survey respondents aged 14–17, LGBTIQ+ and entire sample: Key demographics

Characteristic	Number of LGBTIQ+	% LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305)	% of entire sample aged 14–17 (n=1,349)
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	34	11 ⬆	5
Speak a language other than English at home	81	27	22
Have experienced disability or difficulty for 6 months or more	158	52 ⬆	34
Low socio-economic background	77	25	28
Live outside a capital city	57	19 ⬇	27
Girls	184	60 ⬆	53
Boys	88	29 ⬇	45
My gender isn't listed	28	9 ⬆	1
TOTAL SAMPLE	**305**	**100**	**100**

Note: Upward arrows ⬆ denote results significantly higher, and downward arrows ⬇ denote results significantly lower, than comparable sub-groups at a 95% confidence interval.

One child per household completed the survey. Parent/carer consent was obtained for a child to participate in the survey.

This survey was submitted as part of the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) approval process, with ethics approval granted on 6 July 2021 from the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, ID 5390.

Analysis

Significance testing was applied at a 95% confidence interval to compare the relevant sub-groups (i.e. LGBTIQ+ teens compared with the Australian teen cohort) in the quantitative analysis. The margins of error are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Aussie Kids Online dataset: Margins of error for LGBTI+ sample

Cohort	Number of young people	% Australian teen sample (14–17)	Margin of error +/–*	
			Prevalence 10%	Prevalence 50%
LGBTIQ+ teens	305	22	1.57	2.61

At 95% confidence level.

Open-ended responses were thematically coded according to the procedure outlined in Braun and Clarke (2021). Throughout the report, the sample for qualitative data will vary from the total number of participants as only codable responses have been included in the analysis. The full methodology report for the Aussie Kids Online research series is available on the eSafety website: **www.esafety.gov.au/research/mind-gap**

Limitations

In the survey, teens' gender and sexual identity, as well as potential intersex status, were captured by asking if they identify as LGBTIQ+. This method of data collection meant that we were unable to differentiate the experiences of teens who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, questioning and more. Each of these terms can be used to describe distinct, but not mutually exclusive, experiences of gender, sexuality, the body, identity and community. People who use different terms within the LGBTIQ+ acronym to describe themselves can also experience distinct, but not mutually exclusive, forms of stigma and discrimination. Research shows, for example, that the mental health outcomes of trans and gender-diverse teens are different from those of sexuality-diverse teens (Hill et al., 2021).

This report is unable to delve into the unique, and uniquely intersecting, experiences of our LGBTIQ+ participants, and is therefore limited in the identity-specific insights it can offer. Gender identity was collected in the survey by asking participants if they identified as male, female or 'my gender isn't listed'. The number of participants who selected 'my gender isn't listed' was too small to analyse and report on separately. Only participants who selected that they identified as LGBTIQ+ or 'prefer not to answer' are included in the focus sample.

eSafety is committed to honouring and exploring the specific challenges and benefits that different LGBTIQ+ teens experience online. In the time since the survey on which this report is based was commissioned, eSafety has brought its demographic data collection methods in line with best practice (TransHub, 2021).

As a result of our demographic data collection, intersex teens may have been included in this report as part of an LGBTIQ+ grouping.[2] We don't know how many participants may have identified themselves as intersex, only that some of those who selected that they identify as LGBTIQ+ may be intersex. However, given that LGBTIQ+ studies often have very low rates of intersex participants (Hill et al., 2021), it's our expectation that very few of the teens in this survey who identified themselves as LGBTIQ+ are intersex. When intersex people are grouped with LGBTQ+ people, as in the LGBTIQ+ acronym, their unique and specific needs and experiences can be erased and become conflated with those of the gender- and sexuality-diverse population (Carpenter, 2022; Jones et al., 2016). At the same time, intersex people, regardless of gender or sexuality, can and do experience discrimination and stigma related to sex and gender norms (Carpenter, 2022; Intersex Peer Support Australia, 2023). As such, the findings in this report don't address the specific experiences of intersex teens but are inclusive of some of their experiences.

2. Intersex people have innate sex characteristics that don't fit medical and social norms for female or male bodies, and that create risks or experiences of stigma, discrimination and harm (Intersex Human Rights Australia, 2023). Intersex is a physical variation, not a gender or sexuality. Intersex people have diverse experiences of gender and sexuality, just like non-intersex (endosex) people. As such, they may or may not identify as gender or sexuality diverse.

During the period this survey was conducted, several of Australia's major cities were locked down to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus. This would have impacted LGBTIQ+ teens' online engagement as well as their wellbeing, which in turn may have affected our findings. Further, religious, family or personal sensitivity to LGBTIQ+ identity and experiences may result in young people being reluctant or unable to respond openly to questions regarding sexual orientation. For young people in particular, gender and sexuality can be a source of anxiety, along with feelings of vulnerability, and fear of rejection or of violence from peers (Strauss et al., 2017). Parents/caregivers may have been present while participants were completing the survey, potentially resulting in some LGBTIQ+ teens not disclosing their identity to us. The LGBTIQ+ sample used in this report includes those young people who were willing or able to identify as LGBTIQ+, or who said they weren't sure or were undecided at the time of the survey.
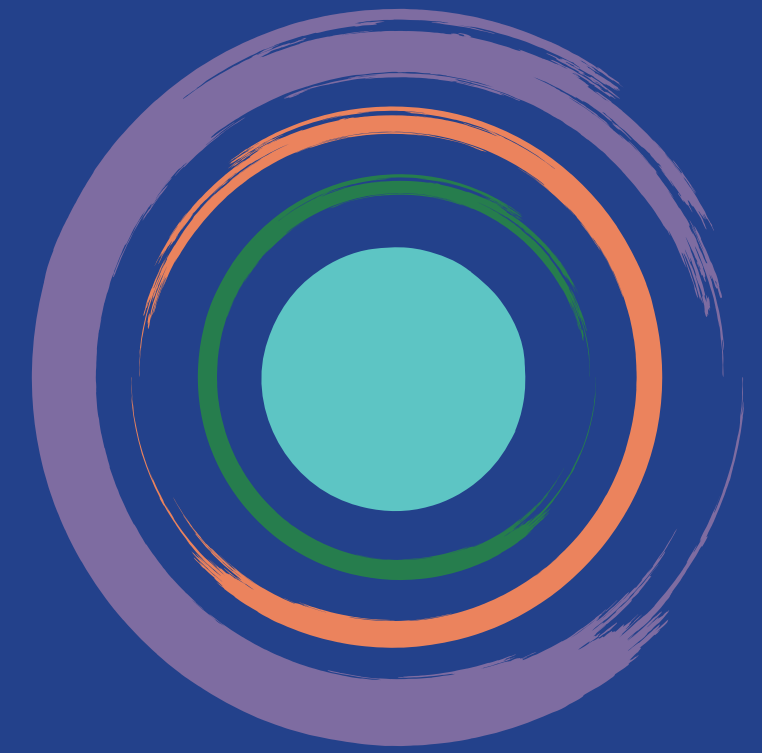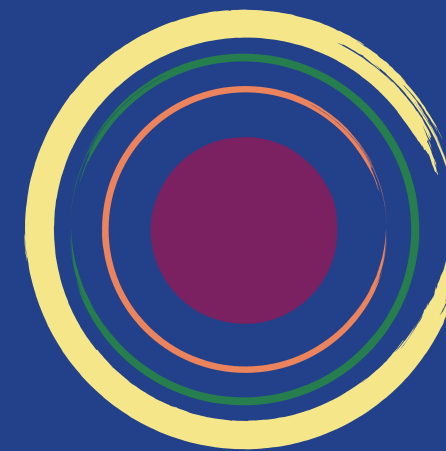
Finally, the demographic composition of the LGBTIQ+ sample (shown in Table 1) isn't reflective of the wider national average, with higher proportions of participants who are young women, young people with disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and smaller proportions of respondents from regional areas. We therefore acknowledge that the data received from the LGBTIQ+ participants may be, at least in part, skewed by the demographic composition of the sample.

Positionality statement

eSafety understands the impact of researchers' intersecting experiences of power and marginalisation on our research and analysis. The authors of this report are a queer cisgender woman and a heterosexual cisgender woman, both of whom are of European heritage. Identities represented in the broader team who contributed to the research design and analysis include men and women, parents, parents of queer young people, those with disability and a woman of Asian heritage. Our team has expertise in quantitative and qualitative methodologies, online harms and safety, and the lived experience of LGBTIQ+ young people growing up in Australia.

How LGBTIQ+ teens feel about the internet

Like most teens, Australia's LGBTIQ+ young people connect with others, expand their knowledge, and share hobbies and interests through digital media. While it is well established that online spaces can be joyful, supportive and informative for LGBTIQ+ teens (Berger et al., 2022), research shows that internet use can also be less positive, with many LGBTIQ+ teens encountering potentially harmful interactions and content. The attitudes of LGBTIQ+ teens reflect these experiences, with this group being far more likely to express both positive and negative feelings towards the internet than the national average.

In order to capture their attitudes towards the internet, young people were asked: **'If the internet were an animal, what animal would it be and why?'** The responses provided by LGBTIQ+ teens reflect nuanced perceptions of the internet and an awareness of the complexity of their online experiences.

As shown in the word cloud in Figure 1, the animal choices of the LGBTIQ+ teens indicate a mixed view of the internet. We found that LGBTIQ+ teens think about the internet as dangerous yet calm like a predator (28%), as lovable yet vicious like a pet (17%), and as something both helpful and to be fearful of, like a venomous animal (13%).

Predatory animal (28%)

'**A wolf** because it is fast and sturdy and is a dangerous predator'

14-year-old boy
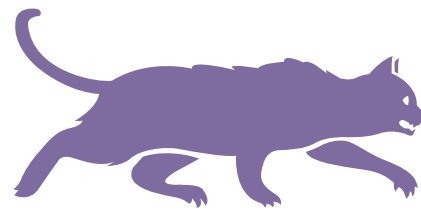
'**A wild cat:** can be nice and calm but can be aggressive too'

15-year-old boy

'**A bear:** nice and cuddly but it will bite my head off if I'm not careful'

17-year-old girl
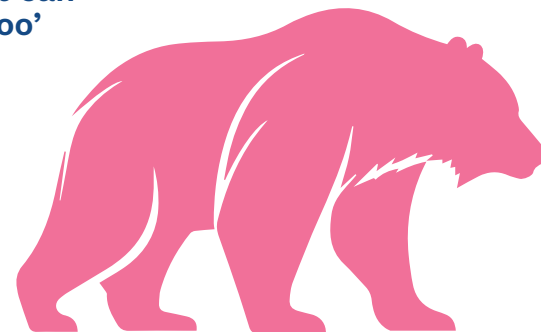
Domestic animal (17%)

'**Dogs** can be really nice and make you feel good but if they aren't trained properly, they can be nasty and hurt you'

16-year-old girl

'**A cat** because it can be happy and friendly one minute and biting and clawing the next minute'

14-year-old girl

Venomous animal (13%)
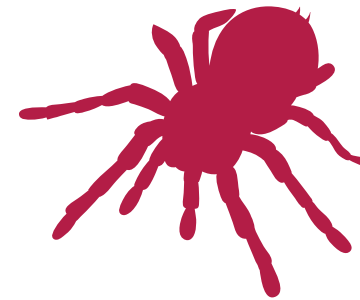
'Probably **a spider**? They help a lot overall (getting rid of pesky bugs and stuff) but if you go about it the wrong way and provoke it the bite can be quite nasty'

16-year-old teen (my gender isn't listed)

'**A bee** because it can do good things and help you (i.e., produce honey) but other times it can hurt you (i.e., sting)'

16-year-old boy

'**A snake** maybe? The biblical symbolism, especially with offering of knowledge, temptation, and the potential to be dangerous if you get on its wrong side, even if it has the potential to be domesticated'

16-year-old teen (my gender isn't listed)

Other types of animals, including flying animals and sea mammals (42%)

'**A crow**, because they are smart but also mischievous'

15-year-old boy

'**A seal** since they are often seen as cute but can harm you if you aren't careful'

17-year-old teen (my gender isn't listed)
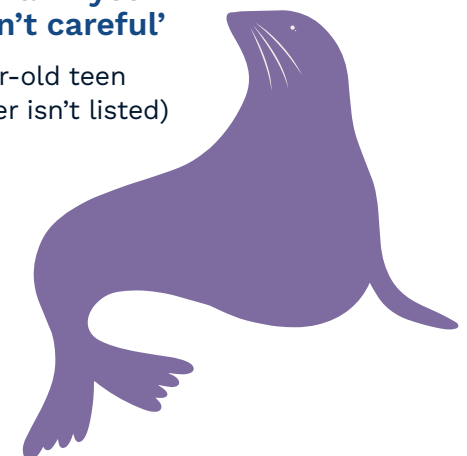
Figure 1: Word cloud of animals chosen by LGBTIQ+ teens in response to the question, 'If the internet were an animal, what animal would it be and why?' (n=258)

Question L4: If the internet were an animal, what animal would it be and why?
Base: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=258).

Analysis of the sentiment expressed in their responses to the question indicated that the LGBTIQ+ teens in our survey were substantially more likely to express mixed feelings towards the internet (41%) than the national average (28%). As shown in Table 3, just over 1 in 5 LGBTIQ+ teens had a singularly negative perception of the internet, while the same proportion had a fully positive view of it. These contrasting perceptions are further demonstrated in Figure 2, which shows the two most common words used by LGBTIQ+ teens to describe their animal choice – and therefore the internet – were 'cute' and 'dangerous'.

Table 3: Perceptions of the internet: LGBTIQ+ teens compared with the national average (aged 14–17 years)

Sentiment*	LGBTIQ+			Total sample	
	Frequency	Percentage		Frequency	Percentage
Mixed	84	41		238	28
Negative	47	23		236	26
Positive	45	22		257	28
Neutral	30	15		177	19
TOTAL	**206**	**100**		**908**	**100**

Note: Responses expressed by survey participants were analysed for overarching sentiment. Mixed responses were those that used both positive and negative descriptors, such as 'useful' and 'dangerous'. Neutral sentiments included 'fluffy' and 'layers'.
Question L4: If the internet were an animal, what animal would it be and why?
Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=206); total sample (aged 14–17) (n=908).

Figure 2: Word cloud of themes in LGBTIQ+ teens' responses to 'If the internet were an animal, what animal would it be?'

Treats You Well
Bite Hurt Stores Information Pretty Sweet
Violent Environmentally-Friendly Like Change
Consumed Imitative
Complex Secret Beautiful Speed Standards
Temptation Preys Intriguing Quick
Different Paths Information Gathering Sturdy Memory
Cool Deceitful Fun Bad Everywhere Search
Knowledge Big Surprise Look Cute
Fast Soft Scary Kill Drain-life
Lead Goofy Freedom Hilarious Poison
Angry Dangerous Vicious
Devours Multiple
Cruising Strike Magical Evil Sly Danger Changing
Doesn't Care Killing Friend Watching Aggressive
Nice Know Better Chill Demand Attention Spiky Harm
Helpful Burrowing Buzzing Reliable Strong
Friendly Idiotic Interesting Stinky Stung Sneaky
Information Large Loyal Adaptive
Cuddly Smart Fine Unpredictable
Nasty Useful Inappropriate Attack Love
King Help Intelligent Slow Loud
Curious Good

Question L4: If the internet were an animal, what animal would it be?
Base: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=206).
Note: Some entries corrected for spelling.

The LGBTIQ+ teens who expressed a mixed view of the internet – that is, there could be both good and bad things about it – typically framed this in one of three ways.

First, many LGBTIQ+ teens indicated that they thought the internet could be good unless the user lacks certain skills and knowledge.
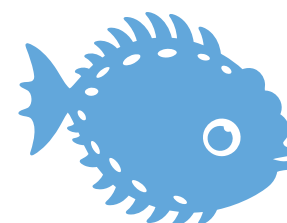
'It would be a **pufferfish** because [if you] do nothing that will harm you the fish will not puff up, but when you do something risky, it will puff up and something bad will happen'

16-year-old teen
(my gender isn't listed)

'**A bee** because everybody needs bees but at the same time bees can sting you if you provoke them'

16-year-old girl

'I believe the internet would be a **dog**. This is because dogs can be cute and sweet and helpful but if you agitate it, it can become aggressive'

15-year-old girl
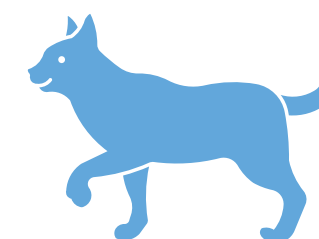
'**A wild small cat** of some kind. Lovely if you know what to/ not to do, and dangerous if you are naive or uninformed'

17-year-old boy

Second, some LGBTIQ+ young people saw the internet as superficially good, and as concealing its negative aspects.

'I think it would be a **polar bear** as [while] it may often look nice on the surface, it has the capacity and very real threat of being ferocious and violent'

17-year-old girl
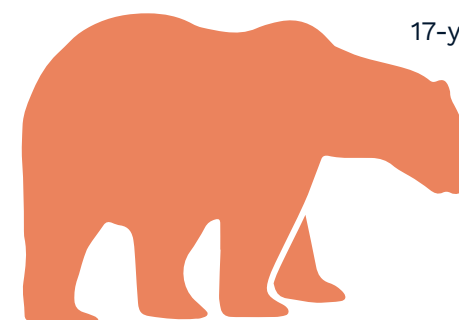
'**A snake** because it can seem cute but strikes'

17-year-old girl

Finally, some young people appeared to perceive the internet as having both positive and negative elements that simply exist alongside each other.

'A hawk, consuming personal information and attacking innocent people but caring for some too'

16-year-old girl

'An ape – extremely intelligent and helpful but dangerous'

16-year-old girl

LGBTIQ+ teens' ambivalent attitudes towards the internet suggest that this cohort of survey participants have had, or are aware of, both positive and negative experiences online and acknowledge both as being a part of navigating online spaces. LGBTIQ+ teens in other studies have similarly reflected that being online can be both expansive and limiting (Cavalcante, 2019), as well as useful and uncomfortable (Byron et al., 2019). The ways in which LGBTIQ+ teens in our study framed their mixed perceptions of the internet may indicate that they understand that skill and knowledge are useful for avoiding negative aspects of being online, but that sometimes these inevitably coexist with positive ones. The remainder of this report draws on our survey findings to understand why LGBTIQ+ young people have such mixed views of the internet, and how they navigate the digital environment that so many of them view as at once fun and dangerous, useful and scary.

Forming connections: The online social lives of LGBTIQ+ teens

For LGBTIQ+ teens, the internet is an important source of social connection, serving as a means of making new friends and expanding their social worlds. In recent decades, there has been a reduction in overt and formal discrimination against sexuality-diverse Australians (Flores, 2021), and some strides have been made in the fields of trans and gender-diverse people's rights (Humphries & Coulter, 2019).
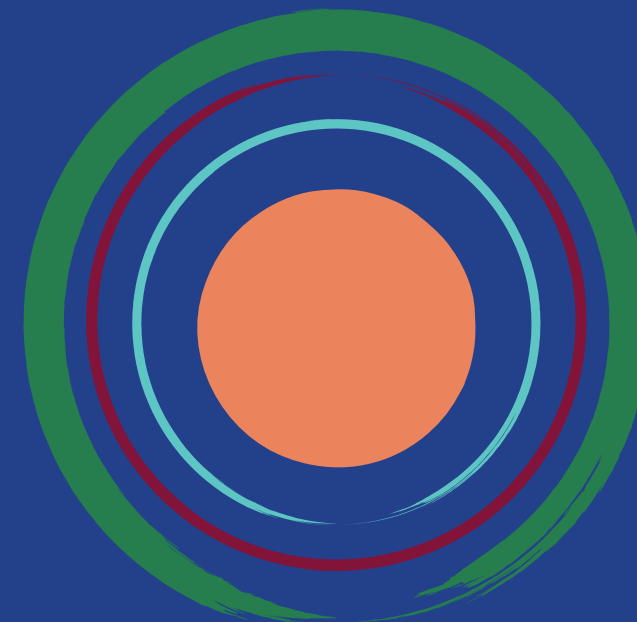
'[If the internet were an animal, it would be] a lion – it can be vicious, but also a magnificent way of connecting with others' – 15-year-old girl
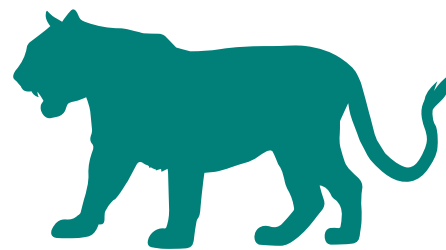
However, both overt and covert forms of discrimination continue to affect LGBTIQ+ people, with prejudice, misinformation and hate speech creating barriers to LGBTIQ+ teens forming connections with peers and community (Berger et al., 2021). Research indicates that being online is especially important to LGBTIQ+ youth seeking connections and community, which may not be as readily accessible in their offline lives (Berger et al., 2022). However, as with all forms of socialising, LGBTIQ+ teens' online interactions can include positive experiences and encounters, as well as hurtful and harmful ones. These varied and complex connections may account for LGBTIQ+ teens' mixed perceptions of the internet. Their high rates of using the internet to connect with others indicate the skill and resourcefulness with which LGBTIQ+ teens navigate their online worlds. In this section of the report, we discuss our survey findings as they relate to LGBTIQ+ teens' social connections, intimate connections, and hurtful and harmful connections online.

Social connections

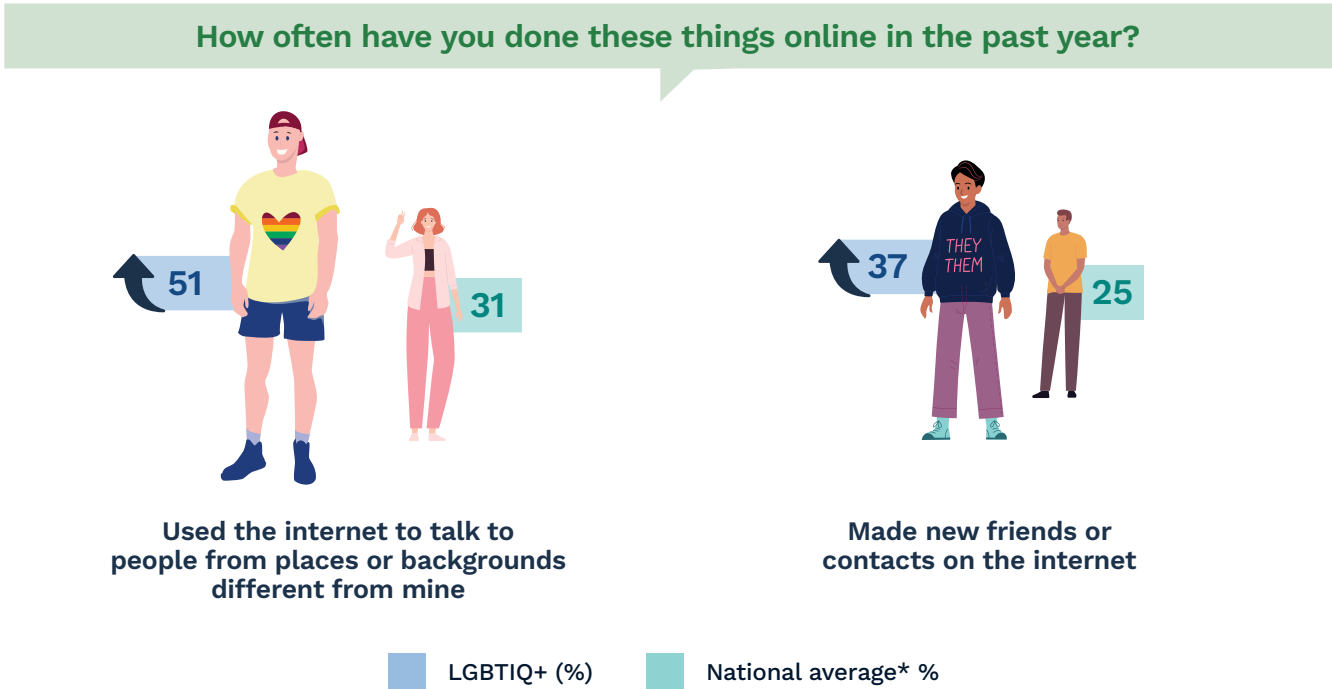### LGBTIQ+ teens use the internet to connect with new people

Meeting people beyond their existing social circles can be an important way in which LGBTIQ+ teens find people who are like them and connect with a sense of community (Byron et al., 2019; Berger et al., 2021; Robards et al., 2020; Selkie et al., 2020). For many young LGBTIQ+ people, offline social circles may not include people with similar experiences or identities to their own (Berger et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2022). This can mean that the internet affords LGBTIQ+ teens an opportunity to form connections they may not otherwise have access to.

The survey findings reveal that LGBTIQ+ teens are significantly more likely to have used the internet to make new friends (37%), compared with the national average (25%). They are also more likely to see meeting new people as one of the best things about the internet (16%, compared with 10%), indicating that this cohort finds more value in being able to meet new people online. This may be because they are connecting with people who share some of their experiences, identities and worldviews (Berger et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2022; Byron et al., 2019; Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021).

Connecting with new people can also allow LGBTIQ+ teens to learn about lives and experiences beyond their own. This appears to be something the LGBTIQ+ teens who participated in our survey value highly, with 51% using the internet to talk to people from

different places or backgrounds to their own, much higher than the national average of 31% (Figure 3). Together, these findings suggest that many LGBTIQ+ young people have rich social lives online, in which they connect with new and existing friends and engage with the lived experiences of others that are both shared and distinct.

Figure 3: Use of the internet to meet and talk to others by LGBTIQ+ teens – comparison with the national average (% weekly or more often)

How often have you done these things online in the past year?

51 — 31
Used the internet to talk to people from places or backgrounds different from mine

37 — 25
Made new friends or contacts on the internet

■ LGBTIQ+ (%)   ■ National average* %

*Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Note: Excludes 'Prefer not to say' response to QC1.
Question C1. How often have you done these things online in the past year? Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

LGBTIQ+ teens share personal details with the new people they connect with online

In addition to being more likely to make friends or contacts online than the national average, LGBTIQ+ teens were found to be more inclined to share personal details with their online connections. As shown in Figure 4, LGBTIQ+ survey participants were more likely than the national average to add connections they made online to their friends or contacts list (29%, compared with 16%), to share personal information such as their full name or address with someone online (18%, compared with 10%), and to send a video or photo of themselves (29%, compared with 21%).

Figure 4: Sharing of personal details with online-only contacts by LGBTIQ+ teens – comparison with the national average (% weekly or more often)

How often have you done these things online in the past year?

29 ⬅ ➡ **16**
Adding them as friends or contacts

18 ⬅ ➡ **10**
Sharing personal information such as full name, address or phone number

29 ⬅ ➡ **21**
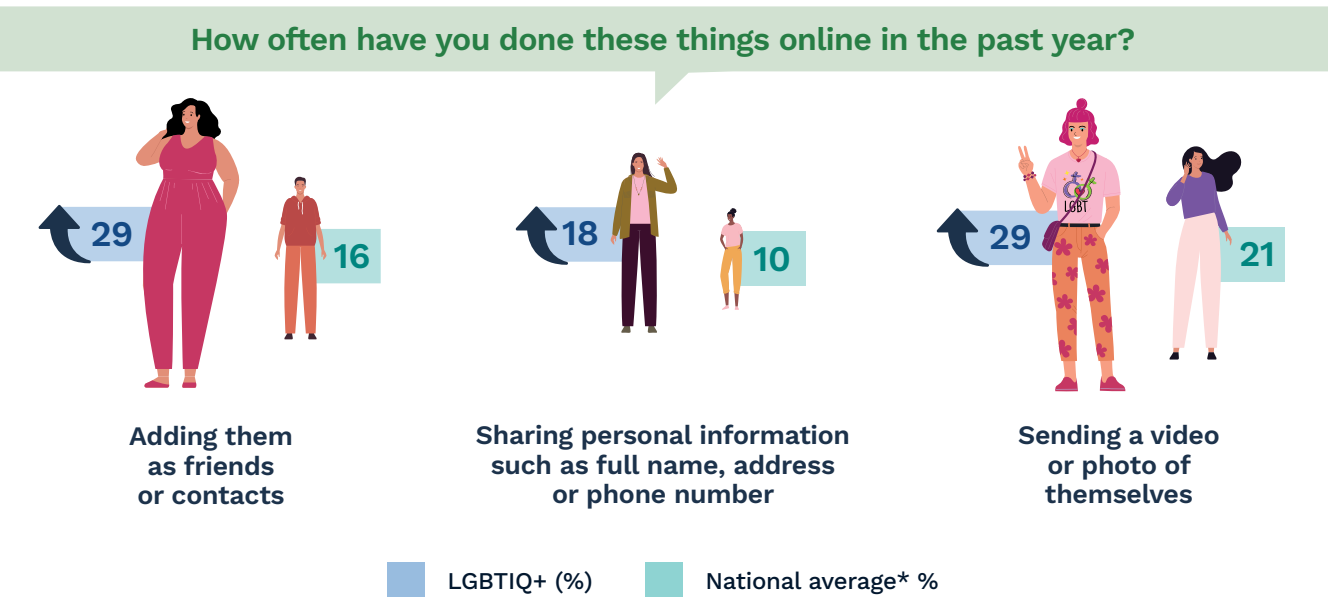**Sending a video or photo of themselves**

■ LGBTIQ+ (%) ■ National average* %

Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Excludes 'Prefer not to say' response to QC1.
Question C1. How often have you done these things online in the past year? Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

The rates of information sharing among LGBTIQ+ teens may be amplified by their higher rates of forming new connections online. It may also indicate that LGBTIQ+ teens feel safe and close with their online friends, with whom they may have shared interests and experiences that are very important to them.
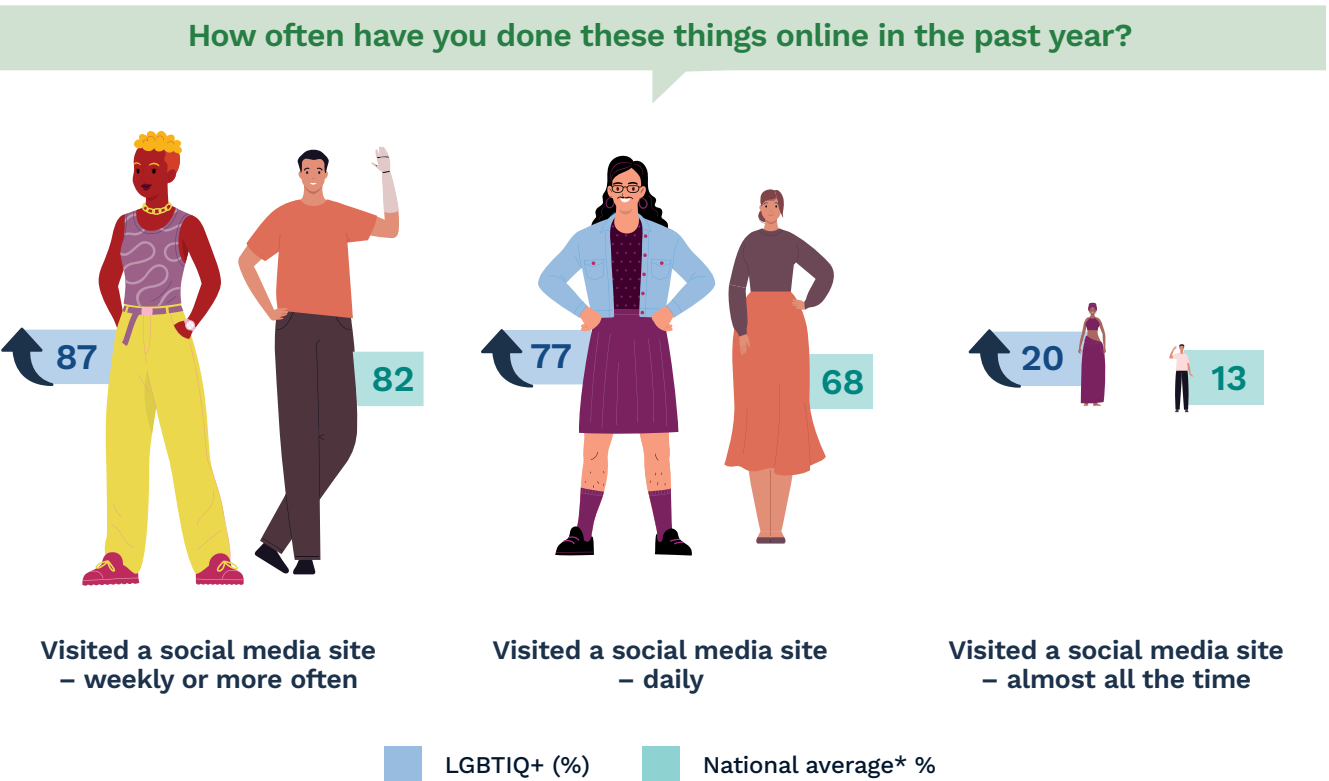
Sharing personal details online may feel like a normal part of socialising to LGBTIQ+ teens, who are part of a generation that doesn't always distinguish between friends made online and those made offline (Yau & Reich, 2018). However, sharing personal details with online-only contacts is associated with privacy and safety risks as well as fraud concerns. LGBTIQ+ teens may therefore be at greater risk of harms such as grooming and doxing, as well as contact offences and other safety concerns.

Social media is a key place for LGBTIQ+ teens to hang out

One of the most popular ways for LGBTIQ+ teens to connect with others is on social media platforms. Research gathered over the past two decades indicates that LGBTIQ+ teens are high-volume users of social media, accessing many different sites with great frequency (Byron et al., 2019). Moreover, social media platforms have been shown to act as digital gathering sites for LGBTIQ+ young people, spaces where they can explore their identity, obtain peer support and meet other like-minded peers in a (relatively) safe environment (Byron et al., 2019).

Our survey results confirm that Australia's LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely than the national average to visit a social networking site weekly or more often (87%, compared with 82%). Indeed, over three-quarters of LGBTIQ+ young people visited a social networking site daily, while 1 in 5 were connected to social media constantly (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Frequency of accessing social media by LGBTIQ+ teens – comparison with the national average (% weekly or more often)

How often have you done these things online in the past year?

87 ⬅ ➡ **82**
Visited a social media site – weekly or more often

77 ⬅ ➡ **68**
Visited a social media site – daily

20 ⬅ ➡ **13**
Visited a social media site – almost all the time

■ LGBTIQ+ (%) ■ National average* %

Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Excludes 'Prefer not to say' response to QC1.
Question C1. How often have you done these things online in the past year? Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

Forming connections: The online social lives of LGBTIQ+ teens

Previous studies have established that the social media platforms used by the LGBTIQ+ population can differ significantly from the general population, with privacy concerns and profiles that don't allow changes to name and gender identified as less safe for LGBTIQ+ users (Cho, 2018; Jenzen, 2017; Haimson et al., 2020). As shown in Table 4 LGBTIQ+ teens are also more likely than the national average to use many of the most popular social media platforms, with Reddit, X (formerly Twitter) and Pinterest almost twice as likely to be used by LGBTIQ+ teens than the average Australian in the 14–17 age group.

Among the social media sites listed in our survey, the most popular among the LGBTIQ+ teens were Instagram (used by 81%, compared with the national average of 74%), YouTube (used by 80%, compared with 65%) and TikTok (used by 69%, compared with 55%).

Table 4: Social media use by LGBTIQ+ teens – comparison with the national average (%)

Social media sites used	LGBTIQ+ (%)		National average* (%)
Instagram	81 ⬆		74
YouTube	80 ⬆		65
TikTok	69 ⬆		55
Snapchat	63		63
Facebook	61		61
Facebook Messenger	51		55
Discord	48 ⬆		26
Pinterest	44 ⬆		24
X (formerly Twitter)	41 ⬆		20
WhatsApp	40		35
Reddit	28 ⬆		12
Tumblr (LGBTIQ+ %)	17 ⬆		6

Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Question D2. Which social networking or gaming sites or apps do you have your own profile for? This means you have your own login for it. Gaming sites not shown.
Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

LGBTIQ+ teens are also more likely to use a higher number of social media platforms, having profiles in an average of 7 platforms compared with an average of 5 for the Australian cohort of 14–17 year-olds (Table 5). One in 4 LGBTIQ+ teens (25%) have a particularly strong presence across social media, with profiles in 10 or more platforms. By comparison, only 8% of the national teen cohort has a similar social media presence.

The use of multiple social media platforms, sites and networks has been found to form part of many LGBTIQ+ people's digital experience, enabling them to interact with different communities according to their needs and interests (Robards et al., 2021). Facebook, for example, is typically used by the LGBTIQ+ population to connect with family and friends, while Tumblr has been found to be especially popular for meeting new friends and potential partners (Nelson et al., 2022).

In addition, an American study found that LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely to maintain multiple accounts within the same platform, primarily to keep content private from parents/caregivers and, often, from school friends (Thorn, 2023). Significantly, LGBTIQ+ teens were found to reserve their secondary account(s) for interacting with other LGBTIQ+ people and/or people they had only met online (Thorn, 2023). It's clear not only that LGBTIQ+ young people use social media to connect with each other, but that they do so strategically, navigating different platforms and accounts to build and maintain their social worlds.

Table 5: Number of social media platforms used by LGBTIQ+ teens in the past 12 months – comparison with the national average (%)

Number of social media platforms used	LGBTIQ+ (%)		National average* (%)
0–4	28 ⬇		41
5–9	47		51
10 or more	25 ⬆		8

Question D2. Which social networking or gaming sites or apps do you have your own profile for? This means you have your own login for it. Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410). Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.
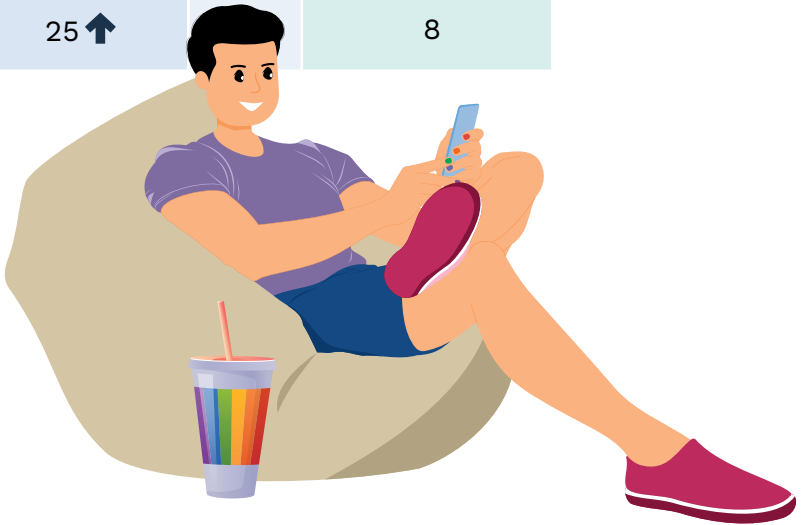
LGBTIQ+ teens seek emotional support online

Online connections can play an important role in providing emotional support to LGBTIQ+ young people (Berger et al., 2021; Selkie et al., 2020; McInroy et al., 2019). Emotional support online may take the form of interpersonal support (Dowers et al., 2021) or informal peer support (Byron, 2023), support via content encountered (Horak, 2014; Woznicki et al., 2021; Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021) or looked for, and support accessed via more formal online service (Robards et al., 2018). The survey results shown in Figure 6 indicate that over a third of LGBTIQ+ young people used the internet to seek emotional support (36%, compared with the national average of 18%). They were also more likely than the national average to regard finding people who could help them as the best thing about the internet (10%, compared with 6%).

These findings are consistent with the known barriers to support that many LGBTIQ+ young people face offline. LGBTIQ+ teens may be likely to experience higher emotional support needs than their non-LGBTIQ+ peers due to higher rates of mental ill health (Hill et al, 2021) and the burden of marginalisation and discrimination (Dürrbaum & Sattler, 2020). They are also more likely to encounter barriers to accessing informal and formal support due to isolation from others like them, and discrimination in formal support services (Berger et al., 2021; Wilson & Cariola, 2020; McInroy et al., 2019). This is especially the case for LGBTIQ+ young people who are First Nations (Spurway et al., 2022) or members of another racial minority (Wilson & Cariola, 2020).

While our survey didn't enquire into the type of emotional support that LGBTIQ+ teens seek online, our findings may indicate the importance of LGBTIQ+ teens' online social connections in providing much-needed emotional support.

Figure 6: Use of the internet by LGBTIQ+ teens for health information and emotional support – comparison with the national average (% weekly or more often)
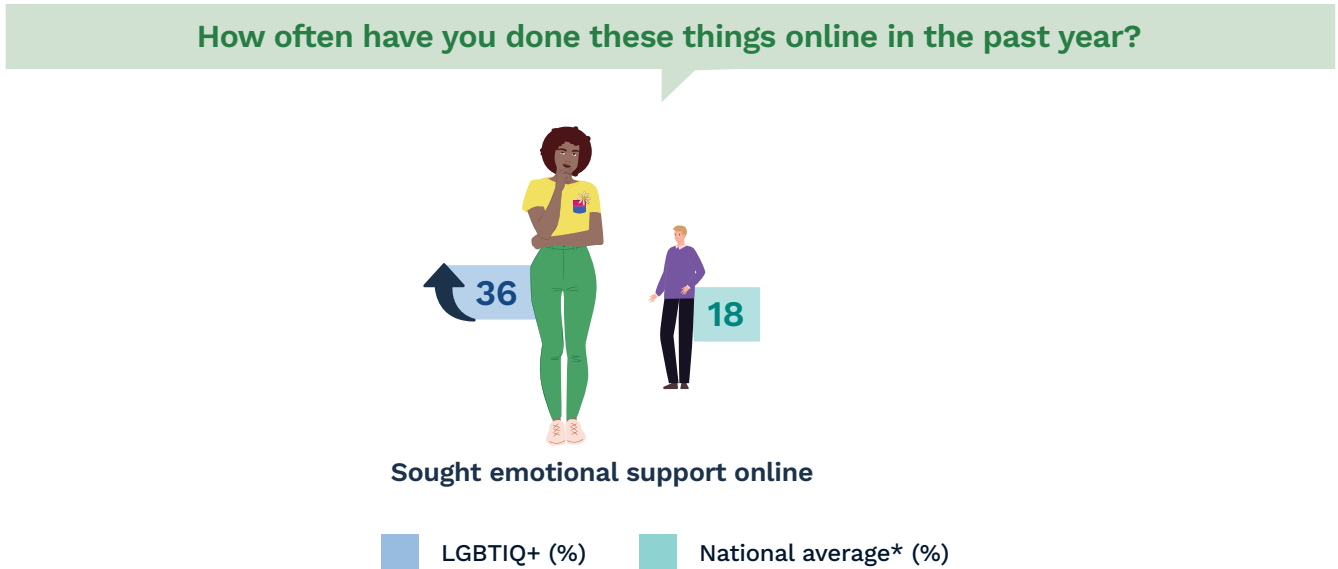
How often have you done these things online in the past year?

36

18

Sought emotional support online

■ LGBTIQ+ (%)   ■ National average* (%)

*Average among Australians aged 14–17. Excludes 'Prefer not to say' response to QC1. Question C1. How often have you done these things online in the past year? Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.*

Intimate connections

Just as LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely to share personal details with people they meet online (p.32), LGBTIQ+ teens in our survey were more likely than the national average to share and receive sexual content online. Sexual and romantic relationships and spaces have long been a feature of community building for various LGBTIQ+ populations (Byron et al., 2021), with LGBTIQ+ people more likely to find sexual and romantic connections online (Castro et al., 2020; Korchmaros et al., 2015). For LGBTIQ+ teens and young people, making intimate connections online can be an extension of their online and offline friendship practices (Byron et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2021). However, these online practices can bring both benefits and risks, with the possibility of unknowingly sharing sexual content with bad actors presenting a risk to LGBTIQ+ teens' safety and wellbeing. The tensions between potential harm and potential connection may be another reason why LGBTIQ+ teens have mixed feelings towards the internet.

LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely to send and receive intimate messages or images online

As shown in Table 6, just over a quarter of LGBTIQ+ teens (26%) had sent someone a sexual message in the past year, compared with 13% of the national average for the cohort. Our survey also found that LGBTIQ+ teens were twice as likely as the national average to have posted a sexual message where other people could see it (15%, compared with 7%) and to have shared naked pictures of themselves online[3] (16%, compared with 7%). One in 10 LGBTIQ+ teens said they had allowed someone else to take naked pictures or videos of them (10%, compared with the national average of 4%).

3. The survey didn't ask whether the photos were anonymous (i.e. without any identifying features such as the face).

Forming connections: The online social lives of LGBTIQ+ teens

Table 6: Use of the internet by LGBTIQ+ teens to send or create intimate messages and images – comparison with the national average (% in the past year)
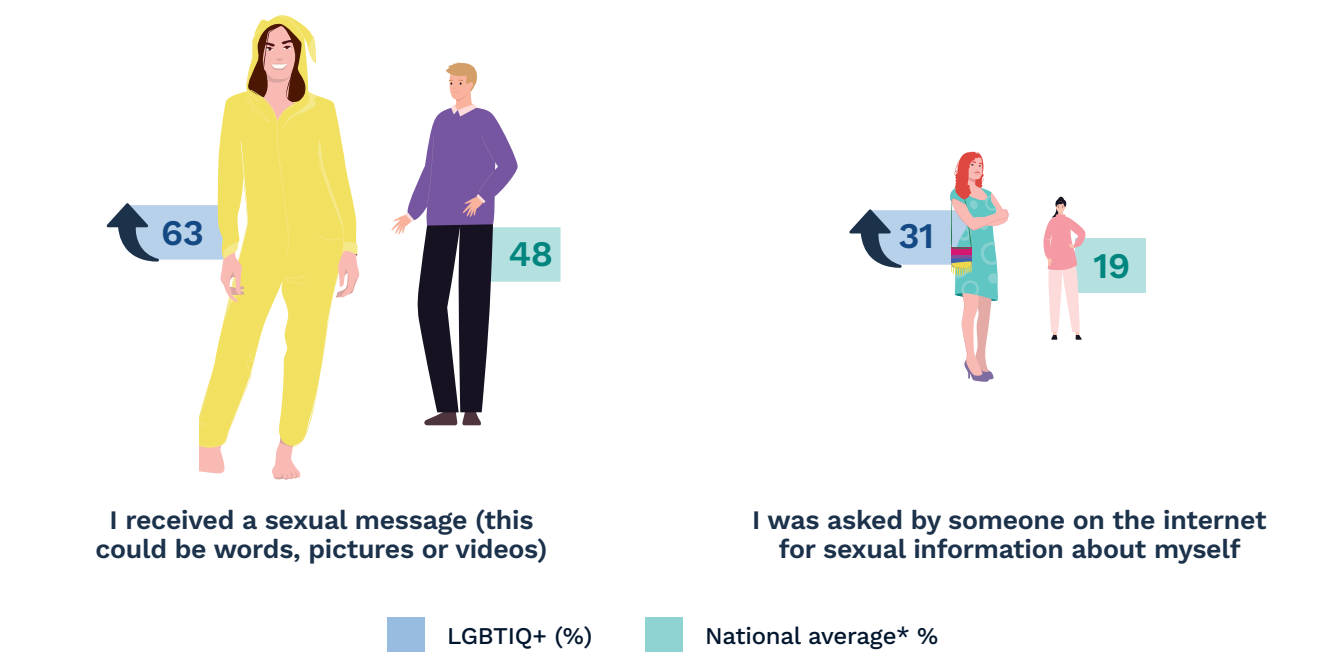
Online Activity	LGBTIQ+ (%)		National average* (%)
Sent someone a sexual message (e.g. words, pictures or video)	26 ↑		13
Have posted a sexual message where others could see it	15 ↑		7
Shared naked pictures or videos of myself (showing breasts, genitals or bottom)	16 ↑		7
Allowed someone to take naked pictures of them	10 ↑		4

Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Excludes 'Prefer not to say' response to QH4.
Question H4. In the past year, have you done any of the following?
Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

Similarly, LGBTIQ+ teens are much more likely than the national average to have received sexual communications from others online, including receiving sexual messages and being asked sexual questions (Figure 7). The proportion of LGBTIQ+ teens sharing and receiving sexual content online may reflect their higher-than-average likelihood of conducting sexual and romantic relationships online (Needham, 2021).

Figure 7: Use of the internet by LGBTIQ+ teens to receive intimate messages or requests for images – comparison with the national average (% in the past year)

63 | 48

31 | 19

I received a sexual message (this could be words, pictures or videos)

I was asked by someone on the internet for sexual information about myself

LGBTIQ+ (%)   National average* %

Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Excludes 'Prefer not to say' response to QH1.
Question H1: In the past year, how often have you received sexual messages online? This could be words, pictures or videos.
Question H2: In the past year, have any of the following things happened to you?
Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).

Sharing sexual content online comes with the risk of having consent and trust breached or of unknowingly communicating with bad actors. When someone receiving online sexual communications abuses the sender, the sender can face harmful experiences such as image-based abuse, sexual exploitation, sexual extortion and catfishing. Further, sharing sexual images is legally problematic if the person sharing or receiving is under the age of 18.

While the survey didn't capture the specific context in which sexual communications were shared, it's possible that some of the sexual communications reported by survey participants were not consensually given or received. Unwanted sexual communications are a form of sexual harassment and can cause those who receive them great distress and ongoing negative impacts.

At the same time, many forms of online sexual communication, if shared consensually, could be viewed as part of typical sexual development for teens who are forming intimate relationships that happen to be online, or whose in-person relationships are mediated by digital media (Albury et al., 2013; Levine, 2013). LGBTIQ+ adults have a high take-up of online dating and hook-up apps (Castro et al., 2020; Korchmaros et al., 2015) and use these to expand community connections and networks alongside seeking sexual and romantic relationships (Byron et al., 2021). As such, it's likely that many of the young people in our survey who reported sharing sexual content online were doing so as part of connecting with their community, as well as forming intimate relationships.

Forming connections: The online social lives of LGBTIQ+ teens

Sexual communication online can be an important way for LGBTIQ+ teens to access connection and develop their relationships. However, the impacts of online harms related to intimate images can be significant, affecting emotional wellbeing and mental health, as well as having social impacts. As LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely than the national average to share sexual content online, they may be at greater risk of experiencing harms relating to intimate images. Harmful connections and their impacts are discussed further in the next section. Young LGBTIQ+ people's mixed sentiments towards the internet may reflect a degree of awareness of the risks associated with intimate connections online, which exist alongside the benefits of connection that the internet offers them.

Hurtful and harmful connections

'I think the internet would be a cat, probably because the internet can be warm and welcoming and cute but tear you to shreds the moment you're part of a minority or your opinion doesn't line up with someone else's' – 16-year-old girl

LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely to have had a hurtful or harmful interaction online

While LGBTIQ+ young people benefit from the interactions they have in the digital world, research indicates that they are significantly more likely to experience online abuse, including hate speech, harassment, discrimination and exclusion (GLAAD, 2023).

LGBTIQ+ young people in our survey were more likely than the national average to have experienced a range of online harms (Figure 8), with two-thirds having been treated in a hurtful or nasty way online (67%), compared with the national average of 56%. In particular, LGBTIQ+ teens were more than twice as likely to have experienced hate speech (31%, compared with the national average of 15%), while a quarter had been threatened with physical harm (25%, compared with 16%).

Although homophobia and transphobia are most likely the primary factors in these online harms (Berger et al., 2021), other forms of discrimination may also be at play. Many in our sample were also First Nations young people, young people with disability[4] and young people who speak a language other than English at home – populations that also attract higher rates of online abuse (eSafety, 2023). It is therefore possible that LGBTIQ+ teens may have also experienced discrimination and hate based on their intersecting identities and experiences (Coe, 2022; Sullivan et al., 2022; Toft, 2020; Miller, 2017).

4. Throughout this report, we use person-first language to describe participants in order to reflect their right to identities beyond their disability. We acknowledge that some young people with disability use identity-first language and that both are valid and meaningful forms of self-identification. As we don't know how individual survey participants self-identify, we cannot follow best practice of using the terms they use for themselves.

In addition, LGBTIQ+ teens in our survey were more likely than the national average to have had personal information posted about them without their agreement (i.e. doxing; 19%, compared with 12%), to have had inappropriate private photos posted without their consent (9%, compared with 6%), and/or to have been pressured by someone to send them sexual pictures or videos (20%, compared with 11%). As described earlier, LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely to share personal information (p. 32) and intimate communications (p. 37) online, which may place them at greater risk for experiencing harms, including doxing and intimate image–related harms.

Figure 8: Experience of hurtful or nasty treatment by LGBTIQ+ teens – comparison with the national average (% past 12 months)
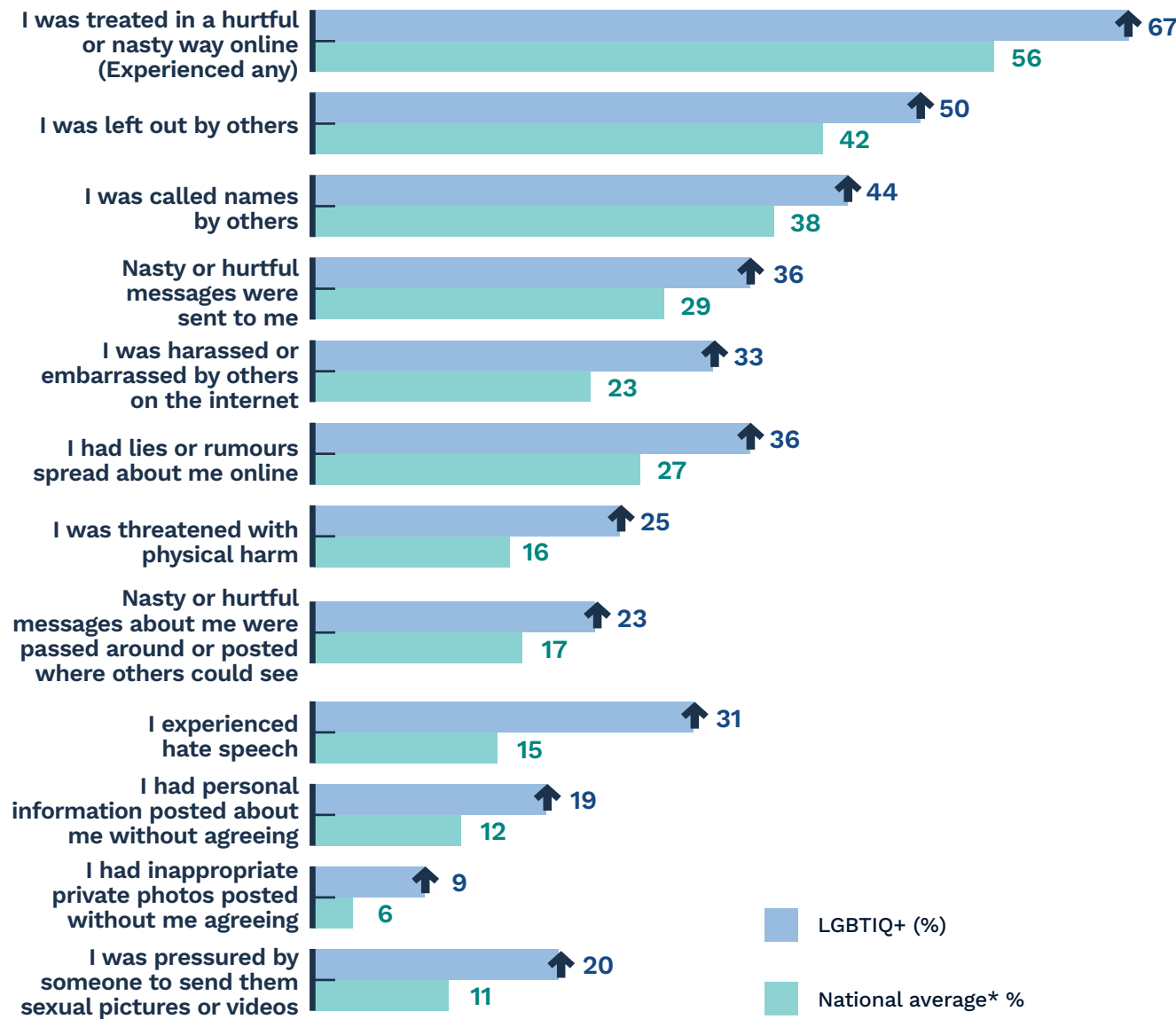
*Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Excludes 'Prefer not to say' response to QI3.
Question I3. In the past year, how often, if ever, has anyone treated you in a hurtful or nasty way online? Question I4. Have any of these things happened to you in the past year? Question H2. In the past year, have any of the following things happened to you?
Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference to the national average in the same age group.

LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely to disclose that they have treated someone badly online

While LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely to have experienced hurtful and harmful treatment online, they are also more likely to disclose that they have treated others badly online.
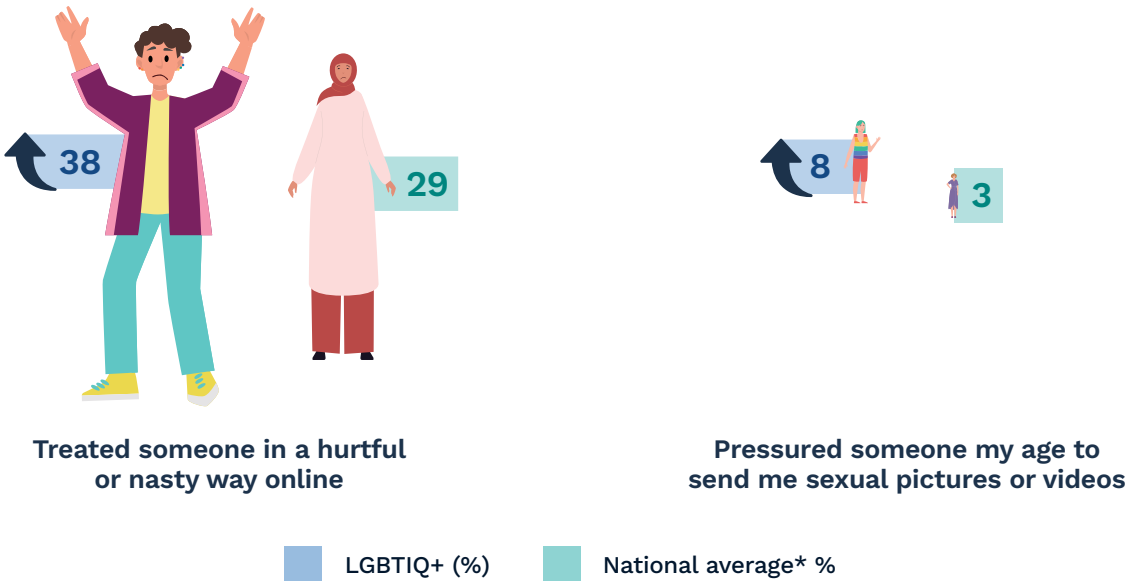
LGBTIQ+ teens shared with us that they had treated someone badly online at higher rates than the national average, as shown in Figure 9. Just under 4 in 10 told us they had treated someone in a nasty or hurtful way online in the past year (38%, compared with the national average of 29%), and 8% said they had pressured someone their age to send them sexual or nude pictures or video (compared with the national average of 3%).

International evidence supports a link between bullying victimisation and perpetration among young people (Nie et al., 2022; Walters, 2021). This link can be seen in our findings, with LGBTIQ+ teens having higher rates than the national average of being treated in a hurtful way, and of being pressured to send sexual images. LGBTIQ+ teens who reported that they have treated someone badly online may be responding to being treated badly themselves.

These findings don't necessarily indicate that LGBTIQ+ teens instigate harmful online behaviour at higher rates; they may simply be an insight into those young people's understandings of their own behaviour. That LGBTIQ+ teens in our survey were more likely to report that they had treated someone badly online may indicate that they have a high awareness of what counts as hurtful or harmful behaviour, and/or that they are more willing to admit to having perpetrated it.

Figure 9: Experience of hurtful or nasty treatment by LGBTIQ+ teens – comparison with the national average (% past 12 months)

| 38 | 29 | 8 | 3 |

Treated someone in a hurtful or nasty way online

Pressured someone my age to send me sexual pictures or videos

LGBTIQ+ (%)　　National average* %

*Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Excludes 'Prefer not to say' response to QI3a and QH4.
Question I3a. In the past year, how often, if ever, have you treated anyone in a hurtful or nasty way online? Question H4: In the past year, have you done any of these things online?
Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).
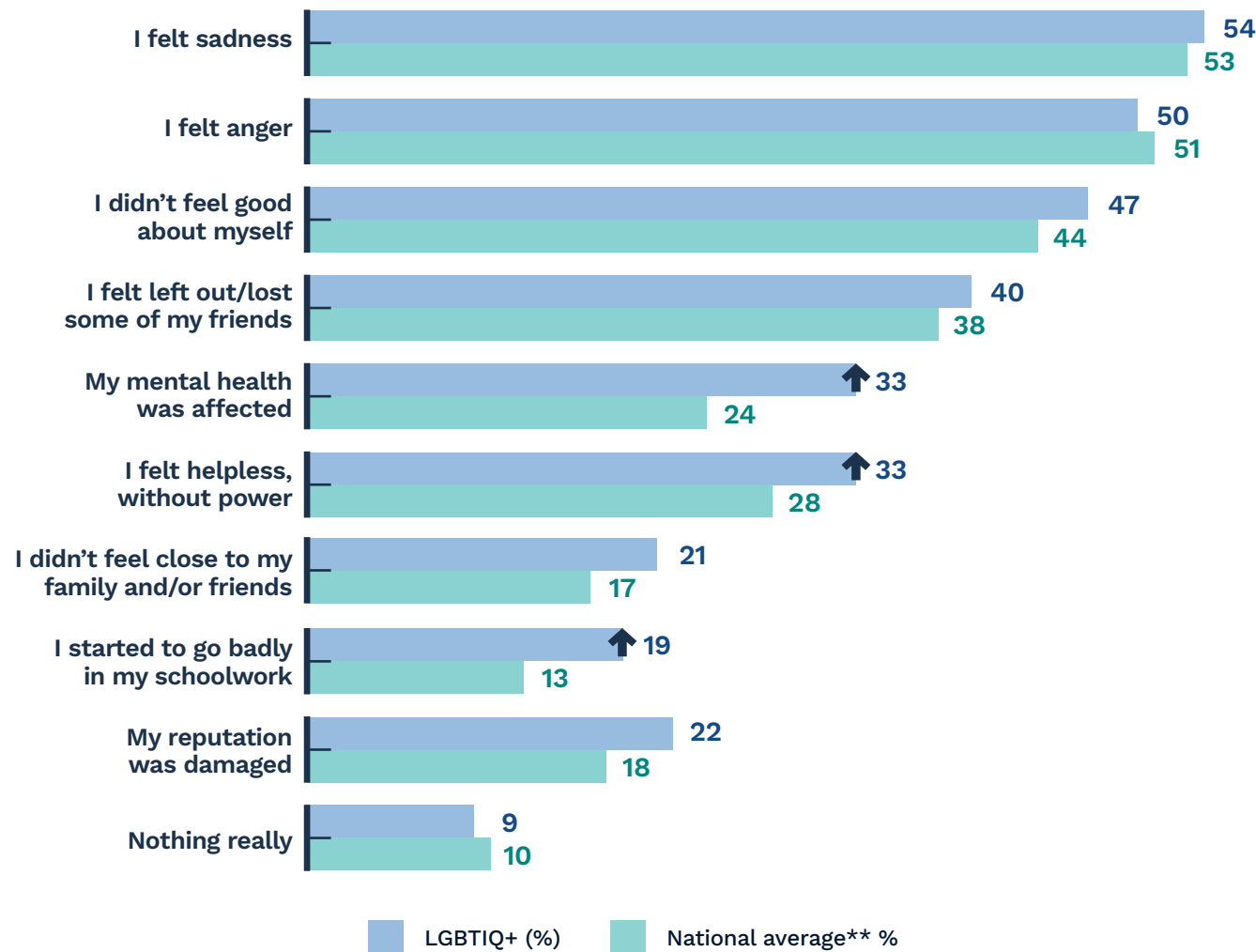Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

LGBTIQ+ teens are significantly affected by hurtful online experiences

Consistent with the national cohort, our survey found that LGBTIQ+ teens were most likely to have felt sad (53%) and angry (49%) following their last hurtful or harmful experience online (Figure 10). They were also more likely than the national average to have felt helpless or powerless (33%, compared with 27%). Similarly, LGBTIQ+ young people were more likely than the national average to report that their mental health had been negatively affected (32%, compared with 23%), that their connection to their family and friends had been affected (20%, compared with 16%), and that their schoolwork had suffered as a result of a hurtful experience online (19%, compared with 13%).

We found that many of the impacts of harmful online experiences were more severe for LGBTIQ+ young people than for the national average, which may reflect the severity of the harms they are more likely to experience – namely, hate speech, harassment and threats of physical harm (see Figure 10). Further, when LGBTIQ+ teens experience these things online, they don't always find support from the websites or platforms where harms occur (Clancy, 2023; DeCook et al., 2022), which could contribute to a feeling of helplessness and powerlessness. These feelings may be intensified by broader anti-gay and anti-trans discourses that are present in the media and politics (Pearce et al., 2020), which could amplify a sense that there is little that large and powerful organisations such as social media platforms are willing to do about hatred and discrimination directed towards them

and their community. In addition, LGBTIQ+ young people in Australia have worse mental health outcomes than the general population (Hill et al., 2021). This is especially the case for trans young people (Hill et al., 2021). Research suggests that experiences of discrimination and harassment, like the harmful online experiences reported by survey participants, are a major contributing factor in the higher rates of mental ill health among LGBTIQ+ people (Hoy-Ellis, 2021; Kelleher, 2009).

Figure 10: Consequences of the most recent hurtful or nasty online experience* among LGBTIQ+ teens – comparison with the national average (% in the past year)

*As listed in Figure 11.
**Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Question 14. Have any of these things happened to you online in the past year? Question 15. Thinking about the last time any of these things happened to you, did any of the following things happen? Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens who had had a hurtful or nasty online experience (n=219); Australian teens aged 14–17 who had had a hurtful or nasty online experience (n=859).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely to take action when they have a hurtful or harmful experience

While LGBTIQ+ young people can be distressed by negative experiences online, they are also proactive in seeking justice and support. As Figure 11 shows, LGBTIQ+ teens in our survey were more likely than the national average to report having had a negative interaction to the relevant website or social media company (31%, compared with 24%) and were also more likely to report it to eSafety (9%, compared with 6%). These findings suggest that many LGBTIQ+ teens have a strong sense of their own right to be treated with respect and without hate or discrimination.
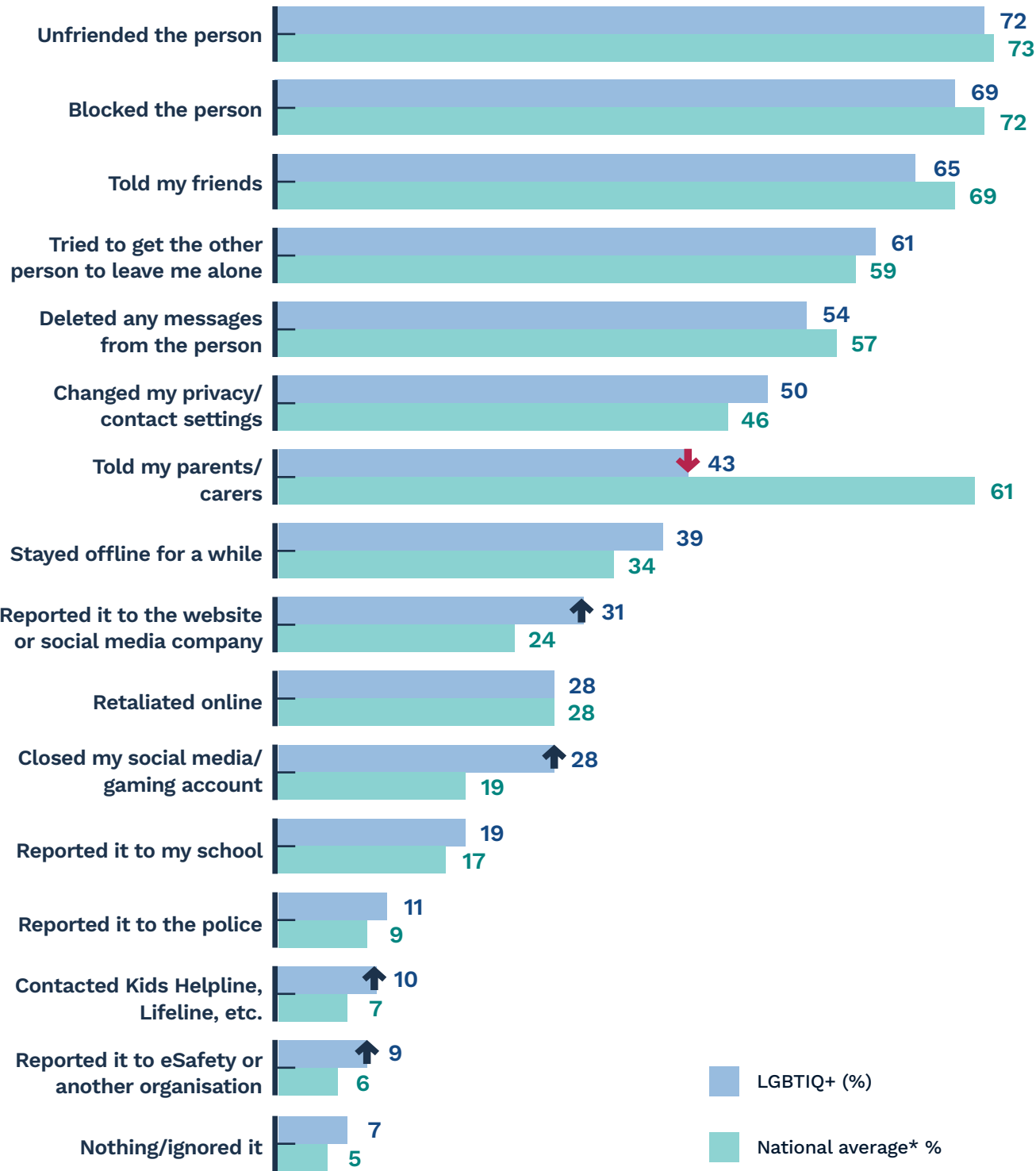
LGBTIQ+ teens in our survey were more likely than the national average to have closed their social media or gaming account in response to a negative online experience (28%, compared with 19%). This response may indicate the significant ways that negative online experiences can impact LGBTIQ+ teens, such that ceasing to be online feels like the best way to avoid further harm. This may especially be the case if LGBTIQ+ teens feel that websites or platforms where harm occurs are unlikely to support or remedy online harms that they encounter. Closing their accounts in response to a hurtful or harmful experience suggests that LGBTIQ+ teens are able to take decisive action to protect their wellbeing. However, this reaction may also have the effect of cutting LGBTIQ+ teens off from the important connections and opportunities that being online offers them. Hurtful and harmful online experiences may therefore not only negatively impact LGBTIQ+ teens but may also put them at risk of losing access to the benefits of being online.

Our survey found that LGBTIQ+ teens were less likely than the national average to have told their parents after their last hurtful online experience (43%, compared with 61%), a finding that is consistent with other studies (Hill et al., 2021). LGBTIQ+ teens were much more likely to talk to their friends (65%) than their parents (43%) when they had a negative experience online. LGBTIQ+ teens may not feel safe or comfortable sharing a negative online experience with their parents if that experience had to do with their gender and/or sexuality, especially if they haven't shared their gender and/or sexuality with their parents (Town et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2023).

However, LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely than the national average to contact a support service such as Kids Helpline or LifeLine (10%, compared with 7%). Following our finding that over a third of LGBTIQ+ teens in our survey sought emotional support online, and that they are more likely to seek support from friends, it's possible that these teens also seek support from friends online, or from online support services, when they experience harms online. Actively seeking emotional and/or mental health support indicates a resourcefulness and resilience on the part of LGBTIQ+ teens.

Figure 11: Action taken by LGBTIQ+ young people after their most recent negative online experience – comparison with the national average (% in past year)

Action	LGBTIQ+ (%)	National average* %
Unfriended the person	72	73
Blocked the person	69	72
Told my friends	65	69
Tried to get the other person to leave me alone	61	59
Deleted any messages from the person	54	57
Changed my privacy/ contact settings	50	46
Told my parents/ carers	↓ 43	61
Stayed offline for a while	39	34
Reported it to the website or social media company	↑ 31	24
Retaliated online	28	28
Closed my social media/ gaming account	↑ 28	19
Reported it to my school	19	17
Reported it to the police	11	9
Contacted Kids Helpline, Lifeline, etc.	↑ 10	7
Reported it to eSafety or another organisation	↑ 9	6
Nothing/ignored it	7	5

Average among Australians aged 14–17. Excludes 'Prefer not to say' response to QI6.
Question I6. Still thinking about that last time any of these things happened, did you do any of these things afterwards?
Bases: LGBTIQ+ young people who had had a negative online experience in the past year (n=173); Australian young people aged 14–17 who had had a negative online experience in the past year (n=860).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

While being online may mean that LGBTIQ+ teens have harmful encounters that have significant impacts on them, it also appears that the connections they form online may be important supports for them that help to buffer against these harms. In this way, harm and support can exist side by side in LGBTIQ+ teens' social lives. It's clear that LGBTIQ+ teens use the internet to connect with others in ways that they may not be able to do offline (Berger et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2022). It may be that their online connections enable LGBTIQ+ young people to navigate online harms, tipping the balance of their online experiences and making the possibility of encountering these harms worthwhile. However, rising incidences of online hate and abuse, particularly targeting trans women, risk limiting LGBTIQ+ young people's access to online spaces where they make vital connections.

'[The internet] would be a chimera, because it's kind of strange and scary at times – especially if you don't know what you're doing – but it's also pretty cool and beautiful' – 17-year-old girl

Self-expression and exploration online

Just as the internet offers LGBTIQ+ teens the ability to form connections that can be both enriching and harmful, so too can being online afford this cohort opportunities for creating and encountering content that can be both expansive and distressing.

Being online enables LGBTIQ+ teens to encounter ideas, information and content that can expand their understandings of the world and who they can be in it. Online spaces provide opportunities for learning, fun and creativity both online and offline. Through these avenues, LGBTIQ+ teens can learn about what is happening in the world and gather important health information. They can explore and express their passions, interests, needs and identities. Amidst this, LGBTIQ+ teens can also encounter content that, depending on the circumstance in which they encounter it, has the potential to cause discomfort, distress and harm. LGBTIQ+ teens recognise this duality in their online lives when they express mixed feelings towards the internet. It's likely that negotiating these mixed feelings and experiences is a skill that LGBTIQ+ teens are continually refining. In this part of the report, we discuss our survey findings relating first to the positive and then to the potentially harmful encounters LGBTIQ+ teens have with online content.
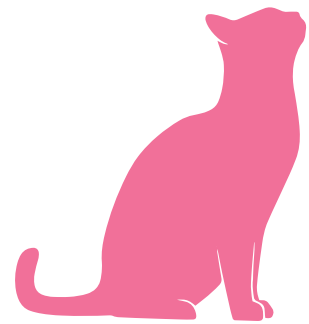
'I would describe the internet as a cat or snake. Very sneaky. Often times you don't know if you're about to click on a website or image which may have a virus or is something disturbing. Though other than that, I think it's a great tool for entertainment and finding information'
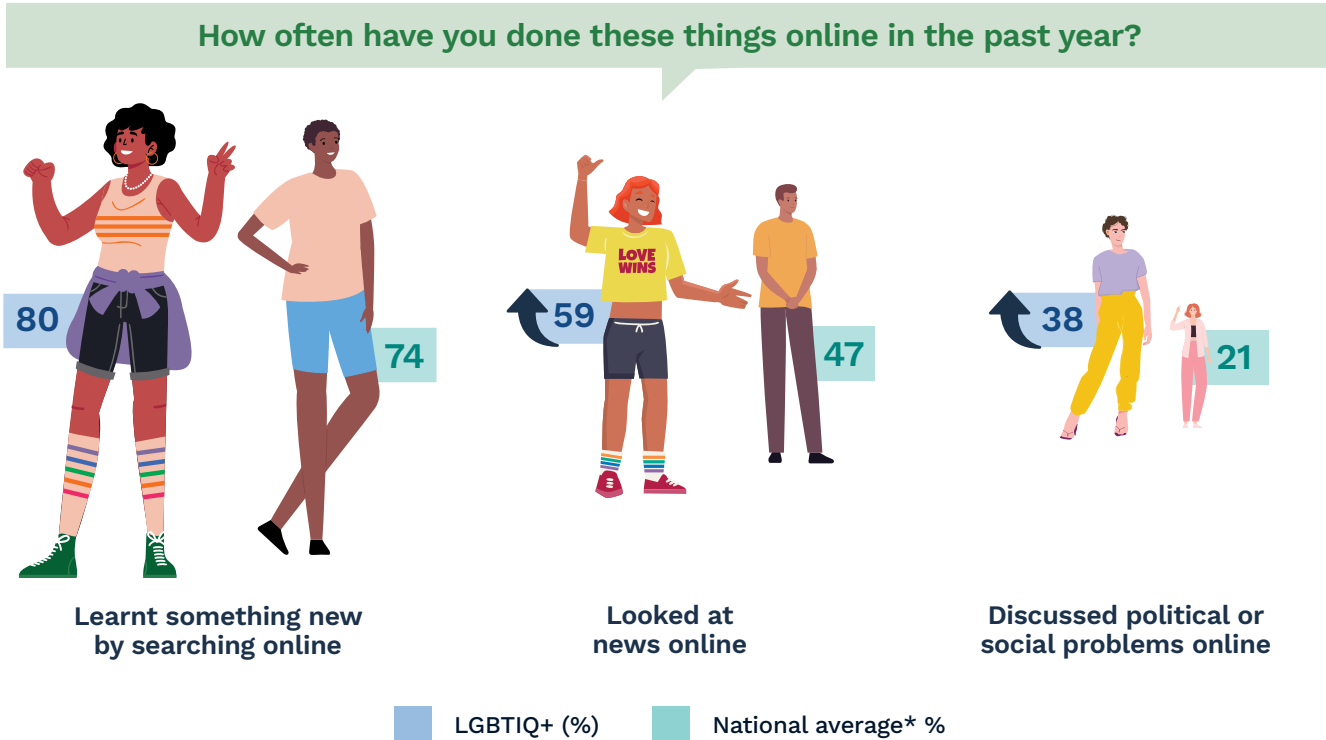– 17-year-old girl

Expanding, exploring and expressing: Positive encounters with online content

LGBTIQ+ teens learn about the world when they are online

LGBTIQ+ teens use the internet to expand their knowledge and understanding of the world around them. Figure 12 shows that the LGBTIQ+ teens surveyed were highly likely to have learnt something new online (80%, compared with the national average of 74%). This may have occurred because they were actively searching for information, or because they came across content shared by a friend or recommended by an algorithm. It's possible that LGBTIQ+ teens' higher likelihood of making new friends online (37%, compared with the national average of 25%) contributes to a higher likelihood of encountering content posted by new people about a variety of experiences and issues, thereby giving LGBTIQ+ young people a greater opportunity to learn while online. LGBTIQ+ young people using the internet are likely to be expanding their knowledge of LGBTIQ+ identities, experiences and issues, alongside other subjects and issues that are meaningful and interesting to them, such as pop culture, sports and art (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021; Cavalcante, 2019; Berger et al., 2021).

LGBTIQ+ teens also looked at news online at high rates (59%, compared with the national average of 47%) and were more likely to discuss political and social problems with other people online (38%, compared with 21%). These findings indicate that LGBTIQ+ teens are likely to be highly engaged and up to date with current affairs. LGBTIQ+ young people may be motivated to stay across the news and to discuss issues online due to the high volume of current affairs that are relevant to LGBTIQ+ rights and communities. As described earlier, LGBTIQ+ young people in our survey were highly likely to use the internet to connect with people who had different backgrounds from them (51%, compared with the national average of 31%). This may expand the range of news and social and political issues that LGBTIQ+ young people feel are relevant to their own lives and the lives of people they know and care about, further motivating their engagement online. However, it's important to note that engaging in news about LGBTIQ+ issues can have negative effects on this cohort through, for example, exposing them to transphobic commentary (Dhanani & Totton, 2023), alongside the positive impacts associated with learning about the world and what is happening in it.

Figure 12: Access to online news and discussions of social and political problems by LGBTIQ+ teens – comparison with the national average (% weekly or more often)

How often have you done these things online in the past year?

| 80 | 74 | 59 | 47 | 38 | 21 |

Learnt something new by searching online

Looked at news online

Discussed political or social problems online

LGBTIQ+ (%)   National average* %

*Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Excludes 'Prefer not to say' response to QC1.
Question C1. How often have you done these things online in the past year? Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

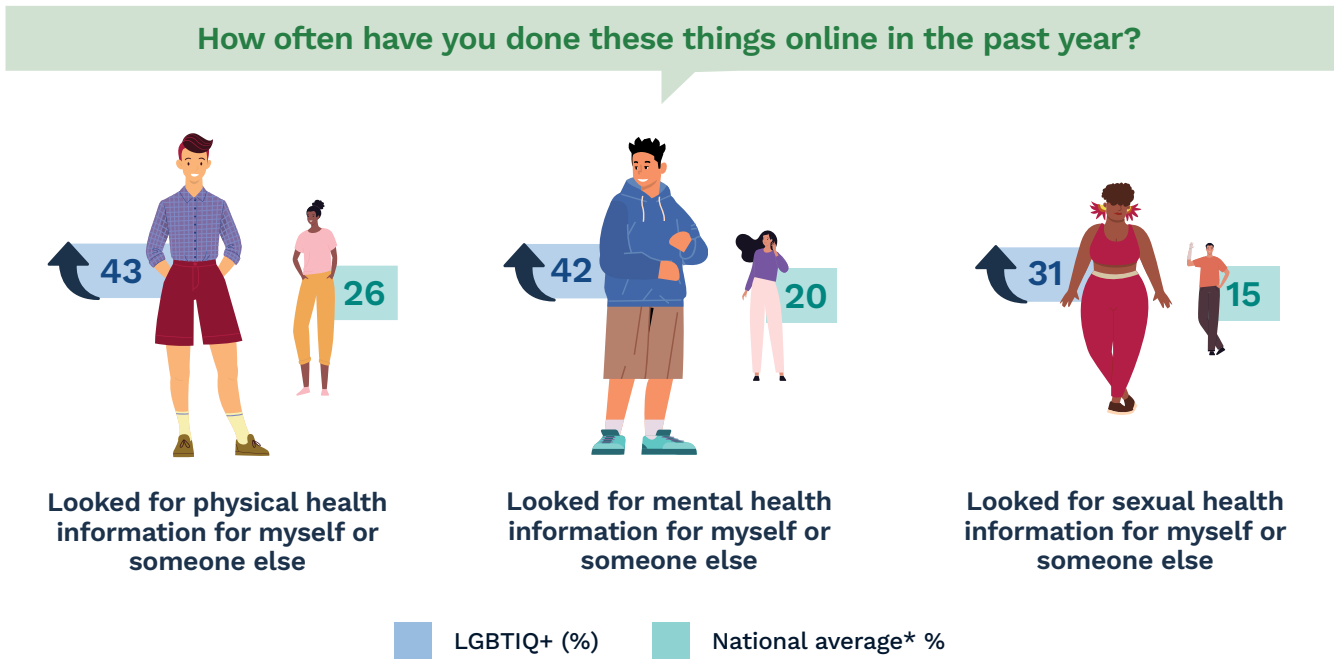### LGBTIQ+ teens are much more likely to find important health information online

The internet is a valuable source of information about all forms of health – including physical, sexual and mental health – for LGBTIQ+ young people. Discrimination in physical, sexual and mental health settings is common for LGBTIQ+ people in the form of stigma and even refusal of care (Ayhan et al., 2020). In addition, the fear or anticipation of discrimination, the possibility of encountering providers with low LGBTIQ+ literacy, and a lack of welcoming health-care environments are significant barriers to LGBTIQ+ people accessing all forms of health care (Silveri et al., 2022; Strauss et al., 2017). As such, online spaces may present a safer and more reliable source of health information for LGBTIQ+ young people.

LGBTIQ+ teens in our survey were twice as likely as the national average to have looked for physical health information online (43%, compared with 26%; see Figure 13) as well as sexual health information online (31%, compared with 15%). They were also significantly more likely than the national average to have looked for mental health information online (42%, compared with 20%).

Self-expression and exploration online

LGBTIQ+ teens' friends, communities and algorithms may also show them physical, sexual and mental health information as content that they encounter, as well as content that they explicitly search for. The internet may provide LGBTIQ+ young people with the ability to anonymously seek out LGBTIQ+-specific physical health information such as what to expect from gender-affirming health care. LGBTIQ+ teens may also seek valuable sex education online that may have been missing from their school- or family-based education (Delmonaco & Haimson, 2022; Ezer et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2019; Jones & Hillier, 2012). Prior research has also found that LGBTIQ+ teens' online cultures are typically very supportive of seeking mental health support from peers, social media and other online sources (Byron, 2023; Ceglarek & Ward, 2016; Escobar-Viera et al., 2020). It's possible that the online communities that LGBTIQ+ young people are a part of are more likely to share physical, sexual and mental health content as a part of community building and participation, providing support that may not be available elsewhere, given the discrimination that can prevent some LGBTIQ+ young people accessing health care (Jia et al., 2021; Fox & Ralston, 2016).

Figure 13: Use of the internet for health information by LGBTIQ+ teens – comparison with the national average (% weekly or more often)

How often have you done these things online in the past year?

	LGBTIQ+ (%)	National average* %
Looked for physical health information for myself or someone else	43	26
Looked for mental health information for myself or someone else	42	20
Looked for sexual health information for myself or someone else	31	15

Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Excludes 'Prefer not to answer' response to QC1.
Question C1. How often have you done these things online in the past year? Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

The online environment enables LGBTIQ+ teens to express themselves creatively and to have fun

Consistent with the national average, most LGBTIQ+ teens surveyed thought that the best thing about the internet is having fun (73%, in line with the national average of 72% – Table 7). Based on our findings, this fun may include pursuing hobbies and interests, playing games and sharing creative content.

Table 7: Answers among LGBTIQ+ teens to the question 'What are the best three things about the internet?' – comparison with the national average (%)

Online activity	LGBTIQ+ (%)	National average** (%)
Having fun	73	72
Finding out new things	57	56
Spending time with friends and family	44 ↓	50
Talking to people who like the same things as me	43	39
Meeting new people	16 ↑	10
Creating content and sharing with others	29	26

Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Question B5: What are the three best things about using the internet?
Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

As shown in Table 8, LGBTIQ+ teens were highly likely to have shared their hobbies and interests with other people online (58%, compared with the national average of 41%), perhaps indicating that online spaces make it easier for LGBTIQ+ teens to find and connect with others who share their interests.

Self-expression and exploration online

Many LGBTIQ+ teens said they played games online, both with others (60%) and alone (65%). While we found that the LGBTIQ+ teens in our survey were about as likely to game online as the national average, studies have shown that gaming spaces can be uniquely valuable to LGBTIQ+ teens (Di Cesare et al., 2023; O'Brien et al., 2022), and to trans and gender-diverse people in particular (Morgan et al., 2020; Cantrell & Zhu, 2022). Much like the internet more broadly, online gaming may allow LGBTIQ+ young people to control how they present themselves or even to experiment with different presentations, connect with other LGBTIQ+ young people to game together, and provide a form of escape from the pressures of offline life.

LGBTIQ+ young people in our survey were also more likely than the national average to have posted their own blog (29%, compared with 21%), and to have created music or a video and posted it online (29%, compared with 23%). LGBTIQ+ teens' creative expression online may indicate that when in the digital world they feel a sense of freedom and safety to share their creations with others.

Table 8: Use of the internet by LGBTIQ+ teens to exchange ideas and share creative pursuits – comparison with the national average (% weekly or more often)

Online activity	LGBTIQ+ (%)	National average* (%)
Shared my interests or hobbies with other people online	58 ⬆	41
Created own video or music and posted it online	29 ⬆	23
Posted own blog or story online	29 ⬆	21
Played games online – alone	65	61
Played games online – with other people	60	57

Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Excludes 'Prefer not to say' response to QC1.
Question C1. How often have you done these things online in the past year?
Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.
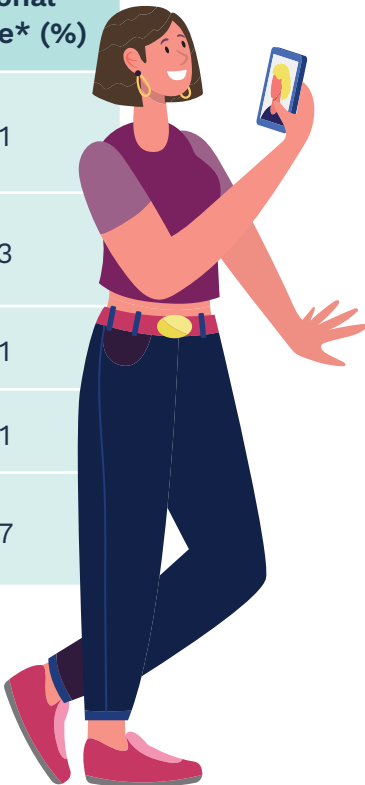
LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely to find it easier to be themselves online than in person

LGBTIQ+ teens in our survey were more likely than the national average to find it easier to be themselves online than they do with people face-to-face (51%, compared with 40% – see Table 9). LGBTIQ+ teens' use of the internet can allow them to express themselves in ways that they may not be able to do offline (Miller, 2016; Cavalcante, 2019; Berger et al., 2022; Hanckel et al., 2019). LGBTIQ+ teens' sense of being able to be themselves online may stem from the anonymity that some online spaces allow for, giving them freedom to experiment and explore how they express themselves and how they identify. LGBTIQ+ teens' strong social connections online (p. 30), their use of the internet to expand and explore their understandings of themselves and the world (p. 50), and the fun they have online (p. 53) may also contribute to this cohort finding it easier to be themselves online.

Online environments may provide spaces where LGBTIQ+ teens feel safe to be themselves. Consistent with the national average, a large majority of LGBTIQ+ teens said they feel safe online (73%). It follows that the LGBTIQ+ teens in our survey were more inclined to talk about different things online than they do face-to-face (53%, compared with the national average of 39%), and to talk about private things online which they don't talk about face-to-face (46%, compared with 28%).

Table 9: Responded 'mostly or very true' to statements about online confidence – comparison between LGBTIQ+ teens and the national average (%)

Online activity	LGBTIQ+ (%)	National average* (%)
I feel safe online	73	71
I find it easier to be myself online than when I am with people face-to-face	51 ⬆	40
I talk about different things online than I do when speaking to people face-to-face	53 ⬆	39
I talk about private things online which I do not talk about with people face-to-face	46 ⬆	28

Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Excludes 'Prefer not to say' response to QD4.
Question D4. How true are these of you? Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

Context and consent:
Encountering potentially harmful content online

'If the internet were an animal, it would be a chameleon. Perspective is everything'
– 17-year-old teen (my gender isn't listed)
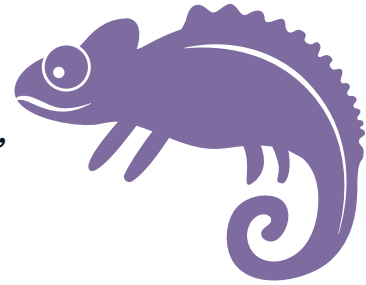
LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely to encounter sexual content online than the national average

Just over 83% of LGBTIQ+ teens in our survey reported that they had seen images on the internet that were obviously sexual (Figure 14). This was higher than the national average, 73% of whom had encountered sexual images online. Curiosity about sex and sexual content is developmentally appropriate for teens aged 14 and up (Quadara et al., 2020). However, eSafety research with teens aged 16–18 years found that young people are unintentionally encountering online pornography at very high rates, with 58% of participants who had encountered pornography having done so unintentionally at least once (eSafety, 2023). These encounters could result from someone sending them this content, or from it appearing in their social media feeds or popping up on unrelated websites (eSafety, 2023). While teens defend their right to engage consensually with online pornography, they describe unintentional encounters as unwanted, uncomfortable and even distressing (eSafety, 2023).

LGBTIQ+ teens in our survey encountered sexual content online at high rates; however, we don't know if these encounters were consensual or unintentional. Our findings may in part reflect a lack of representation in mainstream culture and education of LGBTIQ+ sexuality, which may lead young people to seek out this information and representation via pornography. Research has found that sex education in Australian schools doesn't meet the needs of LGBTIQ+ young people (Ezer et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2019; Jones & Hillier, 2012). Young gay men and transgender youth often report finding information in online pornography that was missing from their formal sex education (Shannon, 2022; Bradford et al., 2019; Litsou et al., 2021).

Encountering sexual content online is likely to be a varied experience for LGBTIQ+ teens, occurring both intentionally and unintentionally. These experiences with sexual content online may contribute to the mixed feelings that this cohort express towards the internet and highlight that context is important for determining if an online experience is appropriate, enjoyable or harmful.

Figure 14: Encounters with sexual content by LGBTIQ+ teens in the past year – comparison with the national average (%)

83

73

I saw images on the internet that were obviously sexual

LGBTIQ+ (%)   National average* %
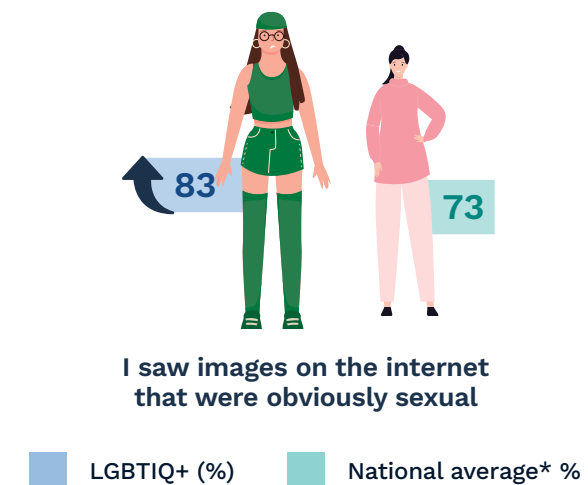
*Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Question G3. In the past year, how often have you seen sexual images online?
Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.
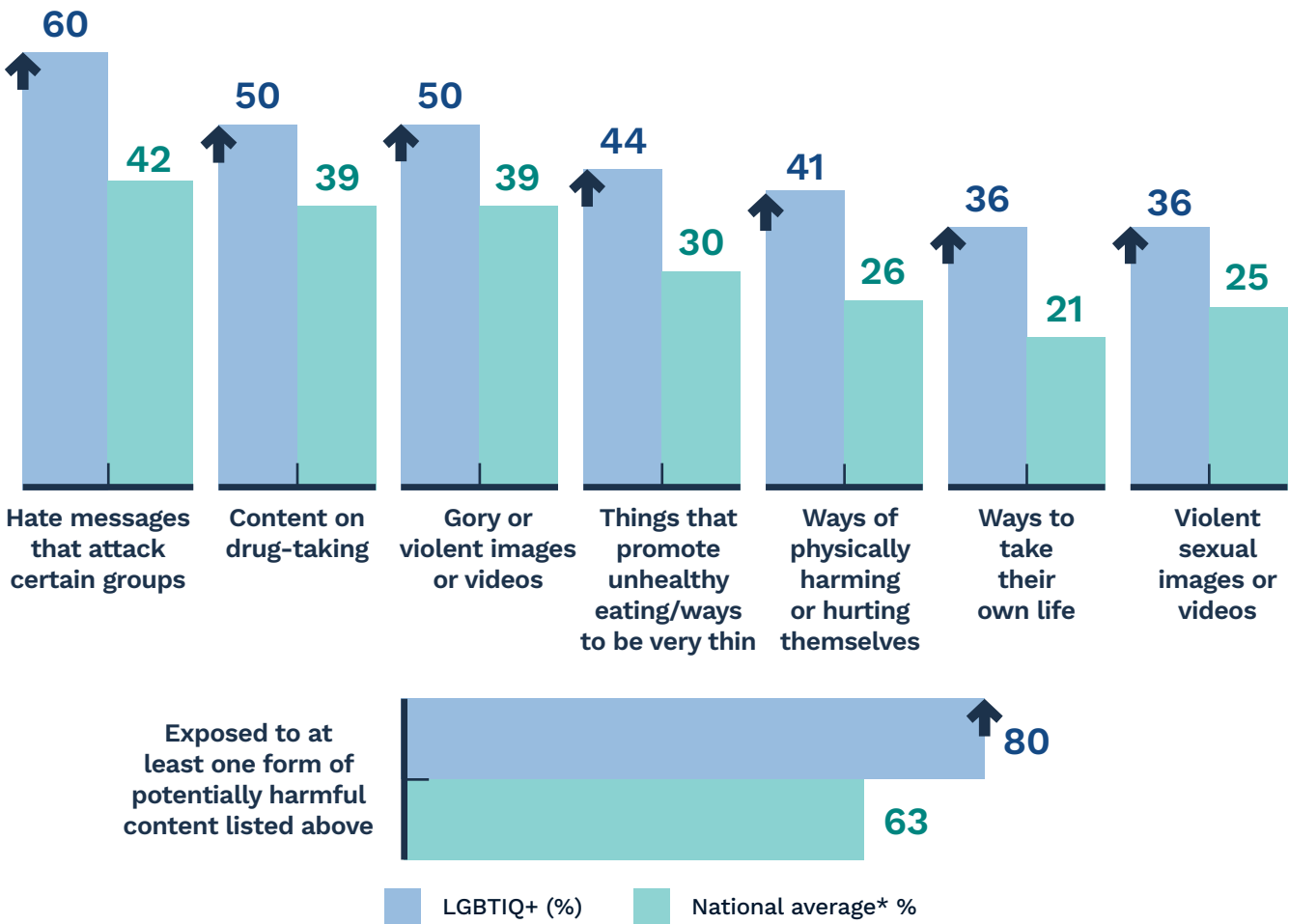
LGBTIQ+ young people are much more likely to have encountered hate speech and other potentially harmful content online

In contrast to online sexual content, online hate speech is always harmful. The context in which LGBTIQ+ teens encounter hate speech and similar content can affect the nature of this harm. LGBTIQ+ young people in our survey were more likely than the national average to have encountered potentially harmful content online (80%, compared with 63%; see Figure 15). In particular, they were more likely to have seen hate messages that attack a certain group or individual (60%, compared with the national average of 42%), ways of harming themselves (41%, compared with 26%), ways to take their own life (36%, compared with 21%), and things that promote unhealthy eating (i.e. disordered eating) (44%, compared with 30%). Encountering this content may be distressing and uncomfortable for LGBTIQ+ teens and may pose a risk to their wellbeing.

Depending on the kind of online communities that LGBTIQ+ teens are a part of, it's possible that many are seeing harmful content in the context of posts and discussions that critique it, provide counter-narratives or support information. For example, it's a common practice among LGBTIQ+ TikTokers to show clips or screen shots of hate speech followed by them making fun of it, dismissing it or responding to it (Rochford & Palmer, 2022). Therefore, some LGBTIQ+ teens may be encountering harmful content in a context that is supportive and may minimise the negative impact of seeing this content.

Self-expression and exploration online

Figure 15: Exposure to potentially harmful content in the past year by LGBTIQ+ teens – comparison with the national average (% past 12 months)

|	LGBTIQ+ (%)	National average* %
Hate messages that attack certain groups	60	42
Content on drug-taking	50	39
Gory or violent images or videos	50	39
Things that promote unhealthy eating/ways to be very thin	44	30
Ways of physically harming or hurting themselves	41	26
Ways to take their own life	36	21
Violent sexual images or videos	36	25
Exposed to at least one form of potentially harmful content listed above	80	63

Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Excludes 'Prefer not to say' response to QG4.
Question G4. In the past year, have you seen websites or online discussion where people talk about or show any of these things?
Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference

The tensions between spending time online to express themselves and explore their worlds, and potentially encountering harmful content while online, are reflected in LGBTIQ+ teens' mixed sentiment towards the internet. They appear to understand that it can be a place where they can potentially see something disturbing, and where they can also expand their ideas of who and how they can be in the world. While some teens may see things like harmful content as being just below the surface online, others see it as something that can be avoided with skill or knowledge. Others, still, may see the harms and joys of the internet as simply coexisting and know that being online means navigating those tensions.
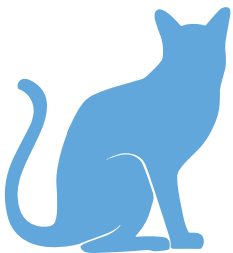
'Echidna: Spiny and spiky on top (internet is a dangerous place), but soft underneath (some really good aspects of the internet)'

– 17-year-old girl
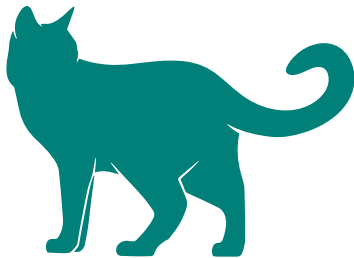
'A cat: friendly most of the time unless you provoke it. Most cats are fine but a lot are nasty'

– 15-year-old girl

'Cat: it's both cute yet vicious'

– 17-year-old boy

Navigating life online and offline

Many LGBTIQ+ young people in our survey had mixed feelings about the internet, reflecting both their positive and negative experiences online. However, LGBTIQ+ teens' internet use also affects other parts of their lives. While we found that their time online has clear benefits for their sense of self and social connections, we also found that the amount of time LGBTIQ+ teens spend online can be the cause of some challenges. These effects are likely shaped in part by family members' lack of understanding about the importance of LGBTIQ+ teens' online worlds. In this section, we outline our survey findings in relation to LGBTIQ+ teens' internet use and its associated offline challenges.
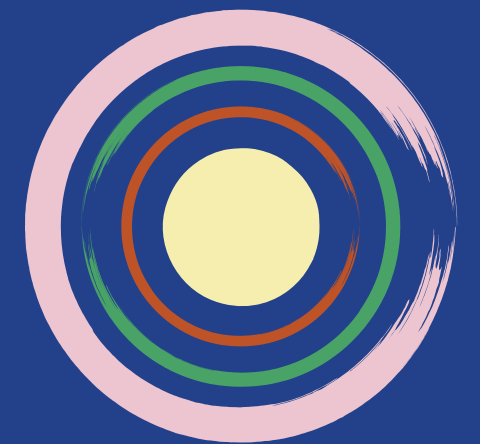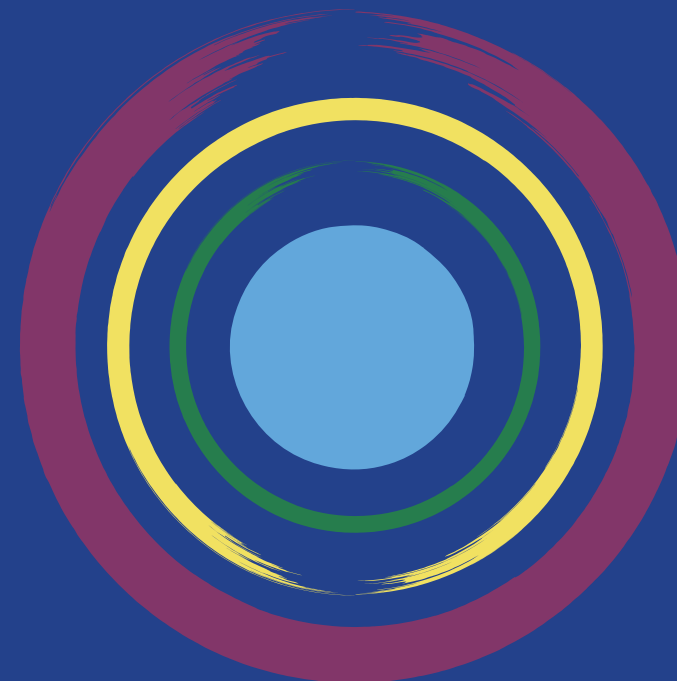
'[If the internet were an animal, it would] … probably [be] a dog, because depending on the situation they can be loving and sweet or bite you'

– 16-year-old boy

LGBTIQ+ teens spend more leisure time online than the national average

The ability which LGBTIQ+ teens report the internet gives them to connect socially, to explore their worlds and to express themselves online is reflected in the large amount of time they spend online. As shown in Table 10, on weekdays, 21% of LGBTIQ+ teens spent between 7 and 11 hours per day online for fun (as opposed to doing schoolwork), compared with 13% of the national average. On weekends, 34% spent between 7 and 11 hours per day online for fun, compared with 27% of the national average.

LGBTIQ+ teens' leisure time spent online is likely indicative of the value of being online that they perceive for their happiness, relaxation and curiosity. Our survey found that being online allows LGBTIQ+ teens to explore and express themselves, an experience that may also drive the amount of time they spend online.

Table 10: Length of time spent online for fun/free time on weekdays and weekends – comparison of LGBTIQ+ teens with the national average (% weekly or more often)

Length of time online	Weekdays		Weekdays	
	LGBTIQ+ (%)	National average* (%)	LGBTIQ+ (%)	National average* (%)
Little or no time	1	1	1	1
0.5–2 hours	21 ⬇	27	9	12
3–6 hours	50	54	46 ⬇	52
7–11 hours	21 ⬆	13	34 ⬆	27
More than 11 hours	7	5	10	8

Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Excludes 'Prefer not to say' response to QB3 and QB4.
Questions B3 and B4. About how long do you use the internet on an ordinary weekday (Monday to Friday)/ weekend day (Saturday and Sunday) for fun/free time? Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=303); Australian teens aged 8–17 (n =1,404).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

LGBTIQ+ young people encounter offline challenges associated with their time online

LGBTIQ+ teens in our survey were more likely than the general population to report that they'd had negative experiences as a result of their time online (Table 11). Issues such as going without food or sleep, or a drop in school performance, may be among the negative effects LGBTIQ+ young people associate with being online, alongside the benefits. Our finding that many LGBTIQ+ teens have attempted to reduce the amount of time they spend online (72%, compared with the national average of 64%) indicates that they are aware of negative impacts of their time online and are attempting to mitigate these.

Navigating life online and offline

Table 11: Experiences connected to time online by LGBTIQ+ teens – comparison with the national average (% in the past year)

Experience	LGBTIQ+ teens		National average* (%)
I have experienced conflicts with family or friends because of the time I spent on the internet	75 ⬆		68
I think the amount of time I spend on the internet causes problems for me	73 ⬆		65
I have tried unsuccessfully to spend less time on the internet	72 ⬆		64
I had to hide my internet use from my parents	65 ⬆		52
I have gone without eating or sleeping because of the time I spent on the internet	65 ⬆		51
My grades have dropped because of the time I spent on the internet	64 ⬆		53

Average among Australians aged 14–17.
Excludes 'Prefer not to say' response to QF3.
Question F3: In the past year, how often have these things happened to you?
Bases: LGBTIQ+ teens (n=305); Australian teens aged 14–17 (n=1,410).
Note: Arrows denote results with a statistically significant difference.

It's also noteworthy that young people have been found to be primed to evaluate the internet as negative (George et al., 2020). The negative discourses about screen time, social media and the internet that teens encounter at school, from parents and caregivers, and in the media more generally, have likely contributed to this tendency to evaluate their time online as negatively affecting them.

LGBTIQ+ teens in our study were more likely to have hidden their internet use from their parents and carers (65%, compared with the national average of 52%). However, it's also possible that they were hiding what they were using the internet for from their parents. Teens who may be questioning, exploring, not ready or not feeling safe to share their gender and/or sexual identity with parents and caregivers are likely to conceal from their parents LGBTIQ+ content that they see online.

LGBTIQ+ young people in our survey were more likely than the general population to have experienced conflict with family or friends due to their time spent online (75%, compared with 68%). It's possible that there is a misalignment between parents' and caregivers' concerns about screen time and online harms, and their understanding of the benefits that their LGBTIQ+ teen may experience as a result of being online. It's important that parents and caregivers, whether they are aware that their teen identifies as LGBTIQ+ or not, are supported to understand the benefits of being online that our LGBTIQ+ survey participants have articulated.

Conclusion

This research sought to explore the online experiences of LGBTIQ+ teens, the benefits and harms that they encounter and how these might differ from their peers' experiences. The significant role that digital technologies play in the social and emotional lives of LGBTIQ+ young people is evident in the survey findings presented in this report, which show that LGBTIQ+ teens' online experiences are characterised by the tensions between the risks and benefits of being online. The findings reported here indicate that LGBTIQ+ teens are skilled navigators of both online joy and online harm, whose positive online experiences motivate them to be online despite the risks and harms they know they may encounter.
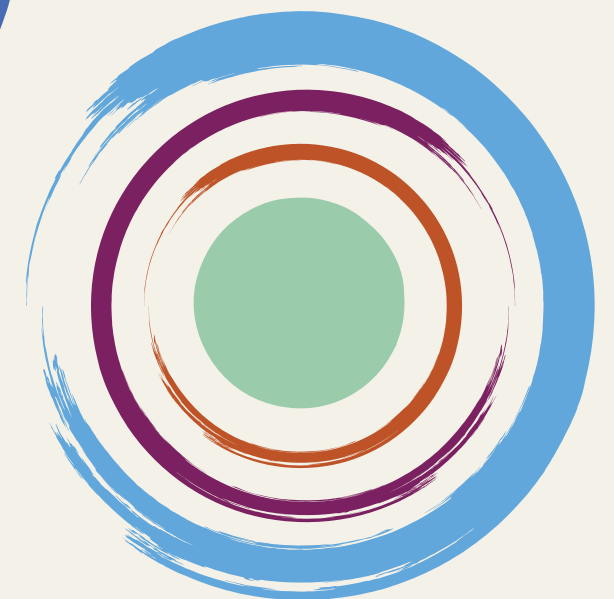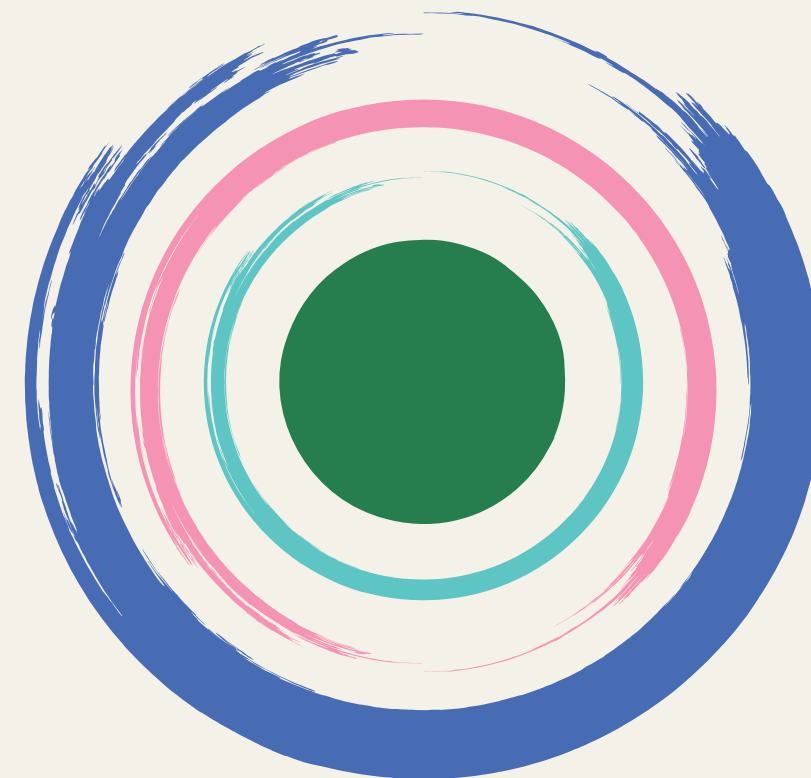
Conclusion

Being online offers LGBTIQ+ teens substantial social benefits, enabling them to make connections they might not otherwise find offline. LGBTIQ+ teens use the internet to make new friends at higher rates than the national average, befriending people with both shared and distinct experiences, worldviews and identities. The friends and communities that LGBTIQ+ teens connect with online can play a crucial role in providing them with emotional support, which some count as the best thing about the internet.

Being online also enables LGBTIQ+ teens to explore the world and express themselves. They use the internet to access information about news and current events, as well as important mental, physical and sexual health information. Encountering this content can allow them to expand their understanding of themselves and the world around them. LGBTIQ+ teens also have fun online and use the internet to express themselves creatively, sharing hobbies and interests, gaming and creating, and sharing original content. Perhaps most significantly, in a world that can be hostile to gender and sexual diversity, LGBTIQ+ teens feel like they can be themselves online more so than they can offline. The ways that they use the internet to explore and express themselves highlight the importance of online participation to LGBTIQ+ teens.

These findings emphasise the significant role of the internet in the lives of LGBTIQ+ teens. For **educators, service providers** and **policymakers**, this report confirms that online spaces are fertile ground for seeding resources and services that can support LGBTIQ+ teens' wellbeing and online safety. Similarly, **parents and carers**, as well as **educators** and **policymakers**, may be able to strengthen online safety interventions with the insight that being online may itself be an important protective factor for LGBTIQ+ teens' social and emotional wellbeing. Online safety and wellbeing strategies for this cohort should be designed and implemented with this in mind and avoid inhibiting LGBTIQ+ teens' access to the benefits they find online.

While the internet can provide them with a wealth of positive experiences and benefits, LGBTIQ+ teens also encounter risks and harms associated with being online. As they connect with friends and community, LGBTIQ+ teens are also more likely to engage in social behaviours such as sharing intimate images and personal details with people they meet online, which can have negative consequences if trust is breached. The survey also found that they are more likely to be treated badly online than the national average, and to experience hate speech and threats of physical harm. In addition, LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely to encounter potentially harmful content while online, such as content attacking certain groups, and self-harm and suicide content. While the context in which they encounter this content may not always be harmful, the potential for harm is high. Negative experiences in the digital environment, especially those centring on hate speech, discrimination and the non-consensual sharing of personal information, may discourage online engagement and, in doing so, jeopardise LGBTIQ+ teens' having access to the benefits of being online.

Platforms and **digital industry** have a unique opportunity to minimise the harms that LGBTIQ+ teens encounter online, without limiting their use of the internet for connection, exploration and expression. Platforms can make efforts to reduce the levels of hate speech and other harmful content online by taking proactive detection measures, by improving the availability, transparency and responsiveness of reporting mechanisms, and by consistently holding users to community standards and terms of use. However, care must be taken with safety measures such as content filtering, which can unintentionally censor content that is important for LGBTIQ+ teens relating to gender and sexuality. The risks associated with sharing personal information and intimate communications could be reduced by platforms implementing safety-by-design principles that empower users to make the safest choices. **Educators, parents and carers** also have a role to play in supporting teens to understand online safety risks and the strategies they can employ to enhance their safety without missing out on the benefits of being online. Framing online safety education, tools and supports around the value of forming connections online may support LGBTIQ+ teens to manage behaviour associated with risk while also forming positive and sustaining relationships online.

When LGBTIQ+ teens' experiences online are negative, we found that they are both more significantly impacted and more likely to take action in response. In particular, LGBTIQ+ teens were more likely to report that a negative online experience had affected their mental health, impacting their schoolwork and their feelings of self-determination. However, our survey also revealed that LGBTIQ+ teens are more likely than the national average to take action when they have a harmful experience online. They report to platforms, unfriend perpetrators, and seek support from friends and online services such as Kids Helpline. LGBTIQ+ teens are proactive and resilient when they experience harm online.

These findings indicate that LGBTIQ+ teens' experiences of navigating online harm could be leveraged in support of efforts to increase their safety online. Online safety interventions created by **service providers, policymakers** and industry may benefit from harnessing the skills and experiences of LGBTIQ+ teens. Co-designing online safety strategies and materials with LGBTIQ+ young people who have lived experience and expertise in navigating online harm can produce powerful outcomes that resonate with this cohort's day-to-day lives and meet their unique support needs and preferences.

Despite the impacts of negative online experiences, LGBTIQ+ teens in our survey typically spend a great deal of time online, especially on social media. This is likely explained by the positive connections and opportunities for exploration and expression that LGBTIQ+ teens find online. However, their time spent online can sometimes cause challenges in their offline lives, potentially generating conflict with family members, interfering with sleeping or eating, and affecting school grades. Many LGBTIQ+ teens were found to have attempted to reduce their internet use but struggled to do so. While LGBTIQ+ teens are able to reflect on and recognise when their internet use is causing problems for them, they may require greater support to manage these challenges.

Conclusion

The findings in this report indicate that LGBTIQ+ teens and their families may benefit from greater support in negotiating the challenges and benefits associated with being online. **Parents and carers** of LGBTIQ+ teens may feel empowered by support services and digital parenting resources that emphasise the value of being online for their teens, and ways to minimise their negative online experiences without reducing their positive ones. Resources highlighting the social and emotional benefits that LGBTIQ+ teens access online – but may not have access to offline – may also help parents and carers to support their LGBTIQ+ teen in developing the balance of online and offline activities that is optimal for them.

Given the internet's vital role in the lives of LGBTIQ+ teens, it's imperative that this cohort receive the support they need to safely maximise the benefits of being online. Doing so requires taking LGBTIQ+ teens' good experiences online just as seriously as their experiences of online harms. Parents and carers, educators, service providers, policymakers and the digital industry all have a role to play in tipping the balance of LGBTIQ+ teens' online experiences into the positive. Efforts to support the online safety of LGBTIQ+ teens must be undertaken as part of broader work addressing the discrimination that is often at the root of the harms LGBTIQ+ teens encounter online. eSafety continues to work with LGBTIQ+ communities to increase awareness of safer internet practices, with further efforts in this field to be guided by the diverse and intersecting lived experiences of LGBTIQ+ teens.

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