

Track, harass, repeat

Attitudes that normalise
tech-based coercive control

Who are you with?

Who are you talking to?

Where are you?





Acknowledgement of Country

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

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the people who participated in this research and gave their time to contribute to a greater understanding of tech-based coercive control.

About the authors

eSafety commissioned the Social Research Centre to conduct this research and to prepare a draft report. This is an edited version of that report.

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List of abbreviations and terms

Abbreviation or term	Description or meaning in full
ANROWS	Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety
Coercive control	A pattern of abusive behaviour used to control someone within a relationship through manipulation, pressure and fear (eSafety Commissioner, 2024).
eSafety	eSafety Commissioner
Linguistically diverse	For this report, this refers to adults who reported speaking a language other than English at home.
SRC	Social Research Centre
Tech-based coercive control	Also known as ‘technology-facilitated coercive control’, this refers to the use of digital technologies, as part of a pattern of abusive behaviour, in order to control, manipulate and create fear in a current or former intimate partner relationship (eSafety Commissioner, 2021, 2024). It can be subtle and targeted, making it difficult for victims to recognise (Attorney-General’s Department, 2024). This form of abuse leverages technology to isolate, harass, monitor, stalk, impersonate, threaten or humiliate the victim, typically a woman (eSafety Commissioner, 2021).
TFGBV	Technology-facilitated gender-based violence. This term captures all forms of violence and abuse that occur online or through other digital technologies and that are rooted in harmful gender norms, discrimination, modes of oppression and unequal structures. It is a multidimensional, systemic and intersectional form of violence that includes every type of abuse or violent behaviour.

About this report

Coercive control is a pattern of abusive behaviour used to control someone within a relationship through manipulation, pressure and fear (eSafety Commissioner, 2024). It is not one behaviour or incident, but a pattern of controlling behaviour. Coercive control is almost always a factor in family, domestic and sexual violence, but it can also happen between people who don't have an intimate relationship with each other.

People who use coercive control in a relationship are more likely to use physical violence against their partner and any children involved, and there is a higher risk of physical harm, including intimate partner homicide (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024; NSW Government, n.d.).

When someone uses digital technology as part of that abusive behaviour, it is known as 'technology-facilitated coercive control' or 'tech-based coercive control' (Attorney-General's Department, 2024; eSafety Commissioner, 2024). This can include behaviours such as monitoring and surveillance, cyberstalking with tracking, impersonation, hacking, harassment and abuse.

This summary report explores attitudes and expectations that could normalise the use of tech-based coercive control in intimate partner relationships. We measured these attitudes by presenting a series of statements to survey participants covering a range of positive and negative scenarios involving the use of digital technology within an intimate relationship.



Overall, we found that men, younger participants and linguistically diverse participants showed a higher likelihood of agreeing with behaviours that could foster an unhealthy dependency or controlling dynamic within intimate relationships – such as constantly messaging, location tracking and controlling what is posted on social media.

We also found that men and linguistically diverse participants were most likely to agree that insisting on checking how an intimate partner looks in a photo, wanting them to be constantly available to respond to the partner's texts and calls, and constantly texting them were **all** usually a sign of care from a partner within an intimate relationship.

Furthermore, men, linguistically diverse participants and married participants were most likely to agree that, within an intimate relationship, it was reasonable for a partner to expect to have their partner's personal passwords **and** to track them whenever they wanted.

Another crucial finding was participants' mixed expectations around digital privacy in intimate relationships, with significant acceptance of expected password sharing among younger participants and those in intimate relationships. This finding may reflect the normalisation of digital sharing in relationships, which may enhance connection but also potentially compromise individual privacy.

Additionally, there was clear agreement from participants that employers should support education initiatives that address tech-based coercive control. Over half of the Australian adults surveyed believe that companies should provide resources on how to handle digital abuse, suggesting a valuable role for corporate advocacy.

Overall, our findings highlight the need for nuanced and targeted marketing and communication activities to:

- increase awareness of tech-based coercive control
- reshape norms around digital privacy and respect in intimate relationships
- educate that consent is an active and ongoing process.

Methodology

In October 2024, the eSafety Commissioner (eSafety) commissioned the Social Research Centre (SRC) to conduct quantitative research into attitudes and expectations that could normalise the use of tech-based coercive control in intimate partner relationships. The research aimed to:

- investigate harmful attitudes and beliefs that could contribute to tech-based coercive control in intimate relationships
- measure the extent to which participants expect corporate Australia to disseminate information regarding tech-based abuse
- contribute to the growing evidence base of attitudes, myths and social norms contributing to technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV).

A nine-question survey was developed, building upon work undertaken for the Technology-Facilitated Abuse Scale as part of the 2021 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey (Coumarelos et al., 2023).

The survey questions and on-screen presentation emphasised the following words and concepts associated with ‘expectations’, ‘reasonableness’ and ‘consent’:

- To what extent do you agree or disagree that each of the following behaviours is **usually a sign of care from a partner** in an intimate relationship?
- To what extent do you agree or disagree that each of the following expectations is **reasonable from a partner** in an intimate relationship?
- To what extent do you agree or disagree that all Australian **employers should provide government resources (such as help and referral information) to employees** to help them respond safely to tech-based or digital-based abuse by a current or former intimate partner?

The quantitative survey was conducted with **general community Australian adults** (18 years and older) using the Life in Australia™ online panel. Life in Australia™ is a probability-based panel constructed using random recruitment means to provide a representative sample of the Australian general community. It’s important to note that Life in Australia™ does have a slight leaning towards older Australians (and away from the youngest adults) and a smaller representation from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. Weighting adjustment, however, takes this into account.

This report is based on final weighted data for 2,046 adults. A comparison of the final sample and Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) benchmarks is provided (see Appendix, Tables A1 and A2). Analysis has been conducted of sub-groups based on gender, age, linguistic diversity, family composition, education, marital status, employment status and regionality. Only significant findings are reported. Specific findings for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander participants weren’t separated out for analysis due to the small sample size.

Please note the following aspects of data processing and presentation:

- A five-point response scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree was used for all questions.
- Findings were presented as asked and no reverse coding was undertaken.
- ‘Not sure’ and ‘prefer not to say’ responses are included.

All aspects of this research were undertaken in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council’s (NHMRC) National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (the National Statement), the Australian Privacy Principles, the Privacy (Market and Social Research) Code 2021, the Research Society Code of Professional Behaviour, and ISO 20252:2019 standards.

Data analyses

Data were analysed using Q Research Software (Q). Statistical tests were undertaken to establish whether the responses for one sub-group were notably different from those for other sub-groups. In this report, we use the term ‘significantly different’ in common parlance to indicate notable differences between sub-groups, as supported by our statistical analysis. Where differences across sub-groups are mentioned in the report commentary (for example, ‘higher than’ or ‘lower than’), unless otherwise noted, it implies that a difference occurred with $p < 0.05$ and is a real difference as opposed to occurring by chance. This approach allows us to highlight meaningful variations in the data while maintaining a balance between technical accuracy and readability for a broader audience.

Recognising early signs of tech-based control in an intimate relationship



Overall findings

Survey participants were presented with a list of five statements and asked to what extent they agree or disagree that each behaviour is **usually a sign of care from a partner in an intimate relationship**. The key contextual words in this series of questions were ‘usually a sign of care’. Three of the statements described behaviour indicative of very high or high levels of tech-based coercive control (see Table 1).

Table 1: Items used to describe behaviours as being usually a sign of care from a partner in an intimate relationship

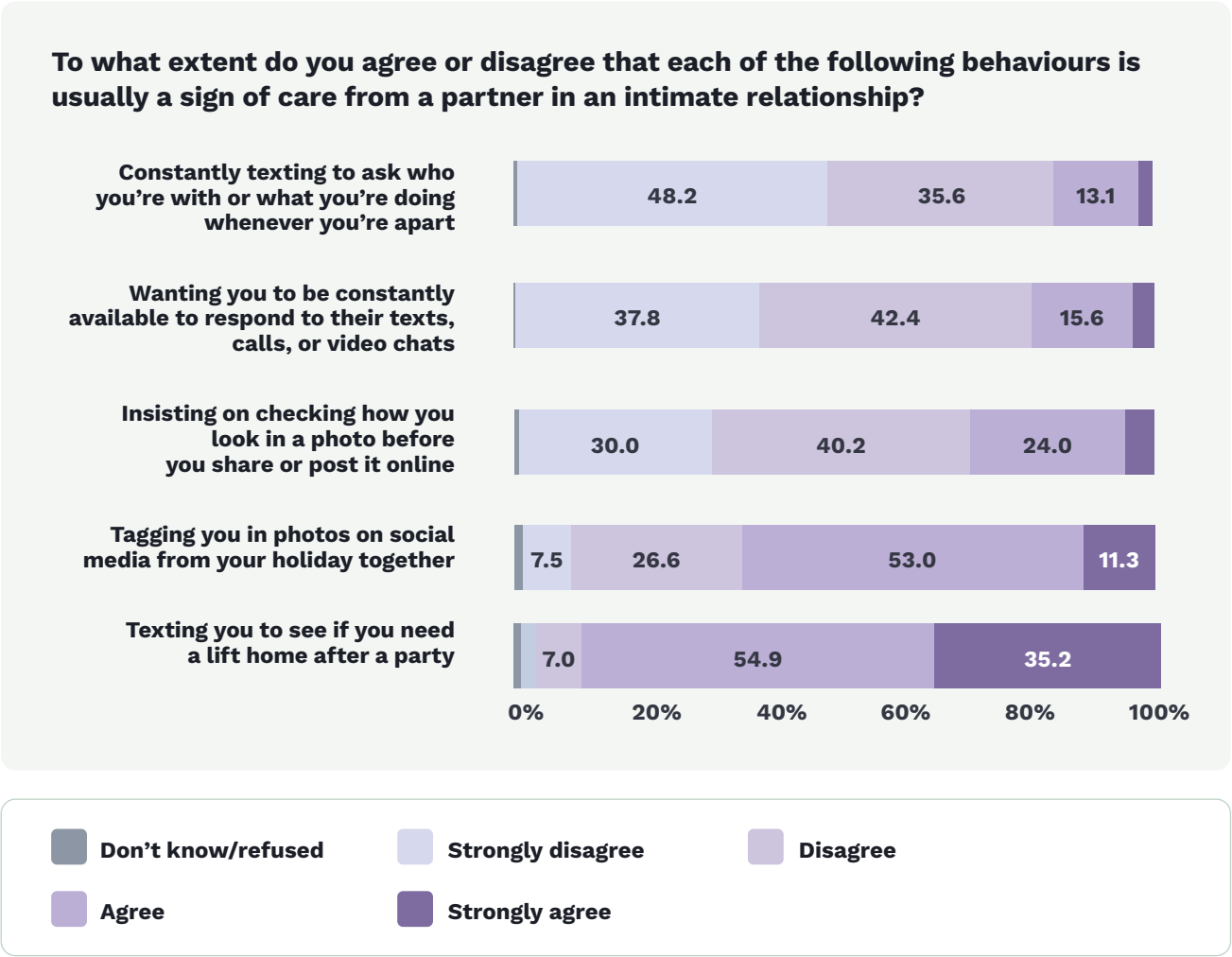
Statement to describe behaviour	Level of tech-based coercive control	Demonstrated elements of control ¹
Constantly texting to ask who you’re with or what you’re doing whenever you’re apart	Very high	Monitoring, isolating, regulating/ micro-managing
Wanting you to be constantly available to respond to their texts, calls or video chats	Very high	Monitoring, regulating/ micro-managing
Insisting on checking how you look in a photo before you share or post it online	High	Regulating/ micro-managing
Tagging you in photos on social media from your holiday together	Low	
Texting you to see if you need a lift home after a party	Very low	

¹ <https://www.ag.gov.au/system/files/2023-09/national-principles-to-address-coercive-control-family-and-domestic-violence.PDF>

Most Australian adults surveyed showed some recognition of the early signs of tech-based coercive control in an intimate relationship. That said, between 15% and 29% of adults surveyed agreed to some extent that behaviours indicative of tech-based coercive control are usually a sign of care from a partner in an intimate relationship (see Figure 1), as follows:

- constantly texting to ask who you’re with or what you’re doing whenever you’re apart: 15.3%
 - wanting you to be constantly available to respond to their texts, calls or video chats: 19.1%
 - insisting on checking how you look in a photo before you share or post it online: 28.7%.
- A total of 38.3% agreed to some extent with at least one of these statements.

Figure 1: Extent of agreement with statements describing behaviours as being usually a sign of care from a partner in an intimate relationship



It's also important to note that tech-based coercive control is a pattern of behaviour. Of the Australians surveyed, 8.4% agreed or strongly agreed that insisting on checking how you look in a photo **and** wanting you to be constantly available to respond to their texts and calls **and** constantly texting you were all usually a sign of care from a partner within an intimate relationship. This finding may suggest either higher levels of attitudes that support coercive control or an inability to identify the early signs of tech-based coercive control.

Agreement with all three statements was significantly greater for:

- men (11.2%) compared with women (5.6%)
- linguistically diverse individuals (13.7%) compared with non-linguistically diverse individuals (6.7%).

Analysis by key sub-groups

Behaviours indicative of tech-based coercive control

Agreement that 'constantly texting to ask who you are with or what you are doing whenever you are apart is usually a sign of care from a partner in an intimate relationship' (15.3% total agreement) was significantly higher for:

- men (20.1%) compared with women (10.4%)
- those aged 18–24 (30.4%) compared with those aged 25–34 (18.8%), 45–54 (7.8%), 55–64 (11.8%), 65–74 (6.5%) and 75+ (11.9%)
- linguistically diverse individuals (29.4%) compared with non-linguistically diverse individuals (10.8%)
- those who were living in major cities (17.2%) compared with those who were living in inner regional Australia (9.5%).

Agreement that 'wanting you to be constantly available to respond to their texts, calls, or video chats is usually a sign of care from a partner in an intimate relationship' (19.1% total agreement) was significantly higher for:

- men (26.3%) compared with women (11.8%)
- linguistically diverse individuals (29.6%) compared with non-linguistically diverse individuals (15.8%)
- those with a secondary education – Years 9 and below (34.4%) – compared with those with a graduate-level education (8.2%).

Agreement that 'insisting on checking how you look in a photo before you share or post it online is usually a sign of care from a partner in an intimate relationship' (28.7% total agreement) was significantly higher for:

- men (35.4%) compared with women (21.0%)
- linguistically diverse individuals (35.1%) compared with non-linguistically diverse individuals (26.7%).

Behaviours less likely to signal tech-based coercive control

Agreement that 'tagging you in photos on social media from your holiday together is usually a sign of care from a partner in an intimate relationship' (64.3% total agreement) was significantly higher for:

- women (69.4%) compared with men (59.0%)
- those aged 18–24 (84.0%) compared with those aged 45–54 (62.9%), 55–64 (56.9%), 65–74 (44.4%) and 75+ (29.3%)
- participants who were in a couple with children under 15 (75.3%) compared with those who were in a couple with no children (55.0%) and those in a couple with no children under 15 (61.5%)
- those in paid employment (72.5%) compared with those who didn't have a job (49.5%)
- those living in outer regional locations (73.8%) compared with those who were living in major cities (65.6%) and remote and very remote Australia (21.5%).

Agreement that 'texting you to see if you need a lift home after a party is usually a sign of care from a partner in an intimate relationship' (90.1% total agreement) was significantly higher for:

- those who were in paid employment (92.7%) compared with those who didn't have a job (87.1%).



Minimising tech-based coercive control in an intimate relationship

Overall findings

Survey participants were presented with a list of four statements and asked to what extent they agree or disagree that each expectation is **reasonable from a partner in an intimate relationship**. The key contextual words in this series of questions were ‘expectations’ and ‘reasonable from a partner’. Two of the statements described expectations indicative of very high levels of tech-based coercive control (see Table 2).

Table 2: Items used to describe expectations considered reasonable from a partner in an intimate relationship

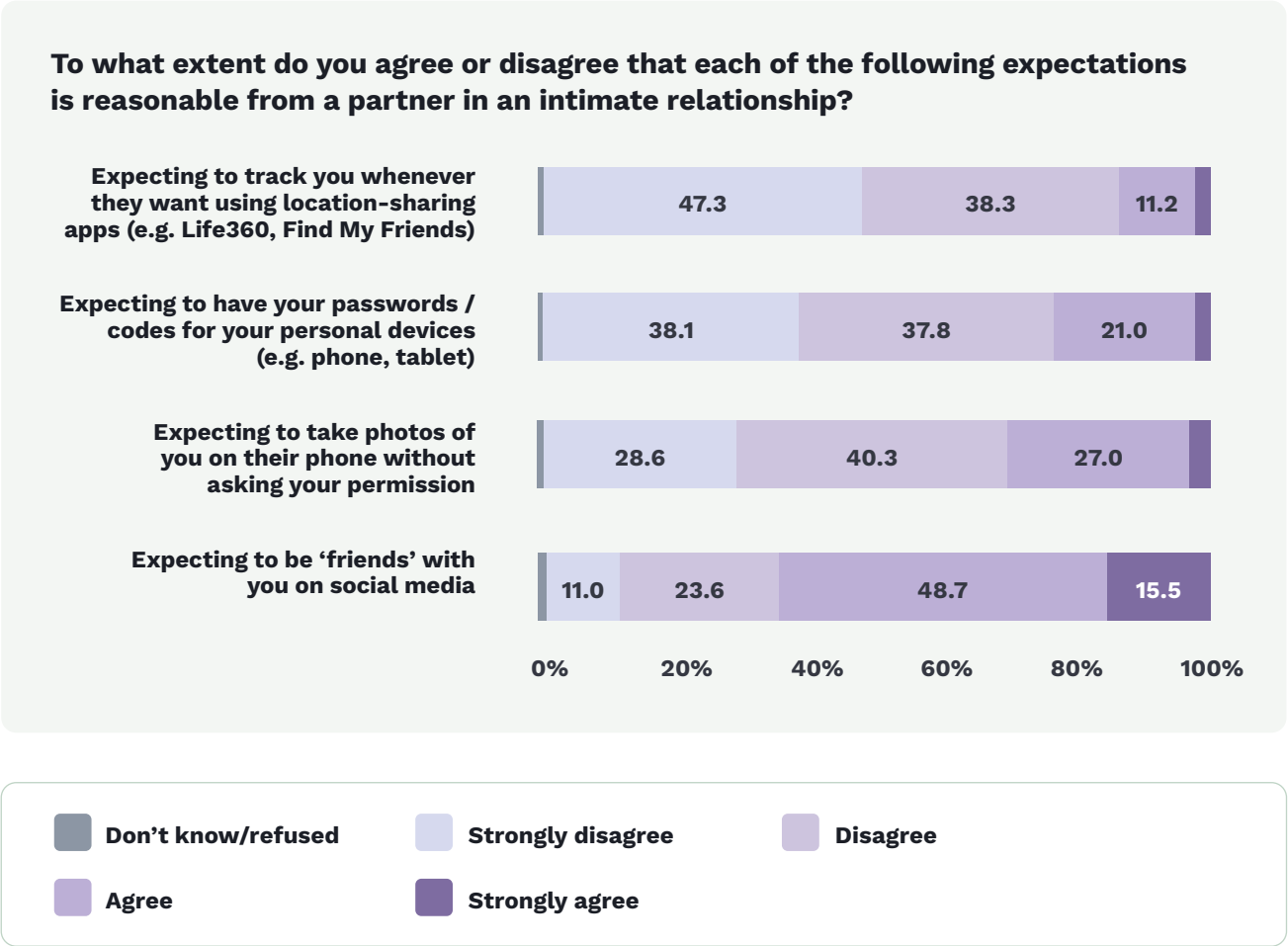
Statement to describe expectation	Level of tech-based coercive control	Demonstrated elements of control ²
Expecting to have your passwords/codes for your personal devices (e.g. phone, tablet)	Very high	Monitoring
Expecting to track you whenever they want using location-sharing apps (e.g. Life360, Find My Friends)	Very high	Monitoring
Expecting to take photos of you on their phone without asking your permission	Low to moderate	Restricting autonomy
Expecting to be ‘friends’ with you on social media	Low to moderate	Monitoring

² <https://www.ag.gov.au/system/files/2023-09/national-principles-to-address-coercive-control-family-and-domestic-violence.PDF>

Most Australian adults surveyed agreed that expectations from a partner that are indicative of tech-based coercive control are unreasonable within an intimate relationship. That said, between 14% and 23% of adults surveyed agreed to some extent that expectations indicative of tech-based coercive control are reasonable from a partner in an intimate relationship (see Figure 2), as follows:

- expecting to track you whenever they want using location-sharing apps (e.g. Life360, Find My Friends): 13.6%
- expecting to have your passwords/codes for your personal devices (e.g. phone, tablet): 23.3%.

Figure 2: Extent of agreement to statements describing expectations as being reasonable from a partner in an intimate relationship



Base: All respondents (n=2,046).

Almost 1 in 10 (9.7%) participants agreed that having your personal passwords **and** tracking you whenever they wanted were reasonable expectations from a partner within an intimate relationship. Agreement with both statements was significantly greater for:

- those aged 35–44 (14.1%) compared with those aged 55–64 (7.0%) and 65–74 (4.7%)
- linguistically diverse individuals (16.3%) compared with non-linguistically diverse individuals (7.6%)
- married participants (11.5%) compared to all other categories of marital status except never married (9.1%).

Agreement with some statements, however (such as ‘expecting to have access to passwords’ and ‘expecting to take photos without permission’), was also high among married participants and those in couple families with children. This may be suggestive of a desire for convenience or for a situation with a shared commitment to trust and consent, rather than of tech-based coercive control.

Analysis by key sub-groups

Expectations indicative of tech-based coercive control

Agreement that ‘expecting to track you whenever they want using location-sharing apps (e.g. Life360, Find My Friends) is a reasonable expectation from a partner within an intimate relationship’ (13.6% total agreement) was significantly higher for:

- those aged 18–24 (18.6%) and 35–44 (18.9%) compared with those aged 65–74 (6.0%)
- linguistically diverse individuals (21.9%) than non-linguistically diverse individuals (10.9%)
- residents of major cities (15.5%) compared with those living in inner regional (8.3%) or outer regional (5.3%) Australia, and remote (4.1%) locations.

Agreement that ‘expecting to have your passwords/codes for your personal devices (e.g. phone, tablet) is a reasonable expectation from a partner within an intimate relationship’ (23.3% total agreement) was significantly higher for:

- men (28.2%) compared with women (18.7%)
- linguistically diverse individuals (29.3%) compared with non-linguistically diverse individuals (21.5%)
- individuals who were married (26.4%) compared with those who are divorced (14.0%).

Expectations less likely to signal tech-based coercive control

Agreement that ‘expecting to take photos of you on their phone without asking your permission is a reasonable expectation from a partner within an intimate relationship’ (30.1% total agreement) was significantly higher for:

- men (36.8%) compared with women (23.3%)
- those aged 18–24 (37.9%) compared with those aged 65–74 (17.9%) and 75+ (21.3%).
- those in a couple with children under 15 (35.9%) compared with those in a couple with no children (26.5%)
- linguistically diverse individuals (37.2%) compared with non-linguistically diverse individuals (27.8%)
- individuals who have never married (34.3%) compared with those who are divorced (22.0%).

Agreement that ‘expecting to be “friends” with you on social media is a reasonable expectation from a partner within an intimate relationship’ (64.2% total agreement) was significantly higher for:

- those aged 18–24 (86.1%) compared with all other age categories except 25–34 (79.2%)
- individuals in a couple with children under 15 (74.0%) compared with those in a couple with no children under 15 (56.6%) and those in a couple with no children (56.3%)
- those who have never married (77.5%) compared with all other marital categories.



Expectations of corporate Australia in tackling gendered online abuse

The survey finished by asking participants their expectations of corporate Australia in tackling TFGBV within the context of family, domestic and sexual violence. Some context was presented via the following text:

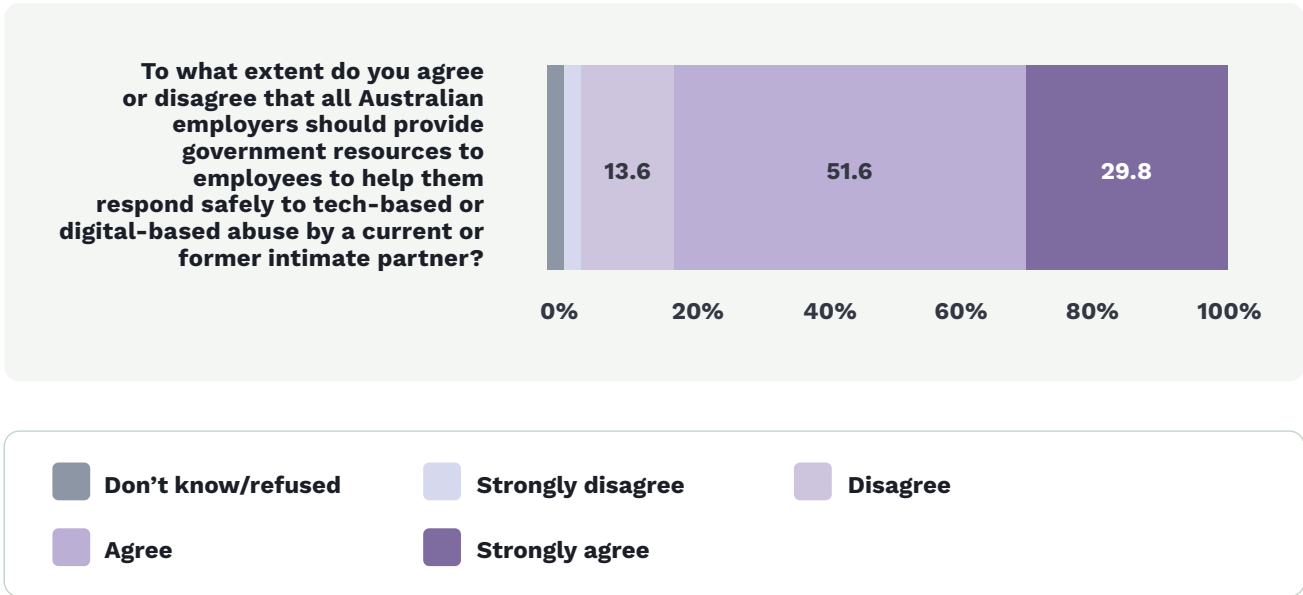
Domestic, family and sexual violence can be physical or non-physical abuse, and it can include things that happen online or that use digital technology. Examples of tech-based or digital-based abuse can include online harassment, making threats of sexual assault or violence (e.g. rape), stalking and patterns of controlling behaviour.

Participants were then asked to rate their level of agreement that all Australian employers should provide government resources (such as help and referral information) to employees to help them respond safely to tech-based abuse by a current or former intimate partner.

Most Australians surveyed agreed (51.6%) or strongly agreed (29.8%) that employers should provide government resources to employees to help them respond safely to tech-based or digital-based abuse by a current or former intimate partner (see Figure 3). That said, almost 1 in 5 (18.6%) disagreed to some extent, didn't know or refused to respond.



Figure 3: Extent of agreement that employers should provide government resources to respond to tech-based coercive control



Base: All respondents (n=2,046).

Agreement that 'all Australian employers should provide government resources to employees to help them respond safety to tech-based or digital abuse by a current or former intimate partner' (81.4% total agreement) was significantly higher for:

- women (34.4%) compared with men (24.9%)
- those aged 18–24 (90.1%) compared with those aged 45–54 (77%) and 55–64 (70%)
- residents of major cities (83.1%) compared with those living in inner regional areas (76.7%) and remote/very remote Australia (63%).

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Appendix: Profile of survey responses

Table A1: Profile of survey responses in comparison to ABS benchmarks

Sub-group	ABS benchmark ³ %	eSafety omnibus %	eSafety omnibus <i>n</i>
Gender			
Men	49.0	44.7	915
Women	51.0	53.8	1,100
Non-binary	–	1.4	28
Age (years)			
18–24	11.6	4.8	99
25–34	19.1	19.5	399
35–44	17.2	17.0	348
45–54	16.2	18.1	371
55–64	14.9	16.2	331
65–74	11.8	15.4	315
75+	9.1	8.9	183
Location			
Sydney	20.6	21.4	438
Rest of NSW	11.3	10.6	217
Melbourne	19.9	19.7	403
Rest of VIC	6.3	6.2	126
Brisbane	9.6	10.4	212
Rest of QLD	10.3	8.4	171
Adelaide	5.4	6.8	140
Rest of SA	1.6	1.4	28
Perth	8.1	7.5	154
Rest of WA	2.2	1.8	37
Hobart	0.9	1.5	30
Rest of TAS	1.2	1.7	34
Darwin	0.6	0.2	5
Rest of NT	0.3	0.1	2
ACT	1.7	2.0	41
Linguistically diverse			
Yes	24.1	21.3	436
No	75.9	78.6	1,608
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Status*			
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	2.6	1.5	30
Non-Indigenous	97.4	98.1	2,008

*It is also important to note that we cannot say the panel is representative of the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander population given that most respondents are located in the more populous states and very few are from remote/very remote areas.

³ <https://tablebuilder.abs.gov.au/webapi/jsf/dataCatalogueExplorer.xhtml>

Table A2: Profile of additional sub-groups used for analysis

Sub-group	eSafety omnibus %	eSafety omnibus <i>n</i>
Family composition		
Couple with no children	32.2	641
Couple with no children under 15	7.8	156
Couple with children under 15	17.0	338
One parent with no children under 15	3.5	70
One parent with children under 15	5.1	101
Other family	7.0	140
Not applicable	27.3	544
Highest educational qualification level		
Postgraduate degree	11.0	225
Graduate diploma and graduate certificate	4.8	98
Bachelor degree	15.9	325
Advanced diploma and Diploma	19.2	393
Certificate III & IV	24.2	495
Secondary education – Year 12	12.2	250
Secondary education – Years 10 and 11	10.0	205
Certificate I & II	0.3	6
Secondary education – Years 9 and below	2.0	40
Marital status		
Married	48.6	995
Never married	32.4	662
Divorced	11.0	226
Widowed	4.2	85
Separated but not divorced	3.4	70
Current employment		
Yes, worked for payment or profit	59.1	1,176
Yes, but absent on holidays, on paid leave, on strike, or temporarily stood down	3.0	60
Yes, unpaid work in a family business	0.7	13
Yes, other unpaid work	2.2	44
No, did not have a job	34.9	694
Remoteness		
Major cities of Australia	74.1	1,517
Inner regional Australia	18.7	383
Outer regional Australia	6.1	125
Remote Australia	0.4	9
Very remote Australia	0.2	4



