Building Australian adults' confidence and resilience online

September 2020

Contents

eSafety research program

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

eSafety research is available at esafety/gov.au/about-us/research

This research report is the last in a series of four reports focusing on adult online experiences which include:

- [Online hate speech. Findings from Australia, New Zealand and Europe](), released in February 2020

- [Covid-19 impacts on Australian adults' online activities and attitudes](), released in June 2020

- [Adults' negative online experiences](), released in August 2020.

Together, these reports provide a comprehensive exploration of the challenges adult Australians face online, their digital confidence and online safety information needs.

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

Overview

Digital confidence — also called digital literacy or digital intelligence — refers to the skills to safely navigate the internet, to critically engage with online information and to effectively manage relationships with others online. As the internet becomes increasingly important in our everyday lives, it is critical that Australians have the confidence, and the skills, to engage safely online.

This research shows that while a sizeable majority of Australian adults are confident in their ability to use online technologies, they are less confident in how to manage specific online risks.

The research also highlights that most adult Australians perceive that there are significant risks of harm online and the top three are seen to be scams/fraud, bullying/trolling and the misuse of personal information/images. The majority of adults report that they need online safety information. However, there is a disconnect between the need for this information and people's actions — only one in ten adult Australians searched for or received online safety information. This is consistent with findings from other eSafety research into parents and young people.[1] It could be that people only seek this information after having a negative experience online. Further research is needed to understand why people don't actively seek online safety information despite seeing its value, and how to change behaviour so Australians become proactive rather than reactive consumers of online safety information.

Results point to the need for differentiated strategies to encourage engagement with online safety information — a one-size-fits-all approach won't work. Older Australians and those with disability report the lowest levels of digital confidence and have the greatest perceptions of risk online. In contrast, people who identify as LGBTQI+ report the highest digital confidence of all groups, followed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These two groups are, however, also more likely than others to have had a serious negative online experience (e.g. being a target of hate speech) and to be adversely impacted by that experience.[2] These groups also differed in their views on the greatest risks online, emphasising the need for a targeted education and awareness approach.

Not only do Australians need more information to counter the risks of going online and build their digital confidence — they want industry to do more. The vast majority of Australians agree that technology companies have a responsibility for online safety, but only a minority think that industry is doing enough to integrate safety features into services and products. Most feel that social media companies could do more to address the spread of online hate speech.

This report is the final in eSafety's series on Australian adults and online safety. Together, these reports show that the online safety support needs of adult Australians differ depending on their levels of digital confidence, online experiences

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[1] eSafety. (2019), Parenting in the digital age. https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/parenting-digital-age
eSafety (2018), State of Play—Youth, Kids and Digital Dangers. https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/youth-digital-dangers
[2] eSafety (2020), Adults' negative online experiences. https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/adults-negative-online-experiences

and preferred delivery channels for online safety information. These needs are heightened in situations where people are forced to become more dependent on the internet, such as during the current COVID-19 crisis. With adult Australians intending to continue using the internet for daily activities at current or increased levels even after COVID-19 restrictions are over, the need for support will continue. However, there is a real challenge in turning adults into active users of online safety information. While the majority of adults need this information, few are actively seeking or receiving it. As this research shows, it is vital that adult Australians proactively build their digital confidence and resilience — it is an issue that is not confined to children and young people.

Key highlights

This research shows that key groups within the adult Australian population differ in their perceptions of online risk and digital confidence, and in their preferred sources of online safety information. It also identifies that while three quarters of Australians agree that technology companies have a responsibility for people's online safety, only one quarter think that technology companies are doing enough to build in safety features into their services and products.

Perception of online risk

- Adult Australians believe that the top three community risks of harm online are exposure to scams or fraud (64%), being bullied or trolled online (56%) and the misuse of personal information or images (55%).

- While there is agreement about the top risk of harm online — exposure to scams/fraud — perceptions of online risk vary considerably across different groups.

- Australians living with disability and older Australians aged 50 to 64 years have a greater perception of risk online than others.

- Women have a greater perception of risk online than men, which may be related to women's lower levels of digital confidence. Similar levels of women and men reported being the target of a negative online experience, although more women than men reported feeling mental or emotional stress because of a negative experience.

- Three in ten adult Australians consider exposure to racist content and other hate speech as a main online risk (35%). For these issues the perception of risk is greater among Australians who identify as LGBTQI+ (51%), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (47%) and those with disability (46%), but not among those who mainly speak a language other than English (LOTE) at home (36%).

- Generally speaking, the perception of online risk is greater than the actual prevalence of negative online experiences among adult Australians.

Digital confidence

- Eight in 10 of the surveyed Australians report a good understanding of the negative things that can happen online (79%) and 7 in 10 feel confident using online technology (72%).

- However, despite high confidence generally, adult Australians are less confident about handling specific online safety issues, such as how to protect their privacy online (64%), how to identify reliable online information (59%) or how to deal with being cyberbullied or harassed online (56%).

- While overall digital confidence trends were similar in the May 2020 COVID-19 period, confidence levels for specific issues rose during COVID-19. It should be noted though, that these results are not entirely comparable due to methodology differences.

- When choosing from a range of online safety issues, adult Australians were least confident about what to do if they were impersonated online (37%) or if personal information/images were circulated without their consent (34%).

Digital confidence in community segments

- Older Australians aged 50 to 65 years are less confident using online technology than those aged 18 to 34 (63% compared to 78%). They are also less confident than younger Australians in managing many online safety issues, such as knowing where to report a negative online incident (33% compared to 54%).

- Men are more confident than women in using online technology (27% strongly agree compared with 19%) and in dealing with some specific online risks.

- Adults identifying as LGBTQI+ have the highest level of digital confidence among Australians, with 87% saying they feel confident using online technology compared to 72% of Australians generally.

- Adults identifying as LGBTQI+ and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have greater confidence in dealing with many online safety issues than other adults. To a lesser extent, this is also the case for those who mainly speak a language other than English in the home.

- In contrast, 67% of Australians living with disability feel confident using online technology. Their confidence in dealing with specific online safety issues is broadly similar to all Australians.

- Adults identifying as LGBTQI+, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and those with disability are more likely to have had a negative experience online than other adults and are more likely to engage in online activities associated with a negative experience. They are also more likely to suffer adverse mental health impacts as a result of a negative experience online. This suggests the need for targeted resources to educate these groups about protecting themselves when engaging in these activities and to raise their digital resilience. This also suggests possible links between digital confidence, online engagement and negative online experiences that are worthy of further exploration.

Online safety information needs

- Adult Australians say they most need information about where to report negative online incidents (45%), followed by protection from viruses and hacking (44%), privacy and safety features on devices (43%), dealing with unwanted contact (36%) and content filtering (33%).

- Of those who need more online safety information, most generally prefer to use Google to search for it (39%), although social media posts are preferred by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (47%) and younger people aged 18 to 34 (44%).

- Older Australians and those with disability preferred to receive online safety information in formats such as eNewsletters/emails.

- Despite a stated need for online safety information, only 1 in 10 adults sought or received this type of information in the 12 months to August 2019. This was lowest for people aged 50 to 65% (10%) and highest for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (24%).

Safety by Design

- While three quarters of Australians (75%) agree that technology companies have a responsibility for people's online safety, only one quarter (23%) think that companies such as social media, gaming and app developers are doing enough to build safety features into their services and products.

- Seven in ten Australians ranked privacy as the top issue for technology companies to address, saying that it's important they ensure the highest privacy settings are in place by default (73%).

- Australians felt that features to protect people from certain forms of content should be put in place by technology companies, specifically scanning user content to detect illegal or harmful content for removal e.g. images of child sexual abuse (67%), more effective age restrictions on content (52%) and automatic flagging of users' inappropriate language and behaviour (51%).

Findings

Perception of online risk

The majority of adults see considerable risks of harm to the community from going online.[3] Six in 10 adult Australians believe that the main risks of harm online are exposure to scams or fraud (64%), being bullied or trolled online (56%) and misuse of personal information or images (55%). Five in ten see computer viruses (48%), unreliable information/fake news (46%) as the main risks.

Exposure to child abuse material, hate speech, pornography or violent content, and a range of adverse mental and physical health impacts are considered by a smaller proportion of Australians to be main risks of being online. The complete list of risks of harm explored in the survey is contained in Table 1.

Perception of online risks in different groups

There is consistency across different groups within the Australian population about the top risk of harm from accessing the internet: exposure to scams or online monetary fraud. Apart from this, the perception of risk varies considerably.

Age is a key factor, with perception of online risk increasing significantly with age. Those aged 50 to 65 are more likely than younger Australians to see most of the online issues identified within the research as being a 'main risk' of harm, as shown in Table 1. The risks of time online having a 'negative impact on self-esteem' and leading to 'feeling isolated from others' are the only exceptions — those aged 18 to 34 were more likely to see these as the primary risks of harm online compared to other age groups.

Women are more likely than men to view all the issues, except for computer viruses, as online risks. This is particularly so for cyberbullying or trolling, misuse of personal information/images, and of time online having a negative impact on their self-image. This greater perception of risk may be related to women's lower levels of digital confidence. While similar levels of women and men reported being the target of a negative online experience, more women than men reported

[3] For this survey, participants were shown a list of negative experiences or impacts that could occur as a result of going online and were asked to select those they saw as the 'main risks of harm to the adult Australian community from accessing the internet.'

feeling mental or emotional stress because of a negative experience, which may also be relevant to women's perception of online risk.

Living with disability is another key factor in perception of online risk. Australians with disability are more likely than Australians overall to see most of these issues, such as being bullied (62%) or tricked, lied to or coerced (49%) as risks of harm from accessing the internet.

Australians who identify as LGBTQI+ (51%), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (47%) and those with disability (46%) are significantly more likely than others to consider exposure to racist content and other hate speech as a main risk to the community. This is due to their own experiences — those with disability experience online hate speech at a higher than average rate, while people who identify as LGBTQI+ and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience hate speech at more than double the national average.[4]

 Those identifying as LBGTQI+ are also more likely than others to consider negative impact on self-image (50%) as a key risk online and are less likely to see exposure to pornography (20%) as a risk. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are more likely than others to see sexist content (36%) as an online risk, and less likely to see scams (60%) and unreliable information/fake news (39%) as risks.

In contrast to other minority groups, Australians who mainly speak a language other than English in the home are just as likely as Australians overall to perceive exposure to racist content and other hate speech online (36%) as a risk online. However, they are less likely than other Australians to view scams (55%), misuse of information and images (50%), and exposure to computer viruses (43%) as a risk from accessing the internet. They are also more likely to consider exposure to some forms of content as a risk online, for example violence (36%), pornography (33%) and sexist content (30%).

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[4] eSafety (2020), Online hate speech. https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/online-hate-speech. See Table 2 at p. 8.

Table 1. Perception of the main risks of harm online

Perceived risk	Net	Gender		Age			Population segment			
		M	F	18 - 34	35 - 49	50 - 65	LGBTQI+	Indigenous Australians	LOTE*	Disability
Exposure to scams or online monetary fraud	64%	60%	67%	53%	61%	76%	64%	60%	55%	71%
Being bullied/trolled online	56%	50%	61%	52%	56%	59%	54%	58%	55%	62%
Misuse of personal information or images	55%	49%	60%	46%	53%	65%	53%	52%	50%	63%
Exposure to computer viruses	48%	48%	49%	38%	45%	61%	48%	47%	43%	60%
Exposure to unreliable information/fake news	46%	44%	48%	39%	44%	56%	55%	39%	45%	53%
Being tricked, lied to, or coerced to behave a certain way	41%	37%	44%	37%	37%	48%	47%	43%	40%	49%
Internet/online addiction (e.g. addiction to social media/notifications/games)	39%	34%	44%	36%	36%	45%	41%	43%	37%	45%
Negative impact on self-image	38%	29%	45%	41%	35%	38%	50%	39%	36%	45%
Unwanted contact with strangers	37%	32%	41%	32%	33%	46%	37%	40%	39%	46%
Child pornography/abuse/exploitation material	37%	33%	40%	32%	33%	45%	38%	41%	38%	46%
Exposure to racist content and other hate speech	35%	30%	40%	33%	33%	40%	51%	47%	36%	46%
Exposure to violent content	32%	28%	36%	30%	30%	37%	31%	36%	36%	40%
Exposure to pornography	29%	25%	32%	24%	26%	36%	20%	31%	33%	33%
Balancing internet use with other areas of life (e.g. getting outside, work)	29%	24%	33%	26%	28%	31%	33%	34%	26%	35%
Conducting/involved in illegal activity	28%	24%	32%	25%	26%	34%	30%	33%	30%	36%
Exposure to sexist content	26%	22%	30%	23%	24%	32%	33%	36%	30%	35%
Accessing/being exposed to content not appropriate for someone's age	26%	22%	30%	23%	24%	32%	22%	27%	27%	33%
Reduced health/fitness	26%	24%	28%	26%	25%	26%	29%	28%	26%	33%
Feeling isolated from others	25%	20%	29%	28%	24%	23%	32%	27%	25%	30%
Content that is not consistent with my values	17%	16%	19%	13%	17%	22%	18%	16%	19%	23%
Sample: Australians 18-65 years	3,737	1,808	1,916	1,396	1,208	1,133	252	198	953	567

Note: top results that are over 5% in each category are highlighted in green. *Mainly speak a language other than English at home.

Perceptions of online risk compared with negative online experiences

When generally compared, the perception of online risk is higher than the actual rates of negative online experiences. This suggests that people's fears about the dangers of going online do not always manifest into a real-life negative experience.

Being better informed about the actual rates of negative experiences online could assist adults in gauging the likely risks of their online activities and remove barriers to greater online engagement. The fact that only a small proportion of the adult population (1 in 10) have sought or received online safety information may also play a part in the lack of awareness (see Table 9). Media coverage of the worst cases may also play a role in enforcing this perception, a factor for exploration in further research relating to what shapes perceptions around online safety.

Table 2: Perception of risk of harm online compared with actual negative online experiences

Perceived main risk of harm online*	Net	Negative online experience	Net
Exposure to scams or online monetary fraud	64%	Attempted scam over the phone — asking to enter details into computer	32%
		Had money stolen through online fraud	11%
Being cyberbullied/trolled online	56%	Things said online to provoke a response in you, start an argument	13%
		Being called offensive names online	11%
		Received threats online or electronically of real-life harm or abuse	8%
		Things said to offend you because of your race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability etc.	9%
		Lies or rumours spread about you online	8%
Misuse of personal information or images	55%	Your personal information used in a way you did not like	10%
		Threats to share private photos of you online or electronically	7%
		Private photos/videos of you shared online or electronically without your consent	4%
Exposure to computer viruses	48%	Device/computer infected with a virus or malware	17%
Unwanted contact with strangers	37%	Repeated unwanted messages or online contact **	42%
Child pornography/abuse/exploitation material	37%	Getting sent unwanted inappropriate content online**	13%
Exposure to violent content	32%		
Exposure to pornography	29%		
Racist content/hate speech	35%	Target of online hate speech	14%

* Perceived risks and negative experiences were explored differently in the survey and therefore don't correspond exactly.

** These items are less similar to the corresponding perceived risk than other items in the table.

Perception of digital confidence

While Australian adults are confident about their online skills and general knowledge of online harm, they are less confident in their ability to handle specific online safety issues.

This is a similar finding to eSafety's COVID-19 research, although results are not entirely comparable due to methodology differences. This research found that 8 in 10 Australian adults believe they have a good understanding of the negative things that can happen online (79%) and 7 in 10 feel confident using online technology (72%). Digital confidence levels rose during the May 2020 COVID-19 period, with 9 in 10 online adults feeling confident they have the skills and access to information to feel safe online and 8 in 10 agreeing they were more confident using the internet to do day-to-day things.

Adult digital confidence levels vary depending on the issue, similar to the COVID-19 research. Six in 10 say they understand how to protect their privacy online (64%), how to tell whether online information is reliable (59%), or how to deal with being cyberbullied or harassed online (56%). In comparison, during the COVID-19 period adults reported higher confidence in protecting their privacy and security and in dealing with cyberbullying — and lower confidence in knowing what sources of online news and information to trust.

Confidence levels drop away considerably for other online safety issues. Less than half would know what to do if their accounts were hacked (48%) or where to go to report a negative online incident (43%). Just over a third would know what to do if impersonated online (37%) or if personal information/images were circulated without their consent (34%).

Table 3: Perception of digital confidence and capabilities

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I have a good understanding of the negative things that can happen online	2%	4%	15%	56%	23%
I feel confident using online technology (computers, smart devices, etc.)	2%	6%	21%	49%	23%
I understand how to protect my privacy online (e.g. location settings, restricting the sharing of certain information)	2%	8%	25%	50%	14%
I know how to tell the difference between reliable and unreliable information online	2%	9%	30%	48%	11%
I would know how to deal with being bullied or harassed online	4%	14%	26%	43%	13%
I would know what to do if my accounts were hacked	7%	21%	25%	37%	11%
I would know where to go to report a negative online incident like abuse	7%	25%	26%	34%	9%
I would know what to do if someone was pretending to be me online	8%	27%	27%	28%	9%
I would know what to do if personal information or images of me were circulated without my consent	9%	29%	27%	25%	9%
Sample: Australians 18-65 years	3,737	3,737	3,737	3,737	3,737

Note: top results that are over 5% in each category are highlighted in green. *Mainly speak a language other than English at home.

Digital confidence in community segments

Age plays a strong role in perceptions of digital confidence. While there is consistency across age groups in understanding the negative things that can happen online (8 in 10 adults), there are significant differences by age for most other measures of digital confidence.

Older Australians aged 50 to 65 are less confident using online technology than those aged 18 to 34 (63% compared to 78%). They are also less confident than younger Australians in managing many online safety issues, particularly:

- where to report a negative online incident (33% compared to 54% of 18 to 34 year olds)

- how to tell the difference between reliable and unreliable information (59% compared to 71%)

- what to do if they were impersonated online (33% compared to 45%)

- what to do if their personal information/images were circulated online without consent (28% compared to 42%).

Table 4: Perception of digital confidence and capabilities, by age

	18 - 34			35 - 49			50 - 65		
	Agree	Strongly agree	Total agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Total agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Total agree
I have a good understanding of the negative things that can happen online	53%	26%	79%	57%	23%	80%	58%	20%	78%
I feel confident using online technology (computers, smart devices, etc.)	47%	31%	78%	50%	25%	75%	50%	13%	63%
I understand how to protect my privacy online (e.g. location settings, restricting the sharing of certain information)	52%	19%	71%	52%	12%	64%	47%	12%	59%
I know how to tell the difference between reliable and unreliable information online	52%	15%	67%	47%	11%	58%	43%	8%	51%
I would know how to deal with being bullied or harassed online	46%	15%	61%	41%	13%	54%	42%	12%	54%
I would know what to do if my accounts were hacked	39%	12%	51%	35%	10%	45%	37%	10%	47%
I would know where to go to report a negative online incident like abuse	42%	12%	54%	32%	9%	41%	27%	6%	33%
I would know what to do if someone was pretending to be me online	33%	12%	45%	28%	8%	36%	23%	7%	30%
I would know what to do if personal information or images of me were circulated without my consent	31%	11%	42%	25%	9%	34%	20%	8%	28%
Sample: Australians 18-65 years	1,396	1,396	1,396	1,208	1,208	1,208	1,133	1,133	1,133

Note: top results that are over 5% in each category are highlighted in green.

There are some gender differences, though not as marked as for perceptions of online risks. Men are more confident than women in using online technology (27% strongly agree compared with 19%) and in knowing what to do if their accounts were hacked (52% agree/strongly agree compared with 44%) or if they were impersonated (41% agree/strongly agree compared with 35%). Similarly, recent research for the COVID-19 period also found that men were more likely to be 'very confident' in their abilities online than women.[5]

Table 5: Perception of digital confidence and capabilities, by gender

	Male			Female		
	Agree	Strongly agree	Total agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Total agree
I have a good understanding of the negative things that can happen online	55%	22%	77%	57%	24%	81%
I feel confident using online technology (computers, smart devices, etc.)	46%	27%	73%	52%	19%	71%
I understand how to protect my privacy online (e.g. location settings, restricting the sharing of certain information)	49%	15%	64%	51%	14%	65%
I know how to tell the difference between reliable and unreliable information online	49%	12%	61%	46%	10%	56%
I would know how to deal with being bullied or harassed online	44%	15%	59%	42%	12%	54%
I would know what to do if my accounts were hacked	40%	12%	52%	35%	9%	44%
I would know where to go to report a negative online incident like abuse	34%	8%	42%	33%	10%	43%
I would know what to do if someone was pretending to be me online	31%	10%	41%	26%	9%	35%
I would know what to do if personal information or images of me were circulated without my consent	27%	10%	37%	24%	9%	33%
Sample: Australians 18+ years	1,808	1,808	1,808	1,916	1,916	1,916

Note: top results that are over 5% in each category are highlighted in green.

5 eSafety (2020), Covid-19 impact on adult Australians online. https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/covid-19-impacts-australian-adults-online-activities-and-attitudes

Adults who identify as LGBTQI+ have the highest level of digital confidence of all groups surveyed.

Almost 9 in 10 LGBTQI+ people feel confident using online technology (87% compared to 72% of all Australians) and say they have a good understanding of the negative things that can happen online (88% compared to 75%). They are also more confident in dealing with most online safety issues than others, though as Table 6 shows, in line with adult Australians overall, confidence decreases significantly for many issues such as where to report a negative incident.

In contrast, 6 out of 10 Australians living with disability feel confident using online technology (67% compared to 72% of all Australians). However, their confidence in dealing with specific online safety issues is broadly similar to all Australians.

Table 6: Perception of digital confidence and abilities by population segment

	LGBTQI+		Indigenous Australians		LOTE*		Disability	
	Agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I have a good understanding of the negative things that can happen online	54%	34%	48%	30%	54%	21%	48%	30%
I feel confident using online technology (computers, smart devices, etc.)	46%	41%	44%	29%	50%	21%	46%	21%
I understand how to protect my privacy online (e.g. location settings, restricting the sharing of certain information)	54%	20%	50%	24%	49%	14%	49%	15%
I know how to tell the difference between reliable and unreliable information online	54%	21%	43%	20%	46%	12%	41%	14%
I would know how to deal with being bullied or harassed online	43%	16%	44%	22%	42%	12%	39%	15%
I would know what to do if my accounts were hacked	39%	12%	35%	16%	39%	11%	34%	13%
I would know where to go to report a negative online incident like abuse	37%	18%	43%	14%	38%	9%	30%	10%
I would know what to do if someone was pretending to be me online	27%	13%	35%	15%	32%	10%	26%	10%
I would know what to do if personal information or images of me were circulated without my consent	27%	11%	31%	15%	31%	10%	22%	12%
Sample: Australians 18-65 years	252	252	198	198	953	953	567	567

Note: top results that are over 5% in each category are highlighted in green. *Mainly speak a language other than English at home.

Adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and those who mainly speak a language other than English at home have similar levels of general digital confidence to all Australians. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples report considerably more confidence than Australians overall in knowing how to deal with specific online safety issues, including:

- how to protect their privacy online (24% strongly agree compared to 10% for adults overall)

- how to deal with being bullied or harassed (22% strongly agree compared to 13%)

- where to report a negative online incident (43% agree/14% strongly agree compared to 34% agree/9% strongly agree)

- what to do if someone is impersonating them online (35% agree/15% strongly agree compared to 28% agree/9% strongly agree)

- what to do if their personal information or images are circulated without consent (31% agree/15% strongly agree compared to 25% agree/9% strongly agree).

Australians who speak a language other than English at home are more confident than Australians overall in dealing with some online safety issues, although to a lesser extent than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. They are more confident in knowing where to go to report a negative incident, and what to do if they are impersonated or have their personal information or images circulated without consent.

Relationship between digital confidence, negative online experiences and online activities

Adults identifying as LGBTQI+ and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the highest levels of confidence in dealing with specific online safety issues. They are also more likely to have had a negative experience online than Australian adults overall.[6] To a lesser extent, this is also the case for Australians with a LOTE background.

Though not examined in the survey, it is possible that for these groups, their negative experiences helped them build their online know-how and resilience, contributing to a greater self-perception of their own digital confidence. This was an issue identified in eSafety's youth research where young people experiencing a negative online experience reported being more aware of their online safety as a result.[7] It could be interpreted that the knowledge of what to do when faced with a specific online safety issue may have been developed through having negative experiences.

However, this is not the case for all groups. While those living with disability are more likely to have had a negative experience online than Australians overall, their self-perceived ability to deal with specific online safety issues is similar to other Australian adults, and they are less confident than others in using online technology.

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[6] eSafety (2020), Adults' negative online experiences. https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/adults-negative-online-experiences
[7] eSafety (2018), State of Play: Youth, kids and digital dangers. https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/youth-digital-dangers

Patterns of internet use may be relevant to Australian adults' digital confidence and negative online experiences. This survey shows that Australians who identify as LGBTQI+ and Australians who speak a language other than English at home, are more likely to use the internet than others, and are more likely to engage in a wider range of activities online. The reverse is generally the case for those living with disability. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are less likely to access news or make bookings online than others. However, a common thread is that all four groups are more likely to engage in one or more types of online activities that may be associated with increased exposure to a negative online experience. These behaviours are:

1. posting comments in response to other people's comments

2. posting comments on news sites in response to articles

3. blogging or creating websites with their own content

4. online dating. [8]

The findings suggest complex relationships between digital confidence, negative online experiences and patterns of online engagement for adult Australians. Research by Livingstone et al. on children's online risks and opportunities identified that digital skills are positively associated with the frequency and range of online activities: the more activities children engage in, the more they develop digital skills, and vice versa.[9] According to Livingstone, children who take up a wide range of online activities are usually exposed to more risks; however, they are also better equipped to cope with such situations, thus experiencing less harm.[10] Research is needed that examines these issues among Australian adults.

Additionally, future research could go beyond self-perceived digital confidence, and assess if people's knowledge is correct or if their response to a negative experience is best practice. An example of this approach is research by Pew Internet that tested Americans' digital knowledge, asking people to answer technology-related questions about topics such as online privacy and cybersecurity.[11] Further research could seek to examine these questions in an Australian context.

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Livingstone, S, Mascheroni, G and Staksrud, E (2018), 'European research on children's internet use: Assessing the past and anticipating the future, *New Media and Society* 20(3), pp. 1103 - 22.

[10] Livingstone, S, Hasebrink, U and Görzig, A (2012), 'Towards a general model of determinants of risk and safety'. In S. Livingstone, L. Haddon and A. Görzig (eds), *Children, Risk and Safety on the Internet: Research and Policy Challenges in Comparative Perspective,* pp. 232 - 237, Policy Press.

[11] Vogels, E and Anderson, M (2019), Americans and Digital Knowledge, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/10/09/americans-and-digital-knowledge/

Online safety information needs

Only a quarter of adult Australians (24%) believe they know or have enough information about online safety, or don't want this information.

However, Australians who are less likely to believe they know or have enough online safety information are those who mainly speak a language other than English in the home (19%), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (18%) and those who identify as LGBTQI+ (16%), when compared to Australians overall.

The surveyed Australians identified a range of information they needed to improve their confidence in online safety. Four in 10 Australians reported needing information about where to report negative online incidents (45%), protection from viruses and hacking (44%) and privacy and safety features on devices (43%). Three in 10 need information on dealing with unwanted contact (36%) and content filtering (33%).

There is little variation across different groups in the issues that people need information about, with a few exceptions. Those who identify as LGBQTI+ are more likely to say they need information on where to report negative online incidents (55%). Older Australians are more likely to require a broad range of information than others, with the areas of most note including information on protection from viruses and hacking (49%) and information on privacy and safety features on electronic devices (47%).

Table 7: Top 5 information needs for adult Australians in the 12 months to August 2019

	Total	Gender		Age			Population segment			
		M	F	18 - 34	35 - 49	50 - 65	LGBTQI+	Indigenous Australians	LOTE*	Disability
Where to go to report negative online incidents	45%	42%	49%	41%	46%	49%	55%	45%	46%	44%
Information on protection from viruses, hacking etc.	44%	41%	46%	41%	43%	49%	43%	43%	45%	46%
Information on privacy and safety features on electronic devices	43%	40%	45%	40%	41%	47%	41%	41%	44%	41%
How to deal with unwanted online contact	36%	36%	37%	35%	35%	39%	38%	38%	39%	37%
Information on the use of filters to block harmful or offensive content	33%	33%	39%	31%	36%	42%	32%	36%	37%	37%
I don't need this kind of info/I know or have enough info	24%	27%	21%	23%	24%	25%	16%	18%	19%	24%
Sample: Australians 18-65 years	3,737	1,808	1,916	1,396	1,208	1,133	252	198	953	567

Note: top results that are over 5% in each category are highlighted in green. *Mainly speak a language other than English at home.

Preferred delivery formats for online safety information

The survey shows that Australian adults generally prefer searching for online safety information on their own when considering their preferred delivery option. Over a third (39%) of those who think they need more of this type of information reported that they prefer doing their own Google searches. This is even higher for Australians who identify as LBGTQI+ (46%).

Social media posts are preferred over Google searches and email by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (47%) and younger people aged 18 to 34 (44%). Women are more likely to opt for social media posts for their online safety information than men (39% compared with 24%).

The next most commonly preferred delivery format of online safety information is eNewsletters/emails (38%) especially for older Australians aged 50 to 65 (46%). This is followed by posts on social media (32%) and online videos (24%). Those who identify as LBGTQI+ show a stronger preference for online videos than others (33%). The research shows that printed booklets or pamphlets (22%) and speaking to someone on the phone or face-to-face (14%) are less popular options. Australians with disability are more likely to prefer these formats than Australians overall (27% and 19% respectively), while older people aged 50 to 65 are more likely to prefer a printed format (29%). Table 8 shows the full range of preferred information delivery formats.

Table 8: Preferred delivery formats for online safety information

	Total	Gender		Age			Population segment			
		M	F	18 - 34	35 - 49	50 - 65	LGBTQI+	Indigenous Australians	LOTE*	Disability
I like to do my own Google search	39%	39%	39%	41%	42%	34%	46%	39%	39%	38%
eNewsletter/email	38%	37%	39%	27%	41%	46%	29%	32%	37%	42%
Post on social media	32%	24%	39%	44%	30%	23%	39%	47%	37%	32%
Online videos	24%	25%	22%	28%	24%	19%	33%	30%	28%	21%
Printed booklet or pamphlet	22%	21%	22%	15%	21%	29%	15%	23%	22%	27%
I'd like to be able to speak to someone (face to face/phone)	14%	14%	14%	13%	14%	16%	15%	12%	17%	19%
Other	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%	4%	3%	2%	2%	4%
Sample: Australians 18-65 years	2,870	1,344	1,519	1,084	931	855	212	165	777	439

Note: top results that are over 5% in each category are highlighted in green. *Mainly speak a language other than English at home.

Seeking out or receiving online safety information

Despite the relatively high levels of concern and stated online safety information needs, only 1 in 10 adults actively searched for, or received, related information in the 12 months to August 2019.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are more active in this than any other group. One in 4 sought out/received online safety information — more than double than those aged 35 to 65 (Table 9). Though the reasons for seeking this information were not covered in this survey, the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have negative online experiences[12] at higher levels and are more likely than others to have negative impacts as a result of their experiences, are likely to be contributing factors.

This suggests that having a negative online experience, particularly a serious one, increases awareness and proactivity. The findings from eSafety's youth research support this — experience increases awareness of risk and actions relating to managing online safety.[13] Those who identify as LGBTQI+ and those who mainly speak a language other than English at home are also more active seekers or receivers of online safety information than Australians generally, although far less so than for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Of those who sought or received online safety information, the more common sources of advice were Google searches (54%), family and friends (28%) and social media companies (27%). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the top-ranked source of information is social media companies (42%) followed by a Google search (41%). Table 10 highlights the top five sources of online safety advice for adults in Australia.

Table 9: Adults searching or receiving online safety information

	Total	Gender		Age			Cohort			
		M	F	18-34	35-49	50-65	LGBTQI+	Indigenous Australians	LOTE*	Disability
Searched for or received any information about how you can protect yourself online or deal with negative online issues	11%	12%	11%	15%	10%	10%	16%	24%	16%	15%
Sample: Australians 18-65 years	3,737	1,808	1,916	1,396	1,208	1,133	252	198	953	567

Note: top results that are over 5% in each category are highlighted in green. *Mainly speak a language other than English at home.

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[12] eSafety (2020), Adults' negative online experiences. https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/adults-negative-online-experiences
[13] eSafety (2018), Youth, kids and digital dangers. https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/youth-digital-dangers

Table 10: Top 5 sources of online safety advice information received or sought

	Total	Gender		Age			Population segment			
		M	F	18 - 34	35 - 49	50 - 65	LGBTQI+	Indigenous Australians	LOTE*	Disability
Google search	54%	52%	56%	50%	58%	56%	67%	41%	48%	51%
Family/friends	28%	23%	32%	28%	29%	27%	36%	28%	29%	33%
Social media companies	27%	24%	30%	32%	24%	23%	29%	42%	25%	25%
Government organisations	25%	26%	23%	25%	19%	29%	14%	29%	27%	24%
News media	20%	20%	20%	21%	23%	16%	26%	27%	27%	22%
Sample: Australians 18+ years who have sought/were sent online safety information	446	213	230	216	122	108	43	48	160	96

Note: top results that are over 5% in each category are highlighted in green. Seeking online safety information in the 12 months to August 2019. *Mainly speak a language other than English in the home.

Safety by Design

Three quarters of Australians (75%) agree that technology companies have a responsibility for people's online safety. However, only one quarter (23%) think that technology companies, such as social media, gaming and app developers, are doing enough to build in safety features into their services and products.

Table 11: Perception of role of technology companies in online safety

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Technology companies have a responsibility for your online safety	1%	4%	20%	47%	28%
Technology companies (social media, gaming, app developers, etc.) are doing enough to build in safety features into their services and products	11%	31%	35%	19%	4%
Sample: Australians 18-65 years	3,737	3,737	3,737	3,737	3,737

Note: top results that are over 5% in each category are highlighted in green. Seeking online safety information in the 12 months to August 2019.

This is an issue that is currently being addressed through eSafety's Safety by Design initiative, which puts user safety at the forefront of online service and product development. This initiative encourages and assists industry to take a proactive and consistent approach to user safety when developing online products and services, aiming to create stronger, healthier and more positive online communities by driving-up standards of user safety.

When asked about specific online safety features in apps, games and social media, most of those surveyed cited privacy features as the most important for technology companies to put in place. Seven in 10 think it's important for technology companies to ensure the highest privacy settings are in place by default (73%). This was the top issue across all groups, as shown in Table 12.

The research showed that adult Australians also think that technology companies should implement features to protect people from certain forms of online content. Six in 10 (67%) report that scanning user content to detect illegal or harmful content for removal (e.g. images of child sexual abuse) is important. Around half feel that it's important for technology companies to put in place better ways to use age restrictions on content (52%), and to enable automatic flagging of users' inappropriate language and behaviour (51%).

This is consistent with findings on online hate speech — most Australian adults feel that social media companies could do more to address the spread of online hate speech. Regulation also has an important role, with the majority of adults supporting the introduction of new laws to stop the spread of online hate speech.[14]

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[14] eSafety (2020). Online hate speech: Findings from Australia, New Zealand and Europe. https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/research/online-hate-speech

Table 12: Top 5 online safety features for technology companies to incorporate into their products and services

	Total	Gender		Age			Population segment			
		M	F	18 - 34	35 - 49	50 - 65	LGBTQI+	Indigenous Australians	LOTE*	Disability
Ensuring the highest privacy settings are in place by default (e.g. location tracking — turned off by default)	73%	69%	76%	68%	75%	76%	74%	71%	68%	74%
Scanning user content to detect illegal or harmful content for removal (e.g. images of child sexual abuse)	67%	65%	68%	64%	66%	70%	71%	62%	62%	68%
Better measures to restrict access to digital content to appropriate ages (e.g. graphic content warnings, non-auto playing of content)	52%	50%	54%	53%	52%	51%	43%	50%	55%	50%
Automatic flagging of inappropriate language and behaviour to allow users to reflect on what they are about to post	51%	50%	52%	53%	49%	50%	53%	50%	51%	47%
Features that limit who has access to a user's post (blocking or muting functions)	47%	45%	50%	48%	47%	47%	47%	48%	46%	48%
Easy to find and use tools that provide updates and feedback to users who report inappropriate content	41%	48%	41%	46%	43%	44%	43%	43%	47%	42%
Regular prompts to remind users about how to stay safe (e.g. making changes to privacy settings)	43%	43%	43%	42%	43%	45%	38%	45%	46%	44%
Pointing users to support and help when making a report e.g. helplines	42%	45%	39%	42%	42%	44%	44%	50%	39%	47%
Reports about what steps the site has taken to keep users safe (e.g. reporting numbers of complaints, steps that have been taken to address these concerns)	42%	44%	40%	43%	45%	39%	43%	45%	47%	40%
Information about rules or community standards providing you with an awareness of what behaviours/content is acceptable or not: Terms of use, terms of conduct, pop up reminders of rules)	38%	41%	36%	42%	37%	35%	45%	36%	40%	38%
Sample: Australians 18-65 years	3,737	1,808	1,916	1,396	1,208	1,133	252	198	953	567

Note: top results that are over 5% in each category are highlighted in green. *Mainly speak a language other than English in the home.

Conclusion

Digital confidence overall is high among adult Australians, with the majority expressing confidence in using digital technologies and in understanding the negative things that can happen online. However, the fact that the majority of adult Australians have had at least one negative online experience reinforces the need to build confidence and positive engagement online, as well as online safety competencies to effectively manage these issues. This is even more relevant for segments of our community such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and adults identifying as LGBTQI+ who are more likely to have serious negative online experiences and emotional and mental distress as a result.

The reality that only 1 in 10 of adults have sought or received online safety information suggests that responses to serious negative online experiences are likely to be reactive. Strategies are needed to encourage proactive engagement with online safety information. This need is further reinforced by the finding that, despite high digital confidence generally, adult digital confidence drops significantly in terms of dealing with specific online safety issues such as knowing where to report online incidents, dealing with incidents such as image-base abuse or hacking or even being able to recognise reliable information and related sources online.

These findings suggest that while a general approach is needed to build the digital confidence of all Australians, more targeted strategies will need to be developed to meet the specific circumstances, needs and higher risk profiles of different segments of the Australian population. More broadly though, these research findings show that the responsibility for building adult digital confidence cannot just rest with government and that individuals — the broader community and technology companies all have a role to play. This research highlights the important role of technology companies in addressing online safety issues, with the concept of 'safety by design' supported by the vast majority of Australian adults, particularly features to protect people from certain forms of online content and to bolster and protect privacy and safety when using digital devices.

As shown by this series of reports on adult Australians, research is needed to provide a more detailed understanding of factors influencing adult Australians' digital confidence and examine why some groups with higher perceptions of digital confidence — Australians who identify as LGBTQI+ or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples — are also more likely to face challenges online. Research that goes beyond perceived digital confidence to examine people's actual digital skills and how they would respond to certain online safety issues would be useful to inform future work on digital confidence and resilience.

Methodology

Findings on people's awareness of online risks, their digital confidence and related information needs come from a nationally representative survey of 3,737 adult Australians aged 18 to 65 about online safety commissioned by eSafety in August 2019. The survey contained a question about digital confidence that asked respondents the extent to which they agreed with a series of nine statements about their digital confidence. The survey also contained a question asking respondents what they see as the main risks of harm to the adult Australian community from accessing the internet, questions about 'safety by design' and questions asking if respondents needed further online safety information, the topics about which they need more information and preferred formats.

The survey followed a mixed methodology approach using a multi-panel online survey (n = 3287) of 20 minutes, alongside a computer assisted telephone interview (CATI, n=450) of 15 minutes. Quotas were set for location, age, gender, socio-economic status (defined by postcodes), labour force status and highest level of educational attainment. The online survey included additional quotas for LGBTQI+ Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, those living with disability and those who mainly speak a language other than English at home. An online boost phase was used to increase the number of LGBTQI+ and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples completing the survey.

To reflect the overall population distribution, results were weighted to Australian Bureau of Statistics population data. The maximum margin of error for the whole population is ±2% at the 95% confidence level. Fieldwork was conducted from August to September 2019 with responses referring to activities that occurred in the 12 months to August 2019.