Australian Government

e eSafety Commissioner

Children and Social Media

Methodology Report

February 2025

Acknowledgement

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.

Introduction

This report outlines the methodology for eSafety's *Children and Social Media* research. The research comprised an online survey conducted in September 2024. The study aimed to build on our understanding of children's access to and use of social media and messaging services, with a particular focus on children aged under 13. The study will provide an updated evidence base to inform current policy discussions regarding young people's use of social media and will be used to cross-reference data that eSafety collects from industry under its legislative powers.

The survey was conducted from 18 to 24 September 2024. A total of 1,504 children aged 8–15 living in Australia, and their parents and carers, took part.

Ethical considerations

Various steps were taken to address ethical considerations during project development and recruitment. This project was submitted as part of the Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee approval process. Ethics approval for the project was received on 9 September 2024 (2024-08-1018).

eSafety took several steps to reduce the risk of harm to participants by ensuring that their best interests were served and that the research conducted provided for their safety, emotional and psychological security, and wellbeing (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018). Informed consent to participate in the research was obtained by providing participants with information about the kinds of questions they would be asked and by explaining the potential risks of participating. Participants were also informed that the research was completely voluntary and that they could opt out at any time. Additionally, participants had the option of not answering potentially sensitive questions in the survey. Informed consent was sought from both parents/carers and children. Help-seeking/self-support information was made available to participants, and parents/carers were provided with links to helpful resources for talking to their child about using the internet and staying safe online.

The study

The study comprised a 10-minute online survey. Questions covered topics such as:

- demographics

- use of social media and messaging services

- use of internet-enabled devices (i.e. smartphones, tablets, laptops, etc.)

- which services children think are 'social media'

- positive experiences on social media

- whether children have their own social media or messaging accounts

- whether children had help in setting up their social media or messaging accounts, and from whom

- whether children had ever had an account shut down by a social media or messaging service because they were too young to be using it.

The following social media and messaging services were included in the survey: BeReal, Facebook Messenger, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Snapchat, Steam, Threads, TikTok, Twitch, X (Twitter), YouTube, Discord, Signal, Pinterest, WhatsApp and Telegram.

The survey also included Messenger Kids and YouTube Kids. While Facebook Messenger and Messenger Kids and YouTube and YouTube Kids were assessed separately in the survey, participants may not have been aware of the differences between these platforms. However, we don't include YouTube Kids and Messenger Kids in the results, as they are designed to be used by children under 13.

Lessons learnt from cognitive testing of previous eSafety surveys with children and young people were applied to the survey, to ensure that participants would be able to understand the survey questions and response options.

Throughout the survey, participants were asked to think about the period 'since the beginning of the year' when answering questions. The reference period for the survey data is therefore from January to September 2024.

Some questions were only asked of participants of certain ages – for example, where the questions/options related to more complex concepts such as their understanding of social media. Where applicable, this is indicated in footnotes or in the base descriptions accompanying figures and tables.

Survey sample

A total of 1,504 children, as well as their parents and carers, participated in the survey.

A non-probability-based online panel provider (Octopus Group) was used to recruit survey participants for this project, with children recruited via their parents/carers. The survey was conducted across Australia. Quotas were set based on Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 Census data to ensure the sample was representative of children aged 8–15 in Australia in terms of age, gender, geographical location and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity. Because the primary focus of the study was on underage use of social media and messaging services (i.e. most social media and messaging services have an age limit of 13+), we recruited a larger sample of children aged 8–12 years, compared with our sample of 13–15-year-olds.

The survey sample also included children with disability (n = 267, 18%) and those who spoke a language other than English at home (n = 211, 14%).

Demographic information was provided by parents and carers. Children were also asked to confirm their age and were given the option to answer questions about their gender and sexuality. Twenty-two participants reported their age as being different from that provided by their parent or carer. Where the age provided by the parent/carer and child differed, the age provided by the child is reported.

Nine in 10 children (n = 1,362, 91%) chose to share their gender identity. Where a child declined to provide their gender identity, the gender provided by their parent/carer is reported. Of the children surveyed, 0.4% (n = 6) identified as non-binary and an additional 1% (n = 15) identified as a gender that differed from that indicated by their parent or carer. Where the gender provided by the parent/carer and child differed, the gender identity provided by the child is reported. Most teens aged 13-15 (n = 442, 97%) chose to share their sexuality. Among these teens, 8% identified as sexually diverse.[1]

Table 1 shows key demographic characteristics of the survey participants.

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[1] 'Sexually diverse' includes participants who identified their sexual orientation as 'gay', 'lesbian', 'bisexual', 'queer', 'asexual', 'I'm still working it out' or 'I use a different term' (included 'pansexual').

Table 1 Survey participants: Key demographics

Participant demographics	Population (%) (8–15 years)	Sample (%)	Sample (*n*)
Gender by age			
Boy aged 8–9	13	14	217
Girl aged 8–9	12	15	225
Boy aged 10–12	19	20	297
Girl aged 10–12	18	20	305
Boy aged 13–15	19	15	227
Girl aged 13–15	18	15	227
Non-binary (any age)	Unknown	0.4	6
State/Territory			
New South Wales	31	31	469
Victoria	25	25	377
Queensland	21	21	316
Western Australia	11	11	163
South Australia	7	7	105
Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania, Northern Territory	5	5	74
Location			
Greater Capital City Statistical Area (GCCSA)	66	66	992
Not GCCSA	34	34	512
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people			
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	6	6	93
Total sample			**1,504**

Note: 'Boy' includes two participants who identified as trans boys, and 'girl' includes one participant who identified as a Sistergirl.[2]

2 'Sistergirl' is a culturally specific term used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to describe transgender women, femmes and effeminate people (TransHub, 2021). However, the word can be used differently depending on a person's location, country and nation. In this research, we grouped Sistergirls with girls in our data, as the term is commonly used by trans women. Any Sistergirls who participated in the study and who wish to have their data grouped with a gender category other than 'girls' may contact the authors.

Analysis

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

Positionality statement

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

Limitations

- The findings from this research are reliant on children's self-reported use of social media and messaging services, rather than on independent observation and assessment. Self-report surveys can be subject to social desirability biases, whereby participants may answer survey items in a manner they deem to be socially desirable or acceptable, as opposed to providing a true reflection of their experiences. For example, if children knew that they weren't allowed to use social media and messaging services, or if they were trying to hide their use of such services from their parent or carer, they may have indicated falsely on the survey that they don't use these services.

- Almost 2 in 5 (n = 567, 38%) children surveyed said that their parent or carer helped them to understand or fill in the survey, and 5% (n = 74) said that their parent or carer did the survey for them because they knew what they did online. This may have also contributed to underreporting on the survey if children were trying to hide their use of services from their parent or carer, or if parents/carers didn't have an accurate understanding of the services their child uses.

- Additionally, some services may be over- or under-represented in the data, if participants did not appropriately distinguish between different versions of certain services (e.g., YouTube vs. YouTube Kids; Facebook Messenger vs. Messenger Kids). In addition, it is possible that participants had used YouTube in their classrooms via YouTube Player for Education.

- The survey sample was sourced from online panels of people who have agreed to be invited to participate in online research on a variety of topics. Technically, these are convenience samples. 'Non-probability-based sampling' means that not everyone has an equal chance of being selected to participate in the research. Results may be subject to a range of biases when compared with results from research using probability-based sampling. Although quotas were used to control for demographic skews, it is more difficult to control for psychographic skews arising from differential approaches to participation attraction.

Note to the reader

Percentages in data tables and figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding or to question formats that allowed multiple answers to be given. Tables and figures may not include response options such as 'don't want to say', 'I'm not sure' or 'none of these'.

References

National Health and Medical Research Council. (2018). *National statement on ethical conduct in human research* (2007, updated 2018). Australian Government.

TransHub. (2021). *Trans mob*. Retrieved from TransHub: https://www.transhub.org.au/trans-mob?rq=sistergirl