Adults' Media Use and Attitudes Report

Published 7 May 2025

Welsh language summary available

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Foreword

Ofcom has had duties to promote and research media literacy since it was established in 2003. We define media literacy as the ability to use, understand and create media and communications across multiple formats and services.

The Online Safety Act 2023 (OSA) clarified and added specificity to our media literacy duties, including to heighten the public's awareness and understanding of ways in which they can protect themselves and others when using regulated services, in particular by helping them to deal with the areas of misinformation and disinformation, content that disproportionately affects particular groups, including women and girls, content of democratic importance, and how people's personal data is being used.

Ofcom's Making Sense of Media (MSOM) programme fulfils our duties through our MSOM Strategy, published in 2024, which sets out three central elements of our work - Research, Evidence and Evaluation; Engaging Platforms; and People and Partnerships.

Our longitudinal studies – our Adults' and Children's Media Lives qualitative research projects, and our Media Literacy Trackers – are long-established, providing rich insights into the ways in which people's media use, attitudes and understanding have changed over time.

Our tracker questions span a range of issues, from take-up and use of different types of online platform and service, through to people's attitudes, experiences, and beliefs about an array of media. We focus on people's critical understanding, as such skills are becoming increasingly important in a world in which the range of news and information sources is growing and becoming more complex and there is increasing uncertainty about what is true and what is false. We ask about people's understanding and use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). We also ask about the extent to which people are using mainstream or other sources of news. We paint a picture of the range of ways in which people deal with their personal online worlds. And we ask about benefits and concerns: both the positive aspects of being online and the extent to which people encounter problematic material and feel able to keep themselves safe online. As in all our reports, we provide detail about different types of UK adults – highlighting age, socioeconomic background and gender wherever it is useful or possible to do so. And we have much more material accessible in our interactive report and data tables.

It is increasingly important that adults across the UK adopt an appropriate range and depth of media literate attitudes and behaviours, to enable them to have a positive, active online experience, as well as helping them to navigate and avoid potential harms. And of course, online services also need to enable a positive and safer online environment, so that people can flourish online.

This report provides evidence about the extent of media literacy across UK adults, to inform our own work and that of our stakeholders and regulated services. It provides the contextual landscape that underpins the discrete areas covered in our Making Sense of Media and Online Safety research publications.

Overview

Key findings

Trust and personal information

- **Whilst use of AI has grown, AI is not trusted any more than it was in 2023.**[1] Around three in ten (31%) adults now claim to have used AI tools such as ChatGPT or Gemini, compared to less than a quarter (23%) in 2023. However, around half of adults aware of AI (52%) said they would be more likely to trust a human-written article than one written by AI, and only 15% said they would trust the AI-written article more. These results are similar to last year.
- **More adults are encountering news on social media that they consider deliberately untrue or misleading.** Around half (49%) of online adults claim to have seen a misleading or false story on social media this year, compared to 45% in 2023. Of those who saw such a story, 13% chose to share it on their social media profile to let others know about it, which may inadvertently help to spread the misleading or untrue information further.
- **Awareness of content recommendation algorithms has increased this year.** Eighty-five percent of internet users claim to be aware of algorithms tailoring content online, an increase compared to 2023 (81%). Awareness levels differ slightly by age, with nine in ten 35-44 year olds having heard of algorithms, compared to 78% of over-65s.

Critical evaluation of online information

- **Only half (51%) of search engine users were able to identify sponsored links on search engine results.** Over-65s had a higher success rate than younger age groups, with 59% of them able to recognise sponsored links compared to 37% of 16-24s. Three-quarters of adults say they use search engines such as Google at least once a day.
- **Fewer adults were able to respond appropriately to an email scam this year.** When faced with a mock-up of a scam email, a large majority (83%) of online adults were able to respond appropriately, such as by deleting or ignoring the email, but this was a decline compared to 2023 (86%). Over-65s (92%) were more likely to respond appropriately than average.
- **Younger adults are better at identifying fake social media profiles.** When shown a mock-up of a fake social media profile, three-quarters (76%) of social media users correctly identified the profile as not genuine. In contrast to the other scenario tests discussed, it was those aged 16-24 who were most likely to correctly identify the profile as not genuine (86%).

Online behaviours and communications

- **Internet users are continuing to broaden their online activities.** In 2024, 24% of online adults in the UK reported visiting many websites they hadn’t used before, up from 19% in 2023 and 16% in 2022. Adults aged 16-44 were more likely to explore new websites, while those over 65 were the most likely to stick to familiar websites they had used before (36%).

[1] Fieldwork was conducted in 2024 so we refer to *this year’s* data as 2024 and *last year’s* data as 2023.

- **Online communication preferences vary by gender**, with more male than female internet users reporting not using any social media apps or sites (11% vs 7%). Men were also more likely to upload, watch and share live streaming content than women (69% vs 61%) whilst women were more likely to use sites and apps to send messages or make calls (96% vs 94%).
- **Over half of UK adults play games (53%), with mobile phones the most-used devices for games.** The number of adults gaming has gradually decreased over the last few years, following an uptick during Covid (60% in 2020). Younger generations were also more likely to play games (85% of 16-24-year-olds) than older generations (25% of those aged 65+).

Online attitudes and wellbeing

- **Adults have felt more positively about online communication platforms[2] this year.** Six in ten users now feel the benefits of these platforms outweigh the risks, compared to just over half in 2022. In addition, around four in ten (42%) users feel online communication platforms are overall beneficial for mental health, a fairly substantial increase from 35% in 2022.
- **Part of this positivity may relate to the use of the internet for wellbeing and health.** This year, three-quarters (76%) of internet users went online for such purposes, with the top activities including using the internet to relax (40%) and to improve their mood or feel happy (31%). There was also an increase in using online sites and apps for looking up health symptoms, with 35% of online adults doing this compared to 32% in 2023.
- **Women tend to be more conscious of the risks of social media than men.** Men (63%) are more likely to believe that the benefits of using online communication platforms outweigh the risks than women (56%). One of the factors that may be driving this is the different social pressures between men and women, with women (35%) less likely to feel that using these platforms makes them feel better about themselves than men (45%).

Digital exclusion and device use

- **Internet access levels in the UK remained stable in 2024.** The proportion of UK adults with home internet access has plateaued since an increase in access during the Covid-19 pandemic, remaining at 94% in 2024. Age and socioeconomic status continue to influence digital exclusion, with 21% of those over 65 having no internet access at home and 15% of those in DE households, compared to 2% of AB households.
- **The majority of UK adults without internet access at home report lack of interest in having it.** Eight in ten stated that they see no need to connect online (81%), although over four in ten of those who don't go online at home have asked someone else to do something for them online (43%), showing the continued reliance on proxies for internet access.
- **Almost one in five internet users go online using exclusively smartphones (18%).** Whilst some adults face challenges with online tasks on mobile devices compared to laptops or PCs, such as completing forms (65% of smartphone users), nearly three-quarters of those using only smartphones say they never feel disadvantaged by this (74%).

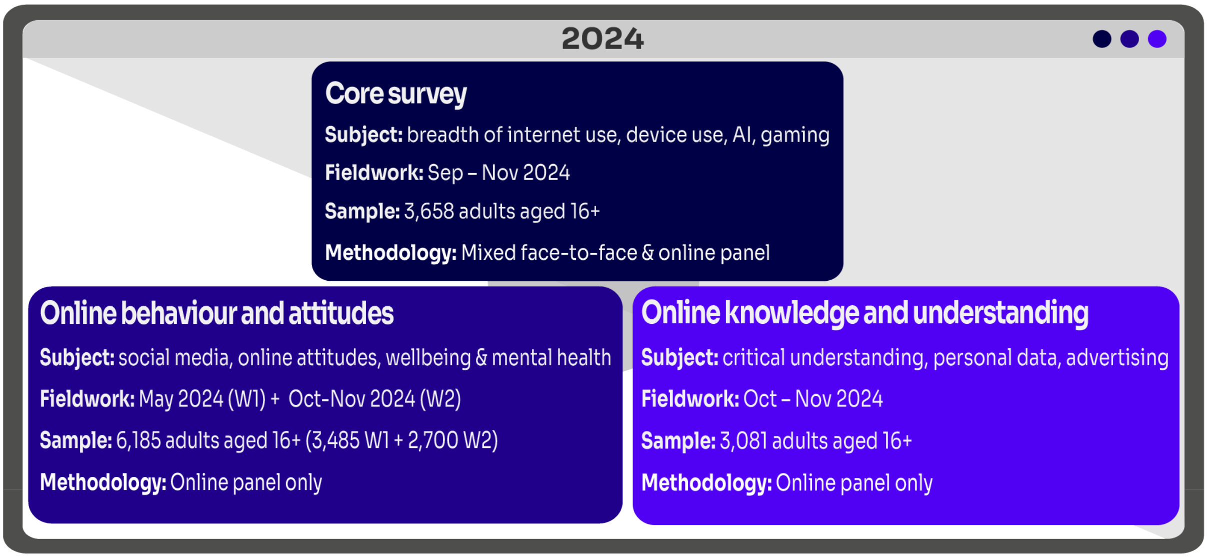
[2] 'Online communication platform' is a blanket term to encompass four kinds of site/app: 1 Apps/sites used to send messages, chat or make voice or video calls, 2. Video-sharing platforms, 3. Social media apps or sites, 4. Live streaming apps/sites used to watch or post content.

Methodology

This report draws its data mainly from our quantitative Adults' Media Literacy Tracker surveys, and discusses media use, attitudes and understanding among UK adults aged 16 or over. More detail, including demographic analysis and responses to the full set of survey questions, can be found in the accompanying interactive report and data tables. A more detailed description of the data collection and analysis process can be found in the technical report, published alongside the data tables.

To support us in providing an over-arching narrative on the key themes of adults' media experience in 2024, this report also draws on our Adults' Media Lives qualitative research. This is a longitudinal, ethnographic project which has been running since 2005. This unique research follows 20 participants over time, with more than half having taken part in the study for at least 15 years. Interviews of up to 90 minutes were conducted face-to-face in participants' homes in order to understand their relationships with media and technology and how they have evolved over time.

The Adults' Media Literacy Tracker comprises three surveys: the core survey, online behaviours and attitudes, and online knowledge and understanding. The latter two surveys were conducted via an online panel, the core survey was conducted through online panel and face-to-face interviews.



To help us to discuss different kinds of internet users in this report, we have categorised internet users into three groups based on the breadth of their use. 'Narrow' internet users are defined as those who have done 1-4 of the 13 online activities we asked about, 'medium' internet users have done 5-8 activities and 'broad' internet users have done 9-13 of the activities.[3] In our latest research, 27% of internet users were defined as 'narrow', 39% as 'medium' and 32% as 'broad'. It is also important to consider the small minority of UK adults who do not use the internet. We will discuss the topic of digital exclusion later in the report.

[3] The 13 activities we ask about are: 1. Online banking or paying bills. 2. Paying for council tax or another local council service. 3. Looking for public services information on Government sites. 4. Finding information for work/ business/ school/ college/ university. 5. Looking or applying for jobs. 6. Finding information for leisure time. 7. Completing Government processes. 8. Signing a petition or using a campaigning website. 9. Using streamed audio services. 10. Listening to live, catch-up or on-demand radio through a website or app. 11. Watching TV programmes/ films/ content. 12. Watching or posting live stream videos. 13. Playing games online. This is not an exhaustive list of online activities, but this selection was found to be the most discriminating in determining breadth of use, from an initial longer list of activities.

Summary of demographic analysis

Age

Of all the different demographics, age is the strongest indicator of someone's media literacy skills, confidence and attitudes. Over-65s generally spend less time online and have less confidence in their skills, including things like recognising AI-generated content, knowing who has access to their data online and in knowing what is true and what is not online. However, there are some areas in which over-65s show greater media literacy than younger adults, including recognising advertising online and providing appropriate responses when posed with a scam email scenario. Older adults also tend to have fewer worries about the time they spend online or the negative impacts of social media such as the pressure to be popular

Gender

Women are less likely to agree than men that the benefits of social media outweigh the risks. Factors behind this include being more likely to feel there is pressure to be popular on these platforms, that social media does not make them feel better about themselves and that screentime on these platforms is an issue. The way women use social media also tends to be more social, communicating with friends and family and helping them keep in touch. Men are more likely to feel people can say what they want online even if it is hurtful to others. Men are also more likely to use and to trust AI, and to be comfortable with the use of algorithms to tailor their online experience.

Socio-economic group [4]

Those in the ABC1 socio-economic group are more likely to be broad internet users and feel confident online. This confidence aligns with ABC1s feeling more comfortable and trusting with various aspects of online life including AI, algorithms and news. However, ABC1s feel more concerned about social media's negative impacts on mental health and about having too much screentime. C2DEs were less likely to respond correctly to some of the scenario tests, including recognising advertising online, and are less likely to take certain security measures online such as using biometrics or installing antivirus software.

Nation

The four nations of the UK have similar media literacy skills, confidence and attitudes overall. There are a few exceptions to this, including adults in Northern Ireland feeling less likely that people should be able to say what they like online even if it is hurtful to others, and those in Northern Ireland and Scotland feeling users should not be able to remain anonymous online. However, adults in Northern Ireland and Scotland are more likely to believe that overall the benefits of being online outweigh the risks, and adults in England are more likely to feel that social media makes them feel better about themselves. Adults in Scotland are less likely to use AI.

[4] A person's socio-economic status is based on the type of work they do, or what they used to do if they are retired. AB: higher and intermediate managerial, administrative, professional occupations; C1: supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative, professional occupations; C2: skilled manual occupations; DE: semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations, unemployed and lowest-grade occupations.

Trust and personal information

Introduction

Nowadays, information is constantly available at our fingertips, from a multitude of different media and sources. Critical awareness is vital in navigating this complex world to help us understand the full context of what we see. Misinformation can spread rapidly online, and distinguishing fact from fiction is increasingly challenging. This is especially important with the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and deepfakes, which have the potential to convincingly create false narratives and visuals. Good media literacy practices include scrutinising the information we come across online, such as by reading the full story and checking against other sources.

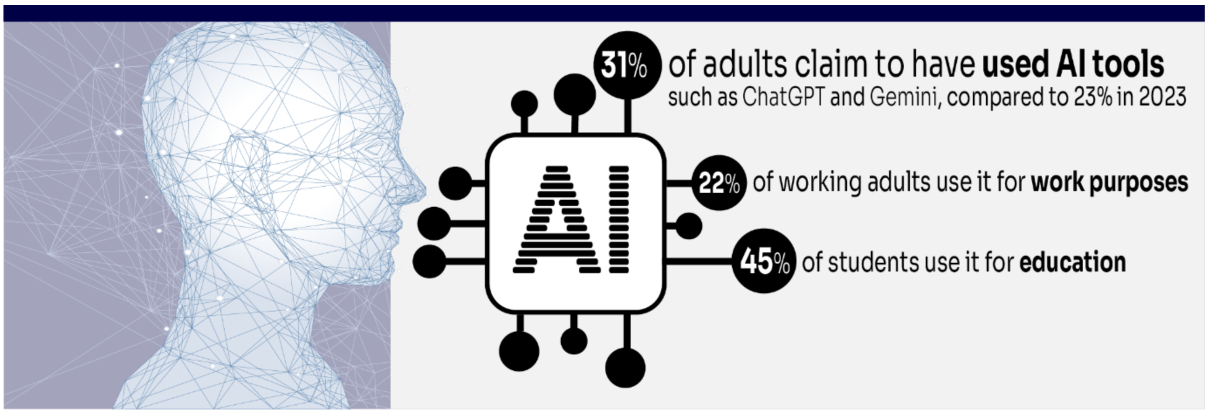
The need for critical awareness extends to the managing of our personal data. Controlling what information we share, when we share it and with whom – as well as understanding how they might use it – has a big impact on our online experience, from shaping what we see to reducing risk. At the more extreme end, bad personal data practice can expose us to identity theft, scams, and other dangers.

AI

Use of and knowledge of AI has grown

Around three in ten adults (31%) claim to have used AI tools such as ChatGPT and Gemini, compared to less than a quarter (23%) in 2023. The age groups most likely to have used AI are those aged 16-24 (53%) or 25-34 (48%), and men (38%) are more likely to have used it than women (25%).

One of the drivers behind the rise in use of AI is the use of it for work and education purposes. Around two in ten (22%) of those in the workforce say they use AI as part of their job; this compares to 12% in 2023. An even greater proportion (45%) of students said this year that they use AI for education purposes. This means that of all AI users, about six in ten (62%) do so for work or education purposes. Of all the reasons we ask about for using AI, work is now the joint top reason alongside curiosity.



This year there had been a marked upturn in the claimed use of such tools among our Adults' Media Lives sample, particularly for those working in office-based jobs. Many of them now regularly use apps like ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot in work, and sometimes outside work as well. On the whole, these were being used for limited, specific tasks, and users considered them helpful, but not revolutionary.

> "It's the Copilot on Microsoft that's been installed on all of our work computers and it's good with the mundane tasks. It's not really good with the creative tasks."
>
> John, 38

> "I went on to ChatGPT... I put in a few places I wanted to go to in Thailand and said, "Can you plan me a trip?". And it did."
>
> Chloe, 24

General awareness of AI has also increased this year; more than eight in ten (81%) adults have heard of AI, up from 74% in 2023, and 45% claim to be familiar with what AI tools are and can be used for, also an increase from last year (37%). Alongside this increased familiarity with AI has come more consideration of whether content online has been generated by AI or not. Half of online adults who have heard of AI claim to consider whether content online is generated by AI at least some of the time, up from 37% in 2023.

But this has not come alongside increasing public trust in AI

Despite this increase in awareness, usage and consideration, there has been no increase in how much adults trust AI this year. When asked whether they would trust an article online written by a human or one written by AI more, around half (52%) said they would trust the AI article less, a similar level to that seen in 2023. Even those who use AI themselves are more likely to trust the human article (41%) than the AI one (28%), and this gap between the two has increased since 2023, when 38% of AI users would trust the human article compared to 30% for the AI article.

Also, while there has been an increase from around a quarter (27%) in 2023, just a third (34%) of adults aware of AI this year said they feel confident recognising AI-generated content online. Given stated confidence online is generally pretty high – 87% of internet users feel confident overall online – this suggests there is still some way to go in the general public acclimatising to AI and feeling confident identifying potential online threats such as deepfakes.

Most active users of social media in the Adults' Media Lives sample claimed to have seen examples of AI-generated images and/or videos in the past year. The majority of examples cited were seen as obviously fake and produced for the purpose of entertainment, such as the Gareth Southgate deepfakes prevalent around the time of Euro 2024. However, many participants were conscious that more convincing and insidious examples of AI-generated content might easily have passed them by.

> "I'm guessing you put some text into something, and Gareth Southgate will just say that when he clearly hasn't said that… A lot of it is obviously for comedy, to make people laugh. I think they're okay as long as they say that it's not real. The election in America has been the big one where there's been so much flying round there… [he's] such an outspoken guy, you actually don't know whether it's AI or whether he actually said it."
>
> Tim, 26

Opinions were split as to the value of AI summaries in search results and reviews

In our Adults' Media Lives study, we prompted for awareness and use of AI summaries in Google search results and Amazon product reviews, using sample screen captures for each where required. Many participants were already aware of the AI summaries presented at the top of Google search results. By and large, they considered these to be helpful, although opinions differed to some extent as to how much trust to place in them.

> "I kind of read it. I don't rely on it. I just kind of think, "Oh, that's quite useful information. Has that answered it?" If it's something really high level, like basic."
>
> Jenny, 31

The AI summaries of online reviews were considered less helpful and potentially less trustworthy.

> "I would rather read a five star review and a three star review than just a sort of AI summary."
>
> Robert, 28

When asked how they saw the future of media technology, most felt that developments in AI were likely to have the biggest impact in the coming years – for better or worse. Those most likely to be concerned about the potential negative consequences of AI were those who had little or no experience of using it. In fact, many participants expressed an interest in learning more about AI, but said they didn't necessarily know where to go for help.

News and misinformation

More adults claim to have encountered misleading or false news on social media in 2024

An increasing proportion of online adults encountered information they considered misleading or false on social media compared to last year, rising from 45% to 49% of users. Of those who encountered such content, around six in ten (58%) took action as a result, with the most likely action being reporting it to the site/app (34%).

Our Online Experiences Tracker asks about online harms that adults aged 18+ have experienced in the past four weeks and 39% of adults said they had encountered misinformation in this timeframe. This makes it the most encountered online harm, above bad language and scams/fraud/phishing.[5]

The sharing of stories encountered on social media can help to spread misinformation further no matter the intention behind the reason for sharing. Of those adults who encountered misleading or false news this year, 13% chose to share the story on their own social media to let their followers know it was misleading or untrue.

More broadly, sharing news stories on social media is a common activity for some – 28% of users say they do so – but many aren't necessarily vetting the information they share. Of those who say they share news stories online, only 16% claim to only share news stories from outlets they have heard of and only a quarter (24%) said they always check the reliability of the news they share.

However, adults claim to be more vigilant about spotting misinformation this year compared to 2023. Around four in ten (38%) say they always or mostly consider the truthfulness of the news they encounter on social media, compared to a third (33%) last year. Men (41%) and those in social grade ABC1 (41%) are more likely to say they do this. The most popular methods employed by those claiming to question information online are checking who posted the news or information (54%), checking the information on other sites/apps (50%) and reading the comments sections (50%).

Trust in mainstream media overall remains high

News from mainstream media[6] as a whole remains widely used, with 84% of adults claiming to use mainstream sources for at least some of their news. However, a small minority (6%) said they do not use it at all because they do not trust it. The other 10% who do not use it give other reasons, such as generally not being interested in news. These results align closely to those seen last year. Whilst use of mainstream news is high among all adults, it does differ by social grade, with nine in ten of those in AB households using it compared to three-quarters of those in DE households. This difference is on account of those in DE households (9%) being more likely than those in AB households (5%) to say that they don't use mainstream media sources because they don't trust them, or that they don't use it for another reason such as not being interested in the news (17% for DE, 5% for AB). Adults in Scotland (76%) are also less likely to use mainstream news sources than the UK average.

Those who use mainstream news indicate that they generally scrutinise the information they receive from it. Around four in ten (42%) say they use these sources but 'sometimes' question the information, while two in ten (21%) say they 'always' do. However, this does not apply to all users of mainstream news; 16% always trust the information they gather from mainstream sources, and 6% do not consider whether the news is truthful or not.

Attitudes towards news have become more polarised among our Adults' Media Lives sample, and consumption habits more fragmented, over the past year. As far as most participants were concerned, the news cycle for the past year has been dominated by the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. This has led to some becoming more interested in news and wanting to dig behind the headlines, while others seek to avoid it. The more engaged news consumers mentioned a diverse list of news sources they follow across social media and YouTube, as well as TV. In some cases, the

[5] Ofcom, Online Experiences Tracker, Wave 6 (2024).

[6] Mainstream media was defined on the survey as "the main organisations that provide news, such as the BBC, ITV, Sky News, the press such as The Sun, The Times, The Guardian, the Daily Mail etc".

choice of sources followed reflects a specific world view. However, a few participants claimed to triangulate contrasting editorial viewpoints on the same story to try and form a balanced view.

> "I get up in the morning and I watch BBC News, Sky News, GB News, Euronews and Al-Jazeera, and make my own mind up about what to think."
>
> Geoff, 73

> "You get a lot more in-person experiences on social media. But when it comes to people reporting then I'll go to YouTube… Piers Morgan is one of them. Zeteo, which is quite a new one, with Mehdi Hasan. But then I also follow, on a more personal basis, Owen Jones, stuff like that as well. People that I feel that are giving quite honest and impartial views."
>
> John, 38

> "It feels like I'm watching less news. It's more of the same, right?"
>
> Denise, 47

A third (33%) of adults 'always' or 'often' trust a news video clip which includes a first-hand eye-witness view. Those more likely to always or often trust eye-witness accounts include men (36%) and those in social grade ABC1 (36%). According to our Mis and Disinformation research, around four in ten (42%) adults trust eye-witness video footage more than photos or written articles.[7]

Personal information and data

Awareness of algorithms has grown this year

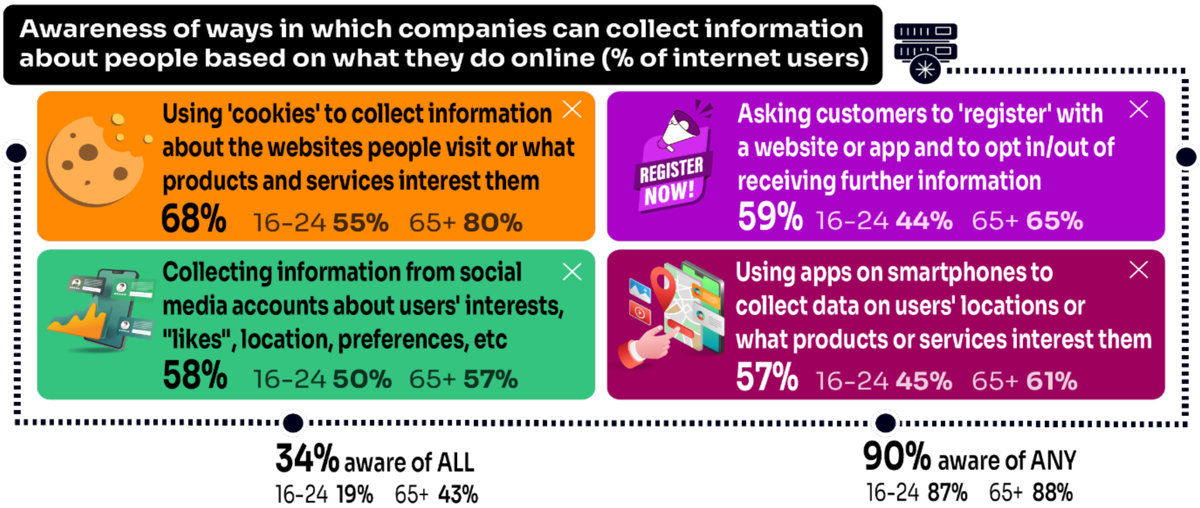
This year, the proportion of internet users who are aware of apps and sites' use of content recommendation algorithms to tailor what users see online increased from 81% to 85%. Awareness levels differ slightly by age, with nine in ten 35-44 year olds having heard of algorithms compared to 78% of over-65s, but this still means a large majority of all age groups are aware of them.

One of the potential drivers behind what content algorithms decide to show users in search results or social media feeds, alongside how popular or relevant the content is, is information about the user so that the results are personalised. Unlike overall awareness of algorithms, awareness of specific methods that companies use to collect information about their users is highest among internet users over-65 and lowest among 16-24 year olds. Eight in ten over-65s are aware of companies using cookies to collect customer information, compared to only 55% of 16-24-year-olds.

Similarly, six in ten (61%) over-65s are aware of companies using apps on smartphones to collect data on users' locations or products of interest, compared to 45% of 16-24s. Across all four data collection methods, over-65s had equal or greater awareness than the average adult and 16-24s had lower awareness than the average adult.

[7] Ofcom, Understanding Misinformation: An Exploration of UK Adults' Behaviour and Attitudes, 2024.

Only a third of adult internet users were aware of all four surveyed methods of data collection. This measure increased with age; only 19% of 16-24-year-olds were aware of all of these ways (19%), rising up to 43% of over-65s.



Over-65s are much more likely to be uncomfortable with the collection of personal data for any reason - four in ten (39%) over-65s do not agree with its collection under any circumstances, compared to only 8% of 16-24s.

Overall awareness of specific methods companies use to collect information about their users has not increased over time. This year, 68% of online adults had heard of the use of cookies and this compares to 71% in 2018 when we first asked about knowledge of these methods. Similarly, 58% knew of collection of information from social media accounts, compared to 60% in 2018.

One of the potential effects of algorithms could be online communication platform users seeing an ‘echo chamber’ of similar views on their feeds. Only around two in ten (22%) of users say they ‘often’ see views they disagree with, while 54% say they sometimes do and 16% ‘rarely’ do. This has remained broadly the same since 2021. Men (25%) are more likely than women (20%) to say they often see views they disagree with, with over-65s (15%) less likely to say this.

There’s a sense for some that there is only so much you can do to limit the sharing of your personal data

Most Adults’ Media Lives participants consider that giving out at least some personal data is a "necessary evil", essential to being able to function in a world where more and more services are delivered online and/or via apps.

A few adhere to a strict policy of giving away as little information as possible, and only to trusted institutions like banks, government and the NHS. Some others have adopted a fatalistic view that their data is now "out there" anyway, so they might as well disclose as much as is required to be able to access the services they want as cost effectively as possible. They don't necessarily feel the need to be vigilant about who else might have access to this data.

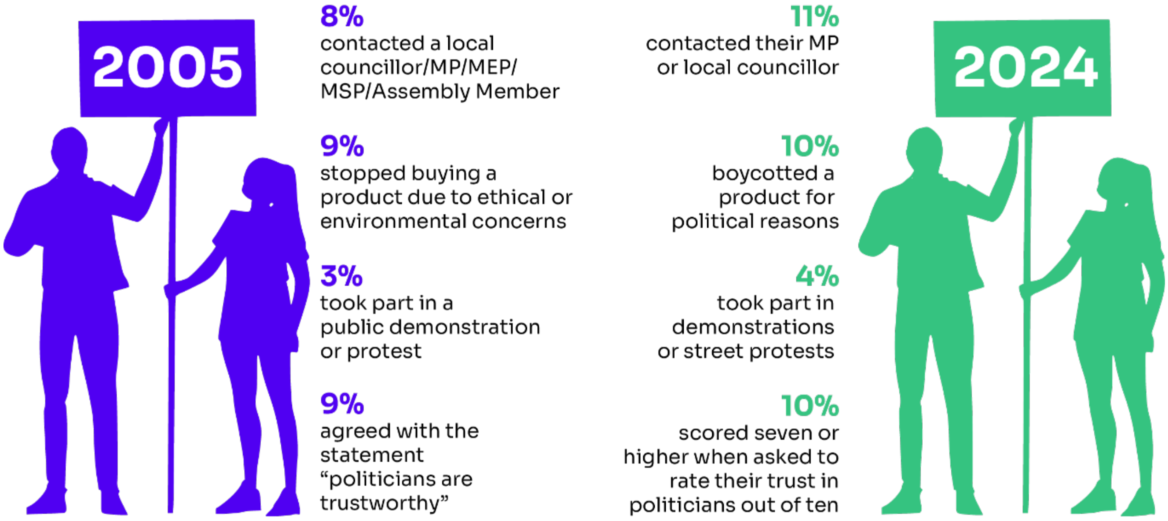
> “Well, they're going to get your information anyway. Whether you don't give it to one company, another company already has it. So me going on to a website and making sure I don't accept cookies... isn't going to stop my data from going out there.”
>
> Hazeem, 20

Politics and democratic participation

Only small numbers engage in political activities

Relatively small numbers of people engage in the forms of political activities we asked about this year. Four percent of adults said they had taken part in demonstrations or street protests and 6% said they started or continued membership of a political party this year. Around one in ten boycotted certain products for political reasons (9%) or contacted their MP or local councillor (11%). Those who engaged in any of the six activities we asked about were more likely to be younger; around four in ten (42%) 16-34 year olds did at least one compared to only 25% of over-65s.

We also asked about three of these back in 2005 and, similarly to 2024, relatively small numbers took part in these political activities then.[8] Twenty years ago, one in ten adults said they had stopped buying a product for ethical or environmental reasons and a similar number (8%) contacted their local councillor, MP, MEP, MSP or assembly member. Comparatively smaller numbers (3%) said they engaged in some form of public demonstration or protest.



Adults are more likely to trust other members of the public than they do politicians. When asked to score out of ten how much they trust most people, only 13% scored three or less out of ten, and 45% scored a seven or higher. However, when asked about politicians, over half (56%) scored three or less out of ten, and only 10% scored a seven or higher.

Participants in our Adults’ Media Lives study downplayed media coverage of the General Election as a factor in influencing their voting choices. The majority claimed to have voted, although only a handful said they had followed coverage of the election results closely. They claimed to have used a mix of sources including party manifestos, leaflets and candidates’ posts on social media, as well as traditional media, to help inform their voting decision.

> “I was quite big on doing my own research… but then also, it's good to see what other people's opinions are and just see their views. You don't necessarily have to agree, but just seeing what people's take on things were and you could get that from TikTok, mostly.”
>
> Jenny, 31

[8] Due to methodological changes between the 2024 and 2005 surveys, we cannot make direct statistical comparisons. Our 2005 survey was conducted face-to-face, the 2024 survey was face-to-face and online.

Critical evaluation of online information

Introduction

'Critical understanding' is a core element of media literacy. It allows users to understand, question and manage their media environment. This is important if they are to explore the benefits that the internet and other media can offer, while avoiding potential harms or risks.

Our research looks at confidence and the interaction it has with critical understanding, partly through a series of practical exercises which test internet users' skills and knowledge. This relationship between confidence and ability is useful to explore, as someone with good critical understanding skills but who is unconfident, could feel unsafe online and not use the internet to its potential. Conversely, someone whose confidence is not matched by ability in practice may be more likely to make mistakes, which could lead to harm.

Overall confidence levels were high, with 84% of online adults saying they felt confident in judging whether an email, text or online message is potentially a scam and 82% confident in recognising advertising online. Slightly fewer, three-quarters (76%), said they felt confident in judging whether online information is true or false. Over-65s were less likely than the average adult to feel confident across all three of these questions, but as the sections below lay out, this did not always mean they were less able in practice. The fact that stronger responses in some scenarios came from older adults, and some from younger, demonstrates there is not a single age group who are completely proficient in media literacy.

In this chapter we include analysis of research which put practical scenarios to our research participants and asked them how they would react or tested their knowledge of what they were being shown. From these, we have created four different quadrants based on adults' ability compared to their confidence. Those who are 'confident and not able', for example, are adults who stated they were confident in a particular online skill but who did not respond accurately in the corresponding scenario we set them. The other three groups are 'confident and able', 'not confident and not able' and 'not confident but able'.

Paid partnerships

Over-65s are the most likely age group to recognise paid partnerships on social media

One of the practical tests we set respondents in our survey was to show them a screenshot from David Beckham's Instagram page and to ask them why they thought he was promoting a particular watch brand.[9] This was to test their ability to spot paid partnerships on social media.

[9] Source: David Beckham Instagram account, 8th July 2022 (Instagram handle – davidbeckham), (Instagram post - https://www.instagram.com/p/CfwYD24owMB/?hl=en). Sources were shown at the end of the survey during fieldwork.

This year, three-quarters (76%) of online adults were able to correctly answer that the reason David Beckham promoted the watch brand was at least partly due to being paid by the company to post about them. This aligns very closely to the results from last year. Interestingly, despite using social media less overall, it was the over-65s who were best at identifying paid partnerships (86%) and it was the younger age groups, including those aged 16-24 (68%), who struggled the most. This suggests those who are most likely to come across, or be targeted with, these kinds of paid partnerships may also be the most susceptible.

2024 saw an increase in the potentially vulnerable 'confident and not able' group, with two in ten (19%) feeling confident in recognising advertising online but unable to answer correctly when their skills were put to the test, compared to 16% in 2023. Those more likely to be confident but not able were younger age groups such as those aged 16-24 (27%), men (21%) and those in social grade C2DE (22%).

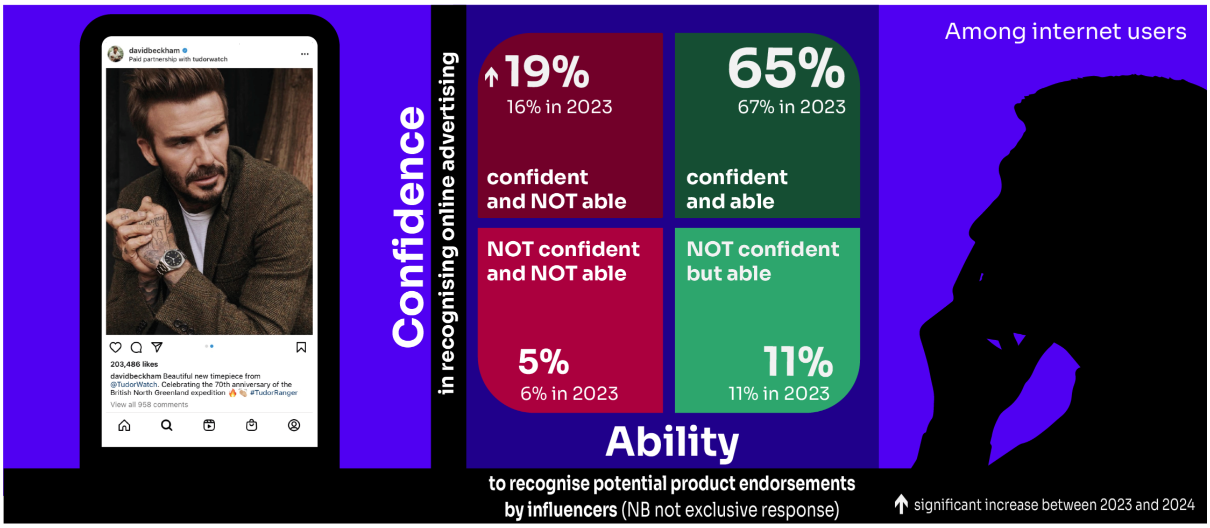


Figure 1: Measuring confidence vs. ability in recognising paid partnerships on social media among adult internet users

Search engines

Only half of adults are able to identify sponsored links on search engines

In a similar exercise, we tested respondents' ability to explain why certain results in a Google search are displayed at the top. For the test, we shared a screenshot of a Google search for 'walking boots' and asked why the top four links, marked 'sponsored', were placed there.[10]

Only half (51%) of search engine users were able to correctly respond that the top four results were there solely because they were sponsored links and had paid to be there – rather than being the most popular or most relevant results, which was the response given by 25% and 24% respectively. In 2023, 54% correctly responded, indicating a slight decline in the ability to identify sponsored links compared to last year. In fact, when we first asked the question in this way in 2018, 48% correctly responded, so there does not appear to have been any marked improvement over the last six years. Similarly to the paid partnerships test, older adults were better at identifying the sponsored links

[10] Source: Google search for 'walking boots'. Walking boots images: Mountain Warehouse, On, Go Outdoors, Scarpa. This Google search was conducted before fieldwork so results may now look different.

than younger adults, with 59% of over-65s answering correctly compared to only 37% of 16-24 year olds.

The slight year-on-year decline in adults' ability to recognise advertising corresponds with an increase in the 'confident and not able' group, who now make up four in ten search engine users. Those most likely to sit within this group are those aged 16-24 (52%) or 35-44 (48%), and those in social grade C2DE (43%).

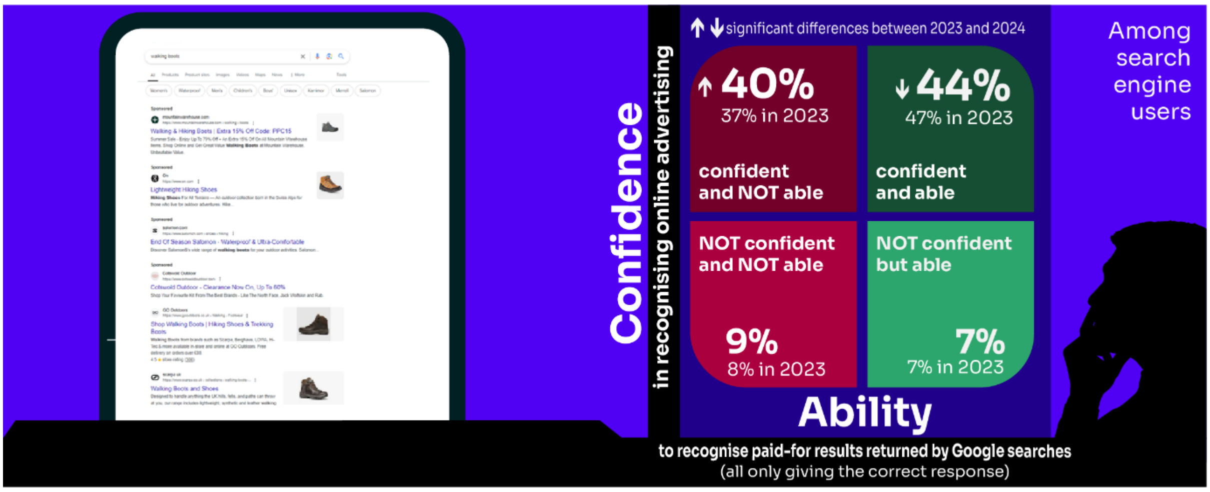


Figure 2: Measuring confidence vs. ability in recognising sponsored links on search engines among adult search engine users

Elsewhere in the survey, we also asked search engine users whether they felt that by virtue of being placed in the search results, that made websites inherently accurate and unbiased. There was an increase this year in those feeling that this did indeed make them accurate (27%) compared to 2023 (23%). This is a further indication that comprehension around search engines is actually worsening over time, strengthened by the fact that when we first asked the question in 2018, only 20% gave this response. This year, a further 12% of adults either claim not to think about whether the search results are accurate or not, or did not know, which leaves around six in ten (62%) who gave the media literate response that they think some results are accurate and some are not.

Search engines are the most commonly used option when seeking information online, but they are not the only platform used for that functionality

Ofcom conducted another piece of research which specifically looked into adults' online searching behaviours.[11] Three-quarters of adults say they use search engines such as Google at least once a day. While that remains the most common platform used for search, there are other platforms that adults are now using for search too: just over four in ten (43%) say they use social media platforms such as Facebook for searching online at least once a day, and a third (34%) say they use video-sharing platforms such as TikTok to search daily. Younger adults were more likely than average to use social media and video-sharing platforms for searching online daily.

Among people seeking out specific types of information, a majority said they turned to search engines first when looking for information about something they might buy, information for studies/educational purposes, and information about a hobby or something that interests them.

[11] Ofcom, [Online Research Panel poll: Searching Online](), March 2025. The poll was conducted among a nationally-representative sample of 2,118 UK online adults aged 16+.

Among those searching for updates and news about celebrities or influencers, the initial port of call was more divided; 35% going to search engines first, 31% to social media and 15% to video-sharing platforms.

We asked adults who used specific types of search how much they trusted the information they received from those specific search options. Around six in ten (59%) users said they always or mostly trusted the information they received from search engines. This compares to 25% for video-sharing platforms and only 19% for social media platforms. Younger adults – who were more likely to turn to these sources – were more likely to trust the results they get when searching on social media or video-sharing platforms.

Participants in *Adults' Media Lives* have also started turning to alternative services in preference to more traditional search engines on occasion. Younger participants have used TikTok to seek out targeted information, and a few were also using ChatGPT as an intelligent search engine.

> "So if I find myself in Thailand, in a hostel and I don't really know the area, I want something to do today, I want somewhere to go to eat, I want an activity to do, I probably would just type it into TikTok."
>
> Chloe, 24

Scams

There has been a decline in adults' ability to respond appropriately to online scams

Scams, fraud and phishing were encountered by a third (33%) of internet users aged 13+ in the last four weeks, making it the third most common online harm recorded on our Online Experiences Tracker.[12] Good media literacy skills would involve the ability to respond to potential scams safely. We showed respondents a screenshot of a fake email purporting to be from a parcel delivery company and asked them how they would respond.[13]

Over eight in ten (83%) online adults responded appropriately to the email, by saying they would take an action such as deleting it, reporting it or blocking the sender. Other actions, such as replying or clicking on links in the email, may risk someone accidentally downloading malware or start the process for a scammer to demand money. This was a decrease from the 86% of online adults who responded appropriately last year, and from 88% in 2022. Similarly to the paid partnerships and search engine advertising tests, it was the older age groups who were more likely to respond correctly, such as those aged 65+ (92%); in comparison, only 70% of 25-34s took the appropriate action.

This has led to another increase in the 'confident and not able' group, with 14% of internet users confident in their ability to recognise scams but who did not respond appropriately in the email scam scenario this year, compared to 12% last year. Those more likely to be in this category are those aged 16-24 (19%) or 25-34 (27%), men (16%) and those in social grade ABC1 (15%).

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[12] Ofcom, Online Experiences Tracker, Wave 6 (2024).
[13] Source: DPD website – Phishing (https://www.dpd.co.uk/content/about_dpd/phishing.jsp).

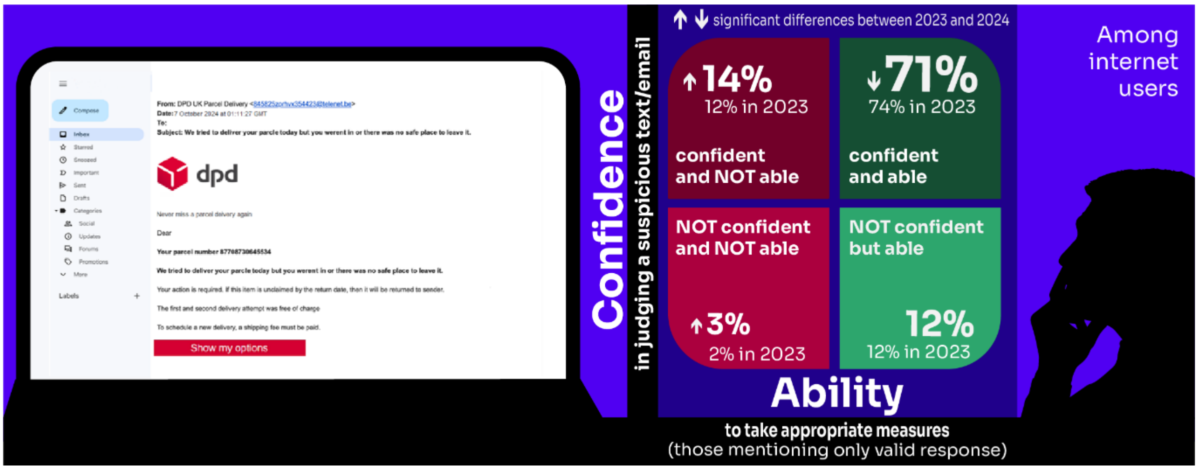


Figure 3: *Measuring confidence vs. ability in responding to an email scam appropriately among adult internet users*

Although participants in our Adults' Media Lives research were not happy about the volume of scam emails, text messages and phone calls they continue to receive, they felt broadly confident about being able to spot these. All appeared to be well-informed about the most common email scams, and some of the key signs to look out for when receiving such emails (e.g. checking the sender address). Nevertheless, there was some concern that scammers might become smarter at targeting individuals at moments when they are stressed, vulnerable or not concentrating, and therefore not exercising full critical judgement. Where they are not completely confident assessing this themselves, participants will consult a trusted "expert" (usually a younger family member).

> "I try not to take it for granted that… I'm not going to be fooled by these things, because they're getting much better at targeting people, and going for your weakness maybe when you're not expecting it."
>
> Dai, 45

Social media profiles

Younger adults are better at identifying fake social media profiles

Another potential harm that internet users can come across are fake social media profiles, which could be used to promote scams or spread misinformation. We showed respondents a mocked-up social media profile and asked them to identify whether they believed the profile was genuine or not and then to click on elements of the profile which influenced that decision.[14]

This year, three-quarters (76%) of social media users correctly identified the profile as not genuine. In contrast to the exercises already discussed, those aged 16-24 were most likely to correctly identify the profile as not genuine (86%). This compares to 73% of over-65s and 70% of 45-54s.

The aspects of the profile those who felt it was not genuine thought were the best indicators were the page bio advertising 'make loads of ££££ from beauty hacks' (72%) and the associated website link made up of seemingly random characters underneath (52%). Other factors included the username and the followers to following ratio, each clicked on by around a quarter. We are also able to look at what respondents clicked on first to give an indication of the initial, primary factor that

[14] This profile is a fictional profile. Images were taken from Pexels.

influenced their belief as to the veracity of the profile. Four in ten who felt it was not genuine clicked on the bio first and 22% on the weblink. Among the users who instead thought the profile was genuine, many features were clicked with no specific element standing out as the key indicator.

Fewer than two in ten users (17%) felt confident in recognising what is true and what is not online, but failed to identify the fake social media profile. This ‘confident and not able’ group has remained consistent since last year and those in it were more likely to be aged 35-44 (22%) or men (21%).

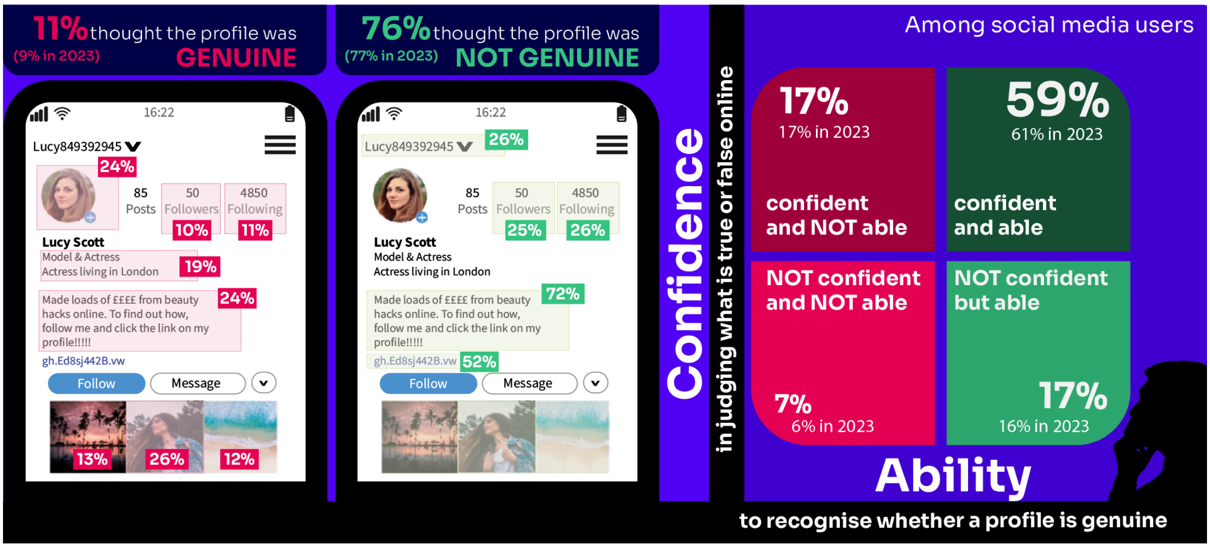


Figure 4: Measuring confidence vs. ability in recognising fake profiles on social media among adult social media users

Social media posts

It can be hard to identify clearly whether a post is genuine or not

Our final scenario for respondents also related to whether content on social media was genuine or not, in this case a Facebook post from MoneySavingExpert which included a customer testimonial about being able to track down lost pensions.[15]

There was no clear consensus among social media users in this instance; 42% felt the post was genuine, 39% felt it was not genuine and 19% were unsure. This demonstrates the difficulty and nuance in judging validity online, particularly on the topic of saving money and not least in the context of the sheer amount of information that people come across. In this instance, we did not judge whether respondents were right or wrong, as we were interested more in the methods employed to decide either way, and a certain amount of scepticism of information on social media is healthy. Unlike in the scam email scenario, for example, the downside to “getting it wrong” and not trusting this particular Facebook post could be missing out on potentially helpful information but nothing as risky as exposing your personal or financial data.

For those who thought it was genuine, the biggest indicators were the profile name (MoneySavingExpert.com), the URL in the post which linked directly to the MoneySavingExpert website and the profile’s blue verification tick. Of those who felt that the post was either not genuine, or who could not decide either way, over half (53%) questioned the customer testimonial,

[15] Source: Facebook post from Money Saving Expert, 14 August 2024 https://www.facebook.com/share/p/12LWKmnVfpj/

which was from ‘Deborah’ and described how she was able to extract £61,700 from her husband’s lost pension.

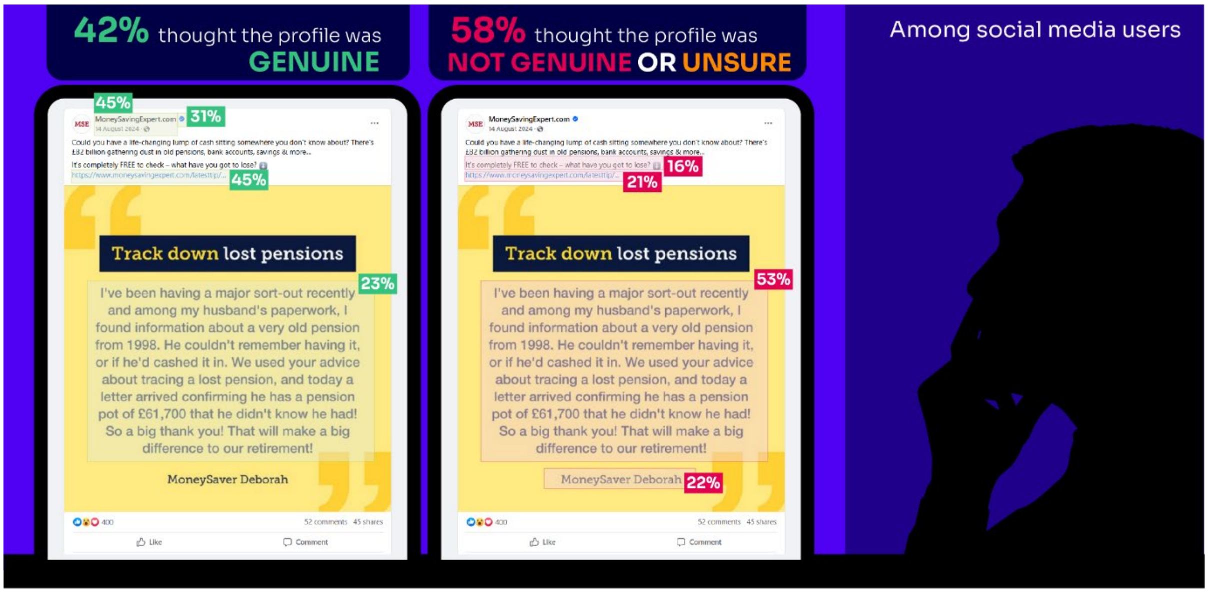


Figure 5: Adult social media users’ responses when asked whether a social media post was genuine or not

Online behaviours and communications

Introduction

This chapter explores how UK adults engage with the internet and provides insight into their breadth of internet exploration, online communication platforms and gaming. Tracking these behaviours helps identify shifts in digital habits, highlighting differences across age groups, socio-economic backgrounds, and levels of digital confidence.

Over the past two decades, the digital landscape has transformed significantly, with the rise of social media, streaming services, and online gaming reshaping how people interact, consume content, and engage with the world. Now, more than ever, the internet shapes daily life, from our social connections to entertainment and information-sharing. Our research has allowed us to track these changes over time and provide insight into the changing media and internet landscape.

Websites and internet services

Exploration of the internet continues to grow

Almost a quarter of online adults in the UK reported that they had visited 'lots' of sites or apps that they hadn't used before in the past month (24%). This is an increase from 19% of adult internet users doing so in 2023, and 16% in 2022, indicating a gradual broadening of internet use over the last couple of years. However, looking further back, in 2014 and in 2019, almost a quarter of adults reported using lots of websites they haven't visited before (24% in both years), indicating that there may have been a slight dip in the range of websites visited in the early pandemic years. The most common response from UK adult internet users in 2024 was that they had used maybe one or two websites that they hadn't before in the past month (46%).

Internet users aged 16-44 were the most likely to have used *lots* of websites or apps that they haven't used before (30%), whilst those over 65 were the most likely to *only use* websites or apps they had visited before (36%). Adults in AB households were more likely to report that they used websites or apps that they *hadn't* used before in the past month (28%) compared to those in DE households (18%).

Participants in our Adults' Media Lives study talked about managing more and more of their daily life through apps. Most now bank online, even some of those who were initially reluctant to do so and going paperless for things like travel tickets is now seen by most participants as more convenient. Although most interactions with services go well, there were some indications that participants are beginning to resent the need to install dedicated apps for every task (e.g. multiple parking apps, event-specific apps), especially when these apps require users to pass on large amounts of personal data (which may then be used for marketing purposes).

> “Before I wouldn't have downloaded an app. But now it seems that is the requirement. And so I've noticed that my phone has got a load more apps than it used to.”
>
> Suki, 47

We also measure breadth of internet use not just by range in websites, but by the different types of activities users do online.[16] Overall, 32% of online adults are broad internet users, 39% were medium, and 27% were narrow. Those aged 25-34 (44%) and 35-44 (42%) are most likely to be broad users, compared to only 31% of those aged 16-24 and 12% of those aged 65+. Adult internet users from AB households are more likely (44%) than those from DE households (15%) to be broad internet users, and conversely, those from AB households are less likely to be narrow internet users (17%) than those from DE households (41%).

Use of online communication platforms

Online communication platforms continue to play a pivotal role in everyday life

As with previous years, nearly all UK internet users aged 16+ used online communication platforms in 2024 (99%). We classify online communication platforms as those where you can: watch or upload videos on VSPs, watch or post live streams, send messages, make voice or video calls and social media platforms. Six in ten of adult internet users use all four types of platforms, which is unchanged since 2022. WhatsApp (82%), YouTube (82%) and Facebook (77%) remain the top three online communication platforms used by internet users in 2024.

The range of sites and apps used to do these types of activity differs by age, as young people are more likely to use a wider range of different sites and apps. The average UK internet user used 6.7 different online communication platforms. However, those aged 16-24 used 9.4 different online communication platforms and this decreased with age down to 3.3 different platforms being used by those aged 65+. Differences extend to socio-economic group; adults in AB households used an average of 7.8 different online communication platforms, compared to 5.2 in DE households.

Looking at the different activities carried out by men and women on online communication platforms, more men watched, shared, or uploaded live streaming content than women (69% vs 61%). Men were also more likely to post on video sharing platforms (38% vs 31%) or live stream content themselves (21% vs 13%), whilst women were more likely to use sites and apps to send messages or make calls (96% vs 94%) and use social media (92% vs 89%).

There were also gender differences at a site-specific level, across online communication platforms. Women were more likely than men to use WhatsApp (85% vs 79%), Facebook (81% vs 74%), Instagram (63% vs 56%), TikTok (48% vs 45%) and Pinterest (28% vs 13%). On the other hand, men were more likely than women to use YouTube (87% vs 77%), X (35% vs 24%), LinkedIn (25% vs 18%) and Reddit (18% vs 11%).

[16] Please refer to page 6 for explanation of how we measure breadth of internet use.

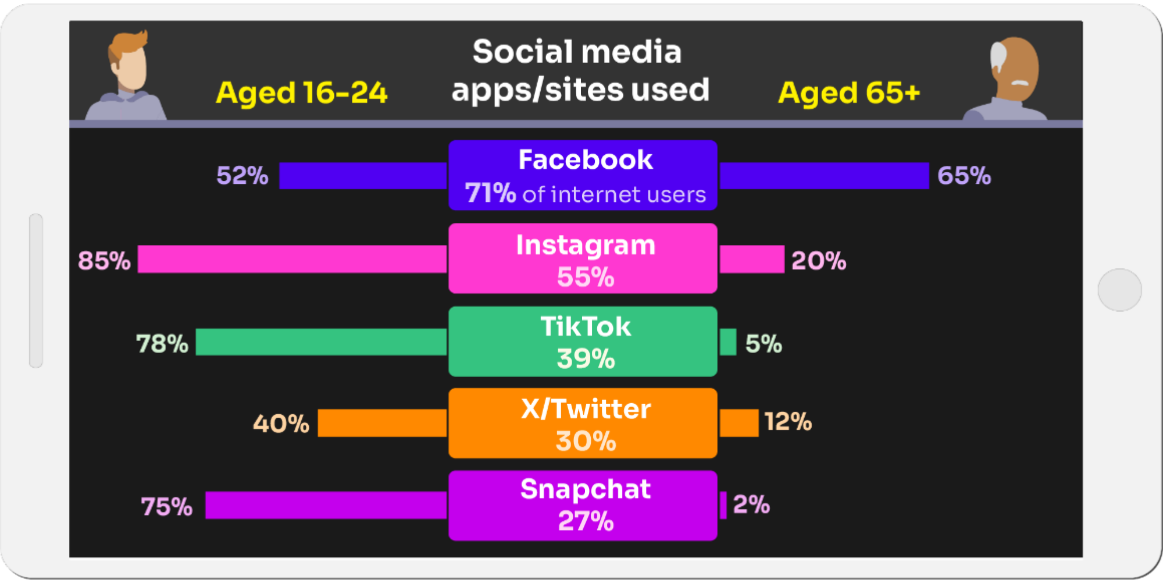
The most common use of online communication platforms was for messaging and calling

The majority of internet users used apps and websites to communicate with others via messages and video or voice calls (95%). WhatsApp continues to be the most popular app for messaging and calling, with 82% of online adults doing so, and was most popular with those aged 35-44 (90% reported using WhatsApp). Internet users aged 16-24, however, were more likely than average to use Snapchat (78%) and Instagram DM (76%) to communicate online.

There has been a decrease in FaceTime use in recent years, as 27% of online adults reported using it in 2024, compared to 31% in 2023 and 34% in 2022. This does not necessarily mean a decrease in adults making video calls but could also mean a migration to the video call functions on other apps. Use of FaceTime was more popular amongst female internet users; 32% of online adult women reported using Facetime to call others vs 23% of men. Results from Ofcom's Technology Tracker also show that, among internet users, women are more likely than men to make/receive video calls over the internet (87% vs 84%).[17]

There are generational and gender differences in UK adults' use of social media sites and apps

Nine in ten online adults use social media, which is consistent with recent years (89% in 2023 and 90% in 2022). Looking back over the last ten years, however, provides a clear picture of the overall increase in social media use since 2014. For example, when asked if they had a social media profile or account on any sites or apps, 72% of online adults said they did, and by 2019, that number had risen to 82%.

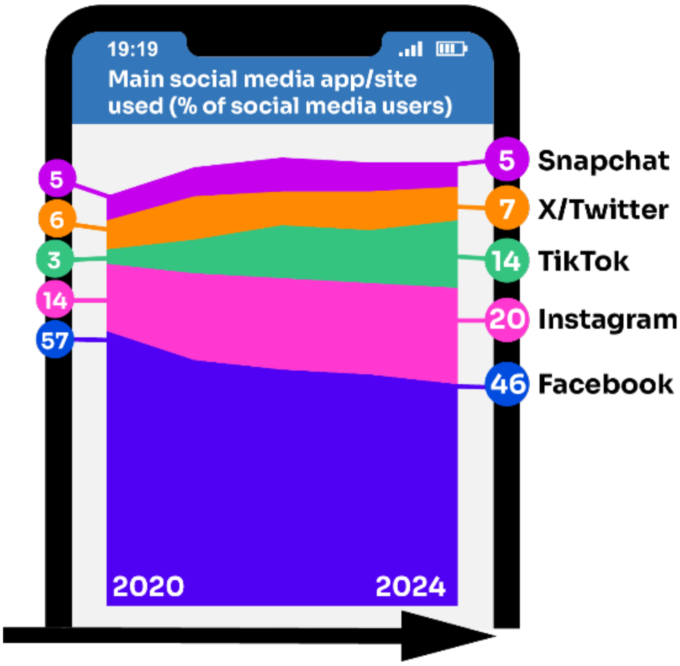


Three quarters of internet users aged 65+ use social media apps (75%), compared to nearly all internet users aged 16-24 (99%). Older generations are more likely to use Facebook exclusively, with 34% of those aged 65+ reporting it as their *only* social media platform, as opposed to 14% of all internet users.

Generational divides extend to which sites social media users reported as their 'main' social media app or site. Facebook is only reported as the main social media site for 25% of those aged 25-34,

[17] Ofcom, Technology Tracker, 2024.

even lower for 16-24-year-olds (6%), and is most popular for those aged 65+ (75% report it as their 'main' social media app). Instagram was most likely to be the main social media platform for those aged 25-34 (33%).



In 2024, TikTok was the most popular main app for those aged 16-24 (35%) and the main social media app for 14% of adult social media users, a higher proportion than in 2023 and 2022 (both 11%), highlighting the platform's continued growth in popularity in recent years.

There are also differences in social media platform use at the socio-economic group level. Those from DE households are more likely to list Facebook as their main site or app than those from AB households (57% vs 43%). Those from AB households were more likely to list Instagram as their main site or app than those from DE households (23% vs 12%).

Among our Adults' Media Lives sample, some previously heavy users of Facebook, X and Instagram described themselves as spending less time this year scrolling through their social media feeds, but TikTok appears to be an exception to this trend. More participants have started to use it, and existing users still claim to spend extended periods scrolling through videos.

> "I think the best one is probably also the worst one. It's probably TikTok, because that takes up too much time."
>
> Hazeem, 20

They are mostly viewing content posted by creators, rather than posts by friends and family, and relying on the algorithm of the TikTok feed as a convenient way of accessing content tailored to their interests. Young users in particular are also using it as a search engine.

> "So if I find myself in Thailand, in a hostel and I don't really know the area, I want something to do today, I want somewhere to go to eat, I want an activity to do, I probably would just type it into TikTok."
>
> Chloe, 24

Reasons for having multiple profiles on social media continue to vary

One in five internet users have more than one profile on a single online communication platform, which is consistent with recent years (21% in 2024, 20% in 2023 and 22% in 2022). Among those with multiple profiles, Instagram (45%) continues to be the most common site/app for this, followed by Facebook at 29% and TikTok at 25%.

The most common reason cited for having more than one profile on the same site or app was to have an account dedicated to a hobby, like cooking, reading or photography (37%). Those aged 25-34 were more likely than average to cite hobbies as their reason to have multiple profiles (44%) followed by having a separate account for promoting their business/business purposes (35%), compared to 29% of all adults with more than one profile.

The most common reason for 16-24-year-olds to have more than one profile on the same social media site or app was 'one for my closest friends and another for my wider circle of friends' (40% vs 31% of all adults). This suggests the continued popularity of so-called 'finstas' (short for 'fake Instagram'). These are secondary profiles used primarily by younger generations to share more 'authentic' content with a select group of friends, to allow for more control over social media interactions.

Younger adults are more active social media users, while older generations tend to be more passive

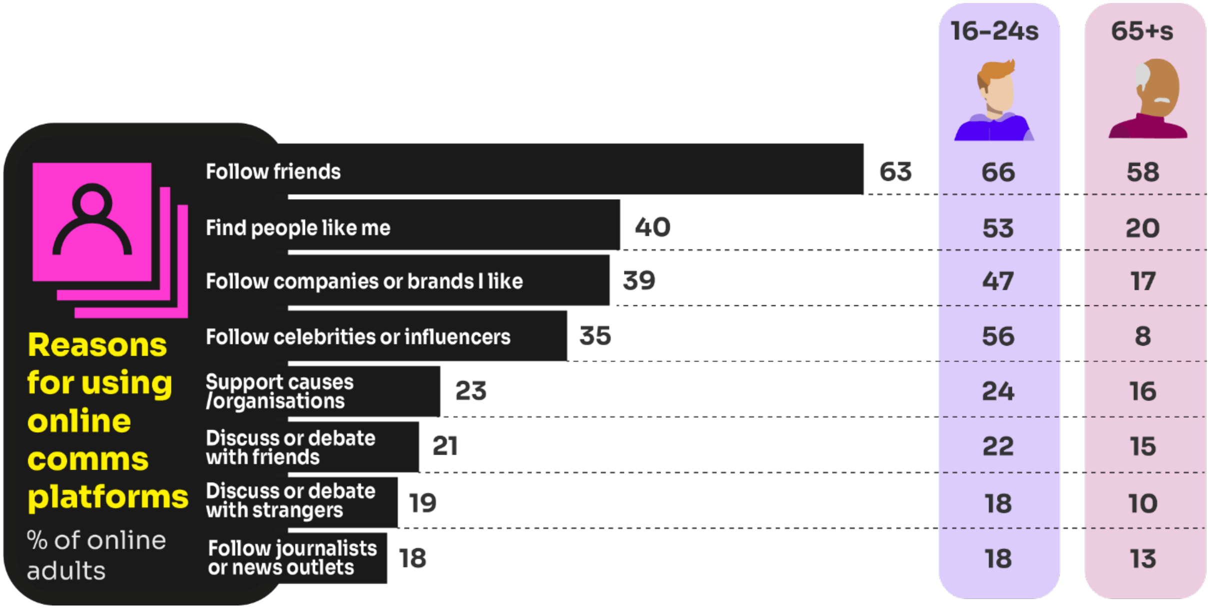
More than six in ten adults who go on social media sites, share, post or comment on them. The most common response for all social media users was that they '*sometimes* share, post or comment' on sites or apps, with around a third reporting that they do so (33%). In line with last year's findings, those aged 25-34 were more likely than average to '*often* share, post or comment' on social media sites or apps (40% do so compared to 29% of all social media users) alongside 16–24-year-olds (37%). Older generations were more likely to 'tend to *only* read things on these sites or apps and *rarely* like or post anything' (35% of those aged 65+).

Active engagement in social media was more common amongst those who use the internet to do a wider range of activities more generally. Broad internet users were more likely than any other type of internet user to report that they '*often* share, post or comment on social media sites or apps' (37% vs 29% of all internet users). Narrow internet users were more likely to '*just* like things on social media sites or apps' (26%) than broad internet users (17%) and were also more likely to '*only* read things' and '*rarely* like or post' (23% vs 11%).

Social media is now used for a variety of different activities

Social media can allow us to do many things: the most popular listed reasons for online communication platform users to use these sites/apps were to follow friends (63%), find people that 'are like me/that share my interests' (49%) and follow companies or brands they like (39%).

However, these reasons varied greatly by age. For example, those aged 16-24 (56%) were far more likely than adults over 65 years old (8%) to follow celebrities or influencers. Those aged 25-34 were consistently the most likely age group to discuss and debate on online social media platforms (40%) and were likely to support causes or sign petitions on social media (38%).



Social review sites have also grown in popularity in recent years, particularly with younger generations, although their overall use remains low.[18] Goodreads, a book reviewing social media platform, is used by 5% of 16-34-year-olds who go online, and Letterboxd, a film reviewing platform, is used by 4% of those aged 16-24 who go online.

In a politically eventful year of elections for both the UK (July 2024) and the US (November 2024), there has been a slight increase in adults reporting that they discuss and debate on social media apps from last year (30% from 26%). This increase is consistent for adults responding that they both discuss and debate with people they know and do not know on social media.

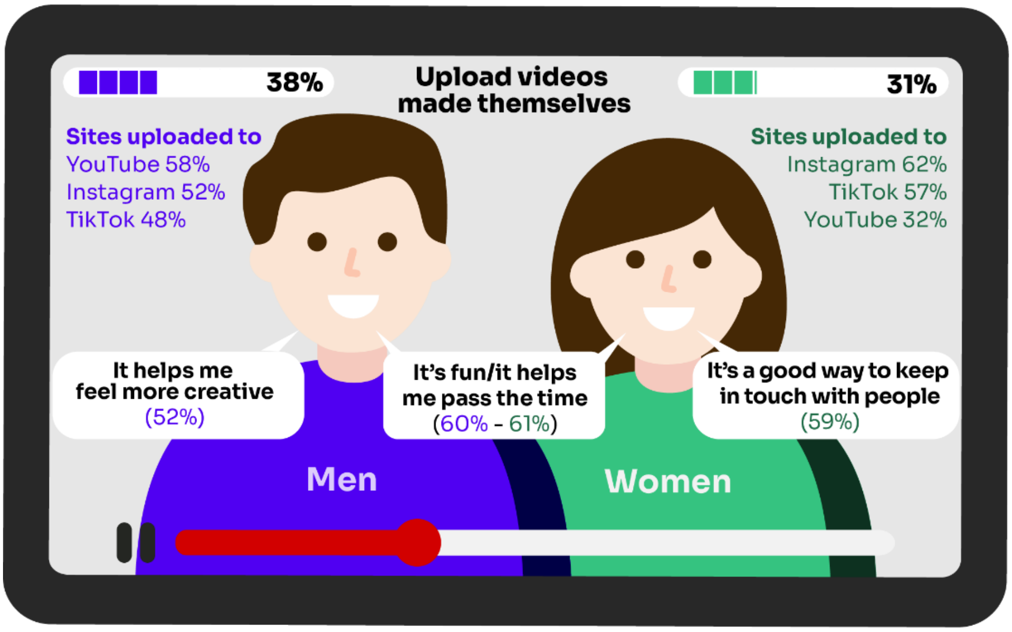
More people are uploading videos online that they have made themselves

Sites and apps used to watch or upload videos or clips remain popular with 92% of internet users reporting they use them. YouTube remains the most used video sharing platform, with just under eight in ten internet users said they watched videos on the platform in 2024 (78%) . Other popular sites or apps to watch videos were Facebook (50%), Instagram (48%) and TikTok (42%).

There has been a slight increase in recent years in internet users saying that they upload videos online that they have made themselves. In 2024, 35% of adult internet users uploaded their own videos online, compared to 31% in 2023 and 28% in 2022. Those from AB households were more likely to upload videos that they have made themselves online (42%) than those from DE households (27%). Uploading self-made videos is also most common among internet users aged 25-34 (60%), followed by those aged 16-24 (53%) and those aged 35-44 (46%).

Men are more likely than women to upload videos that they have made themselves online (38% vs 31%). About six in ten men who have uploaded videos they made to the internet do so to YouTube (58%), compared with around three in ten women (32%). The most popular platform for women to upload their own videos online was Instagram (62%).

[18] *'Readers, movie fans flock to apps like Goodreads, Letterboxd for cataloging, connection'*, Springfield News Letter: https://eu.news-leader.com/story/news/local/2024/08/24/goodreads-letterboxd-drawing-more-readers-movie-fans/74904304007/, Accessed 19th February 2025



Men and women also varied in their reasons for uploading their own video or livestreaming content online. Whilst both genders were equally likely to give 'It's fun/it helps pass the time' as a reason, men were more likely to say 'It helps me to feel creative' (52% vs 45%) and 'I like to be seen and heard online' (35% vs 29%) than women. Women were more likely to say that 'It's a good way to keep in touch with people' (59% vs 52%).

Gaming

Just over half of adults play games, with mobile phones continuing to be the most popular gaming device

Gaming refers to playing various types of games on devices like consoles, mobiles, computers or headsets, with some games requiring internet access while others can be played offline. Gaming habits vary significantly across different generations, genders and socio-economic groups. Overall, 53% of adults play games at home or elsewhere, but this figure is much higher among younger people, with 85% of 16-24-year-olds gaming compared to just 25% of those aged 65 and over. Men are slightly more likely to play games than women (57% vs. 50%), and gaming is also slightly more common among those from AB households (56%) compared to DE households (49%).

Mobile phones were the most popular gaming device, with 34% of adults playing games on their phones. Other popular devices to play games on were games consoles/players (24%), tablets (14%), laptops (12%) and desktop computers (11%). In 2024, more adults reported playing games on a desktop computer than in 2023 (increasing from 8% to 11%). Games consoles continued to be most popular with those aged 16-24 (52%), whilst 3% of those aged 65+ used them.

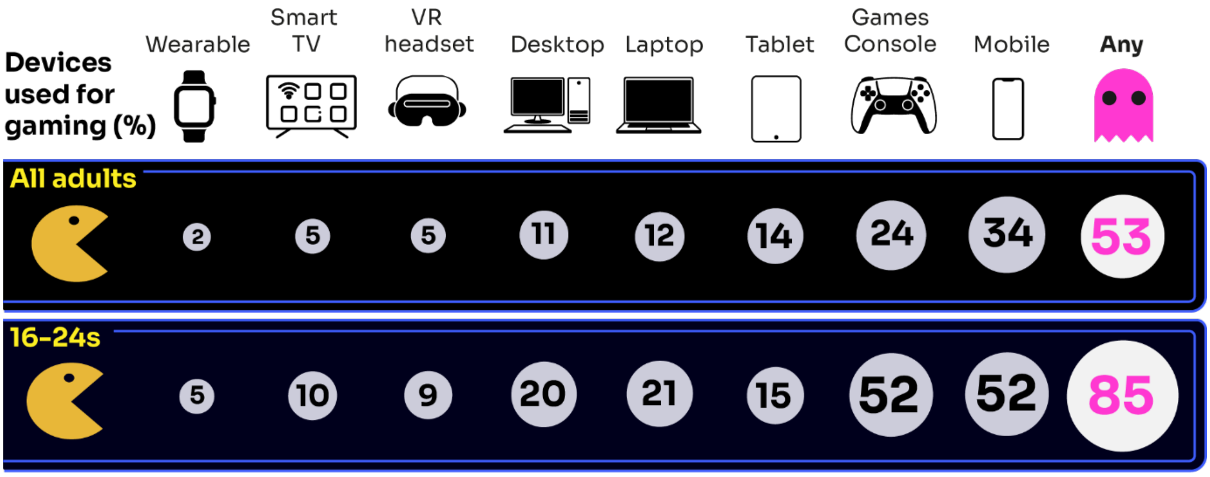
The number of adults gaming has gradually decreased over the last few years. In 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, gaming peaked, with three in five of adults reporting they played games (60%). The proportion of adults gaming dropped to 56% in 2022, 52% in 2023 and 53% in 2024. However, the number of adult gamers still remains higher than pre-pandemic levels, as 39% of adults reported that they played games 5 years ago, in 2019.

Of those who play games, just over six in ten reported that they play games online (63%). Gaming online offers various functions, one of which is to allow gamers to play with others online, be that friends or stranger. Those aged 16-24 were the most likely to do so, with 80% of gamers this age reporting that they play online, compared to 48% of gamers aged 65+. Online gaming was more popular in Northern Ireland than the UK average, with 81% of gamers in Northern Ireland playing games online.

Nearly six in ten adult gamers play puzzles and quizzes, with these games being especially popular among older generations

With mobile phones being the most popular gaming device, puzzles and quizzes such as Wordle, Sudoku, Candy Crush were the most popular types of games in 2024, 2023 and 2022. They were most popular amongst older age groups, with 80% of gamers aged 65+ playing puzzles or quizzes, compared to 40% of 16–24-year-olds. Other popular types of games to play were sports (played by 30% of adult gamers), action and adventure (29%), shooters (28%) and creative and building games (21%).

Those who play games from AB and DE households were similarly likely to play puzzle or quiz games (56% vs 62%). Those from AB households were more likely to play Sports (39% vs 21%), Action/Adventure (39% vs 25%) and Shooters games (34% vs 24%) than those from DE households. This may be explained by the fact that these types of games are typically played on games consoles, which were more likely to be used by those from AB households (27%) than those from DE households (19%).



Men are twice as likely to play via games consoles than women

Women and men were equally likely to play games on their mobile phone/smartphone (women 36%, men 33%). Games consoles saw the largest gender divide in its use, with 32% of men aged 16+ using them vs 16% of women. More men also played games using desktop computers, laptops and VR Gaming headsets than women did using these devices.

Women and men gamers also differed in the types of games they played in 2024. Women gamers were also more likely to play puzzles or quizzes (76% vs 43%) and men gamers were more likely to play Sports games (45% vs 14%), Action Adventure games (38% vs 20%) and Shooters games (41% vs 15%) than women. Gender differences in gaming experience extend to whether men and women play games with or against other people. 58% of women who play games online do so with or against other people, compared to 75% of men who play games online.

Three-quarters of those who play games say they are comfortable with the amount of time they spend playing, compared to only 15% who say they spend too much time gaming. Those aged 16-24 (19%) are more likely than average to feel they spend too long gaming.

WOMEN
MEN
50%
Play games on any device
57%
Play games on any device
Mobile 36%
Console 16%
Mobile 33%
Console 32%
29%
Play online
39%
Play online
Top 3 types played*
1. Puzzles or quizzes (76%)
2. Action/Adventure (20%)
3. Creative & building (20%)
*% of gamers
Top 3 types played*
1. Sports (45%)
2. Puzzles or quizzes (43%)
3. Shooters games (41%)
*% of gamers

Online attitudes and wellbeing

Introduction

The internet exposes adults to a range of different experiences. It can pose benefits, but also risks, and this chapter explores the balance of those, including how digital interactions influence mental health, social connectivity, and fulfilment. Media technology can also interplay with wellbeing – with the capacity to both help or hinder, subject to how it's being used and the content consumed.

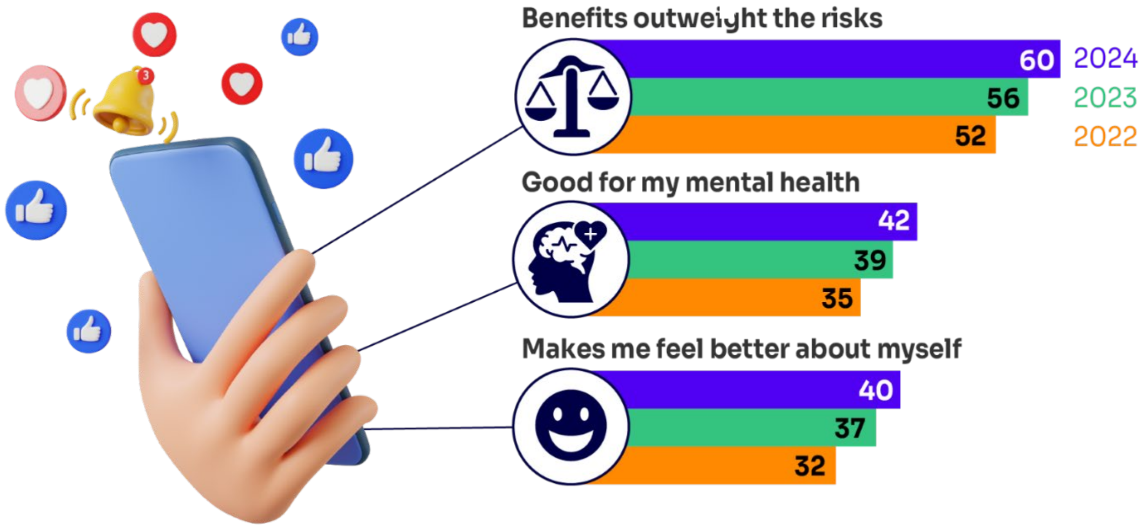
Benefits and risks

Perceptions of the benefits of online communication platforms have continued to increase

We have seen a continued increase this year in users feeling positive overall about the effects of online communication platforms. Six in ten users now feel the benefits of these platforms outweigh the risks, compared to around half (52%) in 2022, while only one in ten users feel the risks outweigh the benefits. Around four in ten (42%) users feel online communication platforms are overall beneficial for mental health, though this also represents an increase from 35% in 2022.

Alongside this, there has been a decrease in users feeling that people are mostly or always cruel to one another on these platforms, with 29% feeling this way in 2024 compared to 32% last year. This coincides with a similar proportion feeling that these platforms can make users feel better about themselves overall. Four in ten users feel that these platforms make them feel better about themselves, an increase from 32% in 2022. Additionally, people agree this year that using social media makes them feel more creative (43%) than in 2023 (39%).

Increasing perceptions of online communication platforms (% agree)



The increasing positivity about online communication platforms has been felt across all age groups and by both men and women. Those aged 65 or over (54%) and 55-64 (56%) remain the age groups least likely to feel the benefits outweigh the risks. However, over-65s have seen the biggest increase (12pp) since 2022. Broad internet users (73%) are much more likely to feel that the benefits outweigh the risks than narrow users (40%), and as over-65s are more likely to be narrow users this may explain why they are less likely to feel the full benefit of being online versus younger users.

Part of this positivity may be because of the use of the internet for wellbeing activities. This year, three-quarters (76%) of internet users said they went online for such purposes, with the top activities including using the internet to relax (40%) and to improve their mood or feel happy (31%). Adults aged 16-34 are the most likely age group to do these, with nine in ten (89%) doing at least one of the wellbeing activities we asked about,[19] compared to just over half (53%) of over-65s. There was also an increase in adults using the internet to improve their physical health this year, with more using the internet to look up health symptoms (35% vs. 32% in 2023), find out about healthy eating (28% vs. 26%) or follow a fitness programme (21% vs. 19%).

Media technology is playing an ever-increasing role in health, fitness and wellbeing for participants in our Adults' Media Lives study. Most now use some combination of smartphones, smart watches and apps to monitor their health and/or support them in their fitness goals and a few described themselves using apps in different ways to support their mental health.

> "I hired a coach and she programmes all of my workouts and they just get uploaded onto this app so I can see what I have to do."
>
> Chloe, 24

> "Do you know the wee colouring apps you can get on the iPad. It's just like colour-by-numbers. I like to do one of them when I come home from work, because it just helps me forget about work and then gets me ready for getting ready for bed."
>
> Brigit, 24

Another factor that may be leading towards a more positive view is the increasing acceptance of content recommendation algorithms. Algorithms are systems which personalise users' experiences online, for example on social media feeds, in part dictated by users' personal data that is held by the platform. While it remains the minority view, more than a third (36%) of online adults now feel comfortable with apps and websites' use of algorithms, compared to 31% last year. This means more adults are now comfortable with algorithms than are uncomfortable with them (32%).

However, men are more likely to feel these benefits than women

Men who go online (63%) are more likely to believe that the benefits of using online communication platforms outweigh the risks than women who go online (56%).

Some of this difference may be driven by the different social pressures between men and women. For example, women (35%) are less likely to feel that using online communication platforms make them feel better about themselves than men (45%). Women (49%) are also more likely to feel there is pressure to be popular on these platforms than men (46%).

The difference may also relate to the different ways in which men and women tend to use social media. Women (31%) are more likely than men (23%) to say they spend too much time on social media. However, women tend to be more passive users of social media than men. While 63% of men

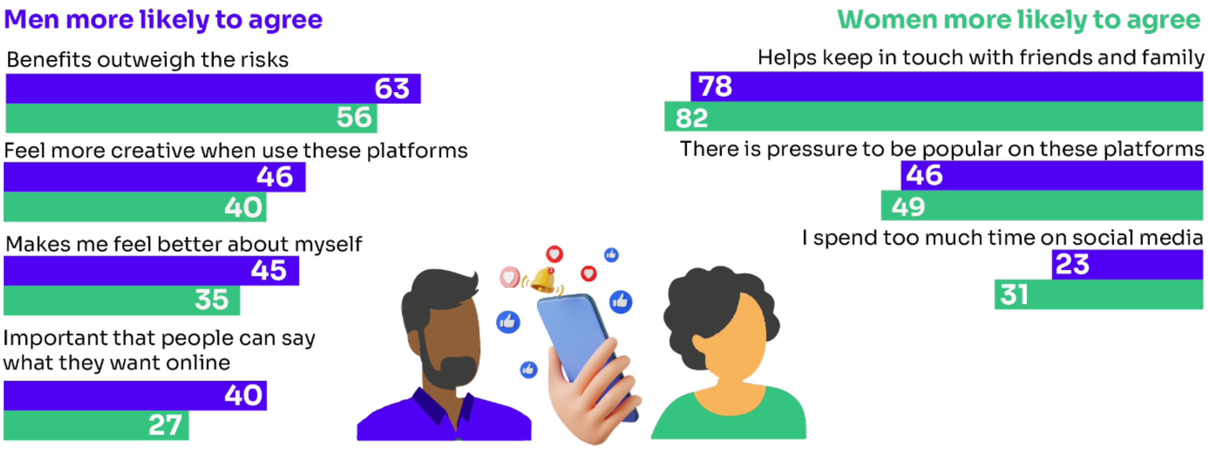
[19] The full list of online wellbeing and health activities we asked about were: 1. relax, 2. look up health symptoms, 3. improve your mood/feel happy, 4. healthy eating/nutrition, 5. follow fitness programme/health tracker, 6. get support when feeling unhappy/anxious/worried, 7. sleep, 8. feel energised, 9. meditate.

claim to often or sometimes share, post or comment on social media, this compares to 59% of women, who are more likely to just ‘like’ or read things. Men (38%) are also more likely to upload their own videos than women (31%). Perhaps this is also a factor in men (46%) being more likely than women (40%) to say that they feel more creative when they use social media.

Men and women feel differently about freedom of expression online. Men (40%) are far more likely than women (27%) to feel that it is important that people can say what they want online even if it is controversial or hurtful to others. Similarly, women (83%) are more likely to feel that internet users must be protected from seeing inappropriate or offensive content than men (74%). This is important as according to our Online Experiences Tracker, a quarter (26%) of online adults have come across hateful, offensive or discriminatory content online in the last four weeks.[20] Men aged 18+ (27%) are slightly more likely than women (24%) to have encountered these types of content.

One area in which women are more positive than men about the internet, however, is for keeping in touch with personal contacts. Women (82%) are more likely than men (78%) to agree that using online communication platforms help them keep in touch with friends and family. Women (82%) are more likely than men (76%) to use multiple sites/apps for messaging and calling.

Perceptions of online communication platforms, men vs. women (% agree)



Adults’ Media Lives participants had many positive things to say about the evolution of media, but change was not seen as universally positive

To mark the twentieth year of the study, Adults’ Media Lives participants were asked to reflect on the evolution of media over the period of the study which began in 2005. Perceived benefits of media evolution include choice of a wide range of content and services and convenience, which in turn has led to the opportunity for greater personalisation of media choices, and access to more diverse interest-specific content. Improved communication with friends and family was another perceived benefit, as was the ability to stay in touch with people (e.g. university friends) with whom contact would previously have been lost.

> “It’s a different way of life now, isn't it? Everything's at your fingertips, from ordering shopping that arrives in five minutes, to booking holidays without having to go to a travel agent, to making phone calls wherever you are… And also things like recording memories… I remember my

[20] Ofcom, Online Experiences Tracker, Wave 6 (2024).

Bamps had a big sort of movie camera when we were kids, and he'd have it on his shoulder. Now you've got your little phone and it's better quality than anything."

Denise, 47

"I was actually speaking to my granny about it and she was saying that she would just lose touch with people. If you didn't write letters to them, you would lose touch. There's so many people that she said that she would have still been friends with if it had been this easy to stay in touch with them. Even things like having someone on Instagram that you went to university with and seeing them get a new job and getting in touch. It's all levels of it."

Jenny, 31

Media technology has also proved to be empowering in various ways to some of our sample. For one, getting to grips with technology has allowed her to build her own identity independent of a series of difficult relationships with controlling partners. Another has been able to build a career tutoring students all over the world from the comfort of his own home. This career wouldn't have been available to him before the growth in video-conferencing technology (particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic).

"Skype, Zoom and Teams… I will use one of those every single day… which for my work has been amazing because it means I can work with kids in the US and Hong Kong and Singapore, and it also means I can go to Singapore but I don't have to take a month off."

Robert, 28

However, there are also several perceived downsides. Due to the rate of change, participants remarked that it has become increasingly difficult to keep up with technology. This includes the risk of losing cherished memories through storage technology/platforms becoming redundant. It has also become more dangerous being a media consumer, because of the risk of exposure to online harm and scams. Some participants considered lack of privacy to be a problem and younger participants in particular expressed concern that their digital footprint might cause problems for them in the future. Another social media-related downside was anxiety caused by the perceived need to keep up with others, or portray an idealised version of themselves. Additionally, one negative effect of the personalisation of media choices has been some fragmentation of family life with less time spent consuming content together.

"It is very easy to find out everything about people if you really want to. Yeah. It obviously it can be dangerous. Your digital footprint as well. You know, once it's out there it's out there and it will follow you for the rest of your life. And obviously when you're younger, you're more naive. You can do things or say things... You see a lot of people now getting cancelled for things that they've said ten years ago."

Brigit, 24

“Living for others. Your whole aesthetic... Not so much for me, but nobody can say that they've not been impacted by it to some level... Comparing yourself to others.”

Jenny, 21

“We won't be probably as family-orientated as we used to. Now it's like everyone comes in and everyone’s just sitting on a device because it's like mindless activity and that's how everyone cuts off.”

Suki, 47

Digital exclusion and device use

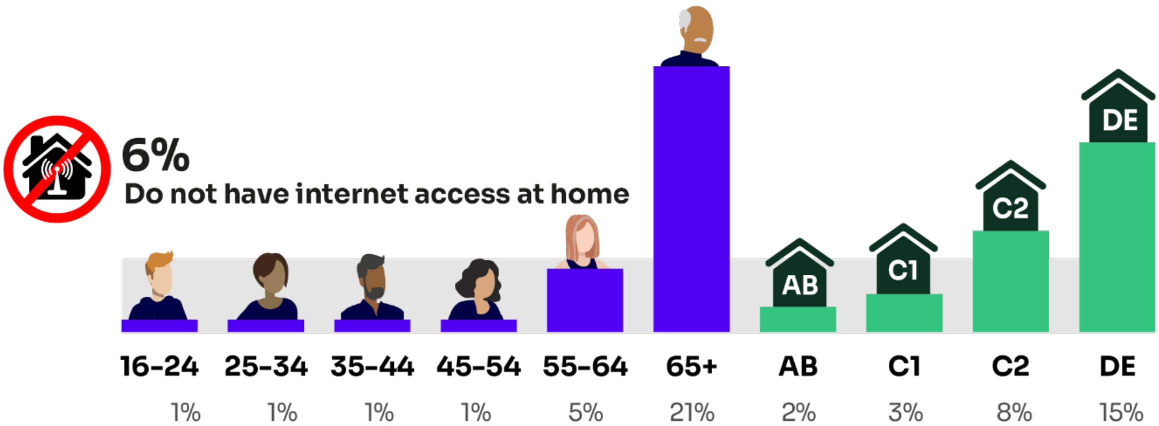
Introduction

Digital services continue to shape daily life, and while many people are well-connected with the online world, some individuals and groups face barriers because of lack of internet access and lack of digital skills. Monitoring digital exclusion is vital to understanding these barriers and how they can be addressed so that everyone can participate in an increasingly digital society. Ofcom's recently published Digital Disadvantage report explores this topic in more detail.[21]

Internet access

Internet access levels remained steady in 2024

Internet access has remained steady over the last few years, with 6% of adults continuing to not have access to the internet at home in 2024.[22] Looking at the longer-term trend, this marks a decrease from ten years ago, when 18% of adults did not have access to the internet in their homes. The Covid-19 pandemic was a significant driver of increased home internet access, with a significant uplift during 2020, and this proportion has remained consistent since then.



As with previous years, adults aged 75+ were the most likely age group not to have access to the internet in 2024 (32%), and a further 8% of adults aged 75+ had access at home but did not use it. 15% of adults in DE households did not have access to the internet at home, compared to only 2% of AB households.

[21] Ofcom, Exploring Digital Disadvantage, 2025.
[22] Both Ofcom's Adults' Media Literacy Tracker and Technology Tracker found that 94% of UK adults have access to the internet at home. While the Adults' Media Literacy Tracker had 6% of adults reporting not having internet at home, for the Technology Tracker this figure was only 5% due to 1% of respondents answering "don't know".

A majority of those without access to the internet reported having no interest or not seeing the need to go online

In 2024, 81% of those without home access to the internet reported simply not being interested or not needing to go online as their reason for not having access to the internet. The fact that the proportion of non-internet users has remained consistent since the pandemic (6%) suggests there remain some individuals who are choosing to stay offline and have not had motivation to change this since 2021. This sentiment is reflected in the fact that three quarters (76%) of those who do not go online at home reported that nothing would prompt them to go online in the next 12 months.

However, some have other reasons for being offline. One in five (21%) non said that it being too complicated was a reason for not being online, higher than the proportion who said cost was a reason (14%) or that they had concerns about being online (14%).

Ofcom's 'Digital Disadvantage' research included qualitative depth interviews with people who were very light internet users, or non-users, and the research touched on their reasons for being mostly or entirely offline.[23] The report found that people who made lower or no use of the internet did so for reasons ranging from personal preference, to not having sufficient help to get online, to cost or logistical difficulties getting connected.

> "I just haven't time to, you know, to start bothering to bother with it. I think that that's part of it. I'm so busy. I mean, I'm 85 years old and probably domestically busier than I've been all my life."
>
> Ian, 85

> "Why do I need internet? I have a good life."
>
> Indeela, 78

More than half of internet users have helped someone else do something online

Of the respondents who do go online, just over half reported that they have helped someone do something online that they were unable to do for themselves in the past 12 months (54%). More than four in ten (43%) of those that do not go online at home had asked someone else to do something for them in the past year. In fact, 16% of those without internet access at home reported 'someone else can go online for me if necessary' as their reason for not going online at home, indicating a reliance on proxy internet use amongst some offline adults.

> "I did have a problem with my landline, they were making me wait [on the phone]. So my friend helped me, they emailed, and they help me if I need. So it's nice to have a friend who has all these mod cons."
>
> Indeela, 78

Among those proxy internet users, shopping was the most common reason to ask someone else to go online for them (56%), followed by access to online health services (31%) and applying or claiming some type of benefit (22%).

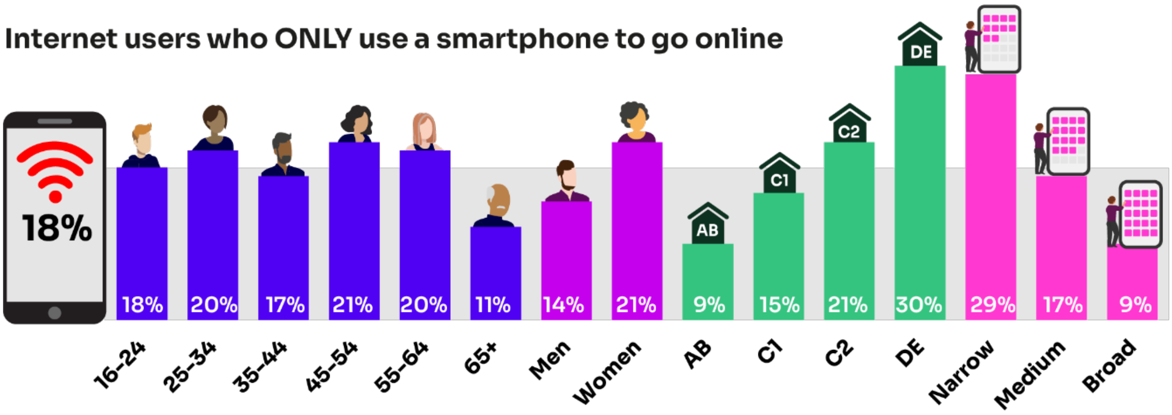
[23] Ofcom, Exploring Digital Disadvantage, 2025.

The support of others to help navigate the online world is also important for those who are online. If internet users were stuck or unsure about how to do something, just under half of them said that they would ask a friend or a family member for help (48%). This was especially the case for adults aged 65+, as 62% reported that they would ask a family or friend to help, compared with 40% of 16-24-year-olds. Other more independent techniques for resolving their issues included just over half of adults reporting that they would look online for help (or 'Google it') and a third saying they would figure it out themselves.

Device use

Nearly one in five adults who go online do so only on a smartphone

Understanding how digital exclusion can manifest in multiple ways and affect people is important in a world in which everyday tasks are increasingly completed online. Around one in five (18%) of adults who go online do so only on a smartphone, not on any other device. This proportion has been stable now for a few years, but has increased since 2019, when 12% of adults were smartphone-only online users. Those aged 16-64 were equally likely to go online using only a smartphone, whilst those aged 65+ were the least likely of all adults to do so.



One factor in relying on solely a smartphone to go online could be the cost of other devices such as a PC or tablet. Among adults in a DE household, 30% reported only going online on a smartphone, compared to only 9% of those in AB households.

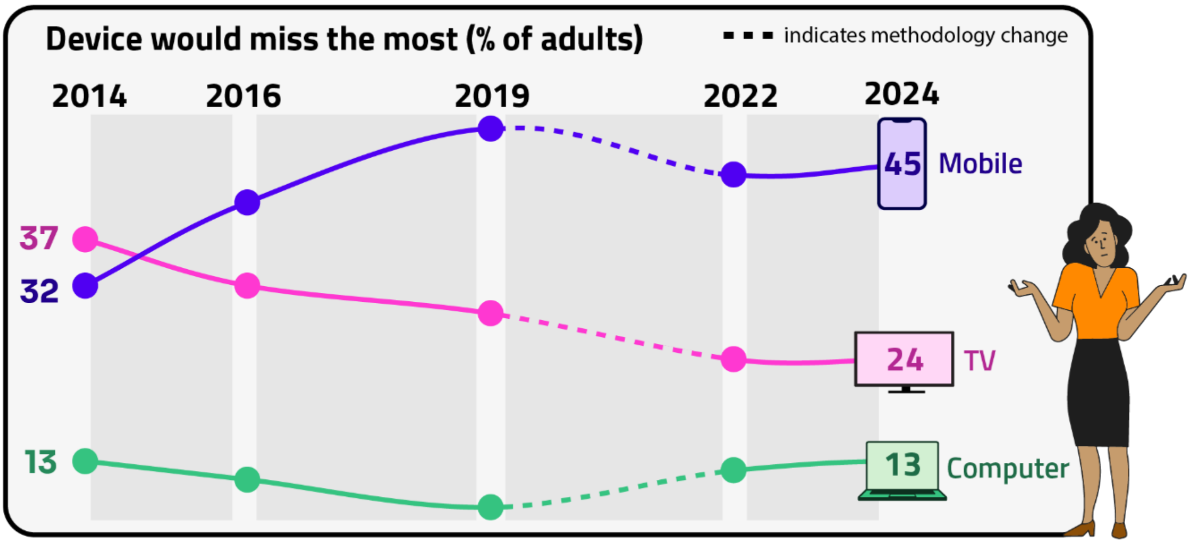
Some adults who only use a smartphone to go online reported difficulties with certain online activities. In 2024, 49% of these users said they struggled to complete forms on a smartphone compared to doing so on a laptop or PC, while 35% agreed that it was difficult to compare products or services. These tasks are common among smartphone-only users, with 90% of them reporting completing forms or applications on their smartphone ever, and 23% doing so at least weekly. Despite these challenges, in 2024, around three quarters of adults who use a smartphone only to go online reported never feeling disadvantaged by it (74%).

UK adults' most cherished device has changed over the last twenty years

In 2014, UK adults aged 16+ were more likely to report that they would miss their TV set, if it was taken away, more than their mobile phone (37% vs 32%). Despite methodological changes since, we can see this was very different by 2024, when 45% of adults said that they would miss their mobile phone the most, compared to 24% reporting that they would miss their television set the most.

What has remained consistent is the generational differences observed in which device UK adults would miss the most. In 2005, when 16-24-year-olds were asked what they would miss *doing* the most, their most reported answer was using a mobile phone (28%), compared to 10% of all adults. In the same year, those aged 65+ were most likely to report missing watching television the most (52% compared to 22% of 16-24-year-olds).

In 2014, there was a change in the wording of the question we asked. We shifted our focus from asking about the activity to asking about the device, because of the way that people were increasingly accessing "TV" in multiple ways. Those aged 16-24 reported that they were most likely to miss their mobile phone the most if it was taken away (59%), and adults aged 55+ were more likely to miss their TV set than their mobile phone (57% vs 6%). In 2024, those aged 16-24 were still most likely to miss their mobile phones the most (63%), and adults aged 65+ were more likely to miss their TV set than their mobile phone as well (49% vs 17%).



In 2024, those from AB households were more likely than those from DE households to miss their mobile phone or smartphone (47% vs 38%). Those from DE households were more likely to miss their television sets the most (32%) than those from AB households (18%). There was also a slight difference in which device men and women would miss the most. More women than men reported that they would miss their phone or smartphone the most (50% vs 40%). Conversely, more men than women reported that they would miss their games console the most if it was taken away (5% vs 2%).

When Adults' Media Lives participants were asked which media device, platform or service has had the single greatest impact on their life over the course of their involvement with the twenty-year-old study, the majority chose the smartphone. They praised it as a device which is powerful, convenient, and has changed the way in which content is packaged and the way in which we interact with society, institutions and the world around us. Most are now heavily dependent on them.

> "The key thing, I think, was the invention of the iPhone, which then just pushed a whole load of different content to you wherever you are... The things that you consume, the way that you can see it, we're going to get more and more aligned to this device."
>
> Dai, 45