

Understanding adults' experiences of using online communities

24th June 2026

Foreword from Ofcom (1 of 2)

This report sets out the findings from our research into UK adults' experiences of, and opinions about, online communities.¹ This mixed methods research explored how online services can support flourishing in online communities through design, governance and community features, not just content moderation. Our aim in conducting this research was to understand more about what users of online communities gain from them, where they encounter problems, and which service levers help or harm participation and wellbeing.

Why Ofcom carried out this research

We have statutory duties to promote, and to carry out research into, media literacy under the Communications Act 2003.² The Online Safety Act 2023 ('OSA') expands our existing media literacy duties. Amongst other things, it requires us to build public awareness about a range of media literacy and online safety issues, and to encourage the development and use of technology and systems that provide protection to online users.

Our [media literacy strategy](#) sets out our desire to better understand how users think platforms can promote their media literacy, so that they can protect themselves, function and flourish online. This research project delivers against our media literacy duties by examining how adults who use online communities are impacted by persuasive design and platform design more broadly, and by exploring what those users expect from services to support positive experiences in online communities.

This research was commissioned and conducted prior to the government consultation, [Growing up in the Online World](#), and the announcement of the outcome. The findings should be read in this context. The views expressed are those of the participants and not of Ofcom or YouGov.

¹ See slides 5 and 61 for further context about online communities

² Ofcom's statutory duties to promote, and to carry out research into, media literacy are set out in sections 11(1A) and 14(6) of the Communications Act 2003. Section 15 of the Communications Act 2003 requires Ofcom to publish the results of research it conducts under section 14.

Foreword from Ofcom (2 of 2)

What ‘persuasive design’ means in this research

Persuasive design refers to the design features of an online service that can influence user behaviour. Examples of the behaviour that can be influenced include making a purchase, signing up for a service, increasing engagement, or viewing support materials or safety settings. These features are often distinct from, but can be embedded within, core usability elements of service design intended primarily to enable access and navigation, such as filters, login processes and information architecture. In this report, we use the term ‘persuasive design’ as a way of describing the various elements of service design that were discussed in the research as shaping participants’ experiences of online communities. The term persuasive design was not used with participants during recruitment or fieldwork.

Service responsibility for user safety

While empowering children and adults to make more informed choices and have more control over their online experiences is an important element of improving users’ experiences online, we are clear that when it comes to protecting all users from illegal content and children from content that is harmful to them, regulated services are responsible. Under their duties in the OSA, regulated services must, among other things, address the risk of harm identified in their most recent illegal content and children’s risk assessment for the service. Our [Illegal Content](#)³ and [Protection of Children Codes of Practice](#) set out recommended measures that providers of regulated services can take to protect users and meet their duties under the OSA.

³ There are some additional duties on some categorised services (category 1 services specifically), which are some of the most widely used online services in the UK. Those services that are required to offer features that help adult users control how likely they are to see specific categories of content – suicide, self-harm, eating disorder and hate and abuse content that is not illegal – on their service and have more control over who they can interact with.

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Background, definition and objectives

By online communities we mean: groups of people who have a shared interest or purpose, interacting on a digital platform under shared rules/norms, at a meaningful scale (more than a handful of friends), including forums and local groups, and enabling interaction with people not known offline.*

- *This research project aimed to explore and understand how online services can support adult users to flourish in online communities. It sought to explore what adult users value about online communities, any problems they encounter online within them, and what tools/levers could be used to improve the experience of community members. **The focus was therefore on how online services can support flourishing online through design, governance and community features, not just content moderation.***
- **Research objectives**
 - *Understand what adult users gain from online communities.*
 - *Determine what adult users don't enjoy about their communities (content, behaviour, norms/governance), and explore with them how services can (i) foster healthy communities and (ii) disrupt pathways into harmful ones.*
 - *To gather suggested recommendations for service design and governance from users of online communities.*

* Throughout all stages of the research, participants were reminded of this definition such that responses and discussions focused on online communities specifically, rather than broader use of online services.

Note: Where platforms are mentioned in this report, the views are those of the participants and not of Ofcom or YouGov. Specific platforms were only discussed in the qualitative research if they were brought up by participants.

Methodology

Quant

- An online survey of UK adults (18+) exploring how many people take part in online communities, the benefits and barriers they experience, and how different service features can affect use. The findings were also used to inform the qualitative phase.
- **Sample:** n=2,448 UK adults 18+, nationally representative by age, gender and nation/region who had ever used an online community; quotas for social grade and education, and 650 respondents who had never used an online community based on natural fallout.
- **Length:** ~10 minutes (online interviews).
- **Fieldwork:** Delivered via YouGov's online panel/omnibus
- **Fieldwork dates:** 13 -15 November 2025

Qual

Qualitative Stage 1:

- **A 2-day digital community**, hosted on the Recollective platform, with **59 UK adults (18+)**, that also participated in the quantitative survey. All adults had used an online community in the last 12 months. Day 1 covered the different online communities they were members of and likes/dislikes. Day 2 covered the benefits and downsides of online communities and their attitudes towards rules and rule-breaking.

Fieldwork dates: 15 - 16 January 2026

Qualitative Stage 2:

- **6 x 90-minute text-based focus groups were carried out with 49 UK adults** that also participated in the 2-day community. The focus groups explored what an 'ideal' online community looked like to them – including what tools, functions, rules and guidelines it would have and how it would respond to specific scenarios.

Fieldwork dates: 19 - 21 January 2026

Key findings



1 Use of online communities

- **Usage of online communities is prevalent in the UK** – 71% of UK adults say they used an online community in the last 12 months, with many of these users engaging across multiple types of communities (72%).
- **Passive ‘consumption-led’ behaviour (e.g. reading content posted by others) is almost universal among current users of online community, while more active forms of use (e.g. moderation or posting creative content) are less common** – Reading (98%) and reacting (89%) are the most common activities users have ever done, whereas 48% have ever posted creative content such as videos and memes. Our qualitative findings suggest that posting can be more selective and often tied to communities that feel personal or supportive, or which offer practical advice (e.g. local communities and/ or communities focused on health support).
- **Half of current users report visiting local neighbourhood groups in the last year, with over 7 in 10 using multiple community types** – Among current users of online communities, younger adults are more likely than average to report being part of entertainment/fan and/or gaming communities, while older adults were more likely to report belonging to neighbourhood communities. 16-24s appear more likely to gravitate towards entertainment / fan (24% vs. 11% total) and gaming (21% vs. 10% total) communities, while those aged 55+ appear to favour neighbourhood communities (32% vs. 20% total) as their most used online community.
- **Online community users say their social media feed was the most frequent route to their discovery of their most-used online community (24%) followed by recommendations (18%)** – Qualitative insights suggest that once users are in an online community, they tend to stay when communities are well moderated, welcoming and focused, however, poor community tone or lack of rule enforcement can trigger users to leave.

Key findings



2 Perceived benefits of online communities

- **For many users, online communities deliver social and emotional value** – When given a list of potential benefits of being in an online community, users report getting advice and support (39%), feeling a part of something (36%) and feeling a greater enjoyment of interests and passions (32%) as the most common answers.
- **Support and advice were seen as important in driving repeated use** – Our qualitative findings show that many participants see their online communities as sources of reassurance and/ or motivation and, for some, they are a place to find reliable, crowd-sourced knowledge that they may struggle to access offline. Our qualitative insights also indicate that participants consider constructive feedback and kindness within online communities to be a central element in creating a positive cycle that encourages long-term participation.
- **A positive, well-moderated tone is central to enjoyment** – In the qualitative studies, most users emphasised that their online communities are often low toxicity environments, unlike other online spaces (e.g. social media platforms more broadly). Clear rules (e.g. no politics, stay on topic) were seen by many to help to maintain a welcoming atmosphere, although this feeling was more commonly reported in smaller, niche communities.

Key findings



3 Participants' concerns around online communities

- **Some users described how minor irritations can accumulate and degrade community experience** – Qualitative research indicated that repetitive postings, off-topic drift and dismissive replies can contribute to negative experiences. These behaviours were not seen as always harmful individually, but users told us that when continued, it can lead them to disengage if they become common.
- **Negative behaviours can be triggers for leaving online communities** – The qualitative research also suggested that when moderators fail to intervene, bullying, harassment or toxic content can result in members leaving the community. Most online community users in the qualitative studies expected moderators to uphold standards and take swift actions; and, if and when they did not do so, communities were seen to be at risk of becoming unsafe and unwelcoming.
- **Around a third of current online community users (32%) said they experienced uncomfortable, upsetting or negative feelings when using online communities** – Certain groups were more likely to report having negative experiences than others. For example, younger users (38% of 18-24s vs 32% for age 25+), LGBTQ+ respondents (43% vs 31% for respondents identifying as heterosexual) and people with health conditions or disabilities (those limited by health issues/disability 48% vs 28% among those who say they do not feel limited).

Key findings



4 Community rules and guidelines

- **Most users of online communities were aware of community rules that users were meant to abide by, but many did not feel that they were consistently enforced** – 81% of users say they were aware that their most-used community had some kind of rules or guidelines in place, with content (71%) and behavioural (68%) rules the most commonly recognised as ‘formal rules’. In the qualitative research, many users noted that they had seen instances of rule-breaking, often with little perceived consequence.
- **Reporting systems were perceived by some users to be confusing and ineffective** – Among the 23% of current users who had reported someone in the 12 months prior to fieldwork, 60% said that *something* happened as a result. Among this group, the highest proportion (31%) said content was removed. The second most common result of reporting someone was receiving a notification/written update (20%). However, among those who had reported someone and seen a response to their report, this was seen as the least effective result of reporting (with 51% claiming that it was not effective). Just over a quarter of users who reported someone in this period (27%) also said that *nothing* happened after their most recent report. This was also reflected in qualitative findings where reporting was described by one participant as feeling like “a black hole”.

Key findings



5 Findings relating to design features

- **Nearly all users identified at least one potential downside associated with online communities** – From the qualitative phase, common concerns were raised about excessive time spent online, echo-chamber effects and being overwhelmed by constant notifications in large or highly active communities. Some users noted that design choices (e.g. infinite scroll or push content) could exacerbate these issues. In the qualitative study, users felt platform design was vital in making navigating online communities easy and enjoyable, however **autoplay and infinite scroll** were viewed negatively, and seen as features that kept users on the platform without adding real value.
- **When current users were presented with a list of tools or options and asked which would improve their experience of online communities, tools allowing greater control and moderation were the most popular** – Tools to block/mute disruptive users (29%), stronger moderation (27%), easier reporting (24%) and customisable content (24%) are the top improvements these users selected, and in each case this was more likely than average among those users who had experienced discomfort in their online communities.
- **Participants in our focus groups indicated that the ‘ideal’ online community should prioritise safety, transparency and user autonomy** – Users cited active moderation with clear consequences, fact-checking mechanisms, structured navigation and personalisation options that support wellbeing rather than maximise use time as key to their ‘ideal’ online community.
- **Users in our focus groups mentioned a range of specific design features when discussing their ‘ideal’ online community** – This included tools to support new community members; structured navigation; built-in platform tools to support consistent and fair moderation; temporary muting and suspension; user-controlled feed personalisation; and built-in fact-checking/source prompts.

Notes for the report

All participants names in the report have been removed.

Age bands and the type of online community user are included alongside verbatim quotations to provide context.

The appendix includes further details about the sample frame for the quantitative and qualitative research phase.

'Users', or current users of online communities:

Respondents who say they have used an online community in the last 12 months

Former users of online communities:

Respondents who say they have used an online community in the past but not in the last 12 months.

Never used online communities:

Respondents who say they have never used an online community.

Findings in the report that are exclusively derived from the quantitative research are marked with this icon:

Quantitative findings

Throughout the report we refer to several sub-groups in order to deepen analysis.

Findings in the report that are exclusively derived from qual and quant samples are marked with this icon:

Quantitative and Qualitative findings

Findings in the report that are exclusively derived from the qualitative research are marked with this icon:

Qualitative findings

Evidence from the qualitative phases (digital community, focus groups) are presented in the form of quotations, attributed by the users' age range and how they engage with their online community platforms.

A 'moderator' was defined as any user that moderated content on an online community platform, a 'frequent poster' as those who post comments, join in with debates and/or post creative content at least once a week, and a 'passive user' as those who read conversations/threads and/or react to conversations/threads only.

1 Use of online communities

Covering:

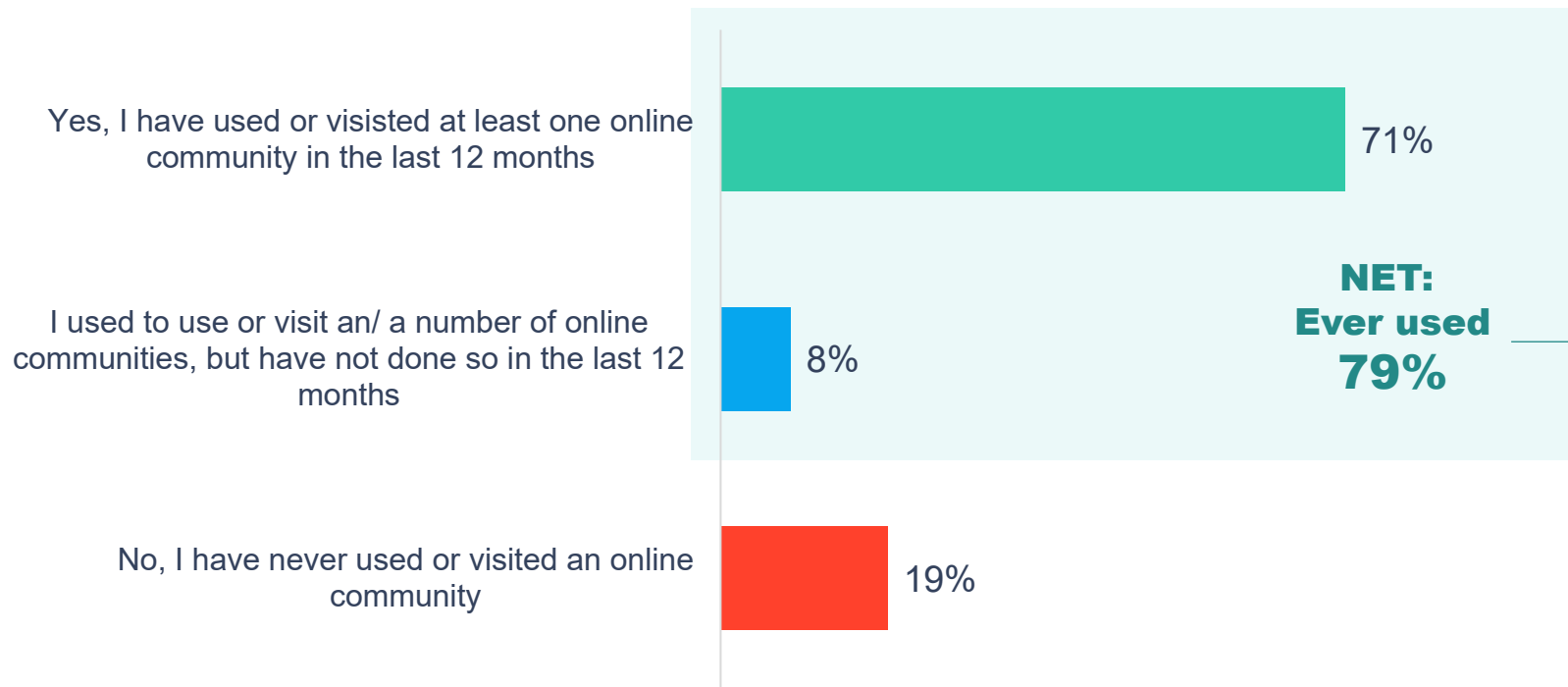
The proportion of respondents who currently or formerly use online communities

How respondents use online communities

Types of online community accessed

Nearly eight in ten adults have ever visited an online community and seven and ten have done so in the last 12 months

Online community use



"[I'm part of] lots of local neighbourhood, community groups... I'm also a member of a few nature-focused groups, both local and national that I joined looking for information." (35-54, frequent poster)

"The community is so creative and I love seeing the incredible art that gets posted every day." (18-34, frequent poster)

Significantly higher vs. total (95% level) :
 LGBTQ+ - (86%)
 High household income (84%)
 ABC1 (83%)
 Working Full Time (81%)

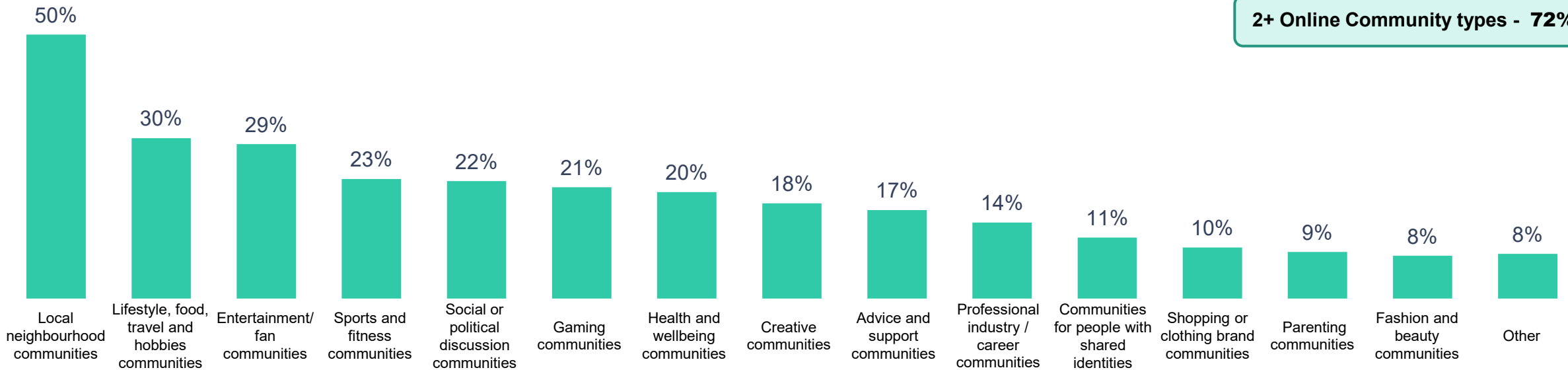
Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative [Q1] Do you or have you ever used or visited an online community or communities? Base: All respondents n = 3,098, LGBTQ+ n = 363, High household income n = 973 , ABC1 n = 1,781, Working full time n = 1,366

Half of current users report visiting local neighbourhood groups in the last year, with over 7 in 10 using multiple community types

Types of online communities used

1 Online Community type - 28%

2+ Online Community types - 72%



Community choice is often influenced by age –

- 18-24s favour gaming (41%) entertainment / fan (53%) and creative (30%) communities
- 55+ are significantly more likely to use local neighbourhood communities (64%)

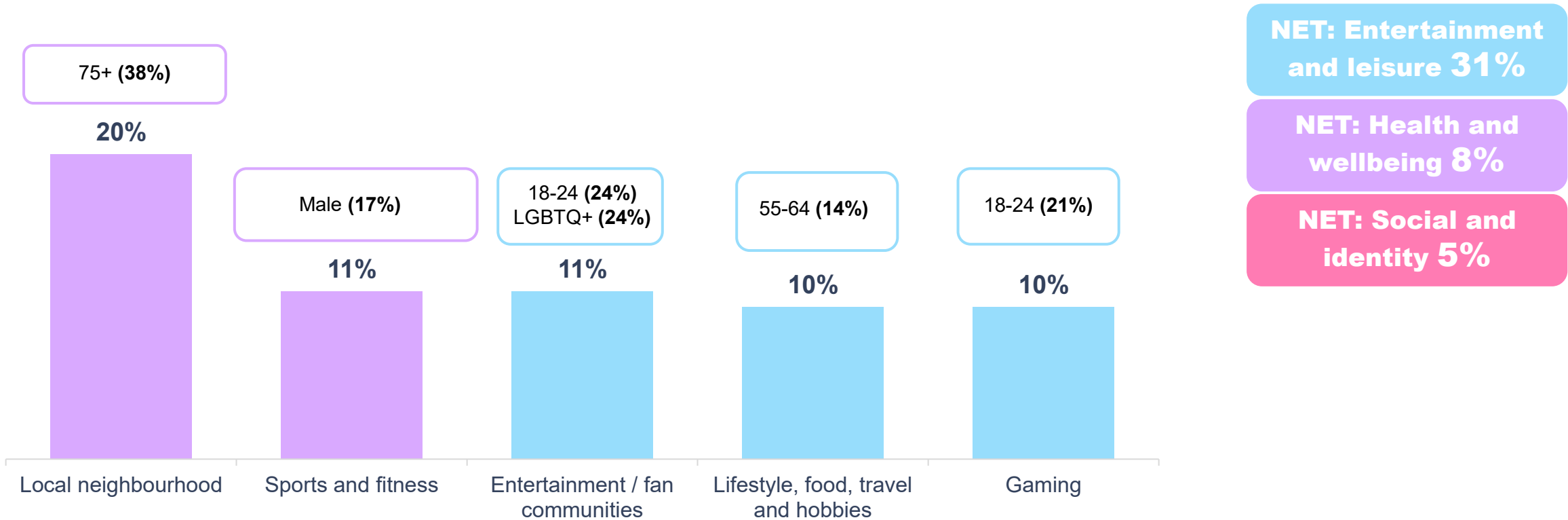
Identity and circumstance shape more niche communities–

- LGBTQ+ users are more likely to use creative (29%), shared identities (35%) and advice/support (23%) communities
- Those with health / disability issues are more present in advice/support (28%) and health and wellbeing (32%) communities

Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative
 [Q3] Which of the following types of online community have you used or visited in the last 12 months?
 Base: All respondents who have used online communities in the last 12 months n = 2,219

A fifth of current users say that local neighbourhood groups are their most used type of online community in the past 12 month

Top 5 types of online communities most used in past 12 months



Callout boxes signify datapoint is the highest cut of data and significantly higher vs. total (95% level)

Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative

[Q5] Which category best fits the online community you have used most often in the last 12 months?

Base: All respondents who have used online communities in the last 12 months n = 2,219; 75% n = 150; Male n = 1,080; 18-24 n = 202; LGBTQ+ n = 277; 55-64 n = 357

Users in the qualitative studies told us they belonged to communities that covered a diverse range of interests, support and/ or information needs

Local groups

These groups helped people stay **informed** about what was happening in their **local area**, including events and community news. Users also relied on them for recommendations and practical tips.

“Our local community page is where residents share useful information, ask for recommendations and sometimes have a good moan!” (35-54, passive user)

Sports, and fitness and health

These communities supported sharing and **discussing** gaming news, reviews, updates and gameplay. They offered spaces to ask questions, share strategies, solve problems and **connect with other players**.

“I have a specific [community] for local news... a specific one for health... a private support group, and several walking ones...” (55+, passive user)

Entertainment / fan

These spaces were used to **share creative or entertaining content** such as artwork, memes, or news about personal interests and to discuss movies, shows, books, music and similar topics.

“Entertainment - discovering new fanart or fanfiction.” (18-34, passive user)

Lifestyle, food, travel and hobbies

Users joined lifestyle communities focused on wellness, parenting, travel, pets, DIY, finance, gardening and arts or crafts. These spaces were used to share **advice, experiences** and provide **encouragement**.

“I was having issues with a tarpaulin roof on my metal chicken run. I asked for ideas to change this and thanks to the advice I received, I have a solid, strong roof now.” (35-54, frequent poster)

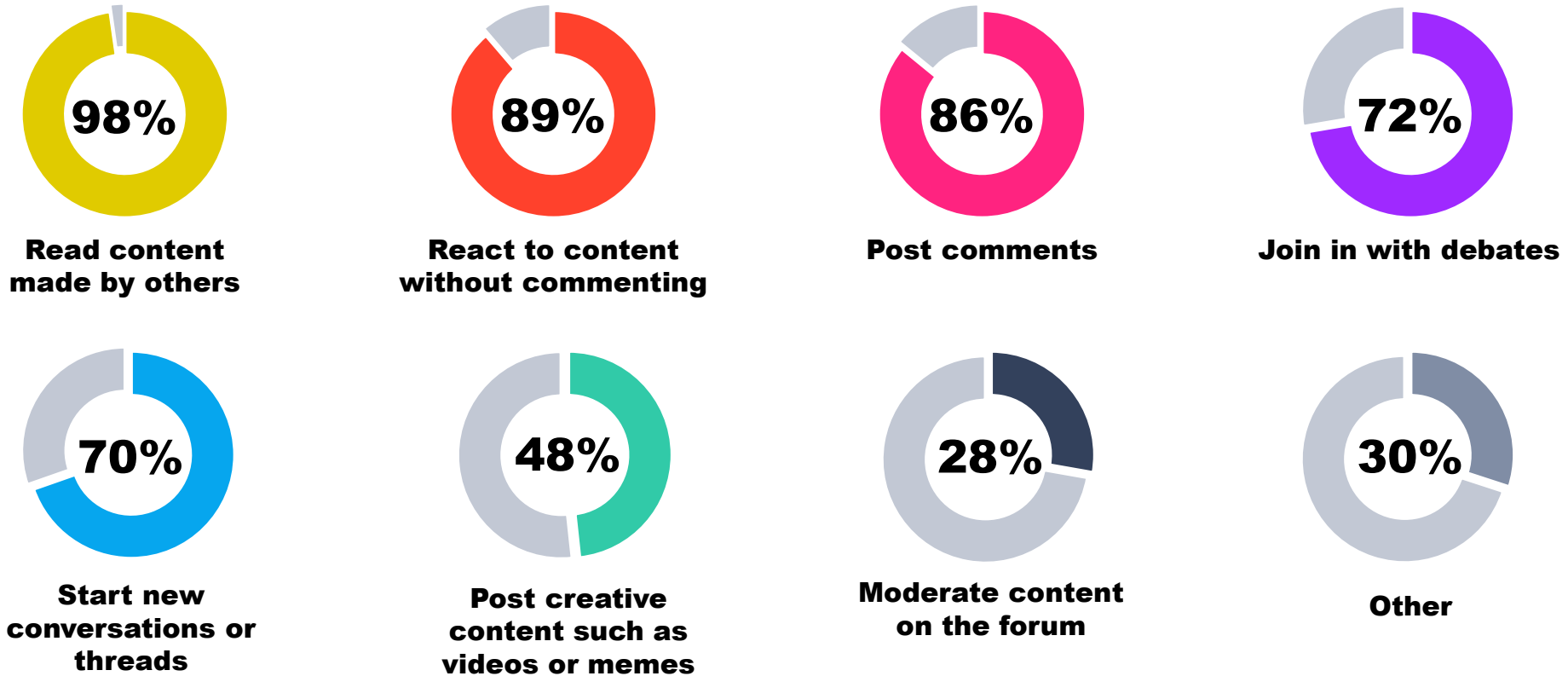
Gaming

These communities supported **sharing** and **discussing** gaming news, strategy, reviews, updates and gameplay with other players.

“There’s enjoyment that I feel that I belong to a [gaming] community, sharing knowledge and social interaction with other players.” (18-34, moderator)

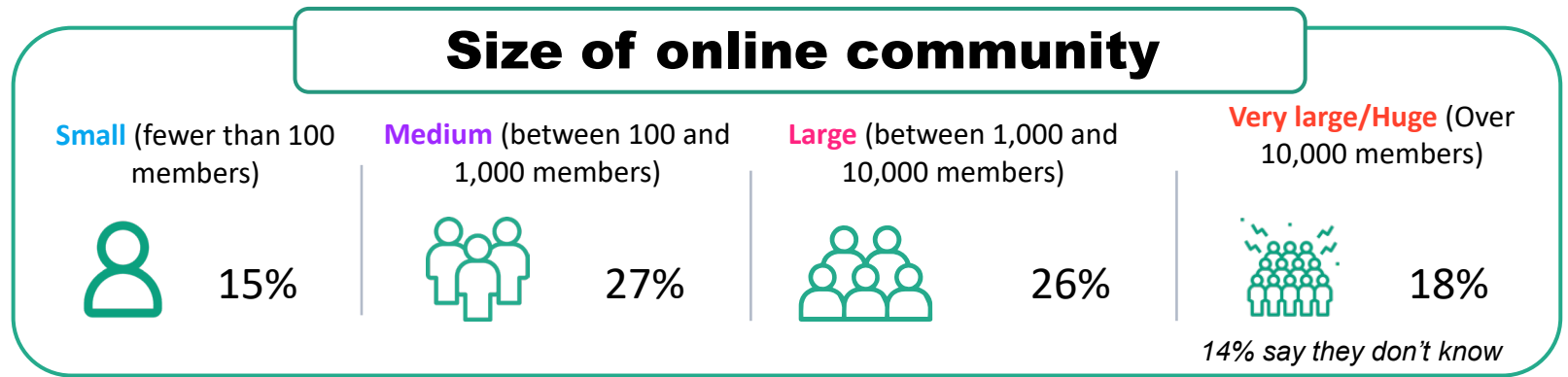
Engagement spans passive and active behaviours, but reading and reacting are the most widespread

% Ever done activity type with their most used community in past 12 months



Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative
[Q12] How often do you engage with the community you have used most often in the last 12 months, in each of the following ways?
Base: All respondents who have used online communities in the last 12 months n = 2,219

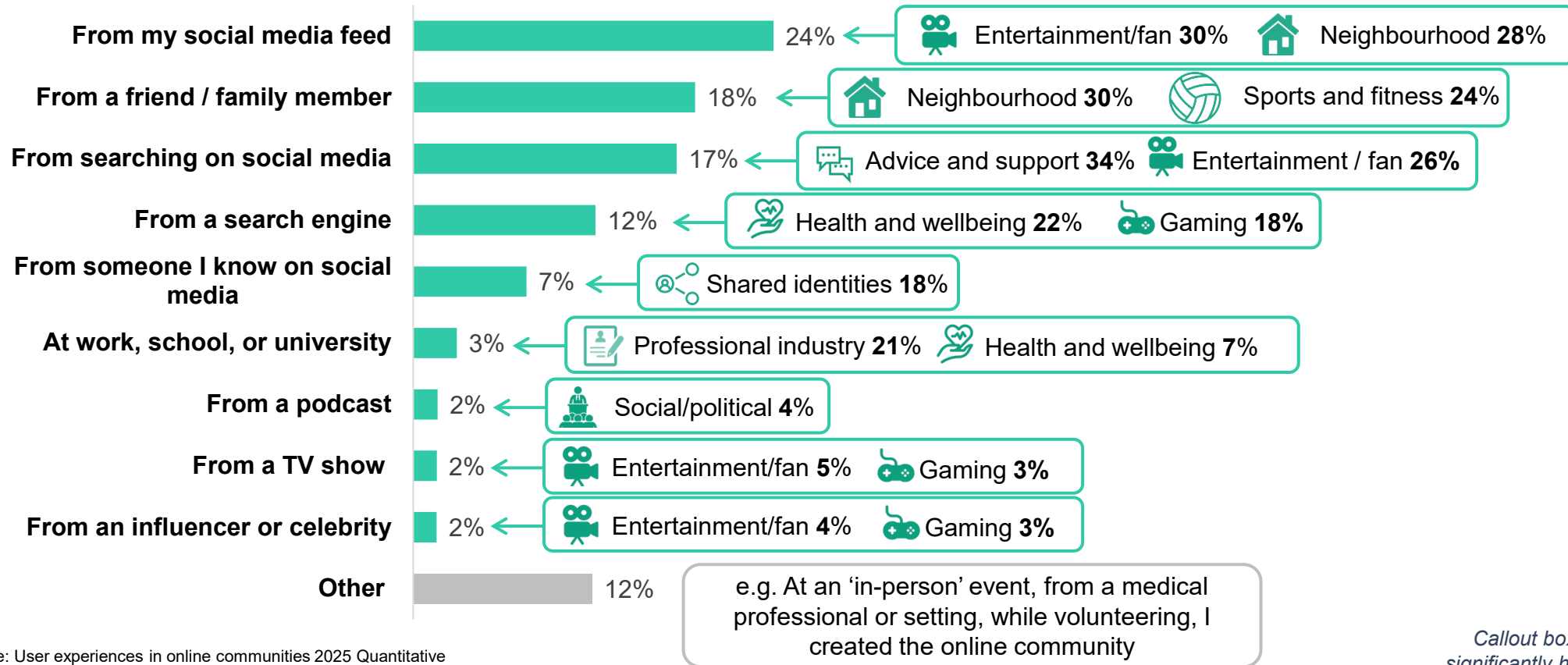
Current users' most-used online communities are fairly evenly split when it comes to their size and reach and the majority include a mix of genders



Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative
 [[Q6] Again, thinking about the online community that you have used most often in the last 12 months, is the community...? ; [Q7] And is the online community that you have used most often in the last 12 months ...? [Q8] And from what you have seen, is the membership...? Base: All respondents who have used online communities in the last 12 months n = 2,219

Current online community users most commonly discover their most-used communities via their social media feed, but discovery routes vary by the type of community

Ways found out about most used online community



Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative [Q9] How did you find out about this online community?

Base: All respondents who have used online communities in the last 12 months n = 2,219; Additional base sizes in slide notes.

Callout boxes signify datapoint is significantly higher vs. total (95% level)

Algorithms, active searches, conversations with friends and life events led users in the qualitative study to discover communities



Search and recommendations

Users typically joined communities through recommendations, discovering them via **algorithms** or while **actively searching** for **content related** to their interests or specific advice needs.

“I love finding new communities and having personalised algorithms make things so much better.” (18-34, passive user)



Life events and personal needs

Others become involved when **significant life events** occur or when they **face new challenges** (e.g., moving to a new area, becoming a parent).

“I joined r/Mommit when I became a mother and have stayed because it is a very supportive and fun community where we share funny stories and offer solidarity to other mums in the trenches.” (35-54, passive user)



Founding communities

‘Moderators’ often start communities after noticing an **unmet need** (e.g., creating a local group) or because they are **passionate** about a particular topic.

“The country locked down at the beginning of 2020 which left many vulnerable residents not being able to shop, pay bills... I organised a community group which was prepared to help. We started a facebook page and then connected with our local facebook noticeboard.” (55+, moderator)

How people tend to join online communities varies to a degree by the type of community, but in a majority of cases admin approval was required

Ways people can join



Top way to join for each type of online community



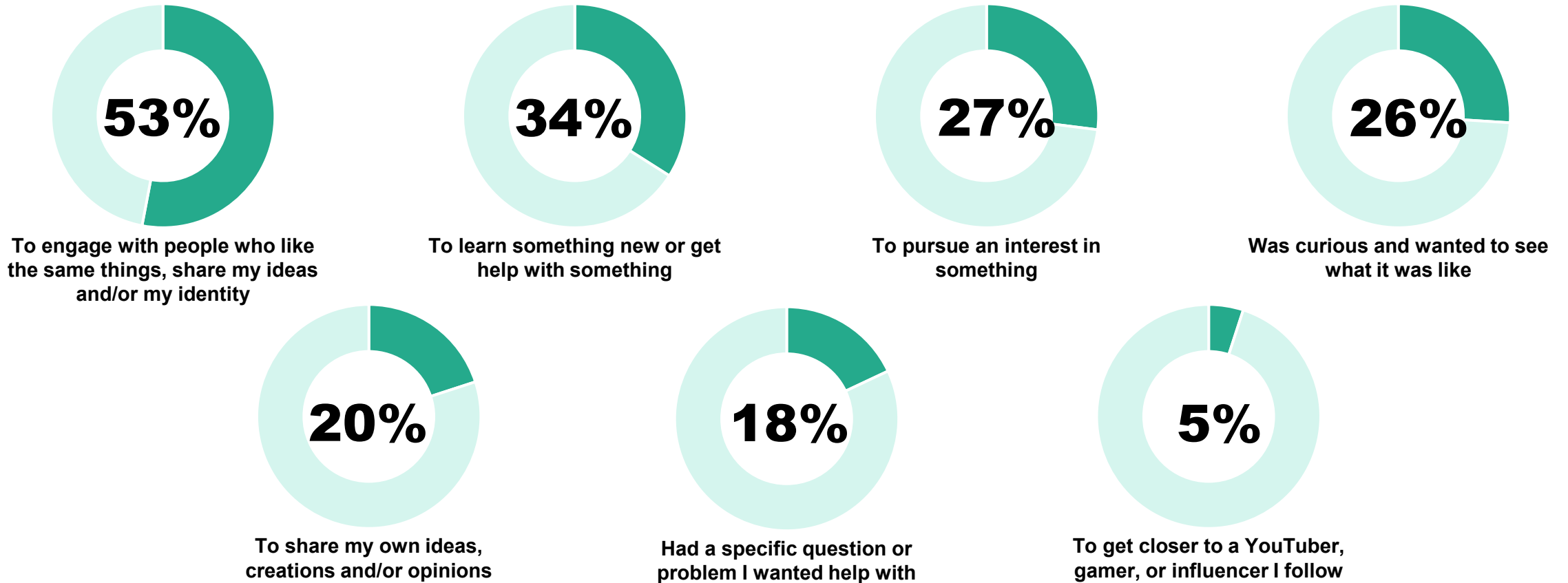
"I loved that the moderators made me feel welcome when I first joined and that they don't hesitate to answer my queries or concerns with confidentiality and promptness." (18-34, moderator)

Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative

[Q4b] For the following platforms, please select how many online communities you have engaged with on each one? As a reminder, by online communities we mean online spaces or groups on which users may post, message or interact with other members and/or read their submissions. Base: All those who have used online community – Gaming n = 203; Health and wellbeing n = 104; Sports and fitness n = 233; Lifestyle, food, travel and hobbies n=233; Professional industry / career n = 85; Local neighbourhood n = 457; Entertainment/fan n = 231; Creative n = 83; Social / political n = 147; Advice and support n = 75; Shared identities n = 76

Over half of current users say they joined their most used online community to engage with others who share their interests

Reasons for joining online communities



Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative
[Q11] Why did you decide to join the community?
Base: All respondents who have used online communities in the last 12 months n = 2,219;

Users in our qualitative studies told us they joined online communities for both practical and personal reasons

Overall, **motivations to join communities overlapped**, users often entered communities for a specific interest or practical need and stayed when their social or emotional needs were met.



Shared interests and hobbies

Users who joined online communities based on shared hobbies usually wanted to **meet like-minded people**. Those with niche interests like specific gaming subcultures were often **surprised** to find others who shared the **same enthusiasm**.

“I’m not sure I was hoping for anything. Just to see content and interact with like-minded people for the various topics...I think the surprise, a positive one, is when you realise how many people out there share niche interests.” (18-34, passive user)



Desire for connection

Most users joined online communities to feel more **connected**. In neighbourhood groups, this helped them build a stronger link to their local area. In **larger**, global groups, users wanted to **broaden their horizons** and hear from diverse people around the world.

“Lots of local neighbourhoods, community groups. I joined when we moved to the area, it was during lockdown and I didn’t know anyone in the village and had a young child, so I was looking for connections.” (35-54, frequent poster)



Seeking understanding and belonging

Some users joined online communities to **feel understood** and to be around people with similar experiences, identities or perspectives. They often relied on these spaces for **validation, reassurance** and **emotional support**.

“With a lot of them it was mostly just about being able to connect with similar interests but some of them have become more than that as they provide great inspiration for creative hobbies and help me to get advice and answers when I have issues with certain things.” (18-34, passive user)

2 Perceived benefits of online communities

Covering:

The benefits users gain from online communities

How support and advice can drive use

Users in the qualitative study felt a belief in common principles and behaviours helped to maintain an enjoyable online community



Most users see their online communities as positive, comfortable spaces, largely because they feel **less affected by the toxicity** which can be found elsewhere online.

“It’s a friendly community, with much less drama than mainstream social media sites (which I tend to avoid). I like how it revolves around creativity rather than destruction... I think the main thing is the community is focused on creativity. This attracts like-minded individuals from many parts of the world, to share a common hobby in virtual city-building.” (18-34, moderator)



Shared values and a sense of common purpose help maintain this **welcoming atmosphere**.

“Yes 100%. I gain enjoyment and learn more about things I’m interested in. I get to interact with likeminded people.” (18-34, passive user)

Divisive topics (e.g. politics in some communities) were **often avoided** or outlined in guidelines to keep interactions **polite and enjoyable**.

“I like that it’s on the lighter side... We avoid politics on there.” (35-54, passive user)



Guidelines **set the tone and expectations of behaviour**.

“Rule from online community: Please don’t comment about foreign wars, disease outbreaks, or other similar crises that aren’t strictly covered by ‘No Politics’ or ‘not UK focused’. There are many other places to discuss these events.” (35-54, frequent poster)

Active moderation was key in managing problematic users (e.g. bullies), and maintaining a **positive atmosphere**.

“For me, safety and moderation are the most important as it makes the community feel part of a social environment who accept people without judgement.” (18-34, moderator)

Helpful and supportive interactions were seen as key in the qualitative stage to retaining online community members and getting them to come back



Users returned to communities when they received **constructive feedback, practical advice, or encouragement** and sometimes simply out of habit.

“The community keeps me coming back as I feel it is a very genuine group. I also like to keep my connections within the group as I like the people that are part of it and they have been very helpful when trying to attend matches.” (18-34, moderator)



They stayed engaged when groups kept a clear **focus on shared interests**; when conversations drifted, they lost interest and left.

“Because it’s a close, niche community, specific to one interest I have, and always remains on-topic.” (35-54, frequent poster)



Fresh content and active discussion signalled a healthy community, while repetitive posts suggested decline.

“I keep coming back to this community because it is so active and the media it is about is still being released weekly so there is always new content to engage with and discuss.” (18-34, passive user)



A positive, respectful tone supported by moderation and guidelines, encouraged repeat visits, even during debates. Moderators and frequent posters often felt a sense of duty, finding purpose in helping and supporting others.

“I keep coming back as at the crux of it, I enjoy helping people. And to see them be happy motivates me. I wish I was paid for my time doing this, but I do enjoy to help.” (18-34, moderator)

Users in the qualitative study felt personalisation, notifications and gamified functions supported use, but not community/user wellbeing



Personalisation

- Personalisation had functional value enabling curation but had little effect on their enjoyment or use.
- They mainly used it to refine news-feed algorithms, preferring organically popular posts in communities.

“I like this feature as it helps me to curate the content I see and means I don’t have to see or interact with content that is going to cause me to have a negative experience.” (35-54, passive user)



Gamification

- A small group, mainly those aged 18–34, found these features **motivating**, especially when they highlighted contributions through rankings or badges.

“[Gamification features] I think helps people know what you contribute to the community.” (18-34, moderator)

- Most saw them harmless, though some felt they added **unnecessary competition** or spotlighted certain users too much.

“I don’t like it as it makes the group become competitive and that’s not the nature of the group.” (55+, passive user)



Notifications

- These features helped users stay **updated** and notified them when their input was needed.
“As long as they’re fully customisable, notifications can be very useful so that you don’t miss important content.” (55+, frequent poster)
- But they were seen as **intrusive** when too frequent or designed to push use without purpose.

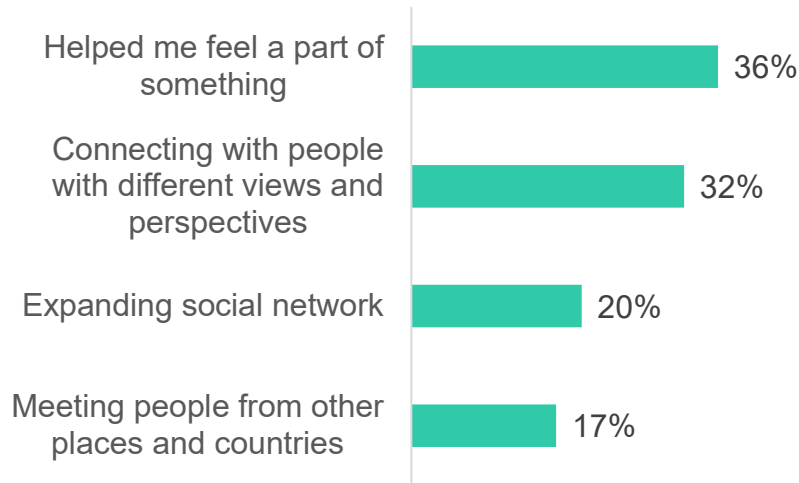
“Anything which keeps competing for your attention is quite irritating.” (18-34, passive user)

Users of online communities find them beneficial for getting advice and support, and giving users a sense of community

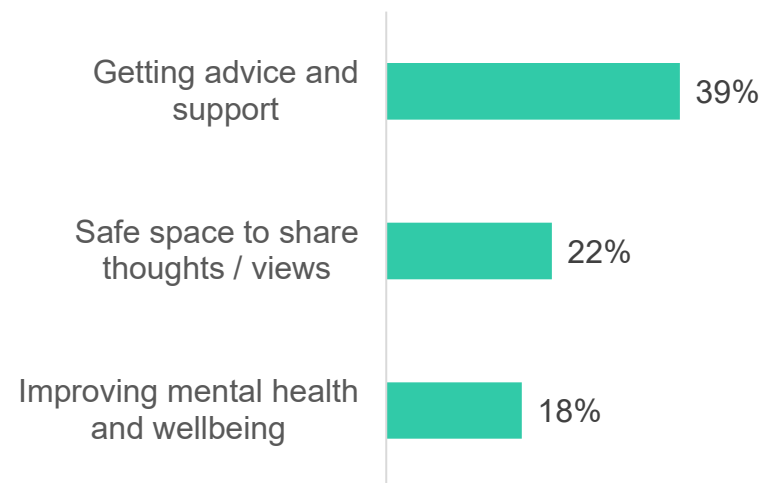
Perceived benefits of online communities



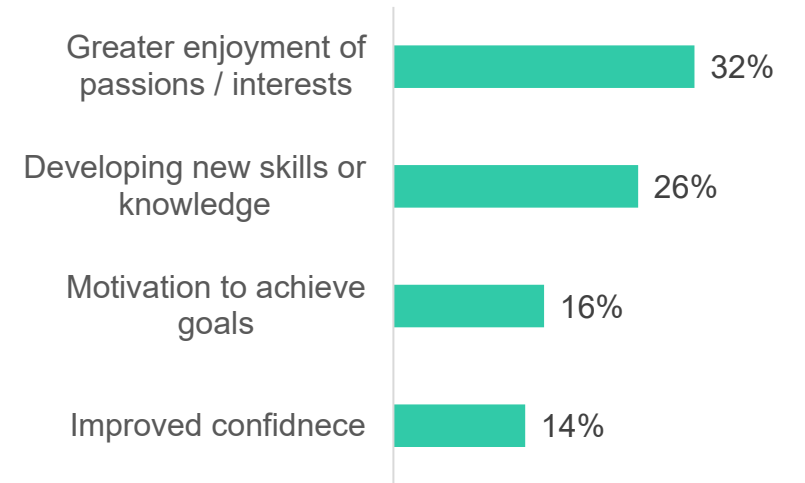
Social benefits 61%



Emotional support 55%



Personal development 53%



Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative
 [Q15] Again, thinking about the online community that you use most often...Has being part of this online community helped you with any of the following?
 Base: All respondents who have used online communities in the last 12 months n = 2,219

In the qualitative study, users felt platform design was vital in making navigating online communities easy and enjoyable



Platform design

- **Likes and trending** indicators helped users see what was popular, making it easier to follow discussions and avoid repeated topics.
- **Upvotes and reactions** gave users affirmation and a way to express themselves, although some said downvotes caused anxiety or that high praise encouraged arrogance.
- **Filtering tools and search** were essential, especially in large communities with many sub-topics, helping users avoid feeling overwhelmed.
- **Autoplay and infinite scroll** were viewed negatively and seen as features that kept users on the platform without adding real value.

*“I enjoy using the upvote or downvote features as they provide an easy way to show approval or disapproval of something without majorly affecting the person that posted it.”
(18-34, passive user)*

*“The platform design features like being able to search for posts, group by relevant, recent or oldest posts. Sometimes, polls are used to get opinions... These are great features because they allow control over what content I wish to see. For example, I may want to find any posts where someone has reported a fault within the building that I live in. It means I can look for specific information, without trawling through lots of posts.”
(35-54, passive user)*

“I do not always think that certain platform design features are always positive, for example infinite scroll can lead to me spending much more time on the app than I would normally intend to.” (35-54, frequent poster)

Strong safety and moderation protocols contribute to community enjoyment, which participants feel offers protection and reassurance



Safety and moderation

- **Community guidelines** set behaviour expectations and reassured users that moderators would act when rules were broken. Guidelines built trust when applied consistently and appropriately.
- **Blocking and muting tools** helped users deal quickly with harassment or bullying.
- **Reporting tools** worked best when sent directly to moderators. When reports went to the platform instead, users often saw little response or felt actions were too extreme, such as shutting down entire communities.

“I think safety and moderation is an important feature of my community because it is exactly why people can feel comfortable with each other, knowing that it is a supportive environment that won’t tolerate bad behaviour.”
(18-34, frequent poster)

“I am glad that there are block and report buttons so I can stop harmful content from being shown to me and report it if necessary.”
(18-34, passive user)

“Reporting does not always work. A lot of the platforms make you choose from a list of what you can report. Some platforms have removed the ability to report misinformation for example.” (35-54, frequent poster)

3 Participants' concerns around online communities

Covering:

- The downsides to online community use

- Triggers for leaving online communities

Online communities offer purposeful use...

...but some users in the qualitative study worry they are spending too much time in their online communities



Many users saw online communities as more **purposeful than generic scrolling** because they centre on personal interests and meaningful topics.



Some referred to these spaces as “**quality over quantity**,” where time spent was more rewarding and less draining than algorithm-led feeds.



Despite this, many still worried about spending **too much time online**.

Some felt communities **might replace real-life interaction**, and others were concerned that highly focused groups could become echo chambers.

“Unlike on social media sites, there’s more quality over quantity in terms of the volume of comments and content posted.” (35-54, moderator)

“I think that the main downside to being part of these communities is that I can sometimes get sucked into the content in them and end up neglecting things I have to do offline.” (18-34, frequent poster)

“People tend to seek out communities because they have a specific interest or way of thinking, and when there’s no one to challenge that then you can fall into the mindset of being ‘right’. If someone were to come into the community with a different perspective, they may find themselves not welcome.” (35-54, frequent poster)

Bullying and 'toxic' comments/discussions were not tolerated by users in the qualitative study if persistent, and could prompt members to leave a community

Users can tolerate occasional 'flare-ups', expecting moderators to intervene through mediation or by ejecting users. However, when there is persistent toxic behaviour, and perpetrators are allowed to act against the rules, this often results in a user leaving the community.



Toxic behaviour

- **Overtly hateful comments** revolving around politics, race, identity and gendered issues were commonly seen as creating a 'toxic environment'.
- Users observed **heightened levels of antagonism and anger** from members in their communities, which was off-putting and if common, could taint respectful debate and discussion.

"What I've found surprising is how angry people can get on some of these groups." (55+, moderator)



Bullying and harassment

- **Personal attacks on users** were regarded as harmful and a major concern.
- Users who had experienced personal attacks of bullying, or harassment - or consistently saw this behaviour towards other members - **left the community.**

"The downside of being part of these communities, is if there is no moderation on them. Some communities are full of trolls... I had one online community, where several members decided to post insults towards me on one of the posts I made." (35-54, moderator)

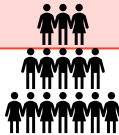
Many users cited moderator behaviour as a recurring source of frustration in the qualitative study



Lack of enforcement

- Users were frustrated when moderators **failed to uphold community guidelines** and rules, allowing spammers, scammers, or 'trolls' to dominate the groups.

"I did leave as the community rules were just not being followed and the admins did nothing about it. People [were] saying horrible things and [the] admin was just not blocking or removing them." (55+, passive user)



Open membership

- A handful of participants also disliked moderation for **allowing too many members to join**. A few felt that the influx **diluted the community**, made it difficult to distinguish real members, invited new problems, and allowed the community's focus to drift.

"I've left several groups... usually because the group descended into generality, or because they became too big and unwieldy." (55+, Moderator)



Too strict

- Others felt moderation could be too strict, removing members for minor or unclear rule breaches.

"I have seen admins push rules too far, and publicly publish content about reminding people of the rules and that certain people have been banned for x-reasons." (35-54, passive user)



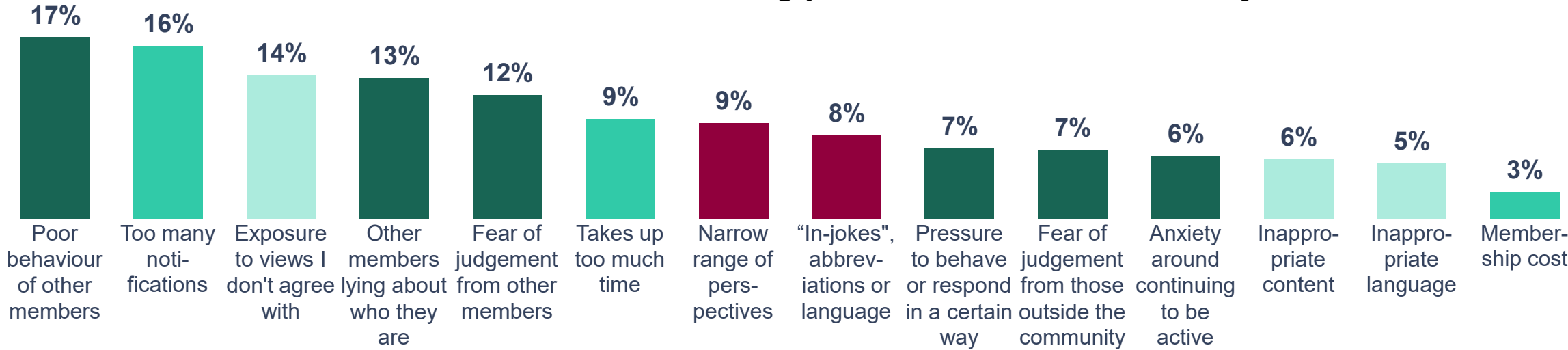
Moderator politics

- Moderators themselves faced challenges, including conflicts with other moderators and being blamed for group problems.

"Unfortunately, the other moderators were not so kind, and I had many bad experiences - from mismanagement, the blame being shifted on me due to another staff members faults, passive aggressive attitude and more." (18-34, moderator)

Users told us that poor behaviour of other members and too many notifications were the leading downsides of the online community they used most often

Perceived downsides to being part of an online community



NET: Worries and concerns 38%

NET: Practical Issues 24%

NET: Content issues 19%

35-44 (45%)
 ABC1 (40%)
 Black & Black British (55%)
 Working full time (41%)
 High income (41%)

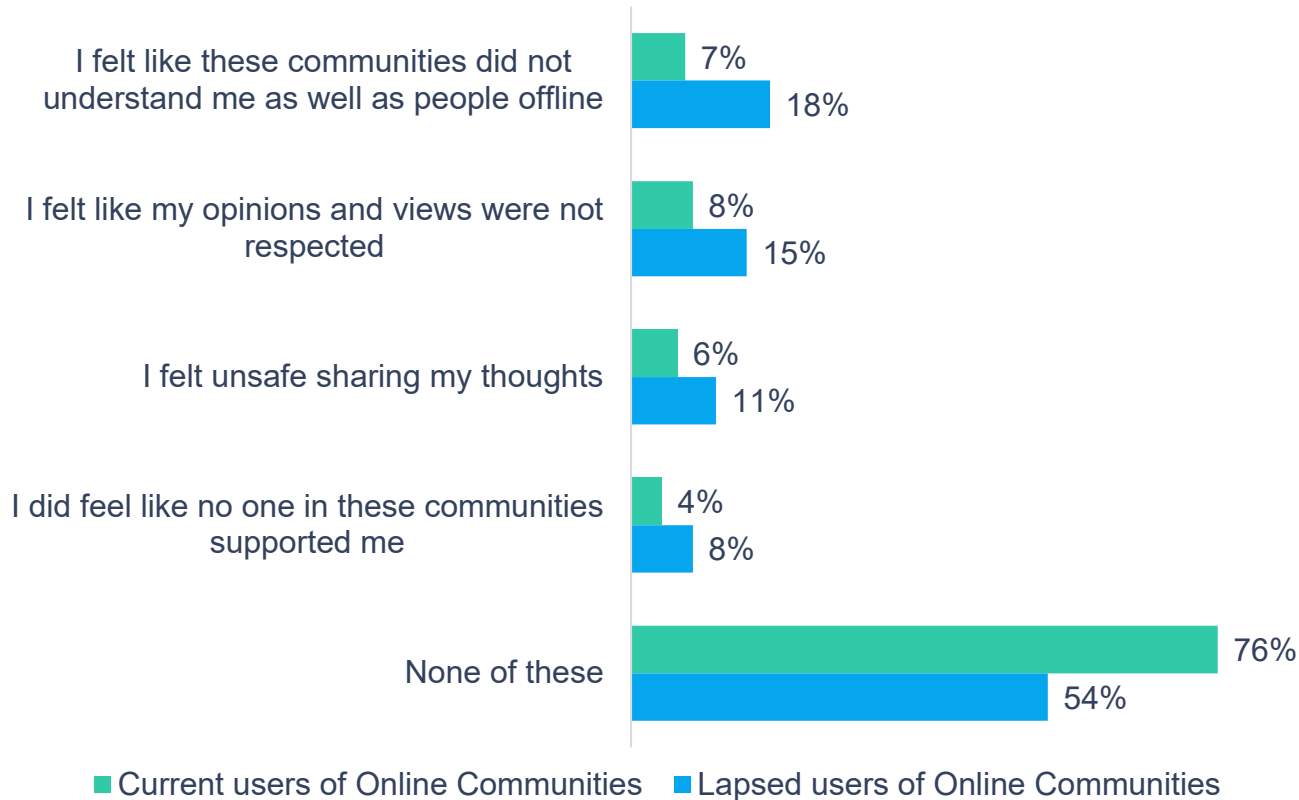
18-24 (38%); 25-34 (34%)
 ABC1 (28%)
 Black & Black British (44%)
 Working full time (29%); Full time student (34%)
 High income (30%)
 Not limited by health/disability issues (25%)

18-24 (26%); 35-44 (23%)
 ABC1 (21%)
 Black & Black British (31%)
 Working full time (22%)
 High income (23%)
 Limited a lot by health/disability issues (24%)

Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative
 [Q16] Still thinking about the online community that you use most often. Are there any downsides to being part of this online community? Please select all that apply.
 Base: All respondents who have used online communities in the last 12 months n = 2,219. 18-24: n = 202; 25-34: n = 321; 35-44: n = 460; ABC1: n = 1,346; Black and black British: n = 77; Working full time: n = 999; Full time student: n = 79; High income: n = 750; Not limited by health/disability issues: n = 1,375; Limited a lot by health/disability issues: n = 312
 Callout boxes signify datapoint is significantly higher vs. total (95% level)

Younger users and those with health issues or disabilities are more likely to have negative experiences

Perceived negative experiences in online communities



People **limited a lot by health or disability*** are significantly more likely to agree with **all** statements, indicating greater challenges within online communities.

Respondents aged **18–24** were more likely to agree with all statements; those aged **25–34** felt misunderstood (**11%**), and those aged **35–44** reported feeling unsafe (**9%**).

Respondents from mixed or **multiple ethnic backgrounds** were more likely to feel unsafe (**13%**) and unsupported (**10%**), with **Black or Black British** respondents also feeling unsafe (**13%**).

Employment status significantly affects experiences: **full-time students** are more likely to feel misunderstood (**18%**) and unsafe sharing views (**14%**); those **not working** also feel unsafe (**11%**), while **full-time workers** feel unsupported (**6%**).

Bisexual respondents were more likely to feel unsafe sharing views in online communities (**11%**).

Male respondents were more likely to feel their views are not respected in online communities (**10%**).

Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative
 [[Q14] Still thinking about the online community that you have used most often in the last 12 month, have you experienced any of the following things? Still thinking about the online community that you used to engage with the most, have you ever experienced any of the following things? Base: All respondents who have used online communities in the last 12 months n = 2,219; All respondents who have previously used online communities, but not in the last 12 months n = 233

* Those with a health/disability issue said they were either limited a lot or a little because of a health problem or disability which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 12 months?

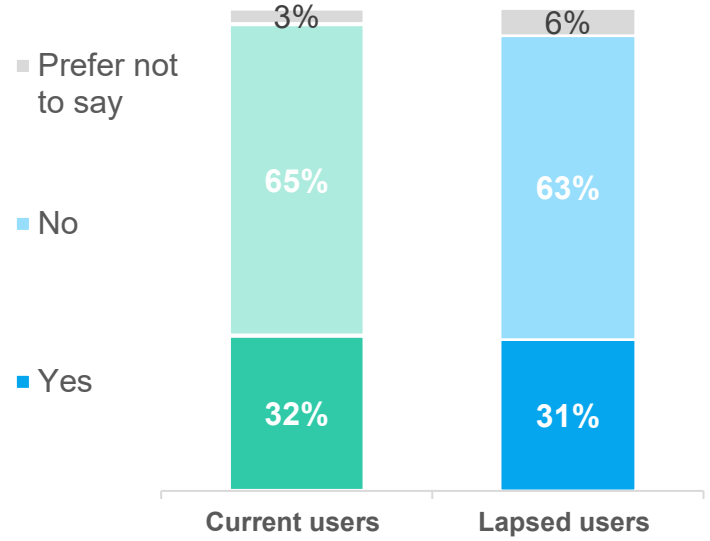
Around a third – of both current and former users – say they have ever come across content that made them uncomfortable in an online community, with certain groups reporting higher rates of negative experiences

Have ever experienced uncomfortable, upsetting or negative feelings in an online community

Age 18-24 - 38%
(significant vs age 25+ - 32%)

LGBTQ+ - 43%
(significant vs respondents identifying as heterosexual - 31%)

Respondents who state that their day-to-day activities are limited by health issues/disability - 41%
(significant vs respondents not stating they feel limited by health issues/disability - 28%)



ABC1 - 38%
(significant vs C2DE - 21%)

There is no significant difference in experience of uncomfortable feelings between current and former online community users, reflecting the earlier finding that this is not a main reason for disengaging.

Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative

[[Q19] Thinking about all of the online communities that you use and visit... Have you come across anything, in the last 12 months, on any online community that made you feel uncomfortable, upset or negative in any way? Thinking about any of the online communities that you used to use and visit... Did you ever come across anything on any online community that made you feel uncomfortable, upset or negative in any way?

Base: All respondents who have used online communities in the last 12 months n = 2,219; All respondents who have previously used online communities, but not in the last 12 months n = 233

Callout boxes signify datapoint is significantly higher vs. total (95% level)

4 Guidelines and areas for improvement

Covering:

- Guidelines and rules within online communities

- The 'ideal online community', including attitudes towards specific features, tools and behaviours

Many users can recall - and describe - a variety of rules that apply to their online communities

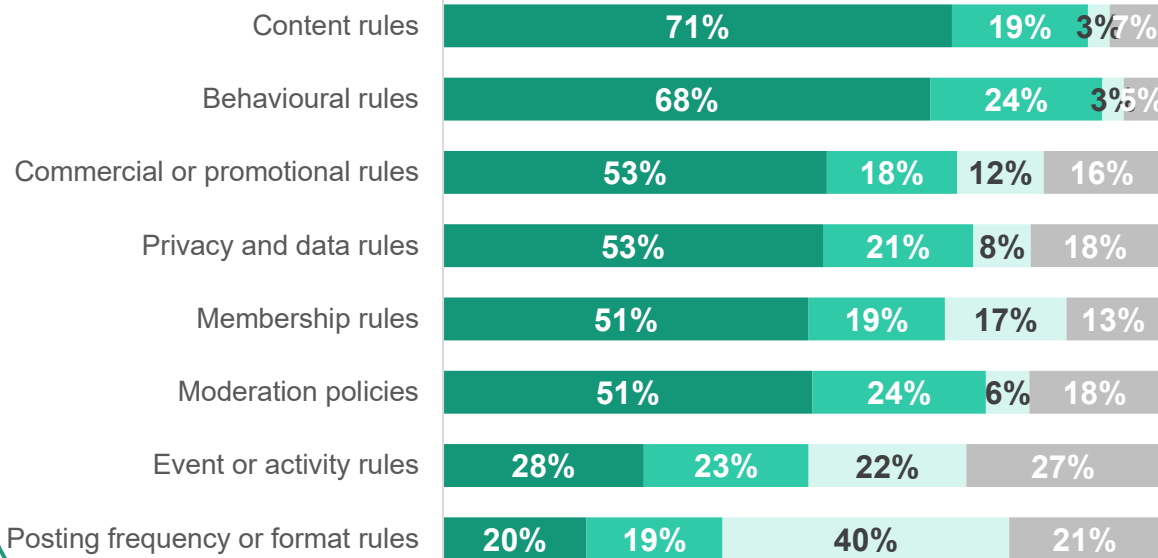
81% 

Are aware that their most used online community has rules or guidelines



Types of guidelines in online communities

■ Formal rule ■ Informal rule ■ Not a rule or guideline ■ Don't know



Common rules that users cited, verbatim:

‘Be kind’ ‘No advertising/spam’ ‘Be respectful’ ‘No low effort posts’
 ‘No harassment, discrimination and bullying’ ‘No doomsScrolling/keep it light’
 ‘No offensive content’ ‘No hate speech’ ‘Stay on topic’/‘Use designated topic spaces’
 ‘No politics’

- **Behavioural and content rules may be more top-of-mind for users because of their perceived importance** in maintaining a welcoming online space. Many users, when reflecting on the ‘downsides of an online community’, referred to harshness, negativity, trolling, arguments, and people ‘not following the rules.’
- Some online community **rules/guidelines (particularly behavioural) were assumed** and considered **synonymous with ‘being a good person’** – this meant that rules were not always readily consulted.

Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative [Q17] Again, thinking about the online community that you use most often. Does the community have rules or guidelines? Base: All respondents who have used online communities in the last 12 months n = 2,219 [Q18] What types of rules or guidelines have you seen on this community? Please select the most relevant option for each rule. Base: All respondents who have used online communities in the last 12 months and are aware of rules n = 1,792

Most users see rules and guidelines as essential to maintaining a positive online community



Rules are believed to have a positive impact. Users described them as “*setting clear standards*”, keeping the community “*on track*”, “*helping to protect everyone*” and “*preventing abuse.*” However, **users were divided on the effectiveness of rules on their own**, without visible enforcement.



Moderator enforcement was seen as critical to having an impact. Some felt rules only make a difference when they are actively enforced by moderators, and that they do very little on their own. For these users, rules could feel like a ‘tick-box’ exercise that people ignore. This view was most common amongst frequent posters and creators, whose higher platform use potentially exposes them to more visible rule-breaking.



However, most felt as though rules still matter for setting expectations. Most agreed that rules are important in establishing clear norms. When paired with consistent moderation, they act as a first line of defence and provide a clear rationale for moderator actions, e.g. ‘X action was taken because X rule was broken.’

Around a quarter of current users have reported someone in the last 12 months, increasing to half among those who had felt uncomfortable, upset or negative when using an online community in this same period

Relatively low reporting could be explained by a lack of confidence in the process. Many users in the qualitative phase expressed that reporting was an essential (but often unreliable/confusing) tool, that currently does not work well. For example, some users trying to report a post end up reporting the entire online community to the host platform, and so are reluctant to use the 'report' button at all.



of all who have used online communities in the last 12 months have ever reported someone



of those who have used an online community in the last 12 months and **felt uncomfortable, upset or negative when doing so** have ever reported someone

- 18-24s (30%)
- LGBTQ+ (32%)
- Health and disability issues net: yes (33%)
- Mental health problems (37%)

Potentially marginalised and more vulnerable groups are more likely to say they have reported someone. These groups are also more likely than average to experience uncomfortable, upsetting or negative feelings when using online communities, which may indicate that their higher reporting rates might be a response to greater exposure to negative experiences.

Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative

[Q20] Still thinking about all of the online communities that you use and visit, have you reported someone/something in the last 12 months? Base: All respondents who have used online communities in the last 12 months n = 2,219; All respondents who have used online communities in the last 12 months and experienced discomfort, upset or feeling negative n = 713; 18-24s n = 202; LGBTQ+ n = 277; Health disability issues net: yes n = 790; Mental health problems n = 790

Callout boxes signify datapoint is the significantly higher vs. total (95% level)

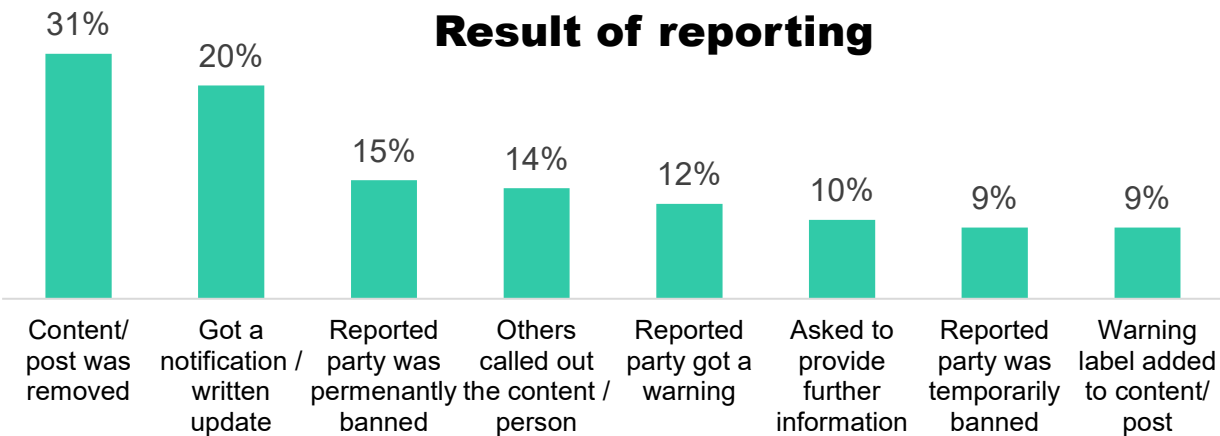
Among current users who reported someone or something in last 12 months, most recalled some follow-up action, although about a quarter said nothing happened

60%
Said **something** happened because of reporting someone/ something*

27%
Said **nothing** happened because of reporting someone/ something*

35-54s (34%)
Women (32%)

Result of reporting



A significant expectation gap remains – while most reporters saw some form of action, over a quarter recall nothing happening, suggesting that **platforms may not be communicating outcomes clearly or consistently enough if action is being taken.**

Indeed, users in the qualitative phase expressed reporting feeling like ‘a black hole’, and confusion about where reports go. This causes reluctance to report.

“Reported material not being taken down after review is really off-putting.” (18-34, passive user)

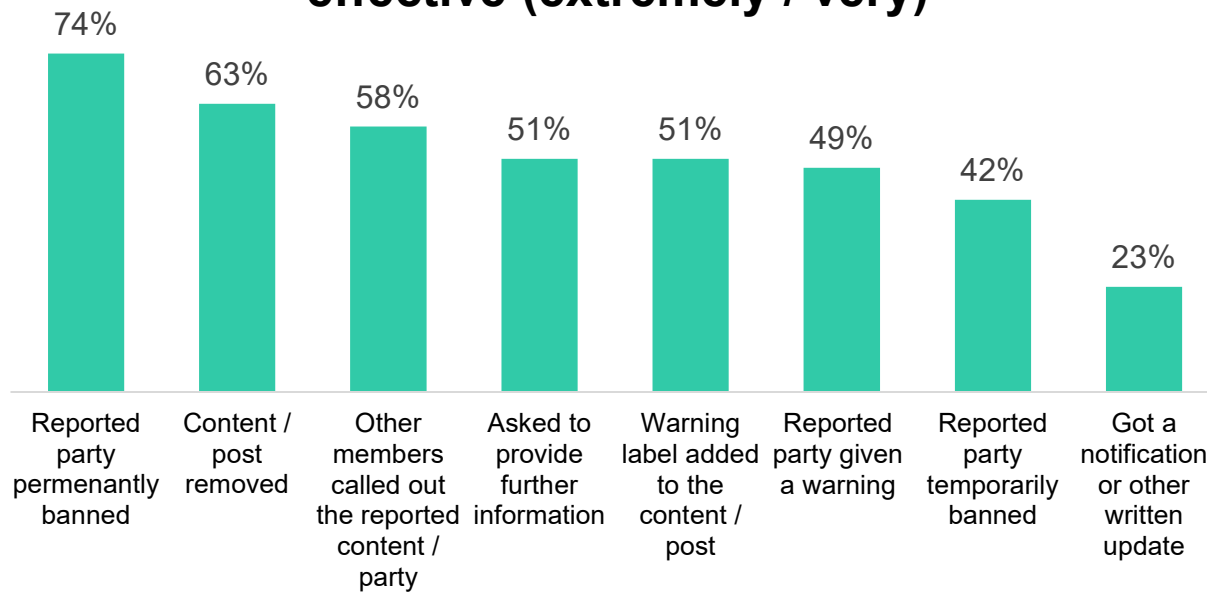
“You report something and you have no idea if any action is being taken.” (35-54, frequent poster)

Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative [Q21] Thinking about the last time you reported something/someone, what happened as a result? Please select all that apply Base: All that reported someone in the last 12 months n = 519; 35-54s n = 167; Women n = 247

* 12% said they did not know whether anything happened as a result of their reporting

Perceived effectiveness was highest for ‘decisive’ actions such as permanent bans, while ‘lighter’ responses such as notifications or written updates were seen as less likely to have a positive impact

Effectiveness of results of reporting – net effective (extremely / very)



Permanent bans are seen as the most effective outcome, but they occur relatively rarely. In contrast, one of the least effective actions, receiving notifications or written updates, happens far more often. Content or post removal offers the best balance - both common and perceived as strongly effective.

- Qualitative findings showed **there was a desire for action to be fast, as well as ‘decisive’.**
- For larger communities where it was more difficult for moderators to achieve this, **users felt they should have greater means to flag or hide content.**

“There has to be a system level moderation that users can flag, and the system takes over and quarantines everything until an admin can check it.” (35-54, frequent poster)

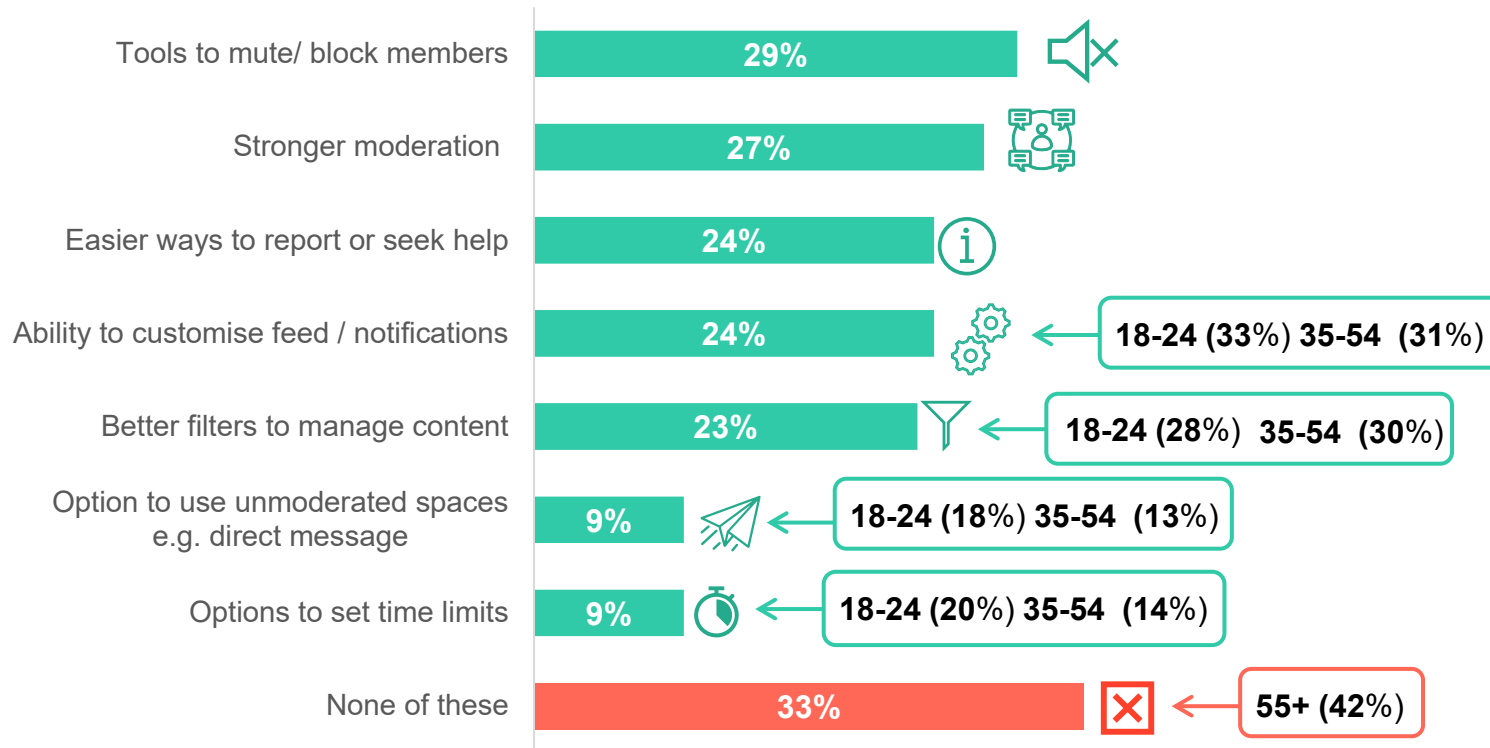
Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative

[Q22] You said the following had happened as a result of the last time you reported something/someone on this community. How effective were each of the actions taken in stopping the behaviour/person you reported in future?

Base: All that reported someone in the last 12 months and got a response, base sizes vary by result n = 44* – 165 *Base size lower than 50, indicative results only

Users told us that the most useful improvements would centre around the ability to hide or remove members who cause disruption

Tools / options that would improve experience



Qualitative findings demonstrated that whilst older participants (35-54 and 55+) saw the value in some tools and interventions, such as muting, blocking and moderating, **they generally preferred a more unfiltered online community experience** with low platform interference or customisation.

Those aged 35+ were more distrustful of algorithms – seeing them as actively harmful (in pushing content or making the online community platform feel ‘noisy’ and ‘interfering.’

Additionally, **those aged 35+ had a lower tolerance** for trolling, rudeness or arguments and are **prepared to leave an online community quickly** as the ‘solution’ to the tone deteriorating.

Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative [Q23] Now thinking more widely about all of the online communities that you use and visit or used to visit. Which tools or options, if any, do you think would improve your experience of using only communities? Please select all that apply. Base: All respondents who have used an online community in the past 12 months n = 2,219; 18-24 n = 202; 25-34 n = 321; 55+ n = 921 ; Male n = 1,080; Global majority n = 215; White respondents n = 1,963

Users who don't want any suggested tools to improve their experience on online communities tended to be less engaged overall

33%
of respondents selected 'None of these' when given options and tools that could improve the main online community they use

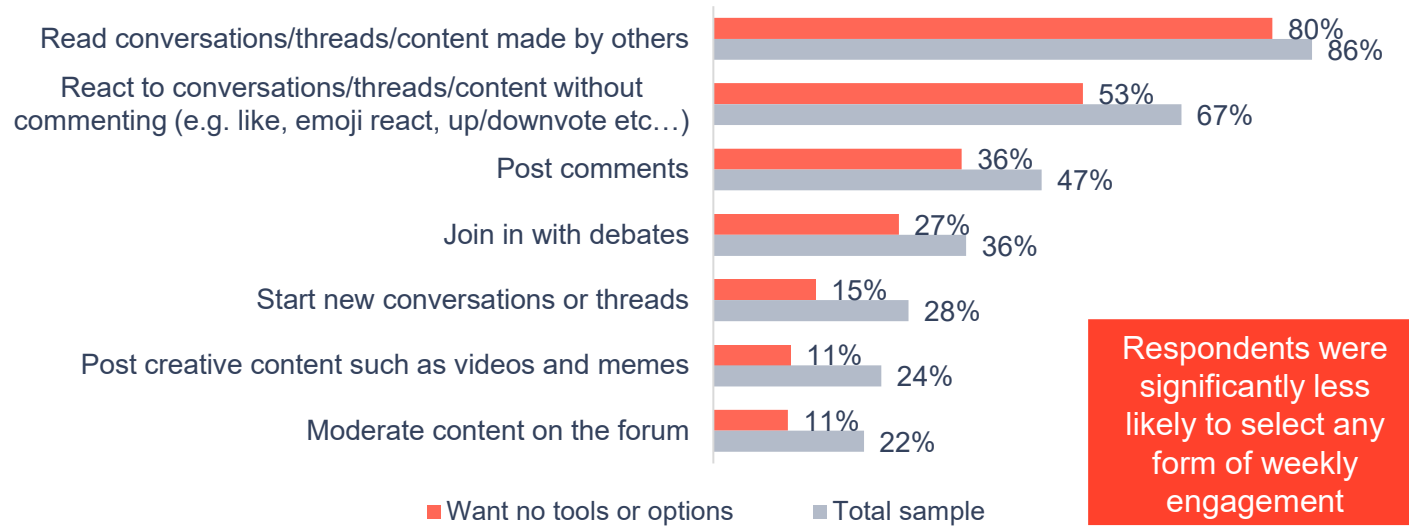
These respondents were also significantly more likely to say that they:

had **never had any negative experiences** when using their main online community used in the last 12 months (**86%** vs 76% total sample)

had **not experienced uncomfortable, upsetting or negative feelings** when using their main online community in the last 12 months (**84%** vs 65% total sample)

had **never reported** someone (**85%** vs 72% total sample)

Weekly engagement with online community in the last 12 months:



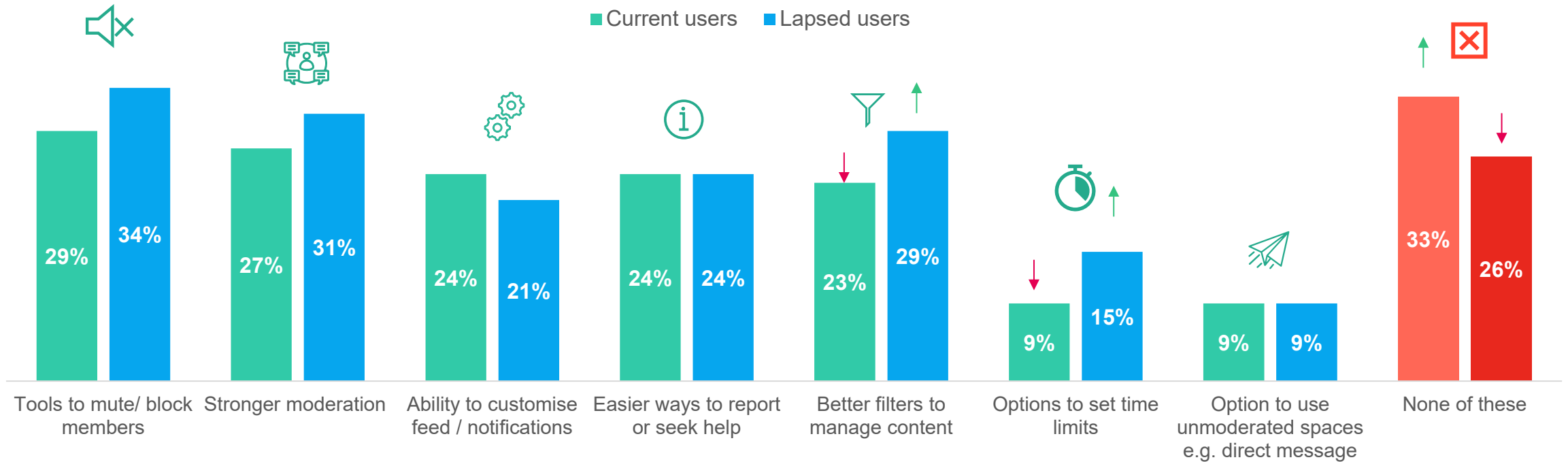
Respondents were significantly less likely to select any form of weekly engagement

They are also more likely to be in **fewer types** of online communities than average (**36%** selecting 1-2 types of online communities vs 28% total sample)

Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative [Q14] Still thinking about the online community that you have used most often in the last 12 month, have you experienced any of the following things? [Q19] Thinking about all of the online communities that you use and visit... Have you come across anything, in the last 12 months, on any online community that made you feel uncomfortable, upset or negative in any way? [Q20] Still thinking about all of the online communities that you use and visit, have you reported someone/something in the last 12 months? [Q12] How often do you engage with the community you have used most often in the last 12 months, in each of the following ways? [Q3] Which of the following types of online community have you used or visited in the last 12 months?
Base: All respondents who have used an online community in the past 12 months (n = 2,219); who selected 'none of these' when asked about any tools or options they would instate to improve the online communities they visit (n = 730)

Both current and lapsed users most commonly say their experience would improve with tools to mute/ block and stronger moderation

Tools / options that would improve experience – current and lapsed users



Lapsed users generally want more from online communities, scoring higher than current users for most tools/options, which could suggest that their expectations weren't previously met.

↑ ↓ Significantly higher/lower than the Total at 95% confidence

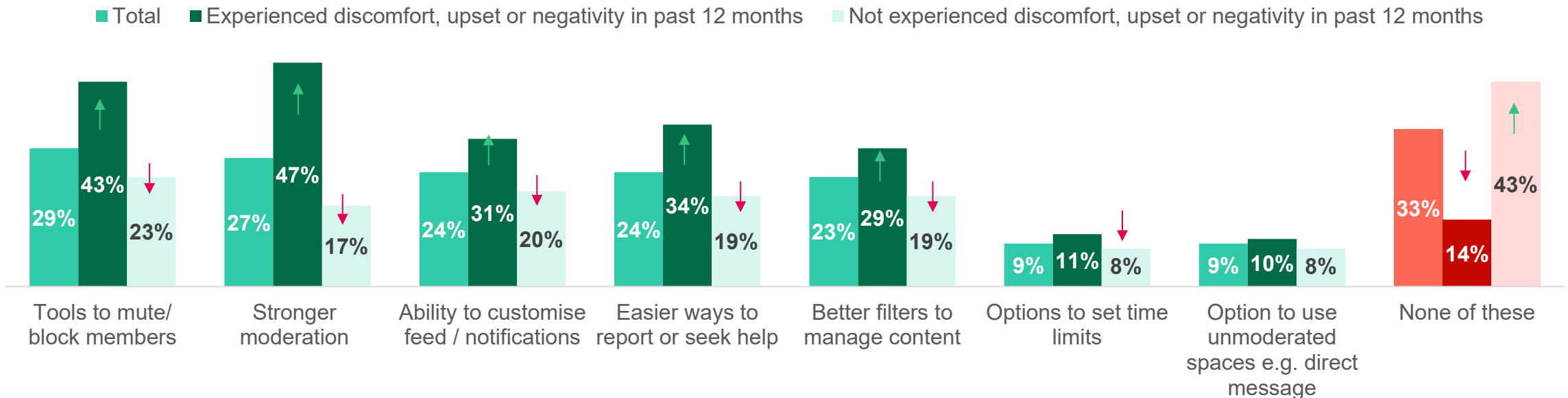
Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative

[Q23] Now thinking more widely about all of the online communities that you use and visit or used to visit. Which tools or options, if any, do you think would improve your experience of using only communities? Please select all that apply.

Base: All respondents who have used an online community in the past 12 months n = 2,219; All respondents who have used an online community but not in the past 12 months n = 233

Over two-fifths of users who experienced discomfort wanted tools to block members, or stronger moderation

Tools / options that would improve experience – those who have or haven't experienced discomfort, upset or negativity in past 12 months



- Stronger moderation, blocking/muting and easier reporting are far more important to those who've had negative experiences in online communities.
- Over two-fifths of those who *haven't* experienced discomfort say "none of these" which could indicate they are more satisfied with guidelines/tools overall.

↑ ↓ Significantly higher/lower than the Total at 95% confidence

Source: User experiences in online communities 2025 Quantitative

[Q23] Now thinking more widely about all of the online communities that you use and visit or used to visit. Which tools or options, if any, do you think would improve your experience of using only communities? Please select all that apply.

Base: All respondents who have used an online community in the past 12 months n = 2,219; Experienced discomfort, upset or negativity in past 12 months n = 713; not experienced discomfort, upset or negativity in past 12 months n = 1,435

In the focus group stage, users were invited to ‘build’ their ideal online community. Users voted on ‘building blocks’ (features and principles) that were most important in their ideal online community.

Users feel an ‘ideal’ online community would be actively moderated, transparent, reliable and safe

Users were invited to rank building blocks according to how important they are in their ‘ideal’ online community, with overall preferences below.

Most important

Active moderation with clear consequences

“Active moderation is important to maintain the integrity of a community.” (35-54, moderator)

Privacy settings you can control

Content filters and fact-checking tools

Transparency about rules and decisions

Simple navigation and powerful search

Spaces for connection and support

Customisable feed and notifications

“I think these features are all ‘nice to haves’, ‘bonus’ features. However, if the community itself is a cesspit, then those things aren’t really going to help.” (18-34, passive user)

Control over design features

Step-by-step onboarding for new members

User engagement tools

Least important

- **Active moderation with clear consequences was considered a key fundamental for all users** in maintaining a space that people want to engage with – this was regardless of age, community role, or use type.
- **Those aged 18-34 were less likely to view privacy settings they can control as a top building block.** For most other users this was a top issue.
- **Moderators of online communities highlighted the importance of a platform’s capabilities with regards to simple navigation and powerful search** – in preventing repetition and minimising the level of support community users need.
- **Content-filters, fact-checking tools, and privacy settings you can control** were a key priority for most, as this engendered feelings of safety and trust.
- **Those who had negative online community experiences**, some of whom that had made reports, **chose ‘spaces for connection and support’** as their top building block. The importance of this was perhaps exacerbated by their own negative experience.
- Building blocks that were consistently **ranked lower** were **‘control over design features’, ‘step-by-step onboarding for new members’, ‘customisable feed and notifications’, and ‘use tools.’** Users stressed that it wasn’t the case that these were unimportant features, but rather ‘nice-to-haves’ that are not fundamental to the health of a community.

In an ‘ideal’ online community, most in the qualitative phase would use some persuasive design features – but on a selective basis

Users recognised the value of some persuasive design features (push notifications, suggested/recommended posts, follower/like counts) in supporting use but also felt that many reduced user autonomy and created a less healthy online community space.

Push notifications

Viewed as useful for most, provided that the frequency can be controlled.

Moderators and frequent posters/creators particularly found them helpful for drawing attention to new posts. However, **older participants (35+) predominantly disliked push notifications**, viewing them as intrusive.

Suggested posts and trending topics

Users treated suggested / recommended posts with caution.

Whilst some - **particularly younger users - liked the discovery element**, and felt it minimised time spent online, **most felt conflicted**, disliking the data use required and felt that they were **fine if controlled**.

Follower counts

Most users – regardless of their age or how they engage with online communities - disliked follower counts, and felt it gave way to ‘influence culture’ and places too much emphasis on image. However, **some 18-34 year olds felt it gave credibility to user responses (advice, gaming)** and provided assurance it was a legitimate account.

Like counts

Similarly to follower counts, some were sceptical of like counts with regards to triggering ‘popularity contests.’ However, most felt they were a useful indicator of high-quality posts, and **helped to funnel their attention to content likely to be the most useful**.

Friend suggestions/connections

Friend suggestions/connections within an online community **felt random and unnecessary**. Users felt that since they had already been brought together, there was not the need to connect on an individual basis. It was also felt that **suggestions often ‘missed the mark’** and reminded them how much data is collected on them.

Infinite scroll

The majority of users **would not include infinite scroll in an ideal online community** – feeling it kept people on the platform for ‘no good reason’, and longer than necessary.

This aligned with their concerns around online communities, that they would spend too much time on it, **compromising their ‘real lives’** and their wellbeing.

Autoplay (for videos)

Users **unanimously disliked autoplay** in their platform experiences. Many users felt it **reduced their sense of control**, and was **annoying, jolting**, and a **drain on battery** and data. Some users **described taking steps such as muting their phone or having it turned off**, to avoid this. It would not be a part of the ‘ideal’ community.

Gamification

Gamification had **some merits for a minority of users** – badges and ‘achievements’ were **valued in gaming communities and for users dispensing advice**, creating a sense of trust, especially amongst those aged 18-34. However, **most other users did not see the value of gamification** – adding unnecessary ‘frills’ and keeping users on the platform.

In the focus group stage, users also explored how the ideal online community would respond to four specific scenarios.

Users were required to comment explicitly on how they think the ideal online community would handle these challenges, both through community behaviour and platform features. The findings for each scenario are summarised across the following slides.

Users believe that built-in tools to aid information discovery are key in acquainting new members

Scenario 1:

Recent feedback on your community suggests that some members are feeling a bit lost. How can you make sure that users have a positive experience, and join in if they want to?

Online community features to tackle this:

- **A warm (human) welcome** - from moderators and long-standing members, to create a welcoming environment.
- **Dedicated introductory spaces for newcomers** - including optional intro threads, posts, boards/channels, to reduce anxiety and encourage people to join when comfortable.
- **Clear and visible guidance** - pinned posts explaining the purpose of the community, rules, expected behaviour and FAQs to set expectations and help new members navigate.
- **Regular community updates** - many cited feeling easily overwhelmed, especially by large communities with lots of posts. Weekly summaries and 'what you missed' posts were felt to prevent newcomers from feeling lost after time away.
- **Low-pressure use** - like voting in polls, feedback threads, or direct messaging for help.

Platform (technical or design) features to tackle this:

- **On-boarding tools** - such as step-by-step onboarding tutorials, virtual guided tours, or tooltips explaining features and where to find things.
- **Bots and automated guidance** - whilst some were sceptical about the use of bots and AI for verification, for signposting, creating welcome messages and walking them through using the space it was considered to be **a good tool in lieu of overworked moderators**.
- **Structured navigation and sub-groups** - well-organised channels, sub-groups and topic areas were considered important to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed and make it easier for newcomers to find relevant discussions and information.
- **Temporarily limiting access** - users suggested restricting newcomers to a simplified interface/small number of channels until they settle in to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed.
- **Pinned content (e.g. FAQs, wikis) and powerful searchable information** - would build user confidence and reduce repeated questions.

Users overwhelmingly agree that tools to empower and assist moderators are most important in this scenario

Scenario 2:

Two members start a heated argument in the community which disrupts the community vibe.

Online community features to tackle this:

- **Strong, quick, human moderation as an intervention** - users felt strongly that arguments should be addressed quickly, fairly and firmly here, in line with the community rules.
- **Move disputes into private spaces** - most felt conflict should be removed from public view, and the offending users should be guided into a private chat, supervised by a moderator.
- **Time-outs and ‘cooling off’ periods** - users felt moderators should apply temporary posting / commenting freezes to let emotions settle and give users a chance to cool down.
- **Consistent rule enforcement** - clear behavioural rules and visible enforcement of that being escalated, e.g. (warning → suspension → ban) felt essential for dealing with these kinds of situations and demonstrating a consistent approach.
- **Moderator communication on the situation** - most felt as though a moderator should (following the incident) reinforce expectations and re-open the discussion calmly to bring things back on track.

Platform (technical or design) features to tackle this:

- **Moderator ability to lock threads/specific topics or sub-channels** - to prevent escalation whilst moderator intervention takes place.
- **Platform-level tools and moderator action systems** - built-in tools on the platform for logging warnings/ formal strikes (e.g. ‘three strike rule’) were deemed helpful in ensuring that moderators acted consistently and fairly.
- **Temporary muting and suspension** - rather than relying on manual ejection from the online community, built-in tools to block posting, commenting or messaging from specific accounts to ‘temporarily mute/suspend.’
- **Automated language flagging** - this was deemed helpful in drawing moderators’ attention to disputes, especially in large communities with overworked moderators. This would automatically flag / hide posts containing abusive phrases or terms that break community standards, ahead of formal moderator review.
- **Clear reporting mechanisms** - in line with frustrations with existing online communities, users felt clear and unambiguous ‘reporting buttons’ would help in this scenario to flag disruptive behaviour to moderators – differentiating between ‘report to moderators/admin’ and ‘report to [Platform].’

Rapid intervention – using humans and tools – are considered key in disrupting harmful patterns

Scenario 3:

The community starts recommending content that becomes more extreme.

Online community features to tackle this:

- **Clear rules about acceptable content and tone** - considered key for establishing group norms, and defining what is acceptable, borderline or 'extreme' in an easy-to-find location (e.g. pinned posts). Rules should focus on protecting members from harm, misinformation or radicalising content.
- **Human moderation to contextualise and assess 'extremeness'** – users repeatedly stressed that 'extreme' is subjective and requires a human to interpret context – 'it is a qualitative thing that a person needs to review and assess.'
- **Quick intervention when harmful patterns emerge** - if content begins drifting into more polarised or extreme territory, users felt moderators should step in early to prevent normalisation, and users should be encouraged to report content.
- **Allow self-curating/self-censoring** - users felt that they should be empowered to curate their own experience, muting certain comments, avoiding certain tags. Younger users particularly liked the idea of choosing their own likes/dislikes to filter and guide the algorithm.

Platform (technical or design) features to tackle this:

- **Content filtering tools and keyword detection** - many users wanted mechanisms to automatically hide or pre-screen content containing sensitive terms or images (e.g. users consenting before viewing an image or having certain words blocked). They also felt it could disrupt misinformation, with key words triggering official factual information (e.g. official UK medical advice).
- **User-controlled feed personalisation** - personalised controls that enable users to turn off recommendations entirely. This was especially popular amongst older users who wanted to curate their own experience.
- **Mute and suspend tools for moderators** - as with the previous scenario, to ensure rapid takedown.
- **Ability for moderators to remove posts from the community algorithm** - backend tools that enable moderators to remove harmful posts from recommendation, so it doesn't continue spreading.
- **User-controlled safety settings** - settings on the account level that allow users to filter out specific categories.

Users feel tools that enable members to share context and sources would normalise the process of verifying information

Scenario 4:

A longstanding member of your community has posted a message that has been accused of spreading unverified information. What do you do?

Online community features to tackle this:

- As with the other scenarios, **prompted moderator intervention was felt to be required, but also that it should be discreet** - there was a desire among users to avoid 'naming and shaming' or embarrassing a respected member e.g. deleting the post and having a moderator verify the information.
- **Ask for verification and provide space for clarification** - the 'ideal' online communities should encourage fact-seeking rather than immediately punishing members who may have made a mistake.
- **Moderators could correct the record openly, without calling out the individual** - for example moderators using pinned clarification posts to make sure misinformation doesn't spread.
- **Use community verification to de-escalate** - users think that responsibility should not just be with the moderator, and that public correction can come from other members – in turn, normalising fact-checking behaviour.

Platform (technical or design) features to tackle this:

- **Built-in fact checking and AI assistance (used with caution and human oversight) and source prompts** - users felt fact-checking tools could support moderators as a first-line content filter, with moderator sign-off to mitigate against AI errors. Alongside this, a box for 'source' or 'news source' could push people to link their sources.
- **Crowdsourced verification tools** - content creators/frequent posters in particular supported systems such as community notes, that allow multiple users to contribute context or corrections.
- **Flag certain information or topics automatically** - users supported the use of automated systems (again – acting as a first-line filter) to flag high-risk content whilst awaiting moderator review.

Overall, users believe the ‘ideal online community’ would have:

Strong foundations centring around safety, moderation and trust

- **Active moderation with clear consequences** - supported by muting, suspending, deleting and thread-locking tools.
- **Transparent rules and decision-making** - with pinned rules, visible expectations, clear (non-shaming) explanations when content is corrected or removed, to help users understand *when* and *why* actions happen.
- **Content filters, fact-checking and verification tools** - keyword flagging, source prompts, ‘unverified’ labels, crowdsourced verification and cautious use of AI as a first line of defence.

High user control, in personalisation, privacy and navigation

- **Privacy settings users can control** - like personal content filters, options like ‘I don’t want to see this’ and the ability to disable recommendation.
- **Simple navigation and powerful search** - sub-groups, topic channels, FAQs, wikis, pinned guidance and structured information to help users find the right place quickly and avoid user overload/ feeling overwhelmed.
- **Customisable feed and notifications** - personalised content feeds that support user agency – not including things like infinite scroll or autoplay (viewed to reduce agency and autonomy).

Supportive spaces for connection and low-pressure use

- **Spaces for connection and support** - e.g. designated spaces for newcomers, designated mentors/‘buddies’ and a welcoming culture set by long-standing members.
- **Established onboarding processes** - e.g. optional guided tours, welcome bots, step-by-step explanations of features/spaces, and weekly summaries to help members keep up at their own pace.
- **Low-pressure ways to engage** - anonymous polls and Q&A channels, giving members the ability to ask questions or share their views safely.

Selective and intentional use of persuasive design features

- **Persuasive design features only used with user-control** (e.g. push notifications, recommendations).
- **Used only where they enhance (rather than overwhelm) the member experience.** Use of notifications, recommended posts and likes can aid discovery, but autoplay, infinite scroll and intrusive suggestions were rejected.
- **Features that focus on wellbeing, and not maximising time on the platform.** Users felt the ideal online community would encourage intention, meaningful participation, rather than compulsive scrolling.

5 Appendix

Quantitative sample

Sample weighting

Sample		Unweighted n (of 3,098 total)	Weighted % of sample
Gender	Male	1,503	49%
	Female	1,595	52%
Age	18-24	344	11%
	25-34	431	14%
	35-44	644	21%
	45-54	469	15%
	55+	1,210	39%
Income	Low (<£24,999)	716	23%
	Medium (£25,000-£49,000)	871	28%
	High (£50,000<)	967	31%
Region	North	737	23%
	Midlands	480	16%
	East/South	1,023	32%
	Wales	161	5%
	Scotland	250	8%
	London	267	13%
	Northern Ireland	55	3%

Ever used online communities: Sample		Unweighted n (of 2,452 total)	Weighted % of sample
Gender	Male	1,205	49%
	Female	1,242	52%
Age	18-24	271	11%
	25-34	345	14%
	35-44	521	21%
	45-54	366	15%
	55+	945	39%

Never used online communities: Sample		Unweighted n (of 596 total)	Weighted % of sample
Gender	Male	278	46%
	Female	321	54%
Age	18-24	62	10%
	25-34	75	13%
	35-44	116	19%
	45-54	96	16%
	55+	250	42%

Qualitative sample frames

2-day digital community

Sample frame:

- The sample for this research project was designed to ensure broad representation across key demographic groups. We recruited a balanced mix of participants by gender and included individuals from all major socioeconomic grades (A, B, C1, C2, D and E) and UK nations.
- We also introduced minimum quotas across urban–rural location, ethnicity, sexuality and disability/long-term health conditions to ensure sufficient representation of these groups within the sample.
- Participants were intentionally drawn from different types of online communities - for example neighbourhood groups, hobby-based forums and fitness communities - and reflected a mix of use levels and types of experiences.

6 x text-based focus groups

The groups were organised as follows:

Group 1: Users aged 18-34 - 9 participants

Group 2: Users aged 35+ - 8 participants

Group 3: Moderators of online communities - 7 participants

Group 4: Creators / frequent posters in online communities (*Those who post comments, join in with debates and/or post creative content at least once a week, excluding moderators*) - 10 participants

Group 5: Users that have experienced both the benefits and downsides of an online community - 7 participants

Group 6: Users that have had a negative experience within an online community, some of whom reported the issue - 8 participants

What are online communities?

This research used the following definition of online communities:

By online communities we mean: groups of people who have a shared interest or purpose, interacting on a digital platform under shared rules/norms, at a meaningful scale (more than a handful of friends), including forums and local groups, and enabling interaction with people not known offline.

Common features in online communities include:

- User profiles – personal information, avatars and activity history
- Posting & commenting – to allow users to create discussions and reply to others
- Messaging – private or group chats
- Reactions & voting – likes, upvotes and emojis for engagement
- Moderation tools – administrators manage content and enforce community rules
- Search & tagging – features to help users find topics and organise content
- Notifications – alerts for replies, mentions and updates
- Content sharing – allowing users to share images, links, files and videos

Features such as personalised feeds and auto-scroll (or infinite scrolling) are commonly used within online communities, particularly those hosted on social media-style platforms.