

Adults' Media Use and Attitudes Report

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Foreword

In many debates about the social, political and economic future of the UK, there is an increasing emphasis on the importance of media literacy. This is for a range of reasons, including promoting the integrity of information, protecting against scams, minimising risk and harm, and encouraging people to flourish and use their online and media services creatively, critically and confidently.

'Media literacy' can be defined in many ways. Our definition of media literacy is deliberately broad, so that it remains relevant in the context of ongoing rapid technological change:

'the ability to use, understand and create media and communications across multiple formats and services'

Ofcom has had statutory duties to promote and research media literacy since it was established in 2003. These duties were further clarified by the Online Safety Act 2023.

In 2024 Ofcom published its first 3-year media literacy strategy, setting out three central pillars in its programme: Research, Evidence and Evaluation; Engaging Platforms; and People and Partnerships.

Our long-running tracking projects are a foundational aspect of this work, sitting within the research pillar. We have been surveying the UK population - both adults and children - since 2005, asking a range of questions about media habits, attitudes, and understanding.

Over this period, we have needed to update our methodology and questionnaires, and this year's report marks a new methodology. We have returned to a single survey in order to be able to conduct more analysis across different questions, exploring what drives different aspects of media literacy. This means that our trends over time are indicative rather than absolute, and we have indicated this where applicable in our report.

Our sample size this year (7,533 UK adults) enables us to analyse our dataset by a range of groups. In this report we focus on reporting differences mainly by age and socio-economic group and later this year we will publish further analysis focussing on differences by Nation, gender, and minority ethnic group. We also plan to publish topic-specific deep dives.

Our research this year tells a number of stories, including around the rapid growth of artificial intelligence (AI), and how its adoption aligns closely with broader digital engagement, meaning that digital divides could become further entrenched without further action. We also note how, while AI adoption rises, uncertainty about whether or not to trust this technology continues.

The data also reveals stories about trust in news more widely, showing how people are using more informal ways of deciding what to trust, such as comments from other users. There are also continuing questions around trust when it comes to 'mainstream' media sources, with one in five now saying they 'always' question if the information is accurate and truthful on mainstream news sources, with a further 16% either completely rejecting it or disengaging from it.

And the research includes stories about personal data, and scams, and how confident people are in spotting potential fraud. We note how younger people can be over-confident, and less able to identify scams in the scenarios we provide. We also note that recognition of fake material tends to stem from textual cues, while those that believe the material is true tend to base their view on visual cues. This further underpins the importance of learning media literacy skills rather than making assumptions based on the appearance of content in order to gauge reliability.

In our analysis, we explore the drivers for some types of media literacy, and see that breadth of online engagement, and confidence in particular skills, are correlated with more reliable critical judgement. The implications of this may lead to there being value in encouraging narrow users to do more online and thereby build up their skills to stay more aware.

However, we also see in our data that there has been a reduction in the proportion of people that say they use 'lots' of new websites/apps. There is also a reduction in perceptions of positivity about being online, across multiple measures, and fewer users are actively posting or commenting.

This range of attitudes indicates perhaps more uncertainty from people about the role of the internet in their lives. For the first time this year we asked a question on how people feel about the amount of time they spend on screens - four in ten say their screen time is too high most days. Another new question indicated the possibility of wider concerns about the growth of the internet and AI, with four in ten saying they are concerned about the overall environmental impact of being online.

The findings in this report help us prioritise our own activity and provide context and underpinning for our work with grassroots organisations and corporates, and policymakers across the UK, as well as our continued focus on how platform design can mitigate some of the challenges that users face online. We hope that this report is thought-provoking and supports the further identification of the areas throughout our daily lives where media literacy can be encouraged.

Key findings

This report presents the findings from Ofcom's Adults' Media Literacy Tracker, supplemented by insights from our qualitative study, Adults Media Lives. Together, these sources document the extent and range of adults' media literacy in the UK, capturing how people use, understand and navigate media and digital technologies, both online and across other parts of their everyday environment. The research forms part of Ofcom's wider programme of media literacy activity.

More adults are using AI compared to last year, yet scepticism persists

Just over half of adults (54%) say they use AI tools compared to three in ten (31%) last year. Three-quarters of online adults (75%) read AI-generated search summaries at least sometimes. However, attitudes towards AI-generated news are cautious: 57% of adults aware of AI say they would trust it less than a human-written story. Confidence in spotting AI-generated content is mixed, with 44% feeling confident and 31% unsure/ neutral. Qualitative findings show early signs of some adults interacting with AI as if it were a person, or using it for reassurance.

Trust in online information is mixed

Most adults (85%) say they use 'mainstream' media for news but trust varies. Around one in five (19%) always trust it, while a similar proportion (21%) always question its accuracy. Experiences on social media further illustrate an environment of uncertainty about what to trust - 56% of social media users say they have seen false or misleading news in the past year. Among social media users who consider the accuracy of news, the most common approaches include comparing the information with other sources (43%) and checking the original source (42%). Many also turn to social cues: four in ten (41%) look at the comments section for indications of credibility, suggesting that other users' reactions can play a meaningful role in shaping trust.

Understanding and managing personal data varies widely

Most online adults (89%) know that companies collect their data and 31% can identify from a list all the main ways in which this happens. Awareness that online content is tailored has declined to 76% (from 85% last year). Views on use of personal data are divided, with 34% comfortable with companies using their information to tailor the content they are shown and 37% uncomfortable. Most online adults (86%) report using at least one of the security measures we asked about. These gaps matter: weaker data practices - such as password re-use or relying on autofill - are linked to people experiencing higher rates of hacking and financial loss as our later analysis shows. Although many take steps to protect themselves, inconsistent behaviours leave some adults more exposed.

Adults' confidence in assessing online information does not always match their ability

Overall confidence online is high (89%), but confidence in specific skills - spotting scams (82%), recognising advertising (81%), judging accuracy online (72%) - is lower. Performance in scenario tests is mixed. Just over half of search engine users (52%) identified sponsored results correctly. Most online adults (82%) responded safely to a scam email (with indications that this has decreased, down from 88% in 2022), and 74% of social media users identified a fake social media profile. However, gaps persist: 37% felt confident recognising advertising but answered incorrectly, 14% felt confident spotting scams but did not take a safe action, and 17% felt confident about judging the accuracy of

online information but misidentified the fake profile as genuine. This highlights that confidence does not always align with ability.

Younger and older adults show different strengths in evaluating online content

Younger adults (16-24) perform comparatively well at identifying fake social media profiles (88% were able to from a test we set) but, although they had high levels of confidence in their ability, performed less well than older users in identifying advertising in search results. Most adults aged 25-44 are highly active online, yet this age group were the most likely to misjudge the fake social media profile as genuine (16%). Older adults showed strengths in identifying advertising, with those aged 55-74 most accurate at identifying paid-for search results (59%). Adults aged 75+ were most likely to use low-interaction but safe responses to scam emails, and show higher uncertainty in judging fake profiles. Across tasks, breadth of online use and task-specific confidence were stronger predictors of performance than age alone.

Adults are becoming less active on social media and exploring fewer new websites

Posting and commenting on social media has declined from 61% to 49% this year. Exploration of new websites has also fallen, with only 14% using 'lots' of new sites (down from 24%) and 40% using none. Younger adults continue to drive video use and creation - 82% of 16-24s watch videos on social media and 42% of 25-34s post them. Platform use remains strongly age-skewed. Snapchat is used by 78% of 16-24s compared to 3% of 75+, and TikTok by 83% versus 7%. WhatsApp is widely used across all ages, and Facebook remains most popular among the oldest group (81% of online 75+).

Feelings about being online are less positive

The proportion of adults who feel the benefits of being online outweigh the risks has fallen to 59% (from 72% last year). Only 36% of social media users say that these platforms are good for their mental health, down from 42%. Concerns about online behaviour are common: 43% of social media users say people are 'often' or 'always' unkind online, and 27% frequently see viewpoints they disagree with. Screen-time concerns are widespread, with 67% saying they sometimes spend too long on screens and 40% saying this happens most days. Despite this, many adults report benefits: 71% say that being online has broadened their understanding of the world, and 62% say it has helped them learn a new skill. Views on freedom of expression and the environmental impact of being online are divided.

Digital exclusion arises from a lack of access, skills, confidence and circumstances

Six per cent of all adults do not have internet access at home. This offline group is disproportionately older: 17% are aged 65-74 and 66% are aged 75+. Most (81%) live in C2DE households. However, being online does not necessarily mean full digital participation. One in five (20%) online adults rely solely on a smartphone for access. Others face barriers linked to skills and confidence. Narrow internet users make up 21% of users and are more likely to be older, female, in C2DE households, and have lower levels of digital confidence.

Methodology

This report draws its data mainly from our quantitative Adults' Media Literacy Tracker survey, and examines the media use, attitudes and understanding that together form key components of adults' (16 and over) media literacy in the UK.

More detail, including demographic analysis and responses to the full set of survey questions, can be found in the accompanying data tables. A more detailed description of the data collection and analysis process can be found in the technical report.

Alongside the survey findings, this report draws on evidence from Adults Media Lives to offer additional context to adults' media behaviours and experiences. 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 these have evolved over time.

The Adults' Media Literacy Tracker now consists of one survey, completed by 7,533 UK adults aged 16+ between 29 September and 28 November 2025 using a mix of online panels and face-to-face fieldwork. This differs from the approach used between 2021-2024, when the study was split into three separate surveys: Core, Adults' Online Behaviours and Attitudes and Adults' Online Knowledge and Understanding. Moving from three surveys to one survey meant some questions had to be moved around in the survey, and the route respondents took through the survey also changed in places. As a result, year-on-year comparisons should be treated with caution. We have highlighted in footnotes areas where caution should be exercised.

To better understand what shapes different aspects of media literacy, this year we conducted further analysis using a statistical technique called logistic regression. This method allows us to explore how demographic factors and online behaviours relate to the likelihood of specific outcomes such as confidence online or awareness of AI. We created indicators covering AI use, online confidence, critical engagement and exploration of new websites, and used regression analysis to identify which groups of adults were most likely to show these characteristics.

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 them.[1] In our latest research, 21% of internet users were defined as 'narrow', 44% as 'medium' and 34% as 'broad'. It is also important to

[1] The survey question ("which, if any, of these activities do you do online?") captures general behaviour rather than doing these online activities within a specific time period. 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.

consider the small minority of UK adults who do not use the internet. We discuss the topic of digital exclusion and narrow users in the digital exclusion section at the end of this report.

This report is structured into chapters that cover the key components of adults' media literacy:

Chapter name	Description
Artificial intelligence	Examines adults' awareness and use of AI tools and AI-generated content, including trust, confidence, and emerging behaviours in how people incorporate AI into everyday tasks.
Trust in news and information	Explores how adults engage with mainstream news, their exposure to misleading content, and the cues and checks they use when assessing the reliability of information.
Personal data use and online security	Looks at adults' understanding of data collection and personalisation, levels of comfort with data use, and the measures people take to protect their privacy and security.
Confidence and critical understanding of online information	Assesses how confident adults feel when navigating online information and how this compares with their performance in scenario-based tests involving scams, advertising and fake profiles.
Online behaviours and communications	Summarises patterns in social media use, content creation, communication habits and exploration of new online spaces, as well as differences across age groups.
Online attitudes and wellbeing	Outlines how adults feel about being online, including perceived benefits and risks, exposure to negative content, screen-time concerns and the role of the internet in creativity and wellbeing.
Digital exclusion	Examines who is most at risk of digital exclusion and why, considering not just access but also device constraints, skills, confidence and intersecting barriers that limit participation.

Artificial intelligence

Introduction

Artificial intelligence is becoming a routine part of people's online experiences. Unlike earlier digital innovations that arrived as distinct tools or apps, AI capabilities are now woven into existing digital experiences, often operating seamlessly in the background. About half of adults say they use AI tools directly, and many others encounter AI as a natural part of their online activity, even if they do not actively look for such tools. The survey data below reflects people's own perceptions of how they use AI.

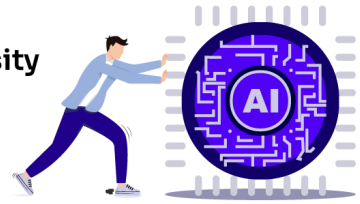
Engagement with AI varies widely: adults differ in how often they use it, what they use it for, and how confident they feel in assessing AI-produced material. This chapter explores all of these, focusing on adoption, trust, and people's ability to recognise AI-generated content.

AI Adoption

54% of adults use AI tools;
79% of 16–24s and **74%** of 25–34s

Among AI users:
47% use for **work/study**
45% use for **factual info**

43% used AI **out of curiosity**



AI in Search

75% of online adults read **AI generated search summaries**

42% read them **often or always**



Trust

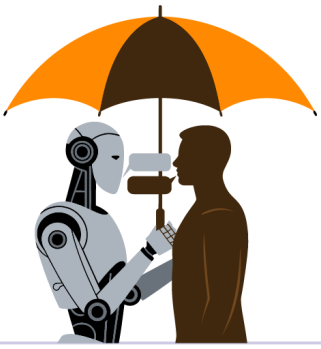
57% of those aware of AI would **trust an AI generated new story less than one written by a person**



44% of those aware of AI are **confident they recognise whether content produced online is by a person or AI**

Companionship

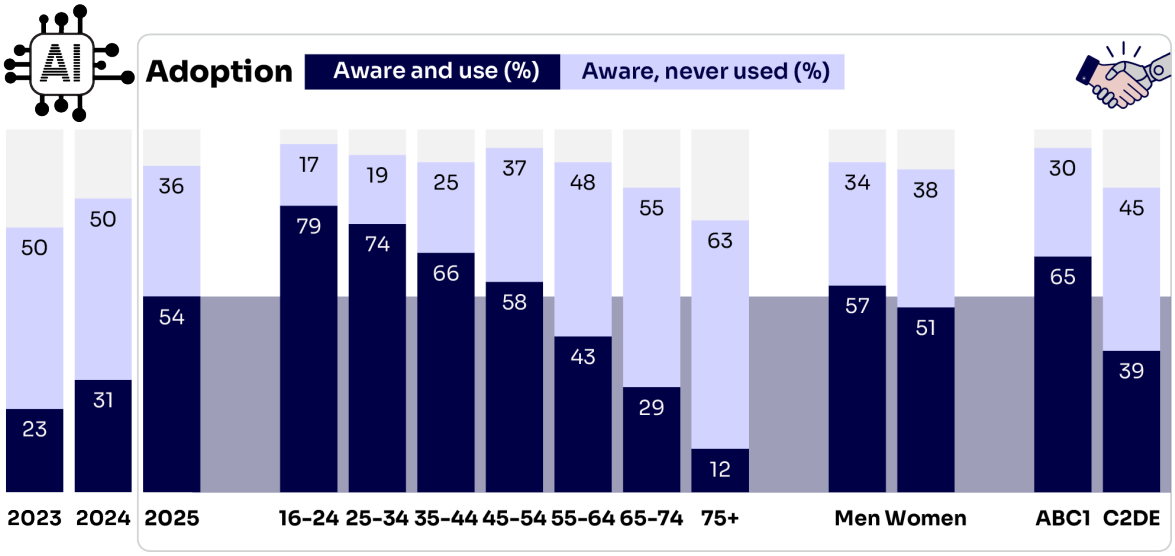
12% of AI users use it for **conversation**;
19% among 25–34 AI users



AI adoption continues to accelerate

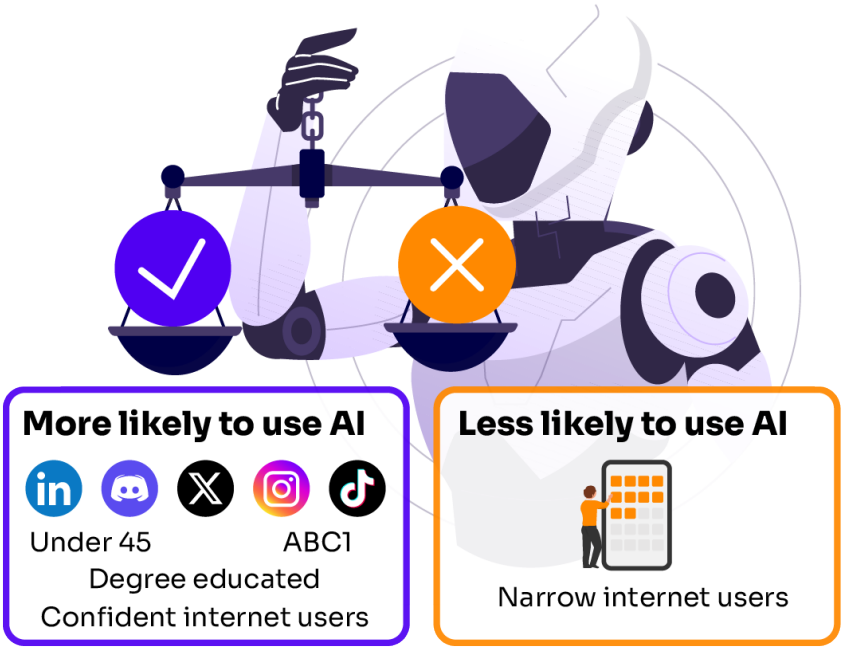
AI tools are becoming part of everyday life. Just over half of adults (54%) now say they use applications such as ChatGPT, Copilot or Gemini. Younger adults continue to drive growth in use, with about four in five 16-24s (79%) and three quarters of 25-34s (74%) saying they use AI tools.

While men remain somewhat more likely than women to report using AI (57% compared with 51%), this gap appears to have narrowed since 2024.[2]



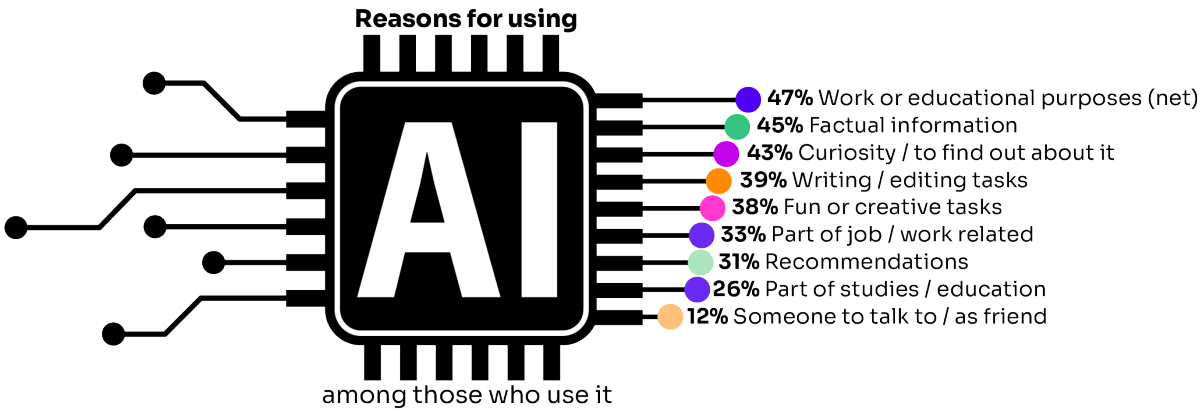
Base: For the 2025 figures the base is all respondents to Module 1 (3,768). For clarity, those who are unaware of AI / unsure whether they were aware are not shown in the chart - which is why responses do not sum up to 100%.

To understand which factors are most strongly associated with AI awareness and use, we carried out additional statistical analysis using binary logistic regression. The results suggest that AI adoption aligns closely with broader digital engagement: adults active on platforms such as Discord, LinkedIn, Instagram, TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) are substantially more likely to use AI. Demographics also matter; those under 45, degree educated, and in ABC1 households show higher take-up. Confident internet users also report greater use. In contrast, narrow internet users are less likely to use AI, suggesting that breadth of online activity is an important marker of adoption. These findings highlight how AI use is becoming more embedded within people's wider digital repertoires.



[2] This narrowing in the AI use gender gap could be due to a change in the methodology and should be treated with caution. Gender was included in the logistic regression cited in the next paragraph and was seen to be a driver of AI use although not as strong a driver as the others cited.

AI users turn to AI for different reasons, most often to support work or study (47%) or to find factual information (45%). Curiosity is also a frequent reason for use, with 43% saying they have used AI out of curiosity. Reflecting the increased attention on the use of AI in education, among younger AI users, study-related use is particularly common (51% of 16-24-year-old AI users say they use it as part of their studies /for educational purposes).



Base: All those who use AI in module 1 (2,061). Those who use AI for work / education is a net created from two answer codes.

Insights from Ofcom's qualitative Adults' Media Lives research show how people's experiences of AI are evolving. Participants described moving from using AI for narrow, task-specific purposes to experimenting with broader and sometimes creative applications.

"Never used it… but then I interviewed for jobs… I used the job description to help me come up with questions and answers."

Brigit, 25

Some also expressed concern about the continuing impact of AI on the future of the workplace.

"[AI] hasn't got that far yet to do [specific work task] but it will and that's what worries me."

Suki, 48

A minority report using AI for companionship but there are signs of growing emotional reliance

A relatively small proportion of AI users report using it for conversational purposes (12%), rising to around one in five (19%) among 25-34s. However, qualitative insights indicate that some adults treat AI **as a conversational partner**, drawing on it for reassurance or support.

[ASKED CHATGPT FOR ADVICE AFTER A BREAK-UP] "Even through my break-up I've been like "Should I be feeling this way? What do you think he's feeling?" Little things.

Obviously, I don't trust exactly what it's saying back, but it can be quite good… He [ex-boyfriend] messaged me about something, and I didn't know how to respond. So, I asked ChatGPT how to respond. And it [said] "Oh, I'm so sorry you're going through that" and then answered it. I wasn't like I was using that over actual human sort of advice. And I

don't think I would listen to ChatGPT over actual human advice either, but I think maybe I was using it as more of a confirmation."

Chloe, 25

Others described how using AI can help them feel less isolated, especially when working alone:

"When you work remotely you are on your own in a room in the house with [only] the dog for company. And unless you've had a Teams call, or made a phone call, most of your day is going to be "tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap", you know? You just want to appreciate that there is another human at the end of that interaction. Maybe thinking that you are talking to another person makes it less isolating."

Denise, 48

AI in search is becoming embedded in everyday information-seeking

Most online adults say they read AI search summaries, sometimes called AI Overviews, which provide a short, automated summary of information drawn from across the web. Three-quarters of online adults (75%) say they read these summaries at least some of the time and more than two in five (42%) say they read them 'often' or 'always'. This indicates that this feature has already become a routine part of how people search for information online.[3]

Even among those who do not use AI chatbots, more than half (54%) say they read AI search summaries at least sometimes. Younger internet users are especially likely to engage with them, with around six in ten 16-24-year-olds (62%) and 25-34-year-olds (60%) saying they read these summaries 'often' or 'always'.

This suggests that for many younger internet users, AI search summaries are becoming a gateway to online information.

Caution towards AI-generated news remains common, though views vary. As AI becomes more embedded in information-seeking, questions of trust become increasingly important. The majority of adults who are aware of AI remain cautious about AI-generated news. Over half (57%) say they would trust a news story written by AI **less** than one written by a person. A further 27% say they would trust AI-generated news about the **same** as one written by a person, and 7% say they would trust AI-generated news **more**. Even among AI users, half (50%) say they would trust an AI-generated news story less.

Views differ across age groups: adults aged 25-44 who are aware of AI are more likely to say they would trust an AI-generated news story **about the same** as one written by a person (37% of those aged 25-44), compared with 17% of those aged 55+. In contrast, adults aged 55+ tend to be more sceptical: **68%** say they would trust an AI-generated news story **less**, compared with **47%** of those aged 25-44.[4]

[3] Respondents were prompted with an image of an AI search summary on the average weather in the UK in October.

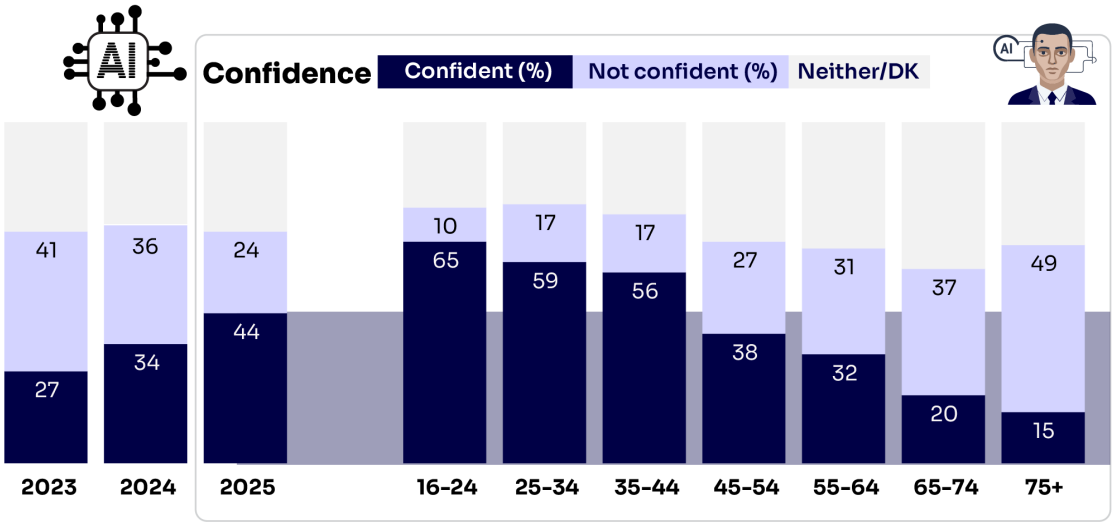
[4] Those aged 55-64, 65-74 and 75+ who are aware of AI have similar levels of distrust in AI-generated news (66%, 69%, 69% respectively would trust an AI-generated news story less than one written by a person).

Confidence in spotting AI-generated content is growing, but remains limited

Confidence in recognising AI-generated content remains mixed among those aware of AI. Confidence does not necessarily translate into ability to spot AI-generated content in practice. For more information on the overlap between confidence and critical evaluation of news see the next section.

However, there are indications that perceived confidence in spotting AI-generated content is growing.[5] More adults feel confident than not when deciding whether something online was produced by a person or by AI (44% compared with 24%), but only a small minority say they feel very confident (10%), and as noted above, confidence does not always align with actual ability.

Younger adults are more likely to feel confident, while those aged 55+ are more likely to say they do not feel confident.



Base: For the 2025 figures the base is all respondents to Module 1 who are aware of AI (3,274). For clarity, those who said, 'neither confident nor not confident' and 'don't know' are in the grey bars.

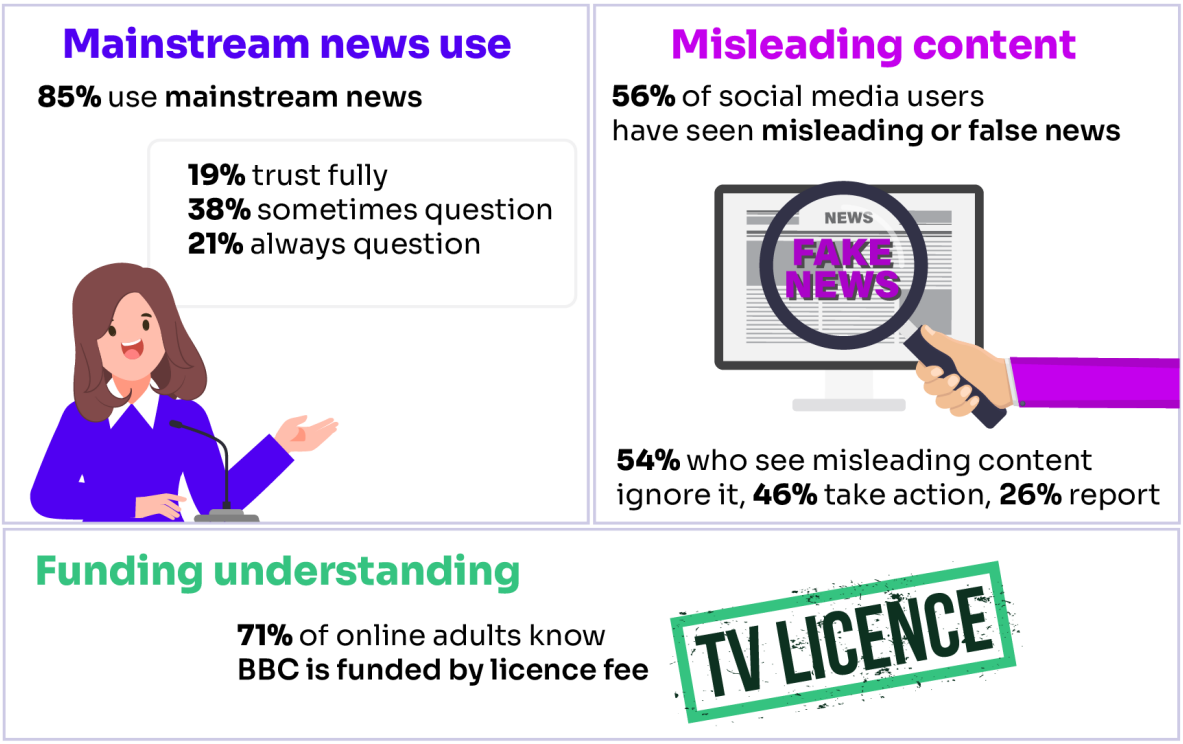
Among AI users themselves, confidence is higher overall, with over half (55%) saying they feel able to spot AI-generated content, although again, only around one in ten (13%) feel very confident.

[5] The amount of change may be influenced by methodological changes.

Trust in news and information

Introduction

People encounter news and information from a wide range of sources and assessing what to trust is a key part of media literacy. This chapter looks at how people use and evaluate news from mainstream media sources, their exposure to misleading or false content, and the checks and cues they rely on when deciding what to believe. It also examines adults' understanding of how the organisations and services which provide news and information are funded, which can shape expectations of accuracy, impartiality and intent.

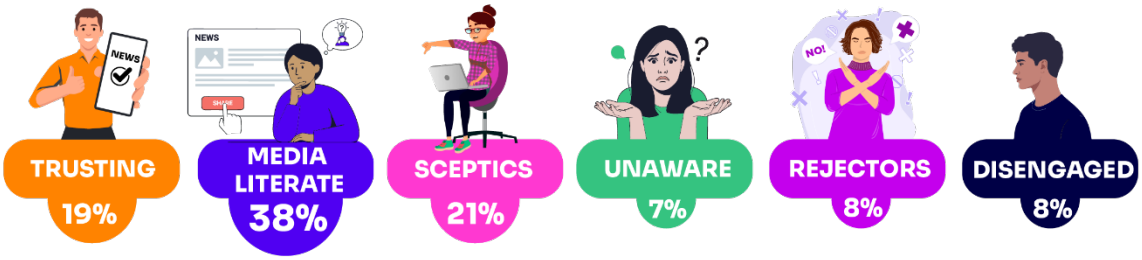


Mainstream media remains widely used, but trust is fragmented

Most adults (85%) say they use mainstream media sources for news, but the way they engage with them differs.[6] Around one in five adults (19%) can be seen as **trusting**: users who say they *always trust* mainstream media to be accurate. The largest group, almost two in five (38%), appear more **media-literate** in their engagement: they use mainstream media but *sometimes question* the accuracy or truthfulness of what they see. A further one in five adults (21%) are more **sceptical**, saying they *always question* whether mainstream media is accurate. Another 7% use mainstream media but do not think about its accuracy. A minority of adults **do not use mainstream media**: 8% avoid it because they do not trust it, and another 8% say they are not interested in the news.

[6] Mainstream media sources were defined in the survey as news organisations such as "BBC, ITV, Sky News and the press such as The Sun, The Times, The Guardian, the Daily Mail etc".

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	TRUSTING 19%	MEDIA LITERATE 38%	SCEPTICS 21%	UNAWARE 7%	REJECTORS 8%	DISENGAGED 8%
	Use mainstream media **Trust them** to give me accurate and truthful information	**Use mainstream media** **Sometimes question** if the information is accurate and truthful	**Use mainstream media** **Always question** if the information is accurate and truthful	**Use mainstream media** **Don't think about** whether the information is accurate and truthful	**Don't use mainstream media** **Don't trust them** to give me accurate and truthful information	**Don't use mainstream media** Other reason/ not interested in news
ABC1	**19%**	**43%**	**22%**	**6%**	**6%**	**5%**
C2DE	**19%**	**32%**	**19%**	**8%**	**10%**	**12%**

Base: All Module 4 respondents (3,762), including ABC1 (2,127) and C2DE (1,628).

Patterns of trust and use vary across demographic groups. Adults in ABC1 households are more likely to say they use mainstream media (89%) than those in C2DE households (78%). People in C2DE households are more likely not to use mainstream media because they do not trust it (10% compared with 6% of ABC1 adults).

Age also plays a role. Those aged 65-74 have the most differences compared to the average: they are more likely to say they do not use mainstream media (23% compared with 15% overall). This is because they are more likely to have disengaged due to distrust (12% compared with 8% overall).

Taken together, these differences suggest that while mainstream media remains a core part of people's media habits, confidence in its accuracy is not universal, and distrust is shaping engagement for some groups.

To explore whether exposure to different viewpoints plays a role in how people engage with mainstream news, we carried out an exploratory analysis looking at the relationship between social media experiences and critical news engagement. Those who say they rarely encounter views they disagree with are more likely to use mainstream media without thinking about whether it is accurate (14%), whereas this is much less common among social media users who often see contrasting views (3%). This suggests that limited exposure to differing perspectives may be associated with more passive or uncritical news engagement.

We also looked at how engagement with mainstream news relates to wider civic and community activity. Adults who use mainstream news sources, regardless of their level of trust in it, tend to show higher levels of civic engagement than those who avoid it (41% of those who use mainstream news sources did at least one civic activity last year compared to 24% of those who do not use mainstream news).[7] Adults who trust mainstream news are more likely to volunteer (19%) or opt in

[7] This figure refers to respondents who selected at least one of the following: taken part in demonstrations or street protests, contacted your MP or local councillor, Continued membership of a UK political party or joined one for the first time, Volunteered for social, environmental or charitable causes, Opted-in for information about social, environmental or charitable causes, Boycotted certain products for political reasons.

to social, environmental or charitable causes (15%) than those who avoid mainstream news because they do not trust it (8% and 5% respectively).[8]

Insights from Adults' Media Lives add further context: while some participants still appreciated mainstream news media, others described stepping back from it because it felt overwhelming or emotionally draining.

"Every time the news comes on, I turn over because it's too depressing. The world is too depressing at the moment."

Elizabeth, 64

People's exposure to misleading content such as deepfakes further heightened doubts about whether they could trust what they saw online or on television, reinforcing concerns about the reliability of news in an increasingly complex information environment.

"The BBC sometimes comes up with things, doesn't it? 'AI-generated' or 'This picture is false', because they've got the technology to be able to determine. The likes of me and Joe Bloggs here… generally I don't think we stand a chance."

Donald, 71

Social cues shape how many adults judge news on social media

Social platforms are also a routine source of news exposure: 78% of social media users say they see news on these apps, and three in ten (30%) go on to share it. Among those who share news, only a minority (23%) say they always check information from unfamiliar sources before sharing, although three in ten (31%) say they check often.

When assessing whether news is accurate more generally, around one in six (17%) social media users say they always consider whether what they see is truthful, and three in ten (29%) say they often do so. The most common checks people use are looking for the same information on other sites or apps (43%) or checking the original source (42%).

Many also draw heavily on social cues, with around four in ten (41%) looking at the comments section to gauge reliability - suggesting that other users' reactions can play a meaningful role in how people judge what to trust.

Insights from Adults' Media Lives reflect these behaviours: participants often described the comments as a form of 'quality control', relying on other users' reactions to judge whether a story seemed credible.

If you see something on social media, whether you believe it or not, you can go to the comments and see everyone's points… If most people agree with it, you know you should be at least somewhat agreeing with it.

Hazeem, 21

[8] Other factors can also drive this association, for example socio-economic group. Those in group AB are both more likely to use mainstream news sources at all and take part in any civic engagement compared to all other groups.

Exposure to misleading news content is common

Self-reported encounters with misleading or false news remain common. More than half of social media users (56%) say they have come across misleading or false news in the past year. While this represents an increase (by seven percentage points) since last year, some of this uplift is likely to be a result of changes in how the question was asked.[9] However, a similar pattern appears in Ofcom's Online Experiences Tracker, where four in ten online adults (41%) reported encountering misinformation, up four percentage points since early 2024.[10] The Online Experiences Tracker found that the most common type of misinformation identified by participants (in their most recent experience) was political or electoral (29%), followed by misinformation related to conflict (25%).[11]

Those who spend more time online are more likely to say they encounter misleading content compared with those who spend less time online. This helps explain why younger adults, who tend to spend more time online, report particularly high exposure, with around two-thirds (65%) of social media users aged 16-34 saying they have seen misleading or false news, compared to 56% of all social media users.

Responses to seeing misleading or false news are divided. Over half (54%) say they simply ignore it. But almost half (46%) say they take some form of action, most commonly reporting the content to the site or app (26%).



Base: All Module 4 respondents who use social media apps and sites (3,152) and all who say they have seen news content on social media apps or sites in the past year that they thought was untrue or misleading (1,758).

[9] This year the survey routing for this question was changed. It is now asked of all those who say they use social media apps and sites. This was previously asked of all respondents who use apps or sites to watch or upload videos or clips, to watch or share live stream videos, for sending messages or making video/ voice calls or for social media.

[10] Ofcom's Online Experiences Tracker finds that 37% of UK online adults aged 18+ say they have seen or experienced misinformation over the last four weeks, fieldwork dates were 3rd - 22nd January 2024 compared to 41% on 19th June - 3rd July 2025.

[11] The Online Experiences Tracker asks follow-up questions based on the participants most recent experience of an online harm in the last four weeks and participants selected these options from a list.

Understanding of how services are funded varies by platform

Understanding how platforms generate revenue is an important part of media literacy, because the way a service is funded shapes its purpose, whether primarily to inform, entertain, or sell to its users, and therefore can influence how people interpret and engage with the content they see.

When asked about the funding models for media across broadcast and online services, awareness is highest for established broadcasters: seven in ten online adults (71%) correctly say the BBC is funded mainly by the licence fee. And around six in ten (59%) identify advertising as the main funding source for other public service broadcasters. Online adults are more confident about the funding model for streaming services, with most (68%) recognising subscriptions as their primary source of income.

Understanding is more mixed for platforms where revenue models are less visible. Just over half of online adults identify advertising as the main source of income for both social media platforms (51%) and search engines (53%), while relatively large minorities recognise that user data is central to how these services are funded (18% and 17% respectively). These patterns suggest that while adults have a broad grasp of how traditional and subscription-based services operate, uncertainty is more common for digital platforms where funding is more complex and less visible, potentially shaping how people interpret the content, recommendations and advertising they encounter online.

Personal data use and online security

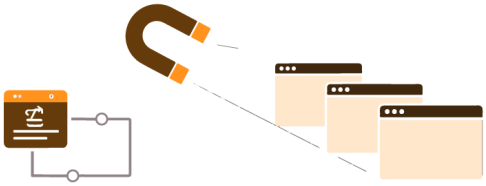
Introduction

Personal data sits at the core of people's online experiences, influencing everything from the content they are shown to the advertising they receive. Understanding that personal data is collected, and that it can be used to tailor online content to individuals, is a key component of media literacy. This chapter examines adults' awareness of how their data may be collected and used, their comfort with companies doing so, and the steps they take to protect their privacy and security online.

Data collection awareness

89% of online adults know that **companies collect data online through various methods**

Only **31%** aware of all methods



Awareness of **algorithmic tailoring**: **76%** (but decreased from 85%)

Comfort with personal data use

34% of online adults are **comfortable with companies using their data to show them tailored content**

37% uncomfortable



Comfort rises with clear explanations **(35%)** or opt-out options **(34%)**

Online protection

86% of online adults use at least one security measure listed



48% fingerprint or face ID



46% download latest software updates



46% use security software

Most online adults know their data is collected, but understanding varies on how this works

Most online adults recognise that their activity generates personal data, but their understanding of the different ways in which this happens varies. Nine in ten online adults (89%) know that companies collect information about people in at least one way.[12] Awareness of specific mechanisms is more uneven: most recognise that websites use cookies (77%), while smaller proportions say they know

[12] This figure refers to respondents who selected at least one of the four data-collection methods listed in the survey question ('cookies', social media activity, registering with a website or app, or data collected via smartphone apps).

that companies collect information through social media activity (54%) or via smartphone apps (45%). Three in ten (31%) are aware of *all* the methods.

There are small demographic differences. Younger internet users are less likely than older internet users to recognise cookies as a way information is collected (71% of those aged 16-24 compared with 77% overall) and are also less likely to know about all the different ways in which data can be gathered (24% compared with 31% overall).

People are also conscious that the content they see online is shaped by this data, although there are indications that this knowledge has decreased. Three-quarters of online adults (76% vs 85% last year) say they are aware that apps and websites tailor the results shown based on user information.[13] Those aged 75+ are the least likely to know about algorithms tailoring the information users see, with almost half (46%) saying they are not aware. Around one in five (ranging from 20% to 26%) of all the other age groups are unaware of tailoring. The vast majority (81%) of those in ABC1 households are aware of tailoring online, compared with 68% of people in C2DE households.

Views on personalised advertising reflect similar patterns: two-thirds (66%) believe the adverts they see are different to those shown to another person visiting the same site, highlighting fairly widespread awareness of targeted advertising.

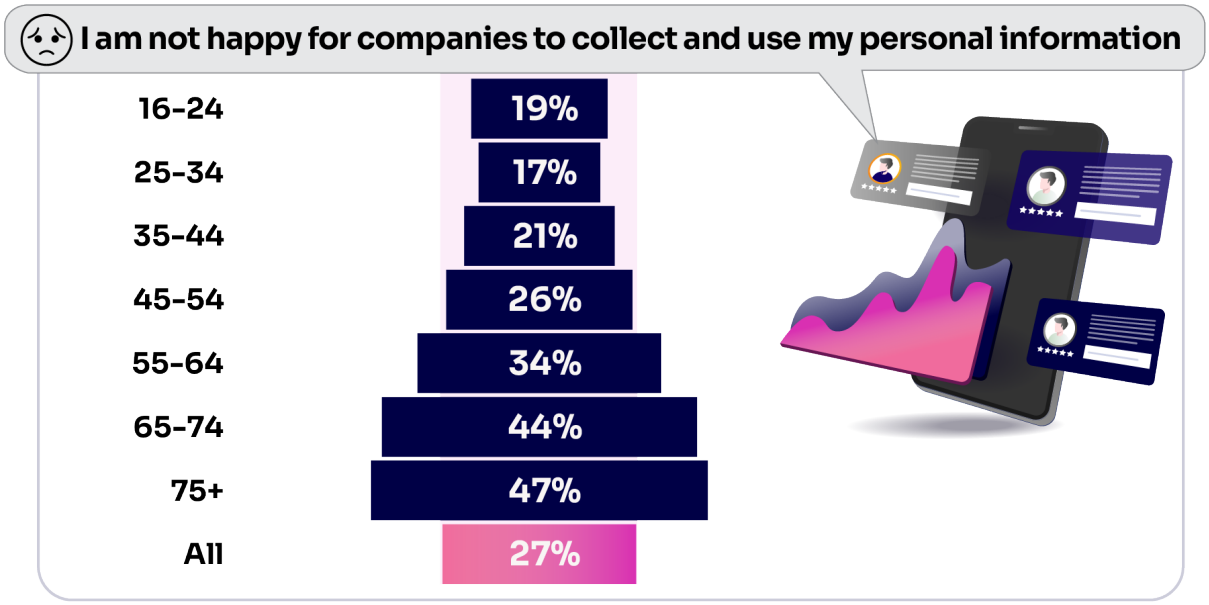
Comfort with personal data use is mixed; older adults more cautious

Adults differ in how comfortable they feel about companies using their personal data. Around a third (34%) say they are happy for apps and sites to use their data to decide what to show them, while a slightly larger share (37%) disagree. Those aged 16-54 are marginally more likely to be happy for apps and sites to use the information they have collected, while those aged 55 and over are more likely to feel negatively.[14]

Attitudes towards data sharing depend on the level of control people feel they have. Around a third say they are comfortable with companies collecting and using their personal data if the organisation is clear about how the information will be used (35%) or if they can opt out (34%). But more than a quarter (27%) say they are never happy for companies to collect and use their personal information, regardless of the circumstances.

[13] This trend is indicative due to methodological changes this year.

[14] Agreement among 16-24s, 25-34s, 35-44s and 45-54s was 38%, 43%, 40% and 36% respectively. Among older adults, disagreement was higher: 43% for those aged 55-64, 49% for those aged 65-74 and 57% for those aged 75+.



Base: All online module 2 respondents (3,523).

Many adults take steps to stay secure online, but risks and confidence gaps remain

Most online adults report taking steps to protect themselves online. Nearly nine in ten (86%) say that they, or someone in their household, uses at least one of the security measures we asked about.[15] Biometric tools such as fingerprint or facial recognition are the most widely used (48%), followed by keeping software up to date (46%) and using security software (46%).

People also apply a range of checks before entering financial details for an online purchase. More than half say they only buy from companies they recognise (62%) or check that the site looks secure (55%). Others use additional safeguards such as reputable payment apps (37%), or look for assurances that their data will not be passed on (26%). Biometrics are increasingly part of financial security: four in ten online banking users or those who pay bills online log in using fingerprint or facial recognition (41%).

Overall, password habits show a similar mix: six in ten online adults (61%) say they use strong passwords, while more than a quarter (26%) re-use passwords across different accounts, and one in five (20%) say they frequently forget them. Those aged 16-24 are particularly likely to re-use passwords, with more than a third (34%) saying they do this.

Gaps in online security practices can leave people more vulnerable to harm. Among adults who use online banking or pay bills online, those who allow their browser to autofill passwords were more likely to report that their personal or financial information had been stolen/used without their permission (11%, compared with 5% of those who typed in their details and 6% of those who used fingerprint or facial recognition). Password habits also show a link to harm: 13% of online adults who re-use passwords and 13% of those who often forget them said their email or social media accounts

[15] Based on respondents selecting at least one of the following security measures: using fingerprint or facial recognition to access a device, app or make purchases; downloading the latest software updates; using anti-virus or anti-spyware software; using email filters to block spam; routinely backing up device data; using a firewall; using a virtual private network (VPN); or using tools such as NewsGuard to flag potentially false information.

had been hacked, compared with 10% of those using strong, unique passwords. A similar pattern appears for financial loss online. 12% of online adults who re-use passwords and 12% of those who frequently forget them said they had lost money online (for example, by being scammed or 'ripped off'), compared with 8% of those using strong, unique passwords.

Confidence in controlling personal data is mixed.[16] Just over half (57%) of online adults feel confident managing who has access to their personal information, while around a quarter neither feel confident nor unconfident. Online adults aged 16-24 (65%) and 25-34 (68%) were more likely than average to feel confident in managing who has access to their personal information (57% overall). In contrast, adults aged 75+ were more likely to say they do not feel confident (34% compared with 18% overall). A similar pattern appears among social media users, where six in ten (62%) say they feel confident using privacy settings to control who sees the photos or videos they post.

[16] Earlier findings in this report show that confidence does not always align with demonstrated ability and should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Critical understanding of online information

Introduction

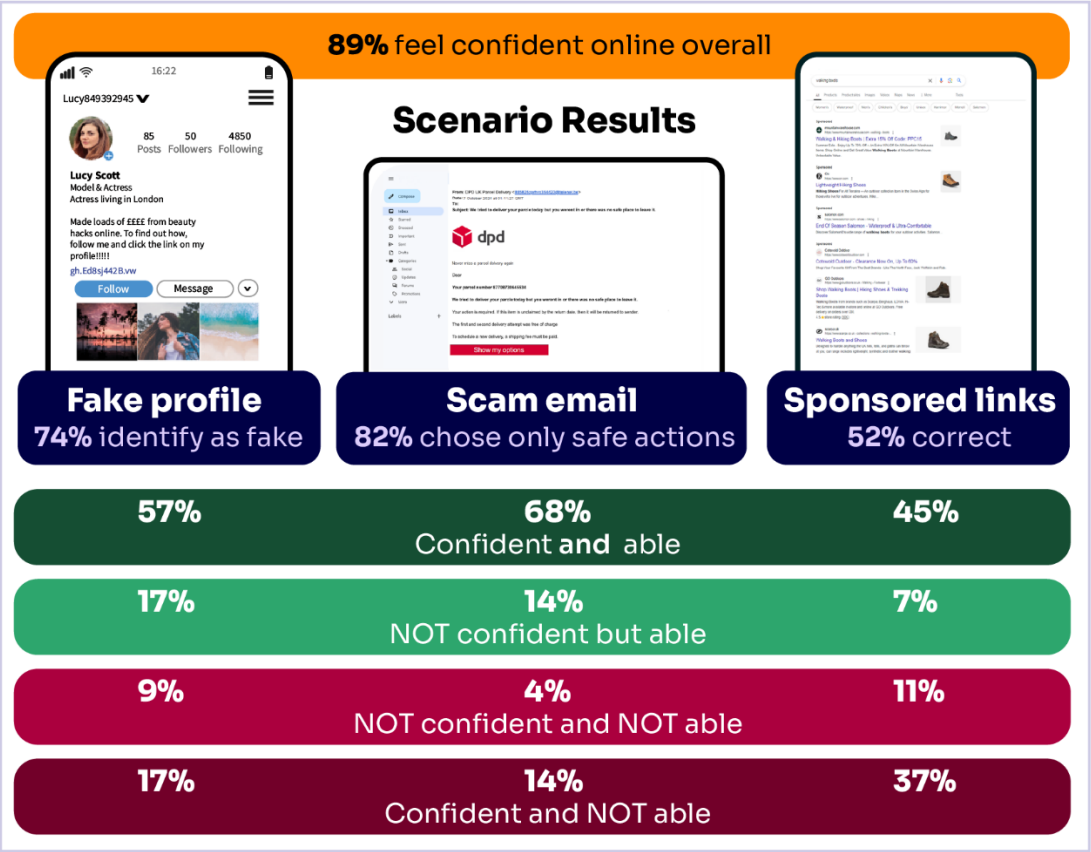
'Critical understanding' is a core element of media literacy. It enables people to assess the information they encounter online, helping them benefit from digital services while avoiding harm.

Confidence and critical understanding can either strengthen or undermine people's online judgement. When confidence exceeds ability, adults may take risks or make mistakes. When ability is stronger than confidence, they may doubt their judgement and feel unsafe online.

In this chapter, we explore this relationship by asking adults how confident they feel about specific online tasks and then testing their ability through short scenarios.[17] This creates four categories:

- Confident and able;
- Confident but not able;
- Not confident but able;
- Not confident and not able.

This approach helps us understand where confidence aligns with ability, and where gaps may leave people more vulnerable online.



[17] The three scenarios are: examples of sponsored links, a fake social media profile, and a scam email.

Adults generally feel confident online, though fewer feel confident in judging whether information is true

Most online adults (89%) say they feel confident as an internet user. Confidence is strong for tasks such as recognising scam messages (82%) and identifying online advertising (81%), but fewer adults feel confident judging whether online information is true or false (72%), and this has decreased slightly since last year.[18]

But confidence overall doesn't tell the whole story. Just over half of adults (53%) feel *very* confident at an overall level, but far fewer feel very confident in specific skills: 30% for recognising advertising, 29% for spotting scams, and only 21% for judging whether information is true or false.

To understand the wider factors that shape adults' levels of confidence, we used a statistical technique called binary logistic regression to examine which demographic and behavioural characteristics are most strongly associated with feeling confident online. Using a combined measure of total confidence across general internet use, scam detection, recognising online advertising and judging accuracy, the analysis shows that breadth of online activity is the strongest marker of digital confidence. Broad and medium internet users were significantly more likely than narrow users to feel confident across all areas. Confidence was also more common among adults who spend more time online, those in full-time work, people with higher levels of formal education, adults without a physical limiting condition, and those who were aware of AI.

Confidence also varies by age, although to a lesser extent than by breadth of internet use. Adults aged 25-34 and 35-44 were the most likely to be confident across all areas (both 72%), but other age groups followed close behind. Confidence among adults aged 16-24 (62%), 45-54 (64%) and 55-64 (58%) showed only modest differences, and even those aged 65-74 (47%) and 75+ (46%) experienced a smaller drop than the decrease seen when moving from broad (78%) to medium (61%) to narrow users (42%). These patterns underline that breadth of online activity is a much stronger differentiator of confidence than age.

Number of questions responded 'Very confident' or 'Fairly confident'	Age							Breadth of internet use		
	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	Narrow	Medium	Broad
0	3%	2%	3%	6%	7%	8%	12%	14%	3%	1%
1	7%	4%	5%	8%	8%	11%	10%	13%	8%	3%
2	10%	6%	7%	7%	8%	11%	14%	13%	10%	4%
3	18%	16%	14%	16%	19%	23%	18%	17%	19%	15%
4	62%	72%	72%	64%	58%	47%	46%	42%	61%	78%

Base: All respondents who were eligible to be included in the logistic regression (3,515). Due to the modular nature of the survey this does not represent all online adults. Subgroup bases: 16-24 (517), 25-34 (592), 35-44 (613), 45-54 (604), 55-64 (554), 65-74 (387), 75+ (252), 'narrow' users (737), 'medium' users (1,485), 'broad' users (1,239).

[18] Last year 76% felt confident in judging whether the information they saw online was true or false. However, this trend should be seen as indicative given the methodological changes this year.

Identifying sponsored search results continues to be challenging

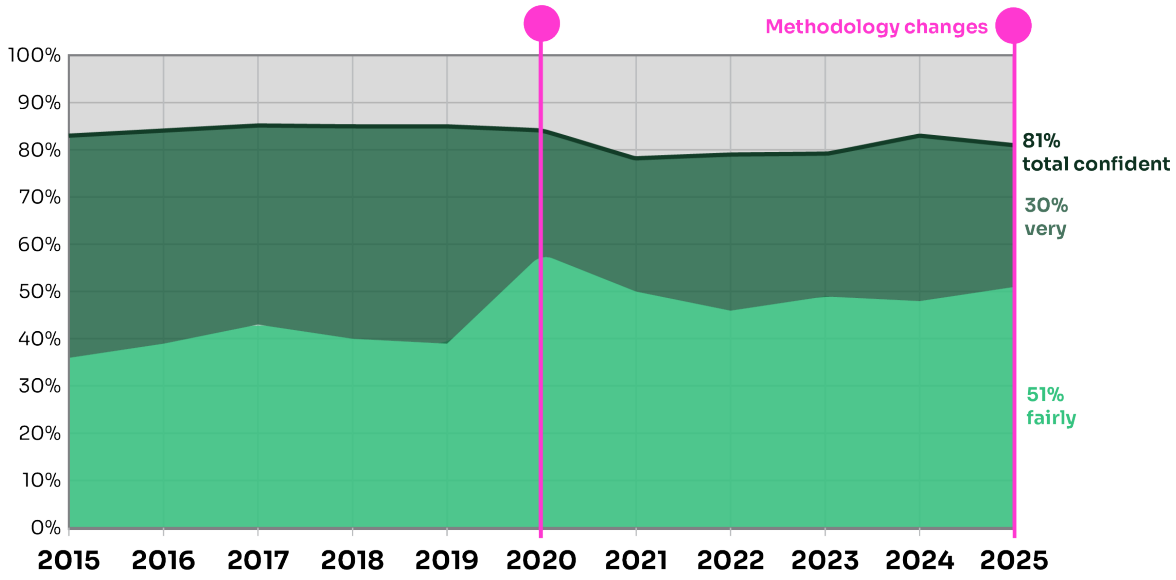
Search engines remain a key gateway to information. Almost all online adults (96%) report using them in the past year, and data from Ipsos iris shows that there were nearly 9 billion Google search page views by UK adults in October 2025.[19] Despite this, many find it difficult to recognise when search results are paid for.

To test this, respondents were shown a Google search for walking boots and asked why the top four 'sponsored' links appeared first.[20] Just over half of search engine users (52%) correctly identified that the results were paid placements. This is similar to 2018 (48%) and unchanged since last year, indicating little improvement over time. Others attributed the placement to relevance (25%) or popularity (24%), as well as, or instead of, recognising them as advertising.

Performance varied by age. Those aged 55-74 were more likely to identify sponsored links accurately (58% of 55-64s and 59% of 65-74s) whereas younger adults were least likely to. Younger adults were more likely to attribute the placement to non-advertising factors; for example, one-third (33% vs 25% of all) of 25-34s believed the links appeared because they were 'best' or 'most relevant'.

Although eight in ten (81%) of adults felt confident in recognising advertising, just three in ten (30%) felt very confident, while half (51%) felt just 'fairly' confident in their ability. This is part of a notable decline in the number of 'very' confident adults, which was 46% in 2019.

Confidence in recognising advertising: 2015-2025



Base: For the 2025 figures base is all online adults (7,029). The grey section represents those who said they did not feel confident, didn't know, or felt neither confident nor not confident. This trend is indicative. This question was asked from 2020-2024 in two different surveys. To help ensure comparability we used the questionnaire closest to the 2025 method.

Confidence did not always align with performance. Less than half of search engine users (45%) were both confident and correct. A sizeable group (37%) said they were confident in recognising online

[19] Ipsos, Ipsos iris Online Audience Measurement Service, Google - Search, October 2025, age: 18+, UK internet users.

[20] 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.

advertising but did not identify the sponsored links accurately when tested. This 'confident but not able' group was particularly common among 25-44-year-olds: 47% of 25-34s and 42% of 35-44s fell into this category compared with 37% overall.

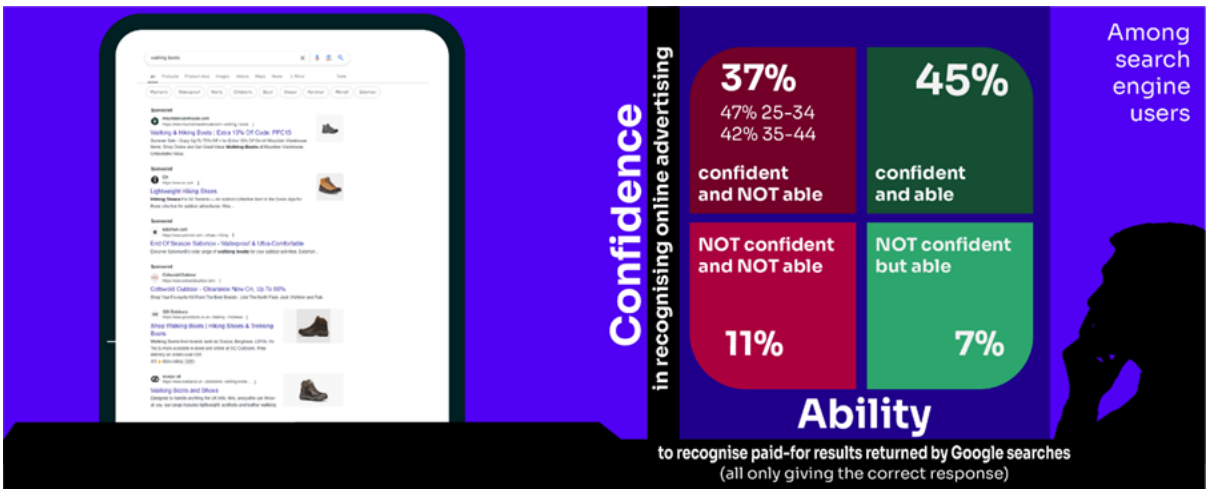
Confidence vs ability to recognise online advertising, by age

	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Confident and not able	41%	47% ↑	42% ↑	34%	30% ↓	28% ↓	32%
Confident and able	40% ↓	41%	45%	48%	51% ↑	47%	42%
Not confident and not able	12%	7% ↓	8% ↓	12%	12%	13%	16% ↑
Not confident but able	7%	5%	5%	6%	8%	12% ↑	10%

Base: All search engine users (6,731). Age-group bases refer to search engine users only: 16-24 (981), 25-34 (1,182), 35-44 (1,168), 45-54 (1,175), 55-64 (1,061), 65-74 (723), 75+ (441). Yellow boxes represent significant differences, and the arrows represent whether this is significantly higher or lower than all search engine users.

Younger search engine users (16-24) were more likely than those aged 45+ to be confident but not able (41%).[21] This suggests that those aged 25-44 may approach search results with greater assurance than their performance supports, reflecting a tendency to attribute sponsored search results to factors other than advertising.

In contrast, adults aged 55-64 were less likely to be over-confident and were more likely to be correct, with 51% of 55-64s classified as confident and able. Adults aged 65-74 stood out as being more likely to be not confident but able (12%). Those aged 75+ were the most likely to be both not confident and not able (16%). Taken together, this shows that over-confidence is more common among younger adults, while adults aged 55-64 tend to show stronger alignment between confidence and ability.



Base: All search engine users (6,731).[22]

[21] Compared to 34% of 45-54, 30% of 55-64, 28% of 65-74, 32% of 75+.

[22] Source: Google search for 'walking boots' Walking boots images: Mountain Warehouse, On, Salomon, Cotswolds Outdoor, GO Outdoors, Scarpa UK. The search was conducted before fieldwork so a new Google search may bring up different results.

Fewer adults assume that search results are accurate or unbiased

Adults are becoming less likely to take search results at face value. This year, 17% said they believe that if a website appears in search results it will contain accurate and unbiased information, down from 27% last year. The majority (63%) continue to take a more cautious view, saying that some sites will be accurate or unbiased and some will not.

Alongside this, a small but growing minority say they do not think about whether results are accurate or biased, and instead click on the results they 'like the look of' (11%, up from 6% in 2024). This shift suggests that a subset of users may be paying less attention to accuracy when choosing what to click, favouring convenience, familiarity or what feels appealing at a glance. For these users, appearance or familiarity may be enough for them to select a result, rather than carrying out any checks.

Adults generally respond safely to scam messages, though there are signs that safe handling is weakening

Good media literacy skills can help adults recognise and reject potential scams. Scams such as fraud and phishing are pervasive online. They are the second most common online harm recorded in Ofcom's Online Experiences Tracker, and eight in ten online adults (80%) have high levels of concern around such content.[23] In the Media Literacy Tracker, more than a third of online adults (37%) said they had personally received a scam email or message encouraging them to share personal or financial information in the past year.

To understand how people manage these risks in practice, respondents were shown a fake delivery email and asked how they would respond. [24] The vast majority of adults took at least one safe action: 95% chose at least one safe response and 82% selected only safe actions. The most common safe responses were deleting the email (42%) and checking the sender's email address to see if it looked genuine (41%).[25] Riskier actions were less common but still taken by 17% of adults, including clicking on a link (12%), following the instructions (7%) or replying to the message (4%). This can expose users to malware or provide scammers with an opportunity to obtain personal details or payment.

There are indications of a slight decrease over recent years: the proportion choosing only valid actions decreased from 88% to 82% over the same period. Although the majority of adults responded correctly, there are differences by age. Those aged 45-74 were more likely than average to respond safely and those aged 16-44 were more likely to respond inappropriately (with around one in five giving an inappropriate response).[26]

There were also clear differences by age groups in the types of actions taken when responding to a suspicious email. Younger and middle-aged adults (16-44) were more likely than those aged 65+ to

[23] 34% said they had seen or experienced scams, fraud or phishing in the last four weeks. Ofcom, 2025. Online Experiences Tracker - Questionnaire (Wave 8, June 2025)
[24] Source: DPD website - Phishing (https://www.dpd.co.uk/content/about_dpd/phishing.jsp).
[25] Other valid actions included: checking whether someone in their household was expecting a delivery (33%), ignoring it (29%), blocking the sender or moving the message to junk (27%), checking whether it was a scam (27%), reporting it (25%) and seeking advice from a friend or family member (8%).
[26] 76% of 16-24 and 25-34, and 80% of 34-44 selected only "safe actions" at the scenario compared with 86% of those aged 45-54, 55-64 and 65-74. Those aged 75+ were more likely than those aged 16-34 to select only "safe actions".

take investigative steps such as checking the sender's email address.[27] Older adults (75+) were more likely to rely on low-interaction precautionary actions, such as deleting the email or ignoring it, to minimise their risk.[28]

Stated confidence did not always match ability. The proportion of adults who were both confident recognising scams and able to respond safely has declined from 75% in 2022 to 68% this year. Meanwhile, 14% felt confident but did not take a safe action. Those most likely to fall into this 'confident but not able' group were younger (under 45), men, and people in AB households.

Insights from Adults' Media Lives illustrate the range of strategies people use. Some participants described being decisive in removing suspicious content:

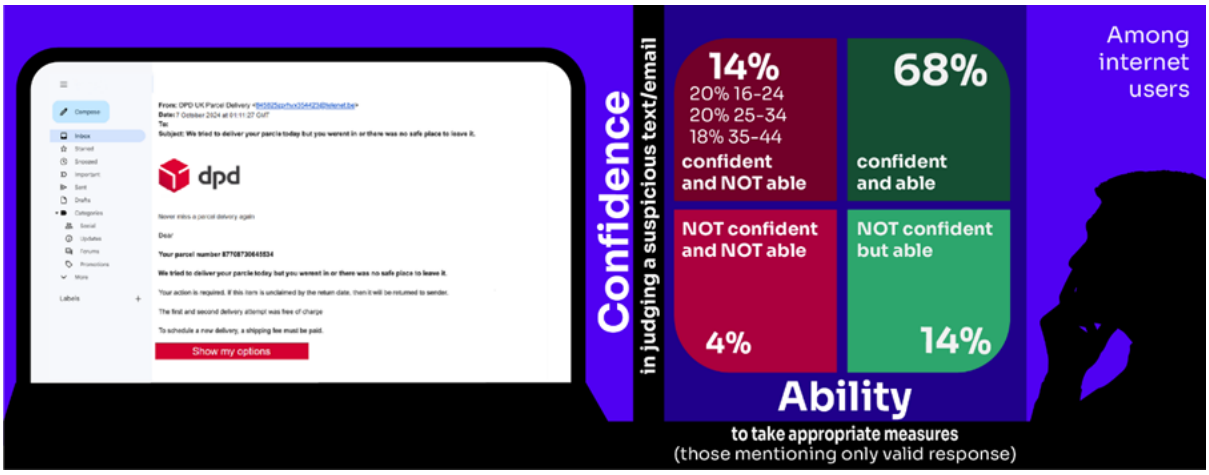
"They come in as a group message… I'm just like "Well, no! Leave, block, delete". I try to block every number in the chain."

John, 39

Others relied on avoidance strategies, such as ignoring unknown contacts altogether:

"I'm going through a run of spam calls at the moment... I don't answer any unknown number. Because my view is, if somebody is calling me and they want to speak to me and I don't answer, they'll leave me a message."

Geoff, 74



Base: All online adults (7,029).

The youngest adults are most likely to spot fake profiles and tend to rely on textual cues

Fake social media profiles are a common online risk and can be used to spread misinformation or promote scams. To explore how adults assess this type of content, social media users were shown a mocked-up social media profile and asked whether they thought it was genuine, and which elements influenced their decision.[29]

[27] 15% of 16-24, 17% of 25-34 and 14% of 35-44-year-olds said they would check the email address to see if it was genuine. Compared with 10% of 65-74 and 8% of 75+.
[28] Online adults aged 75+ were more likely to: delete it (51% vs 42% of all online adults) and / or ignore it (38% vs 29% of all online adults).
[29] This profile is a fictional profile. Images were taken from Pexels.

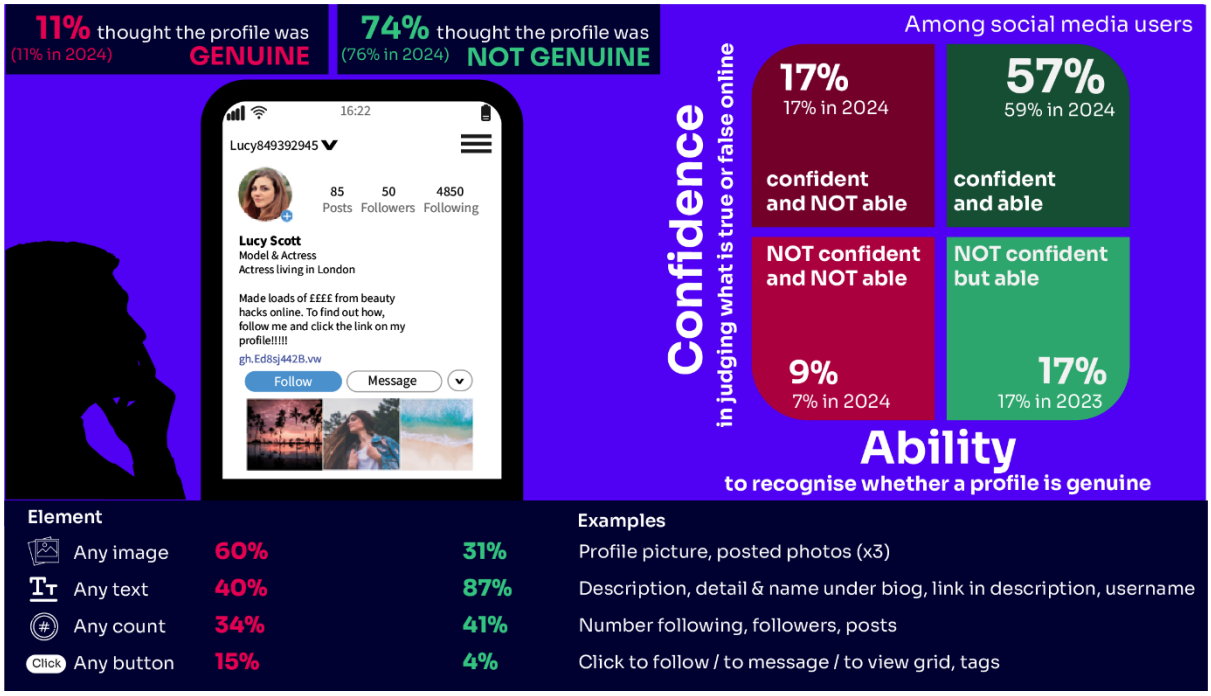
Almost three-quarters of social media users (74%) correctly identified the profile as not genuine. Unlike the other scenario tests, the youngest adults performed strongest: 16-24s were the most likely to recognise the profile as fake, making them the least susceptible in this scenario. However, the pattern was not linear. Adults aged 25-34 and 35-44 were the *most* likely to think the profile was genuine (17% and 15% respectively). Among adults aged 45 and over, incorrect responses were less common, but uncertainty was higher, increasing to three in ten (31%) of those aged 75+ saying they were not sure whether the profile was genuine.

Perceptions of whether a social media profile is genuine, by age

	All online adults	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Yes	11%	10%	17% ↑	15% ↑	10%	8% ↓	7% ↓	6% ↓
No	74%	88% ↑	76%	73%	72%	70%	66% ↓	62% ↓
Don't know	15%	2% ↓	7% ↓	12%	18% ↑	21% ↑	27% ↑	31% ↑

Base: All social media users (6,297). Age-group bases refer to social media users only: 16-24 (1,002), 25-34 (1,172), 35-44 (1,148), 45-54 (1,111), 55-64 (948), 65-74 (580), 75+ (336). Yellow boxes represent significant differences, and the arrows represent whether this is significantly higher or lower than all social media users.

A key difference lies in the cues people rely on. Those who recognised the profile as fake tended to focus on textual warning signs: seven in ten (71%) pointed to the unrealistic biography advertising 'make loads of ££££ from beauty hacks', and almost half (48%) highlighted the web link made up of random characters. By contrast, those who believed the profile was genuine (11% of users) relied far more on images, with over a third (36%) drawing confidence from the profile photo, and around three in ten (31%) from a posted picture, while paying less attention to textual cues. This clear split between text-based scrutiny and image-led judgement appears key to how adults form decisions in this scenario, and helps explain why some users are more susceptible than others.



Base: All social media users (6,297), all who said they thought the profile was genuine (758), all who thought the profile was not genuine (4,630). The elements included in the infographics are nets of several answers.

As with the other tasks, confidence did not always align with ability. While most confident users performed accurately, 17% felt confident but did not identify the profile as fake. This was more common among men (19%), and unlike in the other scenarios, was fairly evenly distributed by age, with adults aged 35-44 slightly more likely than average to fall into this category.

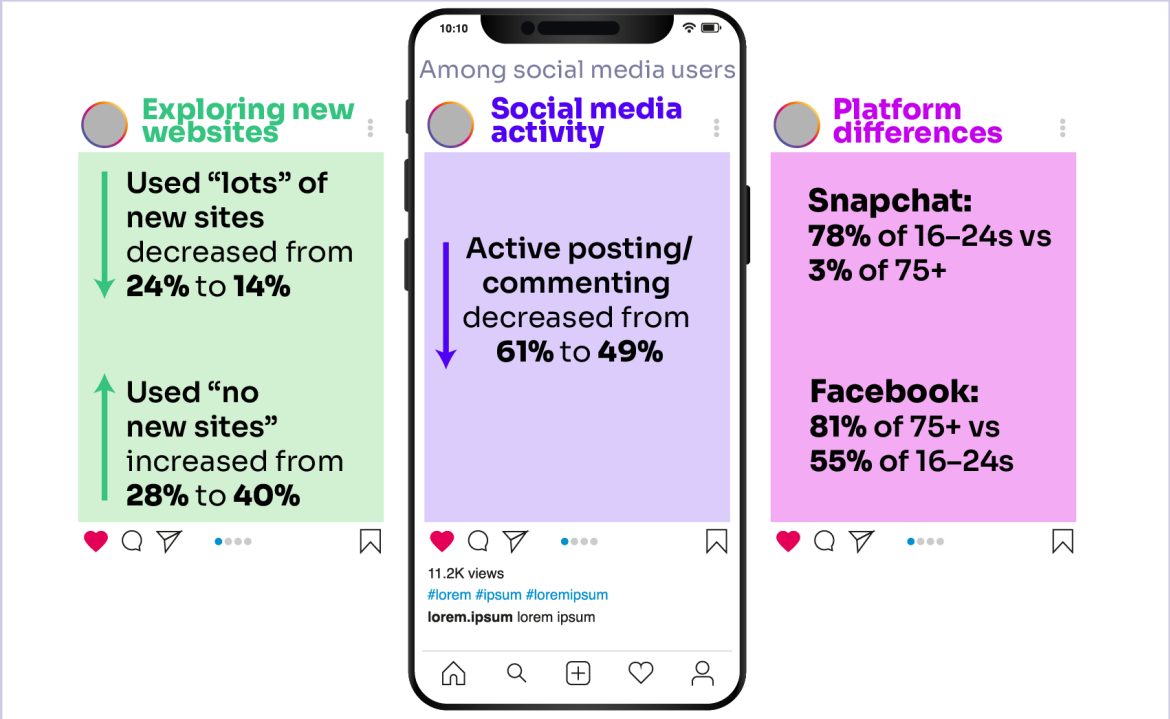
Performance across tasks is shaped by breadth of use and confidence

To understand which factors were associated with consistently strong performance across all the scenario tests, we ran a logistic regression combining demographic characteristics and indicators of online behaviour. The analysis showed that adults who used the internet broadly were more likely to answer all tasks correctly, as were those who felt confident judging scams. Awareness of AI was also a strong positive marker. A small demographic effect was identified for answers across all scenarios: adults aged 45-54 were more likely than other age groups to answer all the questions correctly. In contrast, those who spent only modest amounts of time online were less likely to answer all the questions correctly. Although confidence does not always match ability on individual tasks, the regression analysis looks at a different pattern: when taking all online adults together, those who report feeling confident in particular skills tend to perform better overall across the range of tasks. These patterns suggest that breadth of online engagement and specific task confidence support more reliable critical judgement, while age alone does not predict performance.

Online behaviours and communications

Introduction

This chapter explores how UK adults use the internet and communicate with others online, with a particular emphasis on social media. This is important, as in order to successfully monitor or improve media literacy, we need to have an understanding of what people are doing online and how this changes over time. The subsequent chapter explores adults' attitudes towards being online.



There are signs of social media use becoming more passive this year

This year, a smaller proportion of users are sharing, posting or commenting on social media (49%) compared with 2024 (61%) and 2023 (59%).[30] The remainder tend to simply 'like' things that others have posted (25%) or read things without interacting much (24%). Those more likely to share, post or comment include younger adults aged 16-34 (58%) and those in AB socio-economic households (57%).

Insights from Adults' Media Lives illustrate this shift. Some participants described posting less frequently than in previous years:

[30] This trend is indicative due to methodological changes this year.

"I'm posting something very rarely now, which is funny because when I was younger, I would have been posting what I was eating for dinner."

Brigit, 25

Another participant said she still posted on social media due to social expectations rather than personal motivation:

"I wouldn't have even posted my wedding really but…there's like an etiquette. Nobody else can post your wedding until you've posted."

Jenny, 32

Adults are showing less appetite for exploring new parts of the internet

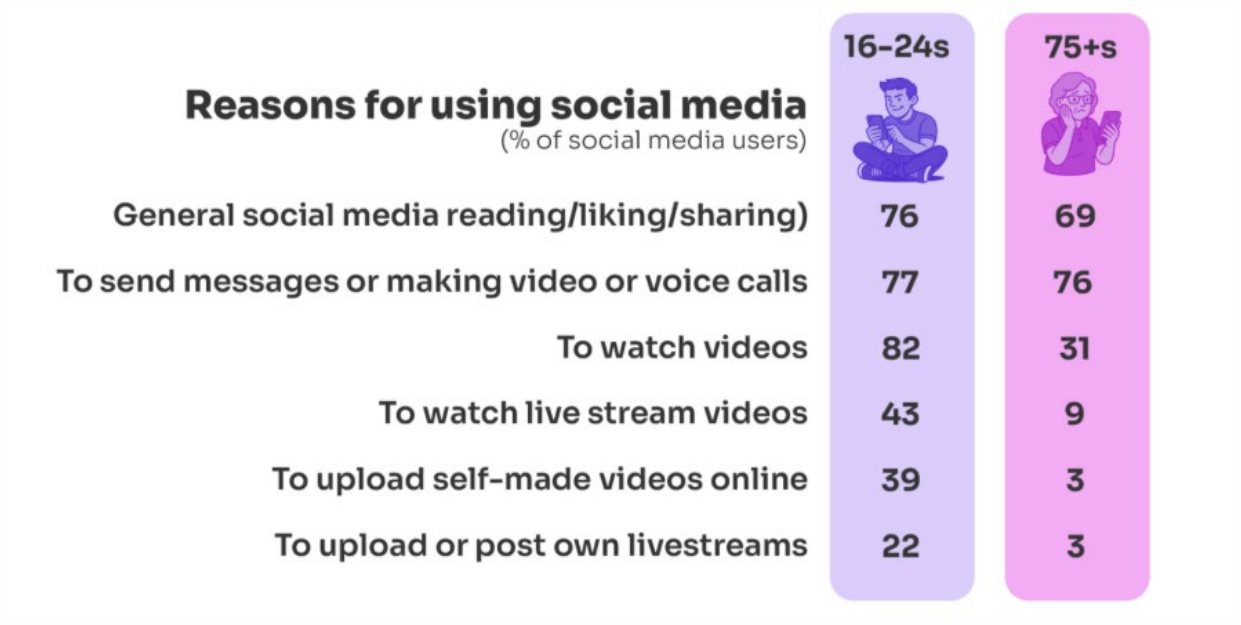
This year, 14% of online adults say they have used 'lots' of new websites, down from 24%, while the proportion who used no new sites at all rose to 40% (from 28% in 2024 and 32% in 2023). While using new and unfamiliar websites can come with risks, it also allows users to explore more of what the internet has to offer. There are various potential reasons behind this shift in behaviour, including the possibility that people are using a more 'one stop shop' type approach while online, and are using applications such as generative-AI chatbots for many different purposes including work, learning, creative tasks and getting recommendations.

To understand what drives exploration of new websites, we conducted additional binary logistic regression analysis. The strongest predictor was age: adults under 45 were significantly more likely to have used new websites than those aged 45 and over. Other factors associated with using new sites included spending 12 or more hours online each week and using streamed audio services, online video, or live or catch-up radio. These factors may be related, as younger adults tend to spend longer online and use the internet for a wider breadth of activities, and using the internet for a greater period of time may also lead to the use of more websites.

Specific reasons for using social media vary by age

Social media use is widespread, with nine in ten internet users (89%) using at least one social media platform, rising to 97% of users aged 16-34 and over two-thirds (68%) of those aged 75+. What people use social media for continues to vary: while messaging and calling remain the most common activities, used by around three-quarters (76%) of social media users and consistent across age groups, other behaviours show clearer age differences.

Watching videos is far more likely to be done by those in younger age groups than older ones; while 82% of 16-24s use social media for watching videos, only 31% of 75+ do. The generational gap is also very wide when it comes to posting videos that users have made themselves, 42% of 25-34s are doing this on social media, compared with only 3% of those aged 75+.



Base: All social media users (6,297). Age-group bases refer to social media users only: 16-24 (1,002), 75+ (336).

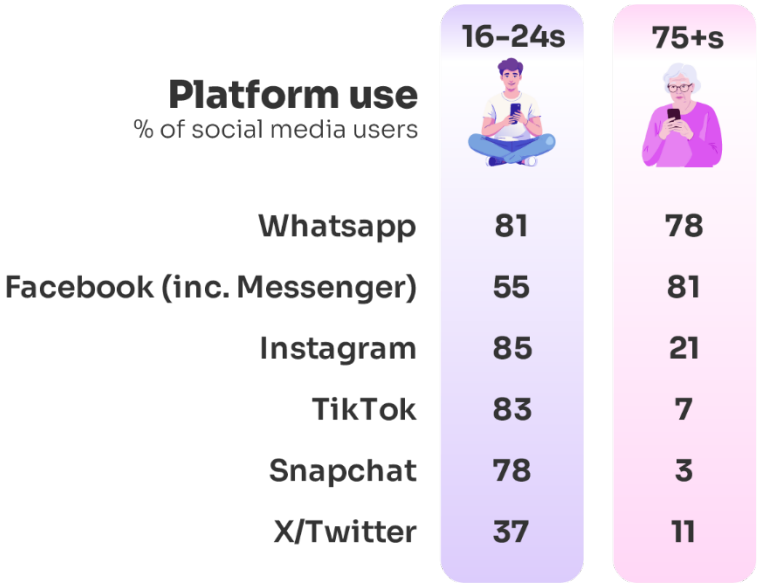
Livestreams have become a popular way for social media users to broadcast to an audience in a way that some feel is more exciting and authentic than a pre-recorded video. Despite the reduction in posting and commenting mentioned earlier in the chapter, one in five (18%) adult users still post their own livestreams, and this is higher among younger age groups. This is a similar level to last year (17%).

When asked the reasons why they posted their own videos or livestreams, the responses varied, with just over half (53%) of video posters saying they did it for fun, about half (49%) saying because it's a good way to keep in touch with people, and over four in ten (44%) saying it helps them feel creative. Almost a quarter (23%) said they posted their own videos or livestreams to promote their business.

Most social media apps are more likely to be used by younger adults

The vast majority of platforms are used by younger age groups in much higher numbers. This is most apparent with Snapchat, used by 78% of 16-24s and just 3% of social media users aged 75+. Another example of this sizeable generational gap is TikTok, which is more than 11 times more likely to be used by social media users aged 16-24 (83%) than by users aged 75+ (7%). Other apps that are similarly used by far higher numbers of younger users than older ones include Instagram, X, Pinterest and Reddit.

However, a small number of platforms stand out for their broad appeal across different ages. WhatsApp has consistently high use across all ages, with 81% of social media users aged 16-24 using it and 78% of social media users aged 75+. Facebook is the only social media platform we ask about in the survey which is more popular among social media users aged 75+ (81%) than with social media users aged 16-24 (55%).



Base: All social media users (6,297). Age-group bases refer to social media users only: 16-24 (1,002), 75+ (336).

Alongside these age differences, there are also gender variations, although the gaps are smaller. Women are more likely than men to use WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and Pinterest. Men are more likely to use X, LinkedIn, Discord, Telegram and Reddit.

Half of adults game online

This year, two-thirds (65%) of adults said they game at home or elsewhere, with half of adults gaming online and the remaining 15% only gaming offline. The most popular devices used for this are mobile phones (47%) and games consoles (32%), but there are many other, more niche gaming options such as through smart TV apps (10%), virtual reality (6%) and smart watches (6%).

As with social media platforms, gaming behaviours differ substantially by age. Most younger adults (89% of 16-24s) game, compared with far fewer of those aged 75+. One of the clearest age divides appears in console gaming: around half (51%) of 16-24s use games consoles, compared with only 2% of those aged 75+. On tablets, the age gap is narrower, with 23% of 16-24s and 8% of those aged 75+ gaming.

Qualitative insights highlight how gaming is often used as a way to socialise or stay connected. One participant described how they game primarily for the social side:

"I think last year I was playing a lot more. Now, I still do come online just so I can talk to my friends from home… When we come online, we just listen to music whilst talking and playing and stuff."

Hazeem, 21

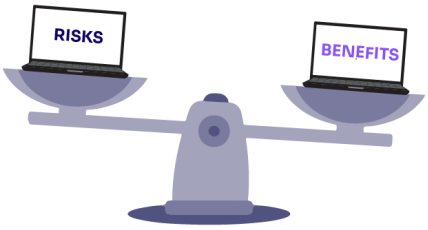
Online attitudes and wellbeing

Introduction

Adults' experiences of being online are shaped not only by what they do, but by how it makes them feel. This chapter explores how internet users weigh the benefits of being online against the risks, how social media affects their wellbeing, and how people use the internet for creativity, learning and self-expression. It also looks at attitudes towards online safety, freedom of expression, and the environmental impact of digital technologies. All these views are important to gather from a media literacy perspective, because these stances reflect to what extent adults are developing their media literacy, as well as the levels of risk that users are facing online.

Benefits vs Risks

59% say **the benefits of being online outweigh the risks** (decreased from 72%)

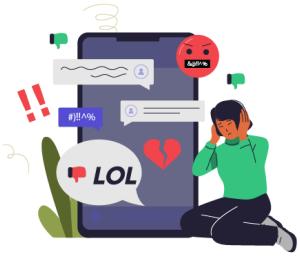


Social media & mental health

36% say social media is **good for mental health** (decreased from 42%)



Negative online experiences



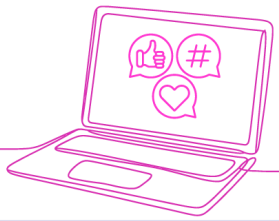
60% had at least one **negative experience** in the past year

Screen time

67% say theirs is **too high**



Creativity and learning



42% feel more **creative** when they use social media apps or sites.

Fewer adults this year feel that the benefits of being online outweigh the risks

This year, fewer adults feel positive overall about being online.[31] Around six in ten of online adults (59%) say the benefits outweigh the risks, down from 72% last year and 71% in 2023. This represents a sizeable decrease, and interestingly the age groups who are most online do not necessarily feel any more positive overall than those age groups who spend less time online. Only just over half (52%) of 16-24s feel that the benefits outweigh the risks, compared with 63% of those aged 75+. Women also continue to be less likely to feel that the benefits of being online outweigh the risks, with 54% agreeing, compared to 64% of men.

Agreement that 'the benefits of being online outweigh the risks', by socio-demographic group

	All online adults	16-24	65+	Men	Women	ABC1	C2DE
2025	59%	52%	59%	64%	54%	65%	51%
2024	72%	72%	68%	75%	70%	76%	67%
2023	71%	67%	64%	74%	68%	75%	64%

Base: For 2025 figures - all online module 3 respondents (3,497). Subgroup bases: 16-24 (516), 65+ (617), men (1,710), women (1,779), ABC1 households (2,074), C2DE households (1,416).

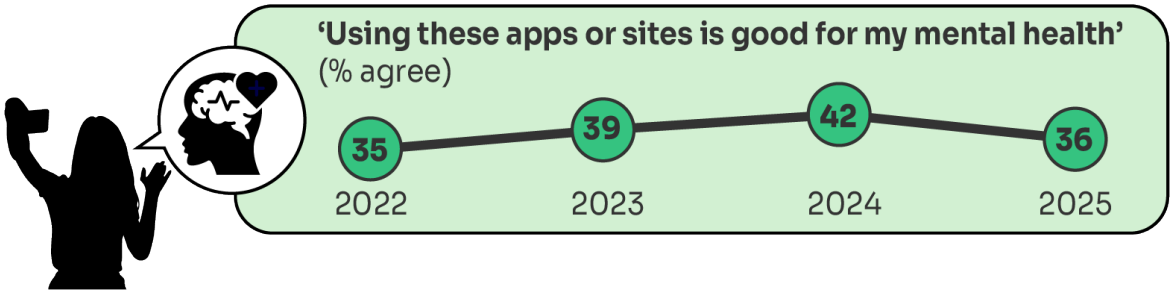
One of the factors that may shape these perceptions is negative experiences online. Six in ten (60%) internet users had encountered at least one of the negative experiences we asked about in the past year. Younger adults were especially likely to report these encounters, with seven in ten (70%) of 16-24s experiencing at least one. The most common included scam messages (37%), notifications of data breaches (21%) and contact from someone pretending to be someone else (17%).

A factor that makes people more likely to feel that the benefits of being online outweigh the risks is using the internet for certain tasks and interests. Overall, 59% of adults feel the benefits outweigh the risks, but this rises to 66% among those who complete government processes online, and 65% for those who sign petitions online, and for those who find or download information for school or work.

… and fewer users this year feel that social media is positive for their mental health

The proportion of adult social media users who feel social media is good for their mental health has fallen this year.[32] After rising from 35% in 2022 to 42% in 2024, this measure has dropped back to 36%.

[31] This trend should be seen as indicative due to the changes in methodology.
[32] This trend is indicative due to methodological changes this year.



Base: For the 2025 figure - all social media respondents to module 3 (3,126).

Several factors may be contributing to this shift, one of which might be uncomfortable encounters. Adults who have had any negative experiences online (such as scams or contact from someone pretending to be someone else) were more likely to disagree (27%) that social media apps were good for their mental health versus the average adult (16%).

Additionally, more than four in ten (43%) adult social media users feel that users are always or often cruel or unkind to one another on social media sites/apps. Some groups are more likely to share this view than others, including more than half of users aged 16-24 (56%), and women are (45%) are more likely to feel this way than men (39%). This may also contribute to the more passive use of social media, covered in the previous chapter, with fewer users actively commenting and posting.

Patterns of use also appear to shape how people feel about social media's impact on mental health. A much higher proportion (45%) of 'active' social media users, (those who share, post or comment) believe that overall, social media is good for their mental health, compared to 'passive' users who only read or 'like' things (25%). Active users are also more likely than passive users to feel creative when they use these apps than passive users (55% vs 27%). It could be that people feel more connected to others through posting and commenting, or feel that it is a more productive use of time than just scrolling.

Concerns about screen time may be another factor leading users to feel less positively about their online and social media experience. Four in ten (40%) say their screen time is too high every day / most days. This affects some age groups more than others, with around six in ten (61%) 16-24s saying they feel their screen time is too high most days, compared with only one in ten (10%) 75+. This has sometimes led to users taking significant steps to reduce their screen time; this year more adults have deleted an app because they were spending too much time on it (24% vs 19% last year).

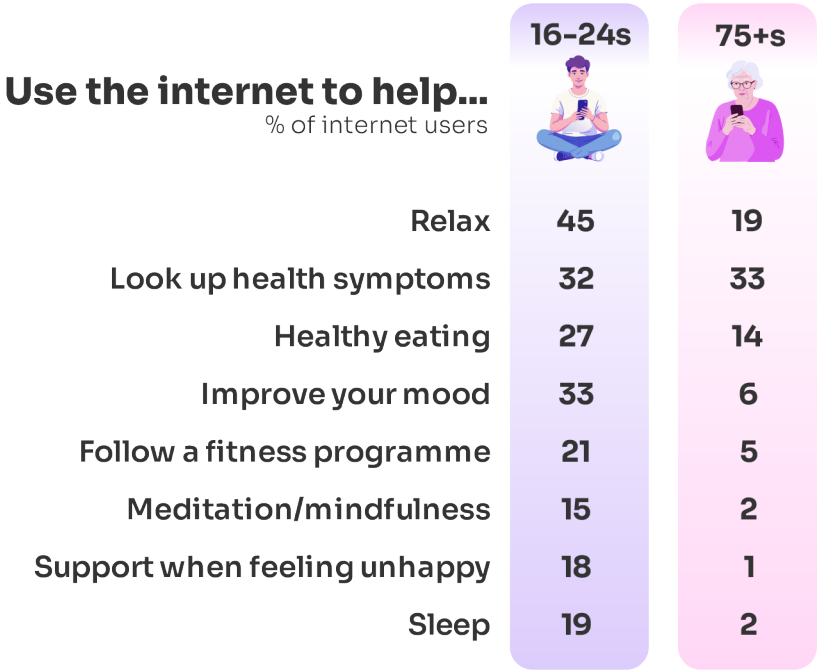
Many Adults' Media Lives participants echoed these concerns. Some described trying to manage their screen time more actively, with mixed success:

"There are times when my screen time is extremely high, which is… not what I want, but not something I have major control over. But we've tried to offset that by reducing screen time in other ways, watching less television or taking the dog out for long walks. When I finish work now, I'll just get out. I don't even take my phone with me."

Tim, 27

Many also use online resources for wellbeing, including relaxation (36%), mood improvement (24%) and mindfulness (14%). Others use the internet to support physical health, such as following fitness programmes (19%). Younger adults are more likely to do these online health and wellbeing activities,

with 86% of 16-24s doing at least one of the nine activities we asked about,[33] compared with 47% of 75+. Those in social grade ABC1 (72%) were also more likely to do at least one of these than those in social grade C2DE (66%).



Base: All online module 3 respondents (3,497). Subgroup bases: 16-24 (516), 75+ (224).

While being online comes with risks, it also comes with opportunities to learn and be creative

Around four in ten (42%) say social media makes them feel more creative, rising to 62% among 25-34s. Some of the specific activities that may contribute towards this feeling include making videos, (done by 16% of internet users), and editing photos (17%). Beyond social media, some internet users also create websites (7%), music (7%) or games (5%). As observed in the previous chapter livestreamers and video creators often describe posting as a way to have fun, express creativity, or promote a business.

Adults also see the internet as a place to learn and build skills. Around seven in ten (71%) say being online has broadened their understanding of the world, this is much higher for broad internet users (83%) than narrow users (52%), and around six in ten (62%) say that being online has helped them learn a new skill.

Some of the participants in our Adults' Media Lives qualitative study have also discussed recently using AI for creative purposes.

"I've used [AI] software now for colourising black and white pictures, enhancing pictures, trying out all these sorts of technologies. I don't actually pay for them, which I suppose is an error, but I use all the free versions and see how they come out."

[33] The nine activities were: relax/unwind, look up health symptoms, healthy eating/nutrition, improve your mood/feel happy, follow a fitness programme/health tracker, feel energised/motivated, meditate/mindfulness, get support when feeling unhappy, sleep.

Geoff, 74

Fewer internet users this year feel that they should be protected from inappropriate or offensive content

Online moderation can be a divisive topic and while many feel that hateful or offensive content should be taken down by sites and apps, there are also perceived downsides of what could be viewed as unnecessary censorship. A large majority of online adults still feel that internet users must be protected from seeing inappropriate or offensive content (74%), but this has fallen since last year (79%).[34]

Views on this issue appear to be affected more by demographics rather than by users having had negative experiences online. Those more likely to feel that users should be protected from hateful or offensive content include those aged 65 and over (82%) and women (79%), but those who have come across something online that has made them feel uncomfortable or upset in the last month are as likely to disagree as those who have not.

Many of our Adults' Media Lives participants have seen something online this year that made them feel uncomfortable. Recent news content that led to some feeling disturbed with what they had viewed online related to the murder of American political activist Charlie Kirk in September 2025.

"There was like actually really, really graphic extreme footage from I don't know, maybe a few metres away."

Robert, 29

There are a variety of views on the issue of whether people should be free to say what they want online, even if it is controversial or hurtful to others, with similar numbers agreeing (36%) and disagreeing (41%) with this statement, and 23% either not being able to decide either way, or saying they do not know. Younger adults are more likely to agree with the statement, with 45% of 25-34s agreeing compared with 23% of 75+. There are also differences by gender, with 44% of men agreeing, compared to 28% of women.

Agreement that 'I think it is important that people can say what they want online even if it is controversial or hurtful to others', by socio-demographic group











	All adults	25-34	75+	Men	Women
% agree	36%	45%	23%	44%	28%

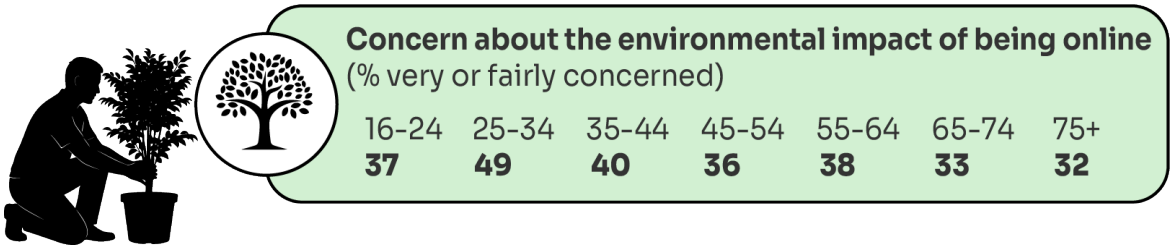
Base: All online respondents to module 1 (3,515), 25-34 (592), 75+ (252), men (1,714), women (1,791).

Another development this year is that more adults (49%) say that they are concerned about whether something they say online could cause them problems in the future than was the case last year (43%).

[34] This trend is indicative due to methodological changes this year.

Attitudes are mixed on the environmental impact of being online

As reported above, the number of adults saying they use AI has increased significantly this year, and there has been media coverage about the energy and water use required for AI data centres. This may have led some to feel concern about the environmental impact of being online, with 11% of online adults 'very concerned' and an additional 28% of adults 'fairly concerned'. The age group most likely to be concerned about the environmental impact of being online are 25-34s (49%) but alongside 16-24s, they are the age group most likely to use AI.



Base: All online respondents to module 1 (3,515), 16-24 (517), 25-34 (592), 35-44 (613), 45-54 (604), 55-64 (554), 65-74 (383), 75+ (252).

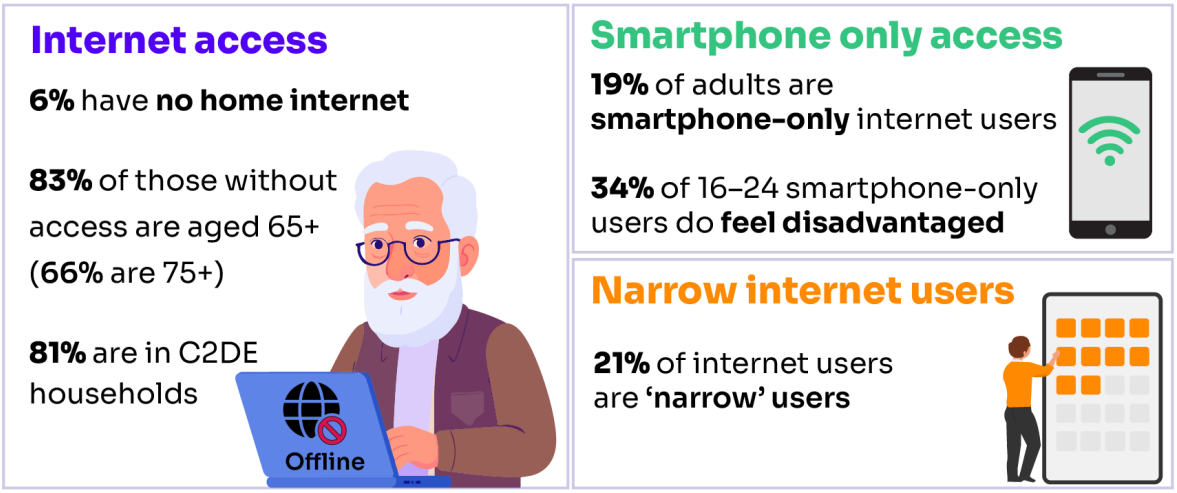
Digital exclusion

Introduction

Digital services are central to how people communicate, learn and manage daily life. Yet while most adults are actively engaged in the online world, some continue to face barriers that limit their ability to participate fully. These barriers go beyond simple access: skills, confidence, device quality, and affordability pressures, and in some cases a lack of interest or perceived relevance, all shape whether people can make effective use of digital services.

This chapter looks at the key indicators of digital exclusion, examining trends in home connectivity alongside proxy measures such as device access, digital skills, confidence, and affordability constraints.

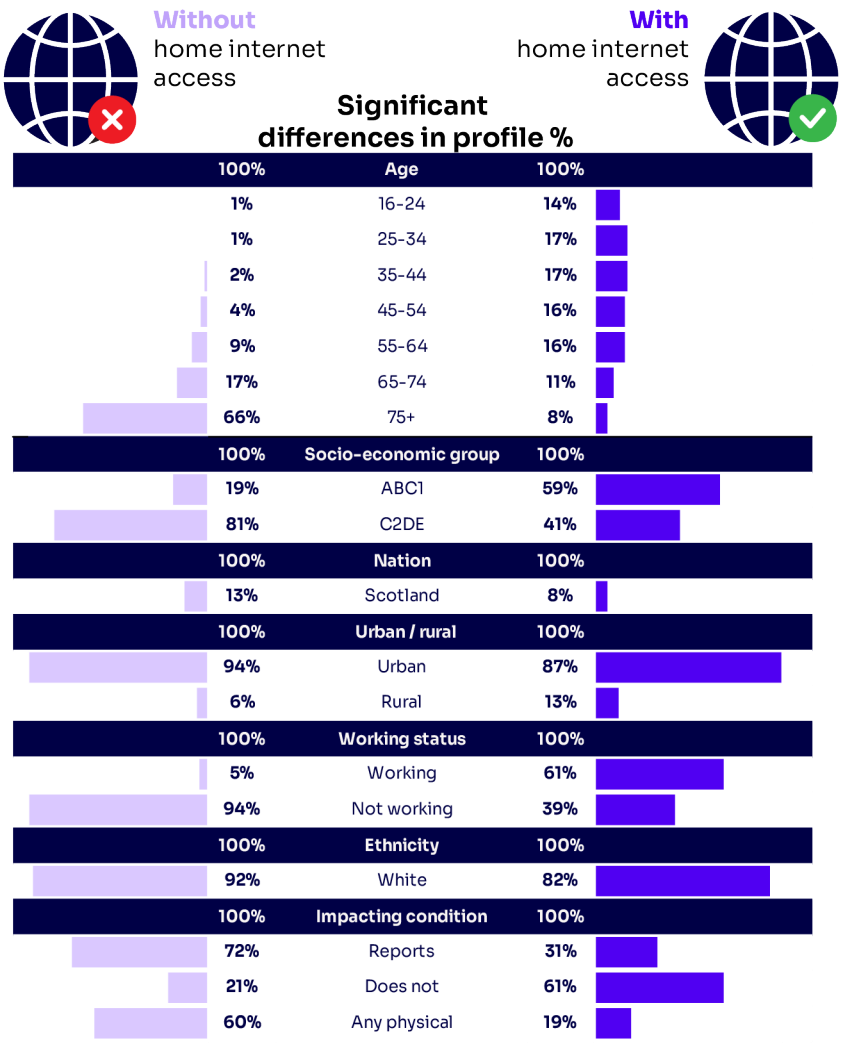
For wider context, Ofcom's Technology Tracker, the Digital Disadvantage report and a demographic deep dive into internet use provide additional insight into these ongoing challenges.



Access levels remain stable, but digital exclusion persists

Ofcom's Connected Nations report states that in 2025 only 44,000 residential and commercial premises in the UK (0.1% of total UK premises) did not have the ability to access a decent broadband connection.[35] In 2025, home internet access remains largely unchanged, with 6% of adults not connected.[36] The increase in take-up during the Covid-19 pandemic has since levelled off, and access rates have held steady.[37]

[35] Ofcom, Connected Nations, 2025.
[36] Both Ofcom's Technology Tracker and the Media Literacy Tracker find similar levels of no access to the internet at home at around 5-6%.
[37] In 2019 (fieldwork dates were from the 20th September - 11th November 2019) the Media Literacy Tracker found that 13% reported they never went online. This question was asked differently to the current question format.



Base: All those without home internet access (417) compared to those with home internet access (7,116).

Barriers to home internet access are not evenly distributed. Older adults remain the most affected: two-thirds (66%) of those without internet access are aged 75+.[38] Socio-economic inequalities also persist, with 81% of adults without home internet living in C2DE households.

However, these patterns reflect more than single characteristics in isolation. The intersection of age, socio-economic circumstances and other factors plays a role in shaping the likelihood of whether people have internet access at home.

Looking more closely at adults aged 75+ highlights how barriers to internet access often intersect. Within this age group, those without home internet access are more likely to have no formal qualifications (63% compared with 20% of those with access). They are also more likely to report a disability: 69% report a physical disability, compared with 42% of those aged 75+ who are online. This includes higher prevalence of disabilities affecting eyesight (16% vs 4%), mobility (43% vs 21%) and dexterity (13% vs 6%), all of which may hinder sustained engagement with digital services.

Financial circumstances further compound these challenges. Nearly one in five (18%) adults aged 75+ without home internet access are classified as most financially vulnerable, compared with 5% of

[38] 17% of those without internet access are 65-74.

that age group who are online. Taken together, this suggests a cumulative effect, where age, educational, health and financial factors combine to increase the likelihood of digital exclusion.

Most adults without home internet access report that they are not interested or feel no need to be online (68%), while others cite perceived complexity (38%) or cost (25%) as reasons for not having internet access at home.

However, a substantial proportion of adults without home internet access rely on others to complete online tasks on their behalf. Four in ten (42%) say they have asked someone else to do something for them online, most commonly to shop online (56%) or to access online health services (37%). When asked about future behaviour, the majority (82%) say that nothing would prompt them to go online. However, 45% of this group have sought help from someone else for an online task in the past year, pointing to a gap between their stated preferences and the practical need to engage with digital services.

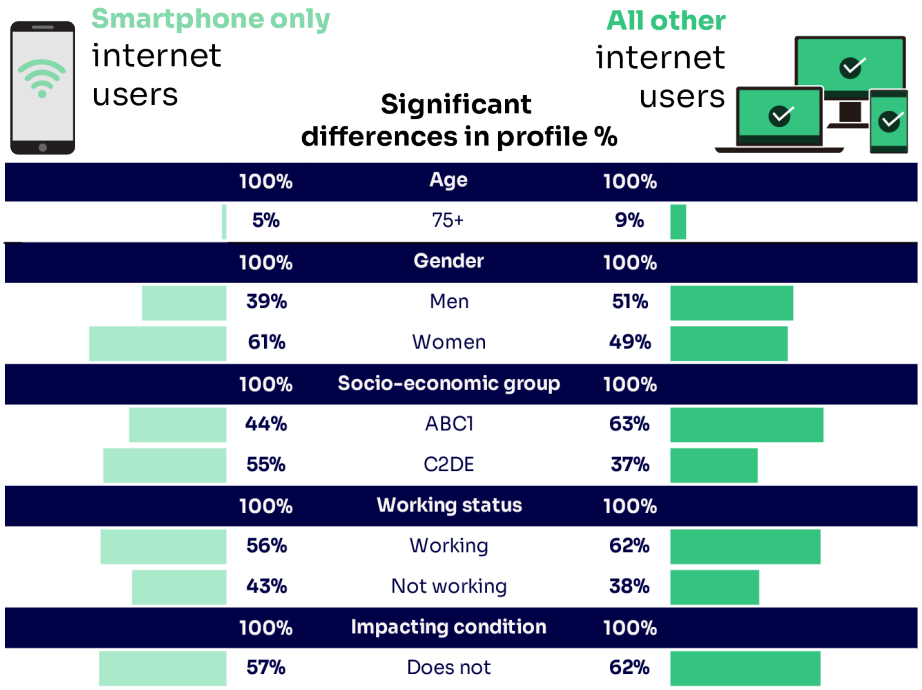
The Covid-19 pandemic acted as a significant catalyst for internet adoption, prompting some previously offline adults to go online out of necessity.[39] Those who remain offline today do so for a mixture of reasons, including structural barriers as well as settled views about the relevance of being online, rather than short-term or situational constraints.

Smartphone-only access is common, but can be a disadvantage

Digital exclusion can also manifest through constrained forms of connectivity. One in five online adults (20%) rely solely on a smartphone to go online, without access to other devices such as a computer or tablet. This represents an increase since 2019, when about one in eight online adults (12%) were smartphone-only, although levels have remained relatively steady in recent years.

Smartphone-only access is not evenly distributed. Among adults who rely solely on a smartphone, most are women (61%), and over half (55%) live in C2DE households, although a substantial minority (44%) are in ABC1 households. Adults aged 75+ are the least likely to rely solely on a smartphone, while rates among those aged 16-74 are broadly similar, indicating that smartphone-only access is not limited to any single working-age group.

[39] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/online-habits/digital-divide-narrowed-but-around-1.5m-homes-offline



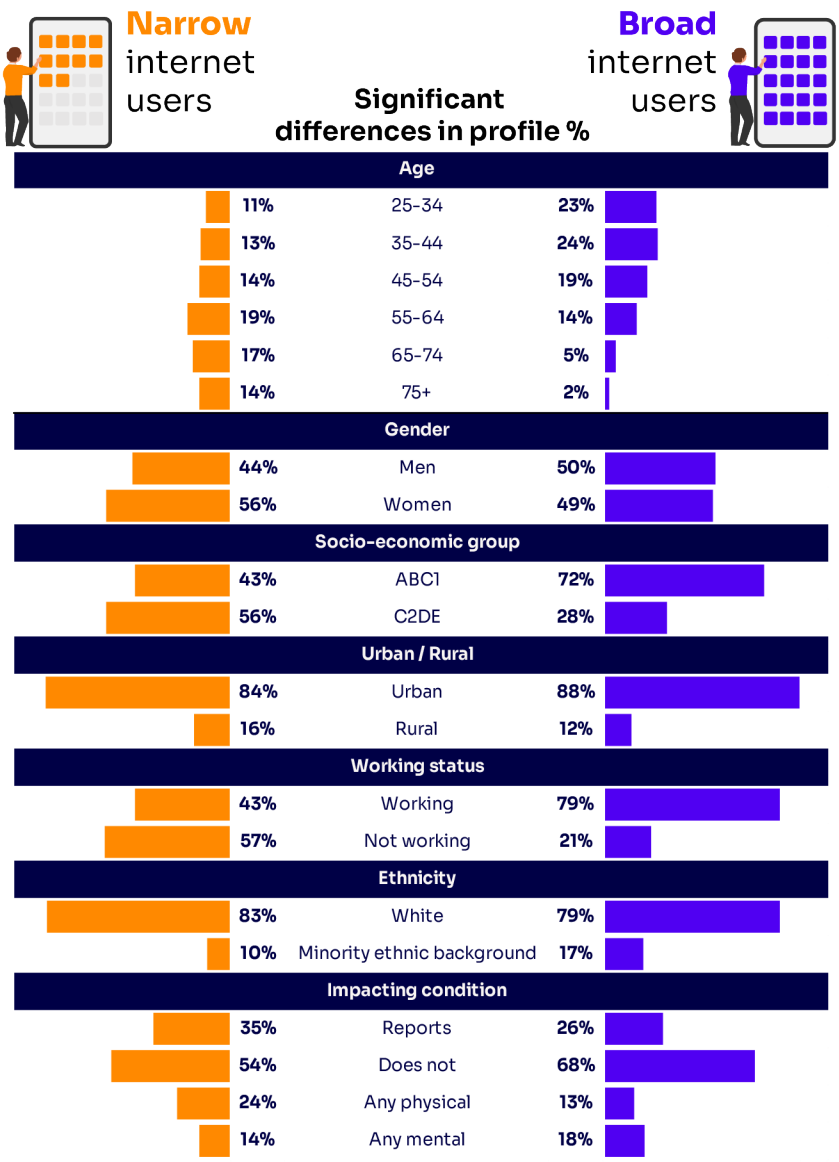
Base: All those who only have access to a smartphone to go online (1,408) compared to all other internet users (5,621).

The majority of smartphone-only users do not feel disadvantaged by only using a smartphone (70%). This has remained fairly consistent over time.

However, perceptions of disadvantage vary by age. Younger adults are more likely to report feeling constrained by smartphone-only access, with 34% of those aged 16-24 saying they feel disadvantaged, compared with 24% of smartphone-only users overall.

Being online does not always mean full digital participation

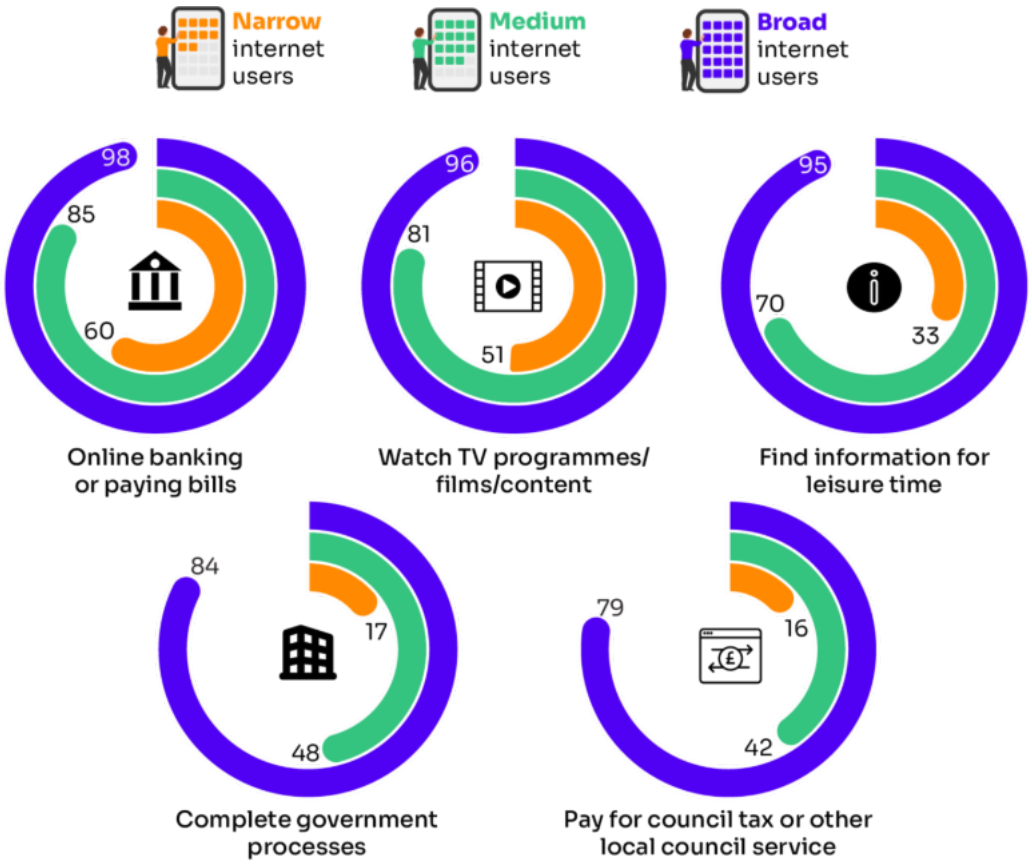
Digital participation is not uniform among those who are online. Narrow internet users are defined as adults who report carrying out between one and four of the thirteen online activities asked about. This group is more likely to be older, with half (50%) aged 55 or over. Narrow users are also more likely to be women (56%) and to live in C2DE households (56%). Smartphone-only access is fairly common among narrow users, with more than a third (35%) relying solely on a smartphone to go online.



Base: All who are 'narrow' (1,488) users compare to 'broad' users (2,417) of the internet.

Despite their narrower engagement, most narrow users continue to carry out some routine online activities. Six in ten (60%) say they use the internet for online banking or paying bills, and around half (51%) use the internet for watching television. However, they are much less likely to use the internet for other tasks, such as completing government processes (17%) or paying council tax online (16%).[40]

[40] It is important to note that these differences partly reflect the way breadth of use is defined, as the activities shown here form the basis of the categorisation into narrow, medium and broad users.



Base: All who are 'narrow' (1,488) users, 'medium' users (3,033) compared to 'broad' users (2,417) of the internet.

Breadth of internet use is also closely linked to confidence. While a majority of narrow users (71%) say they feel confident in their ability as an internet user, they are considerably less likely to feel *very* confident compared with internet users overall (30% compared with 53%). This suggests that limited experience across a wider range of activities may constrain users' confidence and that low confidence may, in turn, limit their willingness to try new online activities.