

STUDY ON ONLINE HARMS IN SINGAPORE 2023

TOPLINE FINDINGS

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OVERVIEW

Who are affected by online harms?

Our findings reveal that the problem of online harms is **widespread** in Singapore, with youths being most at risk. 58 percent reported experiencing and/or knowing others who faced online harms. Compared to male youths, **female youths** are more at risk for online harms of a sexual nature, such as sexual harassment. The evidence presents a strong case for targeted policy efforts to address these issues, including stronger legal measures to better protect more vulnerable groups such as youths and females.

Where do they occur?

Online harms occur more commonly on Internet platforms that are **high-usage** and/or on which **interpersonal interaction** takes place. A significant proportion of these harms are serious, and digital users must be properly educated on how to recognise, avoid, and act accordingly.

What are the consequences?

There is significant impact on individuals, communities, and society at large.

About two in five of online harms survivors experience **serious emotional, mental, and physical impact**, such as fearing for their own safety, depression, and self-harm. Three in 10 of survivors also felt angry, sad, anxious, embarrassed, ashamed, or helpless.

However, one in five reported being unaffected after experiencing online harms, as they regard this as a *“normal part of life”*. This suggests that digital users might be **normalising or becoming desensitised** to online harms. These perceptions must be studied further, as they can **impact norms of behaviour** online and across society.

The findings also indicate a **lack of digital trust** in the online space, with 66 percent of Internet users opting to **self-censor** their views expressed online, to avoid online harms. 68 percent of digital users also report **disengaging** with the online space after encountering online harms. These withdrawal behaviours may impact the quality and balance of online discourse, as it may result in skewed discussions with only the boldest views expressed online. Individuals who choose to disengage may also experience a **loss of digital opportunities and experiences**.

What makes it harmful (or not)?

Half of the survivors do not report or seek help for the online harms they suffer. 30 percent of them perceived the harm in question to be of low severity. This suggests a **lack of clarity** amongst digital users on what amounts to harmful online behaviour. Better public education would help users understand the difference between harmful and benign online conduct, including which harms amount to criminal offences.

Are current recourse measures sufficient?

There is also general dissatisfaction with the current avenues for recourse when users encounter online harms. There is some evidence for stronger enforcement measures and **for swift and more permanent avenues of recourse** especially for those who experience egregious online harms, and improvements can be made to the regulatory and legal recourse framework to ensure this.

What can we do about it?

The prevalence, urgency and impact of the problem is clear. SHE envisions an online space that is safe and respectful for all, and we urge stakeholders to consider addressing this issue as a matter of priority.

SHE is committed to playing our part, and we call upon members of public, schools, educators, parents, community organisations, corporates, Internet platforms, and the Government to:

- Raise awareness of the types and impact of online harms
- Build trust and safety in online spaces
- Improve support resources for survivors of online harms
- Improve avenues of recourse for survivors of online harms

Let's all take steps to building a better and safer online realm, not only for us but for future generations of Singaporeans.

WHY THIS REPORT?

Background

Like a double-edged sword, the Internet offers the advantages of easy access to knowledge and opportunities, but it also carries the potential for dangers and harms.

In 2021, the Sunlight Alliance for Action (or the Singapore Together Alliance for Action (AfA) to tackle online harms, especially those targeted at women and girls) was set up by the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) to address and develop solutions against online harms, especially those targeted at females.

In 2022, the Sunlight AfA conducted a poll¹ of 1,000 Singaporeans and found that:

- a) One in two people in Singapore have experienced online harms
- b) Three in 10 of these survivors experienced gender-based online harms
- c) 61 percent of the female respondents were not aware of how to seek help
- d) 43 percent think seeking help would not make a difference or do not know what to do

These are concerning findings. Not only do they reveal that many Singaporeans have experienced harmful online behaviours, they also show that many females have experience gender-based online harms but they do not know how to seek help or feel that doing so would be futile.

Impetus for this Report

SHE was founded in March 2022², to tackle new and emerging issues for females in Singapore. We believe that gender equity and safety should be enjoyed in both the real world and the online world.

Inspired by the work of the Sunlight AfA, SHE's first key initiative was the **SHECARES@SCWO centre**³, Singapore's first support centre for targets of online harms. Launched on 19 January 2023, the centre is a collaboration with the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO), which operates the centre.

¹ Ministry of Communication and Information (2022). [Sunlight Alliance for Action Report](#).

² SHE is an independent non-profit that strives to empower females by engaging with the community, facilitating research, collaborating with partners, and advocating change. Through these efforts, SHE advocates positive change and champions a more equal society. More information about our work can be found [here](#).

³ The centre provides holistic support for targets of online harms through the following services: a helpline and text-line manned by trained counsellors, free counselling support and *pro bono* legal assistance. In select serious sexual assault cases, the Police will provide support by interviewing the victim on-site at the centre premises. More information about the centre can be found [here](#).

To shape our ongoing efforts meaningfully in this area, SHE sought to learn more about how online harms impact females, and how the present online ecosystem can be improved to keep them safer online and help them seek recourse and support where needed. A research organisation (RySense Ltd) was appointed to conduct a study to help us better understand:

- **Prevalence:** Exactly how widespread the problem is in Singapore, including the nature of online harms experienced by different segments of the population, *e.g.*, by gender or age groups
- **Impact:** The type of impact caused by online harms to individuals, the community, and society at large
- **Recourse:** Whether the existing forms of recourse are sufficient to provide the help and assistance that online harms survivors need

The findings will inform SHE's future work (including public education, outreach, advocacy, and/or further research) and help the SHECARES@SCWO centre to better serve its clients.

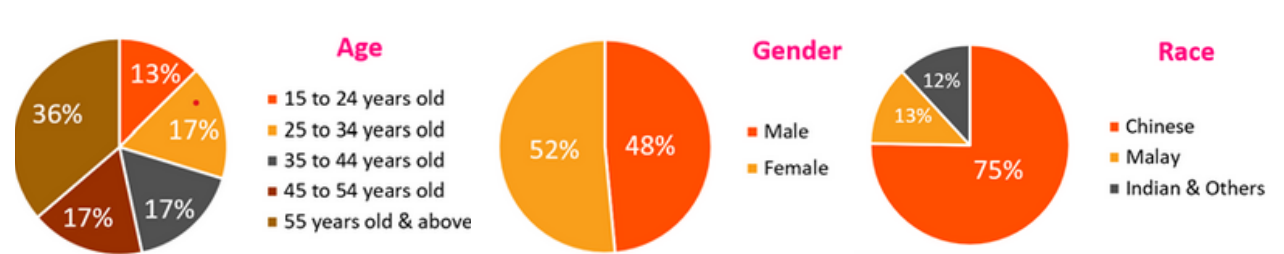
TOPLINE FINDINGS

PART 1: RESPONDENTS & DEFINITIONS

01 Who participated in the survey?

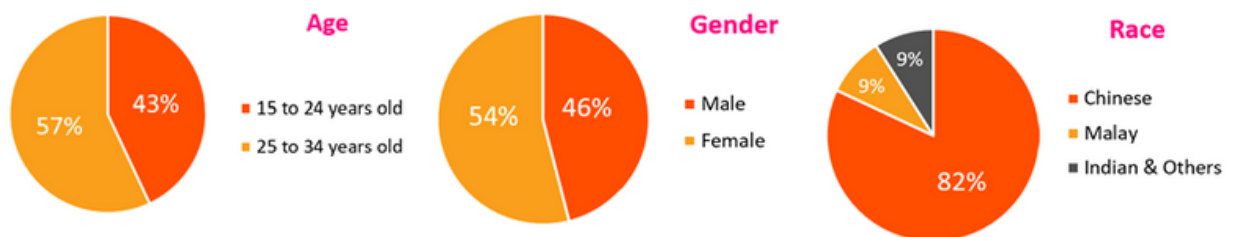
Between 29 May to 12 June 2023, 1,056⁴ Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents aged 15 and above completed the online survey. This sample is nationally represented by age, gender, and race (see [Figure 1](#)).⁵

Figure 1: Demographic Profile of Main Sample Surveyed (n= 1,056).



To allow for youth-specific analyses, we also surveyed an additional 313 youths aged 15 to 34 in addition to the 317 youths in the main sample, bringing the total number of youth participants to 630 (see [Figure 2](#)).

Figure 2: Demographic Profile of Youth Sample Surveyed (n= 630).



⁴ Fieldwork was completed by RySense Ltd using their proprietary online panel.

⁵ Quotas derived from the Department of Statistics (DOS)

02 How were 'online harms' defined in this study?

The study explored nine different types of online harms, defined as follows. These are forms of harms perpetrated by bad actors against others online, whose targets could be expected to approach a service such as SHECARES@SCWO for help. Unlike other forms of harm such as online scams and terrorism content which have come under increased scrutiny by law enforcement and lawmakers, these 9 types of harms have not been the main focus of recent legal reforms but deserve specific attention as well.

Online Harm	Description
1. Sexual harassment	Unwanted messages of a sexual nature or obscene images
2. Cyberbullying/ Harassment	Online bullying, harassment, threats, insults, or abuse (including body shaming and hateful comments on the basis of race, religion, sexuality etc.)
3. Impersonation/ Identity Theft	Posing as someone else online (e.g., setting up a social media account under another person's identity)
4. Defamation/ Falsehoods	False or misleading statements, images, or videos about a person
5. Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA)	Distribution of nude, intimate or sexually explicit images or videos (including altered images or videos) of a person without his/her consent
6. Cyberstalking	Online stalking (e.g., by tracking one's whereabouts through his/her social media accounts)
7. Cancel Campaign	Participate in and encourage others to call for and create pressure to punish a person for what he/she may have said or done (or what is sometimes referred to as "cancellation") (e.g., punishing a person by shaming him/her, or pressuring employers to fire him/her)
8. Hate Speech	Being targeted with hate speech/hate comments because of the community/segment of society you belong to or identify with (e.g., racist comments)
9. Doxxing	Doxxing (i.e., publish a person's identity information to cause harassment, alarm or distress, fear of violence or provoke or facilitate the use of violence)

PART 2: PREVALENCE

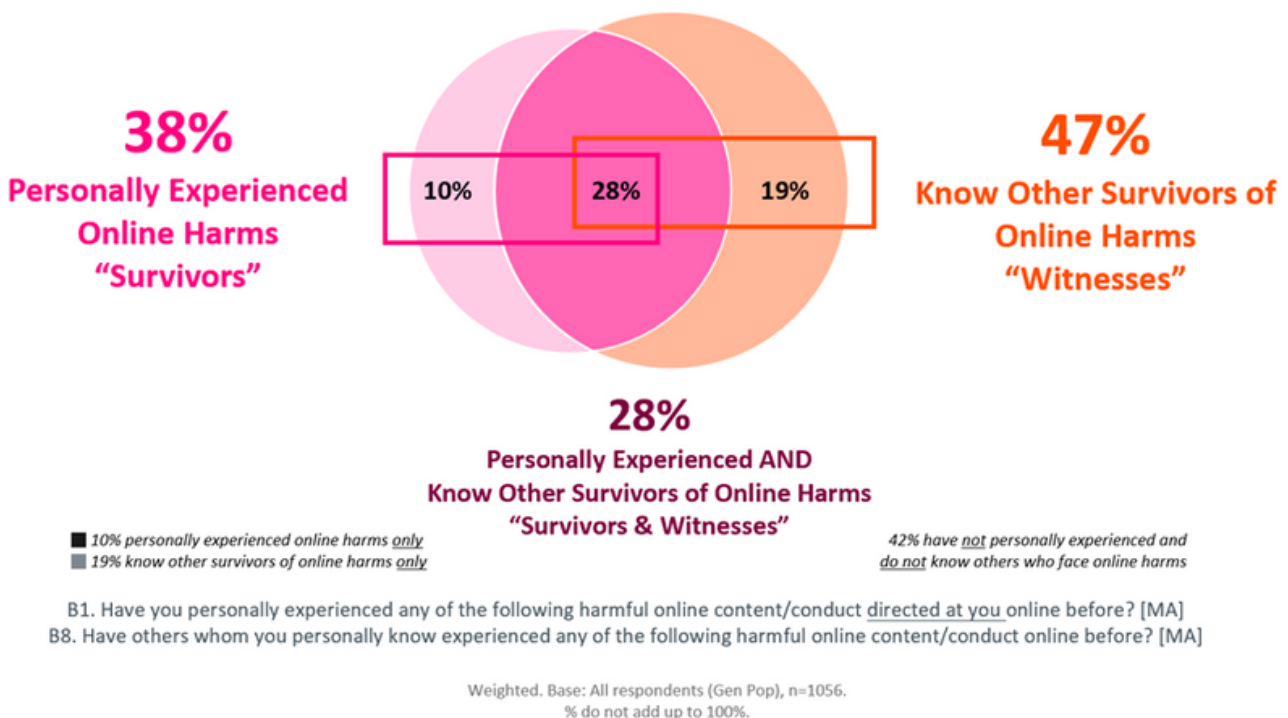
01 Who is affected?

A widespread problem

About three in five (58%) respondents reported personally experiencing and/or knowing others who faced online harms (see [Figure 3](#)).

- 38 percent were survivors and had personally experienced online harms
- 47 percent were witnesses who know of other survivors of online harms
- Of the 38 percent who were survivors, more men reported personally experiencing online harms (F: 35 percent, M: 42 percent). It is however unclear whether women have a higher threshold for reporting an online harm experience in a survey, and this warrants further study.

Figure 3: Percentage of respondents who reported personally experiencing and/or knowing others who faced online harms



More youths affected

A larger proportion of younger segments (aged 15 to 44) reported personally experiencing online harms (see [Figure 4](#)). A larger proportion of younger segments (aged 15 to 44) also reported witnessing online harms (see [Figure 5](#)).

Figure 4: Age distribution of respondents who self-reported as survivors

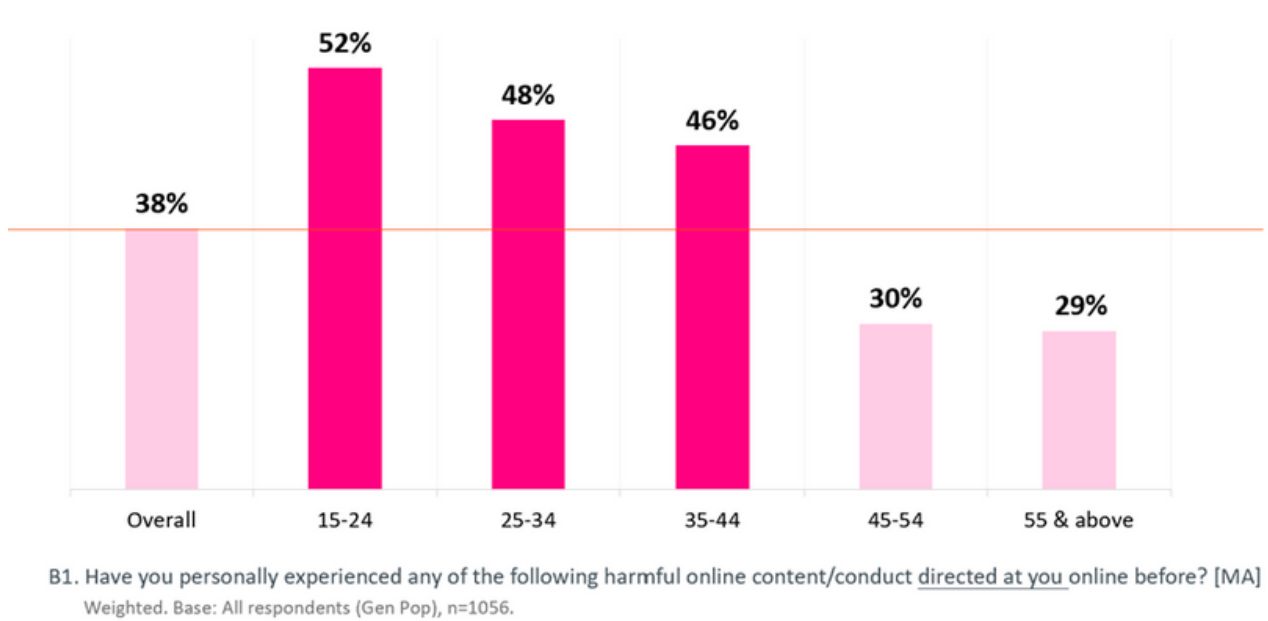
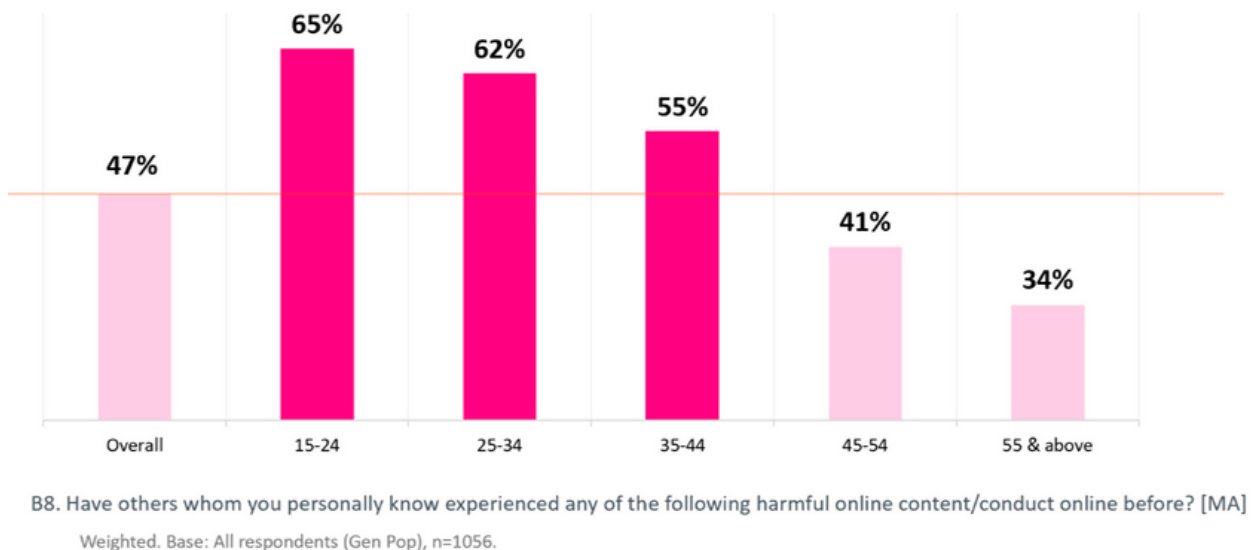


Figure 5: Age distribution of respondents who self-reported as witnesses

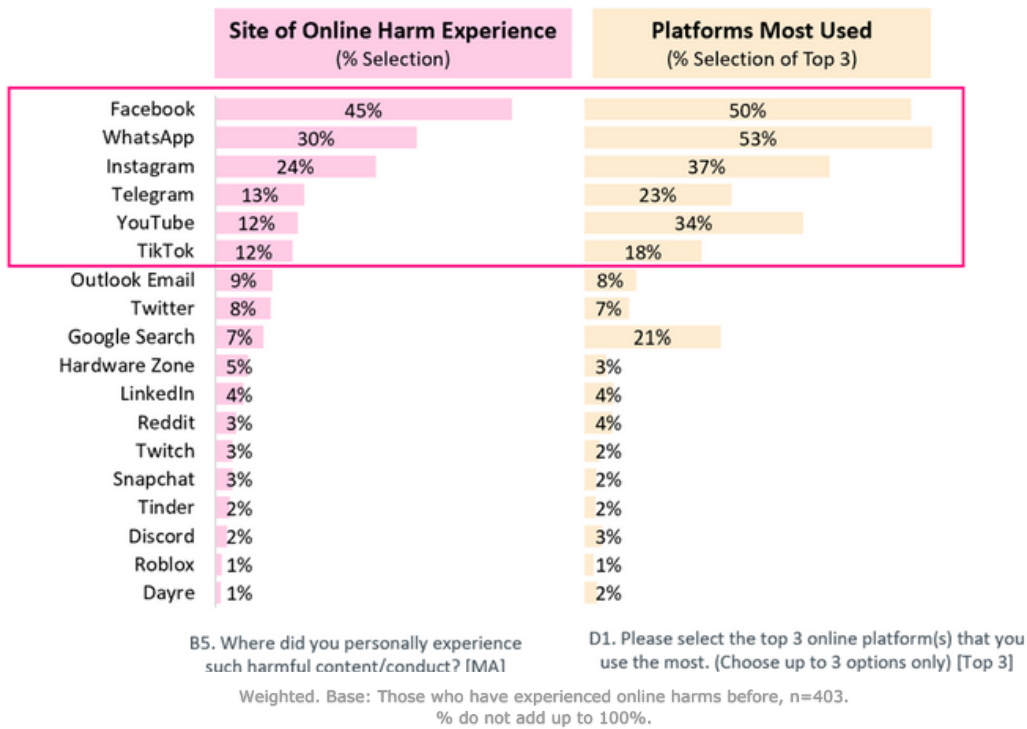


02

Where do the online harms occur?

Online harms more common on platforms with high use

Online harms are commonly reported on platforms or apps that have high use amongst digital users and/or on which interpersonal interaction takes place (see [Figure 6](#)).

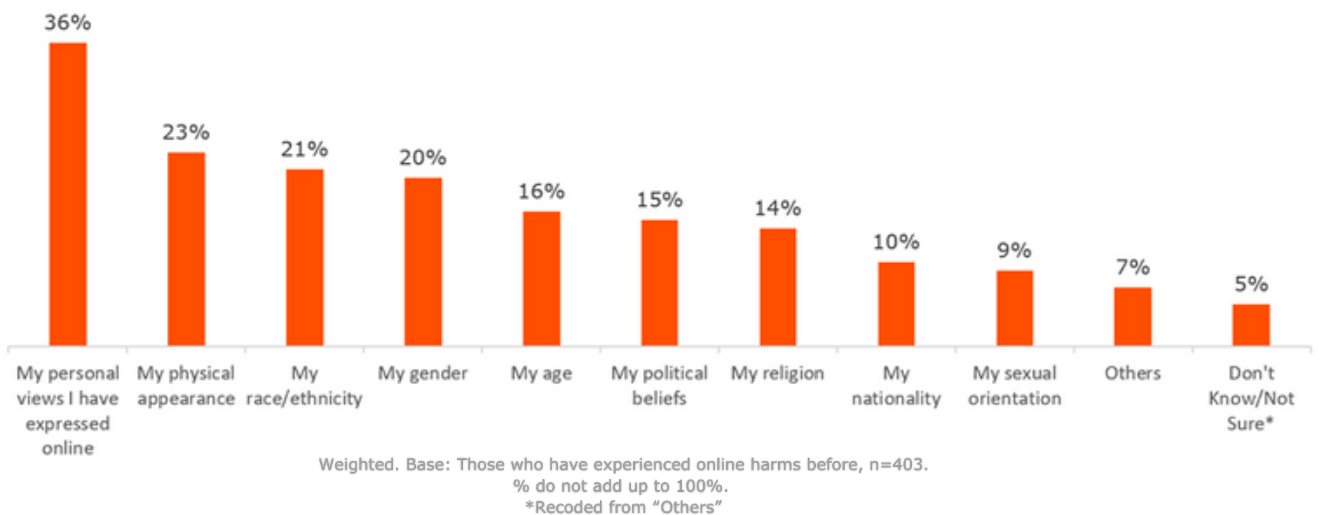
Figure 6: Platforms where online harms were reported

03

Why do online harms occur?

Perceived reasons for experiencing online harms

The top four perceived reasons for personally experiencing online harms are: (i) personal views expressed online, (ii) physical appearance, (iii) race/ethnicity and (iv) gender (see Figure 7).

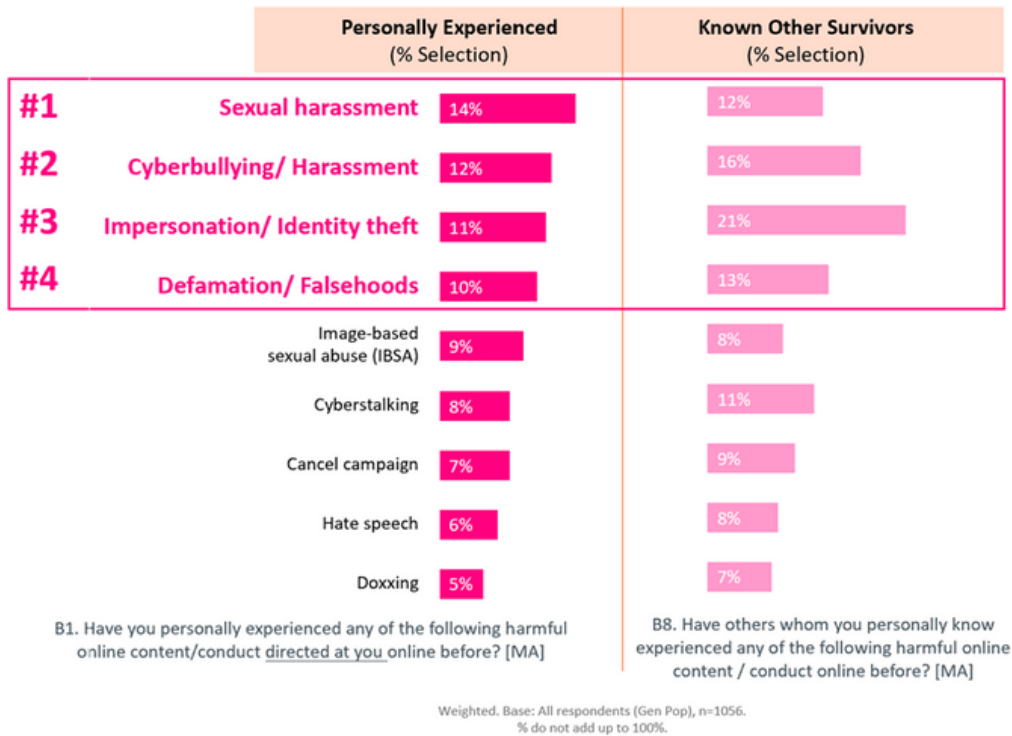
Figure 7: Top perceived reasons for experiencing online harms

04

What types of online harms are most common?

Most and least common online harms encountered

The top four online harms encountered are **sexual harassment, cyberbullying, impersonation, and defamation**, with the least common harm being doxxing (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Top online harms encountered by survivors and witnesses

Female youths more at risk for harms of a sexual nature

Female youths are more at risk for certain types of serious harms, especially harms of a sexual nature. Female youths were almost twice as likely to experience sexual harassment (F: 22 percent, M: 12 percent). For respondents aged 15-24, more females know someone who has experienced online harms (F: 73 percent, M: 58 percent).

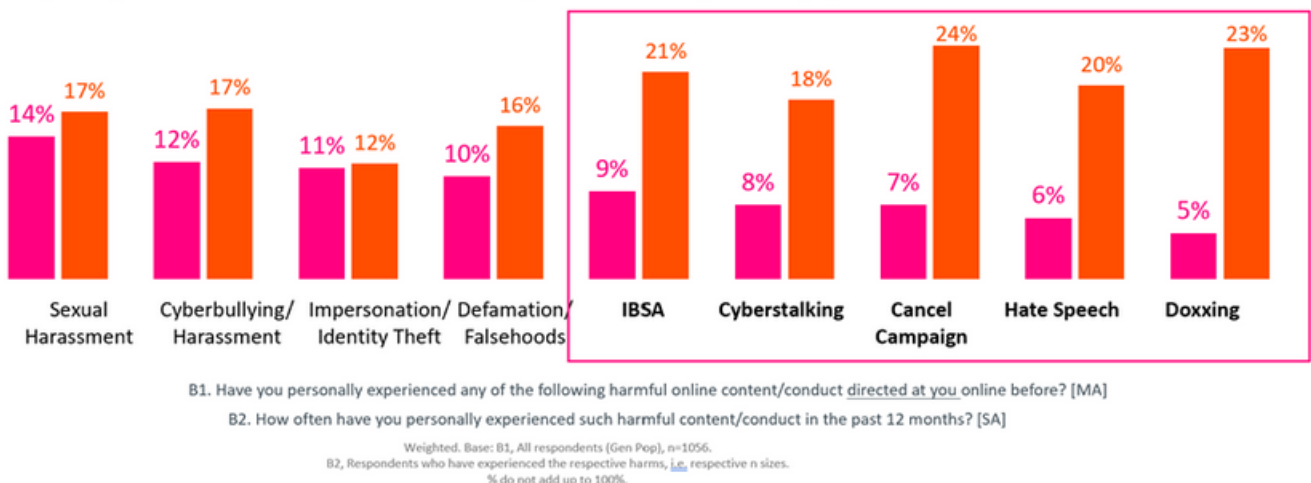
Certain online harms are experienced repeatedly

While fewer respondents have experienced IBSA, cancel campaigns, hate speech and doxxing, survivors of these harms experienced them on a more frequent basis (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Incidence and Frequency of online harms experienced by survivors

Incidence: % selection of online harms

Frequency: % selection of "About once a day or once every few days / About once a week"

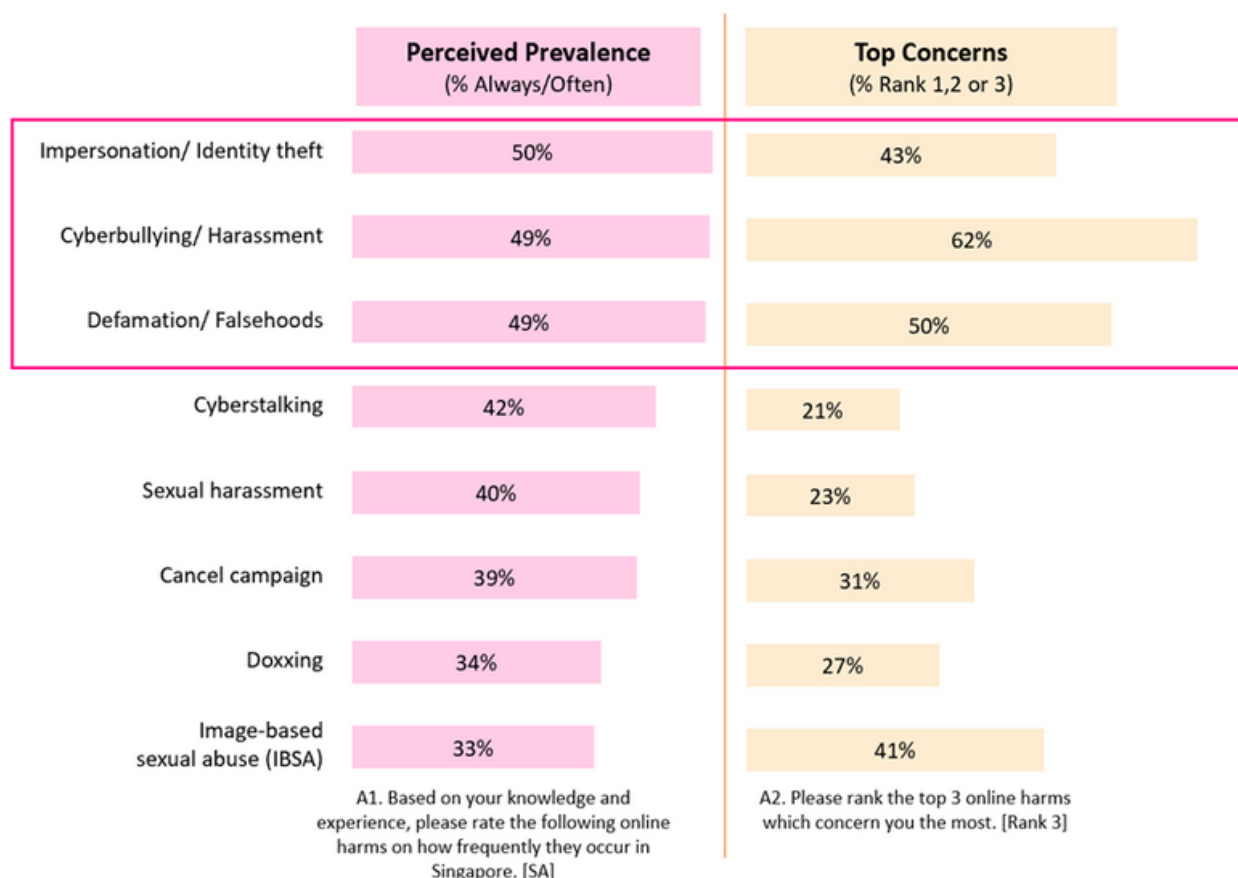


05 What online harms are people most concerned about?

Harms of greatest concern

The top four harms of concern are **impersonation, cyberbullying, defamation, and IBSA** (see [Figure 10](#)). This suggests a belief among respondents that the impact of these harms is the most serious.

Figure 10: Perceived Prevalence and Top Concerns by Survivors



Weighted. Base: Those who have experienced online harms before, n=403.
% do not add up to 100%.

Female and male youths have different concerns

More female youths aged 15 to 34 are concerned about sexual-based harms - IBSA (F: 56 percent, M: 40 percent) and sexual harassment (F: 27 percent, M: 16 percent). More male youths aged 15 to 34 are concerned about defamation (F: 41 percent, M: 51 percent), cancel campaigns (F: 27 percent, M: 38 percent), and doxxing (F: 26 percent, M: 37 percent).

PART 3: IMPACT

01 How are people impacted by online harms?

Many suffer severe forms of impact

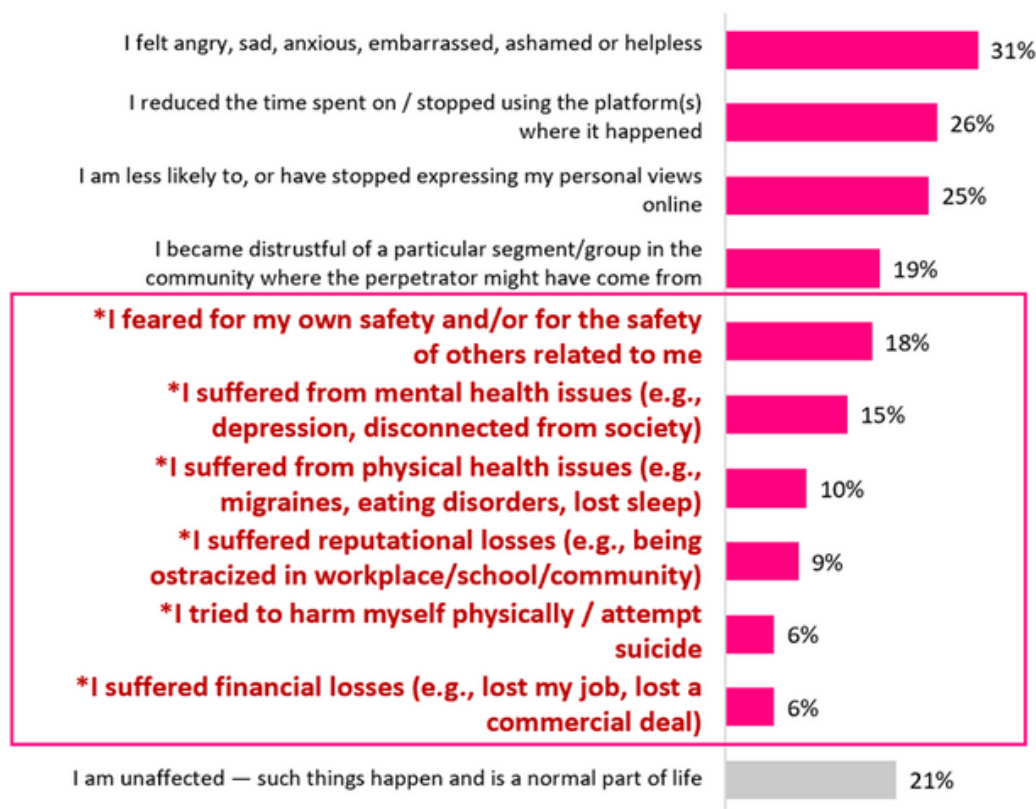
Of the 38 percent who reported to be survivors of online harms, many suffered emotional-related impact or changes in online behaviour (see [Figure 11](#)):

- Two in five reported experiencing at least one severe form of impact (e.g., fearing for own safety, physical/mental health issues, suicidal ideation)
- Two in five reduced the time spent on the platform or stopped expressing their views online

A significant number of users may be normalising online harms

One in five reported being unaffected after experiencing online harms, as this was a “normal part of life” (see [Figure 11](#)). This suggests that digital users may be normalising or becoming desensitised to online harms.

Figure 11: Impact of online harms on survivors



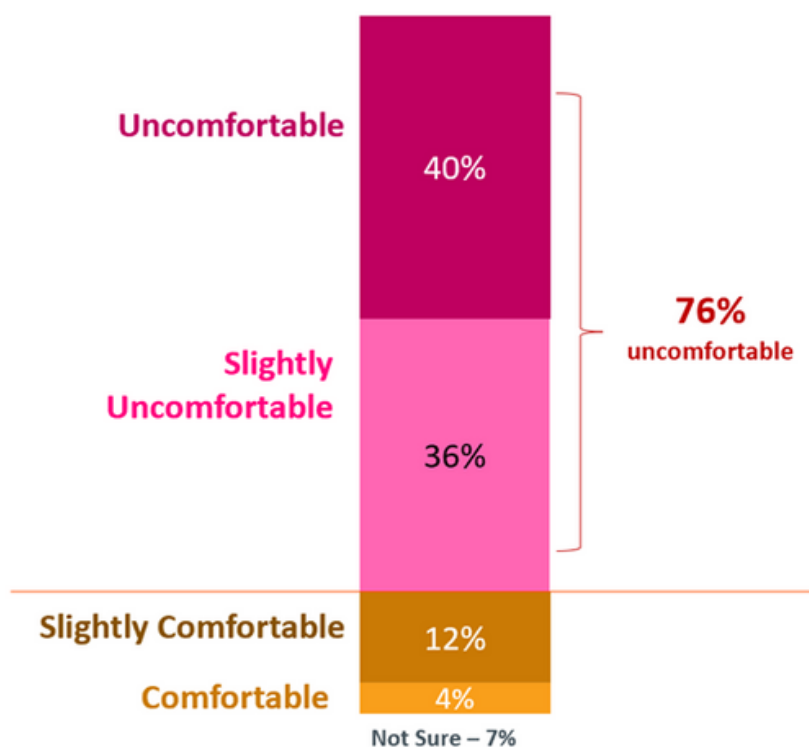
B6. Which of the following describe(s) the impact of such harmful content/conduct on you? [MA]

Weighted. Base: Those who have experienced online harms before, n=403.

A majority are uncomfortable expressing personal views online

Three in four are uncomfortable expressing their personal views on potentially controversial topics (see [Figure 12](#)). More females (80 percent) than males (73 percent) are uncomfortable. Those who were not comfortable were concerned that people would target and cause harm to them, their loved ones, or their employers online and/or in real life.

Figure 12: Comfort level in expressing personal views on potentially controversial topics



A4a. How comfortable do you feel expressing your personal views on potentially controversial topics (e.g., on issues of race, sexuality or government policies) online? [SA]

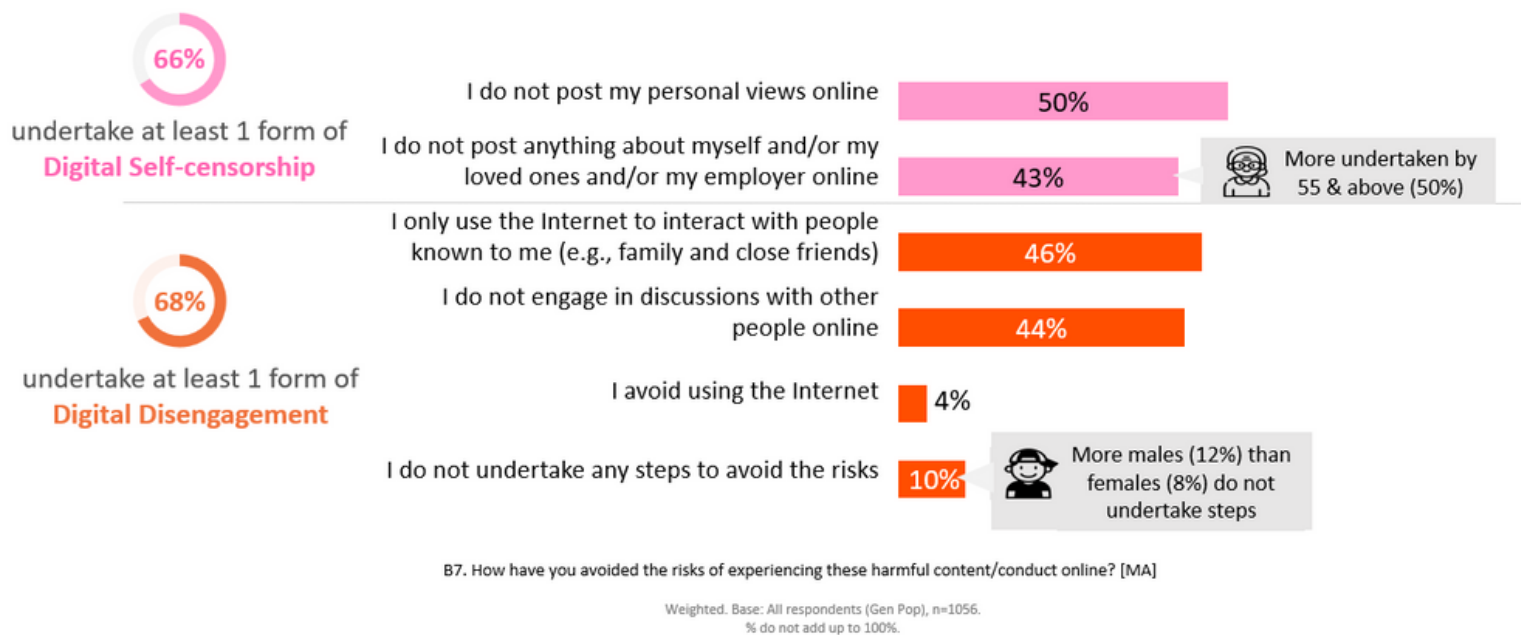
Weighted. Base: All respondents (Gen Pop), n=1056.
% add up to 100%.

02

How are people protecting themselves?

A majority self-censor or disengage as a form of self-help

To avoid online harms, many self-censor (66 percent) or disengage (68 percent) from their online activities. Older persons aged 55 and above are more likely to not post anything personal and not participate online (see [Figure 13](#)).

Figure 13: Actions people take to avoid risks of online harms

Not everyone protects themselves

10 percent of respondents reported not taking any measures against the risks of online harms, with more males than females (M: 12 percent; F: 8 percent) not taking any steps to avoid the risks (see [Figure 13](#)).

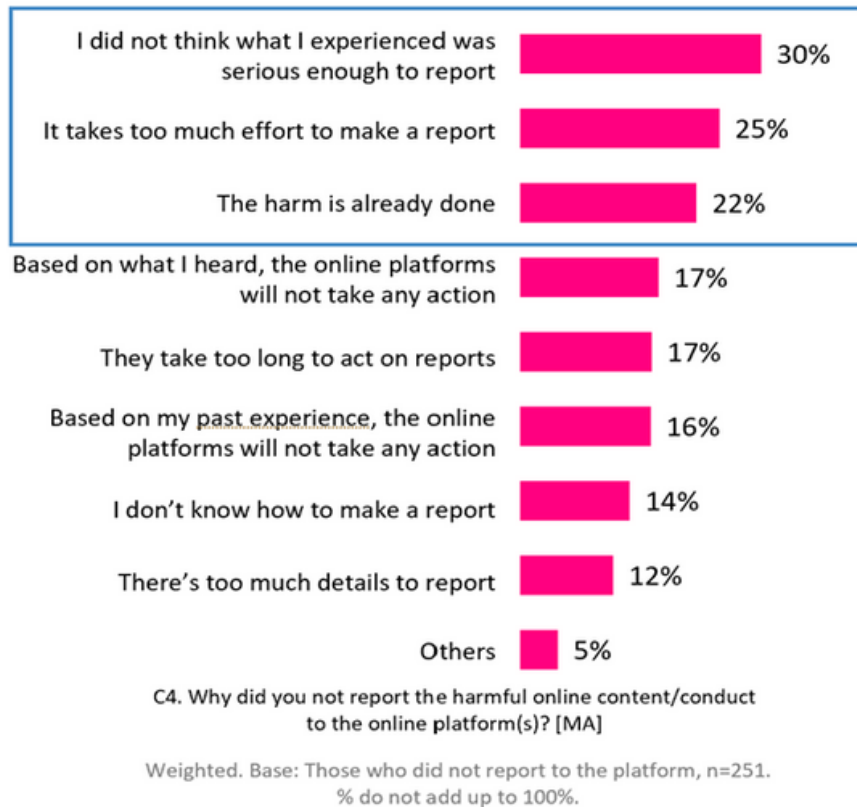
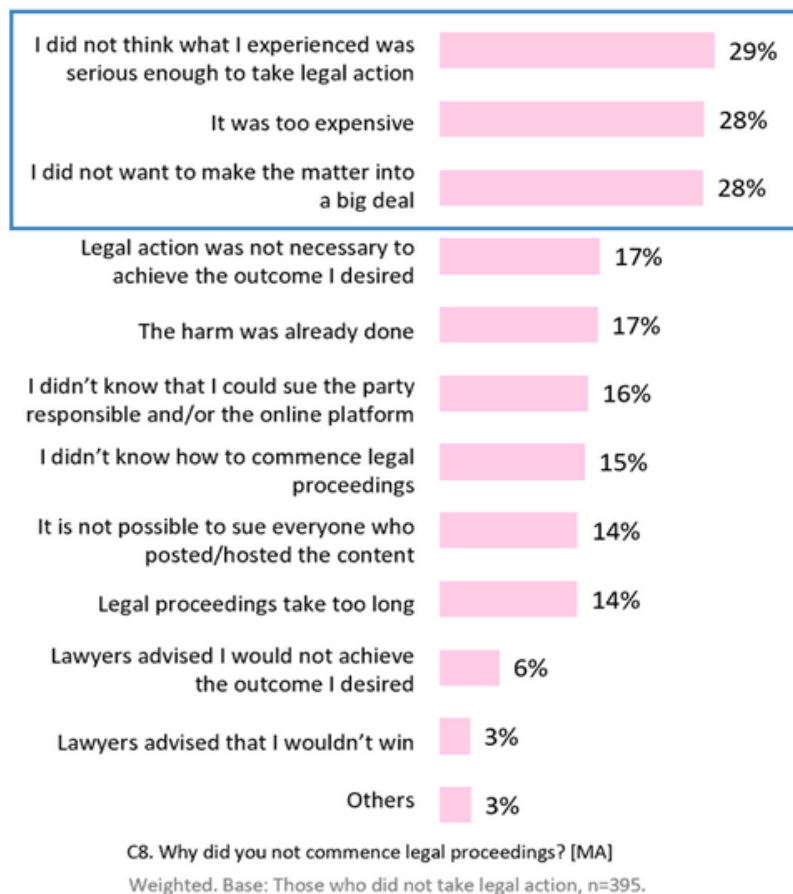
03 How do people respond to online harms?

Many do take steps to report the online harms

Of those who experienced online harms, one in two (53 percent) reported the harm to relevant parties e.g., to the platform or to the police and two in five (38 percent) reported the harms directly to the platform.

Perceived 'lack of seriousness of harms' the top reason why people don't report or take legal action

Among those who did not report the online harm to the platform concerned, 30 percent cited a belief that the incident was not serious enough to report. Of those who did not take legal action, 29 percent cited the same reason. Other top three reasons cited included the effort and costs involved in pursuing such actions, as well as acceptance of the harm and not wanting to make it into a big deal (see [Figures 14 and 15](#)).

Figure 14: Reasons cited for not reporting to platform**Figure 15: Reasons cited for not taking legal action**

PART 4: RECOURSE

01

What can be done to improve recourse for survivors?

The majority agree more rules and regulations are needed

Eight in 10 agreed that there should be further measures, rules, or regulations, apart from online platforms' community guidelines.

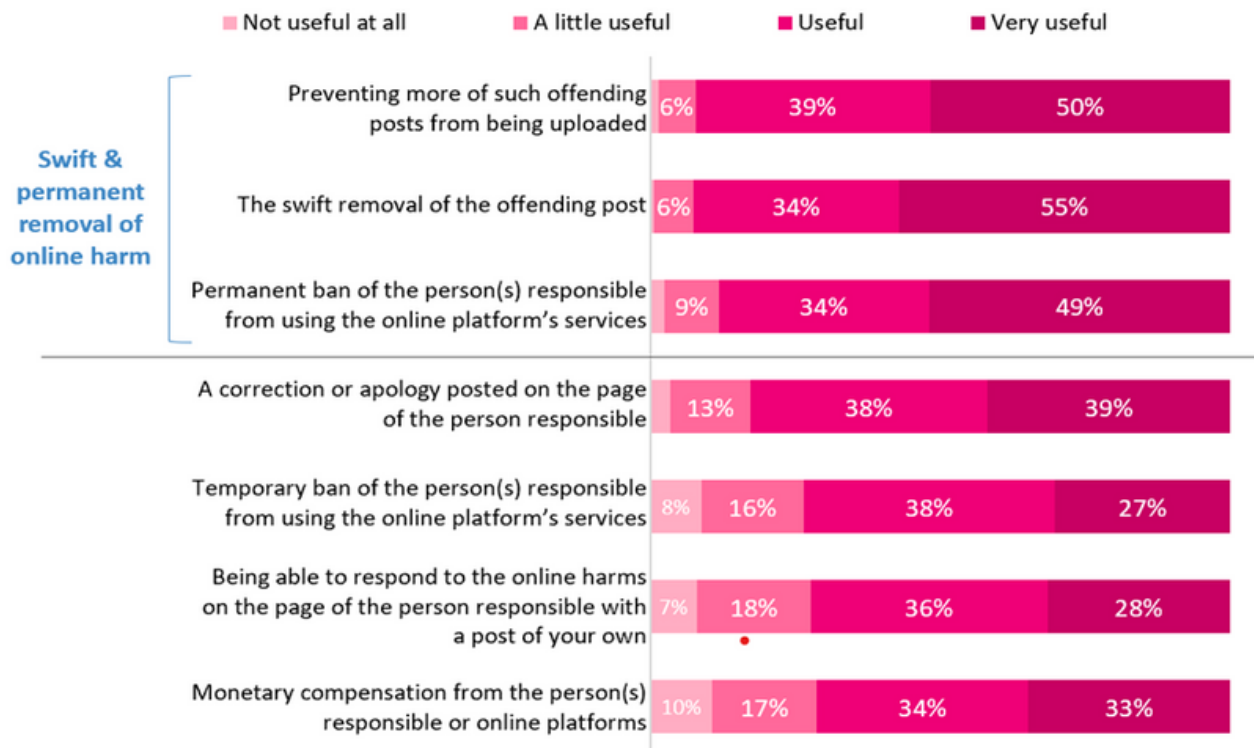
Swift and permanent recourse preferred

More than eight in 10 preferred remedies that would involve the **swift and permanent removal** of the harm concerned. The top 3 remedies that respondents believe are 'useful' or 'very useful' are (see [Figure 16](#)):

- Preventing more of such posts from being uploaded (89 percent)
- Swift removal of offending posts (89 percent)
- Permanent ban of the perpetrator(s) from the platform (83 percent)

The majority also agree that the following remedies would be useful/very useful; an apology (77 percent), monetary compensation (67 percent), and a temporary ban (65 percent).

Figure 16: Preferred Remedies for Online Harms



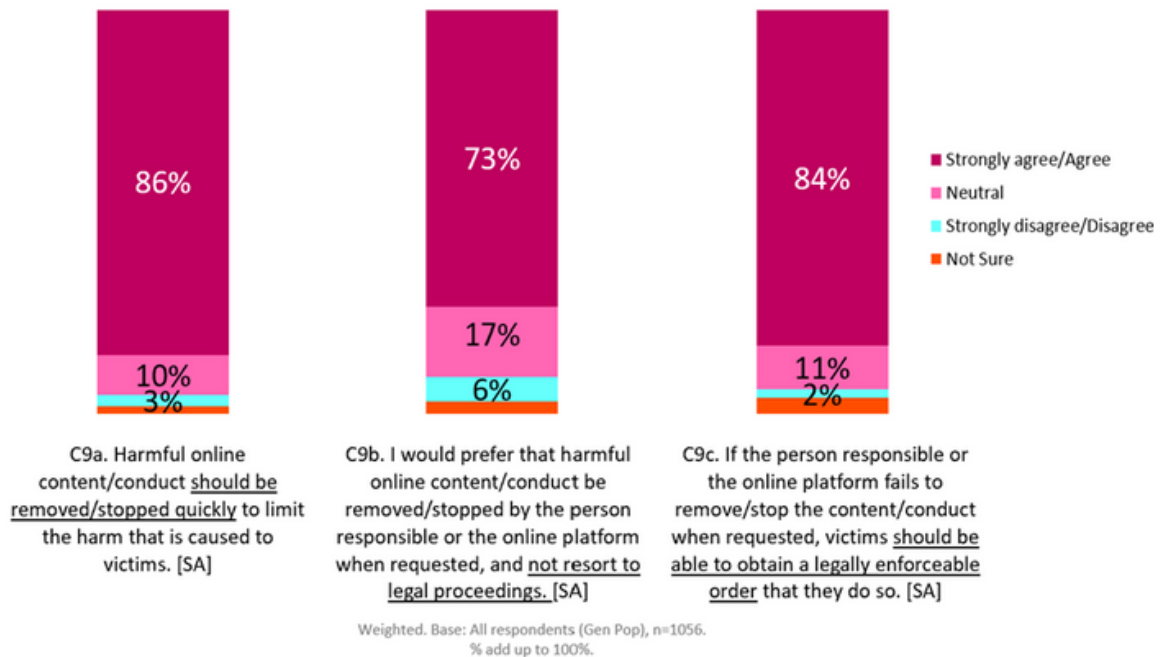
C10. If you were a victim of harmful online content/conduct, how useful would these remedies/actions be for you? [SA]

Weighted. Base: All respondents (Gen Pop), n=1056.
% up to 100%.

Non-legal means of recourse are preferred

The majority agree that online harms should be removed/stopped swiftly, without involving legal action. However, survivors should be able to obtain a legally enforceable order where the perpetrator/platform fails to stop/remove the offending conduct/content when requested (see Figure 17).

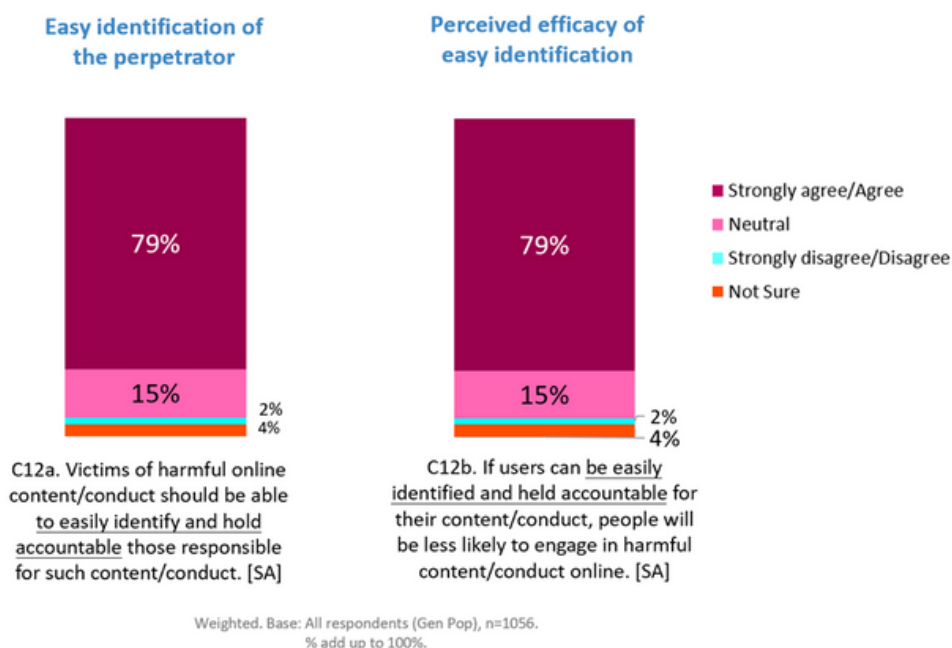
Figure 17: Preferred Method in Removing Harmful Content



Improved perpetrator accountability will deter online harms

The majority also agree that survivors should be able to easily identify and hold the perpetrator accountable, and that if perpetrators can be easily identified and held accountable, this will deter or curb online harms (see Figure 18).

Figure 18: Preference for Easy Identification of Perpetrator



RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to these findings, SHE plans to work in partnership with stakeholders such as corporates, community organisations, schools, and Government to:

1

Raise awareness of online harms, particularly amongst vulnerable groups such as youths and females

- **More public education** on the types and impact of online harms, including how to identify harmful conduct, is necessary. This will allow people to recognise when they are experiencing harmful conduct, and to report it and seek help.
- It is also important to **address the potential desensitisation and normalisation** of online harms. Public education efforts should thus also include practical examples and case studies, to help users better connect with their own experiences.
- Particular attention should be placed on educating **youths and females youths**, who are more at risk of online harms. By working with schools, parents, educators, and community groups, we can ensure these groups have the knowledge and skills to protect themselves and seek help and recourse in the event online harms are experienced.

2

Build trust in online spaces

- To ensure healthy online participation, **digital trust must be promoted** so that users do not self-censor or disengage to avoid risks of online harms. Safeguards can be strengthened by, for example, ensuring that in-app reporting and avenues for help are easily accessible on platform interfaces.
- It is also necessary to encourage **positive norms of civility online**. This will not only help build trust but will promote more balanced civic discourse. SHE recommends developing a **Code of Conduct** for Internet users, to provide a guide on the best practices for online engagement. Measures that allow greater accountability or easier identification of users may also be introduced to deter users from engaging in uncivil online conduct.
- **Community organisations** like SHE can play a key role in the trust-building process. We are well placed to engage in public outreach, including to the groups most at risk, to raise awareness and educate people about how to be kind and respectful online.

3

Improve support resources

- SHE will continue to run the **SHECARES@SCWO centre**, which offers holistic help and assistance to targets of online harms. As part of the effort to provide targeted help for female youths, we will raise awareness on the specific harms of concern for them, namely sexual harassment and IBSA, and look to developing speciality support for those dealing with such harms.

4

Improve modes of recourse

- SHE is a community partner of LinkedIn and Snap and has worked closely with Internet platforms such as Google/YouTube, Meta, TikTok and X to partner on their respective priority flagger/trusted flagger programmes. Such programmes cater for better user recourse, as they allow in-app reports made by SHE and the SHECARES@SCWO centre to be expedited or prioritised as needed.
- As swift and permanent recourse is preferred, SHE will continue to work with Internet platforms to **raise awareness of in-app reporting** as an important part of addressing online harms. More platforms can be encouraged to adopt and/or enhance this function, so that individuals can efficiently seek recourse, and do not have to seek 'self-help' by disengaging from the digital space and missing out on potential opportunities and experiences.
- SHE will also support public agencies in developing **legal recourse measures** that allow survivors to seek quick, effective, and permanent remedies. An example of a legal lever that can be explored might be: - in IBSA cases a legal presumption regarding consent can be considered, such that if an intimate image of a person is shared online, it is presumed to be shared without that person's consent.

5

Further research

- There is currently a **lack of comprehensive research** on the short-and long-term individual and societal impact of online harms (including gender-based online harms), including how such harms may affect gender equality or social norms in both the digital and real-world realms. SHE plans to **facilitate further research** on these matters, to guide our work in addressing online harms, particularly against females.

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We hope these findings have initiated a greater awareness on online harms and that practical steps are taken to protect yourself and your loved ones.

We look forward to working with our partners, new and old, to build a better and safer society for all, and our future generations to come.

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