



# New Zealand Teens and Digital Harm

Statistical insights into experiences, impact and response

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NEW ZEALAND TEENS AND DIGITAL HARM: STATISTICAL INSIGHTS INTO EXPERIENCES, IMPACT AND RESPONSE

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## Foreword

We are pleased to present our latest research findings about teenage New Zealanders' experiences of online risk and harm. This report is the result of the partnership between Netsafe and the Ministry for Women. This partnership has been galvanised by the insights generated by our work so far, and its implications for supporting young people's online safety and development into young adults.

We firmly believe that the partnered approach has extended the reach and depth of our research, through the experience of diverse points of view and different perspectives, knowledge and experiences. Further, this partnership has delivered the first exploratory study since the introduction of the Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015 into the nature of digital harm among New Zealand teens.

In 2017 we released the *Insights into Digital Harm* report, which explored the online lives of 16 and 17 year-olds in a series of conversations. This report builds on that work by gauging young New Zealanders' experiences of unwanted digital communications. For adults the insights in this report are sobering reading.

The research findings are clear. Teenage boys and girls access and use the internet to interact with the world in different ways. This is not necessarily a surprise. However, unless we understand these differences and why they occur it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to design the right support. More concerning is the gendered differences in the levels of risk and resulting harm reported by teenage New Zealanders. Girls are more likely to receive an unwanted digital communication and be adversely impacted than boys.

This is not all. There are clear differences between the experiences of young people with disabilities and those without; and between teens of different ethnicities.

In the foreword to *Insights into Digital Harm* we talked about how, as adults, we often know little about the online behaviour of our children and young people. We said that the first step must be to hear what they say about their online lives, which is why we went out to speak to them directly. We must not forget that behind the statistics in this report are the very real experiences of young New Zealanders navigating a range of diverse online challenges that are largely unseen by the adult world. This report shines a light on these experiences, and it does this by listening to and learning from young New Zealanders: Their stories matter.

Further, this report raises important questions about online risk and harm and other forms of offline aggression and violence - at home, at school, and in wider society. The issues at the heart of this report need to be raised and discussed in a balanced way and informed by evidence. The challenge is to make this work count, by using the evidence to influence changes in the design and delivery of policy interventions. Those who work with and on behalf of young people, and are concerned with preventing and reducing harm, should use this evidence to effect the changes we all want: Thriving young people growing into flourishing adults.



**Martin Cocker**  
Chief Executive, Netsafe



**Renée Graham**  
Chief Executive, Ministry for Women

## Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a nationally representative study whose purpose was to explore the experiences, attitudes, and behaviours of New Zealand teens about digital communications including harm and/or distress. It was conducted by Netsafe in partnership with the Ministry for Women (the Ministry).

While there is growing interest in examining young people's experiences and use of digital technologies, including the challenges and risks teens face, evidence based on representative data in the New Zealand context has been unavailable.

The study focuses on the prevalence of New Zealand teens' experiences with a range of unwanted digital communications<sup>1</sup> in the previous year and the impact these experiences had on them, both emotionally and in carrying out everyday life activities. It also describes teens' responses, the effectiveness of their coping actions, and to whom they would turn for help in the future.

The study reveals distinctive differences regarding experiences of harm and/or distress through unwanted digital communications among different sub-groups of the population surveyed. More noticeable are the varying experiences in the context of gender, with girls being more likely to experience disruptions in their everyday life activities and an emotional toll because of unwanted digital communications. These insights are consistent with key findings from *Insights into Digital Harm: The Online Lives of New Zealand Girls and Boys*, a qualitative study released last year by the Ministry in collaboration with Netsafe. Similar patterns have been identified in the context of participants' ethnicity, disability and age.

The research technique for data collection was an online survey conducted with a sample of 1,001 New Zealand teens aged 14-17 years old and distributed on key demographic variables such as age, gender, disability, ethnicity and location. Fieldwork was conducted in the third term of the 2017 school year. Data collection and initial analysis was carried out by Colmar Brunton. Strict procedures were followed to ensure the protection of participants' privacy and confidentiality. The margin of error of this study is +/- 3.1% on total results.

As digital technologies continue to evolve, so too will the ways young people engage with them. Further research will be required to fully explain new dimensions of the complex nature of teens' and children's interaction with their online environment.

We believe government agencies, online content and service providers, law enforcement, the research community, and the general public will find this report useful. The findings can contribute to the development of policies and practices that are intended to support New Zealand teens to safely take advantage of the benefits of digital technologies and online environments.

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<sup>1</sup> See Glossary section for definition of terms.

## Key findings

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### EXPERIENCES OF UNWANTED DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

- Overall, 7 in 10 teens in New Zealand have experienced at least one type of unwanted digital communication in the past year. Not all these resulted in harm or distress.
- The most common types of unwanted digital communications were
  - being contacted by a stranger; and
  - accidentally seeing inappropriate content online.
- Teens report they most commonly encounter unwanted digital communications through social media. This was more prevalent for girls than boys, who were more likely to experience an online incident<sup>2</sup> through online gaming.
- Teens' experiences of unwanted digital communications are most commonly instigated by a friend or someone they do not know.
- In just over a quarter of cases (27%), an unwanted digital communication was related to a wider issue happening offline. This was higher for girls than boys.
- Compared to other ethnic groups, Māori and Pacific teens were more likely to report receiving unwanted digital communications across a range of different types.

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### IMPACT OF UNWANTED DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

- Nearly 2 in 10 (19%) of New Zealand teens experienced an unwanted digital communication that had a negative impact on their daily activities.
  - The most common consequences they reported were being unable to participate online as they used to, and to go to school or study.
  - Teens with disabilities were significantly more likely than non-disabled teens to be unable to go to school or study.
  - The impact of unwanted digital communications on performing daily activities was more likely to affect younger teens.
- 4 out of 5 New Zealand teens who reported experiencing an unwanted digital communication said they had an emotional response to it. The most common reactions were feeling annoyed, frustrated, and confused. However, some found online incidents funny or did not care.

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<sup>2</sup> In this report we use the terms online incidents and unwanted digital communications interchangeably.

- Experiences of distress and harm are gendered. Girls not only were more likely to experience an unwanted digital communication but also to be emotionally affected and unable to carry on with daily activities because of it.
  - Girls were more likely to feel annoyed, confused and anxious than boys. Similar patterns were found about feeling distressed, insecure, unsafe, and horrified.
  - Being unable to participate online in the way they used to and go to school or study were also more common among girls.

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## ACTIONS TAKEN IN RESPONSE TO UNWANTED DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

- Teens' most common immediate responses to an unwanted digital communication were to
  - Block the person responsible
  - Ignore the situation, or
  - Report the problem to an adult.
- Just over 7 in 10 say their response was effective at changing the situation. However, fewer girls than boys agreed that the outcome of their response was positive.
- If teens received an unwanted digital communication in the future, they would turn to parents and close friends for help first.

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## Introduction

This report is the result of Netsafe’s research partnership with the Ministry for Women. Since late 2016, Netsafe and the Ministry have been collaborating and developing research on the topic of digital harm and teens with a focus on gender. The partnership has already produced a number of evidence-based research outputs.

First, the Ministry led a qualitative study which resulted in the release of the *Insights into Digital Harm: The Online Lives of New Zealand Girls and Boys* report in December 2017. This exploratory study was based on twelve focus groups and has informed the development of subsequent stages of the research partnership. Netsafe has similarly published *Teens and “Sexting” in New Zealand*, a quantitative study that measured the prevalence of the sharing of nudes among teenagers. Recently, Netsafe released *New Zealand Teens’ Digital Profile: A factsheet*, a research summary of teenagers’ use, and attitudes towards, digital technologies and online safety. The insights resulting from the partnership between Netsafe and the Ministry are developing the New Zealand evidence base on young people and online safety.

## Background

This section presents an overview of current research about experiences of online challenges and risks among teens in New Zealand. It starts by summarising the current debate around the impact of digital technologies on teenagers’ development and wellbeing. Then, it outlines the available research conducted in New Zealand. This review of the literature highlights the increasing interest in examining the online experiences of young people both nationally and internationally.

*Teens are actively engaged with digital technologies.*

Today’s teens are commonly referred to by monikers such as *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001), and more recently *iGen* (Twenge, 2017), because they are part of a generation born and growing up surrounded by a range of technological tools such as smartphones<sup>3</sup>. A large body of research shows that teens around the world are actively engaged with digital technologies, particularly mobile devices, and that their use of technology has reshaped the way they communicate, learn, socialise, and play, among other activities (Lenhart, 2015; Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Odgers, 2018). Our findings from *Insights into Digital Harm* (Ministry for Women, 2017) and *New Zealand Teens’ Digital Profile: A factsheet* (Netsafe, 2018b) confirm this trend in New Zealand. These studies explored teenagers’ access to digital devices, how often they go online, and the diversity of social media platforms they commonly use, among other aspects. The findings show that teens are quick adopters and highly engaged with digital technologies, and that these tools play a key part in their everyday lives.

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<sup>3</sup> However, some authors challenge the idea that generational differences are enough to explain young people’s use and experiences of digital technologies or their apparent ability to multitask (see Helsper & Eynon, 2010; Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017).

*Increased opportunity afforded by digital technologies is accompanied by challenge and risk.*

At the same time, however, the relation between teens and digital technologies has generated a debate about the impact of technology on different aspects of young peoples' lives, including their safety and mental health (Gruber & Fineran, 2007; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011; Odgers, 2018). In a recent study, Twenge (2017) argues that smartphones and other touchscreen-related tools are linked to teens' antisocial behaviour, decreasing happiness while increasing loneliness, depression and political disengagement. Prior research also relates teens' time spent using technology to obesity (Kautiainen, Koivusilta, Lintonen, Virtanen, & Rimpelä, 2005). Likewise, digital technologies, some argue, have originated new forms of aggressive behaviours, and problematic or risky practices among young people such as cyberbullying and "sexting" (Ahern & Mechling, 2013; Slonje & Smith, 2008). In addition, the relation between frequent internet use and teens' online victimisation has also been reported by previous research (Erdur-Baker, 2010; Wolak, Ybarra, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007).

While there are challenges and risks associated with the use of digital technologies for everyone, including adults, some have argued that these issues are mediated by technology but not determined by them. In this respect, Boyd (2014) argues that technology mirrors, magnifies, and makes more visible current experiences of everyday life, including bullying and other related behaviours. In the same line, Odgers (2018) notes that behaviours mediated by technology can increase risks in already vulnerable teens. Others (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008) discuss adults' moral panic in which the behaviour and practices of teens are portrayed as a threat to the values and norms of society. The way mainstream media often reports on teens' sharing nudes of themselves supports this point (Netsafe, 2017). Sonia Livingstone and associates point out that "the popular fear that the internet endangers all children has not been supported by evidence" but suggest that increasing access to digital technologies might create risks as "children become more sophisticated, confident or experimental internet users" (Livingstone et al., 2011, p. 11). In addition, public concern regarding the risks of technology use among young people can be explained by a combination of sensitivity around online risks and challenges and the lack of robust and reliable evidence in most countries in regard to this matter (Livingstone et al., 2011).

*As digital technologies have become pervasive, interest in their impact on young people has also increased.*

In New Zealand, government agencies and academia have shown growing interest in exploring the way teens and children interact with digital technologies (ages vary between studies), including the challenges and potential risks they present. Initial research in this area tended to look at particular issues, such as cyberbullying, rather than experiences of digital communications more broadly. For example, Fenaughty and Harré's (2013) study found that teens are more likely to experience cyberbullying and harassment through mobile phones than other internet-based tools. Meanwhile, another study revealed that although there is a connection between traditional face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying, the latter is more likely to last longer (see Jose, Kljakovic, Scheib, & Notter, 2012). Marsh, McGee, Nada-Raja, and Williams' (2010) study found that text-based bullying was associated with other forms of face-to-face bullying and harassment.

However, while relevant, all these studies were conducted before social media platforms, smartphones, and other portable touchscreen devices and applications had become pervasive among New Zealand teens.

*More recent research on young people and online risks and challenges in New Zealand has broadened its scope.*

A qualitative study about media representations of sexual violence found that teens prefer to access entertainment content online, and that they consider entertainment media influence the way they learn about relationships, sex and sexual violence (Office of Film and Literature Classification, 2017). A 2015 study looked at children and younger teens' (9-14 years old) media consumption and found that nearly half (45%) have seen upsetting or concerning content through the internet – mainly pop-ups/advertising on websites, naked people and rude things (Broadcasting Standards Authority & NZ On Air, 2015). A study by ChildFund New Zealand (2015) surveyed children aged 10-12 about their views on safety and protection and found that 8 in 10 kids believed they were at risk of abuse or mistreatment online, a figure which is, according to the organisation, one of the highest in the developed world (ChildFund New Zealand, 2015).

The impact of households' social-economic status on the access to and use of digital technologies by children and teens has also been highlighted in recent reports (Hartnett, 2017; Lips et al., 2017). However, the implications of young people's social-economic status on their experiences of online risks and harm still need further exploration in New Zealand.

Recently, international interest in the relation between gender and the experience of online challenges and risks (see Duggan, 2017; Henry & Powell, 2015; Sevcikova, 2016) has prompted interest here in New Zealand. Prior evidence suggests the online behaviour and experiences of male and female teenagers are different (Burgess-Proctor, Hinduja, & Patchin, 2010; Thompson, 2016). Consistent with overseas research, our previous qualitative and quantitative studies found gender differences in the way girls and boys use digital devices, the activities they carry out online, and their preferences for specific social media platforms (Ministry for Women, 2017; Netsafe, 2018b).

Teens' gender also seems to be related to experiences of harm and distress. For example, a study about mobile phone-mediated bullying behaviours found that New Zealand girls were more likely than boys to be harassed through this type of device (Fenaughty & Harré, 2013). Similarly, an exploratory study about teens' views of digital harm revealed that female teens perceived sexual harassment as an issue affecting both their online and offline experiences (Ministry for Women, 2017). In the same line, evidence shows that girls are more likely than boys to be the target of specific online behaviours such as being asked for nude pictures or videos of themselves (Netsafe, 2017). However, evidence also suggests that girls are not only more likely to be the victims but also the perpetrators of aggressive online behaviours (Green, Harcourt, Mattioni, & Prior, 2013). Despite these significant advances, research on the experiences of digital harm and distress among young people who identify themselves within the LGBTQIA+ community is a gap in the New Zealand literature. This lack of evidence also needs to be addressed, considering that teenagers with gender diverse identities are more likely to be bullied, physically harmed, and afraid that someone would hurt or bother them at school (Lucassen, Clark, Moselen, & Robinson, 2014).

*This report contributes to the understanding of NZ teens' online experiences of challenges, risk and harm.*

By gauging experiences of digital harm and distress among teens, this study will make a substantial contribution to the current body of knowledge in the area of online safety in New Zealand and provide evidence-based insights that can help to prevent and reduce harm.

## Methodology

A quantitative approach was adopted for this study to develop our insights about the nature and prevalence of New Zealand teens' experiences of and attitudes towards digital harm and distress. Current analysis and discussion about the topic has centred on specific online experiences and behaviours such as cyberbullying and/or the personal sharing of nudes online. Considering the complex and dynamic nature of teens' use of digital technologies and their online experiences, a quantitative study based on representative data was the appropriate approach to gauge characteristics of teens' experiences and behaviours.

The research question that guided this study was:

*What are the experiences, attitudes, and behaviours of New Zealand teens in regard to challenges and risks of digital communications including harm and distress?*

In the following sub-sections, we describe the data collection technique used for the study, the characteristics of the research sample, issues related to research ethics, and the limitations of the study.

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### SURVEY TOOL

The study followed the tenets of quantitative research as we were interested in the collection and analysis of statistical descriptions (Fowler, 2014). The high internet penetration in New Zealand and the embeddedness of a range of digital tools and devices in the everyday activities of New Zealanders, including teens, enabled the use of online surveys as a useful data collection technique for social research (Crothers, Smith, Urale, & Bell, 2016). In addition, data collected from online surveys can be administered easily which facilitates analysis and reporting of findings (Wright, 2006).

The survey questionnaire was primarily informed by the findings of the qualitative study regarding digital harm conducted with the Ministry for Women in 2017. The questions were designed to test findings from the Ministry's digital harm study (e.g. teens' preferences for the social media tools they use). Other survey questions were developed based on Netsafe's Annual Population Survey (2018a), a quantitative study of adult New Zealanders' experiences of digital communications. The Ministry and Colmar Brunton provided feedback on drafts of the survey questionnaire. We also drew from the extensive operational experience of Netsafe's contact centre team in dealing with reported cases of harmful digital communications. The survey questions underwent cognitive testing and piloting by Colmar Brunton before going live. Data collection started at the end of July 2017 and continued for five weeks.

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## SAMPLE

The study collected data from teens aged 14-17 years old. Colmar Brunton sampled participants using its online research panel. As children are not panel members, a representative sample of 30-65-year-old adults were asked whether they had children in the target age range. To provide benchmark data for sampling and weighting, Colmar Brunton used 2017 population projections for children in the age range. For this study the use of statistical projections was more useful than 2013 Census data because the ethnic composition of young people in New Zealand has changed significantly since 2013.

A total of 1,001 New Zealand teens completed the online survey. Data collected from this representative sample allowed the analysis of sub-groups with a margin of error of +/- 3.1% on total results. Just over half (51%) of respondents were males and 48.7% females, while 0.3% identified as gender diverse. In terms of age distribution, 14 and 15-year-old participants each represented 24%, while 16 and 17-year-olds each encompassed 26% of the total sample. The distribution of participants according to their ethnicity was as follows: NZ European/Pākehā (66%), Māori (24%), Pacific (13%), Asian (13%), and Other (4%). In addition, 15% of participants identified themselves as experiencing a long-term disability related to sight, hearing, learning, walking, and/or communicating.

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## RESEARCH ETHICS

Because of the sensitive nature of the study, Colmar Brunton, in discussion with Netsafe, ensured that participants' privacy and confidentiality were protected. To this end, the market research company also followed industry standards including the Research Association's Code of Practice. Parental permission was obtained online for all participants at the beginning of the online survey. The participants and their parents/caregivers received information about the purpose of the project, the names of the organisations behind the study, and an explanation about use and protection of the data provided. As mentioned, the questions were cognitively tested to identify whether there was any risk of causing distress to the respondents. Links to relevant services were also included in the survey support material. In the parental permission email we asked parents to allow their children to respond to the survey privately. The email was also tested and refined during the cognitive interviews and during the pilot of 100 online survey interviews. In addition, an on-screen warning message recommended respondents complete the questions on their own while no-one else was watching the screen.

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## LIMITATIONS

While we have obtained significant statistical evidence about experiences, behaviours, and attitudes regarding digital harm and distress, a potential limitation is that the findings are based on self-reported data. Because of the sensitive nature of the questions in the online survey and potential for embarrassment when answering them, there was a possibility that participants were dishonest about their online experiences and attitudes. We tried to manage the issue by asking parents to allow their children to answer the survey alone. We also asked participants at the end of the survey whether there was somebody else present when they filled in the questionnaire.

## Findings

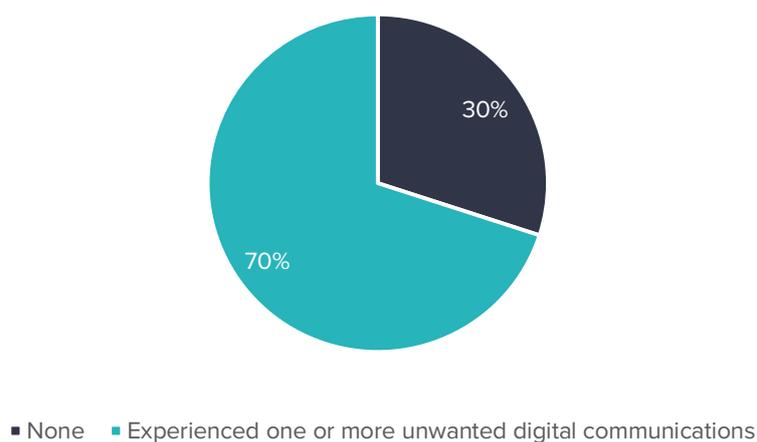
This section presents the findings from the online survey. It describes insights about a range of experiences of digital communications among New Zealand teens, including views of harm and distress in the prior year. While the main focus of the study is on gendered experiences, differences related to age, disability, and ethnicity are also described where significant.

### Prevalence of unwanted digital communications

#### Highlights

- Experiences of unwanted digital communications are prevalent among teens
- The most common experiences of unwanted digital communications are identified, including gender differences

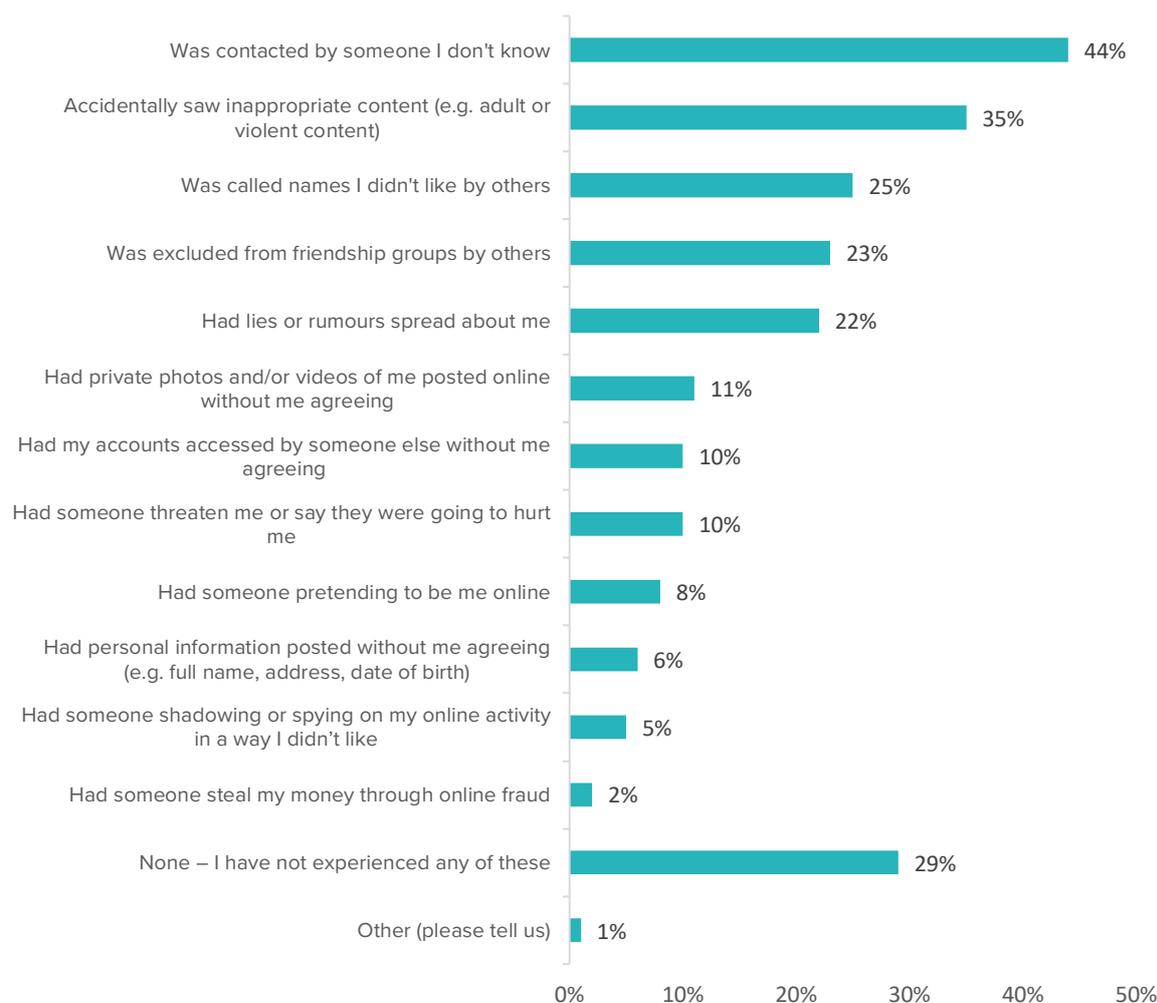
Overall, 7 in 10 New Zealand teens (70%) said they have experienced at least one type of unwanted digital communication in the past year (Figure 1). While this figure seems high, it must be noted that not all experiences of unwanted digital communications cause harm and distress. In this study New Zealand teens' experiences of unwanted digital communications included a range of situations from accidentally seeing inappropriate content, or being contacted by someone they don't know, to being stalked or threatened online.



**Figure 1. New Zealand teens' overall experience of unwanted digital communications**

*Base: All respondents excluding those who preferred not to answer (985).*

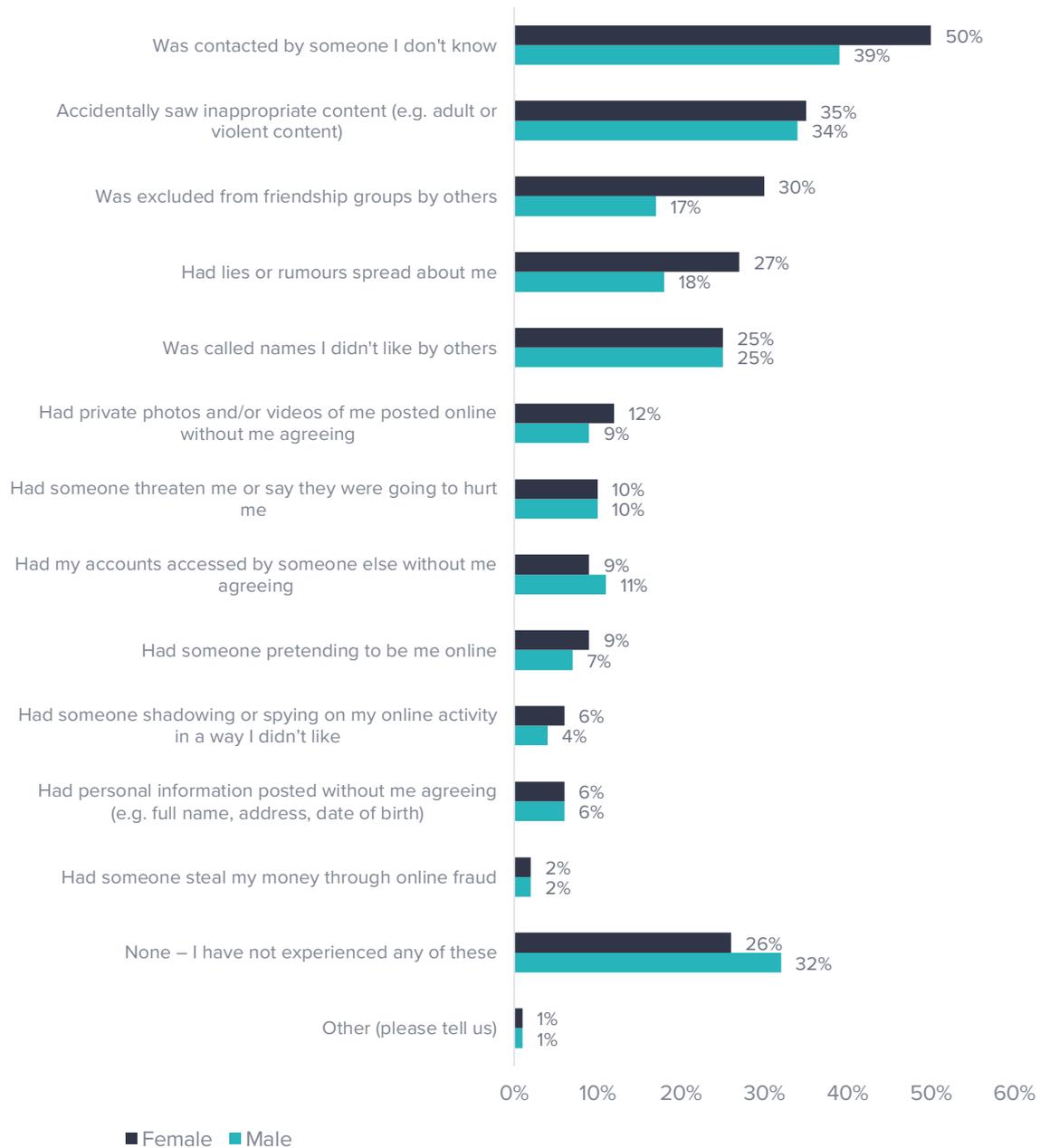
In the previous 12 months, New Zealand teens reported experiencing a range of unwanted digital communications. As Figure 2 shows, the most common experience mentioned by the participants was to be contacted by a stranger (44%), while the second most common was to accidentally come across inappropriate content online (35%). Other significant experiences of unwanted digital communications included being called names (25%), being excluded from friendship groups (23%), and having lies/rumours spread about them (22%).



**Figure 2. Most common types of unwanted digital communications experienced by teens**

*Base: All respondents excluding those who preferred not to answer (985).*

A closer look at the data reveals interesting insights in terms of gender. For example, experiences of some types of unwanted digital communications were significantly higher among females than males. Specifically, being contacted by a stranger was more common for females (50%) than males (39%). Also, more females (30%) reported being excluded from friendship groups in the prior year than males (17%) and having lies or rumours spread about them (27%) compared to males (18%) – see Figure 3.



**Figure 3. Most common types of unwanted digital communications experienced by gender**

*Base: All respondents excluding those who preferred not to answer (985).*

In the context of ethnicity, experiences of unwanted digital communications were noteworthy, in particular among Māori and Pacific teens (see Table 1). For example, Māori teens were significantly more likely to have lies or rumours spread about themselves (33%) and have been called names they did not like (33%) compared to other ethnic groups. In the case of Pacific teens, it was more common for them to be excluded from online friendship groups (28%) and have had personal information posted without their permission (13%). Similarly, the percentage of Māori teens (16%) reporting to have been threatened online was higher than for European/Pākehā teens (11%) and double that of Pacific teens (8%).

**Table 1. Most common types of unwanted digital communications experienced by ethnicity**

Experience of unwanted digital communication	NZ European /Pākehā	Māori	Pacific	Asian	Other Ethnicity
Had lies or rumours spread about me	22%	33%	22%	9%	7%
Had personal information posted without me agreeing (e.g. full name, address, date of birth)	5%	10%	13%	5%	-
Had private photos and/or videos of me posted online without me agreeing	11%	13%	12%	8%	3%
Was called names I didn't like by others	27%	33%	23%	16%	11%
Was excluded from friendship groups by others	25%	24%	28%	14%	11%
Had someone threaten me or say they were going to hurt me	11%	16%	8%	2%	2%
Had someone pretending to be me online	7%	14%	16%	3%	4%
Had my accounts accessed by someone else without me agreeing	10%	16%	15%	6%	7%
Had someone shadowing or spying on my online activity in a way I didn't like	5%	6%	2%	5%	-
Accidentally saw inappropriate content (e.g. adult or violent content)	32%	40%	47%	36%	41%
Was contacted by someone I don't know	47%	46%	44%	39%	41%
Had someone steal my money through online fraud	2%	2%	2%	2%	-
Other (please tell us)	1%	-	1%	1%	4%
None – I have not experienced any of these	30%	21%	28%	34%	27%

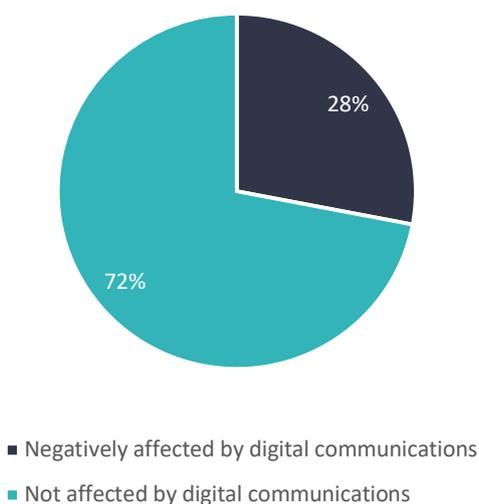
*Base: All respondents excluding those who preferred not to answer (985).*

## Impact of unwanted digital communications on daily activities

### Highlights

- Being unable to participate online and go to school or study were the most common consequences on teens' everyday lives
- The impact on girls was higher
- Younger teens and teens with disabilities were more likely to be affected

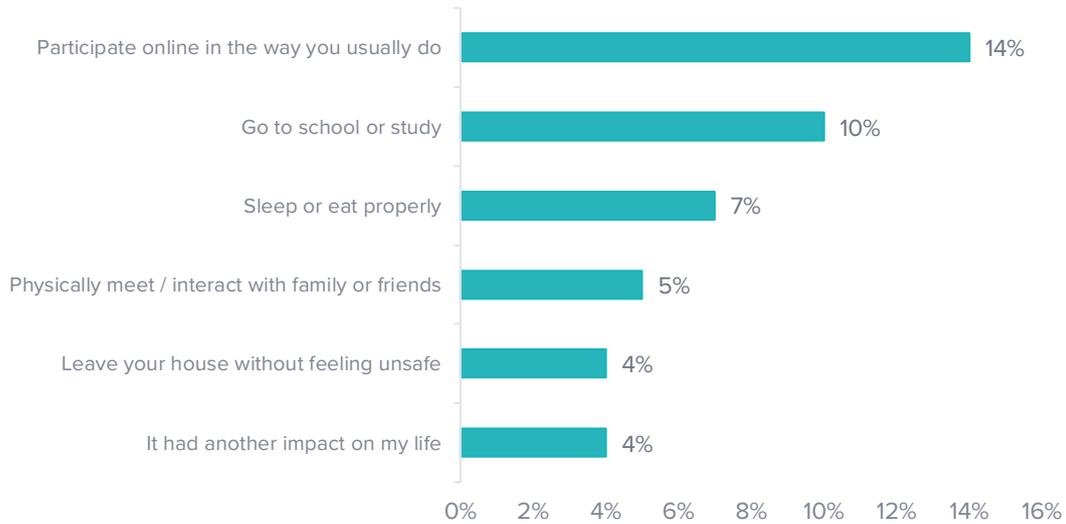
Of the 7 in 10 teens that received an unwanted digital communication in the prior year, 28% said they were negatively affected to the extent that they were unable to perform some daily activities (Figure 4). This is nearly 2 in 10 (19%) of all teens surveyed.



**Figure 4. Overall impact of unwanted digital communications on everyday life activities**

*Base: Respondents who received an unwanted digital communication, excluding those who preferred not to answer (673).*

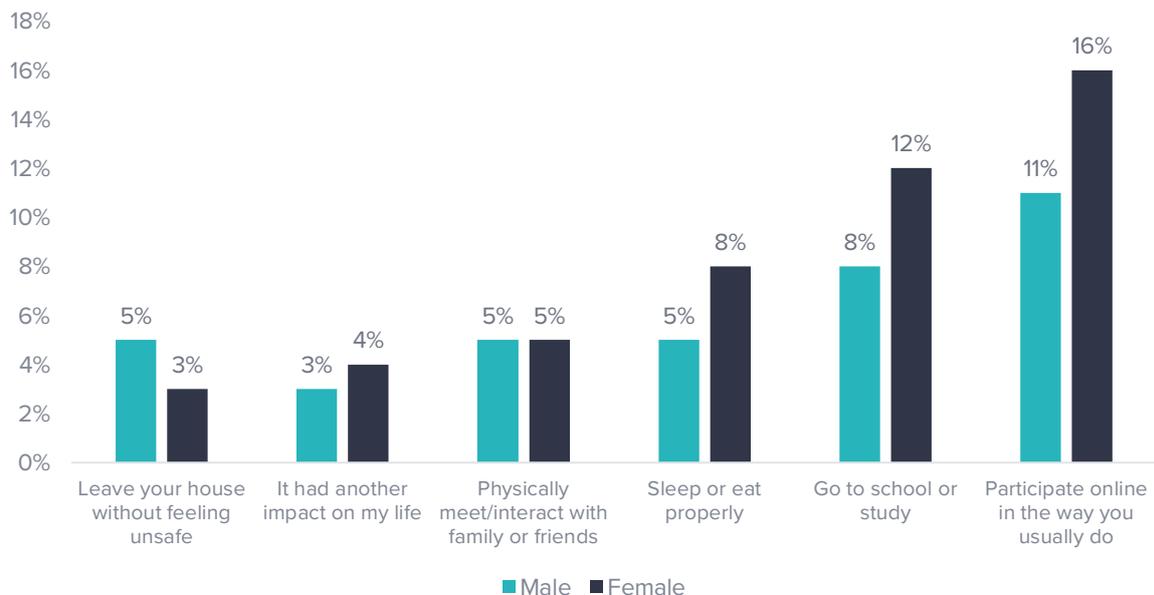
Among those participants who said they were negatively affected by digital communications, the most common effect was to be unable to participate online as they used to (14%). Participants also mentioned being unable to go to school or study (10%), or to sleep or eat properly (7%). Less common among them was the inability to meet/interact physically with family or friends. Figure 5 provides more details in this respect.



**Figure 5. Most common impacts of unwanted digital communications on everyday activities**

*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year – excluding those who refused to answer the question (673).*

In general, females were more likely to say they were affected negatively by unwanted digital communications than males (Figure 6). For instance, 12% of females, compared to 8% of males, responded that they were unable to go to school or study as a consequence of an unwanted digital communication. Females (16%) were also more likely to be unable to participate online in the way they used to due to an online incident compared to males (11%).



**Figure 6. Most common impacts on everyday activities by gender**

*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year – excluding those who refused to answer the question (673).*

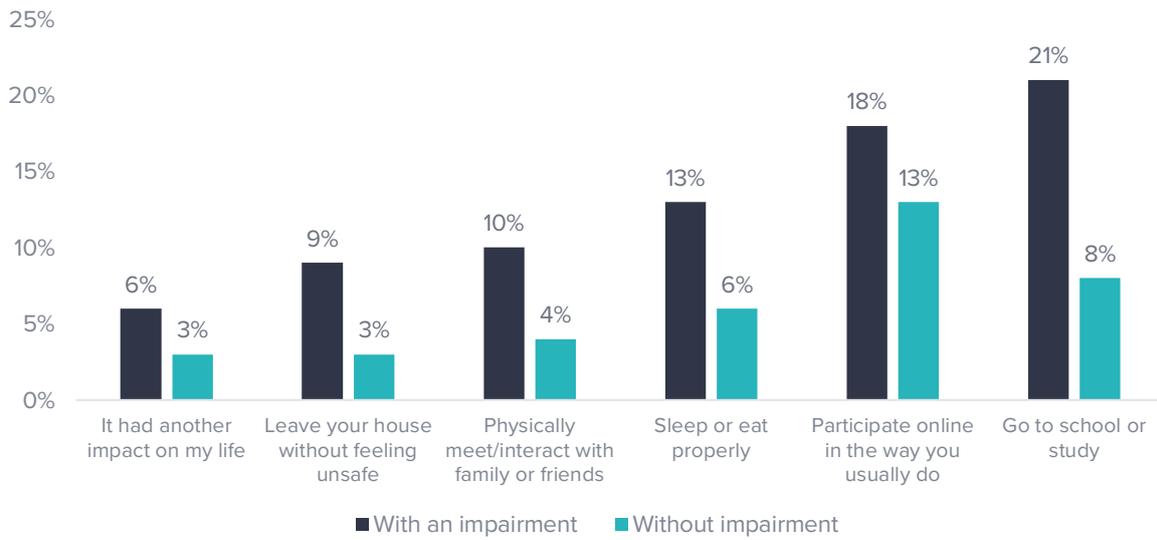
The impact of unwanted digital communications on performing daily activities also differed by the age of participants (see Table 2). It was more common for younger participants, those aged 14 and 15 years old, to say they were unable to go to school or study than their older peers. Similarly, the percentage of 14-year-olds reporting being unable to participate online as they used to was higher than for older teens. In some daily activities differences were not significant across ages (e.g. being unable to physically meet/interact with family or friends).

**Table 2. Most common impacts on everyday activities by age**

Negative impact	14 years old	15 years old	16 years old	17 years old
Go to school or study	14%	16%	5%	6%
Physically meet/interact with family or friends	6%	6%	4%	5%
Participate online in the way you usually do	19%	12%	10%	14%
Leave your house without feeling unsafe	7%	5%	3%	2%
Sleep or eat properly	9%	5%	3%	10%
It had another impact on my life	6%	1%	4%	3%

*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year – excluding those who refused to answer the question (673).*

The findings also reveal that, in general, unwanted digital communications had a higher impact on participants with disabilities' everyday life activities (Figure 7). For instance, teens with impairments (21%) were significantly more likely than their non-disabled peers (8%) to be unable to go to school or study because of distress caused by digital communications. They also experienced more issues around sleeping or eating properly (13%) than teens without impairments (6%).



**Figure 7. Most common impacts on everyday activities by disability**

*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year – excluding those who refused to answer the question (673).*

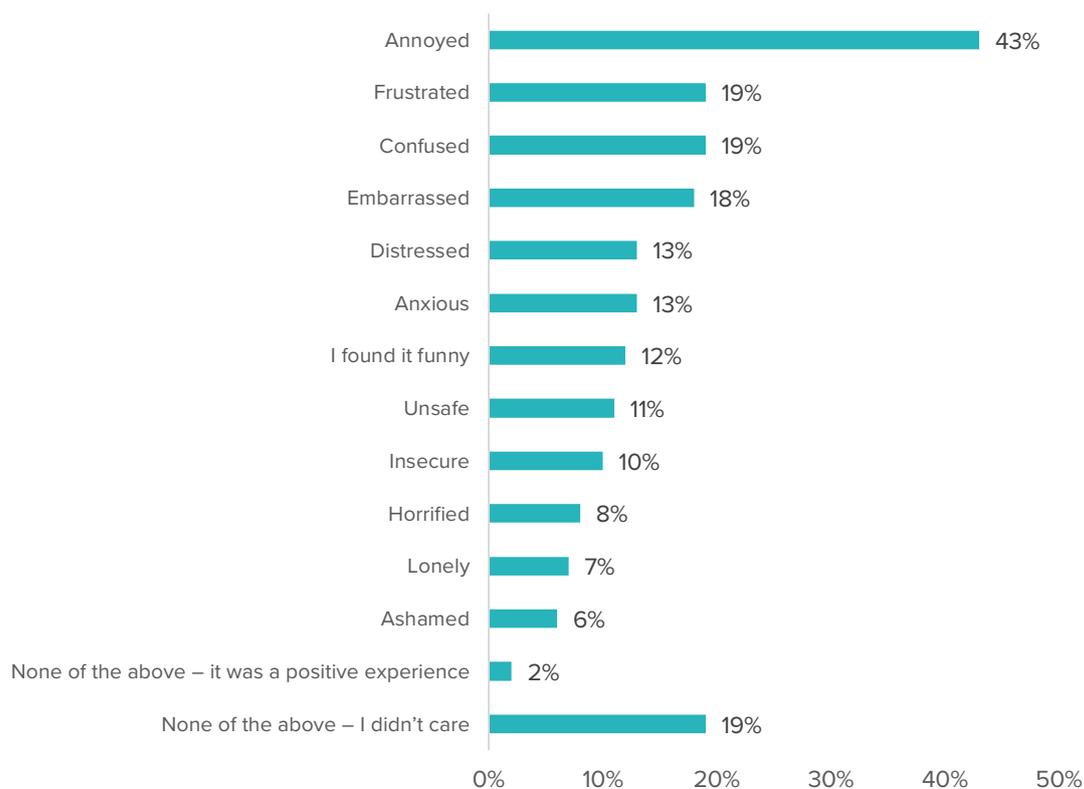
## Emotional reactions to unwanted digital communications

### Highlights

- Teens reported mainly feeling annoyed, confused and embarrassed by unwanted digital communications
- The emotional impact was higher for girls

4 out of 5 New Zealand teens who reported having experienced unwanted digital communication said they had an emotional response to it. The most common reaction was feeling “annoyed” (43%). Other emotional reactions included feeling “frustrated” (19%), “confused” (19%), and “embarrassed” (18%). Some participants also found unwanted digital communications “funny” (12%), while others said they did not experience any emotional reaction (19%) – see Figure 8.

Of the list of emotions we asked about, participants were able to select more than one option. On average, a teenager felt 1.79 of the emotions as a result of the unwanted digital communication.

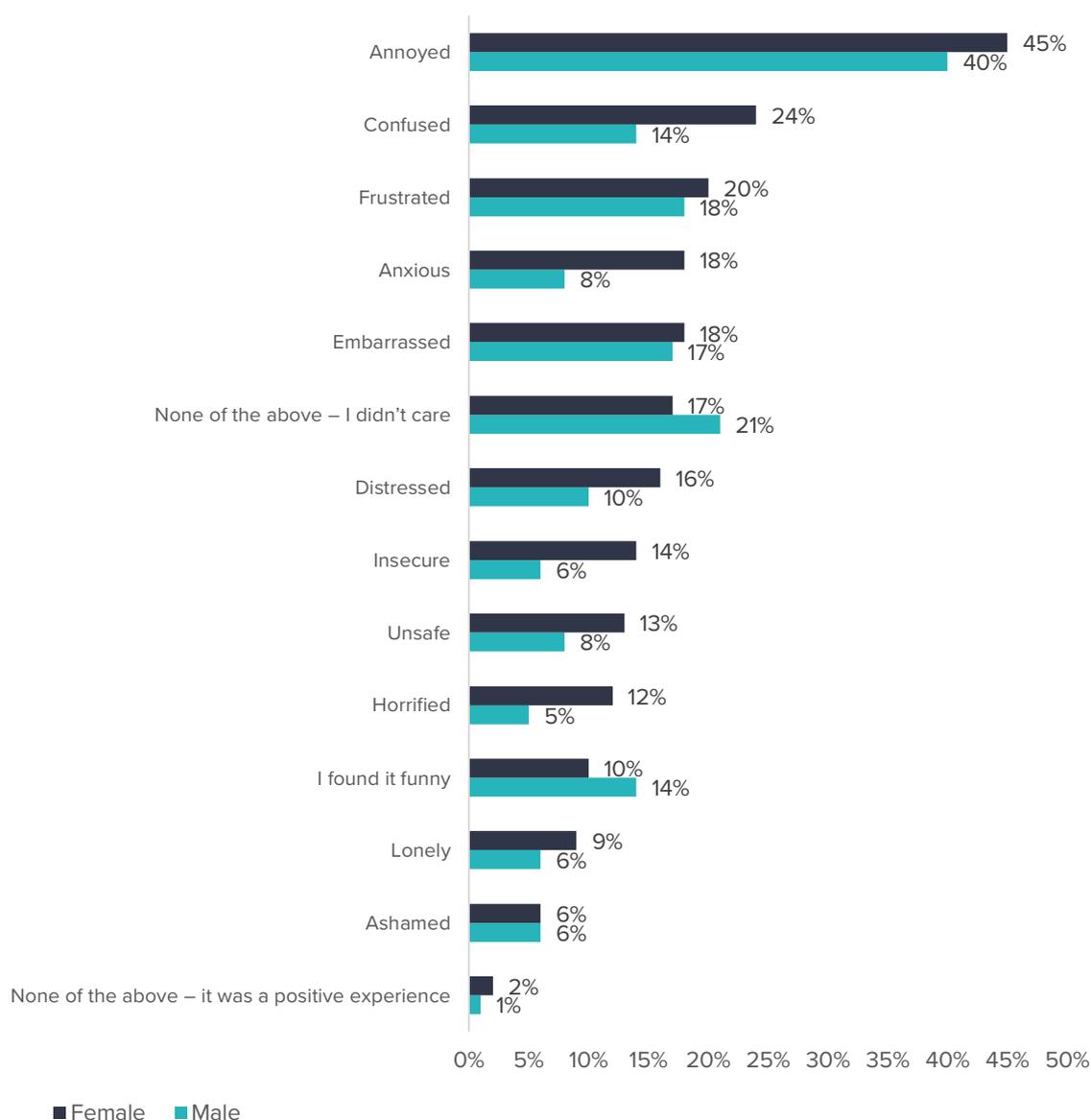


**Figure 8. Teens' emotional reactions to unwanted digital communications**

*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year (671).*

The survey data also shows that female teens were more likely to be emotionally affected by unwanted digital communications than male teens (Figure 9). For example, feeling “confused” was more common in females (24%) than males (14%). Females (18%) were also more likely to feel “anxious”, compared to males (8%). Similar patterns were found when female teens reported that they felt “distressed”, “insecure”, “unsafe”, and “horrified” compared to their male counterparts. Also, females were more likely to experience multiple emotions. On average they experienced 2.04 of the emotions compared with 1.51 for males.

In contrast, compared to females, males were more likely to report that their emotional reaction was to find unwanted digital communications “funny”, or not to experience any emotional response towards them.



**Figure 9. Teens’ emotional reactions to unwanted digital communications by gender**

*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year (671).*

Table 3 shows relevant insights regarding emotional reactions based on participants' age. Overall, 14-year-olds were more likely to react emotionally than their older peers. In particular, for this group of teens, it was more common to feel "ashamed" (11%), compared with other age groups. Meanwhile, 16 and 17-year-olds were more likely to feel "annoyed" (45% and 47% respectively) than their younger peers.

**Table 3. Teens' emotional reactions to unwanted digital communications by age**

Emotional reaction	14 years old	15 years old	16 years old	17 years old
Embarrassed	22%	18%	16%	15%
Lonely	9%	6%	7%	7%
Unsafe	18%	9%	4%	11%
Anxious	19%	12%	12%	9%
Distressed	17%	13%	12%	11%
Insecure	15%	8%	8%	9%
Horrified	9%	7%	7%	10%
Ashamed	11%	5%	4%	5%
Confused	19%	14%	22%	21%
Frustrated	20%	19%	18%	20%
Annoyed	37%	40%	45%	47%
I found it funny	12%	11%	12%	13%
None of the above – I didn't care	16%	23%	21%	16%
None of the above – it was a positive experience	3%	1%	2%	1%

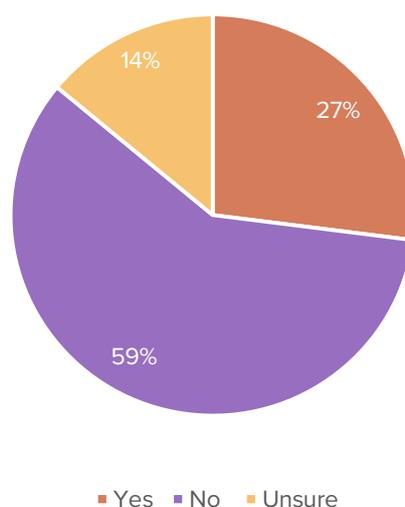
*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year (671).*

## Connection between unwanted digital communications and offline incidents

### Highlights

- Most teens said online incidents were not connected to face-to-face events
- However, for girls it was more likely that an unwanted digital communication was related to a face-to-face incident
- The trend was more significant for teens with disabilities

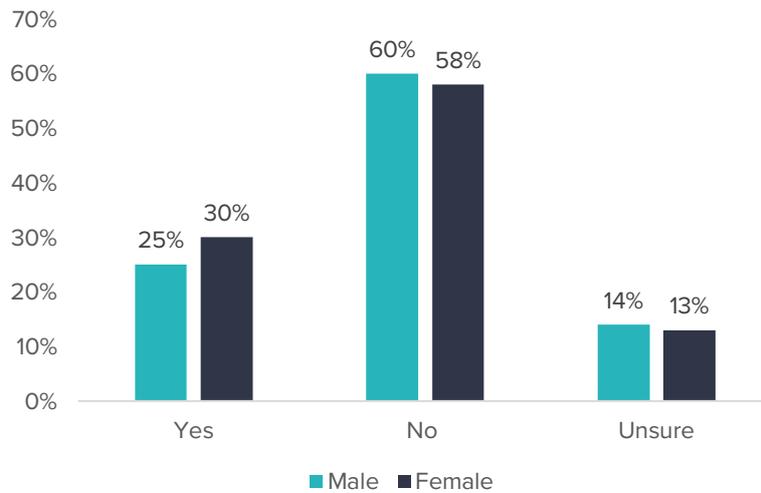
The survey also included a question asking participants whether their personal experience with unwanted digital communications was related to a wider issue happening offline (see Figure 10). Over half of respondents (59%) said there was no connection between their online experience and a face-to-face event, while a quarter (25%) responded “Yes”. Those who were unsure about the matter represented 14% of respondents.



**Figure 10. Connection between teens' experiences of online and offline incidents**

*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year (671).*

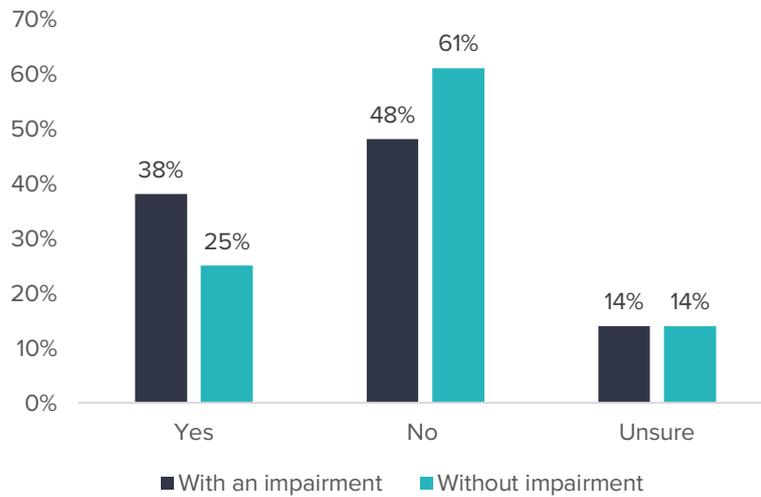
We found some differences regarding gender (Figure 11). A slightly higher percentage of females (30%) responded that their experiences with unwanted digital communications were related to an offline issue, compared to males (25%). Most participants in both groups also reported that there was no connection between their experiences of unwanted digital communications and an offline incident.



**Figure 11. Connection between online and offline incidents by gender**

*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year (671).*

A similar pattern was found for participants with disabilities. The percentage of teens with impairments (38%) who answered “Yes” to the question about the connection of an online incident with an offline issue was higher than for those teens without impairments (25%) – see Figure 12.



**Figure 12. Connection between online and offline incidents by disability**

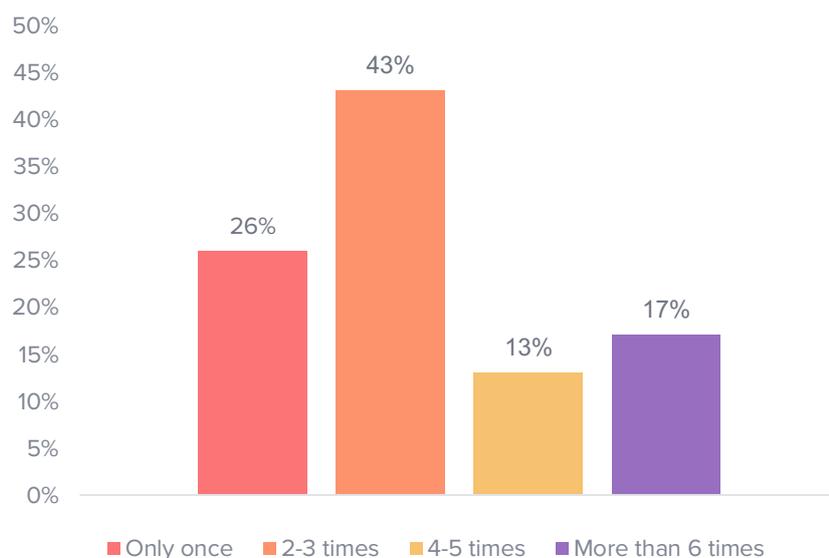
*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year (671).*

## Frequency of experiences of unwanted digital communications

### Highlights

- Most teens experienced an unwanted digital communication 2 or 3 times in the last year
- Frequency varied according to gender

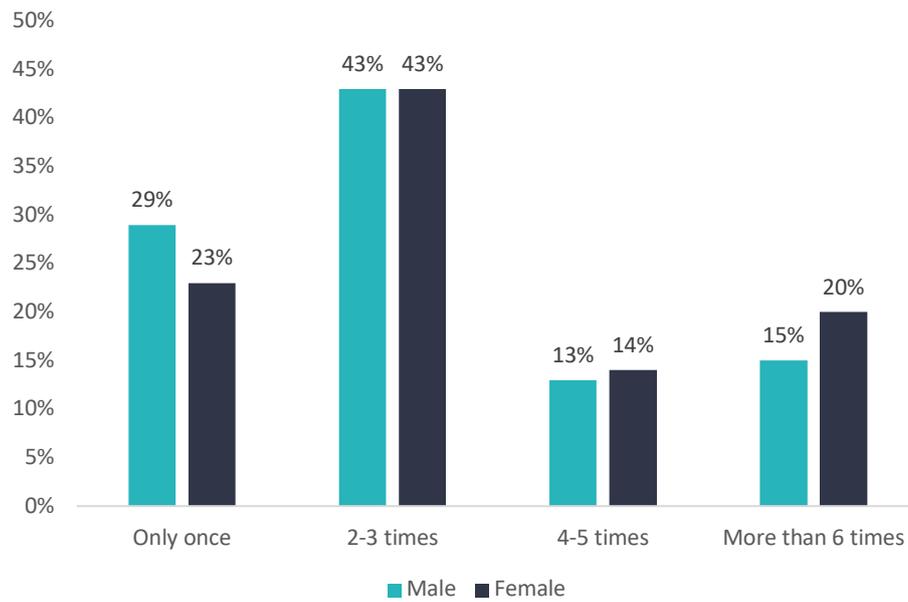
The study also sought to gauge the frequency with which teens received unwanted digital communications in the previous 12 months (Figure 13). Most participants (43%) said they received an unwanted digital communication 2 or 3 times in the last year, while just over a quarter (26%) reported having experienced an online incident only once. For some teens, incidents with unwanted digital communications were more frequent. The findings show that 17% of teens came across unwanted digital communications more than 6 times in the prior year.



**Figure 13. Frequency of unwanted digital communications**

*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year (672).*

In terms of gender, female respondents (20%) said that in the prior year they experienced 6 or more incidents of unwanted digital communications. This percentage was higher than that of male respondents (15%). For males, it was more common to have dealt with unwanted digital communications only once in the past 12 months, compared to females (23%) – see details in Figure 14.



**Figure 14. Frequency of unwanted digital communications by gender**

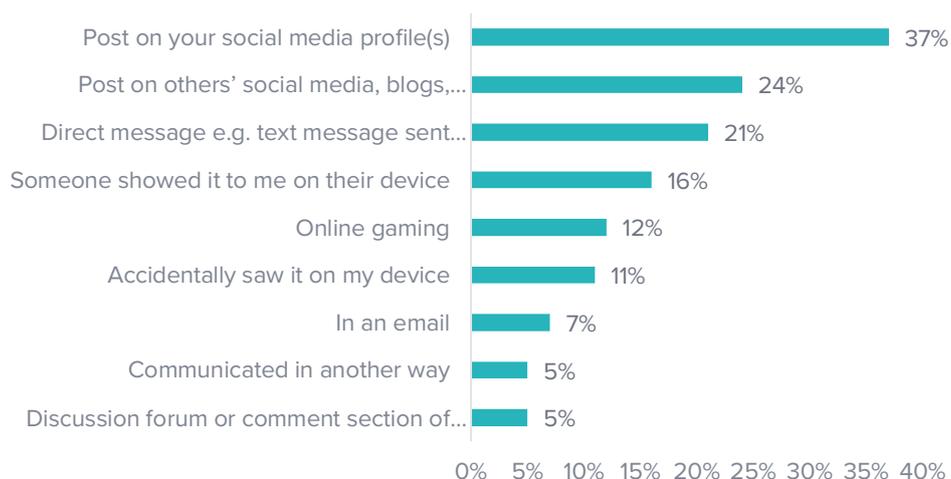
*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year (672).*

## Channels for receiving unwanted digital communications

### Highlights

- Most unwanted digital communications were experienced through social media
- Girls and Pacific teens were more likely to experience online incidents via social media
- Teens with disabilities' encounters with unwanted digital communications were more commonly via a direct message on their mobile phones

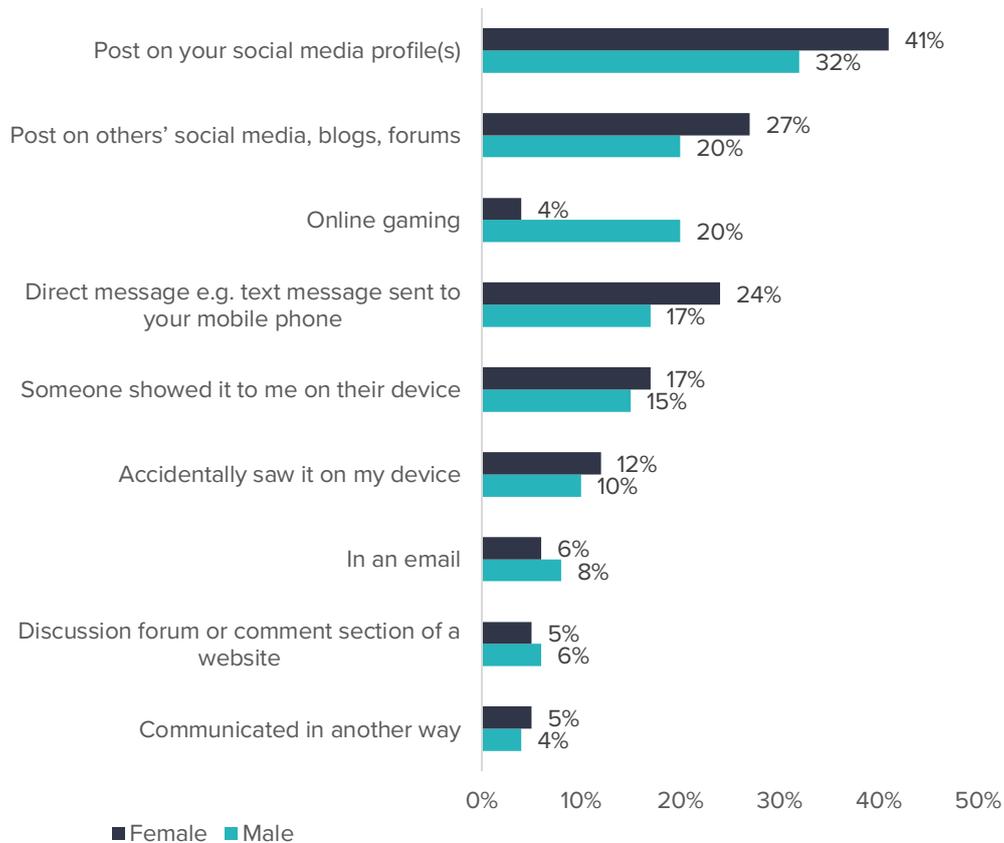
New Zealand teens who have experienced an unwanted digital communication in the prior year most commonly encountered it on their own social media site(s) (37%). They also said that the issue(s) occurred on other people's social media, blogs and/or forums (24%). Direct messages, such as a text message sent to their mobile phone, were also pointed out by just over 2 in 10 participants (21%) – see Figure 15.



**Figure 15. Channels unwanted digital communications were received through**

*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year (671).*

For female teens, an experience of unwanted digital communication was more likely to occur through a post on their own social media site (41%) compared to their male counterparts (32%). The study also found a similar trend between females (27%) and males (20%) in relation to unwanted digital communications posted on other people's social media. Experience of an online incident via direct text message was also more common among females (24%) than males (17%). However, males' experiences with unwanted digital communications were more likely to occur in a different online environment. As our data show, a larger percentage of males (20%) said the online incident(s) occurred through online gaming, compared to only 4% of female respondents – see Figure 16.



**Figure 16. Channels unwanted digital communications were received through by gender**

*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year (671).*

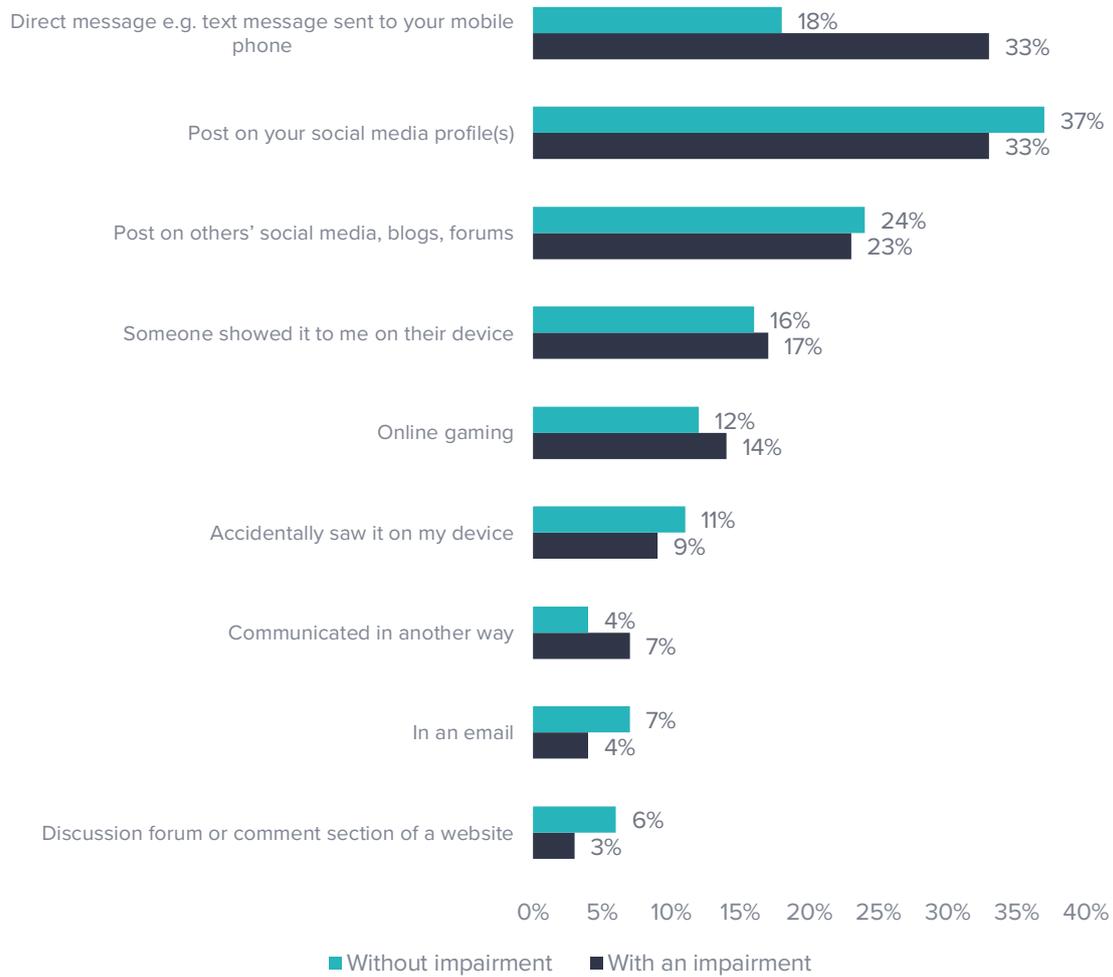
Our data also reveal the channels of unwanted digital communications varied according to ethnic group (see Table 4). For example, Pacific teens had a higher rate of online incidents posted on their own social media sites (46%), and significantly higher through others' social media (42%) compared to other ethnic groups. Meanwhile, Asian teens were more likely to encounter these incidents via email (17%). Overall, all ethnic groups were equally likely to experience an online incident via direct messaging.

**Table 4. Channels unwanted digital communications were received through by ethnicity**

Communication channel	NZ European /Pākehā	Māori	Pacific	Asian	Other Ethnicity
In an email	6%	8%	10%	17%	4%
Post on your social media profile(s)	35%	42%	46%	37%	30%
Post on others' social media, blogs, forums	22%	23%	42%	12%	11%
Discussion forum or comment section of a website	5%	3%	10%	2%	9%
Online gaming	12%	7%	1%	22%	25%
Direct message e.g. text message sent to your mobile phone	23%	21%	23%	22%	18%
Someone showed it to me on their device	14%	22%	34%	10%	8%
Accidentally saw it on my device	11%	10%	8%	12%	24%
Communicated in another way	6%	3%	2%	4%	8%

*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year (671).*

Interestingly, as Figure 17 shows, teens with disabilities (33%) were far more likely than their peers without impairments (18%) to experience an unwanted digital communication through a direct message sent to their mobile phones.



**Figure 17. Channels unwanted digital communications were received through by disability**

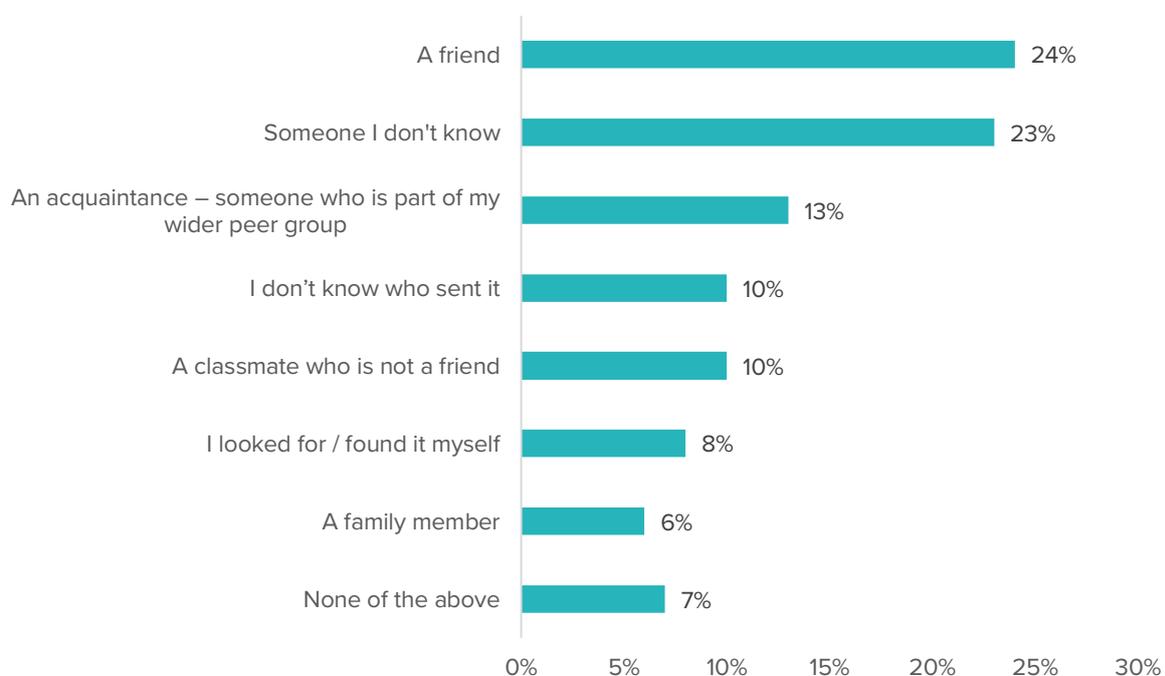
*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year (671).*

## Senders of unwanted digital communications

### Highlights

- Unwanted digital communications were more likely to be initiated by friends or a stranger
- Experiences varied according to ethnicity

We asked participants about who sent unwanted digital communication(s) to them (Figure 18). Participants said that unwanted digital communications were most commonly instigated by a friend (24%) or someone they don't know (23%).



**Figure 18. Senders of unwanted digital communications**

*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year (669).*

Table 5 presents findings regarding ethnicity. It was more common for Asian teens (36%) to receive an unwanted digital communication from someone they did not know. Meanwhile, the percentage whose unwanted digital communication was sent by a friend was higher among Māori and Pacific teens compared to other ethnic groups. A similar trend was found when Māori and Pacific teens reported that the sender was a family member.

**Table 5. Senders of unwanted digital communications by ethnicity**

Sender of unwanted digital communication	NZ European / Pākehā	Māori	Pacific	Asian	Other Ethnicity
Someone I don't know	23%	23%	14%	36%	14%
A family member	4%	8%	7%	-	4%
A friend	23%	28%	30%	19%	15%
A classmate who is not a friend	11%	8%	15%	2%	4%
An acquaintance – someone who is part of my wider peer group	13%	15%	9%	14%	13%
I looked for / found it myself	9%	4%	8%	10%	7%
I don't know who sent it	9%	7%	10%	12%	18%
None of the above	8%	6%	7%	7%	26%

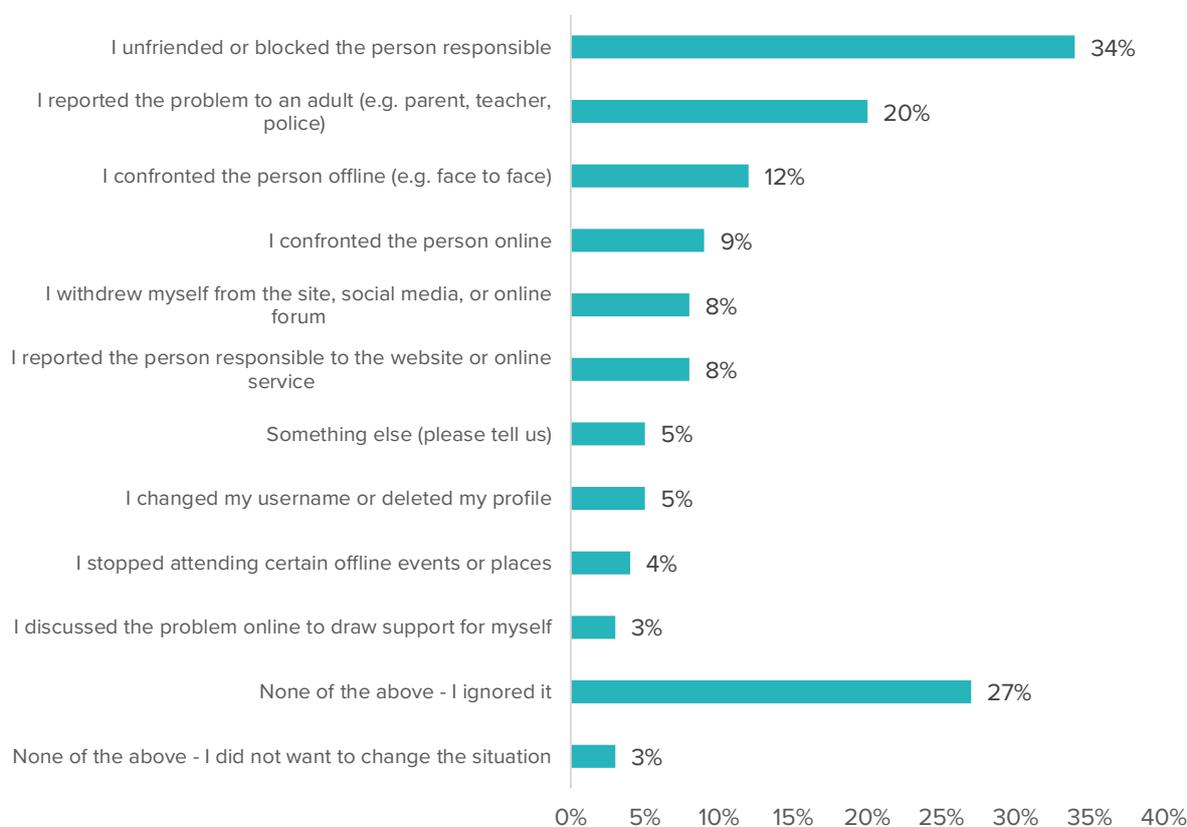
*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year (669).*

## Responses to unwanted digital communications and perceived effectiveness

### Highlights

- Teens' main response was to block or unfriend the sender of unwanted digital communication(s)
- Most teens perceived their response to unwanted digital communications as being effective
- Teens with disabilities were less confident about the effectiveness of their response

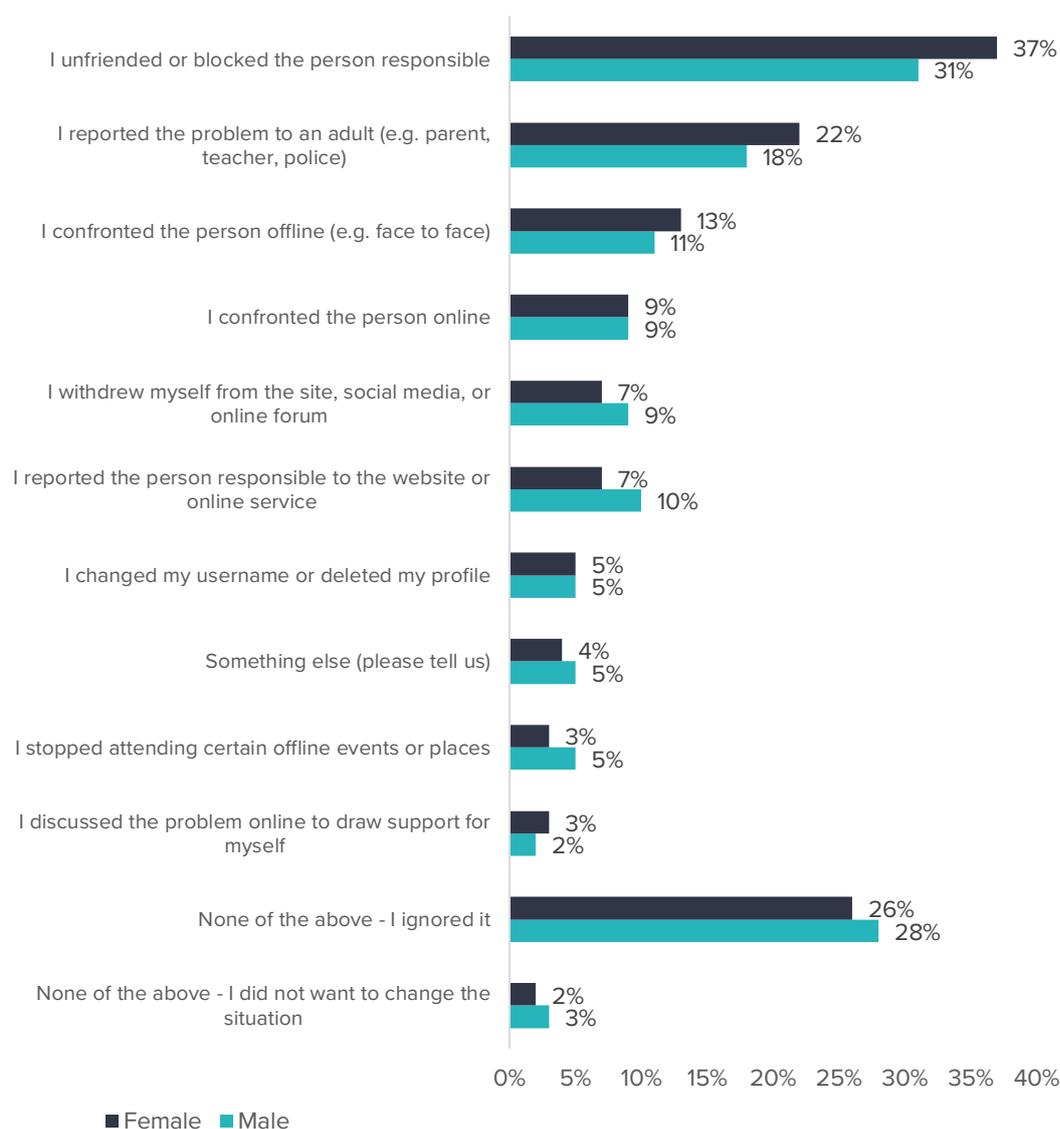
Along with gauging experiences of unwanted digital communications in the prior year, the study also asked participants about what actions they took in order to change or ameliorate the impact of the online incident (Figure 19). Teens' most common action was to unfriend or block the sender (34%). The second most common response was to ignore the situation (27%). Another relevant action taken by teens was to report the problem to an adult (20%). Some participants chose to either confront the sender face-to-face (12%) or online (9%).



**Figure 19. Teens' responses to receiving unwanted digital communications**

*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year – excluding those who refused to answer the question (682).*

Figure 20 depicts some differences in male and female teens' actions to cope with unwanted digital communications. Females, for instance, were more likely to unfriend or block the sender (37%) than males (31%). Girls (22%) were also more likely to tell an adult about the online incident compared to boys (18%). In contrast, the percentage of boys (10%) who reported the sender of the unwanted digital communication to the website or online service was slightly higher than girls (7%).



**Figure 20. Teens' responses to unwanted digital communications by gender**

*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year – excluding those who refused to answer the question (682).*

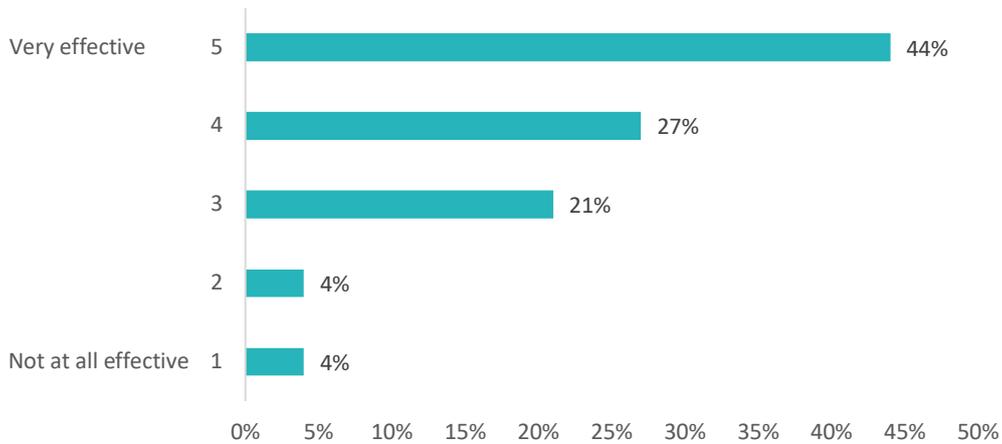
In terms of participants' age, 14-year-olds were more likely than older teens to unfriend or block the person behind the unwanted digital communication, to report the incident to an adult, and to withdraw from the platform/website where the issue had emerged (see Table 6). Teens aged 15, on the other hand, were more likely to ignore the situation and to report the sender to the website or online service.

**Table 6. Teens' responses to unwanted digital communications by ethnicity**

Response to change the situation	14 years old	15 years old	16 years old	17 years old
I confronted the person online	7%	8%	9%	11%
I unfriended or blocked the person responsible	38%	31%	34%	34%
I reported the person responsible to the website or online service	7%	12%	6%	8%
I discussed the problem online to draw support for myself	3%	3%	2%	3%
I changed my username or deleted my profile	6%	4%	3%	7%
I withdrew myself from the site, social media, or online forum	13%	2%	6%	10%
I stopped attending certain offline events or places	6%	5%	1%	3%
I reported the problem to an adult (e.g. parent, teacher, police)	27%	21%	16%	17%
I confronted the person offline (e.g. face to face)	12%	14%	14%	8%
None of the above – I ignored it	23%	32%	27%	27%
None of the above – I did not want to change the situation	1%	4%	4%	1%
Something else	4%	5%	4%	6%

*Base: Respondents who had experienced at least one incident of unwanted digital communications in the last year – excluding those who refused to answer the question (682).*

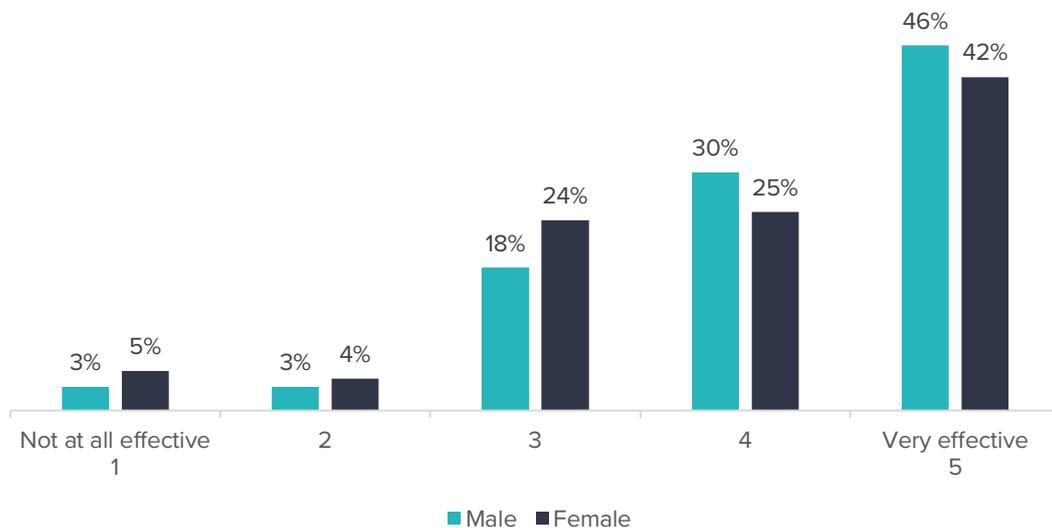
Overall the participants considered that their responses to dealing with unwanted digital communications were effective (Figure 21). A large majority (71%) said that the way they approached the incident of unwanted digital communication(s) was effective or very effective. A minority (21%) was unsure of the effectiveness of their responses in managing the online situation, and 8% said that their actions were not effective. Participants' responses neither significantly varied by type of unwanted digital communication nor by type of response to the situation.



**Figure 21. Teens’ perceptions of the effectiveness of their response to the situation**

*Base: Respondents who have experienced an unwanted digital communication and did not ignore the situation (474).*

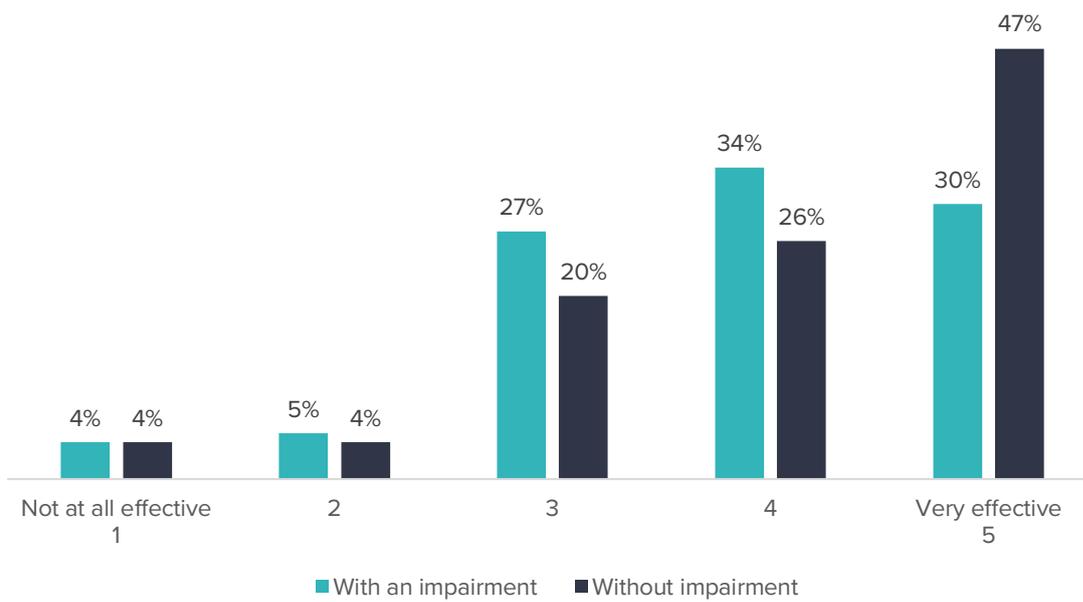
However, the perception of the effectiveness of actions taken to deal with unwanted digital communications varied between females and males (Figure 22). In general, the percentage of females (67%) who perceived that their actions were effective and/or very effective was lower than that of males (76%). Females (24%) were also more unsure about how effective their responses to an online incident were, compared to males (18%).



**Figure 22. Perceptions of the effectiveness of their response to the situation by gender**

*Base: Respondents who have experienced an unwanted digital communication and did not ignore the situation (474).*

Similarly, as shown in Figure 23, teens with disabilities who answered the question (n=85) were less confident about the effectiveness of their personal responses in managing an online incident. In contrast to their non-disabled peers (73%), a lower percentage of teens experiencing an impairment (64%) reported that their actions were effective and/or very effective.



**Figure 23. Perceptions of the effectiveness of their response to the situation by disability**

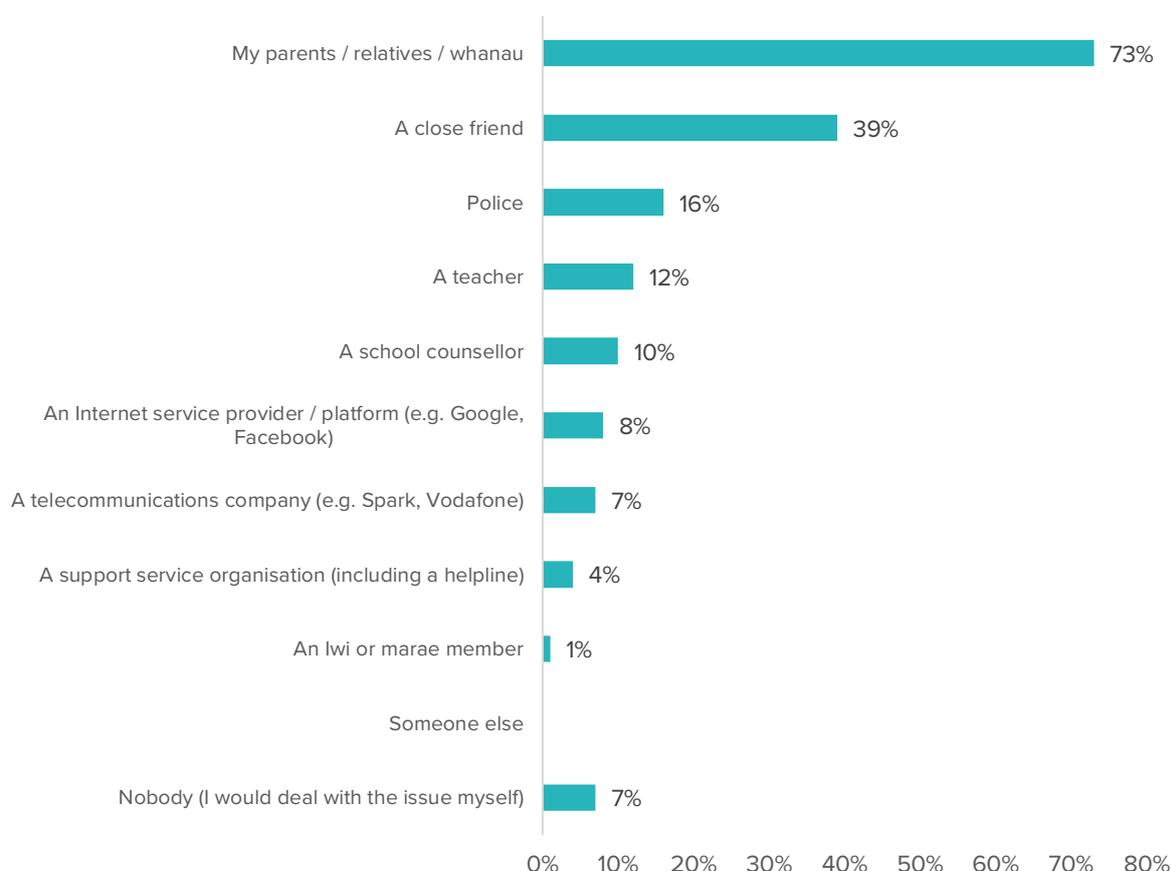
*Base: Respondents who have experienced an unwanted digital communication and did not ignore the situation (474).*

## Where teens say they will seek help in the future

### Highlights

- If an online incident happens, teens said they would primarily seek the support of their parent/relatives and close friends.
- Girls are more likely to rely on the support of close friends to cope with unwanted digital communications compared to boys.

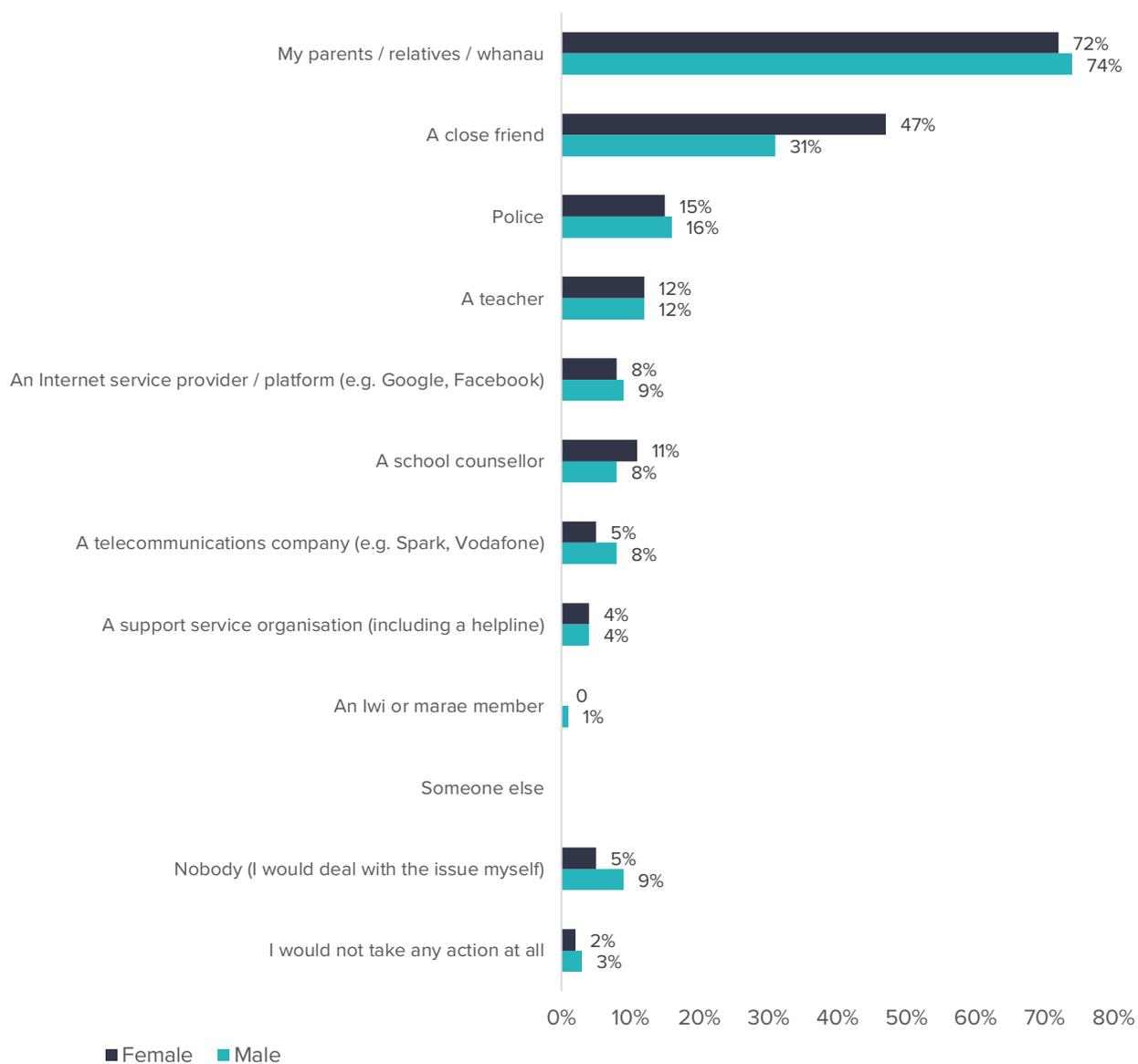
The subsequent questions of the survey were asked of all participants (n=1001). We started by asking them who they would turn to for help first if they received an unwanted digital communication in the future (Figure 24). To help prompt a response to this question we asked participants about a randomly generated scenario such as “if someone spread lies or rumours about you” or “if someone excluded you from friendship groups”. A large majority of respondents said that they would seek the support of their parents, relatives or whānau (73%). The support from a close friend was also mentioned by the participants (39%). Other sources of support that the participants would contact included the police (16%) and a teacher (12%).



**Figure 24. Who teens would first turn to for help in the future**

*Base: All respondents (1001).*

In general, there were no significant differences in terms of gender, except for a close friend as a preferred source of help in the future. In this respect, female respondents (47%) were significantly more likely to seek the help of a close peer if they experience an online incident, compared to males (31%). See Figure 25 for more details.



**Figure 25. Who teens would turn to for help in the future by gender**

*Base: All respondents (1001).*

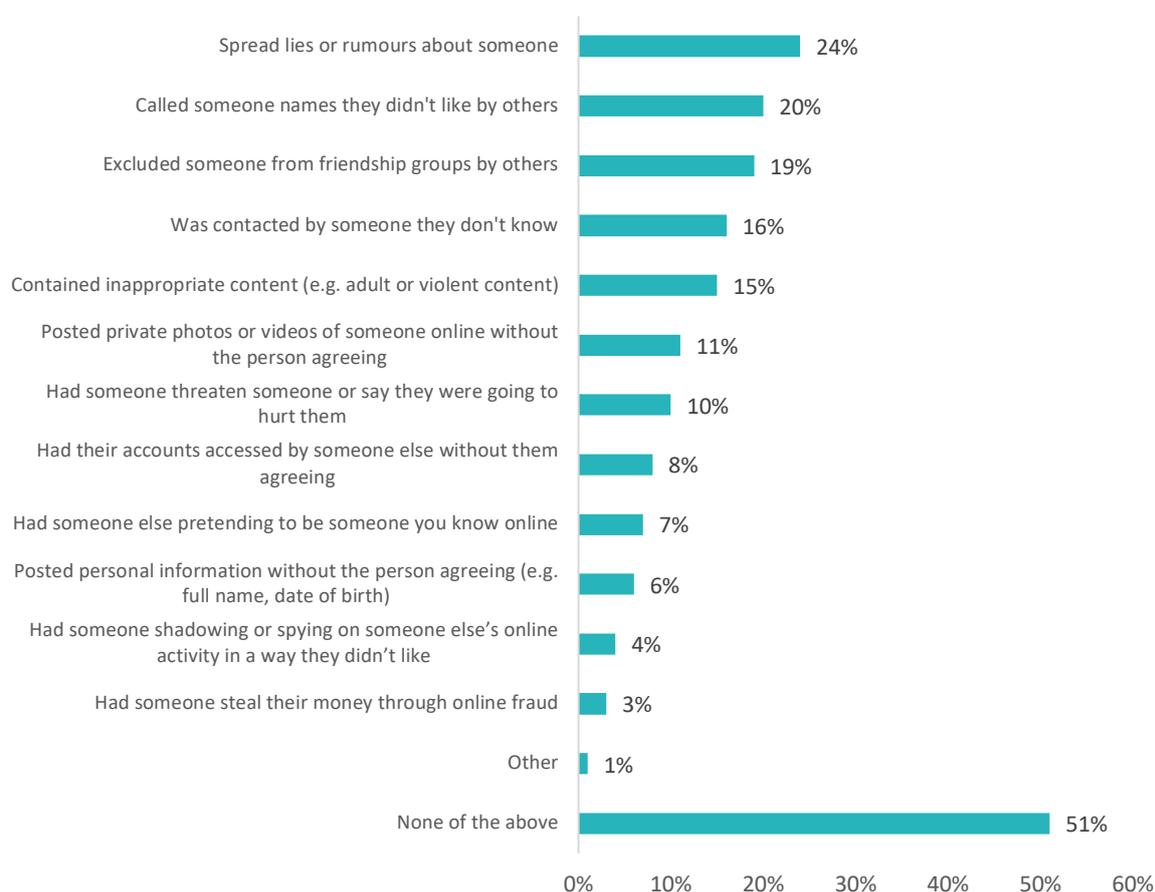
In regard to teens’ age, 17-year-olds were more likely to say they would ask a close friend for help while 14-year-olds indicated their parents, relatives or whānau would be their first option for support.

## Witnessing other people’s experiences of unwanted digital communications

### Highlights

- Girls are more likely than boys to see or hear about online incidents happening to others

All the participants, regardless of whether they had experienced an unwanted digital communication, were asked whether they had seen or heard of it happening to others (Figure 26). Almost half of those surveyed (49%) have witnessed at least one form of unwanted digital communications involving others in the past 12 months.



**Figure 26. Teens witnessing other people experiencing unwanted digital communications**

*Base: All respondents (1001).*

A closer inspection of the data shows that it was more common for female teens (57%) to witness online incidents than male teens (41%). A similar trend was observed with teens with disabilities (58%) who were more likely to say they have witnessed unwanted digital communications happening to others than those without impairments (47%)

## Discussion and Conclusion

This report has presented findings on the experiences, behaviours and attitudes of New Zealand teens about harm or distress caused through unwanted digital communications. Based on nationally representative data, the study provides up-to-date insights about the prevalence and impact that online incidents had on the everyday life activities of teens aged 14-17 years old in the prior year and their self-reported emotional reaction. The study also explored other aspects such as the connection of unwanted digital communications with offline events, teens' immediate actions to deal with unwanted digital communications, and how they might respond in the future.

*Most teens report receiving unwanted digital communications of varying seriousness and impact.*

Our findings reveal that 7 in 10 teenagers have been exposed to unwanted digital communications in the prior year. In most cases these experiences did not result in harm or distress. The most commonly reported online incidents were being contacted by a stranger and unintentionally seeing inappropriate content.

Most teens reported a range of negative emotional responses to online incidents, and nearly 2 in 10 had their everyday activities adversely affected. For them it was more common to feel annoyed, confused, and frustrated but also unable to do things such as participating online as usual and going to school or studying because of an unwanted digital communication. Considering a similar survey conducted with adult New Zealanders (see Netsafe, 2018a), our findings suggest, despite the age variance between sample studies, that teenagers are about twice more likely than adults to not only experience an online incident but also to be negatively affected by it. These findings have implications for policy and service provision as they suggest that early intervention is imperative given the rate of teens' self-reported distress and potential harm.

Another aspect that helps us to better understand experiences of unwanted digital communications is that they can also be linked to offline risks. International research has already highlighted this point (Hasebrink, Görzig, Haddon, Kalmus, & Livingstone, 2011) and, in line with it, our study has found that for some New Zealand teens (27% of those who experienced an online incident) an unwanted digital communication was related to an offline incident (particularly for girls and teens with disabilities). This is an important reminder of why policy interventions should take account of both online and offline aspects and the relationship between them.

*New Zealand teens' experience of digital harm is gendered.*

Our data reveal girls more commonly experience a range of unwanted digital communications than boys. Further, the impact of unwanted digital communications is more significant for girls as they are more likely to experience negative emotions and disruptions to their everyday life activities. This finding is not only consistent with international research (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2010; Duggan, 2017; Gruber & Fineran, 2007; Sevcikova, 2016) but also supports the qualitative findings from the *Insights into Digital Harm* study conducted last year by the Ministry for Women in partnership with Netsafe (see Ministry for Women, 2017).

The impact of unwanted digital communications can be explained, in part, by the way boys and girls interact with their digital worlds. As the study shows, for girls most online incidents tend to occur through social media, an online environment in which they are more engaged with, while boys' experiences of unwanted digital communications take place more often in online gaming settings.

*Young people vary; the interventions to support them should too.*

The gender differences regarding girls' and boys' experiences of digital harm and distress (see also the Background sub-section) have implications for policy and practice. The findings support the need for tailored approaches to protect young people online considering gender characteristics (Thompson, 2018), including an emphasis on interventions in schools to reduce online risks (Rickwood, 2013). Thus, the development of prevention measures will need to meet the needs of girls and boys and consider the different ways they engage with their digital environment.

*Other groups are also affected by unwanted digital communications.*

Our findings also provide general, but still relevant, insights about digital harm and distress in the context of ethnicity and disability. The fact that the experiences and impact of unwanted digital communications were also significant among Māori and Pacific teens and teens with disabilities has implications for further research and policy intervention. In the online safety domain, research on ethnicity and disability has largely been absent. The limited evidence – see Netsafe's (2017) report on the sharing of nudes online – supports the need for a closer analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, on ethnicity and disability and suggests that prevention might require active involvement and conversation with Māori and Pacific people as well as the disability community.

*There is a need to consider teenagers' voices and coping strategies for the development of future prevention and support programmes.*

Our previous studies (Ministry for Women, 2017; Netsafe, 2017, 2018b) suggest a generation gap, with New Zealand teens pointing out that adults do not fully understand their experiences of the online environment (e.g. the prevalence of "sexting") and asking for support to be directed to younger children. In the *Insights into Digital Harm* report, they mentioned a range of preventive actions to address digital harm. They highlighted, for instance, the importance of having access to resources to support themselves, their friends, and family, and the need to deal with issues such as rape culture, healthy relationships, consent, poverty and mental health (Ministry for Women, 2017). The key role played by family and close friends in managing digital harm or distress not only was mentioned in the *Insights into Digital Harm* report but also confirmed in this study, with teens saying they would primarily seek support from their parents and a close friend if an online incident happens to them. Thus, the success of prevention and support programmes will depend on our capacity to understand the way teens make sense of digital technologies and risks, and how we incorporate their experiences of and personal strategies for online safety.

*New Zealand has just started to understand teens' experiences of digital harm.*

As previously mentioned, this study provides valuable insights about the prevalence of unwanted digital communications among New Zealand teens, including experiences of harm and/or distress. However, one limitation is that, like any other similar study, it relies only on self-report measures. Also, as the study looked for general characteristics, particularly in the context of gender, there are other aspects that the study has not covered but will require further exploration in future research (e.g. teens' psychological characteristics and personal background, the impact of socio-cultural factors, perpetrators' motivations, and/or parents' views and role) in order to gain a better understanding of young people's experiences of digital challenges and risks. Finally, while the findings are representative of teens aged 14-17 years old, it is also important to examine younger children's experiences as their engagement with digital technologies seems to be increasing.

Netsafe and the Ministry for Women are committed to continue working on the topic of digital harm. We will be releasing a factsheet with insights about teens' access to resources and support services in the coming months.

## Glossary

**Digital communication:** A digital communication refers to any form of electronic communication as defined in the Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015. This includes any text message, writing, picture, recording, or other matter that is communicated electronically.

**Digital harm and distress:** To describe experiences of digital harm and/or distress we consider two elements: affective and behavioural. Affective is how a person describes feeling about a situation of unwanted digital communication (e.g. annoyed, anxious, unsafe). It is the internal experience of emotional reaction to it. Behavioural refers to the impact of an unwanted digital communication(s) on the person's daily activities (e.g. unable to leave the house as a result of being anxious or feeling unsafe).

**Unwanted digital communications:** Unwanted digital communications include a range of online experience(s) mediated/facilitated by unsolicited electronic communication(s) that might or might not cause distress and/or harm to the person who deals with it (e.g. receiving spam, accidentally seeing inappropriate content, having rumours spread about oneself, being threatened online).

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## Further Resources

Netsafe provides a range of resources and services in order to support the online safety and security of all New Zealanders. In light of the issues raised in this report, the following links are of particular relevance:

- <https://www.netsafe.org.nz/youth-bullying>
- <https://www.netsafe.org.nz/sending-nudes-young-people>
- <https://www.netsafe.org.nz/hdc-act>
- <https://www.netsafe.org.nz/staying-safe-online>

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