



Australian Government



Years 8 and above

Who are you online?

Every day you make choices online: what to click, what to scroll past and how you show up.

This resource looks at some common assumptions about online life. Who really controls what you see and how you act online: you or the algorithm (the system that decides what shows up in your feed)?

Assumption versus reality

It's easy to pick up assumptions about how the internet works. This happens especially when apps are designed to hide what goes on behind the scenes. Nobody gets everything right online, so this is a good chance to check your own habits. Keep an open mind as you read through some common assumptions. Think about who is really in control of your online life.



Note

Online harmful behaviour is any use of technology that hurts, excludes, intimidates or makes someone feel unsafe. This can include creating or sharing content that harms someone socially, mentally or physically.

The passive harm pass

Assumption

If I'm not being openly mean, I'm not doing anything wrong online.

Statistics

In a recent survey, 81% of young people reported negative emotions after their most recent cyberbullying experience. Of these, 53% felt sad, upset or hurt, and 43% felt annoyed, frustrated or angry.



Reality

You might share screenshots of content that may harm someone. You might react to mean comments or quietly watch someone get targeted in a group chat. Each of these actions tells others that this harmful behaviour is okay.

Ask yourself: Have you ever forwarded a screenshot because it was funny or good gossip? Did you think about the person it was about? If you share harmful content or stay silent about it, you help the harm continue unchecked.

Remember

Something that feels harmless to you can affect someone else differently. Online behaviour matters as much as face-to-face behaviour. Reread your post, message or comment from the other person's perspective before you send it.



The group chat vault

Assumption

What I post in the group chat stays in the group chat.

Statistics

A survey showed 17% of young people have had their private messages, information or secrets shared online, while 8% of young people have had someone share their phone number, email or home address online.



Reality

A group chat feels private. But you can't control who sees a friend's screen, who takes a screenshot or what happens after an argument. Once you send a text or photo, anyone can see it, not just the group.

Ask yourself: If a giant screenshot of your group chat was put on the school projector tomorrow, how many friendships would survive? How would you feel about what you'd posted?

Remember

Even private chats and messages can be shared further or used as evidence of bullying and harmful behaviour.



The perception gap

Assumption

I know how I come across online.

'A joke or banter goes too far when you begin to think about it all the time, as something that hurts you, something you always question. Being mean cannot be covered up as a joke when it hurts someone else.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 15,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Reality

Body language and tone don't come through on a screen. What seems like an obvious joke to you can read as aggressive or offensive to someone else. You know what you meant, but you can't control how someone else takes it.

Ask yourself: Have you ever had to type 'it was a joke lol' because someone took a comment the wrong way? When have you misread how someone else was feeling?

Remember

You can't be sure how someone will interpret things online. Consider the impact you can have.



The 'free pass' account

Assumption

If I'm using a fake or anonymous account, it doesn't really count, and no one will ever know.

Statistics

About 75% of Australian young people who experience cyberbullying report that they know the person doing it in real life. Most often, it's a friend.



Reality

Anonymity (using a fake name or no name at all) hides who you are. But the person targeted still feels the impact. Apps also link anonymous accounts to your device and IP address. This means your actions still 'count' to the platform and to the law.

Ask yourself: Does hiding your identity online change how you treat people? How does your behaviour reflect the kind of person you are? Would you post this if your name was attached to it?

Remember

Hiding your identity should not be an excuse to hurt others. Anonymity can protect privacy, but it doesn't remove responsibility. The choices you make online still affect real people, and your online behaviour should reflect who you want to be.



The divide between digital and physical life

Assumption

If something happened online, it's not as serious as if it happened in person.

Statistics

More than one in two Australian young people (53%) have experienced cyberbullying. Another 51% report feeling distressed, shocked or angry after seeing harmful content online.



Reality

Your brain doesn't separate 'online feelings' from real ones. Being left out of a chat, targeted by a rumour or harassed in a game causes the same stress as face-to-face harm. Sometimes it can feel worse because you can't escape it, even at home.

Ask yourself: When something harmful happens online, do you notice a racing heart or a heavy feeling? Why do you tell yourself it's 'just the internet' when your body tells you otherwise?

Remember

Don't ignore your feelings. Seek support and advice from people you trust. For further support, see the organisations listed at the end of this resource.



A quick fix boundary

Assumption

Blocking or muting someone fixes the problem.

Statistics

Blocking is the most common tool used by Australian teens: 54% have blocked or muted an account. However, 36% of young people who were cyberbullied by someone they know said that person was also targeting them face-to-face.



Reality

Blocking and muting someone (after saving the evidence) can give immediate peace of mind but may not stop the behaviour completely. It can stop someone from contacting you, but it can't stop them from talking to others, creating new accounts or continuing the behaviour offline at school.

Ask yourself: When you block someone, does the situation feel resolved? Or are you still waiting for it to continue in real life?

Remember

What happens online can have a real emotional impact. Don't ignore issues, including if you are still feeling uncomfortable after you act. Seek support and advice from people you trust. For further support, see the organisations listed at the end of this resource.



The bystander standard

Assumption

If no one says anything, everyone must be okay with it.

Statistics

Many young people (41%) ignore harmful content online. Yet 46% of teens say what they most want to know is how to support a friend who is in trouble online.



'People rarely announce when bullying is happening. It usually shows up as a pattern everyone understands but no one wants to interrupt.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 15,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Reality

Silence online rarely means agreement. It usually means everyone is hesitant to speak up. When you scroll past a harmful comment and assume someone else will handle it, the silence makes harmful behaviour look acceptable.

Ask yourself: Have you ever seen a chat go too far but decided not to type anything? What stopped you?

Remember

Taking positive, safe steps can support someone being harmed. For more information, see the 'Understanding the bystander effect' resource.



The dissociation defence

Assumption

My online presence doesn't really reflect who I am.

Statistics

More than one third (38%) of young people had someone say hurtful things to them online.



Reality

It can be tempting to treat your online life as separate from your real one. But your searches, likes and comments are real-world actions. Your online presence is just you, making choices in a digital space.

Ask yourself: Imagine someone described you using only your online search history, likes and comments from the past month. Would you be comfortable with that picture?

Remember

What you do online is a reflection of who you want to be. Treat the online world with care and respect. Remember that you can't undo things once you post them.



AI and image-based harm

Assumption

If an AI-generated or altered image/video of me is created without my consent, it's not really about me because it's fake.



These images can spread quickly and cause serious distress. You have the right to control your own image.

You can report harmful behaviour online to **eSafety** at esafety.gov.au/report.

Reality

AI-generated or edited images of a real person (deepfakes) are a form of image-based harm. The images may not be real, but the harm to a person's privacy, reputation and sense of safety is real.

Ask yourself: If a fake or edited image of you started to spread, would knowing it was 'AI-generated' make it feel any less personal or stressful?

If you are tempted to post a fake or edited picture, stop and think first. What harm could it cause, and what could happen to you?

Statistics

Recently, 7% of Australian young people have had fake photos or videos of them made and shared without their consent. Another 7% have had a fake profile created using their identity.



Remember

Something doesn't have to be real to cause real harm. If someone shares an AI-generated image or video of you without your consent, it's not your fault. Seek support from a trusted adult or see the organisations listed at the end of this resource.



*'What happens online isn't separate from real life; it often is real life...
just happening in a place adults don't always see.'*

– YOUNG PERSON, 15, PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL YOUTH COLLECTIVE

The feedback loop

Assumption

The content I see on my feed shows what's really happening in the world.

Statistics

Over two-thirds (69%) of young people who have seen harmful or hateful content online didn't look for it. The algorithm dropped it directly into their feeds. You aren't always choosing the content. The app is choosing it for you.



Statistics

Almost 3 in 4 young people (74%) have seen harmful content online. For 69%, it happened accidentally through pop-ups in their feed. Almost half (47%) of young people have seen content with offensive or sexist views about women, and 44% have seen content that promotes unhealthy eating or exercise habits.



Now that you have this information, you can better recognise the assumptions you make about your online life. This helps you support yourself and others.

Reality

Platforms don't show a neutral view of the world. They recommend content designed to get a reaction and keep you watching. If your feed fills up with extreme views or hateful content, it's because the algorithm has noticed you pause on similar posts. You can train it to show you better, less harmful content by skipping, blocking or selecting 'not interested'.

Ask yourself: Have you ever repeated something you learned from online content creators to friends or family? Did you later realise it was biased or inaccurate? How much is your feed shaping what you think is 'normal'?

Remember

We all have 'filter bubbles' online – feeds shaped by what we've clicked on before. Ask trusted friends and adults for ways to follow better, less harmful content.



You can report harmful behaviour online to **eSafety** at esafety.gov.au/report.



Note

If anything you've read here feels relevant to something happening in your life, you don't have to deal with it alone. Contact **Kids Helpline** (1800 55 1800 or kidshelpline.com.au) for free, confidential support that is available 24/7.



Connected resources

- ◉ Reacting versus responding
- ◉ Identity-based harm

Where to get more help

If you need further support, help is available:

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 or kidshelpline.com.au. Free, confidential counselling for bullying and other harmful behaviours, school issues, online harm and wellbeing, available 24/7.

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636 or beyondblue.org.au. Mental health support for stress, anxiety or overwhelm, available 24/7.

Lifeline: 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au. Crisis support and counselling if things feel overwhelming, available 24/7.

Dolly's Dream Bullying Support Line: 13 36 55 (13 DOLLY) or dollysdream.org.au. Counselling and guidance for children and young people experiencing bullying and other harmful behaviour, available 24/7.

headspace/ehespace: 1800 650 890 or headspace.org.au. Mental health, wellbeing and early intervention support, available 9 am–1 am daily.

1800RESPECT: 1800 737 732 or 1800respect.org.au. Sexual assault, family and domestic violence counselling line for anyone who has experienced, or is at risk of, family and domestic violence and/or sexual assault, available 24/7.

13YARN: 13 92 76 or 13yarn.org.au. Culturally safe 24/7 support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

QLife (LGBTIQA+ young people): 1800 184 527 or qlife.org.au. Free, anonymous peer support and referral service, available 3 pm–9 pm daily.

eSafety Commissioner: esafety.gov.au. Report cyberbullying, get advice and request content removal support.

Australian Human Rights Commission: humanrights.gov.au. Support for cases involving discriminatory harm. Reports can be made via their website or by emailing infoservice@humanrights.gov.au.

State, territory and non-government education sectors will reflect the expectations of the National Framework for Addressing Bullying in Australian schools in their policies and procedures by Term 1 2027. This includes making reasonable efforts to initiate a response to bullying and harmful behaviour within two school days, recognising that further time may be required to fully address the issue. By Term 1 2027, all schools will also publish or link to policies and procedures that align with the National Framework (or equivalent contemporary jurisdiction specific Frameworks) and their local policies and school context.