Factsheet: Trends in unwanted digital communications regarding sexual orientation in New Zealand

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This factsheet compares annual trends regarding the prevalence of unwanted digital communications in Aotearoa New Zealand based on participants' sexual orientation.

There is emerging empirical evidence showing that people who identify as gender diverse and/or non-heterosexual report higher rates of risks and harm online. In New Zealand, for example, Netsafe's research has revealed that adults identifying as non-heterosexual (18 and over) are more likely to experience image-based sexual abuse (Pacheco et al., 2019) and online hate (Pacheco & Melhuish, 2018b) compared to those identifying as heterosexual[1]. Similar patterns regarding online harassment have been reported in Australia and the United Kingdom (see Powell et al., 2018).

To expand the available evidence, this factsheet presents new insights based on longitudinal data exploring and comparing the extent of four types of unwanted digital communications in the last two to three years. The factsheet looks at the prevalence of being the target and the sender of unwanted, potentially harmful digital communications that included physical threats, seeking to embarrass, stalking, and making a sexual advance[2].

Since its appointment as the Approved Agency under the Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015 ("the Act"), Netsafe has consistently provided government agencies, support services, and the public with research-based evidence about the extent of online risks and harm. The insights in this factsheet reflect our long history of supporting and collaborating with New Zealand's rainbow community with research evidence that will translate into tailored online safety resources and information for community members.

Annual trends identified in the data:

- Overall, non-heterosexual participants are more likely to experience receiving these types of unwanted digital communication when compared to heterosexuals.
- Annual rates for each type of unwanted digital communication were not steady, but in 2020 non-heterosexual participants' experiences varied, with significant increases.
- From 2019 to 2020 there was a considerable increase in the percentage of non-heterosexual participants who said they had sent an unwanted digital communication.

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[1] For examples see the *Snapshots from previous research* section in this factsheet.

[2] For further information about our research approach see the *Method* section in this factsheet.

Findings

Table 1 (below) presents annual trends regarding receiving unwanted digital communications among adults (18 and over) based on their sexual orientation. Data included in the table come from Netsafe's Annual Population Surveys in 2018, 2019, and 2020.

Table 1: Annual trends in receiving unwanted digital communications

Percentage of participants receiving different types of unwanted digital communications 2018-2020 by sexual orientation

	2018	2019	2020
Physically threatened or intimidated you			
Heterosexual	3%	8%	8%
Non-heterosexual	13%	12%	21%
All participants	5%	9%	9%
Tried to embarrass or humiliate you online			
Heterosexual	7%	12%	8%
Non-heterosexual	19%	14%	36%
All participants	8%	12%	18%
Stalked you by monitoring your online activity to intimidate or control you			
Heterosexual	5%	8%	6%
Non-heterosexual	11%	11%	28%
All participants	6%	8%	8%
Made an unwanted sexual advance to you			
Heterosexual	8%	11%	10%
Non-heterosexual	28%	26%	37%
All participants	9%	12%	13%

Base: All respondents (2020 n=1,150; 2019 n=1,161, 2018 n=1,001).

Q18 - In the last 12 months, have you personally received an unwanted digital communication (e.g., email, text, photo, video, or online comment) that: Physically threatened or intimidated you... Tried to embarrass or humiliate you online... Stalked you by monitoring your online activity to intimidate or control you... Made an unwanted sexual advance to you (e.g., Messages propositioning sex acts, naked selfie, images or video live stream)

As the table shows, overall, it was more common for non-heterosexual participants to experience each of the four behaviours measured compared to heterosexual respondents. Interestingly, what is more common among non-heterosexuals is to be the target of digital communications that sought to make an unwanted sexual advance. Another interesting finding is that annual rates for each of these behaviours are not steady, but they vary with significant increases in 2020.

On the other hand, Table 2 (below) presents findings regarding the sending of unwanted digital communications. Netsafe started collecting data about engagement in potentially harmful online behaviours in its 2019 Annual Population Survey.

Table 2: Annual trends in sending unwanted digital communications

Percentage of participants sending different types of unwanted digital communications 2019-2020 by sexual orientation

	2019	2020
Physically threatened someone		
Heterosexual	2%	1%
Non-heterosexual	6%	19%
All participants	2%	3%
Tried to embarrass someone online		
Heterosexual	3%	3%
Non-heterosexual	4%	13%
All participants	3%	4%
Involved regularly monitoring someone's online activity in order to influence their behaviour or thoughts		
Heterosexual	2%	3%
Non-heterosexual	3%	12%
All participants	2%	3%
Was a sexual advance toward someone that that you were not sure was wanted		
Heterosexual	2%	3%
Non-heterosexual	2%	23%
All participants	3%	5%

Base: All respondents (2020 n=1,150; 2019 n=1,161)

Q54 - In the last 12 months, have you personally sent or shared a digital communication (e.g., email, text, photo, video, or online comment) that: Physically threatened someone… Tried to embarrass someone online… Involved regularly monitoring someone's online activity in order to influence their behaviour or thoughts… Was a sexual advance toward someone that you were not sure was wanted (e.g., messages about sex, naked selfie, images or video live stream).

As Table 2 shows, there was a considerable increase from 2019 to 2020 of rates regarding non-heterosexual participants who said they had sent an unwanted digital communication in the prior year. The largest increase was seen in sending a sexual advance toward someone that the sender was not sure was wanted; the rate in this respect was more than 10 times higher in 2020 compared to the previous year.

In previous studies Netsafe has generated insights into non-heterosexual participants' experiences of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), online hate speech, and unwanted harmful digital communications during the national COVID-19 lockdown.

Method

The data for this factsheet was collected as part of Netsafe's Annual Population Survey (APS), a large quantitative New Zealand study that, since 2017, has been exploring adults' interaction with and through digital technologies as well as their experiences of risks and harm in the context of the Act.

Netsafe started collecting sexual orientation data regarding the receiving end of unwanted digital communications in 2018. In 2019, Netsafe also began gathering evidence about the sending of these types of communications. To collect data about sexual orientation, we asked participants which of the following options best describes how they think of themselves: (a) "Heterosexual or straight", (b) "Gay or lesbian", (c) "Bisexual", (d) "Other. Please specify", and (e) "Prefer not to answer". There were relatively few respondents in 2018 (n=62), 2019 (n=65) and 2020 (n=69) who identified in categories b, c and d. For this reason, they were grouped as non-heterosexual to make statistically valid comparisons with heterosexual respondents. This approach is common in survey-based research.

The measures from the four behaviours described in this factsheet (physical threats, sought to embarrass, stalked, and was seeking a sexual advance) are based on some of the communications principles adapted from the Act. Also, in the context of the APS, a digital communication refers to "any form of electronic communication as defined in the Act. This includes any text message, writing, picture, recording, or other matter that is communicated electronically" (Pacheco & Melhuish, 2018a).

References

Pacheco, E., & Melhuish, N. (2018a). New Zealand Teens and Digital Harm: Statistical Insights into Experiences, Impact and Response. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 1–50. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3188608

Pacheco, E., & Melhuish, N. (2018b). Online Hate Speech: A Survey on Personal Experiences and Exposure Among Adult New Zealanders. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3272148

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Powell, A., Scott, A. J., & Henry, N. (2018). Digital harassment and abuse: Experiences of sexuality and gender minority adults. *European Journal of Criminology*, 147737081878800. https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370818788006

Snapshots from previous research

In previous studies Netsafe has generated insights into non-heterosexual participants' experiences of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), online hate speech, and unwanted harmful digital communications during the national COVID-19 lockdown.

Online hate speech (2019)*

About a quarter of non-heterosexual participants received hateful digital communications one or more times in the last 12 months

Non-heterosexual participants were more likely to:

- agree that everyone has a role in addressing hateful online content
- disagree with the idea of introducing specific legislation to stop the spread of hateful online content

Sexual orientation was the most common reason for exposure to online hate given by participants who identified themselves as non-heterosexual

COVID-19 lockdown (2020)*

68% of non-heterosexual and 38% of heterosexual participants received unwanted digital communication during/after the national COVID-19 lockdown

Image-based sexual abuse (2019)*

Receiving threats of IBSA was more prevalent among non-heterosexual (8%) than heterosexual participants (3%)

3% of all New Zealand adults have had intimate content shared online without their consent, this was higher (10%) among those identifying as non-heterosexual

About Netsafe research

Netsafe carries out research as a wider part of its statutory role under the Act to inform the design and delivery of its resources and services and provide research-based evidence for others working to address online safety issues. This report's topic sits within the scope of the Act's ten communications principles that together describe a range of potentially harmful types of online communications. For more information about Netsafe's research programme or how you can contribute: research@netsafe.org.nz

What's next?

Netsafe interacts with people from the LGTQIA+ community regularly, and our expert incident advice team continually receives requests for support from people self-identifying as gender diverse. Netsafe collaborates with RainbowYOUTH and other organisations to continually improve how we support every member of the LBGTQIA+ community.

For more information about the support available to help LBGTQIA+ people navigate online challenges visit https://netsafe.org.nz/lgbtqia-info

If you are experiencing online abuse or harassment or other online issues, Netsafe has a free helpline for people in New Zealand. The helpline is open from 8am-8pm Monday to Friday, and 9am-5pm on weekends. Contact Netsafe by phoning toll free on 0508 NETSAFE, emailing help@netsafe.org.nz or visiting https://netsafe.org.nz/report

For more information, resources and other support services visit:

- RainbowYOUTH: https://ry.org.nz
- OUTLine: https://outline.org.nz
- Youthline: https://youthline.co.nz