

# Ofcom Pilot Online Harms Survey 2020/21

Produced by: Yonder

Fieldwork: Nov 20 – Feb 21

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## Understanding the online harms landscape

This pilot survey was conducted entirely online via our Online Research Panel, with 1,000 internet users aged 13+ from the Panel completing a c.15 min survey each month from November 2020 to February 2021.

It replaced the previous annual, ICO co-branded study, which was conducted face-to-face and online amongst c.3,000 12+ internet users.

The survey measured:

- Attitudes towards the internet, including views on responsibility when it comes to moderating content and keeping children safe, confidence in staying safe online, and views on the use of personal data
- Exposure to harms online, including the most prevalent harms experienced, the frequency of exposure, the channels these harms are most often experienced on
- Response to harms online, including emotional reactions, resulting actions, and barriers to reporting

Throughout the report, harms are categorized into 'Content' harms and 'Contact' harms. 'Content' harms refer to potential harm that arises from posts, pictures, videos or other content posted by users. Examples include misinformation, harmful/misleading advertising, offensive or upsetting videos/images, content encouraging racism, etc. 'Contact' harms refer to potential harm that arises from messages, requests, bullying or other contact made by users. Examples include unwelcome friend requests or messages, bullying, abusive behaviour or threats, trolling, cyberflashing, etc.

## Understanding the online harms landscape

Note the use of the term 'video-sharing platforms' ('VSP') in this research:

Video-sharing platforms are websites and apps that people in the UK use to watch and share videos online.

Many of these platforms also contain a mix of video and other types of content and allow users to view and participate in a range of ways, of which video sharing is one element. Therefore, some VSP providers are also included in the broader category of 'social media websites and apps'. This research did not seek to identify which services fall into Ofcom's regulatory remit, nor to pre-determine whether any particular service we refer to would be classed as a VSP under the regulatory definition.

## Sample

- 4,242 internet users aged 13-84 in the UK (1,075 in November for Wave 1, 1,015 in December for Wave 2, 1,072 in January for Wave 3, and 1,080 in February for Wave 4)
- Quotas set on gender, age, socio-economic group, and region
- 50% of the sample drawn from the Ofcom VSP panel and 50% drawn from the PopulusLive panel

## Data collection

- Online survey interviews conducted
- Conducted by Yonder
- Fieldwork from 2<sup>nd</sup>–30<sup>th</sup> November 2020 (Wave 1), 2<sup>nd</sup>–29<sup>th</sup> December 2020 (Wave 2), 4<sup>th</sup>–31<sup>st</sup> January 2021 (Wave 3), 1<sup>st</sup>–28<sup>th</sup> February 2021 (Wave 4)

## Data reporting

- Weighted to be nationally representative of the UK
- Significance testing applied at the 95% confidence level to base sizes of 100+
- Data from Waves 1, 2, 3 & 4 have been aggregated throughout the report

## Summary of key findings

More than three in five internet users spend 2 hours or more online on a daily basis

Almost half carried out 5-6 different online activities in the last four weeks, and 'communicating with others online' remains the activity users are most likely to engage in

Spam emails were the most prevalent harm experienced by internet users, followed by scams/fraud/phishing and misinformation

A small proportion of internet users were exposed to other harms, such as catfishing \*, inappropriate sexual/pornographic content, and use of personal data without consent

More than three in four internet users experienced at least one harm in the last four weeks, with content\*\* harms being the most prevalent

Content harms were also experienced at the greatest frequency, with nearly one in four coming across misinformation more than 10 times in a four-week period

Both content and contact\*\* harms were most prevalent on social media platforms, and while content harms were more common on Twitter than Instagram, contact harms were equally as likely to be experienced on both of these platforms

Facebook and Twitter were the most prevalent sites for misinformation, alternative viewpoints, hate speech, and trolling. However, unwelcome messages/requests were more common on Instagram than Twitter

Nearly one in ten of those who reported exposure to trolling cited a VSP (video sharing platform) as the source

# Summary of key findings

Content harms were more likely than contact harms to be considered very annoying, upsetting, or frustrating

Users were more likely to find misinformation very annoying, compared to alternative viewpoints

Clicking the report button was the most common action taken after exposure to a content harm, while those exposed to a contact harm were more likely to unfollow/block the user

Amongst those who did not take any action, users who experienced contact harms were more likely to cite not being directly impacted as a reason for not taking action, when compared to content harms

The result of taking action was similar across content and contact harms, with under two in five claiming to know the outcome

# Summary of key findings

Over a third of parents and non-parents deemed websites or apps responsible for protecting children online, as opposed to parents or carers

However, those with children were more likely to remain neutral on this topic, compared to those without children

The majority of internet users believed that the benefits of going online outweighed the risks, while around a quarter were unsure

More than three in five also believed that it was possible to avoid seeing harmful photos or videos by using common sense

Over a third of users believed that it was important for websites and apps to monitor and delete offensive views to protect other users

However, a similar proportion were neutral on the subject

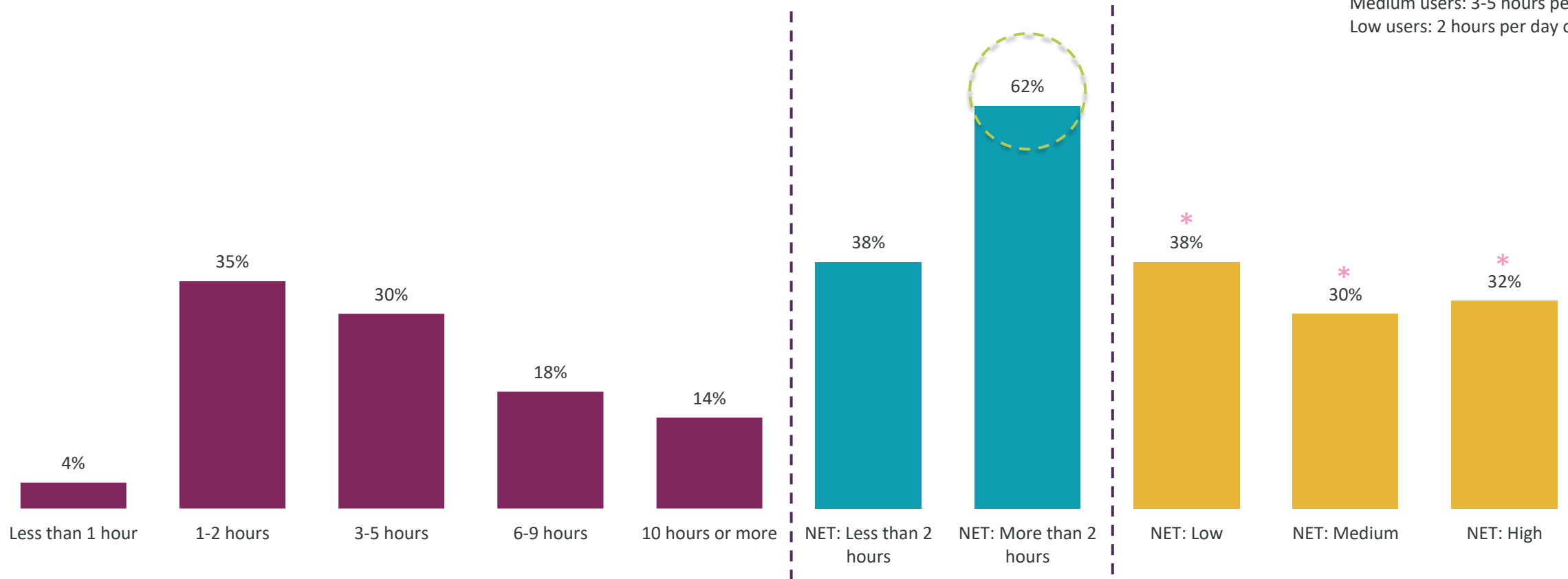


# Section 1

## Online Behaviours

# More than three in five internet users spend 2 hours or more online on a daily basis, while only a small proportion spend less than 1 hour online each day

Average time internet users spend online each day:



\* High users: 6 hours per day or more  
Medium users: 3-5 hours per day  
Low users: 2 hours per day or less

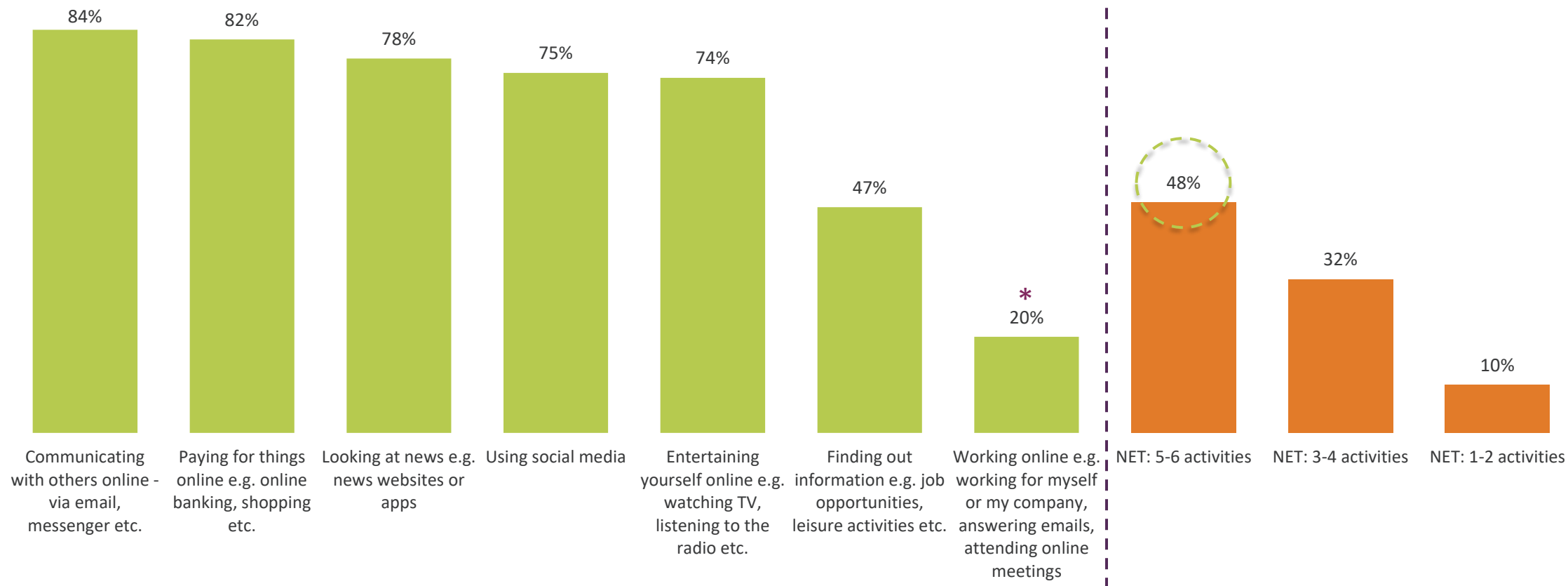
Source: Pilot Online Harms Survey

Q2. Thinking back over the last 4 weeks on an average day how long would you say you spend online? This includes going online via websites and apps through smartphones, tablets, laptops, computers, TV sets, smartwatches.

Base: All, Wave 1-4 n=4,242

## Almost half carried out 5-6 different activities online in the last four weeks, with ‘communicating with others online’ being the activity performed most often

Activities done online in the last four weeks:



\* This code was added in January 2021 and was therefore only shown in Waves 3 & 4 of the study

Source Pilot Online Harms Survey

Q3. In the last 4 weeks, have you done any of these activities online?

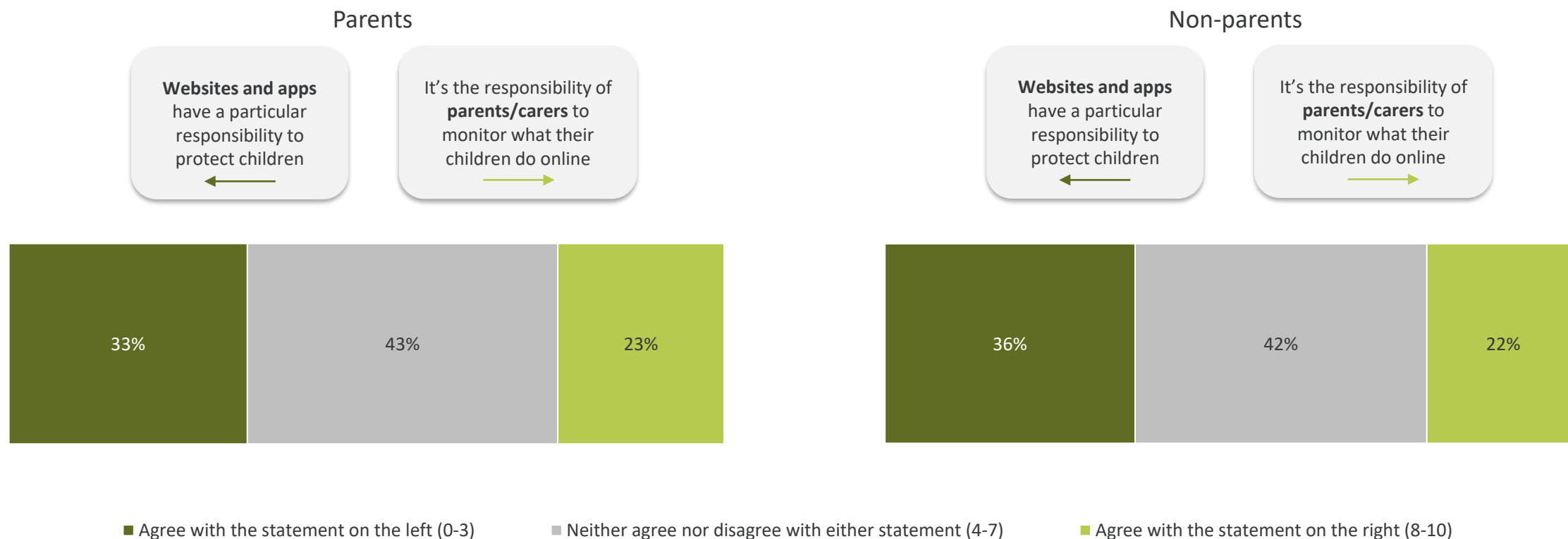
Base: All, Wave 1-4 n=4,242

## Section 2

# Online Attitudes

## While around a third of parents and non-parents held the website/app responsible for protecting children online, a large proportion were unsure who should take responsibility

Views on who should take responsibility for protecting children online:



Source: Pilot Online Harms Survey

Q1. Below are listed several pairs of statements. In each case, please indicate which statement is closest to your own opinion on a scale, where 0 means complete agreement with the statement on the left, 10 means complete agreement with the statement on the right and 5 means you don't agree with either of the statements.

Base: All, Wave 1-4 Parents n=1,046, Wave 1-4 Non-parents n=2,876

# The majority of internet users believed that the benefits of going online outweighed the risks, while around a quarter were unsure

Views on the potential benefits and risks of going online:



■ Agree with the statement on the left (0-3) ■ Neither agree nor disagree with either statement (4-7) ■ Agree with the statement on the right (8-10)

Source: Pilot Online Harms Survey

Q1. Below are listed several pairs of statements. In each case, please indicate which statement is closest to your own opinion on a scale, where 0 means complete agreement with the statement on the left, 10 means complete agreement with the statement on the right and 5 means you don't agree with either of the statements.

Base: All, Wave 2 & 4 n=2,095 \*This statement was not shown in Waves 1 and 3

## The majority of internet users also believed that it was possible to avoid seeing harmful or offensive content by using common sense when going online

Views on whether it is possible to avoid seeing harmful/offensive content online:



■ Agree with the statement on the left (0-3) ■ Neither agree nor disagree with either statement (4-7) ■ Agree with the statement on the right (8-10)

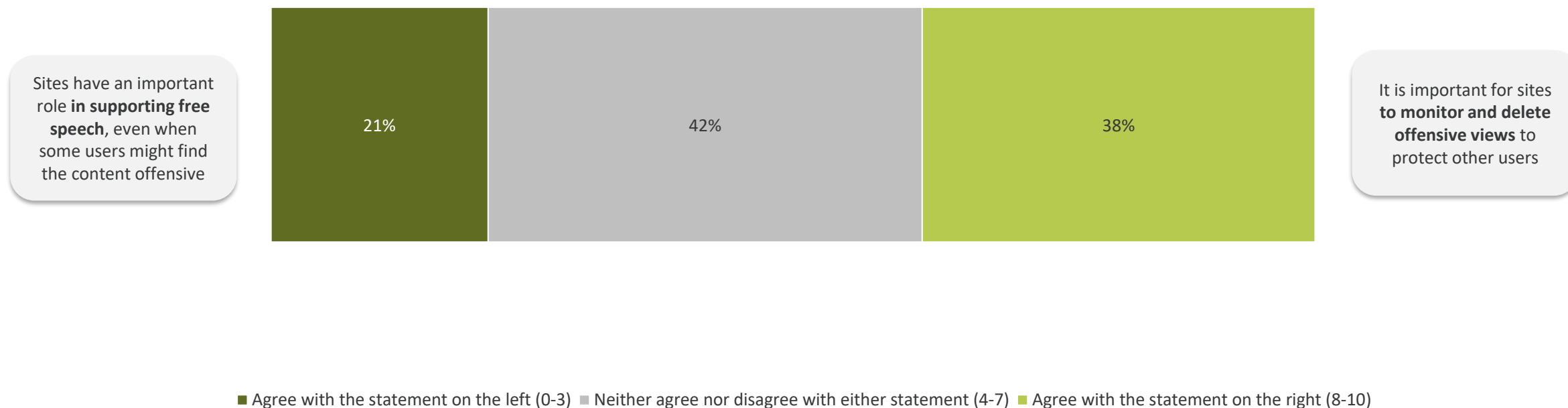
Source Pilot Online Harms Survey

Q1. Below are listed several pairs of statements. In each case, please indicate which statement is closest to your own opinion on a scale, where 0 means complete agreement with the statement on the left, 10 means complete agreement with the statement on the right and 5 means you don't agree with either of the statements.

Base: All, Wave 2 & 4 n=2,095 \*This statement was not shown in Waves 1 and 3

## Users were largely neutral regarding free speech

Views on the role sites and apps play when it comes to free speech:



Source: Pilot Online Harms Survey

Q1. Below are listed several pairs of statements. In each case, please indicate which statement is closest to your own opinion on a scale, where 0 means complete agreement with the statement on the left, 10 means complete agreement with the statement on the right and 5 means you don't agree with either of the statements.

Base: All, Wave 2 & 4 n=2,095 \*This statement was not shown in Waves 1 and 3

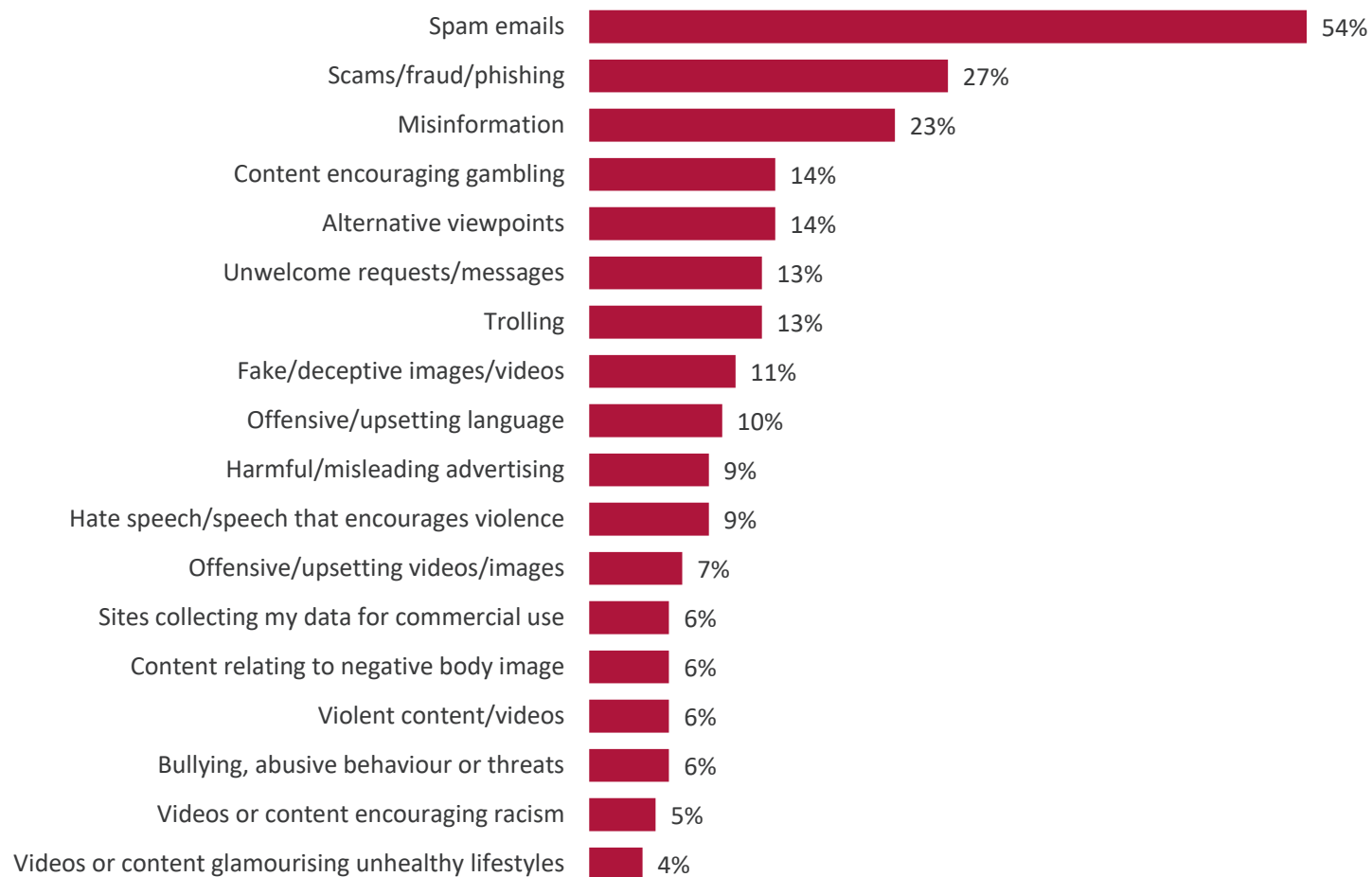


# Section 3

## Harms Overview

## Spam emails were the most prevalent harm experienced by internet users, followed by scams/fraud/phishing and misinformation

Most prevalent harms experienced in last four weeks – prompted answers (1 of 2)



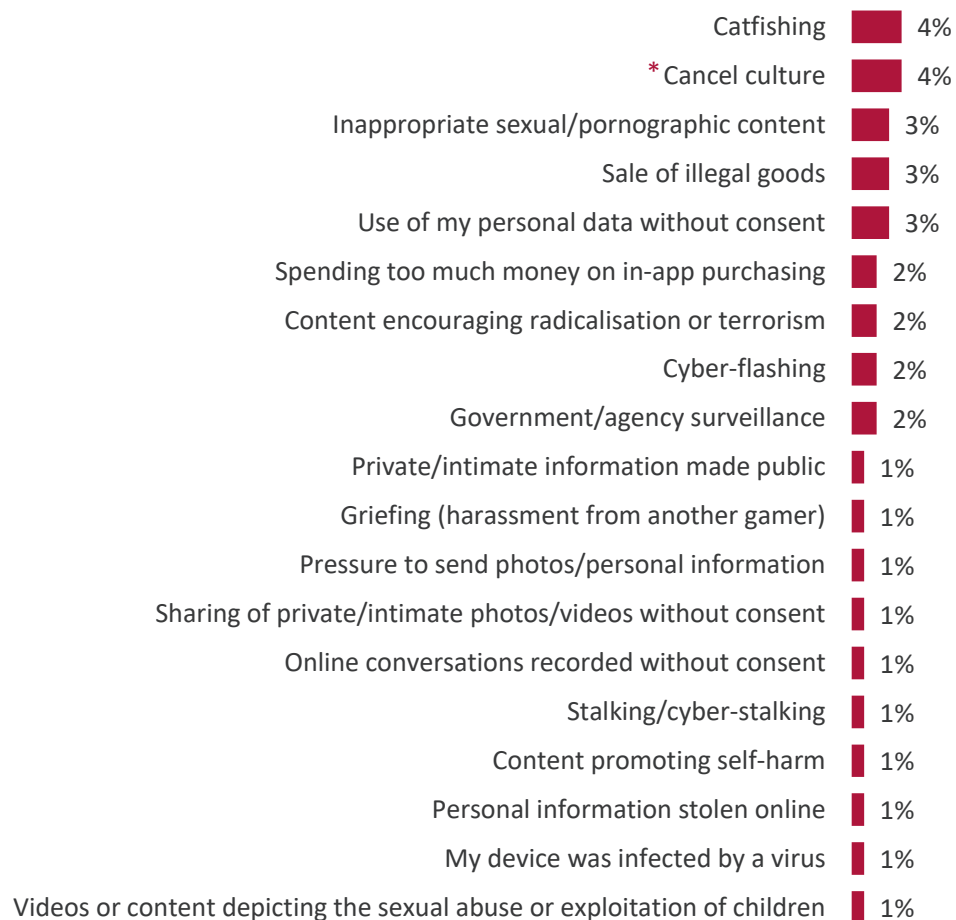
Source: Pilot Online Harms Survey

Q5. Which, if any, of the following have you seen or experienced online in the last 4 weeks?

Base: All, Waves 1-4 n=4,242

## Smaller proportions of internet users were exposed to other harms, such as catfishing, inappropriate sexual/pornographic content, and use of personal data without consent

Most prevalent harms experienced in last four weeks – prompted answers (2 of 2)



\*Cancel culture' was only shown in Waves 3 & 4.

# Section 4

## Harms Deep-Dive

## Three in four have been exposed to at least one harm in the last four weeks and users are more likely to experience content harms than contact harms

Proportion who experienced the following focus harms in the last four weeks:



Source: Pilot Online Harms Survey

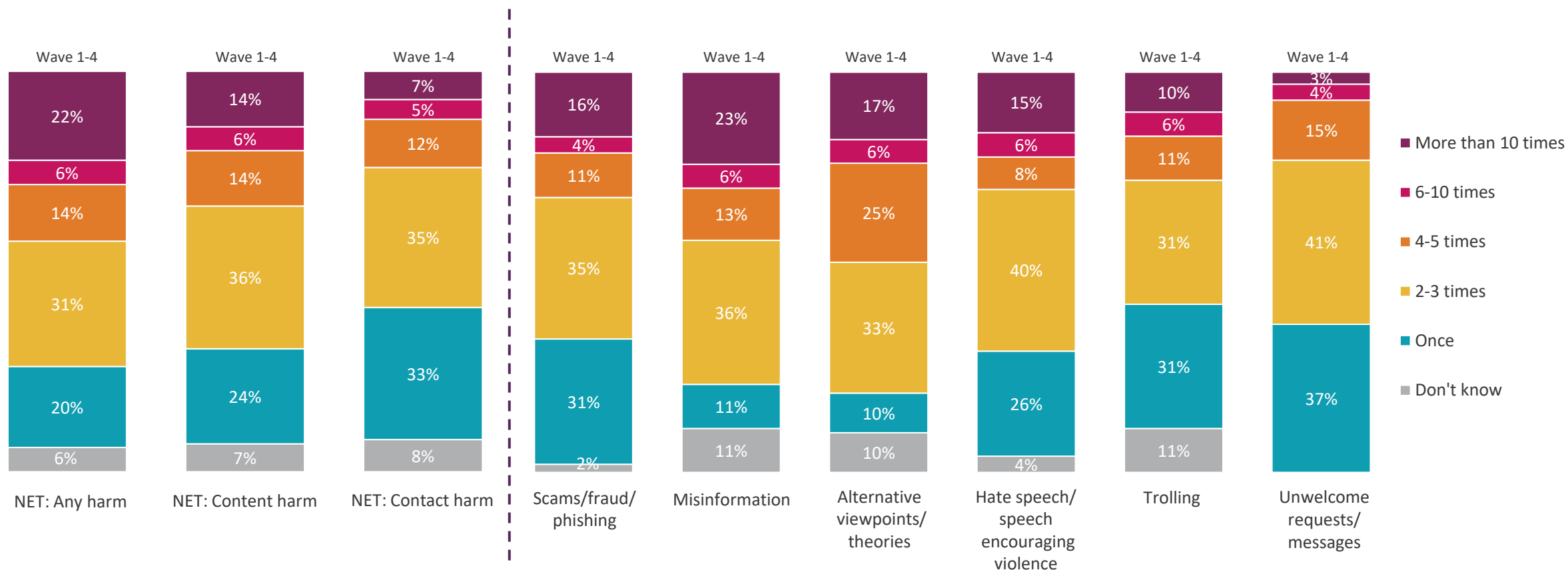
Q5. Which, if any, of the following have you seen or experienced online in the last 4 weeks? Base: All, Wave 1-4 n= 4,242

Harms are categorized into 'Content' harms and 'Contact' harms. 'Content' harms refer to potential harm that arises from posts, pictures, videos or other content posted by users. Examples include misinformation, harmful/misleading advertising, offensive or upsetting videos/images, content encouraging racism, etc. 'Contact' harms refer to potential harm that arises from messages, requests, bullying or other contact made by users. Examples include unwelcome friend requests or messages, bullying, abusive behaviour or threats, trolling, cyberflashing, etc.

Low base sizes shown

# Content harms were also experienced more frequently than contact harms, with nearly one in four claiming to have come across misinformation more than 10 times in the last four weeks

Frequency of harm experienced in the last four weeks:



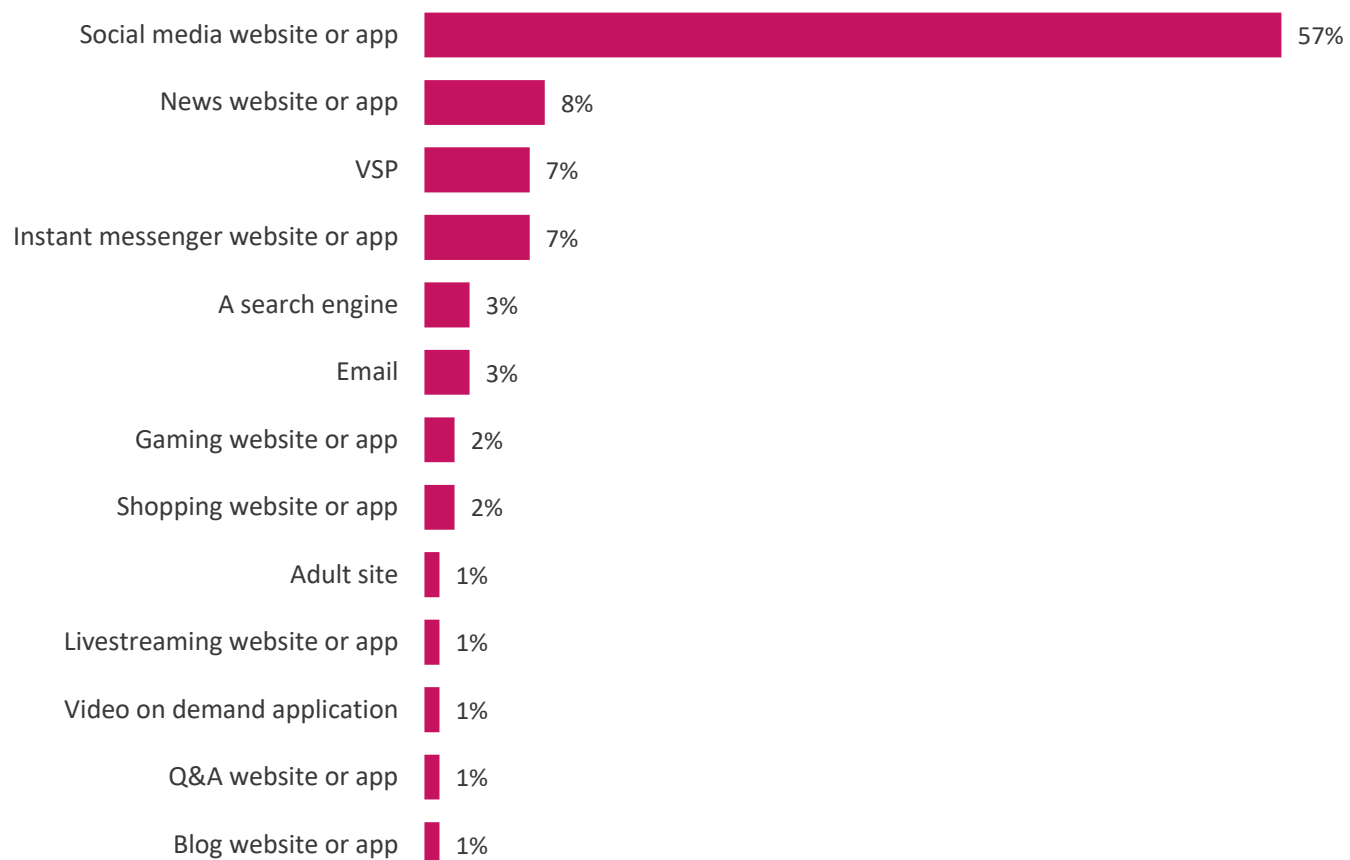
Source: Pilot Online Harms Survey

Q17. How many times in the last 4 weeks did you experience ... when using ...?

Base: All who experienced at least one of these harms most recently in the last four weeks: NET: Any harm, Wave 1-4 n=3,139; NET: Content harm, Wave 1-4 n=880; NET: Contact harm, Wave 1-4 n=546; Scams/fraud/phishing, Wave 1-4 n=266, Misinformation, Wave 1-4 n=299; Alternative viewpoints/theories, Wave 1-4 n=\*98 (low base size – caution); Hate speech/speech encouraging violence, Wave 1-4 n=\*75 (low base size – caution), Trolling, Wave 1-4 n=124; Unwelcome requests/messages, Wave 1-4 n= 145

## Social media websites/apps were the most prevalent sources of content or contact harm, followed by news websites/apps, VSPs and instant messengers websites/apps

Most prevalent site types for **content** or **contact** harms:



Source Pilot Online Harms Survey

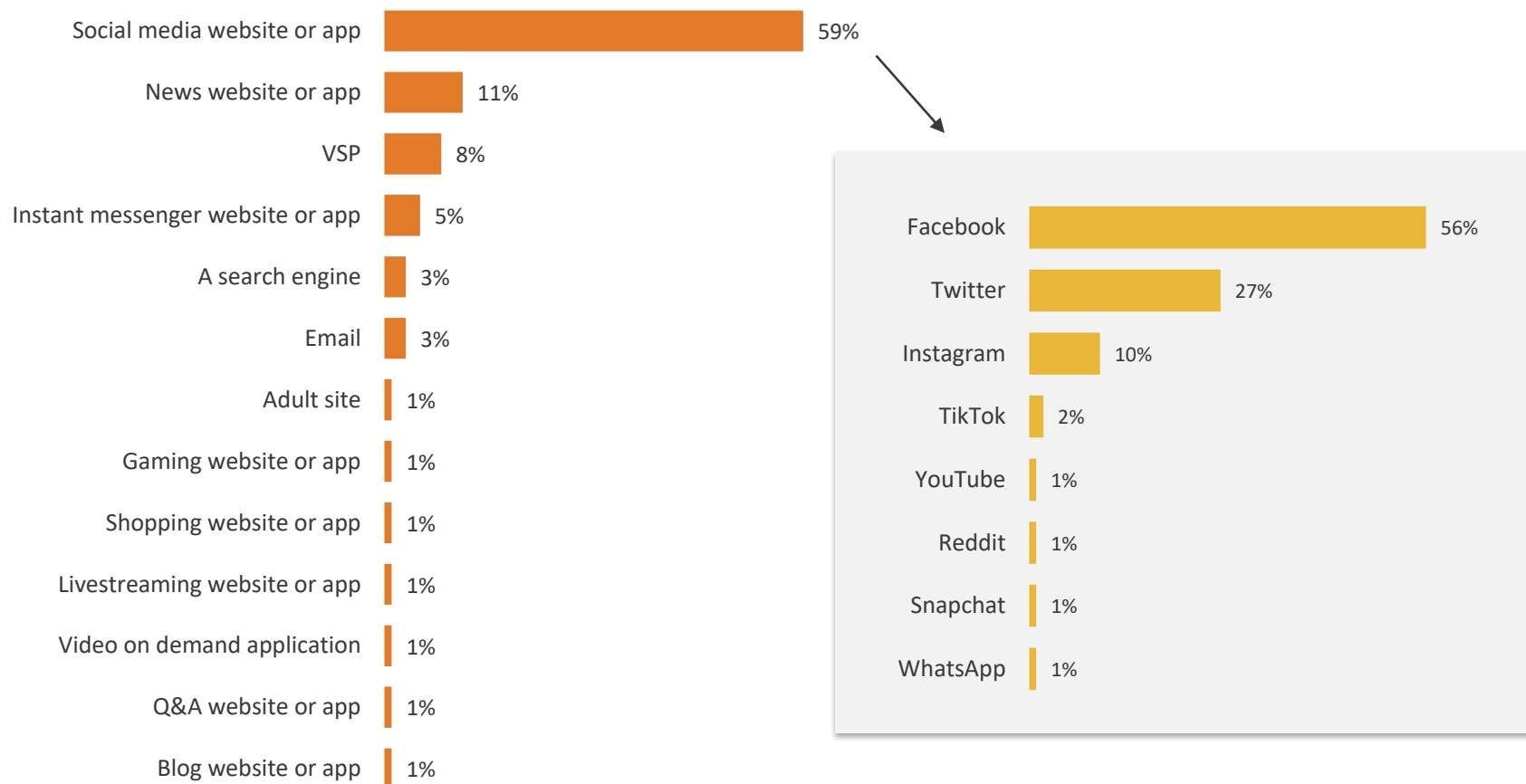
Q9. What type of site or service were you using when you experienced ...?

Base: All who experienced at least one content or contact harm most recently in the last four weeks, Wave 1-4 n=1,426

See slide 4 for explanation of VSPs and social media

Although the majority of content harms were experienced on social media websites/apps, they were also experienced on a range of other platforms, such as news websites/apps and VSPs

Most prevalent site types and sources for **content** harms specifically:



Source: Pilot Online Harms Survey

Q9. What type of site or service were you using when you experienced ...?

Q12. Which social media website or app were you using when you experienced ...?

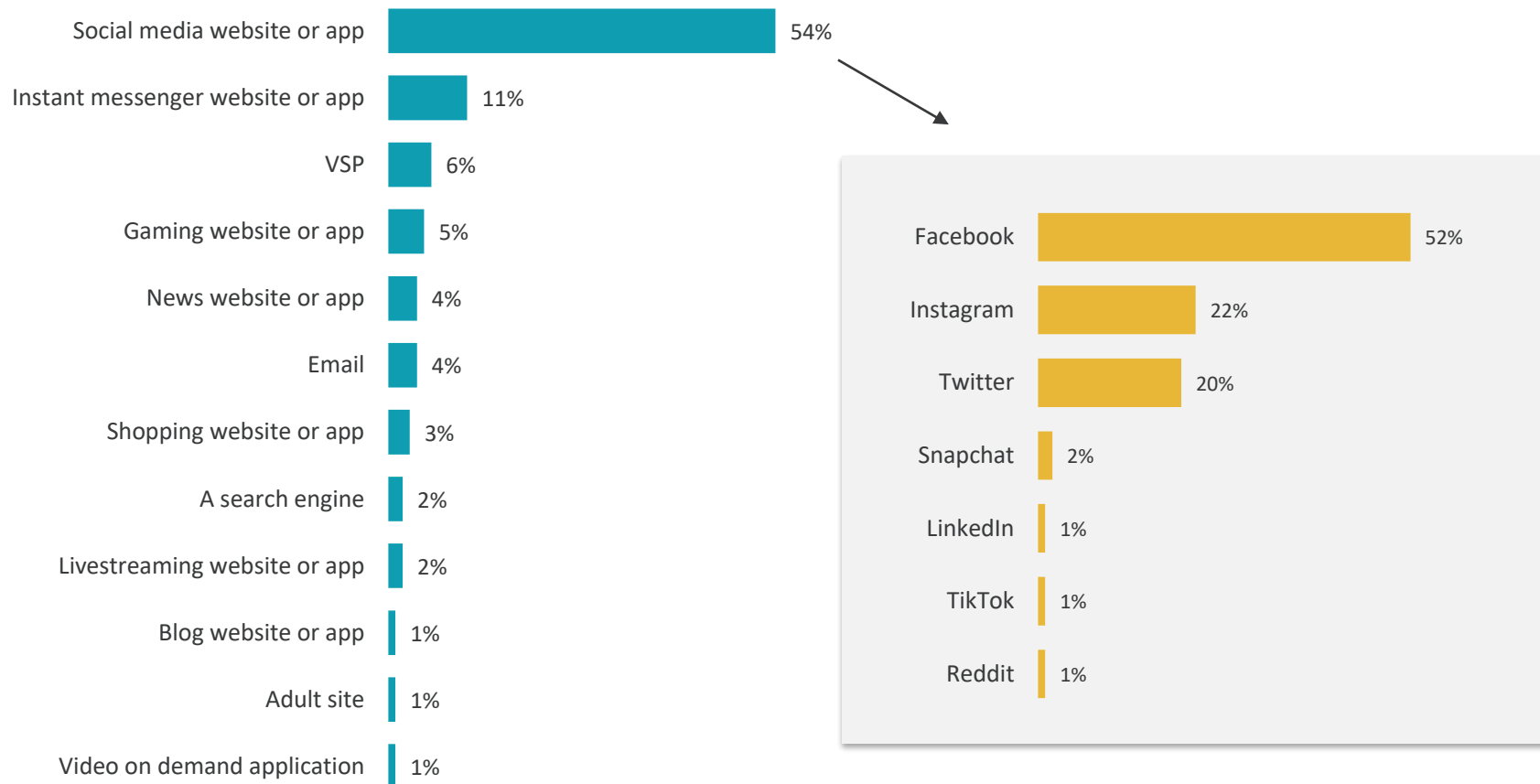
Base: All who experienced at least one content harm most recently in the last four weeks, Wave 1-4 n=880; All who experienced at least one content harm most recently in the last four weeks through a social media website or app, Wave 1-4 n=523

See slide 4 for explanation of VSPs and social media



## While content harms were more prevalent on Twitter than Instagram, contact harms were experienced equally across the two platforms

Most prevalent site types and sources for **contact** harms specifically:



Source: Pilot Online Harms Survey

Q9. What type of site or service were you using when you experienced ...?

Q12. Which social media website or app were you using when you experienced ...?

Base: All who experienced at least one contact harm most recently in the last four weeks, Wave 1-4 n=546,; All who experienced at least one contact harm most recently in the last four weeks through a social media website or app, Wave 1-4 n=295

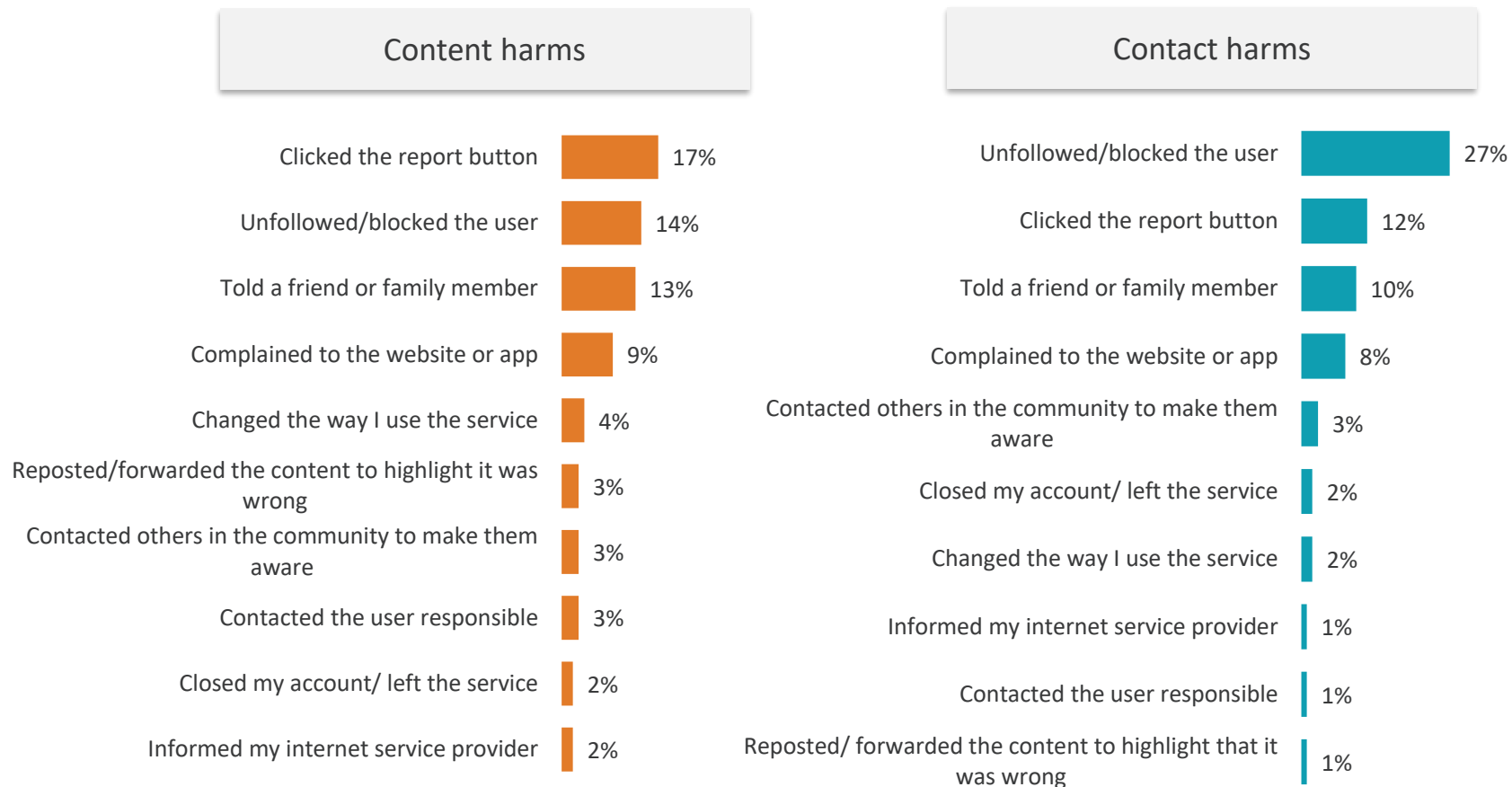
See slide 4 for explanation of VSPs and social media

# Section 5

## Actions taken

## Those who experienced contact harms were more likely to unfollow or block the user, while those who experienced content harms were more likely to click the report button

Top actions taken after seeing content or contact harms (top 10):



Source: Pilot Online Harms Survey

Q19. When you saw ... on that occasion, which of the following actions did you take, if any?

Base: All who experienced at least one content harm most recently in the last four weeks, Wave 1-4 n=880, All who experienced at least one contact harm most recently in the last four weeks, Wave 1-4 n=546

## Among those who did not take action after they were exposed to the harm, the top reason cited was belief that it would not make a difference

Top barriers to taking action against content or contact harms:



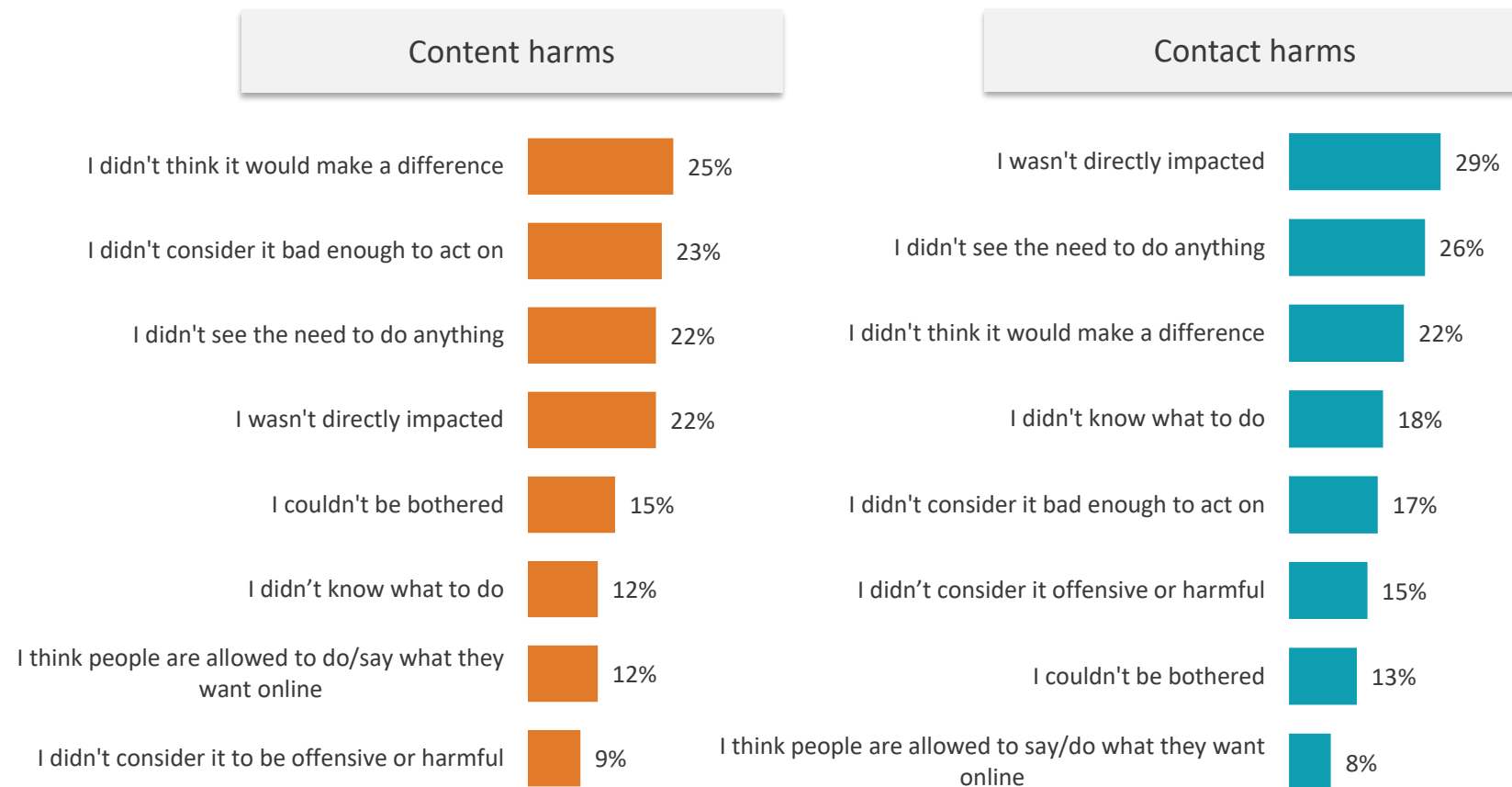
Source: Pilot Online Harms Survey

Q20. You mentioned you did not take any action. Why was this?

Base: All who experienced at least one content or contact harm most recently in the last four weeks and took no action, Wave 1-4 n=627

## Users who experienced contact harms were more likely to cite *not being directly impacted* as a reason for not taking action, when compared to content harms

Top barriers to taking action against content or contact harms:



Source: Pilot Online Harms Survey

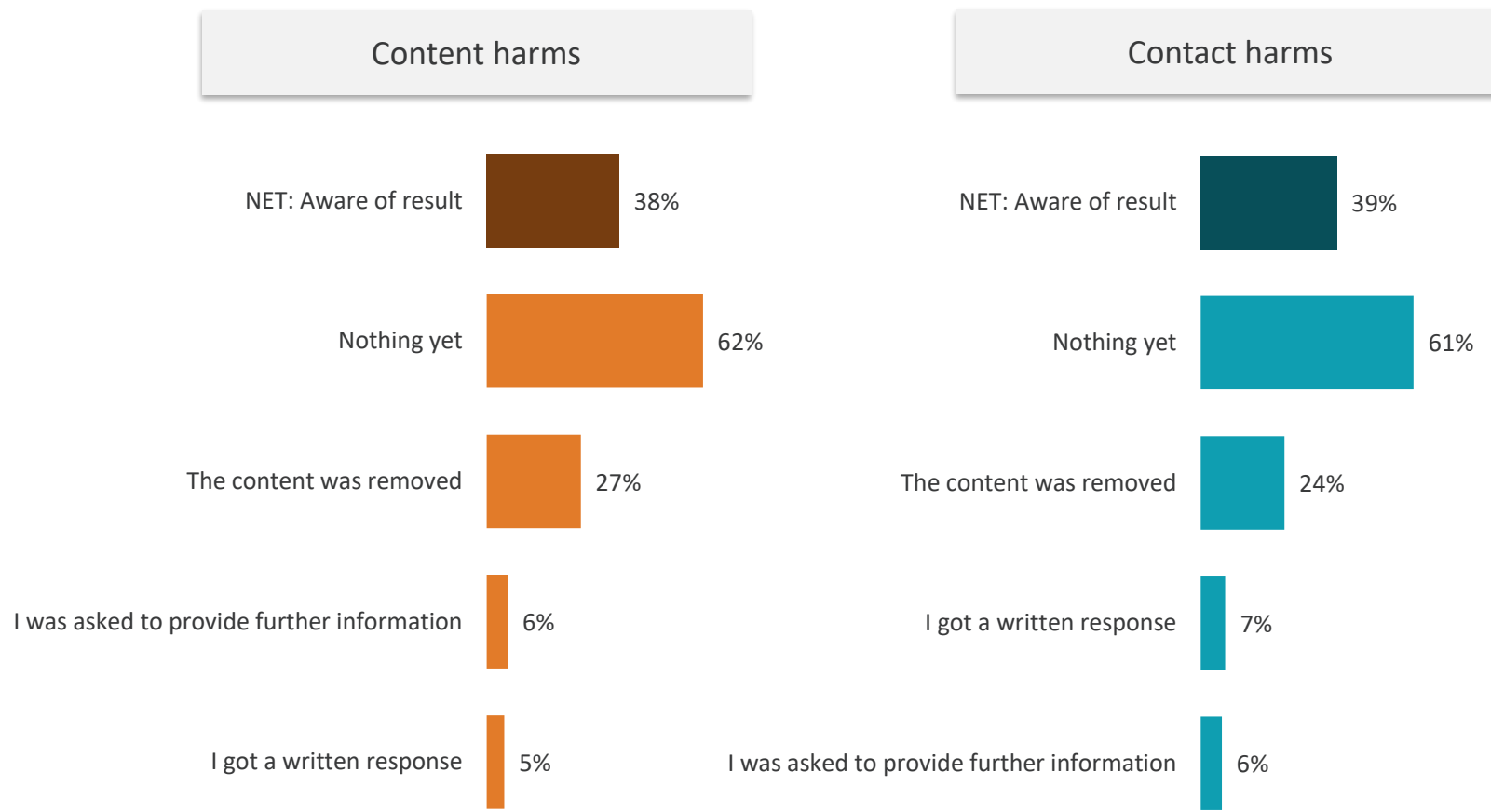
Q20. You mentioned you did not take any action. Why was this?

Base: All who experienced at least one content harm most recently in the last four weeks and took no action, Wave 1-4 n=395; All who experienced at least one contact harm most recently in the last four weeks and took no action, Wave 1-4 n=232

## The outcomes of reporting were consistent across both content and contact harms, with nearly two in five claiming to be aware of the result

Result of reporting content or contact harms:

\*Reporting included reporting to the website or app, the police, Ofcom, another regulator, the ICO, or their internet service provider.



Source Pilot Online Harms Survey

Q21. You mentioned you reported the .... What happened as a result?

Base: All who experienced at least one content harm most recently in the last four weeks and reported it, Wave 1-4 n=236, All who experienced at least one contact harm most recently in the last four weeks and reported it, Wave 1-4 n=119