

The impact of Covid-19 on Women and NB
internet-users navigating digital spaces in Covid-19.

A data analysis from Italy and the UK

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Methodology

On September 18th 2020 we launched an online survey with 10 questions aimed at women and non-binary people. The survey was shared through GenPol's social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn) and further promoted via the social media accounts of GenPol staff. Followers were invited to share it.

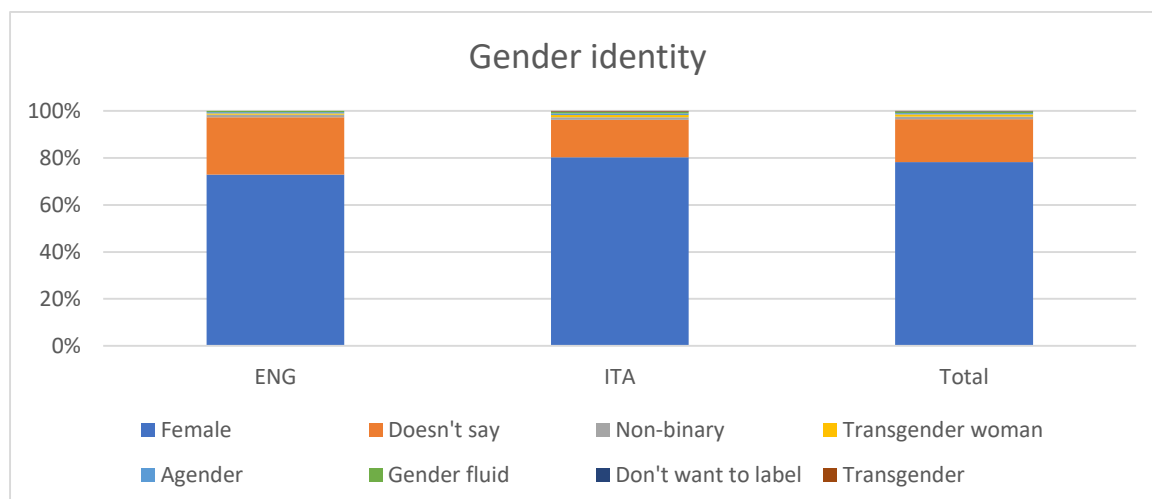
For this reason, the sample is not representative of the wider population and the results cannot be generalised. However, they still provide invaluable insight into the motivations and online experiences of women and non-binary people during the pandemic.

The survey was compiled using open Google Forms and was open for several months, but most responses coming in early in September and October. The survey was offered in Italian (469 complete responses) and English (173 responses). A few respondents who identified as male (cis and one trans) were excluded, alongside a handful of respondents who wrote gibberish or aggressive, inconclusive comments, or took the survey more than once.

Some questions have open-ended answers. This allows us to gather genuine opinions and more nuanced insights. To analyse the results, we coded the data into different categories where possible and created numerical scores to assign individual responses to each category.

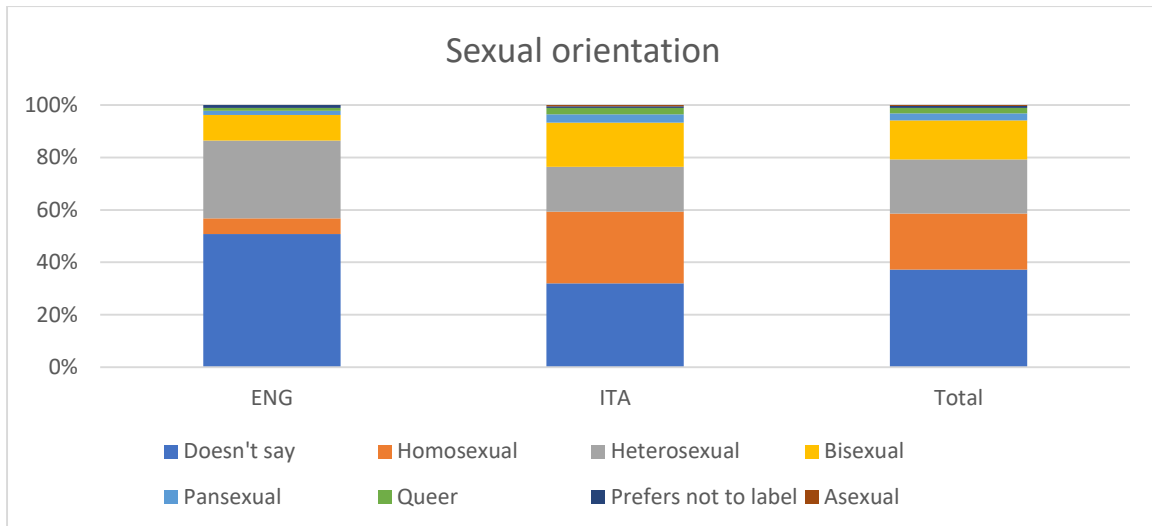
Sample overview

78% of respondents identify as female or woman. 18% prefer not to say and the remaining 3% identify with different gender identities, such as non-binary, agender and gender fluid.





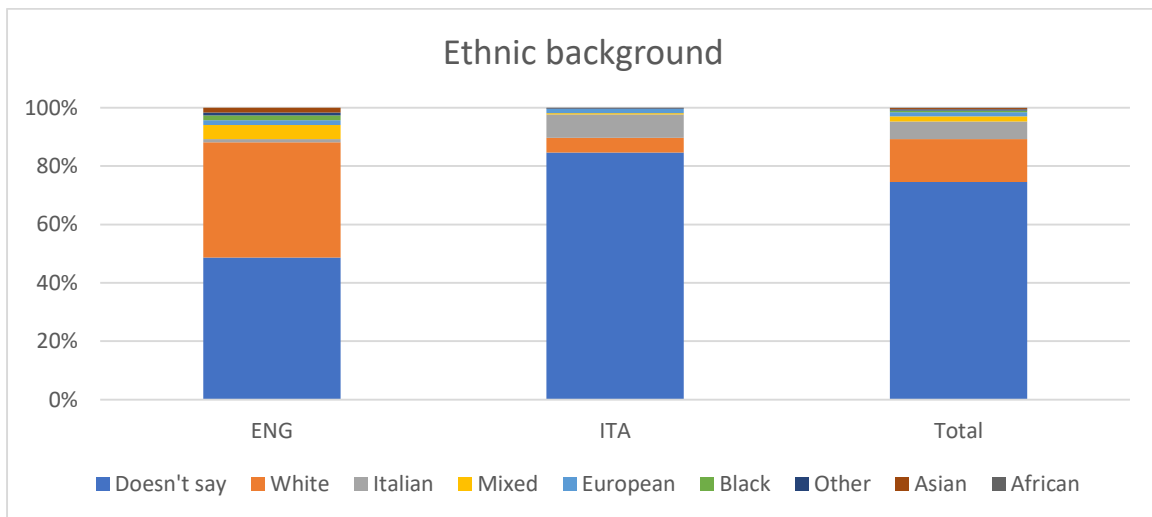
There is a wide range of responses in terms of sexual orientation. 21% of the overall sample identify as gay or lesbian – the percentage is significantly higher in the Italian sample, as a result of the channels through which the survey was distributed. Another 21% say that they are heterosexual and 15% are bisexual. 37% of the sample don't mention their sexual orientation or decline to answer.





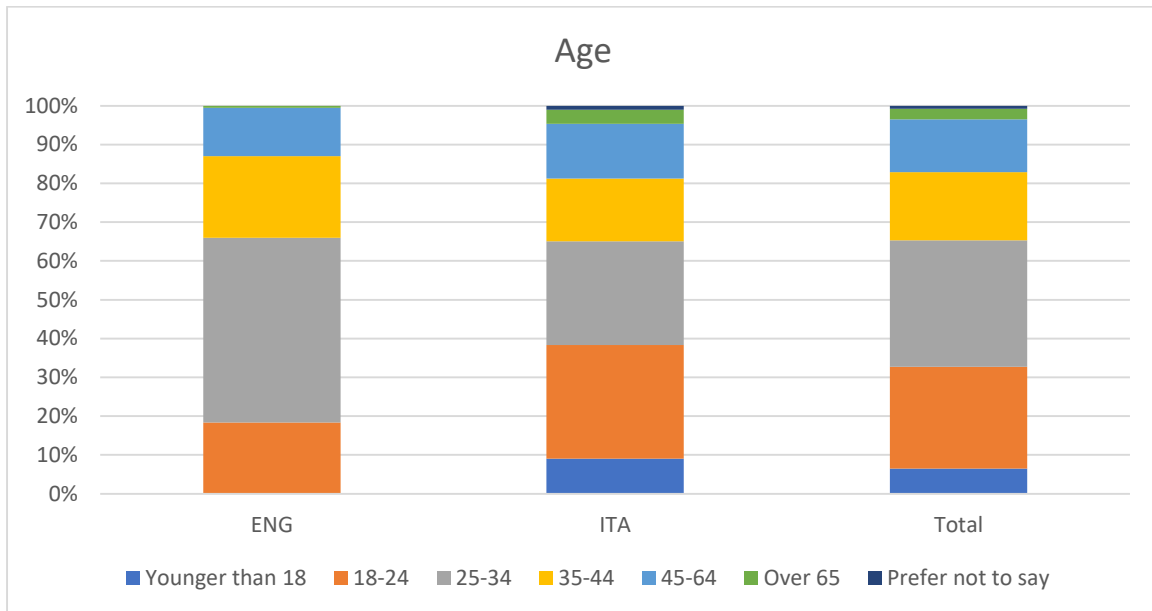
The majority of respondents don't state their ethnic background, in the Italian survey in particular. In Italy, the general public is not used to a standard classification of ethnicity and race and in fact, the public is not used to the concept of ethnic background. As a result, some respondents simply say 'Italian', 'Western' or 'European'. Based on the wider population it could be assumed that they mean White or Caucasian.

If we extend the same logic to respondents who answer the question but only mention their religious background (see below), we can assume that non-White people are under-represented in this survey. Note that we use the term non-White here instead of BAME or BIPOC despite its problematic, White-centring connotation. Not all non-White people identify as BAME or BIPOC, and whilst acknowledging that we don't yet have inclusive language that encompasses the nuances of ethnic and racial identity, we choose to focus on the fact that what these respondents have in common is that they are not White.



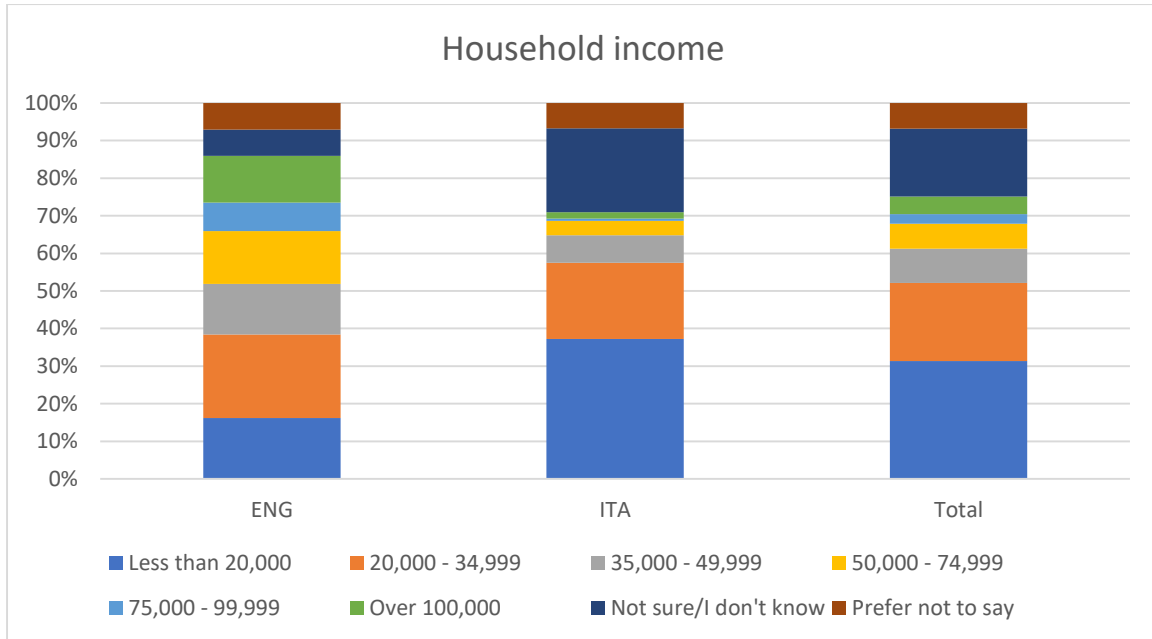


The sample is skewed towards younger demographics. About 65% of the sample is under 35, with the Italian survey also garnering 10% of responses from young people under the age of 18.





Italian respondents have much lower household income – nearly 40% report earning less than 20,000 euros per household per year – and have a much higher proportion of ‘Not sure’. Once again, the proportion of ‘Not sure’ is not surprising as the general public is less used to standard income categories for e.g. census purposes.

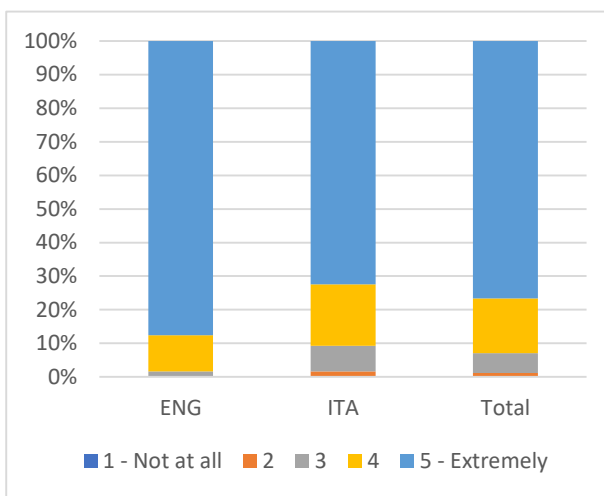
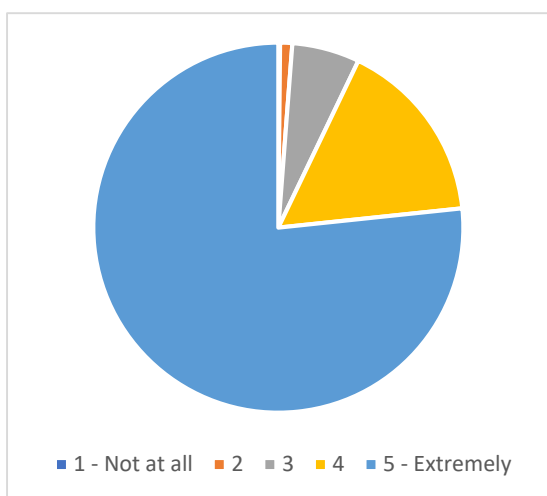




How important is Internet access in your life?

Next, we look at the results of the key questions about the internet and digital gender-based violence.

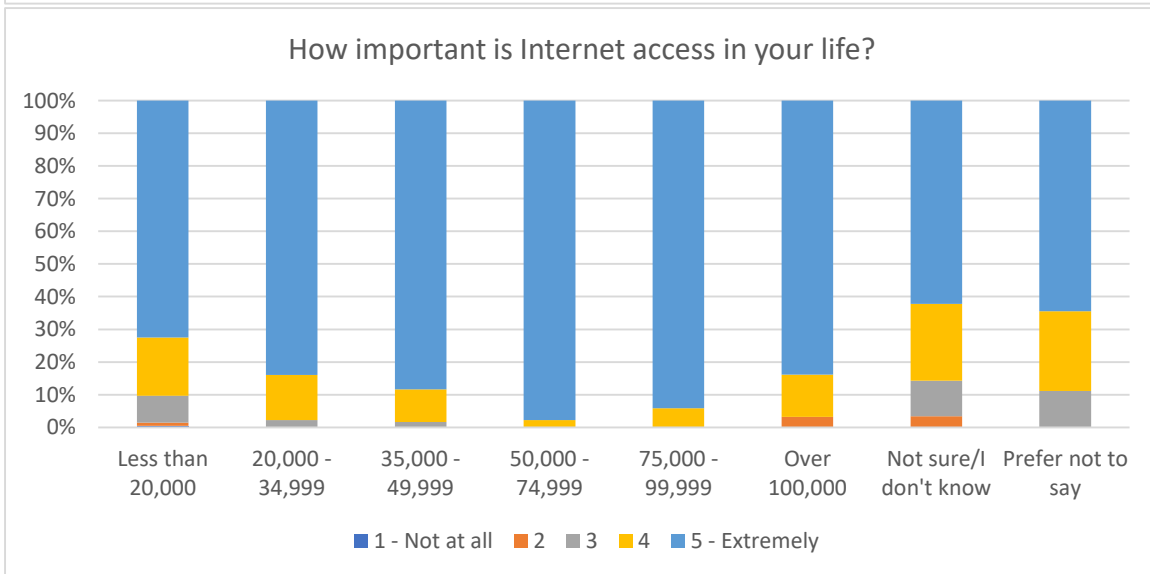
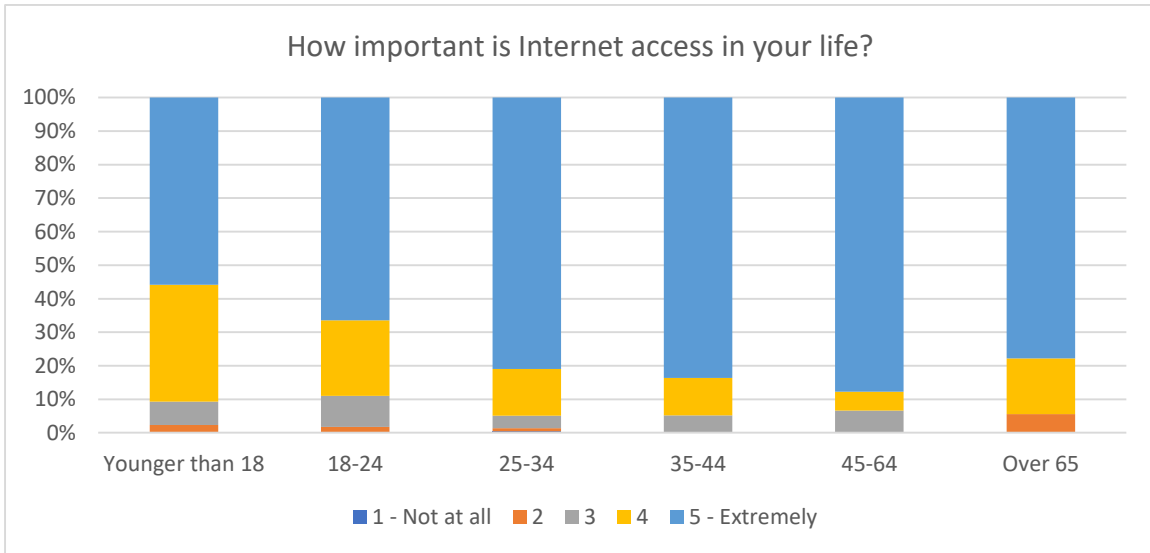
For the vast majority of respondents, access to the Internet is very important or extremely important (93%). It is slightly more important among respondents to the English survey compared to the Italian survey.





The degree of importance is the highest among adults from 25- to 64-year-old. This is perhaps surprising, given the common perception that young people are more digitally connected.

However, the same degree of importance is found among people with high household income, which contextualises the previous result, as more mature adults are more likely to have higher income.

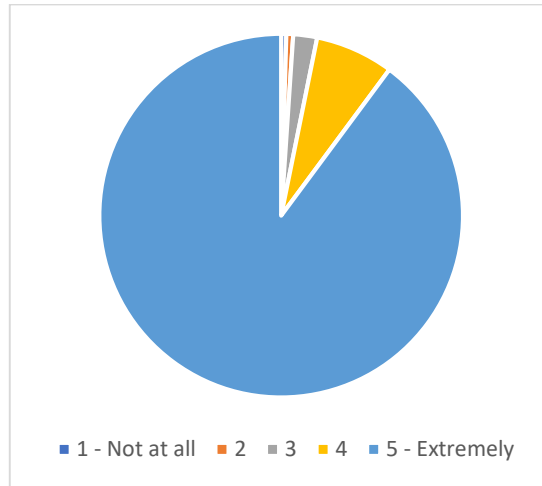




How important has Internet access been to you during the COVID-19 lockdown?

The importance of Internet access gets even higher in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns.

90% of respondents think it has been *extremely* important. As a result, there is little difference by language, age and income, reflecting that even people for whom Internet access was slightly less important, have had to rely on it more during the pandemic.

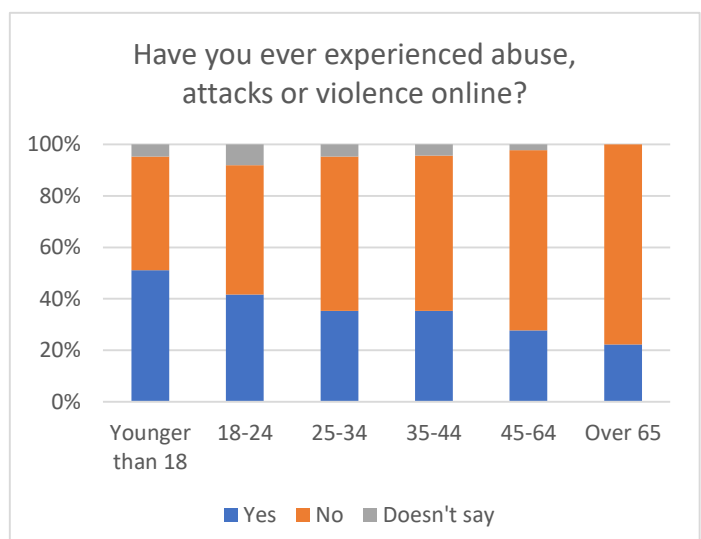
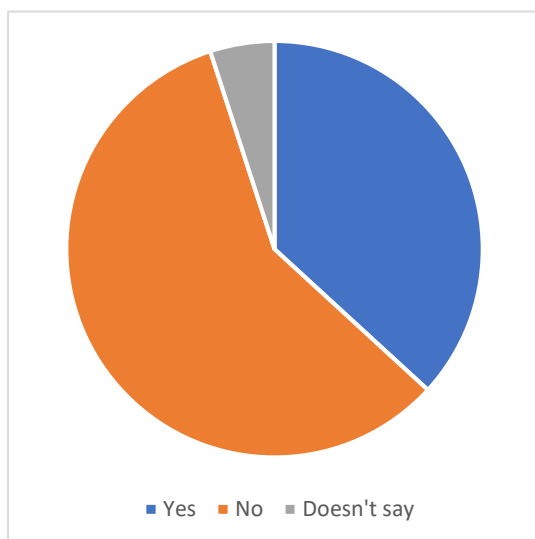


Have you ever experienced abuse, attacks or violence online?

37% of respondents have experienced abuse, attacks or violence online, which we will define as 'digital gender-based violence' (DGBV). 58% have not, and 5% doesn't say.

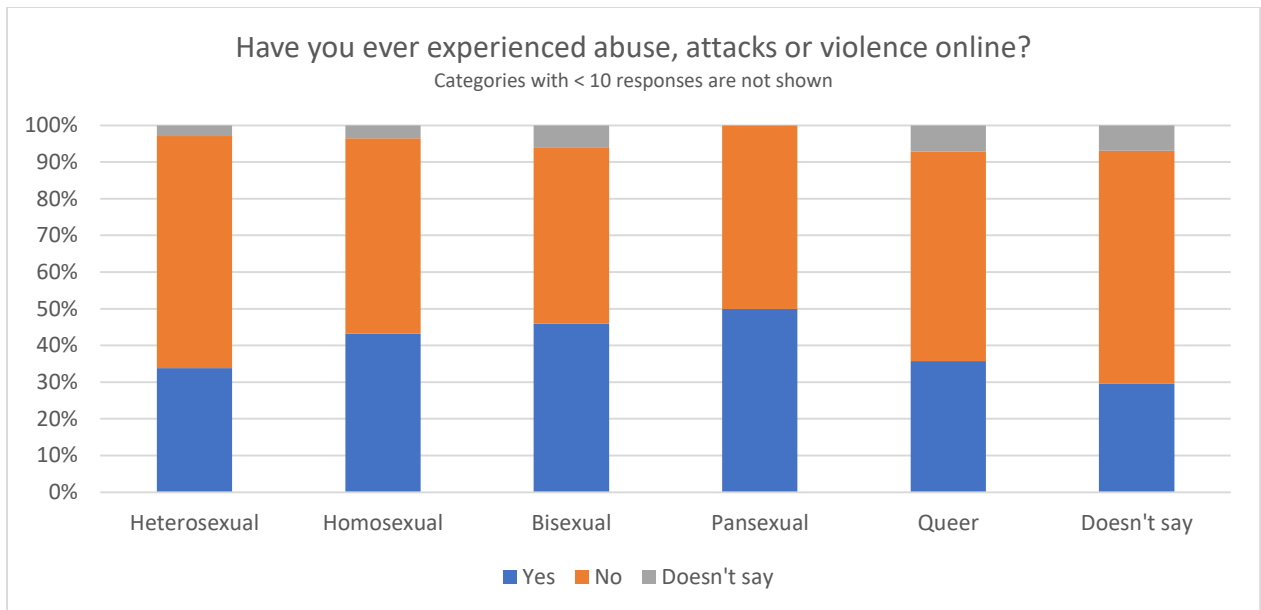
Note that this question was introduced by a warning that answering was completely optional, so not to trigger respondents or put them in any danger.

Despite a similar degree of importance of Internet access, the likelihood of experiencing DGBV is significantly higher for younger people. That is up to 50% of Under 18s and 40% of 18-24s.





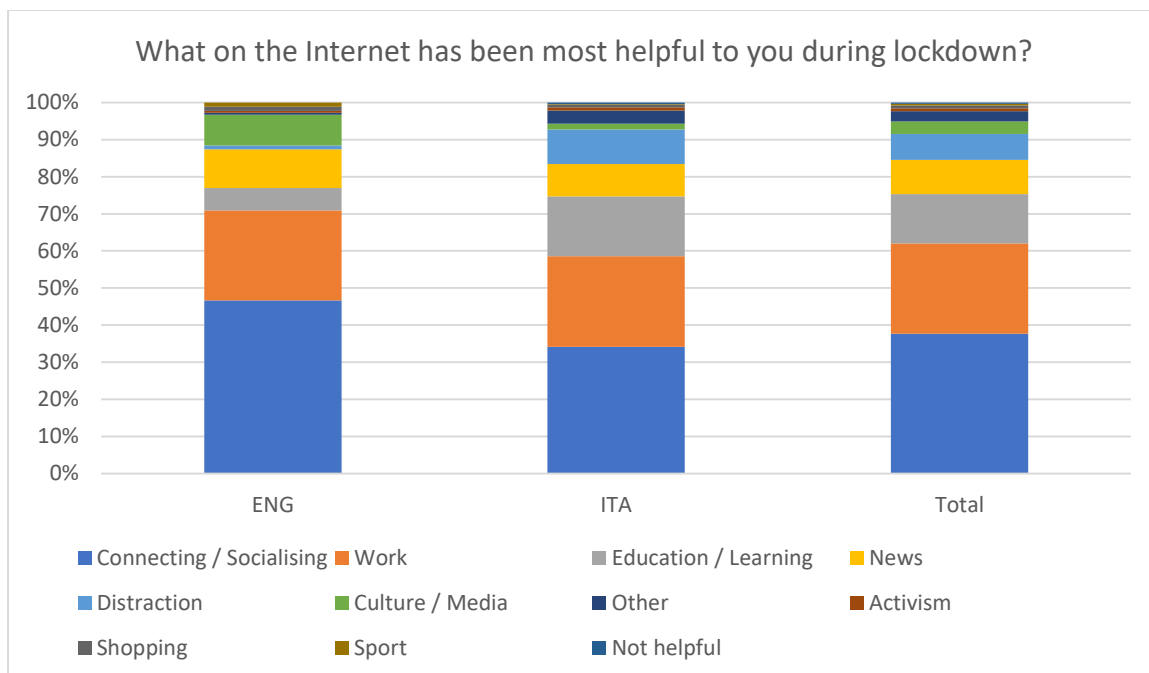
There is some correlation by sexual orientation, with non-heterosexual people reporting higher degree of DGBV but still – heterosexual people report quite a high level of exposure to DGBV (30%).



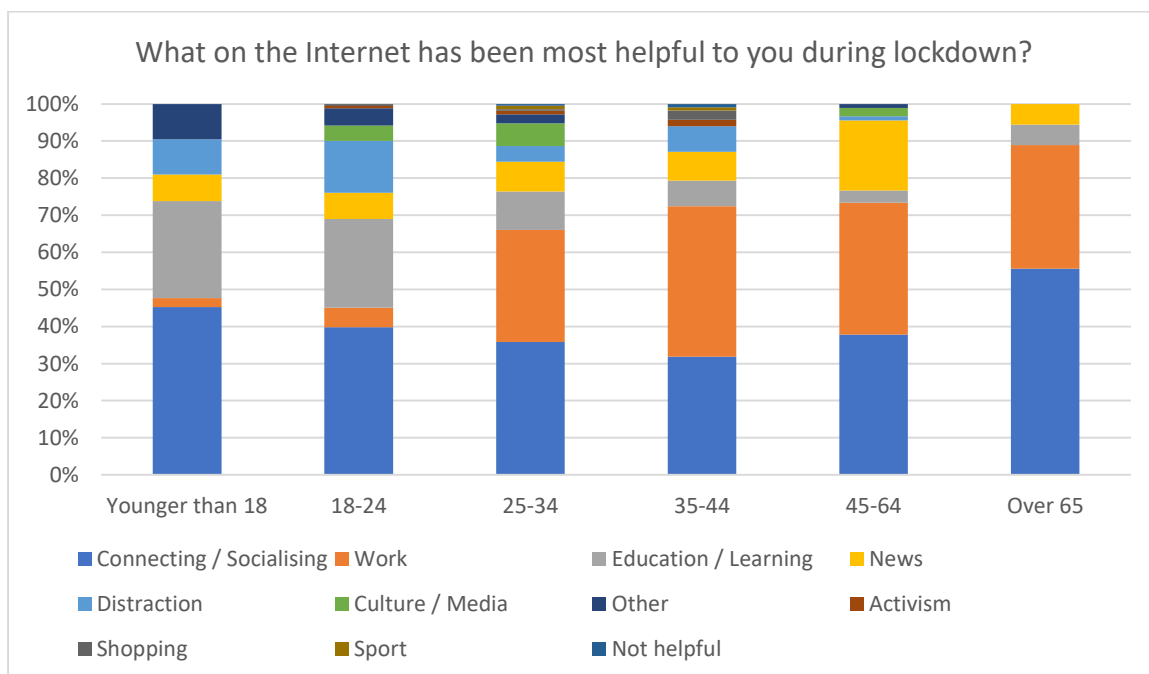
What on the Internet has been most helpful to you during lockdown?

Connecting with other people and socialising with family and friends (for free, over a long period of time) have been the most helpful activities the Internet has enabled.

More people have used for education and learning new things in the Italian survey compared to the English one – a reflection of the higher proportion of Under 18s among Italian respondents and of prolonged school closures throughout the pandemic.



Activities change by age. For 35-44 year-olds, work overtakes connecting and socialising. Only a small percentage of people say that the most helpful way they have used the Internet was to read or watch the news.



And what has been lacking, or has been most frustrating?

There was a wide variety of responses to this question – too many to categorise neatly into a chart.



Many report poor wifi connection, slow bandwidth, lack of internet access for certain communities and lack of tech skills. *“My internet connection is very poor and often I had to study in a shared space with the rest of my family”*. A few highlight the issue of targeted ads, algorithms and lack of privacy.

A high number relates to the lack of empathy, sense of general frustration and hate in social media comments and communities. *“Common decency and lack of awareness, understanding, and compassion pertaining to social issues on social media”*. *“Not being able to speak about things openly without fear of attack, people seem even more aggressive and abusive than normal”*. This highlights the duality of the relationship with social media – which are key to enable social connection, and at the same time fail to provide a safe place for social interaction.

Many respondents complain about lack of reliable news sources, and how to distinguish between real and fake news. *“fake news and the way social media has exacerbated the spread of misinformation risking people’s lives”* This is particularly interesting, considering that the Internet has increasingly become a key source of information, sometimes replacing conventional media like TV and newspapers. This reflects a general sense of uncertainty and frustration that politicians have arguably failed to redress throughout the pandemic.

Others comment about the fact that spending so much time online caused a sense of being overwhelmed, overexposed and pressured to always be online, e.g. while working from home. *“feeling consumed by social media and online news media”*.

Finally, a few mention the lack of specific resources e.g. children activities or access to journals. *“Not knowing how to perform tasks which would allow me to keep working with my customers.”* In particular, lack of free resources is a problem.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about the Internet you'd like to see in the future as a tool of self and collective empowerment?

Overall, respondents highlight a need for more regulation and control measures, for example:

- Blocking violent content, e.g. [TikTok challenge videos](#)
- More control and regulation for cyber crimes and online abuse, trolling, hate speech
- Training and education on how to keep safe online
- Measures to contain the spread of fake news
- Enforcing more balanced and inclusive language

They also identify an issue of accessibility and a need to improve Internet connection for all. Accessibility is also identified through the need of free resources, e.g. webinars, articles.

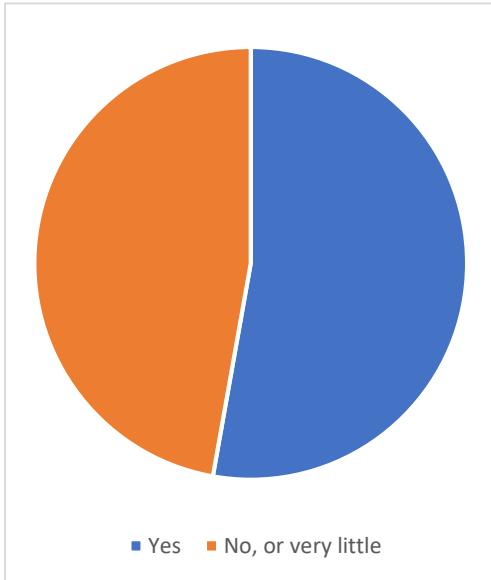
They also highlight the importance of facilitating connections even further and connecting with people. Perhaps this is not separate to the need to guarantee more safety online.

Remote working and studying, and learning in general, are seen as a positive – something that wouldn't be possible without the Internet. Ads and re-targeting are seen as limitations because they narrow the scope of what is presented to things that we already know and like.



Do you take any precautions when you're online?

Only about 50% of respondents say they take precautions, e.g. changing passwords, when online.



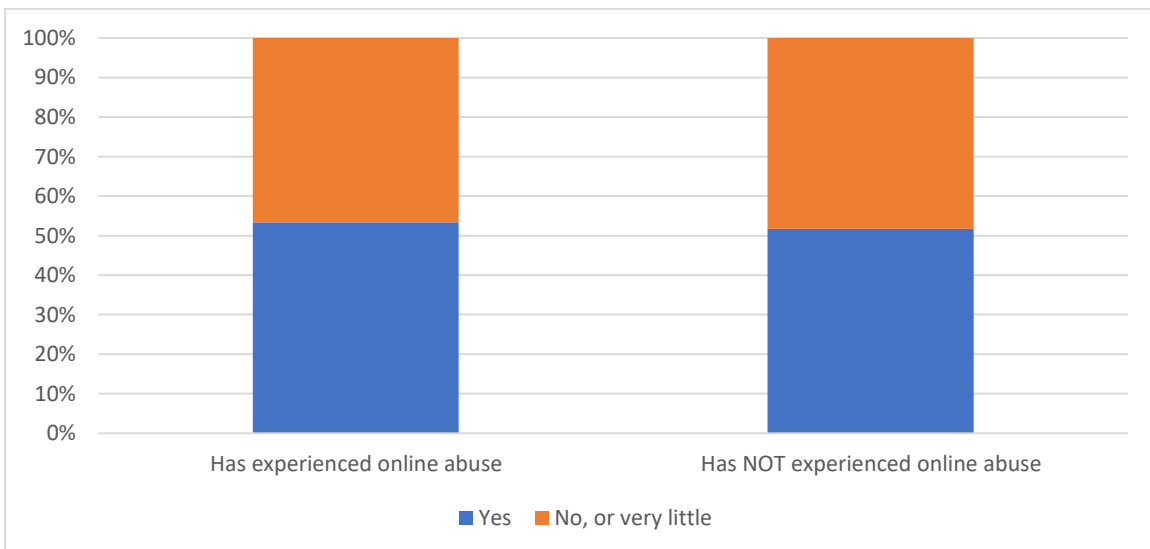
Updating passwords, keeping them safe, not using the same password for every account, longer and more secure passwords are the most common precautions.

A few respondents rely on additional technical security measures, such as VPN, antivirus, firewalls, not accepting cookies, private browsing and ad blockers.

Interestingly, some mention avoidance as a precaution, i.e. avoid commenting on a very political article, or avoid sharing too much of their personal life.

A handful of respondents cover their webcam with blue tape.

Perhaps surprisingly, those who report having experienced online abuse are not necessarily more likely to take precautions, compared to those who haven't experienced it. This could be due to a lack of knowledge as to what precautions are effective or available, or a lack of trust that those precautions actually work, e.g. ad blockers.

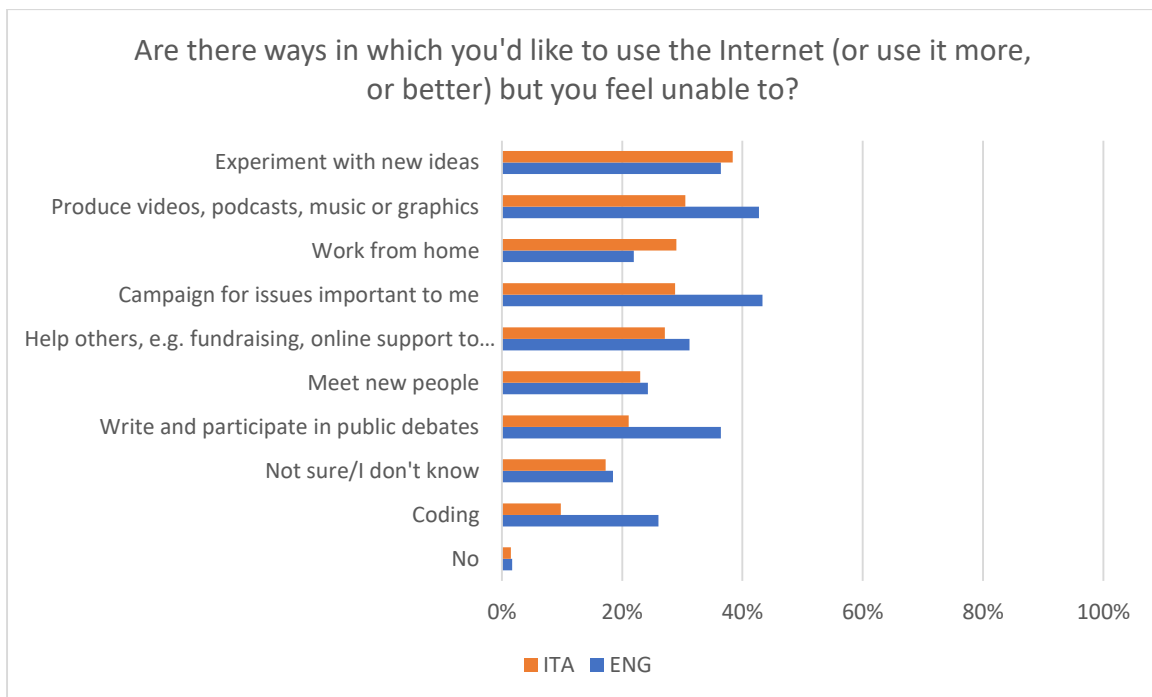




Are there ways in which you'd like to use the Internet (or use it more, or better) but you feel unable to?

Experimenting with new ideas, producing content and campaigning are among the activities that respondents would like to use the Internet more for.

English-speaking respondents are keener to use it for coding/programming and participating in public debates.



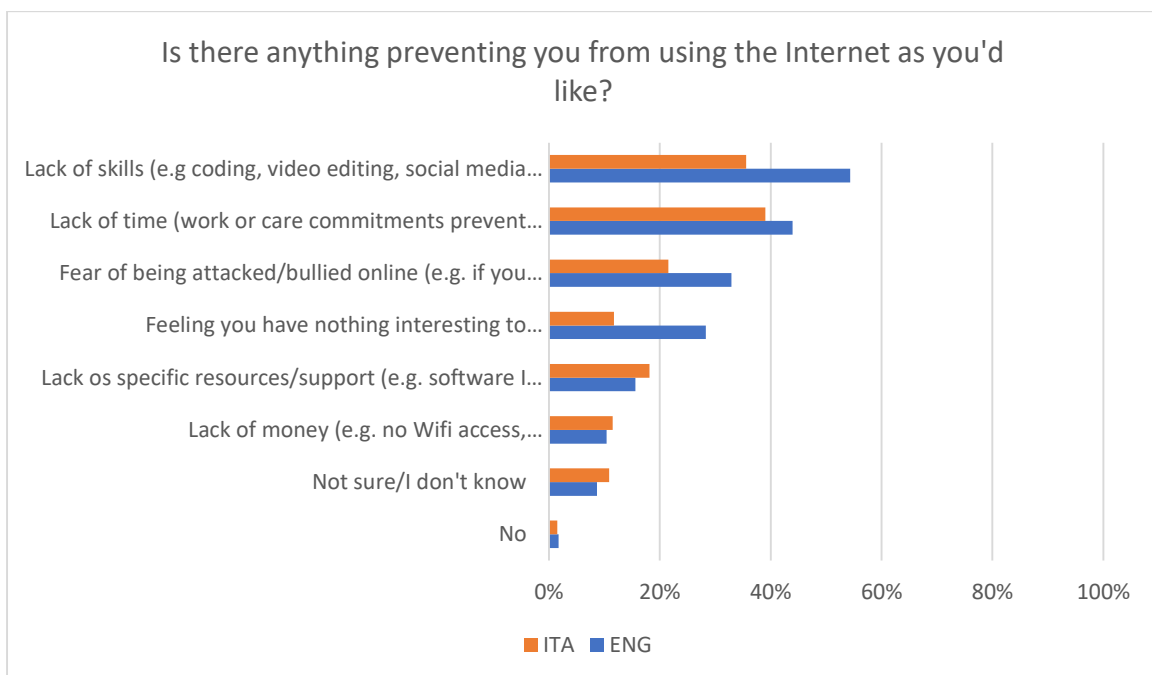


Is there anything preventing you from using the Internet as you'd like?

Lack of skills and lack of time are the main reasons preventing people from using the internet as they would like.

Fear of being attacked and feeling you have nothing interesting to say are more prevalent among English-speaking respondents.

Fear of being attacked/bullied online is relevant for 33% of EN respondents and 22% of ITA respondents.





Are there aspects of the Internet that make you feel unsafe/concerned?

Having passwords or personal images and materials stolen and being attacked for expressing your opinion are primary concerns (55-60%), followed by having your account hacked. This highlights deep concerns about privacy and a sense of helplessness with regards to online crime.

Italian-speaking respondents are more concerned about online scams (59%) and children and young people you care about being exposed to violent and inappropriate material (56%). What accounts for the discrepancy between the two surveys? Why are English-speaking respondents (primarily based in the UK) less concerned about these activities?

English-speaking respondents are more likely to worry about the fact that social media platforms own your data and know a lot about you (70%), that tech companies have access to your location and preferences (61%), and the manipulation of political opinions (57%). This difference is likely a result of the media coverage of scandals, such as Cambridge Analytica.

