

Social media: Jekyll or Hyde?

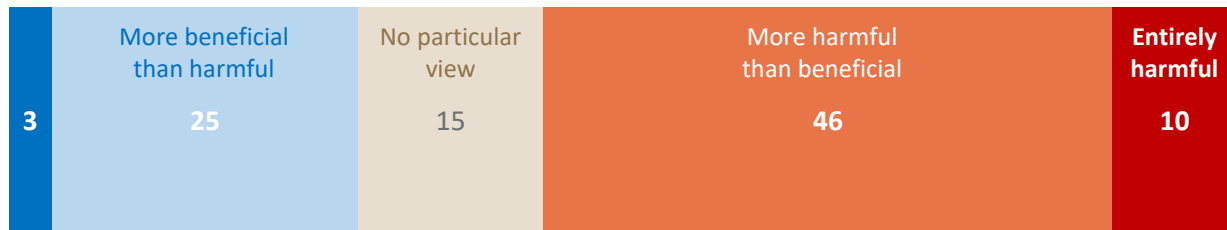
Australian views about the benefit vs. harm of social media



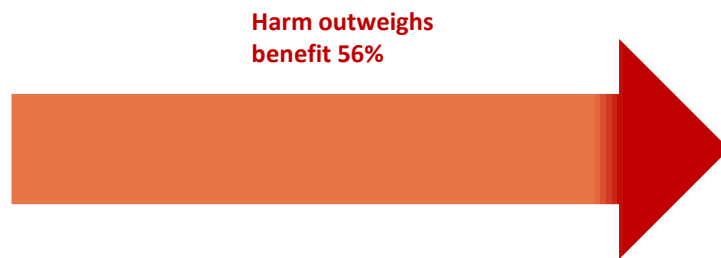
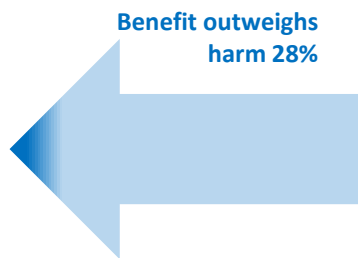
Social media's impact on society: beneficial or harmful?

Now a question about **social media** – in particular, whether social media has **a beneficial or harmful impact on society** in general. Overall, do you think social media's impact on society is...?

%



↑
Entirely beneficial



- Australians tend to regard social media as being like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde:
 - nearly everyone (75%) believes social media has some benefit to society
 - yet, nearly everyone (81%) believes it is harmful to society in some way.

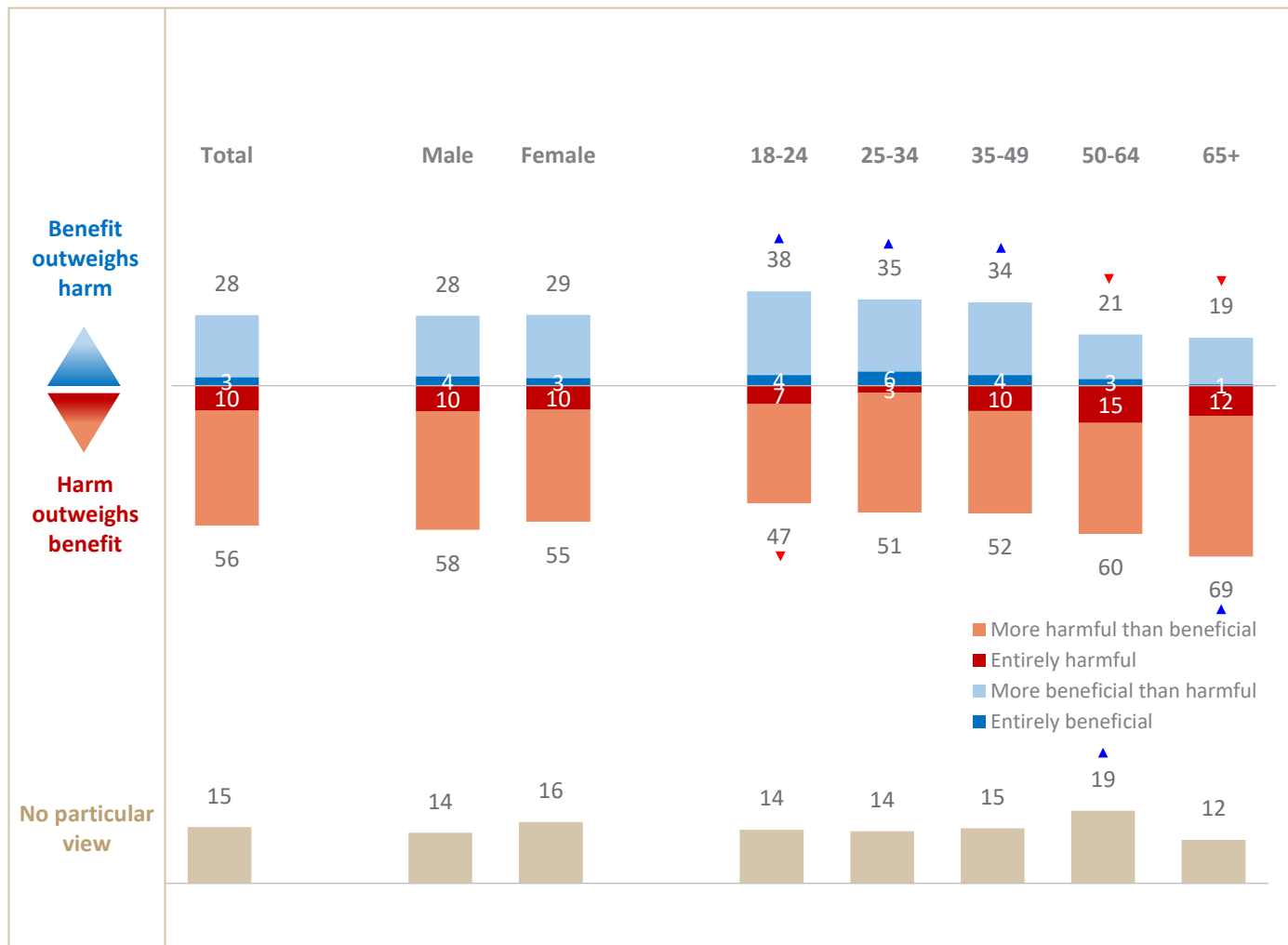
- However, when it comes to the **balance** of benefit vs. harm, those who believe its impact is more harmful than beneficial, 56%, substantially outweigh those who feel it is more beneficial than harmful, 28%.

Methodology: Conducted nationally online among 1,257 people aged 18+. Fieldwork was conducted over the period February 10-15, 2022. Results were post-weighted to reflect the population distribution for age, sex, area and education.

Base: Total sample (n= 1,257)

Social media's impact on society: beneficial or harmful?

- Perhaps not surprisingly, people in older age groups over 50 are more critical of social media.
- Yet even among those aged 18-24 and 25-34, more believe that the societal harm caused by social media outweighs its benefit than vice versa.



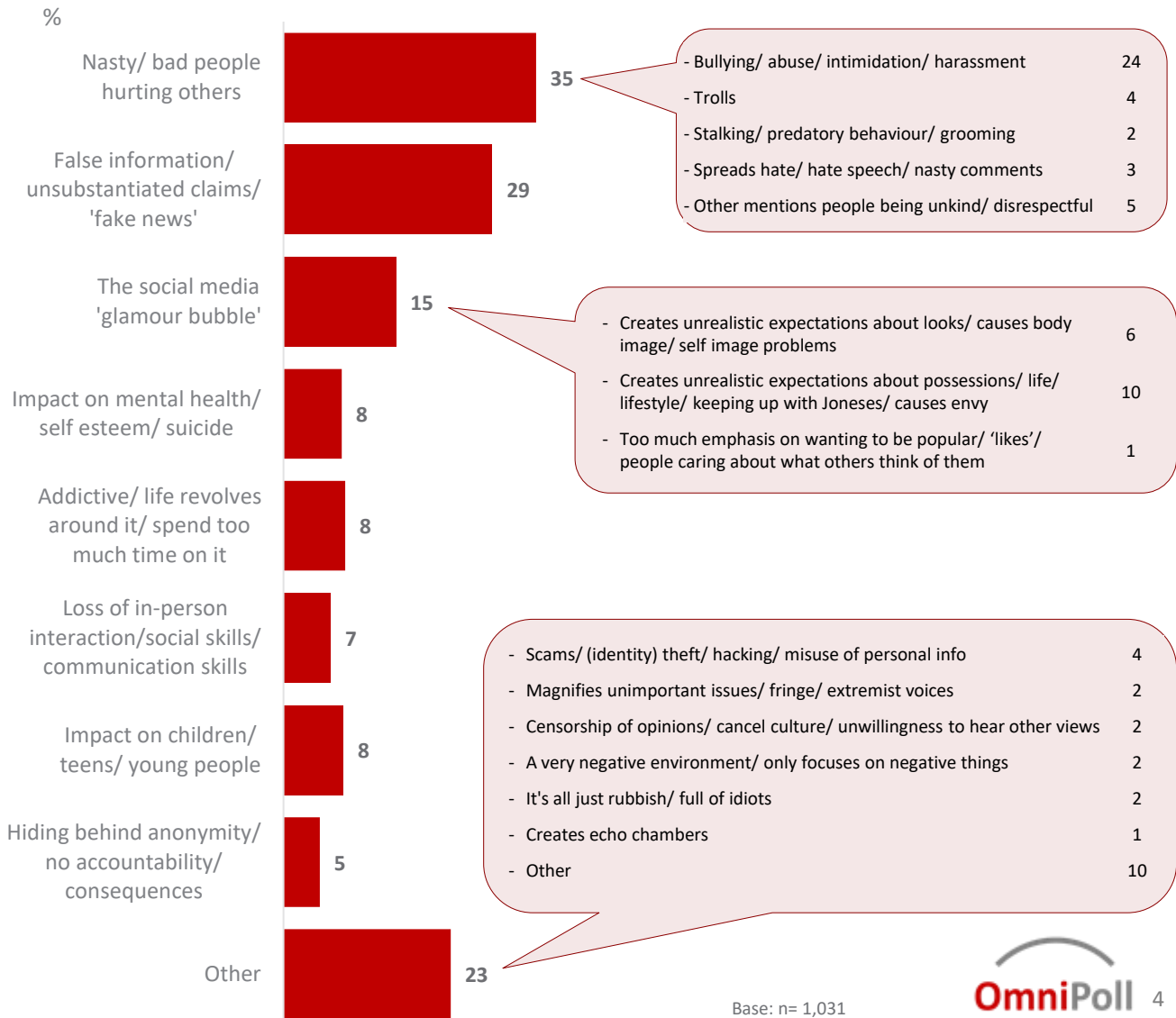
▲ ▼ Significantly higher / lower than others

Base: Total (n= 1,257); Males (n= 625); Females (n= 632); 18-34 (n= 155) 25-34 (n= 236); 35-49 (n= 302); 50-64 (n= 338); 65+ (n= 226)

Ways social media has a harmful impact on society (*unprompted*)

In what ways do you think social media has a harmful impact on society?

BASE: THOSE WHO BELIEVE SOCIAL MEDIA HAS A HARMFUL IMPACT

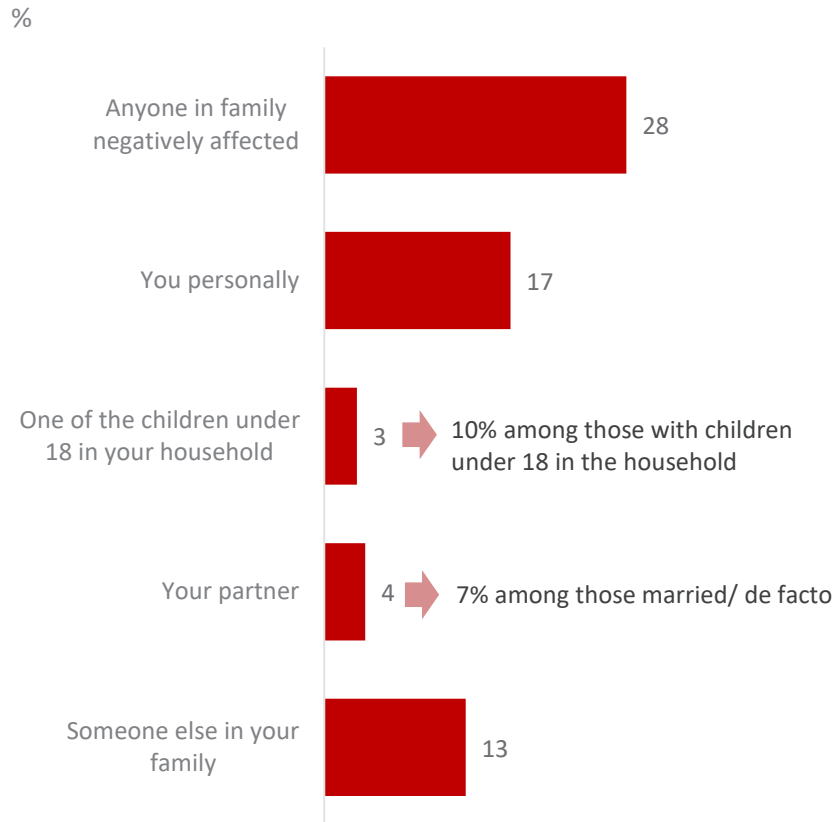


Base: n= 1,031

- So, what's the problem? When asked, people offer a variety of ways they believe social media has a harmful impact on society – embracing both *causes* and *effects*.
- The two most common themes are:
 - nasty/ bad people hurting others, including everything from bullying and trolls to stalking and hate speech;
 - spreading false information and unsubstantiated claims.
- Then comes what might be called the social media 'glamour bubble', with posts creating unrealistic expectations about the way people should *look* (leading to body image problems) or about the possessions/ lifestyle people should *have*.
- Along with body image problems, some raise other effects on mental health, self esteem or even suicide – which may be connected with any of the above issues from bullying to unrealistic expectations.
- And the list goes on...addiction to social media; loss of in-person interaction; impacts on children; 'cowards' hiding behind anonymity with no accountability; scams; cancel culture...*the lot*.

Family experience of negative impact from social media posts

Have **you**, or **anyone else in your family** ever been **negatively affected** by comments or images **posted on social media**?
IF YES: And which of these people in your family have been **negatively affected** by comments or images **posted on social media**?

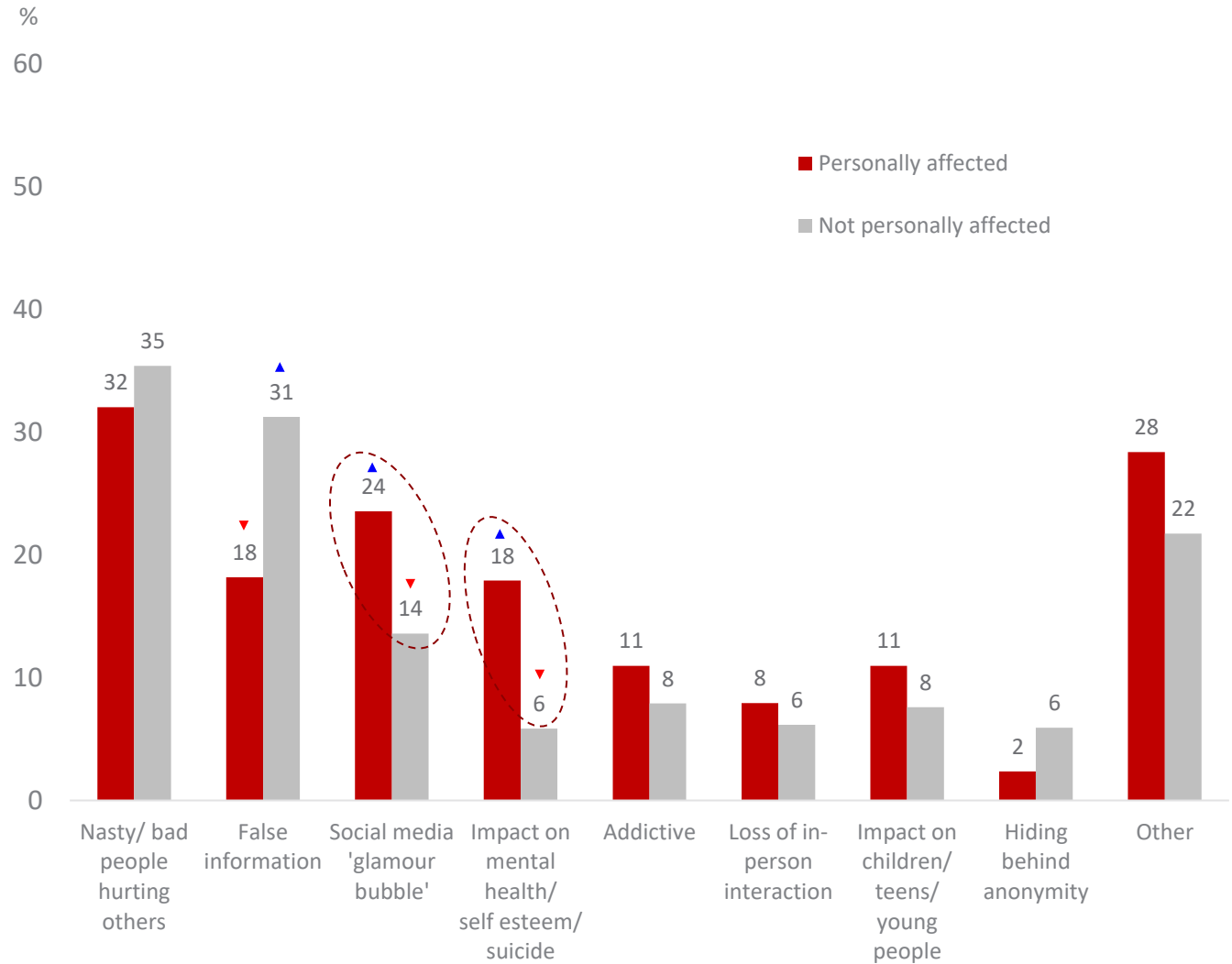


Base: Total sample (n= 1,257)

■ Around 30% of people claim that a member of their family has been negatively affected by comments or images posted on social media, including 17% who say they have been **personally** affected.

■ Of course, this only includes the harms of which people are aware and can report. It's entirely conceivable that others are being affected in ways they do not perceive – for example through an addiction to social media or effects on their self image.

Perceptions of harm vs personal experience of harm



▲ ▼ Significantly higher / lower than others

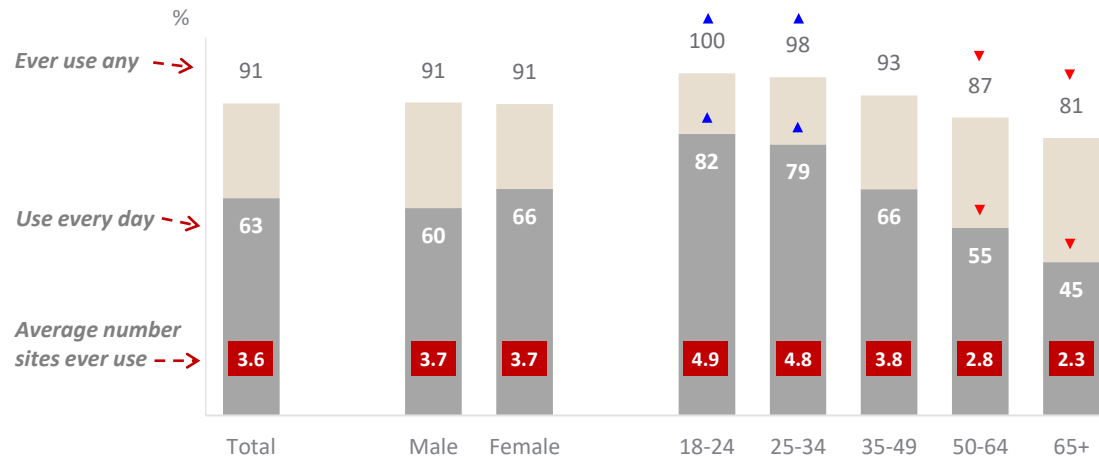
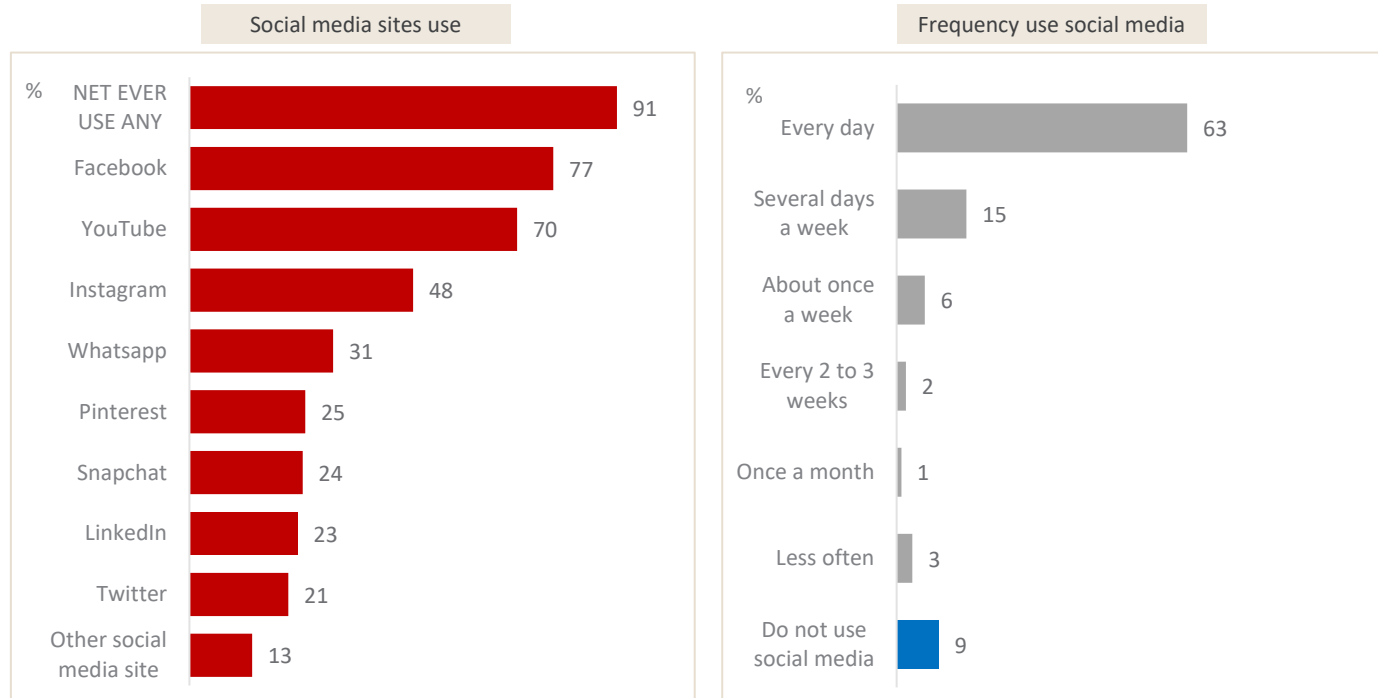
Base: Those believe social media has harmful impact: Personally affected (n= 203); Not personally affected (n= 828)

- Those who have *personally* been harmed by social media posts, are more likely to cite the 'glamour bubble' and impacts on mental health/ self esteem among the ways social media causes harm – which *may* reflect their own experience.
- These same issues are also more prominent among feedback from women than men.

Personal use of social media

Which of these social media sites do **you personally visit or use**, either regularly or occasionally?
In general, about **how often** do you personally visit or use **any social media site**?

- Despite the harms people believe are caused by social media, nearly everyone uses it, even if only very occasionally.
- Around 90% visit or use at least one social media site, be it Facebook, YouTube, Instagram or one of several others. This includes around 60% who say they use social media *every day*.
- And it's not only young people using it: almost 90% of people aged 50-64, and 80% of people aged 65+ say they use social media at least occasionally.
- Younger people, however, particularly those under 35, use it more frequently, and typically visit/ use a wider variety of sites.
- Obviously, because the survey was conducted online, it excludes people who do not use the internet. However, this is estimated to be only 1% of Australian adults¹.



▲ ▼ Significantly higher / lower than others

1. Australian Media and Telecommunications Authority (ACMA), December 2021

Where to next?

- If social media is so harmful, why do so many people use it? Well, it's undeniable that social media provides personal utility to vast numbers of people (though some might simply be addicted to it). It's certainly not all bad.
- It's also true that 'only' 17% of adults say they have *personally* experienced a negative impact from material posted on social media (though that amounts to around 3.1 million Australians). The vast majority haven't.
- Nonetheless in the court of public opinion, there is a long list of indictments levelled against social media. The fact that these things are not being experienced by a majority of users doesn't make them unimportant.
- Which begs the question: what to do about it? There are no easy answers. Perhaps at least lifting the veil of anonymity from the nasty people inflicting harm others might make them think twice. But easier said than done.