



PUBLIC FIRST

THE INHUMAN INTERNET

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AI is one of the most powerful and transformative technologies of our time. For the vast majority of people and organisations, it is being used for positive, productive purposes, from boosting efficiency and creativity to generating new forms of synthetic media that entertain, inform and educate.

But as with any widely adopted technology, a small minority of bad actors are exploiting AI in harmful ways. Their actions risk undermining trust online, with consequences that extend far beyond the technology itself.

AI is now part of everyday online life

AI-generated content is now a common feature of the online environment for many people. Encounters with AI are frequent, varied, and increasingly visible across different platforms, although experiences differ significantly by age and service type.

- Almost half of UK adults (47%) say they come across AI-generated content every time they go online.
- Over seven in ten (71%) 18–24 year olds report encountering bots, synthetic media or deepfakes in the last year.
- Among those who have encountered AI online, around two thirds (65%) say they have encountered bots, making them the most common form of non-human interaction.

AI is increasingly difficult to spot

As AI tools become more advanced, many people struggle to distinguish between content created by humans and content generated by AI. Mistaking AI-generated content for human-created content is now widespread, and this has clear consequences for online safety and fraud.

- A majority of UK adults (58%) agree that AI-generated content is often hard to tell apart from things made by real people.
- More than two thirds (68%) say they have encountered AI content they initially believed to be real or human but later discovered was not, with 73% of these experiences occurring within the last month.
- Nearly two thirds of UK adults (64%) say that digital scams and fraud have increased over the past year, with many attributing this in part to the rise of AI.

The internet is getting harder to use

The increasing presence of AI-generated content is shaping how people feel about the internet as a whole. Many describe online spaces as less human, less trustworthy and less safe, and report changing how they behave online as a result.

- More than two thirds of UK adults (68%) say they are sometimes or often overwhelmed by the amount of AI-generated content they encounter.
- Over half (53%) say they trust what they see online less as a result of the increase in AI-generated content.
- Four in ten UK adults (40%) say they are using certain online services less because the experience has been damaged by bots and AI-generated content.

The importance of human verification

Alongside these concerns, there is strong public support for measures that could restore trust and clarity online. Many people express a preference for online environments where it is easier to know whether interactions are with real humans, and show openness to tools that would support this.

75%

Three quarters of UK adults (75%) say they would prefer to interact only with verified real people when using online services.

64%

say privacy-preserving human verification would increase their trust in online platforms.

72%

Around seven in ten UK adults (72%) say they would be comfortable with online platforms verifying their humanity to ensure all users are real humans.

AI has quickly become part of everyday life, with many people enjoying its benefits and seeing clear value in how it enhances content, creativity and convenience.

However, the actions of bad actors have begun to erode trust in the internet, prompting growing public concern about scams, authenticity and whether additional safeguards are now needed to protect users.

FOREWORD

Today we already live in a world where we can converse with digital tools that speak in friendly tones, quickly digest complex information into practical guidance and respond with a fluency that can pass, at first glance, for human thought.

No online service is immune from the impact of this technological revolution. Whether the social media services we use to connect with friends and increasingly rely on for news, dating, online retailers, buying tickets, making reservations and increasingly accessing Government services.

This research makes clear, the British public have already noticed something is changing for the worse. The findings here should give pause to anyone who cares about the future of the digital economy. Trust is eroding, not in the abstract, but in ways that are changing how people actually behave.

More than half of UK adults say they trust what they see online less than they did a year ago. More than half have walked away from a purchase because they suspected AI or fraud. Seven in ten are more cautious about clicking links or buying things online.

That's why Tools for Humanity is building proof of human infrastructure that lets people verify they're real without revealing who they are. Anonymous, privacy-preserving, and designed for a world where the line between human and machine has seemingly disappeared.

The public appreciates the importance of this shift. Three-quarters of people say they want to interact only with verified real humans online. Nearly seven in ten would actively use platforms that require human verification.

The impact of AI tools may not always be visible, but it will be there, shaping decisions, framing information, and increasingly mediating our relationships with institutions and with one another. The center of gravity in technology is shifting from devices that amplify human agency to tools that increasingly shape it.

Every major phase of the internet has required new foundations. Payments needed security. Communication needed encryption. Now, in an age where AI can use the same services we do, we need a way to prove humanness. Transparency is not merely a technical preference; it is foundational to trust, accountability, and democratic life.

Nick Pickles
Chief Policy Officer, Tools for Humanity

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

About Public First

Public First is a policy, research, opinion and strategy consultancy. We bring a wide range of expertise and capabilities under one roof - including in-house opinion polling, focus groups and immersive qualitative research, robust data analysis, and a deep understanding of policy and politics.

We work with global companies, governments, start-ups, institutions and foundations around the world to tackle major public policy and strategic challenges.

About This Poll

Tools for Humanity commissioned the public first to poll a nationally representative sample of 2,004 online UK adults between 2nd January - 7th January 2026. The results are weighted by interlocking age & gender, region and social grade to Nationally Representative Proportions

Public First is a member of the British Polling Council (BPC) and the Market Research Society, and abides by their rules.

For more information, contact the Public First polling team:
polling@publicfirst.co.uk.

About Tools for Humanity

Tools for Humanity is a technology company building for humans in the age of AI. Founded in 2019 by CEO Alex Blania and Chairman Sam Altman, the company brings together more than 500 scientists, engineers, creatives, economists and technologists working to ensure that advanced AI serves people and expands access to opportunity.

AI Is Now Part Of Everyday Online Life

The rapid development and deployment of artificial intelligence is increasingly shaping how people experience the internet. 55% of UK adults say they have seen an image, video or audio clip they suspect was AI-generated or fake in the last year.

Advances in generative AI have moved quickly from specialist or experimental use into everyday online environments, meaning that for many users, AI-generated content is now a routine part of their digital lives rather than a novelty. **Almost half of UK adults (47%) report that they come across AI-generated content (including text, images, audio or video) every time they go online.**

This suggests that AI is no longer confined to specific platforms or use cases, but is instead embedded across a wide range of online services and interactions. However, this experience is not felt evenly across the population. Younger users are significantly more likely to report encountering AI-generated content than older age groups.

71%

Over seven in ten (71%) 18–24 year olds say they have encountered bots, synthetic media or deepfakes in the last year.

33%

In contrast, just a third of those aged 65 and above report encountering any of these types of AI.

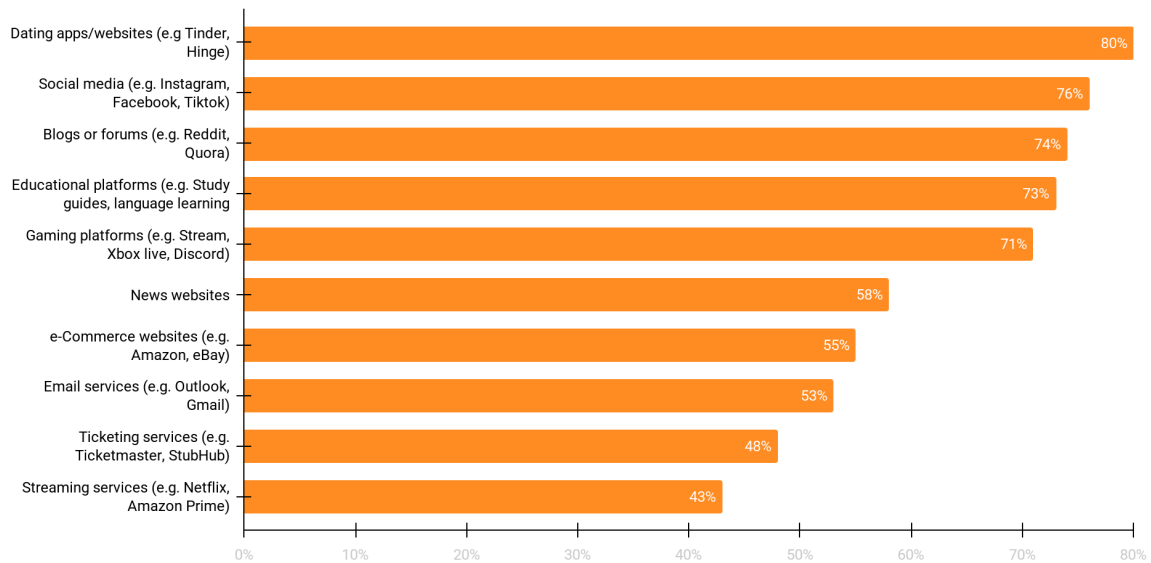
This gap is likely driven in part by differences in online behaviour and platform use, but may also reflect differences in confidence or ability when it comes to identifying AI-generated material.

When asked about specific forms of AI encountered online, bots emerge as the most commonly experienced type of non-human interaction. Among those who have encountered AI online in the last year, around two-thirds of respondents (65%) say they have encountered bots, making them more prevalent than either synthetic media (42%) or deepfakes (41%).

Across the board, people are encountering AI more often than just two years ago, though the degree to which this happens varies dramatically by platform:

Compared to 2024, for each of these online services, do you encounter AI (either bots, synthetic media, AI generated text or deepfakes) more often?

Base: Users of these online services



Different forms of AI-generated content appear to be more prevalent in different online contexts, reflecting how these technologies are being deployed in practice:

- **AI-generated text:** Users of educational platforms are the most likely to report encountering AI-generated text, with over a third (37%) saying they have seen this type of content. This likely reflects the growing use of generative AI tools in learning environments, including for study support, content generation and automated feedback.
- **Bots** are most commonly encountered on gaming platforms, where three in ten users (30%) report exposure. This is consistent with the long-standing presence of automated accounts in gaming environments and online communities.
- **Synthetic media** is most frequently reported on dating apps, where around one in five users (19%) say they have encountered this form of AI-generated content, suggesting its use in profile creation or interaction within these services.
- **Deepfakes** are most closely associated with social media platforms, although at lower overall levels, with one in ten users (10%) reporting exposure. While less prevalent than other forms of AI content, their presence on social media reflects the role of these platforms in the rapid circulation of visual and audio material.

While some forms of AI, such as bots, are already well established and widely recognised, others are emerging more subtly across different platforms, contributing to a growing sense that online spaces are increasingly shaped by automated or synthetic activity.

This is reflected in how people describe the rise of AI online. When asked to select words that capture their perception of AI's growth, respondents are most likely to characterise it as "unavoidable" (41%) and "growing" (40%).

The public is increasingly experiencing the internet as a space where non-human content and interactions are becoming more prominent. While this shift is most visible among younger users and on particular platforms, it is increasingly a shared feature of the online environment as a whole.

AI Is Increasingly Difficult To Spot

Most of the public struggle to distinguish between AI and humans online.

As artificial intelligence becomes more prevalent across online services, it is also becoming more advanced and harder for users to detect. Improvements in the quality and realism of AI-generated content mean that the distinction between content created by humans and content generated by AI is increasingly blurred, shaping how people experience the internet.

A majority of UK adults (58%) agree that AI-generated content is often hard to tell apart from things made by real people, and that this is making their experience of the internet feel less human.

Mistaking AI-generated content for human-created content is now a common experience among the UK public. A large proportion say they have encountered AI content online that they initially believed to be real or human, but later discovered was not, and for many this has happened recently.

2 in 3

68% of UK adults have encountered AI content online that they perceived to be real/human but later discovered not to be.

73%

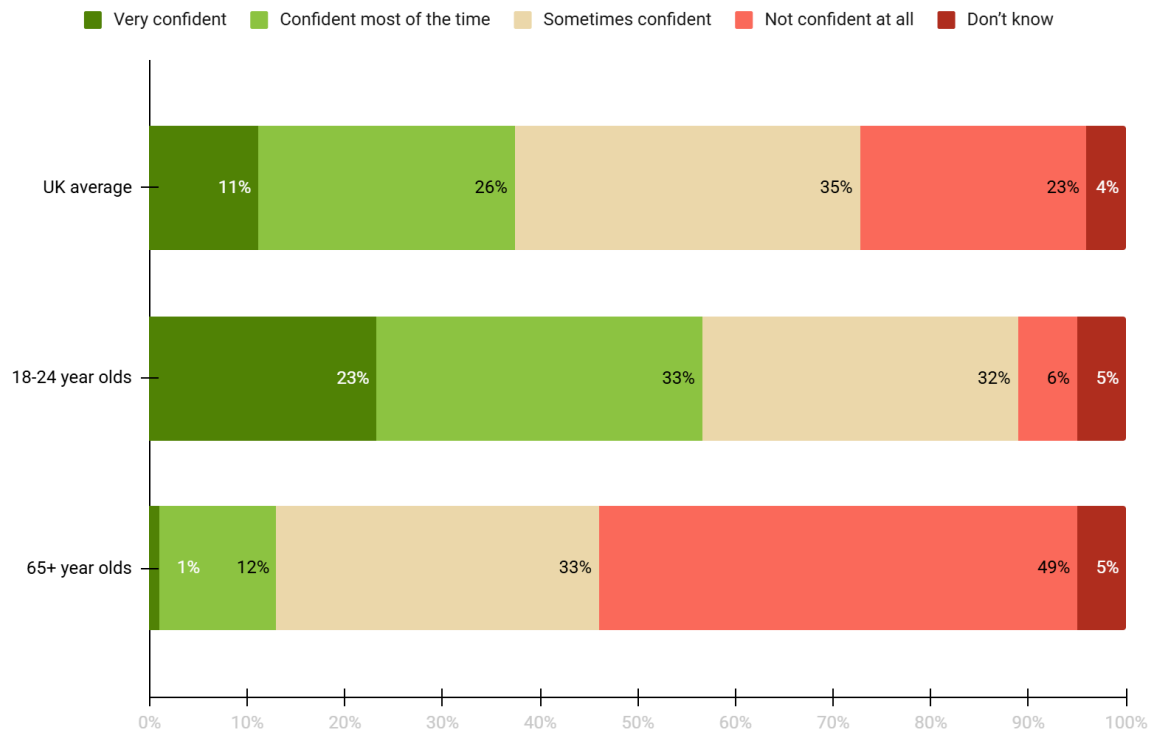
of those who have mistook AI generated content for human generated content, have done so in the last month.

There are substantial differences by age in how people report these experiences. Older respondents are much more likely to say they have never been fooled by AI-generated content. Six in ten (61%) people aged 65 and over say they have not experienced this, compared to just 11% of those aged 18–24.

This gap could exist for various reasons. It could reflect genuine differences in exposure, as older users tend to spend less time online or use services such as streaming platforms where AI-generated content is less visible. However, it may also indicate differences in awareness or confidence when it comes to recognising AI-generated material.

Self-reported confidence provides some support for the latter explanation. When asked how confident they feel in their ability to identify AI online, older Brits are significantly less confident than younger users.

Which of the following statements best apply to your perceived ability to identify AI online?



This has led to a rise in online scams.

The increasing difficulty of distinguishing AI-generated content from human-generated content has had clear consequences for online safety and fraud. As AI tools are used to create more convincing messages, images and listings, people report encountering deceptive or misleading content more frequently across a range of online activities.

Four in ten UK adults (41%) say they are noticing AI-generated or fake product listings more often when shopping online. This points to the growing use of AI in e-commerce scams, including misleading listings, impersonation of legitimate sellers, and the creation of realistic but fraudulent product descriptions.

This trend is getting worse, 53% say the number of e-commerce websites using AI has increased and **nearly two thirds of UK adults (64%) say that digital scams and fraud have increased over the past year.**

55%

of UK adults say they have received a message or call they believe was AI-generated to trick them.

1 in 3

35% said they encountered an AI scam online over the month of December, with 6% saying that they fell victim to it.

These experiences have real-world consequences. Our polling shows that AI-enabled deception is already translating into tangible financial harm for a significant minority of the population.

1 in 4

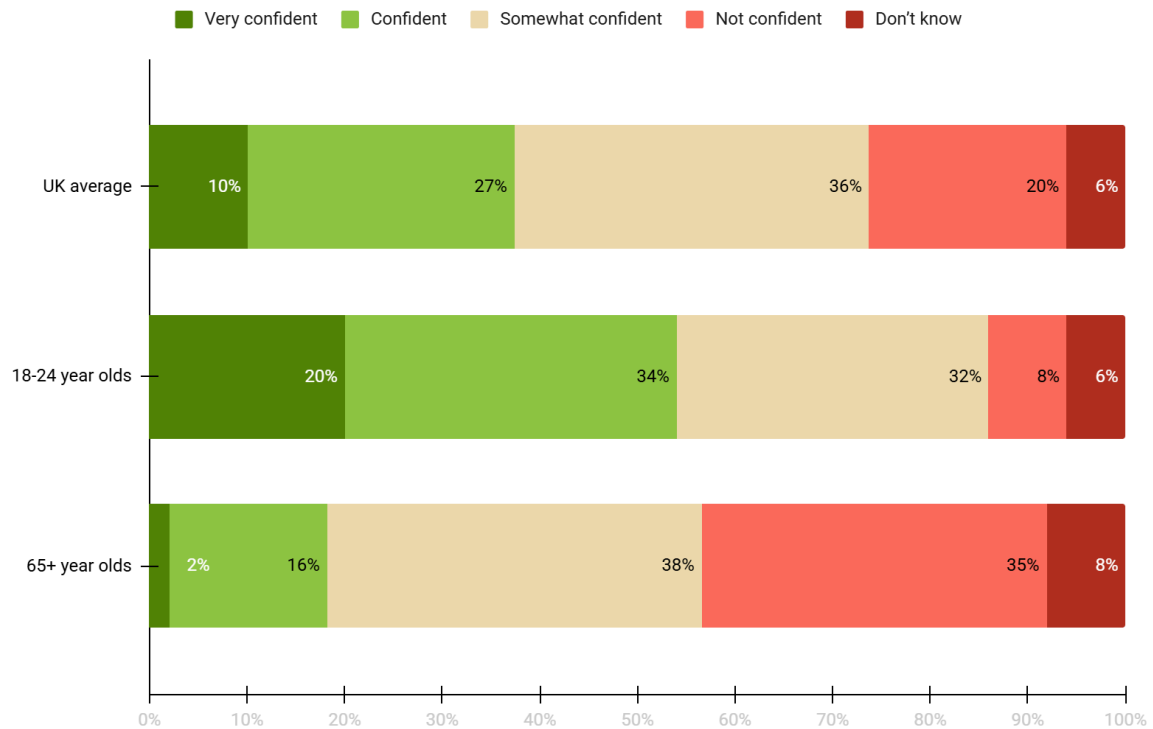
27% of UK adults say they or someone they know lost money because of an online scam or misleading content that they believe may have used AI.

47%

This rises to nearly half (47%) among brits aged 25-34.

Brits are not confident that they can avoid these AI-enabled scams. The majority of UK adults say they are not confident in identifying and avoiding attempted fraud, organised scams or spam emails using AI. As with confidence in identifying AI content more broadly, responses vary notably by age group.

How confident do you personally feel in identifying and avoiding attempted fraud, organised scam or spam emails using AI?



Looking ahead, the public expects these challenges to intensify rather than ease. 68% of UK adults think that with the rise of AI, the volume of scams, fraud and spam emails will increase. Over a third of UK adults (37%) believe that AI will make attempted spam and fraudulent activity much easier for criminals to run scams. By contrast, only 4% believe that AI will make it easier for law enforcement to detect and stop scams.

The Internet Is Getting Harder To Use

The internet feels less human and less safe.

Many people feel that their experience of the internet is worsening. As AI-generated content has become more widespread, users increasingly describe online spaces as harder to navigate and less centred on genuine human interaction.

This shift is increasingly described using the term “**enshitification**” — a phrase that has gained traction in recent years to describe how online services deteriorate over time as quality, trust and user experience are eroded. Originally coined in tech policy debates, it has entered mainstream use as people recognise familiar patterns: platforms becoming noisier, less reliable and more extractive, often at the expense of genuine human interaction.

More than two thirds of UK adults (68%) say they are sometimes or often overwhelmed by the amount of AI-generated content they encounter when using the internet. Alongside this, a majority feel that AI is changing the nature of online interaction itself.

58%

of UK adults think **online conversations feel less personal** or more manufactured because of AI.

38%

of UK adults say their **online interactions feel less genuine** now than a year ago. This rises to 44% among those aged 65+.

These changes appear to be closely linked to falling levels of trust online. Over half of UK adults (53%) say they trust what they see online less as a result of the increase in AI-generated content.

74%

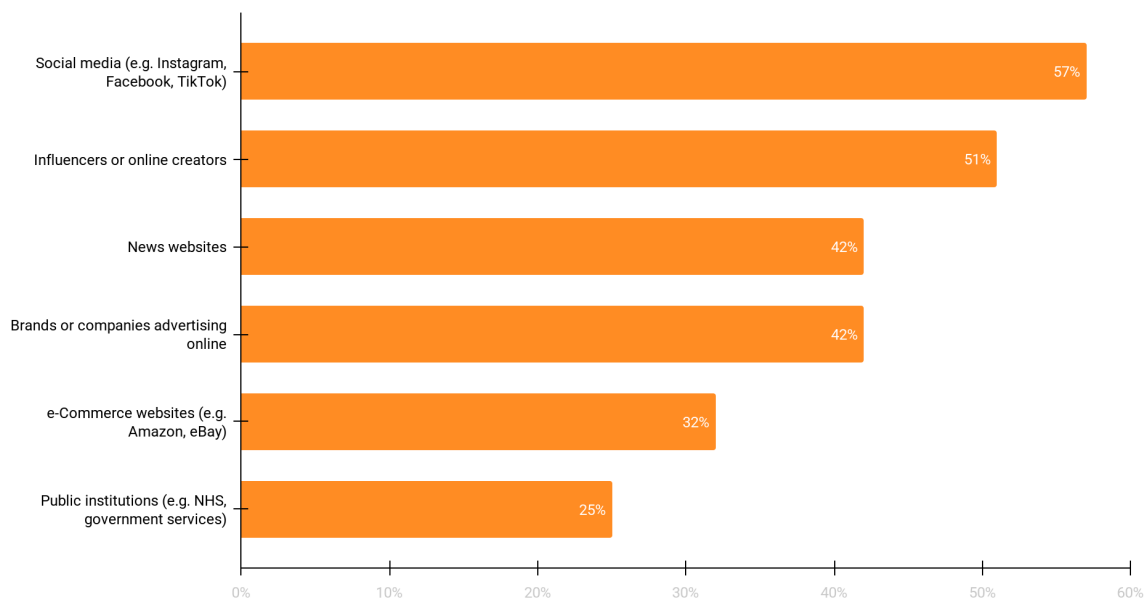
of UK adults are sometimes or often **anxious about potential scams or fraudulent activity** when using the internet.

59%

of UK adults are **less confident that news, reviews or advice online is genuine** because of AI.

Taken together, these concerns are reflected in how trust has changed across different types of online services.

How has the rise of AI online affected your level of trust in the following types of online services, compared to 2024? Total "less/ much less trust":



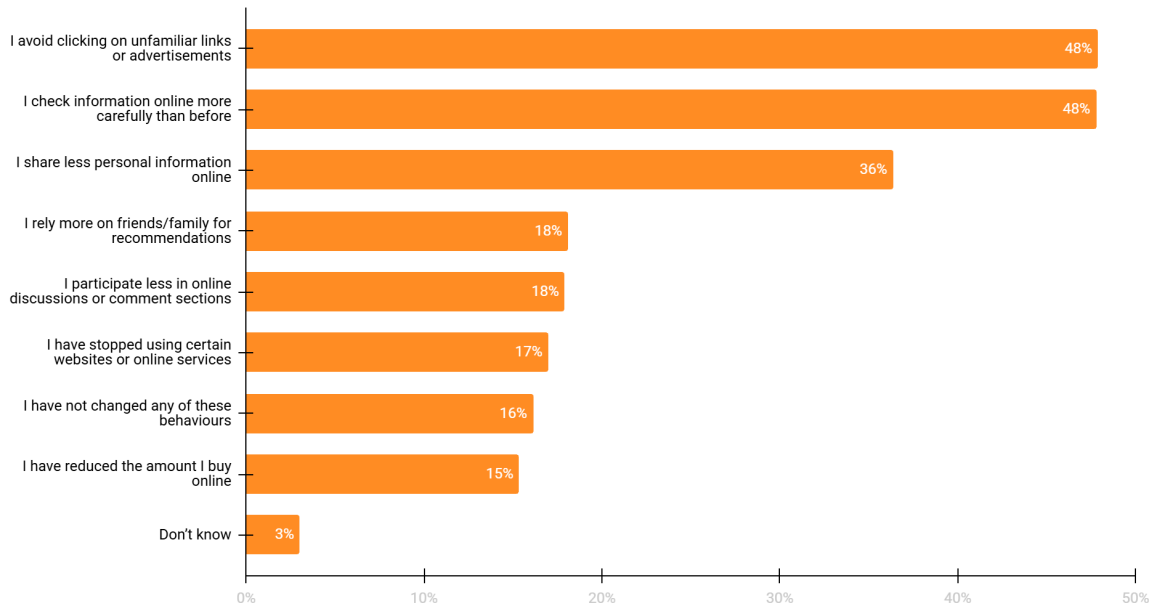
This loss of confidence has broader implications for how safe people feel online. Only 22% of UK adults say they believe internet users are safe given the increasing presence of AI online.

People are adapting their behaviour online in response

Four in ten UK adults (40%) say they now find themselves using certain online services less because the experience has been damaged by bots and AI-generated content. This suggests that for a substantial minority, the presence of non-human or automated content is not simply an irritation, but a factor that is actively shaping how and where they choose to spend time online.

Caution is also becoming a more prominent feature of how people navigate the internet. Over seven in ten UK adults (71%) say they are now more cautious about clicking on links or buying things online because of AI-generated content. Rather than disengaging entirely, many users appear to be adjusting their behaviour, approaching online interactions more carefully and with greater scepticism than they did previously.

In the last year, have you changed any of the following behaviours because of the increase in AI content online? Select all that apply



These changes have implications for how the digital economy functions. If people are more cautious about where they spend time online, less willing to transact, or more hesitant to engage with unfamiliar services, this may affect a wide range of online businesses and platforms. Trust and confidence play a central role in many online activities, and lower levels of both may shape patterns of use and participation over time.

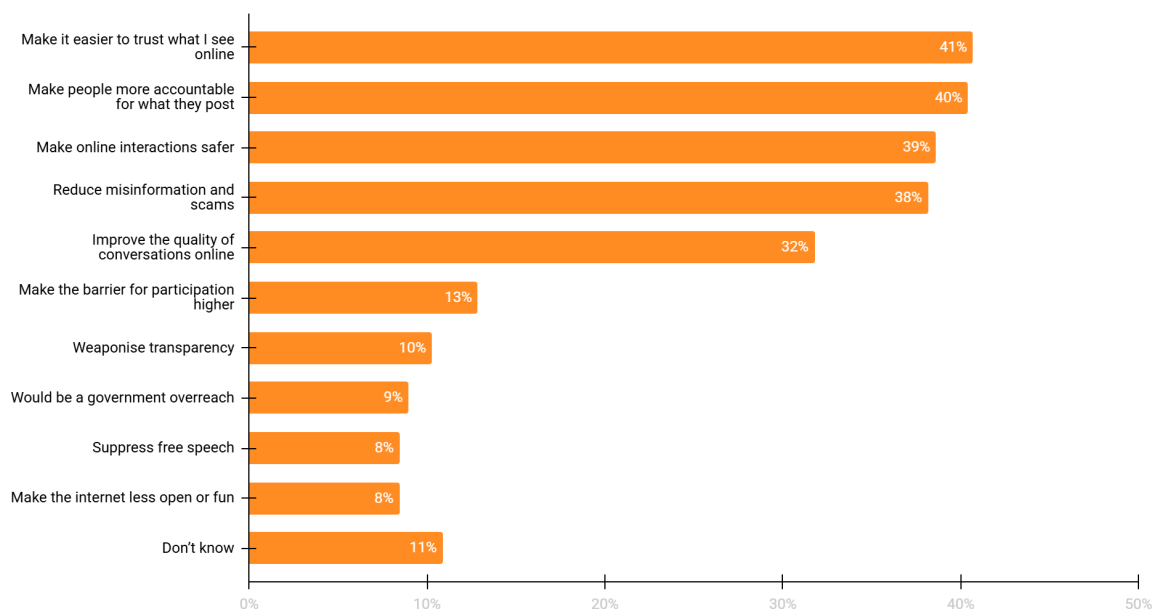
There may also be consequences for the character of online spaces themselves. As users participate less, engage more selectively, or approach interactions with greater scepticism, online environments may become quieter and less interactive. Over time, this could reduce the sense of openness and exchange that has traditionally characterised many parts of the internet.

Only humans allowed?

The majority of the public supports an internet in which online interactions are limited to real, verified humans. As experiences of bots and automation become more common, a preference appears to be emerging for online environments that offer greater certainty about who, or what, people are interacting with.

Three quarters of UK adults (75%) say they would prefer to interact only with verified real people when using online services. A range of perceived benefits help to explain this preference. When asked to imagine a version of the internet where users could easily verify that they are real humans, people identify several potential impacts; most commonly an increase in trust, accountability and safety.

Imagine a version of the internet where users can easily verify they are real humans. What impact do you think this would have?



It's no surprise therefore that there is widespread support for tools and systems that would enable human verification in online spaces.

76%

of UK adults think that a scenario where an online service required verification in order to open an account would improve the service.

64%

of UK adults say that if certain online platforms introduced privacy preserving human-verification requirements, it would increase their trust in these platforms.

Levels of comfort with verification are also relatively high. Around seven in ten UK adults (72%) say they would be comfortable with online platforms verifying their humanity to ensure that all users are real humans. This suggests that, for many people, concerns about bots content could outweigh reservations about verification, particularly where it is framed around safety and authenticity.

Verification may also influence how people choose which services to use. Nearly half of UK adults (46%) say they would be more likely to use online services if those services included a verified watermark indicating whether AI or bots are present.

This points to a potential role for clearer signalling and transparency in helping users navigate increasingly complex online environments.



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