

Africans are increasingly online, but awareness and practice of digital safety remain low

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1132 | Sophie Sunderland, Alfred Kwadzo Torsu, and Joseph Asunka

Summary

Across Africa, Internet and social media use have surged in recent years, especially among young people. Internet use on the continent is growing twice as fast as the global average (Ecofin Agency, 2025), although penetration – the percentage of the population using the Internet – varies widely across countries, from near universal (92%) in Morocco to less than 15% in Burundi and Chad (Statista, 2025). The rapid increase in Internet penetration has yielded significant socioeconomic benefits, from mobile-money services for previously unbanked populations and greater security for financial transactions (GSM Association, 2020) to anti-corruption tools and improved trust in tax administration (Ouedraogo & Sy, 2020).

But online connectivity is not without risks. Interpol's African cyberthreat assessment highlights a rapid increase in cybercrime, particularly ransomware, digital extortion, and online scams (Interpol, 2024). For many Internet users, social media platforms serve as primary sources of news and everyday information, which amplifies their exposure to misinformation, scams, data breaches, and cyber extortion.

Although the growth in online presence has yet to be met with a corresponding rise in online safety awareness or digital literacy (Fikre, 2025), African governments have started to take steps to promote awareness and protect citizens as well as critical infrastructure from malign online activities. A growing number of countries are developing and deploying national cybersecurity strategies, legal frameworks, and relevant policies. For instance, Kenya's cybersecurity strategy prioritises national security and the safety of Kenyans online (Republic of Kenya, 2025), and Ghana's focuses on securing the country's expanded digitisation initiatives, including national identification and digital-address systems (Republic of Ghana, 2024). Some governments have launched nationwide initiatives to create awareness and promote safer online behaviour. In Malawi, a national campaign launched in conjunction with Global Cybersecurity Awareness Month emphasised the importance of creating awareness of digital threats and practicing online security (TechAfrica News, 2025). Similarly, in Rwanda, the government is working with schools to provide cybersecurity education and increase awareness of online risks (Irasubiza, 2025).

To contribute to this discourse and inform public policy, Afrobarometer conducted a telephone survey of adult Internet users in seven African countries in 2024 to explore their digital presence and cybersecurity awareness, including their understanding of digital threats and their use of online safety tools and practices. Findings show that while most access the Internet frequently, many remain unfamiliar with digital security measures and practice them inconsistently if at all. To learn about online safety, people tend to rely on informal networks –

such as social media and personal connections – rather than formal educational programmes or training.

Educating citizens about online safety is an essential step toward building a more informed, resilient, and responsible digital community (Natif, 2025). Real progress, however, depends on translating awareness into action and ensuring that citizens actively adopt and practice online security measures, in addition to strengthening and enforcing the legal frameworks that govern Internet activities (Okuku et al., 2015).

Afrobarometer Calling

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. For its standard surveys, national partners in about 40 African countries conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200-2,400 respondents.

Between standard survey rounds, Afrobarometer also conducts more limited telephone surveys on emerging or time-sensitive topics under its Afrobarometer Calling label. Between 6 September and 8 November 2024, partners surveyed national samples of 1,200 adults (aged 18 and above) who had mobile phones and said they access Internet content. The surveys were conducted in Angola, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tanzania and focused on digital use and cybersecurity awareness.

Key findings

- On average across the seven surveyed countries, among adults who access Internet content, a vast majority (84%) say they do so “every day” or “a few times a week.”
 - Mobile phones are the primary mechanism for accessing the Internet (85%).
 - Young adults (aged 18-35) are more likely to be regular Internet users (87%) than older cohorts (74%-83%).
- More than eight in 10 respondents (82%) say they get news “every day” or “a few times a week” from social media platforms. In addition, half (51%) say they get news regularly from other Internet sites.
- More than half (52%) express concern about the security of their personal information online, and 81% think mobile phones are more vulnerable to harmful online activities than computers and other devices.
- Only about one-third (32%) of respondents consider themselves “somewhat” (22%) or “very” (10%) familiar with tools and skills they can use to protect their digital privacy and information.
- Use of protective tools and practices by Internet users is highly variable:
 - More than seven in 10 (72%) say they use strong passwords to protect their online information, though only about half (52%) of Beninese make that claim.
 - Other security measures are much less commonly used, including two-factor authentication (33%), antivirus software (30%), and virtual private networks (VPNs) (21%).
 - More than two-thirds of respondents say they did not click on unknown links (68%) or download files from unknown sources (70%) during the previous year.

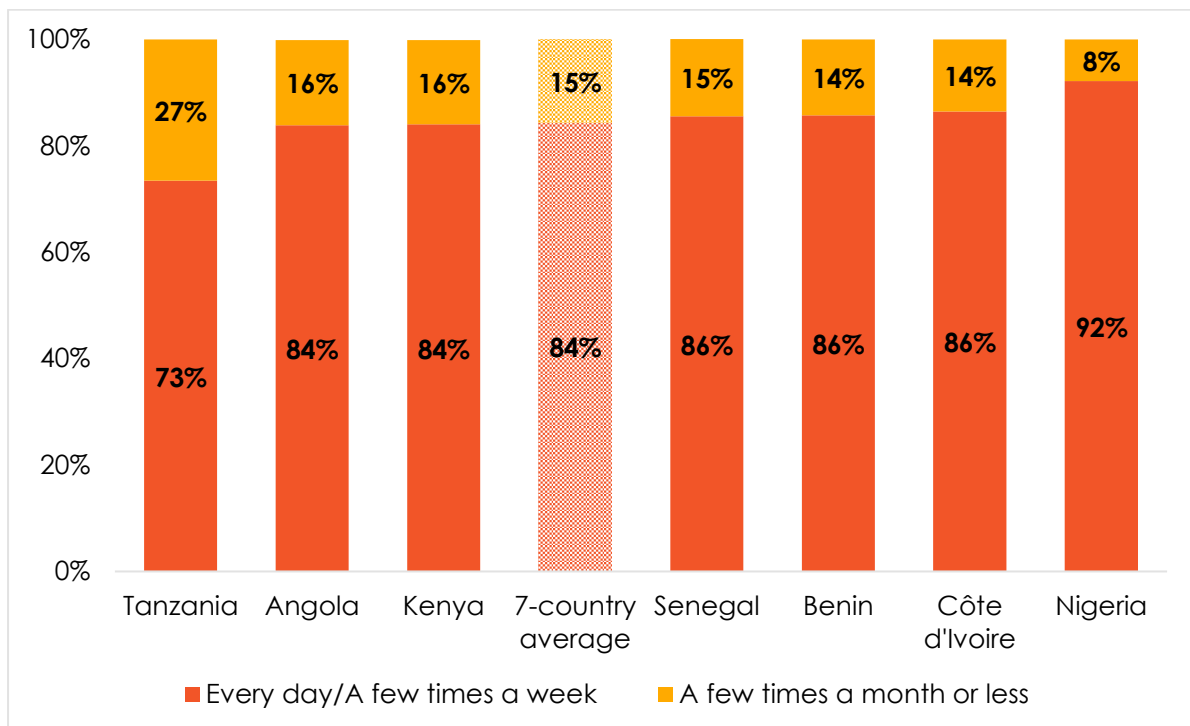
- Youth and men report higher use of most online security tools, while older adults and women are more cautious about clicking suspicious links or downloading unknown files.
- Most respondents rely on social media (60%) and friends and family (62%) to learn about online safety tools.
 - Fewer than half turn to online videos/tutorials (48%), news articles/websites (32%), and the workplace (29%) as sources of information about online safety.

Internet use

The Internet is a large part of daily life in Africa: On average across 38 African countries that Afrobarometer surveyed in 2024/2025, half (50%) of respondents say they use the Internet “every day” or “a few times a week,” and another 10% use it less often.

Results of a separate Afrobarometer Calling telephone survey in seven countries indicate that most Internet users are fairly active online: Focusing only on adults who say they access Internet content, including emails and social media, the survey shows that 84% of respondents report that they use it “every day” or “a few times a week” (Figure 1). Across the seven surveyed countries, Nigerians (92%) are most active on the Internet, while Tanzania (73%) is the only country that falls below average.

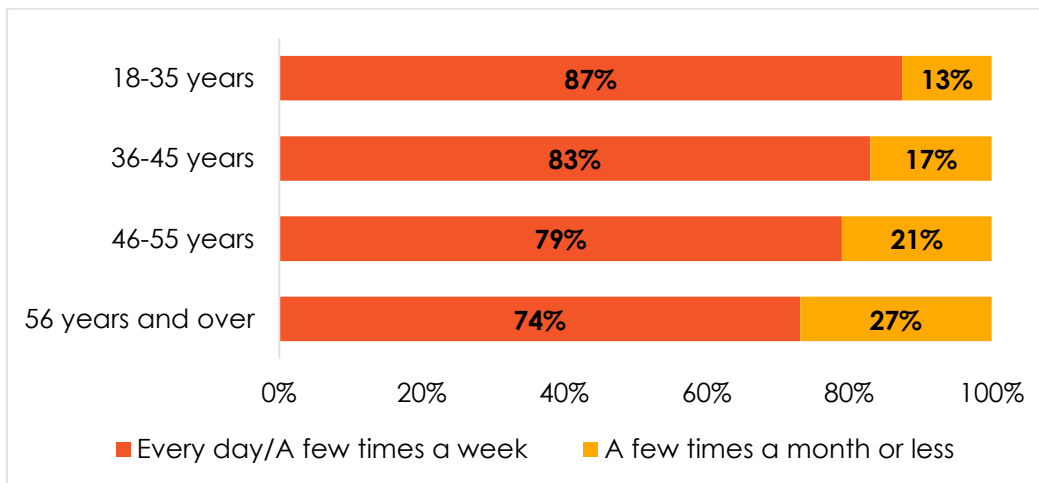
Figure 1: Frequency of Internet usage | 7 countries | 2024



Respondents were asked: How often do you use the Internet, including emails and social media such as Facebook or WhatsApp?

Younger respondents (18-35 years) are significantly more likely to use the Internet regularly (87%) than their older counterparts (74%-83%), highlighting a clear generational gap in digital engagement (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Frequency of Internet usage | by age group | 7 countries | 2024

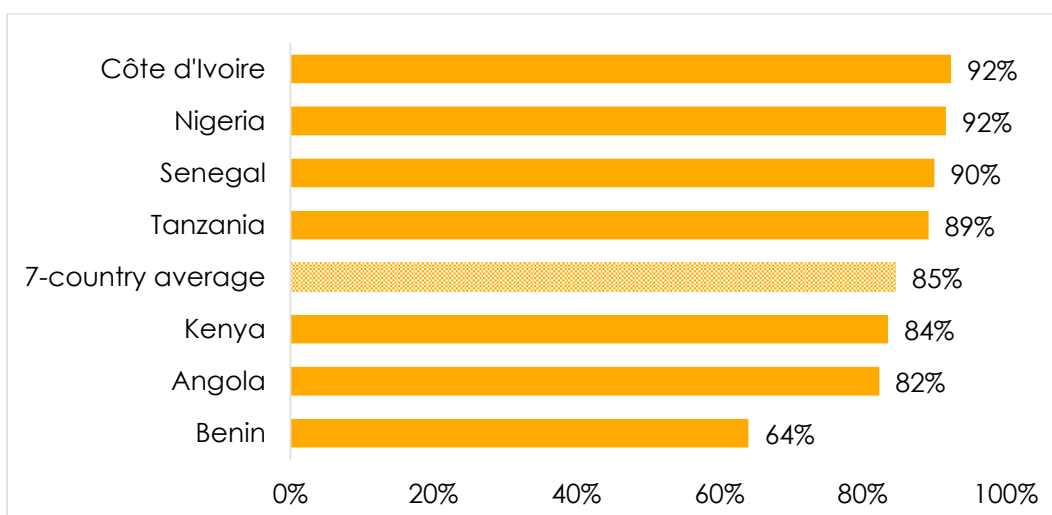


Respondents were asked: How often do you use the Internet, including emails and social media such as Facebook or WhatsApp?

Across the seven surveyed countries, more than eight in 10 respondents (85%) report that they usually access the Internet via their mobile phones. But this varies widely by country, from just 64% in Benin to more than nine out of 10 in Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria (92% each) (Figure 3).

Small minorities access the Internet primarily via a family member's phone or computer (8%, most commonly in Benin (26%)), at work (3%), at an Internet kiosk/café (2%), at school (1%), or at a community centre or public library (1%).

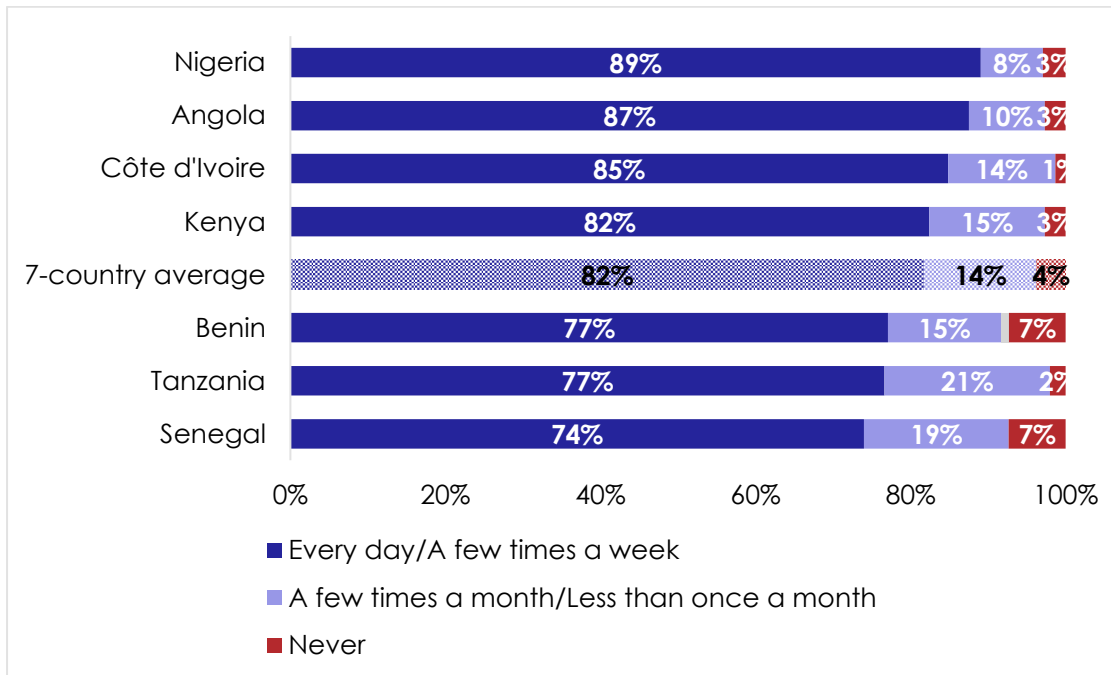
Figure 3: Access the Internet through mobile phone | 7 countries | 2024



Respondents were asked: Where do you usually access the Internet? (% who say "personal mobile phone")

As Internet access expands, many Africans are turning online to stay informed about current events. More than eight in 10 respondents (82%) say they get news "every day" or "a few times a week" from social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp (Figure 4). Nigerians (89%) and Angolans (87%) are particularly likely to look to social media for news.

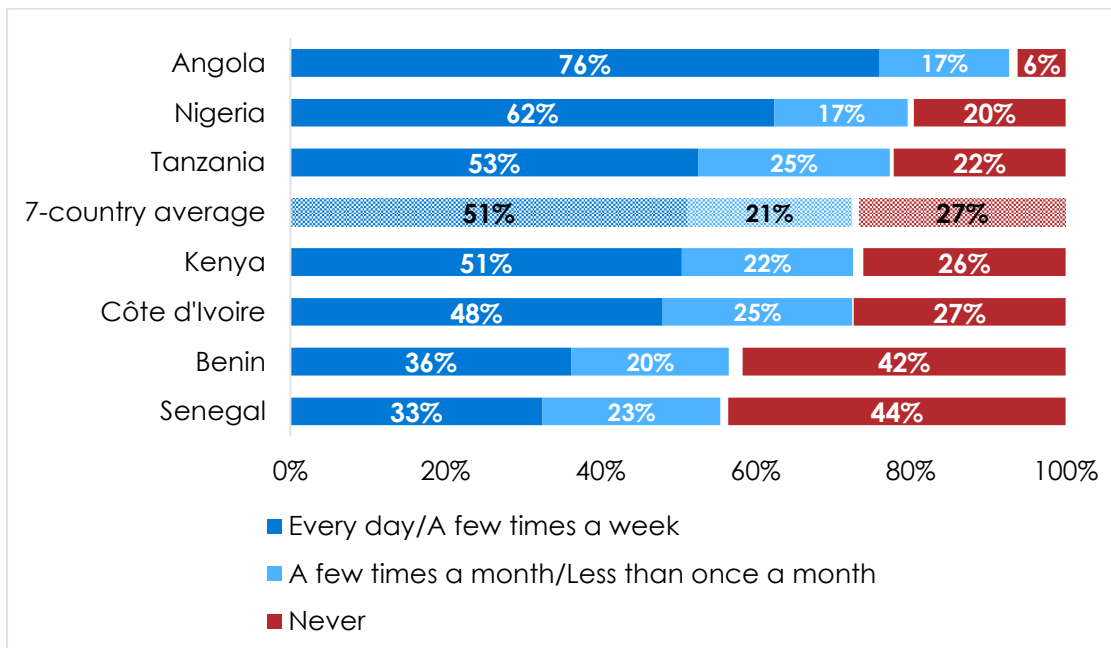
Figure 4: Get news regularly from social media | 7 countries | 2024



Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources: Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, or others?

In addition, about half (51%) of respondents report that they get news regularly from other Internet sites (Figure 5). This news habit varies considerably across countries, from just 33% in Senegal to 76% in Angola.

Figure 5: Get news regularly from other Internet sites | 7 countries | 2024

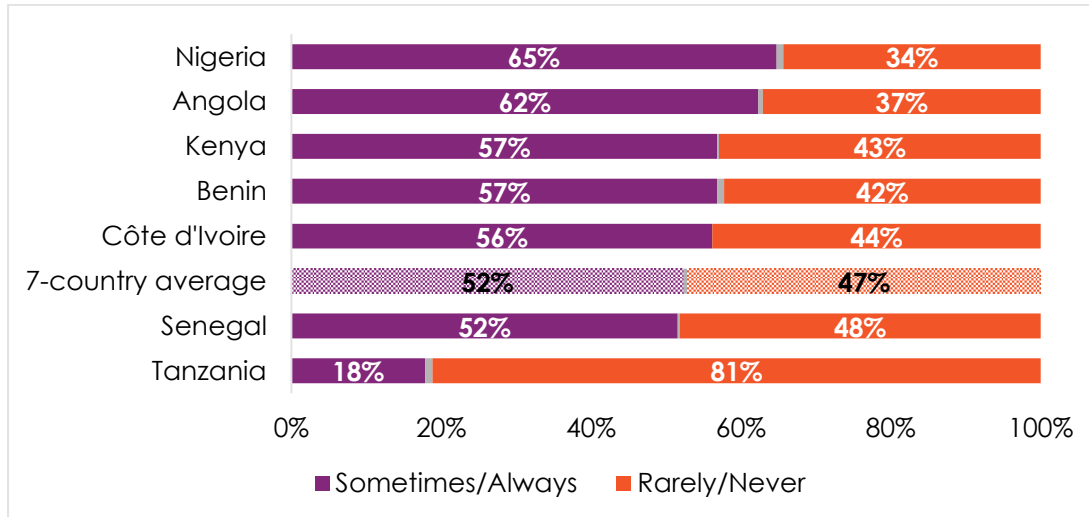


Respondents were asked: How often do you get news from the following sources: Other Internet news sources?

Awareness of online protection tools

While Internet use is frequent, it is not carefree: More than half (52%) of respondents across the seven countries say they worry “sometimes” or “always” that their data may be tracked or used by others (Figure 6). Tanzania is the only country where only a minority (18%) express this concern.

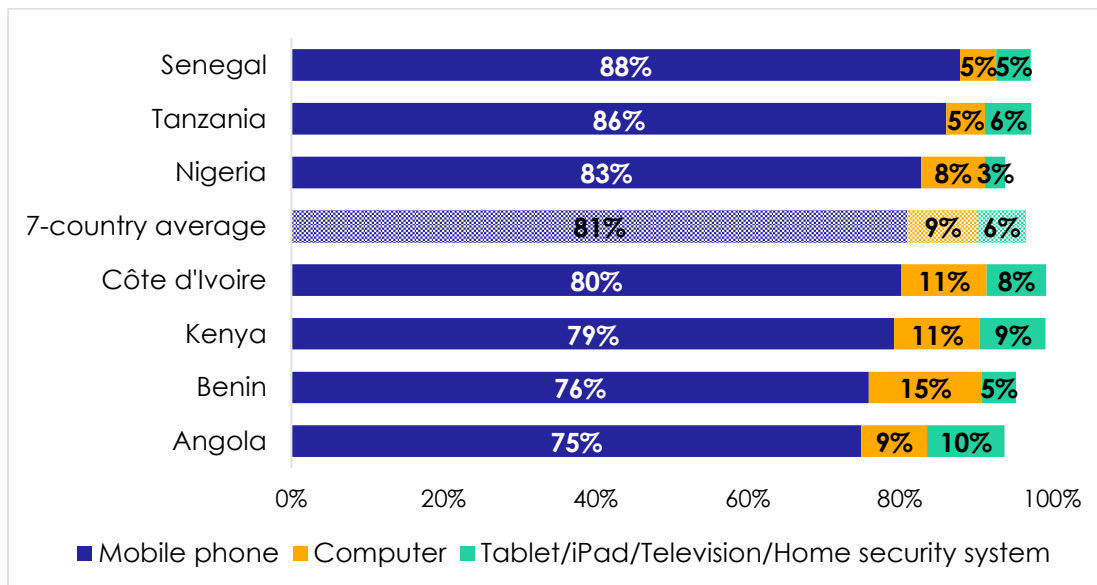
Figure 6: Concern about personal data being tracked or used | 7 countries | 2024



Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, do you worry about the possibility of your personal data being tracked or used by others?

In addition, while a large majority of respondents rely mainly on their phones to access the Internet, about eight in 10 respondents (81%) consider mobile phones the devices most vulnerable to malign online activity (Figure 7).

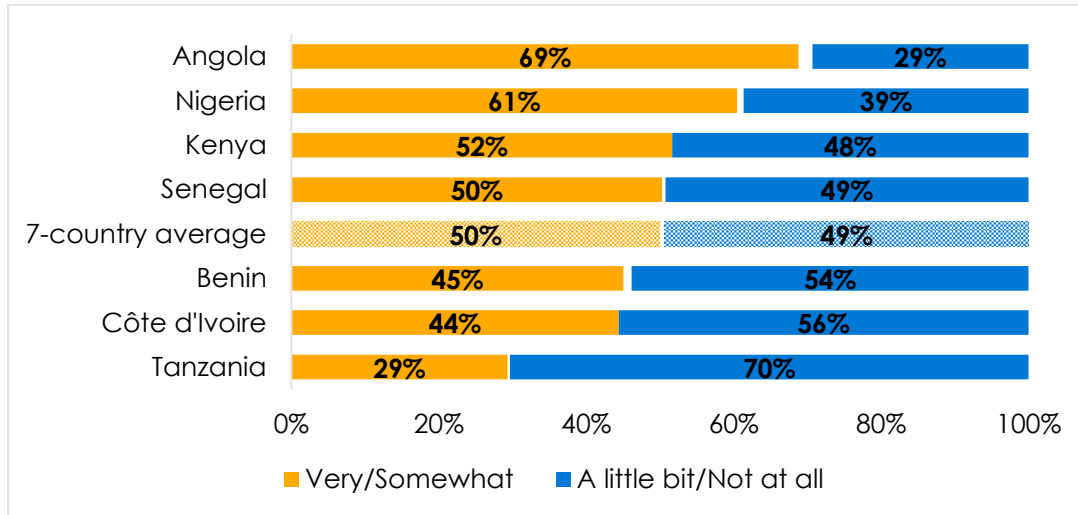
Figure 7: Most vulnerable device to harmful online activities | 7 countries | 2024



Respondents were asked: Which of the following devices do you think is the most vulnerable to harmful online activity, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Fully half (50%) of respondents say they worry “somewhat” or “a lot” about harmful online activity, while the other half (49%) express little or no worry (Figure 8). Levels of concern range from just 29% in Tanzania to 69% in Angola.

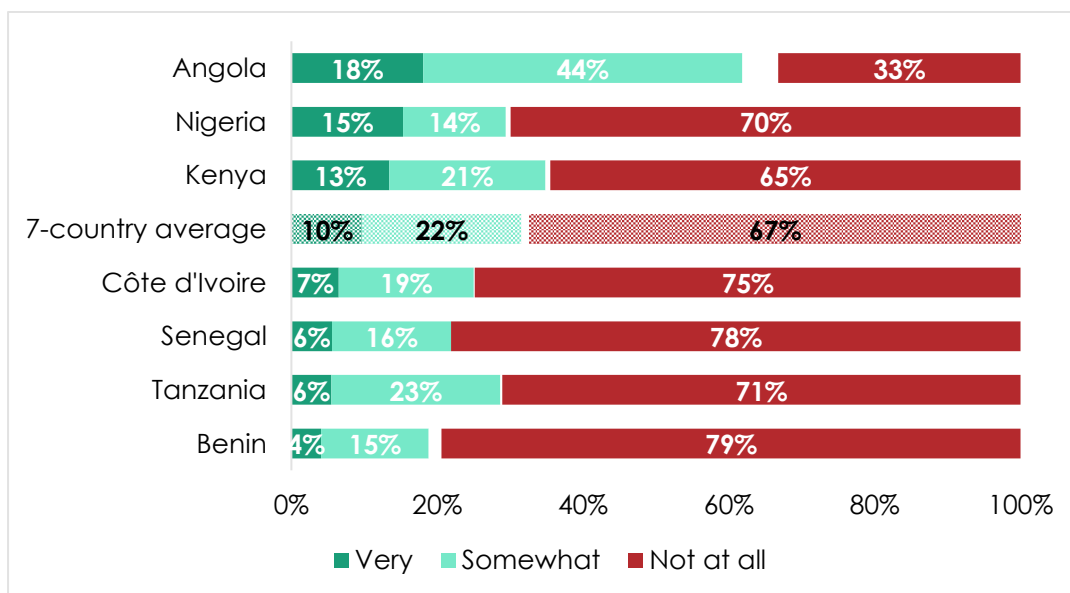
Figure 8: Worry about harmful online activities | 7 countries | 2024/2025



Respondents were asked: How concerned, if at all, do you feel about the possibility of experiencing harmful online activity that aims to destroy or steal your personal information?

Despite widespread concern about the security of their data, awareness of online protection tools has not kept pace. On average, only about one-third (32%) of respondents consider themselves “somewhat” (22%) or “very” (10%) familiar with tools and skills they can use to protect their digital privacy and information (Figure 9). Perceived awareness (at least “somewhat”) of protective strategies is relatively high in Angola (62%) but drops to around one-fifth of respondents in Benin (19%) and Senegal (22%).

Figure 9: Awareness of online protection tools and skills | 7 countries | 2024



Respondents were asked: How familiar are you with the tools and skills you can use to protect your privacy and information on the Internet or social media?

Taken together, these findings highlight a gap between users' perceptions of online risks and their ability to respond effectively to them.

Use of online safety tools and practices

There are a variety of tools and practices that can help protect Internet users and their data from threats such as data theft, account hacking, and online scams and harassment. How widespread is their use?

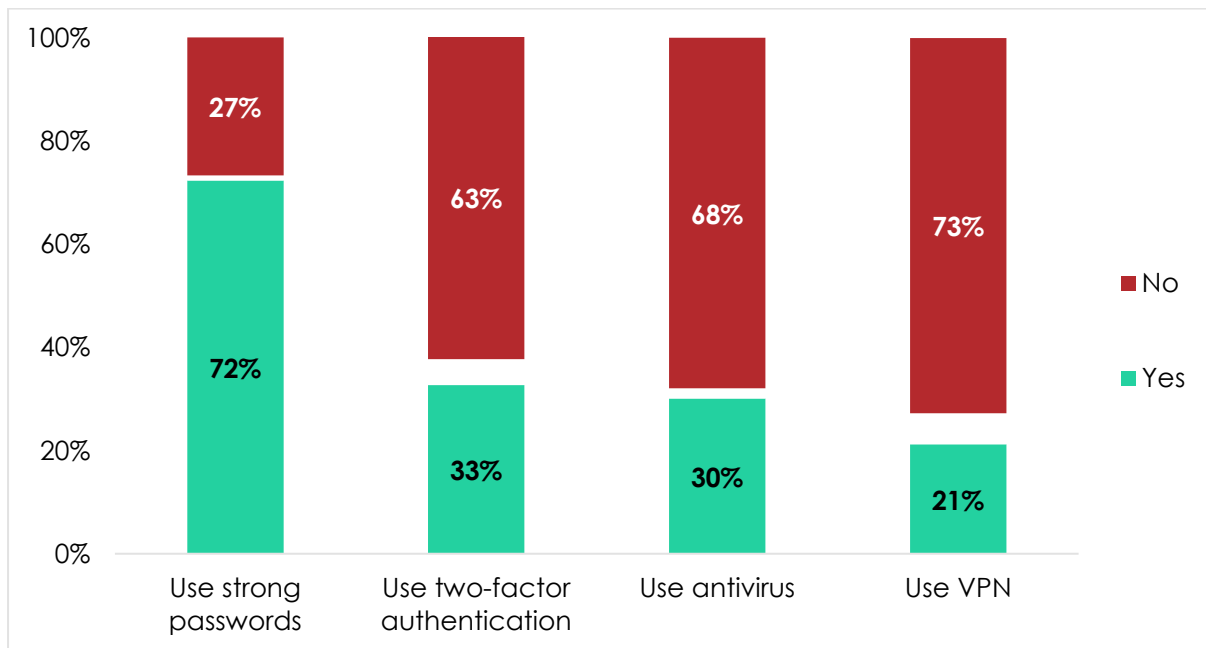
Protective tools

Among survey respondents, the most commonly used safety tool is strong passwords. Seven in 10 respondents (72%) say they rely on strong passwords to protect their online accounts (Figure 10).

When it comes to more sophisticated online security measures, fewer Africans use them. Only one in three respondents (33%) use two-factor authentication, while 21% use a virtual private network (VPN) as an added security measure.

The use of antivirus software is also low, averaging 30% across the seven countries.

Figure 10: Use of online safety tools | 7 countries | 2024

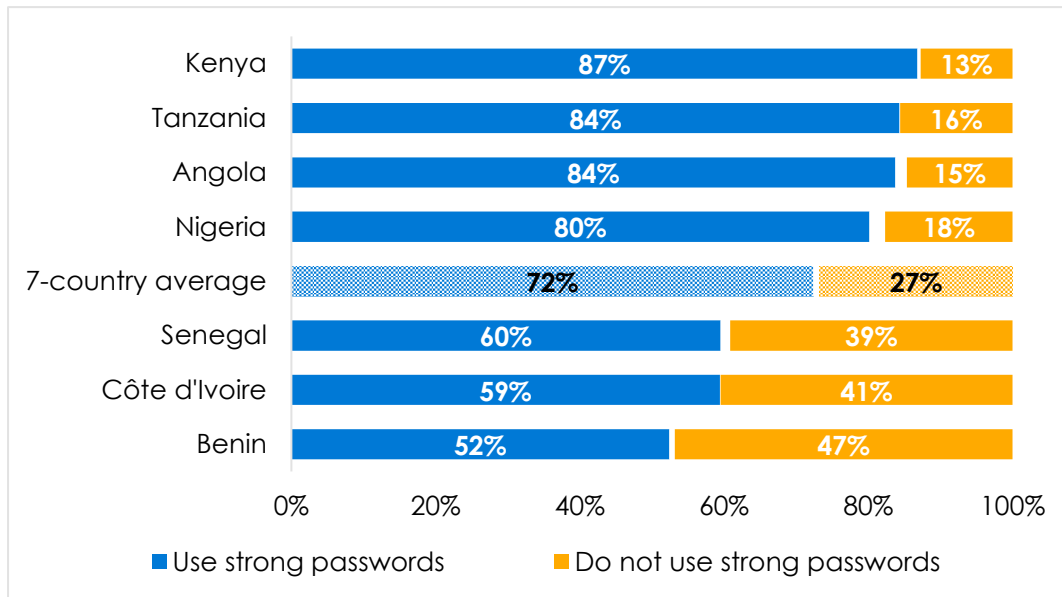


Respondents were asked: Which of the following security measures, if any, do you take online?

Even the use of strong passwords, the most common protective measure, varies considerably across surveyed countries, from just about half (52%) of respondents in Benin to more than eight in 10 in Kenya (87%), Tanzania (84%), and Angola (84%) (Figure 11).

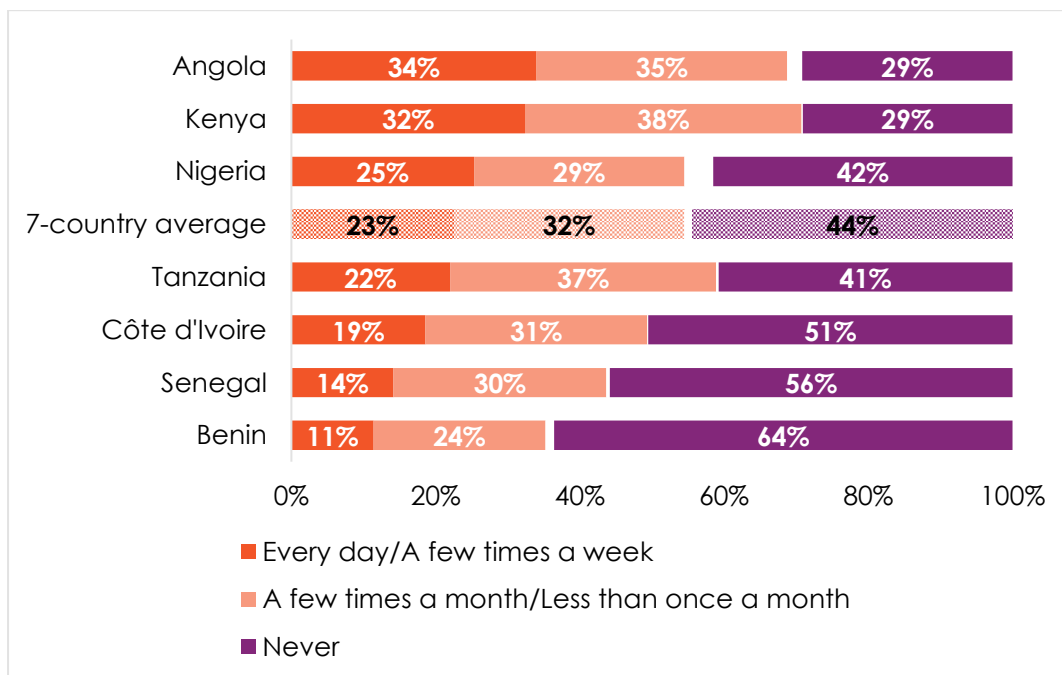
Moreover, fewer than a quarter (23%) of respondents say they change their passwords frequently ("every day" or "a few times a week") (Figure 12). About one-third (32%) do so "a few times a month" or "less than once a month," and a plurality (44%) report that they "never" change their passwords. The "never" group includes majorities in Benin (64%), Senegal (56%), and Côte d'Ivoire (51%).

Figure 11: Strong password as a security measure | 7 countries | 2024



Respondents were asked: Which of the following security measures, if any, do you take online: Use strong or unique passwords?

Figure 12: Frequency of password changes | 7 countries | 2024

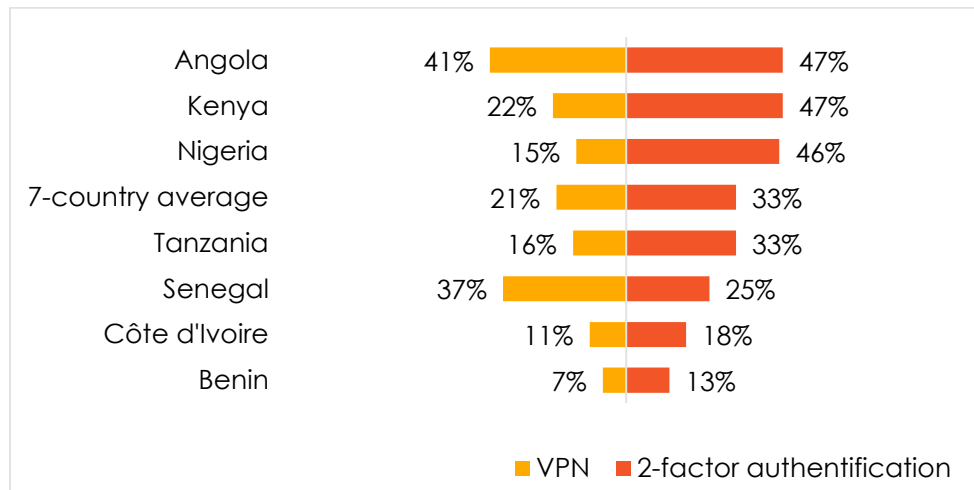


Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, do you change your passwords for online accounts?

Use of two-factor authentication approaches one-half of respondents in Angola (47%), Kenya (47%), and Nigeria (46%) but drops below one-fifth in Côte d'Ivoire (18%) and Benin (13%) (Figure 13).

VPN use is also relatively high in Angola (41%), along with Senegal (37%), but is below one-fourth in the other five countries, including just 7% in Benin.

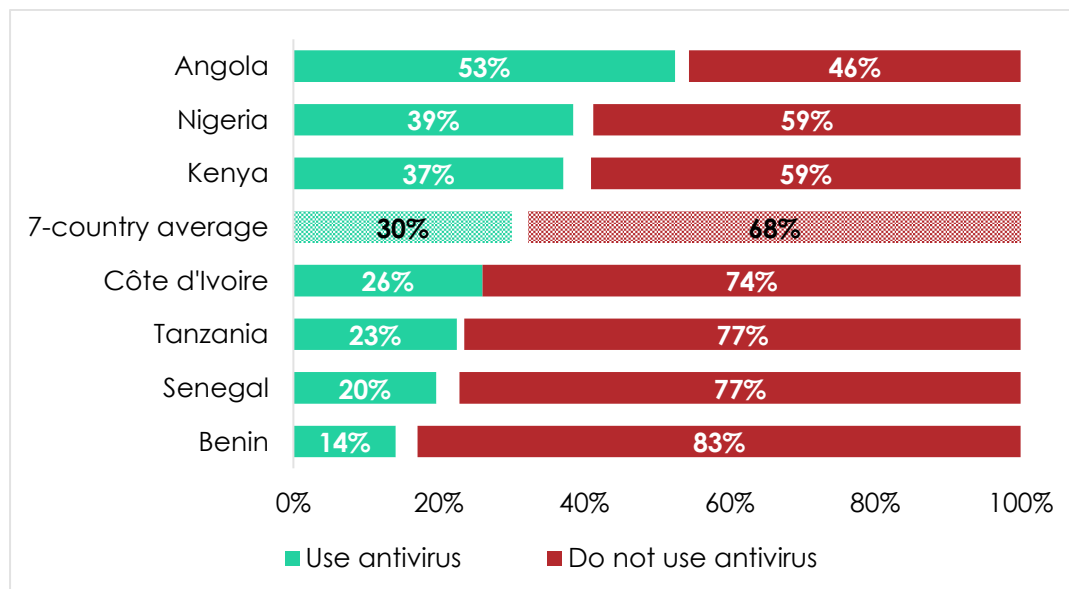
Figure 13: Use of two-factor authentication and VPN as security measures
| 7 countries | 2024



Respondents were asked: Which of the following security measures, if any, do you take online? Use two-factor authentication? Use a VPN or virtual private network? (% "yes")

Angola is the only country where a majority (53%) of respondents report using antivirus protection (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Use of antivirus as a security measure | 7 countries | 2024



Respondents were asked: Which of the following security measures, if any, do you take online: Use antivirus software?

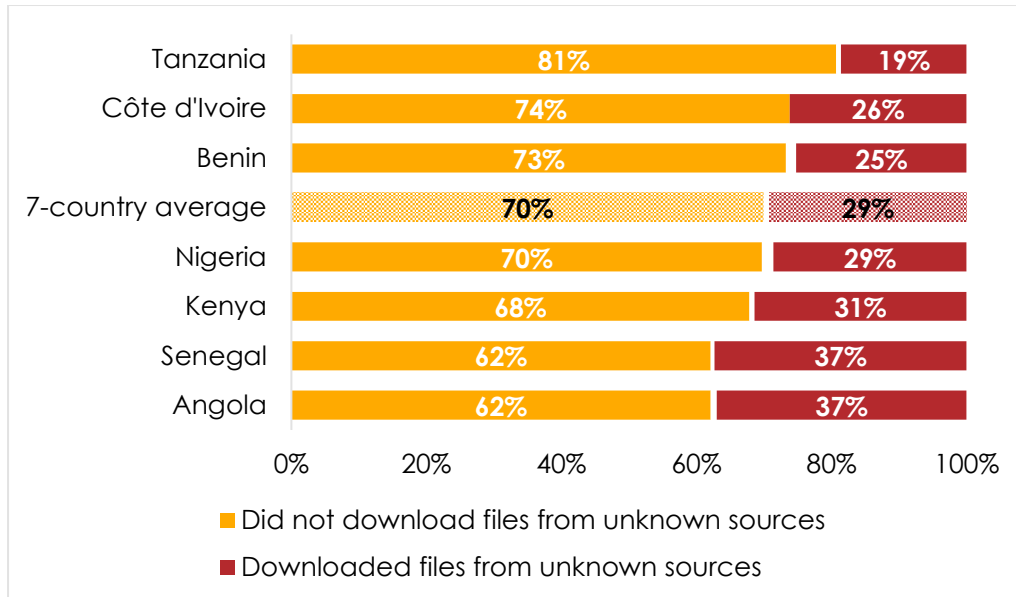
Protective practices

Following certain online and digital practices can also help protect Internet users from harm. Clicking on unknown links and downloading files from unknown sources puts users at risk of scams, malware, and data theft (Dhaliwal, 2023). Reviewing personal security settings can help individuals protect their accounts and personal information from these threats, and regularly backing up important data provides insurance in case of a digital disaster.

On average, 70% of respondents – including more than six in 10 in all seven countries – say they did not download files from unknown sources during the past 12 months, though that means three out of 10 (29%) did put themselves at risk in this way (Figure 15).

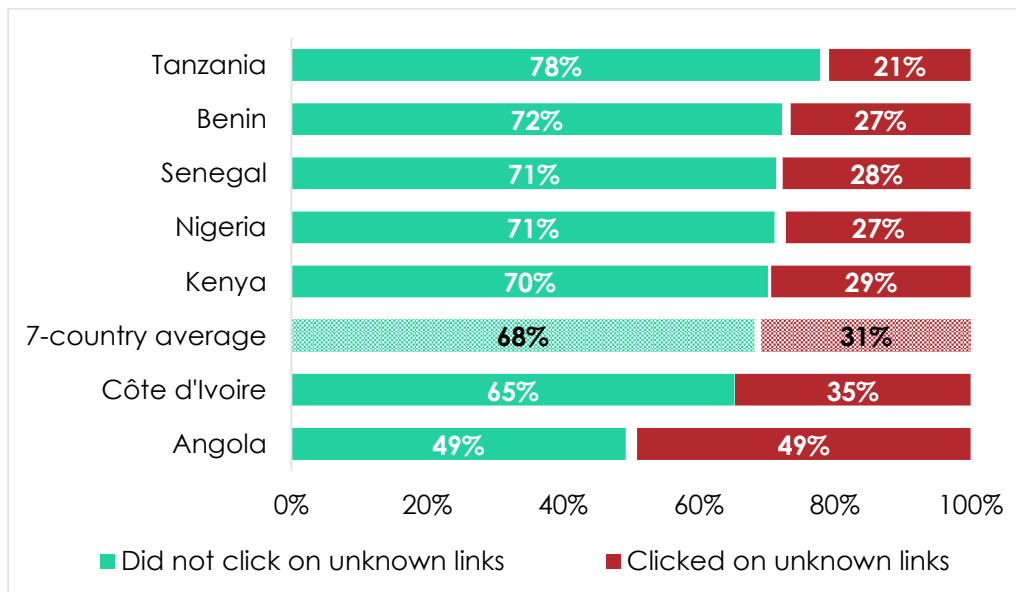
Similarly, more than two-thirds (68%) of respondents say they did not click on links from unknown sources during the previous year (Figure 16). Notably, respondents in Angola are evenly split, with about half (49%) admitting to clicking on unfamiliar links.

Figure 15: Not downloading files from unknown sources | 7 countries | 2024



Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take. Please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things in the past year: Downloaded files from unknown sources?

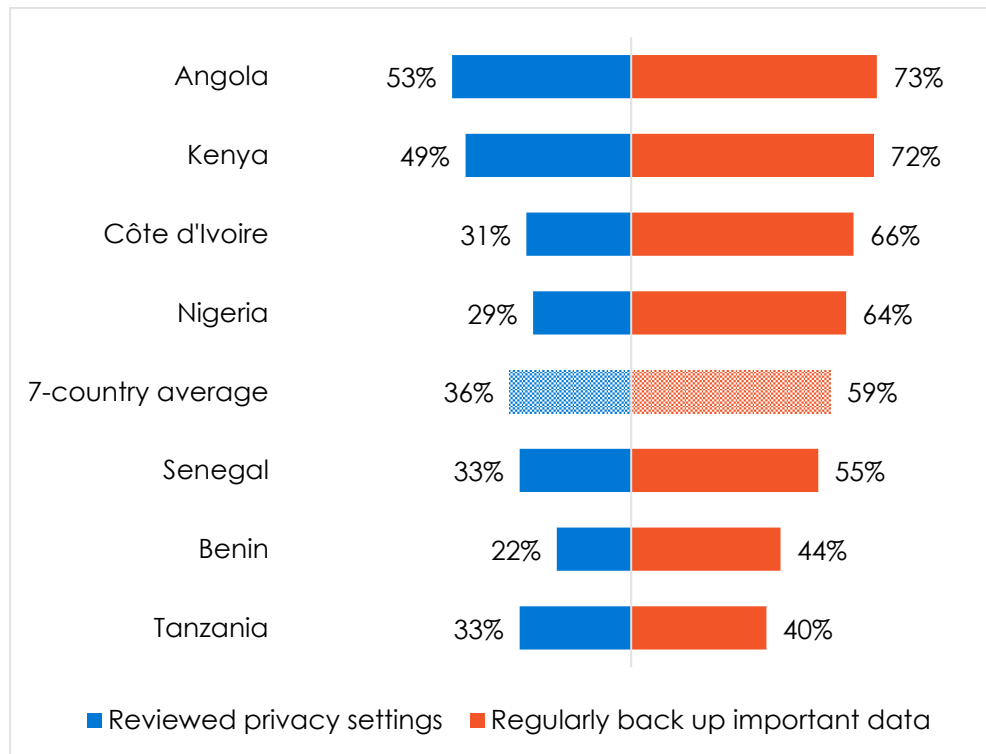
Figure 16: Not clicking on unknown links | 7 countries | 2024



Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take. Please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things in the past year: Clicked on links in unfamiliar emails or messages?

A majority (59%) of respondents also report that they regularly back up important data (Figure 17). However, only a minority (36%) say they reviewed their privacy settings on social media during the past year, including just 22% of Beninese.

Figure 17: Reviewing privacy settings on social media and backing up important data | 7 countries | 2024



Respondents were asked:

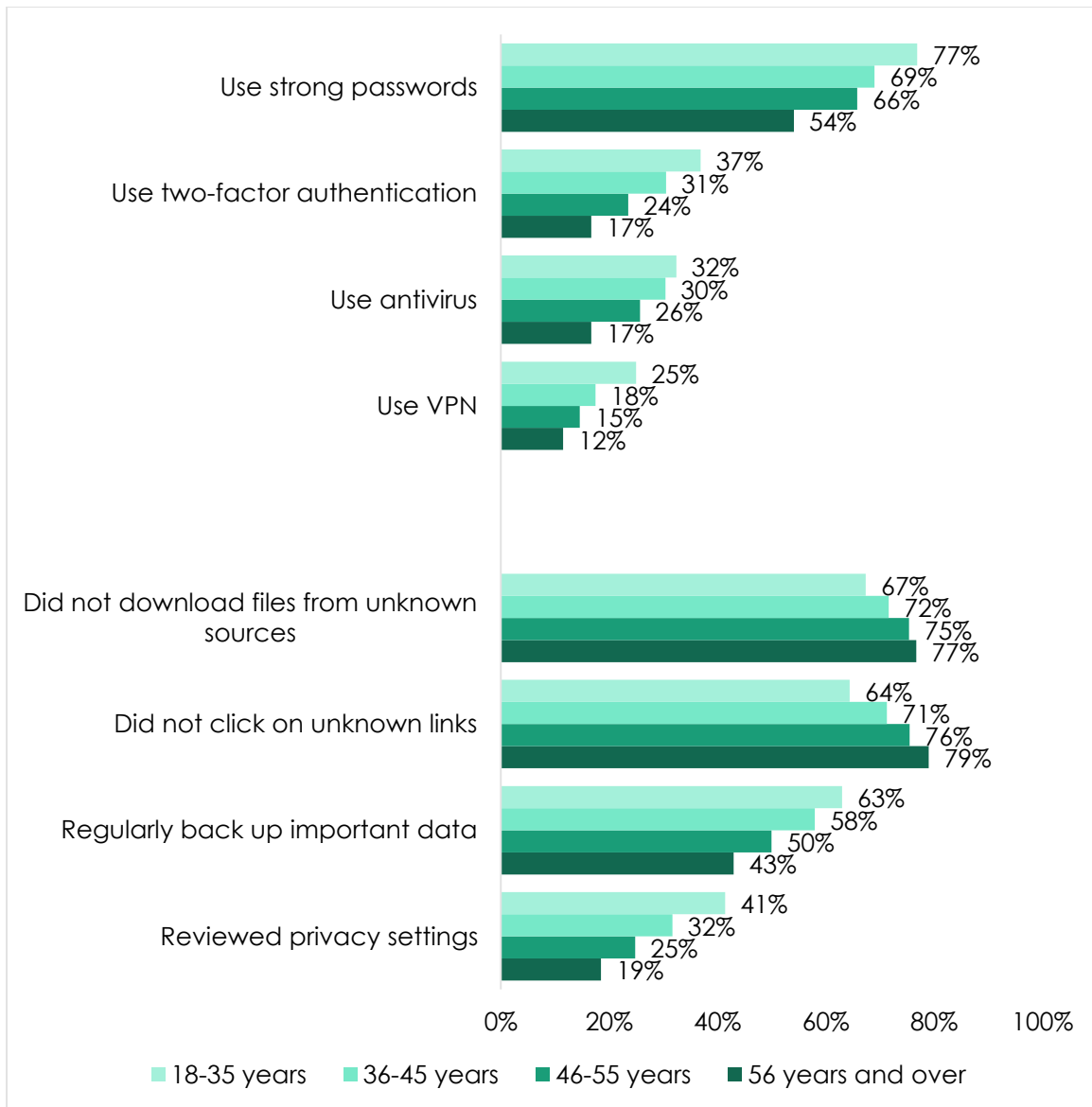
Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take. Please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things in the past year: Reviewed your privacy settings on social media? Which of the following security measures, if any, do you take online: Regularly back up important data?

Who uses online safety tools and practices?

Just as the adoption of online security measures varies across countries, these patterns also differ across demographic groups. Young people are more likely to use security tools – strong passwords, two-factor authentication, a VPN, and antivirus software – to protect themselves online (Figure 18). They are also more likely than their elders to back up important data and review their privacy settings. But the pattern is reversed for avoiding risky links and downloads: Here, older adults are more cautious.

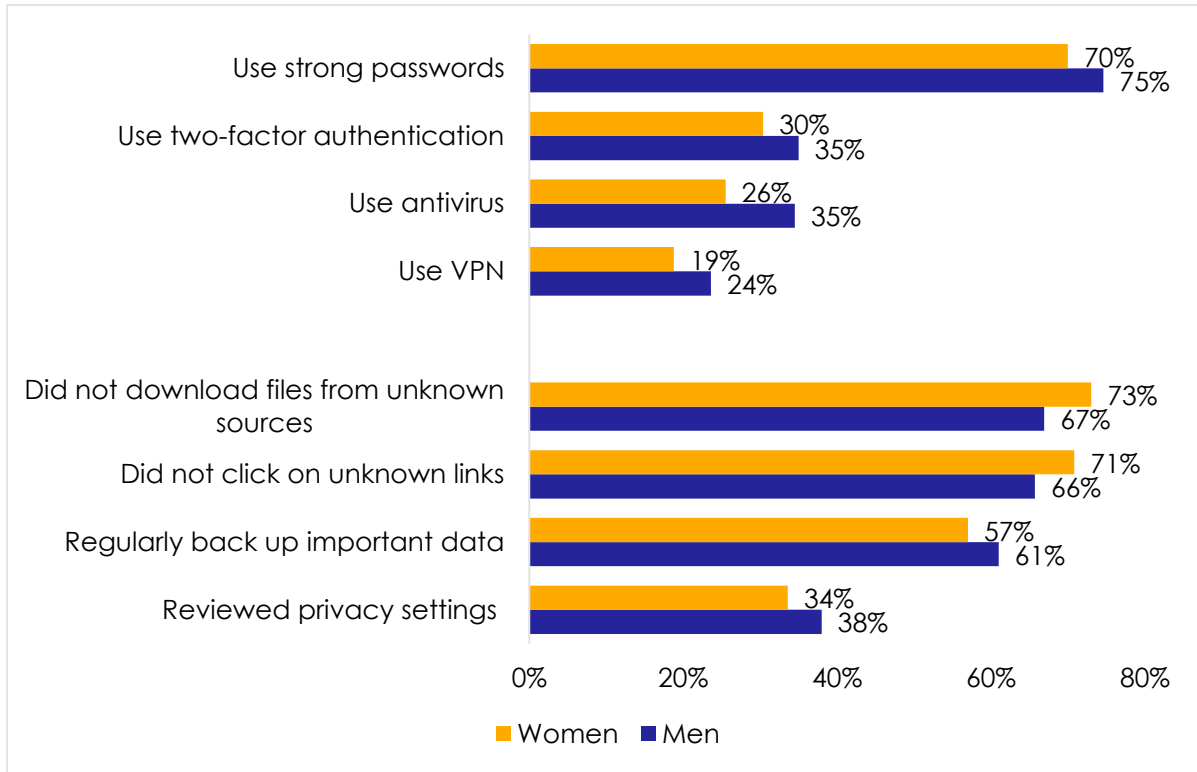
Gender differences follow a similar pattern (Figure 19): Men are more likely than women to report using online security tools, but when it comes to clicking on unfamiliar links or downloading unknown files, women are more careful than men.

Figure 18: Use of online safety tools and practices | by age group | 7 countries
| 2024



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Figure 19: Use of online safety tools and practices | by gender | 7 countries | 2024

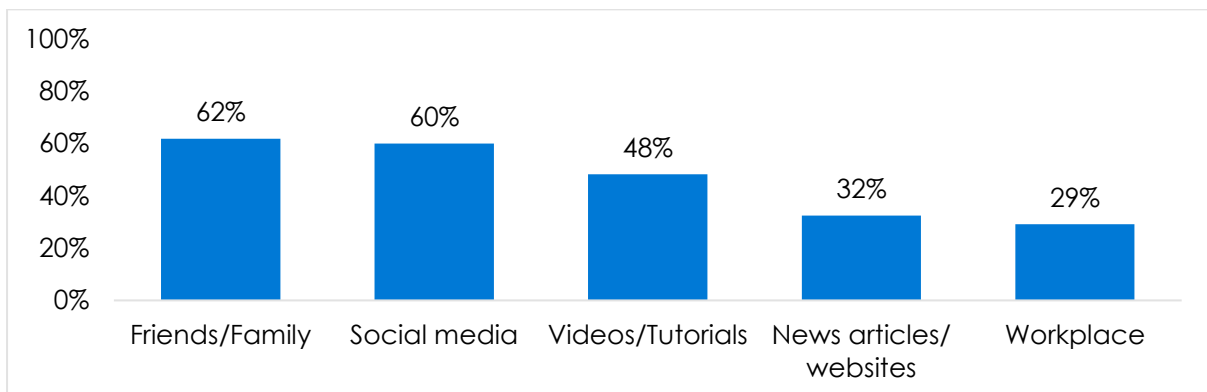


Learning about online safety

Given the gaps in online safety awareness and practice, understanding how citizens learn about online safety is crucial. More than six in 10 respondents (62%) say they get information from friends and family, and almost as many (60%) say social media is a source for learning about online safety (Figure 20). Only about half as many (32%) learn from news articles or websites.

Formal training sources reach fewer than half of citizens: 48% of respondents cite online videos and tutorials as sources of learning about online safety, and 29% say they learn from workplace resources.

Figure 20: Use of sources to learn about online safety | 7 countries | 2024



Respondents were asked: Which of the following sources of information, if any, do you use to learn about online safety?

At the country level, friends/family and social media are sources of information about online safety for majorities in all countries except Benin (43% and 38%, respectively) (Table 1). Majorities also report obtaining safety information from online videos/tutorials in Angola (64%) and Kenya (59%) – two countries where almost half also use news articles/websites to learn about online safety.

Table 1: Sources of information to learn about online safety | 7 countries | 2024/2025

	Friends/ Family	Social media	Videos/ Tutorials	News articles/ websites	Workplace
Angola	66%	74%	64%	47%	38%
Benin	43%	38%	29%	18%	13%
Côte d'Ivoire	53%	61%	48%	27%	24%
Kenya	70%	74%	59%	48%	33%
Nigeria	64%	60%	42%	33%	31%
Senegal	71%	51%	49%	25%	36%
Tanzania	64%	62%	47%	30%	29%
7-country average	62%	60%	48%	32%	29%

Respondents were asked: Which of the following sources of information, if any, do you use to learn about online safety?

Conclusion

The use of the Internet, including social media, is widespread across Africa, and so are concerns about cybersecurity. Findings from Afrobarometer’s telephone survey of adult Internet users in seven African countries show that most are frequent users, going online at least a few times a week, and use their mobile phones to do so.

Yet a majority of these respondents say they worry about the security of their personal data online and think their mobile phones are the devices most vulnerable to digital threats.

Meanwhile, awareness and adoption of online safety measures remain limited. Many respondents are unaware of online protection tools, and few apply online safety tools and practices, especially those that provide stronger protection, such as two-factor authentication, VPNs, and antivirus software.

Respondents tend to rely heavily on informal sources, such as social media and friends or family, for guidance on digital safety, while more structured resources – such as workplace training or online tutorials – are less frequently used.

Though limited to seven countries and respondents over age 17, these findings highlight significant gaps in digital literacy and suggest a need for targeted education and accessible resources to ensure that Africa’s growing digital footprint is both empowering and secure.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, nonpartisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and Innovante Recherche en Economie et Gouvernance (IREG) in Benin. Michigan State University and the University of Malawi provide technical support to the network.

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