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ACCAN Research Snapshot: What Australians Expect from Digital Platforms

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Introduction

Digital media platforms are fundamental to how Australians communicate and live their daily lives. To better represent the consumer voice, the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) conducted a survey to find out more about what Australians expect from digital platforms. We would like to share three key findings. Many people:

1. find it difficult to change their privacy and safety settings of websites and apps.
2. think that digital platforms need to do more to protect users from scams.
3. want more interoperability and data portability to give them more choice between the digital platforms they use.

ACCAN found that people who tend to be more digitally excluded,¹ such as older Australians, Australians on lower incomes and rural, regional and remote Australians, were especially likely to be concerned by issues around privacy, safety and choice. The following research snapshot illustrates that more needs to be done to make all consumers confident online.

Background

Australians spend an average of two hours a day using social media platforms.² Digital platforms provide Australians with a range of benefits, allowing us to stay in touch with friends and family, engage with public debate, find interesting content, and stay informed on the latest news. Examples of popular platforms include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, eBay, Uber and Airbnb.

The benefits of digital platforms have also come with concerns from the public. Digital platforms collect large amounts of data and intrude on consumers' sense of privacy. Consumers are expected to read and understand lengthy terms of service and take proactive steps to individually manage their safety and privacy settings. The popularity of digital platforms has been accompanied by a

¹ Thomas, J., et al. 2021. Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2021. Melbourne: RMIT, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra. Available at: <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/download-reports/>

² We Are Social 2022. *DIGITAL 2022 AUSTRALIA: ONLINE LIKE NEVER BEFORE*. Available at: <https://wearesocial.com/au/blog/2022/02/digital-2022-australia-online-like-never-before/>

growth in bad actors who relentlessly attempt to scam people and produce low-quality and untrustworthy apps. Digital platforms have claimed that they are neutral intermediaries and have limited responsibility for distributing misleading and deceptive advertising.³

While there is plenty of news of different platforms and novel features, for the most part digital platform markets are highly concentrated around a few key companies. When companies have market power, they are less incentivised to innovate or respond to consumers' needs because they face less competition. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) is investigating ways to temper the market power of digital platforms, but consumers still lack the ability to access basic competition features such as the ability to easily switch their social media accounts between providers or move items like photo libraries or music playlists between services.

ACCAN continues to advocate for users of digital platforms as these services converge with broader communications and media. Digital platforms are one of the key activities that people use their broadband services and mobiles for. As ACCAN has argued in the past, while digital platforms provide a host of benefits for consumers, consumers require more effective protections, improved avenues of dispute resolution and mechanisms to facilitate choice in the market.

Safety and Fairness

Users of digital platforms are often urged to take control of their privacy and safety settings. However, research consistently shows that many people find it difficult to understand privacy policies and navigate privacy settings. For example, research by the Consumer Policy Research Centre (CPRC) found that one in four (25%) "Australians shared more personal information than they wanted to" due to manipulative interface design.⁴ Relying on consumers to change their privacy settings shifts the burden of privacy onto consumers and could lead to consumer harms such as data leaks or unwanted disclosures.

Only 56% of respondents agreed when we asked whether "It is easy to change the default privacy and safety settings of websites and apps". This figure is similar to those who say they do change their privacy settings. 56% of respondents agree that "I usually change the default privacy and safety settings of websites and apps that I use". However, many groups who tend to be less digitally included⁵, such as older Australians, Australians on lower incomes and rural, regional and remote Australians tended to find it harder to change their privacy and safety settings.

We found that older Australians were less likely to find it easy to change the default privacy settings on websites and apps. As the graph below shows, only 44% of participants over 50 agree that it is easy to change their privacy and safety settings.

³ Kemp, K, 2022. *The ACCC is suing Meta for celebrity crypto scam ads on Facebook. Here's why the tech giant could be found liable*. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/the-acc-is-suing-meta-for-celebrity-crypto-scams-on-facebook-heres-why-the-tech-giant-could-be-found-liable-179655>

⁴ CPRC 2022. *Duped By Design*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/dupedbydesign/>

⁵ Thomas, J., et al. 2021. *Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2021*. Melbourne: RMIT, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra. Available at: <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/download-reports/>

Proportion of Australians that agree that it is “easy to adjust privacy settings” when using apps and websites, per age bracket.

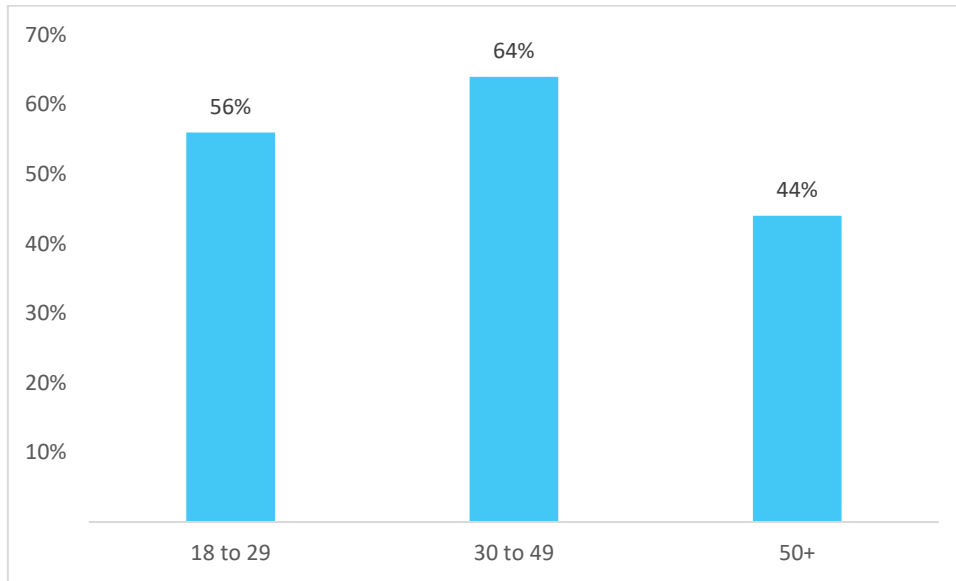


Figure 1. Older Australians were less likely to agree with the statement that “It is easy to change the default privacy and safety settings of website and apps”. Source: Ipsos 2022.

The pattern of older Australians finding it harder to change default privacy and safety settings correlates with the lower rates of older Australians who report changing their privacy and safety settings. This might indicate that older Australians find it harder to change their privacy settings and so change them less often.

Proportion of Australians that agree they “usually change privacy and safety settings” when using apps and websites, per age bracket.

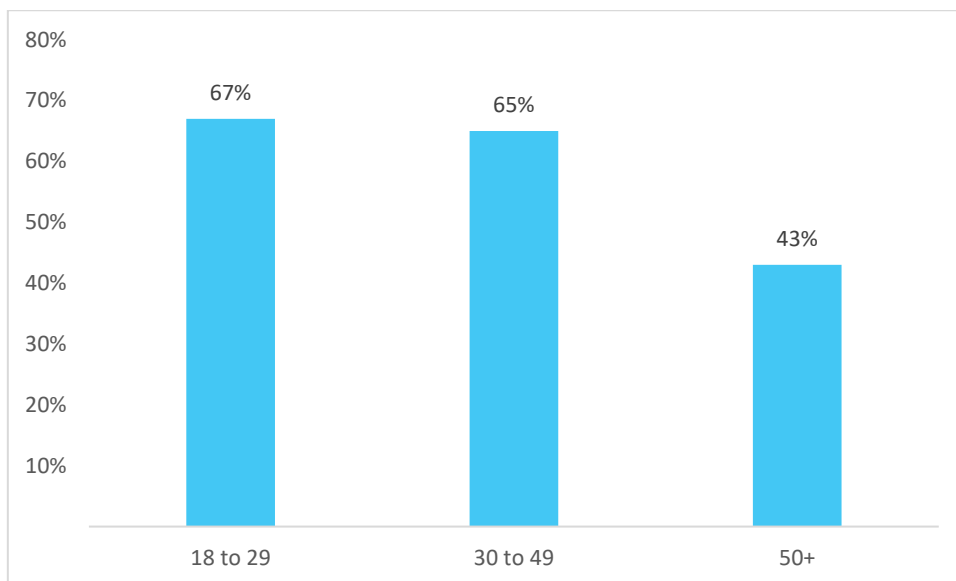


Figure 2. Older Australians were less likely to agree with the statement that “I usually change the default privacy and safety settings of websites and apps that I use”. Source: Ipsos 2022.

Income also impacted on whether participants find it easy to change their privacy settings. People on lower incomes were less likely to agree that changing default privacy and safety settings is easy.

The graph below shows that those on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum were less likely to agree than average, while those on the higher socioeconomic spectrum were more likely to agree.

Proportion of Australians that agree that it is “easy to adjust privacy settings” when using apps and websites, per income bracket.

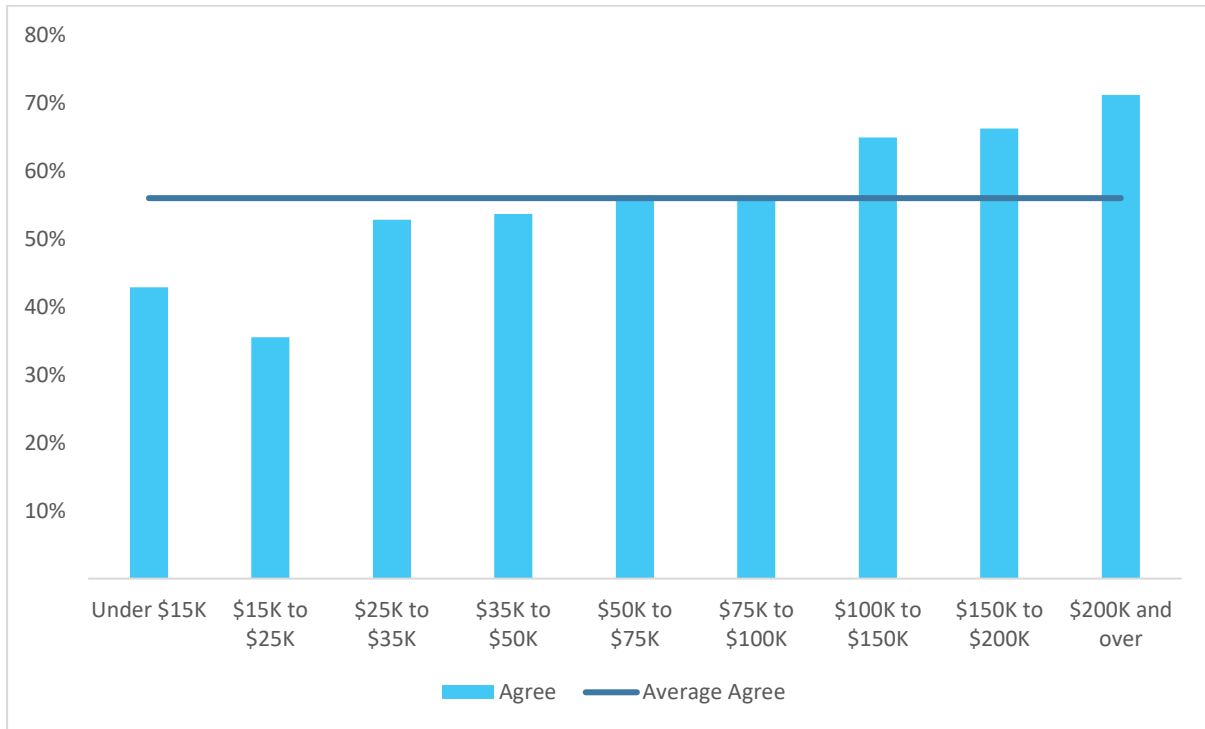


Figure 3. Australians on lower incomes were less likely to agree with the statement that “It is easy to change the default privacy and safety settings of website and apps”. Source: Ipsos 2022.

As the graph below shows, lower income groups were less likely to change their default settings. The survey indicates that respondents with lower incomes were less likely to agree that privacy and safety settings are easy to change and less likely to change their default settings. This may indicate that people on low incomes are more likely to find it difficult to change their setting and so less likely to do so.

Proportion of Australians that agree that they “usually change privacy and safety settings” when using apps and websites, per income bracket.

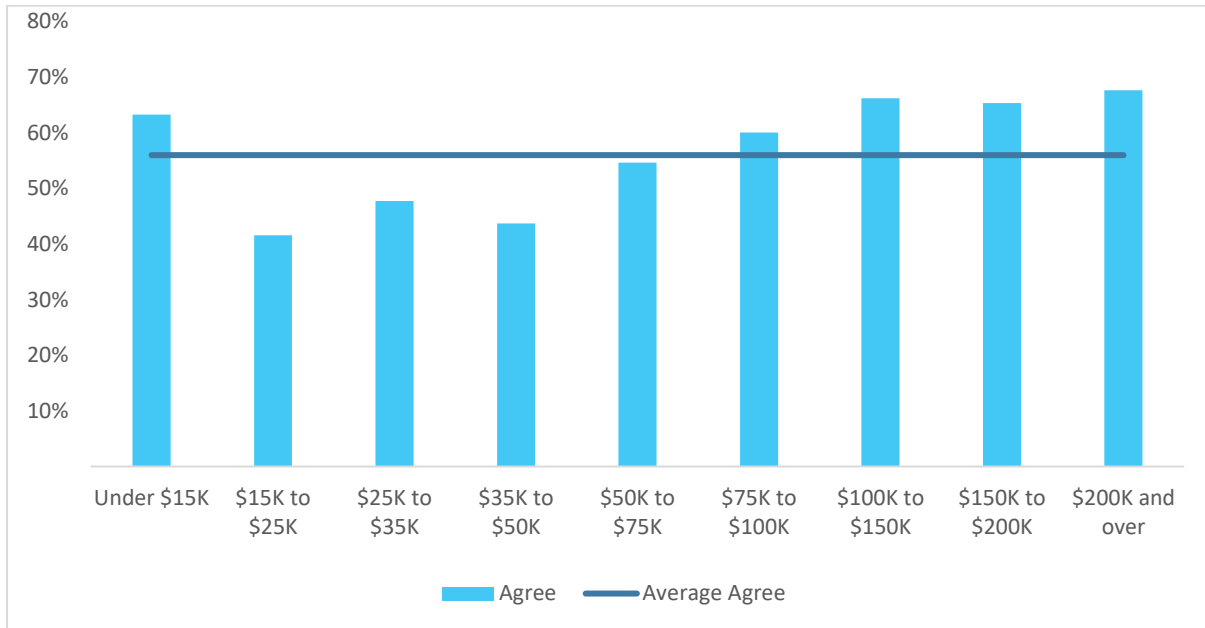


Figure 4. Australians on lower incomes were less likely to agree with the statement that “I usually change the default privacy and safety settings of websites and apps that I use”. Source: Ipsos 2022.

Geography also appears to play a part in how easy participants find it to take control of their safety and privacy. As our graph shows, those who live more than 5km from the nearest town were less likely to find it easy to change their default settings. Only 43% of respondents who live more than 5km from the nearest town agree that it is easy to change default settings and many 26% were unsure.

Proportion of Australians that agree that it is “easy to adjust privacy settings” when using apps and websites, per geographic bracket.

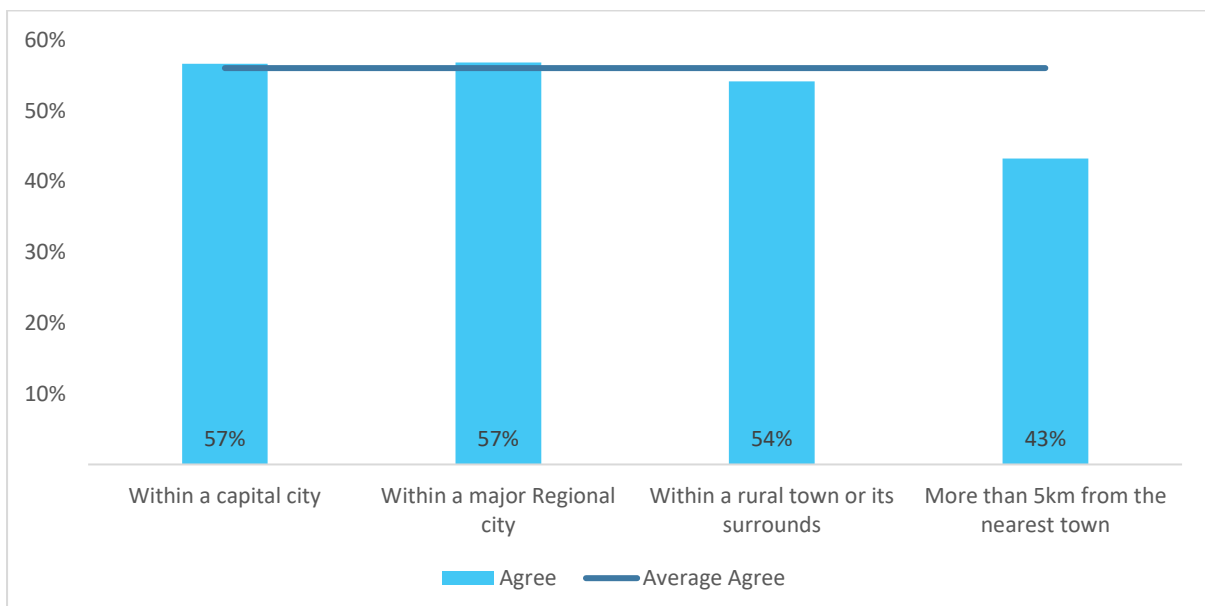


Figure 5. Australians living more than 5km from the nearest town were less likely to agree with the statement that “It is easy to change the default privacy and safety settings of website and apps”. Source: Ipsos 2022.

The notable gap of respondents from the country who find it difficult to change their settings also appears for those who say they usually change their default settings. This could indicate that people in regional and remote areas find it more difficult to change their default settings and so are less likely to do so.

Proportion of Australians who agree that they “usually change privacy and safety settings” when using apps and websites, per geographic bracket.

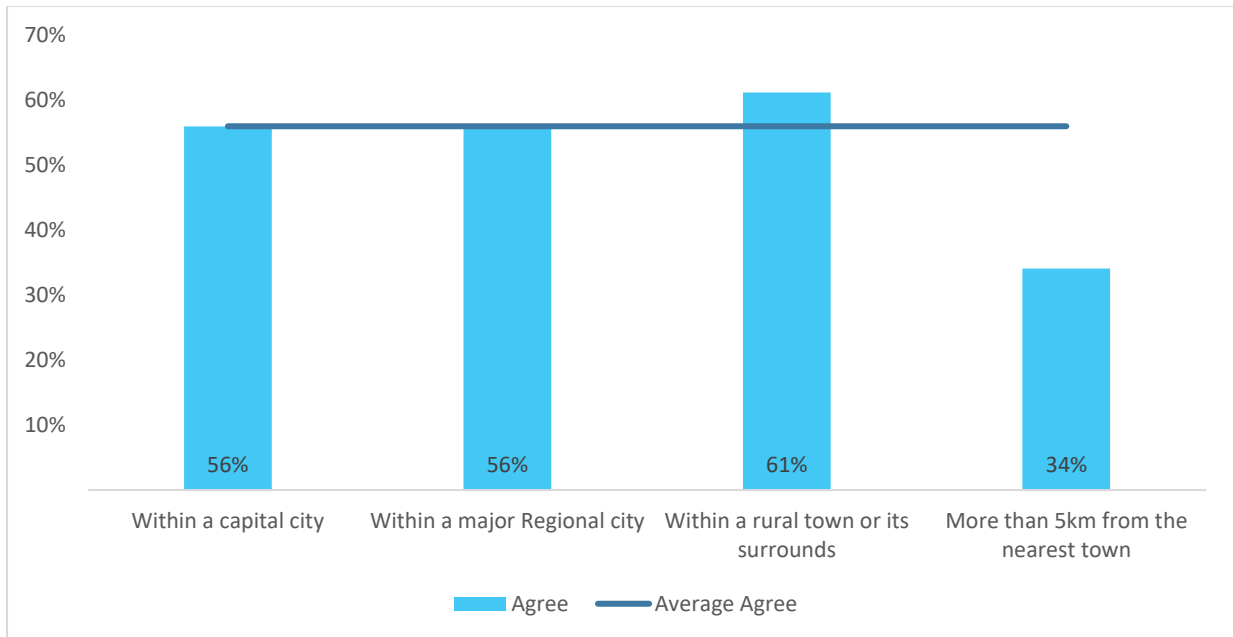


Figure 6. Australians living more than 5km from the nearest town were less likely to agree with the statement that “I usually change the default privacy and safety settings of websites and apps that I use”. Source: Ipsos 2022.

Many people think that digital platforms’ interfaces are not designed to their benefit. Our research found that 65% of respondents agree that “The menus on digital platforms are designed to make it hard to cancel your account or subscription”. According to previous research by the CPRC, “83% of Australians have experienced one or more negative consequences as a result of a website or app using design features aimed at influencing their behaviour”.⁶ This indicates a widespread suspicion among consumers that digital platform interface design contributes to consumer harms such as difficulty cancelling accounts or subscriptions. Clearly more needs to be done to ensure that users can confidently use digital platforms and trust that platform interfaces are designed fairly.

What is ACCAN doing about it?

ACCAN continues to engage on issues of privacy and unfair interface design on digital platforms. For example, in a recent submission to the ACCC’s Digital Platforms Services Inquiry we called for the empowerment of a regulatory body to ensure that digital platforms:

- Provide equal prominence between options to change default settings.
- Respect user choices of their settings and only use notifications reasonably.

⁶ CPRC 2022. *Duped By Design*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/dupedbydesign/>

- Make services as simple as possible to cancel.⁷

We recommend the ACCC introduce a prohibition on unfair trading practices into the Australian Consumer Law (ACL). This prohibition would address certain practices that are arguably oppressive, exploitative, or contrary to consumer expectations of fairness in the market, such as unfair interface design. ACCAN has also represented safety and fairness for consumers in a range of stakeholder meetings including with the ACCC and Digital Industry Group Incorporated (DIGI).

Trust

Protecting consumers from scams is crucial to communications policy. According to the ACCC, Australians lost over two billion dollars to scams in 2021.⁸ Social media was the “second highest contact method in terms of loss with \$56 million lost (17% of total losses).⁹ In a recent speech, Gina Cass-Gottlieb, Chair of the ACCC, recently stated that the regulator expects “organisations to be monitoring their own platforms, services, and transactions for scams”.¹⁰ She noted that while consumer education is important, “[w]e need to use technology and intelligence to disrupt the scammers before they can get to consumers”. This year the ACCC acted against Meta for allegedly facilitating the targeting of scam crypto currency ads.¹¹ Gerard Brody from Consumer Action Law Centre argues that cryptocurrencies are “intentionally complex and should not be advertised and marketed to the general public”.¹²

Our research found that most people think that digital platforms need to do more to reduce scams. 76% of respondents agreed that “Digital platforms are not doing enough to prevent people from being scammed online”. The ACCC notes that older people “lost more money than any other age group with almost \$82 million reported lost”.¹³ Our research found that older Australians, aged over 50, were more likely to agree that digital platforms were not doing enough to prevent scammers.

⁷ ACCAN 2022. ACCC DPSI September Interim Report. Available at: <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/1977-acc-dpsi-september-interim-report>

⁸ ACCC 2022. Targeting scams: report of the ACCC on scams activity 2021. Available at: <https://www.accc.gov.au/publications/targeting-scams-report-on-scam-activity/targeting-scams-report-of-the-acc-on-scams-activity-2021>

⁹ ACCC 2022, p.10. Targeting scams: report of the ACCC on scams activity 2021. Available at: <https://www.accc.gov.au/publications/targeting-scams-report-on-scam-activity/targeting-scams-report-of-the-acc-on-scams-activity-2021>

¹⁰ Cass-Gottlieb, G 2022. Making Australia a harder target for scammers. Available at: <https://www.accc.gov.au/speech/making-australia-a-harder-target-for-scammers>

¹¹ Kemp, K, 2022. *The ACCC is suing Meta for celebrity crypto scam ads on Facebook. Here's why the tech giant could be found liable.* Available at: <https://theconversation.com/the-acc-is-suing-meta-for-celebrity-crypto-scams-ads-on-facebook-heres-why-the-tech-giant-could-be-found-liable-179655>

¹² CALC. Available at: <https://consumeraction.org.au/crypto-as-risky-as-gambling-and-a-haven-for-scams-that-demands-action/>

¹³ ACCC 2022, p.11. Targeting scams: report of the ACCC on scams activity 2021. Available at: <https://www.accc.gov.au/publications/targeting-scams-report-on-scam-activity/targeting-scams-report-of-the-acc-on-scams-activity-2021>

Proportion of Australians who agree that “digital platforms are not doing enough to prevent people being scammed”, per age bracket.

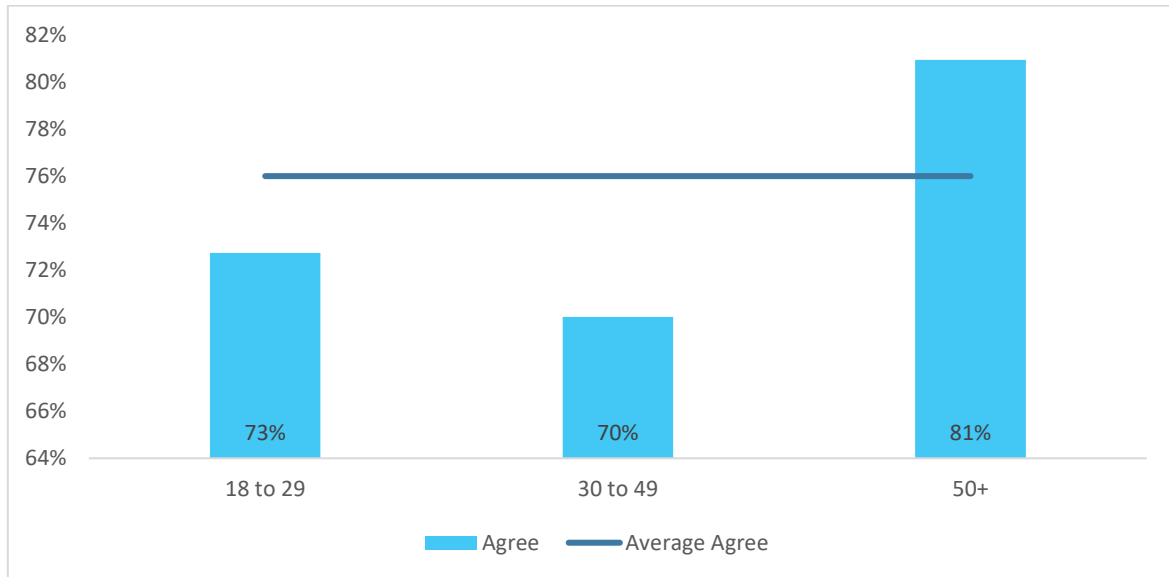


Figure 7. Australians over 50 were more likely to agree with the statement that “Digital platforms are not doing enough to prevent people from being scammed online”. Source: Ipsos 2022.

There are also public concerns about how trustworthy mobile apps on app stores are. The two dominant app stores are run by Apple and Google. An ACCC report found that “apps with the potential to harm consumers continue to be present on both app marketplaces.”¹⁴ The regulator noted that, “In the ACCC’s view, Apple and Google could do more to protect app users”.

Our research also found that there is a lack of trust of mobile app stores from consumers. 76% of our participants agreed that “I should be able to trust apps that I download from the app store” but only 65% of people agreed that “I trust apps that I download from the app store”. This means that there is an 11% gap between the number of people who said that we should be able to trust the apps on offer in these stores, but do not trust apps. Our research found that older people especially agreed that the app store should be trustworthy, with 91% of people over 50 agreeing that apps from the app store should be trustworthy. As Figure 8 below shows, while many people agree that apps should be trustworthy, almost everyone in the 30-49 year and 50+ years age brackets feel that they should be able to trust the apps they download.

¹⁴ ACCC 2021, p.11. *Digital platform services inquiry - March 2021 interim report*. Available at: <https://www.accc.gov.au/publications/serial-publications/digital-platform-services-inquiry-2020-2025/digital-platform-services-inquiry-march-2021-interim-report>

Proportion of Australians who agree that they “should be able to trust apps”, per age bracket.

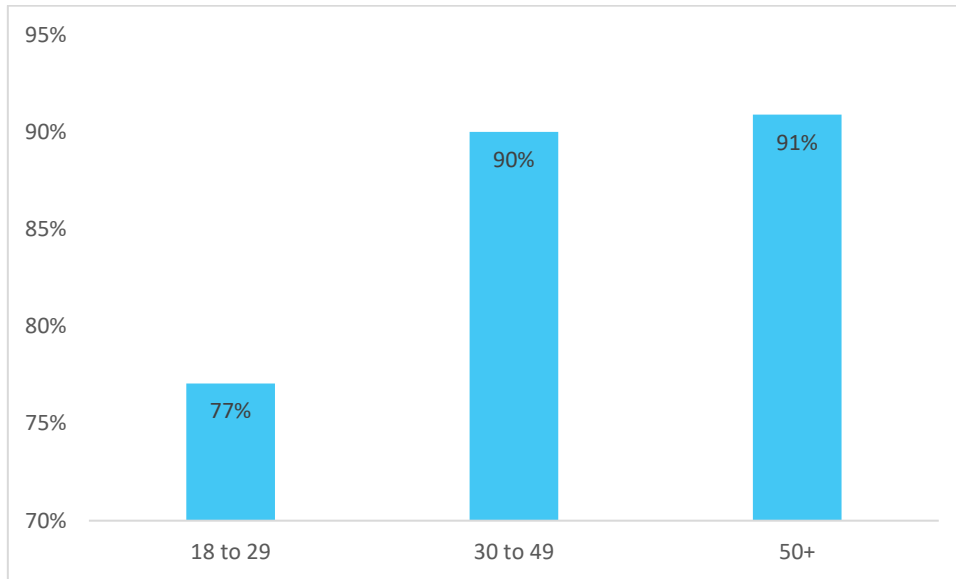


Figure 8. Older Australians were more likely to agree with the statement that “I should be able to trust apps that I download from the app store”. Source: Ipsos 2022.

Although 65% of people do agree that they trust apps downloaded from the app store, it appears that the agreement is somewhat reserved. When we breakdown the agreement into “somewhat agree”, “agree” and “strongly agree” responses we can clearly see that a much smaller number of people strongly agree that they trust apps and many are closer to the fence. Figure 9 below illustrates that across the three age brackets, more respondents somewhat trust apps they download and fewer strongly agree that they trust their apps. This indicates that there is more work to be done to foster consumer trust in app stores.

Proportion of Australians who agree that they “trust apps they download from the app store”, bracketed by “Somewhat agree”, “Agree” and “Strongly agree”.

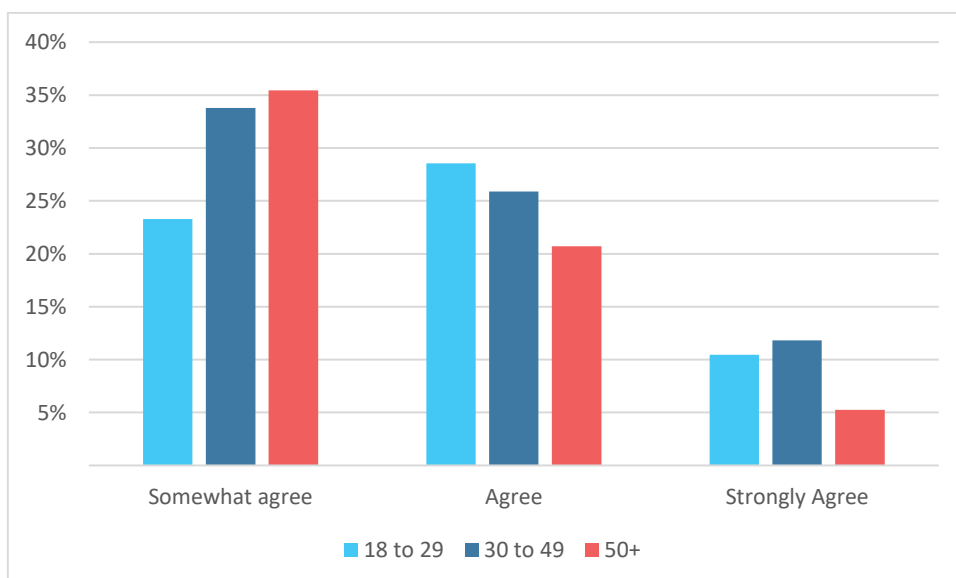


Figure 9. Of the people who do trust apps they download from the app store, respondents were more likely to “somewhat agree” than “strongly agree” to the question “I trust apps that I download from the app store”. Source: Ipsos 2022.

Income and geography also play a part in whether people trust apps that they download. Individuals on low incomes and people who lived in regional, rural and remote areas were less likely to trust apps that they download from the app store. As the graph below shows, respondents on lower incomes were less likely to trust apps that they download compared to respondents on higher incomes.

Proportion of Australians who agree that they “trust apps they download from app stores”, per income bracket.

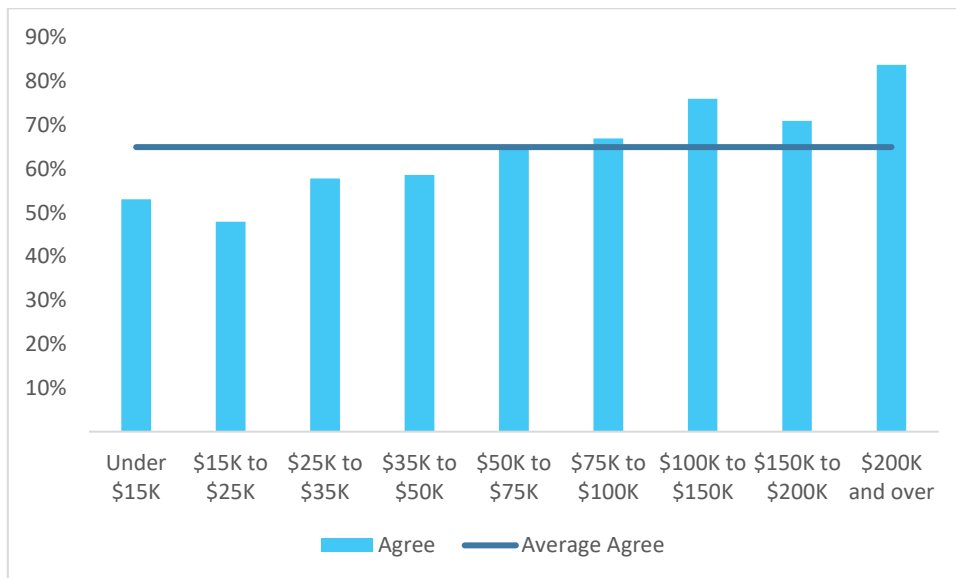


Figure 10. Poorer Australians were less likely to agree with the statement that “I trust apps that I download from the app store”. Source: Ipsos 2022.

Proportion of Australians who agree that they “trust apps they download from app stores”, per geographic bracket.



Figure 11. Australians living further from capital cities were less likely to agree with the statement that “I trust apps that I download from the app store”. Source: Ipsos 2022.

What is ACCAN doing about it?

Scams and mobile apps that do harm continue to be a focus for ACCAN. ACCAN strongly supported the development of industry standards to reduce scam calls and SMS in the telecommunications sector. As these protections come into effect we will continue to push for greater efforts to be made on digital platforms and app marketplaces. We support the ACCC's suggestion that digital platforms be required to:

- improve their existing processes to more effectively monitor, block and remove online scams and malicious apps from being displayed to their users and to manage the harms associated with the prevalence of fake online reviews on their platforms.
- notify and/or provide redress to their users who have been exposed to harmful content identified on their platforms.
- implement systems and processes that proactively prevent the distribution of online scams and malicious apps to their users, such verification requirements for advertisers and labelling that clearly distinguishes the advertisements of unverified advertisers.
- report regularly to relevant regulators and law enforcement agencies.¹⁵

ACCAN also supports the empowerment of a well-resourced body that can meaningfully investigate social media platforms to identify scams. Scammers will target people through the path of least resistance and ACCAN is determined to see avenues closed off and consumer protections hardened wherever possible.

Choice and Competition

Choice and competition are vital for driving innovation and ensuring that consumers can find products that meet their needs. However, the Australian digital platform market is dominated by a few large companies. For example, the ACCC's Digital Platforms final report identified Google and Facebook as "the two largest digital platforms in Australia and the amount of time Australian consumers spend on Google and Facebook dwarfs other rival applications and websites".¹⁶ Experts note that it can be "extremely hard" for new technology company entrants to challenge incumbent players.¹⁷ More work is needed to provide consumers with choice and promote fair and efficient digital platform markets.

Interoperability is a key pillar of enabling competition for digital platforms but many digital platform services remain far less interoperable than they should be. For example, consumers would benefit if online private messaging services were more interoperable than they currently are, allowing consumers to choose services based on their merit and not by the social networks they hold. If people could message each other, no matter the service their contacts were on, they could pick an app or platform that best suits them. There have been some recent developments in

¹⁵ ACCC 2022. *September 2022 interim report Discussion paper*, available: <https://www.accc.gov.au/focus-areas/inquiries-ongoing/digital-platform-services-inquiry-2020-2025/september-2022-interim-report>

¹⁶ ACCC, 2019, p.4. *Digital platforms inquiry - final report*. Available at: <https://www.accc.gov.au/publications/digital-platforms-inquiry-final-report>

¹⁷ Barwise, P. and Watkins, L., 2018, p.24. The evolution of digital dominance. *Digital dominance: the power of Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple*, pp.21-49. Available at: http://lbsresearch.london.edu/id/eprint/914/1/9780190845124_Barwise_Chapter%201.pdf

interoperability, such as between Meta owned apps¹⁸ and between Google’s message app and Apple’s iMessage.¹⁹ However, the limited nature of these recent developments, such as the limited interoperability between Meta owned Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, illustrates the inadequate interoperability offered to consumers. The lack of established standards and interoperability between popular messaging apps including Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Telegram or Snapchat forces people to choose which platforms they use based on their broader social networks instead of each app’s merits.

Our research found that many people, especially younger people, must use multiple messaging apps to stay connected with friends and family. 57% of our respondents agreed that “I have to use multiple messaging apps (e.g., iMessage, Facebook Messenger, Telegram, Snapchat) to stay connected with friends and family”.

Proportion of Australians who agree that they “have to use multiple messaging apps”, per age bracket.

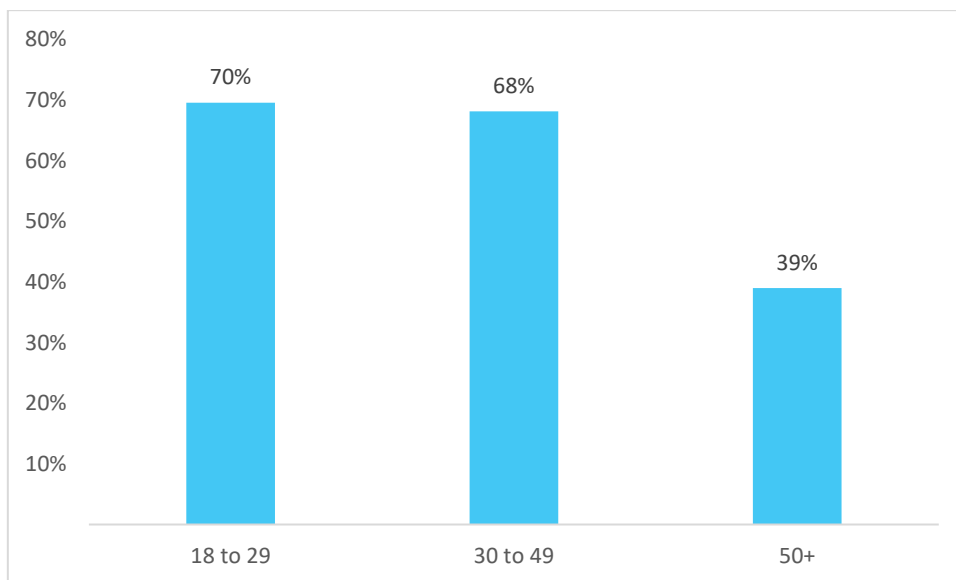


Figure 12. Younger people were more likely to agree with the statement that “I have to use multiple messaging apps (e.g., iMessage, Facebook Messenger, Telegram, Snapchat) to stay connected with friends and family”. Source: Ipsos 2022.

Many people supported the idea that messaging apps should have greater interoperability. 67% of people agreed that “I would prefer to use a single messaging app (e.g., iMessage, Facebook Messenger, Telegram, Snapchat) to stay connected with friends and family”. More than half (55%) of the people we asked, agreed that “Messaging apps (e.g., iMessage, FB Messenger, Telegram, Snapchat) should transmit messages to any other messaging apps (e.g. like email/SMS can send messages to anyone, regardless of platform/provider)”. As the graph below shows, younger people, who are more likely to use multiple messaging apps were also more likely to want greater interoperability between apps. This could suggest that some people feel compelled into using multiple apps because of a lack of interoperability.

¹⁸ TechCrunch 2020, Facebook introduces cross-app communication between Messenger and Instagram, plus other features, available: <https://techcrunch.com/2020/09/30/facebook-introduces-cross-app-communication-between-messenger-and-instagram-plus-other-features/>

¹⁹ TechCrunch 2022, Google’s Messages app can now handle iMessage reactions, challenges Apple with new features, available: <https://techcrunch.com/2022/03/10/googles-message-app-can-now-handle-imessage-reactions-challenges-apple-with-new-features/>

Proportion of Australians who agree that “messaging apps should transmit messages to any other messaging apps”, per age bracket.

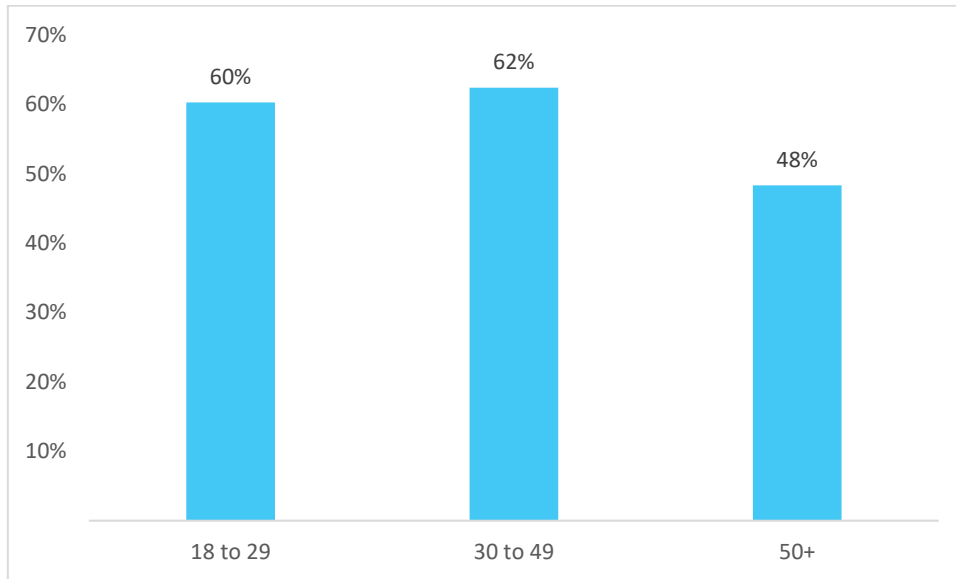


Figure 13. Adults up to the age of 50 were more likely to agree with the statement that “Messaging apps should transmit messages to any other messaging apps”. Source: Ipsos 2022.

We also found that people in the country were more likely to want greater interoperability between their messaging apps. 61% of people who lived more than 5kms from the nearest town think that messaging apps should be interoperable compared to 55% of people in a capital city.

Proportion of Australians who agree that “messaging apps should transmit messages to any other messaging apps”, per geographic bracket.

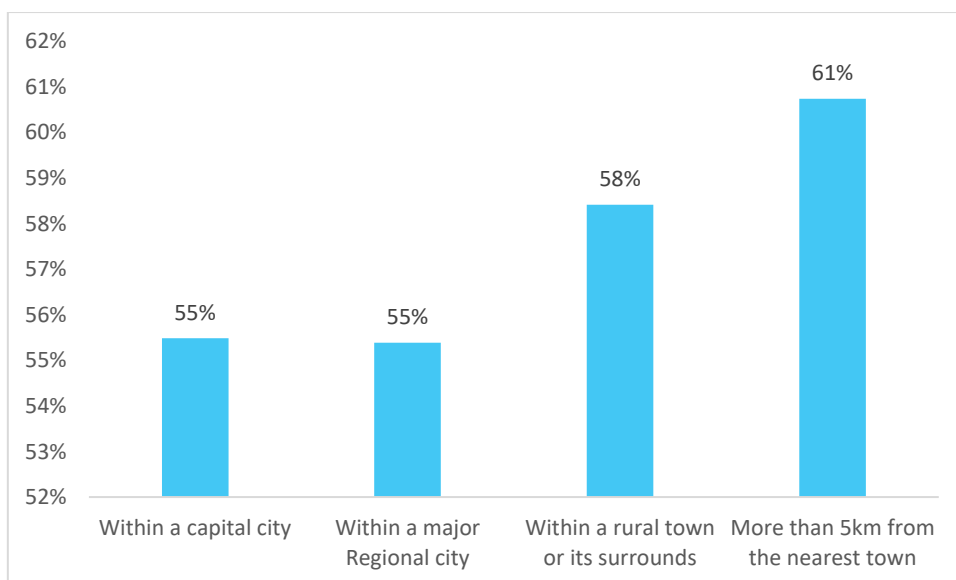


Figure 14. People in a “rural town or its surrounds” or “more than 5km from the nearest town” were more likely to agree with the statement that “Messaging apps should transmit messages to any other messaging apps”. Source: Ipsos 2022.

74% of people who live more than 5kms from the nearest town would prefer to use a single messaging app compared to 67% in a capital city.

Proportion of Australians who agree that they would “prefer to use a single messaging app”, per geographic bracket.

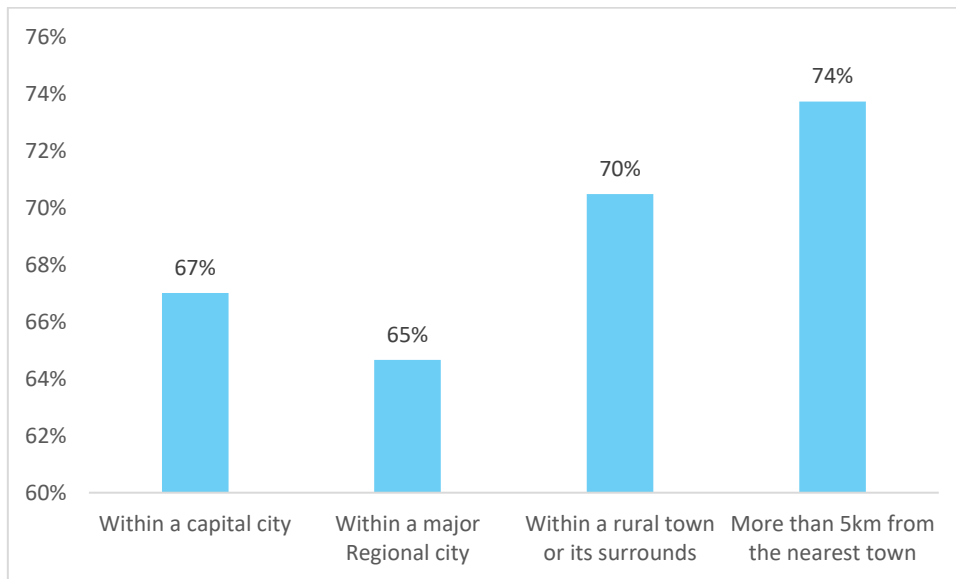


Figure 15. People in a “rural town or its surrounds” or “more than 5km from the nearest town” were more likely to agree with the statement that “I would prefer to use a single messaging app (e.g., iMessage, Facebook Messenger, Telegram, Snapchat) to stay connected with friends and family”. Source: Ipsos 2022.

An issue related to interoperability is data portability. Data portability recognises that consumers own their data, and they should reasonably be able to transfer it between comparable services as they choose. Data portability can contribute to a more competitive digital platform market by allowing users to switch services more easily. For example, consumers could keep their music playlist data when switching between music streaming services or move their photos between different photo apps.

The large digital platforms are aware that consumers want greater choice with the services they use and desire the removal of barriers to switching services or leaving a platform. As Google wrote recently, people “want the freedom to be able to use different online services without worrying about losing their photos, contacts, emails and other data if they close an account or switch to a new company”.²⁰ Meta also recently outlined its attempts to give “people more control and choice over their data”.²¹ These observations were both accompanied by announcements of further efforts to foster data portability between digital platforms. Both Google and Meta have participated in efforts such as the Data Transfer Project (DTP) for several years. However, years later, the DTP product is “still in development”.²² In a recent post on data portability, Meta argues that “the ecosystem we are building to support data portability will not come to fruition without regulation that clarifies

²⁰ Google 2022. *Building data portability to help consumers choose*. Available at: <https://blog.google/outreach-initiatives/public-policy/building-data-portability-help-consumers-choose/>

²¹ Meta 2021. *Transfer Your Facebook Posts and Notes With Our Expanded Data Portability Tool*. Available at: <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/04/transfer-your-facebook-posts-and-notes-with-our-expanded-data-portability-tool/>

²² For further information, see: <https://datatransferproject.dev/>

which data should be made portable and who is responsible for protecting data once it has been transferred”.²³

When we asked, people were supportive of data portability. 66% of respondents agreed that “People should be able to move their social media account easily to other social media platforms”. 71% of young people were especially supportive of the ability to move accounts between social media platforms. Many people (21%) were unsure, indicating a need for more consumer consultation and education, particular for older people. 31% of people over 50 were unsure.

Proportion of Australians who agree that “people should be able to move their social media account”, per age bracket.

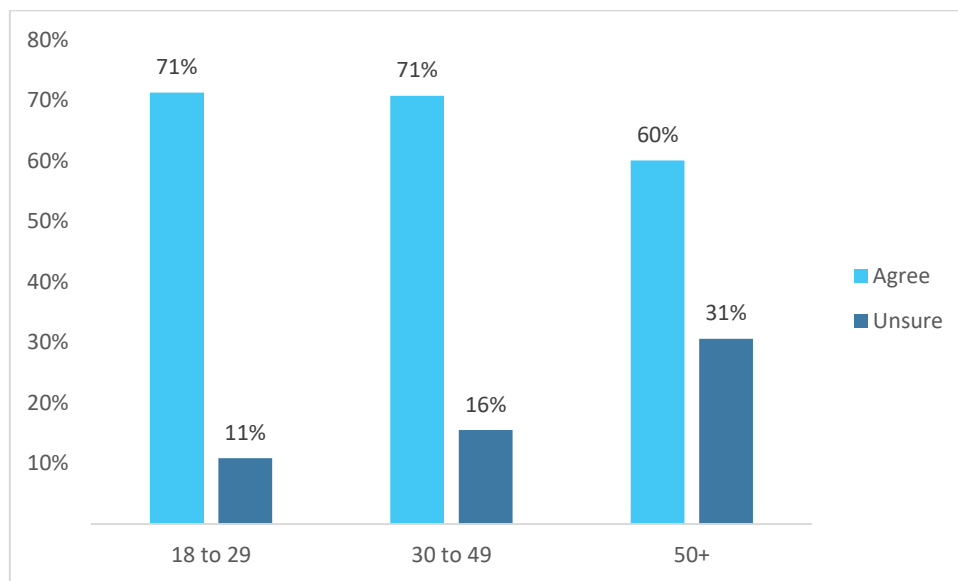


Figure 16. Adults up to the age of 50 were more likely to agree with the statement that “People should be able to move their social media account easily to other social media platforms”. Source: Ipsos 2022.

What is ACCAN doing about it?

ACCAN continues to advocate for greater choice for consumers. In a recent submission to the ACCC we urged stakeholders, like digital platforms, to develop and adopt effective interoperability and data portability mechanisms.²⁴ These mechanisms could help facilitate meaningful consumer choice in the market. Given the number of older people who were unsure about competition measures like data portability ACCAN is considering methods to consult with and inform consumers on this issue.

Conclusion

ACCAN’s research found that consumers expect more from digital platforms. We found that:

- More needs to be done so that people can more easily change their privacy settings.
- Consumers expect digital platforms to do more to reduce scams and most consumers expect app stores to offer trustworthy apps.

²³ Meta 2021. *Transfer Your Facebook Posts and Notes With Our Expanded Data Portability Tool*. Available at: <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/04/transfer-your-facebook-posts-and-notes-with-our-expanded-data-portability-tool/>

²⁴ ACCAN 2022. *Digital Platform Services Inquiry – March 2023 Report on Social Media Services*. Available at: <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/2018-accr-report-on-social-media-services-issues-paper>

- Many consumers would like options to give them more choice. They think that digital platforms should offer better interoperability and make it easier to move between services without losing their data.

ACCAN will continue to advocate for Australians who use digital platforms and ensure that a consumer voice is heard in the emerging communications landscape.

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) is Australia's peak communication consumer organisation. The operation of ACCAN is made possible by funding provided by the Commonwealth of Australia under section 593 of the Telecommunications Act 1997. This funding is recovered from charges on telecommunications carriers.
