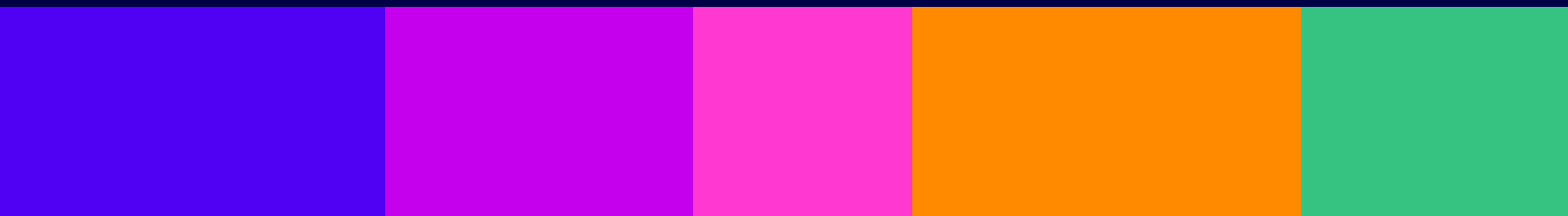# Adults' Media Use and Attitudes report 2023

Published 29 March 2023

Welsh version available

Overview

This report examines adults' media literacy in the UK. The Communications Act 2003 places a responsibility on Ofcom to promote, and to carry out research into, media literacy. Ofcom's definition of media literacy is 'the ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts'. The report is a reference document for industry, stakeholders, and the general public. This report supports our work in this area and our wider Making Sense of Media programme.

What we have found

The benefits of being online

- **The majority of internet users agreed that the benefits of being online outweigh the risks:** 69% of internet users agreed, 8% disagreed and 23% were unsure on where the balance lay.

- **Being online offers opportunities for learning, education, and connection:** the internet had helped the majority of users learn a new skill and broaden their view of the world. Online communication platforms had also helped most users keep in touch with family and friends.

Mental health and wellbeing

- **Opinion was divided on the mental health impact of using online communication platforms:** more users of these platforms agreed (35%) than disagreed (24%) that use of the platforms is good for their mental health, but a larger proportion (40%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

- **Most internet users had been online to support their wellbeing:** nearly eight in ten had done this, rising to 89% of internet users aged 16-24. The most popular activities users had sought help with were looking up health symptoms, for relaxation, and for healthy eating and nutrition.

- **Just over half (51%) of social media users aged 16-24 thought they spent too much time on social media:** up from 42% in 2021. This group were more likely than average to be actively managing the time they spent online, with 36% having taken a deliberate break from using any social media apps and 32% having deleted apps to avoid spending too much time on them.

Use of online communication platforms

- **Internet users aged 16-24 are avid users of online communication platforms:** this group used an average of nine such platforms, compared to six for the average adult internet user.

- **Well-established online communication platforms have continued to grow:** YouTube (80%), WhatsApp (79%), Facebook (77%), and Instagram (57%) were the most popular online communication platforms and all except YouTube had seen year-on-year user growth.

- **TikTok has continued to cement its popularity among younger internet users:** 42% of those online used TikTok, rising to 85% of those aged 16-24; this is up year on year both for adults (34% in 2021) and 16-24s (74% in 2021). Just over a quarter (27%) of social media users aged 16-24 said the app was their main social media platform, second only to Snapchat (29%).

- **'In the moment' posting on BeReal caught the attention of younger internet users:** use of this platform among users aged 16-24 grew from 9% to 22% between spring and autumn 2022.

Critically evaluating online information

- **There are signs that internet users' critical understanding skillsets are improving:** 60% of social media users were confident and able to identify a fake social media profile (up from 55% in 2021), and while less than half (46%) of search engine users were both confident and able to recognise search engine advertising, this was up from 42% in 2021.

- **More internet users are considering the truthfulness of the online information they consume, but evaluating such content comes with challenges:** 77% of internet users said they thought about whether the information they find online is truthful (up from 73% in 2021), but when shown a genuine social media post, there was a lack of consensus on its validity.

- **Three-quarters of internet users were both confident and able to identify a suspicious email, but a minority were leaving themselves at risk:** users aged 16-34 were more likely to be confident but not able, so were at greater risk of making an error in judgement.

Knowledge and understanding of the online marketplace

- **There were differences in the ability to recognise different forms of online advertising:** in using example scenarios, more social media users (67%) were confident and able to recognise social media advertising than search engine users were for search engine advertising.

- **The majority of internet users had taken some action to manage the online advertising they see:** the most common actions taken were unsubscribing from marketing emails (66%) and selecting 'no' to avoid promotional emails (60%).

Home internet access and smartphone use

- **Access to the internet at home was widespread, but a residual group of households remain offline:** 7% of households did not have access to the internet at home.

- **Nearly one in five internet users only go online via a smartphone:** as some devices are less well suited to certain online activities, such as filling in forms, users who exclusively go online via a smartphone can face a risk of digital exclusion.

- **Mobile phones would be the device most missed by adults:** despite the associated constraints with exclusively going online via a smartphone, the device is integral to the online lives of many and was the preferred device for completing a range of activities online.

Methodology

Drawing largely on our quantitative Adults' Media Literacy Tracker surveys, this report provides evidence on media use, attitudes and understanding among UK adults, which for the purposes of this research are aged 16 and over. More detail, including additional demographic analysis and responses to the full set of survey questions, can be found in the accompanying interactive report and data tables.

To support us in providing an over-arching narrative on the key themes of adults' media experience in 2022, this report also draws on our *Adults' Media Lives* research. This is a qualitative, longitudinal, ethnographic project which has been running since 2005. The research follows 20 participants over time – with 12 of them having been in the study for at least 15 years – interviewing them at home to understand their relationship with digital media. This year, interviews of up to 90 minutes were mostly conducted face-to-face in home, with three interviews being held over Zoom.

The Adults' Media Literacy tracker comprises three surveys: the core survey, online behaviour and attitudes, and online knowledge and understanding. This year we changed the core survey from a mixture of post-to-web, post-to-paper and online panel recruitment to face-to-face fieldwork, with additional online interviews conducted through a research panel.[1]
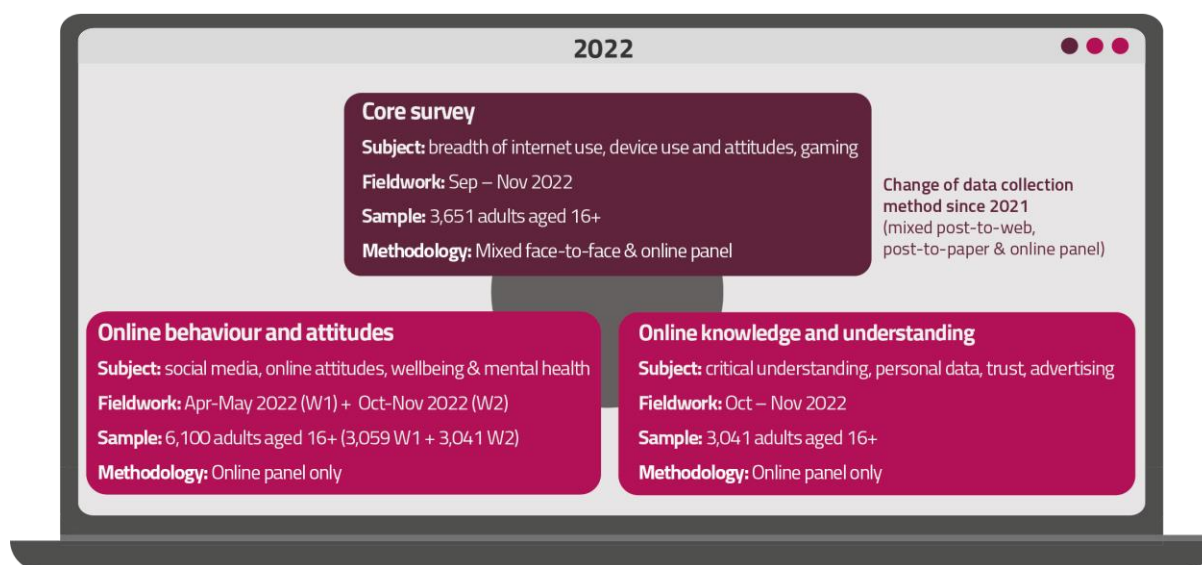
Where there has been a substantial shift in methodology (i.e., for questions carried on the core survey), direct comparisons between the current and previous waves are not possible. However, wherever the methodology and questions have been kept consistent, without any significant change of wording, in both 2021 and 2022 (i.e., for questions carried on the online behaviour and attitudes or the online knowledge and understanding surveys), we can draw comparisons where it is relevant to do so.

Our surveys sought to gauge UK internet users' opinions on a range of aspects about being online. Questions were not asked to test any existing or potential regulatory frameworks. The findings

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[1] Post-to-web, post-to-paper and online panel recruitment was using during Covid-19 restrictions; face-to-face fieldwork will be maintained moving forwards.

reflect general consumer attitudes. They do not necessarily reflect the views of Ofcom, including in relation to our future Online Safety duties.

Use of the internet is ubiquitous and integrated into many facets of everyday life, but users of the internet are not homogenous

More than nine in ten (92%) UK adults use the internet at home or elsewhere. Accessing information, education, entertainment and social connection can all occur online, reflecting the ever-blurring nature of 'life' and 'life online'.

While use of the internet is near-universal, its users are not homogenous. To describe these differences, we use a breadth of use analysis throughout this report. This analysis defines three categories of internet user, based on the range of activities they complete online. 'Narrow' internet users are defined as those who had ever undertaken between one and four of the 13 online activities we asked about.[2] This accounted for 29% of internet users. 'Medium' internet users had ever undertaken between five and eight activities, and this accounted for 36% of internet users. Finally, 'broad' internet users had ever undertaken between nine and 13 of the activities, and this accounted for 31% of internet users.

In addition to the breadth of use analysis, where relevant to do so, this report will pull out demographic differences by age, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds.[3]

While most adults in the UK are online, and have access to the internet at home, it is important to acknowledge this is not the case for everyone. We will address the topic of digital exclusion in the 'Home internet access and smartphone use' chapter later in this report.

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[2] The 13 activities we ask about are: 1. Online banking or paying bills. 2. Paying for council tax or another local council service. 3. Looking for public services information on government sites. 4. Finding information for work/ business/ school/ college/ university. 5. Looking or applying for jobs. 6. Finding information for leisure time. 7. Completing government processes. 8. Signing a petition or using a campaigning website. 9. Using streamed audio services. 10. Listening to live, catch-up or on-demand radio through a website or app. 11. Watching TV programmes/ films/ content. 12. Watching or posting live stream videos. 13. Playing games online. This is not an exhaustive list of online activities, but this selection was found to be the most discriminating in determining breadth of use, from an initial longer list of activities.

[3] A person's socio-economic status is based on the type of work they do, or what they used to do if they are retired. AB: higher & intermediate managerial, administrative, professional occupations; C1: supervisory, clerical & junior managerial, administrative, professional occupations; C2: skilled manual occupations; DE: semi-skilled & unskilled manual occupations, unemployed and lowest-grade occupations.

Media use by age: a snapshot

Legend:
⬆ More likely than the UK average
⬇ Less likely than the UK average
📶 Among internet users
🔍 Among search engine users

*Online communication platforms = social media, messaging, video sharing, live streaming

16-24
- ⬆ **93%** use the internet at home
- **19%** only use a smartphone to go online 📶
- **28%** are narrow internet users 📶
- ⬆ **88%** play games on any device
- ⬆ **87%** use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
- ⬇ **66%** are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
- **42%** are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
- **81%** think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

25-34
- ⬆ **96%** use the internet at home
- **19%** only use a smartphone to go online 📶
- **26%** are narrow internet users 📶
- ⬆ **76%** play games on any device
- ⬆ **83%** use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
- **74%** are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
- **50%** are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
- **78%** think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

35-44
- ⬆ **96%** use the internet at home
- **19%** only use a smartphone to go online 📶
- ⬇ **21%** are narrow internet users 📶
- ⬆ **67%** play games on any device
- ⬆ **74%** use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
- **80%** are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
- **43%** are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
- **77%** think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

45-54
- ⬆ **96%** use the internet at home
- **21%** only use a smartphone to go online 📶
- **27%** are narrow internet users 📶
- **54%** play games on any device
- **58%** use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
- **80%** are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
- **46%** are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
- **73%** think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

55-64
- **88%** use the internet at home
- **19%** only use a smartphone to go online 📶
- **34%** are narrow internet users 📶
- ⬇ **41%** play games on any device
- ⬇ **41%** use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
- **79%** are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
- **44%** are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
- **73%** think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

65+
- ⬇ **69%** use the internet at home
- ⬇ **12%** only use a smartphone to go online 📶
- ⬆ **43%** are narrow internet users 📶
- ⬇ **21%** play games on any device
- ⬇ **19%** use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
- **73%** are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
- **49%** are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
- **80%** think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

Media use by socio-economic group: a snapshot

AB
- ⬆ **94%** use the internet at home
- ⬇ **11%** only use a smartphone to go online 📶
- ⬇ **22%** are narrow internet users 📶
- ⬆ **62%** play games on any device
- **63%** use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
- **78%** are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
- **50%** are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
- ⬆ **81%** think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

C1
- ⬆ **93%** use the internet at home
- **17%** only use a smartphone to go online 📶
- ⬇ **25%** are narrow internet users 📶
- **56%** play games on any device
- **60%** use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
- **79%** are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
- ⬆ **52%** are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
- **80%** think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

C2
- **88%** use the internet at home
- **22%** only use a smartphone to go online 📶
- ⬆ **37%** are narrow internet users 📶
- **55%** play games on any device
- **64%** use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
- **74%** are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
- **42%** are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
- **73%** think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

DE
- ⬇ **79%** use the internet at home
- ⬆ **27%** only use a smartphone to go online 📶
- ⬆ **38%** are narrow internet users 📶
- ⬇ **49%** play games on any device
- ⬇ **58%** use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
- ⬇ **69%** are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
- ⬇ **36%** are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
- ⬇ **71%** think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

Media use by gender: a snapshot

Men
- **87%** use the internet at home
- ⬇ **16%** only use a smartphone to go online 📶
- **29%** are narrow internet users 📶
- **55%** play games on any device
- ⬆ **63%** use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
- **76%** are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
- ⬆ **48%** are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
- **78%** think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

Women
- **90%** use the internet at home
- ⬆ **21%** only use a smartphone to go online 📶
- **30%** are narrow internet users 📶
- **56%** play games on any device
- ⬇ **59%** use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
- **75%** are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
- ⬇ **43%** are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
- **75%** think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

Media use by nation: a snapshot

ENGLAND

89% use the internet at home
18% only use a smartphone to go online 📶
29% are narrow internet users 📶
56% play games on any device
61% use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
76% are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
45% are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
77% think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

SCOTLAND

87% use the internet at home
19% only use a smartphone to go online 📶
31% are narrow internet users 📶
56% play games on any device
64% use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
73% are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
50% are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
75% think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

WALES

92% use the internet at home
⬆ **27%** only use a smartphone to go online 📶
36% are narrow internet users 📶
52% play games on any device
64% use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
75% are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
42% are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
73% think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

N IRELAND

96% use the internet at home
20% only use a smartphone to go online 📶
28% are narrow internet users 📶
50% play games on any device
62% use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
75% are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
48% are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
73% think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

Media use by breadth of internet use: a snapshot

Narrow internet users

92% use the internet at home
⬆ **30%** only use a smartphone to go online 📶
⬇ **50%** play games on any device
⬇ **35%** use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
⬇ **61%** are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
⬇ **35%** are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
⬇ **64%** think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶
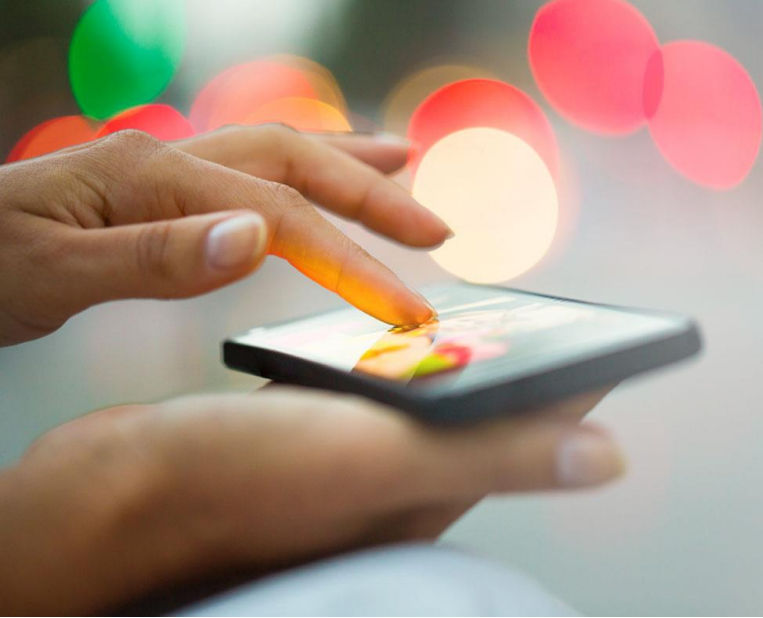
Broad internet users

100% use the internet at home
⬇ **9%** only use a smartphone to go online 📶
⬆ **75%** play games on any device
⬆ **84%** use all four types of online communication platforms* 📶
⬆ **85%** are confident AND able to identify scam emails 📶
⬆ **54%** are confident AND able to recognise search engine advertising 🔍
⬆ **84%** think about the truthfulness of factual information online 📶

Summary of key findings

The benefits of being online

The benefits of being online outweigh the risks for most internet users

Being online provides great opportunities for connection, education and entertainment. Nearly seven in ten (69%) internet users agreed that the benefits of being online outweigh the risks; only 8% disagreed, with nearly a quarter (23%) unsure where the balance lay.

Broad users of the internet and those from ABC1 households were more likely than average to agree that the benefits of being online outweigh the risks, whereas narrow internet users and those from C2DE households were less likely than average to agree.

Looking at some of the benefits that being online offers, 70% of internet users agreed that being online has helped them to learn a new skill, and three-quarters agreed that it has helped them to broaden their understanding or view of the world. Similarly, 77% of online communication platform users agreed that the platforms have helped them to keep in touch with their family and friends. Agreement across all these statements was higher than average among broad internet users, whose breadth of use implies they are tapping into more of the benefits that online life has to offer.

70% of internet users agreed that being online has helped them learn a new skill

69% ✓   **8%** ✗

"For me, the benefits of being online outweigh the risks"

75% agreed it has helped them to broaden their understanding or view of the world
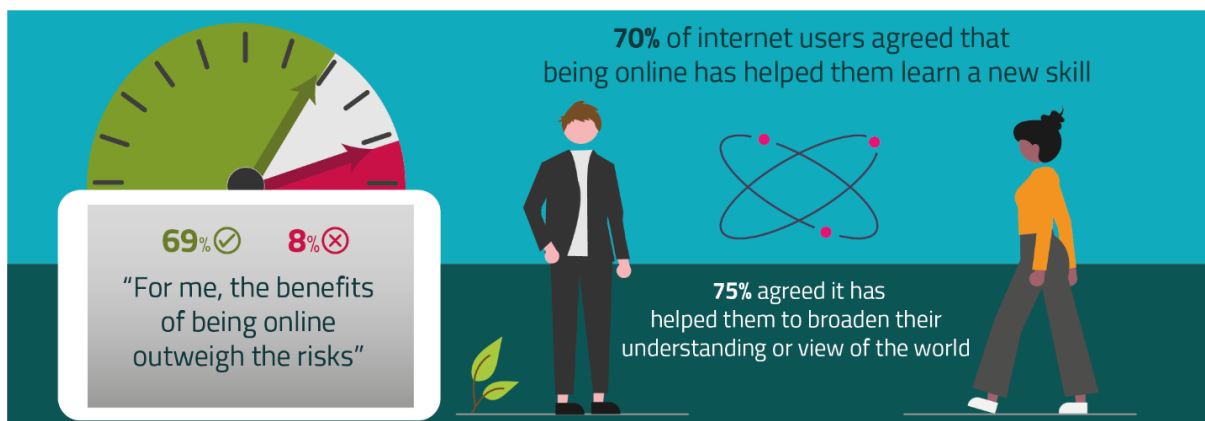
Participants in the *Adults' Media Lives* study also discussed how being online has positively influenced their everyday life. For example, participants mentioned using specialist apps to help address specific needs; such apps included a project planning app for arranging sports coaching sessions, fitness apps for home workouts and food shopping apps to find 'magic bags' of clearance food at local supermarkets.

I've been using an app called Notion because I'm doing a lot of fitness programmes for work… It keeps everything together… You can add documents to it and have it all in the same place. It's easier.

Female, 22, Sports Coach, Warwick

I've been looking at maybe stopping my gym membership recently and finding ways of engaging with things like Zwift, to motivate me to do a bit more sport around the house.

Male, 43, Web Officer, Cardiff

You download this website and it will say to you "Right, there's two magic bags at [shop]". I tried it. You pay £3.30 for a magic bag at [shop] and it should have £10 worth of stuff in it. Too Good to Go – that's what it's called. So you're not throwing out waste stuff. It's all yellow ticket stuff. I went over there, picked up my two bags of stuff and it's a multitude of everything.

Female, 49, Carer, Chelmsford

Mental health and wellbeing

Opinion was divided on the mental health impact of using online communication platforms

The use of online communication platforms was near-universal among internet users, with 98% using these types of apps or sites. 'Online communication platforms' encompass four categories of use: using apps or sites to send messages, chat or make voice or video calls (95%); watching/uploading content on video-sharing platforms (90%); using social media apps or sites (90%); and using live streaming apps or sites to view/share content (64%). We will discuss the use of these platforms in more detail in the next chapter.

When asked the extent to which users of online communication platforms agree that 'using these apps or sites [online communication platforms] is good for my mental health', users were more likely to agree than disagree, but opinion was divided: 35% of users agreed and 24% disagreed. Two in five neither agreed nor disagreed, possibly reflecting those who were undecided on the overall impact or felt that it depended on wider contextual factors (such as the platform or activity being done).

We saw that broad internet users were more likely to think that the benefits of being online outweighed the risks. However, although more broad internet users agreed (37%) than disagreed (28%) that the use of online communication platforms is good for mental health, the proportion disagreeing was higher than average. Similarly, while more online communication platform users aged 16-24 agreed (36%) than disagreed (31%) with this statement, disagreement was higher than average.

Similarly, opinion was divided on how the use of online communication platforms makes users feel about themselves. Nearly a third of users (32%) agreed that using these apps or sites 'makes me feel better about myself', rising to 43% of users aged 16-24. However, about a quarter (24%) of users disagreed and a larger proportion were neutral or did not know how to answer (43%).

Participants in the *Adults' Media Lives* study also reflected on their mental health and the factors affecting it. Social media was cited as one facet of a broader backdrop of issues affecting their mental health, and while the root causes of some issues were often circumstantial (for example, the pandemic or a bereavement), broader media-related factors (e.g. social media or the news) were often seen to exacerbate personal issues.

> *Mental health-wise, my husband was massively affected by Covid and… since Covid things have got worse… He just didn't recognise the family around him. We've talked about splitting for quite a while because he's just not helping at all. All he's doing is being on his phone. It's like an addiction.*

Female, 45, PA, Woking

### Nearly nine in ten internet users aged 16-24 have gone online to support their wellbeing

Although there is no consensus on the impact of using online communication platforms on a user's mental health, considering the internet more broadly, the majority of internet users (78%) had used
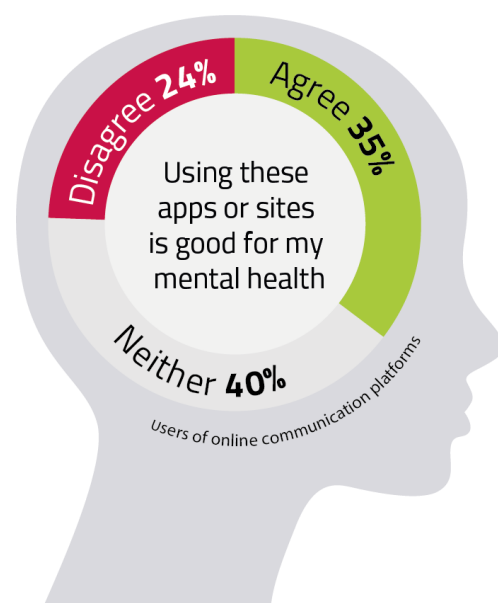
a website, app or online service for an activity that supports their wellbeing. This rises to 89% of internet users aged 16-24 and 92% of users aged 25-34.

Looking up health symptoms (45%), relaxation (34%) and healthy eating/nutrition (33%) were the most popular ways in which internet users were using websites, apps and online services to support their wellbeing. Younger internet users were using this type of online support more; they were more likely than average to have done at least seven out of the nine activities we asked about.

Have you ever used websites, apps or other online services to help you with any of the following things?
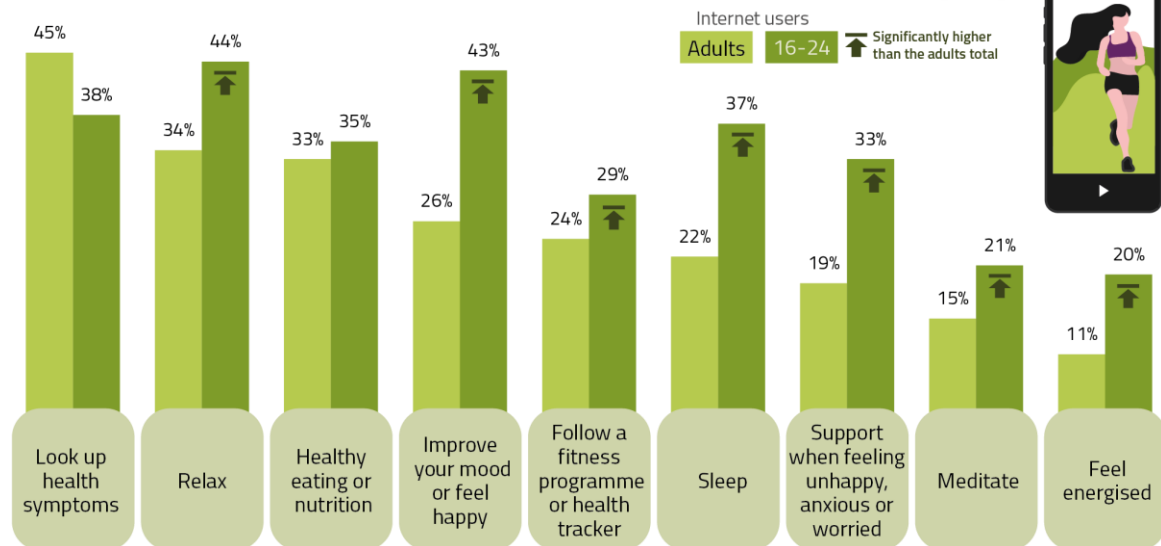
Just over half of social media users aged 16-24 thought they spent too much time using social media apps or sites

The majority of social media users (65%) agreed that they were comfortable with the amount of time they spent using social media apps or sites, with nearly one in three (32%) thinking they spent too much time on them. But just over half of social media users aged 16-24 (51%) thought they spent too much time using these types of platforms, up from 42% in 2021. We know that young adults are avid users of online communication platforms, with the average internet user aged 16-24 using nine online communication platforms out of the thirty apps and sites we asked them about (the average internet user used six), and nearly nine in 10 (87%) using all four types of online communication platforms, significantly higher than the average user (61%). This behaviour was exacerbated during the pandemic when aspects of the offline world became unavailable. Coming out of the pandemic and resuming certain offline activities might partly explain why younger internet users have re-evaluated the time they spend online.

Many participants in the *Adults' Media Lives* study were also conscious of their screen time. They made distinctions between 'necessary' screen time (for example, work meetings held on video conferencing platforms) and 'discretionary activities' (such as using social media and viewing streamed content), and said they were devoting less time to online discretionary activities following the lockdown. But despite this reduction, screen time was still a cause of concern.

> *It's terrible. When it comes up – every Monday, I think it is – you get the [screen time] notification… And I'm like "This feels like a hate crime. Stop... I don't want to see it!"*

Female, 29, Solicitor, Edinburgh

Seven in ten internet users have taken steps to manage their time spent online

At the start of this report, we noted the ever-blurring nature of 'life' and 'life online'. However, we have seen that many internet users have taken steps to keep the two separate. A quarter of internet users said that in the past year they had set aside time for not being online, and a quarter had taken a deliberate break from using any social media apps.

The proportion of internet users aged 16-24 setting aside 'offline time' was in line with the proportion of all internet users doing this, but 16-24s were more likely to have taken a deliberate break from using any social media apps (36%), deleted apps because they thought they spent too much time on them (32%) or deleted apps because they thought they were bad for their mental health/self-esteem (24%).

Other practical strategies for managing online wellbeing and time spent online were also being used. About a quarter (27%) of internet users had disabled notifications or used the 'do not disturb' setting on their devices, and just over one in five (21%) had decided not to take devices such as phones or tablets to bed with them.

In the last 12 months: Internet users

27% disabled notifications or used 'do not disturb' settings

25% set aside time for themselves when not online

25% took a deliberate break from any social media apps

23% deleted apps because they spent too much time on them

21% chose not to take phones or tablets to bed with them
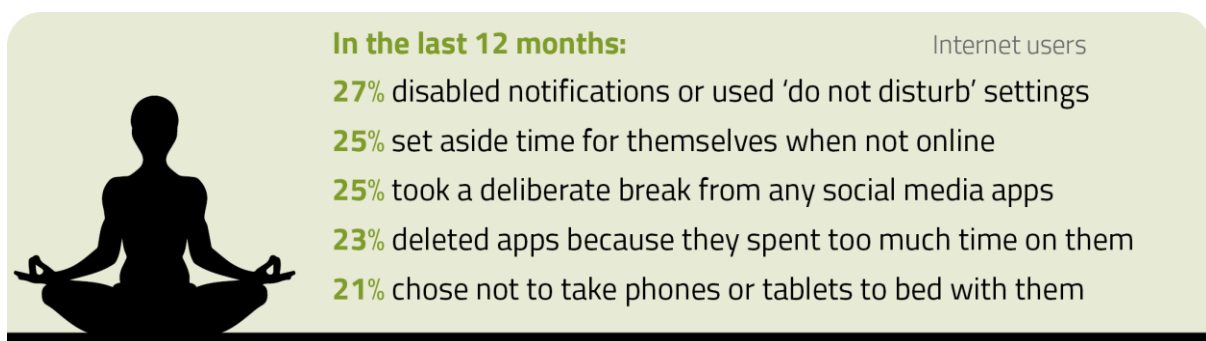
Participants in the *Adults' Media Lives* study had also been using creative methods to control the time they and their families spend online. For example, one participant described the use of a phone cage to limit the time their child spent online.

> *I've tried to restrict how much time [daughter] is on her mobile, but she's worked [out] how to override it. [Husband] bought a mobile phone cage… "Right. Enough. We're all locking our phones in there at 8 o'clock."*
>
> Female, 45, Fundraising Manager, Cardiff

Just over nine in ten users of online communication platforms agreed that there are places online where people are cruel or unkind to one another
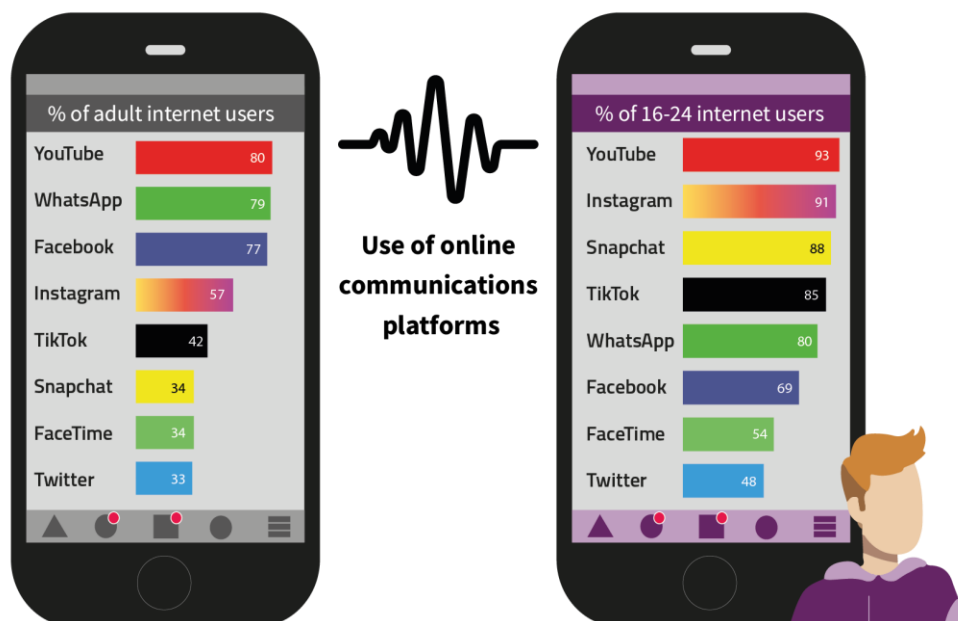
In addition to mental health and screen time, there were other concerns around use of the internet. Just over nine in ten (92%) users of online communication platforms agreed that, at least sometimes, the apps or sites can be environments where people are cruel or unkind to one another; this rose to 97% among users aged 16-34.

We have also seen that nearly half (48%) of users of online communication platforms agreed that there is pressure to be popular on the apps or sites; of those who go online, just over two in five (42%) agreed that they worry about whether something they say online could cause them problems in the future.

Use of online communication platforms

Well-established online communication platforms have continued to grow, and TikTok has further cemented its popularity among internet users aged 16-24

Across the four categories of online communication platforms introduced earlier, YouTube was the most popular among internet users, with 80% having used the platform. WhatsApp was second most popular at 79%, followed by Facebook (77%) and Instagram (57%). Despite being well-established, these online communication platforms are still growing in popularity: WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram all had a year-on-year increase in their user base.

% of adult internet users

Platform	%
YouTube	80
WhatsApp	79
Facebook	77
Instagram	57
TikTok	42
Snapchat	34
FaceTime	34
Twitter	33

Use of online communications platforms

% of 16-24 internet users

Platform	%
YouTube	93
Instagram	91
Snapchat	88
TikTok	85
WhatsApp	80
Facebook	69
FaceTime	54
Twitter	48

The app or site which social media users considered to be their 'main' social media platform differs markedly by age. For example, Facebook was overwhelmingly the most popular for those aged 65+, whereas a more diverse selection was preferred by social media users aged 16-24. Both Snapchat and TikTok have grown in popularity and overtaken Instagram as the main social media platform for 16-24s; 29% of social media users aged 16-24 named Snapchat as the social media platform they use most often (up from 24% in 2021) and 27% named TikTok (up from 21% in 2021). Comparatively fewer (23%) young social media users named Instagram as their go-to social media platform, down from 30% in 2021.

TikTok has grown in popularity for all internet users, with just over two in five (42%) having used the platform in 2022, up from 34% in 2021. The rise in popularity is particularly steep among younger internet users, with 85% of internet users aged 16-24 having used TikTok in 2022 (up from 74% in 2021). The platform seems to have retained the attention of its user base and is becoming an established part of many internet users' suites of online communication platforms. This theme was also evident in the *Adults' Media Lives* study, with users describing spending long periods of time on the platform.

Last year it was very much a case of just getting to see what the fuss was. And then I just got a bit addicted. It's just… a time passer, you know? You just go on scroll, like, mindlessly.

Female, 22, Nurse, Belfast

Despite emerging from the pandemic, use of some video-calling platforms has grown

Hybrid working and the use of video conferencing platforms seems to be here to stay, and the use of Microsoft Teams among internet users grew from 22% in 2021 to 25% in 2022. There are signs that Microsoft Teams may be becoming a preferred video conferencing platform as the use of Zoom among internet users fell from 26% in 2021 to 22% in 2022.

Considering video calling (for what is more likely to be personal use), about a third (34%) of internet users were using FaceTime, up from 31% in 2021. But as with video conferencing, this increase was not evident for all video-calling platforms; the use of Skype declined from 19% of internet users in 2021 to 13% in 2022.

New platforms with novel concepts have emerged and caught the interest of younger internet users

As we have seen, the well-established online communication platforms are still widely used and are growing in popularity. However, the market continues to change. For example, in the past year a new online communication platform has emerged into the mainstream and attracted the attention of younger internet users by offering a novel concept.

BeReal is an app where users post a photo once a day at a random time specified by the platform. Once the notification to 'be real' has been sent, users are encouraged to post within two minutes and use the first photo taken to create a more authentic and 'in-the-moment' online space. Active participation is essential, as users of the app can only see other friends' posts once they themselves have posted.

The app has seen most take-up among internet users aged 16-24, where use grew from 9% in spring 2022 to 22% in autumn 2022. The authenticity of BeReal also attracted the attention of some participants in the *Adults' Media Lives* study, who had recently started using the app. Use of the app was largely still in the novelty phase, so this is a trend we will keep an eye on to see if the 'in-the-moment' concept can hold the attention of its users.

On Instagram and things like that people are trying to show – I don't know how to describe it – like a more fancy side of themselves, like they're always out shopping or going for dinner, whereas BeReal comes up and if you're lying on your sofa sleeping or lying in your pyjamas… that's what you have to post.

Female, 22, Nurse, Belfast

Just over one in five internet users have more than one profile on a single social media platform, but there are signs that users now have less time to manage multiple accounts as life returns to normal

About one in five (22%) internet users had more than one profile on the same social media platform, rising to more than half of internet users aged 16-24 (53%). Instagram was the most common platform where users had more than one profile, at 11% of all users, rising to 31% of 16-24s.

Among those who had more than one profile on a social media app[4], the most common reason, given by 35%, was having a separate account dedicated to a hobby (for example, cooking, reading or photography). This has fallen from 43% in 2021, perhaps reflecting coming out of the pandemic, with

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[4] Social media in this context relates to the use of video-sharing platforms, live streaming and social media

the resumption of certain offline activities reducing the time available for such hobbies and/or managing separate accounts related to them.

Reasons for having more than one profile on the same site or app

% of social media users with multiple profiles*

I have a separate account dedicated to a hobby	35
I have a separate account for business purposes	30
I have different accounts for sharing/ posting my own content and for following other people	27
I have one account for my closest friends and another for my wider circle of friends	21
I have more than one but I no longer use them all	21
I have a 'real' or authentic account and another that is my curated one	14
I have an account for my parents/family to see	13

* Social media relates to the use of video sharing platforms, live streaming and social media

Following friends was the most popular reason for using social media; three in ten internet users were also using it to support causes

Looking at users of social media apps and sites and their overall engagement with the social media platforms they used, we found that nearly three in five (59%) said they were actively using the apps or sites to share, post or comment. Just under a quarter (23%) said they usually just 'like' things, and nearly one in five (18%) were more passive users and tended 'to only read things on these apps or sites and rarely like or post anything'.

To understand more about what social media users are using their profiles for, we asked users of live streaming, social media and video-sharing platforms about the types of things they were doing there. Following friends was the most popular use of social media (64%), followed by following companies/brands (37%), people with similar interests (35%) and celebrities/influencers (33%). Users aged 16-24 were more likely than average to follow celebrities/influencers (54%), people who shared their interests (49%) and companies/brands they liked (47%).

In addition to following accounts, three in ten users were using their profiles to support causes and petitions, and over a quarter (28%) were using it for discussion and debate. Discussion and debate were more prominent among users aged 16-24, with 34% using social media for this purpose.

77% Follow friends, influencers, news or companies

30% Supporting causes or petitions

28% Discussion or debate

Users of live streaming, social media and video-sharing platforms

Online social connection is also achieved through avenues such as gaming. Nearly seven in ten (68%) of those who played games said they did so online, with 43% of this group saying they played with someone they knew, and 26% saying they played against multiple people whom they already knew. However, online social connection through gaming introduces a risk of online harm, particularly for younger online gamers, due to the nature of connecting with people they do not know. Three in ten online gamers said they had played against someone they hadn't met in person (rising to 39% of online gamers aged 16-24), and 18% said they had played against multiple people they hadn't met in person.

Critically evaluating online information

'Critical understanding' is a core component of media literacy; it enables users to understand, question, and manage their media environment. This is important if they are to get the benefits that the internet and other media can offer while avoiding potential risks or harms.

This report looks at confidence, and the interaction it has with critical understanding. Confidence does not just follow from good media literacy skills but intersects with it in a way which can either bolster or undermine good critical understanding. Someone whose confidence is not matched by ability in practice may be more likely to make mistakes which could lead to harm. Conversely, someone who has good critical understanding skills but is not confident in them may not trust their own good judgement, which could lead them to feel unsure or unsafe in an online environment.

In previous sections, we have looked at the use of, and attitudes towards, online communication platforms, including social media. We are now going to explore the critical understanding skills that social media users demonstrate when on these platforms.

Three in five social media users were confident and able to identify a fake social media profile, up from 55% in 2021

When asked how confident they felt in judging whether the information they see or read online is true or false, 72% of internet users considered themselves to be confident. This was higher among 16-24s (80%), 45-54s (79%), ABC1 (79%) and broad internet users (87%). However, as introduced at the beginning of this section, it is important to explore the intersection between confidence and ability. To do this, we created a fake social media profile and first asked social media users whether they thought the profile was genuine.[5] We then asked them to click on the aspects of the profile that made them think the profile was/was not genuine.
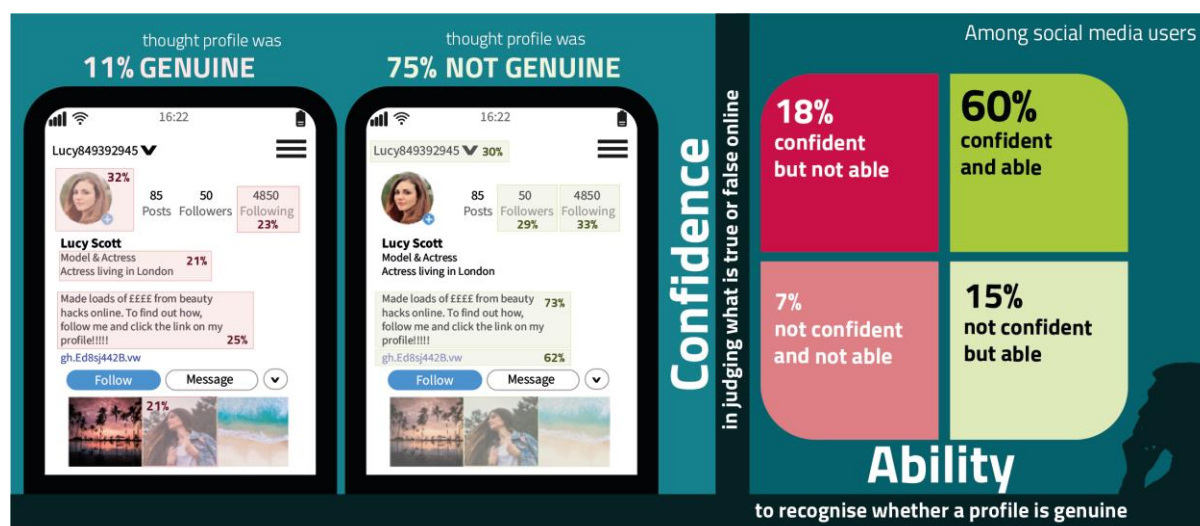
In overlaying these responses with social media users' claimed confidence, we found that three in five were both confident and able to identify the fake social media profile. Social media users aged 25-34 (69%) and broad users of the internet (67%) were more likely than average to be confident

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[5] This profile is a fictional profile. Images were taken from Pexels. Sources were shown at the end of the survey during fieldwork.

and able. Encouragingly, the proportion of social media users who were both confident and able has grown year on year, from 55% in 2021; correspondingly, the proportion of social media users who were confident but not able has fallen from 24% in 2021.

Among the social media users who identified the profile as not genuine, text-based factors were the most popular indicators, with 73% selecting the description under the biography and 62% selecting the link in the description. The description under the biography was the indicator that first caught their attention, with 38% clicking on this aspect first. In comparison, image-based indicators were more important for the social media users who thought the profile was genuine, with nearly a third selecting the profile image as something that made them think the profile was real.

For the first time, we showed the same profile to participants in our *Adults' Media Lives* study to observe how they went about judging its validity. Participants tended to use contextual information and personal experience when assessing the example. However, some specific details were cited on many occasions, such as 'Lucy Scott's' username containing many numbers, and the following/ follower ratio. This highlights the value of social media users being aware of what to look out for; while these may not be fool-proof strategies for always making accurate judgements, they can nudge users to stop and consider the online content they see.

Her follower to following ratio is pretty bad, so it kind of seems like she might have just followed thousands of people in a hope that they might follow her back. Also, she's got a lot of numbers after her name, which kind of sounds like it might have been generated by a bot.

Male, 26, Tutor, London

More internet users were thinking about the truthfulness of the online information they consumed, but this is not without its challenges

Not all online information is accurate, so it is important for internet users to be able to assess and make a judgement on the truthfulness of the information they come across. We have seen an increase in the prevalence of internet users assessing the truthfulness of online information, with 77% of internet users saying they think about whether the information they find online is truthful (up from 73% in 2021).

Considering online communication platforms more specifically, 81% of users had ever considered whether a news story or article they had seen on these types of apps or sites was truthful or accurate; about three in five (61%) said they considered this at least sometimes. Looking at the comments, or what people had said about it (42%), checking if the source was trustworthy (41%), thinking about how likely it would be for the story to be true (41%), and checking to see if the same information appeared anywhere else (41%) were the most common ways of verification.

To further explore how those online assess the truthfulness of the information they see, we showed social media users a real social media post taken from the Money Saving Expert Facebook page and asked them if they thought the post was genuine.[6] We then asked them to select the aspects of the post that made them think it was/was not genuine.

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[6] Source: MoneySavingExpert.com, Facebook, 6th August 2022 (MoneySavingExpert Facebook page - https://www.facebook.com/MoneySavingExpert/), (Facebook post -

Our research highlights the challenge social media users face in evaluating the validity of online information, as 44% of social media users identified the post as genuine but a similar proportion (41%) thought the post was not genuine.
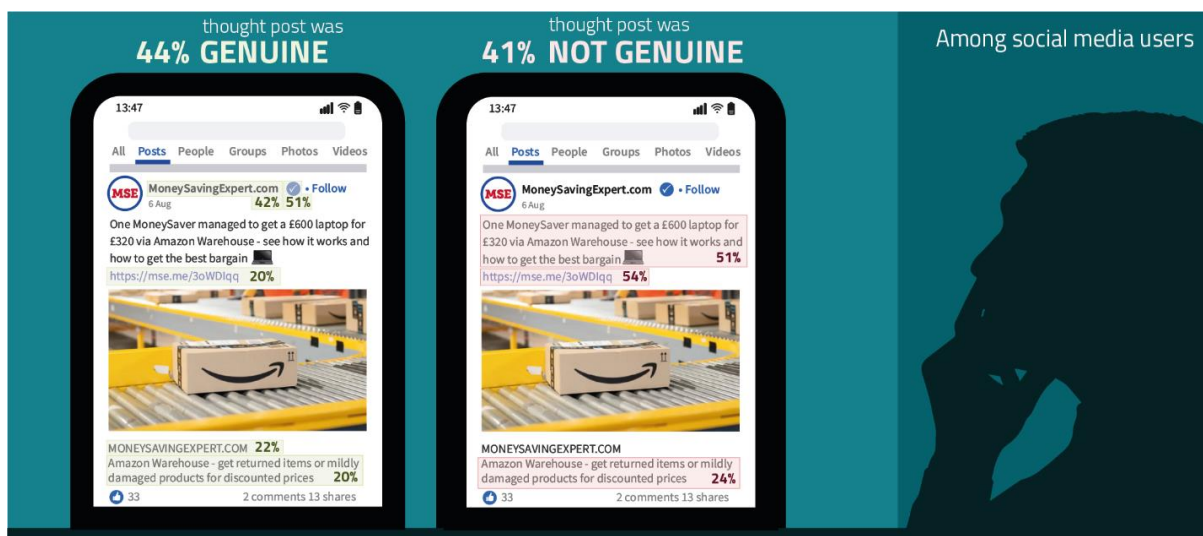
Of the social media users who identified the post as genuine, the verified tick (51%) and the profile username 'Money Saving Expert.com' (42%) were the most popular indicators of the post's validity. One in five social media users who thought the post was genuine also selected the https link in the text of the post as an indicator as to why.

Interestingly, this https link was the top indicator among social media users who thought the post was *not* genuine. When showing this example to participants in the *Adults' Media Lives* study, some referenced both the link and the content of the post (about making big savings) as aspects they would question, due to their wariness of these indicators in the context of scams. What indicates the validity of online information varies by context, so it is important for internet users to have a well-rounded critical evaluation skillset so they can react to and safely navigate all online environments.

The website has a blue tick, which I think is a sign that it's been externally verified. I'm not sure about… I mean that link looks a bit weird.

Male, 26, tutor, London

Well, it says "Making loads of money". That to me rings alarm bells straight away.

Female, 45, PA, Woking

Over the 12 months before the fieldwork, over two in five (45%) online communication platform users said they had seen something on one of these apps or sites that they thought was a deliberately untrue or misleading news story. To better understand what people do when they come across such online information, we asked those who had said they had seen something misleading what they did about it. Reporting to the site or app (32%) was the most common action taken, while a quarter had commented on the article to say it was incorrect/misleading and 14% had shared it

online to say it was incorrect/ misleading. A larger proportion (41%) had taken no action, up from 36% in 2021.

Three-quarters of internet users were both confident and able to identify a suspicious email

Online scams, fraud and phishing are a real area of concern among internet users.[7] Good media literacy skills can be an important tool to help alleviate these concerns as they can equip adults with the knowledge, understanding and confidence they need to avoid falling foul of these types of communication.

The majority of internet users did consider the safety of their personal information online, with 62% saying they performed robust checks before entering their credit or debit card details online and 59% saying they performed robust checks before registering their personal details online. Checking to see if they were familiar with the brand and looking for secure signs such as the padlock symbol or 'https' were the most common checks made before entering both financial and personal information. However, a sizeable minority were not performing such checks before entering their information online. Nearly a quarter (23%) of internet users said they would enter their credit or debit card details if the site was listed by a search engine such as Google or Bing, and 13% would enter their financial information if it was the only way to get the service or product they wanted. Similarly, 23% of internet users would register their personal information if the site was listed by a search engine, and 16% would do so if it was the only way to get the service or product they wanted.

More than eight in ten (81%) internet users felt confident about judging whether an email, text or online message they received was potentially suspicious, or a scam. To explore how this confidence intersects with ability, we showed internet users an example of a scam email and asked, first unprompted and then prompted, what they would do if they received such an email.[8]

Three-quarters of internet users were confident and able to take appropriate action towards the scam email and selected only valid actions.[9] Internet users aged 16-24 were less likely than average to be confident and able, while broad internet users were more likely than average to be confident and able.

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[7] Ofcom Online Experiences Tracker: 75% of internet users were concerned about online scams, fraud and phishing.

[8] Source: DPD website – Phishing (https://www.dpd.co.uk/content/about_dpd/phishing.jsp). Sources were shown at the end of the survey during fieldwork.

[9] Valid actions: delete it; check the email address to see if it looks genuine; check if someone in the household is expecting a delivery; block the sender/block the email address/move to junk folder; report it; ignore it/I wouldn't do anything; check elsewhere to see if it is genuine or has been reported; check with a friend or family member for advice on what to do. Invalid actions: Click on 'Show my options'; follow the instructions (in the email); reply to it.
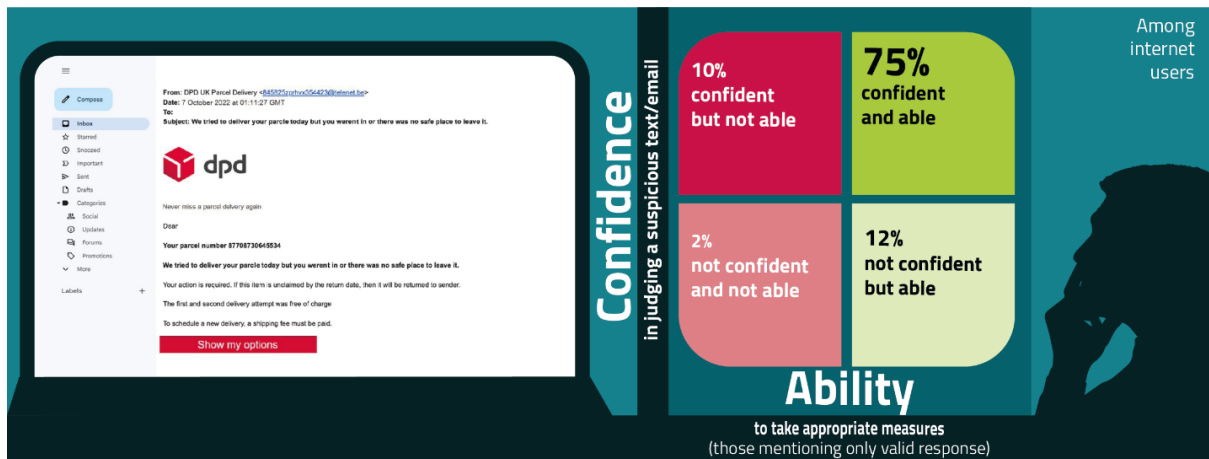
Internet users aged 16-34 were more likely to be confident but not able, so could be at greater risk of coming to harm through making an error in judgement. Narrow internet users were more likely to be not confident but able, which highlights a different risk; these users may face an increased risk of harm either by going against their better judgement, or through digital exclusion if their lack of confidence leads them to avoid online spaces.

In showing this example to participants in our *Adults' Media Lives* study, contextual information and personal experience were again cited as part of the decision-making process. However, as with the social media profile example, specific indicators were identified, which included the spelling mistakes throughout the email and the inconsistency of the email sender address.

That email address is wrong. dpdparceldelivery@telnet.be... Where's that – Belarus or something?
The spelling again is bad. The grammar is bad... I think that's dodgy.

Female, 45, Fundraising Manager, Cardiff

# Knowledge and understanding of the online marketplace

The majority of adults were confident they could recognise online advertising

Eight in ten internet users felt confident that they could recognise what is advertising, and what is not, when they see or read things online. About two-thirds (68%) of internet users correctly understood that different people might see different ads when they go online, up from 64% in 2021.[10] However, there are gaps in understanding: about one in five (18%) thought everyone would see exactly the same ads and 15% didn't know. This was more common among narrow internet users, with nearly a quarter (23%) thinking everyone would see exactly the same ads online.

As the internet has evolved, so has online advertising, and it can now take various different forms. In a similar style to the previous chapter, we are going to explore the intersection of confidence and ability in the context of online advertising and will focus on two forms: search engine advertising and social media paid partnerships.

Less than half of search engine users were confident and able to recognise search engine advertising, although there has been improvement since 2021

Firstly, considering search engine advertising, we showed respondents a screenshot of a Google search for 'walking boots' and asked why the top four links appeared as they did.[11] The majority of search engine users (68%) recognised that the top listings had paid to appear there. However, there is still some confusion as to why search engine results rank the way they do, as 28% of search engine users thought these ads were the most popular results and 23% thought they were the best/most relevant results.
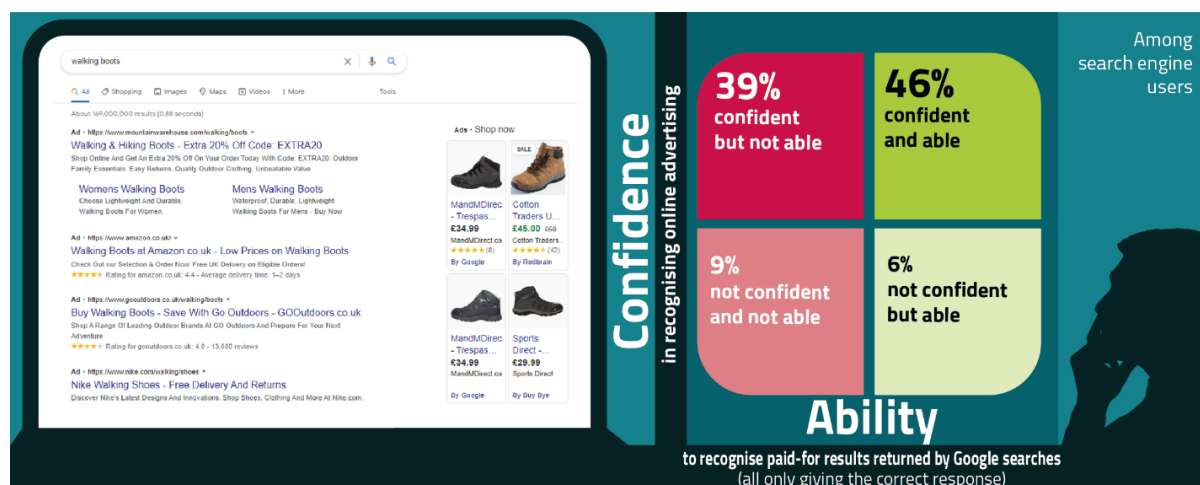
In looking at how confidence intersects with ability, less than half (46%) of search engine users were both confident and able in giving only the correct response – that the ads had paid to be there. However, encouragingly, the proportion of search engine users who are both confident and able has

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[10] Internet users may see different ads online because online platforms can track online behaviours (such as websites visited, terms searched for, and purchases made online) and these tracking methods can have a direct influence on the ads that are promoted.

[11] Source: Google search of 'walking boots'. Walking boots images (reading left to right): M and M Direct, Trespass; Cotton Traders; M and M Direct, Trespass; Sports Direct. Sources were shown at the end of the survey during fieldwork.

grown year on year (from 42% in 2021), with a corresponding decline among those who are confident and not able (43% in 2021).

Two-thirds of social media users were confident and able to recognise paid partnership advertising on social media

While advertising on social media is not a new concept, more recent formats – such as paid partnerships – could be seen as a more subtle advertising model, particularly for those who have not grown up with social media. To explore awareness of paid partnerships, we showed social media users a screenshot of David Beckham's Instagram post[12] and asked why he might be promoting the product shown.

We found that just over three-quarters of social media users (76%) understood that he was being incentivised to endorse the brand on social media. In exploring the intersection of confidence and ability, two-thirds of social media users (67%) were both confident and able to recognise that he was being incentivised by the brand. Broad internet users demonstrated stronger media literacy skills in this area, with 79% being both confident and able, compared to only 48% of narrow internet users. As we have seen, younger social media users accessed the most online communication platforms; however, they did not perform any better in being confident and able to recognise social media advertising.

Attitudes towards online advertising were mixed, but just over nine in ten internet users had taken some action to manage the advertising they see

We have looked at awareness and understanding of online advertising, but it is also interesting to consider what internet users think about it more generally.
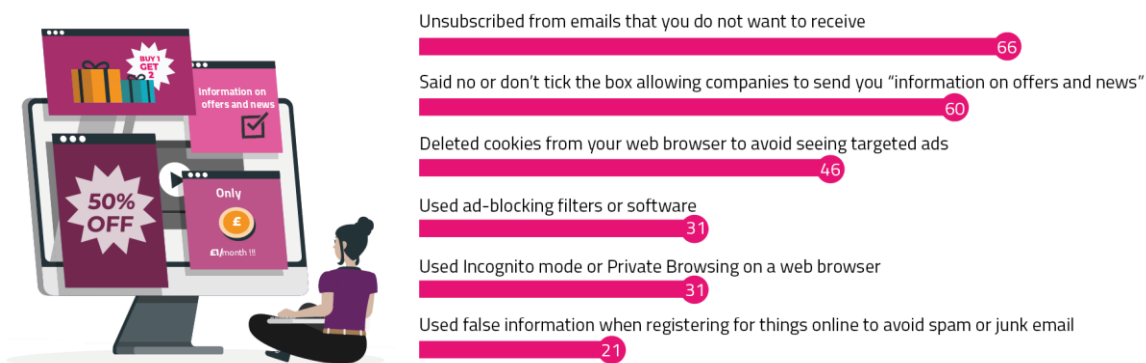
There are indications of an increased acceptance of personalised advertising. The proportion of internet users who said they didn't mind seeing online ads, as long as they were for things they were interested in, had increased from 39% in 2021 to 42% in 2022. About a third (35%) said they disliked seeing all online ads, down from 38% in 2021. There are signs of a generational divide in attitudes; about half (51%) of internet users aged 16-24 were happy to see online ads so long as they were

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[12] Source: David Beckham Instagram account, 8th July 2022 (Instagram handle – davidbeckham), (Instagram post - https://www.instagram.com/p/CfwYD24owMB/?hl=en). Sources were shown at the end of the survey during fieldwork.

personalised, whereas about half (52%) of those aged over 65 said they disliked seeing any online ads.

Despite this split in attitudes, just over nine in ten internet users (91%) had taken some action to manage the online advertising they see. The most popular steps taken were to unsubscribe from unwanted marketing emails (66%), select 'no' to avoid promotional emails about offers and company news (60%) and delete cookies from website browsers to avoid seeing targeted ads (46%).

Have you ever done any of the following? (% of internet users)

Unsubscribed from emails that you do not want to receive — 66

Said no or don't tick the box allowing companies to send you "information on offers and news" — 60

Deleted cookies from your web browser to avoid seeing targeted ads — 46

Used ad-blocking filters or software — 31

Used Incognito mode or Private Browsing on a web browser — 31

Used false information when registering for things online to avoid spam or junk email — 21

In considering actions around personal data, 87% of internet users were aware of at least one way in which companies can collect information about people, based on what they do online. Awareness of the use of 'cookies'[13] was most common, with 68% of internet users aware of this mechanism. But there is still a gap in understanding: of the activities we asked about, only a third of internet users were aware of all four surveyed ways[14] through which companies can collect information about people based on what they do online.

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[13] 'Cookie': When you go online through a browser (like Google Chrome/ Safari and so on) small text files known as cookies are retained on your computer or mobile phone which contain information about a specific visit to a website or app.

[14] The four ways we asked about were: using cookies to collect information about the websites people visit or what products and services interest them; asking customers to 'register' with a website or app and to opt in/ opt out of receiving further information from them or their partners; using apps on smartphones to collect data on users' locations or what products and services interest them; collecting information from social media accounts – i.e. about users' interests, 'likes', location, preferences and so on.
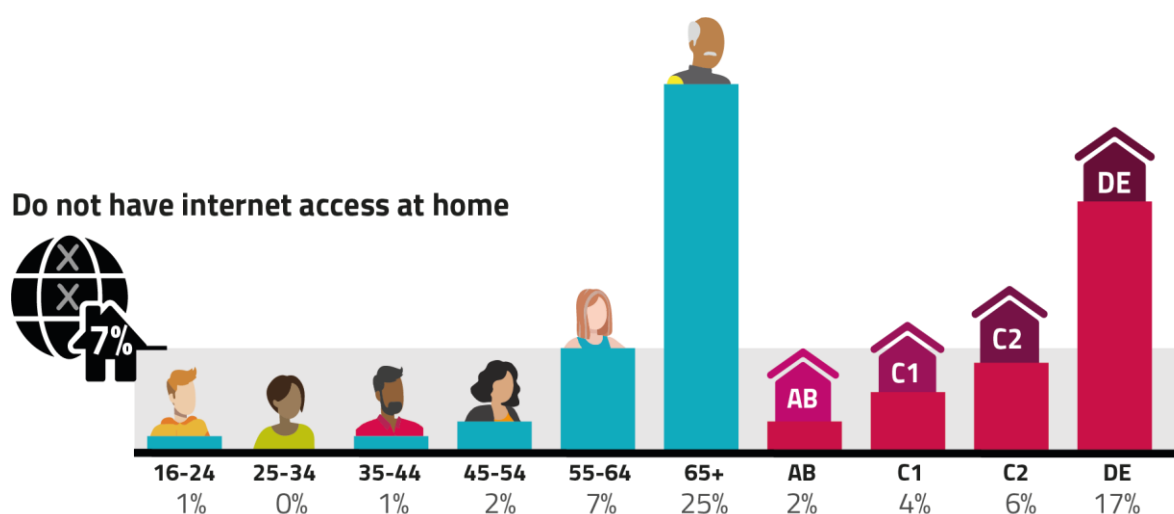
Home internet access and smartphone use

While access to the internet at home is widespread, a residual group of households remain offline and face the risk of digital exclusion

Last year, Ofcom conducted a review of digital exclusion among adults in the UK, which outlined a triple lens of access, ability (as discussed above) and affordability through which we can consider digital exclusion. Access to the internet at home is one of the most straightforward ways in which we can measure digital exclusion, and we have seen that although 93% of UK households have access to the internet at home, 7% of households do not have access via any device, and are at risk of digital exclusion.

As shown below, those more likely to not have access to the internet at home are aged over 65+ and in a DE household. However, among this group of offline households, the reasons for being offline vary. While nearly seven in ten (69%) said they did not want or need to be online, 20% cited concerns about complexity and 20% cited concerns about cost.

This creates an important distinction between the types of people who are offline and the support they may need: there are those who are not online and don't want to be, but may need support to avoid being left behind in an ever-digitised world; there are those who want to be online but may need support in overcoming barriers to access such as cost; and there are those who are online but lack the confidence to navigate the online world safely and may need support in building their online skillset.

Do not have internet access at home

16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	AB	C1	C2	DE
1%	0%	1%	2%	7%	25%	2%	4%	6%	17%

Proxy use of the internet was common among those who didn't use the internet at home, particularly to purchase goods and access health and public services

Among those who didn't use the internet at home, another reason for being offline was that they had someone else who could go online for them if necessary. In further exploring this proxy use of the internet, we found that 46% of those who didn't use the internet at home had asked someone to do something for them online in the past year. Asking someone to buy something was most common (49%), while asking someone to access health services online (24%) and other public services provided by the Government/council (20%) were also cited.

Online shopping was also discussed by participants in our *Adults' Media Lives* study. Some described how the decline of the high street and/or better deals online had inflated their online shopping behaviour. While for some, online shopping offers the benefit of greater choice and convenience, for those not online it amplifies the risk of digital exclusion through reduced access to goods and/or the same value deals as those that can be found online. This risk is particularly acute in the context of lower-income households already being more likely not to have access to the internet at home.
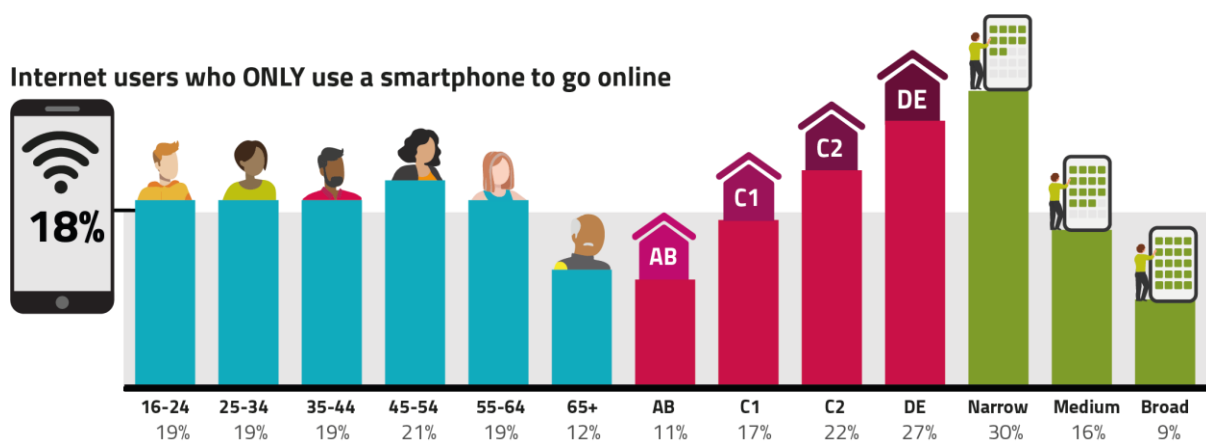
The shops uptown are all closing down, so if there's something I want, that's when I would use [online shopping] more.

Female, 78, Retired, Edinburgh

Over half of adult internet users (53%) had helped someone else to do something online that they were unable to do themselves; this was more common among ABC1 households (59%), 16-24s (69%), 25-34s (59%), 35-44s (59%) and broad internet users (71%). Young adults in particular often helped others complete online activities; 47% of 16-24s who had helped someone else with online activities had done so at least weekly, with parents (57%) and friends (37%) being the most common recipients of their support.

Nearly one in five internet users only go online via a smartphone

Among internet users, 18% only used a smartphone to go online. Those who only access the internet via a smartphone were more likely to be women, narrow internet users and from a DE household; however, it is important to remember that the reasons behind this may vary. For many, going online exclusively using a smartphone may be a choice due to comfort, ease and convenience. But for others, issues such as affordability and a lack of confidence can form barriers to using other devices to get online.

Internet users who ONLY use a smartphone to go online

18%	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	AB	C1	C2	DE	Narrow	Medium	Broad
	19%	19%	19%	21%	19%	12%	11%	17%	22%	27%	30%	16%	9%

This is important when we consider how the device used can affect the user's online experience, as different devices can be more suited to certain online activities. For example, most smartphone users agreed it is more difficult to complete forms and work on documents on a smartphone than on a laptop or desktop (66%) and around half (49%) agreed it was more difficult to compare products and services online.

Therefore, those who have no option but to complete these activities on a smartphone may face disadvantages – for example, in completing job or public service applications, or finding the best deal on products and services. Indeed, over a quarter of those who only access the internet via a smartphone said they had, at some point, felt disadvantaged by their reliance on the device (28%). This highlights the nuances of digital exclusion, as even those with access to both an internet

connection and a suitable device can be at risk of digital exclusion compared to those with greater choice in their means of accessing the internet.

Mobile phones would be the device most missed by adults, with many preferring to use a smartphone for a range of online activities

While there are digital exclusion risks associated with only accessing the internet through a smartphone, it is also important to emphasise how integral the device has become to the lives of many users. Over two in five (44%) adults chose their mobile phone/smartphone as the device they would most miss if it was taken away from them, which rose to 61% of broad internet users, 60% of 16-24s and 48% of those in ABC1 households. A television set was the second most popular (24%), followed by a laptop/netbook (7%).

This is a theme we have also seen in our *Adults' Media Lives* study, where many participants viewed their mobile phone contracts as essential, alongside broadband, and something they would be unwilling to sacrifice even in the face of financial difficulties.

For some, exclusively accessing the internet through a smartphone is not a choice and can introduce challenges. However, many smartphone users prefer to complete a range of online activities – from social media, to shopping, banking, and accessing information – from the convenience of their handheld device.