Understanding misinformation: an exploration of UK adults' behaviour and attitudes

Making Sense Of Media, Ofcom

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Introduction

Background

This research has been conducted to help inform Ofcom's media literacy duty to heighten public awareness and understanding of the nature and impact of misinformation and disinformation online, as well as ways to mitigate exposure to such information.

The report provides evidence of how UK adults think and feel about "false or misleading" information: where they see it, why they think it's false or misleading, and what they do and feel as a consequence. We ask questions about some core current aspects of the news environment to see which statements people think are true or false. Broadly, these follow our areas of focus on UK politics, international politics and current affairs, and health/medical information. We also explore what UK adults think of some news production practices, and whether they are aware of some of the ways that news is produced.

It is important to be clear from the outset that misinformation is a subjective term. Reported incidence of encountering misinformation is only part of the story, and we ask a range of other questions to understand the nature of people's beliefs and attitudes towards the news information they consume. There are a range of ways that misinformation can be characterised, which makes it important to understand the wider context of people's attitudes and knowledge.

Perceptions of misinformation include and aren't limited to: provision of empirically false information; provision of information that someone doesn't agree with; provision of information that doesn't fit with someone's prior knowledge of, or existing beliefs about, a subject – which can result in true information being reported as false, and vice versa; and something that a public figure has said and is being reported on by a news platform or service – with such reporting either identifying the statement as misleading, or providing it as if it were accurate.

The array of ways that misinformation can be construed is useful to bear in mind in the findings which follow, as we explore some of the ways that UK adults navigate their news environments, and as we identify those groups which may be more susceptible to false or misleading information in a range of ways.

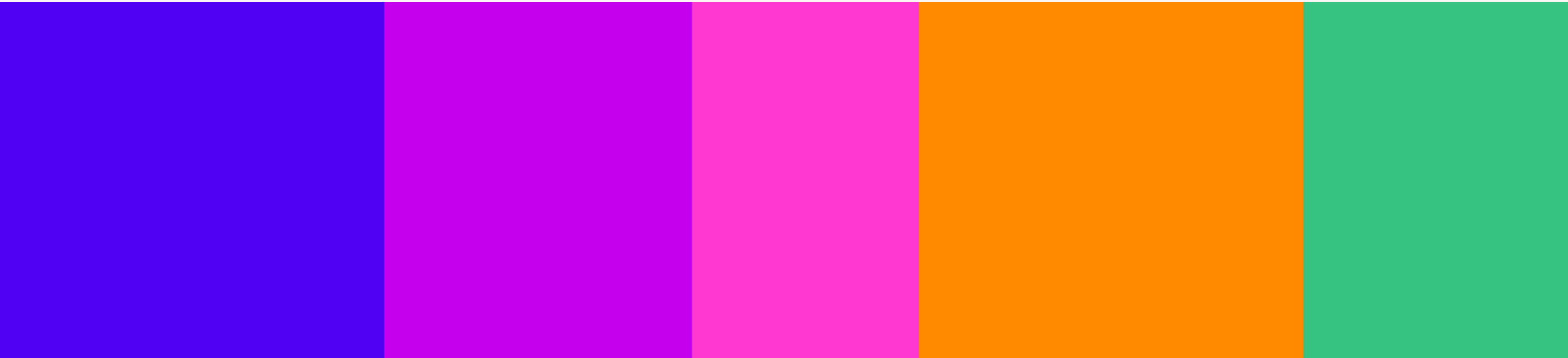
Methodology

- The sample consists of 4,269 politically representative adults aged 16+ in the UK. This included quotas for age/gender/education level, social grade, region/2019 General Election vote, and EU referendum vote.
- All fieldwork was carried out online from 27th June to 2nd July 2024 by YouGov, using respondents from YouGov's online panel.
- The data has been weighted to be politically representative of the UK population aged 16 and above, taking into account recalled vote and a measure of political attention to include a range of perspectives, including those who did not vote or were too young.
- Data tables and the questionnaire can be found on the Ofcom website.

Key findings

- **Over three-quarters of UK adults agree that it's important to check different sources for news**, and seven in ten acknowledge that online information will always be a mixture of reliable and unreliable information. Over half say they are interested in learning more about how to check the accuracy of such information.
- However, over **four in ten are sceptical of conventional news production processes** and only one-third agree that journalists follow codes of practice.
- **Over two-fifths (43%) of UK adults say they encounter misinformation or deep fakes**, and this was more likely for men, younger adults, those from an ABC1 background, minority ethnic groups, LGB+ groups and those with mental health conditions.
- Among those who say they have encountered false or misleading information in the last four weeks, **seven in ten say they have seen it online. Four in ten say they have seen it on TV, and one in five via print.**
- **Almost half of UK adults (45%) feel confident they can judge whether sources of information are truthful**, and just under two-fifths (37%) are confident in their ability to assess whether statistics to support claims are being used accurately.
- **Respondents are less confident in their ability to judge the presence of AI-generated material**. One-third (33%) of UK adults say they are not confident judging whether an image, audio or video has been created by AI.
- **Nearly one half of UK adults say they ignore potentially untrue online content**. One quarter search for further information to check. Over one in five looks at comments on the information to see what others say about it, and 13% ask friends and family.
- **Around a quarter (26%) of UK adults say they have used a fact checker website or tool at least once**. BBC Verify is most likely to be used and heard of, with one in five saying they use it at least once, and one in twenty saying they do so regularly.
- **Nine in ten of those who encounter misinformation say they are concerned about its societal impact**, and almost two-thirds say they are concerned about the impact on themselves.
- When asked to decide which statements about current affairs were true or false, **three in ten UK adults believe that there is a single group of people who secretly control the world together, and a similar figure believe that there is significant evidence of large-scale election fraud.**

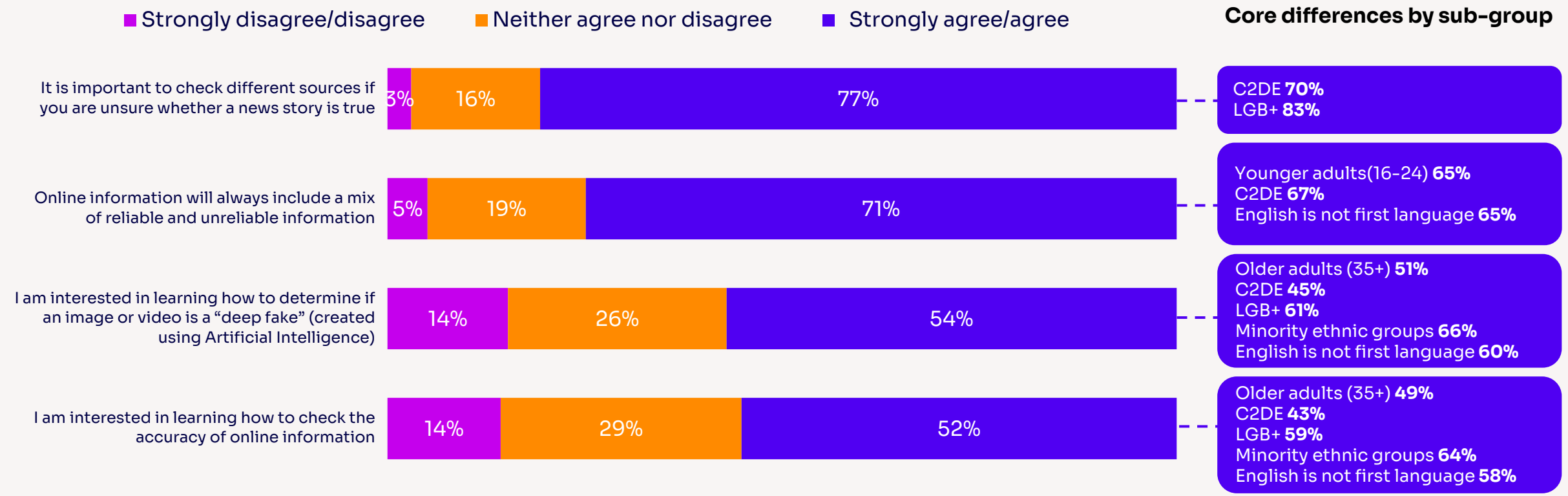
Section 1: Attitudes towards information and news



A majority of UK adults agree that it's important to check the accuracy of news information by looking at different sources, and over half are interested in learning how to check if information is accurate

Over three-quarters of UK adults agree that it's important to check different sources for news, and seven in ten acknowledge that online information will always be a mixture of reliable and unreliable information. Over half say they are interested in learning more about how to check the accuracy of such information.

Agreement with statements about information and news – all UK adults



Note: "Don't know" responses are not included and so rows may not sum to 100%

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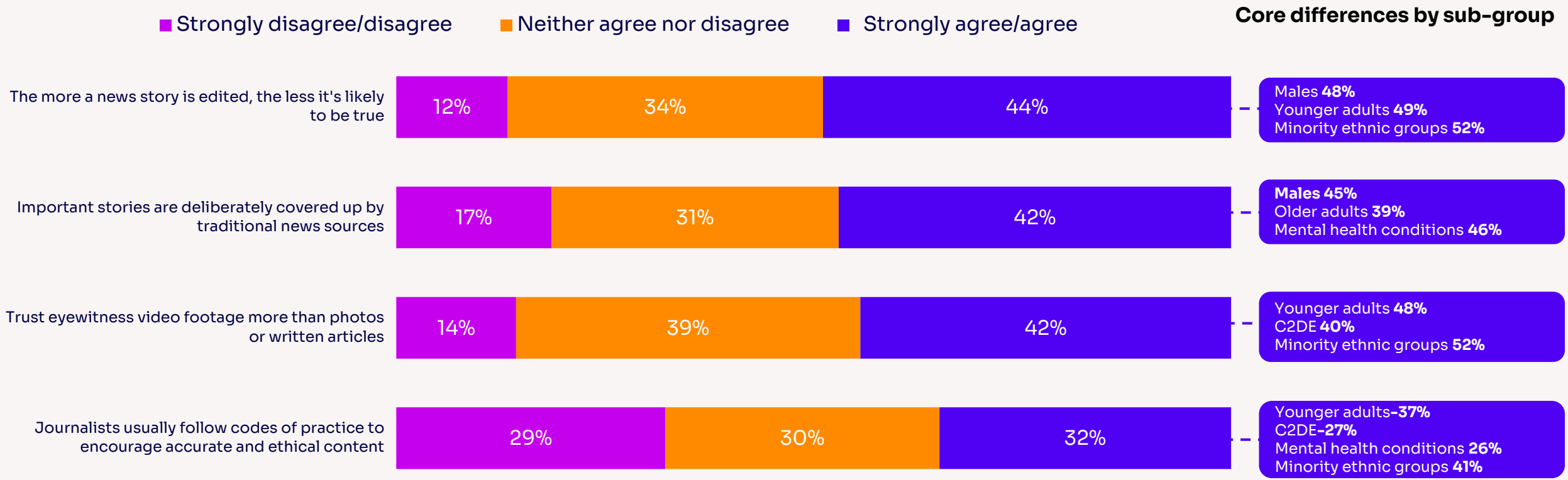
Q20. Below are a range of statements that people have said in relation to information and news. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding information and news? Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement below, if applicable.

Base: All respondents (n=4269)

However, over four in ten are sceptical of conventional news production processes and only one-third agree that journalists follow codes of practice

Just under half of UK adults agree with the statement that “the more a news story is edited, the less likely it is to be true”. Over two-fifths say they trust eyewitness video footage more than photos or written articles, and around one-third agree that journalists usually follow codes of practice to encourage accurate and ethical content. People from minority ethnic groups are more likely to agree with these statements.

Agreement with statements about information and news – all UK adults



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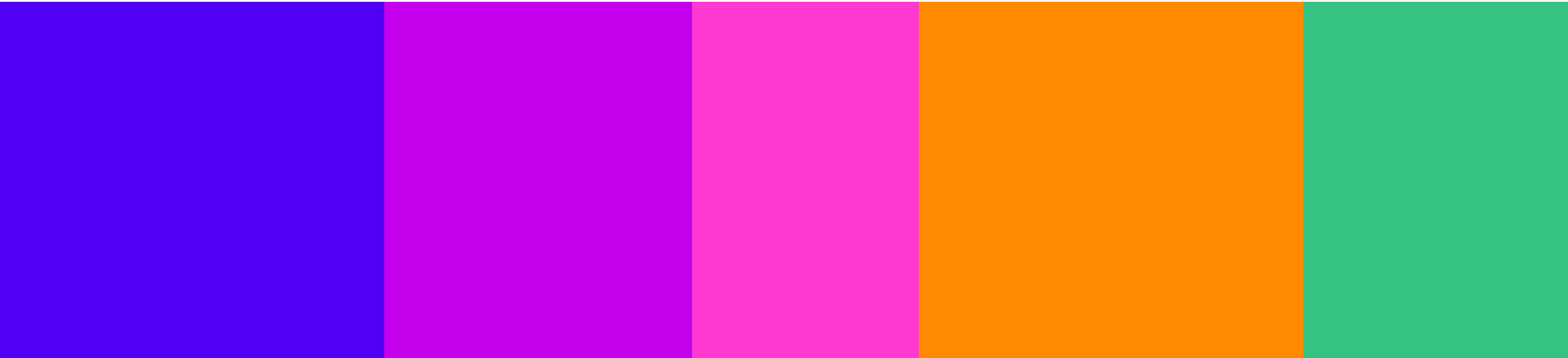
Q20. Below are a range of statements that people have said in relation to information and news. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding information and news? Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement below, if applicable.

Base: All respondents (n=4269)

Section 2: Encountering mis and disinformation



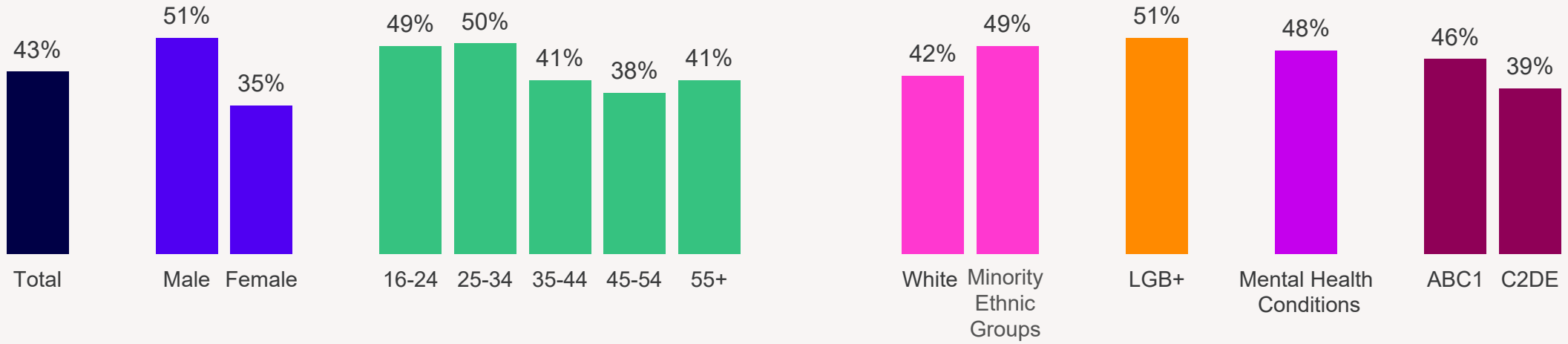
Over two-fifths (43%) of UK adults say they encounter misinformation or deep fakes

We asked respondents to tell us whether they had seen any written misinformation or disinformation, or fake or deceptive images/videos, over the last four weeks. We described this as “false or misleading stories, claims or assertions”. Four in ten said they’d seen written mis or disinformation, and one in five that they’d seen fake or deceptive images/videos. Taken together, 43% of people said they had seen some form of misinformation, and this was more likely for men, younger adults, those from an ABC1 background, minority ethnic groups, LGB+ groups and those with mental health conditions.

Misinformation encountered in the last four weeks (any topic) – by demographic groups

41% Written misinformation or disinformation

20% Fake or deceptive images/videos



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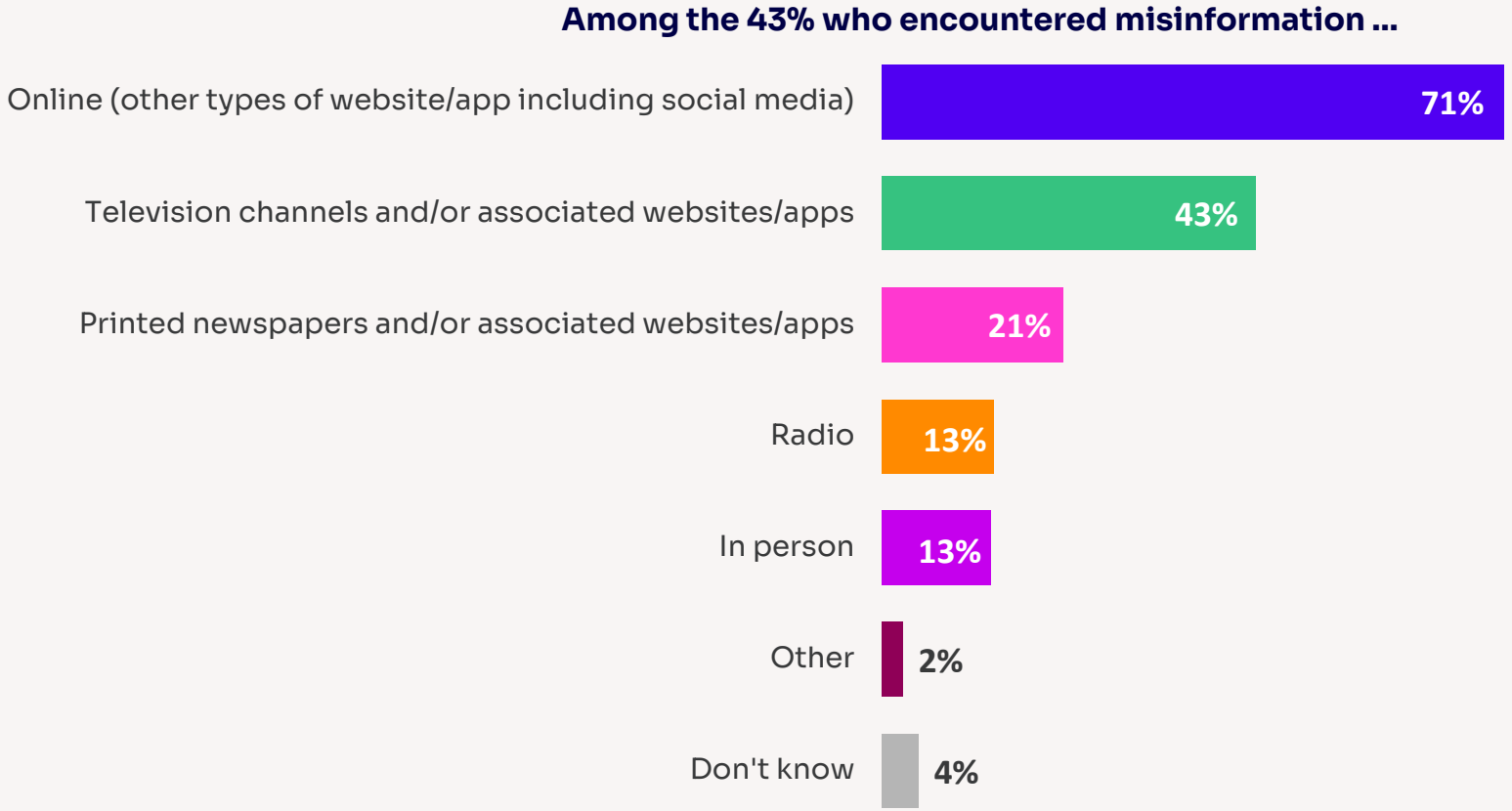
Q5. In the past 4 weeks, have you seen, heard, or read anything about the following topics that you consider to be...? Please select those that apply:

Base: All have seen or heard or read any news or information in last 4 weeks (n=3667)

UK adults who say they encounter misinformation mostly say they see it online

Among those who say they have encountered false or misleading information in the last four weeks, seven in ten say they have seen it online. Four in ten say they have seen it on TV, and one in five via print. As indicated in the introduction, a person's perception that information is false or misleading does not mean that the information is inaccurate, and research participants' perception could also be influenced by allegations about it, or the reporting on public figures whose words are perceived as misleading by the participant.



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Q11. Please state the television channel or channels and/or associated websites/apps on which you came across the information that you considered to be false or misleading information/Q12. Please state the newspaper or newspapers and/or associated websites/apps where you came across the information that you considered to be false or misleading

Base: All who have seen, heard or read false or misleading information in the past 4 weeks on Social media (n=1137); Males (n=634),LGB+ (n=177), 16-24s (n=172), 25-34s(n= 267), +55(n=382),Minority Ethnic Groups(n=152); TV(n=683), 25-34s (n=102), +55(n= 363), Minority Ethnic Groups (n= 72), C2DE (n= 219)

Misinformation was more likely to be encountered on the topic of UK politics, than topics such as international politics or health information

In our survey we asked people to tell us whether they had encountered news about the three topics of UK politics including the general election, international politics and current affairs, and health or medical information, in the last four weeks. We then asked those who had encountered those topics whether they had come across any false or misleading information about them. Given the proximity of the fieldwork period to the general election, it is understandable that this topic was the one where UK adults said they encountered more misinformation than the other two areas.

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Misinformation or deep fakes encountered in the last 4 weeks – by topic (among those who saw news about each topic)

39% UK politics including the general election

14% Election-related misinformation and misrepresentations

12% Unsubstantiated claims about political policies and party positions

11% Allegations of misinformation spread by political parties

Unprompted **Top 3** Misinformation or Deep Fakes Encountered in the Last 4 Weeks – by Topic (Among Those Who Saw News About Each Topic)

33% International politics and current affairs

17% Misinformation and/or misleading images about the US presidential candidates and elections

15% Misinformation or fake images/videos related to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict

11% Allegations of misleading claims made by US politicians

Unprompted **Top 3** Misinformation or Deep Fakes Encountered in the Last 4 Weeks – by Topic (Among Those Who Saw News About Each Topic)

25% Health or medical information

17% Unsubstantiated claims about miracle cures, supplements, diets and weight loss products

17% General mentions of false news stories and deepfakes circulating online

10% Unsubstantiated claims about political policies and party positions about health policies

Unprompted **Top 3** Misinformation or Deep Fakes Encountered in the Last 4 Weeks – by Topic (Among Those Who Saw News About Each Topic)

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Q5. In the past 4 weeks, have you seen, heard, or read anything about the following topics that you consider to be...? Please select those that apply:

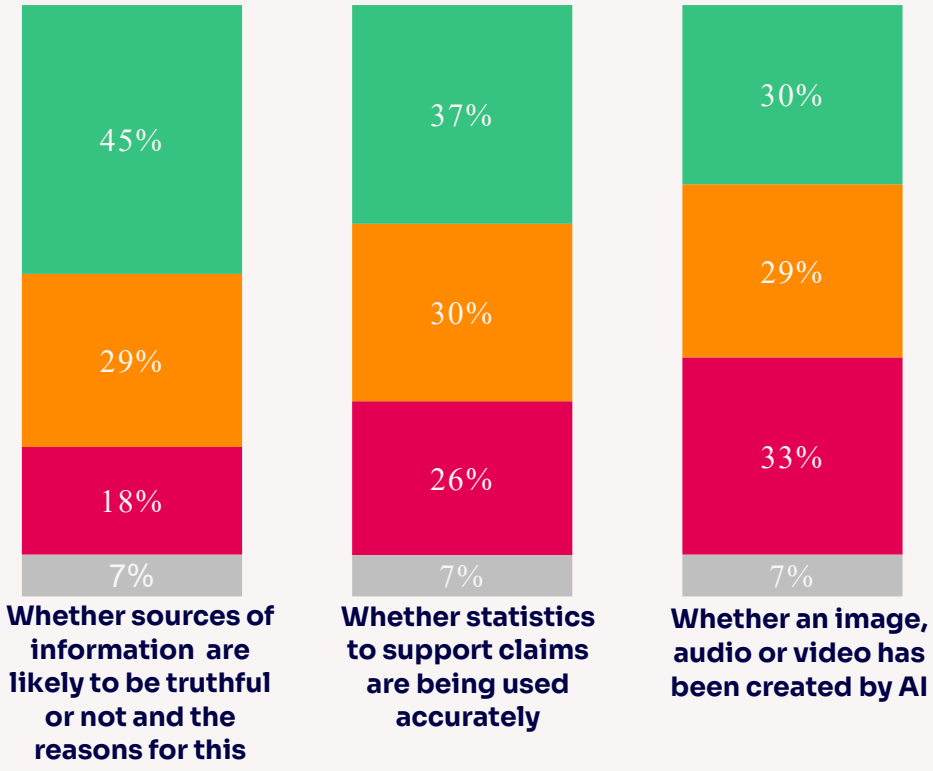
Base: All have seen or heard or read any news or information about health or medical information in last 4 weeks (n=1944) , UK politics including the general elections (n=3483), International politics and current affairs (n= 2644), Other (n =131)

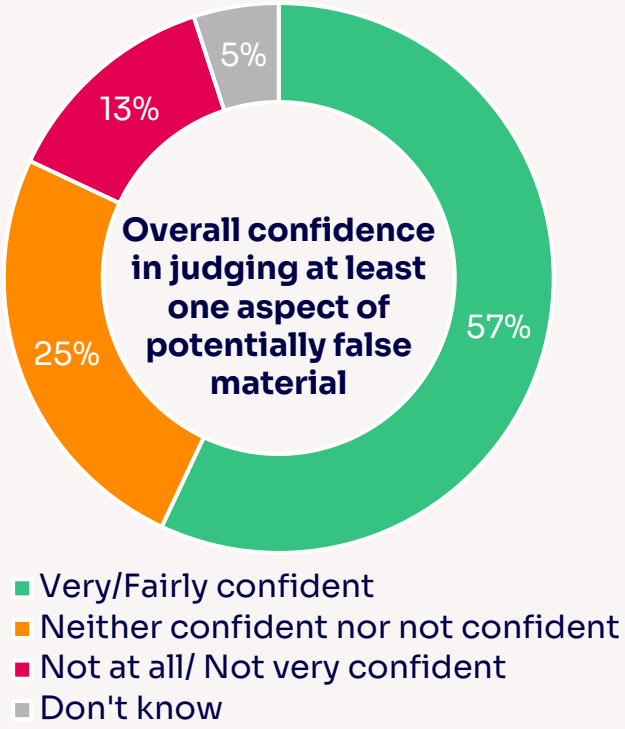
Section 3: How people characterise and deal with mis and disinformation

Almost six in ten UK adults feel confident in assessing the truthfulness of at least one aspect of online information

Almost half of UK adults feel confident they can judge whether sources of information are truthful, and just under two-fifths are confident in their ability to assess whether statistics to support claims are being used accurately. Respondents are less confident in their ability to judge the presence of AI-generated material. One-third of UK adults say they are not confident judging whether an image, audio or video has been created by AI. Overall, over half of respondents say they are confident in judging at least one aspect of information. Levels of confidence vary by group.

Assessing Online Information: Confidence in Judging Various Aspects - Total





Higher c onfidence

Mental health conditions - **61%**
ABC1- **62%**
Males - **65%**
Minority ethnic groups -**70%**
16-24s - **71%**
25-34s - **73%**
LGB+ - **75%**

Lower confidence

C2DE - **16%**
Females -**17%**
+55- **22%**

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Q19. When considering information online, how confident are you in judging the following?

Base: All respondents (n=4269), Males (n=1934), Females (n=2269), Heterosexuals (n=3580), LGB+ (n=454), 16-24s (n=557), 25-34s (n=827), 55+ (n=1596), Mental Health Conditions (n=665), Minority Ethnic Groups (n=527), English is Not First Language (n=340), ABC1(n=2570), C2DE (n=1699), Church of England/Scotland (n=817), Low education level (n=419), Medium education level (n=1524)

Almost half of UK adults say they decide whether or not something is misinformation because they know the facts about the topic

We asked respondents to consider why they had decided a piece of information was false or misleading, giving them a range of options to select from. Nearly half say their decision is based on knowing the facts about the topic. Just over four in ten say that the way the information is portrayed is a key factor, and nearly four in ten check with other sources. Around one-third base their view on the provenance of the information, and three in ten decide based on others' views about the information.

Reasons for considering recent Information as false or misleading - all who have experienced misinformation in last 4 weeks

46% I know the facts about this topic, which are different from this view

43% The look and feel of the information made me think it was untrustworthy

37% I checked the information against reputable sources

34% The person or organisation that posted the information has previously shared false/ misleading information

31% It was flagged or reported as false by others

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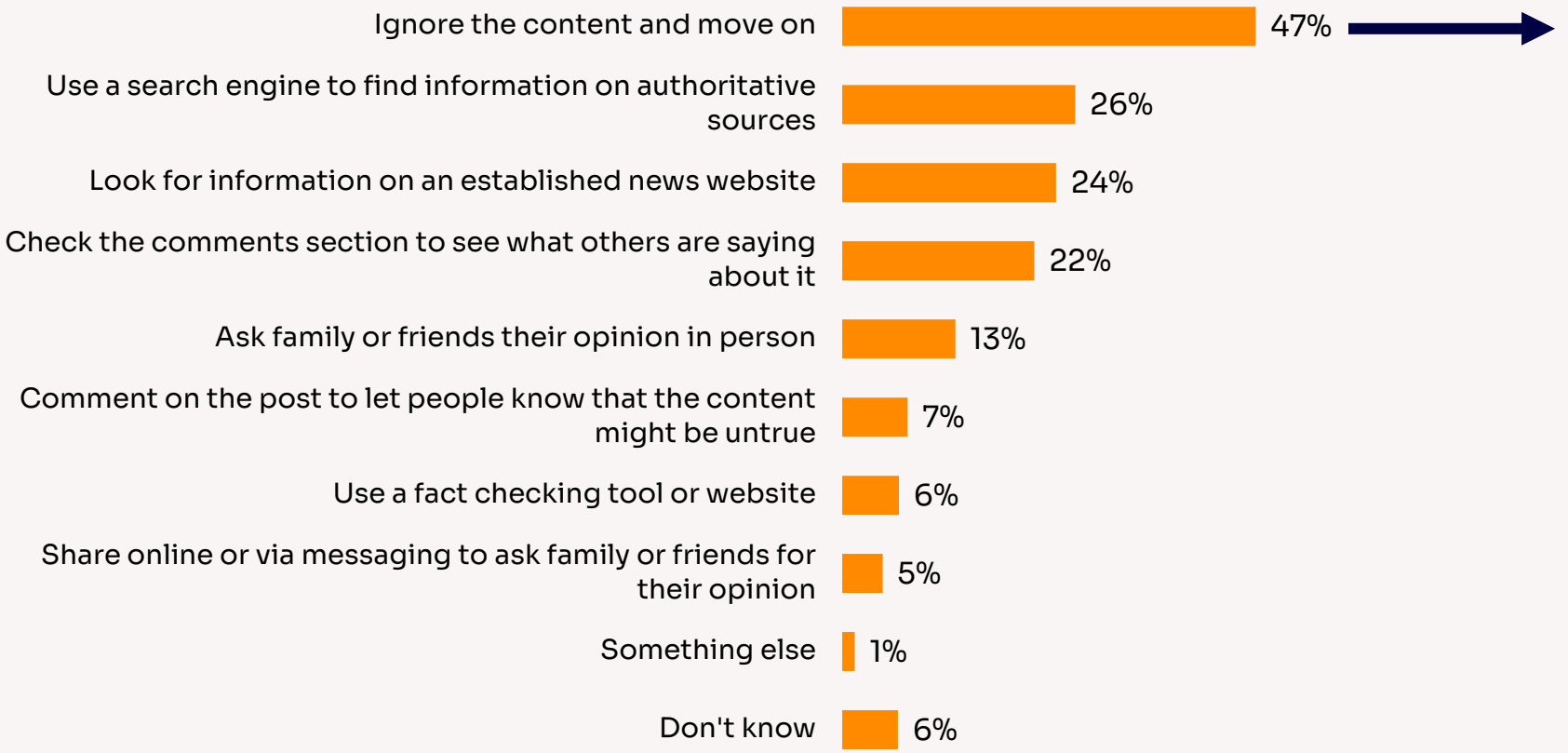
Q15. Thinking about the most recent piece of false or misleading information that you have come across, why do you consider this information to be false or misleading? Please select all that apply

Base:All who have seen, heard or read false or misleading information in the past 4 weeks (n-=1592) Males (n= 876), LBG+ (n =212), 16-24s (n=211), 25-34s(n=341), 35-44(n=341), +55 (n=609), Mental Health Conditions (n= 270), Minority Ethnic Groups (n=203)

Nearly half of UK adults say they ignore potentially untrue information online

Nearly one-half of UK adults say they ignore potentially untrue online content. One-quarter search for further information to check. Over one in five looks at comments on the information to see what others say about it, and 13% ask friends and family. One in twenty says they use a fact checking tool or website.

Actions taken when encountering potentially untrue online content – all UK adults



More likely to ignore:
Older adults (53%)

Less likely to ignore:
LGB+ (40%)
Minority ethnic groups (28%)
People with English not as their first language (30%)

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Q18. If you come across an article or piece of content online that you think might be untrue, what do you typically do? Please select all that apply.

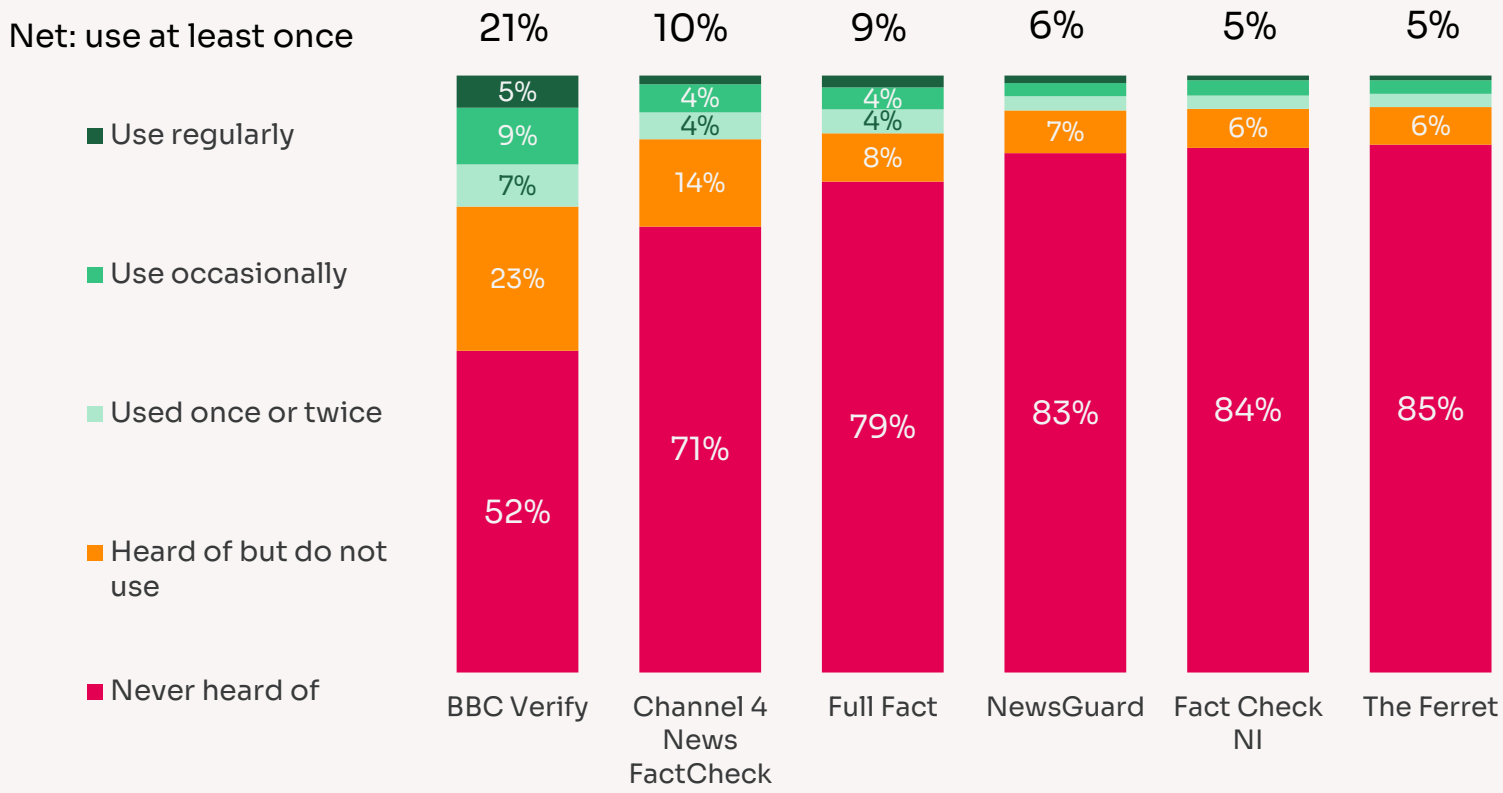
Base: All respondents (n=4269)

A quarter of UK adults say they have used a fact checker website or tool at least once

When asked whether they had heard of or used any fact checker websites or tools, around a quarter of UK adults say they have used a fact checker website or tool at least once. However, across all the fact checker websites mentioned, over half of UK adults have not heard of the website or tool.
BBC Verify is most likely to be used and heard of, with one in five saying they use it at least once, and one in twenty saying they do so regularly.

Prompted awareness and use of fact checker websites and tools – all UK adults

More likely to use at least once:
Males
Younger adults
LGB+
Minority ethnic groups
Non-native English speakers



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Q17. Please indicate whether you have heard of or use any of the fact-checker websites or tools listed below

Base: All respondents (n=4269)

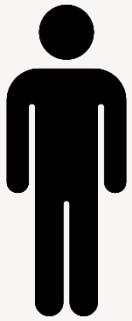
Nine in 10 of those who encounter misinformation say they are concerned about its societal impact

We asked respondents who had encountered false or misleading information how concerned they are about its impact. Nine in ten say they are concerned about the societal impacts of false or misleading information, and almost two-thirds say they are concerned about the impact on themselves.

Concern about the impact of false or misleading Information (any topic) – all who have experienced misinformation in last 4 weeks

90% of participants are concerned about the societal impact of encountering misinformation

People from ABC1 backgrounds (92%) are more likely than average to be concerned



63% of participants are concerned about the individual impact of encountering misinformation

Three quarters (75%) of people from minority ethnic groups are concerned, and 67% of those aged 25-34

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Q8. How concerned are you about the impact on yourself of false or misleading information relating to the following topics, where 1 is very concerned and 5 is not at all concerned? /Q9. How concerned are you about the impact on society of false or misleading information relating to the following topics, where 1 is very concerned and 5 is not at all concerned?

Base: All who have seen, heard or read false or misleading information in the past 4 weeks (n-=1580), 25-43s (n= 335),Minority Ethnic Groups (n=202), ABC1 (n= 1066)

Views about the truthfulness of statements on current affairs topic areas

Respondents were asked whether they thought the following statements on subjects related to current affairs were true or false. Three in ten UK adults believe that there is a single group of people who secretly control the world together, and these views are more likely to be held by those in C2DE groups, younger people, people from minority ethnic groups and those whose first language is not English. Three in ten believe that there is significant evidence of large-scale election fraud, and females, those from minority ethnic groups and from C2DE backgrounds are more likely to hold this view.

Views on whether statements are true or false – all UK adults

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Q22. Here are some statements on current affairs topics that we have adapted from a range of online sources. We will show you a range of true and false statements and we want to know whether you think each is true or false

Base: All respondents (n=4269),Males (n=1934), 16-24s (n=557), 25-34s (n=827), Minority Ethnic Groups (n=527), English is Not First Language (n=340)