

COVID-19: AUSTRALIAN NEWS & MISINFORMATION LONGITUDINAL STUDY



© 2022 by News & Media Research Centre

ISBN: 978-1-74088-526-3 (Electronic)

DOI: 10.25916/0673-7f38

Report Design: Ava Wang

Suggested citation: Park, S., McCallum, K., Lee, J., Holland, K., McGuinness, K., Fisher, C. & John, E. (2022). *Covid-19: Australian News & Misinformation Longitudinal Study*. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre.

The study was approved by the University of Canberra Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval #2275).

This research was funded by the Australian Communication and Media Authority. We would like to acknowledge the support of the ACMA Disinformation Taskforce team for the constructive input and feedback.

Covid-19: Australian
News & Misinformation
Longitudinal Study

NEWS & MEDIA
RESEARCH CENTRE

About the News & Media Research Centre

The News and Media Research Centre specialises in research exploring news consumption, the changing media environment, and the impacts of social and digital media on society. It is the home of the annual *Digital News Report Australia*.

<https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc>

CONTENTS

6	<i>The research team</i>
7	<i>Lists of charts and figures</i>
10	INTRODUCTION
12	Key findings
18	PART 1: QUANTITATIVE STUDY
20	Summary of findings
24	Quantitative study design
25	News sources and use
29	News and information about Covid-19
46	Concern about Covid-19
48	Covid-19 misinformation
54	Mitigating misinformation
67	Covid-19 perceptions
80	PART 2: QUALITATIVE STUDY
82	Summary of findings
86	Qualitative study design
90	A diversity of media diets
92	News and information in the age of Covid-19
96	Questions of trust
101	Understanding misinformation
107	Experiencing misinformation
111	Misinformation concerns and impacts
114	Misinformation susceptibility
118	Strategies for combatting misinformation
127	<i>References</i>
128	<i>Appendix 1: Survey methodology</i>
135	<i>Appendix 2: Questionnaire</i>
142	<i>Appendix 3: Stimulus materials</i>
146	<i>Appendix 4: Interview protocol</i>

The research team

PART 1

QUANTITATIVE STUDY

Sora Park | Professor, News & Media Research Centre

Jee Young Lee | Lecturer, News & Media Research Centre

Kieran McGuinness | Post-doctoral Research Fellow, News & Media Research Centre

PART 2

QUALITATIVE STUDY

Kerry McCallum | Professor, News & Media Research Centre

Kate Holland | Senior Research Fellow, News & Media Research Centre

Caroline Fisher | Associate Professor, News & Media Research Centre

Emma John | PhD Candidate, News & Media Research Centre

Lists of figures & tables

- 25 Figure 1: Frequency of news consumption (%)
- 26 Figure 2: General source of news (%)
- 26 Figure 3: Main source of news (%)
- 27 Figure 4: Number of social media or online platforms used in the last week (%)
- 27 Figure 5: Number of social media or online platforms used by gender, age and education (%)
- 28 Figure 6: Social media and online platform usage by generation (%)
- 29 Figure 7: Source of news and information about Covid-19 (%)
- 30 Figure 8: Source of news and information about Covid-19 by generation (%)
- 31 Figure 9: News media as a source of news or information about Covid-19 by generation (%)
- 31 Figure 10: Social media as a source of news and information about Covid-19 by generation (%)
- 31 Figure 11: Scientists, doctors or health experts as a source of news or information about Covid-19 by generation (%)
- 32 Figure 12: The number of sources of news and information about Covid-19 (%)
- 32 Figure 13: The number of sources of news and information about Covid-19 by generation (%)
- 32 Figure 14: The number of sources of news and information about Covid-19 by main source of news (%)
- 33 Figure 15: Social media and online platforms for news and information about Covid-19 by generation (%)
- 34 Figure 16: Active and incidental consumption of Covid-19 news and information by platform (%)
- 35 Figure 17: Uses of social media and online platforms (%)
- 35 Figure 18: Incidental vs active exposure on platforms by generation (%)
- 36 Figure 19: News and information about Covid-19 when on social media (%)
- 37 Figure 20: News and information about Covid-19 when on social media by generation (%)
- 38 Figure 21: News and information about Covid-19 when on social media by gender (%)
- 38 Figure 22: News and information about Covid-19 when on social media by region (%)
- 39 Figure 23: News and information about Covid-19 when on social media by main source of news (%)
- 40 Figure 24: Trust in news and information about Covid-19 (%)
- 41 Figure 25: Trust in Federal and State/Territory governments by generation (%)
- 41 Figure 26: Trust in news organisations and social media by generation (%)
- 42 Figure 27: Trust in health websites and experts by generation (%)
- 42 Figure 28: Trust in news and information about Covid-19 by light vs heavy news consumers (%)
- 43 Figure 29: Trust in news and information by main source of news (%)
- 44 Figure 30: Trust in news and information by social media and online platform use (%)
- 45 Figure 31: Reasons for avoiding news about Covid-19 (%)
- 45 Figure 32: Avoidance by main source of news (%)
- 45 Figure 33: Avoidance by news access and concern about misinformation (%)
- 46 Figure 34: Changes in the concern level (%)
- 46 Figure 35: Concern about Covid-19 by demographics (%)
- 47 Figure 36: Concern about Covid-19 by State (%)
- 47 Figure 37: Concern about Covid-19 by news and information access (%)
- 48 Figure 38: Experience of misinformation about Covid-19 in general (%)
- 49 Figure 39: Experience of misinformation about Covid-19 by gender (%)
- 49 Figure 40: Experience of misinformation about Covid-19 by generation (%)
- 50 Figure 41: Those who 'don't know' if they encountered misinformation by generation (%)
- 50 Figure 42: Experience of misinformation about Covid-19 by demographics (%)
- 51 Figure 43: High experience of misinformation by State (%)
- 51 Figure 44: Experience of misinformation about Covid-19 by news and platform use (%)
- 51 Figure 45: Experience of misinformation about Covid-19 by main source of news (%)
- 52 Figure 46: Experience of misinformation about Covid-19 among all respondents and among platform users (%)
- 52 Figure 47: Experience of misinformation by type of exposure to news on social media or online platforms (%)

- 53 Figure 48: Concern about Covid-19 misinformation on social media or online platforms (%)
- 53 Figure 49: Concern about Covid-19 misinformation on social media or online platforms (%)
- 53 Figure 50: Concern about Covid-19 misinformation on social media or online platforms by platform (%)
- 55 Figure 51: Responses to misinformation by generation (%)
- 55 Figure 52: Responses to misinformation by education (Top 4) (%)
- 56 Figure 53: Responses to misinformation by main source of news (%)
- 56 Figure 54: Responses to misinformation by the number of social media used (%)
- 57 Figure 55: Responses to misinformation by concern about Covid-19 misinformation (%)
- 57 Figure 56: Number of responses to misinformation by concern about misinformation (%)
- 58 Figure 57: Responses to misinformation by experience of misinformation about Covid-19 (%)
- 58 Figure 58: Number of responses to misinformation by experience of misinformation about Covid-19 (%)
- 59 Figure 59: Awareness and experience of platform interventions
- 59 Figure 60: Awareness and experience of platform interventions by generation (%)
- 60 Figure 61: Awareness and experience of platform interventions by education (%)
- 60 Figure 62: Awareness and experience of platform interventions by platform (%)
- 61 Figure 63: Awareness and experience of platform interventions by main source of news (%)
- 61 Figure 64: Awareness and experience of platform interventions by social media and online platform use (%)
- 62 Figure 65: Awareness and experience of platform interventions among Facebook users (%)
- 62 Figure 66: Awareness and experience of platform interventions among Twitter users (%)
- 63 Figure 67: Awareness and experience of platform interventions by experience of misinformation on social media (%)
- 64 Figure 68: Trust in news on social media by awareness and experience of platform interventions (%)
- 64 Figure 69: Responsibility to deal with misinformation about Covid-19 (%)
- 65 Figure 70: Generation differences in the perception of responsibility of social media or online platforms—agree (%)
- 65 Figure 71: Responsibility of social media or online platforms and main source of news—agree (%)
- 66 Figure 72: Not the job of social media or online platforms by Covid-19 misinformation experience (%)
- 66 Figure 73: False or misleading information is unavoidable by Covid-19 misinformation experience (%)
- 67 Figure 74: Beliefs about Covid-19 (A) (%)
- 68 Figure 75: Beliefs about Covid-19 (B) (%)
- 68 Figure 76: Wearing a mask does not significantly reduce your risk of infection or spreading the virus by State (%)
- 68 Figure 77: The risks posed by Covid-19 are being exaggerated by people in power who want to take advantage of the situation by State (%)
- 69 Figure 78: Misinformed—Wearing a mask does not reduce your risk of infection by demographics—agree (%)
- 69 Figure 79: Misinformed—Covid-19 vaccines that are approved by the health authorities in Australia are safe—disagree (%)
- 70 Figure 80: Misinformed—I am confident that official medical guidelines in my State or Territory are based on evidence and best practice—disagree (%)
- 70 Figure 81: Misinformed—The risks posed by Covid-19 are being exaggerated by people in power who want to take advantage of the situation—agree (%)
- 71 Figure 82: Misinformed—In most cases Covid-19 can be prevented or treated by simple remedies such as taking vitamins and supplements or other over the counter medicines—agree (%)
- 72 Figure 83: Informed and misinformed groups (%)
- 72 Figure 84: Highly misinformed by demographics (%)
- 73 Figure 85: Access to news and information sources by misinformed groups (%)
- 74 Figure 86: News and information about Covid-19 when on social media by misinformed groups (%)
- 75 Figure 87: Trust in news and information source by misinformed groups (%)
- 75 Figure 88: Experience of misinformation by misinformed groups (%)
- 76 Figure 89: Reasons for avoiding news about Covid-19 by misinformed groups (%)
- 77 Figure 90: Concern about Covid-19 misinformation social media or online platforms by misinformed groups (%)
- 77 Figure 91: Awareness and experience of platform interventions by misinformed groups (%)
- 78 Figure 92: Responsibility to deal with misinformation about Covid-19 by misinformed groups (%)

54	Table 1: Responses to misinformation (%)
63	Table 2: Concern about misinformation on social media and awareness of platform interventions (%)
87	Table 3: Focus group participants
128	Table 4: Wave 1 respondents
128	Table 5: Wave 2 respondents
129	Table 6: Generation recoding
129	Table 7: Education recoding
130	Table 8: Income recoding
130	Table 9: News access recoding
131	Table 10: Number of social media and online platforms recoding
131	Table 11: Number of Covid-19 news and information sources recoding
131	Table 12: News avoidance recoding
133	Table 13: Responses to misinformation recoding
134	Table 14: Misinformed groups recoding

Introduction

12

Key findings

16

Overall study design

17

Report structure

The News and Media Research Centre (N&MRC) at the University of Canberra was contracted by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) to provide a mixed method research project to study Australians' access to, consumption of, and critical engagement with news, information and misinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹

Our research is situated in the context of widespread public concern about the prevalence and impacts of online misinformation in Australia and globally. It is informed by the Australian Government's policy agenda on digital platforms, including its response to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's Digital Platforms Inquiry Final Report (2019), the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code (2021), and the ACMA Misinformation and News Quality on Digital Platforms in Australia Position Paper (2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted a strong appetite for credible and fast news. Across the globe, reporters, governments and public health professionals have worked overtime to keep communities informed. News consumption has increased as the public tries to make sense of this rapidly evolving crisis. Despite the surge in demand, Australian news organisations experienced a

substantial hit to revenues. The Public Interest Journalism Initiative estimates that more than 150 local newspapers were either closed or suspended during the crisis in Australia (Public Interest Journalism Initiative, 2021). This has left a significant gap for news consumers in accessing up-to-date, localised information, and an increasing reliance on social media or online platforms for news. However, studies have consistently found that people have low trust in news found on social media or search engines (Fisher et al., 2019; Park et al., 2020a; Park et al., 2020b; Park et al., 2018). The loss of reliable local news is being compounded by the rise of misinformation about Covid-19. This comes at a time when news consumers are more reliant on high quality, trustworthy news sources than ever before.

This study examines how and where Australians are getting information about Covid-19, which sources they find trustworthy and their experiences with misinformation. The report extends our understanding around the access, consumption and critical engagement with news and misinformation during the ongoing global pandemic.

THE RESEARCH AIMED TO:

01. Explore the way audiences consume and make sense of news and information in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.
02. Examine the news diet and audiences' exposure to various types of news and information.
03. Understand audiences' experiences of and concerns about misinformation and disinformation in different social contexts.
04. Understand audiences' perceived impacts of misinformation and disinformation and what they are doing about it.
05. Identify audiences' views about who has responsibility for regulating and mitigating misinformation and disinformation.
06. Explore local wisdom about strategies to combat misinformation and disinformation.

¹ Throughout this report, we use the term 'misinformation' as an umbrella term to cover all kinds of false, misleading and deceptive information, spread both intentionally and unintentionally.

KEY FINDINGS

The transition to digital platforms as a key source of information has resulted in many changes in how people access, consume and share news and information. The online environment is particularly conducive to the flow of misinformation for a number of reasons.

First is the sheer volume of content that is presented to users. Information is no longer scarce, and people are exposed to an overwhelming amount of content through both traditional and online media. The increasing reliance on aggregator news applications and mobile alerts indicates a need to filter and curate information (Park et al., 2020a). However, the current systems of curation are fundamentally different from the traditions of professional journalism. People are left to their own devices when navigating and managing their information and news diet. There is evidence that some people find it hard to cope with the volume of information they encounter, especially online. People report taking breaks from their favourite social media platforms (Perrin, 2018) and avoiding news (Fisher et al., 2019) because they are fatigued (Park et al., 2020b).

Second is related to the nature of how people engage with social media platforms. We know from our previous studies that while social media use is increasing, it is not spread equally among different groups of the population, and only a subset of users choose to comment on or share information on social media (Fisher et al., 2019; Park et al., 2020a). What we see on social media is a limited, fractured and personalised portrayal of the world, as content on social media is tailored to the user's identity, social networks and algorithms (Bail, 2021). During the 2016 US Presidential campaign, Grinberg et al., (2019) estimated that less than one percent of Twitter users were exposed to 80 percent of the fake news and 0.1 percent of users were responsible for sharing 80 percent of such messages. To date, very little is known about how people understand and are impacted by this fractured online environment.

Our findings show that Australians have a diverse media diet and access multiple sources of information. However, they are concerned about the risks of misinformation and many of them devise their own strategies to deal with the 'infodemic' (Mheidly & Fares, 2020). The provision of trustworthy and credible news is more important than ever before, as is the ability of news consumers to be able to discern quality information.

A hybrid news and information diet

Most Australians have a complex and hybrid style of media consumption. In their news diet, Australians include a combination of traditional news media and at least one or multiple forms of social media. Along with mainstream media and social media, participants described their practices of seeking out information from government, science and other expert websites.

Within this complex information diet, the role of traditional news appears to be very important. For Covid-19 related news and information news media are the most accessed source (63%). News consumers are also more likely to recall getting news and information from posts made by news media organisations (67%) compared to links shared by people they know (14%) or posts by celebrities or social media influencers (11%), when they are seeing news on social media. And those who recall getting news and information from official sources or news media are more likely to be informed about Covid-19.

The focus groups confirmed that, while less common, seeking information from official or expert online sources was an important alternative to mainstream news sources and a key part of their verification activity.

Crisis in trust and the rise of scepticism

2020 captured a unique moment in both risk perception and in media consumption, with the global pandemic generating a trend-reversing thirst for credible, reliable news from trustworthy sources (Park et al., 2020b). The global Covid-19 pandemic is taking place in a 'risk society', that is characterised by high levels of distrust in social institutions and traditional authorities, and increased awareness of the threats of everyday life. In such a climate, strategies to control risk and tame uncertainty have proliferated with the paradoxical effect of increasing people's anxiety about risk.

As online and social media sources of news continue to increase in popularity, it has become vitally important to understand how audiences react to global health and economic crises, where they seek out information and who they look to for guidance. However, we find that there is a fundamental crisis in the trust people place in news, public institutions and society in general. Both our survey and focus groups revealed this generalised anxiety and loss of trust in public institutions.

In terms of trust in news, people have differing levels of trust in various sources and there seems to be a generalised scepticism towards all types of news and information. We know from previous studies that the level of distrust or mistrust in news is growing internationally (Park et al., 2020c). We also know that trust can fluctuate depending on external circumstances and the context of news consumption. We experienced a rise in trust during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic (Park et al., 2020b). Whether this 'Covid-19 news trust bump' will be sustained is something to be observed.

Focus group participants expressed clear views about which news brands, mediums and platforms they trusted. These often aligned with their personal ideologies, with the ABC identified as a trusted news brand while commercial imperatives were seen as undermining some news brands' trustworthiness. People were distrusting of the use of 'click bait' to draw audiences in, including commercial mainstream and social media. Facebook was singled out as a particularly untrustworthy source of news due to the platform's perceived commercial imperatives and enabling of rampant misinformation.

In the context of Covid-19, survey respondents and focus group participants reported a heightened trust in health and scientific experts. The survey found that in terms of Covid-19 news and information, Australians are most trusting of scientists, doctors or health experts (80%), and least trusting of news on social media (22%). This was reflected in the focus groups, where participants discussed their reliance on public health experts and science journalists for accurate pandemic advice. In contrast, there were some participants who questioned government and public health motivations in relation to Covid-19 reporting and vaccinations, indicating a pervasive scepticism towards public institutions.

The uneven reach of misinformation

Concern about Covid-19 misinformation is high with more than two-thirds of Australians surveyed expressing concern. However, the qualitative study reveals that participants have varying levels of concern about misinformation and its impacts. Some individuals and groups were highly concerned about the potential harms it could cause, while others conveyed a more relaxed attitude. Anxieties appeared to be heightened among those who had observed the impacts of social media misinformation on young people or family members, or whose relationships had been damaged by it.

Furthermore, the focus groups revealed that people do not have a shared perspective or viewpoint about what misinformation is and how it relates to them in their everyday media practices. This is despite people expressing confidence in their own understanding of what misinformation is, how to identify it, how it circulates, and its consequences. Younger generations and high education groups are particularly confident in their understanding. The awareness and the ability to detect misinformation were related to the engagement level of news consumers. Those who actively seek news on social media or online platforms are also more concerned about misinformation than those who are incidental news consumers. The high awareness of misinformation is possibly due to the higher levels of media literacy among those who are active news consumers and those who are interested in news and politics (Park et al., 2018).

The experience of misinformation spans across the entire media spectrum and not just on social media. Sites and sources of misinformation include mainstream media and political bias, conspiracists, and platforms' commercial imperatives. However, the survey found that those who use social media as their main source of news (29%) are more likely to report experiencing high levels of misinformation. Both the survey respondents and focus group participants named Facebook as a site of particular concern.

While concern about misinformation was evident, many people also defended the right of others to hold opinions counter to their own and to identify social media platforms as an appropriate place for the sharing of contested beliefs. For some participants, the exception to this was the sharing of racist opinion or incitements to violence. These seemingly contradictory views were reflected in the survey results as well. While three-quarters of survey respondents agreed that social media or online platforms should actively intervene to reduce misinformation, almost half (44%) also thought that misinformation is 'unavoidable and something we must live with'.

It should be noted that the survey and focus groups were conducted before widespread controversy and misinformation emerged around vaccination.

A spectrum of susceptibility to misinformation

We found most people were confident about their own resilience to misinformation, but they expressed a range of concerns about the vulnerability of others. Teachers and parents, people with family overseas, and those whose family relationships had been damaged by conspiratorial beliefs expressed most concern about the consequences of misinformation.

Participants identified a range of practices and groups that might be more susceptible to misinformation. They provided numerous stories of friends and relatives who had shared misinformation online. There was no single view about who was more vulnerable. Younger people expressed concerns about older people's lack of digital media literacy, while teachers and parents expressed concern about younger people's immersive social media worlds. Some thought lack of education was a factor while others mentioned strong religious beliefs as making people more vulnerable to extreme views. Those who are socially isolated or have limited social connection were deemed particularly vulnerable. A lack of media literacy and poor news and media consumption practices were identified as increasing misinformation susceptibility. These included: reliance on sources that reinforce views; failing to verify information or consult multiple and diverse sources, and lack of awareness of how digital media platform use algorithms.

Responsibility for mitigating the spread and impact of misinformation

The study reveals that there is no consensus on who is responsible for mitigating the spread and impact of misinformation. Rather, participants expressed a genuine concern about where responsibility for combatting media misinformation lies, and a lack of trust in the institutions responsible.

The survey and focus group research explored people's understanding and use of the wide range of intervention tools that are currently in place. More than half of Australians were aware that social media or online platforms are removing content (55%), labelling potentially false or misleading information (52%), and providing users with the opportunity to report false or misleading information (52%). However, only 7% came across a post being removed and only 13% had seen a label attached to potential misinformation. We found that those who are aware of these measures to combat misinformation are also more likely to be trusting of news found on social media. This suggests that if there are more visible efforts and people increasingly experience these on social media or online platforms, they may be effective in the long-term.

A common theme across the focus groups was that individuals see themselves as responsible for managing their news and social media consumption. More than three-quarters (78%) of the survey respondents agree that it is up to the individual to learn to detect misinformation themselves. A similar number of people (76%) say that social media or online platforms should be doing more, but fewer (59%) agree that governments should be making sure the public is not exposed to misinformation. Somewhat paradoxically, focus group participants expressed the sentiment that both governments and platforms have a responsibility to address misinformation but were deeply sceptical about giving them such powers. We identified a deep suspicion of platforms' willingness to take responsibility for mitigating misinformation if it interferes with their profit motives.

People's responses to misinformation are also diverse. Some take active measures to combat it whilst others do nothing. Almost one-third (31%) of the people who come across misinformation do nothing in response. A common reaction is to stop paying attention to untrustworthy sources (32%). Very few people reported misinformation to the provider (6%) or knowingly shared it with others (6%).

Most importantly, participants in our focus groups recognised there was no single entity responsible for combatting misinformation. While they acknowledged that measures do need to be taken and there is at least some sort of role for both platforms and governments, they also recognised their personal responsibility for assessing the quality of news and information and for containing the spread of false information, particularly that which may be harmful to others.

OVERALL STUDY DESIGN

We adopted a mixed method research design by combining a national online survey and a series of focus groups that were conducted on- and offline. The quantitative survey phase and the qualitative focus groups phase were designed together, with the preliminary findings of the survey informing the design and analysis of the focus groups.

The national online survey was completed by 2,659 Australians aged 18 and older between 19 December 2020 and 18 January 2021. This survey was based on an earlier standalone national survey that we conducted between 18–22 April 2020 to better understand how Australians were accessing news and information during the preliminary stages of the Covid-19 pandemic (Park et al., 2020b). Comparing results from these two surveys provides revealing insights into changing news consumption habits, experiences, and beliefs about misinformation at two points in the global pandemic.

Following the survey, a series of 12 focus groups were conducted with 60 participants between 19 February and 9 March 2021. Focus groups were an important element of the research design that complemented our quantitative findings by allowing news consumers to explain, in their own words, their experiences of misinformation and to provide deeper insights into these complex phenomena.

We adopted a sociocultural approach to media and communication in the focus groups to seek out the perspectives, experiences, voices and words of everyday people in relation to complex social phenomena. By utilising a peer conversation method, which recruits participants from family or social groups and networks to participate in informal and open-ended discussions (Gamson, 1995; Holland, McCallum & Blood, 2015; McCallum, 2010), we were able to capture the language and resources people use to make sense of their experiences of misinformation, to provide depth, nuance and explanation of their experiences and understanding.

While the launching point of our research was news and misinformation during the ongoing Covid-19 global pandemic, we sought to explore the range of misinformation experience across the political, health and social domains.

Both research phases were informed by our long-term digital news consumption project, the *Digital News Report: Australia 2015–2020* (Watkins et al., 2015; Watkins et al., 2016; Watkins et al., 2017; Park et al., 2018; Fisher et al., 2019; Park, et al., 2020a), as well as a growing body of research from Media Studies that identifies a global crisis of trust in both news and political institutions (Nielsen, 2017). These highlight how the shift to digital and the rise of platforms has changed the way news and information are produced, distributed, consumed and shared, while challenging the gatekeeper role of journalists and shifting the balance of power towards digital platforms.

REPORT STRUCTURE

This report is designed in four parts. Following this introductory section, we present the Quantitative Study in Part 1, followed by Part 2, the Qualitative Study. Appendices in the final section include: Survey Methodology; Questionnaire; Stimulus Materials.

PART **1**

Quantitative Study

20

Summary of findings

24

Quantitative study design

25

News sources and use

29

News and information about Covid-19

Sources of news or information about Covid-19

Number of news sources

Access to social media and online platforms for Covid-19 news and information

Sources of news or information when on social media

Trust in news and information about Covid-19

News avoidance

46

Concern about Covid-19

48

Covid-19 misinformation

Experience of misinformation about Covid-19

Experience of misinformation by platform

Concern about Covid-19 misinformation on social media and online platforms

54

Mitigating misinformation

Responses to misinformation

Platform interventions

Responsibility

67

Covid-19 perceptions

Beliefs in authoritative and official advice about Covid-19

Characteristics of highly misinformed groups

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the daily lives of Australians, particularly on the ways in which people engage with news and information. It has highlighted the significance of how messages in the public arena are interpreted during a crisis and the impact this can have on citizens' behaviour. While the research is primarily based on how people understand and respond to Covid-19 related news and information, the experiences of information and misinformation can be applied to other contexts.

The quantitative section of the report is based on a national online survey of N=2,659 Australians aged 18 and older, conducted between 19 December 2020 and 18 January 2021. In this report, we refer to this survey as Wave 2. For comparison we have discussed results from an earlier survey with N=2,196 Australians aged 18 and older, conducted between April 18 and 22 2020, using the same methodology. We refer to this initial survey as Wave 1 in the report. Both samples are reflective of the population that has access to the internet. Over half of Wave 2 sample (n=1,411) were recontacted from the Wave 1 sample. Details of the method are in the Survey Methodology section (p. 138). We compared the repeat respondents from Wave 1 and 2, and the newly recruited respondents in Wave 2, and found the results to be consistent. The analysis in this report is based on all respondents.

The study examines how Australians access news and information about Covid-19, which sources they found trustworthy, their understanding of the pandemic, and their experiences of misinformation.

Australians revert to pre-pandemic news consumption levels

Australians have mostly reverted to pre-Covid-19 news consumption levels. While TV remains the most commonly used general news source, it has fallen from its April 2020 peak, while online news has continued to grow in popularity. In the second wave, social media was the second most frequently used news source, used by 52% of Australians.

This is related to the fact that the overall concern about the Covid-19 pandemic has declined (-10 pp) since Wave 1, with older Australians' concern level dropping more than that of younger people.

More than 90% of Australians use at least one type of social media or online platform regularly. About two-thirds (65%) use 1-to-5 social media platforms, 27% use more than 5. One in 10 (9%) do not use any social media or online platforms regularly. The most popular platforms for general use are Facebook (73%), Google Search (54%), YouTube (51%), Facebook Messenger (42%) and Instagram (39%).

News consumers continue to rely on news media for Covid-19 news and information

Australians continue to rely on news media (63%) for Covid-19 news and information more than any other source. Compared to Wave 1, use of news media has remained the same, while use of other authoritative sources has declined. There was a decrease in reliance on information from Department of Health websites by 5 percentage points, politicians by 9 percentage points, and scientists, doctors and health experts by 8 percentage points.

Incidental news exposure is more common than active news seeking on social media and online platforms

People who use social media and online platforms are more likely to come across news and information about Covid-19 incidentally (45%), rather than actively specifically looking for it (31%). Incidental exposure to news about Covid-19 is highest among Apple News (59%), Google News (58%), Facebook (54%) and Twitter (53%) users. Messaging apps are used less for both active and incidental news consumption.

Those who use social media as their main source of news are more likely to recall getting news and information about Covid-19 from posts made by news media organisations (67%), compared to links shared by people they know (14%) or posts by celebrities or social media influencers (11%). Those who recall getting news and information from official sources or news media are less likely to be highly uninformed about Covid-19.

Younger generations are less trusting of official sources than older generations

Australians are most trusting of Covid-19 news and information from scientists, doctors or health experts (80%), and least trusting of Covid-19 news and information on social media (22%). Trust in news organisations and politicians has declined since Wave 1.

Younger people are less trusting of official and authoritative sources of information, such as the federal government and scientists, doctors and health experts. Trust in official and authoritative sources is associated with people's main source of news. Those whose main source of news is social media have lower levels of trust in official and authoritative sources.

Younger generations, men, highly education, and city dwellers experience misinformation more

Younger people are more likely to say they have encountered misinformation and are less likely to say they don't know if they came across misinformation. Those who use social media as their main source of news (29%) are more likely report experiencing high levels of misinformation.

Similarly, younger generations, men, those with high levels of education and city dwellers are more concerned about misinformation about Covid-19.

Those who actively seek news on social media or online platforms are also more concerned about misinformation than those who are incidental news consumers. Those who are misinformed are also much more likely to be concerned about Covid-19 misinformation.

Younger generations and social media users are more likely to respond to misinformation when they experience it

Almost one-third (31%) of the people who come across misinformation do nothing in response. Among those who do, the most reaction is to stop paying attention to untrustworthy sources (32%). Very few people reported misinformation to the provider (6%) or knowingly shared it with others (6%). Older generations tend to adopt passive ways to deal with misinformation such as stopping paying attention, whereas younger generations engage more proactively by seeking more-reputable sources or searching for different sources to verify the information.

Those who use social media as their main source of news are more likely to search a number of different sources to check the accuracy of information (33%), and seek more-reputable information sources (21%) than those who use other sources.

There is a general awareness of platform interventions but very low direct experience

More than half of Australians were aware that social media or online platforms are removing content (55%), labelling potentially false or misleading information (52%), and providing users with the opportunity to report false or misleading information (52%). However, only 7% came across a post being removed and only 13% had seen a label attached to potential misinformation. Those who use social media as their main source of news, and heavy social media users, are more likely to be aware of and have experienced the measures.

Those who are aware of these measures are also more likely to be trusting of news found on social media. Those who use social media or online platforms are more likely to be aware of these measures compared to those who do not access news on social media or online platforms.

Many people want social media companies to act upon misinformation but also feel responsible themselves

Many (78%) agree that it is up to the individual to learn how to detect misinformation themselves and, 76% think that social media or online platforms should be doing more. Fewer (59%) agree that governments should be making sure the public is not exposed to misinformation. Only a quarter of respondents (26%) think it's not the job of social media or online platforms to decide what is misinformation. Another 44% say misinformation is unavoidable and something we must live with.

Younger generations and social media users have a laissez-faire approach to misinformation

Younger people are more likely to think that it is not the job of social media or online platforms to address misinformation, whereas older groups are more likely to think that social media or online platforms should do more to reduce false and misleading information on their services.

Those who use social media as their main source of news are also more likely to believe that misinformation is unavoidable and that it is 'just something we must live with' (53%) compared to those who use TV as their main source (38%).

Those who experienced misinformation are more pessimistic about what can be done. They are less likely to think it is the job of platforms to reduce misinformation and think it's something we have to live with.

One in ten Australians are at high risk of being misinformed

More than half of Australians are well informed about Covid-19 (59%), 30% are misinformed at a low level and 11% are at risk of being highly misinformed.

Gen Z (16%) and Gen Y (17%) are much more likely to be in the 'highly misinformed' group than baby boomers (5%) and those 74 years and older (3%). Men (14%) are almost twice as likely to be highly misinformed compared to women (8%). Education level is less predictive of being misinformed, with those with low (10%), medium (10%) and high (13%) education attainment having similar numbers, which implies that there are multiple factors that influence how people are impacted by misinformation.

Those who access news media and content from scientists, doctors or health experts for Covid-19 news and information are less likely to be at risk of being highly misinformed than those who access Covid-19 news and information on health and lifestyle blogs, the WHO website, other health authority websites, from politicians, and news and information on social media. Those who are informed and those who are misinformed have different levels of trust in the sources of information. Those who are highly misinformed distrust news media but trust news found on social media more than those who are informed. Informed people trust the government more but misinformed people trust health and lifestyle websites and blogs more.

QUANTITATIVE STUDY DESIGN

The survey reported in the quantitative section of the report is based on an earlier survey (Wave 1) conducted by the News & Media Research Centre (Park et al., 2020b). Between 19 December 2020 and 18 January 2021, a national online survey of N=2,659 Australians aged 18 and older was conducted (Wave 2). The final sample is reflective of the population that has access to the internet. We used a quota for gender, age and education, reflecting the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census 2016 for adults aged 18+. The data was weighted based on the quota. For comparison we have included some of the results from Wave 1, which was a survey of N=2,196 Australians aged 18 and older and conducted between 18–22 April 2020. More than half of Wave 2 sample (n=1,411) were repeat respondents from the Wave 1 sample.

Among the N=2,659 respondents, 1310 (49%) were male, 1344 (51%) were female, and 2 identified as non-binary. A further 2 chose not to disclose their gender. Of the respondents, 217 (8%) were Gen Z, 874 (33%) were Gen Y, 659 (25%) were Gen X, 729 (27%) were baby boomers, and 180 (7%) were 74+. Three quarters of respondents (2029, 76%) live in major cities and a quarter (630, 24%)

reside in regional areas. In terms of education, 558 (21%) of the respondents had high school education or lower, 1117 (42%) had post-secondary education, and 984 (37%) received tertiary education. Of the respondents, 603 (23%) earned less than \$39,999, 1082 (41%) earned between \$40,000 and \$99,999, and 707 (27%) earned \$100,000 or above. Note that the figures may not add up to 100% as the sample was weighted.

We compared the repeat respondents from Wave 1 and 2, and the newly recruited respondents in Wave 2, and found the results to be consistent. The analysis in this report is based on all respondents. Details of the method are in Appendix 1. The survey questionnaire (Wave 2) is in Appendix 2.

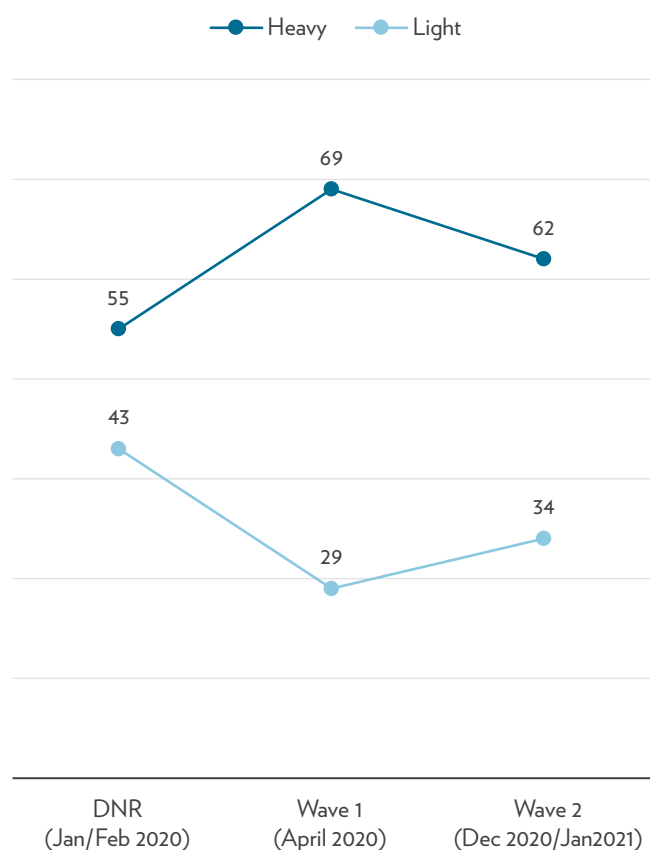
NEWS SOURCES AND USE

News consumption higher than usual

During the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a notable increase in news consumption levels as Australians sought out information about the spread of the virus and the introduction of restrictions. Findings from Wave 1 (April 2020) suggest that much of this initial increase in overall news consumption was attributable to more Australians watching TV news during this period (Park et al., 2020a).

Wave 2 (Dec 2020/Jan 2021) findings show that more than half of Australians are heavy news consumers (62%)—those who access news more than once a day. This is higher than the 2020 pre-Covid levels (55%) according to the *Digital News Report: Australia (DNR) 2020* (Park et al., 2020b), but lower than in Wave 1 (69%) (see figure 1).

FIGURE 01 FREQUENCY OF NEWS CONSUMPTION (%)



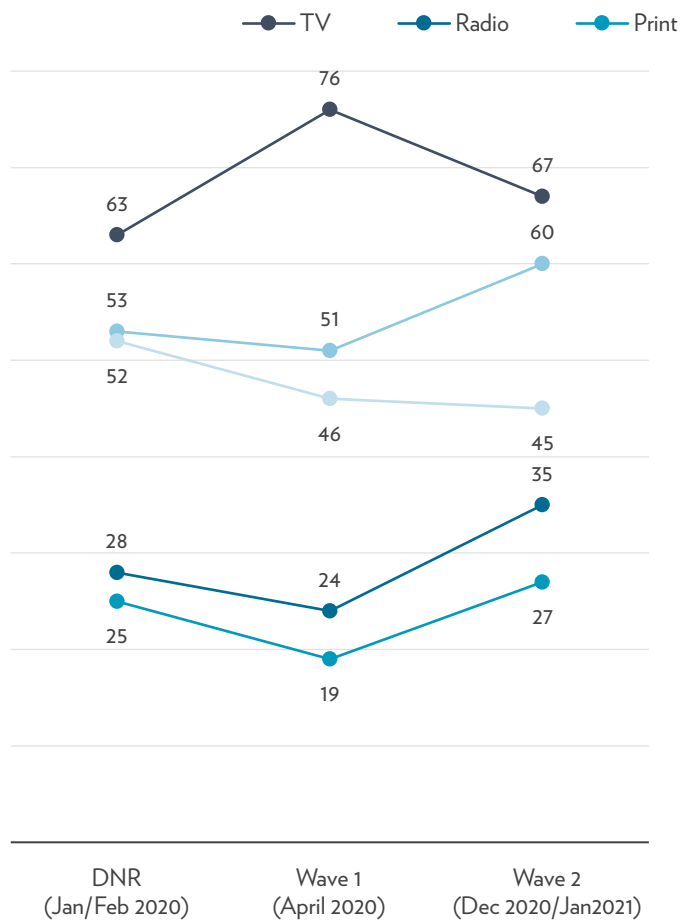
Q1. On average, how often do you access news? By news we mean national, international, regional/local news and other topical events accessed via any platform (radio, TV, newspaper or online) Non-users of news and 'don't know' responses are not included in the figure. (Base: DNR=2,131; Wave 1=2,196; Wave 2=2,659).

TV remains dominant but online is catching up

TV remained the most common source of general news for Australians (67%), followed by online news (60%) and social media (45%). TV news consumption fell from its Wave 1 peak, while access to online news (websites and apps) increased compared to both Wave 1 and pre-pandemic levels (see figure 2). While online news consumption via websites and apps grew throughout 2020, consumption of news on social media remained static.

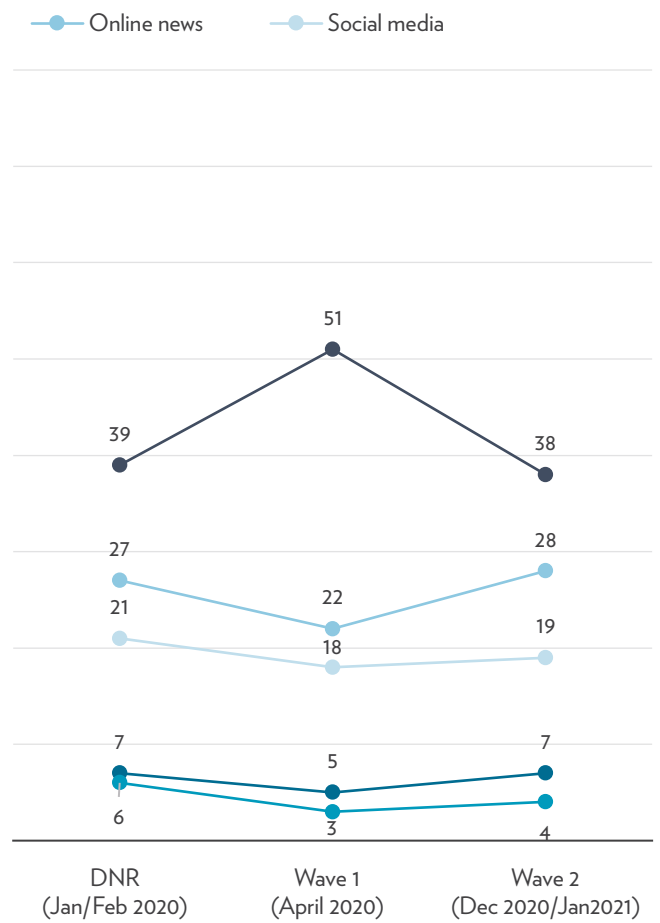
TV remained the main source of news in Australia (38%), but has declined since Wave 1 (51%, -13) back to the pre-pandemic level. As the main source of news, online news use (28%) has also reverted back to the pre-pandemic level (see figure 3).

FIGURE 02 GENERAL SOURCE OF NEWS (%)



Q4. Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news? Please select all that apply (Base: DNR=2,131; Wave 1=2,196; Wave 2=2,659).

FIGURE 03 MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS (%)



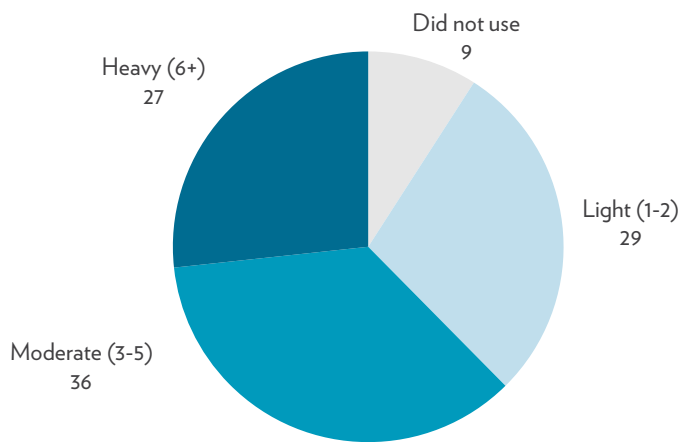
Q5. Which of the following would you say is your main source of news? (Base: DNR=2,131; Wave 1=2,196; Wave 2=2,659).

Many respondents are light to moderate users of social media and online platforms

Among the 18 social media and online platforms we listed in the survey, the median number of social media or online platforms people used in the past week was 4. Half of those surveyed used 3 or fewer different social media or online platforms. 9% did not use any social media or online platforms, 29% were light users (1–2 platforms), 36% were moderate (3–5), and 27% were heavy users (6 or more) (see figure 4).

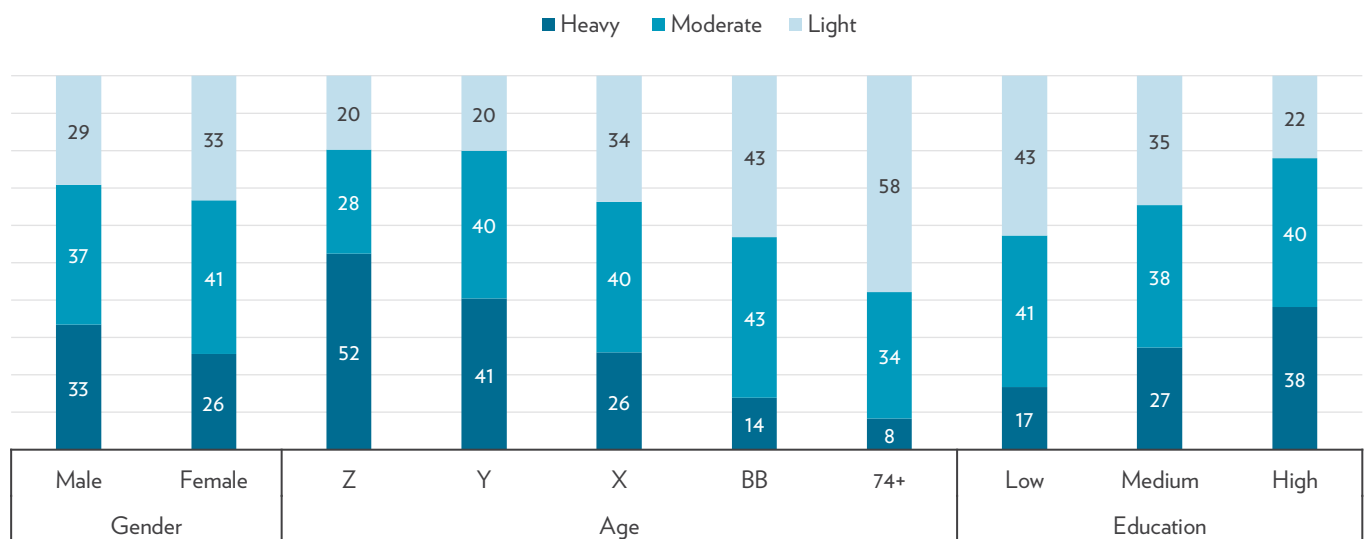
The data show that men (33%), Gen Z (52%) and Gen Y (41%), and those with high levels of education (38%) are more likely to be heavy social media users (see figure 5).

FIGURE 04 NUMBER OF SOCIAL MEDIA OR ONLINE PLATFORMS USED IN THE LAST WEEK (%)



Q6_1. Which, if any, of the following social media or online platforms have you used in the last week for any purpose? (Base: N=2,659)

FIGURE 05 NUMBER OF SOCIAL MEDIA OR ONLINE PLATFORMS USED BY GENDER, AGE AND EDUCATION (%)



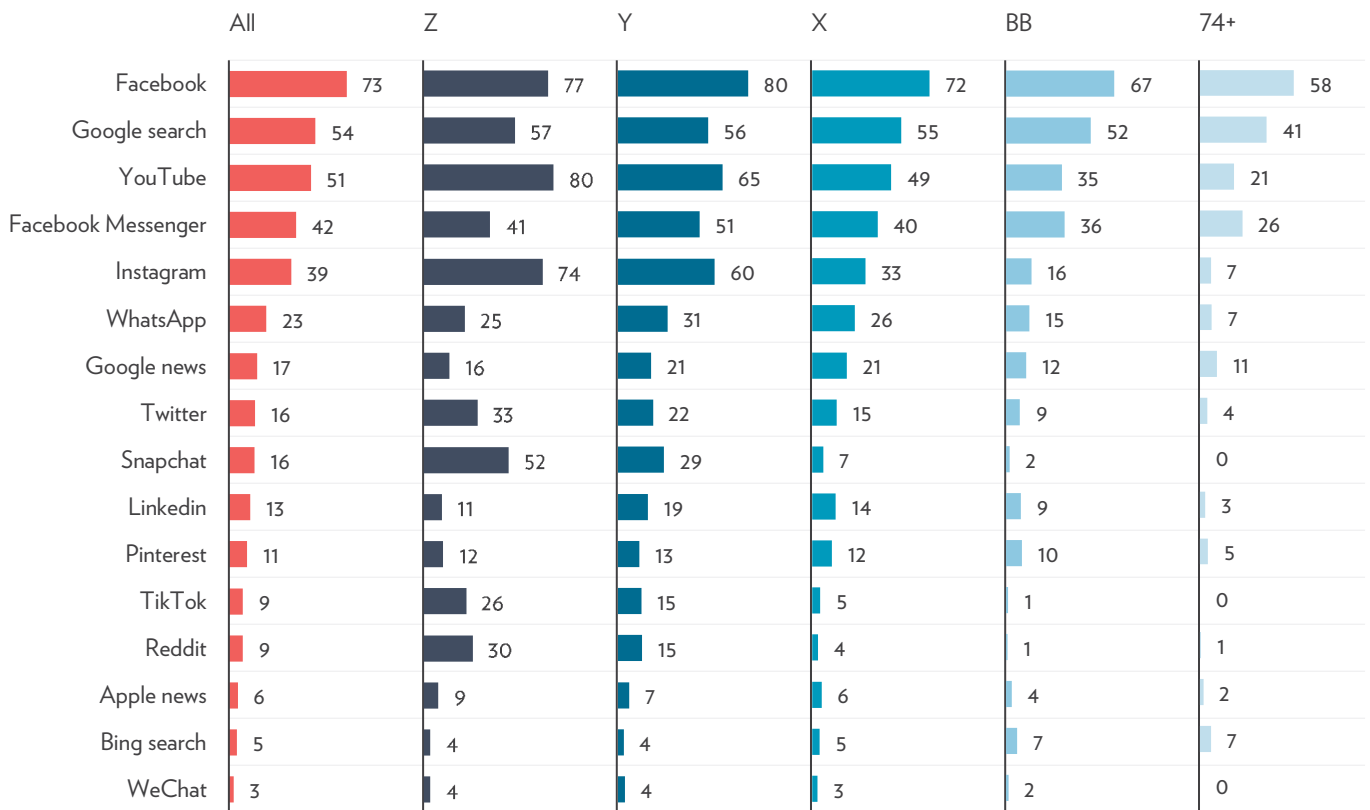
Excluded those who haven't used social media and online platforms in the last week (Base: N=2,418).

Generational differences in accessing social media and online platforms

The most popular platforms for general use are Facebook (73%), Google Search (54%), YouTube (51%), Facebook Messenger (42%) and Instagram (39%). Younger generations use a wider range of social media and online platforms compared to older generations. Commonly used social media and online platforms among Gen Z are YouTube (80%), followed by Facebook (77%) and Instagram (74%). In the case of Gen Y, 80% use Facebook,

followed by YouTube (65%) and Instagram (60%). Facebook (72%) is popular among Gen X as well, along with Google search (55%). A similar pattern was found among baby boomers (Facebook 67%, Google search 52%) and those 74 and older (Facebook 58%, Google search 41%) (see figure 6).

FIGURE 06 SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE PLATFORM USAGE BY GENERATION (%)



NEW_Q6_1. Which, if any, of the following social media or online platforms have you used in the last week for any purpose? (Base: N=2,659).

NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19

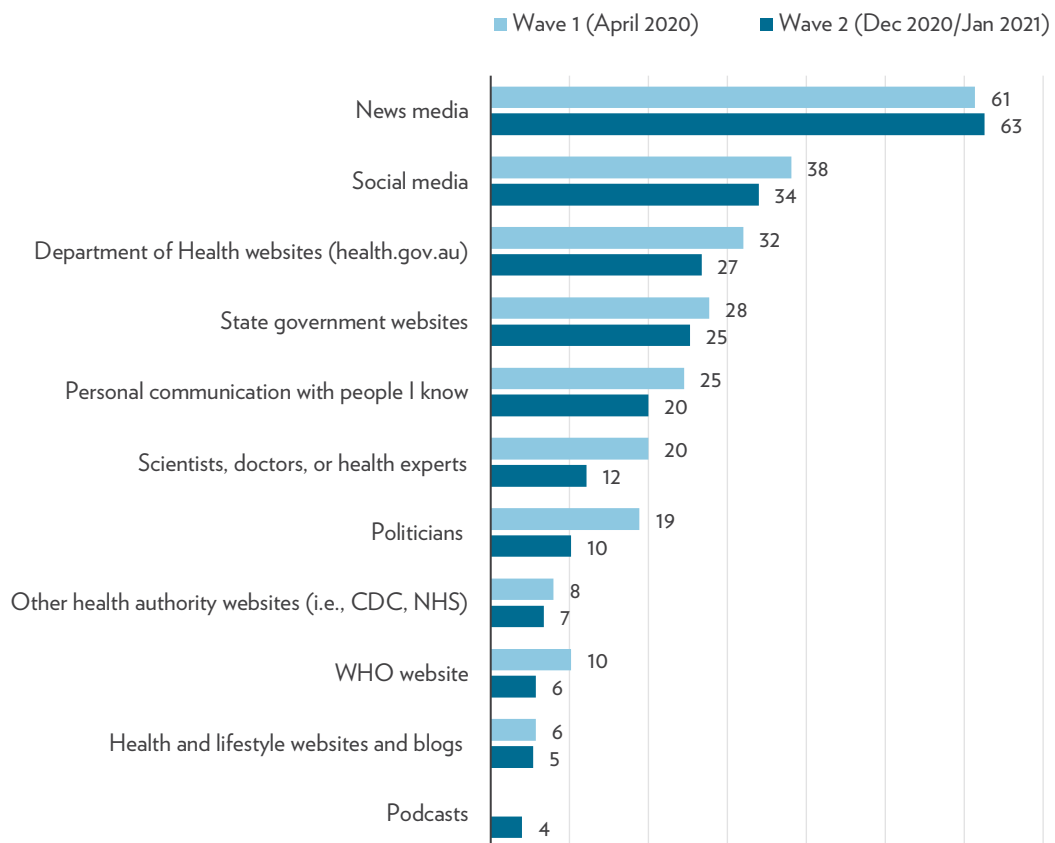
SOURCES OF NEWS OR INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19

According to the results in Wave 2, the majority of Australians (88%) were accessing news and information specifically about Covid-19 at least once a week. This is consistent with the results in Wave 1 (90%).

Australians continued to rely on news media (63%) for Covid-19 news and information more than any other source. Use of news

media remained consistent with Wave 1, while use of other sources declined. The number of Australians accessing Department of Health websites for Covid-19 information reduced by 5 percentage points, and reliance on scientists, doctors or other health experts for Covid-19 information reduced by 8 percentage points. There was also a decrease in use of social media (-4 pp), personal networks (-5 pp) and politicians (-9 pp) (see figure 7).

FIGURE 07 SOURCE OF NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 (%)



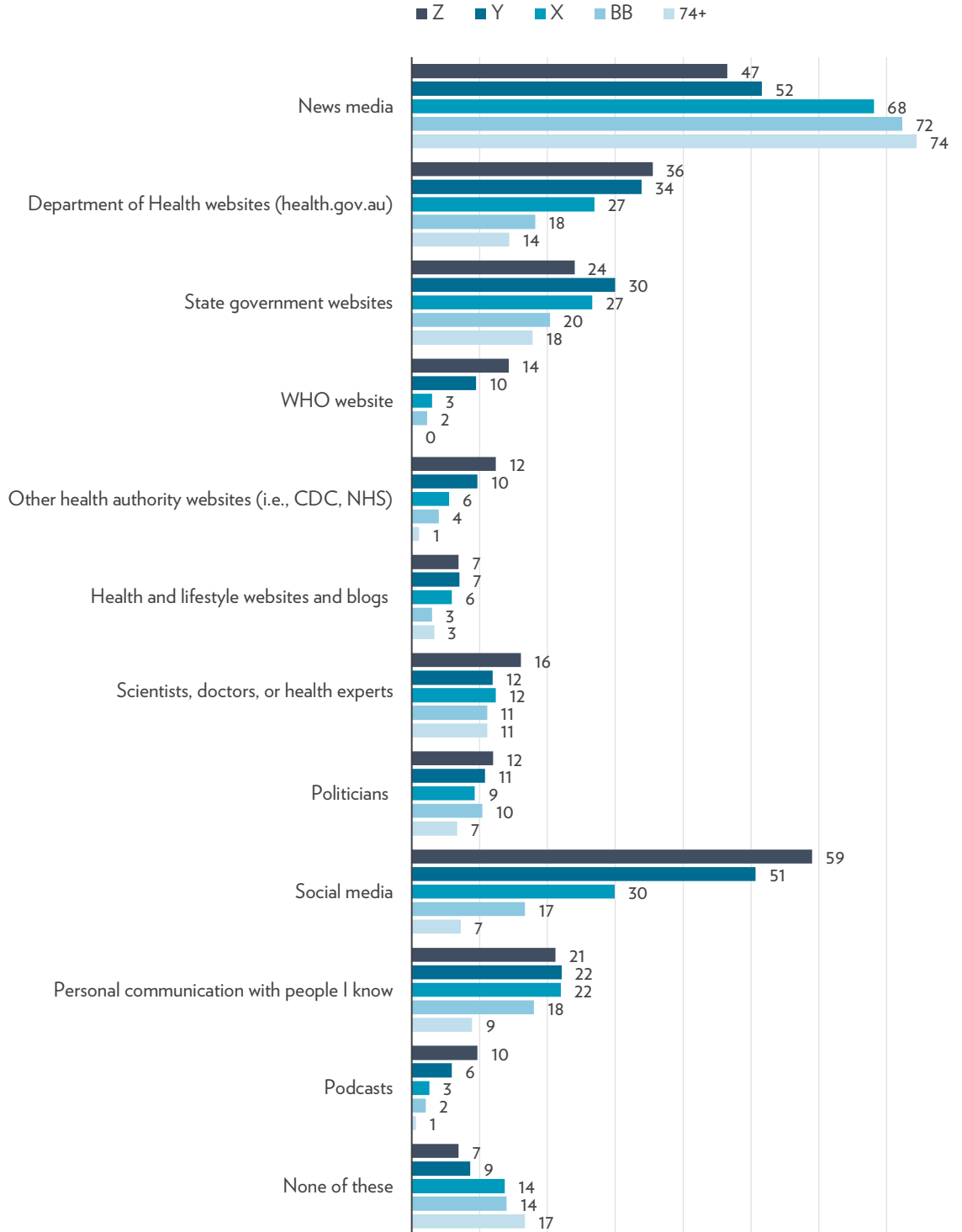
Q6. Which, if any, of the following have you accessed in the last week as a source of news or information about Covid-19? *We did not ask 'podcasts' in Wave 1. (Base: Wave 1=2,196; Wave 2=2,659).

Generational differences found in Covid-19 news sources

There are generational differences in the types of sources used for Covid-19 news and information. Older generations predominantly use news media for news and information about Covid-19 (74% of those 74+ and 72% of baby boomers). By contrast, Gen Z are more likely to use social media for news and information about Covid-19

(59% use social media compared to 47% using news media). Older Australians were also more likely to not use any sources for news or information about Covid-19 compared to younger generations (see figure 8).

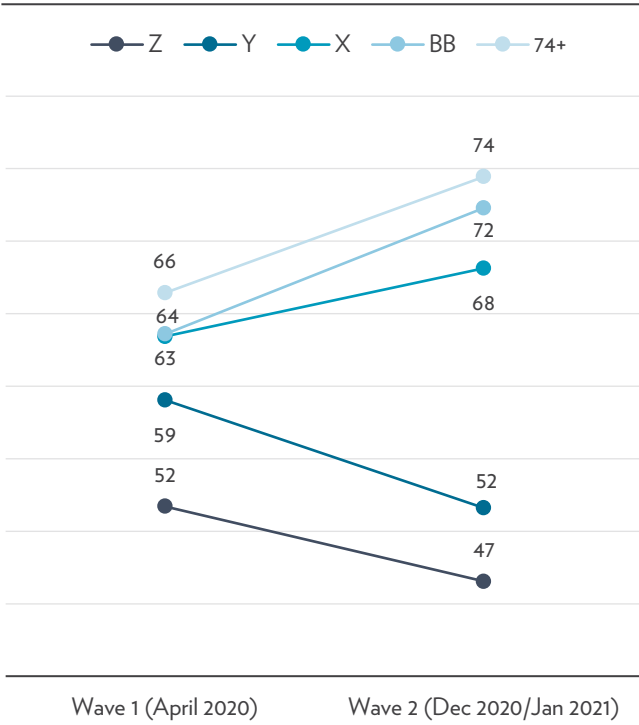
FIGURE 08 SOURCE OF NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 BY GENERATION (%)



Q6. Which, if any, of the following have you accessed in the last week as a source of news or information about Covid-19? (Base: N=2,659).

There were generational differences in the changes between Wave 1 and 2. Gen X, baby boomers and those aged 74+ increased their use of news media as a source of news and information about Covid-19 but Gen Z's and Gen Y's use of news media decreased (see figure 9).

FIGURE 09 NEWS MEDIA AS A SOURCE OF NEWS OR INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 BY GENERATION (%)



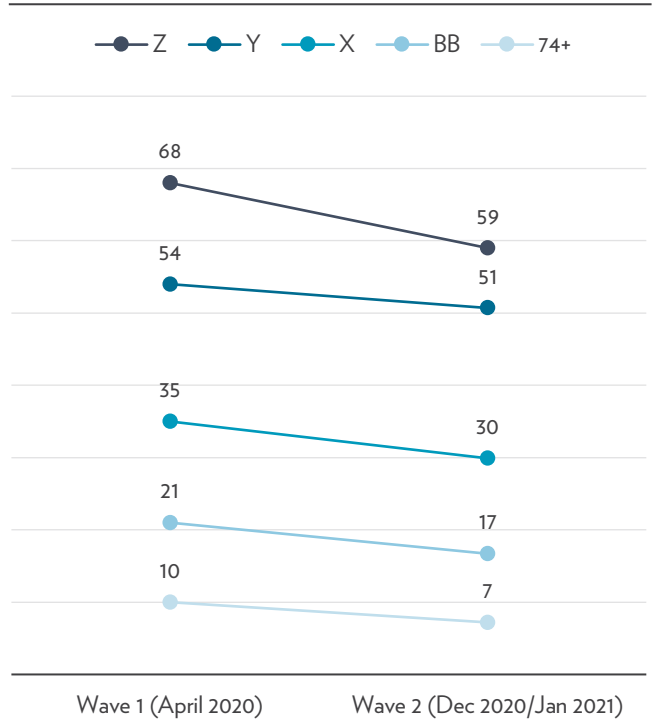
Q6. Which, if any, of the following have you accessed in the last week as a source of news or information about Covid-19? News media (Base: Wave 1=2,196; Wave 2=2,659).

Overall, people rely less on authoritative or official sources (government, WHO, scientists etc) than on news media as a source of news or information about Covid-19. All generations' use of scientists, doctors, or health expert sources decreased between Wave 1 and 2, but the older generations' use declined more significantly (see figure 11). Gen Z are now most likely to rely on scientists, doctors, or health experts as sources of news and information about Covid-19 among all age groups.

Q6. Which, if any, of the following have you accessed in the last week as a source of news or information about Covid-19? Scientists, doctors or health experts (Base: Wave 1=2,196; Wave 2=2,659).

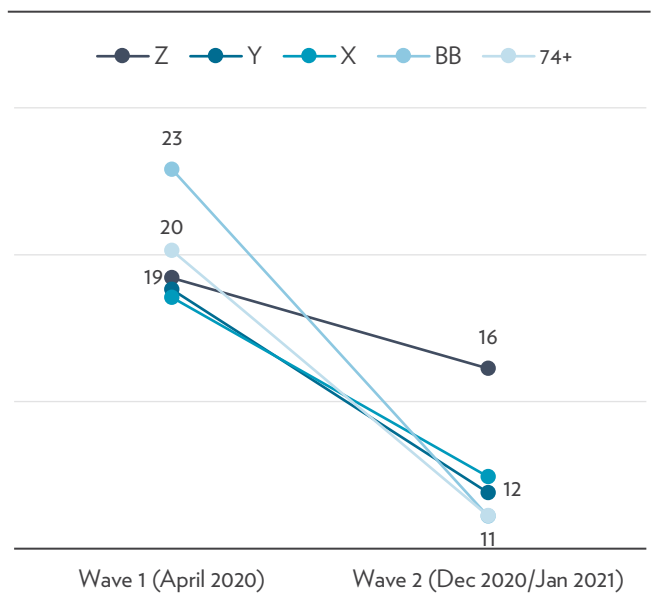
Overall, social media use for news and information about Covid-19 decreased across all generations, of which Gen Z's use of social media decreased significantly (-9) compared to other age groups (see figure 10).

FIGURE 10 SOCIAL MEDIA AS A SOURCE OF NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 BY GENERATION (%)



Q6. Which, if any, of the following have you accessed in the last week as a source of news or information about Covid-19? Social media (Base: Wave 1=2,196; Wave 2=2,659).

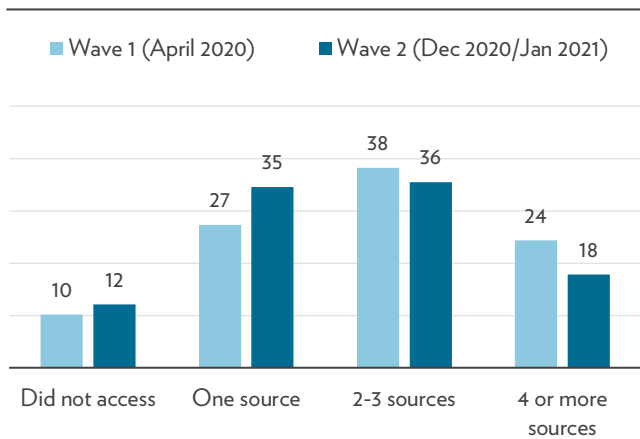
FIGURE 11 SCIENTISTS, DOCTORS OR HEALTH EXPERTS AS A SOURCE OF NEWS OR INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 BY GENERATION (%)



NUMBER OF NEWS SOURCES

We added up the 10 different sources people use to get Covid-19 related news and information to examine the different levels of consumption. For comparability with Wave 1, we excluded podcasts from this calculation. The number of people accessing only one source of news and information about Covid-19 in the last week increased from 27% in Wave 1 to 35% in Wave 2. Those who use more than 2 sources decreased in Wave 2, with only 18% saying they access 4 or more sources (see figure 12).

FIGURE 12 THE NUMBER OF SOURCES OF NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 (%)



Q6. Which, if any, of the following have you accessed in the last week as a source of news or information about Covid-19? *Excluded podcasts for comparability. (Base: Wave 1=2,196; Wave 2=2,659).

There is a generational divide in the use of different sources of news and information about Covid-19. On average, younger generations accessed more sources than older generations. More than half of Gen Z and Gen Y (63%) said they use 2 or more sources of news and information about Covid-19. In contrast, 42% of baby boomers and 48% of 74 and older said they only use one source, and a further 14% of baby boomers and 17% of 74 and older did not access any news and information about Covid-19 (see figure 13).

Depending on their main source of news, people may use more or fewer different sources. Those who said their main source of news is social media or online news access a greater variety of sources of Covid-19 news and information compared to those who mainly use TV, radio or print. 23% of those whose main source of news is online or social media said they access 4 or more sources of news and information about Covid-19, compared to only 14% of those who use TV as the main source and 9% of those who use print as their main source of news. Those who use social media as their main source were also least likely (4%) to say they had not accessed any news about Covid-19 in the past week (see figure 14).

FIGURE 13 THE NUMBER OF SOURCES OF NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 BY GENERATION (%)

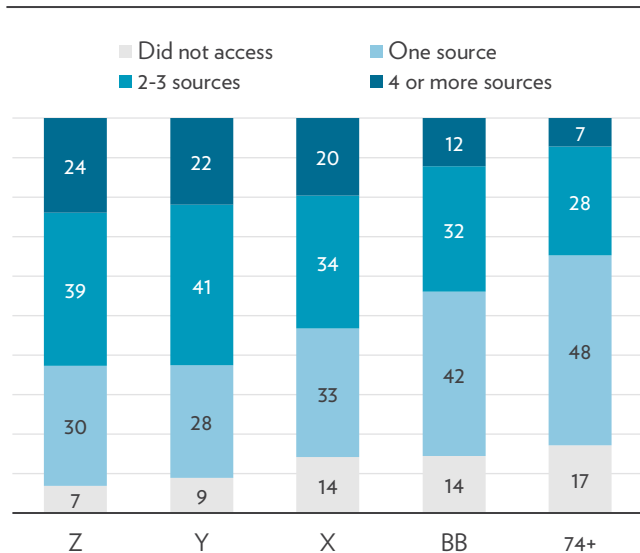
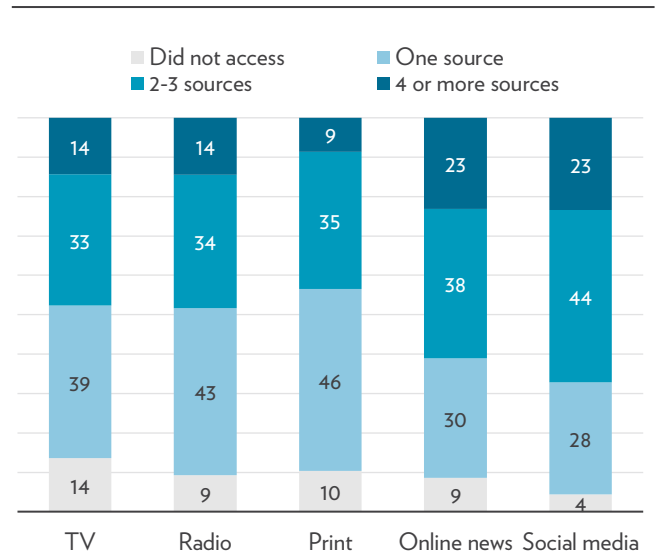


FIGURE 14 THE NUMBER OF SOURCES OF NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 BY MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS (%)

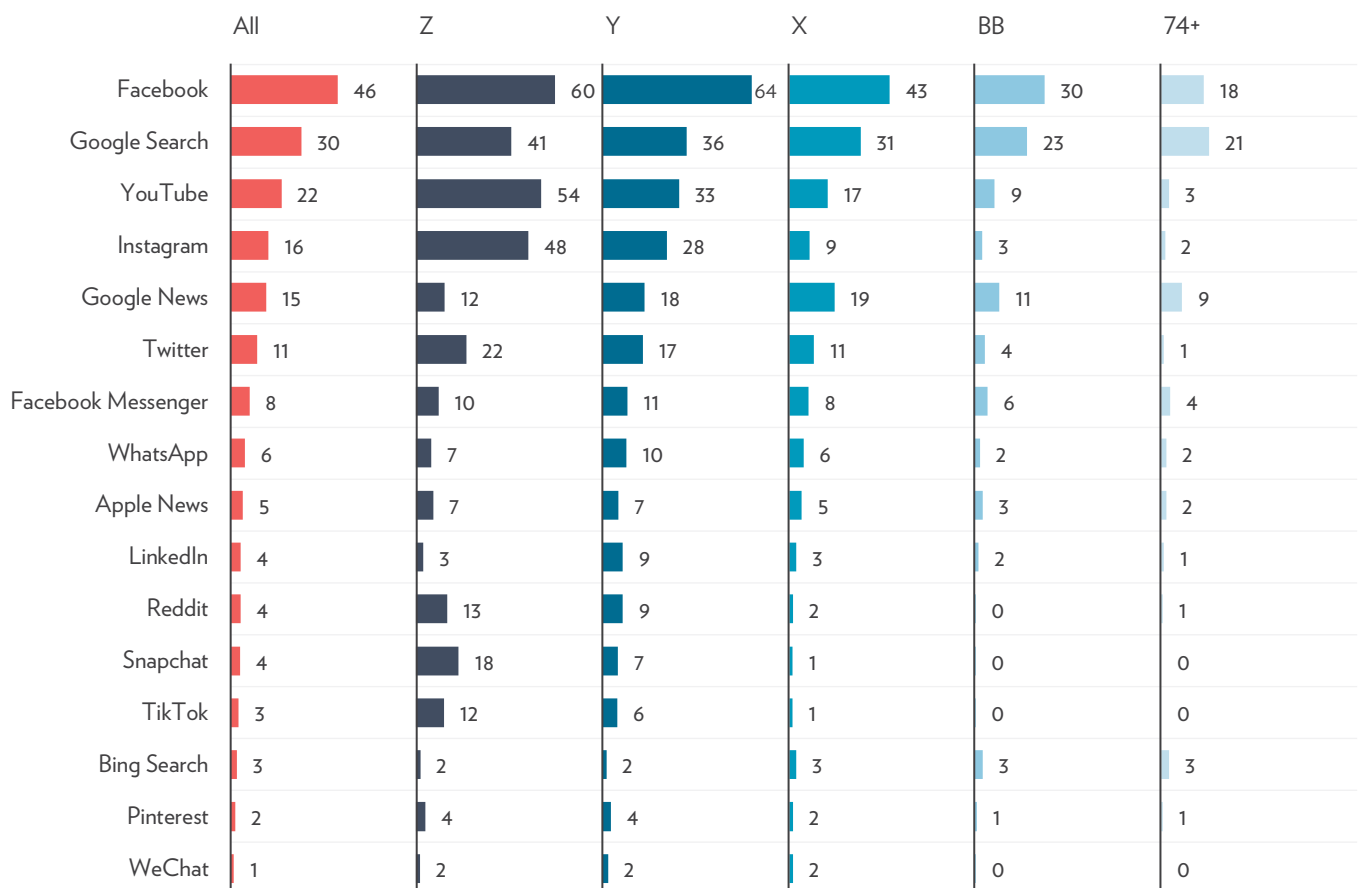


ACCESS TO SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE PLATFORMS FOR COVID-19 NEWS AND INFORMATION

The most commonly used social media or online platforms for news or information about Covid-19 were Facebook (46%), Google Search (30%) and YouTube (22%) (see figure 15). These platforms were also widely used for general purposes as well. Messaging apps, like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, were used less for news and information about Covid-19 compared to other types of platforms. Although the proportion of respondents who said they use TikTok (3%), Snapchat (4%) and Twitter (11%) as sources of news and information about Covid-19 is low, it is important to note these platforms are disproportionately used by Gen Y and Gen Z, who are also more likely to be heavy users of social media and online platforms.

Facebook was widely used for news by almost half of Australians to find news and information about Covid-19 (46%). There are generational differences with younger generations using a wider range of social media and online platforms for news. Gen Z (60%) and Gen Y (64%) used Facebook for news more than all other age groups. More than half of Gen Z also used YouTube (54%) for news, and 48% use Instagram for news.

FIGURE 15 SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE PLATFORMS FOR NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 BY GENERATION (%)

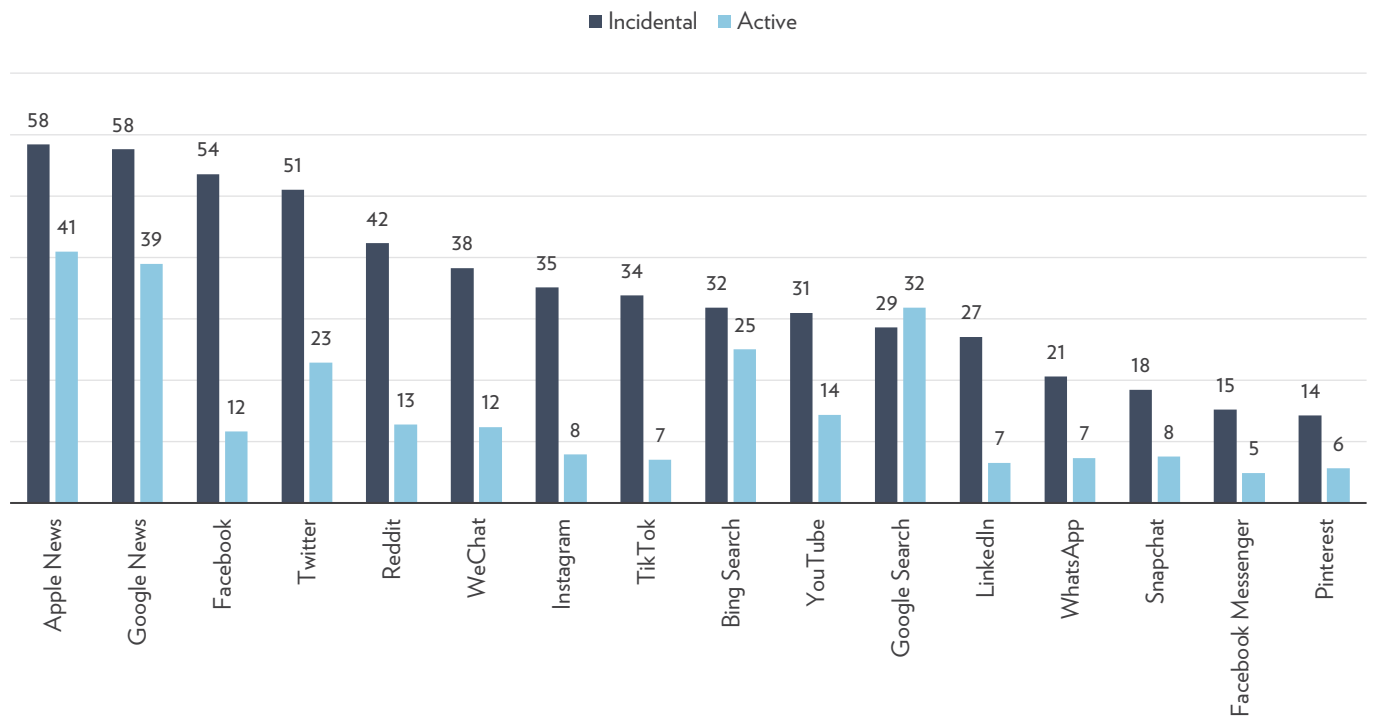


Q7_1. Have you come across news or information about Covid-19 on any of the following social media or online platforms in the last week? Please select all that apply. (I used it specifically to find news or information about Covid-19/ Yes—I came across news or information about Covid-19 while I was on it for other reasons) (Base: N=2,659)

We asked respondents whether they used social media and online platforms specifically to find news or information about Covid-19 ('active') or whether they came across it while using the platforms for other reasons ('incidental'). We found that people are more likely to come across news about Covid-19 incidentally (45%), rather than specifically looking for it (31%).

Google Search is the only platform where active Covid-19 news consumption was higher than incidental consumption. Among other popular online platforms, users of news aggregators like Apple News (41%) and Google News (39%) were more likely to actively seek information about Covid-19; compared to users of social media platforms like Instagram (8%), Facebook (12%) or YouTube (14%) (see figure 16). Facebook ranked third for incidental exposure to news about Covid-19, with over half of Facebook users.

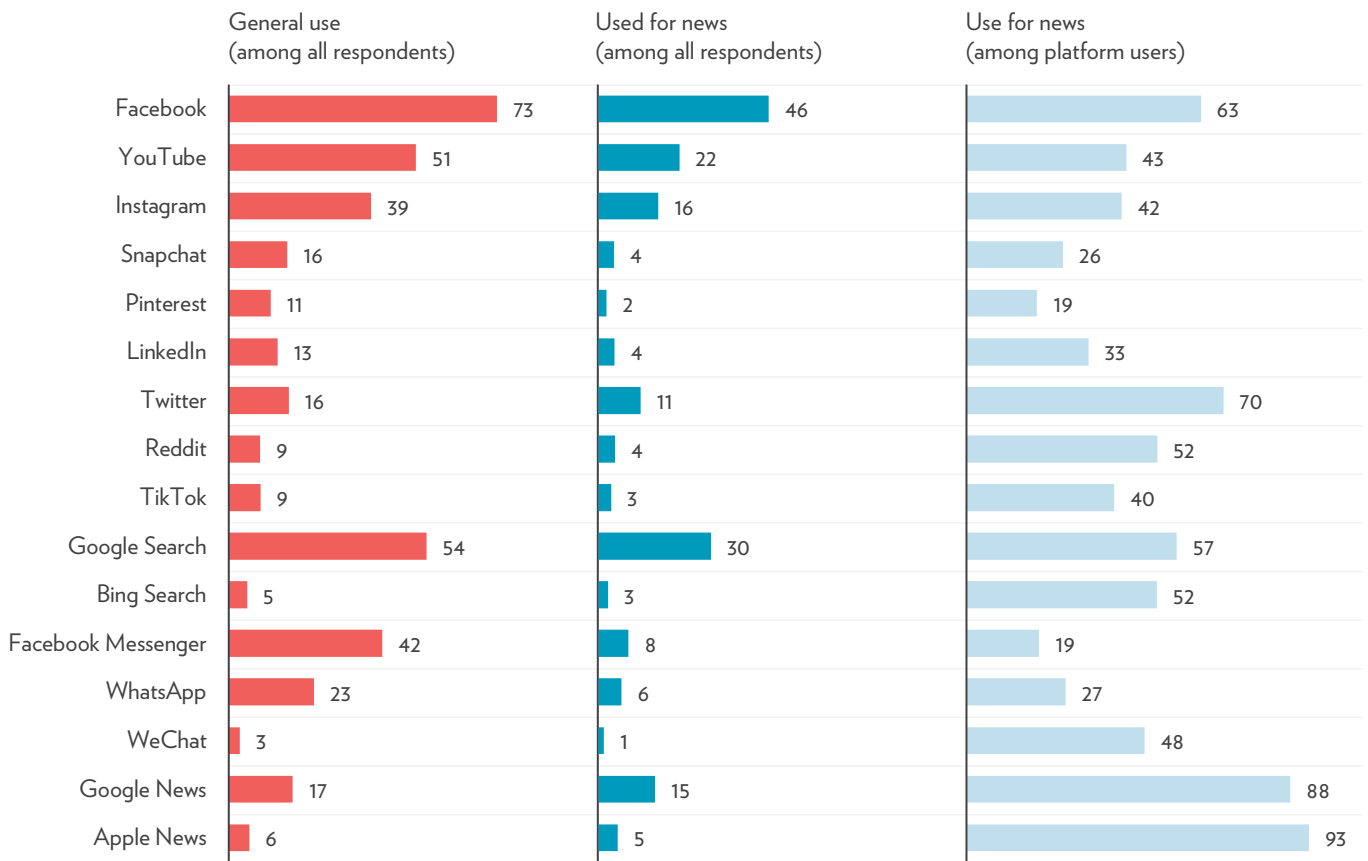
FIGURE 16 ACTIVE AND INCIDENTAL CONSUMPTION OF COVID-19 NEWS AND INFORMATION BY PLATFORM (%)



NEW_Q7_1. Have you come across news or information about Covid-19 on any of the following social media or online platforms in the last week? Please select all that apply. Active= I used it specifically to find news or information about Covid-19; Incidental=Yes—I came across news or information about Covid-19 while I was on it for other reasons. Base: Platform users (Facebook=1935; YouTube=1026; Instagram=1026; Snapchat=423; Pinterest=301; LinkedIn=352; Twitter=433; Reddit=227; TikTok=228; Google Search=1426; Bing Search=132; Facebook Messenger=1108; WhatsApp=616; WeChat=81; Google News=462; Apple News=149)

The most used platforms for Covid-19 news and information (active and incidental) among its users was Apple News (93%), followed by Google News (88%), Twitter (70%) and Facebook (63%) (see figure 17). The least used platforms for Covid-19 news and information among its users were Pinterest (19%) and Facebook Messenger (19%).

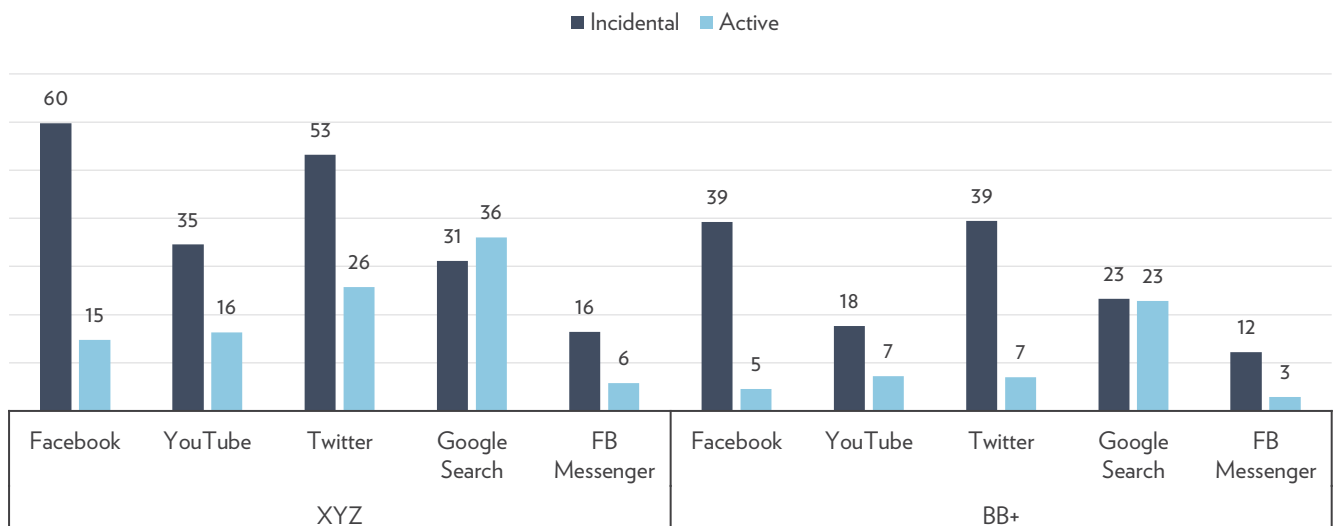
FIGURE 17 USES OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE PLATFORMS (%)



Older news consumers were much less likely to say they are actively seeking news and information about Covid-19 compared to younger users (see figure 18). Younger generations said they use platforms for both incidental and active news about Covid-19, compared to older generations who mostly said they come across it incidentally (with the exception of Google search users).

Among Facebook users, 60% of Gen X, Y and Z were exposed to incidental news, whereas only 39% of baby boomers and those 74+ say they were exposed incidentally. 15% of Gen X, Y and Z actively sought news on Facebook compared to only 5% of baby boomers and those aged 74 and older.

FIGURE 18 INCIDENTAL VS ACTIVE EXPOSURE ON PLATFORMS BY GENERATION (%)



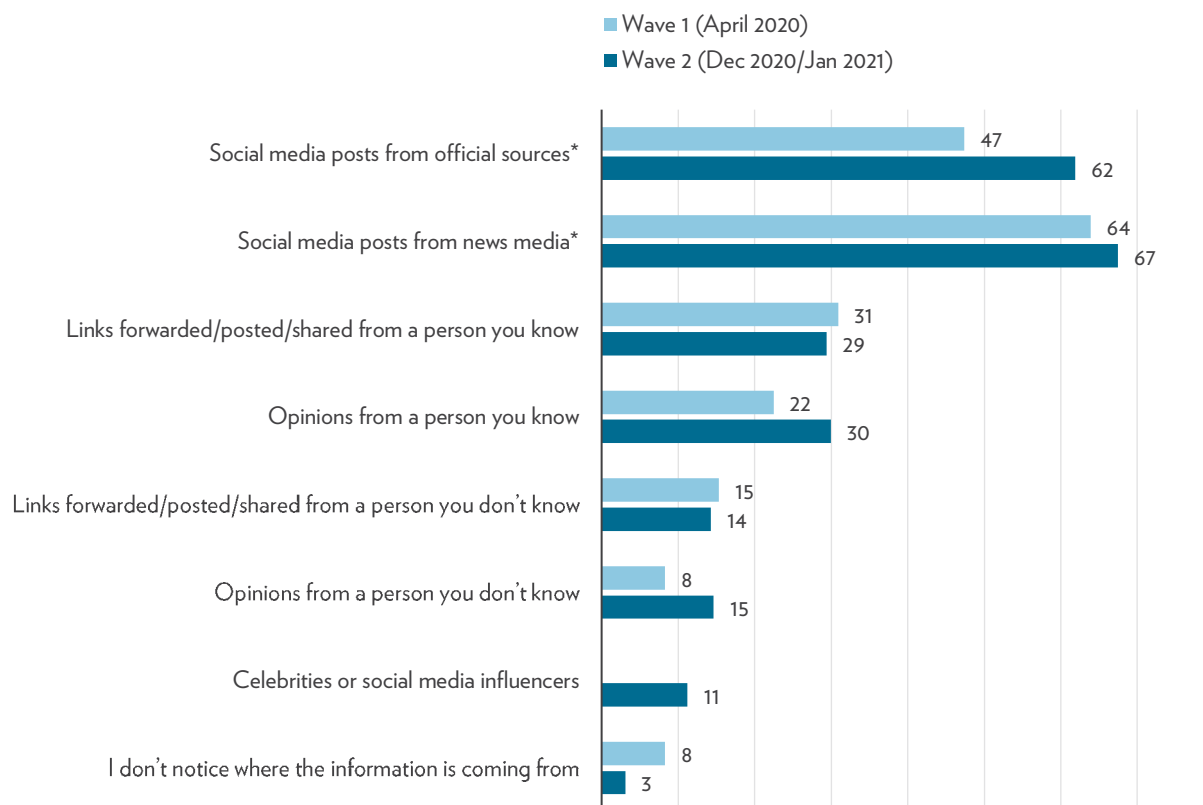
Base: Those who used these platforms for Covid-19 news or information in the last week (Facebook=1936; YouTube=1349; Twitter=432; Google Search=1426; FB Messenger=1107)

SOURCES OF NEWS OR INFORMATION WHEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Among those who see news when on social media, we asked them which sources they were getting news and information about Covid-19 from. Most people (97%) noticed where the information was coming from, 67% saw posts from news media, and 62%

saw posts from official sources such as the government. Links forwarded/posted/shared from a person they know (29%) and opinions from people they know (30%) were less common. One in 10 saw posts from celebrities and influencers (see figure 19).

FIGURE 19 NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 WHEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA (%)

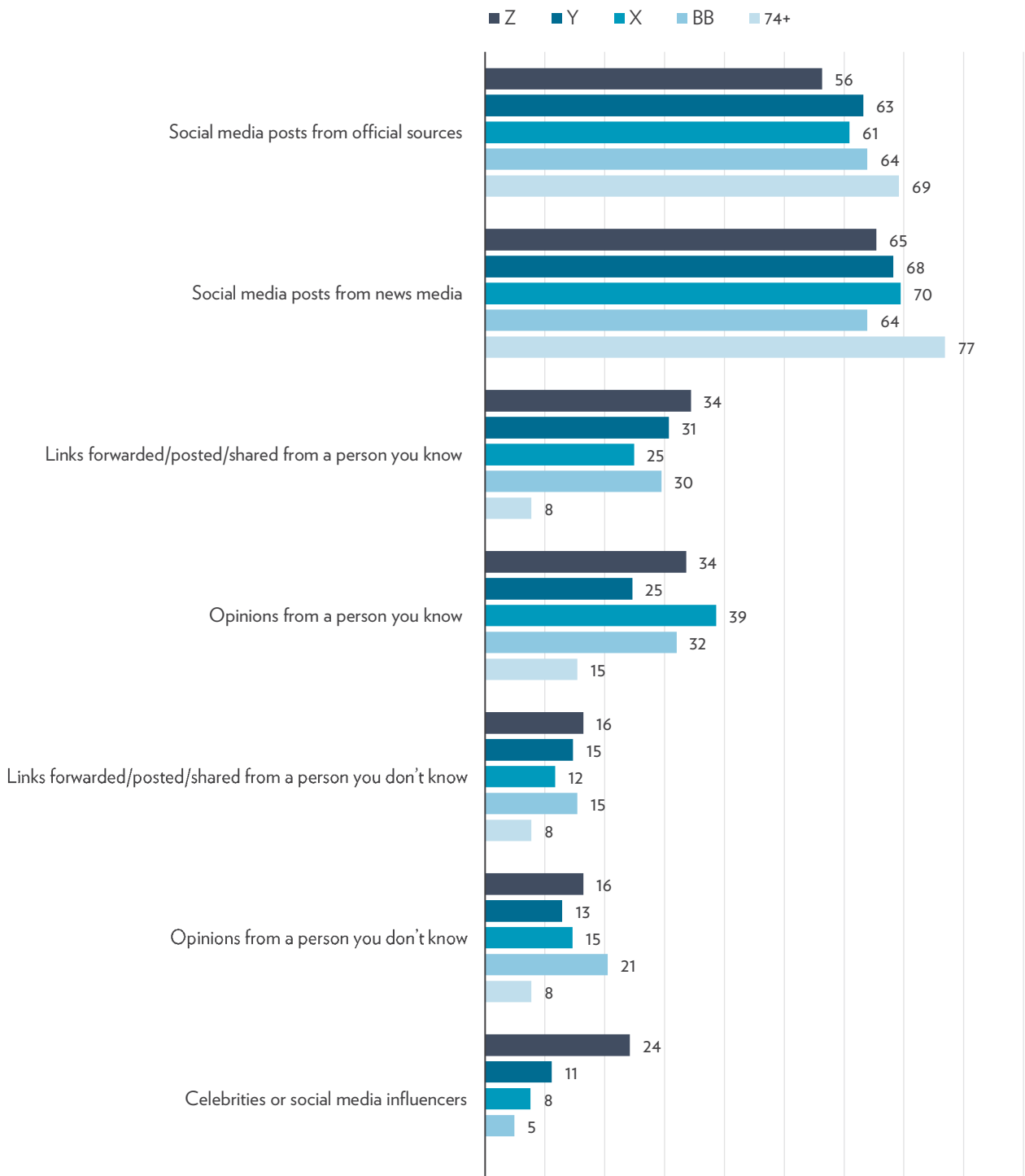


Q8. Thinking about what you are seeing on social media, which of the following sources are you getting news and information about Covid-19 from? Celebrities or social media influencers were not asked in Wave 1. *There was a change in wording for these items. In Wave 1, the response sets were 'Directly from official sources such as the government, WHO etc' and 'Directly from news media such as the ABC, Sydney Morning Herald, news.com.au' (Base: Wave 1=836; Wave 2=903, those who selected social media as a source of news or information about Covid-19).

Younger people are more likely to notice where the information is coming from when on social media. Only 2% of Gen Z and 3% of Gen Y did not notice where information is from, compared to 8% of those who are aged 74 or older (see Figure 20). This is possibly related to the fact that younger generations are heavier users of social media in general (see Figure 5). Those with low education attainment (7%), the unemployed (8%), and those with low incomes (6%) were more likely not to notice the source of information about Covid-19.

Victorian residents saw fewer government sources (56%) compared to New South Wales residents (65%). Younger people (35% of Gen Z vs 8% of 74+) and major city dwellers (32% vs regional 22%) were more likely to see links forwarded by people they know. Men (14%, F 8%), Gen Z (24%, BB 5%), and major city dwellers (13%, regional 7%) were more likely to say they get news and information about Covid-19 from social media posts from celebrities.

FIGURE 20 NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 WHEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA BY GENERATION (%)



Q8. Thinking about what you are seeing on social media, which of the following sources are you getting news and information about Covid-19 from? Celebrities or social media influencers were not asked in Wave 1. *There was a change in wording for these items. In Wave 1, the response sets were 'Directly from official sources such as the government, WHO etc' and 'Directly from news media such as the ABC, Sydney Morning Herald, news.com.au' (Base: Wave 1=836; Wave 2=903, those who selected social media as a source of news or information about Covid-19).

Overall, men are more likely to notice where the information is coming from when on social media compared to women (see figure 21). However, women are more likely to notice official information from the government and other health authorities.

Respondents in regional areas (64%) are more likely to notice news and information from official sources such as the government than city dwellers (61%). On the other hand, city dwellers are much more likely to notice news and information from unofficial sources such as celebrities, or links forwarded by other people, compared to respondents in regional areas (see figure 22).

FIGURE 21 NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 WHEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA BY GENDER (%)

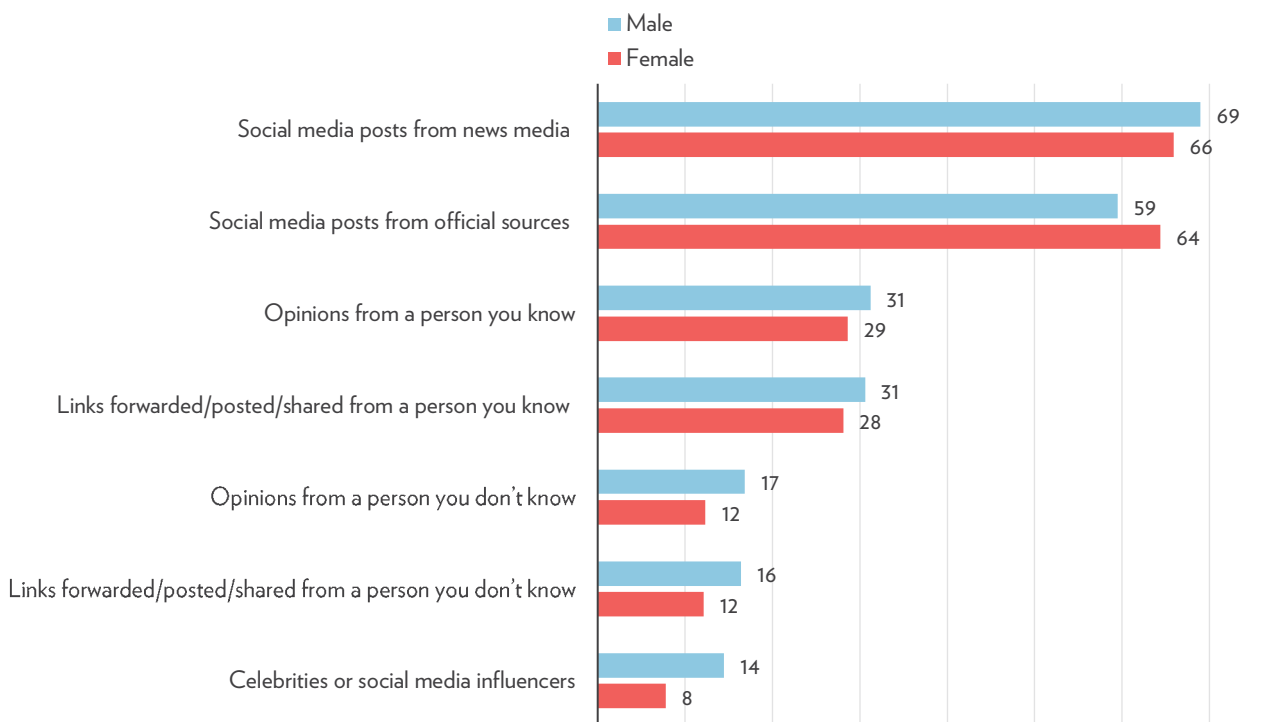
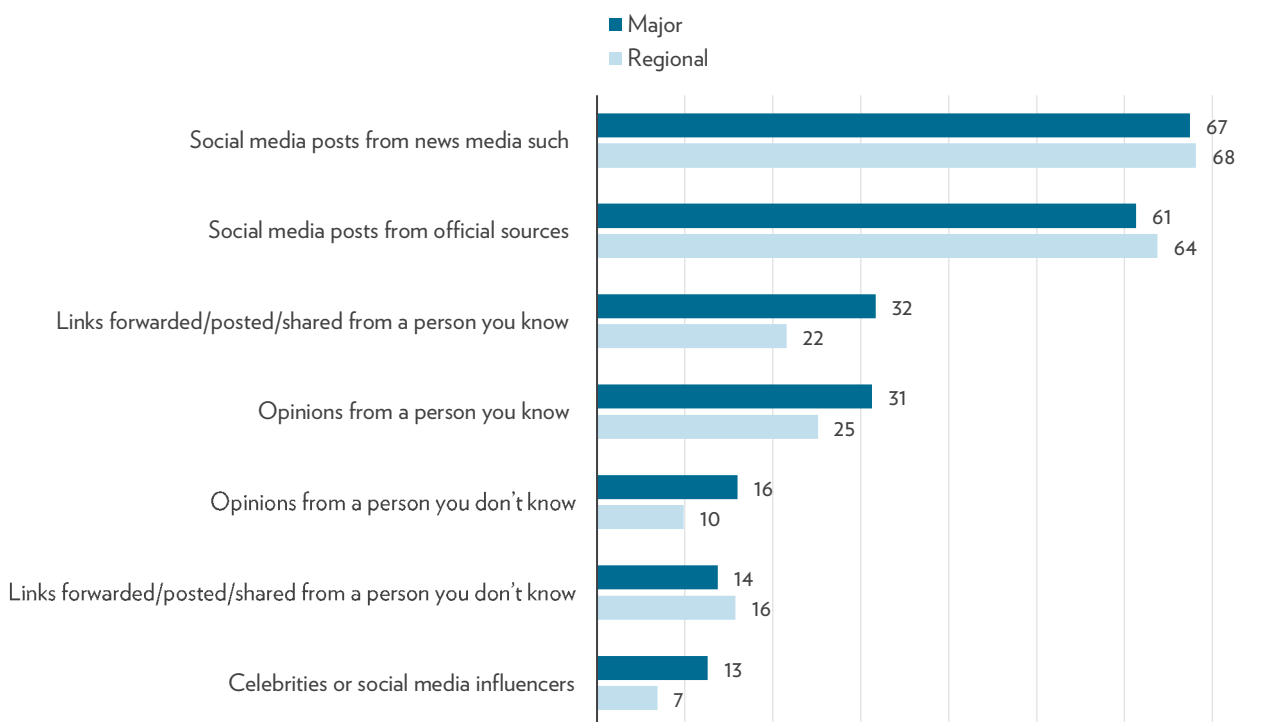


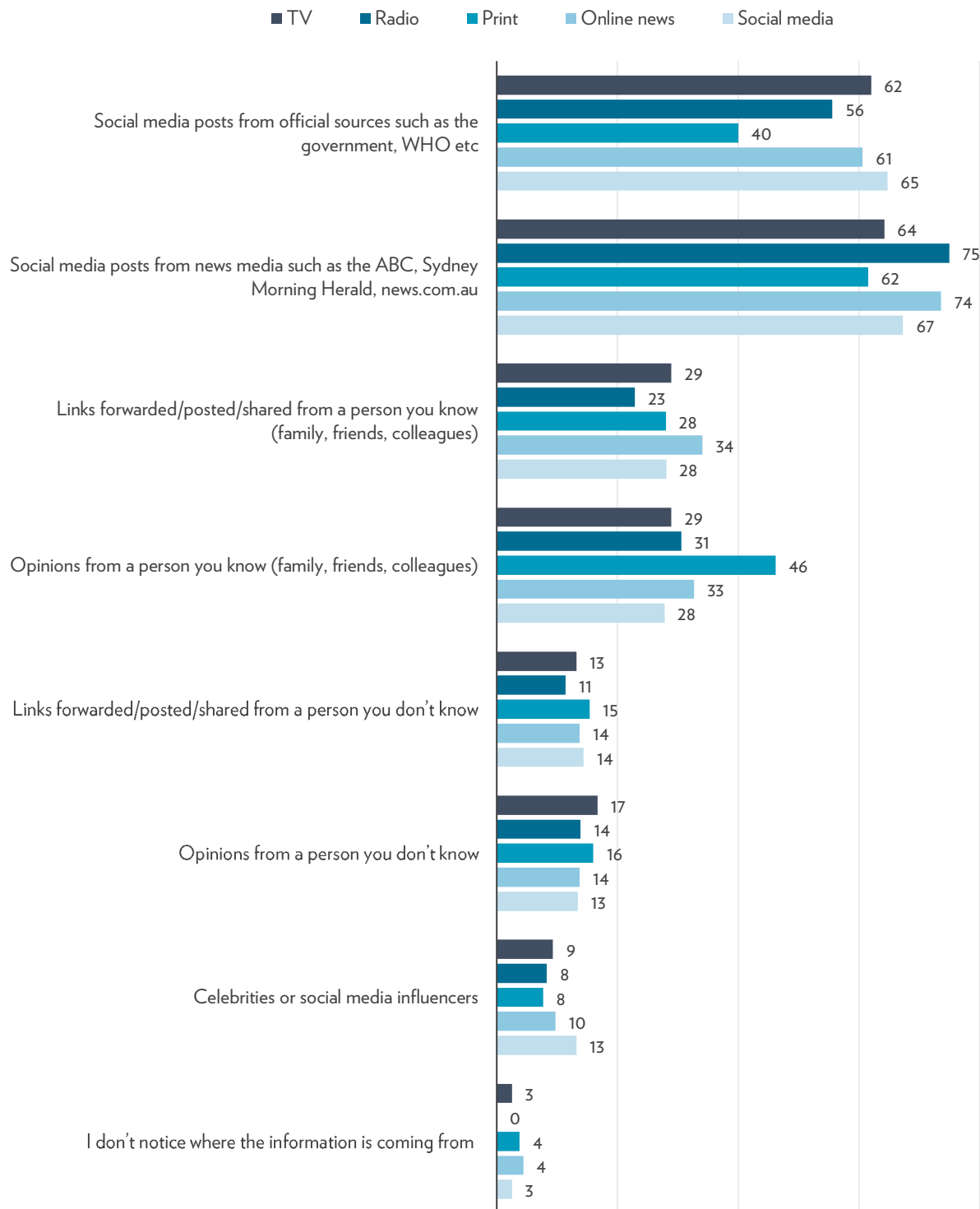
FIGURE 22 NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 WHEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA BY REGION (%)



The sources of Covid-19 news and information people saw on social media also differed based on what they report as their main source of news. Among those who said their main source of news is television, 62% said they got and information about Covid-19 from social media posts made by official sources, such as the government or the WHO. Only 40% of those who said their main source of news is print said the same. Those whose main source of news is print said the same. Those whose main source of

news is social media were more likely to see posts from celebrities and social media influencers (13%) compared to those whose main source is TV (9%), radio (8%) or print (8%). Those whose main source of news is print tended to see social media posts from people they know (45%) much more than those who use TV as the main source (29%) (see figure 23).

FIGURE 23 NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 WHEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA BY MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS (%)



Q8. Thinking about what you are seeing on social media, which of the following sources are you getting news and information about Covid-19 from? Celebrities or social media influencers were not asked in Wave 1. *There was a change in wording for these items. In Wave 1, the response sets were 'Directly from official sources such as the government, WHO etc' and 'Directly from news media such as the ABC, Sydney Morning Herald, news.com.au' (Base: Wave 1=836; Wave 2=903, those who selected social media as a source of news or information about Covid-19).

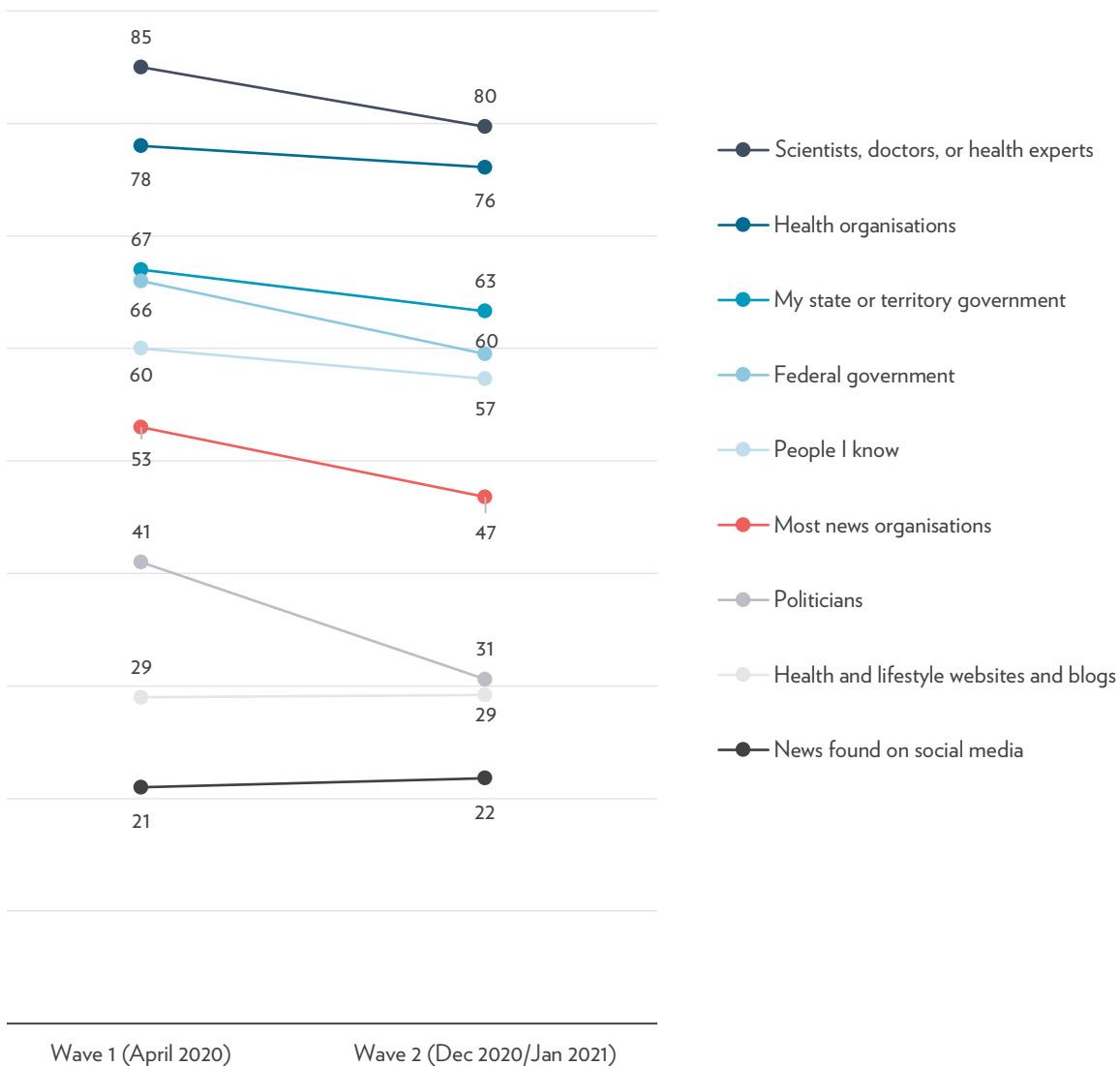
TRUST IN NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19

Trust in news and information sources fell slightly since Wave 1

Trust in sources of news and information about Covid-19 either stayed at the same level or fell slightly since Wave 1 depending on the source. Scientists, doctors, or health experts were still highly trusted (80%, -5), followed by health organisations (76%, -2), and state or territory governments (63%, -4) (see figure 24).

Australians trust in state or territory governments (63%, -4) for news and information about Covid-19 was slightly higher than in the federal government (59%, -7). Trust in politicians as sources of news and information about Covid-19 fell the most from 41% to 31%. Respondents expressed the lowest levels of trust in social media (22%, +1) and in health and lifestyle websites and blogs (29%) which remained around the same levels they were in Wave 1. Trust in most news organisations remained at around half of all participants (47%) and was 5% lower than in Wave 1.

FIGURE 24 TRUST IN NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 (%)



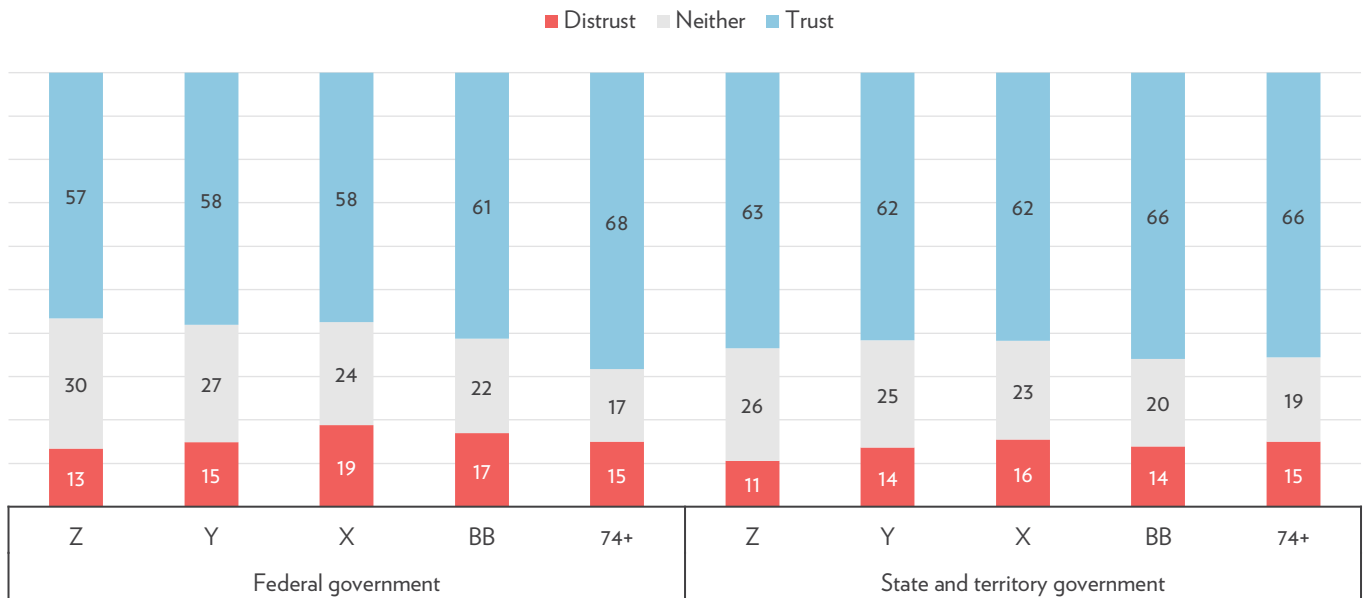
Q10. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about news and information provided about Covid-19? (Base: Wave 1=2,196; Wave 2=2,659).

Social media users, light news consumers, young people are less trusting of news media

There was little difference between generations in their trust levels of state and territory governments. However, younger generations had a higher level of distrust towards the federal government compared to older generations. 57% of Gen Z's and 58% of Gen Y's and Gen X's said they trusted information from the federal government about Covid-19 compared to 68% of those aged 74+ (see figure 25).

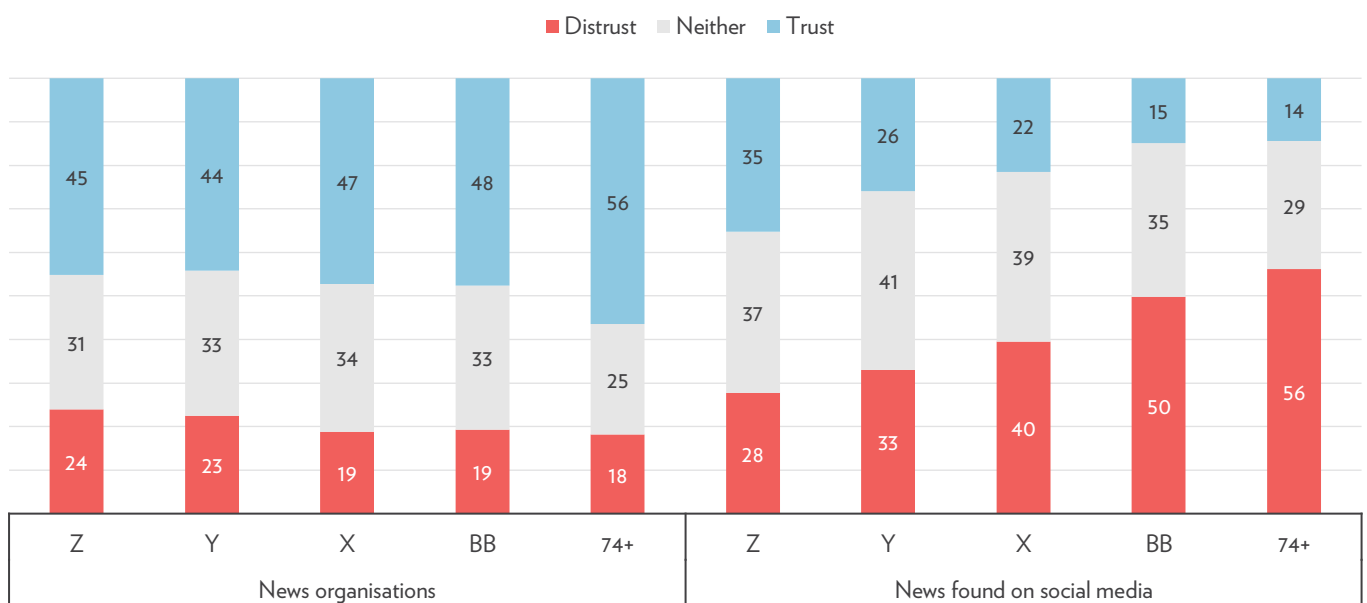
Younger people were less trusting of news and information about Covid-19 from news organisations than older generations. Almost a quarter (24%) of Gen Zs said they did not trust Covid-19 news and information news organisations compared to 19% of baby boomers. Additionally, 35% of Gen Zs trusted news found on social media compared to only 15% of baby boomers (see figure 26).

FIGURE 25 TRUST IN FEDERAL AND STATE/TERRITORY GOVERNMENTS BY GENERATION (%)



Q10. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about news and information provided about Covid-19? (Base: N=2,659).

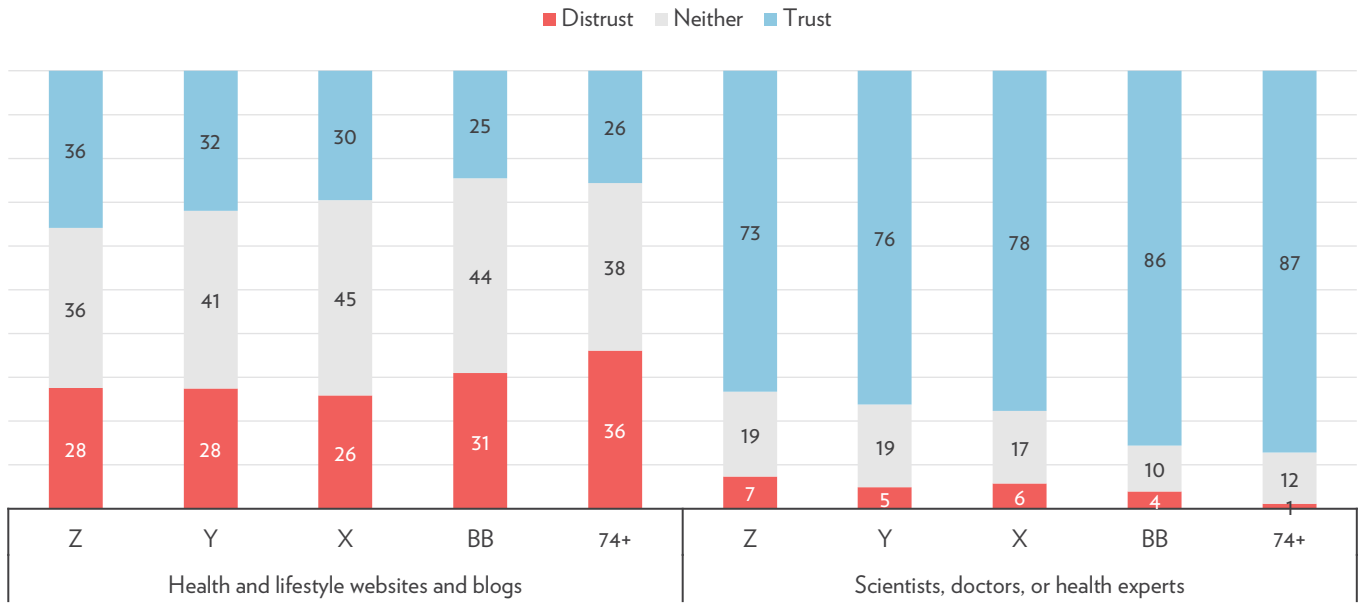
FIGURE 26 TRUST IN NEWS ORGANISATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA BY GENERATION (%)



Although trust in authoritative health sources was high across all generations, Gen Z and Gen Y were more likely to say they do not trust or are unsure about trusting scientists, doctors, or health workers. Gen Z and Gen Y were also more likely to trust health and lifestyle websites and blogs (see figure 27). Those with a lower

level of education were more distrusting of authoritative sources of Covid-19 news and information, including the federal government, state and territory governments, and scientists, doctors and health experts, compared to those who have a high level of education.

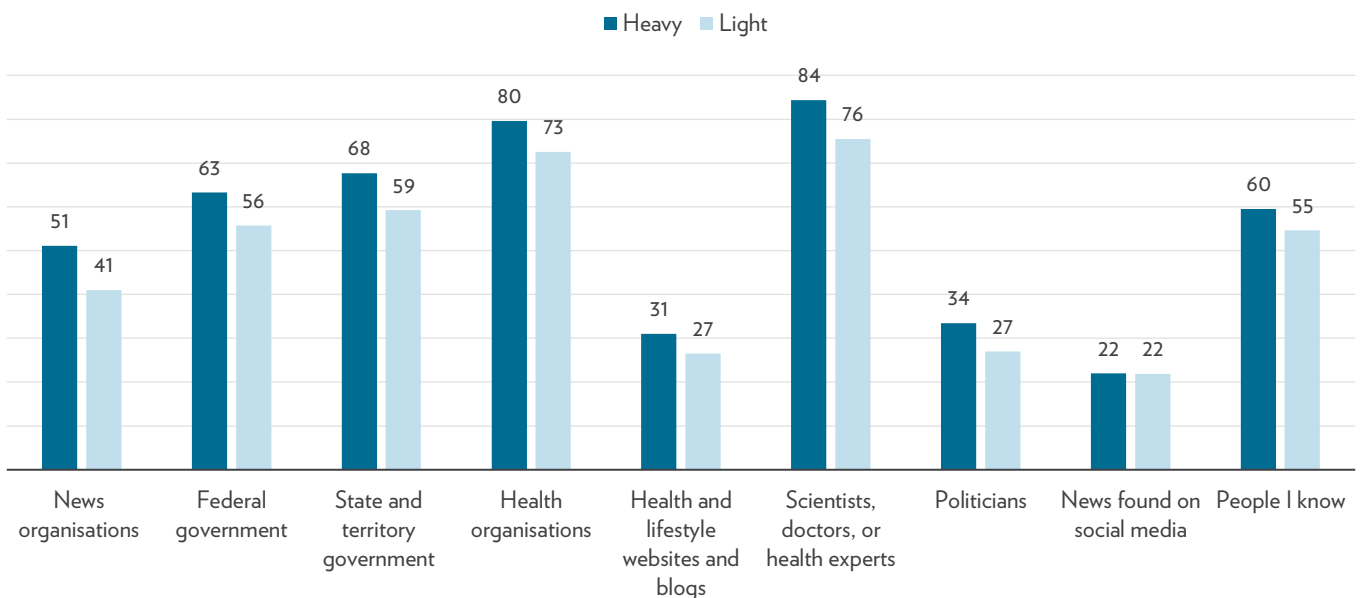
FIGURE 27 TRUST IN HEALTH WEBSITES AND EXPERTS BY GENERATION (%)



Light news consumers had lower levels of trust in information about Covid-19 from health organisations (73%) compared to heavy news consumers (80%). This was also the case for trust in scientists, doctors or health experts (84% heavy; 76% light) and

state and territory governments (68% heavy; 59% light) (see figure 28). Trust in news on social media was unrelated to frequency of news use, with heavy users expressing the same level of trust as light news users (22%).

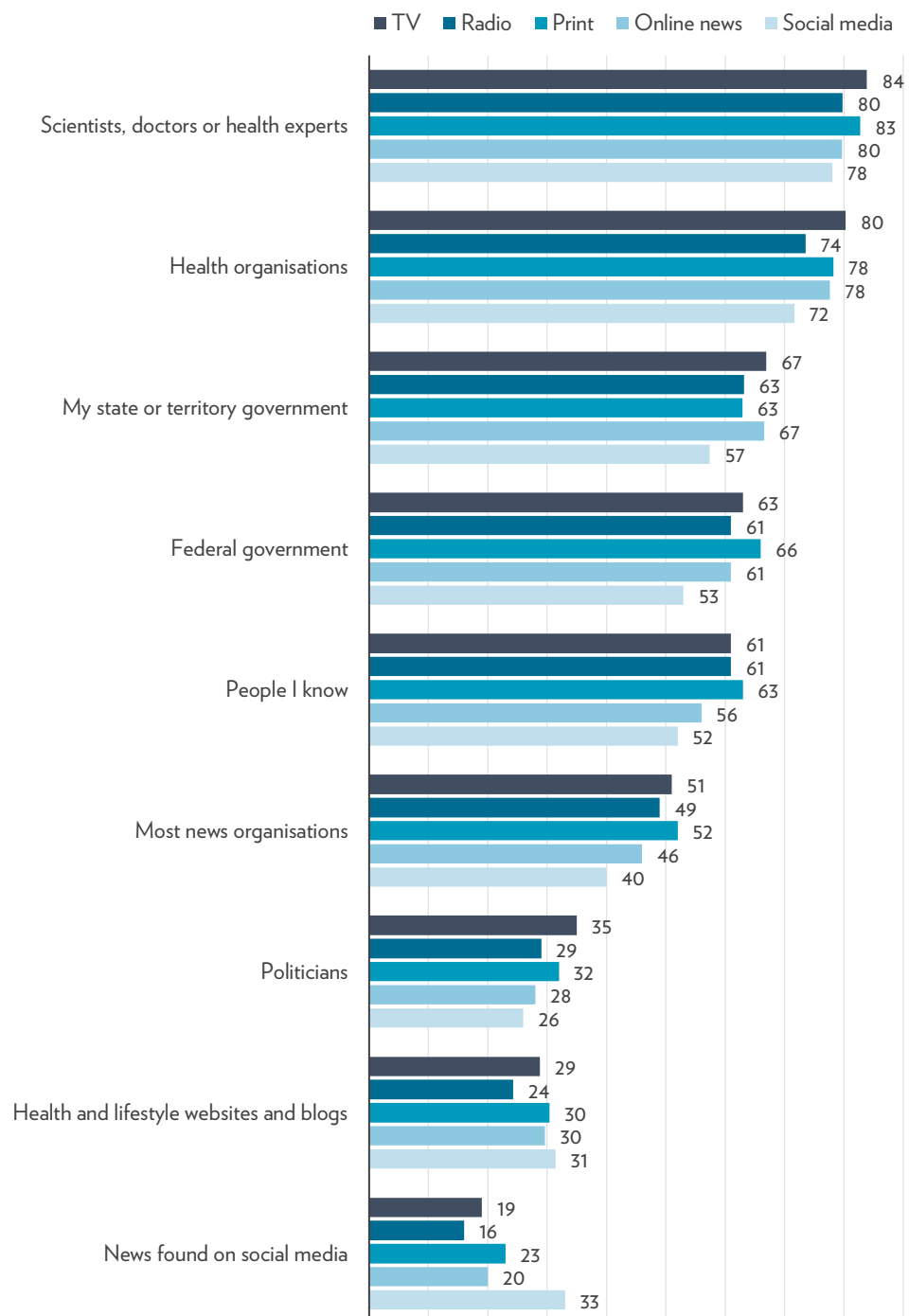
FIGURE 28 TRUST IN NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 BY LIGHT VS HEAVY NEWS CONSUMERS (%)



Importantly, trust in authoritative sources appears to be linked to the main source of news people use. Those whose main source of news is social media had lower levels of trust in Covid-19 information from health organisations (72%), state and territory governments (57%) and scientists, doctors and health experts (78%), compared to those who rely on other sources (see figure 29). Those who mainly used social media for news were unsurprisingly more likely to say they trusted the news they found on social media (33%), and were less trusting of information about Covid-19 from news organisations (40%) than people who mainly relied on traditional sources of news. People who relied on social media for news were also more likely to trust information

about Covid-19 from people they know (52%) over most news organisations (40%). However, as figure 21 shows, those mainly using social media were still more likely to be accessing news and information about Covid-19 from social media posts by news media (67%) compared to links forwarded/posted or shared and opinions from people they know (28%). Broadly, this suggests that although news media were less trusted across the board compared to other sources of news and information about Covid-19 this did not necessarily translate to reduced consumption of news media or a significant increase in the use of alternative sources such as celebrities or social media influencers.

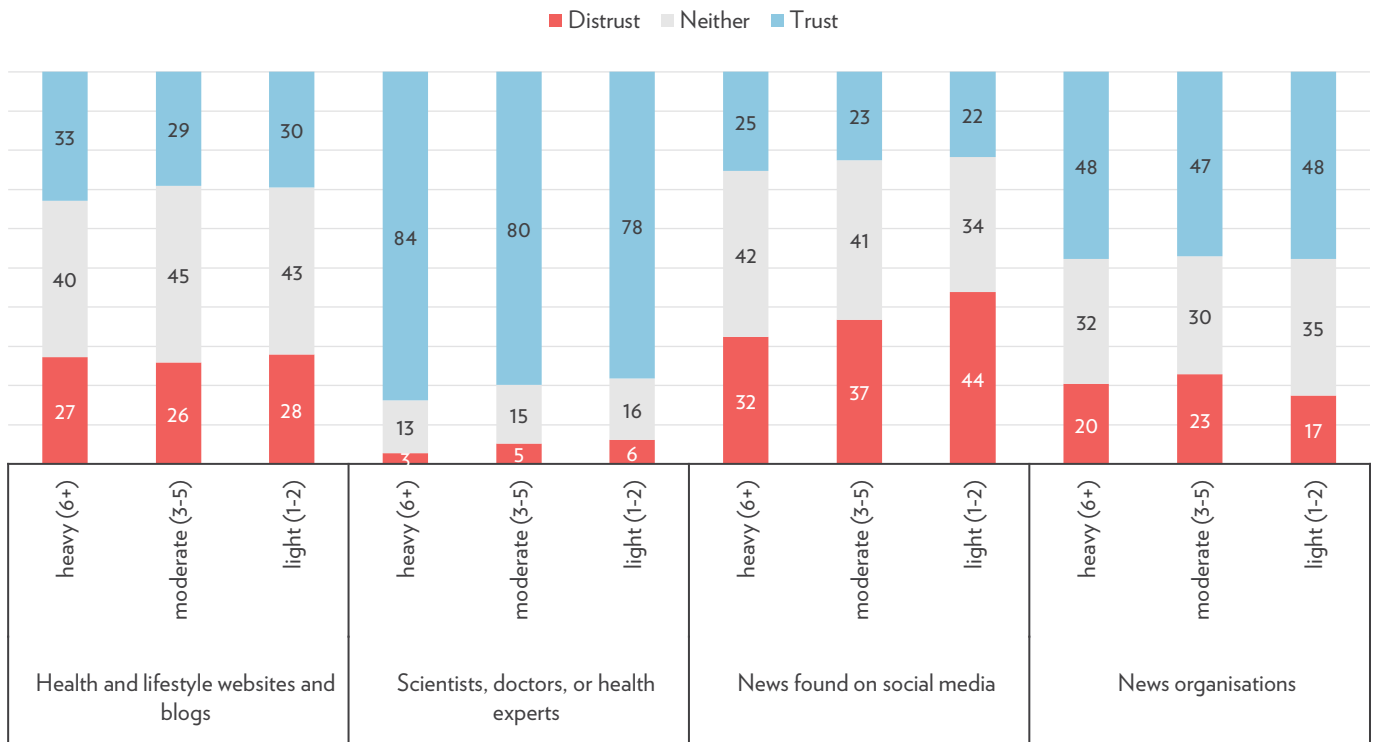
FIGURE 29 TRUST IN NEWS AND INFORMATION BY MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS (%)



Q10. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about news and information provided about Covid-19? Q5. Which of the following would you say is your main source of news? (Base: N=2,659)

Those who used more social media and online platforms were not that different to those who use fewer in terms of trust in news organisations. However, heavy social media and online platform users' distrust in news found on social media is much lower (32%) than light users (44%) (see figure 30). Heavy social media and online platform users also tended to place a higher level of trust in scientists, doctors and health experts as well as health and lifestyle blogs than light users.

FIGURE 30 TRUST IN NEWS AND INFORMATION BY SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE PLATFORM USE (%)



Q10. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about news and information provided about Covid-19? NEW_Q6_1. Which, if any, of the following social media or online platforms have you used in the last week for any purpose? (Base: N=2,659)

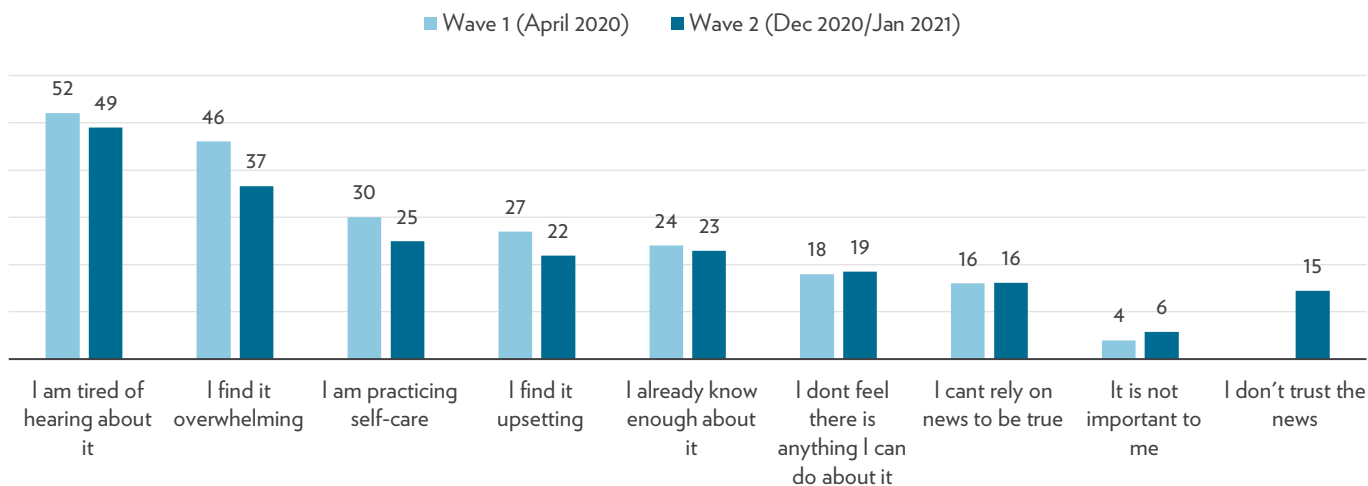
NEWS AVOIDANCE

Many respondents still avoided news but were less overwhelmed

Compared to Wave 1, fewer Australians said they were avoiding news about Covid-19. In Wave 1, 71% said they often, somewhat, or occasionally avoid news; in Wave 2, 67% avoided news (10% often, 26% sometimes and 31% occasionally). About one-third of Australians (31%, +4) said they never avoided news about Covid-19. Among those who avoided news about Covid-19, the reasons given correspond closely to those in Wave 1. The more

frequently cited reason to avoid news was being tired of hearing about Covid-19 (49%) (see figure 31). A quarter of news avoiders said they were practising self-care (25%), and 22% said they avoided it because it was upsetting. As reasons for avoidance, not being able to rely on news to be true (16%), and lack of trust in news (15%), were relatively low.

FIGURE 31 REASONS FOR AVOIDING NEWS ABOUT COVID-19 (%)

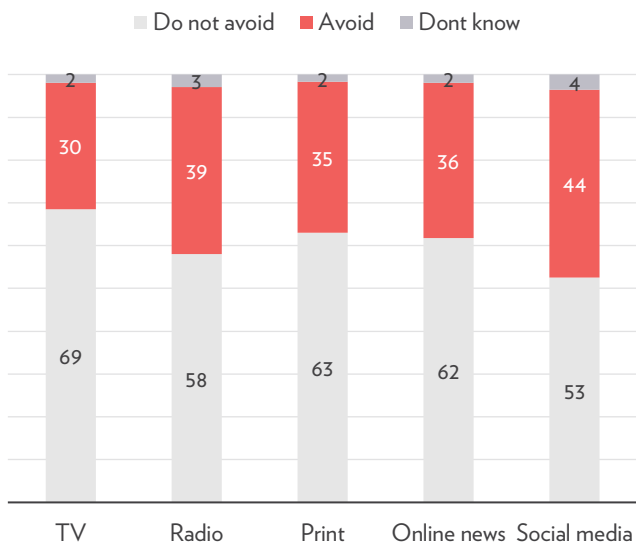


Q17. You said that you find yourself trying to avoid news about the Covid-19. Which, if any of the following, are reasons why you try to avoid news? Please select all that apply. *I don't trust the news' was introduced in Wave 2. **Asked to only those who said often, sometimes, occasionally avoided news about Covid-19 in Wave 2 (Base: N=1,774).

When we look at those who *often or sometimes avoid news* about Covid-19, those who said their main source of news is social media were more likely than other groups to say they avoid news (44%), while those who said that TV is their main source were less likely to avoid news (30%) (see figure 32).

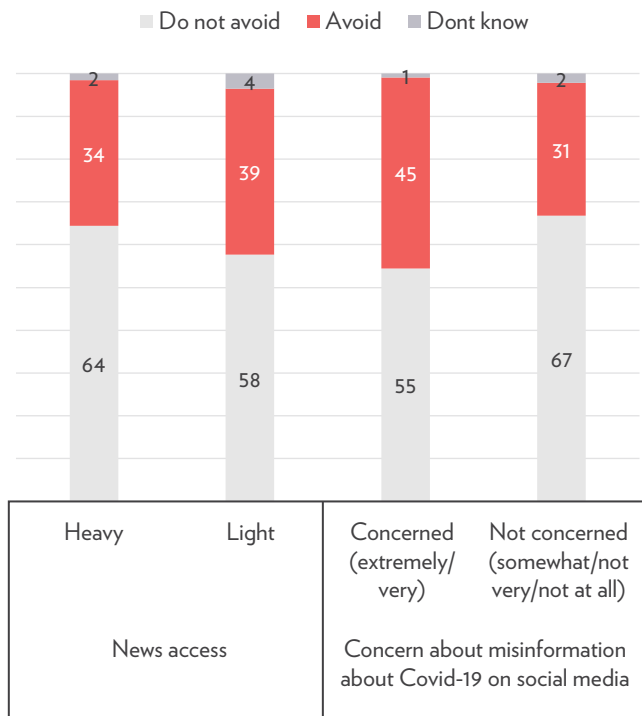
Heavy news consumers (64%) were more likely than light users (58%) to say they did not avoid news about Covid-19. And those who said they were more concerned about misinformation on social media (31%) were significantly more likely to say they often or sometimes avoided news about Covid-19 (45%) (see figure 33).

FIGURE 32 AVOIDANCE BY MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS (%)



Q16. Do you find yourself trying to avoid news about Covid-19? Often; Sometimes; Occasionally; Never; Don't know. Q5. Which of the following would you say is your main source of news? (Base: N=2,659)

FIGURE 33 AVOIDANCE BY NEWS ACCESS AND CONCERN ABOUT MISINFORMATION (%)



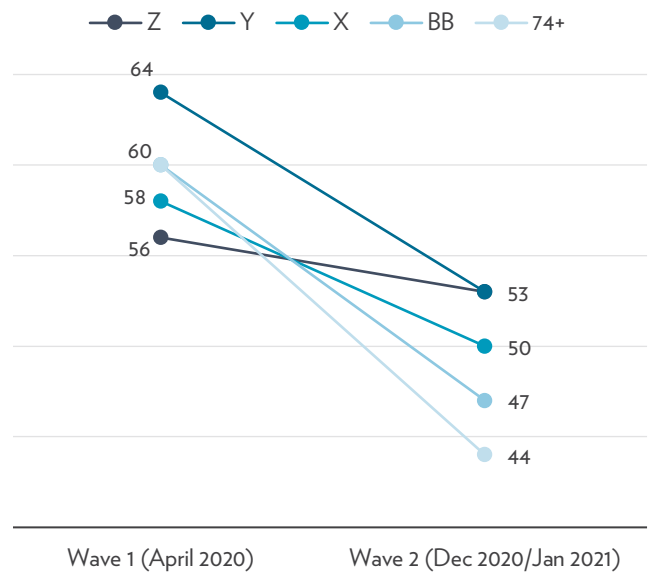
Q16. Do you find yourself trying to avoid news about Covid-19? Often; Sometimes; Occasionally; Never; Don't know. (Base: N=2,659).

CONCERN ABOUT COVID-19

While Australians are still concerned about Covid-19, with 50% saying they are very or extremely concerned, there was an overall decline in concern (-10%) since Wave 1. Older generations' concern level dropped more compared to other age groups, with highest concern among Gen Z and Gen Y (see figure 34).

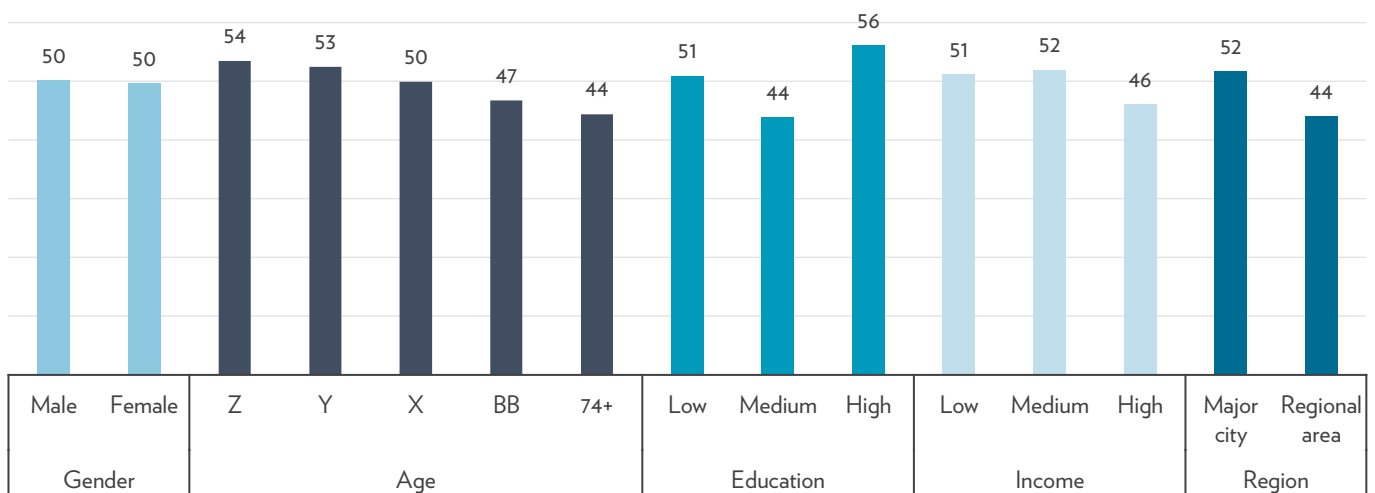
Low/medium income earners (51% low, 52% medium), and major city dwellers (52%) were more concerned about Covid-19 compared to other groups (see figure 35). Those living alone (53%) were more concerned compared to those living with others (49%), which is the opposite to Wave 1.

FIGURE 34 CHANGES IN THE CONCERN LEVEL (%)



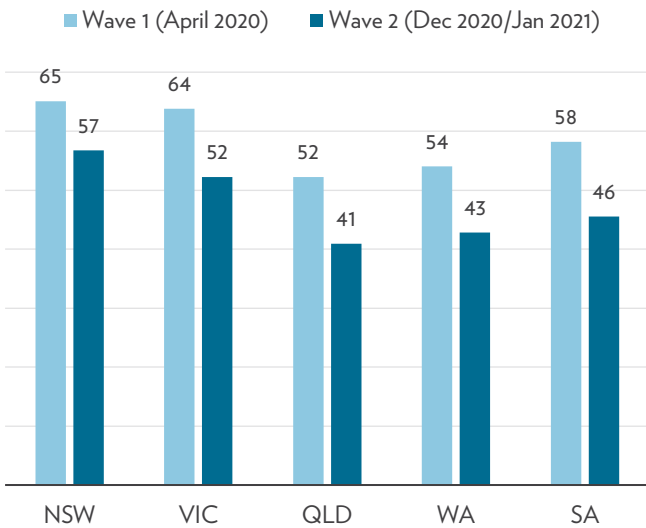
Q3. How concerned are you about Covid-19? Extremely concerned; Very concerned; Somewhat concerned; Not very concerned; Not at all concerned; Don't know. *Concerned = Extremely/very concerned. (Base: Wave 1=2,196; Wave 2=2,659).

FIGURE 35 CONCERN ABOUT COVID-19 BY DEMOGRAPHICS (%)



Q3. How concerned are you about Covid-19? *Concerned = Extremely/very concerned. (Base: N=2,659).

FIGURE 36 CONCERN ABOUT COVID-19 BY STATE (%)

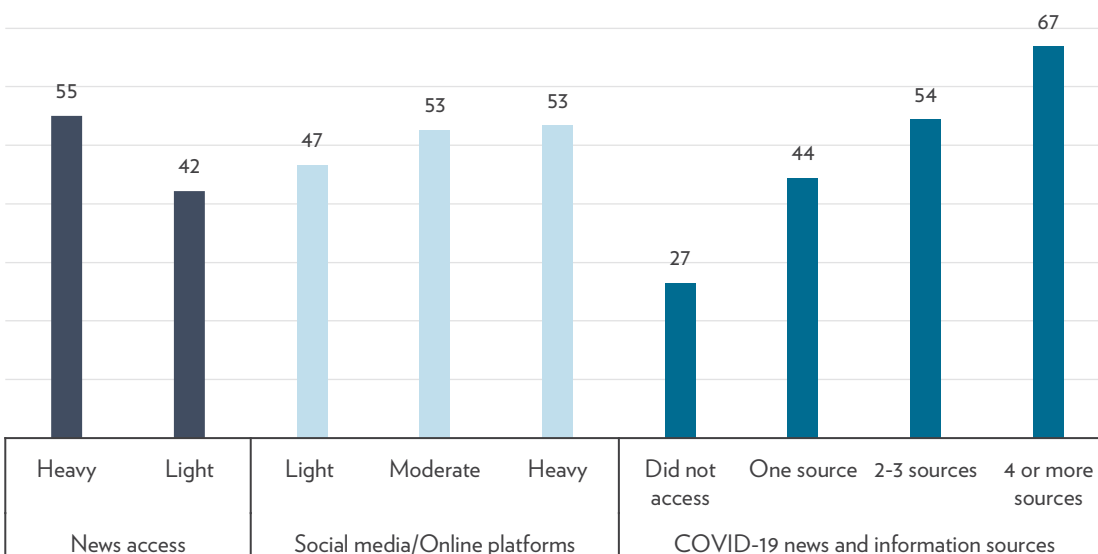


Q3. How concerned are you about Covid-19? *Concerned = Extremely/very concerned. (Base: Wave 1=2,196; Wave 2=2,659).

Those living in NSW (57%), VIC (52%), ACT (56%) were more concerned than those in QLD (41%), WA (43%), SA (46%) and NT (39%) (see figure 36). NSW experienced the smallest drop in concern between Wave 1 and Wave 2 compared to other states. This is possibly due to the fact that during the survey fieldwork, there was a new community outbreak in NSW and lockdown in Sydney’s northern beaches region.

Heavy news consumers (55%) were more likely than light news consumers (42%) to say that they were extremely or very concerned about Covid-19 (see figure 37). Those who were moderate or heavy users of social media and online platforms (53%) were also more likely to be concerned than light users (47%). Similarly, those who accessed Covid-19 news and information via more than 3 sources (67%) were much more likely to be concerned than those who only accessed one source (44%) or 2–3 sources (54%). Those who did not access Covid-19 news or information were the least concerned with only 27% expressing high concern.

FIGURE 37 CONCERN ABOUT COVID-19 BY NEWS AND INFORMATION ACCESS (%)



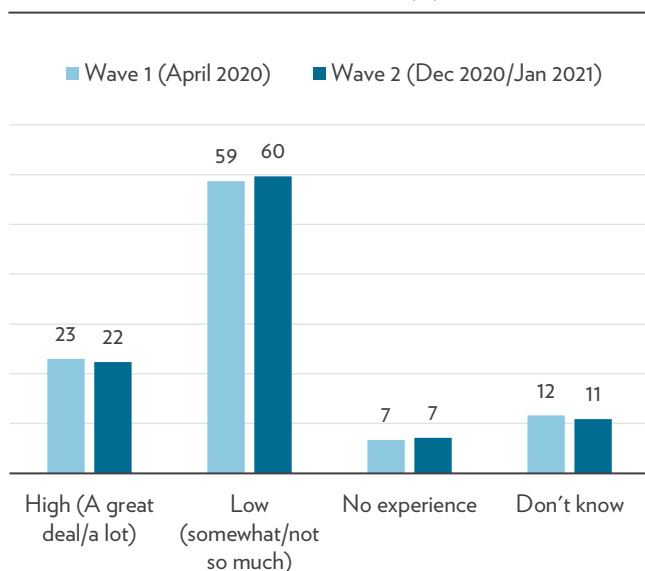
Q3. How concerned are you about Covid-19? *Concerned = Extremely/very concerned. Q4. Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news? NEW_Q6_1. Which, if any, of the following social media or online platforms have you used in the last week for any purpose? Q6. Which, if any, of the following have you accessed in the last week as a source of news or information about Covid-19? (Base: N=2,659).

COVID-19 MISINFORMATION

EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19

In both Wave 1 and Wave 2, we asked respondents whether they had come across news or information that they knew or suspected to be false or misleading about Covid-19. Overall, 82% of Australians reported having some experience of misinformation about Covid-19, consistent across both surveys. Just under a quarter (22%, -1) of Wave 2 respondents said they had come across 'a great deal' or 'a lot' of false or misleading information (high experience). More than half (60%, +1 pp) came across it 'somewhat often' or 'not so much' (low experience) and 7% said they had not experienced Covid-19 misinformation at all (see figure 38). One in ten (11%, -1 pp) said they did not know if they had come across false or misleading information about Covid-19.

FIGURE 38 EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 IN GENERAL (%)



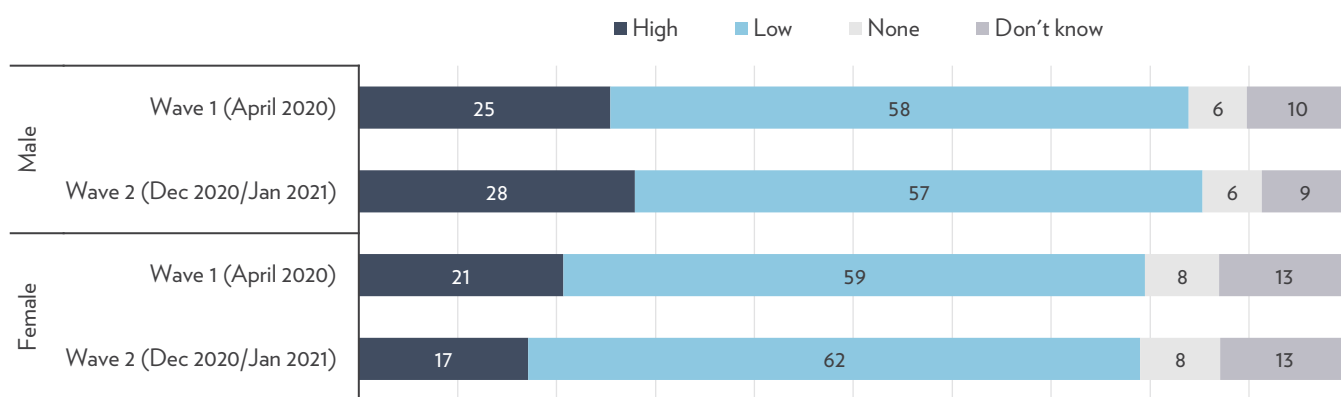
Q12. On average, how often have you come across news or information that you know or suspect to be false or misleading about Covid-19? (Base: Wave 1=2,196; Wave 2=2,659).

In Wave 2, we also asked a separate question about experience of misinformation while online or on social media. As the findings from this question closely resembled that of the general experience of misinformation, we focused the analysis on the general experience for comparison purposes.

Men (28%) were more likely to report high experience of misinformation about Covid-19 compared to women (17%) (see figure 39). The proportion who reported high experience of misinformation decreased more among women (-4 pp) compared to men (-3 pp) from Wave 1.

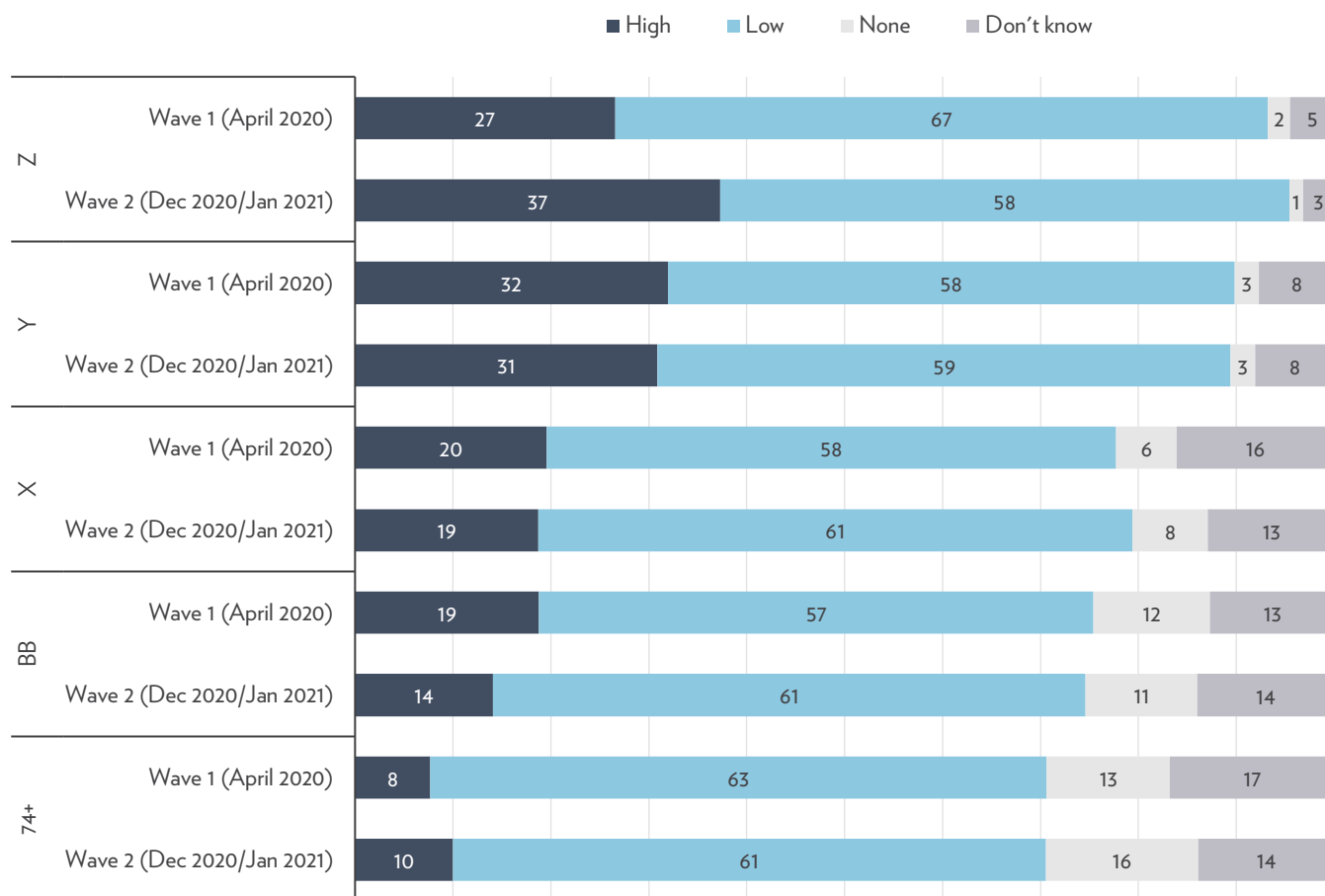
Younger generations reported coming across misinformation more than older generations; 37% of Gen Z reported high experience of misinformation compared to 14% of baby boomers. The number of Gen Z with high experience also increased significantly (+10 pp) since Wave 1, whereas the number of baby boomers reporting high experience decreased (-5 pp) (see figure 40).

FIGURE 39 EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 BY GENDER (%)



Q12. On average, how often have you come across news or information that you know or suspect to be false or misleading about Covid-19? (Base: Wave 1=2,196; Wave 2=2,659).

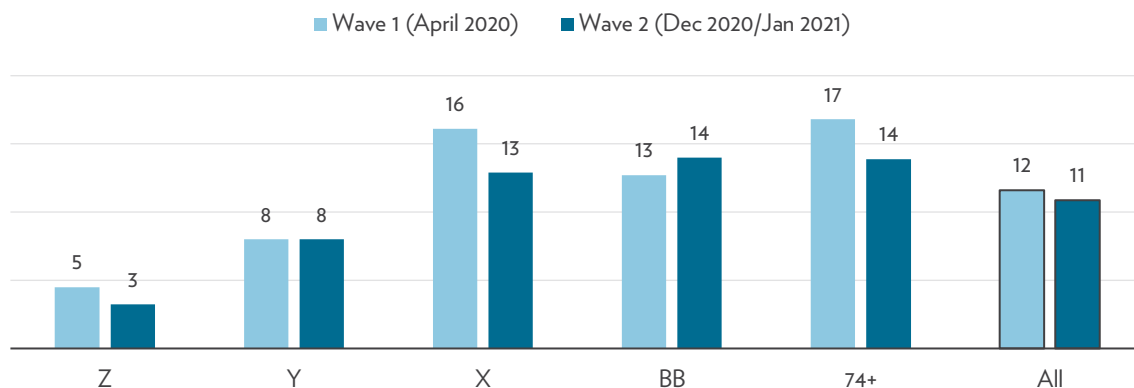
FIGURE 40 EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 BY GENERATION (%)



Q12. On average, how often have you come across news or information that you know or suspect to be false or misleading about Covid-19? (Base: Wave 1=2,196; Wave 2=2,659).

The number of respondents who said they 'don't know' if they had come across misinformation was much higher among older generations in Wave 2 (see figure 41). The younger a person is, the more likely they are to be certain about whether or not they have come across misinformation; Gen Y (8%) was more than twice as likely as Gen Z (3%) to say they 'don't know', and Gen X (16%) was twice as likely as Gen Y to say they 'don't know'.

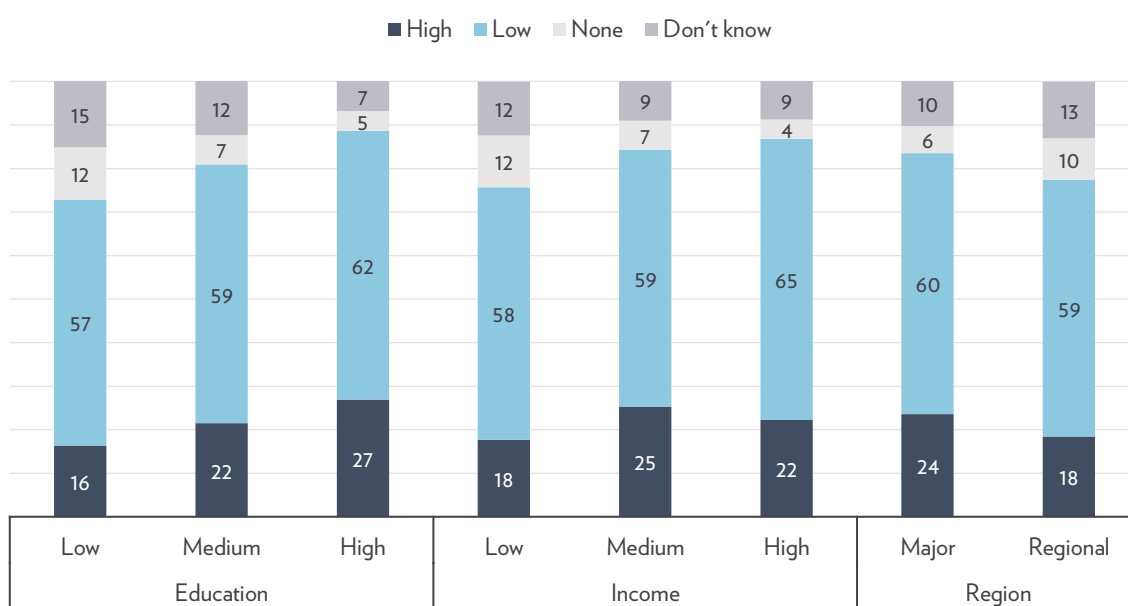
FIGURE 41 THOSE WHO 'DON'T KNOW' IF THEY ENCOUNTERED MISINFORMATION BY GENERATION (%)



Q12. On average, how often have you come across news or information that you know or suspect to be false or misleading about Covid-19? (Base: Wave 1=2,196; Wave 2=2,659).

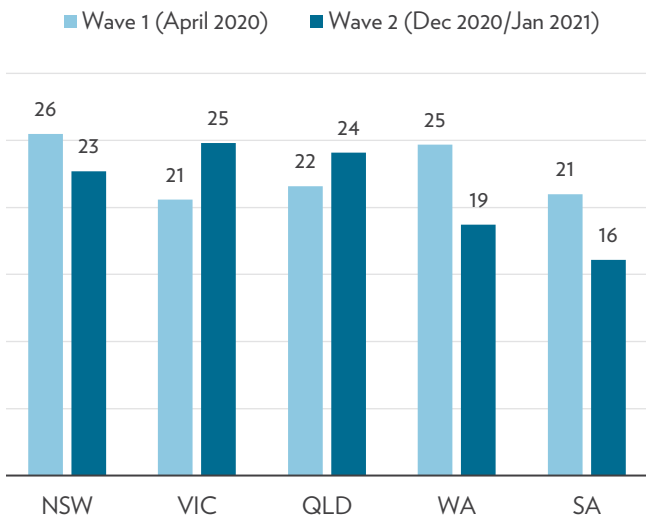
Those with high education and major city dwellers were more likely to report experiencing misinformation about Covid-19 (see figure 42). This was consistent with Wave 1 findings.

FIGURE 42 EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 BY DEMOGRAPHICS (%)



Q12. On average, how often have you come across news or information that you know or suspect to be false or misleading about Covid-19? (Base: N=2,659).

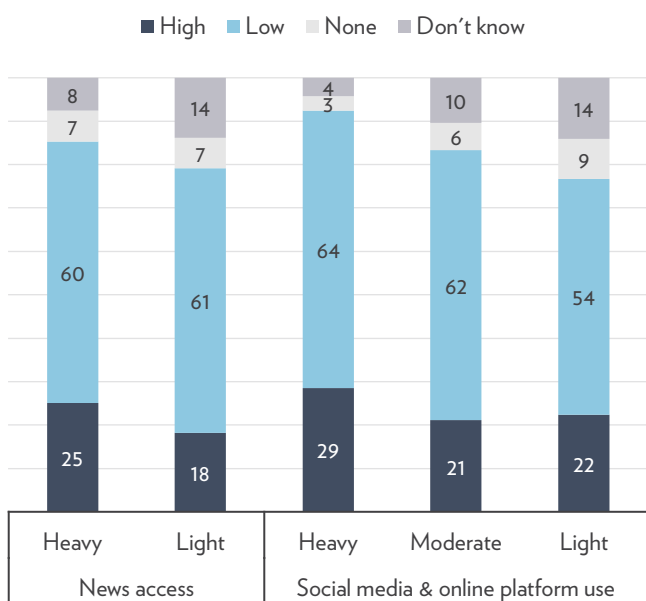
FIGURE 43 HIGH EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION BY STATE (%)



Q12. On average, how often have you come across news or information that you know or suspect to be false or misleading about Covid-19? (Base: Wave 1=2,196; Wave 2=2,659).

Heavy news consumers (25%) were more likely to report experiencing high levels of misinformation than light news consumers (18%) (see figure 44). Similarly, those who were heavy social media and online platform users (29%) were much more likely to report encountering misinformation.

FIGURE 44 EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 BY NEWS AND PLATFORM USE (%)

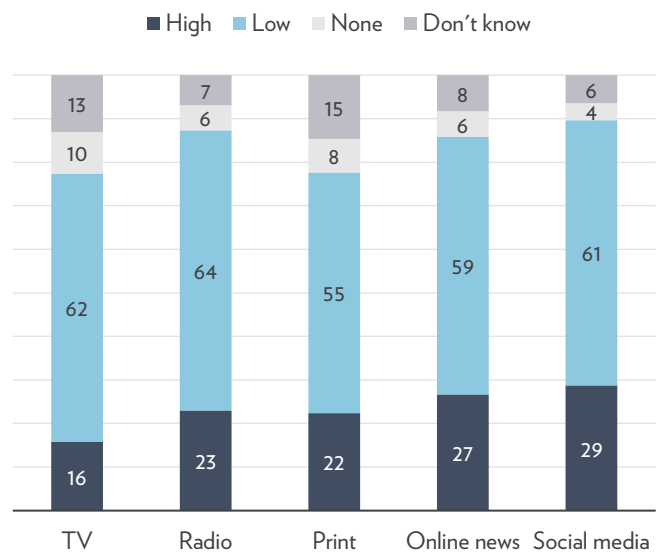


Q12. On average, how often have you come across news or information that you know or suspect to be false or misleading about Covid-19? (Base: N=2,659).

Compared to other states, New South Wales (23%), Victoria (25%), and Queensland (24%) had a higher number of people who said they experienced a great deal or a lot of misinformation (see figure 43).

Those who use social media (29%) or online news (27%) as their main source of news were more likely to report high experience of misinformation about Covid-19 compared to those who mainly use TV (16%) (see figure 45). Those who use TV as their main sources of news were the least likely to report experiencing Covid-19 misinformation (10%).

FIGURE 45 EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 BY MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS (%)



Q12. On average, how often have you come across news or information that you know or suspect to be false or misleading about Covid-19? (Base: N=2,659).

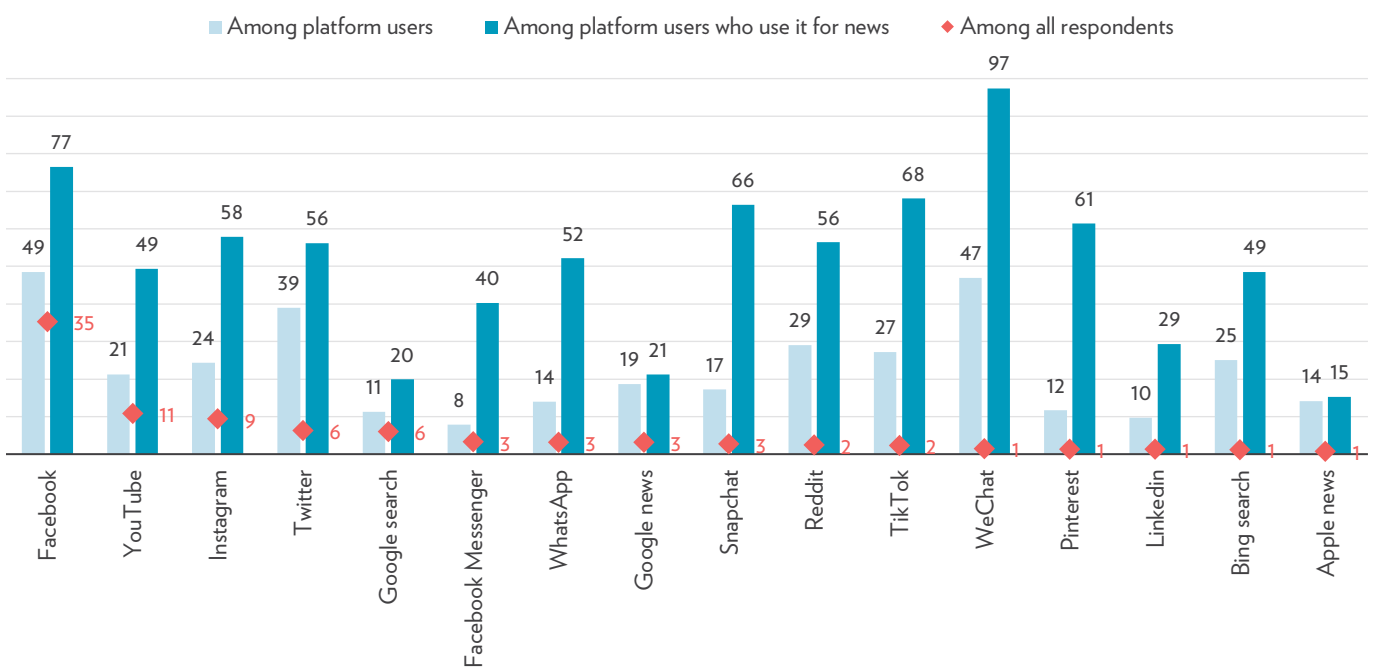
EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION BY PLATFORM

We gave a list of popular social media and online platforms to respondents and asked them to identify on which ones they came across false or misleading information about Covid-19. The data show that 35% saw it on Facebook, 11% on YouTube, 9% on Instagram, and 6% on Twitter and Google search (see figure 46). These figures, however, do not account for the relative popularity of the platform.

When we examine those who experienced misinformation among platform users, we can see that not only Facebook is the

most popular platform in Australia, but it is also the platform with the largest percentage of its user base reporting seeing at least 'some' Covid-19 misinformation (49%). The platform with the second highest reported exposure to misinformation was WeChat. Although it is used by only 3% of Australians, almost half of WeChat users (47%) said they had come across Covid-19 misinformation on the platform, compared to 14% of WhatsApp users and 8% of Facebook Messenger users. Twitter ranked third, with 39% of its Australian users reporting experiencing Covid-19 misinformation on that social media platform.

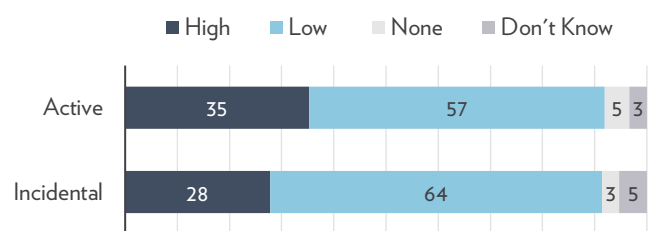
FIGURE 46 EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 AMONG ALL RESPONDENTS AND AMONG PLATFORM USERS (%)



NEW_Q12_2. On which social media or online platforms did you come across false or misleading information about Covid-19? *Among those who experienced a great deal, a lot, somewhat of misinformation about Covid-19 (Base: N=1,413).

Those who actively use social media and online platforms for Covid-19 news and information were more likely to report coming across a high level of misinformation about Covid-19 compared to incidental news consumers (35% compared to 28%). However incidental news consumers were more likely to report low-level experience of Covid-19 misinformation compared to active news seekers (64% compared to 57%) (see figure 47). When we combined the low and high levels of experience, there was no difference between active and incidental social media users in their experiences of misinformation.

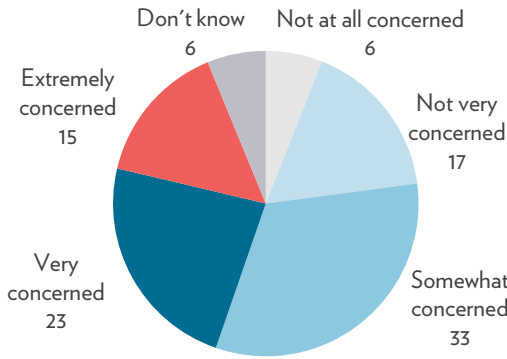
FIGURE 47 EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION BY TYPE OF EXPOSURE TO NEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA OR ONLINE PLATFORMS (%)



Q12. On average, how often have you come across news or information that you know or suspect to be false or misleading about Covid-19? NEW_Q6_1. Which, if any, of the following social media or online platforms have you used in the last week for any purpose? (Base: N=2,659).

CONCERN ABOUT COVID-19 MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE PLATFORMS

FIGURE 48 CONCERN ABOUT COVID-19 MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA OR ONLINE PLATFORMS (%)

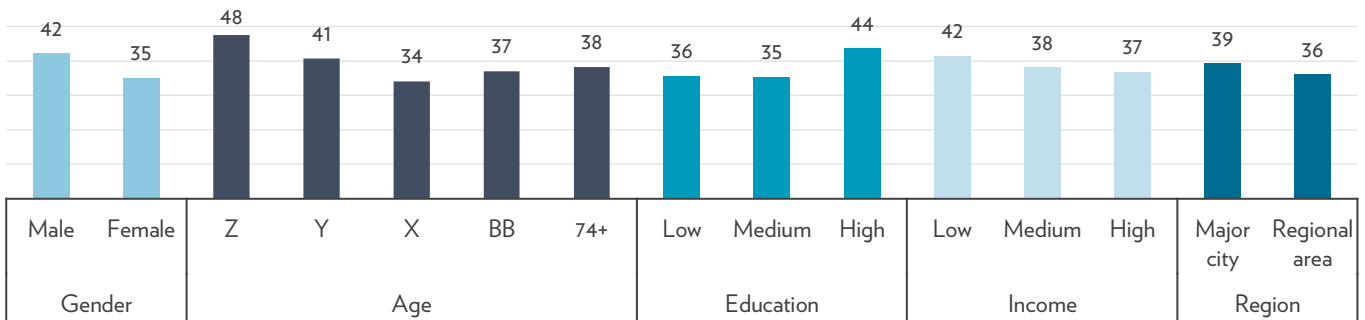


Q. How concerned, if at all, are you about false or misleading information about Covid-19 on social media or online platforms? (Base: N=2,659).

Australians are concerned about false or misleading information about Covid-19 on social media or online platforms. 71% said that they were somewhat (32%), very (23%) or extremely concerned (15%). Less than 1-in-4 said they were not at all or not very concerned (see figure 48).

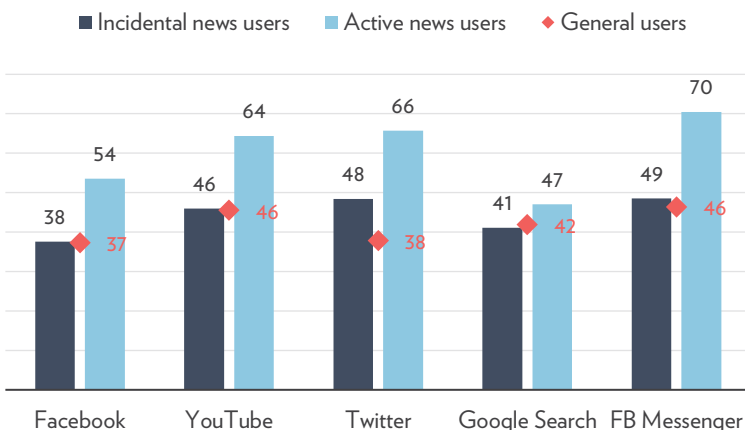
Among those who were highly concerned (very/extremely); men (42%) were more concerned than women (35%), younger people (Gen Z 48%; Gen Y 41%) more concerned than older (BB 37%; 74+ 38%), and those with higher education (44%) were more concerned than those with lower education (36%) (see figure 49).

FIGURE 49 CONCERN ABOUT COVID-19 MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA OR ONLINE PLATFORMS (%)



Q. How concerned, if at all, are you about false or misleading information about Covid-19 on social media or online platforms? *% Includes extremely and very concerned. (Base: N=2,659).

FIGURE 50 CONCERN ABOUT COVID-19 MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA OR ONLINE PLATFORMS BY PLATFORM (%)



Q. How concerned, if at all, are you about false or misleading information about Covid-19 on social media or online platforms? *% Includes extremely and very concerned.

Those who actively seek news about Covid-19 on social media and online platforms were more concerned about misinformation about it on social media or online platforms than those who are exposed to news incidentally or are general users. Those who actively use Twitter (66%) and YouTube (64%) to seek out information about Covid-19 were more concerned than active Covid-19 news seekers on Facebook (54%) (see figure 50).

MITIGATING MISINFORMATION

RESPONSES TO MISINFORMATION

We asked what people did when they encounter false or misleading information about Covid-19. About one-third of respondents who came across misinformation somewhat, a lot or a great deal said they did nothing (31%). Common reactions were to stop paying attention to information shared by people they did not trust (32%), search different sources to see if the information is accurate (27%), and use more reputable information sources (19%). Only 6% knowingly shared or forwarded it to other people, indicating that people tend not to share misinformation if they identify it (see Table 1).

TABLE 01 RESPONSES TO MISINFORMATION (%)

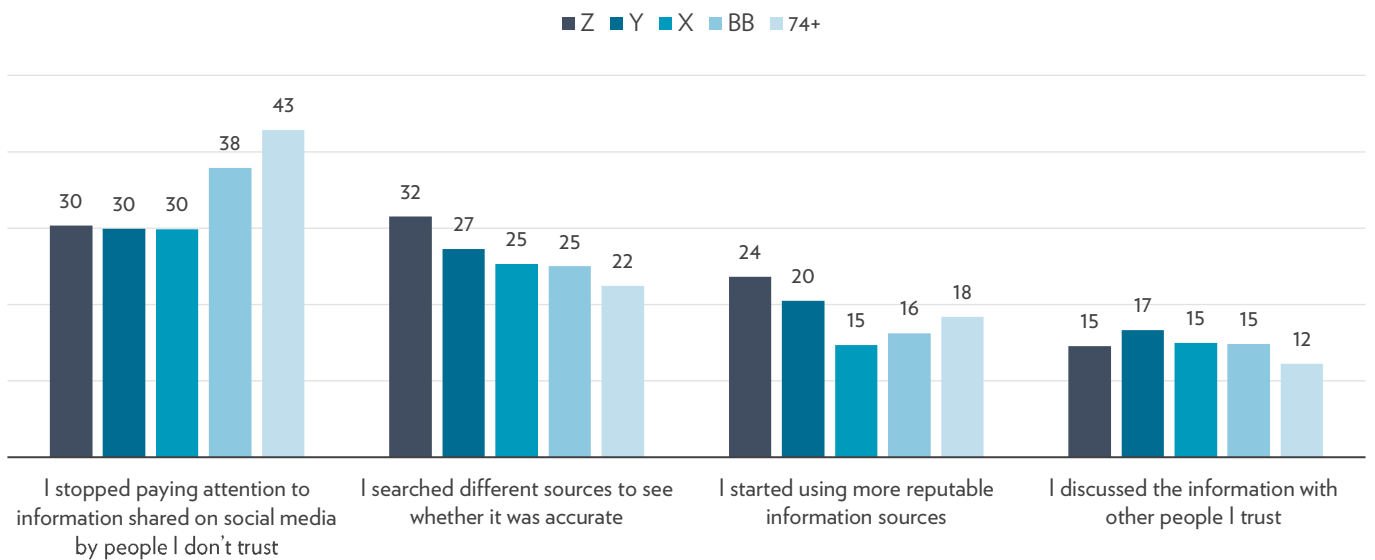
Responses to misinformation	%
I stopped paying attention to information shared on social media by people I don't trust	32
Did nothing	31
I searched different sources to see whether it was accurate	27
I started using more reputable information sources	19
I discussed the information with other people I trust	15
I stopped using or blocked the source because I was unsure about the accuracy of the information	12
I made a complaint to the information provider	6
I forwarded or shared it with other people	6

Q14. When you came across the false or misleading news and information about Covid-19, what (if anything) did you do after seeing it? Check all that apply (Base: N= 1,413, those who said they came across misinformation somewhat, a lot, or a great deal)

Gen Z are more likely to respond to misinformation when they come across it. 78% of Gen Z engaged in at least one type of activity (Gen Y 71%, X 67%, baby boomers 64%, 74+ 67%). One-third of Gen Z said they searched a number of different sources to check the accuracy of information, whereas only 22% of people aged 74+ did (see figure 51). Gen Z are also more likely

to seek more reputable information sources when encountering misinformation compared to older people. On the other hand, older generations are more likely to stop paying attention to information shared by people they do not trust, with 43% of 74+ engaging in this type of activity, compared to only 30% of Gen X, Y Z.

FIGURE 51 RESPONSES TO MISINFORMATION BY GENERATION (%)

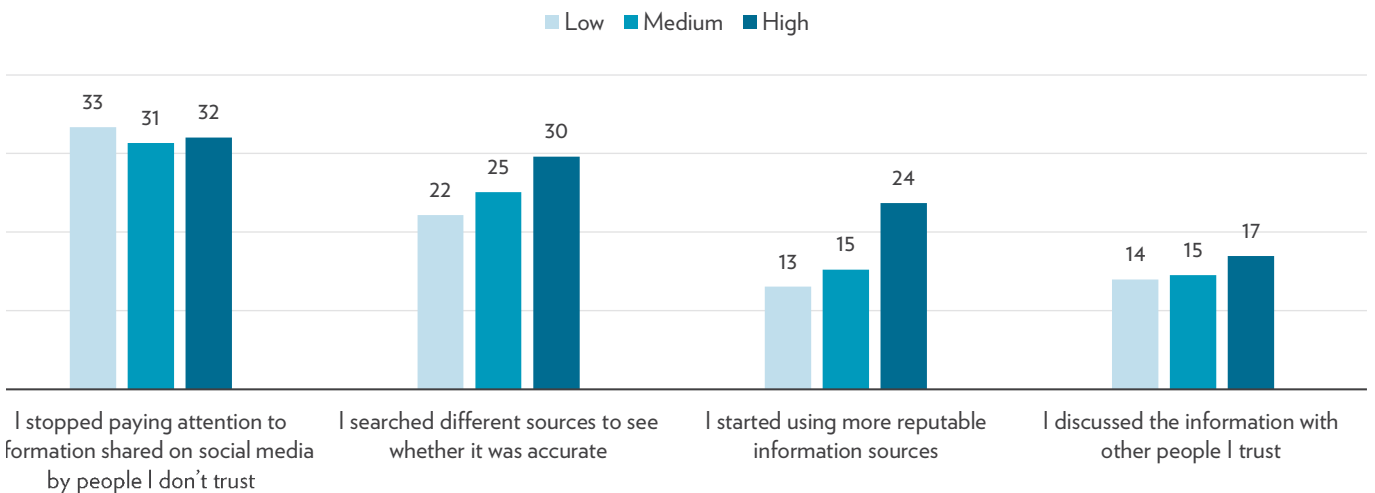


Q14. When you came across the false or misleading news and information about Covid-19, what (if anything) did you do after seeing it? Check all that apply (Base: N=1,413, those who said they came across misinformation somewhat, a lot, or a great deal)

Those with high education are more likely to engage in activities in response to misinformation when they come across it. Many (74%) of those with higher education engaged in at least one type of activity (low 63%, medium 66%) (see figure 52). They are

more likely to search different sources to evaluate the accuracy of information and seek more-reputable information sources compared to those with medium and low levels of education.

FIGURE 52 RESPONSES TO MISINFORMATION BY EDUCATION (TOP 4) (%)



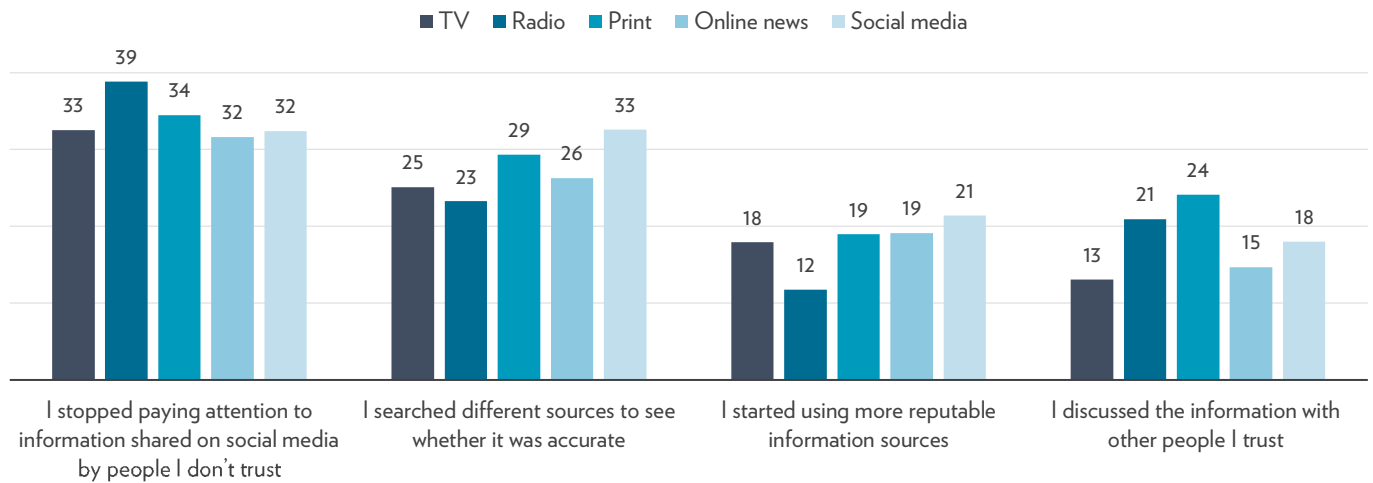
Q14. When you came across the false or misleading news and information about Covid-19, what (if anything) did you do after seeing it? Check all that apply (Base: N=1,413, those who said they came across misinformation somewhat, a lot, or a great deal)

Social media use may be establishing a habit of responding

How people respond to misinformation also differed by main source of news. Those who used print as their main source of news (83%) were more likely to engage with at least one type of activity, whereas those who use TV as their main source of news (65%) were least likely (radio 73%, online news 69%, social media 76%). Those who used radio as their main source of news (39%) were more likely to stop paying attention and those who

used print as their main source of news (24%) were more likely to discuss the information with other people they trust compared to other groups. On the other hand, those who used social media as their main source of news were more likely to search a number of different sources to check the accuracy of information (33%) and seek more reputable information sources (21%) than those who mainly relied on other sources of news (see figure 53).

FIGURE 53 RESPONSES TO MISINFORMATION BY MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS (%)

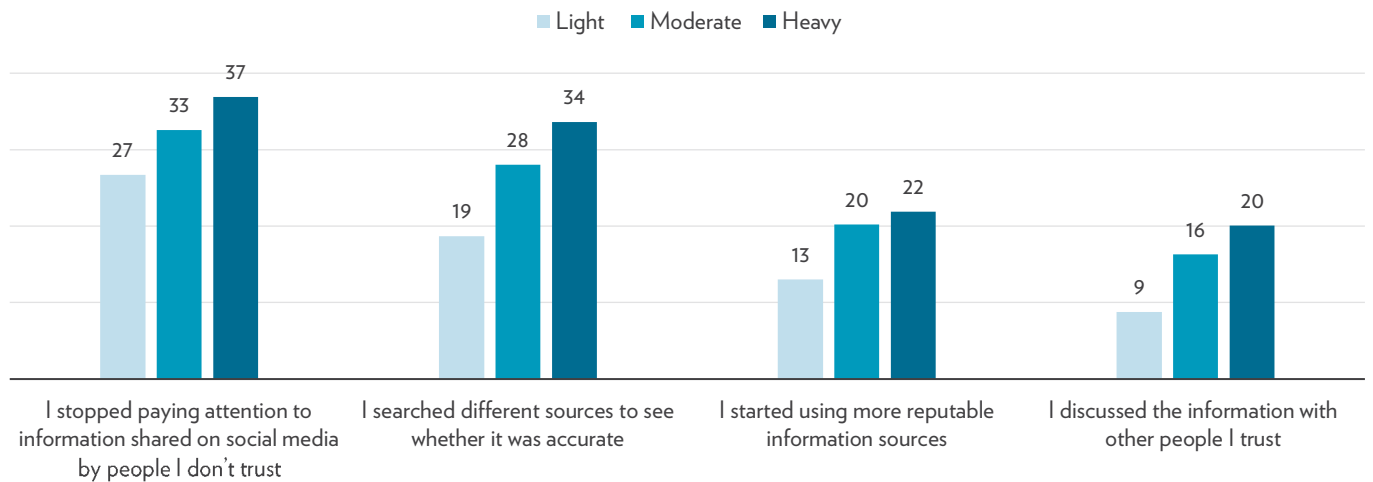


Q14. When you came across the false or misleading news and information about Covid-19, what (if anything) did you do after seeing it? Check all that apply. * Please note the sample size of those who use radio (85) and print (58) as their main source of news is small. (Base: N= 1,413, those who said they came across misinformation somewhat, a lot, or a great deal)

In general, respondents who are more diverse in their use of social media or online platforms are more likely to respond to misinformation through various actions. Figure 52 shows that more than one-third of those who used five or more social media or online platforms (heavy users) said they stopped paying attention

to information shared by people they don't trust compared to 27% of those who used only 1 or 2 social media and online platforms (light users). Also, while 20% of heavy social media users said they discussed the information with other people, only 9% of light users said they did (see figure 54).

FIGURE 54 RESPONSES TO MISINFORMATION BY THE NUMBER OF SOCIAL MEDIA USED (%)



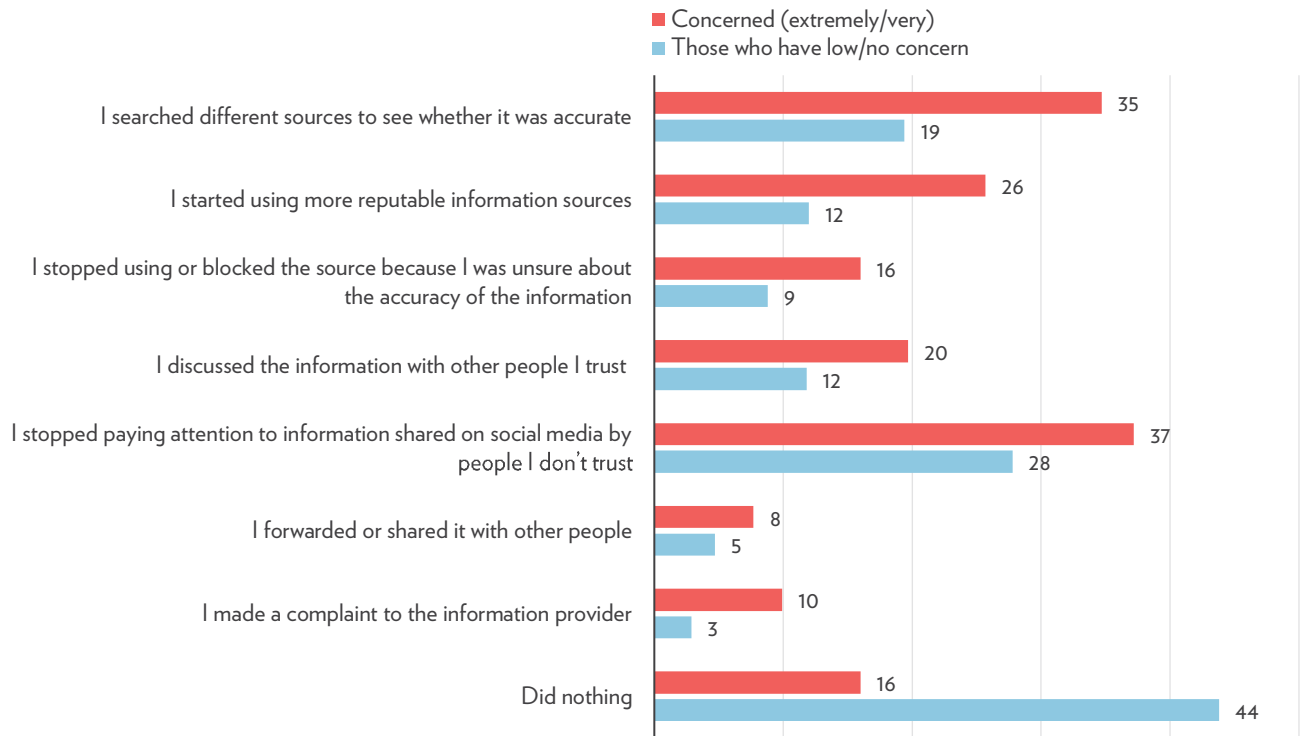
Q14. When you came across the false or misleading news and information about Covid-19, what (if anything) did you do after seeing it? Check all that apply. Q6_1. Which, if any, of the following social media or online platforms have you used in the last week for any purpose? *Heavy (6 or more)/ moderate (3-5)/ light (1-2) (Excluded 'haven't used in the last week') (Base: N= 1,413, those who said they came across misinformation somewhat, a lot, or a great deal).

Concern about and experience of misinformation leads to verification

Those who were *extremely or very concerned* about Covid-19 misinformation were a lot more likely to respond to misinformation, with 84% of those who were concerned using at least one type of verification activity compared to 56% of those who had low levels of or no concern. Figure 55 shows that more than one third of those who said they were concerned stopped

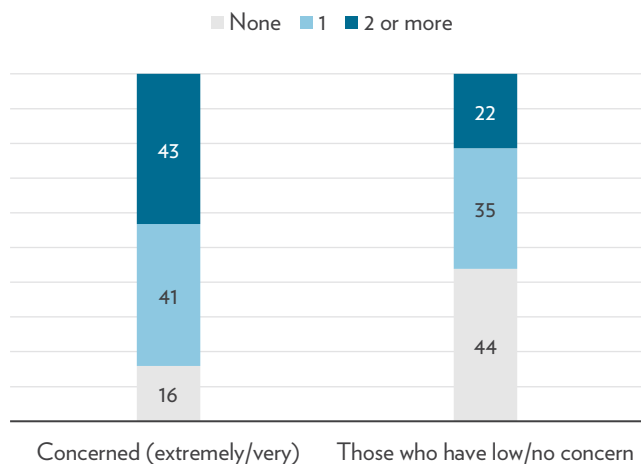
paying attention to information shared by those they don't trust, compared to 28% of those who had low or no concern. One-third of those who said they were concerned started using more reputable information sources, which is more than double the number of people with low levels of or no concern.

FIGURE 55 RESPONSES TO MISINFORMATION BY CONCERN ABOUT COVID-19 MISINFORMATION (%)



Q14. When you came across the false or misleading news and information about Covid-19, what (if anything) did you do after seeing it? Check all that apply.
 Q. How concerned, if at all, are you about false or misleading information about Covid-19 on social media or online platforms? (Concerned=extremely/very, not concerned= Somewhat/not very/ not at all). (Base: N= 1,413, those who said they came across misinformation somewhat, a lot, or a great deal).

FIGURE 56 NUMBER OF RESPONSES TO MISINFORMATION BY CONCERN ABOUT MISINFORMATION (%)



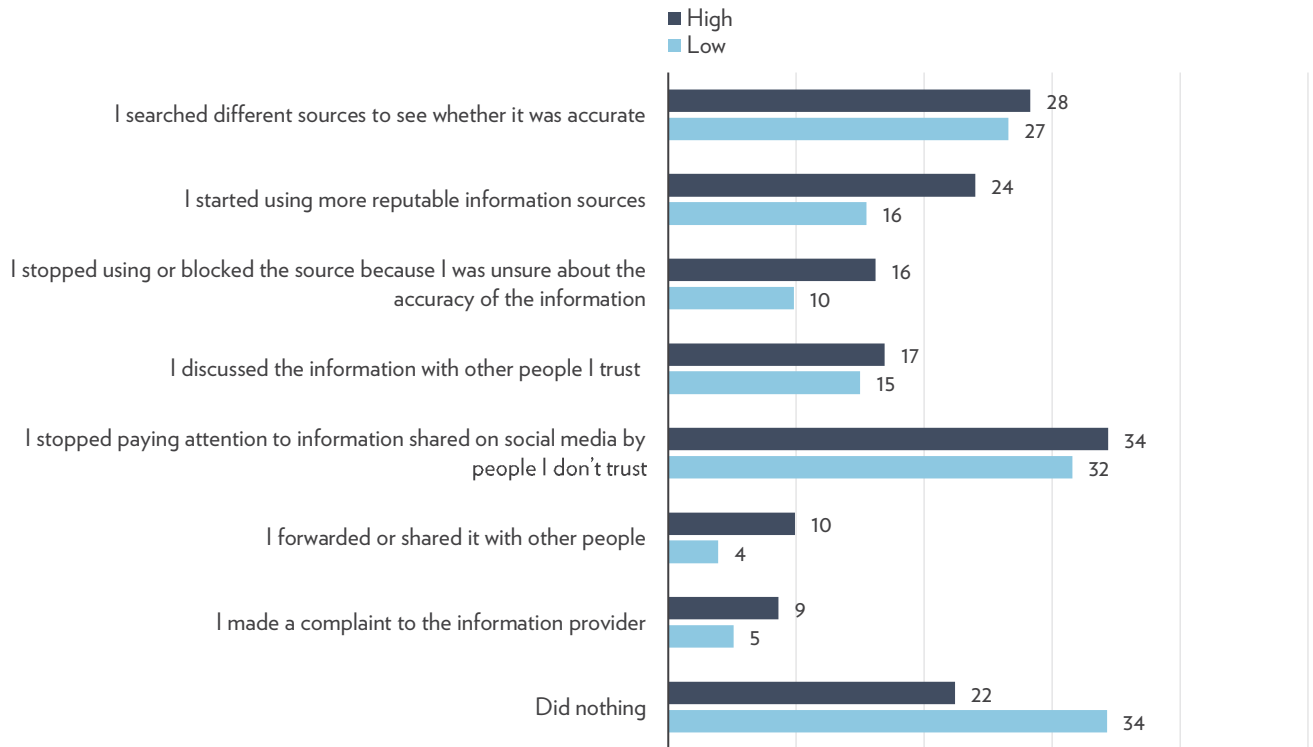
Those who were concerned about misinformation about Covid-19 were more likely to engage in a greater number of activities in response to misinformation. Out of the 7 different types of responses that were given as options, 31% did not engage in any of those activities, 37% engaged in one activity and 32% engaged in 2 or more activities (see figure 56). However, 43% of those with high levels of concerns about Covid-19 misinformation engaged in multiple activities compared to 22% of those with low level or no concern.

Q. How concerned, if at all, are you about false or misleading information about Covid-19 on social media or online platforms? *The number of verification activities was added. (Base: N=2,659).

Those who experienced a great deal or a lot of misinformation about Covid-19 were more likely to respond to misinformation through various actions, with 78% using at least one type of activity compared to 66% of those who only reported experiencing some or not so much misinformation. More than one-third of those who

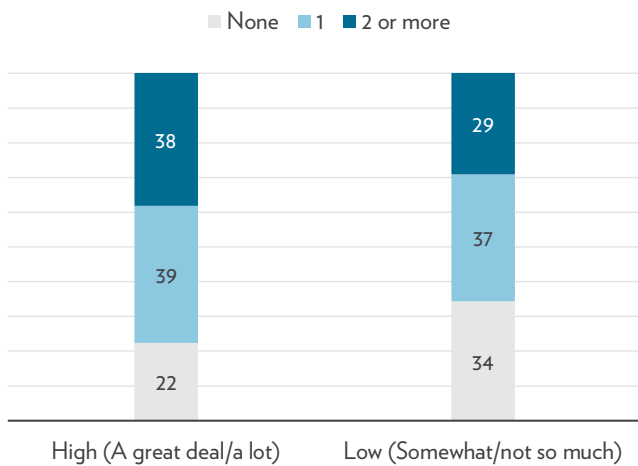
reported high experience of misinformation about Covid-19 said they stopped paying attention to information shared by those they don't trust and almost one-third (28%) of those who reported a high experience of misinformation searched different sources (see figure 57).

FIGURE 57 RESPONSES TO MISINFORMATION BY EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 (%)



Q12. On average, how often have you come across news or information that you know or suspect to be false or misleading about Covid-19? *High: A great deal/a lot, Low: Somewhat/not so much (Base: N= 1,413, those who said they came across misinformation somewhat, a lot, or a great deal).

FIGURE 58 NUMBER OF RESPONSES TO MISINFORMATION BY EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 (%)



Those who reported high experience of misinformation about Covid-19 were more likely to engage in more verification activities in response to misinformation. 38% of those who reported high experience of Covid-19 misinformation engaged in 2 or more activities compared to 29% of those who reported low experience of misinformation about Covid-19, and 20% of those who did not experience any misinformation about Covid-19 (see figure 58).

Q12. On average, how often have you come across news or information that you know or suspect to be false or misleading about Covid-19? *The number of verification activities was added (Base: N=2,659).

PLATFORM INTERVENTIONS

There is a general awareness but low experience of platform interventions

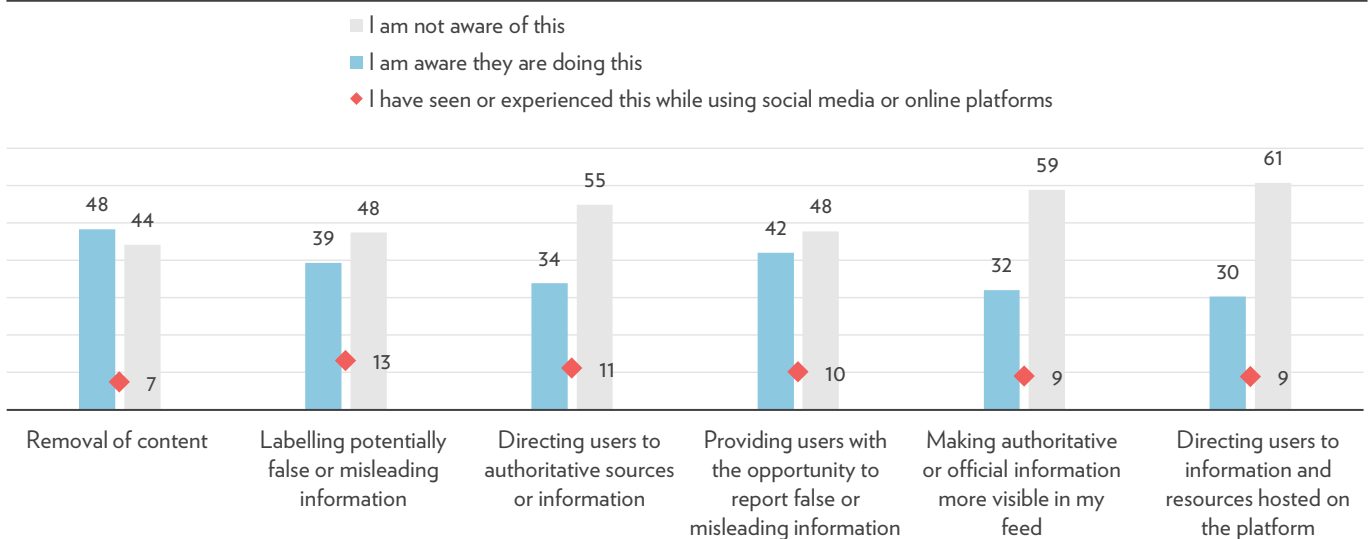
Social media and online platforms are introducing various measures to reduce people’s exposure to misinformation. There was a general sense of awareness among Australians that such measures are in place. However, few said they had actually seen such measures used in practice when visiting individual platforms.

More than half of the respondents were aware that social media or online platforms are removing content (55%), labelling potentially false or misleading information (52%), and providing users with the opportunity to report false or misleading information (52%) (see figure 59). However, many were unaware these platforms are directing users to information and resources hosted on the

platform (61%) and making authoritative information more visible on their feed (59%). In terms of what participants say they had seen or experienced themselves, common measures were the labelling of potentially false or misleading information (13%) and users being provided the opportunity to report false or misleading information (10%). Only 7% had seen content being removed.

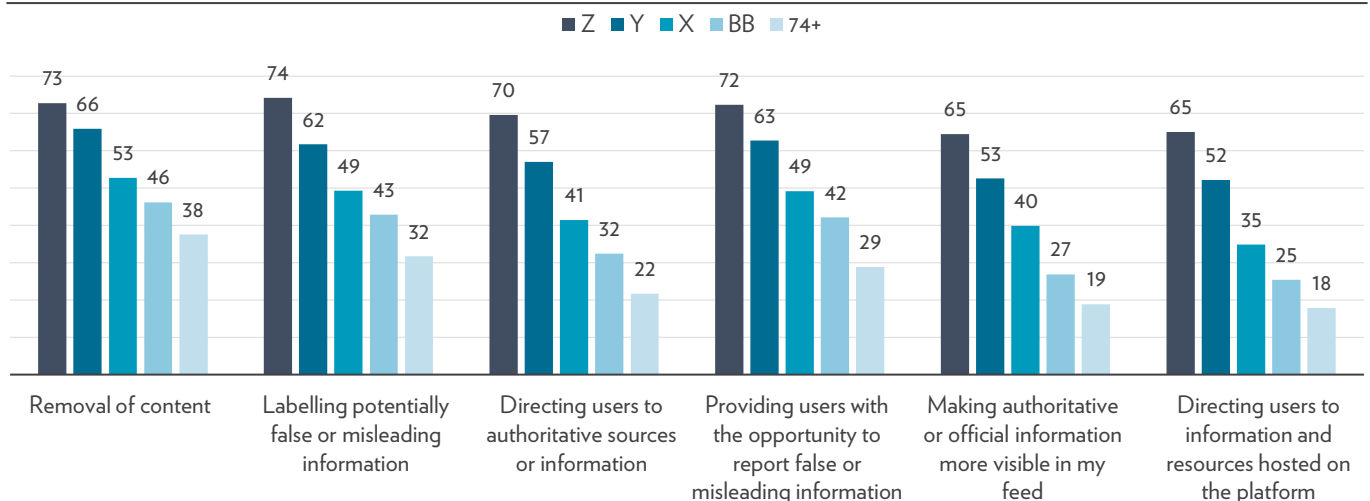
There was a significant difference in the level of awareness between different generations. Gen Z had the highest awareness among all age groups. Baby boomers and those 74+ were less aware of the platform interventions (see figure 60).

FIGURE 59 AWARENESS AND EXPERIENCE OF PLATFORM INTERVENTIONS



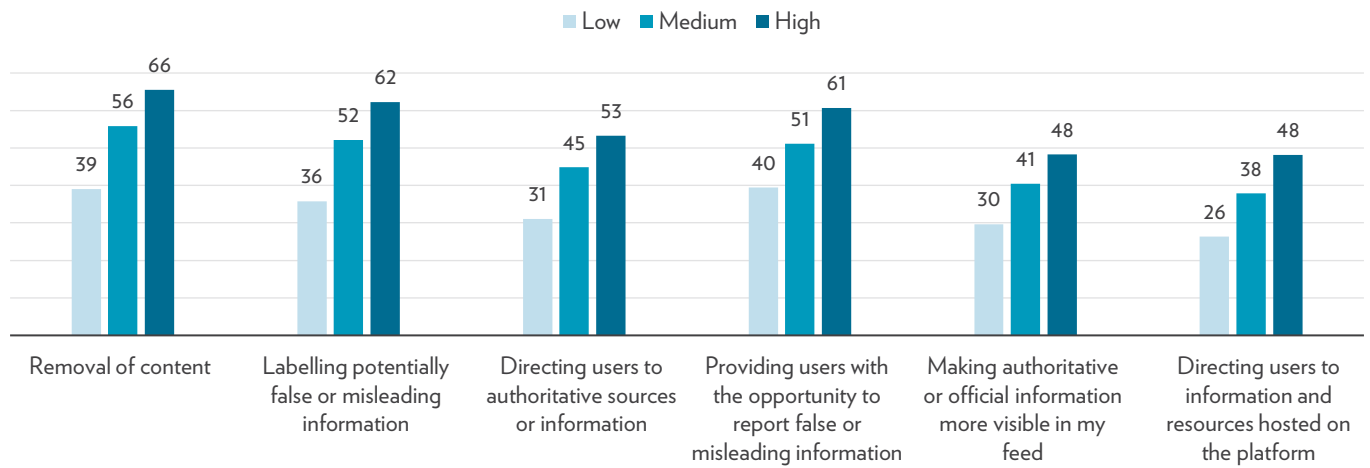
Q. Social media or online platforms have taken a variety of actions since March to reduce people’s exposure to false or misleading news or information about Covid-19. Which of the following are you aware of, or have seen while on social media or online platforms? (Base: N=2,659)

FIGURE 60 AWARENESS AND EXPERIENCE OF PLATFORM INTERVENTIONS BY GENERATION (%)



Those with a high level of education were a lot more likely to be aware of the measures compared to those with low or medium levels of education (see figure 61).

FIGURE 61 AWARENESS AND EXPERIENCE OF PLATFORM INTERVENTIONS BY EDUCATION (%)



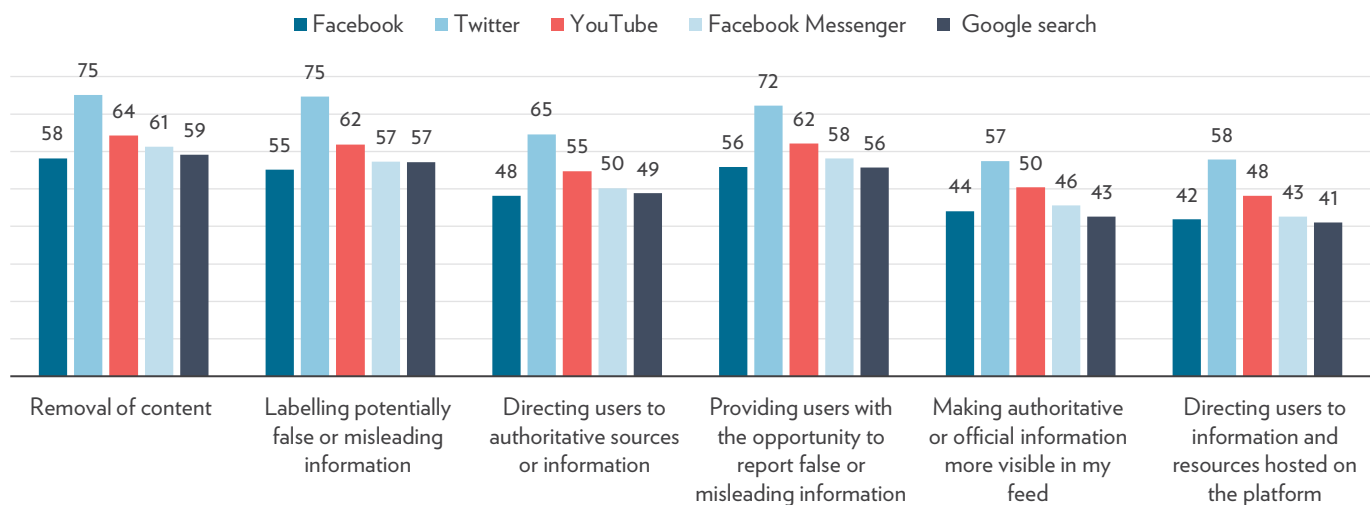
Q. Social media or online platforms have taken a variety of actions since March to reduce people’s exposure to false or misleading news or information about Covid-19. Which of the following are you aware of, or have seen while on social media or online platforms? (Base: N=2,659)

Social media and online platform use and the awareness of interventions

In general, social media and online platform users are more likely to be aware of measures that social media or online platforms are taking to address false or misleading information about Covid-19 than those who do not use them. In particular, many of the respondents who use Twitter were aware that social media or online platforms are removing content (75%), labelling potentially

false or misleading information (75%), and providing users with the opportunity to report false or misleading information (72%). Compared to other social media users, those who use Facebook Messenger or Google search were less likely to be aware of the measures.

FIGURE 62 AWARENESS AND EXPERIENCE OF PLATFORM INTERVENTIONS BY PLATFORM (%)

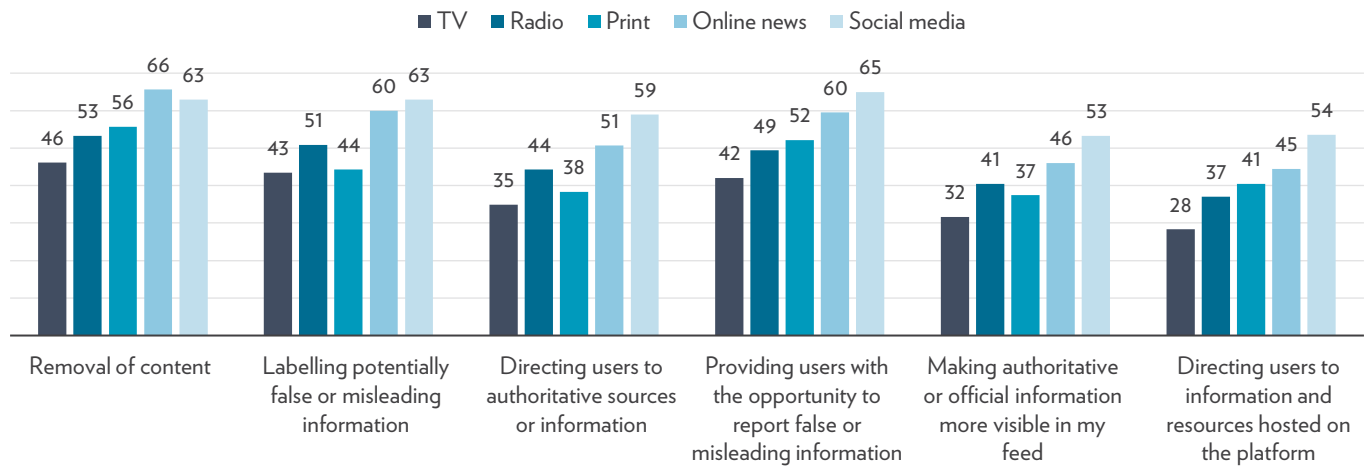


Q. Social media or online platforms have taken a variety of actions since March to reduce people’s exposure to false or misleading news or information about Covid-19. Which of the following are you aware of, or have seen while on social media or online platforms? *Note that users of platforms are not mutually exclusive, and people are more likely to be using multiple platforms. (Base: N=2,659)

Active social media users are more aware of misinformation measures

Those who use social media and online news as their main source of news were more likely to be aware of the measures used by social media and online platforms to help tackle Covid-19 misinformation, than those who use traditional news sources as their main source of news (see figure 63).

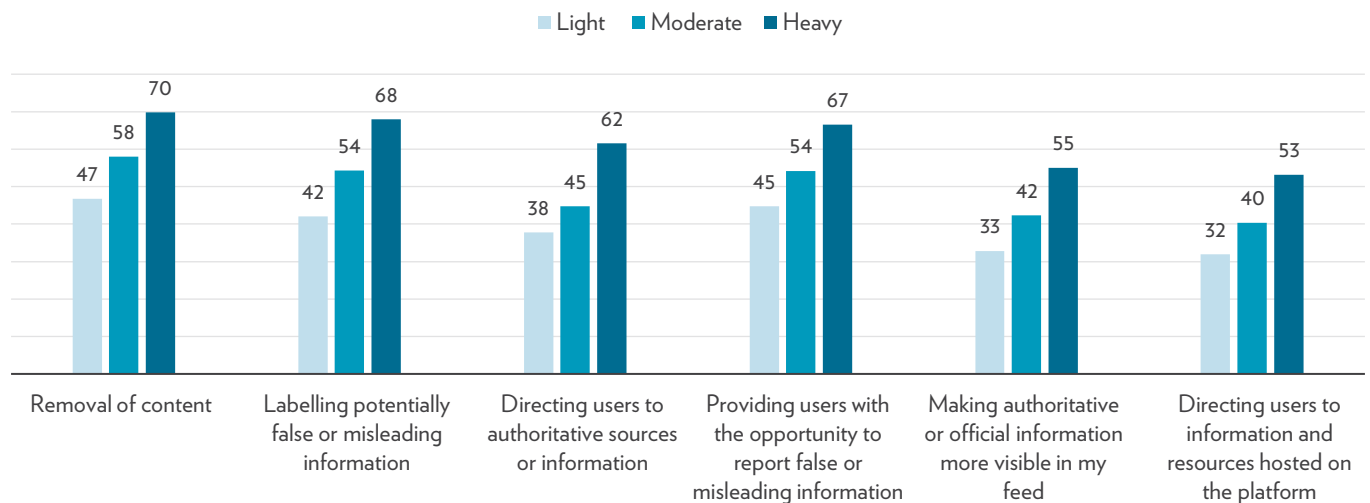
FIGURE 63 AWARENESS AND EXPERIENCE OF PLATFORM INTERVENTIONS BY MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS (%)



Q. Social media or online platforms have taken a variety of actions since March to reduce people's exposure to false or misleading news or information about Covid-19. Which of the following are you aware of, or have seen while on social media or online platforms? (Base: N=2,659)

Heavy users of social media and online platform users were more likely to be aware of the measures compared to light or moderate users of social media and online platforms (see figure 64).

FIGURE 64 AWARENESS AND EXPERIENCE OF PLATFORM INTERVENTIONS BY SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE PLATFORM USE (%)

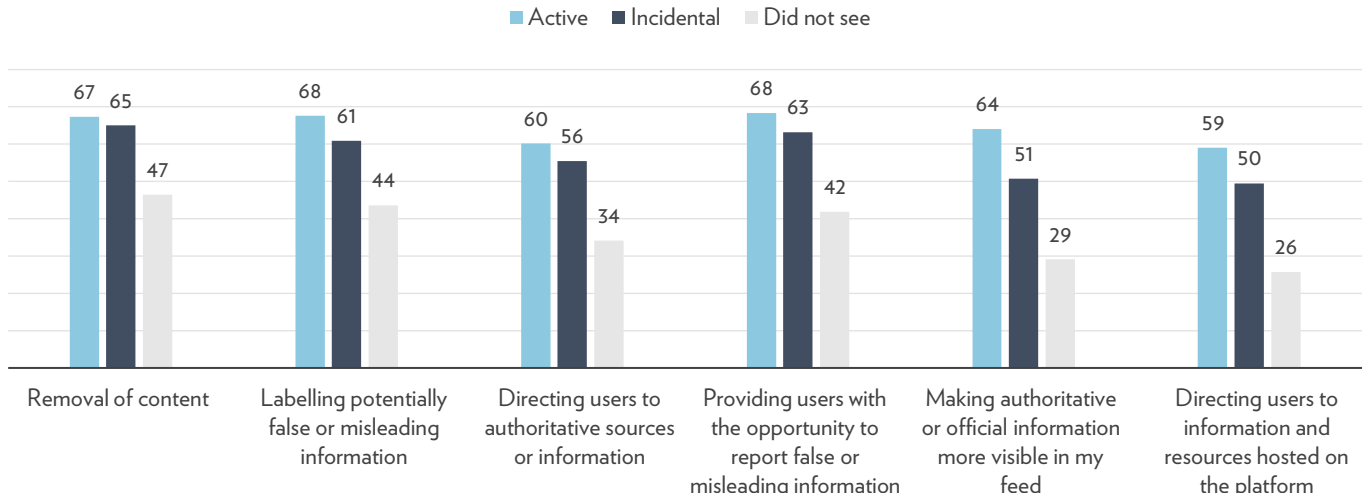


Q6.1. Which, if any, of the following social media or online platforms have you used in the last week for any purpose? *Heavy (6 or more)/ moderate (3-5)/ light (1-2). (Base: N=2,659)

In general, those who use social media or online platform for news were more likely to be aware of platform measures. Figure 65 shows the proportion of Facebook users who knew of the measures. Both those who use Facebook to actively find news and those who come across incidental news on Facebook were much more likely to be aware of the platform measures compared to those who do not use Facebook for news.

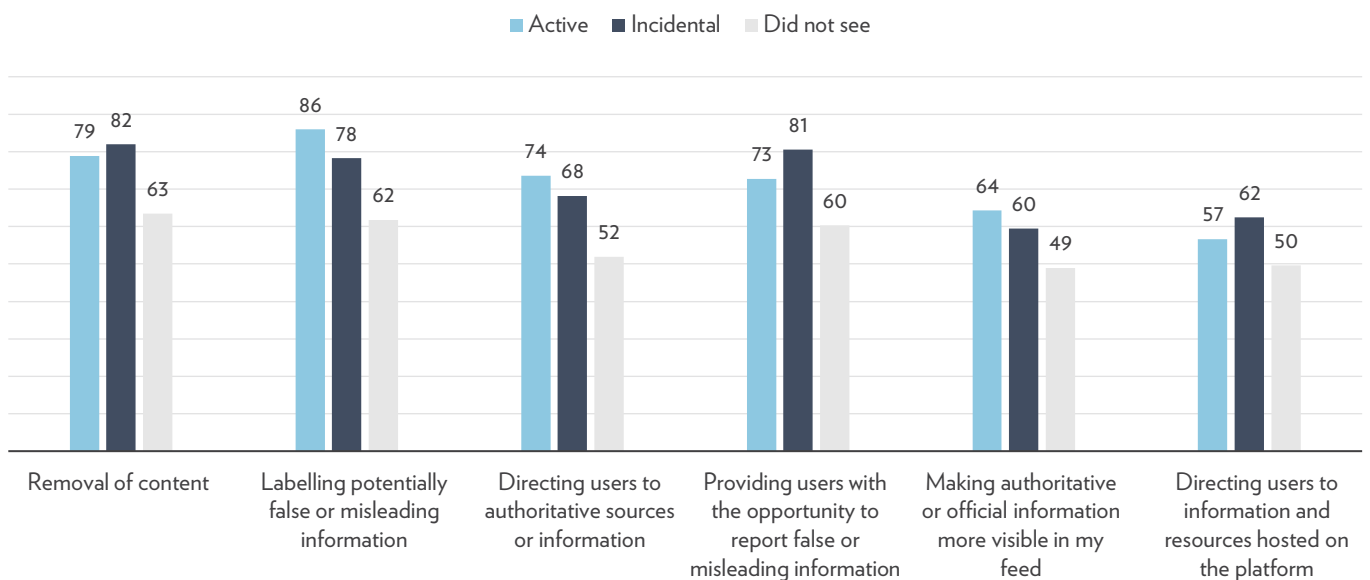
A similar pattern was found among Twitter users. Those who either use Twitter specifically to find news or come across Covid-19 news while on Twitter, were more likely to be aware of the measures compared to those who do not access news on Twitter (see figure 66).

FIGURE 65 AWARENESS AND EXPERIENCE OF PLATFORM INTERVENTIONS AMONG FACEBOOK USERS (%)



Q7_1. Have you come across news or information about Covid-19 on any of the following social media or online platforms in the last week? Please select all that apply (Base: Facebook users=1,935)

FIGURE 66 AWARENESS AND EXPERIENCE OF PLATFORM INTERVENTIONS AMONG TWITTER USERS (%)



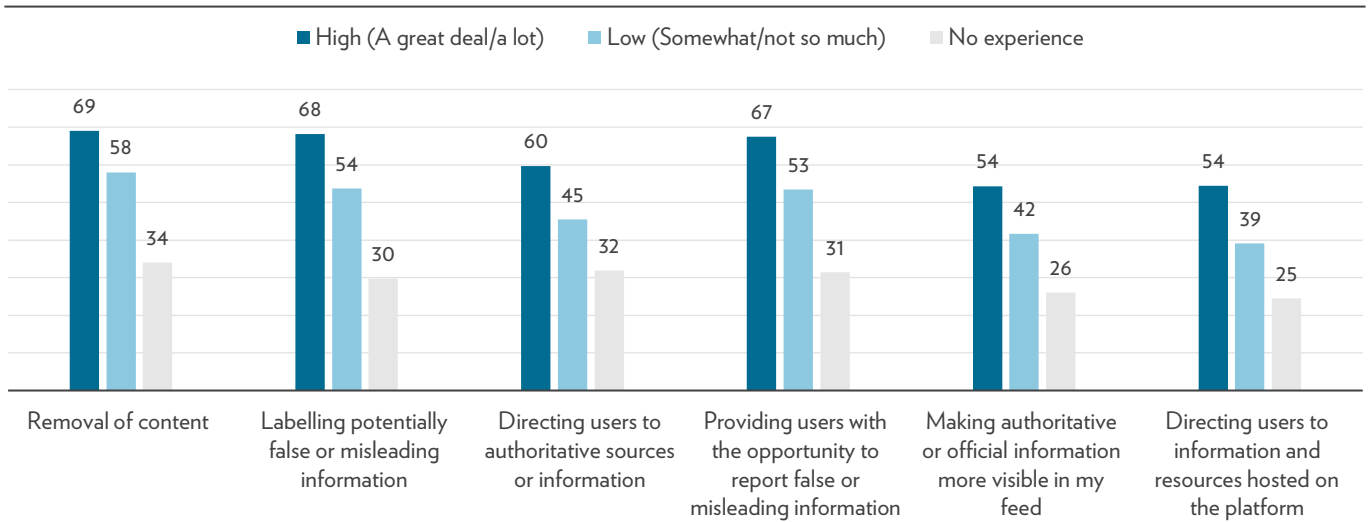
Q7_1. Have you come across news or information about Covid-19 on any of the following social media or online platforms in the last week? Please select all that apply (Base: Twitter users=433).

Experience of misinformation and platform measures

Respondents who said they came across misinformation about Covid-19 on social media were more likely to be aware of the measures, compared to those who did not experience

misinformation or did not know if they had encountered misinformation (see figure 67).

FIGURE 67 AWARENESS AND EXPERIENCE OF PLATFORM INTERVENTIONS BY EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA (%)



Q12_1. This time, just thinking about social media or online platforms, how often have you come across news or information about Covid-19 that you know or suspect to be false or misleading? (Base: N=2,659).

Concern about misinformation and platform measures

In general, those who were aware of or had experienced platform interventions were less likely to be concerned about false or misleading information about Covid-19 on social media or online platforms (see Table 2).

TABLE 02 CONCERN ABOUT MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND AWARENESS OF PLATFORM INTERVENTIONS (%)

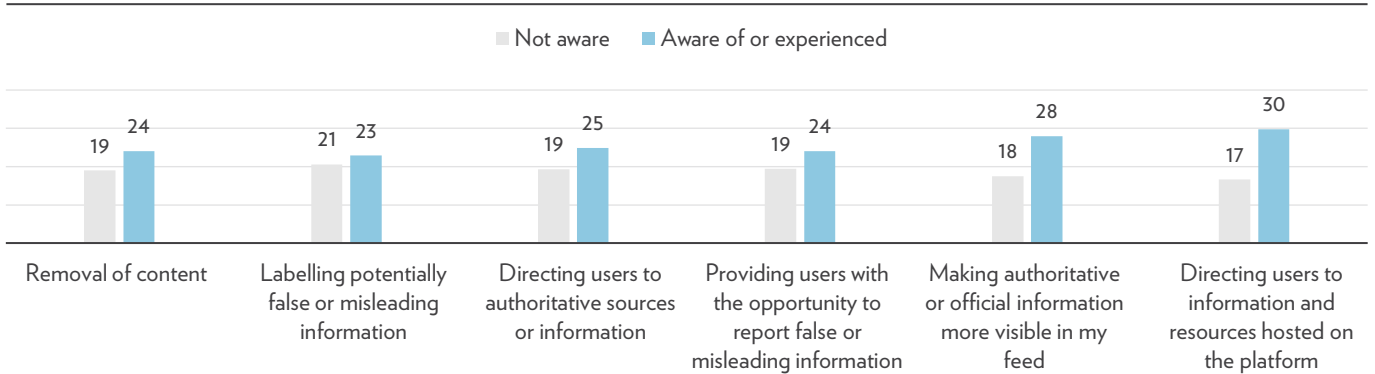
		Concerned	Not concerned	Don't know
Removal of content	I am not aware	44	53	3
	I am aware/have seen or experienced	32	58	10
Labelling potentially false or misleading information	I am not aware	44	53	3
	I am aware/have seen or experienced	33	58	9
Directing users to authoritative sources or information	I am not aware	43	53	3
	I am aware/have seen or experienced	33	58	9
Providing users with the opportunity to report false or misleading information	I am not aware	45	52	3
	I am aware/have seen or experienced	33	58	9
Making authoritative or official information more visible in my feed	I am not aware	44	53	3
	I am aware/have seen or experienced	35	57	8
Directing users to information and resources hosted on the platform	I am not aware	45	52	4
	I am aware/have seen or experienced	35	58	8

Q. How concerned, if at all, are you about false or misleading information about Covid-19 on social media or online platforms? (Base: N=2,659).

Awareness of the measures that platforms are taking to address misinformation is related to trust in news on social media. Figure 68 shows that respondents who were aware of the measures were

more likely to trust news on social media than those who were not aware of the actions being taken by platform.

FIGURE 68 TRUST IN NEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA BY AWARENESS AND EXPERIENCE OF PLATFORM INTERVENTIONS (%)



Q10. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about news and information provided about Covid-19? Q10. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about news and information provided about Covid-19? *Those who answered 'strongly agree' or 'agree' to 'I think I can trust the news found on social media' (Base: N=2,659).

RESPONSIBILITY

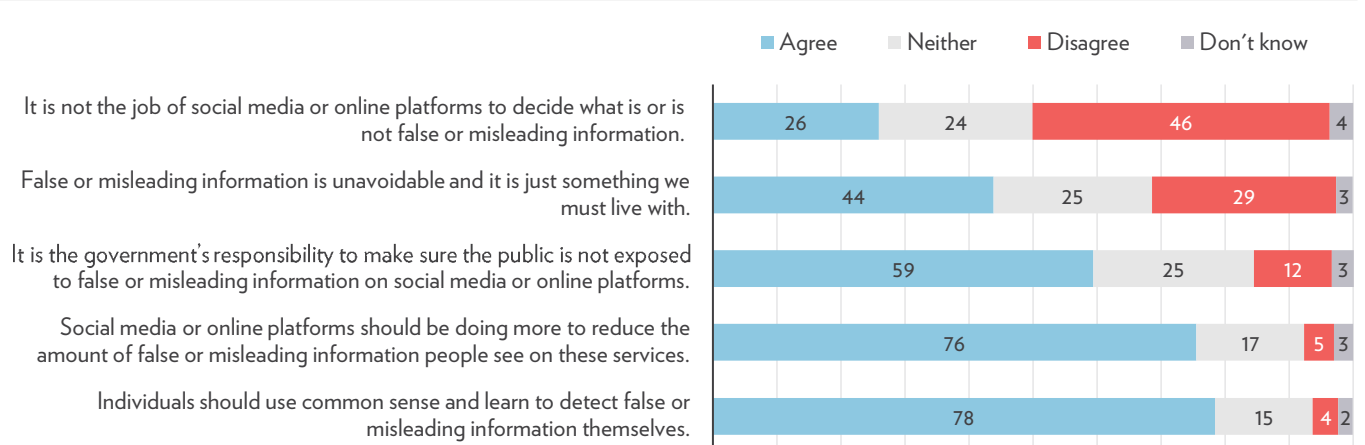
People want social media companies to act upon misinformation but also feel responsible themselves

We asked respondents about who is responsible for reducing the exposure to false and misleading information. More than three-quarters of the respondents (78%) agreed that it is up to the individual to use common sense and learn to detect false and misleading information themselves (see figure 69). A similar number of people (76%) also agreed that social media or online platforms should be doing more to reduce false and misleading information on their services. More than half (59%) agreed that

governments should be making sure the public is not exposed to false or misleading information.

Only a quarter of the respondents (26%) thought it's not the job of social media or online platforms to decide what is misinformation. Almost half of Australians (44%) agreed that false or misleading information is unavoidable and just something we must live with. Only 29% disagreed with this statement.

FIGURE 69 RESPONSIBILITY TO DEAL WITH MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 (%)



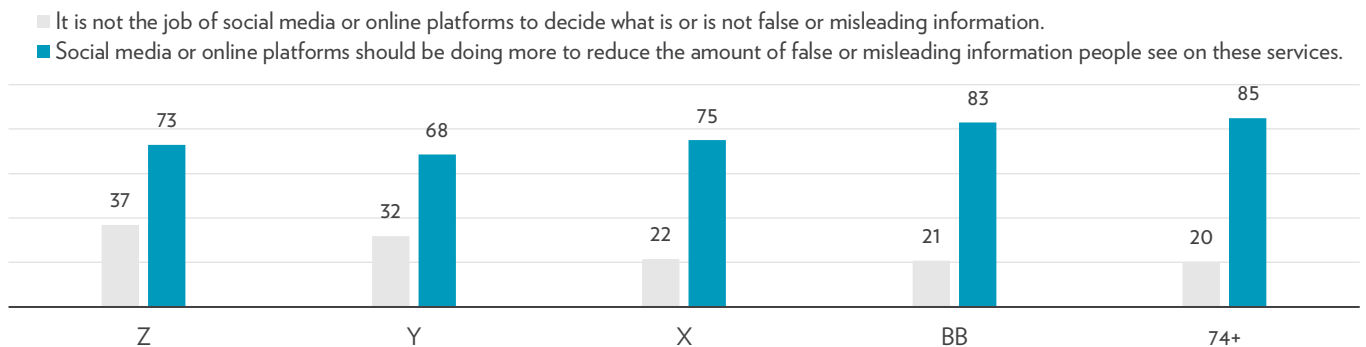
Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about who is responsible for reducing the exposure to false or misleading information about Covid-19? (Base: N=2,659).

Younger generations and social media users have a more *laissez-faire* approach to misinformation

There are generational differences in the perception that social media or online platforms are responsible for dealing with false and misleading information about Covid-19. Younger people were more likely to think that it is not the job of social media or online platforms, whereas older groups were more likely to think that social media or online platforms should do more to reduce false and misleading information on their services (see figure 70).

Younger generations were much more likely to think misinformation is unavoidable and something that we must live with: Gen Z 56%, Gen Y 50%, Gen X 43%, BB 36%, 74+ 33%.

FIGURE 70 GENERATION DIFFERENCES IN THE PERCEPTION OF RESPONSIBILITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA OR ONLINE PLATFORMS –AGREE (%)

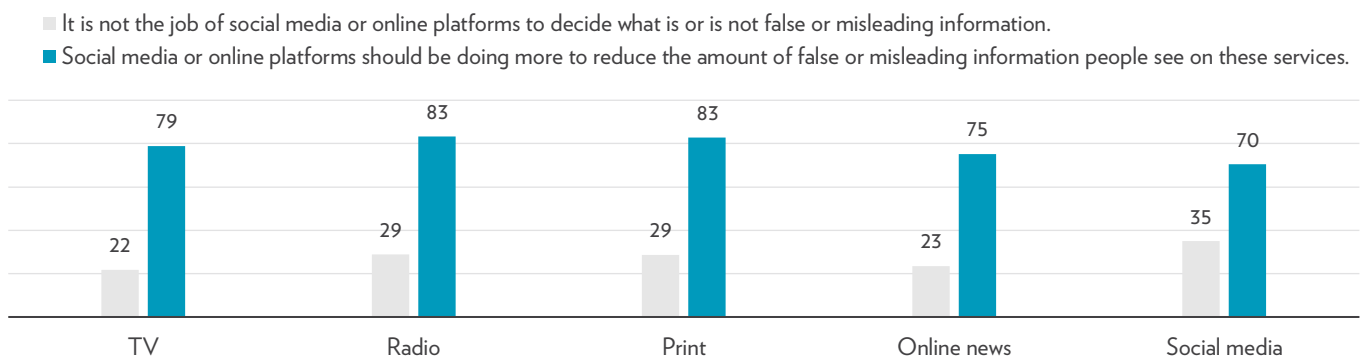


Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about who is responsible for reducing the exposure to false or misleading information about Covid-19? (Base: N=2,659).

Most Australians agreed that social media or online platforms should be doing more to reduce the amount of false or misleading information on their services. This was highest among those who used radio and print as their main source of news (83%) compared to those who reported social media as their main source of news (70%). Similarly, those who mainly use for news were more likely to agree with the notion that social media and online platforms are not responsible for deciding what is or is not false or misleading information (35%) (figure 71).

Those who use social media as their main source of news were also more likely to believe that misinformation is unavoidable and that it is just something we must live with (53%) compared to those who used TV (38%), print (40%), radio (46%) and online news (47%) as their main source of news.

FIGURE 71 RESPONSIBILITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA OR ONLINE PLATFORMS AND MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS –AGREE (%)



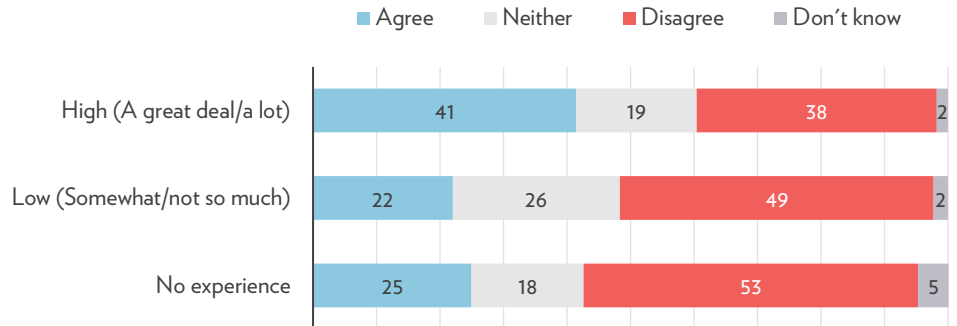
Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about who is responsible for reducing the exposure to false or misleading information about Covid-19? Q5. Which of the following would you say is your main source of news? (Base: N=2,659).

Experience of misinformation is related to pessimism

Those who reported high levels of experience with misinformation about Covid-19 were less likely to think it's the job of social media to decide what is misinformation. More than a third (41%) of those who had high experience of misinformation about Covid-19

agreed that it is not the job of social media or online platforms to decide what is or is not false or misleading information, whereas 22% of those with low experience of misinformation agreed (see figure 72).

FIGURE 72 NOT THE JOB OF SOCIAL MEDIA OR ONLINE PLATFORMS BY COVID-19 MISINFORMATION EXPERIENCE (%)

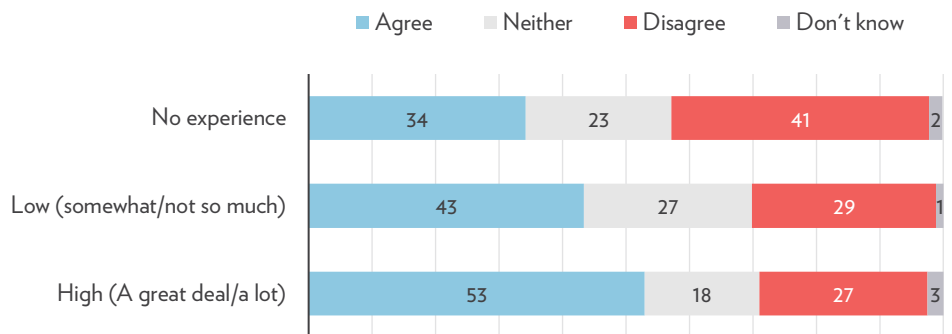


Q12. On average, how often have you come across news or information that you know or suspect to be false or misleading about Covid-19? Q15_3e. It is not the job of social media or online platforms to decide what is or is not false or misleading information. (Base: N=2,659).

Those who experienced a great deal or a lot of misinformation about Covid-19 were more likely to be pessimistic on the subject, with 53% agreeing that false or misleading information

is unavoidable and just something we must live with, compared to 34% of those who had no experience of misinformation about Covid-19 agreeing with this statement (see figure 73).

FIGURE 73 FALSE OR MISLEADING INFORMATION IS UNAVOIDABLE BY COVID-19 MISINFORMATION EXPERIENCE (%)



Q12. On average, how often have you come across news or information that you know or suspect to be false or misleading about Covid-19? Q15_3d. False or misleading information is unavoidable and it is just something we must live with. (Base: N=2,659).

COVID-19 PERCEPTIONS

BELIEFS IN AUTHORITATIVE AND OFFICIAL ADVICE ABOUT COVID-19

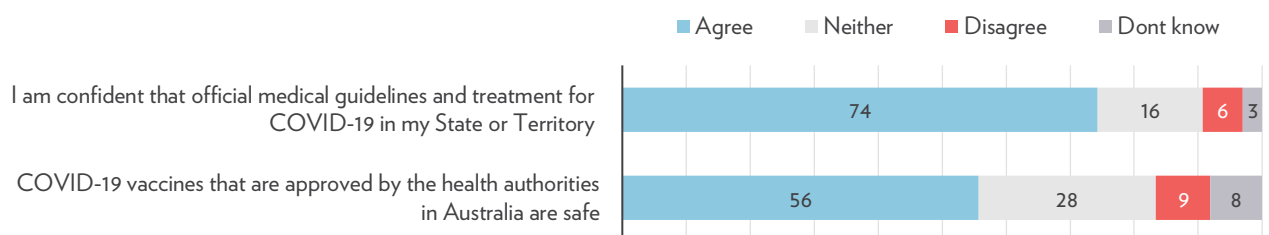
Many Australians are well informed but there are large gaps between different groups

Respondents were asked 5 questions about Covid-19, assessing their beliefs in authoritative sources of information, knowledge of official advice, and the sentiment regarding conspiratorial theories that are circulated online.

Our findings suggest consumers are generally well informed about Covid-19. However, there is a large gap in people's understanding of health advice and belief in false or misleading information.

Three-quarters of respondents (74%) agreed that official medical guidelines and treatment for Covid-19 are based on evidence and best practice. 56% were confident that Covid-19 vaccines approved by health authorities in Australia are safe. A small number (9%) of respondents did not believe that Covid-19 vaccines approved by health authorities in Australia are safe. Additionally, 8% said they don't know the answer to this question. The number of 'don't know' responses was higher for this question than any other. This high level of uncertainty could indicate some vaccine hesitancy within the community, noting that no vaccine had been approved for use in Australia at the time the survey was conducted (see figure 74).

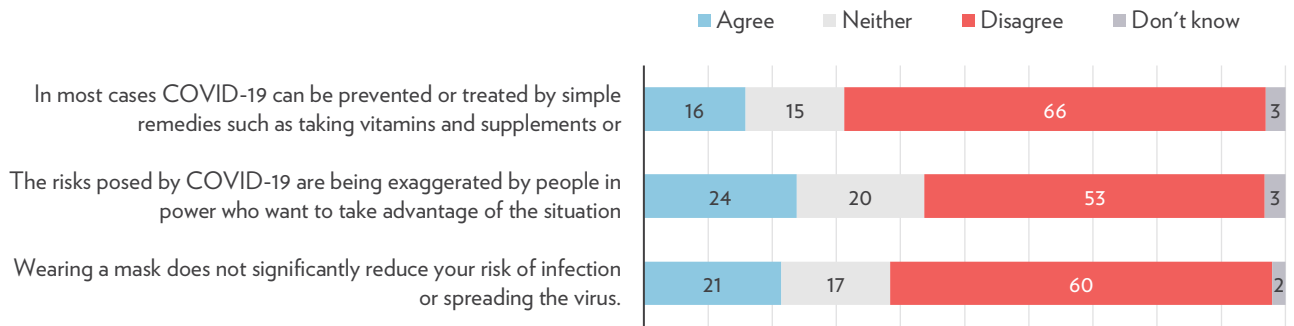
FIGURE 74 BELIEFS ABOUT COVID-19 (A) (%)



Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Covid-19? (Base: N=2,659).

About 60% of Australians were aware that wearing a mask significantly reduces risk of infection or spreading the virus and 66% were aware that Covid-19 cannot be prevented or treated by simple remedies such as vitamins, supplements, or over the counter medicines. However, almost a quarter of respondents believed that the risks posed by Covid-19 were being exaggerated by people in power who want to take advantage of the situation (see figure 75).

FIGURE 75 BELIEFS ABOUT COVID-19 (B) (%)

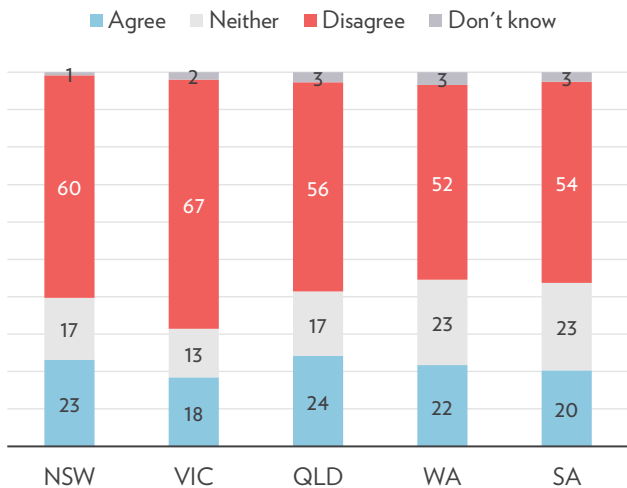


Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Covid-19? (Base: N=2,659).

Victorians (67%) were more likely than those from other states to say that masks were effective in reducing risk of infection or spreading the virus (see figure 76). This could be the result of the extended Victorian lockdown and mandatory mask requirements not experienced to the same extent in other states.

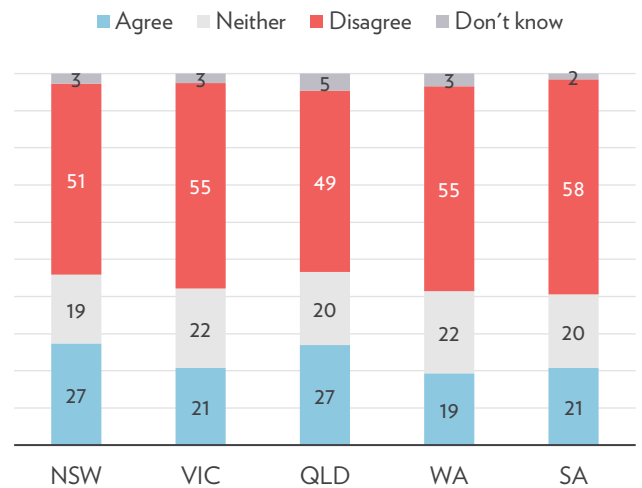
Respondents from New South Wales (27%) and Queensland (27%) were more likely to say that the risks were being exaggerated by people in power compared to those from Victoria (21%), West Australia (19%) and South Australia (21%) (see figure 77).

FIGURE 76 WEARING A MASK DOES NOT SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCE YOUR RISK OF INFECTION OR SPREADING THE VIRUS BY STATE (%)



Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Covid-19? (Base: N=2,659).

FIGURE 77 THE RISKS POSED BY COVID-19 ARE BEING EXAGGERATED BY PEOPLE IN POWER WHO WANT TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE SITUATION BY STATE (%)

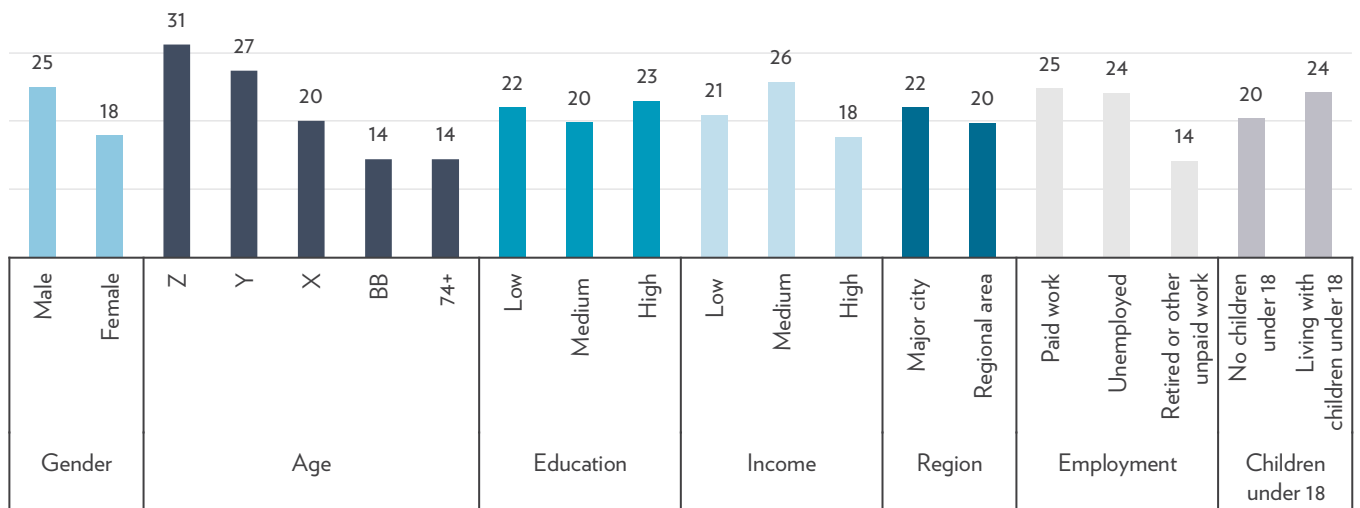


Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Covid-19? (Base: N=2,659).

Younger generations are sceptical of mask-wearing

Younger people, men, employed people, and those with children under 18 years of age were more likely to be sceptical of mask-wearing. Gen Z (31%) and Gen Y (27%) were more likely than other generations to say masks do not significantly reduce risk of infection or spreading the virus (see figure 78).

FIGURE 78 MISINFORMED—WEARING A MASK DOES NOT REDUCE YOUR RISK OF INFECTION BY DEMOGRAPHICS—AGREE (%)



Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Covid-19? *Those who agree or strongly agree with the statement (Base: N=2,659).

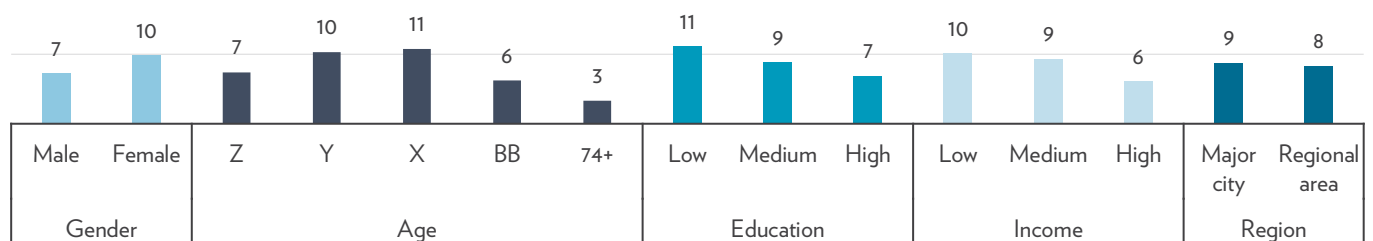
Many Australians think Covid-19 vaccines are safe

In general, only a small percentage of respondents were sceptical of vaccines. 56% had confidence that Covid-19 vaccines approved by health authorities in Australia are safe (see figure 74). We analysed the respondents who disagreed with the statement 'Covid-19 vaccines that are approved by the health authorities in Australia are safe and identified them as 'misinformed'. Women, Gen X, Gen Y, and those with low education were more likely to think Covid-19 vaccines approved by Australian health authorities

are not safe. Those with high income, baby boomers and older, Gen Z, and men are more likely to be informed (see figure 79).

Where people get information seems to be associated with their beliefs about vaccines. Those who say their main source of news is social media (13%) were more likely to disagree that Covid-19 vaccines approved by health authorities in Australia are safe.

FIGURE 79 MISINFORMED—COVID-19 VACCINES THAT ARE APPROVED BY THE HEALTH AUTHORITIES IN AUSTRALIA ARE SAFE—DISAGREE (%)

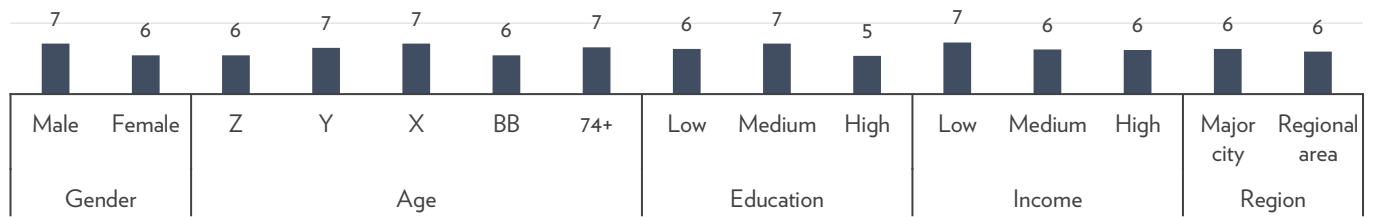


Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Covid-19? *Those who disagree or strongly disagree with the statement (Base: N=2,659).

Australians have confidence in their State or Territory official guidelines

When we examine those who disagreed with the statement ‘I am confident that official medical guidelines in my State or Territory are based on evidence and best practice’, it is a small percentage, confirming that the majority of people at the time of this survey had confidence in the official guidelines. There was very little difference across all demographic groups (see figure 80).

FIGURE 80 MISINFORMED—I AM CONFIDENT THAT OFFICIAL MEDICAL GUIDELINES IN MY STATE OR TERRITORY ARE BASED ON EVIDENCE AND BEST PRACTICE—DISAGREE (%)

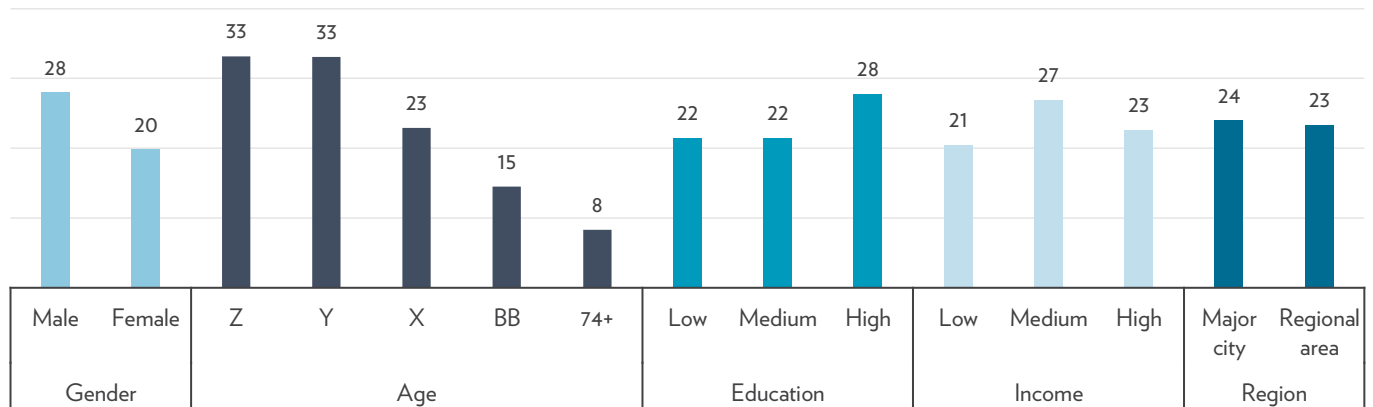


Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Covid-19? *Those who disagree or strongly disagree with the statement (Base: N=2,659).

Younger Australians are more likely to think people in power are exaggerating the pandemic

Men (28%), Gen Z and Gen Y participants (33%) were more likely to say the risks posed by Covid-19 were being exaggerated by people in power who want to take advantage of the situation (see figure 81).

FIGURE 81 MISINFORMED—THE RISKS POSED BY COVID-19 ARE BEING EXAGGERATED BY PEOPLE IN POWER WHO WANT TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE SITUATION—AGREE (%)



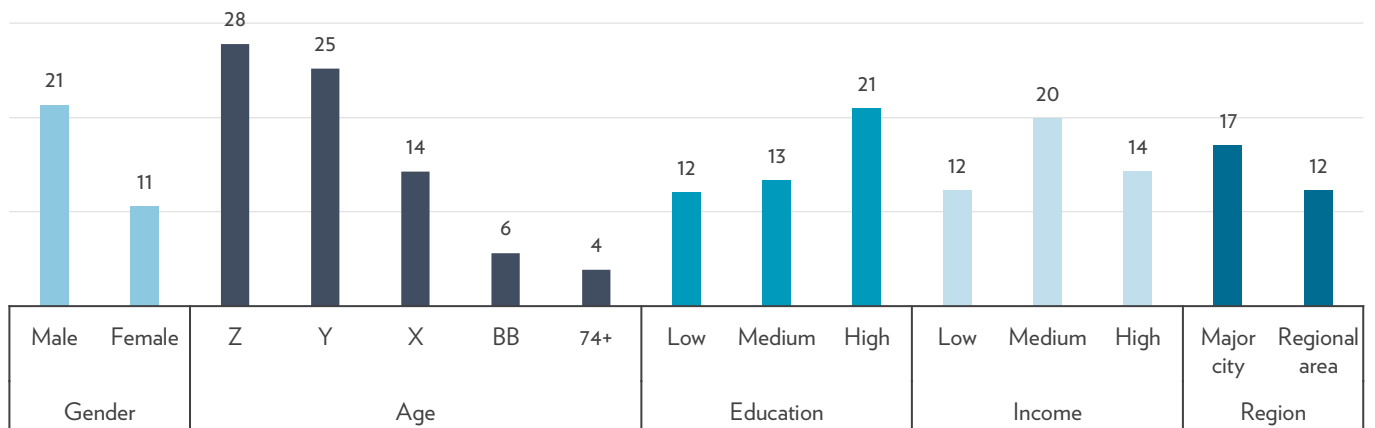
Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Covid-19? *Those who agree or strongly agree with the statement (Base: N=2,659).

Younger generations, high income earners and city dwellers are more likely to think simple, non-medical remedies are effective

We analysed those who agreed with the statement ‘In most cases Covid-19 can be prevented or treated by simple remedies such as taking vitamins and supplements or other over the counter medicines’. Almost one-fifth of Australians (see figure 75) believe that Covid-19 can be prevented or treated by simple remedies,

men (21%) and younger generations (Gen Z 28%, Gen Y 25%) more so. Those who have high education attainment (21%) were also more likely to believe this to be true (see figure 82).

FIGURE 82 MISINFORMED—IN MOST CASES COVID-19 CAN BE PREVENTED OR TREATED BY SIMPLE REMEDIES SUCH AS TAKING VITAMINS AND SUPPLEMENTS OR OTHER OVER THE COUNTER MEDICINES—AGREE (%)



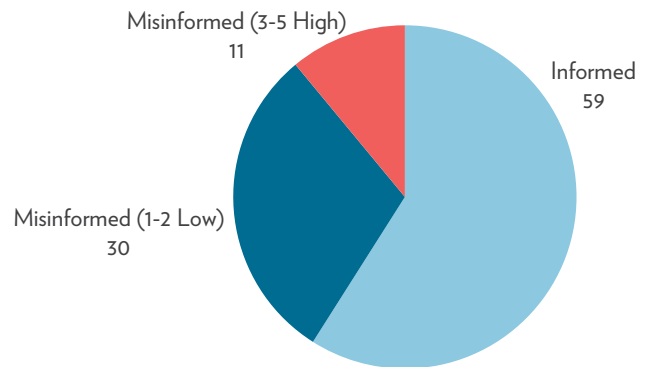
Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Covid-19? *Those who agree or strongly agree with the statement (Base: N=2,659).

CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGHLY MISINFORMED GROUPS

Based on the responses to questions about the respondents' Covid-19 beliefs, we divided the sample into those who are informed, somewhat misinformed, and very misinformed. The questions addressing misinformation beliefs were designed to assess agreement with official advice on a range of issues related to Covid-19 including mask wearing and appropriate treatment. Those who were in general disagreement with the authoritative or factual advice were labelled as 'misinformed'. Of the five statements, if a respondent was in disagreement with one or two statements of health advice, they were categorised as 'misinformed (low) (30%)'. If a respondent disagreed with three to five statements, they were recoded as 'misinformed (high) (11%)'. The rest were recoded as 'informed' (60%) (see Methodology for details) (see figure 83).

In sum, the findings show that women (65%), older generations (baby boomers 73%; 74 and older 75%), heavy news consumers (61%), and those who say their main source of news is TV (67%) or radio (65%) were more likely to be informed. Education level is less predictive of being informed about Covid-19, with lower educated respondents (60%) being somewhat more informed than the higher educated group (56%), but those with medium education attainment were more informed (62%).

FIGURE 83 INFORMED AND MISINFORMED GROUPS (%)

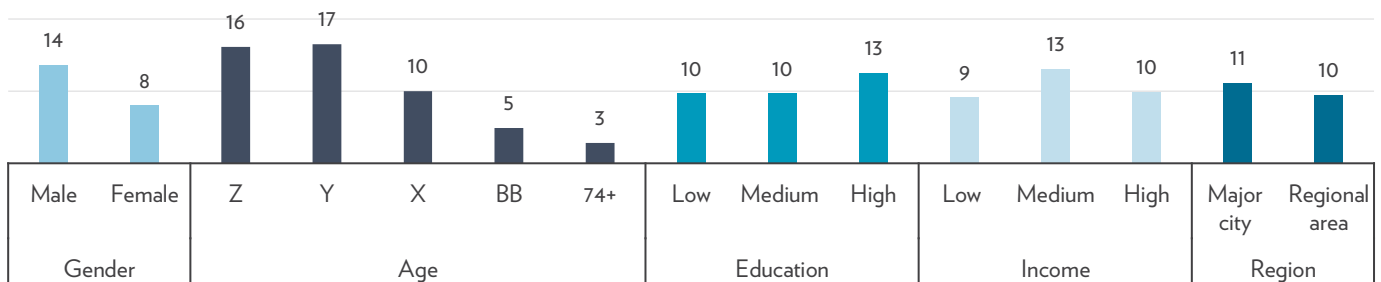


Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Covid-19. Wearing a mask does not significantly reduce your risk of infection or spreading the virus. Covid-19 vaccines that are approved by the health authorities in Australia are safe. I am confident that official medical guidelines and treatment for Covid-19 in my State or Territory are based on evidence and best practice. The risks posed by Covid-19 are being exaggerated by people in power who want to take advantage of the situation. In most cases Covid-19 can be prevented or treated by simple remedies such as taking vitamins and supplements or other over the counter medicines. (Informed: All responses accurate. Low misinformed 1-2 responses against authoritative advice. Highly misinformed: 3-5 responses against authoritative advice)

Younger generations and men are more at risk of being highly misinformed

In this section, we focus on the 'highly misinformed' group, which is 11% of all respondents who were in disagreement with 3-5 official health advice statements. We consider these respondents to be at risk of being misinformed about the Covid-19 pandemic. Figure 84 shows that Gen Z (16%) and Gen Y (17%) were much more likely to be in the highly misinformed group than baby boomers (5%) and those aged 74 years and older (3%).

FIGURE 84 HIGHLY MISINFORMED BY DEMOGRAPHICS (%)

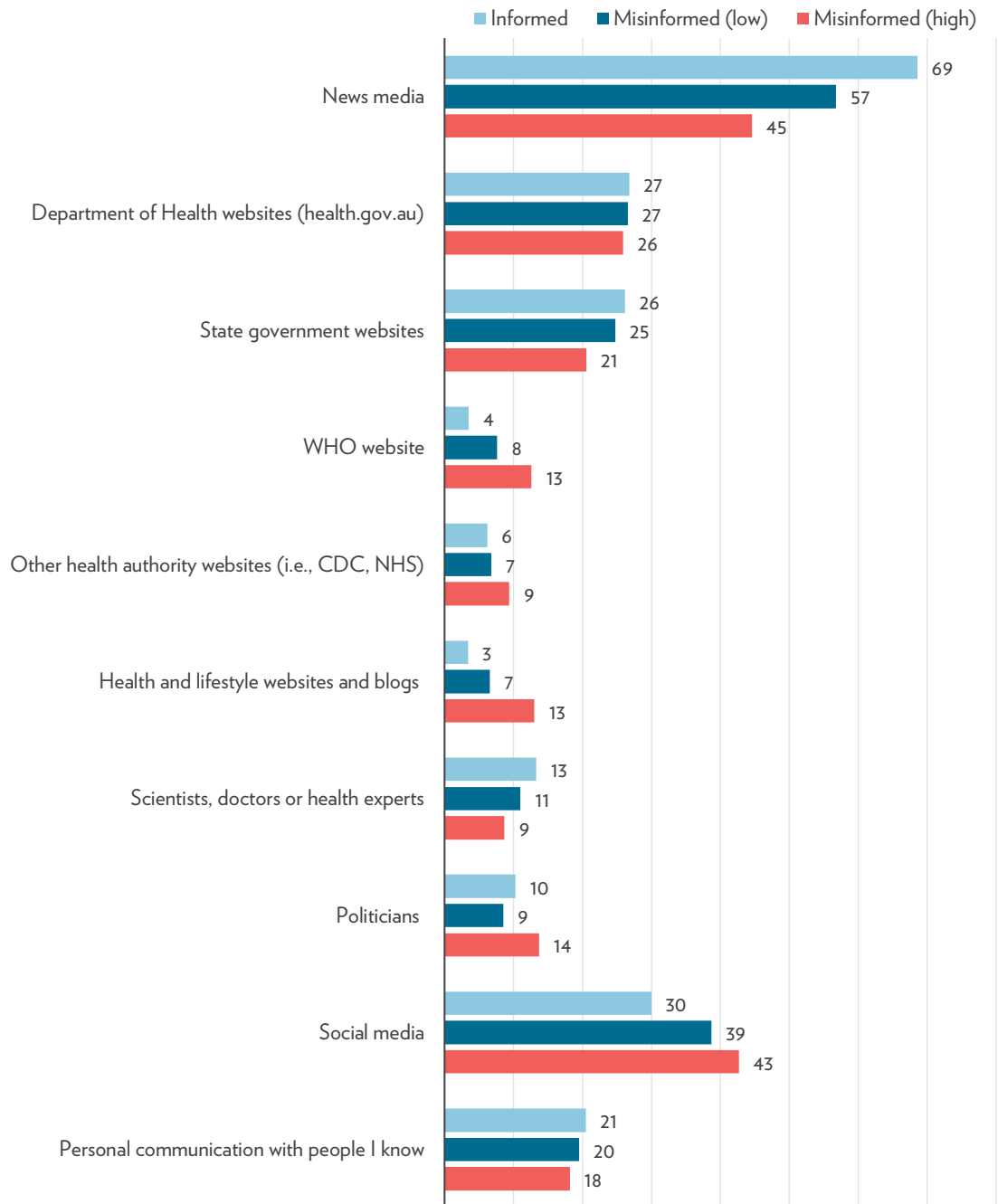


The risk of being misinformed is related to where people get information and whether they trust the source

The main differences between those who were classified as informed and misinformed was their use of news media and social media. Those who were informed were more likely to access news and information about Covid-19 from news media (69%) compared to those who were misinformed (low, 57%; high, 45%)

(see figure 85). The reverse is true in the case of access to social media as a source of news and information about Covid-19. Those who were classified as highly misinformed were more likely to access news and information about Covid-19 on social media (43%) compared to those who were informed (30%).

FIGURE 85 ACCESS TO NEWS AND INFORMATION SOURCES BY MISINFORMED GROUPS (%)

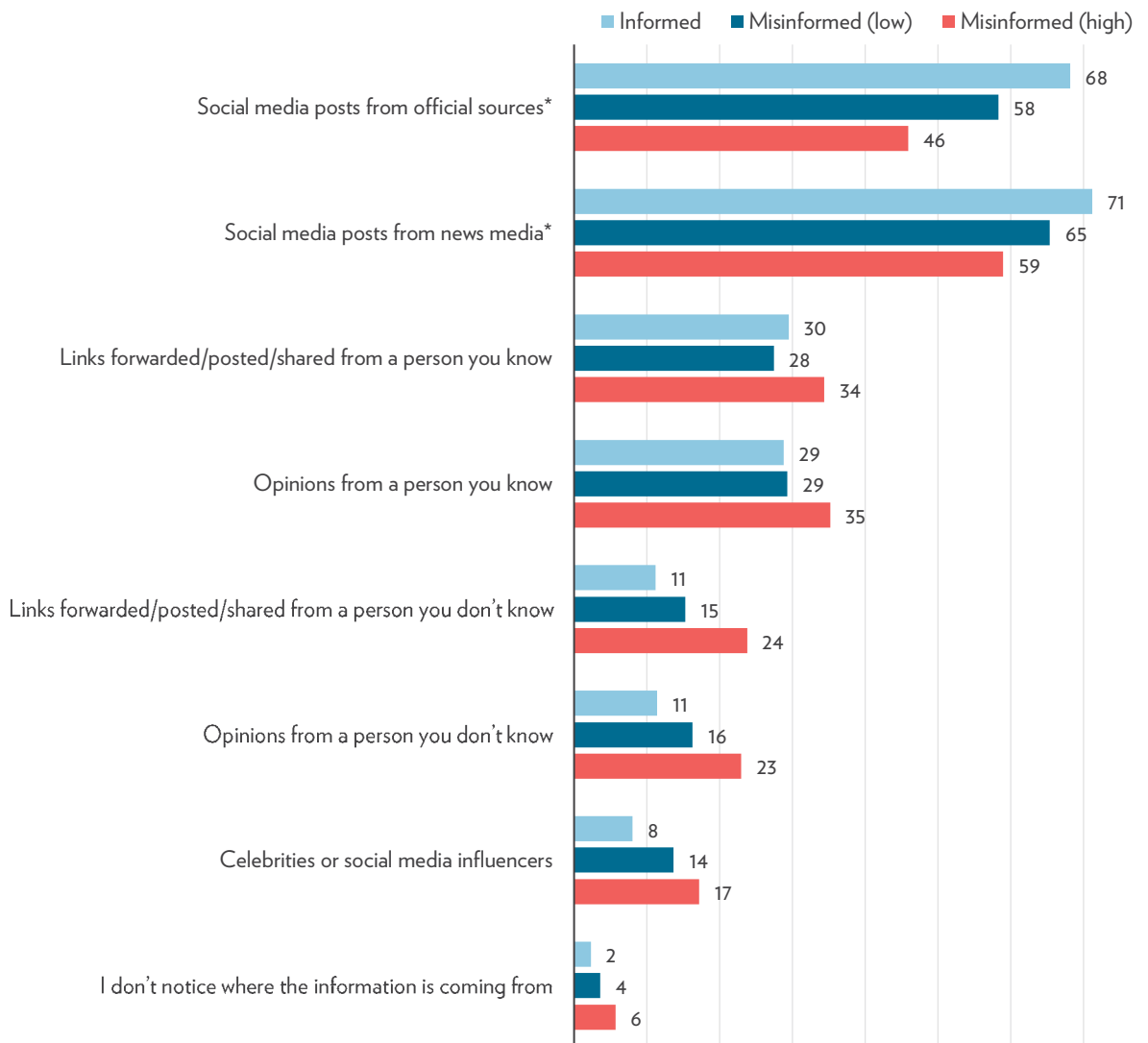


Q6. Which, if any, of the following have you accessed in the last week as a source of news or information about Covid-19? Please select all that apply (Base: N=2,659).

People who used social media for information about Covid-19 and could identify whether posts were from news media organisations or official sources, were more likely to be classified as informed about the pandemic. Those who encountered opinion-based posts

on social media from people they did or did not know, were more likely to be classified as highly misinformed (see figure 86).

FIGURE 86 NEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 WHEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA BY MISINFORMED GROUPS (%)

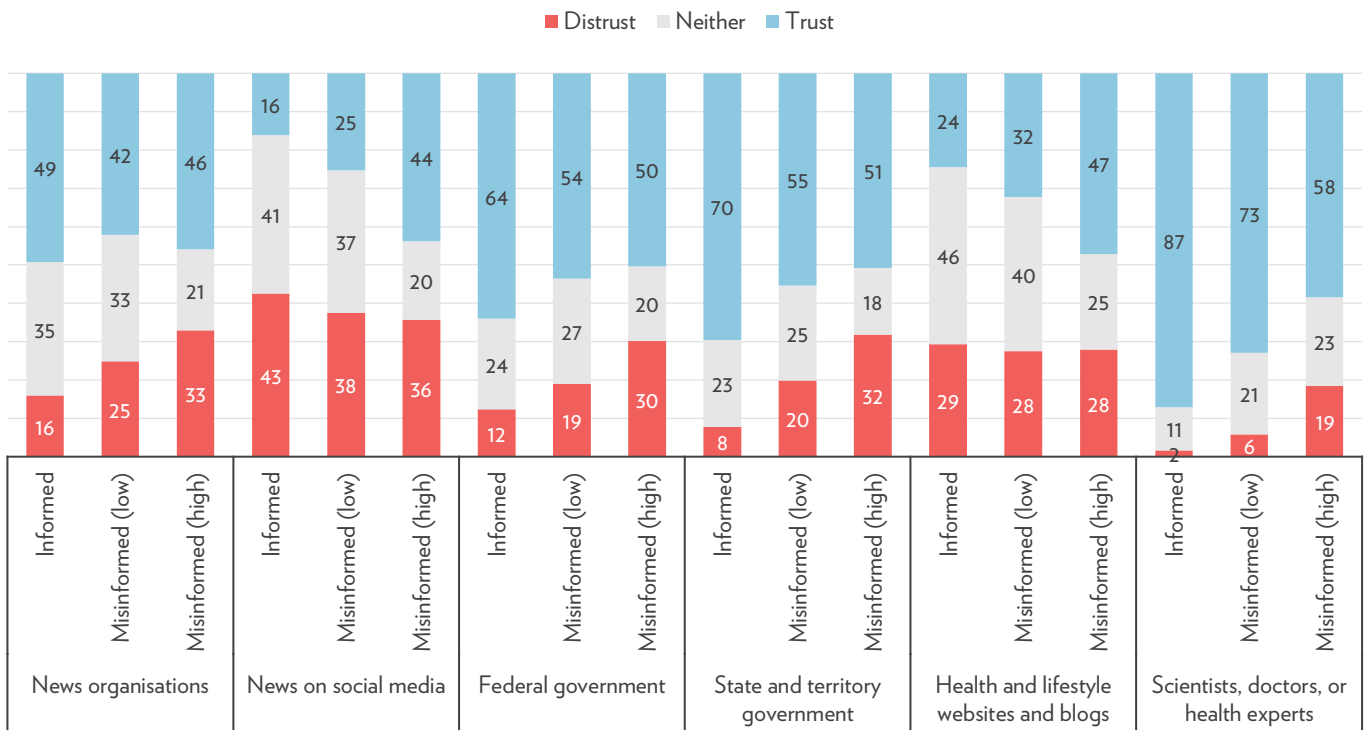


Q8. Thinking about what you are seeing on social media, which of the following sources are you getting news and information about Covid-19 from? (Base: Those who use social media for news and information about Covid-19, N=1,756).

Being informed or misinformed is related to levels of trust in various sources. Those in highly misinformed group were more likely to say they distrust news organisations (33%) than those who are informed (16%). Trust in news on social media has an inverse relationship. Those in the informed group were less trusting of news on social media (16%) than those in the highly misinformed group (44%). Trust in both federal and state governments is higher

among those who are informed. However, trust in health and lifestyle websites and blogs is the highest among those who are highly misinformed (47%), whereas those who are informed had low trust in these sources (24%) (see figure 87).

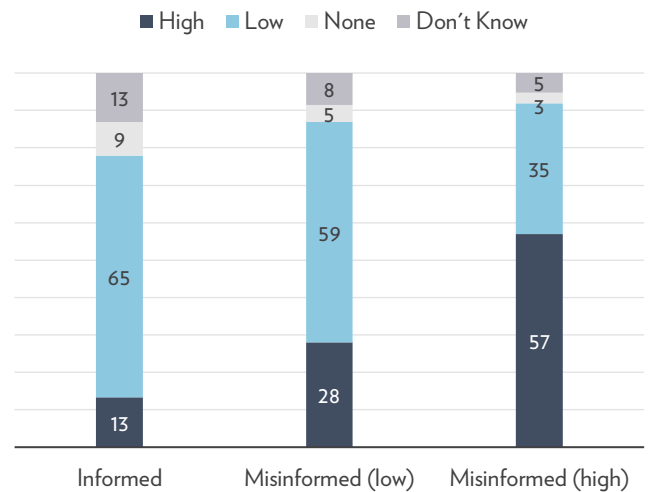
FIGURE 87 TRUST IN NEWS AND INFORMATION SOURCE BY MISINFORMED GROUPS (%)



Q10. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about news and information provided about Covid-19? (Base: N=2,659).

Those who were highly misinformed report a higher experience of misinformation about Covid-19. More than half (57%) of the highly misinformed group reported encountering a great deal or a lot of misinformation about Covid-19 (see figure 88).

FIGURE 88 EXPERIENCE OF MISINFORMATION BY MISINFORMED GROUPS (%)

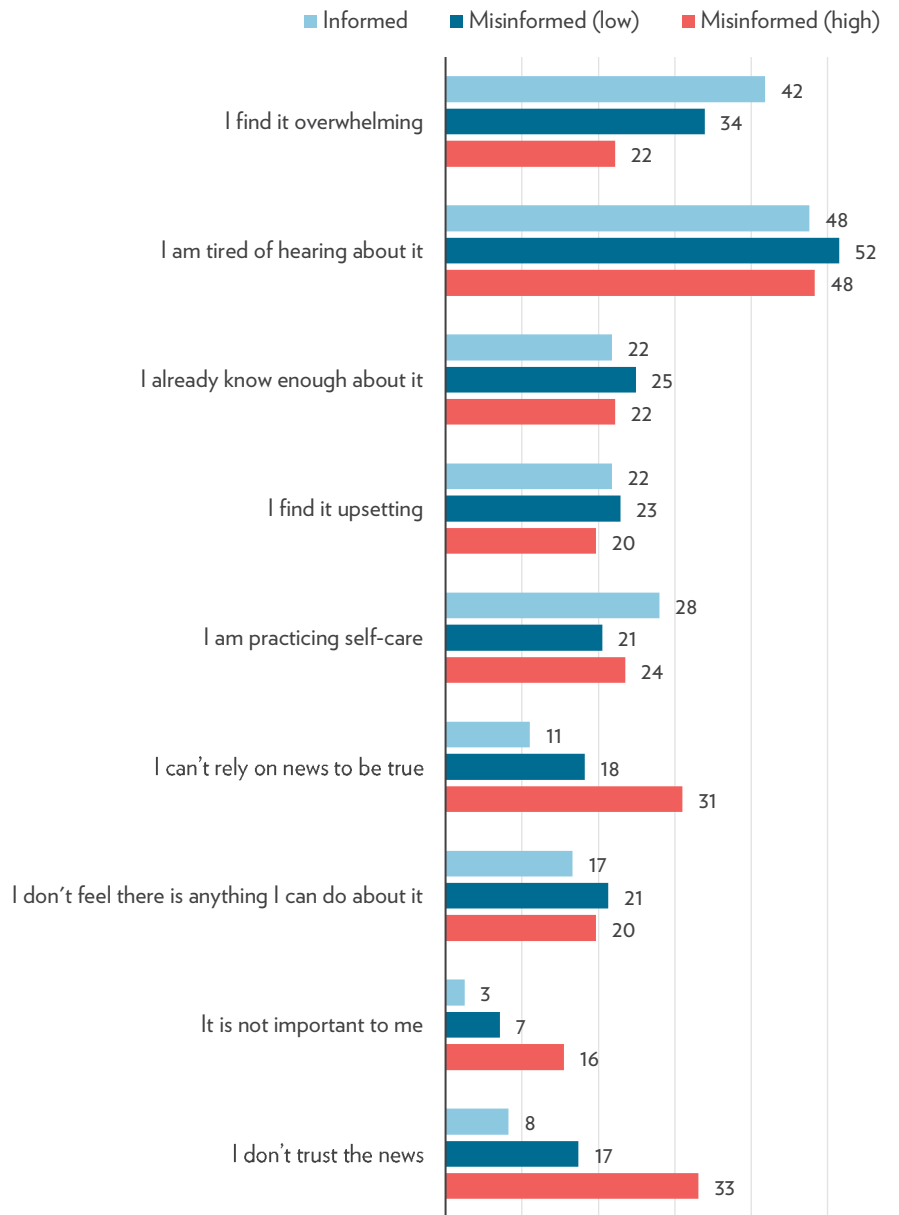


Q12. On average, how often have you come across news or information that you know or suspect to be false or misleading about Covid-19? (Base: N=2,659).

Those who were highly misinformed were much more likely to avoid news because they don't trust it (33%) compared to the low misinformed group (17%) and informed group (8%) (see figure 89). The highly misinformed group also avoided news about

Covid-19 because they said they can't rely on it to be true (31%). They were also less likely to say they find it overwhelming (22%) compared to the informed group (42%).

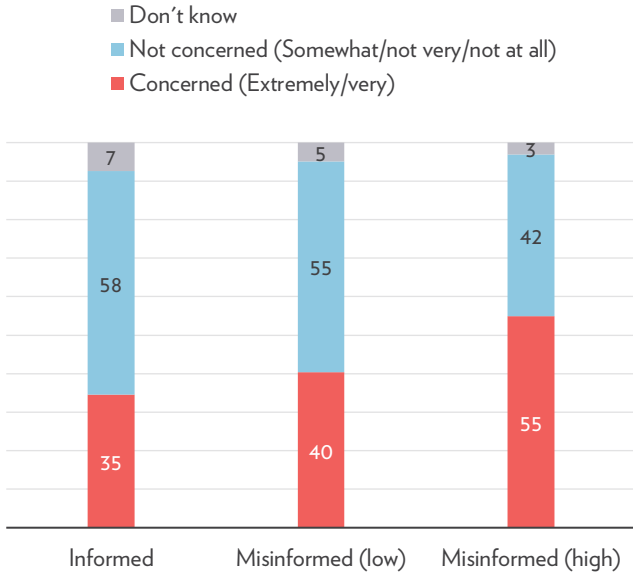
FIGURE 89 REASONS FOR AVOIDING NEWS ABOUT COVID-19 BY MISINFORMED GROUPS (%)



Q17. You said that you find yourself trying to avoid news about the Covid-19. Which, if any of the following, are reasons why you try to avoid news? *Asked to only those who said often, sometimes, occasionally avoided news about Covid-19 (Base: N=1,774).

Paradoxically, those who are misinformed about Covid-19 were much more likely to be concerned (55%) about false or misleading information about it on social media or online platforms compared to those who are informed (35%) (see figure 90).

FIGURE 90 CONCERN ABOUT COVID-19 MISINFORMATION SOCIAL MEDIA OR ONLINE PLATFORMS BY MISINFORMED GROUPS (%)



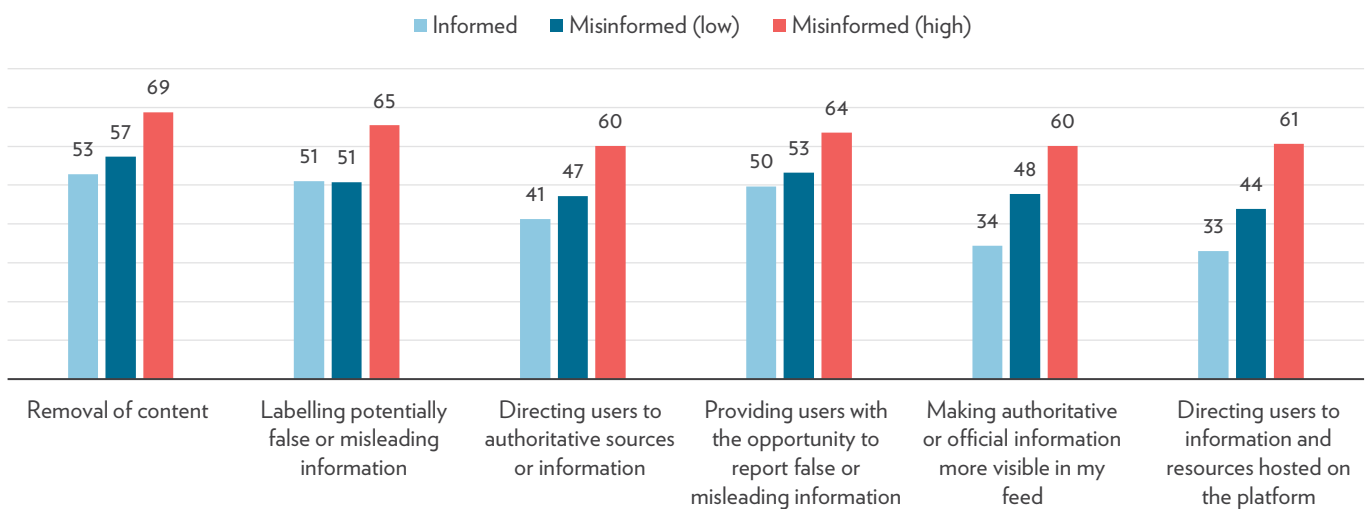
Q. How concerned, if at all, are you about false or misleading information about Covid-19 on social media or online platforms? (Base: N=2,659).

Those who are misinformed are aware of platform interventions

Those who are highly misinformed were more likely to be aware of the measures taken by platforms in general; many of the respondents who are highly misinformed (69%) were aware of or experience the measures that social media or online platforms are

taking to address false or misleading information, compared to 53% of the informed group and 57% of the low misinformed group (see figure 91).

FIGURE 91 AWARENESS AND EXPERIENCE OF PLATFORM INTERVENTIONS BY MISINFORMED GROUPS (%)



Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Covid-19? (Base: N=2,659).

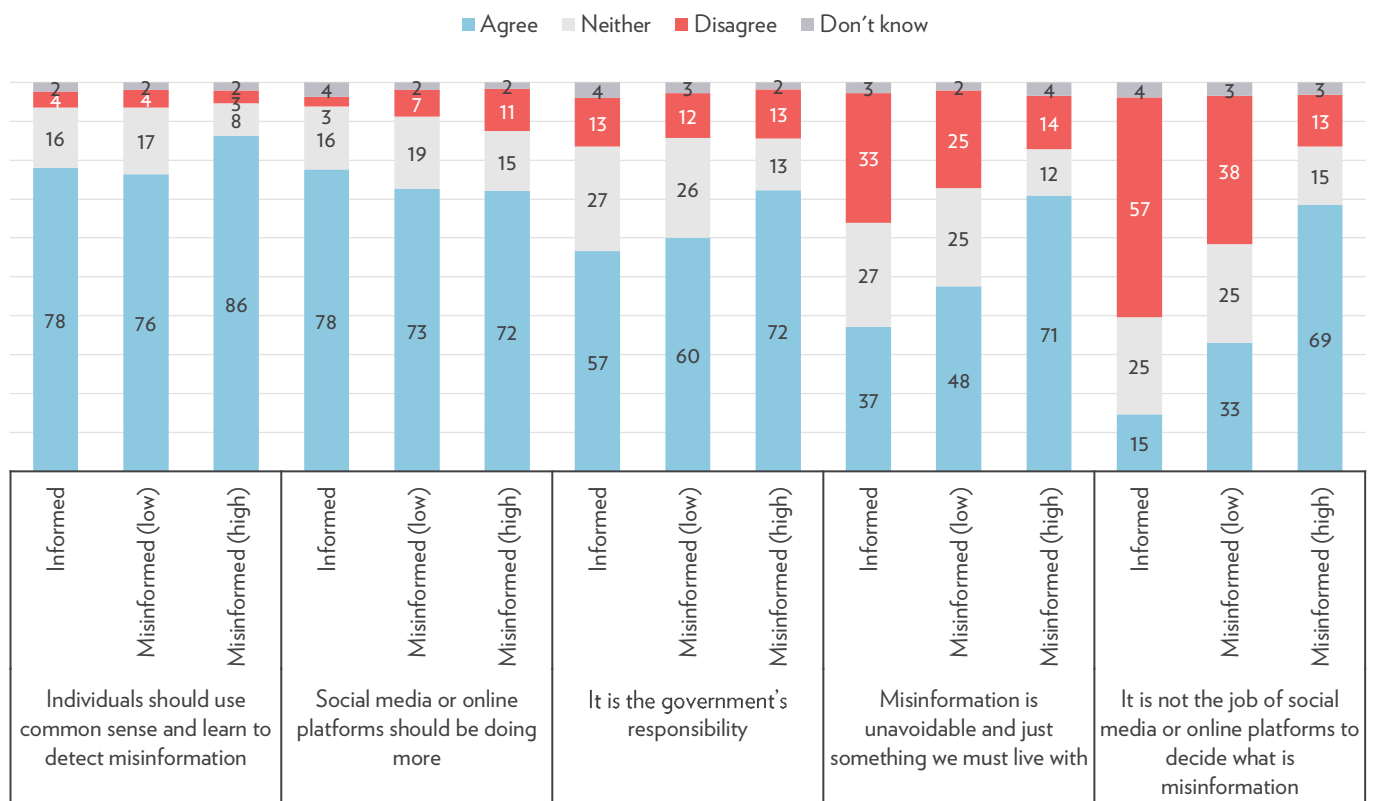
Misinformed groups want more action from the government

The highly misinformed group was more likely to agree that governments should be making sure the public is not exposed to false or misleading information but less likely to think that social media or online platforms should be doing more to address false or misleading information (see figure 92).

In contrast, the informed group was more likely to think social media and online platforms are responsible for addressing misinformation but less likely to agree it is the government's responsibility. They were also less likely to agree that misinformation is something we must live with.

A large number (71%) of highly misinformed people said that misinformation is unavoidable and something that we must live with. However, they also thought it is the government's responsibility (72%) and not the job of social media to decide what misinformation is (69%).

FIGURE 92 RESPONSIBILITY TO DEAL WITH MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 BY MISINFORMED GROUPS (%)



Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Covid-19? (Base: N=2,659).

PART **2**

**Qualitative
Study**

82

Summary of findings

86

Study design

Recruitment and sample

Protocol design

Interview method

Analysis

90

A diversity of media diets

92

News and information in the age of Covid-19

Increased news consumption during Covid-19

Covid-19 news fatigue

Seeking scientific information

Accessing Government websites/information

Incidental exposure to news and information on social media

96

Questions of trust

Traditional news organisations and social media platforms

Political leaders/Government information

ABC specialist health reporter Dr Norman Swan

101

Understanding misinformation

Defining misinformation and disinformation

Misinformation and 'opinion'

Deliberate and purposeful sharing of misinformation

Prevalence and awareness

Sites and sources of misinformation

107

Experiencing misinformation

Conspiracy theories

Covid-19 remedies

Face masks and lockdown

Vaccination

Covid-19 case numbers

111

Misinformation concerns and impacts

Incitements to violence

Wasted expenditure on "useless" and dangerous medications

Racial prejudice

Anti-vaccination sentiment

The vulnerability of the young

114

Misinformation susceptibility

Failing to read past the headlines

Failing to consult multiple and diverse sources: echo chambers and algorithms

Isolation and impressionability

Inadvertent sharing

A spectrum of vulnerability to misinformation

118

Strategies for combatting misinformation

Responsibility for combatting misinformation

Awareness of and responses to specific platform measures

Personal strategies for dealing with misinformation

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This report is based on the analysis of focus groups conducted in 2021 with 60 participants in 12 groups across Australia. The qualitative component of the research was designed to provide in-depth analysis of how different population groups understand and respond to Covid-19 related information and misinformation. Focus groups allow news consumers to explain their experiences in their own words, and to provide insights and explanations about complex phenomena. Thematic analysis of the focus groups identified a diverse, hybrid pattern of news consumption. Participants described a range of exposure to, experiences of, and concerns about misinformation in news media and online platforms, with Facebook singled out as the main site of concern about misinformation on social media. We identified a genuine concern about where responsibility for combatting media misinformation lies, and a lack of trust in the institutions responsible.

Australians consume a rich and diverse news diet

Participants across the 12 groups described a complex and hybrid style of media consumption. Most included a combination of traditional news media and one or multiple forms of social media in their news diet. They described an increase in their news consumption during the Covid-19 pandemic and some described a level of fatigue with the quantity of news and information available.

Along with mainstream media and social media news, participants described their practices of seeking out information from government, science and other expert websites. For many this was an important verification activity, but some people used websites to challenge official sources.

Participants in all groups described some level of social media use. Some participants sought news from digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok, but others described their exposure to news on social media as incidental.

Trust in media and public institutions is declining

Participants had clear views about which news brands, mediums and platforms they trusted. Most participants identified a trusted source of media, whether that was a media brand, journalist, official website, or social media platform. Public broadcaster ABC was mentioned most often as a trusted source of news, although commercial television news and some newspapers were also identified as providing balanced news.

Participants were most distrusting of media organisations that use “click bait” to draw audiences in. However, social media platforms were seen as less trustworthy than traditional news brands, with Facebook singled out as a particularly untrustworthy source of news due to the platform’s commercial imperatives and enabling of rampant misinformation.

This declining trust in media was reflected in an uneven level of trust in political and other public institutions. In the context of Covid-19, people reported a heightened trust in health experts, but some participants questioned government motivations in relation to Covid-19 reporting and vaccinations.

Participants define and explain their understanding of misinformation

Most participants were confident in their understanding of what misinformation is, how to identify it, how it circulates, and its consequences. Younger groups with higher education were particularly confident in their understanding of misinformation.

Very few participants used the term disinformation, even though many of the examples they cited related to deliberate and purposeful sharing of false or misleading information. In their conversations, participants used the terms misinformation and disinformation interchangeably.

Misinformation was identified across the media spectrum, not just on social media. Sites and sources of misinformation identified included mainstream media and political bias, conspiracists, and platforms’ commercial imperatives, with Facebook named as a site of particular concern. While concern about misinformation was evident throughout the groups, many groups defended the right of others to hold opinions counter to their own and said social media platforms were an appropriate place for the sharing of contested beliefs and ideas. For some participants, the exception to this was the sharing of racist opinion or incitements to violence.

| *Widespread experiences of misinformation*

Overall, misinformation was seen as a prevalent feature of the contemporary news and information environment, with all participants reporting exposure to some form of misinformation. Participants shared extensive experiences of misinformation in 2020, particularly in the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The main examples of misinformation included: exposure to conspiracy theories, particularly via social media; advice contradicting public health messages around remedies, masks and vaccines; and the questioning of case numbers.

The most discussed form of misinformation related to conspiracy theories. Prominent examples included former US President Donald Trump and the QAnon conspiracy movement. In relation to Covid-19, conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus (e.g. 'plandemic') and about the Covid-19 vaccine were also discussed.

There were varied levels of concern about misinformation. Some groups and individuals expressed little concern, while others expressed deep anxiety about the impacts of misinformation and its potential harms, including inciting violence, racial prejudice and anti-vaccination sentiments that could have detrimental consequences for public health. Anxieties appeared to be heightened among those who had observed the impacts of social media misinformation on young people or family members, or whose relationships had been damaged by it.

| *A spectrum of susceptibility to misinformation*

We found most people were confident about their own resilience to misinformation, but they expressed a range of concerns about the vulnerability of others. Teachers and parents, people with family overseas, and those whose family relationships had been damaged by conspiratorial beliefs expressed most concern about the consequences of misinformation.

Participants identified a range of characteristics that might make people more susceptible to misinformation. There was no single view about who was more vulnerable. Younger people expressed concerns about older people's lack of digital media literacy, while teachers and parents expressed concern about younger people's immersive social media worlds. Some thought lack of education was a factor while others mentioned strong religious beliefs as making people more vulnerable to extreme views. Regardless of age, religion or education, social isolation and limited social connection were considered to heighten susceptibility.

A lack of media literacy and poor news and media consumption practices were also identified as increasing misinformation susceptibility. These included: reliance on sources that reinforce existing views; failing to verify information or consult multiple and diverse sources; and lack of awareness of how digital media platform use algorithms.

Measures to combat misinformation

Participants in our research recognised there was no single entity responsible for combatting misinformation.

A common theme across the groups was that individuals have a responsibility to manage their news and social media consumption. Participants discussed the different ways they deal with misinformation when they encounter it. Participants commonly reported scrolling by, ignoring or seeking to verify content. Some reported blocking or reporting content and a minority of participants described actively challenging or correcting misinformation posted by their friends or acquaintances on social media.

Somewhat paradoxically, participants expressed the sentiment that both governments and platforms have a responsibility to address misinformation but were deeply sceptical about giving them such powers.

We identified a deep suspicion of platforms' willingness to take responsibility for mitigating misinformation if it interferes with their profit motives.

The News Media Bargaining Code and the Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation

Some of our focus groups were undertaken at the time of Facebook's decision to remove Australian news content from its platform and several participants said they had been impacted by it. This move by the platform was also associated with a level of distrust in Facebook and other social media platforms in terms of their record of mitigating misinformation.

Participants were largely unaware of the Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation.

QUALITATIVE STUDY DESIGN

Part 2, Qualitative Study, was designed to provide qualitative in-depth analysis of how different population groups understand and respond to Covid-19 related information and misinformation.

We conducted 12 focus group interviews with 60 adults across Australia between 19 February and 9 March.

A sociocultural approach to media and communication seeks out the perspectives, experiences, voices and words of everyday people in relation to complex social phenomena. We used the 'peer conversation' method of qualitative focus groups, which recruits participants from family or social groups and networks to participate in informal, open-ended discussions, ideally in their own locations (Gamson, 1995; Holland, McCallum & Blood, 2015; McCallum, 2010). These group interviews are designed as informal, open-ended discussions to capture the language and resources people use to make sense of their experiences of misinformation, to provide depth, nuance and explanation of their experiences and understandings.

This is a particularly valuable method for eliciting 'expert' local perspectives on an issue or topic. While the launching point of our research was news and misinformation during the 2020 Covid-19 global pandemic, we sought to explore the range of misinformation experiences across the political, health and social domains.

THE RESEARCH AIMED TO:

01. Explore the way people consumed news and information in the context of a global pandemic.
02. Access understandings and experiences of misinformation in different social contexts.
03. Assess levels of concern about misinformation in news and social media.
04. Identify views about who has responsibility for regulating misinformation and disinformation.
05. Explore local wisdom about strategies for combatting online misinformation.

TABLE 03 FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

	Group	Description	Mode	Location
FG 1 Pilot	Educated Gen Z	A group of (3) UC students studying in Canberra (1 man and 1 woman studying journalism, and 1 man studying economics). Two were local and the third was from regional NSW.	Face to Face	Canberra, ACT
FG 2	Tertiary educated Gen Z men	A group of (6) young men from Canberra. They were close friends who had attended private school and university and had lived at university residences. Four were from non-Anglo backgrounds.	Face to face	Canberra, ACT
FG 3	Regional/Remote Gen Z	A group of young men (2) and women (3) who work and socialise together in central QLD's Mt Perry and Bundaberg areas. Participants had not attended university. Some had trades and worked on rural properties. Others worked in hospitality/retail or government in the regional centres. One had lost her job as a result of the pandemic.	Online	Central QLD
FG 4	Family group	A Tasmanian family group (5) which included three generations: a husband and wife in their 60s; their son and his wife aged in their 40s; and their son aged in his 20s. The older couple were retirees while the younger couple were public servants who work for the federal government and the younger man was studying at university and working at a restaurant.	Online	Tasmania
FG 5	Older people	A group of (6) elderly people living in a retirement village in Canberra. The group, who know one another socially, met at the home of another resident. There were three women and three men: one couple, two single women and two single men. This group could be described as upper middle class; a mix of former public servants, a scientist and a statistician; and one with a strong Christian affiliation.	Face to face	Canberra, ACT
FG 6	Older men	A group of (6) men in their 60s from the North Coast of NSW. Some were retired and some were still working. This appeared to be a well-educated group; one identified himself as a lawyer.	Face to face	Northern NSW
FG 7	Middle-aged women	A group of (4) female high school English teachers who work at the same school on the North Coast of NSW.	Face to Face	Northern NSW
FG 8	CALD communities	A group of (5) men and women from non-English speaking backgrounds residing in Canberra. All participants had completed or were completing a university degree. Three men culturally identified as Indian; one woman culturally identified as Chinese, and one woman culturally identified as Indonesian.	Face to face	Canberra, ACT
FG 9	Low income/unemployed	This was a group of (6) women aged in their 50s to 60s from the North Coast of NSW. Some were ex-nurses, one worked at a service station and others didn't volunteer an occupation. None had secure fulltime work. Instead, they had a mixture of casual contracts, part-time work, and benefits.	Face to face	Northern NSW
FG 10	Tertiary educated Gen Z women and men	A friendship group of (6) 18–24 year-old men and women from Melbourne. Three male and two female participants identified themselves as Jewish and were tertiary educated. Participants knew each other well.	Online	Melbourne, Vic
FG 11	Professional women	A friendship group of (4) educated professional women. These city-dwelling Sydneysiders had jobs in finance and the tech industries. The majority came from non-English speaking background or heritage.	Face to face	Sydney, NSW
FG 12	Family group	An inner-city family group (4) from Melbourne comprising parents, their 18-year-old daughter and her close friend. The girls were both studying for year 12 during the hard lockdown in Melbourne in 2020. The parents worked in education and consultancy, and have relatives living overseas.	Online	Melbourne, Vic

RECRUITMENT AND SAMPLE

The sample of participant groups was identified through a joint workshop of the N&MRC Qualitative Research and ACMA Disinformation Taskforce teams. The aim was not to arrive at a representative sample of the population. Rather, a purposive sampling method was used to identify groups that were best able to address the research questions.

The 12 focus groups were carefully selected to cover a broad range of demographic characteristics and media habits, including age, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity and education (see Table 14). We paid particular attention to groups that are difficult to reach through survey research and who might have experiences with online misinformation. This included younger men, people in regional and remote areas, people with limited online access, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD). While we did not seek out groups that might be vulnerable to misinformation, we ensured that our sample included groups outside of the perceived metropolitan highly educated 'bubble'. We note that the majority of focus groups had one or more participants who had received a tertiary education. However, approximately 30 per cent of participants were not tertiary educated.

Participants were recruited through the networks of the N&MRC, using a standard promotional text distributed to contacts via email. Based on our initially identified groups, we approached around 15 participant groups, with a final set of 12 selected. In most cases, one contact was responsible for recruiting the peer group to participate in the interview. This ensured that the participants were familiar with one another and came as a group to the research rather than being selected by the researcher. The online recruitment method and the need to conduct four of the focus groups remotely meant that at least one member of each group in the study had access to digital media.

PROTOCOL DESIGN

The design of the interview protocol (Appendix 4) was workshopped with the ACMA Disinformation Taskforce. The interview protocol was designed in six parts:

1. News consumption in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns
2. Media habits and trusted sources of news and misinformation
3. Understandings of misinformation and disinformation
4. Experiences of dis/misinformation (stimulus materials provided. See Appendix 3)
5. Views about platform measures to address online misinformation (stimulus materials provided. See Appendix 3)
6. Views about responsibility and strategies for combatting misinformation.

In media studies the use of stimulus materials is a common method for prompting memories of events and/or eliciting reactions to media coverage of an event or issue. Stimulus material was presented after participants had the opportunity to volunteer their understandings and experiences of misinformation and platform measures.

INTERVIEW METHOD

Covid-19 meant that options for fieldwork travel for the project were constrained. Because we wanted to interview groups across Australia, four focus groups were conducted online, using the Zoom or MS-Teams platforms to interview participants in Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria. Three focus groups were conducted face-to-face by the N&MRC team in northern NSW, and one focus group was conducted by the ACMA team in Sydney. The qualitative study was led by the lead researcher, with focus group training provided to other team members prior to conducting the interviews.

In line with the peer conversation method of focus group research, the aim was to provide a 'natural' setting to facilitate free-flowing discussion. Focus groups were typically conducted in the home or workplace of the organising participant. Two focus groups were conducted at the University of Canberra.

All focus groups followed the interview protocol, but interviewers were instructed to allow as much free-flowing discussion as possible, encouraging debate and sharing of experiences. A series of introductory questions around the Covid-19 pandemic were designed to orient participants towards thinking about their media use during this time. As per the protocol, interviews adopted a 'funneling' approach that moved from participants' general experiences to their specific knowledge and understanding of platform misinformation measures in the latter part of the interview (See Appendix 4).

A \$50 gift voucher was provided to each participant at the conclusion of the interview.

ANALYSIS

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed using Otter ai software. All interview transcripts were reviewed and edited for accuracy. It should be noted that focus groups can get 'rowdy' with participants speaking over the top of one another, making it difficult to ensure the transcript reflects individual participants. However, the research team endeavoured to make the transcripts as accurate as possible. Transcripts were de-identified and identifiers 'P1, P2 etc' were used. Participants were offered the opportunity to review the de-identified transcripts. In accordance with the sociocultural approach to media studies research, the aim of the interviews was to uncover people's understandings and identify dominant and contested views about news, information and misinformation. The focus groups captured the language and resources people use to make sense of their experiences of misinformation, particularly in social media. We assessed participants' responses to a range of measures introduced by digital platforms to combat misinformation and asked their views about where the responsibility for regulating misinformation lies.

Using a standard template, we analysed each focus group over several hearings of the audio recording and used the thematic textual analysis method to identify themes, commonalities and contradictions in the data, in the context of the academic literature and the results of the survey. This research produced rich contextual data and exemplary quotations to complement and strengthen the findings of the quantitative survey research.

A DIVERSITY OF MEDIA DIETS

Focus Group 01

CANBERRA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Social media savvy with traditional brand engagement. Participants in this group accessed news online and engaged primarily with traditional news brands. One participant followed SBS, the ABC and the *New York Times* on Facebook, while another was active on Twitter. One participant preferred ABC television for local coverage and accessed Reuters via YouTube for international news.

Focus Group 02

EDUCATED YOUNG MEN

Traditional news brands with social media for ‘punters’ opinions. This group accessed news online and almost exclusively via mobile phone. Participants followed traditional news brands on Facebook and Instagram, and some also accessed the ABC, *Australian Financial Review* and *Sydney Morning Herald* directly. One participant chose not to actively engage with news brands on Facebook or Instagram, and instead referred to YouTube and Reddit for information, commentary and debate.

Focus Group 03

RURAL YOUNG PEOPLE

Low news engagement with reliance on Facebook for information. Due to the nature of their work and lack of engagement with political news agendas, most participants in this group were light news consumers. When participants did access news, it was often via posts by news brands on Facebook. Occasionally, they would watch commercial breakfast television, or the nightly news bulletin on Seven or Nine. But many said their working conditions and schedules meant that it was not always possible for them to catch the evening TV news and this meant they tended to rely on Facebook. They were unsure about the availability and regularity of local newspapers. One participant, who worked for the local city council, accessed health information through colleagues.

Focus Group 04

TASSIE FAMILY

High news engagement with commercial and ABC TV and Facebook. While media habits varied across this group, television news and Facebook were popular among all participants. Some preferred Seven and Nine, others preferred the ABC. One participant watched some Sky News and the two older participants said they read the printed copy of the local newspaper. All participants used at least one form of social media, and everyone reported seeing news on Facebook.

Focus Group 05

ELDERLY CANBERRANS

Strong engagement with mainstream news brands, political and public health agendas: social media for social not news. Most participants in this group relied heavily on ABC TV and ABC Radio for news. For some participants, this was supplemented by *The Guardian*, Network Ten local evening news, and print copies of *The Canberra Times*. One participant didn't watch the news on television. Instead, they accessed the ABC website, *The Guardian* and *The Saturday Paper* on their iPad.

Focus Group 06

OLDER REGIONAL MEN

Mixed media diets and misinformation concern: strong engagement with current issues and traditional news brands. This group appeared to be heavily engaged with news. Their media diet consisted largely of traditional news media, including ABC Radio, ABC News online, ABC and SBS television news, *The Guardian*, and *Sydney Morning Herald*. Two participants in this group were highly competent and confident online and social media fact-checkers. The others were less engaged online and lacked digital literacy skills.

Focus Group 07

REGIONAL TEACHERS

Diverse news diets and misinformation anxiety but not big social media users. Most participants in this group consumed diverse sources of news that included a combination of traditional news media and a little Facebook. The group was engaged in news and current events, but participants felt they lacked skills to teach about misinformation in the classroom. All participants thought this was a significant gap in the curriculum.

Focus Group 08

YOUNG INTERNATIONALS

News online: international diet with source verification. This group accessed news almost exclusively online via news apps, websites, and social media. Most participants followed traditional Australian news brands on either Facebook or Instagram, and one participant subscribed to *The Australian*. Participants also accessed news—to varying degrees—via YouTube, WeChat, Twitter, Weibo, Reddit and 9GAG. Google was a popular means of accessing and verifying both international and domestic news.

Focus Group 09

LOW SOCIOECONOMIC REGIONAL

Diverse news habits from niche social media to limited news engagement. This group had diverse media diets. Some participants accessed traditional news brands via television and radio, while others also engaged with traditional brands online. One participant relied heavily on YouTube for news and engaged heavily with American news brands. Participants in this group were not heavy users of social media but held strong opinions about Facebook.

Focus Group 10

MELBOURNE GEN Z

Intense engagement with news via social media and traditional news brands. Most participants in this group had high calorie news diets that included heavy engagement with traditional news brands online, and often via multiple forms of social media. Social media use was diverse across the group, with one participant engaging heavily with trending news on Twitter while others preferred Facebook or Instagram. This group's engagement with news changed markedly over the course of the pandemic.

Focus Group 11

URBAN PROFESSIONALS

Interested news consumers but incidental engagement. Participants in this group accessed news via the ABC, including its Triple J Hack and Dr Karl radio programmes. For some participants, the ABC was supplemented with the *Australian Financial Review*, Channel Seven, and news.com.au. One participant used Twitter to access 'breaking news'; another used Facebook and Instagram. This group also listened to podcasts.

Focus Group 12

MELBOURNE LOCKDOWN FAMILY

Avid news consumers with strong social media misinformation concern. This group accessed news from a wide range of sources. Participants engaged with traditional news brands, but the nature of that engagement varied across generations. Older participants accessed news brands directly, including on television and radio, and via mobile apps. Younger participants combined direct online access with multiple forms of social media, particularly Facebook.

NEWS AND INFORMATION IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

This section includes interview findings relating to people's news and information consumption during the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants were asked a series of orienting questions about their experiences of consuming news and information as the global Covid-19 pandemic emerged, borders were closed, and the nation was forced into lockdown. Participants also spoke more generally about their news and social media habits.

THE FOLLOWING THEMES WERE DISCUSSED:

01. Increased news consumption during Covid-19
02. Covid-19 news fatigue
03. Seeking scientific information
04. Accessing Government websites/information
05. Incidental exposure to news and information on social media

INCREASED NEWS CONSUMPTION DURING COVID-19

Most participants had a hybrid media diet that included a combination of traditional news media and at least one or multiple forms of social media. Most consumed some form of news on a regular basis and there was evidence that people were consuming more news in the context of Covid-19, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic. This varied depending on the impacts the pandemic had on their lives.

One young man observed that when he was studying from home and his parents were working from home during the pandemic the TV news was on constantly:

P5: The TV ABC 24 or Seven News was pretty much on from 5 o'clock to midnight, it just didn't change. (Male 20s, FG 4)

One participant in Focus Group 3, which was a group that reported generally low access to news, said he paid more attention to news at the outset of the pandemic:

P1: When it all started, we were actually sort of making a bit more of an effort to watch the news, because you're more interested in what's going on and how it's affecting everyone. (Male 20s, FG 3)

Several participants reported regularly tuning into their State Premier's media conferences on TV, and some could recall in vivid detail their reaction to specific interviews they had seen on television with political leaders and health officials (e.g. Prime Minister, Health Minister, Chief Medical Officer). Participants discussed varying levels of trust in these sources and the news outlets they encountered for information about the pandemic as well as in a more general sense (discussed in more detail in Questions of Trust section).

Participants in Focus Group 10 reflected in some detail on changes in their media practices in the context of Covid-19. One said he started following journalists who were in the Daniel Andrews press conferences, in order to get the news more quickly:

P4: I found that I ended up actually following on Twitter some of the journalists who were in the Dan Andrews press conferences every day, just because they would know information, because I think they get a press release like before the actual press conference, and I would find that I was following them in order to get the news quicker before everybody else, like that's how invested I was in the whole situation. (Male 20s, FG 10)

One participant in this group described how her consumption of news and information changed across different stages of the pandemic:

P3: I actually think in the beginning of COVID my news intake was a lot more like credible. And then towards like middle of second lockdown I was loving the Facebook, you know, not the conspiracy theories but you know, the hating on Daniel Andrews and all of that stuff. So I would definitely say that my consumption patterns changed throughout, and particularly during the second lockdown which is when the COVID exhaustion hit. (Female 20s, FG 10)

COVID-19 NEWS FATIGUE

There was some evidence of Covid-19 news fatigue, particularly among Melbourne participants but also in some of the other groups. Most participants in Focus Group 10 described a level of fatigue with news consumption and explained that it was difficult to balance feeling as though they needed to know the information and the sheer quantity of information available. This took a toll on participants' mental health:

P2: I would say I was probably tuning in more than I should have in the early days but then consciously sort of withdrew from it all because I could see [it] was impacting I guess [my] mental health and just like constantly feeling down about the whole situation. (Male 20s, FG 10)

P5: I don't ever really watch nightly TV news but I found during lockdown I would always switch it on while eating dinner, and then I would always feel low after dinner, and I found there would be this pattern every night [...] and then I'd repeat the same cycle and it was only when I started feeling really really low and kind of the peak of the second wave that I just stopped watching TV news because I couldn't. It was just, yeah, it was too upsetting. (Female 20s, FG 10)

P3: [...] with the COVID exhaustion [...] I didn't read anything, it got to a point where anything that was COVID related [...] I was just completely disinterested. (Female 20s, FG 10)

One 18-year-old woman in another Melbourne focus group recalled her attempts to remain informed about the global status of the pandemic but also becoming overwhelmed by it:

P2: [...] I found especially the ABC News we started watching it every night, which we never did before that, much more useful than going out and looking at kind of global stuff because it just was so overwhelming and kind of almost created a panic. And before that, like it was just something that I didn't need especially doing year 12, I didn't want that extra fear. I just wanted to know what I can do rather than what the world's like. (Female 18, FG 12)

In Focus Group 8 there was also some evidence that participants felt overwhelmed by news about Covid-19, which had prompted some to limit their news consumption and engage less with news over time. Participants also described the difficulty of keeping up with local, national and international news in the context of Covid-19.

P1: After like the first couple of weeks, I kind of got sick and tired after a while so I was like I don't want more news. I want news, I want to know what's going on. But after that little bit in the morning, I don't want any more. I'm done. (Male 20s, FG 8)

One elderly woman in Focus Group 5 commented:

P2: The ABC News is on all the time going round and round and for a few weeks got to the stage of thinking well I don't really want to know. Everyone's got a theory and then [I] gradually switched off from it. (Female 80s, FG 5)

The sense of being overwhelmed by Covid-19 news and the impacts of the pandemic transcended questions of trust for many. A participant in Focus Group 7 said:

P4: I trusted ABC, when COVID was happening. Even then, I was so sick of it, by the end of the year, that stupid floating germ particle [...] It's become burnt into my psyche, that ball with the little spikes. (Female 40s, FG 7)

A slight variation on the Covid-19 news fatigue theme was also evident in Focus Group 7 in which some participants expressed concern about the way in which Covid-19 had taken over the regular news agenda, which they linked to commercial imperatives:

P2: I think also it's really hard to trust news in general, in some ways, because for example, COVID has become the only thing that's really discussed anymore. The climate crisis has not disappeared, you know, domestic violence against women has not disappeared. [...] I think they all know, they're all smart journalists, I completely believe that those people are highly intelligent people. And yet, they're keeping it going the whole COVID story with potentially inflammatory headlines because it's selling news. And so when the ultimate aim is to make money, it's hard to trust. (Female 40s, FG 7)

P4: Yeah, it's the commercialisation. (Female 40s, FG 7)

SEEKING SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION

Notwithstanding the blanket news coverage, the pandemic also prompted some people to seek out information from sources other than news, such as health/science websites, government information and YouTube videos. Actively seeking scientific information was variously related to people wanting to find out more about the science because they had a particular interest in data or statistics or they wanted to know what the situation was in other countries. Some participants said they went to the US-based Johns Hopkins University website for Covid-19 statistics and information, or to make sense of what they were seeing in the news or hearing from political leaders. In Focus Group 7 one woman said she consulted the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which she believed to be a trustworthy source for Covid-19 statistics. This participant said she looked up the Australian Government health website "every now and then" (P3, Female 20s). The woman in Focus Group 9 who got her news primarily from YouTube identified Dr Anthony Fauci as a highly trusted source:

P2: I got all my information from Dr Fauci, I'm sticking with him because I trust him. [laughter] [...] He's a smart man, he's been in this game for a very long time. (Female 50s, FG 9)

Another woman in Focus Group 9 said she sought out evidence-based research about Covid-19 and another said she looked at different websites for scientific sources. This participant recollected:

P1: You follow a lead, you keep going, because the government information and that, they weren't giving us enough scientific basis, and I like that kind of knowledge, more in-depth knowledge. (Female 50s, FG 9)

ACCESSING GOVERNMENT WEBSITES/INFORMATION

Participants reported varying levels of accessing information directly from government health sources, beyond what they were seeing in the news. It was evident that, for some at least, their information needs appeared to be satisfied by what they were seeing or hearing in the news or the information they were provided by their workplaces and thus they did not actively seek out information.

The majority of participants in Focus Group 8 said they accessed health information directly from ACT Health (either via their website or Facebook), which was a trusted source of Covid-19 information. One said they would go to the ACT Health website every day to check on hotspots (P2, Male 20s, FG 8). Another participant in this group said they had signed up to the Australian Government's WhatsApp chatbot, the only participant in any of our groups to mention this:

P1: After mid-March itself, I think I started following ABC News was the big one. I got my news there. And then after that [...] the Australian government started a WhatsApp thing where you could add yourself in and you basically it was a chatbot. So you could ask questions and you could get answers directly from the Australian Government which is pretty cool. (Male 20s, FG 8)

Some participants in Focus Group 7 discussed going directly to 'official' sources that are deemed authoritative rather than simply relying on what was reported in the news:

P1: I often go to the [WHO] and the Australian health sites to find out how many people do actually have COVID, and how many have actually died. And, you know, I like to look at those facts, because I think that it is represented far differently on the news, even the ABC News or in society [...] (Female 50s, FG 7)

This participant queried the need for face masks when "there's no COVID up here" (northern NSW) and discussed her perception of the small number of people who die from Covid-19 compared to other diseases. In that context she went on to say:

P1: So maybe I myself am a conspiracist theorist in that sense. But at least I'm going to the government health site and looking at data. And I'm thinking they're actually giving me this data is no one else reading this data, because kind of not many people are dying, who aren't over 85 and don't have two comorbidities. It's like, not many people are dying. (Female 50s, FG 7)

INCIDENTAL EXPOSURE TO NEWS AND INFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Participants in all groups described some level of social media use but they varied in how they consumed news on these platforms and none relied on them for their news. In terms of accessing news via social media, some participants actively followed particular news outlets on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. Others reported more incidental exposure to news on social media, as evident in the following comment:

P5: If I saw something interesting, I'd be like have a quick read of that, like have a quick look, but I'm not like actively seeking news, more kind of like inadvertently come across it on social media, unless I'm really interested about something then I'll like use Google and maybe I'd read a few different websites to get a consensus. (Male 20s, FG 4)

This active consultation with other websites and sources of information (typically via Google) as a form of checking the veracity of news and information was a practice reported across participant groups (see Strategies for Combatting Misinformation section).

On a similar theme to the previous comment, one participant in Focus Group 7 also said she does not use Facebook for news but may come across it there:

P2: I do see news on social media, but I don't need to go and access it generally because, you know, maybe I've read it. And sure, something might come up and I'll click on it. But it's not the reason I'd use social media. [...] really the only reason I use Facebook, although I do look at my feed, is I'm a member of educational groups. [...] And if they weren't on there, I probably would cancel Facebook. (Female 40s, FG 7)

Even though participants may not go to social media for news, they do encounter it there. A participant in Focus Group 8 said they saw posts on Facebook from the ACT Government and ACT Health page, as well as following *The Australian*, but they also said:

P3: I don't go to Facebook to look at information, I just go to socialise. But the problem is that these media outlets exist on Facebook and that's how I end up getting information. (Male 20s, FG 8)

Across the focus groups there was a general attitude of distrust or taking “with a grain of salt” a lot of information they see on social media. Participants in Focus Group 8 used Google and a variety of social media platforms for news and discussion but one participant said he actively tries not to access news via Facebook:

P1: I've been trying very hard to not get news articles on my Facebook feed. Every time I get recommended one I think there's an option where

you can say I don't like this. So your feed will try to optimise them out. So I've been trying really hard over the last couple of years to make sure I don't get news on Facebook. (Male 20s, FG 8)

This section has identified some of the particularities of people's news and information consumption in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic during 2020. It also points to some more general news consumption practices and sentiments in relation to news found on social media. These ideas will be explored further in the following sections, with the next focusing on Questions of Trust.

QUESTIONS OF TRUST

Participants provided varying views about trust in different sources of news and information about Covid-19 and more generally. Some discussed their mistrust of news media and pointed to health-official sources as being more trusted than news media. But there were also some pockets of mistrust in the government and its handling of the pandemic. These findings are an important foundation for participants' understanding of media misinformation.

THIS SECTION DISCUSSES PERCEPTIONS OF TRUST IN:

- 01. Traditional news organisations and social media platforms
- 02. Political leaders and government information
- 03. ABC specialist health reporter Dr Norman Swan

TRADITIONAL NEWS ORGANISATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Traditional news brands

It was evident in discussion of their news consumption habits that participants had clear views about which news brands, mediums and platforms they trusted and why they did so. Participants tended to have strong positions on the political ideologies of different news brands, which has implications for who and what they trust. There were generally high levels of trust in the ABC, although one man who described a varied diet of ABC and commercial TV news, including Sky News, observed that:

P2: There's a fair difference between [Sky News] and the ABC and if you watch Channel Seven and Channel Nine you probably get a more

accurate view of news for most of it, which we always watch the Channel Seven news. (Male 60s, FG 4).

Suspicion about the quality of news was more likely to be attributed to commercial media (although this was not universally the case) and news shared on social media. They attracted considerable criticism, with some also associating Sky News with misinformation. Participants in Focus Group 11 discussed their trusted news media outlets:

P1: Yeah, ABC and SBS News are most trusted. Dubious? Probably Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail, sites that produce more gossipy content and I think I mentioned before as well I don't like Facebook sometimes when people share things. (Female 30s, FG 11)

P2: It's pretty much the same I trust like ABC and SBS. Sometimes I don't trust like Channel Seven or Channel Nine like the way they present information I'm like this is just twisted a little bit. (Female 30s, FG 11)

INT: Twisted in what way?

P2: Like maybe it's sometimes either too feel-good or like they're not presenting all the information, especially for other countries, so, I don't usually trust it 100% like I'll watch it and I'm like, OK that's not all the information. (Female 30s, FG 11)

Participants in several of the groups pointed to a level of distrust in news organisations that use “click bait” to draw readers in. Click bait is by nature a product of the digital news environment but people also associated it with traditional brands. Participants in one group (FG 8) associated click bait with brands such as news.com.au and Yahoo News, which they tended to distrust. One participant (P3, Male 20s, FG 8) also associated Al Jazeera with click bait. The ABC also did not escape criticism in this regard. In Focus Group 7 one woman observed:

P3: I noticed that even platforms that I love and respect, like the ABC, the kind of titles that they would give their articles were just excessively click bait-y, and I noticed that was more to create social angst than to actually inform people. And I was like, I don't want to encourage media sources to essentially become giant advertising agencies hell bent on fear and social chaos. That's not what the news is for. [...] And I was like, no, I'm out. I can't get my news from here, because of those click bait-y like titles. (Female 20s, FG 7)

Participants in Focus Group 3 said they trusted the news they get from Channel Seven and Nine but they also discussed the problem of “click bait” headlines that don't match the content of the article. At the same time, one participant also said she got her information about Covid-19 from Queensland Health, a source she perceived as more trustworthy than the commercial TV channels she watched:

P5: I guess we got our information from the health advisors, so we didn't take the information from Seven News or Channel Nine News, we got our information from the health guys instead. Because there can be misinformation in some of those platforms, like you get one thing from one channel, but it could be a different thing on another. (Female 20s, FG 3)

For participants in Focus Group 10 (whose experience of the pandemic in Melbourne was quite intense), *The Guardian* was considered the most trusted source of news across the group, and a primary news source for some. *The Age* was also identified as a trusted source. *The Herald Sun*, *Sky News*, *The Australian* and commercial television news were identified as sensationalist, negative and anxiety-provoking. In relation to the *Herald Sun*:

P6: I found it so negative and it almost was just there to incite fear, and it's, it's hard to delineate what's a credible source when something is really just, you know, perpetuating fear and negativity and bias. So I think naturally a lot of people might have tended to switch off towards the end of the lockdown and really just focus on the stats and credible sources more than anything. (Male 20s, FG 10)

Participants in Focus Group 9 attributed a loss of trust to declining standards of journalism:

P1: And I don't trust the media [...] years ago I think the media was a bit more honest, journalism was allowed to produce more truths. Nowadays, that truth is more [...] bottled in, you know, a lot of journalists had to leave because they couldn't speak the truth. (Female 50s, FG 9)

Social media

Several people expressed distrust in news on social media. This was often linked to click bait and the idea that social media companies benefit from encouraging it. One young man expressed distrust of news on Facebook: “a lot of news on there, on Facebook I wouldn't really read too much into because there is a lot of misinformation” (P5, Male 20s, FG 4). As discussed earlier, click bait in the form of sensationalism was seen as a problem. This participant observed:

P5: Well when you do go on social media and you do get flooded with lots of articles and news stories and I suppose all those articles profit from you clicking a link so the link itself normally does make it a bit more dramatic and fearful than it needs to be. (Male 20s, FG 4)

In Focus Group 6 another man commented in relation to Facebook: “My opinion is it's just a degraded environment that I take everything with a grain of salt” (Male 60s), which was met with agreement from other group members. On the trustworthiness of the mainstream media versus social media, a man in his 40s drew a distinction between the relative trustworthiness of professional journalism compared to social media content:

P1: So even like with the Murdoch media or the mainstream media or the ABC they might have little bits of bias here and there but normally it's not complete bullshit that they put up, whereas maybe you don't feel the same level of confidence about what you see in social media as to the legitimacy of the content. (Male 40s, FG 4)

There was widespread recognition that social media companies are businesses and their power in controlling the information that many people are exposed to was an area of considerable concern among participants. As mentioned in the Introduction, an important context for this research is the News Media Bargaining Code and Facebook news ban, which is alluded to in the following quote that captures some concerns about the power of these companies:

P1: Social media for example, like Facebook, the network is in control of one body and longer term I don't think that's a particularly good thing and I know this has probably come to the fore in the recent argument around who gets the money from advertising but you know the reality is, the network that everyone is increasingly relying on is under the control of one area and, they could, you know if they wanted to, perversely push certain messages to the fore in people's feeds then they've got

that power. [...] I think it's something that's, I think it'll be an increasing challenge for society in the coming years about how that's dealt with. (Male 40s, FG 4)

In Focus Group 1 the Facebook news ban was referenced or alluded to multiple times by participants, most of whom were journalism students (P1 also primarily accessed news via Facebook):

P2: I mean, on the one hand, I wouldn't trust Facebook as far as I can throw it. [...] So on the one hand, I'm like okay, and I've seen, you know, articles that have been talking about how the whole point of it was that the people receiving money from like, I guess ad revenue on those feeds were not the companies making the news. On the one hand, that kind of sucks. On the other hand, a lot of those companies are owned by Rupert Murdoch and so, I guess I'm, I don't really have an opinion either way about it at the moment, because I can't kind of tell if there's any good option to resolve it. (Female 20s, FG 1)

P1: [...] as I said that's where I get my media from, and I take on board what you're saying about the whole, like, you don't trust Facebook, but I feel like it's such a dangerous thing where, because especially now that we're taking away news sites like the ABC that are, often they're as factual as possible. It's when you take that away, and people have been saying it, then you get flooded with the fake news and the misinformation that comes in. (Male 20s, FG 1)

On distrust in social media and the algorithm, particularly in relation to what she observes of her students, a teacher in Focus Group 7 observed:

P2: It can build your algorithm. And that's not to be trusted. And I notice it in class now, because I teach a lot of civics type stuff around history, and last year was the first year that we had students saying, "why don't you teach that climate change is not real?", for example. "Why are you teaching Black Lives Matter?" And it's, and that's because I know and we talked about their conspiracy theory feeds and some of them are QAnon followers in the classroom now. And so that's, it's completely untrustworthy. (Female 40s, FG 7)

'Q Anonymus' (a-k-a QAnon or simply "Q") is a conspiracy movement that originated in the depths of 4chan in 2017 and became visible in the mainstream of US politics and culture with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. While QAnon is an umbrella term for an enormous set of conspiracy theories, its central narrative alleges—without evidence—that former President Trump had been waging a secret-war against a cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles. According to QAnon, members of the cabal include 'powerful elites' like Pope Francis and Ellen DeGeneres, as well as a number of prominent members of the Democratic Party like Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama. Several participants in our study were aware of QAnon and discussed it as one of the conspiracy theories they had encountered (see Experiencing misinformation section).

The commercial imperatives of social media companies and the use of algorithms was raised to explain people's scepticism about their role in combatting misinformation (see Strategies for Combatting Misinformation section).

POLITICAL LEADERS/ GOVERNMENT INFORMATION

Participants expressed varying levels of trust in state and federal political leaders and governments. In Focus Group 7, one participant (P2, Female 40s) expressed a strong distrust in "semi-authoritarian" governments and politicians (inc. Health Minister), which was also related to suspicion of government tracing apps. But participants in this group did trust Chief Health Officers (CHO) and the Chief Medical Officer (CMO):

P4: I do trust all those medical officers, they get up and talk behind the state Premiers [...] I don't know why. I think they've got nothing to gain. They've got the shittiest news to deliver. And they're out there telling you what is happening and what they're hoping and why they're doing lockdowns and shit that people don't want to do. (Female 40s, FG 7)

P2: I think it's very difficult to trust sometimes. Because generally, most people I speak to have a very low trust in the government. [...] Like I feel a little bit hypocritical. I read The Guardian, I read this, I read that, and I think I can trust news, and yet I just probably would never go to a government website to get any information. (Female 40s, FG 7)

In this group there was also some questioning of the actions taken by governments in response to the pandemic (around mask wearing and vaccination, for example):

P4: [...] it's well within our rights to be questioning it every step of the way, and we should be. It doesn't mean we're conspiracy theorists. [...] even though I totally 100% understand and believe that COVID is a real thing [...]. But sometimes I just go what if it is more the other way, and that the government, not that they're faking it, but that they're exercising a kind of overt control that they maybe don't need to be doing. [...] And suddenly, we're all having jabs and shit. Do you know what I mean? And not that I'm an anti-vaxxer, either. (Female 40s, FG 7)

It is notable that some people did distance themselves from conspiracy theories in this way because it highlights the way in which people assess their own views and find discomfort in the idea that their legitimate questioning could be construed as invalid or false information. On this point a woman in Focus Group 1 made an important distinction between thinking critically and conspiracy thinking:

P2: I think that people are thinking, as a whole, we're thinking more critically about our governments and we're thinking more critically about our news sources. And I think that's a great thing. But [...] thinking critically and having constant conspiracy theories are two very different games. (Female 20s, FG 1)

Participants in Focus Group 8 considered “.gov.au” to be a particularly trustworthy/reliable source of information. Participants in this group were wary of governments having the ability to remove content or censor information, as was the case with many groups, but it seemed that their wariness of government (generally) stemmed from views of international governments. There appeared to be a higher level of trust in the Australian Government. In Focus Group 10 participants expressed different levels of trust in the Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews, with one participant (P3, Female 20s) describing him as a “fear monger”, while others placed explicit trust in him, even though for one this trust diminished over time:

P5: I found like I was pretty like team Dan [...] in September, October where we knew exactly where they were coming from. Then I started developing this complete lack of trust in what they were telling us [...] it was just frustration and fatigue, and then I just think I just like completely detached unless it was good news. (Female 20s, FG 10).

Participants in Focus Group 4 did not personally express distrust in the government or political leaders, but they did observe that such distrust may be a result of how governments' actions have affected people's livelihoods. They also observed that some people just don't trust governments, no matter their political persuasion. The following comment touches on some of these ideas:

P4: I can get where people who have had to shut down their income and have really suffered can have this bitterness and sometimes the bitterness comes through them just mistrusting every decision that's being made by the people making the decisions and that includes the rollout of the vaccine. These people may not be anti-vaxxers per se. They're just anti this because this has happened to them, and they don't want to be forced into doing something else. (Female 40s, FG 4)

ABC SPECIALIST HEALTH REPORTER DR NORMAN SWAN

When asked which news sources they trusted most in the context of Covid-19, participants discussed the role of expert health journalists. Dr Norman Swan, who is a regular ABC commentator on the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. *Coronacast*),

attracted considerable discussion, particularly within groups that included people over the age of 60 (FG 4, FG 5 and FG 6). Some participants identified him as a trusted source owing to his independence from government and consultation with a range of health experts, while others raised concerns about his role, including that some people may be putting more trust in what he says than in what the CMO and political leaders were saying. For a participant in one group (P2, FG 4) this scepticism was related to a wider dislike of the ABC. This man in his late 60s expressed uncertainty about Dr Swan's messaging vis-a-vis Government and CMO communication and some concern that some people might see Swan as being more credible than the official medical officers:

P2: I felt there was a bit of conflict there we were all watching the Chief Medical Officers when they're on with the Prime Minister and then the ABC would have Dr Norman Swan and you go on Facebook and the ABC site and people who were on the ABC site all the time would say they would sooner listen to Dr Norman Swan than what the Chief Medical Officer was saying. I thought there was a bit of conflict there with that. Probably didn't help things down the track. I'm a little bit biased probably because I'm just a little bit anti-ABC. (Male 60s, FG 4)

However, another participant in this group saw Swan as playing a useful role in making information more understandable for the general public:

P1: I think Norman Swan did, I mean what he did particularly well with the Coronacast and that sort of stuff was probably explain it in a way that was digestible by the general public [...] I thought Norman Swan was a really good trusted source. (Male 40s, FG 4)

In Focus Group 5 there was a lack of confidence in the government's initial response and a belief that media health experts such as Swan played a significant role in alerting the public to the severity of the crisis:

P6: At the beginning there was a Prime Minister wanting to go to rugby league matches [...] and Norman Swan's saying "no don't go. Don't go". (Male 80s, FG 5)

This group of close media watchers had a precise memory of an ABC *Insiders* program in which they felt the pandemic was being played down by the Health Minister and the CMO. One man explained how it prompted him to let family members know who they should be listening to:

P5: Insiders interview with Greg Hunt where the government's not doing the right thing. Yeah, because I heard some of what Norman Swan was saying, and that's when I sat down and sent an email to all my children and stepchildren and my siblings in various parts of Australia to say the government is mucking this up, Norman Swan's the guy you've got to follow! (Male 70s, FG 5)

In Focus Group 6 some concern was expressed that the CMO is not independent of the government of the day and that a source

such as Norman Swan may be more independent, trustworthy and consultative of a wider range of health experts:

INT: If you had to choose between Norman Swan and the Chief Medical Officer, who would you choose?

GROUP: Norman Swan! [laughter][...]

P6: He's not your typical journalist or news source is he? Most journalists don't know much at all about the topic and you can normally see when, if you know anything about the area, you know, well that's an oversimplification or that's not correct or whatever. But in his case, he's a doctor whose been talking to people for 40 years (Male 60s, FG 6)

This section has discussed trusted sources of news and information among participants, with particular attention to traditional news organisations and social media platforms, politicians and government information, and a specialist health reporter. An awareness of the political bias or commercial inclination of traditional news brands informed people's ideas about what may be more credible or trustworthy. Mainstream news and journalism was often discussed as potentially untrustworthy or inaccurate but participants identified particular brands they trusted more than others. Participants also discussed the profit motives of social media platforms and their algorithms as factors that diminished people's trust in them. The next section focuses on people's understandings of misinformation.

UNDERSTANDING MISINFORMATION

Participants were asked about their knowledge and understanding of the terms ‘misinformation’ and ‘disinformation’, and if required were given the definitions provided by the ACMA. ‘Misinformation’ was defined as the inadvertent sharing of false information, while ‘disinformation’ was defined as the deliberate creation and sharing of information known to be false. In general discussion, the term misinformation was used to cover all types of false or misleading content, particularly in social media contexts.

THIS SECTION DISCUSSES PERCEPTIONS OF TRUST IN:

- 01. Defining misinformation and disinformation
- 02. Misinformation and opinion
- 03. Deliberate and purposeful sharing of misinformation
- 04. Prevalence and awareness of misinformation
- 05. Sites and sources of misinformation

DEFINING MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

Most groups were confident in their understanding of what misinformation is, how to identify it, how it circulates, and its consequences. Very few participants used the term disinformation, even though many of the examples they cited related to deliberate and purposeful sharing of misinformation. In their

conversations, participants used the two terms interchangeably. Some participants identified disinformation as misinformation that was intended to harm. The younger groups with higher education (FG 1, FG 2, FG 8 and FG 10) were particularly confident in their understanding of misinformation. A university student in Focus Group 1 stated:

P2: I kind of view misinformation in two categories. First one is obviously facts that are not correct. Things just that are flat out not the truth, and the other branch of that which I think is a little bit more insidious is things that are technically correct, but they're not presented in a way that is an accurate depiction of an event [...] (Female 20s, FG 1)

Another group of educated young people (FG 10) expressed a familiar and nuanced understanding of both mis- and disinformation. While echoing the above comment in some respects, a participant in this group puts more emphasis on “false facts” as opposed to the way “technically correct” ideas might be misrepresented or otherwise taken out of context. Both these notions reflect the difficult task of trying to define these terms without reference to exemplars and judgements.

P3: I don't actually know, but isn't misinformation just like perhaps incorrect facts and disinformation is spreading false facts. (Female 20s, FG 10)

A group of professional women from Sydney defined misinformation:

P2: I think to me it means not giving the full information. Say when you go onto a topic, you can't actually explain all aspects of what's going on. (Female 30s, FG 11)

The majority in a group of young workers from central Queensland hadn't heard the term 'disinformation', and broadly defined misinformation as “incorrect” information. They had vague experiences of seeing clickbait, sensationalist news or entertainment items they thought to be untrue. They made reference to stories in outlets such as *Woman's Day* that “use words that capture someone's attention more so than the correct information” (P4, Female 20s, FG 3).

One woman in Focus Group 4 echoed the view that misinformation constitutes information or opinion that is not supported by facts, including conspiracy theories:

P4: People who are putting up information that isn't factual, we don't know for a fact, or it could be a conspiracy kind of theory that again hasn't been proven, or just an opinion that they're sprouting as fact. That is pretty much how I interpret the misinformation [...] relative to COVID. (Female 40s, FG 4)

MISINFORMATION AND 'OPINION'

While participants demonstrated a strong awareness of and concern about misinformation, several groups distinguished between what they considered “subjective opinion” and the deliberate sharing of misinformation. These groups strongly believed that people should be allowed to hold opinions counter to their own, and that social media platforms are an appropriate place for the sharing of contested beliefs and ideas. There was

a wide range of views across the groups about whether sharing “opinions I don't agree with” equated with the deliberate sharing of misinformation.

A group of young men highly engaged with both mainstream and social media news (FG 2) discussed this at length. They advocated for people's right to express their opinion, especially on social media. Members of this group were keen users of Reddit and avid listeners of podcasts that investigated controversial topics. In contrast to their views about political harm and responsibility for information, they were quite dismissive of what others might term misinformation shared on social media. They were more likely to say that was someone's informed opinion, rather than the spreading of misinformation.

P3: I think I've seen a bit of anti-vaxxer stuff on Instagram, which I guess in some ways you could say that's subjective because the people that are posting it obviously, a few footy players are posting it on Instagram. Like they don't think it's misinformation whereas I think it is. (Male 20s, FG 2)

The Tasmanian family group (FG 4) emphasised that people can have alternative views that are valid but simply disagreeing with another person's opinion does not make that misinformation:

P1: I know you've defined misinformation and disinformation earlier and I think we all probably understand that, but you know you can have alternate views and they're legitimate alternate views. (Male 40s, FG 4)

There was also some discussion about the blurred lines between misinformation and beliefs:

P3: It's pretty hard to fact-check belief systems, you know. Christians have been doing it for 1000s of years, telling people hey do this and you'll be saved. I mean is it any different? Is that any different? (Male 60s, FG 6)

Focus Group 7 teachers were skeptical about the idea that any one person might be able to define the “truth”, and entered into a debate about scientific truths versus beliefs.

P4: Can I ask a question? How do you possibly get an arbiter of truth? But really, in the world of media, how do you? How are we ever meant to know? What is the truth? (Female 40s, FG 7)

Likewise, the Melbourne Gen Z group (FG 10) entered into a philosophical discussion about the nature of truth, and whether you can be sure something is misinformation:

P6: It's probably personal as well how people delineate what's credible and what's not. I mean, I like to see a bit of truth in whatever information I'm given but not really make a conclusion, unless I've heard from multiple sources and based on my own beliefs or prejudice. (Male 20s, FG 10)

DELIBERATE AND PURPOSEFUL SHARING OF MISINFORMATION

When it came to disinformation, participants generally were less confident in their understanding, but some did point to deliberate “skewing” of data for a particular purpose. For example, a woman in Focus Group 11 offered the following explanation:

P1: I haven't heard of 'dis', but misinformation is just sort of skewing the facts or not presenting the picture. It's like you've got data, and you've only shown a fraction of that to get whatever it is, whatever the motivation is behind. That's how I interpret misinformation. (Female 30s, FG 11)

Questions about the credibility and motivations of the source of the information factor into people's understandings of misinformation and their assessments of the harms it can cause. This might include the source of a post shared, the credibility of a news outlet (e.g. *Daily Mail*) or the perceived bias of a journalist or politician.

For a group of young men from Canberra (FG 2), political use of misinformation was of most concern. They made the distinction between “uninformed” sharers on Facebook, where people might inadvertently share unverified information, and deliberate political disinformation. For this group, politicians have more power to use information selectively and therefore a greater responsibility. former US President Donald Trump was the reference point for the deliberate sharing of harmful misinformation.

P2: I think of Trump, saying that like COVID isn't a big deal. (Male 20s, FG 2)

[...]

P5: Well, I think he's [Trump] misinformed, but I think like for example Facebook, you're obviously gonna get a lot of misinformed people, uninformed people, whereas like politicians, assuming that they have all the facts available to them, they're just choosing which ones they want to tell you about. (Male 20s, FG 2)

An elderly participant from Canberra distinguished President Trump from misinformation on the basis that “he's a deliberate liar” (P1, Male 80s, FG 5).

P1: Well, in the case of Trump. Very much disinformation. You know he wasn't going to wear a mask. He didn't believe in it. And of course, all the rabbits who follow him around the country so all said “Oh, Mr. Trump said this”. (Male 80s, FG 5)

State propaganda and censorship were another clear source of disinformation and considered more dangerous than ordinary people's sharing of uninformed opinion.

P5: I think, maybe like China [...] obviously they're withholding a lot of information from their citizens. (Male 20s, FG 2)

As the above accounts suggest, participants have a variety of understandings of misinformation and disinformation and think themselves reasonably confident in discerning the true from the false. It was also clear that people were more concerned about some types of misinformation, shared by some people (particularly those in power and with mass followings), than they were with ordinary people (their friends or family for example) posting their opinions.

One young man in Focus Group 8 emphasised that disinformation is worth fighting because of its harmful consequences:

P1: I think the biggest threat would rather be disinformation. [...] That, I think, we would have to fight. It's not just misinformation, it's not somebody who doesn't know what they're talking about saying something, it's someone who's spent a lot of time getting that message in a format that it reaches a lot of people (Male 20s, FG 8)

People were most concerned when false information led to the harm of others.

P2: I'm happy to let people do whatever they want, think whatever they want, as long as it's not hurting [...] someone else or hurting a different group. (Female 20s, FG 1)

P1: [...] if it's not hurting me and it's not hurting anyone else, then you do what you like in this world. (Male 20s, FG 1)

This of course raises questions about what constitutes harm, particularly harmful information. One person's harmful opinion might be another person's legitimate belief. This dilemma came out clearly in our focus groups and helps to explain people's genuine sense of doubt about what can be done about misinformation online.

Many participants were at pains to draw a line between inadvertent sharing of incorrect facts or opinion, and deliberate disinformation that causes harm to others:

P6: This is where that term 'my truth' comes in isn't it, you know this is my truth and you can have [...] your truth about whether God exists or whatever, but you can't really have your truth about whether vaccines are very dangerous or harmful. (Male 60s, FG 6)

They identified that some people are deliberately misleading, while others are inadvertently sharing disinformation, but acknowledged the fine line between the two terms. This participant also made the important point that recipients of the untruths may be less suspecting, particularly if it fits with their existing experiences and beliefs:

P6: And these two things blur because somebody may start with something they know is an untruth, not truthful. But then say they say

something about vaccines, that's terrible, and they know that they're not telling the truth, but then lots of people, genuine people pick it up and think it's truthful because they might have had a bad experience with a vaccine, so it fits in with their beliefs. So it's hard to delineate between these two isn't it, the disinformation and misinformation. (Male 60s, FG 6)

PREVALENCE AND AWARENESS

Groups diverged in their views about the prevalence of misinformation, from concern that it was rife, to little knowledge of misinformation, to beliefs that misinformation was not a great source of concern. The Covid-19 pandemic and the Trump presidency are twin factors that had increased awareness of, and concern about, misinformation in 2020. One group of young men (FG 2) noted the community had become increasingly aware of misinformation in the context of Covid-19 and the presidency of Donald Trump:

P6: I think we were probably all pretty unaware of [misinformation] before like Trump and COVID, and since then it's much more apparent [...] Like we're all much more aware of what we don't believe in, and what we believe. I think looking back in hindsight I think there was a lot of misinformation out there that we didn't really think about, but just took it at face value. (Male 20s, FG 2)

The Canberra CALD group (FG 8) also identified that President Trump and *Cambridge Analytica* had honed awareness of misinformation.

Families, parents and teachers were particularly aware of and concerned about the prevalence of misinformation in social and mainstream media. A group of teachers from regional NSW (FG 7) were commonly exposed to misinformation, particularly conspiracy theories. One was quite familiar with QAnon while another was aware of it.

P4: [name redacted], a friend of ours, a mutual friend of ours, who is a mother of one of the children, often posts, "quickly watch this before they tear it down". [...] But yes, yes, yes, yes. I've seen lots of it. [...] I've got lots of friends who upload, a few friends who are big conspiracy theorists and so I see that stuff on Facebook, but I just ignore it. (Female 40s, FG 7)

The Tasmanian family (FG 4) identified the abundance of information in the digital world as a driver of misinformation.

P4: There is so much information and misinformation out there that you can find anything on the web, social media, whatever that will back up,

whatever thing you can think of and whatever theory you have, there'll be information slash misinformation that will back you up. (Female 40s, FG 4)

P5: Like there'll be 100 articles telling you that climate change is real and 100 saying it's fake. Stuff like that there's always going to be stuff both ways. (Male 20s, FG 4)

Not everyone we interviewed saw an abundance of misinformation online. The elderly people from Canberra (FG 5) tended to use social media only for keeping up with friends and family. They did not discuss social media misinformation and didn't describe any examples of coming across or challenging misinformation. A group of older women from northern NSW (FG 9) were aware of the 5G conspiracy theory about Covid-19 but this was dismissed. One participant said:

P2: Oh for goodness sake don't even get me started. Bunch of ninnies! There's also leprechauns! (Female 50s, FG 9).

SITES AND SOURCES OF MISINFORMATION

Participants in our study variously identified misinformation as occurring on social media platforms, mainstream news and media, and in their interpersonal and international networks.

Social media sharing

Many participants identified social media platforms, most commonly Facebook, where misinformation is readily shared. Young people in Focus Group 1 identified social media, including TikTok, YouTube, Pinterest and Facebook, as a hotbed of misinformation, particularly the sharing of opinion online. One young man in Focus Group 1 said that the only time he received "blatant misinformation" on Facebook was through friends sharing it and he gave the example of people sharing racist and homophobic content:

P1: Facebook's a big place I think where I encounter a lot of misinformation. I come from a country town where unfortunately there's quite a lot of racism and homophobia, and obviously a lot of the people that I'm friends with on Facebook, do have those opinions. [...] And I often see things where people are sharing posts that they think are true or they think are showing something when they're really not and they're just false, but that's where I find, and especially with COVID, it has come up a bit where people have been sharing a lot of racist stuff [...] mostly about like, phobia of China and just stupid stuff, like you can't think this is true but it just plays into that ideology. (Male 20s, FG 1)

Participants in Focus Group 2 who said they used Reddit to gauge people's opinions about different topics, particularly controversial ones such as how the virus originated, raised some concerns about not knowing the identity and credentials of people posting comments, which meant that people "could be manipulating a lot of things" (P5, Male 20s, FG 2). This was seen as a problem for people of their age who took things at face value rather than fact-checking.

One participant in Focus Group 8 who culturally identified as Chinese discussed what she described as a mainstream platform called Weibo, which often included comments that could not be trusted:

P4: So [Weibo] kind of like Twitter but think that they also can do videos and lots of, and lots of news like actual news or some like about celebrities or those kind of like gossip whatever [...]. And then, that is a very messy place like so, especially in [the] comment section like you can like have a laugh but, in some serious matters like maybe you shouldn't believe that because, like all sorts of people make comment on it so you don't know who said that, or like, where it comes from. (Female 20s, FG 8)

International news

For culturally and linguistically diverse groups or participants, news and information from their home countries, which was often shared with them by family members, was seen as a particularly strong source of misinformation. A group of former and current international students (FG 8) had honed their awareness of misinformation and disinformation through their experiences of international news and information from "back home". This included 'local' international news sent to them by family residing overseas. A participant in Focus Group 10 shared similar concerns:

P5: The biggest difficulty with misinformation was at the start of the pandemic with my grandparents because they are migrants and they're Russian and they don't speak English so they would obviously watch Russian news [...] Russian TV news was telling them that it's all fine and chilled. (Female 20s, FG 10)

One participant who consumed a lot of US news noted that Australia reacted to news produced overseas:

P2: So I think of like again it's the trickle-down effect of Australia being so reactive to the disinformation coming out of America. (Female 50s, FG 9)

In our conversations, participants shared their views and understandings about what drove the production and circulation of misinformation. While social media was the focus of our discussion, it is important to acknowledge that in everyday conversation, mainstream media news content is frequently conflated with social media content, and that social groups have diverse experiences and understandings of what misinformation

is, and where it comes from. In these discussions participants identified key drivers of misinformation as mainstream media and political 'bias' and conspiracists.

Mainstream media and political 'bias'

When asked about misinformation, many of our participants volunteered traditional news brands, from Sky News to the ABC, as producing misinformation. A young participant from Canberra (FG 1) attributed their constant exposure to ideologically driven television shared on social media with the spread of misinformation:

INT: Have you come across [...misinformation...]?

P3: Constantly. Especially on YouTube, you have Sky News everywhere. I just see a bunch of Sky News headlines and yeah, it just seems blatantly obvious that they're trying to spread disinformation. (Male 20s, FG 1)

In Focus Group 4, males in their 20s and 40s expressed some concern about the level of control News Corp has in Australia. News Corp was also raised in the group of 60+ men (FG 6) in the context of their limited and particular engagement with *The Australian* newspaper, which they tended to treat with some scepticism or as an outlet whose ideology or political leanings were not in accordance with their own. Participants in Focus Group 5 were heavily critical of the Murdoch media for "creating a toxic media environment" in the US, UK and Australia by, for example, giving "oxygen to the Trump type people through Fox News". In Focus Group 7 one woman (P4, 40s) expressed concern about Murdoch media and its relationship with the Australian government. A discussion among the Tasmanian family (FG 4) showed a level of concern with journalistic bias across the spectrum, from the ABC to Sky News. One member identified a lack of diversity in media ownership as a driver of poor-quality journalism.

P5: I think the biggest thing is making sure there's media diversity so you get information from all sorts of perspectives instead of just being controlled in a centralised way, like with the Murdoch media. (Male 20s, FG 4)

On a similar theme, one participant in Focus Group 10 observed:

P5: I think obviously it's much much easier for misinformation to be spread if there's a limited diversity of new sources. (Female 20s, FG 10)

For some older people who consumed little social media and engaged extensively with television news, misinformation was defined exclusively in terms of mainstream media ideology and journalistic bias that was closely aligned with party-political agendas. When asked what they think of when they hear the words misinformation and disinformation, the elderly group (FG 5) responded with "Donald Trump" and Sky News. Other responses included "Craig Kelly". But they also identified the deliberate

spread of misinformation by Australian politicians, amplified on mainstream news media such as Sky News:

P3: Well, we have it with the Craig Kelly politician who's been pushing it and being allowed to continue to do so and getting airplay, and that there's a lot of people in different parts of Australia that are not like in Canberra, who will perhaps listen to their local politician and be influenced by it. (Female 80s, FG 5)

In the context of discussing misinformation, younger participants in Focus Group 10 also offered examples from mainstream newspapers, which one participant described as offering an "extreme comparison" that made her step back from those news outlets:

P5: Even things like the political cartoons in The Australian and the Herald Sun of Chairman Dan, or Dictator Dan, or like him in like a swastika outfit Nazi resemblance [...] I would take a step back from news outlets that would portray him in that way. (Female 20s, FG 10)

The ABC was also contested as a source of bias and misinformation. The following dialogue took place in the context of the first participant's expression of general distrust in media and the declining quality of journalism:

P1: I think the TV. Four Corners all those things, that kind of media [...] I just don't trust it anymore, because it's politically based, and biased and runs on that kind of bias, and so for me I take it like a grain of salt. I'll listen, have a look, and then investigate. And they never tell the whole story, they manipulate the words to suit. (Female 50s, FG 9)

[...]

P5: I quite like shows like that, like Four Corners and, yeah, I know I think I trust them more than I trust like reading articles on the internet. (Female 50s, FG 9)

Conspiracists

The deliberate spreading of conspiracy theories was understood as a key source of misinformation across most groups. Almost all were aware of and concerned about the deliberate spreading of conspiracy theories in social media. Facebook was identified as the most common site for the sharing of conspiracy theories, but YouTube, Pinterest, Reddit, TikTok and Instagram were also mentioned.

Participants recalled a range of diverse conspiracies and examples of misinformation, such as flat earthers, celebrity chef and social influencer Pete Evans believing that when people go into isolation with Covid-19, especially celebrities, the government was killing them, the North Korean government killing people with Covid-19 so it looks like they have no cases, QAnon, 5G and vaccination. Examples related to Covid-19 are discussed in more detail in the next section.

On Pete Evans as a source of misinformation one participant observed:

P2: He's kind of known for being a serial misinformation person to put out all sorts of weird stuff, not just about COVID going way back to the food industry things and making great claims about things that turned out to be based in absolutely rubbish, and he was just making a huge amount of money because he's a smart man on that level. (Female 50s, FG 9)

There was some awareness of conspiracies relating to 5G technologies, of which this participant was dismissive:

P3: I've heard coming out of England, a lot with people telling us that 5G is going to do all sorts of things to scramble our brains and [...] children can't have vaccinations because they're connected to 5G and that's going to make them autistic, you know. (Female 80s, FG 5)

There was also some concern about the role of mainstream media in amplifying conspiracy theories, as discussed by one participant in Focus Group 10:

P4: When I see misinformation or just blatant like conspiracy theories being perpetuated online and actually they make their way into the sort of like mainstream media discussion and people are being exposed to them on I guess on a wide basis, that makes me concerned. Yeah, I get concerned about that. I think I mean, they should be addressed, they definitely need to be addressed by the mainstream media and like shut down but yeah it's concerning that they're I guess reaching I guess millions and millions of people. (Male, 20s, FG 10)

In terms of the kinds of factors that might motivate people to deliberately share information they know to be untrue, participants in Focus Group 6 offered the following ideas: that they are sick; are dissatisfied with society; or they are seeking attention. They were aware that many conspiracists view government health websites and public health information as propaganda. More insidiously, some participants identified conspiracy theories that were racially motivated, from anti-Semitism to anti-Chinese sentiment.

This section has covered the different ways in which people understand misinformation, including how it relates to opinion and belief, their ideas about disinformation and their views about the prevalence of misinformation in social and mainstream media. Participants identified sources and sites of misinformation such as social media sharing, international news, mainstream news and political bias. Conspiracy theories were an often-mentioned example of misinformation and these are discussed in more detail in the next section.

EXPERIENCING MISINFORMATION

The previous section outlined people's knowledge and understandings of misinformation. In this section we explore more deeply people's direct and indirect experiences of misinformation. All participants reported some form of experience with misinformation. Several gave examples of misinformation posted or shared by their friends, family or acquaintances on social media or in other settings. Where required, the interviewer prompted discussion using a selection of stimulus material giving examples of online misinformation (See Appendix 3).

THIS SECTION DISCUSSES THE MAIN FORMS OF MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 THAT PARTICIPANTS SAID THEY ENCOUNTERED, WHICH RELATED TO:

01. Conspiracy theories
02. Covid-19 remedies
03. Face masks and lockdown
04. Vaccination
05. Covid-19 case numbers

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

As discussed in the previous section, participants in our study commonly associated misinformation with the creation and spread of conspiracy theories, particularly via social media. In this section we discuss participants' experiences of conspiracies surrounding Covid-19 and more broadly.

QAnon and President Trump

The presidency of Donald Trump was a major stimulus for increased awareness of, and concern about, misinformation. Participants described an emerging fascination with dark conspiracy. A man in Focus Group 6 described a curiosity about wanting to understand where people's views and beliefs were coming from, as demonstrated in the following discussion of former President Trump and QAnon:

P2: I was interested particularly around the [US] election, I was interested in, you know, what was motivating Trump supporters and you know, whether they're all rat bags or whether some of them did actually make some sense. And also QAnon, you know, I wanted to see what they had to say a little bit. (Male 60s, FG 6)

A woman in Focus Group 7 also discussed the importance of knowing about the kinds of conspiracy theories that her students may be encountering and reflected on a particular example of a documentary one of her Year 12 students suggested she watch:

P3: [...] it was like this excruciatingly long, very low-quality documentary, for want of a better word, all about like the QAnon stuff. And I will say I started watching and going okay, yeah, whatever. But then actually, I was like "I do want to watch this whole thing. I want to know what it is these kids think, you know, I want to know what are these conspiracy theories?". Because I find conspiracy theories fascinating. I find them so interesting. They're really weird. (Female 20s, FG 7)

One man in Focus Group 6 discussed how his daughter's belief in misinformation (QAnon) affected their relationship:

P1: [...] when I hear her talking to her friends who I know, it's like listening to I don't know Nazi propaganda. It's just like where the frig do they find this stuff out from? It's all QAnon crap and she said—we were talking about Trump a few months ago – and she goes, because I don't like the guy obviously, and she said, "oh he's done some good things" and I said, "what?" and she said, "oh against the paedophiles" [group laughter] [inaudible] working out of a pizza shop wherever it is in Washington somewhere, Hilary Clinton and eating corpses now. It's just nuts. (Male 60s, FG 6)

He said he sends her links to other sources saying, "Look, just give this a listen, it's not like you're wrong but just give this a listen and see". But she doesn't reply and his daughter's beliefs do put a strain on their relationship: "I mean it's hard being her father, you know, because there's a whole lot of stuff we can't talk about" (P1, Male 60s, FG 6).

'Plandemic'

In Focus Group 4 one participant who said she had a friend who posted anti-vaccination content on social media also discussed her exposure to conspiracy theories about Covid-19 on Instagram and Facebook and her interest in understanding why people believe them:

P4: I think though when the hashtag #plandemic took off I started looking into the conspiracy side of things a little bit. Not necessarily following the conspiracies or believing the conspiracies but just reading up on them and just seeing where and why people would come up with these theories of conspiracy. (Female 40s, FG 4)

Participants in Focus Group 3 also said they had seen some conspiracy theories about the origins of COVID, making reference to the theory about bats and the Chinese wet markets, that the virus was planned and released by the Chinese:

P4: I've heard a lot of conspiracy theories on how COVID was made. (Male 20s, FG 3).

He thought he might have encountered this information on YouTube.

Participants in Focus Group 10 also encountered the theory that Covid-19 was deliberately made in a lab in China, including on Twitter and in mainstream news media:

P4: One of the earliest pieces of misinformation that I was exposed to was this speculation that the virus was deliberately made in a lab in China and was like this, or something like that and that is like an act of bioterrorism. (Male 20s, FG 10)

While there was some agreement that this was misinformation, participants in this group also reflected on how they could not be totally sure that it was:

P1: For me, I don't think that it happened and I agree that I didn't think it happened but I also have to accept that maybe that's not misinformation. (Male 20s, FG 10)

A participant in this focus group also said one of his mum's friends who was into alternative medicine shared videos through Facebook about the virus not being real and other conspiracy theories. He was a little concerned that his mum could believe the misinformation because she is quite impressionable:

P4: I'm not on Facebook but my mum would share, like she would call me over and show them to me so like I was seeing misinformation that way. And then I would like obviously tell my mum that it's misinformation. (Male 20s, FG 10)

COVID-19 REMEDIES

There was some discussion of Covid-19 remedies and evidence that some people were uncertain about their veracity. Participants in Focus Group 8 provided examples of misinformation and disinformation they had seen about Covid-19 remedies that were shared by their family and from international sources:

P2: An example of misinformation was this company back home had made tablets, and they were then like falsely telling you that you might not have coronavirus, you should buy this. [...] A small section of people will try anything (Male 20s, FG 8)

P3: Back home we have some home doctors who provide home remedies. And they had this immune juice. There's a lot of varieties of this juice, but it's everyday what back home people will drink it just to keep yourself fresh, like putting lime in a glass of water and drinking. Similarly, they put other ingredients in and we had some COVID articles about, you know, if you drink this. Some, some are [...] drinking cow piss. That would cure, back home its researched on cancer as well. So, yeah, dire information. (Male 20s, FG 8)

There was general awareness of former President Trump advocating bleach as a remedy, although one participant suggested it seemed to be an issue that was “more predominately sort of overseas than in our own backyard” (P3, Female 20s, FG 10). A man in Focus Group 8 said he spoke to his sister (who was living in New York at the time) about the bleach issue:

P2: [...] she was like people are literally going to the store and they are buying bleach and there are multiple 911 calls that are going out to help these people now. [...] you're sad for them but, you know, again, you're just following someone blindly. It's as similar as saying you know this tablet, the same thing as what happened back home. Like, take this tablet you won't have COVID. He was like have bleach. (Male 20s, FG 8)

A young man in Focus Group 2 recalled a remedy he heard about on breakfast television:

P3: I remember them saying some nonsense about like drinking warm water helps to like wash COVID down or something ridiculous [laughing]. And then my grandma actually called me later that week. Because my sister was still overseas. And she was like oh “you know your sister might be able to get back, you know we gave her the advice about, drinking water or something” and I was like, really? (Male 20s, FG 2)

FACE MASKS AND LOCKDOWN

Some participants in Focus Group 2 reported being exposed to what they judged to be untrustworthy information about face masks on social media:

P6: In Melbourne there was a lot of anti-lockdown sentiment. Yeah, the government's invading our freedom. Yeah, this and that and that we shouldn't have to like listen to what the government has to say. We should be allowed to be free and do what we want. (Male 20s, FG 2)

P4: So I had a lot of different a lot of people/a couple of people that I knew moved down to Melbourne who were like anti-mask like what anti-masking. Yeah. Like, just posting like their diagrams of like, what a mask actually does and how it doesn't work and stuff like that. And I don't know, I could instantly just look at that, and compare to the signs that had

been put up around like how much a mask, like if in two people, and two people wearing masks 99% is actually blocked. I can kind of make my own judgment from that. (Male 20s, FG 2)

Occasionally, participants dismissed conspiracy theories with humour:

P2: I think the funniest like mis- more disinformation was that the pigeons were security cameras and they were like all making sure everyone was like quarantining, around Melbourne and [...] Dan Andrews literally had like machine pigeons, that had like a chip in them. (Female 18, FG 12)

VACCINATION

A few participants reported encountering anti-vaccination material and what they perceived to be conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 vaccine. Some referred to examples of misinformation they had seen on Facebook. For example, one woman referred to a Facebook friend who promotes anti-vaccination content:

P4: I've got a friend who puts a lot of stuff on Facebook and you know she's sort of become an anti-vaccine promoter I guess and she will post things on Facebook or share things on Facebook that have actually come from other parts of the world so it's not actually relevant to us. (Female 40s, FG 4)

In Focus Group 10 one participant (P3, Female 20s) said she received information via Instagram from a “health conscious” friend who had forwarded that information from someone who appeared to be a doctor. The information was described by the participant as carrying an anti-Covid-19 vaccination message. “This person does appear to be a legitimate doctor and I mean I didn't pass it on, but it was definitely being spread around” (P3, FG 10).

Some also discussed experiences with other people sharing information about the Covid-19 vaccine that they perceived to be either “rationally [...] pretty silly” or a “conspiracy”. For example, the young man in Focus Group 4 mentioned a friend's belief about a microchip in the vaccine:

P5: Also, when you're talking about people that don't want to get the vaccine, although it's a bit of a silly point, I know a lot of people do have the idea that, I've got a friend who's adamant they're putting a microchip in it [group laughter] A lot of people do believe that although rationally it's pretty silly, and I've seen a lot of jokes around about it [...] Well, he's sent me information like it's probably from average sources [...] I didn't like read it fully but if you ask him he will like argue really heavily that it is like a microchip – there's this information, there's that information. (Male 20s, FG 4)

A participant in Focus Group 11 also described an encounter with an older Polish woman (the mother of one of her friends), who she described as “the number one conspiracy theorist”:

P3: I got kind of stuck with her while my friend tended her daughter, and she just went on and on, don't get the vaccine they're planting a microchip. Everything was full on. [...] But I enjoy listening to them I think this is crazy shit. But I liked listening to how they kind of had their reasons. And of course, there's a part of me that's like, it could be true? Because it's very convincing when you can talk about every single part. (Female 30s, FG 11)

It is important to note that there was not a large amount of discussion about conspiracy theories in relation to the Covid-19 vaccine. However, there was quite a lot of general discussion indicating vaccine hesitancy, and the overall sense was that most people intended to get the vaccine but many were also quite content to wait and see some of its effects. Participants also discussed reasonable concerns about the speed with which it had been developed. One participant in Focus Group 2 suggested the large amount of discussion about vaccination over the past year could have been increasing anti-vaccination sentiment:

P3: There has been that much content out there like the whole notion that vaccines might be dangerous for you, wasn't even something that I would think about two years ago and now there's that much content out there that I can see why people have concerns about the vaccine, which I think that's really interesting that's something that's changed a lot. Like antivaxers have always existed. But now, people that I would say two years ago wouldn't have any wouldn't question it ever, and now question it. (Male 20s, FG 2)

People's concerns about the potential impacts of misinformation about vaccines are touched on again in the next section of the report.

COVID-19 CASE NUMBERS

Across the twelve focus groups, some participants raised concerns about over-inflation in reporting of Covid-19 case numbers and deaths. While some participants were concerned about whether Covid-19 numbers had been over-inflated, others perceived this as misinformation. For example, participants in Focus Group 8 discussed what they perceived to be misinformation about Covid-19 case numbers in their home countries:

P1: Another source of misinformation I saw was people sowing doubt on COVID numbers. [...] But especially international news now, specifically from back in India. I saw that people used to say, the numbers are fake.

And the reasons they used to give were the government has incentivized admitting people to quarantine centers because the quarantine centers then get money, and they're like okay so the numbers there are fake because people just want to get money from the government. And then they used to use this information in both ways. They used to be like the numbers are actually way more. So people used to think that the government is mishandling the issue and the numbers are actually way more, and they've been suppressed. And on the other hand, people who want to I guess get out of the house, were using them as oh, it's just the quarantine centers wanting to make money out of the numbers so they inflated them. So, it was, it was actually misinformation but it was hard to see which one was true. (Male 20s, FG 8)

[...]

P4: [...] back then when COVID was really bad in China. Like, also we also have like all sorts of numbers about how many cases today and we never believe those numbers because we just feel like the government is just suppressing the numbers [...](Female 20s, FG 8)

Similarly, participants in Focus Group 10 also raised some doubts about Covid-19 statistics:

P3: I have an issue with how they count the COVID statistics. [...] I don't know if that is misinformation that I've been consuming but, you know, that's mainly on social media because I think that's the only type of like platform when it that will kind of be published, but yeah you know there were just like issues with people being considered a COVID death when you know there were other factors that actually contributed to their death and they may have caught COVID for one or two days, which is before I think it's even, like, symptomatic. yeah, there were just some issues with the way that they counted it. (Female 20s, FG 10)

[...]

P2: And the fact of the matter is there are governments around the world that have lied about their COVID status in places like China where the stats can't be relied upon we're not thankfully in a country I believe that that's the case, but it's not a foreign concept or in this case it is a foreign concept I guess. (Male 20s, FG 10)

One participant (P3, Female 50s) in Focus Group 9 expressed some distrust in the reporting of Covid-19 deaths in Australia, suggesting she had heard from a friend who is a nurse that if it is listed as a cause of death on the death certificate the government will give money for the funeral.

This section has covered participants' encounters with different types of misinformation, particularly conspiracy theories such as QAnon and 'plandemic'. It also discussed examples of misinformation about Covid-19 remedies, public health measures such as face masks and vaccination, as well as Covid-19 case numbers. The next section turns more directly to people's concerns about misinformation and its impacts.

MISINFORMATION CONCERNS AND IMPACTS

Participants expressed varying levels of concern about misinformation and its impacts. Some groups conveyed a relaxed attitude, while others were highly concerned about the potential harms it could cause. The content included in this section is a mix of personal and general concerns about the impacts of misinformation. We have already seen references to former President Trump and QAnon; Trump also casts a shadow across many comments in this section.

THE SECTION DISCUSSES THE POTENTIAL HARMS OF MISINFORMATION IN THE FORM OF:

- 01. Incitements to violence
- 02. Wasted expenditure on “useless” and dangerous medications
- 03. Racial prejudice
- 04. Anti-vaccination sentiments
- 05. Vulnerability of young people

INCITEMENTS TO VIOLENCE

In line with people’s belief that disinformation was of most concern because of its potential to cause harm to others, the storming of the Capitol building in the US was widely seen as an example of the real dangers of misinformation and disinformation, particularly when it is disseminated by people such as former President Donald Trump who have considerable power and support.

In one focus group, concern was directed at those who believe the kind of content that Donald Trump was disseminating:

P4: It’s not the fact that he’s giving it, it’s the fact that people believe it. That’s the thing that worries me is that there are many people in America who believe him. (Female 80s, FG 5)

P5: In Australia too, and sometimes I’m astonished. I don’t want to step on anyone’s toes, and I’ve got nothing against religion as such, but some of these fundamentalists are crazy. I mean, if you know, Trump is a creation of these, these really rabid, fanatics. (Male 70s, FG 5)

One participant in Focus Group 5 suggested that some members of his family who he described as “my more fundamentalist born again type relatives [...] seem to believe that they’ve got God on their side and COVID can’t touch them” (P5, Male 70s). As a result, he said he consciously avoided that family. Also, on the storming of the Capitol, there was this dialogue from men in Focus Group 6:

P4: The fact that it has culminated in the storming of the Capitol, you know, it’s not ridiculous, it’s a real thing. (Male 60s, FG 6)

P1: That was terrifying, personally watching that. (Male 60s, FG 6).

Another young man observed, “all the election fraud that [Trump] was spinning [...] he riled up a massive group of people who took every single word that he said as fact. So real-life consequences that you can see play out” (P4, Male 20s, FG 2).

WASTED EXPENDITURE ON “USELESS” AND DANGEROUS MEDICATIONS

One participant in Focus Group 9 who was heavily engaged with American news expressed discontent with former President Trump and the potential for his disinformation to influence the views and actions of Australians, and she cited as an example an Australian philanthropist purchasing “a couple of million doses” of hydroxychloroquine for Australia:

P2: There was even the case of hydroxychloroquine I think, the initial drug Trump was shouting that out to the rooftops. And then there was a huge Australian philanthropist [...] I can’t remember, but I remember reading in the newspaper that he bought a couple of million doses of that for Australia, out of his own pocket, which turned out to be completely useless because Trump was the one touting it, and it’s of no use whatsoever. So I think of like again it’s the trickle down effect of Australia being so reactive to the disinformation coming out of America. (Female 50s, FG 9)

A participant (P2, Male 20s) in Focus Group 10 said that his sister (who was living in Israel at the time) was unable to access hydroxychloroquine for her arthritis as it had sold out, which he attributed to people acting on Trump’s comments.

RACIAL PREJUDICE

All participants in Focus Group 10 had some level of concern about misinformation that ranged from “pretty concerned” to “very concerned”. Anti-Semitism and division in the US were cited as specific reasons for concern here. On the potential impacts of the idea of Covid-19 being formulated by China as an act of biological warfare, one participant in Focus Group 10 expressed concern:

P5: [...] I have friends that are of Chinese heritage and I know that they found it really really difficult when [...] all that speculation was going ahead because for them, seeing all the racist comments that were sparked on social media. (Female 20s, FG 10)

Participants in Focus Group 12 also picked up on the issue of misinformation cultivating prejudice:

P4: What should be done? It’s so hard, I get the freedom of speech argument, but if you look at the history of the world, where misinformation was taking place and the tragedies that have happened because of it. And part of me says yes, stop misinformation. (Female 40s, FG 12)

P2: Because it’s propaganda. (Female 18, FG 12)

P4: Seriously it’s dangerous I think. We end up blaming certain people for certain things you know there’s anti-Semitism right around the world and I think a lot of that’s due to social media so I think it’s good that you do block some of that stuff. (Female 40s, FG 12)

ANTI-VACCINATION SENTIMENTS

There was a degree of frustration and even anger with some examples of misinformation spread by people in the community. This is evident in the following dialogue by participants in Focus Group 12:

P4: Another interesting thing was that we got in our letterbox a flyer from the anti-vaxers and it said millions of people are marching against the vaccine in Melbourne, Perth. So I looked at who had written or put out the pamphlet and it was some anti-vax organisation and then I went to the website I thought let’s see what they believe in and they’d written on the website that vaccine had been proven to cause autism. So this is now and it said, I can’t remember the exact words but it was something like, “as proven by the scientists”, and that was on the website. And that was like, what? Very frustrating. [...] But what worries me is that you might get someone old that sees that. That thinks this vaccine is not safe for me. It might put them off getting vaccinated. Because it’s just these

false claims that they put out and vulnerable people could just believe it, you know? (Female 40s, FG 12)

P2: [...] I think that with Covid-19 especially because it's a novelty, like this strand. It's actually dangerous, like having this misinformation around the internet and so accessible is actually creating fear and danger in communities because it means that people yeah, like what you're saying is that they won't get vaccinated. They don't believe what politicians what scientists are saying of like this is what we're going to do to like, get over this pandemic and get through it. (Female 18, FG 12)

A participant in Focus Group 11 also recalled that her father's GP had misinformed him about the vaccine and she was concerned that a medical professional would be sharing his particular opinions with his older patients:

P2: [...] I think he actually had his GP saying to him the other day that like, they live in the same area. And he was like, oh, is your internet a bit funny? The other day, my dad was like, I was fine. I think the power went out or something. And the GP was like, "oh, no, I think China's running it". And my dad was a bit like, this guy's a bit cuckoo, and I was like, I'm concerned, that he's a GP and he's scaring us. And he did say some stuff about the vaccine. And I was like, do not listen to him. [...] He's a GP, it's really concerning that he's like sharing that information with, especially because he would be interacting with a lot of older people. And I'm sure that they go there because they're really concerned about getting a vaccine. And he's saying, just wait, I don't know how he's getting that information. (Female 30s, FG 11)

VULNERABILITY OF THE YOUNG

Teachers in Focus Group 7 were extremely concerned about misinformation online and they projected vulnerability to misinformation onto other people (students, young people, friends), one describing students, for example, as "passive consumers" (P4, Female 40s). In describing their concern they used words such as "terribly concerned", "I am terrified", "it is dire" and "it is a real worry". TikTok was singled out for particular concern in the following comments:

P2: [...] we're now trying to educate students who are getting educated from TikTok by misinformation and openly challenge you. And it's really difficult. It's very worrying and concerning because you know that there are those kids, you'll never make a dent in them. And it wouldn't concern me if they were just ignorant. But it concerns me because they are deliberately, they're being misinformed and they are holding on to that really strongly, just like any adult who believed in QAnon. (Female 40s, FG 7)

P1: What sort of idea are they strongly holding onto? What misinformation? (Female 50s, FG 7)

P2: Oh, that climate change is not real. That climate change is not human made, that Black Lives Matter protesters, all of those protests are turned violent in America, they were all the Black Lives Matter protesters that did all of the violence when I could easily fact check that that was completely incorrect, because you had the Proud Boys there, for example. Multitude of things, depending on what you're teaching. Last year was a year that I saw a lot of that in comparison to others. (Female 40s, FG 7)

This section has discussed some of the serious concerns people identified in relation to the impacts of misinformation from inciting violence to spreading racial prejudice and anti-vaccination sentiment. It is also important to note that some participants discussed how a family member's belief in misinformation had impacted their relationship with them. For example, one man (P1, 60s) in Focus Group 6 discussed how his daughter's belief in conspiracy theories had affected their relationship and a young woman (P5, 20s) in Focus Group 10 also said her parent's belief in misinformation had put a strain on family dynamics and affected what she is able to talk to her parents about.

MISINFORMATION SUSCEPTIBILITY

Participants provided some general observations about what could make people more susceptible to misinformation. There were varying perspectives about who might be more susceptible and what might contribute to their susceptibility. Some perceptions were focused on how people's news consumption and media practices might heighten their susceptibility while others put more emphasis on characteristics such as age, education, or religious beliefs. Overall, the findings suggest that people think anyone is potentially vulnerable to misinformation and their observations also indicate some strategies that could mitigate people's vulnerability.

WHILE THESE ARE DIFFICULT TO SEPARATE, IN THE FOLLOWING SECTION WE FOCUS ON:

01. Failing to read past the headlines
02. Failing to consult multiple and diverse sources
03. Isolation and impressionability
04. A spectrum of vulnerability to misinformation

FAILING TO READ PAST THE HEADLINES

Several participants identified the problem of people not reading past the headlines. Participants in Focus Group 4 agreed that it was worrying that people might believe the first thing they read rather than doing further research. In part, this was related to the sheer amount of information on social media and the strategies

(click bait) that are used to attract people's attention, as can be seen in the following comment:

P5: Well when you do go on social media and you do get flooded with lots of articles and news stories and I suppose all those articles profit from you clicking a link so the link itself normally does make it a bit more dramatic and fearful than it needs to be. And I know a lot of people will see a link that says oh like "COVID lockdown said to last for a year" when maybe one person said that and you read that in the article but you've just seen that link and I know a lot of people that won't read it and just keep scrolling up and like oh "COVID lockdown's for the next year"

kind of thing. So I think the headlines make it seem worse than what it is and probably a lot of people base their information on the headline rather than reading the article. (Male 20s, FG 4)

FAILING TO CONSULT MULTIPLE AND DIVERSE SOURCES

Several participants suggested that failing to consult multiple and diverse sources could make people susceptible to misinformation. Some mentioned the Facebook algorithm as a potential factor here, particularly for those who are not aware of how it works and do not look outside of Facebook, for example, for their news. One young man commented:

P5: I think [...] once you click on something it's easy to get stuck in the rabbit hole. I think after you, you know if you watch a video, and it automatically goes to the next one, it might be linked. And then, after a little while it's easy to get stuck in that rabbit hole of seeing repeated trends and themes based off those algorithms which can be pretty dangerous especially with misinformation. (Male 20s, FG 2)

Going down a “rabbit hole” was a common phrase to explain how a person might succumb to conspiracy theories and other misinformation.

One participant in Focus Group 10 referred to *The Social Dilemma*, a documentary on the impacts of social networking, which had alerted her to ideas of the algorithm and the echo chamber and encouraged her to follow news outlets and people whose views she does not agree with on Twitter:

P5: [...] you know that documentary very much said, confuse your algorithm, like if you're on Twitter, follow people that you don't agree with, whose policies you don't agree with, because otherwise you will not hear things and I think there's a fine line between misinformation and information that has an agenda that aligns with like your views, if that makes sense like, my, my dad might view something as misinformation that I view is true, because there's just, it's all about the language and like very specific language to maybe talk about the same fact but just skew it in a completely different way to how he's reading it on his new source. (Female 20s, FG 10)

A woman from Sydney identified excessive social media consumption and platform algorithms as contributing to misinformation vulnerability:

P4: I can imagine that for some people it's very hard to be selective and understand what to believe or not believe. And if social media algorithms

is always kind of confirming your view of the world is very dangerous. (Female 30s, FG 11)

In Focus Group 4 concern was expressed about people who might accept the first thing they read rather than consulting additional sources:

P2: But misinformation is, you've really got to not take notice of the first thing you read, you've got to [...] study it a bit yourself. You've got to (Male 60s, FG 4)

P4: It can be very dangerous because a lot of people won't research what they read, they'll just believe it at face value, so it can be very dangerous to have misinformation out there. But then how do you stop misinformation from circulating? I mean how do you stop it from getting there in the first place? (Female 40s, FG 4)

On a similar theme, a young man in Focus Group 2 observed:

P5: I think if there's a lot of information flying around, and people are willing to take things at face value, then. Yeah, all sorts of chaos can break out. (Male 20s, FG 2)

A male in Focus Group 1 (P1, 20s) made a distinction between three groups encountering potential misinformation: those who “are always going to believe in conspiracies”; those who do their research; and those who “don't care enough” to search Google or do any research. He was most concerned about the latter group, particularly in the scenario where fake news was drowning out factual news and information. It is notable that these observations were made in the context of Facebook's take down of Australian news and this participant was concerned about this because many people may bump into news and factual information on this platform that they would otherwise not seek out. The lack of news in comparison to “fake news” in this situation was also seen by this participant as making people more at risk of believing conspiracy theories.

ISOLATION AND IMPRESSIONABILITY

Participants identified some people who may be more susceptible to misinformation than others. Groups identified by participants in Focus Group 12 as potentially being more vulnerable to accepting false claims included older people, people who are feeling emotionally fragile or desperate to be a part of something, and impressionable young children. Participants in this group reflected on some of the factors that may increase people's vulnerability or susceptibility to misinformation:

P3: [...] kids as young as eight now have social media and they are highly impressionable and vulnerable. (Female 18, FG 12)

[...]

P2: I think that honestly everyone is [vulnerable] because obviously, there's the people who are more obviously vulnerable that are like, less educated, and maybe like a younger audience. But literally anyone who is at the right place at the right time, if they've had a really bad mental health day, an argument with their friends, their significant other, have had an argument with their boss, they are so susceptible to literally anything, whether it's fake news, like anything like that they're so impressionable. And that's a lot of the time where a lot of people, like when they're feeling crap, and isolate themselves, they spend that time on social media. And that's where they're most impressionable. And that's when it's most dangerous, because they're already feeling crap. And so they're more likely to share more things or kind of get more annoyed about other things and [...] it's gonna create a cycle. (Female 18, FG 12)

P4: I think, throughout history, that's when people are desperate. They're poor they're unemployed, and then that rises out all different ways. Just anger, anger, and then you know, they want a lot of times they want to be part of a movement doesn't matter what it is. [...] Yeah the storming the Capitol. Right? That's a great example. You know, people want to be part of something they want to they probably don't even care that Trump wasn't president. They just wanted to be part of that. (Female 40s, FG 12)

Teachers in Focus Group 7 also touched on one of the concerns raised by [P2 FG 12] in the above comment about students being exposed to more misinformation because they were spending so much time online during Covid-19 lockdowns:

P2: [...] The more time you spend online, the more exposed you're gonna be to misinformation or disinformation. And so that for me is the biggest issue because we had, we didn't have a very big lockdown here, but we had eight weeks where kids are pretty much glued to devices. So the opportunity for that misinformation is much higher. (Female 40s, FG 7)

INADVERTENT SHARING

It is interesting to consider how some people explained the kinds of factors that can contribute to the sharing of misinformation on social media. Instagram, in particular, is mentioned in the following two comments as a platform that lends itself to sharing content without checking its veracity. An 18-year-old woman in Focus Group 12 said she felt that she may have personally, albeit unintentionally, spread some misinformation. She explained this with reference to the amount of information on social media and the sense of pressure that she felt to be sharing certain posts to

show her allegiance to a particular position or cause (i.e. that by not sharing them “your silence was killing people”); a “toxic” context which didn't lend itself to the checking of sources and the veracity of information. The following comment was made in response to a question about examples of where people may have inadvertently shared information, the truth of which they didn't know:

P2: I think I even did that. Completely unintentionally but especially on Instagram it became a craze, especially when the Black Lives Matter happened. [...] There was so much information going around about literally like anything to do with like politics to human rights. And stuff that was going on globally, but then there's heaps and heaps of stuff, that's also, like COVID information. And it became like a social pressure that if you didn't post and reshare these posts, you became like a really like bad person morally. And I think that I just didn't realise that a lot of other people didn't realise that we actually needed to check out new sources with everything, especially COVID. (Female 18, FG 12)

A similar concern about people sharing social media posts without much thought was also discussed by a young man in Focus Group 2:

P3: [...] So it's like, I just reckon that with social media people just love sharing controversial posts [...] like the amount of people I've seen that repost stuff on Instagram, and I know they haven't given two seconds to actually reading into what it's about, like, if there's misinformation around like that people are just going to go bang share. And might not give two thoughts but then someone else might take it as oh this is actually like really important like we need to do something about this. (Male 20s, FG 2)

A SPECTRUM OF VULNERABILITY TO MISINFORMATION

Most people tended to position themselves as being less vulnerable to misinformation than others. They shared numerous stories of friends and relatives who had been exposed to and shared what they believed to be misinformation. For example, participants in Focus Group 10 had a strong engagement with mainstream news and political agendas, which meant they felt like they were exposed to largely accurate information, but family members were more likely to engage in misinformation.

P5: [...] when you kind of engage with family members that just like, engage with totally different stuff, it's like a bit of a reality check there actually is a lot of misinformation out there. (Female 20s, FG 10)

However, there was no single view about who is more vulnerable to misinformation. Some younger people view older people as

more vulnerable due to their lack of media literacy, while older people looked to younger people's exposure to social media as a likely source. Those with less education, socially alienated people who don't access a wide range of views, and migrants who get their news from overseas were also identified as vulnerable to misinformation. Some also associated religion and adherence to strong beliefs with vulnerability to misinformation.

There were varying views about whether older people or younger people were more vulnerable to misinformation. Participants in one group (FG 8) expressed concern that their parents could be more susceptible to misinformation, but older people were not universally seen as particularly vulnerable to misinformation. For example, one participant in Focus Group 3 provided these comments about her grandparents:

P4: Oh, nah, like my grandparents and that, they'll see stuff, they're very big on googling and looking into things. They are ones that wake up at 4.30 in the morning and read every news article there possibly is and do a deep search on everything. So no, I'm not concerned with them with misinformation or anything like that [...] (Female 20s, FG 3)

In Focus Group 10 participants expressed differing views about the vulnerability of younger and older people to misinformation. For example, one young woman (P3, 20s) pointed to "our" generation as being more impressionable and more likely to encounter misinformation and thus more vulnerable, especially given the nature of the "algorithm". She was of the view that older generations tended to rely more heavily on traditional more "credible" sources of information. This was a point of tension though as other participants suggested that perhaps their awareness of "fake news" meant they were, at times, less vulnerable than older generations who were less aware. There was then some discussion that framed vulnerability to misinformation as an educational issue and there seemed to be consensus on the idea that young, undereducated people are most vulnerable.

Participants in Focus Group 11 were moderately concerned about misinformation and identified people who they thought could be more vulnerable to it, such as older people of their parents' generation. Potential lack of awareness of the algorithm was again mentioned. One participant suggested children should be educated about misinformation from an early age:

P1: It should go back to our education system. And we should be educating kids about these things early on. [...] But I think, like, the older generations aren't educated in this, really. And so they are going down this rabbit hole, do they know that they're going down this rabbit hole? And there's gotta be some sense of transparency of how these algorithms work. [...] I'm just thinking like of my parents. [Group agreement] [...] Some of the things my Dad says sometimes. I'm like Dad that's not right that's not the facts right? [...] he also spends time on random sites online as well [...]. Whereas back in the day he always tuned into SBS News or ABC News and that was the source of truth

whereas all of a sudden with all these publications and access to a lot of information. (Female 30s, FG 11)

[...]

P2: Uh, yeah, my Dad watches like YouTube. [...] he loves like a good conspiracy theory. I mean, he can pick apart a little bit and go oh that's not correct. [...] He's always telling me some conspiracy theory that he's read about. [...] (Female 30s, FG 11)

In the context of discussing the politician Craig Kelly, one participant observed that political leaders could exert influence on susceptible people:

P3 [...] There's a lot of people in different parts of Australia that are not like in Canberra, who will perhaps listen to their local politician and be influenced by it. (Female 80s, FG 5)

In Focus Group 9 there was agreement within the group that certain people may be more vulnerable to misinformation than others, including those who live their lives on social media and those who tend to stick to a narrow view of the world.

P5: Certainly, like some of the people that do go on social media every day [...] (Female 50s, FG 9)

P2: [...] Unfortunately, in my opinion, a lot of people who maybe have not even an education, because I left school in Year 10, so I'm not highly educated at all. It's not an education thing at all. But I think it's just people with a [...] more narrow view of the world [...] People who don't take in all the information that sort of are inclined to just believe what they hear and run with it, and also maybe older people because they don't have the same access to information that we do. [...] (Female 50s, FG 9)

[...]

P1: Yes, there's a lot of people, especially young people, young and old, might you say. And also in between [...] I think it's the majority of the people who don't explore outside their box, [...] Religious people, people who are very narrow minded by their religion, they're not interested in what anyone else, and whatever their religion tells them, they'll believe (Female 50s, FG 9)

This section has covered people's views about susceptibility to misinformation. Some participants discussed this in terms of how people consume news and information, where they raised concerns about people believing the first thing they read, failing to consult a range of sources and potentially getting stuck in echo chambers. Concerns were also raised about people who are isolated and particularly impressionable and the ease with which some social media platforms enable the inadvertent sharing of misinformation. Participants' responses suggest a spectrum of vulnerability to misinformation that encompasses factors such as consumption practices, levels of media literacy and awareness of fake news. The next section turns to people's views about what can be done to combat misinformation.

STRATEGIES FOR COMBATTING MISINFORMATION

Participants were asked about what they do when they encounter misinformation, their awareness of and views about platform measures (including their responses to stimulus material) and their views about where responsibility resides for combatting misinformation. There are inevitably overlaps across these areas, particularly in relation to the question of where responsibility for combatting misinformation resides. We have decided to focus on overarching ideas about where responsibility rests before talking about some specific platform measures and participants' own personal approaches to dealing with misinformation they encountered.

THIS SECTION COVERS THE FOLLOWING TOPICS:

- 01. Responsibility for combatting misinformation
- 02. Awareness of and responses to specific platform measures
- 03. Personal strategies for dealing with misinformation

RESPONSIBILITY FOR COMBATTING MISINFORMATION

Participants in our focus groups had varied knowledge about the measures that individuals, platforms and governments might take to combat misinformation online. A theme across each of the focus groups was that there were no simple solutions to combatting misinformation online and participants could see the

pros and cons of leaving it up to either the platforms, governments or individuals. There was a general scepticism of platforms and governments but recognition that it can't be left up to individuals alone. People often commented that multiple parties across society had a role to play in combatting misinformation.

Individual responsibility

While participants could see a potential role for platforms and governments in addressing misinformation online, many also emphasised that individuals also have a responsibility:

P4: And I also think there's the responsibility of us the readers to scroll on by if there are things [inaudible] not of our interest. Scroll on by. (Female 40s, FG 4)

P3: We have a choice on what we want to feed ourselves with, and I think we all need to start being wiser more critical thinkers. (Female 50s, FG 9).

P3: We're responsible for actually making time and effort to ensure that we're not misinformed. (Female 20s, FG 7)

The above comments encapsulate a general sentiment across the focus groups about the importance of individuals having both the ability (e.g. literacy) and the responsibility to manage their engagement with misinformation. The section 'Personal strategies for dealing with misinformation' provides more detail about what individuals do when they encounter misinformation.

Platform responsibility

There was a deep suspicion expressed across the groups about the platforms' willingness to take responsibility for misinformation and a perception that they can't be relied on to do so because they stand to profit from social media content, whether it is real or fake. There were also some mixed views about the role of platforms among participants in Focus Group 7, as evident in the following dialogue:

INT: Whose job is it to combat misinformation on Google or on Facebook or on Twitter or on Instagram?

P2: Not them, obviously. Not them because they can't be trusted, they can automatically overnight pretty much ban every single news service in Australia, but they can't get off the Proud Boys, they can't fight all the anti-Semitism. So it's not their job. (Female 40s, FG 7)

P3: There must be some form of regulation. There are barely any rules for social media platforms, and the whole tech industry. And so they're just running rampant and wild. (Female 20s, FG 7)

While there was agreement that something needed to be done to tackle misinformation, there was scepticism about the role of platforms in doing it if it interferes with their profit-making priorities:

P1: [...] [Facebook's] only, their only like governing body sort of thing is their investors and people who own their stocks and stuff like that. So, it's such a hard thing now where you wish that they would be the ones that would be getting rid of the fake news, but at the end of the day they're a business and they're profit driven. So it's difficult for them to want to do it. (Male 20s, FG 1)

P1: It's like they're corporations [...] not elected officials, so who's to say that they should be the ones that decided what we can view or not [...] They're gonna act in the best interest of the shareholders and if that means perpetuating some misinformation that's what they're gonna do for ad revenue [...]. (Male 20s, FG 2)

An elderly woman in Focus Group 5 shared some concern about giving platforms the power to remove content:

P2: You don't want [the platforms] to be the arbiters of this. Do we really? You know they could be just as dangerous as the others. So, yeah that's difficult, because it's always going to be complex. (Female 80s, FG 5)

At the same time, there was a view among the younger Queensland group (FG 3) that platforms did take responsibility:

P4: I feel like it [misinformation] gets cleared up [...] it gets removed from Facebook within a day or so. [...] As people who use Facebook you could probably report it to Facebook and then like go okay well they can look into it further. (Female 20s, FG 3)

Participants in this group generally had quite a relaxed attitude about misinformation and were not the type to be getting into debates with others on social media. However, the participant quoted above had reported content on Facebook previously and participants in this group did engage in their own verification practices.

Some participants were more adamant in their position on the responsibility of platforms to remove content. One participant in Focus Group 9 expressed some concern that the platforms were too slow to shut Trump down:

P2: If it's a really obvious lie that is harmful to the public, cut them off, cut them off at the knees, no matter who they are, if they're a president or some spooky little guy in a backyard or whatever. (Female 50s, FG 9)

This participant then suggested the Government has a role to oversee what platforms are doing.

Government responsibility

In terms of government responsibility for regulating online misinformation a young man in Focus Group 1 thought that government had an important role to play:

P3: I think, again, in a perfect world, people just wouldn't use Facebook for news. But in the world we live in, I think [...] the government has to have some input into what is promoted to such a large group of people, especially because again as [P1, FG 1] said, Facebook doesn't exist for the people, it exists for the shareholders, it exists to generate profit and increase its value. And I just I can't see any world where leaving it alone ends with the betterment of media and information. (Male 20s, FG 1)

Participants in Focus Group 8 commented:

P4: I think the government should also be a big part of it. I'm talking about this because I'm just disappointed in Chinese government. [...] (Female 20s, FG 8)

P1: I think if it's something that has been debunked or that is affecting a large group of the population. It will probably be the government's job to at least put that information out there. [...] I really wish that there were like NGOs, and I'd love to support them, if they wanted to take this up because I don't like the government having so much power either. (Male 20s, FG 8)

Participants in Focus Group 12 could identify pros and cons of various options for combatting misinformation and recognised that some people would likely be suspicious of government intervention:

P1: Yeah, if you were asking this question in Myanmar, you probably wouldn't say the government. (Male 40s, FG 12)

[...]

P3: If the government does, people then get angry. (Female 18, FG 12)

The teachers (FG 7) were cynical about the role of government.

P2: Wouldn't it be nice to think it's the Government's responsibility? Really, like that would be really nice. [...] But there's zero accountability of any kind of corruption that happens at the moment in terms of federal or state politics. So therefore, I don't know. (Female 40s, FG 7).

Shared responsibility

Within Focus Group 9 there was a strong sentiment that the platforms have a responsibility to monitor and police misinformation, taking it down if it is clearly incorrect, but also that this needs to be overseen by governments and that individuals must also take responsibility for what they choose to consume online and on social media. A participant in Focus Group 1 suggested it needed to be a shared responsibility:

P2: You know, there's a block button for a reason, but I don't think there's any kind of one solution for this, you know, the internet is a very, it's a large and diverse place and with a lot of opinions, and a lot of people who have different opinions on the way things like this should be handled. And I guess we're just kind of going through it as best as we can. Some, some of it's up to us and some of it's up to the government some of it's up to the media platforms and there's blurred lines between all of them; it's really difficult to pinpoint what is your responsibility and what is someone else's responsibility. (Female 20s, FG 1)

Some participants were asked about the 'Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation', a voluntary code developed by the Digital Industry Group, which was released at the time the interviews were being conducted. The voluntary nature of this code was met with scepticism by participants who were asked about it, yet there was also suspicion about making it mandatory, as evident in this dialogue from Focus Group 7:

P2: So why isn't the Australian government making it compulsory? I mean, who's going to voluntarily do this? Who's going to voluntarily

do that? If it's good, and it's going to mean that we don't have misinformation, then it should be compulsory. (Female 40s, FG 7)

P1: I don't like things being mandated, because the wrong idea might be mandated. (Female 50s, FG 7)

AWARENESS OF AND RESPONSES TO SPECIFIC PLATFORM MEASURES

In the final part of the interview, participants were shown a selection of screenshot images of measures taken by digital platforms to combat misinformation (See Appendix 3). Many participants were aware of and discussed platform measures before being asked to comment on the stimulus materials. People expressed a range of views about different platform measures. We discuss each measure in turn.

Hiding or removing content/ Removing or temporarily suspending accounts

Many participants in our study conflated these two measures that were widely recognised, even without the stimulus. Former President Trump figured prominently in these responses, among both social media users and those who engaged with traditional news. Issues of freedom of speech and censorship were raised across groups and some groups were of the view that this measure wasn't implemented "equally" (FG 9, FG 10). This included participants who were aware of anti-Semitic content that had not been removed.

Participants in Focus Group 4 were of the view that content should only be hidden or removed if it was "pushing illegal activity" (P5, Male 20s) or inciting "some level of criminality or doing something that's illegal" (P1, Male 40s). This accords with our finding that Australians distinguish between misinformation that is mostly inadvertent, and disinformation that has the potential to harm. Participants also identified the problem of censoring one person's account or content versus another and there was some scepticism of the power that gave to the platforms. For example, on Twitter temporarily suspending former President Trump's Twitter account:

P1: I think it's a really good thing that Twitter censored him. But then in saying that it's also a really interesting thing of now that they're censoring news in Australia, we're like, whoa whoa whoa, you don't have that right [...] It's an interesting argument to have because when it's not benefiting me, when I want to see my news on my news feed, then I'm like, well no. (Male 20s, FG 1)

P4: Yeah, I think in that case, it was for the safety of people and the safety of their country. So I sort of get why they did it, but I could understand why people would think no, you shouldn't be silenced. Who makes that decision? (Female 40s, FG 12)

In this context participants expressed reservations about platforms having the power to decide what content should be hidden. There was also some concern that censorship may silence opinion and not just harmful misinformation.

P1: I'm not supportive of [Trump's] opinion stuff being blocked but when it probably got to some of the stuff around the Capitol and the incitement side of things then maybe that was sort of maybe that was getting above the threshold where it might be okay to do that but it is a pretty tricky, I'm not for stopping people saying stuff. I think you can say what you want but you've got to accept there are consequences when they say it and maybe some times the consequence is we're not going to publish you on this forum. (Male 40s, FG 4)

P6: Or kicking Trump off, you know, sort of fitted in with my, my views anyway so I was happy with that, but if it had been someone, you know what a Murdoch person, throwing a politician that I considered to be more reasonable off. (Male 80s, FG 5)

Participants in Focus Group 8 found it frustrating when they came across content on social media that had been removed and there was some concern that it can give whoever is removing it too much power. They seemed to favour transparency rather than removing content and they indicated that this could actually help people to learn how to distinguish what is fake and what is not: "I would understand them putting more information there the authorities say this. This article says this, which is why we think it's fake. But removing it maybe not" (P3, Male 20s); "you would be better off trying to make people less vulnerable rather than simply trying to protect them by removing the news" (P1, Male 20s). One young man was an exception in this group: "I think if its fake it should be off the internet" (P2, Male 20s, FG 8).

Censorship of certain content

Participants were generally aware of this measure, but not specifically in relation to misinformation on social media. In Focus Group 3, participants were familiar with censorship of violent and graphic material. It was common for participants not to have come into contact with the blurring or covering over of false information:

P5: Graphic imagery, stuff like that. I like the false information thing, that would be nice/ (Female 20s, FG 10)

Ability for users to report content

Most participants were aware of this measure and some said they had reported content such as animal cruelty, anti-Semitic content, and other content they perceived to be offensive.

INT: But you have reported it to Facebook?

P1: Yeah I've reported and the same with, on TikTok, they're a little bit different where they have the algorithm that it pops up with the videos that they think you'll like in their thing, and occasionally there'll be one where I'm like this is way off like this is not what I want, and they're usually really good, but that's when there's a button where it's like "not interested" and then a report button, where it's like, you know, report if it's something that's dangerous, but if it's just not something that you agree with, then you just press not interested and I think that's helpful. (Male 20s, FG 1)

There was also some dissatisfaction with the response of platforms to their reports. For some this had not been a trusted or positive experience. This measure was considered to be ineffective, both broadly, and as a means of combatting misinformation.

P4: [...] when I was on Facebook I reported anti-Semitic things many times and I found that they weren't dealt with at all [...] very ineffective. I didn't even bother with stuff like on Twitter related to COVID, or like any of the issues in 2020 the big issues because like it, even though I could see like plainly, what was being like spread, I just knew that like, I can't also like, when there's like 10,000 tweets that support Trump or something like that, I'm not going to go and do 10,000 tweets like it's. It'll take me years to do so. And also I just knew that nothing was probably going to happen. So, I just didn't bother, which is a shame. (Male 20s, FG 10)

Some participants expressed that they did not report because they were not engaged with social media debate or they believed in people's right to express their opinion on social media.

Increasing visibility of credible and high-quality news and information.

Engagement with this measure seemed to be platform specific. Participants who were aware of this measure and had come across it were far more likely to engage with it on Google. Most said they hadn't engaged with it on various social media platforms, some even found it annoying. For example, on the promotion of credible information on Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram, the central QLD group (FG 3) said: "it's annoying, I just delete it" (P2, Female 20s), and "I've never pressed on it" (P4, Female 20s).

Participants from Focus Group 4 were aware of this but hadn't engaged with it on social media. They were more likely to engage with the measure on Google and found it more helpful. The young man in this group (P5, 20s) who used Instagram and TikTok said he would ignore the links on them because that's not what he's on these platforms for. The man in his 40s (P1) similarly said that he doesn't look to Facebook or Instagram for advice about what he should do. There was more agreement in the group, however, about the Google strategies, and there seemed to be a perception that these were more authoritative and useful. The male in his 20s put it like this:

P5: *If I'm on Google, I'm normally on Google to look something up or I'm interested in learning something or getting some bit of information whereas on social media I'm just scrolling because I'm bored half the time, or it's just like, what are my friends doing, what's going on there. But I wouldn't say social media is really where I'm looking for news. (Male 20s, FG 4)*

Increasing distinguishability of sponsored content (ads)

This was widely recognised and the most uncontroversial of the measures. All groups who discussed this supported it. For example, participants in Focus Group 10 said:

P3: *Yeah, it's kind of annoying because now you do have to scroll past the ads to get to what you want but/ (Female 20s, FG 10)*

P4: *I also do want to know what's being sponsored. (Male 20s, FG 10)*

[...]

P1: *Yeah it's definitely a good thing it's happened as well on Instagram with a lot of like Instagram influences have to actually comment in their post saying, this is an ad. (Male 20s, FG 10)*

Fact checking and labelling/flagging/tagging content

This was a less familiar and controversial measure than removing content or accounts, and was most often identified on Twitter. Some participants in some groups (FG 4, FG 8), including some who had not personally encountered the measure, questioned how the determination is made, and who gets to make it. There was some support for tagging information as questionable and providing some explanation of why and according to whom.

P5: *[...] I feel like you should be able to still see it (Male 20s, FG 4)*

P1: *Yeah look I don't know (Male 40s, FG 4)*

P4: *Who is it to say it's false, how do they base that decision on? (Female 40s, FG 4)*

There was awareness that Twitter had started flagging some of former President Trump's posts with an exclamation mark and "this could be misleading information" (P3, Female 18, FG 12), and that Facebook had also started including an asterisk and words to the effect of "we are now aware of misleading news sources" (P2, Female 18, FG 12). There tended to be agreement that these measures were useful, particularly for those who may be more unsuspecting:

P2: *I'm usually quite good at picking it out but especially for a lot of the naive people on social media, I think it's really beneficial because people just apply bias and they take opinions over facts, more now because of social media. (Female 18, FG 12)*

One participant also observed the uneven implementation of this measure:

P2: *Well, Twitter has come out with its little you know, little tick information boxes saying, you know, this has been flagged as disinformation, for example [flagging], they don't use it as often as they could certainly depending on, they've used it very freely for years on nobodies, but they judiciously dole it out to those so-called people with the most followers (Female 50s, FG 9).*

PERSONAL STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH MISINFORMATION

It was evident that participants had their own methods of checking the veracity of the information they encounter. Some described specific measures that they take as well as identifying more general strategies such as consulting multiple sources of news and information on a topic, which was seen as potentially mitigating people's susceptibility to misinformation, as mentioned in the previous section. Many of these strategies could be included under the larger heading of cultivating literacy, particularly in relation to social media.

Across the focus groups, participants discussed the different ways they deal with misinformation when they encounter it. These ranged from scrolling by, directly challenging or correcting it, blocking or reporting it and seeking to verify content. Participants described varying degrees of engagement with misinformation with some quite actively involved in correcting what they believe to be misinformation that somebody shares with them on Facebook, while others took the approach of simply ignoring it or scrolling past. Some reported blocking content.

The following dialogue from Focus Group 7 captures a few of these different strategies participants used to deal with their friends who post conspiracy theories on Facebook:

INT: *Okay, so what do you do when she posts that stuff?*

P4: *I ignore it, most of the time. (Female 40s, FG 7)*

P2: *I block. I've just blocked them all now. (Female 40s, FG 7)*

P4: *I don't respond to it at all. I sometimes read the vitriol she gets and or, you know, but yeah, [name redacted] is another one. I've got lots of friends who upload, a few friends who are big conspiracy theorists and so I see that stuff on Facebook, but I just ignore it. I mean, I had a falling out with one of them and didn't speak to them for eight months. (Female 40s, FG 7)*

INT: Did you challenge them? Did you post and argue?

P4: No, I challenged them face to face over a dinner thing. And she felt really, really belittled and attacked and undermined and not listened to and just didn't want to see us anymore. And then we said, well let's see, I really miss you. I want to see you. Let's just keep COVID off the table, and let's not talk about COVID. And she was like, I can't talk about what I feel passionate about. And we're just on opposite ends of the spectrum about what we believe. (Female 40s, FG 7)

Challenging, correcting and engaging in dialogue

As touched on in earlier sections, a few participants did discuss actively engaging with and seeking to understand conspiracy theories with which they don't agree. For some, this translated into actively seeking to inform and correct others. Several participants also reflected on how to go about challenging and correcting in an inquisitive and dialogic manner, rather than just telling people they are wrong.

Some participants in Focus Group 10 spoke about engaging with misinformation to know what's being said so they could formulate counter-arguments to debunk the misinformation (in the context of friends sharing articles and misinformation via social media). They also discussed fact-checking via Google to identify trusted sources of information. There was consensus that everyone could play a role in starting the conversation and one participant discussed the personal responsibility he felt to do so:

P6: I know it's not my position to change their beliefs, but I do what I can to challenge their beliefs and hopefully incite an intellectual conversation, purely through asking questions really like, where did you get this new source from, why are you feeling the way you feel? What experiences have led you to believe that this is true? And I feel, the more we challenge people's beliefs in a comfortable yet inquisitive way people will be more receptive to open the dialogue. (Male 20s, FG 10)

A woman in Focus Group 1 reported a similar approach:

P2: If it's come across my feed because somebody that I'm friends with or someone I know has reposted that, then I'll often reach out to them and I'll say hey, just so you know, this is problematic slash misinformation, here's sources that contradict this and explain why it's wrong, just letting you know, not trying to offend or anything [...] So for Twitter and stuff, if it comes across my personal feed, like on my timeline, then that's when somebody else that I follow has retweeted that, then I'll reach out to them. (Female 20s, FG 1)

While the majority of participants did not describe directly combatting what they perceive as misinformation online, two participants in Focus Group 6 were actively engaged in fact-checking and correcting what they perceived as misinformation posted by friends on Facebook:

P2: Look there's a particular friend of mine who does dabble in conspiracy theories, etc. And he puts stuff on his Facebook page and I quite often correct [...] So I went and researched all the figures about deaths from flu etc and hospitalizations and looked at, you know, CDC website in the states and got all the figures and said, "Look, that's just not right, because this is a situation" and he actually seemed to react positively. (Male 60s, FG 6)

Another participant also offered an example of correcting misinformation an acquaintance posted on Facebook, which prompted a response from the participant quoted above:

P6: There was somebody the other day had a terrible lot of lies about the vaccine, including that Bill Gates put metal in it and all sorts of ridiculous things. And I just said, I thought, it's not a close friend, I just said, "so and so so please, don't spread this sort of misinformation on the internet, it's very dangerous." [...] I don't want to offend people. Sometimes I send a private note. Sometimes I do it in a funny way. But I tend to I'm on a one-person campaign to correct the internet. (Male 60s, FG 6)

P2: What I do, I try to do it in a way that doesn't just make them look like an idiot [...] (Male 60s, FG 6)

P6: I think that's much better. This was so extreme the other day, I didn't go for politeness. And I also, unfortunately, so often these things have got elements of truth in it, or unprovable things that you can go down a rabbit hole trying to prove to the person is not true. So I thought I'm just going to be authoritative here, or authoritarian, and say something so that other people who read it will see that there's a different point of view, because she already had several little smiley faces and love this sort of thing. [...] I think the main thing I'm trying to do is, what they say with influencing people is that you don't influence the hardliners. What you do is you influence possibly the people that are in the middle so they're getting an alternative perspective. (Male 60s, FG 6)

The active intervention described by the participant in the above dialogue about often commenting on posts he doesn't agree with, not because he necessarily thinks he is going to change the mind of that person but to provide an alternative viewpoint for other readers, is interesting in light of comments from two participants in Focus Group 4 who said they often read the comments on YouTube videos and Facebook posts before reading the actual article as this served in their view as a barometer of its credibility:

P5: [...] Same with Facebook, you might see something and a lot of the comments are basically saying this is stupid, this is wrong because of this, I would go oh I'm probably not going to believe in that article. But I know there's a lot of people who would just see stuff [inaudible] and go that's stuff that I've been thinking and want to jump on it. (Male 20s, FG 4)

[...]

P4: [...] if lots of people are discrediting it already I'm not wasting my time to read it. (Female 40s, FG 4)

Ignoring, blocking or reporting rather than directly challenging misinformation

The majority of participants were quite concerned about the spread of misinformation but others were more accommodating. Participants in Focus Groups 3, 4 and 11 didn't talk about challenging misinformation. They generally had quite a relaxed attitude about it, were happy to just scroll on by, were not the type to be getting into debates with others on social media and very rarely reported content. For example, participants in Focus Group 3 commented:

P4: [...] For me it's more like I just sit back and observe, I don't ever interact with any, or involve myself in any of those types of things I just read the comments, and go oh, you know, that's interesting, or wow that person's really rude. (Female 20s, FG 3)

P1: Just take it with a grain of salt. (Male 20s, FG 3)

P4: But then it all gets taken off like it gets removed off Facebook within a day or so. Or it says, you know that this article is no longer available, this attachment is removed. (Female 20s, FG 3)

The above comments indicate a certain degree of confidence in what platforms such as Facebook are already doing by way of removing content. However, one of the participants quoted above (P4) did say they had reported offensive content (pertaining to the "slaughter of dogs") on Facebook, which she felt did not need to be on her newsfeed every day. But this participant was not one for getting into arguments online:

P4: I don't like getting into those types of arguments because it leads nowhere it achieves nothing if you just try and look like a hero it's better to just if you don't like it, I think it's better to just report it or something. Either block a post so you can't see it, or something like that. Because you don't achieve anything. (Female 20s, FG 3)

A young man in Focus Group 1 who had previously reported content on Facebook and TikTok more often adopted a similar approach to the above participant:

P1: I think for me it depends on the platform that I'm using, like with Facebook most, or essentially the only time I'll get blatant misinformation is through friends sharing it and stuff like that, and I probably don't have the, it's probably, confidence isn't the right word, but I personally don't reach out, [...] A lot of the people from home, aren't going to change their opinion if I chuck them a message [...]. (Male 20s, FG 1)

Rather than confront what they perceived as misinformation, online or elsewhere, participants in Focus Group 9 were more likely to ignore or otherwise block it. This is captured in the following comments from one participant:

P2: Most of my [Facebook] friends very much all, all my friends were on the same page as me politically and so therefore we follow the same kind

of medical kind of information like are all happy to wear masks when we go to Sydney and all that sort of stuff. [...] And if I'm getting repeated misinformation from the source I'll just block the source. I just don't want to see it. It's not worth, it's not worth venturing into an argument about online I'm not interested. Just go away. [...] I'm not a confrontational person, I can't be bothered interacting with people that I consider silly. (Female 50s, FG 9)

Most misinformation encountered by participants in Focus Group 2 seemed to be dismissed (upon being identified as misinformation) rather than actively challenged:

P1: I guess. Well just from my point of view, like if I saw something that I knew was like fake news or whatever. I'd probably just be like are, like, surely no one's gonna believe this anyway and I wouldn't really take any measures to like actively try and shut it down. (Male 20s, FG 2)

In response to a question about whether they had seen any information against the Covid-19 vaccine and the anti-vaxx movement generally one participant in this focus group said:

P2: I block it out, I see it, and it sounds ridiculous to me. I don't even allow myself to read it's just stupid. People are refusing to take vaccines for Polio - well, if we all refused to take vaccines for Polio we'd all have Polio right now. If you've got a chance then let's give it a go. (Female 50s, FG 9).

Verification practices

Practices of verifying information in one form or another were common among the diverse participant groups. Googling was often mentioned. Some said they used specific fact-checking sites. Participants in Focus Group 3, who were generally relaxed about misinformation, did say they would occasionally do a Google search to find out more information to see if something they saw in their news feed (e.g. someone complaining about Covid-19) was true. Similarly, participants in Focus Group 11 identified strategies for checking information that they thought could be dubious, such as going to Google to find different articles from bigger and/or what they saw as more reputable news organisations, such as CNN, *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*. Indeed, consulting multiple sources was a generally common response to encountering misinformation.

Seeking to verify information by consulting other sources was a commonly reported practice. For example, one young man in Focus Group 2 said:

P5: If it's a random source, I'd probably compare it against reliable sources that I already have. And then make an assessment of whether it's an informed opinion about whether it's correct or not. (Male 20s, FG 2)

Participants in Focus Group 4 observed that misinformation can be packaged and presented to make it look quite legitimate, with

one describing what he does to check vaccine-related content posted by one of his Facebook friends:

P1: It's interesting when I get the nutty ones from my friend I normally would do a Google search on say the person or something and, you know, nine times out of 10 it comes up with information how they're discredited but again is that just a vicious cycle and is that just the other side of things just portraying that view? (Male 40s, FG 4)

This captures the information climate discussed by many of the groups wherein information and opinion are so abundant online, on social media and in other forms of media that the spread of misinformation thrives. In this climate, individuals do their own checking, and there are numerous examples of participants doing just that and either coming to their own conclusions or finding a place to sit that, as one woman in Focus Group 4 suggested, "fits [...] their narrative" (P4, 40s). Variations on this theme were evident across the groups, as was the uncertainty about what could or should be done about it.

A participant in Focus Group 7 described using Google to check the authenticity of content her students share with her:

P1: When my kids in class say "Miss, this has happened." And I say, "let me just have a look at that." And then I look at where they've got the photo from. And then I do a few other searches being very specific. And then I do a little bit of background research. And I find out no, that's actually from this magazine, it wasn't true. And I like to sometimes use things like that, but I'll backwards map to where they might have got the original information or image from, or if it's a pastiche. (Female 50s, FG 7)

Participants in Focus Group 6 reported seeing what they considered misinformation and described their attempts at fact-checking. These included checking the details against news sources they deemed to be trustworthy, consulting other websites to cross-check information, consulting Reddit discussions on particular topics and consulting Snopes.com, a fact-checking website. On the question about how reliable a fact-checking website such as Snopes is, participants explained why they see it as reliable:

P2: In my experience it's reliable. [...] (Male 60s, FG 6)

P6: They give you a lot of information about it. For instance they might say, you know, somebody's quotation is attributed to Gandhi or whatever and they go back and show that it was not it was actually printed in this book 200 years before or whatever. . (Male 60s, FG 6)

P2: They don't just say "no it's wrong" They give you enough information for you to decide. (Male 60s, FG 6)

P6: They show you the original image or, and they have a lot of references and third-party sites, like if the New York Times or The Guardian or whatever ever has an article on fact-checking they will refer to Snopes as being one of the sites. (Male 60s, FG 6)

A few participants in Focus Group 10 discussed their experiences correcting older relatives who had encountered misinformation online and from international news media. For example, one participant actively sought to verify information that her parents' American friends had shared with them about George Floyd:

P5: I found some articles that had discredited that, and he [her Dad] was like, oh okay, thanks for flagging it but it just like that made me really aware of the misinformation that my parents consume from their friends in America [...] I was like wow, okay, like there's because you know we have our trusted news sources that are our go tos and we just stick to those, but then when you kind of engage with family members that just like, engage with totally different stuff, it's like a bit of a reality check there actually is a lot of misinformation out there, and I felt like I actively had to go out there and search to prove them that this wasn't a credible source. (Female 20s, FG 10).

This section has discussed participants' views about responsibility for combatting misinformation, awareness and use of different platform measures and the personal strategies they employ when they encounter misinformation in their everyday lives, especially on social media but also in their personal relationships with friends and family. Participants in our study were clearly aware of a range of platform measures for combatting misinformation, whether through directly utilising them or seeing them on social media platforms. While they acknowledged that measures do need to be taken and that there is at least some sort of role for both platforms and governments, they also recognised their personal responsibility for assessing the quality of news and information and for containing the spread of false information, particularly that which may be harmful to others. In general, participants were not for closing down debate and discussion, except when information crossed certain boundaries. Indeed, this was reflected across the spectrum of approaches people took to dealing with misinformation. Support for "freedom of speech" and the "contest of ideas" was apparent in the accounts of both those who were more of the ignore and scroll on by disposition as well as those who took a more interventionist approach. Participants readily identified others who may be more susceptible to misinformation than themselves but they also occasionally acknowledged their own vulnerabilities. Overall, the findings suggest that there may be a need for more media literacy and education programs to assist people to discern misinformation online and to raise awareness of the kinds of strategies that are already in place or that could be developed in the future.

References

- Bail, C. (2021). *Breaking the Social Media Prism*. Princeton University Press
- Grinberg, N., et al. (2019). Fake news on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. *Science*, 363(6425), 374.
- Brown, P., Wenzel, A. & Roca-Sales, M. (2017). Local audiences consuming news on social platforms are hungry for transparency. Retrieved from cjr.org/tow_center_reports/focus-groups-news-media-diet.php
- Fisher, C., Park, S., Lee, J., Fuller, G. & Sang, Y. (2019). Digital News Report: Australia 2019. Canberra: News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2019/06/apo-nid240786-1366986.pdf>
- Holland, K., McCallum, K., & Blood, R.W. (2015). *Conversations about Alcohol and Pregnancy*. Canberra: Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education.
- McCallum, K. (2010). 'News and local talk: Conversations about the 'crisis of Indigenous violence' in Australia' in S. Elizabeth Bird, *The anthropology of news and journalism*, Evansville: University of Indiana Press, 151-167.
- Mheidly, N., & Fares, J. (2020). Leveraging media and health communication strategies to overcome the Covid-19 infodemic. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 41, 410-420.
- Neilsen, R. & Graves, L. (2017). News you don't believe: Audience perspectives on fake news, retrieved from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-10/Nielsen&Graves_factsheet_1710v3_FINAL_download.pdf
- Neuman, N. & Fletcher, R. (2017). Bias, Bullshit and Lies: Audience Perspectives on Low Trust in the Media. Retrieved from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/bias-bullshit-and-lies-audience-perspectives-low-trust-media>
- Park, S., Fisher, C., Flew, T. & Dulleck, U. (2020). Global mistrust in news: Social media news consumers' increased scepticism, *International Journal on Media Management*, 22(2), 83-96.
- Park, S., Fisher, C., Fuller, G. & Lee, J. (2018). Digital News Report: Australia 2018. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. <http://apo.org.au/node/174861>
- Park, S., Fisher, C., Lee, J. & McGuinness, K. (2020). Covid-19: Australian news and misinformation. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. <https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc/publications/documents/Covid-19-Australian-news-and-misinformation.pdf>
- Park, S., Fisher, C., Lee, J., McGuinness, K., Sang, Y., O'Neil, M., Jensen, M., McCallum, K. & Fuller, G. (2020). Digital News Report: Australia 2020. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2020-06/apo-nid305057.pdf>
- Perrin, A. (2018). Americans are changing their relationship with Facebook. Factank: News in Numbers. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/05/americans-are-changing-their-relationship-with-facebook/>
- Public Interest Journalism Initiative (2021). Newsroom changes January 2019—March 2021. The Australian Newsroom Mapping Project. <https://anmp.piji.com.au/>
- Roozenbeek, J., Schneider, C.R., Dryhurst, S., Kerr, J., Freeman A.L.J., Recchia, G., van der Bles, A.M. & van der Linden, S. (2020). Susceptibility to misinformation about Covid-19 around the world. *R. Soc. Open Sci.* 7: 201199. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rsos.201199>
- Watkins, J., Park, S., Blood, R.W., Dunne Breen, M., Fuller, G., Papandrea, F., & Ricketson, M. (2015). Digital News Report: Australia 2015. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2015/06/apo-nid55257-1225591.pdf>
- Watkins, J., Park, S., Blood, R.W., Deas, M., Dunne Breen, M., Fisher, C., Fuller, G., Lee, J., Papandrea, F., & Ricketson, M. (2016). Digital News Report: Australia 2016. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2016/06/apo-nid64397-1239626.pdf>
- Watkins, J., Park, S., Fisher, C., Blood, W.R., Fuller, G., Haussegger, V., Jensen, M., Lee, J., and Papandrea, F. (2017). Digital News Report: Australia 2017. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2017/06/apo-nid95161-1236596.pdf>

Appendix 1 | Survey methodology

Data collection

Wave 1

- Online survey conducted between 18 and 22 April 2020

Wave 2

- Online survey conducted between 19 December 2020 and 18 January 2021
- Repeat respondents from 19 December 2020
- New respondents from 6 January 2021

Sample

Wave 1

- Final sample N = 2,196

Wave 2

- N = 2,671, final sample N=2,659 (after cleaning)
- Recontact from Wave 1: 1,411
- New sample: 1,248

Respondent characteristics

Wave 1

TABLE 04 WAVE 1 RESPONDENTS

Variable		N	%
Gender	Male	1082	49
	Female	1110	51
	Non-binary	2	0.1
	Prefer not to disclose	2	0.1
Age	Z	177	8
	Y	691	31
	X	577	26
	BB	608	28
	74+	143	7
Education	Low	461	21
	Medium	922	42
	High	813	37
Income	Low (under \$39,999)	602	27
	Medium (\$40,000~99,999)	875	40
	High (\$100,000 or over)	526	24
	Don't know	193	9
Region	Major	1677	76
	Regional	519	24
State/ Territory	NSW	705	32
	VIC	553	25
	QLD	435	20
	WA	239	11
	SA	158	7
	NT	22	1
	TAS	48	2.2
	ACT	35	1.6

Wave 2

TABLE 05 WAVE 2 RESPONDENTS

Variable		N	%
Gender	Male	1310	49
	Female	1344	51
	Non-binary	2	0.1
	Prefer not to disclose	2	0.1
Age	Z	217	8
	Y	874	33
	X	659	25
	BB	729	27
	74+	180	7
Education	Low	558	21
	Medium	1117	42
	High	984	37
Income	Low (under \$39,999)	603	23
	Medium (\$40,000~99,999)	1082	41
	High (\$100,000 or over)	707	27
	Don't know	-	-
Region	Major	630	24
	Regional	854	32
State/ Territory	NSW	670	25
	VIC	526	20
	QLD	290	11
	WA	191	7
	SA	27	1
	NT	58	2
	TAS	43	2
	ACT	35	1.6

We note that we conducted Wave 2 fieldwork during an outbreak in Northern Beaches, NSW after a long period of no cases, and that this may have influenced responses.

Recoding scheme

Generation

We adopted the generational categories of the PEW Research. Instead of using PEW's Greatest and Silent Generation categories, we merged the two and used 74 and older.

TABLE 06 GENERATION RECODING

Birth years	Generation	Abbreviation used	Age span
1901–27	Greatest Generation		92+
1928–45	Silent Generation	74+	74–91
1946–64	Baby Boomers	BB	55–73
1965–80	Gen X	X	39–54
1981–96	Gen Y, Millennials	Y	23–38
1997–	Gen Z, Post-millennials	Z	18–22

Education

We asked respondents “What is your highest level of education? If you are currently in full-time education, please put your highest qualification to date” giving 10 different categories to choose from. We recoded them in line with the International Standard Classification of Education levels.

TABLE 07 EDUCATION RECODING

	Level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I did not complete any formal education Early childhood education Primary education Lower secondary education (Yr 10) 	Low
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upper secondary education (Yr 12, HSC, Baccalaureate or other Senior Secondary Certificate) Post-secondary, non-tertiary education (VET, Certificate I–IV) Post-secondary vocational education and training (Diploma, Advanced Diploma, TAFE) 	Medium
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor degree or equivalent Masters degree or equivalent PhD or equivalent 	High

Income

To measure income, we asked respondents their annual household income before tax. We recoded them into 'low', 'medium', 'high', and 'prefer not to say'.

TABLE 08 INCOME RECODING

	Level
Less than \$40,000	Low
\$40,000 to less than \$60,000	
\$60,000 to less than \$100,000	Medium
\$100,000 to less than \$150,000	
\$150,000 or more	High
Prefer not to say	Prefer not to say

Heavy vs light news consumers

We asked respondents how often they access news. News was defined as 'national, international, regional/local news and other topical events accessed via any platform (radio, TV, newspaper or online'. Those who say they access news more than once a day was recoded as 'heavy', those who access news once a day to less often than once a week were recoded as 'light', and those who say 'less than once a month' and 'never' were recoded as 'non-users'. Those who answered 'don't know' were excluded.

TABLE 09 NEWS ACCESS RECODING

Category	Percentage in the sample	Original response
Heavy	62	More than 20 times a day
		Between 11 and 20 times a day
		Between 6 and 10 times a day
		Between 2 and 5 times a day
Light	35	Once a day
		4-6 days a week
		2-3 days a week
		Once a week
Non-users	2.3	Less often than once a week
		Less often than once a month
Excluded	1.3	Never
		Don't know

Heavy, moderate and light social media and online platform users

Respondents were given a list of 17 social media or online platforms with an option to give an additional response; Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Twitter, Reddit, Tik Tok, Parler, Google Search, Bing Search, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, WeChat, Google News, Apple News, and other social media or online platform. Those who did not use any platforms were recoded as 'non-user', 1–2 platforms as 'light', 3–5 as 'moderate', and 6 or more as 'heavy' social media and online platform users. We excluded Parler from the analysis due to the size of the respondents (N=24).

TABLE 10 NUMBER OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE PLATFORMS RECODING

Category	Number of social media or online platforms used in the past week	Percentage in the sample
Non-user	0	9
Light	1–2	29
Moderate	3–5	36
Heavy	6 or more	27

Covid-19 news and information sources

We asked the question, "Which, if any, of the following have you accessed in the last week as a source of news or information about Covid-19?" and gave 11 different options: news media, Department of Health websites (health.gov.au), State government websites, WHO website, other health authority websites (i.e., CDC, NHS), health and lifestyle websites and blogs, scientists, doctors or health experts, politicians, social media, personal communication with people I know, and podcasts. We also gave an option 'none of these'. Of the 11 options, excluding podcasts, the level of Covid-19 news and information access was calculated. In order to compare with Wave 1, we did not include podcasts, as it was not an option in Wave 1. We grouped respondents into 'did not access', 'one source', '2–3 sources' and '4 or more sources'.

TABLE 11 NUMBER OF COVID-19 NEWS AND INFORMATION SOURCES RECODING

	Percentage in the sample
Did not access	12
one source	35
2–3 sources	36
4 or more sources	18

News avoidance

We asked respondents whether they found themselves trying to avoid news about Covid-19 with five options to choose from; often, sometimes, occasionally, never and don't know. We grouped those who responded 'often' and 'sometimes' as 'avoid' and 'occasionally' and 'never' as 'do not avoid'.

TABLE 12 NEWS AVOIDANCE RECODING

	Percentage in the sample
Avoid	36
Do not avoid	61
Don't know	3

Covid-19 misinformation experience

We asked two questions about the level of experience of misinformation about the virus.

- On average, how often have you come across news or information that you know or suspect to be false or misleading about Covid-19?
- This time, just thinking about social media or online platforms, how often have you come across news or information about Covid-19 that you know or suspect to be false or misleading?

We gave six options to choose from; A great deal, a lot, somewhat, not so much, not at all, and don't know. Depending on the level of experience, we regrouped them into:

- High (a great deal/a lot)
- Low (somewhat/not so much)
- No experience (not at all)
- Don't know

Throughout the report we only used the general experience of misinformation and not the experience of misinformation when on social media or online platforms, as the results were very similar.

Trust in sources of news and information about Covid-19

We asked the question, "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about news and information provided about Covid-19?" and gave 11 different options: news organisations, the federal government, the state and territory government, health organisations, health and lifestyle websites and blogs, the scientists, doctors, or health experts, politicians, the news found on social media, people I know with five options to choose from; strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree and strongly agree. We grouped regrouped them into three categories: distrust, neither, trust.

Concern about Covid-19

We asked the question, "How concerned are you about Covid-19?" with six options to choose from; extremely concerned, very concerned, somewhat concerned, not very concerned, not at all concerned and don't know. Depending on the level of concern, we recoded them into:

- High (extremely/very)
- Low (somewhat/not very/not at all)
- Don't know

Concern about false or misleading information about Covid-19 on social media or online platforms

We asked the question, "How concerned, if at all, are you about false or misleading information about Covid-19 on social media or online platforms?" with six options to choose from; extremely concerned, very concerned, somewhat concerned, not very concerned, not at all concerned and don't know.

Depending on the level of concern, we recoded them into:

- High (extremely/very)
- Low (somewhat/not very/not at all)
- Don't know

Responses to misinformation

Among those who experienced misinformation on social media ‘a great deal’, ‘a lot’, or ‘somewhat’ we asked the question “When you came across the false or misleading news and information about Covid-19, what (if anything) did you do after seeing it? Check all that apply” and gave 8 options: I searched different sources to see whether it was accurate, I started using more reputable information sources, I stopped using or blocked the source because I was unsure about the accuracy of the information, I discussed the information with other people I trust, I stopped paying attention to information shared on social media by people I don’t trust, I forwarded or shared it with other people, I made a complaint to the information provider, and other. We grouped respondents into ‘none of these’, ‘one’ and ‘2 or more’ based on their number of responses.

TABLE 13 RESPONSES TO MISINFORMATION RECODING

	N	Percentage in the sample	Percentage among respondents
None	437	16	31
One	524	20	37
2 or more	452	17	32
Those who experienced misinformation on social media/online platforms	1413	53	100
Did not ask the question	1246	47	-
Total	2659	100	-

Responsibility to deal with misinformation about Covid-19

We asked the question, “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about who is responsible for reducing the exposure to false or misleading information about Covid-19?” and gave 5 different options: ‘individuals should use common sense and learn to detect false or misleading information themselves’, ‘social media or online platforms should be doing more to reduce the amount of false or misleading information people see on these services’, ‘it is the government’s responsibility to make sure the public is not exposed to false or misleading information on social media or online platforms’, ‘false or misleading information is unavoidable and it is just something we must live with’, ‘it is not the job of social media or online platforms to decide what is or is not false or misleading information’ with six options to choose from; strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree and don’t know. We grouped regrouped them into four categories: disagree, neither, agree and don’t know.

Covid-19 informed vs misinformed

The questions addressing misinformation beliefs are designed to assess agreement with official advice on a range of issues related to Covid-19 including mask wearing and appropriate treatment. The questions are designed to mitigate acquiescence bias by having a mixture of ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’ responses corresponding with official advice. In designing these questions, the researchers were sensitive to the possibility respondents may want to provide a socially desirable response. To address this, as much as possible the question wording avoids expressing positive or negative sentiment that could suggest there is a desirable response.

Those who are in general disagreement with the authoritative or factual advice are labelled as ‘misinformed’. Of the five statements, if a respondent is in disagreement with one or two health advice, they are categorised as ‘misinformed (low) (30%)’. If a respondent disagrees with three to five statements, they are recoded as ‘misinformed (high) (11%)’. The rest was recoded as ‘informed’ (60%).

TABLE 14 MISINFORMED GROUPS RECODING

	Percentage in the sample			
	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Don't know
Wearing a mask does not significantly reduce your risk of infection or spreading the virus.	60	17	21	2
Covid-19 vaccines that are approved by the health authorities in Australia are safe. <reverse>	9	28	56	8
I am confident that official medical guidelines and treatment for Covid-19 in my State or Territory are based on evidence and best practice. <reverse>	6	16	74	3
The risks posed by Covid-19 are being exaggerated by people in power who want to take advantage of the situation.	53	20	24	3
In most cases Covid-19 can be prevented or treated by simple remedies such as taking vitamins and supplements or other over the counter medicines.	66	15	16	3

Appendix 2 | Questionnaire

Screening questions (age, gender, region, education quota based on ABS Census)

S1. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to disclose

S2. How old are you?

S3. What is the postcode and suburb/place that you live in?

S4. What is your highest level of education? If you are currently in full-time education please put your highest qualification to date.

- I did not complete any formal education
- Early childhood education
- Primary education
- Lower secondary education (Yr 10)
- Upper secondary education (Yr 12, HSC, Baccalaureate or other Senior Secondary Certificate)
- Post-secondary, non-tertiary education (VET, Certificate I-IV)
- Post-secondary vocational education and training (Diploma, Advanced Diploma, TAFE)
- Bachelor degree or equivalent
- Masters degree or equivalent
- PhD or equivalent

Q1. On average, how often do you access news? By news we mean national, international, regional/local news and other topical events accessed via any platform (radio, TV, newspaper or online).

- More than 20 times a day
- Between 11 and 20 times a day
- Between 6 and 10 times a day
- Between 2 and 5 times a day
- Once a day
- 4-6 days a week
- 2-3 days a week
- Once a week
- Less often than once a week
- Less often than once a month
- Never
- Don't know

Q4. Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news? Please select all that apply.

- Television news bulletins or programmes
- 24-hour news television channels
- Radio news bulletins programmes
- Printed newspapers
- Printed magazines
- Websites/apps of newspapers
- Websites/apps of news magazines
- Websites/apps of TV and Radio broadcasters

Websites/apps of online only news outlets
Social media
Podcasts
None of these

[only show the ones selected above, do not show if only one is selected in Q4]

Q5. Which of the following would you say is your main source of news?

Television news bulletins or programmes
24-hour news television channels
Radio news bulletins programmes
Printed newspapers
Printed magazines
Websites/apps of newspapers
Websites/apps of news magazines
Websites/apps of TV and Radio broadcasters
Websites/apps of online only news outlets
Social media
Podcasts

Q3. How concerned are you about Covid-19?

Extremely concerned
Very concerned
Somewhat concerned
Not very concerned
Not at all concerned
Don't know

Q6. Which, if any, of the following have you accessed in the last week as a source of news or information about Covid-19? Please select all that apply.

News media
Department of Health websites (health.gov.au)
State government websites
WHO website
Other health authority websites (i.e., CDC, NHS)
Health and lifestyle websites and blogs
Scientists, doctors or health experts
Politicians
Social media
Personal communication with people I know
Podcasts
None of these

[Among those who selected social media in Q6]

Q8. Thinking about what you are seeing on social media, which of the following sources are you getting news and information about Covid-19 from? Check all that apply.

Social media posts from official sources such as the government, WHO etc
Social media posts from news media such as the ABC, Sydney Morning Herald, news.com.au
Links forwarded/posted/shared from a person you know (family, friends, colleagues)
Opinions from a person you know (family, friends, colleagues)

- Links forwarded/posted/shared from a person you don't know
- Opinions from a person you don't know
- Celebrities or social media influencers
- I don't notice where the information is coming from [if a respondent selects this option then they shouldn't be able to select any other option]
- None of the above

[Do not randomise the order of the platforms and show as displayed below]

NEW_Q6_1. Which, if any, of the following social media or online platforms have you used in the last week for any purpose?

- Facebook
- YouTube
- Instagram
- Snapchat
- Pinterest
- LinkedIn
- Twitter
- Reddit
- TikTok
- Parler
- Google Search
- Bing Search
- Facebook Messenger
- WhatsApp
- WeChat
- Google News
- Apple News
- Other social media or online platform: Specify
- None of these *[Do not show to those who checked social media in Q4 or Q6]*

[only show the ones selected above]

NEW_Q7_1. Have you come across news or information about Covid-19 on any of the following social media or online platforms in the last week? Please select all that apply.

	I used it specifically to find news or information about Covid-19	Yes—I came across news or information about Covid-19 while I was on it for other reasons	Yes—I did not see news or information about Covid-19 on this social media or online platform
Facebook			
YouTube			
Instagram			
Snapchat			
Pinterest			
LinkedIn			
Twitter			
Reddit			
TikTok			
Parler			
Google Search			
Bing Search			

Facebook Messenger			
WhatsApp			
WeChat			
Google News			
Apple News			
Other social media or online platform— Please specify:			
None of these			

Q10. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about news and information provided about Covid-19?

- I think I can trust most news organisations
- I think I can trust the federal government
- I think I can trust the state and territory government
- I think I can trust health organisations
- I think I can trust health and lifestyle websites and blogs
- I think I can trust the scientists, doctors, or health experts
- I think I can trust politicians
- I think I can trust the news found on social media
- I think I can trust people I know

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q12. On average, how often have you come across news or information that you know or suspect to be false or misleading about Covid-19?

- A great deal
- A lot
- Somewhat
- Not so much
- Not at all
- Don't know

NEW_Q12_1. This time, just thinking about social media or online platforms, how often have you come across news or information about Covid-19 that you know or suspect to be false or misleading?

- A great deal
- A lot
- Somewhat
- Not so much
- Not at all
- Don't know

[Those who said a great deal, a lot, somewhat/ give all options/ do not randomise]

NEW_Q12_2. On which social media or online platforms did you come across false or misleading information about Covid-19?

Check all that apply.

Facebook

YouTube

Instagram

Snapchat

Pinterest

LinkedIn

Twitter

Reddit

TikTok

Parler

Google Search

Bing Search

Facebook Messenger

WhatsApp

WeChat

Google News

Apple News

Other social media or online platform—Please specify:

None of these

Q14. When you came across the false or misleading news and information about Covid-19, what (if anything) did you do after seeing it? Check all that apply.

I searched different sources to see whether it was accurate

I started using more reputable information sources

I stopped using or blocked the source because I was unsure about the accuracy of the information

I discussed the information with other people I trust

I stopped paying attention to information shared on social media by people I don't trust

I forwarded or shared it with other people

I made a complaint to the information provider

Other (please specify)

Did nothing *[if a respondent selects this option then they shouldn't be able to select any other option]*

Q_NEW_MisinformationConcern. How concerned, if at all, are you about false or misleading information about Covid-19 on social media or online platforms?

Extremely concerned

Very concerned

Somewhat concerned

Not very concerned

Not at all concerned

Don't know

Q_New_misinformationbelief. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Covid-19?

- Wearing a mask does not significantly reduce your risk of infection or spreading the virus.
- Covid-19 vaccines that are approved by the health authorities in Australia are safe. *<reversed>*
- I am confident that official medical guidelines and treatment for Covid-19 in my State or Territory are based on evidence and best practice. *<reversed>*

- The risks posed by Covid-19 are being exaggerated by people in power who want to take advantage of the situation.
- In most cases Covid-19 can be prevented or treated by simple remedies such as taking vitamins and supplements or other over the counter medicines.

Strongly disagree
 Disagree
 Neither agree nor disagree
 Agree
 Strongly agree
 Don't know

[do not randomise]

Q_NEW_flagging. Social media or online platforms have taken a variety of actions since March to reduce people's exposure to false or misleading news or information about Covid-19. Which of the following are you aware of, or have seen while on social media or online platforms?

	I am not aware of this	I am aware they are doing this	I have seen or experienced this while using social media or online platforms
Removal of content (i.e. Tweets, posts, videos)			
Labelling potentially false or misleading information			
Directing users to authoritative sources or information (i.e. fact-checking services, official sources)			
Providing users with the opportunity to report false or misleading information			
Making authoritative or official information more visible in my feed			
Directing users to information and resources hosted on the platform (i.e. a dedicated page or channel)			

Q_NEW_measures. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about who is responsible for reducing the exposure to false or misleading information about Covid-19?

- Individuals should use common sense and learn to detect false or misleading information themselves.
- Social media or online platforms should be doing more to reduce the amount of false or misleading information people see on these services.
- It is the government's responsibility to make sure the public is not exposed to false or misleading information on social media or online platforms.
- False or misleading information is unavoidable and it is just something we must live with.
- It is not the job of social media or online platforms to decide what is or is not false or misleading information.

Strongly disagree
 Disagree
 Neither agree nor disagree
 Agree
 Strongly agree
 Don't know

Q16. Do you find yourself trying to avoid news about Covid-19?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Occasionally
- Never
- Don't know

[Those who said often, sometimes, occasionally]

Q17. You said that you find yourself trying to avoid news about the Covid-19. Which, if any of the following, are reasons why you try to avoid news? Please select all that apply.

- I find it overwhelming
- I am tired of hearing about it
- I already know enough about it
- I find it upsetting
- I am practicing self-care
- I can't rely on news to be true
- I don't feel there is anything I can do about it
- It is not important to me
- I don't trust the news
- Other: Specify
- Don't know

Q21. What is your employment status?

- Full-time work
- Part-time work
- Unemployed
- Retired
- Unpaid position (housework, volunteer or community service, military service, etc.)
- Other
- Don't know

Q22. What is your annual household income before tax?

- Less than \$40,000
- \$40,000 to less than \$60,000
- \$60,000 to less than \$100,000
- \$100,000 to less than \$150,000
- \$150,000 or more
- Prefer not to say

Q23. What is your current living situation? Please select all the people you are currently living with.

- Parents
- Grandparents
- Partner/spouse
- Adult children
- Children under 18
- Grandchildren
- Housemate(s)
- Living in a retirement community
- Living in assisted living facility
- Living alone

Appendix 3 | Stimulus materials

Examples of misinformation

Australian bushfires

6 January at 15:25

AGENDA 2030 is in full flight

Australians have been constantly spooned lies by Mainstream media and the Government that these past few weeks have just been about the bushfires, but its all been about more than that. These bushfires are destined to be used as a catalyst to change the entire landscape of Australia forever.

Firstly, isn't it suspicious that many fires all broke out at the same time? Stretching fire services to the limit to try to contain them? Thats over 80 fr... See more

Can you imagine?

Now lets take a look at the bushfire path across Australia:

and 303 others 11 comments 878 shares

8 @8Notables

Think California wild fires and high speed rail. #AustraliaFires

Sydney to Melbourne in under an hour: Virgin wants to build 1,200km/h FLOATING hyperloop trains to connect Australian cities faster than ever before

Now let's take a look at the bushfire path across Australia:

By Sahil Makkar For Daily Mail Australia
09:20 24 Apr 2019, updated 09:50 26 Apr 2019

2:46 PM - Jan 7, 2020 - Twitter for Android

285 Retweets 353 Likes

Australian military



QAnon and President Trump

Like Follow Share ...

COVID-19 is but for manipulation, some extremely deformed, and all with extreme psychiatric damage due to trauma.

- It's widely known there are underground tunnel systems (research D.U.M.B) that have been used for decades to traffick people for sex slaves and organ harvesting, across the globe. There is currently a monumental military operation going down, lead by POTUS to uncover these children, arrest those involved, and stop this evil once and for all.

What you are seeing is a war. An invisible war that Trump keeps taking about...

It's a war between Trump and his Secret Service against the elites, bankers and mainstream media.

A war between good and evil.

Pay attention to the bigger picture. Trump has arrested and caught more pedophile and child trafficking rings in the world... but I bet you didn't know that because the mainstream (George Soros funded media) make out that he's a moron...

Trump will go down in history in the coming weeks.

There is no need to panic or have fear. This whole thing is working out as it needs to for Trump and his team to remove the corruption and power that has taxed your hard earned dollars, loaded your loans and credit cards with interest and pulled wool over your eyes.. we have been living as slaves to the system for long enough.

Home About Photos Events Videos Posts Community

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump

The election is absolutely being rigged by the dishonest and distorted media pushing Crooked Hillary - but also at many polling places - SAD

RETWEETS 21,876 LIKES 57,565

1:01 PM - 16 Oct 2016

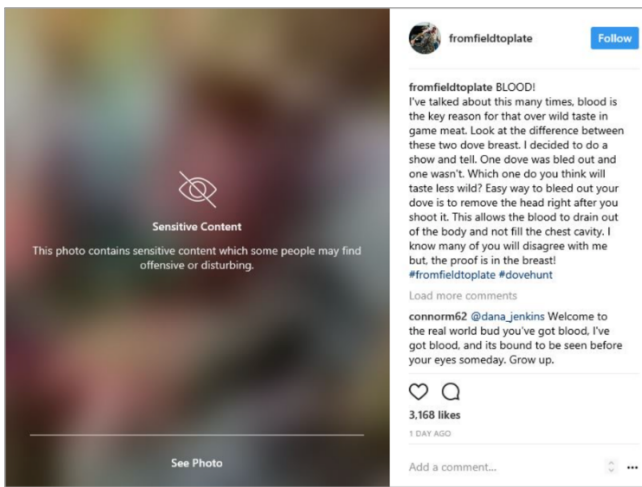
22K 58K

Examples of platform measures

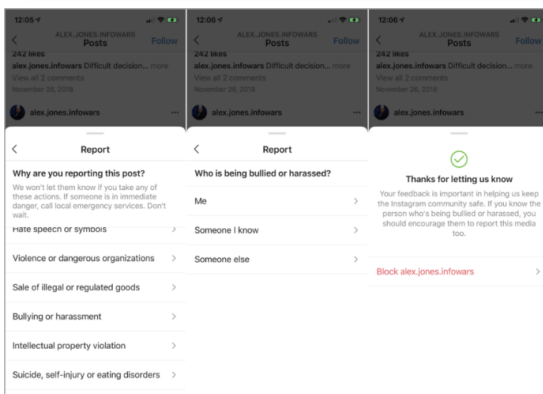
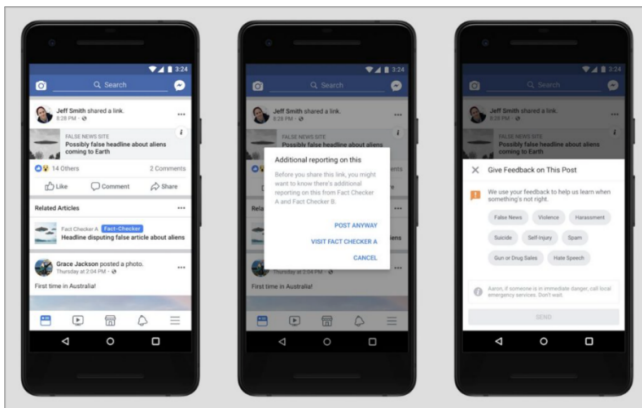
Hiding or removing content



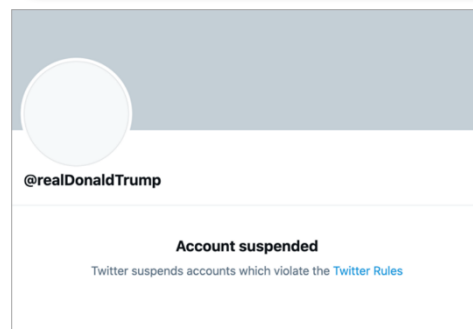
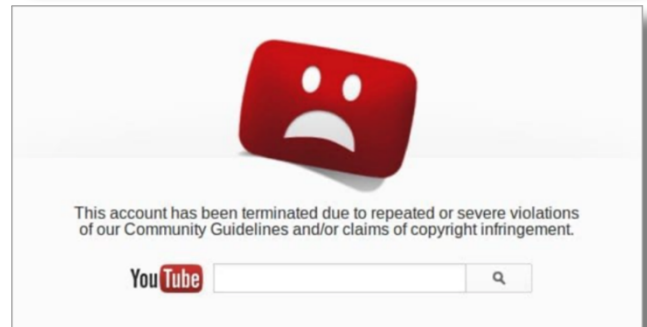
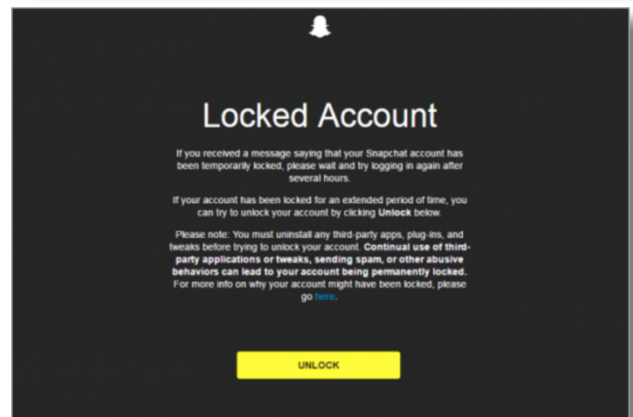
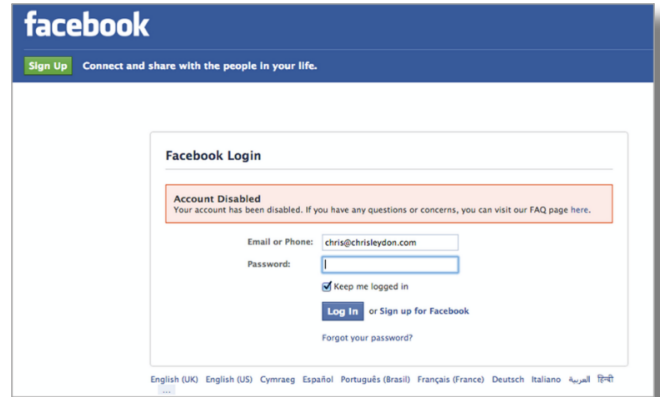
Censorship of certain content



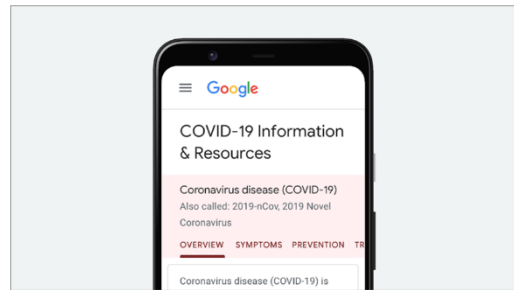
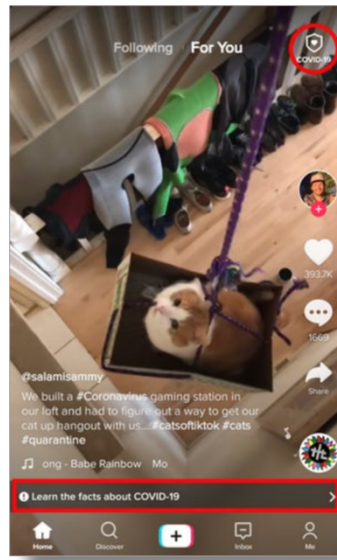
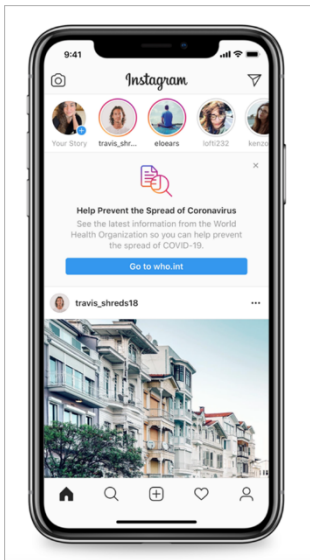
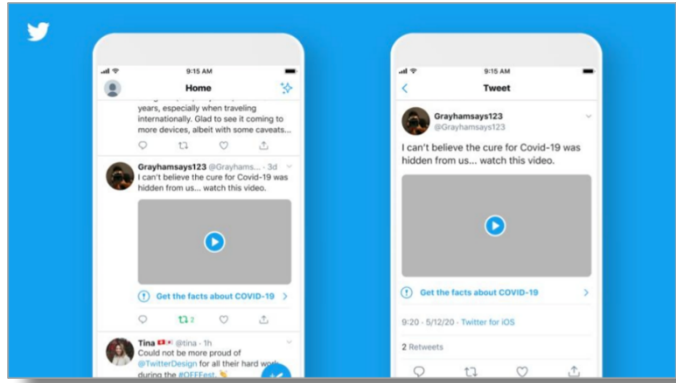
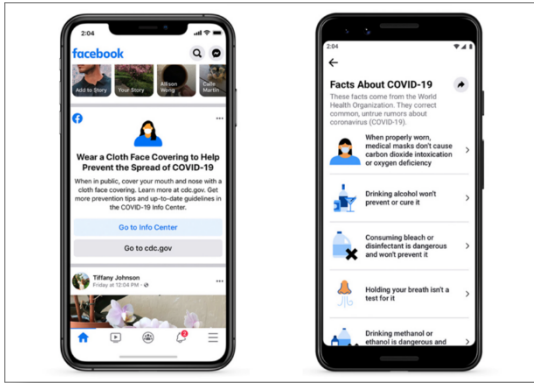
Ability for users to report content



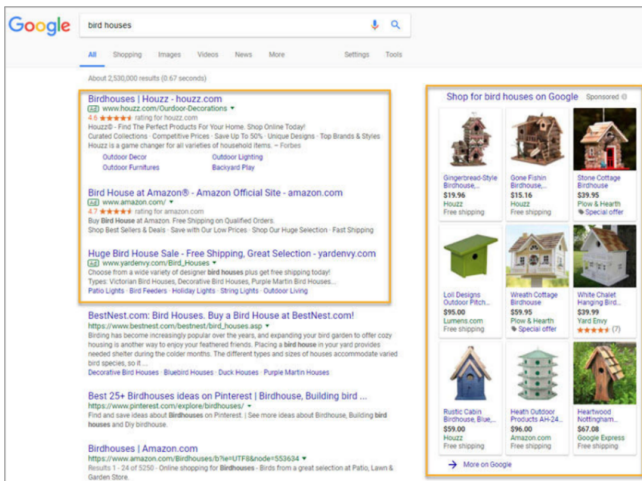
Removing or temporarily suspending accounts



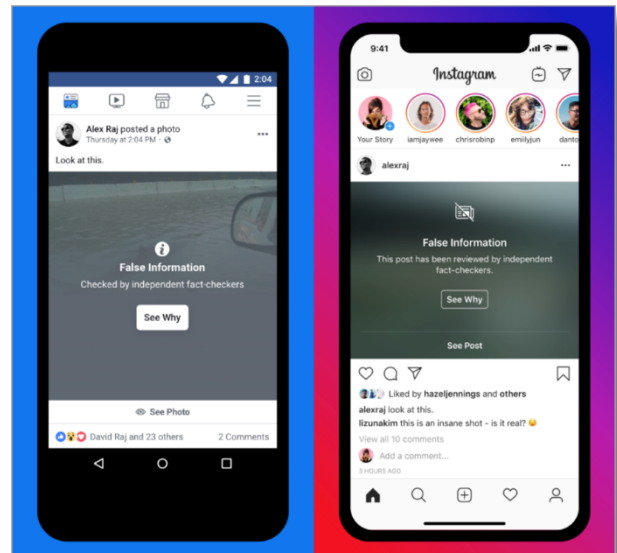
Increasing visibility of credible and high-quality news and information



Increasing distinguishability of sponsored content (ads)



Fact-checking and labelling/flagging/tagging content



Appendix 4 | Interview protocol

An interview protocol provides guiding questions (see below) but allows for free-flowing discussion. Initially, broad questions regarding individuals' trust in news were posed for the purpose of orientating and contextualising discussion. Questions more specific to the project's outcomes were then be asked. Each focus group varied depending on the participants' responses.

One pilot group was carried out to gauge the efficacy of the protocol.

Preamble

Thanks for agreeing to participate in this focus group about news and misinformation in the context of Covid-19. We/researchers from the News and Media Research Centre are interested in learning about how different population groups understand and respond to Covid-19 related news, information and misinformation. I trust you have all had a chance to read the Information Sheet and have signed the Consent Form. I'll start by asking a few general questions about your Covid-19 experiences and the media you use, before asking some questions about your trust in news and whether you've experienced misinformation on social media. The aim is for you to be able to freely discuss the topics that I raise. Later on, I'll show you some stimulus materials.

Guiding Questions

Covid-19 experiences

- Let's start by thinking about Covid, and the media that you used in 2020 during the height of the pandemic.
- Where did you get your news and information from during the pandemic?

Trust in news

- Thinking about your relationship with news, who or what news sources would you say you trust, or find to be the most reliable? Do they tend to be your primary source of news? *Probe for reasons.*
- What about social media? Would you say you were a big social media user? *Probe for specific platforms and reasons, particularly those related to trust/reliability. Facebook incident.*

Understandings of and exposure to misinformation

- Have you heard of the terms misinformation or disinformation?
- What do you think I mean when I use the term mis- or disinformation? Misinformation: the *inadvertent* sharing of false information. Disinformation: the *deliberate* creation and sharing of information known to be false. *Clarify that, while misinformation and disinformation can have different meanings, we will be using the term misinformation to cover all types of false or misleading content going forward.*
- Have you encountered any examples of misinformation when online? *If so, probe where and what content.*
- Can you explain more about how you determined that was misinformation?
- How did you respond to it?
- Has your response or reaction to encountering misinformation changed recently?

Perceptions of examples of misinformation

- Have you encountered the claim that vaccinating children causes autism? What do you think about that claim?
- Do you believe that the Covid-19 vaccines that are approved by health authorities in Australia are safe? If not, why? *Potentially probe about official medical guidelines and treatment.*
- *Other examples of misinformation that can be probed/drawn on include the recent US election result, the cause of the 2019–20 Australian bushfires, 5G, and QAnon [show stimulus material].*

Attitudes towards misinformation

- How concerned are you about false or misleading information. Has that changed recently? *Probe for reasons.*
- Do you think some people are more vulnerable to misinformation than others? *Probe for specific examples and reasons, and whether they believe they themselves are vulnerable.*
- What kind of impact do you think misinformation could have? Probe for personal impact, and whether their response has informed their reaction to encountering misinformation. Probe also for thoughts on the impact of misinformation during a global pandemic.
- What do you think motivates people to disseminate misinformation?

Responsibility for monitoring and managing misinformation

- We're interested in your thoughts about combatting or addressing misinformation online. Whose responsibility do you think it is? *Probe whether they believe it to be an individual responsibility, the responsibility of government, the responsibility of the platform, etc. Probe for reasons.*
- Is that different in the case of more traditional media, such as TV, newspapers and radio? *Why/why not?*
- Thinking about traditional media organisations, like newspapers and TV stations; what role do you think traditional media plays, or should play in combatting misinformation?
- What role do you think social media platforms—such as Facebook and Twitter—play, or should play, in combatting misinformation?
- What do you think Governments should do to combat misinformation online?
- What responsibilities do you think individuals have when they encounter misinformation online?

Awareness and perceptions of measures to regulate misinformation on digital platforms

- Are you aware of any measures adopted by digital platforms—social media platforms such as Facebook, search engines such as Google, and news aggregators such as Apple News—to regulate, manage or combat misinformation? *Probe for specific examples; refer to visual cues if required.*
- What do you think about the effectiveness of those measures? *Probe for reasons.*
- What would you say would be your preferred way or ways of regulating or combatting misinformation online? What would be helpful?
- What do you think would happen if there were no measures taken to combat misinformation online?



**UNIVERSITY OF
CANBERRA**

**News & Media Research Centre
Faculty of Arts & Design**

UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA
CANBERRA ACT 2601
AUSTRALIA

Australian Government Higher Education
Registered (CRICOS) Provider #00212K.

Information in this report was correct at time of printing.
Up-to-date information is available on the University's
website: canberra.edu.au/nmrc

Printed March 2022

canberra.edu.au/nmrc
@NewsMediaRC