

# Children's Online User Ages Quantitative Research Study

Produced by: Yonder Consulting

Fieldwork: 14<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> July, 2022

## Ofcom's responsibilities

Ofcom has a statutory duty to promote and research media literacy, including in respect of material available on the internet. A key way we seek to fulfil this duty is through our Making Sense of Media programme, which aims to help improve the online skills, knowledge and understanding of children and adults in the UK. Ofcom was also given powers in autumn 2020 to regulate UK-established video-sharing platforms (VSPs). And in December 2020, the Government confirmed its intention to nominate Ofcom as the regulator for online safety in the UK, under the Online Safety Bill, which is currently in Parliament.

As referenced in our [Roadmap to Online Safety Regulation](#), this report is one in a series of research studies into online safety that will inform our preparations for implementing the new online safety laws. As part of these preparations, we are building a robust evidence base, bringing together internal and external data, collected using different methods, from a variety of different sources.

In this context, this programme of research further develops our understanding of online harms and how we can help to promote a safer user experience. The findings should not be considered a reflection of any policy position that Ofcom may adopt when we take up our role as the online safety regulator.

# Background, methodology and research caveats

# Background and Objectives

## Understanding children’s user ages on various social media platforms

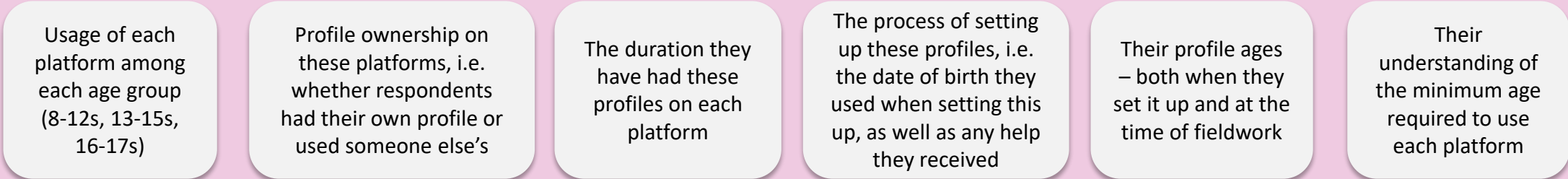
Ofcom’s ethnographic research into the *‘Risk factors that may lead children to harm online’* found that one of the key risk factors was that children were bypassing age assurance measures in social media apps or sites. For example, by using a false date of birth to gain access to online platforms and the content within, while under the minimum age requirement for that platform.

To understand the extent to which children are bypassing age assurance measures, Ofcom commissioned Yonder to conduct quantitative research to estimate the proportion of children that have online profiles with ‘user ages’ that make them appear to be older than they actually are.

Online profiles with user ages of 16+ and 18+ are the point at which some platforms grant access to certain features and functionalities which they prevent younger children from accessing due to the potential for harm enabled by these. These can include the ability to use direct messaging when aged 16, and the ability to see adult content when aged 18. Therefore, the research focused on:

- Those aged 12 or younger with an online user age of at least 13;
- Those aged 15 or younger with a user age of at least 16;
- Those aged 17 or younger with a user age of at least 18.

The research focused on six platforms which were cited as the most used among children aged 8-17 in Ofcom’s media literacy research<sup>1</sup>, and therefore the most likely for them to have a profile on. The research measured:



<sup>1</sup> [Children's Media Literacy Survey 2021 Online Behaviours and Attitudes Combined Wave 1 and 2 Data Tables \(ofcom.org.uk\)](https://www.ofcom.gov.uk/consult/condocs/mls/mls2021/online-behaviours-and-attitudes-combined-wave-1-and-2-data-tables/)

## Sample

- Sample based on quota of 1,000 social media users aged 8-17 (this age group were selected to align with that of the ethnographic study *Risk factors that may lead children to harm online*)
- Respondents used at least one of the following social media platforms according to Ofcom's media literacy research: Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter

## Data collection

- Online survey interviews conducted amongst Yonder's proprietary Y-Live Panel
- Respondents recruited via parents. If there was more than one child aged 8-17 in a household, the child was selected on a least-fill basis to ensure a spread across age/gender\*
- Fieldwork was conducted by Yonder from 14<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> July 2022
- Fieldwork was completed with a sample of 1,039 social media users aged 8-17
- Some survey questions focussed on respondents' top three platforms, if they used more than three

## Data reporting

- Data was weighted to be representative of children 8-17, based on age within gender, region, and parents' socio-economic group
- Age groups were split into 8-12s (i.e. under the minimum age requirement to use most social media), 13-15s, and 16-17s
- Significance testing was applied at the 95% confidence level to identify differences between subgroups e.g. age groups
- Where there is a base size below 50, figures have not been reported on
- Where children may have more than one profile on a given platform, the report focuses on the profile with the oldest 'user' age

\*Least-fill is a statistical design within the survey software that is used to ensure an even spread of demographics, by prioritising quotas with the largest difference between their target and current value

# Research caveats

1

## General caveats:

- All findings should be analysed taking into account that these were **self-reported estimates** from respondents. Therefore, results should be treated with caution and viewed as indicative because:
  - Children may have to admit that they were using these platforms underage, and some may not be willing to answer truthfully in a survey.
  - Respondents may not be able to accurately recall certain information, e.g. the age they used when setting up their profile or how long they have had their profile.

2

## Current 'user age' calculations caveats:

- For those respondents who said their user age was younger than 13 years, for our calculations we have assumed their user age to actually be 13 when they signed up as per the minimum age limit on most social media platforms.\*
- For those who did not know the age they used when they set up their profile, we took their current age minus years on site to estimate their joining age.
  - For example, if a respondent's real age was 14, and they have used a platform for 3 years, they must have joined the platform at the age of 11 – but would have had to state they were at least 13 to join.
  - Assuming they set their joining age to 13 and they have been on the platform for 3 years, their 'user age' will now be 16, although their real age is 14.
- If a respondent has a different user age on several platforms, the profile with the oldest user age has been used for the calculation.\*\*

3

## General calculation caveats:

- Respondents' actual ages were collected in years rather than their date of birth (e.g. age 12). This will on average underestimate age by half a year (e.g. assumes someone is 12 up until they are 13 – even when they may be aged 12 and 364 days). Therefore, there is a small risk that the calculated user age won't be completely accurate.

4

## YouTube caveats:

- YouTube was not distinguished from YouTube Kids in the research; therefore, this should be kept in mind while looking at the YouTube figures, i.e. when the younger respondents state they use YouTube they may be referring to YouTube Kids instead. Any average figures across platforms will also be impacted.

\* For this calculation, we have assumed the respondent did not recall their date of birth accurately, as the minimum age requirements on the platforms explored in this study require profiles to include a date of birth making the respondent at least 13. If a child tried to make a profile using a date of birth which showed their age as under 13 the platform would reject the profile.

\*\* For example, a respondent has a user age of 13 on Site A, and a user age of 17 on Site B – we have used the user age for Site B as this is the one with the higher likelihood of seeing or receiving age-inappropriate content or contact.

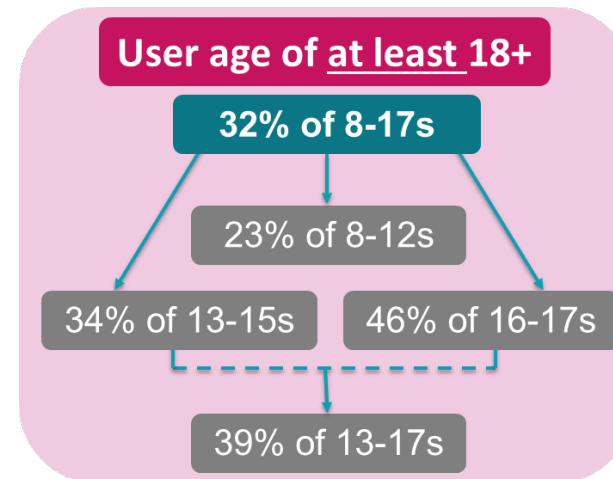
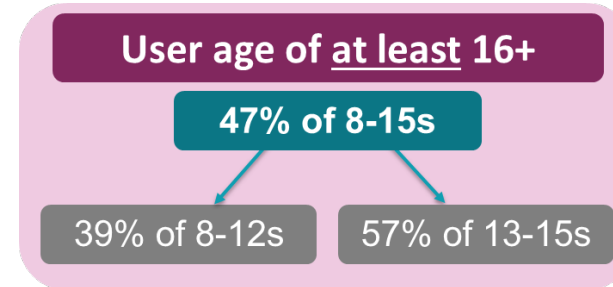
# Summary of findings

The majority of the research findings can be found in this chart pack, however the data tables will have the full data set

## 1: Online user ages

*Slides 11-16*

- The research estimates that almost half (47%) of children aged 8-15, with a social media profile on at least one platform, had an user age of at least 16.
  - This included two-fifths of 8-12 year-olds, and almost six in ten 13-15 year-olds.
- The research also estimates that a third of those aged 8-17, with a social media profile on at least one platform, had a user age of at least 18.
  - While the proportions were lower than those for user age of 16, they were still significant – starting at almost a quarter of 8-12 year-olds.





## 2: Platform usage and personal profiles

*Slides 17-24*

- Among the platforms asked about in the research, **YouTube\*** was the most popular - used by almost nine in ten social media users aged 8-17 years (87%) – with similar proportions for each age group.
  - TikTok followed at 62%, Instagram at 47%, Snapchat at 46%, Facebook at 40% and Twitter at 20%. However, usage of each of these platforms varied by age group (see slide 18).
- Across all platforms **most users within each age group had their own profile.**
  - For 8-17s this ranged from 54% on YouTube to 92% on Snapchat. A minority used someone else's – usually a parent or guardians.
  - For **children aged 8-12** who used social media the proportions with their own profile were; eight in ten (79%) among Snapchat users, 72% for Facebook, around two-thirds on each of the other platforms (i.e. TikTok, Instagram, Twitter), except YouTube at 43%.
  - Among those aged **13+**, **more than nine in ten** (of those using these platforms) had a profile on Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook or TikTok, followed by 86% on Twitter and 66% on YouTube.

\* Use of YouTube may have included reference to YouTube Kids which is targeted towards children up to the age of 12

## 3: Profile set-up

*Slides 25-34*

- Across platforms the proportion of 8-17s who set up their own profile was between 47% on YouTube\* and 71% (TikTok) while others had some help from parents/guardians.\*\*
  - For **8-12s the proportion setting up their own profiles was lower** and ranged 26% on YouTube, followed by 35% on Instagram, 43% on Facebook, 45% on Snapchat to half (51%) on TikTok. This age group were the most likely to have had help setting this up across all platforms.\*\*\*
- To access platforms with a minimum age requirement of 13, children under this age with their own profile would need to enter a **date of birth that makes them older than they actually are** (i.e. 13+).
  - Some younger respondents, aged 8-12, told us that they had done this. TikTok was the platform children were most likely to say this about (65%), while more than half said this for Snapchat (59%) and Instagram (54%). More than two-fifths said this about Facebook (44%) and YouTube (43%).
  - Around **three in ten children aged 13-17 with profiles, said they had signed up with an older age** – this was broadly similar across platforms.

\* Use of YouTube may have included reference to YouTube Kids which is targeted towards children up to the age of 12

\*\* Some respondents had more than one profile, so the data will account for each of these and therefore not total 100%

\*\*\* The base for Twitter was too low to report for both age groups

# Online user ages

*How current profile age was calculated:*

**C3a:** Actual age of child

**Q5:** Length of time they have had a profile

**Q7:** Date of birth used when setting up profile

**Q8:** If false date of birth used, how old this made them

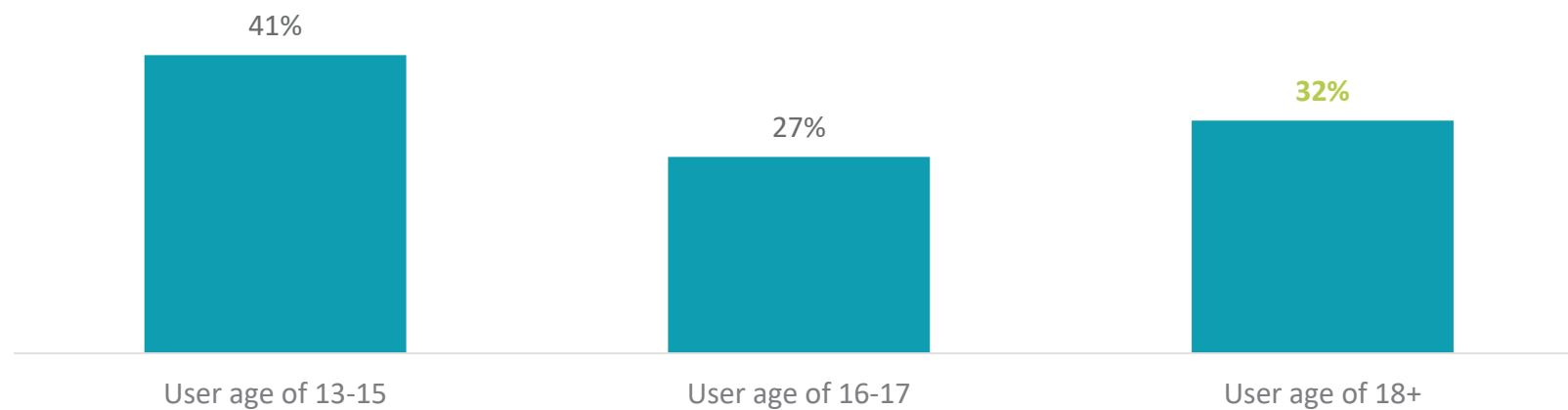
If Q7 = actual DOB, **current profile age** = actual age

If Q7 = false date of birth, **current profile age** calculated by adding Q8 (profile age when setting up) + Q5 (length of time with profile)

If Q5 = DK or respondent didn't have their own profile, profile age not calculated\*

A third (32%) of 8-17s with a social media profile have a user age of 18+

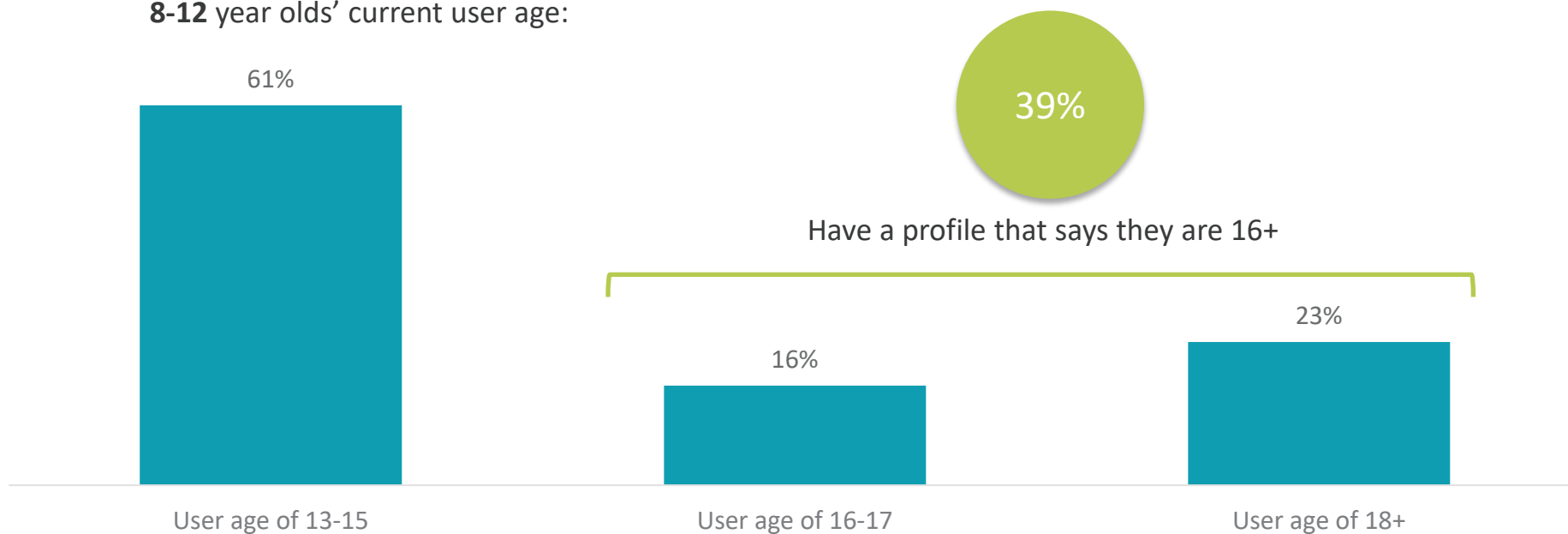
8-17 year olds' current user age:



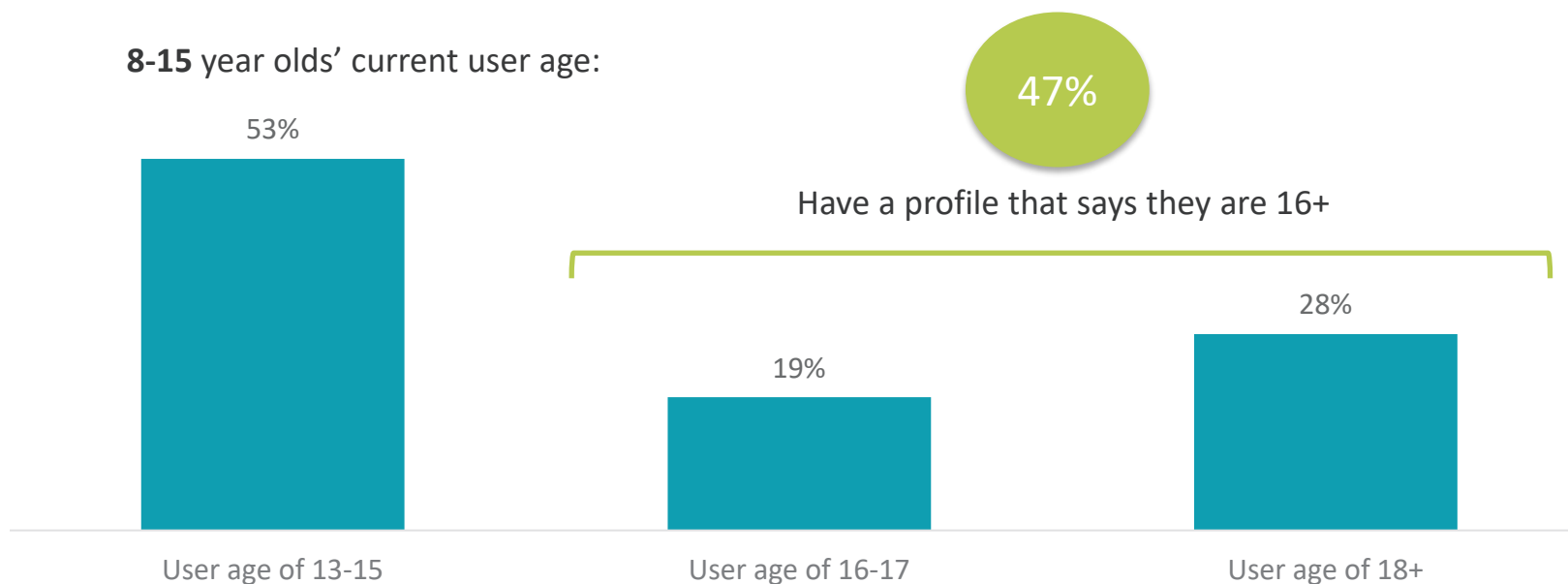
## Two-fifths (39%) of children aged 8-12 with a social media profile have a user age of 16+

8-12 year olds would require a profile age 13+ to use the platform

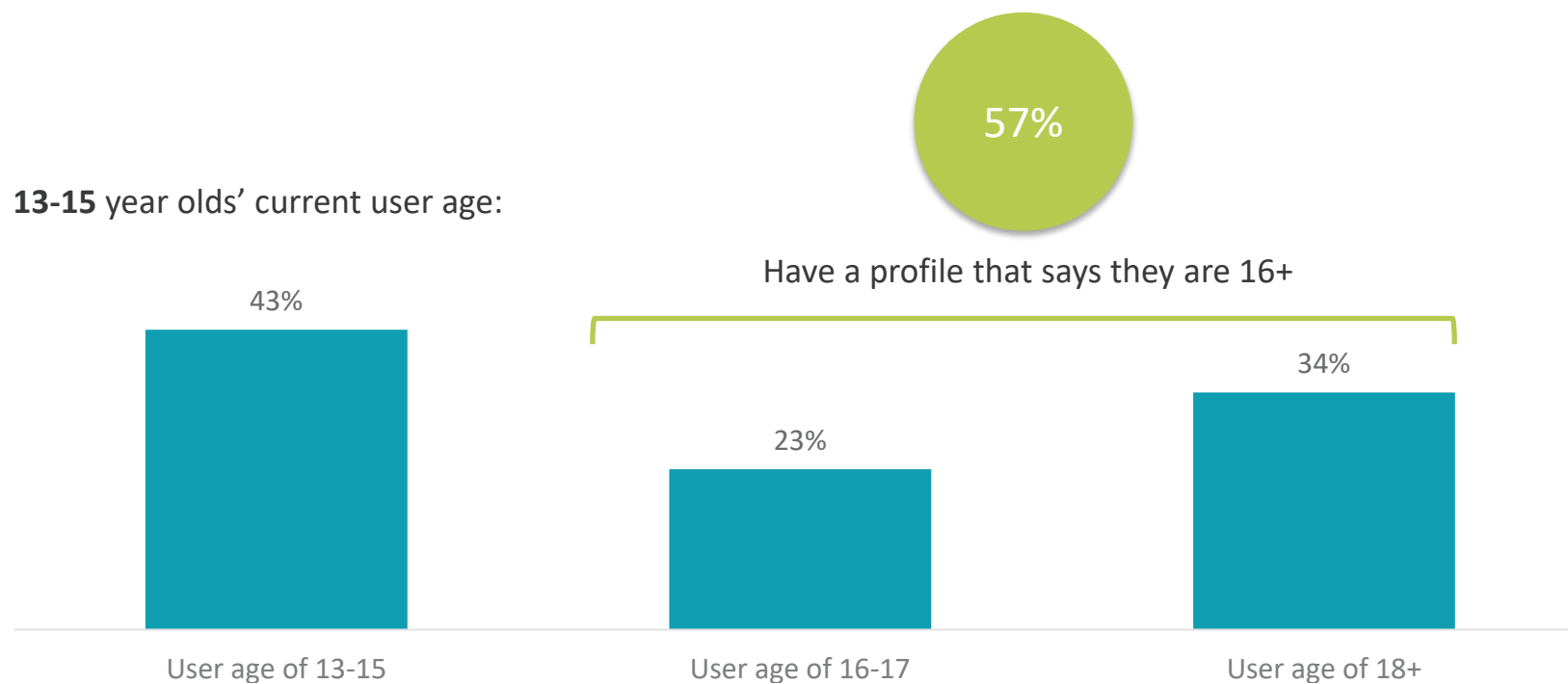
8-12 year olds' current user age:



Nearly half (47%) of 8-15s with a social media profile have a user age of 16+

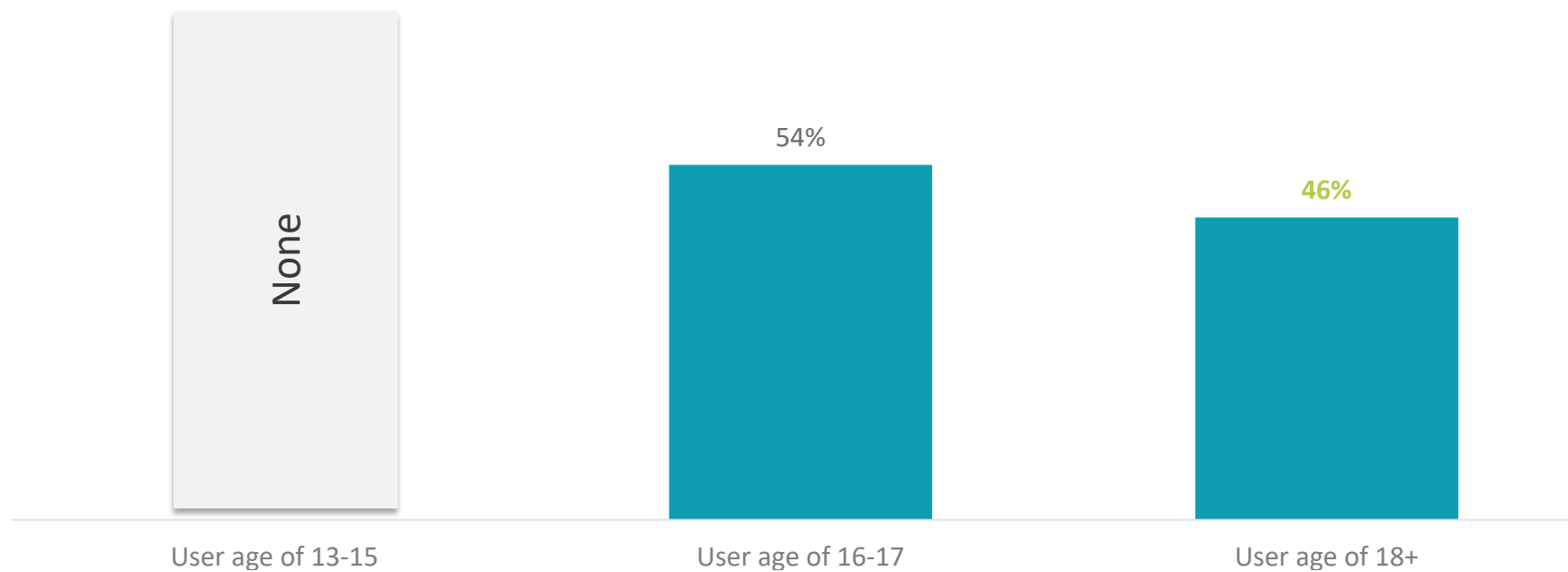


Over half (57%) of 13-15 year olds currently have a profile on a platform with a user age of 16+, including a third who have a user age of 18+



## Just under half (46%) of 16-17 year olds already have a user age of 18+

16-17 year olds' current user age:



Source: Children's User Age Research

Current user age based on C3a, Q5, Q8

Base: All respondents aged 16-17 with their own profile and knew how long they had used the platform (199)



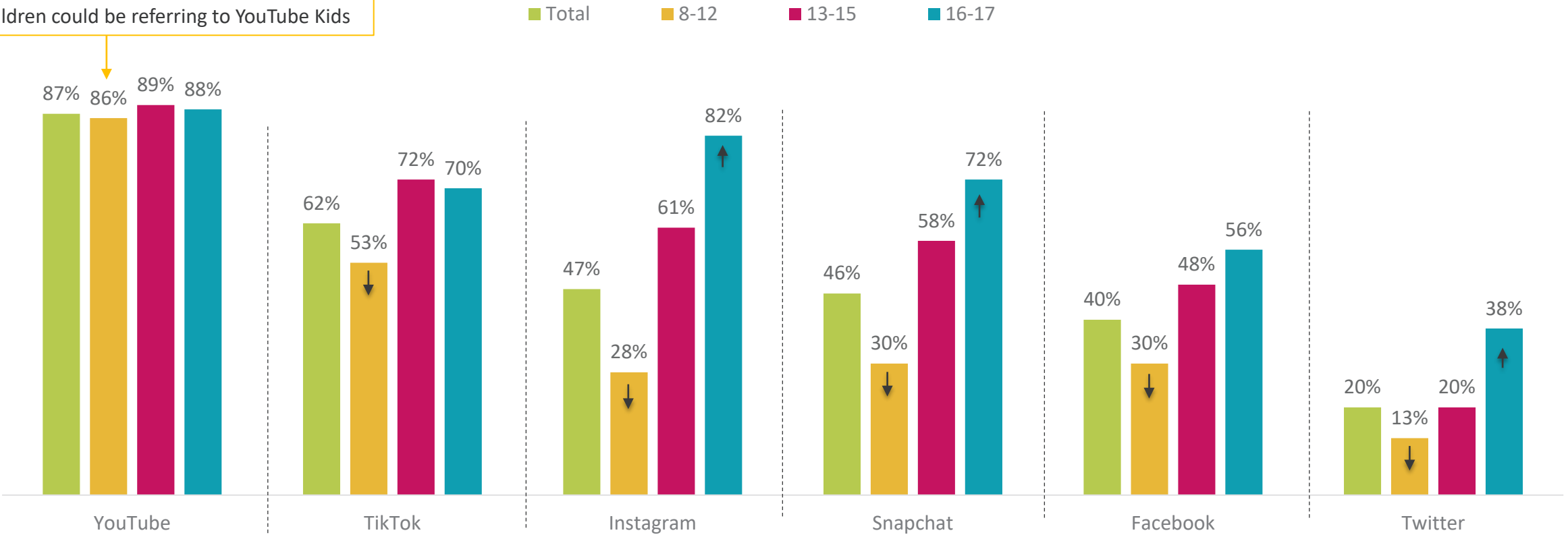
# Platform usage

# YouTube is the most popular site followed by TikTok, with lowest use noted amongst 8-12 year olds



Apps/sites used by children 8-17 - by age of child:

Children could be referring to YouTube Kids



↑ ↓ Significantly higher/lower than other ages at 95% confidence

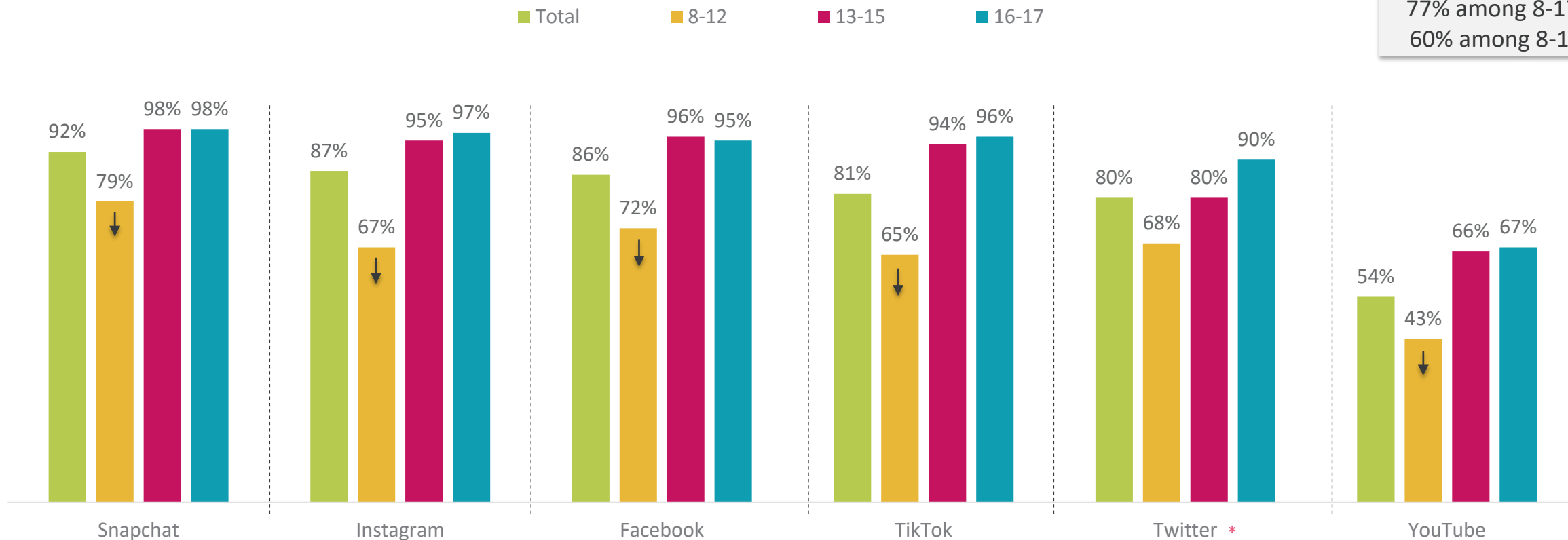
Source: Children’s User Age Research  
 Q1. Which of the following apps and sites do you use?  
 Base: All respondents (1039); 8-12 (518); 13-15 (315); 16-17 (206)

# Personal profiles on platforms

On average,  
77% among 8-17s;  
60% among 8-12s

## Of those that use the platforms, 8-12s are less likely to have their own profile on these

Proportion of children 8-17 who use each platform that have their own profile – by age of child:



↑ ↓ Significantly higher/lower than other ages at 95% confidence

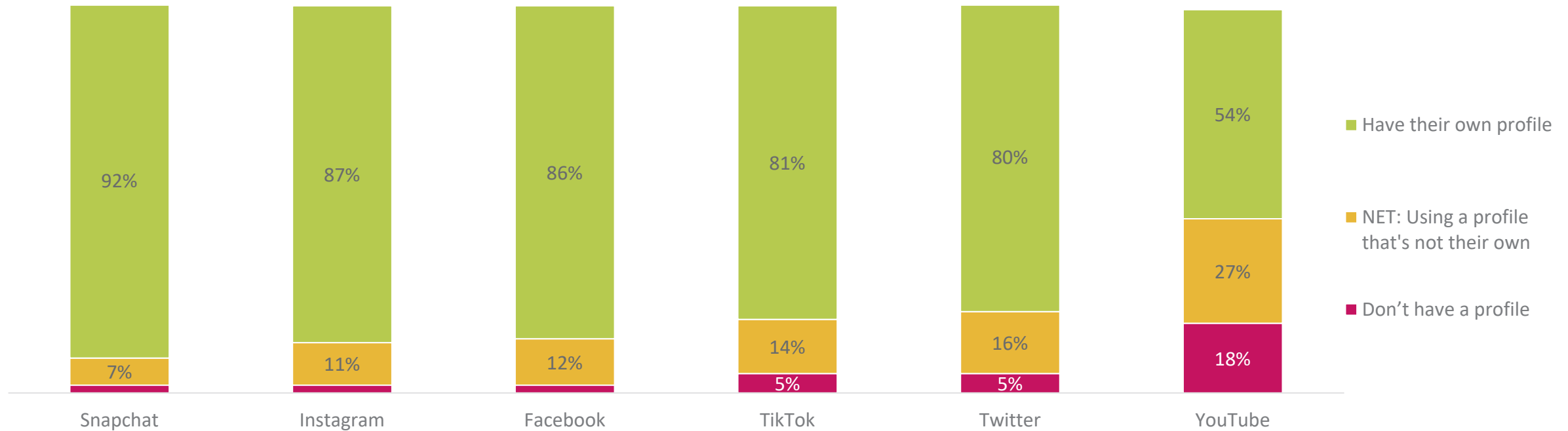
Source: Children's User Age Research

Q2. Below are the apps and sites you said you use. Some can be used by anyone, but others need a profile to be set up first. This may involve choosing a user name, password and a picture for the profile. Do you have your own profile on these or do you use a profile that belongs to someone else? If you have more than one profile, please answer about the one you use the most.

Base: All respondents who use: Facebook 8-12 (157); 13-15 (153); 16-17 (116) YouTube 8-12 (450); 13-15 (281); 16-17 (182); Snapchat 8-12 (163); 13-15 (179); 16-17 (149); Instagram 8-12 (151); 13-15 (193); 16-17 (170); TikTok 8-12 (279); 13-15 (225); 16-17 (147); Twitter 8-12 (67\*); 13-15 (67\*); 16-17 (77\*) - \*CAUTION – Low base size, figures are indicative only

# Most 8-17 year olds have their own profile on the platforms that they use while a minority use someone else's profile

Types of profiles children 8-17 have on the various platforms they use:



Source: Children's User Age Research

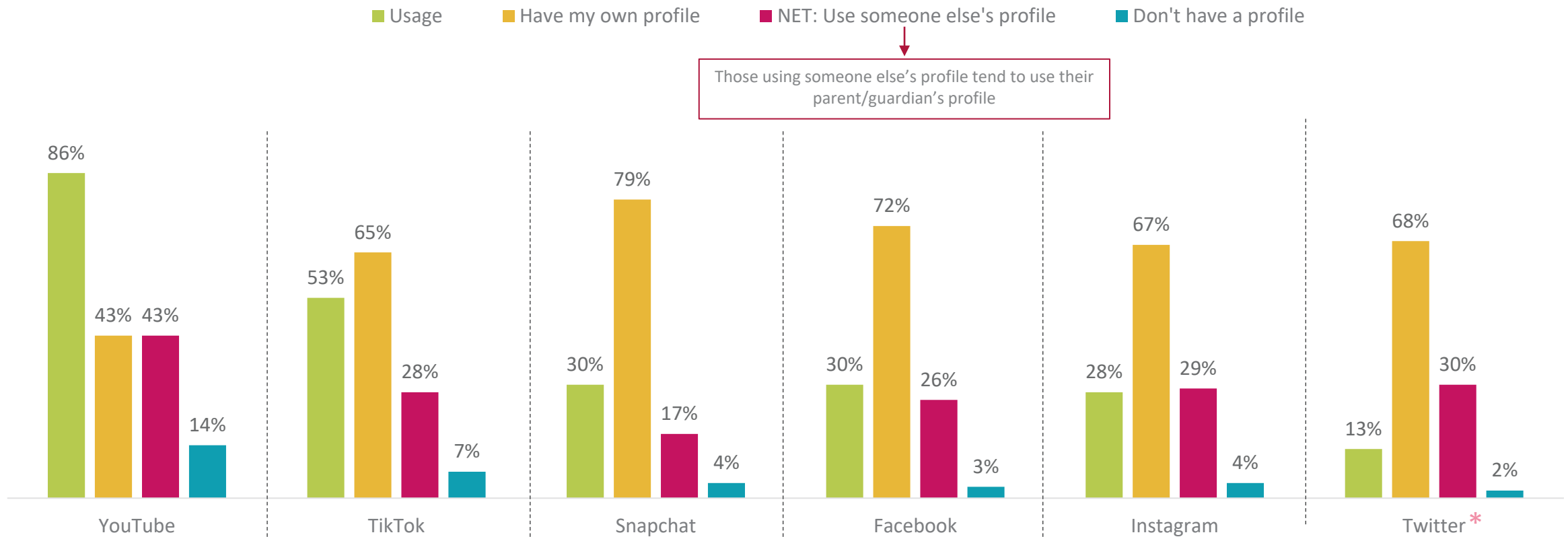
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Base: All respondents who use: Facebook (426); YouTube (913); Snapchat (491); Instagram (514); TikTok (651); Twitter (211)

N.B. – Figures less than 3% not shown

# 8-12s are the age group driving most of the access to platforms using someone else's profile

Proportion of 8-12 year olds who use each platform and types of profiles they have on these platforms:



Those using someone else's profile tend to use their parent/guardian's profile

Source: Children's User Age Research

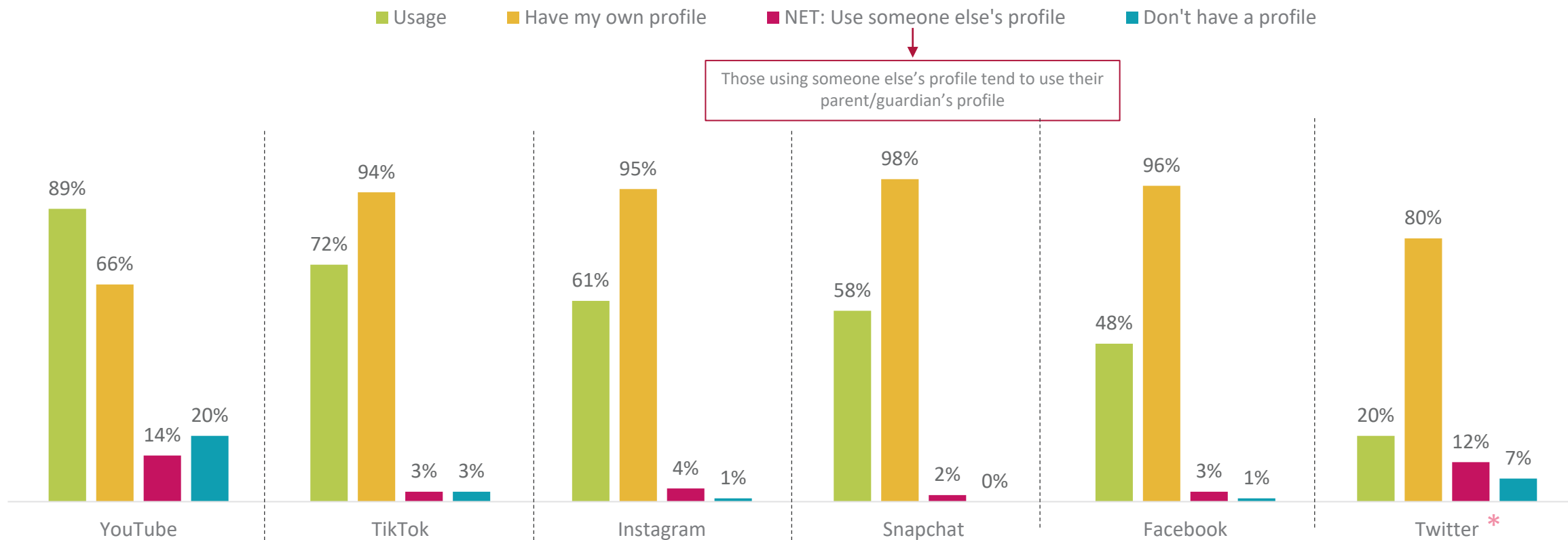
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Base: All respondents 8-12 (518); All 8-12 year olds who use: Facebook (157); YouTube (450) Snapchat (163); Instagram (151); TikTok (279); Twitter (67\*) - \*CAUTION – Low base size, figures are indicative only

\*Across platforms does not add to 100% as the children in the sample may have had a profile on multiple platforms mentioned on this slide

# Most 13-15 year olds have their own profile on each platform, with small minorities using someone else's

Proportion of **13-15** year olds who use each platform and types of profiles they have on these platforms:



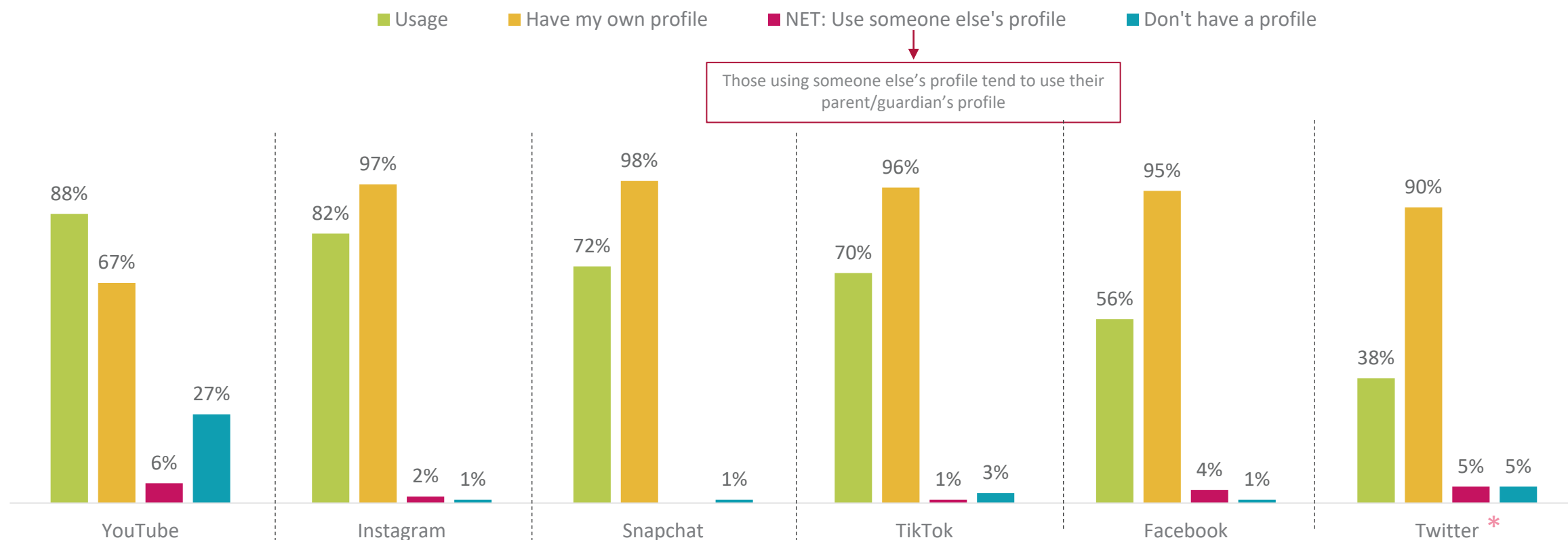
Source: Children's User Age Research

Q1. Which of the following apps and sites do you use? Q2. Below are the apps and sites you said you use. Some can be used by anyone, but others need a profile to be set up first. This may involve choosing a user name, password and a picture for the profile. Do you have your own profile on these or do you use a profile that belongs to someone else? If you have more than one profile, please answer about the one you use the most.

Base: All respondents 13-15 (315); All respondents 13-15 who use: Facebook (153); YouTube (281); Snapchat (179); Instagram (193); TikTok (225); Twitter (67\*)- \*CAUTION – Low base size, figures are indicative only

## The majority of 16-17 year olds use their own profile to access each platform

Proportion of **16-17** year olds who use each platform and types of profiles they have on these platforms:



Source: Children's User Age Research

Q1. Which of the following apps and sites do you use? Q2. Below are the apps and sites you said you use. Some can be used by anyone, but others need a profile to be set up first. This may involve choosing a user name, password and a picture for the profile. Do you have your own profile on these or do you use a profile that belongs to someone else? If you have more than one profile, please answer about the one you use the most.

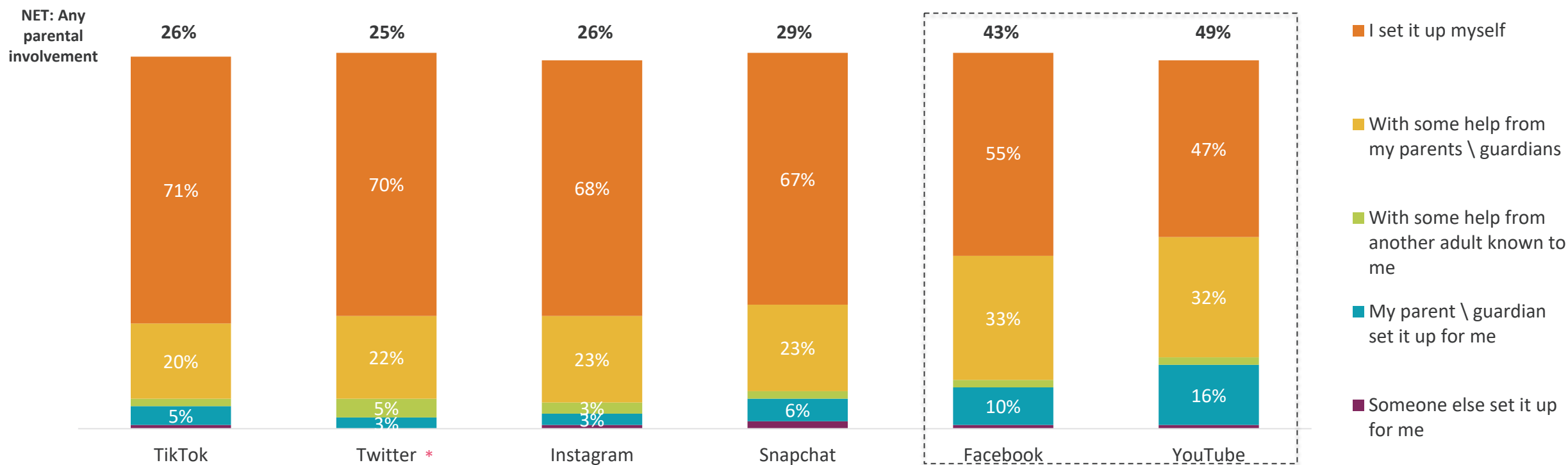
Base: All respondents 16-17 (206); All respondents 16-17 who use: Facebook (116) YouTube (182); Snapchat (149); Instagram (170); TikTok (147); Twitter (77\*) - \*CAUTION – Low base size, figures are indicative only



# Profile set-up

## The majority of 8-17s said they set up their profile themselves, with some getting help; they were most likely to get help setting up their profile on Facebook and YouTube

How 8-17 year olds set up their profile on each platform:



Source: Children's User Age Research

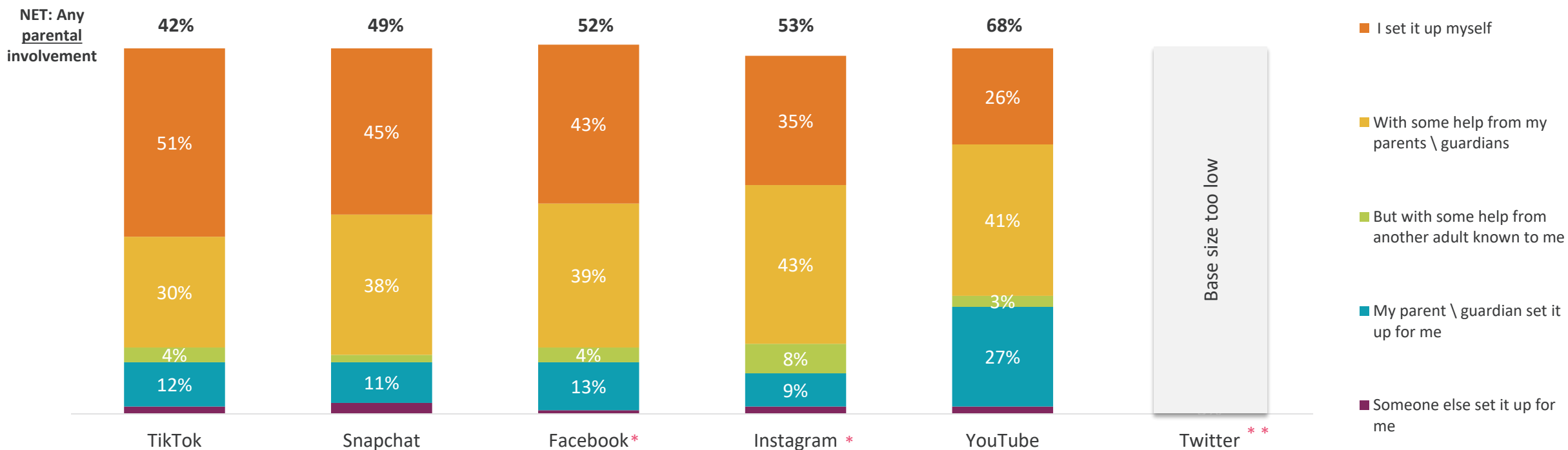
Q6. Did you set this profile up yourself?

Base: All respondents who use ... in their top 3 sites/ apps and have their own profile on: Facebook (254); YouTube (427); Snapchat (378); Instagram (351); TikTok (465); Twitter (82\*) - \*CAUTION – Low base size, figures are indicative only

N.B. – Figures less than 3% not shown, where NET figures don't total the sum of parental involvement this is due to rounding

For many 8-12 year olds a parent/guardian helped them set up this profile on each platform; parental involvement was highest on YouTube and lowest on TikTok

How 8-12 year olds set up their profile on each platform:



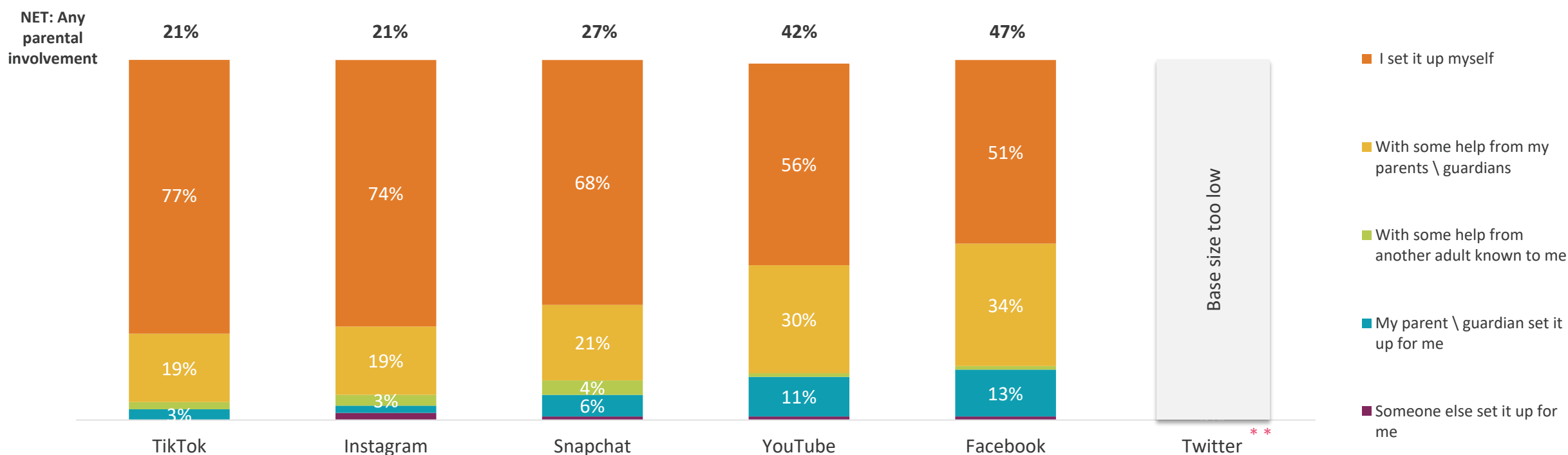
Source: Children's User Age Research  
Q6. Did you set this profile up yourself?

Base: 8-12 year olds with their own profile on: Facebook (96\*); YouTube (177); Snapchat (107); Instagram (86\*); TikTok (161); Twitter (30\*\*) - \*CAUTION – Low base size, figures are indicative only; \*\*CAUTION – VERY low base size

N.B. – Figures less than 3% not shown, where NET figures don't total the sum of parental involvement this is due to rounding

## Parental involvement in setting up profiles was lower for 13-15 year olds on most platforms

How **13-15** year olds set up their profile on each platform:



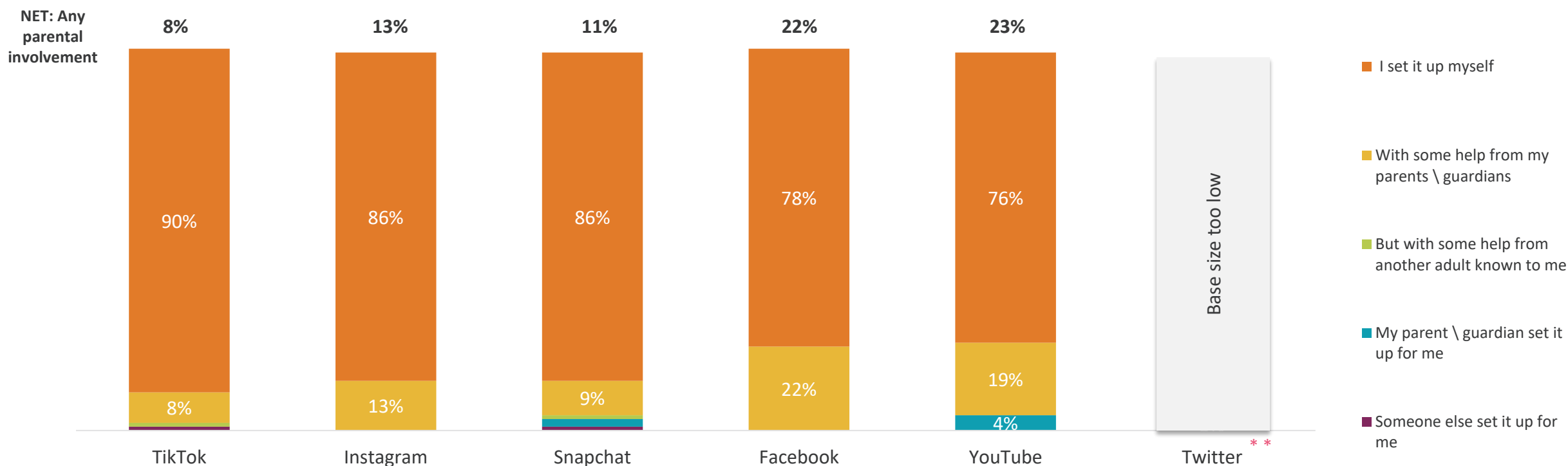
Source: Children's User Age Research  
Q6. Did you set this profile up yourself?

Base: 13-15 year olds with their own profile on: Facebook (95\*); YouTube (151); Snapchat (148); Instagram (140); TikTok (192); Twitter (23\*\*) - \*CAUTION – Low base size, figures are indicative only; \*\*CAUTION – VERY low base size

N.B. – Figures less than 3% not shown, where NET figures don't total the sum of parental involvement this is due to rounding

# Most 16-17 year olds set up their profiles themselves; parental involvement was lowest of all the age groups

How **16-17** year olds set up their profile on each platform:



Source: Children’s User Age Research  
Q6. Did you set this profile up yourself?

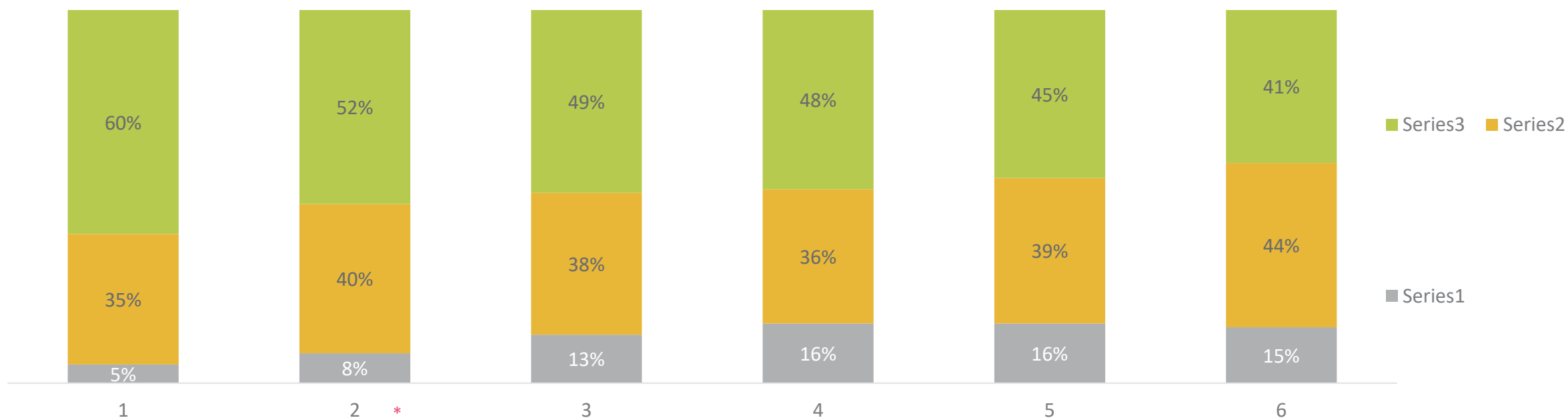
Base: 16-17 year olds with their own profile on: Facebook (63\*); YouTube (99); Snapchat (123); Instagram (125); TikTok (112); Twitter (29\*\*) - \*CAUTION – Low base size, figures are indicative only; \*\*CAUTION – VERY low base size

N.B. – Figures less than 3% not shown, where NET figures don’t total the sum of parental involvement this is due to rounding

## Date of birth at set-up

## Nearly half of 8-17 year olds said they set up their profile on most platforms without using their actual date of birth

Stated date of birth used by **8-17s** when setting up the profile:



**\*\*Note:** Data includes children aged 8-12 who said they used their actual date of birth to create a profile. With the exception of YouTube Kids (which may be reflected in the proportions using YouTube) these platforms require users to be aged 13+ and so these respondents are likely to have either mis-remembered or may have been unwilling to respond truthfully. Proportions ranged from 22% of 8-12s stating they used their actual date of birth to create a profile on TikTok to 50% on Facebook.

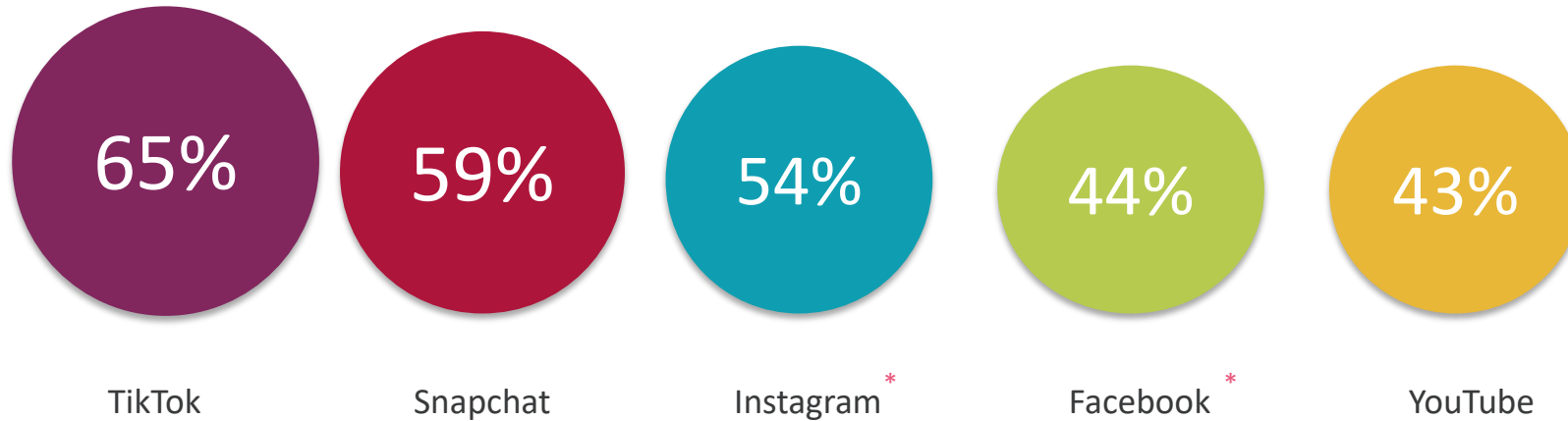
Source: Children's User Age Research

Q7. What date of birth was used when the profile was set up? Please remember you won't get in trouble or lose your profile for answering truthfully.

Base: All respondents who use ... in their top 3 sites/ apps and have their own profile on: Total (861), Facebook (254); YouTube (427); Snapchat (378); Instagram (351); TikTok (465); Twitter (82\*) - \*CAUTION – Low base size, figures are indicative only

# Children aged 8-12 were more likely to tell us they had used a false date of birth when signing up to TikTok

Proportion of 8-12 year olds that told us they used a false DOB to make them older when setting up their profile:



The proportion of 8-12 year olds that **said** they used their **actual DOB** on each platform was\*\*\*:

- TikTok – 22%
- Snapchat – 23%
- Instagram – 33%
- YouTube – 39%
- Facebook – 50%

This is likely to be false reporting since the minimum joining age is 13 across these platforms. There are a few reasons they may have said this:

- 1) They don't remember this correctly given the length of time since they signed up.
- 2) They may not want to answer truthfully as they are underage.
- 3) If their parent set this profile up for them, the child may not know/remember this information.
- 4) They may have found another way to get around this.

\*\*\* Twitter base sizes too low to report and YouTube may include reference to YouTube Kids

Source: Children's User Age Research

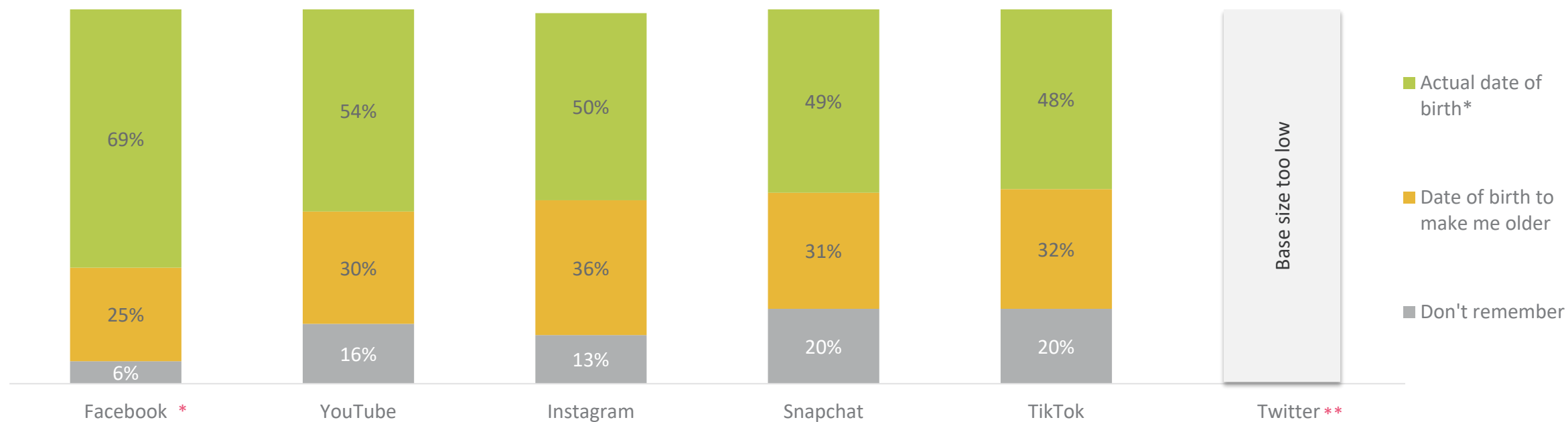
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Base: 8-12 year olds with their own profile on: Facebook (96\*); YouTube (177); Snapchat (107); Instagram (86\*); TikTok (161); Twitter (30\*\*) - \*CAUTION – Low base size, figures are indicative only; \*\*CAUTION – VERY low base size



# Across most platforms, around 3 in 10 children aged 13-15 said they used a date of birth that made them older, when creating a profile

Stated date of birth used by **13-15** year olds when setting up profile



\*As per note on slide 31, some respondents who say they used their actual date of birth may remember this incorrectly or be unwilling to answer truthfully

Source: Children's User Age Research

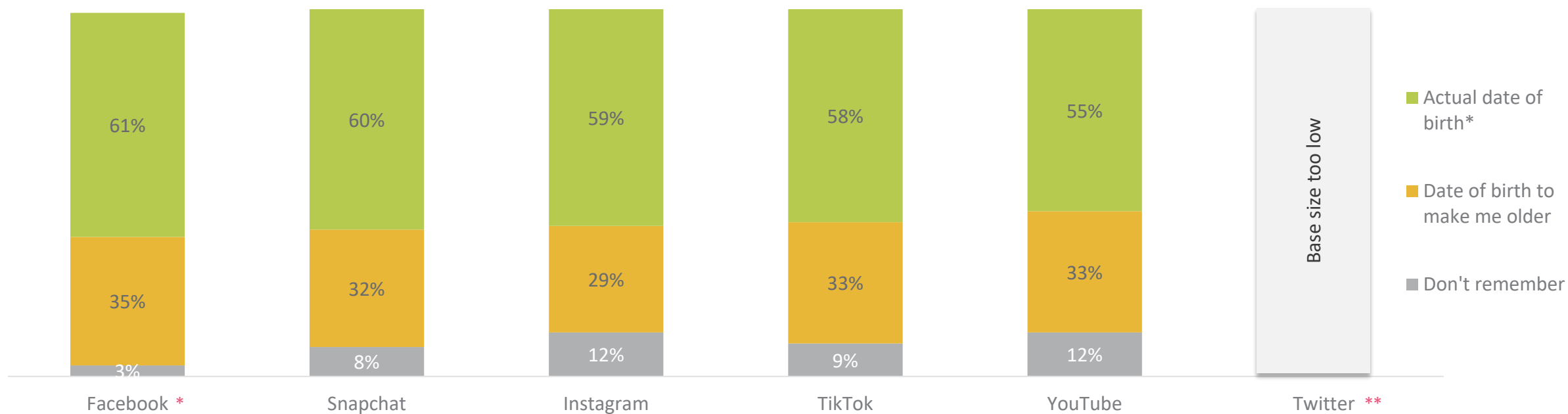
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\*Across platforms does not add to 100% as the children in the sample may have had a profile on multiple platforms mentioned on this slide

## Similar to 13-15 year olds, around 3 in 10 children aged 16-17 said they used a false date of birth when creating a profile on each platform

Stated date of birth used by **16-17s** when setting up profile



\*As per note on slide 31, some respondents who say they used their actual date of birth may remember this incorrectly or be unwilling to answer truthfully

Source: Children's User Age Research

Q7. What date of birth was used when the profile was set up? Please remember you won't get in trouble or lose your profile for answering truthfully.

Base: 16-17 year olds with their own profile on: Facebook (63\*); YouTube (99); Snapchat (123); Instagram (125); TikTok (112); Twitter (29\*\*) - \*CAUTION – Low base size, figures are indicative only; \*\*CAUTION – VERY low base size)