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Background & Introduction

- The use of social networking and messaging apps (hereafter referred to as social media) for buying and selling drugs has increased over recent years.
- These apps provide prospective buyers with a middle-ground option between “street-level” markets and purpose-structured platforms such as cryptomarkets [1].
- However, relatively little is known about the extent and characteristics of engagement with these apps.

Aims

We aimed to investigate, among a sample of people who use ecstasy and/or other illicit stimulants in Australia:

1. Use of social media for arranging the purchase of drugs,
2. Who drugs were being obtained from using these apps, and
3. Experience of drugs being advertised on the apps.

Methods

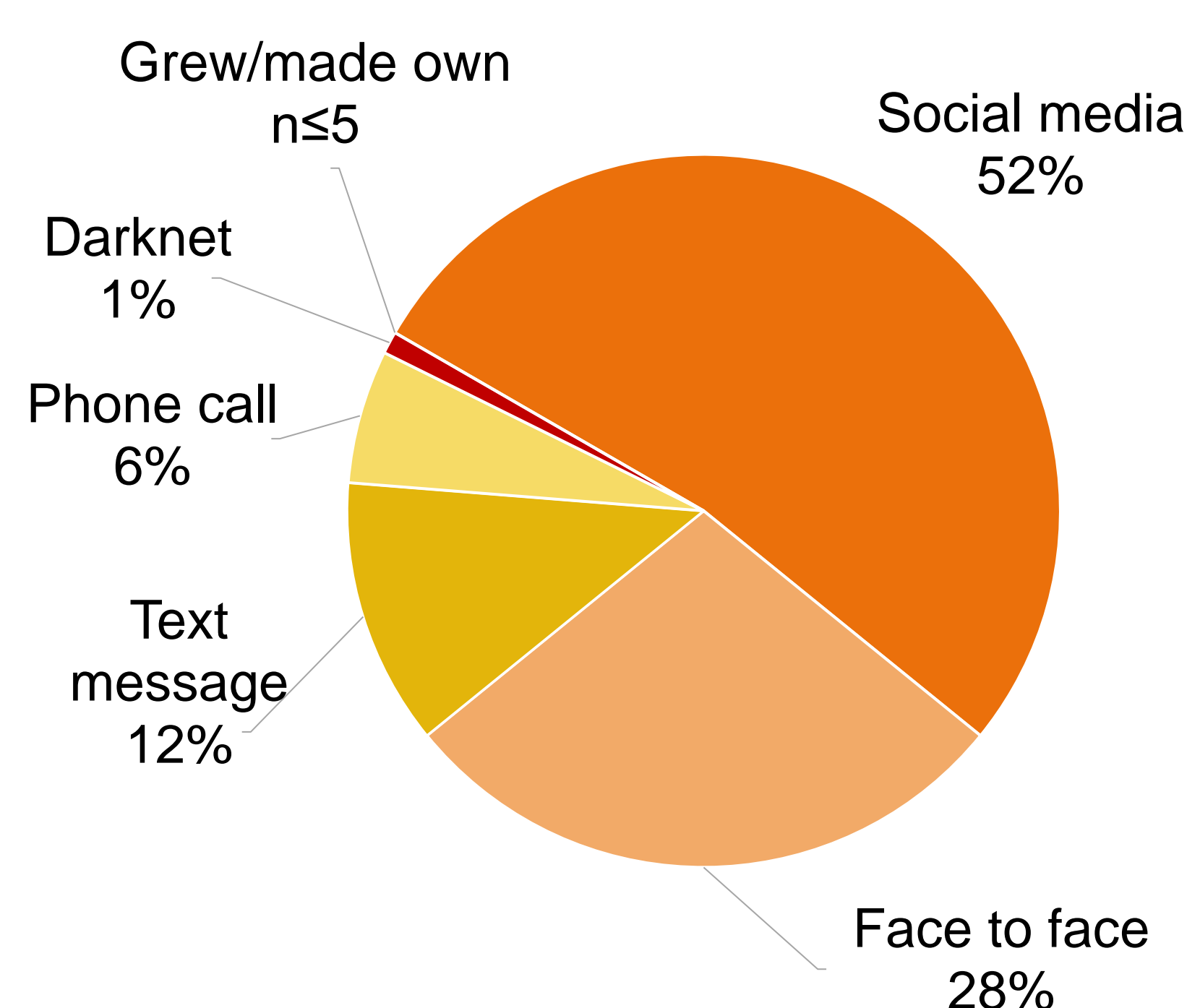
- Data were obtained from interviews with residents of capital cities in Australia who reported using ecstasy or related drugs \geq six times in the past six months.
- Participants were recruited via social media advertising and word of mouth from April to June of 2023 (n=708).
- Participants were asked about how they arranged purchasing illicit drugs in the past year, which social media apps were used to arrange the purchase, who drugs were obtained from via these apps, and whether vendors advertised the sale of illicit drugs on the apps.

Results

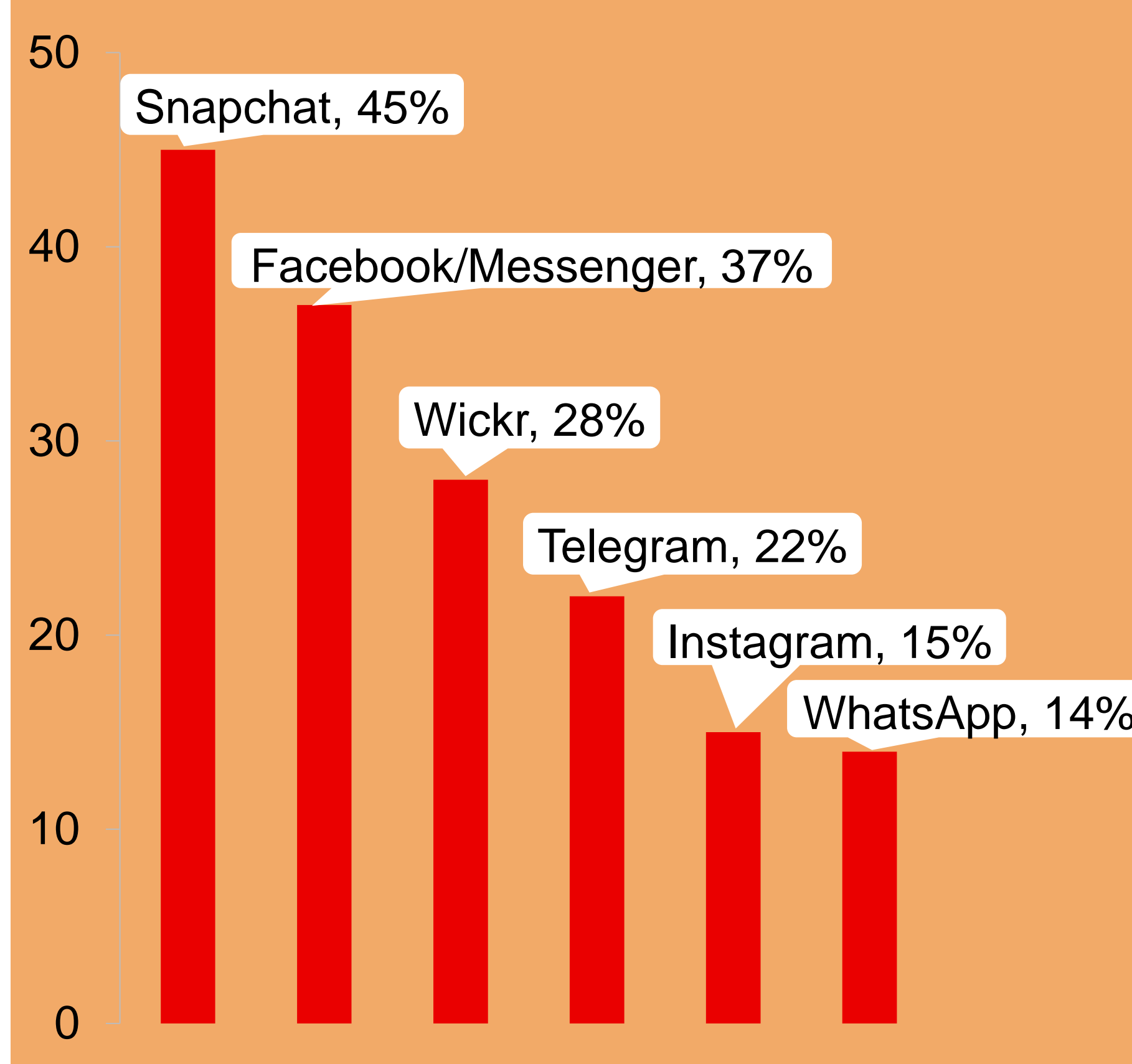
The majority of EDRS participants reported using social media to arrange purchasing illicit or non-prescribed drugs in the last 12 months (71%), with 52% reporting that this was their main way of arranging to purchase drugs.

Note: this refers to people *arranging to obtain* illicit or non-prescribed drugs. This captures participants who messaged friends or known dealers on Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp, for example, to organise the purchase of illicit or non-prescribed drugs, which may have then been picked up in person.

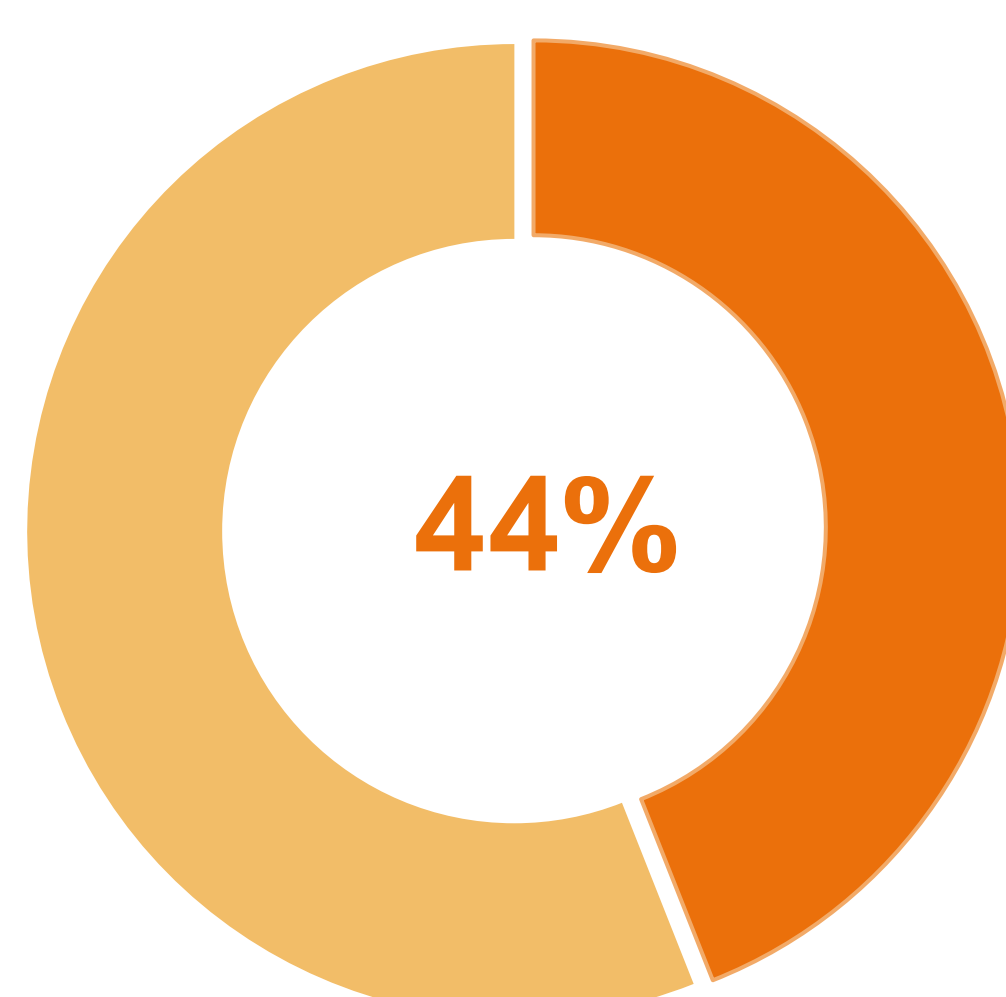
Main method of arranging to purchase drugs



Among those who had arranged to purchase illicit drugs via social media in the last year, Snapchat, Facebook/Messenger and Wickr were the main apps used.

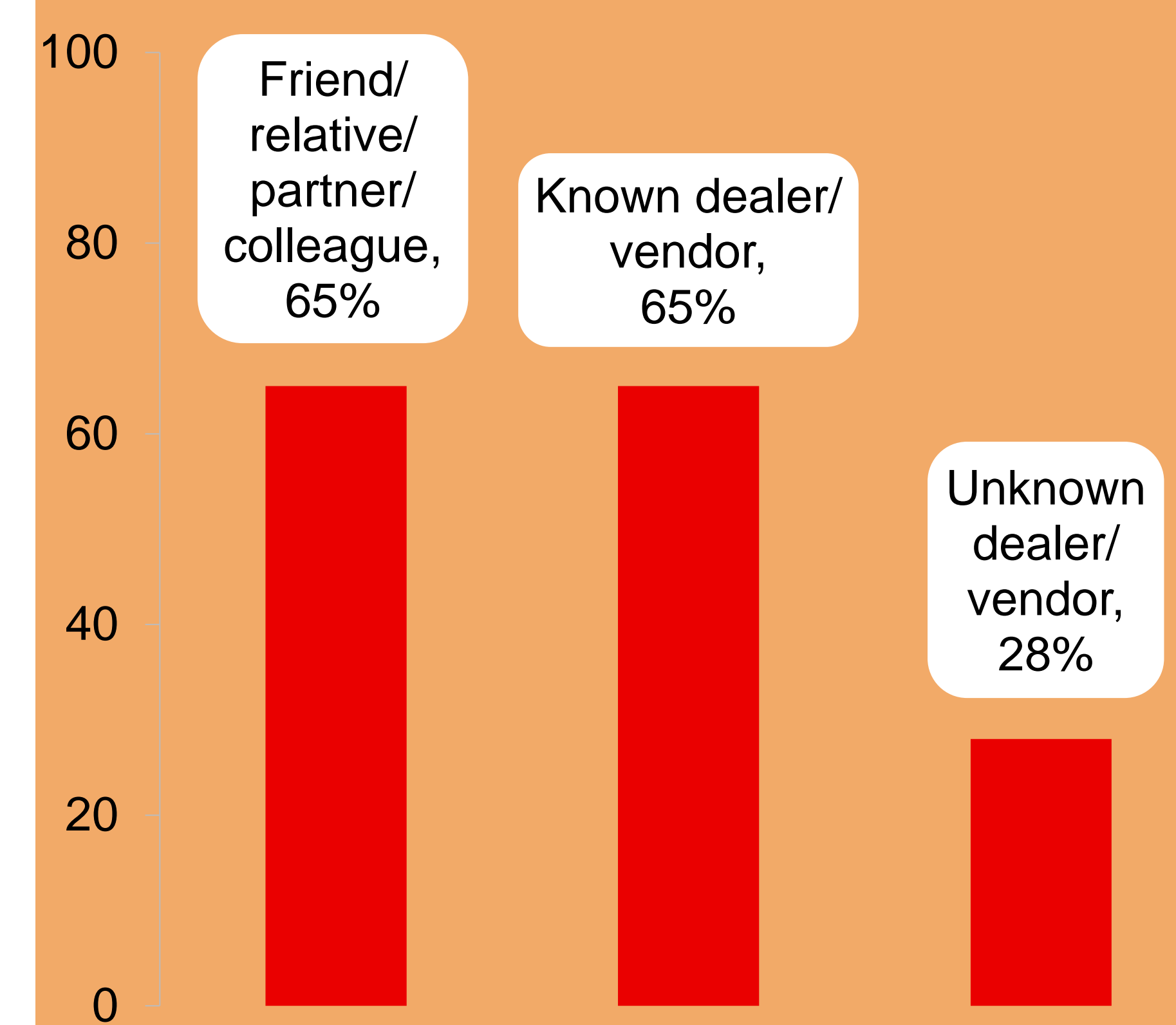


Around half (44%) of those who reported arranging the purchase of drugs via social media in the last year reported that the seller/vendor had advertised the sale of illicit drugs on these platforms.



The Difference is Research

When asked specifically about who they obtained drugs from via social media in the last 12 months, one quarter (28%) reported that they had purchased from an unknown dealer.



Implications & Conclusion

The use of social media to arrange obtaining illicit drugs is common.

While most participants reported arranging to purchase drugs from people that they had pre-existing relationships with (e.g., friends, known dealers), a substantial percentage also did so via an unknown dealer/vendor. This carries potential risks, since there is no robust or reliable way for the buyer or seller to establish a positive reputation.

Previous research indicates that those purchasing via Snapchat carry a belief that the visual representation of drugs allows for some discernment of quality and safety of substances [2].

Although social media apps claim greater security than “street-level” markets, research indicates that many of their users hold inaccurate assumptions about the level of data security they provide [2].

Potential harms could be reduced via education about the potential risk of purchasing drugs from unknown sources and/or without consumer feedback, unreliability of visual representations to determine drug safety, and limitations of social media in protecting platform user data.

References

- (1) Van der Sanden R, Wilkins C, Rychert M, & Barratt MJ., ‘Choice’ of social media platform or encrypted messaging app to buy and sell illegal drugs. *The International Journal of Drug Policy*, 2022. 108: p. 103819.
- (2) Moyle L, Childs A, Coomber R, & Barratt MJ., *Drugsforsale: An exploration of the use of social media and encrypted messaging apps to supply and access drugs*. *The International Journal of Drug Policy*, 2019. 63: p. 101–110.

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