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Evaluating ConnectUp: feature preferences for a digital social connectivity platform among people with disability and carers.

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The scale of the problem



1.3 billion people worldwide live with a disability.

5

More than one in five Australians live with disability.

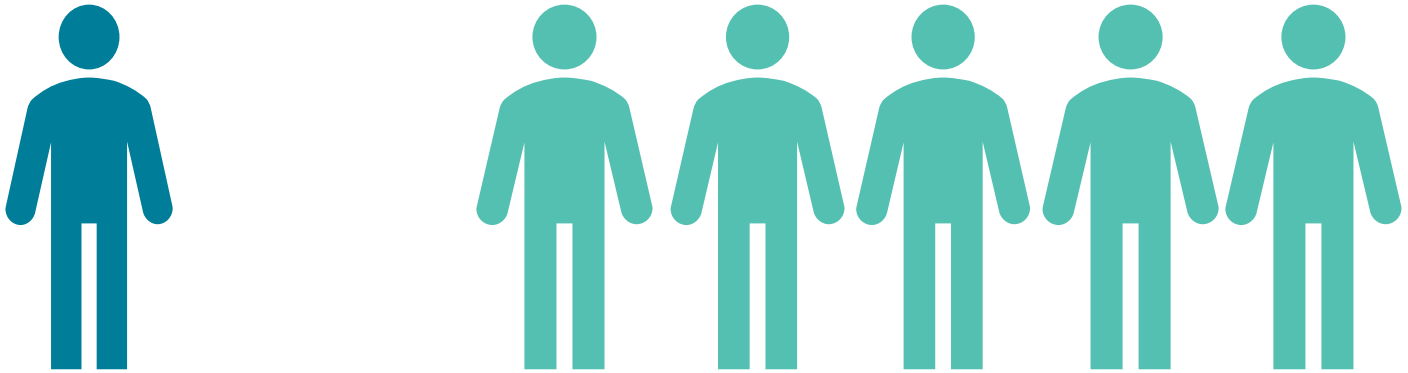


One in eight Australians is an informal carer.

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The isolation problem

- People with disability and carers experience disproportionate social isolation and loneliness.
- More than half of Australian carers are socially isolated. Loneliness raises risk of cardiovascular disease, depression, and early death.



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Existing platforms fail this group

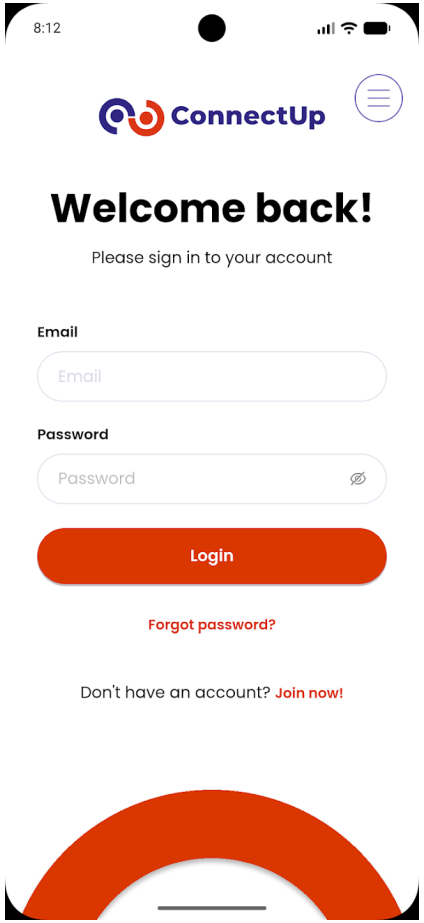
- Facebook, Meetup, and Strava were not built with accessibility or inclusion in mind.
- Non-adoption is common when design does not match user needs.

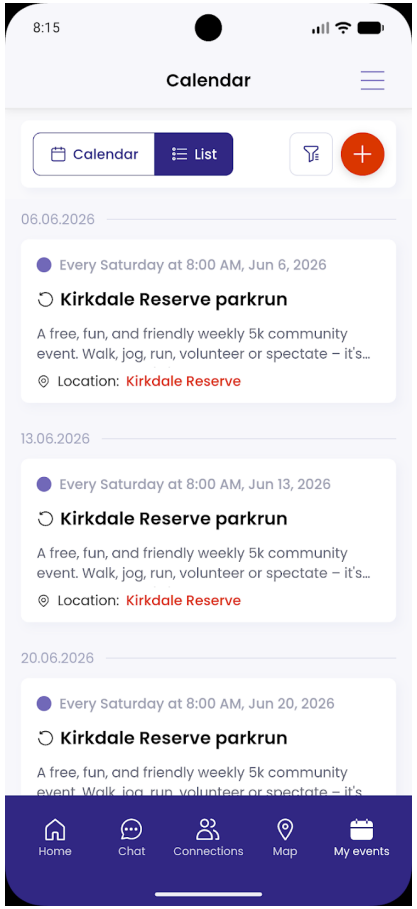


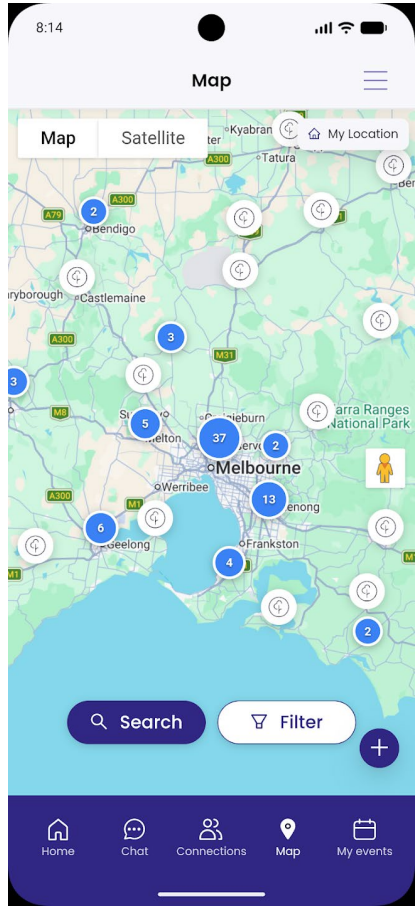
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Enter ConnectUp

ConnectUp is an Australian digital platform co-designed with people with disability and carers to support social connection.

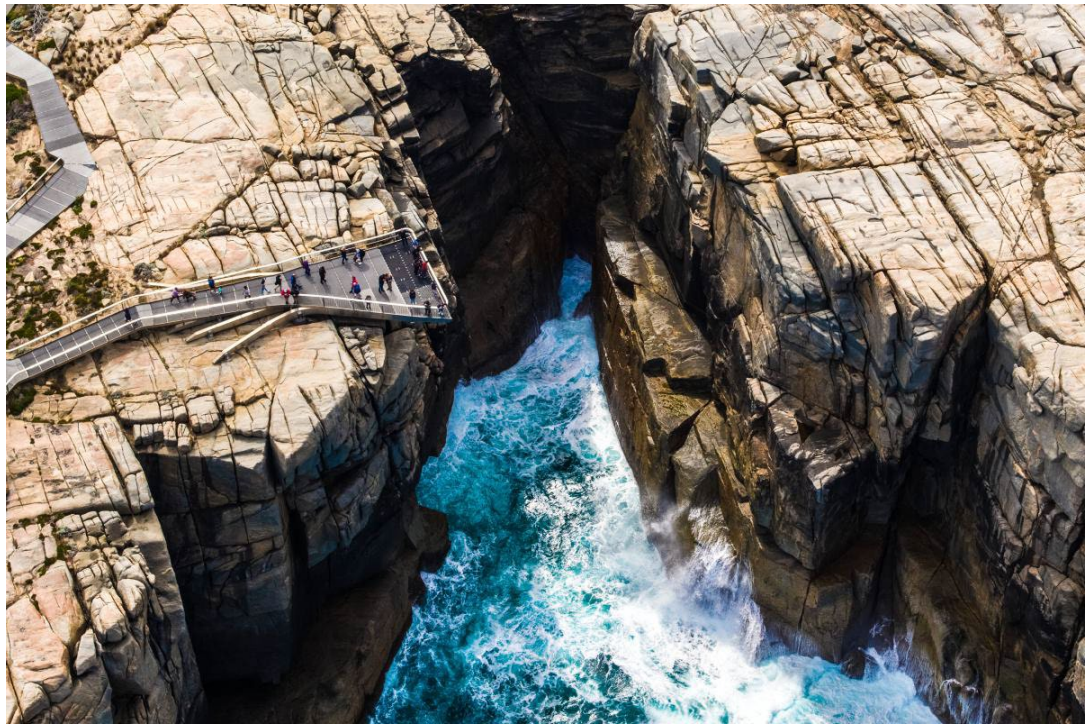






The gap

- No one had asked this population, in a rigorous way, what platform features they actually want.



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Methods: discrete choice experiment

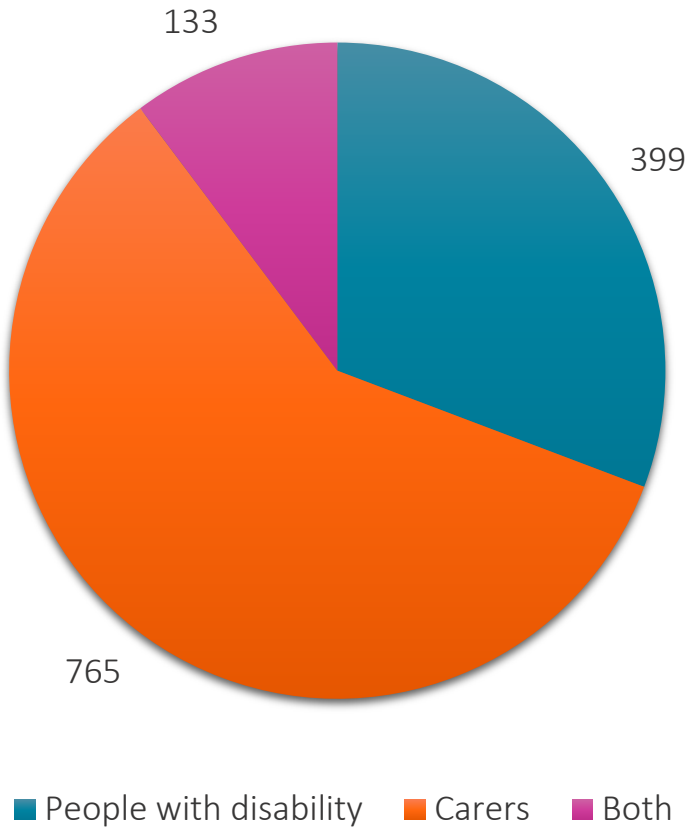
Participants faced pairs of hypothetical ConnectUp profiles and picked the one they preferred. Repeated many times, this reveals what people value most.

ConnectUp Feature	Option A	Option B
Cost	$2/month	$10/month
Ways to communicate with others	Chat and voice	Chat, voice, video and speech-to-text
Group features	Private groups with peer support	Topic-based groups with moderators
Help and support	Help from other users	Chatbot with option to speak to a person
Anonymity preferences	Choose each time	Visible to approved connections only
Source of activity and accessibility information	Shared by trusted users or trained volunteers	Shared by ConnectUp staff
I would pick…	☐	☐

ConnectUp Feature	Option A	Option B
Cost	$5/month	$0/month
Ways to communicate with others	Chat, voice and video	Chat only
Group features	No formal groups with interest-based recommendations	Small private groups with basic checks
Help and support	Message support team	Help pages and video tutorials
Anonymity preferences	Always anonymous	Fully visible with name and profile
Source of activity and accessibility information	Shared by businesses or organisations	Shared by ConnectUp users
I would pick…	☐	☐

The study

1,031 participants | 399 people with disability | 765 carers | 133 identifying as both



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Six features tested

Cost



Help & support



Ways to communicate



Anonymity



Group features

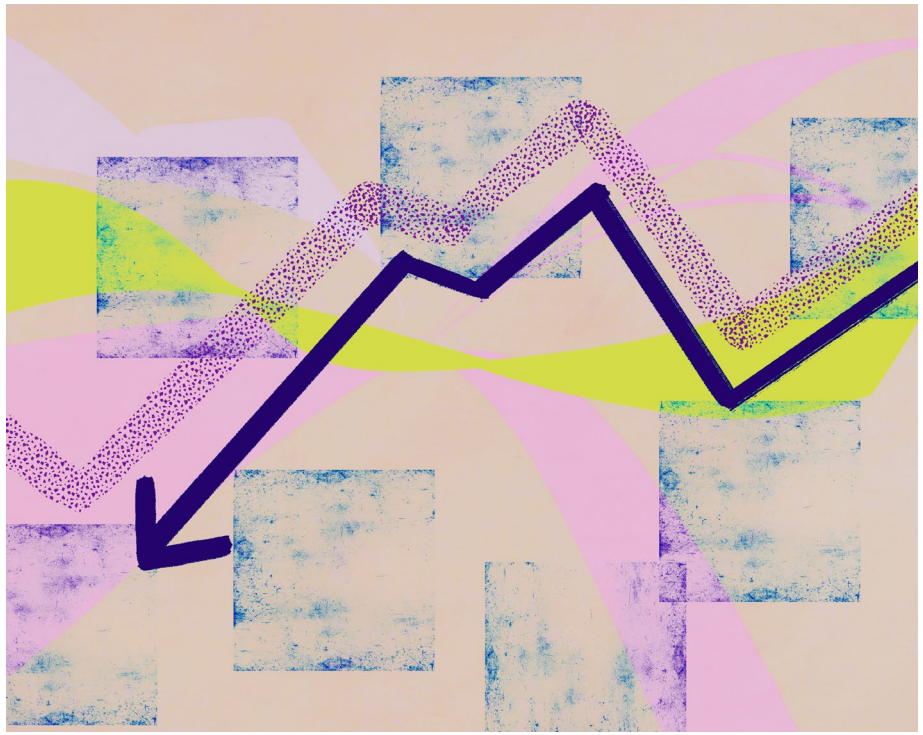


Where information comes from



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Finding 1: Cost rules

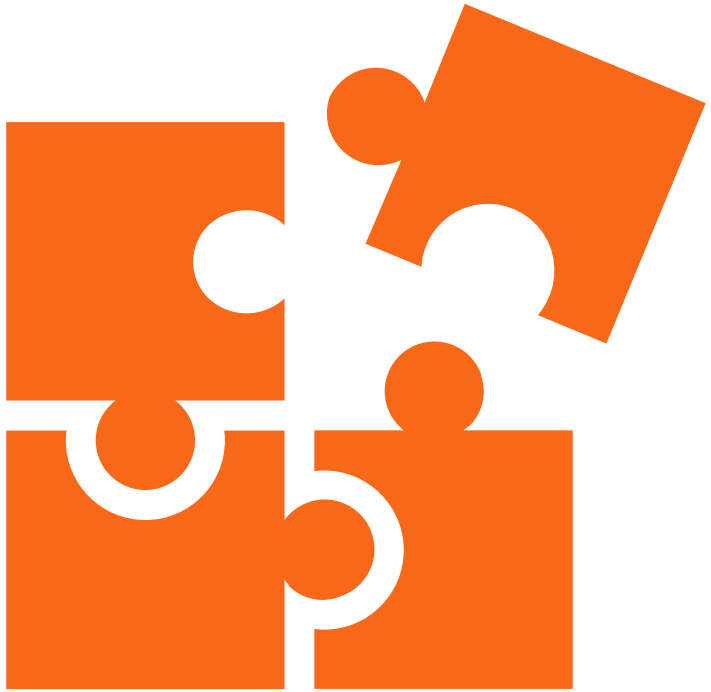


- Cost was the single strongest driver of choice **for almost everyone**.
- Preference fell sharply as monthly cost rose.

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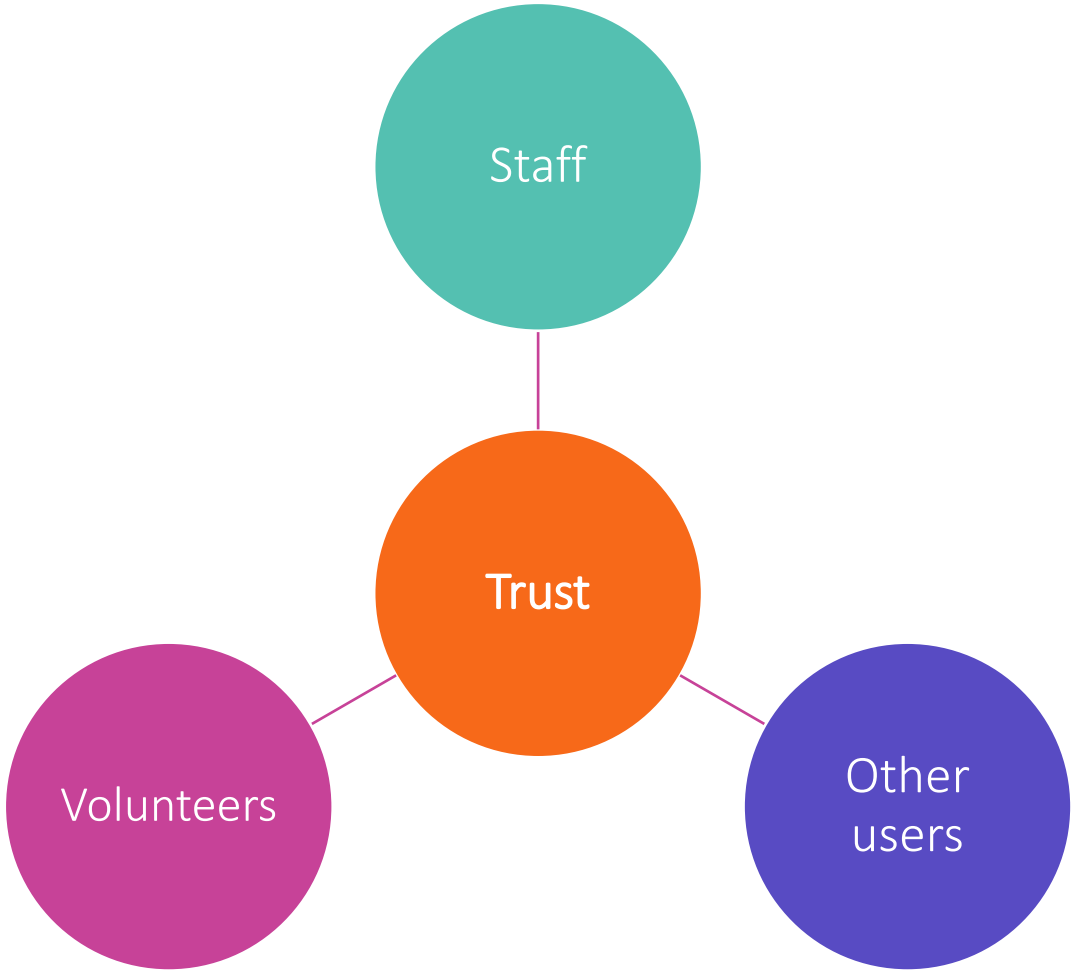
But not for everyone

- One group, **18.2 percent**, mostly people with disability, did not respond to price at all.
- A single funding model will not fit this population.



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Finding 2: Trust matters



- Information from businesses or organisations was consistently disliked.
- People trusted other users, volunteers, and staff far more.

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Privacy is protective

- Being fully visible, with name and profile shown, was significantly disliked, especially by people with disability.

- Privacy by default matters.



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Finding 3: One size does not fit all

Three distinct preference groups emerged:



Strongly cost-sensitive

30.1%



Privacy-focused

51.7%

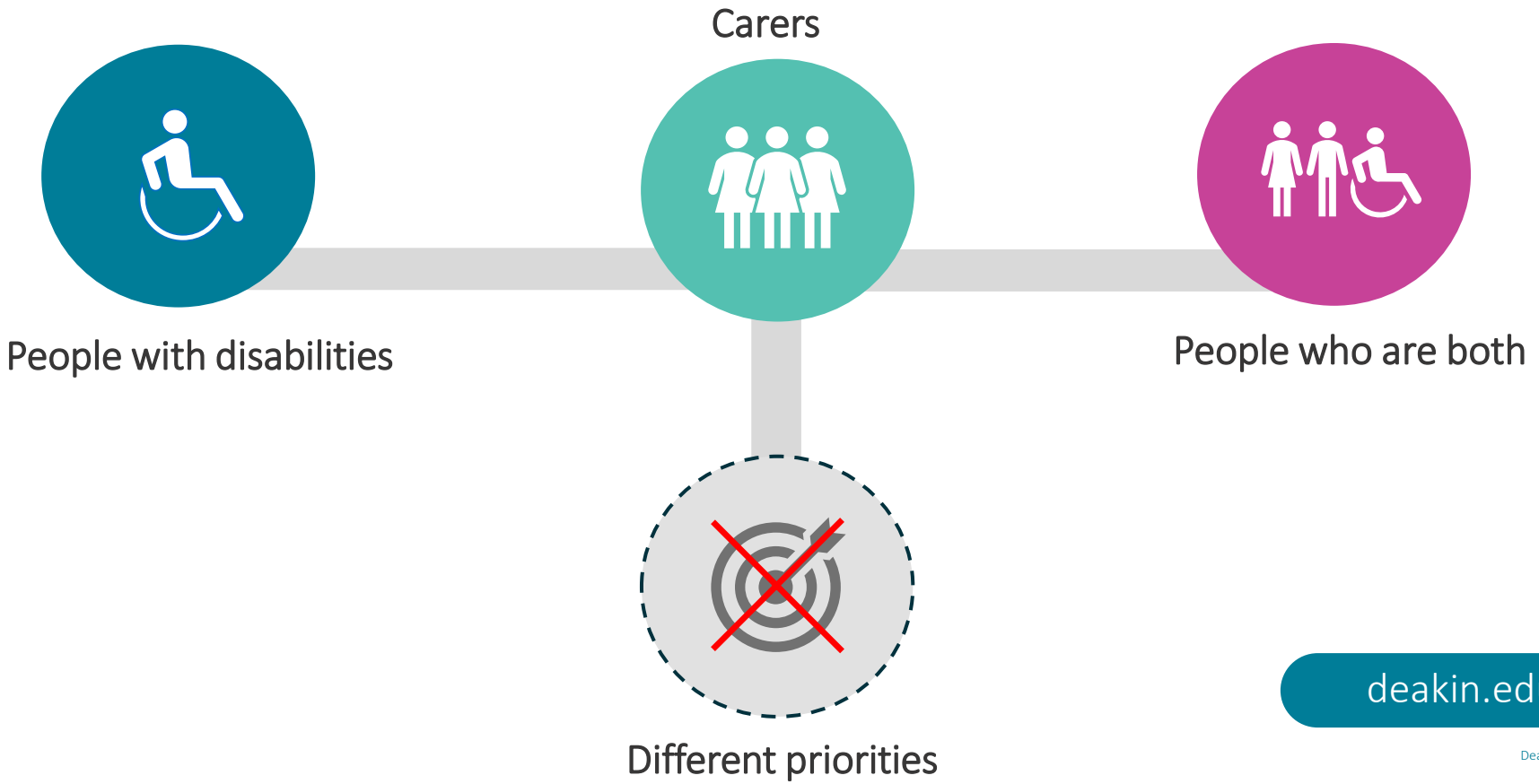


Open to almost anything

18.2%

Different groups, different needs

- People with disability, carers, and those who are both showed different priorities.
- Aggregate averages hide this.



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What people said they wanted



Must have features:

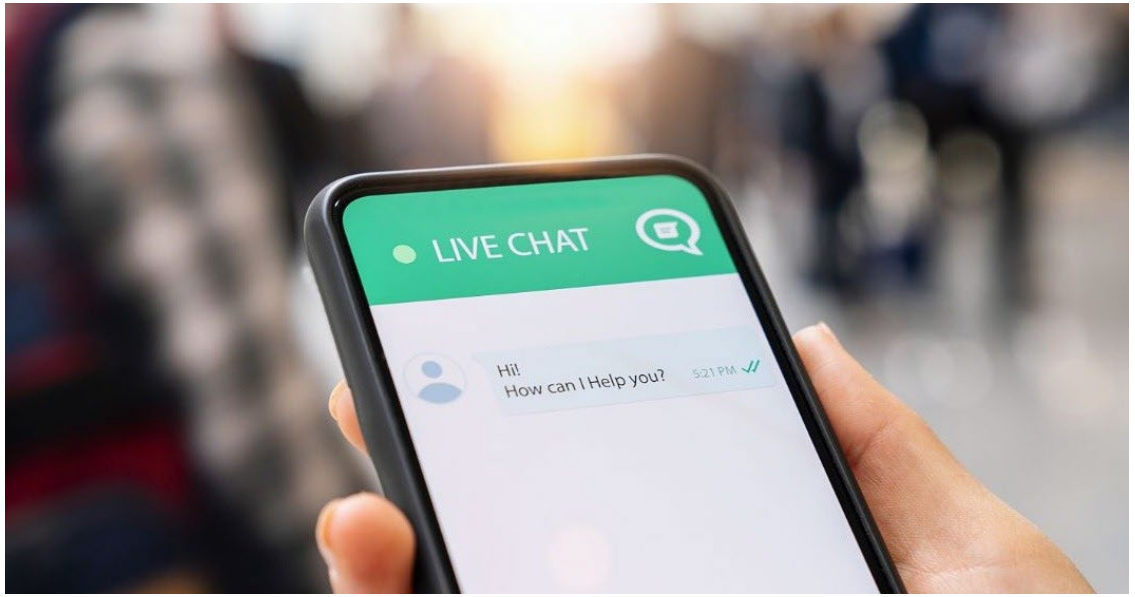
- Simple layout **(84%)** and navigation **(82%)**
- Font size and magnification **(62%)**
- Automatic transcription **(57%)** and alt text **(55%)**

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Humans over bots

Across the board, participants wanted:

- **Real human support** over a chatbot
- Staff trained in **inclusivity**.



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Design implication: Pricing

A free core platform, with optional premium features and donation pathways, fits this population better than one flat price.



Willing to donate



Somewhat to extremely likely to pay a monthly fee for incentives

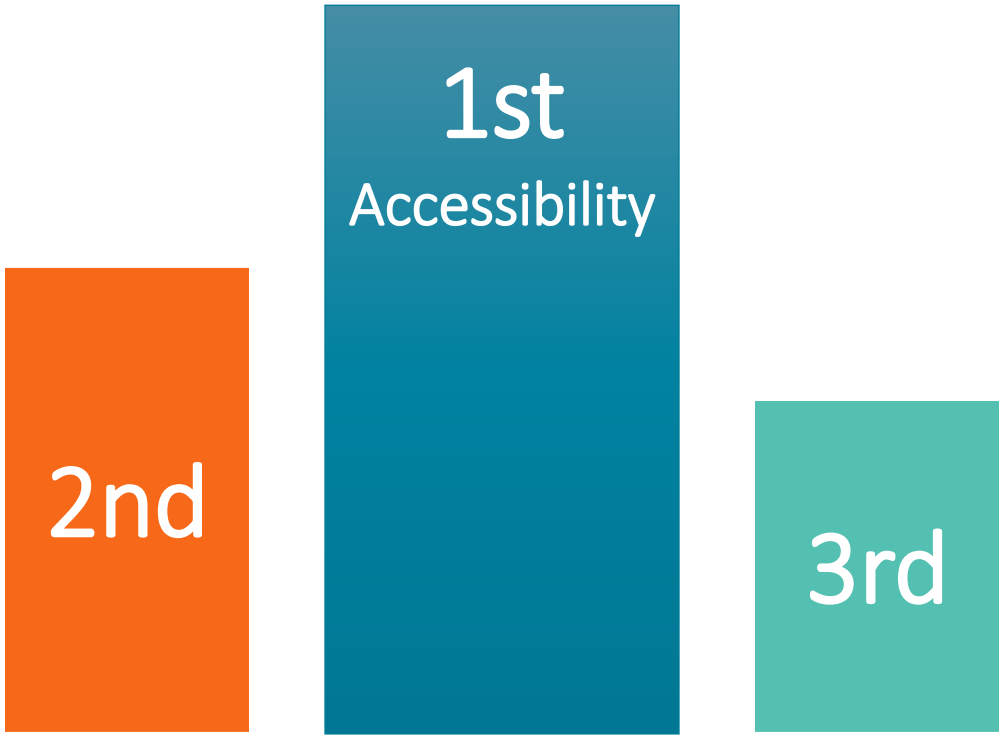


Prefer a free platform with advertisements

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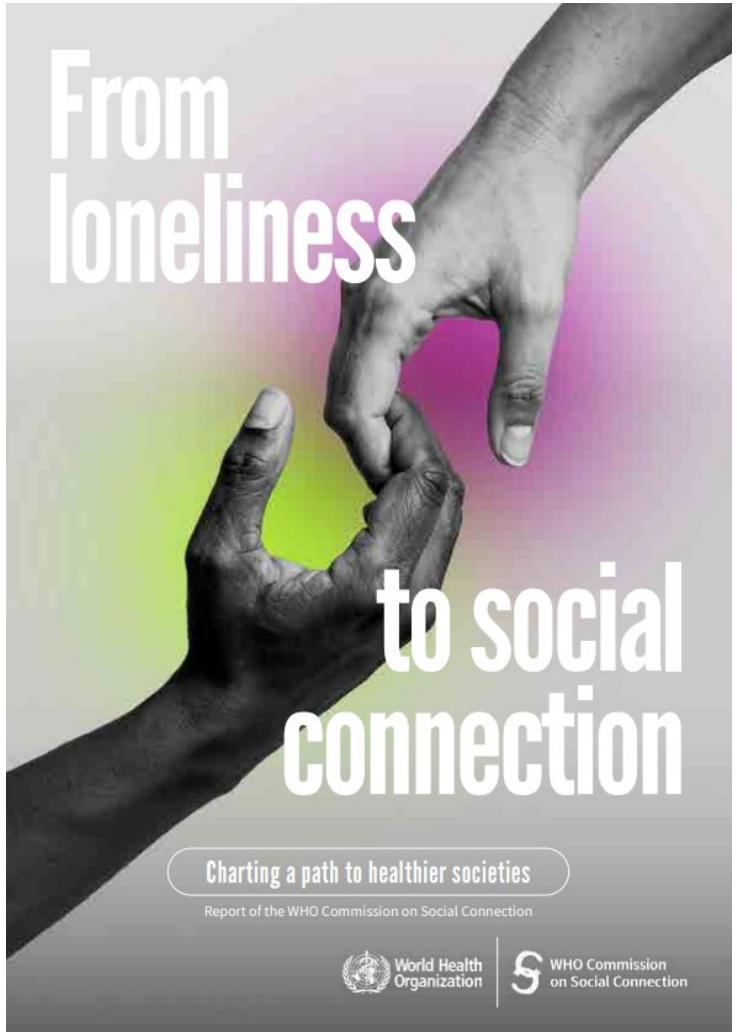
Design implication: Accessibility first

- Accessibility should be a baseline requirement, not an optional extra, alongside privacy-protective defaults.



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Takeaway



- Social connection is now recognised by the World Health Organisation as a third pillar of health.
- Platforms like ConnectUp, built around what users actually value, are part of that infrastructure.

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