

The Consumer Banking Preferences & Behavior Report

Market Research Insights
For Credit Union Marketers & Executives

Introduction

This report surveyed consumers about their banking preferences, behaviors, and value drivers. The questions were positioned to help credit unions better understand current members and potential new members. Over 40 charts within this report show responses broken out by age and primary financial institution usage. This segmentation was done to showcase key differences in consumer preferences and behaviors by different groups. Also, some charts display comparisons to identical questions asked among the audience in the [2022 survey](#).



Who this report is for:

This report is for credit unions marketers, executives, and board members seeking to better understand their members and how to think about attracting new members.



Why we created it:

This report was created to validate, challenge, and demystify consumer preferences for credit unions. The goal of gathering the information was to better align messaging and energy towards the things that matter most to consumers when shopping for loans and/or selecting a primary financial institution.

It also seeks to understand emerging trends in fintech that may threaten a credit union's value proposition within the marketplace. The information provides actionable insights around how consumers perceive their financial service options, what motivates them to change providers, and what they consider to be most important in a financial service provider.

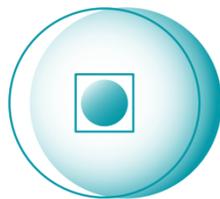
Survey Methodology

To address the objectives at hand, an online survey was utilized. The survey took an average of 10 minutes to complete and included 37 questions. The survey received 1,000 responses. Fieldwork for the survey began on October 20, 2025 and lasted until November 7, 2025.



Who was surveyed:

The target audience for the survey was an equal mix of credit union members (n = 500) and non-credit union members (n = 500). The sample was census representative by gender and U.S. region, but featured even representation from various age groups (18 to 24, 25 to 34, 35 to 44, 45 to 54, 55 to 64, 65 or older). Respondents were also screened to ensure they were household decision-makers on banking, had familiarity with financial institutions available to them, and currently used a credit union or bank.



Confidence level / Margin of error:

With a probabilistic sample, a total of 1,000 responses at the 95% confidence level offers a 3.1% margin of error. If the survey were conducted with another random pool of 1,000 respondents, the results would yield within +3.1% or -3.1% of the stated totals in the reports. The margin of error can be used as a guideline to understand the reliability of these results.

About Gear

Gear is a digital marketing agency that specializes in serving credit unions and community banks.

Founded in 2004, Gear has supported more than **120 credit unions** across the United States, helping leadership teams drive growth in new membership, deposits, and lending through digital channels.

Our work spans digital strategy, marketing execution, marketing automation, data & analytics, and ROI reporting. Designed to operate within the regulatory, data security, and governance requirements of financial institutions.

Gear is a HubSpot Diamond Partner and SOC 2 Type II compliant, reflecting both platform expertise and operational rigor.

Gear regularly shares research and insights with the financial institution industry and has presented at events including **CUNA** and **MAC**, as well as hosting education-focused webinars for credit union executives and marketing leaders.

Today, Gear is a team of 45 professionals headquartered in Richmond, Virginia.



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Section 1

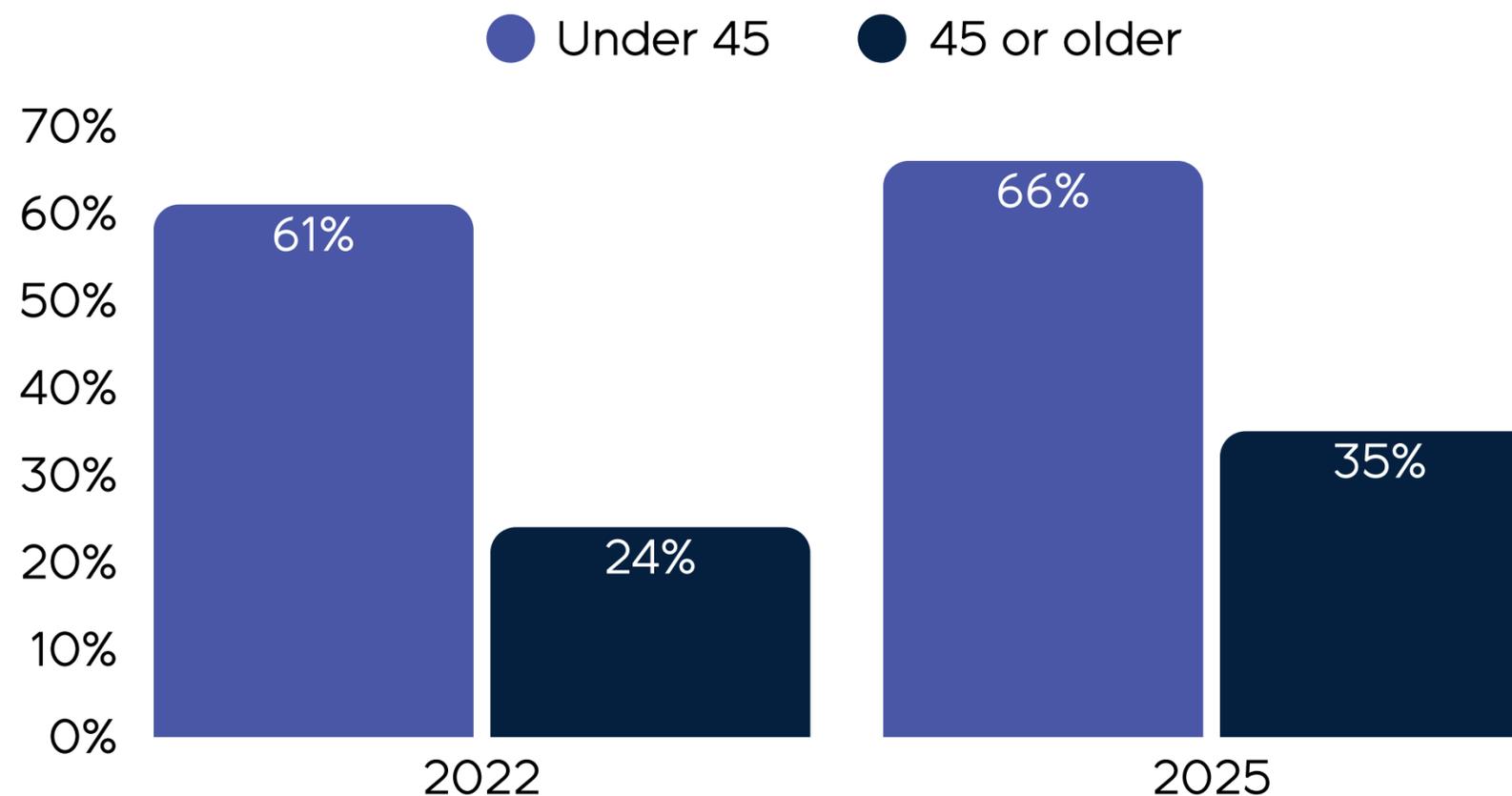
PFI, Fintechs, & AI

Online Bank Adoption is Growing, Especially Among Older Users

While consumers under 45 remain the primary adopters of online banks, membership has significantly risen since 2022 among those 45 or older, as now over 1 in 3 are indicating membership.

Outlook: Digital competitors are successfully penetrating traditionally loyal customer/member bases, requiring retention strategies that focus on relationship value and account security to protect these deposit-rich segments from migrating to fintechs.

Online-Only Bank Membership

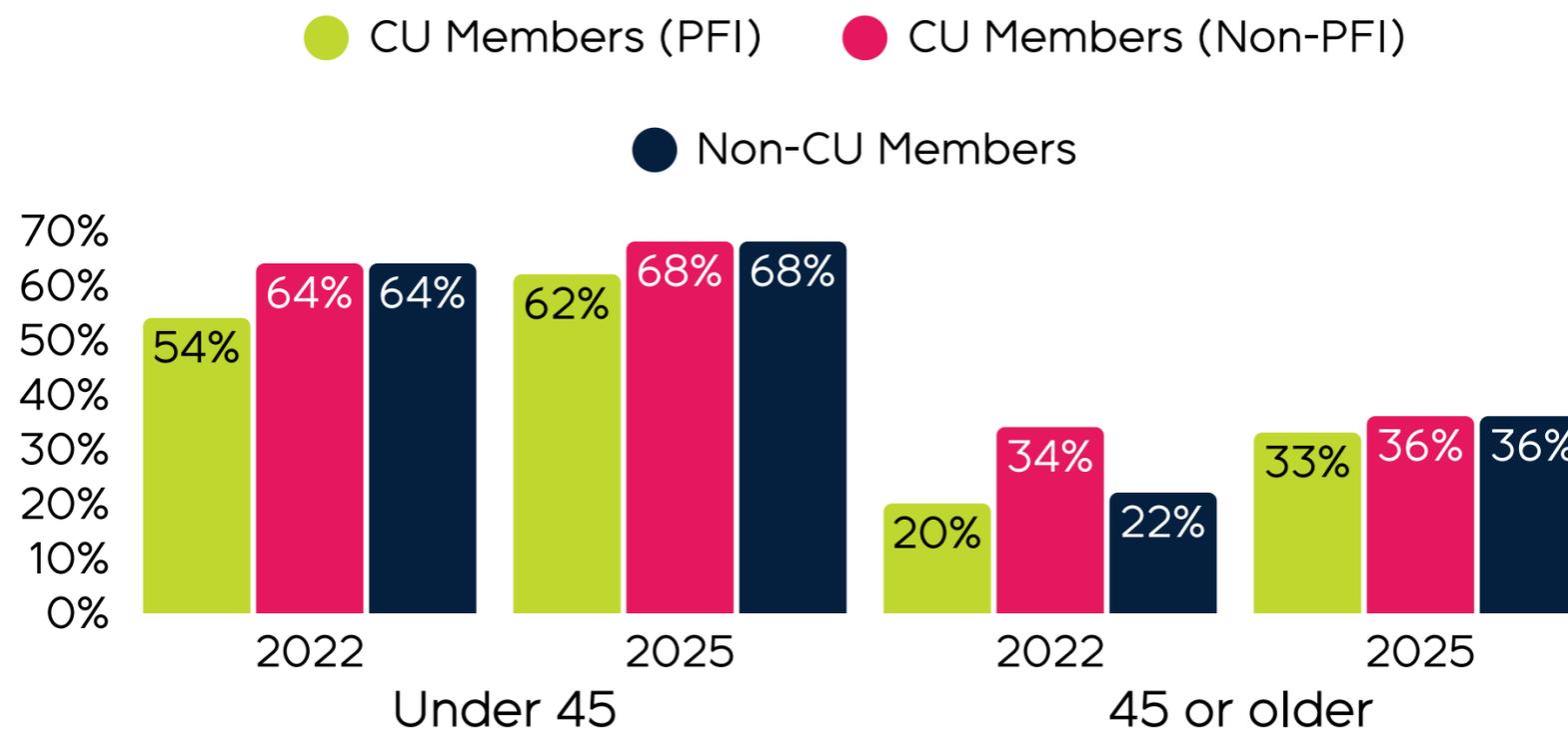


Online Bank Adoption Rising Rapidly Among Primary Credit Union Members

Even among members who consider a credit union their primary financial institution (PFI), online bank membership has surged.

Outlook: Primary status does not guarantee exclusivity, signaling an urgent need to bolster digital value propositions and competitive rates to prevent loyal members from diversifying their deposits into fintech competitors.

Online-Only Bank Membership by Credit Union Experience

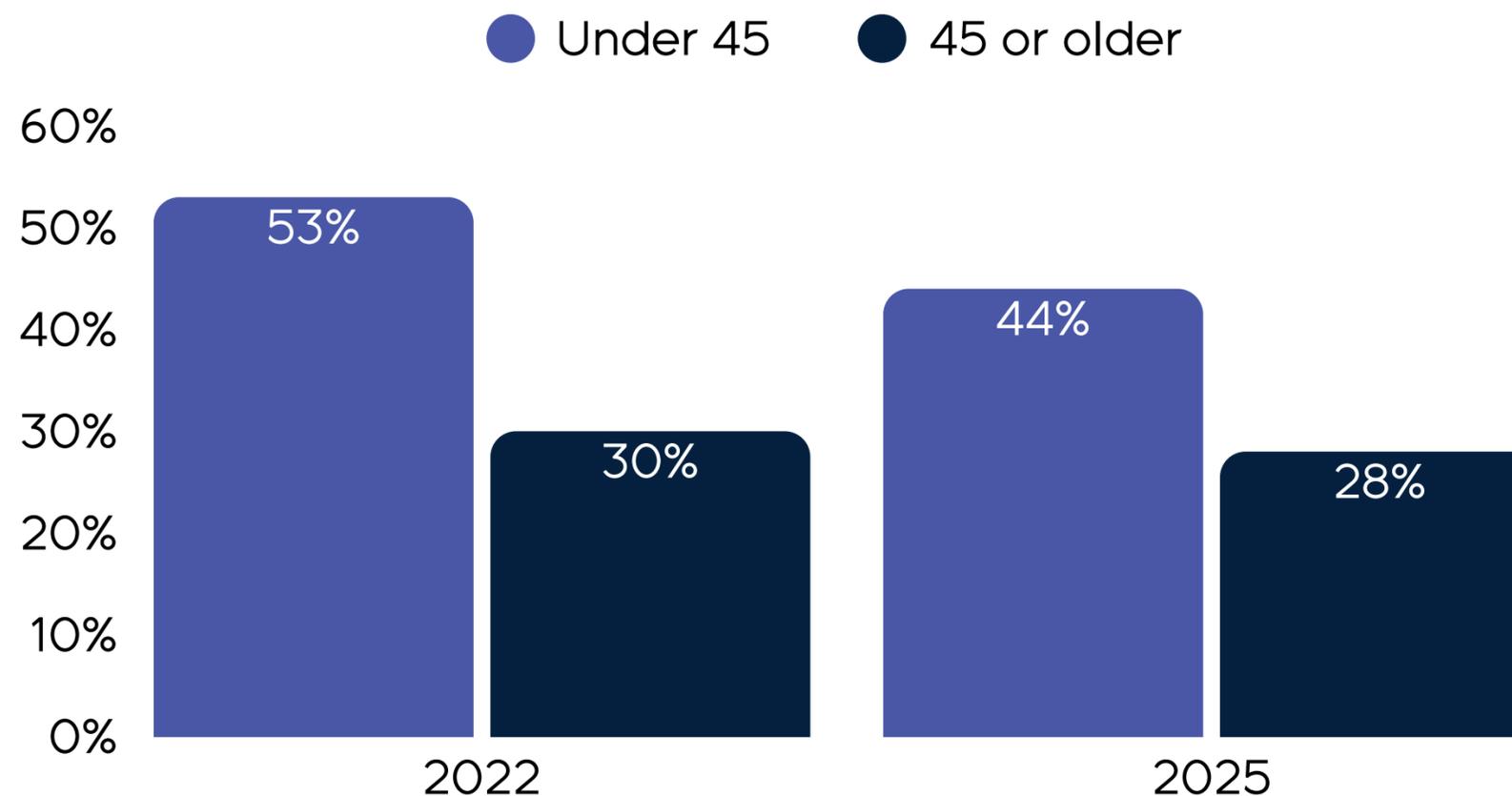


Online Investment Platform Usage Cools, Particularly Among Younger Consumers

In contrast to the growth seen in general digital banking, reliance on standalone online investment platforms has significantly retreated since 2022, most notably from consumers under 45.

Outlook: This contraction hints at potential app fatigue or a shift away from DIY speculation, creating a timely opening for credit unions to pitch integrated wealth management services to members seeking professional guidance and consolidated financial views.

Usage of Online Investment or Wealth Management Service

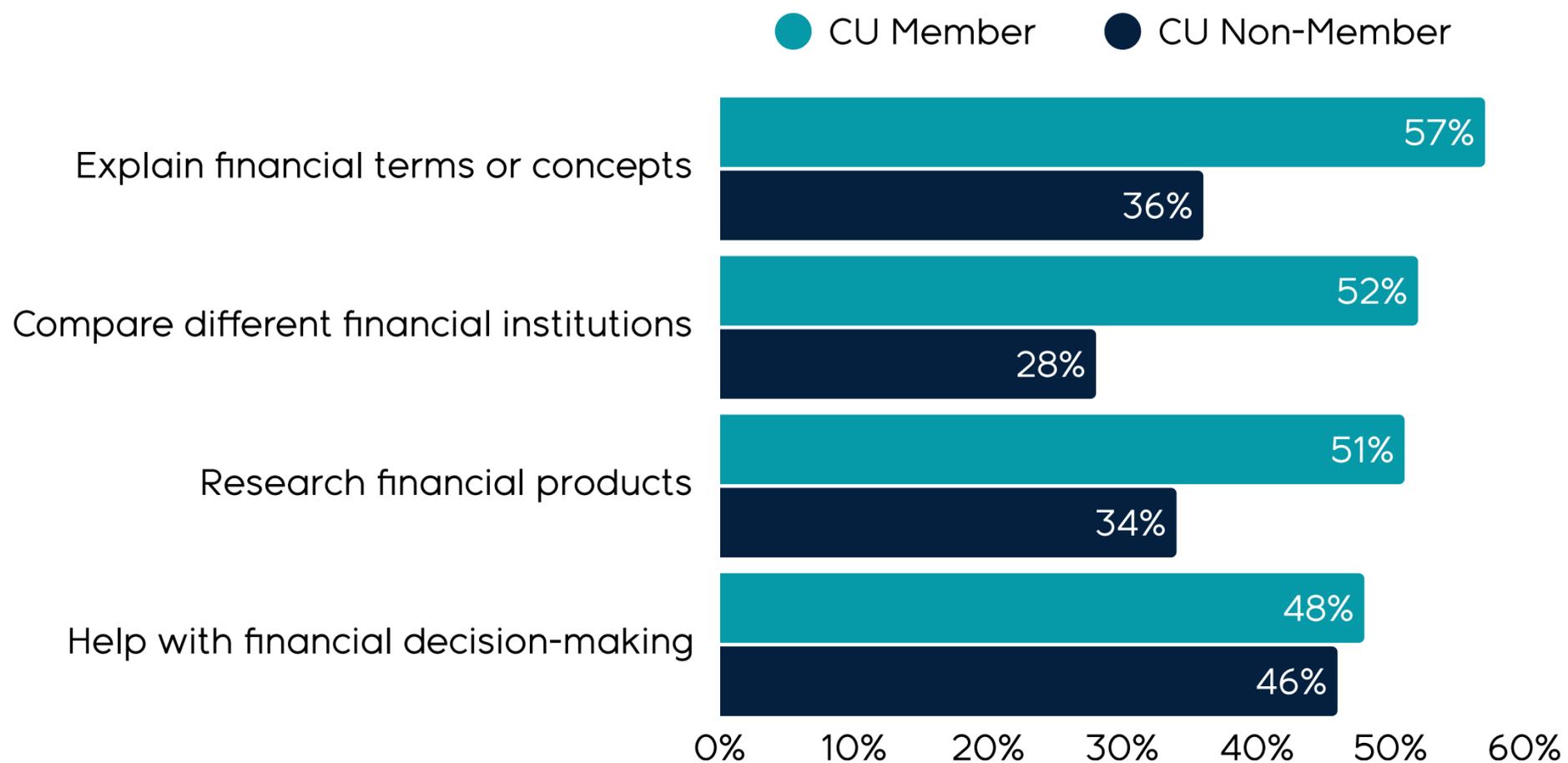


Credit Union AI Users Aggressively Leverage LLMs for Financial Research

Among frequent users of LLMs (ChatGPT, Perplexity, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot) CU members are significantly more likely than non-members to utilize them for foundational tasks, with over half using them to explain financial terms (57%), compare institutions (52%), and research products (51%).

Outlook: Members are self-vetting competitors and products long before speaking to staff, creating a call for institutions to ensure their public data is AI-ready and accurate so they remain visible during this independent research phase.

Frequent Usage of LLMs for Banking and Finance Tasks

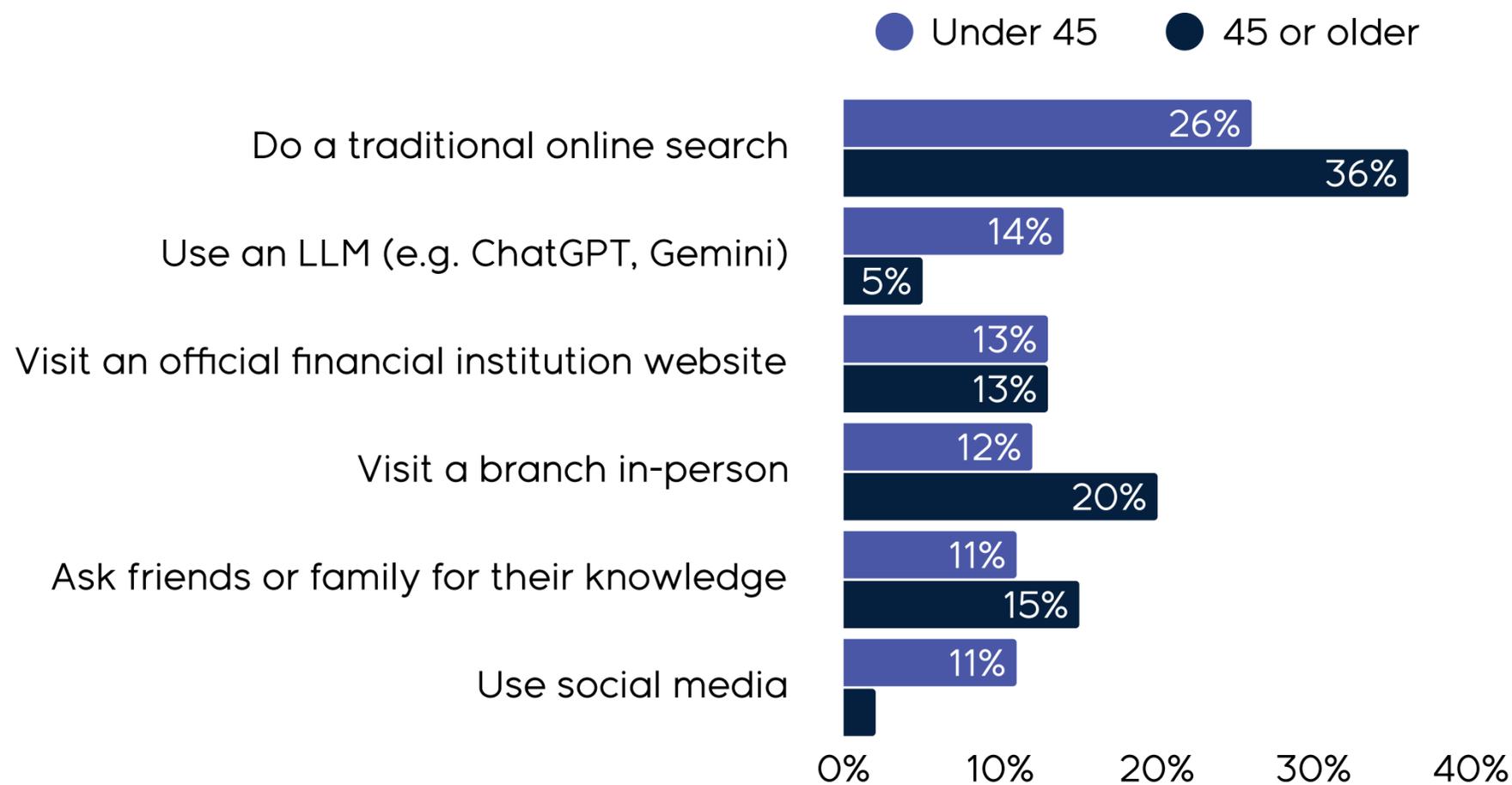


Traditional Search Dominates, Yet AI Outshines Alternatives for Younger Consumers

Traditional online search remains the primary research method for all consumers, and while older consumers still favor branches at nearly double the rate of younger cohorts, both show equal engagement with official institutional websites.

Outlook: A pivotal shift has occurred among consumers under 45, who are now just as likely to consult an LLM (ChatGPT, Perplexity, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot) (14%) as they are to visit a branch (12%), or even the institution's own website (13%).

First Step in Researching Financial Institutions



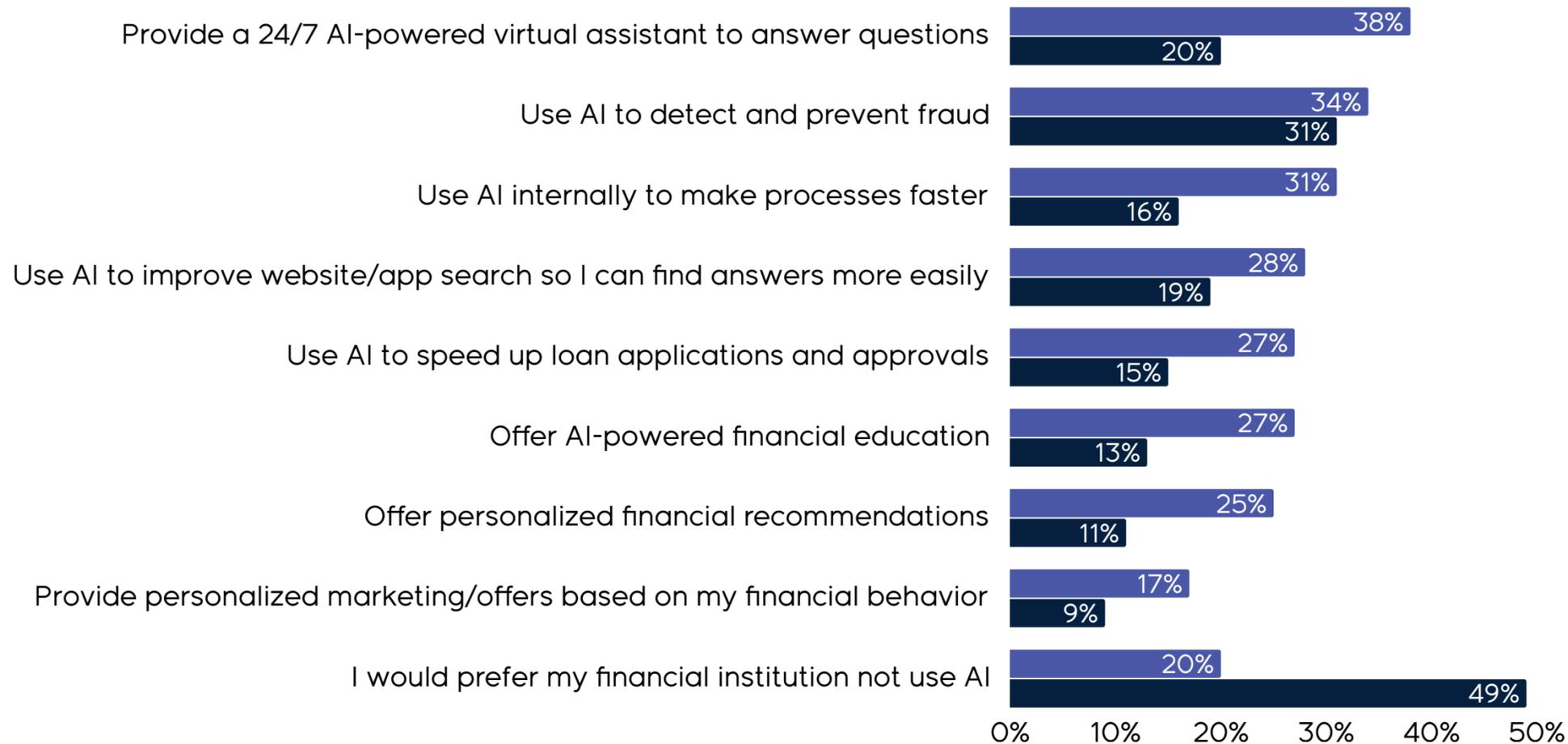
Younger Consumers Demand AI Integration Across the Entire Banking Journey

While nearly half of consumers 45+ prefer their institution not to use AI, consumers under 45 exhibit a robust appetite for AI utility. They are significantly outpacing older consumers in desiring AI for 24/7 assistance (38%), operational speed (31%), and financial education (27%).

Outlook: This demand for a multi-faceted AI experience suggests that to capture and retain younger consumers, institutions must deploy automation not just for backend efficiency, but as a visible, comprehensive tool for advice and daily banking friction reduction.

How would you like to see your financial institution incorporate AI?

● Under 45 ● 45 or older



Section 2

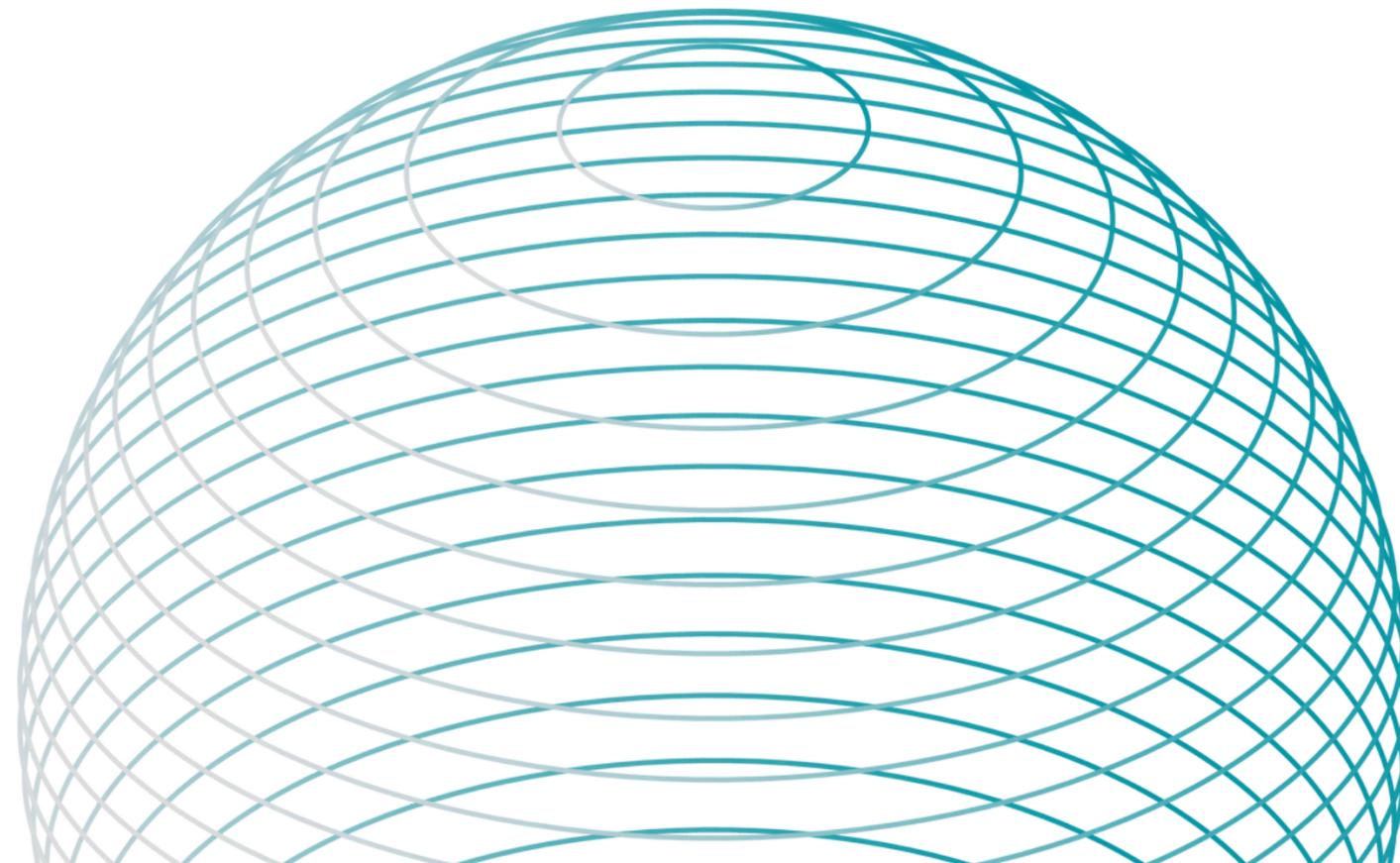
Consumer Banking
Value Drivers

Consumer Banking Value Drivers Introduction

The first portion of this section examines the conventional wisdom on what the consumer cares most about when it comes to their financial institution. The goal is to understand which attributes of a financial institution matter most to consumers.

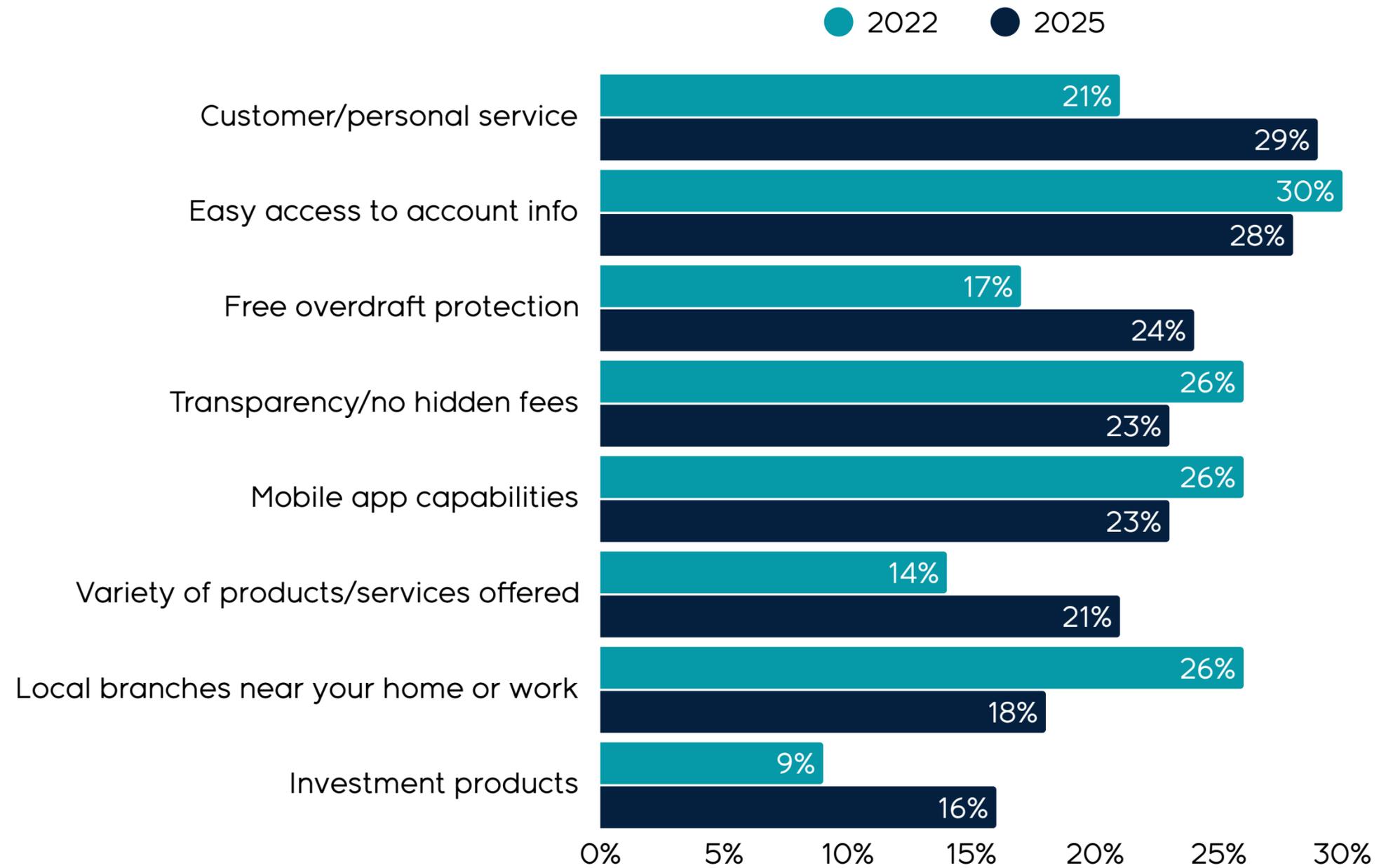
The second portion seeks to understand which financial institutions are perceived to do those things the best. Data is broken out by credit union members who use the credit union as their PFI, credit union members who don't use the credit union as their PFI, and non-credit union members. Separating responses by these segments helps highlight the differences in perception of which financial institution is best at the things that matter the most.

Given the strong emphasis on acquiring newer, younger members, some of the following charts focus on consumers under 45 years old.



Besides favorable interest rates and low fees, which of the following factors do you value most in a financial institution?

CU Members (PFI),
Under 45 Years Old

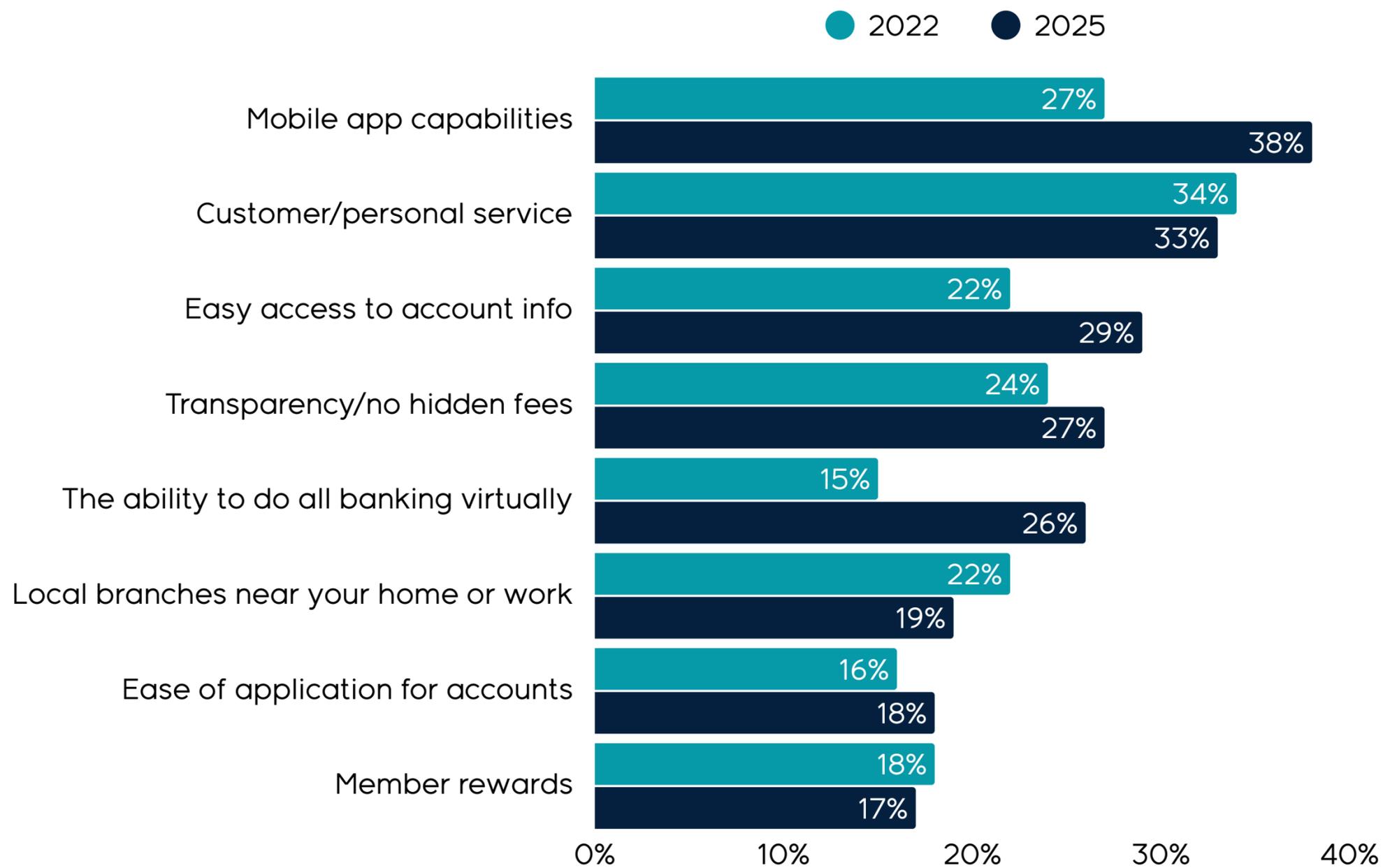


Source: Gear Consumer Banking Preferences & Behavior Survey, 2022 and 2025

Note: Top 8 options shown, up to 3 options could be selected

Besides favorable interest rates and low fees, which of the following factors do you value most in a financial institution?

CU Members (Non-PFI),
Under 45 Years Old



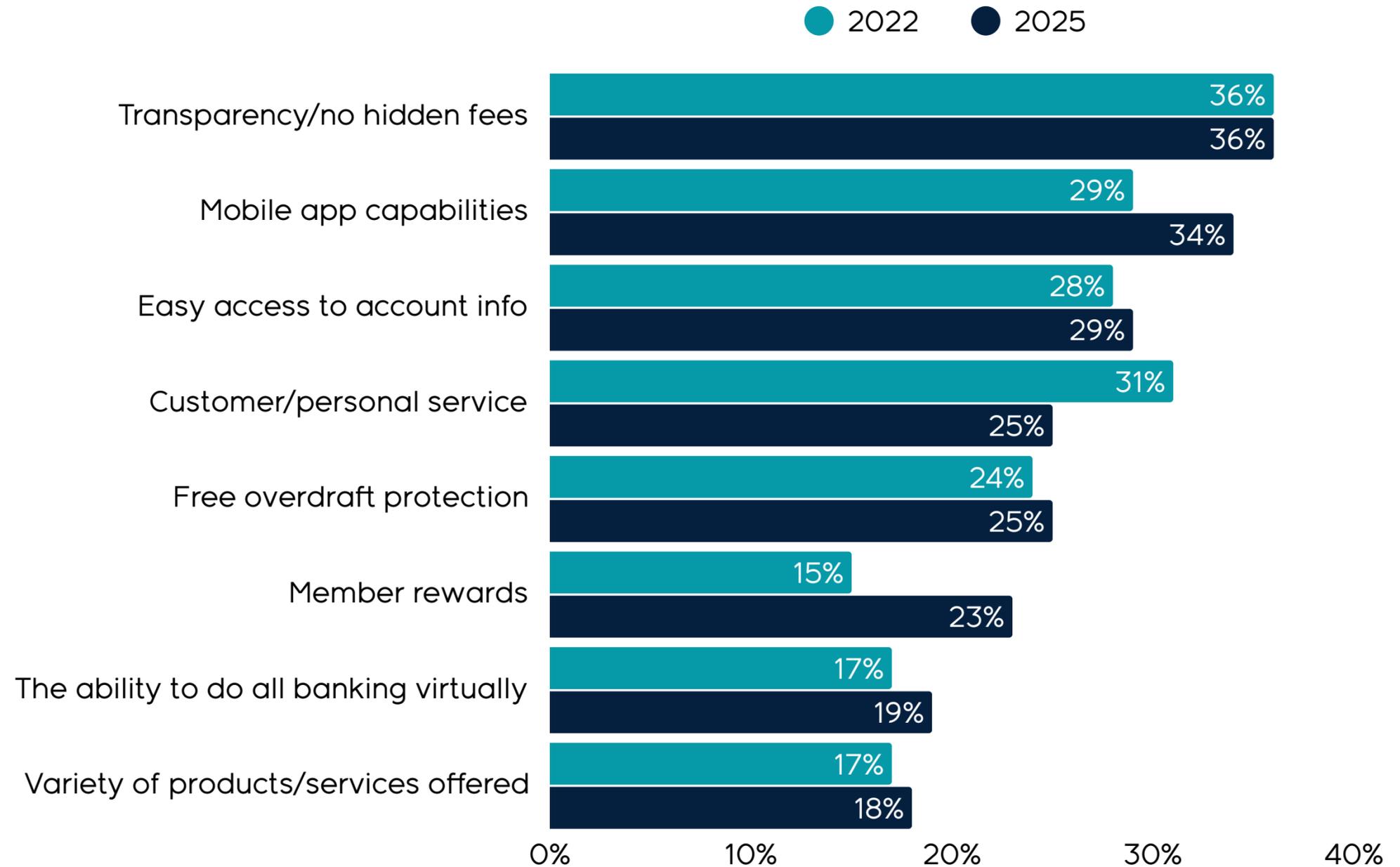
Source: Gear Consumer Banking Preferences & Behavior Survey, 2022 and 2025

Note: Top 8 options shown, up to 3 options could be selected

Besides favorable interest rates and low fees, which of the following factors do you value most in a financial institution?

Non-CU Members,
Under 45 Years Old

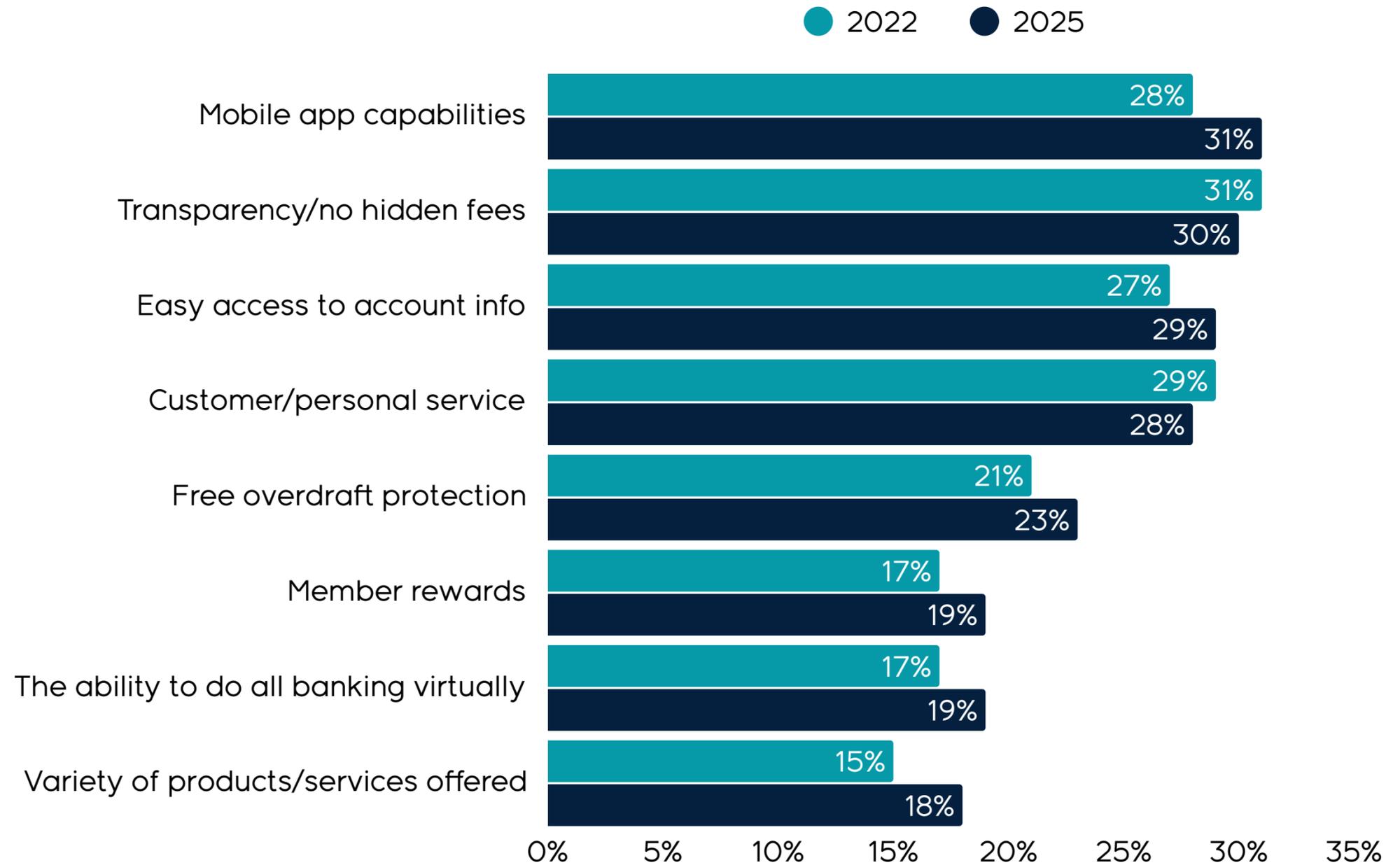
Source: Gear Consumer Banking Preferences & Behavior Survey, 2022 and 2025



Note: Top 8 options shown, up to 3 options could be selected

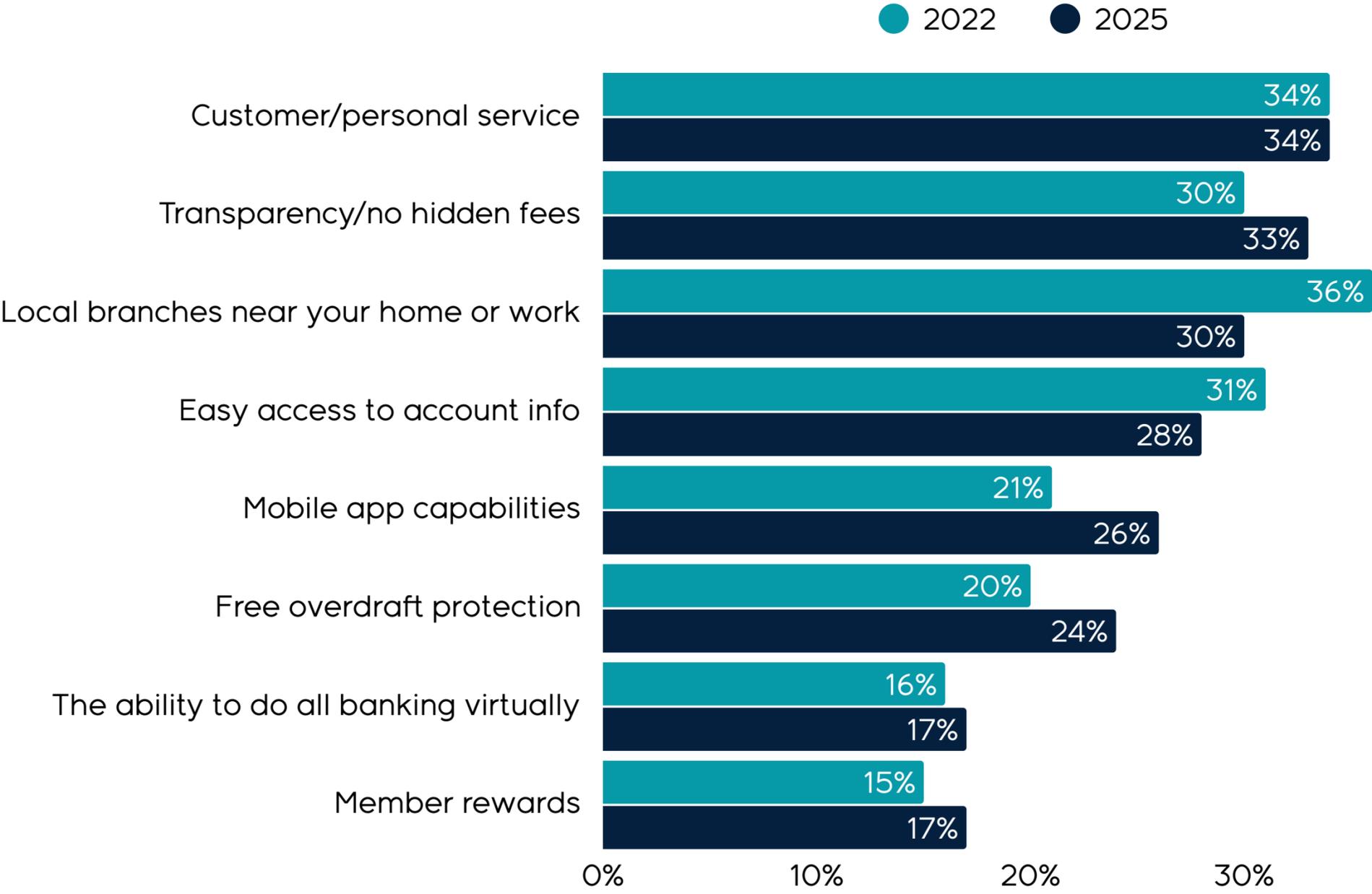
Besides favorable interest rates and low fees, which of the following factors do you value most in a financial institution?

Total, Under 45 Years Old



Besides favorable interest rates and low fees, which of the following factors do you value most in a financial institution?

Total Respondents



Note: Top 8 options shown, up to 3 options could be selected

Source: Gear Consumer Banking Preferences & Behavior Survey, 2022 and 2025

Which Financial Institution Is Best & Which is Worst?

CU Members (PFI), Under 45 Years Old

With online banks now matching credit unions as the best provider for accessibility, credit unions need to focus on differentiating through superior service depth.



MOST IMPORTANT



Financial Institution Factors	Institution MOST Often Rated As Best		Institution LEAST Often Rated As Best	
	2022	2025	2022	2025
Accessibility	●	● ●	●	●
Mobile App	● ●	● ●	●	●
Local Branches	●	● ●	●	●
Customer Service	●	●	●	●
Online Experience	●	●	●	●
Variety of Offerings	●	●	●	● ●
Financial Education	●	●	●	●
Community Involvement	●	●	●	●

Which Financial Institution Is Best & Which is Worst?

CU Members (Non-PFI), Under 45 Years Old

By displacing traditional banks as the top-rated service provider for younger non-primary CU members, credit unions have secured a critical foothold to convert these users into primary relationships through superior human support, counterbalancing the digital dominance of online banks.



MOST IMPORTANT



Financial Institution Factors	Institution MOST Often Rated As Best		Institution LEAST Often Rated As Best	
	2022	2025	2022	2025
Customer Service	● ●	●	●	●
Mobile App	●	●	●	●
Accessibility	●	●	● ●	●
Local Branches	●	●	●	●
Online Experience	●	●	●	● ●
Variety of Offerings	●	●	●	●
Financial Education	●	●	● ●	●
Community Involvement	● ●	● ●	●	●

Which Financial Institution Is Best & Which is Worst?

Non-CU Members, Under 45 Years Old

With traditional banks capturing nearly every high-priority value driver among young non-CU members while credit unions fail to lead in any factor, this group faces a brand relevance gap that calls for differentiation to break the big bank default.



MOST IMPORTANT



Financial Institution Factors	Institution MOST Often Rated As Best		Institution LEAST Often Rated As Best	
	2022	2025	2022	2025
Customer Service	●	●	● ●	● ●
Mobile App	●	●	●	●
Accessibility	●	●	●	●
Local Branches	●	●	●	●
Variety of Offerings	●	●	●	●
Online Experience	●	●	●	●
Financial Education	● ● ●	●	N/A	● ●
Community Involvement	●	●	●	●

Which Financial Institution Is Best & Which is Worst?

Total Respondents

Traditional banks have achieved parity in historically member-centric categories like community involvement and education, signaling credit unions to redefine their unique value beyond these shared attributes.



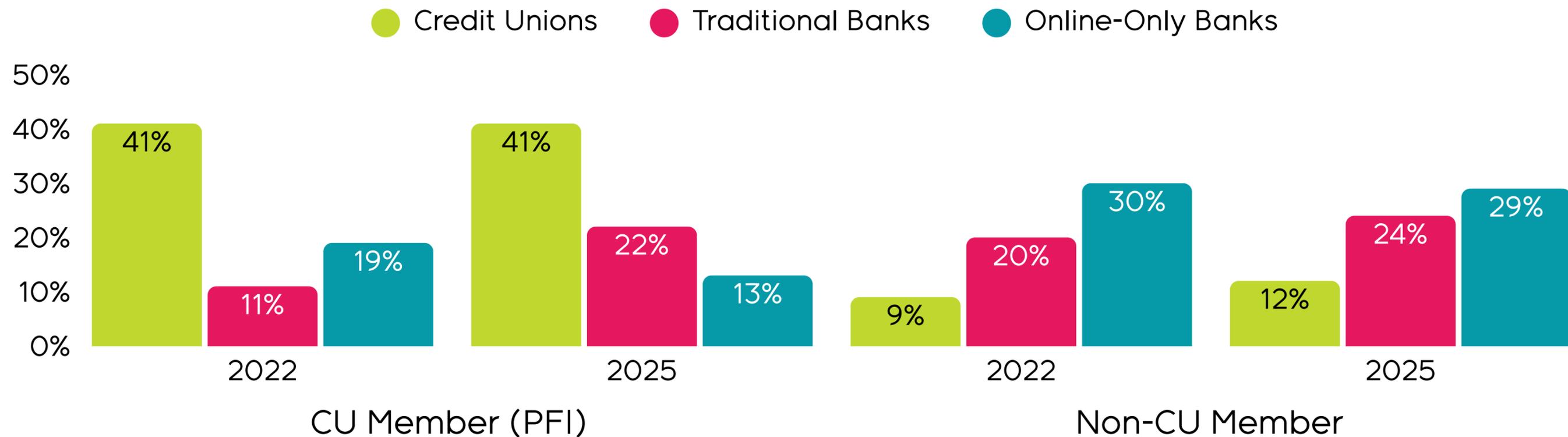
MOST IMPORTANT



Financial Institution Factors	Institution MOST Often Rated As Best		Institution LEAST Often Rated As Best	
	2022	2025	2022	2025
Customer Service	Traditional Banks, Credit Unions	Traditional Banks	Online-Only Banks	Online-Only Banks
Local Branches	Traditional Banks	Traditional Banks	Online-Only Banks	Online-Only Banks
Accessibility	Traditional Banks	Traditional Banks	Credit Unions	Credit Unions, Online-Only Banks
Mobile App	Online-Only Banks	Online-Only Banks	Credit Unions, Traditional Banks	Credit Unions, Traditional Banks
Variety of Offerings	Traditional Banks	Traditional Banks	Online-Only Banks	Online-Only Banks
Online Experience	Online-Only Banks	Online-Only Banks	Credit Unions, Traditional Banks	Credit Unions, Traditional Banks
Community Involvement	Credit Unions	Traditional Banks, Credit Unions	Online-Only Banks	Online-Only Banks
Financial Education	Credit Unions	Traditional Banks, Credit Unions	Online-Only Banks	Online-Only Banks

Which Institution Has The Most Favorable Fees?

While younger primary credit union members still rate their own institutions highest for favorable fees (41%), the percentage who now believe traditional banks offer the best fees has doubled from 11% to 22% since 2022.

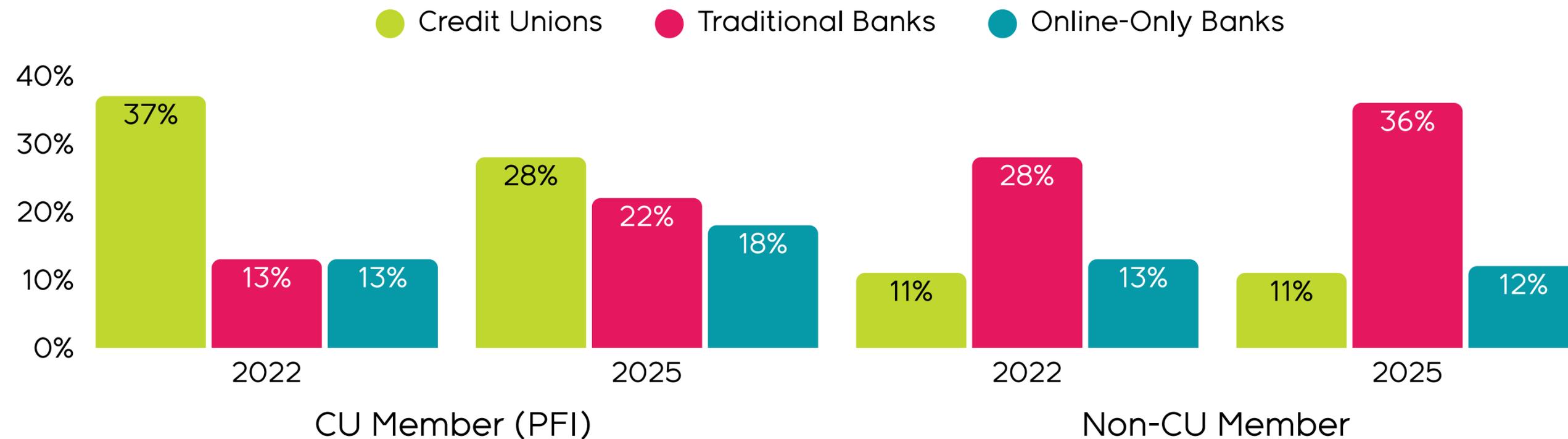


Note: Data shown for those under 45 years old

Source: Gear Consumer Banking Preferences & Behavior Survey, 2022 and 2025

Which Institution Is The Best At Customer Service?

In a stark reversal, the percentage of younger primary CU members who rate credit unions the best for service dropped nearly 10 points from 2022, while their preference for traditional banks surged, signaling that the industry's core service differentiator is eroding with this audience.

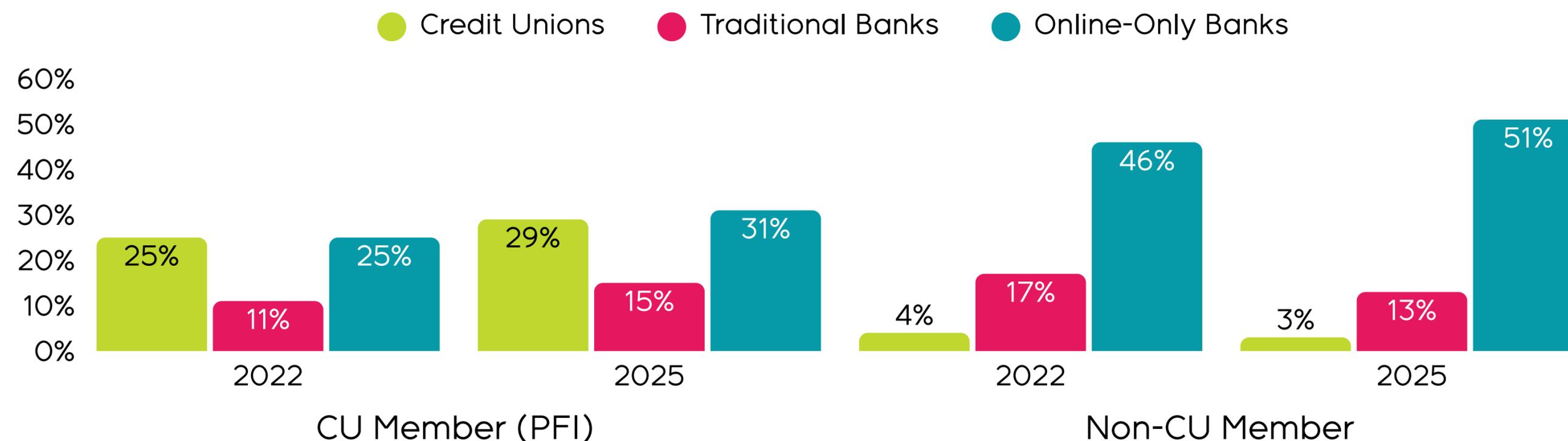


Note: Data shown for those under 45 years old

Source: Gear Consumer Banking Preferences & Behavior Survey, 2022 and 2025

Which Institution Has The Best Mobile App Experience?

Younger primary CU members now slightly rate online bank mobile apps superior to credit union digital interfaces, confirming that member loyalty no longer compensates for user experience gaps and underscores a critical need to improve mobile modernization efforts to match fintech standards.

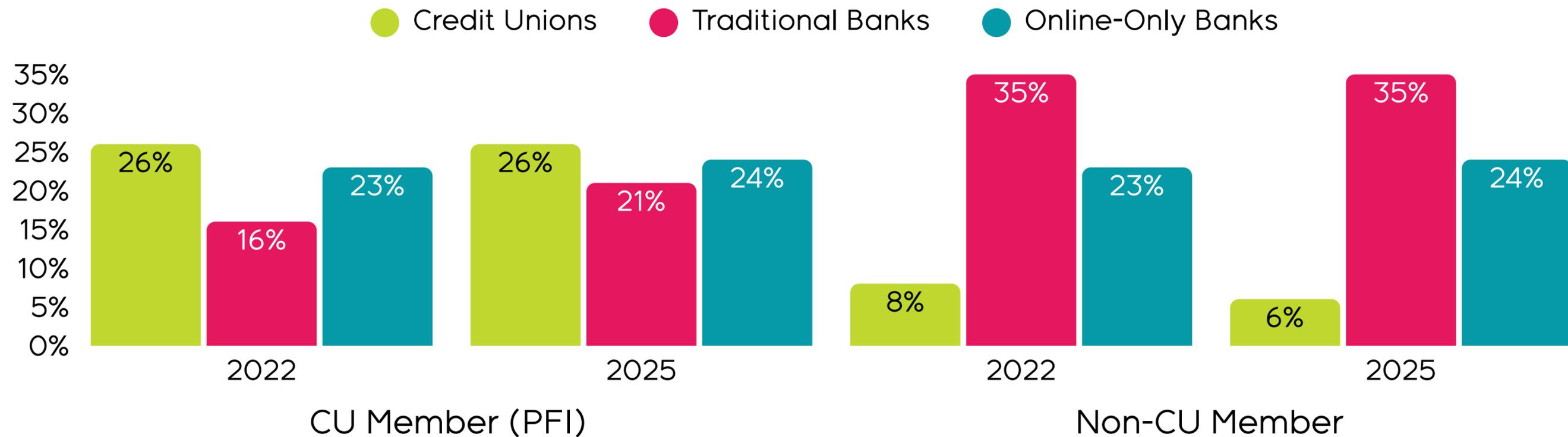


Note: Data shown for those under 45 years old

Source: Gear Consumer Banking Preferences & Behavior Survey, 2022 and 2025

Which Institution Is The Most Accessible (Online & In-Person)?

While younger primary CU members' rating of credit union accessibility remains consistent, their perception of traditional banks as the leader in this category has increased, signaling that the big bank combination of digital scale and physical ubiquity is chipping away at the advantage of local convenience.

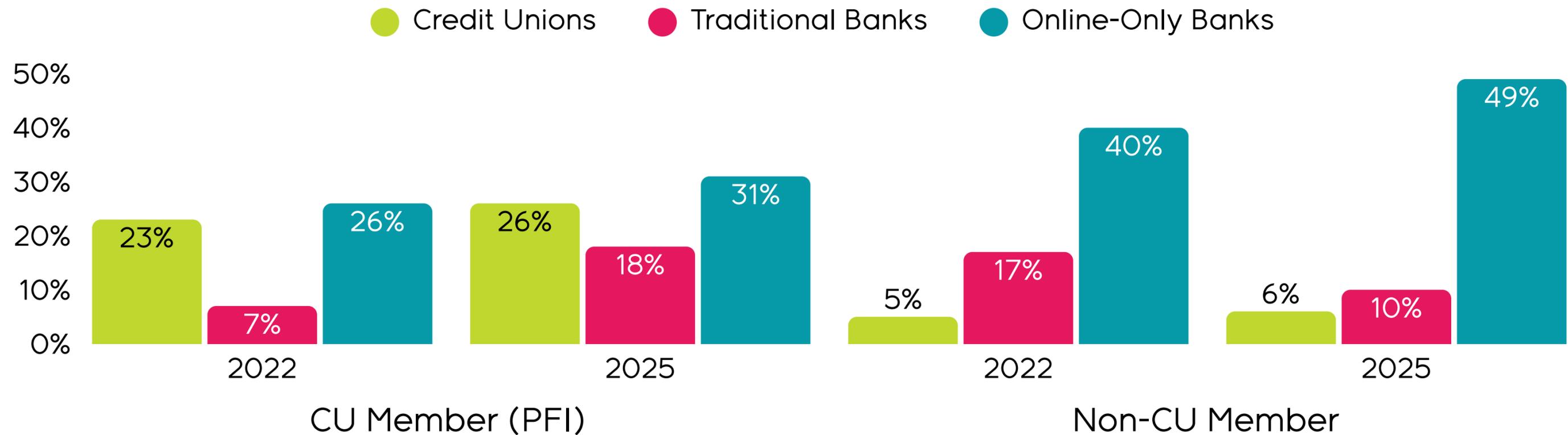


Note: Data shown for those under 45 years old

Source: Gear Consumer Banking Preferences & Behavior Survey, 2022 and 2025

Which Institution Has The Best Online Experience (Website)?

Younger primary CU members now definitively rate online banks superior to credit unions for the best online/website experience, while also doubling their opinion of traditional banks from 2022. Credit unions need to remain competitive with their website's UX and features, or risk falling further behind fintechs and being surpassed by traditional banks.

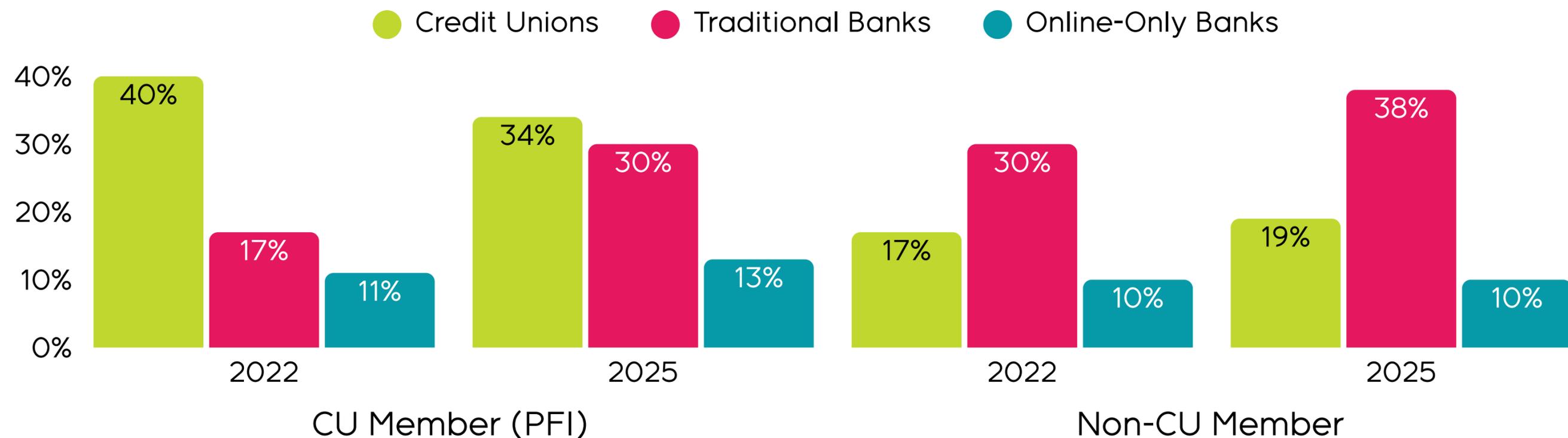


Note: Data shown for those under 45 years old

Source: Gear Consumer Banking Preferences & Behavior Survey, 2022 and 2025

Which Institution Is The Best At Community Involvement?

With younger primary CU members now rating traditional banks nearly on par with credit unions for community involvement, a once-dominant advantage has all but vanished; this rapid decline indicates that big bank marketing is successfully co-opting the local impact narrative, necessitating immediate, tangible proof of local, community differences to restore brand distinctiveness.



Note: Data shown for those under 45 years old

Source: Gear Consumer Banking Preferences & Behavior Survey, 2022 and 2025

Section 3

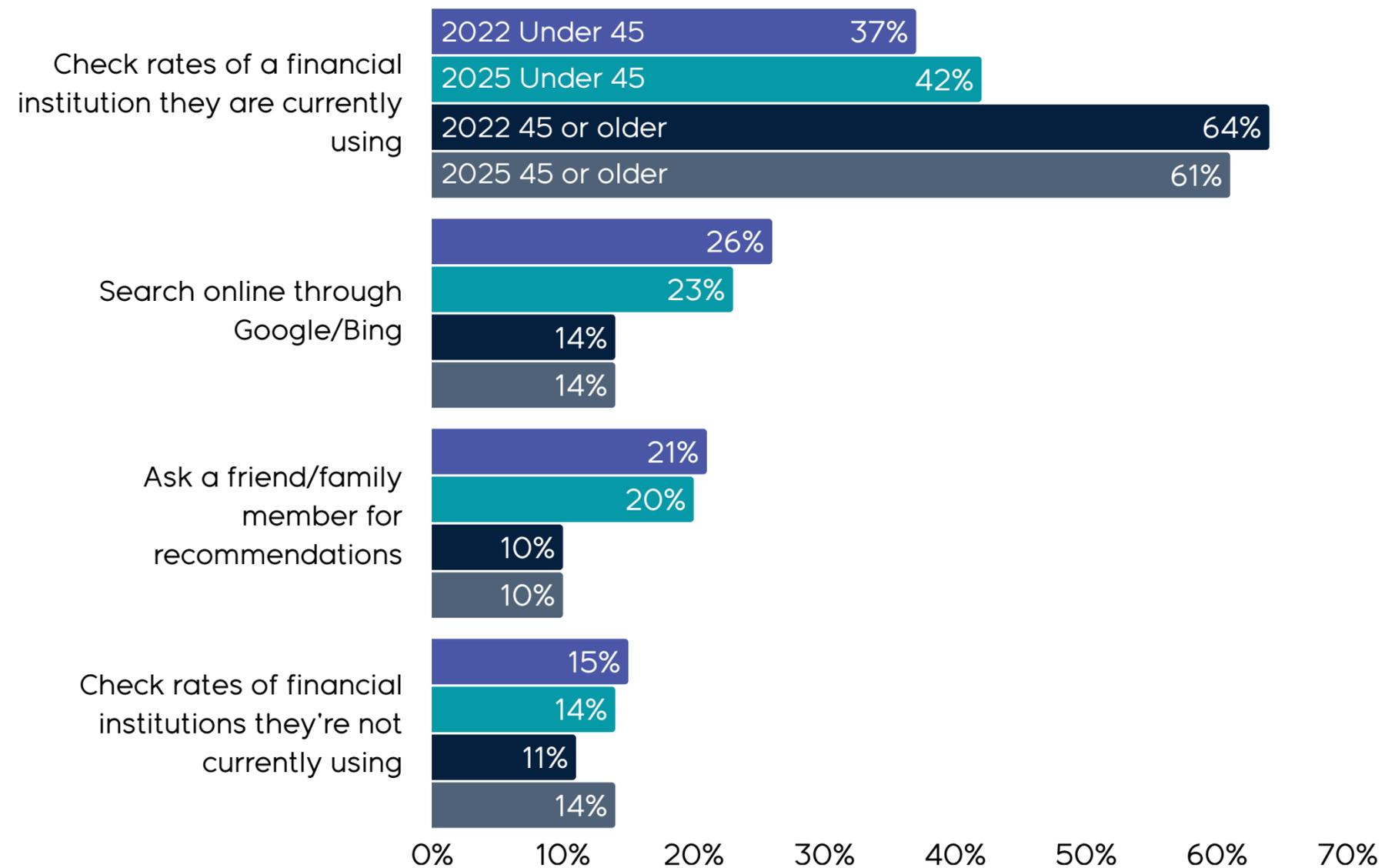
**Consumer Banking Behaviors
& Advertising Experiences**

Younger Borrowers Increasingly Look to Current Providers Before Google

Checking rates with current providers remains the top priority for all borrowers, with those under 45 increasingly opting for this preference, while relying less on search engines. Although older borrowers showed a slight decline in checking with current providers, they still maintain a much higher baseline of loyalty.

Outlook: As younger consumers continue to prioritize their existing provider over search engines for initial research, institutions gain a critical first look advantage that compels immediate rate transparency to secure the loan before shoppers look elsewhere.

What is the first step you would take if shopping for a loan?

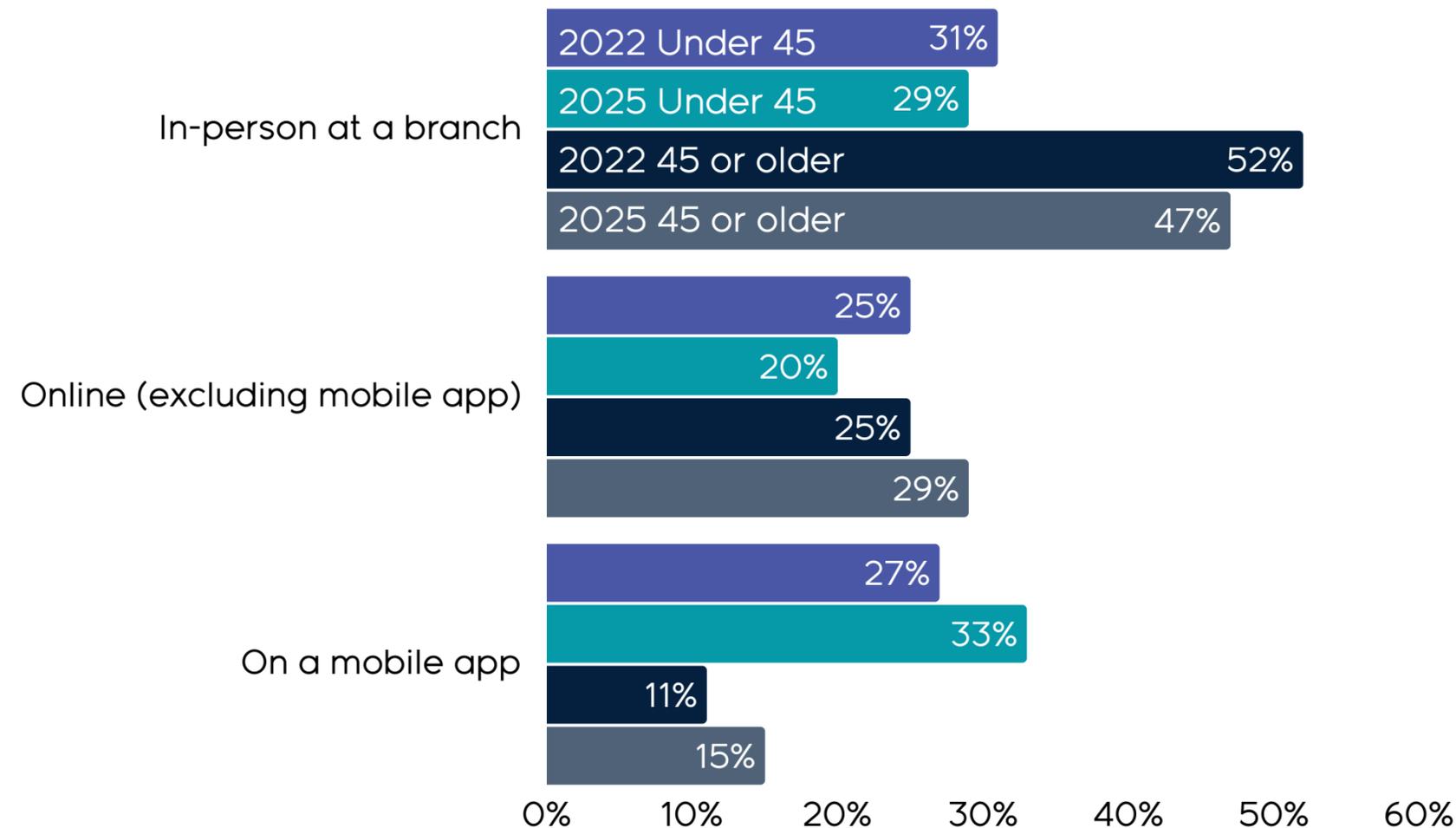


Mobile Apps Overtake Branches as Top Loan Channel for Younger Consumers

Preference for mobile loan applications among consumers under 45 has risen to 33%, officially overtaking in-person branch visits as their top choice. Meanwhile, older consumers are also shifting away from branches, with their preference for in-person applications dropping from 52% to 47% as digital adoption grows across all age groups.

Outlook: With mobile apps surpassing in-person visits as the preferred application method for consumers under 45, this decisive shift highlights the importance of prioritizing mobile origination speed and simplicity, rather than treating it as a secondary alternative to the branch.

How would you prefer to apply for a loan with a financial institution?



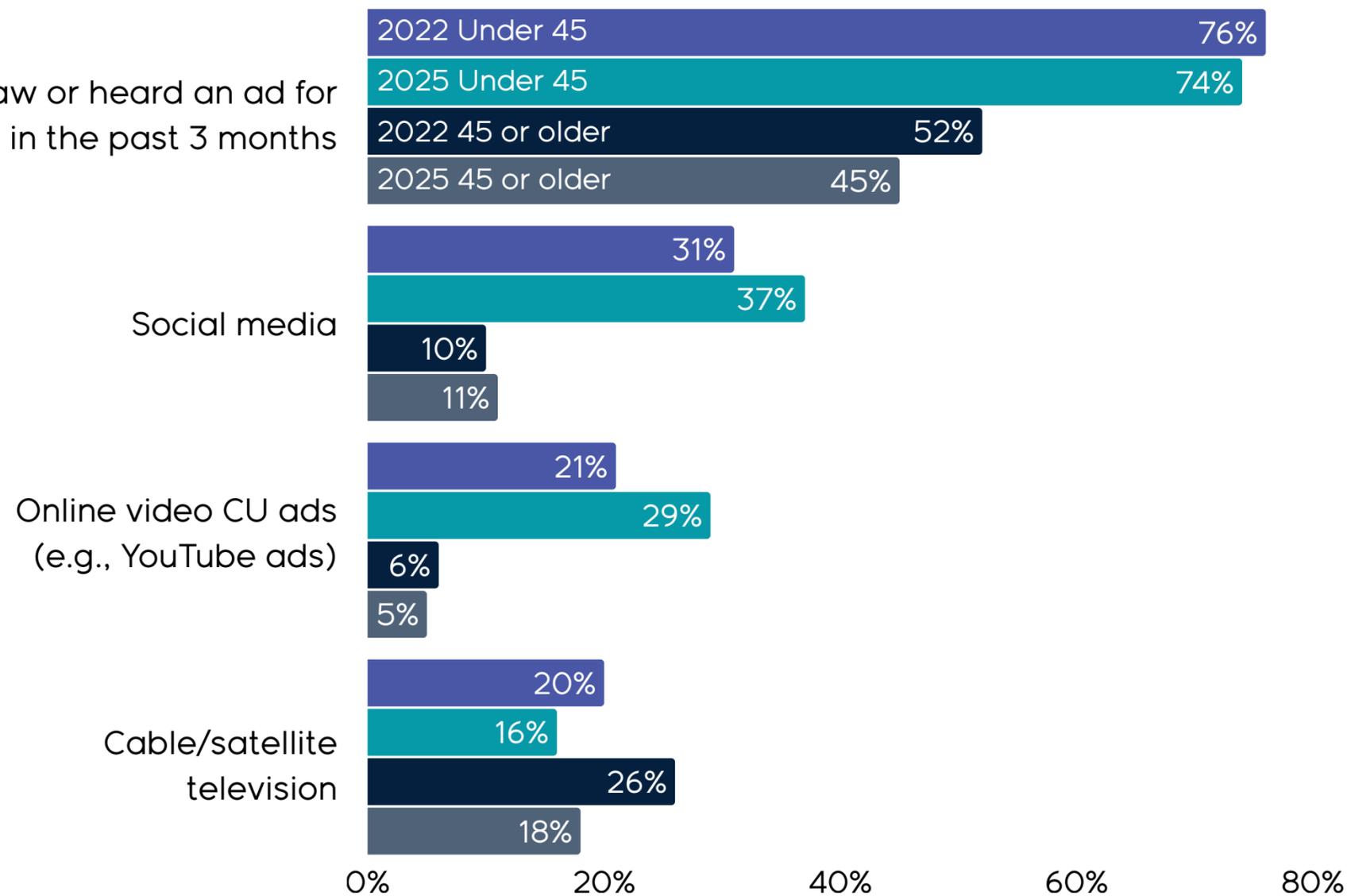
Digital Channels Increasingly Capture More Youth While Older Consumer Visibility Fades

Rising digital recall among younger consumers contrasts with a sharp drop in visibility among those 45 or older as TV effectiveness fades.

Outlook: This divergence encourages a balanced strategy that scales digital outreach without abandoning channels essential for maintaining brand presence with older members.

Saw or heard an ad for CUs in the past 3 months

Where have you seen or heard advertising for credit unions in the past three months?



Section 4

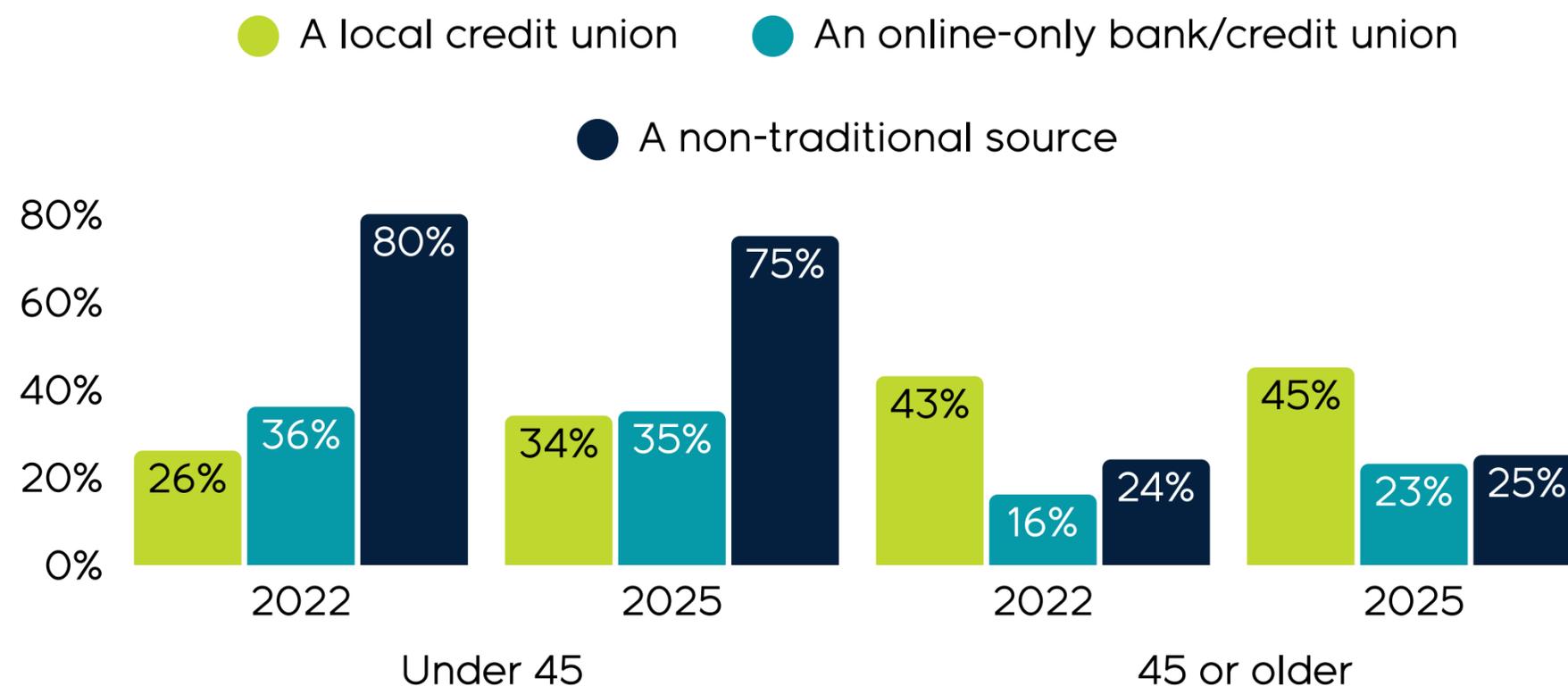
**Switching Primary
Financial Institutions**

Younger Consumers' Consideration of Primary Checking/Savings Accounts Surges at Credit Unions

In a positive shift from 2022, consumers under 45 have increased their consideration of local credit unions for primary checking/savings accounts, effectively matching their interest in online-only banks.

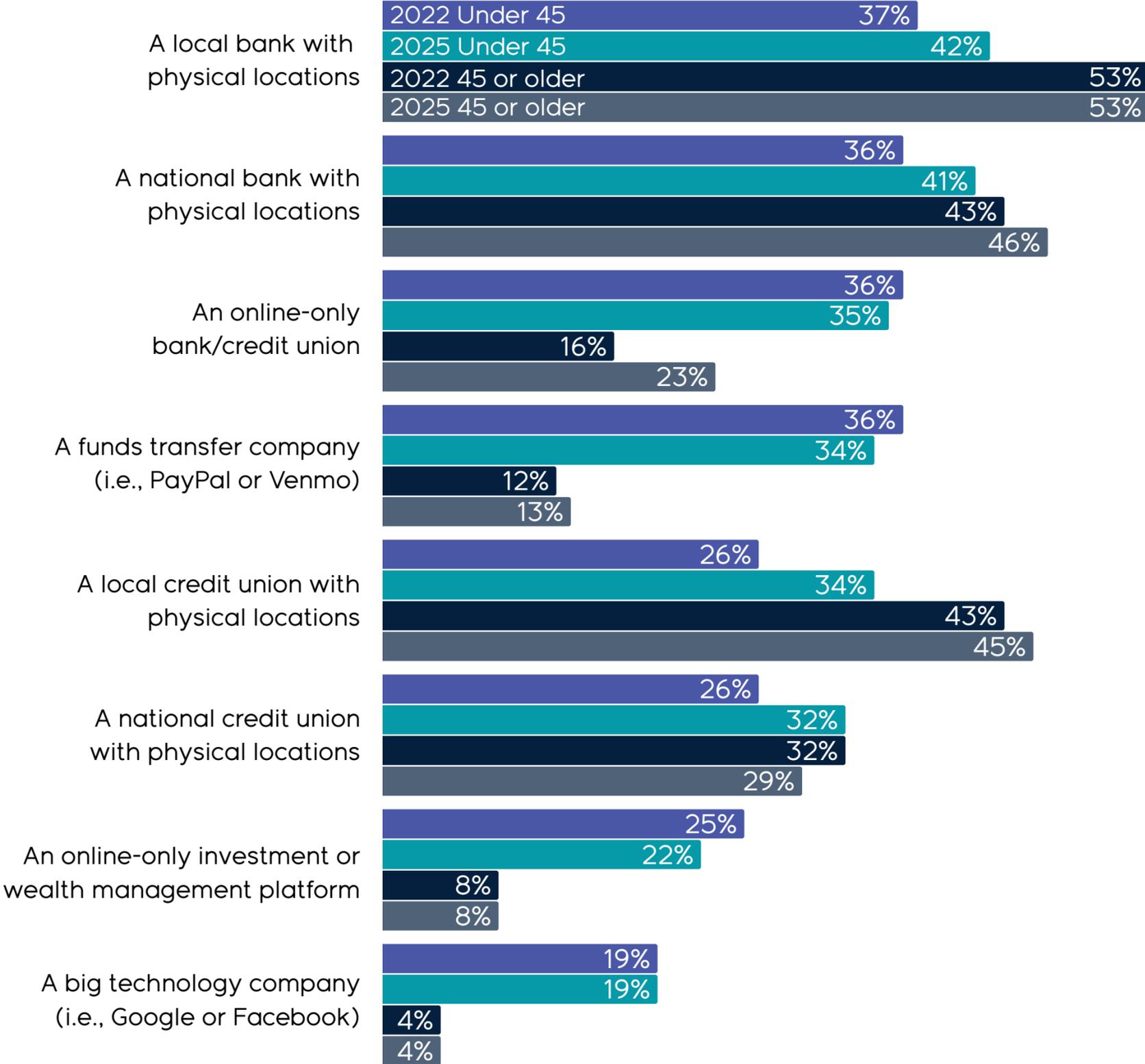
Outlook: This resurgence highlights the power of the hybrid model, proving that physical presence remains a key differentiator for winning younger primary relationships over digital-only competitors.

Consideration of Sources for Primary Checking/Savings Account



Which of the following sources would you be likely to consider for your primary checking/savings account if they offered this service?

All Sources



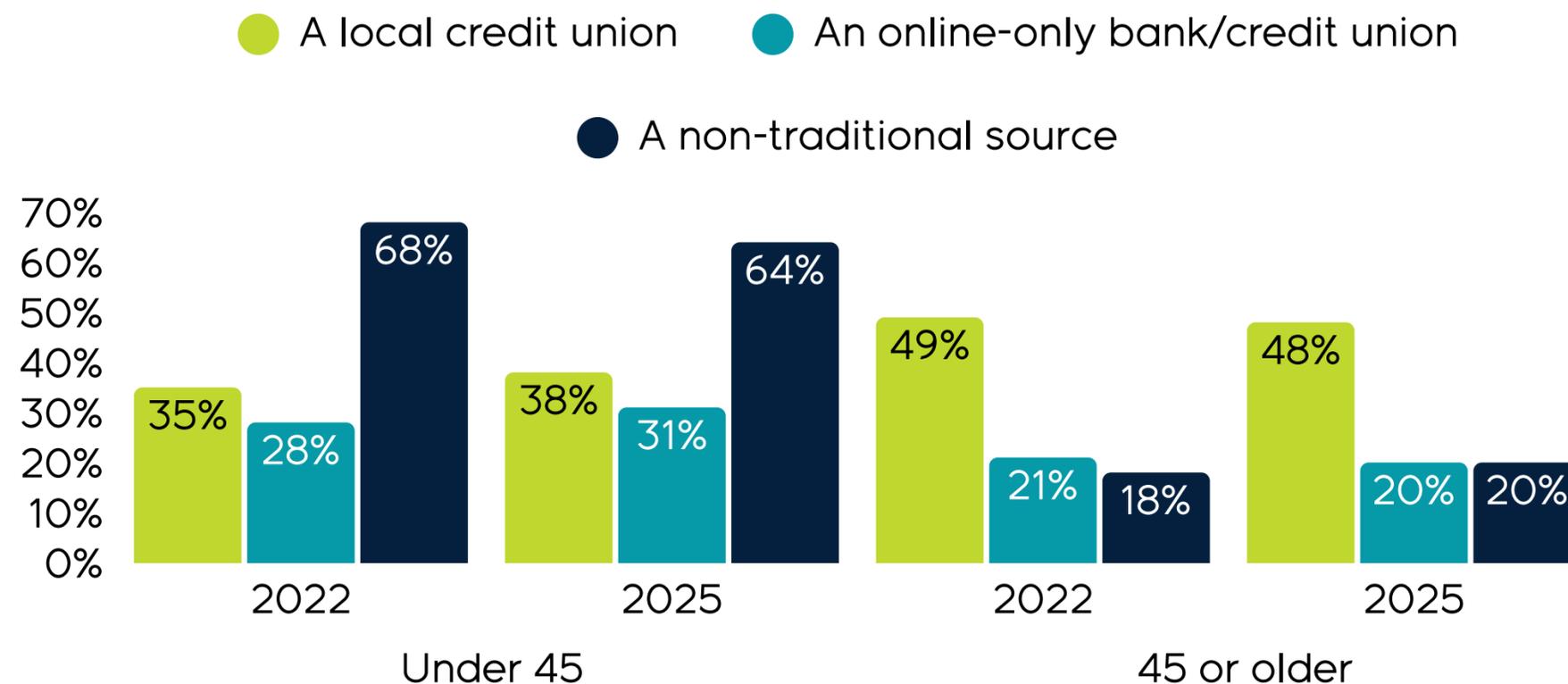
Source: Gear Consumer Banking Preferences & Behavior Survey, 2022 and 2025

Auto Loan Consideration Sources Remain Stable, Unlike Primary Checking/Savings Account Trends

Unlike the movement seen in checking/savings account sources, the top channels for auto loan consideration have remained consistent since 2022.

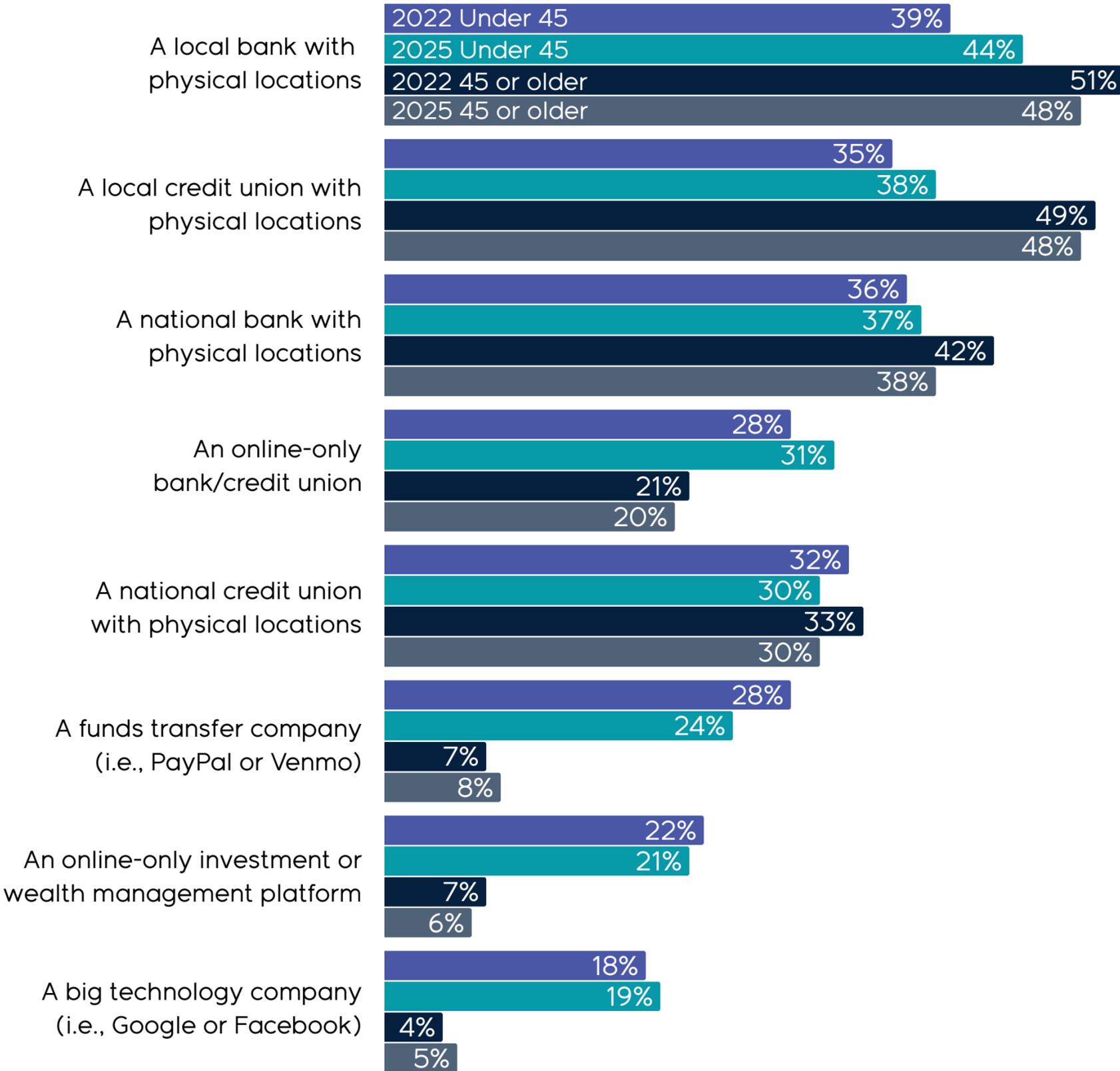
Outlook: Based on this stability, lending strategies should focus on optimizing execution within established channels rather than pivoting to new platforms, as borrower preferences for acquisition sources have not fundamentally changed.

Consideration of Sources for Auto Loans



Which of the following sources would you be likely to consider for an auto loan if they offered this service?

All Sources



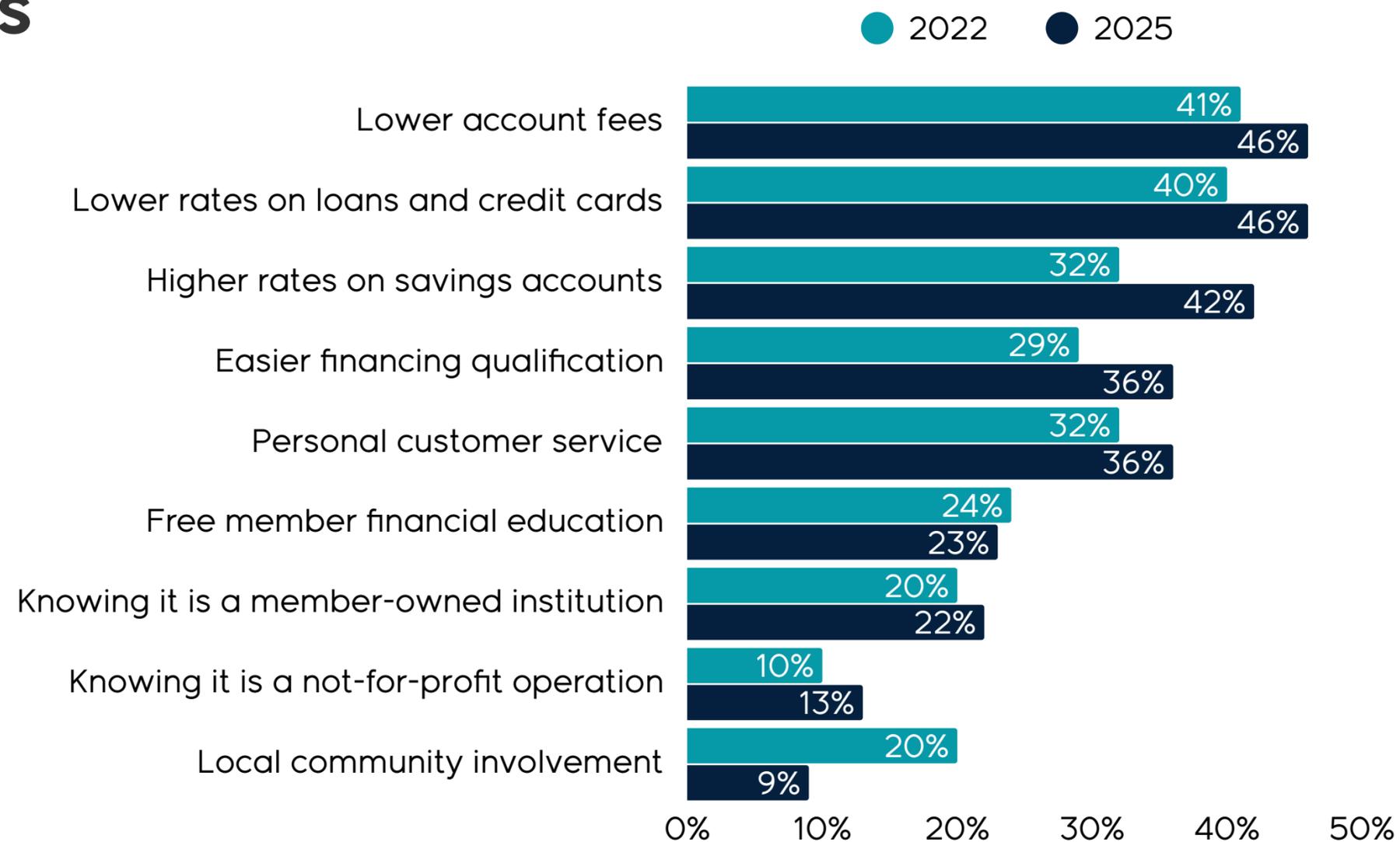
Source: Gear Consumer Banking Preferences & Behavior Survey, 2022 and 2025

Economic Value and Savings Yields Drive PFI Conversion for Younger Non-Primary CU Members

For younger non-primary CU members, the motivation to make their credit union their PFI is increasingly transactional, driven by a 10-point spike in demand for higher-yield savings and the continued dominance of rate and fee sensitivity.

Outlook: Converting satellite accounts into primary relationships requires competing aggressively on tangible financial benefits rather than relying on service alone.

Key Drivers for Switching to a Credit Union
CU Members (Non-PFI), Under 45

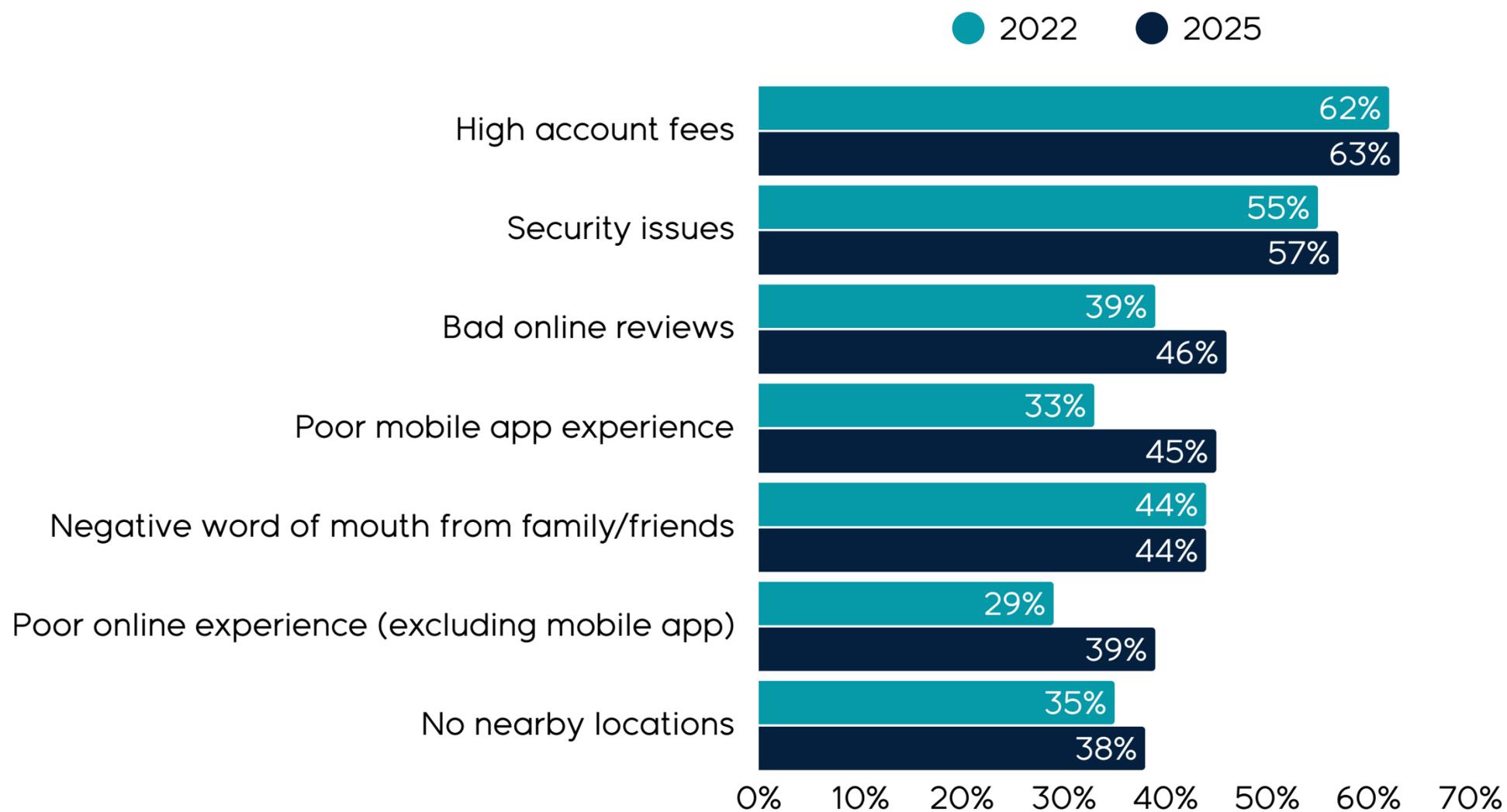


Digital Flaws Increasingly Repel Younger Non-CU Members

With rejection rates for a poor mobile app experience spiking 12 points since 2022, younger non-CU members are rapidly becoming intolerant of subpar digital interfaces.

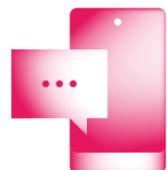
Outlook: Digital competency is no longer merely a convenience feature but a non-negotiable gatekeeper for acquisition, nearly rivaling bad reviews as a primary barrier to entry.

Factors Preventing Bank Selection, Besides Rates
Non-CU Members, Under 45



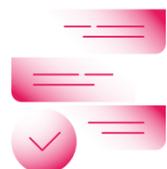
From Insight to Impact

This report reflects how consumers are actually choosing financial institutions. A few patterns are unmistakable:



Digital experience now determines consideration.

Poor mobile and online experiences actively prevent selection, even among existing credit union members.



Consumers are researching without you.

Members are researching, comparing, and validating long before they speak to a human.



Traditional advantages are eroding.

Younger consumers increasingly view banks and fintechs as equal, or better, on service, accessibility, and usability.

What This Means for Credit Unions

Growth no longer comes from a single channel or campaign. It requires digital experiences that meet expectations, marketing aligned to real consumer behavior, and measurement that clearly connects effort to results.

Credit unions that align these elements will earn primary relationships. Those that don't will continue to lose ground quietly.

Where Gear Fits

Gear works with credit unions facing these realities firsthand. Our role is to help connect digital strategy, marketing execution, and reporting, so decisions are driven by evidence, not assumptions.

Next Steps

If this report raised questions about your own results, that's the right place to start.

[CLICK HERE to contact Gear about what this data means for your credit union](#)



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