

# SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

**HOW APPS CAN SURVIVE AND THRIVE**



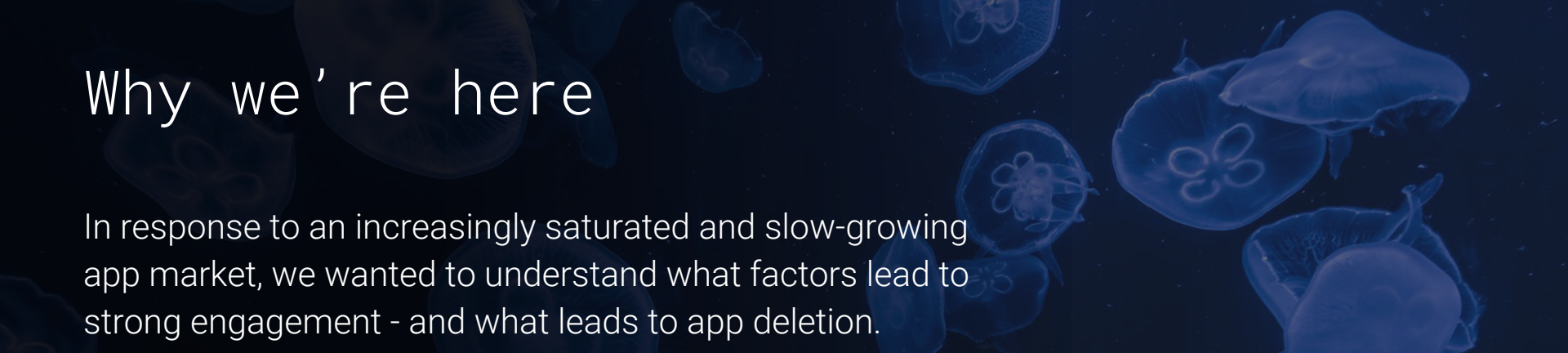
PREPARED BY

sparkler



Google Play

# Why we're here

The background of the top half of the slide is a dark blue, almost black, underwater scene. Several jellyfish of various species are visible, some in sharp focus and others blurred in the background. The jellyfish have a translucent, glowing appearance, with some showing distinct internal structures like the manubria and oral arms. The overall mood is mysterious and serene.

In response to an increasingly saturated and slow-growing app market, we wanted to understand what factors lead to strong engagement - and what leads to app deletion.

This report explores how users currently engage with apps and consume content, how they would ideally like to do so in the future, and what apps can do to not only survive in the early days, but thrive over the long term.

# Our research approach:

To understand app engagement, Google Play partnered with Sparkler in exploring user attitudes and behaviors towards apps across a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods:

3

markets covered across  
2 stage research:



90

participants took part in a  
seven day online community

Across 3 markets  
during the qualitative phase

48

hours in total spent in  
user homes

24 x 2 hr immersions during  
the qualitative phase

3000

people completed an  
15min online survey

n=1000 per market,  
Nat Rep Survey

# Why Survival of the Fittest?

We talked with app users to understand why some apps become firm favourites while others are forgotten, deleted or replaced.

And what we found is that just as in nature, **apps exist in a ruthless and unforgiving environment.** They have to struggle for existence in a crowded, constantly changing world. Hence, **only the fittest of them survive and thrive.**

With the research we've managed to identify 5 principles for developers, based on how users engage, what they value the most and what keeps them coming back to certain apps vs abandoning others.

# Survival of the Fittest: The 5 Principles

2 Principles to help apps **Survive**

3 Principles to help apps **Thrive**

## Principle 1

Be clear about who you are

These principles are essential for users. Failure to meet these principles could lead to premature extinction.

## Principle 2

Be intuitive and reliable

## Principle 3

Don't stand still or run too fast

These principles can significantly improve user engagement and loyalty. Embracing them will help build long term sustainability.

## Principle 4

Be part of the user ecosystem

## Principle 5

Personalize while keeping the user in control

# Principle 1

## Be clear about who you are

“

Be really obvious about what you're going to do and then completely deliver on that.



Male, 25-34

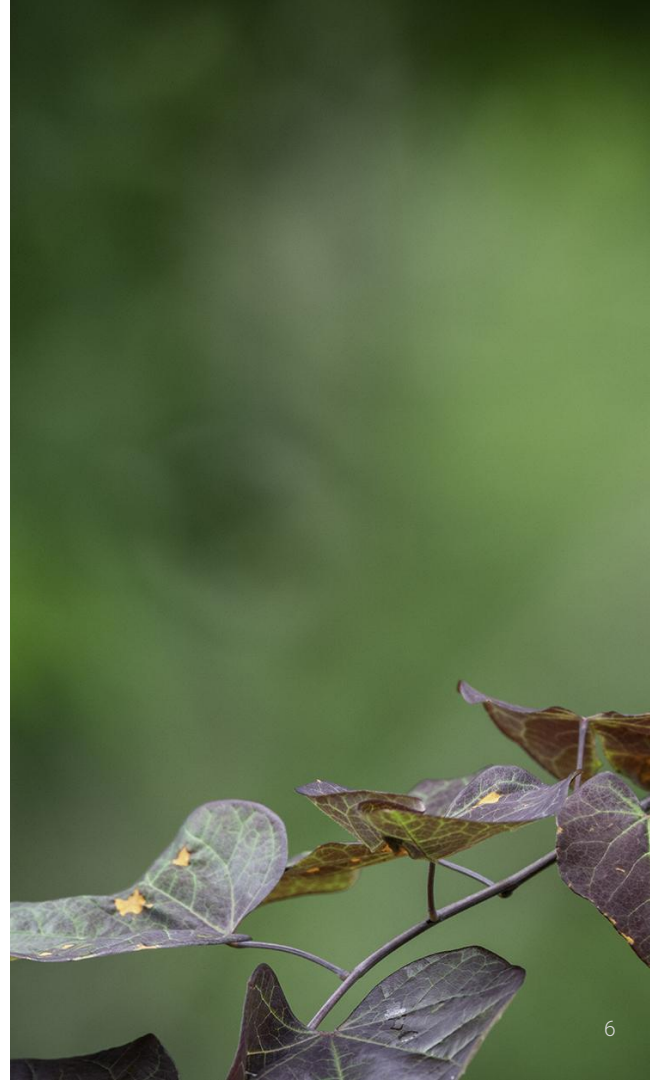


# Deliver swiftly on a clear purpose and a strong identity

In an increasingly competitive world, [first impressions matter more](#).

Users are more likely to keep using an app if, from the outset, they feel it has a [simple and clear purpose](#) - and that purpose is [delivered immediately](#). This allows users to understand what's the value of the app straight away and feel confident while using it onwards.

Don't shy away from [investing into building a brand identity](#) for your app - for many users having an emotional relationship with an app stems them from the temptation to switch.



# Users are fast to make up their minds about app value

Users need to [understand quickly how an app benefits them](#) - hence, they prefer apps that require minimal effort from them to get them started and going.

But too many features can be distracting, and confusing - [obscuring the key purpose of the app and making consumers question its value](#). Remember that for [users, less is more](#) - focus on perfecting the core feature of the app first.

66%

agree that the main purpose has to be clear & easy in the first few tries or they'll give up on it

50%

agree that lots of features in an app can be confusing

“

If it takes a few days to understand [an app's] value, you need to really get that quite quickly or you're not going to continue.



Male, 25-34



# For users, most valuable apps are more than just functional

Users build more emotional relationships with apps that have strong brands at their core. 66% of them admit the best apps feel personal and **when they have a good connection, they're less willing to look for alternatives.**

Whether via a distinctive tone of voice, a strong visual identity or focusing on your brand positioning among competitors - **how an app feels is as important as what it does.**

61%

of users agree that they **feel closest and most engaged with apps** that have:

- An appealing **interface**
- A distinctive **icon** design
- A relatable **tone of voice**
- A good **brand reputation**
- A suitable personality

“

I know there are better apps like this but I prefer this one - it's so cute.



Female, 25-34

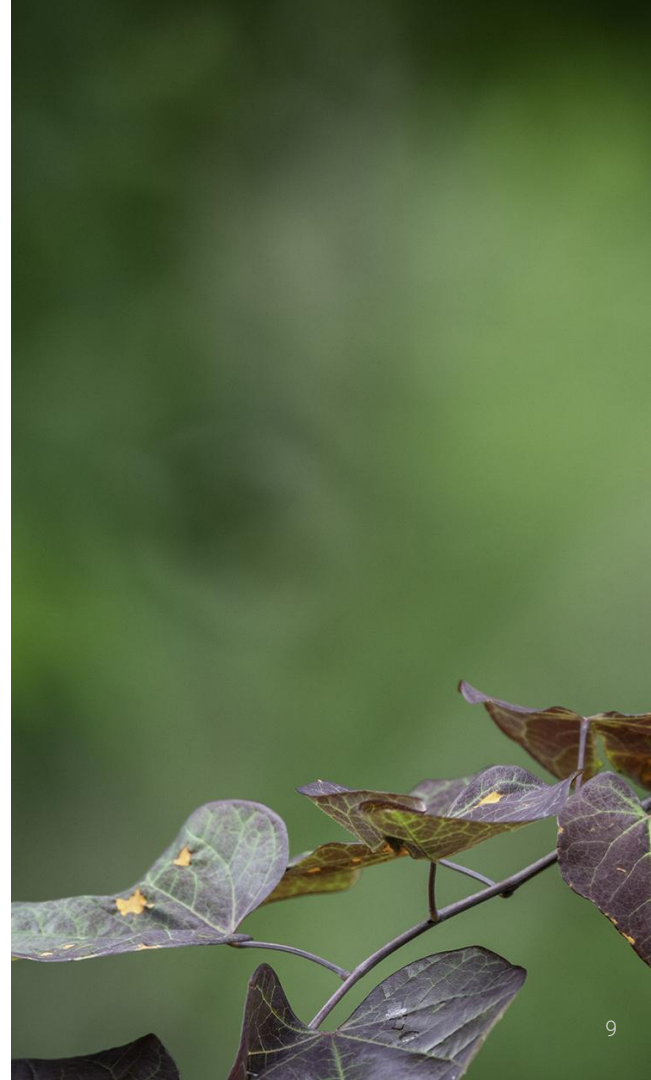
# Get started:

Be clear on your app's core value proposition:

- [Identify and prioritize according to your apps' North Metric star](#)
- [Design your app to drive conversions](#)

Develop and convey your brand identity to stand out:

- [Make a compelling Google Play store listing](#)



## Principle 2

# Be intuitive and reliable

“

It's actually rare to find [an app] where you can just use it straight away - no effort, everything is easy, everything works.



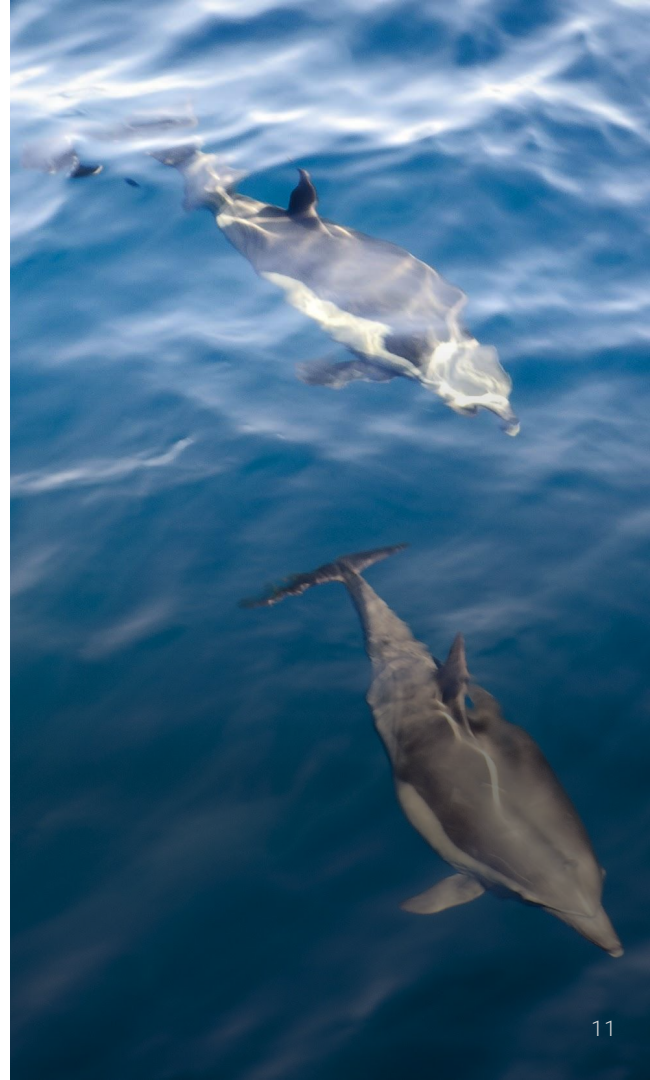
Male, 25-34

# The key to habitual usage is intuitive design with no quality issues

When users are getting to know an app, [they are highly sensitive to usability and quality issues](#). It may seem basic, yet these remain the main causes for early app deletion.

Perceptions of how frequently an app crashes or how much data, memory and battery it uses weigh heavily on users' first impressions.

[The bar only increases for paid apps](#), with users being more annoyed when a paid app doesn't perform as well as it should.



# Intuitive apps are just easier to fall in love with

Users struggle to embrace an app if they need to put unnecessary time and energy to just get started. A [lengthy sign-up process](#) is often seen as more effort than it's worth and a sign of unnecessary complexity down the track.

It's no surprise that an ['easy to navigate' interface](#) is seen as the most important factors and makes it easy for user to appreciate the value of an app.

50%

agree that an app needs to be intuitive and easy to navigate to be valuable

68%

agree that if an app has a long sign-up process, they're unlikely to sign up

1 in 5

users have stopped using or deleted an app in the first few weeks because it wasn't intuitive

# Quality problems cause anger - and can lead to deletion

Nowadays, users find it very jarring when an app lets them down on [basics such as reliability, security or efficiency](#). After an initial disappointing experience, users will likely delete the app and won't be keen to see future improvements.

[And expectations for paid apps are higher](#). Not only for the number or features of content, but for quality as well, with 82% of users claiming it is their top priority.

67%

Of users stopped using / deleted an app due to:

- Excessive storage usage
- Excessive battery usage
- Excessive data usage
- Reliability (bugs, etc)
- Concerns about security

“

If the app glitches too much, my patience goes quickly and I will most likely not keep using it.



Male, 25-34

# Get started:

## Use intuitive design

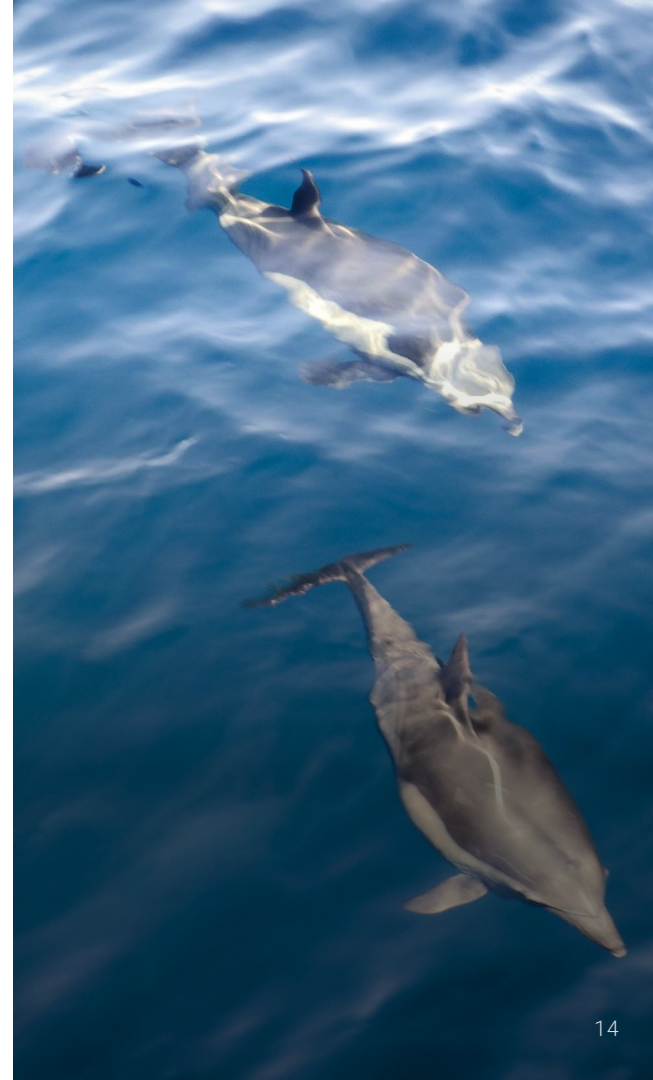
- [Bring your app to life with Material Design](#)

## Implement best practice onboarding:

- [Start where your users start](#)
- [Why the first 10 minutes are crucial if you want players to come back](#)
- [Introduce first-time users to your app](#)
- [Reduce sign in friction with Smart Lock for passwords](#)

## Avoid quality problems:

- [Test your app against core quality guidelines](#)
- [Use Android vitals to improve your app's performance and stability](#) and learn [how to fix quality issues](#)



## Principle 3

# Don't stand still or run too fast

“

The app used to be really simple, but they changed the layout so quickly, almost overnight. I don't really know how to use it anymore.



Female, 18-24



# Seek to balance the pace of change

Providing new content, such as video and audio, and developing new features, like tools and services, is crucial to [drive and sustain user interest in an app over time](#).

If an app is slow to evolve with new offerings, it starts to feel stagnant - and users will start looking for better alternatives.

But it's a balancing act. If users feel an [app changes too fast or excessively](#), they easily become confused and eventually - may stop using it.

# An evolving apps keeps users involved

Users will stay engaged with an app over the long term if it keeps on changing and growing. However, **not all updates are perceived the same**. Whereas regular content updates are welcomed, feature updates can overwhelm more easily.

Key factors in keeping users engaged over time:

- #1 Regular feature updates
- #2 Ability to collect points
- #3 Regular content updates

Key factors in making an app feel valuable to the user:

- #1 Easy to navigate interface
- #2 Regular content updates
- #3 Regular feature updates

“

I think it's easy to get bored of an app if it's not regularly updated. I want surprises and excitement in order to continue being engaged.



Female, 25-34

# Users do want updates - but not too much or too fast

Users expect apps to evolve, but [at a pace that doesn't make them lose control or comfort with the app](#). They can easily be thrown off by significant redesigns or too frequent small changes. It's important to establish a balanced pace of change which will [suit the majority](#).



# Get started:

## Optimize your feature releases:

- [Use beta testing](#) to gather user feedback and iterate a feature before it's rolled out to all of your users.
- [Enable the pre-launch report](#) in the Play developer console to spot potential flaws and ensure technical stability in your alpha and beta apps.
- Run [in app A/B experiments](#) in your live app or game
- [Measure your app's acquisition & retention](#) to monitor the impact of changes

## Learn how users value new content and features:

- [Subscription apps on Google Play: User insights to help developers win](#)

## Principle 4

# Be part of the users' ecosystem

“

An app needs to become an important part of my daily life. Either connecting me to friends and family, or linking to my daily routine, it needs to be irreplaceable.



Female, 18-24

# Embrace users' worlds 'beyond the app' to build value

[Apps don't exist in isolation](#). When an app makes use of other phone features, works with other apps or across different devices - it feels more useful to the user.

And it goes beyond the tech ecosystem - when an app [helps users connect to other people](#), its perceived value increases and users build a more emotional relationship.

An app that can [embed itself smartly within the user's wider tech or life ecosystem](#) is less likely to be replaced.



# Users want to see their tech ecosystem come together

The **tech ecosystem is worth more than the sum of its parts** to the user - apps are more indispensable as part of it.

**Users value compatibility:** apps that utilize existing phone features (calendar, camera etc) making life easy for the user or which work with other apps and devices (voice tech, wearables etc) **offering more and better occasions for use.**

43%

of users value tech compatibility

- 📱 Devices e.g. voice tech, wearables
- 📅 Features e.g. calendar, location services
- 📄 Third party apps

“

[Travel app] works with my email, maps and camera so I can use it as a diary, as well as a planner.



Female, 18-24

I can check my messages and social updates on my watch, making it easier to use at work



Female, 25-34

# Users value apps that foster social interactions

Users **love apps that bring them closer to others** - whether via conversations with friends, competing with others or sharing updates. It makes them **feel part of a community or tribe** - and builds a strong emotional bond between the user and app.

Simply adding a chat function is unlikely to be the solution, however. Social options will only drive desire if they **build on the core purpose of the app and strengthen its performance**.

54%

of users agree that they get more involved in an app if it can be used with friends and family

Sparkler App Sustainability Research 2018 1 Q14. To what extent do you agree with the following statements? 2. Q10. Which of the factors below are important in making you feel close to and engaged with an app? Base: Total Sample N=2996

“

I never get bored of apps that allow me to connect with people. Obviously social media apps are great, but even my [fitness tracker app] provides that connection to others.



Female, 25-34



# Get started:

Learn more about distributing your apps across platforms

- [Create great user experiences for different form factors](#)
- [Distribute your apps on the right Android platforms](#)

Subscribe to the Google Play Apps & Games Medium channel to read an upcoming article on the Power of Community in App and Game Design:

<https://medium.com/googleplaydev>



# Principle 5

Personalize while  
keeping the user in control

“

I love it when an app responds to my preferences and behavior. It becomes something that is mine and mine only.



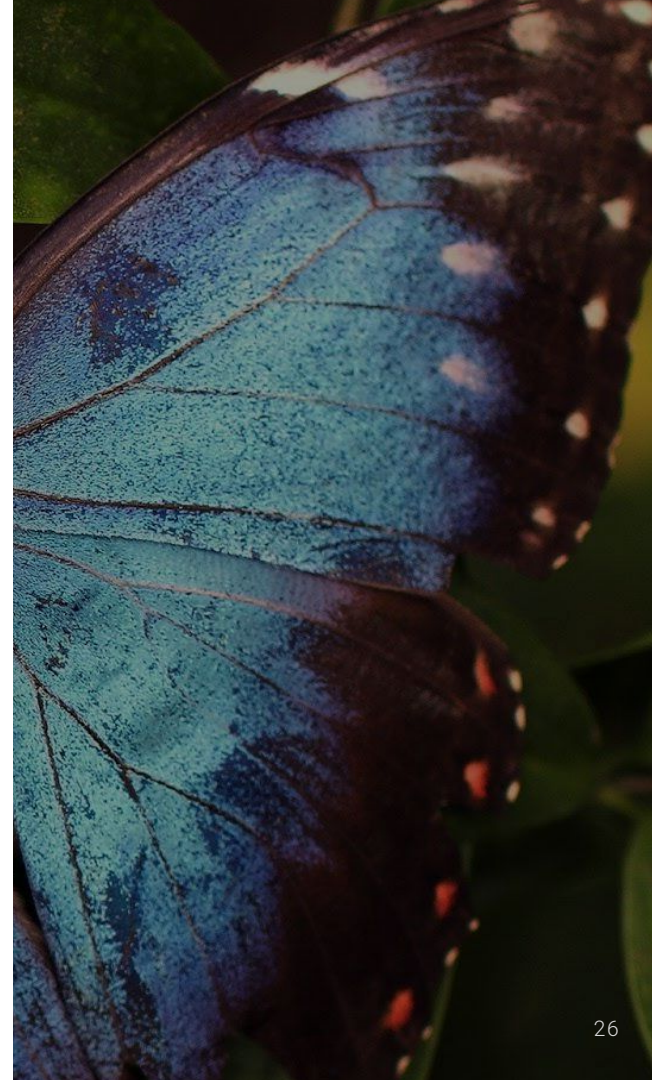
Male, 25-34

# Personalization increases the value of an app and drives user loyalty

Personalization, whether via an app learning about user behavior or a user adjusting the settings on their own, makes users [more emotionally attached to an app](#) over the long term.

[Personalized apps are more valuable for the user](#) - perceived as more tailored to their needs and embedded in their lives. And hence, they are [less likely to switch](#) to alternatives.

But keep the [user aware and engaged](#), so they don't feel like they're losing control of how the app is changing.



# Users value different layers of personalization

When users see how an app has become an expression of themselves and their preferences they become emotionally engaged. [64% of users find more valuable those apps](#), which can save preferences and become more personalized over time.

**Personal record:** Allowing user to see previous history

“

[Music App] is now a bit of a reflection of myself over the years. I can see the playlists I've made with my friends.



Male, 25-34

**Archiving:** Storing content relevant to the user

“

I have all of the recipes I've used and some new ones stored in my [Recipe App]. If I stopped paying for it I would lose it.



Male, 25-34

**Tailoring:** Using previous behavior to build usage

“

[News App] pings me notifications on topics I've read about before. It helps me find articles that I wouldn't otherwise.



Male, 25-34

# Users want to be in control and be involved

Though personalization is generally appreciated, users want to know what data the app is accessing and how it is using it. That's why they overwhelmingly prefer active to passive personalization - where they can see, confirm and adjust personalization settings.

**Active personalization**

37%

I can personalize  
the app to suit me

VS

**Passive personalization**

20%

App learns about me  
and stores my  
preferences

Source: Sparkler Research 2018  
Q14. To what extent do you agree  
with the following statements?  
Base: Total Sample N=2996

# ... and that includes notifications

Receiving **too many or irrelevant notifications** can only add to these **feelings of losing control**. And unless users see easy ways to adjust those settings, they will delete the app.

Give users the option to easily adjust notifications settings, to ensure they feel comfortable and value the benefits of personalization.

24%

of users deleted an app due to **too frequent** notifications

17%

of users deleted an app due to **irrelevant** notifications

“

This shopping app kept on sending me notifications for stuff I didn't want. I eventually deleted the app, I just wanted it to stop.

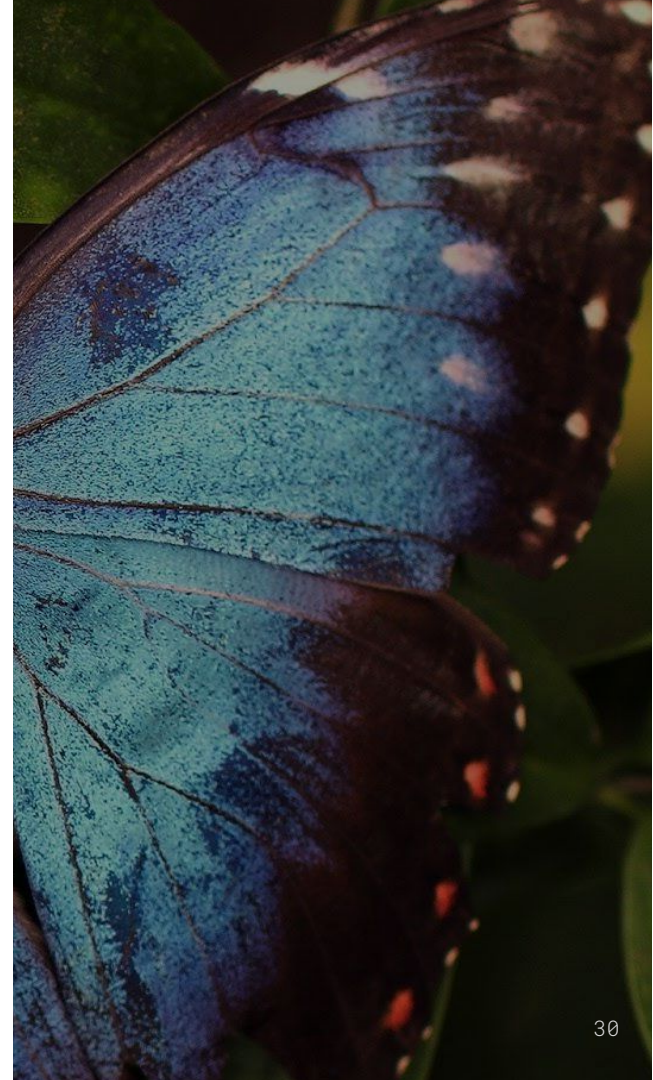


Female, 25-34

# Get started:

Learn more about best practices with notifications:

- [Drive user engagement and extend your app's visibility with notifications](#)
- [Optimizing notifications in games](#)



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THANK  
YOU



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