# 2026 US media consumption report

*The attention economy: who owns consumer attention in 2026?*

Attest

# Introduction

Every brand I've worked with, and every one I speak to now, is grappling with the same problem: it's getting harder to know where your audience actually is. Their attention has scattered across more places, formats and devices than at any point I can remember in over two decades of marketing and product leadership.

The instinct, when faced with that kind of fragmentation, is to reach for old assumptions. That TV still delivers full attention because the set is on, or that reach numbers mean what they used to mean. This report exists because those assumptions no longer hold, and because guessing is an expensive way to run a media budget.

What follows is built on a five-year tracker of US media habits and a fresh, nationally representative survey of a thousand US adults, fielded specifically to understand not just what people watch, read and listen to, but how attentively, how compulsively, and at what price.

The findings genuinely surprised us in places. Creator platforms like YouTube and TikTok claim more of the average day than live TV and subscription streaming combined, and YouTube alone has already overtaken live television outright. Compulsive platform use doesn't follow the pattern most people assume, either: it's Facebook, not a youth platform, where people report feeling most "hooked." And the audience watching ad-supported versions of Netflix, Disney+ and Spotify spans every income bracket, not just the budget-conscious end that's often assumed.

This is about seeing attention as it actually behaves: divided, mobile, and earned in seconds rather than assumed. My hope is that this report gives your team a sharper, evidence-based starting point for exactly that, wherever your budget is currently pointed, and wherever it should be pointed next.

**Todd Latham**
CEO, Attest

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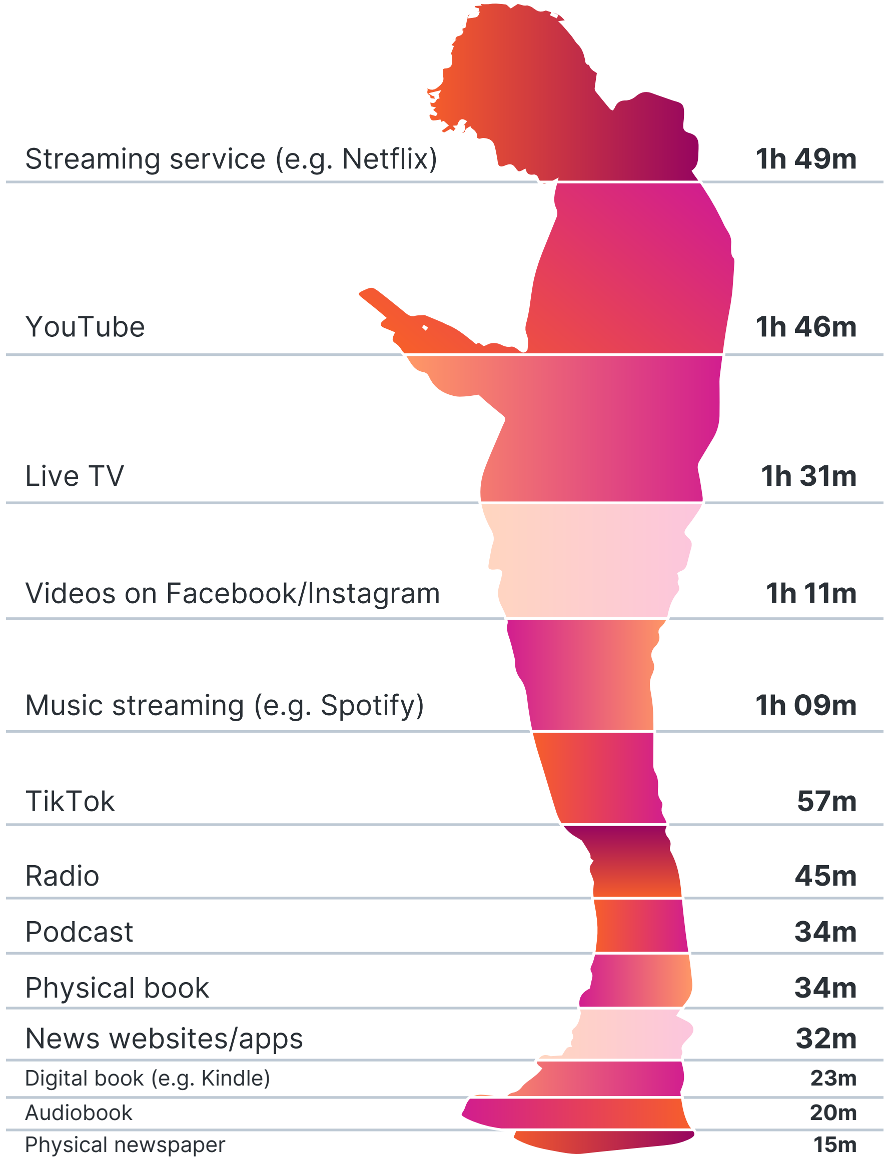
# The average daily American media diet

| Activity | % who engage on a typical weekday |
|---|---|
| YouTube | 90% |
| Facebook/Instagram video | 83% |
| Streaming service | 79% |
| Live TV | 73% |
| Music streaming | 70% |
| Radio | 66% |
| News websites/apps | 65% |
| TikTok | 61% |
| Physical book | 55% |
| Podcast | 50% |
| Digital book | 35% |
| Physical newspaper | 30% |
| Audiobook | 30% |




*Average time across the full sample, including people who don't engage in a given activity at all



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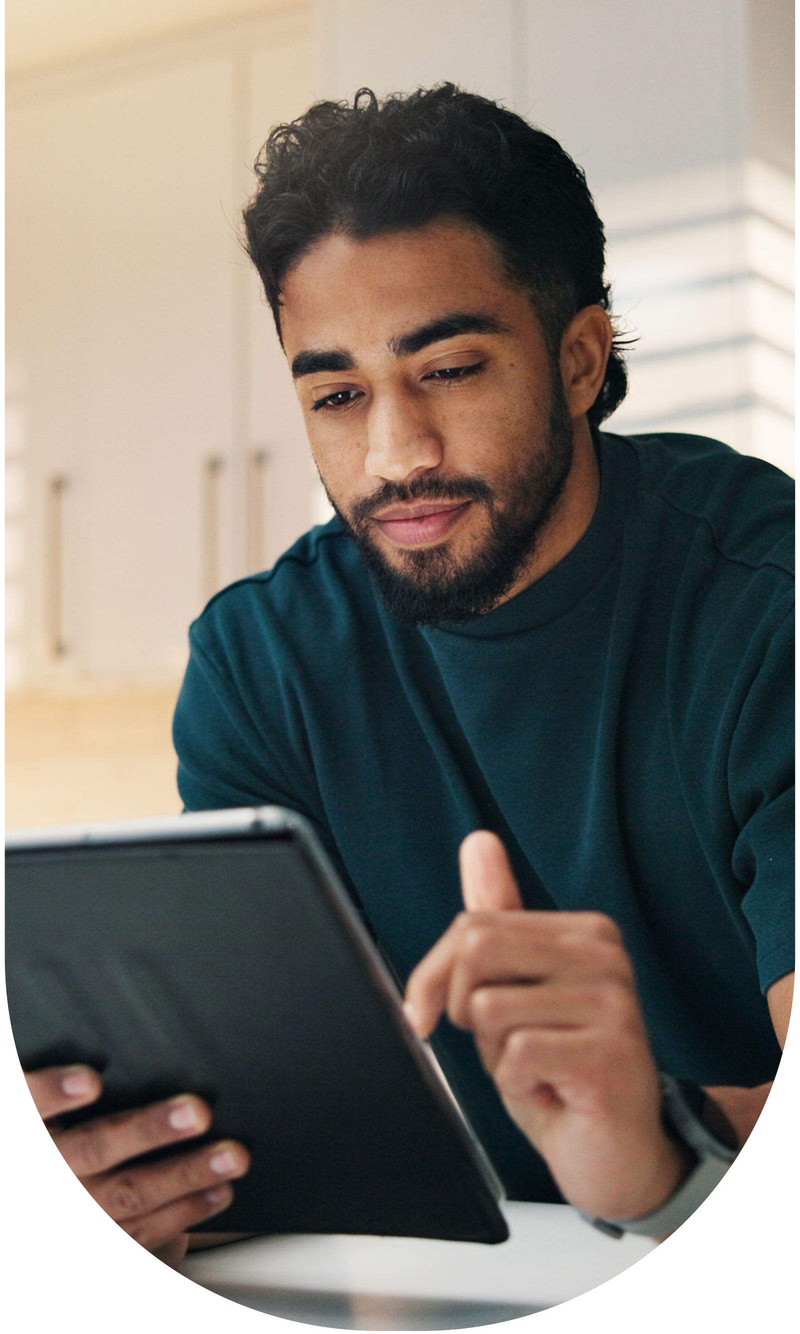
# Chapter 1: The battle for attention

For most of television's history, a small number of gatekeepers decided what the country watched and when. Subscription streaming loosened that grip by handing viewers control over timing, but the content itself still passed through the same commissioning process.

Today, that dynamic has changed completely. On a typical weekday, time spent watching creator platforms — YouTube, TikTok, Facebook and Instagram — now outstrips time spent with live TV and subscription streaming combined.

This data shows the next, more disruptive stage of television's shift: content made by individuals, at a fraction of the cost, with no channel controller's sign-off, is now competing for, and often winning, the hours that used to belong to professionally produced television.



## Creator content has overtaken TV

Add together YouTube, TikTok and social video and people spend an average of 3h 54m a day with them, edging past live TV and services like Netflix combined at 3h 20m. More striking still, YouTube alone has overtaken live television outright: 1h 46m a day against 1h 31m. YouTube hasn't just become an alternative to TV, it's already ahead of it. Tellingly, 23% of Americans primarily watch YouTube on their televisions.

Gen Z watches by far the most YouTube, 2h 25m a day on average, well ahead of Millennials (1h 55m), Gen X (1h 18m) and Boomers (53m). Men also watch significantly more than women overall (2h 09m vs 1h 23m).

**Real voices**

**Q: How do you choose between traditional TV and social video platforms?**

**A:** "Traditional TV has become boring and repetitive, so usually, I choose social video platforms to watch something fresh."

***Male, 18-24***

### Time spent watching creator platforms versus TV and streaming

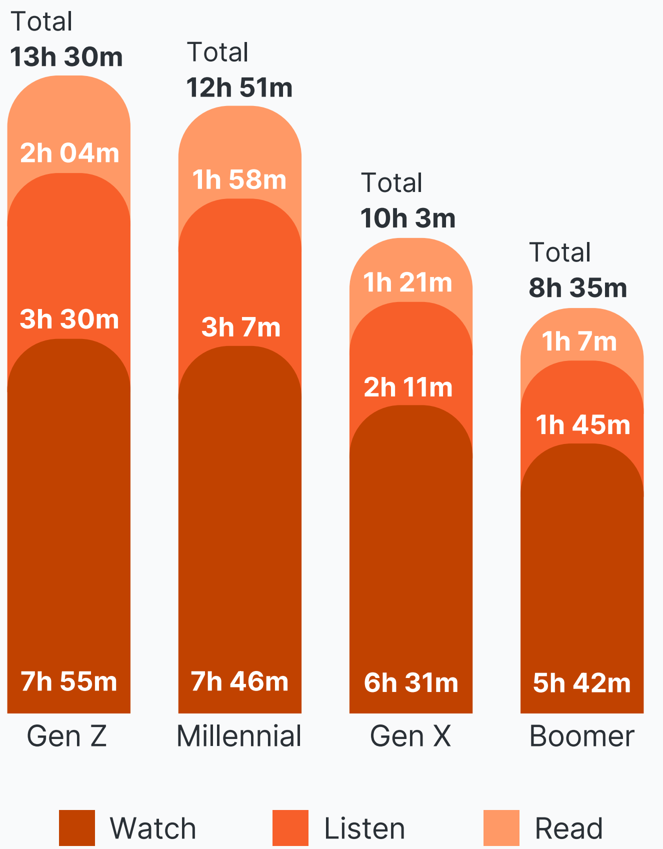
Creator platforms

**3h 54m**

Live TV +
subscription streaming

**3h 20m**

## Time spent consuming media daily




## The generation gap: not just what, but how much

When it comes to overall media consumption, age changes both how much people consume and where they consume it. Total daily media time* — across watching, listening and reading — rises by more than half between the oldest and youngest groups: 8h 35m for Boomers versus 13h 30m for Gen Z (spent across formats not consecutively since much of it overlaps).

Within that time, the mix shifts substantially. Live TV climbs steadily with age, from an average of 1h 6m a day among Gen Z to 1h 41m among Gen X and 2h 8m among Boomers. Music streaming and TikTok run the opposite way. TikTok, for example, falls from 1h 21m among Gen Z to just 22 minutes among Boomers.

Subscription streaming, news apps and Facebook/Instagram video follow a hump shape, peaking with Millennials. Meanwhile, when it comes to podcasts, audiobooks, digital books, physical books and physical newspapers, Gen Z consumes the most of all five.

*Excludes non-video social media consumption

## What this means for media buyers

Attention used to sit in a small, predictable number of bookable slots. It's now spread across millions of individual creators and algorithmically served feeds, with no single buyer, schedule, or studio deciding what gets seen. Reaching an audience increasingly means competing with, or partnering alongside, individual creators rather than simply buying space next to professionally commissioned programming.

**Real voices**

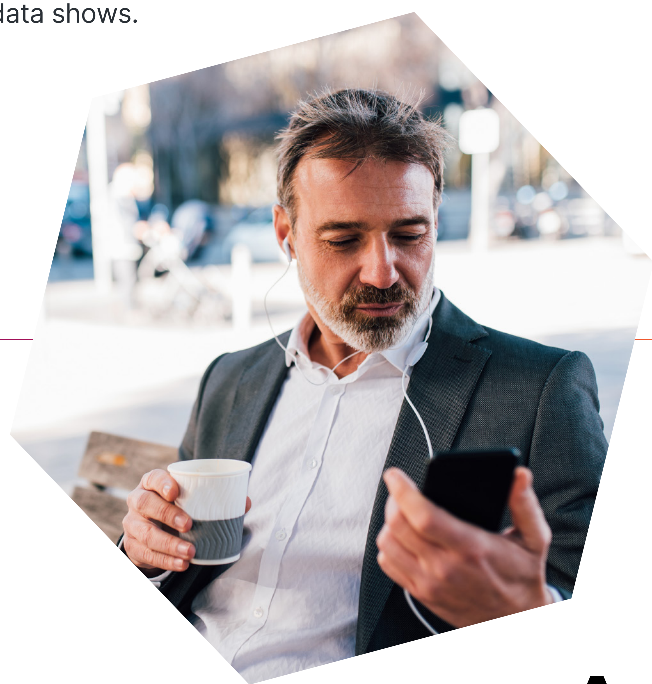
**Q: Do you give each activity your full attention, or are you doing anything else at the same time?**

**A:** "Most of the time I give my quality attention to these things, but sometimes I may be busy playing games on my phone while I'm watching TV or listening to audiobooks."

*Female, 35-44*

## The podcast audience advertisers are missing

Podcasts have become a young, affluent medium. Reach climbs sharply with household income: four in ten of those earning under $20,000 listen on a typical day, rising to seven in ten among those earning $100,000-plus. Time spent is actually highest among Gen Z (45 minutes a day), narrowly ahead of Millennials (42 minutes) — an audience that may still get mis-targeted as older or more niche than the data shows.



# Chapter 2: The creators stealing attention

Two long-standing habits are being rewritten by creator platforms. Television audiences no longer have to sit still for long stretches of content, delivered on a schedule someone else set. And, after 25 years, internet search has evolved beyond typing a single search term into Google and trusting whatever comes back.

TikTok – originally built for 15-second clips – is today holding a chunk of its audience for content 60 times that length. And while Google's answer box hasn't completely lost its audience, young consumers are increasingly taking a video-first route to discovery. Consequently, creator platforms aren't just taking time away from television and search; they're starting to do their jobs.

**Real voices**

**Q: Do you feel a different kind of connection to creators compared to a traditional TV host?**

**A:** "Absolutely. Most traditional TV hosts have agendas that point them in one direction. They'll leave a lot of stories out but your independent journalist tends to have a broader range of topics and will talk about the things going on in the world that really matter."

***Male, 45-54***

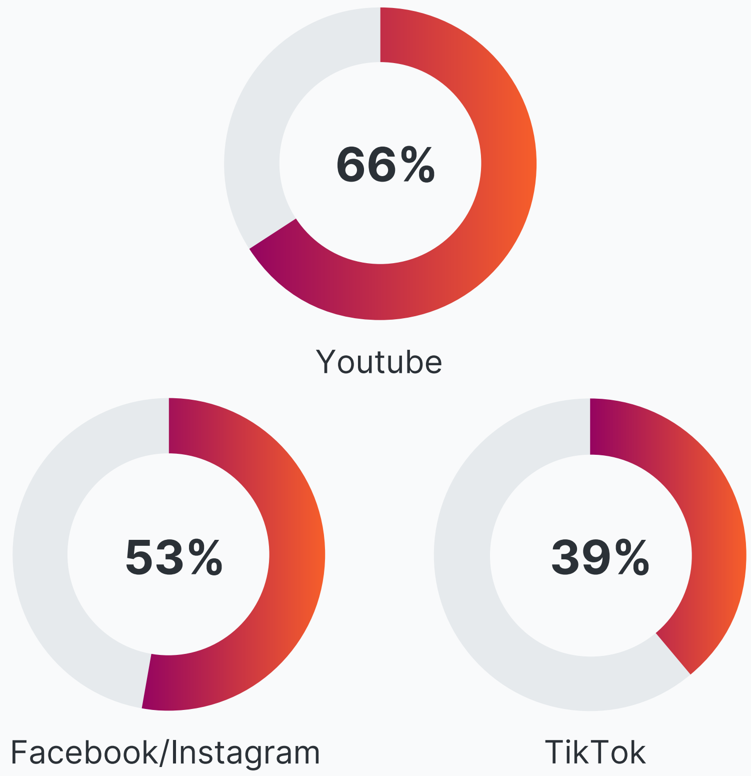
## Long-form video isn't dying

The assumption behind most "short attention span" commentary is that video has been chopped into ever-smaller pieces because that's all people want. The data tells a more specific story: as creator platforms introduce longer content, it's gaining eyeballs. Two-thirds of people regularly watch YouTube videos longer than 15 minutes, while 53% watch long-form on Facebook or Instagram and 39% on TikTok. All four of these platforms launched their short-form video products with strict length caps. They have since expanded them repeatedly, visibly chasing consumer demand for longer content, not just short clips. Today, these platforms are doing something closer to television than their interfaces suggest.

Device choice adds a counterintuitive layer. You'd expect anyone settling in for a long video to look for a bigger screen, but that's not what typically happens: among people who regularly watch YouTube videos longer than 15 minutes, the smartphone is still the dominant device, at 57%. Just under a quarter of these long-form regulars (23%) have moved to a TV.

### Long-form video consumption on creator platforms

% regularly watching 15+ minute content



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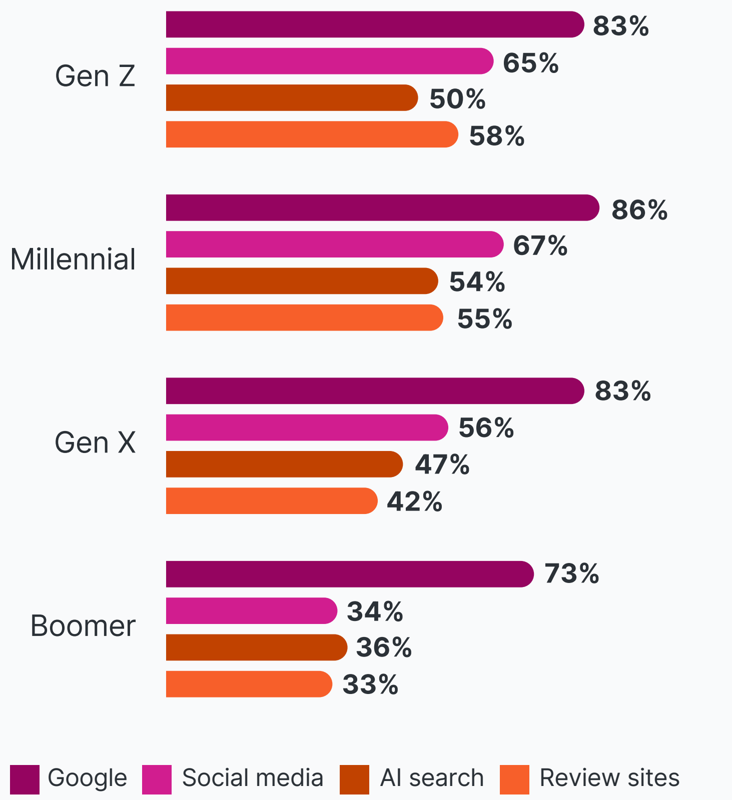
## How different generations research purchases




## Social media is a search engine for younger generations

Creator platforms aren't only becoming a substitute for TV, they're also becoming a substitute for Google – at least among younger audiences. Sixty-five percent of Gen Z, and an almost identical 67% of Millennials, are likely to search social platforms before a purchase, dropping to 56% of Gen X and just 34% of Boomers. This tracks with the broader shift described in the previous chapter: audiences raised on creator recommendation rather than institutional authority are extending that trust from entertainment into research and buying decisions.

Google also has another competitor nipping at its heels: AI search. But unlike social search, adoption of AI search isn't an age thing, it's an income thing – it climbs steeply from 38% to 70% as household income rises (possibly because habitual AI use tracks with better paid knowledge worker jobs). Despite this affluent skew, brands certainly shouldn't give up on Google: it still leads every single generation and income band by a wide margin. After all the AI-search hype, that's a useful reality check for anyone reallocating SEO budget too aggressively toward AEO.

## What this means for media buyers

With people potentially prepared to watch feature-length content on their phones, ads need to be designed with the small screen in mind. Meanwhile, discovery strategy has to be split by audience: social-first content matters most for reaching younger generations, AI-assistant visibility matters most for reaching affluent, premium audiences, and Google still deserves the largest share of everyone else's budget.

**Real voices**

**Q: What makes you trust an influencer's recommendation more than a standard Google search result?**

**A:** "Because they are speaking from personal experience. An influencer can show me what he ate, show me how he liked it, show me how it looked. It'll influence me to try that too. And I trust it."

***Male, 35-44***

# Chapter 3: The attention trap

Casinos are built without clocks or windows for a reason: lose track of time, and you stay longer. Social feeds and streaming platforms achieve much the same effect through mechanisms like infinite scroll and autoplay.

While the ethics of attention-trapping techniques like these are up for debate, for advertisers, it pays to understand where your audience is spending most of their time. And knowing which platforms have the strongest draw is wise when allocating your marketing budget. After all, a platform someone returns to ten times a day offers ten separate chances to be seen, not one.

**Real voices**

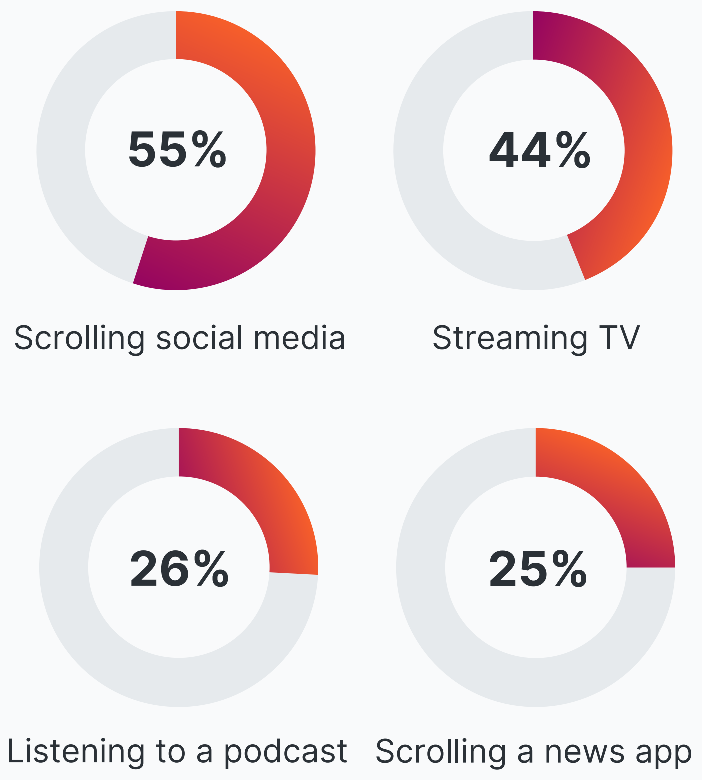
**Q: Do notifications play a role in pulling you back into Instagram?**

**A:** "Yeah, but mostly it's just the urge to see what's on. I do feel guilty about it. It is just a fact that it takes up so much time."

***Male, 18-24***

## Activities people have trouble stopping

% with trouble stopping (very/somewhat frequently)



## Some platforms hold on harder than others

Not all media is equally easy to put down once you've started: 55% of people say they have trouble stopping when scrolling a social media feed, well ahead of losing track of time streaming TV (44%), listening to a podcast (26%), or reading a news app (25%).

That average hides a sharp generational divide, with 65% of Gen Z struggling with doomscrolling, falling to 59% of Millennials, 49% of Gen X and just 34% of Boomers. Streaming TV and news apps show real generational differences too: Millennials report the most trouble stopping with both (50% for streaming TV, 30% for news apps).

The "stickiness" of social media likely comes down to friction; a TV episode still involves a brief pause before the next one starts, and opening a news article takes a deliberate tap. A social feed, on the other hand, serves up a new, bite-sized piece of content every few seconds. There's no natural break, so nothing ever prompts you to reconsider whether to continue.

## Social media's magnetic draw

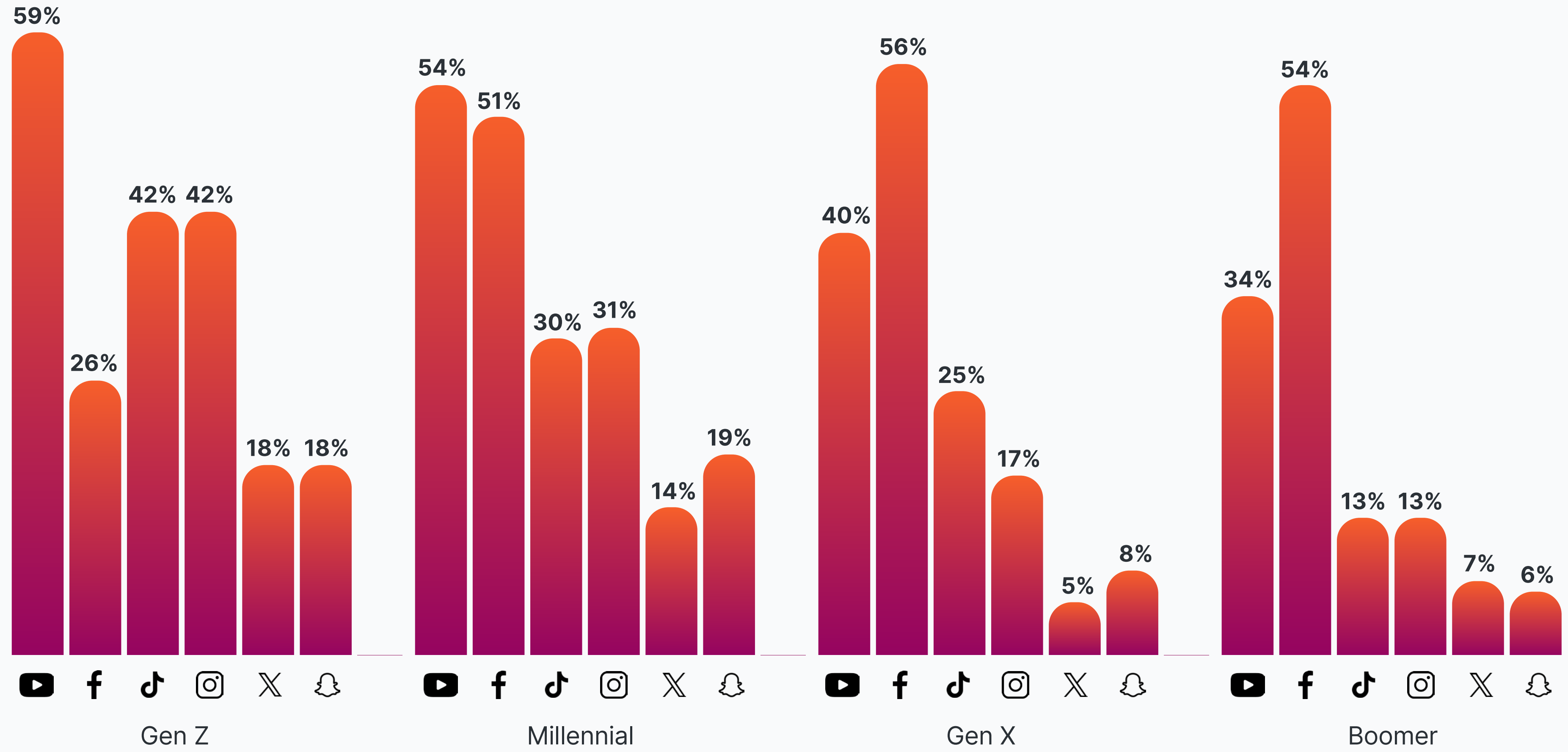
Social media doesn't just keep you locked in when you're on it; it keeps you coming back again and again. The average person checks social media 5.9 times a day, and about a fifth (19%) check it more than 10 times. For a brand, each of those visits is a fresh opportunity to be seen, a frequency that's hard to match on any other channel.

Gen Z, especially, can't stay away, visiting social media 6.8 times a day on average. That's compared to 6.1 for Millennials, 5.4 for Gen X, and 4.1 for Boomers.

Asked which platforms they feel most drawn to, people point to YouTube most often (49% describe themselves as at least mildly hooked on it), narrowly ahead of Facebook (46%), then TikTok (30%), Instagram (28%), Snapchat (14%) and X (12%).

TikTok's pull skews young: 42% of Gen Z say they're mildly addicted to it, against just 13% of Boomers. Facebook does the exact opposite: only 26% of Gen Z feel strongly drawn to it, rising to 56% of Gen X and 54% of Boomers. Meanwhile, your platform of choice is also influenced by your gender. Men are considerably more drawn to YouTube (61% vs. 38% of women) and X (19% vs. 5%); women are more drawn to Facebook (52% vs. 40%).

## Which platforms people describe themselves as “mildly addicted” to



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## What this means for media buyers

Reach and frequency of return aren't the same currency, and campaigns built to land repeatedly, rather than once, should be planned around the second one specifically. Don't default to assuming the strongest pull sits with younger audiences: Facebook shows older audiences can be drawn back just as often as younger ones. One thing worth flagging is that reforms to make platforms safer and less addictive could change these numbers in future, so media planners will want to keep an eye on them.

**Real voices**

**Q: Is there a particular app you have trouble stopping once you've started?**

**A:** "I find TikTok to be quite addictive once you start scrolling through the videos. You can end up spending more time on there than you planned to. Other apps, I don't really have that problem with but TikTok does tend to engage me more than others."

***Female, 18-25***

# Chapter 4: The fragmentation of attention

As we saw earlier in this report, watching television is now rivalled by watching creator platforms. But audience attrition isn't the only change of the last few years — what's also transformed is what "watching" itself actually looks like.

Full, undivided attention on a program is increasingly rare; most people are doing something else alongside it, eating, scrolling, messaging, searching. While this looks like attention leaking away from the screen, it's not always a bad thing. Someone who reaches for their phone to look up something they just saw, or to buy a product a celebrity was using, is arguably more engaged with the content.

The real question for advertisers is what people are doing alongside the screen, and how to work with it rather than simply compete against it.

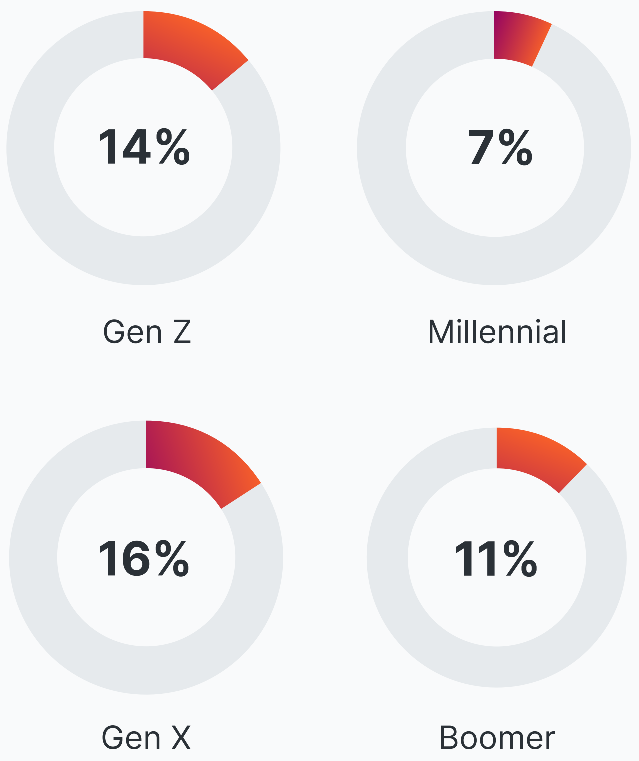
**Real voices**

**Q: If you're watching a show and also on your phone, do you feel like you might be missing some of the details on TV?**

**A:** "I don't get so drawn into TV shows. I'm always multitasking. So TV's like a secondary, just on in the background kind of situation. I'm usually either playing my game or watching TV, or checking emails."

***Female, 35-44***

## How many people give TV their full attention




## Full attention is the exception, not the rule

Only 12% of people give TV their full attention, with no other activity happening alongside it. The other 88% are doing something else, and for 68% of the total, that specifically involves second-screening: scrolling social media, shopping, searching, messaging, or gaming. This isn't simply a young person's habit, and it isn't Gen Z who are the least attentive generation, either: just 7% of Millennials give TV their full attention, the lowest of any age group, behind Gen X (16%), Gen Z (14%) and Boomers (11%). Millennials are also the generation most likely to be doing something on another device while watching TV, at 72%.

Of all the things people do while watching TV, one activity dominates: 43% scroll social media, well ahead of messaging friends (26%), gaming (25%), online shopping (21%), and Googling or using AI search (20%). It means a large share of any TV audience already has a social feed open in parallel. Given how sticky that specific habit is, as the last chapter showed, an ad break is a natural moment for attention to drift there rather than stay on screen.

## Multitasking is a missed opportunity

With multitasking so common, advertisers should seek to lean in instead of viewing it as simply a competing claim on attention. The most obvious opportunity is food and drink: with 53% eating or drinking while watching (the most common activity of all), ad breaks are already a natural cue for a snack or a top-up.

Shopping behavior, too, is already primed for a shoppable trigger: a product seen on screen, whether it's an outfit on a reality show or a gadget in a lifestyle series, can be turned into an immediate purchase with the right overlay, QR code, or "as seen on" landing page. The one in five who reach for Google or an AI assistant mid-show are also ripe for targeting (imagine looking up Olivia Cooke's age and getting prompted to "shop the House of the Dragon look").

The one in four people messaging friends while watching TV feeds into the trend for watch-parties and co-viewing tools. Referral offers timed to exactly when people are already talking about a show could turn a private text exchange into a real conversion moment. Meanwhile, gaming, cooking, and getting ready each point to a specific vertical: in-game placements that complement what's airing, recipe or "cook along" tie-ins, and beauty content for shows watched before heading out.

### What people do while watching TV

## What this means for media buyers

TV reach figures likely overstate captured attention, since “the set is on” and “someone is avidly watching” are no longer the same claim for the majority of viewing time. But the audience isn’t leaving the room; they’re redirecting a portion of their attention to something specific and knowable. Rather than treating every second-screen activity as lost attention, each one, from a snack to a search to a text to a friend, is a distinct opening that a well-placed campaign can work with rather than fight against.

**Real voices**

**Q: When you’re watching a big live event, like sports or a reality finale, does social media feel like a ‘must-have’ companion?**

**A:** “Yes, because I like to see other people’s opinions and views. I look in the comments to see what other people are thinking and feeling about the situation. Or I go to TikTok and Instagram and watch different creators talk about the show and their take on it.”

*Male, 18-24*

# Chapter 5: The price of attention

People might like to complain about ads, but how much do they really bother them? There's a version of almost every platform in this report where nobody sees an advert. Yet many people opt for ad-supported tiers anyway.

That choice is, in effect, a price: people are telling advertisers exactly how much interruption they'll tolerate in exchange for free or cheaper access, and exactly what will make them stop tolerating it. This closing chapter puts a number on both sides of that trade, what the audience is worth, and what it costs to keep them.

## Ads reach further than you'd think

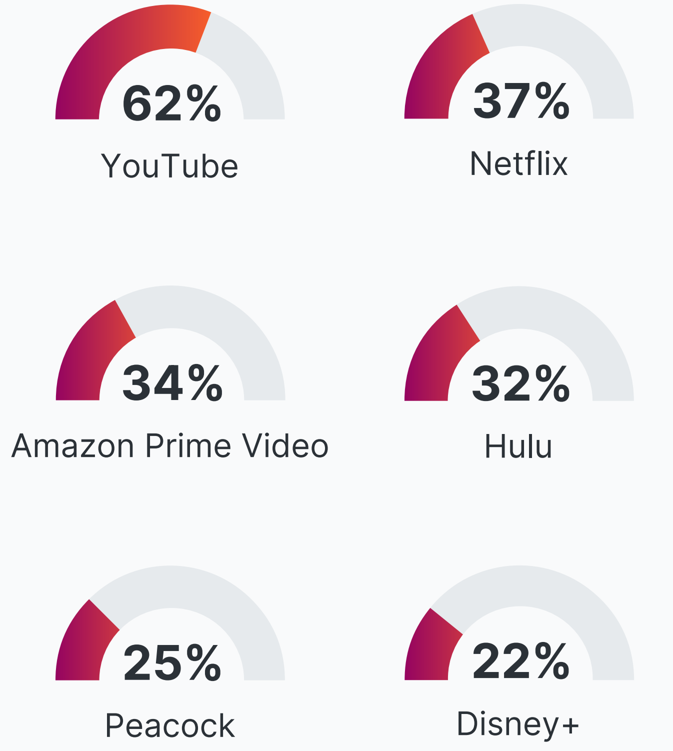
Our data shows 92% of people use at least one ad-supported platform. Conveniently for advertisers, that acceptance is concentrated on exactly the platforms with the biggest reach: 62% of Americans use ad-supported YouTube, 37% ad-supported Netflix, 34% ad-supported Amazon Prime Video, and a similar share use ad-supported Hulu (32%) and Peacock (25%).

Comparing these figures against usage data, we can see that roughly half of Spotify's users are on the free tier, around four in five Amazon Prime Video users are seeing ads, and about two-thirds of Netflix customers are on an ad-supported tier. This is a huge, willing, already-opted-in audience, and they're not only lower income or young consumers.

Ad-tier usage of Netflix, YouTube, Disney+, Hulu and Peacock stays statistically flat across every income band. Usage by generation also remains broadly consistent across Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu and Peacock. Age is a better predictor for YouTube: 70% of Gen Z use ad-supported YouTube versus 46% of Boomers (Disney+ and Spotify also follow the same generational slope).

### How many Americans use ad-supported subscription tiers across platforms

% using with ads



## The universal ad frequency tolerance ceiling

Ad frequency tolerance is one of the only genuinely flat patterns in this entire report. People say ads become excessive once they're shown every 14 minutes on streamed TV and every 12 minutes on social video, a threshold that barely moves regardless of generation.

What isn't flat is what people do about it: 82% of Gen Z always or usually skip ads on social video, compared with 46% of Boomers; on streamed TV it's 68% versus 36%. Everyone hits roughly the same wall, younger audiences just act on it faster and more completely.

It's also worth asking what "can't skip" actually achieves. When people can't skip an ad, only 44% say they continue watching as intended, 34% redirect their attention elsewhere, 17% mute it, and 3% stop watching altogether. Non-skippable doesn't mean watched, it mostly means tolerated. Gen Z viewers, in particular, refuse to co-operate with ads: they're the only generation where redirecting attention (43%) beats continuing to watch (35%).

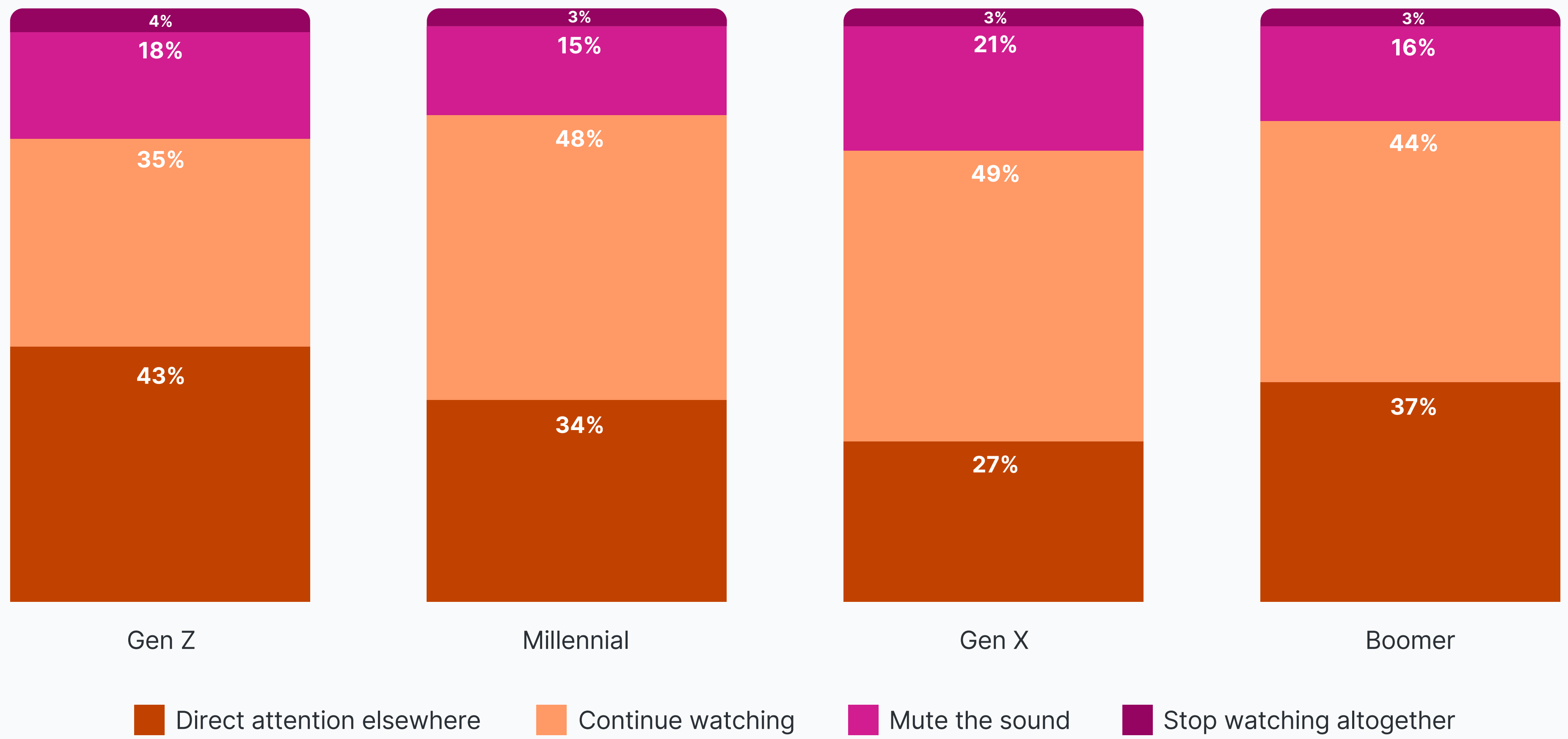
**Real voices**

**Q: Given the choice, do you tend to skip commercials or watch them?**

**A:** "I skip commercials because sometimes they repeat the same commercials over and over. So, when I get a chance to skip it, I skip it."

***Male, 35-44***

## What people do when they can't skip an ad



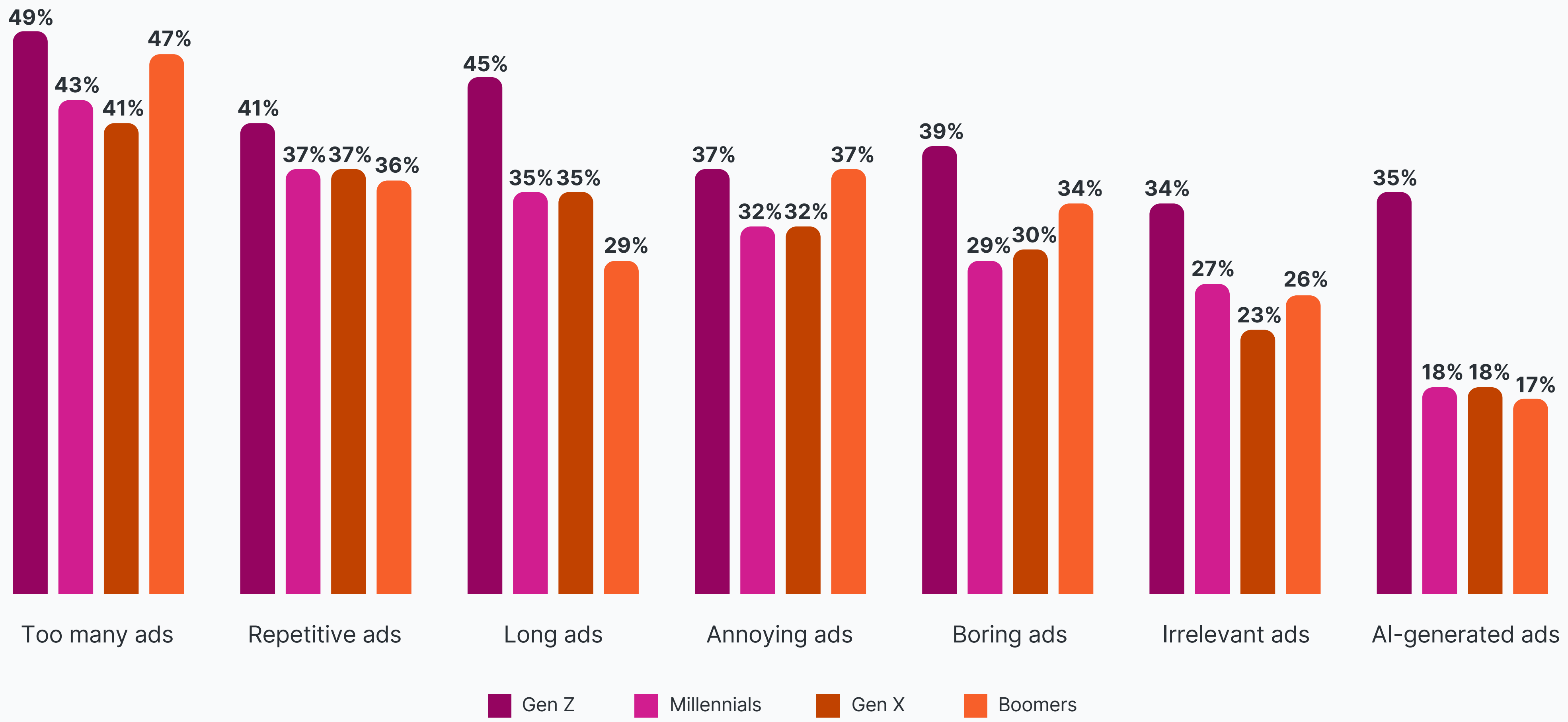
## What actually breaks people's patience

So what separates an advertiser who holds onto an audience's patience from one who burns through it? Asked what makes them disengage from advertising, people cite too many ads (45%), repetitive ads (38%), long ads (37%), annoying ads (34%), boring ads (32%), irrelevant ads (27%), and AI-generated ads (22%).

Long ads bother younger audiences significantly more: 45% of Gen Z cite them as a reason to disengage, against 35% of Millennials, 35% of Gen X and 29% of Boomers. Meanwhile, ad load and repetition are near-universal complaints, not generational ones.

Gen Z does stand out on one driver specifically: 35% cite AI-generated ads as a reason to disengage, against just 17-18% of every other generation, the widest generational gap of any complaint tested. The generation most associated with AI adoption elsewhere in their lives is the most skeptical of it in advertising specifically.

## What makes people disengage from advertising



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## What this means for media buyers

With the vast majority of people skipping ads whenever they're given the option, especially the youngest ones, the real priority is earning attention in the first few seconds. A non-skippable ad that quickly loses someone's attention but forces viewing has achieved very little; a skippable one that hooks them immediately has achieved everything. With that said, ad breaks still need to respect that roughly 12-14 minute spacing established earlier in this chapter: inserting ads any more frequently than that is where tolerance runs out.

**Real voices**

**Q: How do you feel about commercials that look like they might be AI-generated?**

**A:** "I hate AI commercials. Because they're crap, and they're not as good as what real people make."

***Female, 18-24***

# Conclusion: Capturing redirected attention

Television's traditional role, holding people's attention for long, uninterrupted stretches, hasn't disappeared. It's simply changed hands. Creator platforms are now doing that job instead, often more effectively and at a lower cost.

That means treating YouTube with the same creative ambition, brand safety standards and investment as a traditional TV buy, while recognizing that creator partnerships are no longer an add-on to a media plan but a channel in their own right.

Individual creators are capturing hours that once belonged to professionally produced television. That makes a strong case for shifting more budget from traditional production towards creator collaborations, integrated product placements and longer-form sponsored content. These formats often feel more authentic, can be produced more efficiently and are far more flexible than a rigid 30-second spot.

There's also a genuine appetite for long-form branded content. Documentary-style films, extended creator partnerships and richer brand storytelling all have an audience on platforms built to reward how long content holds attention, not how well it fills a scheduled slot.

Beyond entertainment, the same platforms replacing television's role are beginning to parallel Google for many younger consumers. A brand's presence on these platforms is now an essential part of how people discover, evaluate and choose products, alongside search, not instead of it.

This report paints the national picture. But the real advantage comes from understanding how your own audience, in your own category, is spending its attention. Which creators do they trust? What content holds their attention? Where do they discover brands?

The only way to know is to ask them. We're here to help you find the answers.

# Methodology

This report is based on a nationally representative survey of 1,000 US adults aged 18-66, fielded in June 2026, covering time spent watching, listening to and reading different formats, platform habits, ad tolerance, and second-screen behavior. It's underpinned by five years of Attest's own US media habits tracking, surveying 1,000 US adults quarterly since 2022, giving us a longer view of how these behaviors have been shifting and the context to interpret this year's numbers with real confidence.

Both surveys are nationally representative of the US working-age population by age and gender. A few things worth knowing if you're digging into the detail: "Boomers" in this report refers only to the 62-66 age group, since the sample caps at 66, so treat any Boomer-specific figures as a slice of that generation's youngest members rather than the full picture. Generational and income breakdowns are based on standard age bands and household earnings groups.

All differences reported as significant have been tested at the standard 95% confidence level. Time-spent averages include respondents who don't engage in a given activity at all, which keeps the figures additive across an average day, so we've also shown participation rates alongside them where it matters, since a low average can mean low engagement, or a smaller group engaging heavily.

Alongside the quantitative data, we also ran a 30-person qualitative study using Attest Explore, our AI-moderated interview tool, to explore the reasoning and everyday experiences behind these numbers in more depth. Verbatim quotes from these interviews appear throughout this report to bring the data to life.

If you'd like the full data tables, breakdowns, or statistical detail behind any chart in this report, get in touch.

## About Attest

Attest is the AI consumer insights engine used by global B2C brands, including Netflix, Unilever, Nestlé and Reddit, to understand their audiences faster and with more confidence. The platform combines quantitative surveys (Attest Measure) with AI-moderated qualitative interviews (Attest Explore), plus our AI co-pilot Compass that builds surveys, analyzes results, and turns data into shareable insights, all in one connected tool.

Data quality is core to how Attest operates, and it's independently verified: Attest is a signatory of the Global Data Quality (GDQ) Data Quality Excellence Pledge, underlining our commitment to rigorous, externally validated standards for data integrity.

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