

# Are attention spans really collapsing? Data shows UK public is worried, but also see technology benefits

February 16 2022

---



Credit: King's College London

Claims of a supposed "attention war" have seen new technology blamed for a decline in our ability to concentrate—but a major new survey of the UK public by the Policy Institute and Centre for Attention Studies at King's College London reveals a more nuanced picture.

On the one hand, we don't realize how addicted we are to our technology, and worry our [attention](#) is shortening:

- UK adults hugely underestimate how often they check their phones, thinking they check them 25 times a day on average, when studies suggest the reality is up to 80 times a day.
- 50 percent say despite their best efforts they sometimes can't stop checking their smartphones when they should be focusing on other things, with this proving a struggle for [middle-aged people](#) as well as the young.
- People are more likely than not to feel their attention span is shorter than it used to be (49 percent vs 23 percent).

But these perceptions may be linked to some commonly believed myths about [attention spans](#)—and many of us still see significant positive impacts from technology and don't put all the blame on big tech:

- Half (50 percent) wrongly believe the average attention span among adults today is just eight seconds long.
- 51 percent say technology is ruining young people's attention—but a similar proportion (47 percent) think being easily distracted is more just a result of people's personality.
- 60 percent say having information at their fingertips helps them find solutions to problems at work and in their lives.
- 51 percent say multi-tasking at work, switching frequently between email, phone calls, or other tasks, creates a more efficient and satisfactory work experience, compared with 32 percent who don't think this is the case.

## **The attention span of a goldfish?**

Many Britons are wrong about a commonly heard claim—that the average attention span among adults today is just eight seconds long,

supposedly worse than that of a goldfish. This claim has been debunked—but 50 percent wrongly believe it is true, compared with 25 percent who correctly identify that it is false.

## **An attention crisis?**

It's important to recognize that a lack of long-term studies means we can't tell whether attention spans have actually declined. But despite this, there is at least a [public perception](#) that our ability to concentrate has worsened:

- Half the public (49 percent) say they feel like their attention span is shorter than it used to be, while with around a quarter (23 percent) disagree with this.
- Even more widespread is the belief that young people's attention spans in particular are worse than they were in the past, with two-thirds of people thinking this is the case (66 percent), including six in 10 (58 percent) 18- to 34-year-olds, the youngest age group surveyed.
- 47 percent say that "deep thinking" has become a thing of the past—roughly double the proportion who disagree with this view (23 percent).

## **The impact of technology**

It is the case that research has shown technology can interfere with our ability to concentrate. For example, switching our attention between [social media](#), smartphones, tablets as well as TV, radio, or other media harms our ability to complete simple tasks—something that is correctly recognized by 67 percent of the public.

Many think more should be done to address these kinds of impacts, with

51 percent of UK adults believing tech companies and social media are ruining young people's attention spans and that governments should take control to prevent this.

But at the same time, a similar proportion (47 percent) think the reason some people are easily distracted is not because of technology but because it is part of their personality, and many also feel that tech brings important benefits:

- 60 percent say having multiple forms of instant information at their fingertips helps them find solutions to problems they face at work, in their personal life or elsewhere, with 11 percent disagreeing.
- 51 percent say multi-tasking at work, switching frequently between email, phone calls, or other tasks, creates a more efficient and satisfactory work experience, compared with 32 percent who don't think this is the case.
- By 43 percent to 28 percent, the public are more likely than not to say using social media alongside other forms of entertainment like TV or radio enhances their enjoyment by connecting them to others.

## **The pace and complexity of modern life**

Without long-term research tracking attention spans over time, it remains unknown whether technology has caused a deterioration in the country's ability to concentrate. But comparisons with [survey data](#) from previous decades indicate that, on some measures, the public at least feel more pressured now than they did in the past:

- 41 percent of UK adults say the pace of life is too much for them these days, compared with 30 percent in 1983.
- 60 percent say they wish their life was more simple—up from 49

percent in 2008.

## **The UK consists of four groups with different views of attention and technology**

New statistical analysis shows that the country is made up of four distinct groups of people with very different views of attention and technology:

### **"Positive multi-screener" (42 percent of UK)**

Highly engaged users; keen information searchers; relaxed in terms of managing information; some concerns about attention spans but see lots of benefits from the wealth of information available. This is the biggest group in the population, confirming that we don't all see technology trends as negative.

### **"Stressed tech addicts" (21 percent)**

Feel overloaded with information; highly engaged users that see benefits in having these information sources, particularly social media; but the greatest concern about what it is doing to attention spans, and believe it is causing the end of deeper thinking.

### **"Overloaded sceptics" (21 percent)**

Feel overloaded with information; very concerned about decreasing attention spans and the loss of deeper thinking—but much more negative about the value social media brings, compared with the "stressed tech addicts."

## "Disengaged and untroubled" (17 percent)

Uninterested in searching for information; no concerns expressed about attention spans or the amount of information; and barely noticed any signs of an "attention war."

**More information:** Do we have your attention? How people focus and live in the modern information environment: [www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute ... tion-environment.pdf](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute...tion-environment.pdf)

Provided by King's College London

Citation: Are attention spans really collapsing? Data shows UK public is worried, but also see technology benefits (2022, February 16) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-02-attention-spans-collapsing-uk-technology.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.