

**THE
POLICY
INSTITUTE**

**THE CENTRE FOR
ATTENTION STUDIES**

KING'S
College
LONDON

Do we have your attention?

How people focus and live in the
modern information environment

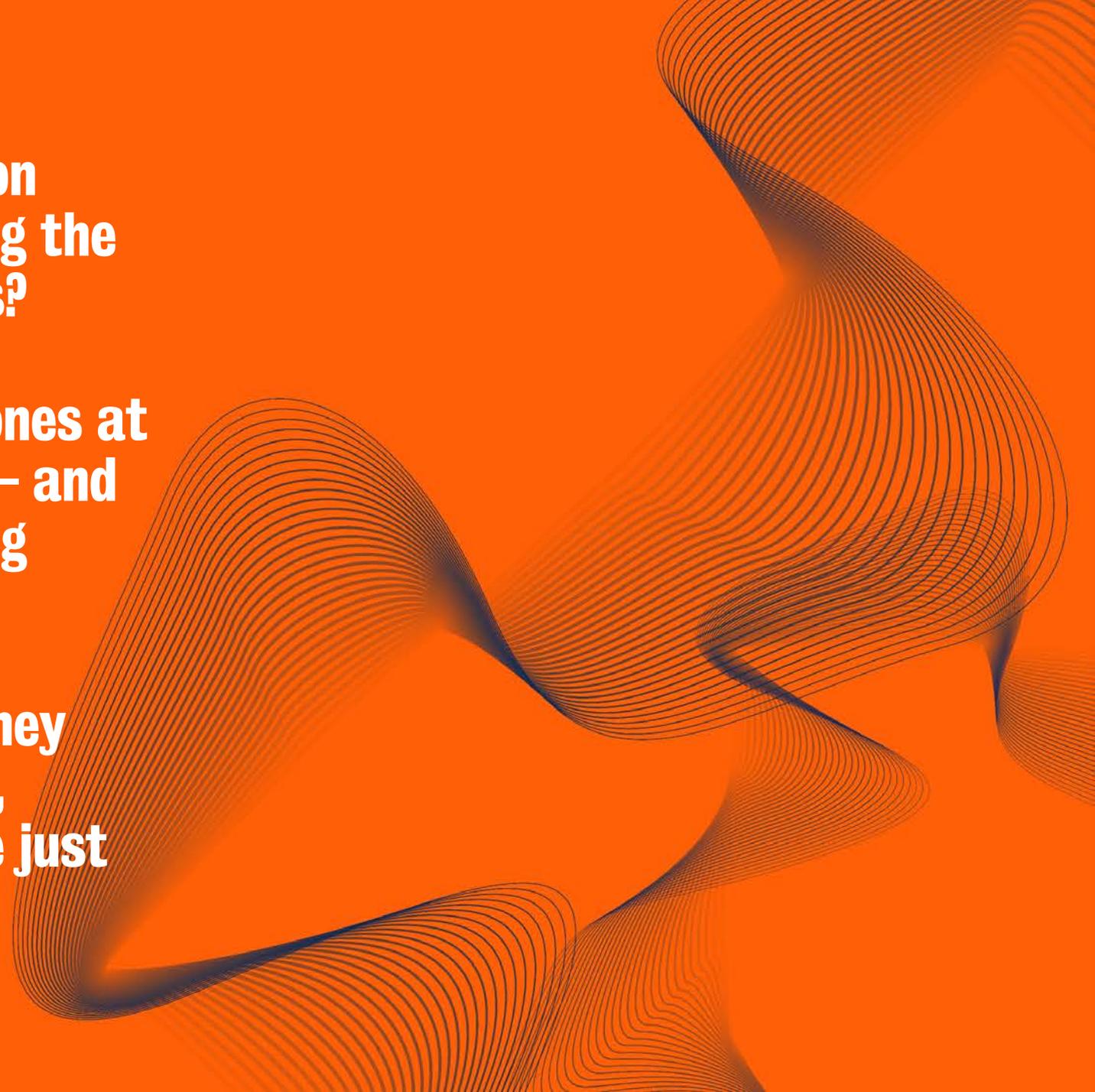
Contact: bobby.duffy@kcl.ac.uk | marion.thain@kcl.ac.uk

February 2022

Does our modern information environment worsen our attention spans? Or are we over-estimating the impact of technology on our lives?

Distraction caused by mobile phones at least appears to be a real issue – and one that doesn't just affect young people.

And while half the public admit they can't stop checking their phones, people still hugely underestimate just how much they do so.



Half the public say they sometimes can't stop themselves from checking their smartphones when they should be focusing on other things, despite their best efforts.

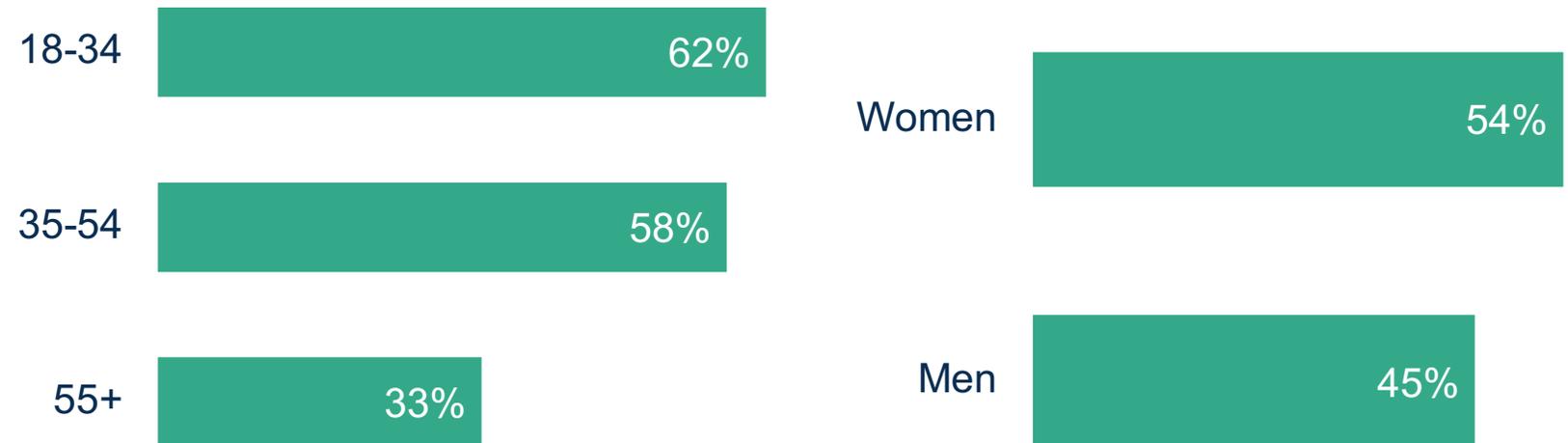
And this isn't just an issue for the young – a majority of middle-aged people say they struggle with this too.

There is also a gender divide in behaviour, with women (54%) more likely than men (45%) to report being unable to stop checking their phone.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **Despite my best efforts, I sometimes can't stop myself from checking my smartphone when I should be focusing on other things**



% who agree



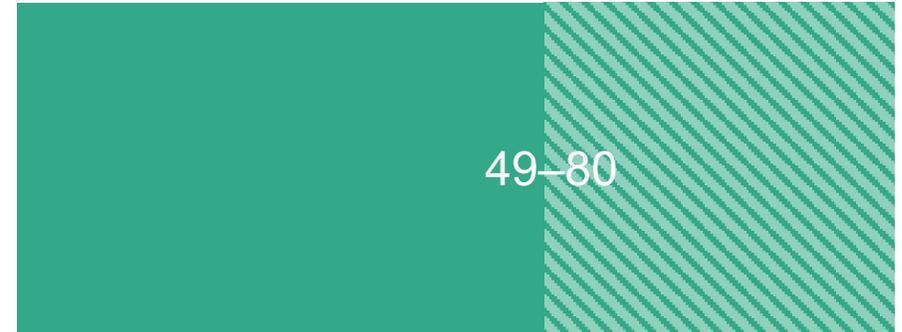
The public hugely underestimate the amount they check their phones.

Their mean guess is that they do so 25 times a day, but according to previous research, the reality is likely to be somewhere between 49 and 80 times a day.

The public therefore check their phones at least twice as much as they think they do.

How many times do you check your phone per day?

Reality



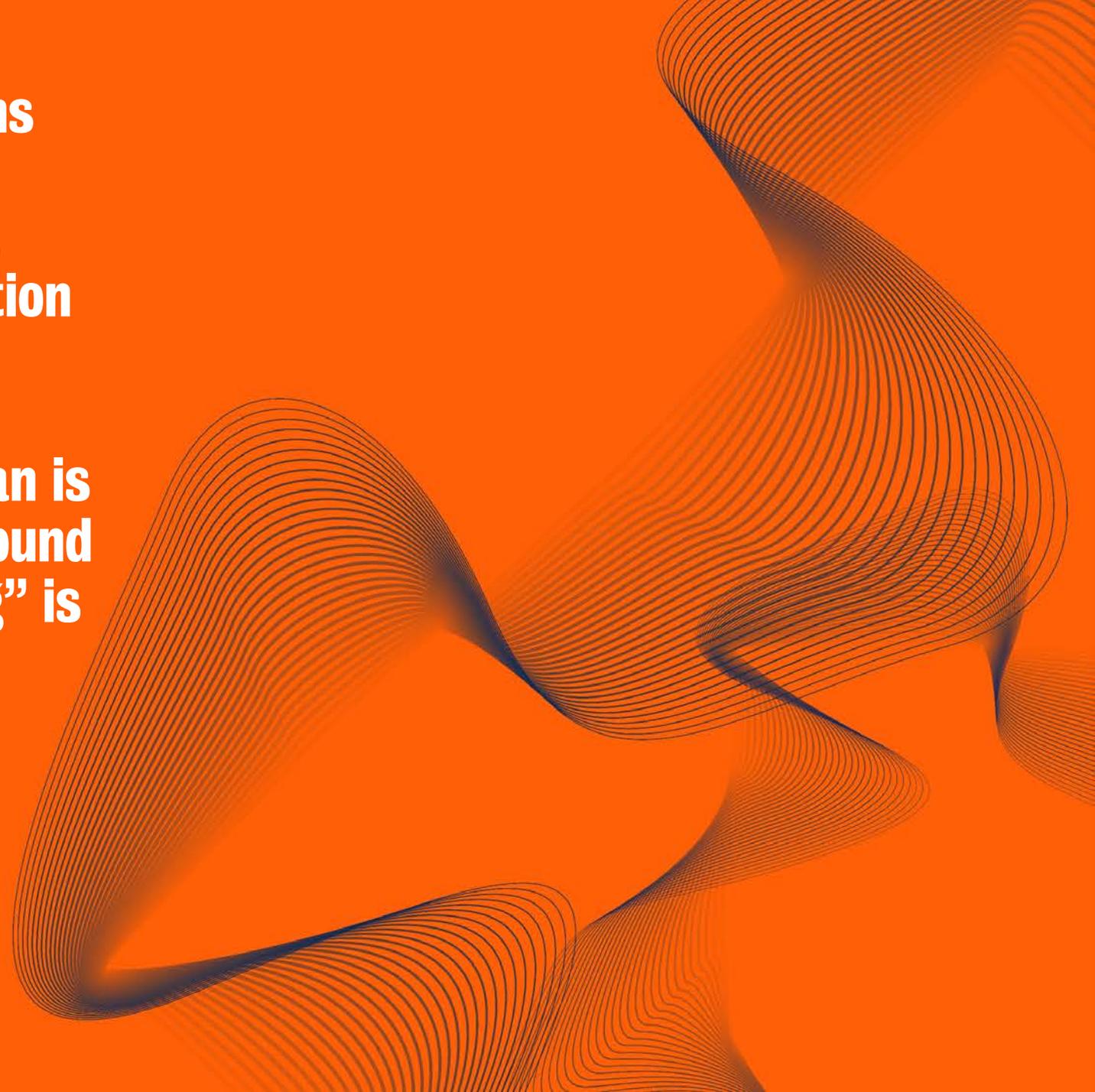
The public's mean estimate



Sources for reality: In 2016, Apple revealed that the average iPhone user unlocks their phone 80 times per day, while in 2019, Verto Analytics found that, on average, people in the US unlock their phones 49 times per day. Clearly, people can check their phones without unlocking them, so both of these figures are likely to be underestimates, but they indicate a likely range.

Base: 2.093 UK adults aged 18+, interviewed 24-26 Sept 2021

A lack of long-term studies means we can't tell whether attention spans have actually declined. Yet there is at least a public perception that this is the case, with people twice as likely to agree than disagree that their attention span is worse than it used to be, and around half believing that "deep thinking" is a thing of the past.



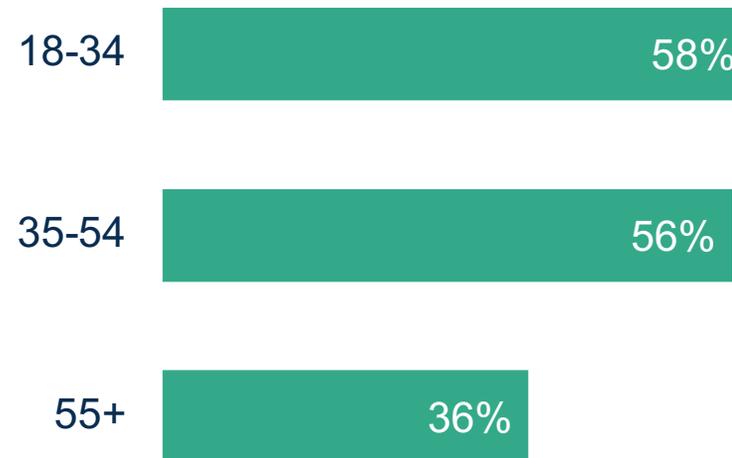
Half of the public (49%) feel their attention span is shorter than it used to be, compared with around a quarter (23%) who believe they are just attentive as they've always been.

Again, a feeling of increased distraction is not just something reported by the young – it's also the dominant feeling among the middle aged too, with 56% of 35- to 54-year-olds thinking their attention spans have worsened.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **I feel like my attention span is shorter than it used to be**



% who agree

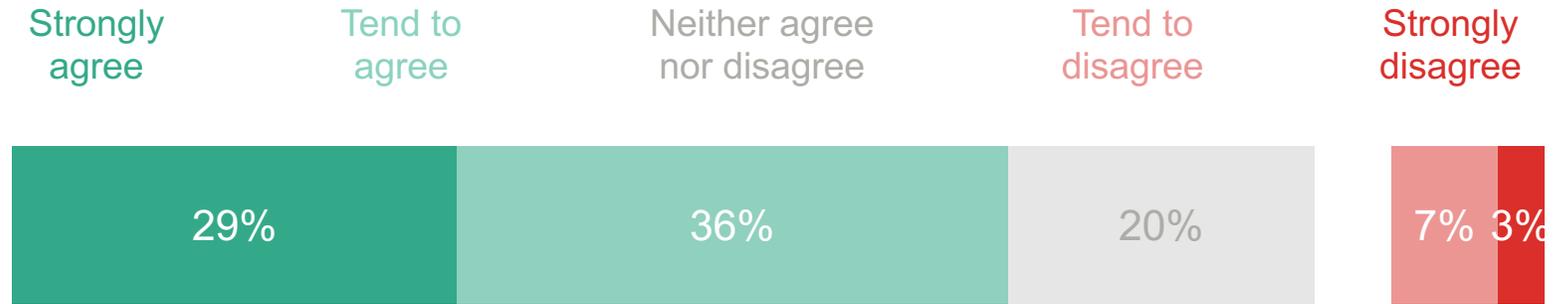


Even more widespread is the belief that young people's attention spans in particular are worse than they were in the past – two-thirds of people think this is the case (66%).

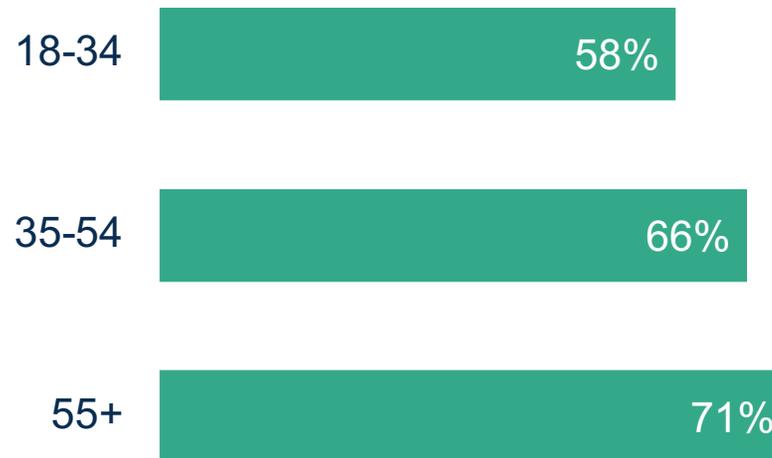
Perhaps unsurprisingly, this belief is most common among the oldest age group surveyed, of those aged 55 and over – however, young people themselves also feel this way, with a majority of 18- to 34-year-olds holding this view.

Some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **I believe young people today have shorter attention spans than young people in the past**



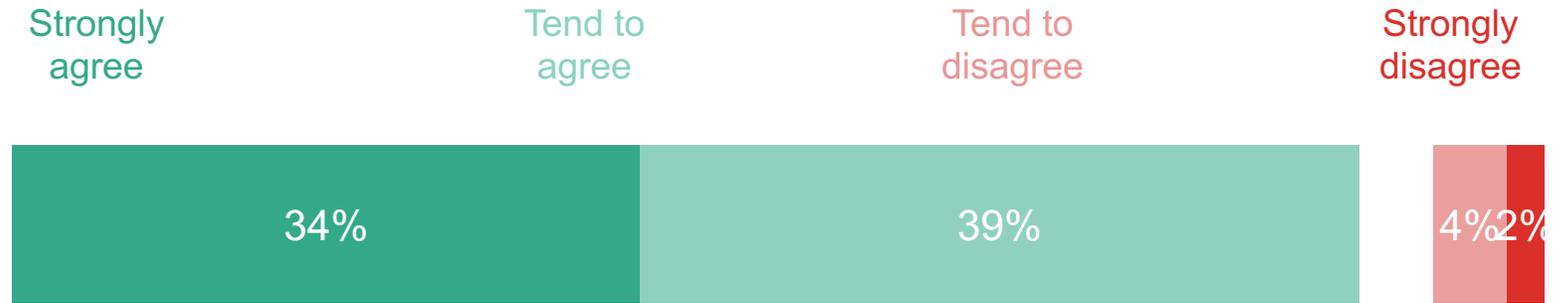
% who agree



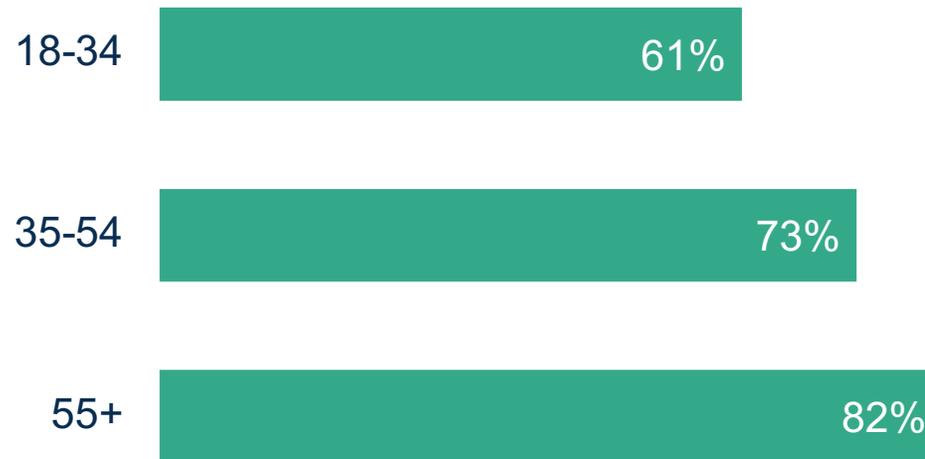
73% of people think there is non-stop competition for our attention from various type of media these days, compared with just 6% who don't think this is the case.

At least six in 10 of all age groups surveyed agree there is such intense competition, with belief highest among those aged 55 to 64, where eight in 10 hold this view.

To what extent to you agree or disagree with the following statement? **We are living through a time where there is non-stop competition for our attention, from TV, news, social media platforms, and other information outlets**



% who agree



47% of the public say that “deep thinking” has become a thing of the past – roughly double the proportion who disagree with this view (23%).

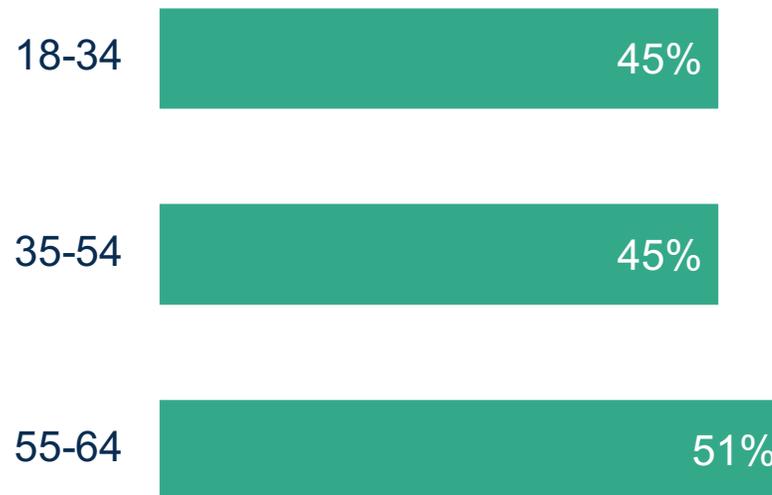
Support for the belief that we’ve lost the capacity for deep thought is consistent across generations, with around half of each age category surveyed

Some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
“Deep thinking” has become a thing of the past



% who agree



People's perceptions of how their attention span may or may not have changed are no doubt influenced by their understanding of concentration – and it's clear that some sections of the public hold misguided views.

For example, half the population wrongly believe that the average attention span among adults is just eight seconds – although the public are better at identifying how some uses of technology can impair our ability to focus.



By 50% to 25%, the public are more likely than not to say it's true that adults today have an average attention span of just 8 seconds.

And despite commonly heard concerns that young people's attentions in particular have worsened due to the impact of technology, the public are only slightly more likely (54%) to believe today's youth are quite this bad at concentrating, with little difference in views by age.

However, the 8-second attention span is a widespread myth, originating from a piece of research published by Microsoft in 2015. According to psychological research, our ability to sustain attention for any given length of time depends on the task at hand, whether it's listening to a lecture, reading a book, or driving.

Some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

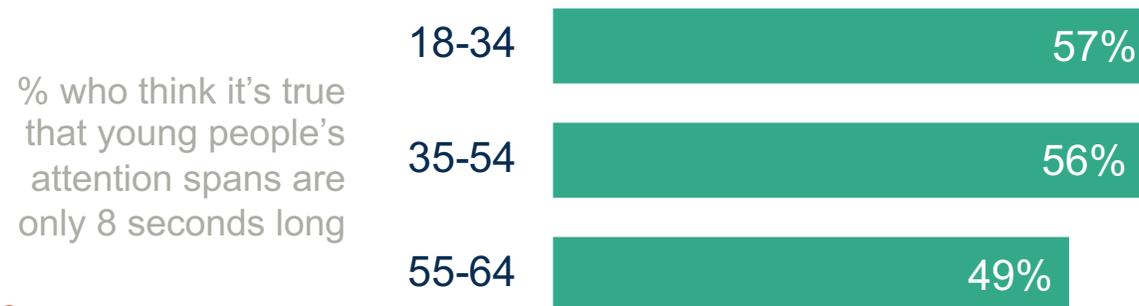
Are the following statements true or false?

The average attention span among adults today is only 8 seconds long



Reality: **False**

The average attention span among young people today is only 8 seconds long



Reality: **False**

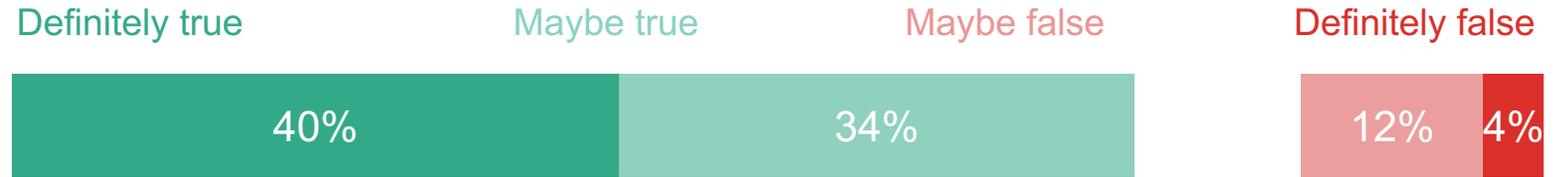
By contrast, the public are better at correctly identifying the impact of mobile phone use on students' ability to learn in classes and the negative effect that switching attention between different types of media has on our capacity to complete simple tasks.

Previous research has shown both of these types of activities have a detrimental impact.

But more subjectively, the public are inclined to feel that, in a work context, this kind of behaviour creates a better experience. 51% think multi-tasking in this setting is more efficient and satisfactory, compared with 32% who disagree.

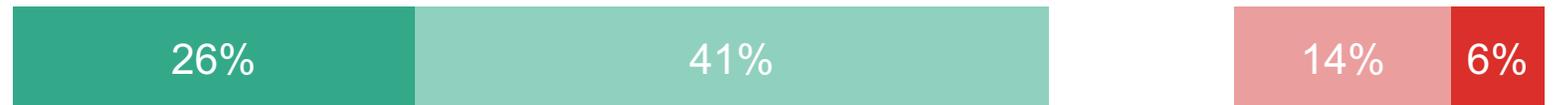
Are the following statements true or false?

Using mobile phones during classes or lectures worsens students' ability to learn and memorise material



Reality: **True**. See [source](#).

Switching our attention between social media, smartphones, tablets as well as TV, radio, or other media harms our ability to complete simple tasks



Reality: **True**. See [source](#).

Multi-tasking at work, switching frequently between email, phone calls, or other tasks, creates a more efficient and satisfactory work experience



Research shows that interrupted or fragmented attention in work settings can increase stress, frustration, a sense of time pressure, and can keep us from staying “on task”. See [source 1](#) and [source 2](#).

With much of the public recognising some of the negative attentional impacts technology can have, half of UK adults think governments should do more to regulate tech companies.

But they don't place all the blame on big tech – around half also think being easily distracted is just part of people's personality and not the fault of technology.



51% believe tech companies and social media are ruining young people's attention spans and that governments should take control to prevent this, with this being the most common view across the various generations surveyed.

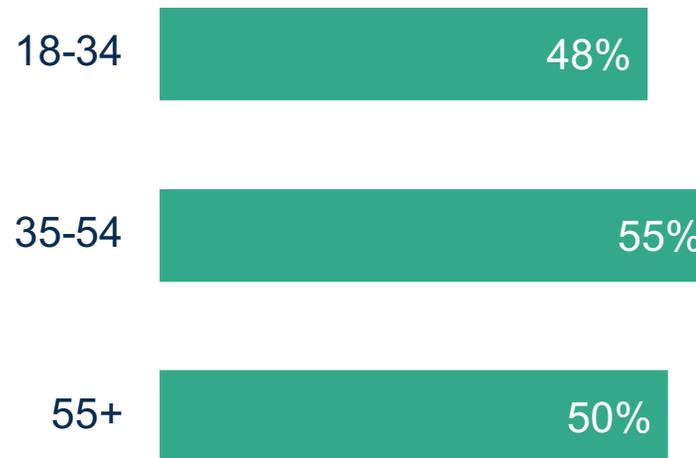
14% of the public overall disagree with this opinion, while 29% neither agree nor disagree.

Some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **Technology companies and social media platforms are ruining the attention spans of young people and governments should take control to prevent this**



% who agree

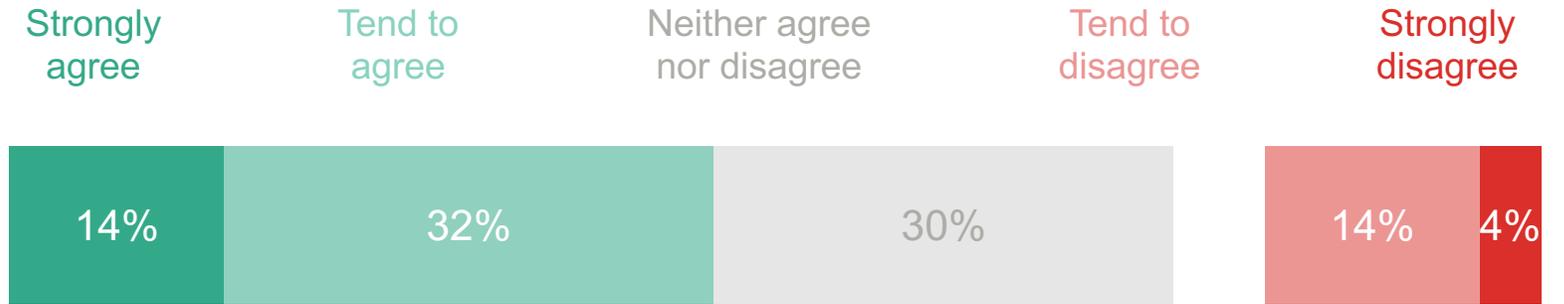


At the same time, around half (47%) of the population also think the reason some people are easily distracted is because of their personality, rather than technology.

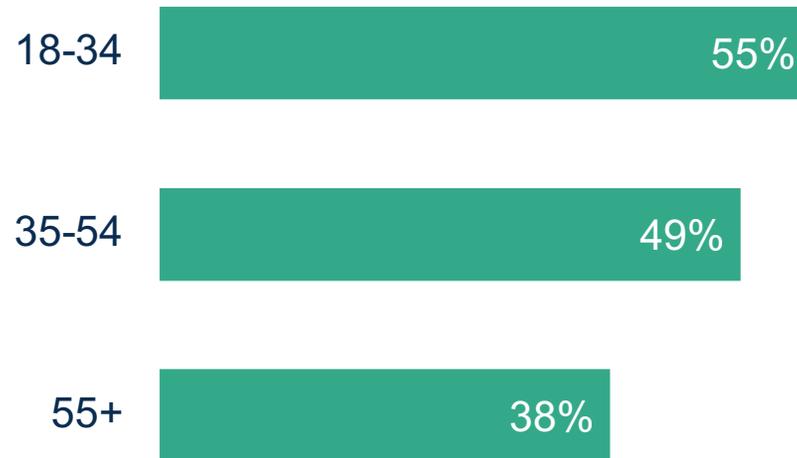
55% of young people think this is the case, declining to 38% among those aged 55 and over.

Some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

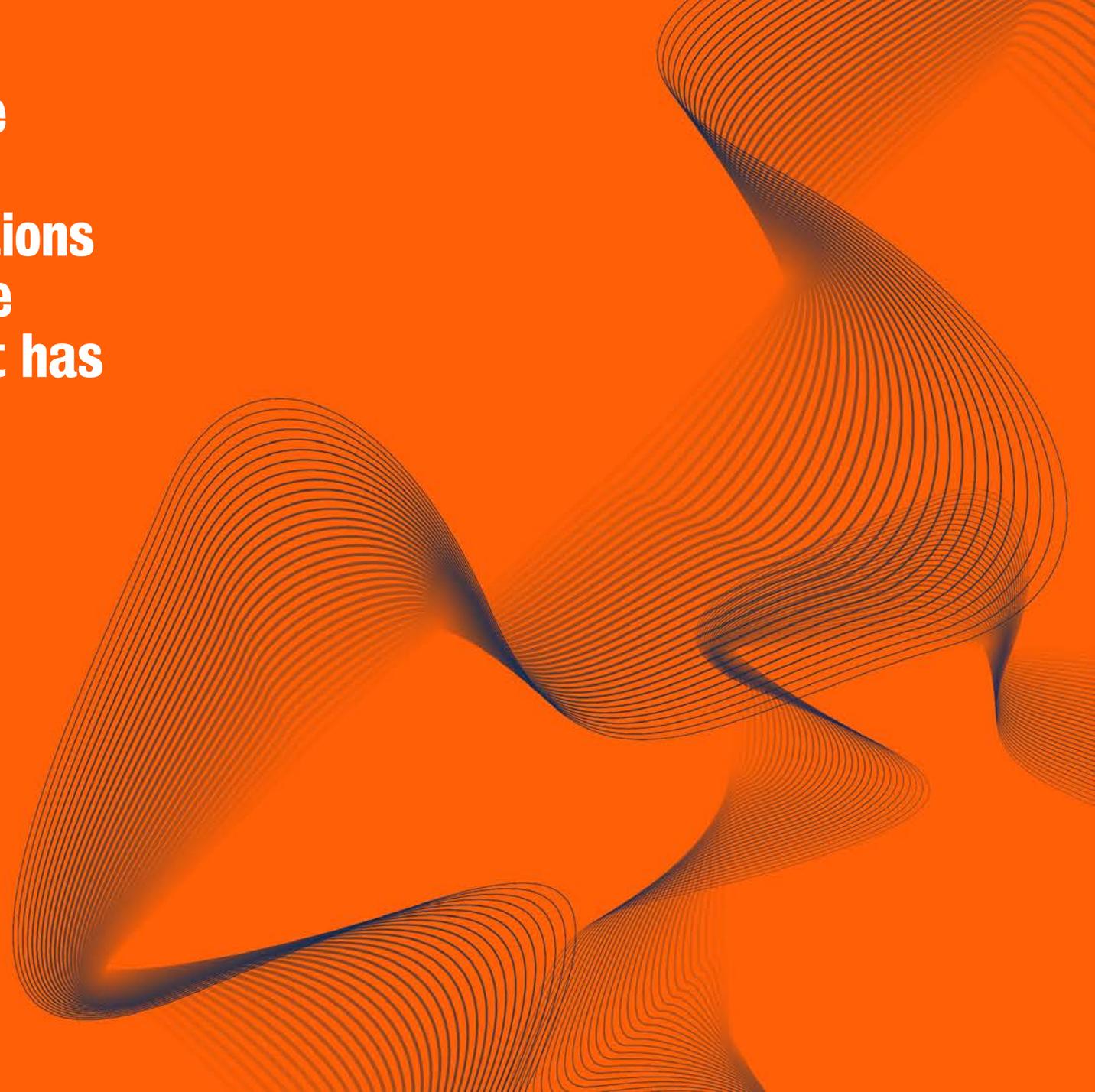
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **The reason some people are easily distracted is not because of technology but because it is part of their personality**



% who agree



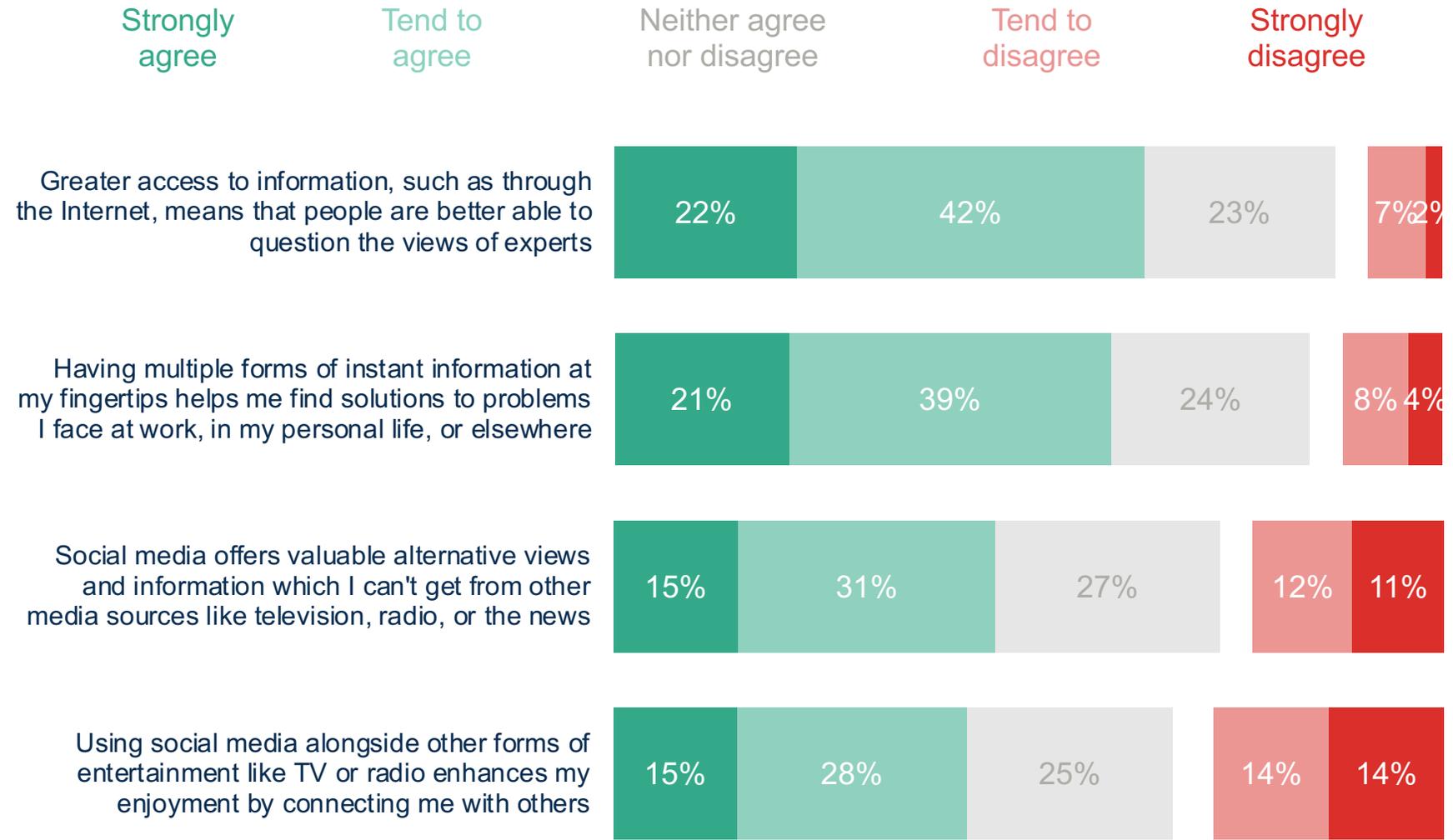
Despite some concerns about the impact of social media and technology, considerable proportions of the public also believe that the modern information environment has important benefits.



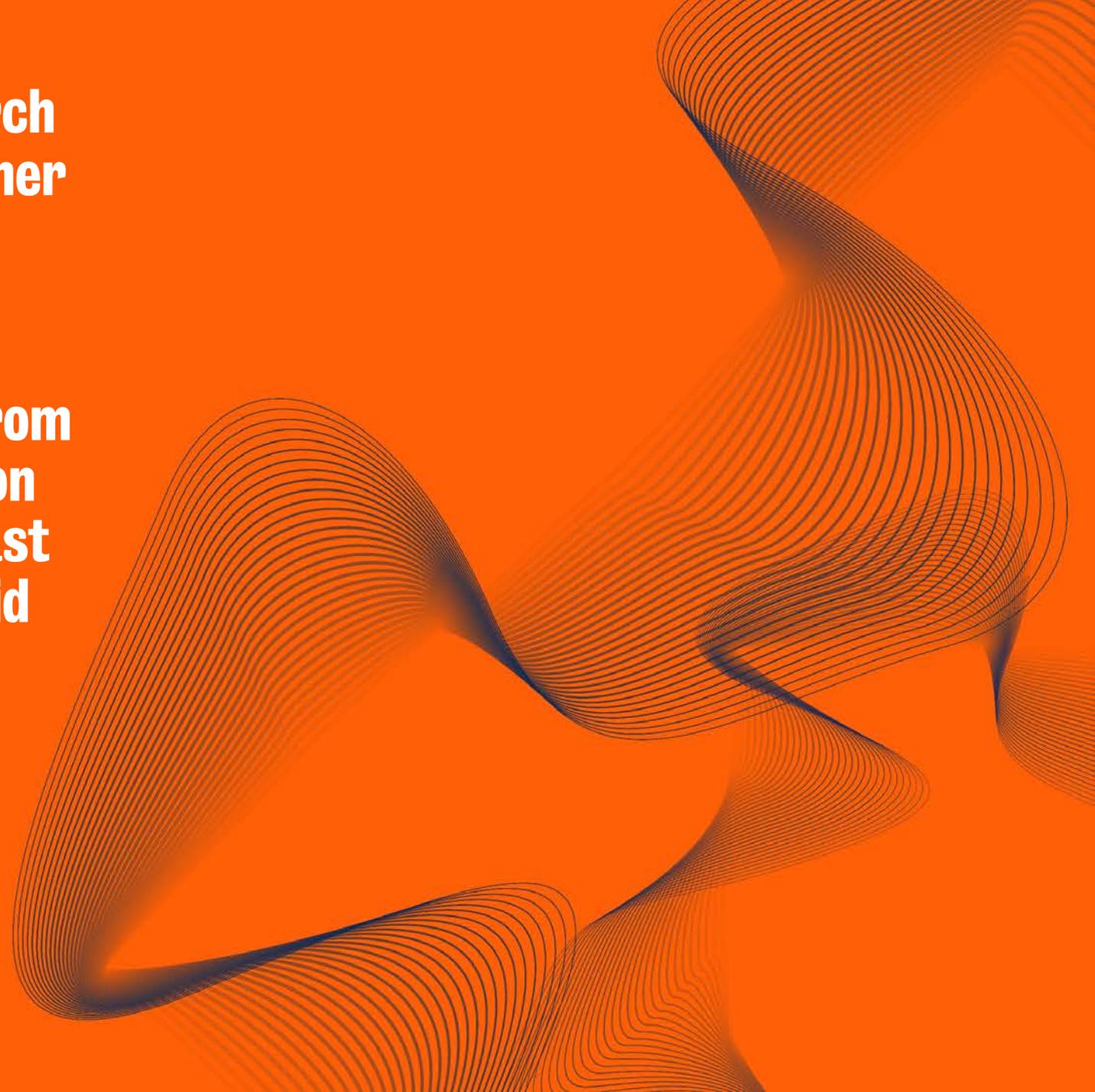
Around six in 10 people agree that greater access to information enables them to better question expert opinion and find solutions to problems they face, with roughly one in 10 disagreeing.

And the public are more likely than not to feel that social media provides valuable views that aren't available from other sources (45% vs 23%), and that using such platforms alongside other forms of entertainment improves their experience (43% vs 28%).

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

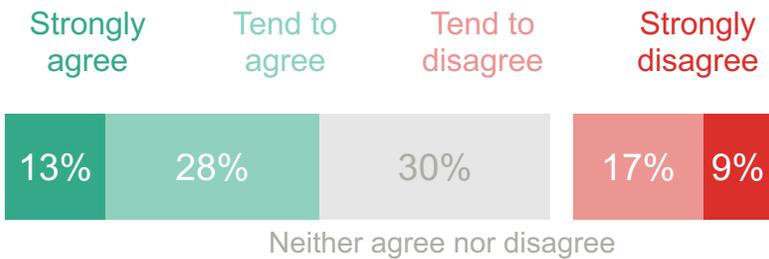


The absence of long-term research means it remains unknown whether technology has caused a deterioration in the country's ability to concentrate – but comparisons with survey data from previous decades indicate that, on some measures, the public at least feel more pressured than they did in the past.

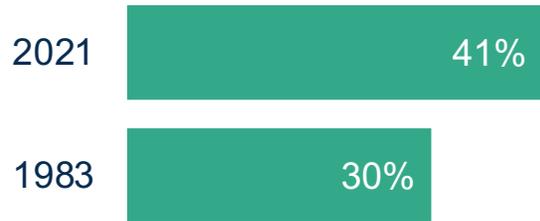


There has been an increase in the share of the public who say the pace of life is too much for them these days – 41% of people felt this way in 2021, up from 30% in 1983.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **The pace of life is too much for me these days**



% who agree



Base: 2,093 UK adults aged 18+, interviewed 24-26 Sept 2021; 1,030 GB adults, 1983;

54% of the public today wish that they could slow down the pace of their lives. However, this has changed little over the past quarter of a century, with around half the public feeling the same at the dawn of the millennium.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **I wish I could slow down the pace of my life**



% who agree



Base: 2,093 UK adults aged 18+, 24-26 Sept 2021; 2,019 GB adults 15+, 9 May-5 June 2008; 2,548 GB adults 15+, 1999; 1,700 GB adults aged 15+, April 1997

55% of people feel there just aren't enough hours in the day to do everything they want – a statement that had strikingly similar levels of agreement in previous decades.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **There just aren't enough hours in the day to do all that I want to do**



% who say this describes them perfectly/quite well



Base: 2,093 UK adults aged 18+, 24-26 Sept 2021; 2,019 GB adults 15+, 9 May-5 June 2008; 1,700 GB adults aged 15+, April 1997

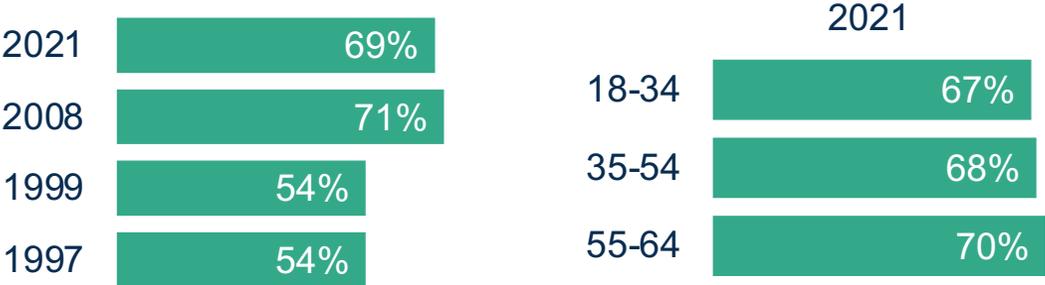
Seven in 10 UK adults say people led happier lives in the old days, when they had fewer problems to cope with. Support for this belief is virtually unchanged since 2008, while in the 90s it was considerably lower.

And this belief in a simpler, happier past is shared across generations, with around 70% of people in each age category holding this view today.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
People led happier lives in the old days when they had fewer problems to cope with



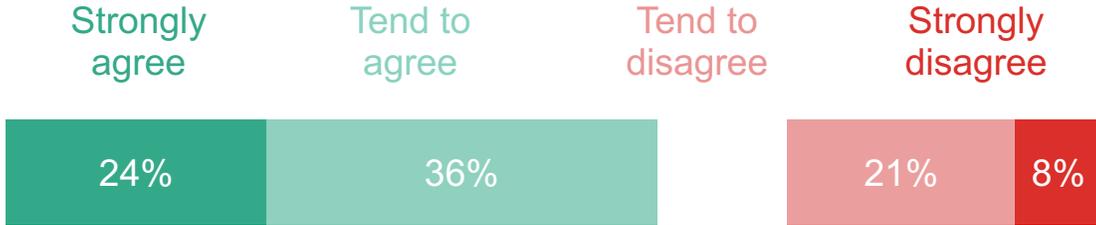
% who agree



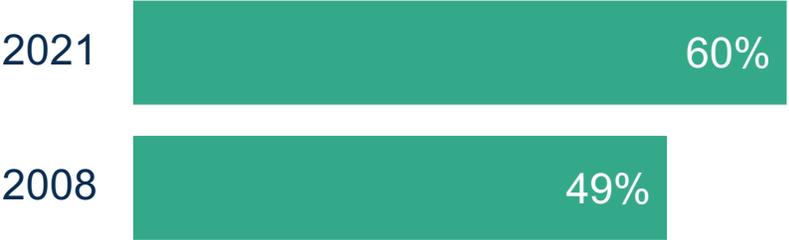
Base: 2,093 UK adults aged 18+, 24-26 Sept 2021; 2,019 GB adults 15+, 9 May-5 June 2008; 2,548 GB adults 15+, 1999; 1,700 GB adults aged 15+, April 1997

And six in 10 people wish their life was more simple – double the proportion who say they don't have this desire and up from around half who felt this way in 2008.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
I wish my life was more simple



% who agree



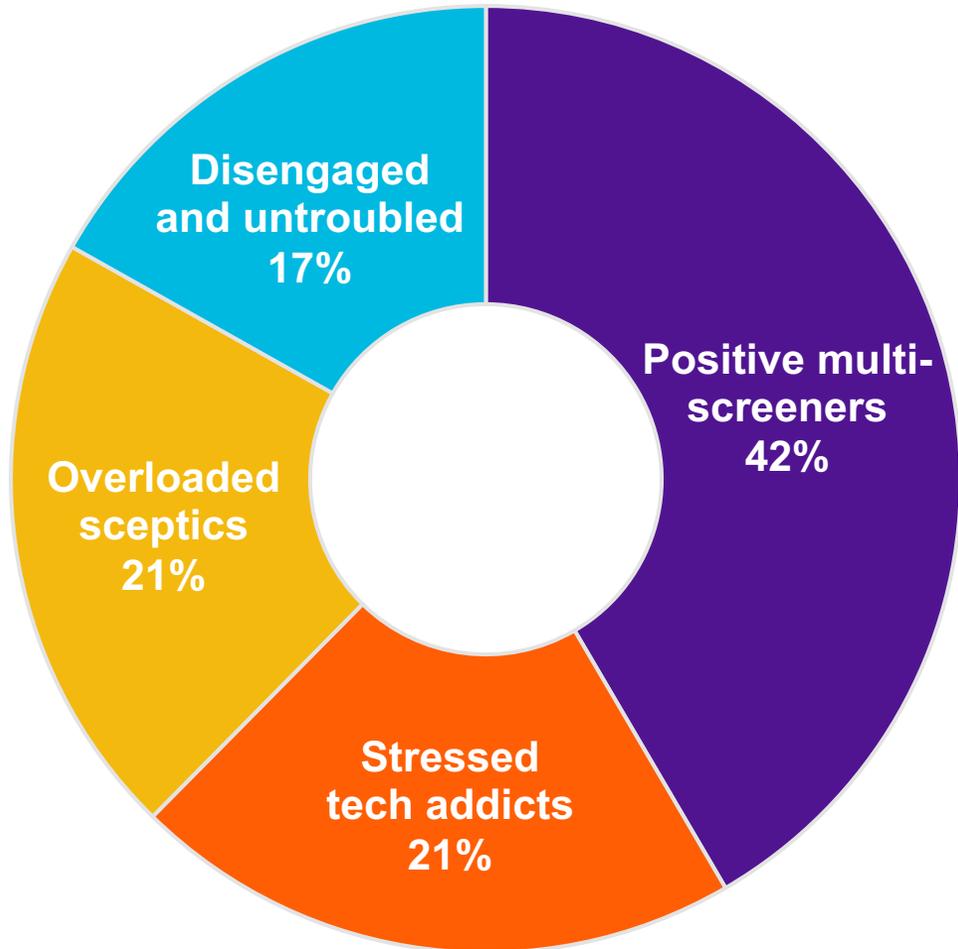
Base: 2,093 UK adults aged 18+, 24-26 Sept 2021; 2,019 GB adults 15+, 9 May-5 June 2008

We analysed the population by their responses to five groups of questions on whether:

- 1) They feel overloaded with information**
- 2) They have attention span problems**
- 3) They see engagement with social media as a good thing**
- 4) They are concerned about minds and mentalities**
- 5) They see access to online information as a positive**

From this, we found four distinct groups of people with very different views of attention and technology...

The four groups of people distinct groups with very different views of attention and technology



Positive multi-screeners (42% of UK)

Highly engaged users; keen information searchers; relaxed in terms of managing information; some concerns about attention spans but no others.

Stressed tech addicts (21%)

Feel overloaded with information; highly engaged users; concerns displayed over attention spans and minds/mentalities.

Overloaded sceptics (21%)

Feel overloaded with information; disengaged from social media; *strong* concerns about attention spans and minds/mentalities.

Disengaged and untroubled (17%)

Uninterested in searching for information; no concerns expressed; relaxed about levels of information received.

Key demographic information

Positive multi-screeners (42% of UK)

Average age of 44, with the highest proportion of women among the groups. Balanced mix of homeowners and renters.

Stressed tech addicts (21%)

Most highly educated and youngest of the groups. Largely living in urban areas with children.

Overloaded sceptics (21%)

Oldest group, with average age of 57. Highest share of retirees and homeowners with no mortgage. Largely living in rural areas.

Disengaged and untroubled (17%)

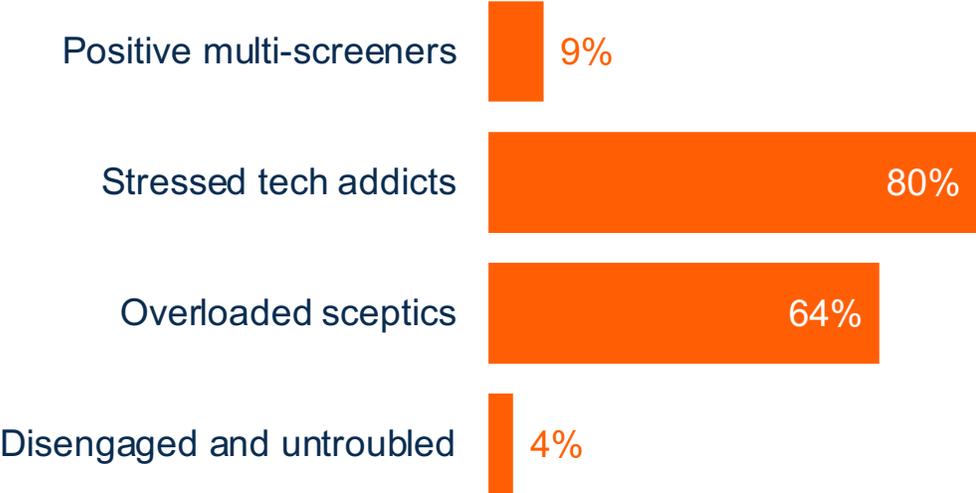
Highest proportion of members living in rented accommodation, with a low share of retirees.

80% of stressed tech addicts think it's definitely true that attention spans are being negatively impacted by the huge amount of information available today – the highest of the four groups.

Overloaded sceptics (64%) are second most likely to believe this is the case, while fewer than one in 10 positive multi-screener and those who are disengaged and untroubled hold this view.

Is the following statement true or false? **The sheer amount of information available to us today is negatively affecting people's attention spans**

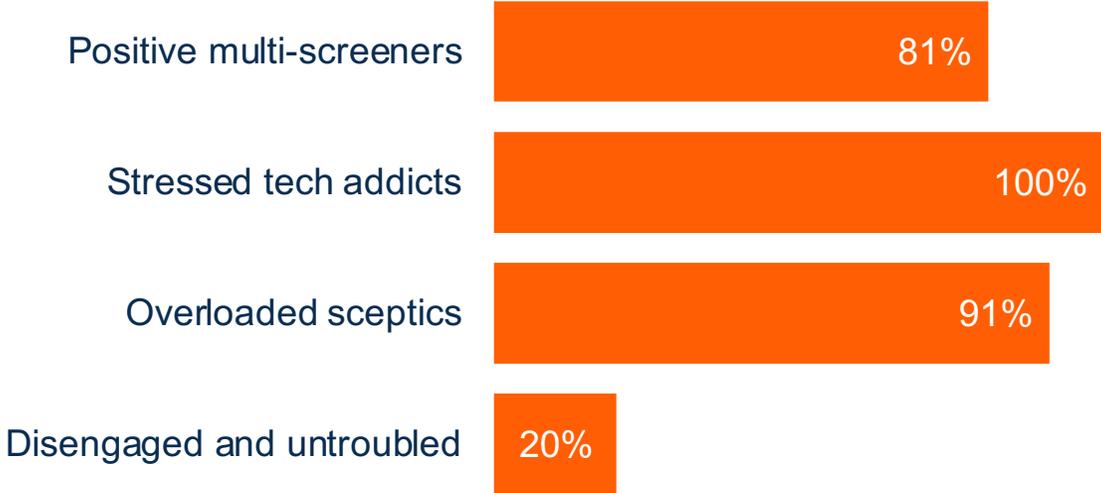
% who say **definitely true**



Large majorities of all groups except the disengaged and untroubled agree we're currently experiencing non-stop competition for our attention. Only one in five people in this group feel this way, compared with at least eight in 10 of the others, rising to 100% agreement among stressed tech addicts, reflecting their status as highly engaged users who feel overwhelmed by information.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **We are living through a time where there is non-stop competition for our attention**

% who **agree**

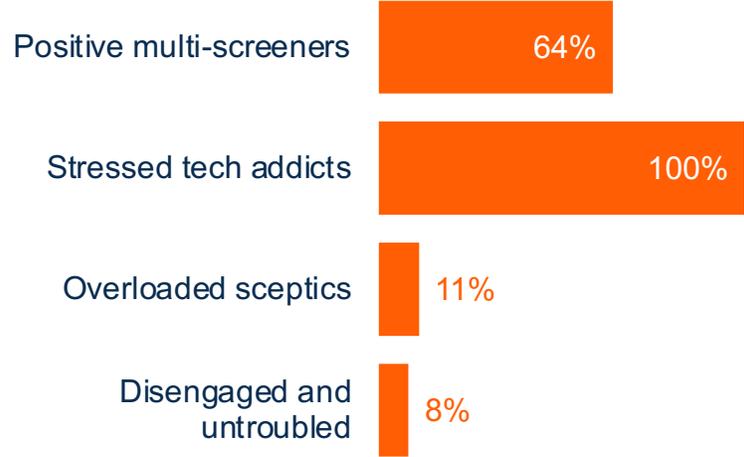


Despite feeling overwhelmed by the volume of information today, stressed tech addicts are unanimous that social media has an important value as a source of alternative views and knowledge.

Two-thirds of positive multi-screeners also feel this way, but the remaining groups are much more sceptical.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **Social media offers valuable alternative views and information**

% who agree

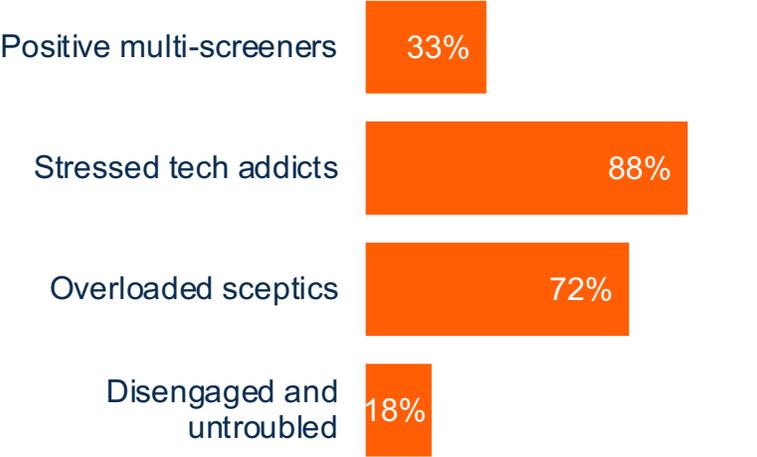


Large majorities of stressed tech addicts and overloaded sceptics agree that deep thinking has become a thing of the past.

But this view is much less common among positive multi-screeners and the disengaged and untroubled.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **“Deep thinking” has become a thing of the past**

% who agree

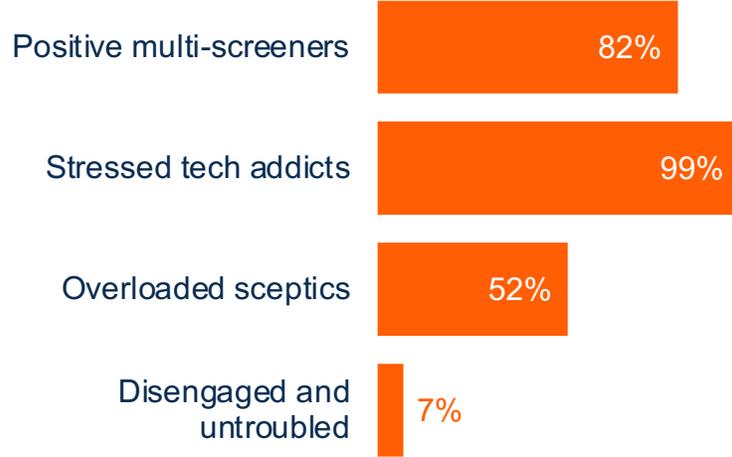


Only 7% of the disengaged and untroubled say we’re better able to question expert opinion due to greater access to information – compared with majorities of the other groups.

Stressed tech addicts are virtually united in a belief that this is the case.

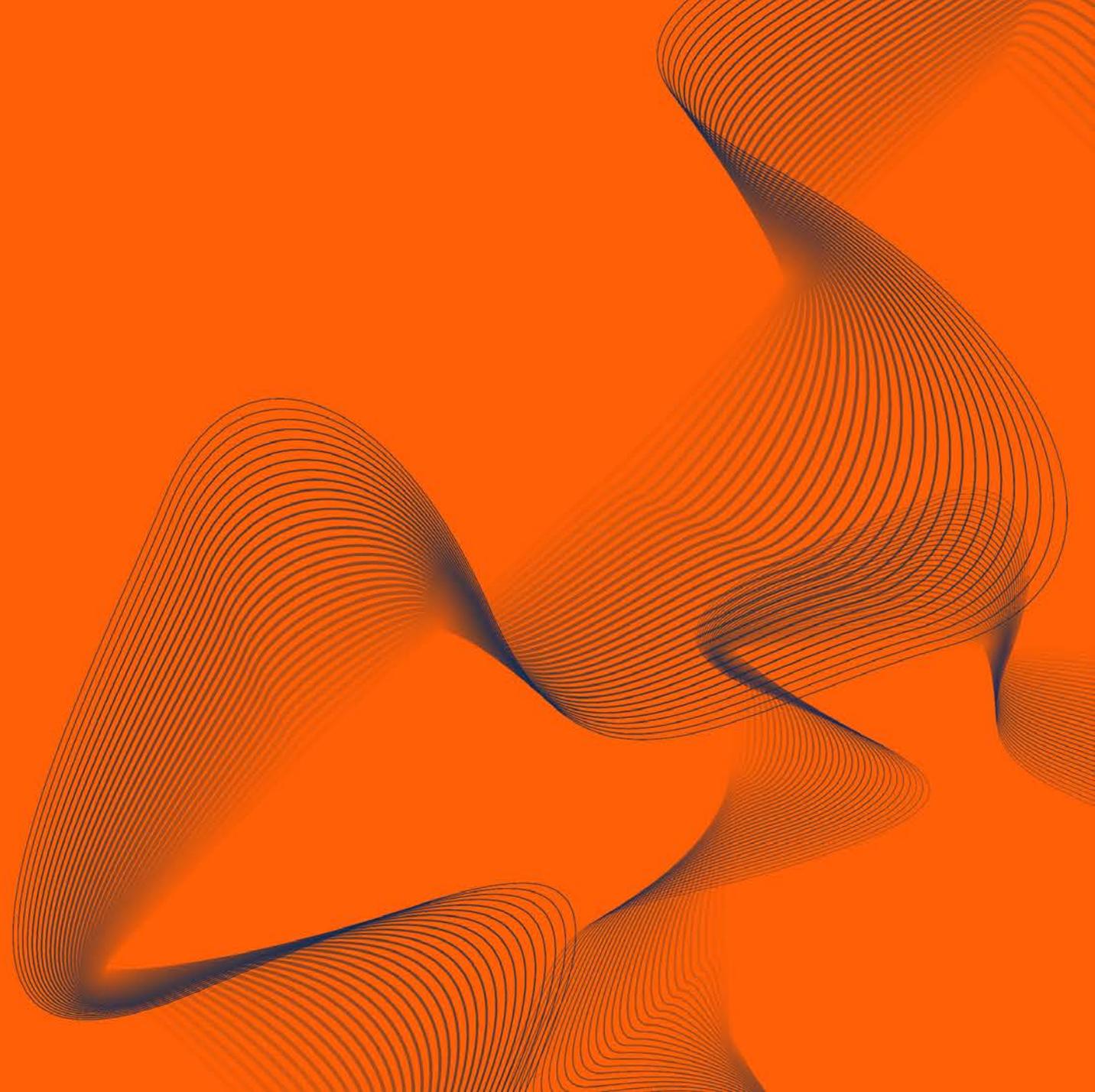
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **Greater access to information, such as through the Internet, means that people are better able to question the views of experts**

% who agree



Base: 2.093 UK adults aged 18+, interviewed 24-26 Sept 2021

Technical details



Technical details

Savanta ComRes surveyed 2,093 UK adults aged 18+ online between 24 and 26 September 2021. Data were weighted to be representative of UK adults by age, gender, region and social grade. Savanta ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. Data tables are available at www.comresglobal.com

Survey items identified for segmentation

Variable Name	Survey question	
SHEER	The sheer amount of information available to us today is negatively affecting people's attention spans	→
SWITCH	Switching our attention between social media, smartphones, tablets as well as TV, radio, or other media harms our ability to complete simple tasks	
DISTRACT	People are more distracted nowadays than in the past, due to the rise of the internet, social media and on demand video	→
NSCOMP	We are living through a time where there is non-stop competition for our attention, from TV, news, social media platforms, and other information outlets	
SOCMED1	Social media offers valuable alternative views and information which I can't get from other media sources like television, radio, or the news	→
SOCMED2	Using social media alongside other forms of entertainment like TV or radio enhances my enjoyment by connecting me with others	
DTHINK	"Deep thinking" has become a thing of the past	→
RUIN	Technology companies and social media platforms are ruining the attention spans of young people and governments should take control to prevent this	
QUESTION	Greater access to information, such as through the Internet, means that people are better able to question the views of experts	→

Overloaded with information

Attention span problems

Engagement with social media a good thing

Concerned about minds and mentalities

Access to information

The above items were recoded into binary outcomes where 1 = negative score (eg not overloaded) and 2 = positive score (e.g. overloaded). Latent Class Models were fitted in Mplus, version 8.3.

**THE
POLICY
INSTITUTE**

**THE CENTRE FOR
ATTENTION STUDIES**

Connect with us

 [@policyatkings](https://twitter.com/policyatkings)  kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute

 attentionstudies.org