CROWD REACT MEDIA

A Division of Harker Bos Group

ANNUAL RESEARCH REPORT

CROWD REACT MEDIA · THIRD EDITION

STATE OF MEDIA 2026.

A three-year study of how American adults spend their attention.

Base: 1,094 U.S. adults 18+ Survey
fielded March–April 2026

CUT THROUGH
THE NOISE.

WELCOME

A letter from the the research desk.

Katie Miller

VP of Strategy
Crowd React Media
A Division of Harker Bos Group

Crowd React Media is a media research and strategy company, and a division of Harker Bos Group. We help radio stations, broadcasters, media companies, and advertisers make smarter decisions about where audiences are, what they want, and how to reach them. The *State of Media* report is one of the ways we put our research to work for an industry we genuinely care about.

This is our **third year** conducting this study, and that matters more than it might seem. A single year of data tells you where things are. Two years tells you something moved. Three years tells you whether that movement is a trend, a correction, or a coincidence. The 2026 *State of Media* is the first edition of this report where we can say with real confidence that we are **watching a pattern unfold** , not just documenting a moment.

What we found this year is more nuanced than the headlines would have you believe. Legacy media is holding on in ways that surprise even us. Digital habits are softening in ways the platforms haven't fully acknowledged yet. Younger audiences are behaving in ways that challenge almost every assumption the industry has made about them.

We've tried to write a report that respects your intelligence and your time. We have opinions. We share them. We also show our work, so you can disagree with our conclusions and draw your own.

Thank you for reading. There's a lot in here worth your time.

How to read this report.

SAMPLE

1,094

U.S. adults 18+ surveyed March–April 2026. Third consecutive year of fielding.

COVERAGE

10

Media types: Cable/Satellite TV, Streaming TV, Radio, Music Streaming, Podcasts, News, Social Media, YouTube, Video Games. Plus a new section on AI.

LENS

3 yrs

Year-over-year trending on every platform. Demographic breakouts by age (18–34, 35–54, 55+) and gender.

MEDIA CUME

The combined percentage of adults who engage with a media type frequently, occasionally, or rarely in a typical week. **Total reach** — the widest possible audience estimate.

CONVERSION

The share of a platform's cume audience that engages *frequently* — three to five days a week. Frequent users ÷ total cume. **Loyalty, advertiser value, and habit.**

01

PART ONE · EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

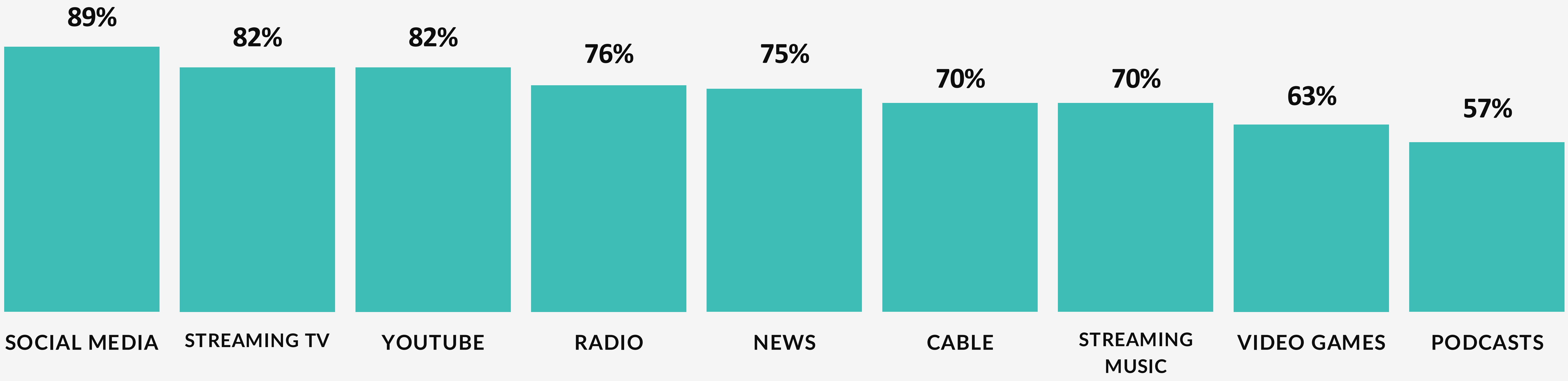
CURRENT STATE OF MEDIA IN 2026.

Something shifted this year, and the numbers know it before the headlines do.

2026 WEEKLY MEDIA CUME

Media is a near-universal presence in American life.

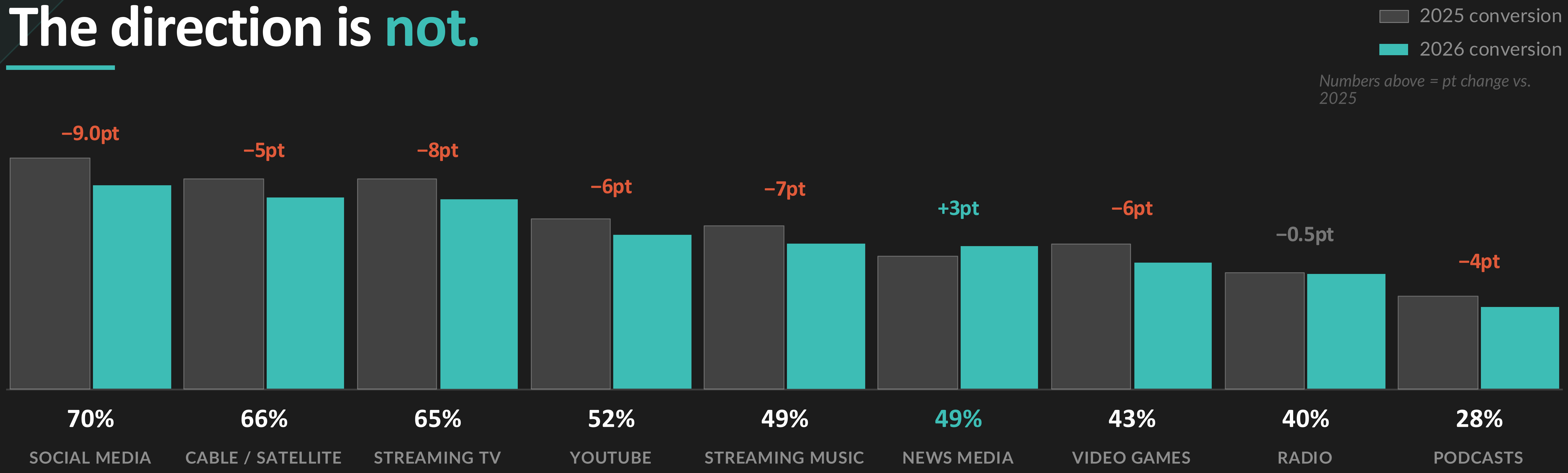
% of U.S. adults engaging (frequent + occasional + rarely) in a typical week, 2026



Not a single platform fell below 50%. The reach story remains intact across every major media format. **But cume only tells you who showed up. It doesn't tell you whether they stayed.**

CONVERSION RATE · 2025 → 2026 CHANGE

The hierarchy is familiar. The direction is not.



8 of 9 platforms lost conversion frequency in 2026. **Social Media led the drop at −9pt** , with Streaming TV (−8pt) and Music Streaming (−7pt) close behind. News Media was the only platform to gain (+3pt). Radio held nearly flat (−0.5pt).

OUR HONEST READ

Audiences are tired.

Not of media itself, but of a specific version of it. The version where every platform competes for every second of attention, where the algorithm decides what's next, where the feed is infinite and the quality is uneven and the whole experience quietly exhausts you without your realizing it.

There is a growing **anti-algorithm sentiment** visible in consumer behavior, not ideological, but behavioral. People are becoming aware that platforms are trying to shape and prolong their attention at all times. That awareness creates distance where there used to be immersion.

The opportunity is not in chasing the algorithm. It is in being the thing people choose when they are tired of being chosen for.

BEHAVIORAL SIGNAL · 1

Cable's cume bounced back.

After two years of decline, cable recovered to 70% cume. Sometimes people don't want to choose — they want something to already be on.

BEHAVIORAL SIGNAL · 2

Radio session length maintained share for three years.

In a media landscape defined by softening habits, radio's stability is a competitive advantage — not a consolation prize.

BEHAVIORAL SIGNAL · 3

18–34s value local radio more than 55+ do.

The audience the industry most wants to grow is the one most motivated by exactly what local radio does best.

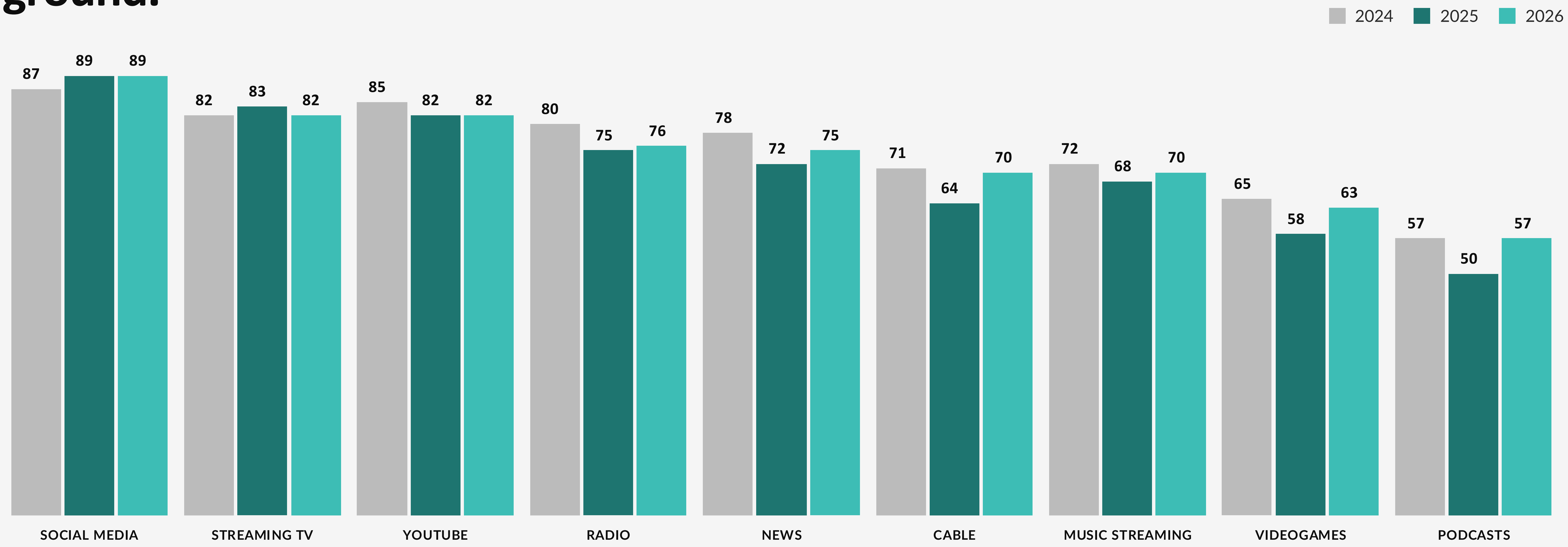
PART TWO · THREE YEARS OF DATA

WHEN THE FEED ISN’T ENOUGH.

The audience widened. The habit narrowed. That pattern deserves a name — we're calling it *habit softening*.

THREE-YEAR CUME · 2024 → 2026

Cumes bounced. Legacy formats held their ground.



2024 · THE PEAK

Nearly every platform posted its highest cume of the three-year study. Pandemic-era surge had not fully receded.

2025 · THE TROUGH

Cumes dropped across the board. Frequent use fell sharper than occasional use — post-pandemic recalibration.

2026 · PARTIAL RECOVERY, WITH A TWIST

Cumes bounced on cable, radio, news, podcasts. But conversion kept sliding almost everywhere.

A WORKING THEORY

Feed **dilution.**

The gradual degradation of content quality across algorithmically driven platforms that makes the experience of scrolling feel less rewarding over time, even as the volume of content keeps rising.

01 AI-generated content

A whiff of AI fabrication turns off a substantial portion of users — even when the content is genuine. Platforms hoped tastes would adapt. They aren't. They're retreating.

02 Human-generated feed dilution

Creators grinding against algorithmic pressure, producing at volumes they cannot sustain at quality. The creator economy made enormous amounts of content, not enormous amounts of *good* content.

03 Creator burnout

The platforms that grew fastest by cultivating creator ecosystems now run on creators producing more with perceptibly less creative energy. Audiences feel this even when they can't name it.

WHY LEGACY FORMATS HELD

Constraints used to be weaknesses. Now they're quality signals.

Radio doesn't have an algorithm. Cable news has a schedule. Local news has a geography. The floor of those formats is set by **structural reality, not editorial will.**

You cannot game a radio daypart. You cannot flood a local newscast with AI content. Sometimes the best thing about a format is that it requires nothing from you.

AN ERA IS ENDING

The period from 2015 to 2023 was defined by explosive growth, platform dependency, and the assumption engagement would keep compounding.

That era appears to be closing.

What comes next looks less like expansion and more like consolidation, with platforms working to earn back the trust they grew too fast to maintain.

PART THREE · A PLAYBOOK FOR MEDIA OPERATORS

THE PLATFORM TRAP.

The pressure to be everywhere at once is a warning for every legacy media organization. The feed isn't the product. You are.

SIX RULES FOR THE PLATFORM-TRAPPED

Concentrate creative energy on what you do better than anyone.

01 · FEED THE MOTHERSHIP

Your flagship is the asset.

Every piece of platform content should serve the morning show, the newscast, the flagship — not compete with it for your team's creative energy.

02 · CLIP, DON'T CREATE

Your best content already exists.

A great interview moment is a YouTube short. A strong opinion is a post. Redistribute. Don't manufacture new content from scratch for every platform.

03 · PICK TWO, DO THEM WELL

Mediocre on six is worse than excellent on two.

Find where your audience actually lives and concentrate your digital investment there. Presence without purpose is just noise.

04 · CURIOSITY, NOT COMPLETION

Tease — don't deliver.

If someone can get everything they need from your TikTok, they have no reason to find your station. Make the mothership irresistible.

05 · BRING THE THREAD HOME

Don't build for someone else’s platform.

A funny Instagram with nothing to do with your programming is marketing for Instagram. Discovery is the goal. Loyalty lives at home.

06 · SIGNAL DEPTH

Make people feel the substance is there.

Short-form doesn't have to deliver expertise, access, and production quality — but it should make people feel they exist. Attract those tired of the algorithm.

The organizations that will be standing in five years are the ones that used every platform as an invitation in, not a destination of its own.

VERTICAL DEEP-DIVE · 01 OF 09

CABLE / SATELLITE TV.

Nobody told cable it was supposed to keep dying.

CABLE / SATELLITE TV

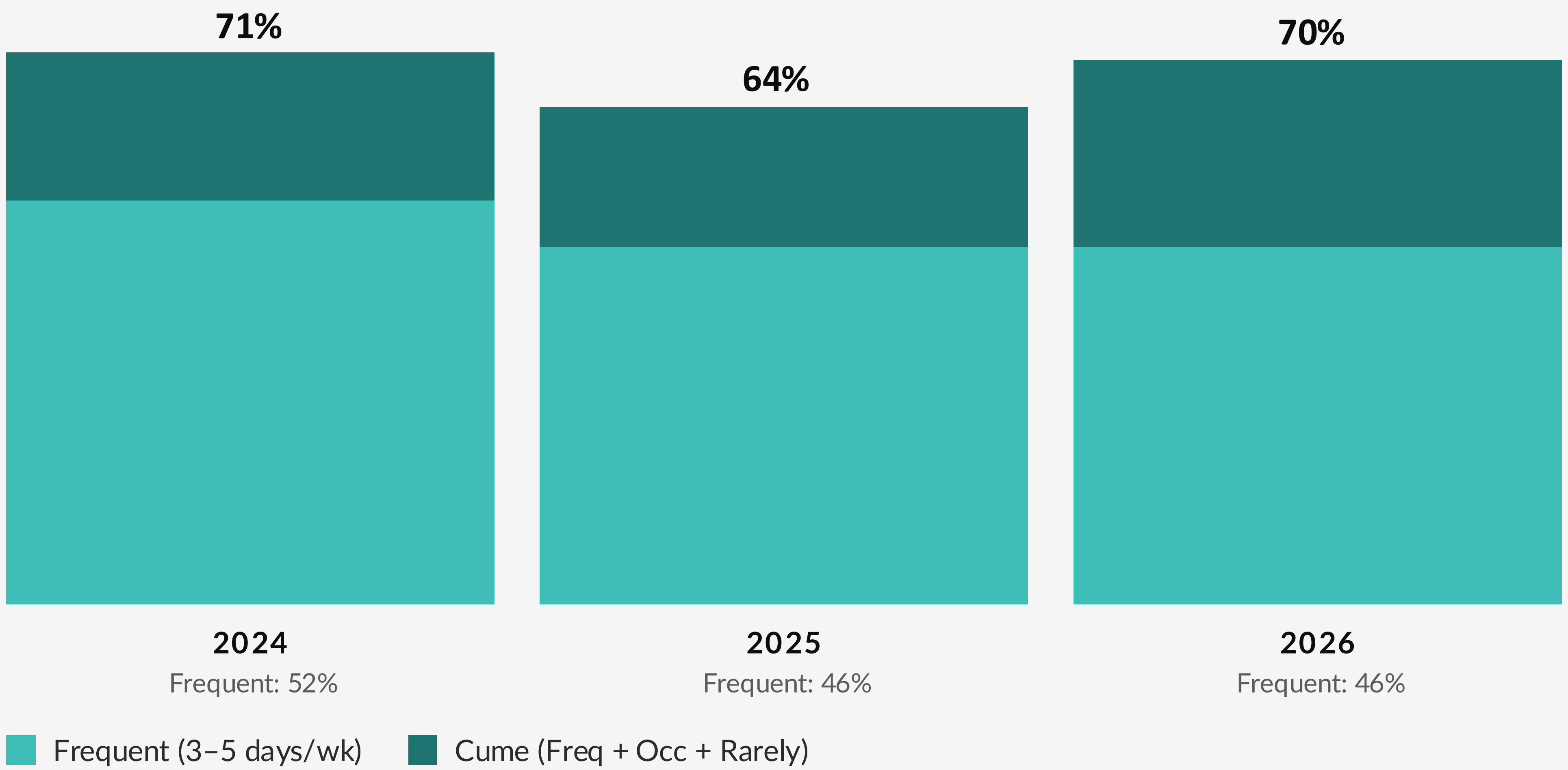
After a rough 2025, cable came back.

Total audience returned to 70%, nearly matching 2024 levels. The streaming landscape has gotten harder to navigate — more services, more paywalls, more content removed without warning. Against that backdrop, the experience of turning on cable and having something already there starts to look less like a limitation and more like a feature.

2026 CUME

61% of American adults watch cable or satellite TV at least occasionally — up from 55% in 2025.

THREE-YEAR CUME & FREQUENCY TREND



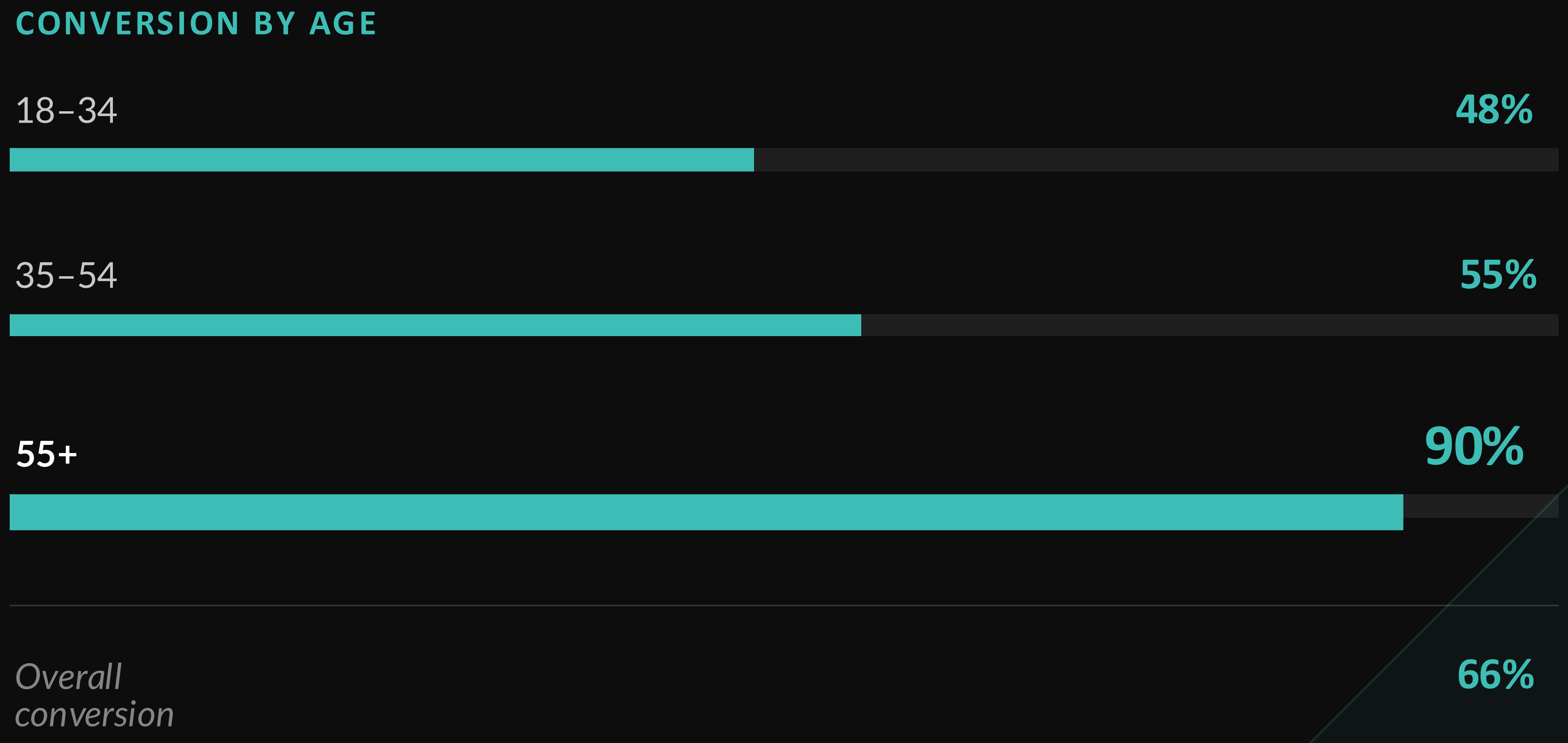
The recovery is entirely in occasional viewers returning. Cable's habitual core didn't grow, but it didn't shrink either.

CABLE CONVERSION BY AGE

For older viewers, cable isn’t *one* option. It's just television.

THE MOST LOYAL AUDIENCE IN THE STUDY

55+ cable viewers convert at nearly 90% — the most habitually loyal audience of any demographic on any platform in this report.



CABLE'S MOST DEFENSIBLE ASSET

Local news is the 88% answer.

88% of cable viewers watch local news content, a figure that holds nearly flat across every age group and gender. That near-universality is remarkable in a fragmented media landscape, and it speaks to something cable does that streaming genuinely struggles to replicate.

National news shows a meaningful gender gap (men 87%, women 73%) worth noting for programmers thinking about audience composition.

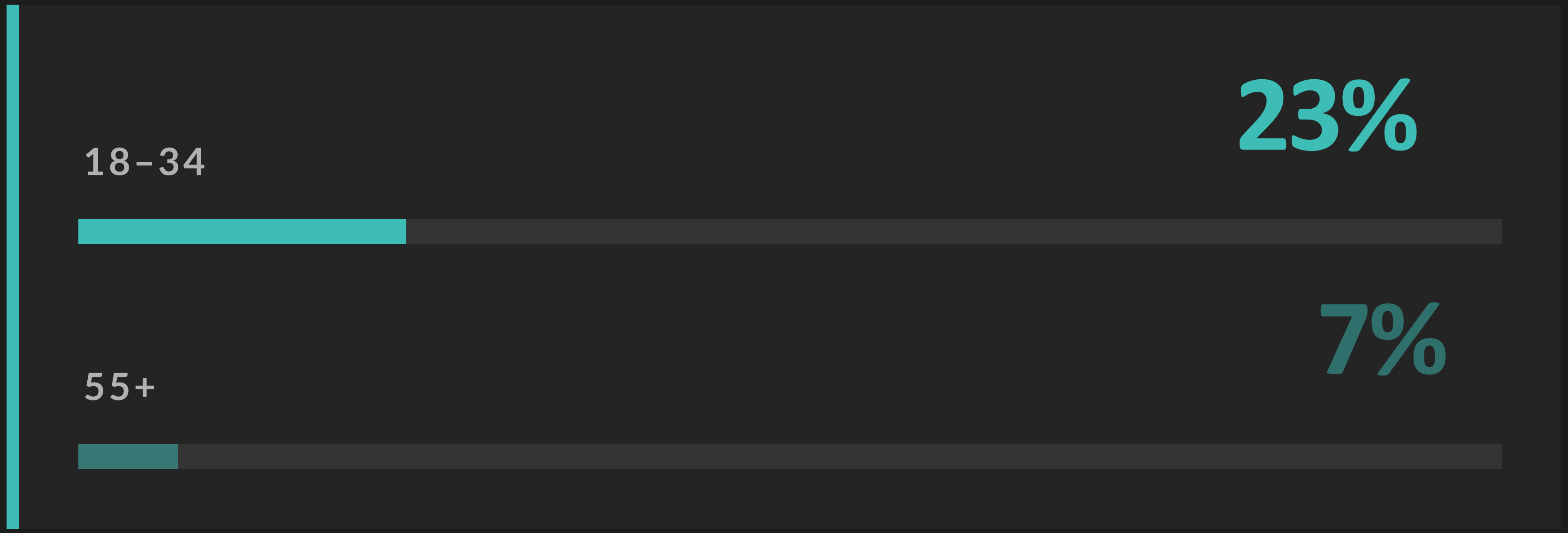
88%
of cable viewers watch local news

28%
of 18–34 watch children's programming

A FINDING WORTH ITS OWN MOMENT

Younger viewers watch Religious & Spiritual content at 3× the rate of 55+.

The conventional assumption is that older audiences drive religious media. The data says otherwise. Whether this reflects spiritual engagement or a broader definition of "spiritual" encompassing wellness, mindfulness, and self-improvement is an open question. The signal is real.



For networks and advertisers, the cable audience is more valuable than ever.

FOR CABLE NETWORKS & OPERATORS

Convert occasional viewers. Protect the local news moat.

- The audience came back driven by occasional viewers — not habitual ones. Conversion is the work of 2026 and beyond.
- Local news at 88% near-universality is your most defensible asset. Protect it and invest in it.
- Program for the 55+ core while building on-ramps for 35–54 viewers who still have cable access.
- Religious & Spiritual programming for younger adults is a legitimate opportunity the industry has missed.

FOR ADVERTISERS

A habitual, attentive, demographically predictable audience. audience.

- The 55+ viewer converting at 90% is present, attentive, and routinely there.
- Local news adjacency remains one of the most credible environments in media.
- For brands targeting parenting demos, children's cable reaches 18–34 and 35–54 households with reliability streaming can't match.
- Habitual loyalty is increasingly rare. Cable still delivers it.

STREAMING TV.

Subscription rates held.
Habits softened.

The audience is still there. They're just opening the app less often.

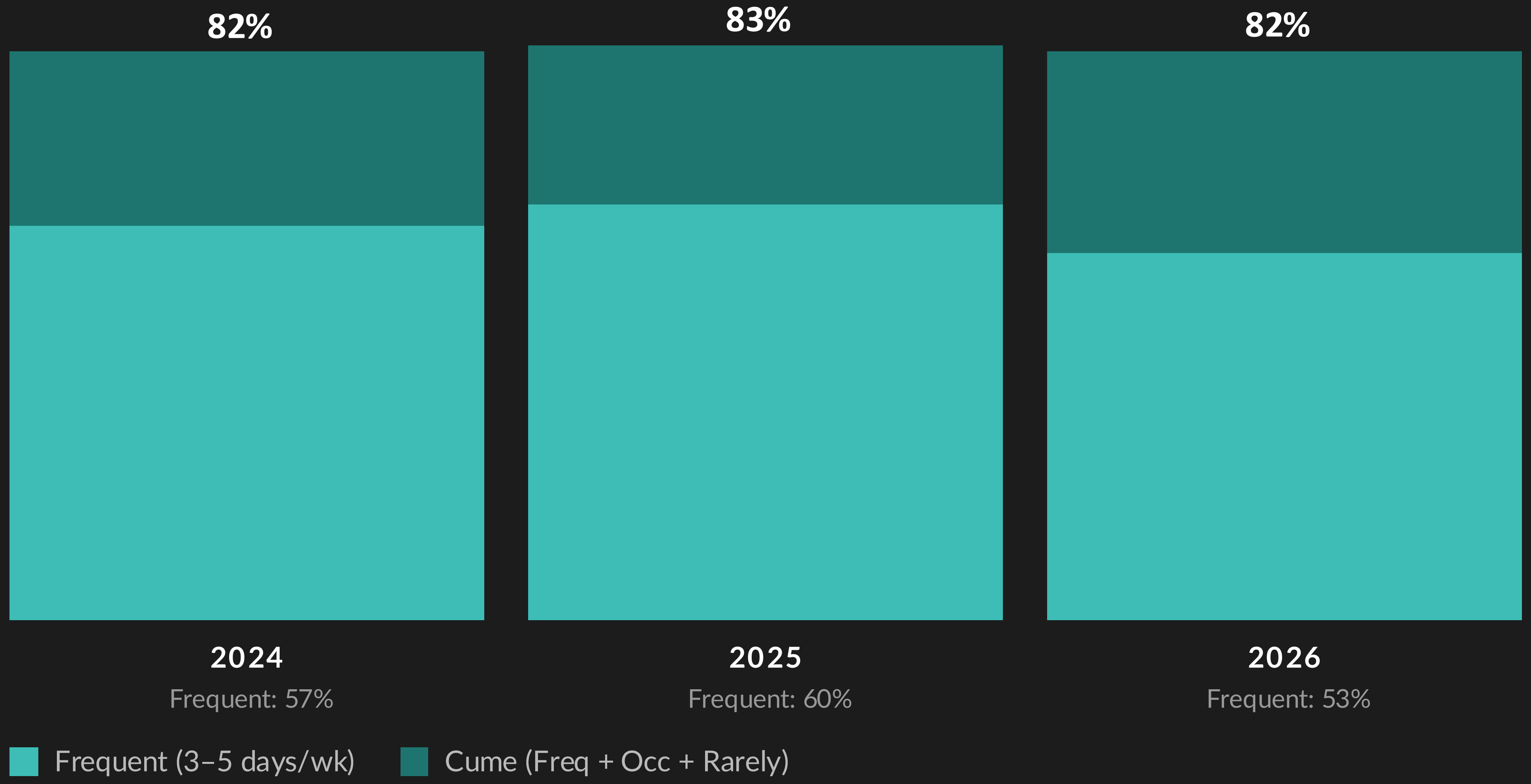
Total cume held essentially flat at 82%. Premium subscription rates sit at 83% across all age groups. People are not canceling.

What shifted is the habit. Frequent viewing dropped from 60% in 2025 to 53% in 2026 — a seven-point slide. Subscription retention and habitual engagement are two different metrics, and right now they're moving in different directions.

SUBSCRIPTION STABILITY ≠ LOYALTY

83% of streaming viewers subscribe to at least one premium service, flat across all age groups. Subscription rates held. Habits softened.

THREE-YEAR CUME & FREQUENCY TREND



CONVERSION

70%	72%	65%
2024	2025	2026 ↓

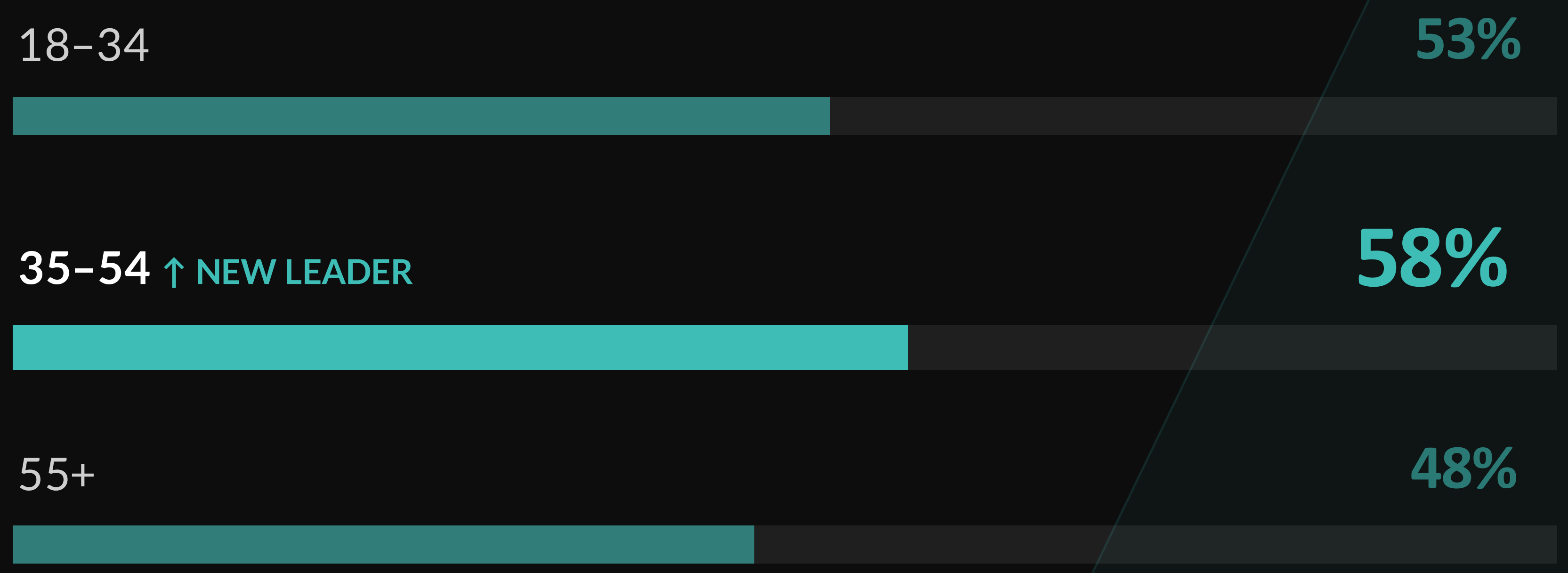
A DEMOGRAPHIC SURPRISE

For the first time: 35–54s are streaming TV's most frequent demo.

The assumption that younger adults are the engine of streaming engagement needs updating. The 35–54 viewer has settled into streaming as a genuine daily habit in a way that 18–34, with more competition for their attention across more platforms, has not.

> FREQUENCY, BY AGE
>
> **35–54 year olds are now the most frequent streaming demographic at 58%, surpassing 18–34 for the first time in this study.**

FREQUENT STREAMING USE, BY AGE



STREAMING · LOCAL NEWS

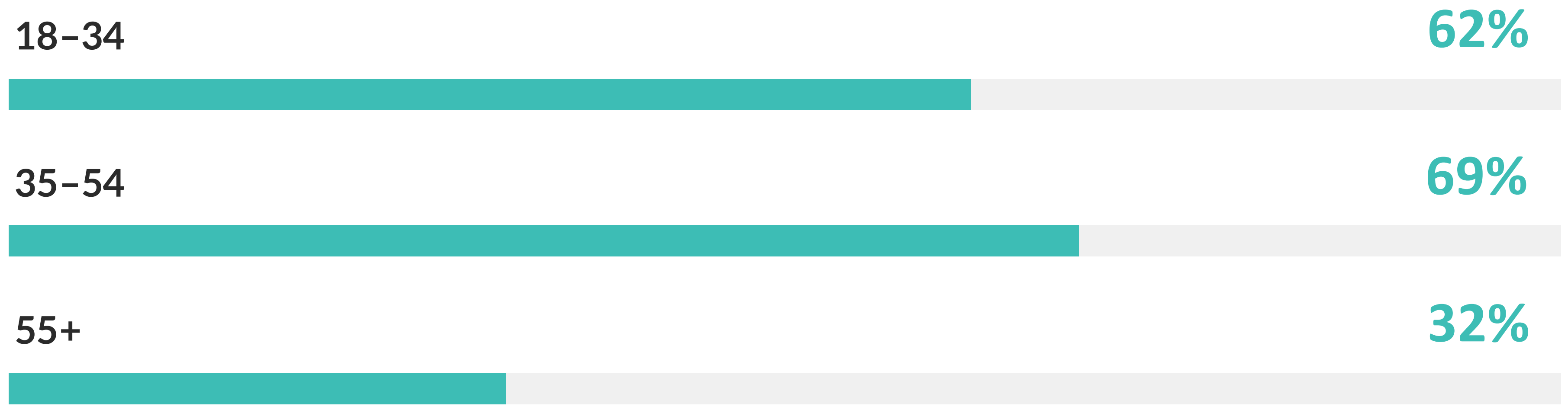
The local news habit is generational. The platform isn't.

65% of streaming viewers watch local news via streaming. But the age split is dramatic: 18–34 at 62%, 55+ at only 32%. Cable owns the 55+ local news relationship. Streaming owns the younger version of the same behavior.

KEY INSIGHT FOR MEDIA OPERATORS

The local news habit exists across generations. Where people satisfy it depends entirely on how old they are.

LOCAL NEWS VIA STREAMING · BY AGE



TOP GENRE

Entertainment · 39% frequent

55+ viewers are the most enthusiastic at 45%.

MOVIES

33% frequent · 5% never

Close to a universal streaming behavior.

Frequency is the metric. Reach numbers can hide a real problem.

FOR STREAMING PLATFORMS & BROADCASTERS

Held subscription ≠ retained audience.

- If viewers are rotating between services, revenue implications are very different from a stable base.
- Frequency reveals which platforms have genuine daily habit vs. appointment viewing.
- 35–54 is your most habitual demo right now — program for it accordingly.
- Local news streaming is a real growth opportunity, particularly with younger viewers actively looking for it.

FOR ADVERTISERS

Reach is there. Consistent presence is the variable to watch.

- Frequency of exposure determines whether a campaign lands. Habitual engagement is softening.
- 35–54 is the sweet spot — most habitual, most subscribed, most consistently present.
- Entertainment and movie adjacency deliver near-universal reach with minimal never rates.
- For local news with younger audiences, streaming is where that behavior lives, not cable.

VERTICAL DEEP-DIVE · 03 OF 09

RADIO.

Radio keeps not dying, and at some point that becomes the story.

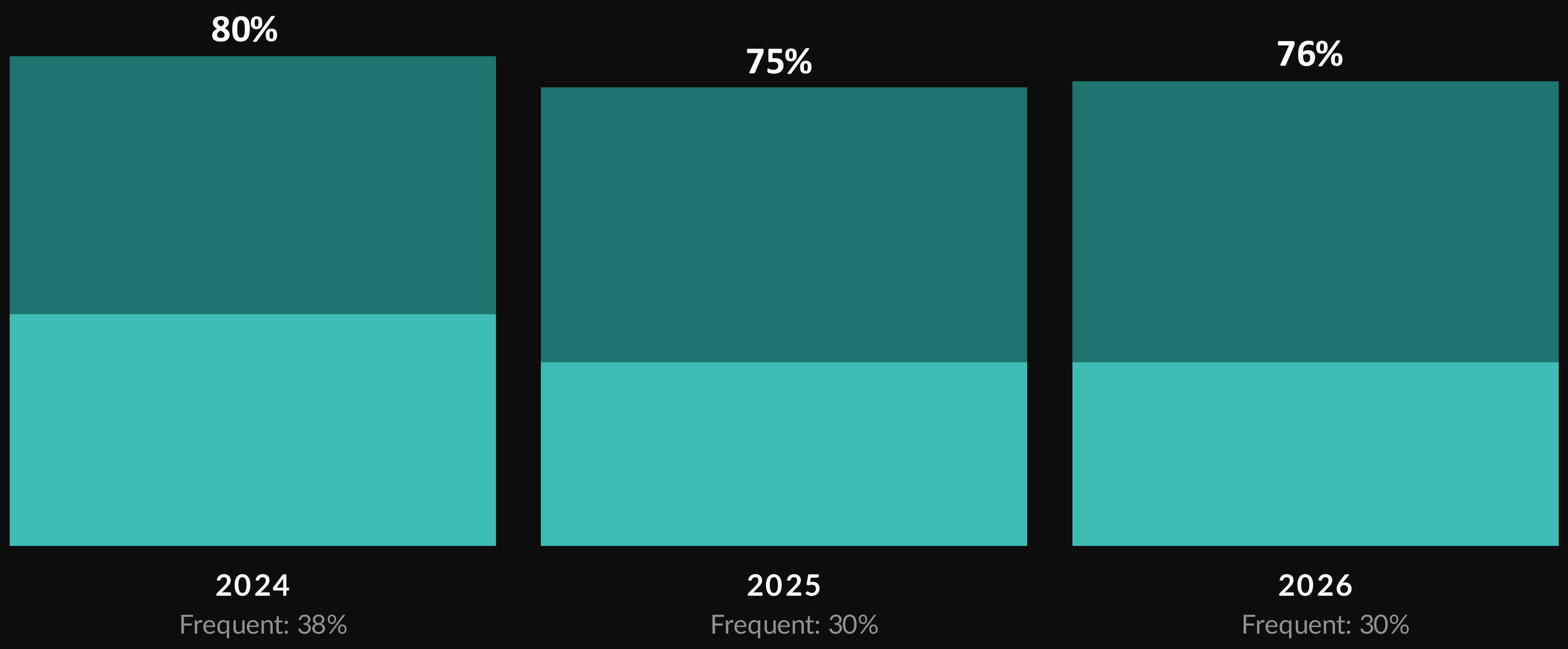
RADIO · THREE-YEAR STABILITY

Consistency is underrated as a story. Radio's stability is the story.

Cume sits at 76% in 2026, within a few points of its 2024 level. Frequent use has held at 30% for two consecutive years. Conversion remained stable as well. Session length has been essentially unchanged across all three years — 30 minutes to one hour the dominant session at roughly 40% each year.

When every other platform is trying to explain why their numbers moved, radio gets to explain why its numbers didn't.

THREE-YEAR FREQUENCY TREND



THREE YEARS OF SESSION-LENGTH STABILITY

Session length has held flat for three consecutive years: 30 minutes to one hour to one hour at roughly 40% each year. When people listen, they stay.

RADIO · DAYPART

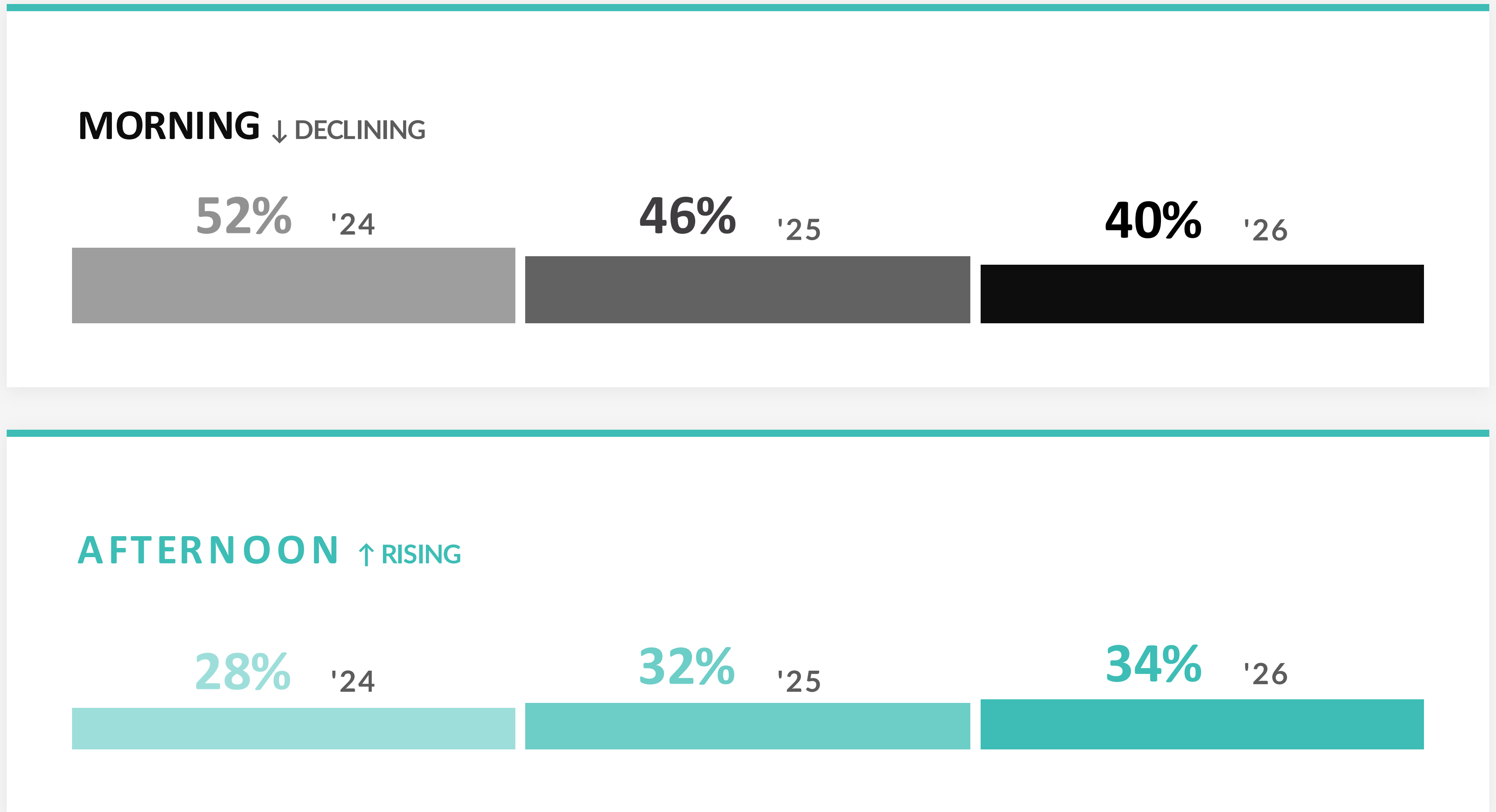
Afternoon is radio's rising daypart.

Morning has been radio's identity for decades. Morning is sliding as a primary listening time. Afternoon has been climbing steadily.

The afternoon drive audience is getting smaller in raw numbers but more committed — cume is down slightly while primary daypart designation is up. The people who are there in the afternoon are *really* there. That's a quality signal, not just a quantity one.

> WORKING / EXERCISING ARE BACK
>
> **Working and exercising both dipped in 2025 and bounced back in 2026. Working 21% → 30%, exercising 25% → 31%. The commute and the gym are back as radio contexts.**

PRIMARY DAYPART · 2024 → 2026



However you get to radio, you're still a **radio listener.**

Among 18–34, combined digital access (mobile + desktop + smart speaker) **exceeds traditional AM/FM** as a listening surface.

ALL LISTENERS

AM/FM	76%
Mobile / Tablet	31%
Desktop Streaming	27%
SiriusXM	24%
Smart Speaker	15%

AMONG 18–34 LISTENERS

AM/FM	70%
Mobile / Tablet	45%
Desktop Streaming	36%
Smart Speaker	22%

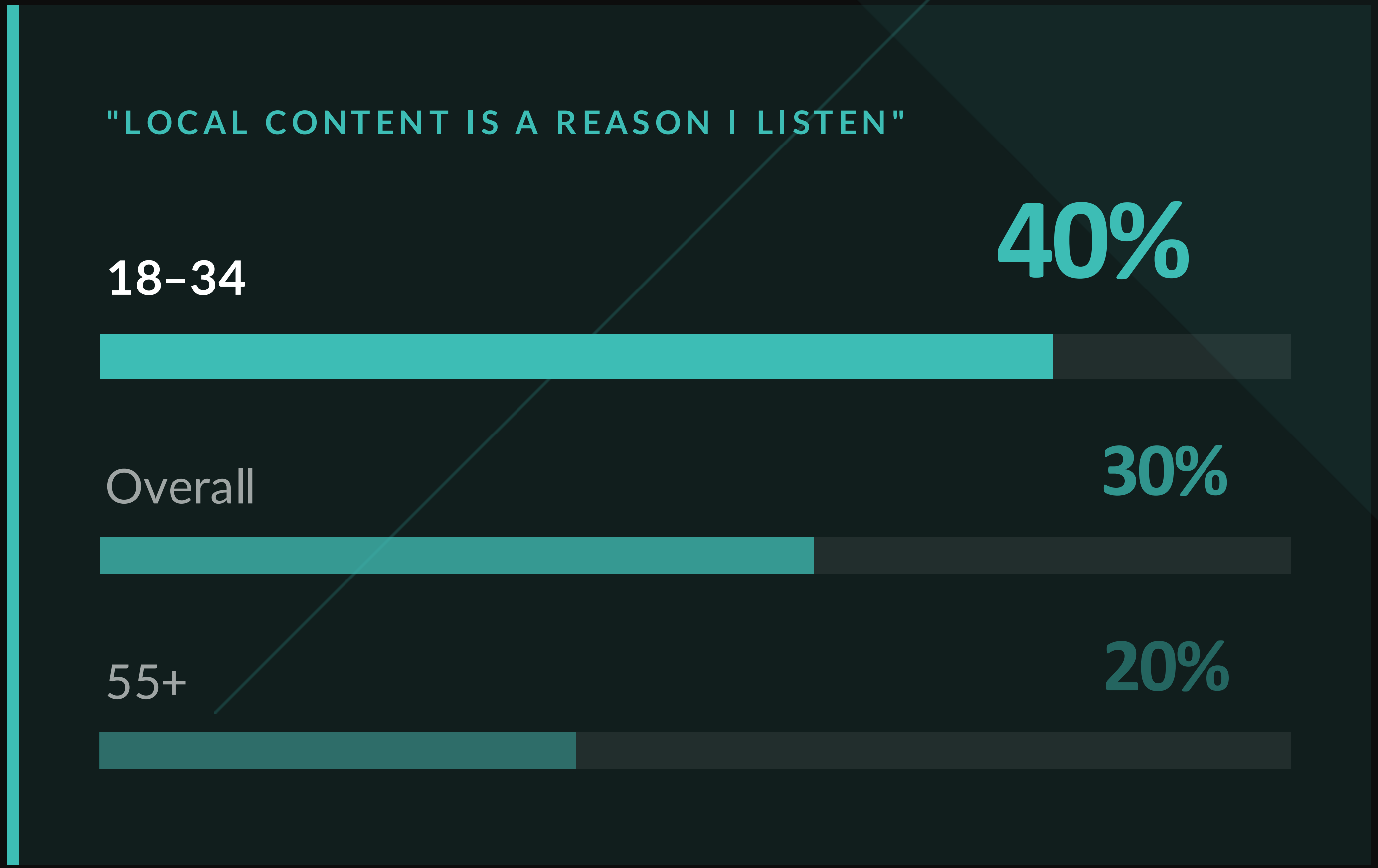
A 25-year-old listening to a local morning show through a phone app is a radio listener. The listener. The listening occasion is the thing worth protecting, not the transmission method. method.

RADIO · THE COUNTERINTUITIVE FINDING

Younger listeners value local radio content more than older ones do.

When asked *why they listen*, 30% of listeners overall cite local content and events. Among 18–34 that number jumps to 40%. Among 55+ it falls to 20%.

That is the opposite of what most people in this industry would predict — and it's one of the most actionable findings in this report. **The audience the industry most wants to grow is also the audience most motivated by exactly what local radio does best.**



NEWS/TALK RADIO

The audience wants balance and breaking news.

70% prefer a **mix of topics** over a specific focus. 55% want a blend of commentary and hard news. 67% want a mix of agreement and disagreement with the host.

Caveat worth mentioning: people say they want balance and then eat fast food every day. Take it as directional.

RADIO'S CLEAREST EDGE

42% strongly agree they tune in for breaking news, the highest-rated motivation in the category. Real-time is radio's edge that no podcast can replicate.

18–34 PREFERENCES

Specific topics over mix · 39%

Debate-style pair format · 36%

Cultural content interest · 21% (vs 1% for 55+)

55+ PREFERENCES

Single host with guests/callers · 51%

Mix of topics · 80%

Global and local content lean · strong

Younger News/Talk Audiences

18–34 News/Talk listeners are double-dipping getting long-form debate from YouTube and turning to radio when something breaks. That's an audience worth understanding as supplemental rather than lost.

Stability is your story. Tell it loudly.

FOR RADIO STATIONS

Lead with consistency. Own breaking news. Court the under-35.

- In a year of softening habits, radio's core metrics held. Make this front-and-center in every sales conversation.
- Afternoon daypart is undervalued relative to its audience loyalty.
- Local content finding among 18–34 is perhaps the most important data point in this section.
- For News/Talk, breaking news positioning is your clearest point of differentiation from podcast competition.

FOR ADVERTISERS

A habitual, session-committed audience in consistent contexts.

- 30-minute-plus session norm — your message has time to land.
- 18–34 mobile listening at 45% is a digitally-native listener who chose to be there.
- News/Talk adjacency reaches a high-info, high-engagement, male-skewing audience.
- 40% of younger listeners cite local content as a motivation — alignment between audience and local-brand interest.

VERTICAL DEEP-DIVE · 04 OF 09

MUSIC STREAMING.

Spotify turns 20 this year. The category it created is shifting.

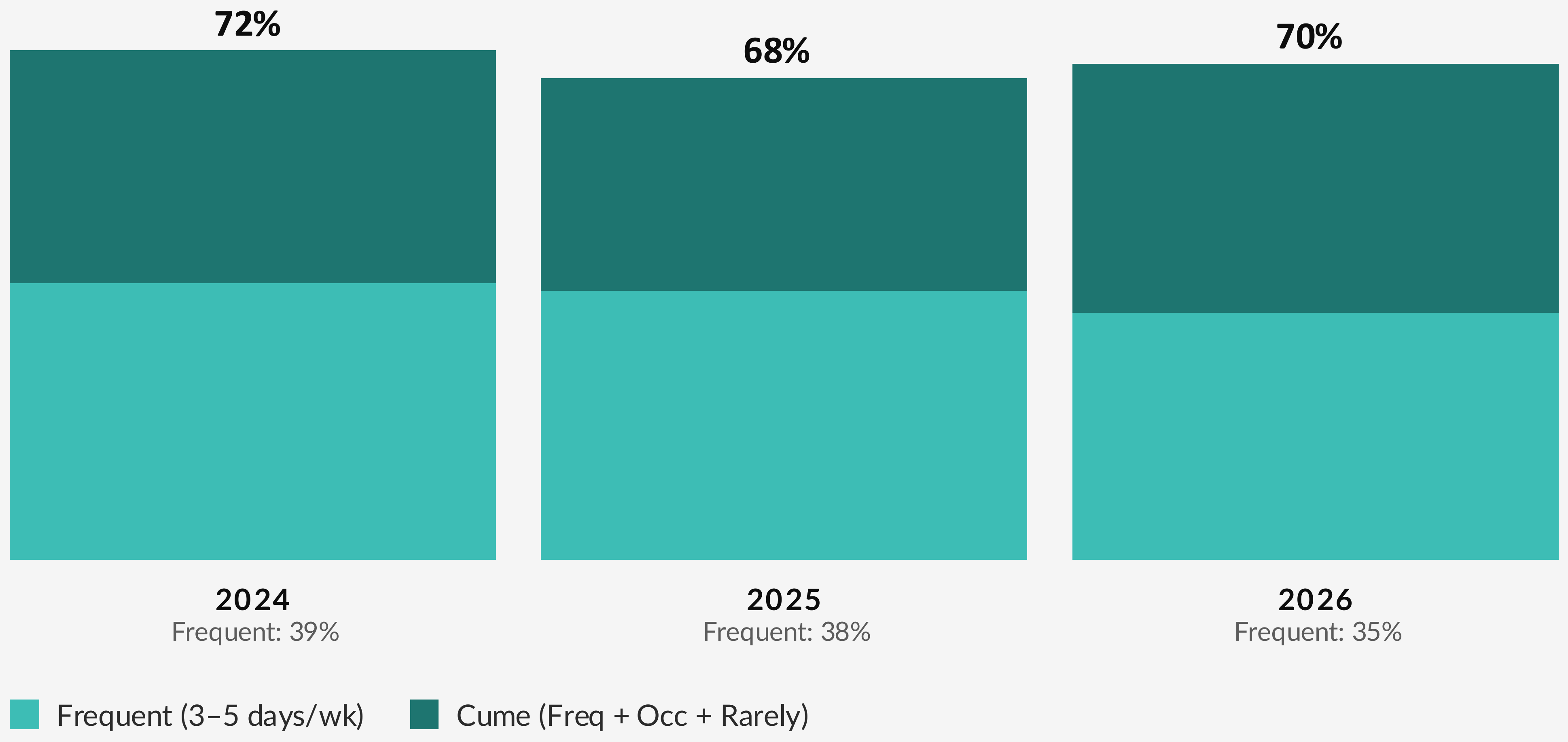
MUSIC STREAMING

Reach is stable. The habit is softening.

Cume has held at around 70% across all three years. But frequent use has declined slightly every year, 39% in 2024, 38% in 2025, 35% in 2026. Conversion dropped from 56% to 50%.

> A REAL GENERATIONAL CEILING
>
> **55+ cume for music streaming is only 50% — one of the thinnest demographic footprints of any age group on any platform in this study.**

THREE-YEAR CUME & FREQUENCY TREND



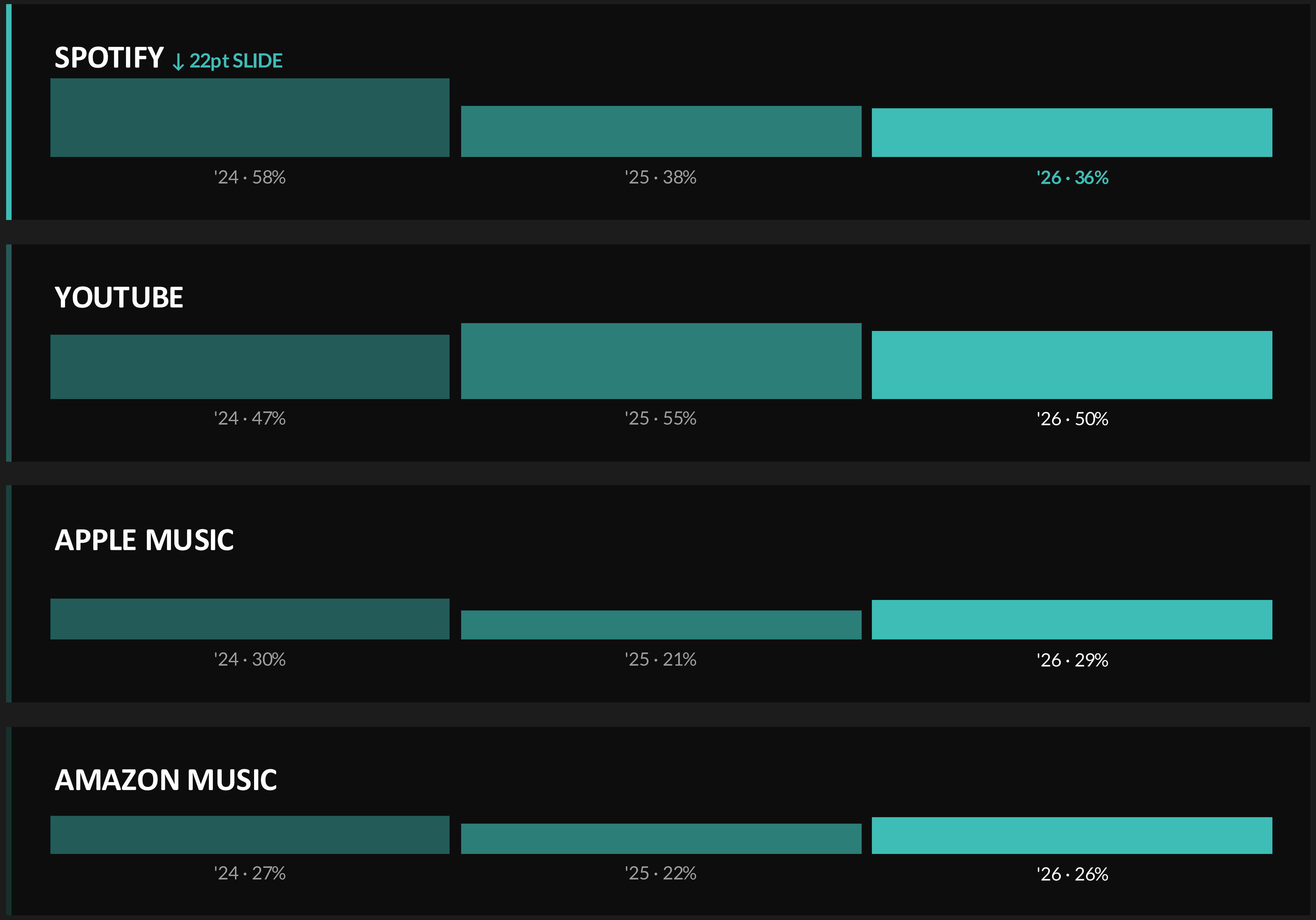
MUSIC STREAMING · WEEKLY PLATFORM USAGE

In its 20th year, the platform that invented the category is losing the weekly habit war.

Usage and habit are different questions. Spotify's weekly usage among music streamers has slid from 58% in 2024 to 36% in 2026 — a **22-point drop** in three years.

YouTube Music leads on habitual engagement among its users at 63% frequent — extracting more loyalty from a smaller base. The platforms people use most often are not always the ones with the most users.

WEEKLY USAGE AMONG MUSIC STREAMERS



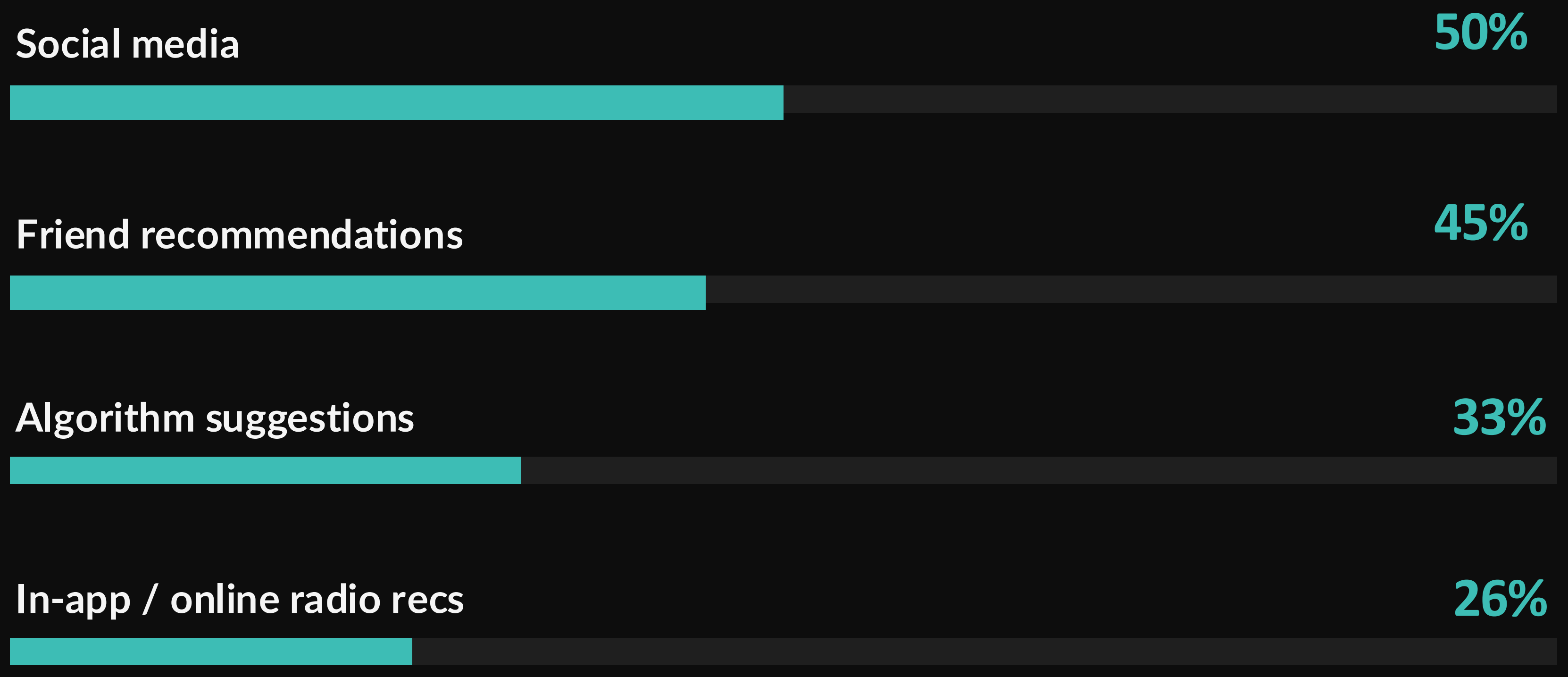
MUSIC · DISCOVERY

Social has overtaken word of mouth.

50% of music streamers cite social media as their top discovery method, edging out friend recommendations at 45%. Among 18–34 the two channels are essentially tied at 57% and 55%.

> FOR YOUNGER AUDIENCES
>
> **Social and friends work together, not against each other. Older audiences have consolidated more around social as their primary external signal.**

DISCOVERY CHANNELS FOR NEW MUSIC



26% of music streamers discover new music through in-app radio features. Algorithmic curation is still curation is still introducing listeners to artists they wouldn't have found on their own.

VERTICAL DEEP-DIVE · 05 OF 09

PODCASTS.

The audience grew. The habit shifted.

PODCASTS · THREE-YEAR CONVERSION

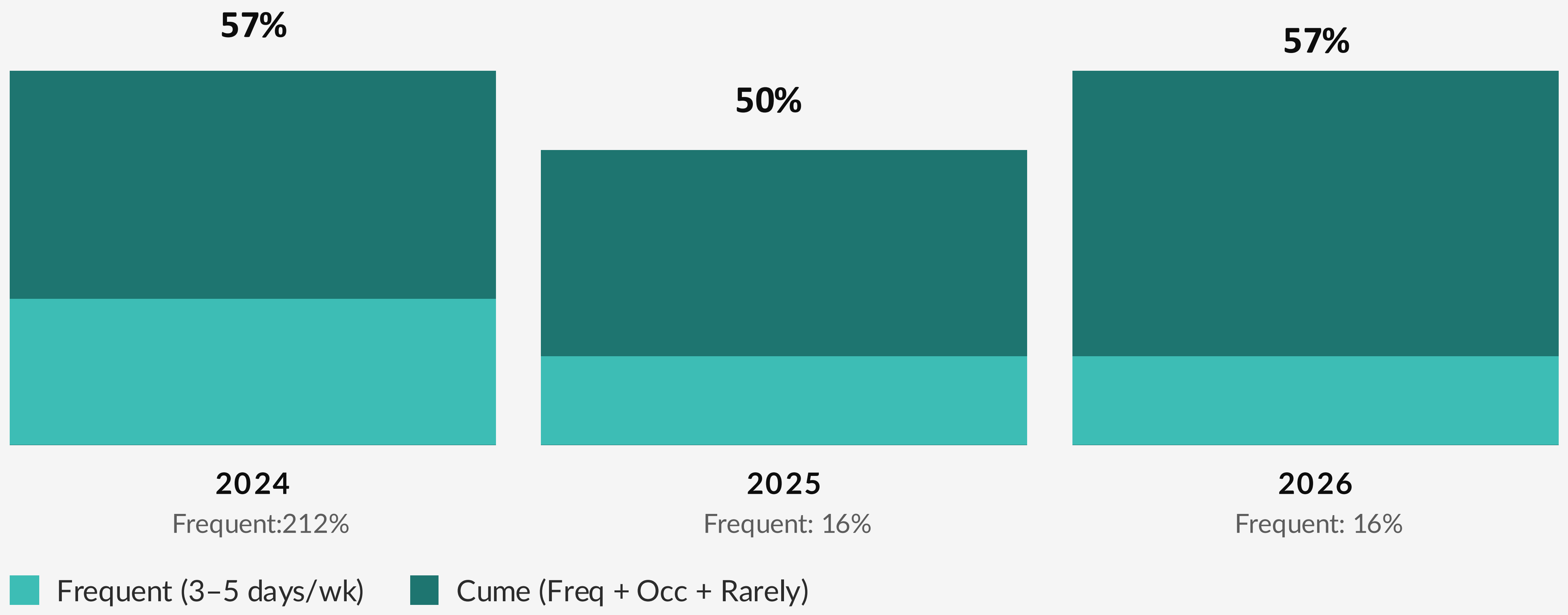
More people are sampling. Fewer have made it a habit.

Cume bounced back to 57% after sliding to 50% in 2025. But frequent listening has held flat at 16% for two consecutive years while the occasional audience grew. As the audience widens, it also grows shallower.

A THREE-YEAR DECLINE

Conversion has declined every year for three years — 37% → 32% → 28%. The audience is growing. The habit is not.

THREE-YEAR CUME & FREQUENCY TREND



Podcasting is overwhelmingly a companion medium.

DOING SOMETHING ELSE

74%

of podcast listeners are doing something else while they listen. Only 26% give a podcast their full attention.

AMONG 18–34

19%

give a podcast full attention. The format works in the margins of other activities — cooking, driving, exercising.

PREFERRED LENGTH

75%

want episodes 15 minutes – 1 hour. Long-form podcasts dominate cultural conversation, not actual listening.

CURATED ROTATION

57% listen to 2–3 different podcasts per week. 23% stick to just one. Listeners find shows they trust and return to them.

DISCOVERY

62% discover podcasts via social media (73% for 18–34). YouTube is the second discovery path at 51%. Word of mouth is at just 16%. The format works against organic sharing.

PODCAST ADVERTISING

Host credibility is not a nice-to-have. It is the product.

When asked about their response to ads that are not read by the host, 24% would skip the ad, 27% would **turn off the podcast entirely** , and 36% skip most ads regardless of format.

> PUT THIS ON THE WALL OF EVERY SALES TEAM
>
> **51% of podcast listeners take active negative action when ads are not host-read.**

RESPONSE TO NON-HOST-READ ADS

Turn off the podcast entirely	27%
Skip the ad specifically	24%
Skip most ads regardless	36%

"Learning and self-improvement" was the dominant theme in podcast open-ended responses. Audiences choose podcasts when they want to get something out of their media time — not just fill it.

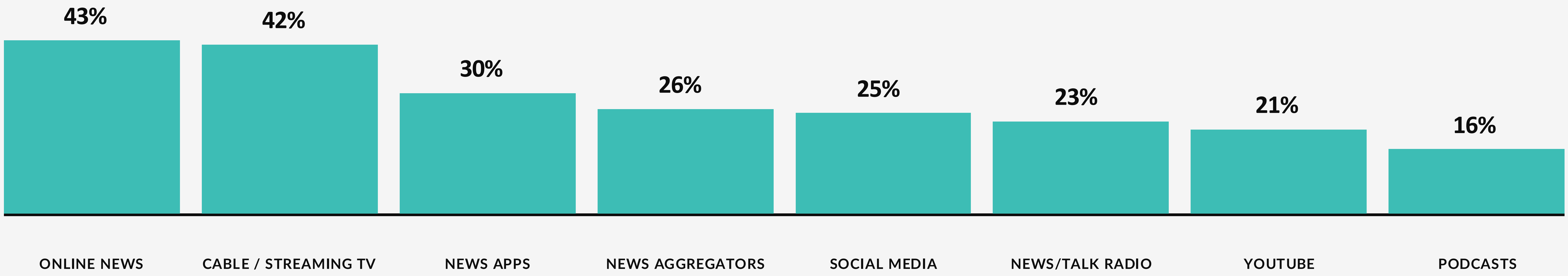
VERTICAL DEEP-DIVE · 06 OF 09

NEWS MEDIA.

News in 2026 is not a single platform or behavior. It is something people assemble across the day.

No single platform owns the news habit.

% who use each source **frequently**. Audiences build multi-source news diets across the day, moving between formats as context and time allow.



FORMAT PREFERENCE

57% prefer to *watch* the news (63% for 55+). For news platforms, video is the primary product regardless of the device.

TIME OF DAY

Two clear peaks — Morning at 56%, Evening at 49% overall (63% for 55+). Program and publish to these windows.

NEWS · ACTIVE VS. PASSIVE CONSUMPTION

For younger audiences, the news finds them.

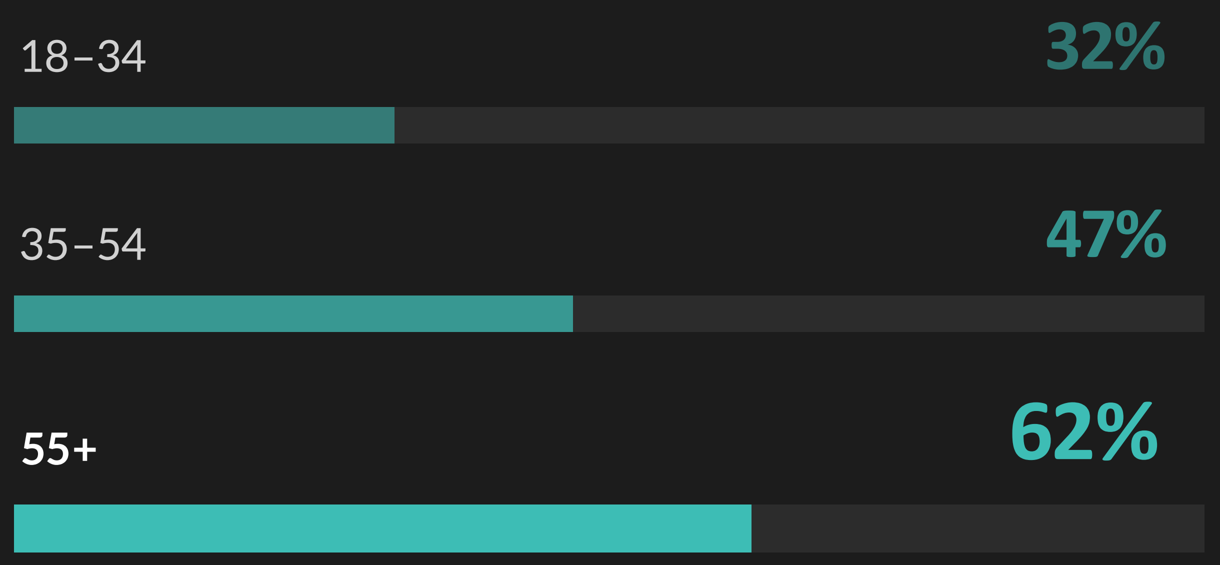
41% of news consumers actively seek out news. 34% come across it passively while consuming other media. Among 18–34, that passive number jumps to 48% — approaching a majority.

An audience whose primary news experience is algorithmically surfaced is an audience whose understanding of current events is shaped by whatever the platform decided was worth showing them that day.

THE ALGORITHM AS EDITOR

48% of 18–34 news consumers come across news passively rather than seeking it out. For that generation, the algorithm is increasingly the editor.

NEWS CONVERSION BY AGE



Older audiences have deep, habitual news relationships. Younger audiences are present but not committed.

NEWS AVOIDANCE, MEASURED

41% of American adults rarely or never consume consume news media. The trend documented in in recent years is visible and measurable in our data. our data.

— A NOTE ON —

Artificial intelligence.

AI has been a thread running through this report since the first page.
Time to look at it directly.

NEW THIS EDITION

2026

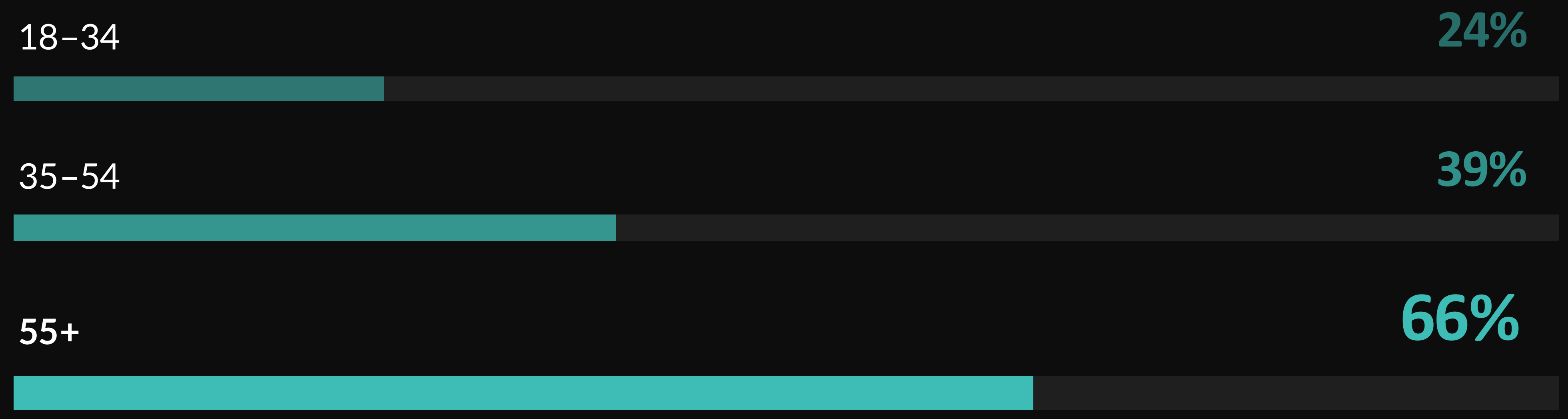
AI · THE USAGE DIVIDE

A real divide that skews sharply by age.

57%	43%
USE AI	NEVER

Of U.S. adults, 57% use AI tools at least monthly. 43% have never used one.

"HAVE NEVER USED AI" — BY AGE



58%
ChatGPT recognition among AI users

52%
Gemini recognition among AI users

16%
Use AI 3+ times per week

Audiences are sensitive, selective, and starting to substitute.

SUSPICION IS EVERYWHERE

77%

of AI users often or sometimes suspect that content they consume was created or modified by AI — even when it isn't labeled. The suspicion applies even to entirely human-made content.

EDITS, NOT DELEGATES

15%

use AI output as-is. 46% edit lightly, 22% substantially revise, 18% use it only for inspiration. The "AI is replacing human creativity" narrative is not what the behavior shows.

SUBSTITUTING FOR HUMANS

42%

have used AI instead of consulting a human — friend, teacher, colleague, doctor — for advice or information. 45% among 18–34 and 35–54.

> *The opportunity for media companies is in what AI cannot credibly replicate at scale: genuine local knowledge, source relationships, editorial accountability, real-time presence.*
>
> **The feed is full. Make sure people know a person made yours.**

VERTICAL DEEP-DIVE · 07 OF 09

SOCIAL MEDIA.

The cume held. The habit broke. This is the feed-dilution thesis expressed most clearly.

SOCIAL MEDIA

The single largest conversion drop of any platform.

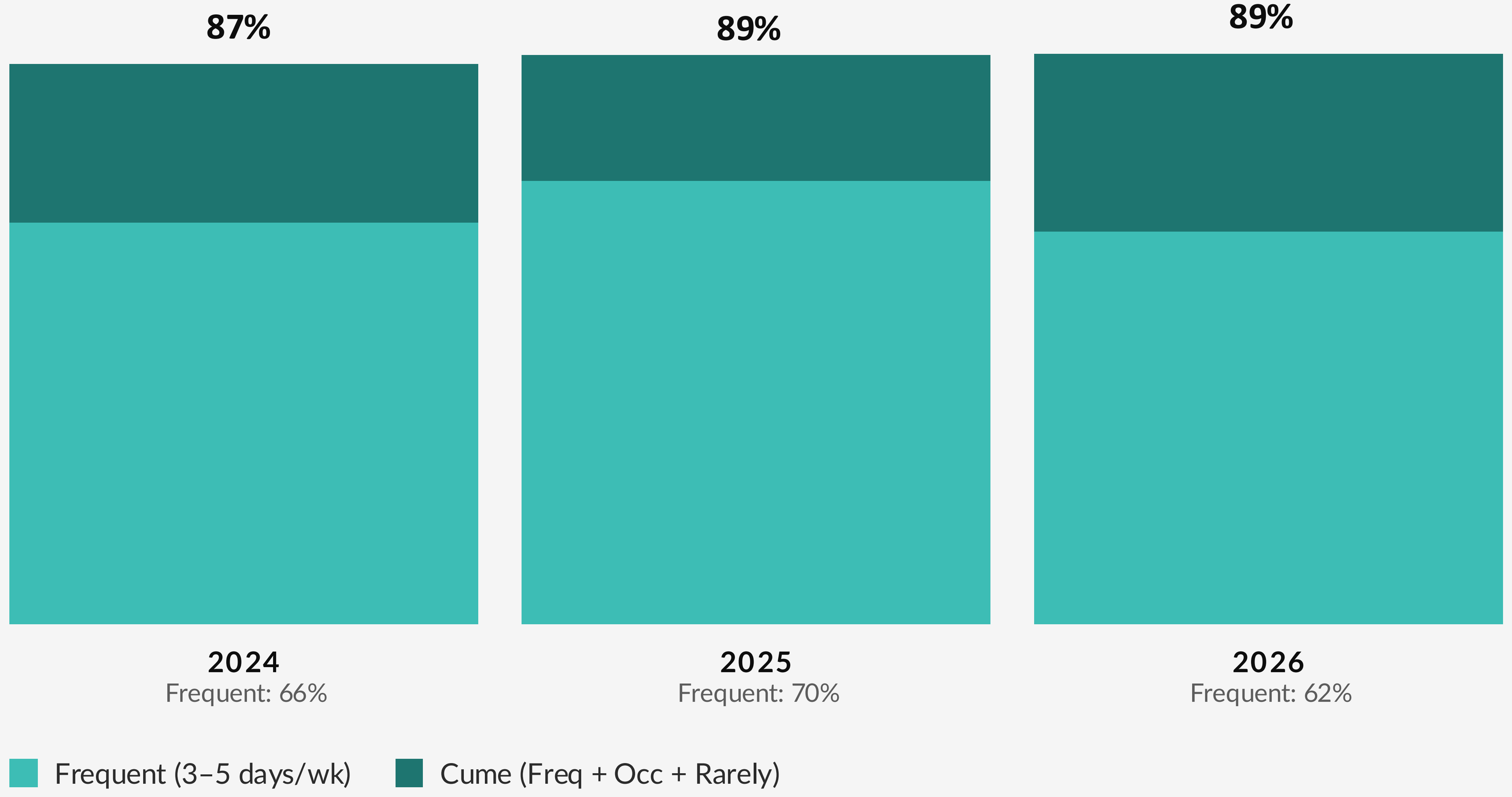
Cume held at 89% — essentially unchanged from last year and the highest of any platform in the study. Nine in ten American adults are on social media in a given week.

Look closer at conversion and the picture shifts. **Frequent use dropped from 70% in 2025 to 62% in 2026.** The cume is a floor. The conversion drop is the signal.

THE BIGGEST SINGLE-YEAR DROP IN THE STUDY

Social media is the platform most dependent on algorithmic content, most saturated with AI-generated content, and most vulnerable to gradual experience degradation.

THREE-YEAR CUME & FREQUENCY TREND



SOCIAL · THE COUNTERINTUITIVE FINDING

The oldest demo on social media is media is now its most habitual.

For 55+ users, the dominant reason is **staying in touch with family and friends at 74%.** That use case is algorithm-proof. It doesn't matter what the feed surfaces — grandma is there to see photos of the grandkids. The relationship is the product. The platform is just the delivery mechanism.

For younger users, motivations are content-dependent — entertainment, inspiration, escape — and therefore directly vulnerable to feed dilution.

CONVERSION BY AGE — 2026

ALGORITHM-PROOF RELATIONSHIPS

74% of 55+ social media users use it to stay in touch with family and friends. Their conversion held precisely because their reason for being there has nothing to do with content quality.

Commercial power intact. The relationship is getting harder.

HIGHEST PURCHASE RATE IN THE STUDY

48%

of 18–34 social media users have made purchases based on social ads or recommendations — the highest purchase rate of any demographic on any platform.

MENTAL HEALTH, HONESTLY

41%

of 18–34 users agree social media has a negative impact on their mental mental health. Combined with the conversion drop, the data starts to look to look less like passive drift and more like conscious pulling back.

POLITICS, BY GENDER

Men 17% vs. women 7% use social to discuss politics. The loudest political voices on social are not representative of who is actually on the platforms or why.

STILL USEFUL

49% find social media a valuable source of information — 57% among 18–34. The platform still has genuine utility. The habit is just a little more intentional than it used to be.

VERTICAL DEEP-DIVE · 08 OF 09

YOUTUBE.

The format YouTube build its identity around - longer, intentional, creator-driven video - is where *durable engagement lives*

YOUTUBE · THE MOST ENVIED DIGITAL PLATFORM

The rest of digital is chasing what YouTube already has.

Instagram and TikTok are both pushing hard into long-form video. That is not a coincidence. It is an acknowledgment that the format YouTube built its identity around, longer, intentional, creator-driven video, is where durable engagement lives.

YOUTUBE ISN'T A COMPETITOR. IT'S INFRASTRUCTURE.

The question is not whether your audience is on YouTube. 82% of American adults are. The question is whether you are there when they go looking for you, and whether your presence there is working for your core product or just existing alongside it.

HOW YOUTUBE USERS FIND CONTENT

31%
HOMEPAGE RECOMMENDATIONS
Rely primarily on the algorithm to surface content.

28%
SUBSCRIPTIONS FEED
Go directly to creators they have already chosen to follow.

41%
BOTH
Use both. This shows building a subscriber base is an important part of audience development.

For some viewers it's a social experience. For others it's a teacher.

18–34

A social, communal experience.

Gaming content · 34%

Creators & personalities · 31%

Reaction videos · 27%

Comment/like/follow engagement · 63%

They comment, like, follow, participate.

55+

An educational resource.

Life hacks · 27%

Cooking · 26%

Nature & wildlife · 24%

Historical documentaries · 23%

They come to learn something specific and leave when they've learned it.

LENGTH, CONTRARY TO ASSUMPTION

21% of 18–34 are comfortable with videos over 30 minutes — almost 2× the rate of 55+ at 11%.
The "short attention span" narrative about younger audiences isn't what the data shows.

YOUTUBE · FOR ADVERTISERS

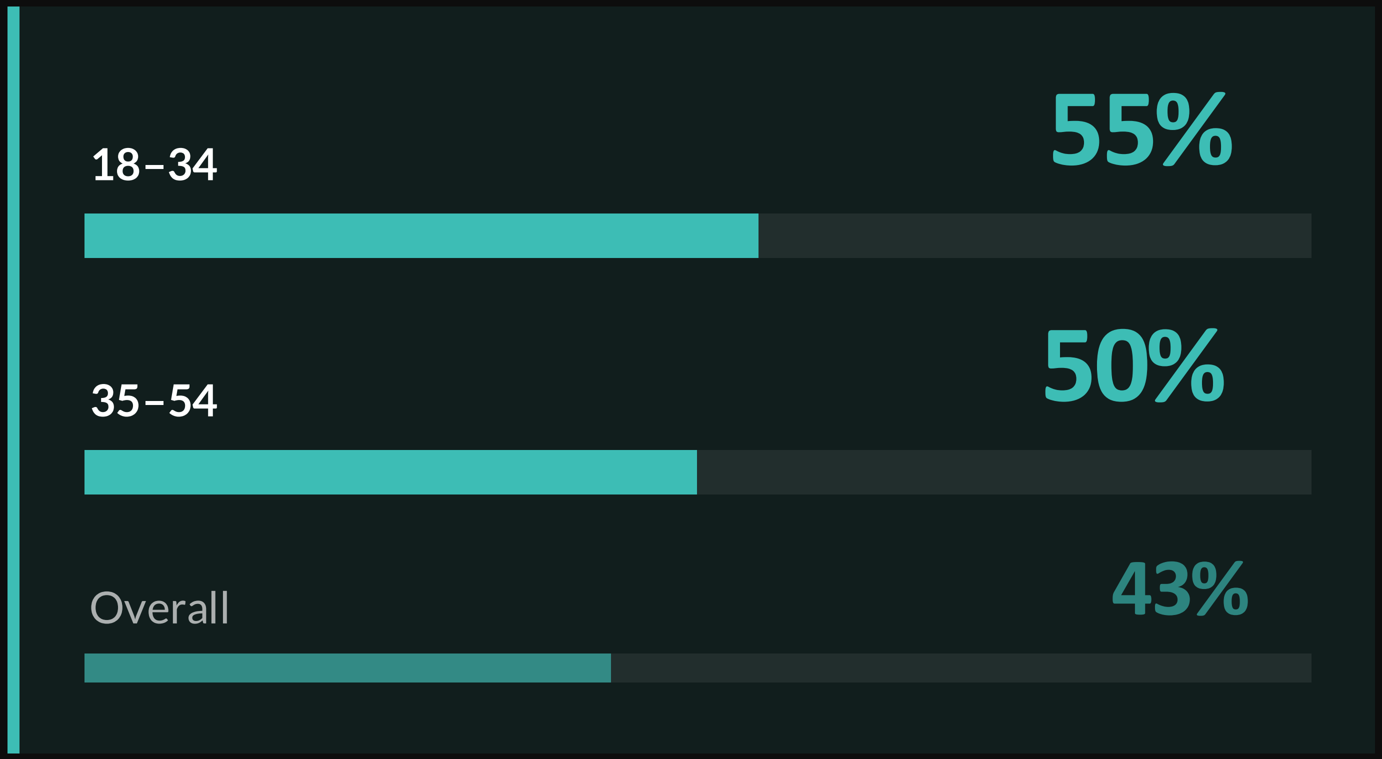
Creator purchase influence is the highest of any platform in this study.

43% of YouTube users overall say they are more likely to purchase a product or service if a creator they follow features it. The number jumps among the two most commercially active demos.

Pre-roll advertising faces a brutal skip rate. The opportunity is not in interrupting viewers. It is in being the content they came to watch.

> A REALITY CHECK
>
> **57% of YouTube users always skip ads when given the option. The opportunity isn't in the ad break. It is in being the video.**

LIKELY TO PURCHASE IF A CREATOR FEATURES IT



That is not a media buy. That is a ***trust transfer.***

VIDEO GAMES.

Gaming is bigger than most outside the industry realize.
And it looks nothing like the stereotype.

VIDEO GAMES · PLATFORM MIX

Not PlayStation. Not Xbox. A phone.

Smartphone and tablet is the most used gaming platform at 53% overall. Women game on mobile at 60%. Adults 55+ game on mobile at 60%. **The console-and-couch image of gaming is one slice of a much larger and more varied audience.**

FOR ADVERTISERS

Mobile gaming reaches a wide, demographically diverse audience including significant female and 55+ populations that traditional gaming advertising mostly ignores.

TWO DISTINCT GAMING WORLDS

WORLD 1

Younger men · console · multiplayer

PlayStation (18–34) · **50%**

In-game purchases (18–34) · **45%**

Multiplayer overall · **30%**

2+ hour daily sessions · **56%**

WORLD 2

Older women · mobile · single-player free-to-play

Mobile (women / 55+) · **60%**

Free-to-play (55+) · **79%**

Single-player (55+) · **77%**

Friend recs as discovery · **40%**

The audience around gaming is nearly as large as the audience playing it.

51% of gamers watch gaming content on platforms like Twitch or YouTube — livestreams, speedruns, reviews. Among 18–34 that climbs to 65%.

For advertisers, the audience watching gaming content is almost as large as the audience playing games — and in some respects more accessible.

DISCOVERY IS HEAVILY SOCIAL

59% of gamers find new games through social media, jumping to 73% for 18–34. The discovery moment lives where the audience already is.

53%
Most-used gaming platform: **smartphone / tablet**

56%
of gamers play **2+ hours daily** — gaming is not a casual side habit for those who do it

35%
subscribe to premium gaming services. Only **10% of 55+** — they operate in the free tier.

41%
of **35–54** gamers play 2–4 hours daily — the heaviest session demo, not the youngest.

THANK YOU FOR READING

There's more where this came from.

KEEP READING

This report covers the highlights. The dataset behind it goes much deeper. Additional analysis, demographic deep dives, and editorial commentary will be published throughout the year at **crowdreactmedia.com**.

WORK WITH US

Crowd React Media offers custom research, audience analysis, and strategic consultation for radio stations, broadcasters, media companies, and advertisers. To understand your audience the way we've examined the broader one, find us at **crowdreactmedia.com**.

CROWD REACT MEDIA

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The 2026 State of Media is a Crowd React Media publication, a division of Harker Bos Group. Survey conducted March – April 2026. Base n = 1,094 U.S. adults 18+.