



Australian Media Uses Report

Social Media & YouTube, 2026



Produced by the Understanding 21st Century Media Uses and Purposes team



Digital Media
Research Centre

The Australian Media Uses Report presents data collected in a multi-year investigation of how Australians use media. This paper explores social media and YouTube use as well as the importance of internet access to media consumption generally.

This report includes results from a survey whose participants (n=2020) represent the Australian population and insights from 70 hour-long interviews with Australians about their media use. More detail about this fieldwork can be found in the method section; notably this fieldwork was completed before the introduction of Australia's social media age restrictions.

Our investigation explores Australians' use of different social media *features*—the different ways to use social media services such as messaging, search, or feeds of followed or recommended posts or videos—and what they like about them. Our questions about YouTube explore what types of content are most watched and valued, and our inquiry about internet access identifies its role in media use and its reliability.

Executive summary of findings

Social media

Social media is widely used in Australia (87%), but only Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube Shorts are used by more than half of survey respondents.

The amount of time spent using social media decreases at a similar pace across older technology generations.

When we 'use social media' we can be doing many *different* things. It is very difficult to make general claims or identify 'typical' use. Major services such as Facebook and Instagram now have so many features that many use a single service in *different* ways at *different* times. Many people use multiple social media services and intentionally use them *differently*.

Most prefer features of social media that allow users to see messages and posts shared by friends and content that they 'follow.' For many, following allows them to construct a '**personal media stream**' that delivers content across disparate interests. TikTok use diverges from other social media, with users preferring features offering content recommended by the service and search features.

Social media use is also much more private than many imagine. By far, **most interaction is done through private messages.**

A lot of popular debate about social media has focused on news, but **for most users, news is a very small, and often incidental component of their social media use.**

YouTube

YouTube is also widely used in Australia (85%) and follows a similar pattern to social media with time spent using decreasing when moving up through technology generation.

Information-based videos are regarded as the most important types of videos and account for half of estimated viewing.

Few post to YouTube. 88% of survey respondents had never posted a video.

Interviewees do not regard YouTube as a form of social media.

Internet use for media

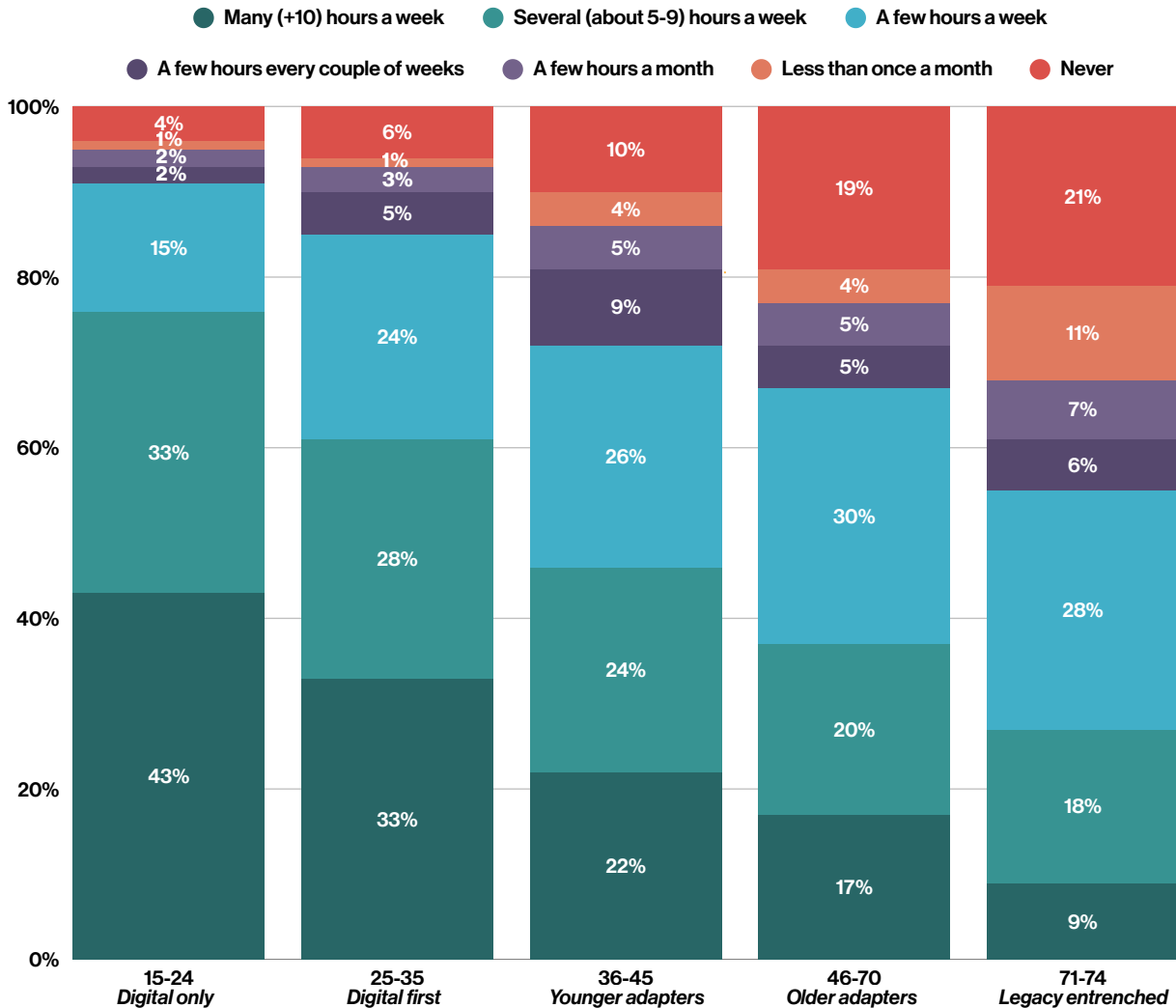
Australians access **the majority of the media they consume through the internet:** 61% of Australians get at least 80% of their media by internet, with similar rates evident across major cities, inner regional, and outer regional/remote/very remote areas.

Internet access is consequently an important issue for media providers. Nearly 20% of respondents report **daily problems with internet access.** Those in major cities experience the most difficulty on a weekly basis.

Using Social Media

Social media is widely used in Australia: by 87% of survey respondents. Recent surveys by the Australian government reveal that more Australians used just Facebook in the previous week (47%) than free-to-air commercial television (46%).¹

Figure 1: Typically, how much time do you spend using social media? By age



The data in Figure 1 makes clear that the amount of time spent weekly on social media is tied to age. We divide the Australian population based on 'technology generation,' which draws on age and life stage at the time of widespread changes connected to adoption of digital technologies (see Technology Generations box). The amount of time spent on social media trends downward the later in life it became available.

Life stage is also a factor in media use. Time pressure from work and family among the Digital first generation leads to less use despite using social media from young adulthood.

Who doesn't use social media?

Thirteen percent of Australians do not use social media. Of nonusers, 69% are aged 46–74 years (though they are 44% of the sample). Nonusers are also more likely to be men (42/58% women/men).

Technology Generations

The sample is representative of the Australian population to age 74 but rather than reporting age differences by even increments we use technology generations that are based on respondents' age and life stage when key digital developments disrupted 20th century media norms.²

Legacy entrenched: aged 71+, born before 1955

Older adapters: 46–70, 1956–80

Younger adapters: 36–45, 1980–90

Digital first: 25–35, 1990–2000

Digital only: 15–24, 2001–2010

Social media aren't all the same to users

Many Australians use several social media services each week, and they use services in different ways. Our interviews asked Australians about how they use a variety of services and what they most value in using them. Knowing that people 'use' a service, or even how frequently they use it, doesn't tell us about how important it is to them or why they use it.

Most *young adults* we interviewed (ages 15–24) prioritized Instagram and TikTok. They used Instagram for keeping up with their friends' lives, accessing content of interest, and sharing and receiving content from friends. They more often described TikTok as 'just entertainment' and a way to keep on top of what is popular or what is going on. They also use the search engine on TikTok for finding specific information or more content related to their interests.

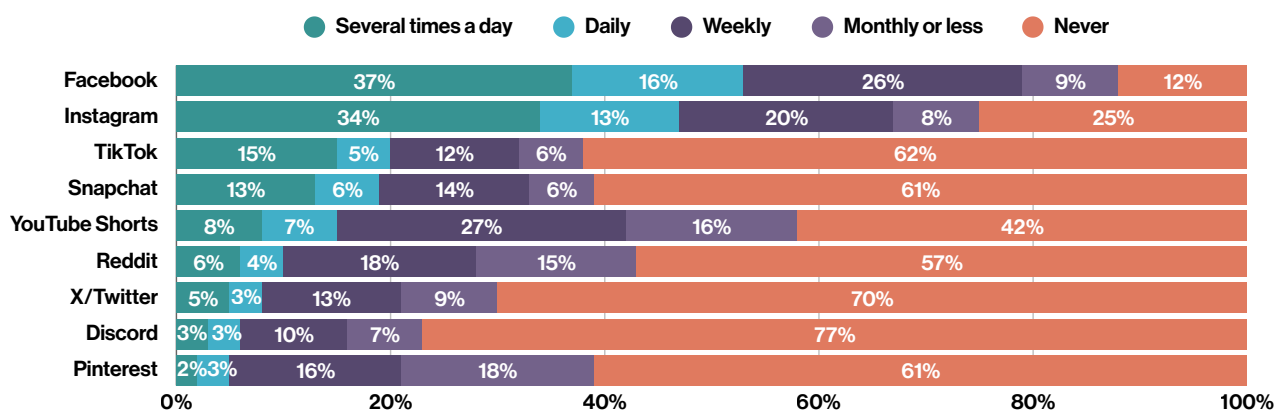
Many young adults also used other services, such as Snapchat and Facebook (including Messenger), but less frequently and mainly as a way of communicating with friends or family not on Instagram. Facebook's Groups feature is used for logistics of sports teams or schoolwork and for keeping up with local news and events in their community. A few young adults prioritize using social media services such as Discord, Reddit, and Pinterest that allow a very different experience from Instagram and TikTok.

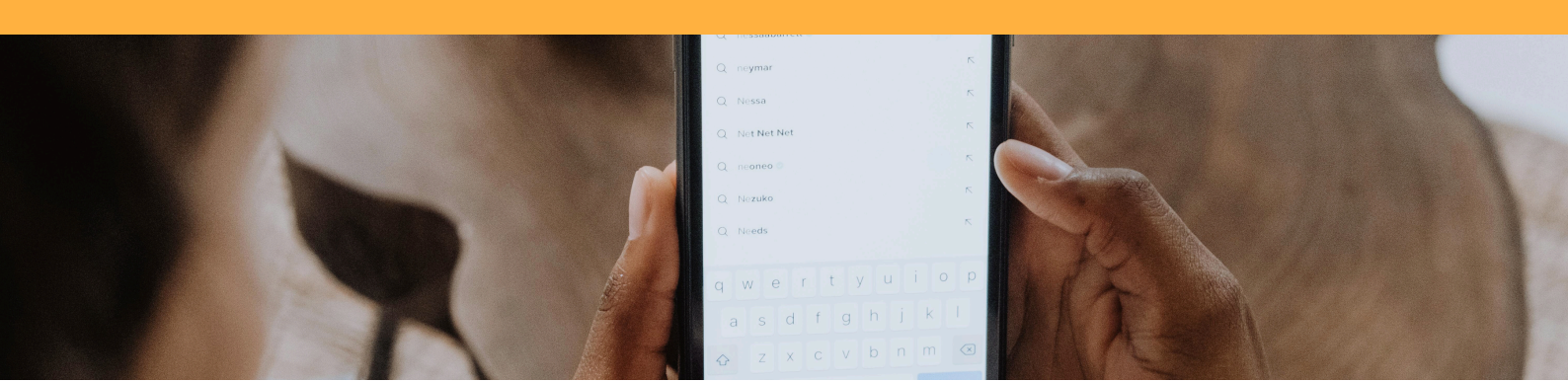
Adults (aged 25+) in our interviews mostly preferred Instagram and Facebook. Many use Facebook regularly but regard its value as a tool needed for life management in addition to a way to communicate with a personal network of friends and family. Few expressed positive feelings about Facebook, yet most also ranked it as the most important service, or the form of media they'd most miss, because it served so many purposes or had features not replicated by other services.

Facebook is important for many things we might not commonly associate with 'social media' such as coordinating school pick-up and children's activities, making plans with friends, and communicating with a wide range of real-life groups and organizations. Many use and value Facebook Marketplace for finding and selling goods.

Our survey data supported the levels of use observed in our interviews. Facebook and Instagram have much higher use than other services. With the exception of YouTube Shorts, all other social media services are 'never' used by more than half of Australians

Figure 2: Frequency of use of different services





Different features let us use social media in different ways

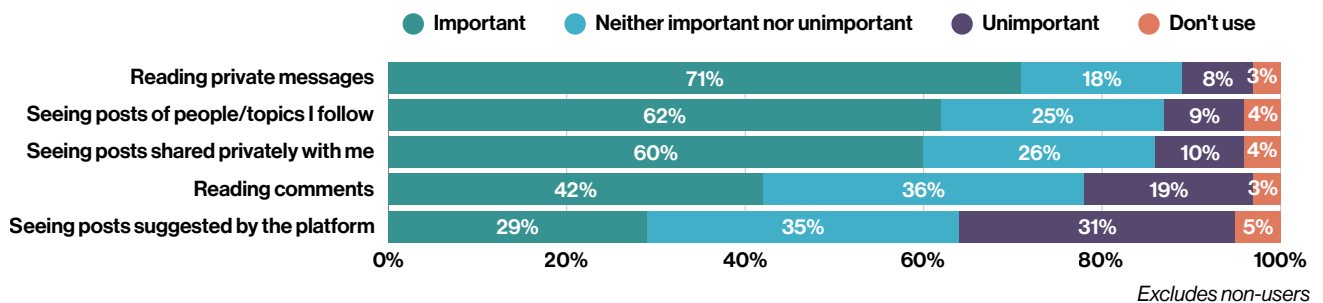
The most widely used social media services now offer a mix of very similar *features* that allow users to have different experiences while using the same service. It isn't just 'social media use' that is varied, but also the use of each service.

Our research has identified three different experiences common across social media services:

- **Following:** Seeing posts about people and interests we follow (Features: Facebook homepage/feed; Instagram homepage; TikTok Following page)
- **Sharing:** Seeing messages and posts friends have shared with us and sharing our own (Features: Facebook Messenger; Instagram's Direct Messages)
- **Exploring:** Seeing posts recommended by the service algorithm based on things we've watched, responded to, or shared (Features: Facebook or Instagram Reels or Explore page; TikTok For You page)

Our interviewees expressed strong preferences for particular features, yet **there is not a single, common way social media is used**. Many use different features at different times; for example, using Exploring features when they have only a few minutes but using Following features when they can look more leisurely. Our survey asked about the importance of different uses of social media and revealed **private messages and posts from followed accounts to be most important**.

Figure 3: Rate the importance of different social media features

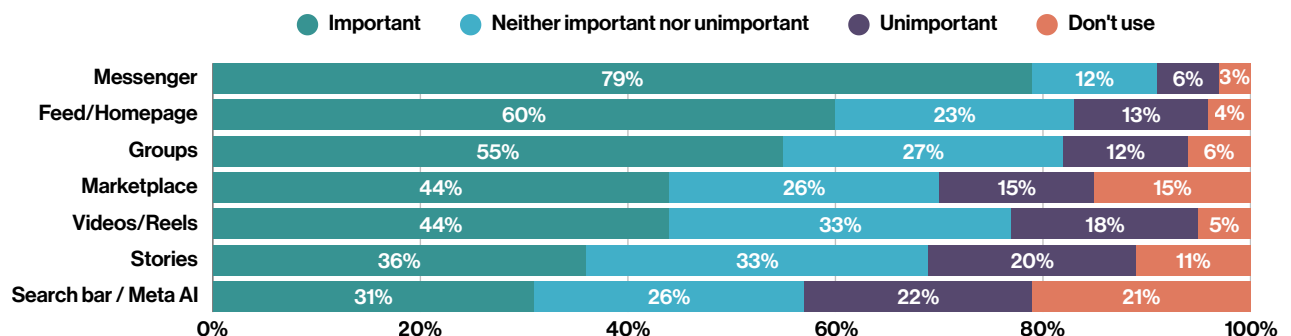


We also asked users about the most important features of specific services.

Facebook

When using Facebook, Messenger, the Homepage, and Groups were strongly valued with more than half of users rating these features as very important or important.

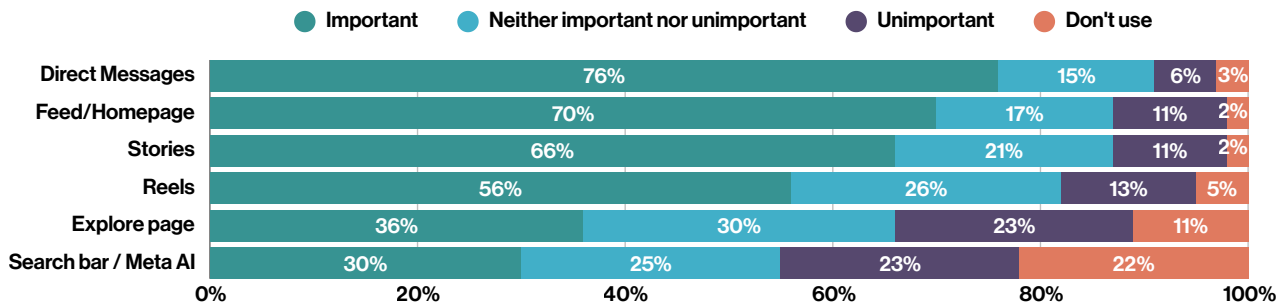
Figure 4: Rate the importance of different Facebook features³



Instagram

Instagram preferences were similar, with the messaging feature (Direct Messages) rating as most important. Following features rated second and third (Feed/Homepage and Stories) and Exploring features (Reels and Explore page) were less valued. Notably, Exploring features are newer features to Instagram (2020) and Facebook (2021) and may not be adopted by users with established routines.

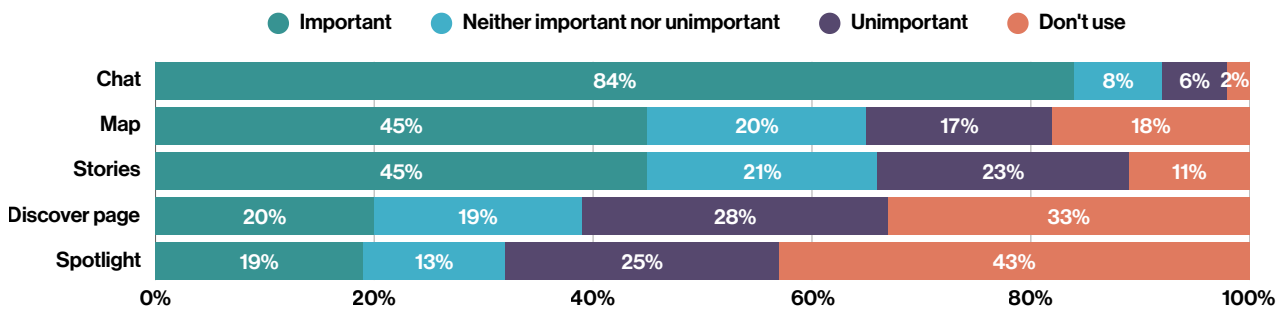
Figure 5: Rate the importance of different Instagram features



Snapchat

Snapchat is regularly used by fewer Australians and a younger average user. Users strongly prioritize messaging functions.

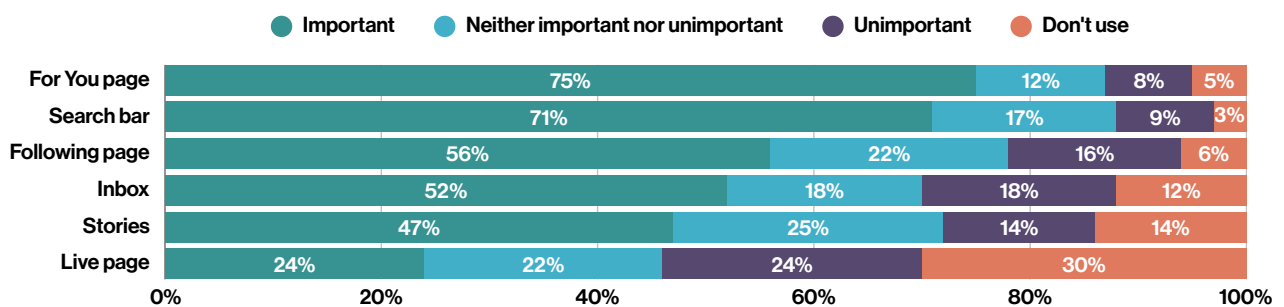
Figure 6: Rate the importance of different Snapchat features



TikTok

In contrast, users strongly prefer the Explore feature For You page and search features of TikTok.⁴

Figure 7: Rate the importance of different TikTok features



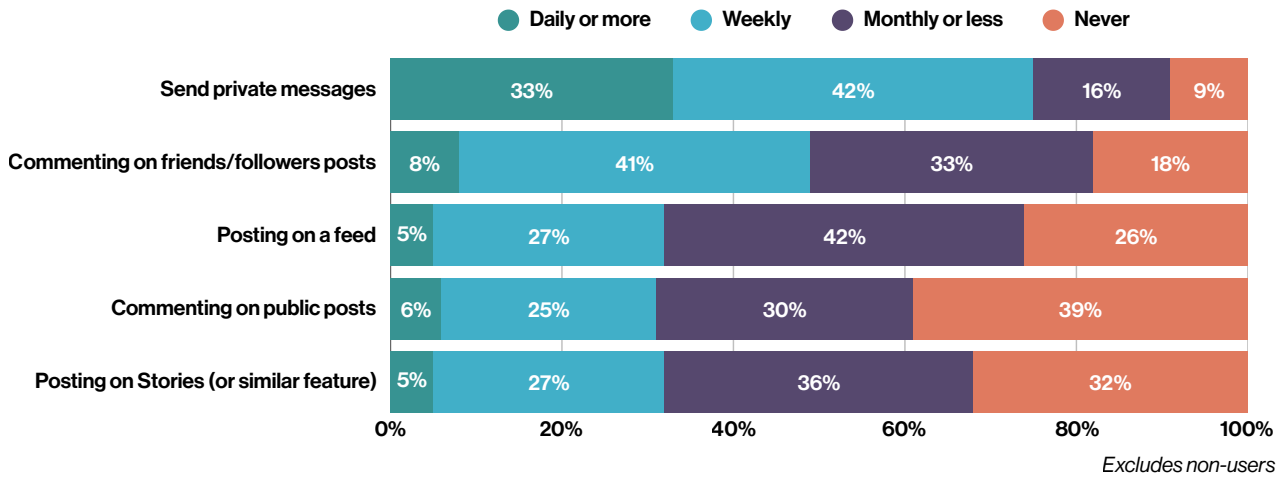
Insight into how users rate the importance of features helps illustrate the varied priorities of users and how that shapes their use of services and features. Young adults prioritize and spend a lot of time on social media with content shared by friends. Adults' use, however, is connected to interests they follow.

The responses also counter perceptions of social media use based on stereotypes or panics emphasized in media coverage. It is notable that most preferred social media features are less governed by services' recommendation algorithms. The uncommon priority on Exploring (For You page) and Search features on TikTok illustrates a significant deviation from other services' use.

Posting: Let's keep it private

We also asked Australians about the frequency of their posting behavior in both interviews and the survey. The survey indicated that most users send private messages at least weekly (75%) and a third of users send them at least daily. Other forms of posting are much less frequent and measured as something done monthly or never for more than half.

Figure 8: How frequently do you post on social media?



In the interviews, we learned that most regard public posting as reserved for exceptional occasions such as going on a trip or big life events. By 2025, the *social* part of social media use takes place primarily through private messaging and sharing. Regular posting is part of social media use for some, but both the interviews and the survey suggest it is a less common practice.





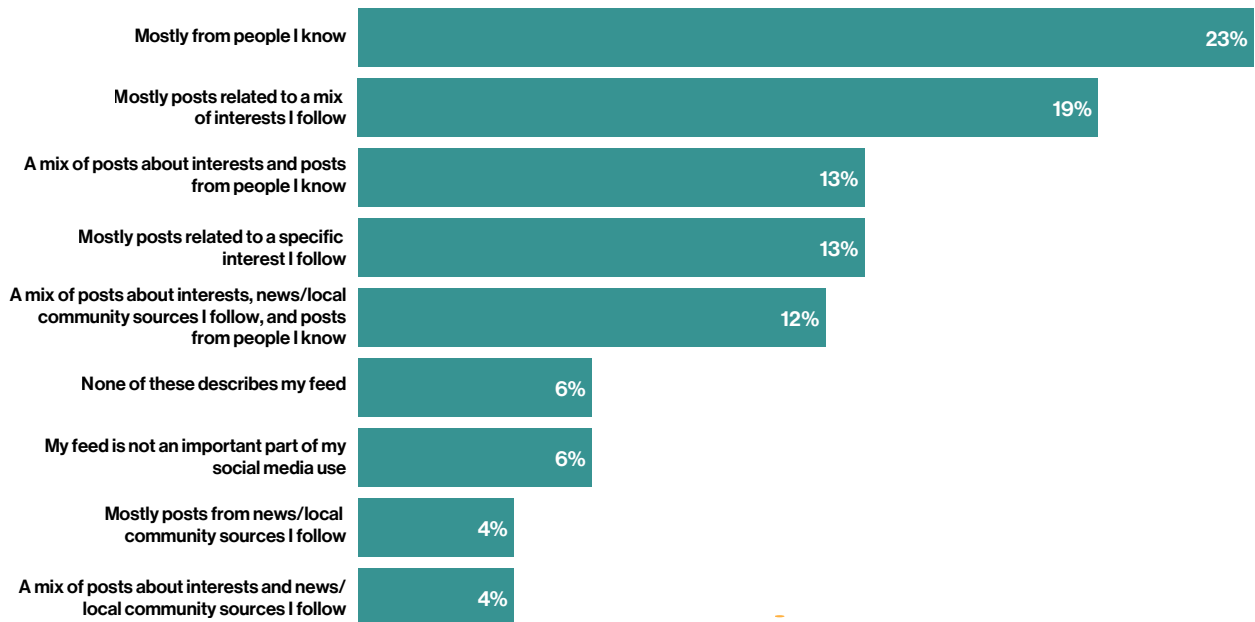
What do we see in our feeds?

Our interviewees screen-shared their feeds during part of the interview and suggested to us that what people see in their feeds varies considerably. We saw the same three categories repeatedly: posts from people they know, posts related to their interests that they follow, and news/community sources, but the balance among those categories varied. In the survey we asked which blend of those categories best described the person's feed.

We learned there is a lot of variation across feeds. Figure 9 shows the most common feed type is made up of mostly people they know, but even though it is the most common answer, it does not even describe a quarter of users' feeds (23%). Next most common are feeds mostly related to interests (19%). Notably, only 6% reported that none of the options described their feed.

Notably, two of the three feed organizations that specify news are the least common feed categorizations by a significant margin.

Figure 9: How do you categorise the content you see in your feed (i.e. homepage) on your favourite social media?



Excludes non-users

These responses help us to understand why many conversations about social media in society are so complicated. Each of us experiences only our own social media use and it can be easy to assume that it is broadly typical. Social media use of academics, journalists, and politicians may mislead them if they regard their use and the composition of their social media feeds as typical.

The survey data, which produced findings consistent with our interviews, illustrate that users curate their feeds in different ways and also that news is a very small amount of social media consumption – and may be entirely absent from the feeds of most.

Using YouTube

We included YouTube as a type of social media when we designed the project, but we quickly learned from our first round of interviews that **users don't regard YouTube as social media**. Our survey consequently asked questions about YouTube separately.

YouTube is challenging to understand. Like the overly broad category of 'social media,' YouTube can be a lot of different things and most users are aware of only a small part of YouTube. With more than 10 billion public videos by 2023, it is more like a video encyclopedia or a vast bazaar than a 'channel' or any other way we've experienced video.

In the early years of YouTube, the service promoted itself with the slogan 'Broadcast Yourself' and many perceived a sense of community was an important part of its use—notably, this was before social media services enabled video posting and sharing. Since then, YouTube has grown much less social and become more like a global video library.

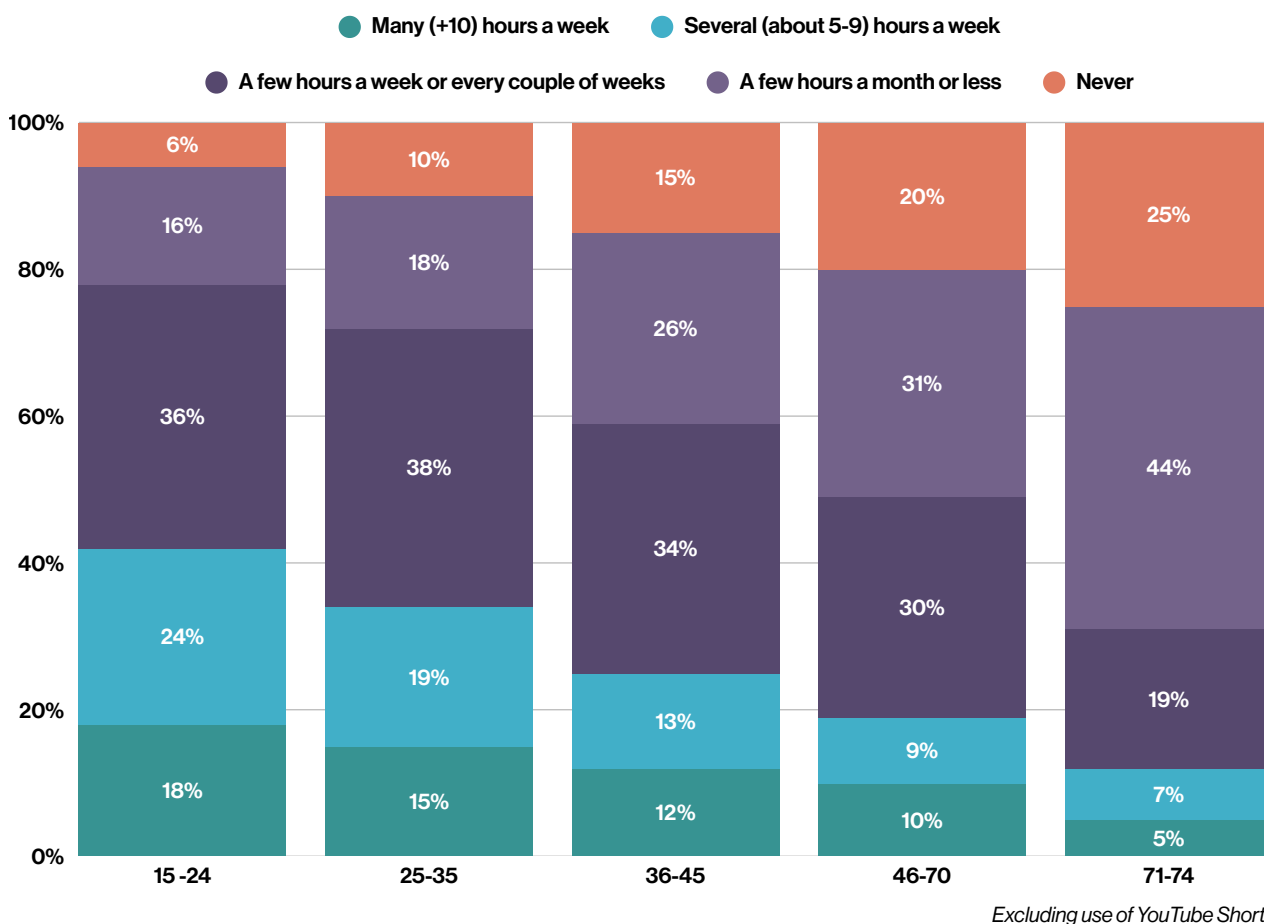
Now YouTube is more often compared with TV, as when YouTube CEO Neal Mohan claimed in 2025 that 'YouTube is the new television.' But this too is a poor way of understanding YouTube. Television viewing is characterized by many, many people living in the same country watching a few things, while YouTube's viewing is spread across its vast offerings. Researchers found: 4.9% of its videos are never watched; 4.4% had a single view; and 18.4% were watched fewer than five times.⁵ Combined, just over a quarter of videos reach no more than the equivalent of a household of viewers.

Time spent

Fifteen percent of our survey respondents reported never using YouTube. Just over one-third (35%) of the people who don't use social media also don't use YouTube, so just 4.5% of those in the sample use neither social media nor YouTube.

Time spent on YouTube varies considerably, with most use categorized as 'a few hours a week' (23%) among all users. Amount of time spent using YouTube decreases with age, similar to the pattern with social media use.

Figure 10: How much time do you spend on YouTube? By age



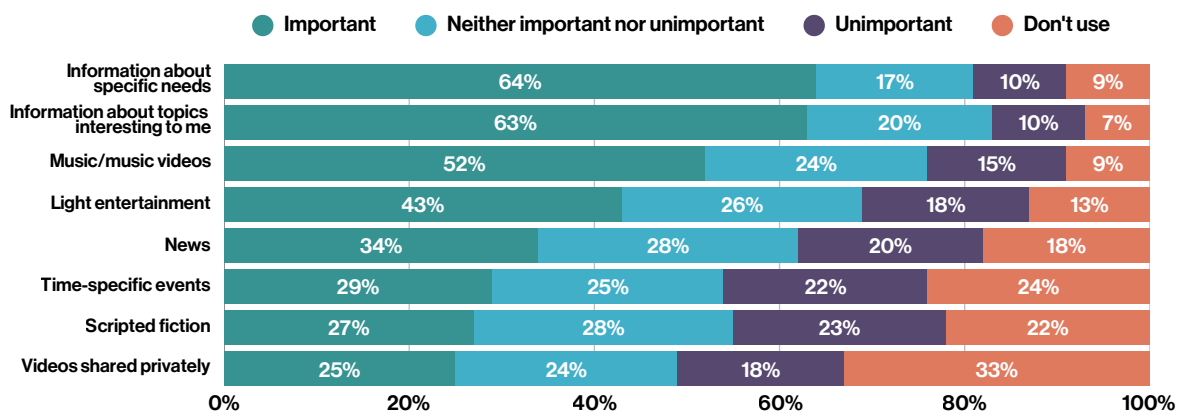


Most valued content

To get a sense of what aspects of YouTube matter most to Australian users we asked about the importance of different categories of videos.

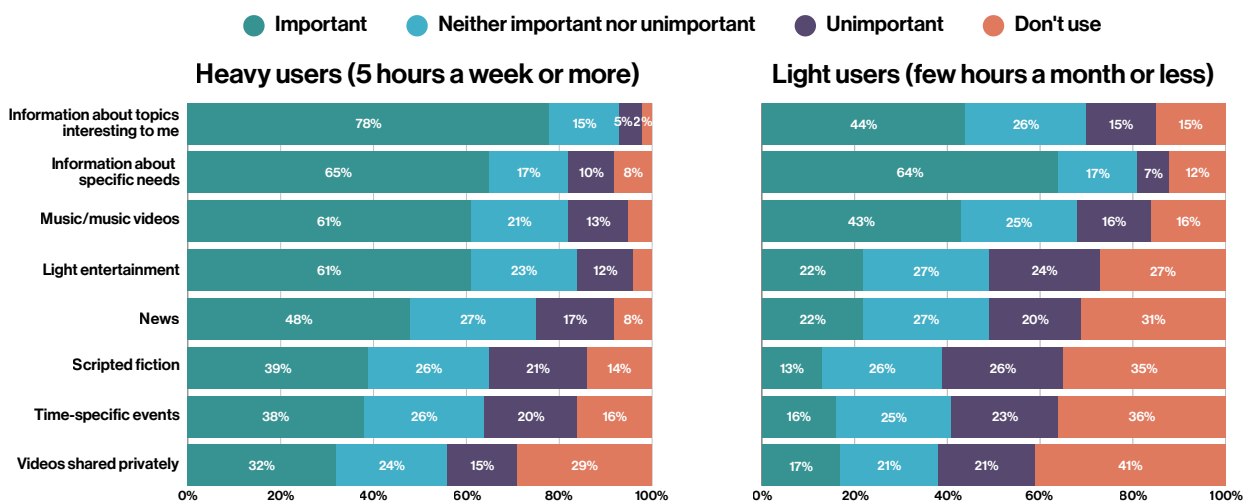
The results indicate **the importance of YouTube for many is in the information it provides**. In many ways, it functions as a video encyclopedia and provides insight on an impressively vast range of very particular questions. We investigated information about specific needs (How-To, DIY, recipes, tutorials) separately from information about topics of personal interest (factual content about interests like travel, cars, beauty, finance, sports) based on the use our interviewees described.

Figure 11: What types of videos are most important to you in your YouTube use?



There are notable differences in the videos important to heavy versus light users. Both groups account for about a quarter of users (each 26% of users). Only 'information about specific needs' is rated as 'important' by more than half of light users. Heavy users rate all types of content substantially higher than light users: their priority is 'information about topics interesting to me' but also rate light entertainment, news, and scripted fiction much higher. The data suggest YouTube is a significant source for many different types of content for heavy users while light users rely on it primarily for specific information needs.

Figure 12: What types of videos are most important to you in your YouTube use?

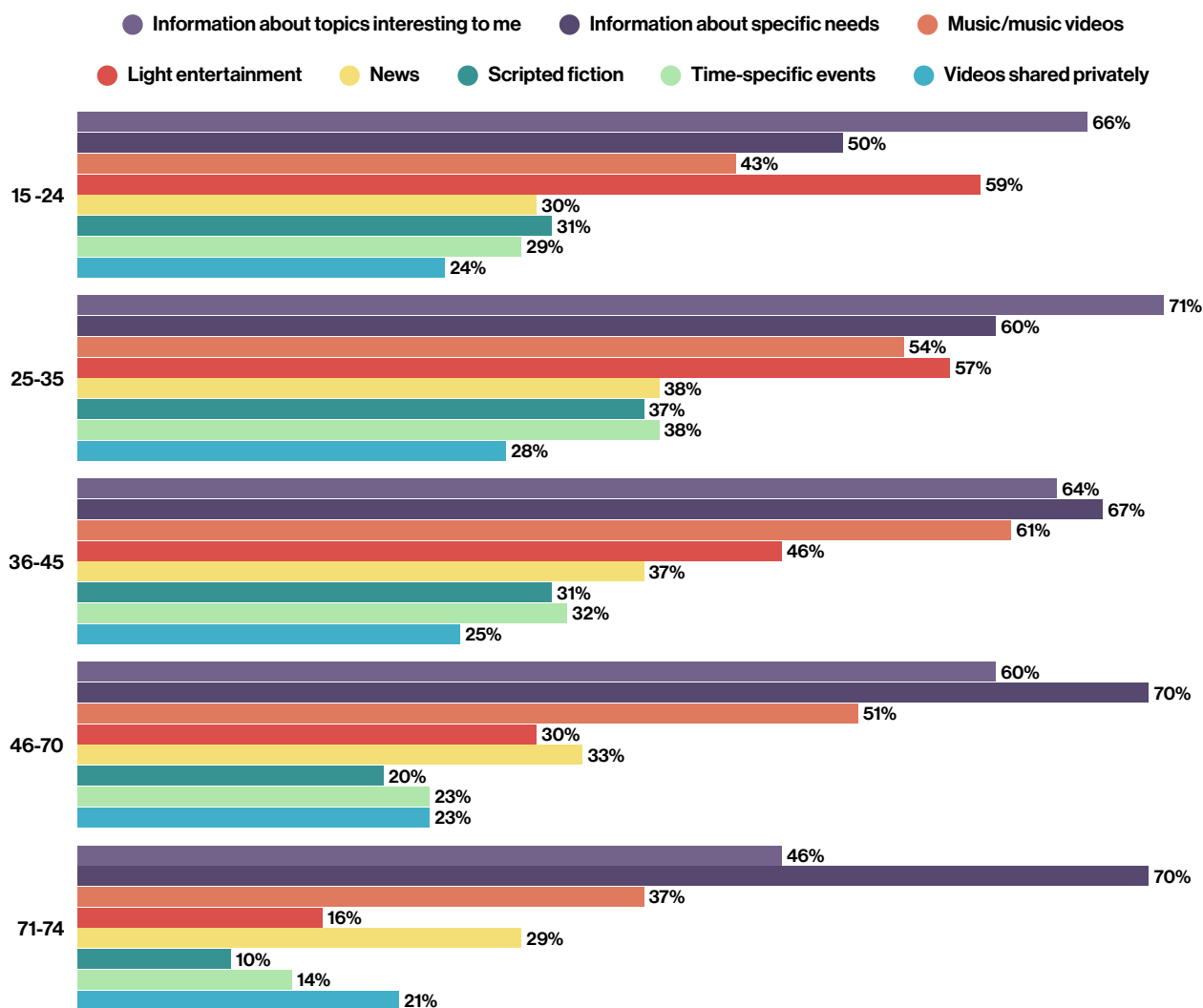


When we examined differences in the types of videos important by age we found information about specific needs is less important among younger users (<35 years old) than information about topics of personal interest, even though both types of information rank similarly when accounting for all respondents. Light entertainment (e.g. vlogs, interviews, Let's Play, Get Ready with Me, Challenge videos) is much more important to younger viewers. This preference makes sense when we consider the younger age of many YouTube content creators.

Those aged 25–35 in the Digital first generation also regard nearly every type of content as more important than the younger Digital only respondents. This mirrors the lower enthusiasm toward YouTube we heard in our interviews with young adults. Figure 13 illustrates the percentage of respondents who regard each type of videos as important or very important by age group.

The middle age groups have similar priorities and place more priority on information about specific needs, especially the oldest users. This suggests that YouTube is used more strategically as a resource than as a regular part of media use. Middle and older viewers also rate light entertainment much lower, which suggests that YouTube is not as important a source for this type of content as other media. This also aligns with the lower levels of YouTube use among older Australians indicated in Figure 10.

Figure 13: Percentage that consider different types of YouTube videos 'important' or 'very important'



Other answer options included: 'neither important nor unimportant,' 'unimportant,' 'very unimportant,' 'don't watch'

Posting

We also asked survey respondents if they posted to YouTube: 88% responded 'never.' Of those who posted, 6% did so 'just for fun,' 4% 'aimed to earn income from it in the future,' 1.5% 'earned some income,' and .17% (3 respondents) reported that it is their 'main source of income.'

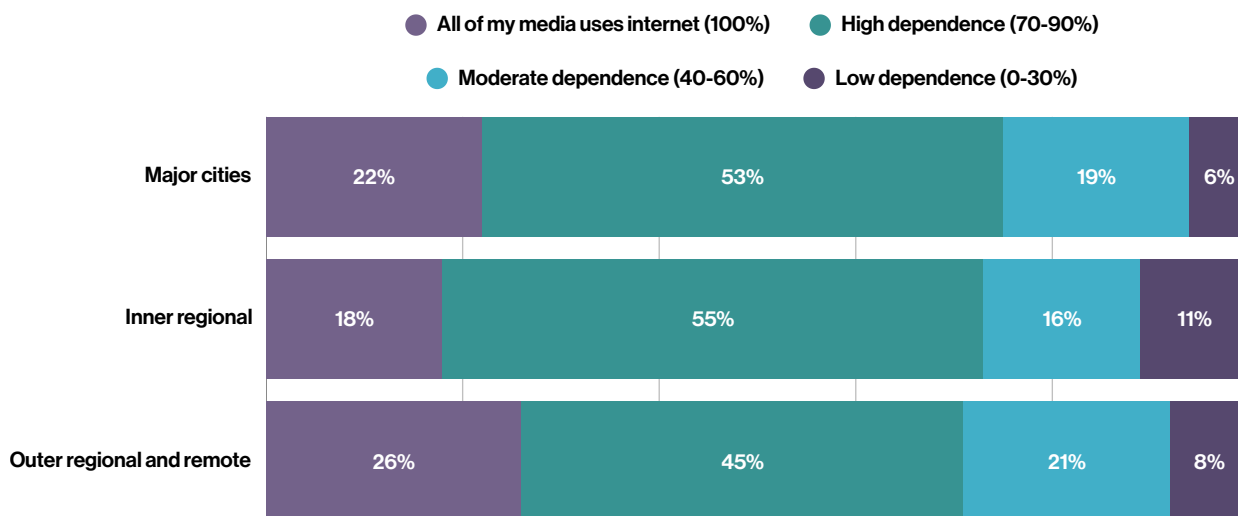
Internet use for media

Our survey also explored how much of Australians' overall media use relied on the internet and the extent that problems with internet access cause difficulty for their media access. Media such as streaming, social media, websites, YouTube, and newsletters that require internet to access are now central to Australians' media use.

Australians' media use relies heavily on internet access. Twenty-one percent of all respondents reported 100% of their media use requires internet access; another 21% reported using internet for 90% of their media consumption, and 19% of Australians reported 80% of their media use requires internet.

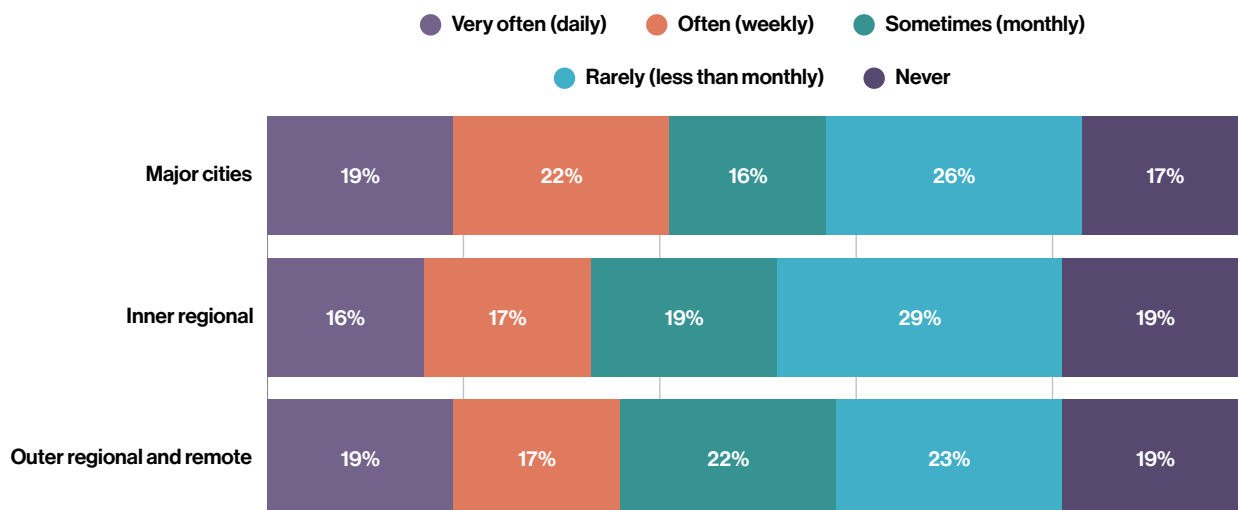
Figure 14 breaks down the respondents by post code to explore how geographic location may affect internet use. Those in outer regions report 100% reliance at higher rates than more urban-located Australians, but rates are quite similar.

Figure 14: What percentage of your media use depends on internet access? By post code



We also asked about difficulty with internet access. Results were similar, with weekly problems reported at a higher rate among those in major cities. Cost was rated a less significant problem (64% significant/very significant), compared with strength/speed (82%), availability when needed (83%), and availability where needed (82%), which were regarded similarly.

Figure 15: How often does the quality/availability of internet access impede your ability to access the media you need? By post code



About the project

The Understanding Twenty-first Century Media Uses and Purposes research team is funded by the Australian Research Council (DP250101051). Prof Amanda D. Lotz and Dr Gabriela Lunardi conducted the fieldwork and authored this report. Dr Dan Dai aided in data analysis.

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Method and project detail

Survey

The survey was designed to explore Australians' media diets and to test findings identified in in-depth interviews across a broader population. Australian survey provider Online Research Unit (ISO 20252 certificate) distributed the survey in November 2025 online to an existing panel of Australians aged 15+. Quota limits for age, gender, and geographic distribution were enforced based on Australian Bureau of Statistics 2025 data.

A total of 2146 valid surveys were completed. The results have been weighted to adjust the sample to be reflective of the Australian population aged 15–74 years old, bringing the total of valid responses to 2020. The analysis of social media use and YouTube presented in this paper excludes those indicating they 'never' use these types of media. The total number of valid responses for social media users is 1763. The total number for valid responses of YouTube users is 1720.

Interviews

In October/November 2024, we conducted 40 interviews with adult Australians (18+) recruited by a research firm that ensured a balance of gender, geographic location (urban/regional), age, and amount of social media use (high, medium, and low). We increased the proportion of 25–34-year olds, however, because of the richness of their media use. In December 2025, we conducted an additional 30 interviews with Australians aged 15–24 years old. We used the same research firm from 2024 and ensured a balance of gender and age distribution (subgroups of 15–19 and 20–24). All interviews lasted about one hour and were conducted via video call (via Zoom or Microsoft Teams).

Notes

¹ See Australian Communications and Media Authority. Communications and media in Australia: How we communicate. Available at: <https://www.acma.gov.au/publications/2024-12/report/communications-and-media-australia-how-we-communicate> and Communications and media in Australia: How we watch and listen to content. Available at: <https://www.acma.gov.au/publications/2024-12/report/communications-and-media-australia-how-we-watch-and-listen-content>

² Composition of each group in weighted sample: Legacy entrenched: 6%; Older adapters: 38%; Younger adapters: 19%; Digital first: 22%; Digital only: 15%.

³ Not all respondents answered questions about social media features for all services. Respondents first reported the frequency with which they used three sets of social media services (1: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat; 2: TikTok, YouTube Shorts; 3: Reddit, X, Pinterest, Discord, Other). Follow-up questions asked the respondents to rate the importance of specific features of only the service used most frequently in each set (to manage survey length). Service response size: Facebook: 1,069; Instagram: 903; Snapchat: 345; TikTok: 530.

⁴ We did not ask about features of YouTube Shorts because, while similar to TikTok, it does not offer a range of features or experiences.

⁵ McGrady, Ryan, et al. "Dialing for videos: A random sample of YouTube." *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media* 3 (2023), p 21. <https://journalqd.org/article/download/4066/3766>

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