

# Going Viral:

a look under the hood of the internet

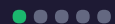
**Part 3:** Chicken soup for the internet soul:  
seeking a respite on the information highway



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Click the dots to navigate



## Introduction

Think about the best thing you saw on the internet today. Maybe it was a goofy dance video, a cute animal gif, or even a touching story about strangers helping each other.

Whatever it might be, there's a strong likelihood that it made you feel, in some way, good. This is the nature of much of our favorite content online; it often falls somewhere on the spectrum of positivity. That might mean educational, funny, inspiring, heart-warming, silly, or just plain *cute*. Feeling good is a natural tendency we are drawn to, it's how we're wired as humans. So it only makes sense that we seek the types of things online that help us feel that way.

This is the focus of the third and last part of our research series on internet culture with GWI. In our first report we looked at the **what**, digging into how memes, gifs, videos, and other parts of internet language have become so compelling. In the second report we focused on the **who**, pulling back the curtain to meet the creators and communities behind these things.

In this last part, we hope to shed some light on the **why**, understanding the role of internet content in making us feel connected, relaxed, and overall better about our days.

And this type of positivity is essential for our mental health – increasingly

so as we end up spending more and more of our time online, where there can be a lot of stressors. They don't call it the information *highway* for nothing.

For brands and organizations, it's important to understand the role of content and communities in uplifting people. That's because when people feel good in a digital space, they're more likely to be receptive to the brands and ads they see. At Imgur, we've always known there's a lot of power in positivity. After all, our vision is to lift the world's spirits for a few moments each day. Through this research, we'll dig deeper into just how crucial that positivity is for users and brands alike.

# Discover the data on our platform

Each chart from our ongoing global research in this report contains a hyper-link that will bring you straight to the relevant question on our Platform, where you can investigate all data by demographics, over time, and among your own audiences.

Sneak preview of our new platform

The screenshot displays the GWI platform interface. The top navigation bar includes 'Charts', 'Audiences', and 'Crosstabs'. The main area is divided into two panels. The left panel shows a filter configuration for 'New Audience 7 May 2020 12:33' with attributes like 'Gender > Male' and 'Gender > Female'. The right panel shows a data visualization for 'New Chart 6 Feb 2020 12:33' with a bar chart and a table of data points.

Question	Data point %	Universe	Index	Responses	Audience %
Someone in my household has a mental health issue	100	15.7K	84.9M	100	47%
	100	15.7K	84.9M	100	32%
	100	15.7K	84.9M	100	52%
	100	15.7K	84.9M	100	38%
	100	15.7K	84.9M	100	16%

## 1 Each of the graphs is numbered

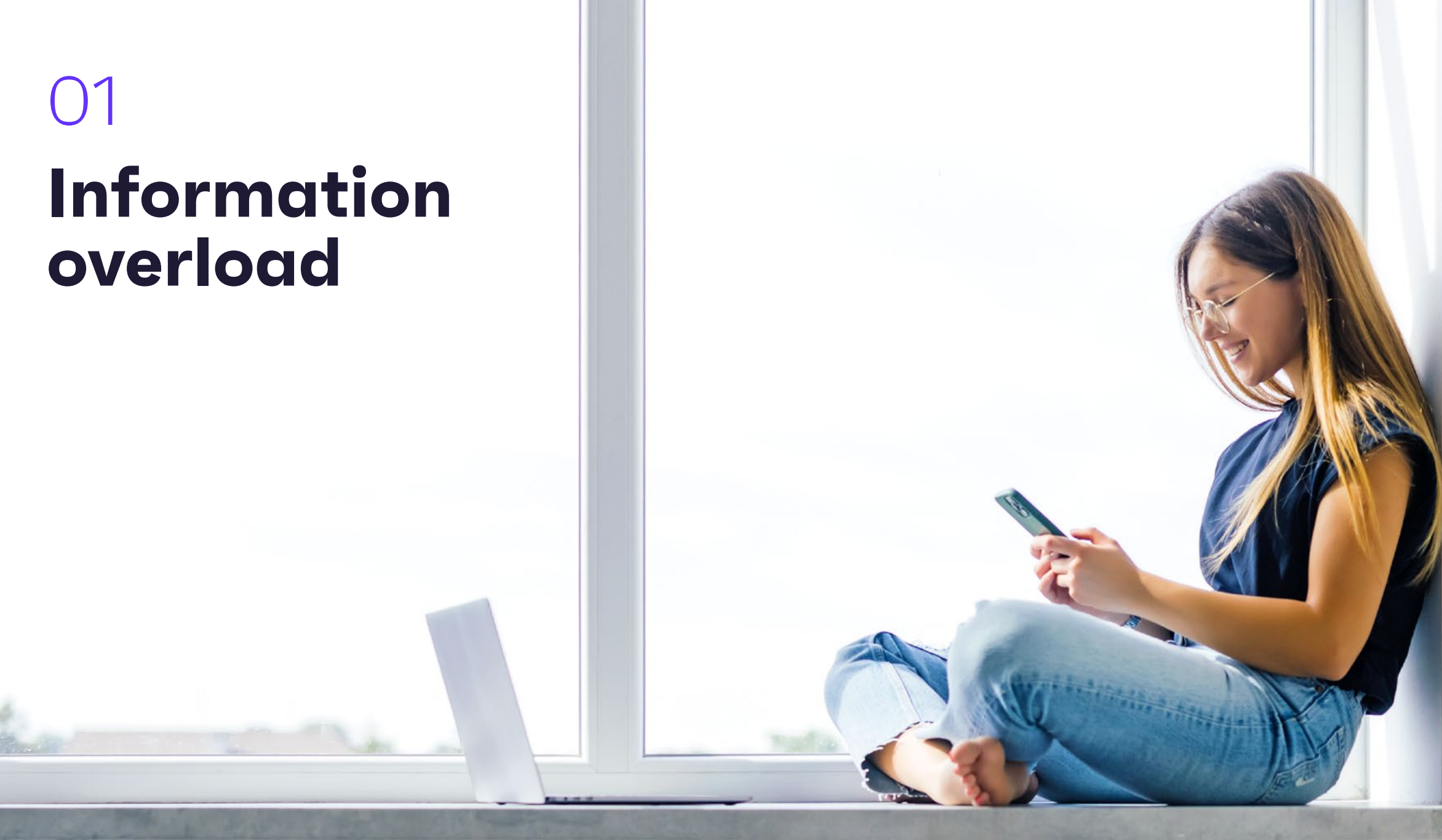
More information can be found in the Appendix section at the end of this report

Just click this icon to explore the data on the platform

- Source** Information about the source
- Base** and base

01

# Information overload



## Young consumers feel they spend too much time online

1

% who agree they spend too much time online

%

- 32 All internet users
- 37 Millennials
- 44 Gen Z



GWI USA Q2 2021

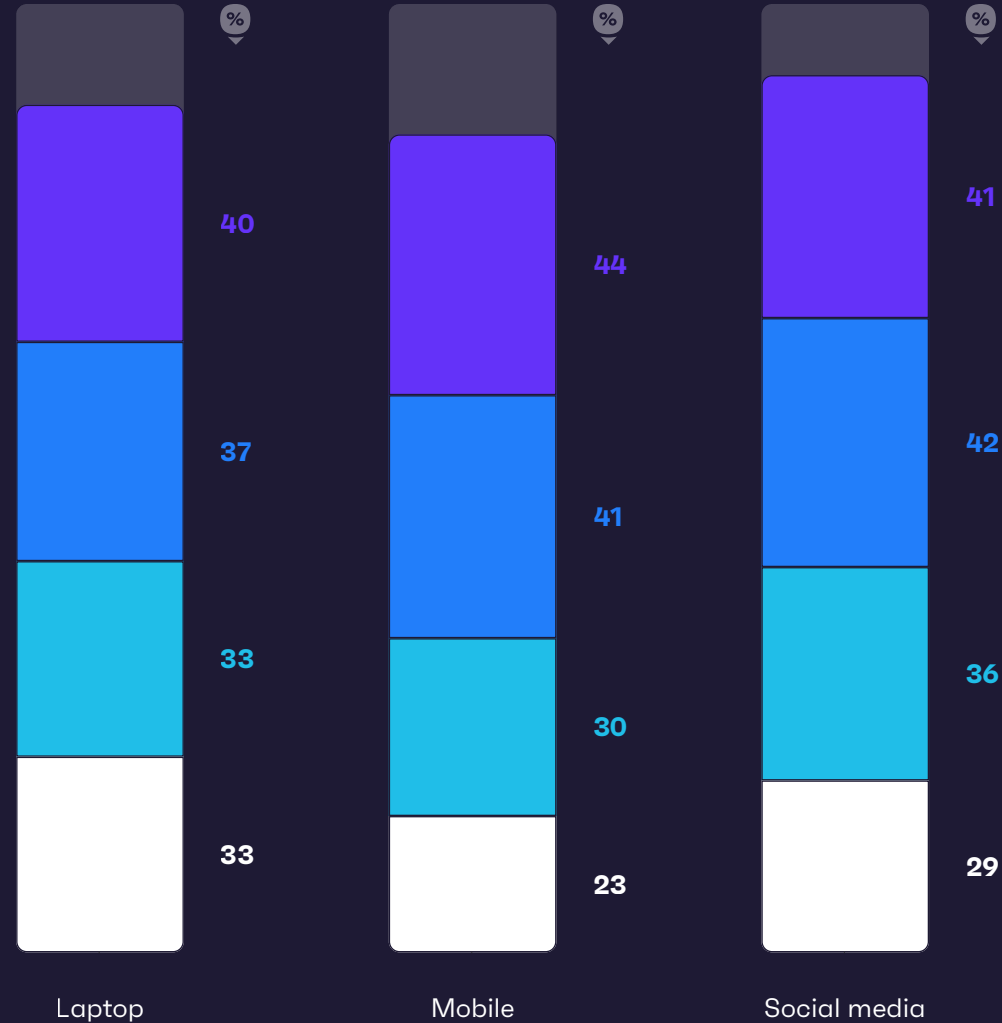


20,068 U.S. internet users aged 16+ |  
5,272 millennials and 2,857 Gen Z

## The more time online, the more we stress

% who say they've experienced stress in past year, split by reported daily time spent across...

- More than 5 hours
- 2 hours to 5 hours
- 30 minutes to 2 hours
- Less than 30 minutes



## One-third of Americans think they spend too much time online

People are more plugged-in today than ever before. And while the internet has improved our lives in so many ways, there's a growing awareness that stress also comes from being constantly connected.

According to our data, one-third of U.S. consumers think that they spend too much time online. This is a bigger worry among younger people; for millennials, agreement is at 37%, and for Gen Zs it's as high as 44%.

A lot of research has shown that too much time online is associated with lower wellbeing for both **kids** and **adults**, and some of our own data validates this. In the U.S. there's a linear relationship between time spent online and feeling stressed.

Consumers who say they spend over 5 hours a day checking their mobile phones, for

example, are twice as likely to say they've felt stressed in the past month vs. those who do so for 30 minutes a day or less. Time spent on laptops and on social media reveals a similar story.

But it's not just the screens themselves that can compound anxiety; it's also the *content*. Between the FOMO-inducing travel pics on social media and the disaster news cycle, there's a lot to stress about. This surely has an effect on people's mental health, and they're starting to realize it.

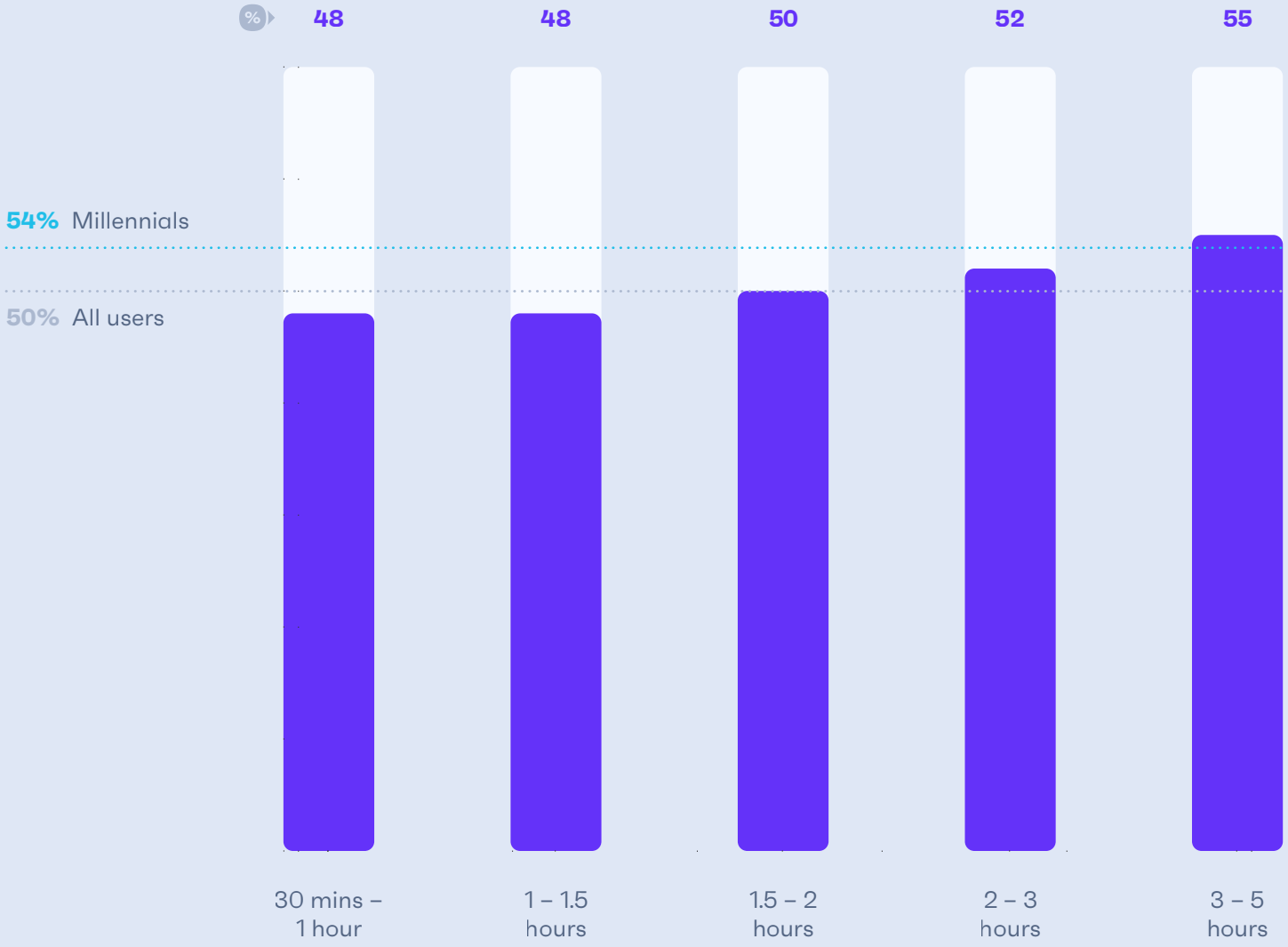
From our study, half of the people we surveyed said they get overwhelmed by negative content online. This is highest among millennials (54%), and it increases proportionately to time spent on social media, indicating that the more content we're exposed to, the more overwhelmed we get.





### Negativity online can be overwhelming

% who agree that they get overwhelmed by negative content online



GW & Imgur Custom Study | 2,026 U.S. internet users aged 16+ who use social media more than 30 minutes per day | 538 millennials

# 02

## An oasis on the internet highway

It doesn't have to be this way all the time. The internet might be a source of information overload, but there's plenty of positive content out there to balance out the "bad" – or, rather, the types that give us stress.

This will be a crucial thing to keep in mind for the future.

We can't avoid the stress of the digital world any more than we can avoid it IRL. That's because the internet, as we discussed in the first report of this series, is increasingly where we live, work, and play. Healthy coping mechanisms are necessary to function in both, and the role of social media to help with this is being more widely recognized.

**Mashable**, for example, called it a "regular act of self care" to seek out heartwarming posts online, while **CNN** reported on the science behind how watching videos of cute animals is good for your health by reducing stress. Media groups like the **Good News Network** have emerged to fill this need, while Subreddits like **/PupliftingNews** or the "funny" hashtag on Imgur are explosively popular.



For three-quarters of social media users, seeing cute or funny videos online makes their day better

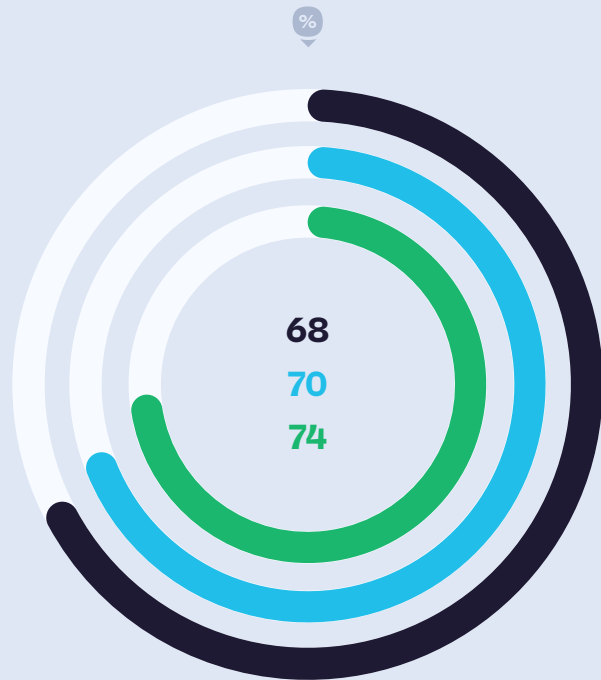


## On the hunt for positive content

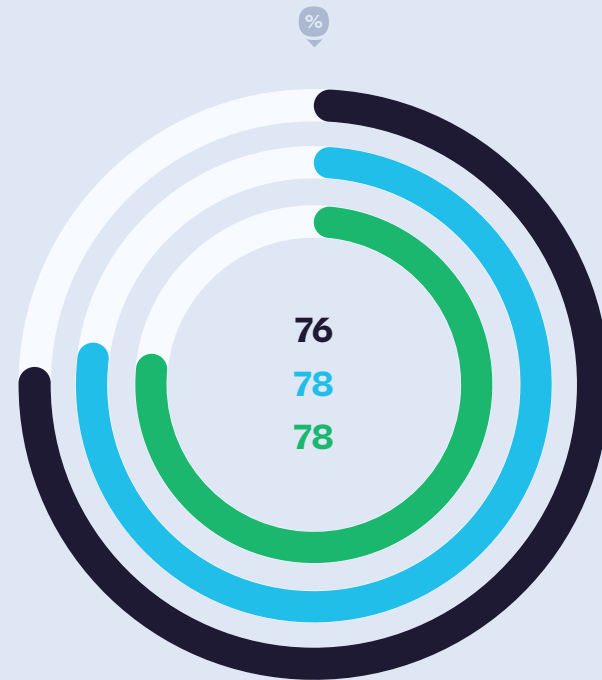
% who agree with the following statements

4

● All internet users ● Millennials ● Heavy social media users (3+ hours per day)



“ I actively seek positive content



“ Seeing cute or funny videos online makes my day better

GW & Imgur Custom Study | 2,026 U.S. internet users aged 16+ who use social media more than 30 minutes per day | 538 millennials | 306 who use social media 3+ hours a day

## 68% of users actively seek positive content

According to our own research, users are very much in tune with this therapeutic effect. The majority of those we surveyed (68%) said they actively seek positive content online. Among millennials and heavy social media users (those spending 3+ hours per day on platforms), this is even higher. The fact that two audiences, who particularly feel the pressures of an “always-on” society, over-index in this response speaks to the importance of fun internet tidbits like memes, gifts, videos, cute stories, etc. in mitigating negative feelings.

Additionally, respondents were clear in telling us that positive content has a real impact on their day-to-day lives.

Three-quarters of people surveyed agree with the statement “seeing cute or funny videos online makes my day better.”

Among respondents who are more in tune with mental health issues, such as those who agree “it’s OK for people to say when they’re struggling” and “we should be more open about mental health,” this figure was at over 80%.

There is clearly a connection between what we’re exposed to online and our overall mental health, and this type of insight validates what we’ve intuitively known to be true at Imgur: **there’s power in positivity.**



# 03

## The power of positivity

“Positive” is a pretty broad umbrella term for stuff that makes us feel good in some way – whether through humor, inspiration, warm and fuzzy feelings, etc. All of these individual attributes have a role to play in what sort of content people engage with online.

When asked what traits make content worth viewing, liking/upvoting, and sharing, users ranked “entertaining,” “funny,” “relatable,” and “inspiring” collectively at the top.

But there is variation in positive attributes when it comes to what people prefer to consume vs. share. For example, “cute” content came in at #3 for preferred sharing; whereas it was further down the list for preferred viewing. “Educational” content had opposite results – people

were much more likely to want to absorb knowledge vs. share it.

Nuances like this speak to a certain pay-it-forward aspect to positive content. You might practically benefit from tutorial videos, but nothing sparks joy at an exponential scale like posting a photo of a puppy. Positivity is something to be shared with others, and finding a community to do that can be personally rewarding.

Apart from these nuances, feel-good content in general is much preferred over neutral, divisive, or negative content. This is obvious when looking at the drop-off in user preference for consuming and sharing things that are “political” or “shocking”.

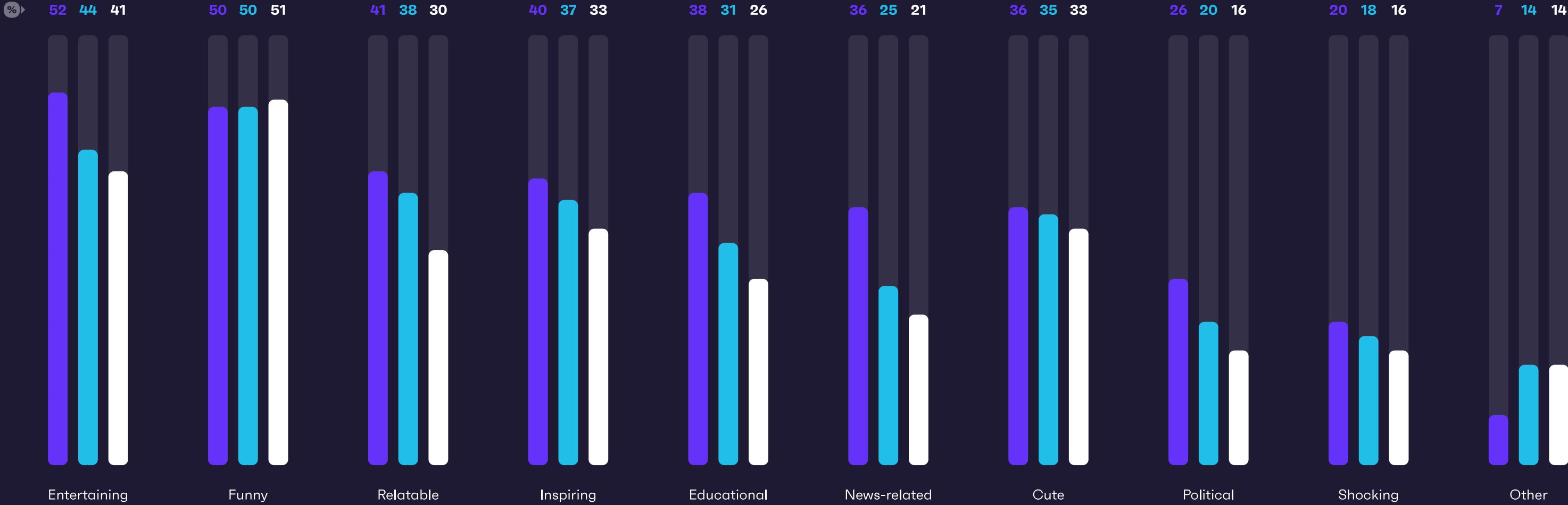
Pay-it-forward: people want to share things that are cute and funny, but want to absorb things that are educational



# Positive attributes far outweigh negative ones

% of users who say...

- I prefer to read/view/listen to content that is...
- I'm most likely to like or upvote content that is...
- I'm most likely to share content that is...



GWI & Imgur Custom Study 2,026 U.S. internet users aged 16+ who use social media more than 30 minutes per day

# 04

## Your one million closest friends

The abundance of negative content online certainly has a role to play, but users get stressed out for other reasons. A big one of these is the pressure that people face from social media, and this is especially true for young people who are still navigating their own identities both online and offline.

Part of the exhaustion is that constant expectation, whether real or perceived, to always show your “best self” on social media – to project an image that your life is just as fun and exciting as your peers. Our data shows that, over time, this pressure has started to wear on users, especially the youngest ones.



### Young social media users feeling the pressure 6

% of Gen Zs who agree with the following statements:

- Social media helps me feel more connected to other people
- I am using social media less than I used to



GW I USA Q2 2020 – Q2 2021

10,420 U.S. Gen Z internet users born between 1998-2004

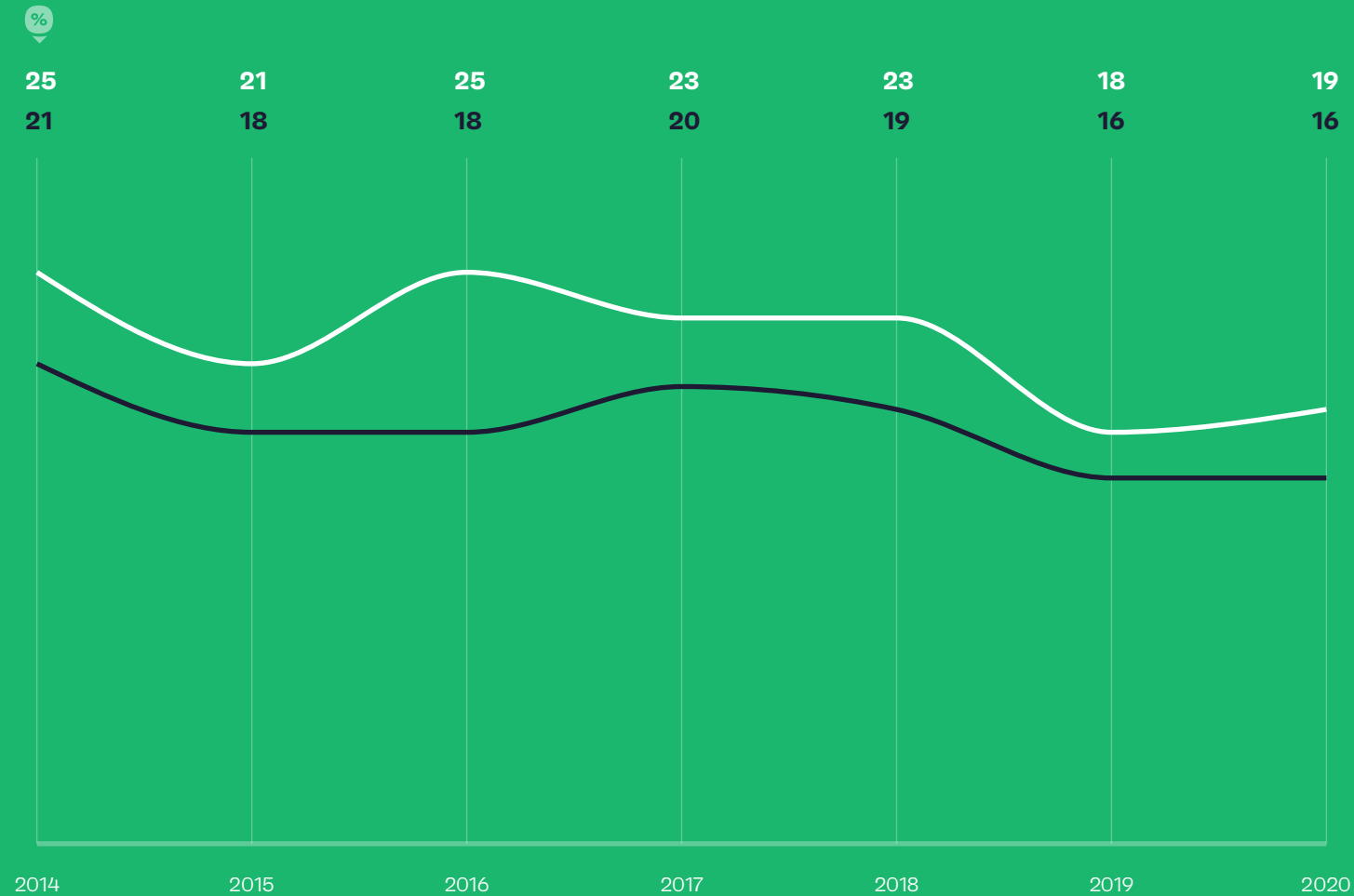


## Sharing life details has long been falling out of favor

7

% of U.S. internet users who say the following are reasons why they use social media

● To share my opinion ● To share details of what I'm doing in my daily life



GWI Core Q3 2014 – Q3 2020 389,218 U.S. internet users aged 16-64

Your one million closest friends

Less and less Gen Zs are saying that social media helps them feel more connected to others

Across all age groups, a longer trend away from self-broadcasting on social media has been around for a while. Since we started tracking these perceptions in 2014, the number of people who say they use social media to share details about their lives or their personal opinions has been steadily dropping.

Data like this tells us there's a big shift at play in how people are using social media, especially when it comes to friendship and communities. Many users are seeking to close the circle, choosing genuine interactions that have less public visibility.

This ties back to the theme of anonymity that we explored in report 2 of this series. Anonymity is not just important for creators; it's also crucial for users, giving people a break

to just be themselves without the public scrutiny that comes from living in an "always on" society.

And social platforms have started to respond. **Instagram** and **Facebook** already have "close friends" lists, with **Twitter** reportedly working on a similar "trusted friends" feature to limit tweets to a select few number of followers.

All of this speaks to a larger truth in the digital-first era: people need authentic communities online. Finding spaces that are inclusive rather than curated, where shared interests and humor are the ties that bind, can be a salve for modern stresses. No pressure to be anything other than yourself, enjoying the fun, cute, or informative content that makes you feel connected to others – just as you might feel with IRL friends.

05

# Why does this matter?

Wherever brands advertise, they typically want to evoke or align with good feelings; this is true whether you're talking about a social media campaign or a poster on the side of a building.

And when it comes to the digital space, our data has shown that positivity can come in many forms. It might come in bursts from content that's cute, funny, or inspiring – offering us a lift from daily stressors. Or it might be a slower burn, something that grows from the feelings of connection and true understanding we find in communities of like-minded people.

Platforms like Imgur, where content uplifts and community thrives, offer a sense of both. For brands, this means engaging with an audience that is more receptive to advertising – and the research helps us prove this.

Half of social media users say they're more likely to click on an ad if they're in a good mood







Half of the users we surveyed said they're more likely to click on an ad if they're in a good mood. Even more people agreed that content from brands should have positive attributes, such as being entertaining (61%), inspiring (55%), or educational (57%).

Among high-value audiences for brands online, including millennials, high-income earners, and those who like to make impulse buys, all of these figures are even higher. And among Imgur users, these metrics are higher yet. Imgurians are more likely to say content from brands should be informative (68% say this), inspiring (60%), and especially entertaining (70%) vs. the average user.

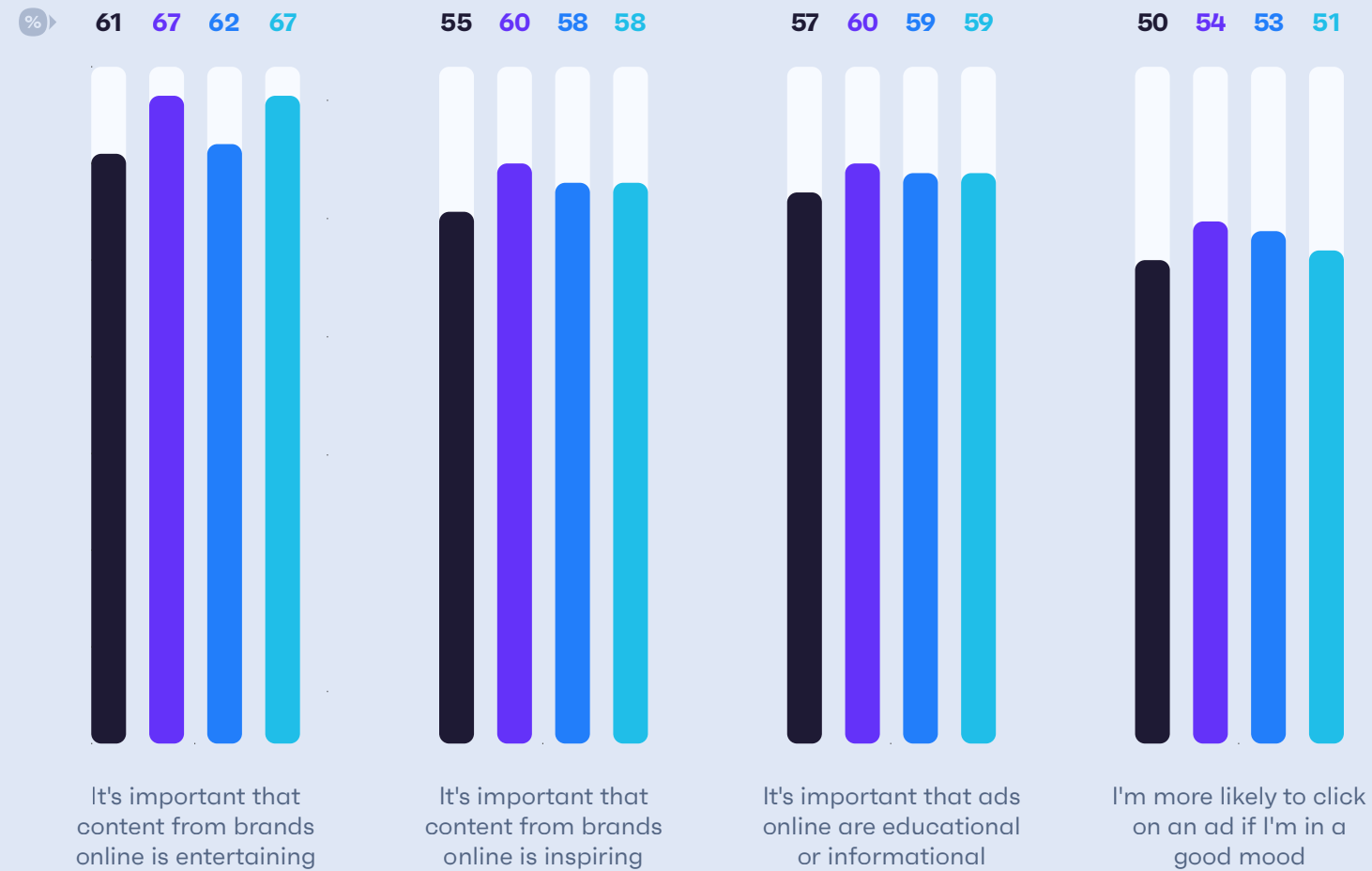
Partaking in the positive vibes, therefore, can be smart for marketing ROI in addition to a good brand-building move. Knowing how to channel the best elements of positivity for your brand – whether that's humor, compassion, or intellect – is also key.

When there's real alignment with your brand's personality, the positive sentiment created by great content or community participation is more likely to last.

## A positive environment makes a difference for brands

% of users who agree with the following statements

● Average ● Millennials ● High-income earners ● Prone to impulse purchases



GWI & Imgur Custom Study

2,026 U.S. internet users aged 16+ who use social media more than 30 minutes per day | 538 millennials | 638 in the high-income segment | 402 who say they often make impulse purchases



# Appendix

- 1 Which of these statements do you agree with? (I spend too much time online)
- 2 Which of these devices do you own or use? | How often do you visit or use these services?
- 3 Which of these statements do you agree with? (I get overwhelmed by negative content online)
- 4 Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements. (Strongly agree/somewhat agree)
- 5 Please think about the content that you read, watch, share, etc. online. Select which of the words best complete the sentences that follow.
- 6 Which of these statements do you agree with? (I get overwhelmed by negative content online)
- 7 What are your main reasons for using social media?
- 8 Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements. (Strongly agree/somewhat agree)





# Notes on methodology

All figures in this report are drawn from **GWI's online research among internet users aged 16+ in the United States**. Please note that we only interview respondents aged 16+ and our figures are representative of the online populations of the U.S., not its total population.

*When reading this report, please note that we use a mixture of data from our ongoing quarterly U.S. research (GWI USA), as well as insights from a custom study conducted in the U.S. among 2,026 active social media users (defined as those who spend at least 30 minutes per day on social media) in partnership with Imgur in August 2021.*

## Representation and quotas

In the past four waves of research between Q2 2020 - Q2 2021 GIW interviewed 81,092 internet users aged 16+ in the U.S. (approx. 20,000 per quarter)

via an **online questionnaire** for our GWI USA dataset. This is representative of an estimated 241 million internet users in the U.S. aged 16+. To ensure our sample accurately reflects the make-up of the U.S. internet population aged 16+, we set **quotas on age, gender, race/ethnicity, income, and regional location**. These quotas are **calculated using a number of demographic research sources, including the U.S. Census Bureau and Pew Research Centre**. During each wave of research, responses are weighted based on the age, gender, race/ethnicity and income of the respondent.

## Language and cultural indicators

Separate from asking about racial identity, we also ask about Hispanic identity. Any respondent is able to identify as Hispanic, regardless of their answer to the racial identity question.

Within the Hispanic group, we monitor language preferences to ensure we achieve a good balance of those identifying as Spanish-dominant vs English-dominant. **We interview a minimum of 2,500 Hispanic respondents each quarter.**

Multicultural questions are shown only to Hispanic, Black/African American and Asian American respondents. **All respondents choose whether they want to complete the survey in Spanish or English.**

## Mobile

GWI USA has been designed so that all questions are mobile-friendly. Respondents are therefore able to complete the survey via mobile, tablet, PC/desktop or laptop/notebook. This means respondents take the same version of GWI USA regardless of the device they are using.



# Get in touch



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