

Question:

Is social media free?



The Attention Economy



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What is the attention economy?

Attention Economy

A system that treats attention as a resource, where companies compete for our attention in order to keep us engaged and advertise products.

Who is trying to get your attention?

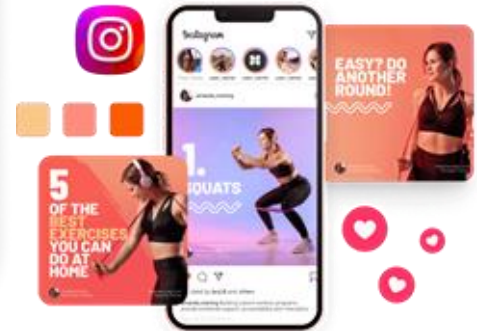


Social media platforms want your attention!

***Social media sites and apps are free.
How?***

They make money from your attention!

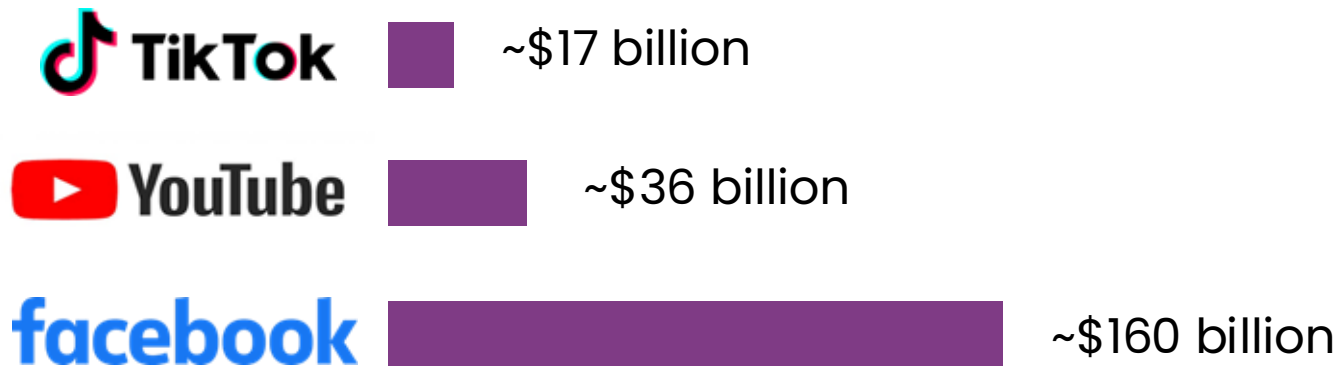
- By showing you ads and sponsored content – the more time you spend on a site, the more ads you see
- By collecting data about what you like and engage with, and selling this to advertisers



Big Business!

Companies make *a lot* of money by showing you ads

Ad Revenue for 2024



How do platforms keep your attention?

Social media platforms use a lot of different techniques to keep your attention:

- **Infinite Scroll:** you can scroll through sites like TikTok, Reddit, and Instagram, and never reach the end. There's always something new to see!
- **Engagement:** receiving "likes", comments, and reposts of your content makes you feel good, and make you want to come back for more
- **Autoplay:** apps like YouTube will automatically play another video so you'll keep watching
- **Recommendations:** sites will recommend new content to you, based on your interests

How do platforms keep your attention?

Social media platforms use a lot of different techniques to keep your attention

- **Notifications:** apps will notify you of new content, even when you're not actively using them
- **Personalization:** apps will choose the content that most appeals to you so you'll be more likely to engage with it



Creators want your attention!

- Content creators and websites make money from platforms based on how much engagement they get
- Many different kinds of creators want to capture your attention – influencers, journalists, bloggers, advertisers, etc.
- They're incentivized to keep your attention, and platforms are incentivized to promote the most attention-grabbing content



What kind of content grabs your attention the most?

Attention Getters

There are lots of ways that content creators will try to get your attention:

- Being bright and shiny
- Exploiting the curiosity gap
- Appeals to our emotions
- Negativity
- Appeals to our identities
- Novelty
- AI slop



Bright and Shiny

You've probably seen thumbnails that look like these:



\$1 vs \$1,000,000,000 Nuclear Bunker!

82M views • 9 days ago



Survive 100 Days In Prison, Win \$500,000

103M views • 3 weeks ago



2,000,000 People Get Clean Water For The First Time!

MrBeast and Mark Rober
67M views • 1 month ago



Survive 100 Days Trapped In A Private Jet, Keep It

129M views • 1 month ago

There are a *lot* of videos online. Thumbnails are made to stick out from other videos by being bright, colourful, and interesting to look at.

Curiosity Gap

The **curiosity gap** is the space between what we know and the information that's being withheld from us

Headlines, video titles, and thumbnails exploit the curiosity gap by creating a question that can only be answered by clicking

What kinds of questions do these YouTube videos create?



Tortoise vs. Hare - Who Wins?



Lasers vs Lightning- Which Is More Powerful? ⋮

Emotional Content

Content that elicits *emotional reactions* is more likely to grab your attention.

People are more likely to click on posts that make them feel:

Angry	Surprised	Afraid
Worried	Anxious	Disgusted

These emotions tend to be negative! We are naturally drawn to content that stimulates our brains to make us think we are threatened or should be scared.



Negativity

Headlines that are *negative* tend to grab more attention than headlines that are *positive*. Headlines with words like:

- *harm, heartbroken, ugly, troubling, angry*

Are more likely to get clicked when compared to headlines with *positive* words like:

- *benefit, laughed, pretty, favourite, kind*

We are drawn to negativity because we interpret it as a threat, and that grabs our attention the most

Google is going 'all in' on AI. It's part of a troubling trend in big tech

Published: May 29, 2025 4:25pm EDT

Fossil fuels harm health from 'cradle to grave': report

By AFP

Published: September 15, 2025 at 7:06PM EDT

ScienceDaily

Experts warn: Smartphones before 13 could harm mental health for life

'We'll be back': What's next for the Blue Jays after heartbreaking World Series loss?

Appeals to Identity

Content that appeals to our *identities* – the things we find important and that make us who we are – tend to grab our attention.

People are drawn to content that appeals to:

- **Political identity** – whether you are a liberal, conservative, right-wing or left-wing, etc.
- **Social issues** – issues like LGBTQ+ rights, environmental activism, etc.



PowerfulJRE

@joerogan · 20.2M subscribers · 3.4K videos

The Joe Rogan Experience podcast ...more

joerogan.com and 1 more link

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Appeals to Identity

- We are naturally drawn to content that we think is important, and **confirms** our beliefs
- We are also drawn to content that **discredits** or **challenges** those who disagree with us
- In other words: we like to hear that we're right, and that people we disagree with are wrong!



Appeals to Identity

- It's not *bad* to click on things you like and interest you
- **But:** Content creators can take advantage of someone's identity and beliefs to get them to click on their content
- **So:** if it's an *important* issue, look for information outside of social media



Novelty

- The **newest** posts, videos, pictures, and headlines tend to get the most attention. We want to be kept up-to-date, and so we focus on what we haven't seen before.
- **Consequence:** new, interesting headlines that are false or misleading grab attention, and by the time someone corrects it, people have moved on to something new.



AI Slop

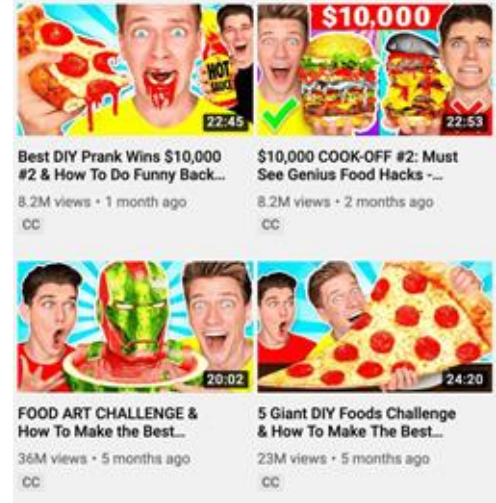
- **AI slop:** low-quality content created by AI, often depicting something that's unusual or emotional
- People will post AI slop to get clicks, and are often connected with scams



Originally created with Copilot

Clickbait

- Posts, headlines, thumbnails, or images that try to get your attention so you will click on them.
 - They will typically be sensational, exaggerated, or misleading. But that doesn't matter: the only goal of clickbait is to be as enticing as possible.
- ***What are some examples of clickbait you've seen?***



Trending

These 18 Things From Amazon Canada May Be Quirky, But I'd Use 'Em All

Excuse me while I add these to my cart.

Brittany Barber

Activity: Made You Click

Take something boring and turn in into something clickable!

Use attention-getters to make the mundane monetizable!

Come up with the most click-worthy creation and vote on a winner!



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What We Can Do: Critical Ignoring

There's a lot online that competes for our attention, but we don't have to pay attention to all of it.

We need to practice **critical ignoring** – choosing what to ignore and deciding what to pay attention to.

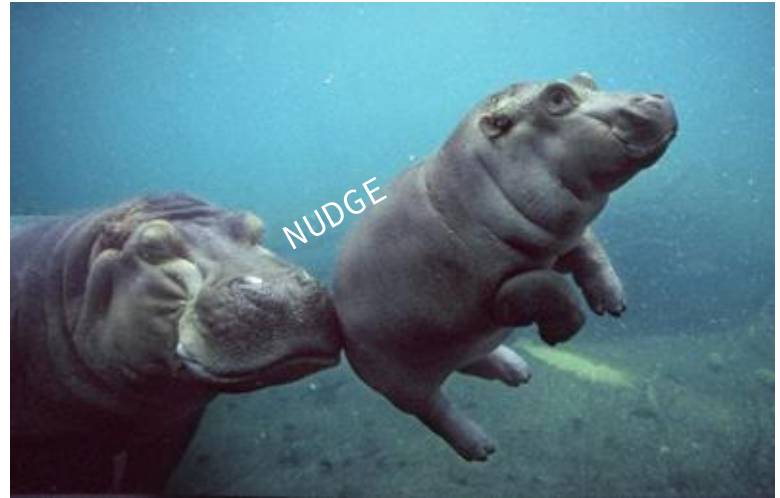
Let's look at 3 **critical ignoring strategies**



Strategy #1: Self-Nudging

Sometimes the easiest way to deal with something that's distracting us is to just get away from it.

- This requires **self-nudging**: making changes to your environment to manage your exposure to temptations.



Strategy #1: Self-Nudging

If you find yourself distracted by apps, notifications, and other tempting things online, you can:

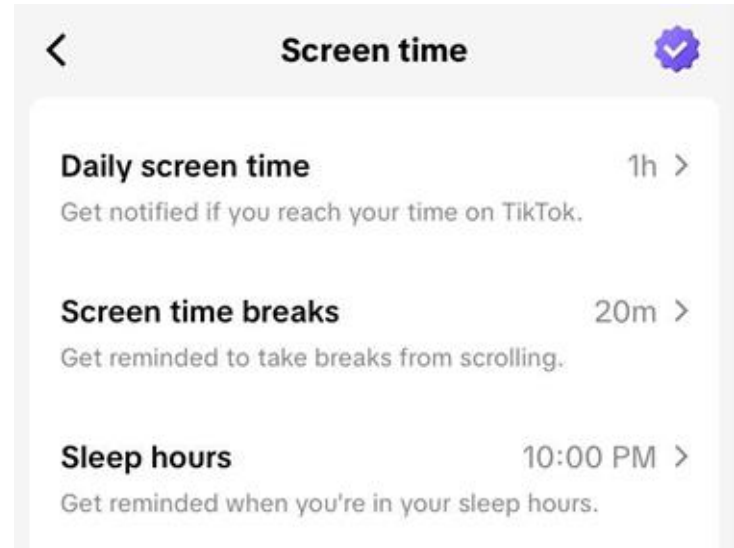
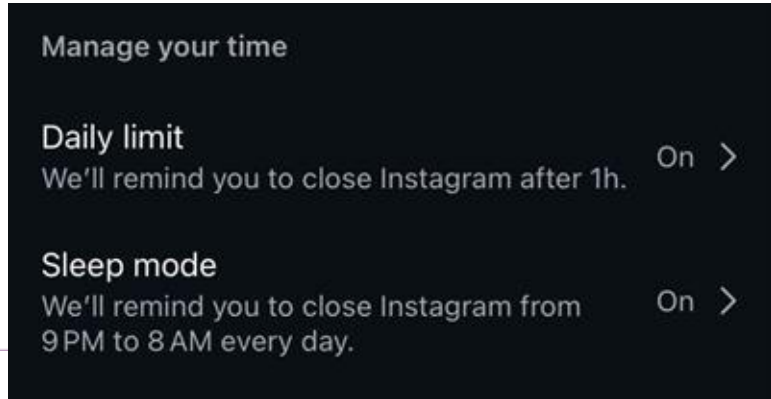
- Put your device away where it can't bother you
- Uninstall apps that distract you
- Install apps that limit your use of social media
- Change the app settings (an app's default settings are designed to make them more tempting!)



Don't use distractions as a reward, e.g. "I'll do some homework and then I'll check my phone as a treat." You'll still be thinking of the thing that's distracting you!

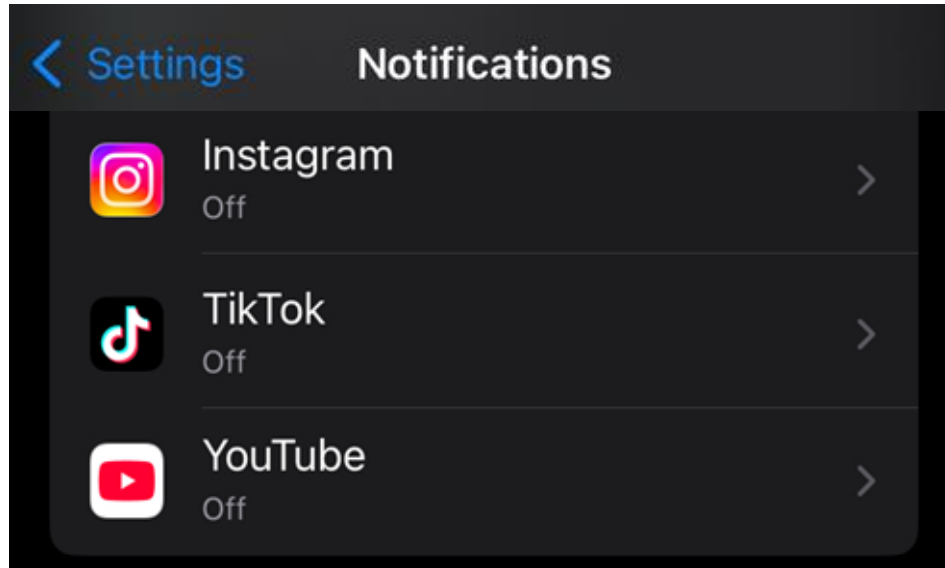
Strategy #1: Self-Nudging

Set screen time limits and sleep hours.



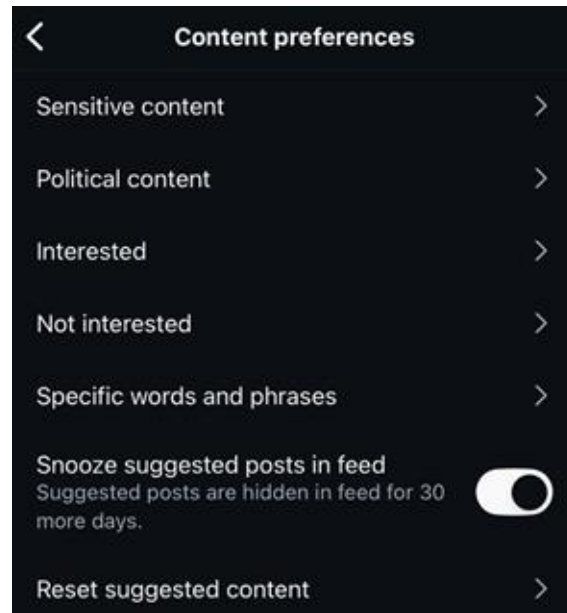
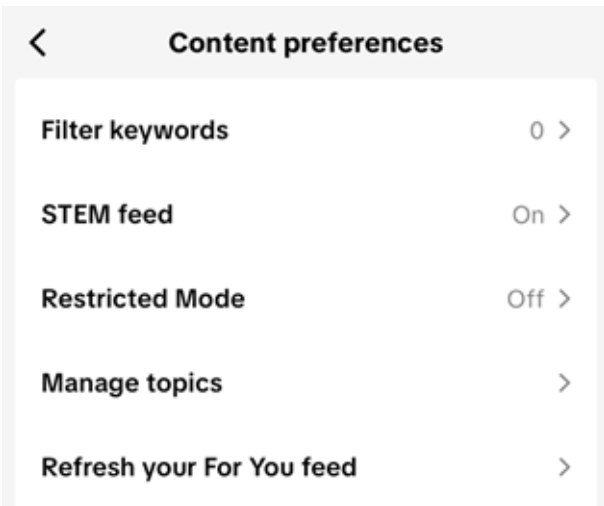
Strategy #1: Self-Nudging

Disable notifications in your phone settings or within the app.



Strategy #1: Self-Nudging

If your feed is getting *weird* you can reset it and manage types of posts you do/don't want to see.



Strategy #2: Don't Feed the Trolls

- **Trolls** capture attention by intentionally provoking or baiting people online.
- If you see someone who is trying to provoke you, don't reward them by giving them your attention. Ignore or block them, or report them if they are spreading harmful content.



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Have you come across trolls online before?

Strategy #3: Be Intentional With Your Attention

- Being aware of how apps and creators try to get your attention can help you being more intentional with what you pay attention to.
- Save your attention for content that you're legitimately interested in, and don't just engage with it because it's in front of you.

