



m&k Magazin // Attention



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Back to the Goldfish?

Media creators and advertisers fear that humanity is regressing: the "TikTok turbo" and content flood, they worry, are drastically reducing our attention span. Do we need to counteract this?

Taylor Swift has broken many records: she is the most streamed singer on the day of an album release, the highest-earning musician, and sold the most vinyl records in a single day. She even managed to occupy all top ten spots of the Billboard Hot 100 simultaneously. Her hit "All Too Well," a ten-minute song, reached the top of the Billboard Hot 100. With an average attention span of eight seconds (the famous goldfish comparison), listening to this song in its entirety would almost be a record in itself. Music listening for a small eternity, attention multiplied by 75. Incidentally, around this point, a goldfish would stop reading and turn to other topics.

The ideal TikTok video is between 9 and 15 seconds long, Instagram Reels end after 90 seconds, and YouTube Shorts after 60. In this extremely short time, it must be possible to convey content and messages. Especially young people are used to quickly scrolling between content, constantly receiving new input and interacting with emojis or likes in seconds. It is said that commercials must hit the mark in the first few seconds if they want to reach anyone. No wonder the attention span of people seems to be on a rollercoaster decline.

Social Acceleration

This is also shown by a study from the Technical University of Berlin, the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, University College Cork, and the Technical University of Denmark, which found that social media leads to a kind of "social acceleration." This means that the attention span of society for a single topic is getting shorter and shorter. What was "in" today is "out" tomorrow. While in 2013, a hashtag on Twitter – now X – was in the top 50 list for an average of 17.5 hours, three years later, it was only 11.9 hours. The same pattern was observed with movie ticket sales, hashtags, and even the use of certain word groups in books. The researchers explain this by saying that while the total amount of attention in society remains the same, the topics and content competing for it are becoming more densely packed.

"The media landscape and the way media is consumed have changed dramatically in recent years," explains Volker Neumann, Managing Director at JOM Group and expert in hybrid communication. "Even those who are still reached through TV often sit on the sofa with a smartphone or tablet, reducing their attention to the twelve-minute commercial block."



Attention as a KPI in media planning is more important than ever. "Advertising effectiveness is primarily a function of visibility and relevance. And to achieve both, I need the attention of my target group. Not an easy task in times of a highly fragmented media landscape and a high noise level bombarding us daily."

Countermovement to the Trend

At the same time, a ten-minute pop song is successful, there is a new hype about books on TikTok, and the new podcast episode from YouTuber Paluten lasts over an hour. "Oppenheimer," with a total length of three hours, was the most successful biopic of all time. How does that fit together? "There is no contradiction because every fast-paced trend also brings a certain countermovement," explains Neumann.

The Berlin Institute eye square has been dealing with the topic of attention for 25 years. The researchers have found that the attention span is indeed decreasing. "We particularly notice accelerated media usage among younger target groups," says Matthias Rothensee, Chief Scientific Officer & Partner.

"For younger study participants, the optimal length of a YouTube video is between three and five minutes, much shorter than typical TV shows in the 80s or 90s. Media content from the last century also shows an almost eerie slowness in camera movements."

Content is adapting, becoming shorter and more compressed today. AI tools that compress content to the essentials are booming. But this also increases the need for deceleration. "Humans are evolutionarily designed to have rest periods between phases of high concentration. This is partly reflected in media usage," says Rothensee.

"The desire for intense emotional staging still drives people, and this applies to advertising messages as well. Emotions need time – in tests, we often find that emotional stories are often over-condensed today, for example, in YouTube 15-second spots. But their emotional impact suffers."

Attention as a KPI

Attention competes with more and more offerings; media is consumed differently – but emotions are in demand. What does this mean for advertisers? It is clear: focusing on the KPI attention is worthwhile. The study "The Attention Payoff" by IAS and YouGov showed that 77% of German media experts reported a significant improvement in sales opportunities since implementing an attention strategy.



"Advertisers need to understand the attention performance of different platforms and incorporate it into their creation," says Matthias Rothensee. However, there is an important distinction: creative attention and media attention. "On the one hand, the platform with its mechanisms and contexts offers me a kind of canvas.

On the other hand, creative staging ensures that this canvas is skillfully played on." Recycling messages for different platforms is the wrong approach, says the researcher. Instead, it is important to tailor advertising messages to consumers on the platform. Those who do this with content that the target group really wants to see, that excites them and provides them with added value, can almost be sure of their attention. Just like Taylor Swift.

Interview with Matthias Rothensee, eye square

"A Deceleration from the Daily TikTok Turbo"

Dr. Matthias Rothensee, Chief Scientific Officer & Partner at eye square, is an expert in the economics of attention. In a brief interview with m&k, he explains how the topic is researched and whether our "attention span" has really become shorter.

M&K: Advertising has always been about attention. Why is this topic still so current?

DR. MATTHIAS ROTHENSEE: Because the amount of media content continues to increase. The platform economy of social networks is designed to keep attention for as long as possible, competing with established media. Gaming is an important trend among younger target groups and also consumes a lot of attention. Therefore, in today's increasingly digitized business models in saturated markets, it is essential to gain, process, and fill attention with messages.

You've been researching the topic of attention for 25 years. What has changed since then?

DR. MATTHIAS ROTHENSEE: The attention of consumers is a precious commodity that they are increasingly using economically. We have realized that not every attention is good attention, not every communicative message needs long focus periods. Social media, with its attention-centered business models, has shown how attention can be monetized. At the same time, consumers are increasingly forced to make a sensory selection due to the



overabundance of media content, and they do this with their eyes. People nowadays view digital advertisements only about a third as long as they did ten years ago.



It is said that people's attention spans are getting shorter. Is that so, or is the supply of information simply greater?

DR. MATTHIAS ROTHENSEE: We particularly notice accelerated media usage among younger target groups. We are used to consuming media content faster and more condensed. At the same time, there is also a need among younger target groups for intense engagement with topics. Media usage has clearly shifted, but even young people sometimes crave a long, intense, decelerated media experience – a deceleration from the daily TikTok turbo. I wouldn't be surprised if a kind of digital avant-garde emerges in the coming years, where breaks from the information flood become increasingly important.



Matthias Rothensee

Chief Scientific Officer
& Partner, eye square

Dr. Matthias Rothensee is responsible for method and innovation development at eye square. His research focuses on the implicit effect of advertising, emotions and visual perception. He is an expert in media research and multivariate statistics and develops eye square's media benchmarks. He also focuses on the role of AI and is leading the development of automated test platforms (SPARK) and dashboards.

He designed the award-winning Screenforce study "Mapping the Impact" (Real Impact Award 2023), studied "Multiscreening worldwide" for Meta (2018) and quantified the "Performance of mobile search" for Google (2017). Matthias Rothensee optimizes communication for clients such as Deutsche Telekom, Stepstone and MediaMarktSaturn.

He speaks at conferences (e.g. dmexco, Horizont, IleX) and publishes in specialist journals (e.g. Journal of Consumer Marketing, European Business Review and Social Science Computer Review).

In addition to eye square, he teaches advertising psychology and research methods.