

# Microsoft study claims human attention span now lags behind goldfish

May 15 2015, by Bob Yirka

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Common goldfish. Credit: public domain

(Medical Xpress)—Microsoft has conducted a study aimed at learning how modern technology is impacting the attention span of people who use it. They have [published](#) their results on their own website, and claim also that they have used Sohlberg and Mateer's model of attention, which allows for providing a timed result. As part of their study, they note that there are three types of human attention: sustained (prolonged focus), selective (maintaining focus despite distractions) and alternating

(shifting attention between tasks or stimuli). The study consisted of surveying 200 people and administering EEG scans to 112 volunteers.

The study was conducted in Canada and its main goal was to determine the impact of modern digital technology devices on attention spans as it relates to advertised material presented on various media.

The surveys consisted of asking questions and asking people to play games that have been designed to measure attention span while allowing for metrics to be taken. Respondent surveys that were returned were separated into three categories: high, medium and low attention span. The EEG scans were administered while volunteers watched different types of media and engaged in various activities—both to note when attention wandered from one subject to another.

In analyzing the data obtained, the researchers found that the average attention span for the respondents and volunteers was just eight seconds, down from twelve back in 2000, and one second shorter than the average goldfish. They also found that using digital devices has caused an improvement in multi-tasking skills.

They researchers also found that those volunteers who used their digital devices more than others, tended to have more trouble focusing in situations where it was required to function. They also noted that early adopters or users who have used digital devices quite heavily have learned over time to front-load their attention, allowing large amounts of information to flow in and to be processed, before switching their focus to something else, resulting in an increase in bursts of high attention. The researchers suggest this means they are better at determining what information they want to focus on and which to ignore.

On the other hand, the researchers also found that users that tend to use multiple screens (such as using their phones while watching TV on

another screen) tend to have difficulty with filtering information that is coming at them on any of their devices. They suggest that overall our brains are adapting to the new technology as it develops and a shorter attention span may simply be a normal side effect.

# Attention spans

**Attention** is a necessary ingredient for effective advertising. Canadians' digital lifestyles are changing their brains -- decreasing the ability for prolonged attention and increasing appetites for more stimuli.

**44%**

of Canadians have to really concentrate to stay focused on tasks

**45%**

easily get sidetracked from what they're doing

**Marketing must also evolve...**

## Don't believe what you hear: it's not just 'kids these days'.

Digital behaviours and lifestyles are correlated with attention; demographics aren't.

### Top factors that impact attention:



#### Media consumption:

**1/2**

of Canadians automatically reach for their phone when nothing is occupying their attention.



#### Social media usage:

**2/3**

use social media for news, but 57% prefer getting media through long-form sources.



#### Technology adoption rate:

**59%**

would feel lost without the devices they use everyday

Digital behaviours negatively affect the ability to remain focused for extended periods of time, **but** savvy Canadians are also training themselves to process information more efficiently through short bursts of high attention.

#### Multi-screening behaviour:

**2/3**

often use other devices while watching TV

Multi-screening doesn't reduce the potential impact of advertising -- it improves the ability to effectively switch tasks, emotional connection, and encoding to memory.



Credit: Microsoft

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