

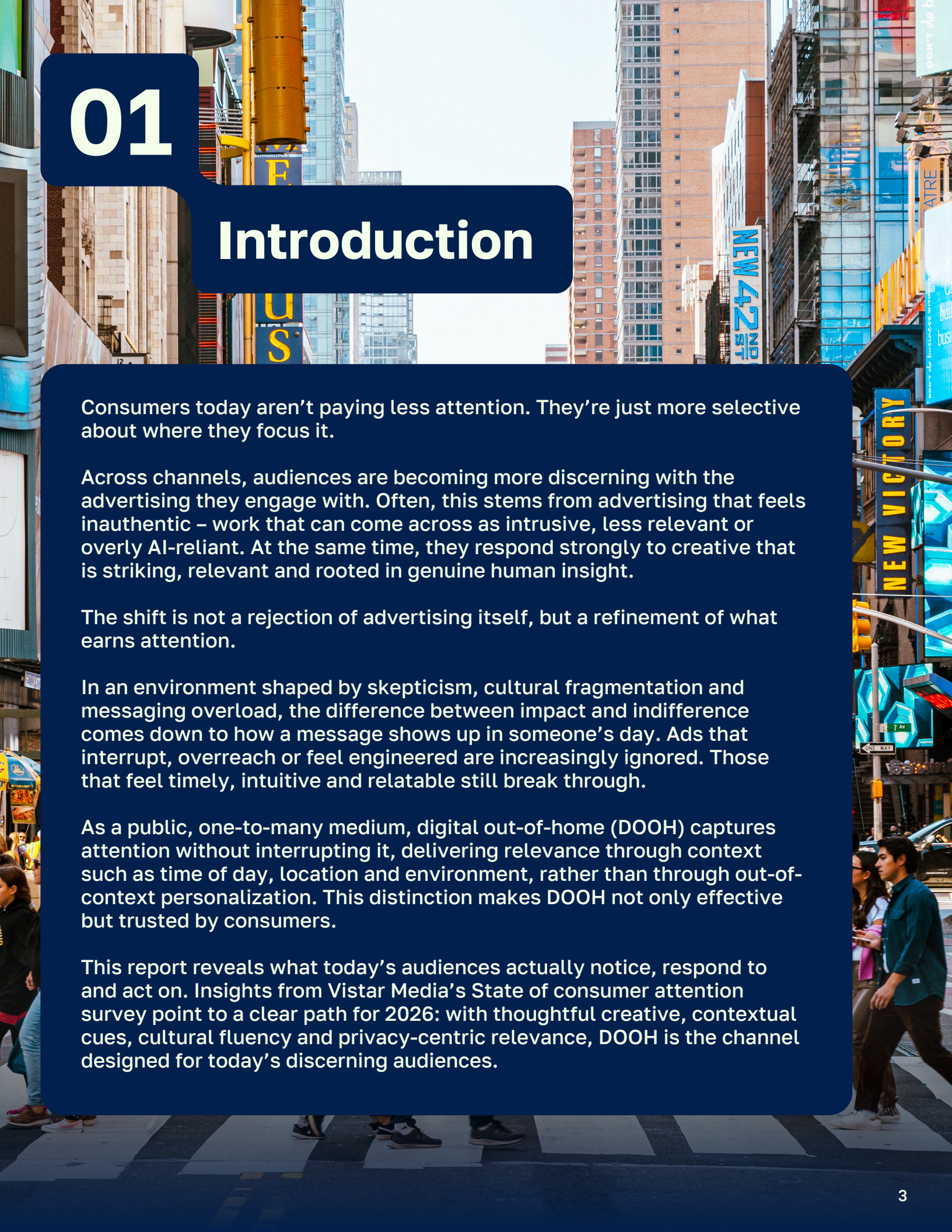
The state of consumer attention:

What people will notice,
trust and act on in 2026



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01

Introduction

Consumers today aren't paying less attention. They're just more selective about where they focus it.

Across channels, audiences are becoming more discerning with the advertising they engage with. Often, this stems from advertising that feels inauthentic – work that can come across as intrusive, less relevant or overly AI-reliant. At the same time, they respond strongly to creative that is striking, relevant and rooted in genuine human insight.

The shift is not a rejection of advertising itself, but a refinement of what earns attention.

In an environment shaped by skepticism, cultural fragmentation and messaging overload, the difference between impact and indifference comes down to how a message shows up in someone's day. Ads that interrupt, overreach or feel engineered are increasingly ignored. Those that feel timely, intuitive and relatable still break through.

As a public, one-to-many medium, digital out-of-home (DOOH) captures attention without interrupting it, delivering relevance through context such as time of day, location and environment, rather than through out-of-context personalization. This distinction makes DOOH not only effective but trusted by consumers.

This report reveals what today's audiences actually notice, respond to and act on. Insights from Vistar Media's State of consumer attention survey point to a clear path for 2026: with thoughtful creative, contextual cues, cultural fluency and privacy-centric relevance, DOOH is the channel designed for today's discerning audiences.

02

Intent, emotion & relevance

Standout creative is most effective when it is thoughtful, intentional and adds value. 27% of respondents say the impact of edgy creative “depends on how it’s done,” while only 23% see a clear upside even when campaigns are executed well. This demonstrated that execution and intent determine whether attention is earned or lost.

When respondents were asked what makes an ad truly memorable, relevance and emotional resonance rose to the top:

- 53% say an ad sticks because it feels personally relevant
- 69% cite humor, emotion, or pure entertainment
- 45% point to creativity or unexpected elements
- 43% say it connects to something they care about

Key takeaways



Memorability is driven less by shock value and more by creative that is purposeful, emotionally resonant and aligned with authentic behavioral signals and brand values. Work earns attention by offering something meaningful to the consumer, not by pushing boundaries for the sake of it.



DOOH rewards smart, attention-grabbing creative — from witty headlines to striking visuals — that engages audiences through relevance, humor and relatability.

03

AI & creative resonance

As AI-labeled creative becomes more common, consumers are developing more nuanced expectations – responding not just to transparency, but to how thoughtfully trust and cultural relevance are addressed. When ads are disclosed as AI-made:

- **43% say their trust decreases**
- **14% say their trust increases**
- **36% report no change**

This skepticism is most pronounced among younger audiences and varies by demographic:

- **Among respondents aged 16–28, distrust rises to 58%**
- **Men tend to be neutral overall, while women skew more skeptical**

Key takeaways



Trust grows when creative reflects genuine human motivations: relevance, emotion, cultural context and clear value. Transparency sets the stage, but audiences respond most to work that carries an authentic, relatable perspective.



AI in advertising is most effective when it supports creative output through research, surfacing audience insights and trends that can improve how ideas are developed and brought to market. Creative should be shaped by human insight and not solely rely on AI as the primary driver.



DOOH's physical presence allows creative to integrate naturally into consumers' environments. From transit hubs to gyms, it delivers contextually relevant messaging that feels thoughtful and grounded in real-world moments, rather than impersonal or generic.

When consumers are aware that ads are fully AI-generated or AI-driven, perceptions can shift. When respondents were asked how it makes them feel:

- **21% respond positively**
- **30% feel neutral or say they expect it**
- **33% say it feels invasive**

Both women and older respondents are more sensitive to privacy issues, reinforcing the growing tension between personalization and trust.

Key takeaways



DOOH addresses many privacy concerns by operating as a one-to-many channel, giving brands a built-in credibility advantage over channels reliant on hyper-personalization.



Dynamic creative optimization (DCO) delivers personalization at scale using context such as time, location, weather and environment – enhancing relevance without compromising privacy.



DOOH fits naturally into how people live, move and experience the world. Creative is shaped by real-world context, while dynamic optimization happens behind the scenes, so audiences see messaging that feels authentic and trustworthy.

04

Fragmented culture, authenticity & creative resonance

Audience preferences point to creative that resonates culturally and emotionally:

- Humor (47%) and nostalgia (26%) are the top-performing creative tones.
- 52% prefer a blend of broad messaging with personal relevance



Key takeaways



Creative should tap into shared cultural moments in ways that feel both timely and contextually meaningful.



DOOH's scale, strategic placement and immediacy create a canvas for humor, nostalgia and culturally fluent ideas that connect with audiences through shared experiences.



Audiences respond to genuine insight, not just big names:

- **58% say authenticity matters more than celebrity, while only 4% prioritize fame**
- **34% trust the message itself over any particular messenger**
- **26% look to credible experts**
- **Community members (18%) and relatable creators (~11%) carry moderate influence**
- **Celebrities (7%) have minimal impact**

Key takeaways



Trust is gained from proof, clarity and expertise, especially when talent genuinely reflects a brand's real values. Aligned voices and credible storytelling resonate more than fame alone.



Authenticity should guide talent selection. Experts, credible storytellers and community voices aligned with brand values carry more weight than influencers or celebrities. Fame can support a story if it fits naturally, but the brand ethos must carry the message.

05

Context & timing

DOOH's effectiveness spans the entire customer journey, with creative quality, placement, context and timing working together to drive recall and action:

- 30% of respondents are more likely to act when seeing DOOH pre-purchase
- 16% find post-purchase ads validating
- 40% say creative quality is the top driver of recall
- 28% see a recall boost from unexpected placements
- 24% see a boost from relevant contextual cues

Key takeaways



Distinctive, environment-specific DOOH creative captures attention, enhances memorability and drives stronger campaign performance. By appearing in everyday spaces, ads reach consumers in a way that feels aligned with the moment rather than disruptive.



Placement, context and environmental cues work together strategically, turning each location into an opportunity to boost recall, drive engagement and amplify overall impact.



Timing amplifies relevance across the customer journey. Pre-purchase placements drive consideration, in-the-moment context ensures resonance and post-purchase placements reinforce messaging over time.



06

Looking ahead

DOOH commands attention, earns trust and sparks engagement by marrying bold creative with contextual relevance and cultural fluency. Its physical presence, privacy-centric delivery and adaptability across diverse environments make it uniquely suited to today's attention landscape. In 2026, DOOH emerges as a critical lever for marketers seeking to reclaim attention, connect meaningfully with audiences and drive measurable impact across the consumer journey.

For more information on Vistar Media and DOOH, visit www.vistarmedia.com or reach out to info@vistarmedia.com.