

**Lean In vs. Lean Back:
Profiling the Podcast Listener and Viewer**

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Sources:
Nielsen Scarborough Podcast Buying Power Service (May 2026 Release)
Nielsen's The Record (Q1 2026)
Nielsen Fan Insights, USA, Jun 2025 - Feb 2026

Podcasts & the outcomes-driven creator economy

The creator economy is no longer just about buzz; it is about [outcomes](#). Nielsen's recent creator research points to the same conclusion across platforms: creator-led media can build deeper brand connection, lift purchase intent and deliver measurable return. That makes podcasts especially important right now. As a medium built around trusted voices and loyal communities, podcasting gives brands a direct line into creator influence at a moment when audience attention is fragmenting and the lines between content, personality and commerce keep getting blurrier.

And, podcast consumption in the U.S. is hitting historic highs. According to Nielsen's Q1 2026 edition of [The Record](#), podcasts now capture an impressive **20% of daily ad-supported audio time** among American adults (18+).

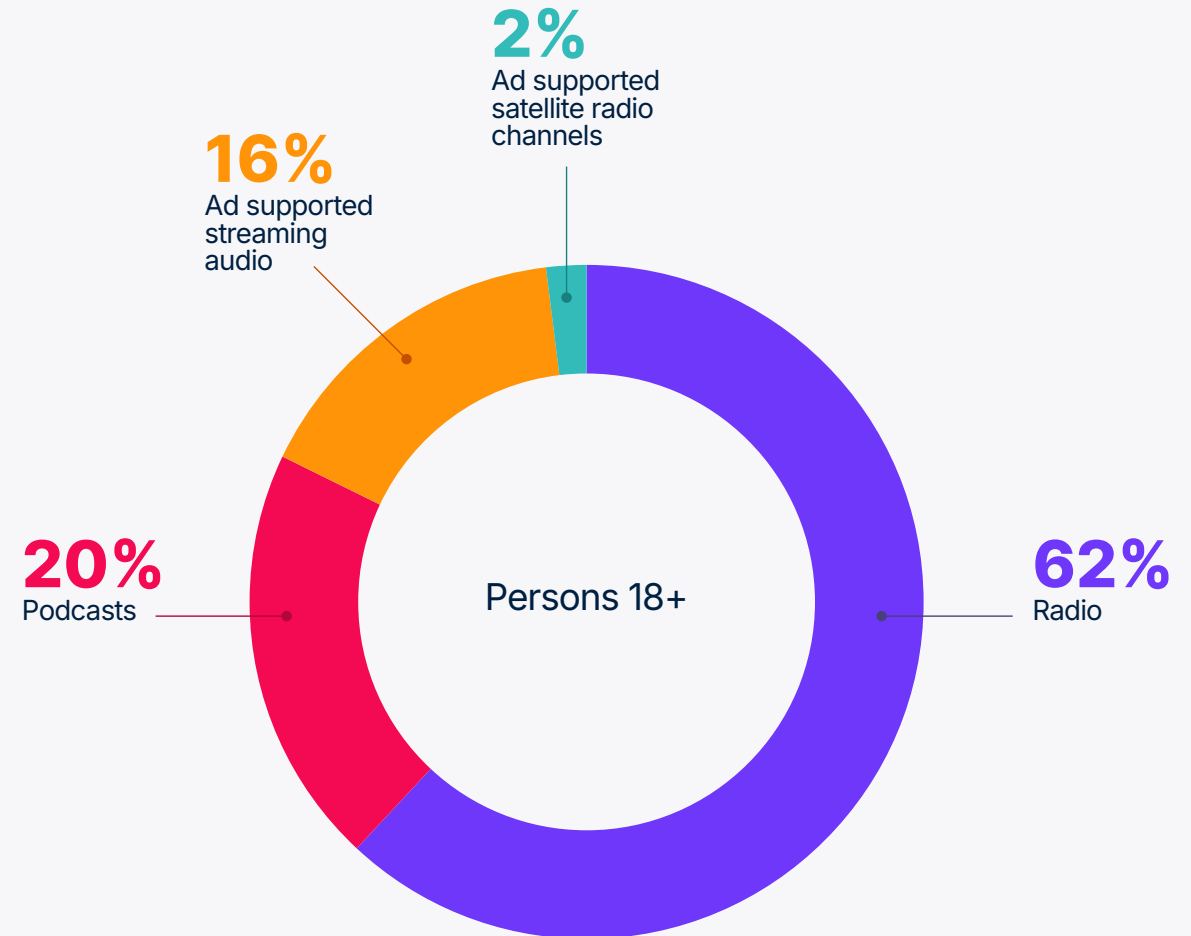
As the overall pie expands, the format itself is diversifying. While the medium built its empire entirely on audio, video-enabled platforms have carved out a highly visible space for the podcast "viewer." For publishers and advertisers alike, a pivotal question has emerged: *How does a consumer's choice to either listen or watch change their demographic profile, daily mindset, and commercial responsiveness?*

New data from Nielsen's [Scarborough](#) Podcast Buying Power service reveals that while both audiences are highly valuable, format choice signals entirely distinct consumer frameworks.

Podcasts own a growing share of time spent listening

20% of daily ad-supported audio time among American adults

Share of daily time spent with ad supported audio among U.S. audiences



Analysis does not include listening to music/music videos on YouTube
Source: Edison Research at SSRS, "Share of Ear®" Q1 2026

Audio remains the bedrock of the industry

Despite the immense industry buzz surrounding video podcasts, audio streaming remains the absolute foundation of the ecosystem. Data shows that **90% of all monthly podcast consumers choose to listen**, while **62% engage by watching**.

When we look closely at individual genres, most of podcast consumption is still audio—by a large margin. Across the top 10 most popular genres, more than 96% of consumers are listening while the amount watching varies between 58% and 80%. Digging deeper into a duplication analysis across these genres, on average only 2% of consumers are watching exclusively (watching, not listening) while 29% are listening exclusively (listening, not watching). Meanwhile, 69% are doing both (listening and watching).

Podcast genres impact audience preference for audio or video engagement

Genre (Ranked in order of monthly audience size)	Watching exclusively	Listening exclusively	Watching and Listening
 Comedy	3%	30%	67%
 News	4%	30%	66%
 Society & Culture	2%	33%	65%
 True Crime	1%	29%	70%
 Sports	3%	20%	77%
 Business	2%	30%	68%
 History	2%	32%	66%
 Health & Fitness	2%	21%	78%
 Music	1%	23%	77%
 Arts	0%	42%	58%

Source: Nielsen Scarborough Podcast Buying Power Service (May 2026 Release)

Sports content is in demand in every medium

Across the top 10 genres, Sports has the most podcast viewers. Because sports programming naturally relies on visual highlights, physical demonstrations, game tape, and on-screen graphics, it acts as a unique bridge between the two experiences, drawing the closest parity between listeners and viewers.

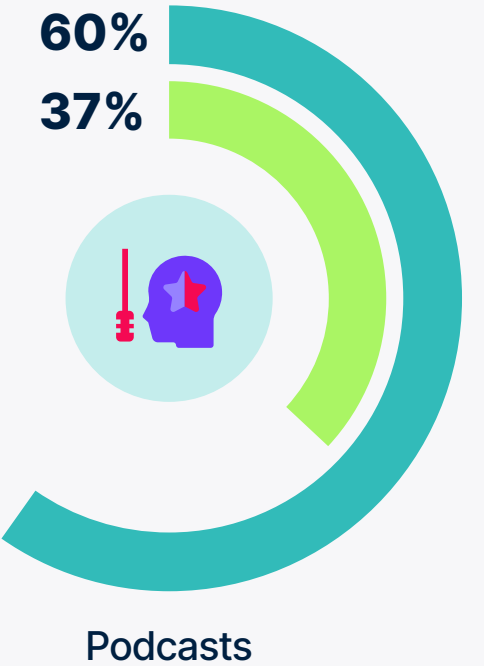
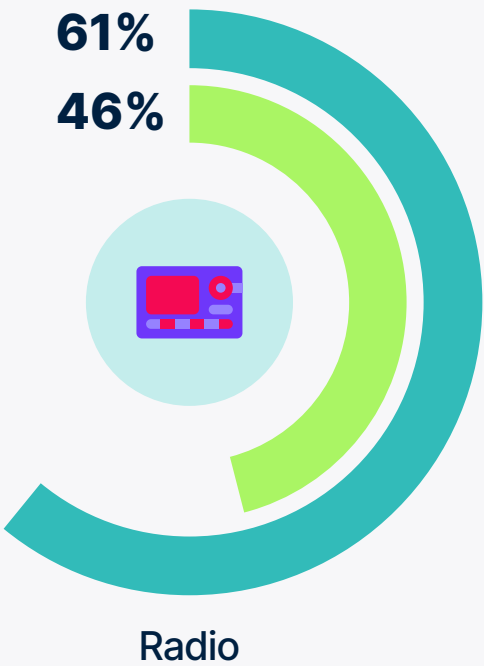
As the [FIFA World Cup 2026™](#) plays off across North America, U.S. soccer fans display these listening and watching behaviors to engage in non-stop coverage of the tournament. American soccer fans are more likely than the general population to listen to radio and podcasts for sports news, and 77% report that they use those mediums specifically for soccer content.

Turn up the volume on soccer fans

While there's nothing like watching the action on the pitch, soccer fans are also avid listeners. American soccer fans are more likely than the general population to listen to radio and podcasts for sports news, and 77% report that they use those mediums specifically for soccer content.

Use of audio to stay informed about sports

● Soccer fans ● Gen pop



Source: Nielsen Fan Insights, USA, Jun 2025 - Feb 2026

Efficiency vs. Entertainment: Two distinct consumer mindsets

The core differentiator between a listener and a watcher isn't just the app they open—it is their lifestyle profile and frame of mind.

The Pragmatic Listener: The “Secondary Soundtrack”

For audio consumers, podcasts function as an ambient companion seamlessly integrated into their daily routine. Audio plays in the background, serving as a “secondary soundtrack” to their life. They lean in listening to podcast content, actively adding value to passive schedule gaps like the morning commute, intense workouts, or simple desk work.

The Profile: As a group, listeners are significantly more likely to be married, highly educated, and employed full-time. They navigate highly structured, busy lifestyles and use audio to optimize their time.

The Interactive Watcher: The “Downtime Destination”

For video consumers, a podcast is treated as a primary media destination. They treat content as an active, focused viewing ritual. Viewers lean back, seeking entertainment and information primarily to fill their dedicated downtime.

The Profile: Podcast video viewers are more likely to be students navigating flexible daily schedules. They look to video versions to feel a closer, face-to-face experiential connection with the hosts, turning on a podcast when they have the dedicated time to sit and watch.



The podcast consumer comparison: Listener vs. watcher



*Data analysis based on Scarborough/Podcast Recontact Study, projected nationwide.

Conversion mechanics: How podcast format drives consumer action

For brands trying to choose between an audio sponsorship or a video-overlay campaign, the good news is that both formats are highly effective at driving real-world ROI. However, the path to purchase looks very different depending on how the content is consumed.

Audio Consumers are Direct Digital Responders

Because audio listeners are frequently on the move—driving, working out, or completing tasks—they lean heavily into direct digital pathways that don't require heavy social interaction. They are highly action-oriented: 46% look up websites for more information on an advertised product they heard about. Notably, 25% execute a website purchase or order after hearing an ad.

Video Consumers are High-Intent Translators

Video watchers bring an immersive, multi-screen energy to their consumption. Because they are already seated and looking at a screen, their digital conversion rate is remarkably potent: 29% execute a website purchase after seeing an ad, running virtually on par with the strong baseline set by audio. Furthermore, watchers act as active brand amplifiers, showing a much higher likelihood to follow or post about a brand on social media or visit a physical storefront after exposure.



Behavior / Campaign Action	Podcast Listeners (Audio)	Podcast Watchers (Video)
Primary mindset	Multitasking, utility-driven	Focused, entertainment-seeking
Consumption style	Ambient "Secondary Soundtrack"	Intentional "Lean Back" destination
Product research rate	46% seek more info on a website	Highly likely to engage on social channels
Direct digital purchase	25% execute web purchase/order	29% execute web purchase/order

Strategic takeaways for marketers

The modern podcast landscape can no longer be evaluated as a monolithic block. Format choice changes who is consuming and how they are paying attention.



To drive volume and immediate digital response:

Audio sponsorships remain an unmatched tool.

The **Pragmatic Listener** uses audio to fill every gap in their day, making them highly receptive to clear, direct-response web URLs and promotional codes while they go about their day.

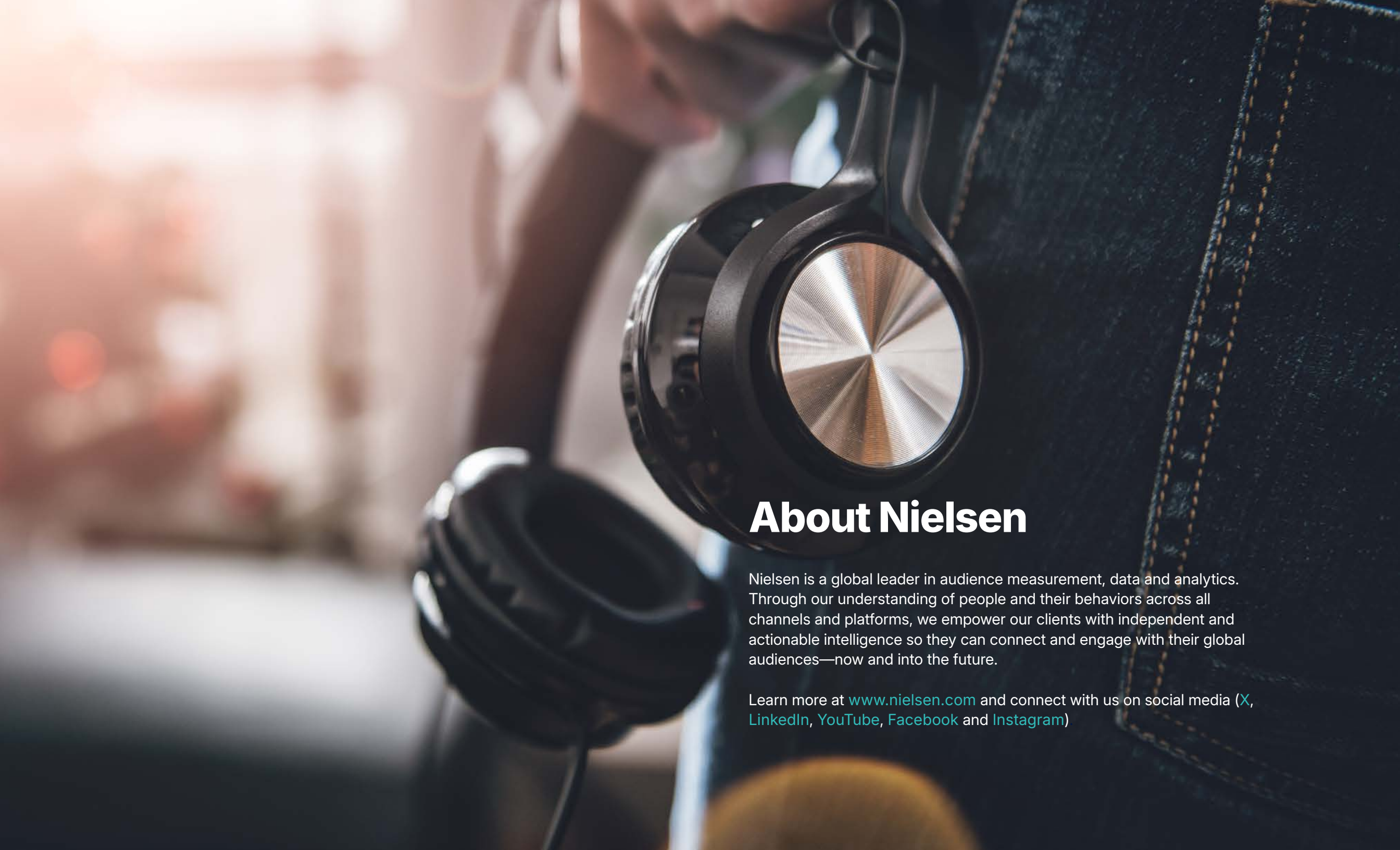


To build deep brand equity and visual awareness:

Video integrations offer premium engagement.

The **Interactive Watcher** is giving you their full visual attention during downtime, making them the perfect target for sensory, storytelling-driven campaigns that ripple across social media.

By aligning creative execution with whether an audience is leaning in with their ears or leaning back with their eyes, brands can capture the full spectrum of the modern consumer's day.



About Nielsen

Nielsen is a global leader in audience measurement, data and analytics. Through our understanding of people and their behaviors across all channels and platforms, we empower our clients with independent and actionable intelligence so they can connect and engage with their global audiences—now and into the future.

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