



PART 1

Read the text below and answer questions 1–13.

THE ATTENTION ECONOMY AND DIGITAL WELLBEING

Digital platforms are often described as competing for “attention,” but the idea has a longer intellectual history than most app users realise. In 1971 the economist and cognitive scientist Herbert Simon argued that in an information-rich environment, attention becomes the limiting factor: a wealth of information produces a poverty of attention. In other words, when content is abundant, what is scarce is the capacity to notice, process, and decide. The modern “attention economy” applies this insight to online markets. Many services are offered at low cost to users because revenue is generated indirectly through advertising, subscriptions, or data-driven targeting. In this model, time-on-platform becomes a commercial asset, and companies have a structural incentive to maximise it.

This incentive shapes not only what platforms distribute but how they are designed. A major strand of research and practice—often called persuasive technology or *captology*—developed from work associated with B.J. Fogg, who analysed how digital systems can be built to influence behaviour. Persuasive design does not necessarily rely on a single addictive feature. Instead, it uses combinations of small frictions removed and small rewards delivered, creating a pattern of repeated checking. “Infinite scroll” minimises stopping points; autoplay prevents deliberate choice about whether to continue; and notifications create intermittent prompts that pull attention back to the device. Many of these features are paired with personalised recommendation systems that learn from clicks, watch time, or shares. Because algorithms are optimised for engagement metrics, they may prioritise content that generates strong emotional reactions, since such material is more likely to be revisited and circulated.

A key behavioural mechanism in these designs is the use of variable rewards. Like slot machines, feeds and notification systems can offer unpredictable payoffs: a funny post, a flattering comment, a dramatic update, or a relevant message might appear—or might not. Uncertainty can increase repetition, because the next refresh could deliver a reward. Over time, this can encourage “continuous partial attention,” a state in which a user remains semi-alert to multiple streams of information without fully committing to any single task. The result is not only more time online but also a fragmented pattern of focus, where work, leisure, and social connection blur into a continuous sequence of small interactions.

Digital wellbeing is a framework that asks whether technology use supports psychological health and everyday functioning rather than undermining them. Concerns arise when usage becomes compulsive, interrupts sleep, displaces offline relationships, or erodes the



ability to sustain concentration. Some studies associate particular patterns of social media use with anxiety, lowered mood, or stress, though findings vary across individuals and contexts. Importantly, wellbeing is not only about total minutes. A brief, purposeful session—checking a timetable or messaging a family member—can be beneficial, while a longer session driven by restless switching may leave a user more fatigued. This is why researchers increasingly distinguish between intentional use and habit-driven checking.

Establishing clear causal relationships, however, is difficult. Many findings are correlational: people who feel lonely or stressed may be drawn to online interaction, but heavy use can also exacerbate those feelings, producing a feedback loop. Measurement adds further complications. “Screen time” can include work, learning, navigation, creative production, or genuine social support, alongside passive scrolling. A single metric can therefore collapse very different activities into one number. As a result, some research now focuses on the quality of use—what people are doing, under what conditions, and with what goals—rather than treating time as the sole indicator of harm.

In response to public concern, many platforms have introduced dashboards, reminders, or “do not disturb” settings. These tools can help users notice patterns and reduce interruptions, yet critics argue they can also shift responsibility onto individuals while leaving the underlying incentive structure intact. If revenue depends on engagement, wellbeing features may be designed to appear responsive without substantially lowering time-on-platform. This tension fuels a wider debate about whether self-control tools are enough when the surrounding environment is engineered to capture attention through frictionless design and variable rewards.

Policy proposals therefore focus on incentives, transparency, and the protection of vulnerable users. Some regulators discuss restricting certain persuasive design practices for minors, requiring clearer disclosure of how recommendation systems rank content, or limiting behavioural advertising based on detailed tracking. In the European context, reforms associated with the Digital Services Act have been discussed as part of a broader shift toward platform accountability, including transparency obligations and risk assessments for systemic harms. Others emphasise competition and interoperability: if users can move between services more easily, platforms may have less power to lock attention through design patterns that discourage switching.

At the same time, individual strategies remain meaningful, especially when matched to personal goals and constraints. Turning off non-essential notifications reduces interruptions; setting device-free periods can protect sleep and conversations; and adopting “single-tasking” routines can reduce the cognitive costs of constant switching. One influential approach sometimes described as digital minimalism recommends using



technologies selectively, in ways that serve clearly defined values rather than default habits. Yet individual control is harder when the same device is required for work and education, and when social expectations make immediate responsiveness feel mandatory. This is why many analysts argue that wellbeing is not only a personal discipline but also a design and policy question about how attention is priced, traded, and protected.

Ultimately, the attention economy reveals a mismatch between what benefits platforms and what benefits users. Engagement metrics reward staying online, while wellbeing often requires limits, sustained focus, and time away from screens. The most realistic goal is not simply to reduce use across the board, but to align technology with human needs through better design choices, clearer transparency, and practical habits that protect attention in daily life.

Questions 1–5

Select the correct answer.

1 What point does the writer make at the beginning of the passage about the idea of competing for attention?

- A** It developed only after personalised recommendation systems became common.
- B** It has an intellectual history that predates modern digital platforms.
- C** It was originally proposed as a way to measure advertising revenue.
- D** It became relevant only when online services began charging subscription fees.

2 Why does the passage refer to Herbert Simon?

- A** To introduce the principle that plentiful information makes human attention comparatively scarce.
- B** To identify the origin of advertising-funded services that charge users little or nothing.
- C** To show that information-rich environments improve people’s capacity to process choices.
- D** To demonstrate that attention scarcity first appeared with personalised online platforms.

3 How do “variable rewards” influence user behaviour?

- A** Regularly scheduled rewards teach users exactly when worthwhile content will appear.
- B** Personalised ranking removes uncertainty by limiting feeds to material users already prefer.
- C** Unpredictable payoffs make users repeat an action because the next attempt may be rewarding.



D Emotional content reduces repeated checking by making users leave a platform more quickly.

4 Why can screen time be a misleading measure?

A Screen-time tools record active work but fail to count passive browsing.

B The measure shows which platforms earn revenue from behavioural advertising.

C It counts the number of interruptions rather than the duration of technology use.

D A single total combines activities with very different purposes and effects.

5 Which statement best represents the writer's overall position?

A Platform wellbeing tools can resolve the problem without changes to commercial incentives.

B Improvement requires personal practices alongside changes to design, incentives and transparency.

C Structural regulation is necessary because individual strategies provide no meaningful benefit.

D The main objective should be to reduce every form of technology use by the same amount.

Questions 6–9

Complete the summary below. Choose **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS** from the text for each answer.

How digital platforms shape attention and wellbeing

Platforms may prolong viewing through **6**, which continues playing media without requiring another decision from the user. A behavioural mechanism called **7** uses unpredictable payoffs to encourage repeated checking. Because much of the evidence connecting technology use with mental health is **8**, researchers increasingly examine the quality and purpose of online activity rather than duration alone. To reduce the cognitive costs caused by repeatedly changing tasks, users can adopt **9** routines.

Questions 10–13

Choose **TRUE** if the statement agrees with the information given in the text, choose **FALSE** if the statement contradicts the information, or choose **NOT GIVEN** if there is no information on this.

10 The passage suggests that the attention economy gives platforms a financial incentive to maximise time-on-platform.



11 The passage states that “screen time” measures only passive entertainment and excludes work or learning.

12 The passage claims that the Digital Services Act was introduced before persuasive technology became widely used.

13 The passage argues that individual strategies are always easy to apply, regardless of work or education demands.

Answer Key

1. B
2. A
3. C
4. D
5. B
6. autoplay
7. variable rewards
8. correlational
9. single-tasking
10. TRUE
11. FALSE
12. NOT GIVEN
13. FALSE