



2025 Marketing Competition | Team Ladybug Z-Test

IS MOBILE MOVING BACK TO BASICS?

This project examines how young consumers view screen time and explores opportunities for AT&T to understand the new “dumb” phone trend.



[Supplemental Materials](#)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Team Ladybug Z-Test found that while Gen Z and Millennials show a clear interest in lowering their screen time, they are not willing to give up the convenience, functionality, and connectivity of smartphones. Across our in-depth interviews, social listening, market research, and competitor analysis, we consistently saw a gap between the desire to disconnect and the reality of how essential smartphones have become.

Although the market offers simpler alternatives like “dumb” phones, which provide basic calling and texting at lower costs, only a very small portion of consumers are genuinely willing to downgrade; out of almost twenty interviewees, just two or three said they would consider it. Social listening reinforced this pattern: online conversations on TikTok and Reddit show curiosity about switching to feature phones, but most users ultimately hesitate because these devices lack core features they consider necessary.

Our broader market and competitor research also revealed that consumers are slowing their upgrade cycles, signaling a desire for more intentional tech use rather than a full shift away from smartphones. Together, these findings underscore an important opportunity for AT&T: consumers want support in managing screen time, but they still rely on the smartphone ecosystem, and the inconvenience of being disconnected currently outweighs the appeal of simplifying their devices.

WHAT ARE “DUMB” PHONES?

“Dumb” phones are simple mobile devices designed for basic calling and texting. They use physical keypads, have small non-touch displays, and offer very long battery life. Some models include limited features such as a basic camera, FM radio, flashlight, or music playback. They do not support apps, social media, or constant notifications. “Dumb” phones appeal to people who want a simple and distraction-free mobile experience.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS



FEWER DISTRACTIONS

“Dumb” phones help people break doomscrolling habits and disconnect by removing social apps and notifications, making it easier to focus on real life.



INCREASED PRIVACY

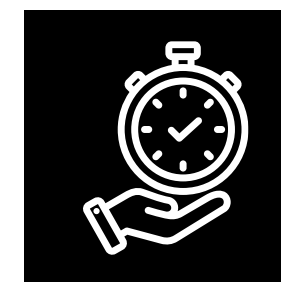
If you care about security and privacy, dumb phones simplify things and reduce your digital footprint for a more private experience.

POTENTIAL DOWNSIDES



LIMITED FEATURES

“Dumb” phones lack the apps and features smartphones offer, so if you rely on navigation, social media, or entertainment, you’ll need to rethink using your device.



LESS CONVENIENT

Texting and calling still work, but accessing messages and contacts is slower and less convenient than on a smartphone.

WHAT METHODS DID WE USE?



Our research explored how changing consumer behavior, growing digital fatigue, and shifting upgrade patterns are influencing interest in simple phones. Through market and competitor analysis, social listening on TikTok, and interviews with people across the country, we found a rising curiosity about more intentional and less connected mobile options.

**We did all of this to understand our research question:
Is the future of mobile actually more basic?**

Market & Competitor Research

Consumer Data

Research shows rising interest in simple phones as upgrade cycles slow. Competitors focus on value plans, premium devices, or low cost basic options, creating pressure across all segments.

Social Listening

TikTok & Reddit

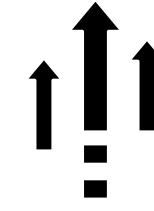
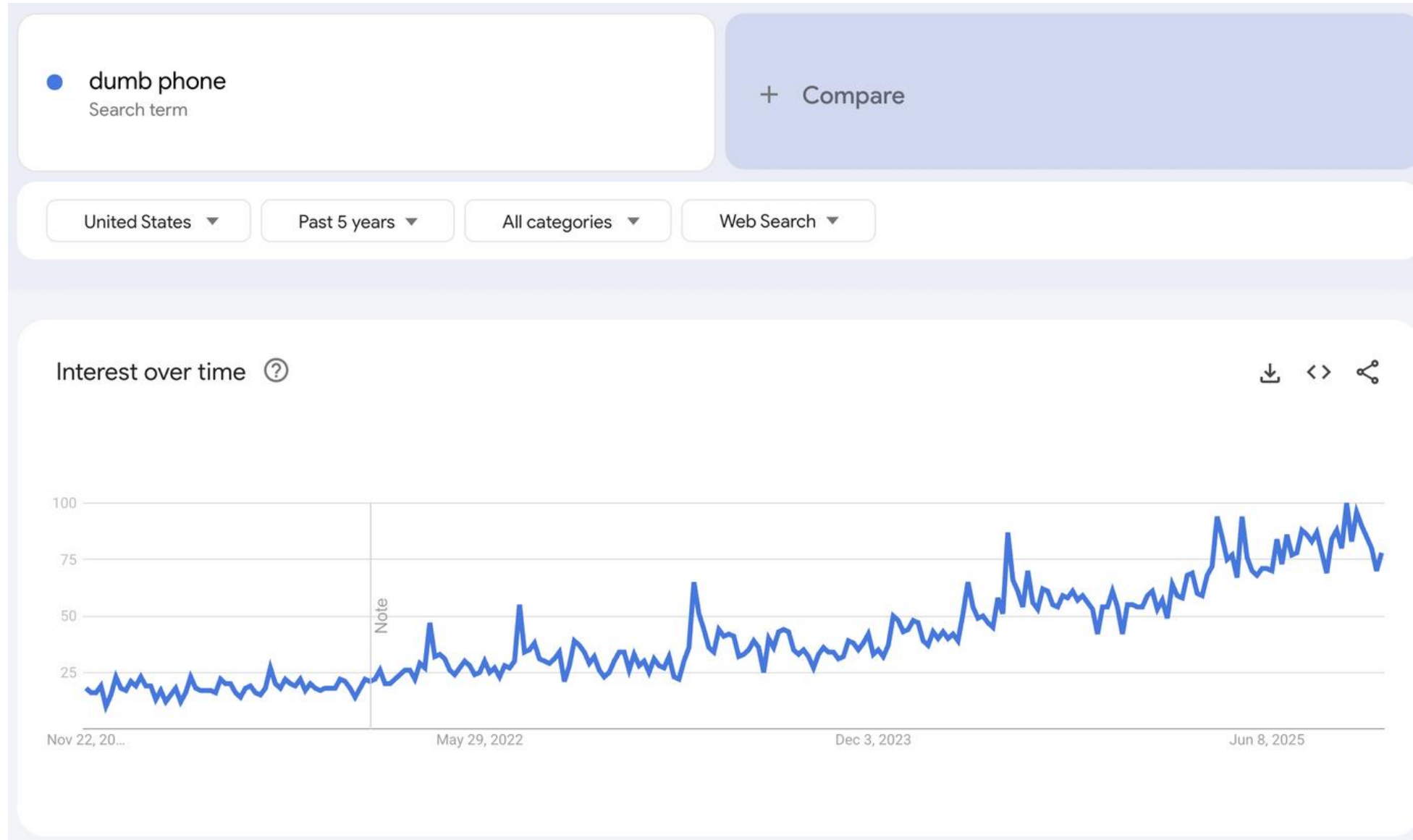
Social media conversations highlight a strong push toward digital detox and minimalist tech. Posts about “dumb” phones and flip phones receive high engagement, especially from younger users.

In-depth Interviews

19 Interviews

We conducted interviews across seven states and two countries, and they reveal growing fatigue with constant connectivity and a desire for simpler, more intentional mobile experiences. However, willingness to change is low.

WHAT DOES THE “DUMB” PHONE INTEREST LOOK LIKE?



UPGRADING PHONE LESS

70% of new iPhone buyers in 2024 owned their previous iPhone **2+ years** and **34%** owned their previous phone for **3+ years** (CIRP).



“DUMB” PHONE SALES

In 2024, feature phones were **~15%** of global handset sales, totaling **210M devices worth \$3.2B**, with only **1.7M sold in North America** and **12M sold in Europe** (Counterpoint).



GENERATIONAL INTEREST

Gen Z adults (28%) and **millennials (26%)** report interest in “dumb” phones much more than **Gen Xers (13%)** or **baby boomers (9%)** (Briggs, 2024).



TIKTOK ENGAGEMENT

#dumbphone has **3,053 videos** with a combined **92.3M views**, averaging **30,264 views per video**, and an **engagement rate of 6.13%** (TikTok).

HOW DOES AT&T COMPARE TO COMPETITORS?



AT&T

- AT&T does not offer a dedicated "dumb" phone plan. AT&T Prepaid and basic postpaid plans are suitable for basic feature phones.



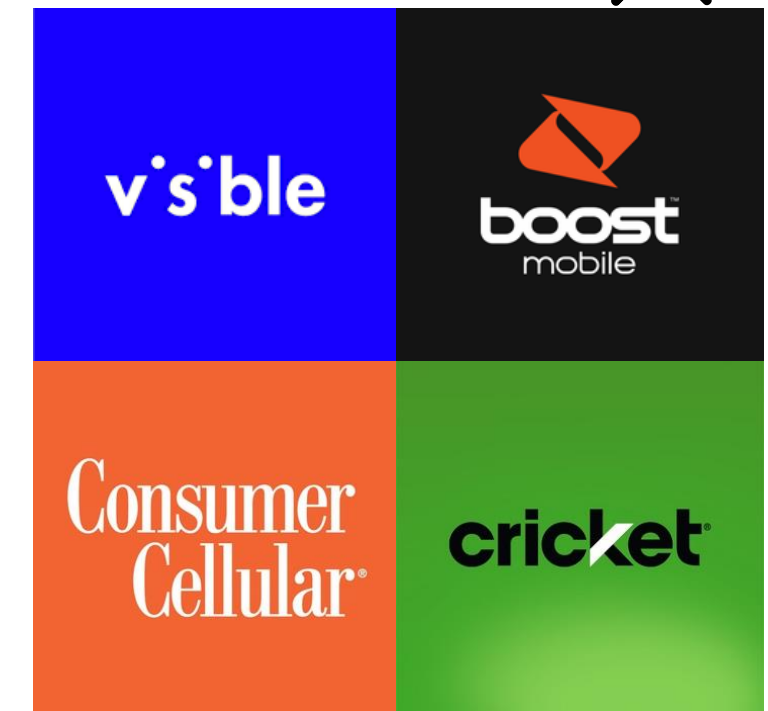
VERIZON

- Offers compatibility and low-data plans for "dumb" phones, but not a core market.
- AT&T has the opportunity to differentiate by owning "basic phone + value".



T-MOBILE

- Offers plans, bundling, and positioning device upgrades for "dumb" phones.
- AT&T must counter with upgrade/plan value, not just device drop hype.



OTHER

- Many other wireless carriers offer cheap, talk-and-text only, or low-data plans on major networks.
- Typically priced under \$10/month.

IS IT TRENDY TO USE YOUR PHONE LESS?

What are some of the trends when it comes to Gen Z and Millennial phone usage? We're finding:

- People are realizing how much time they spend on their phone per day (average of 6 hours).
- Gen Z and Millennials, especially, are finding themselves stuck on an endless doom scroll.
- Across the board, there has been the idea of a "phone detox" or using your phone much less.
- Companies have started pushing out "dumb" phones, and some people are actually using them.

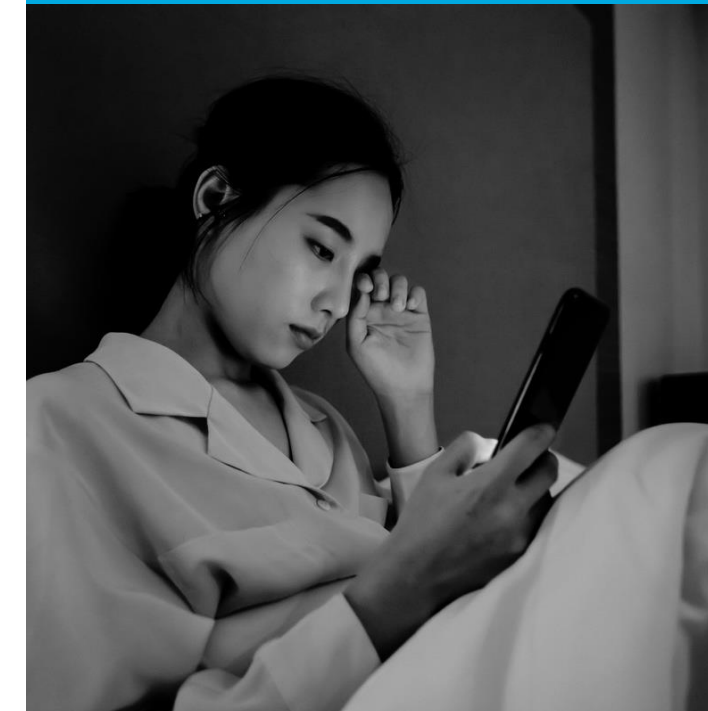
STRESS & MENTAL HEALTH

Heavy phone and social media use can make young adults feel stressed, both from getting less done and from constantly comparing themselves to others online.



FOCUS & PRODUCTIVITY

Many young adults note that doom scrolling and being on social media distracts them and can lead to them losing focus and not getting as much school or work done as needed.



WHAT ABOUT THE YOUNGER SIDE OF GEN Z?

With the last Gen Zs born in 2010, a new wave of teens are entering social media's prime target demographic. For kids ages 13 to 17, this level of online engagement is the new norm. Although most platforms require users to be at least 13, research shows that 40 percent of children aged 8 to 12 are already on social media.

13-17 year-olds in the US

25.8M

(Statista, 2022)

95% use social media

24.51M

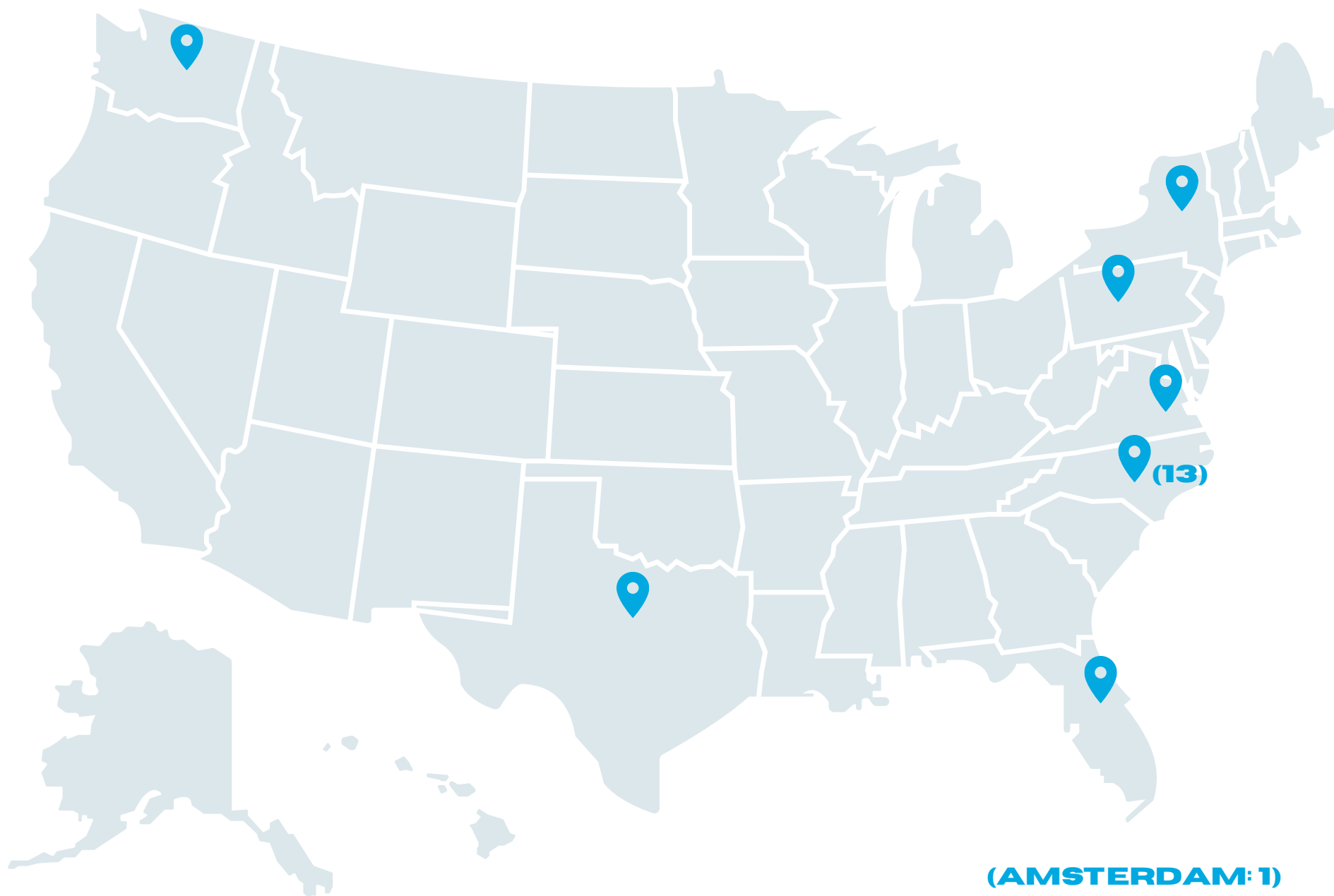
(U.S. Surgeon General, 2023)

1/3 use it "almost constantly"

8.09M

(U.S. Surgeon General, 2023)



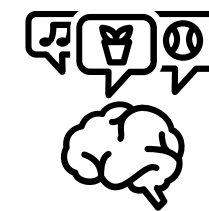


OUR INTERVIEWS



BEHAVIORS & ATTITUDES

We asked participants how they use their smartphones, how they feel about their current screen-time habits, and whether they've ever tried to reduce their usage. We explored motivations, frustrations, and their overall openness to simplifying their digital lives.



INTEREST IN ALTERNATIVES

We evaluated how participants perceive feature phones or "dumb" phones, what features they consider essential, and whether they would realistically switch to a simpler device. We also asked what tools, apps, or support systems would help them better manage screen time without sacrificing convenience.

WHAT DID OUR INTERVIEWEES HAVE TO SAY?

 **Female 24, Netherlands:**

“If I switched to simpler tech, I would have so much FOMO. I already have FOMO on the regular, so not having social media or that connection would make it even worse.”

 **Female 22, New York City:**

“One thing I absolutely need is Apple Pay. I commute using the Subway and my card isn’t working right now so I have to have Apple Pay to be able to pay for my commute.”

 **Male 22, Durham:**

“I don’t really consider simplifying my tech. I do think people constantly upgrading their phone is kinda dumb because it’s basically the same thing.”

 **Male 20, Greenville:**

“I think having a dumphone/flip phone does say something about you. Grandparents might switch back to old phones because they don’t want all the new stuff, but a kid our age would be different. My friends would make fun of me if I switched but I would get used to it.”

 **Female 22, Charlotte:**

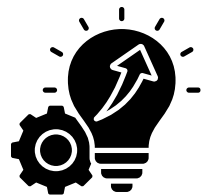
“I might be willing to switch to simpler tech but it would need features like GPS or the ability to connect to (Microsoft) Teams.”

OUR INSIGHT



In a world shaped by technology, AI, and always-on connectivity, people want to cut back on digital overwhelm, but most believe the inconvenience of being disconnected will outweigh the relief they might feel from unplugging.

SO, WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE OF “DUMB” PHONES?



EVOLVING TOWARD HYBRID SIMPLICITY

The future of “dumb” phones is not about fully disconnecting but about blending essential smartphone convenience with a more intentional, less overwhelming experience. Consumers want simplified tools, fewer distractions, and more control without giving up the core functions they rely on.



FROM “DUMB” TECH TO PURPOSE-DRIVEN

As interest grows in digital wellbeing, feature phones will need better branding, more thoughtful features, and smarter integrations that support healthier habits. This shift opens the door for AT&T to reimagine simple devices and digital tools that fit modern needs.

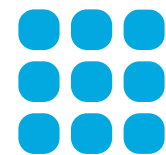


WHY ARE CURRENT APPROACHES UNSUCCESSFUL?



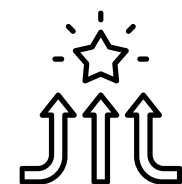
CONVENIENCE

While people want to lower their screen time they are not willing to give up the capabilities and convenience of a smart phone.



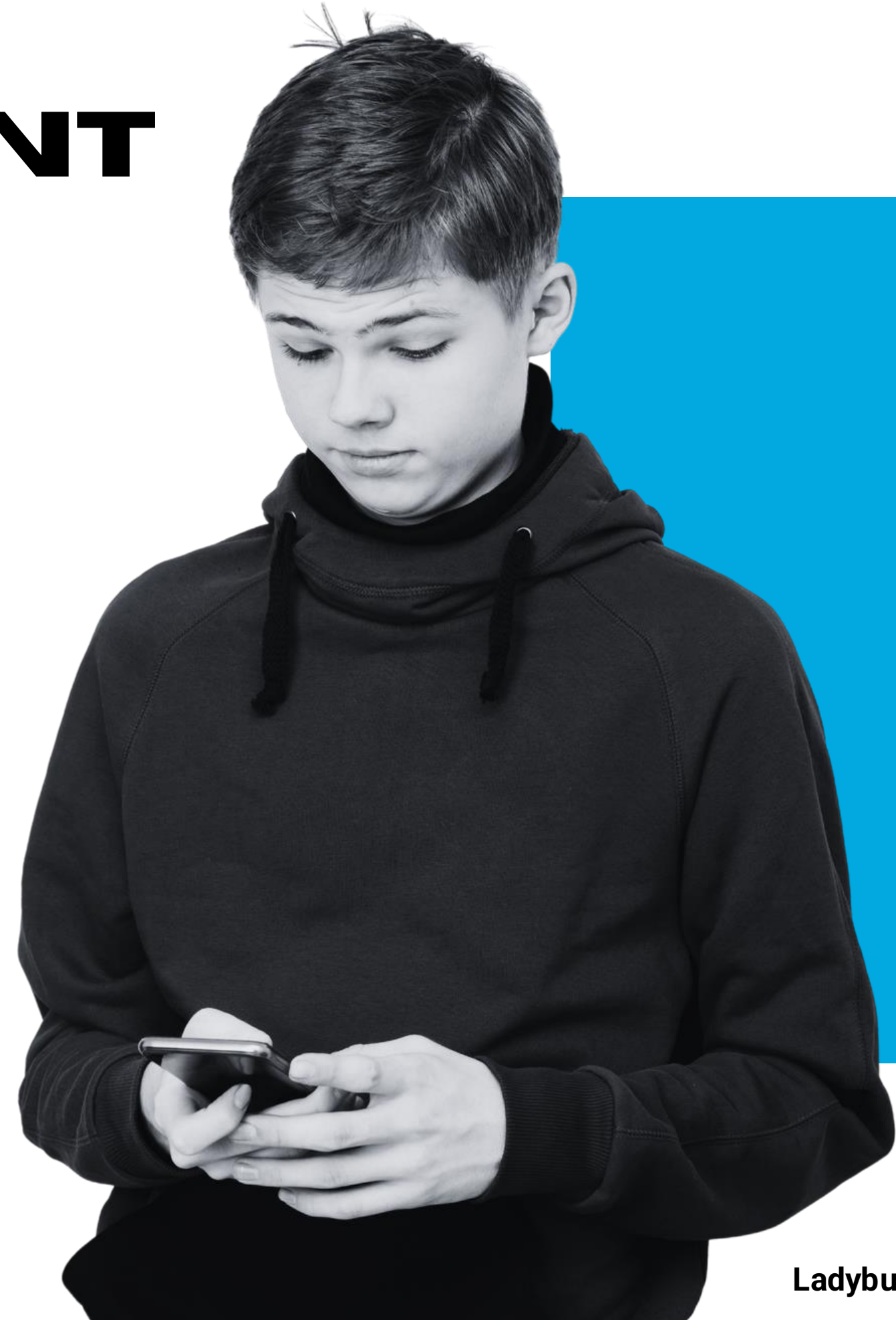
APP USAGE

Removing apps entirely leads to frustration rather than satisfaction.



PERCEIVED VALUE

In order for consumers to reduce their screen time they need to feel like they are gaining value not losing value.





HOW SHOULD WE **RENAME & REFRAME** “DUMB” PHONES?



RENAME

The word “dumb” phone has a negative connotation so calling it a feature phone or detox phone would encourage consumers to be more open minded.

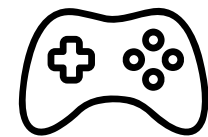


REFRAME

Informing users of the benefits of lower screen time will encourage them to seek less addictive devices.

COULD ANOTHER PHONE APP HELP?

An AT&T screen-time app could help because it would offer built-in tools and gentle guidance without asking users to give up their smartphones. It gives people a realistic way to manage their habits while still keeping the convenience they rely on.



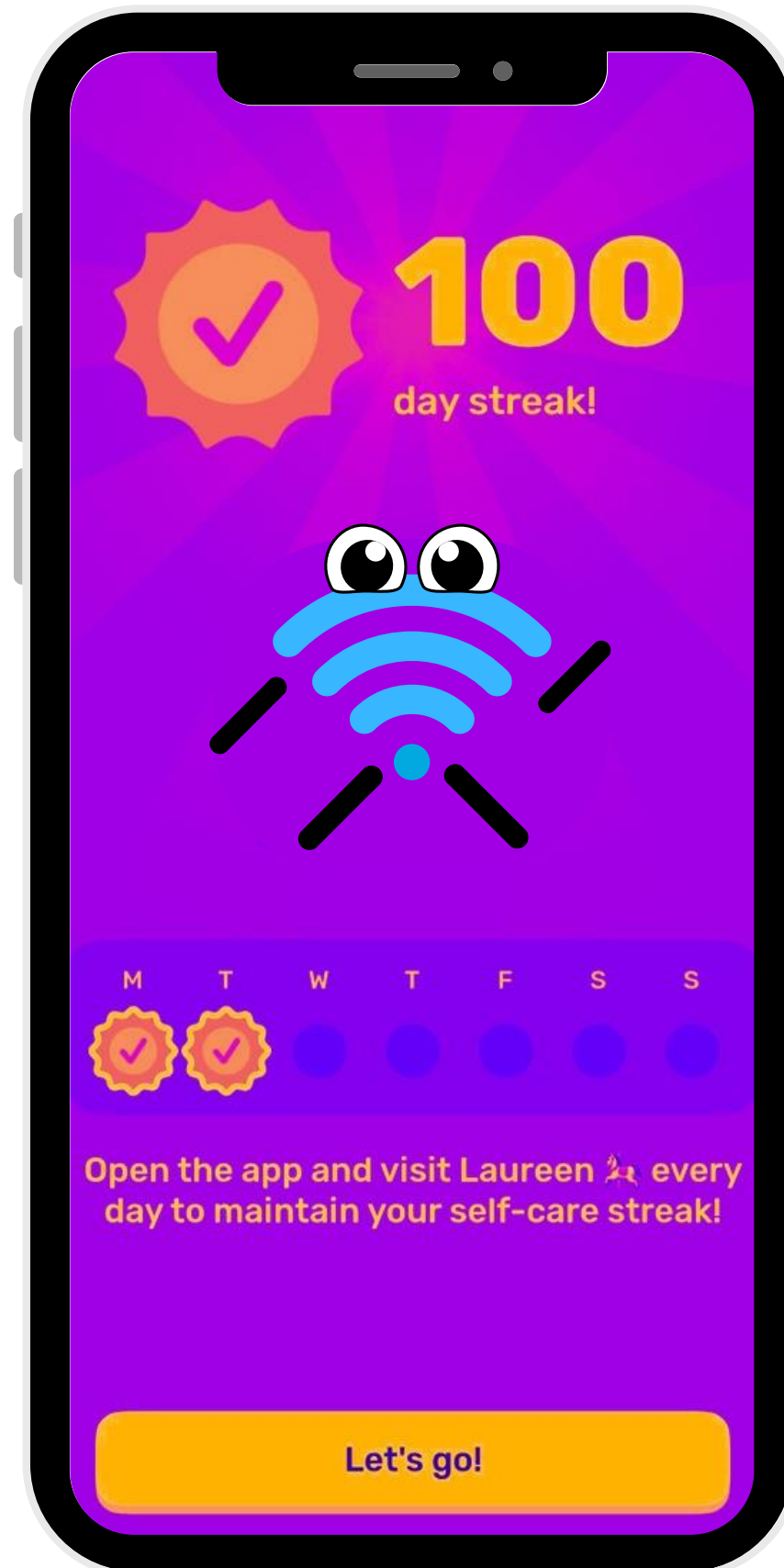
GAMIFICATION

Create a character that reacts to the users screen time. This will incentive users to reduce their screen time by making the process fun and rewarding. Lowering your screen time will allow your character to upgrade while higher screen time will cause your character to downgrade.



ACCOUNTABILITY

Create a feature that allows users to share their screen time reports with family and friends. These groups will serve as accountability buddies and make the experience of lowering your screen time feel rewarding rather than restricting.



HOW CAN PARTNERSHIPS DRIVE PRODUCTIVITY?



CUSTOMIZABLE SETUP

Partner with major phone companies like Apple, Android, and Google to create a customizable setup based on the user's needs. Creating a digital detox mode that locks non-essential apps chosen by the user will support sustainable habits and enhance productivity.

NOTIFICATION RECAP & USAGE REPORTS

Daily usage reports and scroll notices will inform the user of their screen time habits. After 30 minutes of continuous scrolling, the phone will automatically exit the app and requires a 5 minute cool down period. Non-essential apps will give a notification report at the end of the day. Essential apps such as text messages, calls and emails will come through in real time. These improvements will reduce constant distractions through the day.

SO, IS MOBILE REALLY MOVING BACK TO BASICS?

Despite growing interest in cutting back on screen time, our research shows that most consumers are not ready to give up the convenience, connectivity, and functionality of their smartphones. Interviews, social listening, market trends, and competitor insights all point to the same tension: people want healthier digital habits, but the tradeoffs of fully disconnecting are too steep.

This gap highlights an opportunity for AT&T to lead with solutions that support both needs. By offering tools, products, and partnerships that help users manage their screen time without sacrificing the capabilities they depend on, AT&T can empower consumers to stay connected on their own terms by strengthening their control instead of reducing it.



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THANK YOU



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