



The
Joy Test

IMMEDIATE
a Burda company

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Executive Summary: Joy Test

“Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.”

- Henri J.M. Nouwen

In today's world, shaped by cost of living pressures, anxiety, digital overload and an always-on news cycle, the question of what actually makes us happy has never felt more important.

Subjective wellbeing in the UK has reached a plateau. Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) indicates that core measures of life satisfaction and happiness have remained statistically unchanged since 2020, failing to return to pre-pandemic benchmarks. Notably, self-reported anxiety remains at a historical high, with one-third of the adult population (33%) reporting high levels of daily anxiety as of early 2026.

Against this backdrop Immediate, home to some of the UK's most loved brands, wanted to understand what emotional impact our leisure activities have on us - and what role the brands that support them play in that experience.

The Joy Test

Immediate commissioned the University of Sussex to conduct one of the largest studies of its kind - The Joy Test - a wide-ranging research project with nearly 10,000 participants and six focus groups.

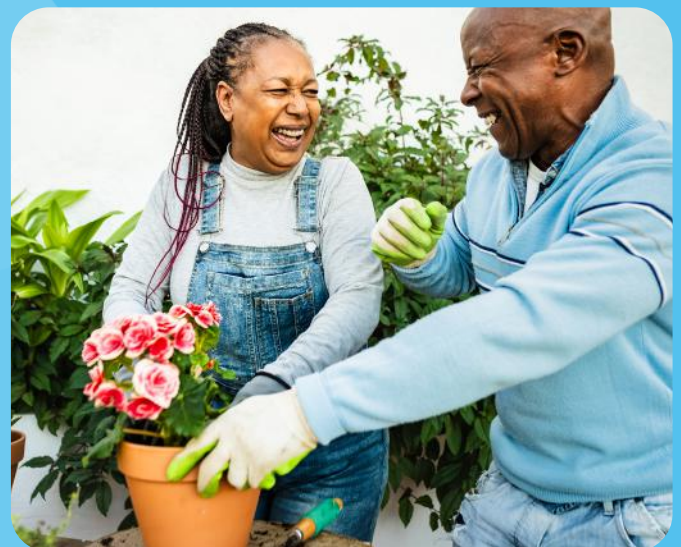
The Joy Test sought to understand not just what brings us joy, but why - and what that means for the brands and content that sit at the heart of people's leisure activities.

The results reveal leisure activities are far more than ways to pass the time. They play a fundamental role in supporting our wellbeing. The research also explored how some of the most commonly engaged with activities - cooking, gardening, TV and radio consumption - bring us joy and increase happiness and wellbeing.

We also discovered a paradox at the heart of modern life: we're spending the most time on the activity that brings us the least joy. Scrolling social media is the single most frequent leisure activity in the UK but the lowest-rated of all 21 activities studied for the joy it delivers. The algorithm optimises for attention, not for happiness.

The research also explored how our leisure interests function as powerful social currency. The majority of gardeners, cooks, TV viewers, and radio listeners regularly discuss their interests with others and this social dimension is directly associated with greater wellbeing and lower mental health difficulties.

In a world where people feel increasingly digitally connected but individually isolated, the communities that form around shared passions carry real and growing value.



The role of Immediate's brands in bringing joy

The research also explored what role media content, specifically Immediate's brands focused on cooking, gardening and entertainment (TV and radio) content, play in people's leisure activities and the emotional impact it had on them.

The more people engaged with Immediate's brand touch-points, across print, digital, social, podcast, and live events, the more joy, flow, intrinsic motivation, and perceived competence they enjoy around their chosen leisure activity. Immediate's content actively deepens people's passions, increasing their day to day sense of joy.

"I think for me it's the feature articles. I like just learning about something new, and if it's maybe on a particular species or a particular type of garden, even if it's not something I'm interested in growing, it's just quite nice to read about."

BBC Gardeners' World Magazine
focus group participant

Joy Advantage

We all instinctively know that some activities make us feel better than others. But what does the science actually tell us? In our research we wanted to understand more about how people are engaging in these leisure activities, the reasons for the choices they make, and the perceived impact of these experiences.

To answer these questions, Immediate partnered with researchers at the University of Sussex to conduct what became one of the largest studies of its kind - The Joy Test.

The Research: Working with the University of Sussex

Led by Professor Robin Banerjee, Professor of Developmental Psychology at the University of Sussex, the study explored the emotional, motivational, and psychological dimensions of how people spend their leisure time - and what happens to their sense of joy when they do.

The scale of the dataset makes this one of the most comprehensive studies of the relationship between leisure activities, joy, and psychological wellbeing conducted in the UK.



Professor Robin Banerjee
Professor of
Developmental Psychology,
University of Sussex

The psychology of joy: intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation

The research measured the motivational and psychological experience of people's leisure activities - including intrinsic motivation, flow, and immersion.

Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging with an activity for internal, self-determined reasons: the inherent satisfaction, enjoyment, and personal growth it provides.

Extrinsic motivation depends on external factors, such as aspirations to be admired by others, keep up with fashion, or be financially successful.

Flow is a state of deep absorption in an activity and the doing of the activity itself becomes the reward. The gardeners in the focus groups captured this sense of flow perfectly: "You go outside just to do one small thing and three hours later you're like, why am I in my pyjamas?"

Immersion is the feeling of being drawn so completely absorbed into a TV or radio programme that it carries you beyond your immediate surroundings, transporting you into the programme itself.

Across all leisure activities studied, joy was much more strongly correlated with intrinsic motivation than extrinsic drivers. The more deeply people engaged with activities for their own intrinsic value, the more joy, flow, immersion, and wellbeing they experienced.




"The study provides compelling evidence that an important key to psychological fulfilment and wellbeing could lie in being more intentional with our leisure time. These findings highlight the importance of dedicating time to hobbies that are emotionally rewarding and socially enriching, offering a powerful blueprint for maximising personal wellbeing."



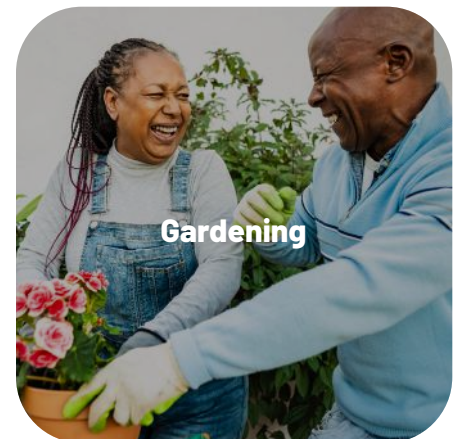
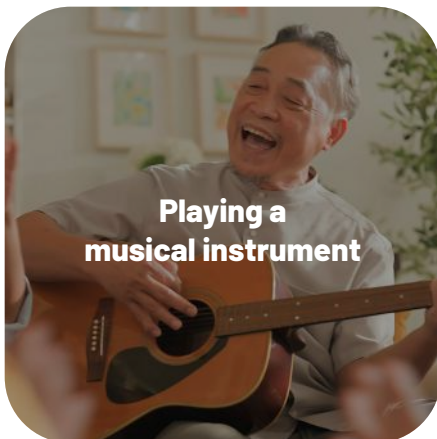
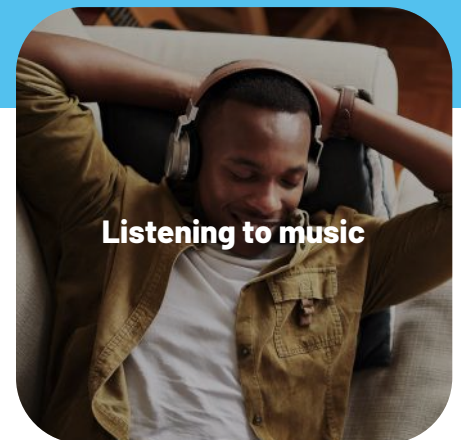
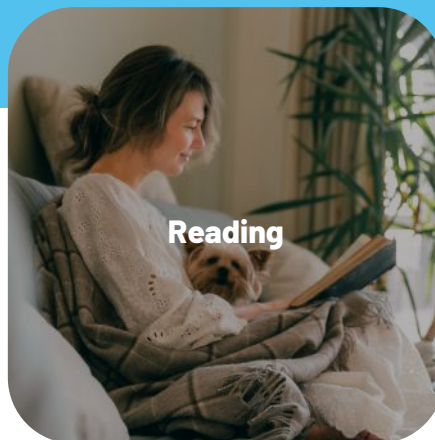
Professor Robin Banerjee,
School of Psychology, University of Sussex

The Joy Hierarchy: What Really Brings Us Joy?

The survey rated 21 different leisure activities against three factors:

-  The percentage of people engaging in the different leisure activities in their free time
-  The average frequency of participation (on a scale from 1 = less often than once a week to 5 = every day)
-  The average level of joy respondents experienced from this activity (on a scale from 1 = not at all to 7 = extremely).

The activities that rated highest for joy were the most intentional and immersive:



These are activities that reward attention, skill or presence.

Of Immediate's content activities, **Gardening** ranked fourth in terms of participation (62% of respondents engaged with it) delivering an average joy score of 5.94 out of 7, and **cooking and baking** (60% participation) scored 5.55.

Radio, though engaged with by just under half of respondents, was described by those who did with deep warmth and emotional connection. **TV**, the most widely consumed of all leisure activities at 85% participation, delivered a meaningful joy boost despite sitting lower on the overall joy ranking than more active pursuits.

The social media scrolling paradox

1/21

for frequency

21/21

for joy

Perhaps the most illuminating finding of the dataset sits at the bottom of the joy ranking. Social media browsing was the single most frequently engaged with activity of all 21 surveyed among Immediate audiences, with an highest average frequency score of 4.55 out of 5. But it was also rated the lowest of all 21 activities for the joy it brought into people's lives, scoring just 4.05 out of 7.

This is the social media scrolling paradox. We're spending the most time on the activity that brings us the least reward. We can lose hours going down a rabbit hole and don't experience the same level of joy that a raft of other activities provide.

This finding has generated significant media coverage, coinciding with Government consultation on banning social media for under 16s and/or restricting features such as 'infinite scrolling'.

That is not to say social media can't be used in a positive way. The challenge for content creators is to create content that 'nourishes, not numbs' as our strategy director Katy Gotch describes it. The focus of Immediate's brands social content is aimed at inspiring our audiences to get more out the things they love - whether that's cooking, gardening or catching-up on the latest TV big hit.

"Advertising environments are not neutral. A brand that appears alongside content designed to trigger anxiety, outrage, or compulsion inhabits a very different emotional space from one that appears in a context of aspiration, creativity, and fulfilment, based on a foundation of trusted passion-led editorial."



Cath Waller

Managing Director, Advertising
Immediate

Before and After: The Emotional Uplift of Intentional Leisure

One of the most powerful elements of the Joy Test design was its before-and-after measurement of emotional state. Respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 1-5, how happy, relaxed, and excited they felt immediately before and immediately after taking part in their chosen leisure activity.

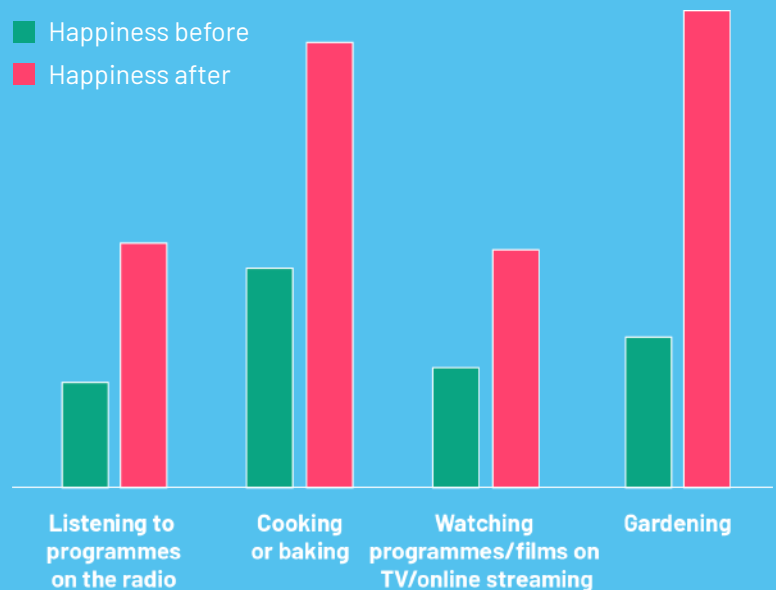
Across all four leisure activities - gardening, cooking and baking, watching TV, and listening to the radio - there were positive, statistically significant improvements in all three emotional reactions. Every activity, done with intention, made people feel measurably better.

The gains were highest for gardening, followed by cooking. Whether someone spends the afternoon planting, baking, settling in for a drama, or listening to a favourite radio programme, they come out of the experience in a better emotional state than they entered it.

"I think for me it almost doesn't feel like a choice, it's just who I am. Sometimes I think I need to get into the garden because I'm stressed. I don't really think about it but I do know it is really beneficial for your mental health."

Focus Group Participant

Happiness Before and After



The Psychology of Joy

The Joy Test reveals strong correlations between our personality, our values, our sense of trust in the world with what we choose to do with our leisure time. And the ways we choose to engage with those interests has a direct, measurable effect on how much joy we experience.

47%

Gardeners are more likely to score highly on conscientiousness than the average respondent

26%

Cooks and bakers are more likely to be highly extraverted

You are what you do

After controlling for age, gender, and income, the research found meaningful correlations between personality traits and people's chosen leisure activities.



Gardeners were the most conscientious of all four groups. They are 47% more likely to score highly on conscientiousness than the average respondent. They also reported above-average wellbeing, life satisfaction, and physical health.



Cooks and bakers were 26% more likely to be highly extraverted. Those engaging in this activity frequently also scored higher on openness and conscientiousness, and reported greater wellbeing, life satisfaction, and lower mental health difficulties.



Radio listeners stood out for generalised trust in others and openness to experience: 16% more likely to score in the highest group for openness and 32% more likely to appear in the highest group for generalised trust. They are also, the data shows, highly receptive to learning: 73% said expanding their knowledge was often or always a key motivation for listening.

Connecting on our passions

One of the most consistent and significant findings of the Joy Test is the social element of people's activities - talking about an interest amplifies the joy of engaging with it - and those who discuss their leisure activities more frequently report greater wellbeing, higher generalised trust in others, and lower mental health difficulties.

The majority of people reported talking about their chosen activity at least sometimes:

88%



of gardeners

86%



of cooks and bakers

80%



of TV viewers

77%

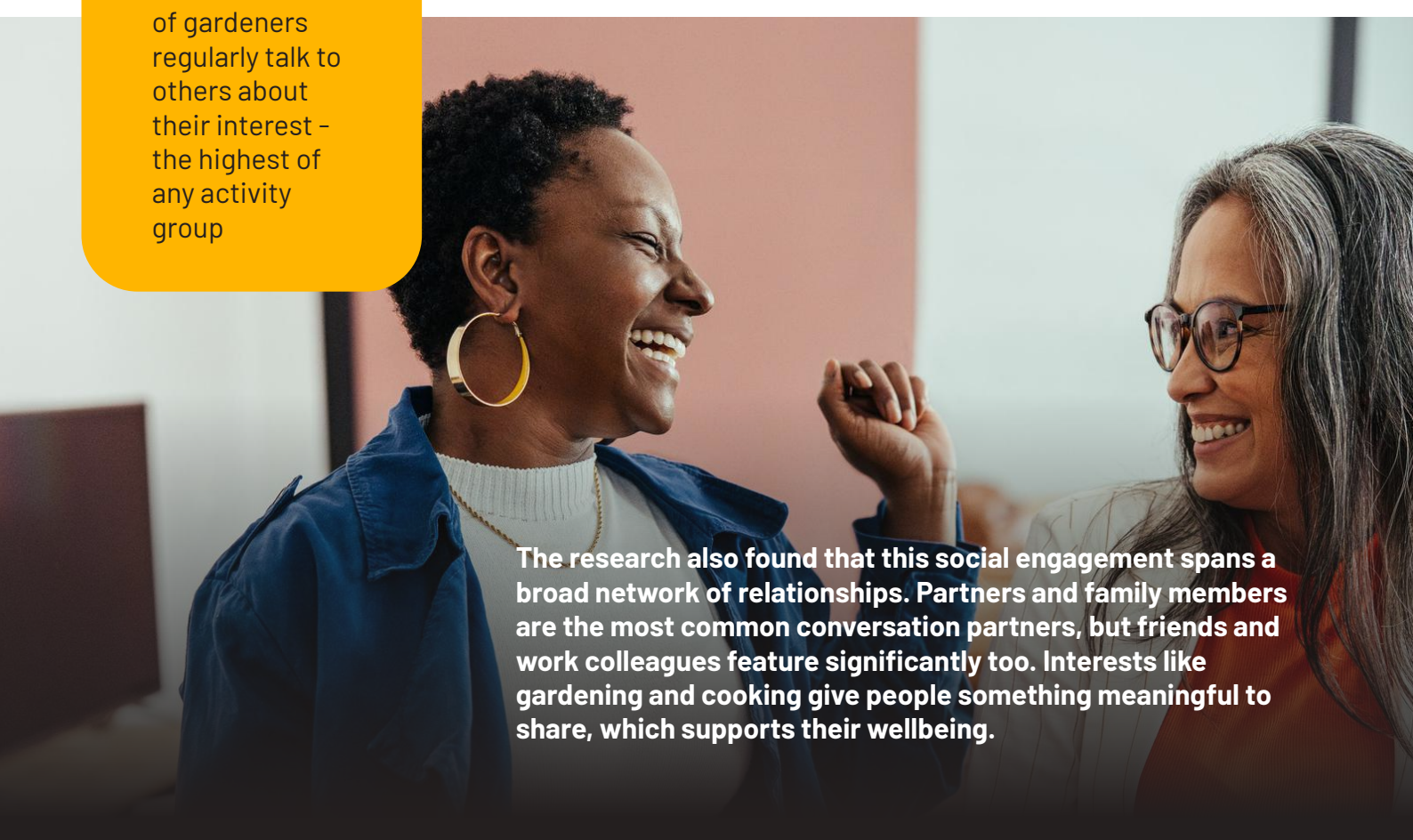


of radio listeners

These are not passive hobbyists, they are communities of interest.

88%

of gardeners regularly talk to others about their interest - the highest of any activity group



The research also found that this social engagement spans a broad network of relationships. Partners and family members are the most common conversation partners, but friends and work colleagues feature significantly too. Interests like gardening and cooking give people something meaningful to share, which supports their wellbeing.

Immediate brands deepen joy

The research found a clear and statistically significant relationship: the more Immediate brand touchpoints people had engaged with, the more joy, intrinsic motivation, perceived competence, flow, and immersion they experienced in relation to their chosen leisure activity.

Correlations ranged from .09 to .25 across these psychological variables - highly significant across a dataset of this scale. The causal direction cannot be determined from a single-timepoint study, but the pattern is consistent with a virtuous cycle: engaging with brand content may deepen knowledge and skill, which could increase confidence and flow, intensifying the joy of the activity itself, and drawing people back to the brand for more.

Across the three Immediate brands studied, the most emotionally resonant responses to touchpoint engagement were feeling inspired - especially for Gardeners' World and Good Food - and feeling curious, especially for Radio Times.



RadioTimes



good
FOOD



BBC
Gardeners'
World magazine

"I read Radio Times cover to cover and then look at all the choices. It's a real moment to sit down and really enjoy it. I really look forward to it."

Focus Group Participant

The power of shared passion

The social dimension of these interests, offers opportunities for memorable brand engagement.

When people gather around a shared passion, in person or online, they're in a heightened state of engagement, openness, and trust. That is an environment in which brands can participate meaningfully rather than simply advertise, with measurable impact across the full purchase journey, from consideration to conversion.


Immediate Live events already demonstrate this at scale. With an average audience dwell time of five to six hours and an NPS score of 70 across all events, Immediate's live experiences deliver deep, sustained engagement. Audiences are fully present, for hours, in an environment shaped entirely around the interests that bring them most joy.



5-6 hours
Average dwell time at Immediate Live events - more than twice the length of a visit to the cinema or theatre

NPS 70
Average Net Promoter Score across Immediate Live events





Section 4

Deep Dive: Gardening

Of the four leisure activities studied, gardening stands out most clearly and consistently as a source of deep, enduring joy. Gardeners scored highly across almost every psychological measure in the research. Happiness in the moment, flow, enthusiasm, intrinsic motivation, and a profound sense of achievement. Understanding why reveals something important about what makes certain leisure experiences more joyful than others and what that means for the brands that serve this audience.

Focus group participants described the experience of ‘flow’ vividly and repeatedly, often without using the word itself: hours spent outside that felt like minutes, unconsciously in the act of doing.

The research also found that gardening produces the highest scores for intrinsic motivation of the activities studied. Gardeners are not doing it to impress others or to keep up with trends. They are gardening for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself.

The most frequently cited motivations were mental relaxation - 81% said this was often or always true for them - and a sense of personal fulfillment and achievement was the most commonly reported impact, cited by 71% of gardeners.

5.94 / 7

Gardening's joy score,
fourth most enjoyed
leisure activity overall

81%

of gardeners cite mental
relaxation as often or
always a key motivation
for gardening

A multi-sensory, visceral experience

The Focus Groups described the positive psychological impacts in more detail, emphasising gardening's emotional power to connect physical and sensory satisfaction. It's one of the few leisure activities that fully engages the body. The hands in the soil, the visible evidence of growth and change. These sensory dimensions are central to the experience of gardening.

One of the research's most consistent findings about gardening was the profound sense of personal achievement and fulfilment. The garden is a place where effort produces tangible, visible results. You can see what you have done, and watch it grow. That relationship between effort and visible outcome

connects directly to what the research identifies as gardening's psychological strength. The experience of flow, and the deep sense of intrinsic motivation that comes with it.

Gardening also carries a distinctive emotional texture that the qualitative research captured well. Participants described feelings of calm, connection, and restoration that went beyond simple relaxation. A sense of being grounded, literally and figuratively, by contact with the natural world.

For several, gardening was the one time in their day when they felt fully present and absorbed.

Make a Metre Matter is Gardener's World's campaign to transform a metre of garden space for the good of the planet. This includes transforming gardens, balconies, and community plots into thriving and joyful habitats for wildlife. Every metre contributes to a connected network of healthy ecosystems.



"Things could go awfully at work but you could go out in the garden and see something shooting up... and it can actually lift your mood. And I'm sure that it does enable me to actually have downtime... switch off from work. And I think that again is a really kind of positive thing to do. It's really worthwhile."

Focus Group Participant

Engaging with BBC Gardeners' World

The Joy Test found that engaging with BBC Gardeners' World Magazine's touchpoints was most strongly associated with feeling inspired and motivated, with 15.2% of emotional responses centred on inspiration and 14.1% on motivation, the two dominant feelings generated by the brand.

The most widely cited perceived impact was becoming more knowledgeable (19%), followed by gaining inspiration (14%) and being encouraged to try new things (12%). In the focus groups,

BBC Gardeners' World magazine was read primarily for pure enjoyment, described as relaxing, comforting, and non-anxiety-inducing.

Meanwhile 62.9% of Gardeners' World respondents engaged with three or more brand touchpoints - the highest multi-platform engagement of any brand in the study.

Gardening is proven to make you happy, and BBC Gardeners' World delivers this in spades. It's the UK's biggest paid-for gardening magazine and is read by more people than The Times or The Guardian. 81% Of BBC Gardeners' World magazine readers trust what they read in it and it has a total monthly GW UK brand reach of 3.2m.

15.2%

of emotional responses centred on **inspiration**

14.1%

of emotional responses centred on **motivation**



"It's non anxiety inducing, relaxing... It's not heavy compared to a lot of the stuff I normally have to read in my normal day to day work... I enjoy reading about how to do stuff and I enjoy learning, but I'm not really learning with an agenda. I'm just kind of flicking and absorbing."

Focus Group Participant

Deep Dive: Cooking & Baking

Where gardening's joy is rooted in a deep physical and sensory engagement with the natural world, cooking's joy can be more immediately rewarding, creative, and deeply social. It's an activity that makes people feel capable, connected, and proud.

57%

rated cooking
and baking

Achievement, competence and flow

57% of those who chose cooking and baking as their most joyful activity out of the four target activities rated it 6 or 7 out of 7 on the joyfulness scale. The research identifies the dominant emotional impact is a sense of fulfilment, having something interesting to do, and an outlet for creativity.

#1

for perceived
competence

Cooking and baking scored highest on two specific psychological dimensions of the four leisure activities the research focused on: perceived competence and task-oriented flow. Perceived competence is the feeling of being genuinely skilled at something, the confidence coming from knowing a technique works, that your judgement can be trusted, that you are getting better.

53%

motivated by
skill-building

Task-oriented flow is the absorption from active, purposeful doing: following a method with focus, making decisions in real time, producing something tangible at the end.

Together, these findings paint a picture of cooking as an activity that engages people at the level of identity and capability, not just pleasure. Developing new skills and abilities was often or always a dominant motivation for 53% of cooks and bakers.

Creative, social and savvy

Creativity and sharing are central to the joy of cooking in a way that distinguishes it from the other activities studied. Cooks and bakers are 26% more likely than average to be highly extraverted. They are people who want to share what they make, swap ideas, and cook for others. 86% reported regularly talking to others about their interest. The research found this social dimension was directly associated with greater wellbeing and lower mental health difficulties.

One of the most interesting findings was around the specific types of cooking that generates the most joy. The research found that batch cooking and creatively using leftovers brings more immediate happiness than complex or special occasion meals.

This highlights that the joy of cooking is often most powerful in its most everyday forms. The quiet competence of making something good from what's already in the fridge, the satisfaction of a meal that will feed the family for three days shows joy from cooking can come from being savvy.

This has editorial and commercial relevance. It's the kind of practical, confidence-building food content that Good Food has always specialised in and suggests that audiences respond most deeply not to aspirational complexity, but to content that makes them feel more capable in their everyday cooking lives.

"I enjoy talking to my children about cooking and helping them learn how to cook... I want my kids to both have a love of food. I see that kind of as a duty, as well as something I enjoy doing now."

Focus group participant



26%

Cooks and bakers are more likely to be highly extraverted than the average respondent

Engaging with Good Food

Feeling inspired was also the dominant emotional response to Good Food touchpoints - the single highest-scoring emotional response at 17%. Motivation (13.2%) and curiosity (12.2%) followed, with respondents also reporting feeling relaxed, engaged, confident, and hopeful after engaging with the brand.

13m

Monthly UK users of Good Food - the UK's number one food media brand

The most cited perceived impact was giving inspiration (20%), closely followed by encouraging respondents to try new things (19%) and making them more knowledgeable (14%). In the focus groups, Good Food was described as a source of recipe inspiration and motivation for trying something new. 37.7% of Good Food respondents engaged with three or more touchpoints.

Good Food is The UK's number one food media brand, it's been helping the nation eat well for 37 years, with recipes and advice that are good for your family, your budget and the planet. Reaching millions every month, selling more magazines than all other food titles combined, and hosting the biggest live food show in the country. All driven by one simple mission: to be a trusted friend in the kitchen and help everyone enjoy good food, every day.

"A lot of what I must do every day requires me to make lots of decisions and really engage my brain. Analysing and looking at stuff and making choices. If I've got a recipe to follow, I don't have to make any of those decisions. If I'm doing something I don't have to think about it, I find that tremendously therapeutic."

Focus Group Participant


Emotional responses centred on:

17%
Inspiration

13.2%
Motivation

12.2%
Curiosity





Section 6

Deep Dive: TV & Radio

80%

of TV viewers regularly talk to others about what they are watching - associated with greater wellbeing and lower mental health difficulties

1 in 3

TV and radio respondents cited 'giving me something to talk about' as a top impact of their viewing or listening

Television and radio occupy a different place in the joy landscape to gardening and cooking. Where hands-on activities generate joy through doing - through competence, achievement, and flow - TV and radio generate joy through connection. They're the activities through which people make sense of the world, find comfort in difficult moments, and discover the shared cultural references that bring communities together.

Empathy, connection, and the cultural conversation

The research found that TV and radio are deeply appreciated for their role in supporting emotional wellbeing: providing comfort, companionship, and positive emotional distraction. Both activities were strongly associated with participants' sense of being connected to something beyond their immediate lives.

This social dimension of media consumption is one of the most key findings in the research. Over a third of TV and radio respondents cited 'giving me something to talk about' as a top impact of their viewing or listening, reflecting the deep human need for shared cultural reference points.

80% of TV viewers and 77% of radio listeners reported talking at least sometimes to others about their viewing

and listening habits, and this social interaction was directly associated with greater wellbeing and lower mental health difficulties.

The research also captures a genuine sense of loss around what participants called the 'water cooler moment' - the shared experience of watching or hearing the same thing at the same time, and the conversations it generates.

In an era of more fragmented viewing, the ability to create a genuine shared cultural moment has never been more valuable. The runaway success of *The Traitors*, and the enduring tradition of *Radio Times*' Christmas issue, are reminders of what that still looks like.

Radio: deep immersion and the hunger for knowledge

73%

of radio listeners cited expanding their knowledge as a key motivation - the dominant driver for the medium

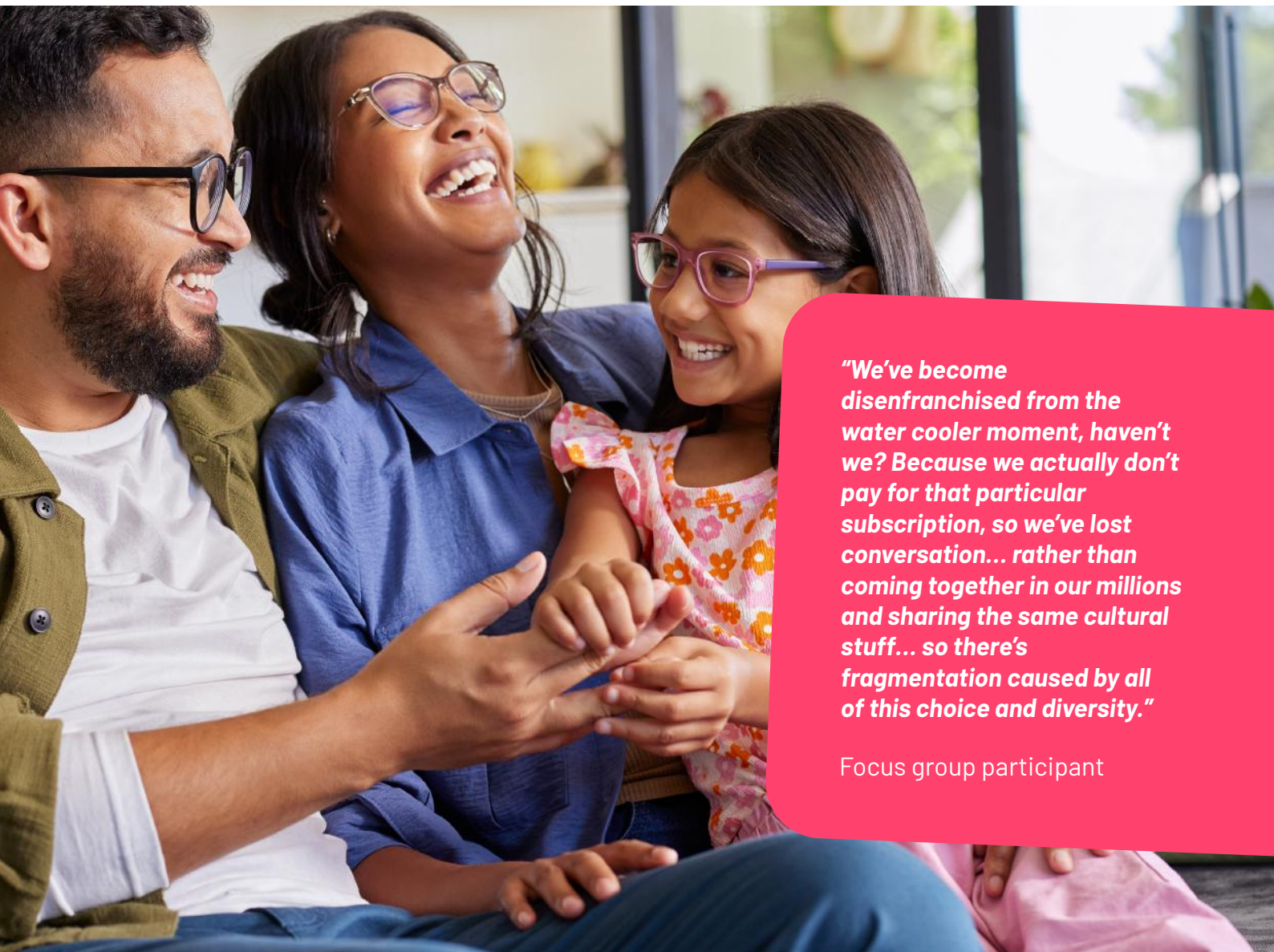
While TV is the more widely consumed medium - 85% of respondents engaged with it - radio produces a distinctly different and deeper psychological experience. Radio listeners reported a higher sense of immersion than TV viewers: the audio experience generates a more active imaginative engagement, drawing listeners further into medium.

45%

said improving their skills and knowledge was the top perceived impact of their radio listening

Knowledge is the dominant driver for radio. 73% of radio listeners cited expanding their knowledge as a key motivation for listening, more than any other single factor. And 45% said improving their skills and knowledge was the top perceived impact of their listening.

Radio listeners are also 16% more likely than average to score highly on openness to experience. They are curious, intellectually engaged, and drawn to new ideas.



"We've become disenfranchised from the water cooler moment, haven't we? Because we actually don't pay for that particular subscription, so we've lost conversation... rather than coming together in our millions and sharing the same cultural stuff... so there's fragmentation caused by all of this choice and diversity."

Focus group participant

Engaging with Radio Times

7.1m

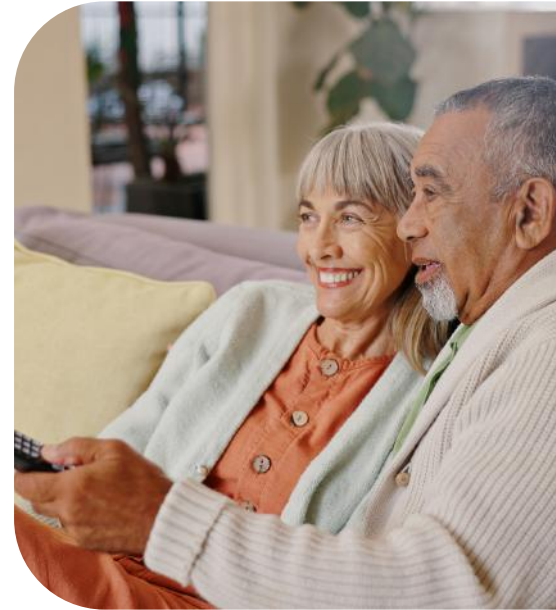
Total monthly UK brand reach for Radio Times - the UK's most trusted TV and radio guide

The dominant emotional responses to Radio Times touch-points were curiosity (14.9% for TV, 14.4% for radio) and feeling engaged (11.2% and 10.5% respectively). The most cited perceived impact was feel more informed about what to watch or listen to (19% for TV, 14% for radio).

58m

Monthly page impressions on RadioTimes.com - more than three times the size of Digital Spy

In the focus groups, Radio Times was associated with enjoyment, information, and most distinctively - a deep sense of ritual and family tradition around the act of marking up programmes, particularly at Christmas. Participants described the brand as a trusted guide in a world of overwhelming choice, valued for its editorial authority and the confidence it gave them about what was worth watching.



Radio Times is a British icon, 103 years in the making. With a total monthly UK brand reach of 7.1 million and 2.42m readers of the Radio Times Christmas issue it has never been more relevant. When it comes to entertainment, we have more choice than ever before. It's here to answer one simple question: what's worth watching? RadioTimes.com is more than three times as big as Digital Spy. And the magazine is still read by more people than any other premium weekly magazine in the UK - the vast majority of whom are deeply loyal subscribers.

"I'm just finding like I'm stumbling in the dark with what to watch because there's too much choice. So, on the website I like the lists, like when they say Top 15 films to watch on Netflix, and it means that I can be very specific about what to choose, and I waste less time."

Focus group participant



Section 7

Methodology

About the research

The main quantitative survey was designed using Qualtrics software. Participants were recruited via the Immediate Insiders panel - comprising people who engage with Immediate brands - as well as from Immediate's customer database, which includes magazine subscribers, app users, and website registered users, and from users of [gardenersworld.com](https://www.gardenersworld.com), [bbcgoodfood.com](https://www.bbcgoodfood.com), and [radiotimes.com](https://www.radiotimes.com).

The final dataset comprised 7,508 respondents, 95.4% of whom were based in the UK. All stats used in the Whitepaper refer to this dataset.

The main survey was supported by a nationally representative survey of 2,182 respondents was provided by CINT

The focus groups

Six focus groups were conducted with a total of 42 participants, recruited from the quantitative survey on the basis of their frequency of brand engagement and reported levels of joy. Groups were structured to include both highly engaged and less engaged brand users across all three leisure activity areas. Focus groups were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, lasting approximately 90 minutes each, and were transcribed and thematically analysed using NVivo.

Lead researcher

The study was led by Professor Robin Banerjee, Professor of Developmental Psychology at the University of Sussex.

What Joy Means for Brands: A Look Ahead

Joy is amplified when brands show up in the right context, at the right moment, in the right environment.

When people engage with the things they love, they are more open, more curious, and more receptive - to ideas, to inspiration, and to brands that show up in the right context.

Building on The Joy Test's findings, Immediate's next research project, sets out to understand precisely what that means for advertisers; it explores how mood shapes decision-making and purchase behaviour and what happens when brands meet audiences in a state of genuine positive engagement rather than passive scrolling. Early findings suggest the gap is significant.

The project will provide the research framework to understand why campaigns like this work - and how brands across every category can harness the power of joy to drive consideration, advocacy, and purchase. The full findings will be published later in 2026.

For more information please contact
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