

PASTBEHAVIOR RESEARCH · ADOPTION AND STRATEGY

When Adoption Looks Like It Stalled

What history shows about the numbers executives use to decide what is growing, who is adopting, and when to act

In 2015, mobile banking looked like it had stopped growing. Eight years later it was the primary way nearly half of banked households reached their accounts. The same problem turns up across AI, generational claims and ecommerce: the metric you are watching can make a growing behavior look stalled, a broad behavior look niche, or a whole segment look resistant.

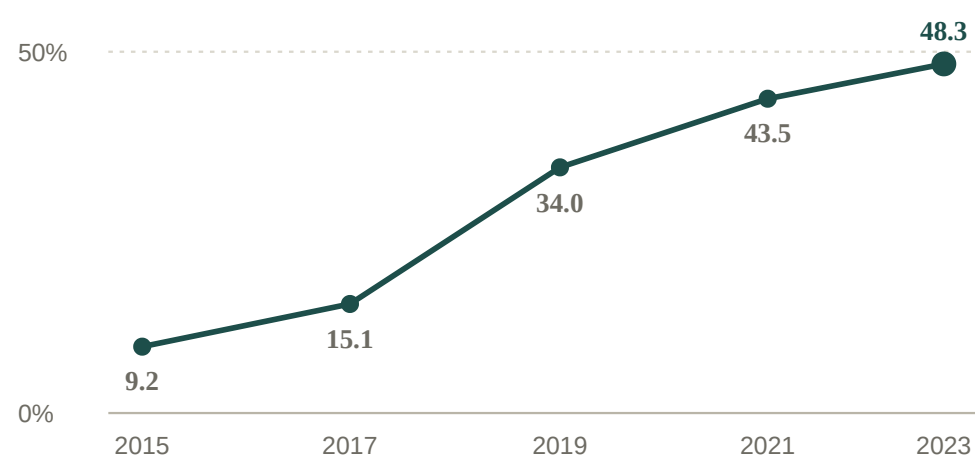
THE ADOPTION SIGNAL IN 2015

51% → 52%

Share of smartphone owners with a bank account who had performed any mobile banking task in the past year. 2013 compared with 2015.

Looks flat.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT



Mobile banking as the primary method of bank account access, US households. Source: FDIC National Survey of Unbanked and Underbanked Households. Note: this is a different measure, on a different population, from the 2015 figures at left.

It had not stalled.

In June 2015, NBC News published a story headlined “Why Has Mobile Banking Growth Stalled?”

The reporting was careful and the data was real. It drew on the Federal Reserve’s annual survey of consumers and mobile financial services, which found that 52 percent of smartphone owners with a bank account had performed at least one mobile banking transaction in the previous year. Two years earlier the figure had been 51 percent. One point of movement across two years, in a category that had been growing quickly. The story also reported that 86 percent of non-users said their banking needs were already being met without it.

Anyone running channel strategy at a bank in 2015 had good reason to read that as a ceiling. The survey was well-designed, nationally representative, and run by the central bank. The 86 percent figure looked like a demand problem rather than a distribution problem.

The FDIC was asking American households something different every two years: what is your primary method of accessing your bank account? By that measure, mobile went from 9.2 percent in 2015 to 48.3 percent in 2023. Over the same period, the share of households relying primarily on a bank teller fell from 28.7 percent to 15.1 percent.

Both measurements were accurate. Only one of them was measuring the thing a bank executive needed to know. The Fed was asking whether someone had touched the channel. The FDIC was asking whether the channel had become their main way of banking. A person could answer yes to the first for years before answering yes to the second, and the distance between those two answers is where the branch network decision lived. The number was right. The conclusion it invited was wrong.

An adoption number can be accurate and still point you toward the wrong decision.

- 1 The wrong people were in the denominator.
 - 2 The definition of “adopted” saturated too early.
 - 3 The metric tracked one product instead of the underlying behavior.
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Who is in the number?

The Fed’s measure ran across smartphone owners with bank accounts. For the question the Fed was answering, that was the right population. But smartphone ownership was still climbing steeply in 2015. As smartphone ownership expanded, new people continually entered the eligible population. A flat percentage among smartphone owners could therefore coexist with rapid growth in the total number of people using mobile banking.

The same trap appears somewhere that looks nothing like banking.

AMONG ALL US ADULTS

15% VS 3%

Current or recent dating app users, under 50 against 50 and older. Roughly five to one.

AMONG PEOPLE SINGLE AND LOOKING

52% VS 26%

The same comparison, restricted to people who have the underlying need. Roughly two to one.

More than half the gap was never about technology. It was about who had the problem. Forty-one percent of adults aged 18 to 29 are single, against 23 percent of those aged 30 to 49, and about 69 percent of US adults are partnered.

The residual two-to-one gap is real and deserves its own explanation. The point here is narrower than “age gaps are fake.” A segment can look resistant to a product when fewer people in it have the underlying need, and the only way to find out is to run the comparison among people who have it. This does not explain most adoption gaps. It explained most of this one.

Before calling a group resistant, make sure the people in the denominator actually have the need and the ability to adopt.

What counts as adoption?

The second problem was the bar. “Did you perform any mobile banking task in the last twelve months?” is a very low one. Checking a balance once in November clears it. So does depositing a single check. Once most of the eligible population has cleared a bar that low, the measure has nowhere left to go while everything an executive cares about keeps moving underneath it.

EVER USED

Saturates early

One task in twelve months counts. The line flattens while frequency, importance and share of activity all keep rising.

BECAME IMPORTANT

Kept climbing

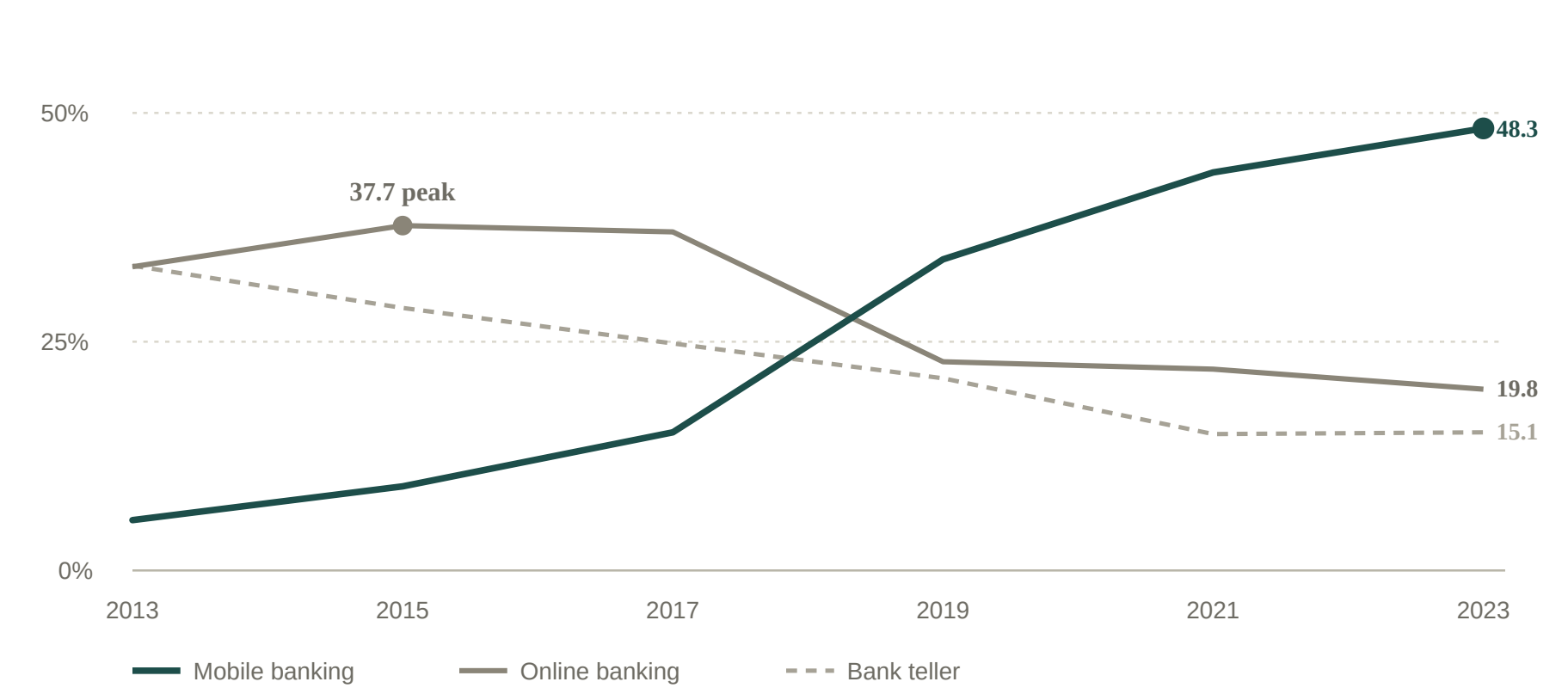
Primary-channel use was about to quintuple over the following eight years.

The Federal Reserve identified this itself, though afterwards. In a 2018 [note on mobile banking survey measures](#), Fed researchers separated general mobile banking users from what they called task-only users. Among general users, 53 percent said mobile was one of the three most important ways they interacted with their bank. Among task-only users, 8 percent said the same. Both groups sat inside the single percentage that made 2015 look flat.

A low adoption threshold can saturate long before the behavior becomes strategically important.

Are you measuring the behavior or the product?

There is a third failure, and it hides in plain sight, because in 2015 something in banking genuinely was peaking.



Primary method of bank account access, US households, 2013–2023. Source: FDIC National Survey of Unbanked and Underbanked Households.

THE SAME SERIES, IN FULL

Year	Bank teller	Online banking	Mobile banking
2013	33.3	33.2	5.5
2015	28.7	37.7	9.2
2017	24.8	37.0	15.1
2019	21.0	22.8	34.0
2021	14.9	22.0	43.5

Year	Bank teller	Online banking	Mobile banking
2023	15.1	19.8	48.3

Online banking, meaning desktop or laptop access, peaked in 2015 at 37.7 percent and has since fallen by roughly half. Three consecutive surveys would have shown an executive a product that flattened and then dropped.

The behavior underneath both columns is reaching your bank account without going anywhere. That never stopped growing. It moved from one product to another. If you tracked online banking, you saw a category mature and decline. If you tracked remote account access, you saw uninterrupted diffusion. The two dashboards could have supported very different branch strategies.

The Federal Reserve’s 2016 report described the mobile channel as complementing consumers’ use of other banking channels. That was a fair reading of 2015 data. It was also the reading that made the coming substitution invisible, because a complement does not eat the thing it complements.

The pattern recurs

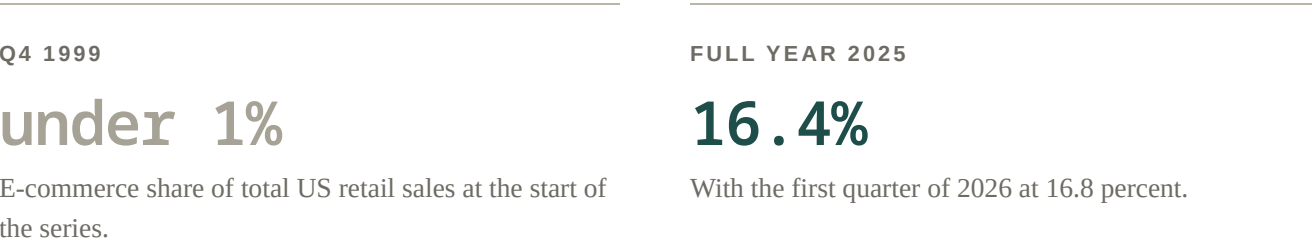
Venmo use runs about 57 percent among 18- to 29-year-olds and 15 percent among adults 65 and older, which looks like a generational fact about money. Measured at the level of peer-to-peer payments generally, the gap is closer to 84 percent of adults under 50 against 57 percent of those 50 and over. The product carries an age gap of roughly three to one. The behavior carries something nearer one and a half to one. PayPal had two decades of installed base, and Zelle arrived inside bank apps that older customers already opened. Same job, three products, three different curves.

A product can decline while the behavior it delivers keeps spreading somewhere else.

Sometimes the curve is real

None of this means adoption curves cannot be trusted. The research turned up a clean one, and it shows where the danger actually sits.

The Census Bureau has published e-commerce as a share of total US retail sales every quarter since late 1999. It counts money that actually changed hands rather than asking people what they do. The comparison base, total retail sales, does not move around. And nobody is asked whether they consider themselves an online shopper, so there is no low bar to clear early.



Then attack it. Seasonal adjustment moves the fourth quarter of 2025 between 16.6 percent adjusted and 18.3 percent unadjusted. Census revised the series in April 2025 to remove nonemployer businesses, changing history retroactively. The denominator covers retail rather than all commerce, so a broader definition would produce a different number.

Each of those moves the level by a point or two. None of them touches a sixteen-point rise across twenty-six years.

Trust the direction. Interrogate the inflection.

Across the cases studied, measurement choices were most dangerous when a decision depended on an exact level, an apparent plateau, a turning point, or the size

of a gap between groups. They rarely overturned a large directional change sustained over many years. This is what survived these cases, not a universal law.

Did the capability converge too?

One more check, because a behavior can converge on paper while what people can actually do does not.

Internet use among American adults has reached roughly 95 percent. That looks like a solved problem. Underneath it, home broadband subscription sits near 80 percent and stays segmented, with rural adoption around 73 percent against 86 percent in suburban areas, and persistent gaps by income and education.

What closed the headline gap was substitution. The share of adults who own a smartphone but have no home broadband rose from 8 percent in 2013 to 16 percent in 2025. Among households earning under \$30,000, that figure is roughly a third, against about 4 percent of households earning \$100,000 or more. Those people have internet access by any reasonable definition. They also do tasks built for larger screens on a phone, including job applications and schoolwork.

The check is not universal. Peer-to-peer payments substituted completely: PayPal and Zelle do the core job as well as Venmo does. Workplace messaging substituted completely as well. Sometimes the substitute is genuinely equivalent, and the convergence is exactly what it looks like.

If adoption spread through a substitute, check whether the substitute actually lets customers complete the job that matters.

Most executives do not need a better statistic. They need to know whether the statistic they already have is measuring the decision they are about to make.

Four questions before you act on an adoption curve

01 — DENOMINATOR

Who is in the number?

All customers, eligible customers, device owners, active buyers, firms, workers, or something else?

02 — THRESHOLD

What counts as adoption?

Any use, monthly use, primary use, paid use, or use across the whole organization?

03 — UNIT

Are you measuring the behavior or one product that delivers it?

If one product is flat, check where else the same job is happening.

04 — CAPABILITY

Did capability converge too?

Can the new users actually complete the job that matters?

If changing one of these answers changes the decision, the metric is not yet decision-ready.

Why this matters now

These are not historical curiosities. The same adoption problem is showing up in some of the largest strategic questions companies are deciding on right now.

AI ADOPTION

For roughly the same period in late 2025 and early 2026, credible government and Federal Reserve sources put business AI adoption at very different levels. None is wrong. They answer different questions.

18%	of firms, unweighted
32%	of firms, employment-weighted
41%	of individuals reporting work-related generative AI use
78%	share of the labor force at firms that have adopted

The Census Bureau also changed its question wording in November 2025, from AI use in producing goods or services to use in any business function, which moved the reported rate on its own.

Before saying “AI adoption is X percent,” decide which question the number needs to answer.

GENERATIONAL CLAIMS

“Gen Z over-indexes on Venmo” is true, and it does not mean sending money digitally is a Gen Z behavior. The same gap between product and behavior can appear in platform statistics far beyond payments.

SEARCH

Google searches ending without a click rose from 49 percent in 2019 to about 68 percent in early 2026, and referrals to news publishers fell sharply over a single year. Almost none of this is segmented by age or customer type, so precise attribution is unavailable. The direction is large enough and sustained enough to act on anyway, which is exactly the distinction this history recommends.

Before calling adoption stalled, mainstream, niche, or concentrated in one group, make sure the curve is measuring the thing your decision depends on.

In 2015, mobile banking looked stalled. It was about to become the primary way Americans banked.

SOURCES AND LIMITATIONS

Mobile banking stall coverage. NBC News, June 2015, citing the Federal Reserve Board’s Consumers and Mobile Financial Services 2015.

Primary method of bank account access. FDIC National Survey of Unbanked and Underbanked Households, conducted biennially since 2009. Figures from the 2021 and 2023 reports.

Task-only versus general mobile users. Federal Reserve Board, “Mobile Banking: A Closer Look at Survey Measures,” March 2018. The complementarity framing is from Consumers and Mobile Financial Services 2016, fielded November 2015.

Online dating. Pew Research Center, American Trends Panel, 6,034 US adults, fielded July 5–17, 2022. Single-and-looking figures; figures for adults 50 and older; share of adults who are single, by age. The survey oversampled online daters and people seeking partners, weighted back to population proportions.

Venmo and peer-to-peer payments. Venmo figures from Pew Research Center, same July 2022 survey (topline and methodology). Broader peer-to-peer figures from AARP Research, fielded by NORC at the University of Chicago, 2,842 US adults, November 2019. *These two figures come from different surveys with different age bands, so the three-to-one against one-and-a-half-to-one comparison is directional rather than a precise decomposition. Pew asked the right question in 2022 but does not publish an age crosstab for overall payment-app use.*

E-commerce share. US Census Bureau, Quarterly Retail E-Commerce Sales, series beginning Q4 1999; series via FRED.

Internet access and smartphone dependency. Pew Research Center mobile fact sheet and digital divides analysis, 2013 through 2025. *Pew changed survey mode in 2023, so comparisons spanning that break should be treated as approximate.*

AI adoption. US Census Bureau Business Trends and Outlook Survey and its 2026 AI supplement; Federal Reserve, “Monitoring AI Adoption in the US Economy,” April 2026.

Zero-click search and publisher referrals. SparkToro analysis of Similarweb clickstream data, January to April 2026. *The publisher referral decline is attributed to Chartbeat in **secondary reporting**; a primary Chartbeat publication could not be reached, and the figure should be verified before republication.*

General limitation. None of this evidence can separate age effects from cohort effects, which would require following the same people over many years. The boundary described in the e-commerce section is what survived the cases examined here rather than a general law.