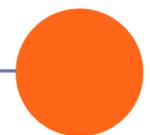




The Web-App Gap: Where Substack's Users Are Slipping Through



-By Sandesh Patil

“ Substack is a platform that turns writers into independent media businesses by combining newsletter publishing with subscription monetization. It’s the middleman that helps creators bypass traditional media and get paid directly by their readers. ”

- Founded: 2017. Founders: Chris Best (CEO), Hamish McKenzie, and Jairaj Sethi. Major leadership remains with the founders (Best still serves as CEO)

Scale & Financials

- Funding: \$92M+ total (\$82M pre-2024 + \$10M 2024 strategic round) 34
- Revenue: \$29M in 2023, projected to grow 114% YOY via premium features like video monetization
- Subscriptions: 5M paid subscribers as of March 2025.

substack

Size: Substack remains a relatively small startup (on the order of ~90-100 employees) (headquartered in San Francisco).

Core Value Proposition

Mission: "Transform reader-writer engagement by empowering independent creators through subscription publishing"

User Personas:

Persona 1: Haripriya



- Age: 29
- Profession: Investigative Journalist, Mumbai
- **Pain Points Using Other Social Media:**
 - Content algorithms on platforms like Twitter and Facebook bury her in trending topics, making it hard to reach readers who care about deep, niche reporting.
 - Ad-based models pressure her to chase clicks over quality.
 - She feels her work is undervalued and struggles to monetize her expertise directly.
- **How Substack Solves This:**
 - Direct-to-Reader Model: Priya can build a loyal audience who pays for her in-depth newsletters, bypassing algorithms and ad pressure.
 - Monetization: Built-in subscription and payment system lets her earn directly from her writing.
 - Creative Freedom: No editorial interference—she controls her content, schedule, and brand.
 - **Unique Features:**
 - Paid and free subscription options
 - Audio/video support for multimedia storytelling
 - Analytics to track what resonates with her audience

Persona 2: Keshav



- Age: 33
- Profession: Tech Industry Analyst, San Francisco
- **Pain Points Using Other Social Media:**
 - Feeds on LinkedIn and Medium are cluttered with generic, surface-level content and sponsored posts.
 - Difficulty finding high-quality, ad-free, and trustworthy analysis on emerging tech trends.
 - Overwhelmed by irrelevant notifications and poor content organization.
- **How Substack Solves This:**
 - Curated, Ad-Free Content: Alex subscribes to top analysts for deep dives, delivered directly to his inbox—no ads, no distractions.
 - Personalized Feed: He can choose exactly which writers to follow, paying for exclusive insights.
 - Community and Engagement: Can interact directly with writers and other subscribers via comments and discussion threads.
 - **Unique Features:**
 - Flexible pricing (monthly/yearly subscriptions)
 - Clean, distraction-free reading experience across devices

Substack: Shifting Focus from Web to App

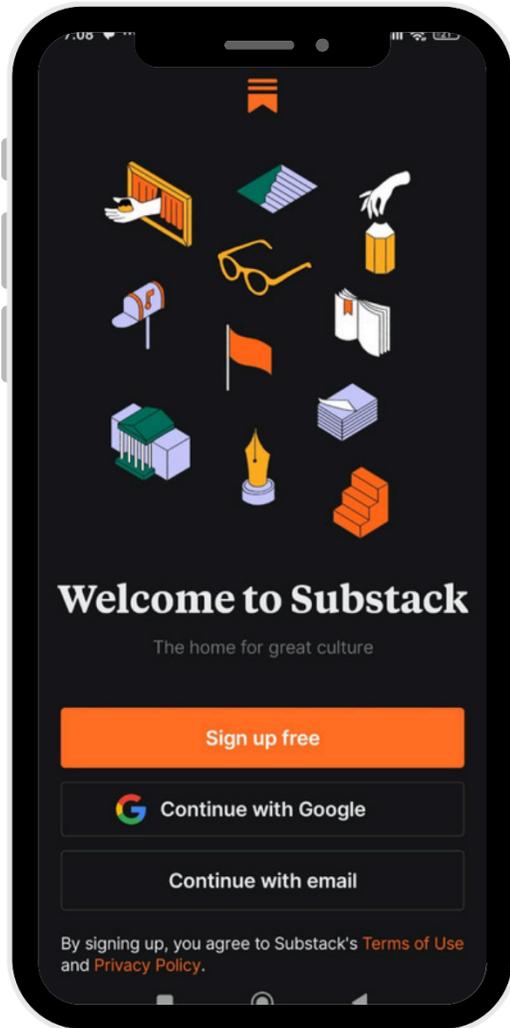
- Fastest Growing Platform Segment
- From <25% in 2023 to ~35–40% in 2025
- Growth driven by better discovery & in-app features

- App Users Engage More
- 15× more likely to comment
- 44× more likely to share posts
- Stronger community dynamics

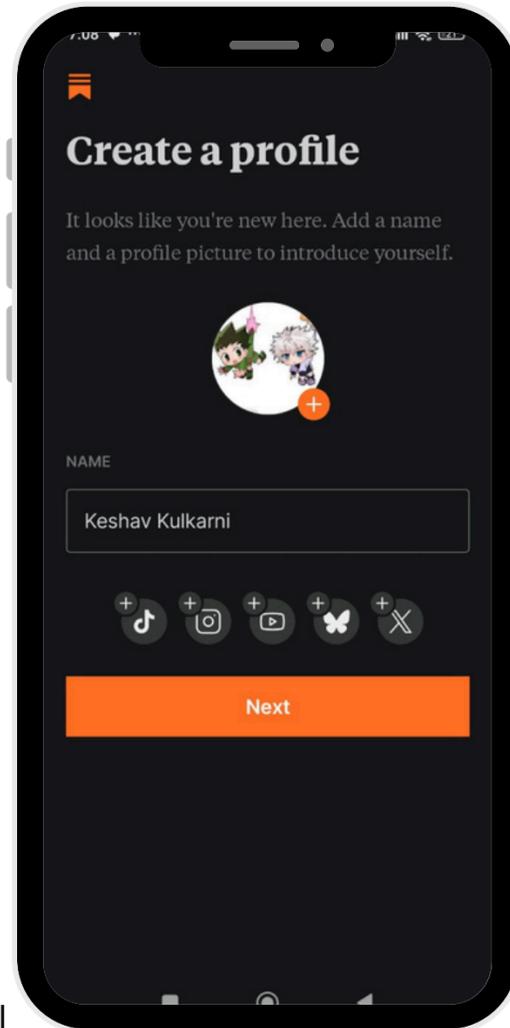
- App Users Are Higher Value
 - 25% more likely to become paid subscribers
 - Stickier behavior = better monetization

- Strategic Focus: App-first Experience
- Investing in app UX, content surfacing, creator tools
- Goal: Push more users from web → app

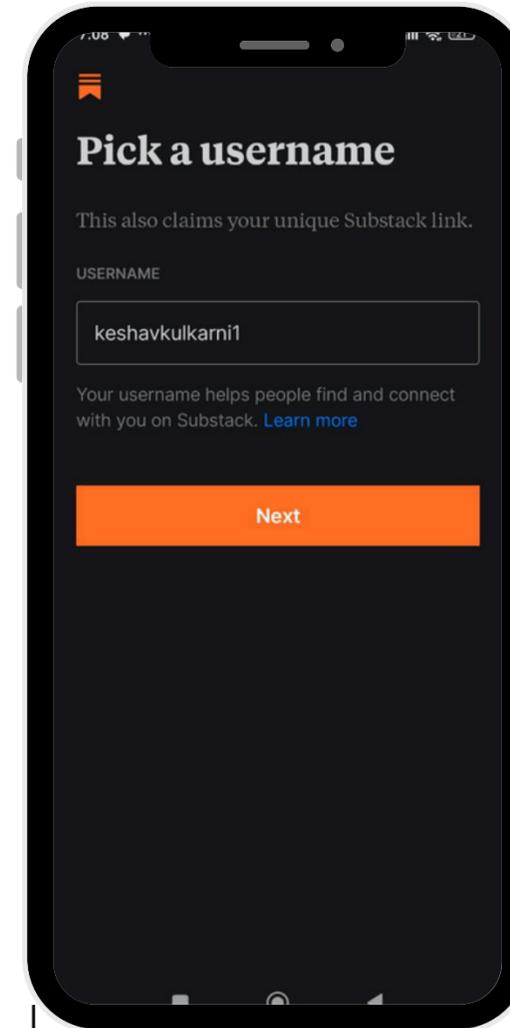
User Journey(onboarding):



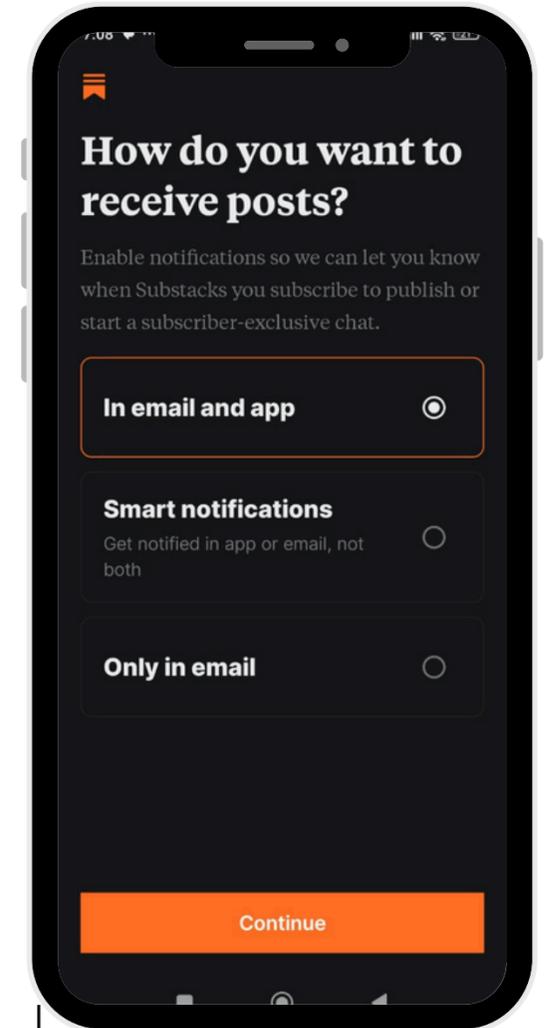
The user is greeted with a visually engaging welcome screen, offering simple sign-up and login options to begin their journey.



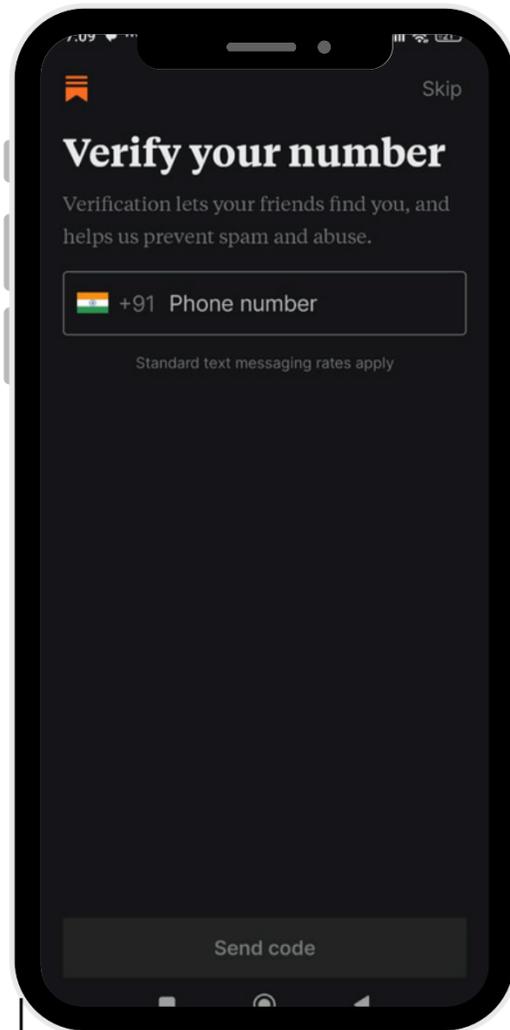
The user sets up their public identity by providing a name, profile picture, and optional social links to introduce themselves to the community.



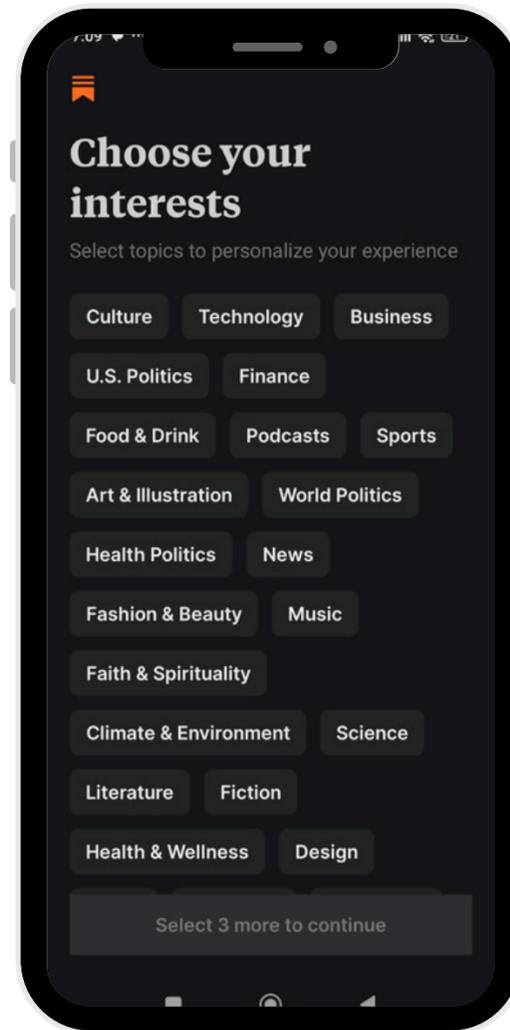
The user claims their unique username and personal Substack link, securing their digital presence on the platform.



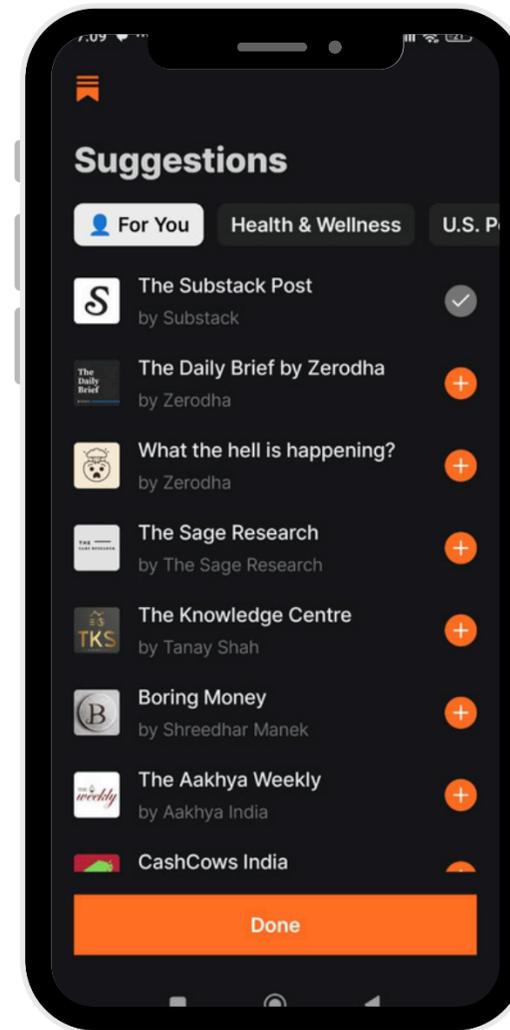
The user customizes their content delivery preferences, choosing how and where they want to be notified about new publications.



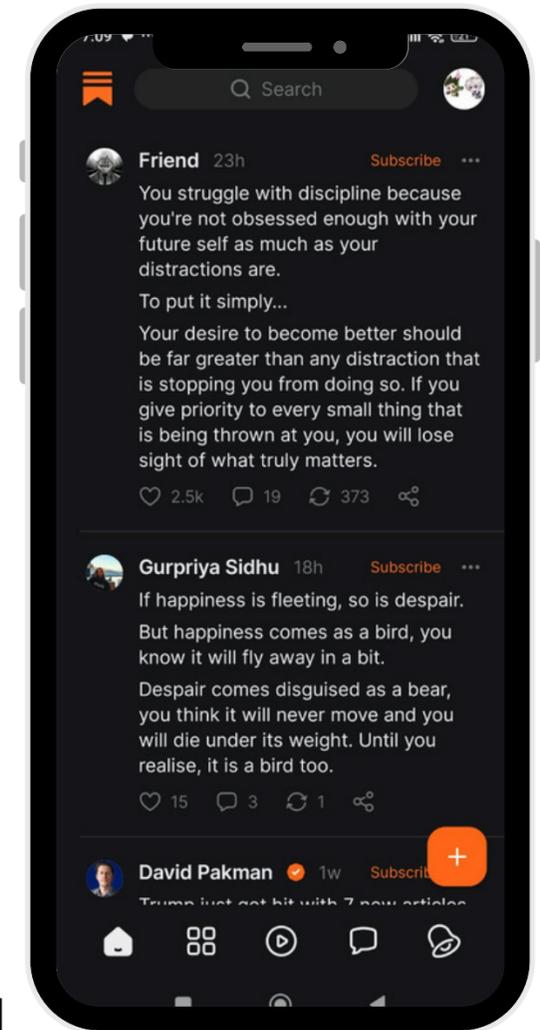
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To personalize the content discovery experience, the user selects topics of interest from a wide range of categories.

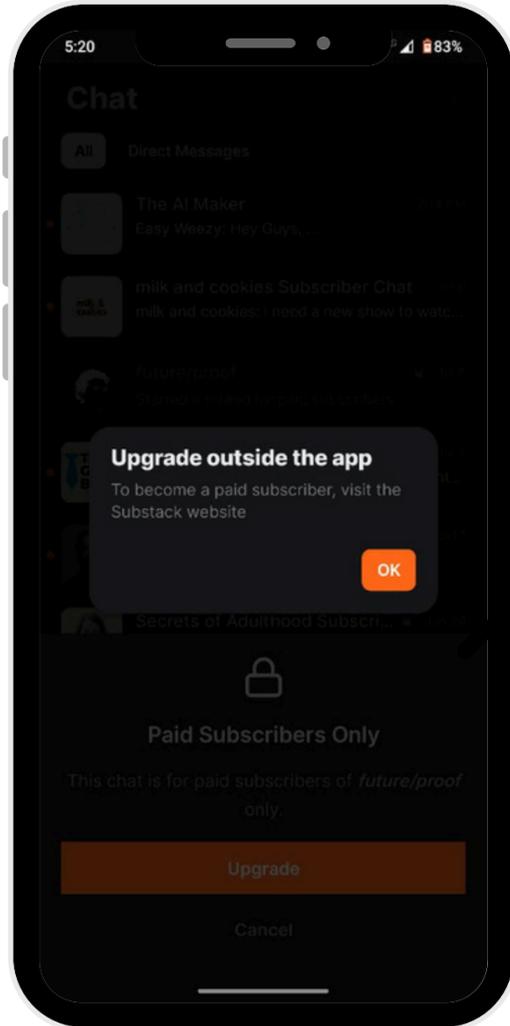


Based on their chosen interests, the app provides tailored publication suggestions to help the user build their initial reading list.

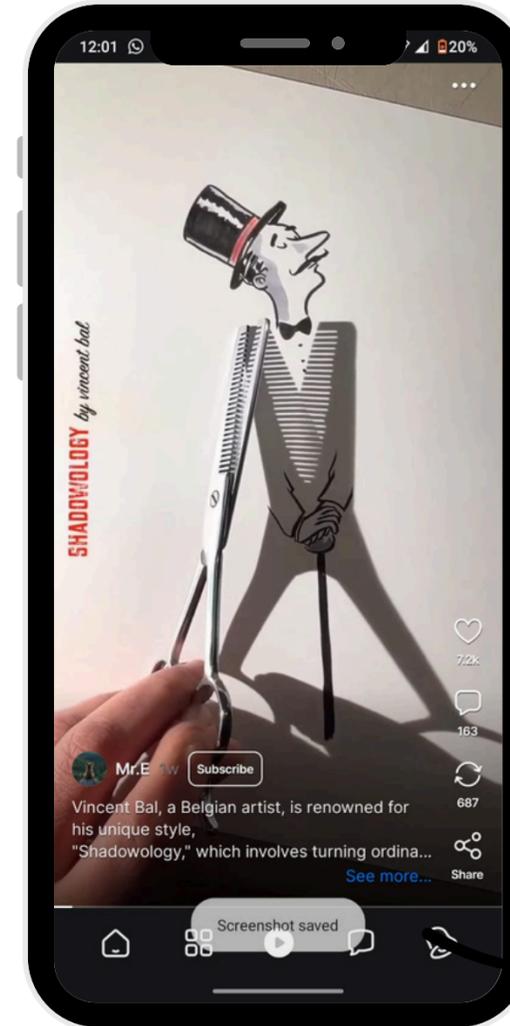


Finally, the user lands on their personalized home feed, where they can begin to discover, read, and engage with content from various creators.

Friction points:



Substack forces users to subscribe via the website instead of the app, creating unnecessary friction in the user journey. This is done to avoid hefty App Store fees (up to 30%), but it risks drop-offs and hurts impulse purchases.



The app has a Reels-style feature that's clearly half-baked — audio from the previous reel keeps playing even after you scroll, making the experience feel chaotic. It seems like Substack is trying to mimic mainstream social media, but the execution is glitchy and lacks polish.

From Current Challenges to Progress

Metrics that Matter:

| Priority | Issue | Description / User Impact | Action Needed |
|----------|--------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| 1 | App Persistence & Multitasking | App disappears from recent apps; users lose reading position | Fix app state management |
| 2 | Audio & Podcast Functionality | Playback issues, unreliable controls, poor text-to-speech | Restore reliable audio features |
| 3 | Login & Authentication | Login failures, confusing password setup, email verification issues | Simplify and stabilize login |
| 4 | Search Functionality | Search cannot find known content; lacks filters and cross-newsletter search | Overhaul and enhance search |
| 5 | Content Organization & History | No reading history, bookmarks, or save-for-later options | Add history and bookmarking |
| 6 | Subscription Management | Cannot manage or upgrade subscriptions in-app; payment issues | Enable full in-app management |
| 7 | Notification & UI Problems | Inaccurate notifications, jerky scrolling, video loading issues | Refine notifications and UI |

| Priority | Issue | Key Metrics to Track | Why It Matters |
|----------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| 1 | App Persistence & Multitasking | - App Session Length - Session Resume Success Rate - Crash Rate / App Background Survival | Indicates if users can reliably return to where they left off |
| 2 | Audio & Podcast Functionality | - Audio Playback Success Rate - Text-to-Speech Engagement - Average Listen Duration - Playback Error Rate | Captures audio reliability and engagement quality |
| 3 | Login & Authentication | - Login Success Rate - Avg. Time to Login - Drop-off Rate (Login/Signup Funnel) - Email Verification Completion Rate | Measures friction during entry and user retention through authentication |
| 4 | Search Functionality | - Search Success Rate (CTR on Search Results) - Avg. Time to Find Content - Search Abandonment Rate - Filter Usage Rate | Reflects how easily users can find what they're looking for |
| 5 | Content Organization & History | - Bookmark Usage Rate - History Retrieval Rate - Save-for-Later Engagement - Content Re-reads | Measures how often users revisit or organize content |
| 6 | Subscription Management | - Subscription Conversion Rate - In-App Purchase Success Rate - Subscription Churn Rate - User Support Tickets (Billing) | Shows if users can smoothly manage and upgrade subscriptions |
| 7 | Notification & UI Problems | - Notification Open Rate - Notification Accuracy Feedback - Scroll FPS / UI Smoothness Score - Video Load Time | Tracks real-time user engagement and perceived smoothness of the app experience |

Competitive landscape:

| Competitor | What They Do Differently | Key Features | What Substack Can Improve |
|-------------------|--|---|---|
| Ghost | Full content/data ownership, open-source, self-hosting, no platform fees, advanced customization | Custom domains, themes, paid memberships, ad support | Allow custom domains, more branding/design control, reduce or eliminate platform fees, enable ad integrations |
| Beehiiv | Advanced analytics, segmentation, growth tools, zero platform fee, modern workflows | Detailed analytics, referral programs, customizable templates, multiple revenue streams | Enhance analytics, add referral/growth tools, offer more revenue options, reduce fees |
| MailerLite | All-in-one email marketing, automation, e-commerce integration, full branding control | Automation, landing pages, e-commerce, AI writing assistant | Add automation, e-commerce, and advanced marketing features; allow deeper branding |
| Butttdown | Minimalist, privacy-focused, developer-friendly, markdown support, API access | Simple UI, custom domains, API, markdown | Support markdown, provide API access, offer privacy-focused features, enable custom domains |
| Medium | Built-in large audience, curation/distribution, partner program for monetization | Network effect, curation, monetization, articles + newsletters | Build stronger discovery tools, enhance curation, offer more audience growth options |
| Gumroad | Sell any digital product (not just newsletters), flexible monetization, marketplace | Courses, memberships, digital products, marketplace | Expand monetization beyond newsletters, add marketplace/discovery features |
| FreshLearn | All-in-one: newsletters, courses, communities, memberships, product bundles | Courses, paid newsletters, memberships, community features | Add community/membership features, support product bundles, enable course creation |