

# Understanding Session Time Metrics

With the switch from Universal Analytics to GA4, a new metric arrived in the pre-built reports called **Average Engagement Time per Session**. This is different from the old time metric of **Average Session Duration**, which still exists. This guide provides more information on the differences between the two metrics.

## Average Session Duration (Universal Analytics)

Formerly, the default time metric in pre-built reports was **Average Session Duration**, which was defined as the average length of a session over a specific period of time. This was calculated by taking the average duration in seconds divided by the total number of sessions. In other words, this metric measured the average amount of time a visitor spent on the site from when they entered to when they left.

## Average Engagement Time per Session (GA4)

In GA4, the default time metric is **Average Engagement Time per Session**, which has a different definition than **Average Session Duration**, despite being in the same position in pre-built reports.

**Average Engagement Time per Session** is defined as the average length of time a user actively uses your site or app, meaning it's the sole focus of their screen. This means that once a user arrives to your site, their time is only being counted if they are actively viewing your content on their screen, and the time will stop tracking once they move away from the site to a new tab, browser, or app.

## How Are These Metrics Different?

The biggest distinction between **Average Session Duration** (UA metric) and **Average Engagement Time per Session** (GA4 metric) is that **Average Session Duration** keeps counting regardless of what the user is doing, where **Average Engagement Time per Session** does not.

## Understanding Session Time Metrics

Generally, the new time metric has shown a smaller number than you might be used to seeing in Universal Analytics, but it's not necessarily a bad thing. When looking at different Channels and Sources of traffic, it's important to remember that each source of traffic will have a different shopping journey than the others.

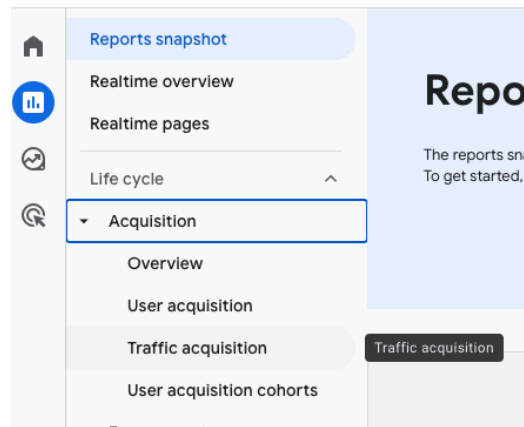
### Examples:

- You may see a longer **Average Engagement Time per Session** coming from Direct or Organic sources, because these users are already aware of your brand and are coming to the site to begin or resume their car shopping research. This means they will be actively browsing the site and starting from the homepage (usually), which means it takes more clicks/events to reach their destination on the site.
- Other sources that drive traffic directly to the VIN on your site (CPC, social campaigns, etc.) might see a lower time metric due to them arriving directly to where they need to be.

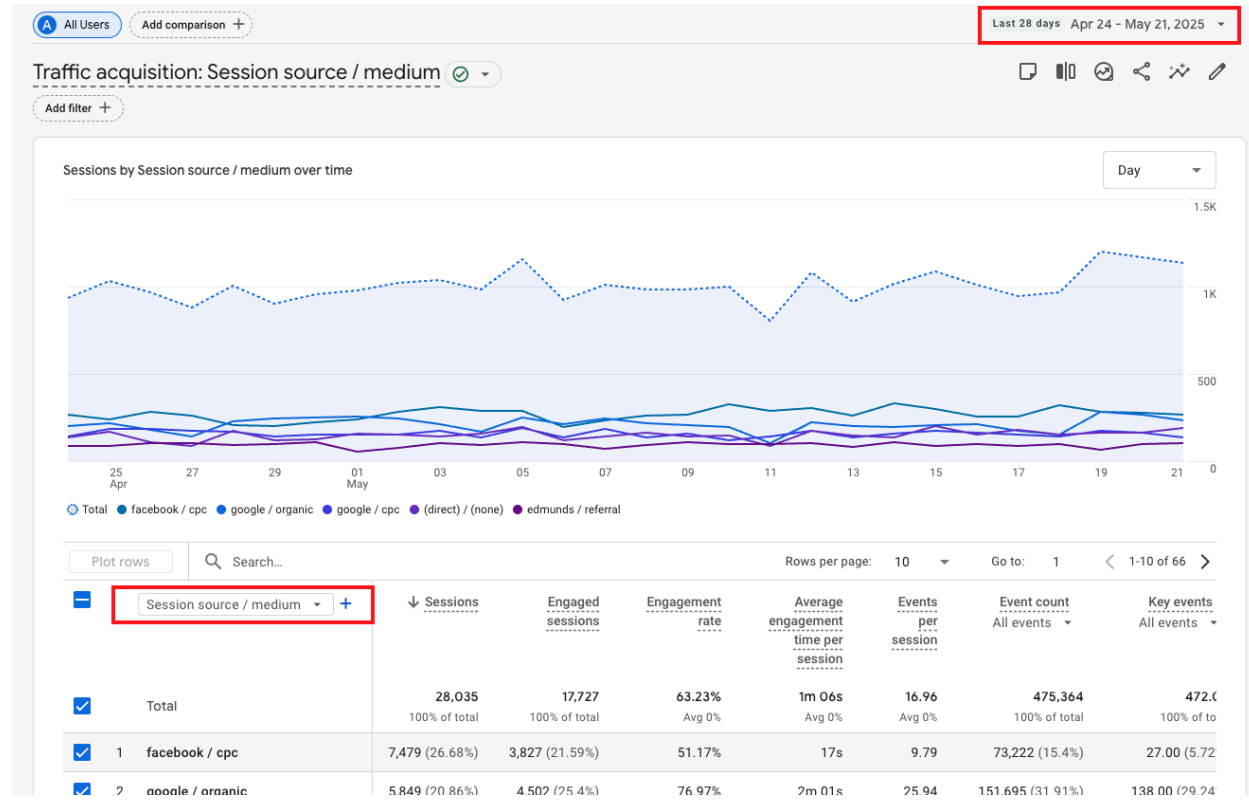
Despite this new metric being the default, **Average Session Duration** does still exist in GA4, it's just not built into any pre-existing report. To get this metric, you will need to create a custom report or modify the existing pre-built ones.

To add **Average Session Duration** to the pre-built reports, follow the steps below:

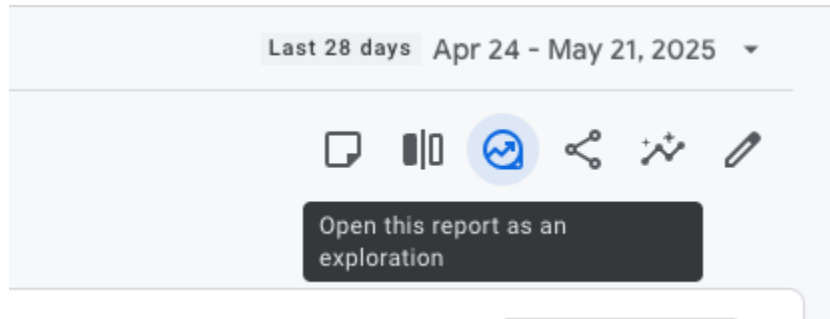
**Step 1:** Open the Analytics interface and go to the “Reports” section, then navigate to the Acquisition > Traffic Acquisition Report



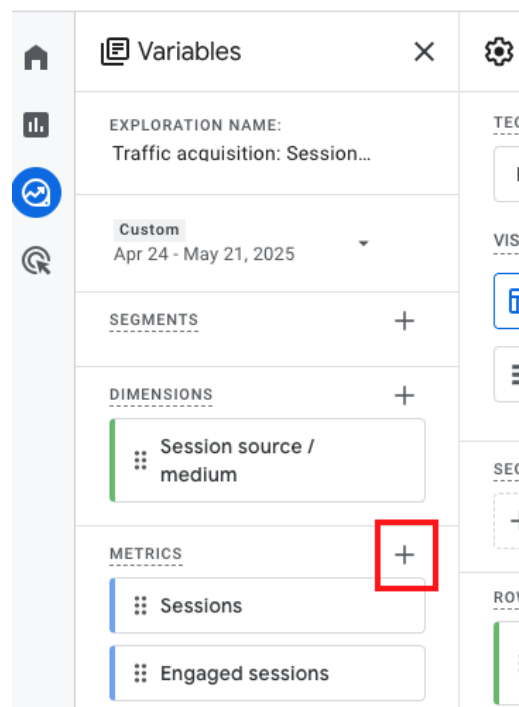
**Step 2:** Once you're in the report, select the date range you want to work with in the top right corner, and select the dimension of “session source / medium” from the drop down selector



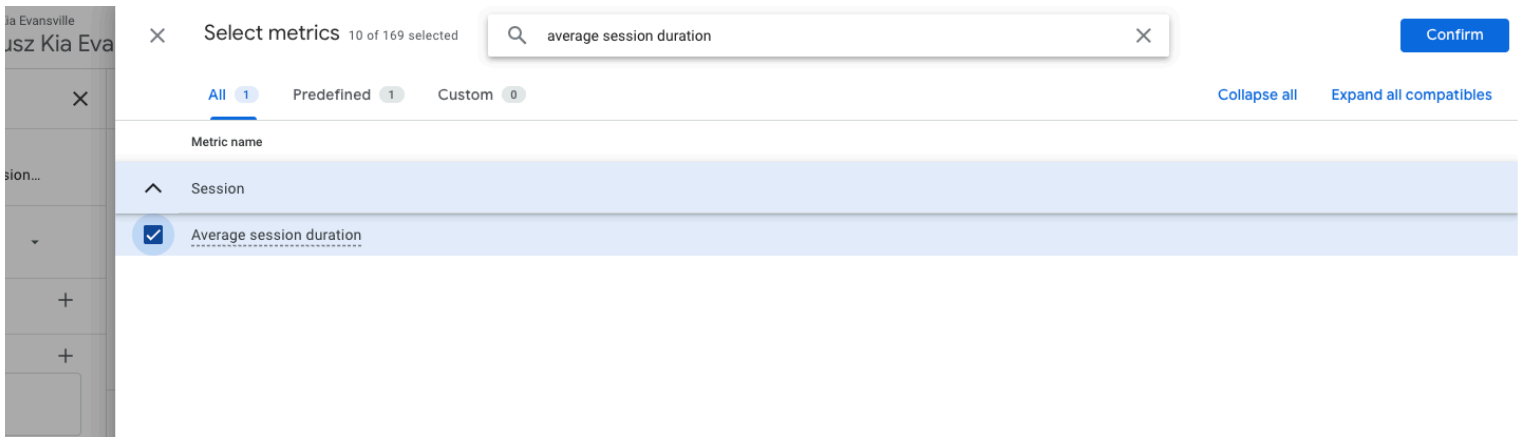
**Step 3:** From here, click the “Open this report as an exploration” button in the top right hand corner of the screen, under the date



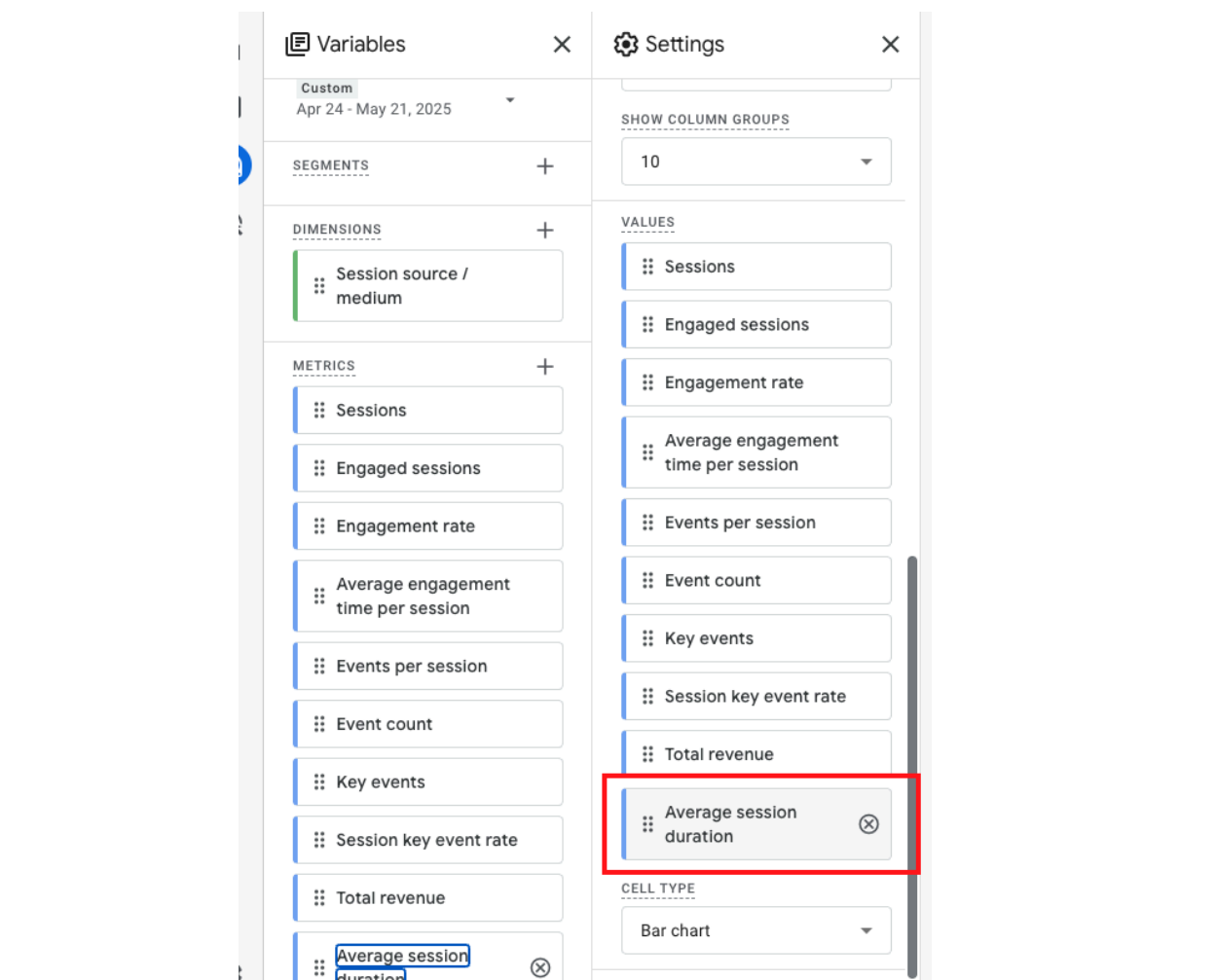
**Step 4:** Once the report opens in the Explore tab, click on the + next to the word “Metrics” in the Variables column



**Step 5:** Search for the metric **Average Session Duration** when the panel pops up and select the metric, then click 'Confirm' in the top right corner



**Step 6:** The metric should now be added as an option to your "Metrics" section in the Variables tab. Double click on the metric to bring it into the visual. Once there, you can click and drag to adjust where it goes in the 'Settings' Column



**Step 7:** Once you've adjusted the report to fit your needs, all you need to do is compare the data! You'll see that **Average Session Duration** is typically longer than **Average Engagement Time per Session** in all scenarios because it's counting the time the session is running and not just the time the browser is in the forefront of the user's screens

Session source / medium		↓ Sessions	Engaged sessions	Engagement rate	Average engagement time per session	Average session duration
<b>Totals</b>		28,035	17,727	63.23%	1m 06s	3m 29s
1	facebook / cpc	7,479	3,827	51.17%	17s	1m 17s
2	google / organic	5,849	4,502	76.97%	2m 01s	5m 15s
3	google / cpc	4,469	3,448	77.15%	1m 45s	5m 01s
4	(direct) / (none)	4,151	2,217	53.41%	58s	3m 52s
5	edmunds / referral	2,601	1,365	52.48%	12s	1m 02s
6	lotlinx / cpc	728	460	63.19%	39s	2m 06s
7	bing / organic	467	405	86.72%	2m 51s	14m 32s
8	m.facebook.com / referral	385	230	59.74%	41s	1m 37s
9	(not set)	309	146	47.25%	1m 36s	4m 22s
10	unityworks / referral	241	87	36.1%	2s	2m 05s

## **Definitions from Google**

**Average Session Duration:** The average duration (in seconds) of users' sessions. This was calculated by taking the average duration in seconds divided by the total number of sessions

**Average Engagement Time per Session:** The average time that your website was in focus in a user's browser or an app was in the foreground of a user's device

- **Average Engagement Time:** Total user engagement durations / Number of active users

[GA4 Analytics Dimensions and Metrics Glossary](#)