Social-First Trends 2026

The Global Indie Insights

SΛMY

Methodology

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27 experts interviewed

Małgorzata Gontarska,
Social Media Manager
180 Heartbeats + Jung V Matt

Oana Oprea,
Head of International Strategy &
Digital Lead
Jam Session

Marta Monteleone,
Head of Content
Next Different

Shraddha Panday,
Director, Content and Founding
Member
The New Thing

Jin Jun,
Campaign Director
Brand New Agency

Abi Bennetts,
Digital PR Director
Launch

Vanessa Touboul,
Head of Digital, Content, Trading &
Innovation
ØCONNECTION

Dylan Newe,
Director, Social & Digital Innovation
Thinkhouse

Karan Dang,
CEO & Founder
DANG

Gaby Arriaga,
Founder
Leonardo1452

Hannah Grace Kiwahko,
Associate Country Lead & Head
of Digital
PRecious Communications

Origbo Nena,
Associate Brand Strategist
TIMA

Sebastián Berríos,
Social Media Manager
Inbrax

Puja Banerjee,
Business Director
Liwa

Mike Sharman,
Chief Creative Officer
Retroviral

Sam Gormley,
Founder
Two Points Technologies

Pedro Rojas,
Social Media Manager
Inbrax

Praful Akali,
Founder and Global CEO
Medulla Communications

Dee (Daryl) Nuncio,
VP, Head of Strategy
SAMY

Abbey Kruska,
Social Strategist
Ultra Super New

Pancho González,
Chief Creative Officer
Inbrax

Taffy Ledesma,
Managing Partner
Medulla APAC

Phoebe Keogh,
Head of media & connections
The Hallway

Jordan Alperin,
Senior Communications Strategist
Zulu Alpha Kilo

Carol Chan,
Founder
InfluenConnect

Andrew Schirmer,
Consulting Director
Medulla USA

Payton Ivancic,
Strategist
The Hallway

Top trends

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1

Authenticity Paradox

As AI-generated content floods social, authenticity becomes harder to fake—and more powerful than ever. Audiences are growing skeptical of anything too polished, craving human-made stories, real faces, and emotionally grounded perspectives they can trust. AI isn't disappearing, but it's moving behind the scenes: scaling creativity, enabling personalization, and fueling speed— without stealing the spotlight. The paradox? The more automated marketing becomes, the more brands must prove they're human. In a world of virtual voices and perfect outputs, trust has become the only real differentiator.

Karan Dang,
CEO & Founder,
DANG

More than 20% of videos shown to new YouTube users are 'AI slop', study finds

Low-quality AI-generated content is now saturating social media – and generating about $117m a year, data shows

📷 The Super Cat League features human-like cats in (AI-generated) bizarre scenes. Illustration: @SuperCatLeague/YouTube

Source: Guardian

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AI is accelerating production at scale, while simultaneously eroding trust at scale

40%
the average productivity boost reported by employees using AI

71%
of social media images are now generated by AI

3h
time marketers save per piece of content when using AI tools

60%
of consumers doubt online authenticity due to the proliferation of AI content

52%
of consumers reduce engagement when they suspect content is AI-generated

98%
of consumers say authentic images are essential for establishing trust

Source: AI Content Creation Statistics 2026 (AutoFaceless, 2026)

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Figure 3: Comparison of the perception of ads labeled as AI-generated vs. human-made

Source: Transparency Without Trust (NIM, 2025)

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"Audiences are already growing fatigued and hyper-skeptical of anything too smooth and perfect. The work that wins now will have human-ness – be it scrappy, honest, practically-shot content or even copy with intentional errors. AI won't disappear, but it'll move underground. I find that it's best used when it's undetectable."

Shraddha Panday, Director, Content and Founding Member, The New Thing

Proving they are human: The new Apple TV intro was built with actual glass and shot entirely on camera

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2

From Authority to Affinity

Influence is no longer borrowed from institutions or big names. It's built through people who feel familiar, honest, and human. As trust in traditional authority erodes, audiences gravitate toward creators, experts, and communities that look and sound like them. Flaws beat polish, real environments beat sets, and shared identity beats reach. Brands that decentralize their voice and let many humans speak won't lose control—they'll gain relevance, trust, and cultural gravity.

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Phoebe Keogh, Head of media & connections; and Payton Ivancic, Strategist, The Hallway
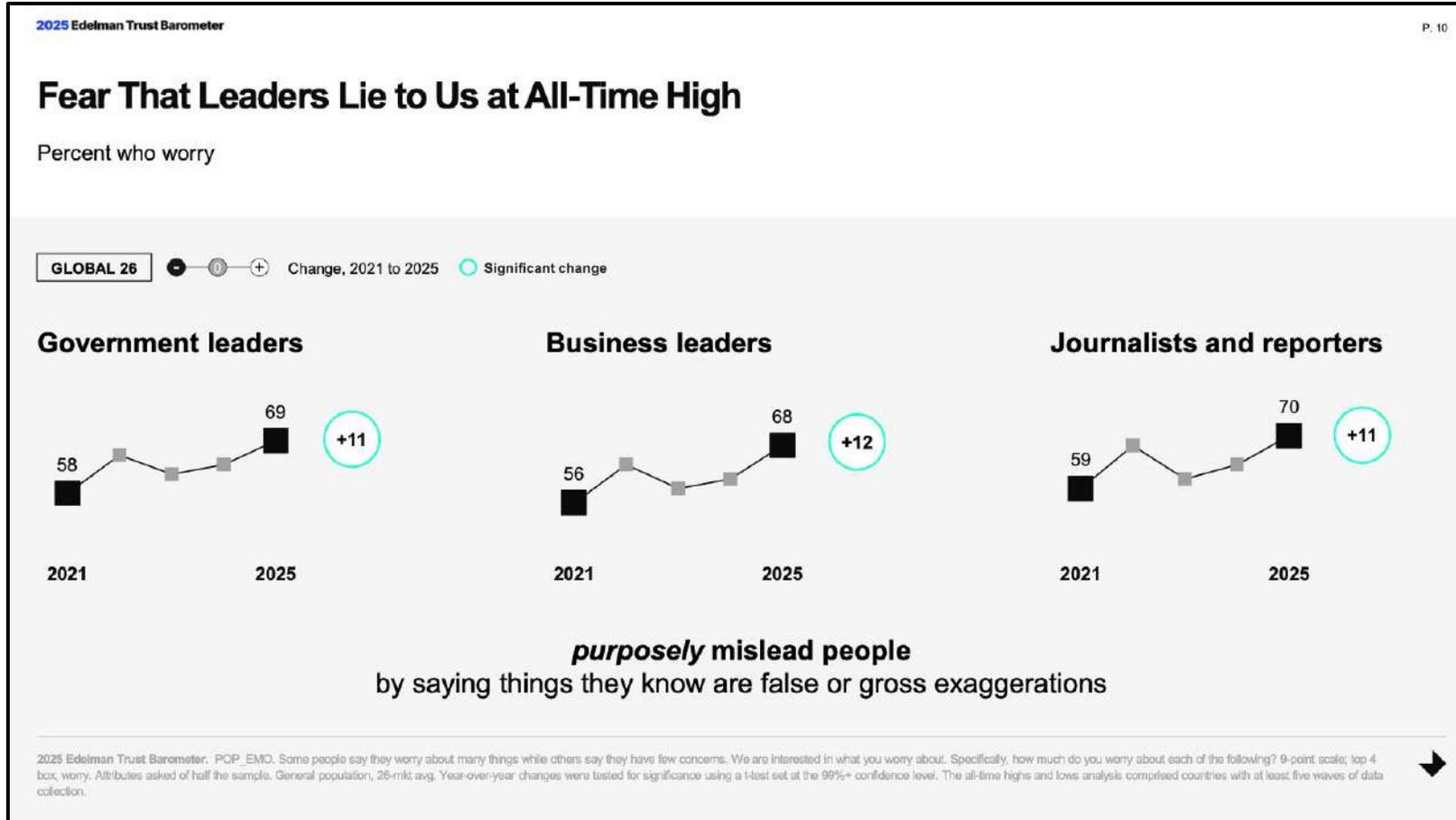
Source: Edelman Trust Barometer (2025)

Brands that decentralize their voice will centralize their influence. By empowering multiple humans to speak, create, react, and show behind-the-scenes truths, brands will feel more alive. More trustworthy. More culturally relevant.

Karan Dang, CEO & Founder, DANG

People trust people, not titles

Top Factors Driving Consumer Trust in Influencers (2025)

Factor	Percentage
Authenticity	39%
Transparency	30%
Consistency	28%
Relatability	26%
Expertise	22%
Engagement	18%
Non-celebrity status	11%

Percentage of Consumers (%)
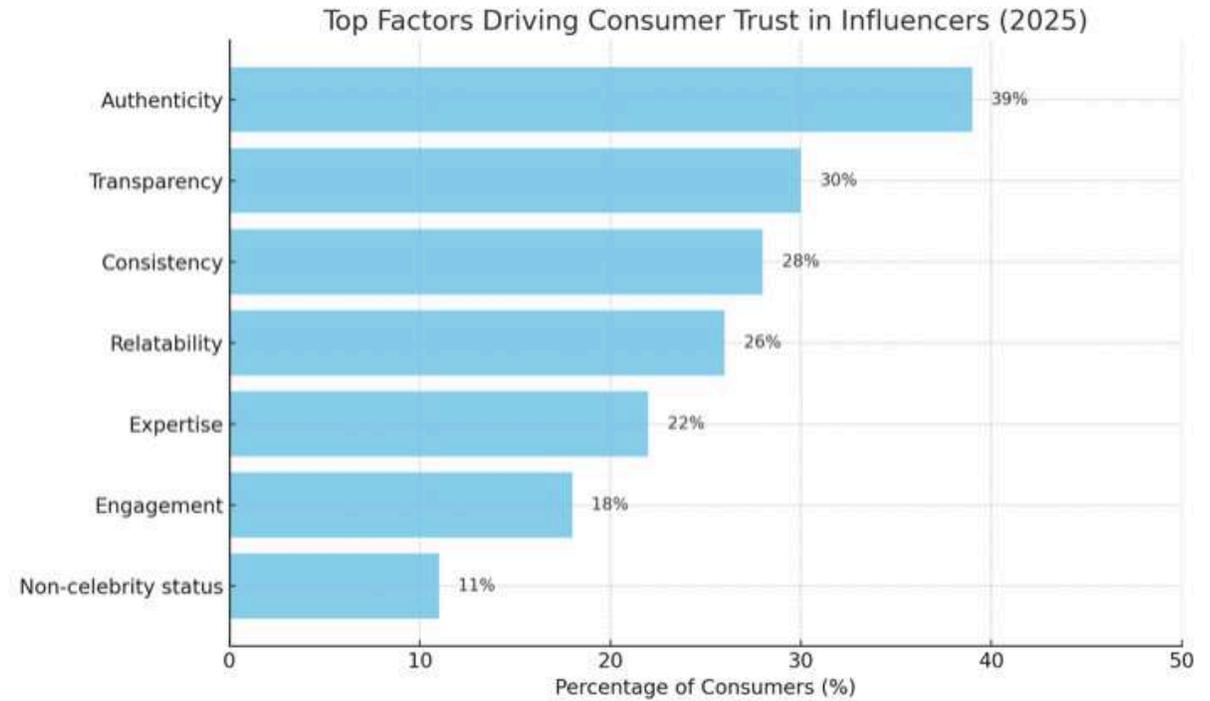
Source: Best Consumer Trust In Influencers
Statistics 2025 (Amra & Elma)

Even Cannes Lions' influencer-first winners show that the share of celebrity influencers is diminshing

74%

38%

Cannes Lions 2024

Cannes Lions 2025

Source: World-Class Lessons On Social Media Marketing 2025 (Cannes Lions & SAMY)

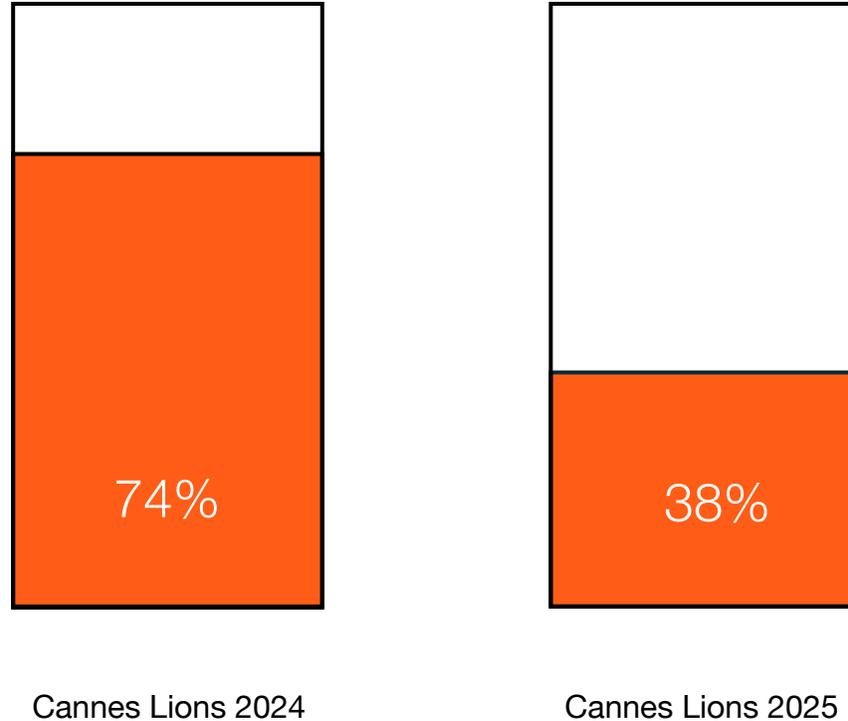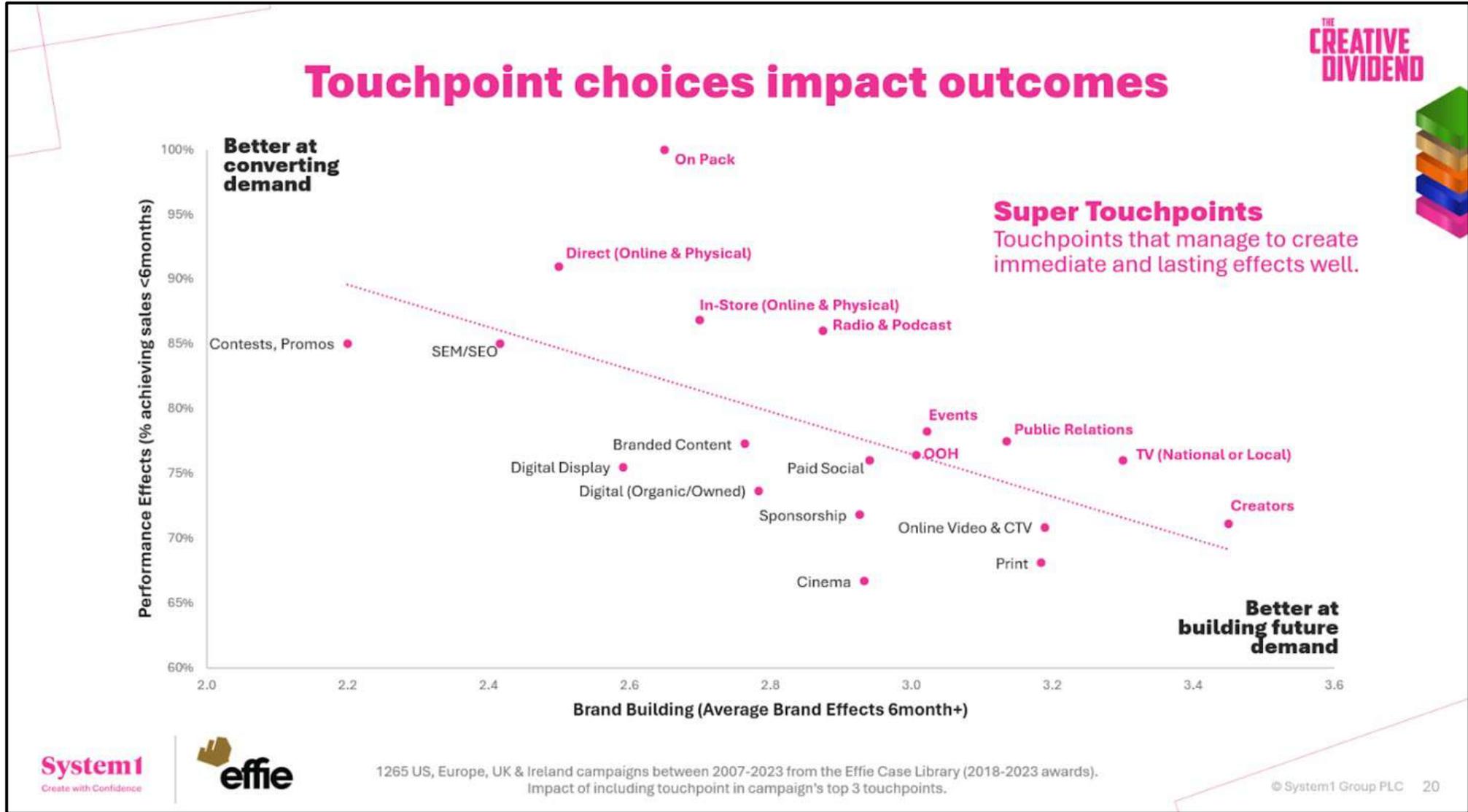Source: The Creative Dividend (System 1 & Effie, 2025)

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3

Niche, Nicher, Nichest

As platform fatigue sets in, attention is splintering into smaller, more intentional spaces. Culture no longer forms in one dominant feed but across dozens of micro-worlds—private communities, niche servers, and tightly defined subcultures where credibility runs deep. Influence now favors specificity over scale: experts over celebrities, relevance over reach. The real impact won't come from broadcasting louder, but from showing up consistently in the rooms where a few hundred people truly care.

Origbo Nena,
Associate Brand Strategist,
TIMA

"As consumers experience 'platform fatigue' and distrust of broad, algorithmic feeds, marketers will prioritize investing in creating or engaging with smaller, highly focused groups (e.g., via Discord, private subreddits, or even niche WhatsApp groups). - - This means winning requires developing AI-assisted creative processes that can generate dozens of hyper-specific, lo-fi video assets targeted to micro-segments, ensuring the content feels organic and user-generated rather than polished and branded."

Pancho González, Chief Creative Officer, Inbrax
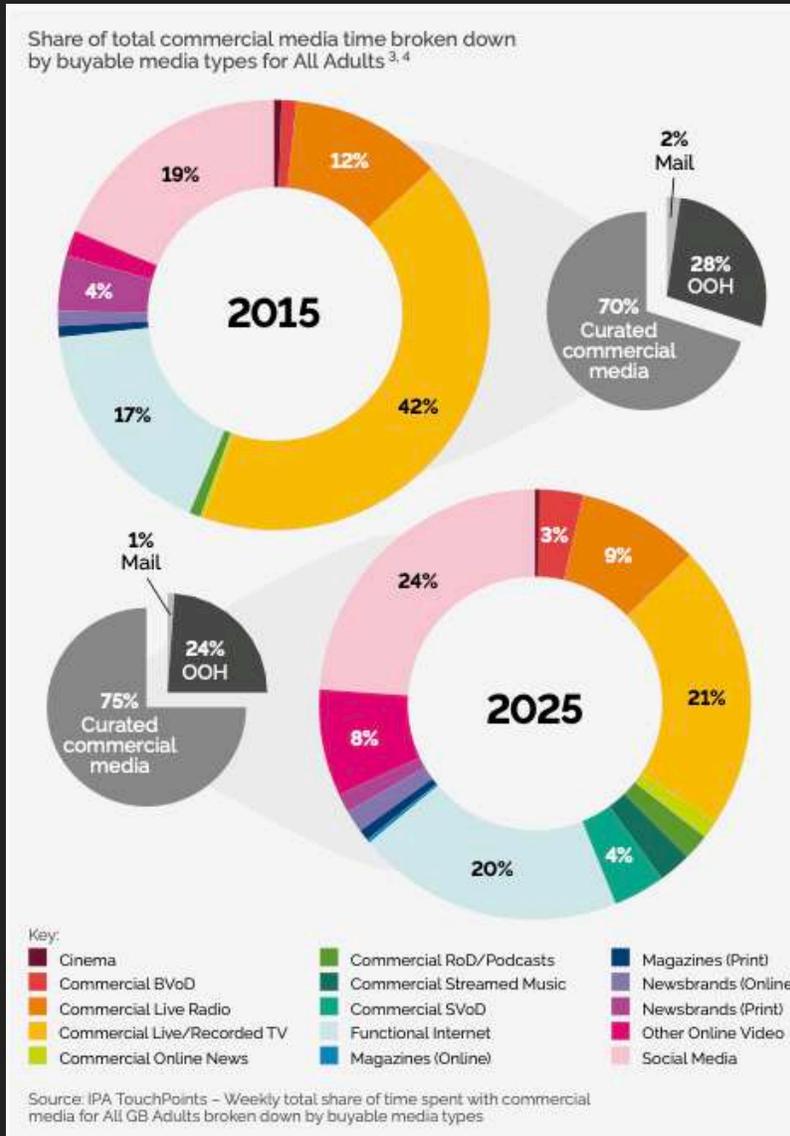
Source: Making sense: The commercial media landscape (IPA, 2025)

"In 2026, the real influence won't happen on the big stage. It will happen in rooms with 500 people who care, not 500,000 people who scroll."

Karan Dang, CEO & Founder, DANG

"A best-in-class counter example is Barbie's Match Day commenting strategy. They took the risk of treating the comment section like its own marketing moment, commenting congratulations and messages on doctors' TikTok videos for Match Day. Instead of chasing trends, they acted like a publisher, showing up in a specific moment for a specific audience. It was personal and all rooted in their brand values. Barbie showed up meaningfully for the right people at the right time. As the comment section becomes a space for community and content creation–users now post photos and spark discussion threads–Barbie leaned directly into that platform behavior. It's a perfect example of how brands win when they take risks, dial into a unique moment, and listen to their audience."

Jordan Alperin, Senior Communications Strategist, Zulu Alpha Kilo

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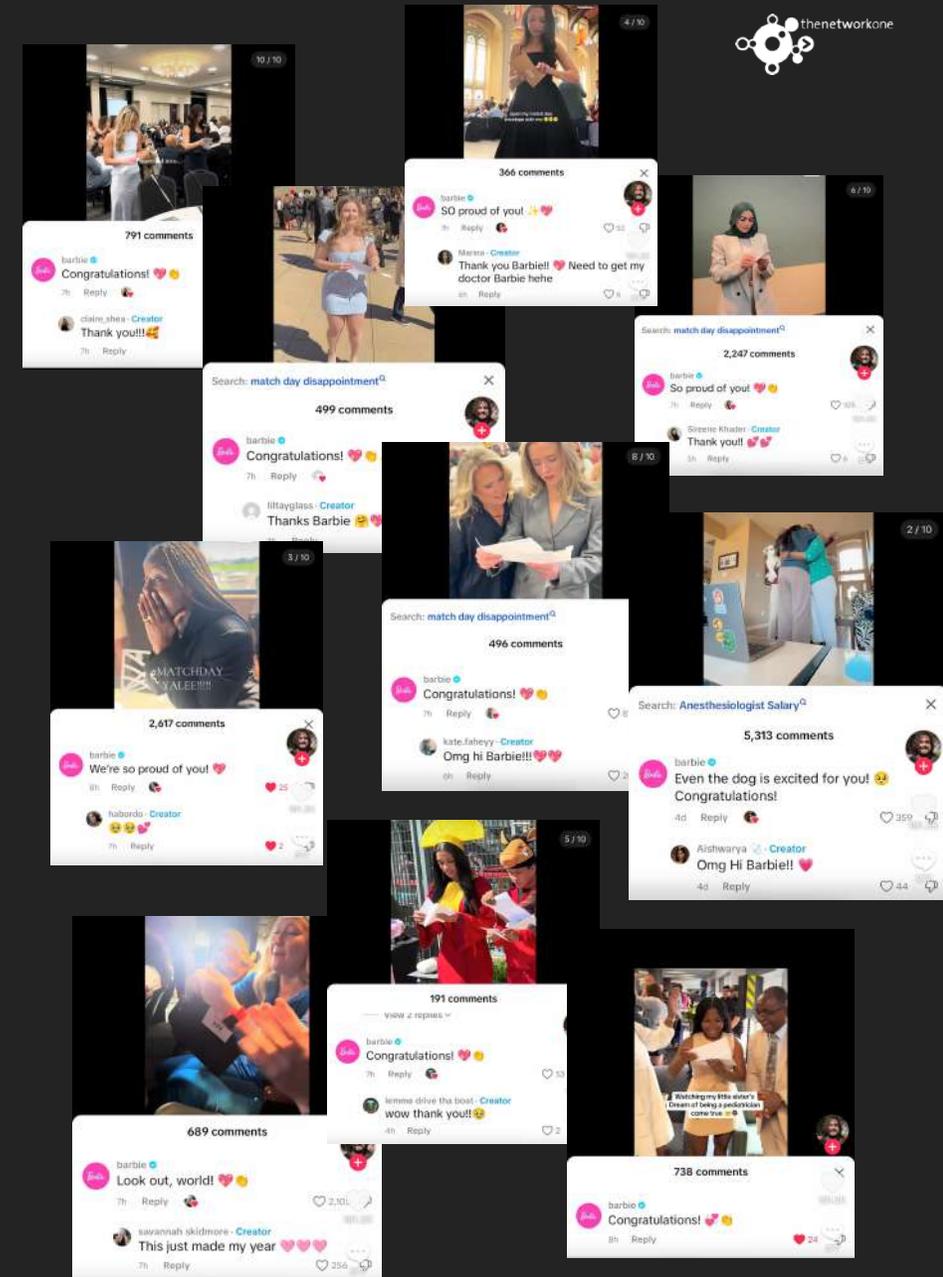
4 Scrollers Become Contributors

Audiences aren't just watching—they're shaping the story. Social-first lets brands listen, respond, and co-create in real time, turning viewers into active collaborators. The winners experiment openly, iterate on what resonates, and use audience insight as a launchpad for culture and creativity. In this new model, the smartest brands don't just speak—they build alongside the people who matter most.

INSIGHT 6

COMMUNITY-FIRST CREATIVITY

Brands are co-creating work and original IP alongside communities, and are using technology to give their audiences the power to create their own product ideas.

By involving communities in the creative process, brands are co-developing solutions that are both relevant and meaningful.

No longer working at a distance, brands are partnering on in-depth research to truly understand social groups - and this is being rewarded with greater cut through.

Winning work demonstrated how brands are embedding themselves deeply into communities. The merit-winning FIRST BODA for MyDawa & Kenya Red Cross turning Kenya's delivery riders into a fleet of first responders, exemplifies this perfectly.

Pencil winners also showed how AI was enabling greater creative input from audiences who are no longer satisfied by being passive consumers, like the Burger King - Million Dollar Whopper Contest, a generative AI experience, allowing fans to reimagine the iconic Whopper their way.

32 THE ONE CLUB FOR CREATIVITY

Source: The One Show 2025

"[The second set of] winners will be brands that understand that they're not the primary source of truth about their business anymore. With the rise of decentralised discovery, what people say about your brand will matter more than what you say about it."

Shraddha Panday, Director, Content and Founding Member, The New Thing

"Social is now the lightest, most natural form of dialogue between a brand and its consumer. Social-first is not just a media tactic but the opening line of the relationship—a way to spark curiosity and open the door before delivering the core message."

Jin Jun, Campaign Director, Brand New Agency

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Audiences trust and act on content from real people

88%
of people trust peer recommendations

8x
how much more effective UGC is in driving purchase decisions compared to influencer content

70%
of Gen Z say UGC impacts their buying choices

79%
of individuals are influenced by content created by real people

82%
of people have bought or considered buying something after seeing it posted by connections

56%
of consumers are more likely to purchase after seeing relatable UGC

Source: 50 UGC Statistics + Strategic Implications for Your Brand in 2025 (Inbeat Agency, 2025)

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"A local case is Becker's campaign in Chile, where the brand invited people to generate AI images using Meta AI. Thousands of playful, user-made visuals flooded social media, proving that when brands give audiences simple tools and permission to create, participation grows organically and authentically. The learning is clear for 2026: People are creative, willing to create, and now fully equipped to do so. Brands that open the door to collaborative storytelling will lead; those that don't will be left behind."

Pedro Rojas, Social Media Manager, Inbrax

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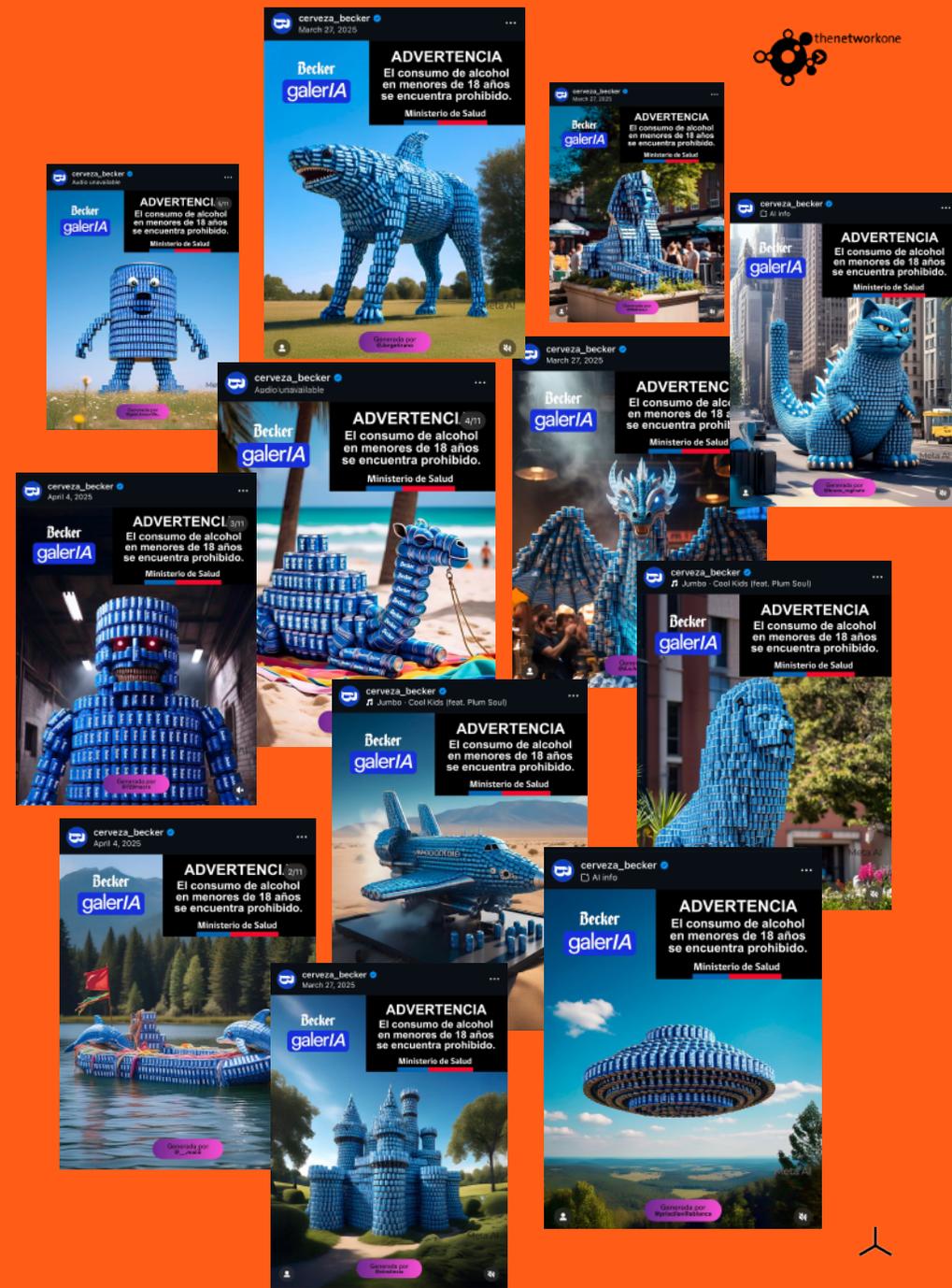
The Post-Trend Era

Virality is losing its shine. In an oversaturated feed culture, chasing every meme now signals short-term thinking, not relevance. The brands that win are building ownable worlds—repeating ideas, recognizable voices, and coherent content systems that feel familiar rather than opportunistic. Social-first no longer means posting more; it means standing for something and showing up consistently. In a post-trend era, confidence beats speed.
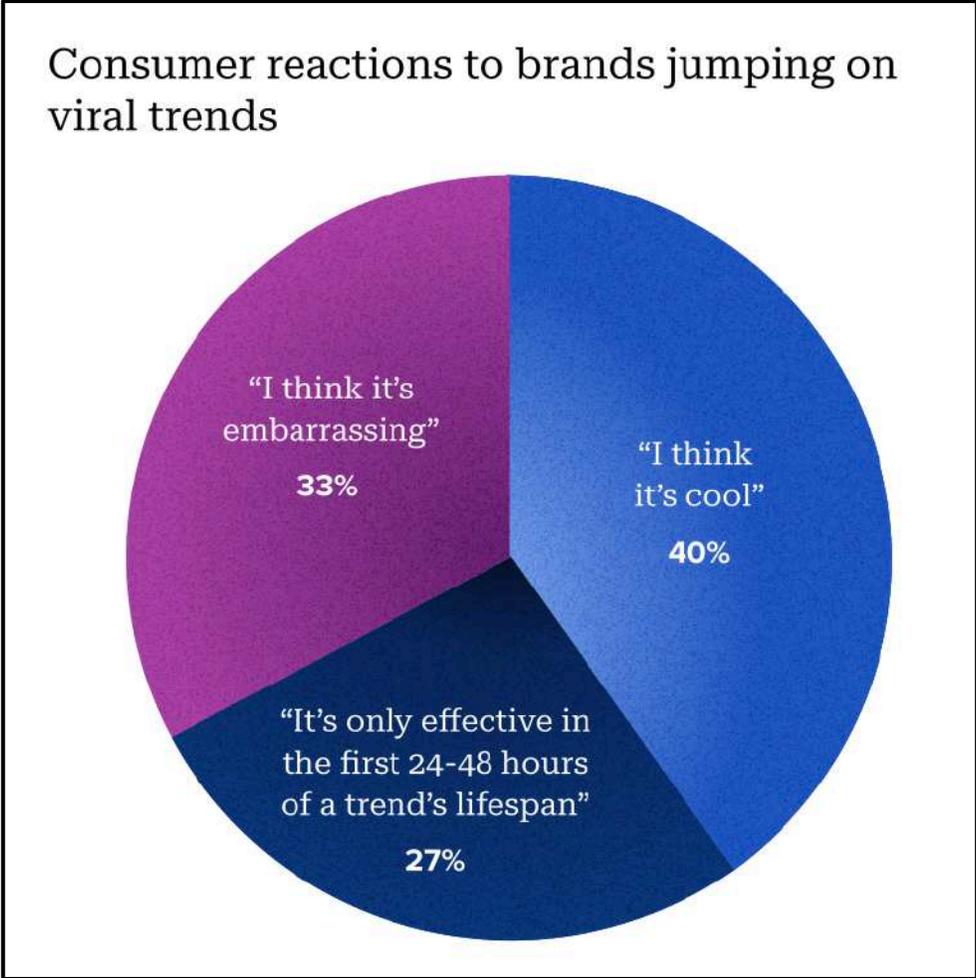
Abi Bennetts,
Digital PR Director,
Launch

"One of the most interesting trends in 2026 is actually the rise of non-trends. We are in a post-trend era where audiences are oversaturated with short-term relevant formats, so brands that create ownable concepts can stand out by creating something that feels more real. Repetitive content series built around a big idea, together with strong hooks, will gain traction because they create familiarity without feeling opportunistic."

Oana Oprea, Head of International Strategy & Digital Lead, Jam Session Agency

Consumer reactions to brands jumping on viral trends

"I think it's embarrassing" 33%

"I think it's cool" 40%

"It's only effective in the first 24-48 hours of a trend's lifespan" 27%

Source: The 2025 Sprout Social Index

"In 2026, the most successful creators and brands will stop chasing viral moments and start designing connected ones. They will blend commerce, culture, and community into the same experience. The real advantage will belong to those who think in systems rather than posts — people who can see how social, retail, and storytelling connect. The best work will not scream for attention, it will sit confidently inside the everyday flow of how people live and buy."

Sam Gormley, Founder, Two Points Technologies

What consumers say makes their favorite brands stand out on social

1 Quality of their product or service

2 Originality of their content

3 How they engage with their followers

4 How quickly they respond to customers

5 Content their employees post

Source: The 2025 Sprout Social Index

"For the launch of *Squid Game* Season 2 on Netflix, we created an intentionally heavy, slow-burning content that blended the series' elimination games with the fierce Christmas traditions of Eastern Europe, all under the watchful eye of the "toughest guardian": the Balkan granny. The long-form approach turned out to be a real win. It didn't go viral in a millions-of-views way, but it created a powerful brand and cultural moment, with high-quality engagement. So, the lesson is simple: feed your communities depth, and they'll reward you big."

Oana Oprea, Head of International Strategy & Digital Lead, Jam Session Agency

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The Death of the Funnel

The funnel didn't just shrink—it collapsed. Social is no longer awareness at the top and conversion at the bottom; it's where discovery, validation, and purchase happen in one continuous scroll. Platforms now answer intent, create demand, and close the sale without ever sending users elsewhere. Brand and performance have merged, and influence happens in real time. If you're not present when curiosity sparks, you're not in the journey at all.
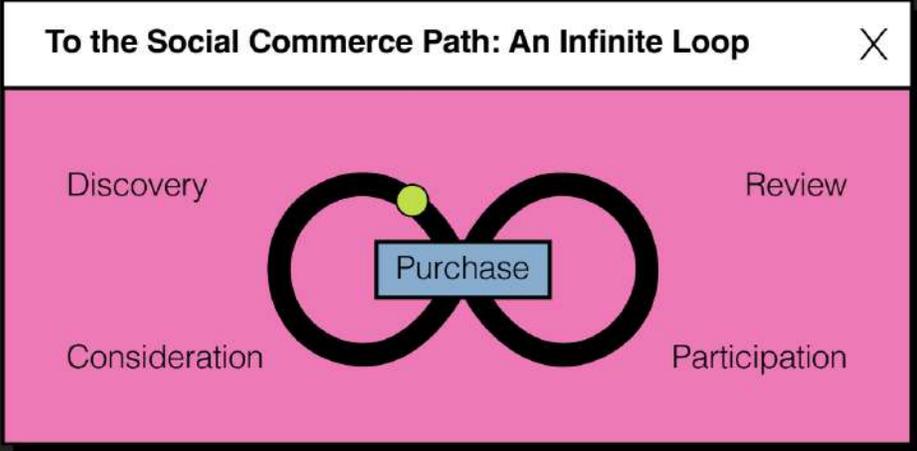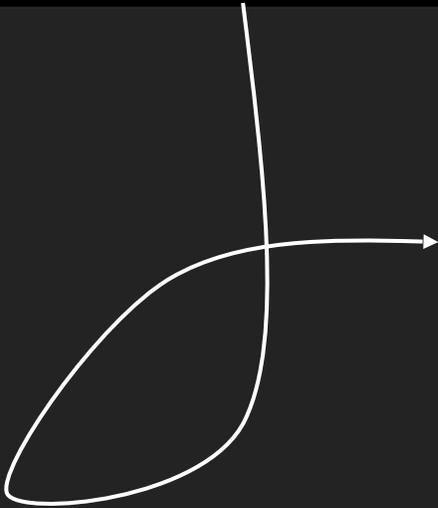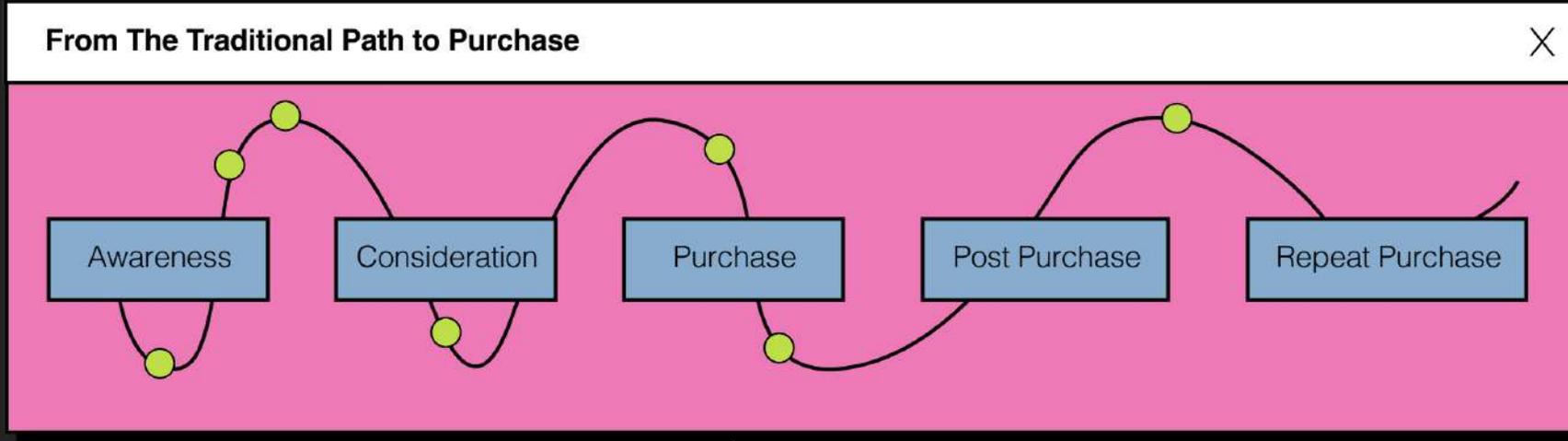
Shraddha Panday, Director,
Content and Founding Member,
The New Thing

"Social isn't just awareness anymore; it's a hub for conversion, entertainment, and connection. Platforms like TikTok let users act instantly: a video can inspire sign-ups, app downloads, or course enrollments in just a few clicks, collapsing the gap between discovery and action."

Origbo Nena, Associate Brand Strategist, TIMA

From The Traditional Path to Purchase

Awareness → Consideration → Purchase → Post Purchase → Repeat Purchase

To the Social Commerce Path: An Infinite Loop

Discovery — Review — Consideration — Participation — Purchase

Source: Marketing Trends 2026 (SAMY)

"If a brand isn't social-first, it's invisible at the exact moment that curiosity is sparked. In addition, algorithms are no longer waiting for intent like search does - they're actively creating intent by putting products and services in front of the right people before they even know they want them."
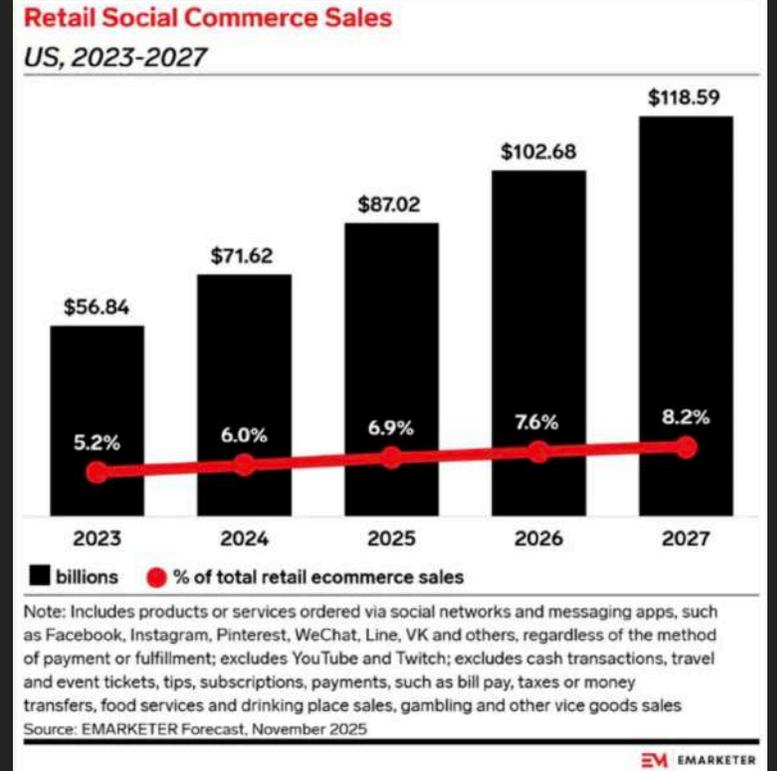
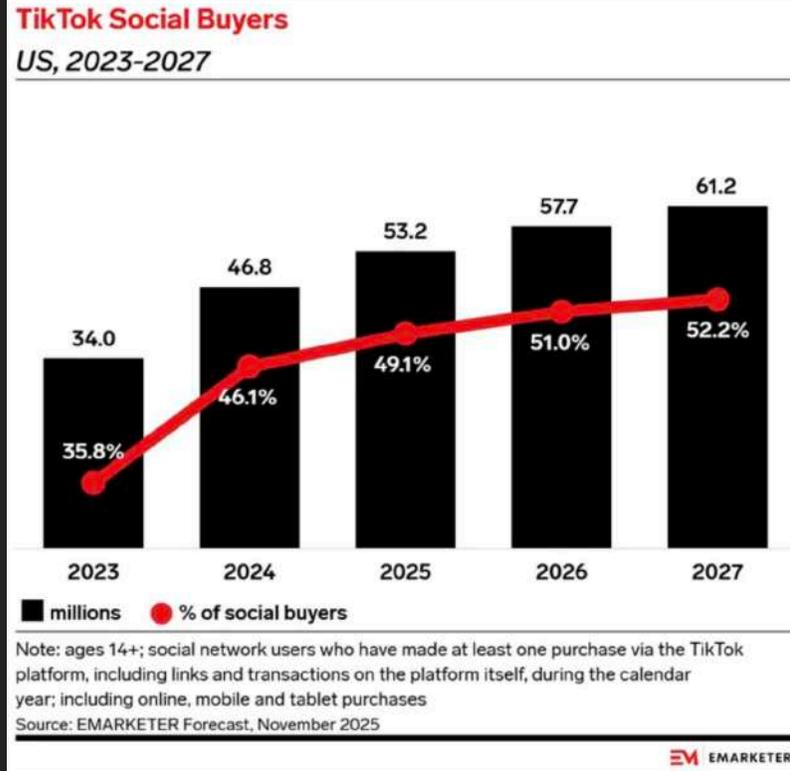Abi Bennetts, Digital PR Director, Launch

WIRED

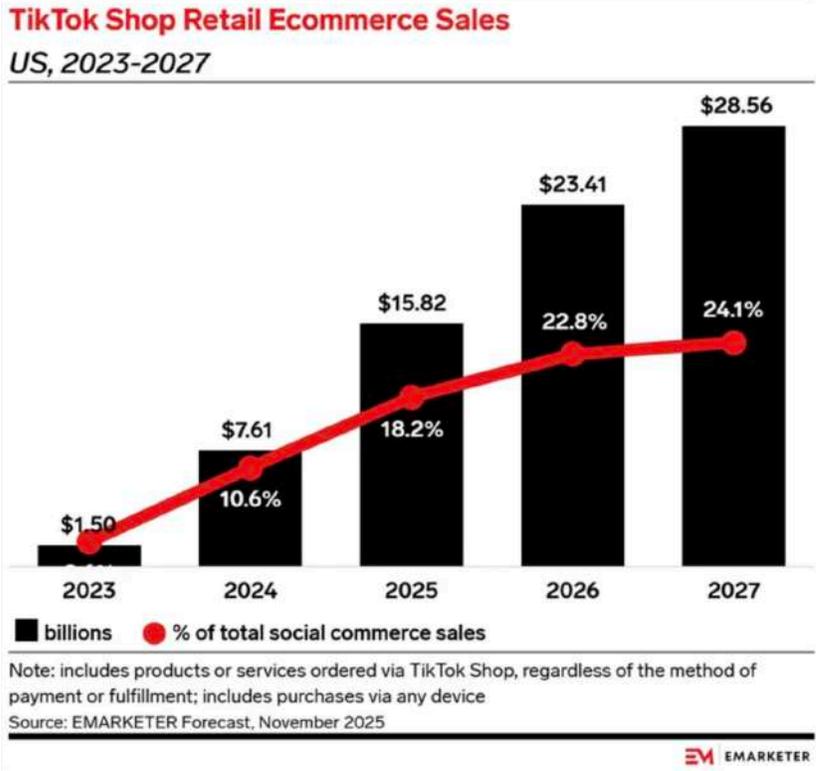ZEYI YANG   BUSINESS   NOV 7, 2025 12:00 PM

TikTok Shop Is Now the Size of eBay

TikTok's ecommerce arm has kept growing steadily, despite tariffs and never-ending debates over whether the platform should be banned.

Source: eMarketer (12/2025)

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Social as the Big Bang

Social is no longer the destination—it's the ignition. What starts in the feed now spills into events, retail, OOH, culture, and real-world experiences. The strongest brands design for social first, then let what resonates travel everywhere else. Social-first doesn't mean just social; it means using the feed as the trigger for worlds people can step into and keep coming back to.

"Social has simply evolved past being a place where people spend time to being the nucleus around how we all live. Look at where Timothee Chalamet is solely promoting his new movie. Look at who the new rock stars in 2026 are; they're creators on social. Look at where sports clips are first seen around the world. In 2026, social doesn't just mean the big platforms; it's everything. Spotify. Strava. Vinted. You name it."

Dylan Newe, Director, Social & Digital Innovation, THINKHOUSE

Fitness tracking platform Strava eyes IPO as Gen Z swaps dating apps for running clubs

BY **ABHINAYA PRABHU** · OCTOBER 14, 2025
· ⏱ 2 MINUTE READ

Image credits: Strava

Strava, a fitness tracking platform, is preparing for an IPO. CEO Michael Martin has confirmed that the San Francisco-based company plans to go public at some point, aiming to raise funds

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"Social-first doesn't mean "social only." It means designing for the most demanding environment — the feed — and then extending what resonates into podcasts, TV, OOH, retail, events, and experiences. At Øconnection, this approach consistently leads to stronger storytelling, faster learning, and better business results."

Vanessa Touboul, Head of Digital, Content, Trading & Innovation, ØCONNECTION

"Our breakout of 2025 was Tinder's Ex-press Disposal Truck. It proves that people trust organic conversations about the category far more than branded conversations about their products. Instead of forcing a message about the app, the campaign picked up an insight that already thrives on the internet. That's why it travelled across 41 countries, earning over 9 million organic impressions without a single rupee spent on media. Instead of trying to own the conversation, Tinder became the facilitator. They gave people a big, visual, talkable moment (literally a truck for dumping your exes' things), so that users could continue a conversation they were already having. And the touchpoints felt native: meme pages riffed on it, creators built their own bits around it, publications picked it up, and people shared it because it felt like culture. The learning is clear: social-first ideas join existing conversations and meet people where they're at."

Shraddha Panday, Director, Content and Founding Member, The New Thing

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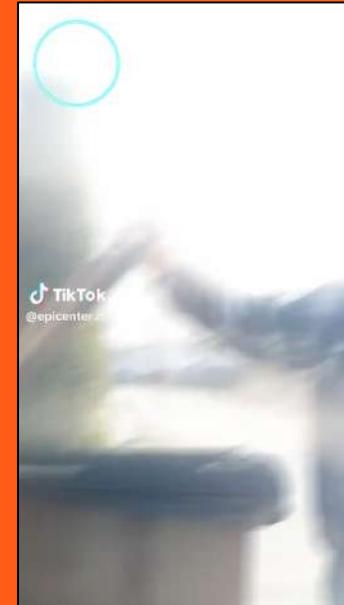
#1 Authenticity Paradox

Audience gravitates to real

#7 Social As The Big Bang

#2 From Authority to Affinity

Thinking everything social-first

Looking for people like me

#6 The Death of The Funnel

#3 Niche, Nicher, Nichest

Blending storytelling into commerce

Rising engagement due to fewer people

#5 The Post-Trend Era

#4 Scrollers Become Contributors

Creating an ecosystem of ownable content

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Let's.
Get.
Social.