

# SOCIAL MEDIA

# TRENDS./

2026

# From chasing trends to seeing them coming

Every year, the internet gets loud with hot takes about where culture is going. Some are smart. Most don't age well.

What is obvious is *this*: the ground is shifting faster than most strategies can keep up. AI is moving faster than strategy decks. Would you be surprised if in three months another evolution of an AI tool you don't see coming greatly changes how you market to your audience? I wouldn't. You can't plan for that.

So this isn't just another trends report telling you what to copy next. It shows you what's already changing underneath your feet, **based on real conversations from real people, happening right now.**

Technology will always change.  
Platforms will come and go.  
AI will keep getting faster.

The advantage has never been the tech.  
It's understanding people better than anyone else.

Yes, you'll see the big cultural shifts shaping creativity, influence, and intelligence. But the real edge isn't knowing our trends. It's learning how to spot yours early, before they show up in everyone else's deck.

That's why the second half of this report is practical.  
How to catch audience signals before they're obvious.  
How to understand where they're headed.  
And how to move while others are trying to make sense of it all.

Read the trends. Then go find the ones that matter to your brand.



**Billy Jones**

Chief Marketing Officer, Hootsuite

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# THE 18 TOP^ SOCIAL MEDIA\_

Social identities and communities are becoming more personal, while AI is taking over content creation. Absurdist chaos battles it out with cozy nostalgia.

**All while social media evolves from a communications channel into a search engine, a research lab, and a high-stakes creative testing ground.**

Here's what you need to know to stay relevant in the lightning-fast social ecosystem of 2026.

# TRENDS./ FOR\_2026

POWERED BY  
TALKWALKER AI

01

# ALGORITHMS ARE GAINING NUANCE

It's not new that TikTok seems to know you better than you know yourself. But heading into 2026, other social platforms are starting to gain this soul-penetrating capability, too. But what really powers this ability to serve up content you didn't even know you were looking for? **Micro-behaviors.**

Sure, you might not have liked or clicked on any videos about hand-crocheted beanies for dogs. But did you slow down *just a little* when you saw one? Hover time has become a key signal to social media algorithms because it signals interest even when you don't take a specific action. Rewatching and pausing shows even more interest.

The way platforms use this information to surface content is changing, too. Social platforms can still draw users in for much longer than they intended. But instead of falling into *rabbit holes*, users are now being sent into *snowballs*.

Rabbit holes are user-driven deep dives into a topic. But snowballs don't require that level of action. You simply experience repetition of a theme from multiple sources as you scroll.

This means that follower count has essentially become a vanity metric. There's a reason almost all of the weekly reels from Adam Mosseri, head of Instagram, focus on reach. The new social experience is based on what interests users, not who they follow.

Rather than building a strong follower base, brands need to build a deep, nuanced understanding of their target audience. Then, create content that speaks directly to those people across formats. This requires a lot of experimentation (which we'll talk about later).

**Algorithms no longer reward brands for accumulating followers — they reward them for consistently signaling relevance.** In this new era, a strong and nuanced understanding of your audience will be your biggest competitive advantage.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Don't rely on follower growth as a proxy for future performance.** Reset your team's success metrics away from follower counts and toward reach quality, content resonance, and repeat exposure across non-followers.
- **Double down on audience research.** Tap into social listening to continually deepen your insight into audience behaviors, motivations, and cultural signals — then operationalize that insight through highly relevant creative that your audience (and the algorithms) will love.

02

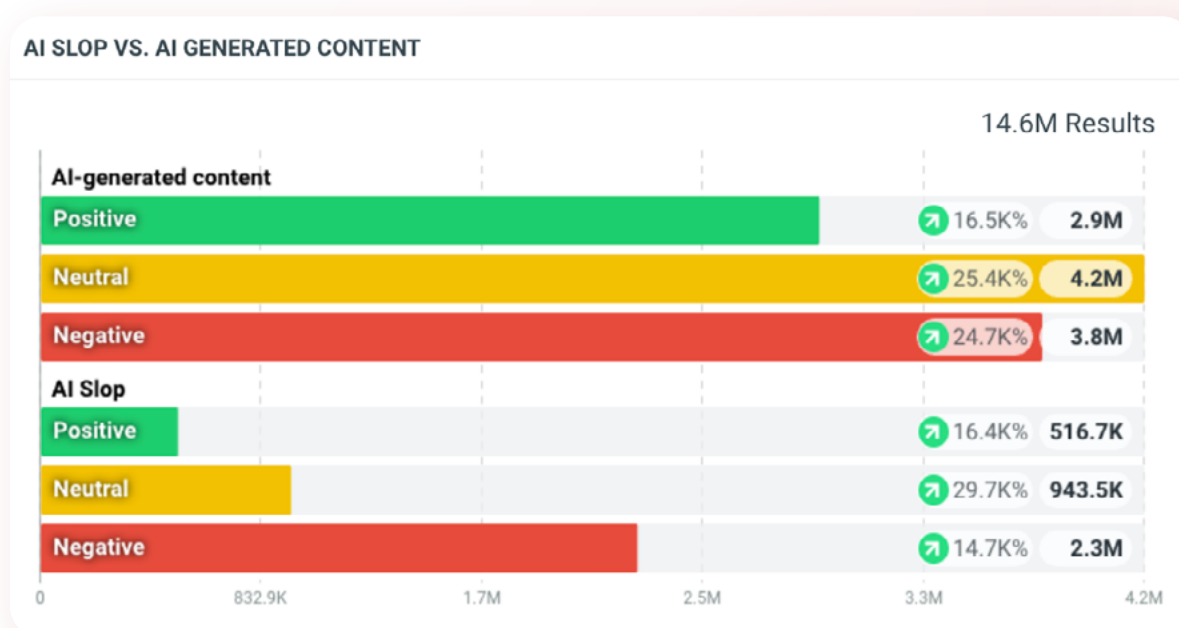
## HUMAN-MADE AUTHENTICITY WINS, BUT AI TOOLS ARE TABLE STAKES

Nearly all employees (94%) and brand leaders (99%) are familiar with generative AI tools, [according to McKinsey](#). Employees are already way ahead of the C-suite's expectations for incorporating AI into their daily tasks. And 92% of companies plan to increase their AI investment even more over the next three years.

AI tools have simply become table stakes for brainstorming, creating and editing content, and iterating content ideas. [Our research](#) revealed that 79% of social media managers now use AI daily. And [eMarketer found](#) that 133 million people in the US alone will use generative AI in 2026.

At the same time, users are pushing back against synthetic perfection. More than [30% of consumers](#) say they're less likely to choose a brand if they know their ads are AI-generated. And [91% of marketers](#) say human involvement is very important or critical for evaluating or generating AI content.

**So should your team use AI for content creation?** We analyzed audience sentiment to help answer this question.



Source: TalkwalkerAI

Social media audiences aren't rejecting AI outright — they're rejecting *slop*. Conversations around AI slop skew heavily negative, with more than half of mentions expressing frustration or dislike. The backlash isn't about AI's presence in content creation, but about outputs that feel repetitive, low-quality, or obviously uncurated. In other words, audiences are quick to call out content that looks like it was published without human judgment or value added.

By contrast, the idea of AI-generated content is met with a far more balanced response. Negative sentiment is significantly lower. Neutral and positive mentions dominate, signaling curiosity and conditional acceptance.

**Audiences are comfortable with AI as a tool, not a replacement for creativity.**

In an effort to make the human touch clear, in 2026, brands are likely to emphasize slight imperfections to stand out from AI noise. The occasional stutter or flub is now a signal of authenticity rather than a mistake to edit out.

Brands may even add imperfections on purpose. “Typo marketing” is not a new social media strategy. It’s a well-established way to get people talking about a campaign. Coors took this to the extreme in 2025 with their massive “refreshment” ads leading up to the [Case of the Mondays campaign](#).

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Don’t sacrifice brand equity for efficiency.** AI should accelerate your teams, not dilute your standards. The brands that win will use AI to move faster — but still insist on human judgment, originality, craft, and *taste*. Treat AI as infrastructure, not a strategy. The competitive advantage will come from how well leaders combine AI efficiency with human creativity — not from how loudly (or how blindly) they adopt new tools.
- **Stay rooted in human insight.** Winning marketing strategies in 2026 will be built on human truths and cultural relevance. Use social intelligence as the foundation for how you shape messaging, creative direction, and campaign strategy.



03

# SOCIAL CONTENT MUST ADAPT TO SEARCH

Social search has been evolving for a few years now. *The New York Times* [declared TikTok the new search engine for Gen Z](#) way back in 2022. By 2025, about [two-thirds](#) of US consumers had used social search.

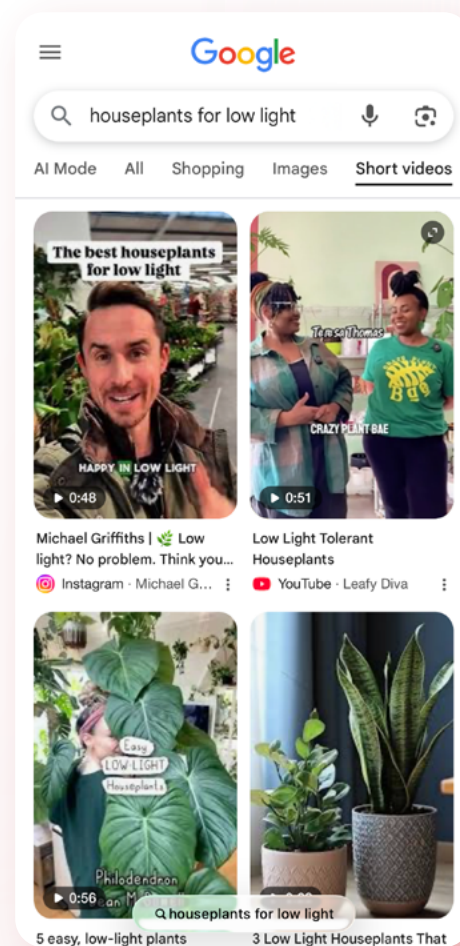
## What's new in 2026 is the multi-modality of social search.

Users might still type a query about the best bars in New York into the search bar on TikTok or Instagram. But they can also use Visual Search on TikTok or Pinterest to search for similar content based on visuals. Or Pinterest Lens to search from a photo. Voice search has also entered the chat, both through social tools like Meta AI and through traditional search engines.

## All of this is making search more conversational.

In July 2025, Google began indexing public Instagram posts and profiles. That means increased [social SEO](#) opportunities, including through voice search and voice assistants. The Short Videos tab on Google is specifically designed to surface vertical social short-form video content from sources like YouTube Shorts, TikTok, and Facebook or Instagram Reels.

This means social marketers should also be thinking about AEO, or Answer Engine Optimization. You're probably already incorporating AEO techniques in your longer form content, like blog posts. But short social media posts that directly answer questions also benefit from AEO.



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Treat social as a discovery engine, not just a distribution channel.** In 2026, social content will shape how your brand is found, evaluated, and chosen. Break down the walls between social, content, and SEO in your organization so that they can build for search behavior on social platforms and outperform those still optimizing only for engagement. Search visibility is no longer owned by one team — and leaders must design for that reality.
- **Make “answerability” a content standard.** In a world of conversational search and AI assistants, brands that clearly answer real questions will be better poised to win visibility.

04

## CREATOR PARTNERSHIPS ARE SHIFTING TO FOCUS ON ROI

In Trend 1, we talked about the lower importance of follower count in a social environment fuelled by nuanced algorithms. That’s having a major impact on the ways brands work with creators.

A creator’s follower count is no longer a critical metric for brand value, and even engagement rate is less important than it used to be.

Instead, brands are looking for audience alignment combined with storytelling quality. The goal is to find creators for long-term partnerships that lead to measurable ROI, rather than one-off posts that create some awareness but don’t necessarily translate into action.



**We’ve seen creators with mid-sized followings drive more interest in bookings than larger accounts with weaker audience trust. That’s shaped our move toward deeper vetting and a more relationship-driven model. We’ve passed on partnerships — even with large creators — when engagement felt inflated or out of sync with our standards.”**

**[Erica Bloch](#)**

Associate Director of Communications  
[Woodlock Resort](#)

We use this strategy at Hootsuite too, bringing back creators our audience knows and trusts. Our most recent influencer marketing campaign [boosted impressions by 73%](#), met the goal for trial sign-up, and saw more than 1,000 content downloads — all real, [measurable impacts](#) on ROI.

The important thing is to define what ROI looks like for your brand, because it’s not always as simple as tracking sales. For instance, Woodloch looks at intent signals like saves, shares, and “questions that indicate genuine trip planning,” Bloch says.

## **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- **Your creator programs need goals tied to real business impact.** Likes are nice, but conversion signals are better. Define what ROI looks like for each partnership.
- **Bet on trusted voices instead of big names.** Key opinion leaders (KOLs) have specific expertise in their niche and have strong audience trust. They can be pricey, but can deliver strong results when there’s a good brand fit.

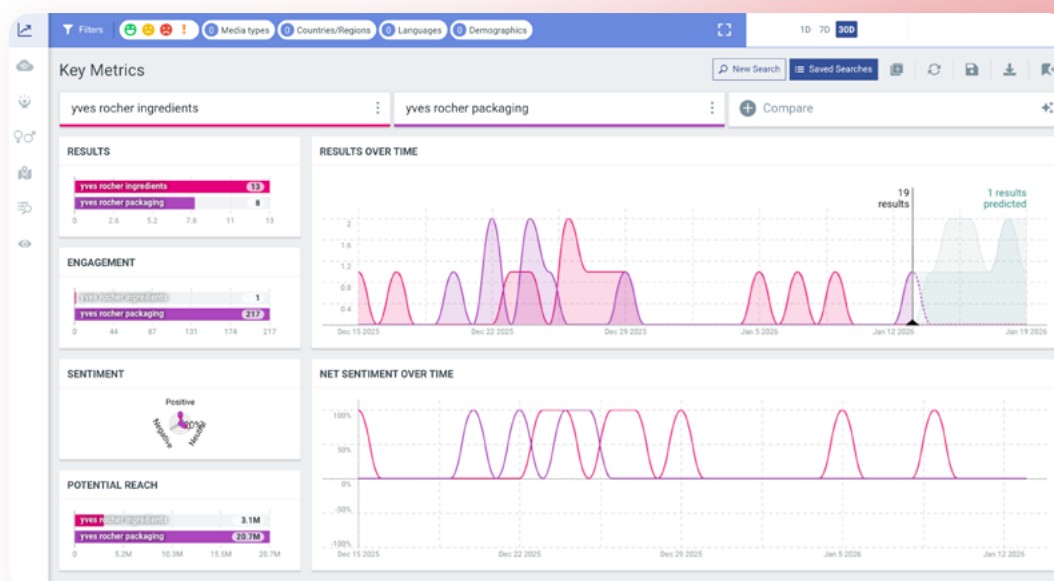
05

# SOCIAL IS BECOMING A FIRST-PARTY DATA & RESEARCH ENGINE

As third-party cookies lose their value, brands are using social channels to collect high-value first-party data with clear user consent. Gated content is a particularly valuable tool here, and automated DMs have made the data collection significantly easier. Lead-gen ads, subscriptions, live events, and even social quizzes and polls can all provide rich context to your CRM.

Brands also increasingly turn to social touchpoints for market and consumer intelligence that evolves too quickly for traditional research methods to keep up. [Social listening tools like Talkwalker](#) use AI to pull specific brand insights from the vast quantities of data available on social platforms, in real time. This data can impact all areas of an organization.

For example, [Yves Rocher](#) uses Talkwalker to track consumer perception of ingredients, eco-design, and natural resources. They use the data to guide product development and positioning.



Source: [Talkwalker data from Yves Rocher Case Study](#)

[STEF Group](#), a temperature-controlled logistics firm, used keyword and sentiment data to drive its content strategy and grow its LinkedIn followers from 50,000 to 100,000 in 18 months.

**Social research and data collection keep brands agile in a culture that keeps gaining speed.** The old way was to review analytics after a campaign. That's still important, of course. But brands can now use social listening to anticipate trends, intent, and sentiment and respond to micro-shifts as they happen.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Move from reactive to proactive research.** Stop relying solely on post-campaign analytics or slow traditional research. Real-time social intelligence allows leaders to detect trends, sentiment shifts, and emerging opportunities before they impact the market.
- **Consider adding a specialized social culture and listening role to your team.** Not only do algorithms favor culturally adapted brands, social data championed by an in-house expert can impact all areas of your brand, from product development to PR.
- **Test an automated DM/gated content campaign for lead generation.** Create a social post promoting a white paper, report, or other gated content resource and use automated DMs to collect leads.



06

# IDENTITIES ARE BECOMING FRAGMENTED ACROSS SOCIAL APPS

We've talked for years about the importance of a [consistent brand voice](#). But we've also talked about the importance of adapting content for each social platform. Heading into 2026, these two concepts go head to head.

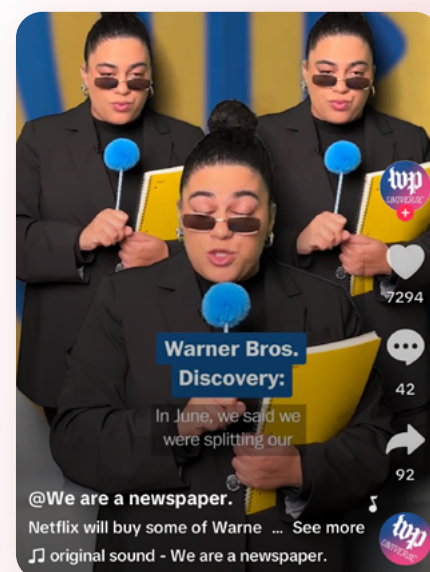
Social media users now maintain multiple identities across apps. A CEO who posts about business strategy on LinkedIn may have a chatty Instagram account dedicated to craft beer and an active Reddit profile focused on 3D printing.

These side quests allow space to explore different personalities within different communities. And brands must follow suit.

A single, monolithic brand voice is less effective when audiences encounter brands through many touchpoints in different online community contexts. In this world, brands must figure out how to craft flexible identities that hold onto core elements of brand truth.

For example, on X, [The Washington Post](#) is a no-nonsense news account using plain language and links to content on their website. On TikTok, [they create](#) fast-moving explainer videos targeted at a younger audience, with no expectation that users will click through to read more.

The real-time nature of Threads, X, and Bluesky makes these platforms ripe for experimentation. If you're unsure how to begin crafting new identities for your brand, these are good places to start.



Source: @washingtonpost

## TO-DO LIST

- **Embrace a flexible identity.** Ensure you have well defined core brand truths that can adapt to the norms, culture, and expectations of each social ecosystem. (And then give your team the freedom to do so.)
- **Map your platform identities to user intent.** Use social listening data to understand what people want from your niche on each platform and what kinds of actions they take there. Adapt your content strategy accordingly and ensure you have a quantifiable way of measuring those experiments.

07

# CREATIVE PATTERN ANALYTICS ARE DRIVING RAPID EXPERIMENTATION

AI is making social analytics tools more insightful than ever. Rather than simply identifying which posts performed best, marketers can now use creative pattern analytics to dig into why certain content had better results.

Analytics tools now look at recurring elements across large volumes of social data to understand which patterns consistently drive performance — for a whole industry or a specific brand.

At the same time, social platforms are constantly adding and changing their features, functionalities, and algorithms. What worked yesterday may not work tomorrow.

**All of this has pushed social teams to adopt rapid testing and feature experimentation.** It's an intense ramping up of single-element testing. It uses the same principles as oldschool A/B testing — just at hyper speed.

Every component of social content is up for analysis — the hook, the tone, the pacing, the structure. This is much more granular than previous analysis, which might have simply compared the success of a video post to a carousel. In an interview with Hootsuite’s team, [LinkedIn’s Director of Product, Sam Corrao Clanon](#), highlighted the need for experimentation beyond basic formats: “We encourage you to explore the formats that best reflect your expertise and connect with your audience, whether that’s video, writing, newsletters, or images.”

[Adam Mosseri himself says](#) that one of the top ways to increase reach is to come up with “repeatable concepts,” so you can repeat a couple of patterns or ideas over time rather than coming up with new content from scratch every day. [He also says](#) it’s critical to experiment. “Even when ranking doesn’t change at all, we see all the time that people’s interests change.”

All of this raises an interesting question: Does quantity now outperform quality? Is virality just a numbers game? [Hootsuite benchmarking data](#) shows that brands are posting on most social media platforms at least once a day, and more than that on Instagram, Facebook, and X. Creators post so often that they have to assure fans they’re okay after a couple days’ absence.

In 2026, brands will need to find a balance: Post often enough to maintain attention and glean rapid insights while maintaining quality content.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Create a culture of experimentation.** Winning in this environment will require constant experimentation across formats, narratives, and creative hypotheses — with fast feedback loops. Structure your team for speed and insight-led iteration over perfectly polished, campaign-led execution.
- **Embrace insight-driven iteration.** Push your team to identify not just what content works, but why. Ensure your team is measuring and acting on granular performance signals — hooks, tone, pacing, and structure — across all social platforms.

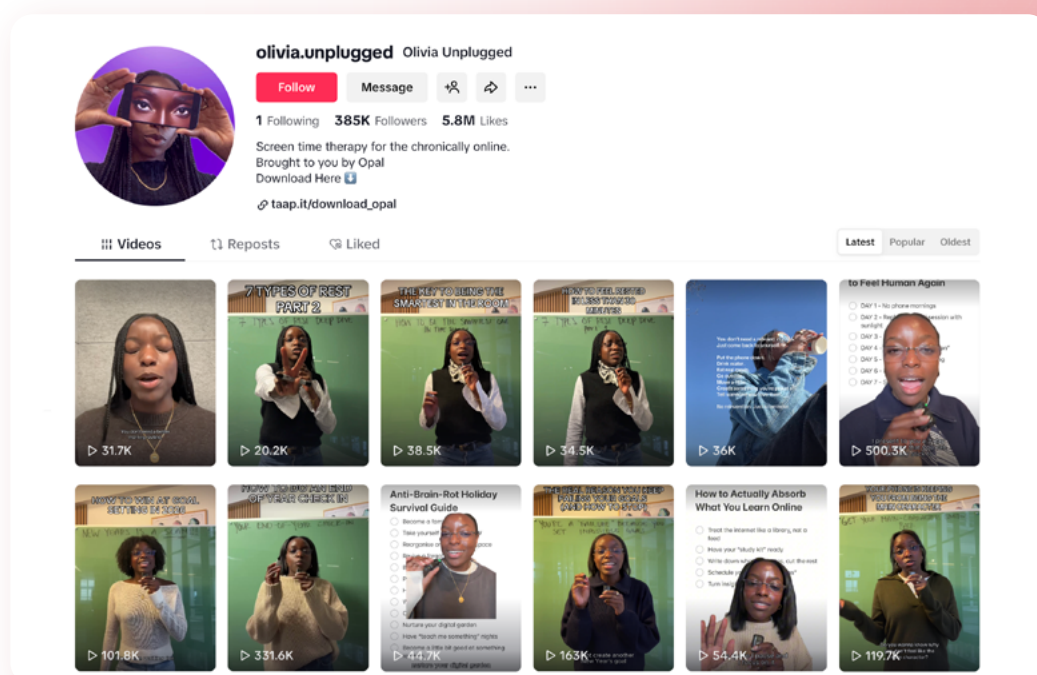
08

# BRANDS ARE ADOPTING A CREATOR MINDSET

Brand teams are coming out from behind the desk and embracing an on-camera presence. This makes branded content feel more like creator content, with components of storytelling, effective editing, and personality-driven engagement.

Successful brand creators are becoming influencers in their own right and materially impacting brand performance.

Olivia Yokubonis is a social media manager at the screen time management app Opal. But she's also the face of the TikTok account [Olivia Unplugged](#), where her 385,000 followers feel like they're engaging with a person rather than a brand. (Because they are!) Her videos talk about the importance of reducing screen time, with the product appearing only as a secondary character. She even got a [reshare from Kristen Bell that racked up more than 24,000 likes](#).



Source: [@olivia.unplugged](#)

*But wait, you might be thinking: You just said that reach has become a volume game.* Sure, there may be a contrast here between these two trends. But realistically, there's a need for both. A performance-forward, growth mindset and strong creative edge are not mutually exclusive.

In fact, the most successful brands will be those that combine these two trends, learning from creative analytics to refine content and brand personality in whatever form it takes.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Lead by example.** Encourage your fellow leaders to get on camera, share stories, and engage directly with audiences. Executives who embrace a creator mindset humanize the brand, build trust, and set the standard for the rest of the organization. Internally, executives who are visible on social signal organizational buy-in for experimentation, creativity, and human-first marketing.
- **Hire for creator fluency.** Creator-style storytelling is no longer a nice-to-have; it's core to social performance. If you're still hiring for publishing and reporting alone, you're hiring for a role that no longer exists. Look for creator fluency — on-camera confidence, storytelling instincts, and cultural awareness — and update job titles, descriptions, and career paths to match how social actually works today.
- **Prevent approval bottlenecks.** Nothing stifles creativity like a group feedback pile-on. Get clear social guidelines in place to protect your brand, then allow your on-camera team some flexibility and autonomy to work their magic.

09

# LINKEDIN IS IN ITS CREATIVE ERA

Once a rather buttoned-up professional network that primarily served as a recruiting platform, LinkedIn has come into its own as a truly social network. With that transition comes a focus on content creation. The LinkedIn of 2026 will be a much more expressive and visual place than the LinkedIn of early 2025.

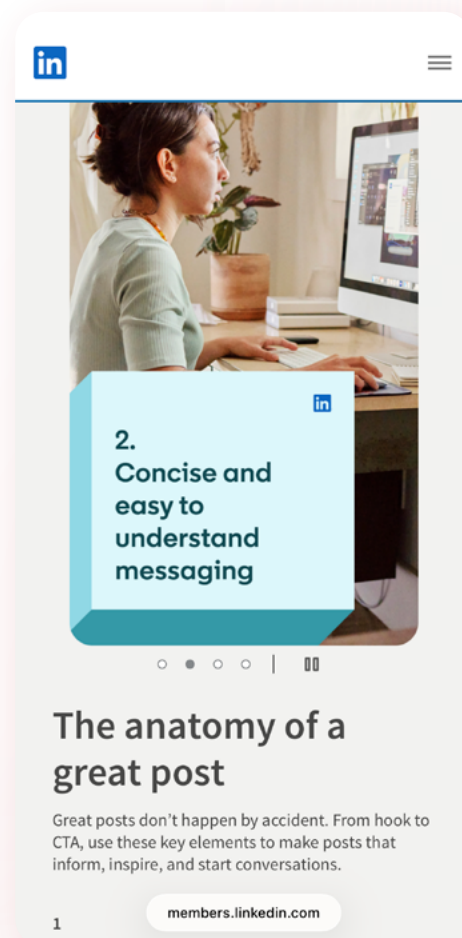
This is partly due to the changing demographics of the platform. Users aged 25 to 34 make up the largest age group on LinkedIn. And there are [significantly more](#) users aged 18 to 24 than 35 to 54.

But it's also because LinkedIn has made the decision at the corporate level to lean into video, and better support content creators.

LinkedIn recently added [new insights features](#) that allow users to track the followers and profile views generated from each post, sends, saves, and clicks on custom buttons. They've also added a [whole microsite](#) and [showcase page](#) with tips to help creators succeed on the platform.

There's also a Videos tab (available in the US), where LinkedIn users are spending [more than twice as much time](#) as they did a year ago.

All of this is making LinkedIn a more engaging place to be. As video uploads increased [more than 20%](#) in 2025, LinkedIn [comments are up 24%](#).





**Adding imagery or video to your message makes it dynamic and helps it stand out in the feed. Videos are one of the most engaging formats on LinkedIn, with members spending more time per post, on average. And adding just one image to your post can lead to up to a 40% increase in reactions, comments, and reshares — with multiple images adding even more impact. However, make sure that the image is relevant to your post — such as an illustrative chart or image that brings additional context to your post.”**

**Sam Corrao Clanon**  
Director of Product  
LinkedIn

This creative shift translates into real value for brands. Hootsuite CEO Irina Novoselsky's LinkedIn presence generated more than [10 million impressions](#) in three months and influenced 37% of Hootsuite's monthly leads.

Meanwhile, [80% of B2B marketers](#) say they need to leverage creative marketing tactics to stand out in a more competitive landscape, and 91% say that getting audience attention is their biggest worry.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Level up your own creative presence on LinkedIn.** The creative era of LinkedIn rewards authenticity and authority. When leaders show up consistently with compelling, visual content, the impact is measurable — from impressions to pipeline influence. In a crowded B2B landscape, people are the voices they trust.
- **Don't treat LinkedIn as a corporate bulletin board.** Creative formats don't just look better in the feed, they perform better. So even though LinkedIn is a “professional” network, allow (dare we say, encourage) your team to create content that feels native, visual, and human. The opportunity isn't just reach — it's relevance.

67

# GEN ALPHA CHAOS CULTURE IS SHAPING NEW CONTENT NORMS

In a move that horrified schoolteachers across North America, [Dictionary.com](#) [declared](#) “67” its word of the year for 2025. As they ask in [their own video](#) about the choice, “How could two numbers possibly be the word of the year?”

Quite simply, this absurdist numeric meme is dominating Gen Alpha humor. The hashtag #67 has 2.9 million videos on TikTok and 1.2 million on Instagram. As a college student says in another [Dictionary.com Instagram video](#), “No one knows what it is, but we all need to know what it means.”

According to Talkwalker data, as of January 2026, the trend seems to be close to reaching its peak and is likely to fizzle out over the next quarter:



But a new absurdist Gen Alpha meme is sure to take its place. **For brands, this is more than just a cultural oddity to shrug off.** It represents a shift to nonsense humor, chaotic content, and brainrot edits. For Gen Alpha, narrative is being displaced by randomness, repetition, distorted audio, aggressive captions, and overstimulation.

If you're marketing to anyone under 30, TikTok culture is your audience's culture. This chaotic visual language is shaping the next generation of consumers and will impact visual branding in the years ahead.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Focus on cultural fluency.** Use social listening tools to actively observe Gen Alpha TikTok culture, including relevant themes and sentiment. Save examples that perform well and talk about why they work. Look to the youngest members of your team for cultural insights.
- **Incorporate elements of chaos without going overboard.** Brands need to tread lightly here. Incorporate visual elements from chaos culture, but don't try to hijack the style for promotional content in a way that would go against your core brand identity.
- **Revisit your audience research.** If your target audience is over 30, they may be confused (or even annoyed) if you dive into these trends. Don't lean into this cultural shift unless (or until) it serves your community.



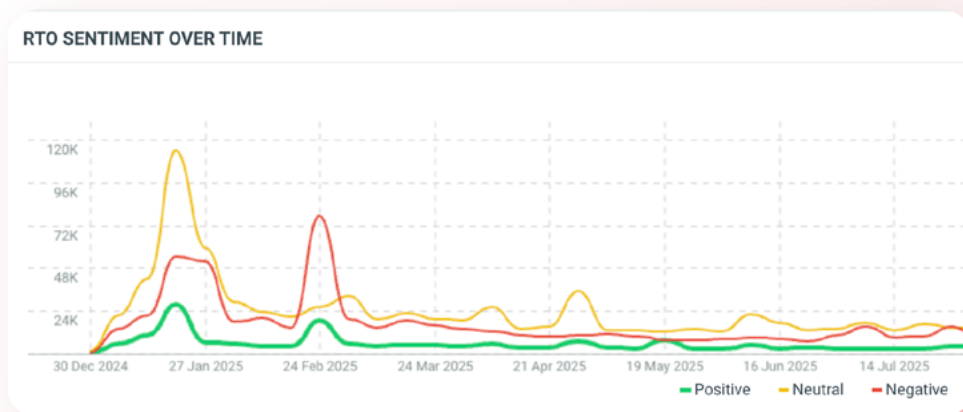
11

## WORK/LIFE BALANCE REMAINS A KEY CONTENT PILLAR FOR MILLENNIALS AND GEN Z

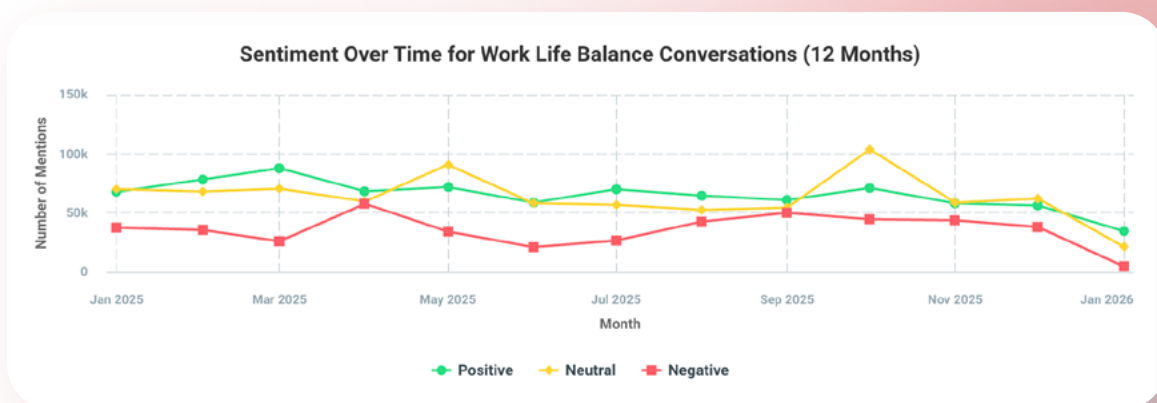
In contrast to the chaos of the previous trend, content about burnout office culture, work/life balance, and hybrid work struggles offers long-term stability. Whereas chaos culture is about cultural relevance with Gen Alpha, work/life balance content signals emotional relevance to millennials and Gen Z.

Two-thirds (66%) of American employees are experiencing some feelings of burnout, according to [data conducted by Censuswide for Moodle](#). That number rises to 81% for 18- to 24-year-olds and 83% for 25- to 34-year-olds.

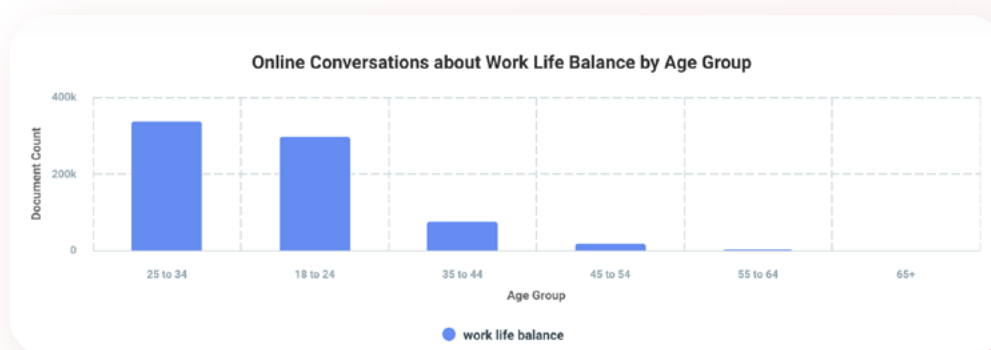
2025 brought a big spike in conversations around return to office (RTO) policies. These heavily skewed negative, and our analysis sentiment over time reinforces why. Spikes in discussion are consistently driven by backlash — often following policy announcements from large global employers — rather than advocacy.



The criticism is less about offices themselves and more about what rigid mandates represent: higher personal costs, reduced flexibility, and a perceived rollback of progress made during remote and hybrid work periods. For many employees, strict RTO policies signal a lack of trust and empathy, which quickly turns workplace decisions into public reputational risks.



By contrast, discussions around work/life balance trend far more positively and steadily. Audiences actively champion flexibility, mental health, and sustainable workloads, with younger workers in particular framing balance as non-negotiable rather than a perk. The takeaway is straightforward: Brands and employers that emphasize flexibility, hybrid models, and employee well-being align more naturally with audience values.



**Reflecting shared frustrations, anxieties, and small victories helps humanize brands.** It's an opportunity to create real brand loyalty. For B2B brands and employer accounts, there's an opportunity to focus on empathy and showcase a healthy working environment. Consumer brands can lean into concepts related to self-care, boundary-setting, and making the most of personal time.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Set up an early-warning system to manage reputation risk.** Conversations about work/life balance can quickly escalate from personal frustration to public backlash, especially when policy changes feel abrupt or misaligned with employee expectations. Talkwalker's real-time alerts and always-on monitoring help you track sentiment and step in early — adjusting messaging, clarifying intent, or aligning internal stakeholders before reputational damage takes hold.
- Activate employee advocacy to build trust and attract talent.** Employee stories about work/life balance, flexibility, and day-to-day culture often carry more credibility than brand messaging, particularly during moments of change. At [DaVita](#), employee-led social content highlighting company culture earned 24,000 shares and increased applicants by 136% — proof that empowering internal voices can positively shift perception and support recruitment goals.

12

# NOSTALGIA REMIX CULTURE IS DRIVING BRAND LOYALTY FOR GENERATION X

Millennials and Gen Z get most of the attention in digital marketing circles, with Gen Alpha drawing more notice as they enter their teen years. But Gen X is actually the generation driving the largest amount of global spending: [\\$15.2 trillion](#) in 2025. They'll be the spending leaders right through 2033, when their spending is predicted to hit \$30 trillion.

Gen X is on social media, and being influenced by what they see there. [92%](#) of Gen Xers use social media every day, and even 28% of TikTok's user base belongs to Gen X. In fact, the share of US TikTok users over age 45 [has grown 13x](#) since 2019.

We've seen that Gen Alpha is leaning into absurdist chaos while millennials and Gen Z identify with relatable workplace memes. For Gen X, nostalgia is the key point of connection.

Nearly half of respondents to the [Pinterest Predicts 2025 survey](#) said they're rewatching classic TV shows or films. Searches for 1970s childhood toys are up 125%, and for '80s luxury up 225%.

In fact, Pinterest says nostalgia is evolving into reclamation of moments from the past. Old meme templates are new again, and '90s music is appearing in new contexts. Toys 'R' Us is opening nostalgic [holiday pop-up shops IRL](#).

While millennials may claim the indie sleaze trend, young Gen X was still in their 20s during its original iteration. The comeback resonates hard with those whose high school years included both grungy flannel and neon bodysuits (and a Kurt Cobain-level of disdain for everything).

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Think cultural reclamation, not retro cosplay.** Nostalgia works best when it feels like recognition, not pandering. These retro throwbacks are best given new life when paired with contemporary humor, formats, or product innovation.
- **Rethink your platform mix.** Gen X is flocking to TikTok, but they're still more likely to be found on Facebook or Instagram. Make sure your Facebook marketing strategy is solid to connect with this demographic.

13

## FRUGAL OPTIMISM AND SLOW LIVING ARE TAKING ON OVERSTIMULATION

Cozy, calming aesthetics are on the rise as a pushback to hyper-online chaos. Comfort is a top theme in the [Pinterest Predicts survey](#), with 55% of respondents prioritizing it in their daily lives.

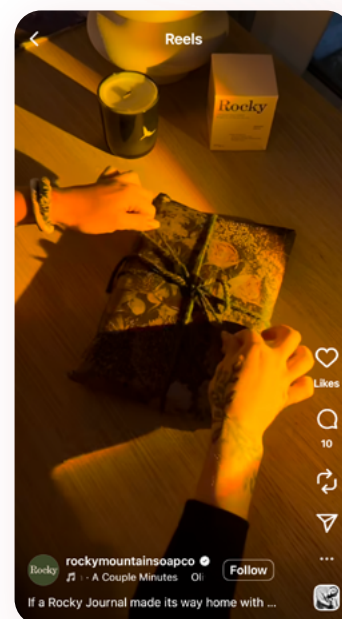
Social media users overwhelmed by content volume are seeking silence, beauty, and curation. [81% of Gen Z say](#), "I often wish I could disconnect from digital devices more easily." Across generations, the most desired vibes are "cozy" and "calming."



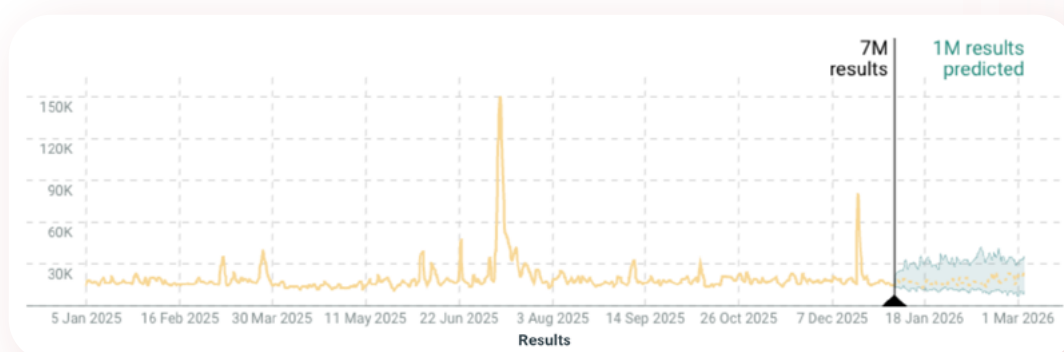
All of this is creating demand for IRL, offline community extensions of online interests: in-person “clubs,” experiences, bathhouses, phone-free parties. Pinterest expects to see a resurgence of letter-writing by actual snail mail this year.

Brands can take advantage of this trend by offering offline, tactile experiences.

At the same time, cost-of-living pressures are driving budget, dupe, and value-focused content. Aspirational content is out of touch. The new aspiration is simply to be well.



For example, how many times have you heard about cold plunges in 2025? According to our forecast data from Talkwalker, you’re likely to keep hearing about them a lot more, as this trend continues to pick up traction:



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Look for ways to add offline experiences to the customer journey.** This could be as simple as thoughtful, pleasurable packaging.
- **Analyze audience data to identify offline connection points.** Look for geographic customer clusters that might support an offline event or pop-up.
- **Highlight your product quality.** Overconsumption is out. Demonstrate how your product sparks joy and showcase the staying power of your products to justify investing in quality.

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# AI ANXIETY VS. AI-NATIVE SOCIAL PLATFORMS

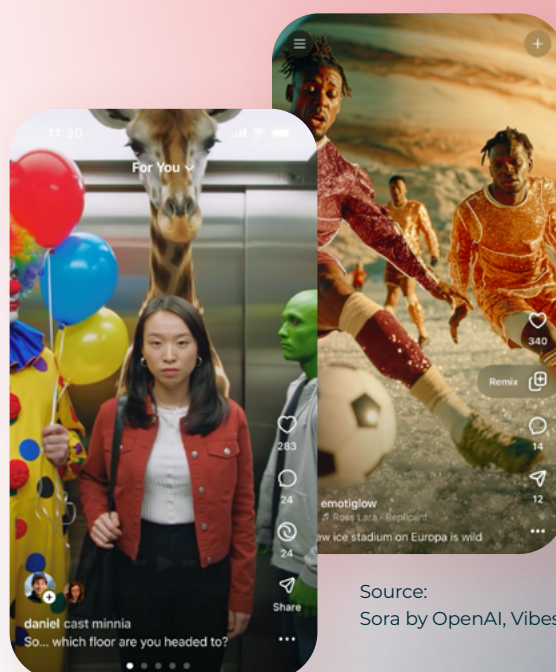
In 2025, the number of AI-generated articles online [surpassed](#) the number of human-written articles for the first time.

This data point needs to be taken with a grain of salt, since it's almost impossible to tell exactly which articles were created by AI. Many AI checkers get the analysis wrong. And many articles are written by humans, but assisted by AI. Still, it's clear that the last two years have seen a dramatic shift in AI content creation. So much so that [Merriam-Webster's word of the year for 2025](#) is "slop."

People are getting better at identifying AI content — although it's not always as simple as it appears. The em-dash got an unfair reputation in 2025 as "the ChatGPT hyphen." But there's rarely just one simple checkbox to confirm if something was created with or by AI.

By mid-2025, about [half of Americans \(47%\)](#) were at least somewhat confident they could identify pictures, video, and text generated by AI.

At the same time, AI-only feeds like Sora (from the makers of ChatGPT) and Vibes (from Meta) are on the rise. These new tools offer AI-only feeds that mimic Reels or TikTok. But they also make AI video creation significantly easier, and allow sharing to other social platforms with just a couple of taps.



Source:  
Sora by OpenAI, Vibes by Meta

Do brands have a responsibility to educate audiences? In short, yes. Most social platforms require AI content to be identified. While creators may not always follow this rule, brands face too much risk to flout the terms of use. New laws are also coming into play here, including the [EU AI Act](#), which requires transparency about the use of AI.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Stay aware of the tools, but don't hop on board just because you can.** Marketers need to know what new AI tools are coming online, but you don't need to use them all just because they exist. Rather than pure content creation, look for SMM-specific AI tools like [OwlyGPT](#) and [Talkwalker's Yeti Agent](#).
- **Focus on trust.** Never use AI tools to try to fool your audience — this is a sure way to erode trust. Label AI content as required.

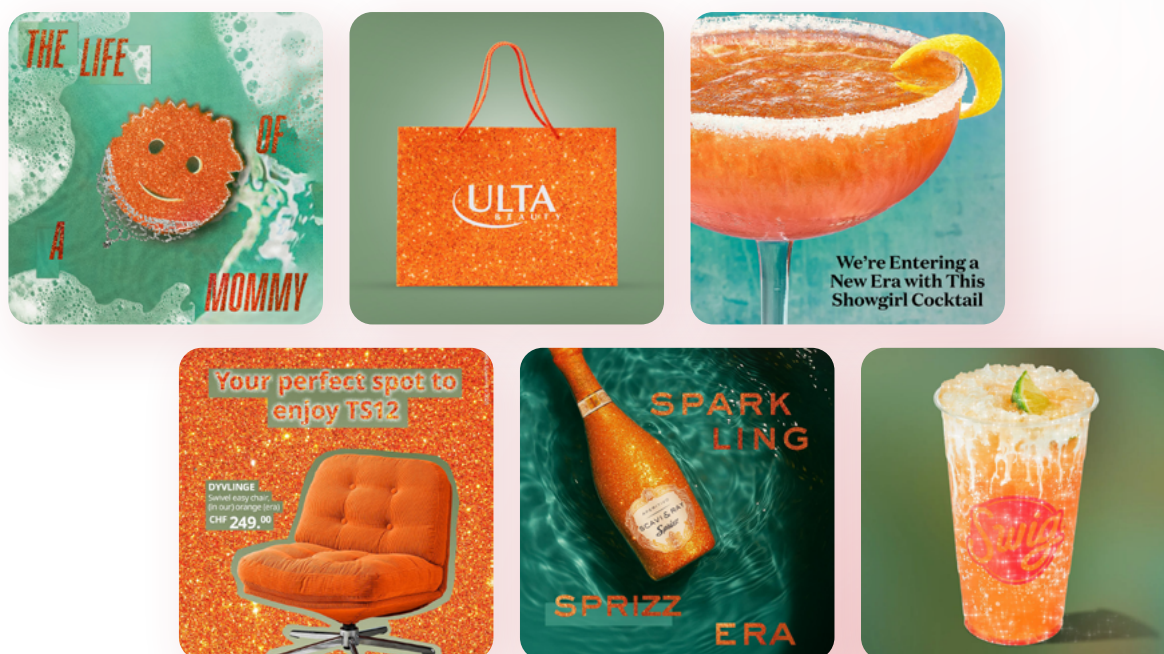
15

## FASTVERTISING IS DISRUPTING THE CONTENT CALENDAR

Constantly online brands are now responding to cultural moments within hours, not days. Twenty-two percent of marketers feel pressure to respond to trending topics or viral moments daily or a few times per week, and 37% feel a high level of burnout from that pressure, according to [data from Adobe](#).

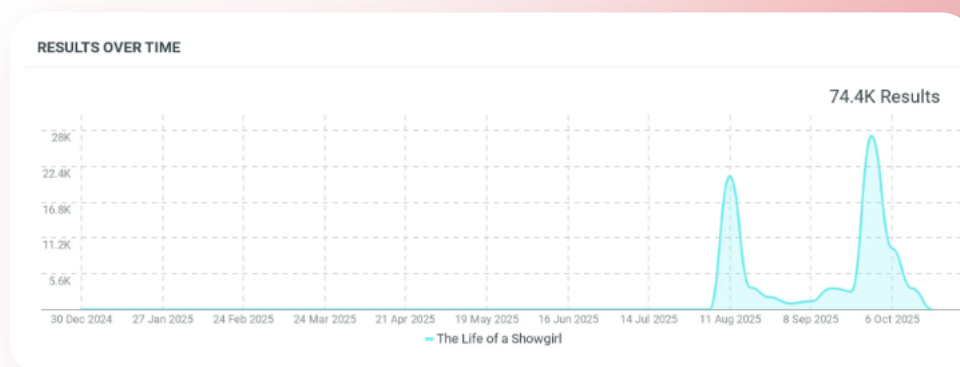
The timing matters — if you're quick, you're "in," if you're slow, you're a laggard. But you still can't prioritize speed over quality. [Thirty-nine percent of marketers](#) say their content flopped due to rushing.

Sometimes this creates feeds of content that look virtually the same. Remember the orange-and-green monolith of content from August, spurred by the announcement of *The Life of a Showgirl*?



Sources: [@scrubdaddy](#), [@ultabeauty](#), [@thekitchn](#), [@ikeaswitzerland](#), [@scaviray](#), [@swigdrinks](#)

It's no shock that brands jumped on board — it's all the internet could talk about. There were 2.08 million mentions of the album during the announcement week and 2.71 million during the week of the launch.



In the era of snowballing (see Trend 1), it's possible the algorithms may reward this bandwagoning behavior. And audiences seem to do so as well: [25% of marketers](#) say they've gone viral with trend-driven content.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Replace rigid content calendars with real-time decision systems.** Culture no longer moves on a predictable schedule, and static calendars can't keep up. But reacting to everything isn't the answer either. Marketing leaders need systems — clear guardrails, escalation paths, and decision criteria — that enable fast participation without sacrificing brand integrity.
- **Speed can easily lead to sameness.** When everyone jumps on the same trend, feeds flatten and differentiation disappears. The pressure to move fast is real, but rushing content is also why so many of these posts flop.

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## EMPLOYEE ADVOCACY = AUTHENTICITY AMPLIFIED

In a crowded and skeptical social marketplace, employee advocacy offers brands an added level of authenticity. People trust other people more than they trust faceless brands. [They also trust employees more](#) than journalists, influencers, or CEOs.

[Employee advocacy](#) comes in many forms. The simplest model is to encourage employees to share brand content on their personal social channels to boost brand reach and add credibility.

But it can evolve all the way into an employee ambassador program, where employees across the brand are highly involved in creating unique content. (This overlaps with Trend 8.)

Hootsuite's own employee advocacy program sees employees [share an average of 1.2 posts per week](#) with an average reach of 21,920. The top-performing post saw a reach of 207,786.

Empowering employees to help promote the brand can strengthen company culture while giving your audience a look behind the scenes.

## TO-DO LIST

- **Clarify the goals of your employee advocacy program.** Are you aiming to support recruitment? Lead generation? Social selling? Brand awareness and trust? Like all marketing strategies, you need clear goals to achieve real results.
- **Recruit employee ambassadors.** Identify key content creators within your company. Look for representation across regions, roles, and areas of expertise.
- **Set up your systems.** Create a plan for content creation and sharing, supported by employee advocacy tools like [Hootsuite Amplify](#).

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## MICRO-DRAMAS GO MAINSTREAM

Quibi, the short-form streaming service that launched and failed in 2020, seems to have been ahead of its time. In 2025, short-form narrative and conversational videos (aka micro-dramas) went mainstream. And there's big money involved. [Deloitte predicts](#) that revenue from in-app micro-series will reach \$7.8 billion in 2026.

So what are micro-series — and why are they succeeding where Quibi failed?

**This kind of serialized content exists in three primary forms:**

1. Conversational, unscripted chat shows, like [Subway Takes](#)
2. Scripted dramatic content/mini soap-operas, like [Rented a Billionaire Husband for Christmas](#)
3. Bite-sized clips from podcasts (which themselves have become a video medium)

Some of this content is created specifically for existing social channels, but there are also a host of new micro-drama apps, like [ReelShort](#) and [Serealt+](#).



Sources: [@subwaytakes](#), [@reelshortapp](#), [@teamcoco](#)

At the same time, “clipping” has emerged as a new marketing strategy that increases the odds of going viral through sheer volume. Brands now hire “clippers,” who chop up longer-form content into bite-sized snippets and blast them across multiple social accounts.

A [\\$15,000 clipping campaign](#) for the FX Series *Adults* resulted in 2,500 short clips, racking up 40 million views on Reels, TikTok, and YouTube Shorts.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Think like a media company, even if you aren't one.** Micro-dramas and clipping strategies succeed because they apply media logic to marketing: serialized storytelling, rapid testing, and continuous output. In 2026, campaign-based thinking falls short. Top teams build content systems that produce and distribute stories at scale — much like media studios do.
- **Volume wins distribution; intelligence wins attention.** The rise of “clipping” reflects a new reality: Algorithms reward frequency, experimentation, and format variation. But sheer volume without insight quickly becomes noise. Strong brands are using performance signals to double down on the clips that actually resonate — then iterating fast.

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# SUBSTACK HAS BECOME A SOCIAL PLATFORM

Substack is not just a platform for newsletters. It's a social identity tool for creators and brands alike. In an [October post](#), co-founder Hamish McKenzie wrote: "We started Substack in 2017 as a response to the ways social media was warping culture, so it might seem odd that we've somehow built... a social media app."

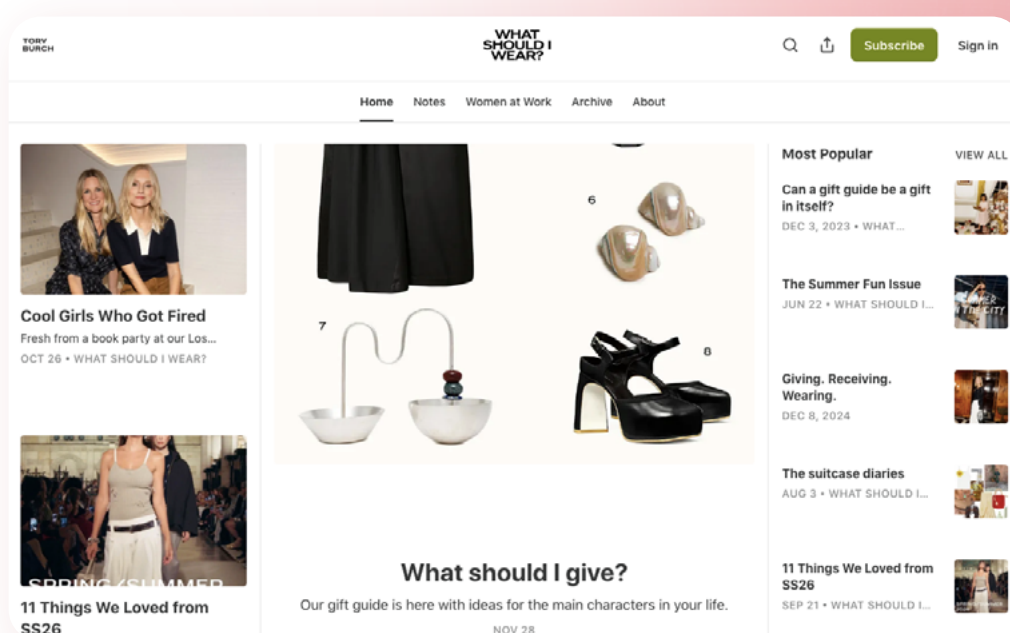
Substack now looks like most other social apps, with a feed, inbox, messaging, and social profiles that all appear quite similar to Threads or Bluesky.

## But it feels different — and people like that.

This means brands should tread carefully here. This is not a platform for promotional updates. In fact, straight-up promotion is prohibited:

*"We don't permit publications whose primary purpose is to advertise external products or services, drive traffic to third party sites, distribute offers and promotions, enhance search engine optimization, or similar activities."*

– Substack Content Guidelines



Source: [Tory Burch's Substack: What Should I Wear?](#)

But there is potential for brands to find value, if they act like Substack natives. That means creating and sharing content of real value. Tory Burch is a prime example here, providing valuable editorial content that looks and feels like a fashion magazine.

For brands without an obvious editorial strategy on the platform, it still presents interesting opportunities for creator partnerships. Substack writers know their audiences, and there's a lot of mutual trust. That creates great potential for brand lift when there's a natural fit or a creator is already a fan.

Letterboxd is another social app that's not strictly speaking social media. Like Substack, it embodies the shift towards community and real voices. While its marketing potential is limited (for now, at least) to the film industry, it's a signal that brands need to keep an eye out for new niche platforms and crowd-sourced PR.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Substack requires editorial discipline.** Substack's appeal lies in what it rejects: algorithmic noise, shallow promotion, and performative brand presence. Audiences go there for depth and original thinking, not updates and offers. You'll need consistent themes, a recognizable voice, and content that audiences would seek out even if it weren't branded. A lot of effort? Yes. But you'll have a huge trust-building asset on your hands if you do it right.
- **Partnering with creators offers a lower-risk entry point.** The trust that Substack writers have built with their subscribers is huge — but it only works when partnerships feel organic and aligned. When done well, a collaboration can deliver significant brand lift without undermining platform norms.

# HOW TO\_ TRACK & FORECAST

POWERED BY TALKWALKER AI

# TRENDS./ IN 2026

The trends shaping social in 2026 have one thing in common: They move fast, fragment quickly, and don't look the same for every brand. What feels like a breakout moment in one industry may be irrelevant — or even risky — in another.

Staying ahead of trends today doesn't come from tracking what's already everywhere, it comes from having a deep understanding of your audience and the ability to spot what really matters to them unfolding in real-time.

Real relevance lives in the nuance of real conversations: understanding who is driving them, how sentiment is shifting, and why certain ideas resonate more than others. So here's your guide on how to do exactly that.

## WHAT DOES “TREND TRACKING” REALLY MEAN TODAY?

Trend tracking is a broad concept. It includes three distinct social media management tactics:



Each of these serves its own purpose in understanding and responding to social trends and cultural shifts.

Approach	Focus	Timeframe	Strategic value	Key activities
<b>Monitoring</b>	Real-time trend awareness	Immediate	Rapid response and crisis management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Set up topic &amp; keyword alerts</li> <li>Monitor trending hashtags &amp; keywords</li> </ul>
<b>Tracking</b>	Historical analysis and benchmarking	Past and present	Benchmarking and reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analyze mentions, engagement, and sentiment related to the trend</li> </ul>
<b>Forecasting</b>	Trend prediction insights	Future	Proactive planning and strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Model trend trajectories</li> <li>Plan content for appropriate moment</li> </ul>

# WHAT ARE THE KEY SIGNALS TO WATCH ACROSS PLATFORMS?

Social media trends typically progress through five distinct stages. Each has its own key signals to watch across the social media platforms most relevant to your target audience.

- 1. Fanbase formation.** Signals: Low volume of mentions with high sentiment. People who spark the trend are fans and early adopters
- 2. Catalyst(s).** Signals: Sudden spikes in conversations. See August 12 and October 3 in the *Life of a Showgirl* example above.
- 3. Virtuous circle.** Signals: Consistent growth in mentions. The trend grows organically.
- 4. Backlash.** Signals: Drop in net sentiment. The trend is overdone or has reached audiences that don't like it.
- 5. Status quo.** Signals: Conversation reaches a stable baseline or fades away, until the next catalyst drives a resurgence.

## HOW TO STAY UPDATED WITH SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS: 5 BEST PRACTICES

Sure, an active digital marketing team will get some sense of what's trending simply by scrolling their feeds. But the most effective social teams understand how to research social media trends proactively. With these best practices, you can create a trend intelligence system to surface meaningful signals. This can give you the jump on the competition.



## 1. Build a listening framework

A social listening framework provides structure and agility to your trend-tracking. Here's a simple three-step framework:

- **Define your goals.** Are you looking for specific content formats and memes? Or overall conversation themes and sentiment shifts? Also, define which platforms are most relevant.
- **Set up social listening tools.** Use Talkwalker to set up comprehensive trend monitoring queries and alerts based on your goals. Include text, image, and video recognition for comprehensive results. And track sentiment and emotion to get a better understanding of each trend.
- **Analyze and act on your data.** Put your insights to work to create trending content and join emerging conversations.

## 2. Combine qualitative and quantitative trend indicators

You saw earlier that trend signals rely on both sentiment and mentions. These are the most obvious qualitative and quantitative trend indicators, respectively. But they're not alone.

- **Quantitative indicators** are numeric data points that track the growth of a trend.
- **Qualitative indicators** are descriptive and interpretive insights. They provide context, so you can get a sense of whether a trend is appropriate for your brand.

Quantitative indicators (Numbers/metrics)	Qualitative indicators (Vibes)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mention volume (of a keyword, hashtag or topic)</li> <li>• Engagement volume</li> <li>• Reach and impressions</li> <li>• Growth rate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tone (track through sentiment and emotion analysis)</li> <li>• Key themes and topics</li> <li>• Key voices (who is talking about this trend)</li> <li>• Types of content (short-form video, meme, etc.)</li> <li>• Conversation clusters</li> </ul>

### 3. Identify rising, peaking, and declining trends early

Timing is everything. [Twenty-two percent of marketers](#) feel pressure to respond to trending topics or viral moments daily.

You want to catch a trend while it's still in the catalyst or virtuous circle stages, before things peak — and that can happen fast.

Talkwalker's growth rate and velocity indicators help you understand how a trend is growing: rapid upward movement is a clue to get on board fast. Volume and engagement alerts can notify you when the trend drops below a certain level, signaling it's too late.

### 4. Validate trends with cross-platform analysis

What's trending on TikTok may not be trending on Instagram (or, at least, not yet). Cross-platform validation helps you distinguish a fleeting or ultra-niche blip from a broader cultural moment.

Seeing the full picture also helps you understand how people's feelings about a trend vary in different online communities. This is critical to understanding whether a trend is appropriate for your brand.

### 5. Automate discovery to avoid manual blind spots

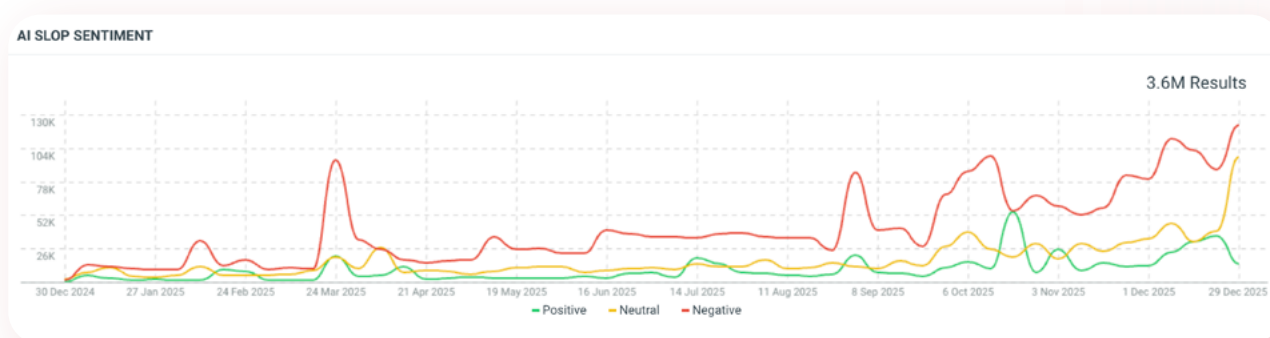
Humans alone can't keep up with new trends at the speed they unfurl today. Automated trend discovery tools like alerts and social listening dashboards ensure you don't miss early signals.

AI-assisted tools like Talkwalker also help you avoid the blind spots that occur when searching for trends. (Think new slang, abbreviations, or unexpected topics.) They help surface new trends and memes before they saturate your audience's feeds.

# HOW TO USE TALKWALKER TO TRACK AND FORECAST SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS

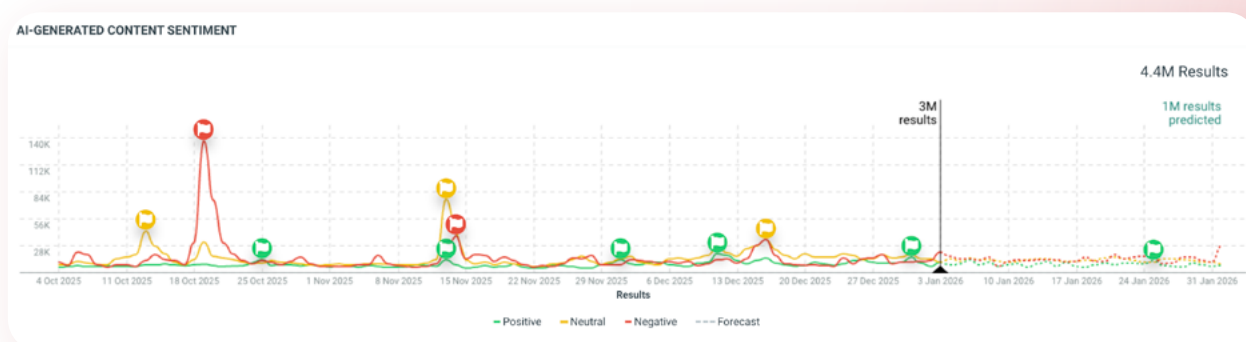
## Set up Over Time Widgets to visualize and analyze trend evolution

Over Time Widgets are visual tools (like charts and tables) that show how data evolves over time, including predictions of future patterns. This makes them particularly useful for tracking trends — especially with the built-in time-lapse replay.

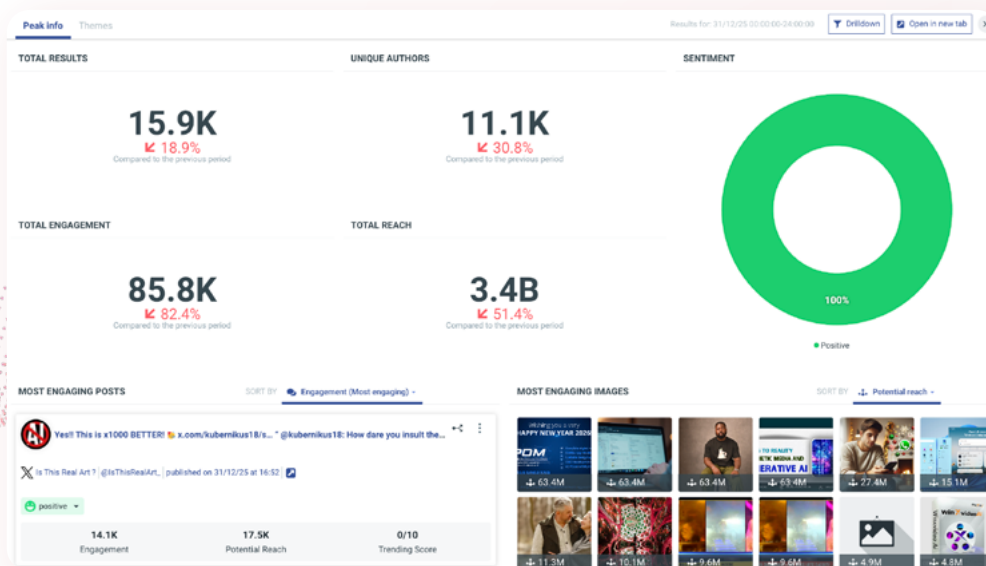


## Identify peaks, changepoints, and conversation dynamics

Over Time Widgets use AI-powered Peak Detection to flag significant spikes in data. These represent unusually high activity or interest in a topic or trend.



The Theme and Sentiment Over Time Widgets show what's driving the conversation and the emotional connection to the trend. This ensures you know the full story behind a trend before deciding whether it's appropriate and relevant. You can hover over each peak or changepoint to drill down into engagement and reach data, and even see a summary of relevant posts.



To set this up, head to your Talkwalker dashboard, choose the Over Time Widget you want to add, then select your data sources, metrics, and time period.

## Customize your Over Time Widgets for different strategic needs

You can customize Over Time Widgets to get the most valuable insights for your strategic trend tracking goals by adjusting:

- **Chart type:** Line, bar, or area charts with color coding and annotations
- **Metrics:** Mentions, sentiment, engagement, topic/hashtag tracking
- **Geography**
- **Time interval:** Date ranges and granularity
- **Filters:** Platform, geography, demographics
- **Comparative analysis:** Overlay multiple trends to see how they intersect, or compare sentiment to volume

You can set the time period to months for long-term trend tracking that represents ongoing cultural shifts. Or set it to days (even hours) for in-the-moment trend analysis.

## Use the Trend Analysis IQ App to understand rising, falling, and flat trends

This Talkwalker feature scans large volumes of social data for automated trend detection. It can highlight topics, hashtags, or keywords using intuitive charts and graphs. It provides clear trendlines, so you can always see if a trend is rising, flat, or falling.

To set this up, head to the Trend Analysis IQ App from your Talkwalker dashboard. Then choose your platforms and timeframe. Look for:

- **Rising trends:** Indicated by significant upward movement. These signal emerging trends or viral moments.
- **Falling trends:** Indicated by significant downward movement. Interest is waning.
- **Flat trends:** Look for periods of stable activity. The trend does not have upward/viral momentum, but may present a good opportunity to create evergreen content.
- **Comparative analysis:** Overlay multiple trends to see how they intersect, or compare sentiment to volume



## Use the Trend Matrix to distinguish emerging vs. established topics

The Trend Matrix takes a different approach to trend analysis. Rather than showing the latest trend's growth over time, it provides a snapshot of the trend right now, divided into four quadrants:

- **High Volume, High Growth:** These are emerging/viral topics ideal for short-term amplification.
- **High Volume, Low Growth:** These established but stable topics are good for ongoing engagement.
- **Low Volume, High Growth:** These are emerging or niche trends with potential to go viral. Consider joining in before the trend reaches the mainstream.
- **Low Volume, Low Growth:** These topics are not trending.



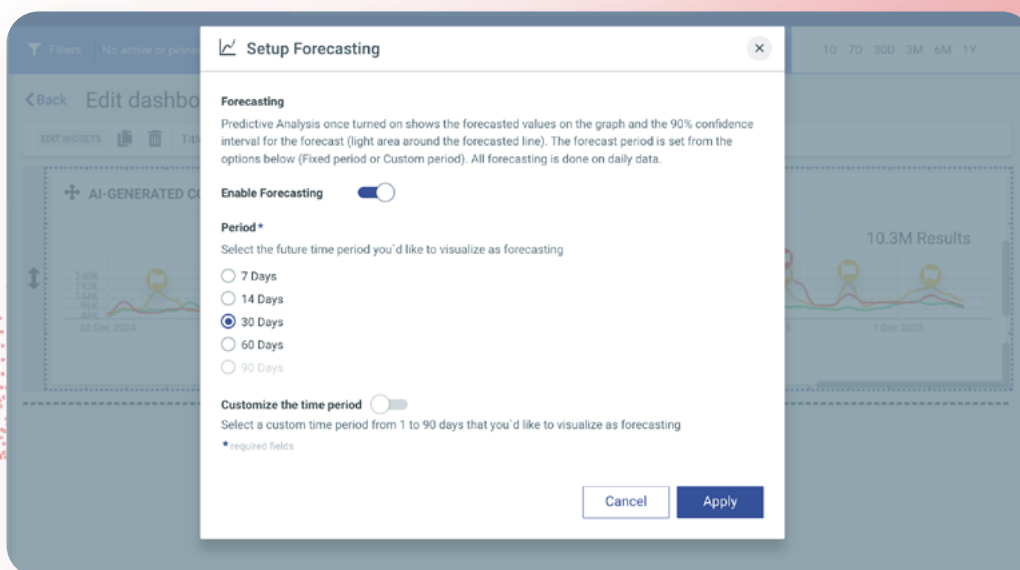
## What Talkwalker's Predictive Analytics can forecast (and how it works)

The AI-driven models in Talkwalker's Predictive Analytics can predict future trends, conversations, sentiment shifts, and engagement for any topic or channel. It uses AI, machine learning, and data mining to create a 90-day forecast with a 90% confidence level.

Here's a quick summary of how it works:

- **Data collection.** Aggregates data from social media platforms, news sites, blogs, forums, and your internal brand channels
- **Historical pattern analysis.** Identifies recurring patterns, seasonality, and anomalies that may impact future trendlines
- **Modelling.** Uses advanced algorithms to model relationships between variables. Then integrates real-time insights with historical signals to refine predictions

Once all of that happens in the background, the tool produces forecasts for key metrics. You'll also see visualizations that make the insights easy to interpret.



Want to catch trends before they peak — and avoid jumping in too late? Talkwalker helps you spot early signals, track trend velocity, and forecast what's coming next, so you can act with confidence, not guesswork.

**Book a Talkwalker demo to see how real-time social listening and predictive insights help you move at the speed of culture.**

**BOOK A DEMO**

