Where Social Media Growth Goes Next



2026 Social Media Trends Report: Issue 2

DASH SOCIAL

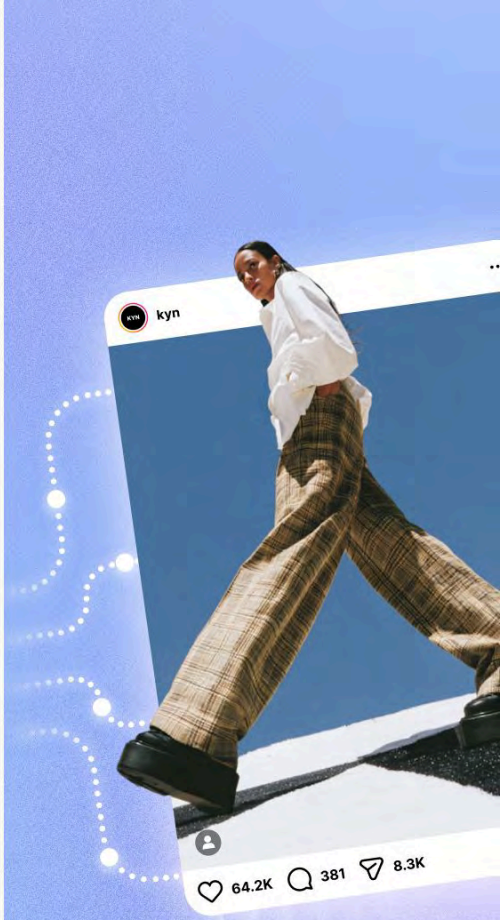
The smartest marketing systems start with social.

Earlier this year, we explored the new rules of social discovery and distribution. Since then, those changes have become the baseline for successful brands earning attention. Content discovery no longer happens through follower count alone. It happens across feeds, creators, search, recommendations, and owned channels working together. Social is now the primary engine of brand discovery and reach is earned through relevance, not volume. That shift rewards a different set of muscles than follower first strategies: creativity, recognition, relevance, and consistency.

But social's role doesn't stop at discovery. It has also emerged as marketing's richest source of brand intelligence. Every interaction generates signals that tell brands what resonates with their audience, how creative performs, what's culturally relevant, and how brand perception is trending in real time. And those signals extend beyond owned content to how creators and consumers talk about, engage with, and perceive the brand, providing real-time feedback from multiple perspectives. When that intelligence connects with the rest of marketing, it becomes the foundation for faster, smarter decisions across the entire ecosystem.

With AI accelerating content creation at an unprecedented pace, a brand's unique identity is more important than ever. The brands that earn attention are entertaining while reinforcing their identity with every post. They leverage AI that's powered by brand intelligence to make smarter creative decisions, understand what will resonate, and how to optimize performance without compromising what makes their brand distinct.

This report explores why connected brand intelligence is the foundation for growth in an increasingly AI-powered world, and surfaces the three trends shaping the next chapter of social marketing.



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Recognition Fuels Relevance

Every post is a first impression, which means brands need consistently recognizable creative that reinforces their identity.

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Every Post Needs a Purpose

Content should build on what came before, turning creative learnings into sustained brand momentum.

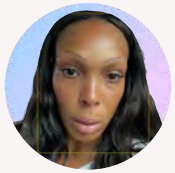
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Connected Brand Intelligence Powers the Marketing Ecosystem

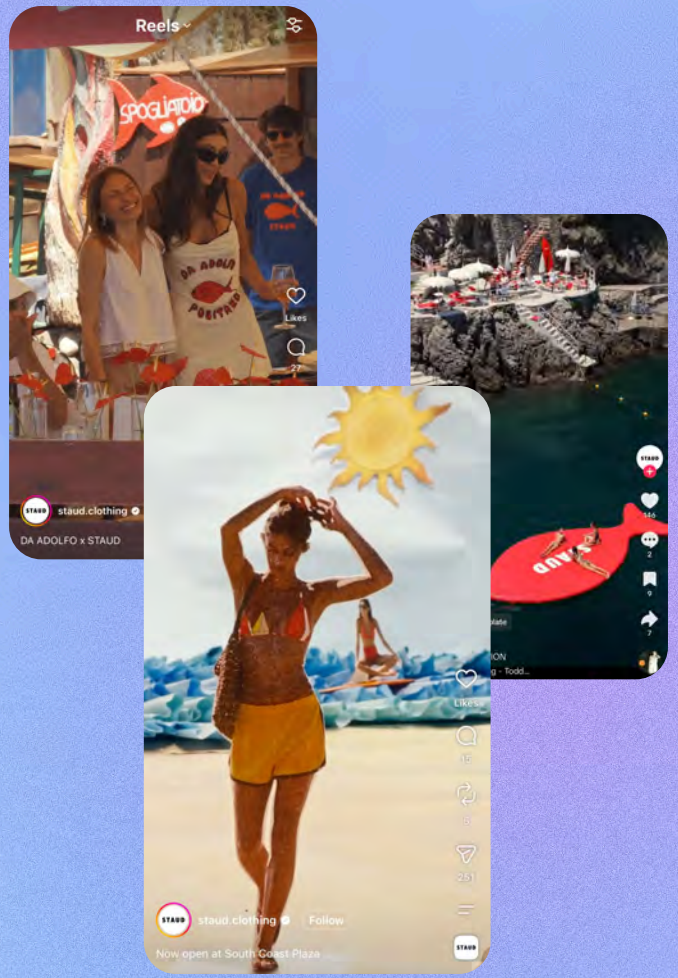
Connected brand intelligence turns social signals into shared context, helping every team, and AI make better decisions.

“For us, authenticity will always matter more than virality.

The goal is to create something that feels true to STAUD, because that consistency builds lasting brand momentum long after a trend has passed.”



Amaka Onuegbu
Senior Social Media Manager
STAUD



Recognition Fuels Relevance

Treat every post as your brand's first impression.

Audiences encounter brands through a series of disconnected moments: an organic post, a creator, a recommendation, a search result, or content shared by someone they trust. Brand perception isn't built in a single feed, follower relationship, or interaction. It takes shape across every touchpoint, as discovery continues to extend well beyond your followers.

Distinctive creative creates a common thread through those encounters. On-brand visual elements, formats, creator collaborations, voices, and ideas build familiarity and reinforce what makes your brand yours. That consistency matters even more as content reaches beyond your followers, introducing your brand to audiences who may not recognize it yet.

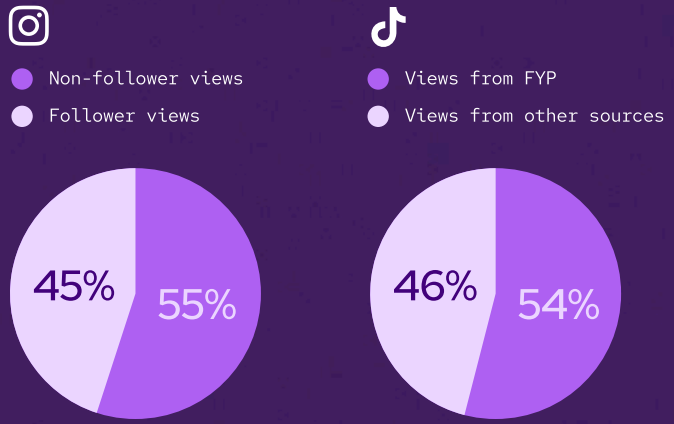
Disconnected visuals weaken brand recognition and can even hurt your bottom line. **Inconsistent branding can cost up to 23% of revenue**, making every impression an important opportunity to strengthen or dilute your brand.[1]

Recognition turns fragmented discovery into a compounding brand asset.

Discovery increasingly happens beyond your followers.

In our last issue, we established that discovery was moving beyond the follower base. That behavior has become the norm across Instagram and TikTok. An even larger share of brand content is now viewed through discovery surfaces rather than follower relationships.

Non-follower vs. Follower Views for Instagram and TikTok



Distinctiveness is a system, not a signature color.

Recognition comes from patterns people feel before they can name them.

Consistent brands are 3.5x more visible, making recognition a goal of every social post, no matter where it sits in the funnel.[2]

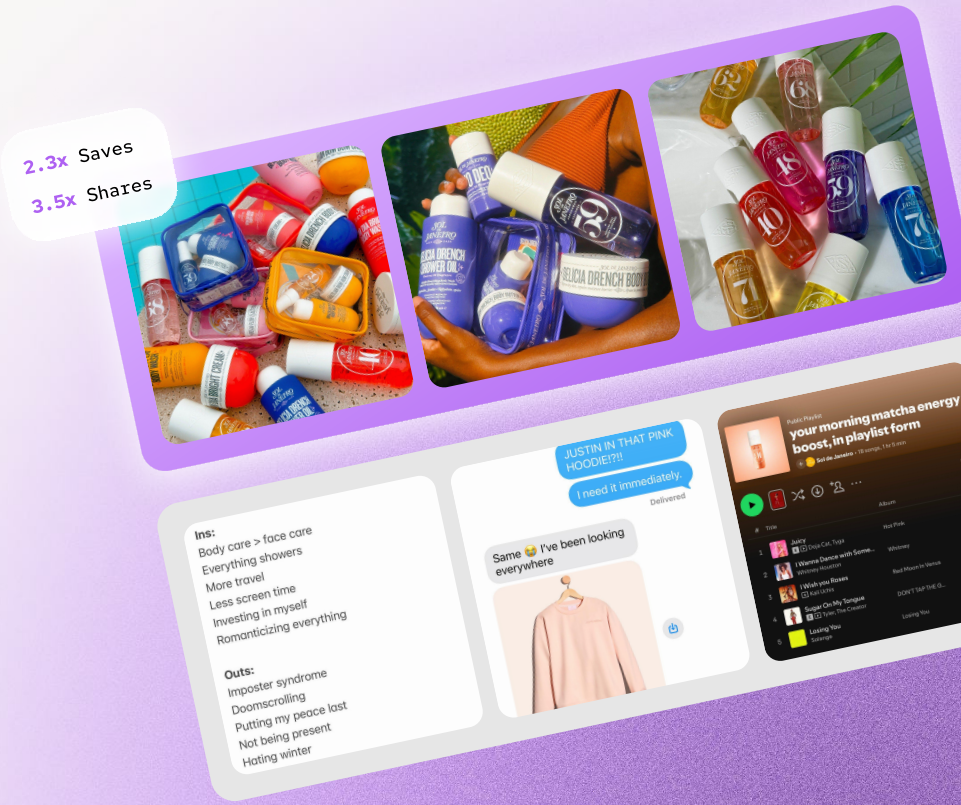
Consistency means showing up with a recognizable point of view, unique sensibility, visual language, creator partnerships, and product framing. It's not any one signal, but the consistency across them that makes a brand distinctive.[3]

And distinctiveness pays off. On TikTok, distinctive posts that are like their brand and less industry-generic, are saved 35% more often and shared 18% more than a brand's most generic posts.[4]

On Instagram, posts that were more consistent with the brand's visual identity saw 23% more saves. On the other hand, posts that were more industry-generic saw 19% fewer saves and 16% fewer shares.[5]

Build consistency with brand intelligence:

- Identify cues that can travel across formats and platforms.
- Choose creators for brand fit, not reach alone.
- Use performance signals to sharpen creative systems.



Creative reach is outpacing follower growth.

Follower growth continues to slow, while interactions with individual pieces of content continue to accelerate.

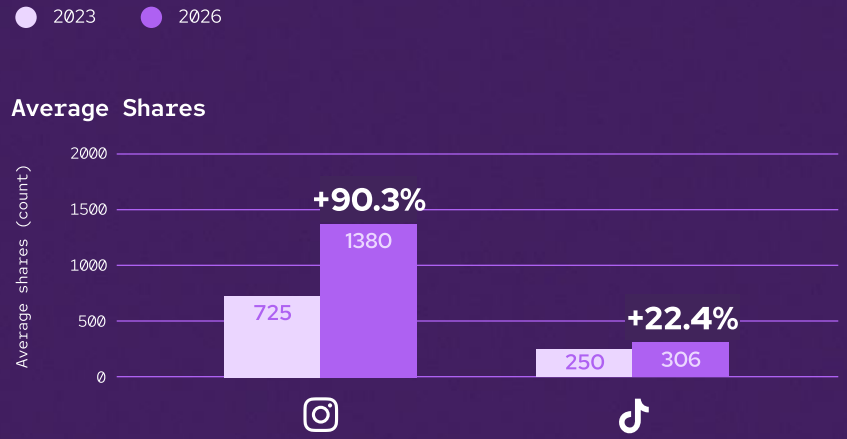
On Instagram, quarterly follower growth fell from **1.7%** in 2023 to **0.9%** in 2026, while shares grew over 50%, from **725** to **1380**.[6]

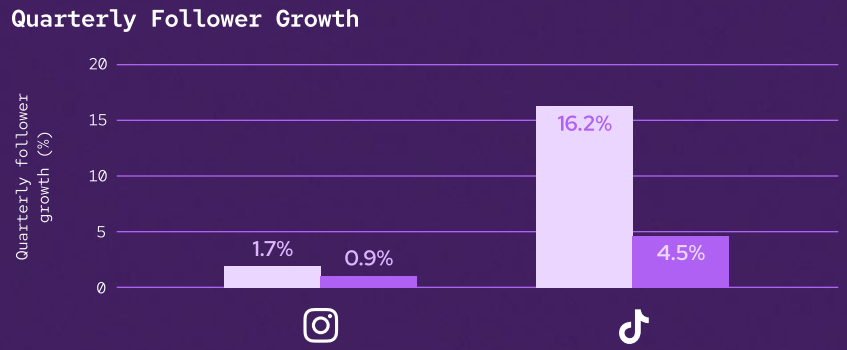
On TikTok, follower growth fell from **16.2%** in 2023 to **4.5%** in 2026, while average shares increased 22.4%, from **250** to **306**.[7]

Shares extend content beyond the follower base, putting individual posts in front of audiences who may have little or no prior relationship with the brand.

> **TREND 1 TAKEAWAY**
>
> Recognition compounds through consistency. Make every impression unmistakably on brand, wherever audiences find you.

Shares Rise as Follower Growth Slows



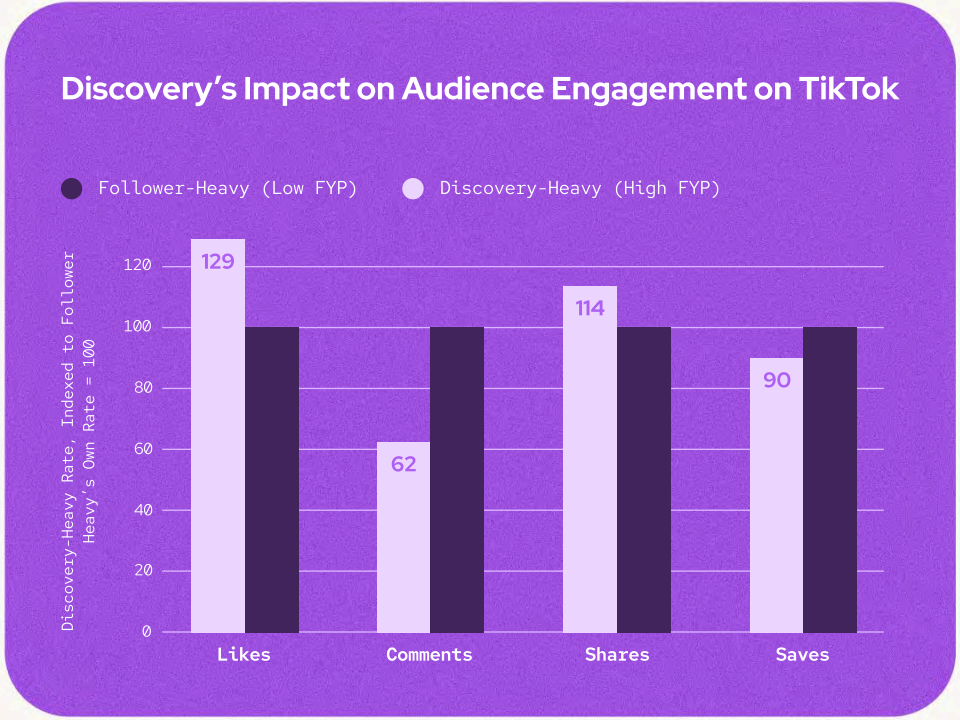


Discovery drives different audience interactions.

Audiences discovering your brand engage differently from followers. More non-followers are finding and viewing your content, but without an established relationship with the brand, they engage differently from audiences who might already know you.

Discovery audiences still like, save, and share, but comments show the relationship gap.

On TikTok videos, content viewed by non-followers earned **29%** more likes and **14%** more shares than follower-heavy content. But the comment rate fell by **38%**, suggesting that new audiences may respond to content before they're ready to actively participate in the brand conversation.[8]



The data in practice:

Design discovery content for audiences who don't know your brand yet. Use recognizable brand cues and clear context to establish who you are, then give new audiences easy entry into the conversation through a relatable hook, clear premise, or reason to respond.

Dash Insight

Discovery changes the engagement mix. Likes and shares signal immediate resonance and distribution. Saves point to lasting utility. Comments reveal whether audiences are moving from passive discovery into deeper connection with a brand.

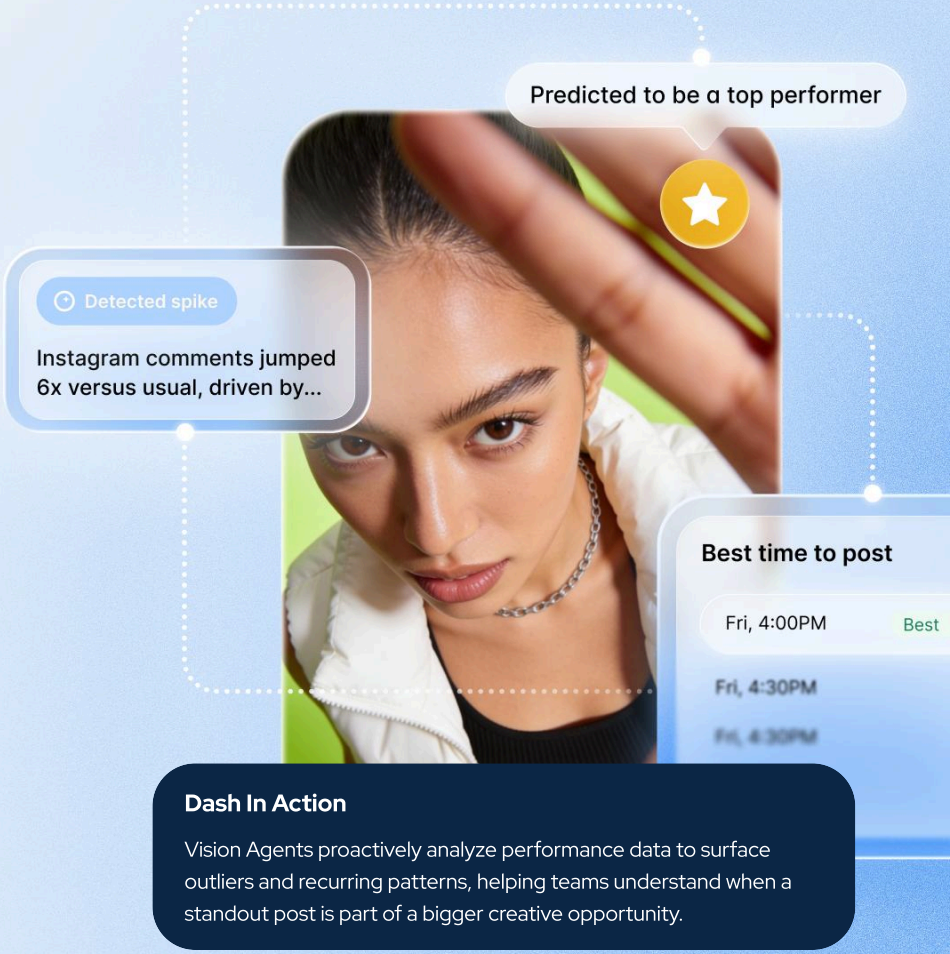
Every Post Needs A Purpose

A viral post creates a moment. A creative system turns it into momentum.

The most effective social teams turn every signal into a strategic decision. A strong audience response can become a recurring series, a comment can inspire a creative premise, and a standout organic post can become an asset worth investing in. This is creative momentum in action.

Every post generates signals that can make the next creative decision smarter. Rather than chasing isolated wins, teams should build systems where every post informs the next.

Those signals become valuable when teams use them to shape what happens next. Real-time brand intelligence reveals which patterns drive performance, what's worth repeating, and where to adjust. What appears to be an isolated win can reveal a broader creative theme or content pillar that consistently outperforms.



Dash In Action

Vision Agents proactively analyze performance data to surface outliers and recurring patterns, helping teams understand when a standout post is part of a bigger creative opportunity.

Momentum is built between spikes.

Total Social Impact (TSI) is a proprietary metric that measures how a brand's social impact compounds across platforms, formats, and distribution.

When these signals shape every post, their impact builds the consistent momentum that TSI captures.

77% of top brands' annual TSI growth happened outside their four biggest weeks.

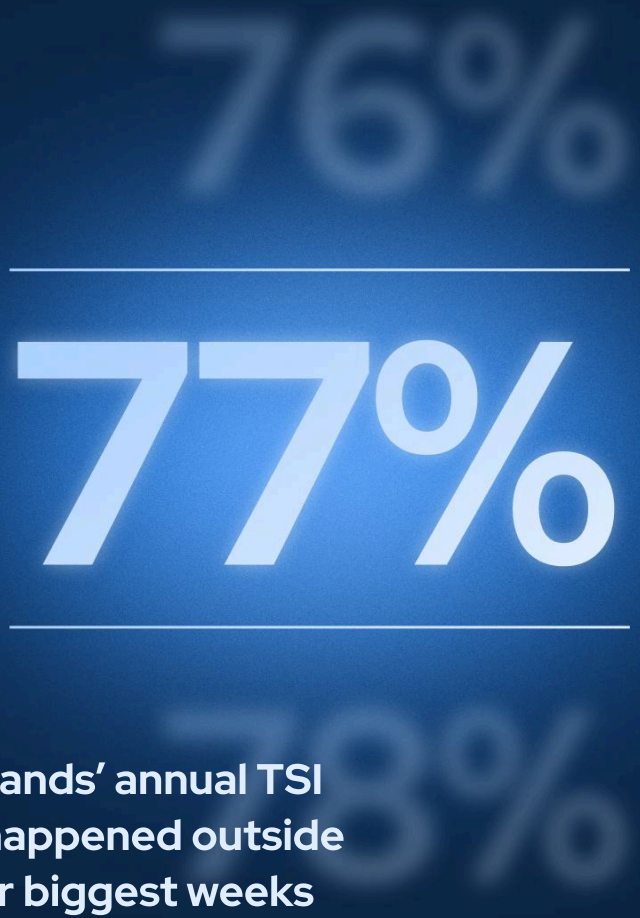
More than half of this TSI was driven across 12 weeks, reinforcing that momentum builds over time.[9]

Sustained growth comes from consistent performance throughout the year, not a handful of breakout moments.

Fewer weekly posts drove **20%** higher engagement, reinforcing that more content doesn't necessarily create more momentum. When volume isn't the advantage, the quality of each creative decision matters more.[10]

AI has removed friction from content creation. It generates more variations and speeds up production. But it can't decide what deserves to exist. That decision belongs to marketers.

In competitive feeds, creative judgment is your greatest advantage. The strongest teams prioritize ideas that serve a strategic purpose, and build on what they've learned, not simply fill a calendar.



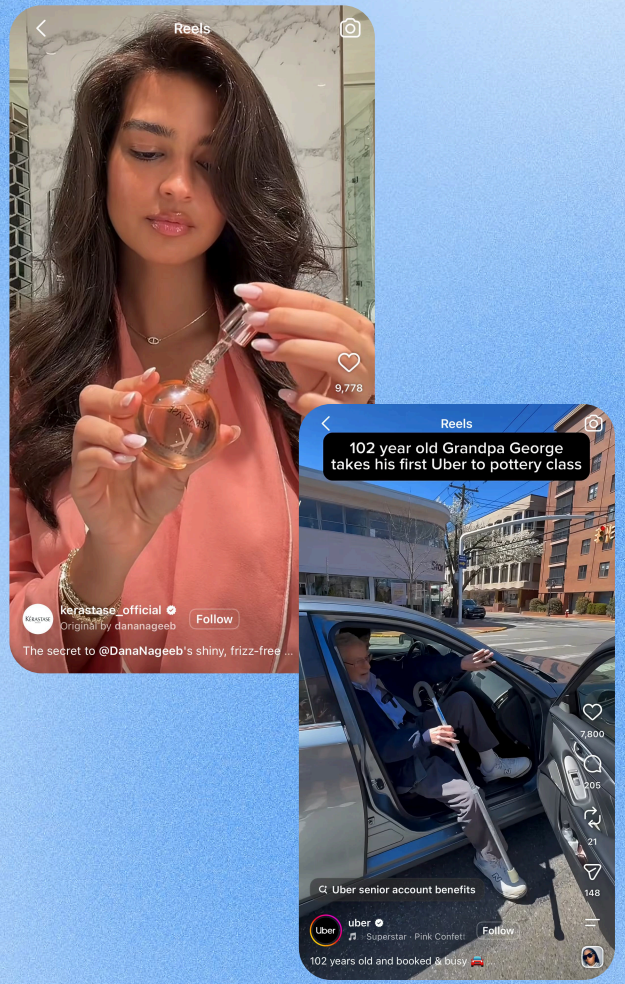
Brands Building Creative Momentum

Looking beyond raw publishing volume reveals brands whose creative consistently generates impact over time.

Brand	TSI Outside Top Four Weeks	Current TSI	YoY Change
r.e.m. beauty	83.8%	3.9B	10.8%
KÉRASTASE PARIS	81.3%	9B	134.4%
CeraVe	78.6%	10.1B	3,891.6%
rabanne	76.7%	6.8B	180.3%
Uber	72.9%	7.3B	292.2%

Dash Insight

Better creative builds momentum. Breakout moments can accelerate growth, but lasting momentum is built through creative that consistently performs over time. The more teams learn from what works and apply it to what comes next, the more that impact compounds.

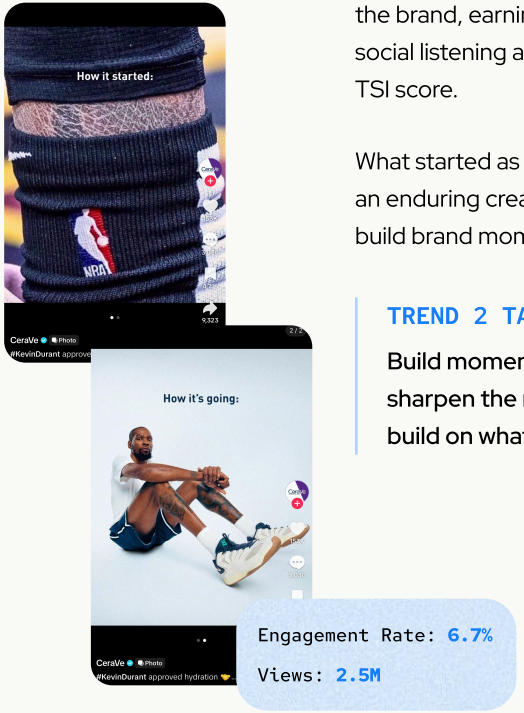


How CeraVe Made a Breakout Idea Last

CeraVe is no stranger to building momentum. CeraVe generated **806%** more TSI than similar brands, with nearly **79%** of its annual TSI built outside its four biggest weeks. Its approach shows the value of recognizing how a breakout idea has the potential to become repeatable creative.[11]

When fans noticed Kevin Durant's lack of moisturizer in 2021, CeraVe jumped at the opportunity to engage with the moment and partner with the NBA player to promote their products and provide the NBA All-Star with the products he lacked, becoming the brand's "Face of Legs".

CeraVe extended the viral moment and brought it into their brand story. And in 2026, Durant continues to work with the brand, earning organic mentions across social listening and contributing to a growing TSI score.



What started as a cultural moment became an enduring creative idea, continuing to build brand momentum years later.

TREND 2 TAKEAWAY

Build momentum by using every post to sharpen the next creative decision and build on what works.

"Creative gets stronger when you can see what's working and use those insights to shape what comes next. Combining visual signals with performance data strengthens each creative decision, builds on what resonates, and creates momentum over time."



Amber Suarez
Director of Brand Engagement
L'ORÉAL GROUPE

Connected Brand Intelligence Powers the Marketing Ecosystem

Your social footprint is a living source of brand intelligence, capturing how audiences respond, what creative performs, which creators resonate, and how your brand is perceived in real time.

Inside marketing organizations, these signals often live across separate plans, platforms, teams, and workflows. Organic teams identify one set of patterns. Creator teams see another. Paid teams learn something else.

When those signals remain separate, each decision starts with only part of the picture.

Connect the signals to improve every decision.

A creator insight can inform owned creative. An organic standout can become a paid driver. Community feedback can influence a campaign brief. Performance patterns can shape what's created next.

When every marketing team can act on the same real-time understanding of the brand, social becomes an intelligence layer for the entire organization.

"The most important decision is not which model you choose, but where your brand intelligence lives, how it's connected and whether it can move securely into the systems where work happens."



Ryan Sasaki
Chief Product Officer
DASH SOCIAL

Organic and paid are becoming more connected.

Brands are increasingly extending the reach of existing organic creative through paid distribution.

Brands boosted 34% more organic posts year-over-year, increasing from 2.9% to 3.9% of posts, even as overall posting declined.[12]

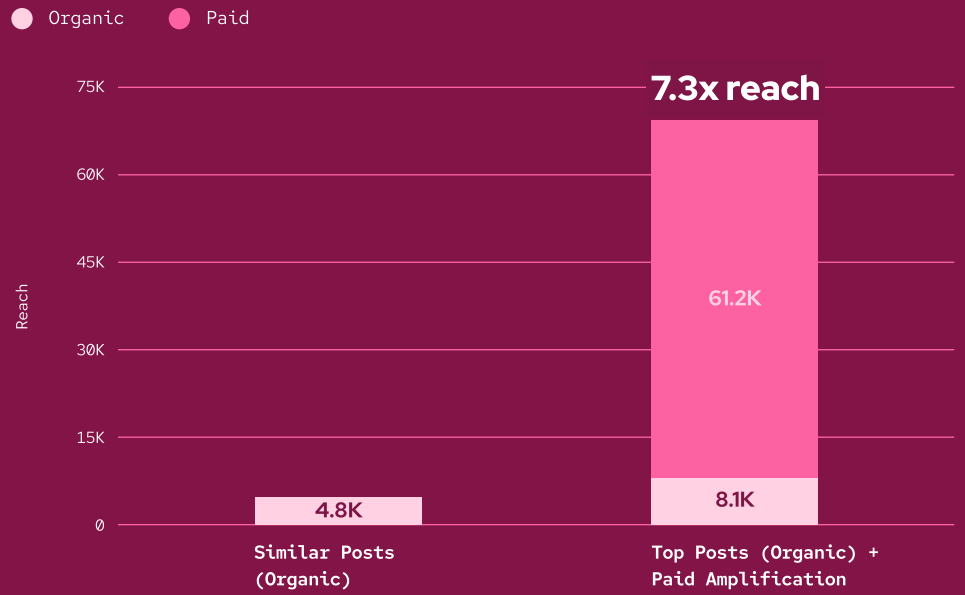
Boosted posts increased 3.5%, while total posts declined 1.3%.

The opportunity is to use organic performance as intelligence. Identify what resonates, then put paid investment behind creative that has already demonstrated its potential. Signals like Dash's Entertainment Score identify which content is outperforming before deciding where to invest paid dollars.

Strong organic performance can signal where to invest next.

Before any paid amplification, top-performing organic posts reached **8.1K** people, compared with **4.8K** for similar posts.[12]

Paid amplification then extended their median reach by another **61.2K** over the post's lifetime. That's **7.3x** their pre-paid organic reach.[13]



Connected brand intelligence raises the quality of every output.

Dash Social research found that with generic AI tools, no marketer created a usable asset in fewer than five prompts.[14]

Generic AI is only as useful as the context it receives. Prompts, websites, and brand guidelines can provide a static view of the brand, but they lack the real-time intelligence to understand:

- A brand's visual identity
- Audience behavior
- Creative momentum
- Cultural relevance
- Creator relationships
- Campaign learnings

Connected brand intelligence gives AI that missing context. It brings trusted historical and real-time creative and performance data into existing AI workflows, informing better decisions. Secure connections like MCP make that context easier to access, within the tools teams already use.

AI can scale speed and output. Brand intelligence helps AI scale quality. But human judgment still determines what deserves to happen next.

> **TREND 3 TAKEAWAY**
>
> Social is your richest source of real-time brand intelligence. Connect those signals across teams, channels, and AI workflows so every insight informs what comes next.

> "When everything is connected, we can see what worked, what didn't, and carry those insights into the next campaign. This intelligence helps us make better decisions faster, and continuously build on what we learn."



Julia Haley
Social Media Manager
STEVE MADDEN

The opportunity for social strategies and AI workflows is clear:

- Give teams and AI systems shared access to real-time brand intelligence.
- Turn performance signals into action across channels.
- Use that intelligence to improve the next decision, not simply accelerate production.

Use brand intelligence to move faster without diluting your brand.

- → Make every impression unmistakably on-brand.
- → Use every post to build creative momentum and sharpen the next decision.
- → Ground AI in trusted real-time brand intelligence.
- → Connect brand intelligence across marketing so judgment can scale.

"With so many brands, teams, and social accounts, the opportunity is making brand intelligence more accessible across the organization. Making social data easier to access and understand means more teams across our brands can put those insights to use."



Ben Richardson
Director of Off-Platform Strategy
CONDÉ NAST

Turn brand intelligence into your social advantage.

Connect with our team today

DASH SOCIAL

1. *How to Build a Consistent Brand* (HubSpot and Canva)

2. *How to Build a Consistent Brand* (HubSpot and Canva)

3. Dash Social analyzed Instagram and TikTok customer data from January through June 2026. Instagram discovery was measured using platform-reported follower and non-follower views. TikTok's For You Page distribution served as a proxy for discovery because TikTok does not provide a direct follower versus non-follower view split. Results were calculated at the brand level, then averaged so each brand contributed equally regardless of its audience size or total views. Deleted TikTok videos and accounts without sufficient traffic-source data were excluded.

4. Dash Social analyzed owned social content using visual similarity models that measured how closely each post aligned with its brand's established visual identity and how closely it resembled content from its broader industry. Posts with high brand similarity and lower industry similarity were classified as distinctive. Their save and share performance was compared with the brand's most generic posts, defined as content with weaker brand similarity and stronger industry similarity. Performance was calculated at the brand level to prevent high-volume accounts from disproportionately influencing the findings.

5. Dash Social used visual similarity models to compare Instagram posts with each brand's established visual identity and with broader creative patterns in its industry. Posts with stronger brand similarity were compared with the brand's baseline content to measure differences in saves. Posts with stronger industry similarity and weaker brand differentiation were compared with the same baseline to measure differences in saves and shares. Results were calculated at the brand level.

6. Dash Social analyzed Instagram customer performance quarterly from January 2023 through June 2026. Follower growth represents the median quarter-over-quarter percentage change in follower count across eligible accounts. Average post shares were calculated separately for each quarter. The ending follower-growth figure reflects Q2 2026, while the share increase compares 2023 performance with Q2 2026.

7. Dash Social analyzed TikTok customer performance quarterly from January 2023 through June 2026. Follower growth represents the median quarter-over-quarter percentage change across eligible accounts. Average shares were calculated across eligible TikTok videos for each comparison period. Deleted videos were excluded.

8. Dash Social analyzed TikTok customer videos published from July 2025 through June 2026. Videos were divided into three equally sized tiers based on reach. Within each tier, videos receiving a greater share of distribution from the For You Page were classified as discovery-heavy, while videos receiving greater Follow-feed distribution were classified as follower-heavy. Engagement behavior was compared within each reach tier, with results weighted equally by brand. The reported findings reflect videos in the middle-reach tier. Deleted videos were excluded.

9. Dash Social ranked eligible accounts by total TSI gain from July 1, 2025, through June 30, 2026. The top 100 gainers were matched with accounts ranked 101 through 1,000 based on follower size, total posting volume, primary platform and data coverage. Each comparison account could be used once, producing 71 matched pairs. For each account, complete weeks were ranked by TSI gain. Dash Social calculated the share of annual TSI generated outside the four highest-gain weeks and counted how many top-performing weeks were required to produce at least half of annual TSI gain.

10. Dash Social analyzed Instagram customer posts published from July 2025 through June 2026. Accounts were divided into moderate publishers, posting six or fewer times per week, and frequent publishers, posting more than six times per week. Engagement rates were calculated at the brand level before the two groups were compared. Media, entertainment and publishing accounts were excluded because their publishing models differ materially from those of other brands. Moderate publishers recorded a 2.33% engagement rate, compared with 1.92% for frequent publishers, a difference of approximately 21%, reported as 20% after rounding. The difference was statistically significant at $p<0.001p<0.001$.

11. CeraVe was evaluated within Dash Social's matched-account TSI analysis covering July 1, 2025, through June 30, 2026. Its annual TSI gain was compared with a matched account selected based on follower size, posting volume, primary platform and data coverage. Complete weeks were ranked by TSI gain to calculate the percentage of CeraVe's annual impact generated outside its four highest-gain weeks.

12. Dash Social analyzed year-over-year Instagram publishing and boosting activity across eligible customer accounts. The analysis measured total posts, boosted posts and the percentage of posts receiving paid amplification during each comparison period. Only accounts with sufficient publishing and boosting data were included.

13. Dash Social identified Instagram posts that later received paid amplification and measured their organic reach before paid distribution began. Their median pre-paid organic reach was compared with the median organic reach of similar posts that did not receive paid amplification. Median reach was used to reduce the influence of exceptionally large posts and accounts. For each amplified Instagram post, Dash Social separated organic reach recorded before paid distribution from the additional reach generated after amplification. Median pre-paid organic reach and median additional paid reach were calculated across eligible posts. The reach multiple was calculated by dividing median additional reach from paid distribution by median pre-paid organic reach.

14. *The State of Creative AI Report* (Dash Social)

15. *How to Build a Consistent Brand* (HubSpot and Canva)