

# Social with Substance and the Return to Real

Ogilvy | Social.Lab

# Introduction

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# The Social Marketing opportunity for brands has never been more exciting, nor more challenging.

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And the audience context requires fresh thinking.

After years of frictionless design and algorithmic optimization, there's a feeling that the internet has hit its saturation point. Users are fatigued by infinite scrolling on feeds engineered for outrage.

Every swipe delivers more content, but less satisfaction. What started as convenience content on demand, now feels compulsive and exhausting. And culture is starting to push back, craving friction, connection, and meaning as antidotes.

But this also presents great opportunity for brands to cut through.

People aren't abandoning social, they're searching for better reasons to stay. Brands that give them those reasons will earn attention that actually matters.

## Proof Points

- ❖ [System1 data](#)<sup>1</sup> revealed Social Creators as the most powerful brand-building touchpoint, ahead of TV, PR and Print.
- ❖ [The Financial Times](#)<sup>2</sup> declared that social peaked in 2022, with younger cohorts leading the charge to log off.
- ❖ [Unilever's CEO announced](#)<sup>3</sup> that the FMCG giant has increased social marketing spend from 30% to 50%.
- ❖ The [words of the year](#)<sup>4</sup> were "rage bait" and "slop".

# Introduction

# What's real, what's worth my attention, and who can I trust?

## Social Context: The Synthetic Feed

*[A social landscape where content volume grows, as user satisfaction declines]*

At the same time, AI is flooding the feeds with everything and nothing at once. When anyone can generate anything, true value is harder to discern.

Pinterest astutely calls this context “ambient chaos – characterized by over stimulation, content overload and constant digital noise”

→ *(Pinterest Predicts, 2025)*<sup>5</sup>

## Audiences are left asking *‘What’s real, what’s worth my attention, and who can I trust?’*

The result is a growing rejection of the noise - a cultural detox led by young people logging off, curating tighter circles, and seeking smaller, slower, more intentional spaces for expression and belonging.

## For brands, the message is clear:

Social remains a must-win channel. But the old playbook won't cut it.

- ❖ *Stop chasing algorithms.*
- ❖ *Start building meaning.*

The next frontier of social marketing is about creating work that earns attention, cultivates intimacy, and carries emotional substance in an age of overload.

The brands that thrive in 2026 will balance technology with humanity - using data and AI to listen and learn, while embracing the substance, imperfection, and texture that make culture feel *real* again.

# Introduction

## The OSL Point of View

❖ For brands who want to connect with consumers, all signs point to “realness” as the path forward. But, more than a tone of voice or aesthetic choice - it’s about realness as a **strategic design principle** that informs the marketing approach.

Real audience truths.  
Real communities.  
Real influence.  
Real world experiences.  
Real human creativity,  
craft and visible effort.

→ Brands will need to intentionally build trust, create value, and offer people something genuine, useful, and culturally relevant.

Increasingly, brands will rely on social and cultural intelligence to discern meaningful signal from surface-level noise, and decode how authenticity works and evolves in 2026:

- ❖ What kinds of stories people connect with and believe
- ❖ How brands can create connection that rings true when anyone can fake it
- ❖ Which communities are shaping culture and where to find them – on social and beyond



So, how can brands translate “real” into actionable working principles for brilliant social-first marketing? →

# Keeping it Real

→ This report sets out the new Rules of Realness - five patterns that shape how successful brands can secure attention, meaning and differentiation in the current social context.

# Trend 001

## Intention Seeking

### Proof Points

■ [The Great Meme Reset of 2026](#)<sup>6</sup> - a viral Tiktok movement that calls for reviving early-to-mid 2010s meme formats in a bid to move away from brain-rot humor toward more intentional, creative meme-making.

■ Movements like the [“Reconnect Movement”](#)<sup>7</sup>, and [Offline Club](#)<sup>8</sup> and [No Phone parties](#)<sup>9</sup> are growing in popularity, because they ask people to put their phones down and connect IRL with the people around them.

**Brainrot ↑ 900% YoY** → (Google Search Trends)<sup>12</sup>

**Enshittification ↑ 58 % YoY** → (Google Search Trends)<sup>13</sup>

⚙️ People are being more deliberate about how they consume online.

After years of algorithmic overload, audiences are feeling hyper-alienated by the increasingly shallow nature of the infinite scroll. Craving substance, users are actively changing their relationships to what they see on their screens, replacing mindless social surfing with intentional filtering. People are still very much on social, but increasingly they want it to add value to their lives, rather than distract from them

To meet the moment, 2026 will be about delivering meaning over noise - think saves over scrolls and quality over quantity. For brands, the content value exchange becomes more critical than ever. Cultural influence won't come from post or view counts, but from deep resonance and deliberate engagement.



consumers have deleted a social media app in the past 12 months

→ (Deloitte, 2025)<sup>10</sup>



of consumers have turned off all notifications for one or more apps

→ (Deloitte, 2025)<sup>11</sup>

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### Community-first content strategy:

- Who is this for and why should they watch it?
- What need state does it answer?
- How will it reward their time and attention?

Brands need to be way more aware of the reasons why people logged on in the first place (spoiler alert: which is not necessarily to engage with brands).



### Serialized, repeatable formats:

In 2026 many more brands will start to think of Social as entertainment TV – appointment viewing for today’s consumer. Creative studios become more like writers’ s rooms, producing targeted thematic content streams with lore-building narrative arcs, recurring characters and signature visual codes. Nail the format, and give it a plot worth following – and reap the rewards of algorithmic momentum and genuine audience retention.



### Design and measure for content value:

Informative utility (*I needed to know this*), emotional resonance (*I feel seen*) or entertainment value (*my show is on!*). Saves, shares, comments and watch time are now the ultimate metrics that matter. “Will they share this in the group chat?” is the bar for content that hits. A mentality of showmanship will beat out traditional salesmanship tactics. → [\(The Creative Dividend System\) & Effie, June 2025](#)



### Intentional creator engagement:

Brands will get much more selective with creator partnerships, prioritizing content resonance, creativity and values alignment over hefty follower counts.

# Trend 001 – For Brands:

Shift from reach to resonance, from exposure to engagement. Create work that rewards attention through emotional truth, clarity, and care. Optimize social content for reference value, not just vanity metrics of scale.



→ Maybelline’s Teddy Takeover turned passive scrolling into an active, city-wide hunt



→ Bumble ditched traditional ads for a serialized interview series with Pete Davidson and his girlfriend



→ Dove’s podcast mini-series Y2K unpacks 2000s beauty culture

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# Trend 001

## In action:

**Amazon Prime's Girl and Boy Room:** TikTok-native, TV-style formats where a host tours the chaotic bedrooms of college-age girls and boys, then transforms them with Amazon-sourced makeovers. Built as episodic series, the formats turn utility and entertainment into appointment viewing.

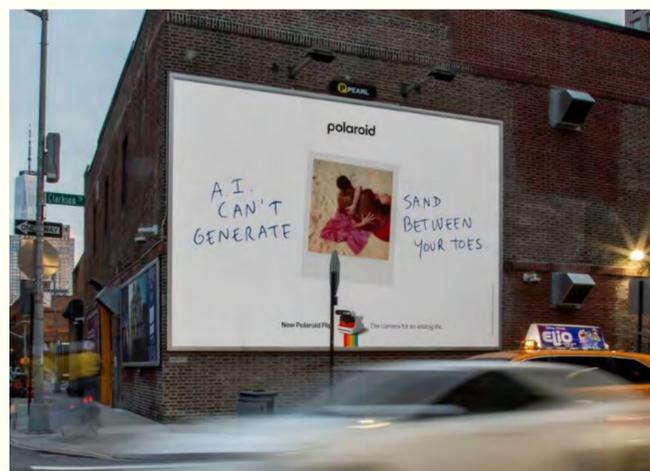


### Case Study

**Deutsche Telekom: #OwnYourWorld,** Deutsche Telekom's summer campaign, designed to connect with Gen Z, not by promoting plans or pricing, but by shining a light on issues of data privacy and digital autonomy for a chronically online generation.

An episodic roll out of social-first explainers, designed to inform, empower and spark conversation, Deutsche Telekom showed up around an issue its customer base cares deeply about, positioning itself as a trusted ally and building brand love along the way.

**Polaroid: Camera for an Analogue Life** champions a slower, more intentional relationship with photography. By celebrating imperfect real-life moments and the permanence of physical prints, the campaign positions Polaroid not as a retro novelty but a cultural counterpoint, inviting audiences to reclaim presence and meaning beyond the feed.



# Trend 002

## Internet Intimacy

### Proof Points

- Themed or passion-centered gathering:** Trends like Home Cafes<sup>15</sup> and the rapid rise of cosy hobbies<sup>16</sup>, show how younger audiences are opting for smaller, friend-based spaces instead of big public scenes. Watch parties and fan meet ups are now staples for sports and entertainment marketing.
- Niche creator talent:** Auntie and Uncle creators<sup>17</sup> like Bus Aunty<sup>18</sup> and Grime Gran are on the rise because they feel like chosen family online, reflecting a broader appetite for warm, familiar voices rather than post-perfect influencers who read as distant and out of touch.
- 2025's Tumblr revival**<sup>19</sup>: a reflection of Gen Z's retreat to smaller online spaces where niche humour, shared sensibilities, low-pressure connection and creative expression replace the performance of big social.

Watch parties 72 % YoY → (Google Search Trends)<sup>22</sup>

Games night 67 % YoY → (Google Search Trends)<sup>23</sup>

Run clubs worldwide have tripled YoY; 800 % in Brazil → (Strava)<sup>24</sup>

When it comes to digital communities, people are trading in broadcasting for belonging.

It's time to put the 'social' back into social media, as people seek content and experiences that revitalize real connection - a welcome antidote to the alienating doomscroll. Tired of hostility and division on public feeds, and against the backdrop of a global loneliness crisis, people crave friendlier, more personal online spaces. They're gravitating towards smaller, self-defined communities built on shared interests: humor, fandom, lived experience or creative pursuits.

*The rise of community marketing is not new, but in 2026 it's leveling up.* The **internet intimacy** is more niche, more sophisticated and integrated across touch points. Social platforms are not the end destination, but an essential tool to facilitate discovery, connection and organization.



of Gen Z identify as fans and 81% prefer to be identified by their interests.

→ (Ogilvy Fandom Flux)<sup>20</sup>



of event organizers reported increased in-person attendance in 2025



of attendees say immersive experiences help them disconnect and engage more meaningfully.

→ (Digital Marketing Trends 2026, Brandwatch)<sup>21</sup>

# Trend 002 - For Brands:

Stop broadcasting. Start belonging. Brands need to behave as participants and hosts, not unwelcome interruptions. Think about how to show up in many small rooms, rather than one big stage, earning trust over time by contributing to communities built on shared values and identity.



## Strategic community engagement:

Effective collaboration goes much further than simply attaching a logo to the loudest or fastest-growing space. It starts with identifying communities most closely aligned to the brand's ethos, values and offering. Relevance comes from shared synergy and mutual value exchange, not opportunistic engagement. Smart brands will leverage deep community intelligence to uncover the richest opportunity areas.



## Intimacy at scale:

"Lots of little" is the strategic unlock for marketers who will be challenged to achieve scale through experiences that still feel personal, small and memorable. Expect continued growth of large micro-creator programs, where multiple niche voices are retained for community trust and cultural fluency. We will also see a much more human side to brand content, with more internal employees or hired actors appearing on camera to cultivate trust and connection.



## Decode the dynamics:

Fandom isn't a monolith – each collective comes with its own rules and codes. Brands need to earn their place by demonstrating deep understanding of community organizing structures, emotional drivers, and belonging incentives. Adding tangible value might look like solving unmet needs, unlocking access to coveted events or talent, offering exclusive benefits, or facilitating new forms of co-creation and participation.



→ Chipotle leverages Discord as a space for clients to hang out and chat live with the brand



→ Brands like Away are giving a curated group of followers early access to products via Instagram Close Friends



→ Nike's Cantonese soup shop on Ersha Island showed up in a niche space where runners already gather

# Trend 002 In action:

**Mattel:** UNO Social Club game nights refreshed the classic card game with an elevated social nightlife experience. Special editions were hosted by cultural icons like J Balvin and the British Fashion Council.

The collage features several key elements:
 

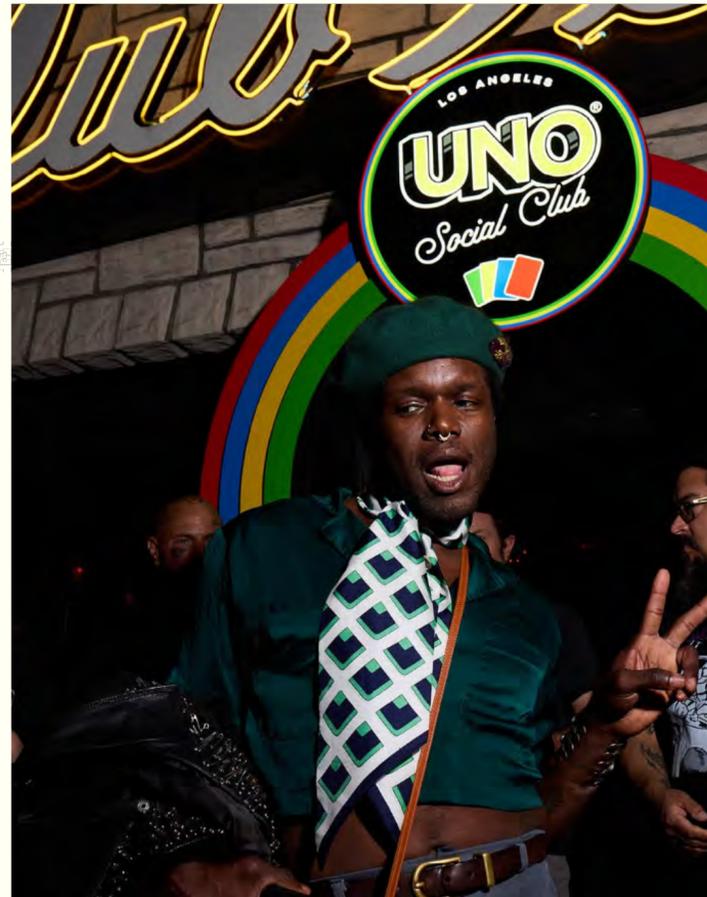
- Instagram Post:** A post by 'sophiarchie' titled 'Free things to do in Abu Dhabi: Museum Date at the Manarat Al Saadiyat...' with 406 likes.
- TikTok Video:** A 'pov: you land in Abu Dhabi' video showing an aerial view of the city, with 45.5K views and 4,626 likes.
- TikTok Video:** A video titled 'the most refreshing place in Abu Dhabi' with 6,943 views and 4,156 likes.
- News Articles:** Several articles about travel costs, including 'Travel is too expensive right now: Americans are spending less or skipping trips altogether', 'Getting to Europe is cheaper this summer – but everything costs more when you're there', and '7 New Tourist Taxes Make Your Holiday Abroad More Expensive'.
- Forbes Article:** 'Summer Travel Too Expensive For One Quarter Of Americans, Per New Survey'.
- Twitter Post:** A tweet from 'Transport International' stating 'Train travel still pricier than flying on most European routes – report'.

**That's Big Branding Energy.**

Case Study

**Visit Abu Dhabi:** in a world where 60% of travellers trust creators more than tourism ads, destination marketing needs a social-first refresh. Abu Dhabi Tourism's Community Core campaign flipped the model, mobilizing an army of micro creators to showcase the region, not as a generic holiday location, but a place to nurture personal passions like Wellness, Fashion, Food, Adventure and more.

**The result?** 8.3M views, 5% engagement rate, and record-breaking visitation with hotel occupancy hitting 78%.



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# Trend 003

## Process, Patina & Proof of Craft

### Proof Points

❗ **Analogue Revival:** Vinyl listening, retro digital cameras, and [MP3 players](#)<sup>25</sup> are trending again as people seek nostalgic comfort rituals that offer weight, tactility, and friction. TikTok's viral [analog bag](#)<sup>26</sup> trend captured our craving for hands-on activity.

❗ **The Mainstreamification of Intensity:** Physically intense experiences like marathon running, Hyrox and the cold plunge craze showcase a collective desire for intense, feeling-first activities (that also make for great social content).

❗ **TikTok's Embrace of Wabi-Sabi:**<sup>27</sup> The platform's celebration of mess, texture, and unpolished imperfection reveals a broad cultural craving for the raw and sensorial, directly opposing the polish of automated perfection.

*The growth of effort-based and sensory experiences at scale:*

Adventure tourism: ↑ 75%

Penpal ideas: ↑ 90%

Adventure tourism: ↑ 75%

→ [Pinterest Predicts, 2026](#)<sup>30</sup>

⚙️ In a world of synthetic perfection, audiences crave tangible proof of human effort, valuing the texture, time and imperfection that make things feel real.

As AI masters the art of flawless imitation, seeing is no longer believing. When our eyes struggle to distinguish human experience from machine fabrication, we need new ways to make sense of the world around us. And so, the new authenticity is no longer seen, but sensed and felt.

This is the next frontier of realness. Disrupting our chronically online culture by returning to things that anchor us back to the physical world. Textured experience through smell, taste, and visceral sensation offers a new kind of proof, based on what our bodies feel, not what our minds are told.

This search for tangible proof is reshaping our content appetite, creating a new value system built on two pillars of human effort:

- 1. The Sensory Proof (Patina):** a return to the messy, imperfect, and analogue. It's the physical weight of a vinyl record, the unpolished grain in a photograph, or the complex layers of a custom-blended perfume. It is truth confirmed by touch and sensation.
- 2. The Temporal Proof (Process):** a new appreciation for things that take time and visible craft. It's the behind-the-scenes glimpse of human hands at work, the documentation of a skill being learned, or the slow progress of a hand-knitted scarf. It is authenticity proven through effort.

For brands, this means a year of leaning deeper into sensory, flawed, and potent expressions that prove a human was here.

# 970%



of people can't tell the difference between fully AI-generated and human-made music

→ (Deezer/Ipsos, 2025) »

# 980%



of consumers agree that 'authentic' images and videos are pivotal in establishing trust

→ (Getty Images, 2024) »

 **Prioritize texture-forward content:**

Spotlight touch, sound, and materiality. Sound design with ambient detail, ASMR and evocative music becomes increasingly important for scroll-stopping content. Collaborate with process-oriented creators, known for tactile or outdoor pursuits like embroidery, illustration, food artistry, marathon training, birdwatching and more.

 **Social beyond the screen:**

A good social presence extends beyond social. Lean into IRL activations, pop-ups, and immersive multi-sensory experiences. This creates real-world momentum that excites brand lovers, but also fuels content that's born from a tangible, visceral expression of the brand.

 **Make time visible:**

Showcase the work that goes into what you create - the craftsmanship, the process, the human effort. Bring in analogue experiences like limited prints or textured packaging that demand people to pause and pay attention.

 **Embrace imperfect aesthetics:**

Capture visceral, feeling-first moments (from physical scenarios to real bodily reactions) to translate intensity into compelling social storytelling. Lean into "wabi-sabi" aesthetics by showing raw materials, human hands, and works-in-progress.

 **Set the guardrails for AI vs Human craft:**

Set clear rules for where AI accelerates social content - and where human voice, judgement and craft must lead. Codify this in updated social playbooks, with built-in standards for AI transparency and disclosure to ensure that efficiency never undermines credibility.

# Trend 003 - For Brands:

Make people feel, not just see. Show the work, celebrate process over polish and don't be afraid of imperfection. Interrogate communications by asking not "What are we telling them?" but "*How are we making them feel?*".



→ #MesswithLancome puts BTS texture and mess center stage



→ Bottega Veneta puts craft at the center of its brand



→ Marathon running is one of many process related hobbies hitting the mainstream

# Trend 003

## In action:

**Hermes:** Tomm Emmerson's playful reimagining of the luxury house's iconic horse and cart logo. An irreverent, delightful scene inspired by the absurdity of the AI visual era but shot entirely on camera with no digital effects



### Case Study

**Google Pixel:** from miniature food to vinyl hunting, to hand blown glass phone charms, Google Pixel's social showcases the device as an enabler of real world creativity.

**Salomon:** to launch the new XT-Whisper as a choice for daring, unconventional creatives, Salomon executed a perfect partnership with the Gohar sisters, multidisciplinary creatives known for immersive sensorial experience design. Shot in New York City Library, with evocative sound and a rhythmic edit, this one hits all the marks.



### Case Study

**Absolut:** an iconic brand's long tradition of artistic stewardship, refreshed for the social-first era. Absolut commissioned Madrid-based artist Bianca Fernandez to create a one-of-a-kind bottle. Her BTS creative process video out-performed the image of the final product, delivering 4x the organic engagement.



Proof Points

❏ Niche tastemakers: The meteoric rise of Substack and podcasting, as well as the explosion of curatorial formats like Criterion's Closet Picks<sup>31</sup> and Perfectly Imperfect<sup>32</sup>, signal culture's fascination with highly specific taste, personal takes, and idiosyncratic recommendations. For its highly anticipated Liquid Glass launch<sup>33</sup>, Apple invited Substack darlings Emily Sundberg and Rachel Karten rather than the expected cast of lifestyle influencers.

❏ Intentional following: Tired of the algorithmic lottery, audiences are moving from passive feeds to "one-to-many" social formats such as Instagram Broadcast Channels, YouTube subscriptions and live video. One-sided group chats as a direct line into trusted voices, where connection is intentionally opted into.

❏ Instagram's "Your Algorithm" features: Meta is rolling out new tools<sup>34</sup> that aim to improve user experience and algorithm clarity. "Your Algorithm" allows users to fine tune their Reels feeds to reflect current tastes and interests.

❏ Human-first platforms: Jack Dorsey is bringing Vine back<sup>35</sup> with diVine, reviving thousands of classic vines and allowing users to create new videos. Now in beta, diVine will block content created by LLMs to create a platform where human origin content is the core feature.

# Trend 004

# The Human Algorithm

❏ People are placing their trust in human filters to find taste, value and meaning.

Curation, taste and a distinct point of view are the new power tools of influence. To sift through the noise, audiences are turning to niche editors and trusted voices who offer clarity and context.

As platforms like ChatGPT replace traditional search engines, online visibility is no longer won with keywords, but with earned authority. To appear in AI-generated answers, brands must be consistently cited within the sources LLMs trust most: Reddit threads, LinkedIn, expert articles, and reputable publications. In 2026, brand social strategy must account for Earned Media as the new SEO.



of Gen Z prefer private DMs over public commenting when interacting with creators or companies

→ (eMarketer)<sup>36</sup>



of people are wary about trusting AI, reporting either ambivalence or an unwillingness to trust

→ (KPMG, 2025)<sup>37</sup>



of global podcast listeners have made a purchase directly because of a podcaster

→ (eMarketer, Dec 2025)<sup>38</sup>

Substack has:

5M+ paid subscriptions

20M+ monthly active users

# Trend 004 – For Brands:

# Credibility, curation and clout are the keys to algorithmic excellence.



## Earned as the North Star:

In 2026 the success of a brand action will be measured by the ripple effect beyond the initial impact. The goal is to create moments so resonant that they're organically picked up. This "echo" - the Substack mention, the Reddit debate, the Forbes article posted to LinkedIn - is the ultimate signal of earned authority, which builds brand magnetism on several fronts: credibility in niche communities, coveted entry into closed group spaces, and digital visibility within LLMs.



## Engage the cultural insiders:

Understand the tastemakers and gatekeepers that matter most to your target communities and build them into your creator engagement plan. Strategic alignment with the right Substack editor, TikTok expert, podcaster or specific Subreddit can make your brand part of the culture-shaping discourse.



## Design for dark social:

The most impactful engagement happens where we can't measure it: in DMs, group chats, and Slack channels. Think about what screenshot-worthy content might look like for your brand: helpful tips or step-by-step breakdowns, insightful data visualizations, provocative or relatable takes and meme-able scenarios. Arm your audience for their private chats and let them do the sharing.



→ Criterion Closet picks has celebrity filmmakers curate their favourite films



→ Emily Sundberg, the author of FeedMe, is a rising substack star

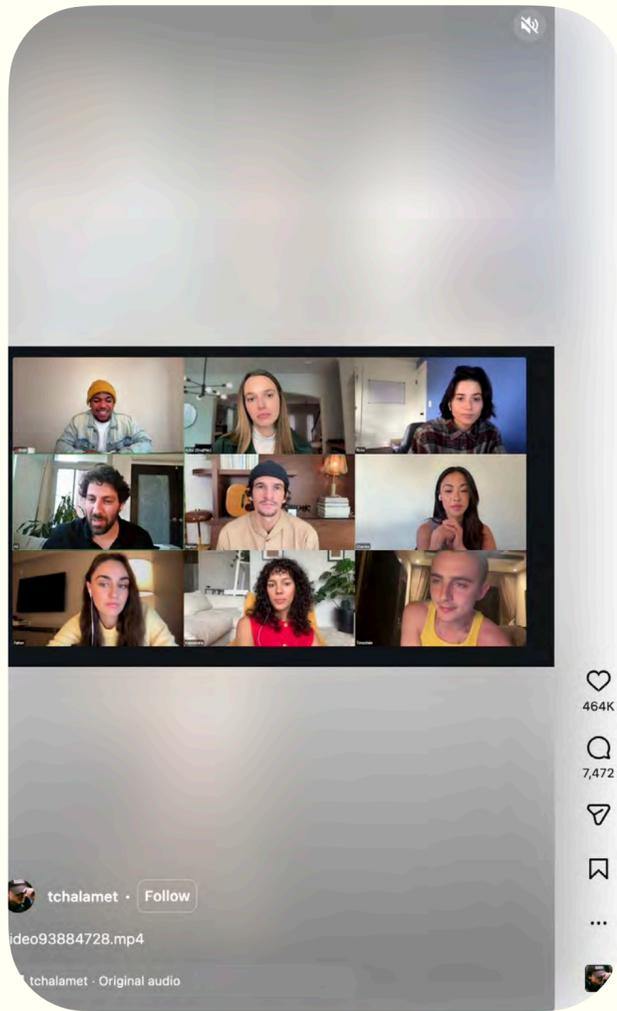


→ People are turning to Booktokers to find new reads

# Trend 004

## In action:

**Marty Supreme:** the Zoom call parody felt around the world, giving audiences an absurd, yet all too relatable, slice of life for corporate creatives that got group chats buzzing. A risky deviation from the standard Hollywood launch playbook that paid off in virality and infinitely shareable spin-off memes.



### Case Study

**Vaseline Verified:** viral user-generated Vaseline hacks were transformed into scientifically tested truths, by putting community-sourced tips through playful lab trials to verify what works and debunk what doesn't. The result is a community-led system of verification that reinforced Vaseline's credibility and boundless versatility. *Winner of 2025's Social and Creator Grand Prix at Cannes.*

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# Trend 005

## Merchant Entertainers and creator-led commerce.

### Proof Points

- ❖ **TikTok Shop explosion:** The rapid expansion<sup>39</sup> of TikTok Shop has normalized in-feed impulse buys. "TikTok Shop" is now a content category, where viral trends and direct sales merge in real-time.
- ❖ **Live shopping events:** Hosted by creators on TikTok and YouTube, these are social's answer to QVC. Blending entertainment with real-time community interaction, the format creates urgency, turning transactional product drops into shared cultural events.
- ❖ **Creator as merchant:** Both brands and platforms are building entire ecosystems for creator-led retail. Social storefronts like ShopMy and affiliate tools like LTK empower creators to curate, sell, and earn directly within their content.

#### TikTok Shop's record-breaking Black Friday in the UK

27 items sold every second; Sales ↑ 50% YoY → (TikTok)<sup>40</sup>

Live shopping ↑ 68% → (TikTok)<sup>40</sup>

Live shopping on TikTok ↑ 20% YoY in 2025 → (Digitay)<sup>41</sup>

❖ "Shop while you watch" culture is here, and it's driving real commercial impact. Creators aren't just influencing sales - they are the storefront.

Shoppable social is maturing, collapsing the customer journey into a seamless fusion of entertainment, influence, and commerce. Beyond convenience, this is about transforming the act of shopping into a connected social experience, where audiences discover, consider, and purchase products, all within the same video, guided by a creator they already trust.

Already mature in Asia, this shift is well underway in North America and slowly emerging in Europe. In 2026, the role of creators will continue to evolve, from top-of-funnel awareness drivers to merchant-entertainers who manage their own sales and performance metrics.

83% of consumers made an influencer-inspired purchase in the past year

50% of people buy an influencer-inspired purchase monthly → (Sprout Social)<sup>42</sup>

DOUBLED Affiliate revenues for creators doubled between 2021 and 2024, rising from \$570 million to \$1.1 billion → (eMarketer)<sup>43</sup>

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# Trend 005 - For Brands:

## Treat creator-led commerce not as a nice-to-have, but as a pillar of sales strategy. Think of creators as a sales team, not just a media buy. Invest in their success, leverage their talent, and actively build around them.



### Support the storefront:

Don't just send creators products; empower them as retail partners. Support their TikTok Shop, Amazon, or Instagram storefronts with exclusive product drops, marketing assets, and data insights to help them optimize sales. Their success is your success, so work with them to make their stores successful.



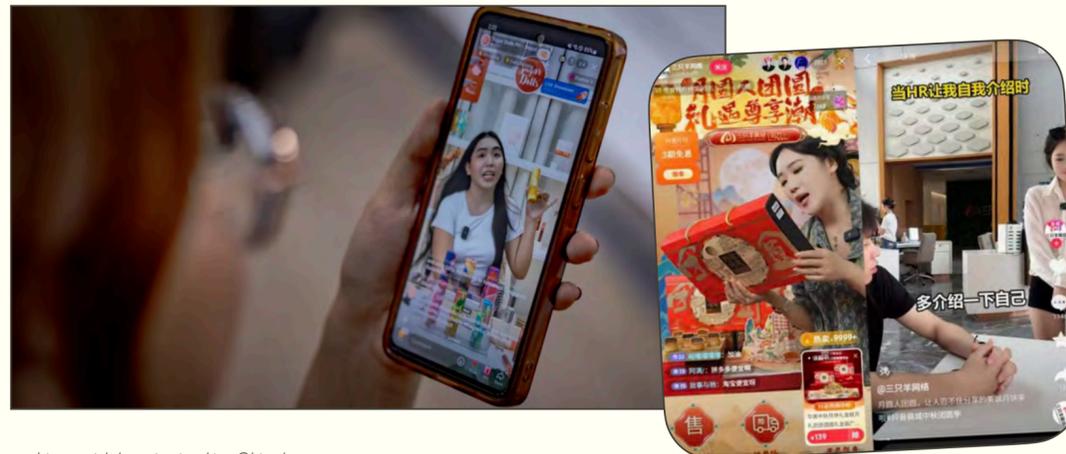
### Create 'shoppable entertainment,' not ads:

Design content with native shopping in mind from the start. This means using creator storefronts in your paid strategy, bundling products around creator identity ("This Creator's Favorites Things"), and creating entertaining formats where the product is a natural part of the story.



### Explore New Partnership Models:

The future of creator collaboration lies beyond one-off sponsored posts. To secure the most valuable talent, explore long-term retainers, revenue-sharing agreements, or even equity stakes for strategic partners. This aligns incentives and turns creators into true, long-term brand advocates.



→ Live social shopping is taking China by storm

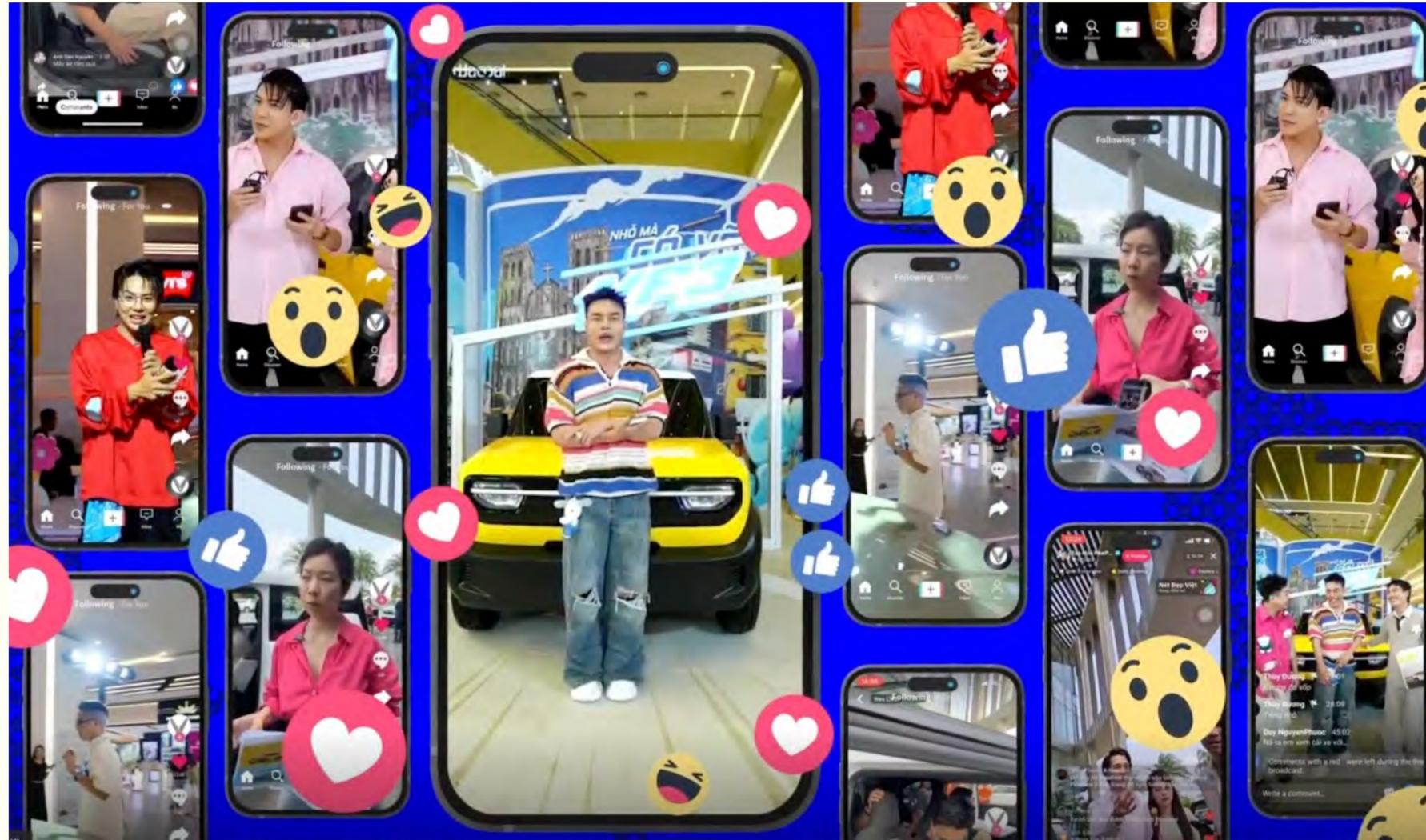


→ With Croctober, Crocs turns creator-made content and collaborations into TikTok Shop opportunities

# Trend 005

## In action:

**Skims Kimsmas:** always ahead of the curve, Kim Kardashian kicked off 2025's festive season with a 45-minute shoppable livestream on TikTok. The moment played out as a holiday entertainment variety show, fully interactive, and completely shoppable, spotlighting Skims holiday collection, with live-exclusive limited editions, deals and giveaways.



### Case Study

**VinFast VF3:** for the launch of VinFast's new EV model, the Gold Effie-winning "Unbound Imagination" campaign pioneered influencer-led livestream car sales in Vietnam. Activating creators across Shopee, Facebook and TikTok the brand drove an unprecedented 25 000 pre-orders in just 66 hours. A rapid pre-order window, combined with urgency and scarcity tactics such as exclusive early-buyer benefits and free charging, compressed the traditional car-buying journey into a high-impact, viral event

## Take-away

For brands who want to connect with consumers, all signs point to “realness” as the path forward. But, more than a tone of voice or aesthetic choice - it’s about realness as a *strategic design principle* that informs the marketing approach.

## Conclusion

These five **rules of realness** reveal an overarching shift from a social strategy built solely on reach and algorithmic optimisation, to one centered on resonance.

The path forward for brands in 2026 is clear: win the humans, and the algorithm will follow. *This is not an all-out rejection of technology, but a call for its strategic rebalancing.* AI will continue to evolve as a powerful tool for acceleration and scale, but its application for social brand building should not come at the expense of substance.

The brands that succeed will be those who trade the old playbook of mass broadcasting for a new one built on genuine connection, visible craft, and earned authority.



# Appendix

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### Original trend stock

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