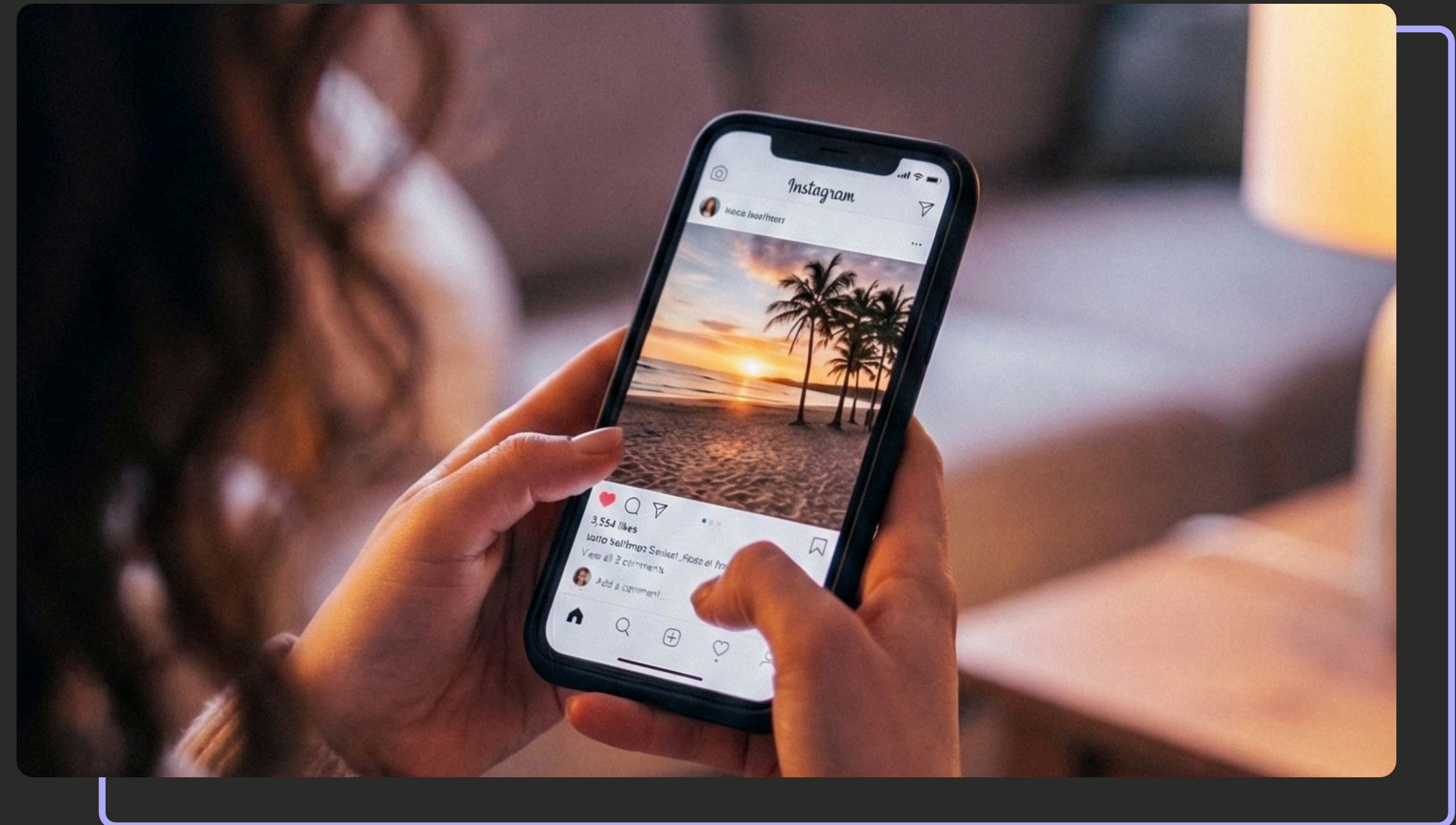# Power

Power Digital Marketing's

2026

State of Social Media Trends Report

Power

The 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report is based on survey data collected from the public between June and September 2025. All insights and findings presented throughout this report are derived directly from those responses.

Our survey respondent data:

1,483 Respondents

52% are between the ages of 25-34

54% identify as a millennial

77% identify as female

84% permanently reside in the U.S.

Table of Contents

Power

1. The New Social Funnel: Discovery, Conversion & Validation

Power

How TikTok, Instagram, & YouTube Now Power the Modern Consumer Journey

Social now captures more of the consumer journey than ever. **TikTok sparks discovery** through creator-led inspiration, **Instagram drives research and conversion** through product search and streamlined shopping, and **YouTube closes the loop** by offering long-form validation before purchase. Together, these platforms form a complete social funnel that many consumers now follow from first impression to final decision.

This year's data is clear: users are no longer just scrolling—**they're searching, discovering, and buying directly on social.**

Instagram drives buying intent, with 60% of users relying on it for product research (+16% YoY) and 37% saying it's the platform where they're most likely to shop.

TikTok powers discovery, with 54% of users searching and 66% actively engaging in trend-led exploration.

When turning to social media for search or research-related behaviors, which platform(s) do you use most often?

59.5% → Instagram

54.5% → TikTok

19.5% → YouTube

18.2% → Reddit

15.4% → Facebook

Consumers are increasingly using social platforms as their primary search engines, with Instagram and TikTok leading this behavior.

YouTube and Reddit serve as validation layers, helping users fact-check, compare options, and dive deeper before making final decisions.

Power

Which social platforms do you primarily use?

- **87%** → Instagram
- **66%** → TikTok
- **33** → Facebook
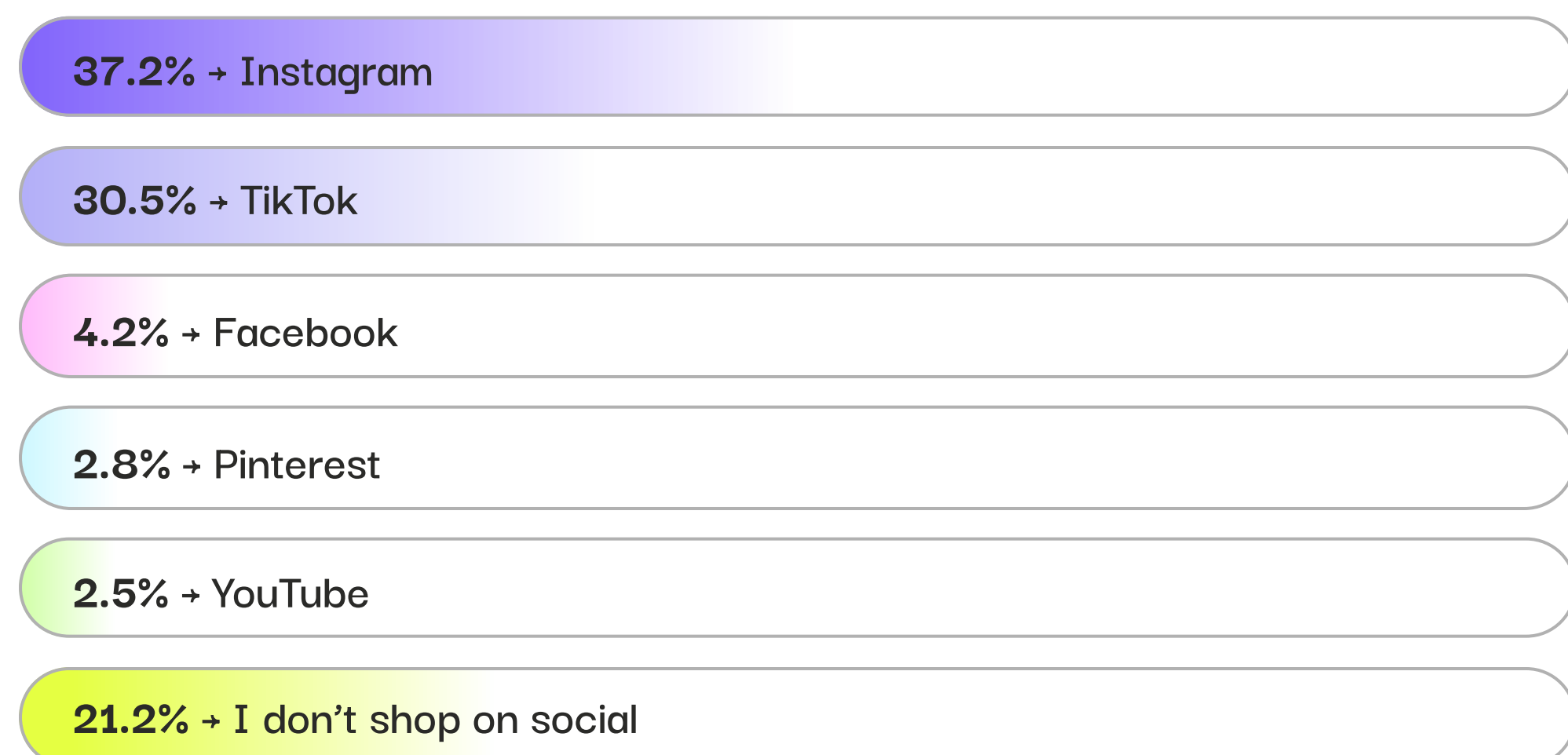- **31%** → YouTube
- **11%** → Pinterest
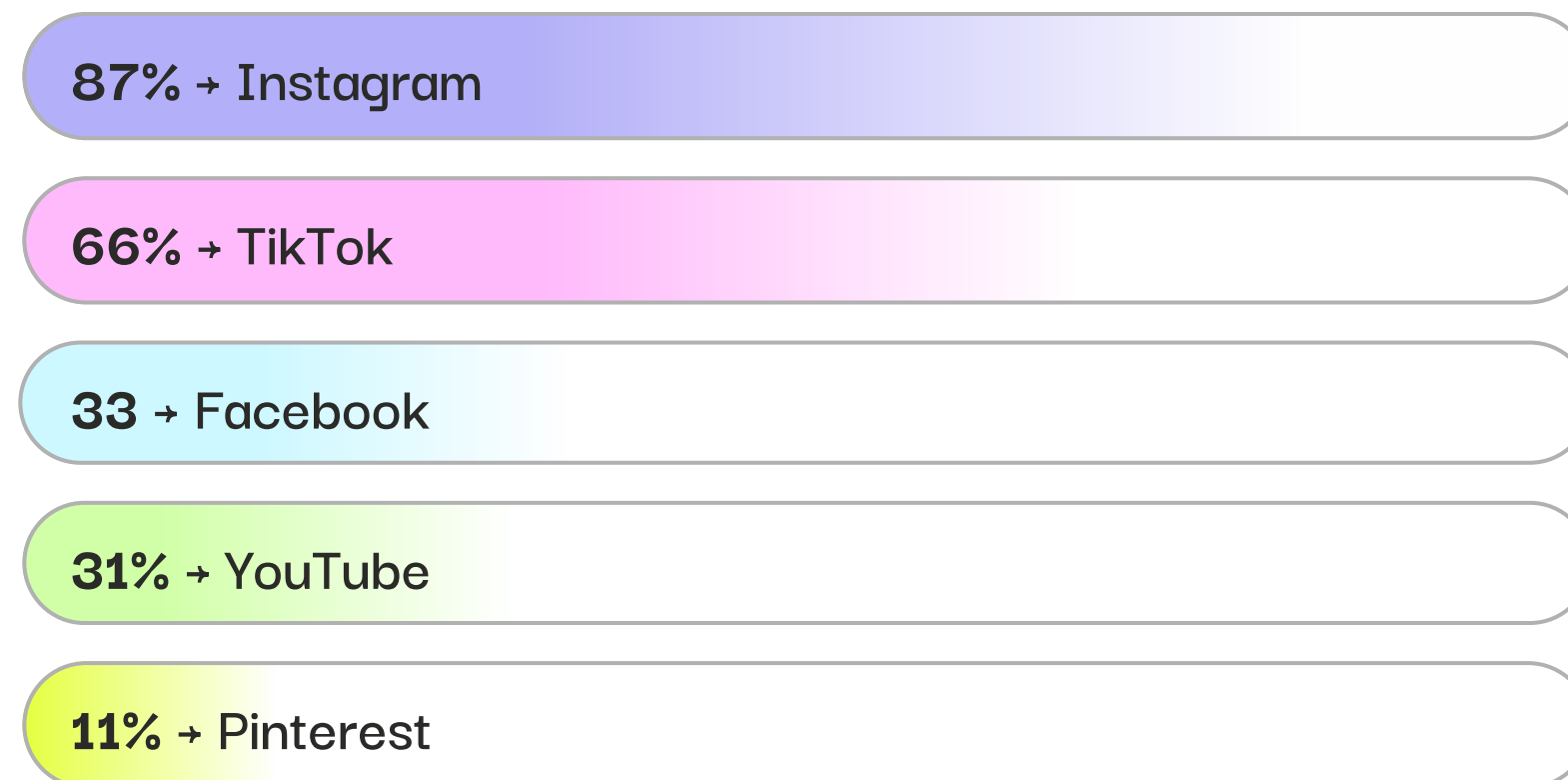
© 2025 Power Digital Marketing • Source: 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report

Instagram remains the dominant daily platform, but TikTok is rapidly closing the gap.

With 87% of respondents using Instagram and 66% active on TikTok, brands must maintain a presence on both to meet users where they scroll, search, and discover new products.

Which social media platform are you most likely to shop from?

- **37.2%** → Instagram
- **30.5%** → TikTok
- **4.2%** → Facebook
- **2.8%** → Pinterest
- **2.5%** → YouTube
- **21.2%** → I don't shop on social

© 2025 Power Digital Marketing • Source: 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report

Instagram leads in product research and shopping intent, while TikTok is quickly emerging as both a discovery and conversion hub, driven by the growth of TikTok Shop. Together, these platforms account for the majority of social-driven purchases, showing that discovery and checkout increasingly happen within the same platform environment.

Power

Instagram's Role in the Modern Funnel

Instagram increasingly serves as a key driver of the mid-to-lower funnel. 60% of users rely on Instagram for product research (up from last year!), and 37% have shopped directly in-app via Shops or creator links.

Its integrated search, community, and commerce capabilities make Instagram a leading platform for consumer evaluation and conversion.

Instagram: The Conversion Powerhouse

How are consumers using Instagram today?

76% feel more loyal when brands reply to comments

60% use it for product research   **+37% YoY**

59% identify Instagram as the #1 platform for customer service

37% shopped directly via Instagram Shops or creator links

© 2025 Power Digital Marketing • Source: 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report

Power

TikTok: The Discovery Engine

How do users engage with TikTok when it comes to products or services?

66% use TikTok (+5.1% YoY)

54% utilize the platform for product or service research

46% have purchased something because of a TikTok trend or challenge

Top discovery behaviors:

**40%** Recipes

35% Fashion/Styling

35% Tutorials

© 2025 Power Digital Marketing • Source: 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report

TikTok is the modern search engine, driving awareness through creator-led authenticity and short-form storytelling. Its power lies in inspiration: users turn to TikTok first to see what's trending, often converting that discovery into action across platforms.

YouTube: The Deep Dive Platform

Which platform do you turn to for validation or information before making a purchase?

YouTube usage jumped +9.7% YoY.

21.3% — 2025

31% — 2026
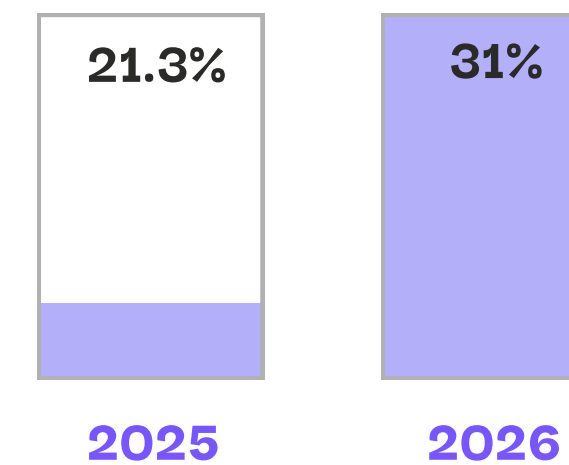
Users rely on it for extended reviews, unboxings, and how-tos, making it a critical validation layer after discovering products on TikTok or researching them on Instagram.

YouTube's +9.7% YoY growth signals rising intent for long-form validation, **a key trend to watch in 2026.**

© 2025 Power Digital Marketing • Source: 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report

"Now more than ever, TikTok is a place for product discovery, research, and purchasing thanks to the explosive growth of TikTok Shop and affiliate content. People can easily find new products, get inspired by authentic creator videos, and check out instantly, and that seamless mix has turned TikTok into one of the most powerful players in social commerce today."

–Sophia Talese, Associate Director of Social Commerce

3 Takeaways:

1.

TikTok shapes demand:

Authentic, creator-led discovery moments now drive cultural relevance and product awareness faster than ever.

2.

Instagram captures demand:

Streamlined shopping features and creator-linked commerce turn intent into action, making it a primary engine of conversion.

3.

YouTube extends engagement:

As the "research layer," YouTube delivers depth and trust, validating purchases through reviews and long-form education.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

The new social funnel runs on intent, trust, and timing, with TikTok sparking curiosity, Instagram converting it, and YouTube reinforcing confidence.

2. UGC & Social Proof

Power

UGC Becomes the New Currency of Trust: From Inspiration to Conversion

UGC has evolved from a supporting signal into a performance engine. It now plays a critical role in the middle of the funnel by **bridging the trust gap between discovery and decision.** What was once a "nice-to-have" is now a core driver of credibility, shaping how people validate brands before they buy.

Consumers no longer trust before they verify - they verify before they trust.
Reviews, testimonials, and comment-section interactions now influence purchase intent, build confidence, and strengthen loyalty in real time.
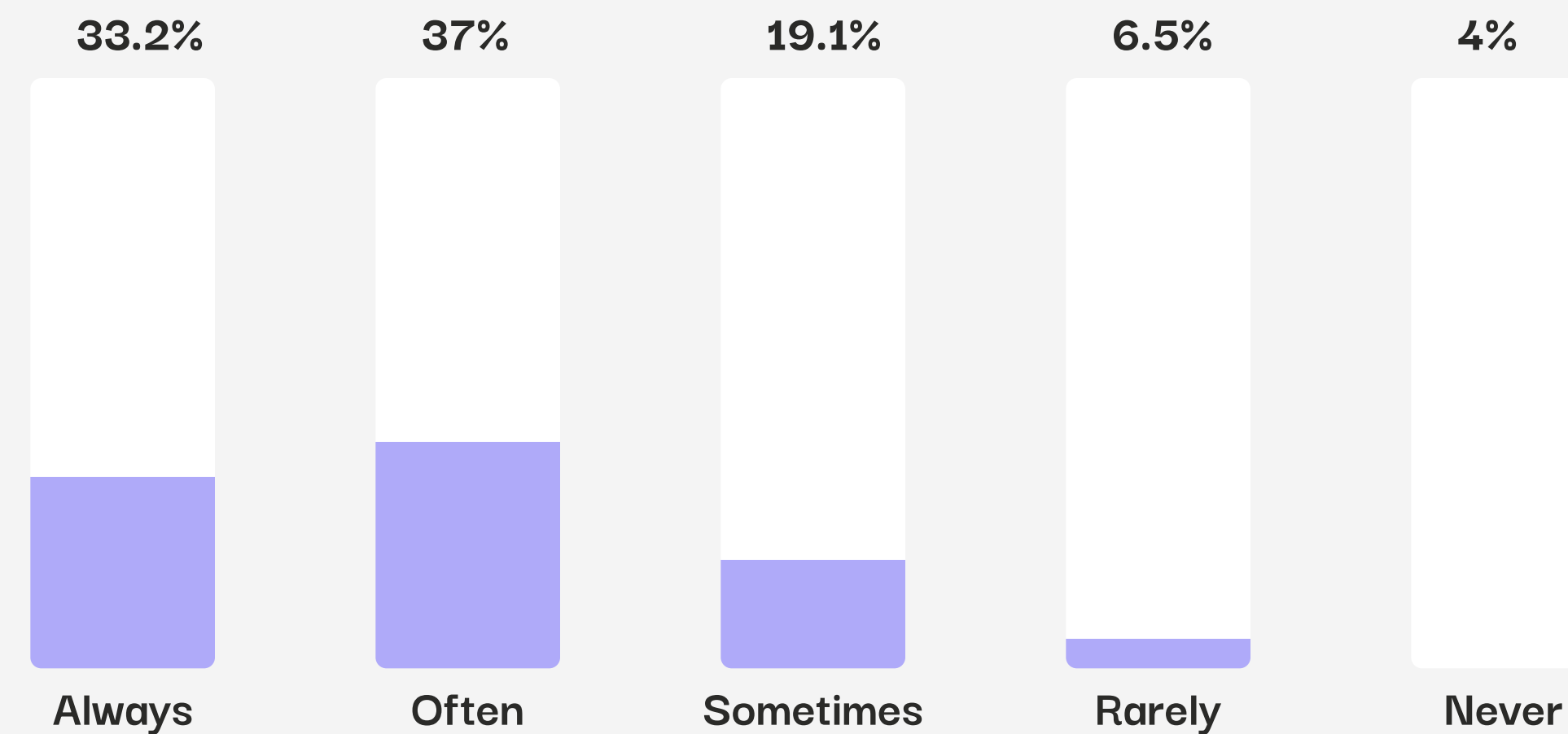
Power

70% of consumers "often or always" look for UGC before purchasing. That's **double** from last year.

35%	70%
2025	**2026**
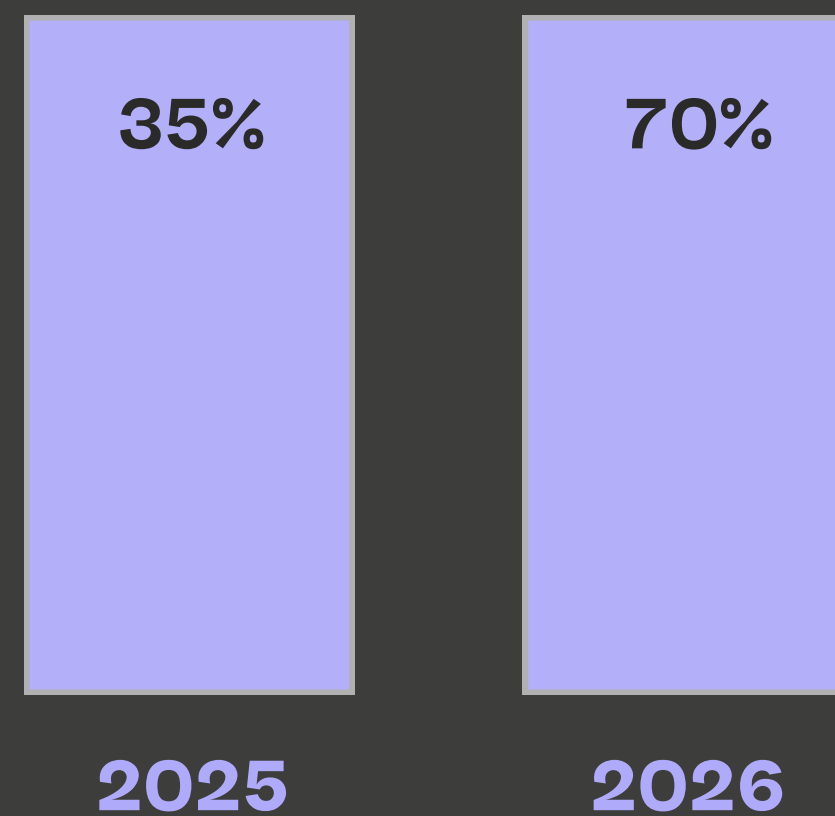
© 2025 Power Digital Marketing • Source: 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report

How often do you look for UGC (reviews, try-ons, or unboxings) before buying something online?

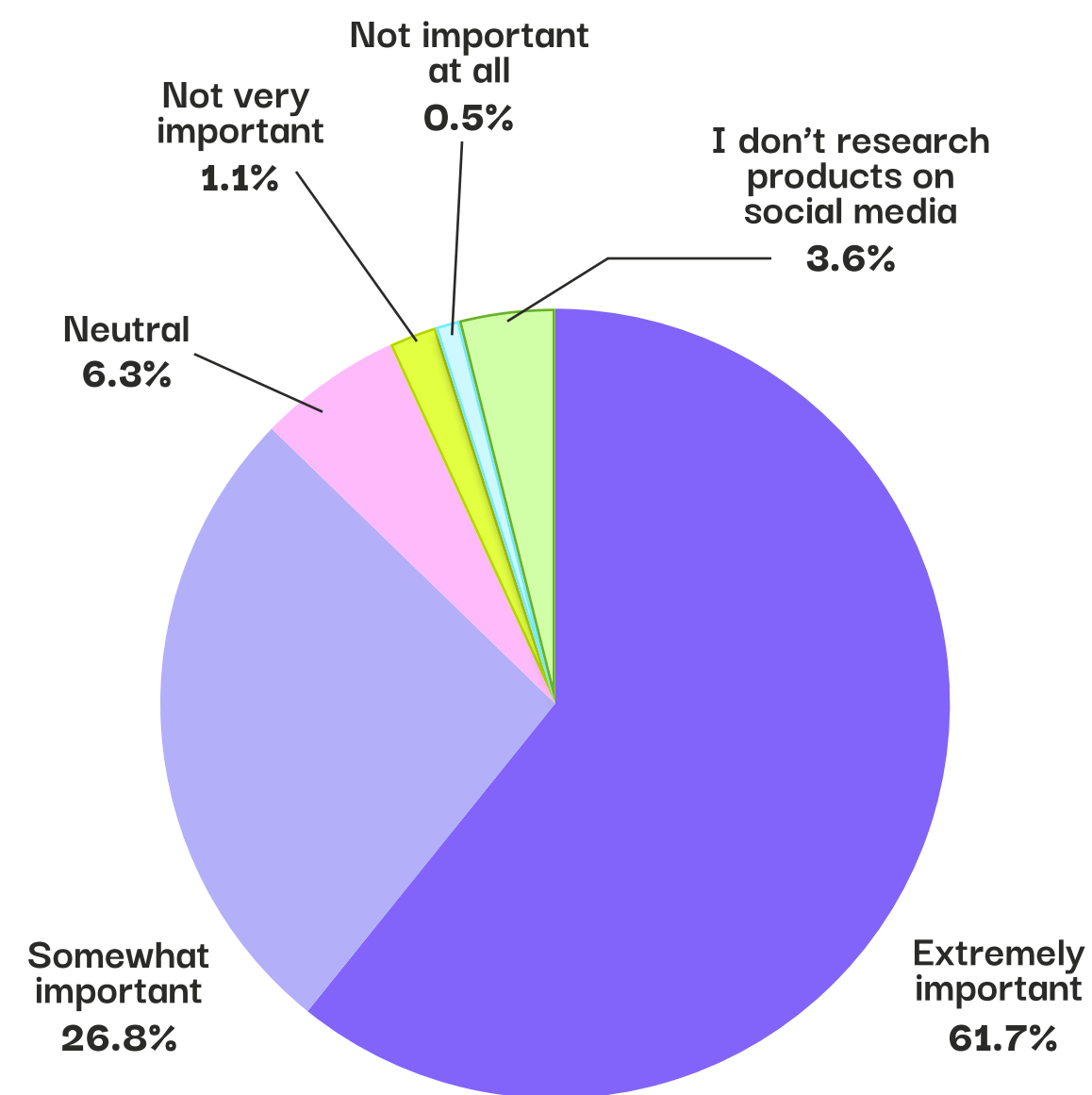| 33.2%	37%	19.1%	6.5%	4%
Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never

Nearly three-quarters of respondents look for real product experiences (photographed testimonials, try-ons, or demos) before purchasing. This positions UGC as one of the strongest trust drivers in the modern purchase journey.

© 2025 Power Digital Marketing • Source: 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report

UGC Validates, Reviews Convert

Power

When exploring products on social media, how important are positive comments or reviews?

Not important at all **0.5%**

Not very important **1.1%**

I don't research products on social media **3.6%**

Neutral **6.3%**

Extremely important **61.7%**

Somewhat important **26.8%**

© 2025 Power Digital Marketing • Source: 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report

62%

cite positive comments or reviews as their #1 trust driver.

What type of content makes you feel most connected to a brand?

59.3% Relatability / Humor

42.0% Behind-the-Scenes

40.0% Customer Testimonials

35.9% Educational

26.8% Trends

23.0% Content About Brand Values / Mission

3.8% Other

© 2025 Power Digital Marketing

Relatable, humorous, and behind-the-scenes content spark emotional connection, but **reviews and customer testimonials transform that connection into trust.**

Together, these formats signal a shift toward more transparent, humanized brand communication.

UGC = The New Middle Funnel

Social proof has moved from awareness into the decision-making phase.

It's a **performance lever**, not a passive signal.

Awareness

Validation
UGC
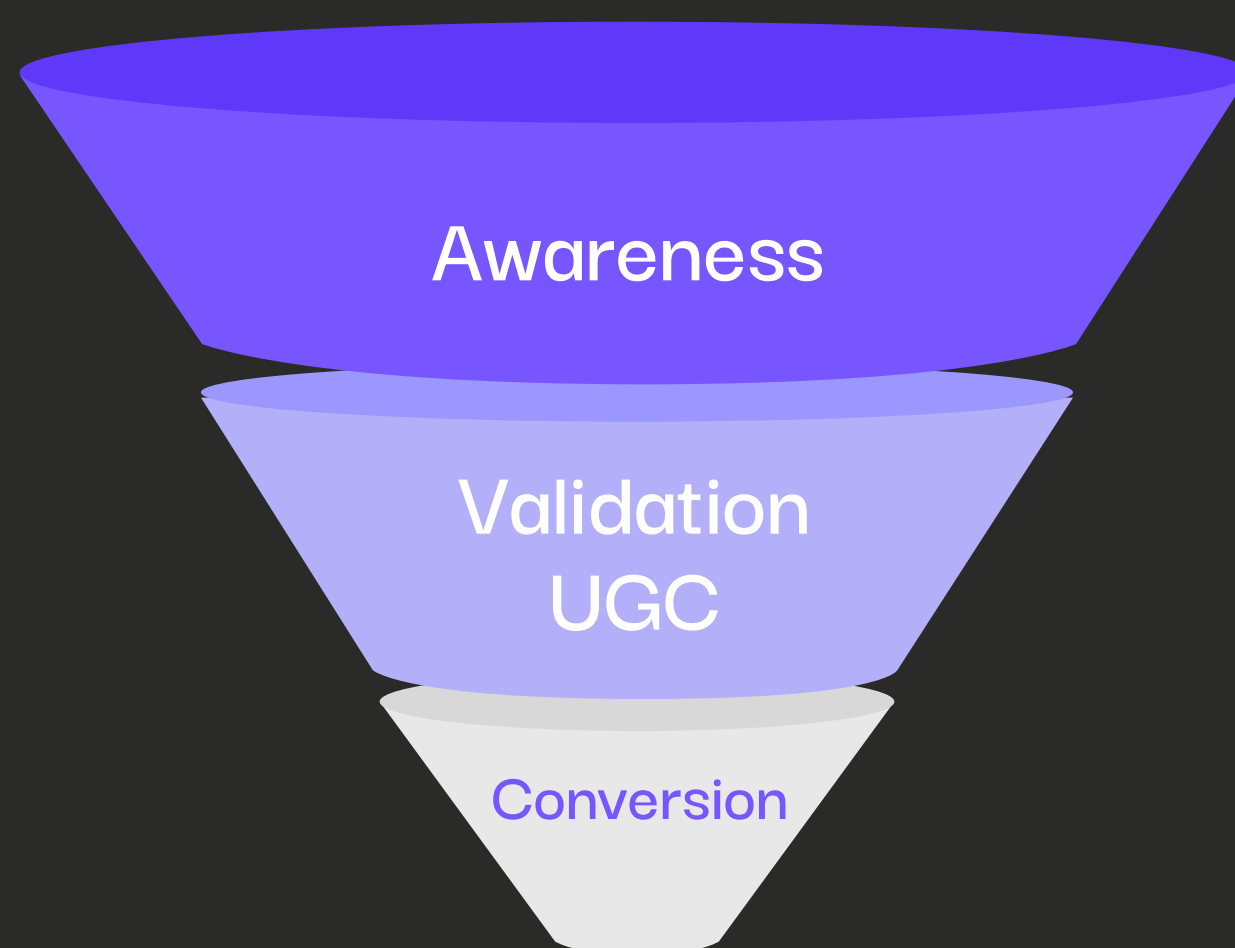
Conversion

In 2025, UGC was seen as a top-of-funnel "nice-to-have."

In 2026, it drives **direct conversion intent**, with 53% of shoppers saying they buy after 2–3 trust-building touchpoints—typically UGC, influencer posts, or reviews.

3 Report Break: Influencer Key Findings

Power Digital's benchmark data highlights the unique strengths of Influencers and creators across core categories—from fashion's unmatched click performance to wellness' top-tier engagement rates and beauty's premium impact. Across the board, creator-led campaigns continue to outperform traditional brand ads by capturing attention, building trust, and driving measurable results at scale.

Influencer Performance Trends by Category

Power Digital's benchmarks reveal clear patterns across creator categories. **Fashion leads across performance metrics**, driving nearly **5x more link clicks** than other industries, proving its strength as a lower-funnel, ROI-driving vertical. These campaigns excel with shoppable formats and direct CTAs, consistently converting attention into action.

Lifestyle/Wellness delivers the highest engagement rate (3.7%), showing that large-scale creators in this category generate strong interactions while remaining cost-efficient. Beauty also performs strongly in engagement, though its higher cost per impression reflects a more competitive and premium category. Lastly, Food & Beverage remains a reliable all-around performer, showing consistent reach, engagement, and cost efficiency.

| Category	Reach	Views	Engagement	Clicks	Engagement Rate	Cost per Impression
Beauty	3.1M	6.7M	295K	1,928	3.2%	$0.95
Food & Beverage	2.7M	3.6M	21K	977	2.65%	$0.04
Fashion	4.9M	3.9M	343K	10,658	2.7%	$0.07
Lifestyle/ Wellness	14M	15.1M	1.1M	3,788	3.7%	$0.03

Category Benchmarks
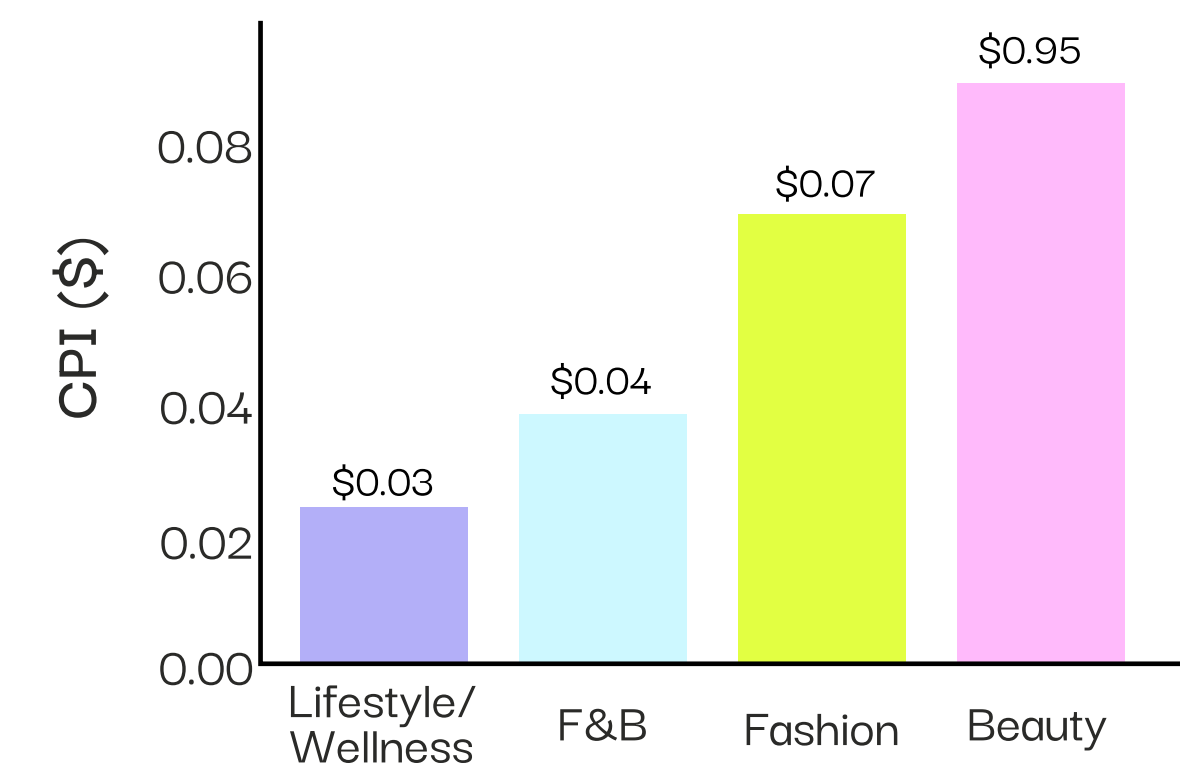
Average Clicks by Category
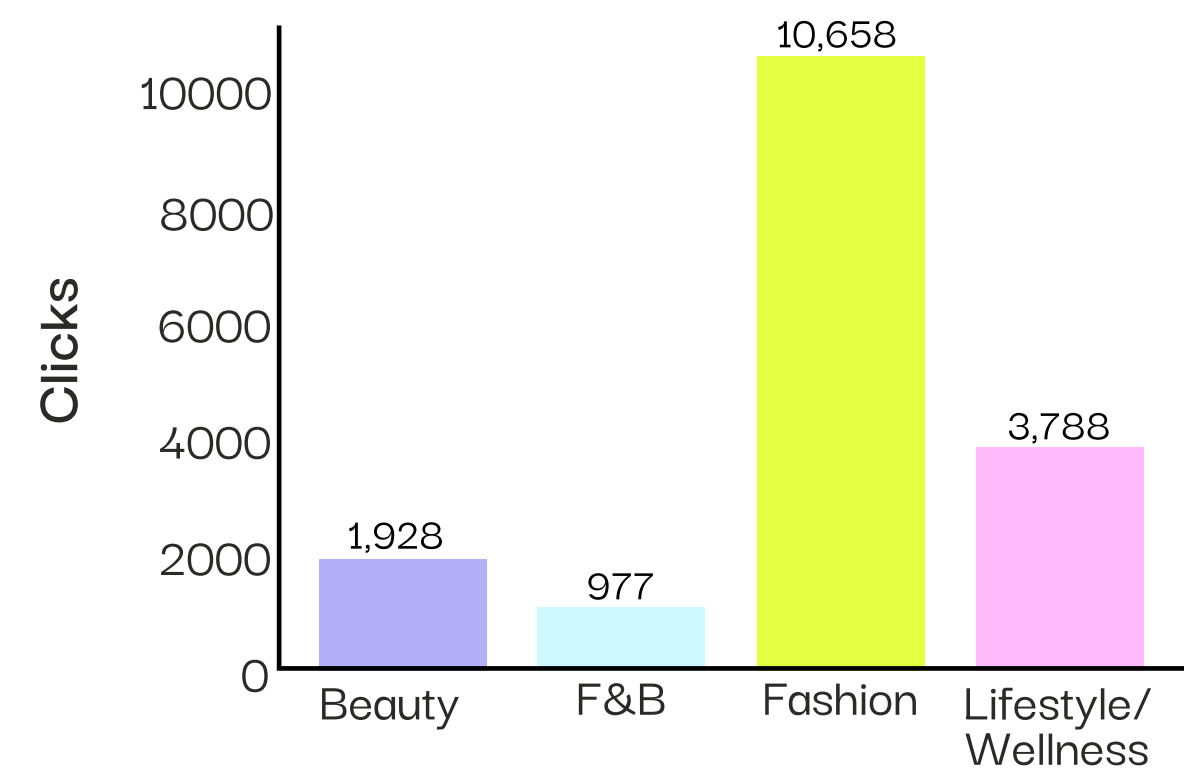
© 2025 Power Digital Marketing • Source: 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report

Average Engagement Rate by Category
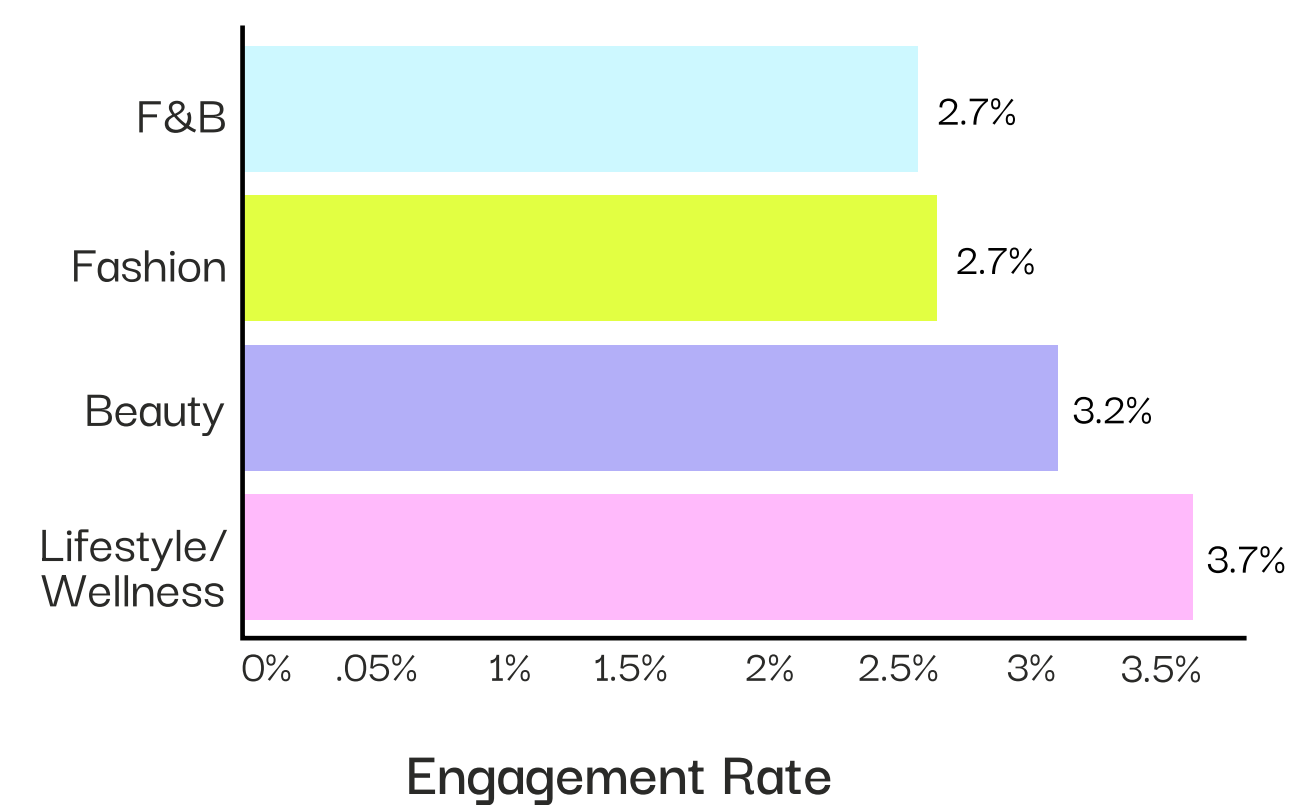
© 2025 Power Digital Marketing • Source: 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report

Cost per Impression (CPI) by Category

© 2025 Power Digital Marketing • Source: 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report

Performance Influencer Findings

Power Digital's latest benchmark analysis shows clear performance differences between influencer and brand ads on Meta. **Influencer ads drive nearly twice the click-through rate,** proving their ability to capture attention with more authentic, scroll-stopping creative.

They also deliver a 25% lower CPC: half the cost in Lifestyle, a third lower in Beauty, and a quarter lower in F&B. These gains come without sacrificing revenue performance - ROAS and AOV remain consistent with brand-led campaigns.

	CTR (Influencer)	CTR (Brand)	CPC (Influencer)	CPC (Brand)	ROAS (Influencer)	ROAS (Brand)	AOV (Influencer)	AOV (Brand)
Fashion	2.50%	1.69%	$0.65	$0.55	4.54	4.25	$96	$94
Beauty	1.17%	0.76%	$2.32	$3.17	20.60	22.73	$669	$692
Lifestyle/ Wellness	3.85%	2.02%	$0.45	$0.75	22.24	17.49	$149	$133
F&B	0.45%	0.36%	$3.32	$4.16	0.58	0.87	$85	$65
All	1.99%	1.21%	$1.69	$2.16	11.99	11.34	$250	$246

© 2025 Power Digital Marketing • Source: 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report

CTR: Influencer vs Brand
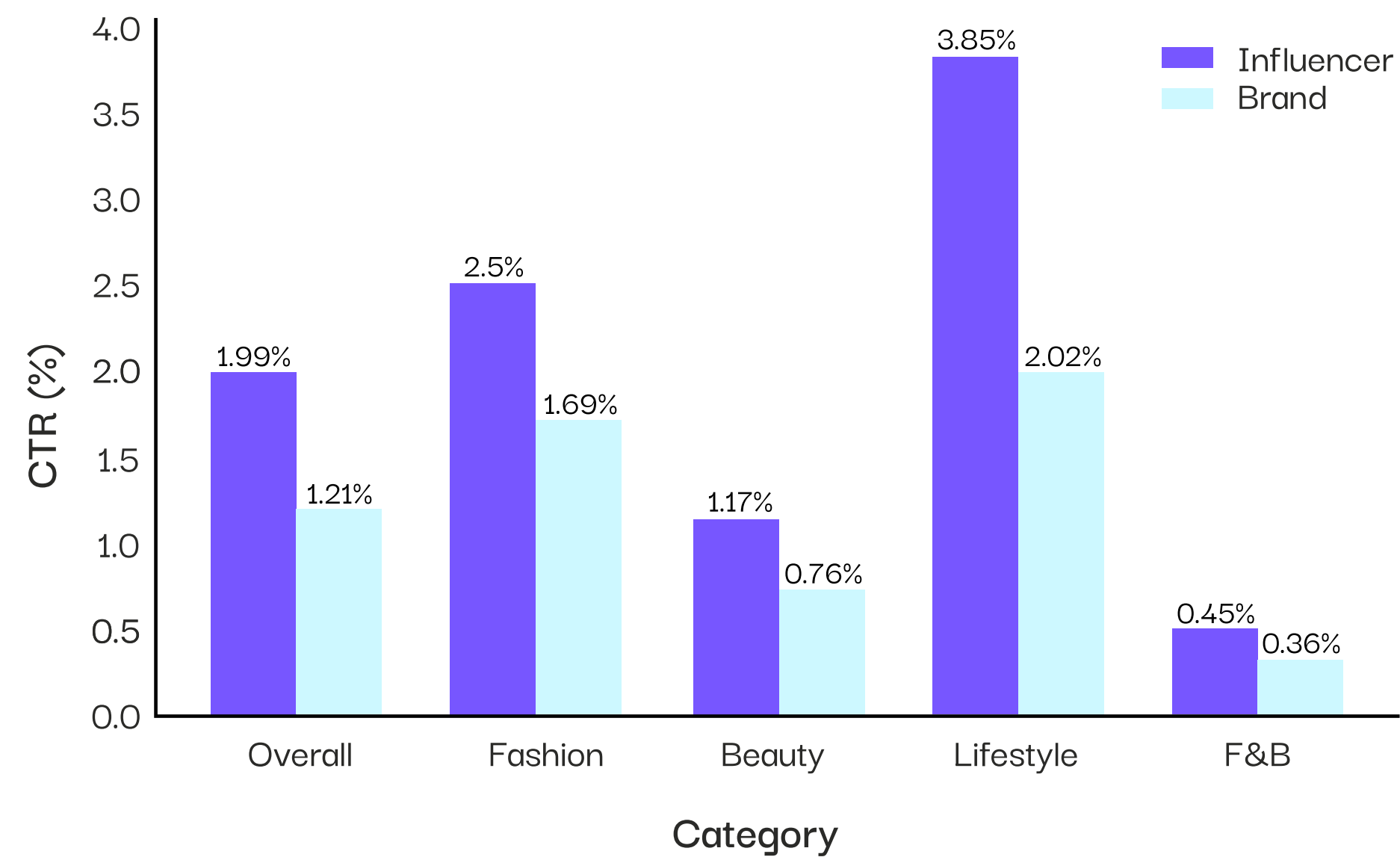
CPC: Influencer vs Brand
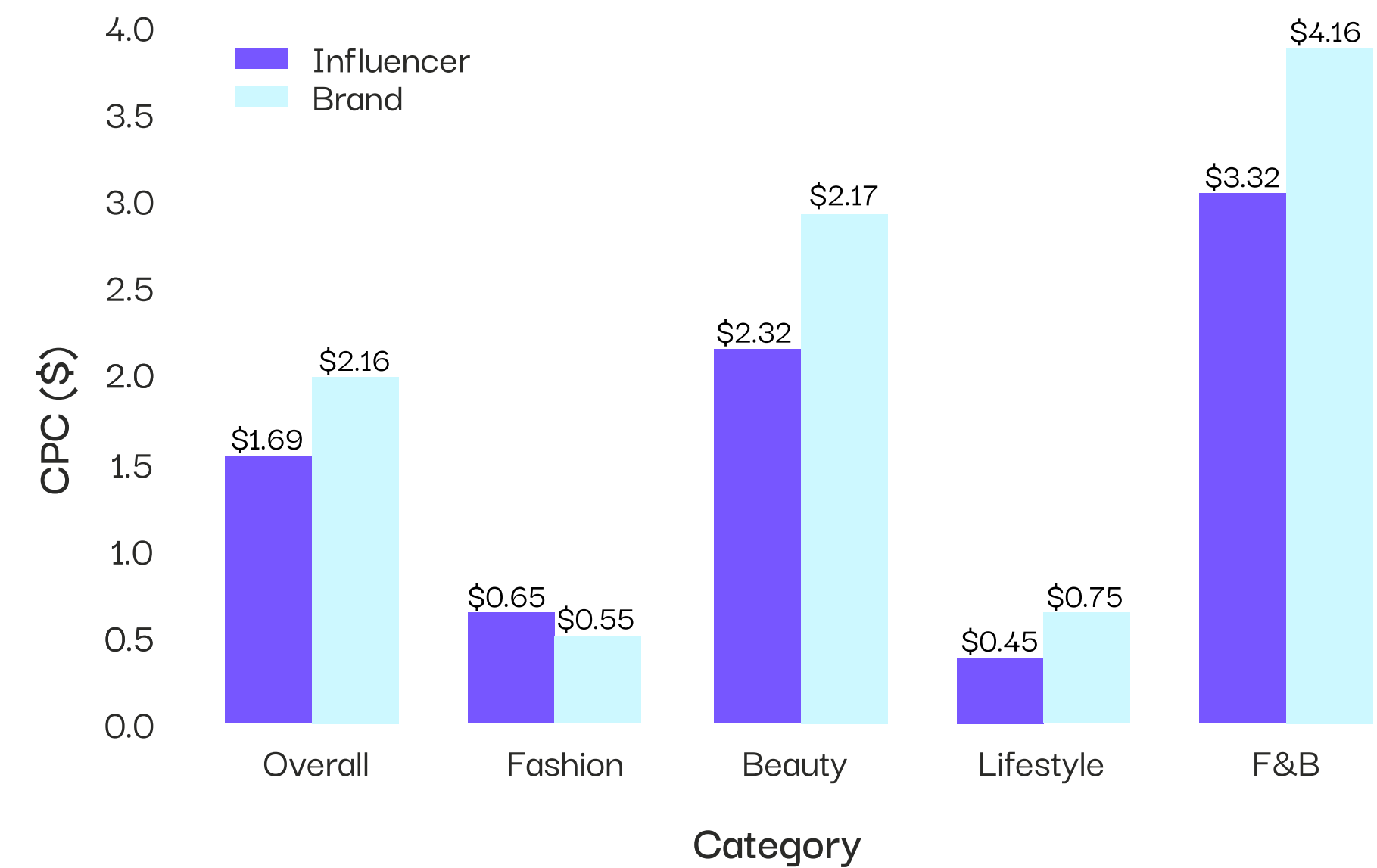
4. Community Management = Loyalty

Power

The comment section is the new checkout.

Community management has officially moved beyond customer service and templated replies. It's now one of the most visible drivers of brand trust and revenue. As social platforms evolve into active community hubs, **audiences expect responsiveness, authenticity, and connection in real time.**

Every interaction from a quick reply to a pinned testimonial shapes how consumers perceive credibility. The takeaway? Community management is no longer optional; it has become the foundation of loyalty, retention, and conversion in the modern social landscape.

76% of consumers feel more loyal to brands that reply to comments or messages.

That's up 8% compared to last year.

Real-time engagement drives real results. Your community management strategy is no longer just a form of customer support... it's a sales strategy. Treat it as such.

When a brand responds to your comment or message on social media, how does it affect your perception of the brand?

75.9% → I feel more loyal to the brand

15.7% → I feel indifferent

8.4% → I didn't know brands responded to comments/messages

© 2025 Power Digital Marketing • Source: 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report

Instagram leads brand engagement with **75%** of users interacting with brands on the platform, double that of TikTok. With DMs, Stories, and an active comment culture, it's the place where real-time connection and loyalty thrive.

But don't count TikTok out—**43%** engage with brands, and its discovery power still drives trends, purchase intent, and conversion.

Silence costs sales. Engagement builds trust.

When brands ignore comments, customers notice—and when they reply, loyalty grows.

Power

Would a notable lack of community management make you less likely to follow or purchase from a brand?

51.5% → Yes

15.1% → No

33.5% → I don't consider community management when making a purchase decision

Which social media platform is your go-to for customer service?

59.3% - Instagram

16.9% - TikTok

11.9% - Facebook

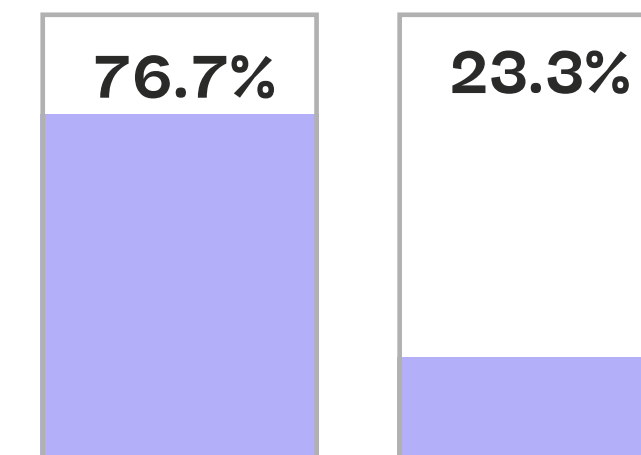**5.8%** - X

1.4% - YouTube

Social platforms continue to act as customer-service hubs, with nearly 60% using **Instagram** for support.

Do you pay attention to brands that respond or engage in the comments?

76.7% — Yes

23.3% — No

77% of users notice when brands are active in the comments.

Community isn't just a marketing channel—it's a loyalty engine.

Audiences equate responsiveness with reliability, and the brands that win in 2026 will be the ones that show up in their comments as much as they do in their ads.

5. AI Skepticism → Human-Led Authenticity

Power

Authenticity Over AI Automation

AI has transformed social media from the inside out, powering smarter targeting, faster replies, and endless creative possibilities. But while it's revolutionizing how brands operate, it's also testing the limits of authenticity and making genuine connections with audiences.

Social users are drawing a line: they value AI as a tool, not a voice. Our data shows that while AI can make brands operate efficiently, consumers still want their interactions and inspiration to feel unmistakably human. AI's sweet spot in 2026? Behind the scenes. Whenever it moves to the front lines of engagement, community trust and connection begin to erode.

63% of consumers are less likely to engage with AI-generated content.

Automation may scale your brand's reach, but the authenticity behind the post will ultimately drive users' motivation to respond. Audiences can recognize when content feels "too AI" and they scroll past accordingly—nearly **two-thirds of respondents say they're less likely to like, share, or comment on AI-generated visuals or copy**.

Would AI-generated creative impact how you engage with a brand's content?

63% → I'm less likely to engage with AI content

30% → I feel indifferent

7% → I'm more likely to engage with AI content

© 2025 Power Digital Marketing • Source: 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report

Efficiency without empathy erodes trust.

Audiences are open to AI behind the curtain, but they want humans at the forefront. This authentic element remains social media's most powerful driver of trust. As automation continues to evolve, brands that lead with **empathy, creativity**, and **genuine connection** will be the ones that earn real trust and lasting engagement in 2026.

How would AI-generated community management/customer service responses affect your opinion of the brand?

49% → I would have a negative opinion of the brand

11% → I would have a positive opinion of the brand

40% → I would be indifferent

© 2025 Power Digital Marketing • Source: 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report

Do you trust AI-generated product recommendations on social media?

58% → No, I prefer human or influencer recommendations

27% → Somewhat, I trust AI in some cases

7% → Yes, I trust AI as much as human recommendations

8% → Unsure, I wasn't aware AI is being used for this

© 2025 Power Digital Marketing • Source: 2026 State of Social Media Trends Report

AI belongs behind the scenes, not as the face of your brand.

Power's Predictions:
What's Next for 2026

6. Power's Predictions

The Future of Social: 5 Predictions Shaping 2026

Social is evolving faster than ever, and the playbook is being rewritten in real time. Power Digital's team of social strategists, as well as data collected for this survey, point to the next wave: **comment sections as conversion hubs, social search as the new SEO, and AI enhancing, but never replacing, human connection.**

Brands that move quickly, show up authentically, and keep audiences both entertained and informed will define the next chapter of social.

Power's Predictions: What's Next for 2026

2026 will be defined by **connection, credibility and culture.**

Comment sections are becoming modern-day storefronts, social search has matured into a full-funnel discovery tool, and audiences are demanding entertainment over promotion. At the same time, consumers are signaling fatigue with automation.
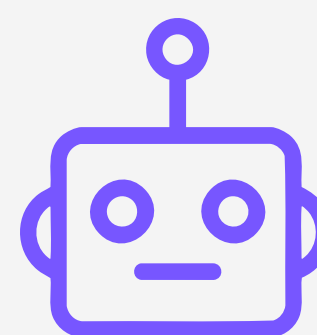
63% say they're less likely to engage with AI-generated visuals. Meanwhile, 76% say they feel more loyal when brands reply personally.

Comments are the new conversions. Replies, pins, and proof drive measurable sales impact.

Social search is the new SEO. Visibility now depends on captions, keywords, and native search optimization.

Keep AI backstage. Use it to scale, not to speak. Consumers crave human tone and empathy.

Entertain to educate. Storytelling and UGC-led content outperform overt product pushes.

Timeliness wins. Brands tied to culture and seasonality outperform those that don't evolve with the moment.

Final Thoughts

The 2026 Social Reality: Authenticity, Interaction, and Speed Drive the Scroll

Power

1. **Authenticity wins:**
Everyday creators and raw UGC outperform gloss and celebrity.

2. **Comments are commerce:**
Engagement is now a measurable sales lever.

3. **UGC = conversion catalyst:**
Proof and reviews close the loop faster.

4. **AI needs a human front:**
Use for scale, not as the social face.

5. **Speed matters:**
Multi-touch journeys and ≤1-week purchase windows define modern social buying.

Power

Ready to turn insights into impact?

Tap into the power of creators, community, and connection with Power Digital's social experts. Connect with us:

www.powerdigitalmarketing.com ↗