



# 2026

## Social Media Trends

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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01 Introduction

02 People

03 Process

04 Planet

05 Technology



# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to ICUC's 2026 Trends Report. As a global social media partner trusted by over 250 brands worldwide, we are bringing our deep insights into this report.

Given the nature of our work, we at ICUC promise to deliver informed perspectives shaped from the latest market data and recent news headlines, as well real-life applications and metrics from our clients, while keeping client confidentiality a priority.

Please note, some facts and statistics mentioned in the eBook are gathered from anonymized client data, whereas some are gained from external sources. Wherever possible, we have validated the accuracy of the information with our analysis; otherwise, we have included links to sources, where applicable.

At ICUC, our mission is to create engaged online communities for the global brands. This eBook will give you the clarity and insights you need to build or grow your brand community in 2026. If you're interested in learning more about ICUC, email us at [marketing@icuc.social](mailto:marketing@icuc.social).



# INTRODUCTION

## Why Do Social Trends Matter for Us?

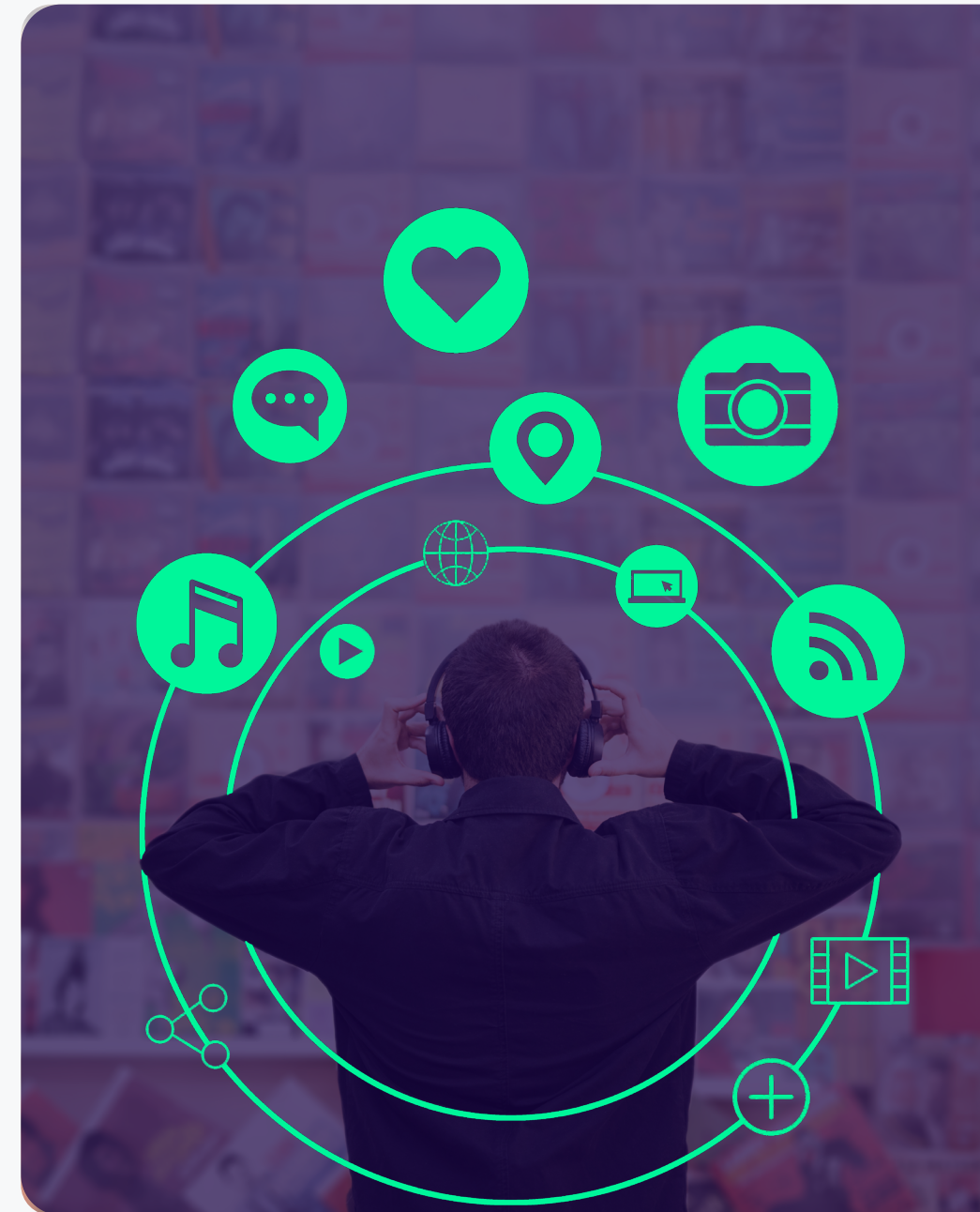
Social in 2026 is poised for continued growth and change. From emerging platforms like BlueSky growing from 10 million to 40 million users (as of November 2025), and algorithm changes shaping how people consume content on TikTok, we are advising brands to be aware of platforms changes impacting your engagement strategy

That's why global brands are currently evaluating these trends to determine their next moves.

In this eBook, we've provided case studies, strategic insights, and suggested action items to help you understand and prepare for the trends that will influence the year ahead. We've categorized each trend by impact area, so you can easily prioritize your next steps across:

- People — How to better find, engage, and retain your community.
- Process — How to listen and respond across channels with empathy and agility.
- Planet — How to empower communities that stand for more than a product.
- Technology — How to innovate responsibly and authentically.

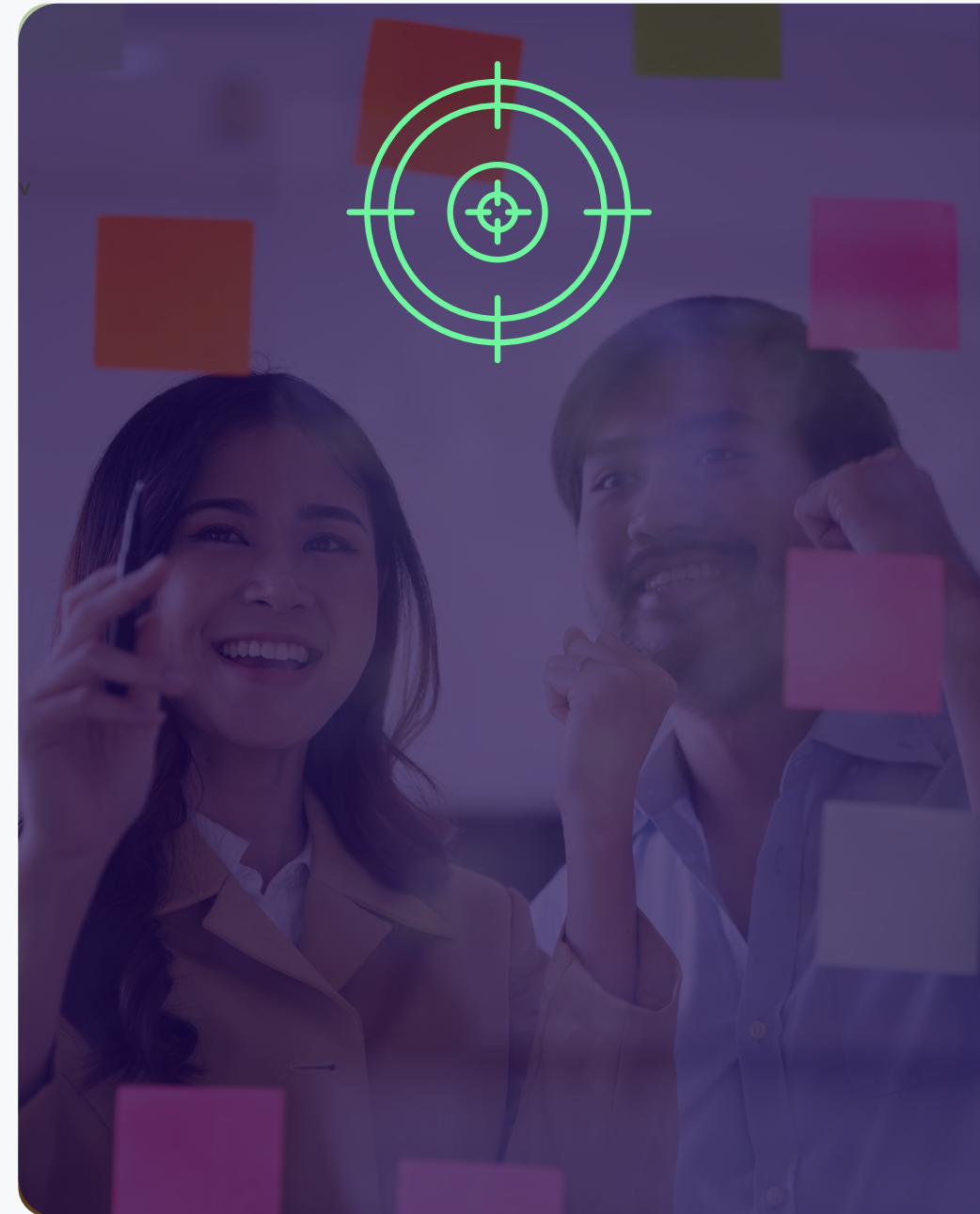
These eleven (11) mega-trends have been aggregated by ICUC's Strategy & Insights teams, and compiled with collaborators across messaging, design, and leadership into the following core messages:



# INTRODUCTION

## Key Takeaways

- Social media in 2026 is siloed, yet deeply personal. Audiences are migrating towards voices that feel safer, more authentic, and more aligned with their values.
- As platforms are flooded with AI-created content and bot-filled comment threads, vanity metrics like reach and interactions are being replaced by genuine engagement.
- Listening at scale is becoming a strategic advantage. Brands that can actively respond in real time turn everyday interactions into moments that earn loyalty and unlock virality.
- Sustainability is no longer tolerated as just a talking point. For brands that appeal to the eco-conscious and social activists, words must be backed by proof, action, and impact.
- AI and language learning models (LLMs) like ChatGPT and Perplexity are redefining how people discover new brands and make purchasing decisions.
- People, Process, Planet, and Technology serve as an effective framework to guide brands on how to stay relevant in a social landscape that evolves daily.





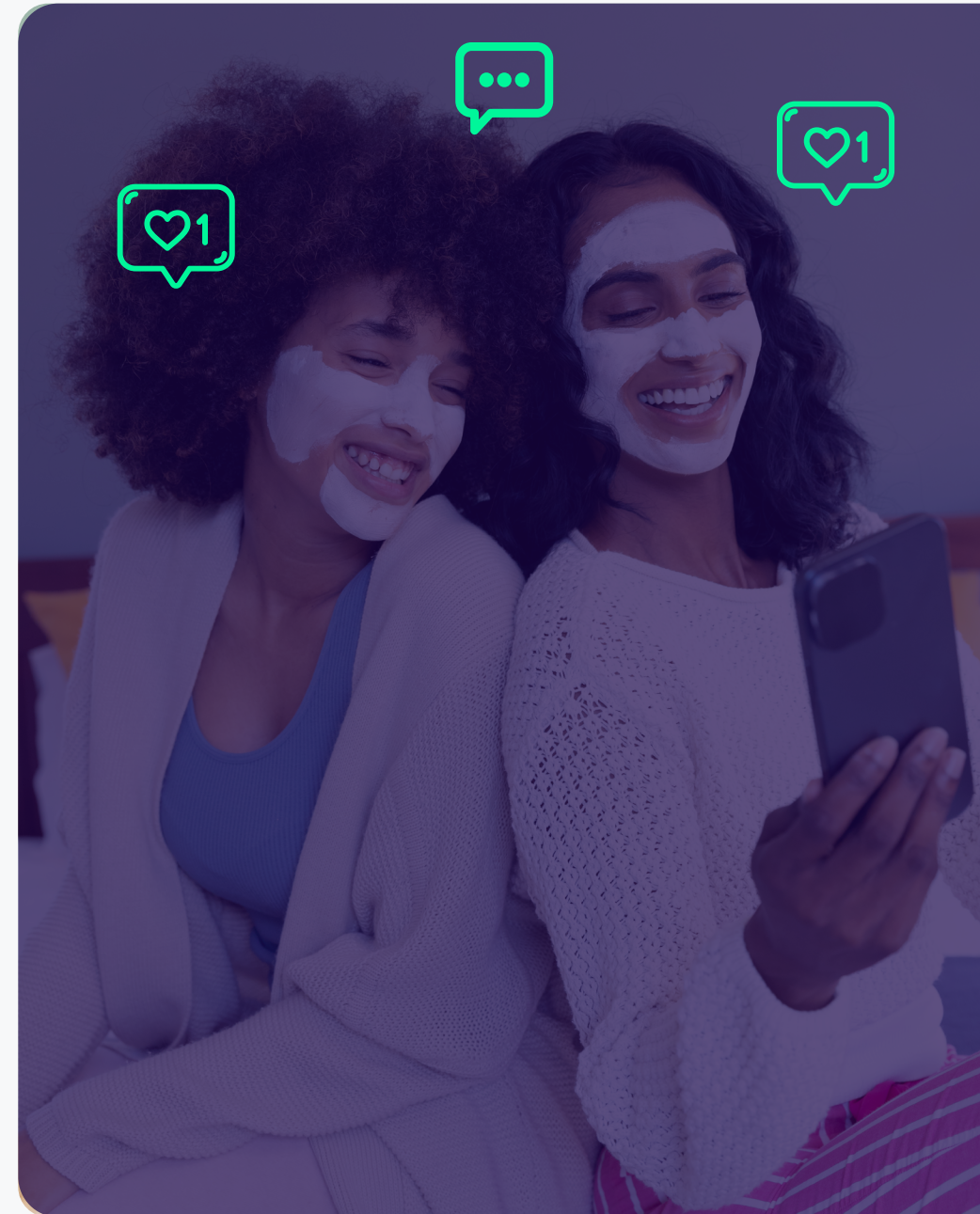
# People | How We Inspire a Community

## 1. Casual Conversations > Polished Content

Authenticity will be the greatest driver of engagement in 2026, championed by a Gen Z audience who isn't rejecting curation, but redefining it. Lo-fi edits, collaborated content, and candid photo dumps may feel simple, but are highly intentional in how they invite participation, encouragement, and belonging.

Given the recent TikTok algorithm shift, which now prioritizes search-driven discovery, niche communities, longer-form content, and higher video quality over purely viral trends, the most effective strategies for creators are to create niche content, optimize for watch time (around 75% of the video duration), and cater to search-driven intent.

ICUC data shows lo-fi content drives 1.8× to 2× more comments than polished campaign posts. What this shows us is that high-production value content reaches wider but may not resonate with an audience who prefers genuine expression and community involvement. While a highly-polished content piece may look aesthetically pleasing in a grid or feed, this type of content does not particularly inspire its viewers to comment or share. We're seeing this as especially notable in video based content, like Reels or TikTok videos.



# People | How We Inspire a Community

## 2. Taking Public Accountability

What were once considered operational issues, like hidden fees, vague policies, and inconsistent service, are now publicly broadcast to an always-on channel that thrives on regular discussion. If your brand does not (or cannot) identify negative sentiments quickly, join in on discussions, and answer to the public grievances with empathy and compassion, you're at risk of creating siloed communities dedicated to spreading negativity about your brand.



### Winning the Moment with ICUC:

After creators Mama Jill & Doll posted a disappointing plus-size Mother-of-the-Bride dress experience at Macy's, ICUC flagged it immediately and collaborated across store ops and social to rectify the situation. Within 48 hours, Macy's hosted a [private styling session](#) at Herald Square including private car service and dedicated support. The result: The follow-up TikTok earned 800 K+ views and transformed a negative moment into authentic advocacy. Doll now organically recommends Macy's when followers ask for dress suggestions.



3. Follower Counts Now Counting for Less

Popular influencers have traditionally built communities around aspirational goals. Moving into 2026, 1M+ influencers still have the potential to reach a larger crowd, but today’s audiences are demonstrably less interested in follower count and more interested in creators who genuinely reflect their community’s values.

Aspirational Marketing

If you do “X, you’ll achieve “Y.”

vs.

Identity-Driven Marketing (Trending)

If you do “X”, you’ll be “Y”.

How Does Your Audience Define Success?

Success for today’s audiences is less about what they have, and more about who they are. Alignment to a certain identity leads to greater satisfaction than obtaining a tangible outcome. How can your product be a core tool in the toolbox of your customer’s identity?

Callie Thorpe

Callie Thorpe × ARRANGE collaboration:

Callie’s purpose-driven, plus-size travel/food lifestyle makes self-love feel every day and inclusive, and her warm “you belong” storytelling naturally lifts the brand.  
[\(learn more\)](#)

BOTTEGA VENETA

Bottega Veneta’s Craft Is Our Language:

This luxury brand set out to prove that craft, care, and connection speaks louder than logos. By placing subtly branded advertisements of popular creators like Tyler, the Creator and Zadie Smith across New York City, Bottega Veneta attempted to combat luxury fatigue.  
[\(learn more\)](#)



# People | How We Inspire a Community

## Strategic Takeaways



### Design for connection over curation.

Audiences reveal what matters through the formats they use. Authenticity outperforms perfection.



### Prioritize participation, not attention.

Brands like Chipotle thrive by posting memes and quick-cut humor that feel co-created with audiences. The payoff: engagement that feels earned, not engineered.



### Treat moderation as strategy.

Trust, safety, and belonging are signals of brand health. When Bollywood actor Shraddha Kapoor's LinkedIn was mistakenly flagged as fake, ICUC's monitoring team surfaced and resolved it within an hour—turning a potential crisis into [public proof of trust](#).

## Process | How We Build Efficiently

### 4. Becoming Leaders in Listening

As of October 2025, there are approximately 5.66 billion social media users worldwide, representing about 68.7% of the global population. Analyzing traffic across such a vast network requires specialized tools like social listening software, which can track any mention of your brand in any language or context, and flag potential opportunities or emerging crises.

By tracking social media conversations at a large scale, brands can identify recurring pain points, escalate to leaders, and create a bottom-up engine for problem-solving. 24/7 social listening tools allow for worldwide monitoring in 52+ languages, for culture specific insights that lead to global impact.



**5.66 billion**

**social media users worldwide**

**68.7%**

**of the global population**



## Process | How We Build Efficiently

### 5. Turning Moderation into Momentum

Brands that can analyze every mention for intent and urgency, then direct to the resolution pathways are taking every opportunity to provide stronger customer care, generate better operational intelligence, and develop more valuable customer relationships.

When it comes to conversations about discrimination, harassment, or poor service, silence is regarded as complicity. Audiences expect brands to quickly identify potentially harmful language in their online spaces and act, by either moderating the discussion or taking public action to rectify the situation. If left unchecked, discussions may escalate to crisis-level events that garner unwanted attention.

### 6. Closing the Optimization Loop

To discover ways to improve the ROI of the community, brands are measuring and reporting key metrics that create a continuous learning feedback loop. The goal of community management is to both strengthen brand trust and operational excellence, so brands that can track response times, resolution rates, and improvements made will continuously justify the costs.



#### Duolingo: Turning Feedback into Fandom

Duolingo transformed criticism of its persistent mascot, Duo the Owl, into a cultural moment. By [“killing off”](#) Duo on social and inviting users to share their mock-hatred, the brand reframed complaint into brand evolution, proving that listening to your audience can become an opportunity for entertainment and viral exposure.



#### Maggiano's: Listening that Drives Menu Innovation

Through always-on moderation, ICUC identified growing frustration over the discontinued “original meat sauce.” After escalation, Maggiano's reinstated the fan fav with a [“Meat Sauce is Back”](#) announcement — transforming customer frustration into brand advocacy and measurable sales uplift.



# Process | How We Build Efficiently

## Strategic Takeaways



### Operationalize your listening.

Create workflows that route insights to the right departments — CX, Ops, Legal, and Product — within hours, not weeks.



### Close the loop publicly.

Customers want to see proof, not promises. Show receipts when an issue is resolved.



### Benchmark empathy.

Measure tone, speed, and sentiment change after responses — because responsiveness without empathy is just noise.



### Elevate moderation to strategy.

Social moderation isn't community management; it's risk intelligence, reputation insurance, and brand trust-building at scale.

# Process | How We Build Efficiently

## 7. Generating Joy with Impact Storytelling

There are 12.97 million mentions annually around sustainability topics. And notably, two million of those are joy-driven—[celebrating buying less](#), [reusing more](#), and [doing it together](#). Each small story becomes a “micro-trigger” for community optimism, and comments pile up with encouragement, useful tips, and healthy debate about trade-offs

Creators like Sam Bentley show how impact storytelling builds trust. His [explainer](#) on Releaf Paper—turning fallen leaves into packaging—sparked useful conversation and shared enthusiasm.





## 8. Promising Sustainability as a Value Driver

In 2025, fast-fashion giant SHEIN not only faced [environmental sanctions](#) for false and confusing claims about their efforts to be environmentally “green”, but they also faced a [viral boycott](#) spreading across social media. What this demonstrates is that audiences are holding brands accountable for their sustainability claims, and they are asking for proof.

Moreover, audiences see environmental and social impact as equal measures of brand performance, alongside quality, innovation, and customer experience. As social media conversations influence online purchasing decisions, sustainability will continue to play a key factor in that discussion.



### Case Study

## patagonia®

As an advocate for the “buy less” movement, Patagonia stayed true to their sustainability commitment with the “Don’t Buy This Jacket” campaign. The campaign included Patagonia publishing real product impact data and expanding their Worn Wear line of trade-in and resell products. To date, Worn Wear has inspired communities across Reddit, YouTube, and Facebook dedicated to helping people make more impactful purchasing decisions.





# Planet | How We Stand for More

## Strategic Takeaways



### Invite the next small step.

Find the right conversations about sustainability and take the opportunities to celebrate.



### Prove impact.

Publish data, show progress, and make sustainability measurable. Transparency builds equity.



### Empower shared responsibility.

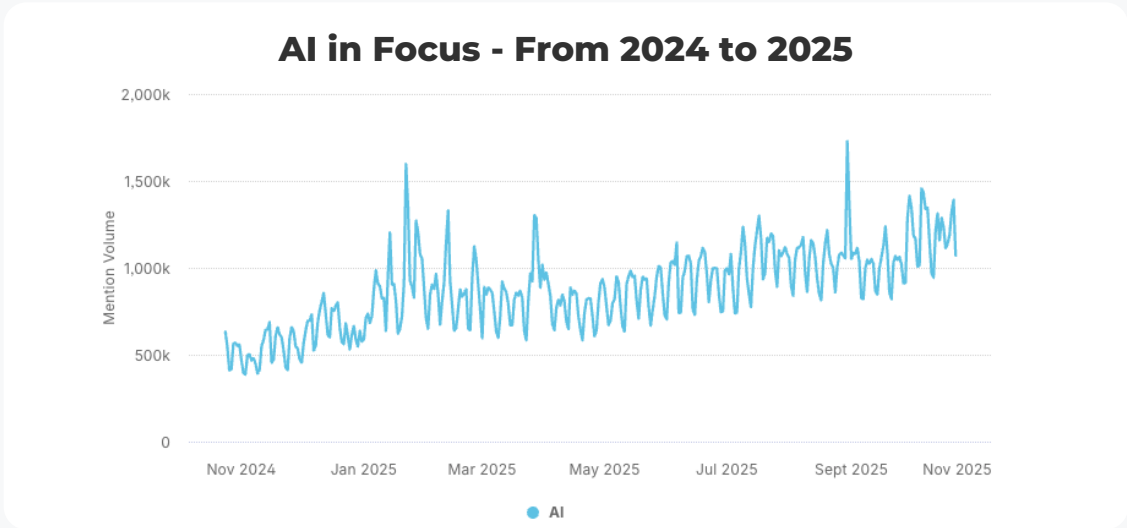
Collaborate with communities to turn intention into action.

## 9. Gathering Artificial Intelligence as a Community

69% of U.S. GenAI users now interact with AI through everyday platforms, like ChatGPT, Claude, and Perplexity. Although still cautious about accuracy, bias, privacy, and the loss of human touch, people still trust LLMs for recommendations and support, including legal, medical, and academic advice.

Audiences are turning to LLMs because when compared to traditional search engines like Google, they offer a more personalized search experience.

Regardless of the pros and cons of AI, there is a community building around artificial intelligence at a rapid pace, and brands can take the opportunity to join the conversation in an authentic way.



# Technology | How We Innovate Responsibly

## 10. Detecting Micro-Trends Early and Often

AI-powered social listening enables brands to quickly spot cultural shifts and be among the first to capitalize on trending interests. For example, when a viral travel destination in California, [Carmel-by-the-Sea](#), surfaced in Creator Search insights, the ICUC Insights team helped creators produce high-performing campaigns on TikTok.

## 11. Building Credibility One Moment at a Time

Can personalization still feel personal when AI is used? That is the million-dollar question for brands, especially for social media commerce brands operating on TikTok Shop or Amazon, and for virtual influencers blurring the line between creator and business. Being transparent about when and how AI is used, while keeping humans in the feedback loop, helps brands drive personalized experiences that still feel personal.

Partnerships like [L'Oréal × NVIDIA](#) demonstrate how AI can enhance creativity and sustainability—using generative AI to create personalized beauty experiences while keeping human oversight central.





# Technology | How We Innovate Responsibly

## Strategic Takeaways



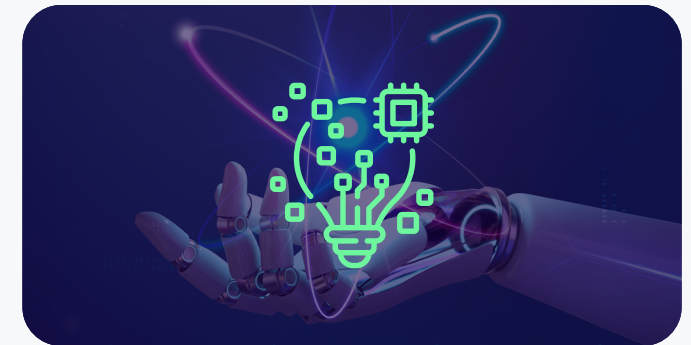
### Make AI the engine of discovery.

By monitoring TikTok's Creator Search and other directories, use AI to surface content themes and capitalize on trends before they peak.



### Lead with transparency.

Disclose how AI is used and show proof of human oversight.



### Design for responsible innovation.

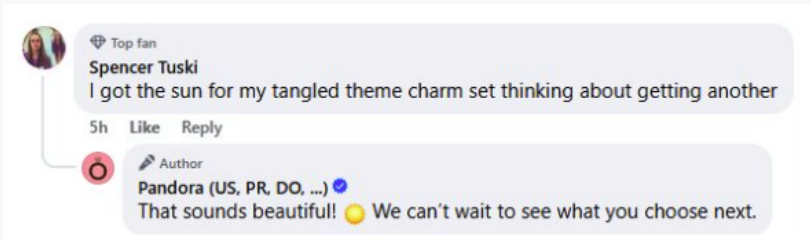
Don't be afraid to innovate, as long as it authentically serves your community.



# Technology | How We Innovate Responsibly

## Engagement Highlights

Building Trust at Scale: These exchanges illustrate when human tone meets technological precision, trust scales. When AI-enabled moderation surfaces these moments and human teams respond in real time with empathy, brands build credibility one conversation at a time—exactly the trust dynamic defining 2026.



# CONCLUSION

## **In 2026, the brands that thrive on social aren't the loudest — they're the most attentive.**

In 2026, brands that thrive on social aren't the loudest—they're the most attentive and authentic. Across the pillars of People, Process, Planet, and Technology, listening and responding with empathy must be at the core for your brand's communities. Every post, comment, and reply is an opportunity to prove empathy, agility, and accountability in real time.

As social platforms silo and audiences gravitate toward spaces that reflect their values, community moderation is no longer a reactive function—it's a strategic differentiator. Moderation at scale feeds strategic decision-making that can both mitigate risks and lead to new opportunities for your leadership team.

Furthermore, sustainability will continue to drive conversations on brand loyalty, serving as a key pillar alongside quality, innovation, and customer experience. Brands that can prove impact will build equity through transparency.

And finally, artificial intelligence and LLMs push the boundary of authenticity, and force brands to examine what constitutes as a personal experience for their audiences. In a digital ecosystem that rewrites itself on a daily basis, the most relevant brands are those that listen deeply, act decisively, and show up human.

At ICUC, we help brands do exactly that—combining 24/7 human moderation, real-time social listening, and AI-powered insight to protect reputation, uncover opportunity, and build trust that lasts. Visit [icuc.social](https://icuc.social) to see how we help global brands lead with relevance in 2026 and beyond.

**Book a Free Consultation**

# YOUR 2026 ACTION LIST:

## People

Design for connection over curation. Audiences reveal what matters through the formats they use. Authenticity outperforms perfection.	
Prioritize participation, not attention. Brands like Chipotle thrive by posting memes and quick-cut humor that feel co-created with audiences. The payoff: engagement that feels earned, not engineered.	
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## Process

Operationalize your listening. Create workflows that route insights to the right departments — CX, Ops, Legal, and Product — within hours, not weeks.	
Close the loop publicly. Customers want to see proof, not promises. Show receipts when an issue is resolved.	
Benchmark empathy. Measure tone, speed, and sentiment change after responses — because responsiveness without empathy is just noise.	
Elevate moderation to strategy. Social moderation isn’t community management; it’s risk intelligence, reputation insurance, and brand trust-building at scale.	

# YOUR 2026 ACTION LIST:

## Planet

Invite the next small step. Find the right conversations about sustainability and take the opportunities to celebrate.	
Prove impact. Publish data, show progress, and make sustainability measurable. Transparency builds equity.	
Empower shared responsibility. Collaborate with communities to turn intention into action.	

## Technology

Make AI the engine of discovery. By monitoring TikTok’s Creator Search and other directories, use AI to surface content themes and capitalize on trends before they peak.	
Lead with transparency. Disclose how AI is used and show proof of human oversight.	
Design for responsible innovation. Don’t be afraid to innovate, as long as authentically serves your community.	