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## **Content is King for Boosting Organic Social Engagement**

If your brand has experienced a drop in organic traffic and engagement on social media recently, you're not alone. Rival IQ's [Social Media Benchmark Report](#) for 2023 found that average engagement rates are declining across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Organic social has, in general, been trending downwards for years in terms of both traffic and engagement, so this in itself is nothing new. But there's one notable exception in this latest review – TikTok. Among all industries, the average engagement rate for Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter never tops 0.47% and, while Instagram took a 30% dip year on year and Facebook and Twitter remained flat, TikTok's engagement rate came in at a whopping 5.69%.

TikTok has clearly disrupted the way social media works. Casey Newton, the founder of tech blog [Performer](#), writes: 'At first, social networks showed you stuff your friends thought was interesting – the Facebook model. Then they started showing you stuff based on the people that you chose to follow, whether you were friends or not – the Twitter model. TikTok's innovation was to show you stuff using only algorithmic predictions, regardless of who your friends are or who you followed'.

Brands are flocking to TikTok in their droves, and TikTok-like formats on other platforms (Instagram reels, for example) have dethroned other formats (such as carousels) for the title of most engaging post-type elsewhere. But with Instagram's user base continuing to increase, brands can't afford to ignore other social channels completely. Instead, it's worth taking note of what it is that gives TikTok the edge when it comes to organic engagement, and developing a social media strategy that reflects the type of social content with which audiences are engaging.

It could be argued that TikTok is not actually a social network at all, but a content discovery platform at heart, and the success of the TikTok model indicates a shift in the way consumers are using social media – with content overtaking communities as a driver for engagement.

The easiest way to boost reach and engagement on social channels is to increase your paid social budget, but relying on growth from social media advertising is like renting an audience. Organic social is the foundation on which social media strategy relies. Buying reach and engagement will only get you the numbers, but a consistent and creative social media strategy with content tailored specifically to the platform and audience are what's required to build brands, relationship, and trust.

With this in mind, here are some of our top tips for getting your organic social right:

- 1. Tailor your creative to each channel, and make the most of all the different formats available.** Never take a one-size-fits-all approach. Consider the demographics of each platform and focus on those that make the most sense for your audience. For example, if you plan to reach a younger audience, learn TikTok hashtag challenges, Snapchat Filters, and Instagram reels, and make sure you're using tools like geotags and shopping tags where appropriate to maximise performance.
- 2. Explore new social media channels.** Don't discount TikTok as a platform just for Gen Z (consider Mumtok, Booktok, or Cooktok) or not the right fit for your creative. As the report highlights above, it is the only channel where engagement rates are currently rising so it is worth investing in creative that works for the channel.
- 3. Leverage relationships with social media influencers and ambassadors.** Influencer content generally has the potential to get higher organic engagement than content shared from brand accounts, and there's a higher level of trust.

With ad budgets down, and a new TikTok-shaped player on the block, competition for organic reach is up. To stay on top, the best brands will be the ones with the most creative content strategies in place – ensuring they reach the most relevant audiences with the type of content they enjoy consuming.





## The Next Big Thing

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The Metaverse (singular, like the Internet) is defined as a persistent and interconnected network of 3D virtual worlds that will eventually serve as the gateway to most online experiences. It has been the hottest topic in the tech industry for the past two years, seen as the future of computing and the successor to the mobile internet.

However, the Metaverse buzz has faded in recent months, with Google Trends data showing that search activity for the term has now dropped back to roughly where it was before the hype train accelerated in 2021.

There are several reasons behind the stalling of this vision which expose the challenges of making it happen in reality.

Firstly, it is fair to say that generative AI such as OpenAI's ChatGPT has stolen the Metaverse's thunder. The technology is set to have a sprawling impact on our lives, and even Meta says AI applications will be a key priority in 2023.

Secondly, the sheer enormity of the challenge of creating the Metaverse is daunting. The computing power required to allow millions of people access to a hyper-realistic, persistent 3D world is some years away due to limitations in bandwidth and processing capability.

Thirdly, the Metaverse's hype became self-defeating. It attracted snake-oil salesmen selling branded experiences in spaces like Decentraland with just a handful of visitors, while others re-defined spaces like Roblox and Fortnite as 'the Metaverse' when in reality they were talking about gaming.

Fourthly, many people lumped the Metaverse in with the decentralised vision of 'Web3', tied to such tech as cryptocurrency and NFTs, which have seen their own hype bubbles burst.

Finally, there are no current killer apps for the Metaverse, as nothing can be done in today's proto-metaverses that can be considered transformative.

However, fading interest in a decelerating tech category isn't proof that it's destined to fade away forever. The decades-old field of AI is famous for going through multiple 'winters' when pessimism reigned. The Metaverse could bounce back when the technology finally catches up with its vision.

The arc of technology has always bent toward more immersive, interactive modes of computing; and computing power is increasing exponentially. So, it's only natural to assume we're heading for something that delivers on this promise. It just might look very different from what Zuckerberg and others had in mind and may take decades to achieve.

Time to re-focus on what's in front of us in the present.





## Exciting and Future-Facing Times for OOH

It's been a positive start to 2023 for the OOH sector with JCDecaux recently sharing that they are predicting around **2.5% organic revenue growth in Q1** this year. Recent market projections also suggest further OOH growth levels of around 7-8% in 2023 as a whole. OOH continues to lead the way as one of the most highly trusted media for brands to adopt. As Justin Gibbons astutely confirmed recently in his book: *The Brand Gap*, 'You can't tell lies in public.' It remains a truly broadcast medium with media owners continuing to invest heavily in exciting new DOOH infrastructure, leading to nearly 70% of all OOH revenue being invested into DOOH by brands in 2022.

Media owners continue to invest in CapEx with Clear Channel continuing their focus and rollout of their flagship Adshel and Billboard Live propositions, while Ocean debuts an exciting new D6 Loop network at Battersea Power Station. JCDecaux also invested heavily in exciting new rail screens and has announced the newly revamped Euston Motion screen. At over 60m long, this will become the largest indoor screen in Europe, once live, later this year.

With this huge investment in premium DOOH infrastructure, it was great to see Ocean present their latest Neuroscience market research this week, at the aptly chosen 'Frameless' art installation venue in London. Building upon a decade of research quantifying the effects of premium DOOH on brand building, relevance, and emotional intensity, their latest installation showcases the role of DOOH in optimising the use of social media. 'DOOH: The Vital Ingredient' showed us that using socially amplified DOOH changes how your brand is perceived and can drive huge emotional engagement, attention, and brand connection.

OOH has been under a critical spotlight lately overpower consumption from digital screens. However, let's remember that three of the four largest media owner screens are now powered by 100% renewable energy. Indeed, the sector has made huge strides in recent years throughout the entire supply chain. Initiatives range from recycled paper, and the use of electric vehicles or zero carbon vans, to carbon offsetting, along with the renewable energy DOOH screens.

A recent showcase of Clear Channel's latest market piece 'The R Word' rightfully focused on 'Responsibility' within their strategy, reminding us that 50% of the OOH industry revenue gets invested back into local authorities (Source: PWC). This money contributes to funding the development of public infrastructure, sustainable transport networks, and the wider economy itself. Clear Channel embrace this commitment and also announced further rollouts of their Living Roofs, which they affectionally nickname 'Bee Bus Stops'. These have been designed to support native biodiversity, help create healthier local communities, and bring greenery back into urban areas. It's brilliant to see everyone in the sector playing their part in ensuring OOH remains the sustainable, future-facing broadcast channel it is.





## Cultural Codes

With the turn of each new year come three certainties: the scramble to book annual leave before your co-workers nab the best spots, the self-promise to live a happier life, and a rush to identify the biggest media trends of the year ahead.

But just as New Year's Resolutions fall by the wayside, so cultural trends fluctuate. Often, by the time a trend is identified, it has evolved into something new.

While we recognise that how people will respond to each emerging socio-economic situation is difficult to predict, we can anticipate events, and track cultural signals that will shape the year ahead.

Embracing this challenge, we have developed our Cultural Codes framework. Using a combination of semiotics analysis and consumer data, we will identify the themes that shape societal shifts in the way that people feel and behave. Ultimately, the framework reveals how they consume, both in the mainstream and leading edge.

Once a cultural code has been identified, it will be plugged into our social and web data monitoring platform, the Cultural Insight Engine, allowing us to surface insights in real-time and track them at both a macro and micro level.

So far in 2023, we have identified nine such cultural codes which are shaping consumer mindsets: Collectivism, Nouveau Nostalgia, Hybrid Hype, Anti-Mentality, Edit Create Copy, Ephemeral Experimentation, Ripple Effect, Cycle of Love, and Predictable Unpredictability. In particular, the latter two hold relevance amongst younger audiences.

**Predictable unpredictability** highlights Gen Z's rebellion against toxic positivity. With the successive crises of Covid lockdowns, climate change, and the cost of living having proliferated for much of their lives, Gen Z would be forgiven for lacking optimism. But rather than succumbing to the 'permacrisis', this generation looks to satirise it through fashion trends such as #avantapocalypse. Further, four in five say they actively seek out content that reflects both the highs and lows of life.

**Cycle of love** mirrors how Gen Z are acutely aware of their purchases' impact on the planet and place cyclical values at the forefront of their thinking. For two-thirds of 16-24s, it's no longer enough for brands to simply tell of their sustainability credentials – this generation wants to see them in action. Reflecting this, some brands have taken purpose-led approaches to their marketing. Rubicon created a special build in the heart of London made entirely from recycled cans, whilst H&M also sought to improvise with sustainable OOH – by turning their posters into shoppable tote bags.

Understanding how these codes develop and influence each other will be crucial to making sense of the emerging cultural landscape and explaining sentiment during key events throughout the year. But this work is far from static, and we expect some codes to grow or diminish in importance as new trends emerge.

If recent years have taught us anything, it's the impossibility of fully predicting the year ahead by the time spring has sprung – just ask your March 2020 self how they expected the rest of that year to go.

But, short of inventing the crystal ball, developing this cultural framework, and tracking codes as the landscape progresses, offers our best chance to harness relevant insights for our audiences. By recognising and understanding these codes, brands can build positive relationships beyond their product and maintain relevance – even in unpredictable times.





## What #LinekerGate Could Mean for Brands

It's not every week that an ex-footballer becomes the hot topic of debate in Parliament, but the recent Gary Lineker debacle achieved just that. Having tweeted critically of the Government's new, tougher refugee policy, including a controversial comparison to 1930s Germany, the legendary centre forward found himself at the forefront of a different kind of attack – one which reinvigorated discussion over whether those in influential positions should be able to speak their views freely.

Much of the debate explores whether the BBC's famously stringent impartiality rules are fit for purpose in our social media age. But the implications are broader. While Lineker appears to have come through the incident relatively unscathed – one commentary-less episode of Match of the Day aside – the debate, around what brands and their associated personalities can or cannot say, appears set to rage on.

Overall, most Brits don't mind public figures taking political stances on their social profiles. A survey by the7stars Pulse found that over two-thirds of Brits say it is important that celebrities are given the freedom to speak about their views – rising to 77% among 35-44s.

But what about those figures who are closely associated with a brand? Lineker is a fitting example of this, having been the public face of Walkers Crisps for almost three decades. When Lineker expresses a political stance, should Walkers be concerned about the impact?

On this question, Brits are more divided. 39% of adults think brands are responsible for the words and actions of their associated celebrities, while 30% disagree. Yet, among Gen Z – the generation who, more than any other, have grown accustomed to the debate over cancel culture – over half believe brands are responsible for the conduct of those who represent them.

Indeed, there have been several prominent examples recently – from Ye to [Elle Darby](#) – of brands dropping partnerships with influencers as a result of highly controversial social media posts. But most of these examples referenced discriminatory comments. In Lineker's case, an impassioned – yet controversial – rebuttal of Government policy sits in a murky grey area of the public conscience.

Further complicating the situation for brands is what stances to take, and when to stay silent, on their owned social channels. For Coca-Cola, this has been an oft-fraught decision. In 2021, when politicians in Coke's home state of Georgia passed a new restrictive voting law, all eyes were on whether the brand would make a statement of condemnation (which they [ultimately did](#)). But just months later, the brand came under scrutiny after a personalised label creator tool [blocked customers](#) from using phrases such as 'Black Lives Matter.'

Research by the7stars Pulse found that three in five Brits support brands taking political stances in their marketing. Yet, highlighting the complexities of the issue, just 21% said they believed such brand stances to be genuine – with 52% more likely to assume it is bandwagoning designed to make the brand look good.

Ultimately, the decision for brands of whether to lean into a public debate should be assessed on a case-by-case basis, but should be taken cautiously with the brand's wider purpose and core audiences in mind. With 76% of 16-34s self-identifying as activists, many will seek out brands that reflect their favoured causes. Nevertheless, brands will be judged less on the words they speak, and ultimately on the actions they take.



## This month's mini stories

Earlier this month, Spotify announced the expansion of their video podcast tools, with video podcasting, interactive episodes (using Q&As and polls), subscriptions as well as analytics now being made available to podcasters on the platform. Julia McNamara (Head of Global Podcast Studios at Spotify) shared that the streaming giant expected continued growth in video podcasting, with 70,000 video creators currently on the platform already. In addition to this, Spotify also announced the merging of all their podcast tools (including Anchor and Megaphone) into a singular platform called Spotify for Podcasters, making it 'a one-stop shop' for creators to manage, grow and monetise their content.



Automaker Hyundai's controversial UK campaign in January saw the brand topping the YouGov BrandIndex data as the most talked about brand of the month. The ad, which saw the British public mispronouncing the name of the brand, allowed the company to see the highest increase in Word of Mouth (WOM) exposure during January, ahead of its competitors. It also tripled the brand's Ad Awareness score since the campaign's debut (even though an online poll of consumers on Twitter found that 76.5% of respondents would not change their pronunciation of the name).

In October 2022, the global ride-hailing giant, Uber, announced the rollout of their advertising business internationally, with a new dedicated advertising division and ad format entitled 'Uber Journey Ads' to connect with their customers. The new ad placement is set to '[capture consumers' attention during their trip](#)' to drive purchases and brand awareness for advertisers using the platform. Features include geo-targeting to specific landmarks, enabling transactions from the app, external landing pages, and more. Thus, the new placement provides a unique opportunity to advertisers by placing brand content and offers in front of users, who are ready to purchase, before and during their journeys.

