

24,364,803 posts analyzed

Instagram *Study*

Formats • Trends • Performance Data

2026

metricool

A snapshot of Instagram in 2026

metricool

+27%

Views

*Replies in
Stories*

+88%

10%

of <10K
accounts
have *grown*

Interactions

+19%

*Comments in
posts with
CTA*

+203%

9x

more *saves*
for carousels

*Avg watch
time per Reel*

8.5
seconds

70%

of *views* in the
first 3 days

The ultimate feed. Where brands shape their identity, creators grow their communities, and users connect with both. In an increasingly demanding ecosystem, where competing for audience attention has become the new normal, Instagram is still setting the rules.

We analyzed over 24 million posts from accounts across every size and industry to **find out what trends and patterns are defining the platform in 2026.**



We're metricool

Data is what drives us, because it helps us put things into context and understand what's really happening on social media. And we're not the only ones. More than 3.5 million professionals (from NBC to a custom hat maker in Louisville) use Metricool every day to plan, schedule, and analyze their content.

Join them and start taking control of your social media.

Create your Metricool account

Sample **5**

Instagram 2026 at a glance **6**

Views **8**

Growing on Instagram **9**

Image and Carousel **12**

Reels **19**

TikTok vs Instagram **22**

Stories **24**

Posting Frequency **26**

Hashtags **28**

Questions **29**

CTA **30**

Mentions **31**

Content lifespan **34**

Best times **35**

Conclusions **36**

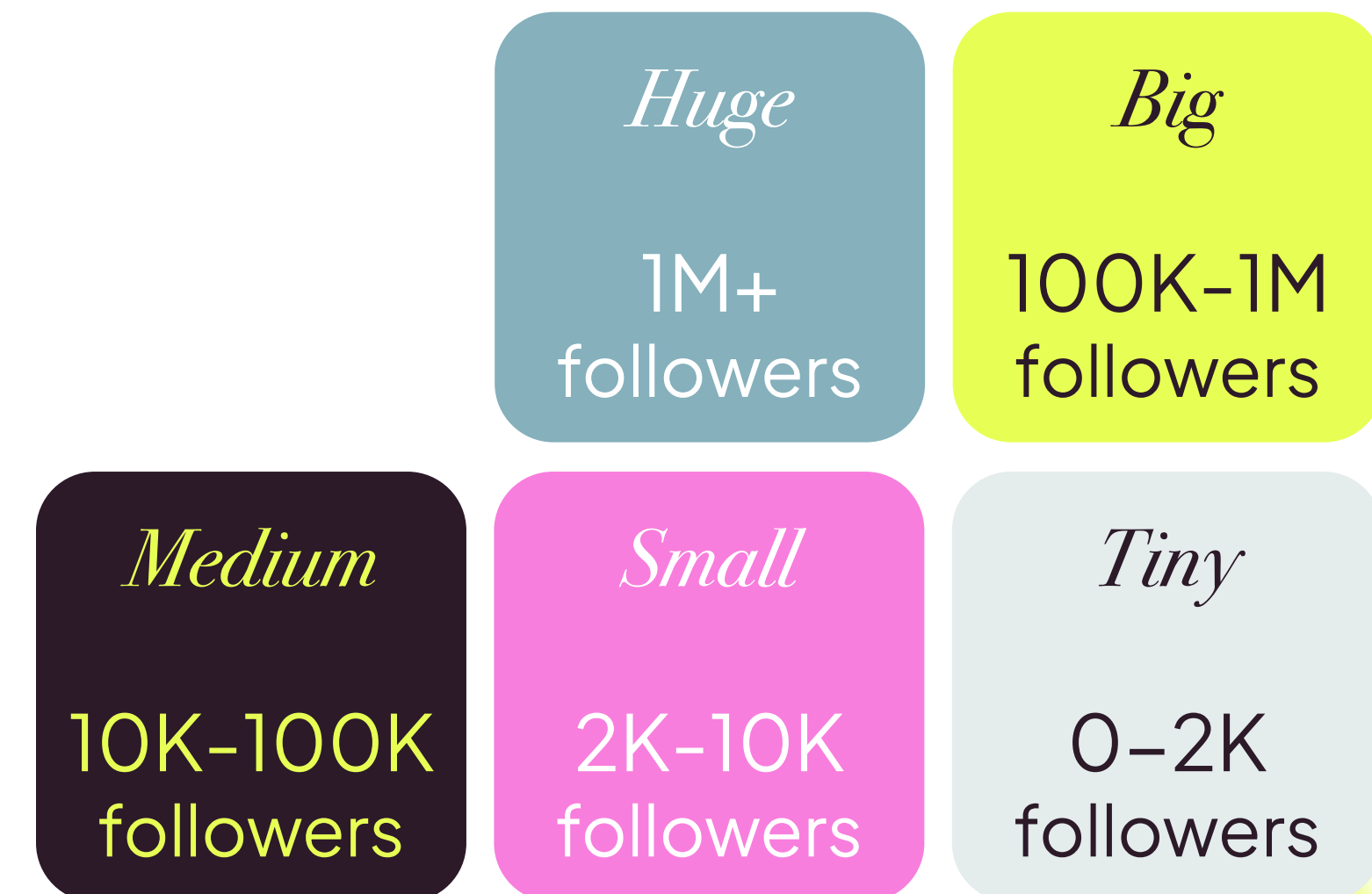
Methodology **38**



24,364,803 *posts from* 375,118 *Instagram accounts*

The study is based on a sample of **24,364,803 posts from 375,118 accounts** worldwide. The analysis covers January and February of both 2025 and 2026.

We present most of the data in this study as averages (adding a note when they're not). To keep those averages as useful as possible, we've grouped accounts by follower count, so you're comparing your account with others at a similar stage, not with accounts that are ten times your size.

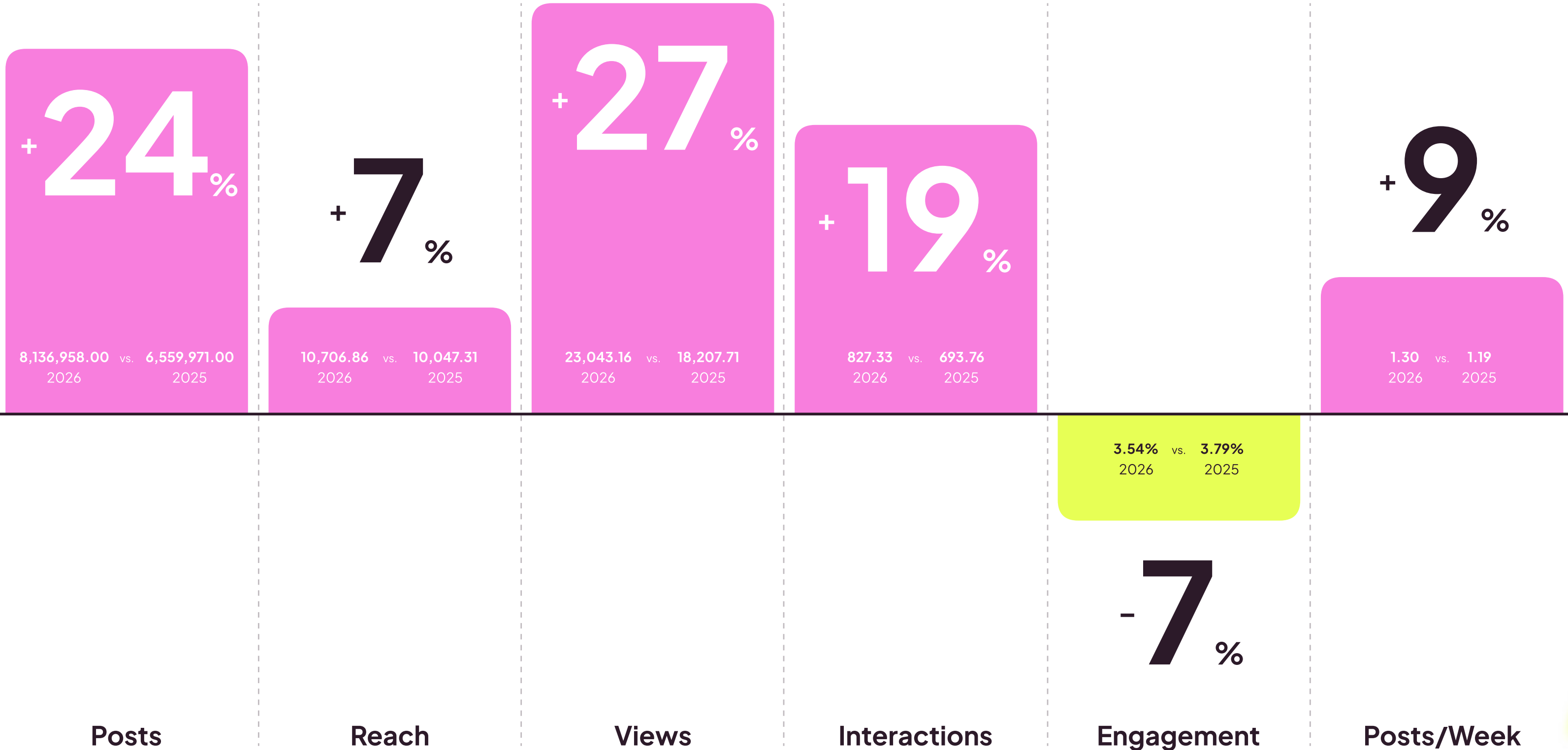


More activity, more content, more eyes

Instagram is still the darling of social media. The place where being seen means staying relevant. Brands know it, and they’re still pouring their efforts into the platform. The numbers back it up: in 2026, brands have published 24% more content in all formats.

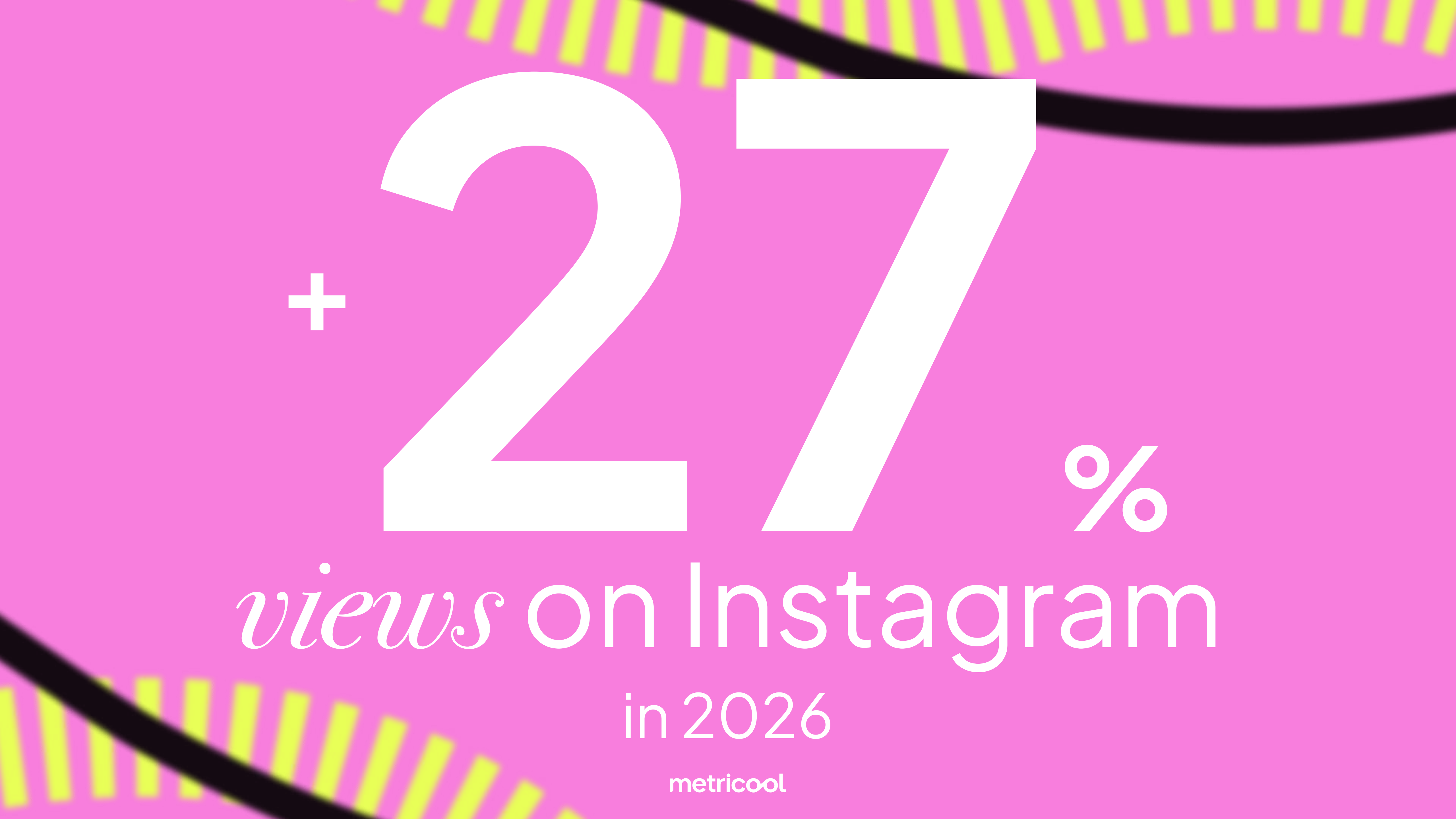
And those efforts are paying off. Instagram has rewarded them with 27% more views and 19% more interactions, showing that posting more can work when the content is relevant and built to connect.

Instagram has already reached a mature stage, where standing out keeps getting harder, but it’s still possible if you know how.



Instagram Overview - Average Key Growth Metrics in 2026

Struggling with your Instagram reach? [↗](#)



+ 27 %

views on Instagram

in 2026

metricool

Views don't mean what they used to

One of the most revealing stats from the study is the 27% growth in views, and it deserves some context before anything else.

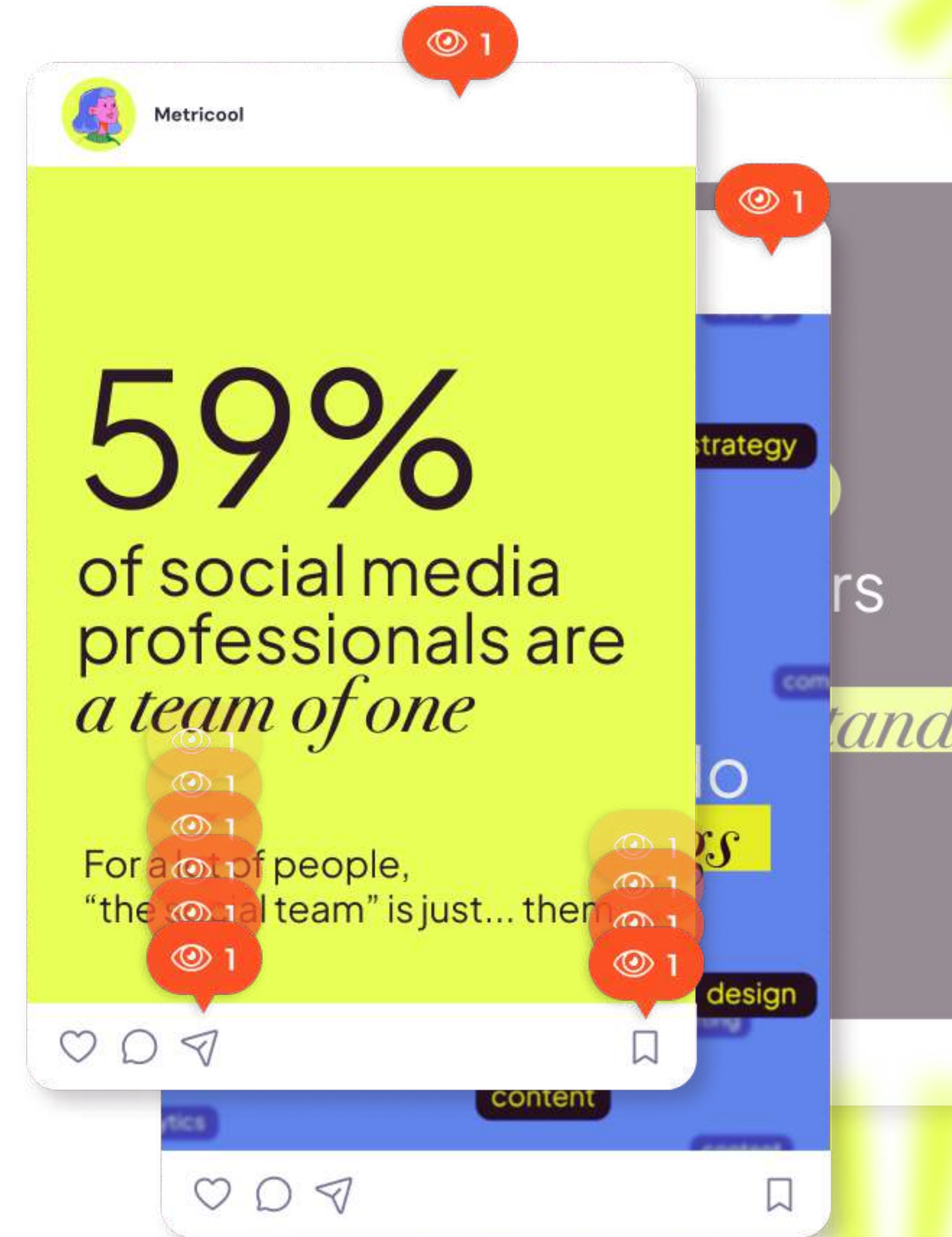
To make sure we're all speaking the same language (and so you can read this study the right way) here's what you need to know: impressions no longer exist on Instagram. Since April 2025, they've been replaced by views.

Before, each format had its own metric: impressions for feed posts and Stories, and plays for Reels. **Now, a single Views metric applies to all formats** — and it's more inclusive. So, each time a carousel is re-served, it counts as a new view, and the same goes for every Reel play and replay, with no playback threshold.

And this unstoppable rise in views is where the algorithm comes in.

Instagram isn't just showing content once and moving on. It's bringing posts back to users who didn't engage the first time, while also rewarding saves and shares. That recipe you save for later? That meme you DM to a friend? Every reopen counts as another view.

These are new ways of interacting with content, and Instagram has decided they matter.

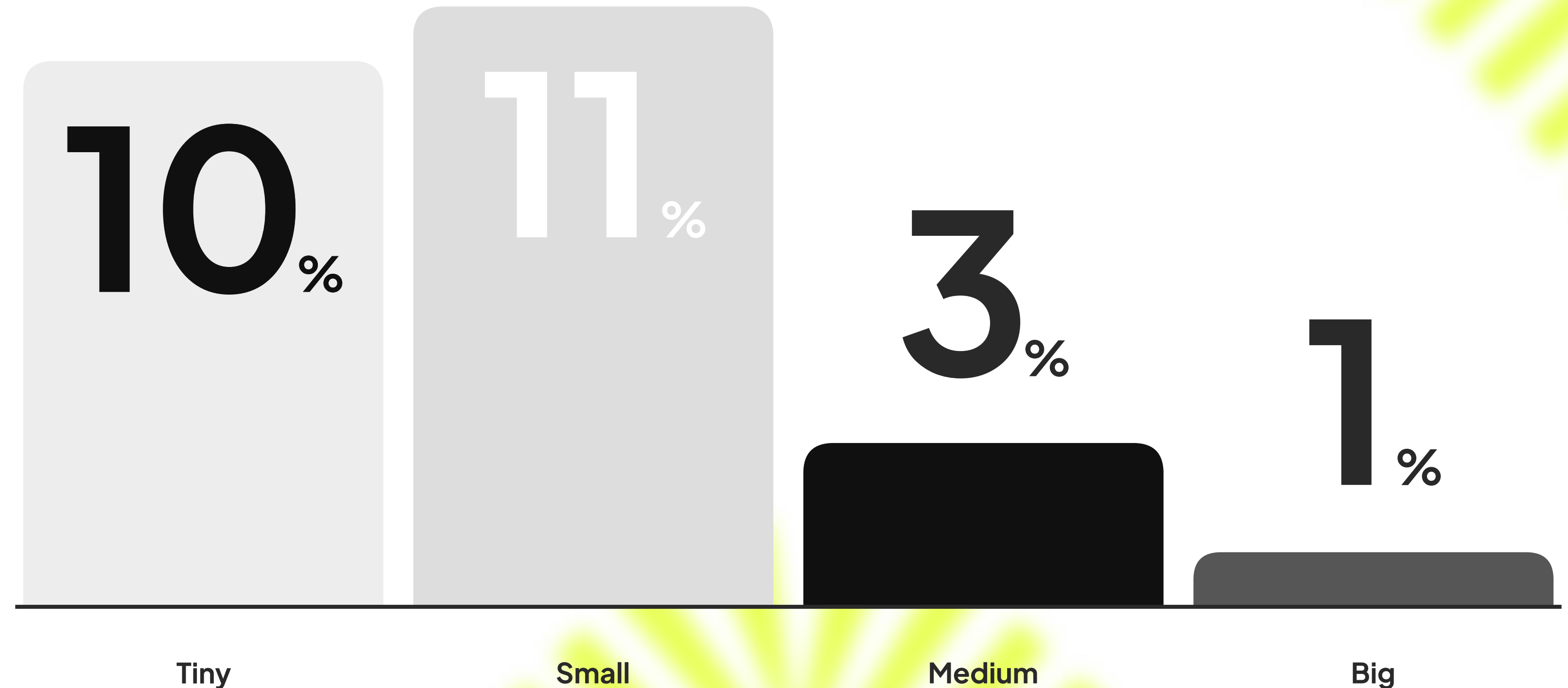


Growth starts small

8.93% of Instagram accounts have grown and moved up a category in 2026. But that number looks very different depending on where you start.

According to the data, **growth is more likely when you're small, especially for accounts with up to 10K followers**. At that level, with the right content strategy, you can gradually gain visibility and grow your audience.

Once you cross the 10K followers line, growing gets much harder. Bigger accounts still grow, but at a much slower pace and breaking through to new audiences gets much harder.

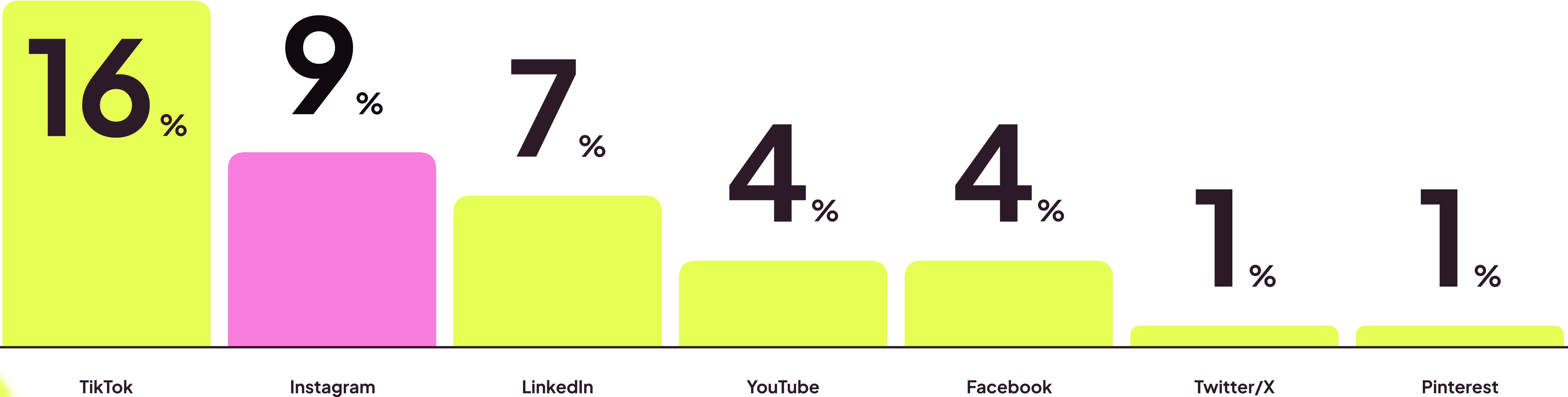


Percentage of Instagram accounts that moved to a higher category in 2026

An uphill *battle*

When it comes to growth, only TikTok beats Instagram for building a following. **It may not be the overall leader, but it still holds a strong position.**

And that has a lot to do with how the platform works: a large active user base, an algorithm that can organically push content to the right audiences, and formats built for sharing. On Instagram, people land on your profile and decide to stay because of your content. Growth may be slower, but it's steady.



Percentage of accounts that moved to a higher category in 2026, by platform

Storytelling matters more than ever

In a feed packed with recipes, restaurants, and endless visual tricks to make food look more appetizing, some creators are redefining what food content can look and feel like.

Sakshi Darda (@bingehousebysakshi) is a great example. She doesn't share recipes, explain ingredients, or walk you through cooking techniques. She uses food as an emotional and narrative device, turning everyday domestic scenes into stories that feel universal.

Why does it work?

- **Short Reels with a cinematic feel:** smooth movements, warm colors, and close-up details.
- **Content that sparks emotional recognition:** it's not trying to sell you anything, it simply tells a story that makes you think, "I've felt that too."
- **Captions that work as emotional hooks.** They connect with the viewer through an almost poetic style.



Format is more than a creative *choice*

In 2026, brands have published nearly 12% more single-image posts, 24% more carousels, and 35% more Reels. But is all that effort paying off? It depends on the format you choose.

Reels and carousels are both strong for visibility, but they work differently. The algorithm pushes Reels to new audiences, expanding reach. And carousels get re-served to users who didn't engage the first time, stacking up views.

For interactions, Reels lead... and it's not close. The average Reel generates over 4x the interactions of a single-image post and, more importantly, it's the only format whose engagement rate has actually grown (+24.76%).

Does that mean single-image posts should be left behind? Not at all. The key is using them deliberately, not by default.

	Posts - Image	Posts - Carousel	Reels
Posts	2,823,219 +11.99%	1,686,859 +24.06%	3,626,880 +35.36%
Reach	4,778.92 -21.96%	11,572.79 +7.15%	14,918.51 +11.69%
Views	11,433.67 +32.63%	27,797.37 +53.57%	23,074.09 +1.69%
Interactions	237.69 -25.41%	897.06 +17.86%	1,035.48 +32.33%
Engagement	1.99% -45.98%	3.08% -26.56%	4.30% +24.76%
Posts/Week	1.36 -2.34%	0.86 +2.63%	1.58 +12.31%

Comparison of Instagram Formats - Average Growth Metrics (2026 vs 2025)

Carousels get 9× more
saves than *single-image*
posts on Instagram

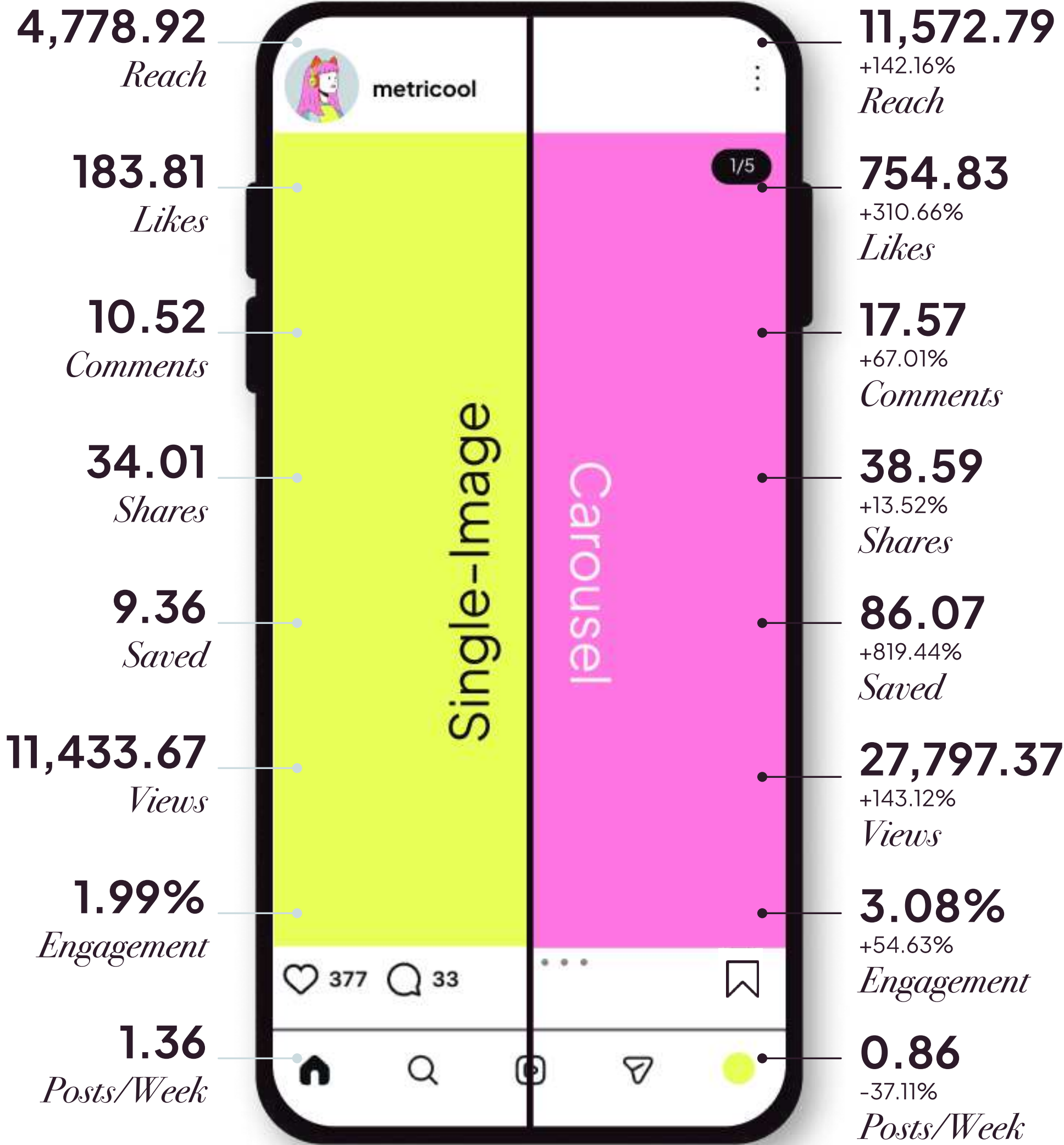
metricool

When in doubt, *swipe* it out

Carousels outperform single-image posts across every single metric, no exceptions. Every post published in this format gets more than double the reach and views, and almost 4x more interactions than single-image posts.

And yet, carousels are used 37% less often. Single-image posts remain popular because this format requires little effort, feels familiar, and fits neatly into the way Instagram has worked from the beginning: fast, visual, photo-first. But defaulting to it **means leaving reach and engagement on the table.**

Create and schedule carousels from Claude



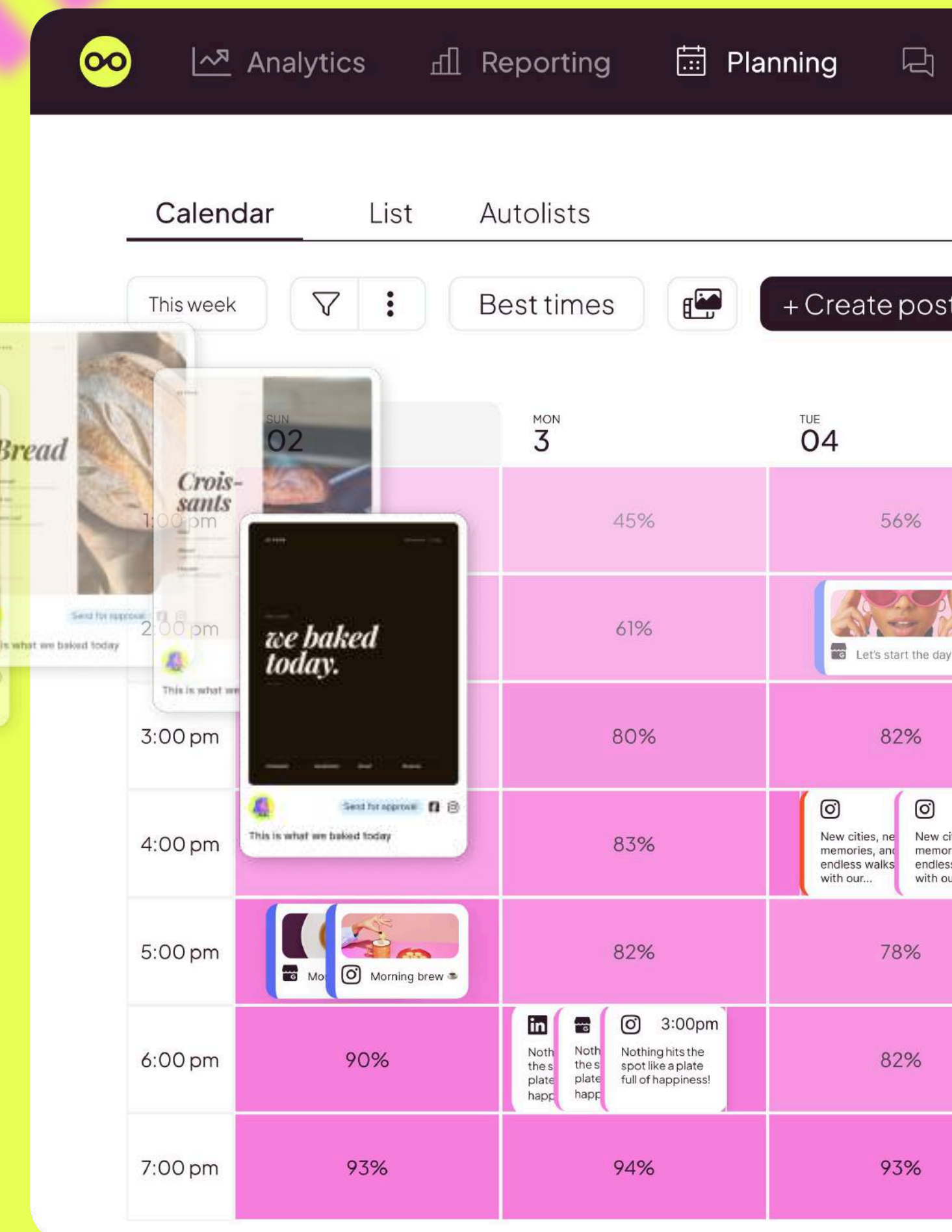
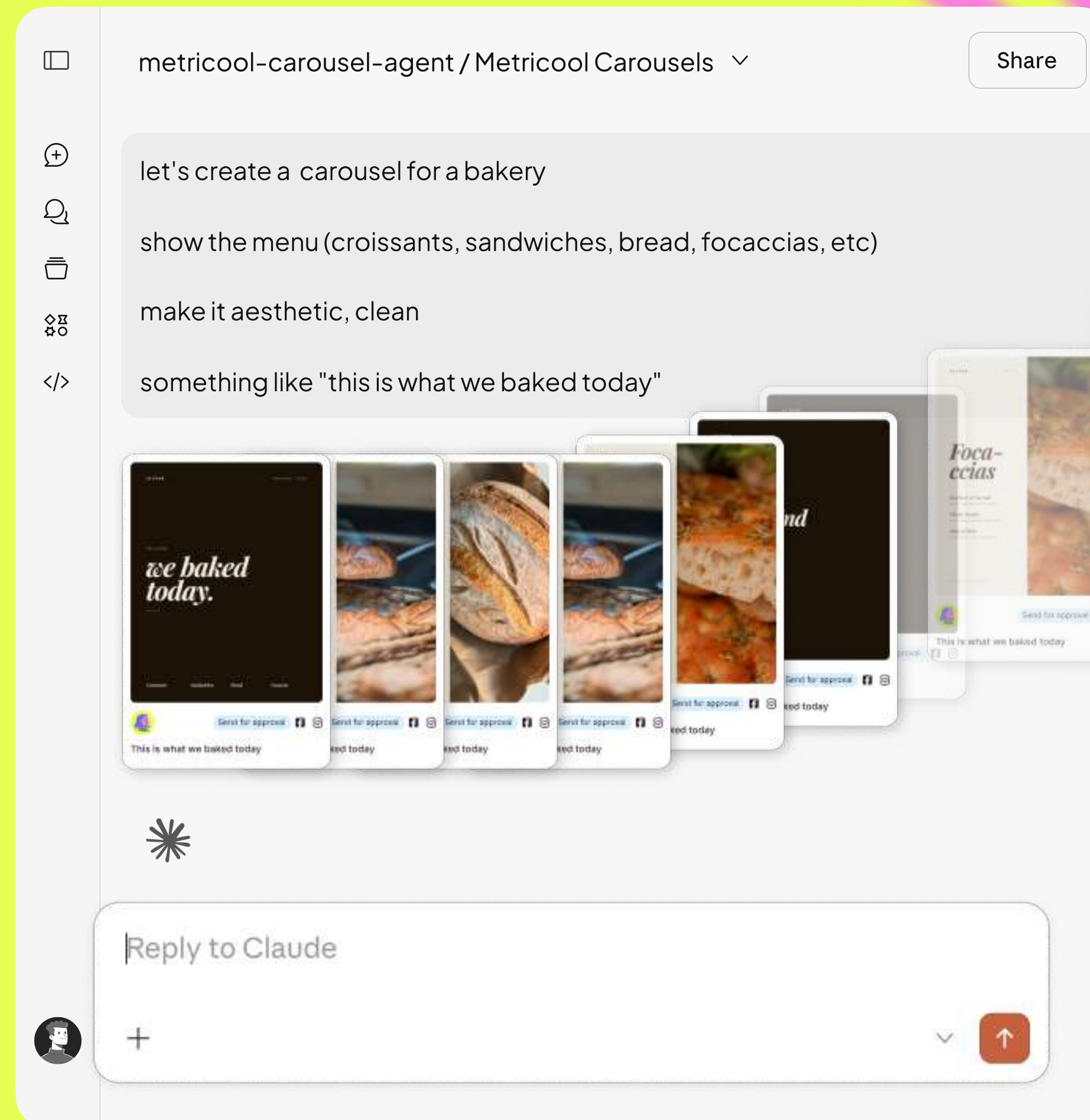
Comparison of static formats: single-image posts and carousels (2026)

What works, without the work

Carousels are the format generating more views on Instagram at the moment, and now you can create and schedule them without leaving your workflow.

The Metricool Carousel Agent **handles the whole process from a single conversation in Claude Code**. It learns everything about your brand, designs the slides, writes the caption, and schedules the post directly in Metricool. You just provide an initial idea, give the directions and approve each step.

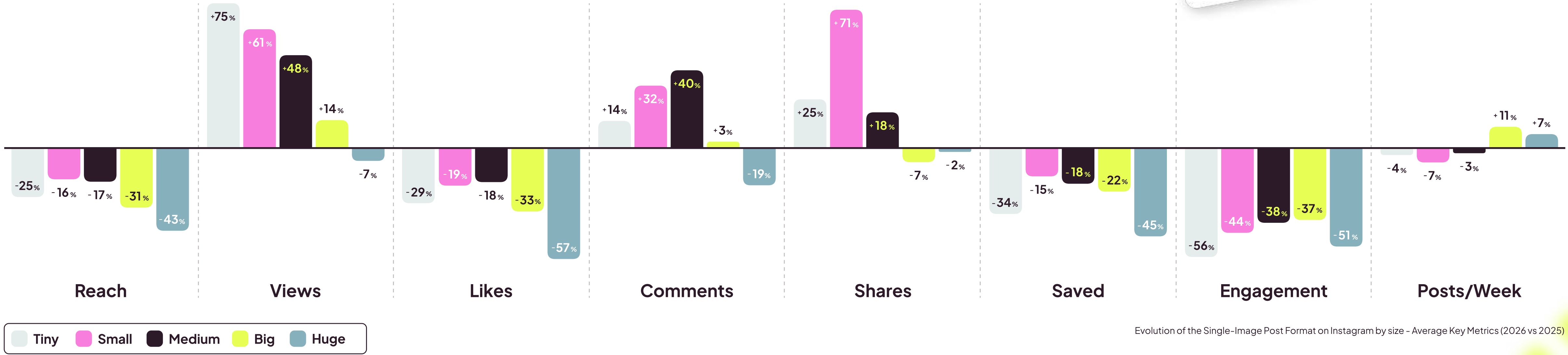
Get the claude agent (free)



The bigger the account, the harder *single-image* posts are underperforming

Huge accounts have lost 43% of their reach and more than half their engagement rate. For Big accounts, the drop is significant too, with reach down 31% and likes falling.

For smaller accounts the decline exists but looks different. Reach is down, but comments and shares are growing, which means the content is still generating conversation within existing audiences.



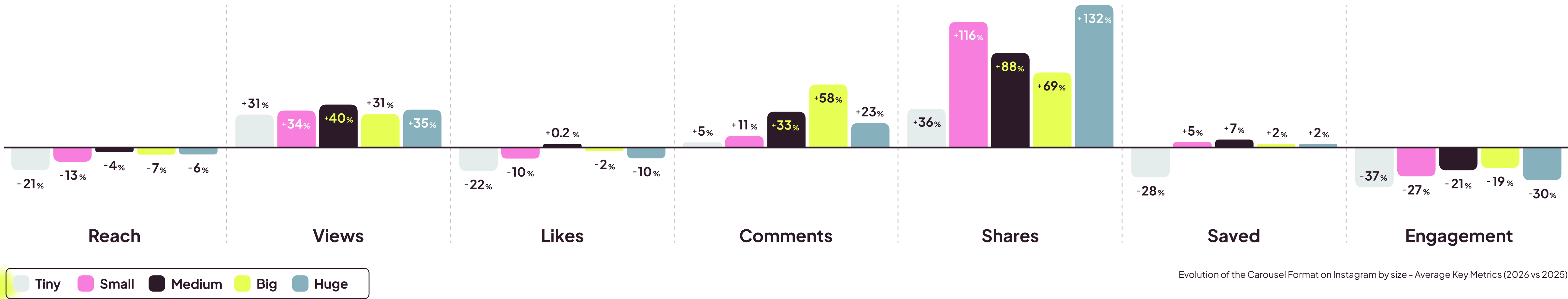
Evolution of the Single-Image Post Format on Instagram by size - Average Key Metrics (2026 vs 2025)



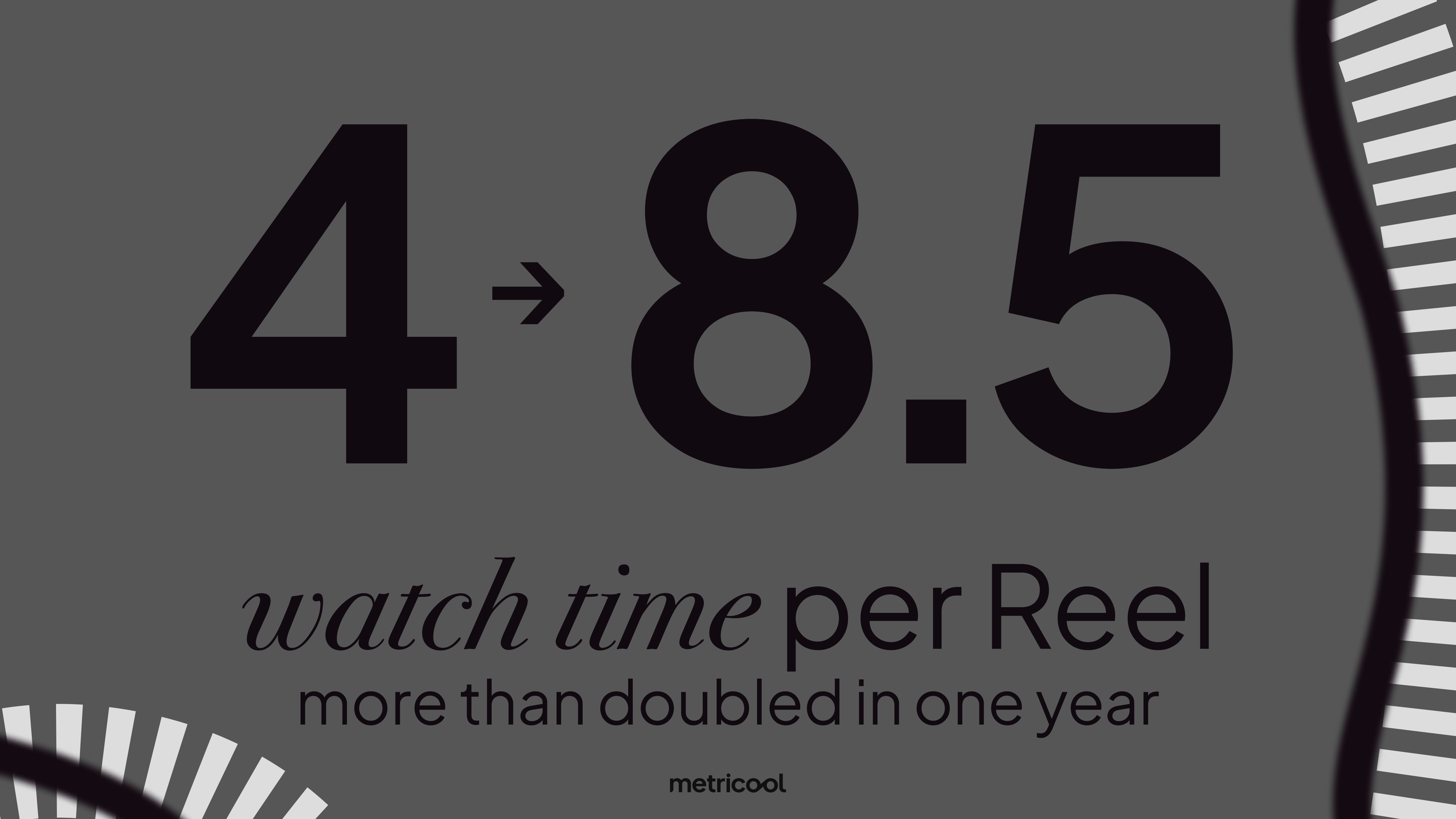
Carousels are generating the signals that drive distribution

Shares have risen across every account size, but they have really taken off among small and large accounts: +116% for Small accounts and +132% for Huge accounts. Tiny accounts are improving too, just at a softer pace.

It's not just shares. Comments are up, saves are growing, and likes are the only metric going the other way. In 2026 that matters less than it used to, because likes are the interaction the algorithm weighs least.



Evolution of the Carousel Format on Instagram by size - Average Key Metrics (2026 vs 2025)



4 → 8.5

watch time per Reel

more than doubled in one year

metricool

The *Reel* deal

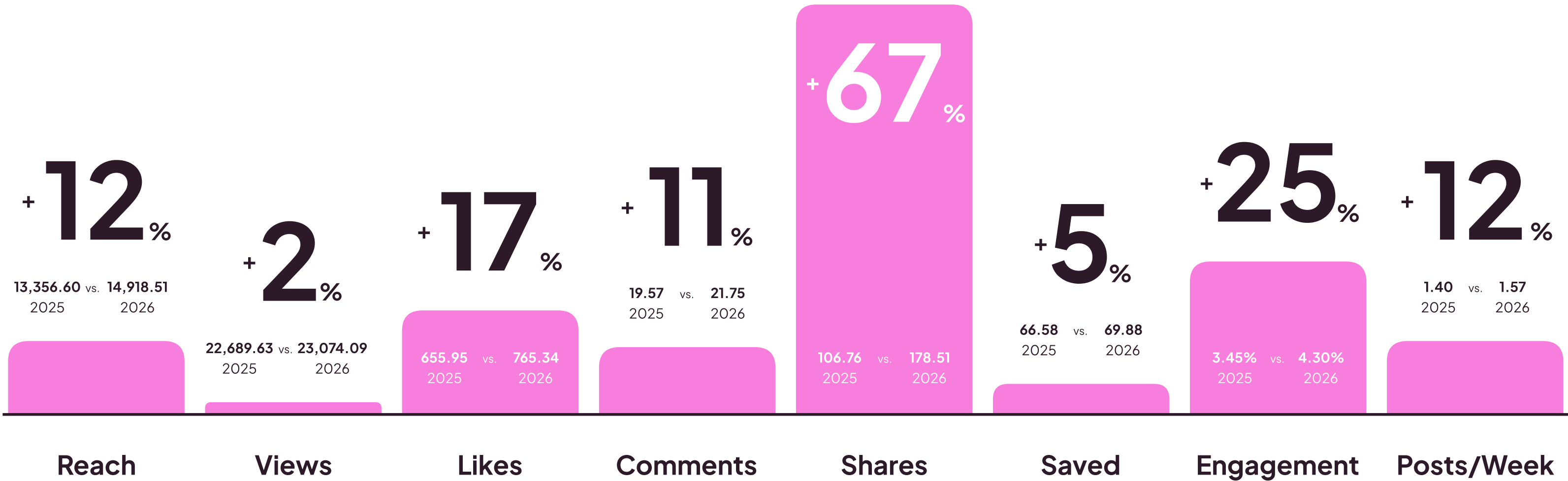
Video is no longer a trend. It’s the everyday language of social media and, according to the data, Instagram’s strongest format by a distance.

Reels are growing on every front, with every metric moving in the right direction. People are posting more of them, they’re reaching bigger audiences, and those audiences are interacting with them more.

The format keeps getting stronger on Instagram, and users are more open to engaging with it.

Among all metrics, shares are the one to watch. Reels have been shared 67% more than in 2025, confirming that users are not only consuming the content, but actively distributing it.

If there's one format to get right on Instagram in 2026, this is it.

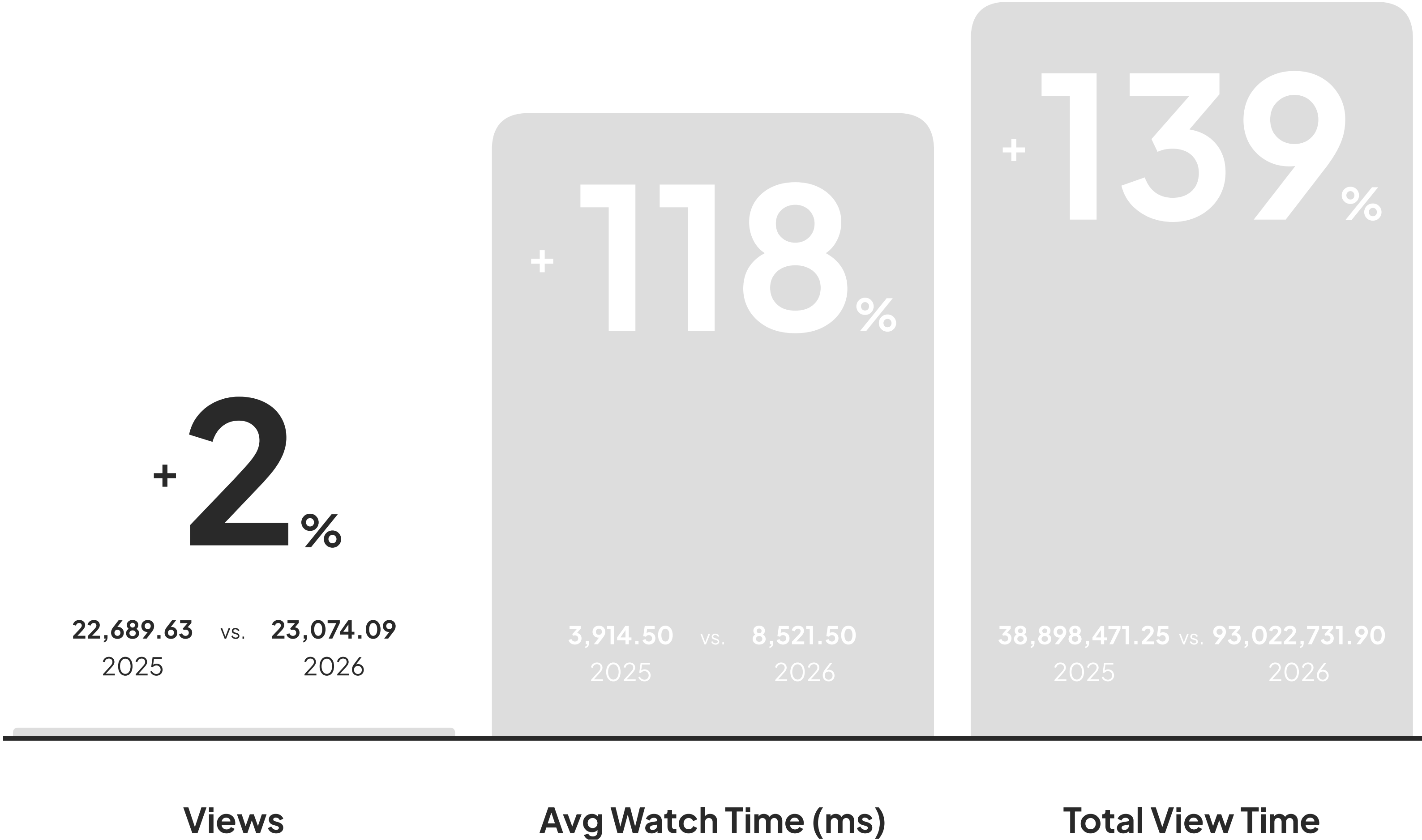


Evolution of the Reels Format on Instagram – Average Key Metrics (2026 vs 2025)

The *Reel* deal

Audiences aren't just watching more Reels; they're watching them for longer. Average Watch Time is up 118% compared to 2025, pushing Total View Time up by 139%.

And with views staying relatively stable, this suggests the algorithm is serving content to audiences who are actually interested in it. Reels are getting longer, and people are here for it.



Evolution of the Reels Format on Instagram - Average Video Key Metrics (2026 vs 2025)

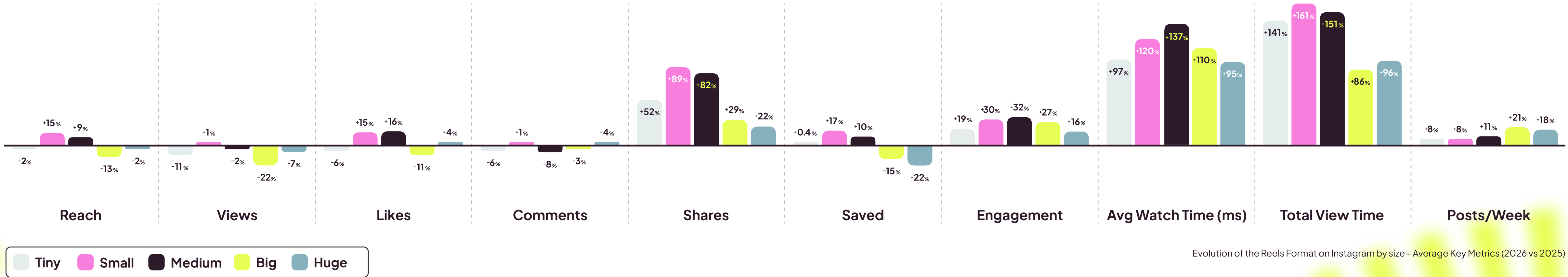
How do Reels work in 2026? 



The *Reel* deal

Watch time has roughly doubled across every account size. Whatever size you are, people are spending significantly more time watching your Reels than in 2025. Video on Instagram is working harder and better for everyone.

Shares are also up across all segments, from +21% for Huge accounts to +88% for Small accounts. People aren't just spending more time on Reels, they're recommending them. Putting them in front of new audiences. The human algorithm is back, and when content resonates, people become the distribution.

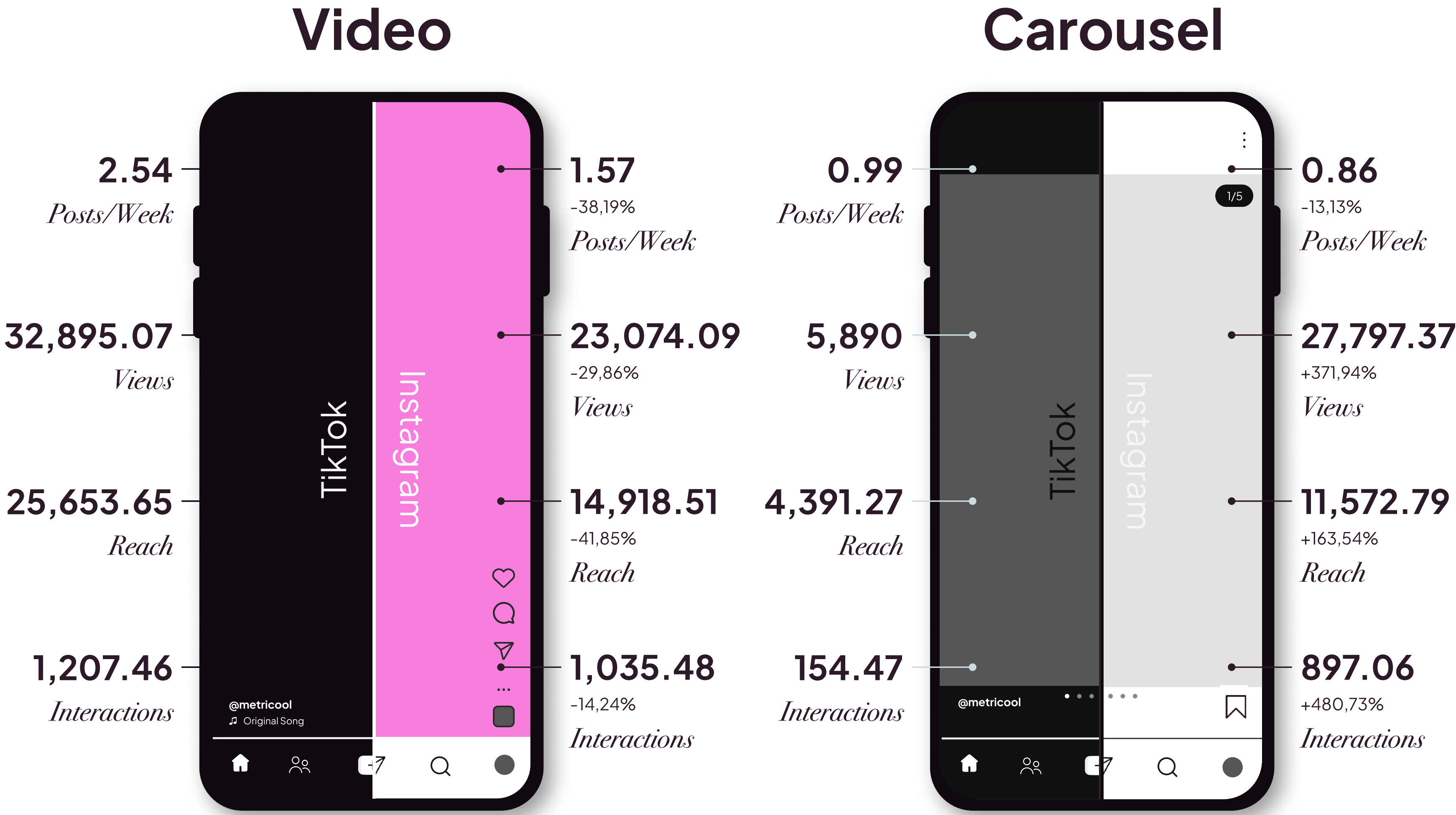


Evolution of the Reels Format on Instagram by size - Average Key Metrics (2026 vs 2025)

Instagram vs TikTok

Although Reels continue to grow on Instagram, **TikTok remains the clear leader for vertical video**. Instagram Reels still get 29% fewer views and 14% fewer interactions on average than TikTok videos.

The pattern reverses when it comes to carousels, and this format generates 4.7x more views and 5.8x more interactions on Instagram than on TikTok.



TikTok vs. Instagram: Video/Reel comparison

TikTok vs. Instagram: Carousel comparison

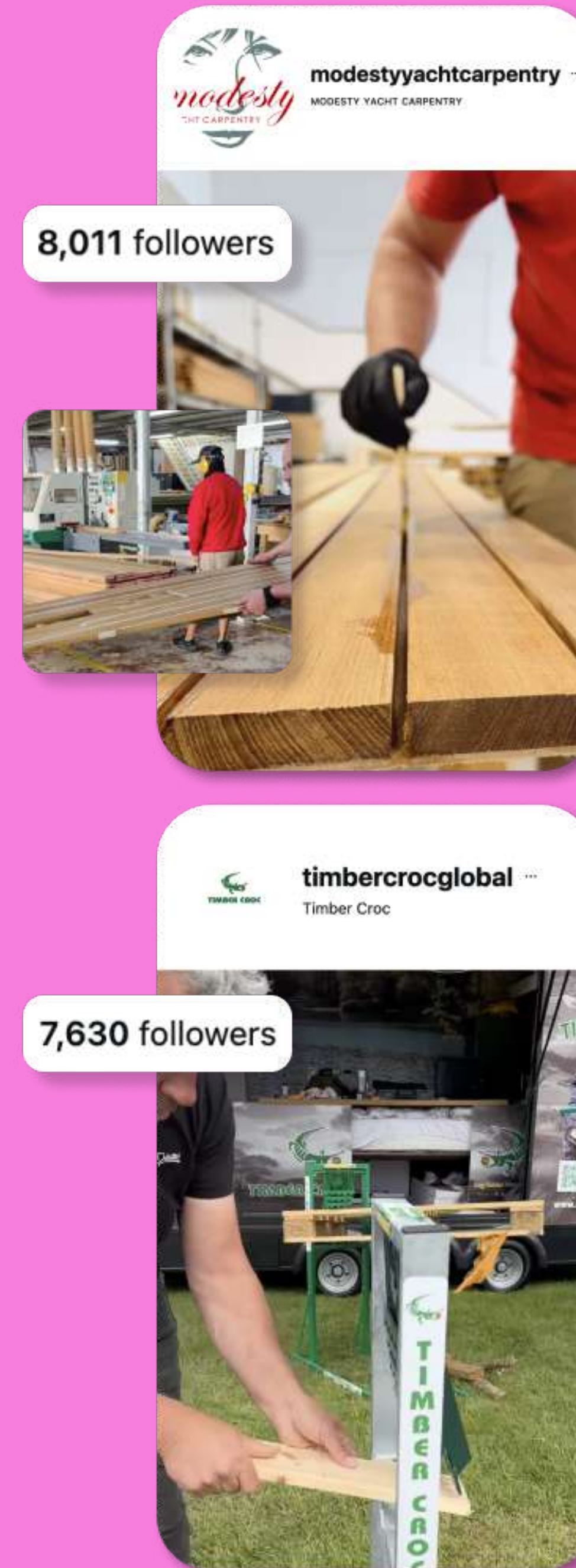
Small in followers, big on connection

Building and maintaining a social media presence as a small business owner is no small task. Time is tight, resources are limited, and the algorithm doesn't care whether you're a 20-person agency or a neighborhood shop posting during lunch break.

They may not always have the most polished strategy, but they do have something many big brands have lost: a real connection with the people who follow them.

Why does it work?

- **It sells without selling:** there are no catalog-style product shots here. The product naturally appears in the story as the answer to a real need.
- **Customers have a lot to say:** reviews become branded content, giving a voice to the people who actually use the product.
- **A one-on-one tone as their signature:** no technical jargon, just regular people talking to their customers in a way that feels instantly relatable.



8,011 followers

2.4K interactions

15.46x higher than accounts of the same category

498.2K reach

209.9x higher than accounts of the same category

664.7K views

144.9x higher than accounts of the same category

7,630 followers

10.9K interactions

70.2x higher than accounts of the same category

508.9K reach

214.4x higher than accounts of the same category

559.9K views

122.1x higher than accounts of the same category

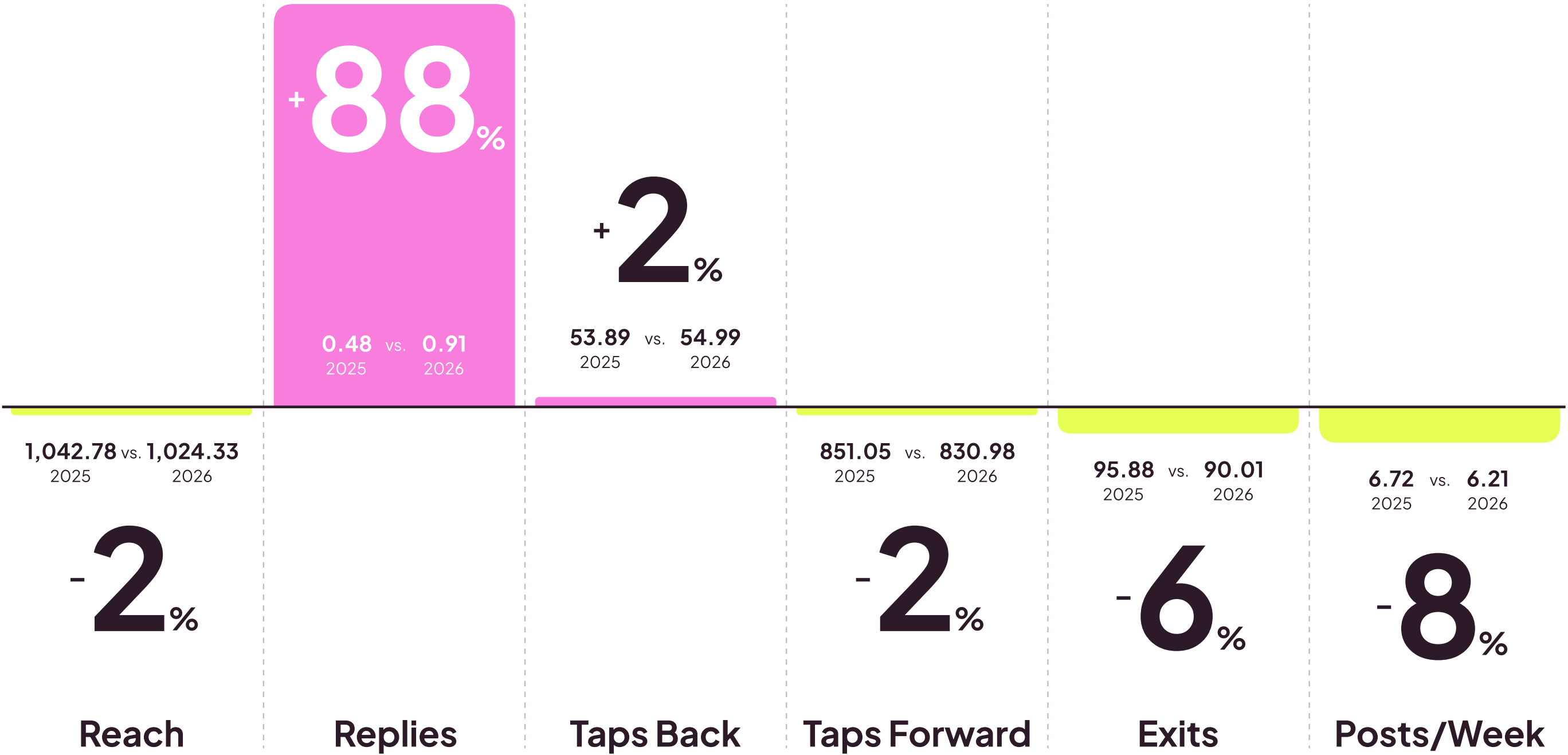
A *story* of staying power

At first glance, it might seem like Stories had a quiet year, but the data tells a different story. Reach is only slightly down from 2025, which means Instagram is still putting Stories in front of people. So Stories are not dead... they're holding their ground.

But the strongest signal comes from replies and exits.

Stories are designed for interaction, and in 2026, they've generated almost twice the replies they did in 2025. **Audiences don't just watch Stories, they interact with them**, and that's great news because they're a format designed to connect with your community.

At the same time, exits are down by more than 6%. Viewers are staying until the end, which tells Instagram's algorithm that your content is relevant and keeps attention. And fewer exits means more visibility for your profile.



Evolution of the Stories Format on Instagram - Average Key Metrics (2026 vs 2025)

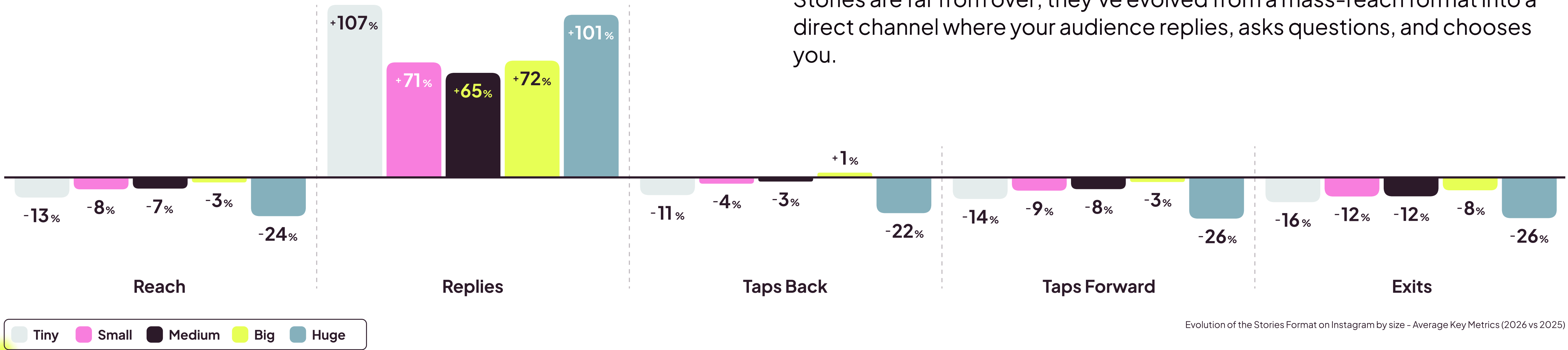
22 creative ideas to get the most out of your Stories



A *story* of staying power

Stories might be Instagram’s most underrated format in 2026. While many are writing them off, the numbers reveal a different pattern: replies have more than doubled in the smallest and largest accounts, and exits are down across every segment. And yes, impressions are down and Stories are reaching fewer people, but those who do see them seem more valuable, because they’re engaging more.

Huge accounts have cut their posting frequency the least, which says a lot. Stories are far from over; they’ve evolved from a mass-reach format into a direct channel where your audience replies, asks questions, and chooses you.

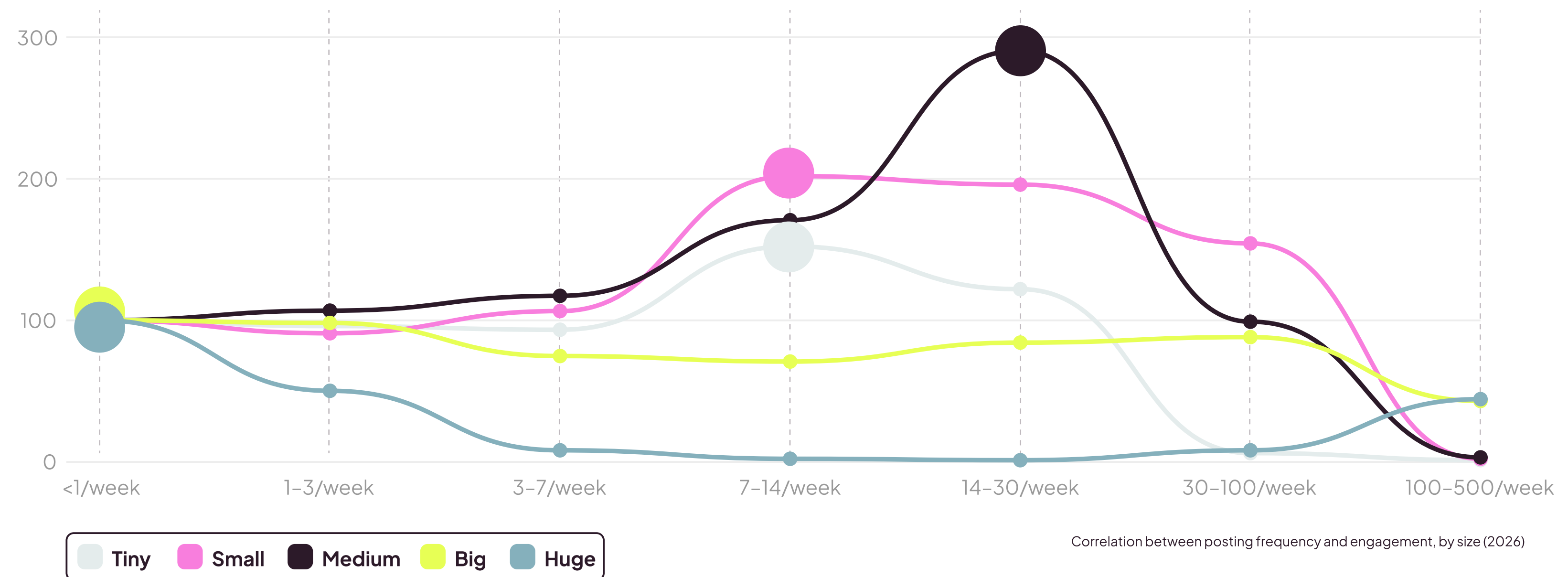


More is more *(for some)*

The data shows **there's no universal answer to how often you should post**. The relationship between frequency and engagement per post changes completely depending on your account size.

Small accounts benefit from consistency. Posting 7–14 times/week is where interactions peak, and the algorithm rewards the rhythm. Medium accounts have a higher ceiling and peak at 14–30 times/week.

But for accounts over 100K followers, it works in the opposite way. The less they post, the more each post gets. A Huge account posting less than once a week averages nearly 6x more interactions per post than one posting daily. More content doesn't mean more engagement; it probably means splitting the same audience's attention across more posts.



Find your niche

Not everyone is trying to build a massive community or appeal to everyone. Some Instagram creators have found something much more valuable than going viral: a loyal audience that knows exactly why they follow them.

The weather analyst who chases storms isn't posting for the algorithm, but for weather lovers. The person teaching you how to install a faucet knows their content isn't for everyone, but it is for someone who just bought a house.

They've found their people, and know exactly how to talk to them.

Why does it work?

- **People know what to expect from you:** you don't have to convince anyone to follow you. If they do, they already know what they'll find on your profile, and that's exactly why they stick around.
- **The content is relevant:** people come to your profile looking for content that teaches them something specific. Tutorials, fun facts, answers to common questions... and that shared learning experience builds community.
- **It comes from an expert voice:** the creator builds authority through their content. They don't know everything, they know one thing really well. And that creates trust and closeness.

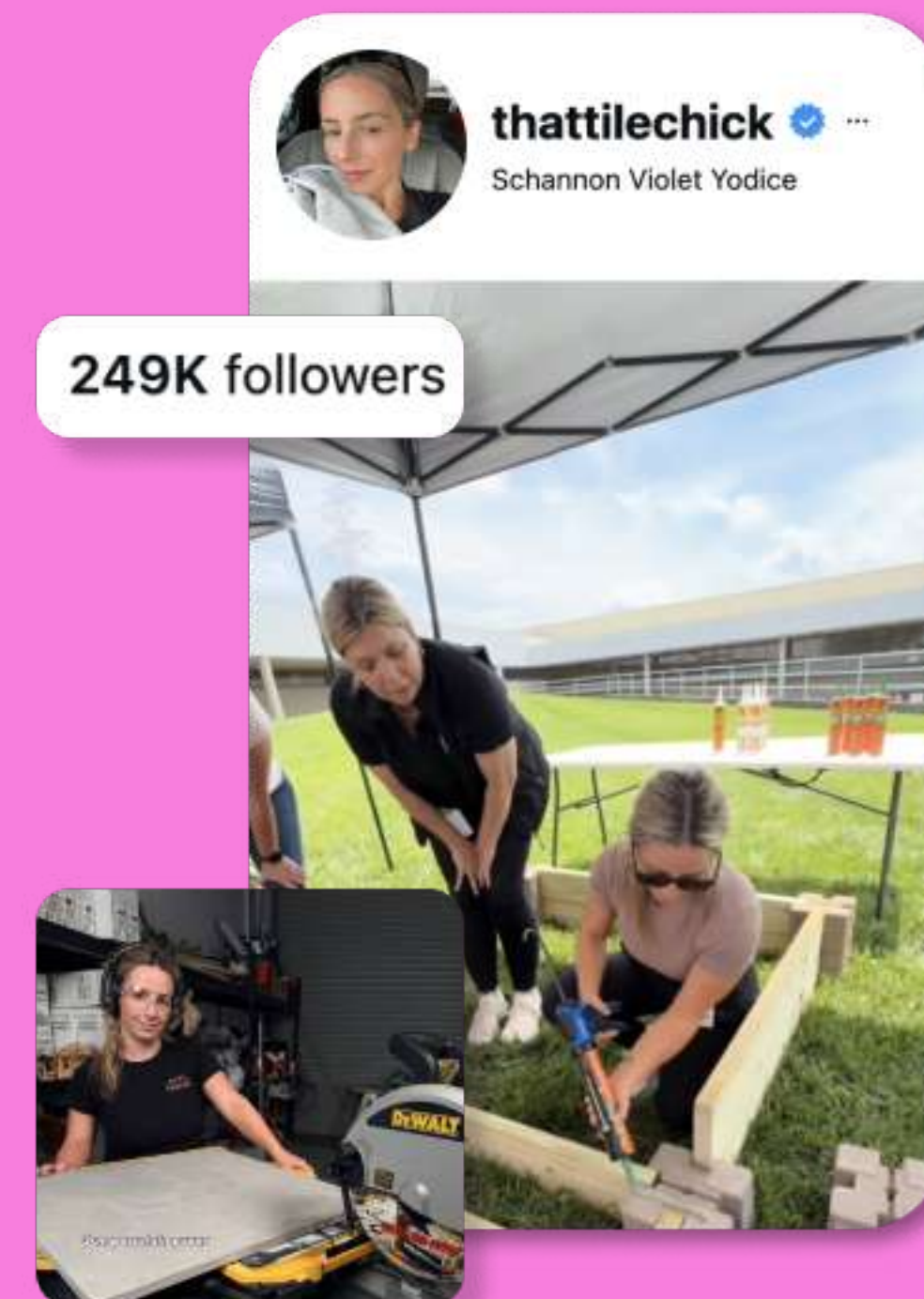


84K interactions

35.3x higher than accounts of the same category

300K views

4.4x higher than accounts of the same category



24K interactions

10x higher than accounts of the same category

1M reach

26x higher than accounts of the same category

1.5M views

21.3x higher than accounts of the same category

Speak the *algorithm's* language

Hashtags are losing ground on Instagram, and posts that use them get 32% fewer views and 34% fewer interactions.

That's a striking gap, though it's worth noting this is a correlation, not a proven cause. Accounts that lean heavily on hashtags may simply be less savvy or active in other ways that matter less to the algorithm.

Instagram now indexes captions via keyword search, and since July 2025, public posts also appear in Google and Bing results. The words you use in your captions now work for you beyond the platform. That's why natural language matters more than ever, especially when you include keywords related to your business. In other words: **Instagram SEO is here.**

So hashtags still have a place, but not as the main strategy. Use them with intention: 1 or 2 relevant tags, tied to your topic or industry. The generic ones are more likely to make you disappear than help you get discovered.

Views

14,185.68 vs. 20,768.37
Views # Avg views

-32%

Interactions

478.22 vs. 723.41
Interactions # Avg interactions

-34%

How including at least one hashtag affects post performance on Instagram (2026)

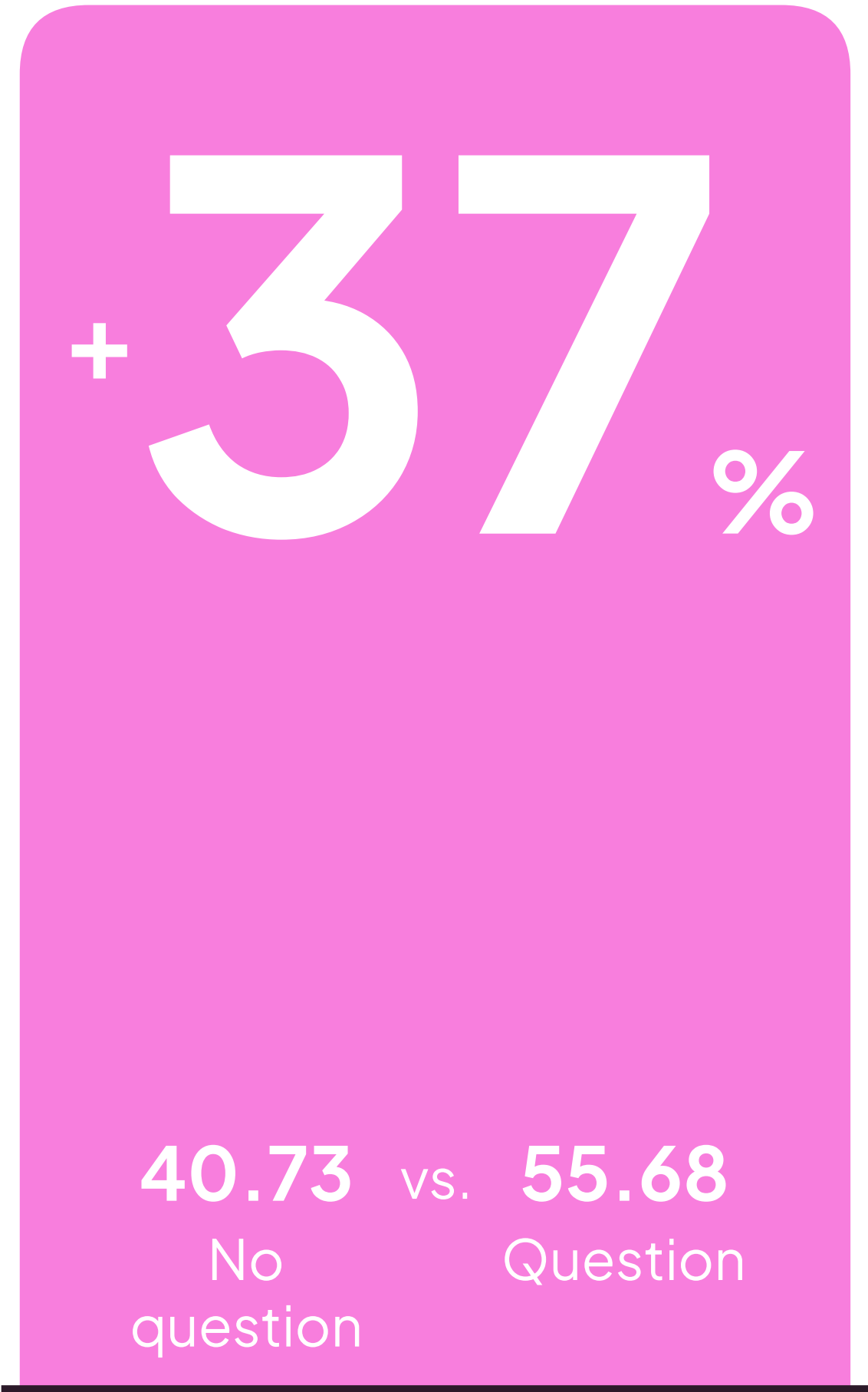
How can Instagram SEO help your content reach more people? [↗](#)

Glad you *asked*

A question turns a monologue into a conversation... and that puts the algorithm on alert.

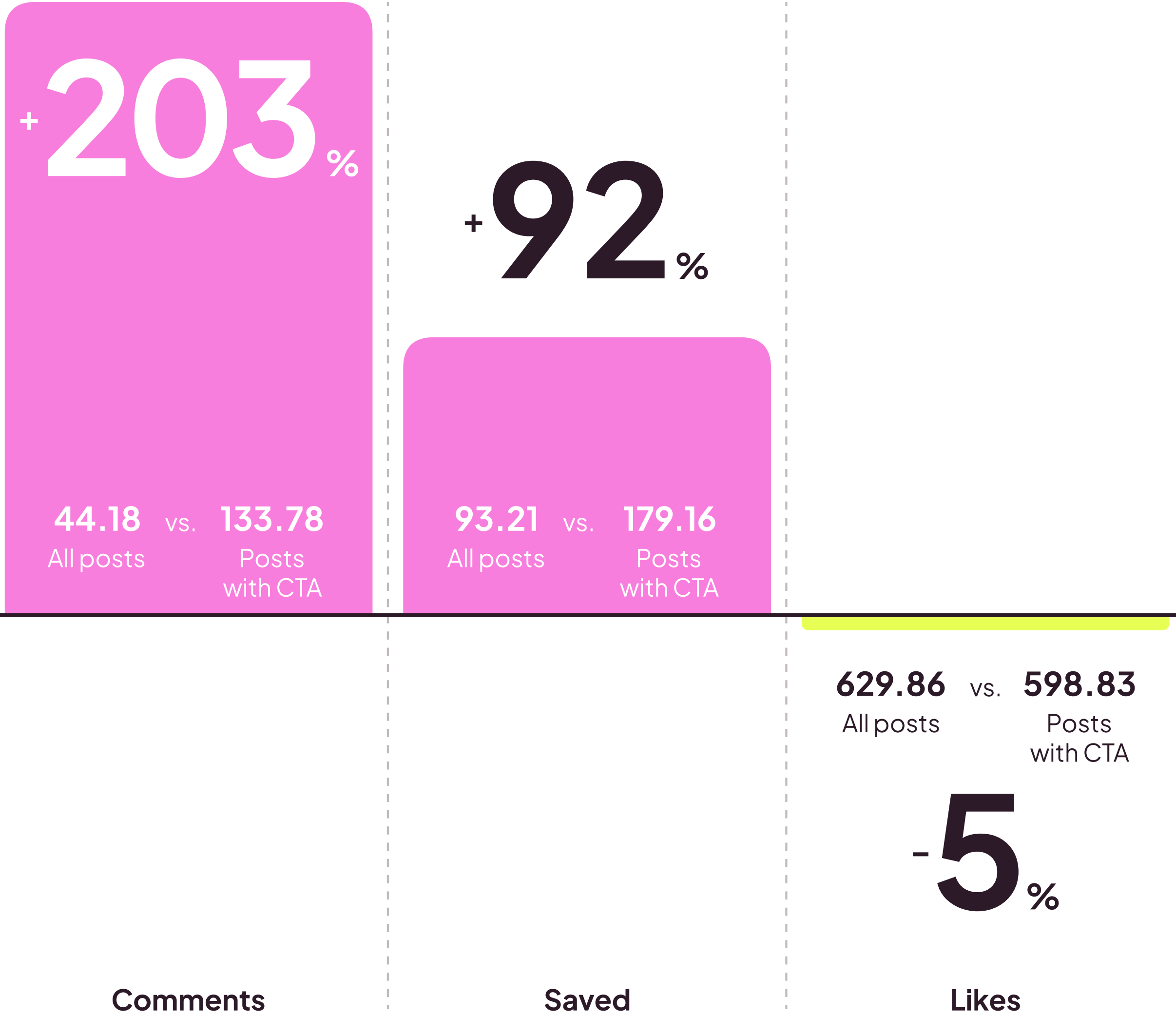
When you ask a question, you break the ice with your audience and give them a clear idea of what they can contribute, showing them their opinions are welcome. And the data backs this up: **posts that include a question get almost 37% more comments than posts that don't.**

From there, the conversation builds on itself. When people see comments, they're more likely to add their own. The algorithm sees that activity as a sign of community interest and starts pushing the post to more people. More reach leads to more comments, and the cycle keeps going.



Comments

How including at least one question affects post performance on Instagram (2026)



Instagram average likes, saved & comments: platform average vs. posts with calls to like or saved or comment (2026)

The *Like* button is not liking

If you want people to interact with your content, ask them to. When the caption includes a CTA asking for comments or saves, comments triple and saves double. **People respond when you speak to them directly.**

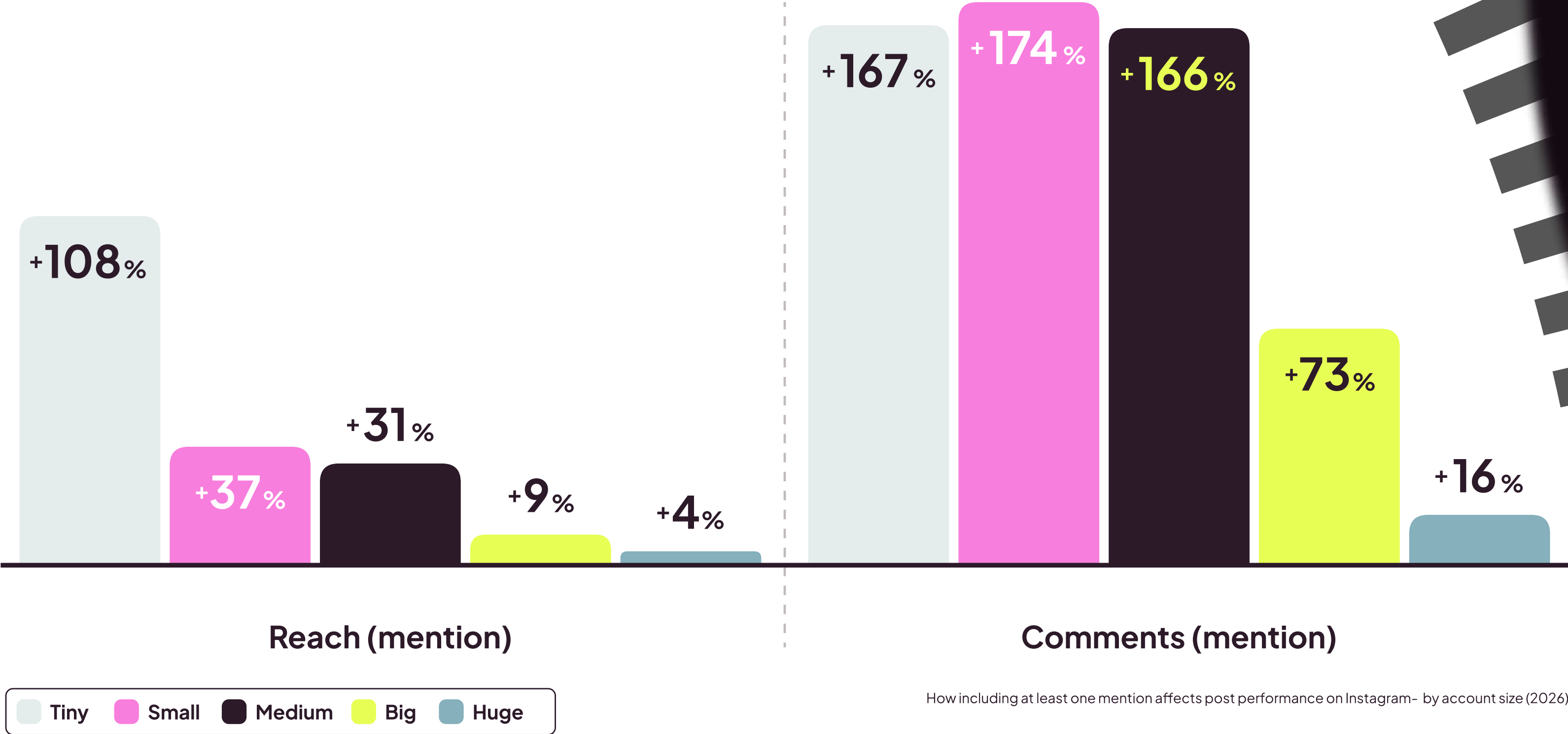
But likes don't follow the same pattern. When you ask for likes, posts get almost 5% fewer than when you don't. And it makes sense. Likes are a vanity metric tied to validation, something people give on their own terms. Comments and saves, on the other hand, help build a relationship.

Do @ me

Mentions can drive reach and comments, but their impact depends heavily on account size. The smaller the account, the stronger the effect.

For Tiny and Small accounts, tagging another profile can significantly increase visibility, driving 108% more reach for Tiny accounts and 36% more reach for Small accounts. The effect is even stronger for comments, where Small and Medium accounts see much more conversation when a mention is included.

For larger accounts, the reach boost fades fast. Mentions are not as powerful, and adding them does not make a major difference in reach for accounts with established audiences, but they still work as conversation starters.



Your Instagram, your storefront

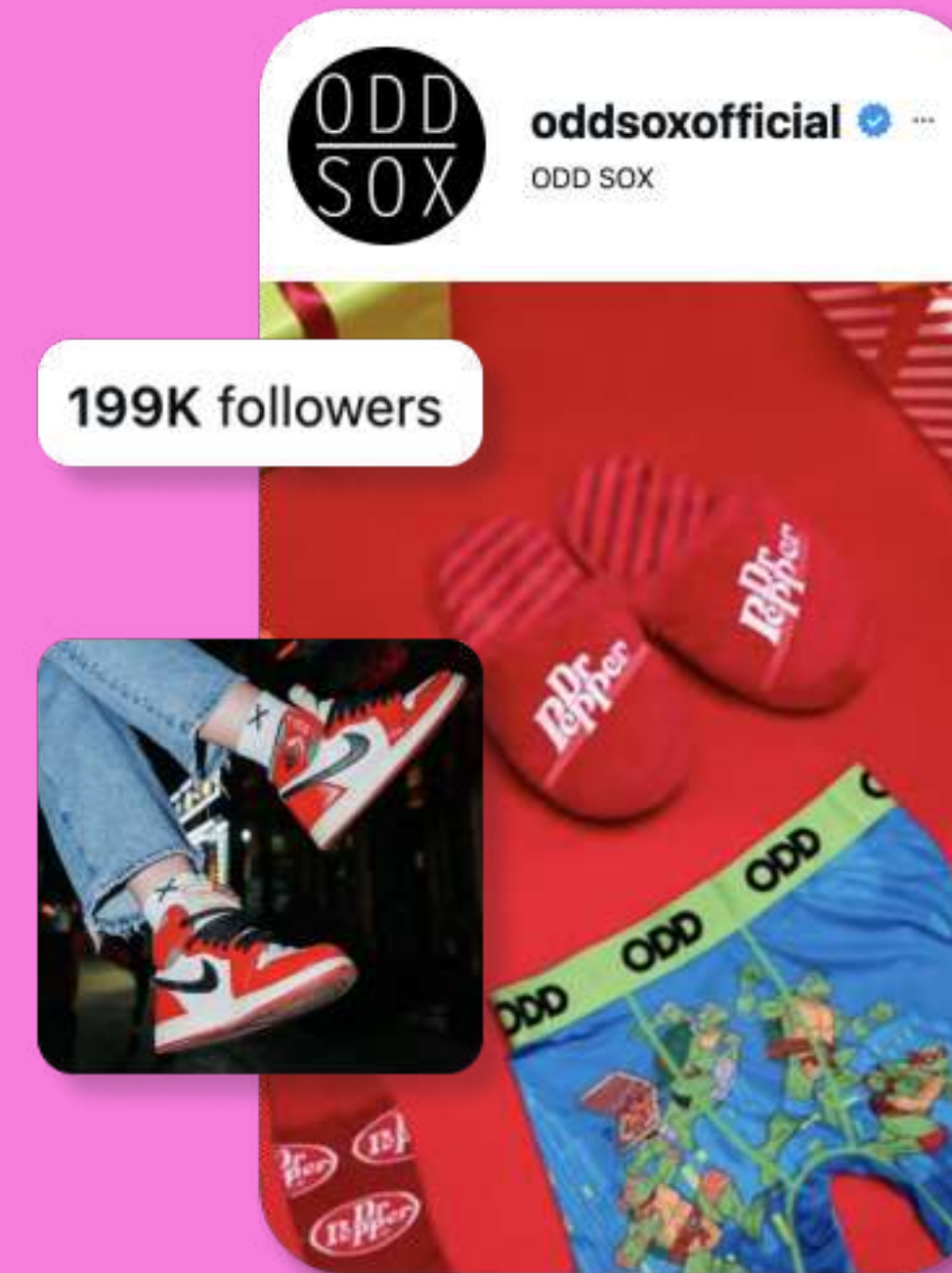
The good part: you have a product people like, look for, and need.

The bad part: competition is massive, and standing out in the crowd becomes a real challenge.

Fashion brands compete in a feed full of similar products. Their product is already visual and appealing, but it gets lost among lookalike pieces, constantly changing collections, and trends that barely last three weeks. The challenge here isn't just posting pretty content. It's being consistent and coherent, and finding a recognizable identity.

Why does it work?

- **It promotes a lifestyle:** the product reflects a way of living that creates desire. People want that lifestyle, so they start with the product.
- **High-quality content and a consistent aesthetic:** being recognizable is the best advantage when competing in a saturated space.
- **Collaborations with trending brands and creators:** they help reach new audiences and frame the product within a specific personality



199K followers

23.8K interactions

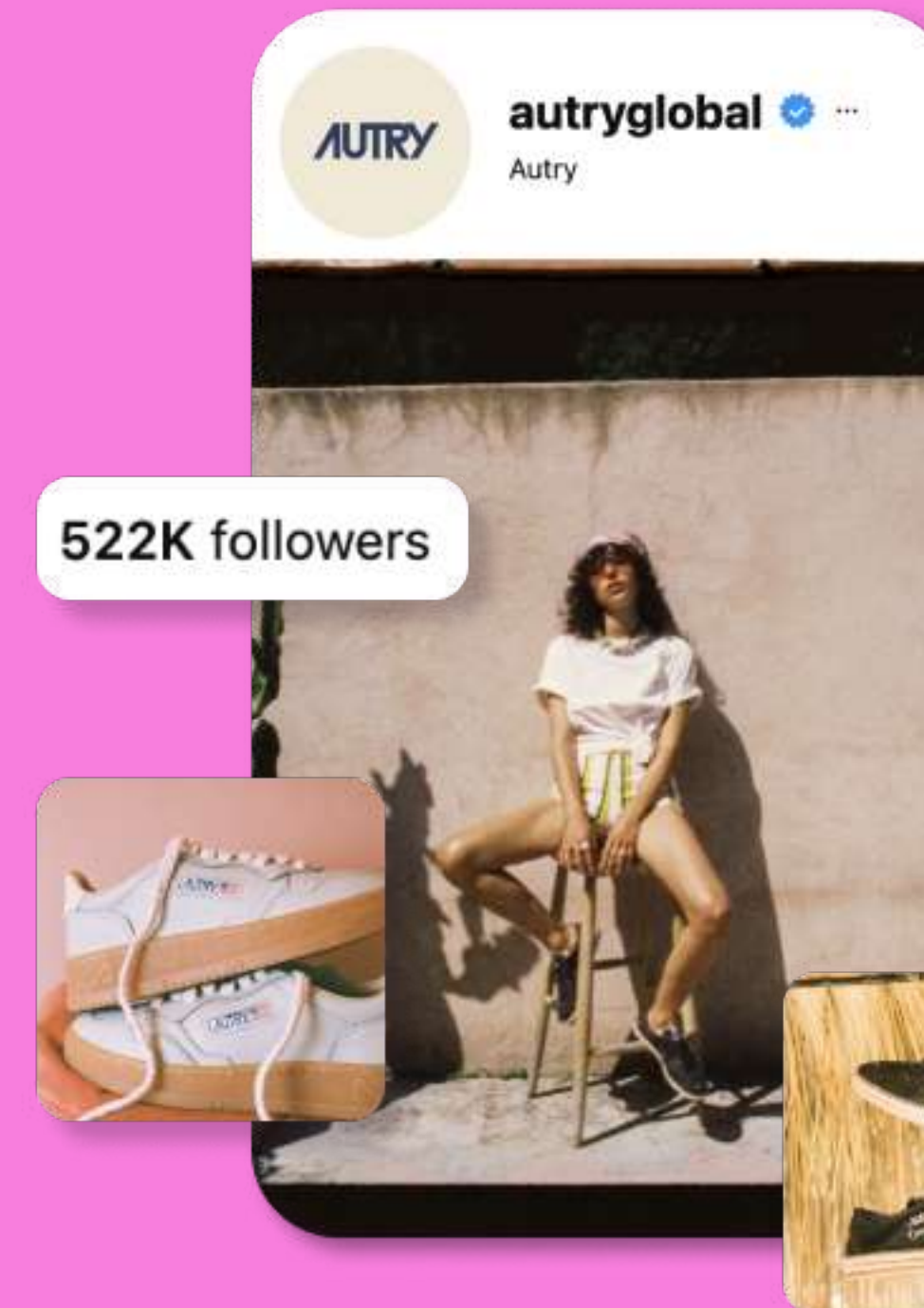
10× higher than accounts of the same category

131,7K reach

3.4× higher than accounts of the same category

226.9K views

3.3× higher than accounts of the same category



522K followers

43.3K interactions

18.2× higher than accounts of the same category

200K reach

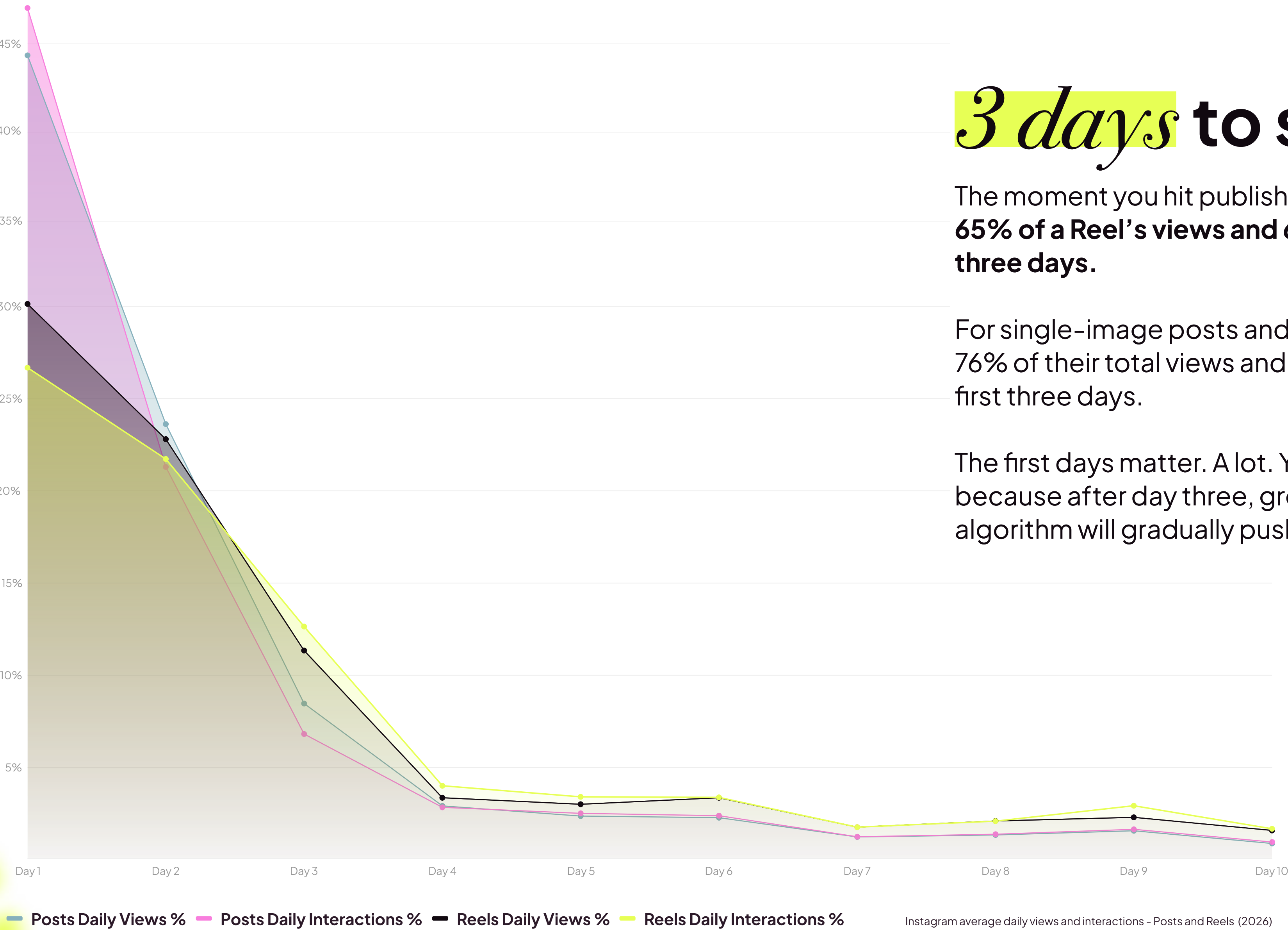
2.9× higher than accounts of the same category



70%
of Instagram *views*
happen in the first 3 days

metricool





3 days to shine

The moment you hit publish, the clock starts ticking. According to the data, **65% of a Reel’s views and 61% of its interactions happen within the first three days.**

For single-image posts and carousels, that window is even narrower, and 76% of their total views and 75% of their total interactions happen in those first three days.

The first days matter. A lot. Your content needs to catch attention fast because after day three, growth becomes much more gradual, and the algorithm will gradually push it into the background.

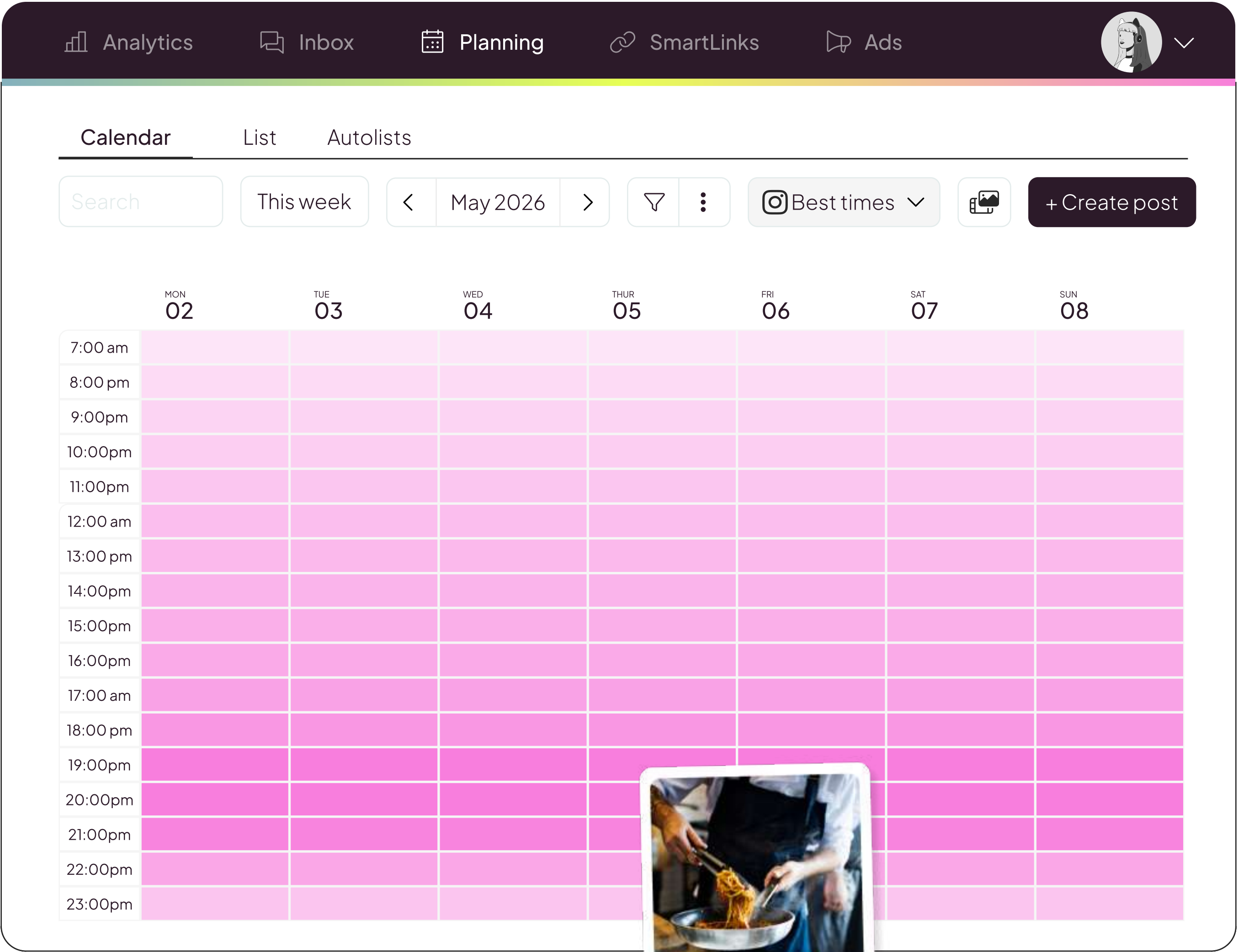
Prime *time*

The best time to post on Instagram is between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m., any day of the week. That’s when more people are online, which means more chances for your content to hit its view peak and reach the right audience.

Publish before or after that window, and you could be leaving views and reach on the table.

These are global averages. For times tailored to your specific audience, check your analytics in Metricool.

Create your Metricool account



Conclusions

- 1 Brands are publishing more content, and the effort is paying off: *Instagram views are up 27%*. Posts can now get views in different ways, from carousels being shown multiple times to content being saved, shared, or resurfaced. That's a clear signal to create posts with staying power.
- 2 *Format matters because it can be the difference between showing up and getting lost in the feed.* The algorithm pushes Reels in front of new audiences, boosting their reach, and keeps re-serving carousels, driving up their views. Single-image posts, however, are losing the most ground. Still, they can have a place in your content when there is a strategic reason behind them.
- 3 *People are spending more time watching Reels and engaging more with them.* Average Watch Time per Reel has increased 2.2x since 2025, and all interaction metrics have increased, with shares leading the way at 67%.

Conclusions

- 4 *Bye hashtags, hello natural language.* Instagram SEO is no longer optional in your strategy, as hashtags become less effective, with views down 31%; natural language in descriptions becomes essential. People are finding your content through the keywords you use, not the tags you add.
- 5 *Community is your growth engine.* If you want to increase your content's reach and interactions, start with the people who already follow you. Get them involved, make them feel part of the conversation, and engage with them. Asking them to leave a comment triples that metric, while including a question increases it by 37%.
- 6 *The first 3 days after publishing set the pace.* That's when your content captures most of its total performance: 65% of views and 61% of interactions on Reels, and 76% of views and 75% of interactions on single-image posts and carousels.

Methodology

Sample

All figures are averages per post, unless otherwise stated. Outliers were not removed, but accounts are segmented by follower size throughout the study. This means that accounts with millions of followers going viral won't skew the data for accounts with a few thousand followers. Each tier is analyzed independently.

Accounts with zero publications were excluded from the sample, as were individual posts with zero impressions or zero interactions.

Sample period

The study data covers the months of January and February of 2025 and 2026.

Growth

When we refer to growth, we mean that an account has gained enough followers to move up a tier. An account that gained followers but stayed within the same tier is not counted as having grown in this context, not because it didn't make progress, but because the threshold wasn't crossed. This is worth keeping in mind when comparing growth rates across tiers, since moving from Tiny to Small requires fewer new followers than moving from Medium to Big.

Best posting times

Best posting times are sourced directly from Instagram's API. Higher activity means more users are online and engaging with content during that window, increasing the likelihood your post will be seen. These times reflect when your audience is most active on the platform, not a guarantee of performance; results may vary depending on your specific audience and industry.

Metrics definitions

Views

The number of times your content is played, opened, or displayed (it includes repeat appearances).

Reach

The number of distinct users that saw your post. This number is an estimate and does not include repeat displays.

Interactions

(Likes, Comments, Saves and Shares): The number of likes, comments, and times your content was saved or shared by users.

Total view time

The total time users spent watching your Reel.

Average watch time

The average amount of time users spend watching your Reel.

Engagement rate

The ratio of interactions per view on a post, calculated as total interactions divided by total views. Interactions include reactions, comments, saves and shares.



metricool