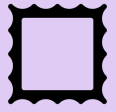


**PULSAR\***



## **What's Iconic today?**

How the shifting idea is redefining consumer behavior



## What does iconic mean to audiences today?

To be 'iconic' is part of the online lexicon, whether talking about a pop star, a look or a memeable moment.

Almost anything can be iconic, which many have argued saps the word of its meaning. Others, of course, could argue that this flexibility is precisely the point. Assuming the power to label something iconic suggests a democratising instinct that's embedded at the heart of online culture.

**Data Collection Period:** Sept 1<sup>st</sup> 2023 - Apr 17<sup>th</sup> 2024

### Channels:

- |           |           |                |               |
|-----------|-----------|----------------|---------------|
| X         | TikTok    | Blogs          | Broadcast     |
| Reddit    | Pinterest | Forums         | Radio         |
| Facebook  | Tumblr    | Online News    | Google Search |
| Instagram | YouTube   | Amazon Reviews |               |

### Markets/Languages:


Global data collection. Analysis in English-language


# A global, cross-platform conversation in 5M datapoints

Iconic is a word that stretches back through human history. From its classical roots denoting revered symbols to its contemporary manifestation as an often semi-ironic marker of greatness – it's use in different contexts has transformed its meaning.

And nowhere is the role of context clearer than when we turn our attention to the conversations playing out online. X, Instagram, Pinterest, TikTok and other social platforms each play host to different audiences and different connotations of the word.

If these platforms serve as the 'frontline' of popular culture, many of these usages and associations are then reflected across the mainstream, in broadcast newspapers, brand accounts and everyday conversation.





As wonderful as America Ferrera is in Barbie, her now iconic monologue being recognized but not Margot Robbie's subtle mannerism of experiencing what it is to be human is baffling. She IS the movie. #Oscars fumbled it real bad here.


Cultural Criticism






One of our favourite collections ❤️❤️❤️ Prada AW 2007. One of the best pieces are the shoes because they are great for all year round transition season #iconic

Brand Identity





Playing an iconic visual novel where a person gets stuck in a costume

Community Bonding



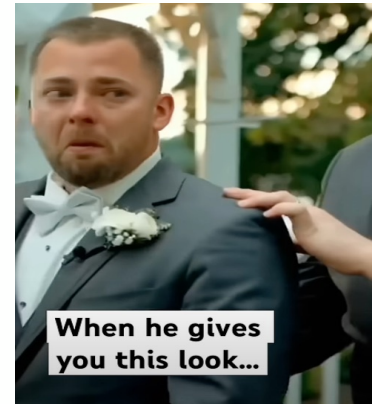


the "MEAN GIRLS" are back!

"Mean girls club member" OMG PERIOD #iconic #viral #2000s #y2k

Viral Moments





When he gives you this look...

My dog gave me an iconic look!

Online Humor

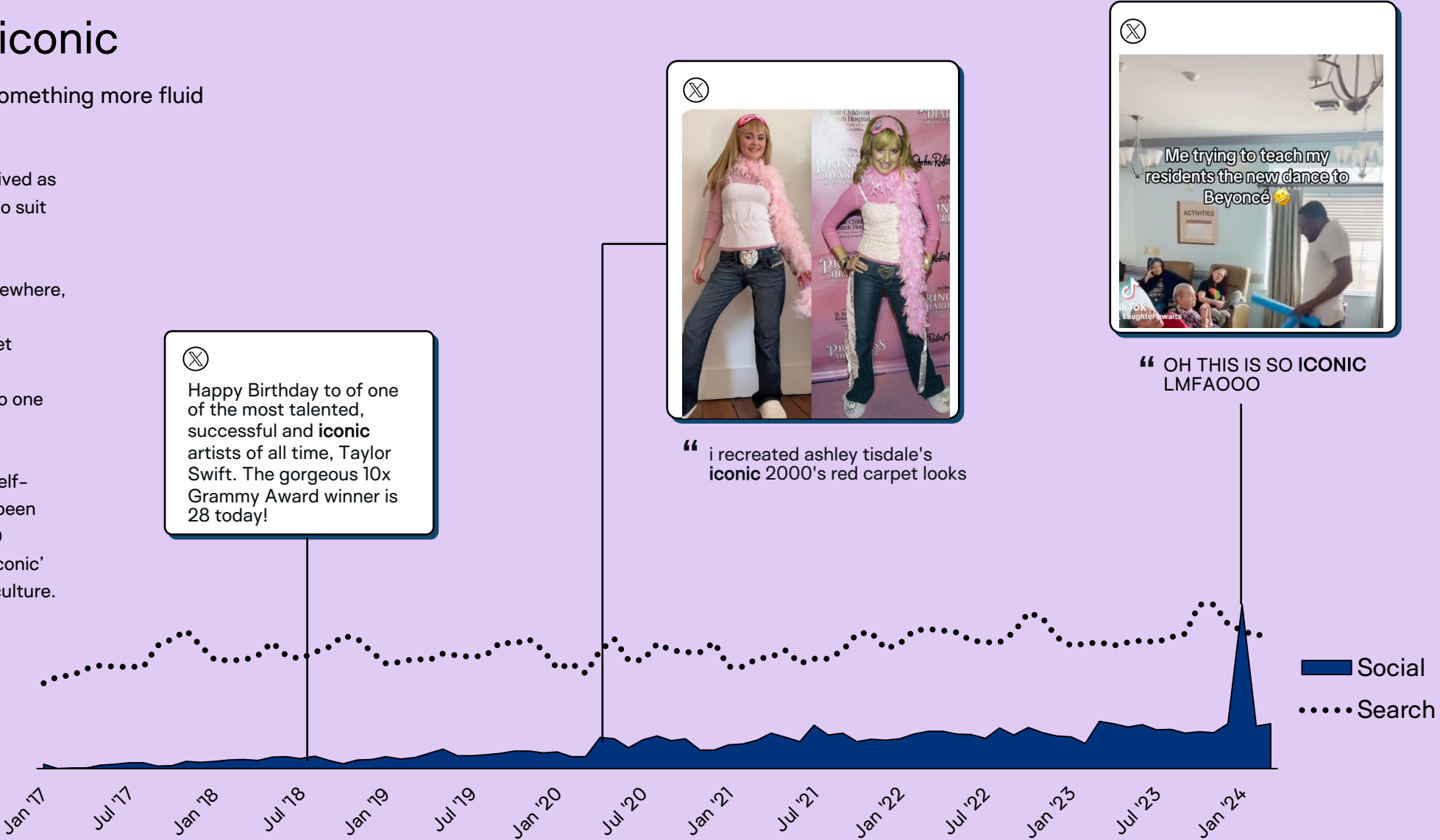
# The growth of the iconic

From iconography and nostalgia to something more fluid

If 'iconic' was once reserved for things perceived as truly exceptional, it has since been adapted to suit individual preferences.

Reflecting a 'nichification' of culture seen elsewhere, iconic has shed any sense of logical category definition (whether it's been influential to a set number of people, for instance) and is now predicated on the idea that what it is iconic to one person may well be unique to them.

To that extent, it's become an extension of self-identification. This process appears to have been turbo-charged over the course of the COVID lockdown, as nostalgic audiences revisited 'iconic' objects, such as those linked to Y2K revival culture.



Volumes of social mentions and search interest around Iconic across the globe, normalized, Jan 2017 – Mar 2024, Source: Pulsar TRENDS & Google Trends

# Where does the iconic occur?

Clearly, the idea of the iconic does not exist in a vacuum. It gains resonance from the concepts, objects and individuals its applied to.

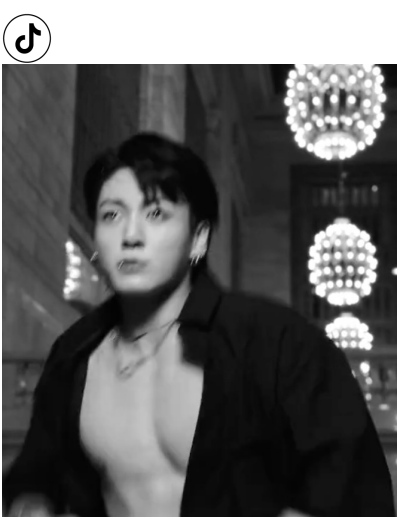
In overlaying mentions of the word against different categories, we sought to get some idea of how audiences use the phrase.

Fashion leads the way, but this was not always a strong correlation. Growth of 32% over the past year has been driven by both audiences and brands, with one notable instance being Calvin Klein's framing of its new collection as 'iconic'.

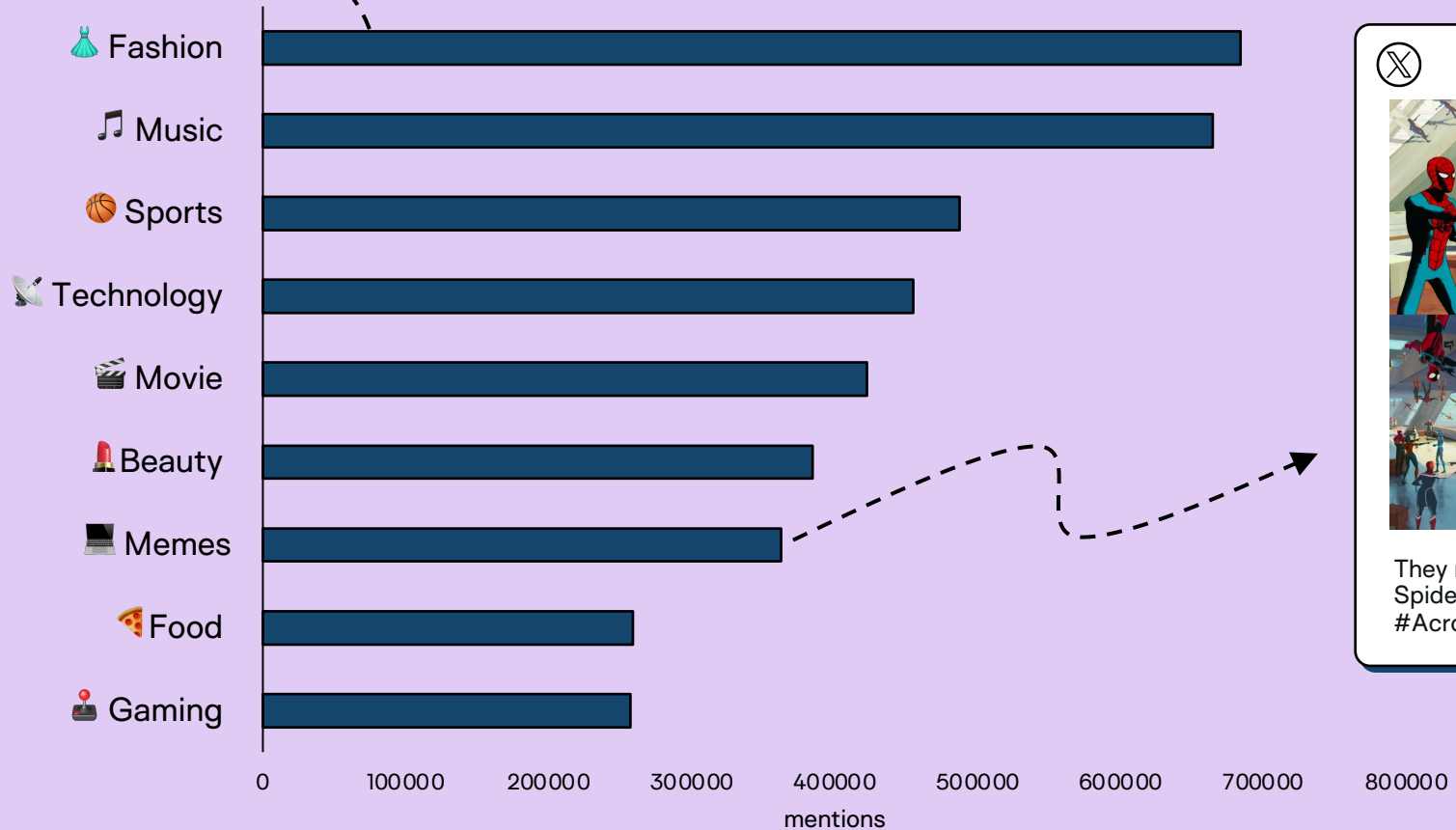
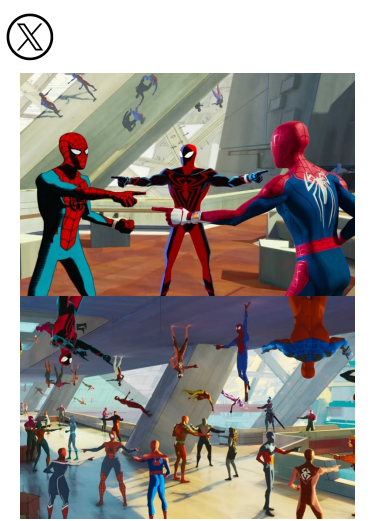
This typifies a kind of virtuous circle within fashion, in which fans are hungry to label the iconic – whether it emerges organically from communities, or from brands themselves.

Memes and internet culture have seen an upswing of 20% over the same period. These are notable in being entirely community-led, unlike fashion, music and sports, where there is some symbiosis between brand and consumer.

Memes, especially those bridging pre- and post-internet eras, tap into a universal nostalgia. Memes that seemed temporal and throwaway on first appearance become 'iconic' through popularity and the passage of time.



#JungKook in Calvin Klein. Experience bold denim silhouettes. Unbuttoned, iconic energy. Discover the new collection. By Mert Alas. #calvinklein

They recreated the iconic Spider-Man pointing meme #Acrossthespiderverse

# What type of thing can become iconic?

When we identify the concepts employed most frequently alongside 'iconic', the role of time becomes clearer still.

'Classic' or 'vintage' both cleave to more traditionalist series of connotations. And whereas previous years saw iconic status guarded more jealously by centralized tastemakers in the media, now it is applied more liberally by audiences to products, brands and the like.

But the look 'back' remains a continuous thread to this earlier conception of the word – even if modern audiences are looking back towards items and moments that were classed as 'low' culture at the time.

The explosion of the 'New' on the other hand is particularly noteworthy, as it often occurs in reference to some existing 'iconic' imagery being repurposed in some way, whether as aesthetic influence, via a remix, or with the release of a new product.

In each instance, the operating assumption is that the iconic is no longer something remote and untouchable, but something essentially collaborative, in which layers of successive meaning and creativity form a fluid, living cultural artefact.

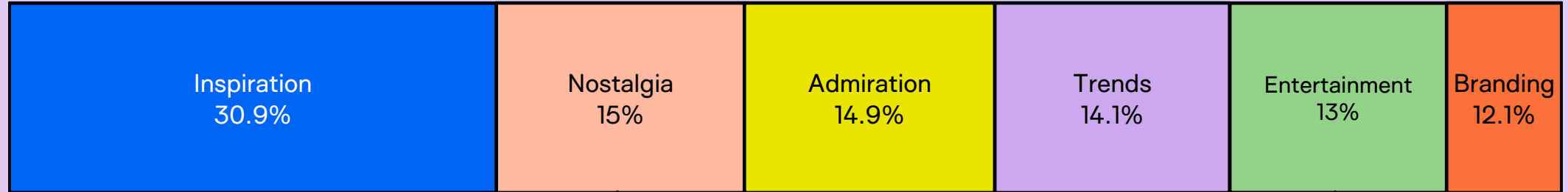


# Why is it iconic?

The primary catalyst behind discussions on the iconic appears to be inspiration. A noticeable trend among younger generations involves reinterpreting and reimagining past trends (such as outfits or makeup looks) within a new framework of representation.

The enduring influence of the Y2K trend speaks to the power of nostalgia, serving not only as a well of inspiration but also as a means of aligning with emerging cultural values with a sense of precedent and prestige. This is epitomized in the re-emergence of brands such as Stussy.

Memes play an important within this, acting as a vehicle for communicating emotions such as nostalgia, admiration and humor. Easily shareable across socials, they tap into shared cultural experiences, with online communities gathering around their shared understanding of the iconic.



Early 2000's Fashion Trends That Were Made Popular By Black Culture. And pieces you can buy now that are inspired by an iconic era.

getting the julia roberts cut today i'm so excited

Take a step back in time with these **iconic** 90s haircuts and hairstyles. From short and sassy to braids and bobs, we've got all the **inspiration** you need to create a modern twist on these retro looks.

Part 3 of a new series called Alternative History; a series where I will be sharing what I think should be in history text books but definitely won't be, and today we're focusing on the queen herself, Rihanna 🍷

"We don't get excited over simple things"

#relatable #friends #meme #fyp #iconic #slay

The rest of the late 80s saw some of the most iconic Stussy imagery come to life, drawing from a mix of music, pop culture, and riffing on mainstream trends.

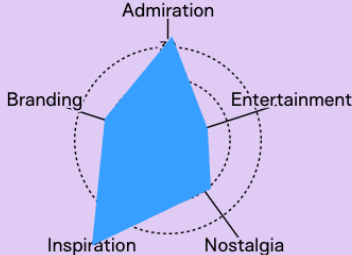
# Iconic: it means something different to different communities

When we analyze the distinct communities – which we’ve grouped according to shared online behaviors & affinities – a couple of clear trends emerge.

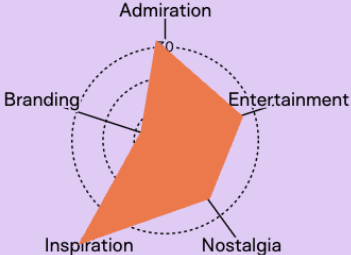
The first is the prevalence of ‘Brand’ loyalty amongst Swifties and K-Pop fans. These communities are quick to assign the objects of their fandom the status of icon.

Communities with deep wells of shared cultural reference, such as Memelords and Gaming & Anime fans, meanwhile, tend to employ the phrase more archly and with a sense of mischief.

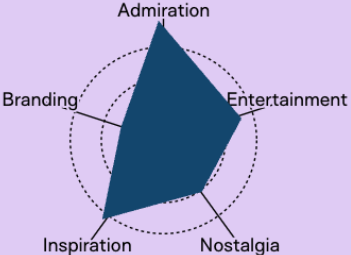
News Fans



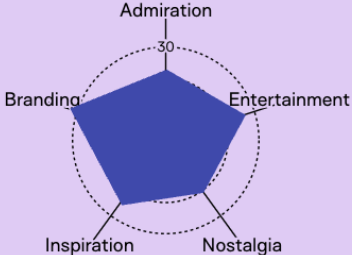
Gaming & Anime Fans



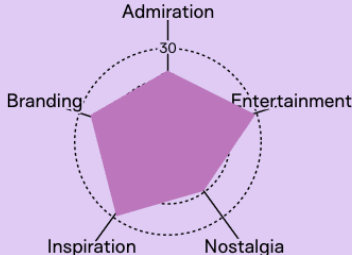
Sports Buffs



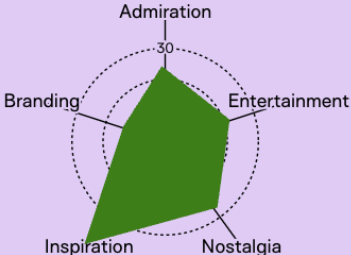
Swifties



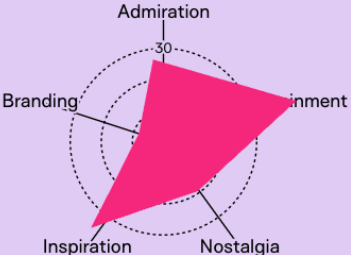
K-Pop Stans



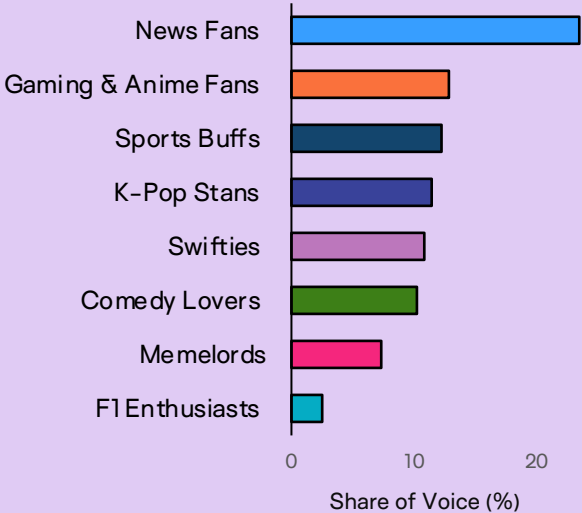
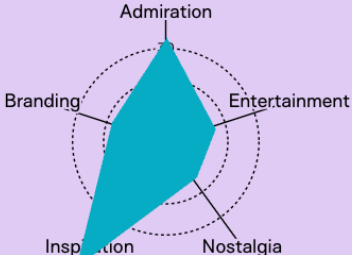
Comedy Lovers



Memelords



F1 Enthusiasts





What does it mean for a brand – or person – to attain iconic status?



What makes this iconic? The hair or the jacket? Chelsea fans and baseless analogies





## Nike rides wave of nineties and noughties nostalgia

Nike is most often cited as 'iconic' when the conversation turns to its products – but it's important to note that these often happen in conjunction with each of the other three categories defined here: culture, moments and individuals & institutions.

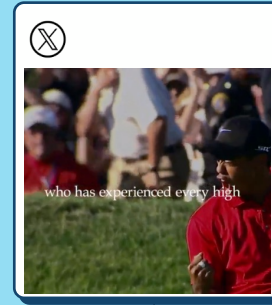
A mention of a sporting moment or star, for instance, will often bring with it an explicit mention of a product. This is very much a 'sweet spot' for the brand to be in, as the broader conversation around Nike remains vital and audience-led, whilst still circling back to the brand's core offering.

One thing that might have complicated this picture, were it not for the business astuteness of the brand, is how much of recent conversation has centred on the nineties and noughties. Nostalgia for this time is well-established. But Nike risked losing some degree of relevancy by becoming too associated with the recent past. There's a thin line between retro and unfashionable.

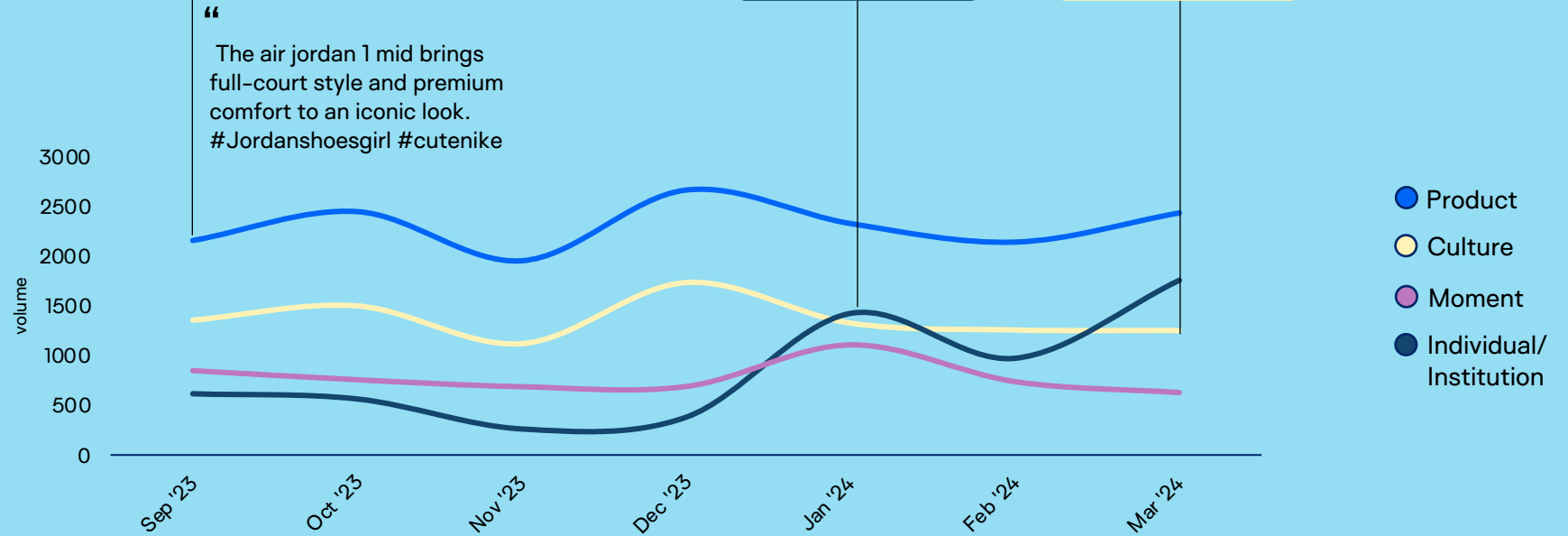
But the reissue of 'iconic' products, and the reaffirming of links with a figure like Michael Jordan (who transcends these different time periods), allowed the brand to spin this into an additional source of revenue.



“ The Nike ad after Tiger Woods won the 2019 Masters was special. It has to be one of the most iconic brand partnerships in sports history



“ In Tim Burton's "Batman" (1989) introducing Michael Keaton in the title role, Keaton wore a pair of custom Nike Air Trainer Bat Boots.





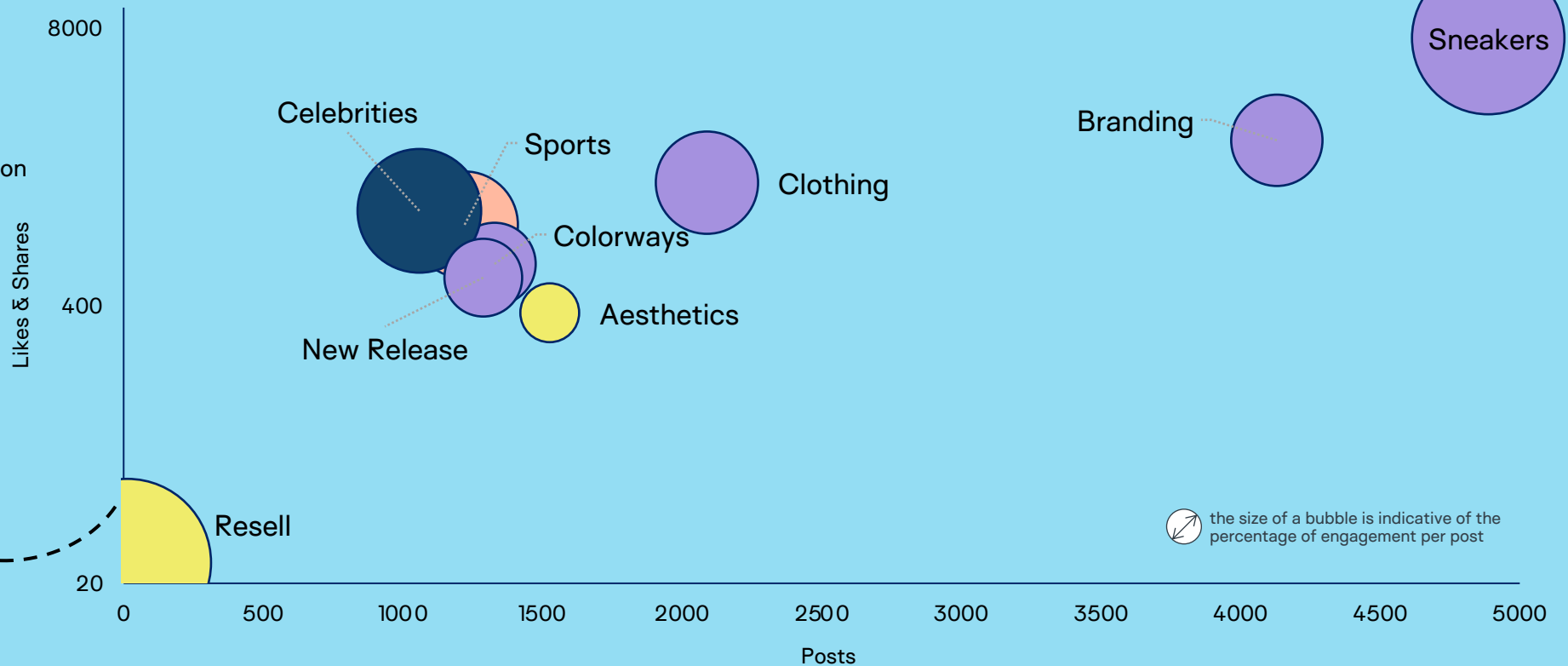
# Nike: it's all about the product

Nike's intelligent repurposing of previous lines is reflected in the prominence of 'new releases' as a term. Except it's not just Nike themselves who sell the brand's products – resellers are also apt to deploy the phrase when looking to talk up vintage or second-hand offerings.


This burgeoning resell culture ultimately ends up being good for the brand – despite it acting somewhat at odds with Nike's own attempts to control the flow of goods into the market. This has become a very active point of discussion online as the size – which reflects engagement levels – of the 'resell' bubble suggests.

But the reason that this resell culture ultimately ends up being good for the brand, despite accusations of oversaturation, is that it creates an incentivized community of sneaker fanatics whose inventories and collections depends on a continued acceptance that Nike remains premium, aspirational and 'iconic'.

- Product
- Culture
- Moment
- Individual/Institution



 Sneakers like Jordans have the highest resale value and many Kyries, LeBrons, KDs and Freaks have also climbed in value over the last few years. These are all under Nike. They are names of NBA players with their own sneaker line under Nike.

 the size of a bubble is indicative of the percentage of engagement per post



# Formula 1: new audiences bring their own sense of the 'iconic'

Formula One, once synonymous with predominately male sports fans, is seeing a notable development in its audience – and in how the 'iconic' is framed.

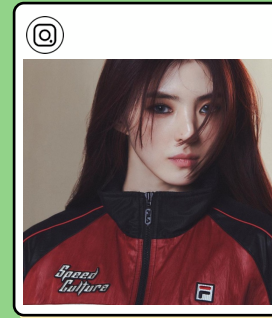
Clearly, sporting events remain the biggest driver of conversation, with championship wins accounting for a large fraction of overall conversation.

But as the sport diversifies its audience following the release of documentary *Drive to Survive*, a new wave of fans are relating to F1 in different ways.

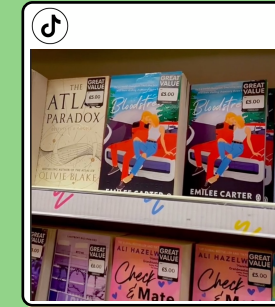
Many of these younger, female enthusiasts manifest their fandom in novel forms, blending aesthetics and cultural trends like Motorcore and F1 romance BookTok, in which the 'iconic' is framed aesthetically or else as the result of communal creativity.



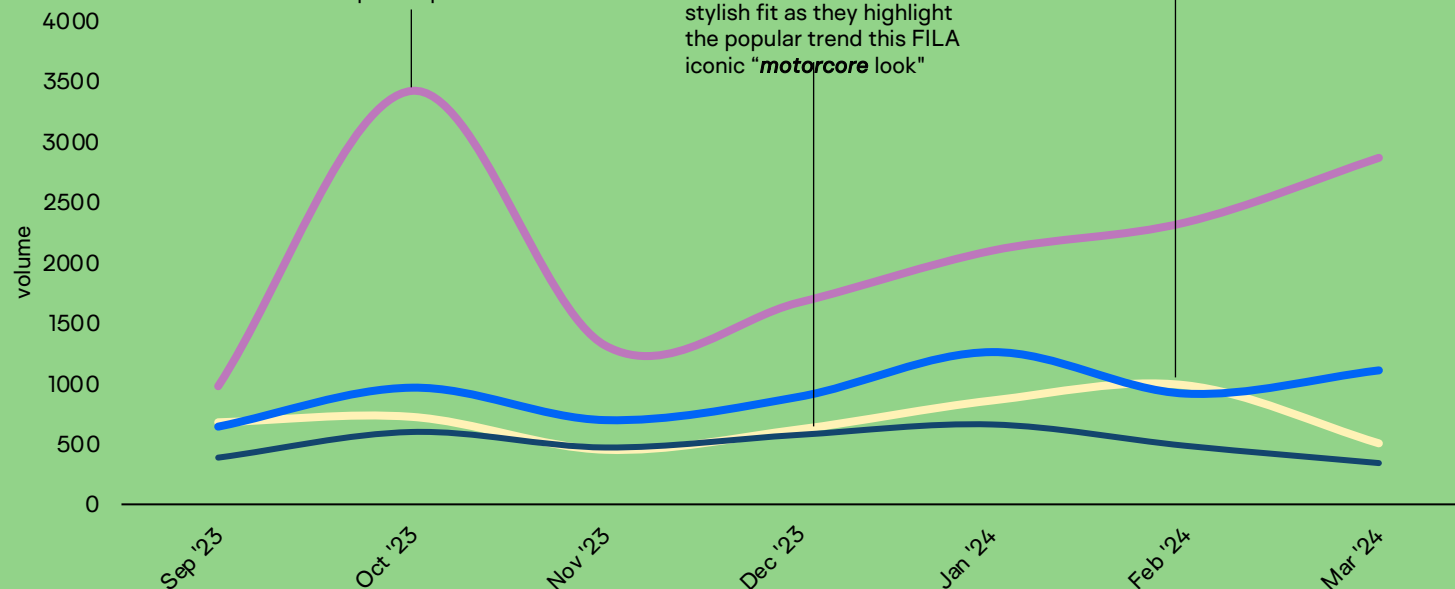
“ 10 years ago today, Sebastian Vettel gave us one of the most iconic photos in **F1 history** after securing his fourth World Championship 🏆🏆🏆🏆”



“ Check this relaxed and stylish fit as they highlight the popular trend this FILA iconic “**motorcore** look”



“ i BEG that this gives 2013 one direction fanfic vibes 🙏💕 new f1 book#formula1 #booktok #iconic”





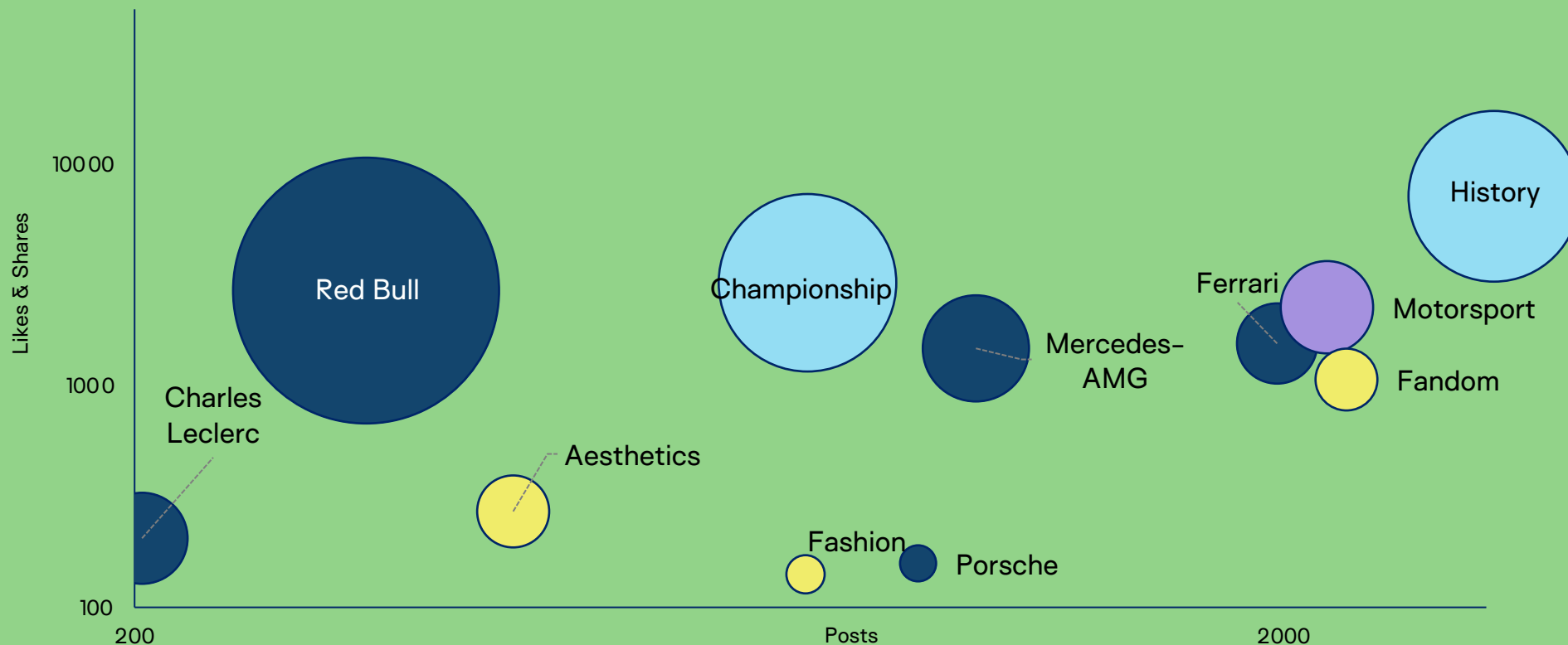
# Girlies & fashion culture drives into the heart of F1 fandom

Much of the conversation about Formula 1's iconic moments takes place on forums dedicated to the topic, such as subreddits and forums, in which they're viewed retrospectively by long-term fans.

TikTok, meanwhile, offers an alternative vehicle for communicating iconic moments – largely centred around heavily soundtracked clips of racing victories.

Things are slightly different for the newer cohort of female fans, who are more commonly found on visually-led platforms like Instagram, Pinterest and (again) TikTok

For now, iconic fashion or iconic aesthetics do not attain the same engagement or reach as the more conventional content – but this is simply because their community within the wider audience is smaller. There is plenty of potential for growth.



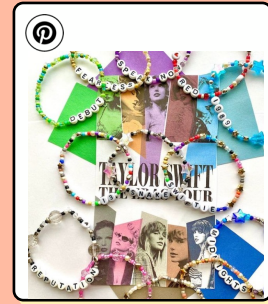


# Taylor Swift – creating an iconic persona in realtime

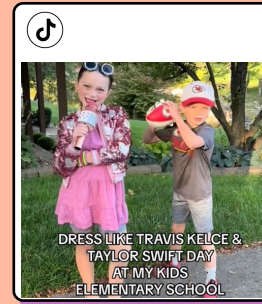
When exploring Taylor Swift as a brand, it's intriguing to observe how her iconic presence goes beyond her music and career, shaped by a diverse array of cultural phenomena.

Swifties, her devoted fan base, continually contribute to this iconic association by launching products that foster a sense of unity among global fandoms, such as bracelets and clothing. These items resonate with the "girlies" aesthetic and serve as a source of inspiration for fans.

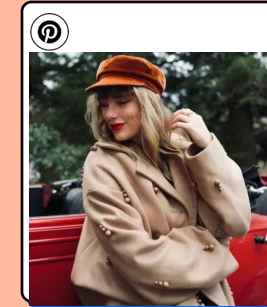
Taylor Swift's influence transcends her fan base, as even non-Swifties participate in the conversation, transforming her personal moments into memes and further amplifying her iconic status.



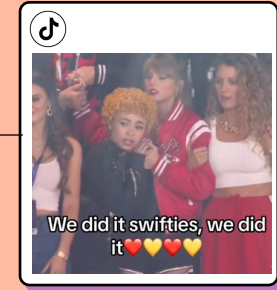
“ This product Includes 13 Taylor Swift Eras Tour Inspired Friendship Bracelets! With the Eras Tour underway, Swifties have decided it would be fun to trade friendship bracelets at the Eras Tour with each other



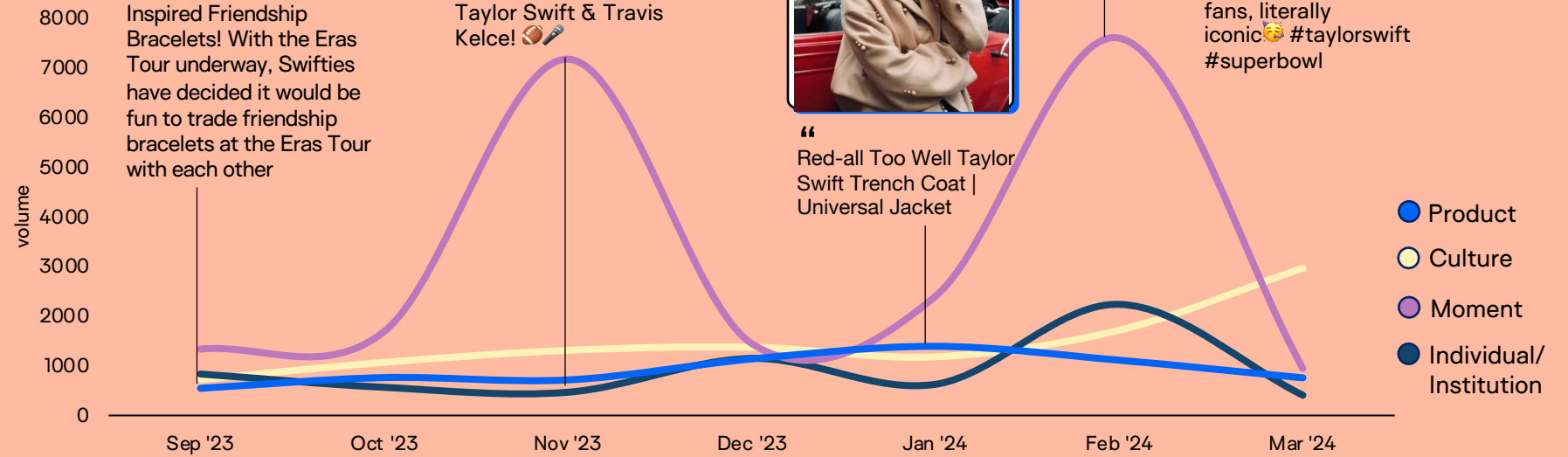
“ An iconic spirit day at school today! Dress like Taylor Swift & Travis Kelce! 🏈🎤



“ Red-all Too Well Taylor Swift Trench Coat | Universal Jacket



“ Many swifties won the superbowl i. the same year they became football fans, literally iconic 🤪 #taylorswift #superbowl

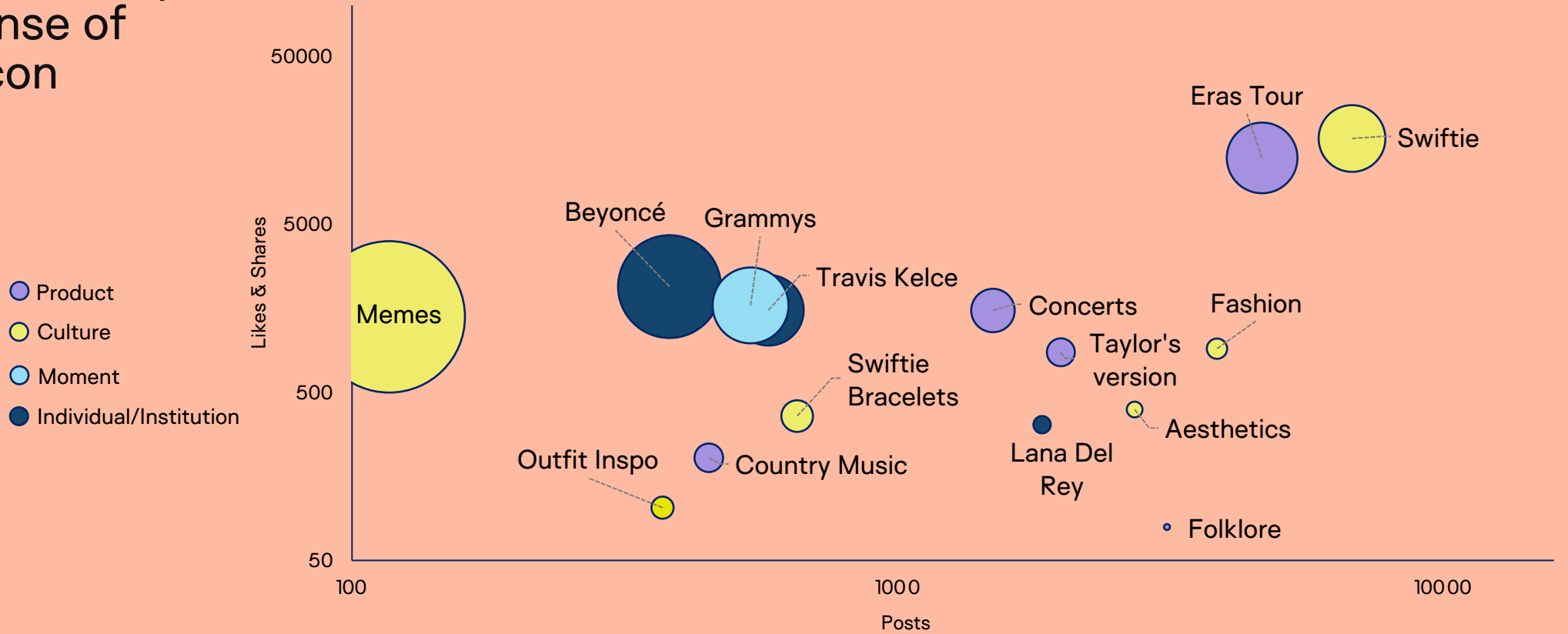




# Audience of 'Swifties' tirelessly project sense of artist as icon

Taylor Swift's status as an icon reverberates across various spheres. While fandom-driven elements like bracelets, outfit inspo and aesthetics find resonance amongst 'Swifties', the community's impact is most felt when it comes to malignifying the impact of signature moments—often ignited by her relationships or public appearances— which regularly evolve into memes.

Swifties also continuously contribute to Taylor Swift's branding memes outside of flashpoints like the SuperBowl of Eras tour, by creating "edits" that remix different moments, aesthetics and musical cues into something approach a Taylorverse of related. This parasocial creation fosters stronger connections within fandoms, amplifying their shared experiences.



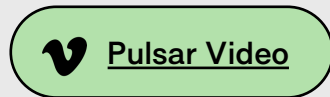
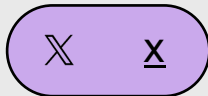
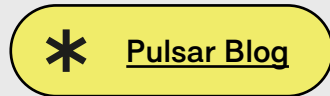
the size of a bubble is indicative of the percentage of engagement per post

## About Pulsar

Pulsar is the world’s leading audience intelligence platform—harnessing rich data sets, AI and human minds – so our clients can access nuanced and actionable insights that get straight to what matters most to their customers, their businesses and to society.

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