

emotional ROI

A case study on what users **really** want when shopping.

Mrinalini Keskar

Emotional ROI

= Did this purchase make you more yourself?

Traditional search assumes:

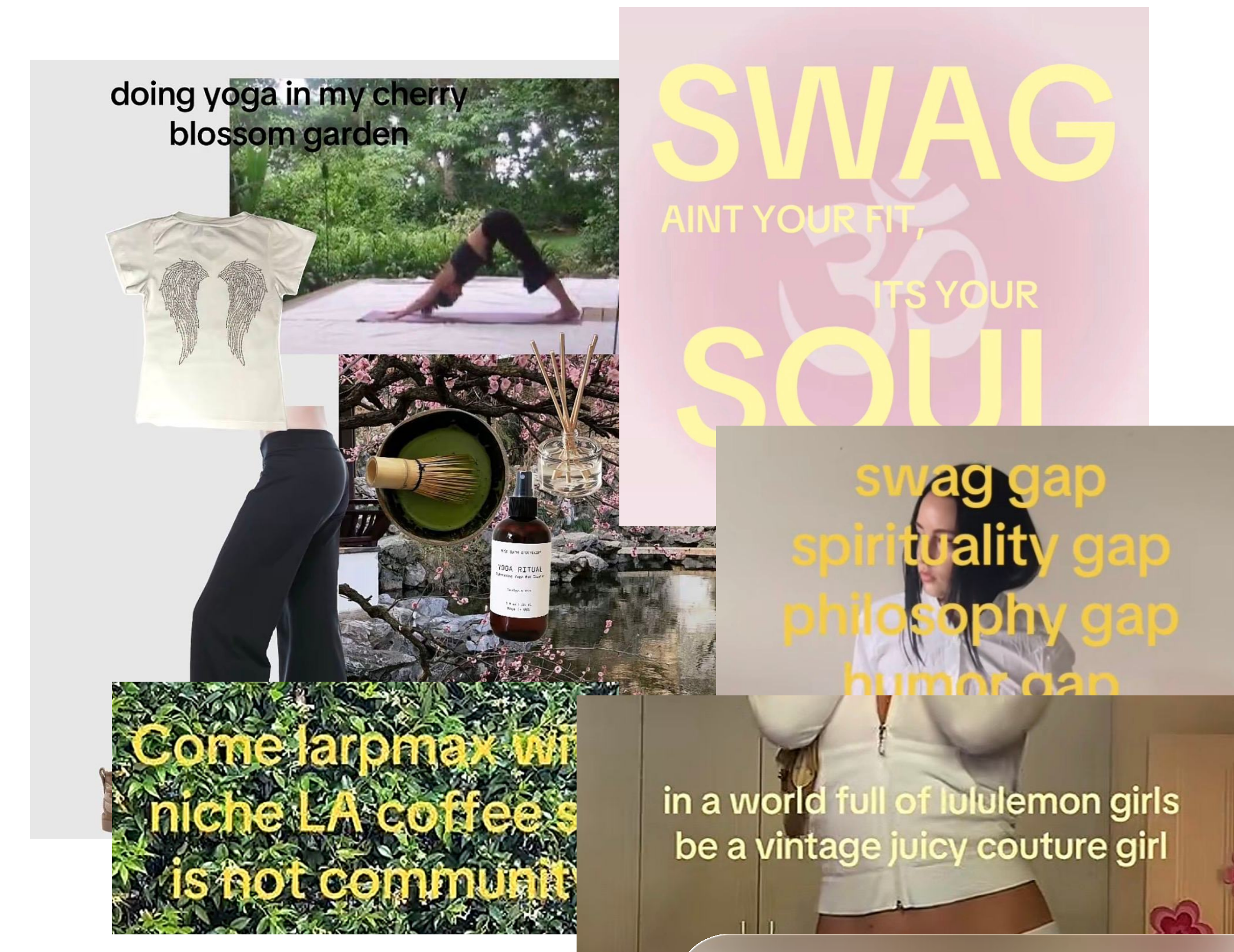
"I know what I want"

But discovery begins with:

"I know how I want to feel."

Gen-Z speaks semantically

“doing yoga in my cherry blossom garden”
is a real query.



#swag #japan #aura #niche

→ more like this...

The product's
job is to turn a
chunk of
words into a
signal.

Inspiration is Aspiration

A niche aesthetic is an ecosystem of a full life.

what i'd wear: breaking up with my founder boyfriend at Nobu Malibu



Each item signals lifestyle, identity, alignment

A product helps construct a coherent self across fragmented inputs.

Gen-Z craves hybrid identities

#lockedin and
#romanticizing

Chronically Offline,
simultaneously
Trend-Literate.

AI-curious, but AI-
cautious.



#offline
257.9K posts

Contradiction is
the shape of self,
but rec algorithms
flatten the
consumer

This mismatch
results in regretted
purchases

(60% of Gen-Z reports
regretting purchases, vs
21% of Gen-X)

A good product
handles nuance.

Commerce is the downstream of culture

Community is the generative layer

Social apps create the culture that shopping apps consume:

eurosummer existed on social before any shopping app could sell it.

The primary social object is the aspirational self, not the transaction.

Pinterest is closer to this, because the social object is the vibe.

Depop's social object is the listing.

Jevon's Paradox

Apps optimized for impulse, efficiency, and viral trends lead to more time spent shopping

Impulse buying on TikTok produces return rates about 23% higher than traditional e-commerce

Consumption increases with efficiency, so better discovery does not automatically mean better outcomes.

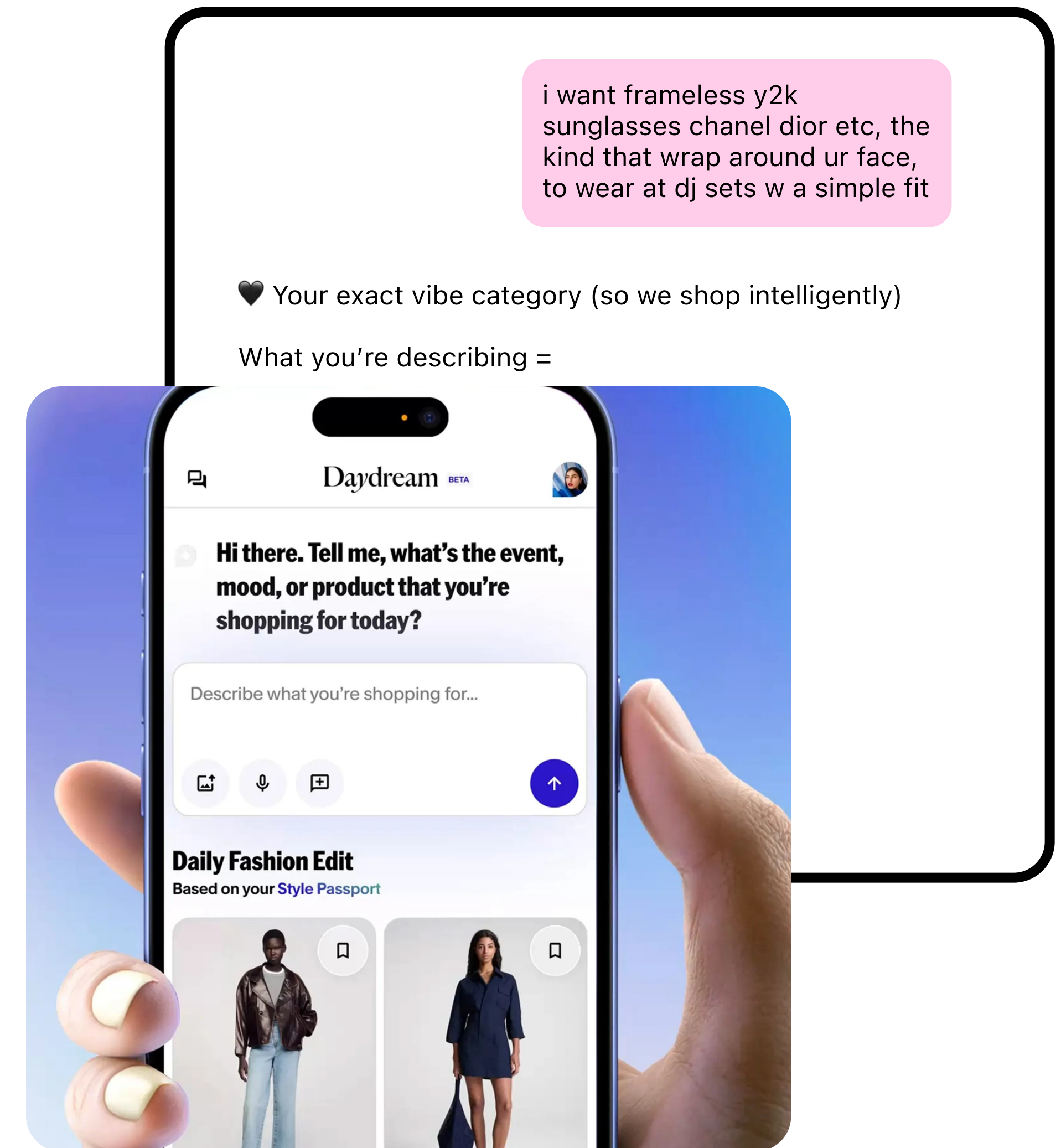
The same technology produces overconsumption or Emotional ROI depending on what it's told to maximize.

Vertical AI Search, Horizontal AI Assistants

LLMs like ChatGPT and Gemini, and assistants like Daydream can name the vibe

However, discovery is highly individual, based around only the prompt and content that the user entered

Additionally, recommendations are optimized for response time.

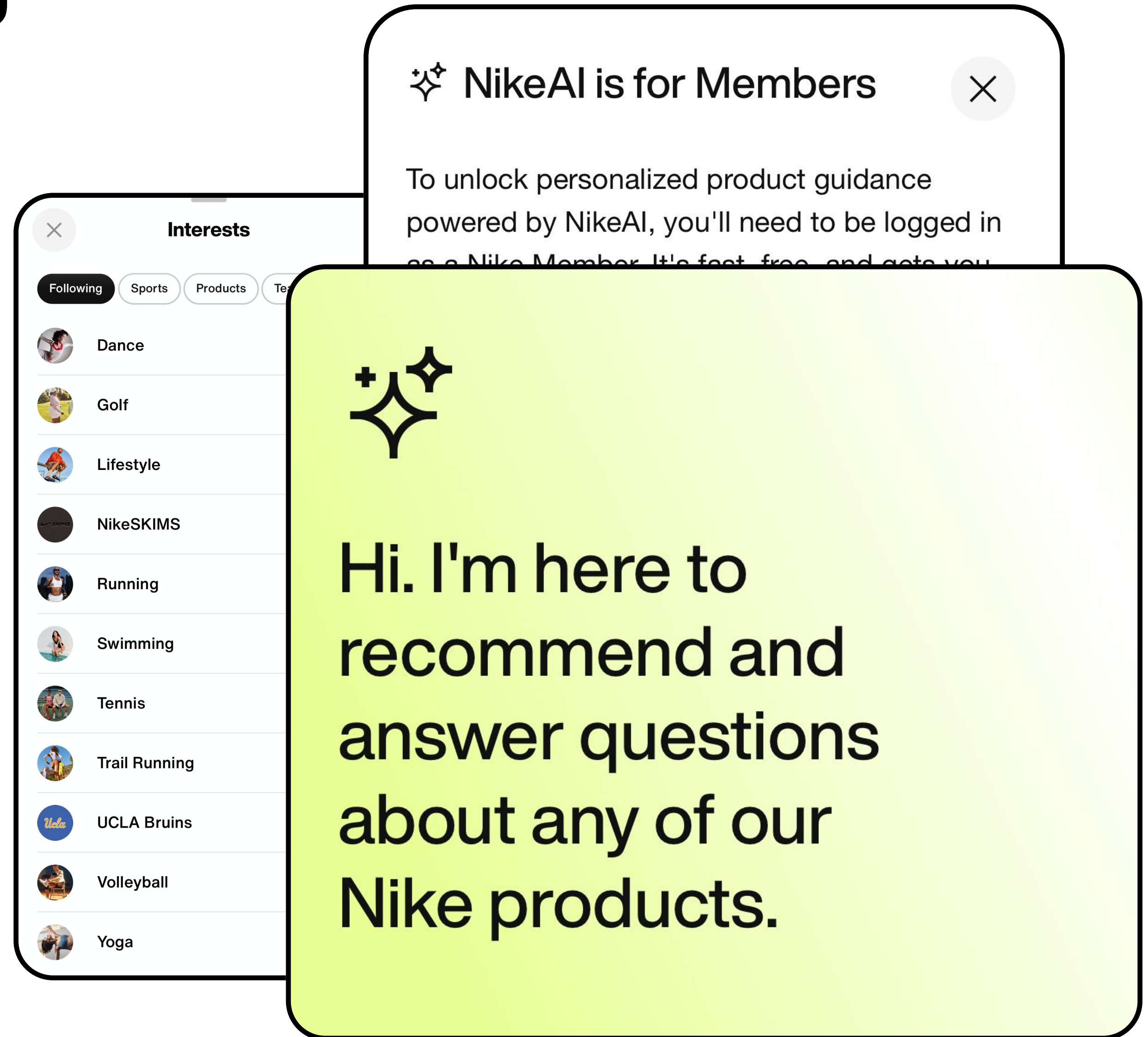


The DTC Lag

Most DTC relies on traditional search and browsing.

DTC misses out when vertical AI search directs consumer attention to *some*, not all brands.

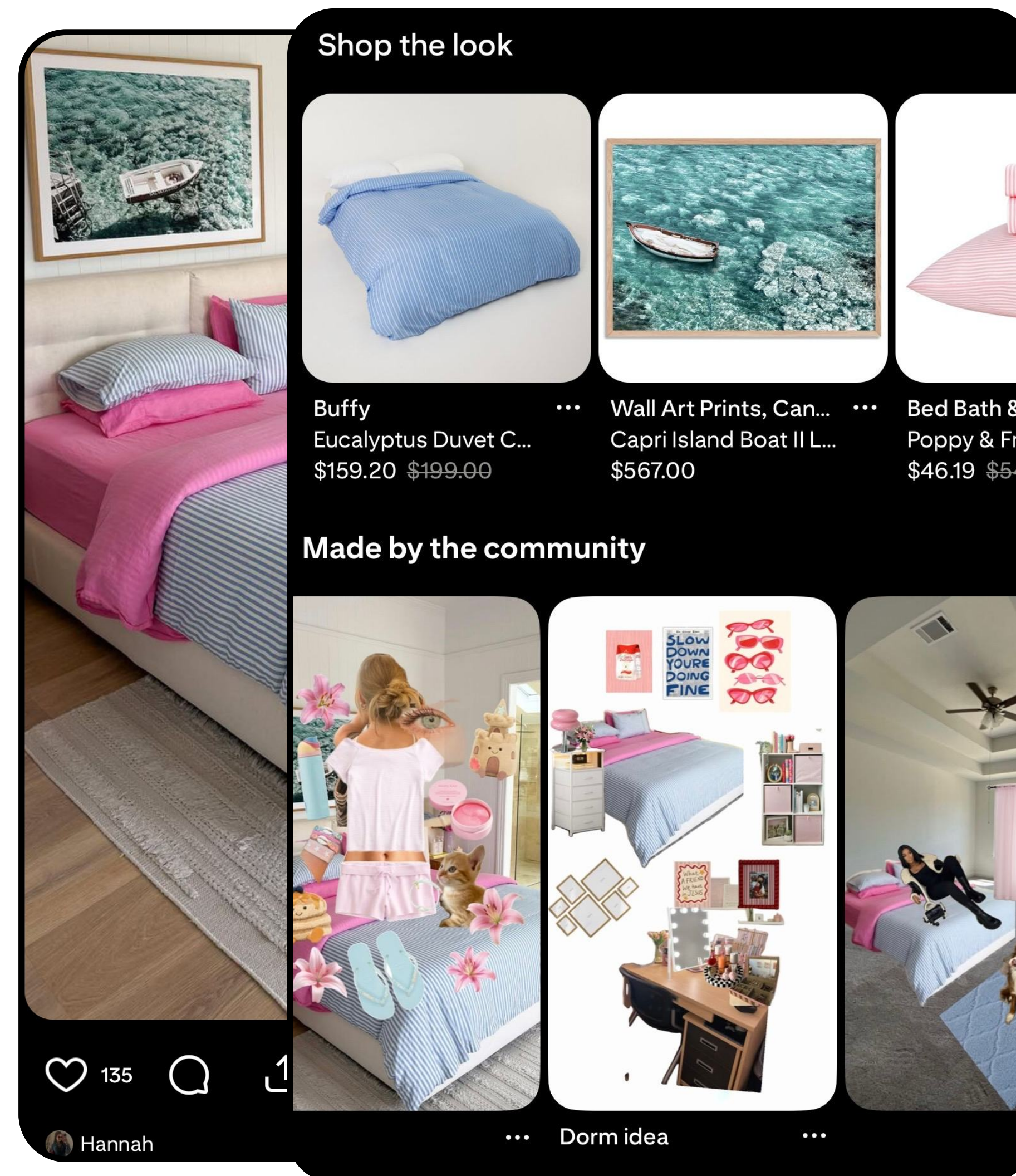
Exceptions like Nike utilize branded AI assistants, but identity isn't constructed inside one brand



Incumbents leveling up

The strongest contenders **lead with social discovery**, recommendations bolstered on second

Pinterest's Taste Graph understands content **and** taste



But Pinterest is ad-funded,

So it optimizes for time on app, not purchases kept

The Objective Function

Every app optimizes for what pays it:

Impulse buys on tiktok return ~23% more often

\$100B+ just to process it

\$850B/yr goes back

**Optimize for satisfaction instead: confidence, fit, retention,
fewer regrets.**

Live in my taste map

Beyond simple social graphs, use aesthetic graphs that includes people

Connect users across visuals, emotion, communities, moods, references

Optimize for identity continuity, emotional resonance, aspirational alignment and cultural exploration

Higher emotional ROI → fewer returns → higher satisfaction

How it works

Computer vision on every screen:

(image, action recognition, scene & style classification)

speech-to-text

OCR on text overlays

analysis on audio tracks

Every post is 'tagged', signaled with attributes that may have never been named by the creator.

Take in input jointly for intuitive and vibe-based browsing

Answer style questions with audio + text + visual inputs in one query

TikTok already does this, it just doesn't tell you what they found

How it works

The product gets smarter and more user-specific with continued use, understands global context, silhouette, aura, vibe.

because the same query means different things for different people
in different places.

football 🏈 vs football ⚽

The case against personalization

Overconsumption is not self-expression, and personality is not fixed.

Hyper-personalization traps users in a loop of themselves, hindering growth, empathy, and learning.

So build in randomness.

Allow exploration, contradiction, and flexibility.

A good product leaves room for you to change your mind.

What's next?

Test:

Does semantic search increase purchase confidence?

Does a feedback loop reduce returns?

Compare:

The profit of confident purchasing vs. ad-revenue based monetization

What's next is what's missing: the middle of the funnel, the grounds between seeing and buying.

Where you discover, connect, and figure out who you are

We don't have a product willing to make money from you being right, rather than restless

Identity signaling is evolving,

Commerce can adapt.