New Brandwatch Research Reveals the 'Question Gap' Between Search Intent and Social Context

Analysis of car buyer questions shows how search engine intelligence reveals what consumers want to know, while social intelligence reveals the context behind their decisions

CHICAGO, June 4, 2026 /PRNewswire/ -- Brandwatch, a Cision company and a global leader in social intelligence and social media management, has released a new research report, *The Question Gap: How Consumers Use Search and Social When Making Decisions*.

"Our research reveals that brands can miss important parts of the consumer journey when they look at search intelligence and social intelligence in isolation…When brands connect these intelligence signals, they get a clearer view of what consumers care about, what is holding them back, and when they are ready to act."

The report highlights a critical blind spot in modern market intelligence: Brands that rely on signals from traditional search intelligence may understand what consumers want to know, but miss the context behind why they are asking. Brands that rely only on social intelligence may understand consumer concerns and emotions, but miss the high intent moments that spark these conversations.

Based on an analysis of thousands of consumer questions about automotive purchases across traditional search engines and social platforms, the study identifies a distinct "question gap": a stark behavioral contrast between the objective, fact-based signals captured through search intelligence (such as Google or Bing queries) and the longer, context-rich conversations surfaced through social intelligence across platforms like Reddit, Facebook groups, and niche online forums.

The Context Behind the Query: What vs. Why

The study found a dramatic structural divergence in how people frame queries depending on the intelligence source.

- **Traditional search intelligence is factual and concise:** Traditional search queries averaged 5.4 words, focusing largely on fact-finding and the immediate information customers need.
- **Social search intelligence is descriptive, context-heavy and evaluative:**Questions posed on social media and online forums averaged 113.8 words, providing deeper context around the "why" behind the query and often focusing on evaluation, reassurance, and advice.

"Our research reveals that brands can miss important parts of the consumer journey when they look at search intelligence and social intelligence in isolation," said Amy Jones, Chief Marketing Officer of Cision. "Search can show what people want to know. Social can show the context, emotion, and validation behind the decision. When brands connect these intelligence signals, they get a clearer view of what consumers care about, what is holding them back, and when they are ready to act."

The Three "Question Mindsets"

The research indicates that the modern consumer journey does not move in a straight line, but rather loops across three distinct question mindsets, which only comes into full view when combining search intelligence and social intelligence:

- Information-oriented questions – factual, feature-focused queries
- Decision and validation questions – community-driven requests for advice or reassurance
- Context and timing questions – highly nuanced, long-form narratives tied to life transitions of changing personal circumstances

While the analysis focuses on automotive buying-related searches, the findings reflect a broader pattern in consumer decision-making. A parallel analysis for a major chocolate brand found that search intelligence captured practical, immediate purchasing priorities (such as sugar-free or dietary needs), while social search intelligence captured the aspirational, sensory, and cultural expectations driving brand affinity.

Closing the Gap

To help organizations close this gap, the report details a practical application framework for how brands can combine search intelligence with social intelligence. By connecting signals across these channels, brands can better understand customer journeys, identify unmet needs, and build marketing strategies that reflect how consumers actually make decisions.

Download *The Question Gap* report

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Media Contact:
Cision Public Relations
CisionPR@cision.com

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