



The Strategic Power of OSINT
for Creative Agencies

Driving Exceptional Brand Strategy and Visual Content Marketing

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Research is a driving force behind any strategy and so understanding what your data is telling you is vital to the success of your strategy.¹

Simon Kingsnorth

Introduction

In today's competitive landscape, creativity is not enough. Most successful campaigns aren't just creative – they are grounded in data, sharpened by a deep understanding of cultural context, and strategically aligned with what audiences truly care about.

Imagine a fashion brand about to launch a new limited-edition sneaker line aimed at Generation Z shoppers in the United States. After weeks of polishing the visuals, the creative team is confident that their bold color palette and street-wear silhouette will be a perfect fit. However, on launch day it is evident that users are not very fond of the design to which they refer to as "out-of-touch" and the campaign is a failure.

Unfortunately, the company was not aware of a trend that showed up a few weeks earlier on TikTok among their ideal customers where viral memes (mostly created by creators in the Midwest and the Pacific Northwest) featured hand-stitched details and pastel hues under the tags #cottagecore and #vintagefashion. Had the agency been monitoring different channels in the domain of publicly available information in real time, they could have changed the campaign's visual content marketing strategy before

launch day and turned this campaign into success.

This is a great example of why Open Source Intelligence (OSINT – using publicly available information and turning it into actionable intelligence) is a crucial component of any creative team's repertoire of skills and strategies. By systematically collecting, processing, validating and analyzing publicly available information, creative teams or agencies can gain valuable insight and infuse every stage of their visual content creation as well as brand strategy and design with evidence-backed data that will serve as the foundation of every successful strategy.

In this post we will explore why OSINT belongs in every creative brief, how it directly shapes your creative assets, and why partnering with an agency that uses this approach gives you a significant advantage in today's competitive marketplace.



What is OSINT?

While a quick Google search is the most basic form of data collection within OSINT, a true OSINT methodology is much more sophisticated. OSINT refers to the collection, processing, evaluation, analysis, and dissemination of publicly available information, commonly drawn from online sources, to inform decision-making.

Traditionally used by national security and law enforcement, OSINT has, in recent years, become an indispensable resource for a wide range of fields, including corporate security, threat intelligence, disaster response, investigative journalism, and many other fields. The same methodologies used to safeguard national security, corporations and institutions can be used to discover hidden interests of your audience, reveal emerging visual trends and identify the competitive voids that will make your next campaign truly stand out.

The true power of OSINT does not lie in the data itself, but in the thorough source evaluation and systematic analysis applied

to it. Without both of those, agencies risk misinformed strategies, reputational damage and loss of client trust.

By leveraging OSINT, creative teams can effectively answer questions such as:

- What visual language resonates most with your target audience right now?
- Which cultural conversations are gaining momentum that your brand can authentically join?
- What sustainability messages are competitors promoting, and what opportunities are they missing that your brand could highlight?

Global data
creation volume
is massive

more than
400 million
terabytes of data
generated every day

Used in a [GDIT](#) commentary on OSINT

For a more concrete understanding of its benefits, the table below highlights the key attributes of OSINT that add value to creative agencies.

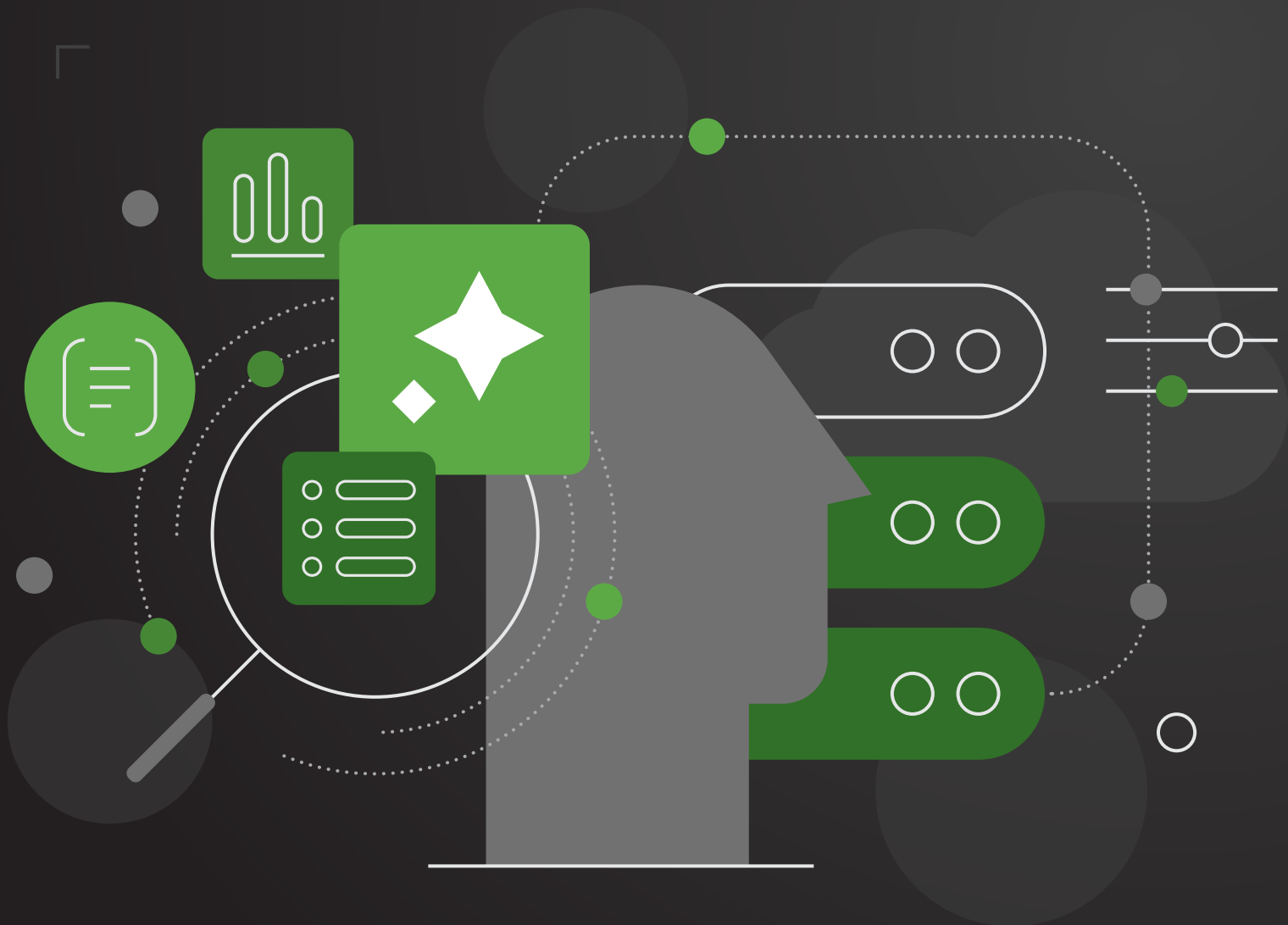
Table 1. Key Attributes of OSINT for Creative Agencies

Attribute	What it Means for Creative Projects
Systematic process	It uses a structured, repeatable workflow to ensure insights are comprehensive and dependable
Verifying against multiple sources	Confirms trends, insights, or audience behaviors by comparing information from several reliable sources before using it in campaigns
Timeliness	Provides near-real-time insights into market trends, public sentiment and emerging conversations to inform agile creative and content marketing decisions
Scalability	It can handle large datasets – from a single brand's social mentions to an entire industry's trends without overlooking critical insights
Actionability	Delivers clear, evidence-backed insights that inform visual content creation, brand strategy and messaging

These benefits illustrate why OSINT is no longer just an option for agencies, but a vital tool for strengthening creative work and making it more impactful.

Key Takeaways:

- OSINT deals with publicly available information – various sources on the Internet and offline (Google is only a starting point)
- It is applicable to any business or industry
- OSINT is a structured process that involves collection, processing, evaluation, analysis, and dissemination of conclusions/reports to inform decision-making



Why Creative Agencies Need OSINT?

Because brand and marketing strategies fueled by OSINT are based on real-world and real-time insights, they can stand the test of time and can help companies regularly adapt to their audiences' expectations, needs and desires. Applying the OSINT methodology gives agencies a competitive edge, positioning them as valuable strategic partners rather than just designers.

Here are some of the key functions of creative agencies where OSINT can add value:

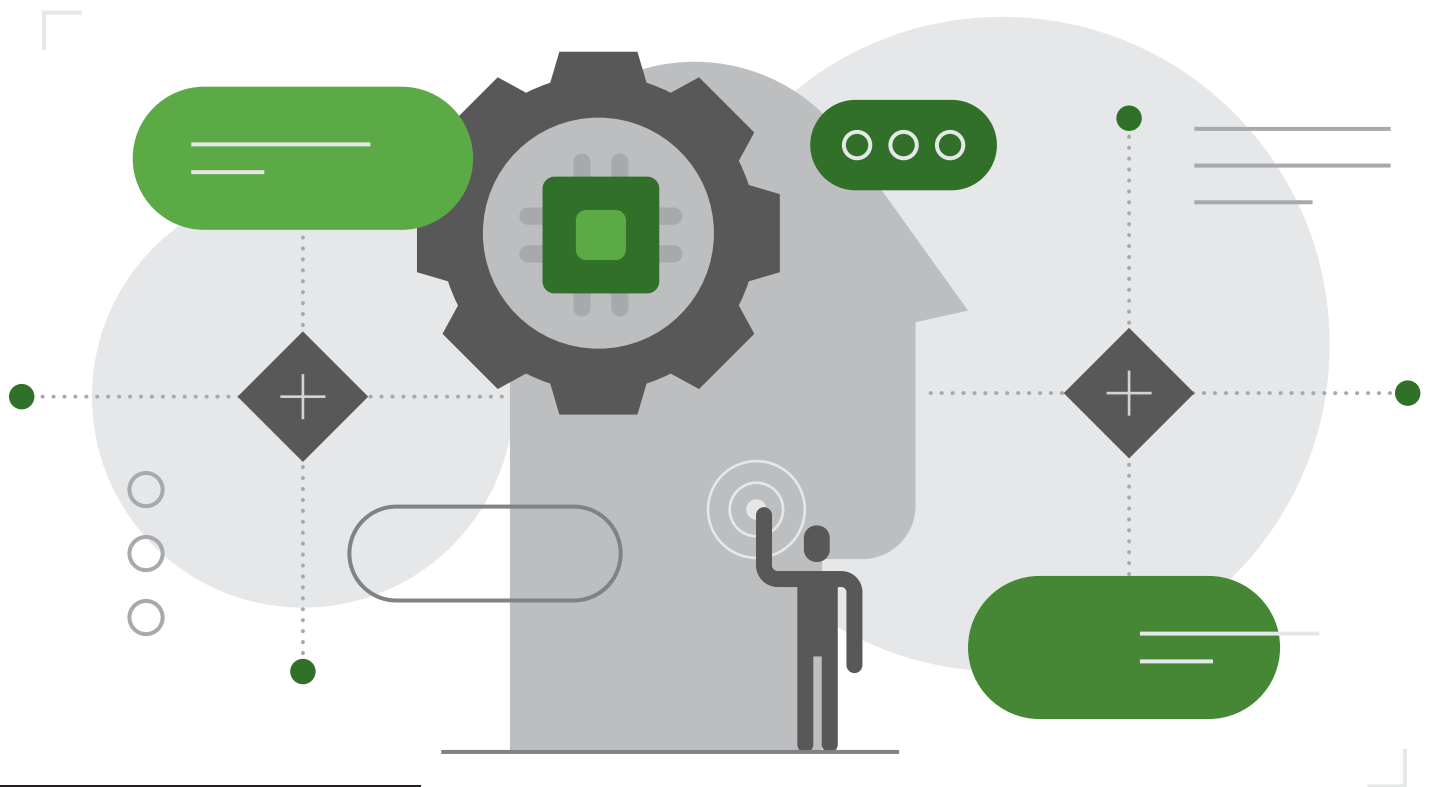
Table 2: Key Creative Functions Reimagined with OSINT – the #cottagecore example

Key function	Traditional approach	OSINT-enhanced	Example
Brand strategy & identity	Commissioned market-research reports, internal sales data, surveys, interviews, focus groups, observational research, secondary research, competitor analysis...	Baseline data plus competitor analysis through current and historic visual elements, taglines, press releases as well as real-time signals from social media showing sentiment, chatter, trending cultural values etc.	Monitoring TikTok reveals a rapid rise of #cottagecore pastel and hand-stitched memes among Gen Z in the Midwest and Pacific Northwest allowing the agency to swap the bold palette for soft pastels and from street-wear silhouette to handcrafted details in line with Gen Z taste.
Content creation & copywriting	Internal team brainstorming sessions, analysis of competitor content, interview experts and customers, analytics and performance tracking of own channels...	Content and copy are created based on the exact language, pain points and questions that the target audience is using in real-time conversations on social media, forums and Q&A sites.	Copywriters notice the phrase "soft-vibe" in trending TikTok posts and replace the initial copy to match trending TikTok language such as "Step into the soft-vibe era with hand-stitched flair" and DIY customization tutorials.
Advertising & campaign development	Concepts from past successful campaigns, general consumer trends, broad demographic data used	Social listening is used to identify niche communities and micro-influencers, to monitor audience reactions in real-time, and track competitor campaigns	Due to geographic location of trending creators on TikTok, the ads containing pastel visuals and hand-stitched details feature local influencers.

Key function	Traditional approach	OSINT-enhanced	Example
Visual marketing & design	Designs are based on brand guidelines, general aesthetic trends and creative intuition	Designs are refined using OSINT findings on cultural insights, current visual trends and consumer feedback collected and analyzed from publicly available sources	The design team quickly shifts from bold colors and studio shots to soft, low-light visuals with pastel hues and hand-stitched textures to match the viral #cottagecore aesthetic.
Research & insights	Insights are gathered from paid market research reports, surveys and secondary research	Insights are gained from real-time data – social media conversations, online reviews, forums, news articles, government databases and more. They help quickly identify pain points, sentiment changes, and emerging consumer trends	The team tracks how fast #cottagecore is spreading, giving the agency time to completely redesign the campaign before traditional research could detect the market shift.
Digital strategy & social media	Content calendars are planned in advance and use past campaign metrics, manual competitor monitoring, basic platform analytics	Social listening tools can scan multiple social media platforms, blogs, and other digital channels to identify viral trends, uncover key influencers, detect shifts in sentiment and monitor brand and competitor mentions.	Detecting the peak of the #cottagecore meme wave two weeks before the launch leads to reallocating the budget to short-form video ads with trending audio and using influencers from the Midwest and Pacific NorthWest to leverage their audience and authenticity.

By incorporating the OSINT methodology into your creative process, you enable your team to:

- uncover hidden consumer insights before any design work begins
- support creative ideas with evidence, reducing the risk of a campaign that misses the mark
- show measurable impact, providing value to clients with clear metrics
- differentiate your agency in a competitive market by positioning yourselves as a data-driven, forward-thinking strategic partner.



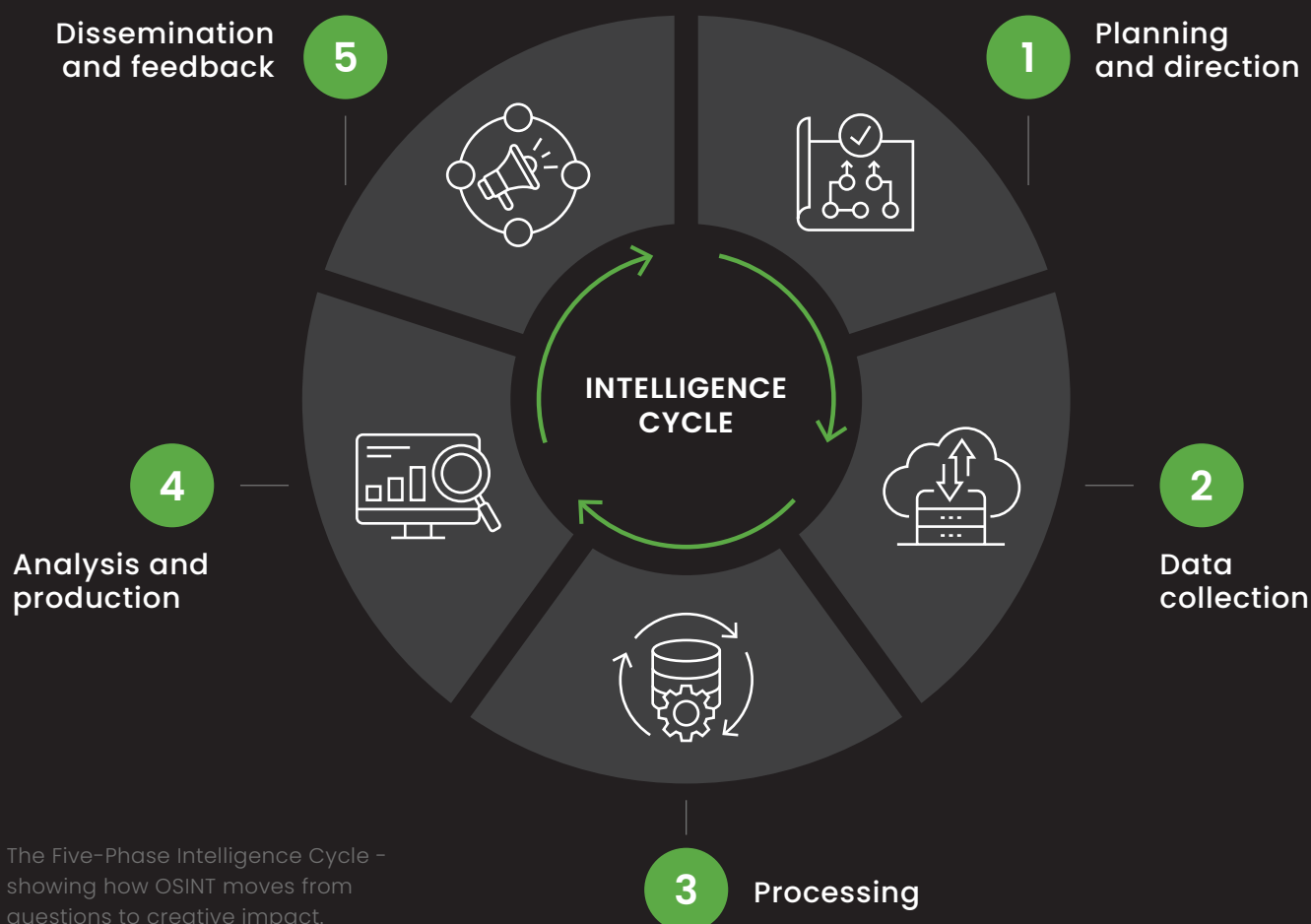
Key Takeaways:

- Applying the OSINT methodology gives agencies a competitive edge
- OSINT adds value to key creative functions by social listening, helping make sense of real-time conversations on social media, understanding sentiment, analyzing competitors, tracking trends and other methods.

The OSINT Intelligence Cycle

Behind every effective OSINT project lies a repeatable framework – the intelligence cycle. It provides a structured, repeatable process that guides each stage: defining the question, collecting relevant data, processing and validating it, and finally transforming findings into actionable insights. This process ensures that your creative decisions are based on reliable intelligence rather than fragmented data, keeping campaigns relevant and impactful.

For creative agencies, understanding this cycle is important because it turns research from being a one-time task to a well-structured process that continuously drives strategy and design. The intelligence cycle can vary from between four and seven steps depending on the organization. For this article, we will focus on five key stages:





Step 1

Planning and direction

To build a winning content marketing strategy, the creative team needs to know answers to specific questions. In the first stage of the intelligence cycle, the team lead defines the key information gaps and clarifies the objective of the insight discovery process. From there, team members create a detailed collection plan that outlines the timeline, who will perform the tasks, the specific information to be gathered, the required format, and the sources to be used. As this research is usually done on the Internet, it is essential to have and follow guidelines for a secure and ethical collection of data such as [these](#) or [these](#).

In this phase, the creative agency's leadership or brand strategists ask a specific

question such as: "Are there any emerging visual, aesthetic or cultural trends among the target demographic that could conflict with the planned Q4 sneaker launch concept (silhouette, palette)?" The team then selects sources such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, Pinterest, Reddit fashion sub-forums, and sets keywords to watch for (*#GenZFashion*, *#SneakerStyle* and eventually *#cottagecore* and *#vintagefashion* as they notice the trend).

By clearly defining objectives upfront, strategists and designers can ensure their efforts are aligned with genuine audience needs, reducing guesswork and enhancing the effectiveness of the final creative output.



Step 2

Collection

This phase involves a systematic approach to identifying and collecting data from various sources, such as analyzing a company's financial reports, extracting information from public datasets, or monitoring conversations on platforms like Instagram.

Building on questions from the Planning and direction phase, the team uses automated scripts and manual monitoring to find public posts, videos, and memes that contain the chosen hashtags and keywords. They notice a surge in *#cottagecore* and *#vintagefashion* posts showing hand-stitched details and

pastel colors and identify top-performing video content and accounts. The team saves posts and raw media files and captures metadata (date of the post, view count, creator location).

However, the intelligence cycle is iterative and it requires constant refining. In practice, this means that the team may revisit the data collection phase even after the initial collection, as new gaps are discovered during processing and analysis, ensuring that the final intelligence, or in this case the creative asset, is thorough and accurate.

OSINT sources (sources of information from the Internet – publicly available):

- + Global social networks such as X, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc.
- + Platforms for content creation such as YouTube, Vimeo, Medium...
- + Messaging and communication platforms such as Telegram and Discord
- + Discussion forums and review sites – Reddit, Quora, Amazon, Yelp
- + Global and Local News Outlets
- + Blogs
- + White papers, academic research
- + Industry news sites, industry publications and whitepapers
- + Public company filings
- + Public records
- + Archival websites – Internet Archive's Wayback Machine
- + Metadata from documents or images
- + Market research tools such as Statista and Google Trends
- + Third-party research firms
- + Academic and professional journals



Step 3 Processing

Once the data is collected, the team organizes and filters it to concentrate on the most relevant information. Conversations and reports are categorized, audio and video is transcribed and/or translated, images are processed and duplicated information is removed.

The team now organizes posts by region, age group and engagement metrics, and visuals are analyzed for dominant colors, textures and styling cues. Raw posts are now turned into structured information revealing a new handcrafted aesthetic – pastel-dominant images rose 250% in the last two weeks and

hand-stitched details are mentioned in 67% of posts from the Midwest.

Processing ensures that collected raw data is converted into a usable format for analysis to take place in the next phase.

Processing is also the phase where source evaluation, a critical principle of OSINT, is applied. This process involves critically assessing the credibility, reliability, authenticity, and relevance of sources as well as verifying the accuracy of the information they provide.

The CRAAPO method

One of the most used methods for source evaluation is the CRAAPO method and applies these six criteria (adapted from "[What is CRAAPO](#)" by the Shapiro Library at the Southern New Hampshire University):



Currency

When was the information published and what particular timeframe does it refer to? Or How recent is the information?



Relevance

How relevant is the information for this particular task?



Authority

What/who is the source of information? Is the author an expert, a recognized leader or someone anonymous?



Accuracy

Is the information provided correct and reliable?



Objectivity

How objective/biased is the source? Does the source have a commercial agenda, a political bias, or simply reflect the same ideas being echoed within a closed online community?



Purpose

Why was the information published?



Step 4

Analysis and production

During this phase, an analyst connects the dots, identifies patterns and extracts actionable insights. He/she is looking for the answer to the "so what" question to ultimately provide guidance on "what now".

A final product can be a brand strategy brief, a detailed competitive analysis report or a presentation for a client, among other formats, that gives answers to questions from the Planning and direction phase. Valuable

knowledge is extracted and can inform decision making and support strategic action.

Analysts compare the processed data against the brand's existing creative brief and identify a mismatch: the planned campaign aesthetic clashes with the emerging pastel/hand-stitched one gaining traction with core Gen Z customers. A concise intelligence product is produced – a one-page "Trend Alert" summarizing the data

and includes a short narrative, key statistics, sample screenshots and a recommendation for urgent visual adjustments in messaging and design.

During this stage, insights are woven into creative strategy, ensuring that campaigns are both visually appealing and strategically crafted to resonate with the target audience.



Step 5

Dissemination and feedback

In this final step of the intelligence cycle, an intelligence product is distributed to the end users and in the case of creative agencies, insights and assets are delivered to the audience.

The intelligence and creative outputs are compiled into a brief for internal teams, while the completed campaign or infographic is shared publicly. After delivery, it is necessary to monitor audience engagement such as social media interactions, survey feedback or click-through rates to validate assumptions and inform future campaigns.

The team delivers the "Trend Alert" via a quick, high-priority internal memo or dashboard update to creative directors who adjust the visuals using soft lighting, pastel hues and hand-stitched textures. After the revised

launch, the team tracks engagement metrics and reports back on the performance of the revised campaign.

The intelligence cycle demonstrates that OSINT is a lot more than ad-hoc searching. It is an iterative process that transforms raw data into structured intelligence that directly informs creative decisions. For creative agencies, applying this cycle ensures that brand strategy and design are grounded in evidence, but also continuously refined with new insights, making campaigns more relevant and effective over time.

Implementing this process requires the right mindset and training, but also a mix of tools that make collection, processing and analysis efficient and reliable. Let's look at some of the more useful options.

Key Takeaways:

- The OSINT Intelligence Cycle is a structured, repeatable process consisting of five stages: planning and direction, collection, processing, analysis and production, and dissemination and feedback.
- It ensures brand strategy and design are grounded in evidence that is verifiable.

Tools of the Trade

OSINT tools excel at collecting information, translating, transcribing, analyzing text, and visualizing data – establishing a foundation for more informed creative decision-making. However, analysis and strategic insight should be left to humans. As Nico Dekens, widely recognized OSINT expert, explains in his [article "Stop Calling It OSINT"](#), "Treat every tool like a witness with motives... A tool is a screwdriver. Ownership does not confer carpentry."

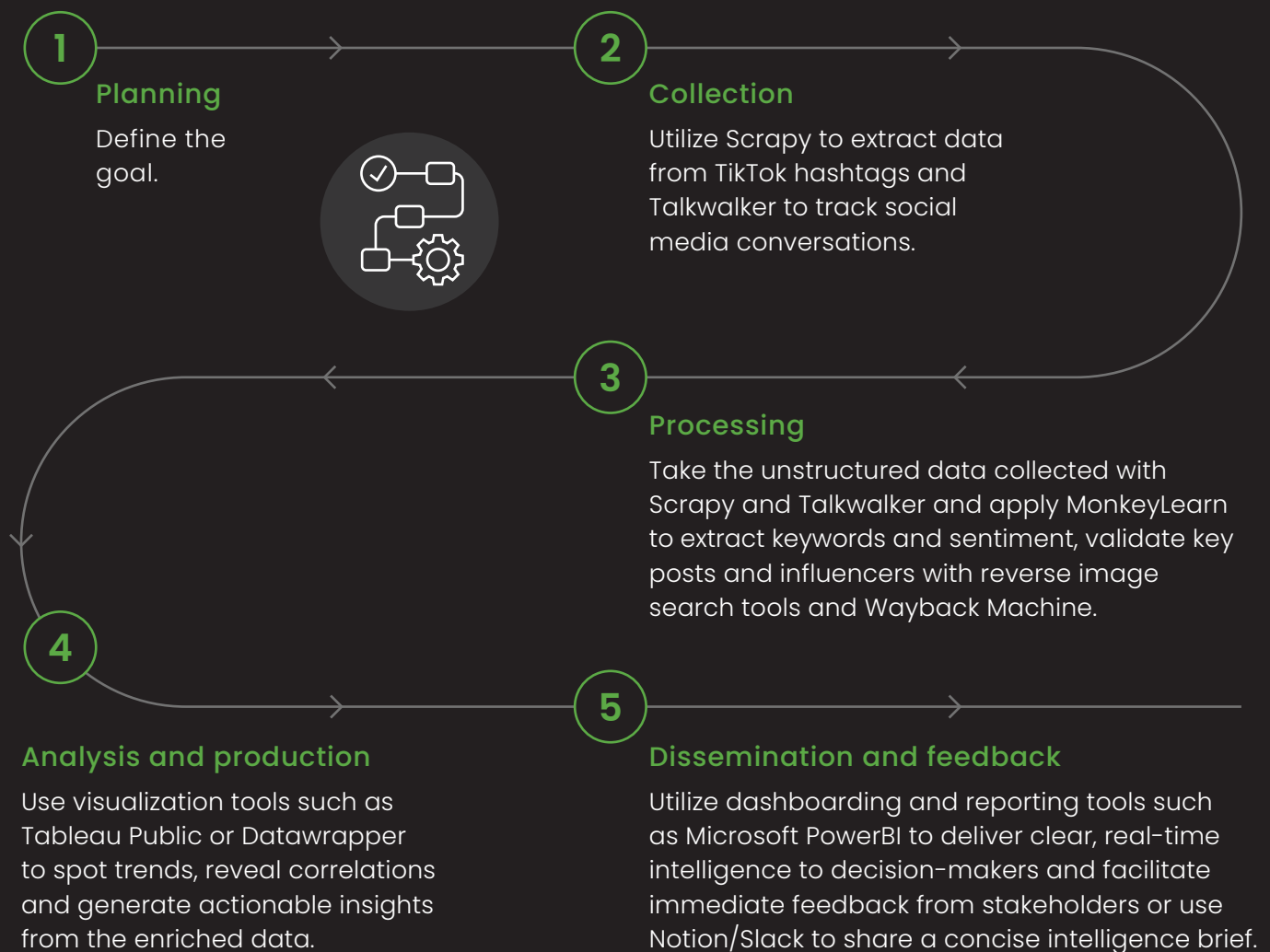
Having this in mind, here are some tools a creative agency could employ in its OSINT work:

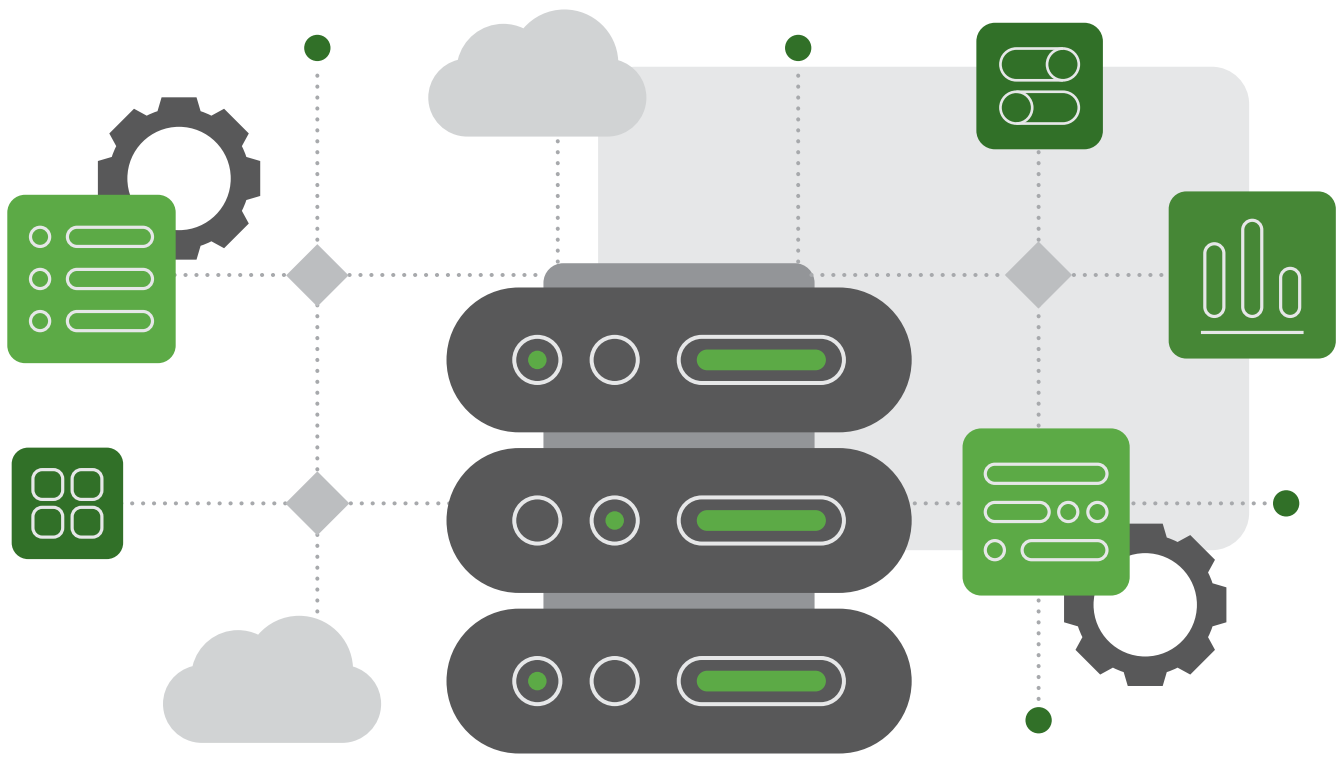
Table 3: OSINT Tools and their Applications for Creative Agencies

Category	Tool (Free and Paid)	What it does?
Data Collection	Scrapy, BeautifulSoup (both Python and open-source), Octoparse (no coding needed)	Scrape public webpages, forums and APIs
Social listening	Talkwalker, SproutSocial, Brandwatch	Real-time trend detection, sentiment analysis
Visualization	Tableau Public, Miro, Datawrapper	Turn raw data into visual stories
Verification	Wayback Machine, TinEye Reverse Image Search	Image provenance and source authenticity
NLP & Text Analysis	MonkeyLearn, spaCy	Extracts keywords and sentiment, topic clustering
Collaboration	Notion, Slack, Confluence	Team communication, consolidates logs and SOPs
Dashboarding	PowerBI, Google Data Studio	Live, client-accessible dashboards that illustrate ROI

Open source intelligence tools are often highly specialized – one tool for data collection, another for visualization, a third for social media monitoring, and yet another for source verification. However, the real power of OSINT in marketing does not come from any single piece of software – it comes from how the insights are combined into a cohesive intelligence process.

A typical OSINT workflow using these tools could look like this:





Before diving into tools, though, OSINT specialists in creative agencies should first develop a strong understanding of both basic and advanced data collection techniques, the various types of data and sources available, and build core analytic skills such as spotting patterns and anomalies,

contextual thinking and translating findings into strategic direction. Combining this knowledge with the right OSINT tools used the right way will enhance creativity and empower teams to transform intelligence into strategy, design and content that truly resonates with their audiences.

Key Takeaways:

- OSINT tools can be very useful for collecting information, translating, transcribing, analyzing text and visualizing data
- They are not a silver bullet – analysis and strategic insight should be done by humans
- It is advisable to first acquire basic knowledge on OSINT methodology, search techniques, analysis and reporting to be able to fully understand and utilize the tools.

OSINT Myths and FAQs: What You Need to Know Before Getting Started

To truly grasp the creative value of OSINT, it is worth clearing up a few common myths that often prevent marketers from seeing OSINT's true creative value. Understanding what OSINT is – and isn't – will help you see how it can fit into your brand strategy workflow.

Here's a look at common OSINT myths and your practical questions, answered.

Table 3: OSINT Tools and their Applications for Creative Agencies

	Common Myth	Reality
01	OSINT is only for security teams and law enforcement.	OSINT is a research methodology that can be applied anywhere publicly available information can inform decisions – whether that is marketing, product development, design, customer support or any other function.
02	OSINT is just a fancy term for "Googling"	Googling can uncover a vast amount of information, but OSINT goes much further. It draws from various sources (social media, public records, news reports, etc.) using specialized search techniques and collection methods. The true value of OSINT lies in not just finding all of this data, but in validating, cross-checking and analyzing it to produce intelligence that can directly inform strategy.
03	Only large enterprises can afford OSINT	A lot of very valuable OSINT sources are free such as government data, social media, corporate filings and news archives. Costs primarily come from the tools and labor needed to collect, process and analyze this information which increase based on the project size – not the size of the company.
04	Publicly available information means no privacy or legal worries	Publicly available information may still contain personal identifiers or copyrighted assets. Ethical OSINT practices honor platform policies and avoid collecting unnecessary personal information.

Table 5. OSINT FAQs: What Creative Teams Need to Know

	FAQ	Answer
01	Do I need an expert to conduct OSINT?	With proper guidance and training, teams can conduct OSINT effectively, although specialists can accelerate analysis, improve consistency and reveal deeper insights.
02	Can OSINT guide creative decisions such as visual style or themes?	Yes. By revealing the themes, color palettes, and storylines that are currently gaining traction, OSINT helps you design visuals that align closely with your audience's interests and preferences.
03	Do I need a legal review for OSINT-derived content?	You should always conduct a quick rights check regarding copyright and attribution. The key is to ensure you are not using copyrighted material without permission and that you are not inadvertently exposing private or sensitive information. By sticking to publicly available information and adhering to the terms or service of the platforms you use, you can confidently incorporate OSINT into your creative workflow while staying both legally compliant and ethically responsible.
04	Should I rely on automated tools for OSINT?	No. Automation can gather large amounts of information, but only a human can interpret context, detect bias and verify the accuracy of information to make the insights accurate and meaningful.

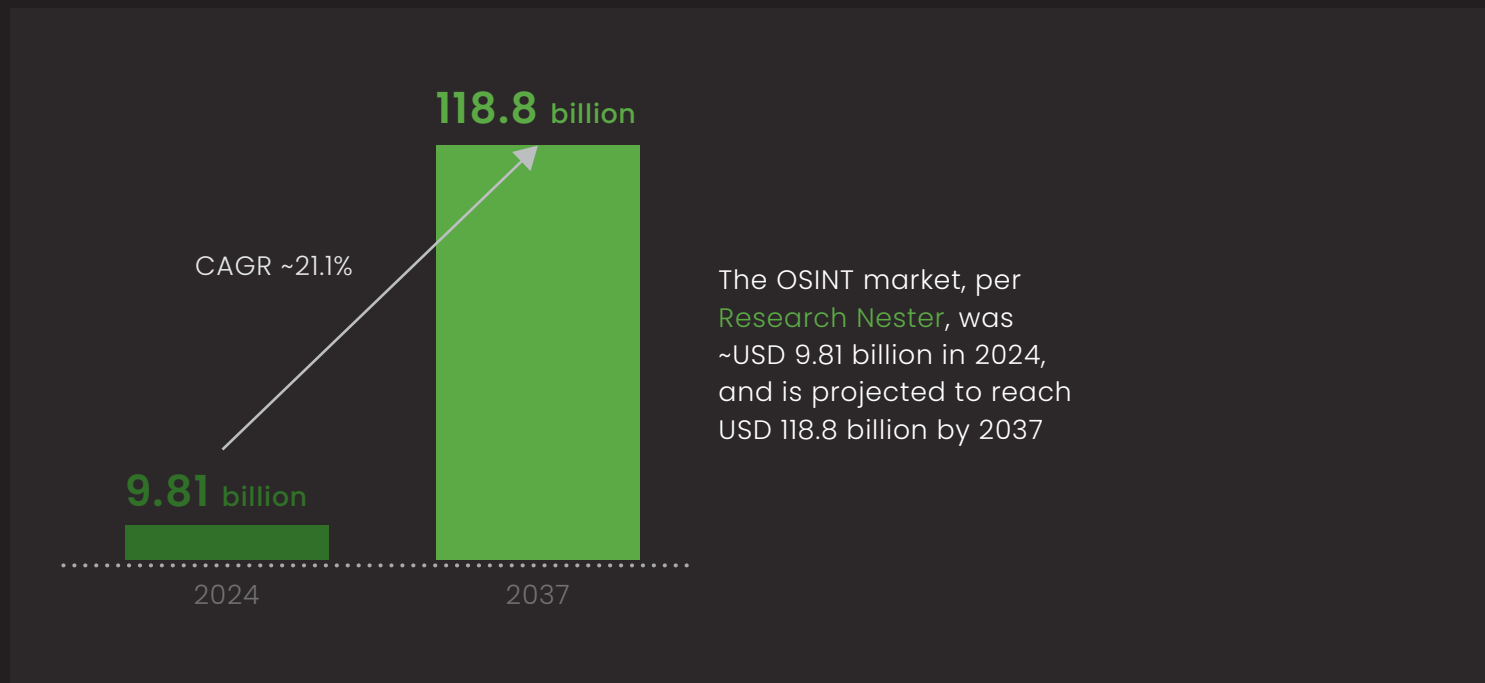
Key Takeaways:

- OSINT is not just for the security sector, it has become an essential discipline for informed decision-making and a powerful tool for competitive and strategic intelligence across all modern organizations.
- OSINT isn't just for organizations with extensive budgets because a vast majority of its most effective tools and resources are entirely free or low-cost.

Conclusion

In the past, creative success was often measured by awards and aesthetic appeal. Today, the most valuable creative work is defined by its strategic impact and measurable results.

OSINT is no longer reserved just for national security analysts, investigative reporters, or cyber security analysts. It is a strategic asset that empowers creative agencies and their clients with superior market insights, enabling tailored, impactful visual content marketing and brand strategies.



Choosing a creative agency that recognizes this assures projects that are both innovative and data-driven, but also positions your brand as a forward-thinking leader in your industry.



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