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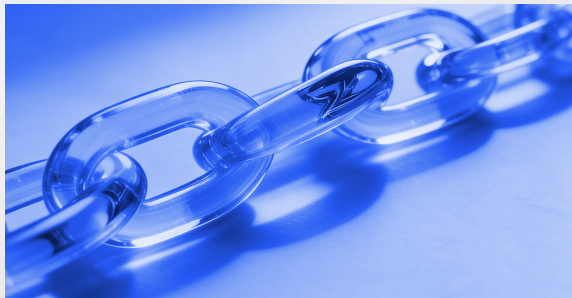
CRYPTO THEMES WE THINK WILL MATTER IN 2026



Last year was a pivotal one for crypto. Not necessarily from a price perspective but from an adoption lens. In many ways, 2025 has built a foundation for what's to come from this sector this year.

As alluded to in our previous research report, **2025 brought a fundamental shift in how we interacted with crypto by moving on-chain.** In other words, **what we saw was that the market share between the centralized crypto services and decentralized applications noticeably began to converge.**

Apart from this theme, **a standout trend was a return to one of crypto's core ethos in privacy.** We witnessed the astronomical rise in networks like Zcash and we anticipate this trend to extend well beyond retail participants.





Institutions also came on board like never before. **Progressive legislations like the GENIUS act in the U.S. and Europe's MiCA regulation have brought a degree of certainty to these large players.** This was reflected in growing momentum around altcoin spot ETF approvals as well as companies beginning to hold select altcoins as part of their digital asset treasury. With more favourable regulations on the table this year coupled with a host of pending ETF approvals, adoption of digital assets beyond Bitcoin and Ethereum is increasingly plausible.

On-chain settlement was a key theme of last year, a trend we expect to accelerate with rising stablecoin usage and the growth of real world assets. Taken together, this report outlines Cryptopolitan's view on the five key themes that could define crypto in 2026.

1

🕒 1 min read

**TOKENIZED
EQUITIES TO
CAPTURE A
LARGER SHARE
OF THE RWA
MARKET**

2

🕒 3 min read

**A CONSOLIDATION
AMONG PERP DEXS**

3

🕒 4 min read

**A RESURGENCE
IN SOCIALFI AND
PUSH TOWARD
ALL-IN-ONE
CRYPTO APPS**

4

🕒 5 min read

**PREDICTION
MARKETS BECOME
INGRAINED
IN NEWS AND
RESEARCH**

5

🕒 5 min read

**STABLECOINS
EXTEND THEIR
FOOTPRINT
IN PAYMENTS
AND SETTLEMENT**

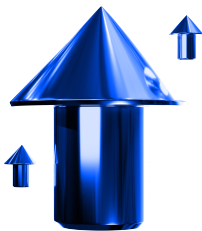
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🕒 5 min read

**PRIVACY
EVOLVES INTO
A FOUNDATIONAL
LAYER FOR
INSTITUTIONS**



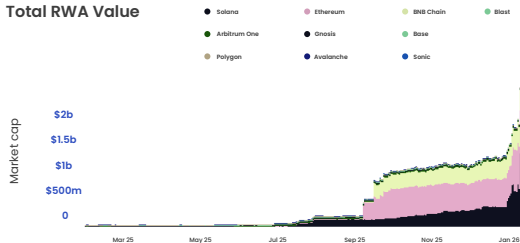
TOKENIZED
EQUITIES TO
CAPTURE A LARGER
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Real World Assets (RWA) on chain became the clearest bridges between TradFi and DeFi in 2025. The largest investment firms and asset managers like Blackrock and JP Morgan tapped into the ecosystem by expanding tokenized offerings, especially in private credit and U.S. treasuries. The total RWA market grew approximately 218% last year from \$5.9 billion to \$18.9 billion.

A subsector within RWAs that saw exponential growth was tokenized equities or digital shares of real stocks that live on-chain. At the start of 2025, the combined marketcap of tokenized stocks stood at \$31.19 million. By the end of the year, this value ballooned up to \$1.23 billion or an increase of around 3,843%.

Total RWA Value



Source: Token Terminal



A CONSOLIDATION AMONG PERP DEXS



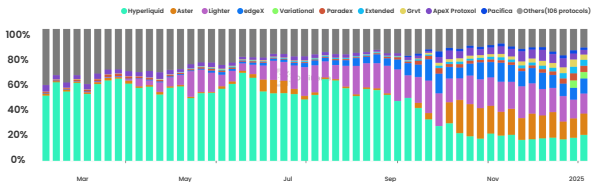
The hype around decentralized perpetual futures platforms reached fever pitch in 2025. **Monthly transaction volumes grew from around \$367 billion in the start of the year to ending the year in the trillions of dollars.**

Technological advancements coupled with a much better user experience that rivaled top centralized exchanges drove the wave towards on chain trading.

Despite this boom, liquidity remains fragmented across many platforms today. Each Perp DEX carved out its own niche: Aster built multi-chain orderbooks, **Hyperliquid offered deep CLOB liquidity**, **Lighter ran zero-fee trading**, **edgeX pushed mobile-first UX etc.** The result is a wild west of market shares.

Perps Volume Market Share

• Top 10 protocols • 365D



Source: Defillama

For much of 2025, **Hyperliquid held roughly 50% of on-chain perp volumes.** By October, however, that **market share was slashed to around 16%** with **platforms like Aster, Lighter, edgeX, ApeX eating into its dominance.** During the same period, smaller **Perp DEXs were already disappearing. RabbitX and Vertex**, two platforms that were among the top ten in trading volume ceased operations in Q3 2025.

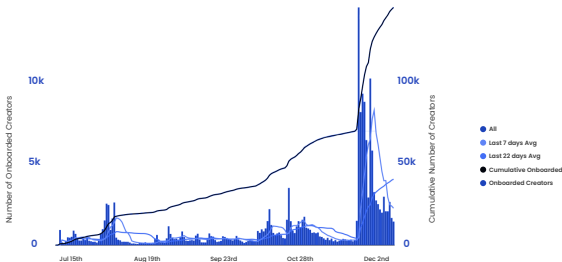


A RESURGENCE
IN SOCIALFI AND
PUSH TOWARD
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In 2026, SocialFi is no longer just a recycled narrative from the last cycle. **What's different this time is where the momentum is coming from and how much the user experience has improved.**

Apps like Coinbase's Base app have helped reframe what crypto-native social platforms can look like by combining social feeds, payments and on-chain activity into a single interface. The core idea is simple but powerful: social interaction itself becomes economic. Posting, sharing, trading, or engaging with content is no longer just engagement—it carries financial value. The pitch is clear: creators and communities finally get a share of the value they generate, rather than handing it all to centralized platforms.

Base app number of Onboarded Creators



Source: Dune

“Creator onboarding” here refers to unique wallets that perform a creator-level on-chain action on the Base app (such as publishing content), rather than passive user activity like browsing or viewing content.

Crucially, the user experience has taken a meaningful step forward. **Smart wallet integrations are starting to remove many of the friction points that killed earlier SocialFi efforts. Onboarding increasingly mirrors Web2 patterns**, with users able to sign in using familiar methods while wallets, keys, and transactions operate quietly in the background.

For the first time, crypto-social apps feel less like financial tools disguised as social platforms and more like social apps with crypto embedded under the hood. This improvement alone makes the current wave meaningfully different from what came before.

That said, skepticism remains justified. SocialFi has a history of burning hot and fading fast. Previous breakouts collapsed once incentives dried up, exposing weak retention, small user bases, and products that were simply not good enough to replace existing social platforms. Those risks have not disappeared. Even today, crypto-social apps operate at a fraction of the scale of mainstream networks and token-based rewards can still distort behavior if not designed carefully.

This is exactly why SocialFi is a theme worth monitoring in 2026, not because success is guaranteed, but because the conditions are finally more credible. Infrastructure is better, onboarding is smoother and distribution through large ecosystems like Base gives these products a fighting chance to reach beyond crypto-native users. If builders can resist over-financializing every interaction and focus instead on genuine engagement, some of these platforms may develop staying power.

If they fail, the outcome will look familiar. Another burst of experimentation followed by consolidation and quiet exits. But if even a handful succeed, SocialFi could mark one of the first real examples of crypto reshaping how people use consumer apps at scale. That possibility alone makes it a narrative that deserves close attention in 2026.



PREDICTION
MARKETS BECOME
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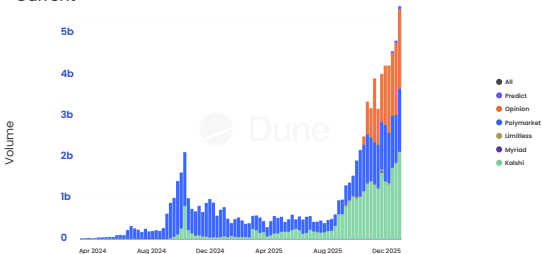
STABLECOINS EXTEND THEIR FOOTPRINT IN PAYMENTS AND SETTLEMENT



Prediction markets have exploded from niche platforms into massive, mainstream activity. Every metric of market activity (volume, transactions, users) saw unprecedented growth.

Weekly Prediction Market Transactions

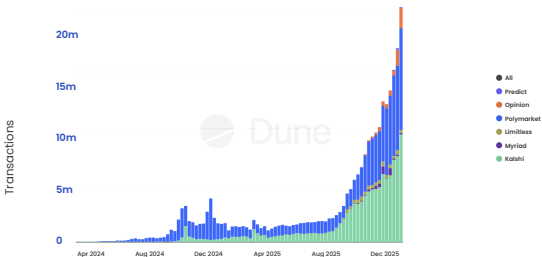
Current week is excluded



Source: Dune

Weekly Prediction Market Transactions

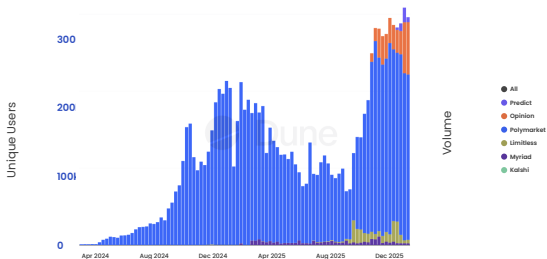
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Source: Dune

Weekly Prediction Market Notional Volume

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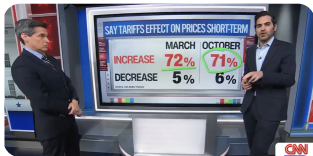


Source: Dune

This growth did not happen in isolation. By 2025, major financial and media players were explicitly embracing prediction markets. Traditional brokers and tech platforms formed partnerships to offer event betting: for example, Kalshi struck deals with Google Finance, the NHL, and Robinhood to make its contracts visible to mainstream customers.

Most strikingly, news networks themselves began embedding market data in coverage. In December 2025 CNN announced a partnership with Kalshi to display live event odds during broadcasts and CNBC followed suit with similar access.

Traditional media outlets are increasingly positioning them as complementary information layers or another data source to interpret unfolding events.



Adoption has come from both retail and institutional avenues. Retail brokerages like Robinhood launched nearly 2,000 tokenized stocks and tier 1 exchanges like Coinbase have begun rolling out similar features. On the institutional front, projects like **Backed Finance's xStocks program introduced around 60 tokenized equities with partner deals with Kraken and Bybit**. Tier 1 exchanges like Coinbase.

Despite the growth of the RWA market, it remains a fraction of traditional markets. When we look deeper and compare tokenized equities to global equity, they make up around **0,001%** of the total market, highlighting just how early this sector is and the scale of upside even if a small portion of global equity capital begins to move on-chain.



Looking ahead, the possibility of this momentum continuing to rise through the year is real. **Nasdaq's recent filing with the SEC to offer tokenized stock trading on its platform is perhaps the strongest institutional greenlight**. With TradFi platforms opening its doors combined with clearer regulatory frameworks for on-chain assets, the scope for capital to flow into this sub-sector in 2026 becomes increasingly tangible.

As of January 6, 2026, there are 91 different perp DEXs that recorded over \$1M in 24 hour trading volume. On chain trading as it is today is highly uneven, characterized by a number of high volume players.

Looking ahead, market dynamics point toward a potential shakeout. **Much of the recent growth across perp DEXs has been driven by incentives, with activity closely tied to token rewards and points programs rather than organic usage.** The key question for 2026 is whether traders remain active once these incentives are reduced or removed.

Our view is that the market is entering a phase where narrative alone will no longer sustain trading venues. Only platforms with strong product-market fit, deep liquidity and durable revenue models are likely to endure. If this holds, a significant portion of lower-volume perp DEXs may struggle as subsidies fade.

History supports the case for consolidation. **Across previous crypto cycles, from the 2017 ICO wave to the 2020 DeFi boom, large numbers of new protocols entered the market, only for activity to narrow to a smaller set of survivors over time.** By the end of each cycle, speculative excess gave way to a handful of core platforms that captured the majority of usage and liquidity. Viewed through this lens, it is reasonable to expect a comparable outcome for perp DEXs. As incentives fade and market conditions normalize, trading volume is likely to concentrate around a small group of platforms that proved their relevance in 2025, while others are sidelined, acquired or quietly sunset. The result would be deeper liquidity and more efficient markets on surviving platforms, albeit with fewer choices than the fragmented landscape seen during the peak of the cycle.

In summary, the perp DEX rise of 2025 appears less like a permanent expansion and more like a transition phase. The boom brought a wave of new competitors, but as hype recedes, only a limited number are likely to endure. If past cycles are any guide, perp DEX activity in 2026 should consolidate around a small set of platforms with durable infrastructure, liquidity and user adoption, mirroring how earlier crypto booms ultimately settled around their strongest foundations.

Institutional interest followed quickly. A coalition of market operators (including Kalshi, Polymarket, Coinbase, and Robinhood) formed a Coalition for Prediction Markets to set industry standards and lobby regulators.

Investors poured money in: Kalshi raised \$1 billion at an \$11 billion valuation in late 2025, and platforms like Polymarket attracted backing from major firms (e.g. a \$2 billion investment from ICE, owner of the NYSE)

It's now clear to us that prediction markets are no longer parallel systems running alongside journalism and research. A crucial reason for this change lies in incentives. **Unlike surveys or punditry, prediction markets reward participants for actively seeking out better information.**

Capital is at stake, which creates a direct financial incentive to track primary sources, follow developments closely, and update views when new facts emerge. In effect, markets don't just aggregate opinions, they motivate participants to improve those opinions. This incentive structure helps explain why market prices often adjust faster than polls or expert consensus when new information enters the system.

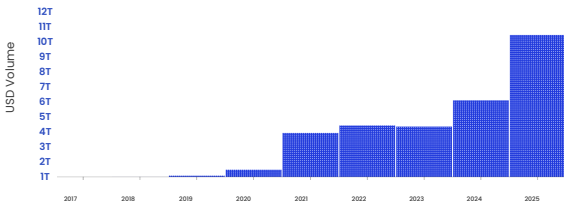
What makes this development especially powerful is how self-reinforcing it is. As prediction markets become embedded in media reporting and research, they attract more participants. **As participation grows, liquidity deepens, signals sharpen, and forecasts improve. Better forecasts, in turn, make markets more useful to journalists, analysts, and researchers, drawing even more attention and usage.**



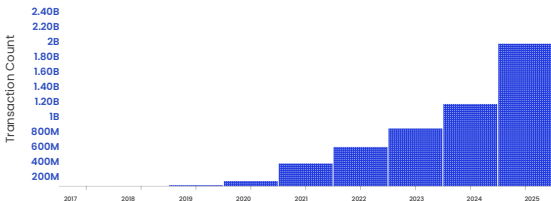
Looking ahead, we believe this is the real theme for 2026. Prediction markets are not simply growing in volume but are being integrated into how society processes uncertainty. As probabilities become easier to surface and interpret, they may increasingly be used as reference points in reporting and research, much like polling averages or macro indicators are today. If that happens, adoption will no longer be cyclical or speculative, but structural, locking in the flywheel that could define the next phase of prediction markets.

Stablecoins stepped into the mainstream spotlight last year, evolving from a largely crypto-native instrument into a global financial settlement layer that now rivals traditional payment rails. **Transaction volumes climbed from \$5.99 trillion in 2024 to \$11.09 trillion the following year**, while transaction counts rose from 1.27 billion to 2.20 billion. Tether's USDT alone accounted for over \$6.3 trillion in settled volume, underscoring just how central stablecoins have become to on-chain value transfer.

Stablecoin Transaction Volume, Adjusted vs. Unadjusted



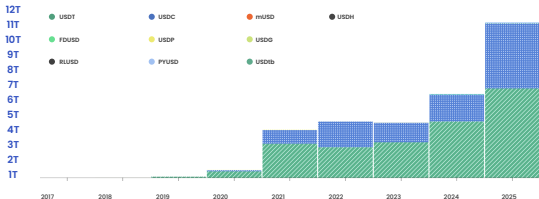
Stablecoin Transaction Count, Adjusted vs. Unadjusted



Source: Visaonchainanalytics

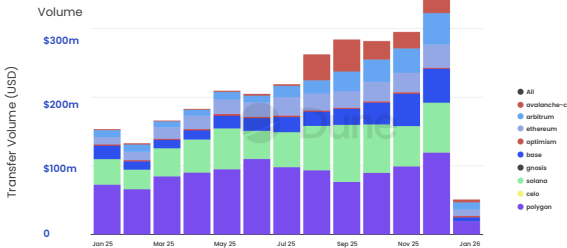
Looking beneath headline volumes, however, reveals a more telling shift. The strongest signal of stablecoins moving toward everyday commerce lies in micropayments. **Transfers under \$100 more than doubled in total volume, while the number of such transactions grew over eightfold.** These trends point to something long promised but rarely delivered at scale: low-friction, on-chain payments suited for frequent, small-value use rather than just large settlements or trading activity.

Stablecoin Transaction Volume, by Stablecoin



Micropayments

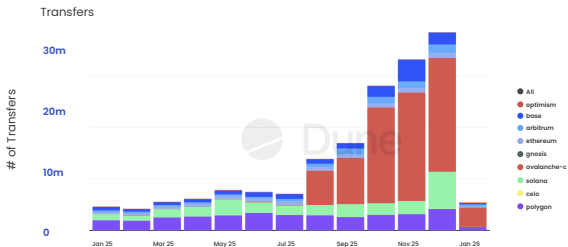
P2P Volumes Classifications



Source: Visaonchainanalytics

Micropayments

P2P Volumes Classifications



Source: Dune

For years, the missing link was not demand but usability. Off-ramping stablecoins into the real economy introduced friction that blunted their utility as payment instruments. That gap is now narrowing. A new generation of card-issuing and payment infrastructure providers has emerged as the connective tissue between on-chain dollars and everyday spending, quietly turning stablecoins into usable money rather than balance-sheet assets. What matters most looking ahead is not that this infrastructure exists, but that it is beginning to align with regulatory clarity. As stablecoin frameworks mature, particularly in jurisdictions like the U.S., where legislation such as the GENIUS Act is formalizing rules, the conditions for wider adoption improve materially. Clearer regulations reduce uncertainty for card issuers, payment networks and merchants alike, allowing these platforms to scale with confidence rather than caution.

Taken together, this sets the stage for 2026 to be less about experimentation and more about normalization. **Stablecoins are positioned to function as a background settlement layer**, while card-based interfaces abstract away on-chain complexity for users. If global regulatory momentum continues, stablecoin rails may incrementally expand their role in everyday payments, taking share at the margins from legacy networks. Over time, this is how on-chain payments evolve from conceptual promise to a credible alternative within the broader payments stack.