

**we
are
social** **THINK**
FORWARD
2021 | **The
Social Reset**

The logo for 'we are social' is displayed in a white square with a thin orange border. The text 'we are social' is written in a lowercase, sans-serif font. 'we' is in purple, 'are' is in pink, and 'social' is in a darker pink. The words are stacked vertically: 'we' on the top line, 'are' on the second line, and 'social' on the third line.

we
are.
social

A black L-shaped bracket in the top-left corner of the white text box.

In 2020, everything we've known – from daily routines to long-term ambitions – has been disrupted beyond recognition. In the face of an increasingly visible and vicious climate crisis, a global pandemic, and a civil rights movement, the global population has been forced to face the cracks in our society's established order of business, and reassess what's important as we grapple with an uncertain future.

Social has played a central role in the theatrics. With lockdown shaping much of our experience in early 2020 – at its peak, the first wave of Covid-19 saw over 3.9 billion people confined to their homes – the role of digital tools and communications have been pulled into even greater prominence.

As a result, our relationship with these channels – how we use them, and how we feel about them – has undergone an irreversible transformation. In some instances, inertia has been overcome; live content, shopping via AR and paying to customise an avatar are all behaviours that have entered the mainstream. But deeper systemic issues in these technologies have also come to light – we've been reminded how quickly misinformation around vital issues can spread, for example, and the disproportionate power of bad actors in digital spaces.

As we move into 2021, we'll see people re-evaluate the role platforms should play in their lives, rethink which sources they engage with, and relearn how to use social in line with tectonic shifts in the drivers that underpin our screentime. **This is the social reset.**

A black L-shaped bracket in the bottom-right corner of the white text box.

2020

The events shaping social

Certain events from the past year have played out in interesting ways online. Some will have an irreversible impact on the way we use social platforms in 2021 and beyond.

January

- More than half of the world's population is now on social media

- Australian bushfires underline the devastation of climate change and spur action among global communities online

February

- The threat of Covid-19 begins to impact the global economy

March

- Covid-19 spreads beyond China and the WHO declares it a global pandemic

April

- TikTok sets the record for most downloads in a single quarter for a social app ever

May

- SpaceX launched its first ever crewed flight, Dragon 2, which was live streamed to the global population in landmark online event

June

- Statues linked to slavery are pulled down globally in response to BLM protests

- J.K. Rowling gets into digital row over trans rights, igniting wider conversations around inclusivity for trans communities

July

- India bans TikTok, along with 58 other Chinese apps

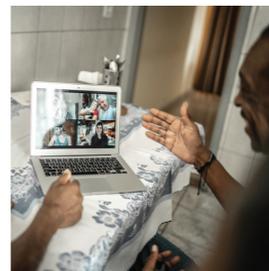
- #StopHateForProfit sees brands boycott Facebook

August

- Jeff Bezos becomes the first person in history to have a net worth exceeding US\$200 billion, fuelling conversation around wealth inequality

September

- The global death toll from Covid-19 exceeds one million



April 2020

Over half of humanity is under lockdown

As governments and medical institutions looked to abate the spread of Covid-19, lockdowns were enforced globally, with April seeing over 3.9 billion advised to stay at home. In this environment, social platforms were forced to adapt to a wealth of new content needs.



June 2020

The death of George Floyd spurs global BLM protests

The unlawful death of George Floyd highlighted tensions around police brutality in the US and beyond. Black Lives Matter protests mobilised across the world, seeing thousands from all 50 US states and 18 other countries march for Black lives.



August 2020

Trump makes moves to ban China-owned apps from the US

The lives of TikTok and WeChat in the US hang in the balance. The former has seen a diverse roster of investors (like Walmart) lean in, while the suggestion of a ban on China-owned apps brings the prospect of enforcing domestic internets (like China's) into the Western consciousness.

1

The Simple Life

People are re-evaluating the things that are most important to them, sharpening a desire to pay more attention to life's simple pleasures, and reconsidering the role social can play in enjoying them.

■ Page 10

2

Practical Advocacy

Amid new constraints, 'armchair activism' has undergone a practical transformation, bolstered by global communities who've realised the power they wield can translate to tangible offline change.

■ Page 16

3

In-Feed Intimacy

The notion that screens and social have a negative impact on our offline relationships is falling away, as people begin to overcome the inertia attached to tools that are designed to humanise digital interactions.

■ Page 22

4

Reliable Idols

People are being more discerning about who they follow, and why. They're not unfollowing beautiful people, but they are putting more emphasis on the tangible value these figures bring to the feed.

■ Page 28

5

Unbound Platforms

Amid the new content needs of 2020, people have evolved the way they engage with social, repurposing old tools for new purposes, and expanding their already prominent role in everyday life.

■ Page 34

6

Open-Source Creativity

In a landscape of duetting and out-of-context soundbites, the process of content creation is becoming more communal. Social platforms are evolving into spaces for people to co-create, not just engage.

■ Page 40



1

THE SIMPLE LIFE



People are using social to
reconnect with their core values.

UNDERSTAND IT

Lately, humanity has been pretty stressed out. The Gallup Global Emotions Report showed that in 2019 more than a third of the global population said so. The events of 2020 have done little to ease the strain. Between wildfires, climate anxiety, a global pandemic and a civil rights movement, the desire to pull back to protect what's most important to us has been heightened.

We're seeing a re-evaluation of values — and a re-evaluation of the role social can play in supporting them

People are shifting the way they engage with their feeds, to complement and nurture, rather than impede, these priorities. Digital channels are being used to strengthen family bonds, from the surging trend for listening to podcasts together in the Middle East to the growing prevalence of co-creating TikTok videos in many parent-child relationships. Meanwhile, Gardening TikTok (which sees people share tips and tricks for budding plant parents) speaks to a growing community of people who are translating 'slow hobbies' into the digital space.

This isn't just about health and family values, but simple pleasures too. Things that have been relegated in the context of modern life and an industrial society — the calm of being in nature, the pleasure of crafting or baking something from scratch, the comfort of feeling part of a local community. Social has not historically been a positive force in preserving those things: individualistic to the point of narcissism, globally connected at the expense of proximate interactions. We're seeing a re-evaluation of values — and a re-evaluation of the role social can play in supporting them.

What's driving it?

Social has become a highly individualistic and politicised space, which, in the context of the events of 2020, is leaving people wanting more from their feeds. There's an awareness of how these powerful digital tools can be used for more wholesome ends that place greater emphasis on the important things in life.

NEW PRIORITIES

The behavioural change

1

People are engaging more with their local communities via digital channels

During Covid-19, local tool kits for how to protect the vulnerable were templated and shared. Some communities used WhatsApp groups to stay connected to those in their locale. In Canada, 'care-mongering', which has seen thousands join Facebook Groups to provide the feeling of community support, continues to thrive. Even as lockdown has eased, these spaces have been repurposed to organise neighbourhood watches, or simply to keep in touch.

2

People are escaping to simplified virtual realities

Whether through the globally successful *Animal Crossing* or the resurgence of digital roleplaying (from a Facebook Group where we pretend to be ants, to one where we pretend the pandemic isn't happening), those unable to escape the anxieties of life in the physical world are finding solace in virtual ones instead.

3

People are engaging with influencers who practice simplicity as a lifestyle

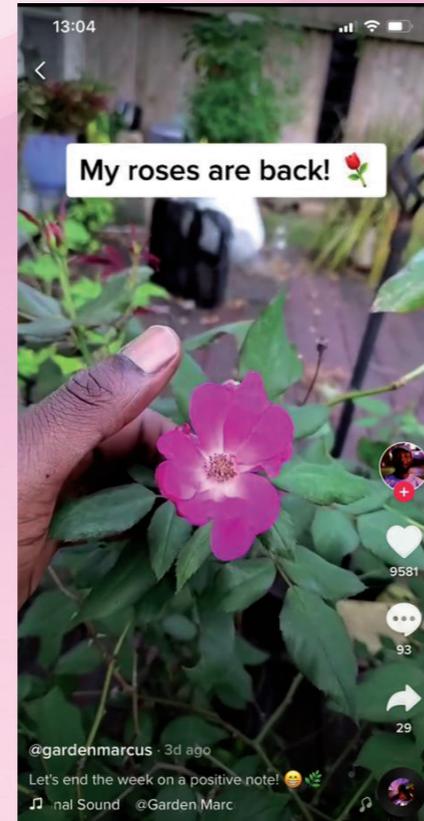
There has been a rise in communities like Gardening TikTok and the cottagecore movement — a Tumblr-born aesthetic defined by mostly city-based women participating in quaint, agricultural aesthetics and hobbies. People are using social to share a renewed enjoyment of simple offline pleasures with global communities of like-minded others.

Since launching his account in December 2019, prolific gardener Garden Marcus garnered over 7 million likes on TikTok

TikTok, 2020



Influencer Florence Rose embodies the quaint and dreamy #cottagecore aesthetic via Instagram Reels



Garden Marcus is leading the Gardening TikTok movement, which sees creators share tips and tricks for budding plant parents

USE IT

This shift calls for brands to demonstrate their own engagement with, and investment in, what's important. On social, it's an opportunity to use platforms to connect directly with consumers and what they care about.

1

Brands should celebrate the importance of the little things, not just the big things

Mobile game-cum-WeChat sensation from NetEase '100 Things To Do In Life' is a checklist of everyday things that everyone should do, such as taking a family portrait or mastering a dish. Brands can have cultural impact by leaning into this celebration of the simple things.

2

Brands should invest in local communities

Digital channels are playing a growing role in how people engage with their local communities, so there's an opportunity for brands to celebrate and invest in those communities. Heineken has been using digital channels to crowdfund and keep independent venues afloat, for example. Another way to do this is to partner with and celebrate the real people customers come to know and love, like a woman who works on the cheese counter in UK supermarket Waitrose, who has gained thousands of TikTok followers for sharing cheese facts.



2

PRACTICAL ADVOCACY

■ People are finding practical ways
to mobilise from within their feeds

UNDERSTAND IT

'Armchair activism' has long been considered the lazier cousin of getting out in the world. But amid the constraints of 2020, digital advocacy has undergone a practical transformation. It's been bolstered by powerful online communities who, galvanised by voices elevated on social, are educating themselves and mobilising. They're realising that online action can translate to tangible offline change.

There's been a realisation that online action can translate to offline change

People are using digital channels to make an impact in the physical world, whether fighting systemic oppression, or supporting those whose homes have been ravaged by natural disasters. Political TikTok has been blowing up. Educational resources are being shared via Google Docs. Clickbait activism is hoodwinking people into educating themselves. Brands are also repurposing their feeds to this end; #PullUpOrShutUp is an initiative by UOMA Beauty calling for its industry peers to be transparent about their in-house diversity.

After all, this is the year that the digital resonance of BLM led to the largest-ever organisation of protests in support of Black communities, with features like Snapchat's Snap Maps aiding participation, helping people observe and locate marches in real-time. It's forcing brands and platforms to reconsider their role in the conversation. Campaigns like #StopHateForProfit have even seen commercial powerhouses work together to put a dent in Facebook's stocks, if only momentarily, while Ben & Jerry's has spoken out against the status quo.



What's driving it?

The innovation of long-form formats on traditionally short-form platforms like Instagram and Twitter has brought education and action to new audiences. This has normalised the behaviour of spending time consuming and engaging with posts in social, evolving the role of these platforms in culture from passive advocacy spaces to active spaces for accountability, learning and impact.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The behavioural change

1

People are getting an education on social justice via Instagram slideshows

Touted as 'PowerPoint Activism' by Vox, high-design 101s created for the IG carousel format – like those posted by @soyouwanttotalkabout – are changing the way we consume information, and pushing Instagram's role as a source of legitimate education and reading around social issues.

2

Teens are coalescing into powerful online communities to boycott real political campaigns

The teens of TikTok made headlines in the run-up to the US presidential election for their very real trolling of Donald Trump. From ensuring that seats remained empty for his Tulsa rally to flooding his app with negative reviews, these online communities are driving offline consequences.

3

People are calling out virtue signalling

The black squares of Blackout Tuesday and the #ChallengeAccepted movement – which saw women post black-and-white photos of themselves in the name of empowerment (and maybe Turkish femicide) – both raised questions around why people are really posting. Hint: it's not for social justice. "After ending racism with my black square I dismantle the patriarchy with a hot black and white selfie," tweeted Taylor Lorenz.



British creative and writer Chanté Joseph posts an educational highlight on confusing acronyms, a digestible 101 from a long-form article for independent media outlet gal-dem

USE IT

Blackout Tuesday encouraged brands to assess how they address injustice in their workstreams, workplaces and communications, but there's no immediate solution to such entrenched issues. While all should focus on cleaning house, brands must get comfortable with the fact that whatever they say or don't say could be met with criticism. In the short term, brands are adapting to a landscape in which social has become a more practical tool for advocacy and education.

1

Brands should educate people where they can

P&G has been running campaigns around anti-Black discrimination for many years. In 2020 it has added weight to its campaign 'The Look', by releasing a number of educational resources outlining the research that underpins its content. It also helps people to understand how they can drive change on a personal and community level. This evolution sees the idea of a brand campaign transform from self-serving to something that uses a brand's reach and profile to be a catalyst for change.

78% of American Gen-Zers have used social media to express support for Black Americans

Yubo, 2020



Taylor Lorenz embodies the cynicism many felt this year at social media challenges that claim to be based on social good

2

Brands should look to social to educate themselves

Learning from conversations among trans people on social about trying out their new names when ordering a Starbucks, the brand launched its 'What's your name' campaign. By working with young trans people to create video portraits for YouTube, and collaborating with trans charity Mermaids, this campaign demonstrated an understanding of how the communities it's speaking to experience its brand. What's more, Starbucks used the conversation unfolding on social to educate themselves on the matter.

3

IN-FEED INTIMACY

■ People are finding ways to humanise
their digital communications

UNDERSTAND IT



The narratives that circulate have often implied that social media damages our offline relationships. And while those anxieties still ring true – as demonstrated by Netflix’s *The Social Dilemma* – recent years have also seen some of those narratives begin to change. Instead of getting in the way of relationships or making them feel creepy, certain digital tools are being accepted as enhancements to offline life.

Digital tools have been integral to maintaining our offline relationships

During the pandemic, these tools became integral. While some have already fallen in the dust (looking at you, Houseparty), others promise to withstand the test of time. Facebook updated its suite of reactions with the ‘care’ emoji to facilitate more intimate interactions, TikTok introduced Small Gestures, which lets users send each other gifts, and mainstream audiences are finally on board with video communication; Bumble introduced a video chat function with great success, and Zoom meetings have become a workplace mainstay.

Live-streaming platforms have seen audiences warm to a format that enables a more intimate connection with influential figures. Madonna wrote her biopic with screenwriter Diablo Cody on Instagram Live, while Jacinda Ardern took to Twitch to connect with voters. This reflects a broader trend of people connecting more intimately with creators via social video, which has been accelerated by the rise of TikTok. Its 60-second video format is not just for dance challenges, but also used by creators to discuss complex subjects with empathy and nuance.



What’s driving it?

The ubiquity of social media has seen the novelty of large followings decline. Instead, people are prioritising the closest circles of their networks in digital spaces. This shift has been magnified by lockdowns, which have seen digital channels become significant lifelines to our loved ones outside our households.

CONNECTION

The behavioural change

1. People are using personalised avatars to humanise their in-chat interactions

From Apple’s Memojis to the recently announced launch of Facebook Avatars and VR playground, Horizon, people are inhabiting virtual versions of themselves to personalise and humanise their digital interactions. The result is a richer immersion in shared digital entertainment experiences.

2. People are using audio formats to communicate with more emotion and nuance

A new wave of apps like Chalk and Space are experimenting with audio formats that enhance intimacy. This borrows from the formats of apps like Discord, which combines the casual nature of a chat app like Slack with audio, enabling gamers to talk hands-free. LinkedIn has also added a voice-note function, while Twitter has introduced audio tweets, though its team is still working on ensuring these features are accessible to all.

3. People are connecting to like-minded communities in private digital spaces

People are seeking out niche spaces in which they can find like-minded users away from their public feeds. From the rise of Facebook Groups like supermarket Lidl’s ‘The Lidlers GB’ community channel to the branded Discord community from Hypebeast, people are finding intimacy in more private social spaces.



Apple's Memojis are helping people humanise the chat

83% of people globally feel brands should be using their social channels to create a sense of community and support

Trust Barometer Special Report, Edelman, 2020



New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's appearance on Twitch demonstrates how live formats are being used to make connecting with large audiences more intimate

USE IT

In this landscape, brands should be taking this opportunity to facilitate more intimate connections with and between their customers, through private groups, humanised customer service and empathetic communications.

1

Brands should be humanising their digital customer services

Chinese beauty brand Perfect Diary created a virtual customer service representative named Xiao Wanzi to connect more intimately with customers in closed WeChat groups, and IKEA Italia has been hosting Instagram Lives with its store staff, creating more human touchpoints for its customers.

2

Brands can capitalise on this shift to generate a feeling of exclusivity

Speaking to people via more intimate formats can help customers to feel they're getting an exclusive experience. February's Milan Fashion Week saw Gucci send invites to show attendees via WhatsApp in the form of a voice note from creative director Alessandro Michele, and Korean beauty brand Glow Recipe has launched a private Instagram handle (@RealGlowGang) so its customers can directly input on product development and connect more directly with the brand.

4

RELIABLE IDOLS

■
People want public figures to
use their platforms responsibly.

UNDERSTAND IT

In 2020, influencers have been placed under a microscope. Between creators breaking stay-at-home orders, aspirational content being condemned as tone deaf and studies suggesting public figures have been responsible for as much as 69% of misinformation spread on social around Covid-19, people are holding influential figures accountable.

Influential figures are being held accountable

People are being more discerning about who they follow, and why. In Singapore, someone even launched an 'Influencer Glassdoor'. This is part of a broader shift away from aspiration for aspiration's sake, and a growing emphasis placed on the tangible value public figures can bring to our lives. Medical professionals are blowing up for democratising information that typically comes with a fee, while specialists in niche fields are gaining traction for combating misinformation. Following the explosion in Beirut, for example, a cartographer went viral for posting an accurate map demonstrating the scale of the explosion.

For those who've already grown sizable followings via the allure of beauty, success and luxury, this is about demonstrating integrity, accountability and a desire to wield the disproportionate influence they hold responsibly. When people looked to Selena Gomez as a voice during the Black Lives Matter activity, for example, she gave up her platform to Black figureheads who deserved it. Audiences aren't unfollowing beautiful people. But they want them to be more than a pretty face, and to prove that they're worth their place in the feed.



What's driving it?

Recent years have seen a rising backlash against traditional influencers, with savvy social users falling out of love with a group that's tarred as unrelatable and inauthentic. As the role of platforms like TikTok and Instagram shifts towards information alongside (and sometimes over) entertainment, expectations for this group to offer more tangible value to the people who follow them have heightened.

DISTRUST

The behavioural change

1

People are looking to influencers they trust to demystify complex issues

Self-taught economist Nathan Tankus has, according to Bloomberg, become a 'must-read' when understanding the state of the economy. London-based @nels9bills is a YouTuber translating his personal experiences into financial advice for his young following. Both exemplify how people are looking to relatable figures to help them understand complex issues. This creates new opportunities for brands in 'unsexy' industries looking to demystify their services.

2

People are following respected experts for free access to knowledge

While Dr Fauci became the beating heart of many online fan communities during the pandemic – a voice of calm and reason in an unpredictable landscape – we've also seen other healthcare professionals rise to fame on social platforms, from OB/GYNs to plastic surgeons to therapists. These experts are using social platforms to democratise knowledge people traditionally paid for.

3

People expect influential figures to give up their platforms for important issues

There has become an expectation that people with a platform should use it to benefit society. English footballer Marcus Rashford is using his platform to impact child food poverty, while megastars including Kim Kardashian and Leonardo DiCaprio staged a 24-hour Instagram boycott alongside #StopHateForProfit in protest of parent company Facebook's role in distributing misinformation.



Cartographer Joanna Merson has gained a following for correcting misinformation around the scale of the blast in Beirut

Trustworthiness is the #1 trait people have looked for in influencers and creators, following the outbreak of Covid-19

GWI, 2020



When people looked to Selena Gomez as an influential voice during the BLM protests, she gave up her platform to Black figureheads like Brittany Packnett Cunningham who could better speak to the climate

USE IT

This shift will, of course, have an impact on how brands partner with talent. Influencer strategies will need to ensure there's alignment on the values and beliefs of brands and those who advocate for them. In addition, to gain traction with audiences, brands should be learning from, and emulating the behaviours of, this new wave of influencers.

1

Brands should be harnessing expert voices to address important issues

Fortnite hosted an in-game event series called We The People, enlisting speakers to discuss racism with authority. Chipotle collaborated with Queer Eye star Karamo for a Pride 'Lunch & Listen' on TikTok. MTV partnered with Michelle Obama to encourage young people to vote. Brands should also be tapping into their own internal experts to evoke authority and inspire trust.

2

Brands should be vetting creators to assess their integrity

In this landscape, the influencers brands work with will increasingly serve as shorthand for the kinds of values the brand itself upholds. Working with talent across the political spectrum will grow trickier, and people may even expect greater transparency around who brands are working with and why. We're already seeing this play out in the dispute around *Mulan* actress Liu Yifei, with the Disney movie facing a backlash after she posted her personal political views to social.

5

UNBOUND PLATFORMS

■
People are diversifying the ways
they engage with social

UNDERSTAND IT

In 2020, the horizons of social have expanded. Influencers are creating content outside their specialisms to address new needs. Platforms have gone through evolutions too, with many introducing new functionality to adapt to these changes in real time. Offline events have sparked a digital reaction that's seeing people and brands alike relearn how they navigate the social landscape.

The horizons of social have expanded

Communities, brands and platforms have been forced to adapt to a wealth of new content needs. Gaming streamers on Twitch have been producing lifestyle content, while creators from Instagram and YouTube have learned how to use TikTok. Games like *Fortnite* and *Animal Crossing* have transformed into social hubs, as have fitness apps like Strava. And live content has seen social feeds evolve into 24-hour events venues, whether for catwalks from brands like Louis Vuitton on TikTok or micro-drag shows aired on Instagram Live.

The fundamental purpose of these platforms is evolving, compounded by new features designed to adapt to changing audience needs. Pinterest, Instagram and TikTok are doubling down on handles and campaigns that teach people how to use their platforms amid their renewed role as arbiters of information. Meanwhile, gaming platforms are evolving to accommodate broader audiences; *Fortnite* introduced a mode for hanging out instead of battling, and Twitch launched Watch Parties, enabling streamers to watch movies with their fans.

What's driving it?

Amid the new content needs of 2020, emerging platforms like TikTok and Twitch assimilated into the mainstream, and the inertia attached to previously untapped features in major platforms (such as Instagram Live) fell away. In this landscape, people have picked up some new scrolling habits, bolstering the already prominent role of social in everyday life.

DISRUPTION

The behavioural change

1

People are evolving the ways they engage with information on social

Twitter has evolved its quote retweet function to make tracking conversations a more streamlined process, and a spike in the use of Saves on Instagram points to a shift in how people organise content they want to come back to. As the reasons for using social platforms diversify, the way people explore and organise content is evolving accordingly.

2

People are attending scheduled digital events

Live content is enabling large-scale digital spectacles that give creators a new stage to perform on. This type of content is leading to a reassessment of social as a place to gather around spectacles, and it's changing the way people fit these platforms into their lives. Rather than opening an app or tab on an ad-hoc basis, people are increasingly shaping their offline plans around scheduled, can't-miss, in-platform moments.

3

People are socialising and hanging out in games, not just playing them

It's been argued that digital spaces, like online games, are also social networks; places where people spend time and community can be fostered. Up until now, that's been a secondary benefit. Now, the emergence of gaming features like *Fortnite's* Party Royale mode point to a future in which people go to games to socialise, first and foremost.



K-Pop band BTS launched the music video for their single Dynamite in Fortnite's Party Royale mode

USE IT

The role digital spaces play in the consumer journey is evolving and becoming more tangible. In this landscape, brands need to rethink how to use these channels in their consumer journey and be sure they're not being discounted as pure-play arenas for PR stunts or one-off awareness drives.

1

Brands should reassess their assumptions of the most effective formats on each channel

As the purpose of these platforms evolves, the formats that define them are evolving too. In the wake of a spike in desire for long-form, informative content on Instagram, for example, text-based imagery has become more commonplace. In this landscape, ads should be evolving to keep up with these formats – it's why Facebook has axed its '20% rule', which historically penalised ads for including text that took up more than 20% of an image.

On Instagram, where there's been a shift towards text-based communication, Refinery29 went from 41% text-based posts in January to 72% in July

Axios, 2020



2

Brands should consider moves to new platforms, but integrate with sensitivity

The culture of a platform is shaped by its community. Engaging effectively with these communities is key to finding success when you're there. When Gucci saw potential in gaming platforms, for example, it partnered with Fnatic e-sports stars to run a campaign with gamers. In contrast, Burger King's Twitch campaign, which co-opted the platform's 'donation' feature for product-placement shout-outs, was condemned by Twitch users as an exploitation of the community.

Over the past two years, Twitch category 'Just Chatting', in which streamers don't game but chat with followers instead, has grown nearly four times as quickly as the platform overall

6

OPEN-SOURCE CREATIVITY



People are engaging with more collaborative forms of content creation

UNDERSTAND IT

Creativity on social has thrived through the removal of gatekeepers, the democratisation of tools and the fluidity of remixing what's already out there. Now, the process of content creation is becoming even more communal. Spearheaded by young audiences with collaborative mindsets, and enabled by tools and formats that encourage collaboration, the feed is increasingly a place to co-create, not just consume.

The feed has become a place to co-create, not just consume

TikTok's meteoric rise was a tipping point. The fundamental features and formats of the platform, duetting with other people's videos, using their audio, and so on, ensure that communal creativity is at the heart of its content. Creators like @angryreactions have found fame purely for reacting to, and riffing off, other people's uploads. Some of the most popular videos in its hashtagged dance challenges are published by accounts dedicated to dance tutorials, encouraging people not just to view, but participate in the output.

Collaboration is enabling creators to meet people's ever-increasing demands for content. Some are using followers' comments as the foundation for new content (a well-worn habit among YouTube creators); others are working with other creators on live feeds to build out communal content streams. It's also why 'collab houses' like the Hype House have become so commonplace. Even Twitter, arguably one of the more individualistic platforms, has launched Co-Fleets, a feature that allows its users to collaborate on public, conversational content streams.



What's driving it?

Gen Z's notoriously fluid approach to content creation is what's driving this behaviour. It's been catalysed, though, by a shift in how creators are operating in response to the sheer volume of content people now expect to scroll through on social. In the context of influencer burnout (a widely reported issue even before the world went into lockdown and quadrupled their screen time), creators are finding ways to work smarter, not harder.

COLLABORATION

The behavioural change

1 People are collaborating with their heroes via social

People are growing accustomed to their heroes putting them and their talents in the spotlight. Charli XCX collaborated with her fans via Zoom to write her latest album, and on Instagram, film industry polymath Miranda July has been crowdsourcing entire scripts from her followers.

2 People are participating in TikTok cults

Trailblazed by Melissa Ong (aka @chunkysdead) and her hyper-dedicated following, TikTok cults - which blew up during lockdown - are defined by a collaborative creator-follower relationship. Ong regularly requests input from her following to inform her creative output. They were invited to name the cult ('Step Chickens'), and she regularly creates content in response to their comments and requests. In this way, her community directly feeds the content she creates and act as stakeholders in her output.

3 People are repurposing #challenges as evergreen content streams

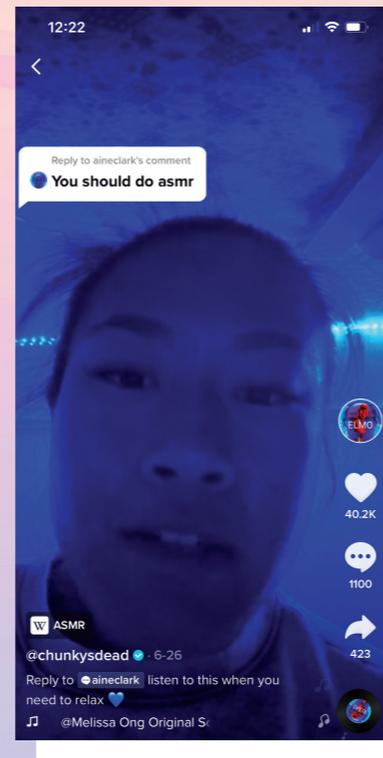
Social media challenges have evolved from their seedy roots of Tide Pods, planking and spoonfuls of cinnamon. In 2020, social 'challenges' began to serve as easy-to-find digital spaces where people can create, and recreate, inventive content around a unified theme. In the #euphoriamakeupchallenge on TikTok, for example, which has drawn over 1.4 billion views, users create make-up looks and tutorials inspired by HBO show Euphoria, encouraging viewers to participate, too.

When Dua Lipa launched a TikTok competition for people to collaborate with her on a music video for her single Levitating, submissions garnered over 4.7 million views in just six weeks

TikTok, 2020



Film industry polymath Miranda July collaborated with her following on Instagram to continue to make movies during lockdown



Melissa Ong regularly uses comments from her 2 million+ followers as a springboard for new content

USE IT

We'll continue to see major platforms evolve their tools and functionality to facilitate more collaborative creation. In this landscape, brands can expect the quality of 'fan' creativity to rise and should harness it where possible.

1

Brands should stop behaving like gatekeepers, and foster creativity

Brands that have the cultural footprint to do so should look for ways to facilitate creativity within their audience. One way of achieving this can be by opening up your own creative tools for people to play with. In response to a wave of young, aspiring designers that emerged during lockdown, for example, fashion designer Reese Cooper launched RCI - DIY, a collection that was released alongside patterns and instruction booklets, encouraging these young talents to make their own clothes, not just buy his.

2

Brands should use comments and community management to directly inspire content

On Instagram, Gymshark has already been leaning into this shift. After a body-positive photo of a plus-size model on its Instagram received mixed reactions, the sportswear brand replied to every single comment. The creative story lived in the community management, not the asset, and it was co-created with the brand's followers. There's an opportunity to take this one step further and use those comments to inspire new content, too.

4

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talktous@wearesocial.net

wearesocial.com





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