

# Think Forward

Building Brands at the **Speed of Social**



# Social has shifted from the supporting act **to the main stage.**

What began as a place to connect is now the world's most powerful entertainment ecosystem, **surpassing TV for time spent**, cultural influence and **return on investment for brands**.

Now, even the biggest, most established businesses are realising that they will lose out on the purchases today's consumers make, now and in the future, if social isn't a serious and significant part of their long-term communications strategy. **Marketers universally agree on the importance of social media in 2026, with 95% of respondents to our Think Forward 2026 survey identifying it as a critical tool for brand building.**

But getting the strategy right is not a simple task. Behind the headline growth, the social landscape is shifting: attention is fragmenting and AI-generated content is flooding feeds. Quantity has never been higher; quality has never been more uncertain. Every scroll now competes for an ever-shrinking slice of human focus.

Yet many businesses don't make the most of what social media has to offer for brand building. **Less than a third use it through the entire marketing funnel**, according to our data. They treat it as a broadcast channel rather than a place for conversation and culture, or they use it as a short-term performance lever.

For nearly two decades, We Are Social has shown that brands can be built and scaled on social. We've pioneered formats, shaped culture, and turned attention into measurable growth.

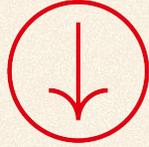
We didn't adapt to this reality. We were born in it. Born in social, raised in culture, and built to turn attention into lasting brand value.

**The question isn't whether to invest in social. It's how to do it smartly.**



**Read on to find out how.**

# Introduction



Understanding how and when to activate trends on social has always been important for brands. But over ten years on from when we first launched Think Forward, hype-cycles are accelerating, trends are proliferating and consumer attention is fragmenting. Return on investment can now be either very high, or very low.

**We've always considered trends in the context of long-term brand building**, so this year we're going a step further by **rooting our trend analysis in established brand building principles with *The Cultural Power Loop***, ensuring they are fit for purpose in **helping brands connect to their audiences and communities.**

To support our findings, **we surveyed 300 marketers in the US and UK** about **the future of social and brand building.**

## 01 The Cultural Power Loop

- **The Four Forces Of The Loop and Why They Matter For Growth**
- **The Role Of Social In The Loop**

## 02 Think Forward 2026: Trends

- **Presence:**  
How can brands show up intuitively in everyday moments and spaces?
- **Power:**  
What does being aspirational mean now, and how can brands communicate status and prestige?
- **Proof:**  
How are trust and expertise earned and evolving?
- **Participation:**  
How is community belonging created, and how can brands harness the power of fandom?

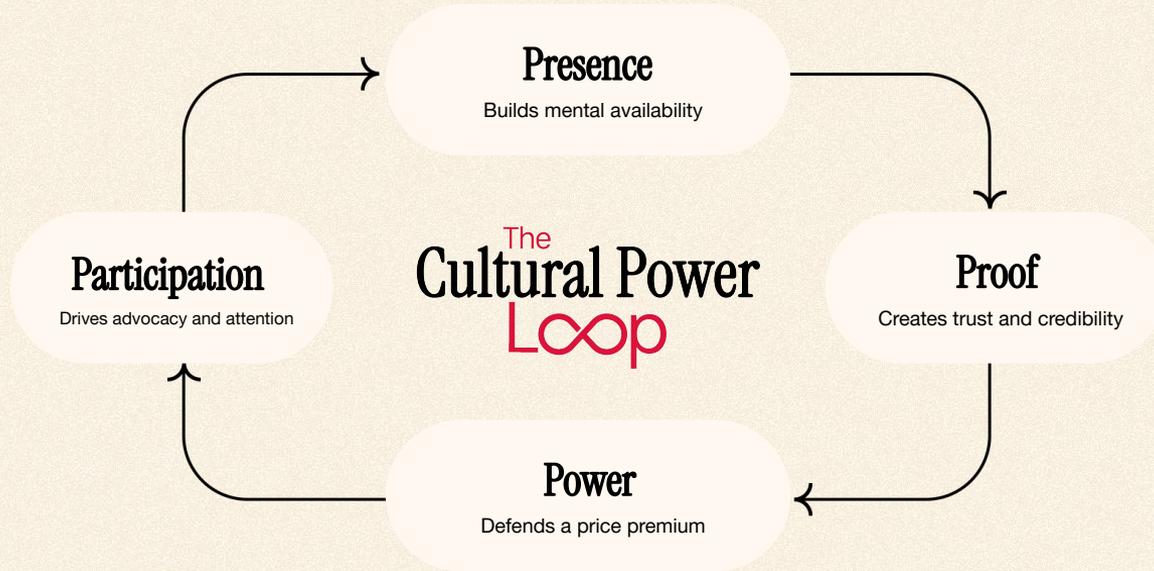
## 03 About Us

- **Putting it into Practice (Case Studies)**
- **Our Capabilities**
- **Research Methodology**

01

# The Cultural Power Loop





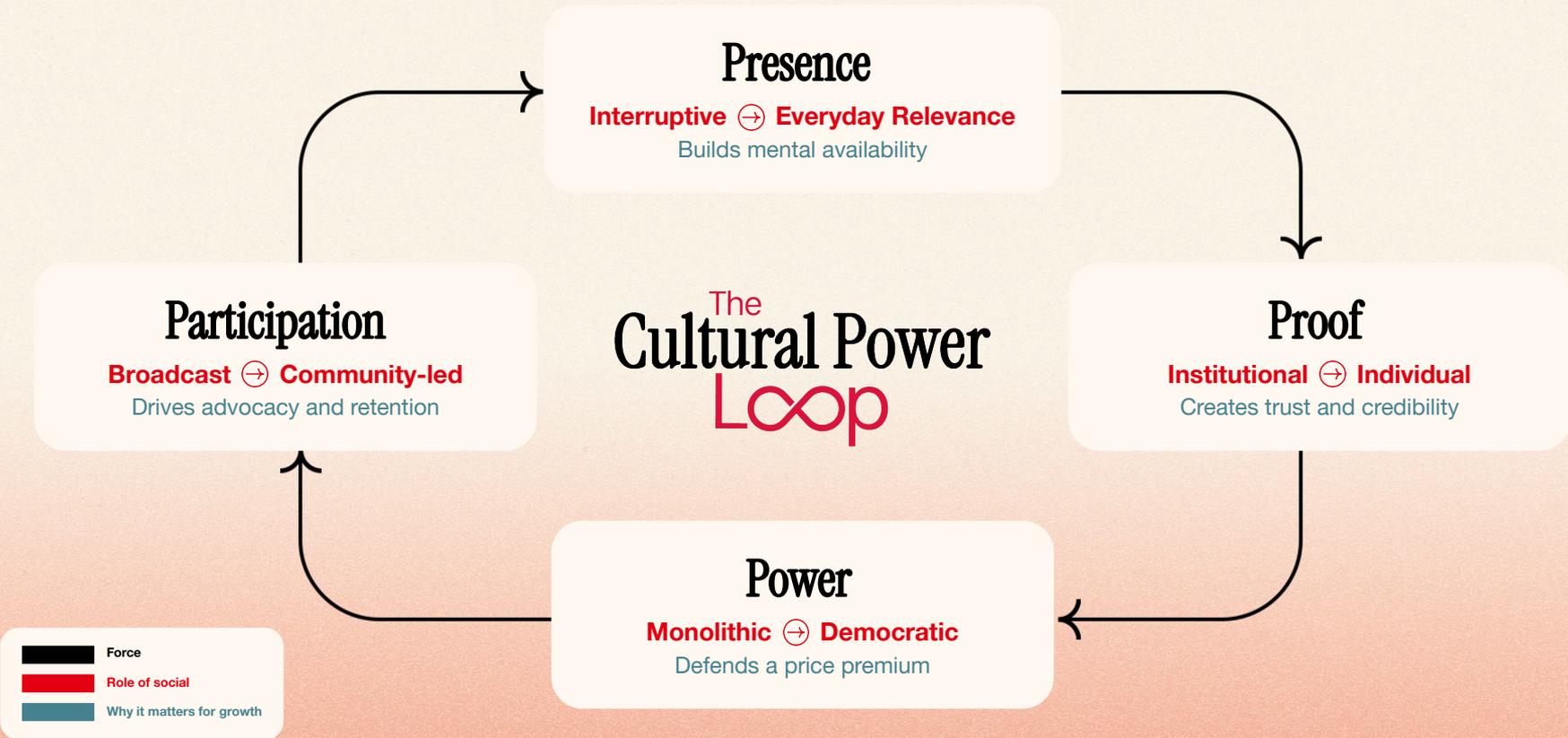
*The Cultural Power Loop is We Are Social's point of view on how to build brands that live in culture.*

Grounded in **established brand-building theory**, it translates timeless principles into a system designed for how culture moves today.

It's an **interconnected ecosystem where four forces (Presence, Proof, Power and Participation) reinforce one another**. When they're aligned, brands stop interrupting culture and start moving with it.

# How does social shape modern brand building ?





# Presence



Social role: From Interruptive to Everyday Relevance

## 21%

increase in sales from aggregating higher frequency of short bursts of attention vs fewer continuous moments

[Analytic Partners/META, 2025](#)

Social is uniquely placed to build this presence through the notion of “lots of littles”, marketing effectiveness analysis which finds that short spans of attention across multiple ads are more effective in driving brand uplifts than seeing one, longer ad on a media channel like TV.

# Proof



Social role: From Institutional to Individual

Creators are outperforming the average media channel in long-term ROI by

## 51%

[System1, 2025](#)

Creators are outperforming the average media channel by 51% in long-term ROI, influencing “brand perceptions, memory structures, affinity and trust and salience among non-active buyers.”

## What the data tells us

# Power



Social role: From Monolithic to Democratic

## 90%

median revenue ROI increase when moving from a performance strategy to a mixed performance and equity approach

[WARC, 2025](#)

Helps brands build equity, which can increase pricing power, according to WARC's Multiplier Effect analysis, through more democratic expressions of premiumness over the monolithic and hierarchical.

# Participation



Social role: From Broadcast to Community-led

## 59%

of consumers say they're more likely to consider purchasing a product that everyone is talking about

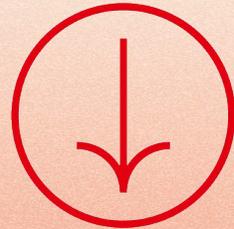
[WARC x TikTok, 2024](#)

Your customers become your biggest fans, co-creating and amplifying your story, with 51% of Americans stating that sharing content on social media is important to expressing their fandom.

The Cultural Power Loop is a **living ecosystem** where four forces power one another. When they're aligned, your brand stops interrupting culture - **and starts riding with it.**

# Think Forward 2026

## The Next Wave of the Cultural Power Loop



To fuel this approach, we have identified **eight key emerging cultural trends**, aligned with each stage of The Cultural Power Loop, which brands can tap into for 2026 to maximise their impact.

Jump to...



## Presence



### The Intimacy Economy

Building everyday presence through emotional proximity and smaller moments.



### Cringe Confidence

Embracing unashamed sincerity wins over the performance of polish.

## Proof



### Radical Subjectivity

Adapting when people are turning to human perspectives over legacy institutions.



### Maverick Expertise

Empowering people to become their own experts in an age of atomised trust.

## Power



### Deconstructing Luxury

Evolving as luxury shifts from passive admiration to actively engaged expertise.



### Rethinking Reality

Framing the future in a post-human, post-reality world.

## Participation



### Fandom Architects

Unlocking the creative potential of fan communities.



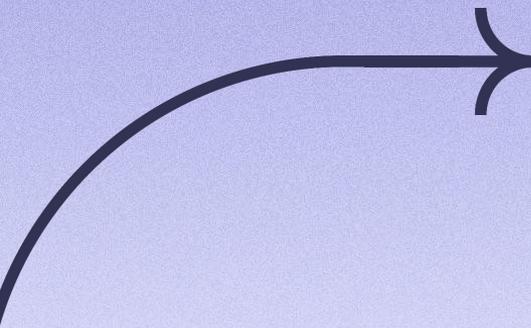
### Reference Maxxing

Turning cultural fragmentation into creative cultural layering.

02

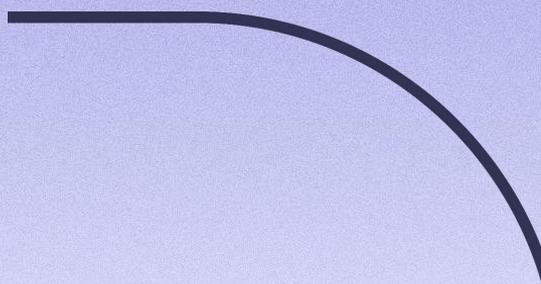
# Think Forward 2026: Trends





# presence

How do brands show up intuitively in  
everyday moments and spaces?



Presence

# the intimacy economy



## Presence

# the intimacy economy

Brands can build presence in the everyday by bringing to life the joy and discovery of small moments.

For years, social rewarded the extraordinary - the optimised, the aesthetic, the performative. But the spectacle has become exhausting. Audiences are now finding comfort in what once felt unremarkable: the small rituals that shape daily life.

Presence is the starting point on *The Cultural Power Loop*. By showing up seamlessly in everyday moments and conversations, brands build a strong foundation for cultural relevance. And in a hyper-curated culture, noticing the mundane has become a quiet act of rebellion. Brushing your teeth, making your morning coffee, going to the shop - **these moments are tiny proofs of being real.**

Did you know?

Social media is marketers' no.1 channel for driving emotional connection

Think Forward 2026 Survey



A growing scepticism of polished content is accelerating this shift. Influencer GRWM videos are littered with comments accusing them of skipping crucial details of cosmetic procedures. Last year saw a wave of people revisiting Lily Allen and David Harbour's Architectural Digest Open Door video, with comments calling out the poignant reality of their home life, as exposed by Allen's *West End Girl* album - itself a sign of our cultural appetite for emotional realness.

Creators are turning everyday moments into opportunities for grounded, intimate connection. In a fragmented, polarised feed environment, audiences are seeking closeness, including - or especially - with those outside their usual algorithmic bubble.

**Authenticity is no longer about total transparency. It's about emotional closeness.**

## Cultural driver

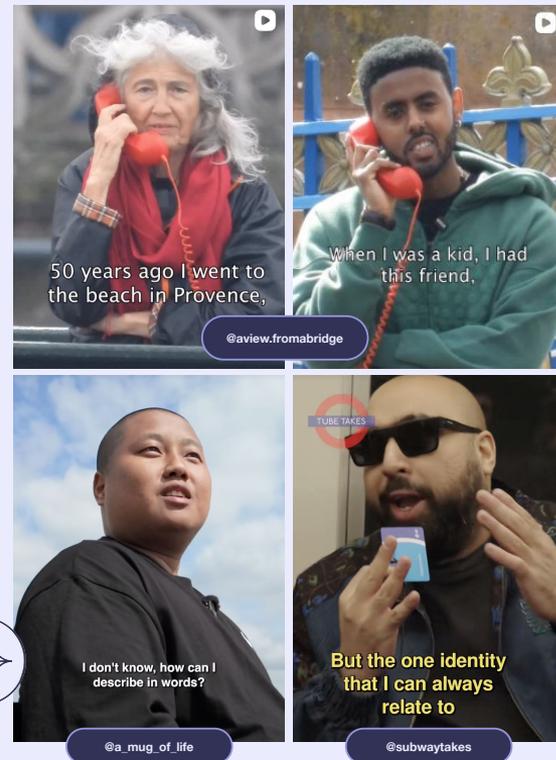
### Slowing down

→ Attention spans are stretched, AI is accelerating output, and feeds move faster than ever

→ In response, audiences are craving slower, quieter moments that help them reconnect with themselves and each other

## Social manifestations

- 01 **Spaces of shared catharsis are emerging.** *A Mug of Life* turns a spontaneous cuppa into micro-therapy; *Scream Clubs* create communal release; *A View from a Bridge* has grown from Instagram into a podcast. Each demonstrates a collective appreciation for emotional honesty and closeness with strangers.
- 02 **Audiences are being invited to share what they really think.** *Subway Takes* captures candid hot takes in the mundane rhythm of the commute, proving that understated, observational storytelling now cuts through better than forced virality.



## How to use it

### Frame storytelling around the ordinary

Amazon Prime's *Girl Room* and *Boy Room* show how unpolished, emotionally honest stories can become repeatable social formats by taking viewers into the messy rooms of Gen Z subjects and renovating them using only Amazon products.

### Turn micro-moments into opportunities for joy

Brands like **Hismile** transform the routine behaviour of brushing your teeth into playful, participatory rituals through crowdsourced flavours, fan-led experiments, and “flavour lab” moments.

### Tackle taboos with reality, tenderness, and humour

Disarming honesty beats polished empathy. **Andrex** reframed **toilet taboo** awkwardness into a culturally joyful moment, proving that even the most everyday products can spark conversation.





Presence

# cringe confidence



Presence

# cringe confidence

Brands can resonate in everyday culture by embracing, and enabling, unfiltered sincerity.

For a decade, digital culture swung between two extremes: cool detachment and performative vulnerability. Both now feel exhausted (and exhausting). To build momentum and Presence within *The Cultural Power Loop*, brands need to meet the needs of audiences searching for content that's emotionally real but delivered with humour, humility, and self-awareness.

In a culture that's done with perfection and irony alike, a new creative language is emerging built on awkwardness and interpersonal friction. As AI-generated content floods feeds, the pendulum is swinging hard toward the human, the awkward, and the earnest.

At the start of 2026, we saw a social trend for revisiting and romanticising 2016, celebrating it as the last chapter of 'cringe but carefree' posting. Today, to be cringe is to resist any critique of trying too hard. Cringe is now a creative stance: proud proof that you're still trying.

**Cringe is being redefined as a language of care, sincerity, and effort, the opposite of algorithmic polish. In a landscape of over-optimised brand behaviours, that stance feels radical.**

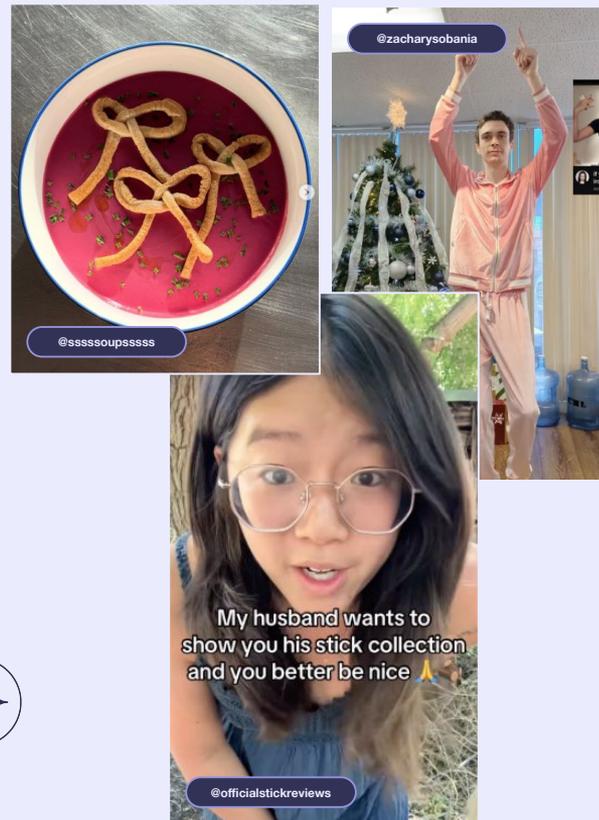
## Cultural driver

### Always-on spectacle

→ The potential for always being watched, or the constant risk of having unguarded, everyday behaviour exposed on social media (whether by friends or by a stranger's [Meta Ray-Bans](#)) is leading people to choose between constantly curated self-scrutiny and vulnerable honesty, with radical earnestness becoming the desired response

## Social manifestations

- 01 **People are proudly sharing hyper-specific micro-obsessions.** [Soup](#) collections, [stick](#) enthusiasm, [low-stakes dance routines](#). Caring deeply, even about something small, has become a cultural flex.
- 02 **Cringe is being reframed as sincere effort.** Once derided figures, from early YouTubers to [Addison Rae](#), are now celebrated for earnestness over polish. Furthermore, creators are advising followers to embrace daunting tasks by taking life a little [less seriously](#), or 'committing to the bit.'



## How to use it

### Play with (and subvert) marketing conventions

Telfar's QVC parody doesn't just embrace cringe, it operationalises it. Lo-fi camera angles, stilted delivery, exaggerated sales tropes, all used to collapse luxury and home shopping into a single, audacious statement of confidence.

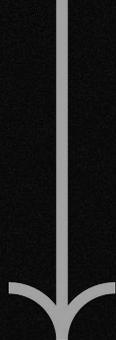
### Lean into unfiltered sincerity

GAP's *Give Your Gift* channels '90s nostalgia and pure performance energy. No irony, no wink - just wholehearted expression. Brands that visibly care about their audience, their category, or even their mistakes, feels refreshing. Being "too much" is better than being invisible.

### Blend irony with empathy

Bilt's creator-first storytelling lives inside creators' own imperfect, cringe, chaotic worlds. The payment and rewards programme has a separate social channel for its *Roomies* sitcom, a form of "sponsorship by stealth" powered by relatability.

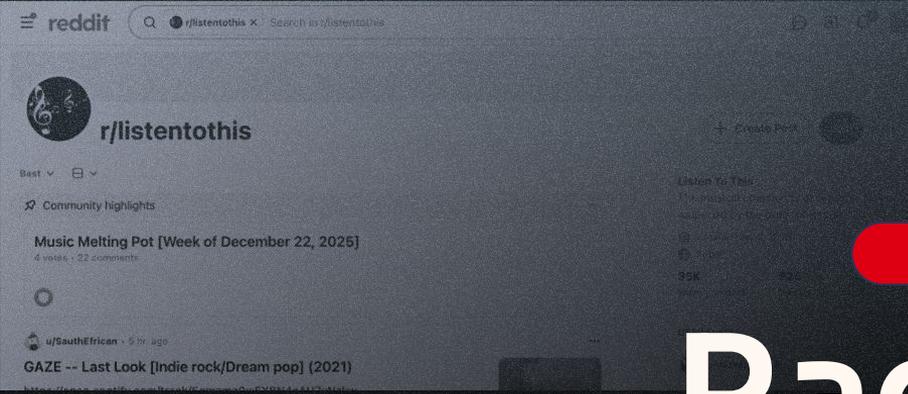




# PROOF

How are trust and expertise  
earned and evolving?





Proof

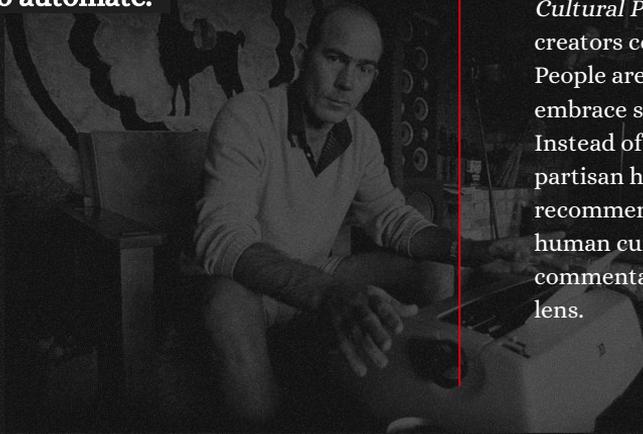
# Radical Subjectivity



Proof

# Radical Subjectivity

Brands can build trust by foregrounding distinctly human perspectives - imperfect, personal and impossible to automate.



Trust in institutions is collapsing. Media confidence in the US [has dropped to 28%](#).

[The Pope](#) has condemned clickbait. Creators' work is being scraped to train LLMs without credit or compensation. Legacy institutions, as well as the algorithms and AI models of Big Tech, are confronted by a culture of scepticism. Today, the idea of an "objective truth" is faced with doubt.

Proof and credibility are essential for *The Cultural Power Loop*, but the way brands and creators communicate these values is changing. People are gravitating toward voices who embrace subjectivity rather than hide it. Instead of being told "the facts" through partisan headlines or algorithmic recommendations, audiences are choosing human curators, connoisseurs, and commentators who openly bring their own lens.

On social, we're seeing the rise of Gonzo-style journalists who lean into personality over polished professionalism. Communities on forums like [/r/ListenToThis](#) or the [Sonos subreddit](#) (149k+ weekly visitors) are growing precisely because they offer diverse, unfiltered viewpoints. TikTok "researchers", from [Miriam Tinny](#) to [Polyester Zine](#) are gaining traction by openly grappling with ideas rather than presenting them as fixed.

**Trust is shifting from institutions to individuals .**  
**And the subjective, human perspective is increasingly valorised as a result.**

## Cultural driver

### AI anxiety

→ There's a growing fear of the apparatus of Big Tech, whether it's algorithms creating a homogeneous culture that encourages convenience at the cost of meaningful engagement, or AI making everyone 'mid'



## Social manifestations

01

People are choosing **manual discovery over algorithmic ease**. Subreddits like /r/ListenToThis and Bandcamp clubs let users dive deep into curated communities run by passionate humans, not recommendation engines.

02

**Journalists are going Gonzo**. Creators like Nicholas Nuvan evolve the man-on-the-street format into genuine interpersonal exploration, while Rob Martinez uses food blogging to platform restaurant owners and their stories. These interactions build trust through presence, personality and perspective.



## How to use it

### Tell long-form, human stories

Yeti builds trust by focusing on people, not products. Its **YouTube documentaries** spotlight personalities, like a reggae researcher turned wilderness obsessive, putting passion at the centre of brand meaning.

### Create spaces for deep, participatory conversation

Sonos fosters transparency by participating in its own Reddit community through a dedicated moderator, **@KeithFromSonos**. His in-jokes, **memes** and troubleshooting humanise the brand and builds loyalty.

### Treat subjectivity as a strength

Brands don't need "the definitive take", they need a clear, human point of view. Share the why, not just the what. People trust brands that show the thinking behind their choices.



**Keith**

[Follow](#) [Start Chat](#)

640 followers  
Social Media Program Lead @ Sonos Inc.

**18,183** Karma  
**1,123** Contributions

**2 y** Reddit Age  
**1** Active in >

**ACHIEVEMENTS**

Popular Post, Rising Star, Banana Aficionado +37 more

[@KeithFromSonos](#)

**YETI**

223k subscribers [Subscribe](#)

Proof

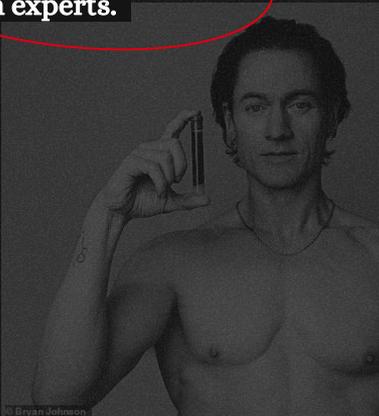
# Maverick Expertise



Proof

# Maverick Expertise

Brands can build trust by empowering people to become their own experts.



[Sleepmaxxing](#), [Fibremaxxing](#), [Hostage Tape RaptureTok](#). Every week on social, there's a new trend for users to be concerned about. Or a new influencer, such as [Ashton Hall](#), shilling them for engagement. Simultaneously, 2025 was the year that long-standing myths like the [10,000 steps a day rule](#) so embedded into people's health rituals that it was installed to iPhone's health widget, was debunked. A rising scepticism of both old and new sources of advice is making people wary of external expertise.

Did you know?

More than **one billion people** use AI tools every month

*Digital 2026, We Are Social*



Trust is becoming atomised. [AI chatbots are being used as personal advisors](#); subreddits and niche forums are treated as classrooms; and people are assembling their own, highly personalised

ecosystems of belief. Alternative spirituality, tarot readers, manifestation coaches, discipline-led biohackers, and science-first podcasters all coexist in this new landscape.

**In the era of Maverick Expertise, people don't want a single source of truth. They want tools, information, and frameworks that help them build their own.**

## Cultural driver

### Rabbit hole ecosystems

→ Platforms are encouraging people to go deeper into their interests and create a universe around the content they engage with

→ Whether it is search links on the bottom of [Reels display for “more like this”](#) or [comments under Spotify podcasts](#), there’s a rise in functionality that adds more layers to content



## Social manifestations

01

**Nerdiness is the new social currency.** Deep knowledge is becoming aspirational. Hours-long [science explainers](#), nutrition analysis, [beauty formulation talk](#) - being able to “go deep” is a new form of status.

02

**Alt philosophies shape trust.** From [tarot card readers](#) to extreme discipline influencers like [Andrew Huberman](#) and [Bryan Johnson](#), audiences are gravitating toward systems that are personalised to their lifestyle and worldview.



## How to use it

### Treat creators as educators

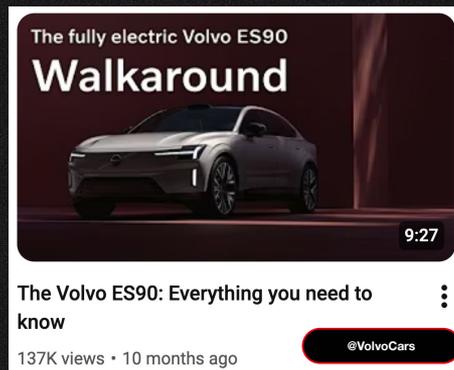
Don't just pay creators to sell; empower them to teach. HMRC partnered with creator **Abigail Rose Foster** to explain self-assessment tax returns in plain, simple language, making complexity accessible.

### Go deep, not broad

Volvo's **Everything You Need to Know** YouTube series respects audience intelligence with detailed, eight-minute explainers. No music, no fluff, just expertise. Depth builds trust.

### Proactively debunk myths

Brands like **The Ordinary** and **Vaseline** earn credibility by correcting misinformation in their categories. From demystifying skincare jargon to clarifying what their products can and can't do, they turn honesty into authority.



# *Power*

What does being aspirational mean now, and  
how can brands communicate status and  
prestige?

Power

# Deconstructing Luxury



Power

# Deconstructing Luxury

Brands can build prestige by shifting from exclusionary elitism to inclusive, informed enthusiasm.

Social has made the appearance of luxury accessible to everyone — and as a result, prestige must now work harder to be distinctive. The centre of gravity has shifted from passive admiration to active commitment. It's no longer enough to buy the right things or access the right spaces; what matters is deep, enthusiastic knowledge.

After years of “**eat the rich**” critique, from *The White Lotus* to *Succession*, audiences have grown cynical of wealth signalling. What they value now is discernment: understanding reference points, creative lineage, and the craft behind a product. Creators are opening the gate, not guarding it, sharing the stories, processes, and cultural context behind premium brands.

In *The Cultural Power Loop*, ‘Power’ is shifting from monolithic to democratised. Deconstructing Luxury is a move away from elitist premiumness toward a more democratic, meritocratic idea of prestige.

Entry isn't about status, it's about mastery. Secrets are shared, effort is celebrated, and subcultural fluency becomes its own form of credibility.

For premium brands, this means speaking meaningfully to niche communities, not broadcasting diluted messages to everyone.

**The audience is already fluent in hyper-specific references; the opportunity is to meet and reward that fluency.**

## Cultural driver

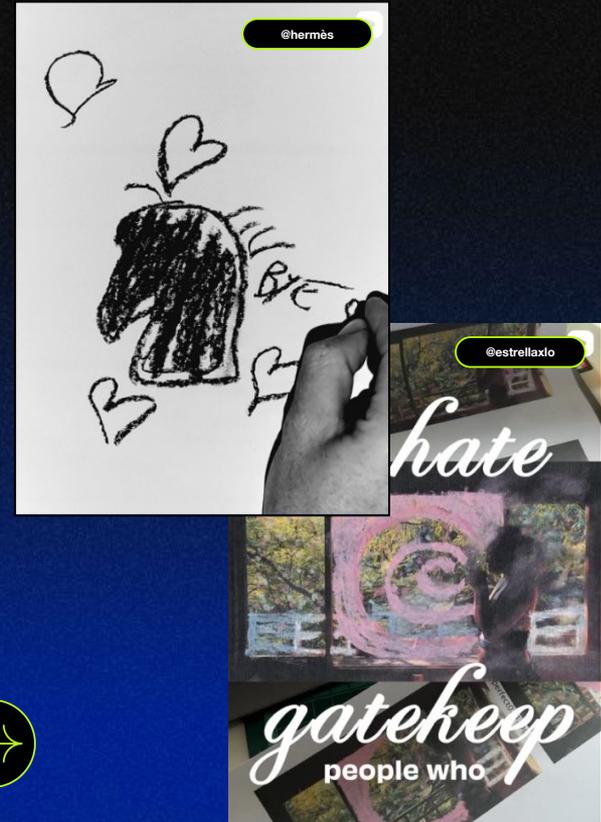
Inimitability over  
imitation

→ As AI outputs become more generic and “Quiet Luxury” becomes easy to copy, true premiumness comes from what can’t be replicated: distinctive ethos, craft, process, and perspective

→ Audiences are hungry for the stories and standards that make a product irreplaceable

## Social manifestations

- 01 **Prestige is shifting from gatekeeping to knowledge-sharing.** Influential voices are revealing their best tips - from haute-hosting, to cosmetic surgery insights, replacing unattainable aspiration with education.
- 02 **Ultra-engaged commentators are sharing informed takes on premium and prestige.** Commentators like Jay Tibbitts, Hanan Besovic and Snaxshot are elevating category expertise and calling out derivative brands, proving that informed critique is now part of premium culture.



## How to use it

### Prioritise depth, craft and archive

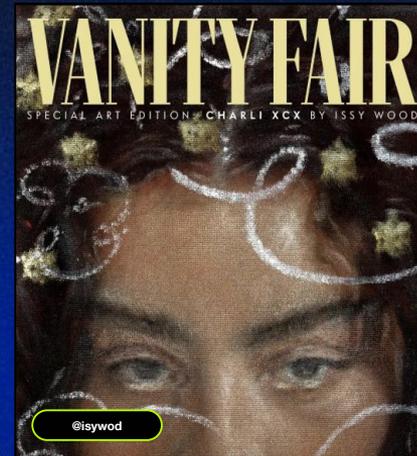
**Mirror Palais** founder Marcelo Gaia uses social to show - not tell - what makes luxury distinct: material choices, process, heritage. Premium brands should spotlight their micro-details, ethos, and archives to communicate real value.

### Go beyond surface-level talent activations

Hennessy signals cultural prestige by embracing polymathic creativity, from **chess** to **painting**. Vanity Fair did similarly by commissioning painter-musician Issy Wood to create its **Charli XCX** cover. Depth of talent reinforces depth of brand.

### Invest in multi-platform knowledge-sharing

adidas used long-form **documentary** storytelling, behind-the-scenes lab access, and platform-native formats to reveal its next-gen innovation. Showing multiple angles helps audiences understand and value the craft.



Power

# *Rethinking Reality*



Power

# Rethinking Reality

Brands have the opportunity to use social to prototype the future of prestige.

High-end creativity has always been future-facing, but today that future is increasingly uncanny, tech-enabled, and reality-bending. With AI encroaching on creative expression, prestige now comes from imagination that can't be automated: visions that feel human, original, and impossible to replicate.

At the same time, our bodies are becoming entwined with technology. [Cosmetic augmentation](#) is normalised, wellness is optimised, and biometric modification is entering mainstream conversation. We're living in a culture of enhancement, and it extends far beyond our screens.

On social, creators are using generative tools not as shortcuts, but as catalysts: pushing beyond realism into surreal, dreamlike, and sometimes unsettling worlds.

**Prestige emerges not from perfection, but from the ability to stretch reality in ways only humans can imagine.**

+ Insight

**Marketers are fast adopting AI tools** - 81% already use them as part of the creative process, and 17% plan to start this year.

*Think Forward 2026 Survey*

## Cultural driver

### Alternate worlds

→ Amid widespread unease about the future, people are embracing ethereal, otherworldly personas and ideas, from [fairies](#) and paranormal spirits to [hyper-real bodies](#)

→ This reflects a desire to transcend current realities and explore a higher plane, often with a penchant for the uncanny



## Social manifestations

01

### Absurd, illogical and dreamlike content is rising.

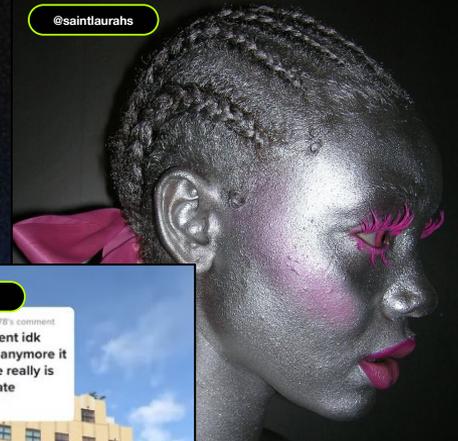
Creators like [Kilmaru](#) are using surreal humour, empty worlds, and fever-dream aesthetics to mirror the strangeness of contemporary life.

02

**Distortion is becoming a signature.** Perfect polish is easy for AI; unsettling imperfection is uniquely human. [Saint Knox](#) (The Hood Van Gogh) embodies this with glitchy, warped visuals that feel like portals into alternate futures.

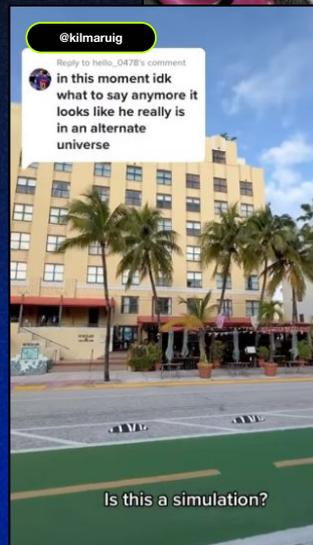


@saintlaurahs



@kilmaruig

Reply to hetic...\_D47E's comment  
in this moment idk what to say anymore it looks like he really is in an alternate universe



Is this a simulation?

## How to use it

### Build digital-first aesthetics that translate into the real world

**Godmode**, the gamer beauty brand from Rina Sawayama and Chloë Grace Moretz, treats its glitchy digital galaxy as the foundation for its IRL products. Annie Choi creates anime-adjacent worlds for **Hermès**, **Loewe**, and **Helmut Lang**, where fantasy informs physical craft.

### Express future anxieties or future optimism through visual storytelling.

From ultra-polished, doll-like bodies (**Xander Zhou**) to cyborg-inspired accessories (**Gentle Monster**), brands are exploring how humans might adapt in unstable futures.

### Design for all senses, not just sight

Brands like **Coperni** and **Space of Time** merge tech and tactility, creating hyper-sensory visual worlds where products feel almost extraterrestrial.

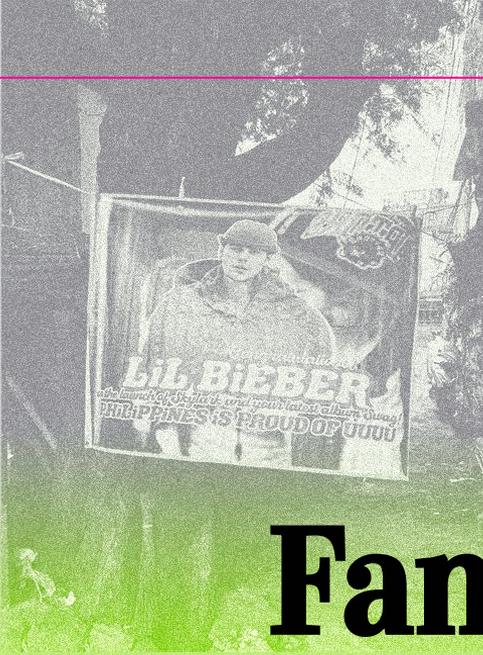




# Participation

How is community belonging created, and how can brands harness the power of fandom?





Participation

# Fandom Architects



## Participation

# Fandom Architects

Brands can build advocacy by recognising fans as creative collaborators who shape their cultural meaning.

Fandom is entering a new era. Obsession isn't enough anymore, it's about ownership. Fans aren't waiting for official narratives; they're building their own. They create lore, rewrite storylines, form subcultures, and push their faves into new cultural territory. The top-down model has flipped: fans aren't just reacting to culture, they're architects of it.

In turn, brands and artists are pulling fan-made work into the canon, validating fan creativity and fuelling a live feedback loop between fan and favourite. Fandom is becoming more personal, more values-driven, and more accountable. Fans expect alignment, transparency, cultural fluency, and they hold brands to those standards publicly.

Insight

73% of marketers believe fandoms will be **critical to their social strategy** this year



Think Forward 2026 Survey

As grassroots fan accounts grow into cultural power players, fandoms are shaping not just the stories they love but the direction of the culture surrounding them.

## Cultural driver

### Niche networks

→ There's a growing feeling that dominant social platforms are experiencing **Enshittification**: a prioritisation of profit over user experience by social platforms

→ In response, people are making their own communities and moving to alternative, specialised platforms like **Substack** or **Letterboxd** to find like-minded individuals who share their passions

## Social manifestations

01 Fans are engaging in **open-ended world-building**. Subreddits like **r/SeveranceAppleTVplus** and **r/TheWhiteLotus** unpack themes, theories, and symbolism, shaping meaning collectively rather than waiting for official interpretation.

02 **Documenting rituals and coordinated efforts is a growing fan expression**. The Filipino duo **@welifesign** create elaborate public tributes to designers, while creators like **@ly.as** host free watch parties for fashion obsessives, turning fandom into a physical, communal experience.



## How to use it

### Reward loyal fans with real access and value

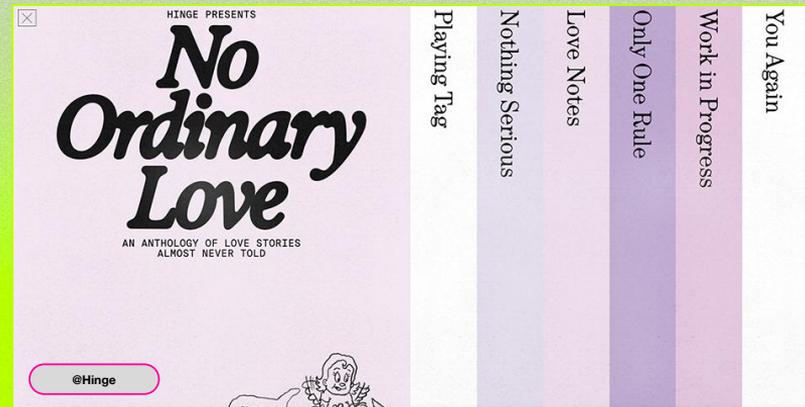
McDonald's **World Menu Heist** turned fan loyalty into cultural access, making limited-edition menu drops a shared moment - not just a promotion. **Jordan** celebrates long-time fans, not influencers, through community trips and spotlighting emerging creators.

### Invite fans into the creative process

From **SCRT x Dazed's** crowdsourced design challenges to **ON's** product-testing communities and **NASCAR's** fan councils, fans increasingly expect a seat at the table.

### Hero everyday fan icons

Fandom drives advocacy more than celebrity. Spotify's **Fan Life** and Hinge's **No Ordinary Love** centre fan stories, proving that everyday devotees can be the most powerful cultural ambassadors a brand can have.



Participation

# Reference Maxxing



## Participation

# Reference Maxxing

Brands can spark advocacy by giving fans the raw material to make their own stories – and letting the discourse become the culture.

Fan conversation is no longer a side effect of culture; it is the culture. When Taylor Swift released [The Life Of A Showgirl](#), audiences weren't debating melodies, they were dissecting fiery lyrics [allegedly directed at Charli XCX](#). An upbeat [brand jingle](#) went viral as people remixed it into chaotic holiday mishaps. Manchester United's most talked-about "star" isn't a player, but a fan refusing to [cut his hair](#) until the team wins five games in a row.

These moments share a single truth: cultural products have become reference points fans use to build their own narratives. As trend cycles accelerate and feeds fragment, references give people something to grab onto - a sense of shared language in a world of atomised experiences. Per *The Cultural Power Loop*, brand advocacy and retention are increasingly driven by interpretation and co-creation.

Reference Maxxing is rooted in a desire for belonging. Fans mine culture, remix it, layer new meaning onto it, and use it as shorthand for identity and community.

The paratext, the discourse, speculation, meme, or remix becomes the main event.



## Cultural driver

### Grassroots power

→ Power is increasingly diffuse, with the megaphone not only owned by the author or brand, but the millions who receive their work

→ Celebrities and brands are increasingly following fans' lead, like Lorde [making a TikTok's skit a segment](#) in her live performance

## Social manifestations

01

**Artists are seeding ancillary plotlines that fuel discourse.**

[Whether it is Keke Palmer and Sean Evans' love story](#) on *Hot Ones* or Sabrina Carpenter [sparking discussions](#) around feminism, fans are being given plenty to feast on and interrogate.

02

**New ecosystems are being built around fan discourse.** Platforms like [loreobsessed](#) and [strangerlore](#) give fans spaces to analyse, expand, and recode the worlds they love, treating discourse as world-building.

## STRANGER LORE

The first-ever 100% fan-sourced library for theories and fanon related to Season 5 of Netflix's ['Stranger Things'](#).



## How to use it

### Reference the unexpected as an attention hack

Cross-fandom mashups consistently go viral. The more unlikely, the better, from **F1 teams** tapping into teen TV love triangles to football clubs posting clips from **music concerts**.

### Elect fan icons and flex your meaning around them

Brands like Rhode are leaning into fan narratives around celebrity, tapping actors such as **Harris Dickinson** to play into rising archetypes (#babygirls #softboys #zaddies) with cultural fluency.

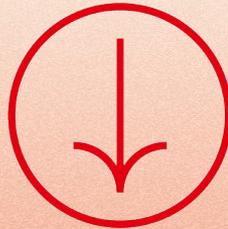
### Let fans create their own codes around your brand

Give them cultural material to interpret and remix. Collaborations like **Coach x Amazon's *The Summer I Turned Pretty*** show how legacy brands can earn fresh meaning by playing into fan interests and passion points.



# Putting it into Practice

## Case Studies Powered by the Loop



**Culture is only as powerful as its outcomes.**

Across our global network, we've built brands that turn cultural participation into measurable growth.



## Cultural Power Loop Force:

Presence

By meeting audiences where travel inspiration actually happens, Tripadvisor began to feel less like a utility and more like a companion - present in the jokes, dilemmas and daydreams that shape modern travel culture.

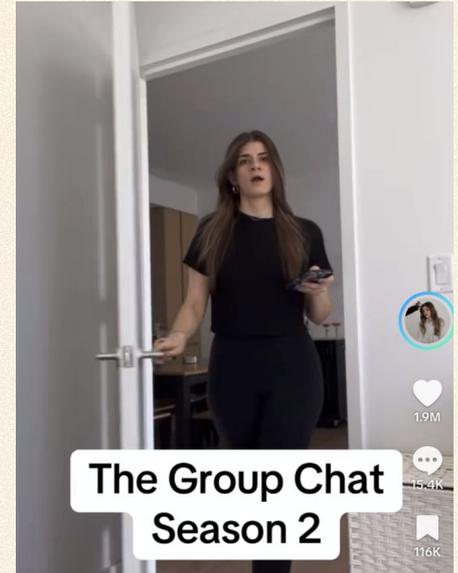
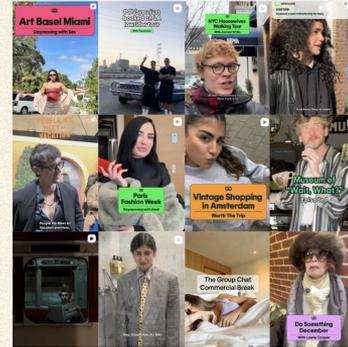
### The result ↓

A measurable lift in cultural perception, validating Tripadvisor's shift from functional tool to social-first travel brand.

# From utility to social-first travel brand

Tripadvisor had a perception problem. Despite being one of the world's most recognisable travel brands, it lacked cultural relevance and advocacy among Gen Z audiences. It was seen as a research tool - useful, but not inspiring.

We reimaged Tripadvisor as a social-first travel experience, moving it from a planning aid to a cultural participant. The brand was embedded into creator-led skits, developed always-on social formats, and showed up in real-time within travel communities, responding, reacting, and participating rather than broadcasting.



## The Group Chat Season 2

15,641 comments



Tripadvisor | Travel Planning

AND NOW WE'RE GOING TO COSTA RICA 🍌

5-1 Reply

43.5K



Tatum

@Sydney Jo deserves to be able to give us a season finale in Costa Rica or Greece. Sponsor that trip babes 🍌

5-1 Reply

405

# SAMSUNG

Cultural Power Loop Force:

Power

Proof

## Redefining premium through cultural leadership

Galaxy Unpacked, Samsung's annual event where they present their newest mobile devices, was losing cultural heat. Creators posted too late and momentum evaporated.

So we flipped the model. Thirty-three top creators were flown to a secret LA Creator Lab for hands-on experimentation with the new Galaxy Z Series. Their brief: show what the phones enable, not what they are.

When Unpacked ended, the internet exploded with creator-made dance edits, surreal comedy, fashion films and mini-shorts, all unmistakably Samsung.

The result ↓

A cultural event, not a tech reveal. Samsung proved that innovation earns value when it sparks imagination.



**jameschoe** 26w

I had a crazy opportunity to be part of Samsung's first ever Galaxy Content Lab that where they flew in 40+ creators and artists to come to Los Angeles California to help create art for the launch of the next foldable phone.

We had 8 days to create something from scratch in the House.



# Building culture at the speed of the feed

Social is a brutal stage for brands. Audiences don't reward scale - they reward belonging. And in music culture, belonging is built in the most niche corners of the internet. For Amazon Music, a platform designed to ignite fandom, the vision was clear: don't broadcast to everyone, and start showing up for someone.

Instead of chasing mass appeal, we deliberately went narrow. We built a Cultural Content Engine designed to operate at the speed of fandom - powered by social intelligence, a real-time newsroom and an always-on TikTok strategy that prioritised depth over breadth.

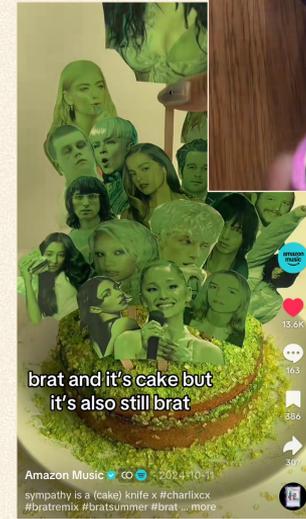
## Cultural Power Loop Force:

### Participation

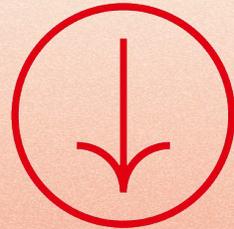
From hyper-specific K-pop edits to chaotic "Brat" discourse, we leaned into micro-communities with lo-fi, irreverent content that felt made by fans, not brands. By committing fully to these subcultures - rather than dipping in opportunistically - Amazon Music didn't just participate in trends, it earned credibility within them.

### The result ↓

Crucially, this niche-first approach didn't limit reach — it multiplied it. Content that resonated deeply in small, passionate communities travelled outward, crossing fandoms, platforms, and formats. That same energy scaled seamlessly into major cultural moments like Amazon Music Live and festival activations, proving a simple truth: when you win the narrowest rooms, the rest of the internet listens. The feed became a living fan page and Amazon Music became a brand fans spoke with, not about.



# We Are Social Capabilities



# We Are Social Capabilities

If *The Cultural Power Loop* is our point of view on how you can build brand meaning, We Are Social's capabilities are how we make it real. It's our modular model for creating, amplifying, and proving brand growth, powered by culture, designed for participation and measurable at every stage.

Each element can be dialled up or down depending on the brand's maturity, category, and ambition.



**Social intelligence & cultural tracking:** We begin by decoding culture in real time - understanding the shifting beliefs, micro-trends, and communities that shape attention. Our Newsrooms, social listening, and cultural insight teams keep brands chronically online and ahead of the conversation.



**The Cultural Content Engine:** Data, craft, and agility come together here. Our in-house creators and strategists turn cultural signals into storytelling at scale - from fast-turn reactive ideas to long-term brand worlds. This is content that earns attention, not interrupts it.



**Creator Collectives & influencer marketing:** We collaborate with native voices who live where culture happens, building credibility, connection, and creative efficiency. Our Creator Collectives deliver always-on authenticity and turn brands into trusted participants in culture.



**Social-first campaigns:** Where brand storytelling meets social fluency. Our campaigns are designed for shareability, remixing and participation - driving both brand fame and commercial outcomes.



**Smart distribution strategies:** Attention without reach is wasted. Through precision paid media, strategic boosting and AI-driven optimisation, we amplify what works in real time, ensuring every dollar contributes to both awareness and affinity.



**Social commerce:** The frontier where inspiration meets transaction. We connect entertainment with conversion - from TikTok Shop to Instagram Checkout, proving that cultural relevance can directly drive sales.



**Social-first brand growth & effectiveness:** Our reporting goes beyond frameworks and automation, we connect social activity directly to brand growth. As social becomes the architecture holding brands together, we build systems that prove the impact of social-first ideas and measure not just what happened, but why it mattered.

# About We Are Social

We are a **global socially-led creative agency**, with unrivalled social media and influencer marketing expertise. With over 1,200 people across four continents, we deliver a global perspective to our clients in a time when social media is shaping culture.

Follow The Feed [@thefeed.global](https://twitter.com/thefeed.global) for cultural analysis at the speed of social from We Are Social's Cultural Insights team.

# Methodology

**Think Forward 2026** was researched by We Are Social's Strategy and Cultural Insights teams.

To form *The Cultural Power Loop*, we undertook a comprehensive review of our own case studies, identifying common brand challenges, alongside reviewing established brand building theories, frameworks and research.

For trend identification, we explored slow and fast culture (analysing audience mindsets, movements and moments) in the context of *The Cultural Power Loop*, conducting a thematic analysis of relevant digital phenomena.

This was supported by a survey of 300 marketers across the US and UK. Special thanks to Grace Kite, VP of Analytics Partners for her insights and thinking.

**we  
are  
social**

# Get in touch to learn how to build your brand at the speed of social



[talktous@wearesocial.net](mailto:talktous@wearesocial.net)