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The

Social

Issue



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M+C SAATCHI
SPORT & ENTERTAINMENT



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FOREWORD

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For more than 20 years, M+C Saatchi Sport & Entertainment has operated on a simple truth; passions are the most powerful vehicles for human connection. We've built our agency on the ability to route 'fan energy' around brands, moving audiences from passive consumption to active participation.

But as we look toward 2027, the nature of that energy has shifted.

In previous issues of this report, we explored our concept of **Fancom** itself, the power of **Togetherness**, and the undeniable rise of **The Women's Era**. In this issue, we address a change that is perhaps even more fundamental; the evolution of the social ecosystem from a communications channel into a participatory culture in its own right.

As with every discipline, we're constantly reviewing the way we approach our social work, whether it's owned, earned, paid or the full social and creator model. So, when our Cultural Strategy Lead, and editor of this zine, Ant, came to me a few weeks ago and declared that the industry has been looking at social all wrong, my ears pricked up.

The tweak was small, but the potential impact is big.

We've all been looking at social as a channel. We should be looking at it as a passion.

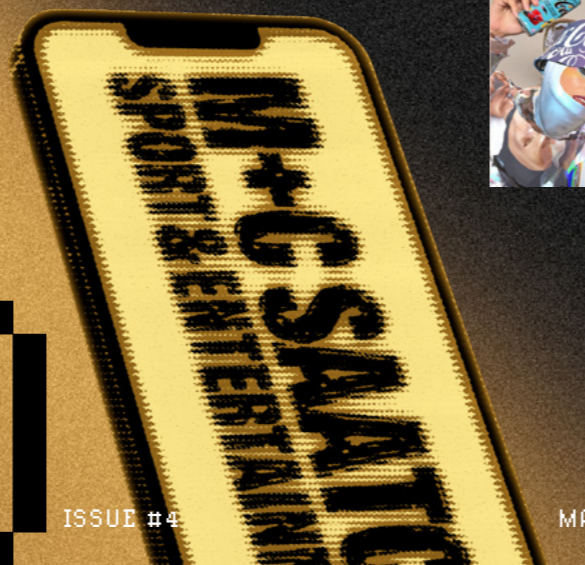
We're the agency that connects brands to consumers through the things people love. And Ant's right... people love social! That gives it a completely different entry point to every other marketing discipline. And so much more opportunity.

For a long time, the industry has operated under a broadcast-legacy mindset and treated social media as a repository for content — a place to grab attention through interruption and measuring success through likes. But social is not a receptacle for content. Nor is it a publishing platform. Social has become a complete cultural ecosystem. The beating heart of the marketing mix. And the primary environment where brand love is fostered and commercial outcomes are secured.

To meet this reality I'm incredibly proud to introduce our new social specialism backed by full-service, end-to-end expertise that bridges the gap between cultural strategy and commercial impact. It's a strategic response to a world where linear media models collapse once paid support ends, but participatory systems regenerate through community behaviour.

We set to work on developing a new model that uses feeds to turn followers into fans- brand loyalists and cultural advocates. Today's fans are deliberate, demanding and discerning. They're also actively shaping the passion spaces they occupy via co-authorship, and that happens nowhere more than on social. So, building a model that invites fans in and is responsive to their ever-changing pulses is essential. As is being choiceful about the role that brands can legitimately play within the social landscape.

Brands often struggle to define their role and behaviour in channels that evolve so rapidly around them, especially when those environments can feel unpredictable and difficult to control. We believe that if brands focus on conducting rather than controlling, they become the centrepiece. Connecting fans, creators and communities within a self-perpetuating loop as cultural energy surges



into networked participation. Conductors guide, assemble and set the pace. They enable things to come together harmoniously and with cultural fluency. They lead with conviction; amplifying components all around them to greater cumulative value that drives that top down, bottom up & side-by-side buzz that true social advocacy thrives on.

Through our new and proprietary **Fancom Accumulator** model, we move brands through three critical phases: we **Conduct** fan energy into active participation; we **Compound** that behaviour through repeatable formats; and we **Convert** that engagement into measurable commercial growth.

We've delivered social and creator work since its infancy; when influencers were bloggers, Instagram had frames, it was (borderline) ok not to tag a brand post and Hailey was Baldwin not Bieber (see left).

We were the first agency to deliver a global creator programme for Coca-Cola, the first agency to sign influencers to a major adidas campaign in the UK (hey AJ Odudu!) and the first agency to place an influencer on the front cover of a magazine, with The Food Medic and Women's Fitness back when publishers were still unsure about this new breed of public figure. We delivered the first ever influencer FROW for Y-3 and introduced the most followed person on Instagram, Cristiano Ronaldo, to the world of YouTubers, racking up over 22m organic views with Chris MD to launch new CR7 products.

Our work with adidas Runners has seen us oversee and expand a social-first, value-based global network across 6 continents, 49 countries & 76 communities. Our long-term digital strategy, channel strategy, content strategy, creative campaigns across brand, owned and partner channels, BAU content, community management and ambassador programmes all worked together to achieve our ambition of growing the channels while maintaining authenticity to the community, elevating the follower count from 300,000 to 915,000, with over 1m impressions monthly.

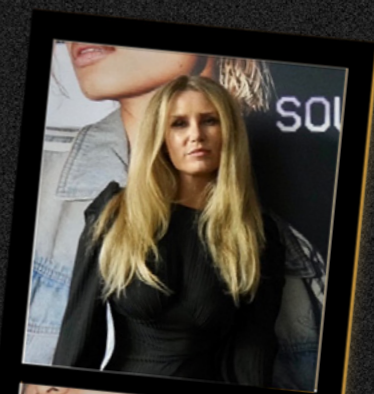
We used social to take Sephora from super-hype to hyper local. The LVMH owned, globally-hyped, beauty destination is iconic, but it didn't know UK culture, especially hyper-local beauty trends essential to winning over regional audiences. We created 'Meet Me At Sephora', blending the brand's exclusive positioning with the regional essence of each store launch location through social listening and creative delivery that saw customers turn out in their thousands to welcome the brand's arrival.

For Jaguar Land Rover, the focus was on building a creator ecosystem in lieu of local social channels, helping to introduce the brand to new target audiences. We vetted and onboarded more than 300 creators, each carefully selected to align with the distinct nuances of individual JLR makes and models and leveraged marquee cultural events such as The Championships, Wimbledon, Glastonbury Festival and London Fashion Week, resulting in the delivery of more than 1,000 pieces of high-impact social content.

So, fusing our years of experience in the space with our brand-new approach marks a significant step-forward in our capability to turn followers into fans and fans into customers- a formidable proposition that I'm incredibly excited to introduce clients to, both here in the UK and Globally.

This issue brings together perspectives from our international network of social specialists, cultural strategists, and community builders — an exploration of modern engagement that offers a valuable lens for any brand navigating the new rules.

Participation is the most meaningful form of brand engagement and a common theme you'll discover throughout these articles. It is the proof of a brand's cultural power. I invite you to explore the following pages not just as a collection of insights, but as a blueprint for how your brand can move from being a spectator to a conductor in the new cultural economy.



EDITORS NOTE

EDITORS NOTE

Editors note



How do you do, fellow kids?

So here we are again with issue 4 of Fancom, and this time it's a chronically online doozy.

Picture this: It's 7am. I've just sat down to write and turned on NTS for my daily religious listening of its Early Bird show. In-and-amongst the eclectic instrumental sounds, the hosts frequently engage with the hive of chat activity happening on the radio's Discord server – reacting to discussion, shouting out usernames, answering ID requests. And then, maybe once in the 2-hour show, the host will say 'and out to all the silent listeners.' An acknowledgement to all those, like me, who listen to NTS, but don't participate in it.

What's clear is that I'm increasingly in the minority.

Wherever you look right now, active participation has quietly become the dominant behaviour on social. I'm not just talking about the superfans who campaign, organise, and swarm, but how everyone has become more deeply engineered towards it. Participation is no longer something you have the option to do on social – it's now kind of the whole point. And it's this very idea we have dedicated this entire issue to.

For as long as "social media marketing" has existed, a significant portion of the industry has treated it as a media channel. A repository for short-form content designed to broadcast to – and occasionally engage – a young audience, measured by the soft metrics of views and engagements. But for the generations currently shaping culture, social media was never a "channel" to be marketed at. What's become clear whilst putting this issue together is that participation on socials itself has become the passion. Not just a vehicle for connecting to other passions like music, sport or gaming – a set of behaviours that, together, appear more like a passion space in itself.

I'll say that again: **participating on social has become a passion in its own right.**

The relationship a person has with their TikTok community or their Discord server could be argued to be becoming structurally identical to the relationship a fan has with their football club, their favourite band, or their gaming clan. It demands the same time, loyalty, effort, and emotional investment and it delivers the same

identity, belonging, and meaning in return. It's just a different dynamic.

This edition of Fancom presents a challenge to the industry. The 'social media as a communications medium' mindset is no longer fit for purpose. The brands, platforms, and rightsholders that will win at social won't be the ones with the sharpest content calendar – they'll be the ones who understand how and why people show up to participate, and then build accordingly for this reality.

To advance this thinking, we tasked the global M+C Saatchi Sport & Entertainment community of passion specialists – based in London, Berlin, Amsterdam, New York, Sydney, Milan, and Dubai – to surface and unpick everything happening at the intersection of social media participation and fan communities. What has returned isn't just 19 good reads on the bleeding edge of contemporary social culture, but four dominant modes that detail why fan communities show up today.

Whether it's the chasing of clout and cultural authority; the obsessive building and contribution to community lore; the reliance on human filters to make sense of culture; or the flight of people into private spaces where meaningful fandom now happens – what's clear is that there's a new social operating system in town. Brands need to learn how to configure themselves into it to earn and sustain their relevance moving forwards.

This isn't about reaching an audience anymore; it's about becoming a participant in their world. It's about understanding that the "like" is the lowest form of currency, while the "solve", the "story", and the "space" are the highest. We are moving into an era where the fans own the narrative, the creators own the context, and the brands that thrive will be the ones who are invited into the group chat rather than shouting into the ether.

In this new era of participation, all that's left for me to say is: 'out to all my silent listeners, this one's for you.'



Ant Firth-Clark
Cultural Strategy Lead, London



THE NEW RULEBOOK OF PARTICIPATION:

THE ABOUT

Culture has become a contact sport. In this space, participation isn't just about expression, it's a bid for status. People compete to be first, to be right, to clock the reference, to set the take, to move the narrative before it moves them. The feed is the stadium, comments are the leaderboard, the effort is the badge, and the prize is cultural authority. Brands don't win this game by shouting louder. They win by prompting people to scout, debate, remix, and do the work – all serving to help them claim and prove they are the ones on point.

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TASTE IS A CONTACT SPORT

by Conall McAteer, London
People are treating cultural literacy as a high-stakes competitive sport, where status is earned through the speed and exclusivity of their references

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THE SOLVE IS THE CONTENT

by Niklas Müller-Hohenstein, Berlin
People are moving from passive viewing to participatory investigation, treating content as a forensic puzzle where the "solve" carries more social currency than the content itself

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STREAMING IS A MULTIPLAYER GAME

by Nona van Leeuwen, Amsterdam
People are no longer watching streaming content, they're "playing" it – treating every episode as a raw asset to be edited, debated, and gamified in the social layer

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THE SUPERFANS ARE RUNNING THE SHOW

by Gianni Borrelli, Sydney
People are shifting from audience members to amateur creative directors, drafting the lore, visual worlds, and narratives of their icons before the official work even arrives

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FAN FRICTION

by Rhian Mason, Sydney
People are rejecting digital ease in favour of effort-as-proof, using manual labour and physical craft to authenticate their passion in a world of weightless automation

THE LORE

How do you create a sense of permanence and narrative from today's ephemeral world of the infinite scroll? This is a question that dominates how people participate on social today. Behaviour is shifting from casual liking into high-context world-building; where canon, continuity, running jokes, micro-histories and endless threads are either understood, or not. Now widely understood as 'Lore' – it's how communities make meaning, gatekeep belonging, and turn everyday passions into living, serialized universes. In this always-on reality, the pressure to keep up is real; because if you don't, do you even have the right to speak anymore? For brands, this is less about racing to keep up with 'The Lore' in pursuit of relevance, and more about how you enable your fans to create, remix and protect the canon of your brand.

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HOBBYMAXXING

by Michelle Mentu, London
People are moving from casual interest to lifestyle optimization, treating passions as identity-building exercises where depth of knowledge is the ultimate status symbol

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BEAUTY & THE "SELLAVISION" BEAST

by Lois Kettlewell, London
People are transforming retail into "Beautytainment", treating their routines as serialized performances and their feeds as 24/7 global reality shows

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FOLO: FEAR OF LORING OUT

by Andrea Palladino, Milan
People are experiencing a new form of digital anxiety where the fear isn't missing the event, but losing the contextual thread required to participate in the conversation

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HIT ME BACK, JUST TO CHAT. THIS IS SYNTHETIC STAN

by Derek Goode, New York
People are deploying AI-agents as digital proxies to manage the "labour" of fandom – patrolling discourse, summarizing threads, and protecting community lore while the real fans sleep

FAN COMMUNITIES SHOW UP FOR...

THE MENS

People don't just watch things anymore, they watch them through someone else. As the internet gets louder and takes get riskier, audiences outsource discovery, interpretation, and even emotion to creators who act as trusted filters. Reaction videos become group therapy. Streamers turn events into places you "turn up to." Attention gets engineered through stacks of sludge content to help the main thing land. Participation here is less about posting and more about choosing your narrator – the human layer that makes culture feel legible, safe, and worth caring about. For brands, this evolves the notion of influence from those who have the biggest audiences, to those a target audience trust most to help the world make sense.

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THEY CRY SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO

by Shanice Dover, London
People are adopting the mode of participation-by-proxy, using creators as emotional safety nets to experience and validate cultural moments without the risk of public exposure

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THE DIGITAL SMOKING AREA

by Katy Ball, London
People are repurposing the comment section as a low-stakes communal hub to simulate the organic, "unfiltered" social connection of a physical night out

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THE PARASOCIAL BLUEPRINT

by Dakota Branch-Smith, London
People are outsourcing the trial-and-error of adulthood to trusted creators, using their life milestones as a navigable "how-to" guide for their own reality

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SLUDGE BRAIDING

by Zara Wilson, London
People are moving toward "attention layering", braiding multiple unrelated streams of content stimulation together to engineer a personalized flow state that they can no longer achieve with a singular piece content alone

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THE SELECTOR VS. THE ALGORITHM

by Molly Whitely, London
People are splitting their devotion between "room-culture" that rewards human curation and "feed-culture" which is optimized for the instant, algorithmic gratification of the drop

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THE SOVEREIGN STREAMER

by Ahmed Moghazy, Dubai
People are abandoning official broadcasts in favour of creator-led access, where a trusted personality acts as the necessary cultural translator for a major event

THE SANCTUARY

As the feed becomes noisier, more policed, and more performative, fans are retreating into smaller, higher-trust spaces where context is protected and belonging is earned. Group chats, private servers, RSS-style stacks and ungrammable events – these are the new cultural hideouts. Participation isn't about reach, it's about density. And for brands, the rule is simple: you can't buy your way in. You have to build something useful enough to be invited.

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THE REVOLUTION WON'T BE GRAMMABLE

by Jessy Webster, London
People are seeking out geofenced, phone-free physical experiences where the lack of a digital footprint is the ultimate proof of presence

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FORWARDED MANY TIMES

by Ross Watson, London
People are treating the group chat as the primary residence of digital life, using peer-to-peer forwarding as the only de-facto quality signal they trust

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THE REINCARNATION OF THE RSS FEED

by Joris Schwitalla, Berlin
People are bypassing algorithmic discovery in favour of "personal infrastructure" – manual, hand-stitched networks of sources that protect their hyper-niche cultural intersections

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THE OTHER TAB'S FOR MEMBERS ONLY

by Jakob Miller, Berlin
People are fracturing their online identity into "public shells" and "private enclaves", moving their authentic participation into gated, context-rich spaces where they don't have to explain themselves

ARTICLES

Taste is a Contact Sport



Conall McAteer
Creative Director, London

ARTICLES

People are treating cultural literacy as a high-stakes competitive sport, where status is earned through the speed and exclusivity of their references.

There's a new athlete you haven't scouted yet.

They don't play on a pitch or a court. Their arena is the social feed. Their performance metrics are reposts, saves, and the speed at which they clock a reference before anyone else. For the generation raised online, cultural literacy has become one of the most competitive behaviours of our time. Knowing what matters, why it matters, and knowing it first.

That's not just fandom. That's sport.

Watch how it plays out. The football accounts that reframed City's win as a Simpsons scene before the pundit finished his sentence. The Bad Bunny Super Bowl halftime show, where knowing your Puerto Rican cultural history in real time separated the people who got every reference from the people who needed a translator. The Letterboxd comment section on Emerald Fennell's Wuthering Heights, where Brontë-scholars and Fennell-stans competed to out-read, out-reference and out-smart each other before the film had even finished its opening weekend.

You see, these aren't passive audiences consuming content. They're competing. Clocking references, placing bets on their own taste, performing publicly for a crowd that's scoring them in real time. The feed is the stadium. The comment section is the leaderboard.

Look at what Lyas built.

A self-starting fashion cultural-commentator from Paris - no industry connections, no fashion school creds. He hauled a flatscreen to a bar when he got knocked from Jonathan Anderson's Dior debut and told his followers to come watch with him. 300 people showed up.

The video hit 1.8 million views. By Paris Fashion Week, La Watchparty was drawing 13,000 people across four cities, backed by the British Fashion Council, MAC Cosmetics and Meta.

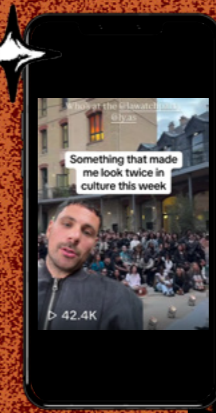
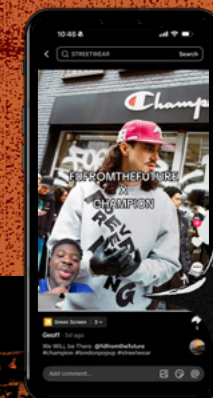
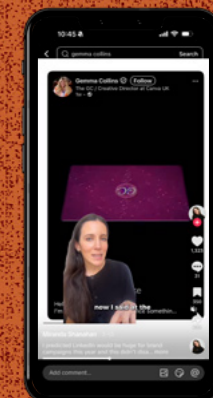
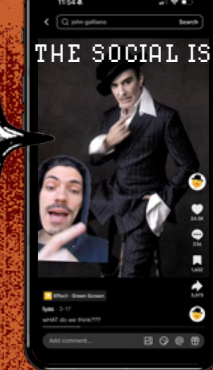
He didn't just build an audience. He built his own arena.

Naturally, Vogue copied it. They announced their own exclusive watch party with no credit. Invite only. Classic. His community responded before he did. Because that's the point. The power has shifted. These cultural athletes aren't being tolerated by the industry anymore, they're revered. They're being signed like sports stars. Sponsors like Casio, adidas, L'Oréal. Lyas now has his own show on the official Paris Fashion Week calendar. He's changed the game.

Because your audience isn't just watching. They're competing. Constantly evaluating whether a brand sees things before they do or after. The brands that understand this are already playing differently. They're not chasing these cultural athletes with a brief and a budget. They're building things worth those creators' attention in the first place - drops, images, a reference worth surfacing, a frame worth reposting, a moment worth being first to clock - and letting the culture of competition do the rest. The ones that don't are still posting into a feed and wondering why nothing lands. Go figure.

The real competition on social isn't for attention. It's for cultural authority. And most brands aren't even in the game. Some don't even know there is one.

Taste is a contact sport. Stop making content. Start making arenas. The new wave of cultural athletes are already on the pitch.



ARTICLES

ARTICLES



THE SOLVE CULT



BY *Niklas Müller-Hohenstein*
**SENIOR CREATIVE CONSULTANT,
BERLIN**

People are moving from passive viewing to participatory investigation, treating content as a forensic puzzle where the "solve" carries more social currency than the content itself

There's this guy online I can't stop watching. His name is Rainbolt. He plays a game called GeoGuessr where you get dropped into a random Google Street View location and have to figure out where you are. He can do it in a tenth of a second. From dirt. From a blurred photo of a fence. He has nearly three million followers on TikTok from doing this. People send him childhood photos and ask him to find the exact spot. Old holiday snaps with no metadata. A faded picture from their parents' honeymoon—just a bench and some trees. And he finds it. He once spent close to 100 hours tracking down a New York bagel shop from a six-second TikTok of an egg sandwich. The game he plays now runs a World Cup that pulled over 360,000 concurrent viewers in 2025, more than the Call of Duty League. Forensic observation turned into entertainment. And he's just the tip of something much bigger.

Across the internet, audiences have stopped watching and started working. Aspiring to become a source of information in exchange for digital, social capital.

In dance music, there's a whole subculture built around tracking down unreleased tracks. They call them "IDs," and the hunt to name one before anyone else has become its own competitive sport, with entire Reddit communities and TikTok creators devoted to identifying music that Shazam can't find. The status isn't in hearing the track. It's in being the person who identified it.

The same energy has spilled into lifestyle content. On Threads and TikTok, a wave of creators have made it their whole thing to identify lamps, chairs, jackets, and skincare products spotted in the background of someone else's video. A half-visible label in a 'Get Ready With Me' clip might as well be a clue left at a crime scene.

When the Netflix released 'Baby Reindeer' – a series about a comedian being stalked, billed as a "true story" – in 2024, the show itself became secondary almost immediately. Within days, users on Reddit and Twitter had matched a decade-old tweet about hanging curtains to a line of dialogue and unravelled the real identity behind a character. Court records got dug up. Old Facebook profiles got combed through. Archived local press got cross-referenced. The programme was the starting pistol. The week-long forensic manhunt playing out across socials was the actual content.

What ties all of this together is a behavioural shift that goes deeper than any single platform or subculture. Passive consumption has lost its (social) value. Scrolling is dead. Liking is meaningless. But solving something, publicly, and being the first to do it, that carries real weight. Information has become the most tradeable social currency online, and the person who provides the answer, the track name, the dress brand, the real identity, becomes 'The Source.' That's the highest status in the digital hierarchy right now. The solve is the content. Everything else is just the prompt.

Now for the big question: what does this mean for brands?

The instinct is always to guide, to polish, to button everything up. Every asset controlled, every frame approved, every message hammered home with the subtlety of a foghorn. But that kind of airtight content is dead on arrival with an audience that has decided perfection is boring and mystery is the only thing worth their time. They engage with things that have loose threads.

The smartest play now is to leave gaps on purpose. Seed details that reward close attention. Build content that has something to find rather than just something to say. Because the moment your audience starts pulling at your work voluntarily, you've got something no media plan on earth can buy; self-directed, obsessive attention.

Your audience doesn't want a message. They want a mystery. And right now, they are better detectives than most brands are storytellers.



ARTICLES

ARTICLES

Streaming is a multi-layer game

People are no longer watching streaming content, they're "playing" it – treating every episode as a raw asset to be edited, debated, and gamified in the social layer

by
NONA VAN LEEUWEN
PR Account Director, Amsterdam

Midway through my most recent streaming obsession – All Her Fault on SkyShowtime – I did what I do ten times a day... I opened TikTok. Muscle memory. But within seconds, I wasn't just scrolling, I was in the show's universe.

A creator was mapping a plot theory so detailed it made me want to rewatch with a rewired brain. A slowed-down clip highlighted a charged glance between characters. A comment section argued over who had the worst husband.

Streaming used to be something you consumed; now it's something you enter mid-conversation. By the time you press play, the story has been interpreted, debated, and emotionally pre-loaded. Watching is no longer the primary experience; it's just one layer of it. It's stopped being about the plot and started being about everyone else's version of it.

Zoom out and you'll see a redistribution of cultural power. The narrative is no longer just formed by the script, it's formed in fragments – edits, theories, and comment sections – shaped by an audience never meant to hold the pen. Creators aren't just reacting anymore; they're setting the lens. They tell you what to notice, who to hate, and what counts as the "real" moment.

That's why the relationship between entertainment and TikTok is becoming symbiotic. TikTok's partnership with the BAFTA Film Awards proves that online creators sit inside the ecosystem, not outside it. In the past year, #Movie generated 40 million posts globally, up 81%. #WhatToWatch doubled to 6 million. This isn't just discovery; it's where the agenda is set.

A show's success is being decoupled from the criticism. A film can get lukewarm reviews and still dominate culturally if it's playable – where you give people enough to build with: a line that becomes a sound, a scene that becomes a template, a character that becomes a debate. The story stops being the finished product and becomes the raw material. Wuthering Heights thrived at the box office not because of its mixed critical consensus, but because its emotional moments were clipped and remixed into a life of their own on peoples' 'For You' pages.

Across social platforms, audiences are extending stories in ways the original format never intended.

On TikTok, "Red Flag" analysis has become a sub-genre of streaming participation. Creators like @ask_kimberly and @michaela.taylo deconstruct toxic behaviours in shows like Tell Me Lies or Love is Blind, treating fictional dialogue as a case study for real-world relationship advice. The show is just the prompt; the play is the collective psychological evaluation in the comments.

Format is starting to matter less than we think. It's not short-form versus long-form anymore, it's about whether content gives people enough to play with. A two-hour film and a 30-second edit sit on the same spectrum if audiences can build on top of them. Some writers are even building "clip seams" into scripts, ready to be pulled apart and redistributed.

For brands, the goal is no longer gaining eyeballs, but creating work that invites reaction, debate and interpretation. Stories must act as starting points rather than end ones.

It also requires a different kind of tracking. Not just reach and sentiment, but a sharper read on the intimate metrics; when something starts to move, when a moment shifts from being watched to being reused, reposted, stitched, shared and saved. That's the way we tell if something is becoming adopted into the culture.

We've seen what this looks like. When a creator posted a Dr Pepper jingle, the brand didn't try to replace the momentum; they leaned into it. They worked with the creator to scale the original charm into a national campaign, which spurred thousands more fan edits. The idea kept moving because people could keep playing with it.

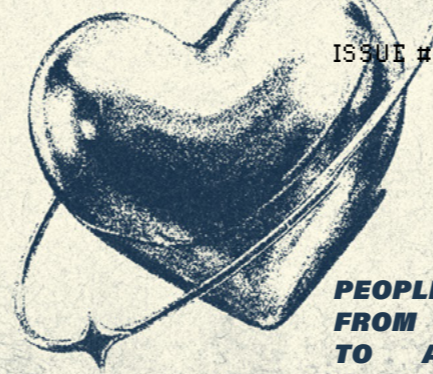
There's a tension here, too. Handing over the controller means letting go. Sometimes audiences remix you into something you didn't mean. But in a world where every feed is full and every attention span is contested, the brands that win won't be the ones that demand control. It'll be the ones brave enough to be played with.

The story no longer ends at publication - it grows across the social layer. In 2026, the audience isn't just watching, they're playing. It may be high-time we hand over the controller.

ARTICLES

ARTICLES

the SUPER FANS are RUNNING the SHOW



PEOPLE ARE SHIFTING FROM AUDIENCE MEMBERS TO AMATEUR CREATIVE DIRECTORS, DRAFTING THE LORE, VISUAL WORLDS, AND NARRATIVES OF THEIR ICONS BEFORE THE OFFICIAL WORK EVEN ARRIVES.

Something shifted in culture when fans stopped being just an audience and became the auteurs. No longer hiding in comment sections, Subreddits and Discord servers, superfandom is now mass culture, operating 24/7 across every platform in every market.

We spent decades thinking brands, labels and creative directors set the cultural agenda. Then the internet handed that power back to fans, and they've run with it. The clearest proof is how often the official work now arrives second. Fans decode Easter eggs from artists' socials, map visual worlds, write theories, make edits, and build narratives before anything sanctioned has even dropped. Culture gets drafted in public, then formalised later.

Taylor Swift is the modern blueprint for what it looks like when an artist genuinely listens to their fanbase and profits from it. Swifties petitioned for years for a ten-minute version of 'All Too Well' before Swift released it in 2021. They championed 'Cruel Summer' as a single years before the label did. Both topped worldwide charts. The fans were right, and they were early.

That's the payoff hiding in plain sight. When you genuinely listen to your most ardent, occasionally fanatical supporters, they will tell you what they want long before the industry catches up. Not as a suggestion, as a demand. Fandom doesn't just react to culture now. It sets the terms: the language, the norms, the timelines, the meaning.

What was once called hysteria, think the heydays of Elvis and Beatlemania, is now considered 'community', and the data backs

it up. A 2025 study by Deloitte found that one in three social media users identifies as part of an online fandom, with 65% of brands citing fan activation as a high priority. Korean entertainment conglomerate Hybe's superfan platform Weverse, home to artists like BTS and NewJeans, surpassed 155 million downloads, with 85% of traffic coming from outside Korea.

A Kearney Consumer Institute study found that 80% of fans say fandom brings them joy, while 42% say it gives them a sense of belonging. This is not a nice-to-have, it's an identity layer.

And it's not just music. McDonald's 2024 rebrand to 'WcDonald's' leaned into decades of anime fan fiction that had quietly renamed the chain to avoid copyright issues. Their CMO called it one of their best examples of a 'user-generated brief'. Gap's collaboration with K-pop group Katseye delivered 66 million YouTube views and double-digit denim category growth, not just because they picked a popular act, but because the fandom was treated like an unofficial creative partner.

Participation is no longer a feature of social media. It's the crux. People aren't logging on to just consume. They're logging on to contribute, to belong, to prove they were there first. Superfans are not passive audiences. They are unpaid creative directors and distribution engines, building the memes, the narratives, the context and the rules in real time.

For brands and agencies, this shouldn't be a threat. It's the most detailed brief you'll ever be handed, with one catch - you don't get to lead. The brands winning in culture right now aren't the ones with the biggest budgets. They're the ones with the highest fandom literacy, the ones who did the homework before showing up, and the ones who understand that you can't buy your way into someone else's community.

The question in 2026 isn't how you reach the superfan. It's whether you've built something worthy of being added to their lore.



by

GIANNI BORRELLI

Senior Director of Social & Influence
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by
RHIAN MASON
Managing Partner, Sydney

FAN FRICTION

People are rejecting digital ease in favour of effort-as-proof, using manual labour and physical craft to authenticate their passion in a world of weightless automation

For the last decade, social media has been engineered to remove friction from everything. Creation is instant, engagement is effortless, and entire communities can be built and commoditised without ever leaving your phone. But somewhere along the way, something stopped landing. Because when everything is easy, nothing really hits the same.

Scroll any feed and you'll feel the uncanny valley. Endless remixes and reactions stacked on reactions, where participation is everywhere but the weight has gone.

So fans are changing the rules. They are moving away from the efficiency of the digital world and back toward the proof of the physical one.

You see it with football supporter groups, where weeks of hand-painting a single banner has become more valuable than a thousand digitally printed tifos. The effort is the point. You see it on TikTok, where "lore" communities are building physical scrapbooks and hand-bound journals to map the worlds of House of the Dragon or Formula 1. These aren't just hobbies, they are artefacts. Tangible proof of time spent in a world that asks us to spend nothing.

This return to the material, be it the 3D-printing of gaming worlds; film photography at live events; the raw representation of the physical labour and process in JW Anderson's craftsmanship – are all examples of a collective search for friction. Even lifestyle brands like Flamingo Estate are thriving by rejecting convenience in favour of slowness, ritual and craft. Everything is signalling a move away from the polish of the screen and toward the visible evidence of the human hand.

Not all friction is chosen. For some, it's already baked into everyday life. But what's emerging here is different. It's intentional, visible, and increasingly used as proof.

This isn't just fandom evolving, it's a broader cultural correction. As content becomes easier to produce, its value has collapsed. What's

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emerging instead is a conscious move towards effort. Choosing the hard way, not for efficiency, but to have people feel something again.

Across culture, there's a growing discomfort with how little the system now asks of us. Streaming replaced ritual, algorithms replaced discovery, one-click replaced anticipation. In removing friction, we stripped away the very thing that made experiences memorable – be that the good or the bad.

We're seeing the response everywhere. Analogue hobbies, film photography, vinyl, thrifting, and a shift towards slower, deeper and more intentional activities. The easier things get, the more we seem to crave difficulty.

Participation hasn't become passive, it's become selective. People are still willing to invest time and energy, but only when it counts. Effort has become the clearest way to prove passion, and one of the only things that cuts through a feed full of automation.

For brands, this is where the model breaks. For years, the focus has been on making everything easier. Easier to engage, easier to create, easier to share. But culture isn't rewarding ease anymore. In some cases, it actively devalues it.

The opportunity isn't to create more content on brand channels, but to create reasons to act. To build ideas that invite participation, reward contribution, and give people something to invest in. The experience needs to become the story.

In a world where everything is instant and endlessly replicable, the only thing left that carries weight is what people are willing to work for. This matters hugely in fan culture. It's how their passion gets seen, and how real fans separate themselves from everyone else.

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by
Michelle Mentu
Senior Social Media & Community Executive, London



HOBBY MAXXING



People are moving from casual interest to lifestyle optimization, treating passions as identity-building exercises where depth of knowledge is the ultimate status symbol

At some point in the last five years, just having a hobby stopped being enough. You had to become that thing.

The modern hobby arrives with an entire identity pre-attached: a visual language, a canon of knowledge, and a set of objects that signal cultural fluency. You don't just take up running... You become a runner. There is a precise difference between the two, and it's performed daily across every social platform.

This is not accidental. It's the product of an environment where every interest is simultaneously a content category and a potential career path. Algorithms reward depth. Audiences reward the appearance of authenticity. Caught between these dynamics, hobbies have become markers of personality rather than just enjoyable acts. For a growing number of people, what began as a pastime is now the thing they do for everyone else too.

This shift has filled a vacuum left by collapsing status markers. Traditional milestones like home ownership or job titles have become largely inaccessible to younger generations. In their place, what you do with your free time has become the most legible signal of who you are. The good life now has receipts.

According to YPulse's 2025 Hobbies and Passions report, 92% of 18-24-year-olds are actively pursuing a hobby. More than just a statistic, this shows that hobbies are now doing the work that institutions like school or religion once did: providing community infrastructure and a space to belong. As a result, younger generations treat hobbies not as a post-work reward, but as the place where the real work of identity is done. Take the grandma hobby renaissance. On platforms like Ravelry, a community of over 9 million fiber artists, crocheting and knitting aren't seen as nostalgic distractions, rather as a considered philosophy in how to live. A chance to be slow and tactile in a world that feels fast and unreadable. Craft

provides the content, content deepens the community, and the community reinforces the identity. The side-quest becomes the main one.

As this behaviour scales, it's clear people want to be initiated into a world, not just purchase entry into a category. Brands that understand this aren't just selling gear, they're enabling people to go deeper into the lore of a passion.

Many brands still treat hobbies as static interest segments, but hobbymaxxers are dynamic and constantly building. The opportunity is to not just sponsor a passion, but to support the rituals and community infrastructure that make it possible. When we recently partnered adidas UK with Twitch, EA26 and a host of gaming creators to amplify their 'Predator vs. F50: Choose One' campaign, it was because we knew the next generation social dynamics of streaming collide. The new rituals of an audience required us to show up at the edges of the football scene, rather than just its core.

The curation that defines hobbymaxxing is, fundamentally, an act of authorship. People are writing themselves into existence through what they know and what they share. The brands that earn a place in that story will not get there through mass sponsorship, they'll get there by becoming a useful tool for a fan or participant's own self-construction.

For brands, the shift is clear. Stop asking how to reach an audience based on what they like. Start asking how to serve them based on who they are becoming. The smartest brands will stop trying to own the hobby and start trying to earn a place in the community's library. The goal is to move from being a logo on a jersey to a chapter in the lore.



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Beauty & the

by
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Strategic Growth Partner,
London

“Sellavision” Beauty

People are transforming retail into “Beautytainment”, treating their routines as serialized performances and their feeds as 24/7 global reality shows



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There was a time when beauty lived in magazines and department stores. The promo for Devil Wears Prada 2 takes us back to an era when well-lit boutiques were like candy shops, buzzing with people hunting the gloss-in-vogue.

Beauty now lives on your phone. It's dynamic, social, and has evolved from a retail category into a genre you might call Beautytainment. Instagram and TikTok didn't simply move beauty online, it transformed it into a performance. Less about product trial, more the theatre of it all.

As if 'IT' knows I've just turned 40, the algorithm has really got me. Collagen peptides, anti-wrinkle creams, magic foundations and 'face gyms' are all over my feed; but they are packaged up like TV series, music videos or a trailer to a new movie.

Scroll for a few minutes and you'll see "Get Ready With Me" routines filmed like mini-documentaries; transformation videos that feel closer to special effects than self-care; "looksmaxxing" and "biohacking" trends that blur the lines between aspiration and sci-fi films.

Beauty is no longer just something you buy; it's something you watch, learn, remix, and share. The front-facing camera has become both mirror and stage. Consumers have become the creators, editors, and distributors of their own image, and content isn't just cultural currency here, it's hard cash. TikTok is now one of the most influential shopping channels in the UK while LTK, the global influencer-led shopping platform, is generating \$5 billion in annual retail sales for brands like Sephora and Ulta Beauty.

Just to add another portmanteau into the mix, what I like to call 'Sellavision' is entertainment-native shopping where the performance is the sales pitch. A concealer goes viral not because of its formulation, but because of how dramatically it transforms a face in 15 seconds. So watchable! The algorithm rewards visual impact and narrative, and because we are all obsessed with how we look on camera, the formula is unskippable.

The question for brands then, is not 'how do we advertise?' but how do we become part of the performance, and how do we give the audience a role?

Participation is the engine. People aren't logging on to see what a brand has made, they're logging on to see what they can make with that brand.



For marketers, this requires a total rewrite of the brief. Stop thinking like a broadcaster and start thinking like a showrunner. The job is becoming less about creating "content" and more about how to build formats people can step into.

This applies to live experiences as well. We had a campaign we called 'Meet at Sephora' in recognition that communities were meeting and hanging out to try, snap and share new products in their own style. A massive trend at the moment is 'fragrance clubs', so this month we launch Burberry's new fragrance with Olivia Dean with pop-ups across the UK designed to drive traction on social.

This means designing work that is inherently remixable. It's about creating a ritual, a template, or a repeatable hook that makes the consumer look good for recreating it. The smartest brands aren't just selling a liquid or a cream, they are seeding scenes. In Sellavision, the brand is the enabler of the story, not the hero. You are providing the props and the script for the audience's own production.

The original Devil Wears Prada was released in 2006, ten years before TikTok even existed. Now another ten years later, the marketing machine behind Devil Wears Prada 2 is a shop window into how fans are interacting with brands across social. It is a full-blown content feast where fashion houses, beauty brands, creators and fans hijack every look, GRWM and red-carpet moment which plug products in plain sight.

We live in a world where entertainment is the shelf, and participation is the checkout.

WILLIAM

FOLO fear of losing out

Andrea Palladino
Junior Strategic Planner
Milan



People are experiencing a new form of digital anxiety where the fear isn't missing the event, but losing the contextual thread required to participate in the conversation.

Have you ever opened social media after a night out and had no idea what people are talking about?

It's 11pm and you just left the pub at a reasonable hour, because you have a meeting the next morning and you want to be on top of your game. You're bored on the subway, so you start scrolling through Reels and come across memes about something that apparently happened 3 hours ago. You know you're supposed to laugh, but you don't get it. Opening the comment section leaves you with more questions than answers. Everyone else is up to date, you are completely clueless. Finally, after 20 comments, you find another user asking: "can someone explain?" The replies? Just more memes.



Welcome to yet another anxiety, FOLO: the fear of missing the context that's needed to take part in the conversation. And that's when you finally understand that one friend who says, "I'm chronically online" like it's a badge of honour.

What you're experiencing is a shift in how content is produced, posted and consumed: from a post-to-post approach to a serialised one. Turning "staying in the loop" into a passion in itself.



Creators and users alike treat their digital feeds like a complex, 24/7 prestige drama. The result is that missing one "episode" makes the next one unintelligible.

That is exactly what happens if you land on content by Julian Sewell.

What started in 2023 as a parody of one of the most thrilling moments of the Oscars, the sequence where the nominated actresses are shown one by one before the winner is announced, has become a universe of content. Julian started by creating fictional characters, the most recurring being Paloma Diamond. He then expanded the narrative, creating content based on fictional movies, interviews and press tours. Audiences didn't just watch, they participated, fuelling the lore by creating

fake Wikipedia entries, IMDb credits and celeb rumours. What started as a parody has become a collective alternate reality. New watchers either figure out what's going on, or are left outside the lore.

On the other hand, a new class of "Context Creators" have emerged specifically to help people avoid FOLO such as @guywithamoviecamera or @coco_mocoe. Their content is based on breaking down the lore of current trends so that the "casuals" can re-enter the conversation.

The lore dynamic extends to even our instant messaging apps when you open a group chat and see 300+ unread messages. Those who are always in the loop become the 'main characters', those asking "what happened" are culturally sidelined. At least Whatsapp and Telegram have introduced the Catch Up feature to help new members of a group chat get into the loop. After that, it's all up to you.

In this lore-driven ecosystem, participation is no longer reactive, it's ongoing.

People crave stories that unfold over time, worlds communities can immerse themselves in. These are the stories that shape culture, because people can reference them, build on them and evolve with them.

For brands, this changes the game completely; it's no longer about showing up with a campaign, but about earning a place within the narrative. Brands can become enablers, not just authors.

And this is where the opportunity lies, because building a lore means unlocking greater creative freedom to explore and expand the brand's world and express what it stands for, without falling into the trap of refined, polished and overly produced storytelling.

If you do it right, you create content that people make their own, by amplifying it, transforming it and adapting it. But that requires loosening the grip on the brand guidelines; not fully controlling the story but allowing audiences to shape it with you.

The key is balance. It's not about creating an overly-coded story, but about building a lore that is compelling enough for the community to participate in and keep building over time.

In this age, the feed is exposure, but the lore is longevity.

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Hit me back, just to chat.

This is

by
DEREK GOODE
Managing Director,
New York

Synthetic Stans

People are deploying AI-agents as digital proxies to manage the "labour" of fandom - patrolling discourse, summarizing threads, and protecting community lore while the real fans sleep.



Being a fan is exhausting, isn't it? It always has been, be it the emotional control we hand over entirely to our teams, or how hard we fight to bag ourselves tickets to the most popular festivals the world over.

But it's the social layer that broke us.

The frenetic, global, 24/7 nature of the online world has changed an expression of our free-time cultural interests into a full-time job only suitable for the most chronically online and sleep-deprived of stans. Participation is no longer something you dip-into when you can; it now requires endless hours of manual labour just to have the right to speak, or even know what's going on in your fandom.

But the fans are catching on, and the AI-tech revolution is their special move. Fighting back against the overwork, fans are vibe-coding new AI agents to act as their 'always-on' digital proxy.

Welcome to the era of agentic fandom.

These personalised agents are being trained with a fan's specific 'vibe', taste, opinion and community knowledge. Synthetic fans do far more than just monitoring a conversation, they inhabit it - acting as tireless representatives of the real fan, on the social platforms where the feed and the discourse never sleeps.

Fans have always seen themselves as stakeholders in bringing their parasocial icons above the noise. But on platforms like X and TikTok, they're starting to see a more efficient way. They're deploying thousands of agentic fans to strategically amplify the narratives that matter to them.

This isn't the clumsy world of spam bots anymore. These are sophisticated human proxies that mimic human-like engagement patterns. They 'pause' to read, vary their tone, and interact with other fans (even synthetic ones). Today, a track won't hit #1 just because of human behaviour, but the army of agents that successfully swerve anti-bot technology while the real fans sleep.

On Discord and Telegram, the most active users are often AI agents tasked by their owners to summarize thousands of messages across dozens of channels. This ensures the fan never suffers from FOLO (the Fear of Loring Out). They filter endless reams of information into a



consumable summary so the real fan can jump back into the conversation with the required context to participate.

The act of keeping on top of the culture has become a background process.

It goes further still. In the fragmented world of fan communities, fans are using agents to patrol the open internet as a means to protect their lore in comment sections and threads, debunk misinformation, and to gatekeep their prized community spaces from the invasion of real and synthetic actors who intend to do harm.

For fans, agentic thinking isn't just about outsourcing their participation, it's also being used as a tool to help other fans participate as well. We are seeing the rise of 'prompt-sharing' as a behaviour, whereby when a fan creates, say, a meme, they share the AI prompt logic that created it, so that others in the community can create their own versions of the joke across their own feeds. In this space, the participation isn't the content, but rather the distribution of tools to create it.

The emergence of agentic fandom presents us with a paradox. At first you think, how uncanny and unhuman is this? But then when you think about it, by fans deploying agents to handle the logistics of keeping up, these bots are freeing up the space for fans to focus on the most human part of all: the need to connect and belong.

In terms of what this means for brands? To me it's the clear parallel. If this is the length people will go to support the objects of their fandom, then let's not forget that brands have fans, too. So let's give them the tools to advocate for our brands when they don't have the time, so they can do it in their sleep.



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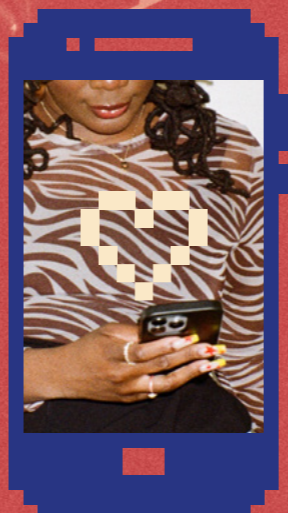
They all do
so you don't
have to

People are adopting the mode of participation-by-proxy, using creators as emotional safety nets to experience and validate cultural moments without the risk of public exposure.

By

Shanice Dover

Associate Director,
Creator and Community,
London



Ryan Coogler's *Sinners* had the kind of awards run studios dream about. Critics loved it, voters rewarded it and think-pieces popped up everywhere. But its most interesting success happened somewhere less prestigious; inside YouTube thumbnails of people crying.

Search 'Sinners reaction' and you don't find neat, measured reviews. You find tears, screaming, stunned silences, hands over mouths, chairs being abandoned mid-scene and comment sections full of praise. Entire reaction channels saw some of their biggest engagement around the film, as viewers flocked to watch strangers experience the same emotional beats they had already lived through themselves.

In 2026, it's no longer enough to watch the thing. We also want to watch other people watch the thing.

Reaction content is hardly new, but it now feels less like a niche format and more like one of the internet's default behaviours. Across film, music, TV, sport and pop culture, audiences increasingly turn to creators not just for opinions, but for co-experience: a way to process moments collectively, without having to perform publicly themselves.

There was a time when social platforms encouraged instant participation. You watched something, thought something, then posted something. Platforms were looser, feeds were messier, and the stakes felt lower. Now every take can feel risky. Misread the mood, phrase something badly, be too earnest, too late, too obvious or simply not funny enough, and you feel exposed at best or end up being publicly dragged at worst.

Posting has become higher effort, so audiences found a workaround. They let creators do the public feeling for them.

This is the parasocial safety net. Creators absorb the social risk so the audience doesn't have to. They cry so you don't need to. They post the hot take so you can just agree in the comments. The creator becomes an emotional proxy, expressing what viewers feel but don't particularly want to put their name to publicly.

Creators like @hthaze have built huge audiences around exactly this. Fans join his streams not just for the music, but to see how it lands collectively, using his reactions and comment sections as a cultural temperature check. On Twitch, Kai Cenat has scaled the model into something closer to

an empire, transforming trailers, viral clips and internet chaos into communal live events. At that point, the source material almost becomes secondary. What people are really showing up for is the atmosphere.

Even quieter formats follow the same logic. 'Study with me' and 'Cook with me' offer a low-intensity version of the same belonging, where engaging isn't required to feel part of something.

What links all of it is that audiences still want context, belonging and emotional release. They just want it without the exposure that comes with public participation.

This reframes what creators actually are. The clunky label of 'influencer' undersells the function. Some are interpreters, translating chaotic discourse into something legible. Some are validators, signalling what is worth attention in the first place. The best ones are emotional proxies, and that is a fundamentally different and more powerful role.

For brands, this changes the brief in two directions. The first is who you work with. The right creator is not necessarily the one with the biggest audience but the one who can host a moment, make it feel welcoming and culturally relevant, and keep a conversation alive long after the original asset has stopped performing.

The second is what you make. Not all content is hostable. A product demo rarely is. A world premiere, a genuinely surprising film, a behind-the-scenes reveal can be. Before any major content launch, the honest question to ask is: would a creator react to this unprompted? If the answer is no, the content probably isn't ready.

You cannot manufacture the proxy. Briefing a creator to perform enthusiasm for something they don't genuinely feel is the fastest way to lose the trust of exactly the audience you are trying to reach. The brief has to start earlier, with building something worth reacting to in the first place.

In the same way *Sinners* created a moment worth returning to, the goal is content that earns its own second life. Not through paid amplification, but because someone, somewhere, felt something real enough to share it.

ARTICLES

By **Katy Ball**
Head of Social, London

the digital smoking area



PEOPLE ARE REPURPOSING THE COMMENT SECTION AS A LOW-STAKES COMMUNAL HUB TO SIMULATE THE ORGANIC, "UNFILTERED" SOCIAL CONNECTION OF A PHYSICAL NIGHT OUT.



Smoking areas really came into their own in 2006 when the ban hit and were fast cemented in the cultural zeitgeist as the well-travelled older cousin of the kitchen at a house party. The Jessa to your Shoshanna. The coolest place on the night out, where the most interesting yaps happened, you became instant best mates with a stranger you'd never see again, while sharing a Marlborough Menthol. Plans to travel to East Asia were eagerly formed in a fog of smoke, youthful enthusiasm and pre-Covid era optimism. Maybe you met your future partner or best mate there. Maybe you met a few.

They were simpler times. And probably the best days of our lives.

And as that once vital, youthful and culture-setting generation comes of age, buys and renovates houses, moves to the country, gets married, has kids, dogs, careers and a fair amount of Botox, the Elder Millennials are nostalgically seeking that familiar behaviour in the depths of social media.

For Millennials, our performative posting era of the 2010s has ended - we're no longer sharing 87 night out pics on the grid, but instead, become professional lurkers. While we now often sit on the edge of participation, the need for connection hasn't gone away. It's just shifted.

We've moved from physical to digital, and the comments section of nostalgia-heavy accounts, or brands leaning in to once-passions of this lost generation, have become a virtual smoking area. It's a place that is far from dead, it's alive and absolutely vibing with shared memory, and deep cultural connection with a place and time.

Serendipitous connections, 'you-totally-get-me' and a feeling of true, temporal belonging are now found deep in the comments sections. Sharing a ciggie with a new best mate (or having a heated debate) now happen on the sofa with a glass of Merlot through our phones, but the energy is still the same.

The comments section is a shared third space, transient, low stakes, a bit chaotic and unfiltered, but it gives you entry into a shared cultural memory that builds fleeting and non-committal connection, in an era heavy with responsibility. Here, the fabric of a quite tired community is woven together. Just make sure it's before 9pm please.

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Brands have already captured this deep desire for cultural belonging through nostalgia with McDonald's Adult Happy Meals and Motorola's Razr reboot, both reaping the rewards of creating a shared moment in the feed. And the trend isn't going anywhere.

If you want to capitalise on the open wallets and chronically scrolling behaviour of Millennials, you'll need to take a fundamentally different approach to community engagement and content strategy.

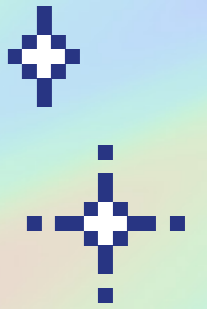
Comments aren't customer service - they're cultural connection. The WKD for the OGs of the club scene who are now (largely) in a different phase of life but feel instant connection with nostalgic vibes.

This isn't really about replying with pithy come backs or brand-safe emojis. You need to build the VIP area for this generation and hand over the wristband for entry - don't police it. Build a model of participation that feeds this generation's deep-seated desire for cultural connection and you'll win not just hearts, but wallets too.

So much of the internet is about what comes next and is focussed on how Gen Z interacts, but brands that fuel the feed and understand the energy of this cash-rich(ish), time-poor generation will win long term fans - and not just that, they'll create true advocates.

Build a place for them in your eco-system. Make it feel stumbled upon, a bit raw, take a risk and you might get a reward. Let the vibe grow and the fans come along. Build for participation, but don't over-participate yourself. Lurk in the twilight, if you will. Engage where you should.

Build it and they will com(e)ment.



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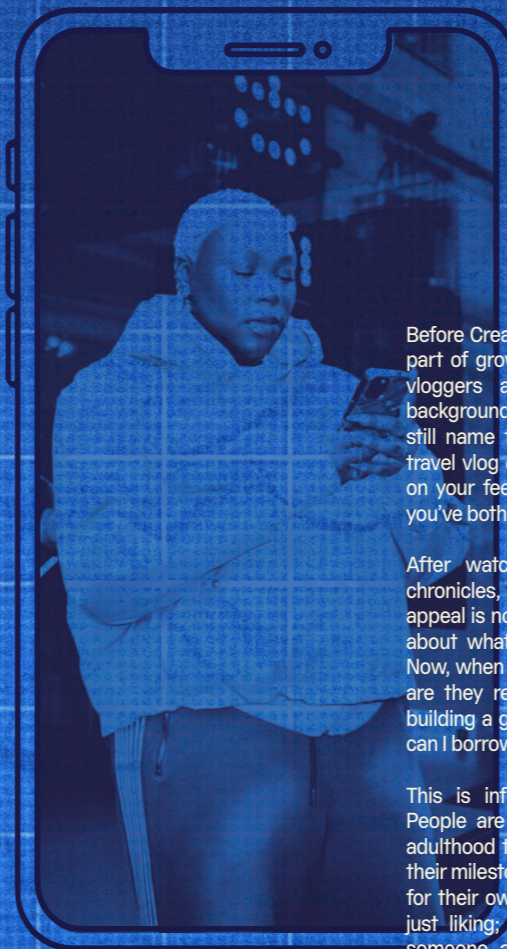
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The PARASOCIAL Blueprint

by
**DAKOTA
 BRANCH-SMITH**
 Senior Account
 Manager, London

People are outsourcing the trial-and-error of adulthood to trusted creators, using their life milestones as a navigable “how-to” guide for their own reality



Before Creators became an industry, they were part of growing up. For Gen Z and Millennials, vloggers and lifestyle bloggers were the background noise of everyday life. You can likely still name the one you first found through a travel vlog or a niche tutorial, whose presence on your feed has taken on a new meaning as you’ve both gotten older.

After watching them move through dating chronicles, marriages, and home moves, their appeal is no longer about the content itself. It’s about what their lives signal about progress. Now, when we tune in, the question isn’t “what are they recommending?” it’s “how are they building a good life, and what in their blueprint can I borrow?”

This is influencing evolving into lifestaging. People are outsourcing the trial-and-error of adulthood to a select group of Creators, using their milestones as a low-stakes dress rehearsal for their own future. Participation in 2026 isn’t just liking; it’s maturation-syncing – tracking someone a few chapters ahead and taking notes for when it’s your turn.

This is the big sister algorithm in action. Audiences are deliberately seeking creators three to five years ahead to explain the things school never covered – from Sunday resets and organization hacks to the ethics of sharing your child online. They aren’t looking for unattainable aspiration; they are looking for a navigable path.

This shift makes perfect sense against a volatile cultural backdrop. Growing up through economic pressure and social instability, traditional milestones feel less certain than they once were. With nearly half of Gen Z and Millennials reporting financial insecurity, is it any surprise they are drawn to people who make adulthood feel less daunting?

Melissa Holdbrook-Akposoe, better known as Melissa’s Wardrobe, is the blueprint for this shift. Her audience arrived for style tips, but they stayed to watch her build a life. The explosion of the hashtag #MelMadeMeDolt is more than a meme, it’s a social contract of trust. Those who followed her fashion blog in 2015 are now in their thirties, buying her Le Luxe laundry products not because they love housework, but because they are in their home-making era and trust Melissa to have solved that chapter for them. As she transitions through motherhood and entrepreneurship, her followers decode those milestones alongside her, filing the lessons away for their own lives.

For brands, the takeaway is clear; you’re not buying reach, you’re buying into a chapter of a life.

Creators are the ones translating shifting lifestyles into purchasing behaviour, making new categories relevant as their audience ages into them. Melissa’s partnerships with M&S, Aveeno, and Dyson worked because they aligned with where her audience is now. The products sat naturally within the life stage her followers were entering, rather than cutting across it.

This is the new brief for brands. Stop treating Creators like media channels and start treating them like narrative arcs. The question isn’t simply who has influence in your category today, it’s who does your audience trust to guide them into the next version of themselves. Because if you earn a role in the Creator’s journey, you become part of the blueprint for everyone else growing up alongside them.



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SLUDGE

sludge

BRAIDING

braiding

by ZARA WILSON
Account Manager, London

People are moving toward “attention layering”, braiding multiple unrelated streams of content stimulation together to engineer a personalized flow state that they can no longer achieve with a singular piece content alone

As a notorious doomscroller, I notice even the slightest changes in my TikTok and Instagram Reels algorithm. During the day it is filled with gym exercises, recipes and comedic content. Then the sun goes down, and the feed shifts.

At night, it tells a different story. It becomes dominated by ASMR and aesthetically pleasing or satisfying content. Increasingly, it is two, sometimes three pieces of content, stacked together in an almost Tetris-like split screen. Kinetic sand at double speed on top, Minecraft parkour underneath. A favourite sitcom paired with a hydraulic press clip that is oddly mesmerising.

So, why is this happening?

The easy explanation is that attention spans are shrinking and everyone is fighting for the last scrap of focus. But the more interesting truth is the opposite. People are not getting worse at paying attention, they're getting more advanced at engineering it.

Audiences are moving away from content with a singular focus toward what's becoming known as attention layering. Multiple, unrelated streams of stimulation are braided together to create a personalised flow state that a single piece of content cannot achieve alone. This is not “brain rot”, it's sensory architecture.

You see it most clearly in streaming culture. Clippers take long-form streams and edit them into 30-to-60 second highlights. Streamers like Kai Cenat or PlaqueBoyMax often have unofficial accounts reposting their content, layered with repetitive mobile gameplay. The main clip carries the story, the secondary layer carries the rhythm. When the stream quietens down, the background keeps the brain from reaching for the swipe.

That is the key shift. The stacked format is not just a way to make short-form content louder, it's a way to make the primary thing stick.

This goes beyond TikTok. The second-screen ritual has evolved. It is no longer just tweeting while watching TV. People now “ambient-game” while listening to complex podcasts, audiobooks or long-form video essays. Low-stakes repetition plus narrative input equals focus. The extra layer quiets the noisy part of the brain so the main content can land.

Take Substack, for example. The growth of long-form and intentional writing/reading is not happening in a world free of sludge, it's happening in unison. People read slow content while something else runs in the background, not because they are distracted, but because it helps them stay with the thought long enough to finish it.

The takeaway for brands is not to start layering user-generated content with reruns of Family Guy. It is to recognise that audiences are actively assembling their own viewing experiences. They are combining formats, tones and stimuli to reach a flow state.

Effective content is no longer just about how something performs in isolation, it's about how it functions as part of a stack.

This is where the role of the brand changes. Posts don't need to be the main event. Maybe it's the case that brands should design their content to be a layer of the stack; something that can sit underneath other content and still feel satisfying to watch. A modular asset that can be re-used, remixed, or routed through people's own content ecosystem preferences.

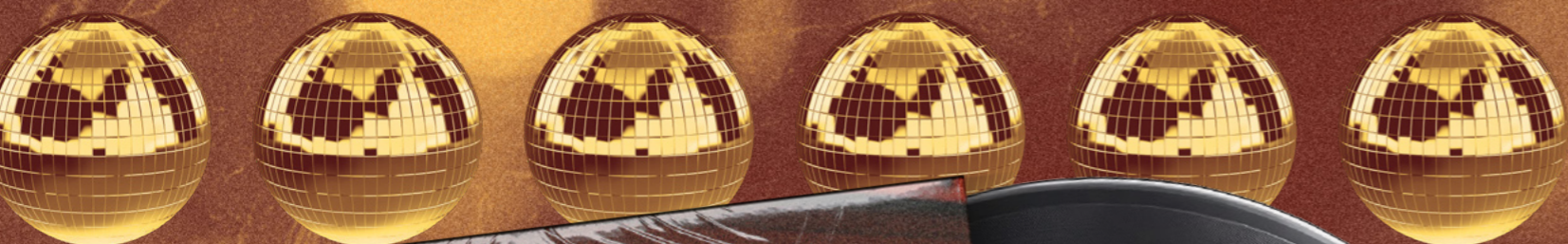
Maybe the goal isn't interruption anymore, but how we enable people to participate with organising our content as part of a stack. Perhaps the 'hack' is to create visual branded wallpaper that becomes part of the daily behaviour for millions of people.

In a layered attention economy, relevance does not come from trying to capture attention outright, it comes from understanding how people are constructing attention, and finding a way to braid ourselves within it.



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BY MOLLY WHITELEY
ACCOUNT MANAGER,
LONDON

PEOPLE ARE SPLITTING THEIR DEVOTION BETWEEN "ROOM-CULTURE" THAT REWARDS HUMAN CURATION AND "FEED-CULTURE" WHICH IS OPTIMIZED FOR THE INSTANT, ALGORITHMIC GRATIFICATION OF THE DROP



For decades the gold standard of DJing was the marathon set. It was a six-hour narrative arc built on patience and a gradual deepening of atmosphere. You stayed for hours because that was the point. A proper club set felt like being pulled into another world. You had to be there physically and give it your full attention.

Music selectors have also started getting more protective. They rely on unreleased edits and white label records that cannot be easily Shazam'd or absorbed into TikTok. This has driven an ID hunter culture online where music heads seek out unrecognized songs as a form of online clout-building.

Dance culture now exists in a different media environment. The dancefloor still rewards patience but social media rewards immediacy. What works in a dark room at 3am does not always translate into a 15-second clip. As music discovery shifts toward short form platforms, a competing power structure has emerged: the content hook and the viral moment.

This reveals that participation in club culture now runs along two faultlines. The first is the intimate presence of live experience where the crowd relishes in connection and vibration. The second is the performative nature of music moments where the role of the crowd is more about filming the drop and posting the clip, thank it is the experience itself.

Out of that tension an algorithmic DJ is emerging. This style focuses less on narrative and more on constructing sets around clips and brand friendly visuals designed to travel well online. Club culture is splitting in two. On one side are the invisible nights the algorithm cannot read. On the other are hyper-visible performances optimised for the feed.

For brands, this creates a choice between two distinct paths. You can back the lore of the underground to earn cultural credibility from scenes that value depth, scarcity and presence in the room. Our ten-year record of facilitating the collaboration between Ballantine's and Boiler Room is a key example of this approach. In this space, social media is used for promotion, storytelling and documentation of the music experience.

You can see that tension in the wider culture around dance music with what emerged through platforms like Boiler Room and HÖR Berlin. They changed everything by making the DJ booth visible and turning an in-the-room experience into content. For a while that felt exciting but now there is a sense of fatigue around what it is evolving into.

Alternatively, you can dial into the velocity of fast twitch screen culture. This path engineers viral music moments that drive the massive reach large brands often need. These social-led moments reach a broad online audience, but they may come at the expense of engaging the deeper music fan who values authenticity and specialized knowledge.

In niche spaces there is a growing backlash against influencer DJing where the performance feels designed for clips first and the room second. Some DJs have become experts at building highly filmable moments into their sets. A breakdown or a stank face reaction is engineered to be shared. In response, the anti-social music fan errs toward audio led spaces like Kiosk in Bruxelles or The Lot in NYC - radio stations earning credibility by not giving into visual spectacle.

The selector vs. the algorithm. It is time to pick your fighter.



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THE SOVEREIGN STREAMER



by

AHMED MOGHAZY

Social Media Director, Dubai

For many years, sport always treated the official broadcast as the highest form of access, with polished camera angles, iconic commentary lines, and creative graphic packages.

Fans no longer gather the same way, often having a second screen to share memes, reaction clips, bench meltdowns, analyst breakdowns, and viral moments in group chats. The match still matters, but the official broadcast is no longer the main focus.

This is the new reality of sport and entertainment. While broadcasts attract millions, the real atmosphere, reaction, chaos, and chatter happens elsewhere. Creators bring match chatter into online fan forums, adding value through their personalities. This transforms an event you watch into something you turn up to.

Last year, French streamer Zack Nani made the unprecedented move to snap up the rights to the Saudi Pro League, the professional football association of Saudi Arabia. This was more than a media story, it was the first major signal of the direction of travel; where streamers can legally broadcast matches across their streamer channels, attaching it to their distinct personality and way of doing content.

This is the rise of the sovereign streamer, the new media figure who doesn't just make the live match or performance accessible to watch, but through their cultural clout and personality, also makes it accessible to people less connected to the sport, musician or otherwise.

This changes everything.

As much as younger audiences are interested in sports, they're less attracted to traditional formats. Youth culture today is about the slay personalities, the comments, the edits, reactions, and communities. When traditional broadcasts turn from a single moment into a myriad of moments for different micro-communities, we start to see a solution unfold that directly targets the challenge of media fragmentation.

For right owners, creator partnerships have started to evolve from content sponsorship into strategic media partnerships. A post, an appearance or an attendance is no longer enough. The opportunity is so much more prolific.

The upcoming FIFA World Cup platform strategy shows the direction of travel. YouTube and TikTok have both been named as 'preferred platforms', in a bid to supercharge digital distribution and create more ways to engage with younger audiences. As part of the TikTok play, FIFA will embed creators into the tournament ecosystem, allowing them to operate as cultural translators for a younger, mobile-first crowd.

The NBA is moving in a similar way. The recent Playstation NBA Creator Cup became an integral part of the All-Star event, featuring creators who had more than 160 million combined followers.

It's signalling a time where the consideration moves from managing and protecting rights, to instead enabling the people that fans want to experience a moment with. For young people, passive viewership was never a thing. Their expectations as a fan are to feel the emotional and cultural experiences that make the event feel alive, delivered through a personality they rate, and who makes them feel like they're right there in the moment, be that courtside or in front of the stage.

To reiterate, the time for a caption or a post is long gone. The game today is about building a format that combines access with recurring roles for the next generation of host talent - in the name of creating the alternative cultural feed that brings your brand or entertainment property to life in a youth-relevant way.

The question is no longer 'which creators can promote this?' and, instead, 'which creators can make this matter consistently to the audiences we need to reach most?' Creators can no longer be an amplification afterthought; they need to be brought way upstream to play an integral role in the whole thing. This is the new modus operandum.

A little bit of control given up, creators land you in their culture and language, a whole new meaning for your brand.

People are abandoning official broadcasts in favour of creator-led access, where a trusted personality acts as the necessary cultural translator for a major event



ARTICLES

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THE
REVOLUTION
 WON'T BE
 GRAMMABLE

People are seeking out geofenced, phone-free physical experiences where the lack of a digital footprint is the ultimate proof of presence

By **JESSY WEBSTER**
 Senior Account Director,
 London



Somewhere along the way, in our vastly digitalised world, a feeling has started to emerge that access has become too easy. Everything is instantly streamed, posted, shared, replayed – even automated. The ease of access is starting to lose its value. Now, culture is starting to push back.

Digital behaviour is becoming increasingly frictionless. We aren't talking about what we see online anymore – not in the way we did a few years ago. When everything can be seen, nothing feels rare.

That's the tension; as digital participation becomes effortless, cultural value is shifting toward experiences that require effort... to be there to fully appreciate & understand.

What this signals is a redefinition of participation.

At Lost London, entry comes with a condition: you give something up. Phones are locked away in Yondr pouches, removing our automatic reflex to record and share the experience to prove you were there. What replaces it is a sense of complete presence, where the only version of the night that exists lives in memory, passed between the people who experienced it, and how they talk about it afterwards.

The rest of the event follows that same logic. Line-ups aren't announced, but discovered on entry. Details are accessed via a phone call, echoing the rave hotlines of the 90s and early 00s. The venue – an abandoned cinema complete with dripping pipes – brings back memories of a 2010 ScumTek rave in a disused Royal Mail depot. I couldn't document it then, and I can't document it now. It's not just drawing on aesthetic nostalgia, but also behavioural. You have to seek it out, and commit.

Elsewhere, artists are taking this even further. Tracks are being "pinned" to places – a street corner in East London, a park in Tokyo – turning listening into something closer to a pilgrimage. The act of getting there becomes part of the experience itself.

And this isn't happening in isolation. These moments sit within a wider cultural swing away from passive, always-on digital participation toward something more intentional, and more physical.

We're seeing it across industries. High-end brands are experimenting with "dark pop-ups" – unmarked retail spaces that only reveal themselves after completing real-world tasks. It's not attracting the masses, only the truly dedicated few.

In sport, there are early signs of the same instinct. "Zero-signal zones" are being trialled in stadiums, removing connectivity from certain areas to bring focus back to the live moment – no second screens or filming, just the shared intensity of the crowd.

The only proof is presence.

For years, the metric of success was visibility – how many people saw it, shared it, engaged with it. Now, value is being reassigned to the opposite; how difficult something is to access, how specific the conditions of participation are, how much it asks of you. How does one even start measuring for that?

Friction is becoming a filter.

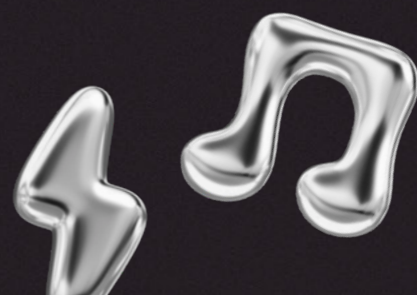
For brands, this flips the model. Social and digital channels are no longer the end point – they're the starting whistle. Their role is to seed intrigue, drop clues, build anticipation. But the real payoff happens offline.

We're already seeing this logic take shape in how campaigns are built. Less emphasis on documenting the experience, more focus on designing it. Our work for Bowers & Wilkins reflects this exactly – a focus on intimate events, crafted with exclusive experience in mind, for a select few. Keeping work intentional rather than chasing mass reach.

But this approach demands a shift in mindset. Brands need to let go of total visibility, accepting that not everything needs to be scalable or shareable to be valuable. In fact, the opposite may be true.

As we move through 2026, the brands that resonate will be the ones that understand this balance – using digital to guide people in, but reserving the meaning for those who show up.

Because increasingly, if you can post it, it's not the point.



ARTICLES

 Forwarded many times


FORWARDED MANY TIMES

People are treating the group chat as the primary residence of digital life, using peer-to-peer forwarding as the only de-facto quality signal they trust

by
Ross Watson
Managing Partner,
London

ARTICLES

It's the day of the UEFA Euro 2024 Final. England vs Spain. You're nervous, it's all anyone's talking about, and every brand on the planet is trying to buy its way into the moment.

Then you get a WhatsApp message. "Forwarded many times." It's the FA's inspirational video about the England team. Minutes later, in a different group chat but in the same room, the same video appears with the same label.

Forwarded many times has become a de-facto quality signal. It is a viral blue tick that carries more social proof than any sponsored post because it implies the content has been stress-tested in multiple trusted circles before it reached yours. This is where culture is being shaped and shared.

The 'social' part of social media has gone dark. In 2026, the public feed is merely a shop window... a performative broadcast. The actual residency of digital life happens in the group chat. Up to 80% of cultural sharing now occurs via WhatsApp, Discord, and Telegram. These are the spaces where kits are judged, opinions are formed, and brands are either canonised or killed.

This is Fancorn manifest: tight-knit circles where passions, history, and internal lore and language play a more significant role than any algorithm. While WhatsApp handles real-life relationships, Discord serves the broader fan ecosystems. These are structured into channels and ranked by tier, governed by a language outsiders can't decode without an invitation - basically the sociology of subculture slapped into a chat room.

The brands that win in 2026 are not the ones who crack the algorithm. They are the ones who get screenshotted. They create content so good that someone in a group of thirty people decides it is worth their social capital to share it. When you drop a link into the chat, you are putting your

reputation on the line. You are betting that the content makes you look switched-on, rather than the person who posts ads.

To win here, brands must stop creating for the feed and start creating for the forward.

This requires a shift toward "screenshot-ready" design. We have spent years designing for the scroll - big text and loud colours. Designing for the group chat means high-density information and aesthetics that hold up in a tiny thumbnail. It means creating for "dark social SEO" - using unreleased tracks, hidden "easter eggs", or "ID culture" that fans have to hunt for and then proudly reveal to their peers.

Success means building for debate-ability: a stat that provokes, a post that draws a reaction, or information that rewards the person who shared it first. It means interrogating what the 'Save' and 'Send' buttons tell you, because they are a far more honest signal of resonance than a like or a view.

By all means, keep measuring your vanity metrics. But the performance of your saves and DM sends will determine the actual cultural power of the work. Anyone can buy engagement on a post, but no one can buy the thousands of shares inside that little paper arrow icon.

Your most powerful distribution network is the one you do not own. It is the group chat full of your most passionate fans. The success of every campaign now lives and dies with them.



REINCARNATION

OF THE

RSS

FEED

JORIS SCHWITALLA

SENIOR CREATIVE STRATEGIST, BERLIN

PEOPLE ARE BYPASSING ALGORITHMIC DISCOVERY IN FAVOR OF "PERSONAL INFRASTRUCTURE" – MANUAL, HAND-STITCHED NETWORKS OF SOURCES THAT PROTECT THEIR HYPER-NICHE CULTURAL INTERSECTIONS.

For anyone under 30, a quick history lesson. Before algorithms decided what you cared about, there was RSS. Really Simple Syndication. A tiny piece of internet plumbing that pulled from blogs, news sites, and forums you choose into one personal feed. No recommendations or curation, just a raw, unfiltered stream of everything you actively wanted to follow. It was ugly and manual, but it was yours. Then Google killed Google Reader in 2013 – the key technology that enabled RSS. The algorithmic feed took over, and the rest is timeline history.

Here we are in 2026, and the most culturally engaged fans on the planet are quietly rebuilding the exact same thing. Not on one app, but across all of them.

My personal stack looks something like this: Springboks rugby, freeride skiing clips, Palace collabs, and the NBA. All followed deeply. Not just the games or the drops, but the memes, discourse and culture around them. Every single one of these passions has become its own cultural universe with a dress code, a vocabulary and a media ecosystem that runs way deeper than any broadcast ever could. And I promise you: no algorithm on earth knows this version of me exists.

Your 'For You' page can model "basketball fan from Berlin, urban area, 30-35." But what it can't do, is model someone deep into niche sports analysis; limited fashion drops, and obscure subculture content at 1am. That person breaks the model, and that person is all of us now.

Fans are building systems to get round these shortcomings of algorithms. They're assembling their own networks of sources, communities and creators to get closer to what actually matters to them. The Nike x Palace Total 90 World Cup collaboration didn't break on any mainstream fashion outlet. It leaked

through private Discord servers and niche hubs like Versus and NSS Sports weeks before the wider press caught up. On X, Shams Charania breaks NBA trade rumours before the league has finished typing the press release. Athlete-owned Telegram channels and podcasts bypass geo-blocked broadcasts entirely and hand The Lore straight to the fan. Twitch communities have become live rooms that no traditional channel can replicate. None of it lives in one place.

This is the RSS feed, reborn. Not as a product feature. As a behaviour. A decentralised, self-assembled cultural operating system held together only by two things: the fan who built it, and the portfolio of intersectional passions they have.

And this is where brands need to pay attention. Most still treat social as a broadcast tower: post, boost, measure impressions and engagements, repeat. But the fans worth reaching have already walked out of that building. They're in rooms you don't have the key to. The opportunity now is less about dominating feeds, and more about becoming useful within the ecosystems people have already built for themselves. The old model was buying reach on a platform. The new ambition is earning relevance as a node in the network, something people choose to route through because it adds value. That could mean trusted creators, insider access, community utility, or formats built to travel peer-to-peer. Not because an algorithm surfaced it, but because the fan actively chose to let you in.

Nobody can predict what platform or tech will come next. But the impulse stays the same. People build these ecosystems because they want to stay culturally relevant to themselves. To keep up with the things that make them who they are, and to stay connected to the people who get it. The smartest brands will stop asking how to interrupt that behaviour, and start asking how to serve it.

Platforms rise and die, but the need to feel culturally alive does not. That's what these hand-stitched ecosystems are really protecting. Not content or information, but one's own sense of cultural relevance. And for brands, that's the only currency that truly matters.

ARTICLES

ARTICLES



by Jakob Miller
Head of Strategy,
Berlin



People are fracturing their online identity into "public shells" and "private enclaves"; moving their authentic participation into gated, context-rich spaces where they don't have to explain themselves

There's a general collective sense today that the open nature of social media has seen it become void of context. A sanitised, hyper-policed space where every take is a liability, and where the algorithmic prioritisation in the feed feels like a hallucination. The nuance has been lost and, for the culturally literate, merely existing on it feels like a chore.

It's no wonder we're ghosting it.

To manage the contemporary reality of social media, people have adopted what could be referred to as a split-identity protocol. We maintain a sterile, heavily curated public shell – a sacrificial avatar meant to absorb and reflect the noise of the open web – while hoarding our actual, unhinged personalities for more private enclaves. But this isn't just about people's craving for privacy, it's about the search context that's real and relevant. We want to be in rooms where the joke, the opinion, the experience, doesn't need an explanatory thread and a cheat-sheet of caveats.

Welcome to the decentralized world of passion havens; identity-locked Discord servers, gated Telegram rings, and Signal groups where the most engaged forms of fandom are actually practiced. Whether it's a high-stakes betting syndicate, a terrifyingly organised Swiftie theory collective, or a Cozy Gamers for ADHD refuge, these micro-networks are the only places left where you don't have to waste your breath explaining who you are.

This is where the real kernels of emerging culture are being incubated, and where tomorrow's trends are currently receiving their first dose of oxygen.

This retreat is the most extrapolated example of the appstinence movement, where people seek to escape the overexposure of the feed for more trusted circles of interaction and sharing. At its most basic, it's the green circle of 'close friends', and at its most protected, the encrypted walls of a gated server.

In this reality, social capital isn't about reach, it's about the density of engagement. It doesn't matter if ten thousand strangers see your post if none of them know the lore. What matters is interacting with your tribe, the people who live your experiences and passion as much as you do, and will, resonate with your every word.

So, once again, we're met with another wild west for brands and a rulebook yet to be decoded.

The mass audience has retreated into a patchwork of sovereign, highly protected digital territories. Posting for a homogenous fandom or audience demographic feels dead on arrival, and these new spaces are far harder to be bought.

To survive this next phase of the splinternet, it is increasingly becoming a focus for brands to move from content broadcaster to that of a tool provider. This means providing the infrastructure that helps these havens run. It's about building assets of actual value for communities like custom mod tools, niche-specific bots, emotes, access to capabilities or talent and, of course, hyper-relevant experiences. In short, anything that can help a group define itself further, or create additional cultural value in membership.

This strategy isn't simple, and can be high in effort in contrast to current accepted metrics in success. But it's also the game we find ourselves in now. Nothing for it but to start playing – else get left in the feed.



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