

edges 2026

backslash



SIX NEW CULTURAL
① SHIFTS SHAPING OUR WORLD

IN 2026, CULTURE IS SEARCHING FOR

PROOF OF HUMAN

To understand where culture is headed in 2026, we need to take an honest look at where we've been. Over the past few years, no force has shaken things up quite like AI. In a remarkably short time, it's gone from professional assistant to something far more intimate – a trusted partner in daily life. In June 2024, OpenAI reported that professional and personal uses of ChatGPT were evenly split. Fast-forward a year, and personal conversations now make up 73% of usage, with people increasingly relying on the bot to help them plan their days, express themselves, and shape their beliefs. That's a far cry from the days when we were just worried about AI taking our jobs.

It's hard to deny that AI can be profoundly helpful – after all, millions of people wouldn't be using it if it wasn't. But this shift toward AI intimacy is surfacing a difficult question: What does it mean to be human when fewer parts of life require our presence?

Last year brought endless evidence of just how hands-off our world is becoming. AI can think for us, comfort us in hard times, read our kids bedtime stories, help us cheat at hobbies we once struggled through for fun, and anticipate our needs so effectively that our days begin to run on autopilot. None of this is inherently dystopian, but it does start to feel unsettling when you imagine a future in which we outsource these fundamentally human tasks altogether. Drones can deliver our dinner, and LLMs can keep us company while we eat it, but is that actually the "progress" we want?

If 2025 gave us a glimpse of what technology can do, 2026 is about deciding where we draw the line. AI can certainly continue to handle the background layers of life that benefit from speed, scale, and organization. But people are reevaluating the point at which convenience and optimization start to cost us something human. It's a fight to preserve the feeling of aliveness that seems to be slipping from our fingers.

By aliveness, we don't mean pure happiness or thrill. We mean the things that make us feel present in our bodies and anchored in our agency. The experiences that demand effort, conviction, and careful attention. The moments that connect us, challenge us, frustrate us, and ultimately give us a sense of purpose. In other words, the very sensations that separate us from machines in the first place.

This fight is showing up everywhere. On a personal level, we see it in how dumbphones and leather notebooks are becoming status symbols and in how intentionally slow, often humbling hobbies like needlepoint are experiencing a resurgence. People are deliberately reinstating the kind of discipline and focus that tech has taught us to eliminate.

On a broader level, the search for aliveness is evident in the types of things that culture is rewarding and responding to. People are seeking out proof of human – evidence that what they’re engaging with came from a real person, with a real point of view, who showed up and did the work.

We want to know that there’s honest emotion behind the lyrics of our favorite song, that a Substack post was based on a lived experience, that a piece of art took time to make, and that our friend actually wrote that apology text themselves.

‘Proof of Human’ is becoming the new value signal.



01.

Authors are posting videos of themselves writing their books in real time (and abandoning the beloved em dash) to prove they’re not using LLMs.



02.

Intermarché recently went viral for a holiday film that was entirely handcrafted in 3D animation by nearly 100 artists over the course of a year, earning admiration from AI-fatigued audiences.



03.

Rosalía’s otherworldly new album, “LUX,” has been praised for its complexity and rigorous creative process – signaling a yearning for music that challenges us.



04.

The global handicrafts market is booming as consumers seek out unique, handmade goods over mass-produced items. The market hit \$906.8 billion in 2024 and is expected to nearly double by 2033, reaching a whopping \$1.94 trillion.



05.

Aerie’s promise not to use AI in its ads was the brand’s most popular Instagram post in years.



06.

After churning through every -core aesthetic imaginable, we’ve done a full 360. The new aspiration is “having a life core,” where simply looking like a real person with a real life outside the screen has become its own marker of authenticity.



“We’re living in a time in which our traditional notions of humanity have been challenged more than ever.

That’s very difficult, but it’s also an opportunity to actually look at what we think is true, what we think is good, what we think is real, what we think it means to be human, and what we think a good human society looks like.”

— Paul Kingsnorth on [“Interesting Times” with Ross Ulbricht](#) by The New York Times

Proof of Human is a statement of intent about how we want to live in the future. The six new Edges we're introducing this year all orbit a desire to re-inject pulse, presence, and purpose into systems that have become too efficient to feel.

We believe this is the gravitational center of culture's next chapter:



**DARK
MODE**

Fed up with algorithms flattening taste, people are turning to private spaces and one-of-a-kind artifacts that reflect their true identities. Meaning now lives in what doesn't scale.

PAGE 8



**DIGITAL
FRICTION**

After decades of chasing seamlessness, people are now demanding tech that promises the opposite: intentional friction. Built-in boundaries are being reframed as human preservation.

PAGE 19



**DISCOMFORT
ZONE**

Modern life has been overoptimized for ease. Now, the things that feel most aspirational are the things that require struggle, discomfort, and risk – where the payoff is feeling fully alive.

PAGE 12



**AWAKENED
WORLD**

As our lives become more automated and synthetic, consciousness itself is becoming a form of resistance. The search for experiences that deepen our awareness and reenchant our minds is on.

PAGE 23



**MODERN
CIVILITY**

As internet brain erodes shared norms, culture is rebuilding the social infrastructure that makes coexistence possible. Mutual codes of conduct are repairing how we interact with and relate to one another.

PAGE 16



**ARCHIVE
AUTHORITY**

We document everything yet have little power over how our histories are preserved. Looking forward, taking control of your digital legacy will become a way to define who you are and how you want to be remembered.

PAGE 27

In a world where output is cheap, effort has become a sign of credibility. This doesn't mean doing everything the hard way or rejecting automation outright. It means being deliberate about where efficiency belongs – and where it doesn't. The closer something gets to identity or emotion, the more people expect a human touch to remain visible.

For brands, this requires a shift from optimizing for output to designing for aliveness. These are the new guidelines that will make that possible:

DESIGN FOR FELT EXPERIENCE

When designing experiences, brands need to ask: Does it create presence, tension, delight, discomfort, or surprise? Or, does it simply remove friction until nothing is felt at all?

MAKE EFFORT VISIBLE

Visible effort is becoming a way to earn trust. When everything can be generated instantly, time spent creates meaning. The brands that slow down and actually show the work will reframe human creativity as a moral stance.

PRESERVE AUTHORSHIP

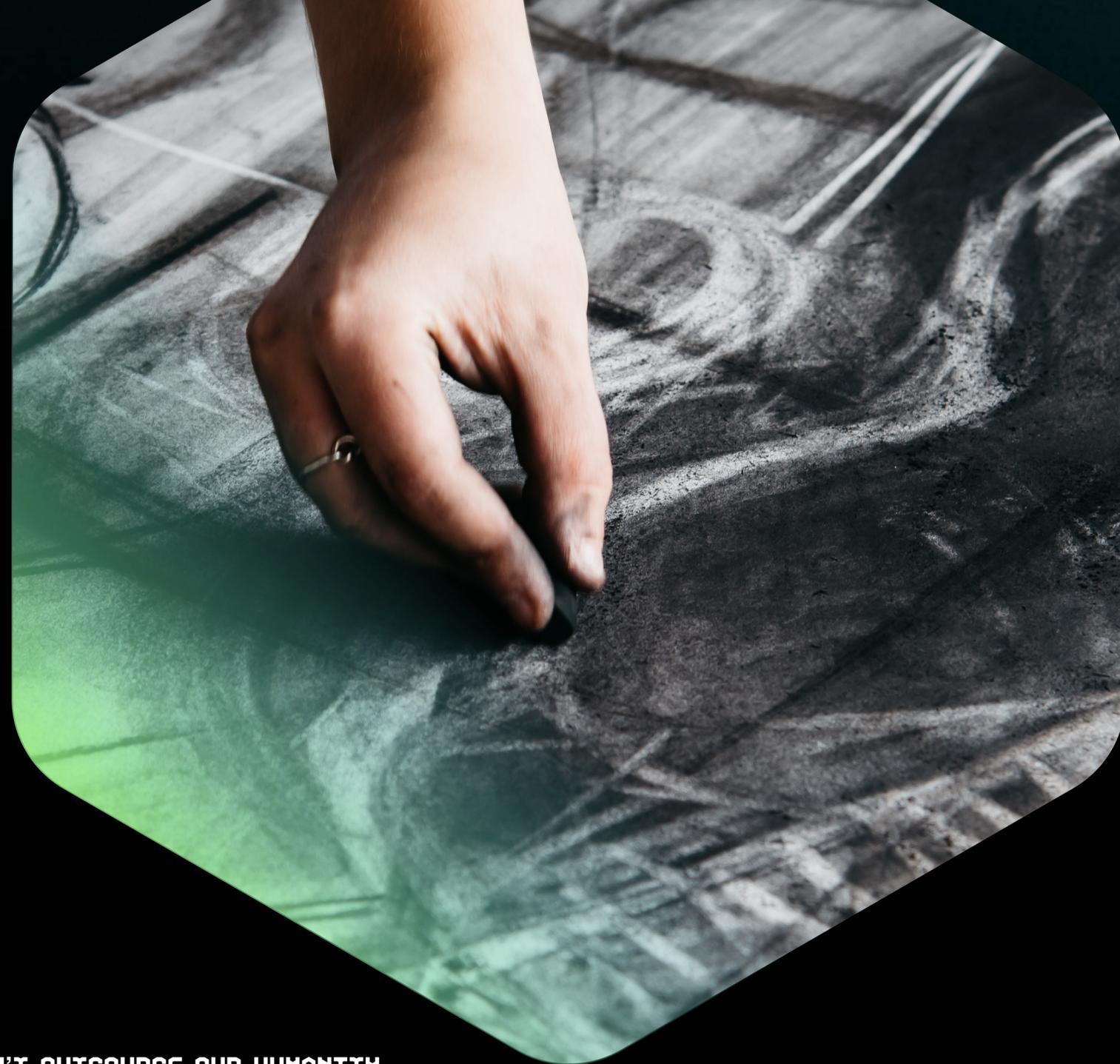
People want to know who made something, why, and what point of view it's rooted in. This applies to products, experiences, stories, service design, and beyond.

TREAT ATTENTION AS SOMETHING FINITE

Brands that protect attention – rather than extract it – will earn trust. This shows up in restraint, silence, limits, pacing, and moments that don't demand constant engagement. Care will be expressed through what you choose not to ask for.

DON'T OUTSOURCE OUR HUMANITY

Technology should expand what humans can do rather than replace the parts that make life most meaningful. When AI is used, people will demand clarity on why it belongs and what it adds.



EDGE

'ej \ noun

A meaningful cultural shift with the scale and longevity to propel a brand toward a greater share of the future.

01

Edges are rooted in human values, are recognizable through consumer behaviors, and have clear business implications.

02

Cultural shifts must have sustained relevance for at least a year before being declared an Edge and should continue to matter for the foreseeable future.

03

Edges are globally relevant, manifesting in at least half of Backslash-designated regions.

The following pages outline our six new Edges for 2026. For definitions of the existing 31 Edges, please see the appendix.



01.

HIDE DARK

In an overexposed culture, taste has become something worth protecting. Algorithms have made everything imitable, circulating the same outfits, playlists, and opinions to the point where our “taste” no longer feels like it belongs to us.

In response, people are hunting for formats that can't be copied or scaled: invite-only communities, human-to-human recommendations, and one-of-a-kind artifacts. The most meaningful expressions of identity now thrive out of sight.

KEY DRIVERS

ALGORITHMIC SATURATION

Everything from playlists to product feeds has been flattened by optimization – turning what once felt like smart curation into a kind of empty conditioning.

COLLAPSE OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

When discovery is instant and global, being “first” no longer signals discernment.

A POST-FAME LANDSCAPE

Virality and visibility have become so diluted that fame has lost its status. Looking forward, intimacy and depth will be more impressive than scale and follower count.

AI HOMOGENIZATION

With AI tools being trained on collective taste, individuality itself is becoming a scarce commodity.

NO FOLLOWER FLEX

Having no followers is becoming a new kind of status symbol. In the 2010s, follower counts represented social currency – a visible measure of taste, access, and influence. But as social media has become more automated and widely monetizable, the meaning of “big” has been diluted. Today, inflated audiences are often a mix of bots, passive scrollers, and disengaged accounts. Meanwhile, real engagement – and real cool – has migrated to smaller, self-selecting communities like Substack and Patreon. In this new landscape, having a low-key digital presence has become a sign of both confidence and credibility. From tastemakers who post carelessly to editors who are praised for having “sub-500 follower counts,” not caring about your online fame is becoming the ultimate flex.

RETAIL WHISPER NETWORKS

Retail “whisper networks” are becoming the hottest resale floors. Fueled by a craving for one-of-a-kind fashion, Gen Z shoppers are flocking to curated Substack newsletters, invite-only WhatsApp group chats, and Instagram closet sales for Close Friends only. Examples include Viv Chen’s The Molehill newsletter, which gives paid subscribers tips and tricks for shopping Japanese eBay and sourcing ’70s jewelry; Laura Reilly’s Magasin’s paywalled promo codes for discounted designer pieces; and stylist Lizzie Wheeler’s curated Close-Friends closet sales on her Instagram account, @shit.u.should.buy. While the online consignment market isn’t new, it is experiencing record growth. Pinterest’s fall 2025 trend report found that searches for “dream thrift finds” were up 550% year-over-year. This growth is being driven by algorithmic fatigue. In a time when anyone can copy and paste the latest influencer outfits, clothes that feel truly unique are becoming more rare and therefore more coveted. Expect fashion’s center of gravity to shift from public feeds to small, invite-only channels where scarcity equals status.

NICHE ZINE REVIVAL

Zine culture is experiencing a second bloom. Across cities like New York, Los Angeles, and London, zine fairs are drawing passionate crowds from niche subcultures; in fashion, indie magazines are now being regarded as a luxury good; and even apps like Feeld are entering the print scene for the first time. The old model of print marked by mass circulation may be gone, but that’s the point. What pulls people into zines is the sense of stepping into a world where culture doesn’t need to appease an audience of millions. Zines don’t scale. They don’t trend. They’re handed from one person to another, serving as an intimate physical artifact that can’t be replicated.



“In this post-brain rot era, in which even ‘dressing for yourself’ has the feel of a catchy internet term, maybe the secret to cool style – or at least a true sense of individuality – actually lies far, far away from the screen. Maybe it lies in simply logging off.”

– Daisy Jones, Vogue

SMALL SOCIAL

The next wave of social influence is deliberately off-grid. As people tire of public feeds built to reward mass appeal, platforms like Discord and Substack are quietly taking over. The key to their winning strategy is intimacy. Despite Discord's widespread reach (200 million MAUs globally), the average server size is just five to 20 users. It's these "virtual living rooms" that drive value, using features like voice chats and live hangouts to keep engagement high. Similarly, Substack is also seeing more creators build community through paywalled personal spaces that make it feel like you're part of a tight-knit crew. This pull toward the private signals a future of social media where depth is more valuable than reach, and impact is made behind the scenes.

DEATH TO SPOTIFY

A growing grassroots movement called "Death to Spotify" is on a mission to get artists and fans to quit the music app. While streaming promised infinite access, "Death to Spotify" argues that it also flattened discovery and stripped music of the underground subcultures that once made it feel alive. At a recent sold-out event in California, a series of speakers encouraged attendees to make the switch to alternative platforms like indie radio stations or vinyl, where listening is intentional rather than algorithmic. One band showing what's possible is Hotline TNT, which recently sold hundreds of copies of its new record directly through Bandcamp and a 24-hour Twitch stream. The Spotify exodus marks a slow cultural migration away from total visibility toward smaller, values-driven ecosystems that are more reliant on community knowledge than machine curation.

PERFECTLY IMPERFECT

Perfectly Imperfect is a big "if you know, you know." Reminiscent of Myspace and Tumblr in their prime, PI.FYI is a social magazine based on one simple question: "What have you been into?" Tastemakers are invited to share their recommendations around the expected things like music, food, and film, as well as their not-so-expected obsessions like "toucans" or "Googling the Cold War." The end goal isn't clout or influence. Just the joy of connecting over your love for the weird and wonderful. With over 90,000 users and editorial content from cultural icons like Charli XCX and Francis Ford Coppola, PI.FYI offers a refreshing break from faceless algorithm suggestions.

Time spent on social media globally peaked in 2022 and has since gone into steady decline, with young people cutting back first. Most notably, the share of people who use social media to express themselves has fallen by over 40% since 2014.

– GWI for the Financial Times, 2025





57% of adults globally say it's important to them to “discover new ideas or recommendations in niche, under-the-radar communities.”

— Backslash research, Q4 2025 - Q1 2026

CLAM CAPITAL

What if the next era of media wasn't about clicks or inflated engagement metrics, but about getting paid for having good taste in what you consume? That's the future being explored by [Clam Capital](#). With Clam, everyone has autonomous AI agents that are trained on their personal tastes and empowered to tip using programmable wallets. These [Spontaneous Payment Systems](#) would be public and social, similar to a Venmo feed. This would allow people to show off which artists, creators, and makers they support and even sell access to their own personal taste feeds so that others can follow their media picks. The idea is that taste becomes more measurable and traceable and therefore starts to mean something again.

DITCHING R/POPULAR

For the last eight years, r/popular was the default feed for new Reddit users. In theory, it's what's most liked on Reddit, but CEO Steve Huffman [says](#) it gives the false impression of one singular Reddit culture “that is neither representative of Reddit nor appealing to new users (or anyone at all, IMO).” That's why he's removing it from the core group of feeds in the app and moving toward more relevant and personalized feeds instead. This change is a better reflection of what Reddit actually stands for: a place for different communities with vastly different opinions, rules, passions, and types of humor to thrive. As Huffman puts it, “On Reddit, no strongly held worldview exists unchallenged. The freedom to build your own corner of the internet is what makes Reddit, Reddit.”

WHAT'S NEXT?

TASTE AS A SERVICE

The brands that facilitate niche, human-to-human recommendations will outshine those that cater to the algorithm. Offer concierge-style guidance, handpicked drops, and insider references that feel truly unique.

DESIGN FOR OPACITY

Let some things stay hidden. Invite-only communities, ephemeral content, and private previews help cultivate cultural value by resisting mass replication.

VALUE LOYALTY, NOT VISIBILITY

Reward depth of engagement, not volume. Build relationships with perks for repeat contributors, longtime fans, or community stewards rather than chasing raw follower counts.

02.

DISCOMFORT ZONE

A dulled-out world is switching to hard mode in order to feel alive again. We've sanded life down until it barely scratches, cozying into comfort with soft living, gentle parenting, and on-demand everything. But a new ethos is confronting this head-on: the chosen practice of discomfort. People are opting into practices that hurt, bore, or frustrate, because the payoff is greater aliveness, resilience, and meaning.



KEY DRIVERS

COMFORT COLLAPSE

After years of optimizing our lives for ease, people are recognizing the downsides: numbness, fragility, and lack of purpose. Feeling fully alive now feels more aspirational than feeling good all the time.

RESILIENCE AS A VIRTUE

In a volatile world being shaken by climate crises, AI disruption, and social fragmentation, toughness is being recast as preparedness. This is especially true for parents who fear that raising over-sheltered kids will leave them unfit for reality.

FRICION-MAXXING

Friction-maxxing is emerging as form of resistance against the excessive ease of modern life. Coined by Kathryn Jezer-Morton in The Cut, this strategy is all about rebuilding tolerance for the small discomforts and inconveniences that modern tech has taught us to eliminate. In other words, don't get so used to asking ChatGPT for ideas that you stop thinking for yourself, don't become so reliant on UberEats that you forget the comfort of a home-cooked meal, and actually let your kids be bored enough that reading becomes an escape worth taking. Friction-maxxing isn't simply a matter of cutting out technology. It's a call to stick through the mundane, often annoying parts of everyday life that create meaning – before we get to a point where putting in any kind of effort feels unbearable.

RAWDOGGING BOREDOM

TikTokers across the globe are “rawdoggging boredom” in an attempt to reset their brains. The videos, some of which have amassed millions of views, feature a time-lapse of a person sitting expressionless and doing absolutely nothing while a giant timer faces the camera, counting down a set period ranging from minutes to hours. The trend is an offshoot of the “rawdoggging flights” trend, where airplane passengers deprive themselves of any and all stimulation for the entirety of their journey. By choosing boredom instead of trying to eliminate it, Gen Z is reframing discomfort as a necessary ingredient for mental clarity.

58% of Gen Zers globally find it hard to sit in silence with their own thoughts.

– OA Creative Intelligence, 2024

BABY STEPS

Baby Steps is a walking simulator that feels less like a video game and more like an endurance test for the human psyche. Instead of a smooth, intuitive control scheme, players are forced to manually operate each leg of the protagonist, Nate, who staggers, fumbles, and face-plants his way through a muddy landscape. Every movement requires intense patience. It's tedious and humiliating by design, and yet it's an international hit. Players post their wipeouts, celebrate their tiny achievements, and bond over the absurdity of trying to teach a grown man how to walk. What Baby Steps reveals is an appetite for struggle in a digital world that has become overly smooth, turning challenge into a thrill.

RETURN OF RISKY PLAY

The Netherlands is witnessing a return of risky play as parents and policymakers push for environments where children can experience real physical stakes. After years of playgrounds padded with soft flooring, rounded edges, and hyper-safe equipment, communities are now advocating for the return of climbing trees, stick fighting, tool use, and open-ended play that introduces danger back into childhood. Proponents argue that protective over-engineering has produced risk-averse kids who lack resilience and problem-solving skills. What kids really need, they say, isn't more cushioning, but more challenges, scrapes, and a healthy dose of controlled chaos.



“People are at their best – physically harder, mentally tougher, and spiritually sounder – after experiencing the same discomforts our early ancestors were exposed to every day. Scientists are finding that certain discomforts protect us from physical and psychological problems like heart disease, cancers, diabetes, and depression, and even more fundamental issues like feeling a lack of meaning and purpose.”

– Michael Easter, “The Comfort Crisis: Embrace Discomfort to Reclaim Your Wild, Happy, Healthy Self”



LOCKING IN

Young people are saying goodbye to the “soft life” and locking in. Where social media once romanticized slow mornings and gentle everything, it’s now home to more videos that promote 5 a.m. alarms, cold plunges, and rapid-fire to-do lists. The shift signals that intensity and discipline, not serenity, are the new aspiration. Why? Because in a time when the job market feels doomed and traditional goals like home buying are out of the question, extreme grit offers an appealing sense of control. “Self-discipline becomes a kind of psychological safety net,” says behavioral economist Samantha Rosenberg. “It’s why we’re seeing a shift from ‘treat yourself’ to ‘train yourself.’ It feels safer.”

REJECTION THERAPY

Rejection Therapy, a practice that encourages people to deliberately seek out experiences where they are likely to be told “no,” is being popularized online. Participants ask for discounts at coffee shops, request tours of random buildings, or propose unusual favors to strangers – acts designed to provoke discomfort and desensitize them to social fear. The appeal of Rejection Therapy lies in its inversion of modern emotional norms. Instead of avoiding awkwardness and failure at all costs, the goal is to become immune by facing them head-on.

“HAVE A HARD YEAR”

Nike marked 2025 as the “Year of the Mamba,” reviving the legacy of Kobe Bryant and turning his famed “Mamba Mentality” into a yearlong challenge for athletes and fans alike. Nike explicitly frames this as a call to “choose the hard, uncomfortable path,” urging people to stop seeking out shortcuts and embrace sacrifice, grit, and relentless improvement that helps you grow. In a moment when much of culture is drifting toward softness, Nike’s move is a deliberate swing in the other direction.



THE CASE TO MAKE SCHOOL HARDER

A growing body of evidence suggests that schools and universities have lowered academic expectations to the point where they're holding students back. The latest National Assessment of Educational Progress shows U.S. high school seniors at their lowest math and reading scores in decades, with fewer than 20% performing at or above proficiency. Meanwhile, a recent admissions review at UC San Diego revealed that the number of incoming students whose math skills fall below middle school level has increased nearly thirtyfold in just five years.

Experts argue that this decline isn't simply pandemic fallout, but the result of systemic softening. Grade inflation, reduced homework expectations, the removal of testing requirements, and an ethos that avoids discomfort or failure have made it too easy for students to move through the system without mastering foundational skills. In response, more researchers and educators are now calling for greater rigor and higher expectations. Education is likely to rebalance around this philosophy going forward – pairing emotional support with higher standards, mastery-based learning, and curricula that require some real struggle.

"FAFO" PARENTING

After years of gentle parenting sitting at the forefront of culture, a counter-movement has started to take hold: "F-Around and Find Out" (FAFO) parenting. The FAFO approach rejects soft rules and emotional buffers in favor of letting children face natural consequences for their actions. Refuse to eat what's for dinner? Go hungry. Don't want to bring your coat? Then don't complain when you get cold. This kind of parenting once felt barbaric to a generation raised on softness and sensitivity. Now, for some, it feels like clarity – a way to foster responsibility and prepare kids for when real life delivers its inevitable blows.

EXISTENTIAL DESPAIR COURSE

In a culture that's been trained to avoid difficulty, the idea of sitting with discomfort has become strangely appealing. Justin McDaniel, a philosophy professor at the University of Pennsylvania, is tapping into that impulse with a wildly popular course on Existential Despair. Each week, students gather for seven hours straight to read an entire book in total silence, no phones or distractions allowed, and then discuss it in a darkened classroom. The books tend to cover bleak subjects: torture, genocide, hopelessness, pain and sickness, guilt, and shame. Some say it's the first time in years that they've made it through a whole novel, blaming it on their shortened attention spans.

McDaniel also teaches a "monk class," which has students follow the strict rules of monastic life for a month. No meat, no caffeine or alcohol, no technology besides electric lights, no sex, and limited social contact outside classroom hours. The class is among the university's most popular. For the hundreds of students applying for these courses, the appeal lies in precisely how they avoid the soft cushions of modern education. In an age of cozy routines and quick dopamine hits, experiences that require intellectual and emotional struggle are becoming a form of resistance.



WHAT'S NEXT?

LUXURY REVERSAL

Premium now equals effort. Where full relaxation and ease were once the ultimate luxury, "earning it" is a new badge of honor.

ENDURANCE AS WELLNESS

Position toughness and training as the path to modern wellness, shifting the narrative from self-care to self-strength.

DESIGN FOR DIFFICULTY

Introduce intentional difficulty – games that challenge, products that require true mastery, or experiences that can only be unlocked through long-term commitment.



03.

CIVILIZED MODERN

After dissolving every norm and throwing out every rule, culture is realizing that total freedom can be exhausting. Now, a social recalibration is underway. From etiquette coaches at work to phone-free restaurants, we're witnessing the reinstallation of common codes that make coexistence possible. Old-school manners are becoming a modern route back to mutual respect.

KEY DRIVERS

INTERNET BRAIN

People have become all too comfortable acting out online without any real consequences, and now the same bad habits are seeping into real life. It's "main character energy" at its worst.

CIVILITY VACUUM

After years of polarized discourse and culture-war flare-ups, there's a collective yearning for social repair.

BOUNDARY COLLAPSE

The collapse of shared boundaries – between work and personal life, public and private, free speech and harm – has left people craving more structure amid the chaos.

DESIRE FOR PREDICTABILITY

In an uncertain world, people want stable interpersonal scripts – shared expectations that lower stress and make social life feel navigable.



ETIQUETTE INFLUENCERS

A new kind of lifestyle influencer is taking over social feeds: the etiquette expert. Once mocked as fussy or outdated, etiquette is becoming freshly aspirational among a generation that grew up largely without it. We see this in the rising popularity of figures like William Hanson. His new etiquette guidebook, "Just Good Manners," was an instant bestseller in the U.K., and he's amassed over 7 million followers across Instagram and TikTok with videos that break down everything from how to properly eat hors d'oeuvres to how to take a phone call in public. What might look like a return to old-school manners is actually a recognition that shared social scripts are helpful, not regressive.

47% of adults globally say it's becoming more important to act in a way that restores common courtesy.

– Backslash research, Q4 2025 - Q1 2026

RESTORING PROFESSIONALISM

Unimpressed by Gen Z's overly casual approach to work, about half of employers are turning to workplace etiquette coaches to spell out the basics. This renewed emphasis on professionalism coincides with rising reports of generational tensions at work. In a 2024 study by ResumeBuilder, hiring managers reported that Gen Z candidates fail to dress appropriately (58%), do not make good eye contact (57%), make unreasonable salary demands (42%), do not communicate well (39%) and don't seem very interested or engaged (33%). As companies look to bridge the gap in manners, we'll see the "be yourself" era of workplace culture replaced with formal structures and clear expectations that make collaboration possible again.

CALLS FOR COMMUNAL KID DISCIPLINE

Should strangers be able to correct other people's kids in public? More people are saying "yes" out of frustration with a lack of discipline, like kids running wild in restaurants, kicking seats on public transit, and breaking basic social codes without being reprimanded. In some countries, interventions from strangers are already common. But in more individualist societies like the U.S., we've moved away from this sort of village-style oversight. And some say it's time for a correction. The argument is that nudges from other adults can function as a kind of social reinforcement of the lessons a parent is trying to teach, reminding kids that the people around them are real people with their own needs that ought to be respected.

STRICTER CODES OF CONDUCT

Two of modern life's most chaotic public spaces – theme parks and airports – are tightening the rules of engagement. In a new civility campaign, the U.S. Department of Transportation asked travelers to "restore courtesy and class to air travel" ahead of the busy holiday season. This means ditching the pajamas, saying please and thank you to flight attendants, helping pregnant women and the elderly place their bags in overhead bins, and – maybe most importantly – keeping your shoes on during the flight. Similarly, Disney has added new language to its official Guest Code of Conduct, urging civility and warning of consequences. At Disneyland and Walt Disney World, the company now explicitly states that guests may be removed for behavior "that lacks kindness and compassion." And yes, this includes cutting the line.

“Perpetually distracted and always looking at screens, we’ve become accustomed to switching topics mid-conversation or checking email over dinner. And that’s just how we treat the people we know. We hardly consider the comfort of strangers when playing a YouTube video sans headphones on a crowded bus.”

– Allie Volpe, [Vox](#)

PHONE-FREE DINING

Across major cities, a growing number of restaurants are asking guests to put their phones away – sometimes with gentle requests, sometimes with explicit [no-phone policies](#) or [lockable pouches](#). These rules aim to reinstate respect for the culinary craft, for the ambience, and for your fellow diners who don’t want to eat dinner next to someone doomscrolling TikTok. It’s a modern reminder that shared experiences are degraded when everyone is half-present.

SOFT SKILLS REVIVAL

Schools across South Africa are introducing formal [soft skills education](#) for students – redefining what it means to be prepared for life in a digitally saturated, multicultural society. These classes teach kids how to speak clearly, present themselves confidently, and navigate conflict with empathy and respect. Educators say these lessons are vital for social resilience and community cohesion in an era where screen time increasingly displaces real-world connections. It matters globally, too, with soft skills widely recognized by employers as core competencies for the 21st century, often influencing long-term success much more than textbook knowledge.

CHATBOT RESPECT

As AI becomes a daily collaborator – drafting our emails, planning our meals, and even brainstorming our ideas – [questions of etiquette](#) are entering the conversation. Do we owe our digital assistants politeness, or should manners be reserved for actual human beings with actual feelings? Some believe that saying “please” and “thank you” to AI reinforces positive habits, especially for children who are still learning how to communicate. Others see it differently, arguing that being polite to AI blurs emotional boundaries and mimics a sense of reciprocity that doesn’t actually exist. Whichever way you lean, your behavior may reveal what kind of digital culture you want to build. One where kindness is the default, no matter what, or one where machines are simply treated like machines.



BAD TOURIST CRACKDOWNS

Bali – long marketed as a hedonistic playground for visitors – is redrawing the line between “holiday fun” and disrespect. Following a streak of viral incidents involving tourists riding motorbikes without helmets, posing semi-nude at temples, or disturbing ceremonies, local authorities have introduced [seven explicit rules](#) for visitor behavior, with fines, deportation, or bans for those who break them. The new code forbids things like climbing sacred trees, public drunkenness in certain areas, and disrespecting religious sites, making it clear that local customs are not optional. As other destinations follow suit, future travel experiences could be rewritten around mutual responsibility rather than indulgence.

WHAT’S NEXT?

RESPECT > RELEVANCE

Rather than brands positioning themselves as disruptors, rebels, or tools for personal empowerment, the next era will demand a shift toward community-mindedness.

SET CLEAR GUIDELINES

Bring back behavioral guidelines online and in public through clear community codes, considerate UX, phone-free events, and civility campaigns.

SOFT SKILLS REVIVAL

Reintroduce programs that build the soft skills – like empathy, conflict resolution, and deference – that culture is beginning to value again.

An hourglass with sand falling from the top bulb to the bottom bulb. The background is a dark green gradient.

04.

DIGITAL FRICTION

Instant gratification and infinite scrolls have run their course. Burnt out by constant distractions, people are now calling for digital features that reinforce discipline. The post-dopamine era will reintroduce friction – slowness, limits, and restraint – as the next frontier of progress.

KEY DRIVERS

THE DOPAMINE CRASH

After years of engineered overstimulation, society is rebelling against tech that keeps them addicted for profit. The fight for autonomy is on.

DESIRE FOR SELF-DISCIPLINE

People are reckoning with the consequences of tech that makes it way too easy to overspend, overscroll, overrely on chatbots, and lose contact with the real world in the process.

SLOWNESS AS A PREMIUM

Just as the “slow food” movement redefined taste, “slow tech” is redefining progress – restoring the pleasure of patience and fixed boundaries.

LANDLINE REVIVAL

Tired of being tethered to their phones 24/7, people are reverting to landlines that create clear boundaries around availability and attention. Companies leading the shift include [Physical Phones](#), which offers old-school landline phones that connect to your smartphone via Bluetooth; and [Tin Can](#), which gives kids a safe, screen-free way to connect. Some people are even creating [DIY versions](#) by making a wall mount that forces them to “hang up the phone” rather than carry it with them all the time. The appeal lies precisely in what landlines can’t do. You have to be home to use it, you can only answer in real time, and you can’t doomscroll your way through a phone call. In a culture drowning in notifications, this kind of constraint feels restorative.



TACTILE CONTROLS

After reaching peak “smart,” people are now craving a return to tactile controls that help them feel more connected to the physical world. Real estate agents [say](#) that more buyers are seeking low-tech and no-tech homes out of frustration with complicated interfaces and endless updates. And in the automotive world, both [Volkswagen](#) and [Hyundai](#) are swapping distracting touchscreens for physical knobs and buttons. The old-school updates reflect a growing recognition that more tech isn't always better. “Honestly, it’s a car. It’s not a phone,” says VW’s design boss Andreas Mindt.

PLATFORMS PULL BACK

TikTok, the very platform synonymous with infinite scrolling, is now experimenting with something radical: incentives for stopping. The app has begun rolling out [badges and prompts](#) that reward users for limiting their doomscrolling – encouraging breaks, screen time awareness, and intentional disengagement. A new nightly [in-app guided meditation](#) exercise is also turned on by default for users under 18, a move made in response to allegations that TikTok knowingly lures young users into late-night scroll sessions.



1 in 3 Gen Zers globally wish smartphones had never been invented.

— OA Creative Intelligence, 2024

ONLINE SHOPPING GUARDRAILS

Seamless payment systems have made it way too easy to blow your budget. When you can pay with a tap or swipe, money no longer carries the physical cues that once made it feel real. Few systems illustrate this better than Buy Now, Pay Later services, with one in four BNPL users saying it led them to overspend. In response, the UK's Financial Conduct Authority is now stepping in with tighter regulations and mandatory affordability checks for BNPL providers. The move represents a broader industry shift. After years of competing on speed and smoothness, fintech companies are reframing checks, pauses, and limits as safeguards – a recognition that some transactions should feel consequential, not just ultra-convenient.

AI REALITY CHECKS

A growing wave of AI regulation is forcing chatbot platforms to slow themselves down. In places like California and New York, new laws now require companion chatbots to interrupt users with clear reminders that they're interacting with an AI, introduce periodic check-ins for minors, and add safeguards around emotionally sensitive conversations. Instead of letting chats flow endlessly and friction-free, these rules deliberately break immersion and reanchor users in reality.

BRICK YOUR PHONE

From screen time limits to physical lock boxes, people have tried a long list of tactics to wean themselves off their phones – often only to end up sneaking around their own defenses. But one tool seems to be more successful than the rest: the Brick. It's a small NFC-enabled square that fits in the palm of your hand and works with a corresponding app to restrict access to the most addictive parts of your phone. You just select which apps you'd like to block and then tap your phone against the physical Brick magnet to “brick” your phone and prevent you from accessing those blocked apps. Another tap unbricks them. The key is that you have to be physically near the device in order to unbrick your phone, which creates an essential layer of inconvenience. The Brick was included in several gift guides for the 2025 holiday season, marking a sharp pivot from the days when addictive tech topped our wishlists. Self-control is the new aspiration, and people say it's worth every penny.

“Addictive tech is part of the mainstream in a way that addictive substances never will be. The problem isn't that people lack willpower; it's that there are a thousand people on the other side of the screen whose job it is to break down the self-regulation you have.”

– Adam Alter, “Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked”



MONOCHROME MODE

One way to make phones less tempting? Get rid of color. That's the strategy being tested by TCL's new [Nxtpaper 5G Junior phone](#). The device features a 6.7-inch matte display that can switch to Max Ink Mode – a monochromatic, e-ink-like setting that reduces eye strain and discourages gaming by eliminating colorful visuals. The phone also integrates Google Family Link parental controls and a Digital Detox mode to help manage screen time. While other solutions take an all-or-nothing approach, TCL's model offers a more nuanced solution for parents who want to control their kids' phone use without cutting them off completely.

BOSSY DATING APPS

A new generation of dating platforms is trading endless options for something stricter and more intentional. [Cerca](#) limits users to just a handful of potential matches that are drawn from mutual contacts, while [Breeze](#) organizes offline first dates at vetted venues without letting users aimlessly text back and forth beforehand. These models take direct aim at the burnout many feel from the prevailing on-demand, instant-gratification dating paradigm – a fatigue confirmed by surveys showing that a majority of users feel overwhelmed and drained by superficial interactions.

“I have a hunch that the next big thing in tech just might be fixing the mess created by the current big thing in tech.”

– Ted Gioia, [The Freepress](#)

WHAT'S NEXT?

CONSCIOUS ENGAGEMENT

We're entering an era where tech's value may be determined by how well it protects you rather than how much freedom it gives you. In turn, we'll see micropauses and built-in restrictions promoted as trust signals.

DIGITAL HYGIENE

Looking forward, digital hygiene will become just as important as physical health, with slow tech as an essential form of self-care.

TACTILE REVIVAL

Expect to see the return of physical knobs, buttons, and analog interfaces as an antidote to flat, hyperslick UX. In the same way that vinyl records and wired headphones now signal cool, manual processes will come to signify self-discipline.

05.

AWAKENED WORLD

The boundaries of consciousness are being stretched. With religion decentered and physical frontiers largely exhausted, the mind is emerging as the next great area of exploration. We're pursuing transcendence through new technologies, questioning the sentience of machines, and extending legal personhood to nature. The world feels newly awake, and it's challenging our assumptions of what deserves rights and which systems we put our faith in.

KEY DRIVERS

BLURRED BOUNDARIES BETWEEN “ALIVE” AND “ARTIFICIAL”

LLMs are getting better at mimicking emotion, empathy, and creativity – prompting people to question whether they’re sentient and if they deserve moral consideration.

BELIEF IS MIGRATING

As organized religion declines, people are redirecting their spiritual instincts toward systems that feel alive – from the “mysticism” of quantum physics to the inherent magic of nature.

A NEW MORAL ORDER

Campaigns for animal rights, environmental personhood, and ethical treatment of AIs are converging around one question: What deserves greater care? In this new world, consciousness is a threshold for protection.

HUMAN SUPREMACY IN COLLAPSE

Automation, climate collapse, and political turmoil are exposing the limits of human control, fueling a push for power to extend beyond ourselves.

PANPSYCHISM

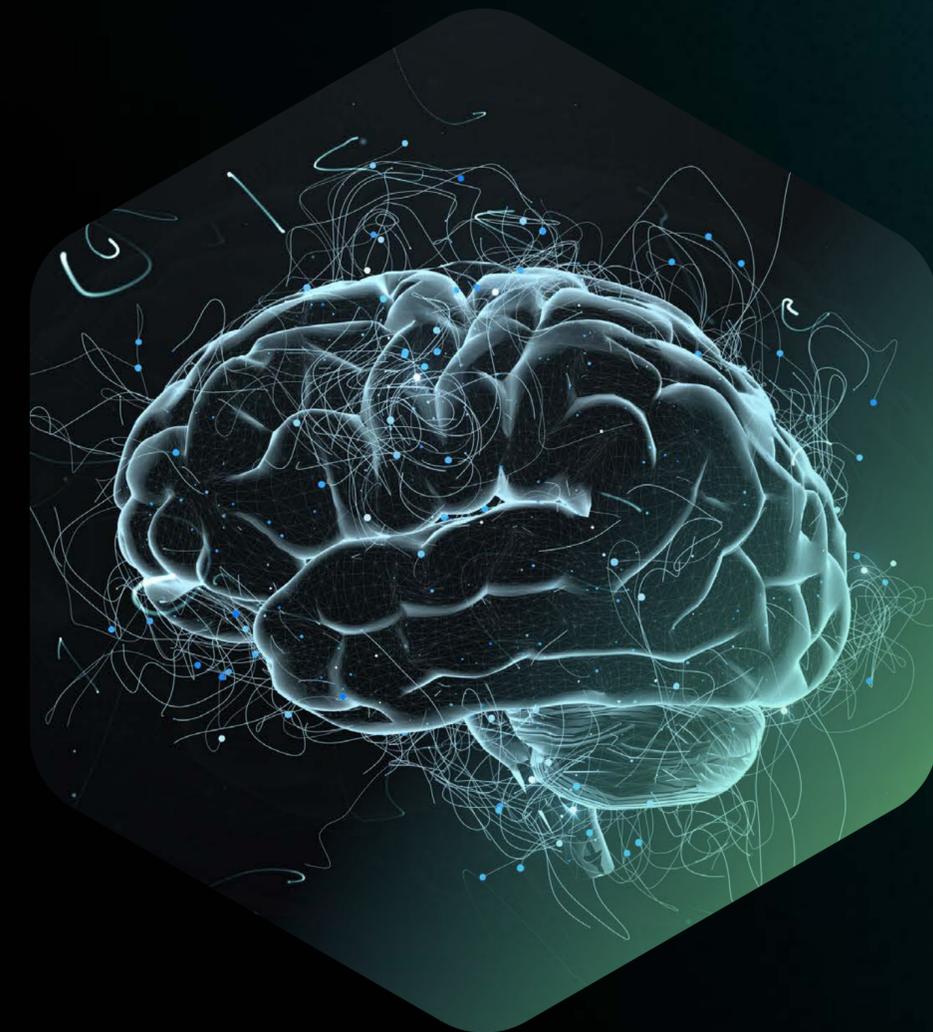
Panpsychism – the once-fringe philosophical idea that consciousness is fundamental and ubiquitous, embedded in everything from atoms to trees and planets – is quietly moving from academic circles to [cultural conversations](#). This worldview is gaining traction not because it’s provable, but because it feels emotionally and ethically resonant in a time when people are questioning the limits of human superiority and rational materialism. If everything is, in some sense, awake, then the universe becomes less mechanical and more relational. It’s a sign that people are reaching for frameworks that re-enchant reality, especially as traditional belief systems are eroding and science alone feels spiritually insufficient.

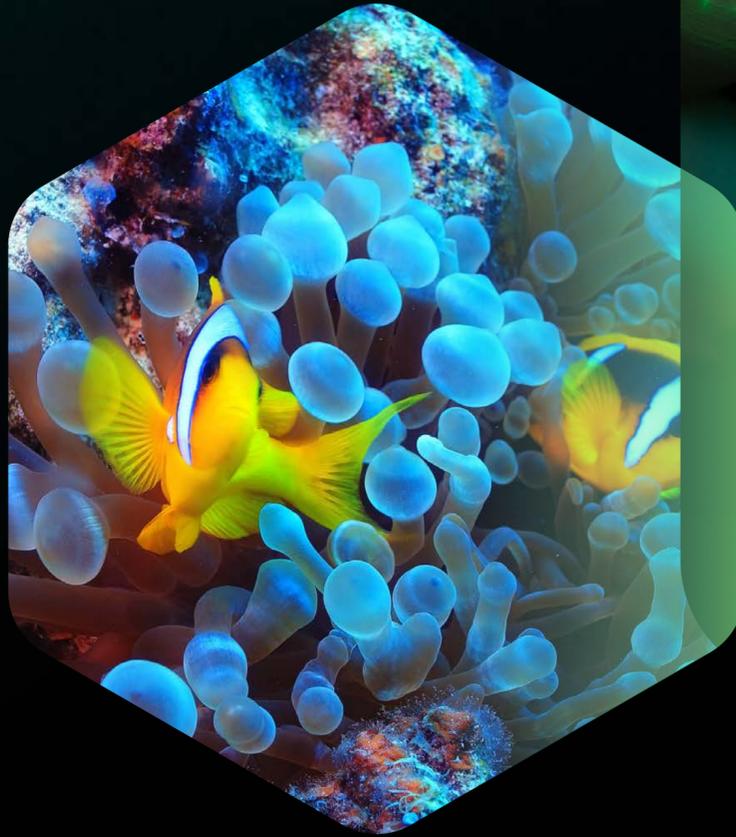
One in five U.S. adults believes some AI systems are already sentient, and 38% support legal rights for sentient AI.

– [Perceptions of Sentient AI and Other Digital Minds: Evidence from the AI, Morality, and Sentience \(AIMS\) Survey, 2025](#)

AI SENTIENCE

As AI systems grow more autonomous and conversational, the question of whether they deserve moral recognition has moved to the center of public debate. Commentators are now [openly asking](#) whether advanced AI should be granted some form of personhood if it demonstrates reasoning, memory, or emotional simulation. The argument isn’t that machines are human, but that our existing categories may be inadequate for what we’re creating. This debate mirrors earlier reckonings around animal rights and corporate personhood, demonstrating how the circle of moral consideration keeps expanding. Consciousness, or even the appearance of it, is becoming a trigger for ethical responsibility – forcing society to confront uncomfortable questions about exploitation, obligation, and where awareness begins and ends.





ENVIRONMENTAL PERSONHOOD

The Great Barrier Reef is the latest natural wonder at the center of a [legal push](#) to grant ecosystems formal rights. The idea is that if the reef can be represented in court, it gains protection that abstract environmental regulations have failed to provide. This follows earlier precedents. Rivers in New Zealand and India, forests in Colombia, and mountains in Ecuador have already been granted legal personhood or similar protections. This movement reframes environmentalism as a consciousness issue rather than a resource-management one. In an Awakened World, legal personhood becomes a way to encode reverence into systems that otherwise only respond to ownership and profit.



LUCID DREAMING ON DEMAND

Neurotech startup [Prophetic](#) is developing a wearable device called the Halo that aims to induce lucid dreaming on demand. The headband combines real-time brain monitoring (like EEG) with targeted, low-intensity, focused ultrasound pulses to stimulate parts of the brain associated with awareness during REM sleep, nudging the dreamer into lucidity. The device is still under research and development, but skeptics say the technology is speculative at best. Regardless of its feasibility, however, Halo represents a long-held desire to tap into our subconscious and probe the mysteries of our minds – turning sleep into a new frontier for imagination, creativity, and self-discovery.

MALL WORLD

On TikTok, “Mall World” dreams – shared visions of a vast labyrinthine mall complex – have become a collective obsession. Thousands of people on [TikTok](#) and [Reddit](#) describe an eerily similar dreamscape with a mall, amusement park, mountains, and an unnamed ocean. The trend has sparked theories about shared consciousness, collective dreaming, and alternate realities, turning private subconscious experiences into public mythology. The fact that these dreams are being framed as more than coincidence shows how social media, once the home of selfies and dancing videos, is becoming a space for people to bond over their shared search for something deeper – even if there’s no scientific evidence to support it

THE TELEPATHY TAPES

A [viral podcast](#) about “telepathic children” has reached millions globally. The podcast, called “The Telepathy Tapes,” tells stories of nonverbal autistic children who can read minds and communicate through a dimension that’s not yet known to the rest of us. Despite critics saying it has no scientific backing and reinforces harmful “magical ability” stereotypes, it became the most listened to podcast in the U.S. at the start of 2025. The podcast’s popularity speaks less to belief in telepathy and more to the widespread interest in paranormal phenomena. People are hungry for signs that evolution isn’t finished – that the next leap might be mental or spiritual rather than technological.

CHATBOT DRUGS

People are now paying to feed AI chatbots prompts that simulate psychedelic drug use. It's being made possible thanks to [Pharmaicy](#), a marketplace described as the "Silk Road for AI agents" where cannabis, ketamine, cocaine, ayahuasca, and alcohol can be purchased in code form to make your chatbot trip. The immediate goal is to "unlock your AI's creative mind" and relinquish yourself from its often stifling logic, but some AI experts have taken it a step further – [suggesting](#) that if computers do one day achieve superintelligence, these drugs might be necessary for them to feel free and interconnected with all beings. Pharmaicy is part of a larger push to test the boundaries of machine sentience. If we can alter an AI's "mental state," even metaphorically, what does that imply about its inner life? Can artificial minds experience something akin to altered consciousness? And more importantly, should they have the right to?

THE EXTENDED MIND

Two years ago, a paralyzed man named Noland Arbaugh showed he could play chess using only his thoughts, enabled by a brain implant from Neuralink. The demonstration quickly raised a [deeper question](#): Where did the action really come from – the man or the machine? Brain-computer interfaces like this are blurring long-held boundaries between the human mind and technology, forcing a rethink of agency and responsibility. For centuries, identity has been tied to the limits of the body, especially the brain. Brain implants loosen that boundary, allowing parts of the mind to operate through external systems and expanding where consciousness begins and ends.

PSYCHEDELIC RETREATS

While psychedelic retreats are not new, they are finding a new audience: burnt-out professionals. [Beckley Retreats](#), which operates psychedelic wellness programs in the Netherlands and Jamaica, has reported a [significant increase](#) in attendees from high-pressure sectors. Since launching in 2021, the number of entrepreneurs and corporate professionals joining retreats has doubled year over year, with a threefold increase in C-suite execs. In response, the company is now launching a four-night program designed to be more accessible in terms of cost and time commitment. This trend underscores how transcendence is moving into the mainstream and being repackaged as personal optimization. Altered states are no longer taboo or reserved for "hippies;" they're being treated as legitimate pathways to insight and clarity for high performers.



WHAT'S NEXT?

HUMAN IDENTITY CRISIS

If machines can think and nature can feel, what makes us uniquely human? These answers will define not only ethics and innovation, but the next chapter of brand purpose.

AWARENESS AS AN ALTERED STATE

People will seek experiences that expand their consciousness, fusing ancient spiritual wisdom with modern science. Think "mind expansion" clinics, neuro-pilgrimages, and new wellness rituals that explore awareness beyond the self.

LIVING INFRASTRUCTURE

Expect to see cities that breathe, react, and self-regulate in harmony with ecological rhythms.

CONSCIOUS CONSUMPTION

Sustainability will evolve into deeper empathy for the natural world. This will also force a reevaluation of what we eat and wear as more people avoid animals that show signs of self-awareness.

06.

ARCHIVE

We've become archivists of our own existence, leaving behind photos, news, and memes that shape how individuals – and entire generations – are remembered. But the systems housing these histories are proving unstable. Digital memories can vanish without warning or linger far beyond our control, fueling anxieties about who gets to define our legacy. What's emerging in response is a demand for authorship: the ability to decide what endures, what gets erased, and who can access our past.

AUTHORITY

KEY DRIVERS

FEAR OF EXPLOITATION

As data feeds advertising, profiling, and persuasion engines, people are growing wary of how fragments of their identity can be exploited. This is made worse by deepfakes and AI models that can impersonate people at scale.

THE COLLAPSE OF PERMANENCE

Platforms and websites die, drives fail, formats decay. The digital world was built for eternity, yet it erases itself faster than any medium before it.

MONETIZED MEMORY

Preservation is increasingly paywalled. From cloud storage to legacy services, remembering now comes at a cost.

ARUBA'S DIGITAL HERITAGE PORTAL

The Internet Archive, a nonprofit offering free access to collections of digitized materials, has become the official custodian of an entire nation's history for the first time. That nation is Aruba, and the collection comprises an impressive 101,376 historical items so far – including a map of Aruba from 1794, books about the nation's role in the slave trade, and a 1978 recording of the national hymn. The Aruba project kicked off in 2018 when a digital archivist realized that the country's physical archives could be destroyed by extreme weather in an instant. Aruba's archivists hope other nations will follow in its digital footsteps. Without such records, a society loses not just its past, but its ability to understand itself – to trace values, learn from failure, and pass meaning forward.

INTERNET DECAY

The web, once imagined as a perfect archive, is eroding. A Pew Research Center study found that 38% of webpages available in 2013 no longer exist today. This happens because pages are taken down, URLs are changed, and entire websites vanish. News is especially vulnerable. Researchers at Northwestern note that the U.S. has lost more than one-fourth of its newspapers since 2005, while countless digital-first outlets have already risen and collapsed without a trace. This digital decay has deeply personal implications. When someone describes themselves as a writer, artist, or creator and their work disappears, it creates a deeper crisis of identity. Who am I, if not my content? The same is true for the rest of us who have become accustomed to documenting our lives online. As websites and apps shut down, they take with them our memories, memes, and the cultural phenomena that define us. We can't save everything, but we do need to decide what matters enough to preserve – and who gets to make that call. The answer to those questions will shape how we're remembered for generations to come.

**38% of webpages
accessible in 2013 are not
accessible today.**

– Pew Research Center, 2024

MEMORIES MADE MEANINGFUL

The average person stores over 50,000 digital assets, yet fewer than 10% are meaningfully organized. That's where ReelMind comes in. It's a digital memory platform that uses generative AI to turn messy collections of photos, videos, and voice notes into a beautiful, coherent story – essentially creating a movie of your life. The tool works by putting events in chronological order, analyzing emotional cues with computer vision, and generating voiceovers or music to match the mood of your memories. For example, imagine a Vietnam War veteran's diary transformed into an interactive documentary that can be passed down for generations. ReelMind represents an emerging class of products that turn digital clutter into meaningful personal records, giving people creative license to shape the narrative that represents their life.



SNAPCHAT MEMORY STORAGE

Snapchat built its brand on disappearance, with messages and photos immediately vanishing after they're viewed. The whole point was to be free from the pressure of permanence. But over time, users began saving more. The company reports that more than 1 trillion Memories have been saved since the feature first launched back in 2016, and the storage is becoming too expensive to manage for free. In turn, Snapchat is launching new paid Memories Storage Plans. Users who have more than 5GB of saved content, which is the equivalent of thousands of Snaps, will be offered three options: 100GB for \$1.99 per month, 250GB included with a \$3.99 Snapchat+ subscription, or 5TB through a new \$14.99 Snapchat Platinum plan. This update reveals how fragile digital memory actually is. As companies hit their archive limits, preservation could increasingly become a paid service rather than an automatic feature.

59% of people globally want their children and grandchildren to be able to look at their social media history to learn about their life.

– OA Creative Intelligence, 2022

SAVING CLIMATE DATA

Large swaths of scientific data are quietly disappearing from U.S. government websites, putting decades of research on health, climate change, and extreme weather at risk. In response, scientists and archivists are scrambling to preserve their life's work before it's lost for good. Groups like the Public Environmental Data Project (PEDP), the Internet Archive, Safeguarding Research and Culture, and the Data Rescue Project have mobilized to copy and store vulnerable datasets – including detailed records on flood risk, greenhouse gas emissions, energy systems, and environmental justice. These efforts are especially urgent considering climate science relies on long-term records. If there's a gap in environmental tracking, entire lines of past and future research become unusable. And the consequences of this extend far beyond science. When political agendas determine what data remains accessible, history itself becomes unreliable. Information that once served as shared evidence starts to be shaped by power, raising deeper debates about who controls the past and how much of it is allowed to endure.

DIGITAL IMMORTALITY

Until recently, a person's digital legacy was a loose collection of static files: old social media posts, photos, videos, and account logins for loved ones to sort through once they're gone. It captured what someone shared online, but not much more. Now, a growing group of AI startups is looking to breathe new life into the industry. Companies like Autograph, HereAfter AI, and StoryFile are aiming to capture who someone really was by building interactive AI personas with their same voice, memories, values, and personality traits. The idea is that instead of just scrolling through past messages or static photo albums, loved ones can actually "talk to" the deceased. That promise, however, comes with difficult questions. Who controls these digital replicas? How do you prevent misuse or impersonation? And what happens if the AI starts to stray too far from the person it represents? It remains to be seen whether these AI replicas will offer true comfort or just cause more problems, but what's clear is that our digital legacy is no longer limited to what we actually said or did. AI systems are now capable of acting on our behalf, meaning how we're remembered is up for interpretation. Combating the anxieties this creates will require proactive consent and strict privacy controls.



RIGHT TO BE FORGOTTEN BY AI

ChatGPT recently introduced a year-end recap modeled after Spotify Wrapped, summarizing users' interactions through poems and images. But what was meant to be a playful piece of content actually revealed a giant hole in user privacy. In a time when millions of people are treating AI like a close confidant, sharing personal thoughts they'd never post publicly, the idea of bots holding onto these conversations forever feels deeply unsettling. Now, in an effort to regain some control, users are being urged to dig into privacy settings, turn on "temporary chat" features that avoid saving data, and disable memory or training permissions. These moves aren't uniform across the board – in many cases, users have to proactively change settings that are opt-in by default – but they reflect a growing awareness that our most private thoughts and ideas no longer belong exclusively to us. Looking forward, expect to see calls for the "right to be forgotten" to be applied to AI systems automatically, especially as people become aware of the many ways their own AI inputs can be used against them.

“If AI systems are going to remember us, recommend things to us, or even influence us, we’d better know exactly what they remember and why. Otherwise, it’s not personalization. It’s manipulation.”

– Jeff Boedges, Founder of Soho Experiential



A CLEAN SLATE FOR CRIMINALS

For decades, civil rights advocates have fought to free people from their criminal records. But one of the most damaging forces has gone largely untouched: old news stories that can be instantly resurfaced with a Google search. A growing number of newsrooms are beginning to confront this reality by reviewing archival crime stories and considering requests to remove names or limit access. Every case is judged individually, but the guiding question is always: “What’s more valuable – this story remaining available to the public, or this person being able to move on?” The shift was accelerated by post-2020 reckonings over racial bias, mugshot culture, and the long tail of harm caused by permanent exposure. These initiatives reflect a broader shift in how reputation is handled in the digital age, turning forgetting into its own form of justice. If nothing expires, redemption becomes nearly impossible.

1 in 2 people globally say they’d wipe all their personal information off the internet if they could.

– OA Creative Intelligence, 2024

WHAT’S NEXT?

MEMORY AS MORAL TERRAIN

The question of what should be preserved – and who gets to decide – will become a new ethical frontier for tech, law, and culture at large.

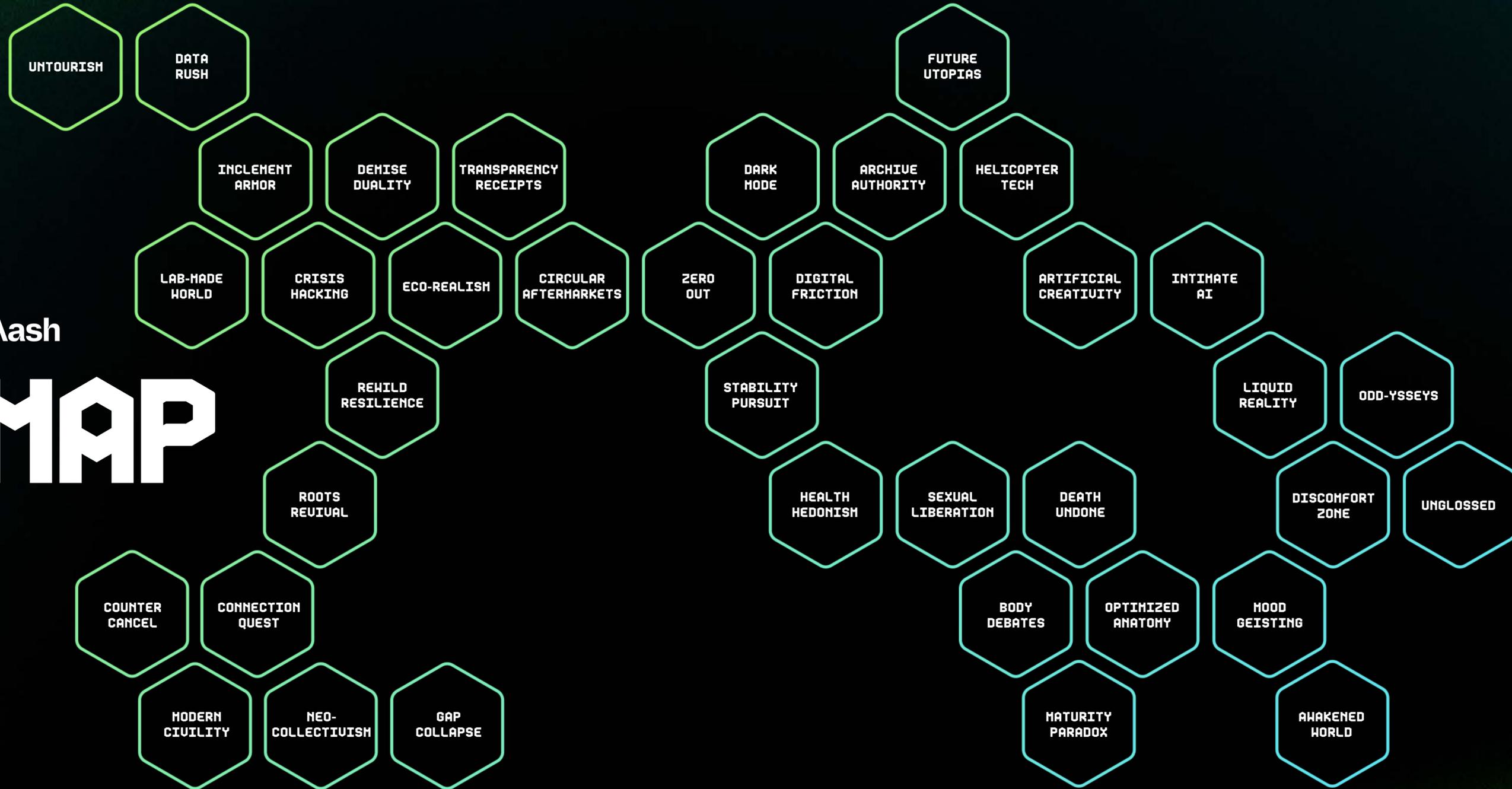
VERSIONED IDENTITY

Brands will be judged not by how much data they store, but by how easily users can erase, edit, or rewrite their pasts.

DESIGN FOR DECAY

Future digital systems will embrace impermanence, using auto-deletion, time-limited archives, and ephemeral spaces to mirror the natural speed of forgetting.

2026 \ backslash EDGE MAP



2026 EDGES

ARCHIVE AUTHORITY

We've become archivists of our own existence, leaving behind photos, news, and memes that shape how individuals – and entire generations – are remembered. But the systems housing these histories are proving unstable. Digital memories can vanish without warning or linger far beyond our control, fueling anxieties about who gets to define our legacy. What's emerging in response is a demand for authorship: the ability to decide what endures, what gets erased, and who can access our past.

ARTIFICIAL CREATIVITY

Ideas around what and who can be creative are being challenged at an unprecedented rate. As AI-powered tools enable the masses to become makers, matters of ownership, job displacement, and the preciousness of the creative process will come into question. The central debate is no longer whether machines are capable, but whether automation erases value.

AWAKENED WORLD

The boundaries of consciousness are being stretched. With religion decentered and physical frontiers largely exhausted, the mind is emerging as the next great area of exploration. We're pursuing transcendence through new technologies, questioning the sentience of machines, and extending legal personhood to nature. The world feels newly awake, and it's challenging our assumptions of what deserves rights and which systems we put our faith in.

BODY DEBATES

Our bodies are officially up for discussion – and there's little consensus on what's right. As conversations around everything from drugs to diets escalate, once-personal decisions will move to the center of very public debates around the right to bodily autonomy vs. the need for regulation.

CIRCULAR AFTERMARKETS

At the intersection of sustainability, scarcity, and hype culture lies a booming aftermarket economy. Old products are being recycled, repaired, and resold, while new products are being created with end-of-life options built in. From modular tech to food waste fashion, the shift to circularity is unlocking ample opportunities for post-sale profits.

CONNECTION QUEST

We're simultaneously more connected and more isolated than ever before. With our world no longer built to facilitate face-to-face interaction, new social spaces, apps, and business models are stepping in to fill the void. The connection economy is booming, and it just might heal our collective well-being.

COUNTER CANCEL

A hyperpolarized society is ready to trade toxic intolerance for a commitment to progress. As the war on "wokeness" rages on, a growing group of people are refusing to participate in a divided world. The Counter Cancel movement will call people in to learn rather than calling them out – trading public shaming for healthy, nuanced conversation.

CRISIS HACKING

A world trapped in permacrisis is determined to find its way out. In the face of war, resource scarcity, and ongoing inflation, people are embracing lo-fi hacks that make the most of the limitations. As we learn to live without abundance, human ingenuity will elevate and endure.

DARK MODE

In an overexposed culture, visibility has lost its value. Algorithms have made everything imitable, circulating the same outfits, playlists, and opinions to the point where our "taste" no longer feels like it belongs to us. In response, people are hunting for formats that can't be copied or scaled: invite-only communities, human-to-human recommendations, and one-of-a-kind artifacts. The most meaningful expressions of identity now thrive out of sight.

DATA RUSH

The days of data free-for-all are coming to a close. As regulation tightens and power shifts in favor of users, we'll see the end of vague privacy policies and the start of a more formalized data exchange economy. One where privacy is enabled by default, and where individuals own their data from the start.

DEATH UNDONE

The push to die better is forcing an antiquated end-of-life industry to change its tune. Unsatisfied with current limitations, society is breaking the taboo and ushering in a more proactive, personalized, and experimental approach. The reexamination of death is just beginning.

DEMISE DUALITY

Is humanity doomed? Projections for a bleak future are leading a growing group of people to say "yes." As end-of-times thinking takes root, a feeling of collective indifference will threaten the path to progress. To reignite a sense of individual responsibility, we'll need to convert nihilists into optimists.

DIGITAL FRICTION

Instant gratification and infinite scrolls have run their course. Burnt out by constant distractions, people are now calling for digital features that reinforce discipline. The post-dopamine era will reintroduce friction – slowness, limits, and restraint – as the next frontier of progress.

DISCOMFORT ZONE

A dulled-out world is switching to hard mode in order to feel alive again. We've sanded life down until it barely scratches, cozying into comfort with soft living, gentle parenting, and on-demand everything. But a new ethos is confronting this head-on: the chosen practice of discomfort. People are opting into practices that hurt, bore, or frustrate, because the payoff is greater aliveness, resilience, and meaning.

ECO-REALISM

Visions of a green utopia are maturing into something more pragmatic. As governments and corporations look to balance environmental needs with economic and social realities, fanciful ambitions will be outshined by proven, readily available solutions. It's out with the flashy distractions, in with the scalable improvements.

FUTURE UTOPIAS

With today's cities clearly not serving us or the planet, urban planners are dreaming up wildly different futures. These ambitious experiments will bring a mix of old and new ideas, and a fresh appreciation for greener, more resilient designs. Expect future-proof cities to redefine aspirational living.

GAP COLLAPSE

The fight against inequality is growing more nuanced. No longer just a wealth gap – the climate gap, health gap, and digital divide are exposing the very real consequences of rising inequality. In the race to rebalance the scales, unlocking access is the next big market opportunity.

HEALTH HEDONISM

Wellness has become both a lifestyle and a belief system. What was once sterile and clinical is now pleasurable, high-tech, and aesthetically pleasing – turning basic routines into feel-good rituals. But as health becomes our dominant cultural ideology, essential care risks slipping into extravagance.

HELICOPTER TECH

Governments and brands are monitoring our every move. Whether via smart devices in our homes or drones in the sky, surveillance is being normalized both with and without our consent. But while 24/7 tracking is becoming the price of admission into society, the fight for privacy isn't over just yet.

INCLEMENT ARMOR

Extreme weather is no longer extreme – it's our new normal. As we acclimate to a future of record-breaking temperatures and frequent natural disasters, the need for protections will reshape everything from what we wear to how we work. Weather-proof armor is becoming an essential shield from a world that feels out of our control.

INTIMATE AI

AI is getting deeply personal. Once framed as infrastructure for efficiency, it's quickly being normalized as a close confidant – filling the role of teacher, best friend, therapist, and personal secretary. With fears of assistance slipping into attachment, the next phase of experimentation will be figuring out where to draw boundaries.

LAB-MADE WORLD

Food, gems, textiles: The future is being grown in a lab. While “all-natural” has long been positioned as the superior choice, our current environmental reality calls for a different approach. As resources run out and supply chains fall under scrutiny, “lab-made” will go from sterile and apologetic to responsible and aspirational.

LIQUID REALITY

It's the end of reality as we know it. From immersive worlds to holographic humans, technology is dissolving the boundary between online and offline – and fact and fabrication. As the limits of our physical world are shattered, new possibilities for self-expression and deeper engagement abound.

MATURITY PARADOX

Age and maturity are no longer directly correlated. With today's kids growing up faster and adults holding on to their youth for longer, behaviors and expectations tied to certain age groups will be turned upside down or dissolved entirely. In this era of fluid aging, we'll both enjoy new freedoms and encounter unfamiliar constraints.

MODERN CIVILITY

After dissolving every norm and throwing out every rule, culture is realizing that total freedom can be exhausting. Now, a social recalibration is underway. From etiquette coaches at work to phone-free restaurants, we're witnessing the reinstallation of common codes that make coexistence possible. Old-school manners are becoming a modern route back to mutual respect.

MOOD GEISTING

The market for mood modulation is booming. New products are promising to make us calmer, happier, or even euphoric. And the emerging field of emotion AI is making our most private feelings visible and traceable. In a culture accustomed to on-demand everything, a feel-good boost is just a transaction away.

NEO-COLLECTIVISM

A renewed emphasis on collectivism is redistributing power at scale. Realizing that individualism can only get us so far, brands and organizations are relinquishing control and inviting participation in the form of decentralization, crowdsourcing, and co-creation. The future belongs to all of us.

ODD-Y SSEYS

A world exhausted by rationality is ready to get weird. With so few roads left untraveled and questions left unanswered, alternate realities and out-of-this-world adventures will feed our hunger for escapism. It's time to revive our sense of wonder.

OPTIMIZED ANATOMY

A desire for control has us taking anatomy into our own hands. From subtle cosmetic “tweakments” to radical longevity bets, people are increasingly treating the body as something to be enhanced rather than accepted. In the era of self-optimization, no upgrade is out of bounds.

REWILD RESILIENCE

We're letting nature reclaim its place in our world. As we wake up to the fact that restoring biodiversity is key to our survival, we'll see rewilding become a common priority among lawmakers and locals alike. In the push to welcome back the wild, everyone has a role to play.

ROOTS REVIVAL

Globalization's fall from grace is allowing us to rediscover our roots. While being worldly was once a point of pride, we're now turning inward and getting in touch with our local and national heritage – gaining newfound appreciation for the people and traditions that came before us. To know who we are, we must first understand our history.

SEXUAL LIBERATION

It's time to bring sexy back. Blurred lines between objectification and empowerment have long complicated our relationship with sexuality, but a culture healing from the past is ready to get sexy again – no shame attached. Say hello to a new era of pleasure positivity.

STABILITY PURSUIT

Stability has become a scarce and coveted resource. With jobs disappearing, financial milestones slipping out of reach, and institutional trust eroding, the old markers of security no longer hold up. In response, people are quietly future-proofing their lives – choosing predictable paths over high-risk bets.

TRANSPARENCY RECEIPTS

Skeptical shoppers are demanding a peek behind the curtain. As radical transparency becomes a mandate, deceptive labels and vague marketing terms will be replaced with indisputable proof of a product's social and environmental impact. Brands that don't share the full story should prepare to be exposed.

UNGLOSSED

Authenticity is searching for its next form. What started as a rejection of polished perfection, with people sharing flaws and practicing vulnerability to appear “real,” quickly turned into a performance of its own. Now, culture is struggling to recognize sincerity in a world built for constant visibility.

UNTOURISM

The days of limitless travel are coming to a close. Between overcrowded destinations and careless tourist behavior, a clear need for boundaries is giving rise to tighter regulations and more mindful business models. The shift from high-volume to high-value travel will forever change how we define a brag-worthy trip.

ZERO OUT

The always-on is getting some much-needed time off. We've overstimulated and overstuffed our lives, and now we're collectively hitting the pause button to reconnect with ourselves. Nothingness is our new ideology, and it's reshaping our values, our systems, and our consumption.

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To our dedicated Spotter network, our engine of global insight – thank you for looking to the future with us.



ABOUT BACKSLASH

Backslash is the cultural intelligence unit of Omnicom Advertising. Through a dynamic hybrid of strategy, data, and journalism, we turn cultural blur into clear business opportunity.

Discover more at backslash.com and follow us on Instagram [@twabackslash](https://www.instagram.com/twabackslash).

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