



# TREND PULSE

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## From Passive Observation to Radical Agency



### The State of Culture

The era of passive consumption is over. As we move further into the latter half of the decade, the Trend Pulse report reveals a decisive shift in how Americans interact with technology, history, media, and even crisis.

Drawing from Horizon Futures' library of 60+ macro trends tracked over the past decade, this report surfaces not just what's new, but how long-standing cultural forces are evolving and accelerating.

We are no longer just watching culture happen; we are hacking, remixing, and immersing ourselves in it. Across the trends highlighted here, a singular theme emerges: **Agency**. Whether it is rewriting the rules of reality with AI, reclaiming the right to play, or turning apocalyptic anxiety into a communal game, consumers are moving from "coping mechanisms" to "creative power."

### Strategic Implication for Brands

The "Crawl-Walk-Run" activations outlined in this report challenge brands to stop being broadcasters and start being world-builders. To win in 2026 and beyond, you cannot just sell a product; you must provide the tools, permissions, and platforms for consumers to participate in these new realities.

# OUR APPROACH

The Trend Pulse gives marketers a live read on culture as it moves, surfacing what's gaining speed, what's fading, and what's shifting expectations—revealing what matters next, not just what's happening now.

Our approach blends long-term signal tracking with real-time cultural intelligence. We draw on longitudinal survey data collected over the last decade from a nationally representative U.S. study of approximately 2,000 respondents. That foundation is paired with AI-powered social listening and semantic analysis that scans thousands of conversation patterns to surface emerging themes, along with projection mapping to track how behaviors, language, and signals are shifting across platforms and communities. These inputs are evaluated through Culture Q<sup>SM</sup>, our proprietary algorithmic tool that measures impact and durability over time, allowing us to see not just what's visible, but how trends are strengthening, stalling, or evolving.

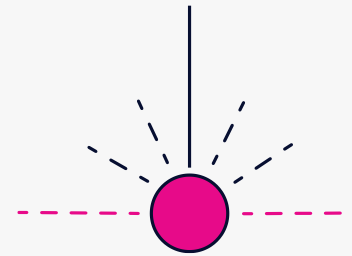
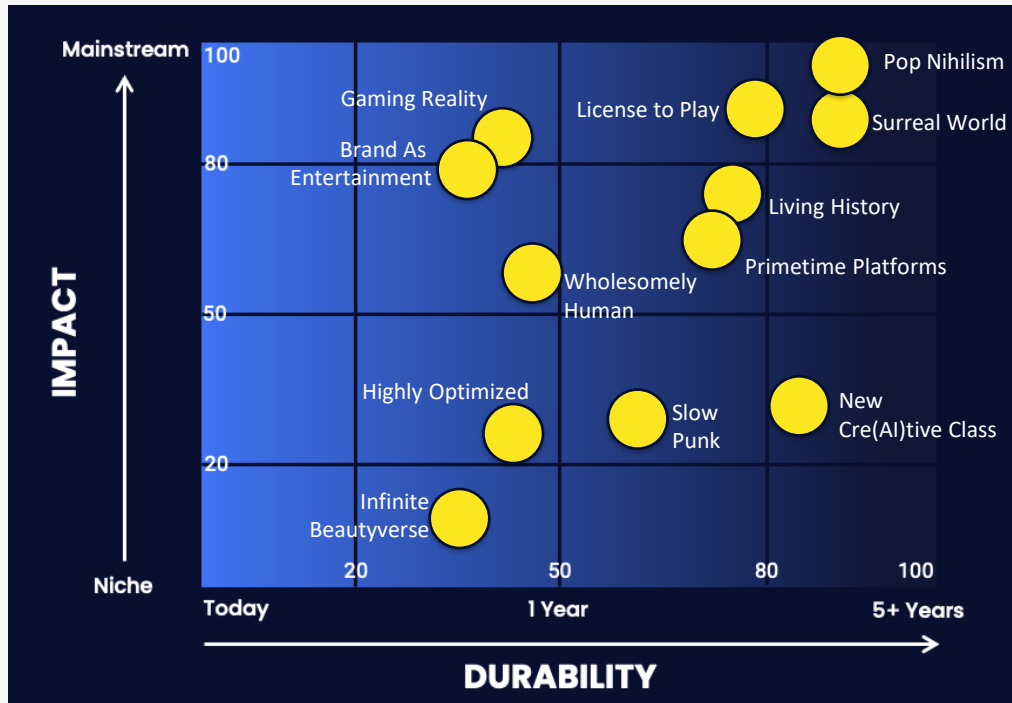
From Horizon Futures' library of 60+ macro trends, a curated set highlights the most meaningful shifts in impact and durability right now. Together, these signals reveal where cultural energy is consolidating or fading and how brands may need to recalibrate to stay aligned with evolving expectations and behaviors.

For marketers, it offers a grounded, data-based read on culture, separating what's losing relevance from what's gaining momentum to support smarter planning in the years ahead.

# UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURE Q<sup>SM</sup> FRAMEWORK

Culture Q<sup>SM</sup> measures trends across two dimensions—impact and durability—using a statistically rigorous 1–100 scoring system. This framework helps identify which cultural shifts are expanding, stabilizing, or beginning to fade over time.

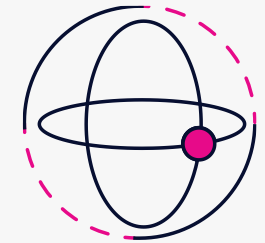
For details on the criteria measured, see the methodology section



## IMPACT

The Impact Score measures the **size** of a given trend in terms of **how many people** it impacts.

*Is it relevant to a niche subculture or a large population?*



## DURABILITY

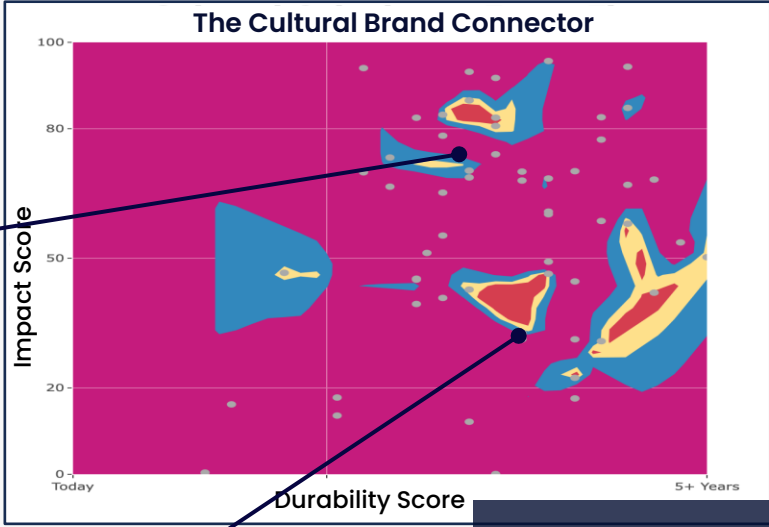
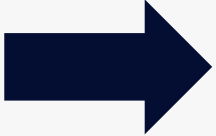
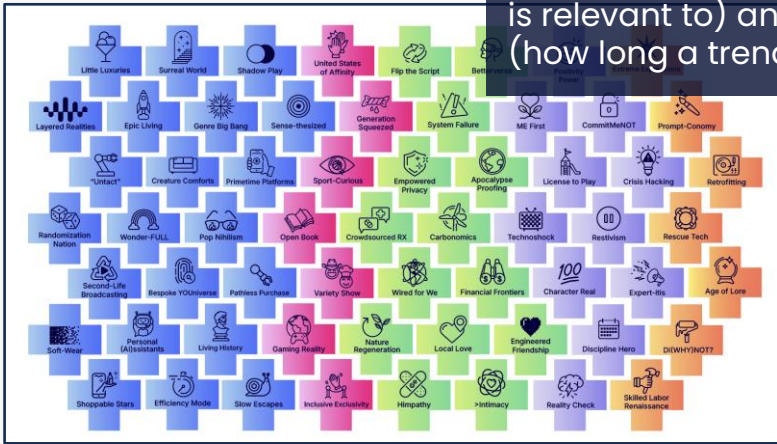
The Durability Score indicates **how long** a trend will be relevant, separating flashy, fast-culture moments from longer-term movements.

*Will this still be relevant next month? Next year? In five years?*

# TRENDS AND BRAND PRIORITIZATION

Not every trend is right for every brand. Determining which trends truly fit your brand takes clarity. Our proprietary culture-mapping algorithm also mathematically determines which trends are the strongest cultural fit for a brand, translating a crowded trend landscape into clear, brand-relevant priorities. It shows not just what's emerging, but what's right for specific brands. By scoring trends across impact (who it matters to), durability (how long it will last), and brand fit, this system helps marketers move beyond trend-chasing and focus on the cultural movements they can credibly own.

**LIBRARY OF 60+ MACROTRENDS**  
Scored on their impact (how many people a trend is relevant to) and durability (how long a trend will last).



**Trend: Sport-Curious**  
**Durability: 62.5**  
**Impact: 86.25**  
**Fit to Brand: 82**

**Trend: Surreal World**  
**Durability: 91.47**  
**Impact: 42.05**  
**Fit to Brand: 84**

**CULTURE Q**  
Heatmap and Scoring of Trend-Brand alignment

**Get in touch to learn which trends are the most culturally aligned with your brand.**  
[TheFuturesGroup@horizonmedia.com](mailto:TheFuturesGroup@horizonmedia.com)

# CULTURAL READINESS SCORECARD<sup>SM</sup>

After Culture Q identifies the trends that best fit your brand, this Readiness Scorecard provides a clear starting point for action.

It serves as a practical guide for marketers to understand how existing assets, partnerships, and first-party data can be mobilized to engage meaningfully with culture today, so cultural engagement becomes a deliberate business decision, not a leap of faith.

In a kick-off meeting, Horizon Futures walks through the Readiness Scorecard alongside the priority trends, identifying strengths and gaps to inform how each can be activated.

READINESS INDICATORS	
<b>OWNED FOUNDATIONS</b> <small>WHAT YOU ALREADY CONTROL</small>	App, CRM, Loyalty, Fanbase First-party data Existing Content or IP
<b>PARTICIPATION MUSCLE</b> <small>HOW DO PEOPLE INTERACT WITH YOU</small>	UGC, remixes, comments, shares etc. Creator affinity Ritualistic behaviors w/product
<b>SPEED &amp; FLEXIBILITY</b> <small>HOW QUICKLY CAN YOU RESPOND TO CULTURE</small>	Test + Learn capabilities Modular approvals Crawl / Walk / Run readiness
<b>TRUST &amp; PERMISSION</b> <small>WHETHER PEOPLE WANT YOU THERE</small>	Credibility in the space (based on CQ brand-fit scores) Category & compliance guardrails
<b>ACTIVATION LEVERS</b> <small>WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE</small>	Clear KPIs beyond awareness (participation, repeat visits, new acquisitions, click-throughs, sales, etc.) Measurement tied to brand meaning + funnel impact

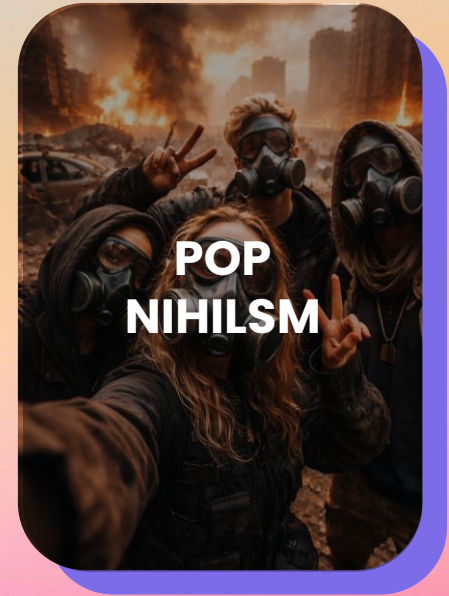
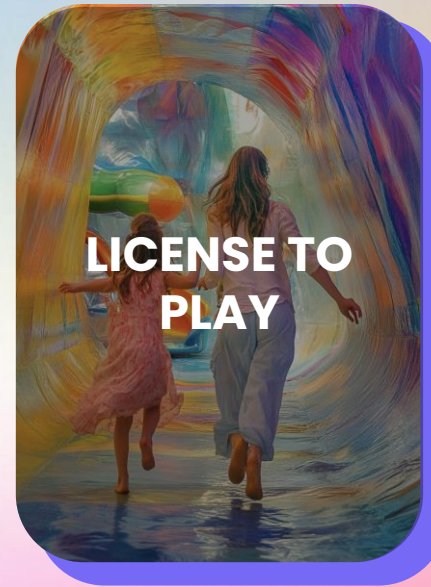
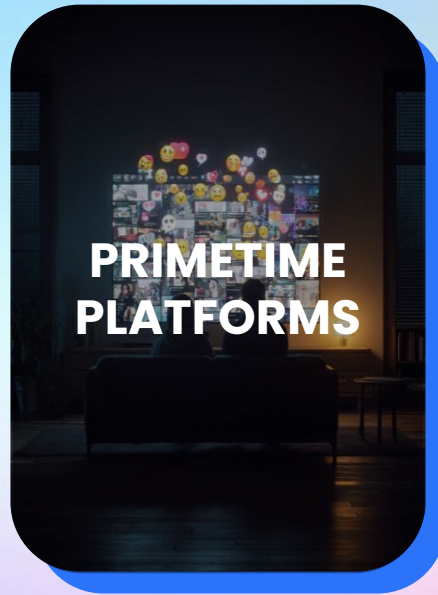
**READINESS SCALE**  
(0-3)

- 1 = Not in place yet
- 2 = Emerging / inconsistent
- 3 = Strong foundation

**KEEP IN MIND:**  
THIS ISN'T A GRADE BUT A STARTING MAP FOR ACTION

# THE TRENDS

We monitor over 60 macro trends across five dimensions: media + experiences, identity, humanity, creativity, and ideology, all analyzed through our Culture Q<sup>SM</sup> framework. The five trends highlighted here are the focus of this report, selected for their greatest increases in relevance and momentum.



MEDIA + EXPERIENCES

IDEOLOGY

# SURREAL WORLD

From fully analog to mind-blowingly high-tech, contemporary human ingenuity blurs understanding with mixed reality creations that bend perceptions, inspire curiosity, and command attention.



**FROM:**

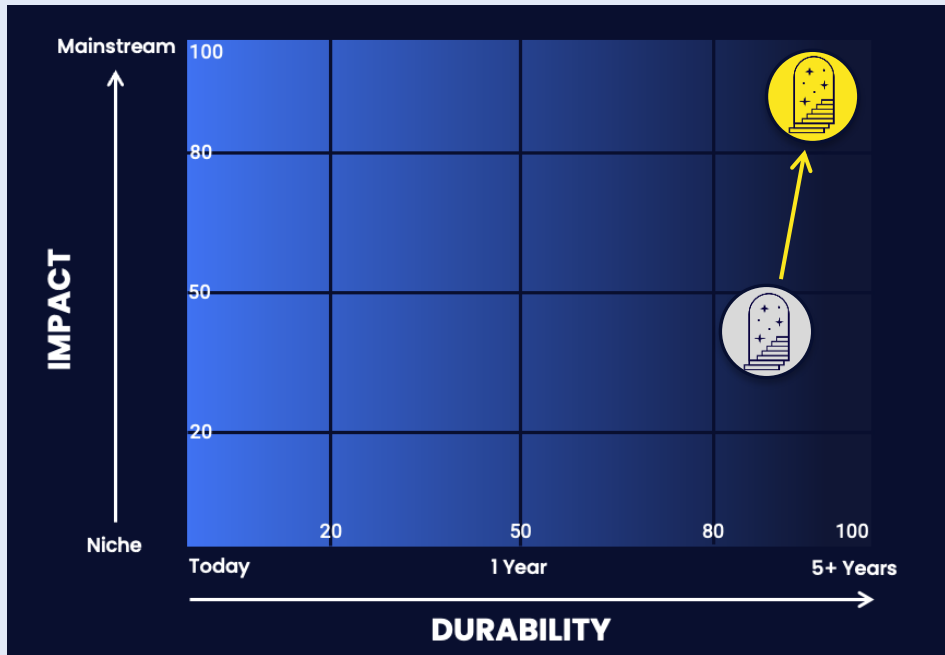
"Look at this cool tech."



**TO:**

"I can't tell what's real anymore—and I'm okay with that (proof fatigue)."

What used to be about showcasing futuristic gadgets is now about deliberately blurring reality until the ambiguity itself becomes the experience.

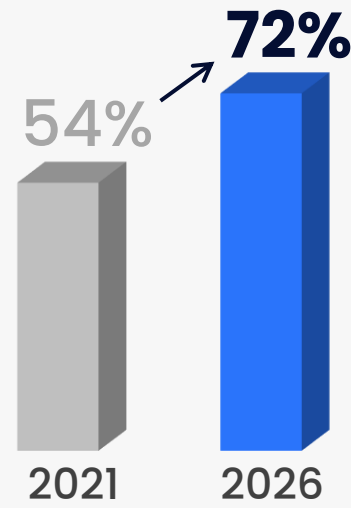


**Impact:**  
Niche → Mainstream  
42.04 → 98.74

**Durability:**  
5+ Years

**Market Opportunity:**  
108.8M Adults 18+

● 2026 Score  
● 2021 Score



"Think advanced tech like artificial intelligence, VR/AR are making it harder to distinguish between digital and real life."

Source: Horizon Media Finger on the Pulse Survey.

**Trend Values + Behaviors**

- Curiosity** — Immersive art  
"Real or AI?" games
- Innovation** — AR Glasses  
Creator AR monetization
- Fun/Play** — Multiplayer AR experiences  
Immersive exhibits as shareable play

# FROM TECH NOVELTY TO NEGOTIATED REALITY

## Wow Factor

VR/AR showcased as exotic, separate-from-reality technology creating isolated "wow moments"

## Tool Integration

AR/VR becoming practical commerce tools that blend physical and digital worlds

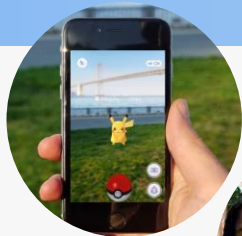
## Reality Liquidity

Technology that destabilizes perception itself (e.g., deepfakes) and reality treated as negotiable, not a fixed truth

## Consciousness Merging

Neural-digital hybridity where human perception becomes customizable; shared simulated realities treated as equally valid as physical space

2021-2023



Pokémon GO AR as novelty entertainment



Snapchat AR filters treated as fun tech experiments



Meta Quest 2 VR gaming experiences positioned as futuristic escapism

2024



Early virtual try-on for makeup (MAC, Sephora)



Meta Ray-Ban smart glasses Gen 1 (camera + audio only)



Metaverse avatars for virtual meetings and shopping

2025



TeamLab immersive exhibitions as spiritual pilgrimage destinations



Glitch aesthetics as intentional art movement signaling "reality is code"

2026+



Project AVA holographic AI companions as physical retail assistants



Neuralink high-volume BCI production (announced Jan 2026)

## What's Fading

Deepfake as threat

Simulation theory as niche philosophy

Immersive experience as novelty



## What We're Watching

Deepfake as playground →

Simulation theory as everyday conversation

Immersive experience as necessity



Deepfake Coyote vs. Roadrunner  
**82MM views**  
reaction is delight, not panic

**6.7M**  
social posts  
in the past  
year

### Key Terms Driving Conversation:



Surreal, Uncanny, Fever Dream, Real Life, Make Sure, Reality, Headset, Experience, Deepfake, Simulation, #LiminalSpaces, #Dreamcore, Digital Twin, Voice Cloning, Spatial Computing

MAINSTREAM SIGNALS



Image Source: [City AM](#)

### AI-Powered Fit Check

Zara’s new AI fitting room and AI-generated imagery exemplifies retail’s shift into mixed reality—where digital doubles and virtual try-ons don’t just help you buy, they blur what “real” even looks like in the shopping journey.



Image Source: [Ikea](#)

### IKEA’s AR Showroom

IKEA’s “Place” AR app blends digital and physical shopping by letting people drop true-to-scale furniture into their own space—making buying feel more like a mixed-reality “try before you buy,” and reinforcing the Surreal World shift toward everyday reality-blending in retail.

FRINGE SIGNAL

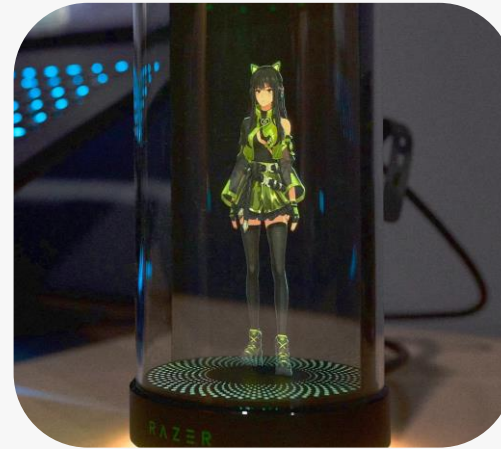


Image Source: [Fast Company](#)

### Holographic Assoc.

Beyond AR try-ons, this imagines commerce as an always-on holographic presence that sees what you see and guides decisions in real time—still fringe due to early-stage mixed-reality hardware and privacy concerns.

# INFLUENCERS

## Drivers

Accounts that are creating new language, frameworks, or formats around the Surreal World concept



@Psychopoly (2.6M TT)  
ex: [AI Iceberg](#)



@gossipgoblin (1.3M IG)  
ex: [Forked Reality](#)



@Meow\_Wolf (708K IG)  
ex: [The Wrong Portal](#)



@lauraegocheaga (294K IG)  
ex: [Simulation Reboot](#)

## Amplifiers

Accounts that are replicating, remixing, or commenting on existing framings



@marcinteodoru (448k TT)  
ex: [Trying AR Glasses](#)



@andr3wsky (1.4M TT)  
ex: [AI comedy](#)

# Surreal World for Retail: From AR Utility to Experiential Commerce

As mixed reality becomes standard in shopping, the opportunity shifts from “cool tech demos” to perception-led experiences that spark debate, drive participation, and make the physical + digital feel inseparable.

## CRAWL

(0-3 months)

### Normalize Mixed Reality as a Utility

- Lean into popular TikTok hashtags like #AiFilter, #Weirdcore, #Hyperreal
- Partner with Snap on branded AR try-on filters that make “see it on me” instant and intuitive.
- Use simple interactive ad units (tap to switch looks / compare / try) across TikTok Spark Ads + Meta, plus retail media offsite (e.g., Roundel / Walmart Connect).
- Give creators a lightweight AR kit (filters + templates) they can use without scripts (TikTok Creator Marketplace / Snap Collabs; whitelist top posts for paid).

## WALK

(3-9 months)

### Build “Is This Real?” Campaigns

- Run “real or AI?” product videos on TikTok and let comments argue it out.
- Give users toys/tools to participate, e.g., voice cloning or remixable A assets.
- Run digital billboards with ads that use a “glitch / distortion” effect to catch attention.
- Add one IRL “anomaly” moment worth filming—mirror portal / forced-perspective window / reactive storefront—seed with local creators + geo-fenced paid.

## RUN

(9-18+ Months)

### Treat Perception as the Product

- Create an in-app “double layer” feature for the physical store.
- Use the app to unlock exclusive content in “surreal mode,” then amplify it across the retailer’s own media inventory, supported by bigger awareness channels like CTV and out-of-home.
- Personalize the surreal at scale (dynamic creative / overlays based on interests; deliver via RMN onsite + offsite, plus CTV retargeting).

# Surreal World: Brand Guardrails & Rules of Engagement

## Move Beyond "Cool Tech Demos"

Stop treating AR/VR as novelty proof points. Experiences that move beyond product demos and create moments of disruption or wonder strengthen brand distinctiveness and improve memorability, increasing the likelihood that people recall and consider the brand later in the purchase journey.

## Lean Into the "Uncanny," Don't Hide It

Audiences are moving past the fear of AI and into a space where "reaction is delight, not panic." Brands should feel safe to experiment with "Fever Dream" aesthetics and "Real or AI?" content without needing to sanitize the experience.

The ambiguity is the entertainment and builds stronger mental availability and brand recall.

## Weave the Surreal into the Utility

Avoid isolating surreal experiences as standalone stunts.

When surreal elements are built into the way people already discover or buy products, they add interest without getting in the way, helping move people from curiosity to consideration while strengthening brand meaning.

# LIVING HISTORY

With the future uncertain, a renewed interest in history is making an immersive comeback as people gravitate to experiences, content, and legacy-preservation tech that keeps the past alive.



FROM:

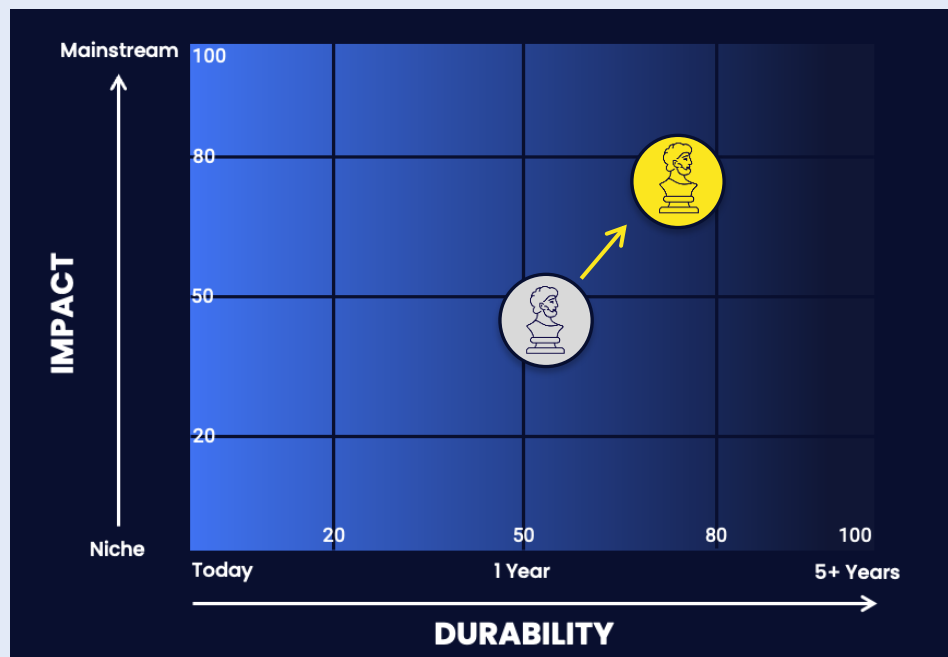
"I need to save the past before it disappears."



TO:

"I want to *feel* what the past was like and *create* memories that build my legacy."

What used to be about researching and documenting history is now about experiencing and embodying history as a living practice.



Impact:

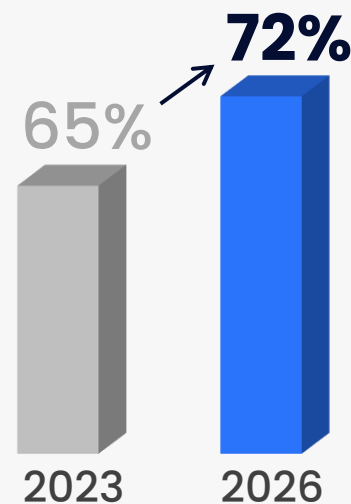
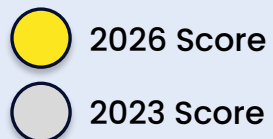
Emerging Mainstream → Mainstream  
51.24 → 76.81

Durability:

2+ years → 3+ years  
55.83 → 75

Market Opportunity:

84.7M Adults 18+



"I'm fascinated by entertainment experiences that allow me to escape back in time."

Source: Horizon Media Finger on the Pulse Survey.

Trend Values + Behaviors

Tradition

Document + preserve the past; Genealogy

Innovation

360° immersion; AI digitizing and colorizing old photos to remove temporal distance

Education

Sharing ancestral lore; Immersive learning

# FROM PRESERVING THE PAST TO CREATING MEMORIES

## Restoration

Digitizing, researching, and preserving history because people felt it disappearing

## Immersion

History went from being studied to lived in with VR headsets, immersive theaters, actors in period clothing, choice-driven narratives

## Embodiment

History is normalized, ritualized, woven into daily life; A spiritual practice that is infrastructure, not novelty

2021-2023



Genealogy boom popularized by PBS' *Finding Your Roots*



Google Photos introduces Magic Eraser + Unblur AI restoration tools



Immersive theater "Death of Rasputin" launches where audiences chose the characters they follow

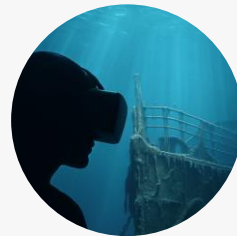


Video game blurs the line between gaming + cultural preservation

2024

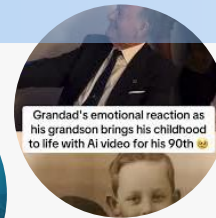


Korean cultural heritage gets a gaming makeover with Cookie Run integration



Titanic VR experience lets visitors feel the experience of having been there

2025



Viral moment of grandfather's reaction when his childhood photos were brought to life with AI

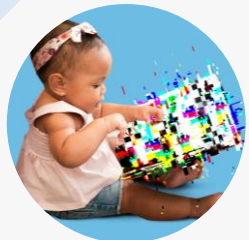


Storii uses AI to turn personal memories into digital stories

2026+



Filmmaker used spatial computing to generate a hologram of Charlie Chaplin inside the historic film studio where he worked



AI-created bedtime stories that are your own life narrative

## What's Fading

Museum as authority

Passive consumption

History as obligation



## What We're Watching

Invisible tech

Multi-generational participation

Creator-owned narratives →



**9.5M**  
social posts  
in the past  
year

### Key Terms Driving Conversation:



Ancestral, Story, Travel, Reenactment, Legacy/Legado, Carrying, Connect, Remember, Living, Immersive, Transport, Sacred

Leading up to the 2028 Olympic Games, PBS SoCal is inviting local storytellers to capture the city's histories, neighborhoods, and cultural moments – stories of legacy and transformation – through its Community Storyteller Initiative.

MAINSTREAM SIGNALS



Image Source: [Men's Journal](#)

## Holographic Sports History

In January 2026, Michelob Ultra revived the 1980 "Miracle on Ice" moment at Lake Placid using holograms, full-ice projection, and AI. With life-size digital players and appearances by the original team, the brand transformed a legendary game into a living, immersive spectacle for a new generation.



Image Source: [Inc.](#)

## Fashion as Historical Preservation

Ralph Lauren's Oak Bluffs collection brings untold history to life, drawing on Martha's Vineyard as a cultural haven for Black Americans in the early 20th century. The launch paired luxury fashion with a corrective narrative through a documentary, curated playlists, and real Oak Bluffs families as models.

FRINGE SIGNAL



Image Source: [24Genetics](#)

## Your AI-Enabled Ancestral Blueprint

By combining DNA and AI, ancestry moves from something you archive into a personalized operating system for health and life decisions—still fringe because it asks people to trust high-stakes genetic data as guidance, not just insight.

# INFLUENCERS

## Drivers

Accounts that are creating new language, frameworks, or formats around the Living History concept



@NotYourMommashistory (169K IG)  
ex: "[Afroterpretation](#)"



@MargaritaLilaRosa (123K IG)  
ex: [Preserving Oral History](#)



@tastinghistory (657K IG)  
ex: [1922 Girl Scout Cookies](#)



@DonAllenIII (133K IG)  
ex: [Charlie Chaplin](#)

## Amplifiers

Accounts that are replicating, remixing, or commenting on existing framings



@MaxFosh (1.3M TT)  
ex: [Google Gemini partner](#)



@vloggingthroughhistory (516K YT)  
ex: [Epic History Rap Battle Reactions](#)

# Living History for CPG: From Instructional to Ancestral

People are evolving from wanting to preserve grandma's recipe to wanting to cook it together, experience the memory embedded in it, and create new family rituals. CPG brands that become part of this journey (not just the ingredient) can become the infrastructure for multigenerational memory-making.

## CRAWL

(0-3 months)

### Make Ancestry Accessible

- Sponsor period aesthetic content on TikTok (e.g., #BrigertonVibes, #VintageStyle) or biologized humor (e.g., Courts and Cops Paternity DNA reveal content on YouTube).
- Sponsor AMA + "Ask a Genealogist / Family Story Coach" on cultural or community subreddits.
- Leverage podcast host-read + segment sponsorships with *The Sporkful* (food lineage), *The Memory Palace* / *Lore* (storytelling) + a companion landing page ("Make a family artifact: recipe card, interview prompts, photo labels").

## WALK

(3-9 months)

### Turn Heritage into Everyday Rituals

- Launch a "Living Recipe" video series with food historians to create content showcasing product use in specific eras/communities.
- Smart kitchen: Alexa / Google Home + Allrecipes: "Heritage-inspired dinner mode" (regional variations, "tell me the origin story," "swap ingredients") with branded prompts and voice promotion.
- Streaming / CTV Contextual placements around food, family, nostalgia-forward programming (cooking, family dramas, holiday marathons, docuseries). Add QR code w/ "Tonight's recipe + story."

## RUN

(9-18+ months)

### Build the Ancestral Blueprint Engine

- Create an "Ancestral Blueprint," a branded experience that turns inputs (survey) into recos (recipes, rituals, wellness routines, traditions to try).
- Own a franchise multi-platform series (short-form + podcast + streaming cutdowns) like "The Dish That Made Us" or "Family Map" that invites audience participation and generates ongoing content.
- Develop an AI-powered family archivist that interviews relatives, auto-captions photos, translates handwritten recipes, and assembles them into a living family cookbook—layered onto Ancestry or MyHeritage.

# Living History: Brand Guardrails & Rules of Engagement

## Move From "Archive" to "Action"

Avoid treating history as something static. Turn heritage into lived, usable experiences that people can bring into their everyday lives.

The goal isn't just to save the past. Brand activations rooted in action and utility strengthen meaning, increase consideration, and reinforce why the brand matters now, not just where it came from.

## Democratize the Historian

Do not position the brand as the sole gatekeeper of "the truth." Instead, build platforms that invite multi-generational participation.

The most powerful role for a brand is to be the infrastructure or toolset (like an AI archivist) that helps people uncover and tell their own family stories.

This role builds deeper identification, trust, and long-term brand affinity across life stages.

## Prioritize Emotional Resonance Over Academic Rigor

Don't let dry facts obscure the human story.

History that is felt, embodied, or emotionally resonant is more likely to be remembered and associated with the brand over time.

Emotional storytelling builds stronger memory structures, improves recall, and supports durable brand preference throughout the funnel.

# PRIMETIME PLATFORMS

Once deemed part of the “second screen” experience, social media is getting a starring role in the attention economy.



**FROM:**

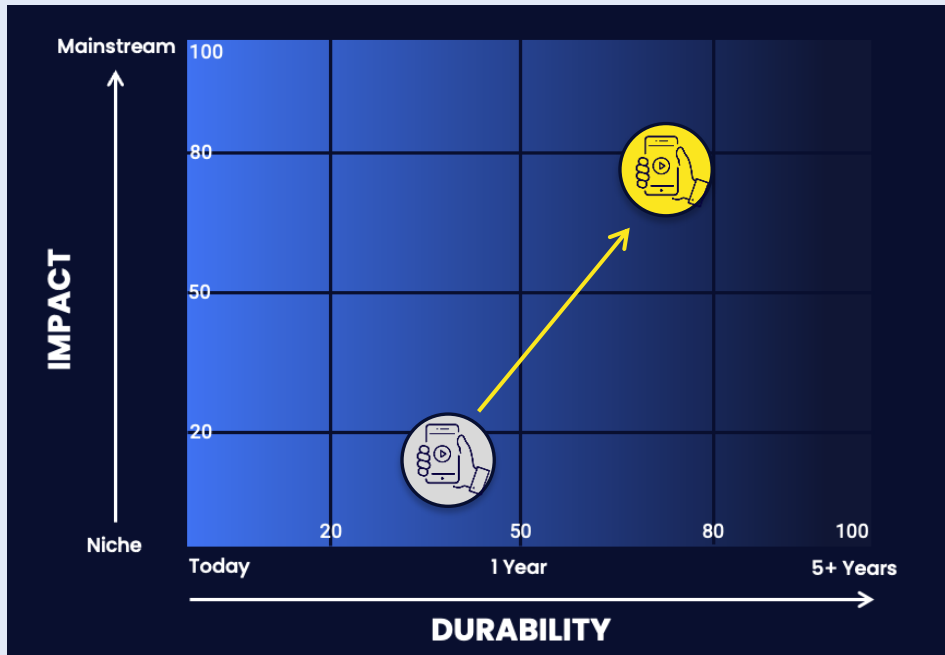
Social media functions as short-form “snack” content watched alongside TV.



**TO:**

Social media has become creator-led primetime—an anywhere, anytime viewing behavior that’s watched like TV.

This isn’t about attention spans shrinking—it’s about attention shifting. Audiences are willing to invest hours in bite-sized episodes that build over time. In this obsession economy, consistency, intimacy, and serialization matter more than polish.



**Impact:**

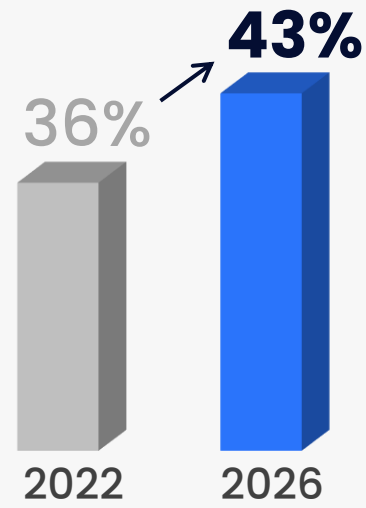
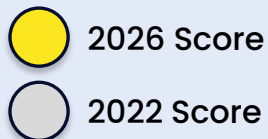
Niche → Mainstream  
13.58 → 82.08

**Durability:**

1 Year → 2.5+ Years  
41.67 → 70.83

**Market Opportunity:**

86.5M Adults 18+



“Lately I find I spend significantly more time on social media than I do watching shows on TV/Streaming.”

Source: Horizon Media Finger on the Pulse Survey.

**Trend Values + Behaviors**

Fun/Play

Recurring “shows,” challenges, character universes, episodic bits

Immediacy

Live marathons, chat-as-co-viewing, guest drops

Indulgence/Pleasure

Lean-back comfort, long video podcasts as background “TV,” parasocial intimacy

# FROM SECOND-SCREEN SCROLL TO CREATOR-LED LIVING ROOM

## Short-Form Takeover

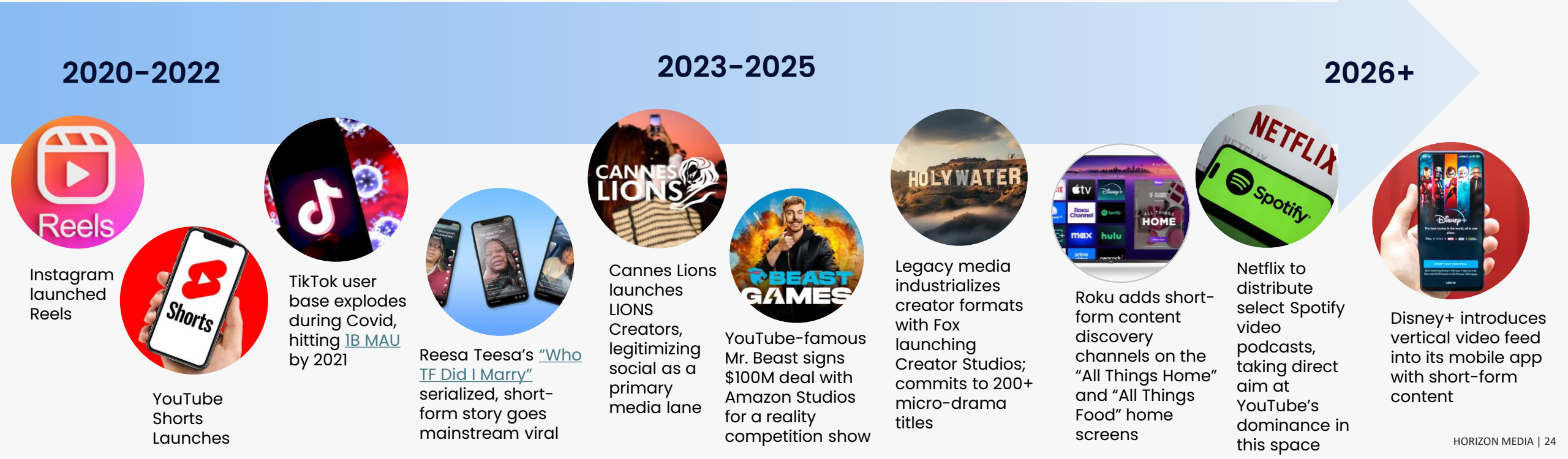
Social video stops being a “snack” and becomes a habit where the feed is the channel and the algorithm is the programming

## Creator TV

Social platforms prove they can hold attention for long arcs, not just quick hits. Production + fandom + on-demand followership makes social a proof-of-concept pipeline for Hollywood

## Primetime Platforms

The second screen flips and TV becomes a screen for social vs. the other way around



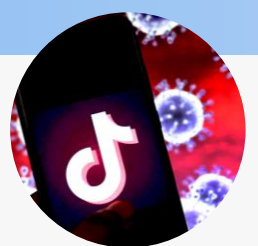
2020-2022



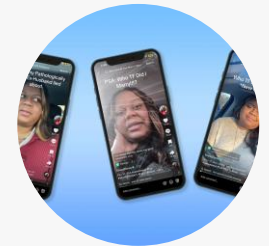
Instagram launched Reels



YouTube Shorts Launches



TikTok user base explodes during Covid, hitting 1B MAU by 2021

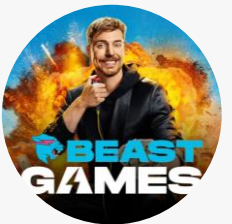


Reesa Teesa's "Who TF Did I Marry?" serialized, short-form story goes mainstream viral

2023-2025



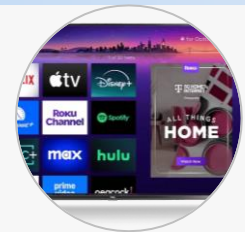
Cannes Lions launches LIONS Creators, legitimizing social as a primary media lane



YouTube-famous Mr. Beast signs \$100M deal with Amazon Studios for a reality competition show



Legacy media industrializes creator formats with Fox launching Creator Studios; commits to 200+ micro-drama titles

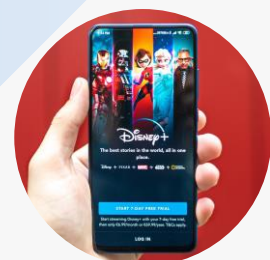


Roku adds short-form content discovery channels on the "All Things Home" and "All Things Food" home screens



Netflix to distribute select Spotify video podcasts, taking direct aim at YouTube's dominance in this space

2026+



Disney+ introduces vertical video feed into its mobile app with short-form content

## What's Fading



## What We're Watching

Linear primetime as the default

Audio-only podcasts

Standalone social apps on TV

Platform-as-network →

Video talk

Streamers copying "the feed" to create daily habit



Rhett & Link's Mythical is a studio-like, creator-centric "network" with a consistent slate of shows and spinoff channels with repeatable formats.

**3.2M**  
social posts  
in the past  
year

### Key Terms Driving Conversation:



Drop/Dropping, Unfiltered, Micro-drama, Vertical-first, Binge-worthy, Series, FYP, BTS (Behind The Scenes), No filter, GRWM, Lore/Deep lore

MAINSTREAM SIGNALS



Image Source: [Oscars](#)

**Social Takes Hollywood**

The Oscars' upcoming move from ABC to YouTube marks a major shift in how cultural events reach worldwide audiences. This reflects social media's rise as a primary destinations for live, appointment viewing, expanding access and engagement.



Image Source: [TechCrunch](#)

**Stream → Scroll**

In a bid to capture daily attention, Netflix announced that it's redesigning its mobile app to feature a vertical, swipe-able feed of short-form video clips. This move, along with a major expansion into original video podcasts, shows the streaming giant adapting its platform to compete directly with social.

FRINGE SIGNAL



Image Source: [Variety](#)

**Promptable Primetime**

Fable's Showrunner app hints at a future where "primetime" becomes promptable. Viewers generate episodes on-demand and influence storylines in real time, shifting platforms from distributing shows to hosting endless, user-shaped series.

**INFLUENCERS**

**Drivers**

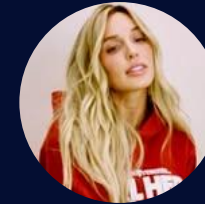
Accounts creating new language, formats, and 'series' structures for platform-native entertainment



@Kai\_Cenat (21M TT)  
ex: [The Last Sleepover at Kevin's House](#)



@sidemen (23M YT)  
ex: [Hide & Seek](#)



@AlexandraCooper (3M TT)  
ex: [Andy Cohen on Call Her Daddy](#)



@BobbiAlthoff (8M TT)  
ex: [Not This Again](#)

**Amplifiers**

Accounts/institutions that clip, recap, distribute, and legitimize creator-led programming.



@dexerto (1.1M TT)  
ex: [Q&A w/Mr. Beast](#)



@coffeefrijolito (43K TT)  
ex: [Super Bowl Meme](#)

# Primetime Platforms for FinServ: Turn Money Advice Into Must-Watch Content

Transform financial guidance into appointment viewing through episodic series, live moments, and video podcasts that audiences follow like shows. Brands must move beyond one-off campaigns to create repeatable, creator-led programming built for sharing and action without sacrificing trust or compliance.

## CRAWL

(0-3 months)

### Sponsor Creator Programming

- Buy into repeatable series segments (e.g., “Money Myth of the Week,” “What This Costs IRL”) vs. one-off opinion content.
- Produce 30–90 second modules that can be lifted into Shorts / Reels / TikTok (clear disclaimers baked in).
- Measure like entertainment, not just media. Track completion rate, saves, rewatches, and “comment-to-clarification” patterns (what people still don’t understand).

## WALK

(3-9 months)

### Build Repeatable Series

- Launch a seasonal “money show” franchise. 6–10-episode arcs with recurring segments and a host (creator + brand expert), designed to be bingeable and clippable.
- Build a creator bench—a small “cast” mapped to needs: credit, everyday banking, travel points, small business, early investing.
- Distribute across YouTube / pod video; clips on short-form; recaps on newsletters / in-app; living-room placement where possible (CTV / FAST buys).

## RUN

(9-18+ Months)

### Operate Like a Mini Network

- Create a branded “channel” ecosystem with a flagship show plus spin-offs (e.g., “Travel Points Lab,” “Small Business Money,” “Money & Relationships,” “Scam Watch”).
- Turn community into retention. Member perks linked to viewing (exclusive lives, credit coaching sessions, early access, points boosts for completing modules).
- Build a proprietary trust signal: a recognizable “verified financial guidance” badge to differentiate from finfluencer noise.

# Primetime Platforms: Brand Guardrails & Rules of Engagement

## Don't Fear the Long-Form

Move beyond optimizing solely for "snackable" brevity.

As Audio-only podcasts fade in favor of "Video talk", brands have permission to create substantial, indulgent content that viewers can actually sink their teeth into.

## Commit to Serialization Over Sensationalism

Don't chase every viral moment. Serialization builds habits, not spikes.

As algorithm shifts continue to erode reach and "unfiltered" authenticity loses its edge, brands need consistency audiences can count on.

In the Obsession Economy, durable attention comes from repeatable series and formats that build trust and routine, not one-off content moments that disappear as quickly as they appear.

## Build a "Universe," Not Just a Feed

Avoid treating your channel as a dumping ground for disparate ads.

Operate like a mini network by creating lore and a cohesive ecosystem of recurring characters and spinoffs that reward the audience for paying close, long-term attention.

Cohesive worlds increase session depth, cross-content viewing, and long-term audience loyalty.

# LICENSE TO PLAY

As the stresses and strains of modern life mount, people of all ages are claiming their right to play as both a welcome release valve and a necessary survival strategy.



**FROM:**

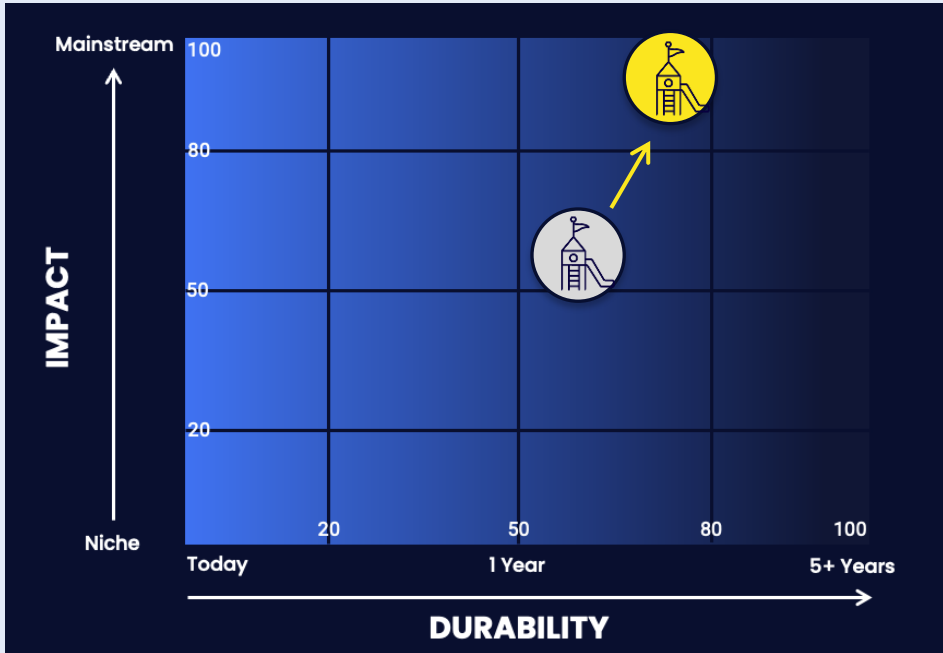
"I know I should be working, but..."



**TO:**

"Guard your joy like a treasure."

What used to be a guilt-wracked coping and escape mechanism is now a defiant spiritual practice, antidote to loneliness and connection tool.

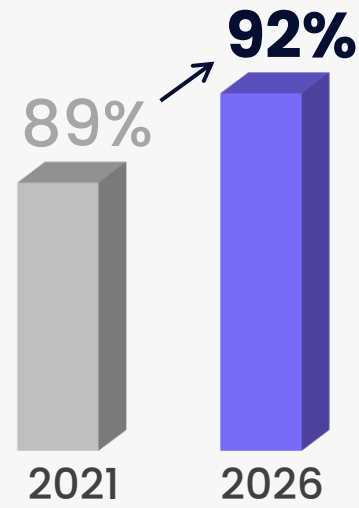


**Impact:**  
Emerging Mainstream  
→ Mainstream  
68.72 → 97.88

**Durability:**  
2+ years → 3+ years  
62.50 → 75

**Market Opportunity:**  
98.9M Adults 18+

- 2026 Score
- 2021 Score



"I think people have a right to indulge in the activities and games they enjoyed as kids."

Source: Horizon Media Finger on the Pulse Survey.

**Trend Values + Behaviors**

- Fun/Play** — Resistance to optimization
- Imagination/Creativity** — Build or retreat into play-based worlds
- Simplicity** — Defense of unstructured time

# FROM SECRET COPING MECHANISM TO PUBLIC RIGHT

## Escape & Coping

Gaming/hobbies as stress release and response to burnout; mental health workaround

## Permission & Reclamation

Play as a right, a necessity and integrated into wellness; Inner child is a valid part of self

## Play as Sacred

Play as a practice, connection tool, antidote to loneliness; Not just for individuals, but for communities

2020



Toys R Us bankruptcy + store closing felt like a symbolic end to permission to play



Animal Crossing codified cozy gaming, whose selling point is emotional regulation, not competition or performance



Among Us turned playful suspicion into a Covid-lockdown party game

2022-2023



A major global brand publicly grants adults permission to engage in toy-like play as a legitimate, even aspirational, hobby

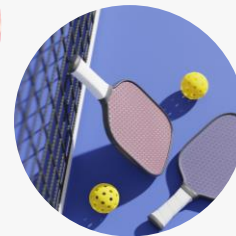


Wordle becomes a sacred micro-ritual

2024-2025



Barbenheimer made movie-going a playful and participatory mass ritual with costumes + sold-out marathons



Pickleball cements itself as America's fastest-growing sport with [~20M participants in 2024](#)

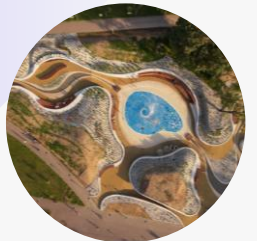


Fashion brand Uniqlo sponsors museum nights in NYC and London, transforming cultural institutions into playgrounds for community connection



The rise of Mahjong social clubs turns ancient play into a modern, repeatable social ritual

2026+



Third-space thinking integrates play into urban design where play is part of longevity infrastructure

## What's Fading

Wistful nostalgia

Isolated individual play

Play as guilt-laden indulgence



## What We're Watching

Clinical, neuroscience validation of play

Community play spaces →

Anti-AI, anti-optimization

**5.7M**  
social posts  
in the past  
year

### Key Terms Driving Conversation:



Inner child, Play, Healing, Childlike wonder, Love, Support, Laughter, Friendship, Adventure, Joy, Moment, Magic, Dream



**1 in 3** U.S. residents do not have a park or green space within a 10-minute walk of home. And **100M** people and **28M** children do not have access to parks.

MAINSTREAM SIGNALS



Image Source: [Lego](#)



Image Source: [Brilliant Earth](#)

FRINGE SIGNAL



Image Source: [URA](#)

INFLUENCERS

Drivers

Accounts that are creating new language, frameworks, or formats around the concept of permissive play



@RamiroClemente (245K IG)  
ex: [Play as Skill](#)



@rachaelrenee (103K IG)  
ex: [#PrioritizePlay](#)



@thepsychdoctormd (943K IG)  
ex: [Play as Therapy](#)



@LEGO (2.7M TT)  
ex: [Creative Exploration](#)

Amplifiers

Accounts that are replicating, remixing, or commenting on existing framings



@homesweethom (278k IG)



@excusemygrandma (675k IG)  
ex: [Mahjong](#)

ex: [Chaotic Creatives Podcast](#)

The Ageless Playground Ring Pop Proposals

Lego’s “Never Stop Playing” campaign featuring Tom Holland champions play as an ageless right. It directly confronts the cultural pressure to “grow up,” positioning creative play as a joyful and necessary part of life for everyone, regardless of age.

Brilliant Earth’s Ring Pop–inspired engagement ring turns a childhood candy into a luxury joke you can actually propose with. The December 2025 giveaway leans into nostalgia and humor, blurring high and low culture to make commitment feel playful, ironic, and culturally fluent rather than overly precious.

Longevity Infrastructure

Singapore’s 2025 Draft Master Plan treats “everyday play” as civic infrastructure—building it into neighborhood design through therapeutic gardens, nature play spaces, and multi-age sports facilities. It’s still largely a blueprint (projects rolling into 2026, with a 2030 horizon), signaling where play is headed before it’s mainstream.

# License to Play for Beauty: From Product to Playground

Beauty has long been framed around discipline, optimization, and flaw-fixing, but under License to Play it becomes a permission space for low-stakes, expressive experimentation with identity, mood, and joy. This shift gives beauty brands the opportunity to move from product-led performance to experience-led play, where products invite exploration rather than prescribe perfection.

## CRAWL

(0-3 months)

### Reframe Beauty as Play

- Shift messaging from “you deserve this” to “give yourself permission to play with...”
- Reframe existing products as “creative play” rather than flawlessness.
- Move beyond static ads by creating playable ad units. Develop mini-games where users catch falling ingredients for a new serum or complete a “match the shade” quiz directly within the ad to unlock a discount.

## WALK

(3-9 months)

### Design for Participation

- “Play Date” Creator Partnership: Recruit 30-50 wellness influencers to produce content showing makeup as creative play.
- Limited Edition “Permission” Collection: Launch playfully-named products (e.g., “No Rules Red”) with affirmation-focused packaging.

## RUN

(9-18+ months)

### Build a Community

- Retreat Partnerships + Community: Co-create multi-day beauty + healing retreats; launch membership community centered on “beauty as permission” with exclusive access to play-focused products.
- Retail “Play Shelf” program: create a dedicated endcap with mix-and-match minis + tester-friendly merchandising, anchored by simple prompts (“Try a new texture,” “Mix two shades”) and QR codes to 15-sec creator demos.

# License to Play: Brand Guardrails & Rules of Engagement

## Resist the Urge to Optimize

Avoid "gamification" mechanics that feel like work (e.g., stressful streaks, leaderboards, or productivity hacks).

True play in this trend is a "release valve" for modern stress. Brands should offer experiences that prioritize fun and flow over performance and KPIs.

## Move Beyond "Wistful Nostalgia"

While retro aesthetics are a powerful hook, the goal is to spark active, present-day joy, not just memories.

Don't just sell a souvenir from the past; provide the tools, spaces, and permission to create new moments of play in the here and now.

## Validate Play as a Necessity, Not a Reward

Avoid messaging that frames play as a "guilty pleasure" or a treat to be earned only after hard work.

Brand communications should validate the "inner child" as a serious part of adult wellness, avoiding condescending tones that treat play as merely "silly" or "childish."

# POP NIHILISM

With mounting crises, people are leaning into dystopian fantasy. While it's nihilistic, dark, and even dirty at times, it's oddly cathartic and proving to be fertile ground for creative inspiration.



**FROM:**

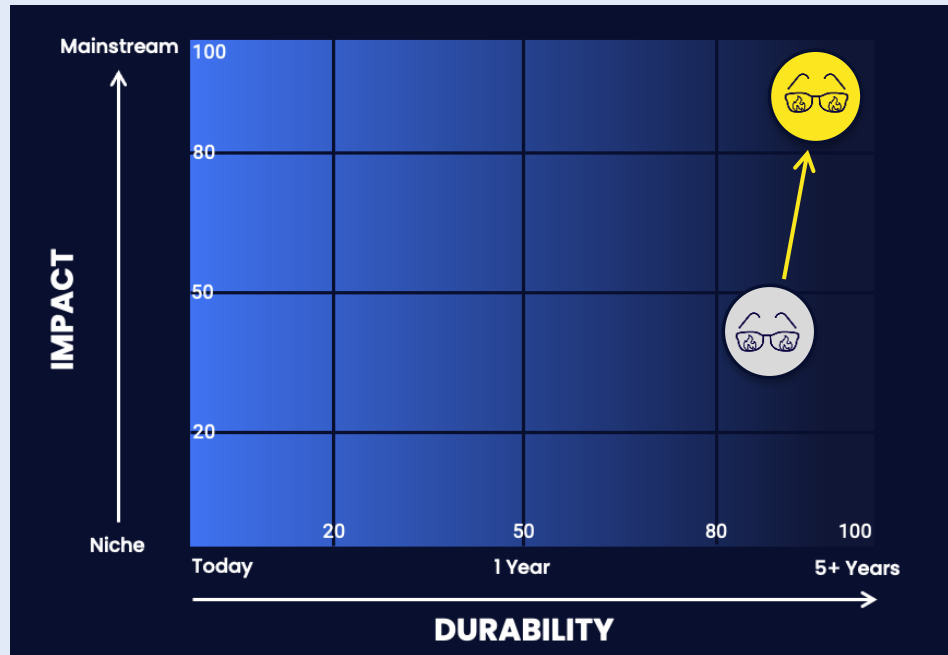
“Everything is collapsing”  
→ meme humor +  
doomscrolling as  
emotional triage.



**TO:**

Collapse becomes a shared  
creative playground that lets  
people laugh with the dread  
instead of denying it.

What started as passive coping through meme humor is becoming a participatory cultural mode. By turning dread into dark humor and play, darkness is no longer a rebellion but a baseline for emotional honesty.

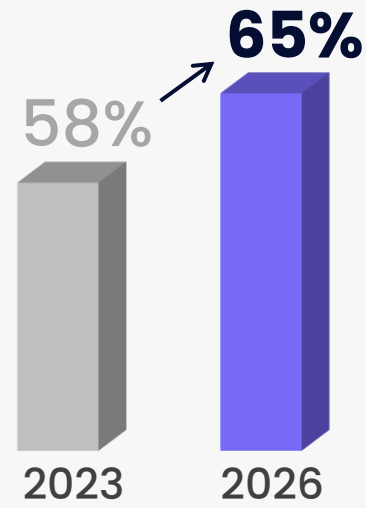


**Impact:**  
Emerging Mainstream  
→ Mainstream  
73.33 → 82.38

**Durability:**  
1 Year → 2.5 Years  
50 → 71

**Market Opportunity:**  
86.7M Adults 18+

● 2026 Score  
○ 2023 Score



Source: Horizon Media Finger on the Pulse Survey.

“With all the stress of the world, the best way to cope is to laugh it off with dark humor.”

**Trend Values + Behaviors**

Rebelliousness

Refusing polite reality, mocking the scripted norms

Imagination/  
Creativity

World-building dread into something designed

Fun/Play

Treating end-times vibes like a game

# FROM DOOMSCROLLING TO DOOM-PLAY

## Doomscroll Coping

Crisis-as-content;  
dark humor + internet-  
native coping

## Apocalypse as Prestige

Dystopia becomes higher-  
production, more "serious," and  
more system-focused

## Mainstream Wasteland Play

The shift from watching collapse  
to participating in it through  
stunts, games, brands, and  
spectacle

### 2021-2023



How it Started/  
How it's Going  
humorously  
documented  
slippage in  
meme form



Netflix's *Don't Look Up* hit as a laugh-so-you-don't-scream disaster satire



*Bo Burnham: Inside* turned isolation + internet collapse into musical comedy.



*Squid Game* used bright, playful visuals to wrap brutal systems critique (game-as-dystopia)



Doomscrolling officially added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary

### 2024-2025



Underground raves in literal gutters/storm drains turn gritty infrastructure into a "wasteland playground"



HBO's *The Last of Us* popularizes "grim survival world" storytelling



A24's *Civil War* was promoted with AI-generated near-future collapse imagery, normalizing "aestheticized ruin"



The Pop Tarts Bowl created an intentionally absurd, nihilistic ritual of eating the mascot

### 2026+



The \$2.5K Vollebak Full Metal Puffer, made with copper, turns anxieties about disease, the future, and survival into a glamorous, high-priced outer skin

## What's Fading

Infinite, mindless doomscrolling

Passive viewing of prestige apocalypse

Generic "ruin aesthetic" without a twist

**3M**  
social posts  
in the past  
year



## What We're Watching

Dark humor and micro-agency ("ok, now what?" coping) →

Participatory apocalypse: stunts, events, lived-in worlds

Survival gear as status and spectacle

### Key Terms Driving Conversation:



Humor, Dark humor, Cope, End of the world, Brain rot, Existential crisis, Nervous system, Gallows humor, We're Cooked, Bread and Circuses, Toxic Positivity

This American Girl Doll charges her cellphone before a storm. She has a go-bag and emergency plan in place. She's a planner.



New York State's emergency services agency used American Girl dolls to deliver preparedness tips in a meme-y tone ("she's not just serving looks—she's serving preparedness").

MAINSTREAM SIGNALS



Image Source: [Amazon](#)

### Survivalist Spectacle

Prime Video is turning end-of-the-world fantasy into a televised sport with *Fallout Shelter*, a reality competition immersed in the post-apocalyptic world of the *Fallout* video game. Contestants compete in high-stakes challenges that bring the game's survivalist ethos and dark humor to life.

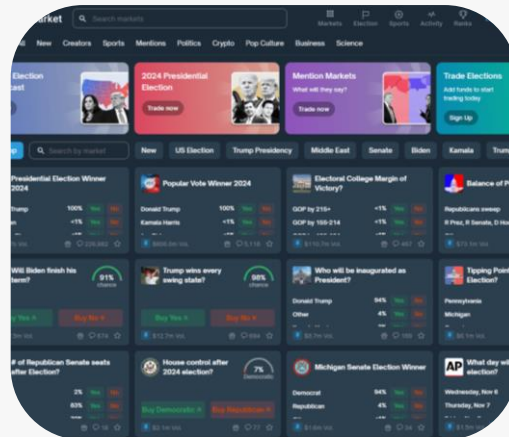


Image Source: [Polymarket](#)

### Dark Prediction Market

As geopolitical crises escalate, prediction markets like [Polymarket](#) are turning real-world upheaval into speculative play. One trader [reportedly earned \\$400K](#) by betting on the capture of Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro, illustrating how coups are reframed as tradable game-like events.

FRINGE SIGNAL



Image Source: [Airbnb](#)

### Doomsday Getaway

A decommissioned missile silo-turned-Airbnb, invites guests to sleep inside Cold War doomsday architecture as a novelty getaway. The move signals a next step from doomscrolling to doom-vacationing: dread becomes a destination, and survival fantasy becomes something you can rent, photograph, and share.

# INFLUENCERS

## Drivers

Accounts that are creating dark humor, dystopian frameworks, or nihilistic formats as a release valve



@TheOnion (4.9M IG)  
ex: [Crisis as Content](#)



@MrBallen(10.7M YT)  
ex: [Campfire Stories](#)



@DrAditiNerurkar (67K IG)  
ex: [Truth about doomscrolling](#)



@BrennanLeeMulligan (794K IG)  
ex: [Gummy Vitamins](#)

## Amplifiers

Accounts that are replicating, remixing, or commenting on existing framings



@cocomicheleillustrations (602K TT)  
ex: [Coloring to Cope](#)



@bydonmartin (471K TT)  
ex: [Causes of Loneliness](#)

# Pop Nihilism for QSR: Feeding the Chaos

Pop Nihilism gives QSR permission to acknowledge the chaos, selling honesty rather than hope. Turn activations into shareable rituals. These activations scale from light tonal “small win” moments to participatory formats and recurring spectacles across social, video, and IRL.

## CRAWL

(0-3 months)

### Play Along without Committing

- Launch a “Doom Bulletin” social series featuring fake breaking-news with a brand-centric punchline. This could involve 6-10 second paid social series on TikTok / Reels / Shorts.
- Purchase contextual video placements around “apocalypse entertainment.” Customize pre-roll bumpers on YT, FAST, gaming livestream that match the content mood (wasteland / survival / satire), but keep it fictional/campy.

## WALK

(3-9 months)

### Participation, Not Just Jokes

- Launch a “Doom Bulletin” social series featuring fake breaking-news with a brand-centric punchline. This could involve 6-10 second paid social series on TikTok / Reels / Shorts.
- Customize an AR “Faction Finder” + UGC Badge. Use a lens or filter that assigns a faction (Comfort Crew / Chaos Gremlins / Heatseekers / Sweet Relief) with a share card.

## RUN

(9-18+ months)

### Create Recurring Spectacles

- Host a Wasteland Week “broadcast” where the brand pretends it’s running a playful emergency station with YT creators, blending dark humor + audience choices (polls decide “what the crew does next”).
- Immersive pop-up drive-thru: “Wasteland Window” for a weekend with costumed staff, signage, menu as “missions,” and photo ops.
- Create an original mini-IP: characters, factions, and “missions” that evolve each quarter (customers collect, vote, unlock).

# Pop Nihilism: Brand Guardrails & Rules of Engagement

## Do Not Trivialize Real Tragedies

Brands must keep it campy + fictional but never targeted at real suffering. The trend is about a playful, creative response to a generalized sense of chaos or "dread," not making light of actual disasters, social crises, or loss of life.

Crossing this line will result in significant backlash and accusations of being insensitive and exploitative.

## Favor Participation to Drive Engagement

The trend has evolved from passive "doomscrolling" to active "doom-play." Simply posting dark or apocalyptic-themed content is not enough. Brands should create interactive experiences that give consumers a sense of agency and participation.

Prioritize activations that generate measurable UGC, increase time-spent with the brand, and boost share rates over passive impressions.

## Avoid Generic Ruin Aesthetics

Avoid generic ruin aesthetics without a clear point of view. These visuals are increasingly easy to scroll past.

Instead, invest in high-effort world-building with a defined narrative, logic, and characters—designed dystopias that feel intentional rather than borrowed post-apocalyptic imagery.

# Want to dig deeper?

## Horizon Futures can help:

- ➔ Design **bespoke research** and **unpack culture** for your brand.
- ➔ Map your **brand values to cultural opportunities** with statistical rigor via our **Culture Q<sup>SM</sup>** tool.
- ➔ Host **custom workshops** to help your team spark culture-forward ideas and inspire new ways of thinking.

# METHODOLOGY DETAILS

# Identifying Trends: Our Research Approach

Culture is constantly evolving. To uncover shifts and changing patterns, we exercise three modes of investigation:

## OBSERVE + CURATE

- Ongoing monitoring of cultural “signals,” or phenomena in culture
- Review public and syndicated data, trades, academic journals, etc.
- Analyze social conversations and content via Quid
- Leverage AI-based social listening via Sightly and Glystn



## CLUSTER, DECODE + MEASURE

- Analyze cultural signals to identify themes and patterns
- Form hypotheses around why we are seeing what we’re seeing
- Name and define our most significant findings
- Measure trends using our Culture Q<sup>SM</sup> tool to understand relevance, adoptability, and longevity
- Survey a nationally representative sample of ~2,000 U.S. adults 18+ in our annual Finger on the Pulse wave study.



## VALIDATE + APPLY

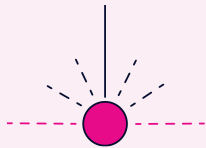
- Conduct annual proprietary study via 2,000+ Finger on the Pulse panelists, nationally representative of age, gender, region, ethnicity, and income across the U.S.
- Apply to different brands or industry verticals
- Derive market opportunity (population estimate) from FOTP survey results projected over the past three years



# Culture Q<sup>SM</sup>: Under the Hood

The IMPACT SCORE puts social data into a viral diffusion model to mathematically calculate the potential spread of a trend among the populace. The DURABILITY SCORE is rigorous, but not algorithmic, weighing 15 different evaluative criteria to measure a trend's staying power.

## IMPACT



The Impact Score measures the size of a given trend in terms of how many people it impacts.

*Is it relevant to a niche subculture or a large population?*

## IMPACT SCORE INPUTS:

- Average daily social post volume
- Cadence of conversation including the number of spikes in volume that are over the specified threshold
- Recency of conversation spikes over the specified threshold
- Influence: Share of verified volume to total posts
- Shareability: index of original content to re-posted content
- Social engagement: share of authors to total volume

## DURABILITY



The Durability Score indicates how long a trend will be relevant, separating flashy, fast-culture moments from longer-term movements.

*Will this still be relevant next month? Next year? In five years?*

## DURABILITY SCORE EVALUATIVE CRITERIA:

- Does this trend have historical value?
- Could this trend apply to more than one sector?
- Does it have crossover potential for new audiences?
- Is this trend impacted by one or more Subcultures?
- Is a celebrity or future event associated with this trend?
- Has this trend been the subject of tv shows, movies, or memes?
- Trending data from custom survey

THANK YOU

[TheFuturesGroup@horizonmedia.com](mailto:TheFuturesGroup@horizonmedia.com)



horizon  
futures