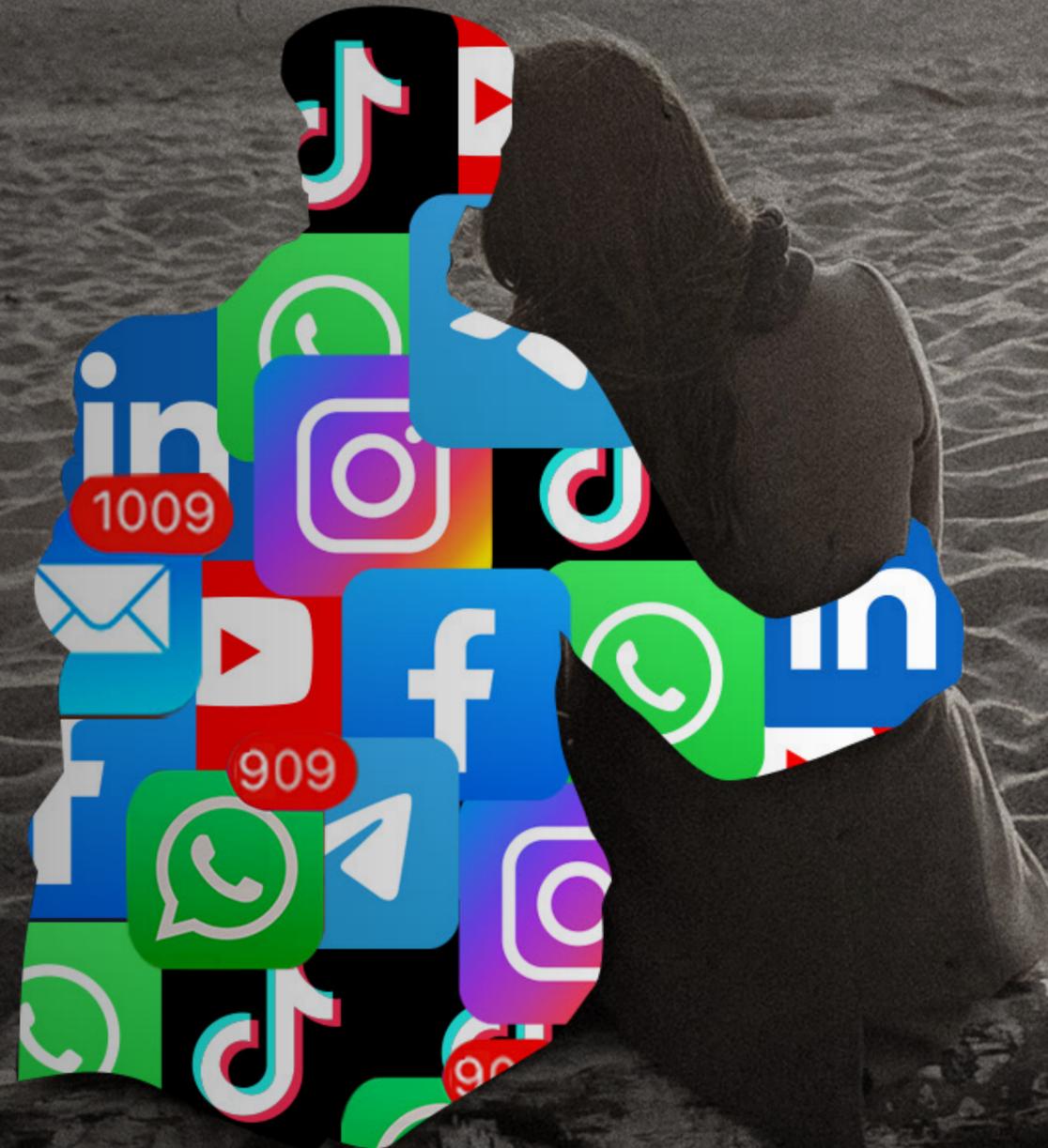


CULTURE MONITOR

This zine was born from M+C Saatchi SSK's Social Forces cultural monitor and our work to identify and understand changing patterns in human (yes, consumer) behavior, and how those patterns impact brands and issues.

By decoding these patterns, we help brands tap into their Cultural Power, the advantage that comes from harnessing culture to create desire, shape conversation, and drive real-world impact. So, what cultural patterns are most present for people? Human desires for connection, comfort, and joy are constant, but how we find them in the face of sustained instability and an economic "vibecession" are constantly being called into question. In the absence of a clear mainstream, algorithm-driven echo chambers foster micro social connection and simultaneously perpetuate broader cultural disconnection.

As people accept that the present state is in fact, the "new normal," there are many who seek stability through change—embracing, perhaps paradoxically, experimentation, reinvention, and overall establishment-bucking ideas. Perhaps nothing brought this more to the public consciousness than the recent presidential election and resulting global and economic instability. The trends and insights that follow demonstrate the lengths we are willing to go to try to find connection, joy, and safety amidst an ever-changing world. In tracking these forces, we hope to show how Cultural Power can be cultivated as a compass toward growth and understanding in unstable times.



After years of living through sustained instability, people's collective frustration, distrust, and exhaustion are reaching a tipping point we're calling the "Vibepocalypse." For many people, anger feels more grounding than uncertainty. Still, without a way to express and release those feelings, people are seeking manifestations of their rage in the form of antiheroes (just look at the online conversations around Luigi Mangione or Trump/AOC split-ticket voters) or drastic life changes (4B movement). With systematic failures in government and the private sector robbing people of their hope, and cultural polarization fueling anger and isolation (Red pill movement, heteropessimism) people are stepping away from the traditional and leaning into the radical.

Takeaway:

In the wake of the "vibepocalypse," relatability is no longer enough. People need to feel their frustrations are being acted upon. Brands should offer tangible pathways for change. It's about empowering people without increasing their exhaustion.

GETTING OLD IS GETTING OLD

America's contradictory relationship with aging is on full display. Hollywood's "silver wave" celebrated age while aesthetics like "eclectic grandpa" or "coastal grandma" trended. Yet we also tried to prevent aging in increasingly dystopian ways: from Silicon Valley immortalists to designer skincare for babies, "prejuvenation" trends, and whatever was happening in "The Substance." At the root is our species' age-old obsession with youth.

Simultaneously we're cheering for those who defy what getting old is supposed to look like, dubbing 83-year-old Martha Stewart "so brat," hosting "Golden Bachelor" watch parties, and embracing new models of aging where old people are hotter, healthier, and more empowered.

Ted Danson's "A Man On The Inside" reframes aging as a stage of reinvention rather than decline. Older people today look and act very differently from the "old people" of decades prior, but for the new model of aging to be grounded in reality, we need to reconcile older people's lived experience of aging with younger people's fear of and aspirations for it.



Takeaway:

Aging has ceased to feel linear. Instead aging is a dynamic aspect of identity and an evolving model in culture. Brands have permission to play a substantial role in this cultural remodel of getting old. There's an open space for those who, rather than sell youth, celebrate and center the vitality of actual aging people.

GETTING OLD IS GETTING OLD



LOVE IS ON OUR SCREENS

With the return of the rom-com, the rise of romance novels on BookTok (ACOTAR, anyone?), and the Hallmark Channel soaring to #3 in popularity, romance is back in a big way.

But interestingly, the romance on our screens is not translating IRL. Americans have stopped hanging out, the 4B and Boysober movements (of mostly young women choosing self-love over relationships) are thriving, and if the sex scene discourse around “Saltburn” and “Poor Things” is any indication, America has gone prudish.

As social media creates increasingly superficial ways to measure a relationship’s worth from attachment style compatibility to whether they pass the Orange Peel Theory test, and companies like Match Group engineer our addiction to endless swiping, what hopeful daters seem to be missing most is simplicity. The rise of AI companions like Replika is providing some 30 million people with relief, offering the promise of a way to practice healthy relationship habits, without the messiness of human relationships.

Takeaway:

As we navigate a world where engineered relationships (whether parasocial obsessions with Pedro Pascal or flirting practice with AI chatbots) offer contentment and control, brands must recognize that today’s consumers are increasingly prioritizing personal fulfillment and emotional safety—leading them to question who and what adds value to their pursuit of connection.

LOVE IS ON OUR SCREENS

THE DINNER TABLE IS NOW DIVISIVE

Sharing a meal has always been about connection, storytelling, and nourishment. But today's eating rituals feel like more of a way to flex personal values and identities rather than fostering inclusivity, conversation, and community.

Whether it's TikTok restaurant critics taking over the FYP, the rapid turnover of grocery store "it" items, or top designers replacing fashion shows with dinner parties, food is now the ultimate stage for luxury and self-expression.

The irony? While "family" cooking pages like Nara Smith or Ballerina Farms are more popular than ever, we're also dining solo more than ever and feuding over food more than ever. Everyone eats and yet something so unifying is showing us just how divided we are.

Takeaway:

Food is a casualty of our fractured relationship with each other. Our appetite for the latest food trend may really be a craving for connection. What would it look like for brands in the category to act as vehicles for community and connection, over cultivating personal taste?

SHAMELESS IS THE NEW AUTHENTIC

In today's political climate, it's hard to trust your neighbor let alone big corporations. If authenticity is an overplayed buzzword, shamelessness has evolved as the second wave. This year typos got our attention, celebrities removed their fillers, and "brat" became a lifestyle. Charli XCX's "Brat Summer," an album turned lifestyle, celebrates messiness, freedom, and self-acceptance all aligning with the broader cultural trends of radical honesty. While political figures received more leniency in adopting the "brat" attitude and aesthetic—Kamala Harris was applauded for it by a usually shrewd demographic—in contrast, brands that tried to be "brat" were dubbed cringe (KFC, NATO, Ritz, JanSport, the list goes on) offering a cautionary tale. In a world where everything feels unreliable, shamelessness now signals the truest of truths, cutting through the noise to promise a glimpse of what's raw and unfiltered, as long as you can believe the typos are unstaged.

Takeaway:

In a low-trust society, shamelessness prevails. But for brands, brashness runs the risk of alienating connection, or feeling forced. Brands shouldn't try so hard to behave like consumers, but should look for where they can embody confidence and empower consumers' evolving definitions of authenticity.



SHAMELESS IS THE NEW AUTHENTIC

An aerial, top-down view of a beach at night. The scene is illuminated by a dark, starry sky, suggesting a night-time setting. Numerous people are scattered across the beach, many lying on towels or blankets, engaged in various activities like sunbathing or socializing. The people are dressed in swimwear, and the overall atmosphere is one of relaxed, communal leisure. The central text is overlaid on this scene.

People are **REDEFINING**
AGING, LOVE, CONNECTION, and
AUTHENTICITY in a world where
STABILITY is found through
CHANGE and **REINVENTION.**



A zine produced by

M+C SAATCHI SSK