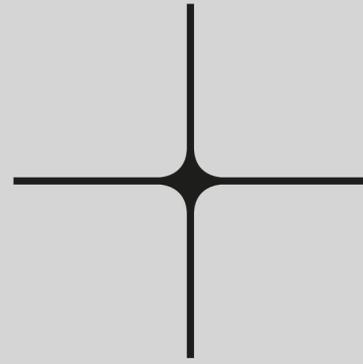


Ogilvy | Social.Lab



SOCIAL-FIRST *BRAND BUILDING*

KEY SHIFTS FOR 2025



INTRO

In 2024, the runaway success stories of brands like Liquid Death, CeraVe, and E.L.F. Cosmetics demonstrated the power of social-first – not as a channel play, but a brand building approach. 2025 will see more brands embracing the social-first paradigm shift. It's no longer just about social media; it's about understanding the evolving connected media landscape and its impact on culture-driven consumer decisions.

Attention is fragmented, dispersed across platforms with communities and creators holding the keys. Winning in this era requires a lot more than understanding social platforms as a media touch point; it necessitates a reimagining of how brands are built.

This means embracing new rules of engagement, navigating a world of decentralised influence, and co-creating with communities.

It means loosening of traditional tight controls, while still finding innovative ways to build memory structures and gather intelligence. It means playing to the platforms' strengths while seeking legitimate ways to shape culture. This report explores crucial shifts brands must make to thrive in the social-first landscape, offering actionable strategies for agencies and brand teams to unlock sustainable growth in today's attention economy.

DUCTION

A SOCIAL FIRST BRAND



WHAT IT IS



A business engine that sits at the core of brand strategy, product development and customer engagement. Social-first brands leverage data signals rooted in social communities and behaviours to embed themselves in culture, cultivating online conversation, brand fandom and loyalty that translates into demand and sales.

WHAT IT IS NOT



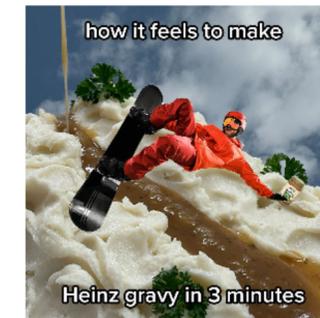
It's not limited to content strategy. It's not about superficial trend-jacking. It's not about divesting from other channels or doing away with performance marketing – but it's also not about maintaining the status quo of ATL driven marketing. Lastly, it's not about abandoning brand heritage, identity and distinctive attributes in favour of internet chaos.

WHY IT'S CRITICAL

Today's consumers are overwhelmed by the sheer volume of choice that's available at unprecedented convenience and speed. Increasingly, culture and community affiliations are used to navigate this complexity, as people increasingly seek brands that align to their values, interests and identities. Social is a primary incubator for culture and community, where trends and shifts are born and amplified, which is why a social-first approach is key to unlock several advantages for brands including mental availability, relevance and affinity, differentiation and growth.

SOME EXAMPLES OF THRIVING SOCIAL-FIRST BRANDS

Legacy brands that successfully pivoted or reinvented for the social-first era:



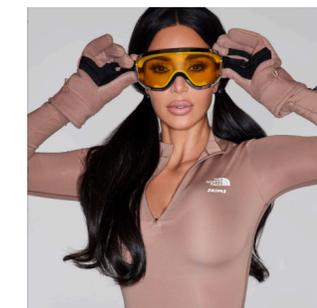
Digital natives with social-first engrained in their brand DNA:



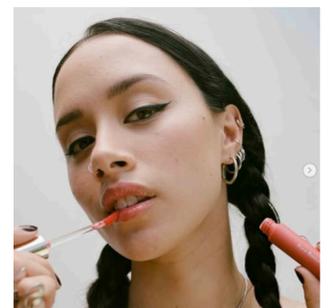
Glossier.



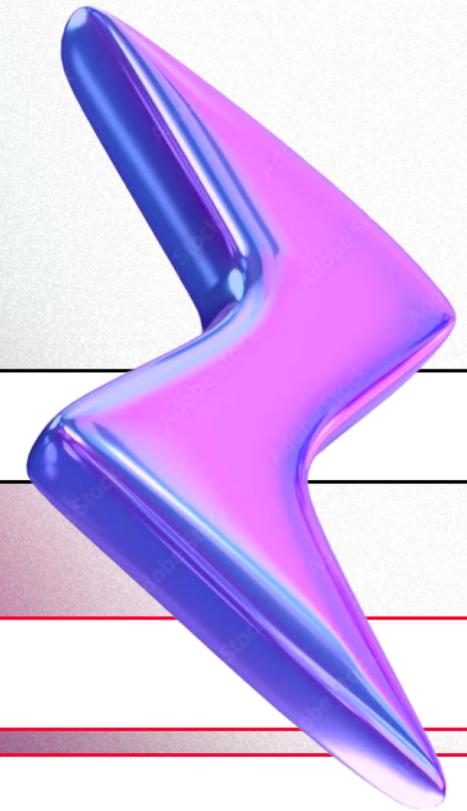
Liquid Death



SKIMS



Rare Beauty



5 CRITICAL SHIFTS FOR SOCIAL-FIRST BRAND TRANSFORMATION		✕
SHIFT 01	SOCIAL-FIRST BRAND BUILDING AS A NEW MARKETING MODEL	✕
SHIFT 02	SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE BECOMES A BUSINESS-CRITICAL DRIVER	✕
SHIFT 03	BRAND WORLD REINVENTION FOR A SOCIAL-FIRST ERA	✕
SHIFT 04	BRAND PLANNING CYCLES ADAPT FOR NEW CULTURE FREQUENCIES	✕
SHIFT 05	SOCIAL-FIRST TRANSFORMATION FUELS OMNI-CHANNEL IMPACT	✕

SHIFT 01

SOCIAL-FIRST
BRAND BUILDING

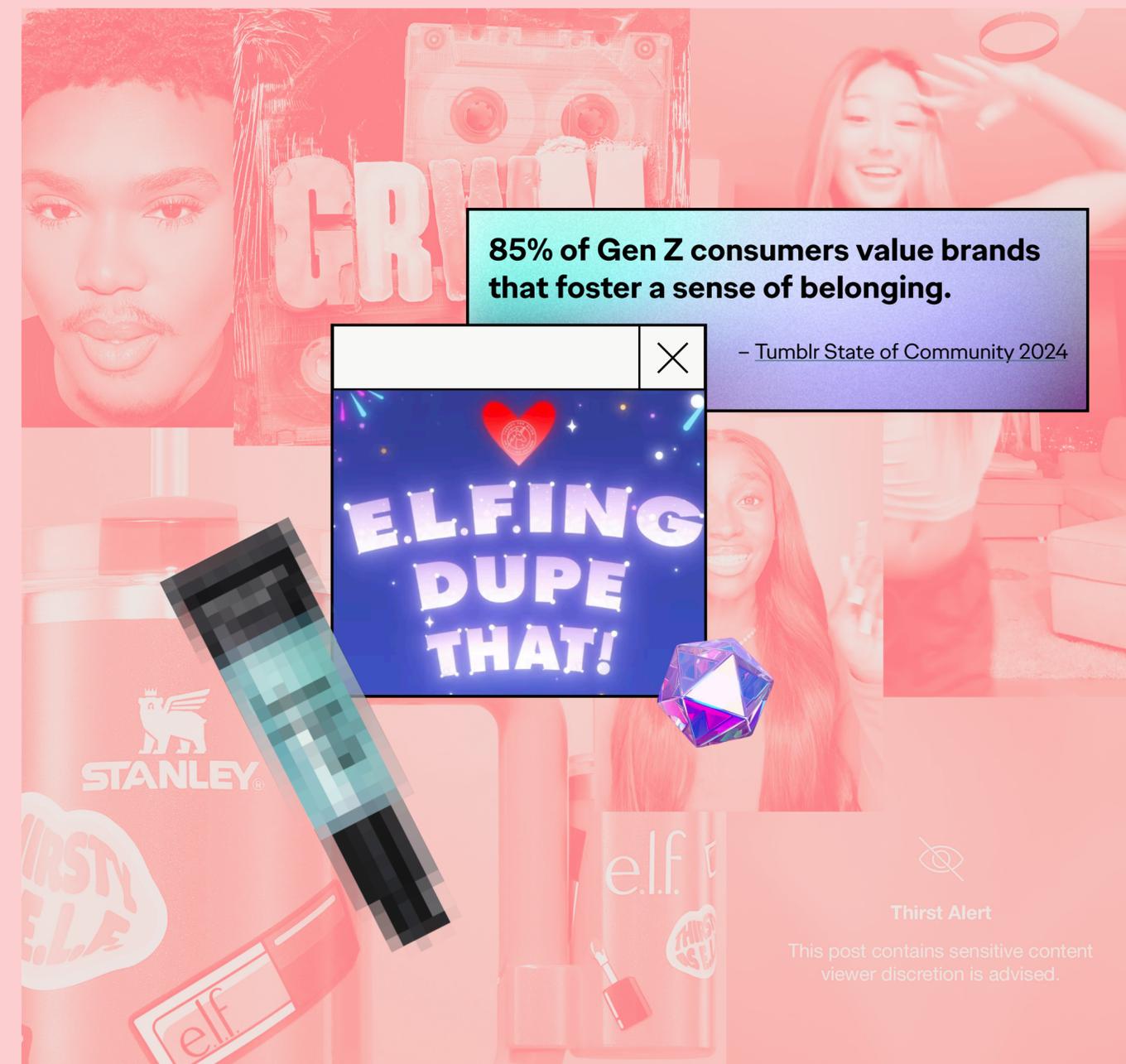
AS A NEW
MARKETING MODEL

SHIFT 01 SOCIAL-FIRST BRAND BUILDING AS A NEW MARKETING MODEL ✕

SOCIAL-FIRST BRANDS START BY UNDERSTANDING WHAT MAKES TARGET ONLINE COMMUNITIES TICK, AND HOW BEST TO SERVE THEM.

The previous paradigm saw social strategy being developed to support brand and product strategy. But in the social-first era, social and community insights are the starting point, as brands increasingly develop products, initiatives and communications to satisfy existing appetite.

This creates marketing that’s ripe for earned online buzz, and inherently primed for enthusiastic audience response. It also builds community, customer intimacy and brand love by creating a “You asked, we heard you” dynamic.



SHIFT 01	SOCIAL-FIRST BRAND BUILDING AS A NEW MARKETING MODEL	✕
THE SHIFT IN ACTION		✓

THE QUICK HIT	✕
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Internet speculation lit up when Taylor Swift was spotted at a football game eating a snack with an unknown sauce, dubbed “Seemingly Ranch”. Within 48 hours Heinz released a limited edition product by the same name – an instant sell-out and a viral sensation.

IT'S A NEW ERA FOR HEINZ.

LIMITED EDITION KETCHUP AND SEEMINGLY RANCH COMING SOON.



📍 | Taylor Swift was eating a piece of chicken with ketchup and seemingly ranch!



DUPE THAT!

THE LONG GAME	✕
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e.l.f. Cosmetics, one of Gen Z’s most beloved beauty brands, has built cult status and a booming business (38% CAGR over the past 4 years, as reported by Forbes) by successfully leveraging social-first principles from community centricity to culture savvy.

Stand-out moments of 2024 include collabs with Stanley and Tinder, as well as Get Ready With Make Up (GRWM), a musical album offering from the brand’s entertainment division. We'll keep an eye on how they continue to reinvent the marketing playbook in 2025.

SHIFT 01 SOCIAL-FIRST BRAND BUILDING AS A NEW MARKETING MODEL	✕
ACTIONS FOR BRANDS	✓



01 ✕

Invest in the right toolsets, mindsets and skillsets needed to drive a social-first shift in business operations. This will likely require change management strategy and training to upskill teams.



02 ✕

Start small: transformation takes time – but small steps build momentum and help secure organisational buy-in. Task teams to explore what social-first quick wins could look like for your brand and team.



03 ✕

Be open to a new marketing playbook. Social-first brands move differently – and some traditional marketing approaches are no longer fit for purpose. If it looks and feels like a traditional marketing promotion, it probably won't fly with social audiences.

SHIFT 02



SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE
BECOMES A
BUSINESS-CRITICAL DRIVER

REPORT PROGRESS

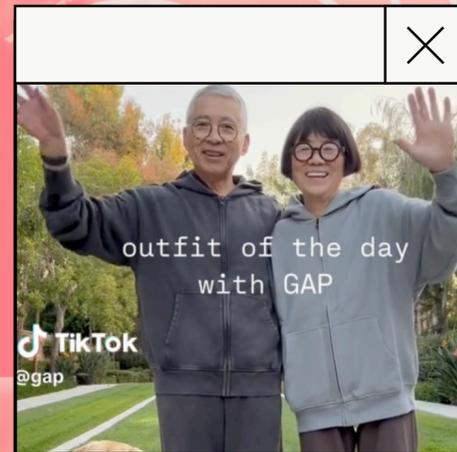


Folder icon Folder icon

Progress bar with 2 red segments

LET'S GO

SHIFT 02 SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE BECOMES A BUSINESS-CRITICAL DRIVER



SOCIAL-FIRST BRANDS ARE POISED TO RESPOND AT THE SPEED OF CULTURE – AND SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE IS A KEY COMPONENT OF A WINNING SETUP.

Beyond reporting and basic social listening, social intelligence combines multiple data signals to equip brand teams with robust culture analysis and a real time view of the social-first opportunity space. Intel on audience behaviour, community feedback, cultural trends and content performance must be interpreted into actionable insights to empower data-led decision making.

- Is a community voicing desire for a product that doesn't exist yet?
- Has your brand inadvertently come up in a buzzy conversation, trending meme or music video?
- What culture or community spaces have natural synergy with your product offer and brand values?
- What social trends in adjacent categories could get your brand ahead?

Intelligence enables social-first brand teams to make sense of the quick-moving zeitgeist, identify prime opportunities and respond in good time.



SHIFT 02 SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE BECOMES A BUSINESS-CRITICAL DRIVER

THE SHIFT IN ACTION

Leading brands are setting up sophisticated social intelligence engines to drive business decisions and maintain a competitive edge.

By leveraging advanced AI-powered tools like real-time social listening, sentiment analysis, and predictive analytics, teams can gain deep understanding of their target audience's needs, desires, and pain points.

This data can act as a brand's culture radar and fuel for innovation, informing new product development and marketing campaigns but also strategic partnerships, creator collaborations, and overall brand positioning.

The ability to identify and respond to cultural currents allows brands to remain agile, relevant, and deeply connected with their communities.

 United Kingdom - All

Show 10 entries

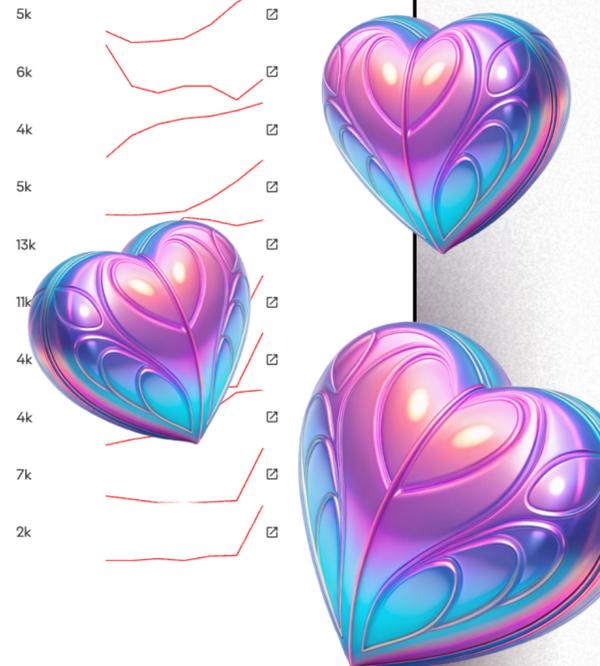
#	Past 7 days	Posts	Views	Ratio	Trend
1	(4) #girlssupportgirls	15k	41M	3k	
2	(6) #valentinesday	5k	20M	4k	
3	(6) #ice	2k	23M	10k	
4	(8) #thetraitors	2k	69M	41k	
5	(8) #traitors	2k	48M	30k	
6	(3) #losangeles	1k	18M	18k	
7	#dinnerideas	2k	66M	32k	
8	#text	2k	17M	11k	
9	(4) #healthyrecipes	2k	42M	20k	
10	(5) #elvispresley	1k	6M	6k	

 United States - All

Show 10 entries

#	Past 7 days	Posts	Views	Ratio	Trend
1	(4) #badbunny	29k	151M	5k	
2	(2) #fire	19k	107M	6k	
3	(6) #valentinesday	58k	256M	4k	
4	(4) #dtmf	12k	55M	5k	
5	(7) #игравкальмара	23k	306M	13k	
6	(5) #wildfire	319	3M	11k	
7	#pacificpalisades	293	1M	4k	
8	(10) #coldweather	14k	57M	4k	
9	(2) #wildfires	132	870k	7k	
10	#palisades	228	565k	2k	

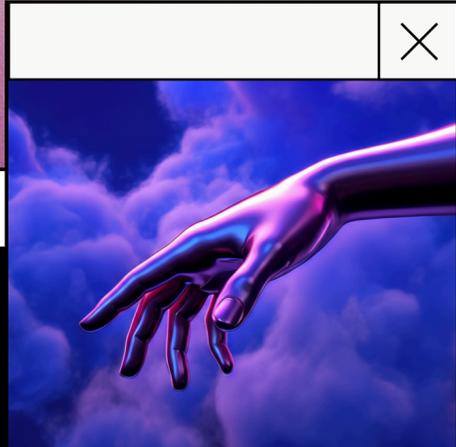
Social.Lab Proprietary Trends Tracking Tool



SHIFT 02 SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE BECOMES A BUSINESS-CRITICAL DRIVER	✕
THE SHIFT IN ACTION	✓

01		✕
<p>Instill a social intelligence solution to empower brand teams, and update work flows to ensure it's integrated as a catalyst for action, rather than a siloed reporting function.</p>		

02		✕
<p>The setup should include skillsets like data and media analysis, social listening, culture strategy, creator management and community engagement.</p>		

03		✕
<p>Invest in AI powered toolsets to supercharge social intelligence, track insights over time and streamline access for teams across the business.</p>		

SHIFT 03

BRAND WORLD
REINVENTION
FOR A SOCIAL-FIRST ERA

SHIFT 03 BRAND WORLD REINVENTION FOR A SOCIAL-FIRST ERA



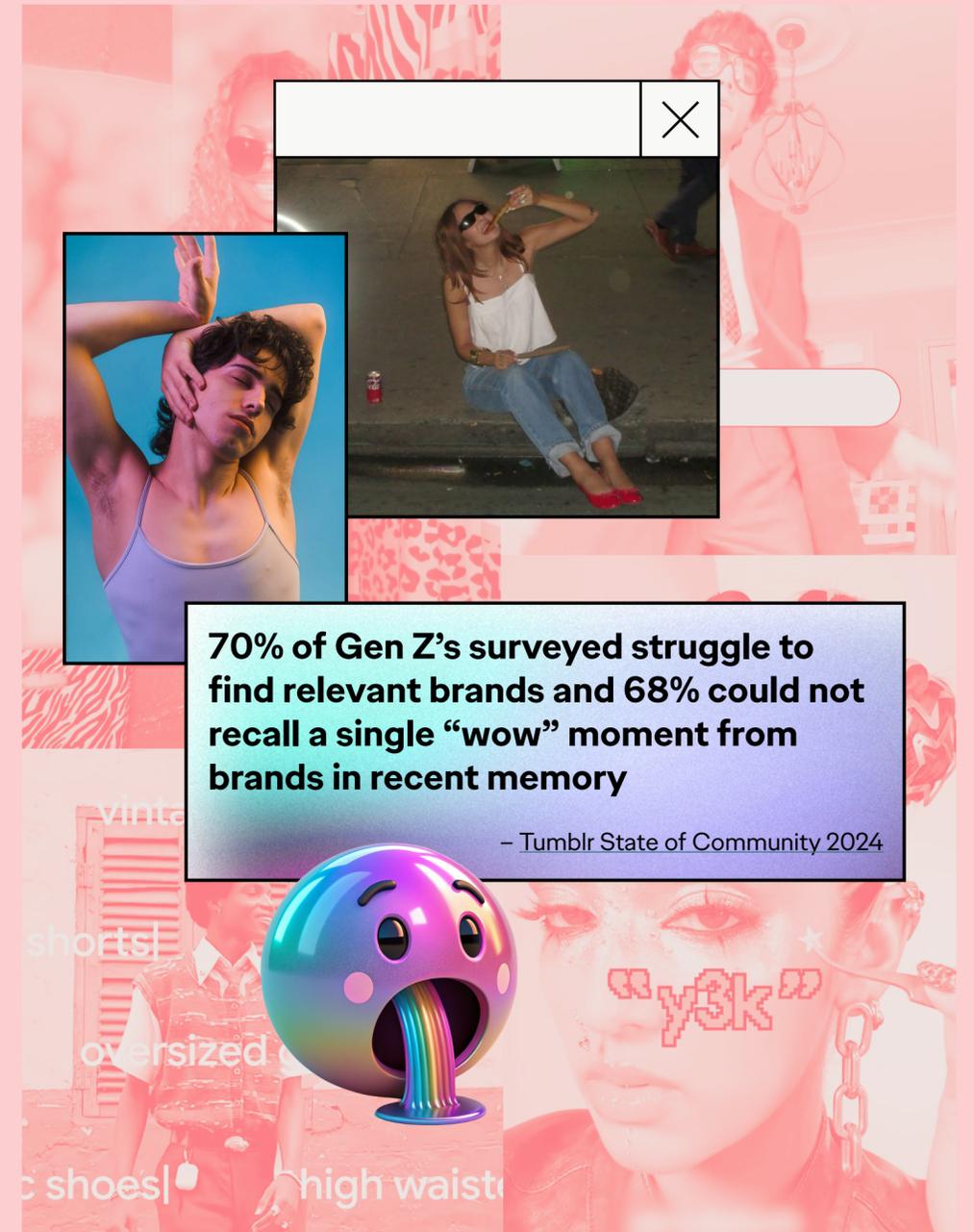
Social-first brand expression is by definition ever-evolving, shifting with the tides of culture to constantly delight audiences with new entry points and fresh reasons to engage, participate or buy. However, a big watch-out is to avoid the great ‘online culture soup’ that’s come to define late stage social media.

Simply leveraging the right social tactics is not enough when the default brand approach has become a predictable mix of memes, trends, UGC and creators.

2025 will see more brands returning to their foundations, but expressing them in bolder, more social-forward ways. Expect to see more brands adopting a publisher or entertainment studio mindset, investing in original (and shoppable) content geared to capture social attention and spend. By setting strategic and creative parameters as anchor points of a social-first brand world, brands can allow room for reinvention and newness without compromising equity or memory structure building.

The most successful social-first brands understand that sharp strategy, clear values and a differentiated point of view are more critical than ever. They keep their social efforts cringe-proof - distinct and instantly recognisable through consistent codes, visual and tonal identity attributes, and smart use of recurring devices like brand characters or content franchises.

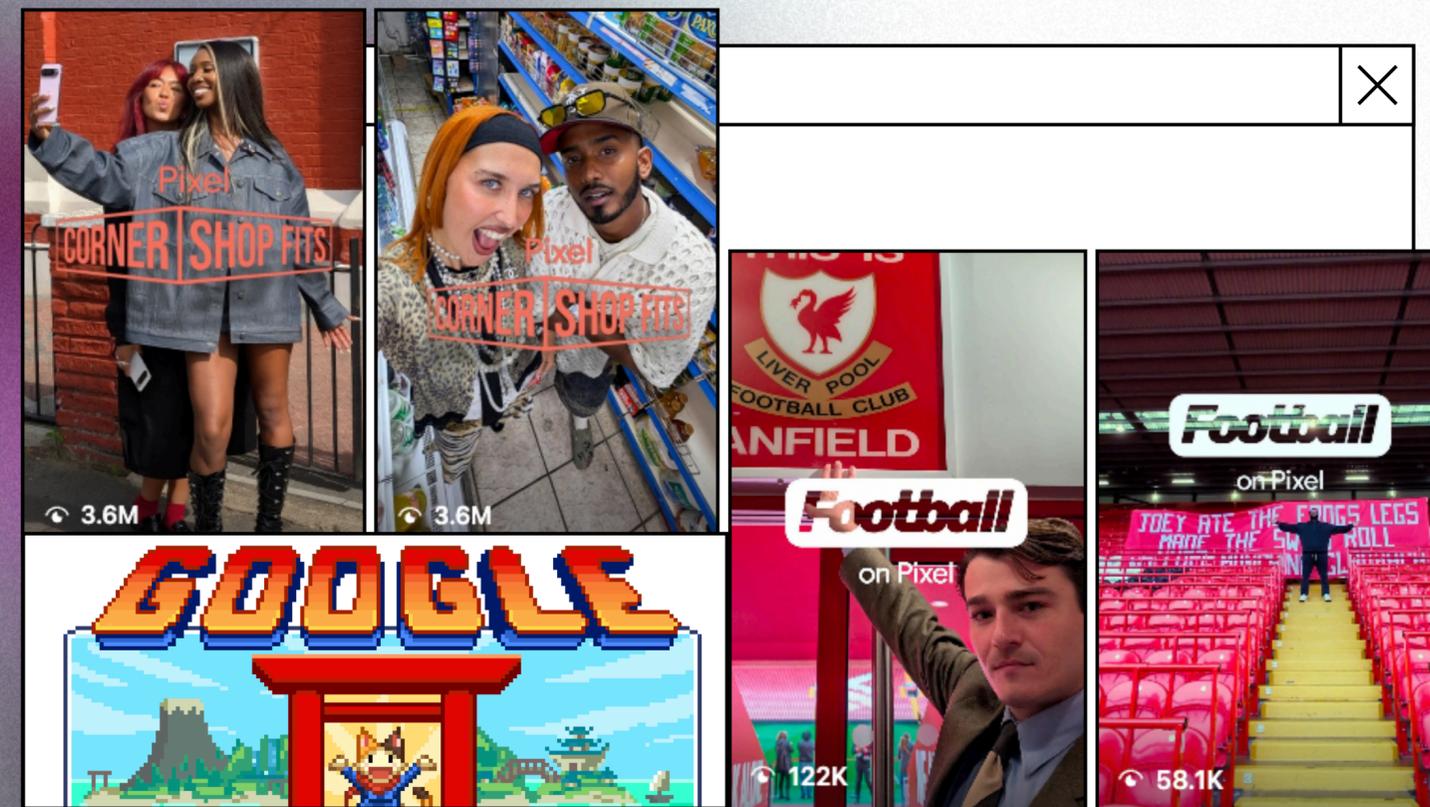
Crucially, these are designed to work natively on social – it’s about pushing and evolving brand guidelines, not abandoning them completely.



SHIFT 03 BRAND WORLD REINVENTION FOR A SOCIAL-FIRST ERA

THE SHIFT IN ACTION

The Cannes Grand-Prix winning Michael CeraVe campaign is a master-class demonstration. It hit all the marks of social-first with breakthrough entertainment value, seamlessly integrated nods to internet culture, and a buzzy creator line-up. At the same time, the campaign was unmistakably CeraVe, reinforcing the signature CeraVe blue, light-hearted tonality, and “Made by Dermatologists” positioning without relying on tired selling tropes.



Google Pixel embraces social-first content codes and culture associations to showcase its mobile phone capabilities. Through ongoing content series rooted in culture hotbeds like Fashion and Football, the Pixel device is entrenched as a lifestyle companion for switched on youth audiences.

SHIFT 03 BRAND WORLD REINVENTION FOR A SOCIAL-FIRST ERA

THE SHIFT IN ACTION

01



Take time to set up or revitalise social-first brand world parameters including strategy, visual and tonal identity, and consistent codes.

02



Clarify the social-first engagement plan which defines how to activate within these parameters. This includes:

- Culture playgrounds - fertile culture territories for the brand to activate
- Community activation plan
- Creator and / or influencer strategy
- Content strategy – strike a balance of big bets, algorithmic optimisation, and community centricity

03



Reorganise content production operations to support social-first delivery. This could include dedicated 'in-house' creators, agile content studios and generative AI tools.

SHIFT 04



BRAND PLANNING CYCLES
ADAPT FOR
NEW CULTURE FREQUENCIES

SHIFT 04 BRAND PLANNING CYCLES ADAPT FOR NEW CULTURE FREQUENCIES ✕

TRADITIONAL BRAND MARKETING CALENDARS PLANNED 12 – 24 MONTHS IN ADVANCE CAN ONLY TAKE A BRAND SO FAR



In 2025 social-first brands will embrace new planning cycles that can accommodate brand activity across time horizons, no longer relying on cookie-cutter product roadmaps and repetitive campaign formulas.

This includes both mid and long term planning for tentpole bursts and product activations, as well as agility mode which allows for live planning of responsive actions tied to the culture zeitgeist.

Always-on agility mode enables an iterative test and learn approach, where learnings from smaller activations can be applied to bigger bets to make them even more culturally sticky. Smart brands will use always-on activity to crack concepts that break through algorithmically to generate organic heat and demand. Paid support can then be allocated to further amplify proven success and drive conversion.

3 TYPES OF SOCIAL-FIRST CONTENT TO PLAN FOR ✕

- 

Evergreen content: Focused on community building & discoverability. Leverages native formats for messages around product attributes, use cases & consumption occasions, or audience need states. Developed for organic as well as paid retargeting of potential buyers.
- 

Entertainment content: Big bets focused on driving talkability & brand relevance based on enduring cultural currents. These typically involve more elaborate productions, creator support and partnerships. Designed for big bursts of activity including paid investment and earned tactics.
- 

Agile responsive content: Rapid response to live opportunities in culture. Discerning activations prioritising moments aligned to the social-first brand strategy, where the brand can add something unique to the conversation. Designed for earned & organic traction.

SHIFT 04 BRAND PLANNING CYCLES ADAPT FOR NEW CULTURE FREQUENCIES

THE SHIFT IN ACTION

Absolut Vodka's global social presence balances content across culture frequencies, all underpinned by the brand's Born To Mix platform and light-hearted conviviality territory.



EVERGREEN



ENTERTAINMENT



AGILE



RESPONSIVE

SHIFT 04 BRAND PLANNING CYCLES ADAPT FOR NEW CULTURE FREQUENCIES



THE SHIFT IN ACTION



01



Break down departmental siloes and assemble integrated, cross-functional project teams with multi-disciplinary expertise. This allows for shorter timelines, faster feedback loops and rapid go-to-market cycles.



02



Experiment with new and agile ways of working: collaborative processes, hot-house style workshops, real time intelligence and post-launch team huddles can accelerate iteration and innovation.

03



Plan for the unplanned: update budget allocation to reserve resources for agile responsive activity. Consider a Measured Magic approach in which 20% of social budget is retained for experimental and responsive social-first opportunities.

SHIFT 05



SOCIAL-FIRST
TRANSFORMATION



FUELS
OMNI-CHANNEL IMPACT

SHIFT 05 SOCIAL-FIRST TRANSFORMATION FUELS OMNI-CHANNEL IMPACT

SOCIAL-FIRST DOES NOT MEAN SOCIAL ONLY.

It's not about prioritising social media channels, but rather a fundamental shift in brand orientation that should inform and energise every touchpoint, blurring lines between online and offline to create a cohesive interconnected brand experience to match the modern customer journey.

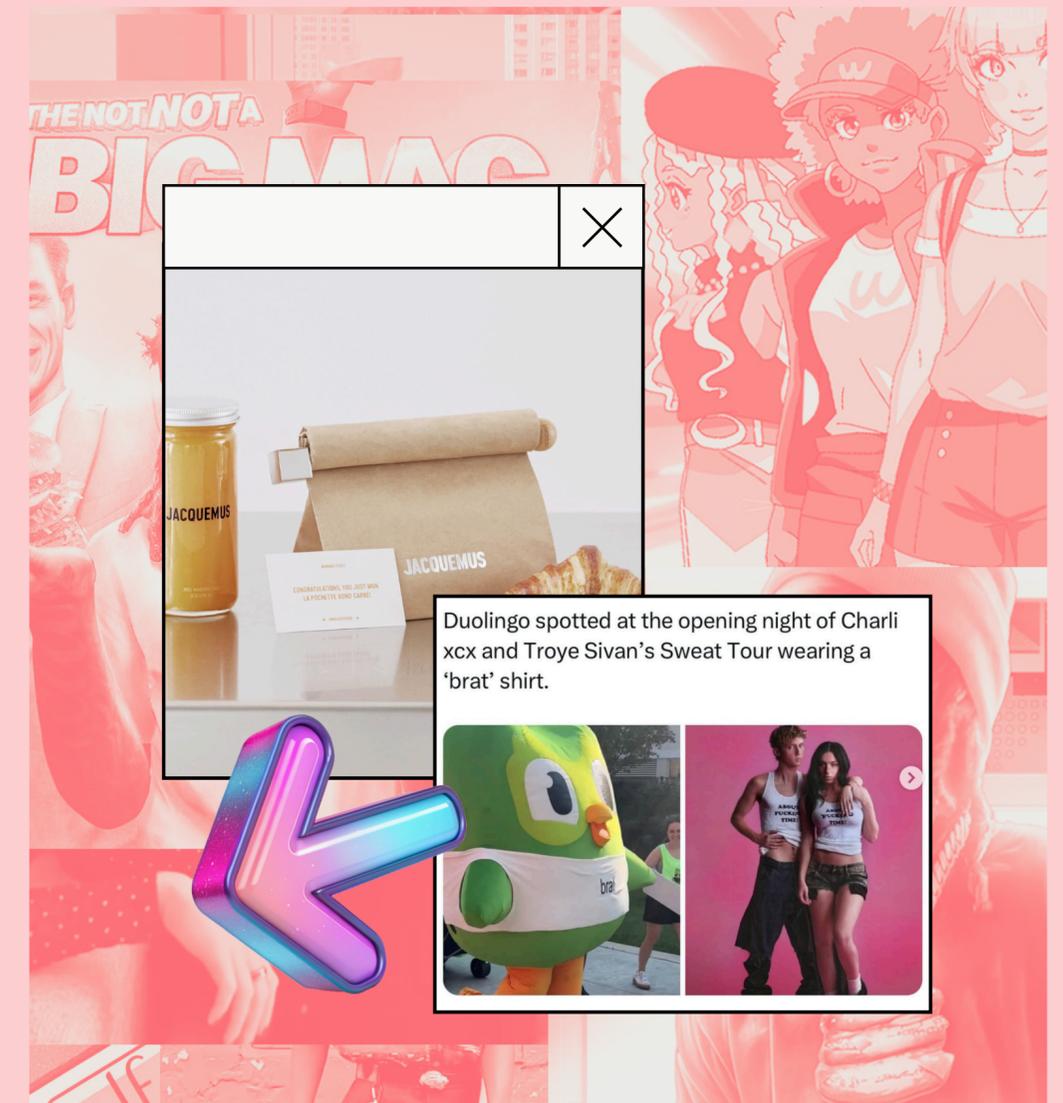
2025 will see brands thinking about social-first strategy well beyond owned social channels, ensuring integration across connected communities, media platforms, retail spaces, strategic partnerships, immersive experiences, and more.

Consider how a limited-edition product drop, teased exclusively through a well-timed creator post, can ignite a frenzy of social buzz and drive traffic to both online and physical retail locations.

Or how an interactive pop-up shop or in-store activation, designed for shareable moments, generates user-generated content that amplifies the brand message organically across social platforms.

Forging enduring bonds with engaged communities requires meeting them where they are, whether it's their favourite podcast, a hit Netflix show, an unexpected influencer collaboration, or a personalised email campaign inspired by trending social conversations.

This type of cross-channel activation creates a feedback loop, with offline experiences fuelling online conversations and vice versa.



SHIFT 05 SOCIAL-FIRST TRANSFORMATION FUELS OMNI-CHANNEL IMPACT

THE SHIFT IN ACTION

McDonald's has been reaping the benefits of a culture-rooted social-first strategy with a slew of hits. In 2024 their WcDonald's campaign was developed with specific focus on engaging the vocal and vibrant online Anime fan community.

The insight: Anime shows have featured WcDonald's for years as a way to reference the fast food chain without infringing copyright.



The execution:

- ★ Product: a limited edition "WcNuggets" meal and special sauce
- ★ Packaging: custom design by a known manga illustrator with a QR code linking to digital character expressions
- ★ Digital: a special website hosting 4 original short anime episodes
- ★ Event: immersive multi-sensory dining experience
- ★ Social: supporting content & community engagement



SHIFT 05	SOCIAL-FIRST TRANSFORMATION FUELS OMNI-CHANNEL IMPACT	✕
THE SHIFT IN ACTION		✓

01
✕



Ensure briefings are integrated between channel experts and build omni-channel executions for key initiatives. Design for interconnected and non-linear consumer journeys - where each touch point works in isolation for light users, but creates a rich, cohesive experience for deep engagers and super fans.

02
✕

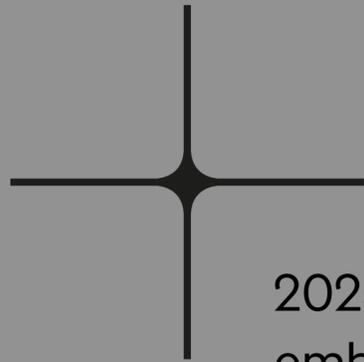


Evolve measurement & KPIs. Performance reporting needs to account for interconnected consumer journeys, measuring activity holistically across touch points, rather than separately or competitively. Develop bespoke measurement approaches tailored to the social-first brand strategy, connecting metrics like social conversation and sentiment with conversion.

REPORT PROGRESS
✕



SO CLOSE



2025 will offer amazing opportunities for brands that embrace social-first transformation and establish new ways of working. Expect bigger culture hits and sustained growth from those who successfully pivot away from traditional top-down, campaign-driven approaches towards entertainment-leaning culture activations, from big bets to agile, always-on engagement plays.

This requires empowering teams with social intelligence, prioritising community engagement, and fostering a culture of experimentation and rapid iteration.



CONCLUSION

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Report contributors: Mathieu Gillain, Catherine Sackville-Scott, Awie Erasmus, Rob Hill, Quentin Glode, Nurya Doorenbos, Alice Marchetto, Arnaud Vanhemelryck

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FOR MORE INFO OR ENQUIRIES, EMAIL MATHIEU.GILLAIN@SOCIAL-LAB.EU