

M+C SAATCHI GROUP

CULTURAL POWER

THE YEAR OF AUTOMATION VS AUTHENTICITY

01/26

Authored by M+C SAATCHI GROUP

WELCOME TO

EDITION 2

WHY THIS REPORT MATTERS

Every December brings a surge of “year ahead” forecasts - yet most are written through a Western lens that doesn’t fully capture the pace, ambition, or cultural complexity of the GCC. This report exists to spotlight the shifts that are actively reshaping how people live, create, consume and connect across our region. Shifts that signal not just what’s next, but what’s gaining momentum right here.

CULTURAL SHIFT VS TREND

Trends are flashes - moments that spike, fade, or stay confined to the fringes. Cultural shifts are different. They’re rooted in evidence, emerging from the deeper movements in what people value, how they think, how they behave, and how they choose to spend. These shifts don’t just “happen”; they compound. And when they do, they redefine categories, expectations, and opportunities.

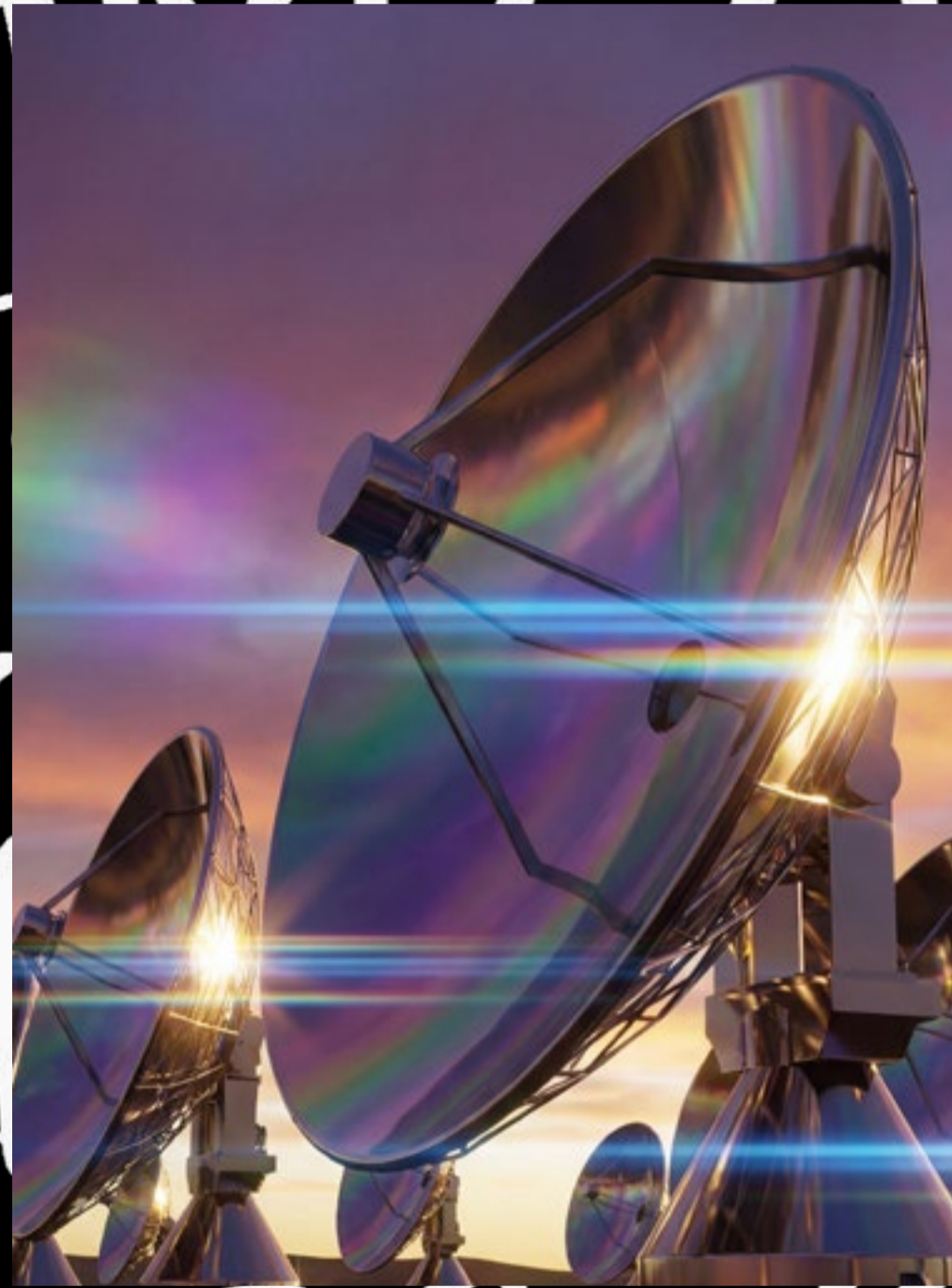
OUR METHODOLOGY

To identify these shifts, we look back at the year’s most telling signals: campaign insights, product launches that moved the needle, social and creator communities gaining real traction, and the stories that dominated headlines and feeds. This year, we’ve widened our lens further - bringing in perspectives from across our business to reflect the diversity of thought, culture and lived experience that shapes the region today.

HOW TO USE THIS REPORT

Cultural shifts have weight and longevity. They offer brands the strategic foundation to build products, experiences, programmes and campaigns that stay relevant beyond a single viral moment. As you move through this report, consider which shifts your brand has the right to participate in - where your offer can meaningfully solve a tension, amplify an emerging behaviour, or spark new forms of value in people’s lives.

CULTURAL INSIGHTS HAVE
WEIGHT AND LONGEVITY
THEY OFFER BRANDS THE
STRATEGIC FOUNDATION
TO BUILD PRODUCTS
EXPERIENCES, PROGRAMMES
& CAMPAIGNS THAT STAY RELEVANT



BUT FIRST,
A CULTURE
CHECK!



HOW LAST YEAR'S SHIFTS MATERIALISED

ACROSS 2025

● CRAVING CONNECTION



UAE Declares
2025 the Year
of Community

In 2025, the UAE declared the Year of Community under the motto "Hand in Hand." It marked a clear push for deeper social connection, reinforcing the loneliness wave we predicted would shape how people seek belonging.

● INSTANT EVERYTHING



We Live on
Minute Speed

We predicted instant gratification would define daily life, and it did. Amazon Now launched, Noon filled streets with delivery times by area, and Careem Quick ran cheeky ads about getting fresh food faster.

● MICRO WELLNESS



Gaining More
Pull Every Day

A few cues stood out in 2025. Samyang, a brand no one links to wellness, dropped protein chips. At the same time, Poppi landed in the UAE and Arla's protein puddings blew up in KSA.

● THE GCC: THE GAMING COOPERATION COUNCIL



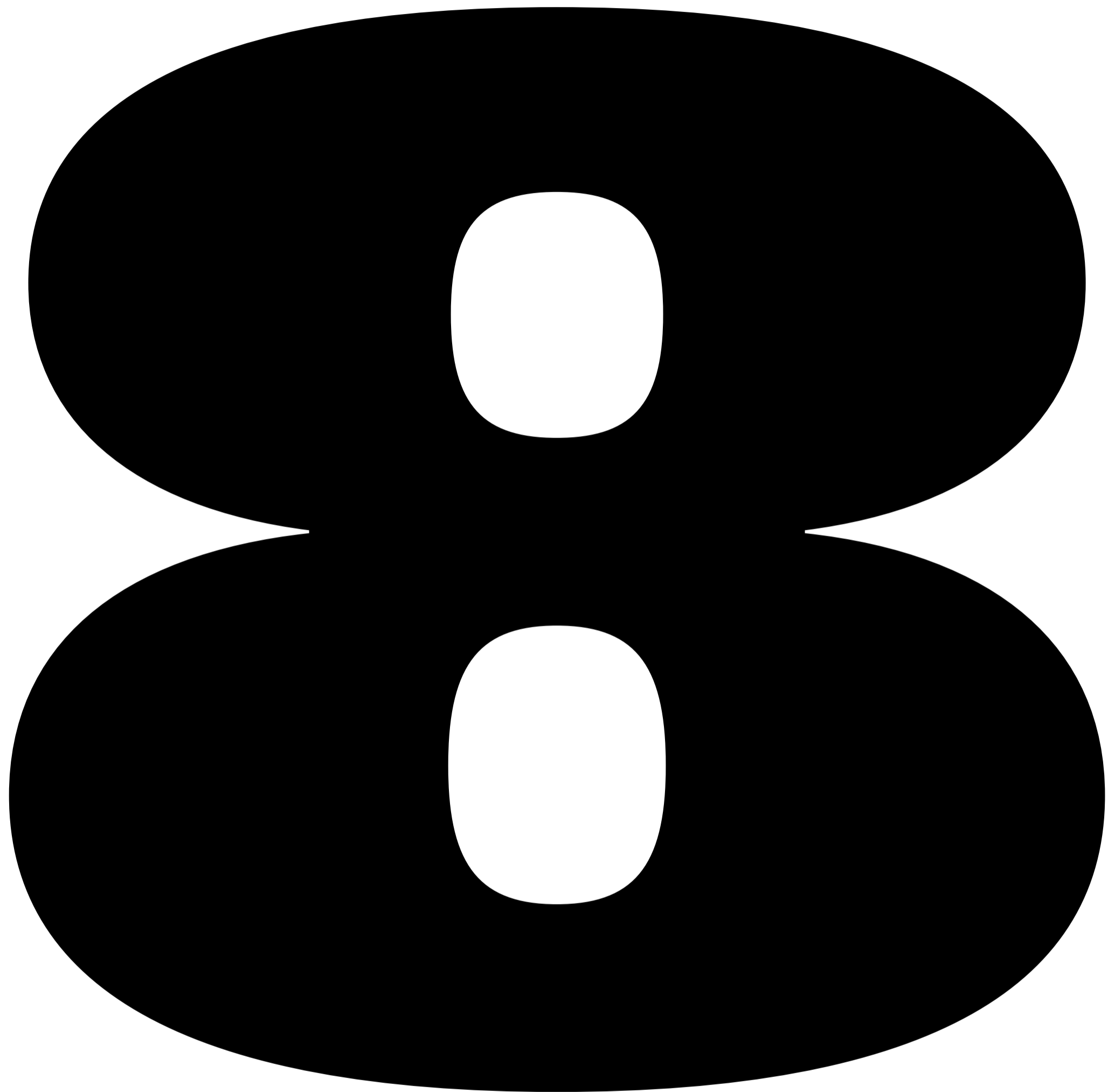
The Region
Doubles Down
on Gaming

The region's gaming rise played out exactly as predicted PIF's \$55B EA takeover was the headline moment, and Ampverse Pulse entering the Gulf confirmed gaming's shift into a full media and creator ecosystem.

The remaining trends showed up, but didn't grow the way they did in 2024

● REMIX CULTURE ● LOCAL GOING GLOBAL ● PROUDLY DUPED

● The trends we got right ● The trends we kind of got right ● Trends that didn't materialise



TRENDS SHIFTING GCC CULTURE - 2026

01

OVER THE INFLUENCE



02

A POST-TRUTH WORLD



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THE ENERGY ECONOMY



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KEEPING IT IN THE COMMUNITY



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REWIND REALITY



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HEALTHSPAN > LIFESPAN



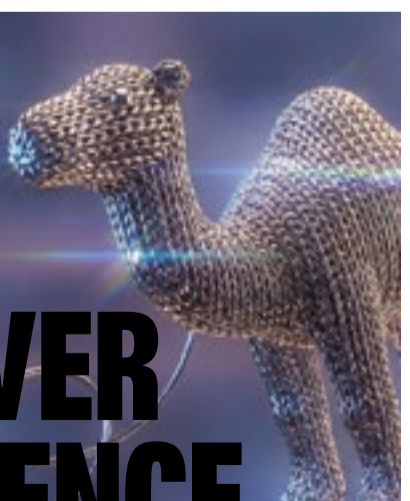
07

THE GREAT ESCAPE



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CRAFT OVER CONVENIENCE



OVER THE
INFLUENCE

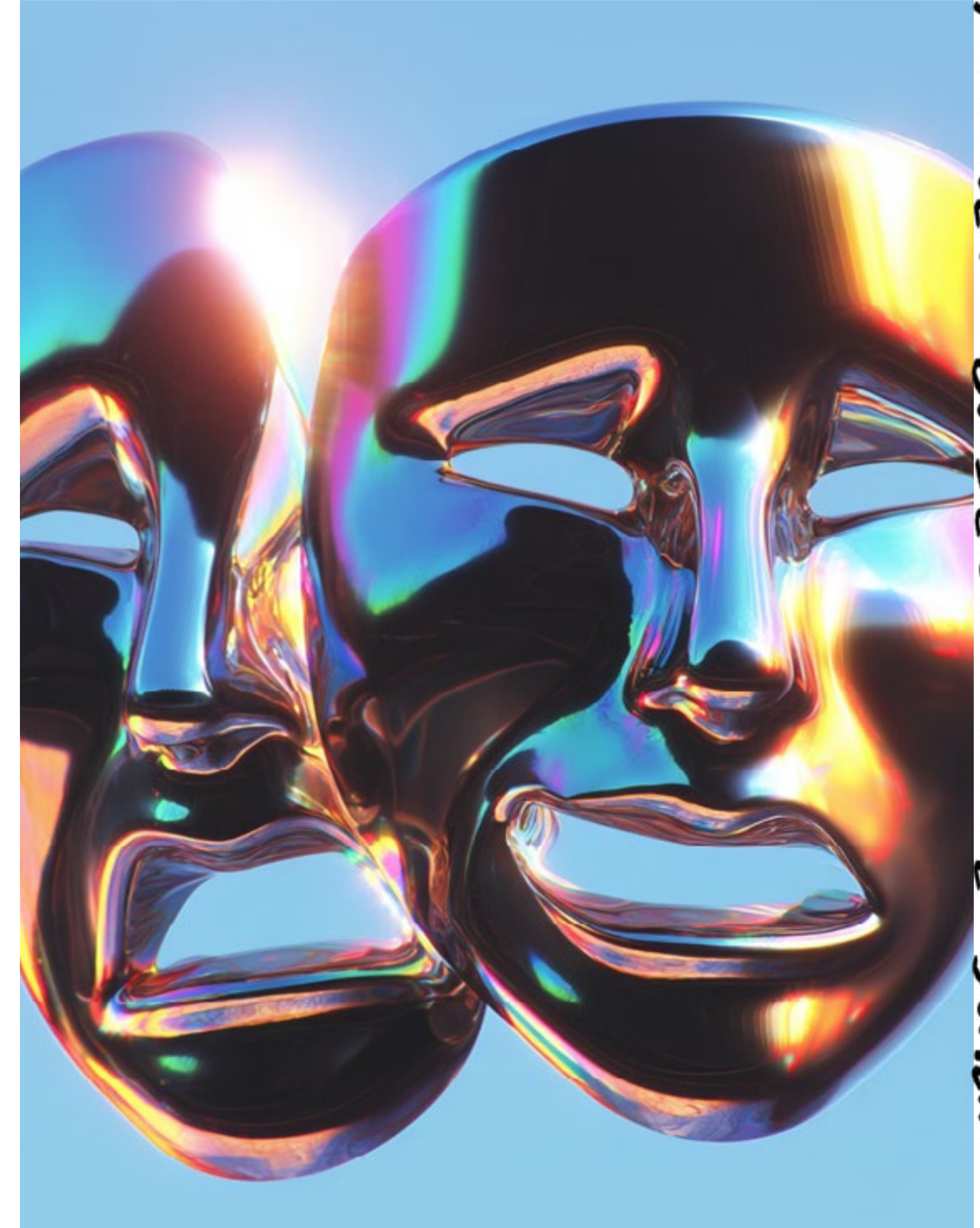
TREND

ONE

OVER THE INFLUENCE

OVER THE
INFLUENCE

IT'S VAST. IT'S NOISY.



IT'S POWERFUL BUT BENEATH THE SCALE, SOMETHING

MORE STRUCTURAL IS TAKING PLACE



Samar Mustafa
Strategist
M+C SAATCHI GROUP MIDDLE EAST

“I’ve realised I don’t entertain influencers the way I used to. I’m far pickier now about who I listen to and what I give my time to.”



The creator economy is booming on paper - yet culturally, influence isn’t hitting the same.

With more than 263,000 influencers across the GCC and a 74% surge in creator growth in just two years, the ecosystem looks unstoppable. It’s vast. It’s noisy. It’s powerful. But beneath the scale, something more structural is taking shape. Audiences are disengaging. They’re scrutinising the hype cycles, the undeclared partnerships, the curated perfection.

Influence isn’t collapsing - it’s maturing. People are becoming more discerning, more sceptical, and far less willing to reward content that doesn’t feel grounded in reality or relevance. The GCC is entering a new era where cultural pull isn’t assumed; it has to be earned.

CRACKS IN THE CULTURE OF INFLUENCE

TREND IN MOTION

Signals of a sharper, more self-aware audience are already emerging.

Influencers were recently ranked as the least trusted profession in the UAE, falling below real estate agents and telemarketers. A wave of digital backlash gained traction - “Boycott the Influencers” and “Unfollow Dubai Squad” - calling out superficiality, over-flexing and content lacking cultural value. New regulation followed: the UAE’s introduction of mandatory permits for influencer advertisements, a clear signal that accountability is shifting from audience expectation to systemic requirement.

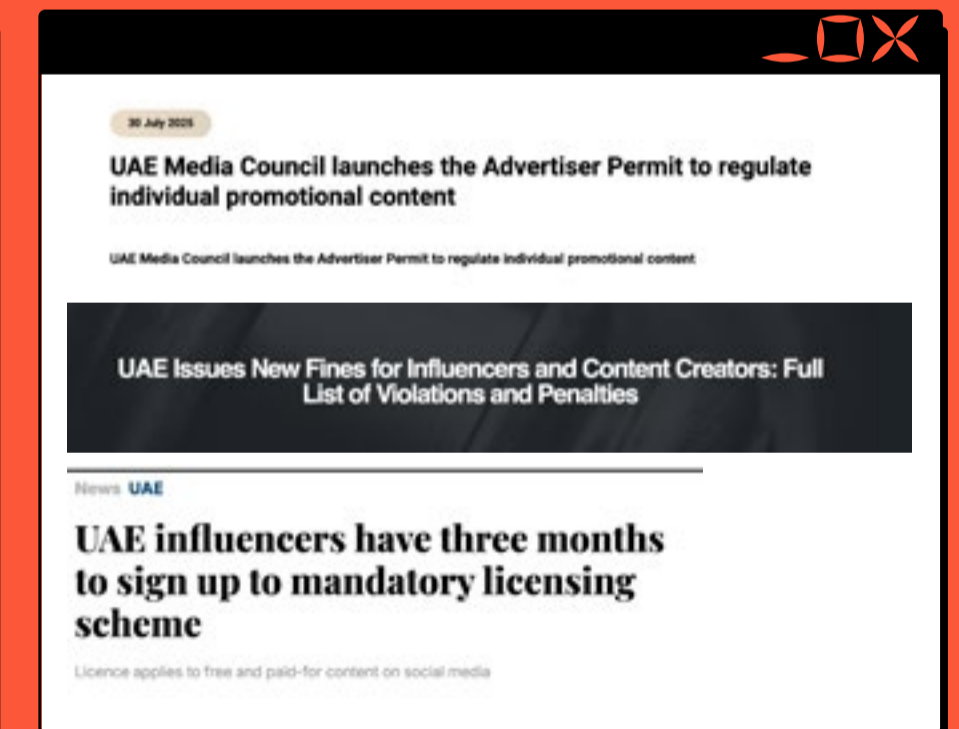
These are not isolated moments - they point to a broader recalibration of what influence should look like.



Influencers ranked least trusted profession



“Boycott the Influencers” and “Unfollow Dubai Squad” go viral



UAE introduces mandatory permits for influencer ads

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

It's time to reset influence to its original purpose - collaborations built on credibility, delivering value for creators, audiences and the brands willing to earn their place; not just pay for reach.



① THE RISE OF NANO INFLUENCE

Smaller followings, deeper trust. Nano-creators hold credibility in ways macro voices increasingly struggle to match. They speak within communities, not at them; and generate much higher engagement rates (4.59%) versus those with larger followings.

② CHOOSE CREATORS, NOT INFLUENCERS

Partner with people who genuinely understand and shape your category - experts, enthusiasts, cultural contributors. Audiences can spot a transactional endorsement instantly.

③ EGC: THE INFLUENCE ALREADY INSIDE

Employee-Generated Content is becoming one of the most authentic influence engines. From Currys in the UK to Talabat in the UAE, brands are empowering their teams to create content that is relatable, grounded and culturally closer to the audience than many paid influencers ever are.

A POST-TRUTH
WORLD

TREND

TWO

A POST-TRUTH
WORLD

A POST-TRUTH
WORLD

WILL AI UNLOCK CLARITY



OR CREATE MORE NOISE



Mark Haycock
Regional Head of Strategy
M+C SAATCHI GROUP MIDDLE EAST

“My scrolling has turned into fact-checking. Every post feels like a question: is this real or did an algorithm make it?”



Photo: Markus Winkler

As the UAE becomes a global leader in AI adoption, the question isn't just 'What can AI do?'—it's 'What can we trust?'

The GCC understands - perhaps more than most - how information can be shaped, framed, and weaponised to serve competing narratives. And now, as the UAE steps onto the world stage as the highest AI-adopting workforce globally (announced October 2025), another layer of complexity emerges.

The milestone is remarkable. But it arrives at a moment when we're also interrogating the limits - and liabilities - of AI at work. From hallucinations masquerading as facts to bad actors cloning identities, this new AI-powered era isn't simply accelerating productivity; it's complicating our relationship with credibility itself.

Will AI unlock clarity, or create more noise? And what responsibilities do brands carry in helping consumers navigate the ambiguity that comes with any breakthrough shift?

TRUTH UNDER PRESSURE

TREND IN MOTION

In 2026, the burden of proof gets heavier. Audiences will work harder - and expect brands to work harder - to distinguish the human, the machine and the trustworthy.

AI may be marketed as a shortcut, but in reality it demands sharper literacy. Consumers are already operating like digital fact-checkers - comparing sources, questioning outputs, scrutinising authenticity.

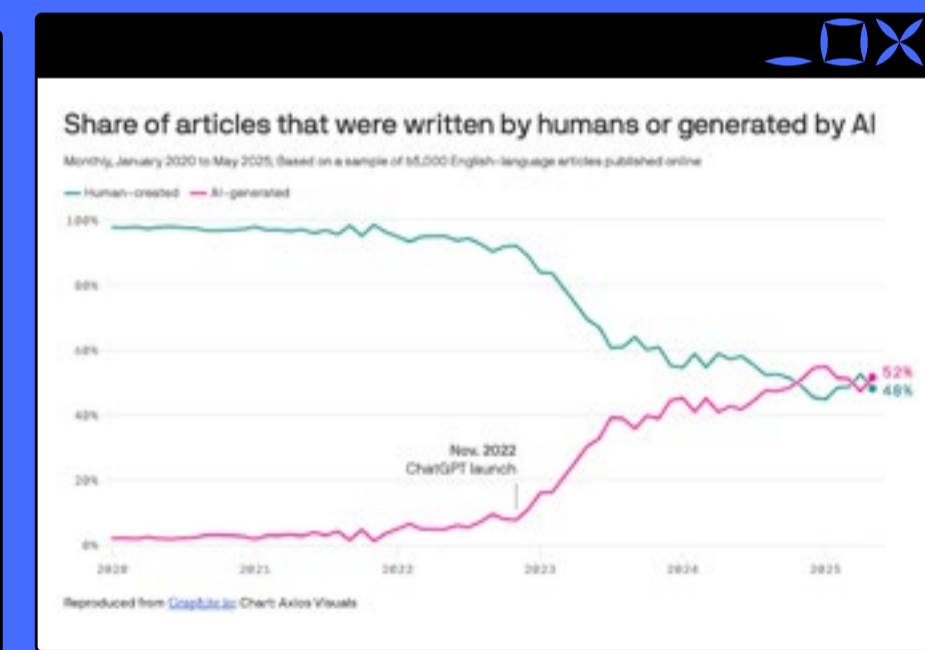
Early signals include:

- AI hallucinations becoming widely recognised and widespread
- Bad actors using AI to impersonate companies and individuals
- 23% of teens trusting AI-generated recommendations as much as friends or family
- AI-generated content surpassing human-made content in key categories
- Digital influencers entering the mainstream
- Emirates pausing social ads to reassess the role of AI content

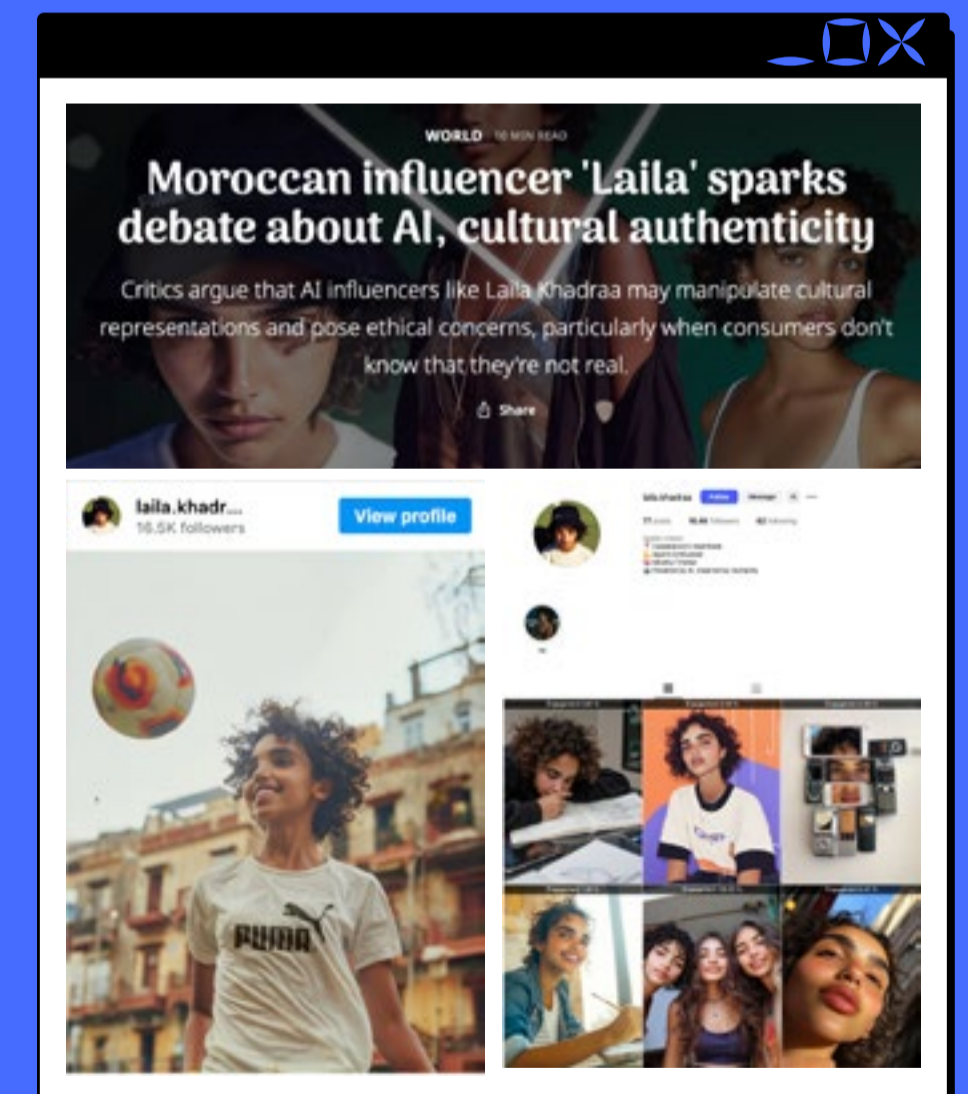
These aren't edge cases; they are the foundations of a new trust economy.



Emirates pauses all social ads



AI generated content overtakes human generated content



Digital influencers go mainstream

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

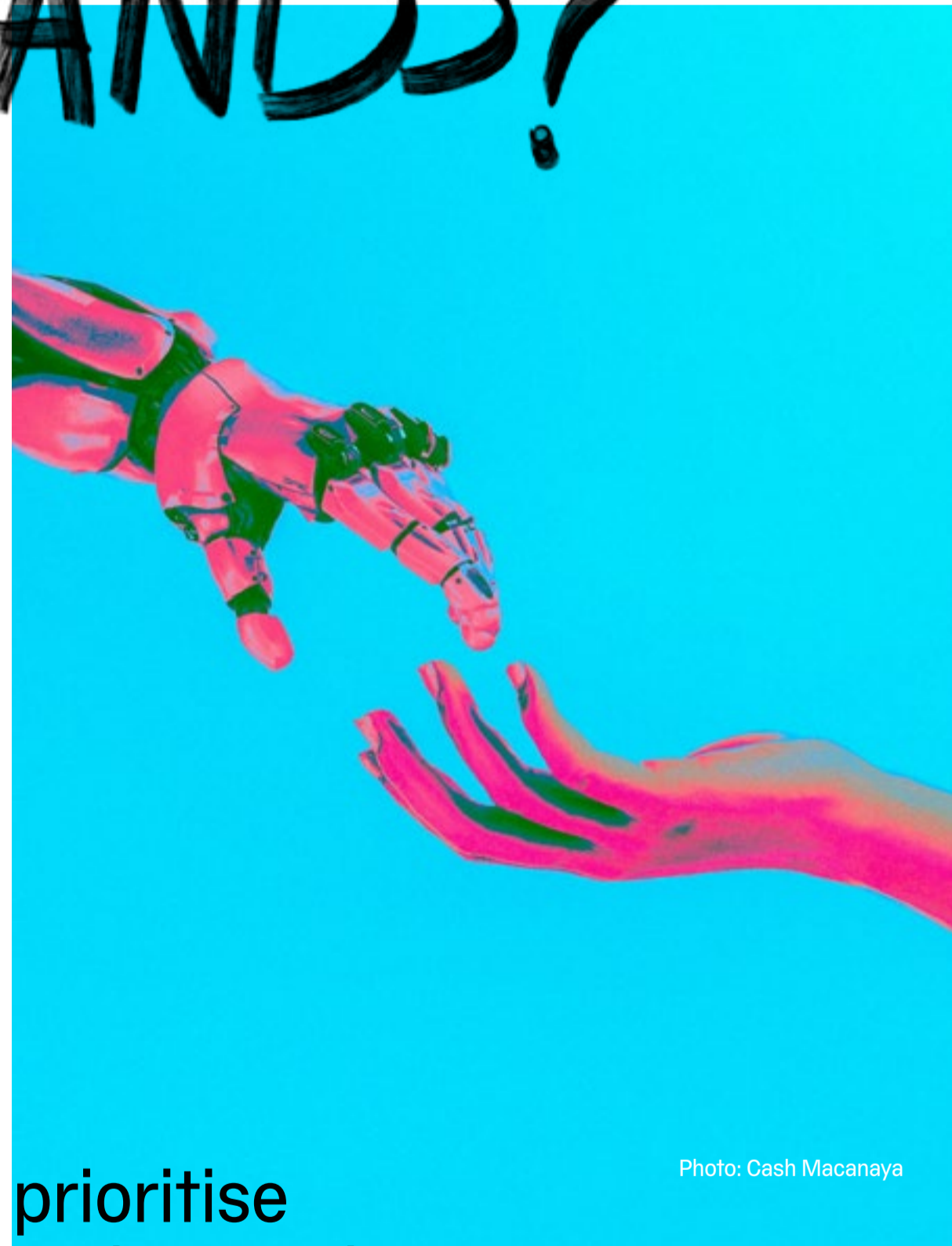


Photo: Cash Macanaya

Plan for mistakes, prioritise transparency and understand how to influence the algorithm.

① RADICAL TRANSPARENCY

A recent (though small) System1 study in the UK suggests audiences don't mind when brand-building content leverages AI. But when it comes to educational materials, product explanations or AI-powered influencers, concerns spike. Our stance: use AI responsibly - but be upfront. Transparency becomes a cultural currency, especially deeper in the funnel where clarity matters most.

② FROM SEO TO GEO

As generative platforms reshape search behaviour, a new discipline is emerging: Generative Engine Optimisation (GEO). Companies like geosurge.ai are helping brands surface in AI-driven recommendations by designing content for the algorithms behind tools like ChatGPT. If your category involves high-stakes decisions - and more consumers are outsourcing those decisions to AI - GEO should enter your media and content strategies now, not later.

③ CRISIS COMMS FOR THE AI ERA

Mistakes are inevitable. Tools hallucinate. Automations misfire. Content slips through. Brands need scenario planning akin to data-breach protocols:

- How will you respond when AI gets it wrong?
- What's the protocol for misinformation that originates in your own systems?
- Who owns the apology—and the accountability?

AI isn't just a new toolset; it's a new risk surface. Preparedness becomes brand safety.

THE ENERGY
ECONOMY

TREND

THREE

THE ENERGY
ECONOMY

THE ENERGY
ECONOMY

ENERGY*



HAS BECOME THE SCARCEST RESOURCE OF ALL~



Rafiwe Molai
Strategy Intern
M+C SAATCHI GROUP MIDDLE EAST

“The world feels more demanding than ever, and I’ve realised energy isn’t unlimited. I’m learning to be more intentional about where I put it.”



GCC youth are budgeting energy, the way previous generations budgeted money

Gen Z isn’t apathetic, unmotivated or aloof - they’re exhausted, and increasingly strategic about where they place their emotional, social and physical energy. In a region defined by ambition, constant motion, and high social expectation, energy has become the scarcest resource of all.

Everyone is craving connection in what feels like an increasingly disconnected era, but fewer are willing - or able - to pay the energetic cost of maintaining it. Long commutes, rising living expenses, family responsibilities, digital overstimulation and social-media performance culture all compete for the same finite reserve. “Protecting my energy” has moved from therapy-speak into common vocabulary.

Boundaries aren’t just for friendships - they apply to work, commitments, creativity and digital visibility. For this generation, energy is a currency, and spending it wisely is a form of self-respect.

SELECTIVE NOT ECONOMY

TREND IN MOTION

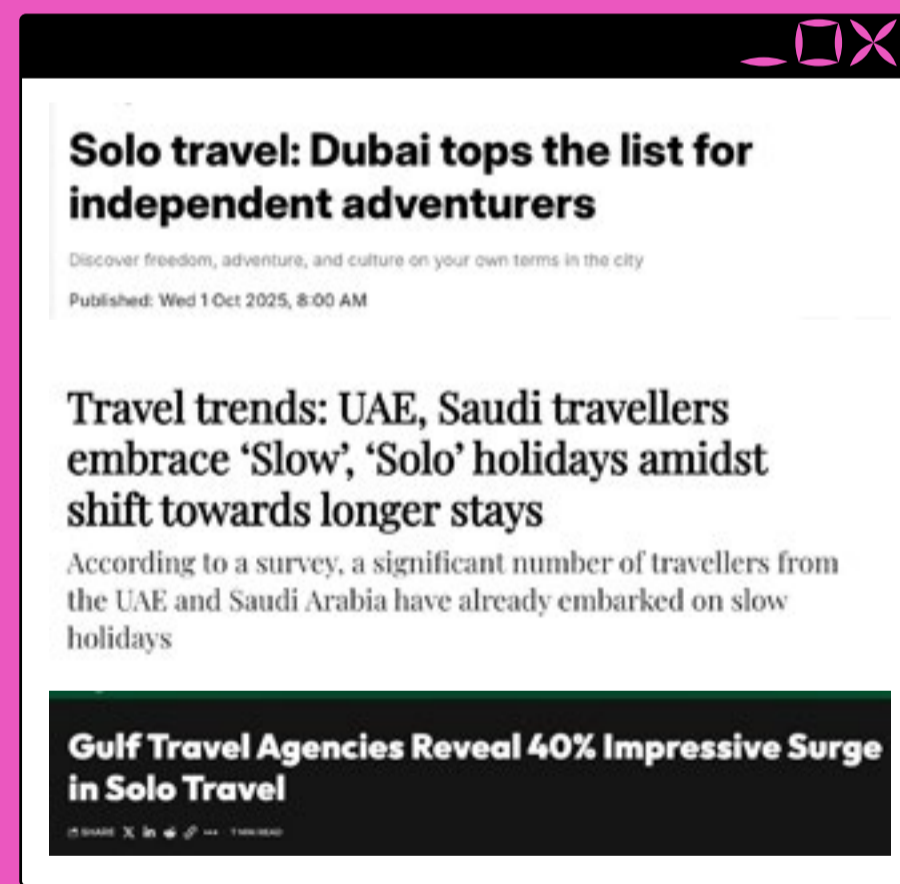
Gen Z is simultaneously the loneliest and most boundary-conscious generation. They crave belonging, but they protect their bandwidth.

The culture of “recharging” is now socially accepted. Declining plans is no longer taboo - it’s considered healthy. Rising burnout awareness, new mental-health policy language and shifting workplace norms have reframed withdrawal as self-preservation, not disengagement.

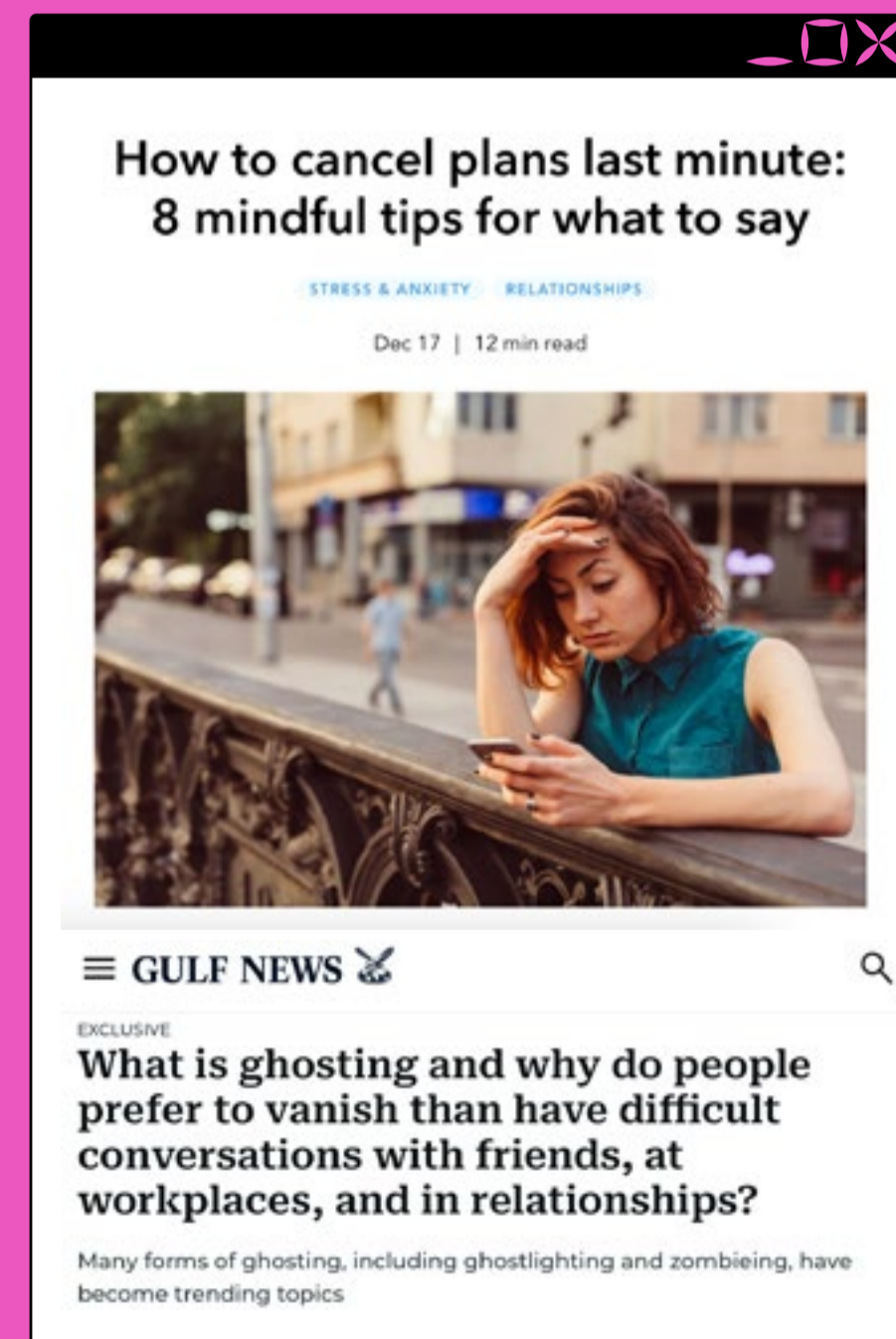
This shows up as:

- Ghosting group chats while liking posts about loneliness
- Skipping a friend’s dinner but watching every story from it
- Wanting closeness - just not on someone else’s terms

These behaviours aren’t contradictions. They’re indicators of a generation optimising for emotional sustainability.



The Rise of Solo Trips



Tutorials on how to cancel plans



Burnout and Stress

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

Belonging doesn't have to be loud to be meaningful. Low-energy connection is becoming a cultural norm - and a brand differentiator.

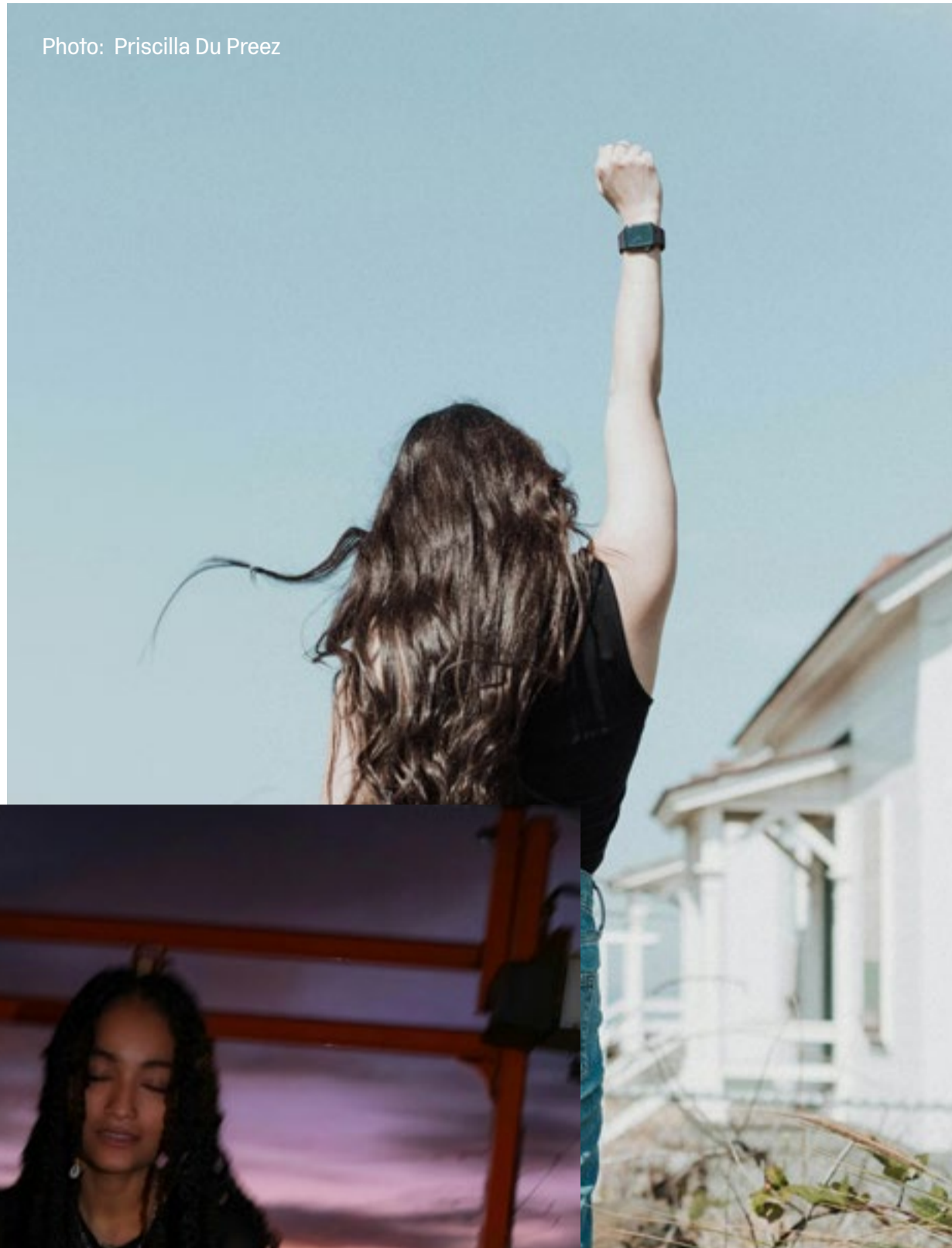


Photo: Priscilla Du Preez



Photo: Mike Von

① INVEST IN GEN Z'S AMBITIONS

Support the lives young people are trying to build - not just the moments they transact. This means backing passions, creative pursuits, side projects and self-defined goals with tools, platforms, collaborations and real opportunities. Career development should extend beyond job tasks to personal progression. Brands that champion Gen Z's growth become partners in their momentum - earning trust, relevance and long-term loyalty.

② DESIGN LOW-ENERGY BELONGING

Remove the everyday frictions that drain people: ten-step cancellations, cluttered navigation, always-on expectations and communities that require constant participation.

Gen Z gravitates to brands that conserve their energy, not consume it. Build systems and experiences that feel effortless to join, stay part of and step in or out of without penalty. Examples include: one-tap reorders and subscription refills, "pause anytime" features, interfaces that reduce cognitive load, low-pressure communities, "send-your-presence" gifting, silent check-ins and ways to show up without physically being there.

KEEPING IT IN
THE COMMUNITY

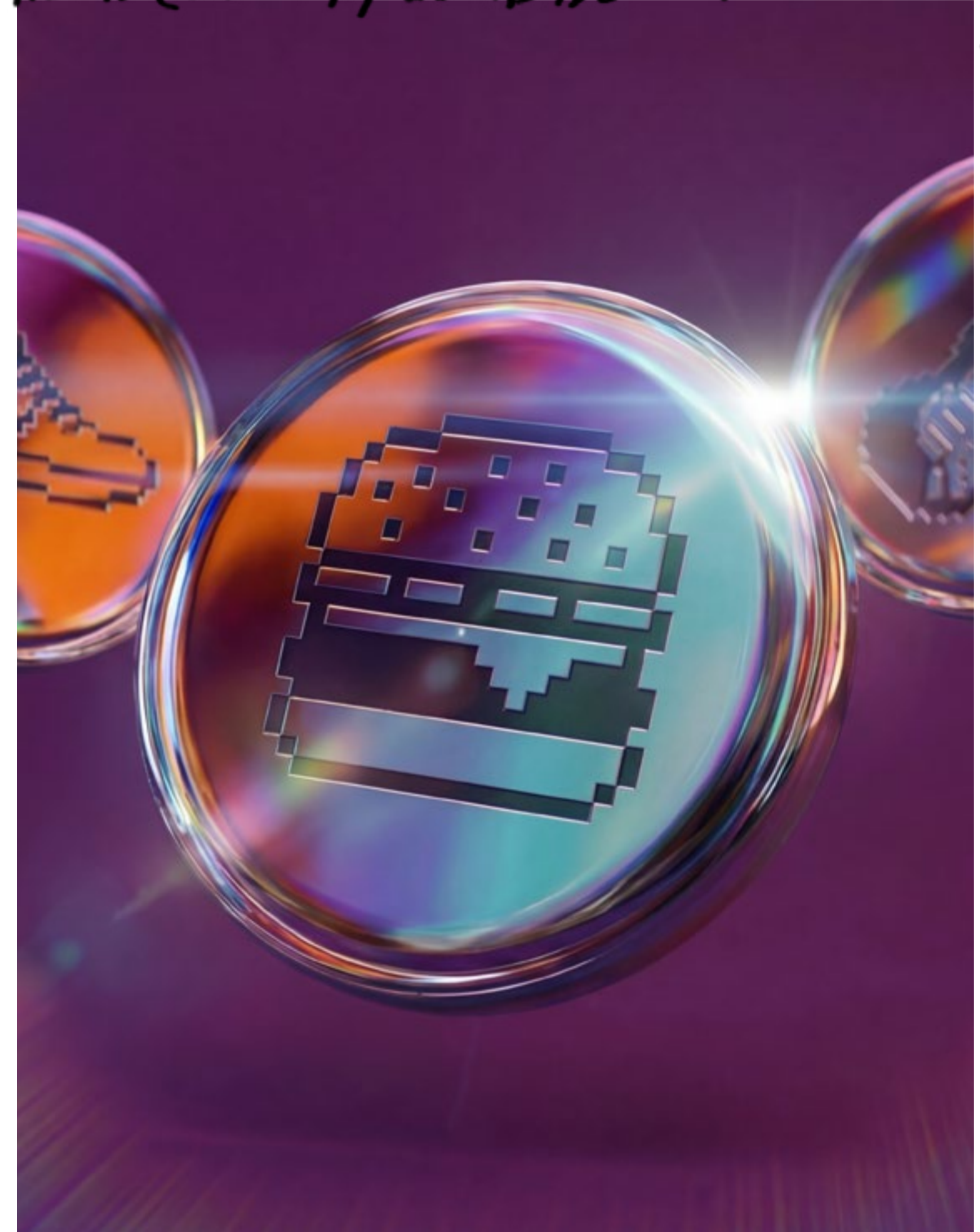
TREND

FOUR

KEEPING IT IN
THE COMMUNITY

KEEPING IT IN
THE COMMUNITY

THIS IS COMMUNITY AS IDENTITY— CHOSEN,



INTENTIONAL AND TIGHTLY HELD.



“Lately it feels like the most interesting things in the city are happening in smaller circles, shared quietly with the people that ‘get it’. If you’re not in the right group chat, you’re missing out.”

Oliver Garner
Production Assistant
M+C SAATCHI GROUP MIDDLE EAST

CURATED BELONGING, NOT MASS CONNECTION



From run crews to supper clubs, micro-communities became the real social engines of 2025.

What began as small interest groups has grown into a region-wide movement centred around micro-communities built on shared passions and insider culture. Across the GCC, people are stepping away from broad social platforms and gravitating toward intentionally small, tightly formed circles - spaces that feel protected, purposeful and “for the few who get it.”

From run crews to supper clubs, Discord servers to artist collectives, the desire for intimacy is reshaping how people gather, create and participate. In an era where everything becomes mainstream in minutes, these micro-communities offer something rare: cultural depth, trust and a sense of belonging that’s curated, not broadcast.

This is community as identity - chosen, intentional and tightly held.

TREND IN MOTION

Belonging is becoming more curated. People want communities that feel intimate, insider-led and aligned to their passions.

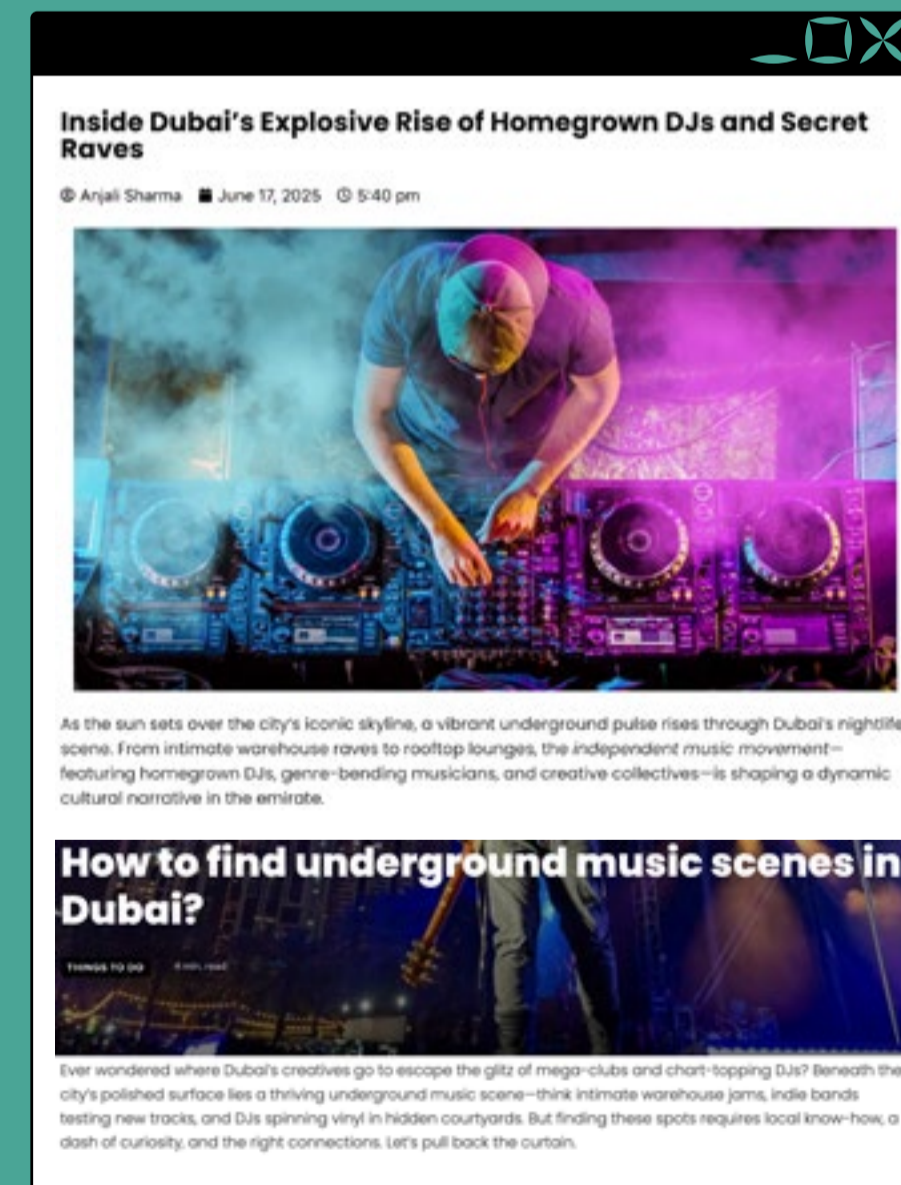
We're seeing this play out across culture:

- Run clubs are booming across the UAE and wider Middle East, with Time Out Dubai's 2025 listings showing a record number of groups - female-only crews, night runners, trail groups and hobby-led collectives.
- Underground music is accelerating, with guides spotlighting a rise in invite-only gigs, micro-club nights, genre-specific showcases and tight-knit listening communities.
- Supper clubs have become the region's best-kept secrets, positioned as intimate, RSVP-only dining experiences curated around shared tastes and small-group connection.
- Creative collectives are multiplying - from emerging-artist programmes and photography circles to zine makers and micro-studio communities - fuelling an underground cultural ecosystem built on participation rather than performance.

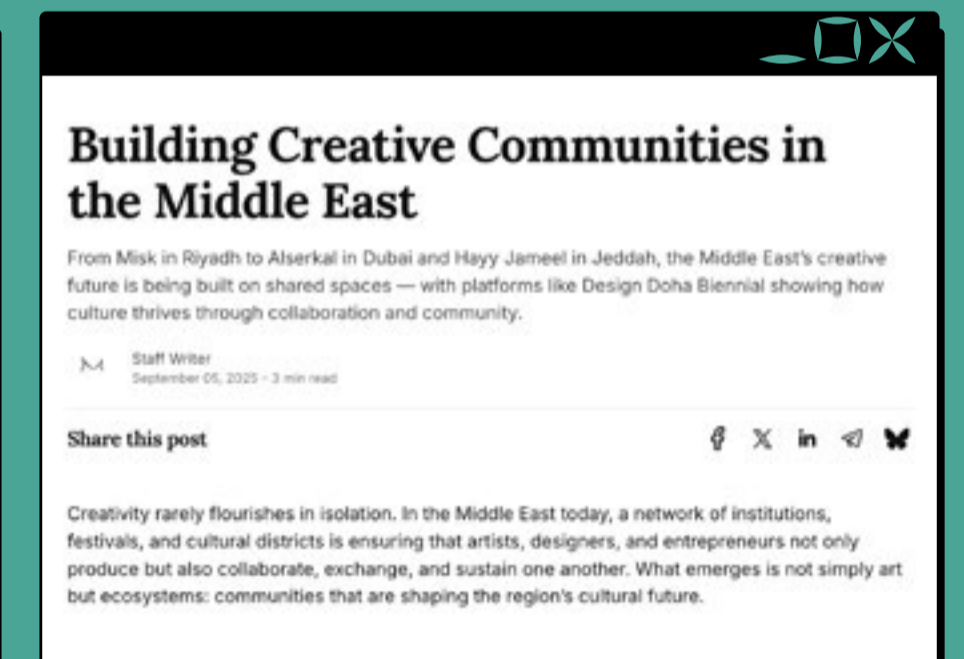
These spaces aren't just "smaller" - they're more meaningful.



Invite-only Supper Clubs



Underground Music Scenes



Niche Creative Collectives

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?



To resonate in hyper-curated micro-communities, brands must rethink scale, presence and intention. These groups thrive on trust, intimacy and insider understanding. If you don't bring value, you won't be invited in.

① ACTIVATE SMALLER

Go micro, not mass. Host intimate workshops, supper-club-style dinners, private previews or members-only sessions - and focus on adding real value to the space, not dominating it with brand messaging.

③ CREATE COMMUNITY-LED CONTENT

Let the insiders tell the story. Documentaries, portrait films, behind-the-scenes formats and low-polish storytelling can reveal the texture of these communities in ways polished brand content cannot. Authenticity and intimacy are the aesthetic.

② CO-CREATE WITH INSIDERS

Partner with the true gatekeepers: run-crew captains, underground DJs, supper-club hosts, curators, community organisers. Co-create experiences, products or content designed specifically for the niche few who truly participate.

④ BUILD TOOLS & SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Enable, don't impose. Offer resources that strengthen the community on its own terms - night-run routes, DIY maker kits, artist residencies, micro-grants, rehearsal spaces or collaboration hubs. Brands that empower culture get welcomed into it.

REWIND
REALITY

TREND

FIVE

REWIND
REALITY

REWIND
REALITY

IT'S ACTIVE RE-LIVING, RE-MIXING



AND RECONNECTING WITH FORMER VERSIONS OF OURSELVES



Renad Nahfawi
PR Account Exec
M+C SAATCHI PR

“Everything around me is moving so quickly that older references and experiences have become the easiest way to feel grounded.”



Photo: Erik Mclean

The world is accelerating, yet people are rewinding to what feels familiar.

In an age defined by constant change, information overload and relentless innovation, people across the GCC are seeking refuge in the cultural textures that once felt simple, close and comforting. As the region moves at double-speed - economically, technologically, socially - audiences are emotionally hitting “rewind,” returning to the aesthetics, sounds and digital imperfections of earlier eras.

This isn't nostalgia as passive reminiscence. It's active re-living, re-mixing and reconnecting with former versions of ourselves. It's a desire to feel something human in a world that increasingly feels optimised, accelerated and slightly out of reach.

REACHING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

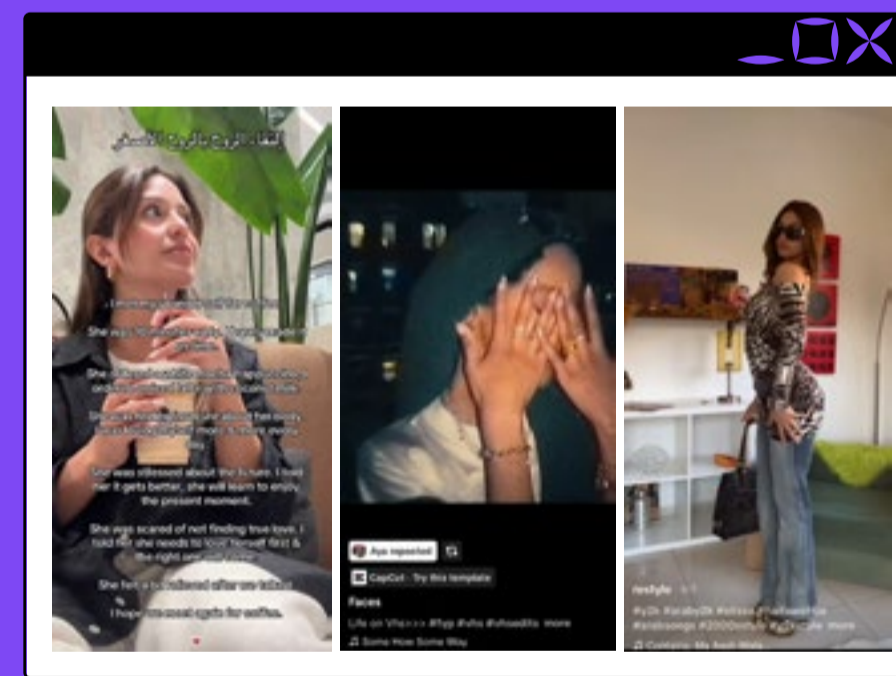
TREND IN MOTION

Nostalgia-driven behaviour is rising as people seek emotional grounding and cultural continuity in a fast-moving world.

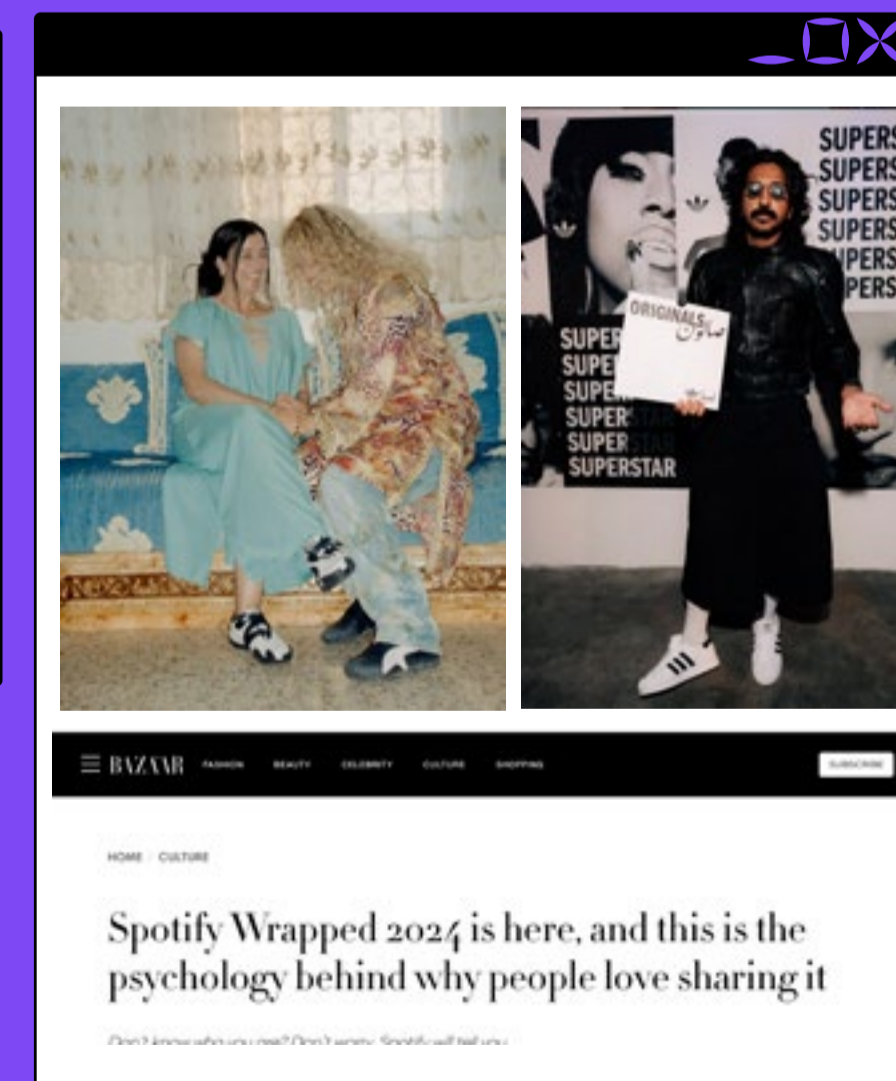
Across the GCC, the past is resurfacing - reinterpreted for a new generation that wants authenticity, comfort and emotional recognition:

- On TikTok, trends like “I met my younger self for coffee” are exploding, blending introspection with lo-fi visual storytelling.
- Arabic pop jingles from the 90s and 2000s are being remixed into viral sounds and ad-libs.
- Immersive throwback baqala pop-ups are appearing at festivals and cultural events, turning neighbourhood nostalgia into experiential design.
- Events like BRED Abu Dhabi, Sole DXB and Sikka Art Festival are incorporating 2000s aesthetics, archive references and retro-inspired merch.

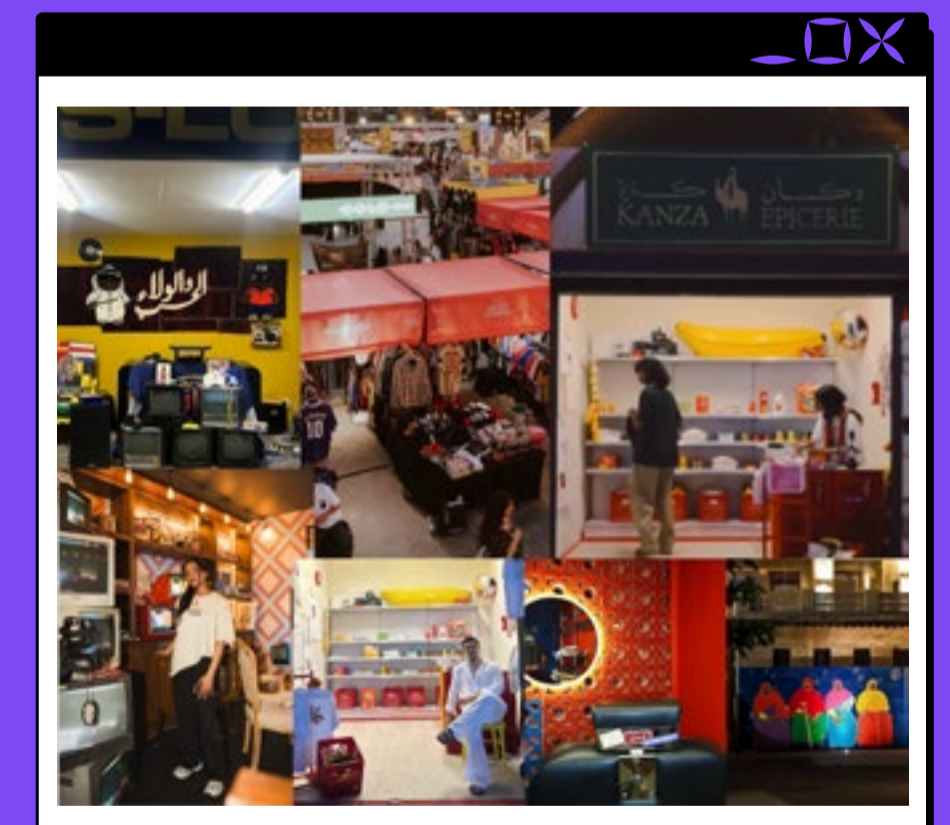
These aren't just nods to the past - they're emotional devices. They spark collective memory, create warmth in an overstimulated world, and give people permission to pause. Nostalgia has become both an escape and a grounding force.



Digital & Social Trends



Entertainment, Fashion & Archive Revivals



Throwback Spaces, Events & Cultural Experiences

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

In a world that rarely slows down, nostalgia has become the closest thing to a pause button - and brands that understand this emotional need will earn deeper relevance.



① BUILD EMOTIONAL CONTINUITY, NOT JUST CAMPAIGNS

People want to feel something real. Brands should tap into their own heritage - iconic moments, early visual worlds, signature cues - to create emotional bridges between past and present. Reintroduce familiar assets. Revive the details that defined your early identity. Lean into storytelling that feels lived-in rather than manufactured. When audiences recognise a feeling, connection happens instantly.

② CREATE EXPERIENCES PEOPLE EMOTIONALLY RECOGNISE

Nostalgia works when it's felt - not simply referenced. Design spaces, pop-ups and content that recreate the warmth, texture and imperfection of earlier eras: retro-inspired interiors and lighting, familiar soundscapes and jingles, archive-influenced design languages and creators who naturally embody cultural memory. The goal isn't to go "vintage" - it's to spark recognition, comfort and resonance. Nostalgia is not about looking back; it's about creating emotional anchors in a world that's moving too fast.

HEALTHSPAN >
LIFESPAN

TREND

SIX

HEALTHSPAN >
LIFESPAN

HEALTHSPAN >
LIFESPAN

THE REGION ISN'T PREPARING FOR



THE FUTURE; IT'S BUILDING FOR FUTURE SELVES.



“I’ve noticed a change in my own attitude towards health & wellness, my priorities for what I want to get out of it have shifted.”

Monika Prokop
Strategy Director
M+C SAATCHI GROUP MIDDLE EAST



We’re moving from the ambition to live longer, to the determination to live better for longer.

The GCC’s median age is projected to rise from ~32 today to ~51 by 2100, accelerating the urgency around healthspan, preventive care and functional ageing. But unlike Western markets - where longevity has emerged as a response to ageing populations - the GCC’s longevity movement is being shaped by something entirely different: a young, ambitious region; future-focused governments; higher disposable incomes; and cultural values rooted in vitality, purpose and family responsibility.

Here, longevity is not passive “healthy ageing.” It’s an active pursuit of capability - maximising participation, performance and quality of life across every decade. Health is becoming a long-term asset, embedded into policy, daily lifestyle, real estate, entertainment and emerging healthcare infrastructure. The region isn’t preparing for the future; it’s building for future selves.

LONGEVITY AS CAPABILITY, NOT CHRONOLOGY

TREND IN MOTION

We're shifting from surface-level wellness to behaviour that actively extends long-term vitality and performance.

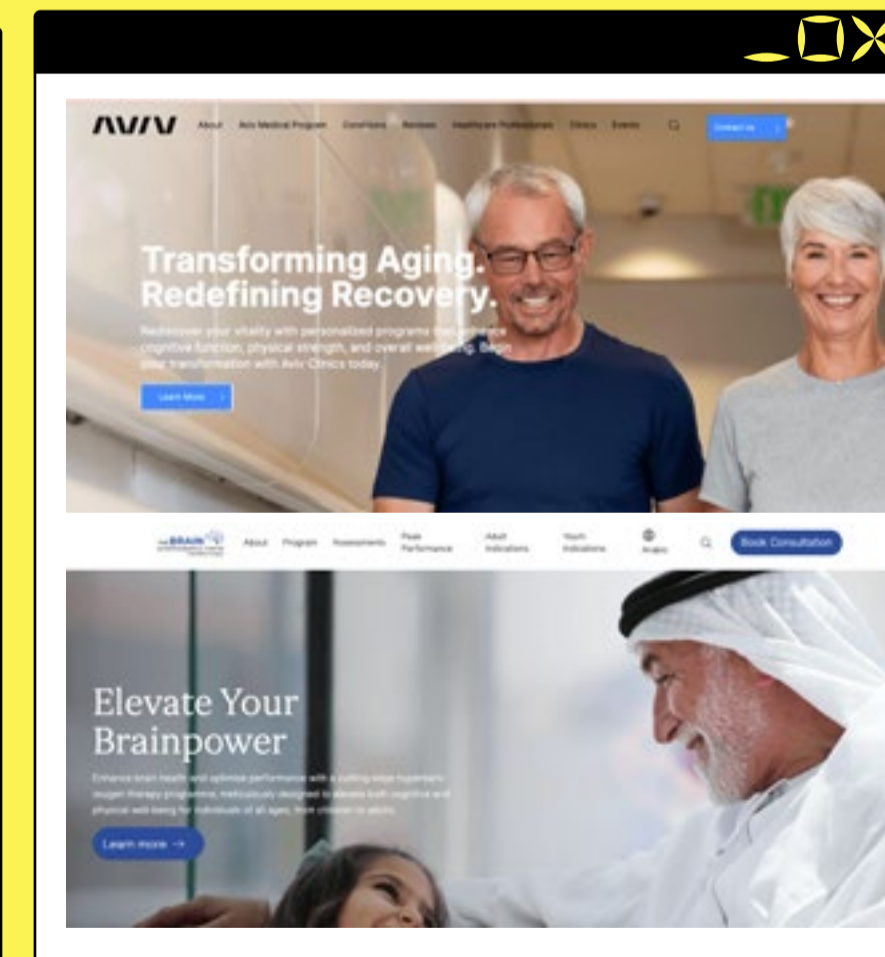
Longevity is spilling into hospitality, food culture, entertainment, and everyday routines:

- Sleep-optimised hotels, longevity-forward spas and recovery-led hospitality
- Functional cafés and nutritional concepts centred around regeneration
- Content formats focused on cognitive health, biological ageing and daily vitality rituals
- The introduction of Whoop Health Age, reinforcing our desire to feel younger, not just be younger
- A rise in cutting-edge treatments - from hyperbaric oxygen therapy to brain-health diagnostics
- Entire destinations, from longevity islands to next-gen senior living facilities, being designed to extend quality of life through environment, design and mobility

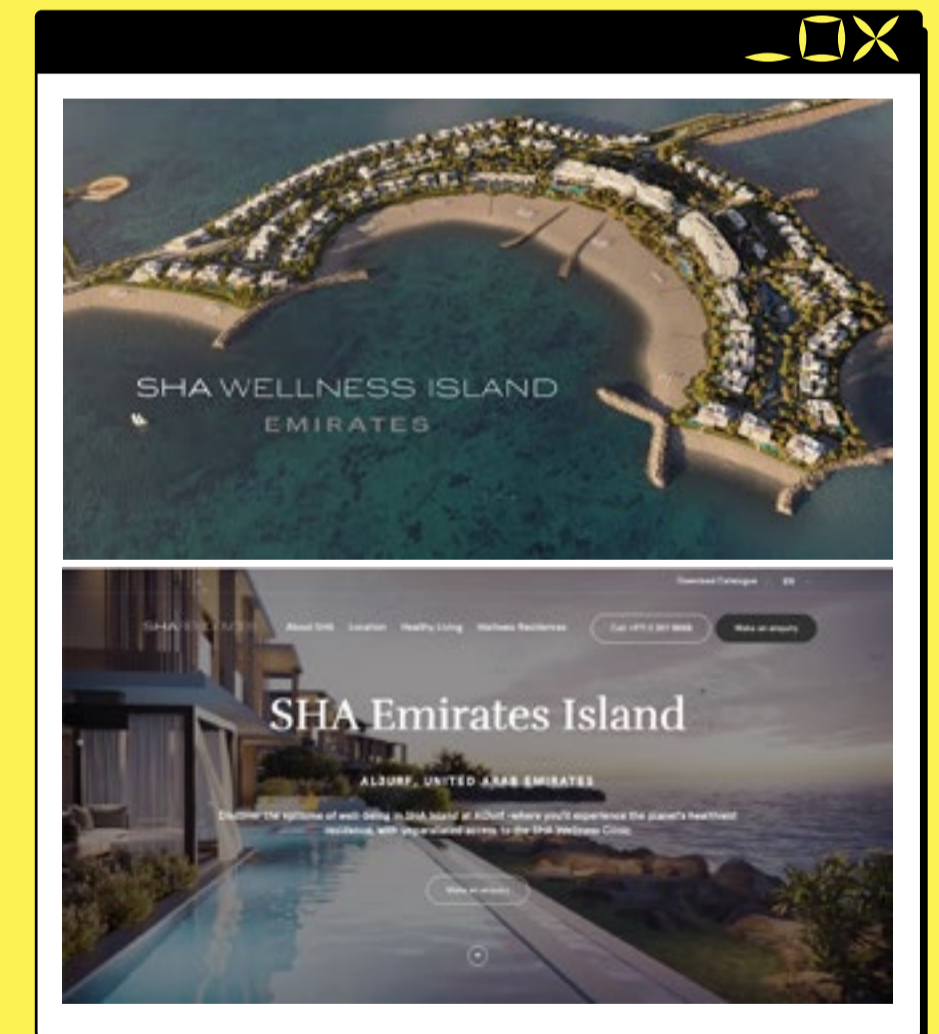
People aren't just adopting wellness habits - they're playing the long game. Longevity has shifted from niche to mainstream cultural aspiration.



Whoop introduces health age

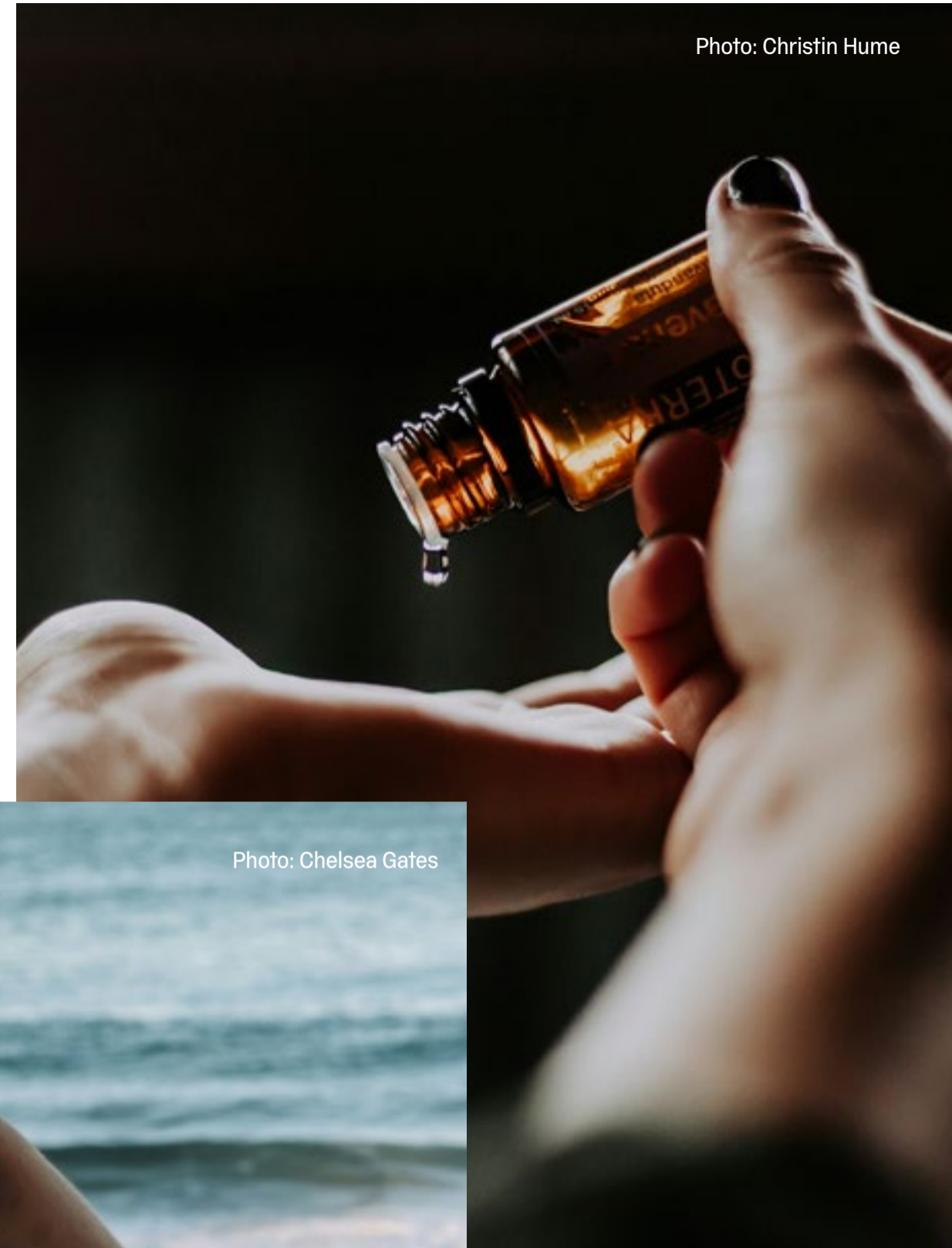


Hyperbaric chambers enter the region



The UAE's first longevity island

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?



In a region shifting from short-term wellness to long-term vitality, brands must design for endurance, resilience, and capability.

① TURN PRODUCTS INTO LONGEVITY RITUALS

If your products have any direct or indirect longevity benefits, highlight them in content, comms and activations to drive new appeal.

② ACTIVATE FOR LONGEVITY

If your product is part of the wellness ecosystem you can create distinction with your activations by focusing on this less-trodden but emerging topic of health span and longevity. Work with creators, experts and technologies that can deliver a standout experience that speaks to this emerging shift.

THE GREAT
ESCAPE

TREND

SEVEN

THE GREAT ESCAPE

THE GREAT
ESCAPE

ESCAPE ISN'T INDULGENCE.



IT'S PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF-PRESERVATION.



“In a hyper-connected world, the real premium is any space that lets people disconnect.”

Amanda Fox-Pryke
Senior Client Director
M+C SAATCHI SPORTS
& ENTERTAINMENT

OVERLOADED MINDS, OVERSTRETCHED LIVES



People are overstimulated, overwhelmed and craving spaces that let them breathe. Escape is becoming both a new luxury and a new necessity.

We are living through an age of polycrisis - relentless news cycles, digital hyper-stimulation, productivity pressure, global uncertainty and emotional fatigue. People aren't just tired; they're maxed out. The mental load is constant, the noise is unending, and the ability to switch off is collapsing.

In a region where ambition, pace and performance sit at the core of daily life, this pressure compounds. Almost half of UAE residents (49%) admit to feeling FOSO - the fear of switching off - during travel. Vacations may change the scenery, but they no longer cut the signal.

Increasingly, escape isn't indulgence. It's psychological self-preservation. People are searching for spaces - physical or digital - that offer a complete disconnect: from screens, from obligations, from the machine. They want to feel present again, grounded again, alive again.

TREND IN MOTION

In a world running too fast, the brands that offer true escape become portals - giving people back presence, clarity and emotional breath.

Across the GCC, businesses are responding with experiences that feel cinematic, sensory, touchable and deeply transportive:

- Immersive entertainment booms: New experiential venues offer entire worlds to step into. Immersion is no longer a novelty - it's a baseline expectation.
- Wellness escapism rises: Breath work pods, longevity lounges, cold-therapy studios, desert sound baths, off-grid meditation retreats - each designed to counter emotional burnout and restore nervous-system balance.
- Hospitality shifts from "stay" to "transformation": Hotels are selling journeys, not rooms. Think: curated itineraries, sensory dining, isolation suites, sleep labs, desert stillness, digital-free zones. Escapism becomes the product.

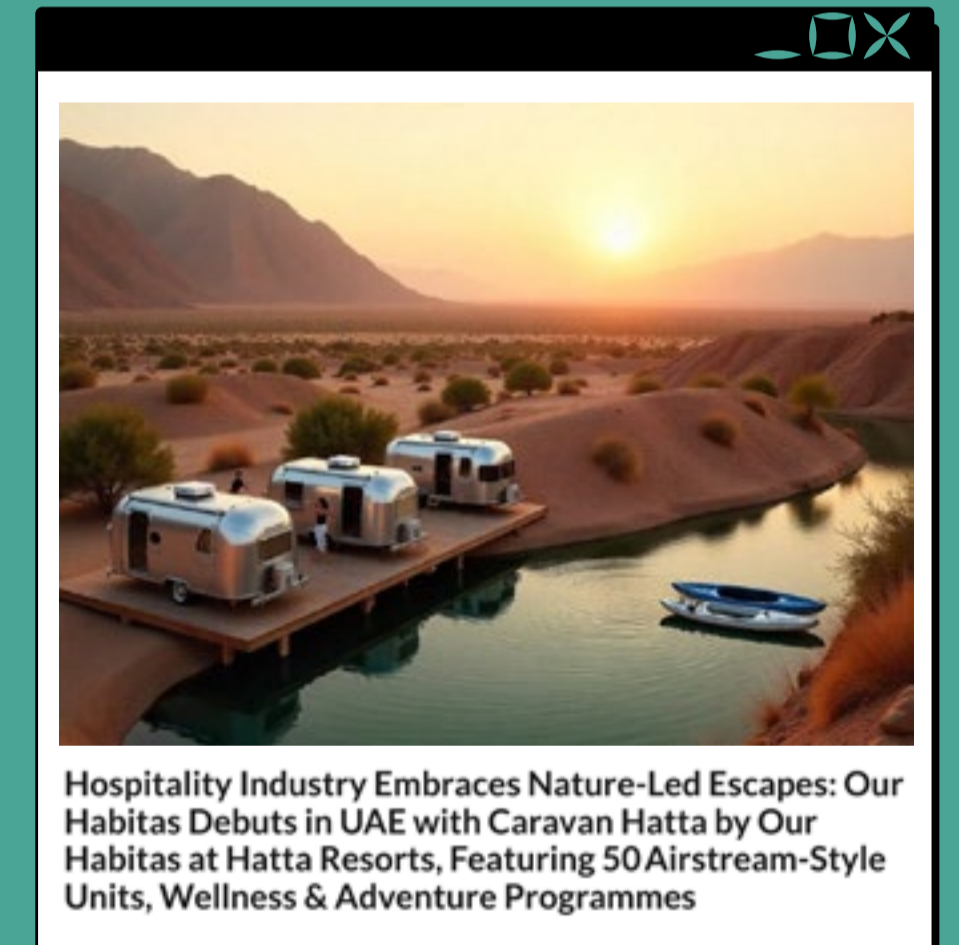
People no longer want more stimuli - they want a way out.



Immersive Entertainment Boom.



Wellness Escapism.



Hospitality Industry Embraces Nature-Led Escapes: Our Habitas Debuts in UAE with Caravan Hatta by Our Habitas at Hatta Resorts, Featuring 50 Airstream-Style Units, Wellness & Adventure Programmes

Hospitality shifting: "Transformation" over 'Stay'.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

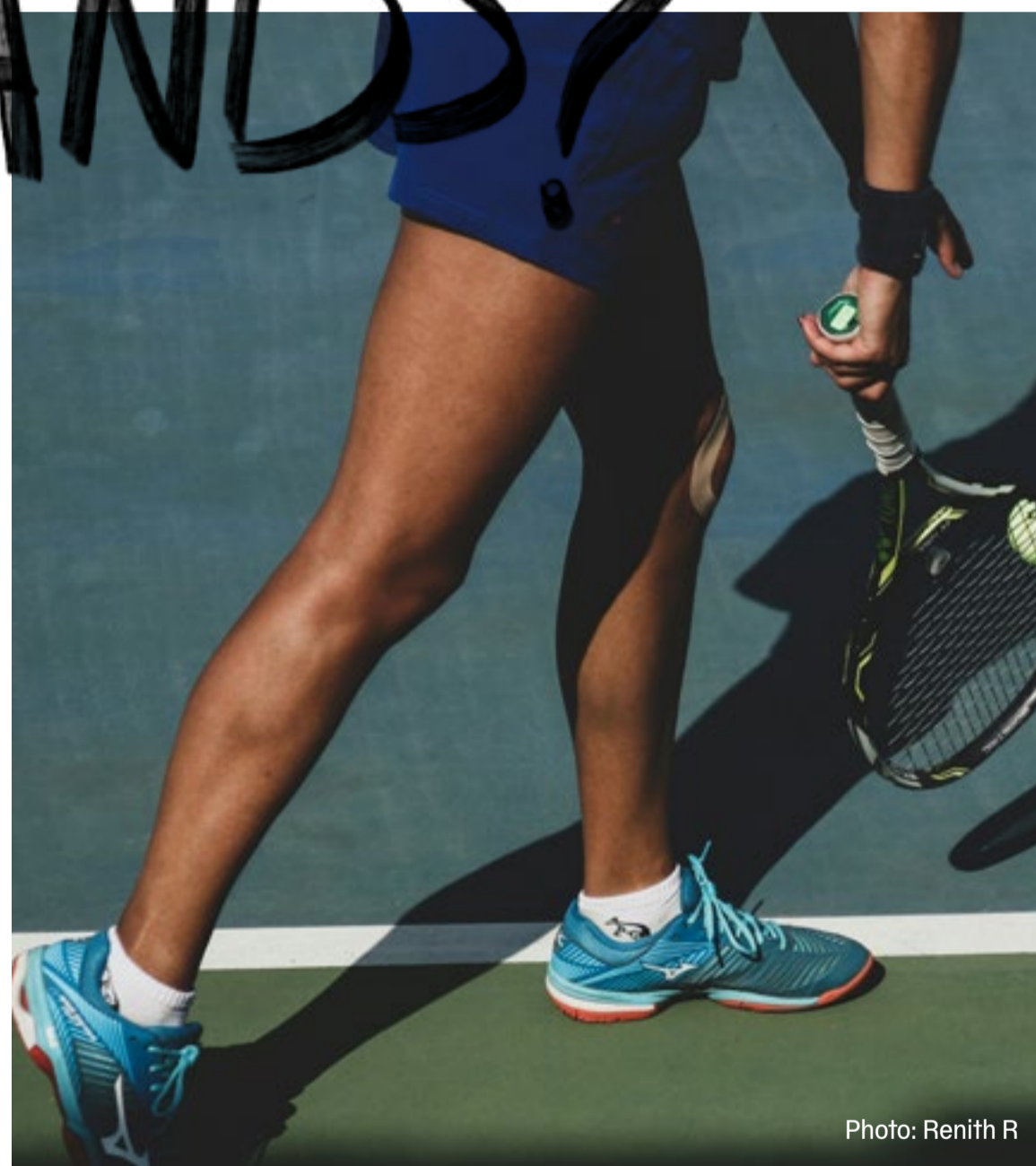


Photo: Renith R

As digital consumption accelerates through AI, new platforms and relentless innovation, people will feel more overloaded than ever. In 2026, the Great Escape becomes a cultural necessity, not a luxury.

① EXPERIENCES THAT TRANSFORM, NOT JUST ENGAGE

Consumers will reward brands that create restorative, sensory, immersive worlds - moments that help them escape the noise instead of adding to it. People don't want more campaigns, content or products - they want feelings. Relief. Clarity. Calm. Awe.

③ COMMUNICATIONS MUST BREAK THE DOOMSCROLL

In an era of digital saturation, the brands that win will shift from information-heavy output to emotional storytelling - messaging that interrupts overwhelm with presence, meaning and inspiration.

② WELLNESS AS A CORE STRATEGY, NOT CATEGORY PLAY

Wellness is no longer the domain of gyms, spas or fitness apps. Whether you're in retail, entertainment, tech or hospitality, your ability to support mental clarity and human connection becomes a competitive advantage. Ask: How does your brand help people feel calmer? Clearer? More connected?

④ SPORTS REDEFINED AS EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES

Movement = therapy. Sports, activewear and fitness brands must tap into emotional escape - not just physical performance. Design programmes, communities and narratives that restore balance, reduce stress and help people feel human again.

**CRAFT OVER
CONVENIENCE**

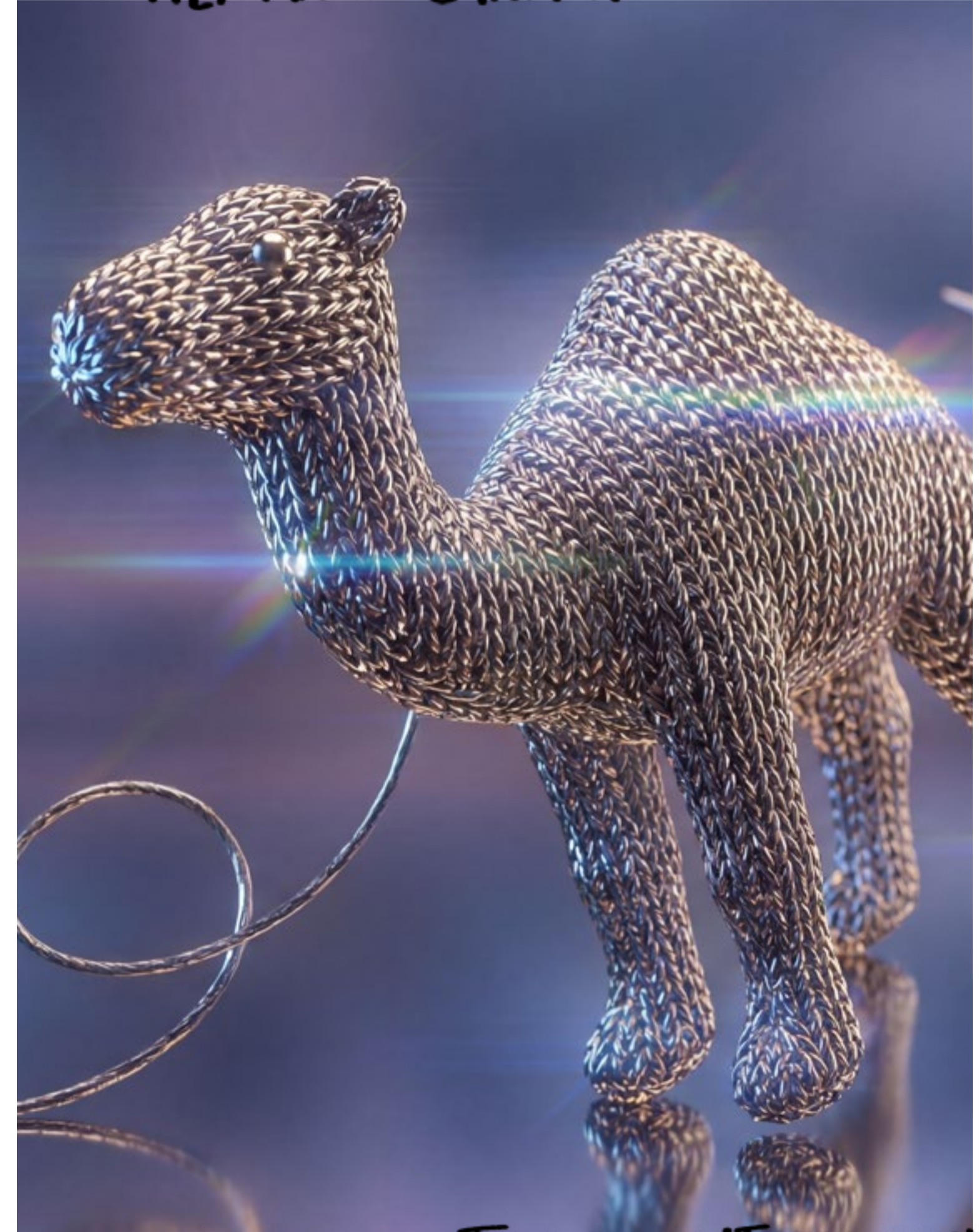
TREND

EIGHT

**CRAFT OVER
CONVENIENCE**

**CRAFT OVER
CONVENIENCE**

A RETURN TO CRAFT AS THE ANTIDOTE



TO INSTANT EVERYTHING



“In a world where everything arrives instantly, I am finding myself looking for products that feel like they were made with real care.”

Michael Ellis
Senior Commercial
Partnerships Manager
M+C SAATCHI SPORTS
& ENTERTAINMENT

THE HUMAN COUNTERWEIGHT TO HYPER-SPEED LIVING



In a region engineered for speed, craftsmanship is becoming the new quiet luxury.

In one of the fastest regions in the world, life runs on instant access. Anything - food, fashion, groceries, financial services - can arrive in minutes. But as convenience becomes ubiquitous, it loses its emotional value. Across the UAE and KSA, people are reaching for the opposite: things that feel made, not manufactured. Objects with visible skill, time, intention and story. As automation accelerates and digital life dominates, audiences are gravitating toward products and spaces that feel warm, human and crafted.

Luxury houses, regional designers and global retailers are responding - spotlighting materials, technique and artistic detail as new markers of modern taste. Convenience isn't disappearing, but a counter-movement is rising: a return to craft as the antidote to instant everything.

Craft is becoming a form of contemporary status - not loud, not flashy, but deeply felt.

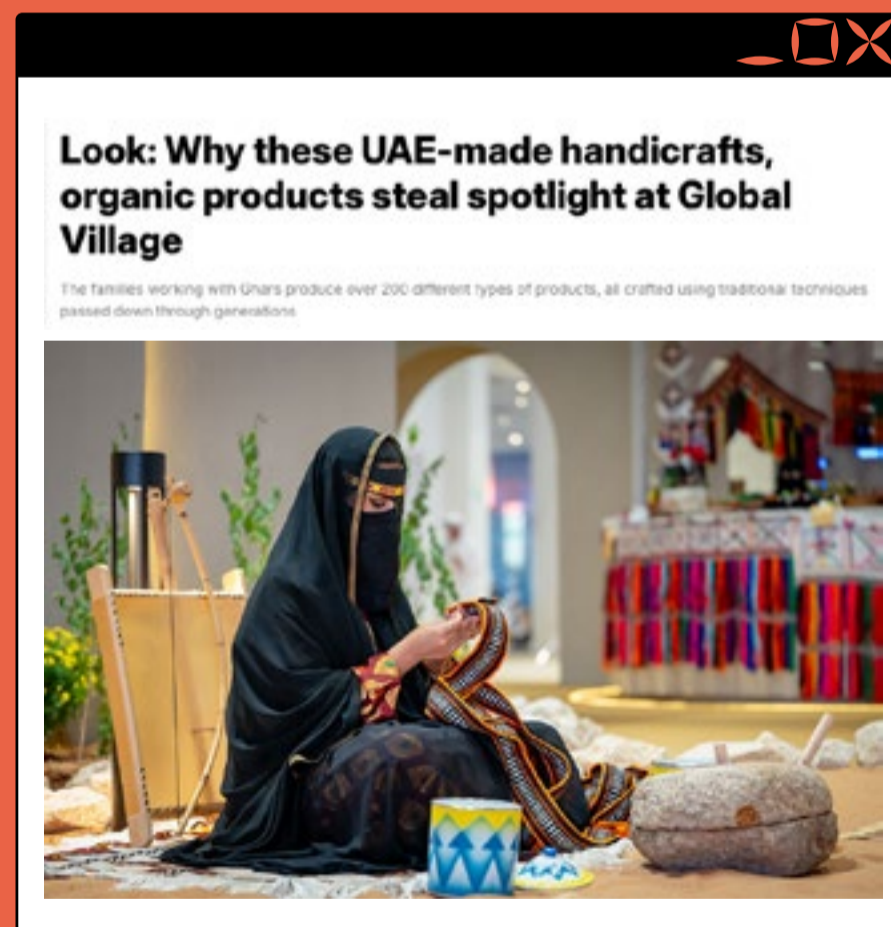
TREND IN MOTION

Craft is moving from niche appreciation to mainstream cultural expectation.

Across the GCC, craftsmanship is being re-centred through:

- Large-scale exhibitions celebrating regional artisans and heritage techniques
- Local producer markets bringing handmade goods into weekly culture
- Artist residencies and maker programmes elevating the creative process
- A flourishing maker scene at destinations like Ripe Market and Riyadh's JAX District
- The rise of mom-and-pop Instagram shops, selling everything from ceramics to scent blends
- Creative hubs like Alserkal Avenue showcasing slow craft within fast cities

These signals point to a shared desire to slow down, appreciate the process, and value the human hand in a highly automated world. Craft is not nostalgia - it's a recalibration of what quality feels like.



The resurgence of craft exhibitions



Local producers in vogue



AlUla Artist Residency

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

Craft is becoming a cultural currency. Brands that demonstrate the human intention behind their products will earn deeper trust and emotional relevance.

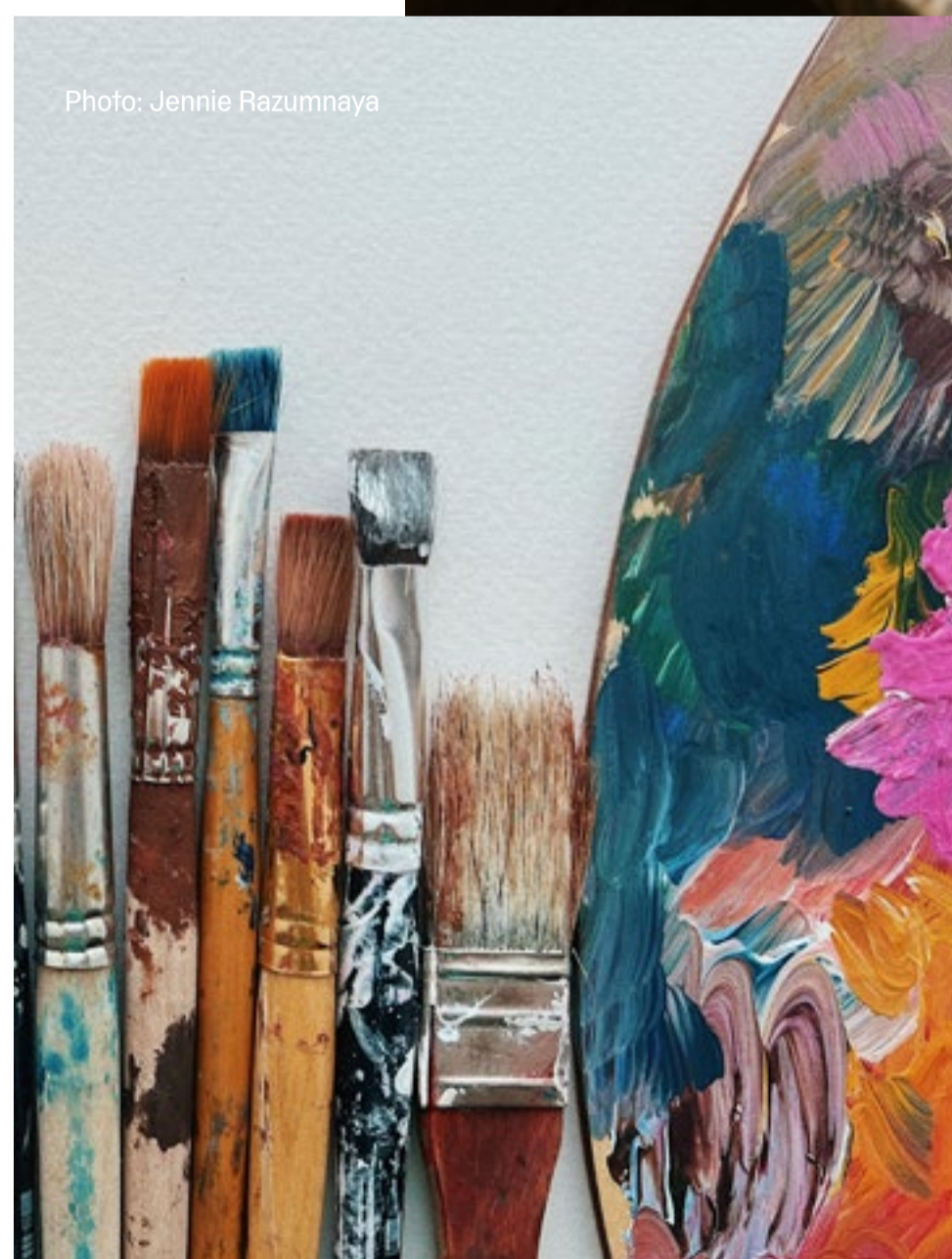


Photo: Jennie Razumnaya

Photo: Mojar Zhu

① SHOW THE MAKING, NOT JUST THE MADE

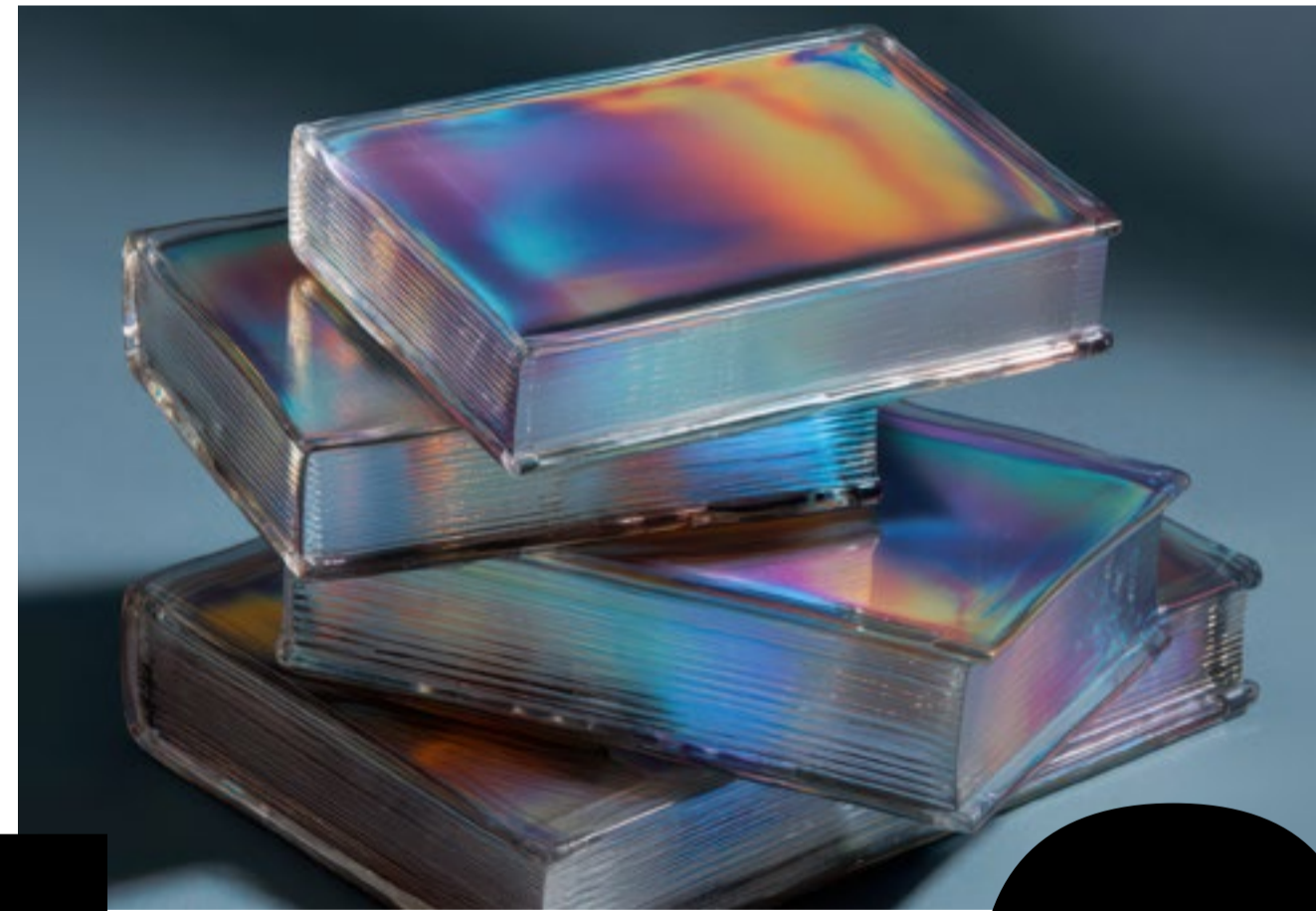
Turn invisible labour into the hero. Film the process. Name the roaster, the baker, the perfumer, the ceramicist, the designer. Let audiences see the hours, the hands and the decisions behind the final product. Craft is credibility.

② DESIGN “SLOW MOMENTS” INTO FAST ENVIRONMENTS

Within malls, festivals, hotels, retail and events - create pockets of intentional slowness: live roasting bars, engraving and embroidery stations, pottery wheels, scent-blending counters and customisation desks. Let people invest time with you. Slow engagement creates emotional stickiness.

③ COLLABORATE WITH REAL ARTISANS IN UAE & KSA

Work with ceramicists, weavers, roasters, painters, woodworkers and perfumers as genuine co-creators - not aesthetic props. Give them visibility in campaigns, in-store storytelling and on-pack credit. When brands elevate local craft, they anchor themselves in authenticity, culture and place.



IN SUMMARY

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

These shifts reveal a simple mandate: show up with truth, humanity and value.

In a region running at full speed, people want brands that help them feel clearer, calmer, stronger and more connected.

The future belongs to those who can read these cultural undercurrents and build boldly into them.

01

OVER THE INFLUENCE



02

A POST-TRUTH WORLD



03

THE ENERGY ECONOMY



04

KEEPING IT IN THE COMMUNITY



05

REWIND REALITY



06

HEALTHSPAN > LIFESPAN



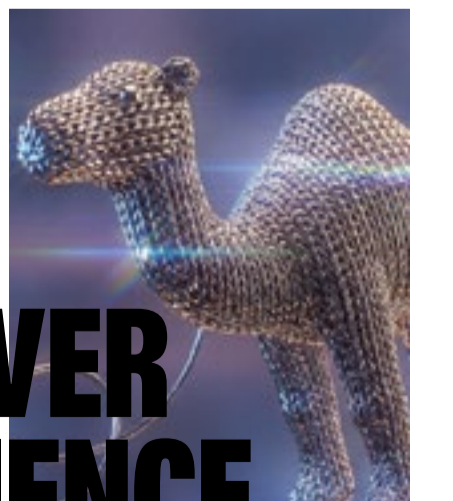
07

THE GREAT ESCAPE



08

CRAFT OVER CONVENIENCE



LET'S TALK!



If you're interested in building
Cultural Power for your brand in
The GCC, get in touch...

Mark Haycock
Regional Head of Strategy, MENA
mark.haycock@mcsaatchi.com

Authored by
M+C SAATCHI GROUP