



# CULTURED

**HOW BRANDS CAN MAKE THEIR MARK IN CULTURE  
AND WHY IT MATTERS**

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**M BOOTH ONLY THE BOLD**

**03**

INTRODUCTION



**04**

HOW DID WE GET HERE?



**07**

SO WHAT IS CULTURE?



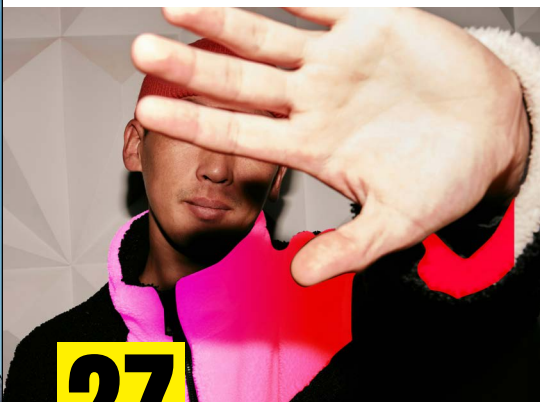
**13**

MEETING THE CULTURAL  
MOMENTS



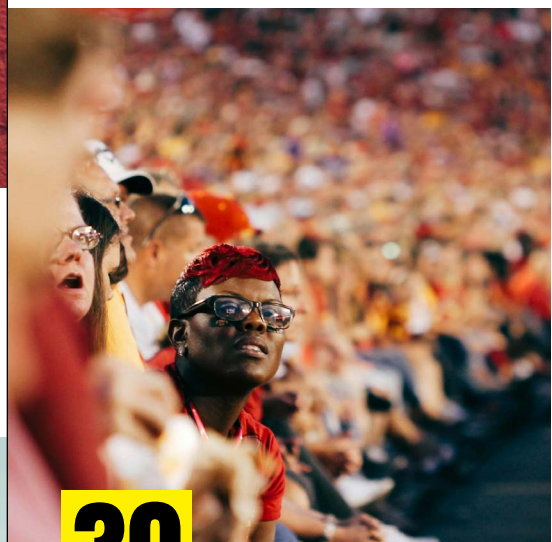
**16**

WHAT CONSUMERS WANT  
FROM BRANDS



**27**

HOW TO FIND YOUR LANE  
& AVOID CRASHING



**30**

A FUTURE FRAMEWORK



**35**

CONCLUSION

**36**

METHODOLOGY

**37**

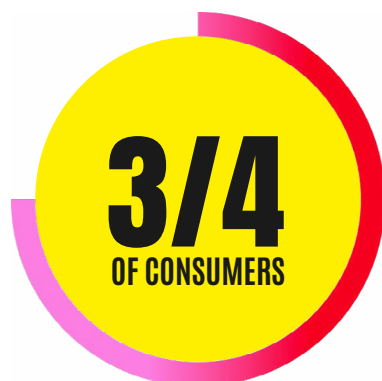
APPENDIX



# INTRODUCTION

**To move business today, you must move culture.** But how is culture defined today and what are the different paths to building an iconic brand through cultural connection?

Through our landmark research, “Cultured,” we sought to understand the opinions, beliefs and behaviors of consumers at the intersection of brands, marketing and culture. We conducted an online survey of 3,015 Americans ages 18-55, nationally representative of gender, race/ethnicity, age, geographic regions and household income. The robustness of our survey enabled us to capture a wide range of perspectives and ask deeper questions: How do consumers perceive and define culture? Do consumers see brands as relevant in culture? Do brands impact culture? And most importantly for marketers, do brands today have a right or even a responsibility to shape culture?



**believe that brands should be connected to culture at all times.**



The answer was resoundingly clear: our research shows three quarters of consumers believe that brands should be connected to culture at all times. But in a rapidly changing and highly polarized world, understanding culture is essential and complex. Brands can only bring unique value if they understand culture, find a space in it where they can deliver value, and contribute to society—all while minimizing risk or a possible misstep. Let's dive in.

A vintage television set with a glowing red screen, a desk lamp, and a teal background. The television is a classic wooden cabinet model with a large speaker grille on the left and a control panel on the right. The screen displays a solid red color with a subtle, grainy texture. A desk lamp with a brass-colored base and a glass globe is positioned above the television. The background is a solid teal color. The overall aesthetic is retro and minimalist.

# HOW DID WE GET HERE?

**M BOOTH** ONLY THE **BOLD**

A diagonal bar with a gradient from pink to red, extending from the bottom left towards the bottom right of the image.

For hundreds of years, consumer brands have existed in the context of culture and, in many examples, have catalyzed mass culture and movements. While we may think it's a novel idea that brands are embedded in culture, it's not. Brands have been ingrained in culture for centuries.

The first attempt to protect a brand from being copied was in 1870, with the introduction of trademark legislation. It was the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, and the need for brands to distinguish themselves became increasingly urgent as mass production surged and products could be manufactured in uniformity and therefore more easy to replicate. In an *Atlantic* article from 2011, Marc de Swans discusses how brands were born out of a need to **differentiate** from competitors that were rapidly copying one another in the mid-twentieth century.



## IT'S NO COINCIDENCE THAT THE DISCIPLINE OF BRAND MARKETING TOOK OFF WITH MARKET LEADERS LIKE PROCTER & GAMBLE' CREATING A DISCIPLINE CALLED BRAND MANAGEMENT THAT ASSIGNED MORE THAN FUNCTIONAL ATTRIBUTES TO PRODUCTS.

In this "Mad Men" era, companies began building emotional attributes into product marketing. Interestingly, and similarly to today, this was also an era of mass changes in media consumption, which fueled a rise in consumer culture, as national radio stations and network television channels were able to connect people across the country through popular programming and deliver ideas into the homes of Americans at mass scale. Artists like Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock challenged the idea of mass culture

and commented on the loss of originality during this period, while Black writers like James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison challenged the status quo by bringing new ideas to the public consciousness as the Civil Rights movement gained momentum.

In the early part of the twentieth century, something more subversive was happening: the birth of public relations, hatched by an early thinker on brands and public opinion, Edward Bernays. Often attributed

<sup>1</sup> client



as the father of PR, and a nephew of Sigmund Freud, Bernays's work for brands and organizations was unlike traditional advertising at that time. He used the psychology of mass audiences to examine how people lived, and to find ways in which his clients' products could be more relevant to consumers' lives. His strategy was to influence, not to interrupt consumers. He worked to integrate messaging and ideas into the fabric of what mattered to them on a more primal level.



The American Psychological Association [breaks down](#) one of his most iconic campaigns, "Torches of Freedom." The campaign, for the Lucky Strike cigarette brand, was born out of a business objective to expand market share by getting more women to smoke. The cultural norms of the time made smoking only acceptable for men. But after re-examining the systems of power in society, Bernays had an insight. Smoking, reserved for men, represented yet another space where women were locked out. He equated smoking with the power men wielded over women during the times. This thought led Bernays to an idea: he would encourage women to claim agency by smoking in public. He worked with Vogue magazine and enlisted socialites to smoke in iconic places in New York. Putting aside the negative impact on women's health, this campaign is regarded as an early example of how a brand can influence culture, and in terms of branding and sales, heralded as a major success.

While brands have been connected to culture since the birth of marketing, what continues to evolve is culture itself.

A man with a beard, wearing a white helmet, reflective sunglasses, and a dark cycling jersey, is riding a red road bike. He is looking forward and slightly to the left. The background is a clear blue sky with some light clouds. The text "SO WHAT IS CULTURE?" is overlaid on the left side of the image in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters.

# SO WHAT IS CULTURE?

**MB00TH** ONLY THE BOLD



## LET'S START WITH SOME DEFINITIONS.

Google Gemini summarizes culture as, *“the shared set of beliefs, values, practices, and material objects that constitute a people’s way of life. It encompasses everything from language, religion, and art to social norms, customs, and traditions. Culture is learned and transmitted from generation to generation, shaping how people perceive the world and interact with each other.”*

This definition is not a bad start to understanding what culture is today and why it is vital. If we dig deeper, the word “culture” derives from French, and ultimately the Latin word ‘colere,’ which means to tend to the land or cultivate. It shares its [etymology](#) with a cloud of words related to actively fostering growth. In “Cultured,” we queried consumers to help us further unpack how they understand culture and how it can help a brand grow its relevance and impact.

Our research shows that culture is vast for consumers. At its core, culture is essentially the context we are living in. Culture includes the ideas of our times, trends, social behaviors, and evolving norms of society. We build and sustain culture through art and communication, allowing us to express and exchange ideas. Culture today is fueled and influenced by many factors, but perhaps none as influential as the digital media ecosystem that enables ideas to be exchanged faster and on a larger scale. Demographics, new generations, race and ethnicity, along with the cultures we come from, continue to catalyze cultural change.

### SOME HELPFUL DEFINITIONS FOR MARKETERS + COMMUNICATORS

“FROM CORES TO AESTHETICS, MOVEMENTS AND MORE, THERE ARE A HOST OF BUZZWORDS CONNECTED TO CULTURE TODAY. CULTURE IS NEVER ONE THING. THERE ARE MANY LAYERS AND JET STREAMS THAT COME TOGETHER TO FORM A CULTURAL COLLECTIVE. IT’S A SYSTEM.

ADRIANNA G. BEVILAQUA, CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER  
AT M BOOTH



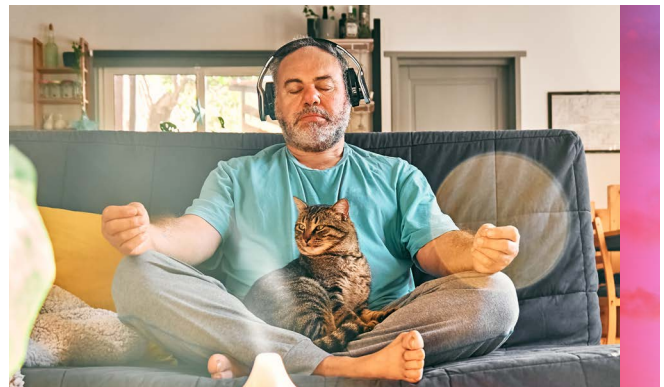




We've defined some terms here starting with what's most overarching to provide a framework that helps us understand the ongoing interconnectivity through these forces.

**Macro cultural movements.** These are big swings in our collective cultural narrative that connect masses of people in service of a larger idea. These movements can be catalyzed by innovation, art, science and social progress. Examples can range from urbanization to the mental health movement, digitally connected living to modernism and more. Larger movements around equality like the women's movement, racial equality and LGBTQ+ rights are all macro cultural movements that deeply shape the contours of culture.

**Trends.** Defined as a change in a situation or the way people are behaving over time, trends really note a change in taste or preference linked to a larger idea, i.e., a macro movement. The trend of meditation, for example, is linked to the larger cultural movement around mental health. Meanwhile, the framing of DINK, shorthand for "double income no kids," and those that embraced the lifestyle, is linked to a larger movement of young people delaying or forgoing having children for personal or financial independence.



**Trending expressions.** Some say that the concept of trends is disappearing due to the speed of social media. Or maybe the things we are measuring aren't fully fledged trends, but instead snapshots of a moment in time, or fast shadows of a larger trend that has some staying power. For example, mermaid nails are a trending expression of a larger trend, Mermaidcore. Some connect the origin of the Mermaidcore trend to the macro cultural movement toward sustainability and a yearning and appreciation for the [natural world](#). Trending expressions like these typically are powered by social media; in the early 2000s we looked at conversations on Twitter. By 2010 it was Facebook, followed in 2020 by Instagram, and now TikTok seems the preferred method to take a pulse on what's trending.

**Zeitgeist.** If Taylor Swift called her recent tour the “Zeitgeist Tour,” it wouldn’t have had the same ring, but it would have a similar meaning. Zeitgeist refers to a prevailing mood over a period of time. The early 2000s, for example, is characterized as the age of the internet. The 1990s have been framed as a time of relative peace and prosperity by some historians and grunge by others. Zeitgeist is a prevailing mood of the times that results from macro trends and movements. These are often framed in hindsight or upon reflection.



**Countertrends.** For every person who is prioritizing their health and wellness through exercise, diet and hydration apps, there is someone, somewhere, **bedrotting**. That is, opting to eat take out in their beds and binge streaming TV for large swaths of time as a way to unwind. Counter trends are the inevitable antidote to prevailing ideas. They create friction. When an overall trend becomes so ubiquitous that it reaches levels of fatigue, it will inspire a crop of counter trends that swing the pendulum toward questioning, disrupting, and ultimately, creating new trends. With the ease of creation and distribution today, trends and countertrends are fast and ever-present. Cultural stagnation is almost impossible.

“HIP HOP, BLACK CULTURE, AND GAY CULTURE, WHILE ALL DISTINCTLY DIFFERENT, SHARE THE SAME VIBE: THEY REJECT THE MAINSTREAM... OR MAYBE BECAUSE THE MAINSTREAM REJECTED THEM, THEY’VE REBELLED AND CREATED THEIR OWN WORLDS, LANGUAGES, CODES, RULES, STYLES, ARTS, ETC...AND THEN OF COURSE THE MAINSTREAMS COME BY TO SAMPLE IT.

LAMAR DAWSON, SIRIUSXM’S TIKTOK RADIO HOST AND POP CULTURE EXPERT

**Pop culture.** Better known as popular culture, pop culture refers to cultural products of music, literature, dance, fashion, film, internet, TV and radio consumed by the majority of a society’s population. ThoughtCo shares that in the mid-19th century popular culture referred to the cultural traditions of the people, in contrast to the “**official culture**” of the state or governing classes. Today pop culture is simply culture that is embraced by the masses without the same negative connotation.



**Subcultures.** These are smaller pockets of culture and communities that coalesce around a shared area of passion and cut across traditional demographics. Subcultures like weightlifters, car aficionados, yogis, sneaker heads, and gamers are often early adopters of trends and ideas that make their way into the larger cultural story. We wrote about micro-communities and [subcultures](#) back in 2016 and discussed how these groups thrive when brands and companies center these highly engaged folks in their efforts.



## COMPOUNDING CULTURAL COMPLEXITY: (SAY THAT THREE TIMES)

We know through our research that brands can have an impact almost anywhere in our society. Brands can shape social norms and impact politics, drive social causes, catalyze language, impact technology, and inspire fashion and food culture. But we also know that every brand can't go everywhere. The challenge for marketers is deciding what part of culture their brand can connect with in a meaningful way, within an increasingly complex cultural landscape. We have identified two growing factors that are making the cultural landscape more complex than ever: the size of our culture, and its polarization.

**The compounding size and scale of culture.** Today there is more culture being created than ever before. Seventy-five years ago, the United States had four broadcast television stations and about seven radio stations distributing programming and news to millions of Americans. This system of legacy media—newspapers, television and radio—dripped information out into society in regular cadences: the morning paper, drive time radio, the nightly news. By contrast, now there are [153 linear](#) TV channels in the U.S. and [200 streaming](#) services globally. From 2009 to 2023, the number of scripted TV shows created [doubled](#) from 210 to 516. We are swimming in a sea of plots, characters, arcs, and ideas, not to mention the memes, articles and conversations these shows generate. Now let's factor in social media platforms and think about the volume of content created with 5 billion people using social media in 2024 alone. The size and scale of today's media landscape is like

trying to understand the size of the universe; the volume is hard to comprehend and it's continually expanding in all directions.

**Growing polarization within culture.** The World Economic Forum classified [societal and political polarization](#) as one of the top three largest global risks. Vanderbilt University [reported](#) earlier this year that political polarization continues to be a divisive force in America. As we hone in on the U.S. specifically, we see that extremism is actually happening in the middle. In a [dialogue with PBS](#), historian Kevin Boyle says, "the level of polarization in the United States today, the sense of division that makes people in the mainstream — and that's the extraordinary thing — in the mainstream see their political opponents as enemies, that's a really dangerous and accelerating situation in the United States today."

This combative situation creates an environment of distrust and animosity that can hinder confidence in institutions, including brands and the media, and hamper the important innovation and technological progress that can happen when we work together. So what is different from 50 years ago? What's driving this change? Digital and social media **algorithms** feed us information based on the things we previously searched for, are naturally interested in, or have stopped and watched. Algorithms, at their core, create a cycle of confirmation bias that can manufacture extremism. It's been widely documented, for example, that on social media anyone searching for diets will get fed tips and videos around **disordered eating**. These echo chambers can become dangerous in shaping our opinions and habits, particularly as they align with political agendas. Outlets like Straight Arrow News, a news site dedicated to unbiased reporting of facts and balanced opinions, are starting to show how one event can spark an array of headlines, ranging from liberal extremes to conservative extremes. It's important to remember that media outlets today are competing for eyeballs and often the hyperbolic headline will be the most attention-getting. This cycle drives more polarization.





# MEETING THE CULTURAL MOMENT

**MBOOTH**

**ONLY THE BOLD**



The ability to meet the cultural moment has been a hot topic this election season for both candidates and their attempts to do so reveal the power of culture when the stakes are highest.

CULTURAL HEADWINDS IMPACT BRANDS

David Brooks, an opinion editor at *The New York Times*, [writes](#) that, “American culture changes with astonishing speed. Nearly every decade, there are shifts in values, fashions and norms – in the whole atmosphere of national life. Sometimes when you’re watching a presidential campaign, it is best to ask: What year is it? What values and moods are dominant in America right now? Which candidate just seems right for this moment, and which candidate is simply out of step with the zeitgeist?”

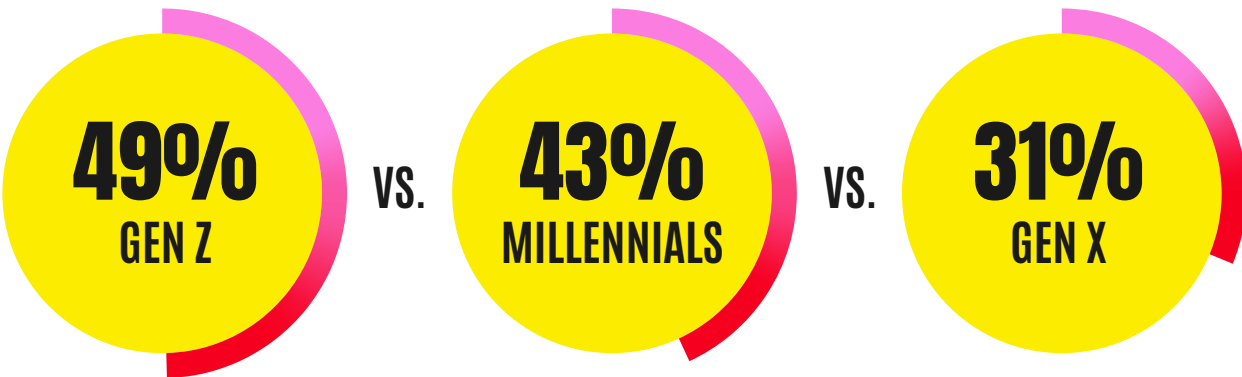
As we look at the cultural landscape pre-election, we see the candidates of both parties leaning in. Brooks’s opinion came to life this summer when Kamala Harris leveraged one of the biggest trends of the year, Brat Summer. A trend that was about being candidly

oneself, even if a bit messy and uncensored. When an edited video meant to hurt Harris made its way to the internet showing her on loop laughing with seemingly disconnected thoughts, Charli XCX anointed the candidate as Brat. The Harris campaign immediately mixed social media memes and transformed her social media HQ to Brat green. Even though Charli XCX came out saying that her art was not political, Harris’s campaign had already seized the moment to drive a surge of support from younger voters. Did the content change minds? That part is unclear. But it did motivate a younger generation to [engage more heavily](#) in her campaign. It’s no surprise that viral iconography was front and center, since our research revealed the importance of memes and social media trends for younger generations.

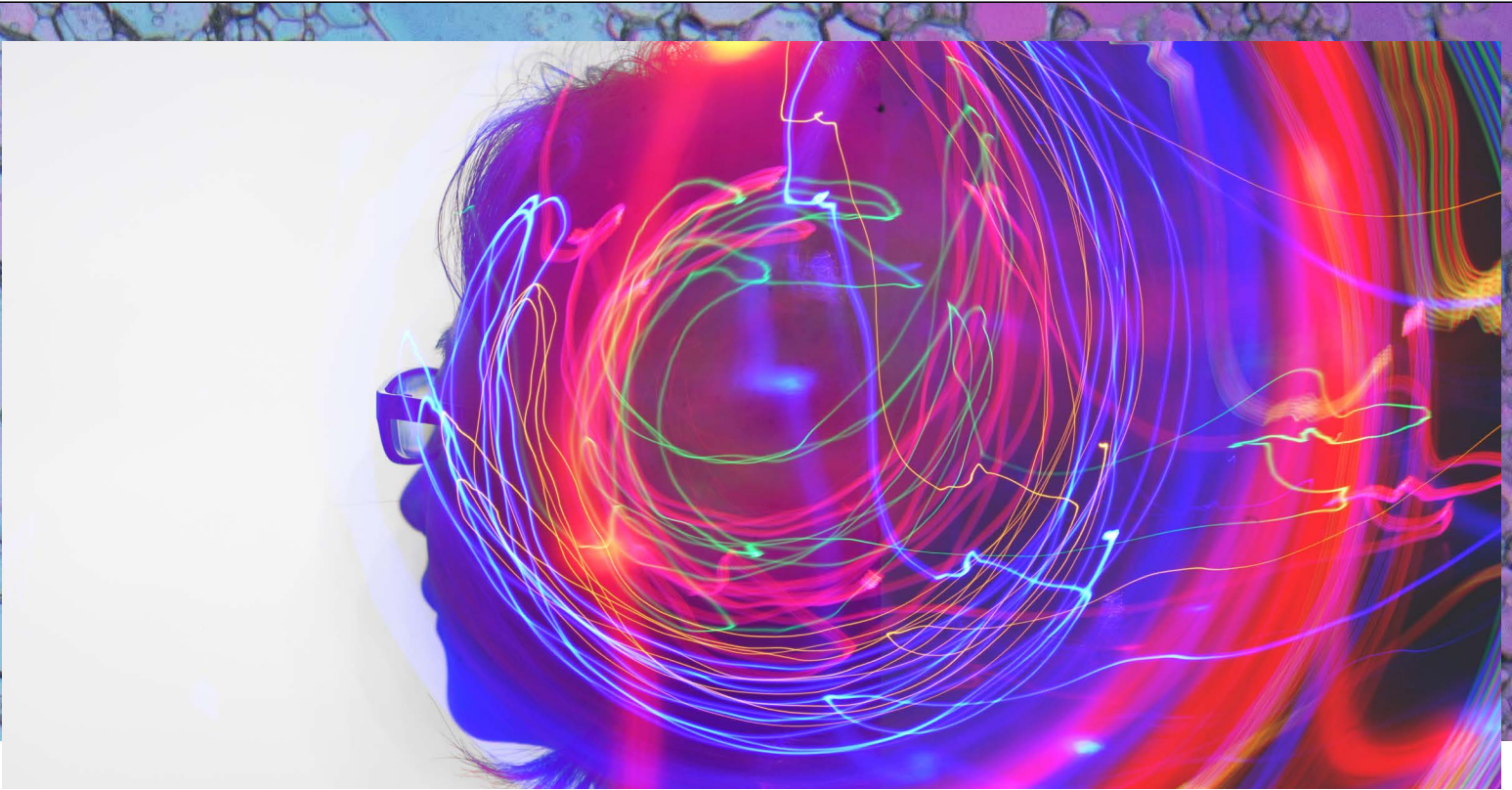
**41%** OF RESPONDENTS BELIEVE BRANDS ARE CULTURALLY RELEVANT WHEN THEY PARTICIPATE IN POPULAR INTERNET MEMES OR SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS



A BELIEF THAT IS MORE PRONOUNCED AMONG...







On the other side of the ticket, we also see former President Trump leveraging influencer marketing in an unprecedented way for his party. For those unfamiliar with Jessica Krause, better known as House In Habit, take note. Krause, a former Democrat who is endorsing Trump, has one of the top 10 [highest earning](#) newsletters on Substack and has been granted [unique access](#) to his

campaign this year. From epic boat parades to family fireside chats with the Trump clan, Krause has caught the in-between moments of his campaign through a unique and intimate lens. The result? Instagram-worthy content on the campaign trail that humanizes Trump and his followers, served on the hour, to her well-heeled followership of 1.3M across the political spectrum.



# WHAT CONSUMERS WANT FROM BRANDS

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## LET'S GET CULTURED

In a world where culture is so fragmented and audiences are so contrary, we had to ask the hard question: Do brands even belong in the fabric of culture? We've seen brands across categories make missteps, even with the best of intentions. Is the risk worth the reward? Spoiler alert: It is.

**“OUR PROPRIETARY STUDY, “CULTURED,” BOTH CHALLENGED AND CONFIRMED OUR HYPOTHESES AROUND BRANDS AND CULTURE, BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY, THE DATA EXPANDED OUR THINKING ABOUT THE ROLES BRANDS CAN PLAY IN CULTURE BY BRINGING MORE RIGOR AND SPECIFICITY TO THE PRACTICE.**

BONNIE ULMAN MILLER, CHIEF RESEARCH & INSIGHTS OFFICER AT M BOOTH

### IT'S CONFIRMED. BRANDS HAVE A PLACE IN CULTURE.

Our research showed three quarters of consumers believe that brands should be *connected* to culture at all times. We also learned that 83% of consumers say culture influences brands and 77% say that brands influence culture which can fuel a cycle that can give a brand staying power.

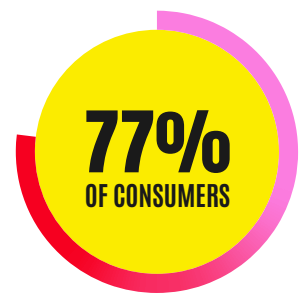
In the summer of 2023 the film *Barbie* demonstrated what can happen when a brand has the power to not just connect to culture, but to shape it. Beyond the commercial success, *Barbie* set myriad trends in motion. Some moved pop culture forward, from the revival of bubble gum pink that shaped an entire vibe in 2023, to fashion trends, even to the song of the summer. But the film also shaped deeper conversations about what more inclusive feminism could look like, the long-term effect of gender inequality, while even driving online searches for [gynecology](#). *Barbie* hit a cultural nerve because it showed that the iconic doll's story was a bit more complicated than originally thought and required a new cultural digestion in the light of modern times, ultimately helping us reconcile our relationship with *Barbie* while driving worldwide sales records.



**3/4** OF CONSUMERS BELIEVE THAT BRANDS SHOULD BE CONNECTED TO CULTURE AT ALL TIMES



**83%**  
OF CONSUMERS  
SAY CULTURE  
INFLUENCES BRANDS



**77%**  
OF CONSUMERS  
SAY BRANDS  
INFLUENCE CULTURE

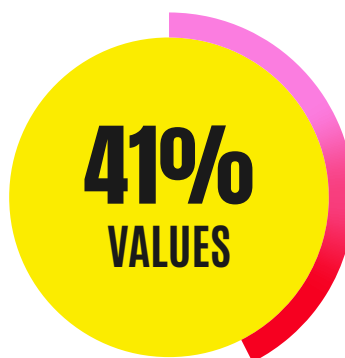
*Barbie* is a culture shaper. As we go on this journey it's important to dive further into nuances and specifics to understand what drives the relationship between brands and culture. And what the differences are between creating cultural relevance, cultural impact and the ability to shape or catalyze culture.



## WHAT MATTERS MOST FOR CONSUMERS? MISSION + VALUES + ACTION

We asked consumers what's most important in determining the kind of cultural impact — an indisputable influence or effect grounded in altruism — a brand or company has outside of its organization.

For Americans, how a brand shows up in culture through its mission, values and values in action are the **MOST important factors in determining the impact a brand has on culture** (42%, 41% and 42%, respectively). Examples in action? Patagonia's commitment to climate. Dove's commitment to changing the standards of unrealistic beauty, particularly in the age of AI. Ben & Jerry's unrelenting care for social causes.



The element of ‘values in action’ holds greater importance for Gen X (46%), compared to 41% of Millennials and 38% of Gen Z. Examples of brands that have made cultural impact?

We provided 13 options to choose from and there was some consensus and some dissent among our cohorts.

**The complete ranking is below**



**“ YES THERE IS AN ECONOMIC DECISION CALCULUS. BUT THERE IS ALSO A MORAL DECISION CALCULUS WHERE PEOPLE AT THE COMPANY JUST MAKE THE ARGUMENT THAT THIS IS THE RIGHT THING TO DO.**

**AMERICUS REED, PROFESSOR OF MARKETING AT THE WHARTON SCHOOL**

So what else is culturally impactful for consumers? Closely aligned with values in action, 38% of survey respondents say that those who publicly represent a brand have the most impact, on par with its employees’ experiences—namely satisfaction, motivation and loyalty—and a brand’s diversity and inclusion commitments, both at 37% percent.



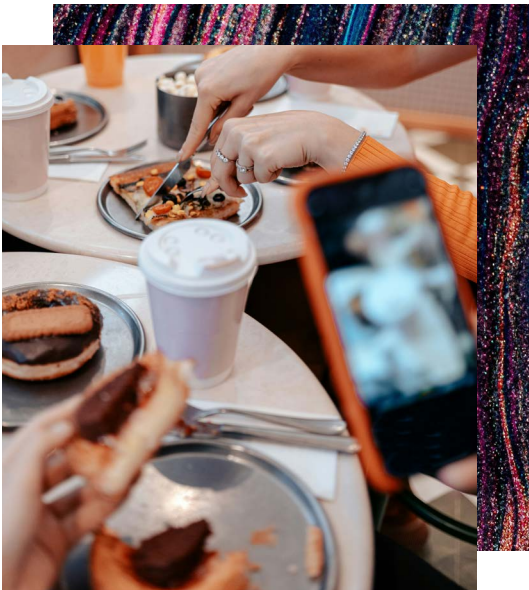
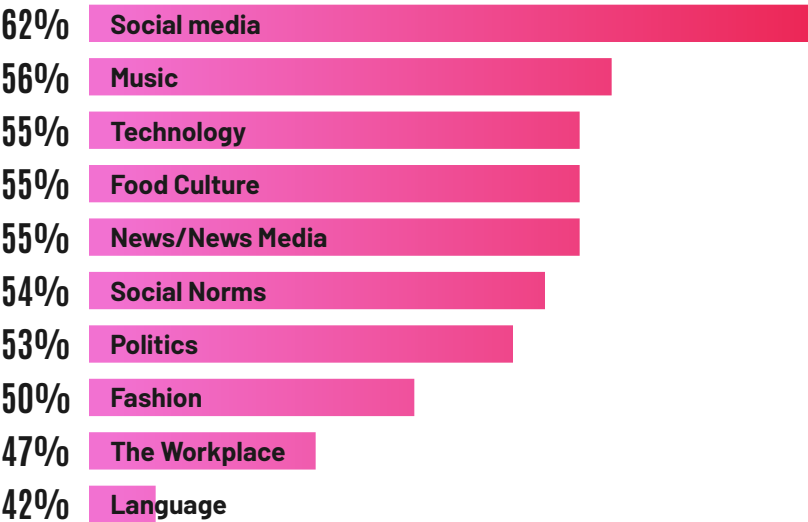
A moment on diversity and inclusion: with the heightened focus on DEI since 2020 (and recent subsequent cooling), diversity and inclusion commitments did not fall within the top three most important factors that determine the kind of impact a brand has on culture. With only 37% of the general population reporting that diversity and inclusion commitments are most important, tied with the trait of employees’ experiences, we were curious about trends among different cohorts. Out of all generational and gender cohorts, diversity and inclusion seems to matter more to women (40% compared to men at 33%), and especially Millennial women (42%).

The lowest percentage was among Gen Z males who are less likely than the general population (29% compared to 37%) to believe a brand’s diversity and inclusion commitments have the most impact for a brand in culture. Recent media coverage and research suggests that Gen Z men, compared with female counterparts, are divergent in attitudes, leaning toward more conservative views. According to [Newsweek](#), recent data from Gallup and the Walton Family Foundation found that Gen Z teens are twice as likely to identify as more conservative than their parents when compared to millennials 20 years ago.

BRANDS IMPACT + SHAPE MANY DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE FROM SOCIAL MEDIA TO SOCIAL NORMS

According to **Americans, brands are showing up in almost every dimension of culture today. When we explored the present-day significance, we asked consumers to weigh in on the different dimensions of culture where brands are creating meaningful impact.**

Social media tops the list, with 62% of respondents pointing to the impact that brands have on their feeds. Music, technology and food culture rank among the top five on the list, reflecting the interconnected role brands can play in our cultural tastes and preferences. And rounding out the top five is brands’ present influence on news and the media, suggesting that the majority of consumers understand that the fourth estate is not free from corporate influence.



## BRANDS HAVE THE POWER TO SHAPE CULTURE

**Sixty percent of consumers agree that brands should *shape* culture.** Consumers recognize that in addition to the influence brands wield on music, technology, food and news media, they also have a hand in shaping social norms and culture. Brands mold social cohesion, facilitate cooperation, simplify decision-making and even signal group membership. Lingerie brand ThirdLove, which caters to diverse body shapes by offering a wide range of bra sizes and styles, and Bonobos, which promotes its clothing line while challenging traditional gender roles by featuring men in non-traditional settings and roles, both show how a brand can reframe how consumers see themselves in the world.



**IT'S CRITICAL FOR BRANDS TO APPROACH THE CULTURE WITH A GENUINE DESIRE TO CONTRIBUTE, TO COLLABORATE, AND TO COMMITMENT. DON'T BE A CULTURE VULTURE. CONTRIBUTE TO THE CULTURE TO FIND WAYS TO HELP GIVE BACK.**

**LAMAR DAWSON, SIRIUSXM'S TIKTOK RADIO HOST AND POP CULTURE EXPERT**

Language also cracks the top 10, as we see the impact brands can have on both accelerating existing vernacular and even shaping the language we use. Tinder's infamous "swipe right," which derived from the user experience on the platform when selecting a mate, has become cultural code for "yes, I'm interested."

## BRAND IMPACT ON CULTURE IS GROWING

**In addition to the different dimensions that brands are impacting culture, the impact brands have on important aspects of culture is growing with no signs of slowing down.**

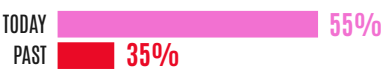
When we asked people how impactful brands have been *in the past* versus how impactful they are today, each time they said that brands have a larger impact on culture today than they have in the past.



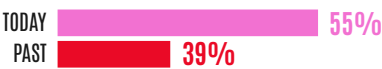
SOCIAL MEDIA ▲ 82% INCREASE



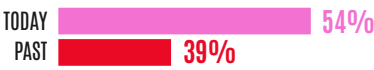
TECHNOLOGY ▲ 57% INCREASE



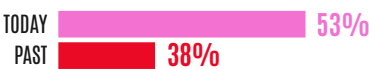
NEWS AND MEDIA ▲ 41% INCREASE



SOCIAL NORMS ▲ 38% INCREASE

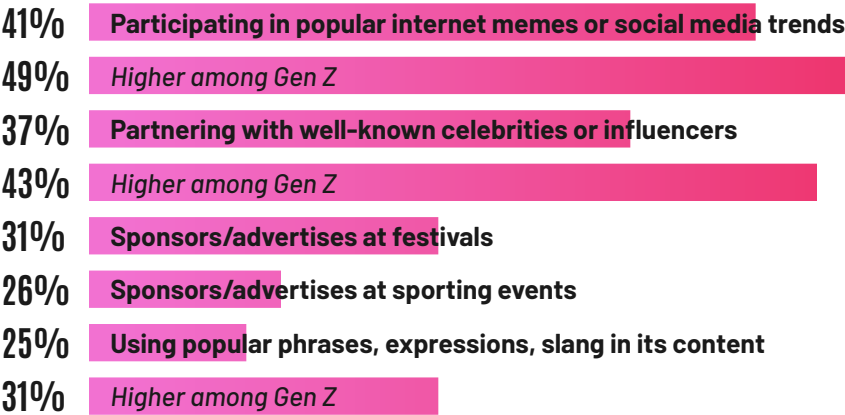


POLITICS ▲ 39% INCREASE



RELATING TO CULTURE DRIVES TALKABILITY

We’ve also learned that when it comes to demonstrating relevance, consumers want brands to show up in many spaces that matter to their lives. The places, spaces and ways that matter most include:



Relating to culture in order to connect with consumers can be done in more traditional ways like participating in culturally relevant events and moments through sponsorships. Brands can also lean into the moment and intercept culture in more opportunistic ways. Whether it’s Heinz, capitalizing on Taylor Swift’s snacking habits through limited edition Ketchup & Seemingly Ranch, or an adult entertainment company going viral after offering pole vaulter, Anthony Ammiratti a brand deal, after he just missed the mark at the Paris Olympics, entering the cultural conversation in light-hearted ways can engage and entertain audiences, *most of the time*.

“HUMOR CAN BE A VERY EFFECTIVE WAY FOR BRANDS TO ENTER THE CULTURAL CONVERSATION, ESPECIALLY WITH YOUNGER GENERATIONS. HOWEVER, HUMOR IS A TRICKY HORSE TO RIDE. IT IS VERY EFFECTIVE WHEN YOU GET IT RIGHT, BUT IT IS ALSO EASY TO GET IT WRONG.

DR. POLLY BLACK, MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSOR AT WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY

When a brand is connected to culture, more than a third of consumers say they will be more likely to speak positively about it (41%), purchase its products (37%), or recommend the brand to family and friends (36%). Beyond these hard metrics there is a more emotional, kinesthetic story at play; survey respondents said that when brands are connected to culture they feel like the brand “gets them” and they feel connected to it through a shared community or shared purpose. We’ve also observed that brands can push beyond relating and even *catalyze* culture when they expand out of their swim lanes and inspire new ways to think about their product or category. This growth can happen through innovation and storytelling.

BUILDING CULTURE INSIDE OF AN ORGANIZATION

Workplace culture is a hot issue for organizations, as research continues to show that brands and companies with positive internal cultures retain talent, innovate faster and **perform better** in the marketplace. To explore how a company or a brand may show its cultural impact *inside* of the organization we asked, Americans to identify the *most* important factors (outside of compensation and benefits) that determine what kind of impact an employer has on culture inside of its organization. We found the top results closely mirrored the traits respondents selected when we asked the most important factors for a company or brand impacting **external** culture. Both show values in action at the top of the list of what’s most important.

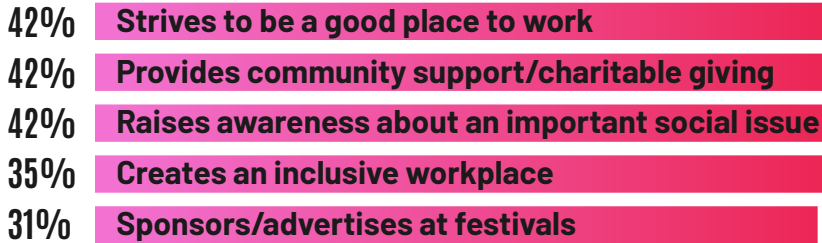
The complete ranking is below with a brand’s values in action at the top:





## Cultural Relevance & The Workplace

When we simply asked what made a brand **culturally relevant** in general, it was interesting to see among the top five responses were two traits focused specifically on the workplace: *Strives to be a good place to work* (42%) and *Creates an inclusive workplace* (35%), underscoring the idea that the corporate brand and consumer brand are symbiotic. The top five traits include:

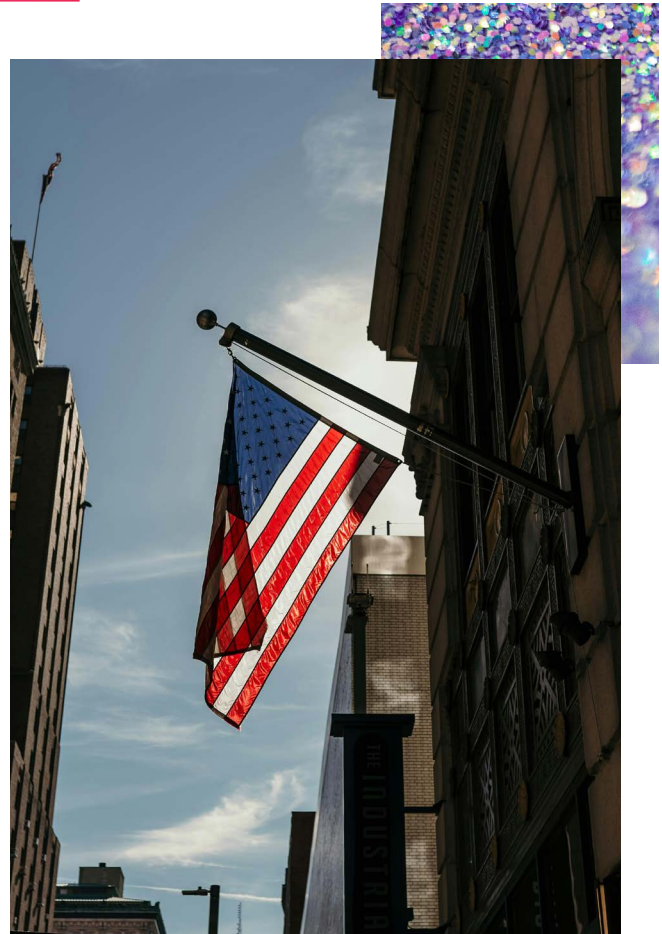


A brand's efforts toward creating a good place to work was especially important to Gen X (47% compared to the general population at 42%), while creating an inclusive workplace was particularly important to women (37% compared to 33% of men).

## BRANDS + POLITICS + SOCIAL ISSUES: IT'S COMPLICATED

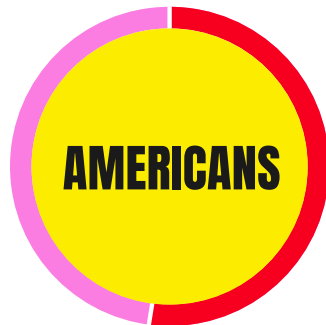
We hinted earlier that according to consumers there is no place brands can't go, including social and political issues (although these conversations can be nuanced).

But before we look at the differing opinions among cohorts and the places where we all actually do agree, let's create some distinctions between social issues and political issues, and understand that these terms are related but not interchangeable. Social issues are defined as issues that affect a large portion of society. Examples of social issues include, but are not limited to, the environment, hunger, housing, education, discrimination, crime, and mental health. We cross over into the political arena when we attempt to solve these issues through government and policy and, of course, to frame these issues along party lines.



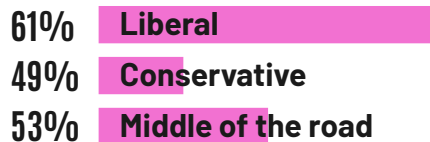
With many conversations and opinions related to social issues and especially how to solve social issues, Americans are conflicted about the question of whether brands and companies are **actually helping** with social issues.

## CONSIDER THIS:



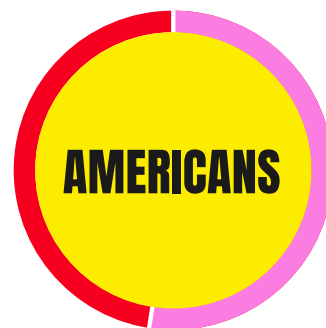
53%

THINK BRANDS/COMPANIES HAVE HELPED TO ADVANCE SOCIAL ISSUES



47%

THINK BRANDS HAVE NOT HELPED TO ADVANCE SOCIAL ISSUES



48%

THINK BRANDS HAVE BROUGHT PEOPLE TOGETHER

52%

THINK BRANDS HAVE CREATED DIVISION ON SOCIAL ISSUES



**WHEN ASKED IF BRANDS DO MORE HARM OR GOOD FOR SOCIAL ISSUES WHEN THEY GET INVOLVED, AMERICANS WERE SPLIT**

50/50

## CONSUMERS WANT VOCAL BRANDS (AS LONG AS THEY SUPPORT THEIR POSITIONS)

How brands can provide support for social needs or issues is not so clear cut when you consider that while Americans may believe brands should be present when it comes to social issues, that belief is often contingent on them agreeing with the stance on a particular social issue.

For example, overall more than half of Americans (56%) believe that brands/companies should take a stand on social issues, but **when digging deeper, 26% actually stipulate that brands should only do so if they personally agree with the stance, while the remaining 30% believe brands should take a stance regardless of whether or not they themselves agree.**

Similarly, 53% of respondents report that brands should incorporate social issues into their marketing; but taking a closer look, we find that 25% say they only believe brands should do so **if they agree with the brand's stance on social issues.** The other 28% believe brands should do so regardless of their own personal opinions.



So what is a brand to do when faced with these three options?



**RESEARCH SHOWS THAT YOU'RE BETTER OFF NOT SAYING ANYTHING THAN YOU ARE SAYING SOMETHING WATERED DOWN. THERE ARE DIFFERENT OPTIONS. DON'T SAY ANYTHING. SAY SOMETHING THAT IS VERY VANILLA. GO ALL IN ON WHAT YOU STAND FOR. YOU'RE ACTUALLY BETTER OFF DOING NOTHING OR GOING ALL IN.**

**AMERICUS REED, PROFESSOR OF MARKETING AT THE WHARTON SCHOOL**

Perhaps not surprisingly, Gen Z (61%) is slightly more likely to believe brands should involve themselves

in social issues than Americans overall (56%). But 29% of Gen Z say this belief is contingent on them agreeing with the brand's stance. Gen Z (58%) is also slightly more likely than Americans overall (53%) to say brands should incorporate social issues into their marketing, while 29% of Gen Z say this is only true if they share the same opinion as the brand.

And when considering race and ethnicity, BIPOC respondents (62%) are also more likely than Americans overall (56%) and white respondents specifically (52%) to feel brands should take a stance on social issues. However, BIPOC respondents (30%) are also more likely to stipulate that brands should only take a stance on social issues if they themselves share the same opinion on the matter (compared to 26% of Americans overall and 23% of white respondents).

## ADDRESSING THE ELEPHANT (OR DONKEY) IN THE ROOM

While the lines between brands tackling social issues bleeds into politics, when we dive into politics specifically there seem to be strong opinions, held on to loosely.

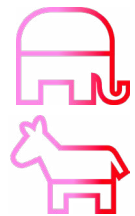
**Seventy five percent of Americans agree** that brands **do not need to play in politics, but 59% say that today's current climate demands brands/ companies get involved.** Those who describe themselves as Liberals (64%) are slightly more likely than Americans in general to believe today's cultural climate demands brands get involved.

Is brand involvement in politics perceived positively or negatively? Americans are more likely to say that brands/companies have impacted politics negatively (39%) than positively (33%).

Interestingly, men (37%) are more likely than women (30%) to see the effect brands have on politics as positive.



While more than half (56%) of Americans believe brands/companies should take a public stance on social issues, fewer than half (45%) believe brands/companies should publicly advocate for a political candidate or party. In fact, almost a quarter (22%) of Americans say brands should only publicly advocate for a political candidate or party if their opinions align.



We know from our research that Americans believe that the face of a company is key to cultural connection. To that point, **72% of Americans believe that if a company or brand works with an influencer or celebrity that is vocal about their political stance, that the company endorses that point of view.**

A person wearing a bright pink hoodie is shown from the chest up. A large hand is placed over their eyes, obscuring their face. The background is a light gray with a subtle geometric pattern. The overall mood is one of mystery or focus.

# HOW TO FIND YOUR LANE & AVOID CRASHING

**MBOOTH** ONLY THE BOLD



## BIG SWINGS + BIG MISSES

We shared earlier that almost three quarters of consumers say that brands should stay connected to culture at all times. However, our study suggests that **there needs to be a great deal of authenticity and good intentions behind these efforts**. After seeing many brands swing big and miss, it's no surprise that there are some guardrails in how brands should engage with culture.

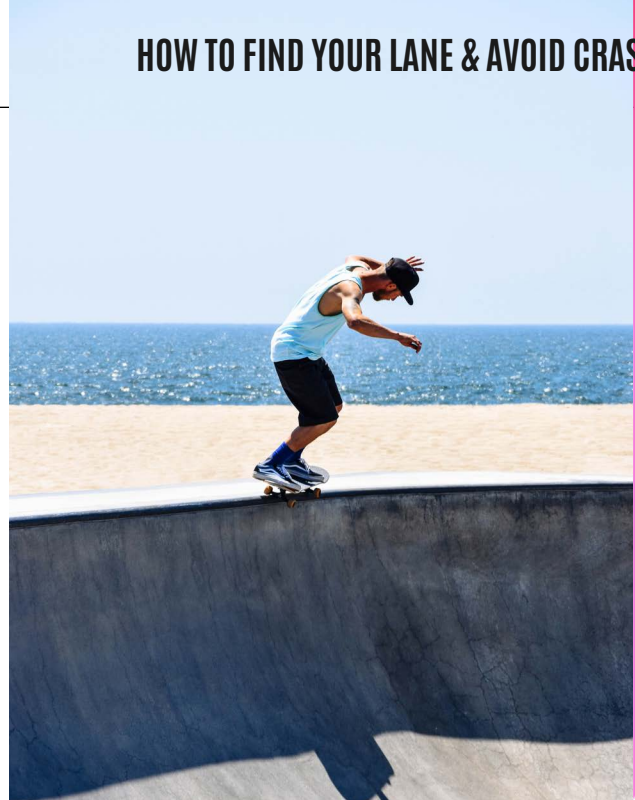
### What Triggers Consumers

In "Cultured," we found that for 43% of Americans, **virtue signaling**—the public expression of opinions or **sentiments** intended to demonstrate one's good character or moral **correctness**—is one of the biggest missteps a brand/company could make when it tries to connect with culture. In particular, liberal women (48%) are more likely than conservative women (36%) to say so. Exploitation of a social issue to drive sales or image with no genuine commitment to address the issue was offensive to 41% of consumers. Likewise, misleading or untrue statements made about a company/brand values or impact seemed to offend 40% of consumers. Cultural appropriation, or

superficially including elements of a culture without understanding or respecting its significance, is a problem for more than a third of consumers (37%). Brands and organizations must think deeply about getting "credit" for altruistic efforts and ensure they are centering action over amplification of their efforts, or risk being deemed performative.

Americans threaten to boycott on the table when brands make cultural missteps. When brands have made missteps, more than a third (37%) have talked about it to family and friends. Other top actions they're prepared to take in the wake of a brand's cultural misstep include:

- 34% **Waiting to see how the brand would apologize/make up for it, before buying from it again**
- 29% **Boycotting them permanently**
- 26% **Talking to their coworkers about it**
- 24% **Letting the brand know through social media that they disapproved**
- 23% **Still buying from the brand, but no longer supporting it publicly**
- 23% **Influencing family/friends to boycott it**

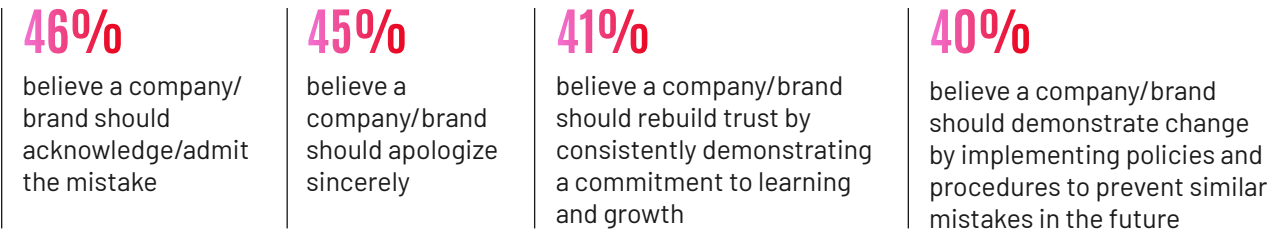


BRANDS + FORGIVENESS

In a year of brand boycotts on social media, we asked ourselves how forgiving consumers would be of brands if they make a misstep. It’s a mixed bag. Although **there is reputational carnage, the grips of cancel-culture seem to be loosening.**

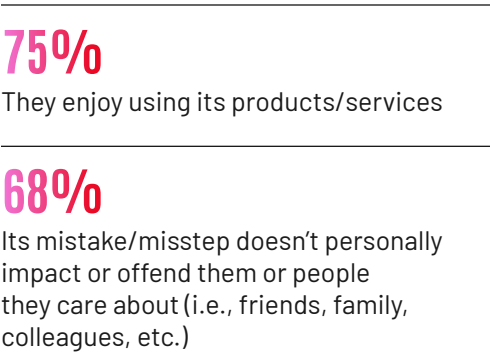
*If the right steps are taken to rectify a misstep, 34% of Americans will grant forgiveness, and be more likely to give it another chance if it missteps again. Gen Z is less lenient, with **38% saying** they would forgive but be less likely to give another chance.*

*If a company does make a misstep, Americans believe the path to forgiveness begins with **transparency, owning up to the mistake and demonstrating learning and growth** as illustrated by these breakout statistics:*



There are also indicators that positive cultural connections can protect brands when they make mistakes because their fans will defend them. **According to Dr. Polly Black, Marketing Communications Professor at Wake Forest University, “When brands participate in culture in positive ways, they forge strong cultural bonds with their consumers that encourage both loyalty and forgiveness. This gives the brand more latitude, allowing it to develop a deeper personality and a broader range of meaningful points of connection with the consumer.”**

And yet, not completely surprisingly, Americans tend to prioritize their own convenience and world view when it comes to cutting a brand slack, indicating that boycotts can be conditional. When we asked consumers if they would cut a brand slack after a misstep, 79% said they would **if they felt the brand had good intentions**. Additionally, if a brand or company makes a public mistake or misstep, they’d be more likely to show some grace if —————→



In the end, these insights show that forgiveness is subjective, transparency is key and that a brand’s authentic beliefs and commitments are what will reign supreme in the end. When that’s missing, companies/brands are likely to face an uphill climb to earn back stakeholder trust. Driving culture must be approached with great intentionality and with strong risk-readiness systems to offset doubt in a company or brand’s purpose. Research also is essential for mapping stakeholder opinions.

# A FUTURE FRAMEWORK

**M BOOTH** ONLY THE BOLD





One of the biggest takeaways of our study is that brands can indeed go anywhere, but that doesn't mean any brand should go anywhere. There needs to be an appetite from their audience and also an authentic commitment from the brand or organization and experts agree.

According to Chloe Markowicz, Editor at Contagious, "A brand needs a crystal clear understanding of who they are to be able to adequately respond to what's happening in culture, let alone lead the conversation."

As we digest "Cultured," we've learned that brands move every dimension of culture today, from social media to social norms. We also know that mission and vision are the most critical element to consumers, along with actions that live up to these values. That is true across the board, and even more heightened with our surprisingly idealist Gen Xers.

We've also seen four distinctive territories emerge as we think about the different ways a brand can connect to culture.

- 1 **RELATE TO CULTURE:** Brands that relate to culture show up in spaces that are familiar and embraced by their audiences. They can entertain, engage and even amplify this culture to ensure they are top of mind with their consumers and seen as like-minded.
- 2 **SHAPE CULTURE:** Brands shape culture when their point of view provides consumers with a new way to think and behave. This can show up as a way to challenge social norms or even destigmatize behaviors that hold their consumers back.
- 3 **CATALYZE CULTURE:** Brands that catalyze culture inspire new ways of thinking about their products or their category. They expand the purview of their brand or company with key audiences.
- 4 **IMPACT CULTURE:** Brands that impact culture have a positive impact on society resulting in a positive impact for the brand's relationship with its key stakeholders.

## CULTURAL ARCHETYPES™

In 2001 [Carol S. Pearson](#) and Margaret Mark wrote *The Hero and The Outlaw: Building Extraordinary Brands Through the Power of Archetypes* and introduced a 12-archetype framework for brands based on Carl Jung's 12 Ancestral Archetypes. Inspired by this framework and our own research in cultural connection, we've identified 8 Cultural Archetypes for brands interested in making their mark on culture.

### RELATE TO CULTURE:



#### CULTURAL CHASER

These brands are here to participate in culture and weave in and out of cultural heat moments. They show up to enhance the spaces where they play and this may come to life via event experiences.



#### CULTURAL COMMENTATOR

These brands take on low-risk topics like how you roll toilet paper or squeeze your ketchup. They avoid controversy by playing in safe spaces related to pop culture and benign preferences.

### CATALYZE CULTURE:



#### CULTURAL INNOVATOR

These brands are innovating their product offering at the pace of culture and are able to marry benefits to how consumers want to live today. Our research shows that technology and the ability to innovate matters to consumers and is a place where they believe brands can have a critical role.



#### CULTURAL TRAIL BLAZER

These brands eclipse their category and take their brands into spaces in culture where their competitors dare not go. Think beauty brands that go full on comedy or beverage brands that help consumers plan for the afterlife.

### SHAPE CULTURE:



#### CULTURAL LIBERATOR

These brands dialogue around taboo topics and destigmatize issues to create more energy and excitement for their category. They are not afraid to go there and help influence and introduce a new set of norms. We know through our research that consumers are very open to brands playing a role to shape new norms.



#### CULTURAL REBEL

These brands catalyze trends instead of following trends. They galvanize subcultures and design for their most influential stakeholders.

### IMPACT CULTURE:



#### CULTURAL CRITIC

These brands are taking a stance on an issue in culture that is relevant to their product and offering and forming a values-based opinion. They look at their category and are not afraid to be critical and highlight what needs to be elevated or improved.



#### CULTURAL ACTIVIST

These brands take on social and political topics that are likely to create cultural waves. These brands are often going out of the lane of their products and services into high-risk topics and do not back down and retract. They do not shy away from politics or appearing out of their lane on issues. Although this space may feel risky, we know that almost half of consumers are open to brands taking on social causes and even getting political.





## TRENDS LITERACY™



**IN ORDER TO PARTICIPATE IN THE DAYS' CULTURAL CONVERSATIONS, BRANDS NEED TO BE LITERATE IN TRENDS AND HAVE AN APPETITE TO FULLY UNPACK THE ORIGIN OF THE TREND OR MEME AND UNDERSTAND THE LARGER MOVEMENTS IT IS CONNECTED TO.**

**ADRIANNA G. BEVILAQUA, CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER  
AT M BOOTH**

**With 82% of consumers saying that it is essential for brands to engage thoughtfully in culture,** ensuring we are able to fully dissect trends is key. Take the tradwives trends. On the surface this may present as a nostalgic take on the domestic lives of women. But experts have observed this trend is linked to antifeminist ideas. It's also connected to conversations surrounding women and mental health issues.

Brands must do more than look before they leap into cultural conversations. They must first do a deep dive to understand the communities and ideas that catalyze these trends or they can risk harming the communities that they are actually trying to excite.

According to Americus Reed, Professor of Marketing at The Wharton School, "If you really understand your customer and you've been doing due diligence and the correct sociological analysis to understand who these people are ideologically, and in terms of the lifestyle, and their identity, then you can present this very bold thing that you're doing. But it's not really that bold because you understood who is in the tent."



Remember when everything was on "fleek?" While brands had a heyday jumping into this conversation, the one thing that wasn't on point was the actual creator behind the trend, who was not enlisted or engaged as major CPG brands profited from her wit and creativity. Research, analysis and a respect for the people and communities that launch trends is key for understanding these cultural currents and assessing if a brand can authentically swim among them. When these moments bring on risk, it's critical that internal stakeholders are engaged to ensure that they will back the direction of the brand.



# CONCLUSION

**As the world spins madly on, we are experiencing the cultural impact of brands—not just noting their presence on social feeds, retail shelves or e-comm sites—but absorbing their growing influence over time and across dimensions.**


Brands relate to, catalyze, shape and impact culture everyday and these dynamics themselves become currents within the larger cultural narrative. The rise of AI means that there will be an unending wave of “tools” and ways to potentially report on culture. But the story of culture lies in the why it’s happening,

not just the what is happening. As new ideas enter our collective consciousness we are all challenged as individuals with identities and as members of a larger society. The ultimate jury for companies and brands is not at Cannes or among the marketing elite. Instead it lies in we the people.

# METHODOLOGY

M Booth conducted an online study among n=3,015 Americans, ages 18–55, nationally representative of gender, race/ethnicity, age, geographic regions and household income. The study was fielded by research partner Savanta between August 24, 2024 and September 6, 2024. The margin of error of the total sample at a 95% confidence interval is +/- 2 percentage points. The large sample size allowed for detailed analyses across other diverse cross-sections of demographics, including education level, employment status, political leaning, sexual orientation, parental and education status.

To align participants in a shared understanding of the word “culture” within the context of the study, the following definition was provided at the beginning of and throughout the survey.



**CULTURE INCLUDES THE SOCIAL BEHAVIORS, BELIEFS, CUSTOMS, AND SOCIAL NORMS OF A SOCIETY, AS WELL AS THE ARTS, LAWS, INSTITUTIONS, AND HABITS OF THE INDIVIDUALS IN A SOCIETY. CULTURE CAN INCLUDE MANY ASPECTS OF LIFE, SUCH AS HOW PEOPLE TELL STORIES, CELEBRATE AND ENTERTAIN THEMSELVES, AS WELL AS LIFESTYLES, WAYS OF LIVING TOGETHER, SYMBOLS – INCLUDING LOGOS – OR EVEN REAL-LIFE AND FICTIONAL HEROES. BRANDS OFTEN CONNECT WITH THEIR CUSTOMERS AND EMPLOYEES THROUGH VARIOUS EXPRESSIONS OF CULTURE.**



# APPENDIX

**How Brands Were Born, The Atlantic**

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**How the American Media Landscape is Polarizing the Country**

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