

HERE BE DRAGONS PRESENTS:



2026 TAILWINDS: A PRIMER

CONTENTS

INTRO

ABSURDUM AD INFINITUM

FOOD, INGLORIOUS FOOD

OFFLINE POPS OFF

FOREVER YOUNG

THIS IS HARDCORE

A NEW HOPE

TO DO



INTRO

In 2025, pop culture got **seriously unserious**. Absolutely nothing made any sense anymore. Big John became a left-wing political commentator. Alexander Skarsgård got his legs out on the Lorraine sofa. Americans became obsessed with the **Jet2 theme song**. The Minecraft Movie made “**chicken jockey**” a meaningful phrase. A **Coldplay kiss-cam** caught a CEO cheating. **Katy Perry** went to space. And then got it on with **Justin Trudeau**.

Amid this **amorphous chaos**, there were a few discernible trends. One was the **multiverse crossovers** (like Marvel films, but with celebs instead of comic book characters). Bonkers combinations of the glitterati kept congregating, as if they had been imagined by the admin of Getty Images Fan Club. **Olivia Rodrigo** ate strawberries next to **Roy Hodgson** at Wimbledon; **Timothée Chalamet** shouted-out **Susan Boyle**; **Rio Ferdinand** did a skit with **Donald Trump**; and **Thomas Skinner** invited **JD Vance** round for a BBQ.

It was also the year that fetid **AI “slop”** filtered into the mainstream. It was as if Thames Water were running artificial intelligence. For the first time in history, generative imagery was becoming indistinguishable from reality. **ChatGPT** — attracting **1.8 billion UK visits** in the first eight months of 2025 — became a verb in the global vocabulary. And an endless regurgitation of **sludgy content** spewed into our eyeballs, putting the emetic in memetic.





Was it all -- to use the Oxford University Press word of the year -- **ragebait?** Maybe so. Either way, brands saw dollar signs and tried to **monetise** this new abnormal. Bizarre marketing campaigns and capsule collections didn't show any signs of slowing down, ranging from **Shrek** and **LUSH** to the **SKIMS**' merkins to **Wicked** teaming up with **Skiffer**. Corporate behemoths like **McDonald's** and **Cola-Cola** treacherously entered the uncanny with **AI campaigns**. And there were canonical misfires when it comes to brand messaging (see, most notably, **Sydney Sweeney** and **American Eagle**).

The biggest winner of all was **Labubu**, the demonic elfin doll that turned **Pop Mart** into a **\$34 billion company**. But, as no one else seems to have noticed, the world's first ever **Labubu pop-up**, held in **August 2025** in **West London**, was hosted by, err, **Pixie Lott**? Make that make sense.

Which is all to say, 2025 was totally unpredictable. Even **Paul the Octopus** (RIP, he would have been 18 this year) wouldn't have been able to grasp this tentacular mess of time and space. It's no mean feat, then, to try to **predict** what's going to go down in **2026**. Fortunately, we're up for the challenge. Since the start of the year, we've been **cosplaying meteorologists**, predicting 2026's key culture and **marketing trends**. So, we present to you, the Here Be Dragons Tailwinds Forecast.

ABSURDUM AD INFINITUM

With great adversity, comes great absurdity. As the world has plunged into a **chronically depressing state** over the last few years, the unorthodox has become orthodox, with surreal humour plastered all over social media. "TikTok doesn't just reward **absurdist humour** – it actively encourages it," wrote Benjamin Nicki for The Conversation, noting that the sense of surprise invoked by silly skits pleases the all-seeing, all-knowing algorithm. No wonder "**unseriousness**" is one of Pinterest's talking points for 2026. This **fashionable flippant behaviour** has seen Duolingo killing off their mischievous mascot owl (he was it by a Tesla Cybertruck); Nutter Butter build a Nuttetrverse full of nutty lore; and Astronomer hiring Gwyneth Paltrow as its "very temporary" spokesperson.

Elsewhere, **Instagram comedians** like Al Nash, Toby From Bath, Imogen Andrews and The Squid have earned cult followings for their zeitgeisty sketches and zany **skits**. Brands are smartly getting involved, realising that a "**commitment to the bit**" means a commitment to the clip and, hopefully, commitment to the brand. See, for example, Al Nash partnering with MOTH for a sketch, sharing a party pack of its cocktails with Wallace, Gromit, Sabrina Carpenter, Mick Hucknall, Alan Carr, Guillermo Del Toro and Gordon Ramsay. Or Imogen Andrews and Niall Gray simultaneously parodying '00s makeover shows and promoting both Pinterest and Bleach London in a skit which sees her disastrously dye her hair blue. **Funny ads** are back, but they're smaller than ever.

But it's not just on social media. Whether it's Keir Starmer messing around a classroom with the "**six-seven**" meme or German teens congregating in parks with bowls of pudding, the surreal has become a disruptive communication tool and community builder in all corners of culture. This absurdity is cultivating a new **IYKY currency**, where understanding the intricacies of Italian **Brainrot** or the nuances of EsDeeKid lore earns you clout, depending on which **esoteric sphere** you orbit. This year, expect everything and the contents of the kitchen sink to end up in the blender of the internet, churned into the troughs of our social media feeds. Whether we eat it up or not, is up to us.



FOOD, INGLORIOUS FOOD

On the subject of feeds: our literal ones have been **getting weirder**. "Every food collab now is completely bonkers," declared Eater in 2025. Slop, it seems, is just as much on the table as it is on our phones. Alongside the Dubai chocolate mania and **matcha latte obsession**, a slew of brands joined forces to take **fusion cuisine** to its logical limits. Campbell's partnered with Pabst Blue Ribbon for beer-infused soup; Jack Link's seasoned their beef jerky with Doritos dust and Panda Express released a range of chocolate bars with Compartés. Elsewhere, **fashion and food are fusing**. "From ketchup-packet shaped bags to burrito-wrap blankets, **brand crossovers**, especially between food and fashion brands, are proliferating," wrote Business Insider.

Alongside this, there's been a **return to cleaner eating** or, (no) thanks to Wegovy or **Ozempic**, less eating altogether. "A sign of true wealth is the ability to forgo food entirely. Eating essentially betrays a person's most basic human needs," wrote Serena Smith for Dazed in 2023, accurately predicting the resurgence of **ultra-thin beauty ideals**. Case in point: Pinterest, it turns out, is expecting **cabbage** to have a big moment in 2026. "Food forecasters see a year of quieter tastes: **little bursts of pleasure**, less-jangling restaurants and more healthy foods worthy of the ideal," wrote The New York Times.

But we're not all going to be drinking bone broth for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Expect, more interestingly, a **new counterculture** to emerge in 2026, cutting through the stale shock factor of mad collabs and ascetic food and moving towards an intentional, authentic **acceptance of our love of food**. Banning adverts for HFSS food will only make them more tempting. Snaxshot, the popular Instagram account and Substack, is planting the seeds for this new snack culture. As The Guardian notes, we're still living in a "Fast Food Nation" and are **hooked on ultra processed food** -- but better the devil we know. While we are all too aware of the negative health impact, savouring treats and satiating our appetites for pleasurable, indulgent **grub in moderation** will bubble up to the surface -- **guilt** has reached saturation point.



OFFLINE POP OFFS

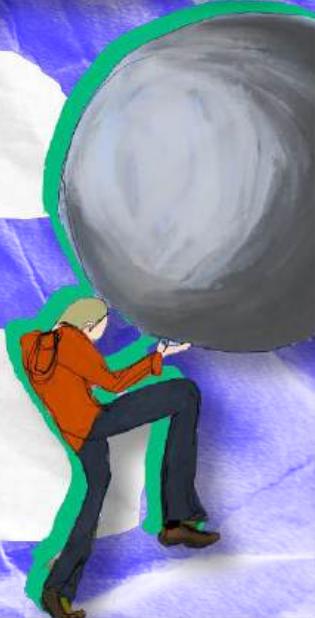
This proliferation of online “slop” is creating a **new counterculture: offliners**. Exasperated by content, jaded by robots and disillusioned by immaturity, this new group of Gen Alpha and Gen Z kids are doing everything they can to switch off. **Phone blocking** solutions like Forest, Opal and Brick have soared in popularity, with half of 16 to 21-year-olds in the UK supporting a **digital curfew**. Research from the BSI, meanwhile, finds that 47% of young people would prefer to live in a **world without the internet**. In New York, youth movement The Luddite Club has popularised this desire to ditch digital devices and **touch grass**.



This **migration back to reality** has galvanised a new range of IRL pastimes, often revolving around activities rather than alcohol. **Chess clubs** have become the new nightclubs, mahjong groups (like Green Tile Social Club) are cooler than ever and poetry clubs (like Adult Entertainment) are **turning bookworms into social butterflies**. There's a mega opportunity here for brands to engage with these **localised communities** and create merch for these new arts groups or host their **own offline events**.



But **heading offline** is easier said than done. While The Cut may have declared that “In 2026, We Are **Friction-Maxxing**” -- avoiding uber-convenience and accepting the psychological “friction” that this creates -- sticking to this resolution will take resolve. Like all habits, they’re not easily broken. Brand and key opinion **leaders** will have to step in and **provide solutions** to make this tolerance of “friction” a **smoother process**, demonstrating that it’s more rewarding and nourishing to make an active effort to **log-off**. While it’s still online, some fashion brands on social media are already showing a commitment to spending more time and money for the sake of **artistic integrity** -- both Hermes and Valentino have **collaborated with (human!)** animators to bring their campaigns to life, earning the respect of titles like Outlander.



FOREVER YOUNG

In 2025, anti-ageing went mass market. **Aesthetic treatments** like fillers gave way to skin boosters, retinol and exfoliants, all promising to roll back the years on our visages and improve our dermatological health. Now, **reverse-ageing** is all the rage: rapamycin, a miracle molecule discovered in the soil of Easter Island, has been found to extend the lifespan of mice by 9-14%. **AI-driven skincare**, meanwhile, is promising to rejuvenate tissues and modify genetics. But there's some hesitation. Entrepreneur Bryan Johnson's desire to **avoid death** has attracted ridicule and **Gen Alpha** spending their pocket money on **anti-ageing creams** is the final boss of pharmaceutical capitalism.

Anticipate, in 2026, a shift towards **natural anti-ageing treatments** that don't require credit cards or invasive injections and take a mindful approach to getting and looking older. Equally important, too, will be **feeling younger**. Whether it's collecting retro toys, filling in junk journals or heading to raves (more than 3.7 million Brits over 45 now go raving once a week), **nostalgia** will, to the lament of futurists, continue to be a powerful force. Maybe, too, multiple generations will collaborate more, following on from the rise of **intergenerational friendships**. Joy Crookes and Bacardi's "Move With The Greats" campaign celebrated all-ages dancing, inviting movers-and-shakers to bring their grandparents for a party at Peckham's JUMBI.

This appreciation of youth is typified by two huge cultural happenings in the UK. Firstly, the **Museum of Youth Culture** -- set to celebrate a century of teen life with relics from myriad subcultures -- is opening in Camden in the Spring of 2026. Danny Boyle, Gareth Pugh and Carson McColl, meanwhile, are celebrating 75 years of youth culture with **You Are Here**, inviting a cast of artists, musicians and daners to the Southbank Centre in May. Add to that the recent successful return of **i-D magazine** (with its Instagram bio "so youth culture it's baby") and a genuine **youth revival** is on the cards. Greater attention will also go towards the **demise of youth clubs** -- something Amelia Dimoldenberg has spoken out about at length -- with 1,000 shut between 2010 and 2023. Can brands get to these **new third spaces** first, offering young people new safe, IRL places to create?

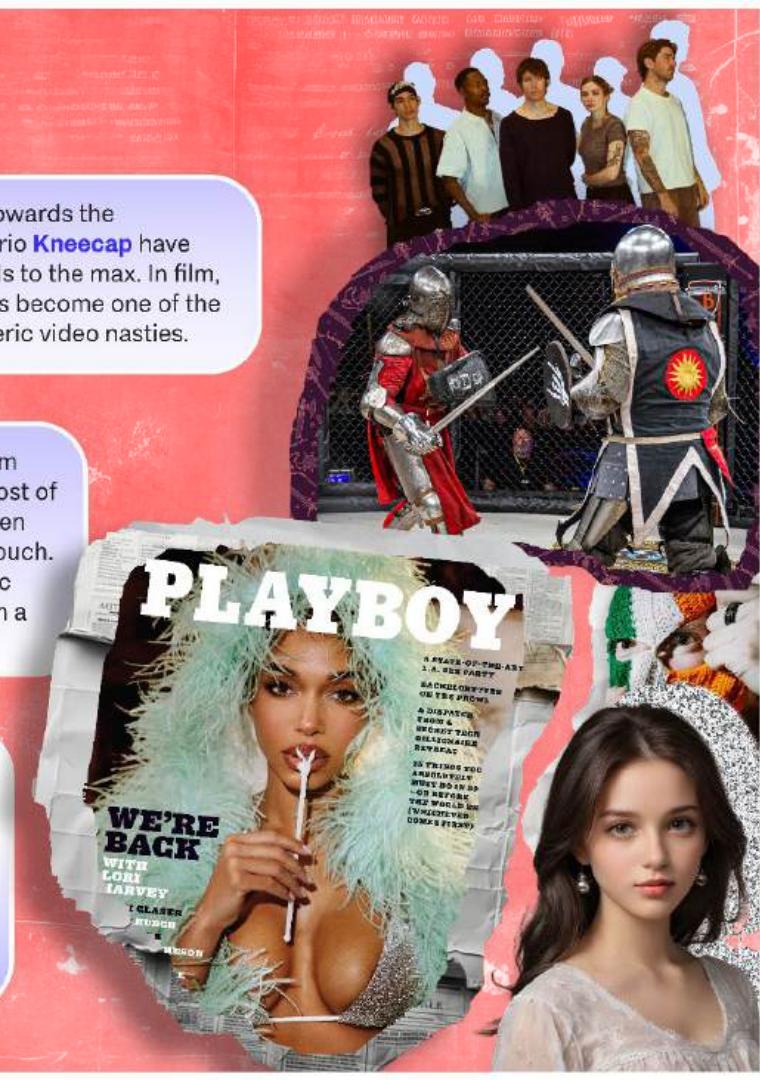


THIS IS HARDCORE

But all the toy collecting doesn't mean we have collectively gone soft. There's been a **seismic shift** towards the hardcore. In music, revolutionary guitar band **Turnstile** have built a mega fanbase; tireless Irish rap trio **Kneecap** have galvanized a new wave of direct action; and artists like **2hollis** and **Snow Strippers** are pushing BPMs to the max. In film, meanwhile, **grindcore** cinema is running riot. **The Nickel** -- a new indie cinema in Clerkenwell -- has become one of the buzziest venues in London, with a meticulously-curated programme of cult horror classics and esoteric video nasties.

Straddling this will be a **new erotica movement**, a counterculture to the turn away from promiscuity seen in recent times. With **AI porn** set to proliferate in 2026 thanks to a host of new platforms like JOI and Candy and the narrative surrounding **gooning** set to get even more depressing, edgier creatives will desire a return to adult content with a human touch. Inspired by the **Playboy relaunch**, sexy mags like New York's Dirty Magazine and erotic romantasy fiction, a new range of publishers will be inspired to take the **print revival** in a NSFW direction.

And with our dopaminergic receptors collectively fried and social ennui now epidemic, expect more people to chase **IRL adrenaline rushes**. A new Jackass movie is set for release in June this year, inspiring a new **generation of daredevils**. Ice climbing will continue to take off, amateur wrestling will find new audiences and a new range of **post-Internet extreme sports** -- from Sperm Racing to Medieval Armored MMA to Power Slap -- will continue to entertain and enrage in equal measures. **Insidious prediction markets** will continue to surge and hit Britain hard, with people betting on presidential elections, military developments and celebrity deaths. As the Here Be Dragons slogan goes: "**No Risk, No Story.**"

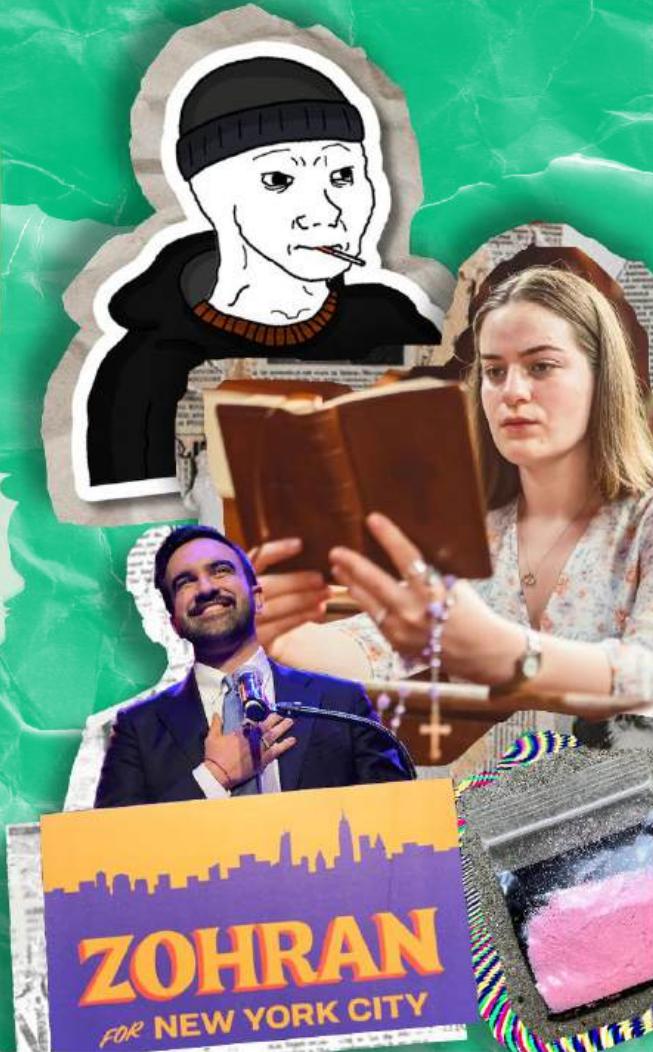


A NEW HOPE

This hardcore revival doesn't mean more nihilism. For the last few years, **not caring** has been in vogue; it became **fashionable** to take a cold detachment towards life, listen to Red Scare and make memes about the end of the world. But now, our attraction to the **doomer** way of thinking is waning. "Is **hopecore** the last gasp of a less-toxic internet?" asked Kieran Press-Reynolds earlier this year for GQ US, celebrating the "green shoot of positivity in a swamp of internet sludge." Fatigued with dystopian discourse and ruminating on **infinite ruination**, we're looking towards something brighter.

While Trump continues to dominate the headlines, there are reasons to be hopeful in **progressive politics**. In the UK, Zack Polanski has spearheaded a Green Party membership surge that's nearly hit 200,000 people, with the genuine possibility of receiving more votes than Labour. Across the pond, **Zohran Mamdani's** win in New York City was a momentous **victory for the left**, catalysed by Mamdani not shying away from being **positive and personable** (see, for example, his appearances at queer clubs, on Subway Takes and his wife Rama Duwaji's The Cut profile).

Hope will also be found through new and ancient **belief systems** and consciousness-shifting chemicals. Zakia Sewell's anticipated book *Finding Albion* will add fuel to interest in **British folklore**. Young people in the UK will continue to explore **Christianity** (just this week, Bible sales reached a record high) in a search for deeper meaning. Saunas will head outdoors into the wild and scream clubs will help young people **let it all out**. Mushroom coffees and magic mushroom drops will continue to entice budding psychonauts, alongside the continued rise of 2CB and more niche **designer drugs** like 3-MMA. Really, though, there's no need to do hallucinogens to see wondrous, phantasmagoric visions -- just head on social media, eh?



TO DO

OUR
WORK
→



Lean into the surreal

From absurd internet humour to bizarre campaigns, the weirder has never been more wonderful. It's time to create your own zany multiverse crossovers and build a world of meaningful nonsense.



Reward intentional desire

The tension between abstinence and indulgence has given way to a new middle ground, where pleasure is led by purpose and moderation. How can you find the sweet spot between virtue and vice, giving people a treat without the guilt?



Create third, fourth and fifth spaces

The offline revolution has led to more young people searching for new IRL environments, bringing together communities of like-minded hobbyists. There's never been a better time for brands to join the club(s) and show they're game for this new, analogue era.





NAVIGATING BRRAVELY

AHOY@HEREBEDRAGONS.CO

**HERE BE
DRAGONS**