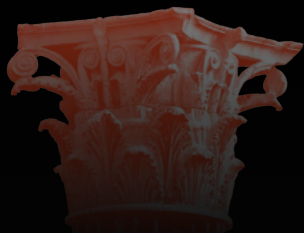
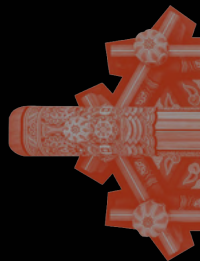




synthesis

CULTURE SHAPERS

2026 REPORT



WWW.SYNTHESIS.PARTNERS

No.	Introduction	P
01	Why Culture-led Marketing is <i>Hard</i>	3
02	Letter To Brand Leaders	7
03	Culture Shaping Brands In Action	12
04	Consistent Habits of Culture Shaping Brands	26

No.	Culture Shaping Brands In Action	P
01	Dove x Category Differentiation	17
02	Aesop x Coherent Experience	18
03	Bodyform x Cultural Taboo	19
04	Barilla x Owning the Occasion	20
05	Zespri x Long-term Conviction	21
06	Heineken x Sponsorship Coherence	22
07	Airbnb x Emotional Connection	23
08	Bumble x Reinventing a Stance	24
09	Netflix x Proving Culture Impact	25



Every brand wants a place in culture.

So we reach for trending moments, memes and causes,
because it feels relevant, proven and low-risk.

But borrowed culture is shared culture. Everyone reaches for
the same proven moment, and looks and sounds the same.

AI is accelerating the flattening too. Trained on everything
that already exists, it gives us the same likely answers.

A brand that can't stand apart can't command a premium,
compound meaning in people's memory structure,
or own the occasions that matter.

Culture-led marketing is hard.

This is a report about how to shape culture
to stand *tall* in the sea of sameness.



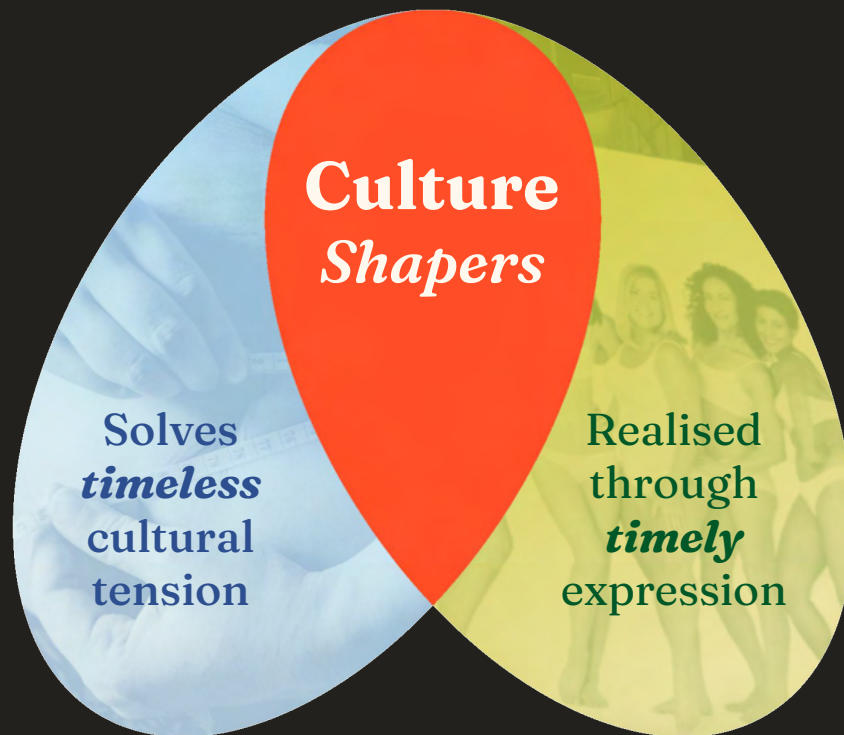


*Culture
shaping
brands*

*go beyond
the obvious.*

Going Beyond the Obvious

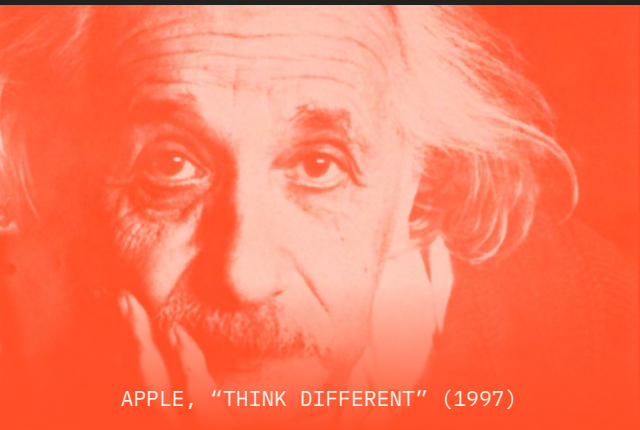
Culture Shapers work on two timescales at once — *timeless* and *timely*.



Anchored in a **deep human tension** a brand can credibly own, they build memory and equity that compound over years.

And they bring it to life by **staying relevant** today without trading away what makes them distinctive tomorrow.

When everyone has access to the same data,
the winners are those who read it best.



APPLE, "THINK DIFFERENT" (1997)



CADBURY, "GORILLA" (2007)



DIAGEO (*for* GUINNESS), "SURFER" (1999)

Going beneath the surface to the *human tensions* and *cultural meaning* underneath.

That's where the opportunity lives.

Dear Reader

In preparing this report, we hosted and consulted over 150 brand leaders and creative agencies around the world, all working toward the same goal: building brands that shape culture rather than chase it.

The ambition is there, but we keep hearing the same problems:

brilliant teams with great instincts, but without data or systems to back up their cultural instincts.

How do you *make culture legible* across a global organisation?

How do you move *fast enough to be timely* whilst *retaining what makes you timeless*?

How do you *persuade a risk-averse* stakeholder to back a brave bet?

That's the problem we set out to solve:

making culture actionable without pretending it's simple.

This means frameworks that help brand teams navigate complexity with confidence. Rich data that inspires and backs instinct with evidence. Metrics that measure long-term cultural brand building.

Culture-shaping brands are built deliberately, systematically, over time. Our experienced team, proven frameworks and data-backed tools are here to help you build something only you can own.

From Amy Lim
& Harriet Robertson

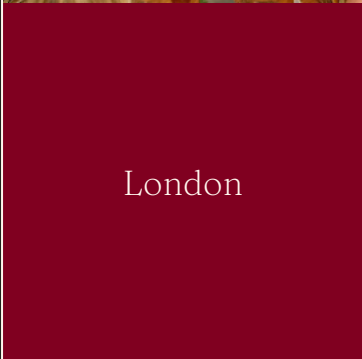




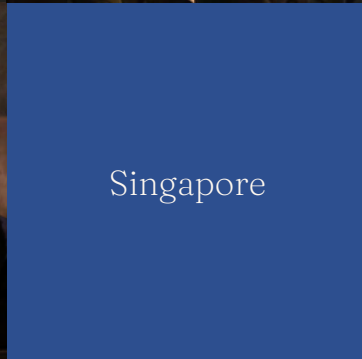
New York City



a **roundtable** of
brand leaders



London



Singapore



150+ experts
across 4 cities



Chicago



compelling
conversations



At *Synthesis*, we turn **cultural insight into brand action.**

We've studied habits of culture-shaping brands and built it into systems that find the opportunity only your brand can own.

1

Know your Timeless Foundations *(the role you can own)*

Culture operates at two speeds.

Fast Culture is *Timely*

Surface level: Fast-changing manifestations evident in our daily lives (e.g. trends, moments, viral content)

Slow Culture is *Timeless*.

Deep structures: Steady forces moving gradually, but defining long-term change (e.g. norms, values, beliefs). This is where your brand's role is rooted.

To build lasting resonance and shape culture meaningfully, you need to know the role only your brand can own.



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Activate with Cultural Confidence *(right angle, right now)*

From slow shifts to fast activation.

Fast Culture is real-time signals you can act on to stay relevant and spark participation.

Our fast-culture engine connects those slow cultural shifts to how they're playing out in everyday life, so you can activate your positioning in ways that feel urgent and fresh.

Backed by analysis of award-winning campaigns, so you can learn from the best, spot the whitespaces, and find angles still fresh for your category.



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At *Synthesis*, we turn **cultural insight into brand action.**

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3

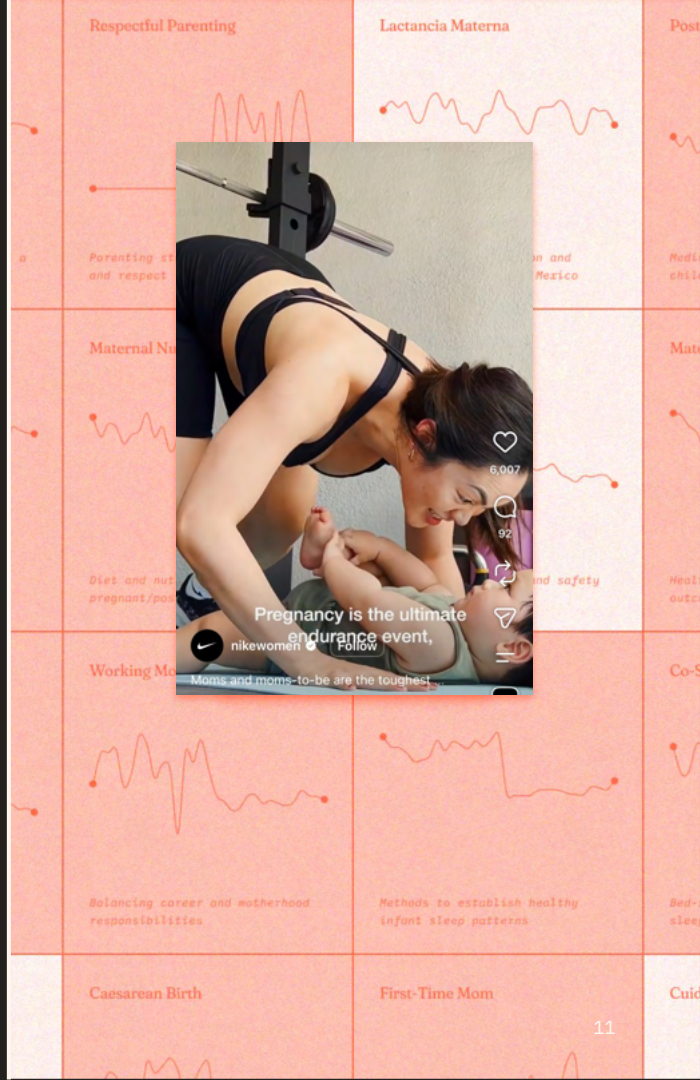
Track Your Culture Impact (*proof it compounds*)

Culture Impact Measurement.

We layer behavioural data to show how well your campaign is delivering brand KPIs, and which cultural levers are connecting most powerfully with your audience.

We track cultural relevance and lever attribution, brand distinctiveness and differentiation.

So you can see why a campaign worked, giving you a confidence to double down on the levers.





The habits of culture-shaping brands are an [OPEN SECRET].

You can see them in the work,
but seeing them doesn't mean it's easy to do.

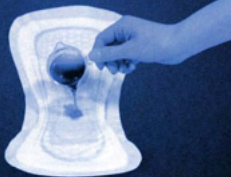


They read the 'why' beneath the shift
and know the role only they can play.

And they take a stance and *act* in culture.



**INSTANTLY
ABSORBS**
FOR UP TO ZERO ODOR



Period ads showing me
blue liquid and not even
saying the word "period"
but using "time of the
month"



How do you read
the *why*
underneath a
cultural shift?

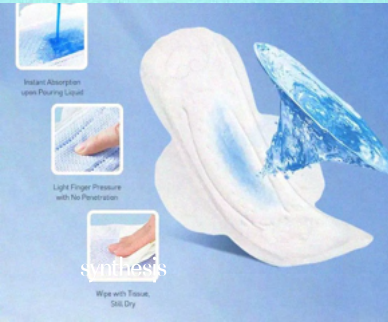
FROM

TO

Leading
generic
brand



Elapsed time 34 seconds, pads pre-loaded, 10min calibration period before insult shown



synthesis

CANVAS

**As the world goes linear,
we go lateral.**

Everyone can see the trend. But few can see why it's happening or what only your brand can do about it.

Synthesis Canvas is built for a world where brands need to reach a new depth, beyond what everyone can see. Where in culture do you have permission to play? Be consistent with your brand foundation whilst distinctively differentiating.

Take the slice of culture that matters to your brand and interrogate themes at scale.

*I'm **Bourbon Whisky Brand** and I want to **own a sharp positioning territory** -*

Belonging as Collective Medicine

This community is bound by a growing belief that friendship, shared meals, festivals, self-trust, and cultural truth-telling are essential foundations for wellbeing, identity, and social repair.

Harvest this theme →

Fit to screen

Reset layout



synthesis

CANVAS

**Find a cultural opportunity
you can *uniquely own* and *win*.**

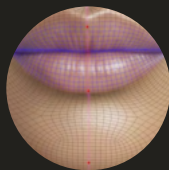
Synthesis Canvas reads expert commentary through millions of articles, podcasts and journals — maps overarching narratives, and the tensions beneath them — so our strategists can read the ‘why’ and find ‘*the role*’ only your brand can own.

When we read the *why*, and the shared cultural opportunity becomes a **stance only you can take to *shape culture***.

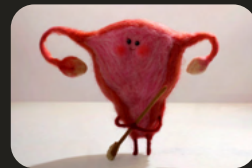
The stance rooted in your brand foundation compounds, building brand equity and cultural impact no competitor can copy.



Here's



what



that *looks*



like

in



practice...



Dove:

GenAI Beauty

In a world where... algorithms dictate what beauty looks like by flattening our feeds with the same high-engagement faces and a narrow ideal.

So Dove turned the tool against itself, teaching AI, through its own Real Beauty legacy, to picture beauty as it actually is.

What's the Secret?

Dove has held one foundational idea for 20 years and simply updated its enemy. Real beauty is the constant; each era's threat is the variable.

So Dove doesn't chase the next cultural shift, it owns one, and lets each new threat make the idea newly urgent, compounding it in people's memory.

Timeless Foundations

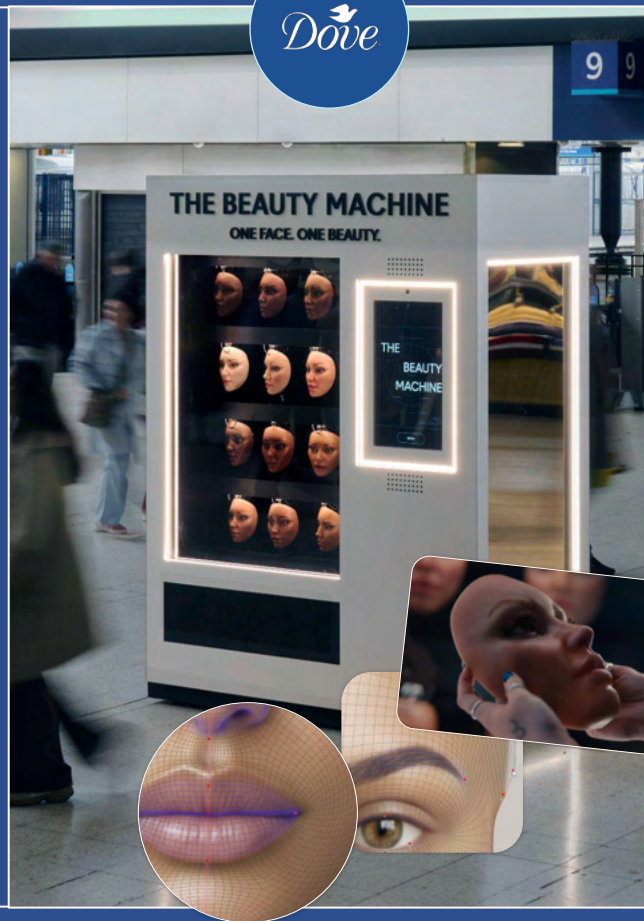
Beauty should be a source of confidence, not anxiety. For 20+ years, Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty has fought the manufactured standards, stereotypes and ideals that no real woman can meet.

Timely Activation

The Beauty Machine (2026) made the fight physical.

A vending machine in Waterloo Station promised variety but dispensed the same face over and over, showing how algorithms reward one ideal until every feed looks alike.

The newest enemy of a timeless position: retouching, then filters, now the algorithm.



Aesop:

Space to Slow Down

In a world that celebrates efficiency and frictionless, one-click commerce, Aesop asks more of shoppers. As retail got faster, Aesop built spaces and rituals that ask us to pause, linger and stay.

What's the Secret?

Aesop is coherent everywhere precisely because it repeats nothing. The constant goes beyond a look or a format, it's a belief: the ordinary deserves extraordinary attention.

So every store is unrepeatable yet unmistakably Aesop. It doesn't scale by copying itself; it deepens by expressing one idea in a new way each time. Distinctiveness that compounds instead of dilutes.

Timeless Foundations

A belief that the ordinary rituals of daily life deserve extraordinary attention, including their beauty formulations developed with scientific rigour and sensorial intention.

Timely Activation

Each store is designed with local architects, specific to its neighbourhood and unrepeatable anywhere else. Walls of soap bars in Knightsbridge. A velvet subway carriage in Milan. And Penguin partnered [reading list](#) asks us to slow down and linger.

All is expressed differently, but tied under the same belief.

Aēsop.



Bodyform: Womb Stories

In a world where... women's bodies have been sanitised and silenced by advertising, medicine and social convention, Bodyform gave a voice to the stories no brand had dared to tell.

What's the Secret?

Bodyform spoke the hidden truths experienced by women all over the world. The brand continues to break the silence and shame around periods and women's bodies, and help women feel seen.

Timeless Foundations

Women's bodies are complex, powerful, and deserve to be spoken about honestly. Since #BloodNormal in 2017, Bodyform has built a consistent position as the brand that breaks the taboos holding women back.

Timely Activation

#Wombstories is a series of films that go inside women's bodies and emotions.

Real and raw we see endometriosis depicted as a monster ripping through a uterus, perimenopause as a burning apartment, we see the turbulent journey of trying to conceive.



Barilla: Playlist Timer

In a world where... cooking has become an efficient problem to solve with meal kits, air fryers and recipes optimised for TikTok.

Barilla found a way to make you want to slow down and stay in the kitchen.

What's the Secret?

The Playlist Timer is a campaign that embodies belief. Cooking pasta deserves your full, unhurried attention. Streaming culture was simply the most timely, joyful expression of a ritual they've championed for decades.

Timeless Foundations

Pasta is more than food.

For Barilla, it has always been the centre of the Italian cooking rituals where cooking is an act of care, not convenience, and the kitchen is where life really happens.

Timely Activation

Playlist Timer is eight Spotify playlists each lasting exactly as long as it takes to cook a different pasta shape to al dente: Boom Bap Fusilli, Moody Day Linguine, Timeless Emotion Penne.

When the music stops, the pasta is done. A kitchen timer that makes you want to dance while you wait.



Zespri:

Grown for Good

In a world where... we're eating more, but getting less because our overflowing supermarket shelves are engineered for taste, convenience and long shelf life over nourishment.

Zespri asks a daring question: what if food was actually grown for good?

What's the Secret?

Grown for Good is more than a campaign about kiwifruit. It's a call to action in a world optimised for consumption over nourishment. Zespri planted its flag there with their long-term stance, rather than borrowing nutrition trends.

Timeless Foundations

Zespri has always believed in the natural simple, delicious nutrition of kiwifruit, and that getting more of kiwifruit into more people's lives is genuinely good for the world. Good for farmers, good for the planet, good for consumers.

Timely Activation

Grown for Good launched in 2026, just as Zespri reached a record 116 million consumer households and became the number one fruit brand in 15 markets for the second year running.

Zespri used the moment to sharpen its purpose and place hidden hunger at the centre of its global platform.



Heineken:

Fans Have More Friends

In a world where... Loneliness is at epidemic levels, where we have more followers than friends and more ways to watch together alone.

Heineken built a platform on a powerful idea: *fans have more friends.*

What's the Secret?

That cultural thread is what makes the platform so powerful. From a Champions League final, a Formula 1 Grand Prix to a Coachella weekend, activations that could otherwise feel disconnected are held together by one idea.

Heineken doesn't need a different idea for every sponsorship; it has one culturally rooted idea that gets richer every time it shows up somewhere new.

Timeless Foundations

For decades, Heineken has championed IRL connection over performed social life. Not the highlight reel, but the actual night out with friendship, laughter, passion and of course beer.

Timely Activation

Fans Have More Friends turns that belief into proof.

Backed by research, 75% of fans say their fandom has helped them meet new people, Heineken united its sponsorships under one cultural truth: shared passion is among the fastest ways to connect strangers.



★ HEINEKEN



Airbnb: Surrounded

In a world where... urban life has become relentlessly digital, overscheduled, and screen-saturated we are craving disconnection and escape to nature.

What's the Secret?

The secret is what Airbnb chose not to show. Rather than real nature footage, it built a handcrafted miniature world and the very fact that it isn't real is what opens it up: you don't watch someone else surrounded by nature, you imagine yourself there. Abstraction becomes an invitation.

Timeless Foundations

Airbnb has always sought to offer more than a place to sleep. Through experiences and unique stays, guests are offered ways to find connection to a place and its character.

Timely Activation

Surrounded is the newest film in Airbnb's "Get an Airbnb" series, handcrafted miniature worlds by studio BUCK, scored to Herbie Hancock's "Watermelon Man."

A family trade a cramped, crowded hotel for a cabin in the woods, alive with wildlife, running streams and warm light.



Bumble: Met on Bumble

In a world where... we're more connected and more lonely both at the same time, Bumble set out to design a product that solved for fundamental barriers to connection in our modern world.

What's the Secret?

Naming the tension is the very first step. Under founder Whitney Wolfe Herd's return, Bumble has the right cultural read, but it's still searching for the stance to match it, having stepped back from the very "women first" flag it once planted. The tension is real. Whether Bumble can own it is still being written.

A stance only compounds when a brand has the nerve to hold it and the execution to make it true.

Timeless Foundations

Bumble set out to create a world where all relationships are healthy and equitable.

It continues to innovate against that belief by developing features to foster safety, respect, and empowerment in every space built for human connection.

Timely Activation

Women message first was built from a clear reading of a deep cultural tension: harassment and disempowerment women experienced in digital dating spaces. The brand has kept innovating from the same culture-led perspective with Bumble BFF responding to the modern loneliness epidemic and Bumble Bizz tackling the structural lack of professional networks for women.

Bumble



Netflix:

Culture Impact

In a world where... attention is fragmented across a thousand platforms and advertisers are drowning in media placement options.

What's the Secret?

For seven years Synthesis has worked closely with Netflix to identify, amplify, and measure that cultural impact.

Today we help Netflix prove the power of advertising on its platform by tracking the culture uplift advertisers enjoy, and how association with high-attention cultural moments builds equity for advertising partners.

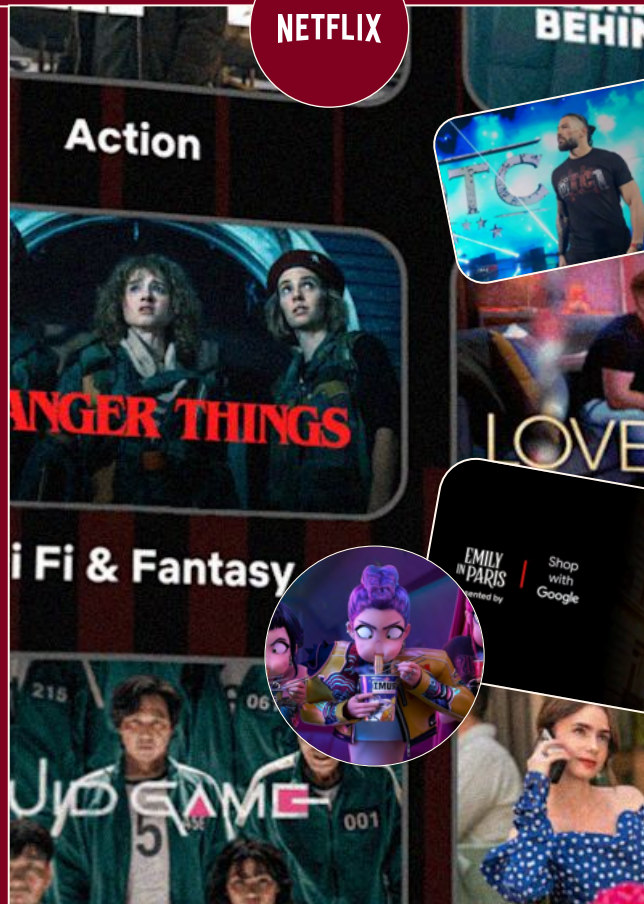
Timeless Foundations

Great storytelling has the power to change how people see the world. For over two decades Netflix has shaped culture and been shaped by culture. That is the Netflix Effect.

Timely Activation

Netflix Ads gives brands the opportunity to embed themselves inside that cultural force by activating content moments that dominate cultural conversation and drive brand outcomes.

NETFLIX



Across every culture shaping brand in this report, we see the *same habits* at work.

1

Timeless Brand Foundations

They know what they stand for and hold that position long enough for it to become theirs.

2

Timely Cultural Resonance

They move fast with confidence — jumping on the right tensions, ignoring the noise.

3

Sub-Culture Activation

They show up in any market, cohort, or passion space in a way that's locally resonant and globally true.

4

Embedded Culture Frameworks

Allowing them to scale, pivot and track what's working and double down.

synthesis

When everyone has
access to the same data,
the winners read it best.

The brands that read the
why, know their role,
and take a stance.

We help them do it.



NETFLIX

prime video



JACK DANIEL'S



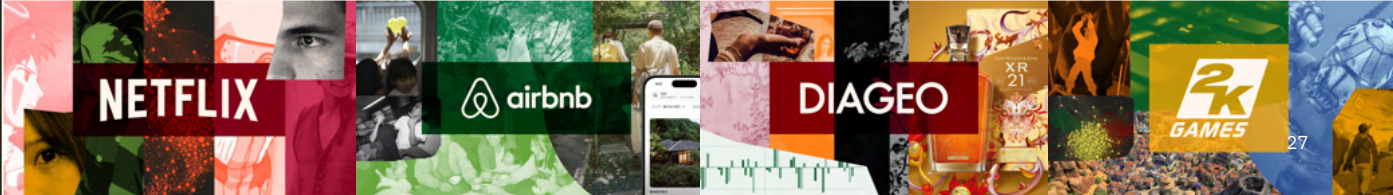
SUNTORY

★ Heineken®



Disney

DIAGEO



NETFLIX

airbnb

DIAGEO

2K
GAMES

65%

of Cannes Lions award-winning campaigns since 2024 have *culture tension* at their heart.*

6x

Brands with *high cultural relevance* grow six times faster than those with low.*

*Source: Synthesis Cannes Lions Awards Analysis

*Source: Kantar

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Become a **Culture Shaper**

If you're looking to propel your brand into the future and grow beyond the fans you know, ***reach out.***

We're a curious, culturally attuned, straight-talking partner who cares that the work elevates our partners.

HELLO@SYNTHESIS.PARTNERS

1

Culture Positioning

Activate a cultural territory that's relevant now, that you can champion for years.

3

Culture-led Innovation

Move beyond lab-led concepts to a roadmap shaped by cultural momentum and category foresight.

2

Sub-Culture Connection

Connect to subcultures, communities and cohorts with global consistency and local relevance.

4

Culture Impact Measurement

Measure your brand's performance over campaigns you know where to keep, kill or pivot.

We help *future proof* business by making sense of the world's data.

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CULTURE SHAPERS

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