

GATHERGROUND

**Communities making places and
purpose together**



FastForward continues...

You're reading the second edition in our Experience Deficit series. In issue #1, we explored the rise of SPONTAINMENT: the rise of engineered spontaneity and the search for unplanned joy in an over-optimized world.

This time, the focus is on community. We know that word has been overused and often misunderstood. But lately, it's taken on a new shape. Communities aren't just gathering; they're building. And in an era defined by sameness and isolation, that shift matters.

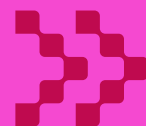
How will — and when should — your brand show up in the spaces people are constructing for themselves?

Think you've heard it all about community? Think again.

Whether it's on Reddit (110.4 M DAUs, up 21% YoY) or Roblox (111.8 M DAUs, up 41% YoY), WhatsApp or WeAre8, people have found connection in online communities. But that hasn't cured the loneliness epidemic. It turns out that finding your tribe and feeling like you belong are two different things.

Over the past few years, niche communities have gathered IRL — think #BookTok meetups or podcast tapings. But in 2025 and beyond, they're going beyond convening and starting to construct. Co-creating physical environments that reflect their needs, identities and priorities.

Passive participation is passé. These spaces are collaborative by default, shaped by shared contributions. The most meaningful spaces aren't made for everyone; they're made by someone. Built with care, and grounded in use. And that's not just a new kind of community. It's a new way of belonging.



Communities don't need a brand to gather.

But brands might need a community to matter.

The evolution of GATHERGROUND

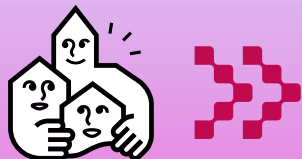


2010 TRIBEFACTURING »

Consumers began seeking brands that reflected their identity and spoke their tribe's language. Successful brands didn't just sell products, they earned credibility by aligning with specific tribes.



To serve the growing number of pet owners, Honda Japan launched Honda Dog — a dog-friendly guide to car buying that includes considerations like the ease of hair-removal from upholstery.

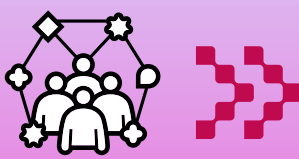


2019 VILLAGE SQUARED »

With tech-fueled lifestyles and aging populations contributing to an increasing sense of social atomization, brands began opening spaces that fostered connections and promoted social wellbeing.



Costa Coffee unveiled 'chatter and natter' tables at 25 cafés across the UK, with on-table signs to indicate patrons were open to conversation with strangers.

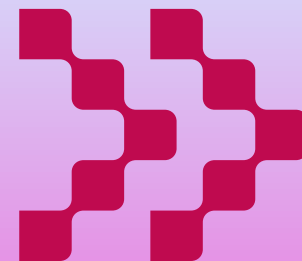


2022 NICHE NETS »

As new technologies and emerging trust models created a wedge between social and media, micro communities and subcultures saw a renaissance online.



Developed by a Tinder co-founder, social media platform Niche allowed users to form clubs around shared interests and topics, with rewards for engagement and content creation.



2025 GATHERGROUND

Communities are moving beyond online connection to co-create physical spaces shaped by their own needs and values. These aren't brand-built experiences, they're community-built environments for real belonging.



Saucy Books, a romance-focused bookshop, blends retail with community by creating a physical space shaped by TikTok fandoms and subgenre-specific readers.

Why now?

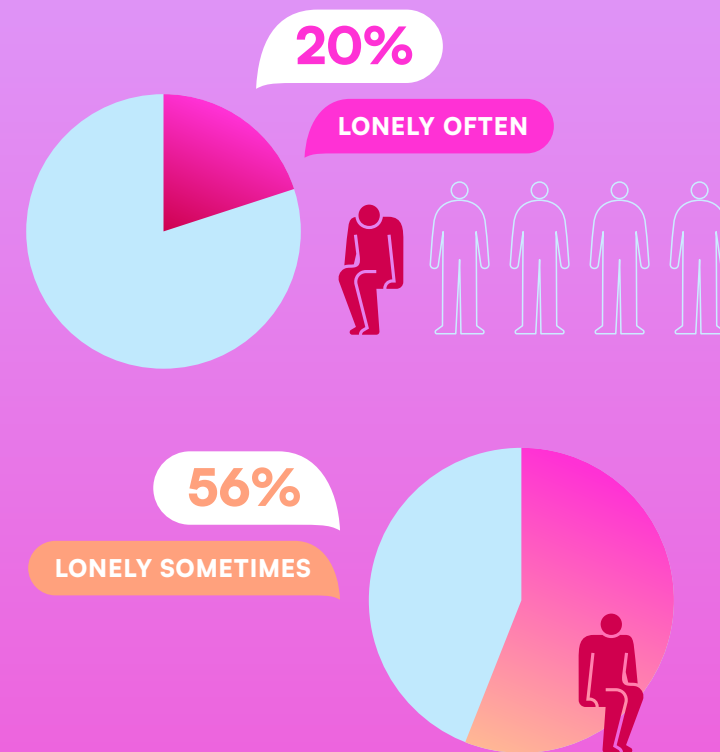
SEEKING: LOST JOY

Social media has shifted from connection to consumption, with almost three quarters (74%) of US consumers agreeing that it's no longer 'social'. The quest for community has moved offline, towards physical worlds built around shared obsessions. Across the globe, Gen Z are joining run clubs, attending coffee-fueled daytime raves, organizing double dates and embracing knit-while-you-watch screenings. From Buenos Aires to Seoul, the emphasis is on joy and connection — not output. It's a clear break from Millennial hobby energy (think: turning a love of dahlias into a lifestyle business). Younger consumers don't want another project to scale or monetize. They want spaces where being together is the point, not the byproduct.

COMMUNITY OR COMMODITY?

It's not just you, every 'third space' *does* feel the same, with many optimized for Instagram rather than belonging (as we touched on in SPONTAINMENT). When brands actively court 'community' — now a buzzword in its own right — it can feel extractive: more about community dollars than community needs. People sense the mismatch and are choosing to build their own spaces instead. What they're actually looking for are 'fourth spaces', places for active participation, skill-sharing and making something together. The chance to be a contributor, not just a customer, is central to genuine belonging.

One key driver underpins this trend: ongoing loneliness.



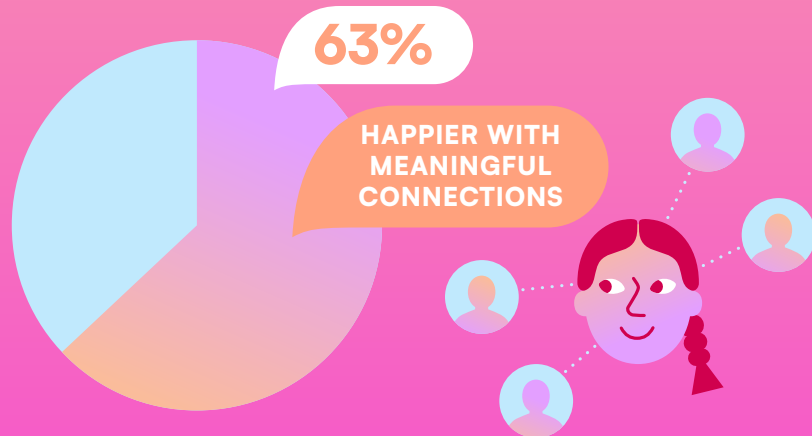
One in five people across 13 countries (20%) report feeling lonely often, while over half (56%) have felt lonely at least sometimes.

Nivea Connect Compass, June 2025

Young people aged 16 to 24 are more likely to feel isolated than any other age group: one in four young people (24%) are affected.



The antidote to loneliness is connection. 63% of people who have meaningful connections with others feel happier.



WE'RE ALL NORMIES NOW

With more than 50% of Netflix subscribers tuning into anime (causing Reddit user u/alikamal48 to exclaim "NOOOO, WE'RE ALL NORMIES NOW, IT'S HORRIFYING."), it's time to ask if subcultures still exist. Gen Z says no: 80% in the US say niche and underground culture is going mainstream (similar numbers in the UK and Australia agree). In 2023, 74% of Gen Z labeled themselves as mainstream, up from 59% in 2021. When everything scales infinitely online, subcultures lose the very things that made them feel special: insider language, shared references and the sense of being part of something distinct.



SAUCY BOOKS

Romance readers claim physical space with UK's first dedicated bookshop »

Saucy Books, England's first romance-dedicated bookshop, opened in London in June 2025. With deck chairs, parasols, and a "smut hut" featuring erotic fiction, the shop blends retail with a community space. The launch followed record UK sales of £69 million in the romance and sagas category in 2024, pushing fiction revenues past £1 billion. Despite its popularity, founder Sarah Maxwell says the genre still faces industry snobbery rooted in sexism. BookTok favorites like *Fourth Wing* are in high demand, with themed tropes — cowboys, enemies-to-lovers, romantasy — drawing readers worldwide. Many customers discovered the shop through TikTok.



Book clubs are evolving beyond discussion groups, with wine tastings or craft add-ons. Some are becoming dating scenes. Saucy Books takes this shift to its logical conclusion and, as a bookstore designed as an experience ecosystem, shows what happens when book culture becomes three-dimensional.



TELFAR

NYC flagship turns retail into community-powered culture space »

The first brick-and-mortar store from fashion brand Telfar isn't just a place to shop — it's a hub for community and creative expression. Located in Lower Manhattan, the 10,000 sq ft flagship features a public-access TV studio, modular gathering spaces, and interactive screens that let customers contribute content in real time. Conceived as a 'gift' to the brand's loyal fanbase, the space invites visitors to hang out, collaborate and broadcast on TelfarTV. From the LED-wrapped facade to QR-coded garments that unlock video screens, every element is designed to reflect and amplify the brand.



Telfar's understanding of its community's interests and motivations led to a store that prioritizes participation alongside purchase. The TV studio marks a shift from extracting value to providing infrastructure. What if you stopped selling to your community and started solving for what's missing?



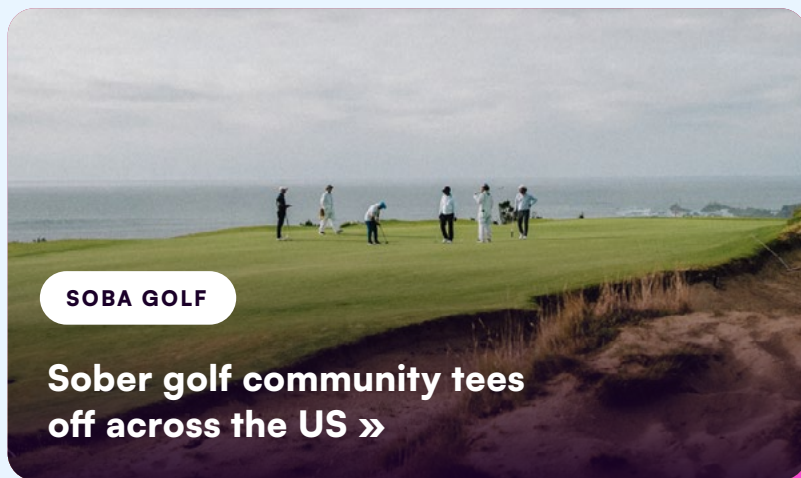
HANGOUT LAUNDRY

Reimagined laundromats signal the rise of community-first businesses »

A group of young Singaporeans spent Valentine's Day 2025 not at a cocktail bar or a typical event space, but at a laundromat. The dating mixer featured beer, a live DJ and quirky games like blindfolded laundry folding. It was hosted by Hangout Laundry, a local establishment that's reimagining the laundromat experience. First opened in December 2024 in the heartland neighborhood of Bedok North, the fully air-conditioned space doubles up as a café and co-working space. Its stylish, multi-functional setup makes waiting for laundry more comfortable — and more social.



Corporate 'third spaces' feel forced...because they are! The magic of Hangout Laundry? Nobody planned for it to become a community hub — it emerged because people need both clean clothes and human connection. Brands take note: the best community spaces grow from needs, not strategy decks.



SOBA GOLF

Sober golf community tees off across the US »

Soba Golf launched across the US in January 2025, creating a dedicated community for sober and sober-curious golfers. Founded by Corey Davis (14 years sober), it transforms golf culture by removing alcohol and adding wellness - combining the sport with meditation, fitness, and mindset coaching through retreats and local events. Members connect via Discord between meetups, with podcasts and articles supporting their journey. The initiative emerged from fragmented sober golf conversations across Reddit and Facebook, proving demand for spaces where sobriety and sport intersect.



Golf + sobriety is a niche within a niche. But with 79% of Gen Z and millennials seeking blended experiences, innovation can be found at ultra-specific intersections. Which obvious barrier in your category could be keeping the community out?



JULES VERNE & NOON

Travel platform builds connections among overlooked 'queenagers' »

Slated to launch in Q3 2025, Noon Voyages is a new travel initiative from the UK-based tour operator Jules Verne and midlife women's platform NOON aimed at 'queenagers' (women aged 50+). The first trip takes travelers to Egypt with female Egyptologists guiding visits to Cairo's Grand Egyptian Museum, the pyramids and the Sphinx, with a focus on women's roles in ancient history. The itinerary also includes peer-led 'Noon Circles' and 'Queenager Conversations' for participants to connect and reflect on midlife experiences. It responds to findings that this demographic drives most travel decisions but feels overlooked by the industry. Women aged 50+ make up over 70% of Jules Verne's solo travelers.



Serving an overlooked demographic isn't enough! How will you help them *find* each other? Noon Voyages combines peer-led circles and conversations with shared experiences. Forward-thinking brands will go beyond offering products or services and provide connection with like-minded others.



What are communities really seeking?

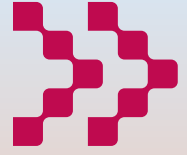
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"The deep yearning comes from this embodied memory of what it felt like to be fully present in a room full of people. To have conversations that couldn't be screenshotted, to be awkward without it being documented, to change your mind without leaving a digital trail."



Maalvika Bhat

PhD candidate, writer and content creator, via Vogue Business



Action steps for brands

Gatherground principles to guide your thinking

1

START WITH WHAT'S NEEDED, NOT WHAT'S BRANDED

Sometimes presence is welcome. Sometimes it's a distraction.

The difference lies in whether you're solving or centering.

2

INFLUENCE DOESN'T EQUAL INVITATION

Being known doesn't guarantee trust.

Instead consider: who asked you to be here?

3

SUPPORT DOESN'T ALWAYS LOOK LIKE STRATEGY

Support might mean funding. It might mean showing up quietly.

It probably doesn't mean leading.

4

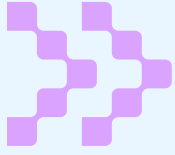
BELONGING ISN'T A BRAND ASSET

You don't get to own it — but you can help protect it.

5

NOT EVERY MOMENT NEEDS DOCUMENTATION

Let communities shape their stories without interruption.

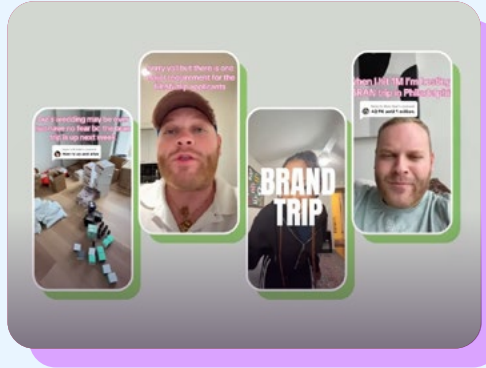


From influence to infrastructure

Creators and brands are turning audiences into communities

As community shifts from audience to infrastructure, creators and brands are building platforms *with* their people, not just for them.

These four innovations show what it looks like when fans are treated not as followers, but as co-builders of culture.



When creators treat fans like co-creators, community deepens »

In May 2025, TikTok creator [Brandon Edelman](#) hosted a weekend retreat in Philadelphia for three fans and their plus-ones, chosen via a TikTok application process that rewarded creativity and political alignment. The experience included facials, sports games, branded dinners and product gifting from over 30 brands. Rather than broadcasting from a distance, Edelman built a shared space for followers to connect with him and each other.



Influence is no longer just about reach. It's about co-experience.



Invite your biggest fans in, not just #influencers »

Skincare brand [Cocokind](#) is rethinking influencer marketing by inviting its most loyal customers, not creators, to experience the perks of brand trips. Participants were selected through video submissions, then flown to destinations like Napa Valley and Miami to take part in mural painting sessions, gifting suites, and other collaborative brand moments. The result? Over USD 3.7 million in earned media and a 745% increase in participation between the first and second trip.



When customers are the community, the campaign becomes theirs, too.



Belonging isn't one-size-fits-all. Neither are public spaces... »

Launched in May 2025, Dubai's [Hewi initiative](#) reimagines public parks as people-first gathering spaces. Announced by Crown Prince Sheikh Hamdan and developed by the Dubai Future Foundation and Dubai Municipality, the project aims to revive the spirit of traditional Emirati neighborhoods through shaded areas for elders, family-friendly play zones, and dedicated venues for events. It's a shift away from one-size-fits-all park templates toward community-informed design.



Even civic infrastructure is being rethought around local values, not mass design.

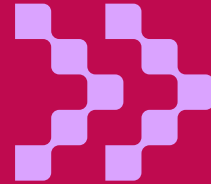


Meet people where they gather, then build around them »

To reach Filipino Gen Z gamers, [Jollibee](#) hosted its first gaming convention in May 2025, with livestreams, fan engagement and limited-edition GameJoy Combos. Bundled meals came with Peach Mango Pie, a drink, and digital credits redeemable in Genshin Impact, Minecraft and more. This went beyond a campaign, towards a branded ecosystem designed around an existing community's passions.



Brand-built space can work, but only if they start with what fans *already* care about.

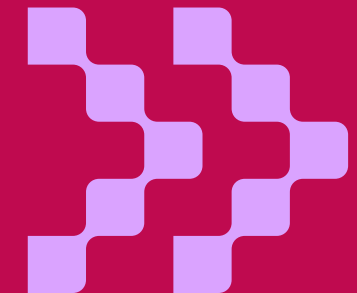
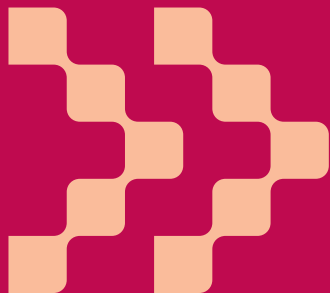
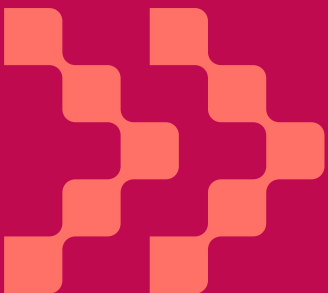
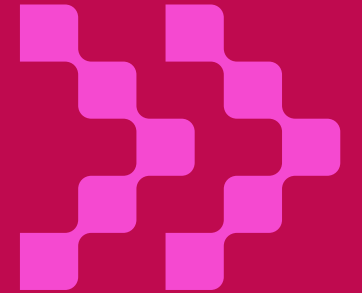
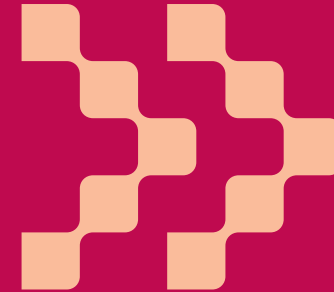


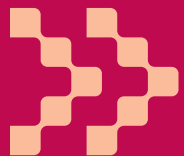
Not every space needs a brand in it.

That's the uncomfortable truth at the heart of this trend. As communities tire of being managed and monetized, many are choosing to build on their own terms. They're going smaller, taking it slower and getting more specific.

For brands, this isn't a call to insert or amplify. It's a moment to observe, to support or in some cases) to stay out of the way.

Some spaces will welcome you. Others won't. The real challenge is knowing which is which.





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