FastForward

SPONTAINMENT

Engineered moments of unplanned joy

Hello!

And welcome to FastForward #2, focusing on the Experience Deficit. This three-part series examines how brands are responding to an over-optimized world.

This first report explores how companies are engineering joy for consumers who've optimized away their own ability to be delighted. We've made everything so convenient that we've forgotten how to be surprised — now brands must help create those moments.

Over the coming months, we'll dive deeper into how brands are filling the gaps left by a friction-free culture. But first, let's turn our attention to SPONTAINMENT.

Ready to be surprised? 🎁

The unexpected has been optimized away.

The hippocampus shows enhanced neural activity when encountering unexpected events, resulting in stickier memories. But people experience less surprise than ever: reading reviews before booking or watching, mapping routes before walking. The desire for control and value has deepened the shift to convenience culture — now algorithms predict desires before they form (half of Gen Z say their FYP knows them better than their parents do).

In response, controlled surprise is booming. Pop Mart's blind boxes generated USD 1.8 billion in sales in 2024, with Labubu sales up 700%. Blind boxes promise perfect uncertainty — surprise within safe parameters. Consumers may not know what's inside, but they know they'll like it.

People crave surprise but struggle to create it themselves — overthinking and overscheduling have killed the impulse. Enter SPONTAINMENT: brands engineering moments of wonder and unplanned joy. Less planning. More play.

spon·tain·ment | /spɒnˈteɪnmənt/ noun

1. Experiences designed to recreate spontaneity through controlled surprise
2. The practice of engineering unexpected moments within safe parameters
3. Marketing that provides permission for unplanned joy

»» Why now?

ZERO EFFORT EVERYTHING

Essay due? Prompt it. Need an image? Generate one 🪄. Per a UK study, 92% of students use AI, up from 66% in 2024, with 18% including AI-generated text directly in their work. In many cases, AI isn't *assisting*, it's *replacing* the (often messy) process of learning, creating and problem-solving. While there are convenience and democratization benefits, the hidden cost is satisfaction itself. AI isn't just doing the work. It's also changing communication. Research shows people are adopting AI's preferred words, making human communication increasingly homogenous. Welcome to what economist Kyla Scanlon calls the 'simulation economy', one that doesn't just keep people glued to screens, but convinces them that real-world effort is obsolete. The friction hasn't vanished, of course; it's just been outsourced to machines.

THE CONVENIENCE TRAP

Platforms like YouTube and Netflix tapped AI to make services more convenient. Now, they're leveraging that same tech to place ads at emotional peak points or develop interactive mid-rolls that blend with content (Discord, Amazon Prime Video and WhatsApp are also experimenting with ads). The playbook is ~~simple~~ cynical: make access effortless, then make enjoyment painful. Instead of competing on value, platforms compete on annoyance thresholds. Consumers don't upgrade for better features. Instead they pay to remove artificial pain points that didn't exist until companies put them there. This creates a backlash: people will gravitate toward brands that create delight rather than engineer frustration.
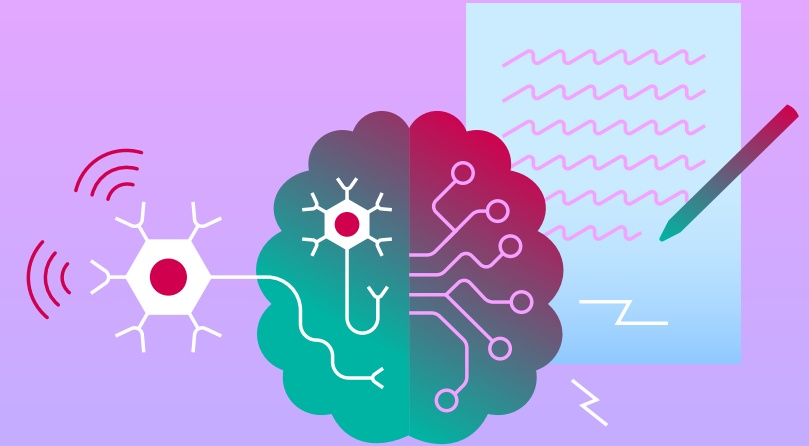
Study reveals 'cognitive debt' from AI essay writing:

- **LLM users showed weakest brain connectivity and lowest essay ownership, unable to quote their own work. When forced to write without AI, they exhibited neural under-engagement. Essays within each group looked remarkably similar.**

- **During the four-month, 54 participant study, researchers found LLM users 'consistently underperformed at neural, linguistic and behavioral levels'.**

MIT Media Lab, June 2025

84%

"TOO BEIGE"
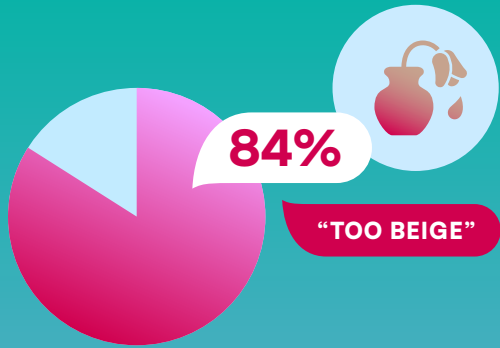
84% of affluent Gen Z and Millennial travelers in the US say 'luxury hotels feel beige lately'

"TOO INSTAGRAM FOCUSED"

83%
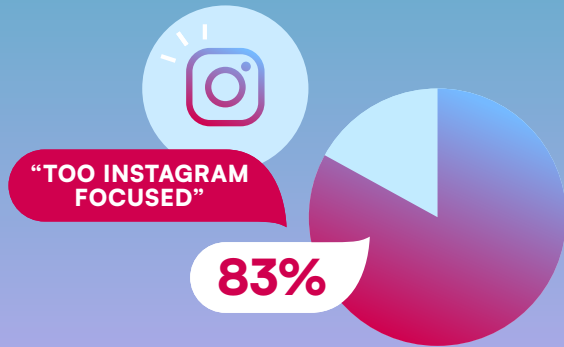
83% believe hotels are too focused on being 'Instagram-ready,' rather than authentic

Preferred Hotels and Resorts, May 2025

SYNTHETIC SATURATION

AI slop is everywhere. All 16 trends in Pinterest's April report featured multiple AI-generated images in the top 20 results, forcing some users to seek out curation platforms like Cosmos and Silk. Fatigue with AI-generated beats is driving a resurgence in roots music; a genre that's both human-made and beyond the filter bubble. As the volume of synthetic content continues to grow, consumers will become curators of their own experiences. They'll lean on AI for workout playlists or recipe ideas, but seek human-made content for moments that matter. In 2026, the question won't be 'is it real?' but 'does this moment need to be?'.

MORE PLAY, EVERYDAY

Children spend 50% less time outdoors than a generation ago. The decline of playtime is resulting in a generation that's more comfortable with scheduling: less than 1 in 10 young adults make spontaneous plans. No wonder the UN introduced an International Day of Play. A desire for certainty is the result of a precarious world, but planning, prediction and productivity come at a cost. People feel the loss. 76% say shopping lacks surprise, yet crave the unexpected. Of course, telling adults to 'be more playful' isn't particularly helpful. Instead, create permission structures — specific moments where silliness is sanctioned and talking to strangers is encouraged.
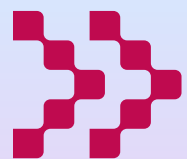
Culture Shifts

Early signs of the spontainment movement

The Chicken Jockey trend started when Gen Z Minecraft fans turned a line from A Minecraft Movie into a viral meme. What began as ironic trailer edits on TikTok escalated into cinema chaos, with teens shouting and throwing popcorn during showings. It resulted in a wave of mischievous, meme-driven audience participation in theaters worldwide. *PS*: remember 2022's #Gentleminions debacle?
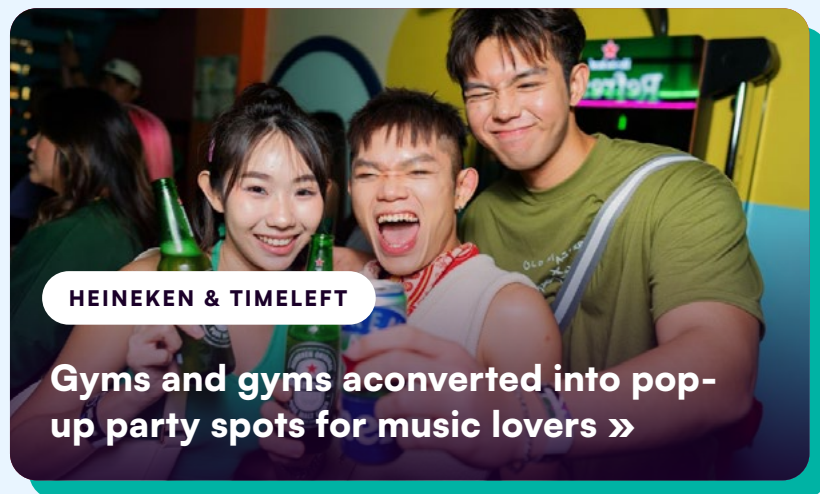
Reflecting a pushback against digital overload, independent boutiques are embracing more tactile shopping experiences. Koibird and Outline opted to shutter e-commerce sites and send print catalogs instead, with shoppers browsing offline and placing orders by visiting stores or texting sales teams. Meanwhile, fashion stylist and Substacker Laurel Pantin open an appointment-only boutique in Beverly Hills later this year, offering what she calls a 'high-touch shopping and styling experience'.

'Kid rotting' is a new label for an old idea: letting kids do nothing during school holidays. As the cost of summer camps soars, some US families are opting out of overscheduled summers with parents embracing boredom and unstructured play.

Chinese travelers are embracing spontaneity with 76% now booking trips less than one month before departure (up from 73% in Q3 2024). Even high-net-worth travelers are ditching extensive planning, with 70% booking within a month of departure.
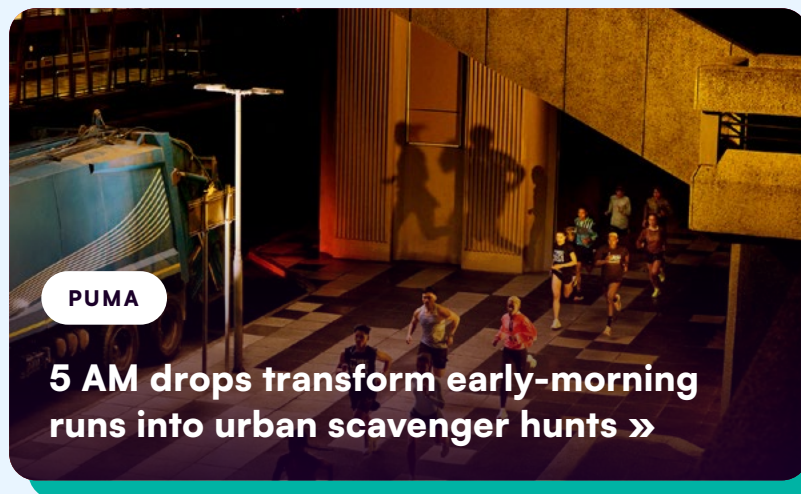
HEINEKEN & TIMELEFT

Gyms and gyms aconverted into pop-up party spots for music lovers »

PUMA

5 AM drops transform early-morning runs into urban scavenger hunts »

LONDON SPORT

Campaign challenges 'No Ball Games' signs to unlock urban play »

April 2025 saw Heineken Malaysia introduce Refreshing Sessions — a series of pop-up music events designed to connect strangers. Part of the brand's third annual *Refresh Your Music* campaign, the sessions encourage music discovery in unexpected places. Powered by a partnership with the Timeleft app, the invite-only events matched attendees with new people, encouraging real-world connections alongside high-energy DJ sets. The kick-off event transformed Good Juju Barbell Club into a live music space; subsequent events were hosted at QRA supermarket and Eslite Bookstore.

Global sports brand PUMA elevated the early morning run from a personal habit to a communal adventure with its 5 AM High Drops activation. Active in Boston, Tokyo, London, Mexico City and other major cities through April and May 2025, the campaign rewarded dedicated dawn runners by leaving free pairs of the latest PUMA running shoes at elevated locations along city streets. Participants needed to check PUMA's local Instagram channels at 5 AM to discover the secret 'high drop' locations, then be among the first to reach those spots to claim their prize: a pair of Deviate NITRO 3 or Forever Run shoes.

Since the 1970s, 'No Ball Games' signs have restricted play and movement in public spaces across London. More Ball Games — a March 2025 initiative from London Sport and Saatchi & Saatchi — called for change by tackling both individual and systemic barriers to sport, play and physical activity. The launch saw a basketball hoop installed on one of the signs, turning a long-standing restriction into an invitation. Beyond public activations, the initiative is lobbying policymakers, councils and housing associations to remove outdated rules and rethink how urban spaces can support active, healthy communities.

›› **Gyms, supermarkets and bookstores all have latent social potential waiting to be unlocked. Recontextualizing familiar spaces as stages for unexpected encounters transforms mundane locations into connection hubs. Which everyday spaces could your brand temporarily reimagine?**

›› **PUMA didn't create new behaviors; they just gamified the pre-dawn runs that dedicated athletes *already* participate in. Sometimes the best activation doesn't require behavior change, just behavior elevation. What consistent customer rituals could you transform into shareable micro-adventures?**
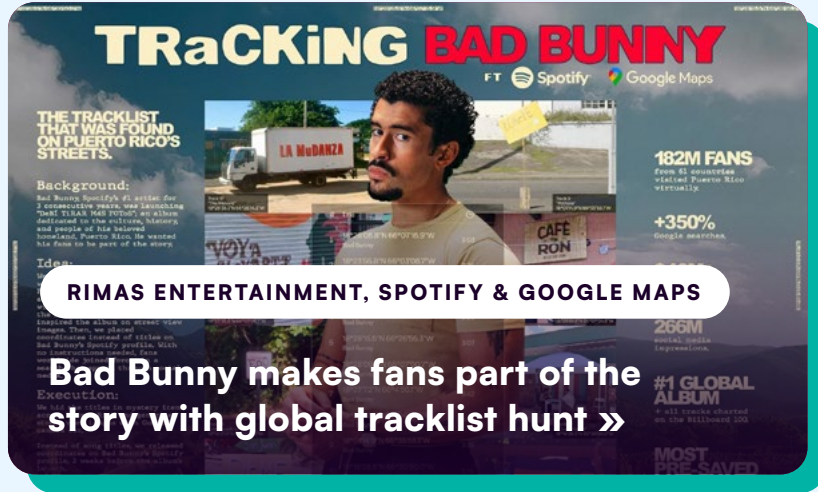
›› **This campaign unlocked existing potential by eliminating outdated restrictions. Instead of adding something new, take away the rules that prevent natural behavior from emerging. What 'common sense' restrictions in your industry might actually be blocking SPONTAINMENT? Can you remove them?**

RIMAS ENTERTAINMENT, SPOTIFY & GOOGLE MAPS

Bad Bunny makes fans part of the story with global tracklist hunt »

VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM

Museum storage becomes personalized discovery space »

OMA'S SOEP

Free meals encourage intergenerational connection »

To launch his January 2025 album *Debí Tirar Más Fotos*, Bad Bunny invited fans to unlock the tracklist through a global treasure hunt. Created by DDB Latina Puerto Rico for Rimas Entertainment, the Tracking Bad Bunny campaign replaced song titles on Spotify with GPS coordinates. Fans entered them into Google Maps to find hidden track names in Puerto Rican locations featured in the album. The activation drew 182 million fans from 61 countries and earned over USD 40 million in media — culminating in a Cannes Lions Grand Prix.

The V&A East Storehouse transforms how visitors engage with national collections by making museum storage publicly accessible. Opened in May 2025, the facility displays over 250,000 objects without traditional glass barriers across 16,000 sq m. The Order an Object feature lets visitors book appointments to request specific items from the collection, turning the vast storage facility into a personalized discovery experience. Rather than wandering predetermined galleries, visitors can essentially commission their own mini-exhibitions by requesting objects that intrigue them.

Oma's Soep tackled elderly isolation by creating a simple framework for strangers to connect: free meals for seniors dining with younger companions. The initiative, which ran in June 2025, was developed in partnership with 100 restaurants across the Netherlands as part of 'A Table for Two Against Loneliness'. By removing financial barriers and providing a clear reason to share a meal, the campaign transformed awkward age-gap interactions into natural conversations. The program scaled from 25 to 100 locations in one year.

»» **When customers have to work for access, they earn the right to participate and strangers become temporary teammates. The shared effort transforms fans from observers into insiders. How could your brand make customers work together to unlock value?**

»» **Order an Object inverts the curator-visitor relationship and turns passive museum-going into active treasure hunting. Visitors become temporary curators of their own experience while the institution provides the surprise. How can you maintain authority while giving audiences agency over their journey?**
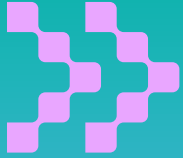
»» **A simple solution that removes the awkwardness that prevents natural human behavior. Oma's Soep didn't just offer free meals — they created permission for people to gather. A shared meal became an excuse that makes connection feel natural, not forced.**

Beyond entertainment

Where does SPONTAINMENT go next?

The demand for controlled surprise extends beyond marketing campaigns and brand activations.

As consumers grow weary of over-optimization across all aspects of life, opportunities emerge for SPONTAINMENT thinking in all sectors.

People have optimized away their own ability to be surprised. Brands can step in to create it for them.

BEAUTY & PERSONAL CARE

Help customers get comfortable with the unexpected through small style risks. Think 'micro-dare' campaigns that nudge people toward choices they wouldn't discover via the algorithm.

Interactive experiences that respond to customer interests create memorable moments beyond traditional sampling. Glossier used technology to trigger personalized poems; build on this with color recommendations or style suggestions based on selections.

CONSUMER TECH

Singapore's National Library Board developed Augmented Reading using Snap's Spectacles to overlay real-time audio and visual effects onto physical books, transforming reading from a static experience into dynamic discovery.

Instead of creating new digital habits, reveal unexpected depth in activities users already love. Make familiar experiences richer without losing their original appeal.

FOOD & BEVERAGE

Turn familiar products into unexpected experiences by changing when and how they're encountered. Create controlled surprise by delivering products in unusual formats or at surprising moments.

Vogel's created Toastcards, and mailed bread slice postcards to New Zealanders overseas. Consider similar format disruptions: ingredients that arrive as puzzles to solve or familiar foods in unfamiliar packaging.

HEALTH & WELLBEING

What if doctors prescribed experiences instead of medications? Vancouver Art Gallery partnered with Canada's PaRx program to let healthcare providers offer free gallery visits as mental health treatment.

This shifts wellness from clinical settings into unexpected spaces. When museums become treatment centers, it gives patients permission to prioritize these activities as legitimate healthcare solutions.

HOME & LIVING

Urban infrastructure holds untapped potential for spontaneous community moments: OMO Turkey added soccer goals, hoops and slides to billboards, turning ad space into a playground.

City dwellers assume there's no room for play, but creative activation of existing structures can change that. Rethink overlooked urban elements — building facades that invite interaction or apartment hallways designed to spark neighbor conversations.

NONPROFIT

Surprise donors by revealing unexpected connections between contributions and real-world outcomes. Personalized impact discoveries could show how donations funded something completely different than expected.

Volunteer matching could embrace randomness rather than perfect skill alignment. Pairing environmental activists with literacy programs creates cross-pollination and helps supporters uncover new passions.

TRAVEL

San Diego International Airport introduced live poetry exchanges where local poets collected travelers' stories and transformed them into original poems on the spot.

Could you embed unpredictability into routine journeys? Instead of optimizing every touchpoint for efficiency, introduce elements that slow people down and create memorable interactions.

WORK & EDUCATION

As job security disappears, workers need tools that help them discover opportunities they never imagined Google's Career Dreamer analyzes skills, visualizing possibilities through an interactive web that encourages exploration beyond obvious choices.

Apply this internally and help employees uncover hidden talents through experiments. Forget performance reviews — create pathways that surprise people with their own capabilities.
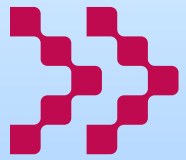
Your spontainment starter kit

A practical exercise to turn everyday interactions into moments of wonder

Ready to take your concepts further? Use our AI ideation tools:

Find your framework

Identify the most spontaneous brand outside your industry. What 'safe space' do they create that lets people be unpredictable? How could you adapt this?

Surprise the routine

Name one thing your customers do consistently. What unexpected twist, discovery element or social moment could transform it into something memorable?

Borrow from another category

What does hospitality/retail/entertainment do that your industry would never try? What if you did?

Map your predictability

Select your three most routine customer touchpoints (checkout, onboarding). Pick one: how could you add a discovery layer without breaking what works?

Transform a space

Think of an everyday location your customers visit regularly. How could your brand temporarily transform it into something unexpected?

Start an experiment

Pick the two most inspiring SPONTAINMENT innovations from this report. What would a hybrid of these look like, delivered by your brand?

PRODUCT LAB »

Input your business details, target audience and the trend. Generate new product ideas that add discovery layers to routine experiences.

CAMPAIGN CRAFTER »

Tell the tool about your organization, audience and the insight that resonated most from your worksheet answers. Watch campaign ideas unfurl around surprise.

SCENARIOOOH »

Input your business details, target audience and the trend. Generate new product ideas that add discovery layers to routine experiences.
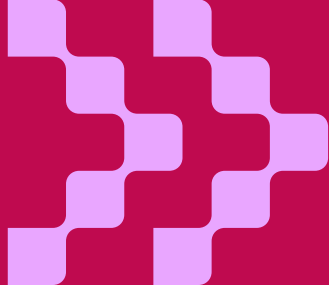
The SPONTAINMENT opportunity:

As convenience culture reaches its limits, space opens for brands willing to add friction back into consumer experiences. This doesn't mean abandoning efficiency. In fact, many brands will continue to find success through optimization and seamless service.

For companies looking to differentiate, SPONTAINMENT offers a different path: creating controlled surprise for consumers who've optimized away their own ability to be delighted. The brands that master this approach won't just capture attention; they'll fill a genuine human need that algorithms and efficiency aren't serving.

How will you seize the opportunity to stand out by helping people rediscover what it feels like to be surprised?
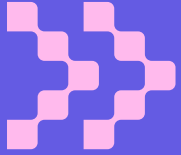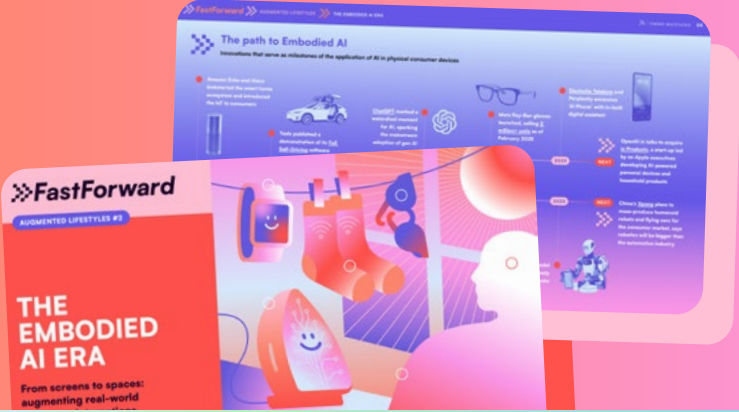
CHECK OUT FASTFORWARD SERIES 1

The Augmented Lifestyles reports explore how AI and technology are supercharging the consumer experience.

1

THE CONSUMER AGENT ECONOMY

READ HERE »

2

THE EMBODIED AI ERA

READ HERE »

3

THE AI EMPATHY ENGINE

READ HERE »