

SIGN
SALAD



Sign Salad Trends Roundup

As the year draws to a close, we examine 10 trends to look forward to in 2021

Introduction

Covid 19 has been a difficult time for us all. To varying degrees – and statistics show it's been hardest for those living closest to the poverty line (8 in 10 hard-up families said they were financially worse off as a result of the pandemic (Child Poverty Action Group)) – we have all been forced to adapt to new ways of living, working, socialising, and raising our children. Each week has presented new challenges to which people have had to find pragmatic and often imperfect solutions. It's been a period of deep social anxiety as we have worried for ourselves, others, and the future.

Studies conducted by the Mental Health Foundation show that many people's mental health has suffered during this time, with 87% of people reporting they needed a 'coping mechanism' to help them stay on top of stress. Many of us have become overwhelmed by depressing news cycles and daily case figures; and it has been difficult to find things to look forward to.

In this difficult context, it can be easy to get lost in the gloom, but periods of great stress can also catalyse positive cultural change.

As Sign Salad approaches the end of the year, we wanted to collate some positive cultural shifts that we've identified across our projects from the past few months. These cultural shifts point to a brighter horizon and signal some significant trajectories that may inspire renewed optimism. Taken from a range of categories, our trends cover everything from food to fashion, health to horoscopes. We think these trends indicate a more positive year – bearing fresh possibilities for our industry and beyond – might be just around the corner.



About Sign Salad

Brands are inseparable from the culture that surrounds them. In this report, we've looked at the positive cultural shifts which have emerged in the turbulent time of Covid 19 and the key-takeouts for brands.

Sign Salad is a cultural insight agency, specialising in semiotics and language analysis. By using semiotics, we help clients understand how culture impacts the way people respond to their brands and products, and ensure that they are optimally relevant and meaningful.

Whilst talking to consumers will help to understand their opinions and perceptions, semiotics investigates the cultural conditions that created those beliefs - and how those beliefs will change as culture changes.

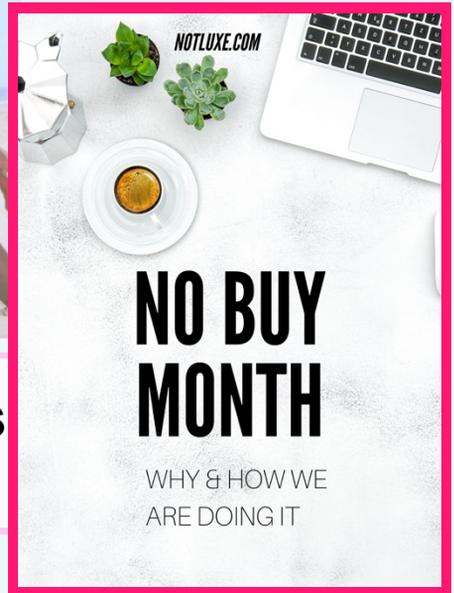


Billie razors and KLM both reminding their consumers of the option to not use their products, in a spirit of laid-back acceptance

Various 'no-buy' challenges are sweeping the internet

OUT ON A WING

The Netherlands' national airline is encouraging people not to fly



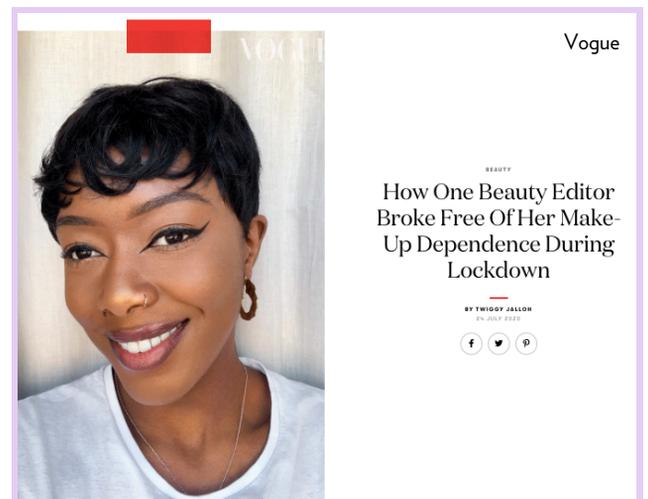
1. The Power of Not Doing.

Though lockdown has brought many challenges; it has also revealed to us the power that resides in **not doing**. Routines and habits we previously considered ubiquitous have been re-revealed as choices – do I actually want to do that thing? Is this an opportunity to re-assess my relationship with various behaviours?

With 69% of women reporting to have stopped wearing makeup during lockdown (Skinproud), and 40% of people stating their intention to wait at least 6 months before flying again post-Covid (IATA), an extended period of rest and reconsideration is upon us. Brands have an opportunity to help consumers take a pause from certain habits and routines – to unburden them and slow the pace; rather than automatically propelling consumers to do, buy, and add more.

Last year, KLM's CEO Pieter Elber penned an open letter asking people to fly less. "Could you take the train instead?", he asked. Razor brand Billie also taps into this new focus on not doing, and strikes a good tone by doing so: "What you do with yours is up to you. Grow it, get rid of it, or comb it. It's your hair, after all."

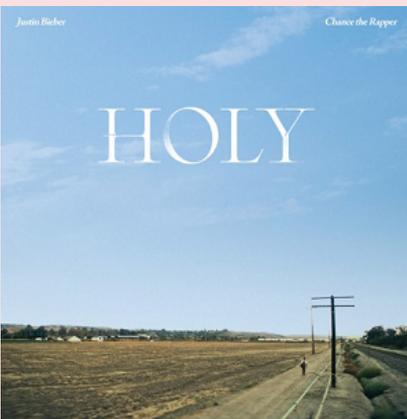
Counter-intuitively, the best way to build your brand right now may be to encourage customers to use it less frequently.



2. Existential Exploration.

Connected to this moment of pause, we have observed a rise in people wanting to turn inward and explore their very selfhood. Who am I? What do I believe in? We have been living through a period of enforced reflection. Spirituality and religion has risen exponentially – one of the UK's largest online Christian bookstores, Eden, saw physical Bible sales rise by 55% in April – and we see repeated signs of an enhanced spiritual priority bubbling up in the cultural realm, too. From Justin Bieber's new video for Holy to a vivid fixation on horoscope sites, spiritual belief is woven through many aspects of popular culture.

One category that represents this trend towards the astrological is online dating. The recently launched US astrology-based dating app Struck calculates compatibility based on birth charts; meanwhile, astrology app The Pattern have announced a new Connect feature that will allow users to search for new dates and friends. In social media, Snapchat has also recently added an astrology feature, showing that consumers are ever more often looking to the stars to guide them in all kinds of interpersonal relationships.



Grazia's 4 split-covers featuring frontline NHS workers

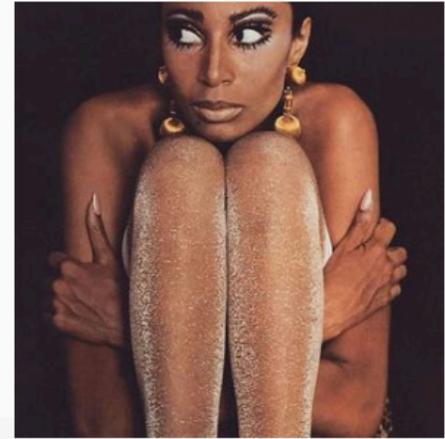
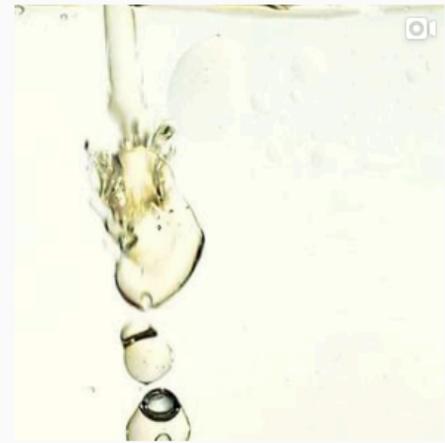


3. The Rise of Normal People.

“There’s a sense that celebrities are irrelevant now”. So goes a headline from The Guardian earlier in the year. The faith and admiration we the little people once felt for the rarefied few has diminished as our collective priorities have shifted. Who matters? Who’s doing interesting stuff? Who *helps*? There’s something more enthralling, it seems, about watching normal people valiantly responding to a pandemic than out-of-touch celebrities trying to strike the right tone from their mansion homes. Over the course of the past year we find a new cultural emphasis on ‘normal-looking’ settings (welcome, cluttercore), people and products. This revival of normcore moves beyond curated perfection to confidently acknowledging the more down-to-earth reality of our collective lockdown experience. There is beauty in this showcasing of normality.

Greta Thunberg's new book – the title emphasising her smallness, rather than her 'greatness'





4. Animal Friends.

2.1m people in UK acquired a pet during lockdown (PMFA); proving the role of animals as a soothing distraction has never been more important. And it's not just in the acquisition of our fluffy friends – we have observed animals popping up as a soothing visual motif across many parts of culture.

Gucci's 'A Horse of Course' summer campaign created a luxurious, surreal tone (horses shown sitting at a tea table, shopping in the supermarket, chillin' poolside). Elsewhere, many emergent personal care brands feature anthropomorphised, relaxed-looking animals (e.g. cucumber eyes, wrapped in towel) amongst their Instagram posts, creating a feeling of comfort in their cuteness.

Whether fantastical and humorous or comforting and soothing; animals have been used by brands as a means of creating much-needed immediate emotional gratification in their audiences.



Clockwise from bottom left: artist Ben Lenovitz's pet portraits; Gucci's Summer 2020 campaign; grooming brand's Fur Instagram feed

Marcus Rashford in Burberry; as part of their youth charity project



BLACK LIVES MATTER
BLACK LIVES MATTER



Elsewhere brands such as Deciem, Nike, and Fenty have contributed thousands of dollars to Colour of Change, Black Lives Matter and Movement for Black Lives

5. Can-do Collectivism.

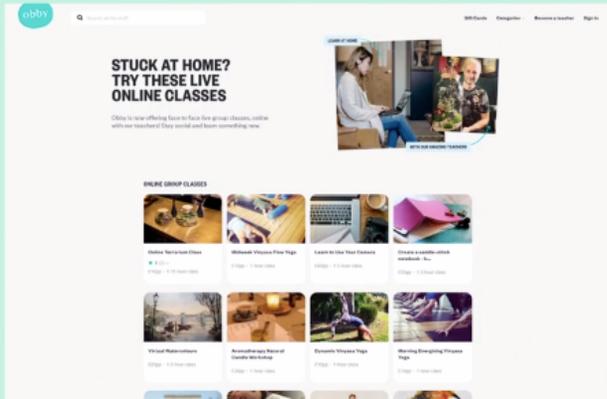
There's a sparkle of optimism in the air as evidence of collectivism's successful outcomes bubble to the surface. Countries – and companies – across the world have united to work together on finding a response to the coronavirus; setting market competition aside to share crucial vaccine know-how.

And on a National level, 2020 has been a year of pulling together to achieve shared goals – Marcus Rashford demonstrating how pragmatic social action can quickly achieve meaningful and much-needed outcomes. Burberry have recently partnered with the hero footballer, with the brand supporting initiatives for young people (including youth centres frequented by Rashford as a child) while the athlete stars in their latest campaign. This willingness to not only representatively but also actively support grassroots causes and their champions shows how brands can meaningfully participate in the growing collective spirit.



LVMH-produced hand sanitiser signals a can-do, civically-minded side to the brand

If 2020 has revealed anything to us, it's that collectivism can and does work, and brands would do well to remember that many consumers will be riding into 2021 on a wave of invigorated political optimism. How brands contribute to social causes matters – and people remember how (or rather, if) brands pulled their weight.



Apple's 'Creativity Goes On' advert showcases their own role in keeping creativity alive during the pandemic

6. DIY Creativity.

What did you make during 2020? Endless loaves of (admit it, quite dry) banana bread? Face masks? Tomato chutney? Did you learn to weave on a loom? TikTok dancing? Brush up your rusty French? For many, the reality of being at home for long stretches of time offered an opportunity to work on existing skills and learn new ones. People have been reconnecting with the imaginative, creative parts of their brain and as such we've witnessed DIY output pouring proudly across social media platforms.

And it's not just individuals – this rough 'n' ready, daringly DIY ethic has been brought to bear in brand worlds too. We've seen behind the scenes and caught a new glimpse of brands 'working in beta' to find creative solutions to new problems. This 'imperfect but ingenious' ethic is not a merely practical workaround but has also unlocked a whole current of creative exploration. Like a designer whose imagination is unlocked by a tighter brief, brands have countered the constraints of Covid with flair and creative curiosity to remind themselves of what's possible to achieve.

(Right) Royal Mail's new parcel collection service, where postal workers will pick up packages from your home instead of having to take them to the post office, is, according to BBC News, a response to the rise in online shopping – but the kind of innovation that makes you think, "why wasn't it like that before?"



How a Swimwear Designer Sourced, Sewed, and Shot Her New Collection From Quarantine

Clockwise from top left: Class, course and workshop platform Obby adapted their offering to online classes, where previously they had all been in-person; Oatly BTL comms; Diptique 'homemade ad'; Maayan Sherris swimwear; Apple's 'Creativity Goes On' campaign



LEE SMITH / REUTERS

Google's 'leave a local business a review' campaign, featuring Anthony Joshua and Sheridan Smith



1. **Choose 3** local businesses
2. **Shop** with them & show the love
3. **Tag 3** friends to #adoptashop

Portas

7. Local, cosy and intimate.

An undeniably uplifting shift that we've observed is people getting to know their local neighbourhoods in a way that seemed almost inconceivable pre-Covid. Two fifths of Brits reported to have shopped locally during 2020 (YouGov), in a national movement that has re-stimulated the local high street and reconnected the public with their community roots. Before 2020 we saw the world through a wide lens. Now we have been forced to zoom in and focus on what's in front of us, and the result has been an amplified sense of intimacy in people's lives.

Brands that know how to connect with and contribute to their local environments will be able to weave themselves into the meaningful bonds being renewed between businesses and communities.

Portas agency's new 'AdoptAShop' campaign and hashtag invites local residents to hero 3 of their most beloved shops and businesses in their neighbourhood

Supporting communities

You can now make double the impact in your community. When you shop with us, we're doubling what goes to local causes and community organisations so it's just that little bit easier to give a helping hand.



Through its Local Community Fund, The Co-op gives money back to members as they spend in store – and allows the membership to choose where this money then goes



Fenty Skin isn't prescriptively for men or women; it's for everyone who wants to use it. Comms feature A\$AP and Lil Nas side-by-side with Rihanna + other female models

8. Blurred Binaries.

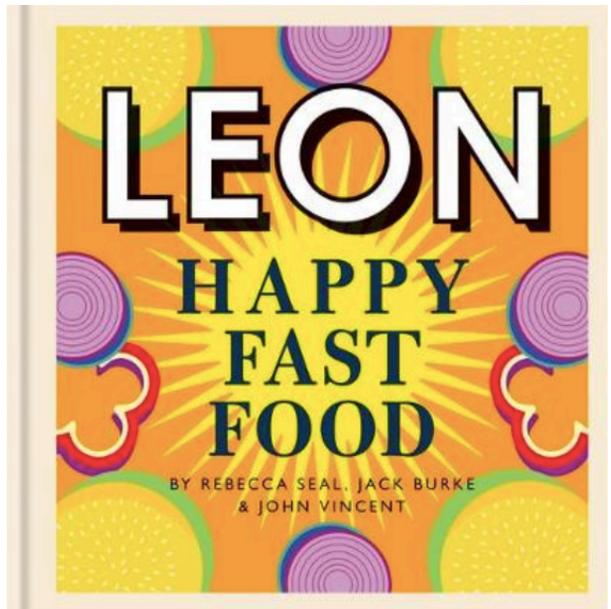
Something else to be optimistic about is an increased embrace of nuanced 'middle states' that occupy the (often vast) terrain between fixed binaries. This new acceptance of 'in-between' indicates a questioning of polarising frameworks. We observe a growing desire in people to embrace freedom, complexity and nuance. Things no longer have to be 'this' or 'that', but can be neither, or both.

For example, we need no longer think of food as being healthy or unhealthy. It can be both, simultaneously. What's good for the heart is not always what's good for the soul – and when it comes to our wellbeing, both health lenses can co-exist at the same time.

In an adjacent sense, we are challenging the rigid sex-stereotypes of masculinity or femininity. Increasingly, people are free to embrace characteristics that feel right to who they are, outside of these fixed norms. There is freedom in rejecting a binary framework and claiming the unseen terrain that lies between.

Brands can evolve beyond binary frameworks of 'one or the other' to offer consumers products and experiences that feel interesting, nuanced and ultimately, far more relatable.

SHELBY'S™
HEALTHY HEDONISM



Healthy fast food chain Leon had a prominent moment in March when in response to supermarket shortages, it turned its restaurants into food shops. The brand also brought out its latest cookbook, Happy Fast Food, in May, continuing its tradition of blurring the line between instant gratification and wholesome pleasure.

9. Foody, Yummy, Thank Ye.

If there's one question that's defined the lockdown experience, it's 'what shall we have for dinner tonight?'. For many people, food and drink has become a source of comfort, excitement, and distraction. We have seen people training up as their own bartenders, creating sophisticated cocktails presented with elaborate serves. In addition, people have been more experimental and daring in terms of the recipes they have taken on. People are now cooking to escape – or rather eating to escape – and brands have a clear role to play in terms of helping consumers embark on these invigorating culinary journeys.



Minor Figures have promoted their Chai Concentrate on Instagram with a recipe for customers to make their own cocktail, emphasising creativity by describing it as “a seasonal riff on the Espresso Martini” and injecting an uplifting hint of playfulness with their unusually literal use of the word “cheeky” – a light-hearted distraction through the medium of mixed drinks.



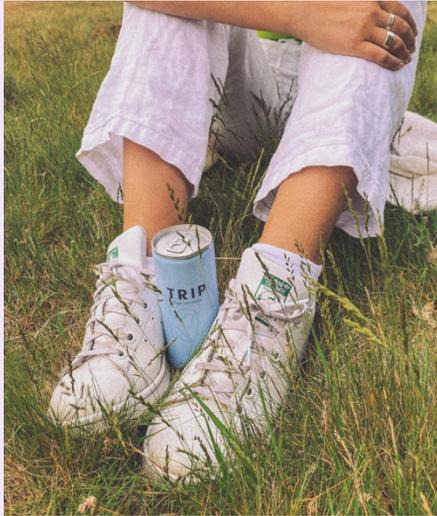
Vegan Junk Food Bar



Squarespace 2020 advert



Mother Clucker at-home meal kit



Trip wellness drinks are CBD infused and emphasise their sensorial properties: “CBD experiences that are just as enjoyable to taste as the feeling after. Products with amazing flavour that leave you more productive, less stressed and more you”

Earl of East acknowledges the way scent can offer heady, transportive experiences: “Scent has a unique way of conjuring memories and transporting us to places we’d love to be”



10. Hyper-Sensorials.

Finally, and related to the previous idea of journey-making, let’s close by deeply inhaling for a moment and appreciating the new focus we’ve seen on hyper-sensorials. When we are limited in terms of literal travel and physical journeys, new appetites for mental trips and mind-bending ‘inner’ experiences emerge. We’ve seen this evidenced in a cultural explosion of all things sensorially stimulating. According to Kantar research, sales of scented candles, potpourri and essential oils for diffusers jumped 29% in October.

In response to Britain’s first lockdown and the ensuing nostalgia for everyday spaces no longer frequentable, London-based home and lifestyle brand Earl of East developed the Scents of Normality candle collection. The tongue-in-cheek fragrances and their even more ironic descriptions provide a humour hit - making light missing everyday details we never imagined we could, such as “a fug of recirculated air” or “the ersatz-lemon of a urinal block” - while tapping into the evocative power of scent to mentally transport us to places currently off-limits.

Key take-outs for brands

1

Enable people to relax and slow down. Be on the front foot and allow your consumers the opportunity to step back from the seeming relentlessness of certain rituals. Though it seems counter-intuitive; it is a way of establishing credible trust over the long term.

2

Acknowledge people's yearning for spiritual engagement and their curiosity for the soul. What is your brand's version of spiritual connection and how could this be leveraged in an authentic way?

3

Rather than glossy and unattainable talent, try using 'ordinary' people with a story to tell as your brand ambassadors. In addition, invite people into the backend of your brand. Introduce your staff and let them share their role – how does their invisible work help the brand function properly?

4

Animals soothe people as well as adding a touch of sensorial luxury to imagery. Which animals best represent your brand? How could you involve them across your touchpoints?

5

How could you leverage your brand platform to add weight and visibility to social causes? How could you help existing charities and movements achieve their ambitions?

Key take-outs for brands

6

There's a thirst for 'imperfect but ingenious' homespun making, and people are curious to see how brands are finding creative solutions to novel problems. What part of your brand's creative process could you lift the lid on and share with consumers?

7

However big or small, brands are bound by geography and a sense of place. Showcase the locality from which you grew, or in which you currently operate. How do your stores fit into local area? What's the contribution? How can local consumers better connect with you?

8

Challenge your commitment to fixed binaries – good and bad, masculine and feminine, healthy and unhealthy. Are things really so simple?

9

People want to go on delicious food and drink journeys. The high point of many people's day, they want to be treated, dazzled and distracted. Food and beverage brands: help them go on these exciting, disruptive journeys.

10

When people cannot travel, they want to coddle themselves in sumptuous sensory experiences. How can you upweight the sensorial profile of your brand to create intense and memorable moments?



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