

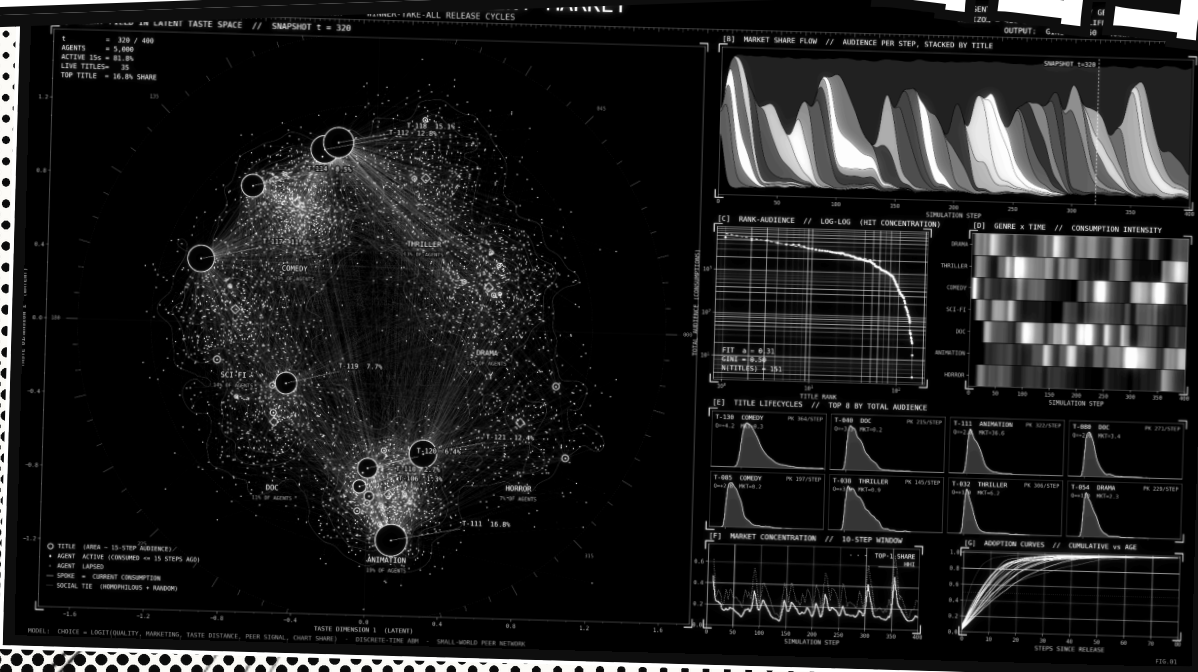
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ZEITGEIST INTELLIGENCE

Using AI to Surface Gen Z Culture

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The views expressed below are solely those of the author, and do not reflect those of the Entertainment Technology Center, its members, the USC School of Cinematic Arts, or USC as a whole.

For the past four years, the entertainment industry has been talking too much about AI and too little about culture. And it's easy to see why. Sure AI is complex and poorly defined, but it's a rich and cohesive industry. Most important: it's a great story, with heroes, villains, and jazz hands valuations. Culture, in contrast, looks like a flock of starlings: it's a large, baffling and vaguely systemic collection of creators, companies, and audience segments that feels like everyone's landscape but nobody's business.

But where AI is kinetic, culture is tectonic. Everyone and everything, including —and especially —AI —lives on it. In the end, even tech has to reach through culture to lay roots in society. Technology may have all the money, but culture is the apex predator.

The term “Zeitgeist” perfectly captures this fundamental and subliminal quality. Often translated as “the spirit of the times”, the zeitgeist is the invisible reality of a large cultural “system” composed of many providers (these days, everyone) and consumers (these days, everyone) whose shape represents who people are and what captures their attention today. A flock of starlings.

The zeitgeist is culture, pure and simple. And for the media industry, the zeitgeist is the market, that moody motorcycle boyfriend that the industry can neither fully understand nor quit.

This is what makes the media landscape so forbidding. Social media companies are fighting the war for attention with a form of media that is truest to its reptilian neuroscience (addiction, FOMO, and the drive to build social capital). To compete and thrive against this potent business model, traditional media companies have no other choice than to refine their understanding of their market. They have to leverage all available technical tools to understand and predict the cultural zeitgeist.

For a long time, this playbook looked out of reach. Modeling and predicting a system as large and fast-moving as culture means an impossibly large amount of data, lots of expensive compute, and algorithms spread out across math, neuroscience, and filmmaking. But here is the thing: people love to talk about what they love. And now they're talking about it in enough volume, publicly, and in a way that the traditional media industry (which here also means advertising) can comprehend even better than

the social media companies that these conversations live on (note: it's a completely accepted —and awesomely ironic, in the age of generative AI —legal fact that social media data is public data, and that scraping it is legal. Courts don't even recognize terms of service as contracts).

People have never talked more about what they love. A mere 5 minutes on Reddit or Discord will make clear how deep and precise these conversations are. So developing insights into culture has never been more possible. But it doesn't mean it's easy. That data is hard to collect. And when you do it's messy, it's unstructured. Text, photos and videos are the modeling equivalent of an iceberg: most of their meaning is hidden. But you can only look below the waterline with expensive machine learning models and hand-drawn ontologies.

This is where AI comes in. Not generative AI, but the other kind of AI. The one that for long has been mislabeled as “analytics” but is in fact as hard —and sometimes much harder —than generative AI. It's also not trained on copyrighted content and it does not replace anybody's job. In fact, it makes everyone smarter and better informed. We call it “strategic AI,” because it helps people build strategy and make decisions. And if we have it our way, it's going to help both Hollywood and Madison Avenue move at the speed of culture.

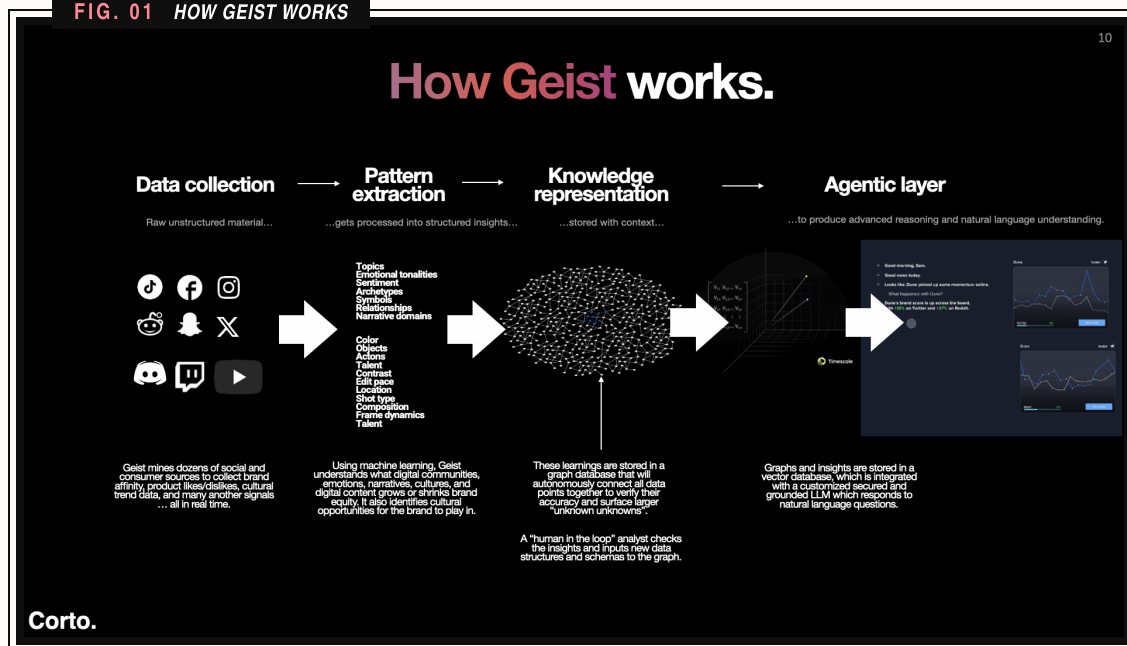
For over the past three years, CortoAI has been quietly building, in close conversations with dozens of media companies across entertainment and advertising, a multimodal agentic AI application to mine all of this unstructured data and build the very predictive picture of the cultural zeitgeist.

This product, called “Geist”, leverages unique¹ and proprietary machine learning models to access the world's largest dataset of social, consumer, and market data, to make predictions about where culture is going.

We build and track tens of thousands of cultural segments, then use that real-life data as an input to build market simulations where thousands of synthetic audience segments are presented with

¹ It includes models drawn from areas of AI (probabilistic logic, topology, and information theory) still considered outside the mainstream.

FIG. 01 HOW GEIST WORKS

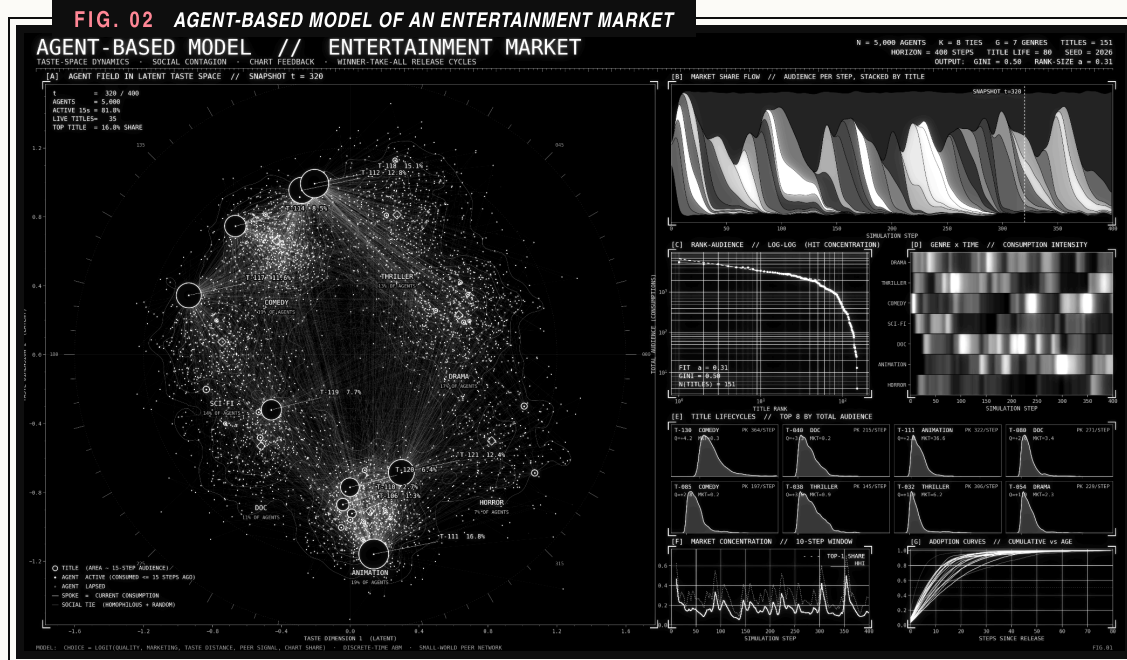


hundreds of different entertainment products, to predict where culture is most likely to go².

Dozens of Hollywood studios and large brands, including Lego, Levi's, Unilever, and Coca-Cola, have been using "Geist" to understand culture and predict where it's going. A handful of them have started using it to design and launch new products, write new stories, and design new campaigns. We allow them to see the culture they're a part of, build meaningful relationships with their customers, and, in the end, market to one.

This is the AI stack we have used to develop the insights below on what is happening in Gen Z culture right now.

² This synthetic market simulation method is called agent-based modeling, and it has been used for decades to model complex systems. We think it's going to be a very big part of AI moving forward.



第1話

01

THE WAR IS ATTENTION. THE BATTLEFIELD IS CULTURE.

It's a cruel reality: as long as there are only 24 hours in a day, the demand for media will not meaningfully grow³. The supply, on the other hand, has been exploding. We've all felt it, but the scale is almost unfathomable: 500 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute, nearly 3 million videos added to the platform every single day. Similarly, a recent Cornell University study found that nearly 5 million new videos are uploaded to TikTok every hour⁴. Meanwhile, platforms like Roblox are vacuuming some of the youngest and most valuable audience segments —like Gen Alpha —where the number of

³ Which is why Netflix co-founder Reed Hastings famously said in 2017 that its biggest competitor was “sleep”.

⁴ Stell, Schirmer, Ruths, Pfeffer, “Just Another Hour on Tik Tok”, Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media, Vol. 6, Article 002 (2026). Available here: <https://arxiv.org/abs/2504.13279>.

children under 9 who play videogames has jumped more than 65% between 2020 and 2024⁵.

Economic theory and empirical studies, from Kelvin Lancaster's Characteristics Demand Theory in 1966 to Chris Anderson's "Long Tail" in 2004, show us that anytime supply of a product category is exploding, consumer segmentation follows suit.

For the past 5 years, Corto has been collecting petabytes of culture data (reaching back to 2002) across every industry and tens of thousands of social/consumer channels. We have seen this fragmentation of tastes happen and accelerate in real time. But nowhere as much, and nowhere as fast, as in entertainment.

For example, our data shows that the number of media franchises, musical artists, creators, or brands that share the top 10% of all consumer conversations, has gone from 39 in 2015 to 327 in 2026. We even see this fragmentation within genres. The manga and anime genre, which used to have a fairly homogeneous base of fans, has now splintered into a dozen niches, led by horror anime/manga, which — at 7.2% Y/Y growth — is one of the fastest-growing niches in entertainment⁶.

Even the "cultural refresh rate" is accelerating, especially for younger demographics. Looking at a sample of over 363,000 people aged 12-21, we see that the percentage of musical artists, film and TV franchises, as well as comic books that get mentioned year over year has gone from 24.8% in 2020 to 15.9% in 2025 (a 36% decrease).

Unsurprisingly, this turnover rate is fastest in film (a 31% decrease in loyalty from 2020 to 2025), and slowest in videogames (12% decrease in IP loyalty). Sports, as predicted, has the lowest turnover rate of all content segments, with just over 3% turnover for teams, and 17% for athletes.

The explosion of supply and the increasing sophistication of the curator space tells only part of the story. The Corto data has been showing an increasing disaffection of Millennials, and now Gen Z, towards not just Big Media but all forms of institutions.

⁵ The Anne E Casey Foundation, "The Impact of Social Media and Technology on Gen Alpha", June 2025: <https://www.aecf.org/blog/impact-of-social-media-on-gen-alpha>.

⁶ Across Reddit, Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, YouTube, Snapchat, Discord, IMDB, and Letterboxd.

第2話



HOLLYWOOD'S "CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE" AMONG YOUNGER DEMOS

Over 30 years ago, the Internet did the most punk thing in history: it took the monopoly of knowledge formation and social connection away from institutions. With information and communication being free and ubiquitous, churches, political parties, labor unions, corporations, the government, and all the other organizations handed down their power to networks. Us folks.

The tech revolution that ensued was about one thing and one thing only: making everything computable. Knowledge (Google), society (Meta), money (Bitcoin), stories (Midjourney, Runway and all the others), and now organizations (agentic AI) are all computable and solidly in the hands of networks. And unsurprisingly, networks started turning against institutions. We have seen the same story spread across Gen Z on social media for the past few years: all institutions — and the elites that lead them — are conspiring to manipulate elections, poison our food, keep people sick, and generally engage in unethical behavior for profit.

Across Reddit, YouTube, Tik Tok, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, X, Discord, and thousands of additional consumer and social sources, we see the same stunning picture of disaffection:

In the U.S., the percentage of negative sentiment about religious institutions is up 25% between 2023 and 2026⁷, with intensely polarized emotions, such as joy and gratitude, but also anger and disgust, growing at an all-time pace (over 6% Year over Year).

In 19 countries (not just the US) across the Western Hemisphere, Europe, and Asia, political parties have gone from 66.13% negative sentiment to 87.29% just between 2023 and 2026. In these countries, emotions such as “neurotic”, “depressed”, “disgust” have collectively been growing over 9% year over year.

Big Media is not immune from this trend. After all, studios are in the sensitive business of monetizing inspiration, identity, and nostalgia. And while they legally own the franchises, they have to share their emotional custody with the fans. Studio executives, like crisis negotiators, call that a “multifaceted relationship”.

Indeed. Our data shows a net increase of 8.7% in negative sentiment about the large studios among Gen Z between 2020 and 2026⁸, with the exception of Sony Pictures Entertainment, which has seen a dramatic, 27% rise in positive sentiment (with joy and excitement dominating the emotional landscape about SPE). Where Disney is holding up with a very polarized sentiment (note: if we measure the strength of the sentiment about Disney, we see a large positive (65.3%), but also a substantial negative (72.8%). Sony is riding high among Gen Z and Gen Alpha mostly because of the “Spider-Man” franchise (including — and especially — the “Spider-Noir” series). But its investment in

⁷ Negative sentiment related to religious institutions has grown from 64.58% to 80.77%. Even the polarity of the negative sentiment (which measures the intensity of how negative the sentiment is) has grown 18% over the same period.

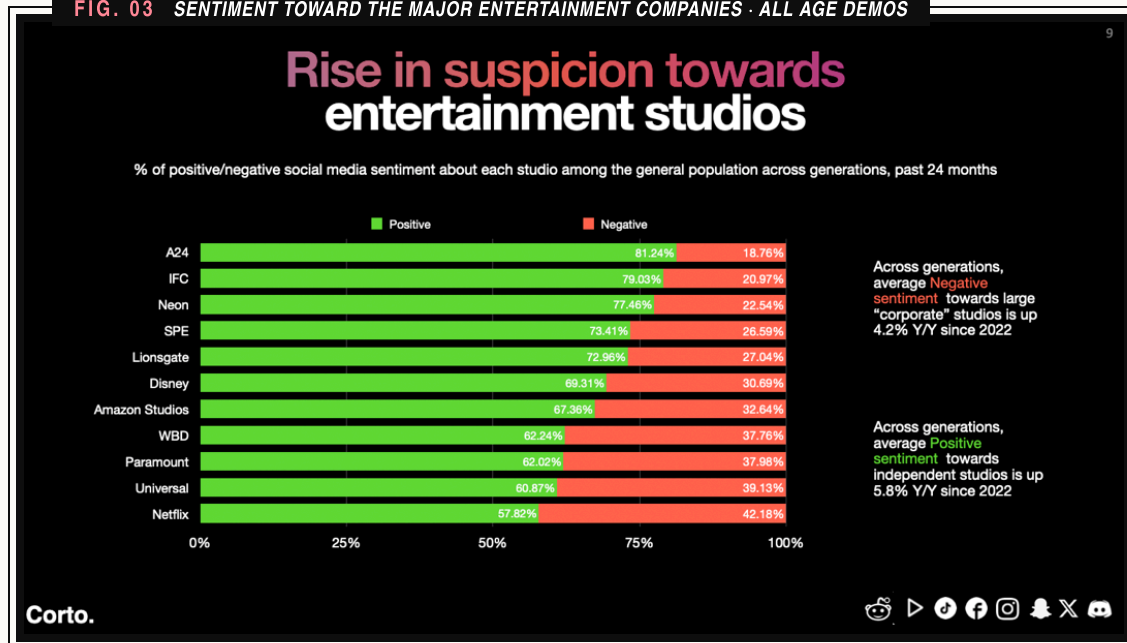
⁸ Negative emotions such as neuroticism, anger, and sadness, as expressed in conversations about the large studios, have risen 13% year over year in the same period.

anime distribution, and the strength of its TV production slate (“The Boys” and “Pluribus” are among the fastest-growing series of the past 12 months) have been a consistent draw for Gen Z.

Conversely, indie studios such as A24, Neon, and even IFC, have seen an explosion in both the amount and the quality of attention across the demo spectrum, but the affinity is strongest among Gen Z. The Gen Z powerhouse A24, for example, has seen a net 34% increase in positive sentiment (with curiosity, surprise, and joy dominating the emotional landscape among Gen Z) between 2022 and 2026.

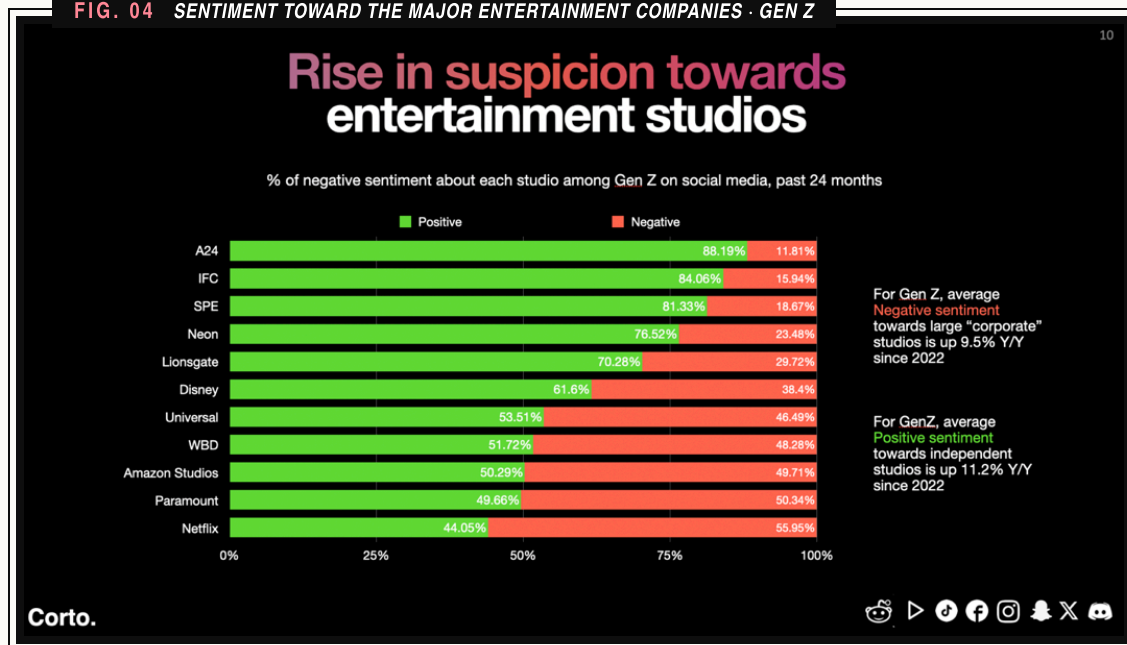
The slide below shows the positive/negative sentiment breakdown between the major entertainment companies across all age demos:

FIG. 03 SENTIMENT TOWARD THE MAJOR ENTERTAINMENT COMPANIES · ALL AGE DEMOS



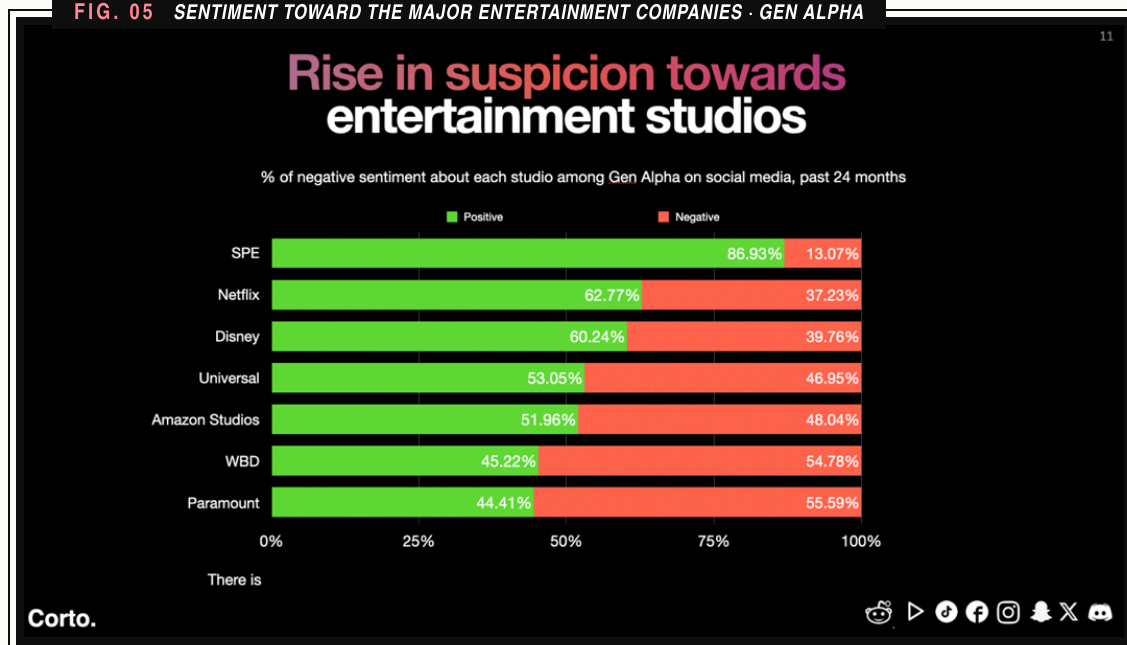
... and the same breakdown specifically for Gen Z:

FIG. 04 SENTIMENT TOWARD THE MAJOR ENTERTAINMENT COMPANIES · GEN Z



... and Gen Alpha, for whom SPE is the favorite (thank "Spider-Man"):

FIG. 05 SENTIMENT TOWARD THE MAJOR ENTERTAINMENT COMPANIES · GEN ALPHA



But while studios are being swept up in the generational suspicion of all generations — but particularly the younger ones — towards large corporations, looking into which affinities and fandoms are growing the fastest reveal a certain paradox: studio franchises are holding strong, and even growing, in the Gen Z zeitgeist.

Here is a list of the 40 fastest-growing entertainment genres and properties of the past 6 months (note: we are taking into account creators only in the entertainment genre, not other categories such as health and wellness, fashion, or beauty) :

01	Grand Theft Auto 6 (videogame)	13.9%	21	Berserk (anime series)	4.6%
02	Spider-Man (franchise)	12.8%	22	Survivor (TV Series)	4.5%
03	The Pitt (TV Series)	12.4%	23	Star Citizen (videogame)	4.3%
04	Microdramas (genre)	11.6%	24	My Hero Academia	4.2%
05	Dune franchise	9.2%	25	No Man's Sky (videogame)	4%
06	Horror videogames (genre)	9.1%	26	House of the Dragon (TV Series)	4%
07	Pokemon (franchise)	9%	27	Final Fantasy (videogame)	3.9%
08	Kingdom Come (videogame)	9%	28	Fallout (videogame)	3.8%
09	The Boys (franchise)	7.9%	29	Lego (toys+TV series)	3.8%
10	DDLC (videogame)	7.6%	30	Dark Souls (videogame)	3.6%
11	Horror Literature	7.5%	31	Dead by Daylight (videogame)	3.5%
12	Horror manga and anime	7.2%	32	Naruto	2.9%
13	Warhammer	7.2%	33	Studio Ghibli	2.8%
14	Game of Thrones universe (including the book series and derivative)	6.7%	34	Marvel	2.6%
15	Marvel Rivals	6.5%	35	Harry Potter (franchise)	2.3%
16	Horror Games	6.3%	36	NBA 2K	2.2%
17	Lord of the Rings	6%	37	Star Wars (franchise)	2%
18	Battlestar Galactica	5.4%	38	Hunter x Hunter (manga and anime series)	1.9%
19	Stardew Valley (videogame)	5.3%	39	Anime (genre)	1.5%
20	Adventure Time (TV Series)	4.7%	40	One Piece (manga and anime series)	1.4%

A full 35% of the top 40 entertainment fandoms that are growing the fastest among Gen Z are owned and developed by a Hollywood studio. And they are growing by an average of 6.2% in the past 6 months (9% faster than the 5.7% benchmark average across all 40 properties and genres). Some top 10 staples, like GTA 6, “Pokemon,” or Spider-Man have been at the top of the cultural zeitgeist for decades, and still going strong. Others, like the TV series “Battlestar Galactica,” are even riding high despite being off the air for 17 years.

A few other things stand out:

- ◆ The Pitt is a massive and growing cultural phenomenon among Gen Z, despite not being on the air since April 2026.
- ◆ Microdramas are still strong and growing.
- ◆ The staying power of the horror genre among younger generations: it represents 20% of the list, and averages around 6.2% growth over the past 6 months (also 9% faster than the list’s average growth rate). Derivatives of the horror genre, such as horror games and mangas (see below), are growing faster than horror film and TV IP. Horror is going from a genre to an industry.
- ◆ Unsurprisingly, Anime properties represent almost 18% of the list with an average 4.1% growth rate over 6 months, well over the anime genre, which has only been growing over 1% in the same period. What this shows is that anime as a genre has reached maturity, and just like other genres like sci-fi or fantasy is hugely hit-driven. Another sign of maturity: sub-genres are growing faster than the genre itself. Horror-themed manga and anime, which did not make the list 18 months ago, are now growing much faster than the genre itself.
- ◆ The modern version of “Battlestar Galactica,” which aired its series finale in March 2009, and wasn’t even available to stream until a few months ago, has been getting a massive cultural revival.
- ◆ Lego is getting stronger among Gen Z, which should be great news for a company that’s been struggling to broaden its appeal beyond its “adult fans of Lego” fanbase.
- ◆ Marvel and Star Wars are still in the top 40, and growing among Gen Z, but that growth is

◆ decelerating, and every 6 months we see them both falling further down on the list.

So what is this apparent dichotomy between the studios and the IP all about? How can large media companies be so unpopular when many of the worlds they develop drive so much audience affinity? And why are creative-first niche genres and indies rising?

The answer is incredibly surprising, and potentially groundbreaking, for the media industry.

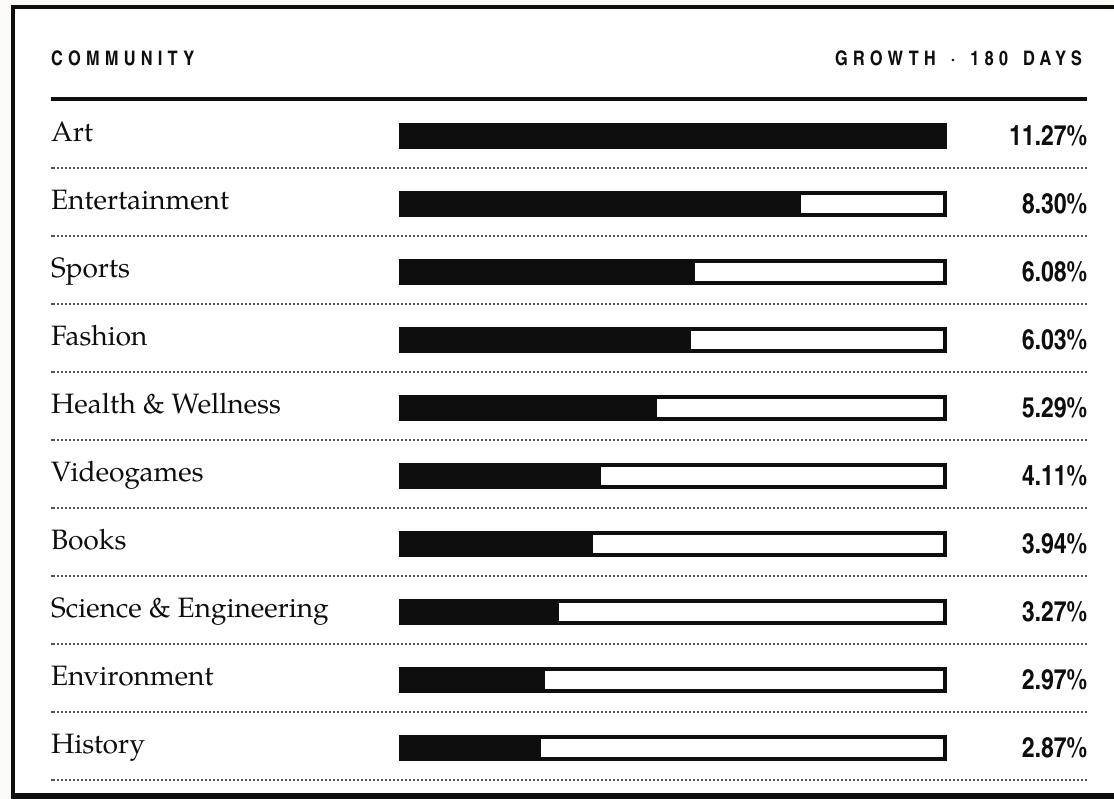
第3話



THE RISING POWER OF ART IN THE GEN Z ZEITGEIST

It's worth remembering that the cultural zeitgeist goes far beyond entertainment. If we zoom out the Corto lens to what Gen Z categories of affinity and interest are growing the fastest (see below), we see something truly surprising: art is the fastest-growing area of culture in this demo.

Art is the fastest-growing area of affinity among Gen Z in the past 6 months (across Reddit, Instagram, Tik Tok, Facebook, Pinterest, X and Discord):



Art not only tops the group of fastest-growing interests among Gen Z, it's growing 30% faster than entertainment ... and at almost triple the rate of the entire videogame category.

We see this across all social and consumer channels, including YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Reddit, where subreddits like "Art Museums," "Sculpture," or "Art History" are growing by double digit, in the same velocity cluster as entertainment leviathans like "Pokemon" or GTA 6. This trend is even hitting Lego, where "Lego MOC" communities (for "my own creation") are growing much faster than the Lego affinity category as a whole.

We see this trend almost everywhere, including —and most notably —in entertainment, where conversations about the technical artistry of film and TV shows is

FIG. 06 FASTEST-GROWING SUBREDDITS OVER 100K SUBSCRIBERS, PAST 180 DAYS · I

SUBREDDIT	URL	AUDIENCE VELOCITY RATE 180D	AUDIENCE VELOCITY SCORE 180D	AUDIENCE VOLUME SCORE 180D	DATE LAST COLLECTED
 gta6unmoderated	www.reddit.com/r/GTA6unmoderated/	103.211%	10	5	9/23/2026
 netflixdocumentaries	www.reddit.com/r/NetflixDocumentaries/	85.183%	10	5	9/23/2026
 shittyillegallifetips	www.reddit.com/r/ShittyIllegallifeTips/	44.809%	10	5	9/23/2026
 horrormovies	www.reddit.com/r/HorrorMovies/	43.424%	10	6	9/23/2026
 siloseries	www.reddit.com/r/SiloSeries/	35.628%	10	5	9/23/2026
 sculpture	www.reddit.com/r/Sculpture/	35.076%	10	6	9/23/2026
 genv	www.reddit.com/r/GenV/	33.52%	10	5	9/23/2026
 nflv2	www.reddit.com/r/NFLv2/	29.626%			9/23/2026
 marvelcirclejerk	www.reddit.com/r/marvelcirclejerk/	29.359%	10	5	9/23/2026

Corto.

Fastest-growing subreddits over 100k subscribers, past 180 days (1)

FIG. 07 FASTEST-GROWING SUBREDDITS OVER 100K SUBSCRIBERS, PAST 180 DAYS · II

SUBREDDIT	URL	AUDIENCE VELOCITY RATE 180D	AUDIENCE VELOCITY SCORE 180D	AUDIENCE VOLUME SCORE 180D
 harrypotteronmno	www.reddit.com/r/harrypotteronmno/	41.797%	10	5
 comedyhell	www.reddit.com/r/ComedyHell/	20.726%	10	7
 pokemoncardvalue	www.reddit.com/r/PokemonCardValue/	20.58%	10	6
 nintendoswitch2	www.reddit.com/r/NintendoSwitch2/	20.223%	10	8
 answers	www.reddit.com/r/answers/	19.567%	10	8
 gamingpc	www.reddit.com/r/gamingpc/	19.566%	10	7
 unusualart	www.reddit.com/r/UnusualArt/	18.707%	10	6
 pokemonanime	www.reddit.com/r/pokemonanime/	18.545%		
 makenewfriendshere	www.reddit.com/r/MakeNewFriendsHere/	18.35%	10	9
 partneredyoutube	www.reddit.com/r/PartneredYoutube/	17.804%	10	6

Corto.

Fastest-growing subreddits over 100k subscribers, past 180 days (2)

FIG. 08 FASTEST-GROWING SUBREDDITS OVER 100K SUBSCRIBERS, PAST 180 DAYS · III



SUBREDDIT	URL	AUDIENCE VELOCITY RATE 180D	AUDIENCE VELOCITY SCORE 180D	AUDIENCE VOLUME SCORE 180D
 norrorgaming	www.reddit.com/r/norrorgaming/	14.040%		
 legoleak	www.reddit.com/r/Legoleak/	13.587%		
 daredevil	www.reddit.com/r/Daredevil/	13.424%	10	6
 pcmasterracefr	www.reddit.com/r/pcmasterraceFR/	13.406%	10	6
 pkmtcgcollections	www.reddit.com/r/pkmtcgcollections/	13.357%	10	5
 masterhacker	www.reddit.com/r/masterhacker/	13.209%	10	7
 museum	www.reddit.com/r/museum/	12.985%	10	7
 thriftgrift	www.reddit.com/r/ThriftGrift/	12.871%	10	6

Corto. Fastest-growing subreddits over 100k subscribers, past 180 days (3)

up 144% Y/Y among Gen Z in the US. Instagram and Tik Tok accounts talking about color grading, cinematography, sound mixing, and even film formats, are proliferating at a rapid pace (they are up 39% Y/Y), and their subscriber growth is consistently in the double digits.

The amount and detail of conversation (often shot by shot) about the creative choices in “Dune,” Christopher Nolan’s “The Odyssey,” “Backrooms,” “Sinners,” and — especially — the latest releases in the “Spider-Man” franchise (“Spider-Noir” and “Spider-Man: Brand New Day”) does not have any precedent in previous titles or generations.

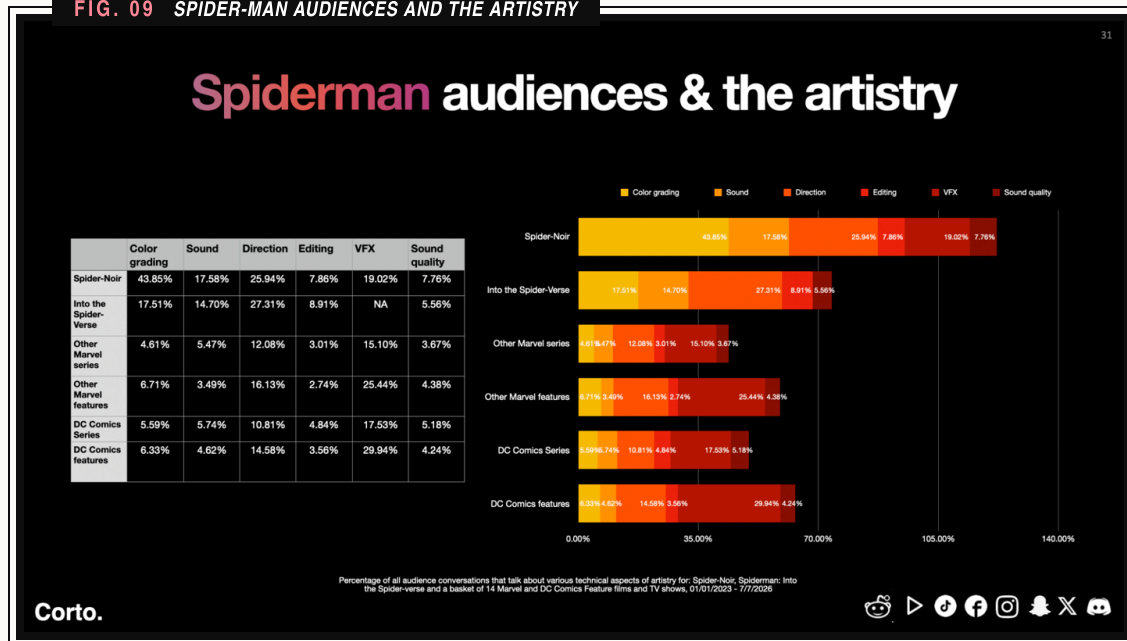
Across all ages and demos, cinematography is mentioned 3.5 times more in social conversations about the top 100 most successful feature films of the past 7 years than in the bottom 100. It’s mentioned 8.8 times more in Gen Z conversations about the same top 100 performing features. Audiences even get in the weeds of color grading for the titles they like: it’s mentioned 5.9 times more in the top 100 performing feature films than in the bottom 100 (12.6 times more for Gen Z audiences).

Gen Z is 4.6 times more likely to talk about the artistry of the “Spider-Man” franchise than any other demo segment. The passion is even stronger in Gen Alpha, which is

11.4 times more likely to talk about the artistry of the “Spider-Man” franchise than other segments.

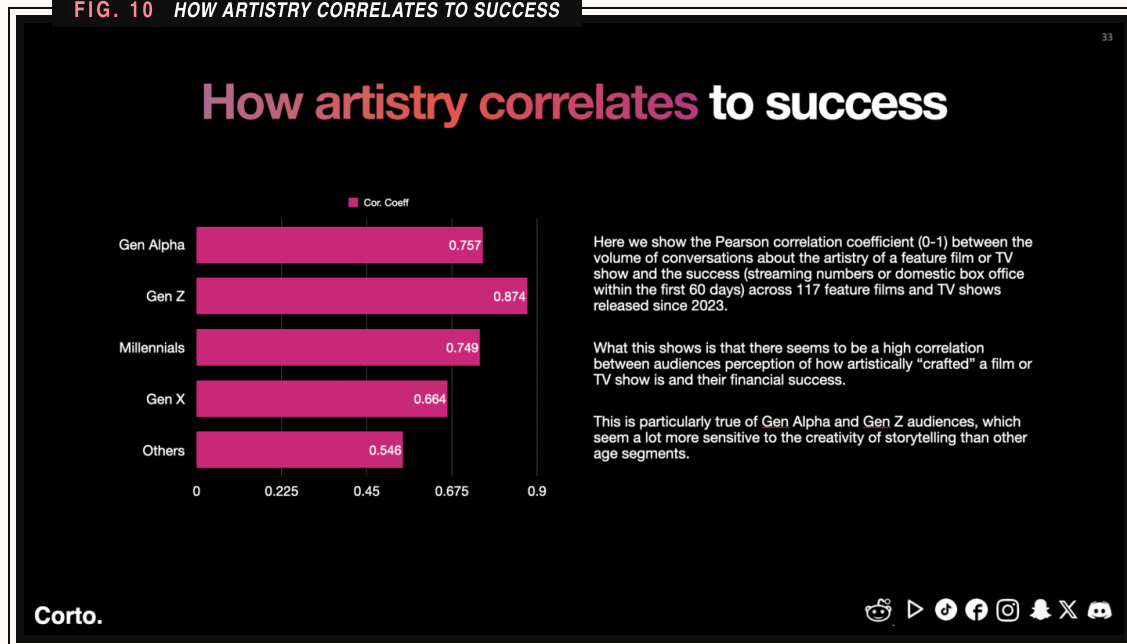
The more popular entertainment properties are among Gen Z, the more we see this play out. The slide below shows how much more conversation was conducted among Gen Z about the technical artistry behind the Emmy-winning TV series “Spider-Noir” and “Spider-Man: Brand New Day” than with any other entertainment IP.

FIG. 09 SPIDER-MAN AUDIENCES AND THE ARTISTRY



In fact, our data shows that there is a remarkably tight correlation (as measured by Pearson correlation) between the volume of conversation about the artistry behind a theatrical release and its commercial success:

FIG. 10 HOW ARTISTRY CORRELATES TO SUCCESS



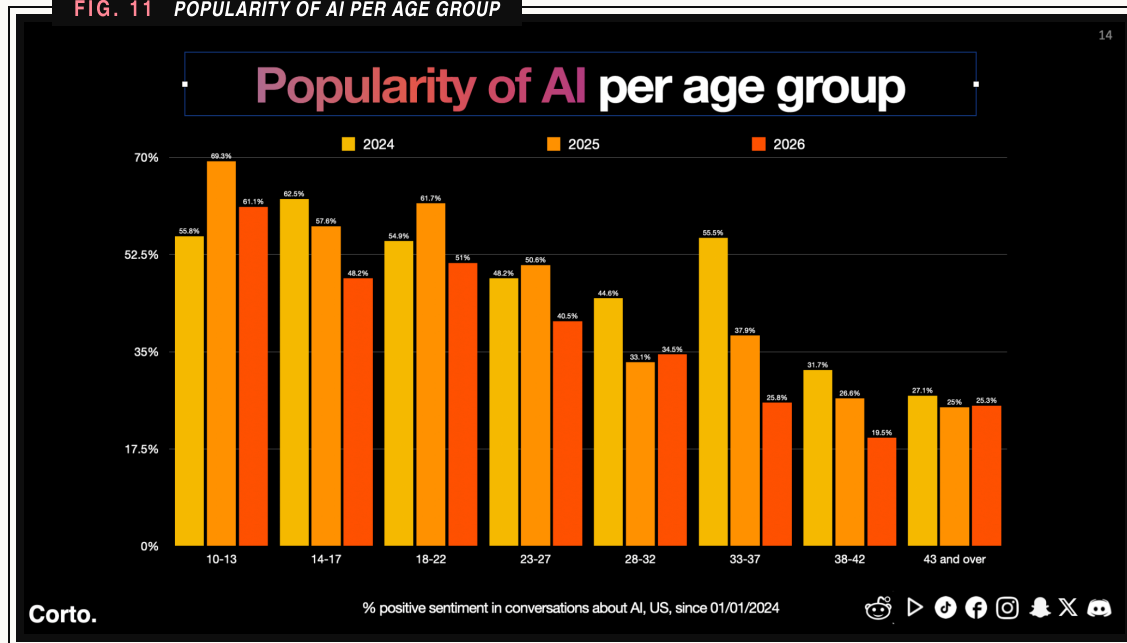
So does this focus on artistry rule out the usage of AI in content production? Here again the data is both clear and fascinating, since it follows the trends laid out throughout this paper.

First off, the popularity of AI as a whole seems to be declining very fast across all age demos, especially Gen Alpha and Gen Z.

Similarly, across a sample of over 500,000 audience conversations on Reddit, Facebook, Discord, X, Threads, and Letterboxd, we see that the vast majority (76%) of audiences across all ages oppose the use of AI to create entire scenes. 88% of Gen Z audiences feel the same way. But a similar proportion (65% to 78% depending on age) does not oppose the use of AI as part of post-production, under two conditions: (1) it has to be under the direction and control of artists and creatives, and (2) it has to be invisible. As in: "it's fine if it's just another form of VFX, but it can't look like AI".

This feels like common sense, and it is completely in line with what the rest of the data shows. Going back to the list of the top 40 fastest-growing entertainment genre and IP

FIG. 11 POPULARITY OF AI PER AGE GROUP



with this data point about artistry in mind, we see a clearer picture: the vast majority of the properties on the list have been created and driven by strong *auteurs* with a distinct creative vision.

“The Pitt” is a highly nuanced drama developed by a two-time Humanitas Prize-winner, R. Scott Gemmill (note: The Humanitas Prize recognizes film and TV writing that excels in its complex description of the human condition).

“Dune” and “Battlestar Galactica”? Nuanced, layered, reinvigorated sci-fi led by strong *auteurs* with a bold creative vision.

There’s something similar at play with horror, horror lit, mangas and anime like Studio Ghibli properties: all of them are driven by very distinct and very strong creative visions. Just like “Obsession” and “Backrooms”, two indie films that perfectly captured the Gen Z zeitgeist.

The data is very much looking like something a lot of people in Hollywood have been dreaming about: strong creative visions, especially if they scare the hell out of development executives, are good commercial bets. Artistic intent matters now more than ever. But this should come as no surprise to those reading the tea leaves of the

cultural zeitgeist: for years now, the data has shown that younger, digital-first audiences are desperate for novelty and innovation in film and TV.

THEY WANT CULTURE TO FEEL DANGEROUS AGAIN.

第4話



“INTERESTINGNESS” AND THE FUTURE OF MEDIA

The war of attention is fought on first principle thinking. Meta, Tik Tok and YouTube understand the nature of media with perhaps too much refinement: it is a neuroscience industry. The smartest corners of Big Media such as Disney Imagineering, Sony Research, Dolby, and others, also incorporate neuroscience in their products.

What is perhaps less understood is that, from the same lens of neurobiology, the media industry finds itself in the unfortunate position of selling to an audience of experts in its products. The human brain is bombarded by stories, all day, every day. Even at a young age, it has been exposed to tens of millions of stories, big and small, and is therefore highly trained to recognize which ones it finds interesting. Parents of toddlers know all too well that “newness” rules their storytime world.

German computer scientist and AI pioneer Jurgen Schmidhuber call this “A Formal Theory of Fun and Creativity.”⁹ According to him, intelligent agents (biological or synthetic) will naturally gravitate towards objects (which can be a book, a person, a film) with a specific ratio of attributes that are already familiar to attributes of novelty. We’ve all had the experience of reading a book, watching a movie, or meeting someone that felt too familiar to draw all our attention. This is why many movies, TV shows,

⁹ Jurgen Schmidhuber, “A Formal Theory of Fun & Creativity”: <https://people.idsia.ch/~juergen/creativity.html>

songs, and even relationships bomb. Writers are all too familiar with the prompt “write me something that is like X but feels fresh.”

We put that paper to the test and used agent-based modeling to create a synthetic entertainment market where we ran over 1,500 synthetic feature films across 4 different genres, narrative structures, creative talent, and levels of visual and narrative novelty against an audience of 700,000 synthetic audience members (AI agents), all coded to about 80 different demographic and cultural attributes that our data shows play a role in entertainment decisions. Both Gen Z and Gen Alpha were represented in our sample.

Over 100,000 simulations showed that the feature films with a higher ratio of novel creative attributes performed 62% better than those with a lower ratio. Among our synthetic Gen Z and Gen Alpha audiences, they performed 265% better. “Oddball” synthetic films and TV titles tagged across 3 or more genres also performed 40% better with Gen Z than those tagged with less than 3.

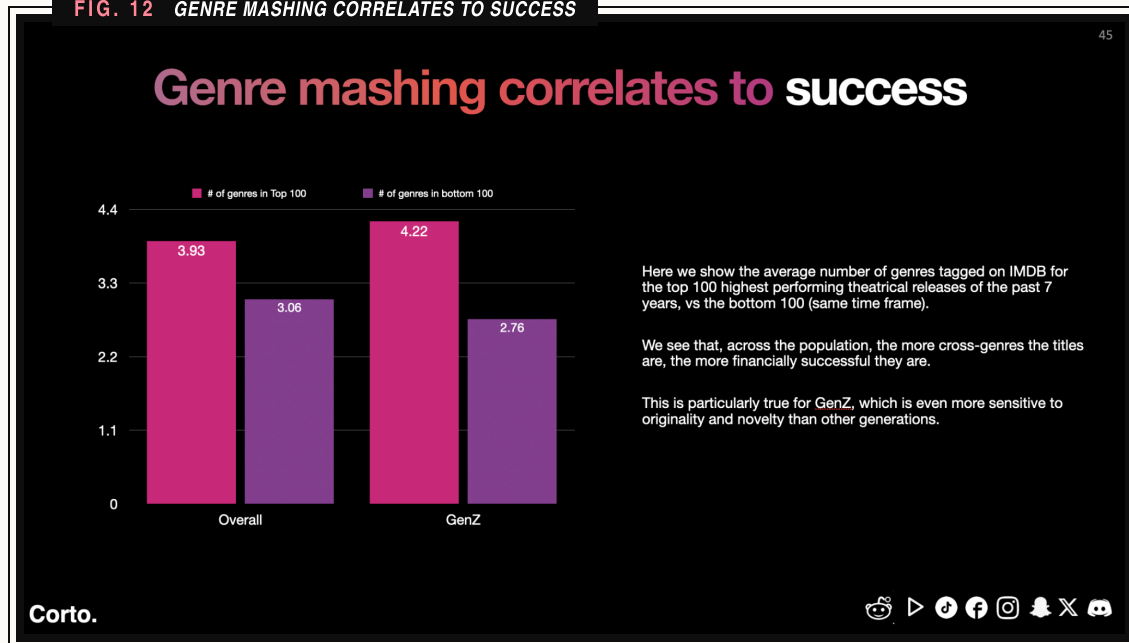
We wanted to see if we could validate these results in the zeitgeist, so we looked at the relationship between the commercial performance of feature films and the number of genres that are tagged with on IMDB. The hypothesis is that titles that sit across many genres are more likely to draw on novelty and feel both fresh and exciting to audiences.

The result confirmed our simulation. The top 100 highest-performing feature films of the past 7 years were tagged with an average of 3.93 genres, whereas the bottom 100 lowest-performing films were tagged with an average of just 3.06 genres.

This trend towards novelty is even more pronounced among Gen Z. Their top 100 most favorite feature films of the past 7 years were tagged with an average of 4.22 genres, with the most unpopular ones tagged with an average of just 2.76 genres. It seems that oddball, creative and innovative titles are no longer a commercial risk, it’s the cookie-cutter content that is. Maybe “Backrooms” and “Obsession” were not an accident. Maybe unbridled creative artistry is back.

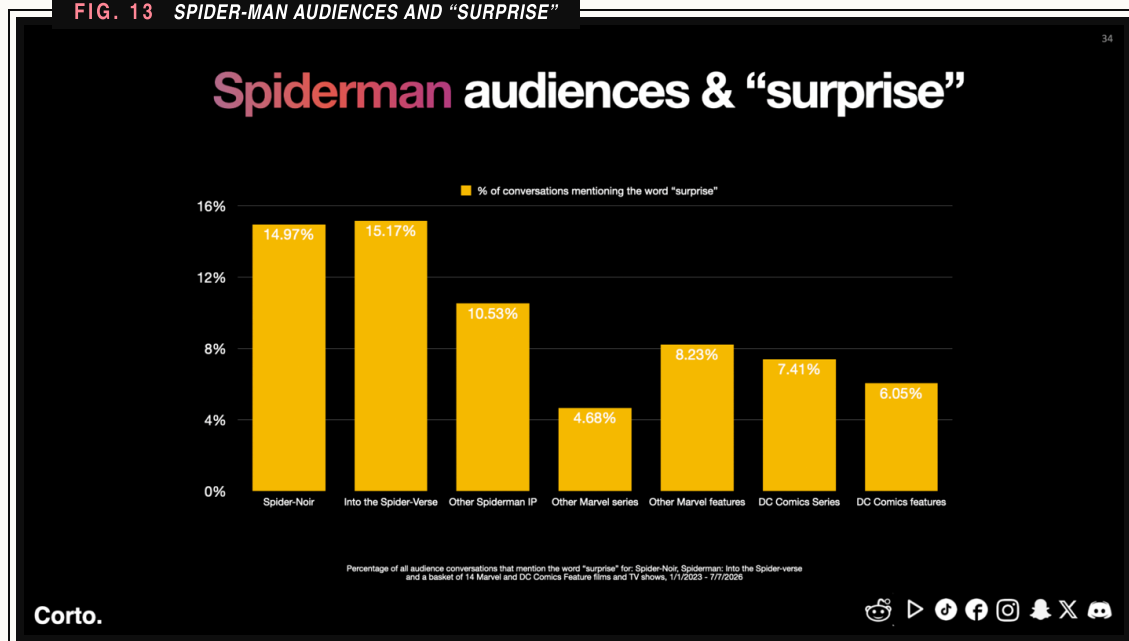
The signals in the data certainly line up with this hypothesis. We observe a similar trend when we look at the type of language that audiences (across demos) use in their conversations about films and TV shows. The slide below shows, for example, that audiences use the word “surprise” 2 to 3

FIG. 12 GENRE MASHING CORRELATES TO SUCCESS



times more for titles in the “Spider-Man” franchise than for other, similar franchise titles.

FIG. 13 SPIDER-MAN AUDIENCES AND “SURPRISE”

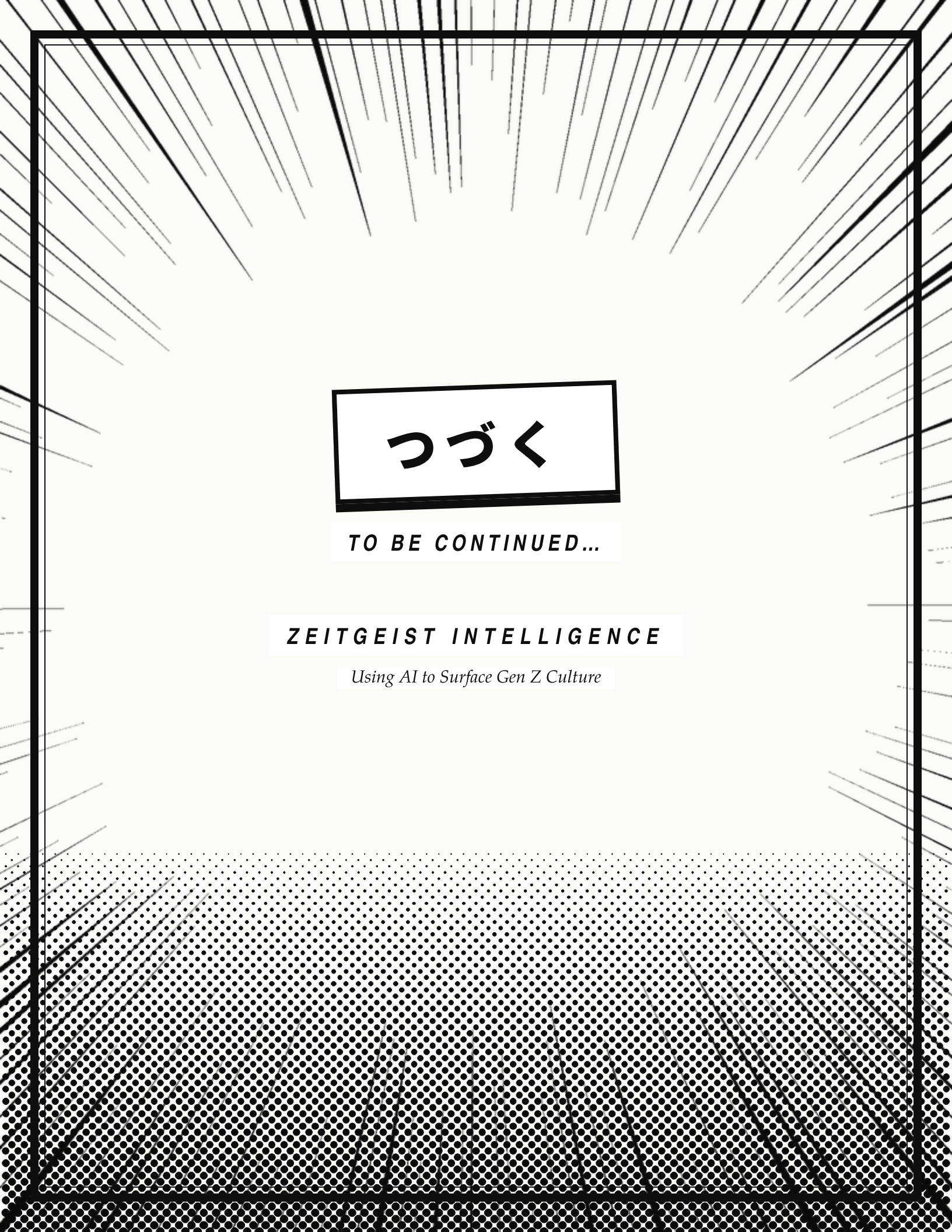


Novelty and Surprise. Maybe the entertainment industry isn't so depressed after all. Maybe a new golden age of filmmaking is around the corner. And maybe all it has to do is hear the uncomfortable clamor of the market itself.

A lot of the commentary circulating after the dramatic box office haul of "Obsession" and "Backrooms" expressed the hope that the media and entertainment industry would beat the winds of technology and automation to re-enter an era where creative vision and corporate interests aligned to drive commercial success.

Our data shows this is the case. But how we've gotten to it, and the technology we have developed in the process, open up even wider opportunities for risk-averse media corporations. Because in the end, AI offers not one but two complementary solutions to fight—and win—the war for attention: deep market intelligence and faster-to-market content production. Used in combination and under the tutelage of artists, these two radically different forms of AI can help the media and entertainment industry move again at the speed of culture.

Nobody knows how much the deployment of artificial intelligence will impact jobs in the industry. But through the cacophony of hype and what feels like a million opinions, we are starting to see the outline of a future where technology serves artistry. And rather than dictate the creative, it allows it, and even challenges it, to lean even more deeply into humanity.



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TO BE CONTINUED...

ZEITGEIST INTELLIGENCE

Using AI to Surface Gen Z Culture