

Ogilvy Social.Lab Releases Its 2026 Social Trends Report:

Social with Substance & the Return to Real

The agency outlines five essential "Rules of Realness" for brands to build meaning and cultural impact in an AI-accelerated social landscape.

XXXX, January 28 — Ogilvy Social.Lab (OSL) today announced the release of its annual *Social Trends Report for 2026*, titled **“Social with Substance & the Return to Real”**. The report unveils a radically changed social landscape shaped by AI acceleration, content saturation, and growing audience scepticism. It outlines the strategic shifts brands must embrace to stay credible and culturally resonant in an increasingly synthetic feed.

A Direct Response to a Changing Social Environment

As social platforms become more crowded and more automated, OSL observes that brands are no longer facing a visibility problem, they are facing a *substance* problem. The report identifies 2026 as the year when audiences enter what OSL calls the **Synthetic Feed**, a landscape where content volume soars, but genuine connection shrinks. Users are fatigued by endless scrolling and crave friction, connection, and meaning as antidotes.

“The volume of content has exploded, but real audience connection has suffered,” said **Awie Erasmus, Chief Strategy Officer, Ogilvy Social.Lab**. *“In a world where everyone can make content with AI, the real challenge is to make it mean something.”*

Realness as a Strategic Design Principle

The report highlights a central tension: brands are not struggling to *show up* on social; they are struggling to *matter*. With audiences increasingly questioning what is real, trustworthy, or valuable, authenticity has become a design problem, not a tone of voice.

A key proposition of the report is our belief that realness must now be operationalized. Rather than relying on relatability tropes or behind-the-scenes aesthetics, brands must build systems rooted in credibility, creativity, and community. For brands, "realness" is not just a tone of voice or an aesthetic choice, but a strategic design principle that informs the marketing approach, built on real audience truths, communities, influence, experiences, and human creativity.

The New Rules of Realness for 2026

Ogilvy Social.Lab introduces the five new Rules of Realness – patterns that shape how successful brands can secure attention, meaning, and differentiation in the current social context:

1. **From Attention to Intention:** People are being more deliberate about how they consume online, replacing mindless social surfing with intentional filtering, seeking value and meaning in their lives.
2. **The Intimate Internet:** When it comes to digital communities, people are trading in broadcasting for belonging, gravitating towards smaller, self-defined groups based on shared interests and real connection.

3. **Process, Patina & Proof of Craft:** In a world of synthetic perfection, audiences crave tangible proof of human effort, valuing the texture, time, and imperfection that make things feel real.
4. **The Human Algorithm:** People are placing their trust in human filters to find taste, value, and meaning. Curation and a distinct point of view are the new power tools of influence, making earned media the new SEO.
5. **Merchant Entertainers & Creator-Led Commerce:** "Shop while you watch" culture is here and driving real commercial impact. Creators aren't just influencing sales; they are the storefront.

OSL argues that 2026 marks a decisive shift: the collapse of the attention economy and the rise of the intention economy. Success will depend on creating content that respects audiences' time, intelligence, and values.

"Being loud is easy. Being meaningful is much more difficult. The brands that win will design for intention, not interruption," added **Catherine Sackville-Scott, Strategy Director, Ogilvy Social.Lab.**

The full Ogilvy Social.Lab Social Trends Report 2026 is available on the [global Ogilvy website](#).