The Soft Rebellion

Creative Trends 2026

I n t r o

In 2026, the creative industry slows down to make room for substance. The race for perfection gives way to raw emotion, the loud surrenders to the intentional, and play outsmarts seriousness—inviting more presence, more honesty, and more humanity into an overstimulated world. From vulnerable design choices to AI-assisted workflows, this year's creative direction is shaped not just by aesthetics, but by values.

At DepositPhotos, we've explored the visual signals forming this evolution: mining platform data, analyzing shifts in design culture, and collaborating with creative leaders across industries. The result is a set of eight trends that reflect what's gaining traction, why it matters, and how it's being applied. Each one offers a snapshot of the creative state of mind in 2026: a context, a sentiment, and a toolkit for those shaping what's next.

How we forecast

1

Search analysis
We review year-over-year user behavior to surface fast-growing categories, keywords, and audiovisual patterns.

2

Pattern recognition
Rising queries are grouped into clusters that hint at emerging visual and narrative shifts.

3

Qualitative trend validation
We combine DepositPhotos data with qualitative research, tracking the evolution of styles and approaches across design communities, creative platforms, and digital culture.

4

Expert insight & peer feedback
We collaborate with the industry-leading creative directors, strategists, and content creators to refine trend framing and surface real-world applications.

5

Curation & context
Final insights are matched with visual assets by the DepositPhotos content curation team to build audiovisual collections and moodboards that help creators act on what's next.

At DepositPhotos, our trend forecasting blends platform data with creative analysis. We begin by analyzing search and download behavior from 40M+ users across the 320M+ file library, identifying the ideas and themes gaining traction. Then, we validate and expand those signals through ongoing research across art, design, branding, motion, photography, editorial, and emerging technologies. Finally, we return to the data to refine and ground each trend in what creatives actually want and use.

HOW WE FORECAST

depositphotos
by vistaprint.

All trends

ALL TRENDS

Reality Strikes

Audiences are craving creative work that feels emotionally grounded, honest, and unpolished—thus relatable.

Trend data

These trend-related keywords showed significant YoY growth in search volume across our platform.

authentic self **400%**

600% everyday life

trust yourself **267%**

In 2026, audiences are done with the gloss. After years of overly polished storytelling, hyper-curated images, and immaculate branding, they're growing weary of perfection. The illusion that 'ideal' exists is beginning to crack, and this shift goes far beyond aesthetics. It's emotional. As the world becomes more unpredictable, people are realizing that the only way to move forward is to stay grounded in reality. They're drawn to creative work that feels honest and mirrors their truth: the friction between chaos and calm, burnout and awakening.

For brands, this is a call to meet audiences exactly where they are: in the state of vulnerability, imperfection, and change. From Oatly's disarmingly honest packaging to Garnier's raw product sketches, the most relevant and resonant brands are those that open their doors and invite audiences inside. Their visuals feel tactile, their casting is refreshingly unfiltered, and their stories are lit by realism. If you could do just one powerful thing for your brand in 2026—stop performing and start connecting. Human to human, not brand to consumer.

Expert opinion

We've moved from polished digital advertising to an amplified version of traditional media online. Consumers no longer respond to anything that feels like an ad. People trust people. Honest feedback and creator-led content now carry more weight than brand messaging, lowering defence mechanisms and building trust faster.

For years, brand communication tried to hide human flaws, but imperfection makes brands feel real and relatable. It signals authenticity and creates space to experiment without the pressure of staying flawlessly "on-brand". Raw content may seem cheaper, yet it often requires a sharper strategy to balance authenticity with brand goals. Through UGC Factory, we've seen everyday creators craft more impactful stories than polished campaigns, simply by sharing genuine experiences.

And for creative leaders, vulnerability is clarity, not emotional dumping. Admitting what you don't know and opening space for dialogue builds trust and stability. Keep mistakes in the flow, stay open to experiment, and remember: if it doesn't feel like an ad, it's potent.

Demetris Stefani

Founder of Hivebreed & UGC Factory
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Expert opinion

Emotional honesty is becoming one of the most powerful creative tools. In a world where it's hard to tell what's made by AI and what's made by humans, real beats perfect. AI can't grasp the quirks and contradictions that make us who we are—that's why it needs human guidance toward imperfection. Brands that embrace rawness over polish are tapping into something far more lasting: truth, vulnerability, and connection.

The strongest examples in modern advertising aren't flawless. They're timeless. Think of IKEA's Proudly Second Best or Guilty Pets, or Tinder's minimalist print ads with a single burning flame without any copy, just a logo. These campaigns work because they capture something beautifully ordinary and instantly recognizable. When an insight works in print, it can be applied anywhere: film, digital, or any other medium. Even the dullest product becomes meaningful when it's built on truth.

People crave honesty over flattery and genuine feelings over performance. They aren't wired for relentless positivity or hyper-curated perfection. That's why authenticity resonates so strongly, especially among the new generation. Over-polished visuals may impress in the moment, but what stays with us isn't what looked perfect but what felt true. And that's where creativity needs to go next: back to being human.
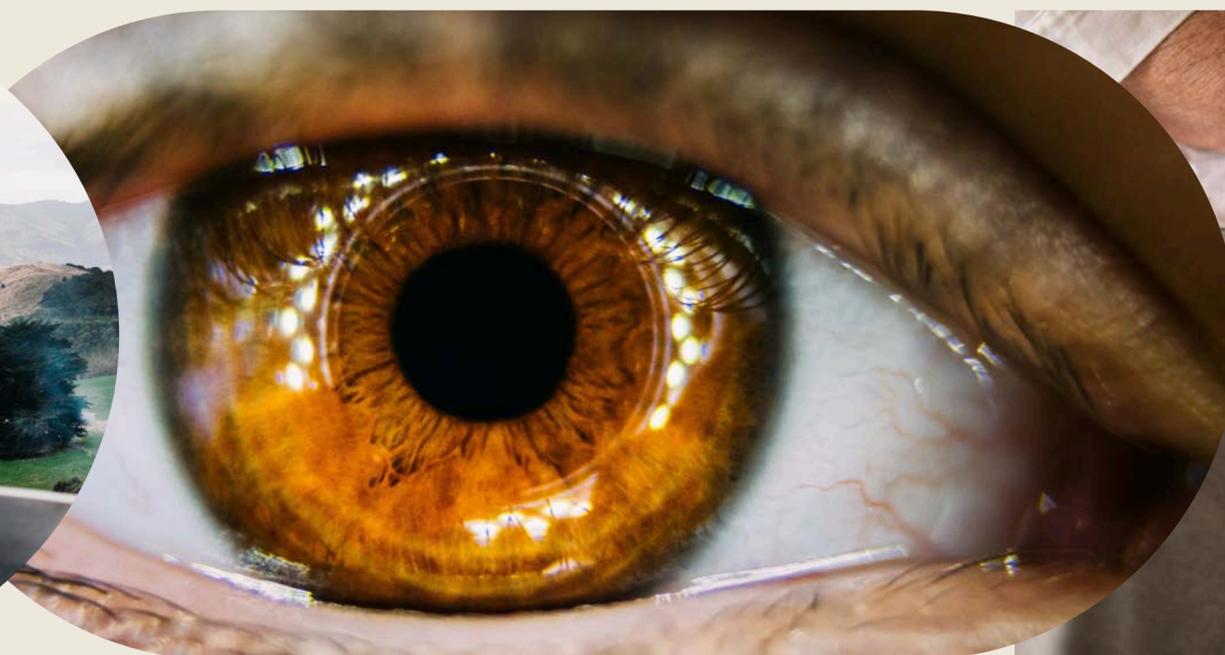
Adina Cirstea

Creative Director at McCann Worldgroup
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As overstimulation peaks, creatives turn to blue—a color that communicates calm, emotional clarity, and trust.

Trend data

These trend-related keywords showed significant YoY growth in search volume across our platform.
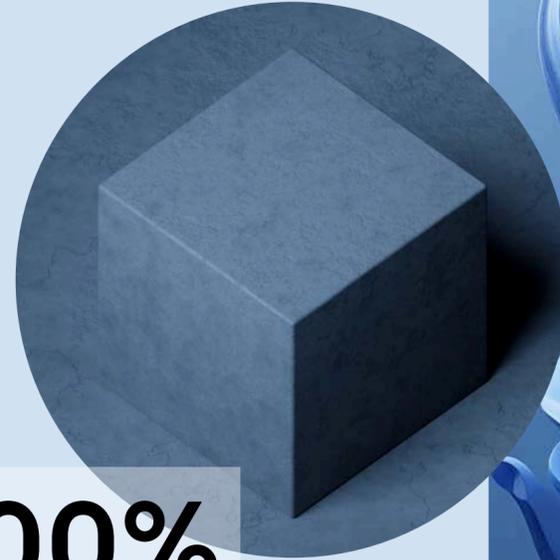
powder blue background **400%**

**+800%** sea coast

sapphire blue **200%**

If we had to describe 2026 with a single color, it would be blue. In a world of sensory overload, where content often competes for attention through noise and novelty, blue is emerging as a quiet force. Unlike bolder, more attention-grabbing colors, blue speaks with conscious intention. It calms without muting, and connects without shouting.

However, this shift is not about returning to safe, corporate blue logos or outdated websites. It's about reclaiming the color across multiple creative disciplines: packaging that looks serene in the golden evening light; UI design that reduces visual fatigue and helps people stay longer without getting tired; branding, campaigns, and editorials that use tone and texture to dial down the drama and invite reflection.

Blue has long been associated with trust—we've known that for decades. What's new is that in 2026, it becomes a visual language of emotional intelligence: not just a color choice but a storytelling device that helps people slow down, stay present, and contemplate the moment.
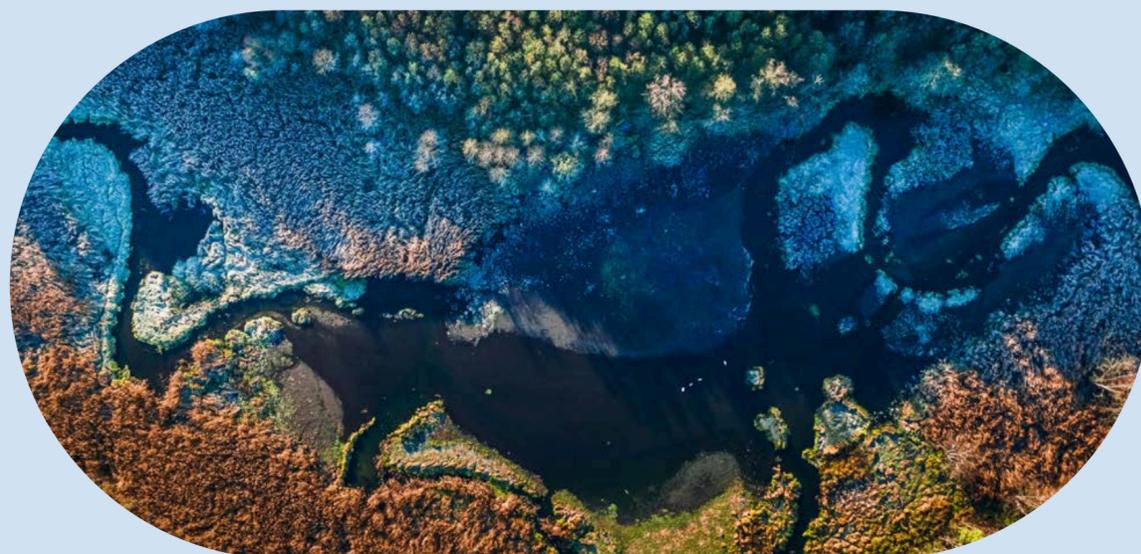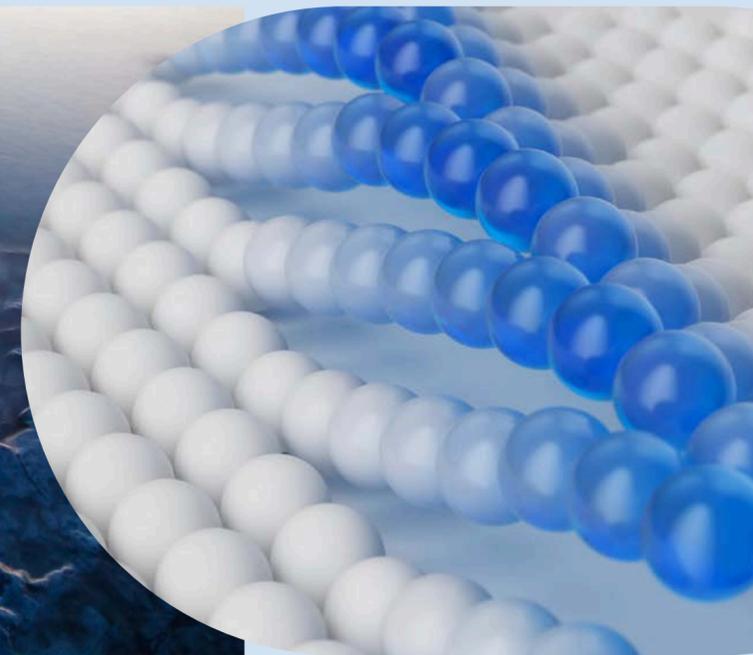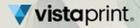
BLUE HOUR

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Authentically
Artificial

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In just one year, generative AI has evolved from a creative experiment to a full-fledged collaborator. It's now embedded in everyday workflows, reshaping how brands and creators ideate, produce, and adapt content across various channels. Platforms like Zalando are already generating digital twins, while designers are blending algorithms with human direction to expand reach without sacrificing quality. Additionally, the time from idea to licensed visuals is shrinking, thanks to tools like the AI Image Generator and AI Image Editor that support faster, more flexible execution.

This hybrid creative process is fueling a new visual style: semi-generated realism, where human storytelling meets machine logic. At first glance, surreal compositions appear photographic—flawless skin, razor-sharp shadows, and structured light. But a closer look reveals something uncanny: too crisp, too controlled, too perfect. That's where human touches come in—expressive color grading, subtle grain, imperfect focus. These choices reintroduce tension, emotion, and intent, reminding us that even machine-shaped visuals can carry a distinctly human signature. As this style evolves, the creative challenge is to co-create visuals powered by algorithms—yet still unmistakably yours.

AUTHENTICALLY ARTIFICIAL
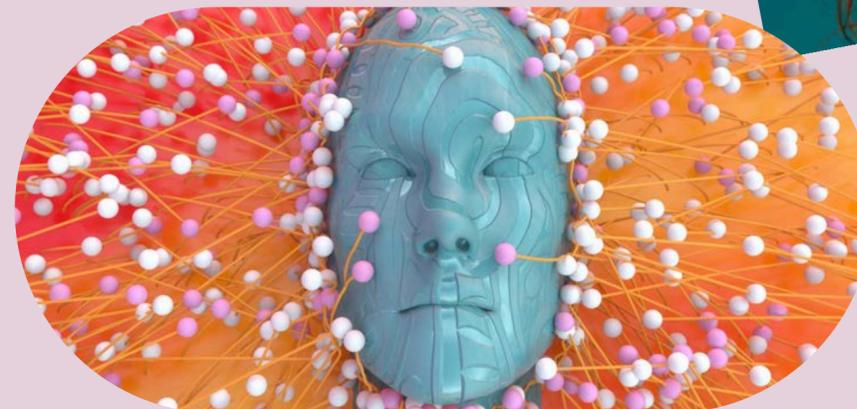
Expert opinion

Authenticity once meant "made by humans". Now, it means "made with intention". AI doesn't erase the human—it reveals it. When I use AI, it forces me to articulate what I feel, rather than just what I can manually produce. My intuition becomes the brief, and the machine becomes the amplifier. The soul stays human; the execution becomes augmented.

Creative teams are shifting from craft execution to concept orchestration. Involving AI blurs linear roles into circular ones, where authorship moves from button pressing to direction setting. The best teams aren't those with the sharpest prompts, but rather those with the strongest point of view. They create visuals that are hyper-designed yet purposefully imperfect: anchored in human emotion, expanded by AI, and built as modular stories where one idea can unfold into infinite meaningful variations.

The role of creative leadership will evolve from crafting outputs to crafting conditions for ingenuity. The most effective leaders won't be the ones who master the most tools, but those who build a culture where their teams feel safe to experiment, fail, and try again—fast and at scale.

Ruben van Eijk

Creative & Tech Executive

in LinkedIn

Expert opinion

AI isn't replacing creativity, but it is changing how we define it. Humans bring intent, taste, and context; machines offer scale, variation, and speed. The best work still feels human, even when built with the power of AI models.

As teams evolve, new roles—like prompt directors, dataset wranglers, and provenance editors—will coexist alongside traditional storytellers, supported by shared prompt libraries, reusable pipelines, and lightweight testing systems. Making the origins of work visible may even become part of the design language, strengthening trust in co-created outputs.

Visually, we'll see more realistic images and motion with lived-in imperfections: believable light, natural pacing, and fluid transitions. This realism will stay anchored in strong creative storytelling, where fun is encouraged and vanilla is no longer accepted. We'll also see more culturally aware localization, rooted in ideas conceived and approved by humans. Metadata may begin to appear as a graphic element that signals care.

As humans and machines openly collaborate, semi-generated content will carry more lived insight—not just well-composed prompts, but choices shaped by relevant datasets, audience understanding, and intentional asymmetry. Imperfect crops, pauses, and ambient textures will become tools, not flaws. The real test will be whether audiences can sense a person—not just a model—making thoughtful, considered decisions for them.

Alexandra Zeevalkink

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AUTHENTICALLY ARTIFICIAL

Generate and edit visuals with AI on DepositPhotos

Generate images

Edit images with AI

Petal Power

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Florals take center stage as powerful visual symbols of organic rhythm, individuality, and care—softening design across mediums with a deeper emotional intent.

Trend data

These trend-related keywords showed significant YoY growth in search volume across our platform.

nature flowers **200%**

250% organic pattern

petals background **200%**

This year, flowers are strategically entering the creative spotlight. They move beyond seasonal romance or feminine clichés and become tools to signal rhythm, individuality, and vulnerability in overstimulated visual environments. This resurgence reflects a broader cultural desire to reconnect with the organic world. As everything becomes faster, louder, and more artificial, florals offer a visual counterbalance. Their imperfections feel human. Their natural cycles echo burnout and recovery. Their symbolism brings emotional depth without overstating it.

Designers across mediums are embracing florals as mindful anchors. On packaging, botanical elements printed on textured surfaces introduce tactility and calm. In UI/UX, organic curves and floral patterns soften the rigidity of grids. In the editorial, stylized blooms become metaphors for personal transformation. In spatial design, oversized floral installations create moments of pause and reflection. For brands, florals aren't just a visual choice; they're a statement: a decision to slow down, lead with care, and reconnect with storytelling that prioritizes emotional resonance. In 2026, petals become punctuation marks— quiet yet powerful reminders that softness is strength, and growth takes time.
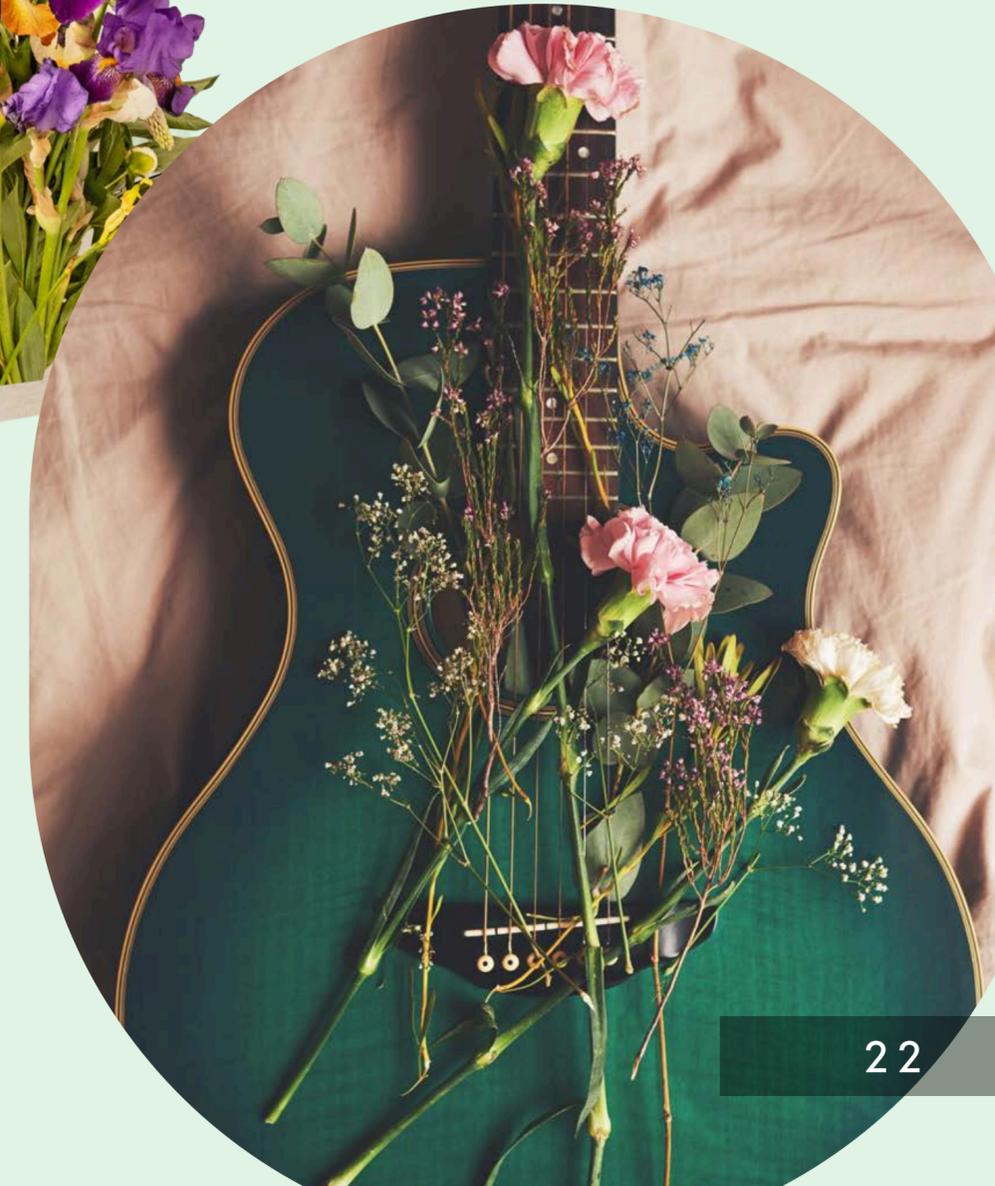
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k i d u l t

KIDULT

Playful design matures into a strategy, using creativity, joy, and nostalgia to break tension, invite curiosity, and build human connection.

Trend data

These trend-related keywords showed significant YoY growth in search volume across our platform.
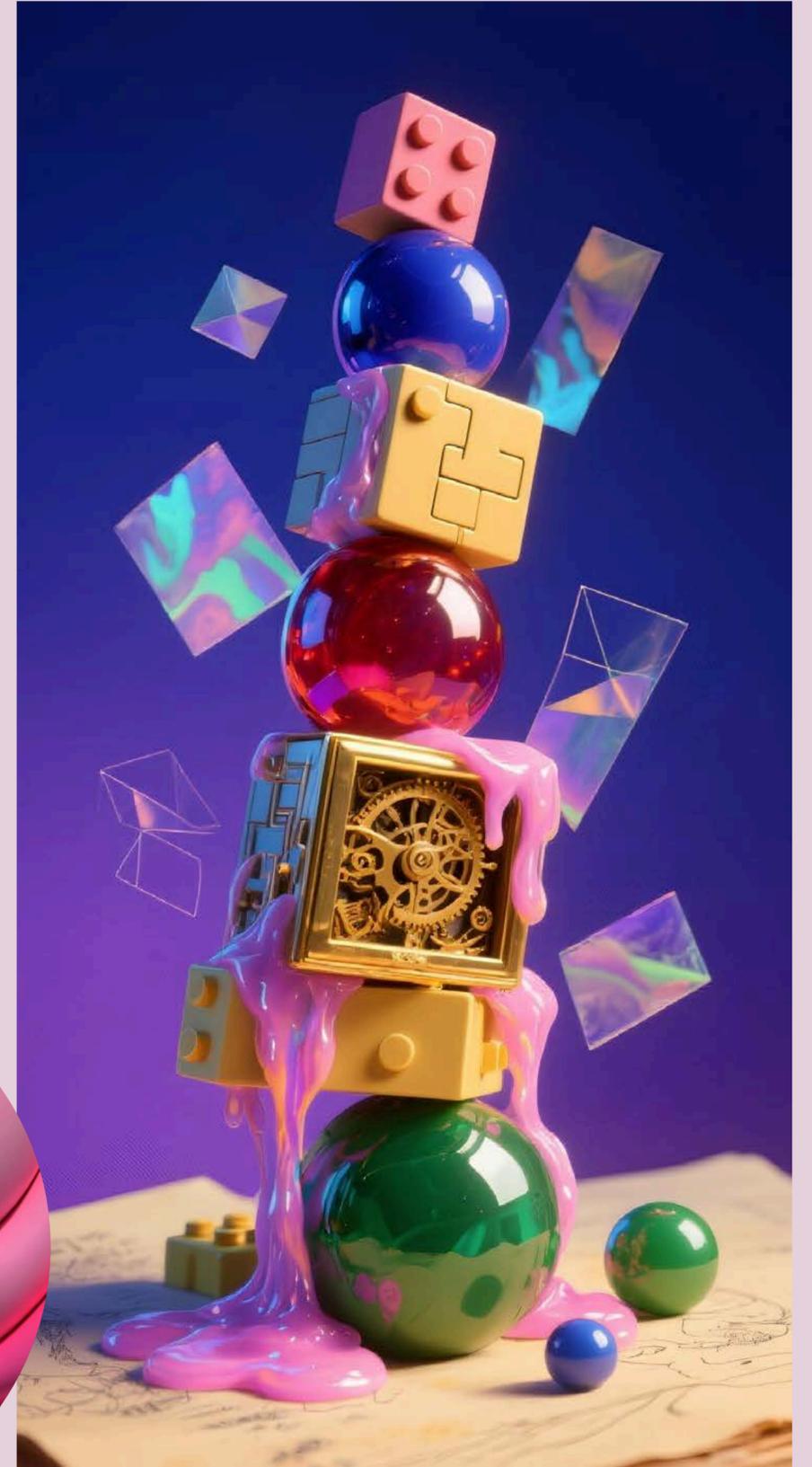
happiness joy **+300%**

12000% labubu

vibrant background **400%**

In 2026, play becomes a full-scale design strategy. The Kidult trend marks a cultural shift toward reclaiming lightness in a world that often feels increasingly heavy. It champions joy as a coping mechanism and creativity as a form of resilience. When pressure mounts, the antidote lies in curiosity, positivity, and imagination—the tools that keep us open when everything else asks us to shut down.

Visually, Kidult speaks through experimentation in color, form, and texture. Bold and reckless palettes, plush materials, diverse shapes and standout typography with a touch of whimsy. But this aesthetic is no longer confined to playful industries. It's making its way into finance, healthcare, and software sectors, where brands are starting to communicate with empathy, generosity, and warmth without losing clarity or credibility.

From digital storytelling to collectible product packaging and gamified mechanics, brands can use Kidult for UX, campaigns, or launches to build connection through delight. It lowers barriers, invites interaction, and transforms ordinary moments into small acts of emotional care. Because the future belongs to those who can imagine it with childlike wonder and create it with grown-up intent.

KIDULT

Expert opinion

People are tired of the constant worry and over-dependency on tech, finally feeling ready to embrace balance and do what feels right. This gives rise to a broader cultural shift—the return to human—where play becomes the driver of positive energy, especially in communities. We see it in the rise of run clubs, festivals, and gatherings encouraging more genuine connections, forged through emotional and physical experiences. In this landscape, play serves as a pressure release, signaling confidence and care. It makes complex things feel human without reducing rigor, which builds trust faster in high-stakes journeys.

In creative direction, we'll see motion that reassures rather than dazzles, warm and clear microcopy, hosted experiences that people shape together, and a surge of raw, documentary-style content led by founders with strong personal brands. Curiosity will be expressed through tactile type and variable weights, soft geometry and rounded edges, rhythmic asymmetry in grids, and disciplined palettes with sparks of optimism. Humour and surprise will help brands shorten distances and reset attention. However, sequence will matter more than ever: truth first, twist second. Keep levity in low-risk moments and sobriety where money, health, or safety are in play. In 2026, the winning brands will be those that are filling this void both through design and experience.

Peter-Jan Grech

CEO & Founder, BRND WGN
www.brndwgn.com in LinkedIn

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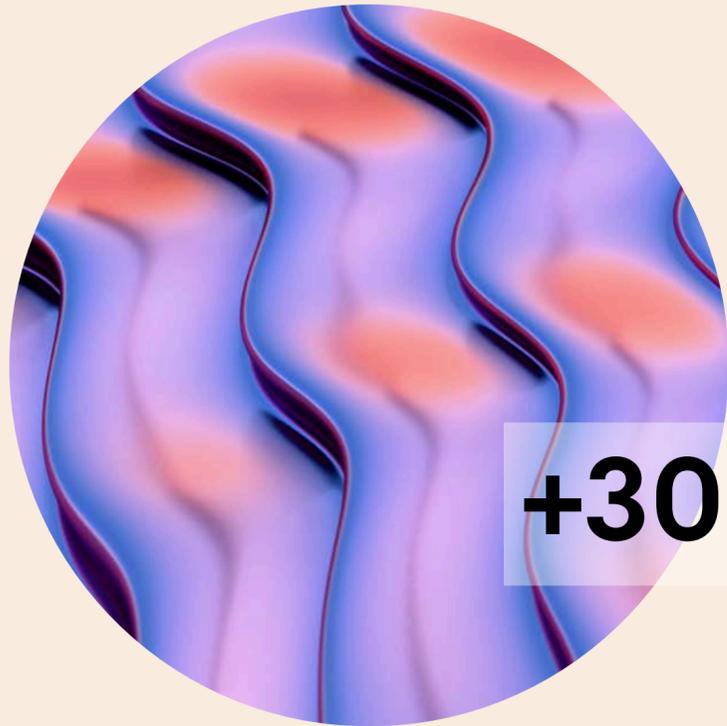
The Tender Shift

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by vistaprint.

Design takes a gentle turn as brands adopt softer aesthetics, empathetic UX, and communication that supports rather than shouts.

Trend data

These trend-related keywords showed significant YoY growth in search volume across our platform.

glass morphism **183%**

+300% fluid dynamics

gentle background **+200%**
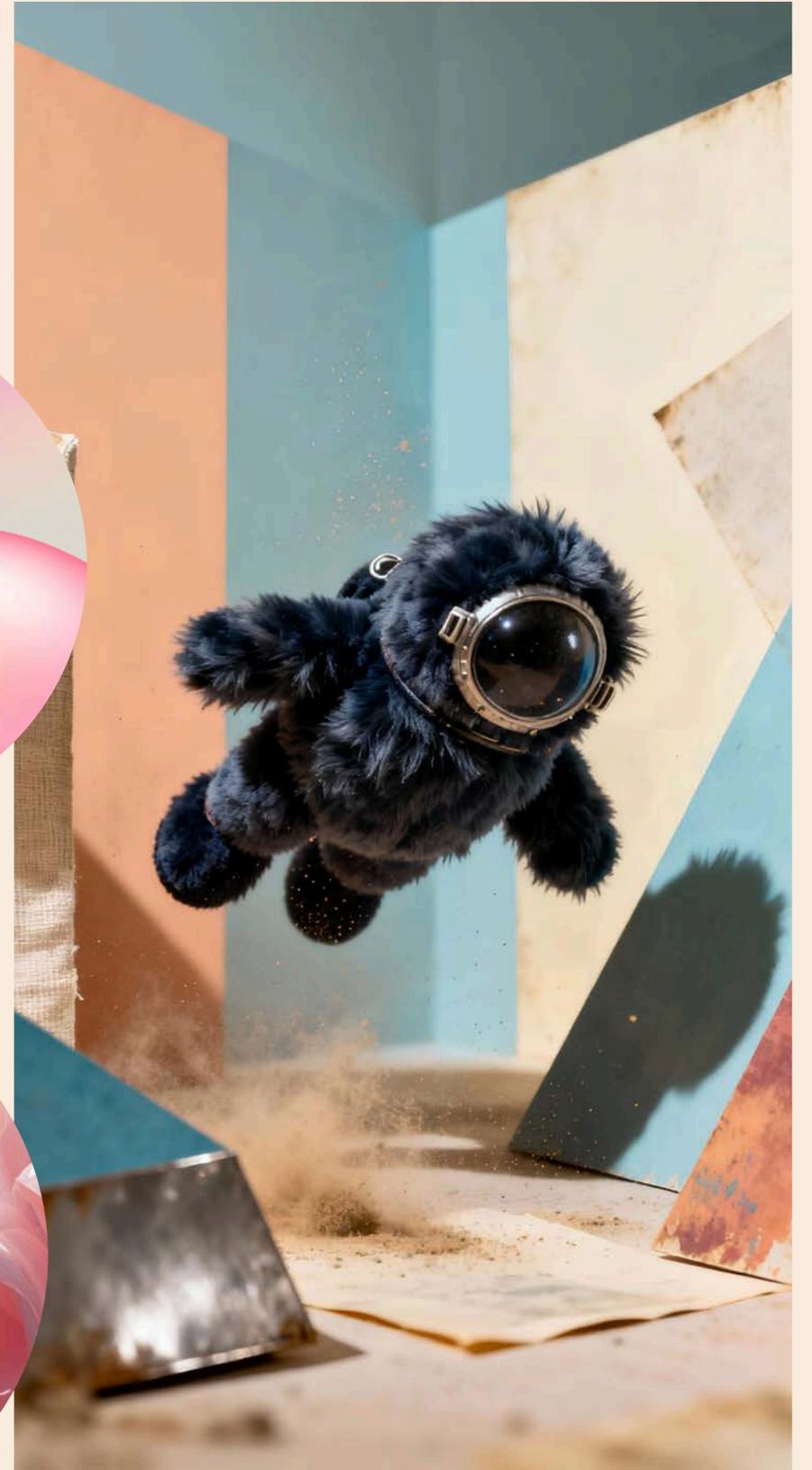
We're finally entering a new phase in brand communication, where kindness becomes one of the most powerful tools. With the self-love narrative already integrated into our culture, brands are now exploring how to signal safety, presence, and human values across every design and experience touchpoint. This shift isn't about sentimentality—it's about clarity. When kindness leads, design becomes not just more beautiful, but also more trustworthy, relatable, and emotionally intelligent.

In practice, the shift appears in subtle but meaningful ways. Glassmorphism and gentle animations in UI reduce cognitive load and create space to breathe. Calmer color palettes—muted lavenders, soft creams, earthy neutrals—replace high-saturation schemes, expressing vulnerability and softness. Typography gains a tender touch, with rounded edges or hand-drawn details that soften the harshness of cold minimalism. In voice and tone, brands are moving from broadcaster to companion—listening more than declaring at every stage of the user journey. GF Smith's and La-Z-Boy's radical rebrandings and motion graphics are examples of how brand communication can feel both human and tender, even through the screen.
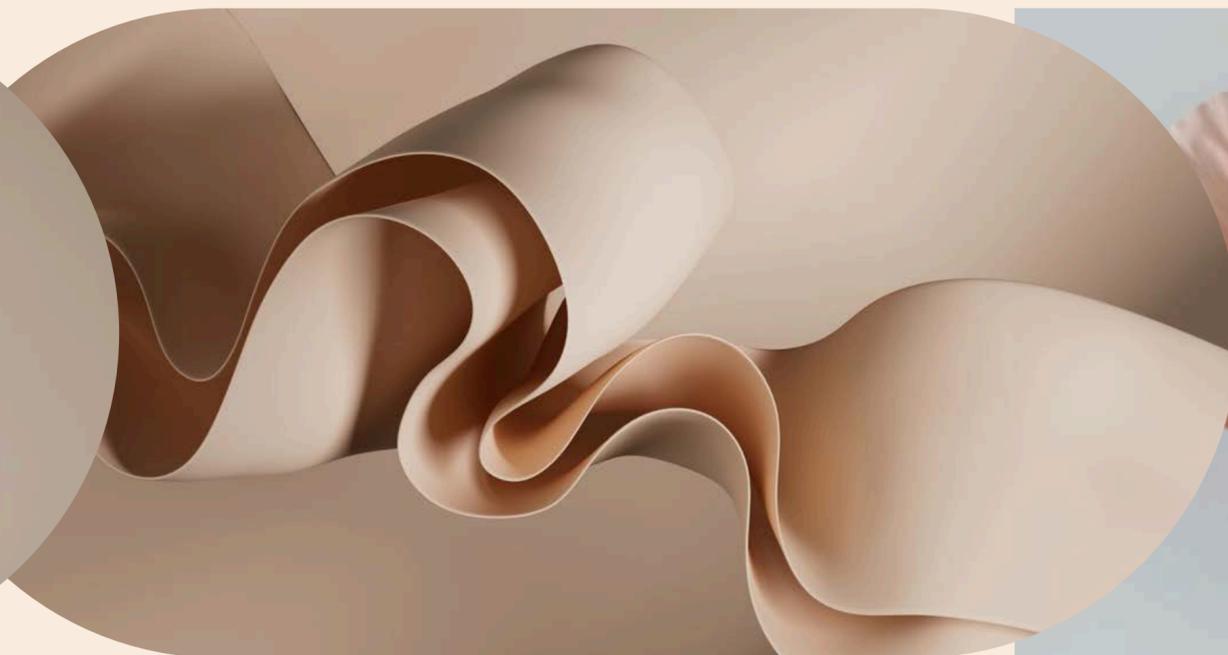
THE TENDER SHIFT

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Quietly Loud

Minimalism and maximalism come together, merging clarity with striking design elements to deliver confidence, focus, and impact without excessive noise.

Trend data

These trend-related keywords showed significant YoY growth in search volume across our platform.
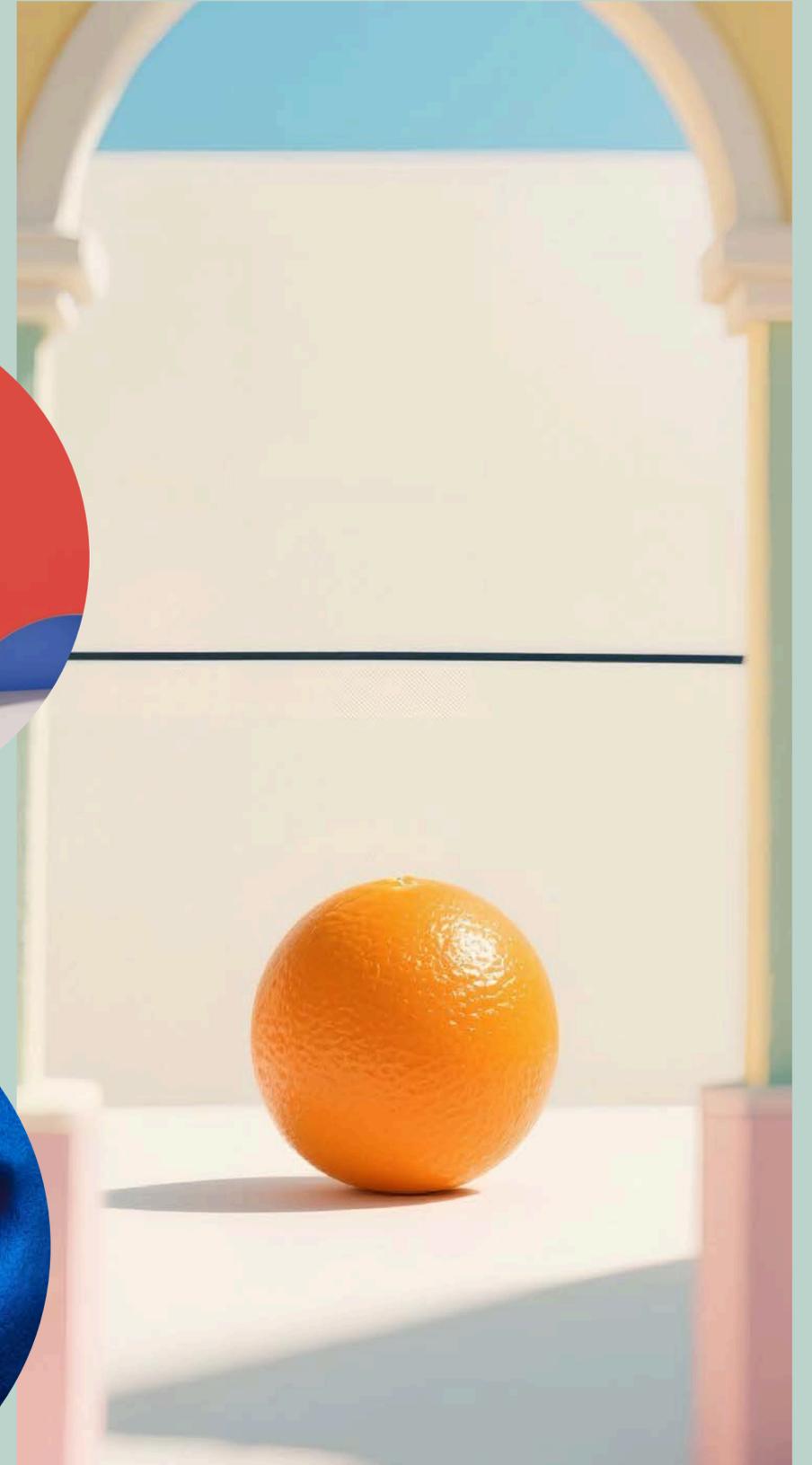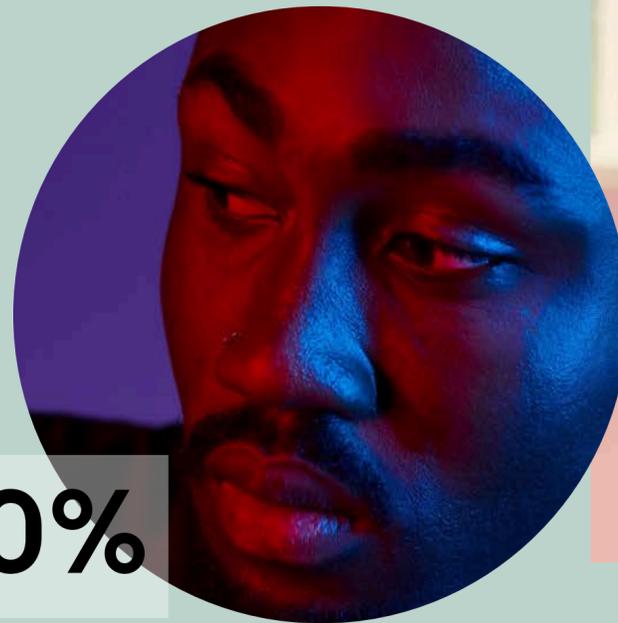
vibrant background **400%**

140% abstract vector
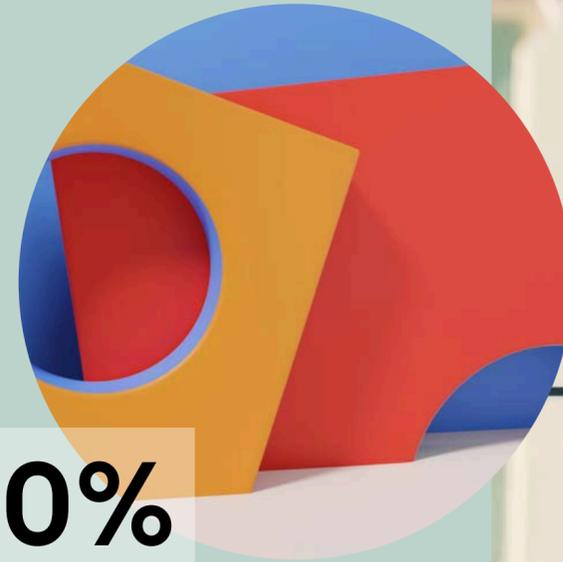
contrast effect **200%**

After years of design extremes—minimalism's restraint versus maximalism's spectacle—a new visual philosophy is taking hold. It doesn't pick sides. Instead, it merges clarity with expression, simplicity with strength, and precision with personality. Brands that want to stand out no longer have to choose between quiet design and powerful impact, they can do both at the same time.

This is the essence of Quietly Loud: a composed aesthetic built on deliberate contrast. Every element serves a purpose and every detail pulls its weight. Think oversized typography framed by generous negative space; motion graphics that hit with purpose, not chaos; color choices that are intentional, not performative. Together, they create a composition that feels modern, memorable, and unmistakably confident. From OpenAI's and RSPCA's pared-down rebrands to PayPal's refined digital expression, the examples show how to redefine sophistication in your own terms.
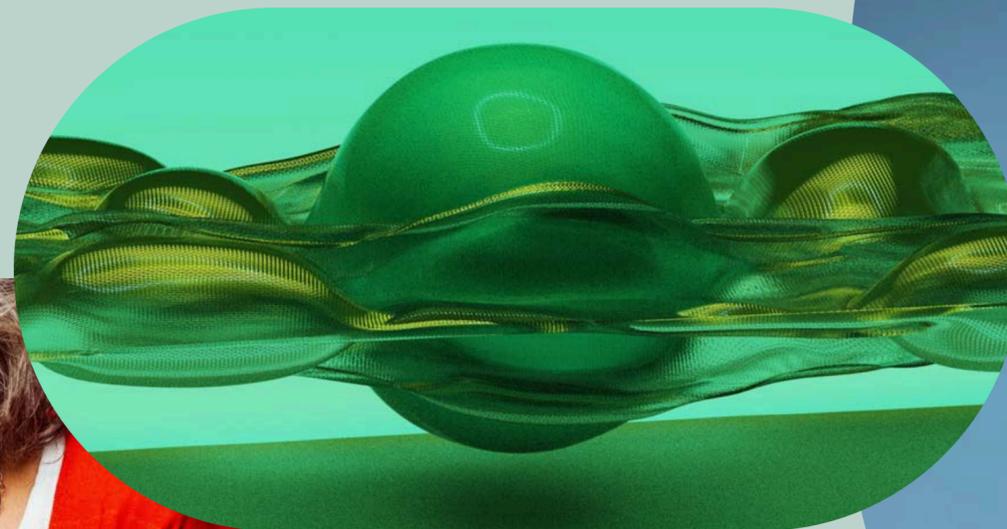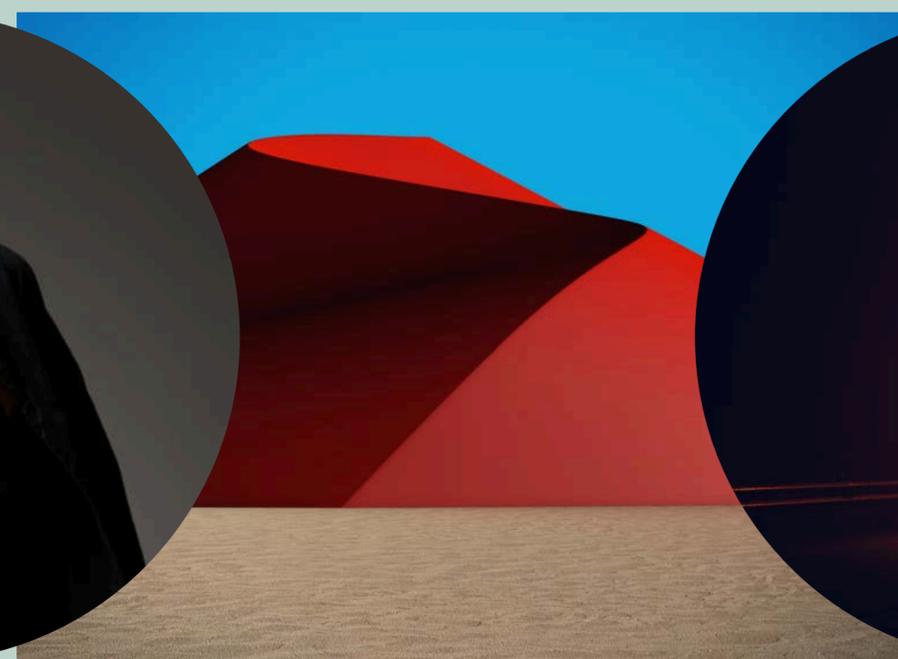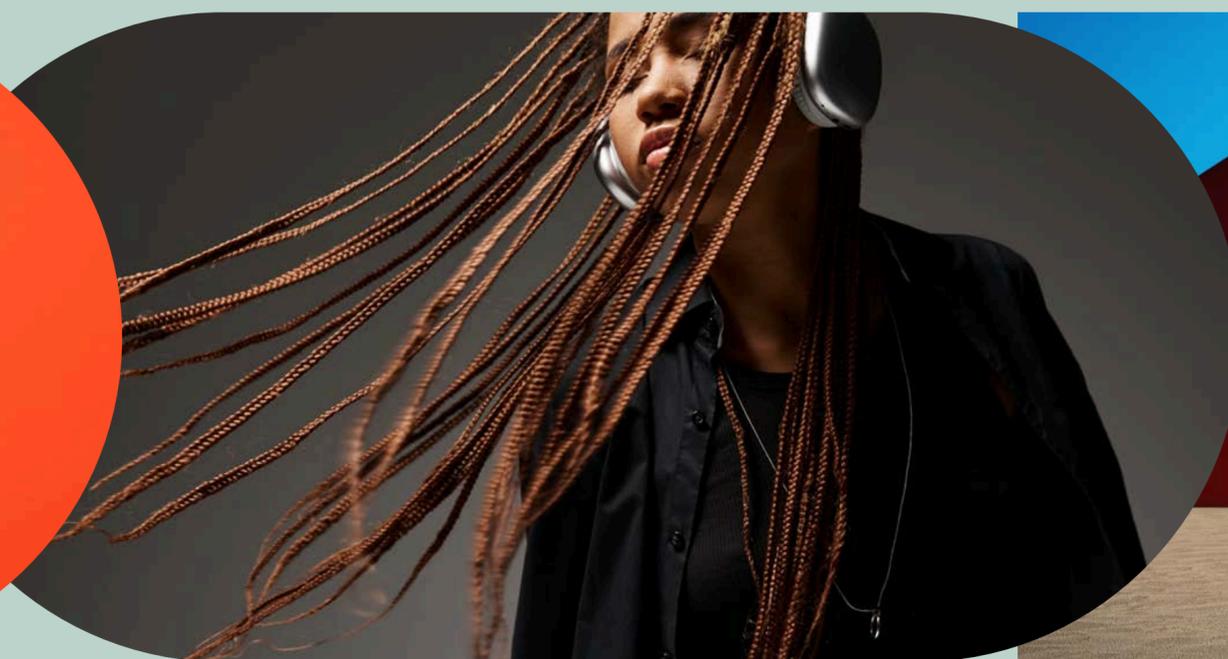
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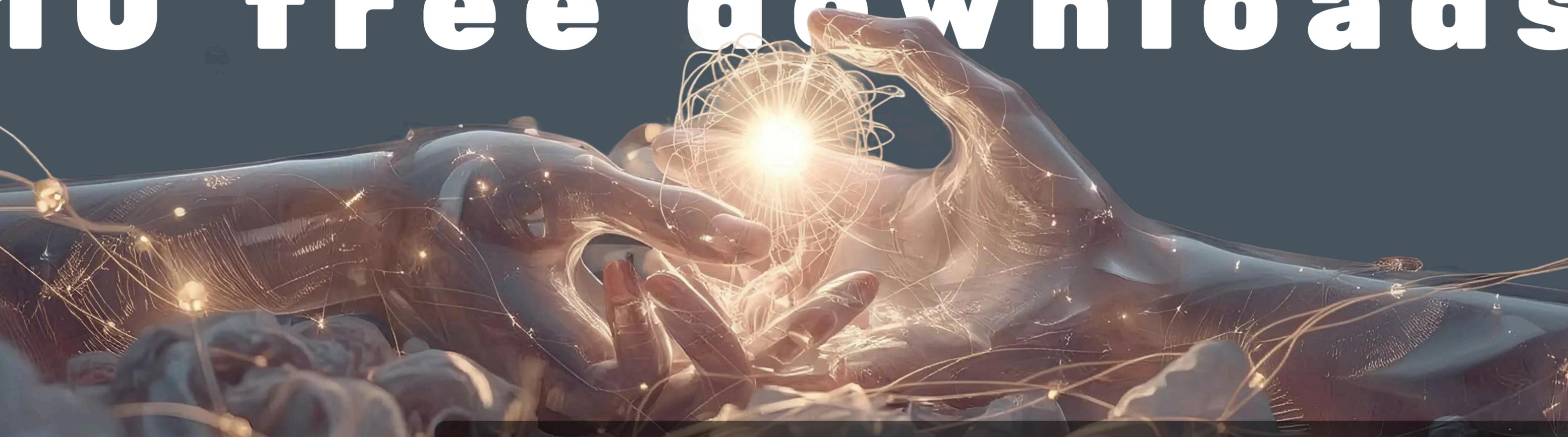Music & SFX collection

Video collection

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Creative Sync

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Redeem Now

In 2026, creativity is taking a new turn. Under pressure to create faster and more consistently, teams are looking for systems that minimize friction and maximize momentum. The goal is a workflow designed for velocity without burnout: one that keeps ideas flowing as quickly as they form, while maintaining creative control and coherence. This evolution isn't just about speed; it's about balance between automation and artistry, structure and spontaneity. DepositPhotos plays an essential role in building this new workflow, offering licensed stock content with AI-powered search, generative AI tools, and curated design resources—all in one platform.

For creators and teams alike, this new flow-centric model turns creative work into a seamless system. Brand kits update in real time, AI visuals adapt to match motion graphics, and UI assets come pre-synced and ready to deploy. Platforms like Lovable, MagicPatterns, Penpot, Runway, Gamma, and Showrunner show how ideation, production, and adaptation can exist in one continuous loop. The future of creativity runs on intelligent design infrastructure—architecture that feels as intuitive as it is efficient.

Expert opinion

A great ecosystem is where you can be free to play around, make mistakes, go back to the drawing board, refine, and even find new ways to solve the challenge you didn't expect. Creatives aren't asking for tools that take the joy and human side of the work out of the equation. The tools in that ecosystem should reduce the tedious parts and make collaboration easier and more rewarding between team members.

Having different ecosystems that can be linked together in a seamless way enables creatives to fine-tune their workflows in a way that suits their needs. Brands like Slack, Figma, and Miro have found success by paying attention to how users actually work and introducing tools accordingly as technology evolves. One of the biggest pitfalls is systems that scale fast but give no flexibility—leaving designers without the polish and fine-tuning tools they need to create effective assets.

Being part of the Skyscanner motion team, we're always looking for new ways to streamline the technical side of our roles. AI-powered platforms and plugins help track easing conventions, keyframing, and transitions, which is a great way to understand how to keep elements moving in a consistent and dynamic way. It's not just about creating something that looks good; it's about how we show up across so many constantly changing channels. These are the skills we're now watching for in creatives eager to thrive in system-led environments.

Patrick Horan

Senior Brand & Motion Designer at Skyscanner
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CREATIVE SYNC

Creative leadership in 2026 means knowing when to scale, when to slow down, and how to stay emotionally intelligent in an increasingly automated world. The most impactful work this year will balance system and soul—navigating complexity with clarity, and business growth with real value.

At DepositPhotos, we believe trend forecasting should be more than visual inspiration. It should be a practical roadmap. That's why Creative Trends 2026 blends platform data, design culture shifts, and expert insight to help brands and creators shape what's next—not just react to it.

Use this report as a year-round guide to ideate, plan, and build creative work that's both relevant and resonant. For more inspiration, seasonal trends, and content resources, explore our Blog and follow us on social media.

Reach out to us to request a tailored plan, explore unique content scaling opportunities for your business, AI-powered tools, and more bespoke solutions by DepositPhotos.

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