

## SACRED SYNC

Ritual is redesigned for  
restless times



# Welcome!

This is the final edition in our Experience Deficit series. Issue #1 explored SPONTAINMENT: how brands engineer joy in an over-optimized world. Issue #2 examined GATHERGROUND: communities that build spaces rather than just gather in them.

This time, we're exploring a different kind of deficit: the search for meaning. While self-care culture promised happiness, global satisfaction has actually declined. Many are hungry for a connection to something bigger than themselves.

The response comes in unexpected forms. From AI spiritual companions to dream visualization devices, brands across industries are helping people find what they're really seeking.

How will your brand support the search for depth in an increasingly shallow world?

## Life is convenient... but it's not satisfying.

Self-care culture promised relief from burnout, but global happiness has declined since 2011 in 15 of 20 tracked countries. Over a third (34%) of young adults across the globe have deep fears about the future. It turns out that treat culture and wellness apps deliver distraction, not depth.

For those craving meaning, the answer isn't more products — it's practice. Growing numbers are creating new rituals by extracting what works from different traditions and experimenting with contemporary forms of guidance. The result is approaches built around personal resonance, not universal prescriptions.

For brands, SACRED SYNC signals a move from selling solutions to enabling practices. How will you help people develop their own rituals that actually stick?



**People are creating new rituals that serve old needs for meaning and connection.**

**The opportunity lies in providing the infrastructure for these emerging practices.**

# Why now?

## GOTTA HAVE FAITH?

As the shift away from religion continues, the landscape is undergoing a significant change. Between 2010 and 2020, the number of people who identify as religiously unaffiliated rose by 270 million, while Christians' share of the global population fell by 1.8 percentage points. Headlines about Gen Z's embrace of religion, attributed to everything from the loneliness epidemic to a loss of trust in establishments and the demographic's rightward political and social shift, are probably premature. Instead, what's emerging is faith reimagined for digital-native generations: see the design-first Byble, the Vatican's digital twin and Masdar City's net-zero mosque.

## SPIRIT LEVEL

In conversations about mental health, one dimension is often overlooked: spiritual health. Last year, a 26-country survey from McKinsey found that the vast majority of respondents said spiritual health is 'somewhat' to 'extremely' important. Across age groups, higher spiritual health is associated with better mental, social and physical health. However, the survey revealed significant generational differences, with Gen Z approximately three times more likely to report lower spiritual health than Boomers. The gap between spiritual health needs and outcomes is driving the search for new, accessible spiritual wellness solutions: the global spiritual wellness apps market was valued at USD 2.16 billion in 2024 and is projected to reach USD 4.84 billion by 2030.

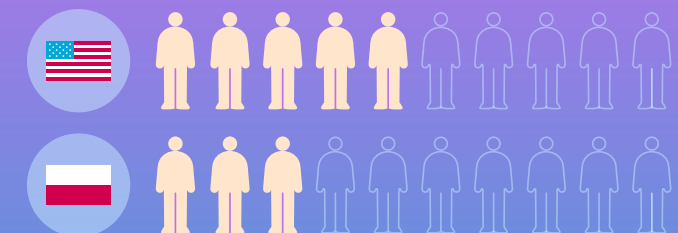
## RELIGIOUSLY UNAFFILIATED



Between 2010 and 2020, the number of religiously unaffiliated people rose by 270 million, reaching 1.9 billion. The share of "nones" climbed nearly a full percentage point, to 24.2%.

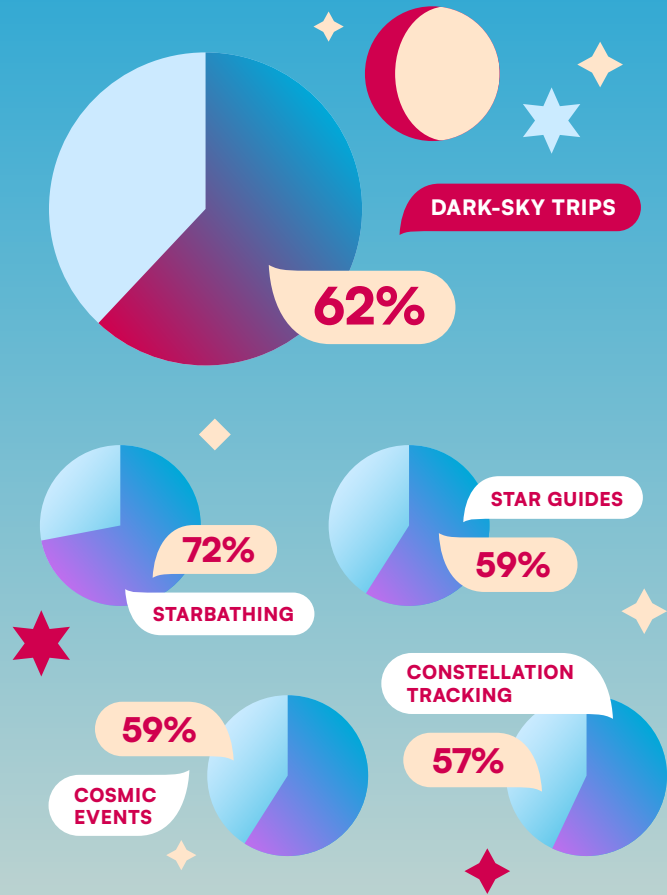
Pew Research Center, June 2025

## NATURE CAN HAVE SPIRITS



Nearly half of U.S. adults say they believe that parts of nature (mountains, rivers or trees) can have their own spirits or spiritual energies. Solid majorities in India and Peru also hold this view. But only about three-in-ten people surveyed in Poland say parts of nature can have spirits.

Pew Research Center, June 2025



**In 2025, 62% of global travelers plan to seek out dark-sky trips, with starbathing, star guides, once-in-a-lifetime cosmic events and constellation tracking the top draws.**

Booking.com, 2024

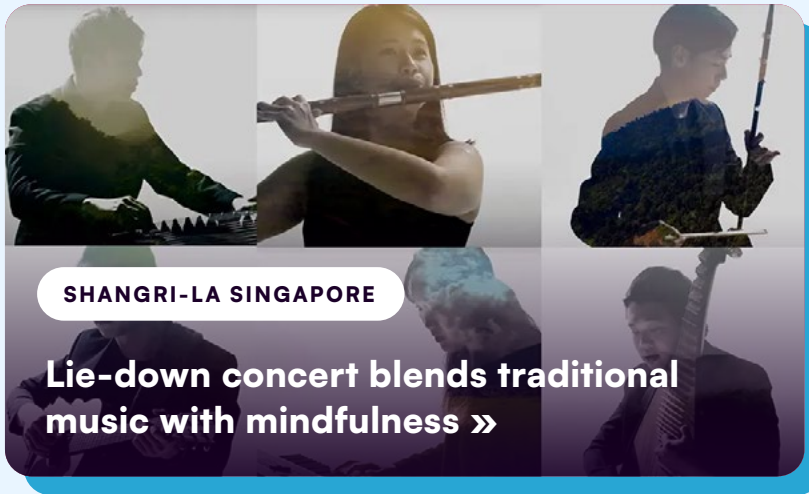
### PRAY TELL

New technologies have always changed the ways people seek guidance, and the same is true of AI. As of June 2025, Bible Chat had 5 million monthly active users, while AI pastor Chowon receives around 2,000 daily inquiries. Others view AI as a spiritual companion, a private, stigma-free confidant that's always available. These use cases come with valid ethical concerns, including provenance, escalation and privacy controls. Younger generations are primed for AI-mediated relationships — more than 70% of US teens have used AI companions, with almost a third (31%) agreeing the conversations are "as satisfying or more satisfying" than talking with real friends. For teens comfortable sharing personal thoughts with AI, spiritual seeking through these platforms is a natural extension.

### RESET MODE

Interest in dark-sky travel, nature bathing and digital- detox breaks keeps rising as travelers prioritize intentional restoration over escapism. The benefits of these trips go beyond #content — many travelers hope they'll help tackle stress, screen overload and disconnection. The question is whether benefits extend beyond the vacation itself. Research suggests they can: a 2025 meta-analysis found post-holiday wellbeing stays elevated for 3—6 weeks, especially when people detach from work and move their bodies. For travelers seeking lasting impact, the key lies in translating vacation practices into daily rituals that offer both meaning and a sense of control.



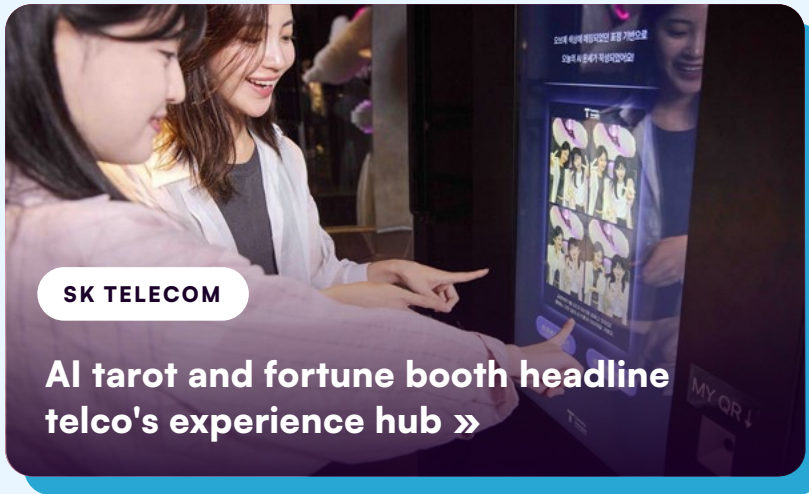


**Lie-down concert blends traditional music with mindfulness »**

Hosted in September 2025, 五行 Wuxing, The Five Elements was a multisensory experience that blended traditional Chinese music and therapeutic sound. Developed by The TENG Company and Shangri-La Singapore, the 45-minute concert surrounded participants with live music from The TENG Ensemble, known for fusing Eastern and Western sounds, alongside monaural beats designed to promote relaxation. Registered music therapist Evelyn Lee led the session, guiding attendees through breathwork and visualizations inspired by the five Chinese elements: wood, fire, earth, metal and water. Tickets cost SGD 148.



**Wellness experiences that draw from cultural traditions offer something deeper than generic stress relief. By anchoring relaxation in frameworks like the five elements, participants get both therapeutic benefits and cultural education — mindfulness with meaning, not just momentary calm.**

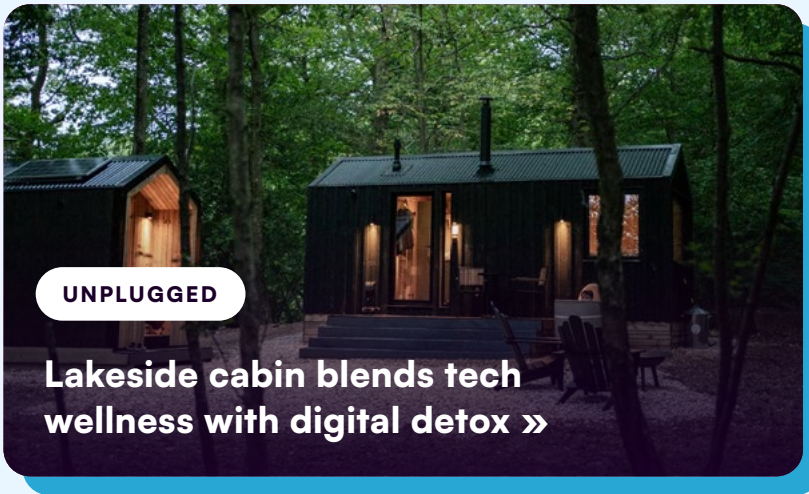


**AI tarot and fortune booth headline telco's experience hub »**

In September 2025, SK Telecom opened T Factory Seongsu, a three-floor, 2,150-square-meter experience space in one of Seoul's trendiest neighborhoods. The venue is designed to connect with Gen Z through AI-powered installations, cultural pop-ups and K-pop trainee role-play. On the second floor, visitors encounter SKT's large language model in action with an AI tarot service. Guests receive a hands-free tarot reading, automatically recorded and summarized in the A.dot app. An adjacent "AI Fortune Photo Booth" analyzes facial expressions, adjusts background colors, then prints a four-photo strip alongside an AI-written horoscope.



**SK Telecom's tarot booth sits alongside K-pop role-play, recognizing that Gen Z is genuinely invested in both experiences. Rather than forcing consumers to choose lanes, successful brands create spaces where different aspects of their identity can coexist. What happens when you blend fandom culture with spiritual seeking?**



**Lakeside cabin blends tech wellness with digital detox »**

In August 2025, Unplugged launched Helix, its first wellness-focused cabin blending digital detox with health tech. Created with Healf, the UK lakeside retreat combines unplugged living with curated wellness tools. Unlike Unplugged's off-grid stays, Helix includes power to run devices supporting Healf's four pillars of wellbeing: eat, move, mind and sleep. While phones are locked away (with instant cameras and Nokia phones provided), guests can access targeted wellness tech: matcha blends and electrolytes for nutrition, Pilates gear and Therabody massage tools for movement, plus journaling kits, vagus nerve stimulators and custom sleep masks for mental restoration. Stays cost from GBP 600 for three nights.



**Create the conditions for personal ritual. By removing distractions but providing wellness tools, Helix transforms downtime into intentional practice while teaching guests what truly serves wellbeing. The experience becomes education in sustainable spiritual self-care, not just temporary escape.**

## FFERN

**Organic perfume brand ties fragrance to the rhythms of the year »**

The UK-based fragrance house **Ffern** builds its perfumes around the natural calendar, releasing four organic scents each year on the solstices and equinoxes. Founded by siblings Emily Cameron and Owen Mears, customers must apply for membership before purchasing. Each perfume is blended and aged in Somerset, drawing inspiration from local folklore and seasonal rituals such as wassailing and harvest festivals. The brand extends its seasonal philosophy to candles and teas. Ffern's podcast **As the Season Turns**, which sees 70,000 monthly streams, charts the skies, hedgerows, rivers and seas. In July 2025, the brand promoted its new scent launch with a vintage ice cream van serving matching sorbet flavors.



**Like Norway's Gen Z folk revival, Ffern shows how traditional practices survive by being recombined in new contexts. By extracting meaningful rituals from Somerset folklore and repackaging them through fragrance, they're going beyond products to offer accessible practices for modern life.**

## SOL

**App blends ancient wisdom with personalized digital self-care »**

**Sol** positions itself as more than a wellness app, offering users a tailored path to self-discovery. Rather than one-size-fits-all mindfulness, Sol curates tools based on emotions, personality and values, combining practices like tai chi, prayer and breathwork with modern psychology. The app layers in astrology, numerology and personality insights, turning log-ins into daily rituals enhanced by a glowing avatar that reflects users' moods. Circles connect people around shared interests in tarot, lunar cycles or meditation. An AI chat feature provides real-time spiritual guidance, while virtual classes range from hypnotherapy to astrology. Subscriptions start at USD 7.99 a month. Sol launched in the US in Q1 2025.



**Spiritual practice isn't about choosing between ancient wisdom and modern psychology. It's becoming personalized, with people choosing what works for them. Which wellness practices could your users mix and match instead of adopting wholesale?**

## MODEM

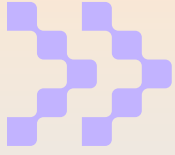
**Bedside device transforms dreams into analog-style visuals »**

Developed by the design and innovation office Modem, **Dream Recorder** is a bedside device that visualizes people's dreams. It captures spoken dream recollections and uses gen AI to transform them into what the creators call 'ultra-low definition dreamscapes' — intentionally fuzzy visuals that mirror the hazy quality of actual dream memories. Users wake up, describe their dreams by speaking in any language and watch them materialize as low-resolution cinema in various aesthetic styles. Each unit can store a week's worth of 'subconscious theater.' Dream Recorder is open-source. Design files and software are available on GitHub; the required parts cost around EUR 285



**Dream Recorder signals the shift from self-quantification to self-intimacy. Consumers no longer want to hack sleep with biometrics — they want meaning from their inner lives. Smart brands will help customers understand themselves, not just track themselves.**



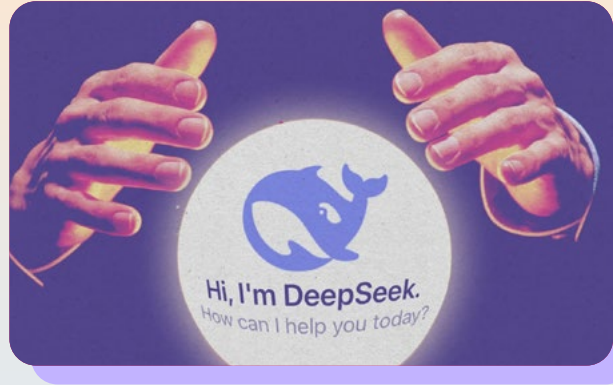


## Tradition evolved

**Ancient practices,  
new expressions**

While East Asia appears to be one of the least religious regions in the world, rituals remain important. Rates of religious disaffiliation are high in Hong Kong and South Korea, but **48% of Hong Kong citizens and 52% of South Koreans make offerings to ancestors.**

**Across the region, tech-mediated spirituality is emerging — from AI horoscopes to digital scripture tools — showing how traditional practices evolve, rather than disappear. As APAC markets become laboratories for spiritual technology, they're revealing how global brands can adapt digital wellness for different cultural contexts.**



### RECODING DIVINATION

In China 🇨🇳, DeepSeek's rise has supercharged BaZi fortune-telling (a traditional Chinese system that maps people's fate based on their birth date and time), with posts about the best BaZi prompts going viral. With youth unemployment reaching **17.8%** in July 2025 — the highest reading since August 2024 — many young people are turning to the practice for reassurance and confidence. This trend extends beyond China. Thailand's 🇹🇭 Gen Z are turning to ChatGPT for palm, face and birth-chart readings as a low-friction, stigma-free alternative to human tellers.



**When external systems feel unstable, people seek guidance from ancient practices that have weathered centuries of change. Which cultural traditions could your brand help people reconnect with during turbulent times?**

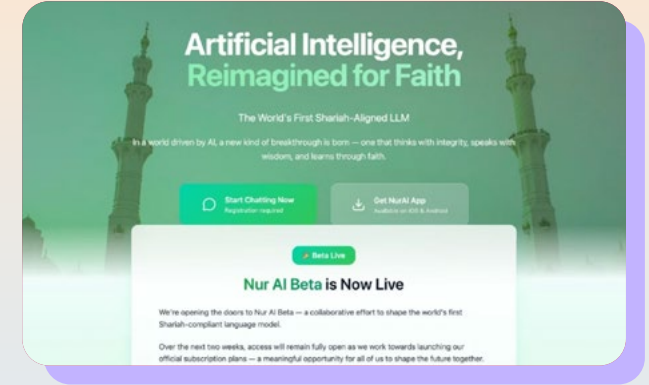


### CULTURAL AI

BuddhaBot Plus — an LLM trained on Buddhist texts — is currently being tested with 200 monks and nuns in Bhutan 🇧🇹. Depending on trial results, the chatbot could be rolled out to all citizens, and expanded beyond religious teachings into other fields of thought, including philosophy and economics. Awake Corporation, a Korean startup 🇰🇷, has developed Chowon, an AI pastor providing biblical guidance. The service, which had 150,000 monthly users as of Q1 2025, generates responses reviewed by a panel of pastors and theologians.



**Cultural knowledge needs cultural validation. Both BuddhaBot and Chowon were built with traditional experts. What expertise do you need to make your technology culturally relevant?**



### VALUES REPRESENTATION

Developed by Malaysia-based 🇲🇾 Zetrix AI, NurAI is billed as the first Shariah-aligned LLM, trained with oversight from Islamic scholars. It's trained to offer guidance consistent with Shariah rulings across subjects including law, healthcare and finance, as well as Islamic philosophy and Quranic studies. According to Zetrix AI, the LLM — which launched first in Malaysia and Indonesia 🇮🇩 — gives Muslim-majority nations and Muslim communities an alternative to existing Western and Chinese AI models.



**Communities want AI that reflects their values, not just their language. NurAI shows there's significant demand for alternatives to dominant Western and Chinese AI models among underserved populations. Which communities might your industry be overlooking?**





## RITUAL IN MOTION

In October 2025, the Hattori Tenjingu Shrine in Osaka, Japan 🇯🇵 will host the Hikyaku Marathon, where the focus will be on connection and heritage rather than completion time (in fact, timekeeping is *not* conducted). The shrine, known as the 'foot shrine' and historically popular with traditional hikyaku (couriers), will offer a course that includes prayer rings and wish-making spots. Participants will receive tenugui hand towels and goshuin-style completion certificates with personalized calligraphy and will be able to try on waraji (sandals made from straw).

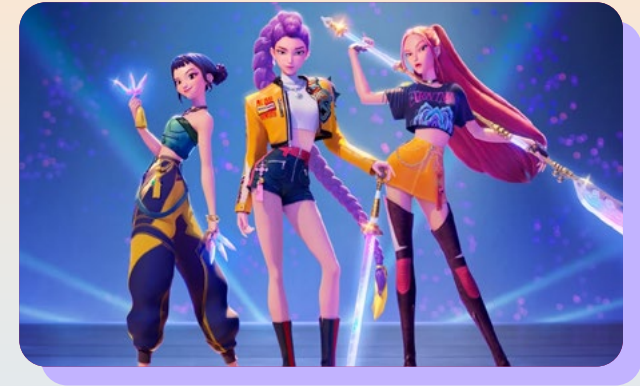
When every activity becomes about metrics, people crave experiences that prioritize connection over competition. Hattori Tenjingu swaps personal bests for personal reflection. Which performance-driven activities in your industry might benefit from a redesign?



## SHRINECATIONS

Blending leisure travel and pilgrimage, Gen Z and millennials across India 🇮🇳 are embracing 'shrinecations', opting for domestic destinations like Rishikesh, Bodh Gaya and Kedarnath. These experiences combine culture and ritual, appealing particularly to the 33% of Indian Gen Zs and 29% of millennials who say they feel stressed or anxious all or most of the time.

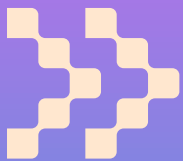
Young Indians are turning domestic pilgrimage sites into wellness destinations, combining cultural heritage with stress relief. How might traditional sites in your region serve wellbeing needs?



## CULTURAL CROSSOVER

The recent global success of Netflix's K-Pop Demon Hunters sparked a wave of national pride in South Korea 🇰🇷. Cultural institutions like the National Museum of Korea — home to some of the traditional artefacts featured in the film and some exclusive merchandise — saw a rise in visitor numbers and even hosted themed events. Media outlets also reported a rise in visits to Buddhist temples among overseas K-pop fans. When a local monk performed a Buddhist ritual for one of the bands featured in the Netflix hit, over 4,000 fans joined the livestream.

Entertainment can inspire genuine curiosity: Netflix's hit encouraged both domestic and overseas fans to engage with cultural traditions. Authentic representation in popular content creates opportunities for tourism and heritage engagement.



# The evolution of SACRED SYNC

The search for meaning is getting practical. As people remix traditions into simple, repeatable habits, there's an opportunity for brands to enable new rituals.

1

## AI-guided reflection goes mainstream

AI moves from niche apps into everyday care and work, with clear guardrails on privacy, escalation and provenance. This will normalize reflection as part of whole-person wellbeing.

### Consider:

Adding an opt-in 'reflection mode' with human escalation; publish a plain-English ethics note.

2

## Seasonal business rhythms

To build anticipation and meaning *without* adding noise, test quarterly cadences tied to local seasons and cultural calendars.

### Consider:

Planning your next four releases around solstices/equinoxes; aligning content and events to each arc.

3

## Heritage travel, made restorative

Traditional sites and cultural venues reframe visits as time to slow down, move, and learn — going beyond sightseeing to offer grounding and connection.

### Consider:

Co-creating low-tech pauses (walks, wish-making, simple tokens) with heritage partners.

4

## Rituals at work

Organizations introduce brief, shared practices that mark transitions and build connections. These create belonging and meaning beyond productivity metrics.

### Consider:

Replacing one standing meeting with a 10-minute weekly reset: one prompt and no laptops or metrics.

5

## Make it modular

Instead of prescribing complete 'spiritual systems', brands offer mix-and-match components — meditation prompts, reflection frameworks, or symbolic objects that customers combine into personal practices.

### Consider:

Offering modular options (choose a start/finish/reflect step); highlight user-made variants.

6

## Community without commitment

Brands create opportunities for shared experiences that don't require ongoing belief or membership. Think walking routes with optional reflection stops or communal wish-making spaces.

### Consider:

Adding a 'with others' layer to an existing experience: shared maps and paired questions are just the start.

7

## Design for continuity

One-off highs give way to routines people can keep. Design for gentle follow-through, not novelty. This extends benefits beyond the event or purchase.

### Consider:

Building a follow-on path (tiny check-ins, low-effort actions) that fits users' daily life.

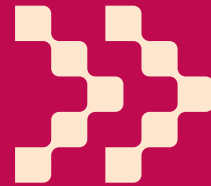
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## Credit and care for culture

If you draw on cultural knowledge, involve tradition-holders early; credit and compensate transparently.

### Consider:

Setting up an advisory loop; publishing who was consulted and how they're remunerated.

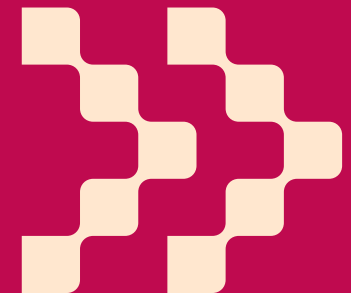
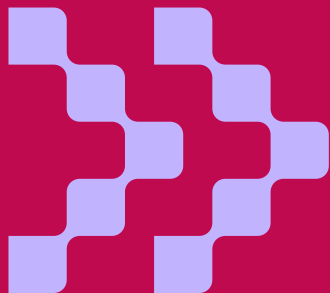
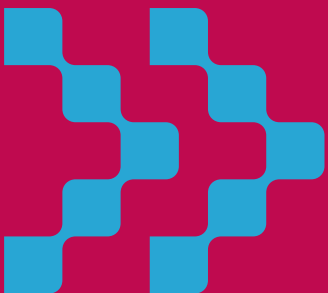
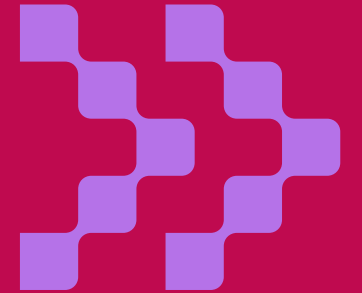
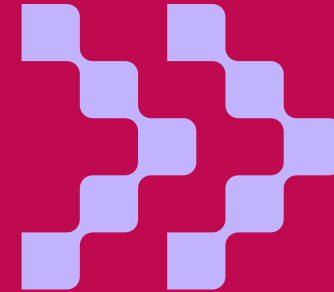


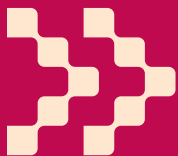
## People aren't abandoning the search for meaning. They're just finding what works for them.

The opportunity for brands isn't to replace traditional sources of guidance, but to support the personal practices people are cultivating. Success comes from enabling sustainable rituals, not selling quick fixes.

This shift spans industries: telcos hosting AI tarot booths, fragrance brands following seasonal cycles and retreat centers curating intentional technology. The common thread isn't spirituality — it's personalization. In a world of one-size-fits-all wellness, people crave approaches that resonate with their individual needs and values.

The brands that win will help customers cultivate their own approaches to meaning and connection. How will you move from selling solutions to enabling practices?





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