

HYPER-OPTIMIZATION

Creative Stagnation Amidst Cultural Abundance

Despite the abundance of culture surrounding us, why does culture feel more stagnant than ever?

We are collapsing under the weight of cultural abundance:

**more products to buy
more apps to download
more influencers to keep tabs on
more misinformation to parse through
more polarization in our feeds**

Ample evidence demonstrates this abundance of physical and digital cultural output. The amount of fashion garments produced annually has tripled from 50 billion garments to upwards of 150 billion since 2000. Billboard reported that global, on-demand music streams more than tripled from 432 billion streams in 2016 to 1.45 trillion streams in 2023. Steam, the world's largest gaming distribution platform, with 14 percent of total marketing share, self-reported that just north of 500 video games were published on the platform in 2013—a decade later in 2023, over 14,000 games were published in 2023.

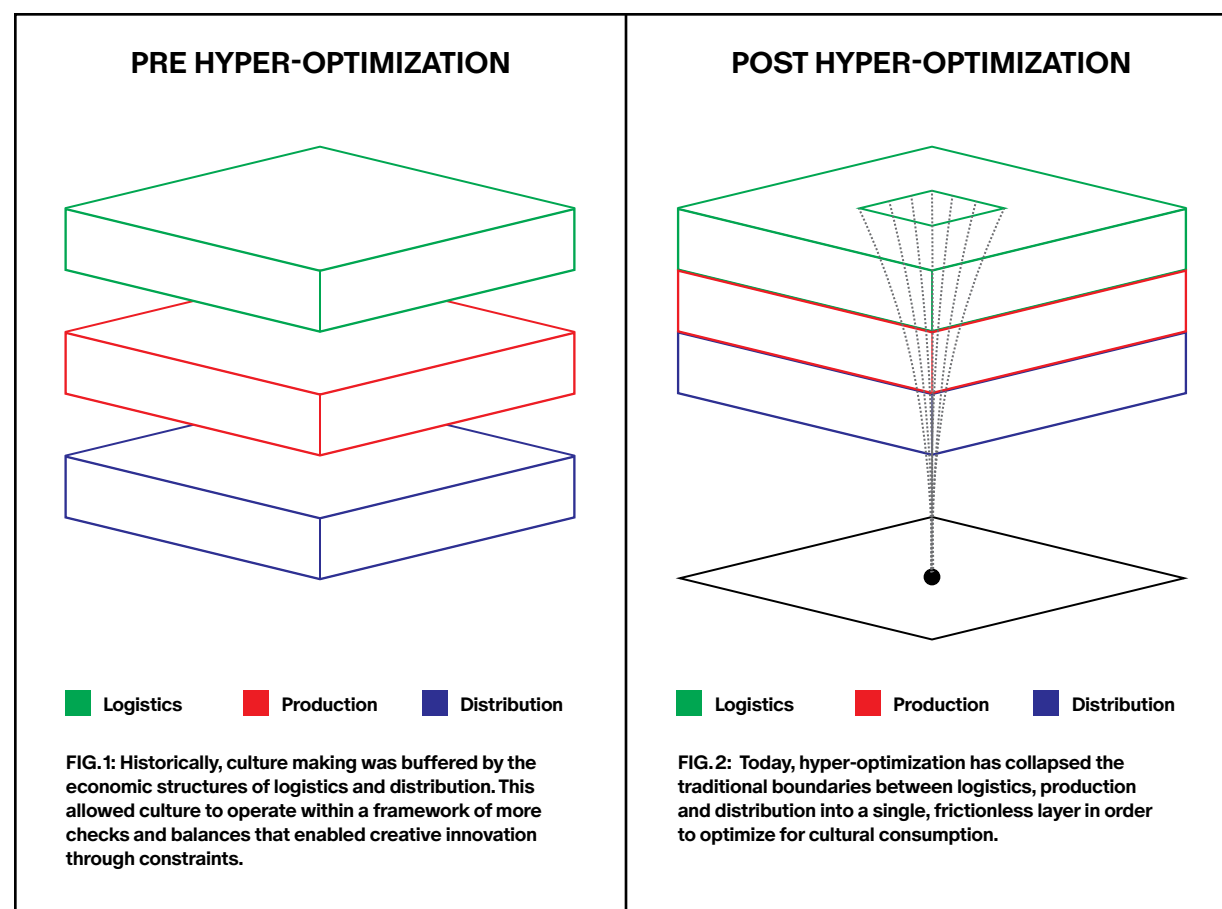
The acceleration of cultural production is further magnified by the passion economy: there are now over 50 million professional content creators and influencers globally. Influencer marketing has grown from a 1.7 billion dollar industry in 2016, the year TikTok launched in the United States, to a forecasted size of 24 billion dollars this year. Every cultural moment—from a music album reveal to a sports event—now recursively generates more creative digital content by an order of magnitude higher than ever before.

Culture has become characterized by an emergent phenomenon we are calling hyper-optimization: the point at which culture is so optimized for consumption that the very lifeblood of culture—creativity—ironically becomes a waste product in the process of cultural production. Hyper-optimization represents the macro-structure of culture today, organized with the primary intent of accelerating the speed of consumption. In order to accomplish this, hyper-optimization seeks to remove all sources of friction—from radical experimentation to subcultural formation to active debate—from our systems of cultural production. Friction defined in this sense can be broad: it refers to any force that slows down the speed of cultural production.

Because hyper-optimization seeks to remove all barriers to increasing the velocity of consumption, it has also subsumed the economic structures of logistics and distribution into the very act of cultural production. The means of making and discovering culture have been superimposed, the distinction between different cultural fields and roles performed by different players within the ecosystem is meaningless under hyper-optimization. Today, publishers are retailers; retailers are influencers; influencers are designers; designers are entertainers; entertainers are communities; communities are publishers; ad nauseam. These boundaries were once a necessity, creating the cultural tension needed for culture to incubate and innovate. Now, it's one giant quantum goop.

Subcultures used to be a critical source of cultural friction. They traditionally functioned as a countercurrent to popular culture, establishing an ecosystem where culture could progress through reaction and transformation. Today, the communities that drive subcultures no longer exist in the same way because the algorithm is too good at discovering them in their nascent stages and packaging them into an aesthetic before the community can properly incubate, like punk in the '70s. This reduces most subcultures primarily into a packaged good, without any of the criticality or community underlying them.

Vaporwave, an anti-consumerist music microgenre, had the potential to become a subculture in the mid-2010s. Despite healthy online discourse on forums and essays written by proponents of the



movement trying to give the subculture’s critique of consumerism cultural weight in the zeitgeist, it died within a few years because it was too quickly exposed and then co-opted by major artists, such as Drake, and incorporated into the visual design language of entities like MTV and Tumblr. Today, niche micro-communities on social media are exposed as soon as they gain traction: creators intentionally “niche down” to game the platform and become trending content on the front page before they can properly gestate into a true subculture. Today, we have trends like #watertok that function more like an untapped commercial opportunity for brand partnerships than subcultures. We are inundated with an endless cycle of new, yet ultimately meaningless cores that pop in and out of existence on a weekly basis: dreamcore, cottagecore, gorpcore, goblincore, corecore and so on. The illusion of counterculture gives a false sense of meaningful newness.

The removal of this dichotomy means there is less of a meaningful distinction between establishment and anti-establishment in culture than ever—merely the aesthetics of it for the sake of consumption. While there are young brands, designers and artists that continue to embrace an anti-establishment practice, almost all are still sold or streamed on major platforms and marketed on traditional social media apps. Hyper-optimization has streamlined and consolidated the distribution of cultural production to such a point that finding success

outside of these major power players is more impossible than ever. Can a young designer succeed without being sold by SSENSE? Can an emerging musician grow their career without being on Spotify and Apple Music?

Culture today is so self-aware, self-mimetic, and self-referential that it can endlessly spawn near-infinite variations of itself at dizzying speeds. Artificial intelligence will turn this into a cultural singularity, in which AI-generated content is both a predictive signal and training data to generate more AI-generated content in an infinite loop, at which point we will lose control of the speed of culture itself. Europol recently warned that “as much as 90 percent of online content may be synthetically generated by 2026.”

Hyper-optimization therefore represents the event horizon before which we can no longer control the speed of culture because it has become frictionless. The cultural structures that enabled regulation and growth have been removed in order to make cultural consumption as superconductive as possible.

CULTURE IS WHAT EMERGES AS A PRODUCT OF THE FRICTION BETWEEN PEOPLE AND IDEAS. SO THE IRONY HERE IS THAT FRICTION ITSELF IS WHAT MAKES CULTURE EXCITING TO BEGIN WITH.

— Phil Chang, Creative Director & Founder C47 Creative

Under the allure of cultural abundance, society has begun to enter a period of cultural stagnation. Despite the amount of culture surrounding us, it increasingly feels like an iterative repetition of something we’ve already seen before, disguised as newness. Creativity has become a luxury, a scarcity alienated by the very process of cultural optimization, because we have over-optimized culture for metrics of consumption.

Cultural optimization is straightforward enough: the cultural output that performs the best for reach, engagement and conversion is what is doubled down on, produced in greater quantity, then iterated upon for more variations in order to offer more of the same under the banner of newness. It is why every luxury fashion brand, regardless of the logo, seems to offer the same products. It’s the Marvel-ification of cinema into formulaic franchises. As writer Adam Mastroianni notes: “Until the year 2000, about 25% of top-grossing movies were prequels, sequels, spinoffs, remakes, reboots, or cinematic universe expansions. Since 2010, it’s been over 50% every year. In recent years, it’s been close to 100%.” Under capitalism, this is a reassuring way to manage cultural production because it is incremental and predictable.

But this quantum state of optimizing culture for both familiarity and unexpectedness has removed the possibility of real progress.

Hyper-optimization describes the emergent macrostructure when it is taken to the extreme. It is when society extols cultural optimization to such an extreme that we encode it as the ultimate virtue in our systems of production. It is a social paradigm whereby we prioritize optimization over progress, without even consenting to or realizing this as a society.

Progress is very different from optimization. Progress is rarely linear nor gradual: it happens in waves, through step-change, and is often chaotic in nature. It shifts the paradigm and changes the very structure of cultural production itself. It requires radical creativity, an openness for entropy, and the criticality needed to shatter the status quo—all forces that are detrimental to hyper-optimization. Optimization is incremental, and this is reassuring for capitalism. You can A/B test for it, you can gather market data, you can release new versions that gradually perfect what drives tangible key performance indicators. But hyper-optimization cannot create the conditions for cultural progress because it actively removes them.

CULTURAL PRODUCTION HAS BEEN HIJACKED BY PERFORMANCE-DRIVEN OPTIMIZATION. NOW, IT'S JUST DOPAMINE HITS FOR ANALYTICS' SAKE.

— Jay Douzi, Creative Director and Co-Founder, Studio Periphéria

Hyper-optimization results in cultural stagnation because it actively removes any sources of friction in the system. But without friction, creativity cannot thrive in a meaningful way. Much like with online platforms and their decreasing quality over time, the enshittification of culture is a logical conclusion when you consider how much culture has become treated as a tech product.

Hyper-optimization may seem to be the inevitable conclusion of an algorithmically deterministic world. But there are counterforces that offer the possibility of new strategies for finding creative value. We have identified six of them: emicness, metabolism, self-destruction, entropy, pluralism, and degrowth.

Each counterforce introduces a layer of friction that allows us to regain control over the flow and trajectory of culture. Through the following six case studies within this dossier, the Office of Applied Strategy explores these counterforces both within the context of a specific aspect of cultural production or distribution, as well as its broader implications in navigating the parameters of hyper-optimization at large.

These counterforces are valuable strategic principles which allow brands and cultural practitioners across fields to resist the effects of hyper-optimization, find new sources of value beyond consumption-driven metrics of success, and exploit structural weaknesses within the paradigm of hyper-optimization. From these counterforces come the basis of novel strategies that allow brands, creators, and institutions to navigate the parameters of hyper-optimization.

We are at an inflection point: the algorithmic dominance of cultural production today threatens to usher in a cultural dark age. Not one characterized by a loss of culture, but one where we are flooded by it — a vicious feedback loop spawning more bland, regurgitated, repetitive culture drowning out the possibility of true newness or ideas from taking root. It may feel exhilarating as we are tricked into believing we are entering a golden age of cultural abundance, but this euphoria belies our loss of control.

Instead, we will lose culture to a system that, by design, deprioritizes creativity or progress. And when we finally realize this deluge of tepid cultural content and products offers nothing meaningfully new and lose interest, we will wake up asking ourselves where our future went.

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YOU'RE READING AN ABRIDGED VERSION OF OUR DOSSIER. THE FULL DOSSIER CONTAINS SIX ADDITIONAL CASE STUDIES EXPLORING THE PHENOMENA OF HYPER-OPTIMIZATION ACROSS VARIOUS CULTURAL VERTICALS INCLUDING LUXURY FASHION, CONSUMER TECH, HEALTH AND WELLNESS AND BEYOND.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED IN RECEIVING A COPY OF THE FULL DOSSIER, PLEASE REACH OUT TO US AT: INFO@OFFICEOFAPPLIEDSTRATEGY.COM

HYPER-OPTIMIZATION FOR SIX COUNTERFORCES

1. EMICNESS

Emicness describes an approach to culture building that focuses on unique identity, codes, and symbols within a micro-community. It is an emphasis of difference over similarity.

2. METABOLISM

Metabolism describes the process by which culture sustains and transforms itself. It asks us to question what is a resource versus waste, and the viability of more circular approaches to culture making.

3. ENTROPY

Entropy describes the presence of chaos and randomness in our systems of cultural production, distribution, and consumption. It introduces the possibility of the unknown as a feature in culture.

4. SELF-DESTRUCTION

Creative self-destruction describes an intentional pivot away from successful creative franchises in order to permit ourselves ample space to experiment with new ideas in culture.

5. PLURALISM

Pluralism describes the importance of resisting the consolidation of cultural production and distribution across all levels, from devices to apps to brands, so that more rich fragmentation can occur.

6. DE-GROWTH

Degrowth describes a reorientation of our consumption habits and production priorities to focus on what value actually means outside of traditional metrics of consumption.

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THE OFFICE OF APPLIED STRATEGY

The Office of Applied Strategy is an independent strategy practice. We advance a hybrid approach to problem solving: combining management consulting, brand strategy & think tank research. We build new growth frameworks at scale for brands in luxury, culture & technology. We believe that truly disruptive, meaningful opportunities require anti-disciplinary thinking to make happen. We seamlessly straddle left and right brain disciplines to offer clients an integrated, ideas-driven, and data-backed approach to insights, innovation, business development, marketing and beyond.

In doing so, we often work with brands on ‘n+1’ type engagements, answering first-of strategy questions around new business opportunities, category expansion, cultural application of new technologies, and futures-driven consumer insights.

We’ve worked with clients to become first-to-market in a new category, such as developing a direct to consumer e-comm strategy for blue chip art gallery David Zwirner. We’ve disrupted conventional industry paradigms, such as working with Sequoia Capital on a web3 outreach strategy to drive crypto dealflow. We’ve conducted primary research to help clients understand new consumer and cultural trends, such as creating an ethnographic study for Cash App on Gen-Z middle schoolers and their cultural relationship to money today.

While we work across industries—from fashion to fintech—the common thread across our clients and work is the appetite to disrupt the playbook and chart new models of scaling and building brands.

Past clients include Prada, Miu Miu, Chanel, Cartier, Valentino, David Zwirner, Netflix, Cash App, Riot Games, Mercedes Benz, e.l.f. Beauty, Estee Lauder, Diageo, Sequoia Capital and Uniswap.

The think tank arm at OAS invites staff, collaborators and friends of the firm as contributors to develop and publish research around the future of luxury, culture and society. Previous research written by OAS includes the 2022 Highsnobiety × Boston Consulting Group report titled Luxury 3.0, and a 2023 social media trends report titled Social Media Futures Forecast.

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