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TOPICS OF THE 2026 EDITION

Main topic and subtopics in their extended versions.

DESIGNED TO DESIRE

We live in a world shaped by consumption. Not only by what we buy; much of our daily lives unfolds between stimuli competing for our attention: screens, billboards, notifications, trends. In that landscape, desire takes on a particular form. Many of the tools that mediate what we see today do more than simply inform or present options; they can amplify certain emotions, alter our priorities, and shape the way we interpret what is "worth" wanting.

This is not about assuming that every desire is induced or that consumption is, by definition, negative. Consuming can also mean enjoyment, exploration, or simply practicality. The question is another: what changes when desire becomes an object of design? To the extent that there is "engineering" behind what we are shown, how do we distinguish what we choose out of conviction from what we choose on impulse?

In this context, conformism does not necessarily appear as resignation, but rather as a form of adaptation. Faced with so many options and so much pressure to choose, following what is recommended can be efficient. But can that efficiency reduce the space we have to ask ourselves what we truly want, what matters to us, and why? Trends, which have always existed, are now amplified by digitalization: they emerge, spread, and disappear at unprecedented speed, and can be so personalized that they feel "tailor-made." In a hyperconnected world, the need to belong intensifies, and a doubt arises: do we want something because we desire it, or because we fear being left out? How many decisions do we make because we believe we "should" make them, and how many arise from a genuine need of our own? And if what is "in fashion" becomes increasingly fleeting, what happens to identity when it is built on constant novelty?

Looking at this phenomenon from a business perspective opens another set of questions. Organizations have learned to design experiences: not only products, but complete journeys that go from discovery to purchase, from first impression to recommendation. There are multiple tools to understand how we decide, and to influence those decisions. The challenge is that "influence" is not a neutral word. Where is the line between persuasion and manipulation? What does it mean to "help someone decide" when the goal is to sell? Can desire be built responsibly, and what would that mean?

At the same time, for an entrepreneur or professional, knowing these tools can be an advantage: they allow for clearer communication, stronger value propositions, deeper understanding of needs, and better-designed services. But knowing them also brings responsibilities. If we know which emotional triggers work, when is it legitimate to use them? If we can segment audiences with precision, how do we avoid reinforcing insecurities or inequalities? And if desire can be designed, can it also be designed toward goals other than impulsive consumption: well-being, sustainability, healthy habits, education? In some cases, it already is: social and public health campaigns make what is "right" easier to choose. The question, then, is not only whether these tools work, but toward what ends we direct them.

"Designed to Desire" does not propose condemning consumption, but invites lucidity. Perhaps the point is to recognize that desire today operates within a system that amplifies, accelerates, and directs it, and that understanding this system can give us back a margin of choice. What changes when we stop seeing ourselves only as consumers and begin to see ourselves also as interpreters and even designers of the forces shaping our choices? How can autonomy be built in an environment that constantly competes for our attention? And finally, what would we do differently if we could more clearly identify which desires are truly our own, which are borrowed, and which, though borrowed, we consciously choose to make our own?

REDEFINING CONSUMPTION

Consumption can be formally defined as the use of goods and services over a period of time to satisfy a necessity. However, this definition seems lacking to describe what we understand as consumption today. No doubt we continue to consume to meet basic necessities, but all around the world consumption keeps rising at an alarming pace. Across industries, resource usage cannot keep up with rising consumption trends, added to the amount of waste produced, which societies are not prepared to handle. Despite the advantages that today's consumption brings, it is clear that something must change, but how can we create meaningful and lasting change?

This increase in overconsumption did not happen overnight, and understanding the historical events of the past 300 years could help in developing solutions. With the industrial revolution in the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century, mass production revolutionized the way consumption was understood until then. As nations became industrialized, consumption patterns that were previously reserved for the elite were spreading. Added to societal changes taking place at the time, social classes with available purchasing power appeared. Industrialization continued into the 20th century, where technology such as the radio and television revolutionized publicity and the way products were marketed. It was after the Second World War that the consumerist society we know today was established. Towards the end of the 20th century and in the beginning of the 21st, with the information era causing increasing globalization, consumption was yet again revolutionized. With constant product availability and increasingly targeted marketing, we reach the present of overconsumption.

Many efforts have been and continue to be made in an attempt to mitigate overconsumption and its repercussions. Some of these efforts are at the consumer level, which includes reevaluating consumption patterns and being more mindful in our decisions as consumers. For instance, the zero waste movement has grown in popularity in the past years. Other efforts are centered around modifying business practices, such as the circular economy philosophy. Moreover, technological innovation is another way in which overconsumption and its repercussions are tackled, such as the implementation of AI and machine learning in waste management. Finally, governmental policies are another example of efforts towards change, such as the 12th goal in the UN´s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

These examples are only a few of many, all of them with the capacity of greatly impacting people´s lives. Therefore, it seems only natural to critically evaluate them to see where there is room for improvement. How effective is an initiative in achieving its intended objective? What are the ethics behind an initiative? Is it feasible to integrate certain initiatives into a community or industry? Where is certain initiative applicable? Can it be modified to work for different communities or industries? Are cultural factors taken into consideration when designing an initiative? Why have past initiatives failed? Questions such as these are crucial in understanding why past initiatives have failed or succeeded, and may guide us in planning for the future. And considering that the global standard of living is on average at a historical high, how much do these metrics depend on production processes and consumption? Therefore, can we change without interfering with global progress?

It could be argued that this generation will face the challenge of seamlessly integrating change initiatives into fast-paced societies and industries. No doubt many initiatives are already in practice: some successful, others less so. But questioning them and analyzing past experiences could be a step in the right direction to face the question: How do we create change towards a prosperous and sustainable future?

THE GILDED CAGE

Digital life promised to expand our possibilities: immediate access to information, endless entertainment, connection with people anywhere in the world, tools to learn, create, and work. And in many ways, it delivered. Yet alongside these open doors came the pull of constantly remaining inside them. "The Gilded Cage" represents that tension: an environment that feels comfortable, bright, and necessary, but that can limit our freedom of attention, choice, and well-being.

This subtheme does not begin with a condemnation of technology or digital consumption. While there are arguments both for and against digitalization, the question is rather: what kind of relationship do we build with these systems when their design is oriented toward capturing and retaining our attention?

A first clue appears in the way we manage what we feel. Many digital experiences help us distract ourselves, avoid boredom, or seek quick companionship or approval. That is not necessarily bad; at times, it is a genuine resource for getting through a difficult moment. But if we grow accustomed to using consumption as an automatic response to any discomfort, what happens when we replace processing an emotion with the anesthesia of a stimulus?

At the same time, it is worth analyzing how digital life reshapes communities by allowing people with similar interests, identities, or experiences to connect. Yet this connection can also have a polarizing effect. The personalization of what we consume narrows our view of the world: whether in politics, culture, health, identity or even everyday tastes, if we receive more of what we already look at, we may fall into a cycle of confirmation. To what extent are our beliefs strengthened because we think them through, and to what extent because we see them repeated? What do we lose when we avoid contact with difference and choose more controlled interactions? And conversely, what do we gain when a digital community becomes a gateway to action and relationships in the real world?

In addition, there is the element of comparison. Social media exposes us to an immense catalog of other people's lives: trips, achievements, bodies, routines. While this can inspire us and broaden our horizons, it can also install a persistent sense of insufficiency: there is always someone who seems to be doing better. If the benchmark is updated every minute, how do we redefine what we consider "enough"? And what role does consumption (of products, courses, treatments, experiences) play as a promise to close that gap?

We thus find ourselves within a system of immediate and constant rewards: easy dopamine, rapid validation, infinite novelty. The question is not whether we should renounce it, but what cost it carries when it becomes dominant. How long are we capable of staying in silence, without stimulus, without a screen? What space remains for deep thinking, sustained attention, difficult conversations? What habits are formed when every pause is automatically filled?

"The Gilded Cage" invites us to examine the relationship between digital consumption and autonomy: how habits are built, how attention is negotiated, and how our relationship with ourselves and others is transformed. It also leaves open a central question: if technology can design increasingly absorbing environments, what personal, social, cultural, and business tools do we need to ensure that the shine does not ultimately become a cage?

FORGING THE KEY

We often believe that creating requires a stroke of genius that comes out of nowhere, reserved only for minds with innate talent. However, reality can be quite different: to create is to look closely at our surroundings—the everyday, the broken, the missing—and dare to give it a twist.

In October 2007, two roommates, Bryan Chesky and Joe Gebbia, lived in San Francisco and couldn't pay their rent. Worried about making ends meet, they made an observation that changed the hospitality industry: they saw an air mattress and some floor space in their apartment. Taking advantage of the fact that the city's hotels had no available rooms, they decided to post it online and rent it out to three strangers, offering a place to sleep and a homemade breakfast. What to others was just a messy room, to them was the seed of "Air Bed & Breakfast," or what would later be known worldwide as Airbnb. It didn't take magic, just a new perspective on the resources they already had. They didn't limit themselves to passively inhabiting their reality; instead, they decided to question it.

To achieve this, it is vital to understand that creation is fueled by what we consume. While "passive consumption" makes people accept information without question, "active consumption" is the true engine of the creative process. It is not just about absorbing, but about interacting with the environment critically: interpreting, deconstructing, and giving new meaning to every experience in order to use it. The subject stops being a spectator and becomes an architect who analyzes and questions.

But this ability to transform what is given does not only happen externally. In an environment that pushes us to desire the same things as everyone else, the act of creating becomes a fundamental tool for building our own identity. Facing the blank page, we are forced into a process of introspection where we ask ourselves, "What do I have to offer?" Consuming makes us the same, but creating sets us apart.

However, this differentiation carries a risk that often paralyzes us. Today, the creative process feels dangerous because we live in a "gilded cage," saturated with edited lives and instant successes, where failure seems non-existent and consumption offers an anesthetizing comfort. It is necessary to remember that creating is, essentially, a matter of trial and error. The trajectory of icons like Steve Jobs reminds us that linearity is an illusion and that failure is not the end, but part of the method. His key was not continuous success, but his ability to iterate, adapt, and give new meaning to his downfalls.

Today, there is a suffocating pressure to be "successful" right now. But what is success, really? Many of the great failures of the past ended up being successes in the future. So, is success simply a matter of temporal perspective that we only understand when we dare to create our own path? Creation is the key because it gives us back the agency over our own story. As Steve Jobs said: "You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future." The challenge, then, is to stop waiting for the future and have the courage to forge it.