

Romance



2025



Romantic Rebellion

This report aims to piece together a number of trends and micro-trends that have appeared over the past years and that together tell the story of something bigger.

Beneath the noise of dystopian politics, tech fascism, AI takeover, aggressive consumerism, and environmental anxiety, there is a collective yearning.

From fairycore aesthetics to esoteric obsessions, nostalgic fashion, the rise of fantasy literature, and the coquette and ballerina-core aesthetics, a hunger for softness is becoming apparent.



6 in 10 Gen Z report feeling overwhelmed by news and events happening in their community, their country, and the world at large.

UNICEF, 2025

People are mourning the decay of a way of living that feels gentler or more human, even if it exists only in collective imagination. It's REGRESSION-CORE. They retreat into emotional interiors, nostalgic dreams, and anachronistic aesthetics as a means to escape a world that feels... cooked.

The pace of production keeps rising. Burnout has become ordinary, the veil of moral motivation within our governments has been yanked off quite harshly for those who hadn't already questioned it. Irony and nihilism have become means of self-protection and dominate the cultural mood. Many feel helpless in the face of rising fascism, collapsing social structures, and increasingly tense gender relations. Especially young people who were children only a few years ago and who came of age during the isolation of Covid.

We all search for safety, belonging, and the freedom to express ourselves without fear of ridicule or rejection. As overwhelming as this moment feels, it is not entirely new. History shows that when societies become too rational, too controlled, emotion begins to push back. When reality becomes too tight, people start to resort to fantasy.



Historic Precedent

History tends to repeat itself. There have been times before, when rapid progress, technological advances and an emphasis on the rational has resulted in counter-movements that center around emotion, spirituality, and beauty.





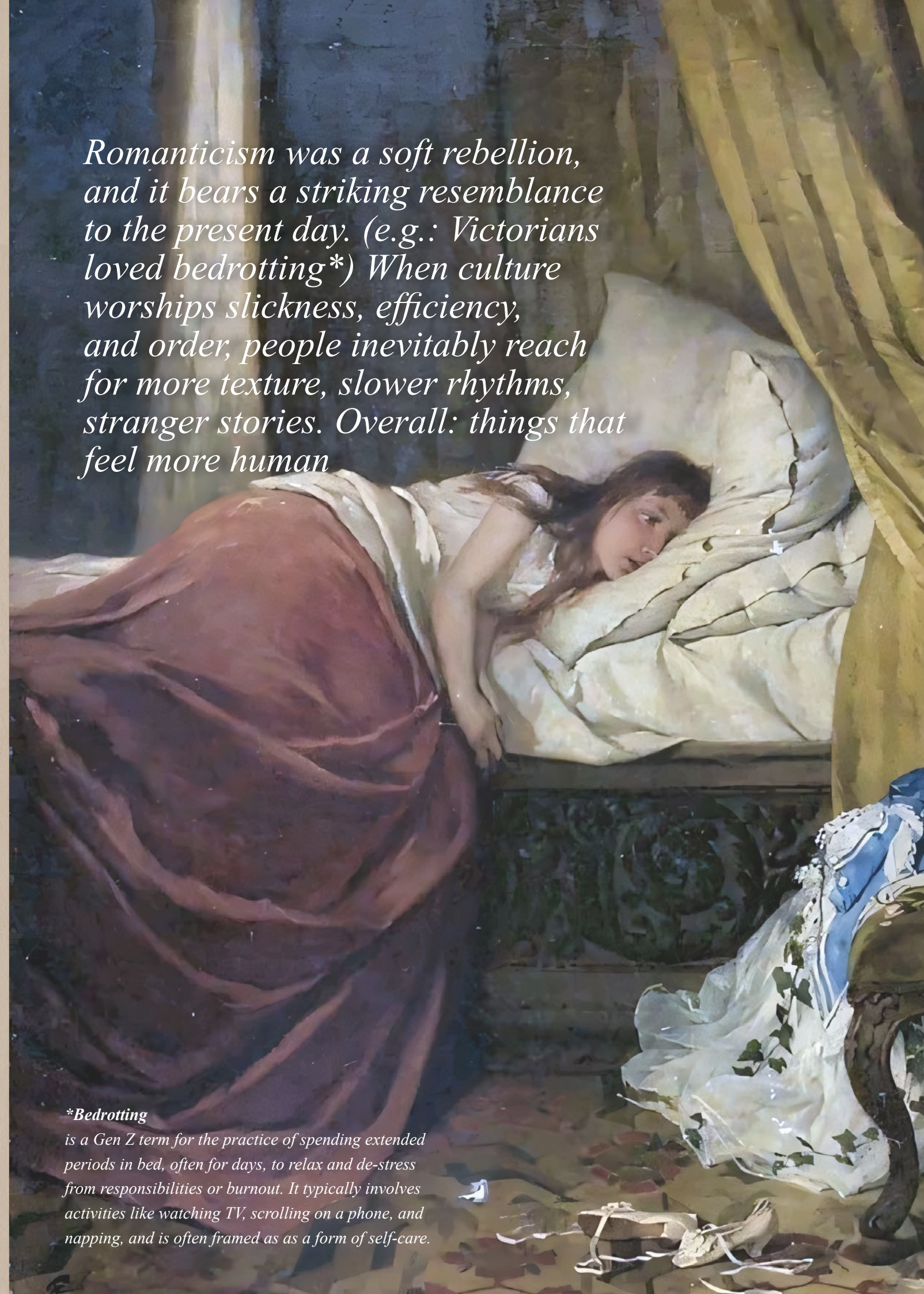
19th Century Europe

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Europe was changing fast. The Enlightenment had crowned reason as truth. The Industrial Revolution pulled people from rural rhythms into factory schedules (pre workers' rights). Cities were expanding at a rapid pace, and the rhythm of life accelerated to levels never experienced before.

Romanticism rose as a cultural counter-movement, born from a spirit of protest. It wasn't overtly political, but instead took place in the personal and emotional side of life. It pushed back against the dominance of logic and productiveness, through the power of intuition and imagination. Artists and writers turned inward, reclaiming dreams, mysticism, and nature as sources of meaning.

Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* made romantic passion tragic and contagious. Caspar David Friedrich painted figures dwarfed by vast landscapes, implying the human need to surrender to the natural world. Beethoven's symphonies thundered with longing. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* warned of what happens when ambition outruns empathy (a story that feels strangely current in the age of AI).

Romanticism was a soft rebellion, and it bears a striking resemblance to the present day. (e.g.: Victorians loved bedrotting) When culture worships slickness, efficiency, and order, people inevitably reach for more texture, slower rhythms, stranger stories. Overall: things that feel more human*



***Bedrotting**

is a Gen Z term for the practice of spending extended periods in bed, often for days, to relax and de-stress from responsibilities or burnout. It typically involves activities like watching TV, scrolling on a phone, and napping, and is often framed as a form of self-care.

20th Century Japan

A similar pattern unfolded in Japan mid 20th century. Amid economic miracles and rigid social norms, kawaii culture emerged as a soft counter to hard modernity and rapid technological change.

Kawaii means “cute,” but it carried emotional weight. It made space for vulnerability in a society obsessed with discipline and strict gender scripts. Characters like Hello Kitty and Monchichis became mascots of comfort and playfulness.

The same impulse echoes today. Fairycore, coquette, and “little treat” culture and Labubus all tap into that desire to escape optimization through softness. Under constant digital pressure, young people build nostalgic worlds that feel safer than reality.



Japanese Kawaii Culture of the 1970s and 80s

The obsession of social media influencers with Japan is not exactly subtle. Harajuku Street Style has long filtered down into western trends.

Also there is a total craze to visit Japan; leading the country to break their tourism record in 2024, welcoming over 36 Million international visitors.



Romantic Micro-Trends

The longing that once moved poets and painters now plays out across screens. It doesn't appear as a unified movement, but as fragments scattered through online life with a modern media specific shelf life. But still: those small aesthetic worlds can be read as one. They all offer a version of the same dream: that life could feel slower, deeper, or somehow more real.

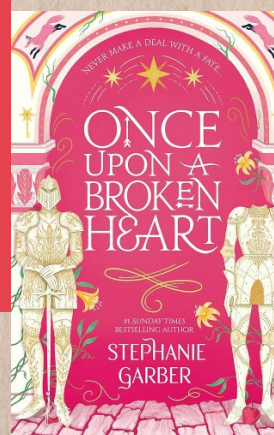
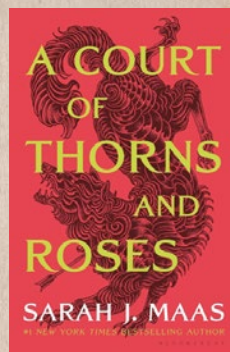
Fantasy Based Niche Aesthetics

In recent years, many subcultures have gained popularity that center around imagined worlds and often are rooted in gaming culture: Cottagecore, Fairycore, Witchcore, Goblincore, Medievalcore ...you name it. They are set in little huts in the forest, kitchens filled with herbs, in forests that might as well be digital renders, in candle-lit rooms shared through phone screens. These communities blend folklore with the aesthetics of computer games, merging



Book Tok and Romantasy

Books have been trending for a few years now. More specifically fantasy fiction has returned to the centre of youth culture. On BookTok, readers share novels about magical kingdoms, tragic love, and moral awakening. Reading becomes an act of intimacy. It slows time, restores imagination, and allows emotion to exist without irony.



Japan Obsession

The western fascination with Japanese culture plays out in many ways. Many of the current trends are a loose reference to kawaii aesthetic, but there are also direct adaptation of Japanese culture like Matcha cult or Studio Ghibli filters. Japanese culture has become the hottest shit for the disillusioned western youth.



Y2K and Thrift Core

First it was the 90s, then it was y2k, the 80s are next.. It seems GenZ loves nothing more than trying to escape the current timeline and is recreating one decade after another that feels lighter, less anxious and possibly more human. There seems to be a preference to resorting to youth cultures of Millennials and GenX instead of creating something distinctly new. The vintage trend might have started from a motivation of avoiding environmental impact but trifcore has since taken shape of just another form of consumerism.



Offline as Status Symbol

Wired headphones, flip phones and digital cameras have made a comeback. Anything that resists speed is trending: Film photography. Journaling. Collecting vinyl, even baking or handwriting letters. Being offline is the new status symbol. Luxury Brands like Miu Miu jumping on that trend and creating campaigns for the sexy bookworm is cementing this archetype for the privileged elite, that is not glued to their phones.



If you curate everything authenticity slips out of reach.

Much of today's social status is tied to personal branding online. Gen Z pulls from an aesthetic archive that stretches back to the big bang, which makes their creative expression much less about innovation and more about precise curation. They are, in many ways, cosplaying identity.

From coastal grandmother to indie sleaze to dark academia, the internet offers endless miniature worlds to choose from and patch together a sense of "uniqueness." But this freedom is deceptive.

Gen Z's value system often orbits around taste, refined consumption, references, and performed individuality. Those impluses can be read as a deeply conformist, even conservative.

The stakes of self-presentation are so high, and social anxiety around getting it wrong is omnipresent.

What Happened to Actual Romance?



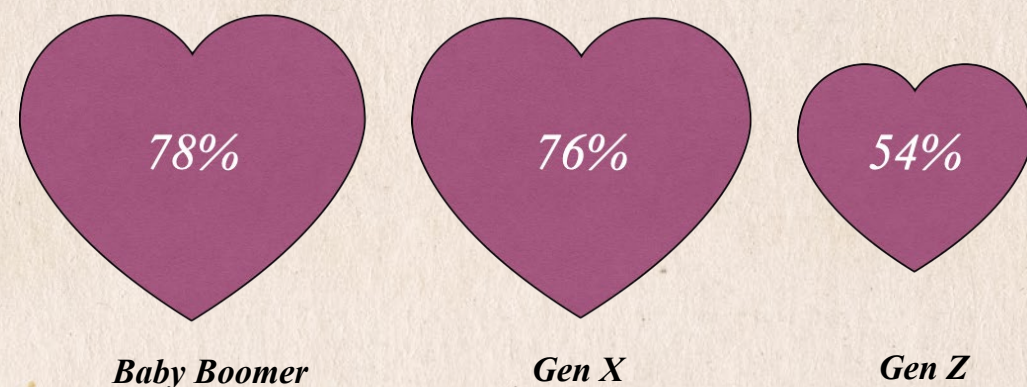
The idea of romantic love was born not that long ago. Yet young people seem to be somewhat disillusioned about this narrative. GenZ is having less sex, reporting less interest, and turning increasingly toward solo pleasure and digital intimacy.

Goon caves, Only Fans, AI companions, and parasocial attachments offer safe, predictable alternatives to the chaos of human connection. The erotic has become mechanical or even to frightening to think about. Approaching another person romantically feels risky or simply too exhausting. It's easier to desire through a screen than to feel vulnerable up close.*

*Goon Caves

Online slang for digital spaces (often physical setups at home) where men spend extended periods in immersive solo sexual activity, usually involving multiple screens and constant stimulation. The term reflects a hyper-digital, depersonalized form of pleasure that replaces human intimacy.

Men who claim to have been involved in a romantic relationship at some point during their teenage years



Survey Center on American Life. 2024

1. Identity Fatigue

In the age of dating profiles, pronouns, gender, sexuality, politics have to be defined and declared before desire can even enter the conversation. For some, this visibility is liberating. For others, it's exhausting. The landscape of Dating Apps and Profiles has played it's part into normalizing that we see others as an accumulation of hashtags. People fear saying the wrong thing, liking the wrong person, or being seen through the wrong lens. The result is a strange paralysis: everyone talking about love, yet fewer and fewer daring to truly risk it.

2. Dating Apps and the erosion of Intimacy

For a generation raised on digital connection, intimacy has never felt more distant. Dating Apps have turned interpersonal connection into a field of performance, ideology, and transaction. When swiping obsession becomes a business model, maybe it's not surprising that sticking with one person becomes harder and harder for people. Choice has become endless, and attention spans microscopic.

We are being crushed by the need to compare ourselves, thriving for constant optimization and streamline our personal brand. Meanwhile the yearning for something real is everywhere, but it's harder than ever to locate.

3. Radical Gender Scripts

The manosphere sells dominance as masculinity. Tradwives brand submission as the only way to express femininity. Pro-natalists reproduce as some form of national duty. Relationships are being reframed through the logic of biology, hierarchy, and content creation.

It feels a bit like Sydney Sweeney smiles through an American Eagle ad that feels more like 1930s German propaganda than fantasy.

On the other end of the specturn, performative males or „soft boys“ with labubus on their totes and painted nails perform for the female gaze to be perceived as non treating allies. Yet both are reactions to the same anxiety:*

No one knows what romance is supposed to look like anymore.



*Performative Male

A term describing men who consciously craft their persona through aesthetics, vulnerability, or irony to align with the female gaze or internet ideals of "softness." It's often a response to toxic masculinity but can slip into performance rather than authenticity.



*Alpha Male

A term originally derived from animal behavior studies describing the dominant male in a social hierarchy. In contemporary culture, it has been adopted by online communities to promote an ideal of hypermasculinity centered on dominance, confidence, and control. The concept has been widely criticized for oversimplifying gender dynamics and reinforcing toxic or regressive stereotypes.



Romance at its core, depends on the courage to imagine a shared future. But what happens when that future feels uncertain, or dark to say the least?

Without the promise of a shared horizon, relationships risk becoming transactional, reduced to exchange rather than creation. The tech industry and content farms have done their part in teaching us to think about romance as another form of consumption.

Beneath all the irony and fatigue, this collective pull toward softness, nostalgia, and fantasy is more than escapism. It's a response to a culture that has fetishized efficiency and algorithms that turn desire into consumption. Much like in the Romantic era of the 19th century, it has sparked a deep yearning for truth, poetry, beauty, and connection.

Perhaps these micro-trends are not only ways to cope with the present, but also quiet attempts to shape what comes next. Imagination is the first gesture toward the future, though for now, many of these visions remain trapped inside our phones and our heads.

If we can learn to hope again, it will be nothing short of a radical act.





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