

# TEN DIGITAL TRENDS FOR 2020

## COLLAB FATIGUE IS COMING – HERE'S WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

### FIRST THINGS FIRST – WHAT IS A COLLAB?

Collaborations, for many brands, are an opportunity to make noise; it's to drive conversation, garner relevance, or at the very least look pretty cool. By definition, it's the action of two groups coming together to create something. In the past few years, collaborations have managed to flood every industry imaginable – anyone from fast food chains to electronic companies to auto manufacturers are hoping to strike gold with some form of social or cultural relevance. As we're seeing collaborations become one of the quintessential ways to cash in on a growing fad, it's likely that we'll see an influx of these collaborations in 2020. So much so that we're entering what looks to be a massive oversaturation of the collaboration space that will only grow larger (and more pointless) in 2020. And like all things done without moderation – we're going to get sick. People are going to grow increasingly tired of seeing collabs that exist just for the sake of existing. This will inevitably lead to what we deem to be the true trend for 2020 – **collab fatigue**.

With partnerships like KFC and Human Made's Colonel Sanders-inspired **merchandise line** or AriZona Tea and Adidas' **sneaker take** on the 99¢ floral can, there have been countless partnerships (rightfully) met with rolling eyes and less-than-impressed scoffs. It seems as though the original authenticity of collaborations has been exploited by brands looking to revive their stale social and cultural presence or pander to subcultures that are getting more attention in the mainstream (i.e., streetwear) and ride the coattails of those waves.



Source: [hypebeast.com](https://hypebeast.com)



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The good news is that the overwhelming presence of collaborations doesn’t necessarily mean their overall death. There can still be a way to foster sincere, organic collaborations in 2020 – especially when we consider how long other industries have been able to do so effectively.

## WHO’S DOING IT RIGHT?

Music in particular has been an industry able to master the art of collaborations for decades and arguably has established the modern blueprint for how brands can model their collaborations today. When we think about music and collabs, the most obvious manifestation of this exists in the form of your classic artist duet. By definition, a duet is a musical composition for two performers in which the performers have *equal importance* to the piece. It’s symbiotic, and it’s meaningful. Like duets, there’s a lot of beauty in brands working hand in hand with another brand or creative partner (e.g., musician, designer, etc.) who can view one another in a light that both parties never knew existed. The magic of a collab – when done right – is creating something new and exciting but maintaining the intact integrity of each individual entity and hoping your audience sees the vision.

In music, many collaborations started safe, in that they existed between artists with quite a bit of overlap. For example, in 1966 Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell recorded one of the most iconic duets in music history with their song “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough.” In this case, the two artists who existed in similar genres came together to create a project that was in sync with their audience, their brands, and their talents. In the brand world, we’ve seen this manifested with partnerships such as Taco Bell and Doritos® for their fan favorite, Locos Tacos. Both brands service a somewhat similar audience, and they created something that existed in the perfect intersection of the two.

## CO-CREATION IS KING

While this alone surpasses what some of these recent collaborations have been able to accomplish, what will *really* determine your brand collaboration’s success in the new year is **co-creation**. While on the surface it seems synonymous with collaboration, co-creation goes beyond collabs in that it is the action of two or more entities working jointly to create something that reflects both parties’ shared ideas and/or goals. It specifically requires each party involved to be fully invested and lend a piece of itself to be a part of the project. As a brand, you are entering co-creation when you are willing (even welcoming) to relinquish part of your brand to be a true participant.

Not all collaborations have to exist in the same overlap for them to be impactful and fall under co-creation. In 1986, hip-hop legends-in-the-making Run-D.M.C. partnered with the ever-prolific Aerosmith for a new take on the band’s famous song “Walk This Way” to merge two very different but complementary genres together – rock and hip-hop. With this, the goal was twofold: Foster genuine co-creation while also marrying two very different brands with different audiences to reach a new, larger audience base and ultimately push the status quo. Brands have been able to leverage this form of collaboration as well, such as with [Halo Top ice cream](#) and [ColourPop Cosmetics](#) and [IKEA](#) and [Virgil Abloh](#).

However, growing social awareness and the ability for audiences to easily spot inauthenticity and disingenuous marketing are quickening the public’s exhaustion with collaborations. For example, we can all name one song that features two artists who, upon first listen, make it clear they have no business appearing on the same track together – other than for the *sole* purpose of charting and/or building hype. For example, the frequently used, often pointless, and highly unnecessary rap verse on pop songs of the last half-decade. Since hip-hop and R&B now account for the majority (25.1 percent) of total music consumption in the U.S. (compared to 23 percent for rock), hip-hop breaks and features are being sprinkled into pop tracks for quick success and relevancy. Camila Cabello’s “Havana” ft. Young Thug, Katy Perry’s “Bon Appetit” ft. Migos, or Taylor Swift’s “Bad Blood” ft. Kendrick Lamar all exhibit this sort of strategy. While these songs may see commercial success – much like many of these brand collaborations – their relevance is fleeting, and they hold no longevity for the artist’s or brand’s image, awareness, and overall impact. These are not and will never be classics. And neither will your brand collaboration if it follows this strategy.

It’s quite obvious when a brand follows this path to collaboration as they’re usually not culturally aware in their method to pick whom they collaborate with and how they plan to execute the partnership. This is where cultural documenters such as Complex, Hypebeast, and The Fader fall into the picture. Brands are starting to identify that partnering with these media companies will get them an instant stamp of approval, and in some cases, that might work. However, brands should be using them as partners in helping to amplify their collaboration instead of asking them to serve up a suggested tastemaker to collaborate with and be on their way. If our clients/brands are committed to the strategy of collaborating, then they must seek out partners in sincere, earnest ways. Don’t be hesitant to allow the collab process to be mixed and mastered by others. Oftentimes, the more open and collaborative a project, the better the outcome.

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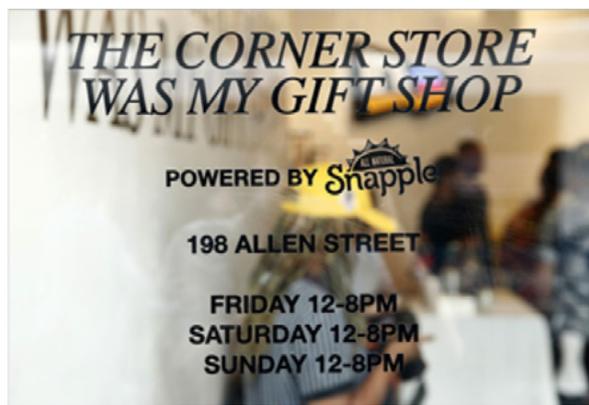
We’ve done a lot of talking about the rules of successful collaborations and how to foster genuine co-creation, but beyond the preaching, we’ve fortunately been able to actualize this as well.



Music credit: larrenwong – [Voiceover transcript for video](#)

## HERE’S HOW WE DID IT

Just this summer, Snapple took the leap to try a new form of collaboration. The ask was to make Snapple relevant to a new audience. While this ask alone could have gone in any direction, the team saw there was an untapped opportunity that, if done correctly, could bring entirely new light to the brand. This is where the idea to partner with an up-and-coming Chicago-based streetwear designer, Joe Freshgoods, came to mind. While streetwear collaborations are in no way new, it was the way in which the collaboration was approached by both parties, from inception to execution, that made it meaningful and impactful.



For Snapple, it was the first opportunity in a while where the brand would be able to gain a sort of social currency with a new audience in an authentic way. The collaborative effort was put forward by both Snapple and the Joe Freshgoods team, and from the beginning, it was about being sincere to the audience but also getting the most out of the first iteration of the collaboration. To Joe’s credit, working with him never felt like a corporate tug-of-war between two brands, but more like a series of discussions at a family cookout on how we can bring Snapple back to its glory days and how the name Joe Freshgoods can begin to enter the homes of a new audience. In a way, Joe was Run-D.M.C. and we were Aerosmith. In the end, the team was able to produce exciting merchandise pieces, but the most valuable part of the partnership was our willingness to share the iconic Snapple bottle, including the brand logo, as a blank canvas for Joe to have creative freedom. Since the intention from the beginning was to enter the collaboration sincerely, Snapple lending the most notable piece of its brand to Joe was the largest differentiator between us and other potential collaborators, and ultimately the piece of the partnership that solidified his willingness to work with us. And that’s the beauty of doing a collaboration the right way – it’s symbiotic, it’s meaningful, and it exists in true co-creation.

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The success of the collab was measured by how those invested in the culture responded to it and their sentiments on the collaboration as a whole. Understanding how the audience shows love (or doesn’t) was a key part of assessing whether the collaboration was received the way it was intended to be. Snapple and Joe Freshgoods were able to make brand history and orchestrate one of their best collaborations of the year because of their sincere and open approach, ultimately allowing Snapple, Joe, and the agency to reach new heights and set the bar a bit higher than where we started.



## WHAT DID WE LEARN?

If you’ve made it this far (or just skipped to the end for a quick recap), what we’re really wanting to drive home is:

The ultimate goal of a collaboration is to reach the highest form of co-creation. It’s possible to be true to your brand while still allowing yourself to truly lean in. Don’t be afraid to be vulnerable and pull back the curtain (those who beat collaboration fatigue are also those who give more insight into the story of how the collab came together).

Turn to other industries for inspiration. We talked a lot about music’s blueprint for advertising, so it would be beneficial to study album rollouts or artist release strategies for insight on how we should help propel our brands.

Look for the influencer’s influencer. Subcultures like fashion and hip-hop have an abundance of up-and-coming artists that are pushing the envelope creatively. Many of the influencers you might have in mind are likely looking to these other figures for inspiration – you should too.

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## Trey Green

To Trey, digital is far more than tweets, memes, links, and likes. It’s about the spread of stories. The kind of stories we’ve always told one another but now share faster, farther, and more transparently than ever.

So the words we use and the opinions we voice—the products we sell and the brands we champion— have to be genuine, inclusive and, above all, very engaging.

Just like Trey.

A culture and content specialist who helped launch YouTube TV while at Google, Trey joined The Richards Group in 2018 and lends his outsized skills to brands including Choctaw Casinos & Resorts, Snapple, Metro by T-Mobile, Firehouse Subs, the SEC, and The Home Depot. When he’s not at work, you can usually find Trey entertaining his nieces, nephews, and thoughts of pro football glory while playing Madden.



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## Helina Seyoum

Helina believes that brands and culture should work in perfect harmony. Maybe it’s due to her background. Upon graduation from the acclaimed Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, Helina left Dallas to pursue a degree in sociology with a minor in the music industry from the University of Southern California.

While in Los Angeles, she explored a career in the music business through internships at Roc Nation and Universal Music Group.

Returning to her hometown of Dallas, Helina felt drawn to explore the different collaborative relationships between artist and listener, management and client, story and soundtrack. Naturally, this led her to advertising.

Today she serves as a digital curator of sorts, expanding and shaping the conversation between consumers and brands like Keurig Dr Pepper, Go RVing, and Choctaw Casinos & Resorts. Typically while enjoying one of her 200 Spotify playlists.



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Have a question or would like to debate a particular trend? Please feel free to [contact us](#). We love this stuff.

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