

KEEPING IT REAL WITH GEN Z

THE FIRST GENERATION OF TRUE SOCIAL NATIVES.

Generation Z (or Gen Z for short) has broken many norms. Not only is it the largest, most diverse and soon to be the most educated generation to date, it is also the first truly mobile AND social native generation. And it is safe to say, Gen Z is also not afraid of tackling big issues head-on, nor shaking up gender norms.

But who is this up-and-coming generation, really? How is this group different? What are their key motivators in life? Which ideas do they stand by or reject? How do they behave, and why?



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One might look for answers in statistics: We know...

- Gen Z is aged between 8 and 23 years old¹
- Gen Z outnumbers Millennials and now accounts for 32% of the global population²
- More than half are still in school³
- 63% are still living with their parents⁴
- 60% live in urban areas⁵
- Gen Z is the most ethnically diverse generation yet⁶
- The majority has not found their soulmate yet, given that 79% are single.⁷

But that doesn't tell us the whole story or give insight into Gen Z's real identity. In fact, **it is almost impossible to try fit them into one box, because one size certainly does not fit Gen Z.**

This article aims to grasp Gen Z in all its shapes and sizes (and gender non-conformity), and tries to answer the question:

Who is Gen Z really?

CONTEXT IS CRUCIAL

It all starts with the environment that Gen Z grew up in and how it shaped their thoughts, values and behaviours. Including:

TORN TRUST

Fake news, data breaches, greenwashing practices, #Metoo, police brutality and so on have led to a decreased trust in institutions and a parallel demand for transparency.

POLARIZING POLITICS

The Trump and Brexit era introduced a political environment that is highly polarizing.

FINANCIAL FEARS

Gen Z was raised in an economic crisis that hit home (for some really hard) and caused financial distress in their households. The current covid-19 pandemic has caused more uncertainty.

THRIVING TECHNOLOGY

Growing up in a tech world evolving and advancing at a higher pace than ever before, resulted in Gen Z being the most tech-savvy, connected and online generation ever.

CLIMATE CRISIS

The effects of global warming have become more extreme and uncovered a rather bleak outlook for the planet. Gen Z has been one of the first generations to aggressively force society to face this crisis head-on and to try take a turn for the better.

REALLY GET TO KNOW GEN Z

Gen Z might not be growing up in a picture-perfect world, but that's what helped shaped the uniqueness of this generation. It has ignited a generation of:

ESSENCE SEEKERS

Gen Z is constantly seeking to find and express their authentic selves.

Growing up in a society that is not necessarily at its best, helped shape a generation that doesn't appreciate sugar-coating the facts nor wearing rose-tinted glasses. In their relentless quest for authenticity, Gen Z's priorities in life became more pragmatic, their position in society more progressive, as they feel empowered through peers and their choices driven by purpose.

CHANGE INITIATORS

Gen Z is driving change in today's society by taking matters into their own hands.

Gen Z is determined to share their ideas and beliefs, even if this requires them to break through taboos and smash outdated norms and values. In fact, 67% of Gen Z find it important to voice their beliefs⁸. Their demand for change ripples throughout society, largely driven through online behaviour, further fuelled by lockdowns brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic.

REALITY SHIFTERS

Gen Z takes on a fluid approach to life as they perceive the world as an undefinable reality.

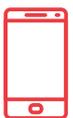
The search for truth and the willingness to drive change in today's society is by no means a linear process. No, Gen Z believes that people's realities (and reality as a whole) are non-fixed and ever evolving. As a result, they strongly criticize labels and stereotypes, and encourage a world that embraces multifaceted personalities and ways of living.

CREATIVE HACKERS

Gen Z is not afraid to draw outside of the lines to fully unlock their creative spirit.

Their aspiration to explore their authentic selves, to find tactics that make change happen and to play around with fluid expressions, have unlocked their highly creative spirit. Social media democratized Gen Z's love for exploration and experimentation by offering them an almost limitless creative playground and unlocked a critical mass of like-minded people to connect with, no matter how niche the interest.

HOW GEN Z CONNECTS THROUGH MEDIA



UNSURPRISINGLY, MOBILE IS THE KEY TO ENTERING GEN Z'S WORLD.

As mentioned before, Gen Z is the first truly mobile native generation, which strongly impacts their media consumption behaviours:

- Constant connectivity and access to media wherever and whenever they want makes Gen Z **crave instant gratification**, but also resulted in a savvy, yet cautious generation.
- **TV is** (maybe against expectations) **not completely forgotten by Gen Z**. eMarketer⁹ estimated that 12 – 17-year-olds will watch approximately 81 minutes of TV per day in the next year.
- **Mobile is often the sidekick to TV watching**. Nearly 90% of Gen Z using mobile devices while watching TV¹⁰ with social media as the top activity in this multi-screen experience¹¹.



A CLOSE BUT PRIVATE RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIAL MEDIA.

As social natives, Gen Z spends up to 2h55 on social media each and every day¹². However, Gen Z's close relationship to social media does not imply an all-unveiling social media portrait of their personal lives. Platforms like Snapchat, that has seen great adoption by Gen Z, offers personal and private interactions with their immediate social circle. On the other hand, Facebook is used more for sharing with larger networks of friends and family. Another interesting example is Finsta's, or fake Instagram accounts, which are set up to share real-life snapshots with a select group of friends with content that's more real, raw and less filtered.

GEN Z
2h55
time spent on
social media/day



(UN)POPULAR SOCIAL MEDIA.

When taking a closer look at their use of social platforms, Gen Z plays a key role in the adoption or rejection of social platforms, new and existing. While they are active across a variety of social platforms, including Spotify, Twitch, and Depop, the following four are the outright favourites of Gen Z:



YouTube is currently Gen Z's platform of choice, and not just for entertainment purposes. 80% claim to acquire knowledge on YouTube while 70% believes it makes them feel more connected¹³.



Instagram operates as the platform to express lifestyles and interests¹⁴, but also to create inspiration for each other.



Snapchat is dominated by Gen Z who turns to the platform for intimate conversations with friends, and immersive content experiences.



TikTok has seen an exponential rise in popularity largely thanks to Gen Z, with a major boost during the recent lockdowns. One of the main reasons for this love story is that this novel platform checks many of Gen Z's content needs.



THE MAGICAL GEN Z CONTENT FORMULA.

There are four considerations to bear in mind when creating content that speaks to Gen Z.

- 1. Bite-sized and snappy:** It must grab Gen Z's attention in a matter of seconds, considering they only have an average attention span of 8 seconds¹⁵.
- 2. Video:** Richness and diversity of video content appeal to Gen Z, not only for consuming, but for creating. Creating and uploading videos on platforms like YouTube and TikTok was, in fact, the number three activity during times of a complete lockdown¹⁶.
- 3. Real, raw and relatable:** Gen Z has largely redefined the overly polished, Millennial-initiated Instagram aesthetic and is not afraid to break through norms, traditions or even taboos to express themselves in more authentic ways.
- 4. Creatively inspiring:** Gen Z love to creatively hack content, and there's been a major rise in expressive formats like AR filters, lenses, emojis, gifs, etc.



THE INFLUENTIAL INFLUENCER.

Gen Z's content preference also stretches into the influencer spectrum. Gen Z's influencers are more authentic, which in turn makes them more relatable. Not only in terms of aesthetics, but also norms and values. When beliefs align, Gen Z develops an authentic and strong relationship with influencers, which is more powerful than you may think. Gen Z influencers help empower fans through self-expression and purpose, but also influence purchasing decisions.

Gen Z influencers were born and raised in the social age. Although traditional influencers still hold some power, they are starting to see less engagement. For example, Forbes¹⁷ observed that Emma Chamberlain, a teenaged YouTuber who loves to talk about coffee, generates high engagement rates of 25% on average. To put it into context, that is about 5 times higher than famous singer-songwriter Selena Gomez, who on average received a 5% engagement rate.



OMNICHANNEL SHOPPERS WITH A LOVE FOR SOCIAL.

Although Gen Z's influence on family spending may still be higher than their own spending power, brands should be prepared for what's soon to be the largest group of future consumers¹⁸.

Compared to other generations, Gen Z is less likely to shop in physical stores¹⁹. However, that doesn't mean brands should underestimate the importance of physical retailing and creating offline brand experiences that trigger talkability and sharing. As Forbes²⁰ puts it: "*Gen-Z expects a strong omnichannel experience and to be able to consistently experience the brand both in store and online.*"

Gen Z's close relationship with social media, extends perfectly into the field of commerce.

Social media is:

- a source of inspiration for 1/4²¹
- a place to discover products & brands, especially through influencers
- the most popular source to research products²², with user-generated reviews playing a highly influential role and friends and family being the most trusted source for advice about products or brands²³.

Now, what does all of this mean for brands?

HOW BRANDS CAN CONNECT WITH GEN Z



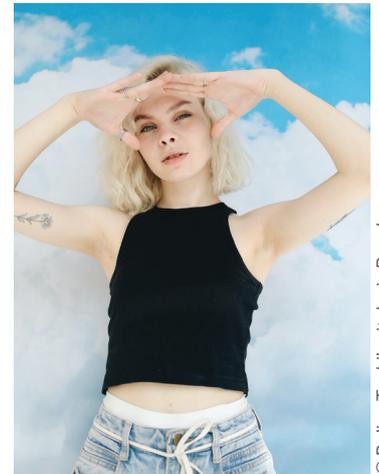
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1 BRAND LOYALTY REDEFINED

Gen Z requires a different approach to building strong brand relationships in a digital environment.

Witnessing how society has developed (and broken) their trust made Gen Z rather sceptical and somewhat reserved towards brands. Gen Z is not likely the generation that will exhibit brand loyalty simply based on a company's long-standing existence, or the beliefs and opinions of their parents. Their search for authenticity, for a greater purpose, for alignment with individual expression and so on has set higher expectations for brands. As a result, it has become more challenging for brands to build strong connections and gain loyalty compared to previous generations. Levels of brand loyalty are especially low amongst the younger age groups, with it decreasing from 46% among 19-to-21-year olds to only 22% for the 13-to-15-year group²⁵.

The emergence of the digital age has certainly played its part in the changing attitudes towards brand loyalty. Remember, Gen Z has near ubiquitous online access that allows them to research, interact or talk about brands in real-time which, again, sets the bar much higher for brands, forcing them to attempt connection in other ways.



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2 GET REAL ALREADY

Gen Z urges brands to be their most authentic selves.

As we know by now, Gen Z is represented by true essence seekers and that drives them to constantly separate out truth from lies. So, when brands or people portray a forced or fake image, they will know. Not only does Gen Z's quest for realness act as a benchmark for authenticity, their mobile and online savviness and trust in peers have also contributed to their critical eye towards brands.

Brands can build authenticity by delivering quality on a product and service level. More than 65% of Gen Z prefers to buy high-quality products over lower quality ones²⁶, which stems from their pragmatic approach to finances and they will rather invest in products that will last longer and result in less waste. In Gen Z's eyes, quality does not only apply to the end product but to the entire production process. This increased attention to sustainability is affecting their purchasing behaviour, with 63% of teens preferring to buy from sustainable brands²⁷. Another way brands can succeed is through highly effective and accessible customer service. After all, this generation wants to be heard, at all times and on the platforms of their choice.

Besides a brands' product offerings, Gen Z also looks at brand communications as a benchmark for authenticity. In other words, avoid overly stylised visuals and false promises, and rather depict real people/life and ensure transparent and honest claims.



3 LESS TALK, MORE ACTION

Gen Z buys into brands that translate their purpose into actions.

As society experiences several developments like fake news, data breaches and movements like #MeToo, Gen Z urges brands to help guide society towards a better future. This generation projects its purposeful drive onto brands, with evidence of nearly 70% wanting brands to add value to society²⁸.

It is important to note that Gen Z's activist spirit urges brands to back up their mission statements with tangible actions. They are not afraid of a boycott, in fact, they invented cancel culture. It is important to practice what you preach and maintain actions consistent with your core values, and involve fans when you can to increase authenticity and create stronger bonds.

A brand's contribution to society, whether negative or positive, not only directly effects sales, but can affect talent acquisition for these businesses as well. Gen Z finds brand purpose increasingly important when applying for jobs. But maybe most importantly, the values of a brand can contribute to the brand's relevancy when they align with the values of Gen Z. When they do, Facebook²⁹ found that Gen Z (in a study in France, UK & Germany) were 50% more likely than older generations to encourage others to discover the brand. In the case of Millennials, this percentage decreased to 30%. Social media is a particularly important platform to help communicate this, with Gen Z being 1.3 times more likely to turn to social to share their satisfaction with a brand.

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4 UNIQUELY MADE (TOGETHER)

Gen Z connects with brands who value their expression through personalization or individualization.

Being true evangelists of individual expression drives Gen Z to connect more strongly with brands that do the same. One route is through **advertising representation**. Many types of people that have been traditionally overlooked are demanding to be seen and reflected back by the society they have always been a part of and helped build. Gen Z is the proud home of ethnic diversity, gender fluidity, non-traditional relationships, the differently abled and so many more. Another route is through **creative personalization**. Gen Z is actively looking for personalized products and services, and expects the same from brand communications. 38% of Gen Z actually prefers seeing personalized ads, which is nearly double when compared to Millennials³⁰. The chance to discover new brands and products is an important reason for this. Another route to meet Gen Z uniqueness is through **co-creation**. Brands should empower Gen Z to take part in the creation of unique brand experiences, products/services or campaigns.



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CONCLUSION

Gen Z is **uniquely connected with society** by being essence seekers, change initiators, reality shifters and creative hackers. They are **uniquely connected through media**, evidenced by their mobile mentality, their relationships on social media, their massive influence on the success of social media platforms, their preference for real, raw, creative & fun social media content, and their love for omnichannel shopping experiences with social inputs. Ultimately, **brands** are urged to **connect in a unique way with this generation**. Earning brand loyalty demands the fulfilment of specific needs in a digital, mobile and social environment. Gen Z's critical eye forces brands to be as

authentic as possible and to inject purpose in the form of tangible contributions towards building a better society, joining Gen Z in this fight. Meeting the unique expectations of Gen Z can be achieved through personalization or co-creation opportunities.

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