



# THE YOUTH KALEIDOSCOPE

GEN Z'S SHAPE-SHIFTING QUEST FOR BALANCE  
IN A WORLD THAT HAS ROCKED THEIR IDENTITY

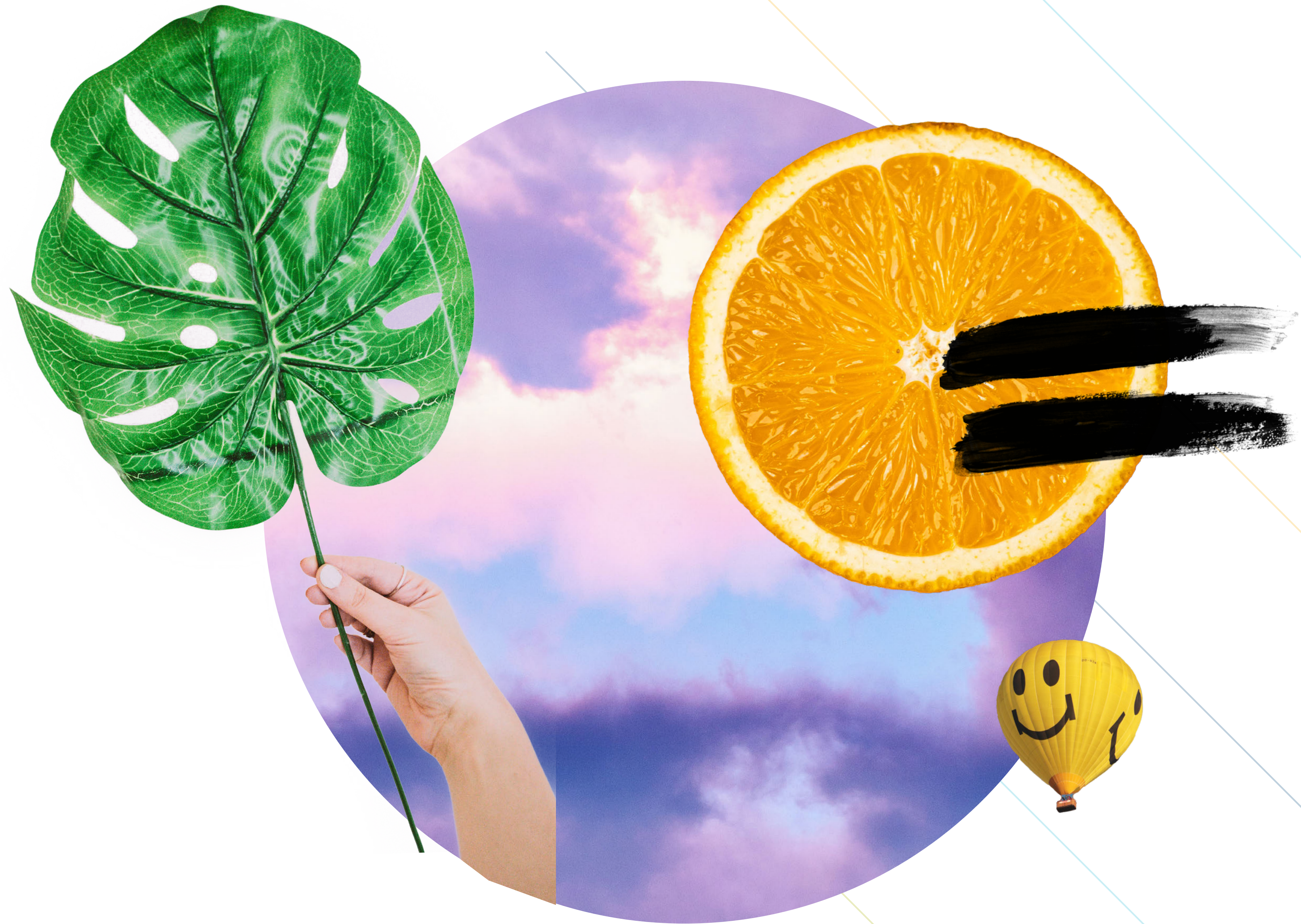


FLEISHMAN  
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**At FleishmanHillard, the Culture Unit is a global team of cultural strategists focused on analyzing consumer behavior and providing strategic insights to guide clients on how to position their brand, product or organization.**

Operating as the springboard between data and creative, the team strives to tackle stereotyping and gain better understanding of community-driven movements. Not just aligning with culture to mitigate risk, but authentically engaging it and empowering the audiences and communities found within. Ultimately, we seek to help organizations lead and stay on the forefront of culture by enabling it, instead of reacting to it, so they are truly moving it forward.

In this report we examine youth audiences alongside the next generation of Content Creators, specifically looking into Gen Z and Gen Alpha. Analyzing this audience through the topics of Mind, Meta and Why It Matters, this report gives firsthand insights to help understand and authentically engage with this generation as they continue to be shaped by the world around them, and in return, shape the culture in alignment to their different ideals, expectations and approaches.



## WHERE TO START?

There's ample analysis of youth audiences, and yet it still feels like we don't fully understand their behaviors, motives or desires. We're still figuring them out — partially because they're still figuring themselves out too.

These “digital natives” have grown up in a different landscape than previous generations — more intersectional, with an abundance of technology and social platforms, connections and information; they are the epitome of the cross-culture kid and are widely considered as having greater cultural intelligence, or CQ, than their predecessors. They have different ideals, expectations and approaches to identity than other cohorts, and internal and external stressors significantly affect how they view the world.

Recent times have not been kind to young people. They're stuck in the middle of an internal and external crisis, in an increasingly polarized world, causing them to question their identity, role and purpose. In these times of crises, our youth have been taking action to protect their futures. They have lost trust in older generations and increasingly reject their guidance or leadership, choosing to forge their own paths and find solutions that work for them instead.

Interestingly, what our research is beginning to uncover is that young people today are tired and burdened by being labeled as change-makers

who will do whatever it takes to right the wrongs of past generations. Not everyone is Greta Thunberg; many young people don't want to pick a side or have an extreme opinion — they simply want to see the full picture so they can establish their own identity, regardless of whether it's “right” or “left.” In fact, many don't see anything wrong with taking “the middle” ground; it's not fence-sitting — it's choosing to listen to both sides to come to a personal conclusion based on their own understandings of the world around them. In short, what is right or wrong, true or false, has become flexible and fluid for this generation. For better or for worse, brands and organizations need to consider broadening their definitions of this audience in order to resonate with them.

As this generation embarks on their journey into adulthood, their defining traits will continue to evolve as they adjust to the world of work, enter the housing market or simply experience their first true heartbreak. Until then, we can only observe the transience of this digital generation as they navigate the world and define their own paths. This report will explore youth through the macro themes of “mind” and “meta” and unearth new ways brands can engage, empathize and support the next generation.



# THE MIDDLE GENERATION



“ It seems like nowadays when you’re on social media you have to be an activist or something deeper or to fight for something. And sometimes you simply just wanna watch content or social media content, or whatever content is out there. Sometimes you don’t even wanna get involved. You just wanna just watch and be the middleman. ”

- HEATHER MORADEYO, U.K., @HEATHERDEYOOOO





# IDENTITY

# WHO, HOW?

## GEN Z WILL...

You only have to type “Gen Z will...” into a search engine to see the growing global burden this young cohort are expected to carry. The notion that our youth has a unique ability to change the world and shape global culture for the better is a narrative that media and experts have been perpetuating for some time. It’s not just academics and media conglomerates; we’ve seen this “change-maker” mentality shine and evolve through teenage angst and unrest via a f\*cks given about issues, but a no f\*cks given attitude, where young people are embracing their authentic selves, feeling inspired by global pop culture sensations like Billie Eilish and Lil Nas X, who are now mainstream icons.

This identity is carried through to our youth’s social presence, where social media platforms are used in the billions to share, discuss and even teach older generations of this new cultural context we find ourselves in.

gen z will



gen z will **never retire**

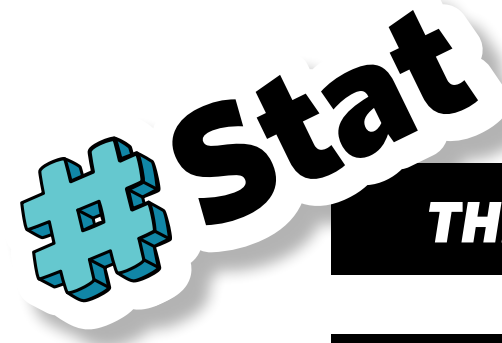


gen z will **never own a home**



gen z will **save the world**





**THE NEW YORK TIMES FOUND THAT "WHILE THERE WAS NO CLEAR CONSENSUS OF VIEWS ON TIKTOK, YOUTH IDENTITIES WERE FRONT AND CENTER IN A WAY THAT MAKES IT STAND OUT FROM OTHER SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS LIKE FACEBOOK OR TWITTER."**

(Click through for full source)\*

While there are positive defining factors of our youth that revolve around unapologetic self-expression, political action, acceptance of all and a rejection of labels, it also adds to an underlying pressure of practicing what you preach, at all times. One foot wrong leaves them exposed and open to critique and contradiction. This exposure means they may be missing out on experiences that shape their identity.

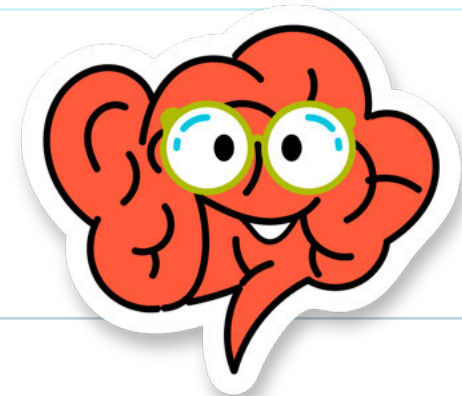
**They are a wanderlust generation who can't travel due to the pressures of the global climate crisis, a politically astute generation who's mocked for having no life experience, and a sustainably conscious generation who are criticized for taking valuable resources from people in need. They are almost set up to fail by their own standards, which have been blown up by the media and created impossible principles to sustain or fulfill.**

## GLOBAL RESEARCH FROM WORLD ADVERTISING RESEARCH CENTER DISCOVERED THAT TODAY'S YOUTH FEEL PASSIONATE ABOUT TIKTOK BECAUSE IT DELIVERS ON THEIR DESIRES TO:



# LIFT OFF

IN THE REPORT, WE WILL EXPLORE:



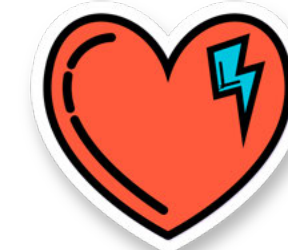
## MIND

The mental strain and pressures on Gen Z, spanning social media, body image and financial anxiety, resulting from external forces.



## META

The future of how we'll connect with Gen Z and youth audiences, and brand considerations for engaging in the future Web3 metaverse.



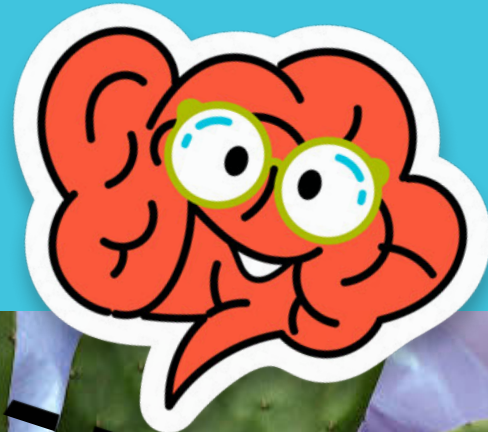
## WHY IT MATTERS

How brands can authentically engage with this generation in a way that will move the needle as they define who they are.



# SECTION 1:

# MIND



## **THE MENTAL HEALTH IMPLICATIONS FOR A DIGITAL-FIRST GENERATION**

A rapid transformation occurs in the minds and souls of young people, particularly as they move from being a child to a teenager. Pop culture is full of references exploring teenage angst, rebellion, mood swings and a young person’s relentless search for answers. This need to make sense of their surroundings and identity is hard enough without dealing with the external stressors that are omnipresent in their lives: from social media exposure to financial anxiety, from shifts in beauty ideals to the planet falling apart. Young people are inundated with woes while figuring themselves out in the process.

In this section we will look at:

- The nuances of mental health and social media**
- The complexities of body and mind**
- The burden of financial anxiety**



## # MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL MEDIA

# IS SHARING REALLY CARING?

The youth of today have championed conversations around mental health, bringing it to the forefront, even making it mainstream. This notion of sharing your feelings is something widely celebrated and embraced. However, we are also seeing an alarming amount of data indicating “over-sharing” in its extreme form may indeed be causing more harm.

### A PROBLEM SHARED IS A PROBLEM HALVED

Online communities and forums that provide opportunities for young people to share can be hugely beneficial. For example, ex-navy officer turned social media phenomenon Bella Poarch credits one of her social media platforms for “saving her life.” She rose to fame seemingly overnight by creating lip-sync videos using Face Zoom feature. This effect creates cutesy, anime-esque facial expressions that are oddly quite captivating. She notes that in doing this, not only did she find comfort in embracing a character that helped her escape from her everyday reality, but she also credits her online community for helping her move through her childhood trauma, PTSD and depression.

**Despite continued concern surrounding how much Gen Z use and consume social media, how much Gen Z use and consume social media, it is their main way of staying connected. Research shows that 65% of Gen Z said they used social media to stay connected when they feel alone. This is the generation who completely ignores the old rule about strangers and instead is known to be comfortable making friends online with people they’ve never met in person.**



“Overnight, my life changed because of an APP”

- BELLA POARCH  
(Content Creator)



“ We are encouraging a generation of young people to think that normal life stuff is actually mental illness. ”

- PIERS MORGAN  
(Global Journalist)

The power of a community online or offline knows no bounds; the adage “a problem shared is a problem halved” has been proven in studies all over the world. However, vocal skeptics such as Piers Morgan believe this type of sharing is not necessarily conducive to a healthy society. He was heavily criticized for saying, “We are encouraging a generation of young people to think that normal life stuff is actually mental illness.” But how does one define normal? Given the world around them, is it perhaps an expected response from younger generations based on what is accepted as “normal” around them?

**Every generation has dealt with struggles, but today’s youth are contending with unprecedented stressors impacting their mental health, exacerbated by the pandemic. To help them on their evolving journey, we’re seeing that many young people are finding confidants in creators and comfort in online communities. And as a result, they are feeling less alone when it comes to mental health.**

## #Stat

**IN THE U.S., 70% OF TEENS ACROSS ALL**

**GENDERS, RACES AND FAMILY-INCOME LEVELS**

**SAY THAT ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION ARE**

**SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS AMONG THEIR PEERS.**



## ETHNIC MINORITY BACKGROUNDS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Young people from ethnic minority backgrounds are contending with extra barriers and stressors when it comes to dealing with mental health. In the U.K., Black people are four times more likely to be detained under the Mental Health Act than white people but are less likely to seek mental health support. In the U.S., research shows that only 25% of Black people seek mental health treatment when needed, compared to 40% of white people, and this is often due to the cultural stigmas attached. A culture of shame also stops Asian communities from seeking help, and young people are finding solace in using online platforms to gain help and support. This is not surprising when you consider the microaggressions and racism BAME communities face in physical healthcare settings.



My online community has allowed me to relate more and explore new ways to heal in my journey. Social media apps are powerful educational tools.

- SOCIAL MEDIA USER

I got discharged from the hospital two days ago. When I go to the hospital, it's always quite interesting because the healthcare professionals, if they see my Nigerian name, they tend to treat me differently. This is the Nigerian nurses or African nurses, they tend to say things along the lines of, 'Have you prayed? If you pray, you wouldn't have this mental illness' or 'Have you thought of your family?' I've even had somebody tell me that mental health is a European mentality, a white man's mentality, which was like, ***I'm literally in the hospital and you're telling me this.***

- HEATHER MORADEYO, U.K., @HEATHERDEYO0000



## FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH



**THIS!!!!** So true I almost dread when a POC healthcare professional enters my room and as a Black woman myself, it shouldn't be that way! Why we out here telling Black people that mental illness is a white person thing, nobody chooses to live with this much distress.

- SOCIAL MEDIA USER

I can literally relate and **it's extremely damaging,** like I'd think that they'd take some sort of mental health crisis response training.

- SOCIAL MEDIA USER

Social media is a double-edged sword that can **MAKE** or **MAR** a situation. I support it for Awareness and Advocacy of positivity and love in truth.

- SOCIAL MEDIA USER



## IS MENTAL HEALTH CONTAGIOUS?

Recent studies have suggested that stress can be as contagious as the common cold, and you can actually “catch” other people’s anxiety. Other studies recognize that secondhand stress such as the daily whining of a colleague or a friend can be “caught” through emotional contagion; as a result, we could be inadvertently affecting the mental health of those around us. One study even found that cortisol levels rose by 26% in people simply observing an individual under stress.

We can all relate to this in some way or another. We pick up on behavioral cues, body language and someone’s overall mood the more time we spend with them. But has this emotional contagion bled into the online world for young people?

The powerful effects of online communities helping young people overcome real-world issues is well documented, and there’s plenty of evidence to suggest that it has created a safe and validating environment.

We saw a viral trend make waves in 2020 when individuals with Tourette’s syndrome and tics shared content documenting their experiences. Many of these people racked up hundreds of thousands of followers and over 3 billion views under #tourettes. While many see this as a platform for raising awareness and reducing stigma around these conditions, last year Great Ormond Street Hospital in the U.K. announced that an increasing number of teenage girls had been referred to their services seeking help for Tourette’s and that there was “concern that social media apps that promote the sharing of videos of influencers with symptoms may have a part to play.”

**While we can recognize that mental health issues can spread among close communities due to exposure, there’s not enough evidence to suggest social media directly causes Tourette’s or obsessive-compulsive disorder. What we do know is that social media creates an environment, like a classroom or a home, in which, if a stressful or traumatic experience is had, an influence can be made. But, Gen Z are not simply going to give up platforms. Rather, they will continue to be valuable outlets for Gen Z to connect at a time when social interaction is ramping back up.**



It definitely has created an environment where people feel less alone and are more aware of the help they can get. It is considered taboo by many cultures to discuss specific health topics. However, people still face these issues. My platform allows me to highlight what society often hides. By doing this, thousands (and sometimes millions) of people realize that what they feel is valid and have access to help.



- HEATHER MORADEYO, U.K., @HEATHERDEYOOOO



## STEPHANIE ON THE POWER OF SHARING



### STEPHANIE FLORES,

ALFRED FLEISHMANHILLARD FELLOW,  
FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.S.

I think it's incredibly important to recognize that mental health discussions on these social media platforms allow individuals, Gen Z for this instance, to find a sense of community and feel that their situations and feelings are valid. As a person of color who has had struggles with my mental health in the past, I've found it difficult to approach people, including my parents, about what I was going through and ask for help. It was a topic that was seen as taboo in my family and within the Hispanic community — and it often felt that my struggling equated to being ungrateful.

It was through friends and social media creators who would discuss their own mental health struggles, that helped me understand that it is OK to feel the way that I felt due to stressors or traumatic experiences. It didn't mean I wasn't grateful for the opportunities and privileges I've had in my life thus far.

While I think there are definitely circumstances where mental health issues can spread among close communities, I think it's also important to recognize that empathy plays a large part. As explained prior, social media users may find solace in sharing their struggles and experiences on social media; others may view their content and feel compassion toward their situation — or see that it aids in validating their own struggles and experiences.

**Recognition is a large step many brands can take when arming themselves to support both consumers and employees. While some brands may not be equipped to offer mental health guidance, allowing consumers and employees to have accessibility to resources is a step in the right direction — especially as the stigma around mental health continues to shift as it has within the past few years.**



## BRAND CONSIDERATIONS

Brands who are authentically engaging in conversations around mental health and well-being are building strong loyalty from young people. But just as greenwashing is widely criticized, well-being washing is also something brands need to be aware of. Research found more than a third (35%) of businesses are well-being washing, focusing more time supporting mental health initiatives outside the business without supporting the workforce internally.

Brands need to ask themselves, are they practicing (internally) what they preach (externally)? Are they talking to their young workforce on a regular basis? Are they bringing young people into decision-making rooms? Culturally many workforces leave big decisions to senior leaders, rather than those the decision directly impacts.

We're not always going to get it right, but our research, expertise, and most importantly, our young people can demonstrate why it matters to brands and give them the tools to move forward.



A year or two ago, the space was more saturated with positive mental health messages. However, I believe being authentic and sharing real stories and moments, even when they may not be positive, has made my viewers open up and share with me about their own mental health. I think positive mental health reminders work well to lift spirits and bring a positive perspective and vibe to a creator's page. That enhances viewers' mood, but not bombarding the individual is important. There is an important balance of positive reminders and remaining authentic.



- EMILY OCON, U.S., @HEALTHEMBODY



## # BEAUTY AND BODY

REALISM VERSUS IDEALISM 

## IN THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER



Perhaps somewhat ironically, coming of age in this hyperconnected world can elicit feelings of isolation and loneliness among many. The confluence of 24-hour news, seeing friends posting content and having fun without you, alongside the pressure to keep abreast of social trends can make our separation even more apparent.

We're seeing paradoxical tensions lurking beneath the surface. Cyclical, and oftentimes dangerous body-image trends rear their ugly head, and there has been a boom in cosmetic procedures — a fact that jars with Gen Z's typical "unapologetically me" identity that encourages body positivity and embracing natural beauty.

Social media apps have been found to negatively impact teenage mental health, and according to a Wall Street Journal report, photo-based apps are credited with worsening body image for 1 in every 3 teenage girls. Filters and photo-editing apps are now so normalized that teens and young adults are almost encouraged to create an ideal version of themselves, in turn fueling the cycle of unrealistic beauty expectations. More recently, we've seen

unique AI art applications like Lensa (turning images into cartoon-like avatars) become hugely popular and widely shared in a short amount of time. As is often the case, a quick rise has resulted in a steep fall-off, with the trend becoming over-shared and even receiving criticisms for how the AI technology was affecting different bodies and skin tones.

**Although the rise in technology and celebrity has in some ways made issues worse, we are seeing seismic shifts in response from the beauty and fashion industries. In the last decade, we've seen the body positivity movement (#BOPO) completely explode. Conversations around body positivity, diversity and inclusivity continue to dominate cultural conversation, and Gen Z wield their purchase power in support, or not, of brands who champion positive body image.**





## SEEING IS BELIEVING

“ I have become known around the world as a game-changer after appearing on the front cover of Vogue in 2020. I definitely think the fashion and beauty world has improved now due to using models like me with Down syndrome and other models with disabilities. But there is still room for a lot of improvement, and I still feel the industry is scared to use models like us for certain campaigns and have us on show. I am proud of who I am and how far I have come and showing my beauty and disability to the world and what I can achieve. **I am authentic, true to myself and confident, and will never change who I am.** ”

- ELLIE GOLDSTEIN  
(British Model)



“ I assert my identity and experiences through my beauty **just by being me and showing my natural beauty.** ”

- ELLIE GOLDSTEIN  
(British Model)

We welcome this unequivocal rejection of the one-size-fits-all Western beauty standards and ideals that are being championed all over the globe but, as Ellie points out, more needs to be done. According to fashion search engine Tag Walk, 90 of the 247 brands from the spring/summer 2023 ready-to-wear season held in September in New York, London, Milan and Paris included plus-size models. That's over a third, which seems pretty impressive, but on analysis, it appears that in the majority of cases, brands used one token curvy model against the standard sample size, which dominated. Bella Hadid made the biggest headlines by closing Paris Fashion Week wearing a dress that was spray-painted onto her skin. Although everyone hailed the innovative technology needed to create such a spectacle, young people were once again exposed to yet another unrealistic beauty ideal.

#### BRAND CONSIDERATIONS

Diverse and accurate representation and inclusivity, as we know, is no longer a nice to have, but a necessity, and brands and businesses are benefitting. They are not only putting themselves at the heart of a cultural shift, but they are profiting. Ellie Goldstein's Gucci Beauty campaign became the fashion label's most-liked post ever, racking up over 50 million likes. Following Rihanna's inclusion of plus-size model Steven G during the Savage x Fenty fashion show, men on social media shared that the inclusion of male models with bodies like theirs made them feel sexy, confident and even emotional. Both empires have crushed beauty standards and helped pave the way for what inclusive beauty looks like.

The body positivity movement has helped bring diverse shapes, sizes, and most importantly, voices into the mainstream. In theory, this movement is exactly what we should be championing to a generation who are marred with body and beauty issues. But, as young minds and bodies grow and develop, brands should be practicing what they preach and championing something that celebrates diversity — and feels more tailored. It's no longer about casting with diversity and inclusion at the forefront and paying lip service to your DE&I efforts with a token few, it's about asking if your product is actually accessible to the diverse audience, taking action and meeting them where they are.



## #Stat

**NEARLY 40% OF BRITISH PEOPLE**

**SAY THEY WANT TO CHANGE THEIR**

**APPEARANCE DUE TO CELEBRITIES,**

**AND 18% WANT TO CHANGE**

**THEMSELVES DUE TO REALITY.**

(Click through for full source)\*

## “BODY TYPES ARE NOT TRENDS” — FROM DIVERSE HEROINES TO HEROIN CHIC



In the wake of the body positivity movement, Gen Z has rejected the 2000s’ body-shaming culture of Perez Hilton and Mad Lad, shocked by the standards Gen X and older millennials were formerly held to by media. Although we have made mammoth steps forward, diet culture, unattainable body standards, and gossip about which celebrities have lost or gained weight persists — just in a more digitally savvy way. The potentially damaging trends of the ’90s and ’00s that should not have a revival are, terrifyingly, making a comeback.

This balancing act of trend versus values is conflicting with our young people’s identity. On the one hand, it seems they champion body

positivity, yet on the other, they are inundated with unattainable “trending bodies” across platforms and forums.

For example, a widely criticized trend, heroin chic, has reemerged as reported by the NY Post: “Bye-bye booty: Heroin chic is back.” The article was met with an onslaught of dissent from critics such as Jameela Jamil, who said, “OUR BODIES ARE NOT TRENDS, SAY IT WITH ME.” But the notion that “thin is back” has been slowly seeping in, right under our noses. From Kim Kardashian boasting about losing 15 pounds to fit into Marilyn Monroe’s dress, to spray-painted dresses, all of these trends negatively impact the mental health and well-being of young people.



Like heroin chic, another questionable trend, the sad girl aesthetic, has made a comeback. Popularized in the ’90s, the aesthetic had a resurgence in 2015 and again in 2022. It’s the idea that it’s trendy to look sad online, but it is rooted in something more twisted.

If you look at historical and fictional narratives, heroines are often cruelly tormented, killed or forced to commit suicide. Female pain has been made to feel alluring, enigmatic, and captivating. Today we are seeing this pain glamorized via makeup artists who help give young girls the sad girl aesthetic by helping them achieve just the right amount of puffy eye, all the way to Instagram accounts that trivialize mental health.

**Social media sites are trying to regain control by banning such hashtags as #thinspo, which now redirects users to mental health and eating disorders resources; however, there are a vast number of hashtags in the beauty and body space that are not monitored — such as the “what I eat in a day” sensation. Is there a role for brands to do more in this space? Outside of beauty and fashion, could brands in the healthcare space, for example, counteract these trends to help young people feel less vulnerable?**

# KAREENA TALKS US THROUGH TOXIC BODIES



**KAREENA GARG,**  
GRADUATE TRAINEE, FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.K.

It's interesting to see how we as people and the media react to celebrities' bodies and what we take as an example. For years people craving having a butt and hips looked to the Kardashians, Kim and Khloe, for their curvy figures. But now, the curvy-figure era is over, and there are rumors of them getting their implants removed. People are worried they can't keep up and that they

have to keep changing their bodies to look like the famous people whose bodies are so publicly discussed. While the Kardashians have tried to make their brands, SKIMS (Kim) and Good American (Khloe), size-inclusive, they are still guilty of perpetuating toxic body images and false realities through their heavily edited photos and videos.



**#Stat** ONLY 29% WOULD POST A PICTURE OF THEMSELVES

ON SOCIAL MEDIA WITHOUT EDITING IT FIRST.

(Click through for full source)\*

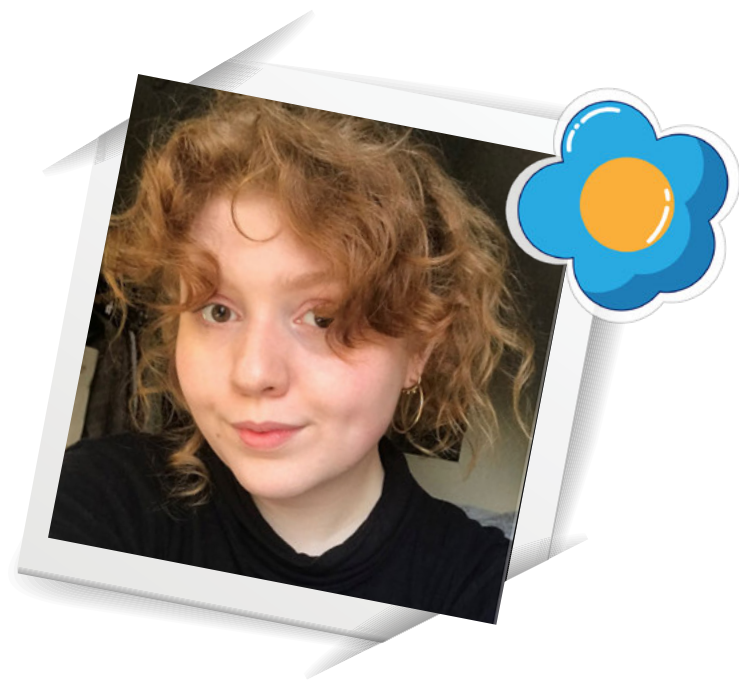
AMONG GEN Z, 1 IN 4 FEEL THAT REALITY TV MAKES THEM

WORRY ABOUT THEIR BODY.

**#Stat**

(Click through for full source)\*

## REBECCA EXPLAINS THE GEN Z PARADOX



**REBECCA BRADFIELD,**  
ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE, FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.K.

What we are seeing now feels like the stratification of these ‘hipster’ trends of yore, with labels being conjured and banded around daily, pervading my feeds — from twee to coquette, from sad girl to clean girl, from the cottagecore to Scandi aesthetics. These self-assigned labels feel both progressive and regressive; they encourage us to consume sustainably by looking to secondhand clothing for inspiration as well as to develop an individual sense of style unique to us instead of feeling pressured to conform to what the masses are consuming.

Gen Z are essentially doing a desirability dance, tiptoeing to the precipice of being “different” and “unlike previous generations” but never jumping. We want to stand out but are limiting ourselves by creating arbitrary labels like "twee" to do so, which then create such precise definitions that strip us of the freedom to explore and expand our tastes. **We are trying to assert a sense of individuality that isn't really there. Gen Z wants to stand out, we want to be unique, and above all, we want to be our own person, but instead, we are becoming the product of the people watching us and the people trying to sell us stuff. And despite knowing all of this, I still eat it up again and again.**



**#Stat**

**65% OF GIRLS SHARE THAT MEDIA SET UNREALISTIC BEAUTY**

**STANDARDS THAT MOST YOUNG WOMEN CAN'T ACHIEVE.**

(Click through for full source)\*

## **(BODY) DISSATISFACTION IS NOT GENDER-SPECIFIC**

There's a common misconception that beauty standards and body dissatisfaction only plague young girls. But there is a worrying amount of evidence showing that more and more young boys are affected. [One recent study](#) found that 75% of adolescent boys are dissatisfied with their bodies. One-third (31%) of teenagers in the U.K. felt ashamed in relation to their body image, and more than a third (35%) had stopped eating or restricted eating due to worrying about body image. Many factors may contribute to poor self-image. These may include family and cultural influences, the attitude of peers, (dis)ability and, of course, social media.

Masculinity, more broadly, is directly linked to body image, and this one-dimensional view of masculinity is halting progress. When we look at culture through the lens of film and TV, we see that the modern screen hero is often perfectly sculptured. In the past few decades, the "ideal" male body type has trended toward a muscular and toned physique. In Hollywood, it has become the norm for the heroes to be bulked up and strong, while the geeky or sidekick characters are portrayed as slimmer and less imposing.



Young people are inundated with images of athletes, actors and influencers with these enormous muscles, but we are seeing an influx of men who are rejecting this and opening up more about their struggles. Olympic figure skater Adam Rippon talks about “quiet starvation” throughout his career, and football players and runners have explained how their body image issues led to eating disorders. Actor Robert Pattinson revealed that he would not succumb to the pressure to bulk up for his role as Batman, nor would he follow the personal meal plan. Sharing experiences like this help redefine what it means to be masculine. This is something that Gen Z has been championing, particularly in the gender fluidity space, and brands are listening.

American telehealth company, Hims recently promoted its concealer stick by tapping into former MLB player Alex Rodriguez to be the face of the campaign. In doing this, they normalized men wearing makeup in an arena that has traditionally been so regressive. The Players’ Tribune is another brand that has enabled sports stars to open up and share their stories. Former NFL player Marcus Smith II shared his experiences around toxic masculinity, and the site frequently has posts from athletes on body image and societal pressures. Should we be leaning into sport as it has the power to equalize?

“ We want[ed] to address the stigma, and someone who has identified with more of a traditionally masculine space like Major League Baseball, hopefully helps broaden the audience and **helps men feel like they are really seen.** ”

- HIMS, TELEHEALTH COMPANY

“ I think if you’re working out all the time, **you’re part of the problem.** ”

- ROBERT PATTINSON, MEN’S HEALTH



## CALEB ON CHANGING MALE POV



### CALEB DAWKINS,

ART DIRECTOR, FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.S.

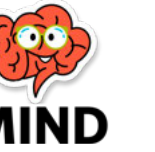
Men are conditioned at a young age in the United States to have a muscular build, to seem more attractive to the world and sometimes even themselves. What is even more striking is that many men are hesitant to speak up about their body image issues — because of the stigma attached to it. It was through friends and social media creators who would discuss their own mental health struggles, that helped me understand that it is OK to feel the way I felt due to stressors or traumatic experiences. It didn't mean I wasn't grateful for the opportunities and privileges I've had in my life thus far.

As we know, the outcomes of a negative body image have detrimental effects on your mental health, creating a compounded type of stress for men who equate their body image to their own masculinity. Many men feel reluctant to openly

discuss their problems with their friends and family.

There have been prominent men in Hollywood who have called out the unrealistic body standards that the movie industry has created, though. Take Jonah Hill for example, who has repeatedly told fans to not comment on his body since it does nothing to help him, or Matt McGorry, who spoke about struggling with his body image once he quit bodybuilding. The common thread is that no one wants their body to be critiqued or picked apart.

**To make a change, brands need to speak up and provide a real perspective on this issue by highlighting more inclusive body types in their work. Take Savage x Fenty, for example, who inherently includes men of all body shapes and sizes across their work. The makeup of the world is changing, so it is important that brands follow, or they will be left behind.**





## FINAL WORD FROM NICK ON RIPPING UP THE RULEBOOK



**NICHOLAS PALMER-BROWN,**  
HEAD OF SPORT AND ENTERTAINMENT,  
FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.K.

**In its own right, sport is well known to be the ultimate equalizer. But as global culture becomes slowly more inclusive, sport and its key stakeholders struggle to keep up.**

There are a plethora of gendered and increasingly outdated ways of telling someone to “get on with it” or “man up,” and unfortunately, it often fits a brand’s commercial agenda to conform or is otherwise deeply rooted in sporting traditions. It’s why providing lofty platforms for the new generation of athletes starting to force the issue and modernize their respective fields, is critical to the future of inclusive representation in sports.

Where it was previously linear but ultimately less inclusive, the sporting landscape now of who can compete, in what competitions, and the framework for that to happen from elite to grassroots level is so complex and divisive that if we were on a golf course, you would ask for a mulligan — a do-over. Fair competition vs. inclusion is the game of the day, and they seem to be totally at odds. The pressure on boys and girls trans children and their parents to navigate their sporting journey and digest what they’re seeing played out in stadiums or on TV is immense, relentless and let’s be honest, confusing.

In 2022 we saw governing bodies in cycling, rugby and many more forced into action because of athletes transitioning from amateur to elite-level sport or categories no longer being fit for purpose — can you imagine having your identity pulled apart on the global stage? I can’t.

**The articles interrogating body image, sports-pivoting rules, and regulations to tackle isolated participation questions are all stacking up, but the truth is radical reform is needed. Rip up the rulebook and start again, and let’s own that. The world is different now, and that’s a good thing. I’ll take a do-over please.**

“I believe brands can support the body neutrality movement by using size-inclusive models and eliminating messaging that contributes to diet culture. Body neutrality is a great movement where consumers receive the message of living for themselves. They are not looking to a different time where an individual’s body can be “better.” As the new year rolls around, I personally have seen brands buying into the New Year’s resolutions or “new year, new me trends.” Brands, especially in the health and wellness space, need to turn away from the harmful messaging that individuals need to change what they look like by instead promoting the opposite — love for themselves. In order for brands to support this movement, they need to focus on messaging that shows individuals being happy with themselves as they are in the present rather than looking for results in the future.”

- EMILY OCON, U.S., @HEALTHEMBODY



Gen Z is the most diverse generation in history and YPulse’s research shows they’re more likely to identify as LGBTQ+ than any other generation. Generational favorites such as Harry Styles, Billie Eilish and Travis Scott are examples of celebrities who are challenging gender norms and expectations. The fact that we’re seeing more sports stars and brands open up in this space is hugely promising, and we hope to see more brands, industries and sectors doing more to eliminate these stigmas and mitigate these unnecessary pressures.

## BRAND CONSIDERATIONS

### Is the answer neutrality?

Body neutrality is a recent offshoot of the body positivity movement. It suggests that people should love and respect their bodies regardless of their appearance, and encourages looking after your body in the present moment instead of focusing on what you feel needs to change or “look better.” This differs from “body positivity,” which sought to bring an end to body-shaming and fatphobic behaviors.

However, body neutrality campaigns and messaging often revolve around female-identifying people. Brands that take a body-neutral approach have the opportunity to talk to all genders. We see time and time again that there’s a huge spectrum of people

who identify as trans, queer, nonbinary or intersex who have little to no representation in the body movement space. People are often guilty of wildly misrepresenting or oversimplifying communication in this space, too; this is where brands can help move the dial in a way that reflects everyone accurately.

While body neutrality becomes more mainstream, beauty neutrality is an untapped space for brands to make a difference with regard to young people. Despite Gen Z championing self-expression and rejecting society’s expectations of what “beautiful is,” they are also exposed to celebrities, filters and facial modification apps, and we’re seeing a huge rise in cosmetic procedures. This surge was exacerbated

by the pandemic, where we were seeing the “Zoom effect” surfacing in young women in their early 20s who spent so much time looking at themselves during Zoom meetings that they started to notice their “flaws and imperfections.”

**It’s not for any brand to tell a young person not to turn to these procedures, after all, many Gen Zers feel liberated and empowered by using “top-up” treatments. Younger generations approach certain treatments to be preventive. However, embracing beauty neutrality is a way for brands to offer appropriate guidance and support in this space without preaching or dictating.**

## # FINANCIAL ANXIETY

  
**THE BURDENS OF FINANCIAL  
AWARENESS AND ANXIETY**  
**Content  
Creator**

“ Clearly, financial times have changed. When my parents were young, the cost of a can of coke was 75 cents, the median family household income was \$35,000, and the median cost of a home was \$104,000. On the one hand, some of my followers were clear about the fact that they didn’t have the same environment as their parents, which therefore means they aren’t getting the same real-life experiences that force them to acquire financial management knowledge. However, the flip side of this is that some followers spoke of how they have more resources and tools today through the internet and platforms to learn more about finances and better place themselves for future success. There’s always a need to be careful around irresponsible advice (whether on social media or not). Over-saturation of financial advice has existed for all generations, some advice ages and becomes out of touch, but the key is that the money management education and skills are there and available, whether you want to get them through experience or available resources.

- DAVID WILSON, U.S., @IMDAVIDJWILSON



## SIDE HUSTLE TO SIDE SURVIVAL

The financial climate has greatly impacted the minds of our young people who feel stuck in a cycle of debt and are reevaluating their future completely. Our findings offer no quick fix but instead examine the multiple layers, complex issues, and internal conflicts that cloud and confuse our young people's minds, in order to find solutions forward.

**Today we are seeing young people experience the highest level of financial anxiety we've ever come across, and this has become yet another burden of stress, with 69% reporting that it is leading to people avoiding looking at money out of fear of what they may find.**

**43% OF GEN Z WORKERS HAVE TAKEN ON EITHER**

**A PART- OR FULL-TIME JOB IN ADDITION TO**

**THEIR PRIMARY JOB.**

(Click through for full source)\*



**IN THE U.K., 57% OF GEN Z ARE SPENDING MORE**

**THAN 16 HOURS A WEEK ON SIDE HUSTLES.** 

(Click through for full source)\*

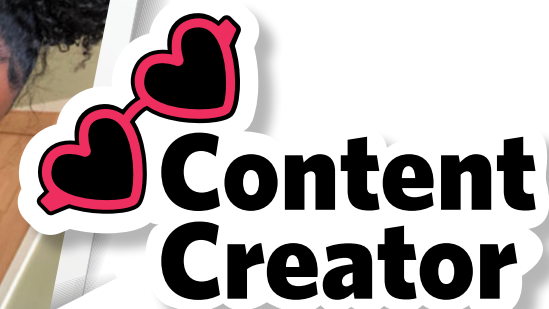
Gen Z have fueled the “side hustle” phenomenon, with outsiders coining it as the new golden age of entrepreneurialism. However, where it was once seen as a marker of self-expression or a means to pursue your true passion, it seems to have evolved into something much bleaker, where young people are striving for “passive income.” In other words, striving for a stream of income that continues long after you have finished working towards or investing in a project — ideally requiring little effort; which made us ask the question, have we moved from side hustle to side survival?

[Research shows](#) around half of Gen Zers (48%) and millennials (54%) said they live payday to payday and worry that their monthly salary won't be able to cover all of their expenses, while 2 in 5 have taken on a side hustle to make ends meet. [The research](#) also revealed nearly half of Gen Z (48%) feel burned out by their workload — and with the cost of necessities, like heating and food, reaching rapid heights across the globe, it's no longer about having money for fun, it's to quite literally survive.

“Facing economic realities seems to be getting even harder and harder for young people today. However, my followers spoke of how it's typically the FOMO purchases and not keeping up with trends or attending social events that gave them feelings of financial anxiety. Some of them spoke about having phases of feeling a ‘need’ to spend more money on material things, and it seems that the pressures of having ‘more,’ rather than having ‘enough’ were actually what drove anxieties. This, of course, speaks to our capitalist consumer culture, but also how trends still have such an influential effect, not just on young people's purchasing, but consequently also on their mental well-being.”

- MONIQUE JONES, U.K., @MYFINANCESCRAPBOOK



 **Content Creator**



## VIEW FROM THE YOUTH ON STAYING POSITIVE



**KAREENA GARG,**  
GRADUATE TRAINEE,  
FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.K.

I can't stop comparing myself to my older brother, who at my age was able to be fully independent from our parents. He was able to buy his first flat before 30 and I know I won't ever be in his position due to the cost-of-living crisis. Despite this, I think my generation finds a way to use the cost-of-living crisis to connect and to laugh, we are able to make jokes about how 'broke' we are, but also find a sense of relief in knowing that it's not just me or my fault, we are all experiencing this.

**We haven't done anything wrong to make us a failure, so we should stop feeling that way.**



**CALEB DAWKINS,**  
ART DIRECTOR,  
FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.S.

The impact of financial anxiety is felt across many people in the United States, but for Gen Z in particular, the impacts are debilitating. With many of us graduating college in 2020, we faced a global health crisis while also working to land our first full-time jobs, which all proved extremely difficult. While we are happy about the hybrid approach, the process to get and stay at our jobs has created some serious mental health issues for us.

**Side hustle culture was pushed on us for a while, with many telling us to turn our passions into sources of income. However, instead of side hustles being a source of disposable income, it has turned into another stressor. In our 20s, many of us are living paycheck to paycheck and balancing one side project to another. We need to be on top of the next big opportunity for money in the hopes of building something for the future.**



**MICHAEL MAHON,**  
SENIOR ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE,  
FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.K.

One of the most prevalent issues that have come up due to the cost-of-living crisis has been a lack of fun. What I mean by that is people, quite rightly, are watching their pennies and saving their pounds, but this inevitably leads to a sense of isolation from colleagues. After-work drinks are becoming a once-in-a-blue-moon treat rather than a chance to connect with the people you spend 7.5 hours with outside of work.

Granted, there have always been other elements like family life or different commitments that would make attending difficult. But the frequency of such catch-ups used to mean that if you couldn't make one, you could go to the next. This is also true for activities in your personal life. Budget cuts, tighter purse strings, and worries about the heating have made it harder for people to decompress after a long day's work which in time compounds to more stress and burnout.

Of course, work always comes first. But there should always be room for a laugh or a joke, if only to keep some of the pressure at bay.

## HOW IS IT MAKING THEM FEEL? SHAME AND EMBARRASSMENT

What seems to make it feel worse for young people is that prior to the cost-of-living crisis, many could get by and even save money in some circumstances. But now it feels like the rug has been pulled from beneath them, and they are wondering where they went wrong. This is having an impact on their identities; they aren't where they thought they would be and many are feeling too ashamed to talk to the people closest to them.

Gen Z who are working for the first time feel like failures and feel embarrassed for having to ask their parents for help:

- Over half of Gen Z find sorting their finances to be stressful and want their employers to start programs that educate them on how to understand their money better or offer tailored financial advice from an expert.
- Gen Z also feel immense pressure to hit big milestones, whether this is in a professional field or in their personal life.
- Despite the blurring of traditions and ideologies, Gen Z still feel a burden to get married, buy a house and have children by a certain age so they can say they've led successful and happy lives.

**49% OF WORKING PARENTS SAY THAT THEIR**

**MAIN CONCERN IS THEIR CHILDREN'S**

**FINANCIAL FUTURE.**

(Click through for full source)\*



## THE POSITIVE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON #COSTOFLIVING



Social media has helped create a sense of community for Gen Z. #CostOfLiving is trending on TikTok and has accrued over 600 million views. TikTok is now the [fastest-ever-growing news source](#) and has become Gen Z's search engine of choice. People go to the app to share stories of how much they have in their bank account and express how they cannot afford to go into work or buy more food until their next paycheck.

Some are struggling to afford their rent as their bills have increased. Young people are using the comments section of their social media platforms to share their similar concerns with comments such as: ME, but I don't have enough to pay next month's rent. The comment section on TikTok is a powerful source, as 79% of the users read comments. Social media conversations help young people feel that they aren't alone, and users often share advice on how to cut back, where the best deals are, and additional tips to help get by. This is certainly something brands have tried to mirror.

Influencers, such as @ndainternet and @duchessofthrift, are trending for offering budgeting advice. Even food influencers are showing how to create budget-friendly meals; "4 meals under \$10" is commonly shared and liked. Many teens are now stressed over their finances and rank having a well-paying job as their number one financial goal.

**What's clear is that young people are seeking answers and finding inspiration and guidance from social platforms. Brands need to play a bigger role to help ease the financial load for young people, as these issues aren't going away anytime soon. In order to do so, they need to put themselves in the shoes of their audience, give active and tangible support, and not underestimate their individual struggles. It can no longer be a one-size-fits-all approach.**

## TURNING ECO-ANXIETY INTO ACTION

Gen Z is shouldering a heavy burden — the impact of a lack of actions on climate change from prior generations and the struggle of debating how their own decisions will impact climate change in the future.

Billie Eilish is the latest celebrity to shoulder climate change, speaking out about her own climate anxiety and addressing her Gen Z audience directly during her series of climate talks in London last summer — which also saw historic heat waves — alongside her concerts in the country. The headlines: sustainable fashion, vegan diets, and overall, making client-conscious decisions.

So how can we help Gen Z turn eco-anxiety into action?

There are actions they can take through thrifting, swapping and renting fashion, but they'll also make a statement with their purchase power — opting for sustainable, eco-friendly brands when choosing where to put their dollars, both within the fashion industry, as well as across verticals. But there's also a socioeconomic divide we can't ignore — because organic, and sustainable, oftentimes comes with a higher price tag.

**Interestingly, we're seeing Gen Z encourage more sustainability and corporate responsibility within financial institutions. Research from Bloomberg shows 51% of students identified green and sustainable investing opportunities as most important when considering where to invest, with 45% also stating that their main impetus behind investing is to ensure "a better tomorrow."**



Seeing the impacts of waste around the world really gets us worried, but we're inspired by the grassroots solutions out there!

- SOCIAL MEDIA USER



**KAREENA GARG,**  
GRADUATE TRAINEE, FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.K.

While social media can have its toxic moments when we are hit with reels and stories of people our age partying and traveling, it has its amazing moments. It's nice to see a generation band together to share tips online on how they're saving, where to go for the best offer and sharing discount codes, we really want to make sure that everyone is looked after. While we do have a tendency as a generation to try and sort these issues out ourselves, we do want to see change from brands and policymakers that show that they are listening to us, because while we understand that being young and struggling for a bit is a thing, **we can only sustain it for so long.**



## A CALL FOR LESS WASTE FROM LAURA



My feelings certainly swing between hope and frustration. I feel frustrated that we're not doing enough, not doing it quickly enough, and that everything seems to take so much effort to move the needle just a little when it comes to climate action.

However, I have so much hope because we know the answers to climate change. We know we need fewer fossil fuels and more renewable energy, less consumption and more reuse, fewer cars and more bikes, less top-down and more grassroots power, more indigenous wisdom, and nature and wildlife around us to thrive. However, we need to get there sooner. I also have so much hope as I see more and more young people pour into the workforce where they can implement climate decisions, and their passion spurs on stories in the media and action at a local level. I know we can do this, especially with the help of the next generation. My follower base has taken many steps, from everyday lifestyle actions to protests, workplace initiatives, further study or policy change. I see people day in and day out looking for ways they can improve our world through climate action, and it inspires me every day. I love how much of a community space my platforms have become. I strive to create a space for everyone to share in the work that they are doing and share ideas with one another. I am inspired to take more action after engaging with the amazing people who follow my page, and I am so proud of creating a community of activists.

- LAURA YOUNG, U.K., @LESSWASTELAURA



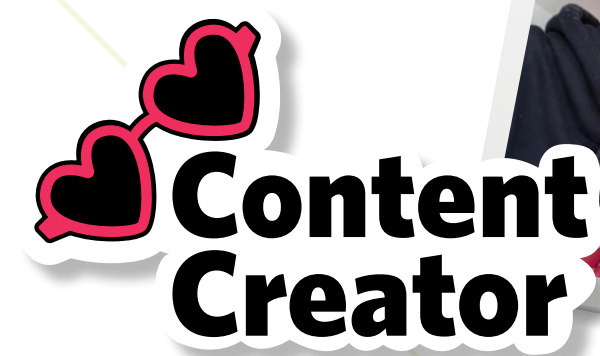


## NEXT-GEN SOCIAL INFLUENCERS ON CREATING AWARENESS

“ Showing empathy for consumers is vital given the current economic climate. Brands and businesses have a duty to ‘approach customers as people first,’ ensuring their needs are met and their voice is heard.

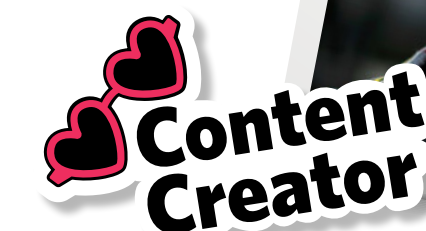
Brands can support Gen Z by creating more financial awareness through practical, realistic and tangible actions. Don’t just raise awareness, create it. This could include things such as working with schools to teach children and provide the knowledge and confidence to effectively budget, save, and invest for their future. The goal is to inform consumers rather than hard selling a service and/or product, ultimately building trust between the audience and the brand.

- MONIQUE JONES, U.K. @MYFINANCESCRAPBOOK



“ I see many Gen Z wanting to break the restrictive paycheck-to-paycheck cycle and instead be empowered by their finances to go and live out their calling. Through job hopping or side hustles, Gen Z is not concerned with loyalty to the employer or a specific career, instead asking themselves, ‘Does my work and wage support the lifestyle I want now and in the future?’ Ultimately, the personal finance trends of Gen Z in 2023 will depend on a variety of factors, including the state of the economy, the job market and individual financial circumstances. But that reinforces the fact that Gen Z can focus on these timeless ‘trends’ to overcome many of the same financial challenges as previous generations and hopefully live more financially free.

- DAVID WILSON, U.S., @IMDAVIDJWILSON



## CANDACE ON PROGRESSIVE NEXT STEPS FOR THE NEXT GENERATION



**CANDACE PETERSON,**  
GLOBAL MANAGING DIRECTOR, BRAND MARKETING, FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.S.

I recently learned of a progressive community that was being built for multigenerational households. Not even a few years ago, the idea of having grown children move back home after university seemed absurd. It was a mark of failure for both parent and child. Yet, now with my first in college along with the surging cost of living and sky-high rents, I'm coming to grips that this has become the norm.

Upon graduating from a prestigious private university, a friend's child landed a dream job only to scour meeting rooms for catering leftovers to save on groceries. What seemed on paper to be a sustainable salary was a financial stranglehold. Since moving back home, the anxiety of grappling with the decision of whether to buy toilet paper or be able to attend happy hour has been lifted.

Listen, as a parent you want your kids to be independent. But if independence for young people today means shouldering decisions of whether to eat or pay rent, I suppose I have a multigenerational household renovation in my future.



**Although many young people in this position seem grateful for hybrid styles of working, over a third are choosing to stay at home due to their financial situations. Transport costs and buying lunches are a burden to their bank accounts. As a result, they are sacrificing the social elements that benefit career progression and are missing out on the general camaraderie. This only further affects their mental health; many are in their first jobs right out of a pandemic, where they lost in-person interaction and were unable to see friends, yet despite restrictions being lifted, they are feeling isolated and are missing out on the fun, social aspects of work.**



## **THE NEXT FRONTIER—WE KNOW THE DIRECTION BUT NOT THE DESTINATION**

The metaverse, much like young people today, is still developing and finding its way. As such, there is considerable opportunity for misconceptions, and consequently misjudgment, about what the “metaverse” entails. While most brands know what the possibilities around a “metaverse” generally include, the technology and services involved are nowhere near final form.

Bearing in mind the limited scope of metaverse technology today, while still building with an exciting future in mind, how can brands and businesses utilize the metaverse to engage with young audiences, captivating their attention today while building with their future in mind?

In this section we will look at:

**The history of the metaverse, internet development, and what we can expect that to change for us moving forward**

**How young consumers are shaping their metaverse experiences both today and tomorrow.**

# SECTION 2:

# META



# META-WHAT? WHERE WE ARE, WHERE WE'RE GOING, AND WHO'S TAKING US THERE



# METaverse

Not just a virtual reality.

An ecosystem of shared digital 3D experiences, interconnected through virtual platforms, spaces and physical augmentations.

A metaverse involves either Web 2.0 or Web3 technology and is vastly different depending on which is used.

## A HISTORY OF CONNECTION

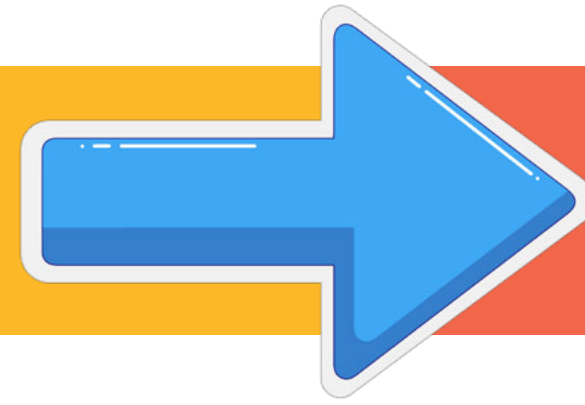
Media buzz might have us thinking that this technology has entered the mainstream and become the new normal, but the reality is only a very minute portion of consumers are actively engaging with this technology as we imagine it in future form (i.e., genuinely immersive, virtual realities that offer an alternate digital space). Currently, metaverse experiences incorporating Web3 and virtual reality headsets are rudimentary, niche and not accessible to mass consumers. Instead, the most widely used metaverse experiences are still based on Web 2.0 technology.

No one can say with 100% clarity right now exactly how future metaverse experiences will take shape, but we do know it will undoubtedly play a part in the next frontier of consumer and brand experiences. Similar to how the smartphone or Web 2.0 social media unlocked new possibilities – the Web3 metaverse will do the same. **While brands can only build so much in their meta-house for now, they can also start building the community roads that will gradually lead to a Web3 future they will have helped shape.**



## WHERE WE ARE NOW:

# WEB 2.0



## WHERE WE ARE GOING:

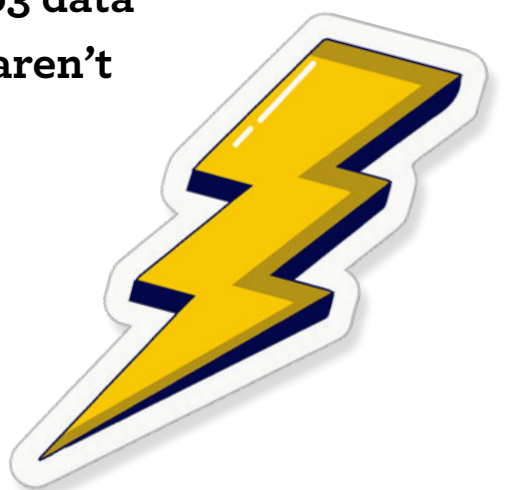
# WEB3

### THE PLATFORM ECONOMY

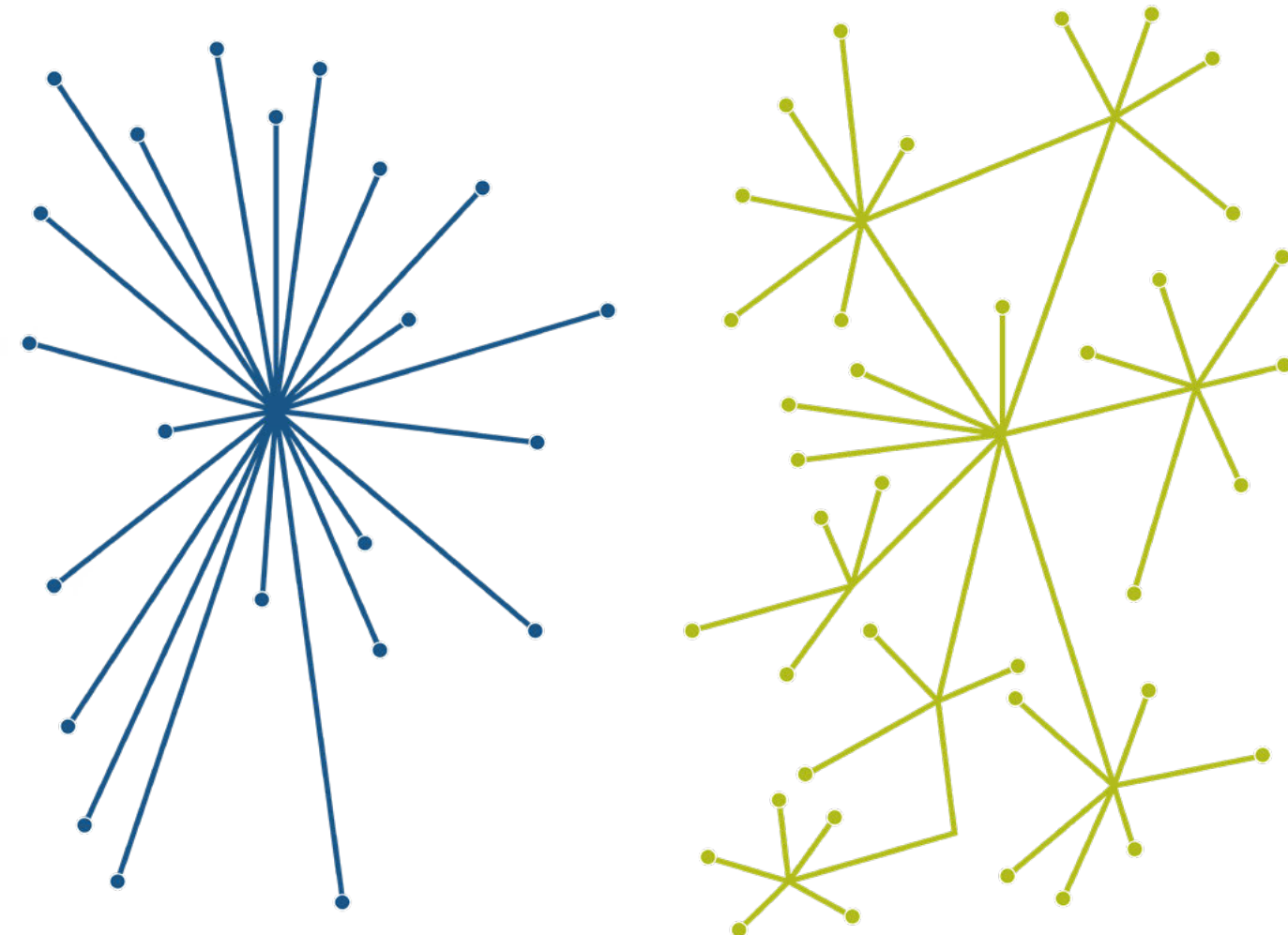
- Web 2.0 is when the internet went social. Users could connect, share and create, rather than just simply consume content.
- Web 2.0 experiences are dictated by the platforms and the digital “space” (Facebook/Meta, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Wikipedia), where the data is centralized on servers and owned by someone.
- Metaverse experiences using Web 2.0 are typically based on one platform, portals to other experiences.
  - o Young consumers logging into video games like Roblox, Fortnite or Pokemon Go can experience so much more than just the game if they choose. They can experience a Travis Scott concert on Fortnite or buy a digital Gucci bag to personalize their avatar in Roblox. Gaming is just the entry point to socializing.
  - o **Teenagers used to hang out in the mall, they now also (and many times prefer to) log on and hang out virtually through these Web 2.0 spaces.**

### THE OWNERSHIP ECONOMY

- Web3 is when the internet will give power to the people. The backend of networks is open, connected and publicly available to everyone. Put in today’s context – it will be impossible for big tech companies to hide how their platforms are built or what they do with user data.
  - o This is because Web3 is dictated by open source, blockchain technologies that decentralize data. Put in simpler terms, all the information is peer-to-peer and duplicated across the network. Any transaction or information will be replicated across the network across all of our different computers, constantly updating the information and resulting in no central location for that data.
- Another important facet of Web3 blockchain is its interoperability, which means a product or system can work seamlessly across platforms with other products or services. Consumers will be able to seamlessly bring their digital wallets, avatars and smart objects across virtual worlds, just as they bring themselves, their credit cards and backpacks across stores today.
- Consumers will no longer be restricted by the channels and platforms they use. Instead, they will be able to build their own identity and spaces completely, and control how much they share with the platforms they use.
- **Some say it will take away power from Big Tech, increasing transparency, facilitating innovation, and giving users control over their information and online interactions.**
- **Others say that increasing the data network only serves to make it a larger, easier target to attack and that there may be new Web3 data and privacy hacking dangers that we aren’t even aware of yet.**



## CENTRALIZED (WEB 2.0) VS. DECENTRALIZED (WEB3)



### WHO WILL TAKE US THERE?

It is probably no great surprise to hear that young people are leading the charge, with about [48% of Gen Z](#) in the U.S. at least hearing about the metaverse. However, they aren't just aware of it, they make up the majority of active users on the most prominent metaverse platforms currently in mainstream play, such as Roblox.

Roblox, a hugely popular Web 2.0 metaverse video game, reported in 2022 that [two-thirds](#) of all U.S. kids between 9 and 12 years old used Roblox, and it's played by [more than half](#) of all Americans under the age of 16. It's not just an American trend either, Europe accounts for [29%](#) of the daily active Roblox users, and the audience in Asia Pacific is a fast-growing community with the game accounting for 13% of the user base despite its ban in China.

It's not just about playing games either, individuals are expressing themselves, collaborating and even forming communities, with 1.3 trillion minutes of content watched on Twitch in 2021, from the 8 million streamers that go live each month.

**Against the backdrop of the cost-of-living crisis, the metaverse may also provide a new way for young people to earn a living. Recent research found just over half of Gen Z gamers say they want to earn in the metaverse, while 33% have a desire to build an actual career there. This may not come as a surprise, knowing that many young gamers are already purchasing items in the metaverse, some more in this world than in real life, but for some, there is still a desire to stay true to the platform that made them.**

“ Change is great for the growth of your community, but I do not intend on moving on to larger things outside of Twitch. My channel (which is primarily streaming video games in drag) has been a long journey. It has been a passion project for almost four years. They say, ‘if it ain't broke, don't fix it,’ and that's what I'd like to live by on my channel. If my Twitch community were to shift into anything, I would love to see it evolve to the creation of a video game that we can all play together on my channel. ”

- NEMESIS LACROIX, U.S., @NEMESISLACROIX



### BRAND CONSIDERATIONS:

How can brands step up to these new expectations and provide new offerings that authentically engage with a young person's desires and demands from this space? Looking at yearly planning and how it maps to future five to 10-year goals, how can brands utilize the expertise of the youth of today to make meta mainstream? With their Web 2.0 upbringing, the youth of today will be more

accustomed to being able to shape the way they communicate, maintain the communities they've become a part of and grow alongside the space in which they do it. They will expect brands to do the same, or at least afford them the flexible opportunities to do it themselves.

## **BUILDING THEIR WORLD AS THEY EXPERIENCE IT**

The youth of today are building the world as they want to live in it. From Minecraft to Roblox, Gen Z and Gen Alpha are using these digital spaces as core places to socialize, play, collaborate and create. Instead of socializing through a simple chat message back and forth, they're interacting in real time and expressing themselves in completely new ways.

Emoji and GIF responses aren't needed to fill the emotional response gaps anymore, instead, they're reacting in real time with their customized avatars, communicating with facial and body cues to go along with everything else. Expressing their identity more fully through digital identities is just the tip of the iceberg, some are even creating and modifying the virtual space around them — dictating how they choose to play in their digital playgrounds.

### **#Stat**

**INFLUENCER NEMESIS LACROIX POLLED HER TIKTOK AUDIENCE, AND FOUND:  
84% OF RESPONDENTS FELT MORE COMFORTABLE SOCIALIZING**

**IN VIRTUAL SPACES, SUCH AS TWITCH, THAN THE NON-VIRTUAL WORLD.**

“ I feel like I can be a more perfected version of myself online, however I'm trying to be more and more weird and authentic — but my online self represents me creatively.”

- SOCIAL MEDIA USER





## GROWING UP WITH GEN ALPHA



### BRAND CONSIDERATIONS:

**Overall, these new platforms are allowing young people today to socialize in ways that simply didn't exist for prior generations. Metaverse experiences are giving young consumers more control and ability to express themselves, whether it's customizing an avatar or creating and living out alternate realities through VR. They're able to represent themselves in ways that haven't been possible before. For a generation that is constantly talked about as fluid and existing on a nonbinary spectrum, it is no surprise to see them act as such when given the tools to do so.**

Combined with the fact this generation has grown up comfortable with e-commerce, deliveries straight to the door and paying with alternative token currencies such as Robux (Roblox) or V-bucks (Fortnite), they are already looking at how they can build from their metaspaces into the real world. They will be far more accustomed to digital transactions and alternate currencies, with greater expectations of the flexibility and mobility provided by brands across different platforms. The virtual world is already here for this generation, but it's only just getting started and it's imperative that brands grow alongside the audience.

Gen Alpha (those born 2010 and on) are the first generation to truly grow up with Web 2.0 metaverse spaces. How this will impact their generational traits and future behaviors is yet to be fully realized, but we can already see it impacting how they choose to socialize, with virtual spaces such as Fortnite or Minecraft not just providing a video game but ultimately becoming a social space for them, where they can enjoy virtual music concerts or express themselves through digital forms and assets.

It's not just their place of socializing, these Web 2.0 platforms give young audiences the tools to shape the platform itself. Roblox has previously reported that the young gamers creating games on their platform had earned “[over \\$30M](#)” back in 2017. Those figures have skyrocketed along with the game's popularity today, and the success stories have continued with young game developers claiming to have [helped pay off mortgages](#) and found their first job through the game.

However, behind the success stories are less fortunate tales of exploitation and false promises. Media has been rife with stories about [young game developers being taken advantage of](#), Roblox's [unethical business model](#) that profits off its ecosystem of games created by young users, and even [lawsuits](#) concerning sexual and financial exploitation. With the great success of being a first-mover in the category has come greater responsibility, and Roblox is currently seeing the flip side of opportunity with more scrutiny into its [business, security practices](#) and incidents of [cyberbullying](#).

## BUT IT'S NOT ALL ON THEM — WHY POLICYMAKERS AND REGULATORS NEED TO CATCH UP AND KEEP UP

With new possibilities come new responsibilities — and not just for the young people using the technology. The potential harm of today's social media platforms on young consumers has been well documented (addiction, unrealistic peer pressure, self-esteem issues, etc.). Immersion in metaverse experiences has the potential to exacerbate these issues if not handled responsibly by those who make it. As these platforms become increasingly normalized in the lives of young people, it is vital that the correct legislature is set up to regulate these new spaces from the get-go. Any online safety bills and regulations will need constant reviews and updates in real life, just like software updates are needed for apps and games.

Any brand deciding to try to shape the space and contribute to pushing the integration of metaverse technology into society needs to do so with rigorous planning and awareness around its own digital and immersive tech literacy.

Similarly, brands entering the space will face an interesting relationship between sustainability and climate change — while Web3 metaverse could help climate change by moving IRL experiences

to meta, it's also met with the high energy costs of undertaking transactions, demonstrating how much the metaverse needs to evolve to become part not just of our everyday lives, but our future livelihoods. As we know, sustainability is a huge priority for young people today. With Web3 being incredibly resource-reliant, the youth of today potentially face a choice in the future of using this innovation or sticking to their integral beliefs in a sustainable future for themselves and the planet. The carbon footprint of this innovation is still being ironed out, just as the technology is.

**But whether it's bitcoin or a more energy-efficient blockchain technology, brands looking to play into the space need to be aware and very selective about the technology they use to avoid potential future tech dead ends or public backlash.**

### #Stat

**TODAY, A SINGLE ETHEREUM (CRYPTOCURRENCY) TRANSACTION CONSUMES AN**

**AVERAGE OF 60% MORE ENERGY THAN 100,000 CREDIT CARD TRANSACTIONS,**

**WHILE AN AVERAGE BITCOIN (CRYPTOCURRENCY) TRANSACTION CONSUMES**

**14 TIMES MORE ENERGY.**

(Click through for full source)\*

However, some argue that the full adoption of Web3 and the metaverse could actually create a more sustainable future than we've anticipated. Imagine this: You're paralyzed by eco-anxiety and the climate crisis, but also trying to feed your sense of wanderlust. The metaverse is a potential solution to still experiencing and exploring the world, without the climate impacts. It's not an exact replacement — how could you replicate the tastes of authentic Spanish cuisine or the feeling of snow falling around you at Rockefeller

Plaza? At its core, the metaverse allows for an eco-friendlier solution, if we're able to navigate the energy that it consumes.

Just as Web3 and the metaverse are evolving, so is sustainability within the space. It's a new frontier that will also require us to wait and see how the industry and regulators respond to the ongoing evolution of cryptocurrency and other Web3 technologies, and the cost-benefit of pursuing investment in the space.

## VR SPACES—THE GOOD AND BAD



### OVERALL

Realism, such as VR, can have both positive and negative effects as Gen Z is exposed to experiences that take on a level of realism, such as VR, during an important mental and emotional development period for their brains.

A 2022 [study](#) in India looking at the impact of metaverse experiences on teenage anxiety recently found:

- **43% of the total subjects experienced an increase in social anxiety after playing metaverse applications**
- **41% experienced a decrease in social anxiety after playing metaverse applications.**
- **16% did not experience any change.**

### GOOD

There are studies that show virtual reality can improve mental health and help with issues such as PTSD, as well as improve social skills in children. We've seen companies such as Sunsilk build Roblox metaverse spaces ([Sunsilk City](#)), allowing users to not just play games with each other but also collaborate and design their own. Metaverse experiences have the immersive potential to provide a safe and controlled environment for kids to interact with their peers in productive and creative ways, make new friends, and develop social intelligence in kids.

### BAD

However, digital avatars and metaverse experiences can come with potential problems too. Being able to modify and project a version of yourself that differs from real life can be dangerous for adolescents and their sense of identity if kept unchecked, with potential body image concerns for impressionable minds. Immersion in these experiences could also see the same addictive tendencies come into play.

### BRAND CONSIDERATIONS

The issue is that safety policies can be difficult to monitor and enforce in virtual spaces. Immersive digital incidents happen in an instant; there isn't necessarily the ability to search for hate speech that was said in the moment for instance. As we've seen with Web 2.0 social media platforms that have struggled with data privacy issues, there is a responsibility on those creating these spaces—to ensure safety is built from within and from the ground up, not as a retrospective action in the future.

Early signs are promising, with [programs](#) such as the one between Middlebury College and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The new project aims to develop a set of best practices and centralized resources for monitoring and evaluating extremism and exploitation within online gaming. With gaming platforms essentially serving as social platforms, the two-year program marks the first time the DHS has committed funding (\$700,000) toward counterterrorism in the industry, and there is talk of the need to establish counter-extremism teams within games that are played by millions. The program aims to protect vulnerable players and has identified several metaverse games to train and enhance security protocols, with plans to expand the program's output with industry bodies such as the Entertainment Software Association.

## VR SPACES—THE GOOD AND BAD

Meta, and its virtual space, Horizon Worlds, came under fire in mid-2022 after reports that various researchers had been sexually assaulted in the Horizon Worlds virtual space. Some reporters even claimed it only took 60 seconds from logging on before they were assaulted.

We saw Meta try and combat this by introducing features such as “[personal boundary](#)” barriers in Horizon Worlds, which gives people a 4-foot distance between your avatar and non-friends, but that still didn’t stop the barrage of hate speech and abuse young people were reporting.



Lego Group and Epic Games recently announced a long-term partnership aimed at shaping the future of the metaverse, with three core principles at the heart of the partnership:

- Protecting children’s right to play by making safety and well-being a priority.
- Safeguarding children’s privacy by putting their best interests first.
- Empowering children and adults with tools that give them control over their digital experience.

## KEEPING TRACK OF THEIR HEALTHBAR AND STATS

While there is still a lot for us to learn about the metaverse, we cannot deny its potential to transform the way we communicate and engage with younger audiences on important health topics.

We're already seeing an emergence of younger generations who are more invested in their virtual health than their physical health, and it's easy to see why. In a game, your health is at a percentage that decreases when you are tired or injured and increases when you rest or find the right supplies — it's simple and tangible. In real life, it isn't quite so straightforward, and while the growing popularity of smartwatches is allowing us to track a host of health aspects, we still don't have access to the full picture.

**The metaverse could offer a brilliant platform in which to engage with this audience at a time when they are truly tuned in and receptive to health messaging, particularly when the call to action can also be completed online — such as bookings for routine health checks or vaccinations. However, healthcare is a highly personal and confidential space, therefore it may not appeal to every individual need in the same manner.**



## IS THE METAVERSE THE NEXT STEP IN HEALTHCARE?

I have several mental health issues and have often been put on hold by an automated machine during an emergency. I believe that if someone were actually speaking to me, they would hear the urgency and act quickly. I also worry that healthcare options in the metaverse may not include assistance for what you need. I also worry you will have to wait longer to get the help that you need.

- HEATHER MORADEYO, U.K., @HEATHERDEYOOOO



## WE ASKED SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

It's difficult to answer because how do you express things you may not be able to explain with grammar.

- SOCIAL MEDIA USER

It's terrible because they are trying to make it a one size fits all.

Not everything should be dealt with online primary or not. So I hate it.

- SOCIAL MEDIA USER

Depends ... because it's not always a professional on the other side of the screen. So if you can double-check their credentials first then sure, online.

- SOCIAL MEDIA USER



## BRINGING THE NEXT GEN CLOSER TO THEIR HEALTH

We're also seeing an increase in VR chatrooms being used as safe spaces for patients with long-term health conditions, such as cancer, to share their stories and support others with similar conditions. This suggests the metaverse could prove a fruitful channel to tackle some of the more taboo or sensitive health topics in a more palatable way that encourages engagement without compromising anonymity. However, while individuals may present themselves as fictional avatars, it is important that brands who engage with patients in the metaverse do so compliantly with consent, and that procedures are put in place to monitor and safeguard those within the community.

Other examples of this include a [content series](#) by a creator named Syrmor. For example, one [video](#) in the series features a woman speaking about her cancer diagnosis in a VR chatroom, using an avatar in the form of Ronald McDonald. When looking through the comments of the video, it is clear that many are able to empathize and even relate to the woman's experience — what's even more telling is that a majority of comments point out that her choice of avatar made her words "that more poignant." Perhaps seeing familiar brand mascots in a new light can help young people relate to their peers in the virtual space.

**The potential benefits of the metaverse don't start and stop with consumers. Recent reports suggest that the metaverse's use of artificial intelligence, virtual reality and augmented reality could also benefit healthcare professionals (HCPs) by offering new ways to train, assess and even treat their patients.**

“ I believe the metaverse is bringing awareness to holistic healthcare. Through the surge of communications about healthcare in the metaverse, young audiences are engaged now more than ever in caring for themselves.

This messaging carries over to areas such as TikTok and Instagram, where I have seen engagement rise in health topics for young women, such as hormone health. Specifically, in treating hormone health in a way that goes against the norm. I believe routine health checks in VR encourages these young individuals to have a voice for themselves and speak up when advocating for their symptoms. ”

- EMILY OCON, U.S., @HEALTHEMBODY



## HADASSAH OUTLINES META HEALTHCARE



**HADASSAH CULLEN,**  
HEAD OF CONSUMER HEALTH,  
FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.K.

Since the pandemic, we've seen a lot of routine services shift online, and with the introduction of meta-technology, we can only expect this to grow in adoption and sophistication, allowing better accessibility and flexibility to the way people give and receive care. And while this may feel like a step in the wrong direction for some who prefer in-person contact, research suggests that this

might just be the ticket for younger audiences and could also help tackle some of the burden on our over-stretched health services. That said, it's important to remember that while digital health is coming on in leaps and bounds, there are still many services that cannot be delivered virtually, such as blood donation and cervical screening, and we must continue to emphasize the importance of real-world healthcare interaction for both HCPs and younger consumers.

In summary, for healthcare brands looking to dip their toes in the metaverse water, there is certainly opportunity to reach younger audiences and leverage their openness and receptiveness to health messaging in the online world. However, this technology is ever-evolving, and there is still a lot for us to learn about consumer behavior in the metaverse and how brands can engage authentically to trigger real-world behavior change. These learnings will come, so now is the time for brands to lean in and start taking note.

## NEW LANGUAGE, NEW ME

It's tempting to say the young digital natives of today are addicted to their tech, devices and apps. While to some degree that is true, they are also only addicted to the extent that human beings are social creatures, who depend on community and socializing to thrive, not just survive.

“ Gen Zers and their forms of communication are always in a state of flux. For example, ‘Gamer speak’ has, in fact, become a part of everyday communication within the real world due to its immense popularity — terms such as ‘GG’ (Good Game, i.e, good effort) have found usage in everyday conversation irrelevant to its original space. ”

- JAMAL JOHNSON,  
JUNIOR CREATIVE, FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.K.



With new tech comes a new set of rules for engagement. Languages and symbology are constantly being updated, with the past decade of Likes, ❤️, 🤖 and 🤩 evolving into different forms of expression.

[Recent reports](#) on TikTok trends show that this is a generation consuming trends at hyper-speeds. Fourteen days was the average length for audio clips to rise to peak levels, before 18.5 days later reaching 75% decrease in popularity on average. In other words, on average, it took 14 days for clips

to become memes and reach peak shareability — and another 18.5 days of diminishing returns, before the trend had “had its moment.”

Trend culture is moving even quicker than before; think of the weeks this year when we couldn't escape Kate Bush's “Running Up That Hill” or Louis Theroux's “Jiggle Jiggle” meme, before they disappeared as quickly as they came. However, it's important to note that there's just as much value in not jumping into these trends as a brand knowing they disappear as quickly as they start to trend.

We [recently](#) saw Gen Z proclaim two of the most widely used emojis as outdated and out of fashion. The 🖐️ was considered hostile and passive-aggressive, while 🤡 was deemed outdated and a sign of age. It's not just a pushback against older language and seeing the rise of new terms as this generation claims new grounds of identity, sometimes arising from community roots before seeing wider use in the mainstream.





## GRACEY ON KEEPING UP WITH THE LINGO



Even as a ‘young person’ keeping up with language trends is confusing — so it’s not just you. God forbid you don’t scroll for one day, and suddenly you’re out of the loop on the new viral joke or audio clip. Knowing that, brands would benefit by tapping into viral trends/memes with some hesitation. More likely than not, ideas will get caught up in legal review before they can be published and risk being a few days late to the conversation. In my view, it’s usually not worth the effort for a brand to insert themselves into a fleeting cultural moment. Brands also risk speeding up the trend timeline even more by saturating consumers with an onslaught of the same content in their feeds. Brands should consider this question — is there really something to add here or is it just to make the brand come off as relevant?

On the flip side, Gen Z is also more willing to call out where the language comes from and its history. In the late 2010s, many latched onto phrases originated by the queer community (“slay,” “yas,” “queen”), and that language quickly circulated into the mainstream. It made its way onto mugs, T-shirts and countless other items. With Gen Z, however, I’ve noticed that the same words that dominated a few years ago are now ‘cringe.’ Sometimes without acknowledging the background (in this case, the Black trans community), it can sometimes come across as tone-deaf and tokenizing a respective community.



- GRACEY WALLACE,  
SENIOR ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE, FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.S.



## NEW SPACES, NEW EXPECTATIONS

It's not just the language they're communicating with that is evolving, the platforms they do it on and the mentality around those places of socializing are changing as well:

According to studies:

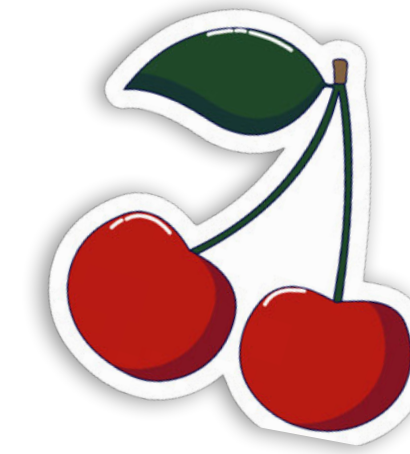
- **1 out of 3 Gen Z gamers want virtual stores to shop in the 3D worlds they explore — this is in line with a lot of sentiment toward making shopping a more inclusive experience for all.**
- **Gen Z players will spend a fifth of their “fun budget” on metaverse goodies — the goodies will be microtransactions for cosmetic items for your avatar as well as other vanity options.**
- **This generation also finds stability and emotional comfort online, with 33% saying they play to build a more idealized version of the world — escapism is a major theme in the metaverse, especially when it can be done with others.**
- **65% believe their online relationships are just as meaningful as their offline ones.**
- **52% of young gamers say they would like to experience making money in the metaverse, while 33% of them would like to experience career development.**



This increased focus on digital social spaces is not just changing their desires on purchasing and relationships, it's impacting their perspectives on key life milestones and ownership.

An impossible housing market for many, combined with increased subscription models in the consumer space, is leaving some to speculate that the future for young people is one where physical ownership is not the defining factor in their identity. Recent research suggests our previously held beliefs aren't carrying the same weight they used to. Only 40% of consumers think home ownership is a stronger signal of prosperity and adulthood now than in the past, and 1 in 5 say they would get married in the metaverse or to a place of worship in the metaverse. These new markers of adulthood, identity and initiation are seeing their own identity change alongside the next generation and will continue to do so as more of the generation take up the technology.

Before even getting to a decentralized future through Web3, young people today are reframing what they consider to be markers of their identity and ownership. A lack of physical ownership doesn't mean a lack of identity — if anything, it means more of an emphasis on the things they are in control of.



In many cases, these digital spaces offer the safe space where young people can thrive to express themselves further. They want to reflect an idealized version of themselves, and with that comes the want and need to build the platform channels they're socializing on, not just using them as intended. But they're also wanting to reflect an idealized version of the world they live in. For a generation focused on sustainability and being eco-conscious, they can both recreate environmentally conscious experiences while also showing the world what it would look like for us to take a step back and put the environment at the forefront.

### BRAND CONSIDERATIONS

**Young consumers can express their identity in various ways within these metaverse experiences at their disposal, but things such as modifying social spaces, updating their “in-game” look and repurposing existing content and culture are only the beginning.**

## DIGITAL SPACE

The digital spaces around them are influencing their behaviors, but it's important for brands to not just look at the space itself but also how young mentalities are shaping them — viewing different purposes for the same space.

When it comes to the metaverse, one thing stands out as a universal truth for many users. Regardless of whether they're a gamer, or someone who simply wants to connect and be part of a community — the metaverse can be a safe place for literally anyone and everyone.

**The metaverse offers young users the chance to enter a better-realized version of reality. One that can foster community, acceptance and companionship. The real world doesn't necessarily offer this for many (not just including young people), so metaverses feel like online safe spaces that can bolster people together. Given the last three years (COVID pandemic), it is easy to see why so many young people feel the need to escape to a place where their wants and needs can be realized.**

One area we see them realize these wants and needs is through their identities. Within the metaverse, the ability to change the aesthetics of one's avatar offers people the ability to manifest their ideal version of self. This is something that is very prevalent within the LGBTQ community, which views the metaverse as a place where their gender identity is something that is not only respected but acknowledged.

For instance, both Twitch and Roblox have developed a strong LGBTQ+ presence, with countless groups being used to share their experiences as queer people and find support, as well as play games and make friends. These groups have become increasingly popular, with some of the most well-known LGBTQ+ communities amassing up to a million members.



## INCLUSIVE SPACES

In a similar vein, Gen Z have welcomed the diversification of their digital environments. One example was the launch of Kami, the world's first digital influencer with Down syndrome. Kami was developed by digital modeling agency The Digitals in collaboration with Down Syndrome International to revolutionize the metaverse and establish it as an inclusive and diverse space accessible to all, especially for individuals with disabilities. With the help of Ellie Goldstein, a model with Down syndrome who has been an advocate and ambassador for models with disabilities, over 100 young women shared their experiences of having Down syndrome to accurately gauge and represent their physicalities alongside their personalities.

As a digital influencer, Kami will participate in global brand activations, campaigns, and events across the fashion industry, as well as events such as the Paralympic Games. Kami, whose name was chosen for its derivation from "perfection," is emblematic of a global shift toward the mainstream digital inclusion of people with disabilities as equals, who in the real world are so often forgotten about or excluded.

“ I loved working with Kami. I think the idea was amazing and shows our followers and others that having Down syndrome doesn't stop us from living a great life. Kami pushes inclusion and representation and gets the message across about our condition. The world needs virtual influencers like Kami and real people like me to get across to people that we are human as well. We have feelings; we can achieve. Sometimes we may be a bit slower at learning but we can do most things. The future is good for Kami as she can continue to teach people about our condition. ”

- ELLIE GOLDSTEIN,  
MODEL, U.K.




**REBECCA BRADFIELD,**  
ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE,  
FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.K.

With the emergence of the metaverse and Web3, there is enormous capacity for positive change. Decentralized blockchain tech allows us to center human experiences, and for underserved and underrepresented groups to shape their development in a much greater capacity. That said, this also gives way for the dark underbelly of the internet to rear its ugly head too, allowing for more personal and brutal attacks on women, queer and trans people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and other vulnerable people. When working with Web3 we need to platform and promote diverse voices to ensure that these people and groups are not, yet again, marginalized. They need to not only be fully and accurately represented, but also able to access these products and communities that can be such wonderful facilitators of change. The development of Kami does exactly this. She signposts the mainstreaming of previously overlooked and marginalized people in our digital communities, and overall responses to her launch have been warm, friendly, and inviting. These responses are emblematic of our changing priorities, as Gen Z is wanting to develop progressive and inclusive communities and connect beyond a superficial level — if not seeing this as a fundamental prerequisite for any future developments in online communities and social media. **It is therefore vitally important that brands now follow in Kami's footsteps and seize the opportunities to help Gen Zers realize new, fully inclusive digital environments. And, with the development of the metaverse and Web3, they now have an invaluable opportunity to learn from previous exclusionary mistakes and seize this opportunity before our modern world and technologies run away from us as they always seem to do.**

## **NEMESIS ON MOLDING IDENTITIES ONLINE**



I'm a beautiful trans woman, and that person lives and breathes both off and on camera. Some people identify as extroverted or introverted, with no in between. I see myself as both. Nemesis is my online drag persona, but Casey is a great person with a charming personality, not very different from the person depicted on screen. All that is different is a couple of eyelashes and foundation. I will also say that my heart is very sensitive, though, and it's just natural to put your guard up when you put yourself out there for others to perceive.

Twitch is my full-time job, and I love my career, but I need to put my walls up for security reasons. There are a bunch of people that are willing to tear you down. Whether that is a random troll or someone who wants to take advantage of you. Having an online persona allows me to protect myself, no different than the average person putting themselves first. I have to protect my peace and my heart. Nevertheless, that does not mean there's a difference in my identity when the camera is on or off. I can confidently say I'm proud of the person I am today, and I'm happy with the woman I've grown into. 

- NEMESIS LACROIX, U.S., @NEMESISLACROIX



## **FUN SPACE (GAMING/ENTERTAINMENT/RETAIL)**

It's easy to look at some of the findings in this report and conclude that Gen Z is the "online-only generation." However, it highlights young people's willingness to not only live part of their lives online (keyword being part) but also embrace the metaverse in its entirety. The metaverse doesn't just offer "new experiences" — within these virtual/digital worlds that young people find themselves in are opportunities to make real, lasting relationships with people they may never meet face to face. That is a huge draw for a generation that is having to be the bastions of hope for sustainability, the climate crisis, equality and so much more.

As great as the gaming world is, it does have its pitfalls. Seedy loot boxes that target impressionable kids and vulnerable adults, publishing companies that are willing to have developers work under awful conditions, and online harassment from gamers toward other gamers. These are just some of the things holding gaming back and it remains to be seen how industry leaders can address the issues at hand and foster a positive environment for the next generation of gamers who will have access to cutting-edge hardware, game design, new communities and more.

“ Twitch isn't just a gaming platform. Analytics have shown that the “Just Chatting” category (a section of Twitch streamers that just sit and talk to their viewers) has the most watched and viewership out of any other video game streamed on the platform. Overall, Twitch is just a great resource to meet new people and socialize, and there are so many great mechanics on the website to help everyone involved. There is some progress to be made, especially for the safety of LGBTQIA+ and POC creators, but overall the website lends to creating bonds that are unbreakable. ”

- NEMESIS LACROIX, U.S., @NEMESISLACROIX



“ I truly believe that gaming will always be a place in which the impossible becomes realizable. No matter who you are or where you are from, the spaces, stories, characters and worlds it creates will leave a lasting impact that will be felt for years to come. ”

- JAMAL JOHNSON,  
JUNIOR CREATIVE, FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.K.



## SERIOUS SPACE (CAREER, EDUCATION, SAFETY)

Young people are even using their creativity in metaverse spaces to not just find new ways of interacting with each other, but to generate career opportunities and income through platforms such as Roblox.

We're anticipating continued impacts on Gen Z with the current state of the global economy, which could continue to result in their search for alternative income.

For example, the NFT space is a bubble that has been deflated to slightly more realistic proportions in recent times. Looking past the Bored Ape NFT and other gimmicky uses of NFT art, future art scenes (whether music, visual, etc.) will have more direct links to their work and transactions with consumers. For artists, this will result in cutting out the middleman, resulting in further profits and income in a time when they're struggling against the backdrop of the cost-of-living crisis. A future museum may have a variety of artists on display, with individual royalties going straight to the artists depending on how (or how many times) audiences interact with the artwork.

In recent times, we've seen the advancement of AI technologies (such as ChatGPT-3), with the potential to significantly disrupt industries and workflows. [Microsoft](#) has invested for the past three years, recently announcing a multiyear, multibillion-dollar investment with the creator of the tech, OpenAI. From drafting

emails to song lyrics, the technology can be "talked to" and continually prompted via text chat to deliver what is being asked of it. While ChatGPT-3 is only at an initial demo stage, discussion around its next iteration (ChatGPT-4) has already shown that it will be exponentially more powerful (1 trillion+ parameters, compared to 75 billion on ChatGPT-3) and the potential impact it could have on the next generation is clear.

**Beyond career, the ongoing educational opportunities are multiple — just as social media has largely replaced search engines for Gen Z, the metaverse will be a space they can turn to learn — about health, finances, themselves — the list is endless.**

**Lastly, there is hope that with decentralization and internet use no longer restricted, instead controlled by giant central organizations, trust will be increased in future generations.**

**Although there are a lot of exciting things on the horizon when it comes to this technology, brands and organizations must be wary of what this could mean for future youth employment.**



## AI SPACE

There are already articles saying that jobs in roles such as blogging and copywriting could cease to exist with such technology, and companies such as BuzzFeed have already started incorporating this AI tech into their content. ChatGPT is free after all, and people aren't; companies may try and cut corners using this technology which could put young people starting out in certain professions at risk. Only time will tell how AI tech continues to revolutionize the world, and it's hard to predict whether it poses a real threat to young people — so we decided to ask the tech itself:

### CHATGPT, AI TECHNOLOGY

#### *When asked if AI poses a threat to young people:*

“AI technology itself does not pose a threat to young people, but like any technology, it can be used for good or bad purposes. Misuse of AI can lead to negative consequences, such as online privacy violations, cyberbullying, and the spread of misinformation. However, when used responsibly and ethically, AI has the potential to greatly benefit society, including young people, by improving healthcare, education, and overall quality of life. Ultimately, it is up to individuals, organizations, and governments to ensure that AI is developed and used in ways that prioritize the well-being and protection of all individuals, especially young people.”

#### *When asked about the great technological challenges facing young people today:*

“Young people today face a unique set of technological challenges, including issues around online privacy and security, balancing screen time with physical activities, combating cyberbullying and fake news, and staying current with the constantly evolving digital landscape. These challenges require digital literacy, media literacy, and the development of critical thinking skills to navigate the technology-driven world.

“Although ChatGPT tech offers ‘correct’ answers, it’s difficult to know whether it can truly give that ineffable emotive lens that humans offer. When it comes to our young people, they are still developing, evolving and shape-shifting. They are inundated with thoughts and feelings that they like to share with the world, replicating such raw emotion and exploring more abstract concepts may take some time (if it’s even possible!) to truly crack in the tech-sphere.”

#### *When asked “What is love?”:*

“Love is an intense feeling of affection and caring toward someone, characterized by strong emotions, attachment, and a commitment to maintain a relationship. It is often described as a complex mix of emotions, behaviors, and beliefs associated with strong feelings of affection, protectiveness, warmth, and respect for another person.”





## AUTHENTIC ACTION > AUTHENTIC EMPATHY

The youth of today are in the middle of trying to navigate through an identity crisis, struggling to work out when, why, and how to act and react to ongoing stressors around them, all while being influenced and shaped by internal and external cultures, and subcultures that are emerging via social media, influencers, peers, family — the list is truly endless.

As their identities are more fluid, more diverse and more evolved than ever before, brands that don't invest in getting to know how this young cohort are feeling will not resonate. However, simply understanding how they feel, or taking an empathetic view of young people, will only take you so far.

Empathy undoubtedly creates a stronger and deeper connection with a youth audience, it humanizes relationships and can cultivate loyalty and community with this next generation of customers. But applying empathy alone to their real-life anxieties and fears is never going to cut it for a generation who are feeling more hopeless than ever before. Sitting on empathy alone signals care, but not correction. And this is what young people are looking and yearning for.

**This is where authenticity takes center stage. It may have become a buzzword we use time and time again in our communications, but there is no greater example of trust and active change when you live and breathe what you preach authentically. Being authentic is a commitment to making long-term change, no matter how expensive or lengthy. Being authentic is unwavering, uncompromising, and unstoppable. Ultimately, the two aren't mutually exclusive, and in this climate, we're not always going to get it right, but practicing empathetic action while prioritizing authenticity gives young people the best start and support for the future.**

With our topics in mind, using sector experts and a panel of young people, we want to help brands and organizations take authentic action in order to align with the values and identities of the youth of today.

Below are principles and takeouts to guide brands and organizations on best practices for reaching a young and complex audience. All takeouts have been crafted through collaborative workshops with our Gen Z participants and experts.

# SECTION 3:

# WHY IT

# MATTERS





### **BE TREND-AWARE, NOT TREND-LED**

Keeping a finger on the trend pulse is a vital part of understanding your youth audience landscape and can help you identify new ways to engage and stay relevant with your target consumer. However, it's important that you don't lose sight of the values, purpose, and personality on which your brand is built. Before jumping on the next big thing, ask yourself: Does this trend compliment your brand's core purpose, or does it conflict with it? Not every new trend will present you with an opportunity, and that's ok.

### **LEAN INTO INDEPENDENT EXPERTISE:**

Gen Z are no strangers to misinformation. There is no end to the advice readily available to them on important health and well-being topics; however, the challenge is sorting fact from fiction. Before you engage with new messaging, particularly regarding sensitive topics such as weight loss or aesthetic procedures, consider who your target audience would consider credible and a trusted source of information. It might be a nonprofit organization, healthcare professional, an influencer, or a member of the public with lived experience. You might want to leverage them as brand or independent spokespeople, or simply engage with them for strategic counsel. Either way, the right partnership is key.

## CONSISTENT DIVERSITY ACROSS ALL CHANNELS

In all sectors, we are seeing commercial benefits and greater brand affinity when brands use diverse influencers who align with their brands, and brand backlash for those that don't. For instance, brands in the beauty industry have been accused of fostering a toxic culture where young people of color in particular feel like they need to change their appearance to fit into white and Western cultures. On the flip side, brands such as Fenty Beauty and newcomer REFY Beauty have been praised for showing a diverse spectrum of models and real people on their platforms and websites, making their brands feel more accessible to their unique and varied audience base.

But consistency is key. Brands that aren't following through on their diversity promise across all channels are opening themselves up to criticism. Rare Beauty by Selena Gomez was recently condemned online for not showing diversity on their actual website versus social channels. Too often we see "diverse" Instagram channels, but this has not been replicated or truly authenticated within the business itself, and as a result, young people are rejecting them.

Diversity should also be reflected in body type in brands. We are seeing more and more brands use mannequins that reflect real figures, but they are still few and far between. Introducing more colors into the typically white mannequin is also a simple but effective shift in beauty and body standards. While many retailers use white mannequins to showcase their clothing, it may be inadvertently sending a message that their clothing has been created for white people, which is clearly alienating.

Ultimately, brands should listen and learn from their audiences of color and learn from experts who have lived-in experiences to mitigate risk. Using platforms such as [The Black Beauty Effect](#), which teaches brands how to build their websites and how to hire talent, etc., is a great way for brands to authentically connect and cater to all races and ethnicities.



## INTRODUCE NEW PLATFORM CHANNELS: BEREAL

An app that brands should think about introducing into their channel mix to buck some of the trends discussed is [BeReal](#). Knowing that Gen Z value authenticity and reject social norms that don't align, BeReal could be the perfect antidote to the overstylized aesthetic of other social media platforms. It works by sending a notification at a random time to prompt users to take a spontaneous snapshot from both the front- and back-facing cameras of their smartphone.

In doing this, it shows what you're doing alongside your reaction. The random notification almost gamifies the experience, as users are only given two minutes to respond. The no influencers, no ads and no edits, coupled with the one post per day ethos of the platform means that content is as real as it can be. At present, there are no in-app advertising opportunities, but there's hope that this will change in the future so that brands can start being present in this space. We're already seeing brands experimenting. Chipotle was the first brand to create an account and post a discount code giving the first 100 people who used it a free meal.

With issues like the cost-of-living crisis, and ongoing body-beauty debates plaguing the minds of young people everywhere, brands will often lean into platforms such as Instagram and TikTok to respond. Introducing BeReal into their channel mix could be an authentic way for brands and organizations to make noise and truly connect with their young audience who are constantly seeking help and guidance.

Financial anxiety doesn't feel like it's going anywhere anytime soon, and brands and organizations may struggle to find ways to make a real impact with young people. However, there are steps below they can take to help young people see that they are doing everything they can; they are not just taking empathetic action, but tackling authentic actions.



## SUPERCHARGE VALUES AND BENEFITS AND THINK ABOUT YOUR REMOTE WORKERS

- Not all young people will be working in hybrid working environments, but those that do may find themselves stuck in a financial cycle without having the confidence or know-how to get out of it. 44% of employers admit that their staff are not fully aware of the benefits they offer or don't fully understand them, according to research from [GRiD](#), the industry body for the group risk protection sector. Often companies have countless benefits and initiatives yet don't seem to do enough to celebrate them.
- When it comes to remote workers who can't reap these benefits, how else can we bring them into the fold so they don't feel isolated? For many young people, they have spent the majority of their professional life working in remote conditions during a cost-of-living crisis where budgets have been cut. Although they have the benefit of working elsewhere, our research suggests that many are living outside of London, not by choice. They shouldn't have to miss out on the simple additions that make a difference.
- We've seen countless studies also showing that young people will leave work forces if they don't share the same values as them. Although this is highly documented, we want to highlight this takeout as one that brands should be prioritizing. Why? Because sharing your values means understanding what is at the root of their unease, and allows you to then put an appropriate response in place. Whether that's putting in the appropriate guardrails to supply guidance or providing the solutions for those who need them, listening is only part of the equation. Organizations must take those shared values and ensure they act on them and look to build upon them, or else risk losing valuable, passionate members of their workforce.

### #Stat

**TWO-THIRDS OF YOUNG EMPLOYEES ARE CONSIDERING THEIR**

**JOBS IN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS BECAUSE THEIR EMPLOYER**

**DOESN'T SHARE THE SAME VALUES AS THEM.**

(Click through for full source)\*



## UTILIZE DYNAMIC SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

As the cost-of-living crisis remains a source of stress and anxiety for families and young people, many are turning to unlikely social media platforms for advice, and brands have taken note. Videos around energy-saving hacks such as showering at work, cutting back on food waste, and budget recipes that go further have gone viral over the last year and young people in particular are finding comfort and relief in this type of content across many social media platforms..

Research by [One Poll](#) found that 33% of people now choose social media as the best place to get financial advice amid the cost-of-living crisis. [Sky News reports](#) that those aged 12-17 said they have sourced their best money-saving tips from TikTok and say they have valued this kind of advice much more than what they get from their parents or school.



“ As more people seek financial information online, it’s important to us that we help our community access the right support and advice, especially if they may struggle to access it elsewhere. ”

- SOCIAL MEDIA SPOKESPERSON



## ACTIVE AND TANGIBLE FINANCIAL ADVICE

- 44% of Gen Z don't know how much they need to save to live their desired lifestyle in retirement, despite the fact that many don't believe they will have money left to retire comfortably. They are also much more eager to move up the ranks and to seek promotions, with 49% wanting management and leadership training from their employers to help them achieve this quickly.
- Now more than ever, employers and organizations have to take responsibility for their young employees (grads, people with lower wages). For example, this could mean providing them with financial advice sessions on a quarterly basis for free or at a discounted rate, not limited to just how to save and budget.
- Brands and organizations simply need to ask young employees what they want to see more of on a regular basis so they can see that they are being catered to. For example, sessions could include conversations and tips around pensions, ISAs, mortgage rates, interest rates, and investments so young workers feel like they can manage their money in a smart and independent manner that works best for them.



### #Stat

**73% OF GEN Z ASK THEIR RELATIVES**


**FOR FINANCIAL HELP AND ADVICE.**

(Click through for full source)\*

## IMPLEMENT FINANCIAL LITERACY INITIATIVES TO ENABLE FINANCIAL FREEDOM

“ When I was 20, I thought, how on earth am I ever going to have enough money to retire, so I started investing. ”

- DAVID WILSON, U.S. @IAMDAVIDJWILSON

 **Content Creator**



- There’s been an enormous swell of financial influencers (AKA fin-fluencers) across social media, professing ways in which young people can establish “financial freedom.” Young people have been lapping up this content, with #finfluencer racking up 20 billion views. Research also shows that 34% of Gen Zers say they get information on banking and finance from TikTok and YouTube.
- This rise in consuming fin-fluencer content demonstrates that they’re eager to develop the financial literacy to build their wealth and sustain their financial futures online. We’re seeing that they are bypassing the scant-at-best personal finance lessons at school (that is, if they have them at all!) and seeking to streamline their know-how and maximize their financial gain through bite-size and easily consumable financial advice straight from the horse’s mouth, i.e., content by influencers who have been there done that and bought the T-shirt with all the money they’ve made through investments and saving.
- The effects of this are already beginning to be seen: Between 2020 and 2021, 1 in 6 Gen Zers said they had invested for the first time, either in stocks, or in cryptocurrency, over one-third have already saved more than £1,000, and they’re the generation least likely to have debt.
- Buy Now, Pay Later companies are also giving Gen Zers more flexibility to buy, but many young people are damaging their credit scores by missing payment deadlines. Additional financial advice when experimenting in this space is critical to help young people feel financially literate.
- Ultimately, young people are yearning for seamless ways to learn and don’t always have the time to introduce this into their lives. Employers, brands and organizations can help make this a priority so that it becomes part of a young person’s training, ensuring that there are in-house experts who can facilitate this desire to safeguard their financial future.





## ENCOURAGE HONEST CONVERSATIONS WITH FRIENDS

- The cost-of-living crisis has changed their social spending habits. They're seeking cheaper, or even free social events. But they have also noted a new need to have frank and open discussions with their friends to understand each other's financial situations, and then adjust their plans to work for everyone. They don't want to be defined by their money; they just want to be able to hang out with each other without worry.
- We are taught in our professional careers that it's rude or inappropriate to talk openly about money. This is still the case for many generations. However, our research is indicating that, in fact, young people are finding comfort and relieving part of their financial anxiety by talking openly with friends.
- This is proven by responses from our finance influencer, Monique Jones, who asked her followers if they benefit from sharing with friends, with one user commenting: "I try to let my friends know I'm saving money and we try to opt for lower cost/free social events."
- Brands and organizations should recognize that encouraging an open dialogue between young people and their friends is becoming the new normal.



## MENTAL HEALTH DAYS AND ALLOWANCE/NON-TAX BENEFITS

- A third of Gen Z employees stay at home because they cannot afford to come into the office, and we're seeing that this is having a negative effect on their health. Our panel of youth experts has expressed a need for employers to start looking into providing mental health days or training to help Gen Zers cope and manage their day-to-day stress and pressure. This is supported by wider evidence suggesting that [82% of Gen Z](#) would find it beneficial to have mental health days or training.
- We are seeing brands and organizations wanting to see more people in the office without taking away hybrid benefits. Young people have also expressed the desire to work in more dynamic and social work environments so that they can benefit professionally. As we know, cost is a barrier for young people to come to work; therefore, companies could try and introduce nontaxable benefits. Subsidized lunches could extend to dinners, compensation for transport costs or covering a certain allowance for buses, tubes, car (petrol) fees can all make a difference and help young people feel valued.
- Brands who can introduce positive training into mental health days may see long-term benefits in their young workforce who are yearning for support but aren't necessarily sure where to turn to receive it.



# THE NEXT CHAPTER OF STORYTELLING ACTING

Stories bring people together, shift opinions, entertain masses, inform, educate, and endear customers to brands and stakeholders to companies. Successful communication for businesses means continuously adapting to shifts in an ever-changing communication landscape brought about by increasingly rapid innovation cycles.

From the first-ever fax machines and pagers, through to personal blogs and Myspace, TikTok and BeReal, and now to Web3, the metaverse, and truly autonomous AI — connection and stories are a fundamental part of the human condition.

**With the technology we possess today (and in the expected future), brands have almost unlimited opportunity to take their stories to new heights and introduce them to new audiences — they can “story-act” with increasingly immersive abilities.**

The technology behind Web3 metaverse experiences is poised to radically change how we look at connecting for business, play, socializing and so much more that hasn't even been realized yet. However, when it comes to bringing

these emerging technologies into a modern communications experience, brands must focus first and foremost on solving business and marcom challenges. Not forcing an innovative solution just for the sake of innovation, but instead applying practical innovation that allows them to expand experiences, skillsets and knowledge while solving brand challenges through emerging technology.



## 3-STEP GUIDE TO STORY-ACTING

Brands can look at three key areas to elevate their brand narrative and match the bar of expectations around these innovations:

### 1. THE EXPECTATION FOR KEEPING UP WITH RAPID BUT TANGIBLE INNOVATION

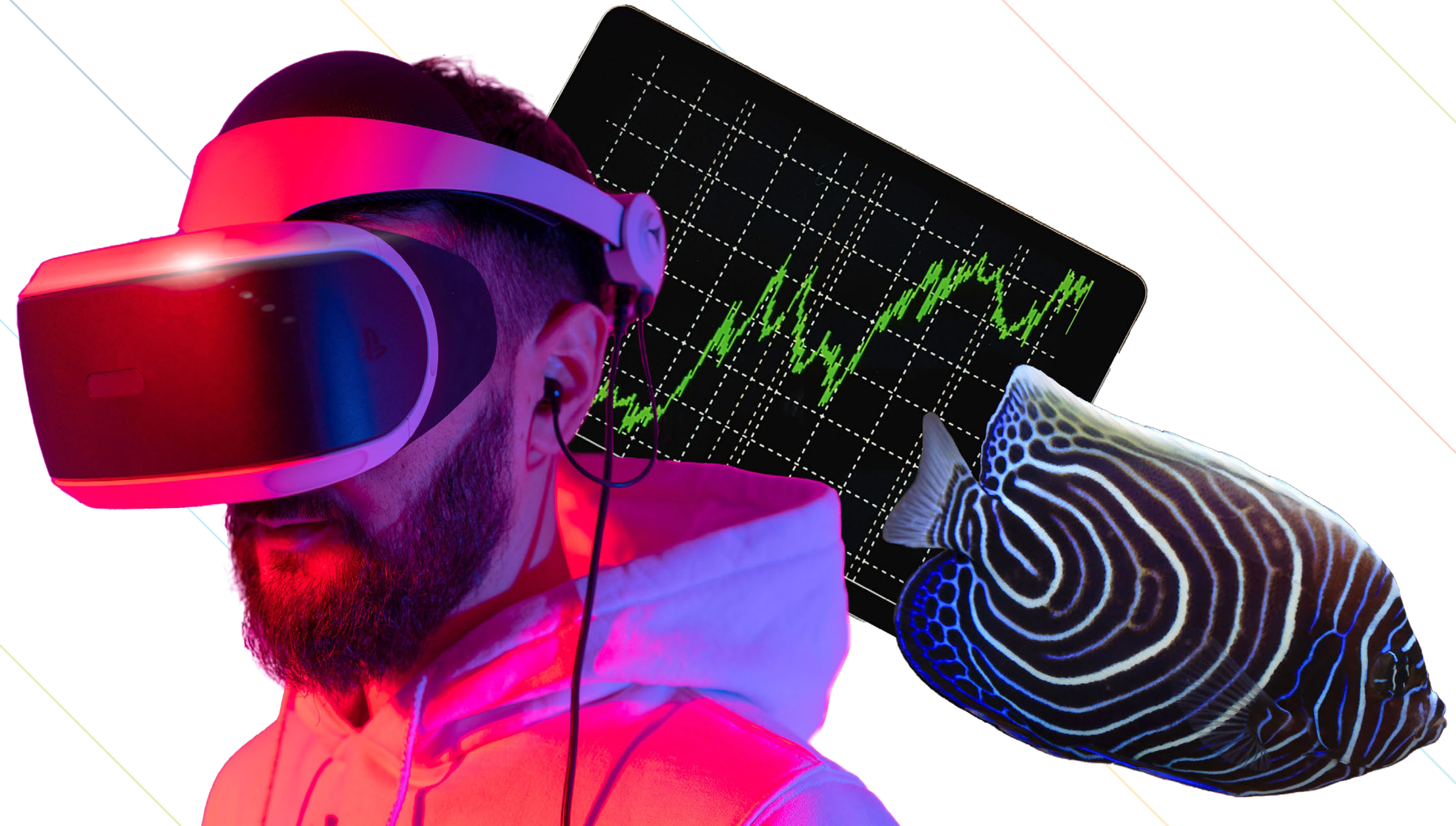
Stakeholders expect brands to innovate by moving purposefully and carefully with a full view and understating of the unintended consequences innovation brings about. Don't just seek innovation, seek innovation with purpose that fixes issues, systems and brings a higher quality of life to your audiences.

### 2. THE EXPECTATION ON BRANDS TO PROVIDE A PLATFORM FOR LIVING OUT PURPOSE

It's not enough for a brand to make and sell good products—people expect their employer to be more than just a career and a paycheck. They need a platform to realize their true potential for themselves and their role in making the world a better place.

### 3. THE EXPECTATION ON BRANDS' ACTIONS TO BE ALIGNED TO STAKEHOLDER VALUES

Expectation for actions grounded in authenticity and transparency—now more than ever, stakeholders expect brands to be vocal on where they stand and what they stand for, beyond corporate narrative grounded in corporate action — in a way that extends beyond how brands do business to who they associate with.



## NEW LANGUAGE, NEW YOU

If young people's language is evolving — does that mean we need to audit our language, or introduce new spaces and ways to reach them?

The metaverse is changing the ways in which Gen Z communicate — not just by providing new platforms but consequently also changing their linguistic behaviors and patterns. Despite best intentions, it can be challenging to reach audiences with a new tone of voice when it is not authentically matched with your own brand voice or heritage. Catering to young audiences can result in trying to keep up with language and trends that are moving faster than ever and may not authentically reflect your brand.

**Brands face a choice in trying to evolve themselves and their brand language, or utilizing the audience themselves to speak.**

**Just as young people today try to find a middle ground, businesses too can balance long-term evolution of self, with careful consideration on changes and how they will play out, while still providing ease to new platforms for youth audiences to have their voice and expression amplified through short-term collaboration. With the landscape around the tech highly subject to change, intention behind the language (where it was said, how it was delivered, and by whom) can make all the difference.**



## HELP THE METAVERSE MAKE BIG STRIDES BY TAKING BRAND BABY STEPS

While the metaverse and Web3 remain in the early stages, not yet fully accessible to the masses, there remains a huge opportunity for brands to explore and move into this space and pioneer new ways of engaging with consumers in a way that is genuine and honest to brand identity.

The fleeting nature of youth trends today means it is so important that brands are constantly reviewing with their finger on the pulse. It also doesn't mean reacting to everything in sight, but surveying the community and knowing when to authentically engage.

On the flip side of fleeting trends, as they spend more time in these spaces, we're seeing more long-term language preferences evolve into mainstream use. The memes they use to communicate may be of-the-moment, but we are also seeing more permanence through their language preferences, too. Brands will need to balance the challenge of knowing when something is a trend and when something is a preference in order to communicate organically with this audience.

## LOST? DECENTRALIZE TO INCENTIVIZE

It is important for brands to understand that this is not just about talking or sharing information/content online, but actively creating and collaborating with each other to create decentralized communities.

Brands need to reflect the growing value being placed on transparency and community by Gen Z. While the virtual reality for these communities will take years, brands can begin cultivating the grassroots and early-adopter movements to help shape and steer the technology by leaning on the opinions and beliefs of its consumers. Just as surveys are taken to revitalize brick-and-mortar offerings and increase footfall, it's important to understand what consumers are expecting in the space — even if they don't fully understand what's possible to get a sense of where they would like it to go.

**In contrast to physical stores, experiences will not be centralized, and every consumer's journey may be entirely unique. Consumer spaces in the future will be moldable, and the earlier brands can start to develop a more decentralized relationship and let loyal consumers steer the ship (at appropriate times, and in reasonable measure), and then the better prepared they will be for a Web3 future.**



## PROTECTIVE SERVERS SHOULD HELP, PROTECT AND SERVE

The metaverse has enormous potential for being a purpose-driven power for good. However, to ensure this, we must work collectively to ensure that the dark underbelly is not given the space to breathe.

Brands should ensure that all their engagements with metaverse are not just in line with governance and legal regulations, but engage with consumers, and if young, their parents/guardians to help them avoid or navigate their way out. It's also not enough to start well with good intentions; brands need to start as they mean to continue. Continuously updating their offering, their positioning and whether brand experiences are keeping up with industry standards and the innovations coming out of the space.

## PURPOSE-DRIVEN POWER

Metaverse, blockchain technologies, NFTs and cryptocurrencies are huge energy drains. Intel believes that our global computing capabilities need to be [1,000 times more powerful](#) to sustain the

metaverse. To maximize engagement and reduce backlash from eco-conscious Gen Z audiences, brands need to avoid flagrantly disregarding these concerns and, ideally, be on the constant journey of educating both internally and externally on the challenges of innovation vs. sustainability. While it will be impossible to avoid certain energy use in this space for the foreseeable future, brands can at least show audiences that a conscious effort is being made to balance that innovative tech and experience with the generational concerns around the environment.

## POP THE BUBBLE

For some brands, it's no use pretending to be experts in the field when your brand simply shouldn't be activating in the metaverse or releasing an NFT. We've seen a certain amount of the hype bubble reduce in the past year, as we've seen cryptocurrency scams and crashes, and lukewarm reactions to various metaverse experiences. Brands shouldn't feel pressured to always act as if they completely understand the

space, or try to create a virtual world or brand mascot avatar. This also opens up the opportunity for brands to seek direction from their audience and allow communities to provide directions on where they would like it to go. For some brands, activating in the space is completely justified and relevant to their industry, their objectives and what is technically possible for them in 2023. But for other brands, the upcoming years will be just as much about getting metaverse-ready, and educating and preparing internally, rather than claiming those first-mover bragging rights.

## KEEPING UP WITH KAMI

Gen Z are breaking down barriers and, more than ever before, are embracing inclusivity and wider representation within their digital environments. Kami is emblematic of these developments, and is hopefully the tipping point for other brands to replicate and expand these positive developments to normalize diversity within the metaverse and Web3 as it develops and seeps into the mainstream.



A FINAL

FEW WORDS

FROM OUR  
EXPERTS



## CLOSING STATEMENT



**CANDACE PETERSON**, GLOBAL MANAGING DIRECTOR, BRAND MARKETING, FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.S.

The youth of today are carrying a psychological bag that weighs more than we realize. When you peek inside, it's loaded down with dueling stressors — a few packs of identity crisis, a tube of financial insecurity, a vial of climate change, and scattered bits and bobs of conflict, media noise, peers, influence and, where did it go? Oh, yes, there it is...a dose of hopelessness. Like anyone, what people carry in their bag is reflective of who they are. And in this case, the significance of their weight is profound, if not all that visible. Layer on the observation that their identities are more fluid, more diverse and more evolved than ever before, brands that don't invest in getting to know the complexities of how this young cohort are truly feeling will miss the mark with them. And while applying empathy certainly signals care, empathy alone won't help drive a straight line down a crooked path. And this, it seems, is what young people are yearning for.

That's where honest-to-goodness candidness and realness can take center stage. When a brand is honest, forthcoming, candid, and above all, real in their commitments to making long-term change, no matter how expensive or lengthy, they become a force. Fall and skin your knees out of the gate?

Fine. Be the first to admit it? Undying support. They will not only want to root for you, but get behind you and push you forward. So, as the youth of today's bag continues to have new formulations of pressures dropped into it every day, we believe organizations that take real, authentic action to align with their values and identities will help lighten the load and make a real difference in making meaningful connections.



## THE POWER OF INFLUENCE: REAL WORLD VS. VIRTUAL WORLD



**LIZ HAWKS,**  
HEAD OF FH INFLUENCER, FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.S.

For Gen Z, influence has never been defined by social reach alone. And to them, influence has never existed only in social platforms. Those personalities driving conversation online also use their influence offline to engage this generation in the places and spaces to which they turn.

Gen Z can see through a mega or celebrity tier influencer endorsing a product, brand or service that isn't authentic to what the influencer would organically talk about or pay attention to. Instead, Gen Z are engaging with content developed by any tier influencer that resonates with their interests and passion areas. The very term "influence" for this group goes well beyond product and brand endorsement into coalition and movement-building. They are pulling in followers by understanding how to game platform algorithms and wrap their content in education, entertainment or utility.

They expect that a sponsoring brand has done its due diligence to use audience-first data, ensuring the influencer him/herself isn't just mirroring the brand's target audience but that the influencer's followers also mirror that target, creating the best fit and most relevant partnership.

And determining "best fit" isn't a one-sided proposition. Gen Z influencers will research potential brand sponsors to understand their position (and action) on various social issues. They may decide not to partner with a brand that isn't already walking the talk on issues that matter to Gen Z, and providing proof that the brand already has a track record of supporting societal, political and philanthropic causes that are also in the best interests of their generation. With the right approach, influencer marketing can help solve for these needs, meet audience expectations, and be a powerful force for good.



**BEN VARQUEZ,**  
MANAGING DIRECTOR, YOUTH MARKETING CONNECTION, U.S.

Gen Z came of age as the first internet and social media-native generation — born with all of the world's information at their fingertips and seemingly endless possibilities to chart their own paths and decide what influences them. The idea of celebrities-know-best suddenly felt outdated, and young consumers began seeking more authentic relationships to channel their aspirations. Simultaneously, social media was making Gen Z celebrities more accessible and relatable, while also having the potential to transform everyday consumers into Gen Z celebrities.

Today, Gen Z consumers have more autonomy and choice around where they invest their time and energy, and how they engage with the people and communities they want to be influenced by — communities largely made up of their peers. Influence no longer aligns with arbitrary status, but rather Gen Z looks up to influencers of all types, identifying everything from

shared values, interests, and passions to common traits and orientations, helpful skills, and interesting knowledge. They are also proving the power of nano- and niche-level peer influence, especially on emerging platforms, through more raw, authentic and relatable content that doesn't appeal to everyone. They crave authentic firsthand recommendations told through a storytelling lens vs. the glossy perfection of the mature millennial Instagram aesthetic. The best thing brands can do when it comes to Gen Z influencers is to empower the right people and get out of the way.

# THE KALEIDOSCOPE OF YOUTH AND IDENTITY NEEDS A REBALANCE



**V VARILLY,**  
HEAD OF YOUTH AND PARTNERSHIP, FLEISHMANHILLARD, U.K.

Our young people today are defined as creators and change-makers. They are alert, aware and constantly questioning, searching and even demanding explanations to make sense of their world. Their identity is a complex and evolving kaleidoscope, and asking “WHY” is at the heart of their quest for answers.

Even after they receive answers, they are dwelling and replaying. On the whole, this may be viewed as positive news, after all, questions = progress, and that’s how the world moves forward. However, this obsession to question and find solutions is causing significant stress and anxiety on this young generation, who have arguably not yet even had the chance to live.

It begs the question, why are we constantly unloading and projecting the world’s problems onto the youth of today? Perhaps it’s a subconscious passing of our problems onto the next generation — when instead, we should be demanding more answers from those presently in power and giving breathing space to the younger generations so they can be “young” again.

The important safety of expression is at risk of being lost in our younger generations, where they should be able to grow and find their identity through expressing themselves, trying things out, and perhaps most importantly, failing and learning—all in the safety of being “young.” It is this kind of experimentation that is required to unlock future innovations and new conversations.

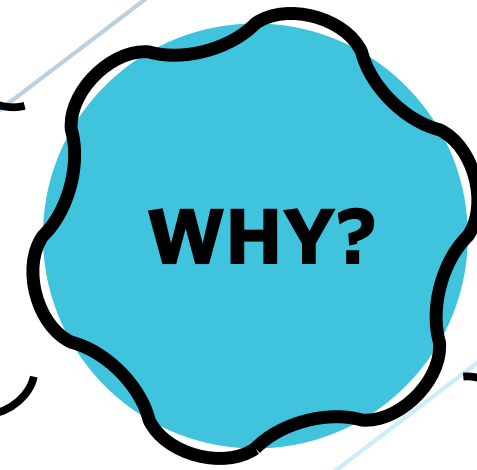
This is particularly critical when you

think about Generation Alpha, who are starting to gain more traction. The first generation born entirely within the 21st century (2010-2025), the most technologically integrated generation of our lifetime who once again has inherited a whole host of crises, from food insecurity to a dying planet. But new research suggests that despite being made up of children 9 years old and younger, they are already committed to saving the planet.

Of course, there is hope and positivity knowing our world’s overall health is at the top of young agendas. But as the world gets worse, are we going to see a future of toddlers who are terrified about living? What can we do now, to soften the landing for future generations as they cross cultural issues?

**WHY IS THE WORLD FALLING APART?**

**WHY DO I NEED TO GET GOOD GRADES?**



**WHY DO I FEEL MENTALLY STRAINED?**

**WHY DO I NOT FIT IN?**

**#Stat**

**67% OF 6 TO 9 YEAR OLDS SAY THAT SAVING THE PLANET WILL**

**BE THE CENTRAL MISSION OF THEIR CAREERS IN THE FUTURE.**

(Click through for full source)\*

**FROM GENERATION WHY TO GENERATION WHY NOT**

Although our young people are inherently inquisitive and pragmatic, should we be teaching them that you don't have to make sense of the world or feel the pressure to improve the world around you all the time? And actually, it's better if you incorporate more play, real connection and middle-ground opinions into your world because ... it breaks the cycle of WHY, and breaks society's expectation of who you're supposed to be and where you belong. In effect, it forces them to ask "Why not?" instead.

A "why not" attitude can help young people adopt a positive outlook. As Dr. Seuss said, fun is good. The benefits of laughter alone include improved immune functioning, stress relief, increased tolerance for pain, improved cardiovascular health, reduced anxiety, and improved mood. So the question is, how do brands and organizations do more to ease this load?

Luckily there are more outlets and platforms that young people can lean into to escape, disconnect and exercise a more playful outlook on life via a "why not" attitude, but even that comes with a barrage of criticism and somewhat sensationalist media coverage.

**BALANCE OF BOTH?**

Perhaps, rather than trying to break what feels like an inherent "cycle of why," we should be supporting them more so that they can fulfill both desires of being a change-maker and a child, embracing their multiple worlds, blurred lines and layers while helping to relieve the burden that's been bestowed upon them. Surely in doing this, we are allowing them to be their true authentic selves.

**WHY NOT FLY AND EXPERIENCE THE WORLD?**

**WHY NOT SWITCH MY PHONE OFF FOR A WEEK?**

**WHY NOT?**

**WHY NOT ESCAPE INTO THE METAVERSE?**

**WHY NOT TALK ABOUT MY HEALTH WITH MY COMMUNITIES?**



**#Stat**

**YOUNG PEOPLE SPEND LESS TIME OUTSIDE THAN PRISONERS.**

(Click through for full source)\*

# WHAT'S NEXT

The Youth Kaleidoscope Report was produced by FleishmanHillard's Culture Unit team, in conjunction with global, pioneering young thought leaders and the next generation of Content Creators who are using social media to connect with their peers.

Partnering with these specialists, we have addressed key themes and topics for young people today throughout the report, as they look forwards and start to question how they can progress through turbulent times. Speaking with real thought leaders in the space, as well as hearing directly from the young perspectives within FleishmanHillard, the insights within this report have come straight from the source and are geared towards starting an honest conversation about how businesses can take the correct next steps in building for the next generation.

But where does the conversation go next? Brands and organizations can never rest on their laurels, and must continually keep a finger on the pulse of both the culture around them as well as the youth audiences that continue to grow alongside culture.

Together with our partners from Zebedee and Youth Marketing Connection, FleishmanHillard's Culture Unit is able to dissect these macro findings and apply them more specifically to your business and industry, answering how to best engage with youth audiences for both today and tomorrow.

## TO GET IN TOUCH

To hear and discuss more, please reach out, and we'll be in touch at the earliest opportunity.

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## METHODOLOGY

To fuel the report, its insights and thinking, we examined existing reports and analyzed primary and secondary research and data to help us develop key insights as we examined youth audiences.

Third-party reports analyzed for this paper encompassed a wide range of topics and demographical surveys, which examined consumer trends across youth audiences.

The report has been co-collaborated with industry experts. Working with insights provided by practice leaders across FleishmanHillard, as well as vital anecdotal insights provided via focus groups and surveys of Gen Z across the global FleishmanHillard network. Additionally, the report has been created by working with specialist partners, from Zebedee Talent, a world-leading inclusive talent agency, and Youth Marketing Connection (YMC).

We explored alongside the next generation of Content Creators, with specialisms and interests across health, finance and identity. This includes the likes of: Ellie Goldstein, a model with Down syndrome who helped create Kami, the first digital avatar with Down syndrome; Heather Moradeyo, an advocate for mental health who has used social media to create a supportive community for people with schizophrenia to share their stories; and Nemesis Lacroix, a transgender drag artist and full-time gamer who is passionate about challenging stereotypes of gamers and making visible the LGBTQ+ community in online spaces. This assortment of talented, perceptive, and pioneering young thought leaders infuses this report with firsthand insights that will help brands, employers, marketers, and whoever else to understand and authentically engage with this generation as they continue to be shaped by — and are themselves — shaping the world around them.

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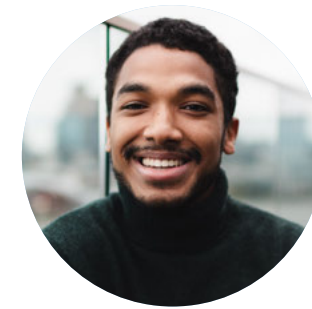
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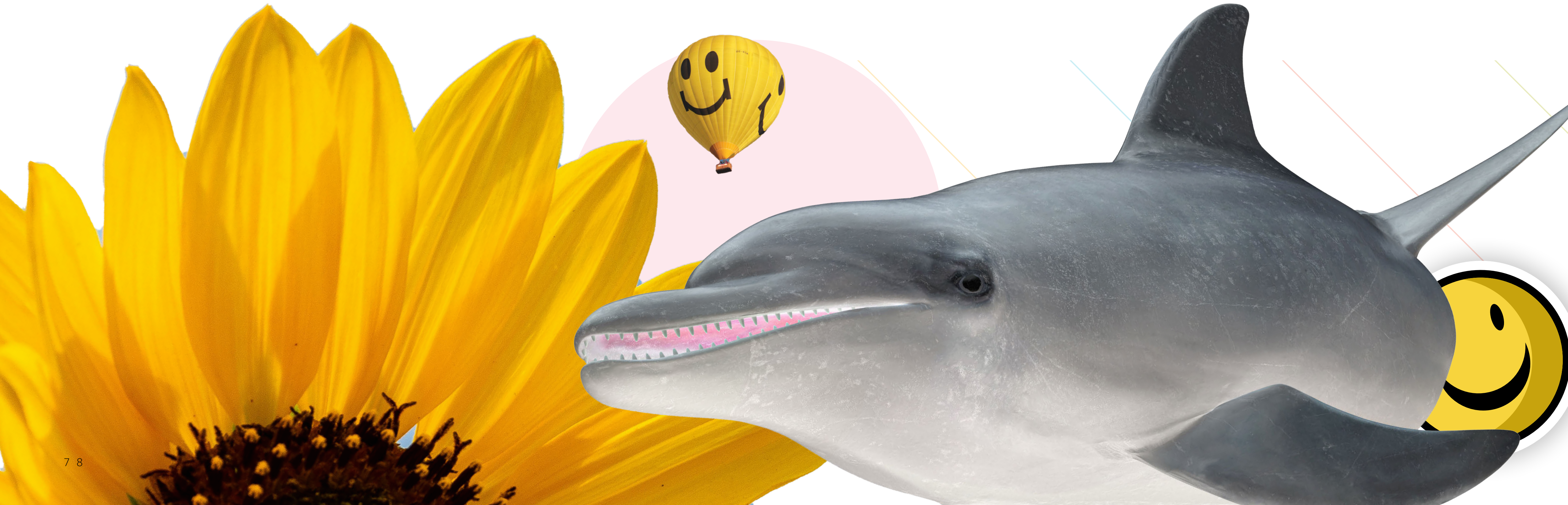
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A woman with dark, curly hair is shown from the chest up, wearing a black leather jacket. She is holding a smartphone in her hands, which are positioned in front of her. The background is a light, textured wall. A black banner with the text 'THANK YOU' in white, bold, sans-serif font is overlaid across the middle of the image. The overall aesthetic is modern and professional.

**THANK YOU**



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