

Generation Influence:

Reaching Gen Z in the new digital paradigm.

Gen Z and technology: The first generation to be digital-first.



Throughout history, generations have been defined by the advent of technology. From the transistor and the personal computer to the Internet and the iPhone, innovation and invention have served as driving forces that inform generational identity.

In today's rapidly evolving digital world, that identity is apparent in the way different generations use the Internet, the way they value its importance, and the overall role digital experiences play in their lives. For example, a Baby Boomer born in the 1950s will experience the Internet and the wider digital world differently than a Millennial born in the 1980s—they have different levels of familiarity with the web, and it's played a vastly different role in each of their lives.

But one generation trumps them all when it comes to both digital fluency and dependency: Gen Z—the generation born between 1996 and 2015. This generation has never known a world without the Internet, and in many ways, they're at the leading edge of shaping its future.

Gen Z was born into a world that was already online, where the foundation of today's digital ecosystem was already visible. As such, this generation sees the web as the starting line, it's an intrinsic part of their everyday lives. Given this omnipresent role of connected technology, Gen Z's expectations for the digital world far exceed those of any generation that has come before them.

Who is Gen Z? Today, Gen Z makes up more than 40% of all U.S. consumers, and as members of this generation graduate from college, join the workforce, and increasingly realize their colossal buying power, they are changing the way we all identify with and are influenced by the Internet and the larger digital world.

Businesses of every size and across every industry should take note, and seek to understand how they can engage with these fast-moving, digital-savvy trailblazers. This report, which examines the way Gen Z, as well as other generations, engage and interact online, aims to aid in that understanding and provide insight into the types of digital experiences demanded by online audiences today.

Acceleration in a time of uncertainty.



2020 saw an already-crowded digital marketplace grow even larger with a surge in online activity due to Covid-19. As businesses around the world moved the majority of their activities online, the divide between physical and digital began to break down faster than ever for all of us.

Almost overnight, businesses were thrust into rapid digital transformation. While the shift was abrupt, it has also yielded some positive, albeit hard-won results.


Businesses that have been able to keep up—by moving quickly to an

eCommerce model or upgrading to a more performant website or hosting provider—have been able to expand their footprint and accelerate in uncertain times. By building digital experiences that allow them to tap into larger, more engaged audiences, these businesses can survive in the new digital paradigm and thrive.

One major segment of their audiences? You guessed it—Gen Z, which has transitioned into this new digital reality like a fish into water. In many ways, Gen Z was already living in a digital-first world, the rest of us have simply been forced to catch up. Now, Gen Z sees the online experience as more than just a convenient option; digital has been tested and vindicated as the best way forward for everything from buying groceries to making new friends.

Just as previous iterations of this report have shown, Gen Z is not interested in turning back or slowing down. This is a generation on the move, with distinct preferences for the future. Wondering how to speak to Gen Z? Personalize, entertain, and engage. If you're not providing Gen Z with entertaining, engaging digital experiences, someone else most certainly is—the endless amount of choice available online is not lost on this generation.

If 2020 has taught us anything, it's that Gen Z's version of a digital-first world is the new digital paradigm. The only real choice you have is to get on board and meet this generation where they are.

A group of diverse young people, including men and women of various ethnicities, are smiling and posing for a selfie on a beach. They are wearing sunglasses and summer attire. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter.

Generation Influence.

An international study comparing Gen Z with
other generations.

Generation Influence.



Generation Influence is the third annual, international study of Gen Z, conducted by [The Center for Generational Kinetics](#) (CGK) and commissioned by [WP Engine](#), examining the new expectations for the web held by Gen Z. Armed with this information, marketers and developers will be better equipped to build digital experiences that speak to younger generations such as Gen Z, who are constantly pushing the limits of technology.

The specific goals of this year's study were to understand how different generations expect, demand, and intend to experience the Internet and websites, both now and in the future, through a comparative generational analysis of data from 2017, 2018, and this year.

Identity and influence.

The below sections will examine these results through the lens of **Identity**—how each generation identifies with the digital world and how they see their identity reflected in it—and **Influence**, how the digital world influences each generation as well as the influence they have on it. The study also looked for new insights into consumer trends and online preferences through a customized U.S. national study.

Research methodology.

WP Engine and The Center for Generational Kinetics jointly led this research study, which was administered as a survey to a total of 1,252 U.S. respondents ages 14-59, including a 250-person oversample of Gen Z.

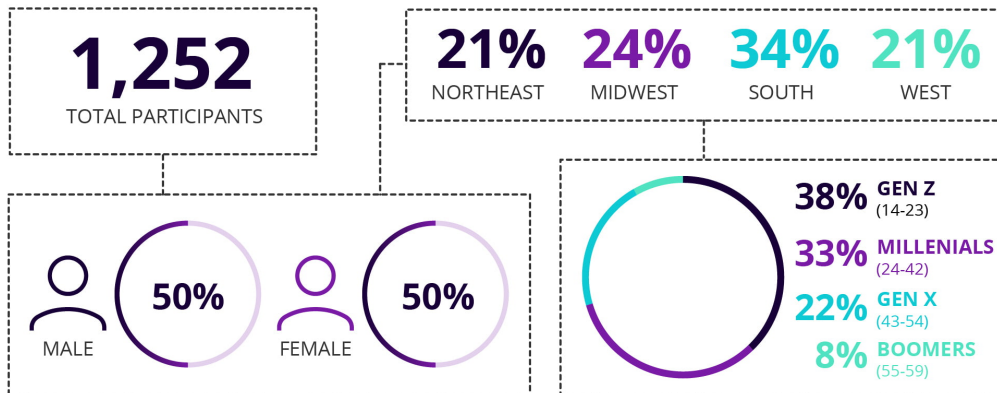
How long is a generation?

If you ask a person what generation they are in, you might not always get the same answer. According to CGK, a generation is a group of people born around the same time and raised around the same place. People in this “birth cohort” exhibit similar characteristics, preferences, and values over their lifetimes. For the purposes of this report, it's important to understand how we define generational age groups based on the year they begin and end.

Who is Generation Z? Gen Z is defined as those between the ages of 14-24, Millennials are defined as those between the ages of 25-43, Gen X is defined as those between the ages of 44-55, and Baby Boomers are defined as those between the ages of 56-74. The sample was weighted to the current census data for age, gender, and region. If you're wondering what comes after Gen Z, it's Generation Alpha. While they aren't a part of this particular data set, we look forward to including them in future research.

The sample was weighted to the U.S. Census for age, region, gender, and ethnicity. Note: "Total Sample" in any graph represents the sample as a whole. In an instance that a chart total for a single select question does not add to 100%, please note that this is due to the minimal effect of rounding.

SAMPLE OVERVIEW: TOTALS



The survey was conducted online from September 19, 2019, to October 1, 2019, and has a margin of error of +/-3.1 percentage points.



Identity.

Examining how Gen Z identifies with the digital world, as well as how their own identities are reflected through digital experiences, is key to understanding what Gen Z cares about and the way this generation prefers to engage and interact online. In the following sections, we'll unpack survey results that speak specifically to the way digital informs Gen Z's identity and the implications these trends hold for the future.

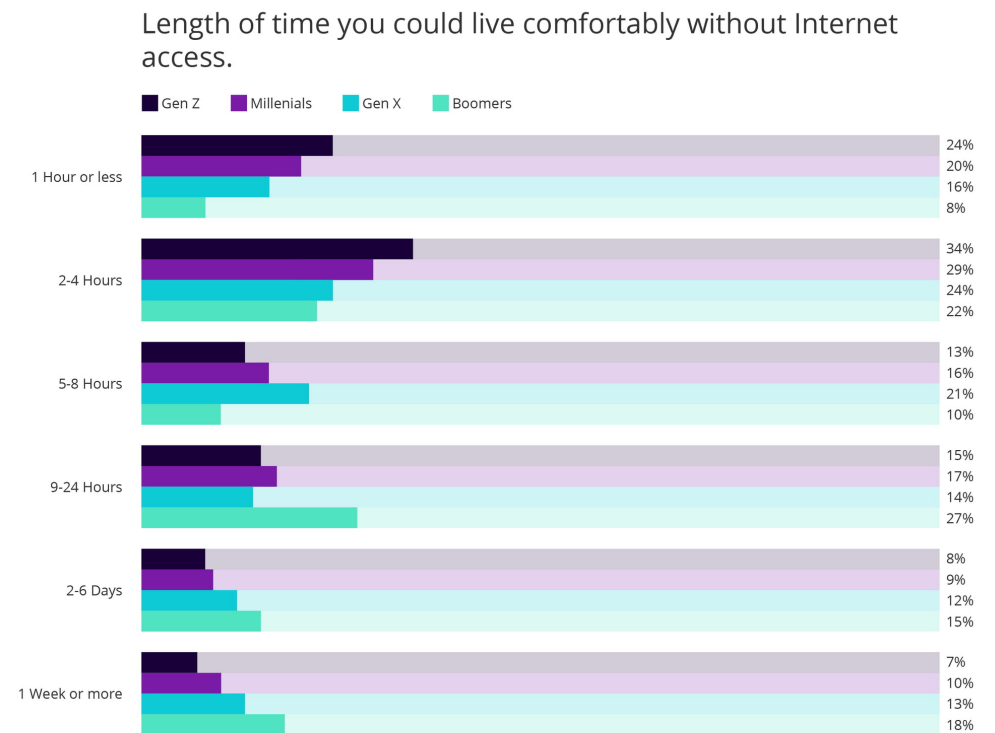
The most Internet-dependent generation.

Gen Z is inextricably tied to the digital world, and the way they identify with it is rooted in their deep connection and familiarity with the Internet. This generation spends more time connected to the web than any other generation ([on mobile devices in particular](#)), and by their own admission, they are the most dependent on it.

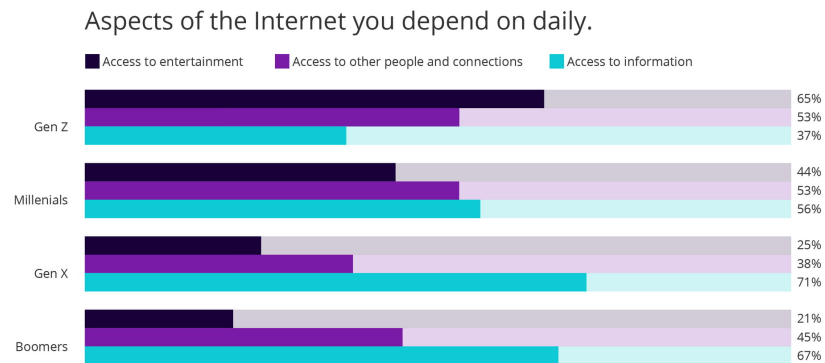
Just as in years past, a majority (58%) of Gen Z said they couldn't go more than four hours without Internet access before becoming uncomfortable—a 3% increase from the previous survey. By contrast, 27% of Boomers said they could go up to 24 hours without Internet access, up 7% from the previous report.

This huge contrast between the generations is a testament to the overlap Gen Z sees between the digital and physical worlds, which they view as one. Other generations are more likely to “sign-off” or even prefer time away from their screens, while Gen Z is online throughout the day.

The concept of signing on or off is archaic to Gen Z—for them, what happens online reverberates everywhere, and this “always-on” mentality is a key ingredient to understanding their identity as true digital natives.

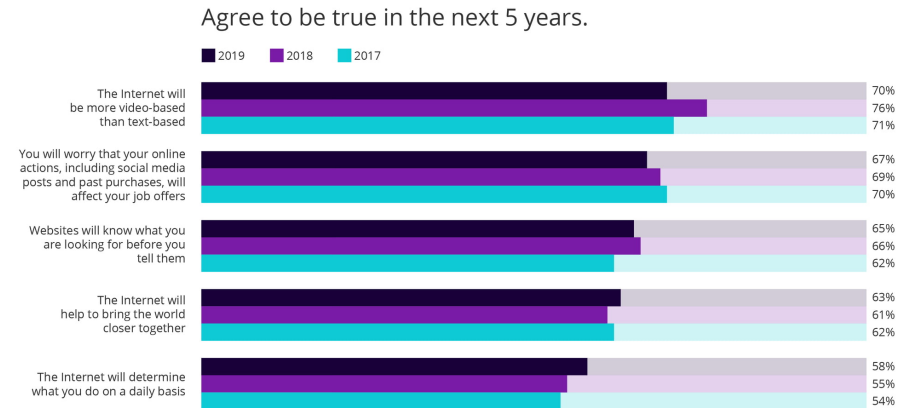


Gen Z also represents a shift regarding what they depend on the Internet for—primarily entertainment and access to their friends. This is a divergence from Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers, who rely on the Internet primarily for access to information.



While these trends have remained similar over the course of the study, the implications for marketers are just as clear. Engaging Gen Z with entertaining content, and video in particular, across different channels, is one of the most effective ways to get and keep their attention.

Video has continued to skyrocket as the preferred format for online content, and not just among Gen Z.



Across all generations, survey respondents said they believe video will dominate the Internet in the next five years, with all of us ultimately relying more on video than text. Gen Z is leading this charge, and as they shift their attention to consumer content, they will undoubtedly want a video-infused entertainment experience to follow them.

58% of respondents said within the next five years, they expect the Internet will determine what they do on a daily basis.

A cohort of creators.

Gen Z also views online entertainment as a two-way street. Their fluency in all things digital means they're extremely capable content creators themselves. From Instagram to TikTok, Gen Z is well accustomed to curating their own personal brand through digital creativity, and they view the content they're presented with through a highly discerning lens.

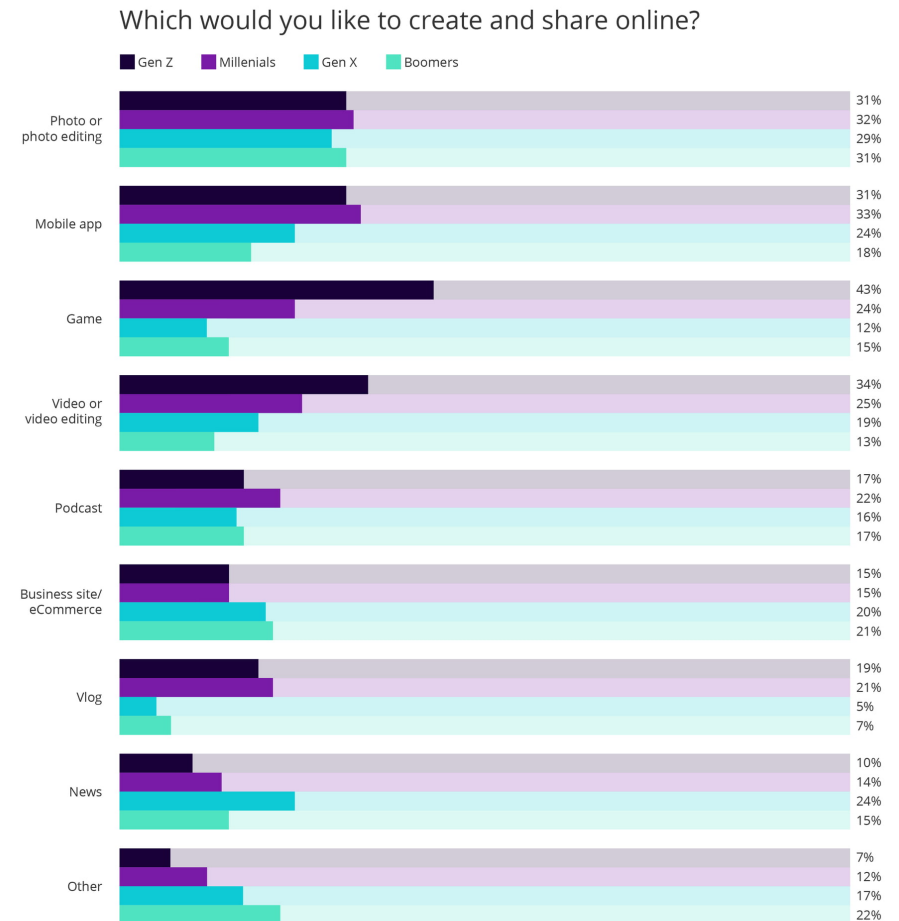
Marketers should embrace the idea that Gen Z loves to create and give them opportunities to do so within the digital experiences they provide. Harness their enthusiasm for social media by providing them with content they can create and share.

Across all generations, when asked what they would most like to create and share online, Gen Z leads in almost every category, including photo editing, mobile apps, gaming, and video editing.

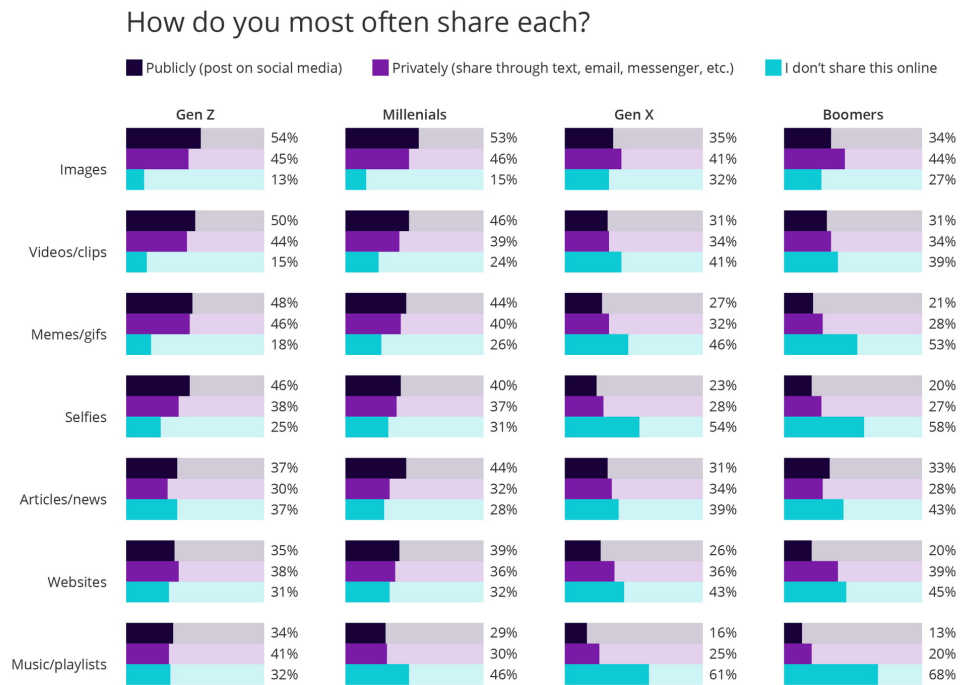
These choices are a clear reflection of Gen Z's digital confidence and an indication of their technical capabilities. They simply feel more comfortable jumping into these buckets as creators, not just participants, and using the web as their creative canvas.

This creative spirit is also visible in the way Gen Z shares online, including everything from images and memes to videos and music.

They are open and enthusiastic about sharing their own content, as well as content from other sources.



54% of Gen Z is comfortable sharing images publicly online, 50% regularly share videos publicly online, 48% publicly share memes, and 46% are perfectly comfortable with publicly sharing selfies online.



Outside of websites, Gen Z leads all generations when it comes to sharing content online and creating their own language or Gen Z slang. This is reflected through the ease at which they navigate digital

channels to create and find what they ultimately share with the wider world.

For marketers, this means giving Gen Z the opportunity to share—both content they discover through digital experiences as well as content they create (personalized images, videos, etc.). If you can successfully leverage Gen Z's penchant for sharing content, their evangelism will significantly amplify your brand.

The Internet as a driving force for good.

Some of Gen Z's openness towards the web, despite the traditional security and privacy concerns held firmly by other generations, is rooted in their overall opinion of the Internet as a force for good in the world. Here, too, they separate from the other generations, with a warm embrace of the digital world that is free from much of the skepticism found among Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers.

Call them young at heart, but Gen Z's insistence that the Internet can be harnessed for good is a persistent thread across many of their online preferences. It's also a trait they actively foster, pushing for more authenticity in online interactions, and supporting social causes in their online habits.

When it comes to the Internet overall, 79% of Gen Z compared to 70% of Boomers think it has made people more connected.

We see more divergence when it comes to emerging, Internet-connected technologies like artificial intelligence, where 64% of Gen Z compared to 46% of Boomers think its use will have a positive impact on the world.

Believe this is how websites might function 5 years from now.

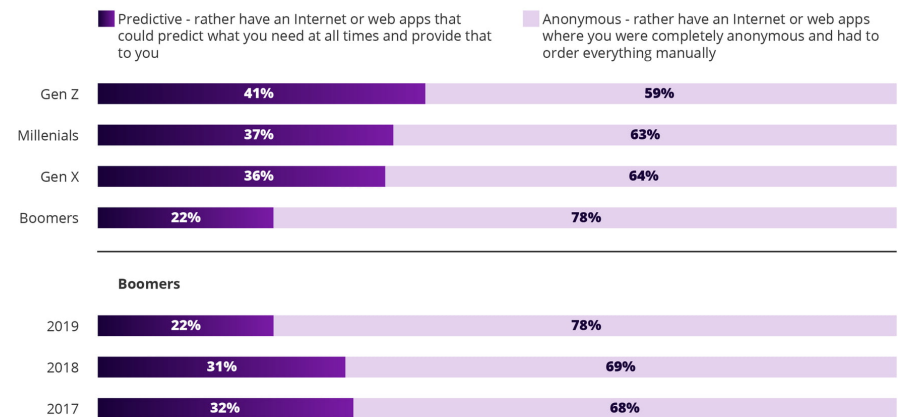


Gen Z also has the highest expectations for these technologies in the future. 82% of Gen Z believes biometrics will see increased adoption in the next five years, while 77% believe the same about virtual reality (VR).

The power of predictive.

In a similar vein, Gen Z is also more enthusiastic about leveraging new technologies like voice and predictive personalization to power digital experiences.

Prefer predictive or anonymous Internet in the future.



More than any other generation, one of the defining characteristics of Gen Z is that they prefer the Internet and connected devices to become more predictive in the future, ultimately predicting what they need at all times—and providing it, an expectation that is already coming to fruition with the increase in online orders and delivery.

To Gen Z personalization isn't creepy, it's a desirable prerequisite for a trusted brand.

Gen Z is adamant about predictive technologies, and today, 41% will leave a website if it doesn't predict what they like, want, or need. Gen Z also expects this trend to follow their lead. In five years, 64% of Gen Z believes the Internet will be so predictive, it will determine what they do on a daily basis. 66% believe all websites will soon "talk" to one another, presenting a personalized experience across every site, application, and even appliance.



A digital representation of self.

Based on their strong connection to the web, Gen Z's identity is deeply intertwined with the digital world. Because the Internet plays such a strong role in their lives, it's not surprising that Gen Z views what they do online as their digital identity, and to a greater extent, their identity overall.

This is clearly reflected in Gen Z's prodigious content creation outlined in previous sections, but it's also apparent in the way Gen Z feels direct and personal involvement in activities, even if they only occur online. For example, 72% of Gen Z believe they can be part of a social movement even if they only participate through social media.

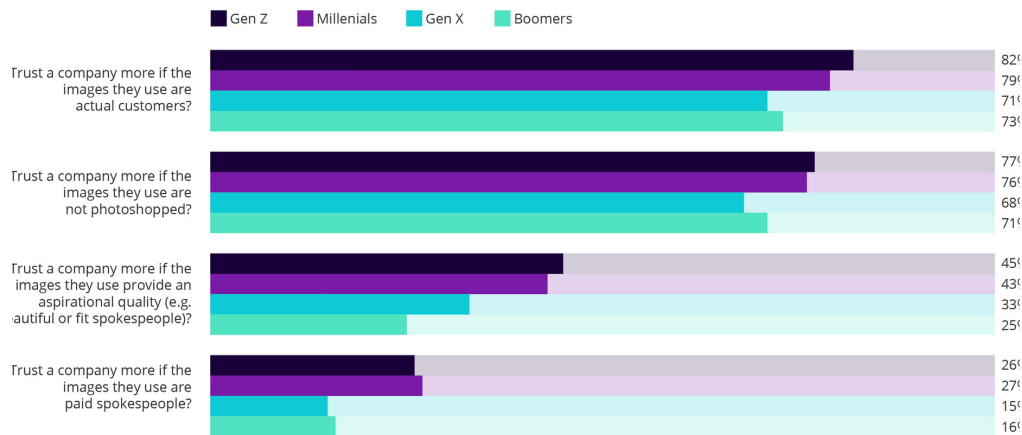
Equally compelling, 56% of Gen Z is friends with someone they only know online and have never met in person, and stunningly, almost a quarter of Gen Z (23%) trusts someone they meet online more than someone they meet in person.

This high level of trust is again, rooted in Gen Z's desire for authenticity and their view that the real and digital worlds are one. Just as they see the web as a digital representation of themselves, they expect others to present themselves authentically in the digital realm—it should be the same. Failure to do this, through inauthentic or tone-deaf content, will send Gen Z elsewhere in a heartbeat.

As seen in years past, more than any other generation, Gen Z wants brands to be truthful with them. Across the board, Gen Z trusts companies more that use images of real customers in their ads and

all key components of Gen Z's overall identity. Marketers should approach their efforts with this in mind, and create digital experiences that allow Gen Z to be creative, engage on a personal level, and most importantly, be themselves.

Answered yes about images used in a company's ads.



they prefer those endorsements over a celebrity or paid spokesperson.

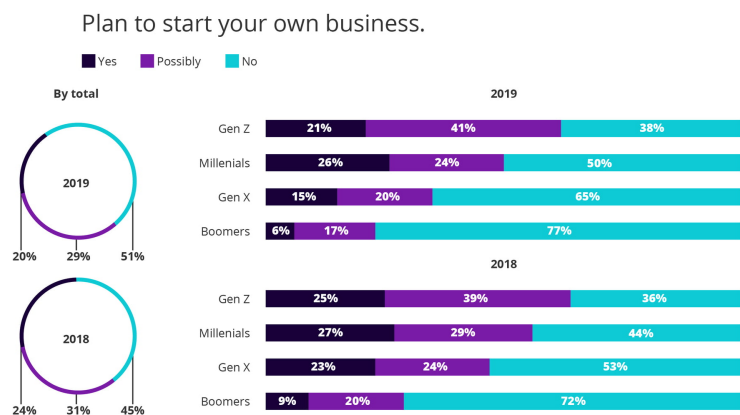
Lastly, when asked which value, quality, or attribute is most important to their generation, Gen Z rated tech-savviness (19%) almost as highly as freedom (22%). Gen Z's identity and technology are fused in a way never before seen in any generation.

The attributes of trust, sharing, and authenticity in the digital world are

Influence.

Exploring the way Gen Z is influenced by the digital world, as well as how they influence the rest of us, is a study of their digital identity in action. In the following sections, we'll unpack survey results that offer a view into the influence Gen Z wields across the digital world, as well as the elements of digital experiences that most influence them.

The most entrepreneurial generation ever.

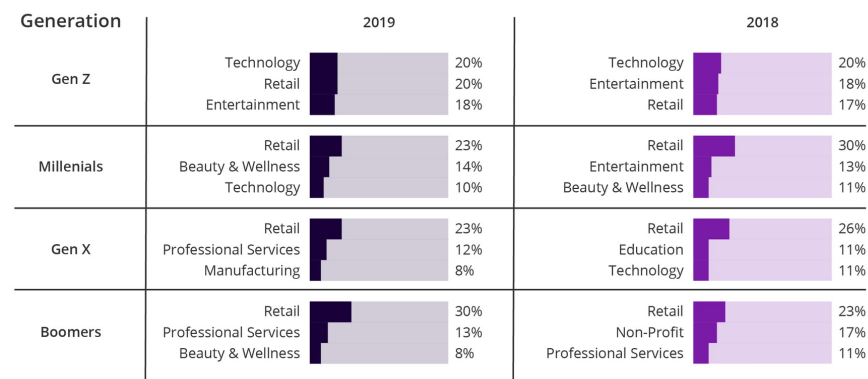


Gen Z is a massive segment of U.S. consumers that already represents an estimated global buying power of \$150 billion. They also account for [40% of global consumers](#) and have an [indirect spending power of \\$600 billion](#). In addition to being highly attuned to how they spend their money, Gen Z is also eager to make it, and they have a shrewd sense of the business world as a digital-first generation.

As far as their business acumen goes, year-over-year, Gen Z remains the most optimistic generation with regards to starting a business.

This is undoubtedly tied to Gen Z's high level of digital literacy and their embrace of technology. While retail remains the first choice for every other generation when asked which type of business they want to start, Gen Z is the only generation that chooses technology first—a clear indication of where they feel the most comfortable.

Type of business you plan on starting in the future.



Not only are they enthusiastic about starting businesses rooted in technology, Gen Z is also taking action, and using technology to educate themselves.

Gen Z is an incredibly resourceful generation, and they rely heavily on the web as a primary source of education. This is a generation of self-starters—their favorite social platform is YouTube, where how-to videos are a huge category of interest—and their “can-do” spirit is rooted in the wide expanse of information available on the web.

WordPress as an engine for Gen Z success.

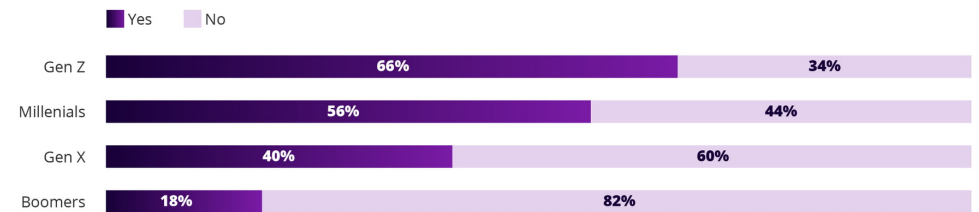
Gen Z feels so confident in the educational potential of the web that 66% of them would rather have unlimited access to the Internet than a college degree. They see the Internet as the place to learn and the place to build their businesses, and they’re doing both to bring their entrepreneurial vision to life.

Because Gen Z prefers self-serve, practical solutions, it’s not surprising that this generation has firmly established WordPress as their platform of choice when it comes to building and launching new websites. WordPress is conducive to self-learners, which resonates with Gen Z, and the ability to build sites quickly, with easy options for adding video and social content, is a huge WordPress benefit that Gen Z increasingly values.

Additionally, WordPress is open source, which means it’s free from upfront licensing costs that would require early capital from a business looking to get its brand off the ground. With WordPress, Gen Z—or any self-starter—can dive headfirst into website creation and establish an

online presence, which in today’s digital paradigm is every business’ front door.

Have you ever used WordPress for your website?



This easy access point into the market is firmly on Gen Z’s radar, and they now lead all generations in WordPress adoption, with 66% having personally used, worked with someone else, or hired someone to use WordPress for their own websites.

Gen Z’s preference for WordPress is a telling sign for the future, where established businesses are already adopting WordPress at a rapid pace. Now, as Gen Z builds its entrepreneurial empire and continues to build out their personal brands, WordPress will play an increasingly crucial role for their businesses and the digital experiences they provide to their customers.

Leading in product innovation.

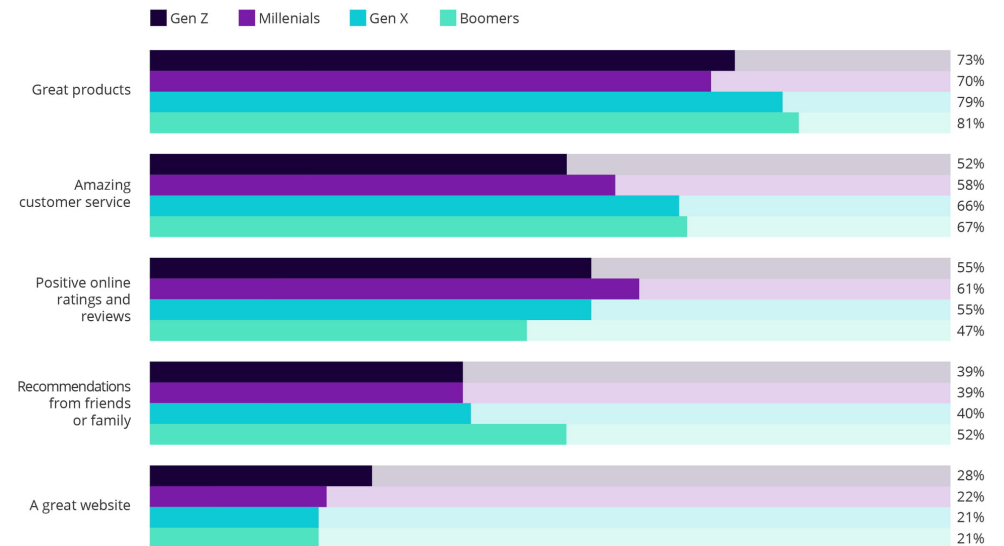
Make no mistake, armed with powerful technology and the digital prowess to use it in new and creative ways, Gen Z's entrepreneurial spirit will have a massive influence on the way we all do business. But their influence will also extend to the product level, as their preferences permeate the market.

For example, 75% of Gen Z, compared to 56% of Boomers, are more likely to buy a product if they can customize it—a direct link between their digital habits and physical preferences. Gen Z wants the opportunity to customize and personalize products online before they buy them.

Withhold this from Gen Z at your own peril, as it's clearly something they want. 41% of Gen Z—more than any other generation—will forgo security/privacy concerns and provide their data if they receive a personalized experience in return.

Another digital-physical connection? Online feedback translates directly to sales. Touching again on the theme of trust and authenticity online, Gen Z is highly influenced by likes and positive product reviews.

Most build your trust in a company or brand.

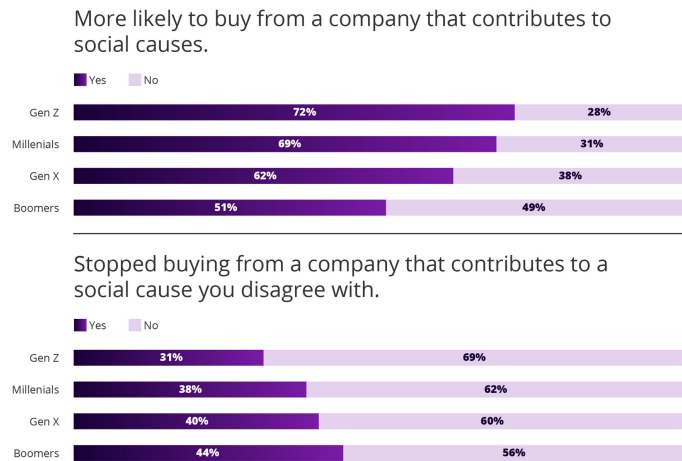


69% of Gen Z, compared to 46% of Boomers, are more likely to buy a product if they know others like it, and a third (33%) of Gen Z believe the opinions of online influencers more than their family or friends.

This means your customer feedback channels may need a second look, as reviews do, in fact, matter. Beyond that, finding tapping into the evangelism of online influencers—not necessarily celebrities—is key to reaching Gen Z in a format they find palatable.

The social quotient.

Gen Z is also highly influenced by social issues, particularly as those issues play out on social channels. Their preferences here, too, have a significant effect on the products they buy.

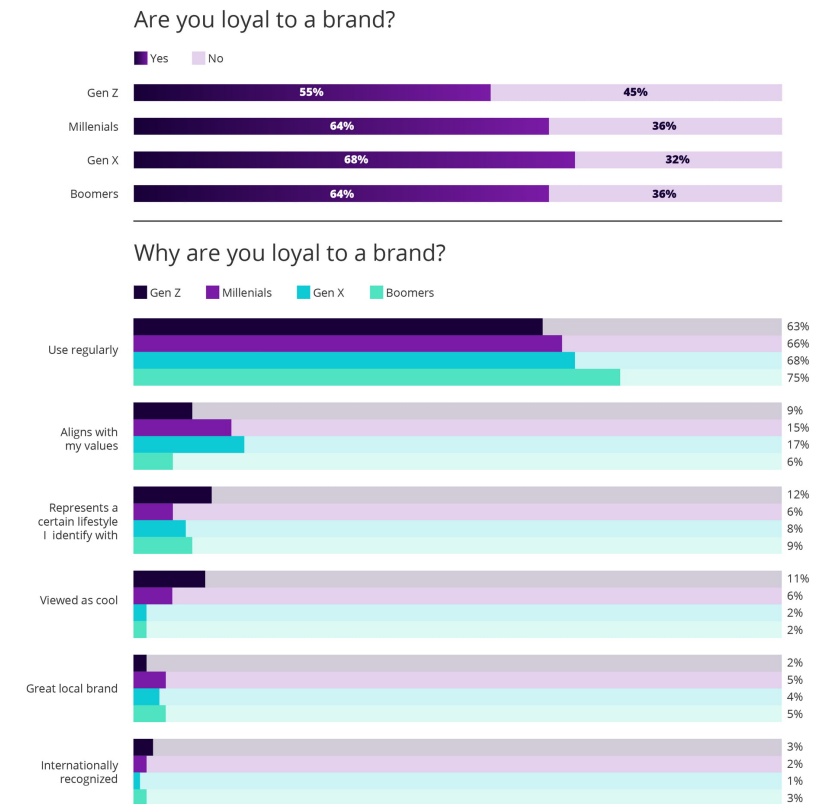


More than any other generation, Gen Z is more likely to buy products from a company that contributes to social causes. That said, they are also the most forgiving generation when it comes to a company that supports social causes with which they don't agree.

The takeaway for marketers? Be anything but silent. Gen Z wants to see brands take a stand, and will reward it more than they will punish it.

Highly selective. Fleetingly loyal.

As much of this report has made clear, Gen Z is a highly selective generation, with deeply-held digital preferences that go beyond their screens and influence their everyday lives.



While they are forgiving of brand missteps to some degree, Gen Z is also the least loyal generation when it comes to buying from one brand over another.

This too touches on Gen Z's desire for authenticity, their awareness of social issues, and their easy navigation of the digital world. Gen Z is aware of the choices at their fingertips, and they choose products that fit their needs and meet them on their terms. Brand loyalty won't sustain itself for Gen Z, you must continually earn their business.



Gen Z are the pioneers in our new, digital world.

Young people have always embodied the zeitgeist of society, profoundly influencing trends and technology adoption alike. As we forge ahead in our lives, working from home, shopping for groceries online, and learning in front of our screens, Gen Z will increasingly take their place in the driver's seat of society.

Their influence—as the first generation of true digital natives—is now radiating outward at a faster pace than other generations of youth in their time, precisely because it is digitally-based. They've never drawn a distinction between the physical and digital worlds. For them, whether online or offline, the critical element is that they can seamlessly move between both of them.

Gen Z is leading this shift in behavior with their digital fluency, and in doing so, they are articulating nothing less than a new paradigm for digital experiences. At the core of this new paradigm, in life and in digital, lies a set of values—tech-savviness, connectivity, authenticity, and a desire to have a positive impact on the world that will most certainly influence behavior, technology, and society in radically new and exciting ways.

As we've seen in past studies, if this generation of pragmatists, self-starters, and entrepreneurs, finds it doesn't exist, Gen Z won't wait around for something to happen. They will build it.

About WP Engine.

The [WP Engine WordPress Digital Experience Platform](#) gives companies of all sizes the agility, performance, intelligence, and integrations they need to drive their business forward faster. WP Engine's combination of tech innovation and an award-winning team of WordPress experts are trusted by over 100,000 companies across 150 countries to provide counsel and support, helping brands create world-class digital experiences.

About The Center for Generational Kinetics.

The Center for Generational Kinetics (CGK) is the leading research, speaking, and strategy firm focused on Millennials, Generation Z, and solving generational challenges. CGK's team of PhD researchers, strategists, and keynote speakers help leaders around the world solve tough generational challenges in areas ranging from employing multiple generations and recruiting Gen Z to selling and marketing to Millennials and across generations.

Each year, CGK works with over 100 clients around the world, from car manufacturers and global hoteliers to insurance companies, hospital chains, and international software firms. CGK's team is frequently quoted in the media about the effect of generational differences and emerging trends on everything from shopping and parenting to work style and social media. Learn more about CGK at [GenHQ.com](#).

Thank you for reading

Generation Influence: Reaching Gen Z in the new digital paradigm.

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