Gen Z's Digital Discovery:
Strategies for Brands to Connect

Plus the three distinct Gen Z
life stages you should know

www.superawesome.com

Gen Z: Unlocking engagement with a unique generation

Gen Z is unlike any generation before or after. As they navigate emerging adulthood, their values and motivations are shaped by the digital environment they grew up in and the new life experiences they're having now. Amidst the pandemic, social movements, and rising living costs, they face unparalleled challenges and crave security and comfort as they move through the world.

Brands looking to connect with Gen Z need to understand that this generation has a unique customer journey that often starts in and around the gaming ecosystem, and includes a focus on community, wellness, and mental health.

This report will showcase how Gen Z's distinct life stages and perspectives shape their evolving relationship with media and brands. It will also offer tools for creating strong connections with this influential group.

How we define Gen Z

Gen Z is usually defined as those born between 1996 and 2010. In this report, we've focused on the Gen Z cohort ages 16-24.

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Methodology

SuperAwesome commissioned MarketCast to conduct comprehensive qualitative and quantitative research focused on Gen Z's identities, experiences, and values when it comes to themselves and media. Fieldwork took place October - November 2022.

This report includes responses from 16 in-depth interviews and a nat rep survey of 2,781 young people (ages 16-24) from the United States and United Kingdom.

About SuperAwesome

Founded in 2013 and acquired by Epic Games in 2020, SuperAwesome is building a safer internet for the next generation. Used by hundreds of brands and content owners, our award-winning technology enables safe, authentic digital engagement with Gen Alpha and Gen Z.

Get in touch for a further deep dive into the US, UK, German, or French markets for your specific vertical.

Contact us

Key findings

1. The digital advertising ecosystem for connecting with Gen Z is completely unique.

Their media consumption habits are different from any generation before or after, and engaging them requires a nuanced understanding of their three distinct life stages and where they're spending their time—namely across gaming platforms and the gaming ecosystem (social media, YouTube, and OTT vehicles and the algorithms that surface content).

80% use streaming services

78% regularly use social media, including YouTube

73% play console games

55% use YouTube a few times a day

2. Finding "my people" is more important than conforming to be popular.

Gen Z is joining digital communities where they can be their authentic selves and gain a sense of belonging. On social and video platforms, they connect with content and influencers that reflect their values—and they expect brand interactions in these spaces to do the same. Effectively reaching Gen Z involves engaging multiple niche communities vs. mass targeting the "popular group."

84% want to be part of a group of people "like me"

Only 15% want to be part of the popular group

3. Mental health is the new wealth.

In a life stage and cohort shaped by uncertainty, Gen Z is prioritizing wellness, safety, and comfort through welcoming, non-toxic online and gaming experiences.

60% care most about their mental well being over physical appearance

50% take social media breaks for mental health

4. Gen Z understands the advertising value exchange.

As the first digitally native generation, they have positive views of digital advertising that engages with them authentically and improves their content and digital experiences.

67% like advertising

67% don't use an ad blocker

30% cite social media advertising as the best way to reach them

5. Gen Z is establishing lifetime brand loyalty.

They're making more and larger purchases themselves, and deciding on the products and brands that they'll follow throughout their lives.

1 in 3 have already established loyalty and use the same brand now as they did when they were children

Say hello to Generation Z

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Gen Z is growing up across three distinct life stages, defined by new milestones and major changes. As they transition from adolescence to adulthood, navigate relationships, and begin their higher education or workforce journeys, their identities, values, and perspectives are being shaped by evolving independence and responsibilities.

We've provided a life stage breakdown for each unique cohort within Gen Z.

Ages 16–17
Emerging Independence

This group is preparing for their journey into adulthood. They're beginning to feel like adults, but they still rely on their parents.

Ages 18–19
Leaving Home

This is an especially turbulent time for Gen Z as they leave home and take on new responsibilities as young adults.
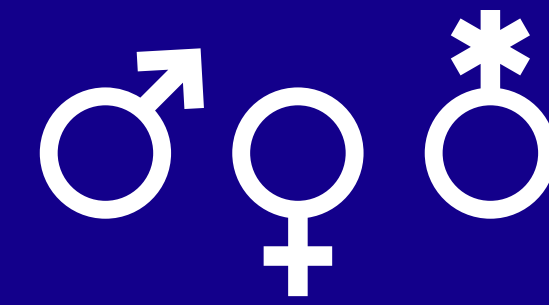
Ages 20–24
Financial Independence

Older Gen Z audiences are increasingly focused on developing long-term financial, professional, and social goals.

Life stage overview

Gen Z experiences a period of massive change as they navigate the transition from the teen years into adulthood.

Our study included responses from male-, female-, and non-binary-identifying Gen Zers. Wherever relevant, we've included data that shows how people outside of the gender binary are viewing this stage of their lives.
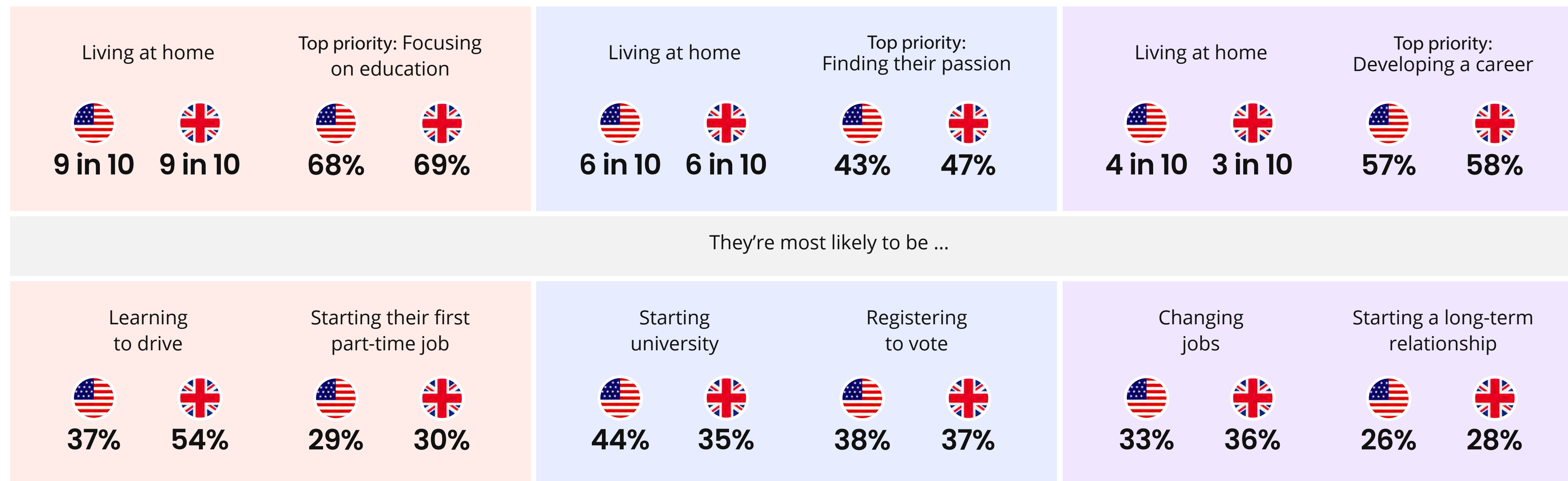
🇺🇸 US   🇬🇧 UK

| Ages 16-17		Ages 18-19		Ages 20-24	
Living at home	Top priority: Focusing on education	Living at home	Top priority: Finding their passion	Living at home	Top priority: Developing a career
🇺🇸 9 in 10 🇬🇧 9 in 10	🇺🇸 68% 🇬🇧 69%	🇺🇸 6 in 10 🇬🇧 6 in 10	🇺🇸 43% 🇬🇧 47%	🇺🇸 4 in 10 🇬🇧 3 in 10	🇺🇸 57% 🇬🇧 58%
They're most likely to be ...					
Learning to drive	Starting their first part-time job	Starting university	Registering to vote	Changing jobs	Starting a long-term relationship
🇺🇸 37% 🇬🇧 54%	🇺🇸 29% 🇬🇧 30%	🇺🇸 44% 🇬🇧 35%	🇺🇸 38% 🇬🇧 37%	🇺🇸 33% 🇬🇧 36%	🇺🇸 26% 🇬🇧 28%

Questions:
Which of the following have you experienced in the last year?
What are your top priorities over the next year or two?

How they feel about the world
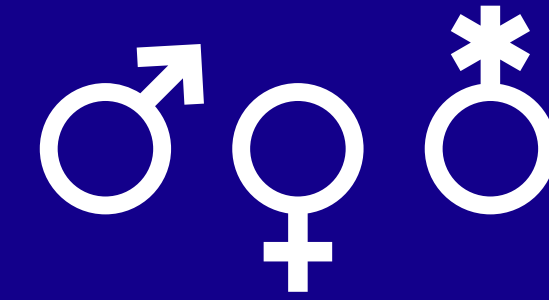
The world is especially challenging for non-binary Gen Zers. Only 22% agree that the world will be better in the future compared to their female (26%) and male (33%) counterparts.

This is an unsettling time for Gen Z as they face environmental, situational, and life stage challenges. They don't feel overly optimistic about the world, and only half believe that their beloved tech will help solve the world's problems. However, they're more positive about the things in life that they can control, like working towards their goals.
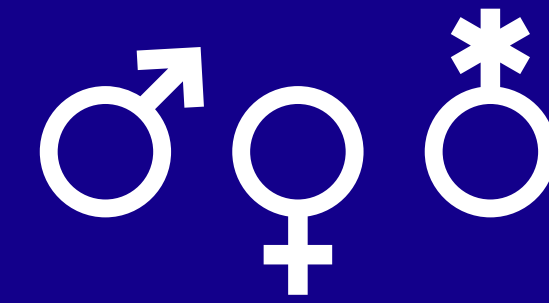
US 🇺🇸   UK 🇬🇧

	Ages 16-17 US	Ages 16-17 UK	Ages 18-19 US	Ages 18-19 UK	Ages 20-24 US	Ages 20-24 UK
Life can be really overwhelming	83%	69%	85%	80%	84%	81%
The world will be a better place in 10-15 years	32%	20%	32%	24%	38%	30%
Believe it's important to work hard towards their goals	95%	95%	90%	94%	92%	89%
Tech will save the world	50%	55%	47%	54%	52%	54%

Questions:
Thinking about yourself, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Thinking about the world and society at large, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Thinking about yourself, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

What they believe

Gen Z recognizes the global issues all around them and tends to respond with a heightened sense of social consciousness, caring about privacy, the environment, and speaking out for causes they believe in.

82% of non-binary Gen Zers believe in speaking out about social/political issues, compared to 57% of males and 65% of females.
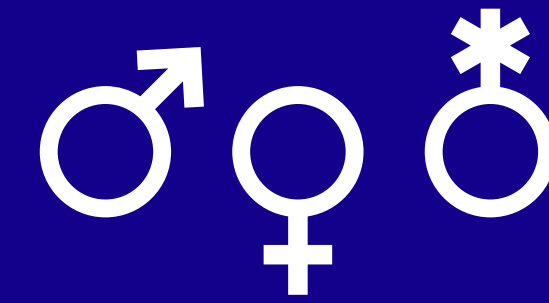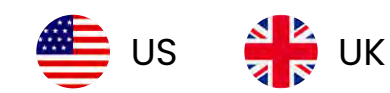
🇺🇸 US   🇬🇧 UK

	Ages 16-17		Ages 18-19		Ages 20-24	
	🇺🇸	🇬🇧	🇺🇸	🇬🇧	🇺🇸	🇬🇧
Digital privacy is important	87%	83%	80%	84%	81%	77%
Speaking out about social/political issues is important	62%	58%	61%	65%	64%	65%
It's good to try to be environmentally friendly	52%	53%	56%	54%	63%	54%

Questions:
Thinking about the world and society at large, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Thinking about spending money, how much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

What they value

Gen Z's values are different from the Millenials before them and Gen Alpha after. More than 2/3 of Gen Zers value happiness and mental health over money and physical appearance, and the overwhelming majority have a desire to connect with "my people." They're still invested in social media, but many also appreciate breaks from it.

Non-binary people are more likely to value happiness over money (72%), being part of a like-minded group (92%), and focusing on their mental wellbeing (73%) than their peers.

🇺🇸 US   🇬🇧 UK

	Ages 16-17		Ages 18-19		Ages 20-24	
	🇺🇸	🇬🇧	🇺🇸	🇬🇧	🇺🇸	🇬🇧
Happiness over making money	69%	64%	71%	68%	71%	65%
Being part of a group of people "like me"	86%	83%	86%	87%	87%	83%
Their mental wellbeing over physical appearance	65%	59%	62%	56%	68%	65%
Taking social media breaks for their mental health	57%	46%	51%	40%	65%	54%

Questions:
Below are some pairs of statements that contrast each other. Please read both statements and select which one you agree with more.
Thinking about social media and online spaces, how much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

What they want to hear

Gen Z's three distinct life stages should be considered for messaging that is authentic and relatable. Creating a sense of comfort and easing uncertainty is important as they focus on the aspects of their lives that they can control.
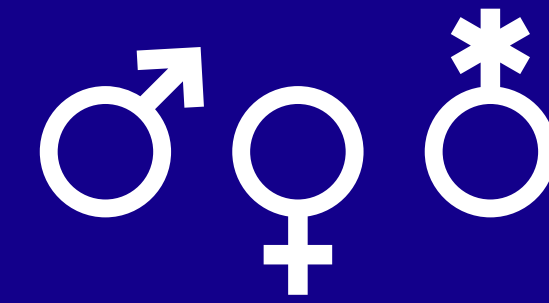
Gen Zers who identify as non-binary are more interested in cultural and societal topics like arts/culture and politics, compared to sports for males and lifestyle, food, and celebrities/influencers for females.

Ages 16-17

These teens are solidifying their identities and finding "my people." Approach this group with relatable messaging that speaks to their emerging values and create digital communities for them to join based on their interests.

Ages 18-19

This is the age group with the most uncertainty and jarringly new experiences. They have more free time for leisure than they did in high school. Lead with familiar IP and comfortable, soothing content.

Ages 20-24

This older group is more established in their identities and brand preferences. Communicate brand values and show how products benefit their lives and help address uncertainty.

How brands can connect with Gen Z

Gen Z turns to digital media during these tumultuous years to seek comfort, explore their identity, and find people that share their values and passions.

They seek out gaming and influencers for community, and are actively training their algorithms to surface the content they like across social media, YouTube, and OTT platforms, where they consume the majority of their digital advertising.

Gen Z embraces digital advertising

Unlike previous generations, Gen Z has grown up in an entirely digital world. With that comes an unprecedented understanding of the advertising value exchange and the desire to support creators.

They don't hate advertising.

2/3 of Gen Z say they like advertising.

2/3 of Gen Z don't use an ad blocker. (They choose to engage).

They have strong ad preferences.

Their top five favorite types of ads are:

- ✓ Ads you can skip
- ✓ Holiday-themed ads
- ✓ Ads that sponsor a small but authentic creator
- ✓ Digital billboards in a gaming world
- ✓ A brand sponsoring a famous celebrity or influencer

Their least favorite types of ads?

- ✗ Ads shown in the middle of videos
- ✗ Ads you can't skip

I prefer targeted ads, because they often are somewhat more interesting to me than random ads on the street."

Gen Z response

I prefer advertising that does not get in my way, such as in-game ads or social media ads."

Gen Z response

How Gen Z is gaming

For Gen Z, gaming offers both social interaction with friends and an opportunity to self soothe. Gaming platforms serve as rich online communities, where players can explore their identities through their avatars and express individuality with in-game items. Additionally, gaming is the only digital media vehicle that doesn't rely on algorithmic discovery and requires a more grassroots approach.

Play video games for 7+ hours/week on average	Agree that playing is more about being with friends than the game itself	Play games they enjoy regardless of what friends play
🇺🇸 83% 🇬🇧 83%	🇺🇸 56% 🇬🇧 50%	🇺🇸 86% 🇬🇧 80%

Insights in action

Brands can play a role in enhancing Gen Z's gaming communities with fun integrations or branded worlds that surprise and delight players. As Gen Z seeks control over their environment, consider providing quests or power-ups that add to their experience.

Brands can be part of players' identity exploration and self expression by offering collectible items that persist even after the campaign has ended.

See how Athleta Girl worked with SuperAwesome to bring its spokesperson and collectible tote bags to a Roblox activation.

Question:
Thinking about video games and game consoles, how much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

How Gen Z uses social

Social media is a constant source of connection and entertainment for Gen Z, with around half regularly watching social creators across platforms. They're using social media daily, and try to project authenticity and connect with people who share similar interests and values.

Regularly spend time on social media	Try to be their authentic self on social platforms	Feel that social media is a great place to connect with like-minded people
🇺🇸 76% 🇬🇧 80%	🇺🇸 74% 🇬🇧 73%	🇺🇸 75% 🇬🇧 72%

Insights in action

Gen Z understands the value exchange advertising provides and wants to support their favorite Influencers (with top platforms including Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and Twitch). Ads that sponsor small but loyal creators make their top 3 preferred ad experiences, though Gen Z prefers brand integrations over ads.

For the most authentic experience, don't provide a script for your talent, but rather let them bring your product to life as they know best.

" [I like] advertising on social media where it's content based - for example, a content creator making an ad rather than an ad forced upon a user. Or where ads are being sought - like internet searches."

– Gen Z response

How Gen Z uses YouTube

YouTube is the #1 platform for Gen Z video consumption—they watch YouTube multiple times per day, often seeking content from funny, relatable gaming influencers and videos that evoke feelings of comfort and nostalgia.

Watch a few times a day	Gaming videos are the most watched	Subscribe to social media influencers
🇺🇸 59% 🇬🇧 51%	🇺🇸 44% 🇬🇧 41%	🇺🇸 38% 🇬🇧 41%

Insights in action

YouTube can serve as a hub for all of your campaign's video content.

Brands should not only create YouTube content to make viewers aware of your gaming experience, but also scale new content from the game environment and Influencer campaigns to make it discoverable on YouTube.

Learn how Adidas used YouTube to scale its campaign videos.

How Gen Z streams content

OTT is the most popular platform for Gen Z to consume long-form content. Gen Z in particular seeks comfort in familiarity and nostalgia. You can see examples of this trend in the bevy of popular TV series getting new life in refreshed versions for the 2020s, drawing from much-loved toy franchises, and leveraging music from Gen Z's parents' generation.

Watch streaming services every day		Prefer streaming to regular TV		Likelihood to indulge in nostalgic content	
🇺🇸	🇬🇧	🇺🇸	🇬🇧	🇺🇸	🇬🇧
67%	**62%**	**74%**	**74%**	**78%**	**64%**

Insights in action

Only 33%

of Gen Z regularly watches traditional TV. If you're still spending budget here, it's time to shift those funds over to digital options for greater value.

Streaming generates discovery and word of mouth among Gen Z. Include streaming in your media mix to be part of the conversation.

Algorithms are the new word of mouth

Gen Z understands that algorithms inform the majority of their content discovery across OTT, YouTube, and social media platforms.

They appreciate the personalized content and creator recommendations that the homepage provides, and actively train their algorithms to help discover new content, create community, and reduce decision fatigue.

Algorithms are the new word of mouth

Social media

50% of Gen Z follow algorithmic content recommendations from social media

over in-person word of mouth (44%) or social media word of mouth (44%).

YouTube

Just over 1 in 3 Gen Zers watch new TV series/films discovered via YouTube ads and videos.

YouTube "long form" is 2x as powerful as the Shorts format (which only drives 17% of Gen Z to watch).

OTT

68% of Gen Z follow algorithmic content recommendations

from streaming services over in-person word of mouth (64%) or social media word of mouth (53%).

Questions:
How do you discover new series, shows and movies?
How do you discover new games?
How do you discover new social content or influences?
Where are you most likely to pay attention to an advert for a new TV show or film?

Source: SuperAwesome's Streaming and Entertainment Study (2023)

5 principles for creating Gen Z-friendly content

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To reach Gen Z across all digital platforms in a crowded market, content needs to resonate with them and reflect their values. Meaningful marketing campaigns will follow five ground rules to master algorithmic and gaming discovery.

3. Safety vs. Fear

Effective campaigns will appeal to a sense of safety, comfort, and nostalgia—not encourage insecurities or a negative view of the world.

71% like to watch the same series and movies they did as kids

1. Innovation vs. Unoriginality

Using the same old marketing vehicles and messaging won't get you far with Gen Z. Brands have to go further to stand out by creating something unique and tailored.

75% of Gen Z want brands to do something unique online

4. Integration vs. Interruption

Seamless experiences are key. Successful strategies are about integration and immersion, not interrupting Gen Z's digital experiences.

65% dislike ads that appear in the middle of games and videos, disrupting their online experience

2. Authenticity vs. Insincerity

Gen Z can see through phony advertising. Authentic messaging speaks directly to their values and concerns and proves its relevance to each age group.

54% of Gen Z want brands to speak to them according to their age

5. Inspiration vs. Boredom

Nothing is worse than boring Gen Z. Make them laugh, cry, inspire, and uplift them—being "beige" will lose their attention.

51% say that ads that made them smile are the most memorable

Gen Z is solidifying a lifetime of brand loyalty

The Gen Z audience is in a stage of identity formation, which extends to exploring brand and product relationships. They're in a unique position of dual influence, with the younger Gen Zers still impacting household spend and the entire cohort's individual purchasing power growing along with them.

This age group is also distinct in solidifying long-term brand loyalty. As children, they explored many brands and tried new things. Now they're spending money that they've earned, and solidifying brand relationships and product choices that will last their whole lives.
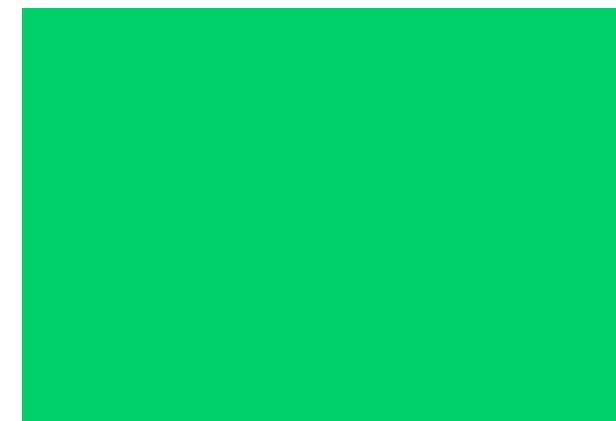
Loyalty, spending & influence

Young people have made many of their first purchases and begun their brand journeys before the age of 16. Gen Z ages 16+ are solidifying brand loyalties for life as they take on more purchasing responsibility.
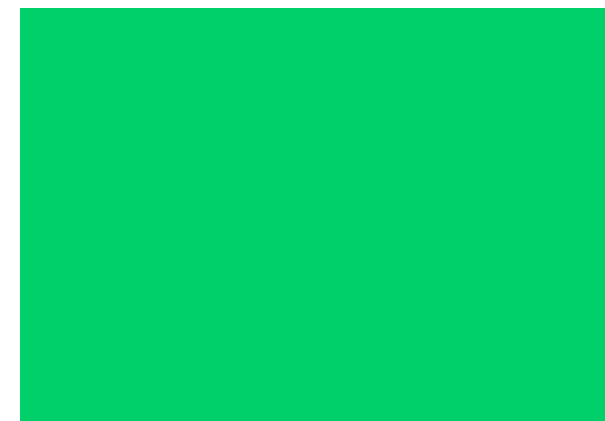
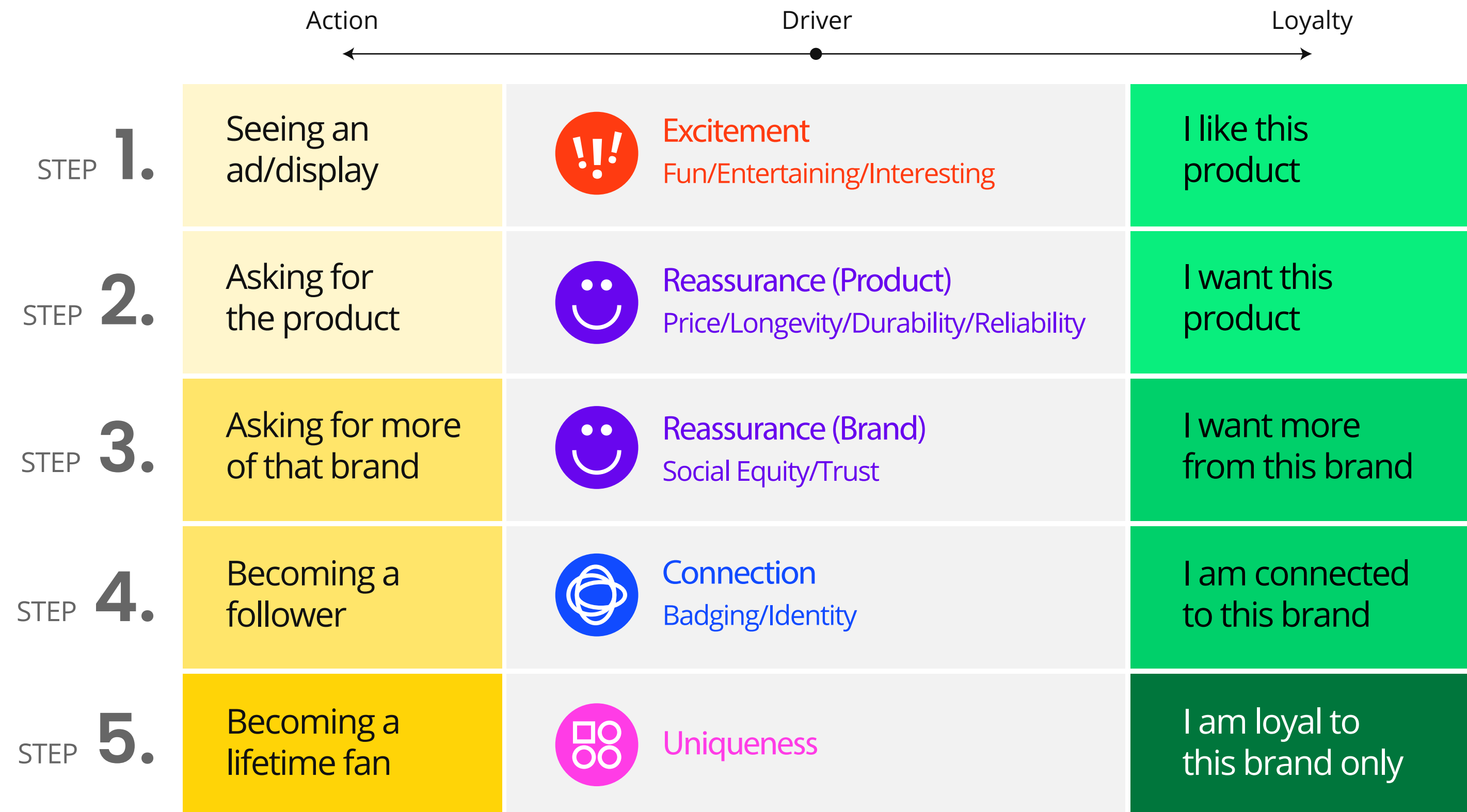|	Household spend influence	Spending power	Loyalty level	Takeaways
Ages 16-19 Emerging Independence & Leaving Home				Brands have the opportunity to benefit from independent and household purchasing. Their financial independence is growing, and their favorites have been established.
Ages 20-24 Financial Independence				These older Gen Z audiences are spending the most and making their first household purchases as the majority have moved out of the family home. Make sure your brand accompanies them at the start of this journey for

Medium ■ ■ ■ High

The path to brand loyalty

Loyalty drivers shift as the brand relationship deepens. Generating excitement is key to getting attention, but brands must prove their value and generate trust before establishing loyalty.

	Action	Driver		Loyalty
STEP 1.	Seeing an ad/display		Excitement Fun/Entertaining/Interesting	I like this product
STEP 2.	Asking for the product		Reassurance (Product) Price/Longevity/Durability/Reliability	I want this product
STEP 3.	Asking for more of that brand		Reassurance (Brand) Social Equity/Trust	I want more from this brand
STEP 4.	Becoming a follower		Connection Badging/Identity	I am connected to this brand
STEP 5.	Becoming a lifetime fan		Uniqueness	I am loyal to this brand only

The bottom line

To successfully engage Gen Z, brands need to understand their life stages and leverage a digital approach centered around the gaming ecosystem and algorithmic discovery across social media, YouTube, and OTT. This generation appreciates messaging tailored to them and their values and are generating lifelong brand loyalty.

Gen Z prioritizes mental health, psychological safety, and brands that understand this. These brands can connect by designing experiences where Gen Z can see themselves and find "my people," creating a sense of comfort, and speaking to aspects of their lives that Gen Z can control.

The best campaigns to reach Gen Z will emphasize gaming and leverage thoughtful, niche approaches that prioritize audience and brand safety in moderated, non-toxic digital environments.

How to win Gen Z with SuperAwesome

SuperAwesome offers industry-leading performance, safety, and consideration for Gen Z's needs.

Sky Broadband Gigafast Fortnite integration, targeting ages 18-24

Our solutions include:

Bring your brand to life in-game

Over 3 billion minutes spent engaging with brands in SuperAwesome's custom builds and integrations.
t

We bridge youth expertise with gaming executions that enable safe, positive, and mission-aligned in-game experiences.

Curate authentic connections through creator content

66% of Gen Zers said they wanted to buy or have the product or brand featured in a SuperAwesome Creators ad.

SuperAwesome Creators has delivered over 1 billion social views, built on a decade of youth expertise and a diverse creator community aligned to Gen Z's values: healthy self image and non-toxic content.
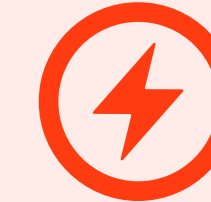
Maximize reach across apps, sites, OTT, and YouTube

Over 621 billion monthly available impressions across mobile, web, OTT, in-game, and social placements.

AwesomeAds scaled media drives 97%* increase in gameplays. Our machine learning and human-reviewed placements deliver unparalleled contextual accuracy in brand-safe environments.

*Gameplay was measured both with and without a SuperAwesome amplification campaign. The 97% increase is an average across all campaigns.

Building a safer internet for **the next generation**

Sign up for our Digital Youth Update newsletter and get more insights delivered to your inbox.

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