



# Gen Z: Coming of age in chaos

*Anxiety and stress are at an all-time high. How is Generation Z handling the chaos?*

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Pandemics, protests, political toxicity, killer hornets. In many ways, 2020 was a disaster. But for Gen Z, a generation that has come of age in chaos, the last year is just more of what they've come to expect.

In October 2020, approximately six in 10 members of Generation Z told us, "It's harder growing up today than ever before." But this sentiment isn't a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. In January 2019 the exact same number of Gen Zers agreed with that statement. They have witnessed disaster again and again and they have always felt it's harder for them. The oldest members of Gen Z were born just a few years before the September 11 attacks. They have seen the carnage of economic hardship, school shootings and vicious political campaigns. They have listened with purpose to the stories that rallied millions around Me Too and Black Lives Matter. Generation Z is no stranger to intensity and struggle.



With anxiety and chronic stress at an all-time high, one might expect them to retreat in defeat. Instead, their resilience makes them uniquely equipped to navigate changing norms, chaotic moments and complicated cultural nuances. They are perhaps the most resourceful and relentless generation yet.

Here are three themes we are following that highlight their unique strength amidst unprecedented chaos.

### **1. They're finding highlights in the haze.**

A lifetime of “once in a lifetime” events has left Gen Z with a realistic, albeit harsh, outlook on life. They have never known a time of societal rest and they are connected 24/7 – which brings its own unique unceasing pressure.

This is a generation infamous for its anxiety and stress. More than three in five – and seven in 10 Gen Z females – tell us they are “constantly stressed out.” The pandemic only amplifies their baseline angst: 53% say they are more anxious than ever before and 58% say they expect things to never be the same again.

While the pandemic shattered the lives and routines of adults, for Gen Z it was just another catastrophe. Their snarky outlook helps them push through. They’ve developed a nonchalant nihilism – confronting the absurdities of the world with an eye roll and a meme.

But don’t mistake the snark and sarcasm for negativity. Gen Z’s deadpan delivery is actually a pathway to positivity. Three in five say they are still optimistic about the future.

They've become consummate copers who expect the worst but find silver linings in even the most stressful moments. Fifty-seven percent of Gen Z discovered new hobbies during the pandemic and the same number tell us they have enjoyed spending time at home more than they thought they would. They have rallied together via the technology that already connected them. Whether it's TikTok or Among Us, they did not have to learn to live digitally like many adults did, they just adjusted to a new balance.

So how do brands learn from and harness their hope and resilience? Start by recognizing their unique brand of humor. Deadpan laughs and snarky statements help them get through the bad times, but be careful not to double down on the darkness. Leverage the power of levity, and acknowledge how they use it as a tool for strength and communal coping.

## **2. They're working to be woke.**

It goes without saying that Gen Z, the most diverse and digitally connected generation we've seen, is focused on the collective. They want to connect with their immediate groups (61% think just like their friends); they want to connect globally (63% are passionate about learning about other cultures and places); and of course, they want to connect digitally (70% use TikTok every day to build social communities).

But that's not to say individuality isn't important as well. In fact, just as many say that it's important to stand out, as it is to fit in (42%). But growing up in an era of cancel culture – where a new celebrity seems to come under fire each day – has left them cautious and cagey about standing out in the “wrong way.”

This affects how they act online, and in real life: 64% say they're extremely careful about what they post on social, and 55% say there is a big difference between what they talk about online vs. what they talk about in person.

The difference is particularly pronounced among Gen Z guys who feel they are coming of age at a time focused on calling out the failures of masculinity. Half report that they are “not sure how people should flirt in a new world of sexual harassment” and 52% of Gen Z guys feel there is “too much political correctness these days.” So while Gen Z has a reputation for being open minded, for many it's quite a journey to get there.

Still, Gen Z is doing the work to become more woke – unlearning ways of thinking while learning to be an adult, all at the same time. And they're looking to do it in a sincere, authentic way, meaning they can see right through virtual signaling. They are embracing major social shifts faster than many adults. Fifty-two percent of Gen Z agrees “there are more gender identities than just male and female.” Just under six in 10 say that when they are selecting one brand over another “it is important that the brand is committed to racial equality.” And 44% say they make an effort to shop at minority-owned businesses whenever possible.

Importantly, they expect the same sincerity from brands. Take the Black Lives Matter movement: 55% of Gen Z says it's important for brands to address BLM, but 44% think it's inauthentic for brands to support BLM now if they never have before.

For brands to channel authenticity in a way that is accessible to Gen Z, they have to start with themselves. Relieve the stress of Cancel Culture by showing that your brand is also a work in progress. By owning up to past mistakes, showing positive growth and creating a space for emotional evolution, you'll cultivate a community of engaged Gen Zers.

### **3. They're burning it all down to build it back up (better).**

The past few years have laid bare the cracks in the foundational systems of society – and Gen Z has noticed. The media, the state, the country are all “SUS” in the eyes of this skeptical generation. Only 25% trust the government to be truthful, and only 24% trust the media.

Half of all members of Gen Z say they don't trust the police to help them if they were in trouble (and that number is 63% for Black Gen Zers), and half even say they have seriously considered moving out of the country. Not even their parents are seen as viable role models. While they love them and count mom and dad among their friends, only 25% see their parents as mentors. As one 19 year old told us, “I love them ... but they can't begin to understand.”

This generation not only feels unheard and unseen, but are also unimpressed with the world we've left them. So when they can't find role models or reason in the system they are reinventing their own.

If Millennials were the generation that “killed” everything (from motorcycles to wine corks), Gen Z is the generation expected to build it all back. And they're doing it on their own terms. Despite their distrust, they've turned to action not apathy. From Greta Thunberg to the everyday TikTok-er, Gen Z is working at all levels to uplift the issues that matter to them: 64% say they are into volunteering and supporting causes that are important to them; 30% identify as politically active; and more than three in five say their involvement in political causes was higher last year than ever before.

## **Amplify their influence**

Knowing that the age of Gen Z advocacy is here, what can brands do to enlist them in their causes? Begin by amplifying their influence. Gen Z has the vision, drive and passion to enact change – you have the platform. Help them feel heard and seen by using your megaphone to bolster their causes. But be sure to play a supporting role. Showing trust in their leadership will go a long way. Position yourself as a true partner who is willing to hand over the reins to make their unique message heard.