DOES GEN Z REALLY EXIST?

5 WAYS TO AVOID THE GENERATIONAL MARKETING TRAP

GWI.

IN THIS REPORT

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Notes on methodology

All figures in this report are drawn from: GWI Core - our continuous online research among individuals aged 16-64 (or 16+) in 53 markets worldwide. Other external sources, if any, are disclosed under the given graph and in brackets within the body text.

For our GWI Core data set, we speak to over 1 million individuals annually. Where relevant to their interests / behaviors, Core participants will be invited to take part in further studies about specific topics: GWI Alcohol, GWI Automotive, GWI Consumer Tech, GWI Gaming, GWI Luxury, GWI Moments, GWI Sport, GWI Travel, and GWI Work. We also invite participants in the US to complete GWI Pulse, a weekly deep dive into topical themes. Some data in this report was collected through its predecessor, GWI Zeitgeist, which ran in multiple markets at the time.

Index

Throughout this report, we refer to indexes. Indexes are used to compare any given group against the average (1.00), which unless otherwise stated refers to the global average. For example, an index of "1.20" means that a given group is 20% above the global average.

FOREWORD

Ask a marketer which audience is top of mind, and nine times out of ten the answer is Gen Z. Why? Because it is instantly recognizable, maps onto planning tools, and carries enough cultural meaning to get a strategy moving. And because Gen Z is one of the most commercially significant audiences of the next decade, the fervor to understand them is entirely justified.

Segmenting by generation is not a mistake. But like any shortcut, you need to know when to trust it, and when to go deeper. That challenge is what this report unpacks, because GWI's data shows that the picture is more complicated than the headlines suggest. A confidently expressed or widely accepted audience definition is not always the same thing as an accurate one.

The marketers who navigate this best are not the ones who abandon generational thinking. They are the ones who know how to pressure-test it. The rules in the second half of this report are built from that approach: practical ways to get more out of your existing audience thinking, grounded in data that cuts through the noise that has built up around Gen Z.

Whether you come to this report as a believer or a skeptic, my hope is that you leave with sharper tools, clearer questions, and more confidence in the audience decisions that matter to your work.

JASON MANDER
CHIEF INSIGHT OFFICER, GWI

01

WHY BRANDS CAN'T STOP TALKING ABOUT GEN Z

GEN Z SPENDING POWER IS ON THE RISE

Spending power of Gen Z in trillions

$2.7 TRN

IN 2024

$12.6 TRN

MORE THAN THE GDP OF GERMANY, JAPAN AND CANADA COMBINED

PROJECTED IN 2030

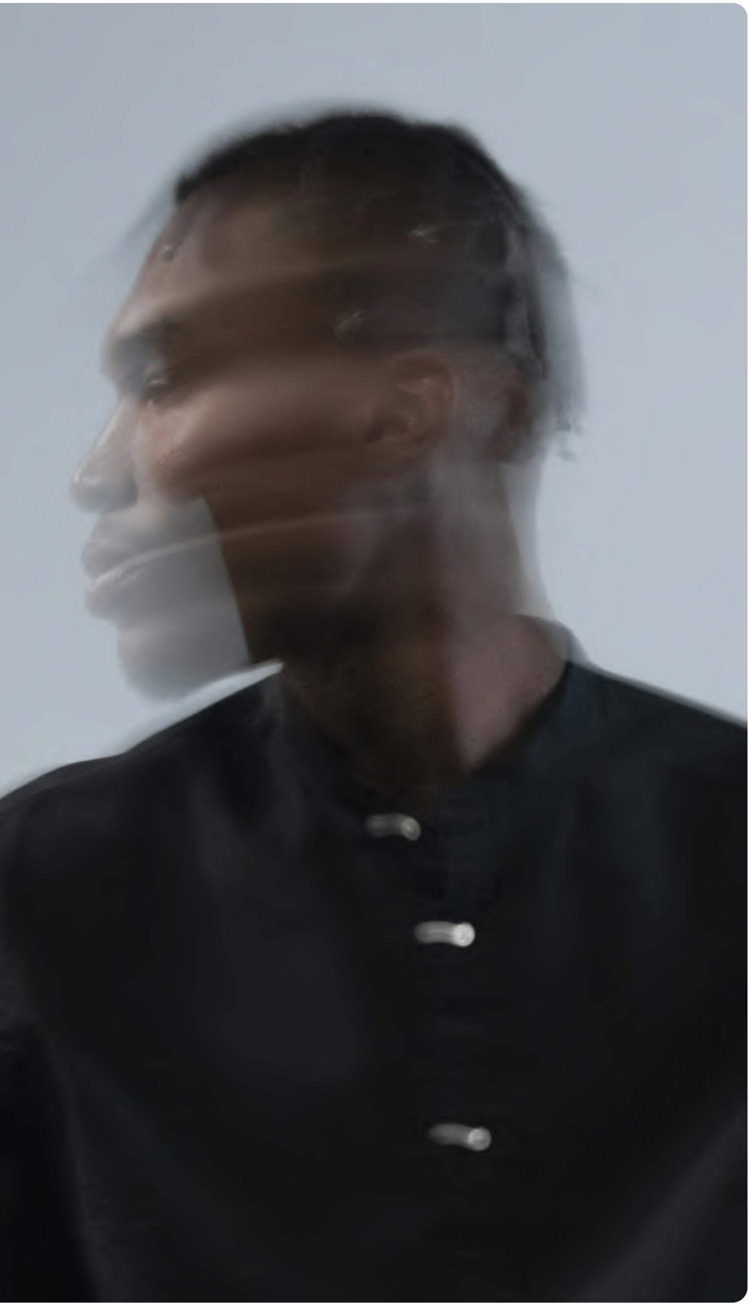
Source: 3 BofA Global Research, World Data Lab, Generations Forecasts, UN

Major brands are already building Gen Z into their plans.

To name just a few examples: Nike has refreshed "Just Do It" through Gen Z-focused campaigns. Hugo Boss has positioned its fashion line Hugo as a Gen Z-facing brand and launched Hugo Blue as part of that push. McDonald's has run TikTok campaigns designed to feel "Gen Z-first," using content creators rather than repurposed TV content.

And it's not hard to understand why.

Gen Z are already the most searched generation today (Google Trends), and by 2030 their spending power is expected to reach $12.6 trillion – more than the GDP of Germany, Japan and Canada combined. Those born between 1997 and 2012 are also moving into greater financial independence, growing in the workforce, shaping household spending, and building brand relationships that could last for decades.



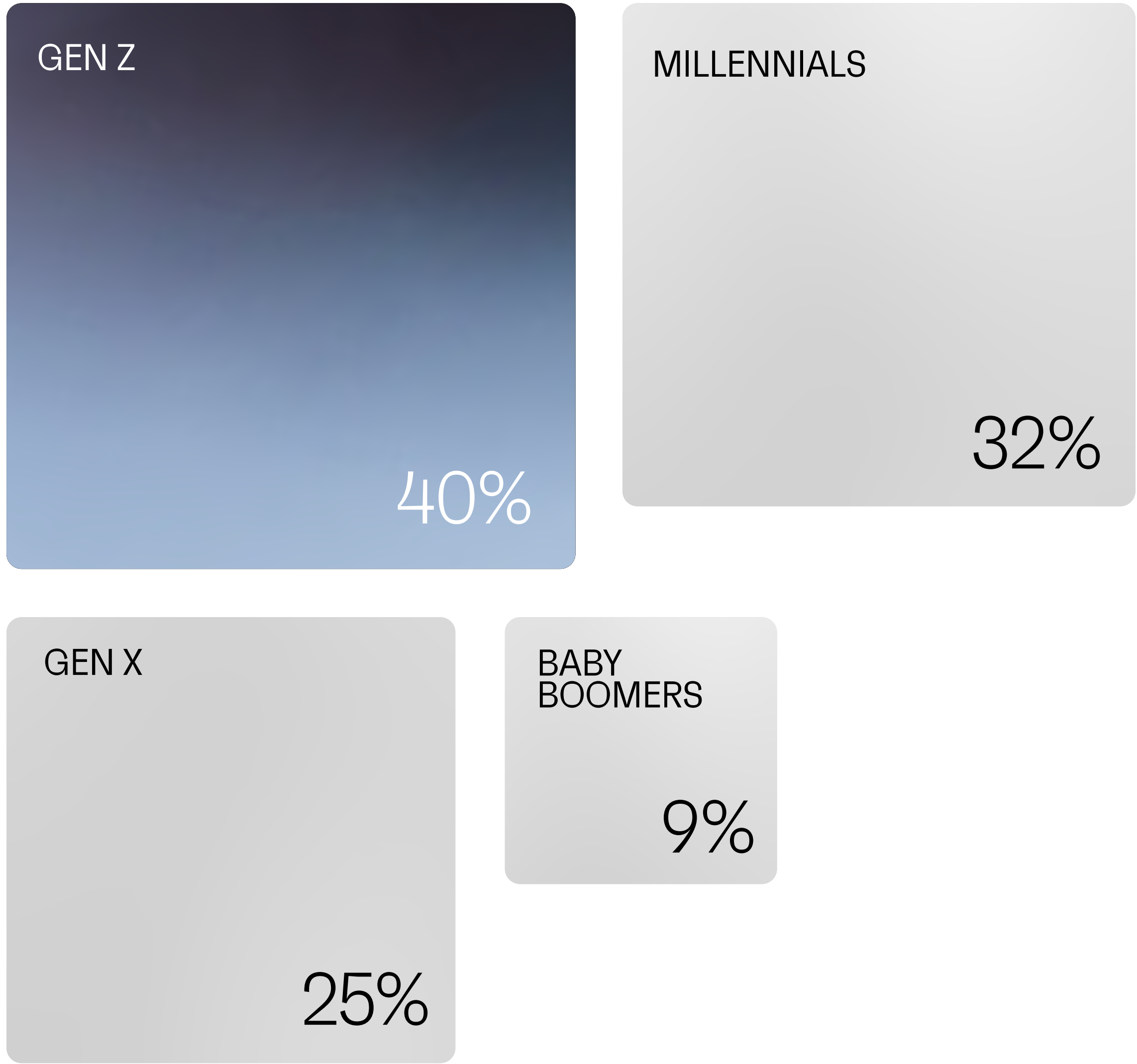
But the appeal is not purely commercial. Across the world, younger audiences have often been central to popularizing new cultural trends and behaviors: rock and roll and counterculture in the 1960s, music video and visual identity in the MTV era, and smartphones and social media as Millennials came of age.

Gen Z appears to be playing a similar role. They are already leading users of AI tools for learning and education. Two fifths use AI to learn or improve skills, such as a new language or career-related skill, compared with 32% of Millennials, 25% of Gen X and 9% of Baby Boomers.

They are also deeply engaged in the creator economy. Gen Zers are 28% more likely than Millennials, 66% more likely than Gen X, and 223% more likely than Baby Boomers to describe themselves as heavy users of vlogs and influencer videos. More than a third of Gen Z (36%) watched how-to videos or vlogs every day or most days in the last week.

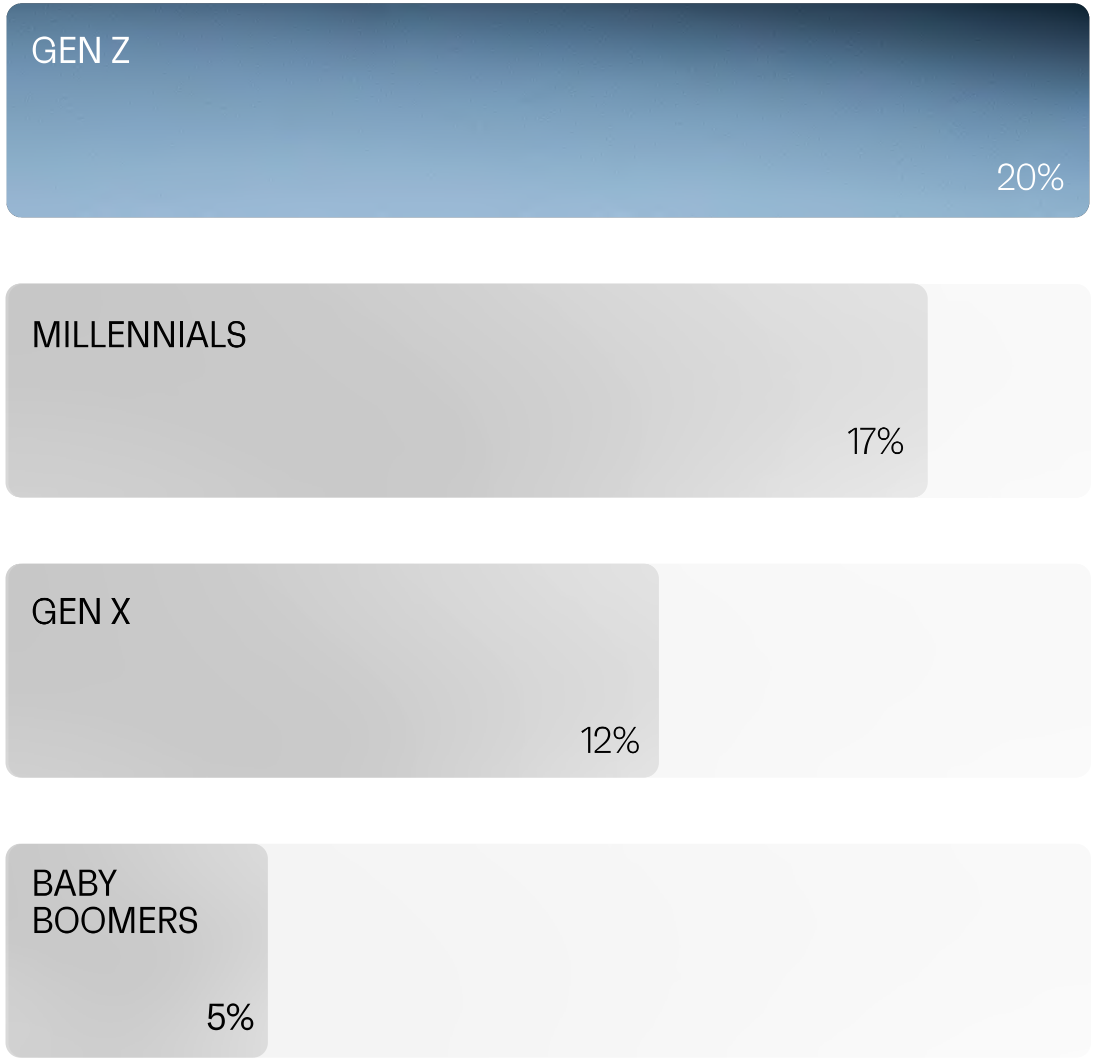
AI FOR LEARNING: A FOUR-GENERATION GRADIENT

% in each generation who use AI tools to learn or improve skills



BRAND DISCOVERY THROUGH INFLUENCERS SKEWS TO YOUNGER GENERATIONS

% in each generation who say they discover new brands through influencer endorsements



That matters because behaviors associated with younger audiences can quickly reshape commercial strategy. Influencer marketing, for example, has more than tripled in value between 2020 and 2025, reaching $32.55 billion (Statista). This growth is not solely down to Gen Z, but Gen Z are the generation most likely to discover new brands through influencer endorsements, with 20% naming it as a brand discovery channel compared with 17% of Millennials, 12% of Gen X and 5% of Boomers.

The pattern is broader than influencers. For Gen Z, social platforms are not only places to pass time. They are part of the research journey. Nearly half of Gen Z (48%) use social networks when actively researching brands, products or services, compared with 21% of Boomers.

Edelman also reported that the generation “wields tremendous influence over every other generation, across not just what we buy, but how we live and what we believe.” For marketers under pressure to spot the next growth audience, understand emerging behaviors, and build relevance with future consumers, Gen Z is an obvious place to look.

The risk begins when attention turns into over-reliance. The more visible and commercially important Gen Z becomes, the more tempting it is to treat a broad population label as a clear audience strategy. A generation can be a useful lens. It can show direction, context and momentum. But it can also make a vast and varied population feel simpler than it is.

That is the tension at the heart of this report. Is Gen Z a clear and distinct target audience – the kind of audience a brand can build a strategy, message, product roadmap or channel plan around? Or has a useful shorthand become a convenient fiction – one that makes a messy audience feel easier to identify, buy and understand?

To answer that, we need to start with the first thing the Gen Z chase can distort: not how brands see Gen Z, but who they stop seeing around them.

02

THE PROBLEM WITH LOOKING ONLY AT THE EXTREMES

MARKETERS REALLY DO LOVE A (NEW) GENERATION

Gen Z can feel like a sharply distinct audience because of who it is often compared with.

Put Gen Z next to Boomers, and the differences can look dramatic: media habits, housing prospects, technology use, brand loyalty, social values. That contrast has value. It helps brands see how much the world has changed, and why younger consumers may need to be understood differently.

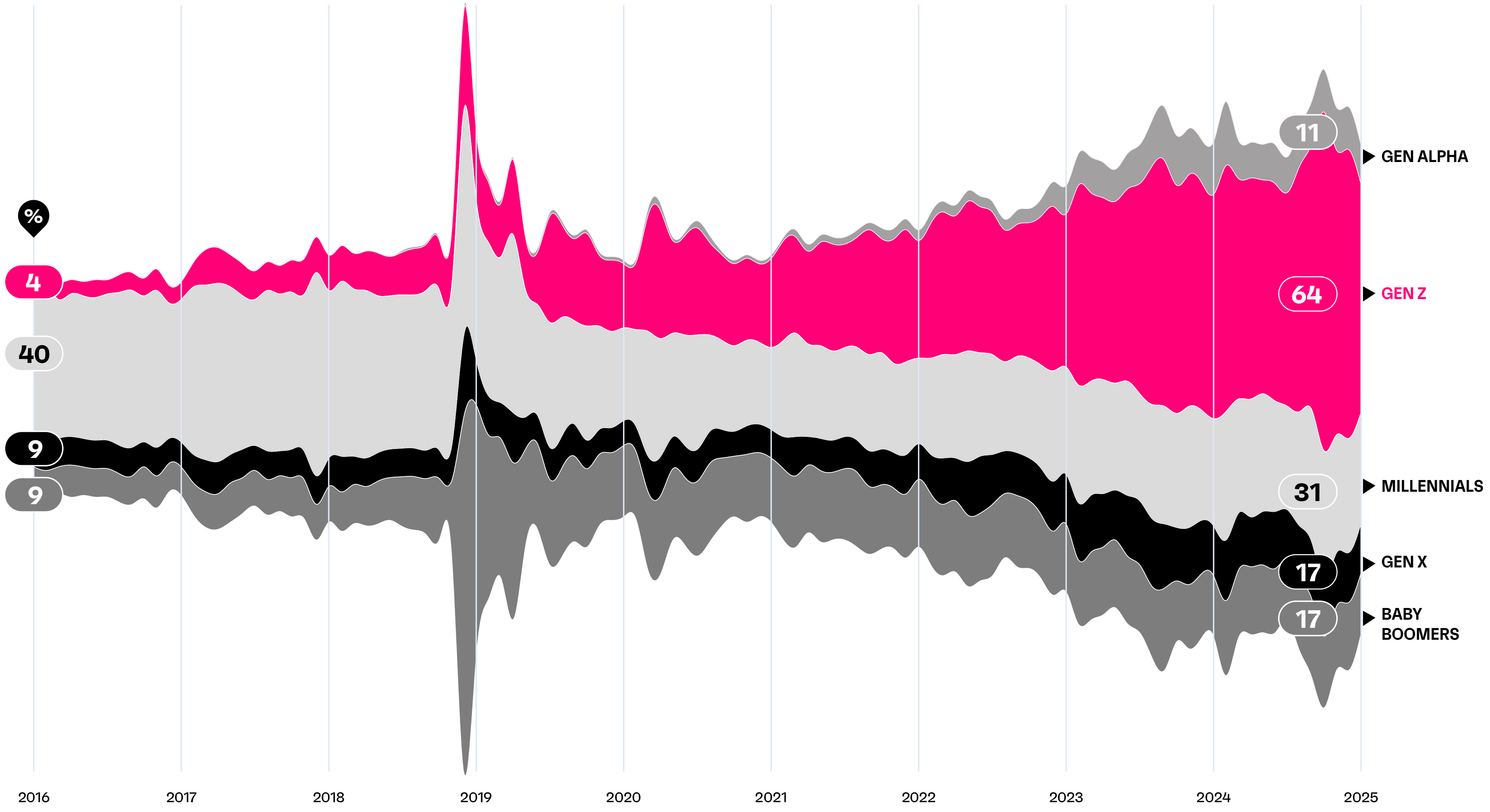
Housing is one such example. In 1975, for Boomers around the age of 25, the median US home cost around $39,000, roughly 2.5 times the average annual income (U.S. Census Bureau; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development). In 2026, for older Gen Zers aged around 25, the median home costs over $400,000, around five to eight times the average entry-level income in many markets (Harvard JCHS; Redfin).

The story tells itself, with intriguing change and tensions clearly visible. But stark comparisons can also distort the conclusion. Add Millennials and Gen X back in, and some behaviors or circumstances that first looked uniquely Gen Z start to look more widely shared.

That matters because the missing middle is not commercially marginal. Gen X, aged 46 to 61 in 2026, for example, are in their peak earning years. Globally, they hold the largest share of spending power at 23.5%, and in the US their average annual expenditure is $96,941, the highest of any generation (US Bureau of Labor Statistics).

Yet while Gen Z is the most searched generation, Gen X is the least searched. Search interest is not strategy, but it is a useful signal of where attention is going. Gen X sit barely above Generation Alpha, who are not yet out of school. Also, only 15% of Gen X feel represented in the advertising they see, lower than Gen Z and Millennials.

INDEXED GOOGLE SEARCH POPULARITY FOR GENERATIONAL TERMS WORLDWIDE 2016 - 2025



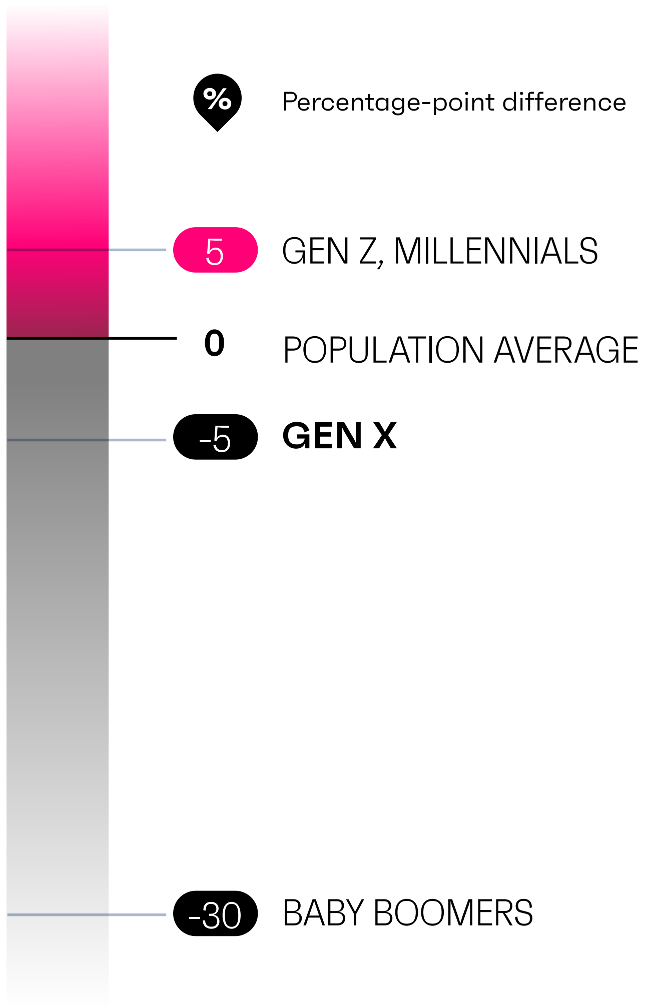
This is where the Gen Z chase can narrow the market. The most culturally visible audience gets studied, discussed and briefed again and again. The commercially powerful middle gets less attention, partly because it does not always behave like an extreme.

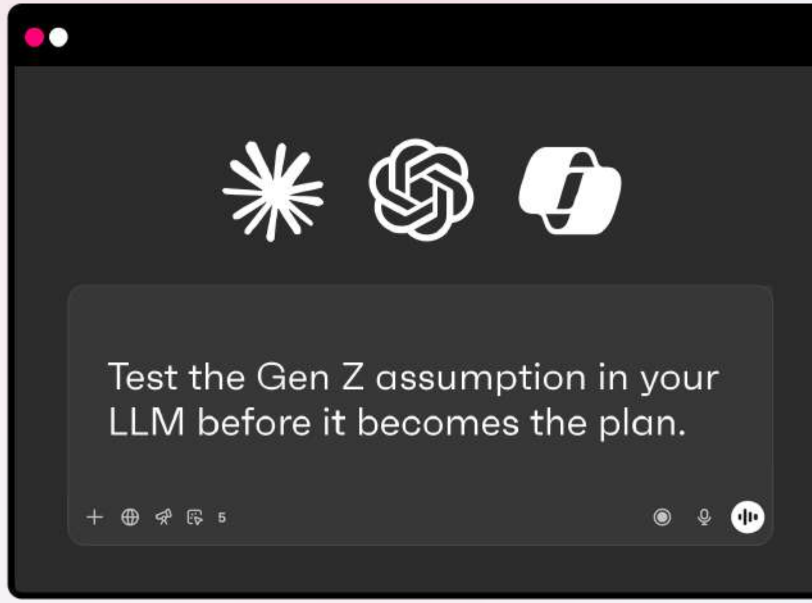
Across a wide range of behaviors, attitudes and preferences, Gen X tends to sit closest to the average consumer, based on each generation's average distance from the total sample across the measures analyzed. It does not spike as sharply as younger generations on some behaviors, or sit as far apart as Boomers on others. That can make Gen X less headline-friendly, but it may also make them more representative of where much of the market sits.

CLOSE TO THE AVERAGE ON ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR, GEN X OFTEN GOES UNNOTICED

Showing how far each generation typically sits compared to the population average, across:

- Attitudes
- Behaviors
- Marketing preferences
- Purchasing and tech usage





Read our Gen Z prompt guide

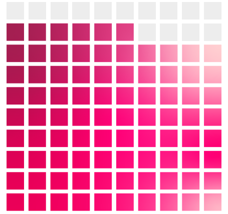
SMARTPHONE AS THE MOST IMPORTANT DEVICE

Take smartphones. If you only compare Gen Z with Boomers, smartphone dependence looks like a habit concentrated among under-30s. Widen the lens, and that impression falls apart. 86% of Gen Z call their smartphone their most important device, and so do 86% of Millennials and 82% of Gen X. The dropoff comes with Boomers, at 58%.

% in each generation who say a smartphone is their most important device

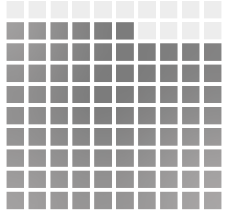
GEN Z

86%



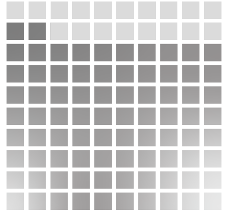
MILLENNIALS

86%



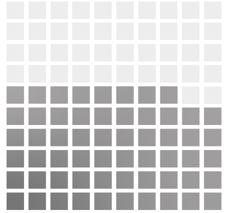
GEN X

82%



BABY BOOMERS

58%



The same pattern appears in category strategy. A food and drink brand launching a healthy snacks range might see Gen Z as the natural starting point. After all, they are 14% more likely than Boomers to be interested in healthy food or drinks. But a fuller generational view changes the read: the same proportion of Gen Z, Millennials and Gen X say they are interested in the category. The opportunity is broader than the Gen Z-versus-Boomer comparison first suggests.

This is the first generational marketing trap: the clearest contrast can make Gen Z look more distinct than it is.

The contrast still matters. It can reveal meaningful change. But when it becomes the whole view, brands may start attributing behaviors to Gen Z that are shared more widely, while overlooking audiences that are just as relevant to growth.

So before asking whether Gen Z is a distinct audience, it is worth asking who they are being compared with.

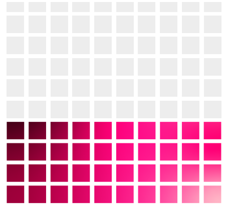
Because the comparison that makes the sharpest story does not always reveal the sharpest opportunity.

INTEREST IN HEALTHY FOOD CUTS ACROSS GENERATIONS

% in each generation who say they are interested in healthy food or drinks

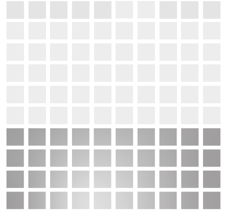
GEN Z

40%



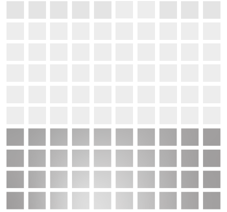
MILLENNIALS

40%



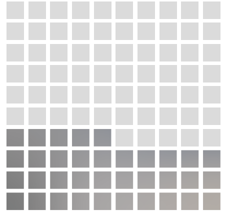
GEN X

40%



BABY BOOMERS

35%



03

FAMILIARITY IS NOT UNDERSTANDING

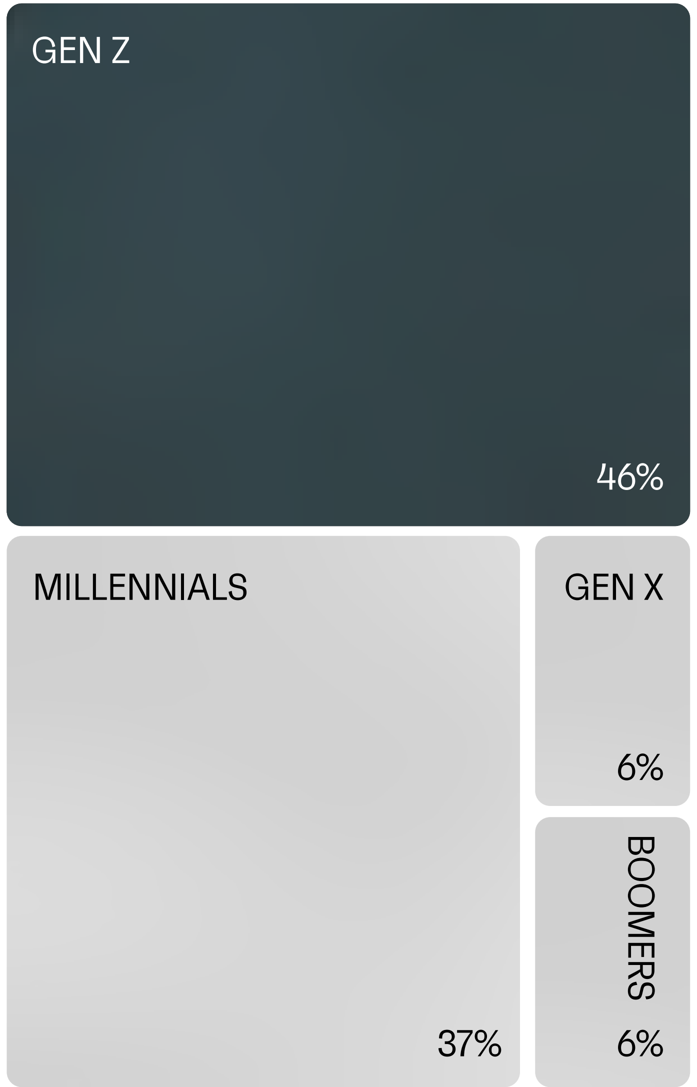
Gen Z may feel easier for marketers to read because marketers tend to share more attitudes with them than with older generations.

GWI custom analysis shows that across 145 attitudinal statements, marketers align with Gen Z on 46% of them. With Gen X and Baby Boomers, that figure drops to just 6%.

That overlap can be useful. It may help marketers spot cultural signals and understand why younger audiences matter. But it can also make Gen Z feel more familiar than they really are.

MARKETERS ALIGN MOST CLOSELY WITH THE GEN Z MINDSET

Share of 145 attitudinal statements where marketers are in line with these generations

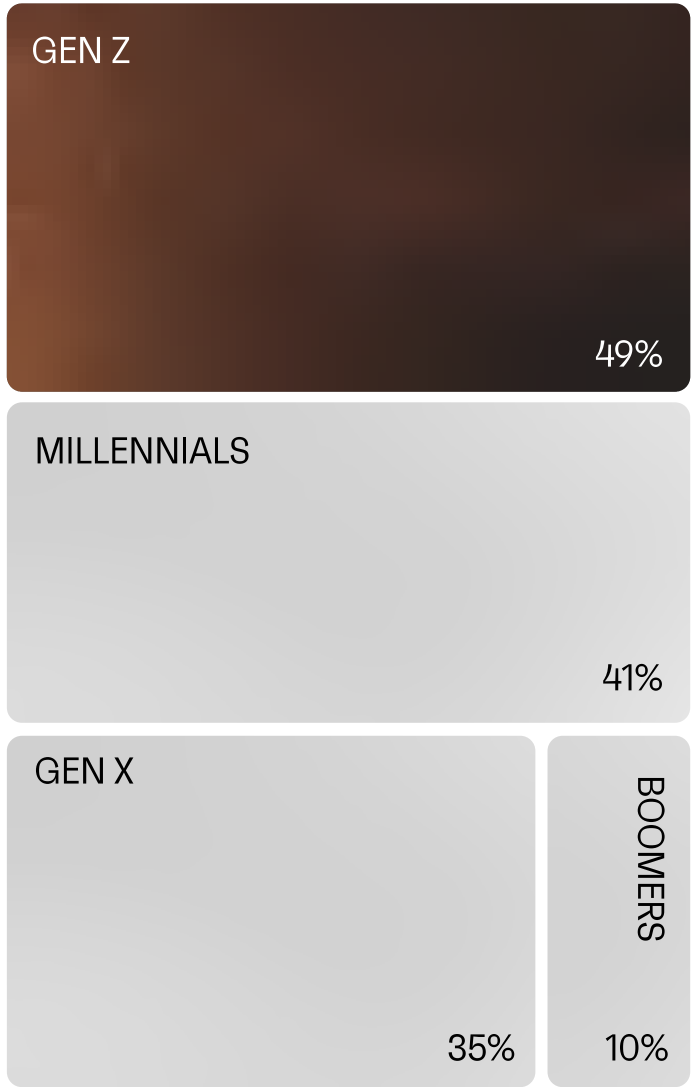


The fit is still partial. Even Gen Z marketers only match the wider Gen Z population on 49% of statements. More than half of the time, even the youngest marketers differ from the wider audience they are trying to understand.

That matters to the question this report is asking. If the people defining Gen Z only partly overlap with Gen Z, then the "Gen Z" used in strategy can become a filtered version of the audience: familiar enough to feel right, but incomplete enough to miss what matters.

DO MARKETERS RESEMBLE PEOPLE FROM THEIR OWN GENERATION?

Share of 145 attitudinal statements where marketers align with their own generation



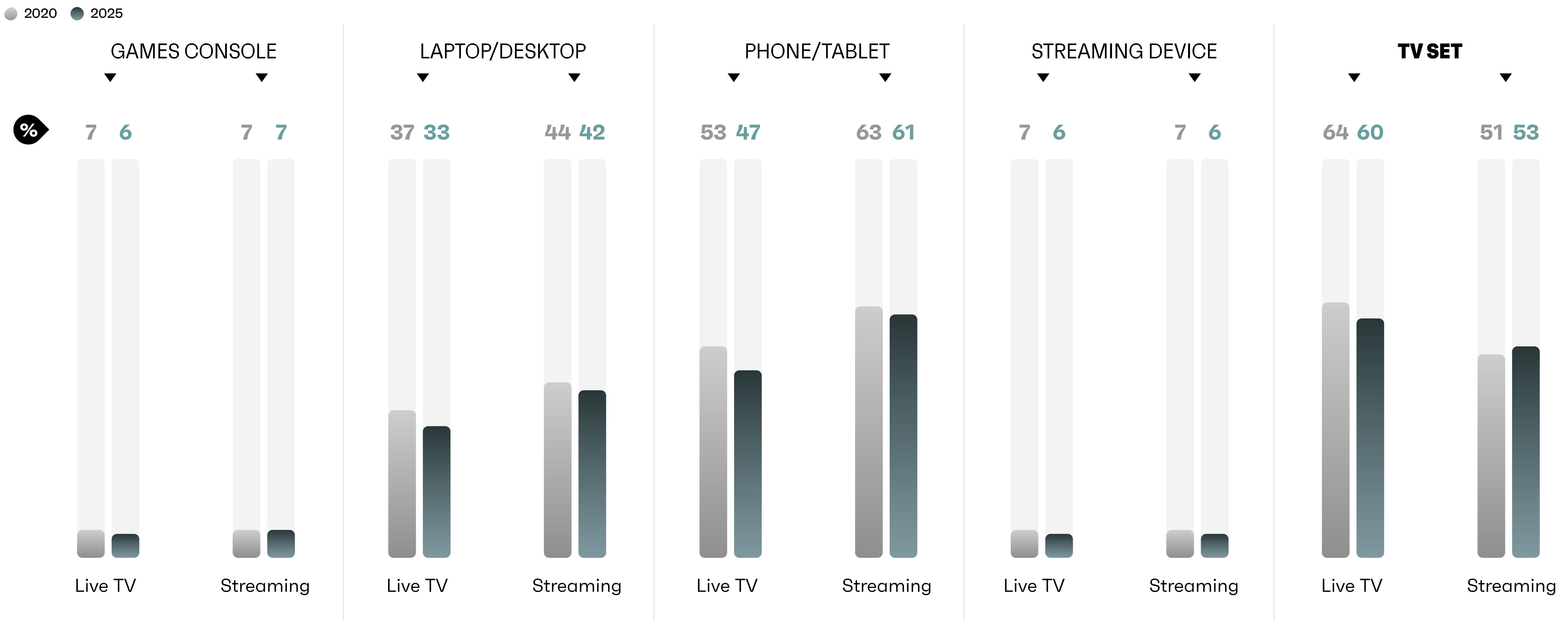
One example is TV.

It has become common to frame Gen Z as moving away from traditional TV. In the US, for example, Deloitte's Digital Media Trends report found that Gen Z cable subscribers are almost three times as likely as Boomers to say they plan to cancel within the next year. GWI data supports part of that story: more than 60% of Gen Z watch streaming on their phones, which is more than the share who stream on TV sets.

But there is another layer underneath it. As Gen Z gain more independence and move out of their parents' homes, TV viewing comes back, but as part of a broader content mix where linear plays a less prominent role. They are watching linear programming, but also Netflix, on-demand content and YouTube on the big screen. What changes their behavior is less about age and more about living situation.

GEN Z STILL WATCHES MORE ON THE TV SET THAN ANY OTHER DEVICE

% of Gen Z who say they watch TV/streaming via the following devices



Another example is price.

It is easy to see why Gen Z is often framed as price-conscious. Cost of living is a major concern for younger consumers, while thrift, resale and deal-seeking have become visible parts of the Gen Z consumer narrative. Barclays, for example, has described Gen Z as a more conscientious shopping cohort, seeking out deals and showing stronger interest in secondhand buying.

That can naturally point strategies toward value-led or discount-led messaging.

But the data adds nuance. Just 36% of Gen Z describe themselves as price-conscious, compared with 45% of Gen X. Some 41% of Gen Z say they look for the best deals, compared with 53% of Boomers. And 22% of Gen Z use price comparison websites, compared with 31% of Boomers.

On these measures, Gen Z are less price-led than Gen X or Boomers. Price still matters, especially by category and life stage, but “Gen Z equals discounts” is too blunt to carry the strategy on its own.

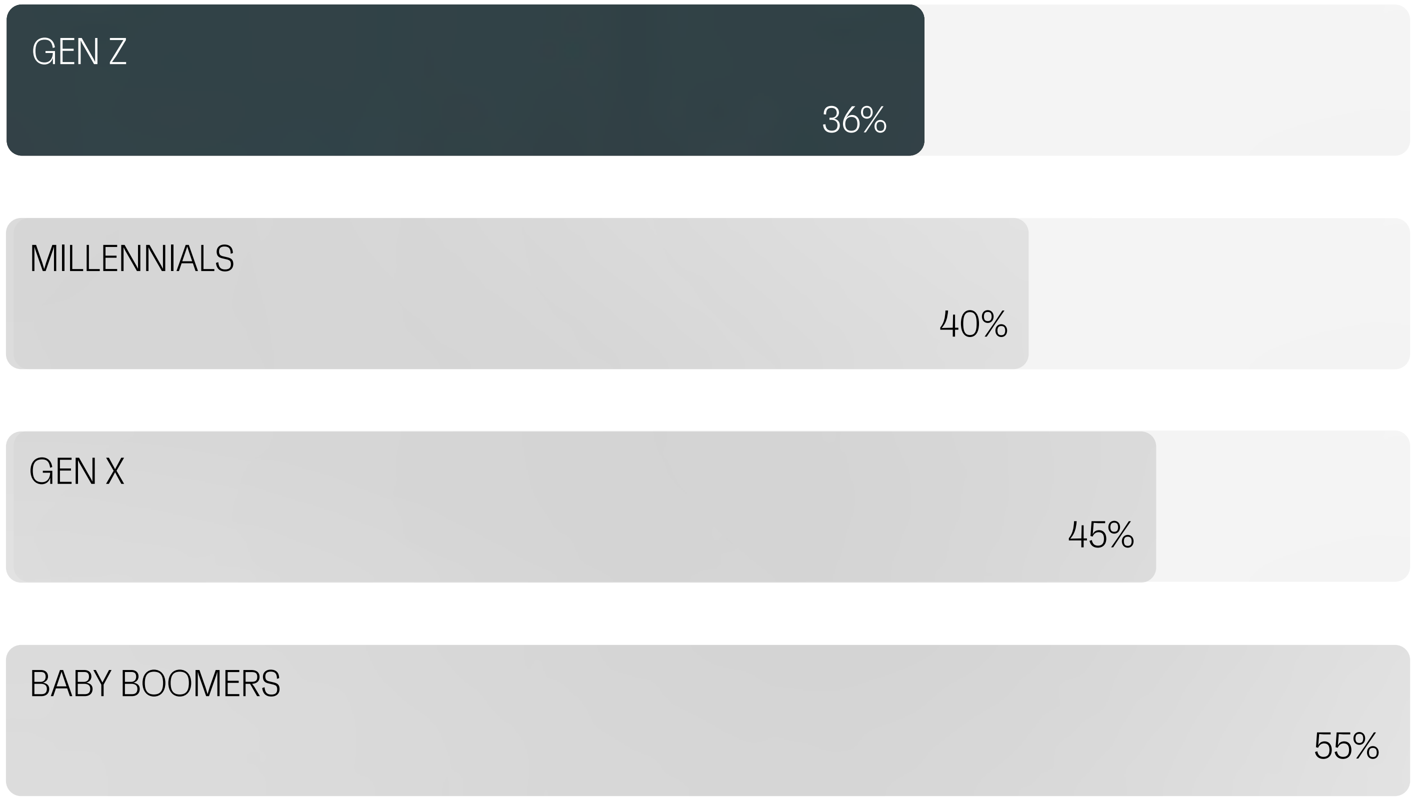
The version of Gen Z that feels familiar may not be the version the data reveals.

Section 2 showed how comparison can make Gen Z look more distinct. This section shows how familiarity can make Gen Z feel more knowable. But neither contrast nor familiarity is the same as understanding.

And if familiarity is not enough, the next question becomes more important: what can a generation actually explain?

PRICE SENSITIVITY: NOT WHERE THE BRIEF ASSUMES

% in each generation who describe themselves as price-conscious



04

WHERE GENERATIONAL THINKING BREAKS DOWN

Generational analysis has obvious uses. It can show that one group is more likely to do something than another. It is simple to brief, easy to align on, and instantly recognizable across an organization. It also maps neatly onto how many media platforms sell targeting, where age bands are one of the most accessible ways to define an audience.

But it does not always tell brands why that behavior is happening, what need is underneath it, or whether the same opportunity exists beyond the cohort.

That distinction matters because “Gen Z” is easy to define by birth year. The harder question is whether birth year explains the behaviors, needs and choices a brand is trying to understand.

Take cruises.

Ask most people who enjoys cruises most, whether that is a week in the Caribbean, a Mediterranean tour, or an Alaskan expedition, and the answer will probably be Baby Boomers.

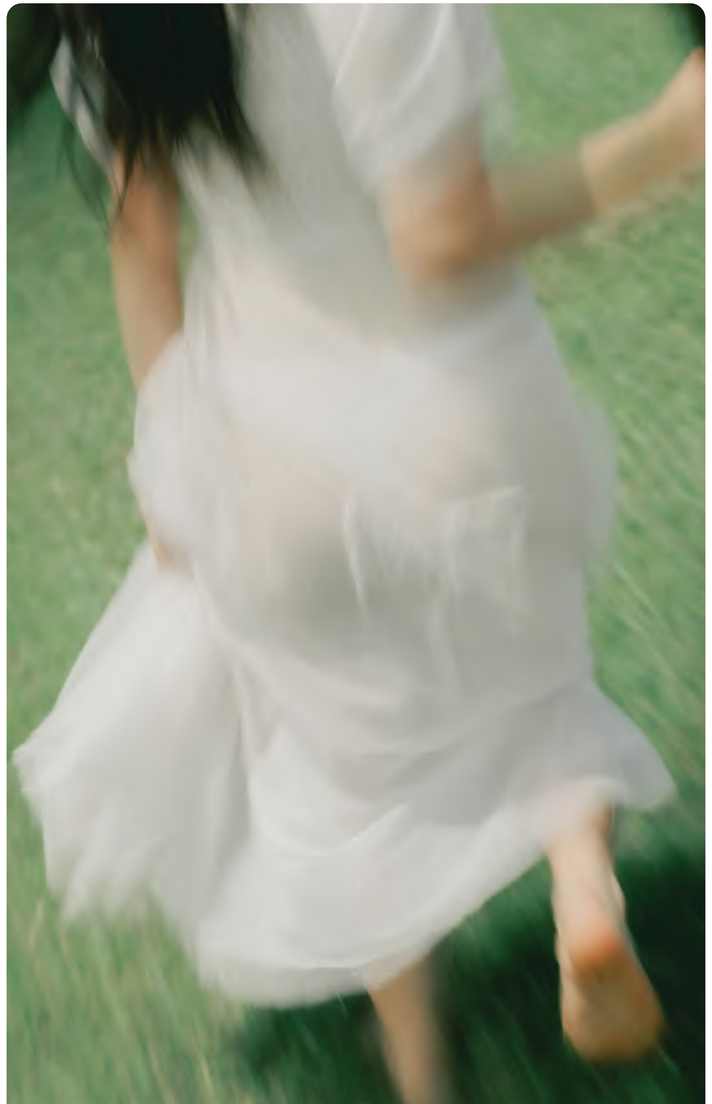
At first glance, the data supports the stereotype. Around 22% of Boomers say they enjoy cruises, more than any other generation. But Millennials and Gen X are close behind, with 19% of each generation saying the same, while 17% of Gen Z say they enjoy cruises too. The gap between the most enthusiastic generation and the least enthusiastic is only five percentage points.

Boomers lead, but the gap is small enough to ask what else is driving interest.

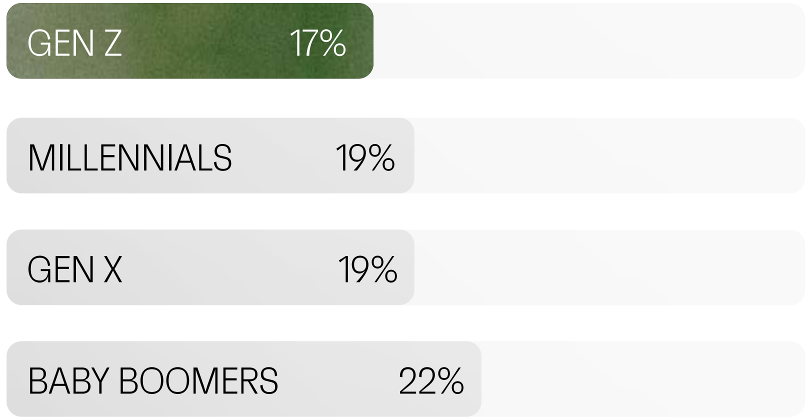
When we look beyond age, a more useful audience picture appears. Cruise enthusiasts over-index on higher incomes, with 27% sitting in the top earning bracket, making them 41% more likely than the average person to be high earners. They also lean strongly toward sociability, with 62% describing themselves as social and outgoing, 56% more likely than average.

That helps explain why Boomers may still lead: retirement, accumulated wealth and fewer dependent children can make cruises more accessible. But those are circumstances, not uniquely “Boomer” traits.

AGE VS MINDSET: LOOK CLOSER, IT’S ABOUT MINDSET AND CIRCUMSTANCES



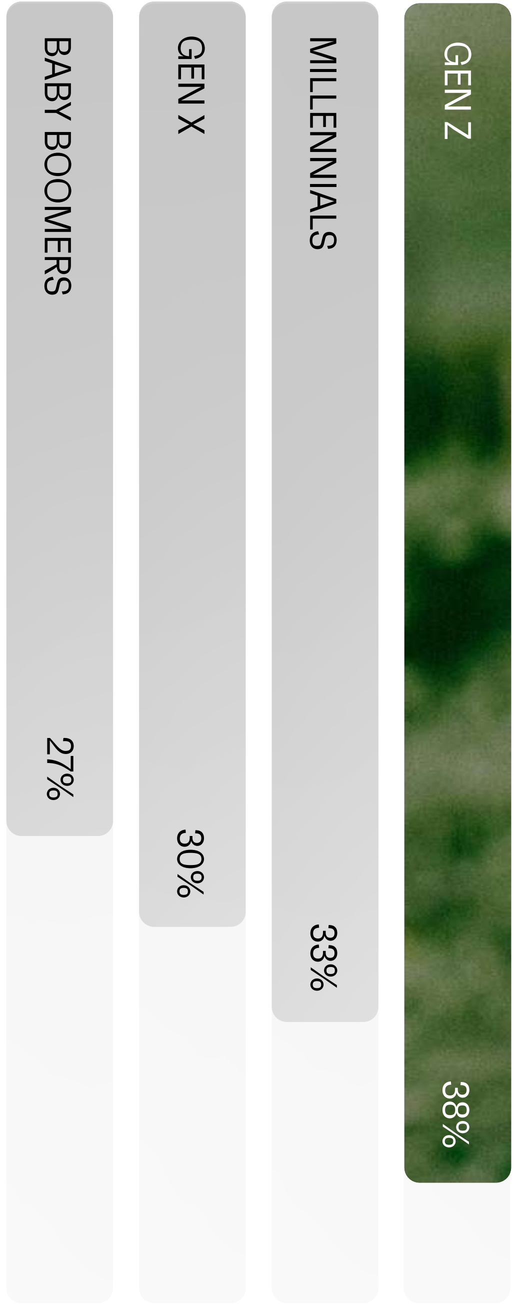
% in each generation who say they enjoy taking cruise vacations



....and are also among affluent, ambitious, socially outgoing adults with no children/no young children

SKINCARE AND BEAUTY INTEREST: NOT JUST A YOUTH-LED CATEGORY

% in each generation who say they are interested in skincare and beauty



The same pattern appears in categories often framed in the opposite direction. Skincare and beauty, for example, are frequently discussed as youth-led categories. Gen Z do lead on interest, with 38% saying they are interested in skincare. But Millennials are close behind at 33%, followed by Gen X at 30% and Boomers at 27%. The total gap between the youngest and oldest generations is only 11 percentage points.

A skincare brand that stops at “Gen Z” could miss substantial demand across every other generation. The more useful question may be who has the strongest routine, category involvement, disposable income or self-image need.

That is where the distinction matters. A generational label can show where a pattern appears. It cannot always explain why the pattern exists. And if the label cannot explain the behavior, it is hard to treat it as the audience strategy.

AGE IS NOT HOW MOST PEOPLE DEFINE THEMSELVES

% who cite the following as the biggest contributors to their identity

	%
1. VALUES /BELIEFS	59
2. PERSONALITY TRAITS	50
3. HOBBIES / INTERESTS	48
4. LIFE EXPERIENCES	48
5. EDUCATION LEVEL	42
6. MENTAL HEALTH STATUS	37
7. SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS	37
8. FAMILY BACKGROUND / UPBRINGING	36
9. OCCUPATION	36
10. MEDIA / ENTERTAINMENT	34
11. PREFERENCES CULTURE	34
12. HEALTH STATUS / MEDICAL CONDITIONS	31
13. AGE	30
14. PHYSICAL APPEARANCE	27
15. GENDER	27

The same limit appears when people describe their own identity.

When we asked people what defines them, age ranked 13th out of 15 factors, behind values and beliefs, personality traits, hobbies and interests, life experiences, education, socioeconomic status and occupation.

Values and beliefs sit at the top, with 59% saying they define or shape who they are. Personality traits follow at 50%, while hobbies and interests and life experiences both sit at 48%. By comparison, only around 30% say age defines or shapes who they are.

Generational labels are also usually assigned from the outside. People do not opt into being "Gen Z" in the way they might identify with a hobby, value, community, life experience or belief.

That matters for strategy. If age is not a strong part of how people define themselves, it may be a weak foundation for messaging that needs to feel personally relevant. Values, personality, interests and life experiences are often closer to the reasons people notice, choose or reject a brand.

Generational targeting can skip past those signals and stop at the age band. This is where generational thinking breaks down: the label starts to act like the answer.

The data may still be technically true. Boomers may lead on cruises. Gen Z may lead on skincare. Younger audiences may lead on certain social behaviors. But if those differences are treated as the full story, brands risk mistaking the first layer of the audience for the audience itself.

That distinction already matters in planning. It matters even more when AI enters the process, because a tool that can generate a polished audience profile in seconds can also make a weak explanation feel complete.

05

AI FOUND EXACTLY WHAT YOU WERE LOOKING FOR. UNFORTUNATELY.

The limitations of generational marketing are not new. AI deepens the risk by making those limitations faster, smoother and easier to scale.

Ask for a Gen Z audience profile and AI can quickly return a detailed persona, a polished summary or the outline of a ready-made brief. The output can feel complete before the underlying assumptions have been checked. A broad label becomes a confident answer. A familiar stereotype starts to look evidence-based. A messy audience begins to look neatly defined.

That matters because AI is now part of how audience decisions are being made.

WHY AI FEELS IRRESISTIBLE

AI-generated insights are already the second-biggest source marketers and advertisers use to make audience targeting decisions, behind only personal intuition and experience, and level with internal customer data. Around 44% of marketers used AI-generated insights for audience targeting decisions in the last year, compared with 31% who used custom research.

More broadly, over half of marketers have used AI to find information, making them 17% more likely than the average person to do so.

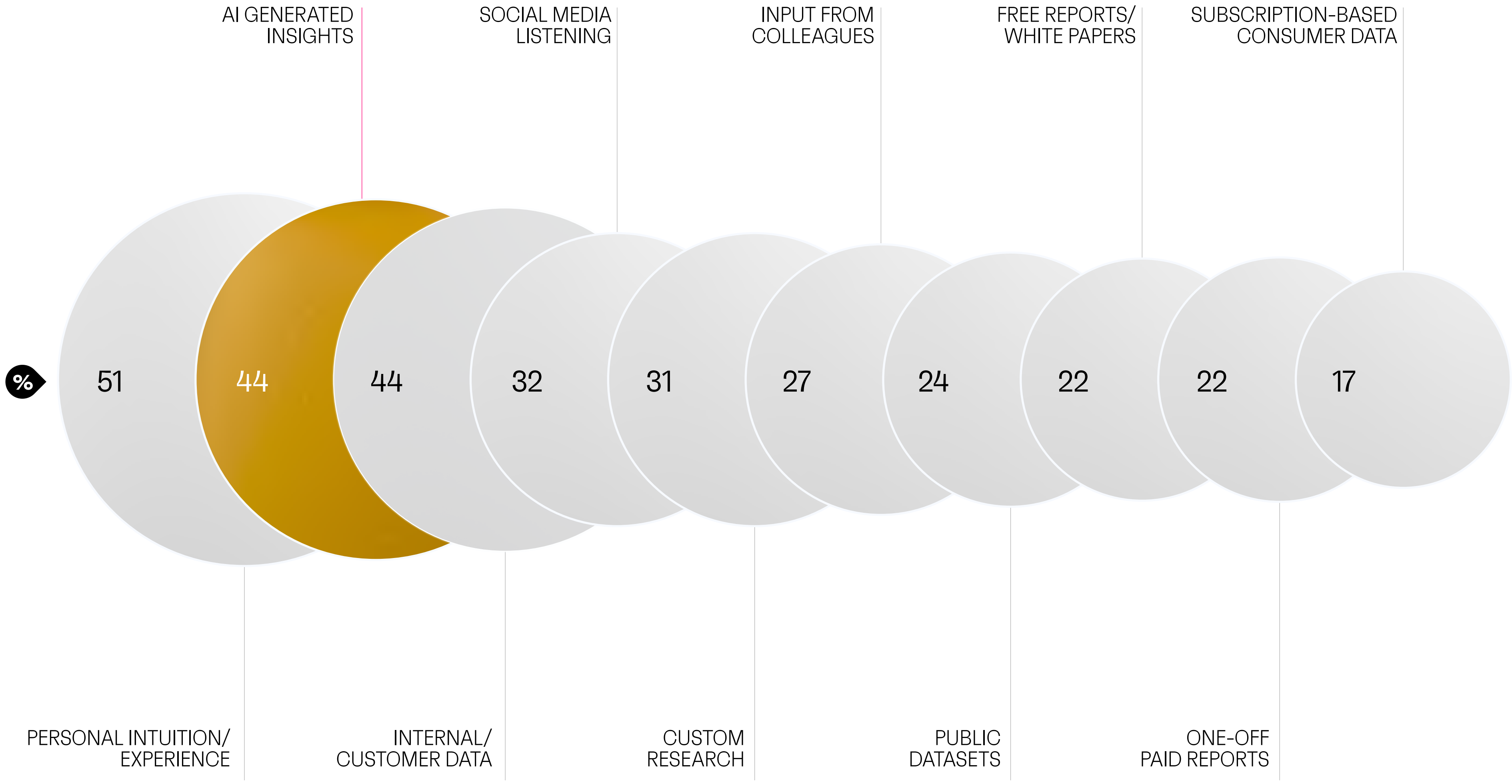
It is easy to understand why. Custom research can be slow and expensive. Social listening is noisy. Internal customer data can be patchy, siloed or historical. Generic reports can be useful, but they rarely answer the specific audience question a team is trying to solve.

AI chatbots are fast, accessible and often good enough to move the work forward. They can help teams get to an audience view before the work begins.

But rapid adoption sits alongside a clear trust gap. Only 23% of marketing managers believe AI-generated content is of high quality. That concern matters because of where many AI-generated audience insights begin.

AI-GENERATED INSIGHTS ARE ALREADY THE SECOND BIGGEST SOURCE FOR AUDIENCE TARGETING DECISIONS

% of advertisers/marketers who used the following sources to make audience targeting decisions in the last year



OPEN-WEB INSIGHT REFLECTS VISIBILITY, NOT REALITY

When AI is asked to generate audience insight from the open web, it often draws on uneven material: press coverage, public reports, brand thought leadership, research snapshots, SEO articles, social commentary and claims that have circulated for years.

The output rarely shows that messiness. It arrives as a smooth paragraph, a neat list, or a finished persona. Partial evidence can feel comprehensive. A repeated claim can feel like a finding.

This matters especially for generational audiences. When a model is asked to describe "Gen Z," it is not interviewing Gen Z. It is drawing from what has already been written, published, indexed, optimized and repeated about them.

The open web is not a neutral sample of the world. Half of all websites globally are in English, even though English is the first language of only around 5% of the world's population (w3techs, Rest of World). The searchable web also skews toward people with the access, confidence, time and incentive to publish.

Platforms add further distortion. LinkedIn over-represents professional self-presentation. Reddit over-represents certain subcultures. TikTok over-represents visible performance, trends and algorithmically amplified content.

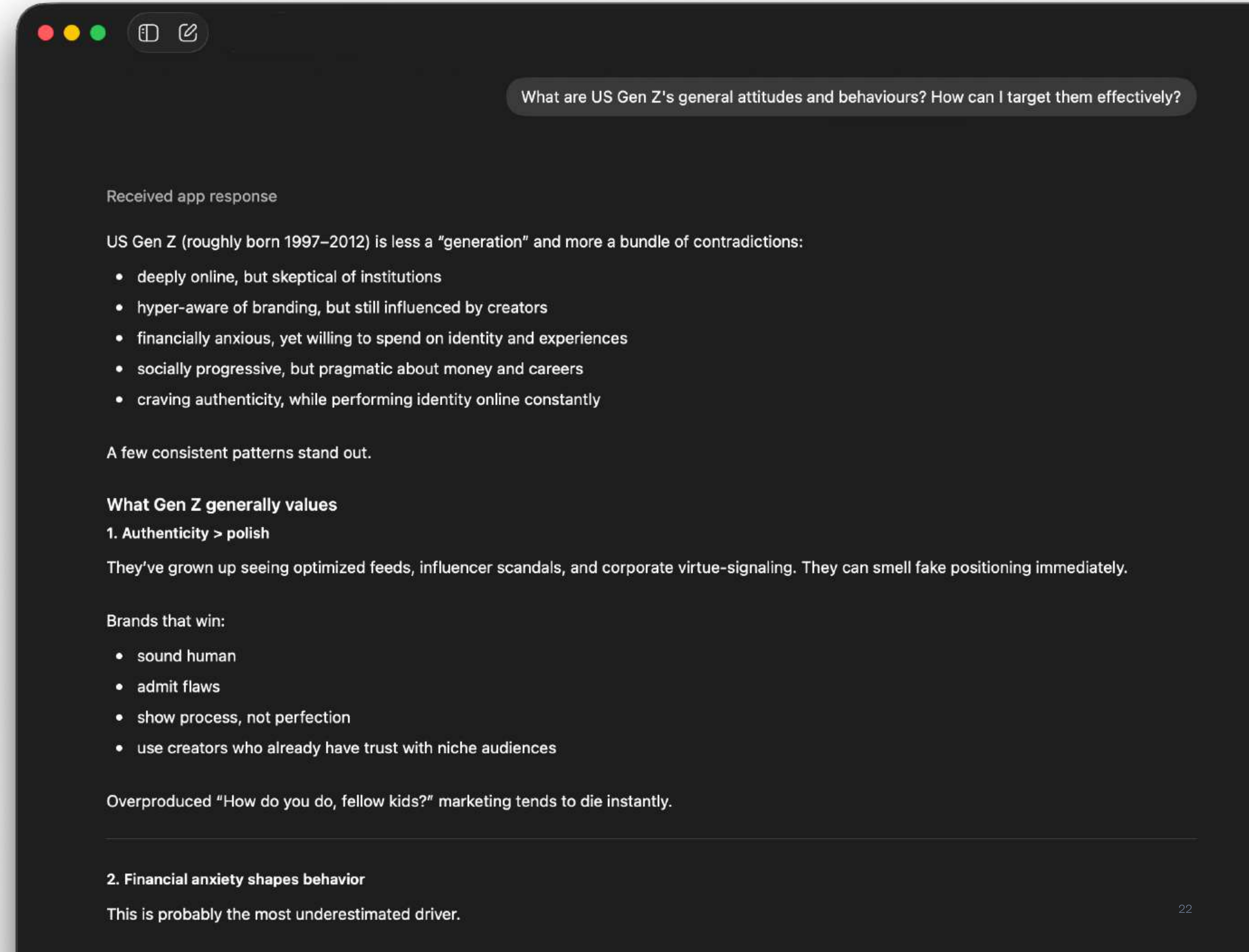
For Gen Z, the bias can be sharper still. The open web tends to over-represent the most vocal, English-language, Western and digitally visible slice of a global generation. US Gen Z, for example, look different from Gen Z globally across multiple brand-relevant behaviors.

US Gen Z are 38% less likely than global Gen Z to want brands to be young (18% versus 29%). They are 20% less likely to use AI tools or chatbots for product purchasing advice (28% versus 35%) . And they are 11% more likely to discover brands through in-game advertising (20% versus 18%) .

So when AI builds an audience persona from the open web, it may show the internet's inherited version of that audience: the version most written about, most searchable, most repeated and most culturally available.

WHAT AI SAYS ABOUT GEN Z

GENERIC | NO SOURCES QUOTED | NOT BACKED BY ANY DATA | SIGNIFICANT ASSUMPTIONS | VERY PREDICTABLE INSIGHTS



THE INHERITED PERSONA: GEN Z INVESTORS

You can see the risk when a generic AI-shaped audience profile is compared with first-party audience data.

Take Gen Z investors: an audience shaping digital trading platforms, online finance communities and the wider culture around money, risk and financial independence.

To test the kind of profile AI can produce, we asked widely-used AI tools to describe Gen Z investors as a target audience. The outputs varied, but the same themes appeared repeatedly: digitally native, predominately male, mobile-first, risk-tolerant, crypto-aware, socially influenced, values-led, and hard to reach through conventional advertising.

That profile is not useless. Parts of it may be true for parts of the audience. The issue is that it is familiar, plausible and incomplete.

GWI's first-party data shows a richer audience. Nearly 41% of Gen Z investors are female. Some 61% describe themselves as creative, making them 33% more likely than the average person to do so. Just over half are arts and culture enthusiasts, 60% more likely than the average Gen Z consumer.

They are also not only reachable through finance, trading or social-media tropes. A quarter watched a live gaming stream last month, making them 91% more likely than the average Gen Z consumer to have done so. They discover new brands through in-game advertising at 72% above average rates, and through podcast sponsorships at 75% above average rates.

That is a different audience: more gender-balanced, more creative, more culturally engaged, and more reachable through entertainment, gaming and audio than the inherited persona might suggest.

Those differences matter because they can change the work. One version may send a brand toward crypto memes, finance influencers and performance channels. The other may open up gaming, culture, podcasts and creative self-expression.

Change the audience profile, and the brief, channel strategy and budget allocation change with it.

AI WITHOUT GWI DATA

WHO THEY APPEAR TO BE

Male-dominated, digitally native, mobile-first, risk-tolerant, crypto-aware and finance-led.

HOW TO REACH THEM

Trading content, finance influencers, crypto communities, investing platforms, performance channels and money-focused podcasts.

AI WITH GWI DATA

WHO THEY ARE

41% are female
61% describe themselves as creative
51% are arts and culture enthusiasts
76% are current affairs and causes enthusiasts

HOW TO REACH THEM

48% use Instagram more than once a day
25% watched a live gaming stream last month
72% more likely to discover brands through in-game ads, and
75% more likely through podcast sponsorships, compared with the average consumer.

THE PROBLEM IS WEAK INPUTS AT SCALE

The risk is not simply that AI can produce a weak audience profile. It is that the profile can look strong enough to scale.

Weak audience assumptions do not stay in the insight deck. They shape who gets targeted, which channels get funded, what creative gets made, which partnerships are pursued, and which audiences are ignored.

The commercial stakes are clear. The Association of National Advertisers tracked $123 million in real ad spend across 35.5 billion impressions and found that only 36 cents of every dollar reached consumers. The 2024 follow-up showed modest improvement but still found that for every $1,000 spent programmatically, only $439 actually reaches consumers. More than half of every programmatic dollar disappears before it gets in front of the audience the brief was written for. AI did not create that inefficiency, but weak AI-generated audience profiles can make it harder to fix by scaling assumptions that already point media in the wrong direction.

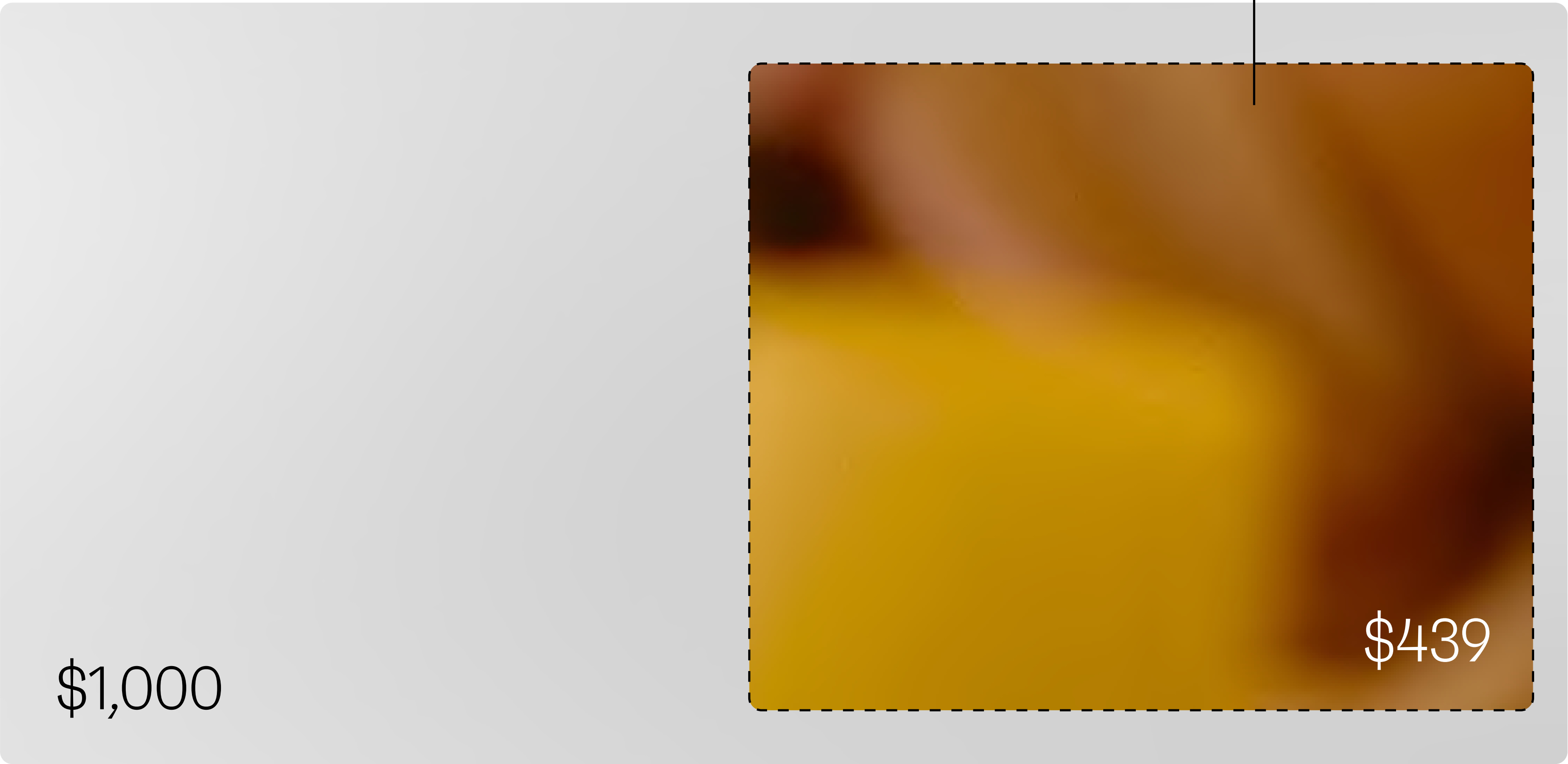
The point is to ground AI in better data. Used well, AI can sharpen audience understanding. Used on weak inputs, it can make old assumptions feel certain.

The most troublesome insight is never the one that is obviously wrong. It is the one that feels right.

Which brings us to the verdict.

MISUNDERSTOOD AUDIENCES LEAD TO WASTED MARKETING SPEND

FOR EVERY
$1,000 SPENT ON PROGRAMMATIC ADS,
ONLY $439 REACHES CONSUMERS



SO, DOES GEN Z REALLY EXIST?

06

Gen Z exists as a population: nearly 2 billion people born between 1997 and 2012, around 22.9% of the global population. It also exists as a cultural reference point. But does Gen Z exist as a single target audience – the kind of audience a brand can build one distinct strategy, message, product roadmap or channel plan around?

NO. NOT ON ITS OWN.

In practice, the Gen Z many strategies rely on is often a composite: part data, part assumption, part inherited shorthand. The label is useful, but it has gradually been asked to carry more precision than it can support.

A simple cultural example shows the limitation. Take two of the most visible Gen Z figures in popular culture: Jake Paul and MrBeast. On paper, they share a lot. Both are American men born in the late 1990s. Both built their fame through short-form video, with YouTube as their main platform today. Both create high-energy, spectacle-driven content. Both have built major business empires and attract large young audiences.

But few marketers would seriously treat them as interchangeable. Their public personas, content, fan relationships, brand fit and commercial meaning are very different. The point is not about either person individually. It is that even when generation, gender, nationality, platform and fame all line up, the audience logic can still be completely different.

2BN

PEOPLE BORN BETWEEN 1997 - 2012

The same principle holds across the wider Gen Z population. Full-time working Gen Z are 269% more likely to drink alcohol regularly than Gen Z students. That has little to do with their age and much more to do with independence, disposable income and social routines.

571%

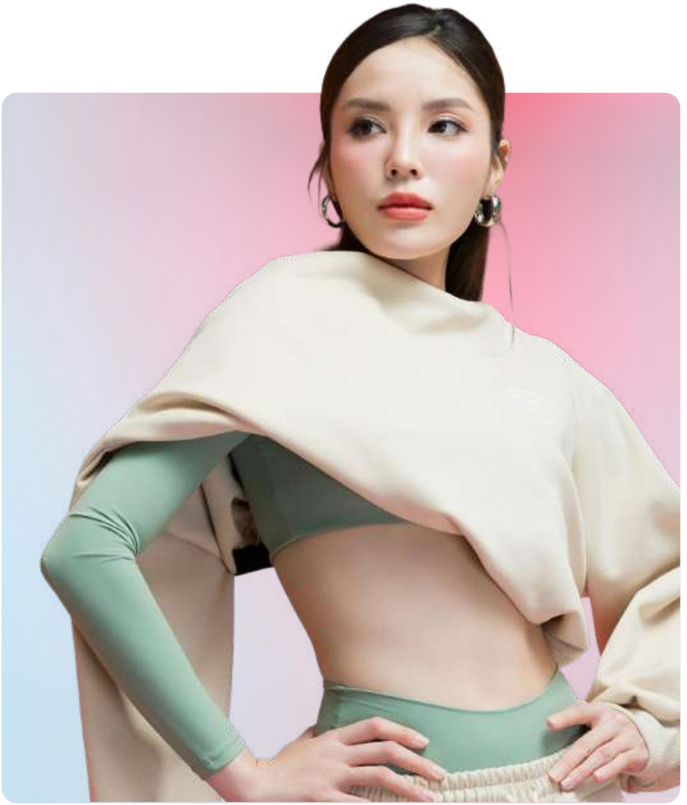
more likely to have purchased baby shampoo last month than Gen Z living with parents

GEN Z LIVING WITH A PARTNER are 571% more likely to have purchased baby shampoo last month than Gen Z living with parents. That is less about their generation than about the household needs that come with adult life, partnership and early parenthood.

82%

more likely to have paid for a music streaming subscription than lower-income Gen Z

HIGHER-INCOME GEN Z are 82% more likely to have paid for a music streaming subscription than lower-income Gen Z. The stronger signal is not birth year. It is disposable income, budget pressure and the ability to turn interest into paid behavior.



GEN Z IN NIGERIA are 291% more likely to have paid for study programs last month than Gen Z in Germany (43% versus 11%). That difference is less about age than about market context, education needs, career expectations and the role of paid learning in different economies.

291%

more likely to have paid for study programs last month than Gen Z in Germany

The split is attitudinal too. Higher-income Gen Z are 19% more likely than lower-income Gen Z to say “confident” describes them, and 25% more likely to feel confident using new technology. Yet they are also 12.5% less likely to believe the environment will get better in the next six months.

Taken together, the data points to a clear conclusion: inside Gen Z, income, work status, household situation and market context can create very different behaviours, needs and worldviews. These are not small variations around one stable audience. They are different audiences sharing one label.

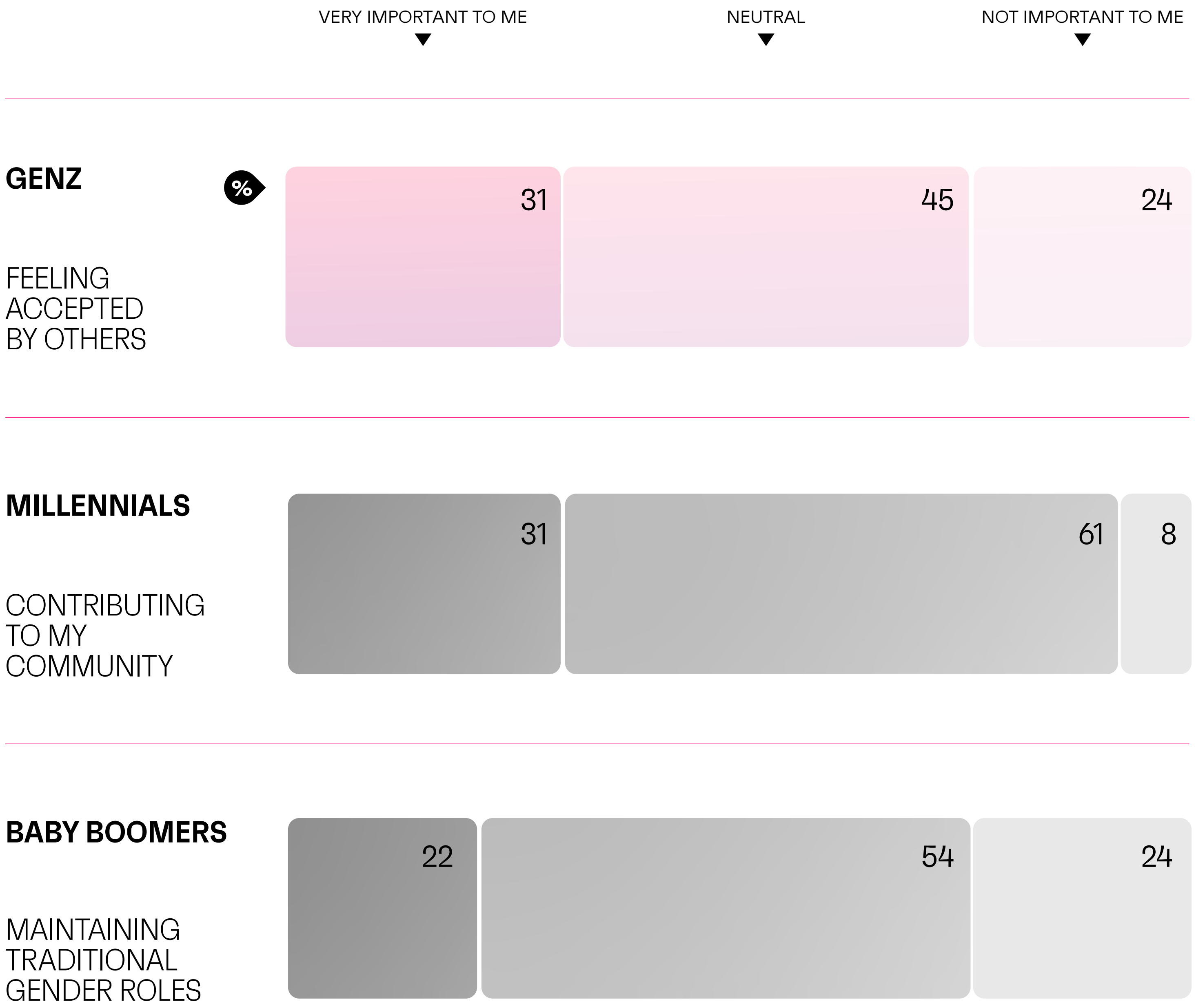
And that’s the same across all generations. Every generation contains its own internal contradictions, regardless of the question.

So the more useful question is not whether brands should talk about Gen Z. It is how to use the label without being trapped by it.

The five rules that follow show how to avoid the generational marketing trap and how to find the sharper, more commercially useful audiences hiding underneath the label.

NO GENERATION SPEAKS WITH ONE VOICE

% of each generation globally who say the following



07

FIVE WAYS TO AVOID THE GENERATIONAL MARKETING TRAP

BETTER AUDIENCES WILL BE FOUND IN

MINDSET, MARKET, LIFE STAGE, BEHAVIOR, CATEGORY NEED CONTRADICTION

This is where the report turns from diagnosis to practice.

For some brands, generation will remain a useful starting point: a way to size an audience, understand cultural context, and communicate direction across a business. For others, generation will be too broad to lead the strategy, and the better audience will be found in mindset, market, life stage, behavior, category need or contradiction.

The five ways that follow are five rules designed for both cases. They help teams test when generation is doing useful work, when it is hiding something more important, and how to find the sharper audience underneath the label.

They draw on GWI's experience working with some of the world's largest consumer brands, providing the data behind their insight, product and marketing decisions. And are backed by continuous survey research across more than 1 million people every year, 53 markets, and over 250,000 data points refreshed quarterly.

Use them wherever a broad generational label is being asked to carry strategic weight: the campaign brief, the research plan, the product roadmap, the media strategy, the brand tracker or the budget review.

#1

START WITH MINDSET. LET GENERATION FOLLOW.

A GENERATION CAN TELL YOU WHO FALLS INTO AN AGE BRACKET. IT CANNOT ALWAYS TELL YOU WHAT MAKES THEM CARE, ACT OR BUY.

Fitness is an useful example. A sports apparel brand launching a new training range may look to Gen Z first because they are highly-visible in creator culture, often early to new behaviors, and easy to associate with emerging fitness trends. So a Gen Z brief may feel like a natural place to begin.

But “Gen Z fitness consumers” is still too broad to guide the work on its own. Here, mindset means the motivations and behaviors that put someone close to the category: learning, improving, tracking progress, comparing routines and finding products.

Those behaviors matter because they sit closer to category intent. Someone looking for training routines, comparing products, following fitness creators or asking AI for workout advice is likely already engaging with the category. Age may tell the brand where to find more of them. Mindset tells the brand why they might respond.

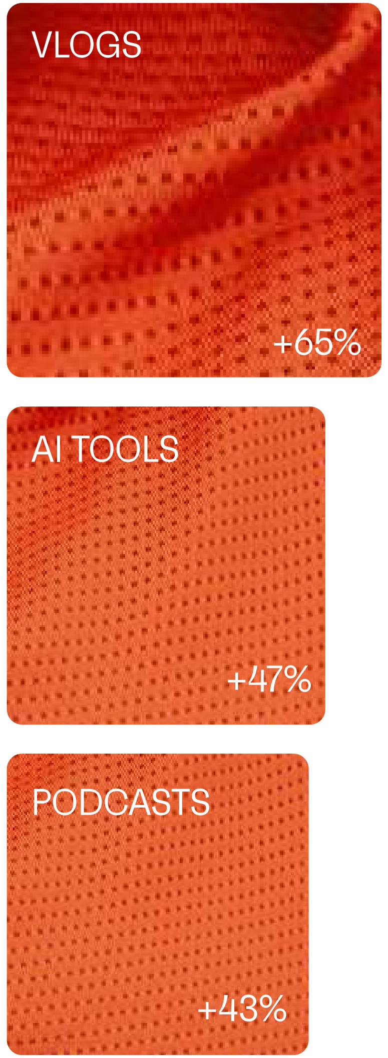
WHAT THE DATA CHANGES

Gen Z fitness enthusiasts are 65% more likely than the average person to discover new brands through vlogs, 43% more likely through ads or sponsored content on podcasts, and 47% more likely through AI tools like ChatGPT.

A generation-led read might naturally push the brand toward familiar youth channels: short-form social, influencer partnerships, TikTok-first creative. Some of that may still be right. But a mindset-led read suggests a broader and more distinctive route into the audience: long-form training content, creator education, podcast environments built around habit and routine, and AI-assisted moments where consumers are actively asking for plans, recommendations or guidance.

HOW GEN Z FITNESS ENTHUSIASTS DISCOVER NEW BRANDS

% more likely than the average person to use these channels



WHAT THIS CHANGES

The channel plan, the content strategy and the measurement audience.

PRESSURE TEST

If the audience can only be described by when they were born, the audience definition has not gone deep enough yet.

HOW TO USE THE RULE

The strategic audience and the activation audience are not always the same thing. The strategic audience is the group the brand is trying to win. The activation audience is the closest available proxy a platform can reach.

The proxy may still be necessary for activation. It just should not become the audience the strategy is judged against.

For any audience currently defined mainly by generation, identify the two or three motivations, interests or behaviors that drive the category outcome. Then use generation to size, locate and activate the audience.

The audience may still end up being mostly Gen Z. That is fine. But it should be Gen Z because the data led there, not because the brief started there.

#2

TREAT GEOGRAPHY AS AN AUDIENCE LAYER, NOT A LOCALIZATION TASK

A global food delivery brand might define its Gen Z audience as mobile-first, social-led, value-conscious and deal-driven. At a high level, that may sound useful. It gives teams a common audience, a common language and a plan they can work with.

But the risk is not only that the final campaign needs local adaptation. The bigger risk is that the audience definition itself has not been tested market by market.

Geography can change the behavior the strategy is built around: how people discover brands, which platforms they trust, what convenience means, how social commerce works, what price signals matter and what kind of proof people need before they buy.

A GLOBAL GEN Z STRATEGY SHOULD NOT ASSUME GEN Z BEHAVES THE SAME WAY EVERYWHERE

WHAT THE DATA CHANGES

Look at Gen Z food delivery users across markets.

In Saudi Arabia, Gen Z food delivery users are 21% more likely than the average person to use social media to find products to purchase. That points to a purchase journey where social discovery, peer influence and platform-based shopping behaviors play a bigger role than they might elsewhere.

In Thailand, the same broad audience behaves more like active participants in TikTok culture. 31% have participated in a TikTok trend, making them 84% more likely than the average person to do so. 42% followed brand accounts on TikTok in the last month, 89% more likely than average.

In Japan, the route into the audience runs through social influence and paid social discovery. 33% follow celebrities or influencers on social media, making them 223% more likely than the average person to do so. 27% use social media to find inspiration for places to visit and things to buy, 205% more likely than average.

These are not identical behaviors, and that is the point. The same broad audience can require different routes into attention, trust and purchase.

In one market, the priority may be reducing friction between social discovery and transaction. In another, it may be giving people something to join, follow or share. In another, it may be choosing the right mix of influencers, creators and paid social.

Calling all three audiences "social-first Gen Z" may be directionally true, but the commercial logic underneath each market is different. Social shopping, TikTok participation and influencer-led discovery point to different planning choices.

3 MARKETS. 3 FLAVORS OF SOCIAL-FIRST.

How Gen Z food delivery users engage with social platforms across three markets

SAUDI ARABIA	USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO FIND PRODUCTS TO PURCHASE	+21%
THAILAND	PARTICIPATED IN A TIKTOK TREND	+84%
JAPAN	FOLLOW CELEBRITIES OR INFLUENCERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA	+223%

WHAT THIS CHANGES

The market brief, the channel mix and where local teams should have evidence-led room to adapt.

PRESSURE TEST

If the audience definition reads the same in every market, check whether it is genuinely global or just too broad to be useful.

HOW TO USE THE RULE

Separate what needs to stay consistent from what needs to be tested locally. The brand idea may stay consistent.

The creative platform may stay consistent. The audience definition should not be assumed to travel untouched.

Before signing off a multi-market generational strategy, pressure-test the audience by market:

- Which behaviors are consistent across priority markets?
- Which behaviors change enough to affect the plan?
- Which assumptions are coming from one market and being scaled into others?
- Which platforms, behaviors or trust signals shape the local journey?
- What would local teams change if they were starting from the data?

The aim is not to create a different strategy for every country. It is to avoid scaling one market's assumptions and calling it global insight.

#3

INVESTIGATE CONTRADICTIONS BEFORE SMOOTHING THEM OUT

A CLEAN AUDIENCE PROFILE IS USEFUL. A PROFILE THAT IS TOO CLEAN CAN HIDE THE OPPORTUNITY.

Audience work often tries to make people coherent. A clear persona is easier to brief, present and act on.

But people do not behave the same way in every category. They trade off. They save in one place and spend in another. They reject some status signals and embrace others. The finding that looks like an outlier may be pointing to a more useful segment.

WHAT THE DATA CHANGES

Luxury is where this tension becomes interesting. A premium watch brand looking at Gen Z might start with price sensitivity. That would be understandable. Around 36% of Gen Z describe themselves as price-conscious.

But price-conscious does not always mean premium-resistant.

Price-conscious Gen Z consumers are 13% more likely than the average person to have purchased a luxury watch in the last year and 23% more likely to want a luxury car as their next vehicle. They are 56% more likely to have purchased jewelry online in the last three to six months and to be considering more. And they are 9% more likely than the average person to buy the premium version of products across categories.

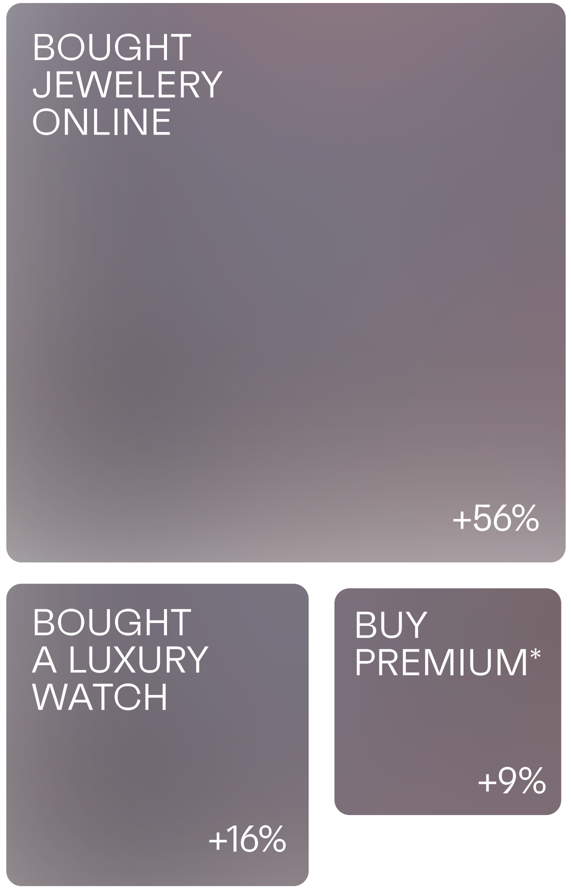
That tension is worth understanding before it is smoothed away.

A consumer can be careful in everyday spending and still make room for products that signal progress, identity, reward or taste. They can want value without wanting cheapness. They can be selective with money and still stretch when the product feels worth it.

A strategy built only around price sensitivity may push the brand toward discounts, entry-level products or value-led messaging. A strategy that investigates the tension sees a more useful audience: young consumers who are careful with money, but still open to premium products when the reason to buy is strong enough.

THE HIDDEN SEGMENT INSIDE PRICE-CONSCIOUS GEN Z

Price-conscious Gen Z
compared to the average person



* Buy premium versions of products

WHAT THIS CHANGES

Pricing strategy, product tiering, messaging and the creative tension.

PRESSURE TEST

If a finding does not fit the audience profile, test whether it is noise or the edge of a sharper opportunity before you dismiss it.

HOW TO USE THE RULE

When a data point does not fit the expected audience profile, pause before removing it.

Ask:

- Is this noise, or a smaller segment inside the audience?
- Does the tension reveal a trade-off the category should understand?
- Does it point to a different message, product tier, channel or buying moment?
- Are we removing this because it is weak, or because it makes the story harder to tell?

The goal is not to build messy personas that explain everything. It is to avoid cleaning the data so much that the opportunity disappears.

#4

USE LIFE STAGE TO FIND DEMAND

BIRTH YEAR CAN GIVE YOU CONTEXT. LIFE STAGE OFTEN TELLS YOU WHO IS ACTUALLY READY TO BUY.

A major appliance brand could look at Gen Z and decide they are not yet a priority audience. Too young. Too early in their careers. Too unlikely to be buying ovens, dishwashers or anything that depends on having a household of their own.

That read would be understandable. It would also miss the part of Gen Z already moving into the moments where the category becomes relevant.

WHAT THE DATA CHANGES

Gen Z full-time workers are 29% more likely than the average person to have bought an oven in the last three to six months. They are also 41% more likely to be planning a dishwasher purchase in the next three to six months.

At the same time, another part of Gen Z is still living at home and spending very differently. Gen Z students living with parents are 55% more likely than the average person to be joint food shoppers in their household. They are inside the household purchase decision but not yet setting up one of their own. Their needs, budgets and buying priorities look very different from a Gen Z full-time worker furnishing an independent kitchen.

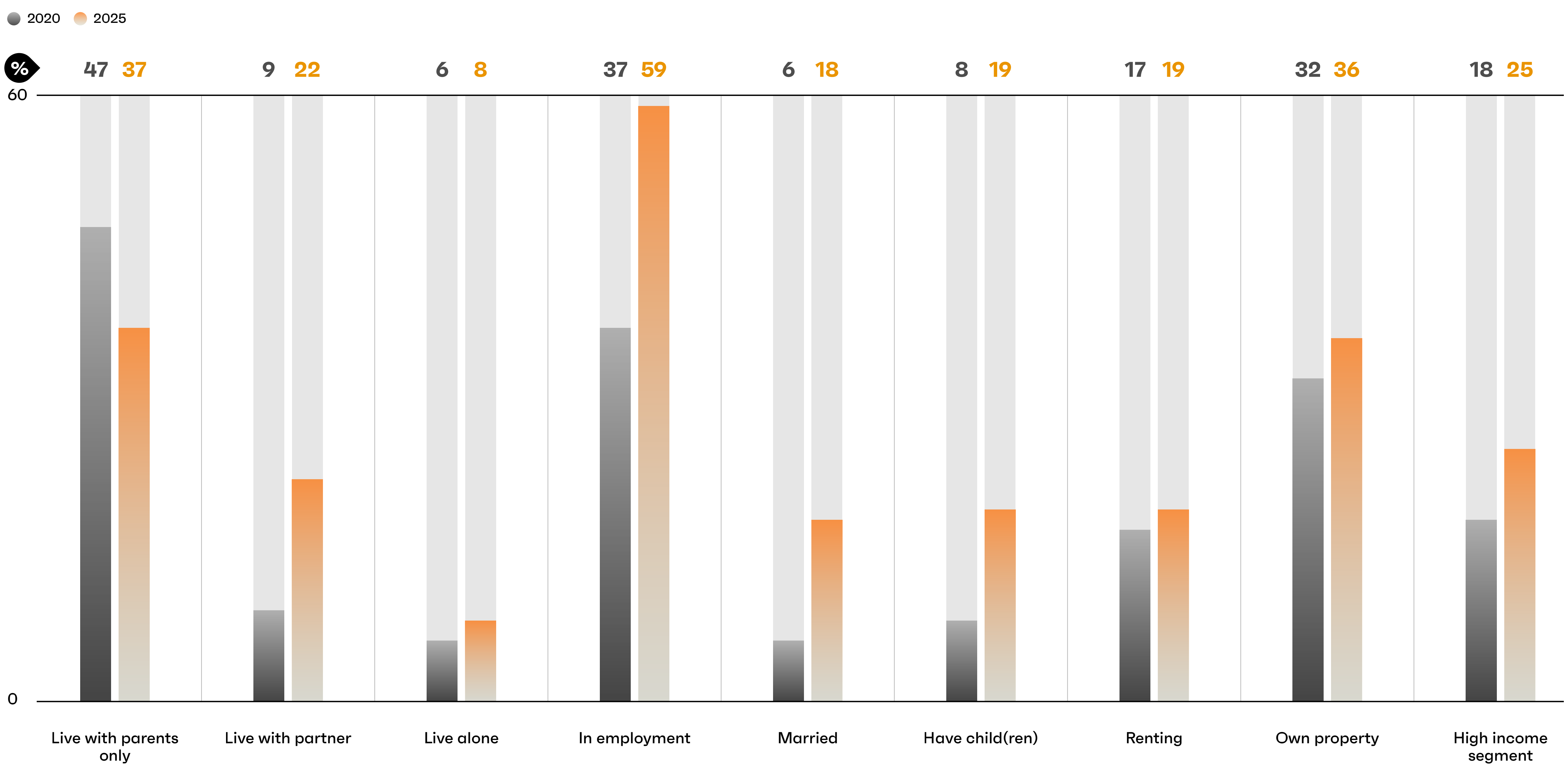
Both groups are Gen Z. For an appliance brand, they are not the same audience.

The point is not simply that life stage matters. It is that Gen Z is moving across life stages quickly and unevenly. Between 2020 and 2025, the Gen Z population in GWI's data changed shape. The share living with parents fell from 47% to 37%. The share in employment rose from 37% to 59%. The share living with a partner rose from 9% to 22%.

Those shifts change what people buy, what they need from brands, how much they can spend, and which categories become relevant to them.

A Gen Z student living with parents may be a future appliance buyer. A Gen Z full-time worker in a first independent home may be an active one. A Gen Z young parent may need a different combination of reliability, convenience, space, safety and long-term value.

GEN Z'S RAPID (AND NOT SO RAPID) LIFE STAGE CHANGES



WHAT THIS CHANGES

Timing, the demand signals you look for, and which part of Gen Z is worth prioritizing now.

PRESSURE TEST

Before asking how old they are, ask what stage of life they are in and whether that stage makes the category relevant right now.

HOW TO USE THE RULE

Before treating Gen Z as one audience, find the life-stage variables most likely to affect the category: employment, living arrangement, relationship status, parenthood, household responsibility and financial independence.

Then ask:

- Which part of Gen Z is closest to making the purchase?
- Are they an active buyer, a future buyer or not yet relevant?
- Which life-stage shift would move them into the category?
- What would change in the product, message or channel if we split Gen Z this way?
- This does not mean every campaign needs lots of small segments. It means birth year should not stand in for actual demand.

For fast-moving Gen Z categories, the recency of the data matters too. The audience is moving into work, independent households, partnerships and early family life. An old Gen Z insight may describe a version of the cohort that has already moved on.

#5

MAKE GENERATION EARN ITS PLACE IN THE DECISION

BEFORE YOU TARGET GEN Z, DEFINE WHAT GENERATION IS DOING IN THE STRATEGY.

Before a team writes "target Gen Z," it should be able to explain what role generation is playing in the decision.

Is it the main audience definition? A way to size the opportunity? A cultural context layer? A media activation proxy? A reporting cut? Those are different jobs, and they should not be treated as the same thing.

This matters because different decisions need different audience lenses. A campaign plan may need to know who is most likely to respond to a message. A media plan may need to know where discovery is happening. A product roadmap may need to know whose needs are not being met. A market-entry plan may need to know where demand is growing.

In some of those cases, Gen Z may be the right lens. In others, the better audience may be fitness enthusiasts, first-time earners, young parents, premium buyers, social shoppers, category switchers, gaming fans, or people united by a need that cuts across generations.

WHAT THE DATA CHANGES

The previous rules show why this matters. Mindset may explain category intent. Geography may change the route to purchase. Contradiction may reveal a higher-value segment. Life stage may show who is ready to buy now.

Generation can still be useful, but it should be clear whether it is leading the strategy or supporting it.

The test is simple: if removing the generation label makes the audience fall apart, generation is probably doing useful work. If removing it makes the audience sharper, the label may have been standing in for something more important.

WHAT THIS CHANGES

Whether generation is the basis of the decision, a supporting layer, or just an activation proxy.

PRESSURE TEST

Do not target Gen Z until you can explain why generation is the right lens for the decision in front of you.

HOW TO USE THE RULE

Before approving a generation-led recommendation, ask three questions:

- What decision are we trying to make?
- What role is generation playing in that decision?
- What audience becomes clearer if we remove the generation label?

A strong answer does not need to reject generation. It needs to put generation in its proper role.

Sometimes generation will be central. Sometimes it will be a useful secondary layer. Sometimes it will be little more than a practical way to buy or report on an audience. The important thing is knowing which role it is playing before the strategy is built around it.

NOW YOU KNOW WHAT TO LOOK FOR. HERE'S WHERE TO FIND IT.

The five rules in this report are designed to make generational thinking more useful. They show when a broad label is doing strategic work, when it is hiding a sharper audience, and when a strategy needs to look beyond age before it moves forward.

But the rules only become valuable when they are applied to a real audience decision: your category, your market, your product, your customer, your growth question.

That is where data matters.

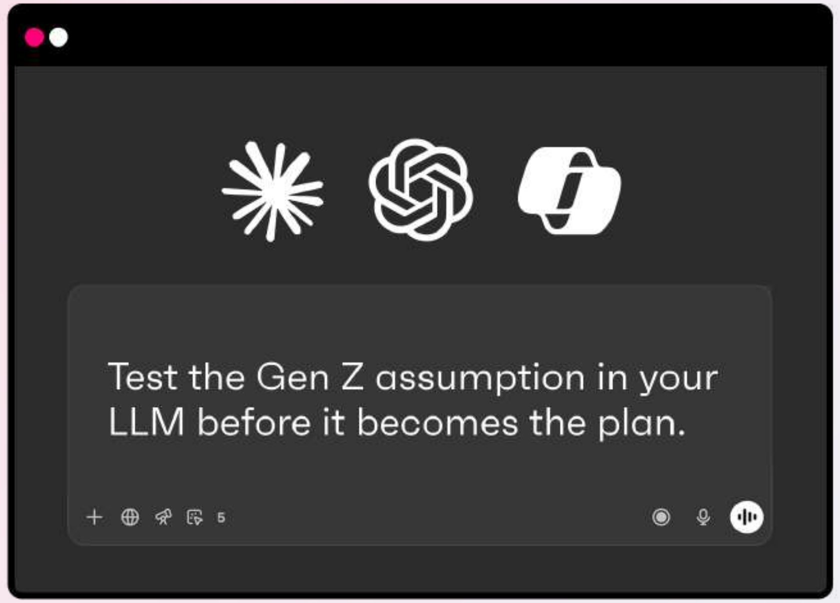
The framework shows what to look for. The data shows whether it is really there. GWI is built for that kind of audience work. The data behind this report comes from year-round consumer survey research with more than 1 million people every year, across 53 markets, with over 250,000 data points refreshed quarterly. It covers the behaviors, attitudes, life stages, category interests, brand relationships and media habits that help turn a broad audience label into something more specific, more current and more commercially useful.

That matters because the generational trap rarely announces itself. It usually appears as a reasonable audience definition, a familiar planning slide, a plausible AI summary, or a target segment everyone in the room recognizes. By the time the work reaches market, the assumption has already shaped the budget, the creative, the channel mix and the opportunity the brand chose to pursue.

The best time to question that assumption is before it hardens into strategy.

That is why we have built a prompt guide for this report. It contains the questions to ask in GWI to apply the five rules to your own work: your category, your markets, your audience and your next strategic decision.

Use it to test whether generation is doing useful work, where another signal explains more, and which sharper audience may be hiding underneath the label. The first useful answer can arrive within minutes.



Read our Gen Z prompt guide

GWI.