

Benjamin Koziol

The State of Gen Z Media Consumption

20 January 2026

Executive Summary

Gen Z was the first generation to grow up in conjunction with algorithmically mediated media systems. This drastically influenced how Gen Z perceived culture in terms of production, distribution and consumption. While this generation is often pooled together with surface level behaviors such as short-term attention spans, platform hopping, declining loyalty to name a few. Such explanations overlook deeper structural dynamics within media environments. This report examines how platform architecture and algorithm mediation shapes Gen Z media consumption across music, fashion, sports and streaming.

Taking from industry research, platform data and AI-assisted pattern recognition, this report is not about what Gen Z's stated values are in relation to media, but rather how behavior manifests itself across platform designed to optimize engagement and personalization. Rather than evaluating individual preferences, this analysis focuses on cross-industry patterns that reveal how media infrastructure influences attention, trust, authenticity, and agency.

Three core findings emerge across all four industries:

- **The gap between Gen Z's stated values and observed behavior is structural, not psychological.**
Ethical preferences, desire for depth, and claims of authenticity repeatedly diverge from consumption patterns shaped by frictionless, engagement-maximized systems.
- **Gen Z is functionally dependent on platforms they increasingly distrust.**
Algorithmic curation dominates content discovery, even as trust in these systems erodes, it creates reliance without confidence.
- **Passive consumption has translated into continuous negotiation of attention.**
Engagement is no longer granted upfront but constantly reassessed through interaction, social validation, and emotional resonance.

Together, this report serves as evidence that current media models are misaligned with Gen Z's lived experience. The opportunity for media companies and platforms lies in not correcting Gen Z's consumer behavior but rather redesign the infrastructure to acknowledge these contradictions.

This report is not a critique of creators or platforms. It is an exploration of how media infrastructure shapes consumption behavior and the implications that emerge for the future generation of media companies.

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Context for this Analysis:

A lot of what I seek in this exploration has derived from my own innate use of these media outlets. Speaking from personal experience, most of my relationship with media consumption felt nearly sub-conscious. It's almost as if my body was inherently on autopilot growing up, in turn, I've been more self-aware where I delegate my attention. Over the past couple years, I have realized something uncomfortable. I consume media the way I consume junk food. I know it's not good for me. I know it doesn't satisfy me long term. And yet, when I'm tired, bored or stressed, that's exactly what I do. This made me understand a tension between my awareness and behavior. This realization has been a strong catalyst on whether this was an intrinsic psychological weakness or structural design. In response, a transformative habit that I have implemented in my life has been being comfortable with being idle. Not consuming, not blasting music everywhere I go, keeping my devices concealed and merely existing. (Which inherently was what previous generations were doing before) it has allowed me to be more present in the outside world. I'm able to process my thoughts, reflect on my days and be more attentive to my surroundings. This isn't about superiority or discipline, but rather a realization over how much agency I have gained over my attention. I recently moved to New York City. I take the subway nearly every day. It's customary to look around and see everyone with their nose down, buried in their devices. (Which makes me question what people look at half the time, as there is no signal in the subway). This begged questions central to this report, is Gen Z discovering content, or being fed it? How much agency does my generation have over the algorithms? Is Gen Z starting to push back or self-regulate? On the surface, one might think that the generation

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responsible for coining the term the “iPad kid” would be greatly absorbed in the vortex of “doom-scrolling.” While our parents were riding bikes, playing around in their neighborhood park, learning the social skills pivotal for child development. We were the first generation to experience childhood and adolescence with personal technology instantly at our disposal. For these very circumstances, I’d like to view my generation as the guinea pig in an era of innovation. We were the first lab rats, the first generation where technology was jointly paired with child development. My purpose of this report is not to delegate blame or judge these conditions we were raised on. Rather to understand these conditions and experiences as context toward our present-day relationship with media environments.

Methodologies

This report synthesized insights from industry research, platform data and cultural analysis across music, fashion, sports and digital media. AI tools were used to assist with pattern recognition, identification of themes, and cross-source synthesis, enabling analysis across a broad and fragmented set of inputs.

Source selection, contextual evaluation and final interpretation was conducted by the author. AI was not used to generate opinion or conclusions but rather used to source reoccurring signals and relationships in the data. All insights, frameworks, and interpretations presented reflect the author’s judgment, informed by both research and lived experience within contemporary media ecosystems.

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Music

My relationship with music has consistently evolved over the years. Music to me is a source of wellbeing. I view music as an emotion enhancer, an amplification of my current state of being. That observation is what led me to explore how Gen Z engages with music today, not how we say we do, but how behavior, data, and platforms suggest we do. My generation seems to resonate with my observation: 86% of Gen Z listen to music or consume podcasts to help boost their mood (Edison Research). For Gen Z, music serves as a functional and almost therapeutic role. Gen Z actively uses audio to manage emotional states, rather than consuming it for aesthetic enjoyment and background ambiance.

In comparison to other generations, audio consumption is accelerating dramatically. Gen Z listened to songs more than 560 billion times on Spotify in Q2 2023, a 76% increase over the year prior (Spotify, *Second Quarter 2023 Earnings*). Gen Z treats music as essential infrastructure for daily life rather than entertainment. Everywhere you look, people are reliant on audio companionship. Giving presence to moments that were once quiet, on-demand music now fills them with consumption. Where Gen Z views music as an avenue to regulate their emotions, I ponder whether this is a mechanism to support emotional processing or to deflect it? Rather than sitting with their own thoughts, meditating on it. The distinction between regulation and

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avoidance seems to be ambiguous, but seemingly music's role has expanded beyond just entertainment.

Gen Z has also shown to be in favor of micro-targeted content that matches different moods, activities and identity expressions. In the context of music, this shows up as music recommendations tailored to individual taste. Fragmentation has been considered the new norm as Gen Z has rejected the one-size-fits-all approach to music consumption. There has been a 63% increase in streaming of personalized playlists with focus on "hyper-niche moments" (Spotify, *Culture Next Report US*). There are conflicting views on this assertion. Gen Z claims to value artist authenticity and unfiltered expression yet relies on algorithmic curation. Skepticism arises about Gen Z's supposed preference for authenticity, questioning whether a generation raised on filtered social media would reject curated personas. To compound on this, there is a growing trend in the music industry, an increased prevalence of mainstream genres and artists. 80% of Gen Z agrees that niche and underground cultures are increasingly going mainstream (Spotify, *Culture Next Report US*). For a Generation that values authenticity, the lines have been blurred between genre preferences, implying the indie artists/underground community being deviated from the spotlight. Which raises a bigger question within the trends of the music industry. It makes me ponder on whether new contemporary artists will have the visibility to break into the mainstream spotlight? As the world is consuming music on the same apps (Spotify, YouTube, Apple Music), it follows that the music industry is becoming homogenized begging the question: Will new artists have the ability to break into the mainstream? Algorithms have collapsed barriers between subcultures and mass cultures, crossovers now happen in the

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case of weeks. The tension between seeking "real" human connection and relying on AI led discovery remains unresolved.

An encouraging development that I have witnessed with my generation, is a growing trend the influx of the DIY (do-it-yourself) artist movement. DIY culture is a trend increasing in popularity amongst Gen Z artists where they pursue music independently and perform all the roles of a typical record label (Zinnbauer). Where awareness of predatory label practices combined with accessible production technology has enabled artists to maintain creative control and financial compensation by self-managing careers. This again, is where the contradiction reappears. Gen Z is consistently driving mainstream genre popularity, while simultaneously championing DIY independent and underground artists. There seems to be a deviation from Gen Z based on what they desire and what is transpiring. Another development that Gen Z has provoked is an inverted A&R model. Labels are now scouting social media metrics rather than developing artists from scratch. Viral success precedes signing rather than following it, transferring power from institutions to audiences. Historically, record labels would use a top-down approach where they would force audiences to like artists under the label, but now the inverse is true with Gen Z, where record labels are now more fixated on fan interaction (Zinnbauer). The democratization of distribution has eliminated labels' monopoly on exposure. They are now adding artists with a foundation of success rather than acting as necessary gatekeepers. Personally, I think this is a necessary development for artists to have autonomy over their work. For a generation that places importance on authenticity, allowing artists to manage all

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aspects of their career, I believe allows the art itself to fully flourish without working around the constraints of major labels.

Gen Z is now using music as educational infrastructure to expose them to more global perspectives. I believe to be a benefit of homogenization, as there is an increase in demand for cross-cultural collaborations and international artist discovery beyond Western markets. Gen Z in the US is 42% more likely to feel that music is a gateway to other cultures than they did in 2021 (*Spotify, Culture Next Report US*). In a way, Gen Z's change in behavior is shifting the power dynamic in the industry. Where audiences are now dictating where labels are allocating their marketing resources and not vice versa. Now we see artists such as Bad Bunny bringing Spanish-language reggaeton to America's biggest stage: the NFL Superbowl. Or South Korean band BTS dominating U.S awards, without transitioning to English. This effect of globalization is promising, as these platforms allow the immersion of culture to be more feasible than ever. Which I believe to be one of art's greatest utilities, the ability to understand, appreciate and empathize with people from different walks of life. With Gen Z's appetite for global music and cross-culture content, means companies must invest in diverse catalogs, international artist development to further the transition into cultural authenticity.

The impacts of Tik-Tok cannot go understated. From personal experience, I have discovered an abundance of different artists and sounds, old and new alike, from passively scrolling on social media. For a generation that values emotional connection toward their music, I personally believe these new avenues for discovering music have watered-down the experience. I believe

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that artist old and new produce music to encapsulate a specific artistic vision. Whether it be emotionally inducing through lyrical substance or amplifying it sonically. There is a specific utility and rationale for these artists. With discovery channels such as Tik-Tok or Instagram reels stripping down the holistic vision of the art, making it into short digestible clips and either slowing down or speeding up the music to cater to their content. I believe devalues the art itself. There has been a shift in ways to discover music stemming from social integration. Music is more passive now, as algorithmic playlists, TikTok trends, and video game soundtracks constantly surface new songs, so Gen Z may not feel the need to actively seek out music. Which raises the question, does this diminish the art itself? Or is it just a necessary evolution of the medium to which the industry must adapt?

Fashion:

My relationship with fashion has evolved over the years. My preferences, the trends I follow, the different color palettes I incorporate. However, the foundational philosophy of fashion has remained constant for me. I believe it is the extension of oneself, I embody my personality traits through the expression of my clothes. I carry an emotional weight to my clothing. That might sound materialistic, but I believe the way one carries themselves aesthetically, largely contributes to their internal belief about themselves. Seemingly, research supports how fashion for Gen Z is coupled with self-branding and individualization. Millennials wanted to fit in with their fashion choices, while Gen Zers wanted to stand out, focusing on self-branding and personalization (Petro). Fashion has shifted from a social conformity tool to identity differentiation strategy. Gen

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Z treats clothing as personal marketing material in an attention economy. However, this is where the stark contrast comes into play. Gen Z claims to value self-expression as standing out, however social media creates an intense pressure to follow trends. Therefore, results in a generation that values self-identity, while partaking in complying behaviors. Which dilutes their true sense of self. From personal experience, I've observed this to be true. I think my generation inherently partakes in complying behaviors subconsciously. A lot of innate pressures are most likely programmed from social media, enhancing a loneliness epidemic within Gen Z, which I believe translates into attention seeking behaviors. A lot of the style choices that are introduced from Gen Z are centered around the connotations of being bold, an outcast, abrasive and authentic. However, through personal observations, I feel like most of those style choices are carefully curated to conform to societies preferences. Being audacious in one's outfit, I believe is our generation's façade of authenticity. Bolder outfits are equivalent to larger engagement online. This is where internet terms such as the "performative male" or the "pick me" girl have derived. It is a fashion consumption/behavior pattern sprouted from performance required for social belonging. Thus, you get instances of thoughtfully selected approaches to fashion that adapt to rapidly shifting micro-trends found on social media. This is evident through the emergence of vintage clothing and thrifting hauls. Where blending nostalgic Y2K/90's trends with modern, personalized "micro-aesthetics" are at the forefront of pop culture. Online resale is growing even faster at 23%, and social platforms like TikTok amplify thrift hauls and resale fashion as part of self-expression (Top 20 Gen Z Fashion Growth Statistics) Very similar to the cross-generation collaborations we see translated into the music industry, social media platforms such as Tik Tok

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are creating cultural cachet around vintage finds.

Another parallel that we see from the music and fashion industry is the prevalence of the DIY model. Where Generation Z demands deep personalization, from Nike by You's customizable sneakers to DIY costumes. This is coupled with the acceptance of gender fluid clothing. As traditional fashion boundaries are dissolving, requiring brands to move beyond traditional gendered marketing and product lines, Gen Z requires creative agency in the consumption process itself. Clothing is now treated as personalized marketing material in today's attention economy. I believe this artistic autonomy is a progressive approach to consumption. As stated earlier, that the homogenization of outlets such as music, I believe have diluted the industry. In the fashion industry however, the influx of independent and local designers combats industry-wide homogenization as they are typically producing distinct silhouettes and culturally rooted work. A positive development, one which I believe upholds my personal philosophy of fashion being an extension of one's personal identity.

This is we also see another overlap in consumption with the music industry regarding being ethical and sustainability conscious. 81% of Gen Z consumers have changed their decision to buy a product based on brand actions or overall reputation (Petro). Gen Z was the generation to pioneer "cancel culture" a term to digitally ostracize brands and individuals alike as the result of perceived ethical failures. Now we are seeing brand behavior become an attribute to the product itself. Corporate ethical concerns can trigger viral accountability, not gradual reputation erosion. With Gen Z experiencing multiple nationwide crises in their formative years, Covid-19, the financial crisis, which created a landscape for adaptive capacity and a preference for social

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consciousness, Gen Z merges activism with fashion consumption (Top 20 Gen Z Fashion Growth Statistics). Gen Z is tied to the dialogue and emotional storytelling in relation to their buying patterns. This is showcased through their stake in the luxury brand segment, an industry that is driven by emotionally driven storytelling. By 2023, Gen Z and Alpha account for 45% of the population and represent the largest target segment for luxury brands (Nguyen). However, there is a glaring contradiction between what Gen Z claims they want versus how they behave. Gen Z grew up in the boom of fast fashion, which is a business model that focuses on quickly and cheaply producing trendy, mass-market clothing to meet rapidly changing consumer demands. The consequence? Significant environmental and labor concerns. Rapid production cycles have exacerbated high pollution, high water usage and significant landfill waste. The generation that is so keen on being ethical campaigners, are the same generation funding corporations that rely on sweatshops, low wages and unsafe environments for garment corporations. Evidence suggests that fast fashion supply chains systematically underpay garment workers relative to the value they generate. According to data compiled by Rawshot.ai, approximately 93% of fashion brands surveyed do not pay garment workers a living wage, highlighting how low labor costs are structurally embedded in the industry's pricing model (Linder) In major manufacturing hubs such as Bangladesh, garment workers may earn as little as roughly \$0.33 per hour, despite producing clothing for global brands sold at significant markups (Emont). This ethical paradox many are calling an "Intention-behavior gap" within Gen Z. As awareness of the problems exist but it has not translated to behavior change. Gen Z's shopping frequency reflects their faster fashion cycle and higher consumption rate, a habit partly driven by

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social media trends that change weekly (Top 20 Gen Z Fashion Growth Statistics). Personally, I believe the hedonistic thrill of partaking in the industry allows my generation to be susceptible to the fast fashion business model. I don't necessarily fault these major corporations for taking advantage of the "dopamine-economy" which capitalizes on Gen Z's impulses. However, I think the problem still relates to the conformist tendencies of Gen Z. I believe Gen Z's desire to support ethically sound business practices is a result of it being the "popular" or "trendy" thing to do. I do believe that Gen Z carries an emotional burden to the brands they do wear, which social-responsible companies undoubtedly play a role in, however when push comes to shove, personal pleasure supersedes over ethical considerations. Gen Z favors their intrinsic motivations for their buying patterns over external ones such as sustainability measures, seemingly favoring their own hedonistic pleasures rather than external ethical concerns (Branca). Stated values vastly diverge from actual consumption behaviors. This inherent contradiction induces a larger societal issue that is industry agnostic. The rise of "Greenwashing" has plagued the common day marketing practices. Where companies are now misleading consumers into believing their products, services or operations are more "environmentally friendly" which exploits the growing demand for sustainable options.

Sports

I have a very endearing relationship with sports. My childhood was heavily influenced by sports and a lot of that was inherited from my parents' inclination to the sports world. From my earliest memories, I felt like I could recollect the sheer magnitude that sports played on my outside

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environment. If the state of Nirvana was ever attainable, I sure felt it in the early 2010s as a Chicago sports fan. With the Blackhawks dynasty reigning terror on the rest of the NHL, a birth of a hometown superstar in Derrick Rose with the Bulls, the Bears' valiant attempts to dethrone Aaron Rodgers and the Green Bay Packers from ruling the NFC North. Unfortunately, both MLB teams were subpar to say the least. There was a radiant energy that surged through the city, unifying the communities, reconciling enemies into allies, a common ground. From a young age, I was able to comprehend how deeply imbedded sports was into pop culture. Unlike the other two mediums discussed, I would consider my consumption behaviors to sports media to be linear and opaque. Where you could point to distinct pivots in trends and popularity throughout the eras of music and fashion. It seems like my viewing habits for sports were rather straightforward throughout the course of my life. That's because the data supports that there is a gradual decline in traditional sports engagement for my generation. Only 18% of Gen Z attended a live sporting event in the past year (vs. 25% for Millennials), and 33% don't watch live sports on TV (vs. 22% for Millennials). Franchise fandom is collapsing: 38% of Gen Z say they don't have a favorite sports team, compared to 25% for all US adults. (Uribe and Simpson).

It's easy to read those stats above and conclude that the sports industry in totality is dying out. One might suggest that there is a gradual erosion of cultural shared spaces (major sporting events). The key distinction to note is that Gen Z didn't lose interest in sports. But their apparatus for viewing the medium has vastly changed. And it's quite the opposite, they are becoming the biggest players in the industry. By 2027, Gen Z is expected to surpass Millennials in total market influence, making them critical for future sustainability of the global sports economy. Yet my

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generation does not have the bandwidth to appreciate the games in full. As only 31% of 18-24 fans watch full-length live matches (vs. 75% of 55+ fans) (Uribe and Simpson). Which is the exact problem that sports league and media companies are actively competing against.

Traditional broadcasting can't compete in the Attention Economy War. Sports no longer compete with other sports, they compete with doomscrolling, instant gratification, and algorithmically optimized dopamine hits. It seems to be a common trend with Gen Z that they want a degree of agency, a degree of control and convivence in the media they digest. The natural peaks and valleys of a full professional game do not resonate with Gen Z. The mundane moments in professional outings are no longer appreciated, the slow climatic build up to the end of the games are now archaic due to the prevalence of social media. The spending forecasts for Gen Z across sports and entertainment represent unprecedented growth. NielsenIQ's 2024 "Spend Z" report projects Gen Z will add \$9 trillion in new global spending by 2034—the largest increase of any generation (Spend Z – Gen Z Spending Power & Habits). Gen Z global income will reach \$36 trillion by 2029 and \$74 trillion by 2040 (Gen Z: A New Economic Force.). While the sports consumption habits for Gen Z has changed, their presence in the industry is potent. The brutal reality is that sports media faces a generation where attention spans are collapsing, team loyalty is dying, and TikTok provides more satisfying dopamine hits than three-hour games. The industry's response requires reinvention. Those who cling onto traditional broadcast methodologies will be surpassed. While team loyalty is diminishing, the rise of individualism within sports is evolving. You can't wait until 2027 to figure out Gen Z engagement, by then, their consumption patterns will be solidified around competitors who started adapting today.

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Which is why media companies are now embracing the Personality Economy within the sports world. The main product isn't exclusively the live action, it's the human drama surrounding it. Athletes are no longer merely performers, they are multi-faceted celebrities, with personal brands that amplify pop culture. Social media content from athletes is the single largest driver of Gen Z sports engagement, with 63% of Gen Z saying content from their favorite athletes increases their engagement (versus 42% of non-Gen Zers) (Wyman). While athletes have always been deeply intertwined with culture and social activism. Think Michael Jordan, Mohammed Ali, Michael Phelps. It seems to be even more pronounced to Gen Z. The lives of athletes are now more transparent through the lens of social media, they now have platforms to leverage their influence. Gen Z is now gravitating toward content that humanizes athletes, including day-in-the-life videos, candid reflections and unfiltered opinions. A common thread for Gen Z is it's draw toward authenticity and social values. When athletes control their own social narrative, they build trust and emotional resonance. Gen Z is 52% likely to closely follow athletes' personal lives (vs. 43% overall), and 62% continue following an athlete after they switch teams—signaling personality-driven fandom over team loyalty (Zeng) For brands, leagues, and media companies, the implication is clear: storytelling power has decentralized. Success now depends on enabling athletes to be narrators. Fans might not be aware of the result of the Oklahoma City Thunder game, but they will assuredly be tuned into what outfit Shai-Gilgeous Alexander wears in the pregame tunnel. Rather than seeing what Stephen Curry's final box score stat line was at the end of the game, fans maybe more receptive to how he boastfully celebrates after a deep three-pointer. Which inherently is the perfect formula that our Attention Economy is optimized

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toward. Short-form, bite-sized, burst of highlights, or story-driven headlines. Only 40% of Gen Z watch live sports on cable TV (vs. 51% Millennials, 61% Gen X). Instead, 67% prefer consuming sports content on their phones while on the go, and 74% get most sports content from social media platforms. A striking 39% opt for highlights or catch-up content over live viewing (Engaging Sports Fans & Gen Z: The New Playbook) For leagues, broadcasters, and rights holders, this represents a structural challenge and an opportunity. Live games remain valuable, but they are no longer the dominant entry point. Seemingly there seems to be a holistic reevaluation of how to communicate value to Gen Z.

We already have witnessed professional leagues take initiative adapting their marketing strategies, to condensed, relatable forms of media. Even the MLB has taken steps to fundamentally change the game of Baseball. Shortening the length of games, enlarging the bases, which has already translated to a higher retention rate with viewers. The NBA has condensed storytelling, through a higher load-management acceptance, aggressive highlight distribution and socially promoting NBA stars. In result, leading to a more high-stake, highly narrativized moments, that circulate swifter through platforms. The MLB has even implemented an MLB creative class, hiring social media influencers, with the hopes of inspiring a deeper relationship between the casual fan and the game. One case that epitomizes the relevance of Storytelling vs Live Action is Netflix's "Drive to Survive." First aired in 2019, this docuseries significantly expanded Formula 1's global fan base by offering behind-the-scenes drama and driver narratives. Which is masterfully constructed to cater to Gen Z's viewing pleasures. This high production docuseries in many ways shed light on a sport that was rather unfamiliar and inaccessible to

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public eyes. F1 filled this gap of ambiguity through a relatable, humanized vantage point of the sport. Underlining their athletes' personal journeys, their emotional highs and lows and politics that get overlooked from its traditional product. The end product was a captivating, authentic, story-telling of real-life events that made the sport relatable and reinvigorated a young Gen Z fanbase. Broad global data reflect a similar trend: between 2019 and 2021, Formula 1 gained 73 million new fans worldwide, 77% of whom were age 16-35 – a surge largely attributed to the Netflix docuseries and F1's social media efforts to engage younger viewers (Dalleres). With seasons of Drive to Survive consistently trending on Netflix, F1's owners have openly acknowledged the show as a catalyst for youth engagement (Dalleres). Empowering creator driven content is now becoming a prerequisite in relation to growth initiatives. Where legacy broadcasting/commentary still holds a necessary role in narrative driven storytelling, more niche creative outlets have begun to cannibalize traditional sports media. Gen Z often enjoys creator-driven content, YouTubers, streamers, TikTokers, whose style is more irreverent, fast-paced, or tailored to internet culture...more than a charismatic influencer reacting to the game in real time with memes and slang (Engaging Gen Z: Short-Form, Social, and the Future of Sports Viewing Gen Z) yearns for reliability and agency on where they delegate their attention to. Where traditional broadcasting can often project out as a manufactured product, creators bring a more malleable/tailored experience to a shared interest. With the presence of social media, is the emergence of creative-driven interpretation that also implements a communal element to the viewing experience. Creators are recontextualizing the visual product of sports through internet native storytelling and modern humor. Sports streamers offer live reactions with real time live

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chats and viewer polls. Cultivating a more participatory oriented sports ecosystem. I believe traditional broadcasting can greatly benefit by fostering a more interactive culture with the viewing experience. 51% of Gen Z fans look up player/team statistics while watching (vs. 44% overall), 51% use social media to read comments (vs. 36%), and 34% use messaging platforms to interact with others (vs. 29%). Gen Z rarely passively watches—they blend live events with interactive and social behaviors (Zeng). The best way to nurture real-time engagement in today's Attention-driven economy, is combating the passive nature of Gen Z. Adopting elements from streaming services such as YouTube and Twitch that provokes social engagement and community, would greatly support engagement for a generation that desires an augmented viewing experience. 51% and 54% of Gen Zers said gaming and fantasy content, respectively, increased their sports engagement (versus 31% and 33% of non-Gen Z audiences) (Wyman). Rather than the linear narrative delivered top-down that feels outdated, traditional media should implement interactive experience that facilitate social coordination. These behaviors from Gen Z point to a fundamental redefinition of "fandom" where isolated, passive broadcasting is archaic.

Another industry agnostic truth that Gen Z prides themselves on, is being strong advocates of social activism. 74% of Gen Zers believe sports teams should take a stand on social and environmental issues, and 72.4% expect the same from athletes (Lebouef). This goes along with the theme of athletes being inseparable from their professional lives. The growing trend has been to humanize the sports world. Gen Z resonates with athletes that represent the worldview, ethics and social priorities that mirror themselves. This also extends out to brands and leagues themselves. They are now being viewed in the light of value-bearing institutions. Personally, I

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believe that these athletes and brands have the financial and social leverage to precipitate social justice. With sports becoming increasingly more political and the forefront of pop culture, neutrality often reads as avoidance. A lot of those developments have propelled female athletes as future engagement drivers. Gen Z's values align naturally with the rise of women's sports. Athletes like Caitlin Clark, Angel Reese, or Paige Bueckers embody authenticity and gender equality, key drivers of youth fandom (Zeng). As Gen Z champions empowerment and inclusivity, these are essential qualities that drive marketing initiatives for these leagues. While men's leagues can feel over-commercialized and insulated by tradition, woman's leagues are grounded in transparency. It comes off as purposeful engagement to leagues such as the WNBA or the NWSL rather than passive. I believe that traditional media properties and sports leagues should capitalize on the momentum of Women's leagues. Not just as due to their flourishing market potential and marketable stars like Caitlin Clark, but as cultural pillars for a sports ecosystem that craves representation alongside entertainment.

Video and Streaming

My relationship with video and streaming is rather volatile. Growing up long-form entertainment was a staple of my childhood. Where social media and streaming services were rather obsolete, traditional broadcasting was the main driver for my attention. From my earliest days, I could remember big studio conglomerates monopolizing the entertainment industry. Where fortune 500 companies such as Disney, Nickelodeon, CBS, Fox etc. having a foothold in media and largely influenced Gen Z's upbringing. Traditional broadcasting was a universal apparatus for all

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generations alike, the typical family living room TV served as a contentious landscape for families alike, because that seemingly was the only form to consume entertainment. When mobile devices hit the scene in the late 2000s' this changed the digital landscape indefinitely. Long-term form of content was not transferred to hand-held devices, gratification became immediate, more personalized and offered my generation agency on where they delegated their attention. Social media platforms at the time such as Instagram and YouTube were at their primitive stages. Many of these platforms were still in their experimental phases and were less polished, less monetized and more exploratory than the ecosystems we know today. While much of Gen Z just got introduced to the internet during this time, they were met with a digital landscape that was being invented in real-time. While traditional broadcasting was still flourishing, digital content resonated with my generation, often being characterized as deeply personal, low resolution and awkward. There was a certain endearing, vulnerable nature to the short-term content that came out in the early 2010s, which characteristics I believe have translated to the preferences of present-day Gen Z consumption. Content wasn't professionalized at this time; it was raw and unapologetically authentic. Culture didn't trickle-down from institutions, it emerged from the contemporary creators that felt extremely relatable. Virality was structurally amplified and was engrained into the architecture of short-form media in its early days. This concept has been curated and evolved into the algorithms that Gen Z craves today.

Currently, we are seeing cord-cutting being accelerated and linear TV becoming obsolete in the behaviors of Gen Z. 73% spend an hour or more per day on paid streaming services, and nearly 1 in 3 say they never watch linear TV (Rand). This isn't necessarily a preference shift, but more an

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infrastructure replacement signaling a decay in traditional broadcasting. However, this does not mean that Gen Z in totality is chronically less online. Media companies compete for an average six hours of daily entertainment time per person, and this number doesn't seem to be growing (Deloitte Insights). Every minute gained by one platform is stolen from another. Everyone's fighting for the same attention. If you don't give people a reason to care, they move on. It boils down to the similar themes that surround the other mediums of media, Gen Z innately desires more agency and control over their attention. The dwindling attention spans of Gen Z don't coincide with the passive and patient nature of linear TV. I could see the main application for cable, being that they hold a great proportion of news and sports property rights. However, even news outlets are being condensed into more bite-sized, digestible content. 60% of Gen Zers turn to social media as their primary source of news and information, more than any other platform (Uribe and Simpson). This indicates that the information ecosystem is now being redistributed into platform algorithms. This lies a cognitive dissonance within Gen Z, however. Gen Z uses social media as their primary information source (60%) yet only 22% trust it (Uribe and Simpson) They're critically aware of platforms' unreliability while structurally dependent on them for news, entertainment, and cultural participation. For a generation that values authenticity, the same generation that is aware of misinformation, they are unintentionally accelerating it. Gen Z's preference for individual voices over institutions heightens authenticity, but at the same time opens the door for charismatic misinformation. Gen Z operates through real-time information, and engagement is activated especially when it triggers a strong sense of emotion. Which is a stark contradiction for algorithms that reward immediacy and not accuracy.

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If it's not on-demand, Gen Z probably isn't waiting around for it. Streaming services have carefully evolved to this preference, allowing on-demand, fast and flexible content. Gen Z viewers spend an average of 1 hour and 51 minutes streaming daily, as opposed to just 38 minutes watching live television through linear — almost three times more time spent streaming than on cable (Karrer). I believe a common misconception regarding my generation is that they don't appreciate long-term content. That they Gen Z doesn't have the attention span or mental bandwidth to appreciate the long form arts. While a shift toward short-form media can justify this rationale, Gen Z has shown the willingness to gravitate to professionally produced content when it interests them and is marketed effectively. The share of American Gen Zers attending cinemas at least once a month has increased 29% since 2021, more than other generations (Clark). This sentiment is even shared in the advertising industry, where perceived value of content directly correlates with commercial acceptance. Gen Z are 46% more receptive to CTV ads during longform content of an hour or more, compared to 38% for shorter content (Karrer). When Gen Z commits to a movie or other long-form content they've already decided that their content is worth their time. That shows ad tolerance is driven by engagement. In other words, ads are tolerated when content commands sustained engagement but rejected during disposable viewing.

One of the most defining contradictions in Gen Z's relationship with technology, is their dependence on algorithms daily, yet increasingly challenge the power these systems hold. Gen Z is not debating whether algorithms should exist, they want more control over their outputs. When asked about what they would like to see improved, the group was unanimous in pointing out they

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like to see improvements in the algorithms, wanting a more transparent and sophisticated algorithm (Broadpeak). Gen Z champions the hyper-personalized, convenient structure of the algorithms that are programmed to extract as much attention from the consumer as possible. Many of these social media and entertainment conglomerates implemented a system that specifically targets their user's identity and emotions, which inherently optimizes platform retention. In present day media, the Attention Economy is won by reducing friction in consumer decision making. Algorithms are rewarded for cutting out manual discovery and human curation. It's the efficiency in which the algorithms can show personally resonant content, is why Gen Z has accepted algorithms as inevitable infrastructure. However, Gen Z is self-aware when it comes to the algorithms influence over what news they see, how culture gets formed and how voices get amplified. Therefore, transparency is Gen Z's currency of trust and will define the next decade of marketing. 41 percent of Gen Z say they would be more likely to trust a company with their data if given clear explanations of how it's used (Weiser). The contradiction lies in Gen Z being the most active generation when it comes to algorithm engagement, but resents the opaque systems that don't provide visibility.

Cross-Industry Takeaways: What These Patterns Reveal

The Intention-Behavior Gap as an Infrastructure Problem

What has remained true throughout every domain, is that there is a deviation between Gen Z's articulated values and their behavior. Stated preferences (ethical consumption, deep engagement, niche discovery) diverge from measurable actions (impulse purchasing, passive scrolling,

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algorithm-driven homogenization). Holistically speaking, this could indicate that Gen Z has an innate cognitive dissonance in relation to media, however the evidence suggests a different mechanism at play. The inconsistency between values and behavior operates at an infrastructural level. Where Gen Z navigates systems optimized for outcomes that are different from their expressed values. These platforms were designed to minimize friction, maximize engagement at scale and deliver personalized content. Structurally prevents the behavior that they champion. Their public advocacy for transparency and platform accountability point to their awareness of this constraint.

Functional Dependence on Distrusted Systems

Algorithmic curations account for most of the content discovery, simultaneously, trust in these systems erodes. Gen Z uses these platforms daily and accepts personalization from practices they deem as unethical. The reliance on the platforms suggests a functional dependence on these systems. Where their participation seems obligatory, despite their psychological deterrence. As Gen Z's media environment is so intertwined with algorithms, where opting out seems no longer a realistic choice. Trust in these platforms have declined over a short period, even as usage continues to rise.

The Impossibility of Passive Attention

A fundamental shift has occurred regarding how attention is granted and sustained. In traditional media, attention was initially granted from consumers once the content crossed an initial barrier

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of interest. Now Gen Z is no longer giving up that attention upfront, but their behavior suggests that it is being continuously renegotiated. Across domains, passive-consumption has been replaced by simultaneous multi-tasking, interactive participation and live commentary. Where prior generations granted sustained focus for content, they deemed worthwhile, Gen Z withholds full engagement seeking validation through interactivity or internal reassessment. Gen Z moves across platforms constantly, staying present in many places but fully focused on just one.

Personalization as the New Normal

Gen Z simultaneously demands individualized experiences but fears its consequences. They adopt systems that customize reality to preference, with a majority willing to trade data for personalization. While having an awareness that these same systems narrow perspective, reinforce dependence and eliminate serendipity. Discovery itself is increasingly personalized, calibrated to reduce friction, rather than expose users to the unfamiliar. Which limits the opportunities to encounter unfiltered experiences. Gen Z is acutely aware of this demanding to "see inside" these algorithms in desire to see how data is used and applied. Gen Z seeks agency over systems that are shaping perception and world views itself. This generation is the first cohort to fully accept that they grew up and are living inside algorithmically curated realities.

Authenticity as Market-Optimized Output

The most frequently cited generational value in this report was "Authenticity." Market forces are now uniquely optimized to stimulate and commodify this demand. Gen Z demands unfiltered

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expression through media contexts. What Gen Z views as authentic is now absorbed into market systems as performance variables. Vulnerability is content strategy, transparency is brand vernacular, grassroots movements are transitioned into influencer partnerships. That's the authenticity paradox. Where the more Gen Z aggressively demands it, the more algorithmically engineered is its aesthetic. Their skepticism to influencer and brand messaging serves as an indication for the recognition of this pattern.

Looking Ahead: Where Opportunity Lives

Transparent Algorithmic Interfaces May Build Durable Trust

The demand for algorithmic transparency indicates an actionable intervention point. Platforms could start experimenting with exposing the logic behind the curation. Showcasing the data points that influence recommendations, users should be able to adjust the weight of these signals and create agency over the algorithms. This could help address the trust deficit without sacrificing the personalization benefits. Evidence includes a significant portion of users would grant greater trust toward companies if they clearly explained their algorithms, signifies that transparency could build lasting loyalty, not just satisfy regulations. Systems that help users understand and shape their algorithmic reality may prove to be more sustainable than merely optimizing for engagement.

Resolving the Intention-Behavior Gap Requires Structural Redesign

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Gen Z's contradiction between stated values and actionable behaviors alludes to infrastructure deficiencies rather than just psychological weakness. This gap creates the opportunity for platforms to reduce friction around ethical options, making them more visible, making sustainable options a default rather than a premium. Instead of platforms requiring users to actively resist impulse-driven systems, they could redesign these systems to support the behaviors that Gen Z already claims to prefer. Data suggests that Gen Z is more receptive to systems that guide, rather than exploit their impulses. Fashion platforms could algorithmically prioritize secondhand or sustainable options along new releases, rather than treating them as secondary. Streaming services could reintroduce serendipitous discovery within personalized feeds rather than just optimizing for familiarity. Sports media platforms could treat highlights as an entry point rather than replacement. Using short-term clips to guide consumers into a full game experience with contextual prompts and flexible viewing options. In whole, companies may gain a competitive advantage willing to de-optimize short-term engagement in favor of long-term alignment between users' values and system design.

Building Connected Media Ecosystems Across Platforms

The pattern of platform-hopping and bundle preferences suggests Gen Z wants consolidated access without consolidated control. Rather than competing through exclusivity, media companies could explore models that allow services to work together. For instance, subscriptions that travel across platforms or easier discovery and coordination across services. The willingness for users to cancel individual subscriptions in favor for bundled offerings indicates an appetite

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for integration. Platforms that can lower the cost of context-switching while maintaining platform diversity could capture value, that has decayed due to subscription fatigue and fragmentation frustration.

Active Participation-Driven Infrastructure as Foundation for Next-Generation Media

The deterioration of passive consumption signifies a growth for media companies to build around interaction initially, rather than layering on engagement features after the fact. Instead of asking how to hold consumer attention, the question should be how does content foster connection for users. This could look like sports broadcasting integrating real time communal decision making or commentary into the viewing experience. Streaming services could offer viewing parties or synchronized watching into their architecture. Emphasizing a "two-way communication" between the consumer and intuitions can serve as a catalyst for creating social meaning around content. A trait that Gen Z craves.

The Authenticity Paradox Requires Restructuring

The modern-day authenticity paradox exists due to genuine demands being made to market that optimize and simulate the thing demanded. Which indicates there is a structural limitation in ad-supported models that financially reward appearance over substance. Alternative approaches might explore subscription models that reduce pressure to chase virality. Public infrastructure that offers curation and discovery without commercial implications. What remains true in present day media: authenticity fails to survive in platforms where visibility and performance are

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inseparable. Building economic models where authentic content can coexist with algorithmically optimized alternatives, is imperative for the next generation of media.

The Path Forward

These opportunities all lead to one collective theme: Gen Z's contradictions are not user failures, but design constraints to be acknowledged. Their demands consist of transparency, human-agency, personalization, convenience and value alignment seems to be incompatible with the present media systems in place, which goals are more financially oriented. Companies that lean into openness, autonomy and ethical alignment not just as marketing positions but as core technical problems might be able to garner a significant competitive advantage over Gen Z. The data suggests that Gen Z is not alluding to less technology or similar systems, but rather architecture that reflects their intricate and self-aware relationship with the digital landscape.

Conclusion

Across the cultural pillars of music, fashion, sports and digital video. Gen Z's media behavior reveals a set of contradictions that are misaligned with the current models of contemporary media. The existence of these tensions suggest that it is less of a reflection of individual choice, but rather an adaptation to the systems that structure it. When platforms are designed to maximize engagement, reduce friction, and personalize at scale, naturally, consumption behavior deviates from stated values. Gen Z appears to operate under great self-awareness to these systems, rather than opting out, they are adapting to the architecture set in place. Going back to

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the primitive days of personal technology, Gen Z was accustomed to being the test-cohorts in algorithmically mediated media. Gen Z has become more conscious on how these platforms largely shape worldview and identity. Trust and value-alignment may prove to be a more durable model for value rather than merely optimizing for short-term engagement. The next generation of media are not questioning whether these contradictions exist between design and behavior, but rather how they will be addressed. Implications for future media systems will not derive from how optimal their platforms are in retaining attention. But rather judged on how these systems can accommodate these tensions, support consumer agency and foster meaningful connection in an increasingly digitized world.

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