

How Gen Z breaks marketing's cultural mold

In new research, Horizon Media found the group no longer believes in mainstream pop culture, pushing the industry toward levels of nuance that haven't traditionally been its forte.

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As the first generation to grow up with the internet everywhere and easily at its fingertips, Gen Z lives in a world where even those with the most niche interests can find a like-minded tribe. Its members have matured with algorithms directing them to new hobby areas and online communities where they can find companionship and camaraderie. They seem to enjoy the variety, posing challenges to marketers accustomed to adopting broad-based demographic targeting strategies and narrow definitions of what's moving culture.

"The algorithm is their gateway to the world," said Maxine Gurevich, senior vice president of cultural intelligence at Why Group, a unit within the agency Horizon Media, of Gen Z. "They're showing up on different channels and different places than other generations. They're hard to pin down."

In a new report, titled "The Gen Z Field Guide: A Marketer's Manual for Following the Niche Over the Norm," Horizon Media identified five categories — and 12 subcultures within them — that have become critical to understanding and reaching this next generation of consumers. Among a cohort fragmented in its perspectives, the one thing they all seem to agree on is there's no one theme uniting them. According to the research, 91% of 18- to 25-year-olds believe mainstream pop culture is a thing of the past.

As a result, successful marketing to Gen Z will not be about tapping into “the culture” in a traditional sense but rather addressing subcultures that address unique and personalized interests that can sometimes be at odds with each other.

“The trends are changing so often, there really isn’t a ‘mass culture’ anymore,” said Gurevich. “Subcultures are the new demographics as members of this generation connect and respond to the things they are most passionate about.”

Sorting through subcultures

The five major cultures identified by Horizon Media are gaming, entertainment, education, fashion and beauty. Within those categories, sub-segments range from “Gamer Girls” to “Scientific Edutainers” to “Cursed Cosplayers,” each with their own passion points and engagement tolerance. Reaching such hyper-specific consumers requires a level of nuance that hasn’t previously been marketing’s forte, according to Gurevich.

“You have to be deeply embedded in the culture. You can’t just open TikTok one day and know what will appeal to these consumers,” said Gurevich. “There’s a lot of noise, and Gen Z is looking for more intimate ways to connect. That’s how we have to approach these subcultures, by looking at the passion behind them.”

For instance, Gamer Girls are a subculture of 3.1 million female gamers who regularly show up to play in a traditionally male-dominated — and sometimes misogynist — gaming category. As a result, their subculture is passionate about diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). Traditionally male-skewing brands with heavy gaming strategies can tap into these passions to reach Gamer Girls without necessarily alienating their core consumers.

Many esports and gaming deals this year reflect the insight.

Denny’s in August partnered with Complexity Gaming, the sister esports team of the Dallas Cowboys, on sponsored Twitch streams with a lineup of all-female creators to promote DEI. On the flip side of the coin, products historically marketed to women are

taking their first steps into the gaming arena to connect with a similar audience.

With a successful campaign, a brand has the opportunity to reach other groups as Gamer Girls interact with various subcultures. Indeed, many Gen Zers find affinity with more than one subculture, presenting a chance for marketers to reach an entirely different cohort.

“They’re not mutually exclusive,” said Gurevich. “Just because we found someone in one subculture, doesn’t mean we won’t find them somewhere else. If you have an entry point into one subculture, you can use that to run alongside the other subcultures.”

Change ‘on steroids’

In order to do so, however, brands need to be authentic. They have to identify what they stand for and understand how those qualities might connect with subcultures. That doesn’t necessarily entail alienating consumers aligned on different ends of the spectrum.

“It is possible to be many things as a brand,” said Gurevich. “It’s not inauthentic to speak to different — even seemingly opposing — subcultures if a brand has a strong purpose.”

But the continued ability to reach these subcultures will require diligence and care. Marketers haven’t been in “set-it-and-forget-it” mode for many years now, but the rate of change among Gen Z is rapid and constant, requiring fluid media and creative strategies, per Gurevich.

“It’s on steroids,” said Gurevich. “You have to have a team constantly checking in on the subcultures regularly because they may not even be the same in a year. You have to stay on it.”