

**NRF** National  
Retail  
Federation

**NIQ** NielsenIQ

THE  
state  
OF gen Z

**Generation Z (born between 1998 and 2012) holds a strong cultural influence, bringing to the table a unique and extremely diverse set of voices.** But as many Gen Z consumers find their footing during turbulent social and economic times, brands face more of a challenge when it comes to building genuine and sustainable connections with this group.

In this deep dive presented by NIQ and the National Retail Federation, we'll explore the latest insights on Gen Z to help you understand the values and attitudes driving this important cohort of consumers — a group that is quickly coming into their own economically, socially and professionally. These insights leverage findings from [NIQ Consumer Life](#)'s annual U.S. studies, primarily data collected in early 2024.

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# HOW GEN Z IS **navigating** TODAY'S WORLD

Gen Z today is 64.5 million strong in the United States, and quickly shaping the direction of our world — leading the adoption of new trends, often the first to try out emerging tech, and instigating change. Today, **Gen Z accounts for approximately 17.1% of total global spending**, or \$9.8 trillion USD, and in the next decade Gen Z spending is expected to grow at a CAGR of 4.02% (exactly twice the speed of previous generations). However, Gen Z consumers are living in a time where unpredictability is simply the norm.

The economy has changed, and Gen Z sees what this means for them: Student debt repayments, the impossible cost of home ownership and the struggle to build their savings, alongside a high cost of living, is triggering a significant shift in values. On top of that, [almost one-third of Gen Z still live with their parents](#).

Gen Z is doing their best, yet they feel the pressure of today's world. Many are taking a step back and asking:

## What really matters today?

- **New relationship with work:** Today, Gen Z ranks the personal value of “*working hard*” lower than other generations (No. 12 on a list of 57, versus No. 7 or No. 8 for older age groups). In 2013, when Millennials were at this point in their lives (aged 15–25), they ranked it about the same as they do now. Gen Z is challenging traditional images of success and may no longer be striving to climb the corporate ladder in the same way.

- **Stability-minded:** They do, however, care about financial security: “*Material security*” is a top 10 value among Gen Z today, ranked higher not only than the general population but when compared with Millennials in 2013 who ranked it lower than average. And although Gen Z’s relationship with status and power is not as strong as previous generations, “*wealth*” and “*ambition*” are ranked highest today among this generation that is particularly eager to reach true financial autonomy.
- **Seeking balance:** Striking a balance between work and life, with the ability to maintain a sense of independence, is not a new concept but it remains important to young adults. Gen Z trails only Millennials in the strength of their desire to maintain work-leisure balance. [Millennials have more of a “blurry line” between their personal and professional worlds](#), often pursuing career-related goals for fulfillment — with Gen Z values diverging from Millennials, it will be important to track the evolution of “balance” as a concept for this generation.

## The role of technology in shaping a generation

With Gen Z as the first true cohort of digital natives, technology sits at the epicenter of how they live. The result: A highly nuanced relationship with tech.

While Gen Z is confident about technology (43% feel optimistic about the future effect of tech on society, only slightly behind Millennials and the national average), many spent formative teen and adult years navigating remote work and remote learning, which has a significant impact on who they are today. They are also acutely aware of the risks that accompany digital lifestyles.

- **The good:** In contrast to the national average, and even traditionally bullish Millennials, Gen Z is more likely to agree that the internet is a good way to meet people and that their computers are a primary source of fun and entertainment. Gen Z also leads among all generations in citing social media as important for shopping, entertainment and work/business.
- **The bad:** At the same time, Gen Z also indexes higher than these audiences on the acknowledgement that social media has made them more anxious and leads to jealousy of others. Concerns about tech addiction and technology's impact on mental health also resonate more with Gen Z than they do with the average American. In fact, 87% report being somewhat or very concerned with the polarization of social media.

## How Gen Z and Millennials **value success at similar points** in their lives

	ambition	material security	wealth	working hard
Gen Z in 2024	20	9	40	12
Millennials in 2013	25	14	44	9

*Ranking of traditional values relating to success and achievement (out of a list of over 50 life values).  
Source: [NIQ Consumer Life](#)*



## Gen Z and personal relationships

Declining marriage rates and birth rates started in earnest with Millennials, yet Gen Z is amplifying the trend — shifting focus away from commitment, marriage, friendship and children. **Marriage rates for women declined from 2011 to 2021**, and **44% of Gen Z men report having no relationship experience** at all.

This is evident in the shifting priorities of Gen Z as it relates to intimate relationships. Values like “sex,” “romance” and “enduring love” continue to decline over time for Gen Z, which is a notable contrast from the high placement these values enjoyed among Millennials around the same age in 2009.

Instead, Gen Z values community — **43% say that community is very important**. While a digital-first lifestyle may trigger increased feelings of loneliness, it’s allowed Gen Z to find a stronger sense of belonging online and experiment with their identity. As a result, personal relationships and living situations then were not what they are now. “Stable personal relationships” ranks as the No. 14 personal value for Gen Z today — in contrast, Millennials ranked this No. 2 in 2009.

### How Gen Z and Millennials **value personal relationships at similar points** in their lives

	enduring love	romance	sex	stable personal relationships
Gen Z in 2024	25	31	42	14
Millennials in 2009	11	19	21	2

*Ranking of traditional values relating to success and achievement (out of a list of over 50 life values).*  
Source: [NIQ Consumer Life](#)

# GEN Z AS consumers

Reaching the Gen Z consumer can be a bit of a feat for companies today. An endless number of brands, products and channels are competing for their dollars. But Gen Z is still willing to participate — if you can capture their attention.

In response to the volatility of recent years, many younger consumers have adopted a self-indulgent attitude as a coping mechanism. *“It is important to indulge or pamper myself on a regular basis”* ranks No. 21 on a list of 43 attitudes — 12 ranks higher than in 2021. Many of them incorporate “little treats” into their daily lives with this in mind and [will be seeking brands that help them sustain this regular sense of indulgence.](#)

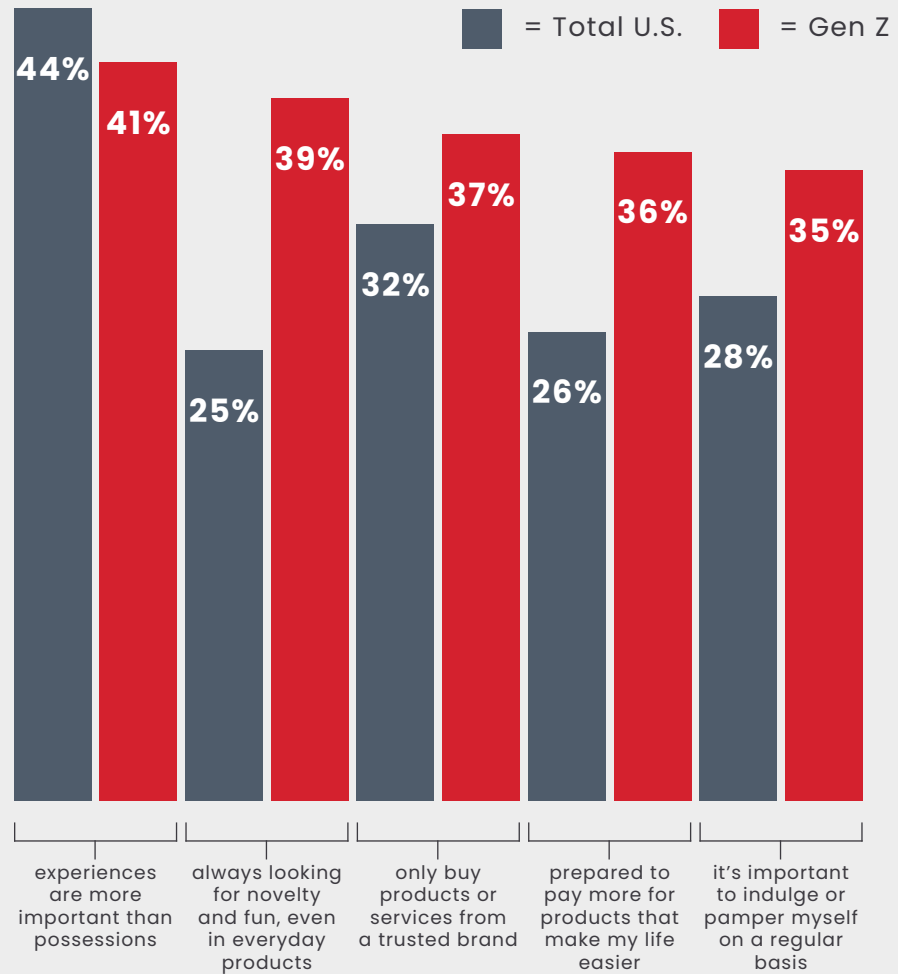
To build valuable connections with Gen Z, it’s crucial to think beyond traditional marketing strategies and meet them where they are:

- **Shifting in-store:** For Gen Z, shopping is viewed as a “fun” experience — while online channels are a natural fit for Gen Z, they still hold a strong preference for the in-store experience. Gen Z is more likely than average to go out of their way to find new stores to shop and agrees that it’s worth traveling an hour or more to shop at their favorite stores.
- **Open to new channels:** Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok are increasingly capturing the attention of Gen Z, offering an interactive way to easily buy products. Gen Z is the age group most likely to click on shoppable posts or stories on social networks and leads in shopping via “Buy” buttons along with Millennials.

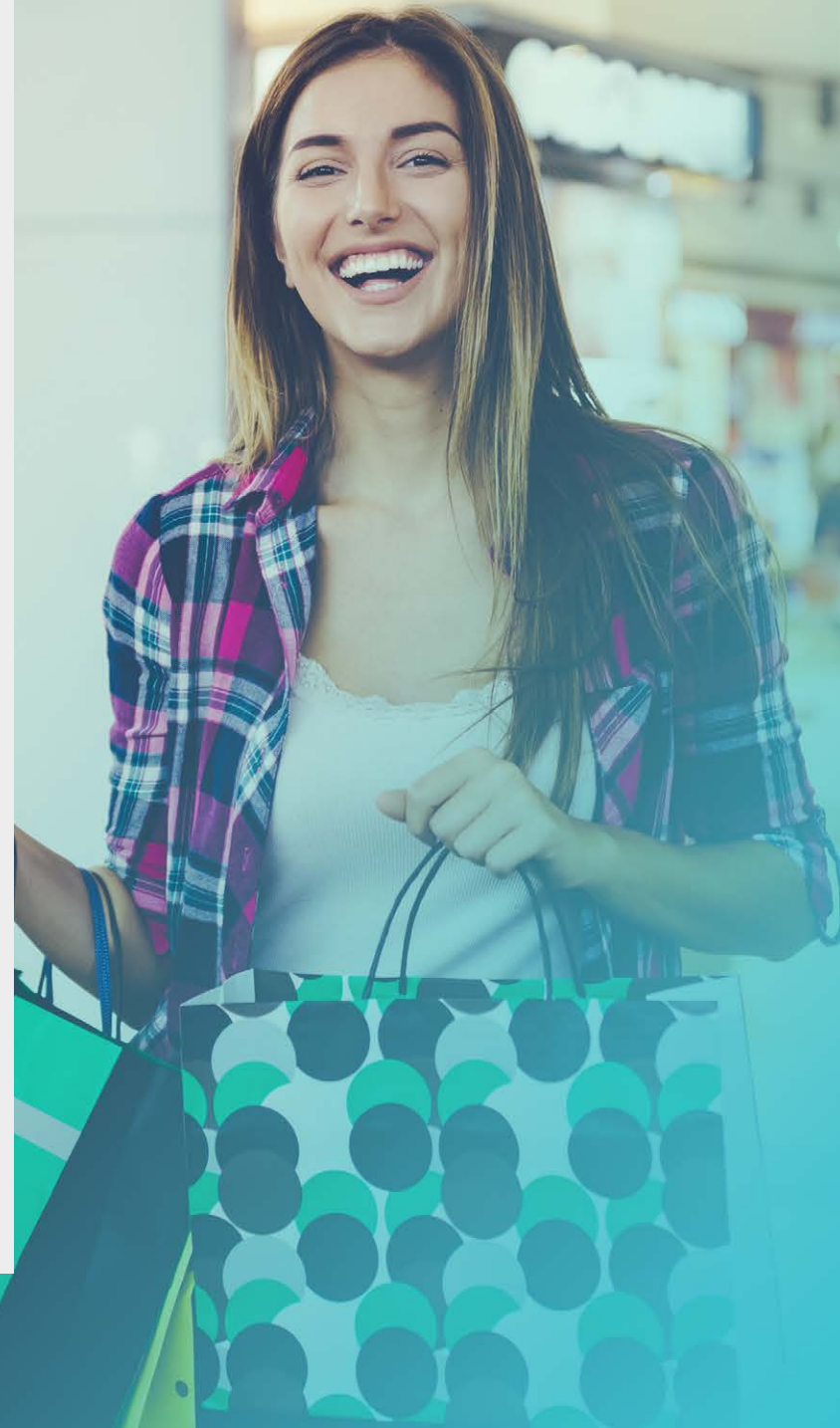
- **Easily influenced:** Influencer culture heavily impacts the shopping decisions of Gen Z today. They are about twice as likely than the national average to cite social media influencers as very important when shopping. Influencers feel “relatable” and like a peer to Gen Z — what they have, Gen Z want. Gen Z is also the age group most likely to click on shoppable posts or stories on social networks.
- **Something old, something new:** With financial stability in mind, many Gen Z shoppers are focused on price, value and snagging a deal, even aligning with the general population that the No. 1 way to define a product’s value is its durability. But they’re also embracing other methods of smart shopping. Thrifting is a big play for younger consumers, from vintage pop-ups to secondhand shopping and direct-to-buyer resale sites. Nearly half (44%) of Gen Z have bought secondhand items instead of new ones in the past year. This behavior is reflected in the growth of peer-to-peer selling marketplaces for secondhand and retailers that are [encouraging](#) or [facilitating](#) purchases of used items.

Gen Z is more likely to say **“It is important to indulge or pamper myself on a regular basis”** than they were a few years ago.

## Gen Z are **active and engaged** consumers



Attitudes toward Life-Top 2 boxes (% , 2024)  
Source: [NIQ Consumer Life](#)



# the socioeconomic stance:

## GEN Z ON POLITICS AND SUSTAINABILITY

For Gen Z, the last few years were a challenge.

With many experiencing their high school years or a good part of their 20s in lockdown, witnessing polarizing political events and struggling financially, this cohort is no stranger to instability. But with challenge comes resilience, and Gen Z is a highly informed and motivated generation.

### Politics

In recent years, the political landscape has been tumultuous. Every election Gen Z has participated in was highly polarized, shaping the fears, hopes and desires of this generation. Today, Gen Z is the generation least likely to feel a strong connection to our country, and is least optimistic about various

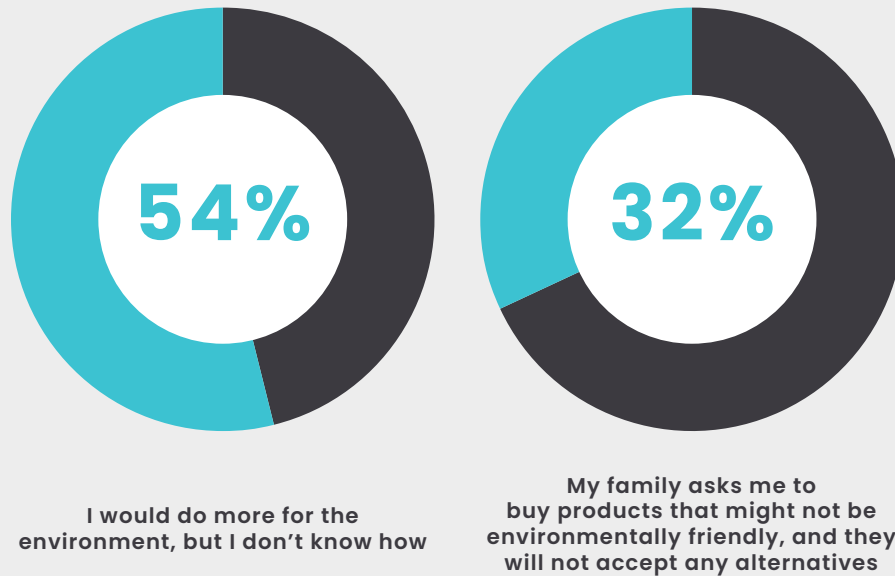
aspects of society such as quality of life, our health care system and how well our government works.

Yet this doesn't translate into complete apathy. While many in the Gen Z population are moving away from traditional political affiliations because of their disillusionment with our current system, they're also leading the charge in activism: 43% of Gen Z agree that if they feel strongly about an issue, they will participate in a civil protest, higher than any other generation. And Gen Z today is notably more likely than Millennials were in 2009 to report feeling connected to a social activism or volunteer group. They are also the generation currently most likely to have attended a rally/protest, shared their political opinion with a media outlet, or made a political speech in the past year.





## Gen Z and the **Sustainability Conundrum**



Lifestyle Attitudes Toward Environment-Top 2 box (2024, %)  
Source: [NIQ Consumer Life](#)

### Sustainability

Sustainability is not just a hot topic, it's a global imperative. And Gen Z is seeing the value in preserving our world. "Being in tune with nature" is up 11 ranks among Gen Z values since 2019 – likely a result of the pandemic prompting a reconnection with our natural world.

However, Gen Zers are not yet finding it easy to align their consumption

behaviors with green attitudes. Although Gen Z is eager to embrace sustainable shopping behaviors like thrifting and circular buying, many are still drawn to other areas like fast fashion. [Seventy-two percent of college students](#) say they've shopped on a fast fashion website in the last year; Gen Z also trails other age groups in exhibiting green behaviors like recycling, conserving energy/water at home and buying only what they need to avoid waste. **Why?**

- **Cost of entry:** Living sustainably comes with a price tag; most products with sustainable product attributes come at a premium price point and Gen Z consumers are just not earning enough. A knowledge gap about the "right" behaviors also persists – the sentiment "I would do more for the environment, but I don't know how" is most popular among Gen Z.
- **Limited freedom:** With many of them still living at home, Gen Z is limited in what actions they can take now, so many of them are likely expressing future intention and not necessarily current action. But the frustration is there: Gen Z is the age group that is least optimistic about the future quality of our environment.
- **The bigger picture:** As a group, Gen Z is adopting the perspective that their individual actions carry little impact compared with systemic reforms. Today, they are more likely than average to feel that the government should be addressing our environmental problems, not individuals.

Brands should focus on more actionable policies around sustainability and waste to get Gen Z to embrace greener consumption patterns. [Gen Z and Millennials already lead on some promising activities like plant-based diets and using public transport](#), but need more information from brands to move the needle on other smart behaviors.

# IS YOUR BRAND **gen z** FRIENDLY?

Traditional efforts just aren't enough to connect with Gen Z — an informed, diverse and progressive group. To better connect with this key group of consumers, consider the following:

- **Accountability is key:** Gen Z is quick to shop, but they want to do more. Offering a seamless, enjoyable shopping experience that allows them to participate in the economy in a responsible way is key. While they're willing participants, they desire to shop in a more conscious way — and they expect brands to enable them.
- **Values matter:** Gen Z is challenging what fulfills them — family and friendship matter, but Gen Z is focused on strengthening their own identities first and foremost.
- **Meet them where they are:** Gen Z are digital-first consumers, yet they find satisfaction in shopping regardless of channel.

They crave a fun, enjoyable experience as a form of escapism. How can you spark moments of joy to indulge a group who sees the value in treating themselves — but doesn't want to strain their wallets too much?

## The power of Gen Z

Gen Z's influence on the market, society and politics is profound and growing. As they navigate a world marked by economic volatility and rapid technological advancements, their unique perspectives and values shape not only their personal lives but also their expectations from brands and institutions. Understanding Gen Z's priorities — such as financial security, work-life balance and sustainability — provides crucial insights for brands aiming to build authentic and lasting connections with this demographic.

Brands that wish to resonate with Gen Z must prioritize accountability,

transparency and adaptability. Embracing digital innovation, committing to sustainable practices and engaging in genuine social activism are essential strategies to meet Gen Z's high standards. By aligning with their values and leveraging their digital fluency,

brands can foster meaningful relationships with Gen Z consumers, ultimately driving loyalty and growth in an ever-evolving market landscape. As this generation continues to shape the future, staying attuned to their evolving needs and preferences will be key to success.





### Top 10 **Gen Z values** (2024)

	authenticity	honesty	enjoying life	protecting the family	freedom	friendship	learning	knowledge	material security	having fun
<b>Gen Z</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Total U.S.</b>	4	1	5	2	3	16	6	10	12	26

Gen Z's top 10 values from list of 57, ranked versus how total U.S. ranks same values.  
 Source: [NIQ Consumer Life](#)



## About NRF

The National Retail Federation passionately advocates for the people, brands, policies and ideas that help retail succeed. From its headquarters in Washington, D.C., NRF empowers the industry that powers the economy. Retail is the nation's largest private-sector employer, contributing \$5.3 trillion to annual GDP and supporting more than one in four U.S. jobs — 55 million working Americans. For over a century, NRF has been a voice for every retailer and every retail job, educating, inspiring and communicating the powerful impact retail has on local communities and global economies. [nrf.com](https://www.nrf.com)

## About NielsenIQ

[NielsenIQ \(NIQ\)](#) is the world's leading consumer intelligence company, delivering the most complete understanding of consumer buying behavior and revealing new pathways to growth. NIQ combined with GfK in 2023, bringing together the two industry leaders with unparalleled global reach. Today NIQ has operations in more than 95 countries covering 97% of GDP. With a holistic retail read and the most comprehensive consumer insights—delivered with advanced analytics through state-of-the-art platforms—NIQ delivers the Full View™.

## About NIQ Consumer Life

[NIQ Consumer Life](#) is the longest-running and most comprehensive study of changing values and lifestyles around the world. The 25+ country database and related perspectives provide a rich understanding of key demographics, markets, and categories both today and tomorrow. We identify how people live, what they want, and how they think.