

**Passing the
Gender Equality
Vibe Check
with Gen Z:
From Truth To Trust**

REWRITING THE RULES OF AUTHENTIC GENDER REPRESENTATION FOR GEN Z

Every generation takes on the world anew. They bring sensibilities, desires and passions that are uniquely their own with an orientation to the future that is grounded in their lived experiences. In many ways, the daily lives of the nearly 70 million Gen Zers in the U.S. are fundamentally different from those before them. Comprising 20% of the population, Gen Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation. They are also the first true “digital natives”, never having known a world without digital connectivity or social media.¹ In addition, Gen Z is focused on purpose and making sure all aspects of their lives are aligned with their inner North Stars.

Gen Z has inherited the social movements of the mid to-late 20th century including the ongoing fight for women’s equality and LGBTQIA+ liberation. But an area where Gen Z diverges from previous generations is in embracing and supporting the ideals of self-determined identities and expressions in everyday life, particularly when it comes to gender and sexuality. And by virtue of their size, diversity, and approach to inclusion, Gen Z is having a major influence on driving acceptance of the concept of gender as an identity and a set of lived experiences rather than being pre-defined and binary.

In fact, nearly **40%** of Gen Zers say labels should be chosen by the **individual, not society**. This openness to diverse gender and sexuality identities goes hand in hand with this generation’s willingness to claim LGBTQIA+ identities for themselves: 16% of Gen Z adults (ages 19-24) identified as LGBTQIA+ in a recent Gallop poll, compared to 9% of Millennials, 4% of Gen X, and 2% of Boomers.² Notably, even 54% of Gen Zers who self-report as having a conservative mindset believe this, while 9% of conservative Gen Zers are



“I BELIEVE GENDER IS FLUID, AND HAS DIFFERENT ROLES IN EVERY CULTURE, SO MIXING AND MATCHING YOUR GENDER EXPRESSIONS TO FEEL MOST AT HOME WITH YOURSELF SHOULD BE ACCEPTED.”

undecided. This sense of allyship is intrinsic to this generation’s ethos.

In addition, Gen Z is the foremost champion of women’s equality for every intersectional tenet, from age, religion, body type, race and ethnicity to disability and sexuality. In fact, Gen Z are more likely than all other generations to state that women’s equality is an important personal issue.³

[1] It is worth noting that socio-economic and geographic diversity/inequity dictates whether a particular Gen Zer has consistent access to wi-fi/can afford various wi-fi devices to stay connected/engage in social and digital platforms

[3] Perceptions of Progress, State of Women’s Equality in the US, SeeHer & dentsu



REIMAGINING GENDER IDENTITY, REINFORCING GENDER EQUALITY

But for many, reimagining gender identity and expression is new territory. Gender is a social construct that has been ingrained in society over time. According to Medical News Today⁴, “A person’s gender identity is not always the same as their biological sex, nor their assumed gender based on their assigned sex.” This, of course, is a radical departure from the way gender has been conceptualized by previous generations.

But for marketers and media to truly understand and connect with Gen Z it is imperative they embrace the Gen Z worldview, of which fluid concepts of gender identity and non-binary gender expression are critical components.

And the first lesson to learn with this generation, is that we need to take an inside-out approach to understanding who they are and what they stand for. If we understand their inner truths, we can create the outward messaging and content they expect and through that earn their trust.

SeeHer partnered with Horowitz Research to conduct a landmark two-part qualitative and quantitative study, *Passing The Gender Equality Vibe Check With Gen Z: From Truth to Trust* to provide this inside-out approach. This study includes not just insights, but clear direction on how to be in conversation with this generation.

A UNIQUE PARTNERSHIP YIELDING UNIQUE RESULTS

SeeHer, the leading global voice in gender equality, brought to the research collaboration thought leadership in accurate representation of humans in content and advertising. In addition, SeeHer leveraged nearly a decade of institutional knowledge of trends and insights into current and evolving gender norms in advertising and content. Horowitz Research brought expertise and customized approaches in conducting culturally sensitive research to form a unique and timely study.

The Gen Z Vibe check is the most comprehensive AND actionable study of its kind. This study’s focus on

[4] Medical News Today Types of gender identity: (medicalnewstoday.com)

Gen Z views of identity, gender, gender roles, and sexual orientation informs a new framework for media and marketing efforts towards this generation.

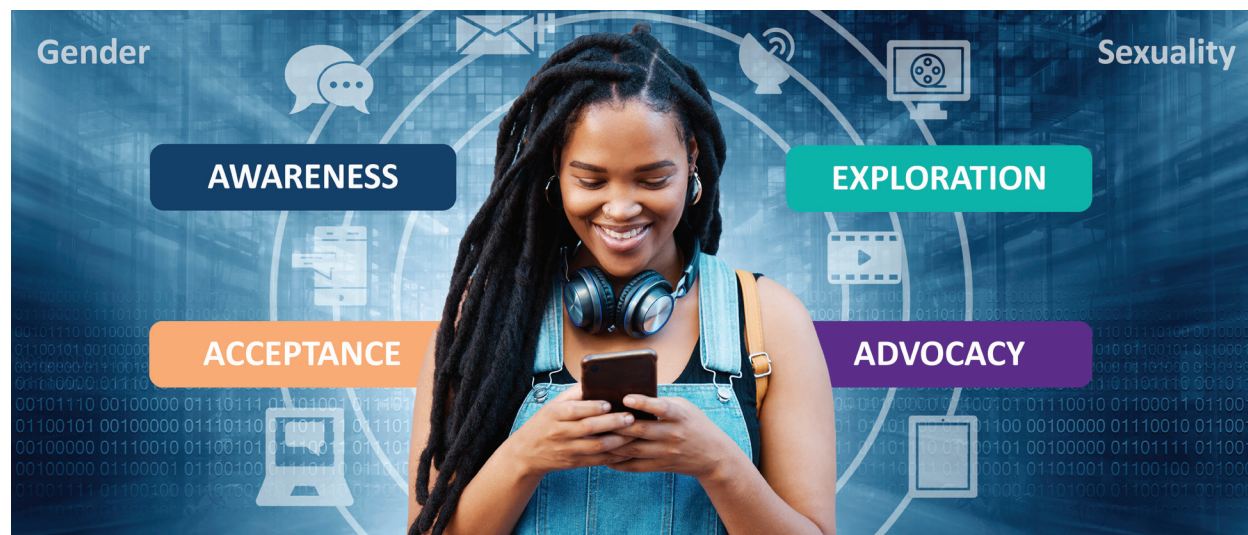
THE POWER OF MEDIA IN INFLUENCING THE GENDER IDENTITY JOURNEY

There is a push – pull when it comes to media’s influence on gender perceptions and consumers’ influence on gender portrayals in media. We know that media plays a major role in influencing people’s perceptions of gender. At the same time, consumer motivations to view resonant content that reflects and represents the world they live in are driving change in terms of how gender representations and portrayals are seen in media today.⁵ Gen Z is a major driver of this push-pull scenario.

For example, 42% of adults have noticed more female lead characters in scripted content and 45% have noticed more LGBTQIA+ lead characters in content. Not only are consumers taking notice, they are also making it clear to content creators the type of content that will increase viewership, with half (51%) of consumers surveyed saying that seeing a female lead character in a show has a positive impact on their decision to watch it. The Gen Z Vibe Check study also found that **(62%)** of Gen Z say TV shows, **(60%)** say celebrities and influencers, and **(54%)** say digital media content have all influenced what they think about gender and sexuality.

In short, Gen Z’s gender identity journey has been shaped by media, and in parallel, Gen Z is holding the media accountable for how it continues to message around gender and sexual inclusiveness.

MEDIA IMPACT ON THE GEN Z GENDER IDENTITY JOURNEY



MEDIA CONTENT HAS ENCOURAGED ME TO	GENDER	SEXUALITY
Become aware of gender/sexual identities I didn't know about before	38%	38%
Explore my gender identity/sexuality	32%	40%
Accept others' gender identities	43%	43%
Advocate for gender and sexuality inclusiveness	35%	34%

[5] Horowitz State of Consumer Engagement Study, 2021 and 2022

FOR BRANDS A BALANCING ACT BETWEEN INTENTION AND ACTION

Gen Z also cites brands as having a major role to play in influencing perceptions around gender and inclusivity. Two thirds (64%) say that accurately representing women in advertising would advance the stature of women and women's equality. And close to half (44%) feel that "brands have a responsibility in shaping thinking about racial and cultural diversity" And this impacts their brand choice. In fact, nearly **50%** of Gen Z respondents claimed, "when I know a brand is committed to diversity and inclusion, I find myself being more likely to do business/shop from it." But **expressions** of commitment to gender and inclusivity are not going to move the needle with this group. Close to half (**46%**) of Gen Z say to trust a brand, its not enough for them to **claim support**, but to show it in **action**.

64%

GEN Z RESPONDENTS SAY THAT ACCURATELY REPRESENTING WOMEN IN ADVERTISING WOULD ADVANCE THE STATURE OF WOMEN AND WOMEN'S EQUALITY.

And **47%** said it feels like pandering when a brand makes ads focused on a cause that they're not involved in. Gen Z has grown up in a cultural context different from previous generations informed by digital technology and the connections and information this enables. Given this, they are more aware and attuned to both brand messaging and where brands stand on social and cultural issues.



"MY DEFINITION IS THAT NORMAL IS DIFFERENT FOR EVERYONE... WHO ARE WE TO SAY SOMEONE IS NORMAL OR NOT NORMAL?"



The Gen Z Framework For Gender Representation

IDENTITY | EQUITY | PORTRAYAL

The challenge for media and brands in terms of accurate gender representation is that Gen Z consumers are constantly challenging the rules! To help brands and media navigate this new territory, specifically in terms of gender roles and gender equality, we have created a new framework on how brands and media can pass the ‘vibe check’ with Gen Z.



TARGETING GEN Z BASED ON LIFESTYLE AND INTERESTS IS MORE EFFECTIVE

| Labels Don't Define Them |

- Gen Zers overall feel that society is more likely to label them by their gender identity, race/ethnicity, and physical traits, and nearly **(40%)** of Gen Z say that those societal labels are not what defines them, or at least not what **solely** defines them. The characteristics Gen Zers feel play the biggest role in who they are include their hobbies, talents, passions, and personality, not just what can be perceived from the outside looking in. In other words, Gen Z sees their identities as multifaceted, dynamic, and **chosen: Identity is an act of self-agency.**
- Notably, when it comes to non-cisgender and non-straight Gen Z consumers, gender and sexuality labels play a much bigger role in their own sense of identity. Almost half **(48%)** of non-cisgender Gen Zers say gender identity is one of the top characteristics that define who they are, and nearly **40%** of non-straight Gen Z participants say that their sexual orientation is. We hypothesize that this has much to do with shaping their concepts of self in the company of others who share what still are marginalized identities.

>> KEY TAKEAWAY: *Rethink traditional labels and targeting. Engage and learn about your Gen Z consumers based on their interests and chosen identities.*

BREAK TIES WITH TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES

| Women Lead in Redefining Gender Roles |

- Challenging gender norms is one of the ways to address gender inequality, and Gen Z is on it! The study finds that most Gen Z participants do not ascribe to the idea that femininity = female and masculinity = male. They believe binary gender roles and expectations no longer dictate what people can do and how people can express themselves. Both men and women and those who identify as females or males can do anything, from wearing make-up and heels to holding down and excelling in a STEM career to initiating sexual advances. Female-identifying and LGBTQIA+ Gen Zers are leading the charge in terms of this. However, the study finds that male-identifying Gen Z are also skewing towards truly balanced and equal gender roles.
- Notably, **43%** of female-identifying Gen Z (and **20%** of male-identifying Gen Z) say the media has been an influence on them to not conform to traditional gender roles, highlighting the impact of media and marketing to showcase female empowerment in both content and advertising. It also highlights how important it is for marketers and media to do more to model and celebrate a variety of nuanced male personas beyond the “alpha male” to help reinforce that they too, do not have to conform to the narrow (and often damaging) society-imposed definitions of “manhood” and “masculinity”.



“I BELIEVE THAT THE ROLES OF MEN AND WOMEN IN SOCIETY ARE SLOWLY BLENDING. I BELIEVE IT IS INEVITABLE THAT GENDER TAKES A BACKSEAT IN TERMS OF QUALITIES THAT DEFINE A HUMAN BEING, IT IS ONLY A MATTER OF HOW LONG IT WILL TAKE TO GET THERE.”

>> KEY TAKEAWAY: *Be intentional about how gender roles are depicted. Remember that this generation expects, embraces and rewards seeing men and women in non-traditional roles.*



“GENDER, SEX AND IDENTITY ARE FLUID AND WE NEED TO STRIVE TO CREATE A SPACE FOR EVERYONE. WHO AM I TO TELL SOMEONE HOW THEY CAN LIVE. WE NEED TO QUIT CANCELLING PEOPLE BECAUSE THEY THINK DIFFERENTLY THAN US!”

REFLECT GENDER FLUIDITY

| Comittment to Allyship |

- Shifting identities is a key principle of Gen Z consumers’ view of gender and sexuality. Half **(50%)** of Gen Z see gender as non-binary, while the other half see it as binary, or they are undecided. This near majority viewpoint is a major departure from traditional views of gender.
- **(64%)** of Gen Zers — the majority — believe that sexuality is fluid, underscoring the reality that among this generation, acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people and lifestyles is the norm, not the outlier.
- Many Gen Zers believe in acceptance of people and communities who do not share their identities, world views, values, and beliefs. From a Gen Z point of view, everyone has the right to self-identify and to choose a path that is best for the individual. This sense of allyship is as critical to this generation as their inclusive world view.
- This demonstrates that most participants do not think that expanded notions of gender identity and sexuality will negatively affect society, and instead, can visualize a future that looks very different than the one previous generation experienced in terms of how human beings are categorized, compartmentalized, and marketed to.

>> KEY TAKEAWAY: *Continue to challenge sexual stereotypes and utilize counter-stereotypes to break societal norms in advertising and content development.*

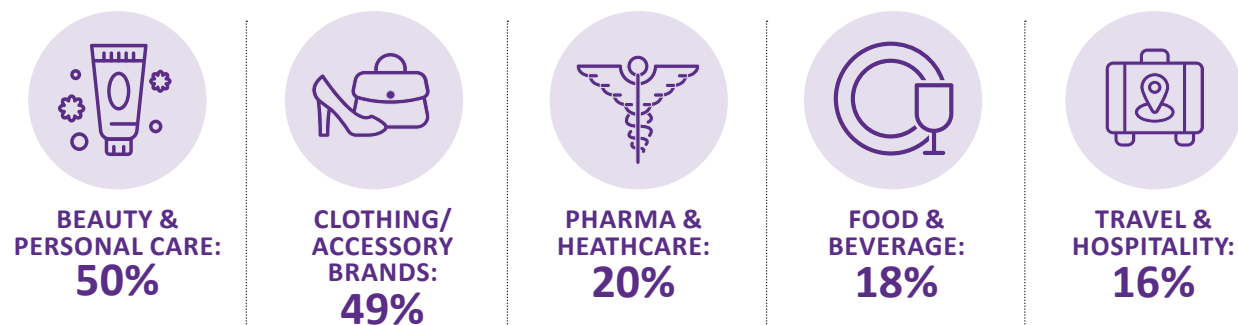
IMPACT & EXPECTATION BY CATEGORY

Gen Zers who believe brands have a responsibility when thinking of how gender/sexuality is portrayed, have an elevated expectation that marketers be inclusive. As consumers, they feel that some categories have more accountability for shaping thinking about gender equality than others. These categories tend to be those where individual expression must shine through in their content by virtue of the type of platform, content genre, or product type. But this also leaves white space for other categories to gain trust with Gen Z by stepping forward to meet their expectations.

enjoy branding that includes gender-neutral clothing and gender-expansive models and those that showcase a broad range of body types and inclusive sizes, races, ethnicities, and skin tones. They notice companies who advertise their gender-inclusive hiring and philanthropy practices and when brands celebrate/showcase LGBTQIA+ identities year-round.

On the other hand, they also notice when brands create content or advertising that does not align with their more inclusive and gender-neutral perspectives and/or seem to be pandering to this savvy audience. Building trust with Gen Z starts with truth before it leads to trust. Only about

EXAMPLES INCLUDE:



And Gen Z is taking notice of brands that are doing it right. For example, many of the participants say they

half (**47%**) of Gen Z consumers agree that advertising does a good job of reflecting them.



WHEN A BRAND SAYS...“WE PROMOTE ACCOUNTABILITY, EQUALITY, AND KINDNESS IN AN EFFORT TO END MISOGYNY AND RE-WRITE ARCHAIC GENDER ROLES” (I SEE THIS IS TRUE) BY THEIR EFFORTS TO GIVE ALL PEOPLE, ESPECIALLY WORKING MOTHERS’ FLEXIBLE SCHEDULES.”

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE WHEN DIVERSITY IS TABLE STAKES

Unlike marketers, media is quickly evolving to accurately reflect the everyday lives of Gen Z. Almost all (**78%**) say that media (content) is doing a good job of reflecting Gen Z identity and lifestyle.

What lessons can marketers learn from media, specifically when it comes to depicting women or

female-identifying people? How can brand identity and brand messaging be more part of the conversation—reflecting identities, lived experiences, values, and worldviews?

The Gen Z consumers surveyed have some specific recommendations as to how advertising could improve:

TOO LITTLE DIVERSITY of (Women) Characters in Advertising / Content:



WANT TO SEE MORE NARRATIVES (For Women) in Advertising / Content:





PASSING THE GEN Z VIBE CHECK: WHAT IS YOUR TRUTH?

Essentially, creating a new framework for accurate representation for Gen Z means seeing identity as multifaceted. True inclusivity has many different dimensions. It includes layers of cultural and linguistic diversity, ranges of skin tones and body types, ranges of genders and sexualities, and people with different abilities, values, and beliefs.

Gen Zers want to see a spectrum of female-identifying people actively directing their own lives, pursuing their passions and interests, and achieving their goals, with a focus on the process they undertake to get there and how they evolve through their journey. From a storytelling perspective, the narratives for women that Gen Z is looking for should align with their own views of themselves.

When considering how to earn trust with Gen Z consumers, it is important to understand that Gen Z is holding media and marketing to the standard of not just talking the talk but walking the walk. In other words, performative marketing will backfire with Gen Z if your marketing and messaging are not in alignment with your brand's true ethos.

CONSIDER HOW GEN Z MAY BE EVALUATING YOU AND ASK YOURSELF:

- What's in your **brand's DNA** when it comes to DEIB?
- How does your brand portray the **range of genders, gender roles and sexualities**?
- Would Gen Z consider your brand **inclusive by their standards of inclusivity**?
- How does your brand model **allyship**?
- From a media and advertising perspective, how might you **deliver more resonant storytelling**?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEDIA AND BRANDS:

- **Make diversity a natural part of your media and brand ethos.** Not doing it will make your brand/content feel outdated and out of touch.
- **Reimagine the way gender, gender roles, and sexualities are expressed** in advertising and content to be more aligned with how Gen Z thinks about these things.
- Accurate and inclusive depictions for Gen Z means **featuring more diversity/aspects of intersectional identities** in ads and content.
- Portray female-identifying people engaged in **personal growth, self-realization, and being in charge of their destiny** in ads/content.
- Do more to help **challenge traditional "male" roles** that fail to provide male-identifying people with more holistic and inclusive role models.
- Find ways to **join open dialogue that is inclusive** and without judgment.

CONCLUSION

To connect with Gen Z, brands must be more concerned about being authentic to and about **themselves**. Being “authentic” to an entire generation of people that is defined by diversity, inclusiveness, and fluidity is impossible and will be viewed as pandering by this generation. Instead, brands need to consider how they can make the cultural and internal shifts to be more aligned with this generation’s

concerns, passions, viewpoints, and beliefs. This will require owning an understanding and acceptance of these new concepts about gender and sexuality that might feel foreign, different, or even wrong in some circles. It will require an examination of your corporate and personal values and drive to understand and embrace a new way of thinking about gender, gender roles, and sexualities. Only then will a brand be able to become a believable and trusted voice to this generation.



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Imagery provided by SeeHer global member Shutterstock — a premier partner for transformative brands, newsrooms and media companies, empowering the world to create with confidence and offering the most comprehensive selection of resources to bring storytelling to life.

Please review this **SeeHer Shutterstock Collection** for additional ways to illustrate gender equality within the Gen Z audience

ABOUT SEEHER

SeeHer is the leading global movement of media, marketing and entertainment leaders committed to the accurate depiction of women and girls in advertising and media. Launched in 2016 by the **Association of National Advertisers (ANA)** in partnership with **The Female Quotient (The FQ)**, SeeHer is changing how women are portrayed in media. To help members benchmark success, SeeHer spearheaded the development of the Gender Equality Measure® (GEM®), the first research methodology that quantifies gender bias in ads and programming. GEM® proves that content accurately portraying women and girls dramatically increases both purchase intent and brand reputation. The GEM® methodology quickly became the industry standard, winning the prestigious ESOMAR Research Effectiveness Award, leading to its global rollout in 2018. The movement has expanded its verticals to include sports (SeeHer In Sports), music (SeeHer Hear Her) and health (SeeHer Health.) To learn more, visit **SeeHer.com** and follow SeeHer on **Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, TikTok, and Twitter**.

ABOUT HOROWITZ RESEARCH

Horowitz Research is a leading provider of consumer market research specializing in consumers and their relationships to media, content, and technology with a particular expertise in cultural insights among America's Black, Latinx, Asian, LGBTQIA+, Gen Z and Gen Alpha audiences. A woman-run full-service research company staffed by a team of passionate, savvy, diverse, multilingual, and multicultural researchers, the company offers custom quantitative and qualitative consumer research for companies ranging from small start-ups to Fortune 500. The company also publishes a robust suite of à la carte syndicated reports including studies on Gen Z as well as Black, Latinx, Asian, and LGBTQIA+ consumers. For more information, visit **www.horowitzresearch.com**



Background, Methodology and Sample

All research and analysis were conducted by Horowitz Research, a full-service research firm with expertise in research among diverse consumers, in conjunction with SeeHer. This cutting-edge study was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 consisted of a 2-week online community discussion among 70 15–24-year-old Gen Z consumers across a range of gender identities, sexualities, religious affiliations, and political viewpoints. The discussion covered a range of topics including gender roles, gender identity, gender expression, sexuality, societal, media, and brand influence, and consumer expectations, and was moderated by Horowitz’s diverse team of Gen Z and Millennial researchers. Phase 2 of the study consisted of a 20-minute online/mobile quantitative survey among 800 14–24-year-olds in the United States.

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