



LEARFIELD

Engage with Purpose: Reaching **Gen Z** Fans

July 2022



Let's talk about Generation Z

What do we know about this diverse and growing generation?

What brands do they follow?

How do they engage with **college sports**?

It turns out that when it comes to sports fandom, **Gen Z is rewriting the rules**, and brands will need to pay close attention as this generation matures and continues to evolve.



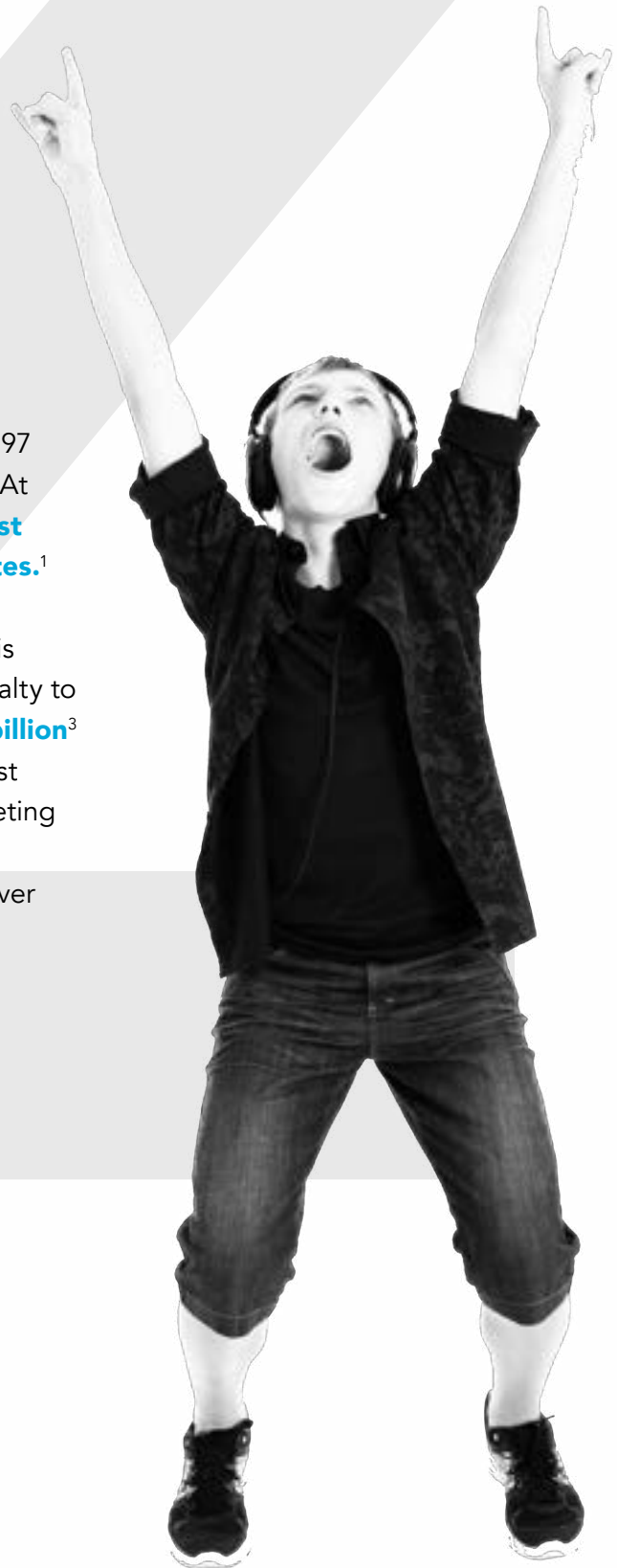
Understanding Gen Z and their motivations reveals key attributes—**purpose and passion**—that define who they are. Creating the right opportunities to reach and engage this generation will foster long-term affinity with the largest emerging and most diverse demographic of college sports fans. In this white paper, marketers will learn how to reach and engage the Gen Z college sports fan with purpose-driven content that builds community and brand advocacy.



Who Is Gen Z?

Members of Generation Z were born between 1997 and 2012, making them 10–25 years old in 2022. At 65 million, they are currently the **largest and most diverse demographic group in the United States**.¹

While they are the most educated generation, this attribute does not automatically create brand loyalty to their alma maters.² However, Gen Z holds **\$360 billion**³ **in spending power**, making them one of the most important demographic groups in terms of marketing and advertising. Moreover, they will become the primary consumer segment in the US economy over the next 10 years.





Gen Z consists of
65M
people in US



of US consumers
are Gen Z



Gen Z buying power
in the US is
44B⁴

Gen Z grew up during a time of vast change in computing and internet technologies, including the rise of touchscreens and apps. They are **digitally fluent social media natives** and **consume content differently** than generations before them.



They have lived through the 2008 recession and one of the worst global health crises in the past century and a half. Nevertheless, members of Gen Z are **driven, resilient, and focused on the future.**

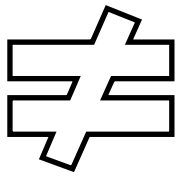




They are the **"purpose generation."**⁵ They care deeply about the planet and choose brands that represent their values and commitments to the environment and social justice. For Gen Z, their purpose extends to their own sense of agency as well as their own self-care and mental health. They have watched as elite sports stars prioritize mental wellness and social justice over high-stakes competitions and their own career longevity.

Their collective history, experiences, and behavioral tendencies make Gen Z a unique demographic to reach through college sports. In this white paper, we'll explore this influential generation's values, their approaches to digital technology, and what marketers of college sports need to understand about them in order to reach them effectively.







Gen Z and Millennials Are NOT the Same!

Gen Z interacts with and consumes media differently than other demographic groups. In fact, their primary means of media consumption (and, therefore, exposure to marketing) are from sources that didn't exist in previous generations.

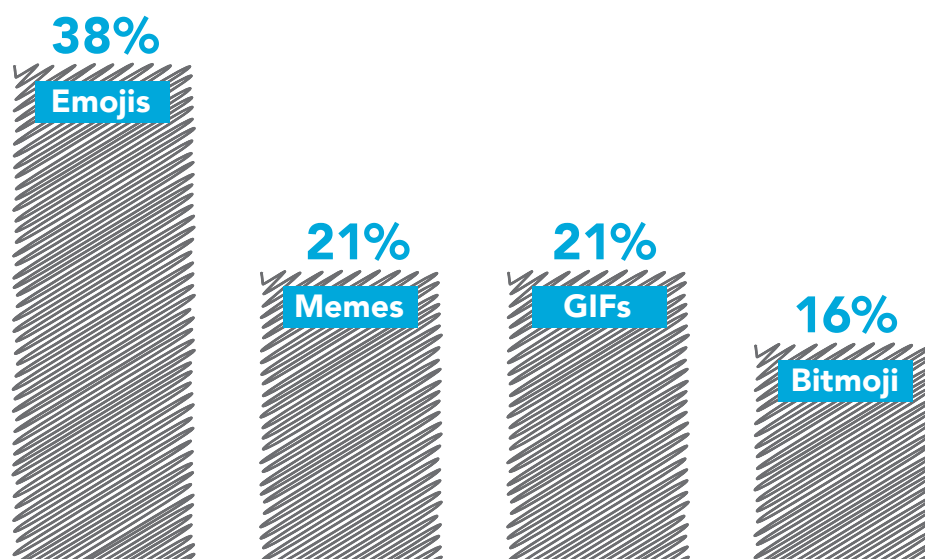
What does this tell us? **Traditional marketing strategies of years past, and especially those used with millennials, will not resonate with Gen Z and achieve the same results.** Different methods and approaches will need to be used.



How Gen Z Consumes Media⁶

	Year Founded	Favorite Channel
 TikTok	2016	23%
 Instagram	2010	21%
 YouTube	2005	20%

Even the way Gen Z communicates is different from past generations. They enjoy communicating visually and often use emojis, memes, GIFs, and bitmoji.⁷



Unlike millennials, members of Gen Z are **purpose-driven, socially conscious**, and **have an entrepreneurial spirit**. They are a generation of activists and influencers who want to be loyal to brands that align with their beliefs.

The people who influence their buying habits the most are their friends, followed by influencers on social media channels such as athletes who endorse products.⁸

34%

My Gen Z friends

20%

Celebrities (Actors, Athletes, Musicians)

15%

Online Celebrities

11%

Subject Experts



What Can We Learn From Gen Z in Their Own Voices?

Who better to ask about how to market college sports to Gen Z than Gen Zers themselves?

Going straight to the source is one way Professor Mark Beal of the Rutgers School of Communication and Information has become an expert on understanding this generation. When working on his book *Gen Z Graduates to Adulthood*, he used inclusive, rich, and immersive methods to engage and involve his Gen Z students as direct partners in his work. This method of research embodies the very qualities that Gen Z seeks—**authentic and personalized engagement with purpose**—and it yielded key insights that can help brand marketers and universities work together to understand and reach Gen Z effectively:

Two things matter most to Gen Z:



PURPOSE+AUTHENTICITY



What's Important to Gen Z



Purpose Matters

Purpose is extremely important to this generation, especially when it relates to the **environment** and to **mental health**. Members of Gen Z are more likely to be loyal to brands that incorporate social justice and other philanthropic missions. To reach this generation, promote how your brand gives back to the community and/or the environment in substantive, meaningful ways.



89%

of Gen Z say they are more likely to purchase products from companies that support charitable causes.⁹



Through LEARFIELD's partnership with Team IMPACT, college athletics teams are paired with children facing a serious illness or disability—creating experiences and relationships with university partners that benefit everyone involved. This type of philanthropic effort is a great example of what Gen Zers expect from brands.

“

Being environmentally and socially responsible is a must.

Other than those necessities, our generation values authenticity, transparency, and realness. By that, I mean we can see right through marketing jargon. We gravitate toward companies led by people who believe in their products, care for the people who work for them and also for those who consume their products.”

~Hailley S¹⁰

”





Be relatable; be conscious of current issues, movements, and trends; treat employees the way you describe in your job postings. Consumers—specifically Gen Z—are willing to spend on quality products and services from quality companies.

~Brian A¹¹



Gen Z is less interested in which brands and products sports icons buy, and more interested in what causes they support and whether the brands they are representing have ethical and sustainability objectives. These fans use the internet and social media feeds from college athletics teams and athletes to investigate their positions on environmental and social issues. Brand loyalty can suffer when such content is not specifically included and/or curated to ensure message alignment.

Moreover, **brands most trusted by this generation have incorporated philanthropic commitments**, values, and mission statements that reflect social values. Gen Z has embraced brands like TOM's, Bombas, and Patagonia due to their commitment to meaningful philanthropic causes. In fact, how brands react to societal events can result in increased or decreased support via social media and even boycotts of particular brands.

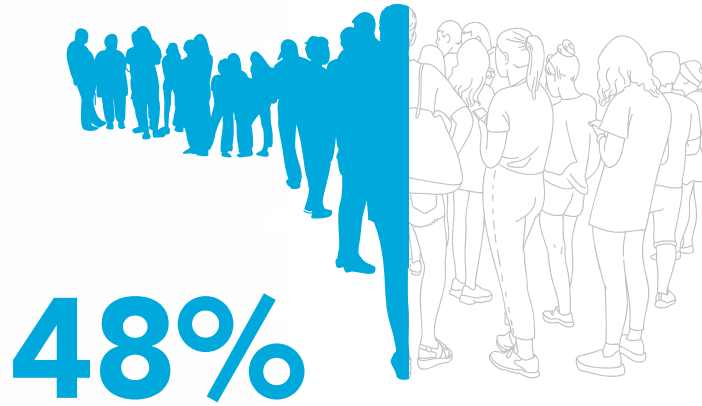


91% of Gen Zers will research a company before purchasing its products to confirm the company is purposeful in their actions and the way in which they conduct business.¹²



Mental Health

The statistics about mental health among Gen Z speak for themselves.¹³

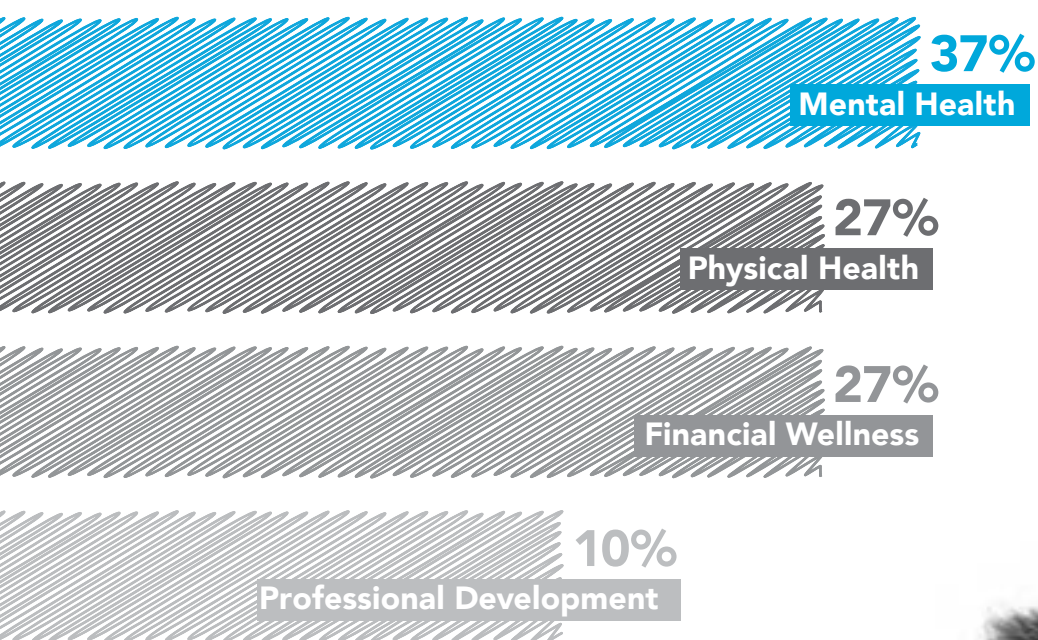


of Gen Zers are stressed out and unhappy.

And while the pandemic has seen increased attention on mental health in general, Gen Z still ranks mental health among their primary work and life concerns. They believe not enough is being done to bring focus to discrimination on the basis of mental health.

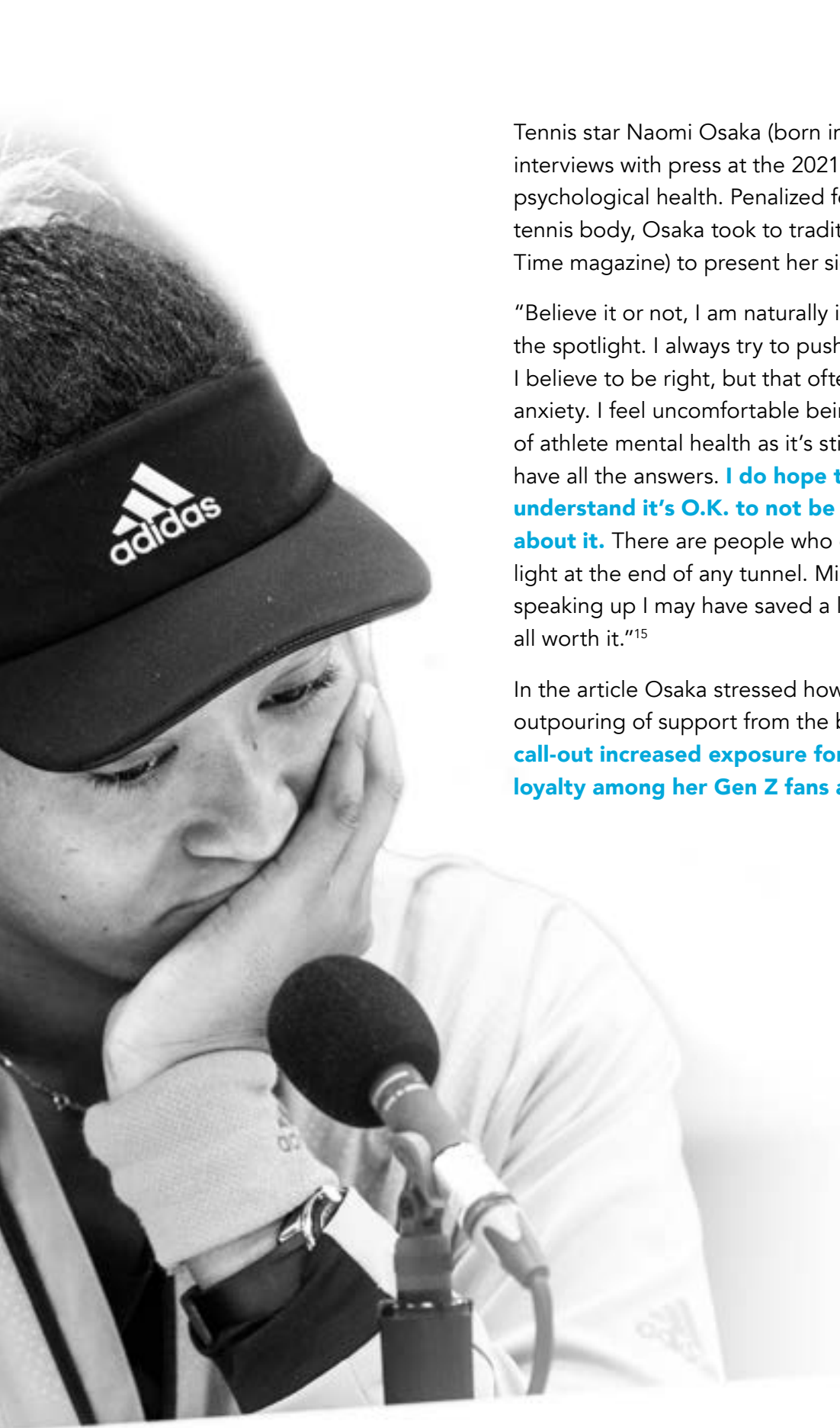
Many factors influence this perception: changing economic times, political uncertainty, increased unemployment, plummeting standards of living, widening of the gap between rich and poor, and lack of work/life balance. When taken together against the backdrop of a global pandemic, it shouldn't surprise us that members of Gen Z prioritize mental health and self-care. In fact, they rank these concerns higher than any other priority.

When it comes to setting personal goals, **mental health** ranks first with Gen Z.¹⁴



Gen Zers also believe that focusing on these priorities will help to de-stigmatize struggles around mental health and encourage more people to seek help.





Tennis star Naomi Osaka (born in 1997) refused to do interviews with press at the 2021 French Open, citing her own psychological health. Penalized for this move by the governing tennis body, Osaka took to traditional media (via an article in Time magazine) to present her side of the story.

"Believe it or not, I am naturally introverted and do not court the spotlight. I always try to push myself to speak up for what I believe to be right, but that often comes at a cost of great anxiety. I feel uncomfortable being the spokesperson or face of athlete mental health as it's still so new to me and I don't have all the answers. **I do hope that people can relate and understand it's O.K. to not be O.K., and it's O.K. to talk about it.** There are people who can help, and there is usually light at the end of any tunnel. Michael Phelps told me that by speaking up I may have saved a life. If that's true, then it was all worth it."¹⁵

In the article Osaka stressed how thankful she was for the outpouring of support from the brands she represents. **This call-out increased exposure for the brands and increased loyalty among her Gen Z fans and supporters.**

What's Important to Gen Z



Authentic Engagement Through Unique Experiences

Gen Zers aren't likely to watch an entire sporting event live. They tend to use streaming services, like YouTube, to watch highlights instead.

30%


View YouTube 3-9 Times a Day

27%

View YouTube 1-2 Times a Day

26%

View YouTube 10+ Times a Day

A black and white photograph of a person from behind, wearing a white shirt, holding a smartphone up to take a picture. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor event or crowd.

Gen Z does not seek mere engagement via social media. **They identify with activities and brands that provide unique, authentic experiences and content with which to personally engage.** The more engagement, the better—which is why online channels like Twitch, Discord, and games with robust text, voice, and chat features appeal to Gen Z. They offer opportunities for engagement with like-minded Gen Zers.

“

Provide customers with an experience they cannot get elsewhere. Consider bringing settings and elements from television and converting those to real-life experiences that Gen Z can participate in and share on their social media channels.”

~Sean Bo¹⁶

”

“Market towards a memory” is one way to think about the type of meaningful and unique engagement experiences that members of Gen Z seek from advertising.¹⁷

80%

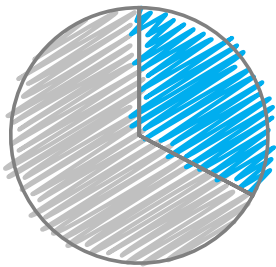
of Gen Zers agree that unique experiences, events and access are the most effective way for marketers to engage them.¹⁸



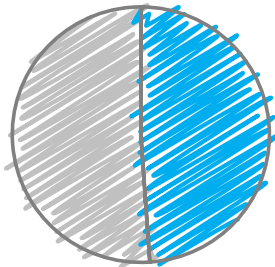
Here's an example of a marketing campaign that connected with Gen Z.¹⁹ In ice hockey, a Zamboni is the machine that smooths and solidifies the ice surface between periods. Through a social media contest, a college student was chosen to ride on it during a break. The winner live streamed this memorable moment on Instagram, one of the social networks preferred by Gen Z, so that friends and contacts could share their experience.

What Does All This Mean for Gen Z and College Sports?

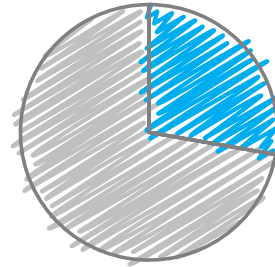
How does Gen Z engage with college sports and how will their engagement evolve as they continue to graduate? Where can we reach them?



33% of Gen Zers seek information and news about sports online.



49% of Gen Zers prefer YouTube for sports content.



About **28%** of Gen Zers go online for e-sports or gaming content.²⁰

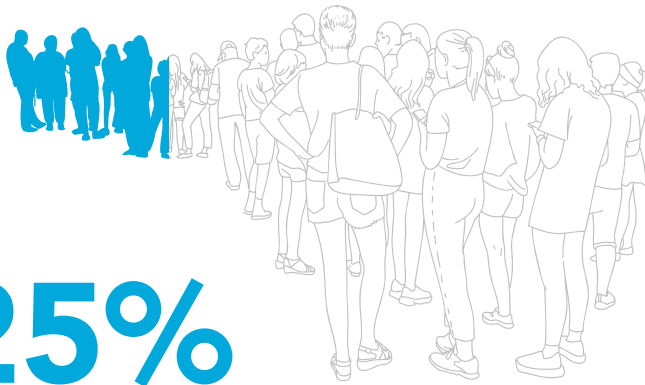
This generation is less likely to watch sports content live—unless they have a particular stake in sports events through participation in a Fantasy Sports league or gambling. Gen Z prefers to get sports highlights and analysis on social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube instead of cable television programs such as ESPN’s SportsCenter.



We will actually sit and watch an entire game on TV because of gambling. If my roommates and I place a small bet on a game, we will watch the entire game. It serves as a form of at-home entertainment. I would recommend that sports television networks do more intergrations with sports betting brands and personalities in the game telecasts as that will drive greater tune-in with Gen Zers.

~Brendan²¹





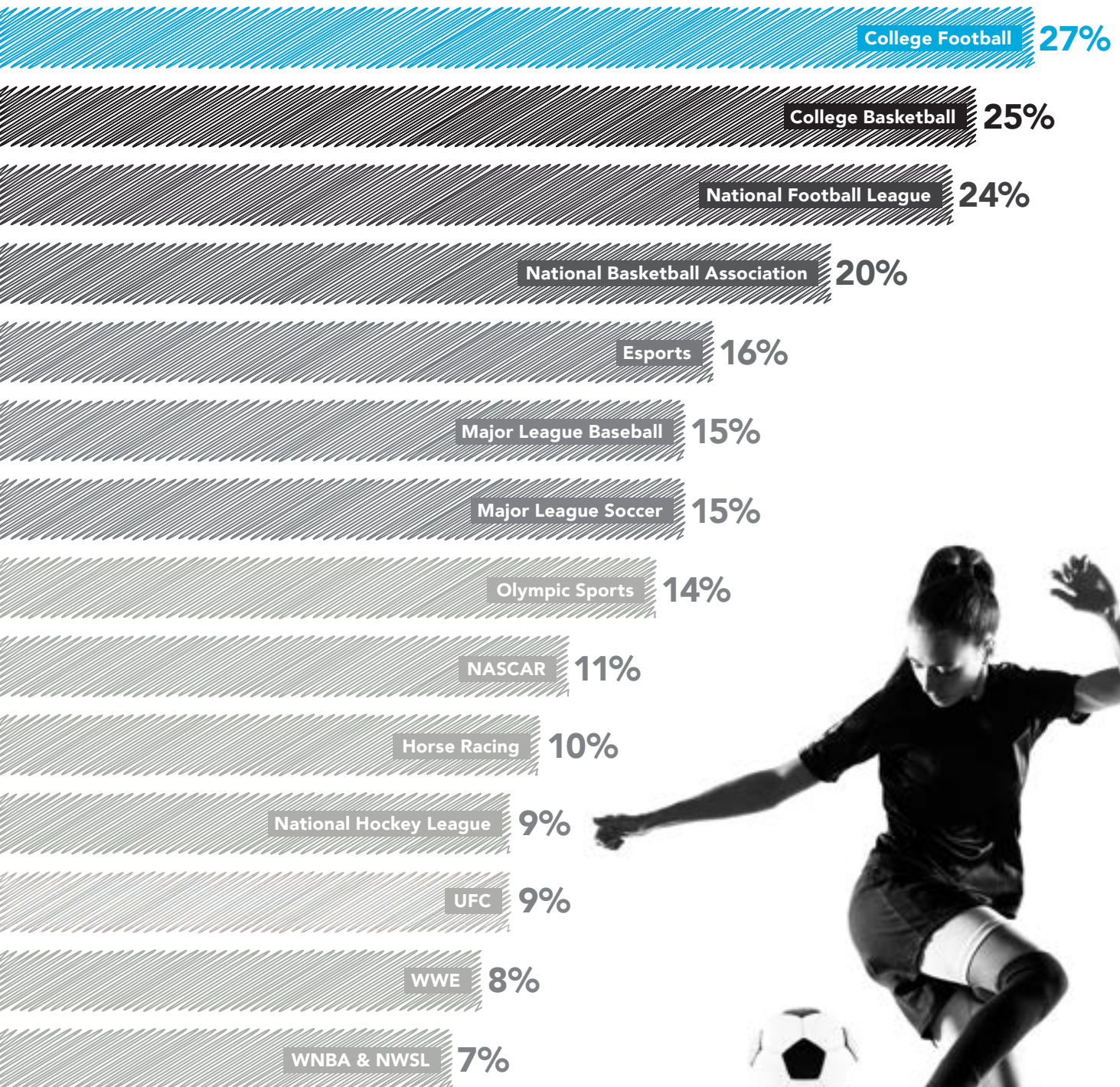
only **25%**

of Gen Zers think you need to watch live sports to be considered a fan

Therefore marketers will need to change their strategies to align with Gen Z's preferred method of engagement. Partnership opportunities, where brands and agencies can share collegiate team assets in display ads, social media, streaming content, or via unique and collectible NFTs, are critical for reaching this group.



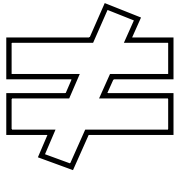
Gen Z considers themselves fans of these sports.²²



Conclusions

Gen Z is the largest generation in the world²³ and is set to overtake millennials as the largest consumer segment, with a current estimated spending power of \$360 billion. As a priority demographic for marketers, it's important for brands and agencies to build relationships with Gen Z college sports fans. But this generation consumes content differently than other generations, and most Gen Zers (69%) tend to find traditional ads disruptive.²⁴

Through an in-depth analysis of research compiled by subject matter experts and Gen Zers themselves, this white paper has shown that **Gen Z seeks authentic and personalized engagement with purpose**. Brands and agencies seeking to engage Gen Z college sports fans should focus their efforts online and meet members of Gen Z where they are—on their preferred social media channels like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. To reach this generation, college sports needs to embrace a new strategy that prioritizes purpose over profit and evolves from marketing to engaging.



Gen Z and Millennials Are NOT the Same!

Key Takeaways

Don't stereotype. Diversity and inclusiveness are pillars of Gen Z social concerns.

Be real. Gen Z can see through marketing and advertising that's disingenuous.

Brief is better. Gen Z finds ads disruptive.

Take notice. Recognize the influence of Gen Zers within their community.

Do your research. Gen Z doesn't consume media the same way millennials or other generations do.

Recommendations

Create campaigns and programs that will matter by involving members of Gen Z in your marketing ideation and planning efforts to avoid implicit bias, microaggressions, and potentially problematic language that will adversely affect Gen Z sensibilities.

Speak to Gen Z in their language and incorporate social media trends into advertising campaigns.

Keep ads short and engaging (a good benchmark is less than eight seconds, according to some Gen Z surveys).

Learn from other brands who have successfully tapped this audience and apply those learnings as you plan.

Focus on reaching Gen Z where they are, such as YouTube, Twitch, Discord, etc.



Purpose Matters

Key Takeaways

Alignment matters. Before deciding to support a brand, team, or school, Gen Z researches it and looks to their community on social media to see how the brand aligns to the things that are most important to them.

Mental health is a big deal. How college sports programs and brands support mental health can make or break trust and loyalty among members of Gen Z.

Go to the source! Gen Z can tell you what matters to them.

Recommendations

Curate teams' social media feeds to ensure that responses to social justice issues are visible and aligned. Understand that how individual athletes use social media, especially in regards to controversial issues, will affect Gen Z's affinity for the team.

Investigate and understand how each program or brand addresses mental health within the organization and leverage these learnings in your campaigns.

Engaging directly with Gen Z will require that marketers:

- Learn about Gen Z's college sports preferences. Elder members of this generation are recent college graduates, and there's an opportunity to further develop their allegiances to particular sports or schools.
- Learn from other brands' successes. Research highly respected brands that have included Gen Zers in marketing to their own demographic (and beyond).
- Align with issues important to this generation. Promote sustainability focused content and highlight initiatives that are philanthropic & experiential.



Authentic Engagement Through Unique Experiences

Key Takeaway

Wow them. Gen Z wants different, fascinating, and unforgettable experiences.

Make it engaging. Gen Z doesn't want to just sit back and watch.

Don't reinvent the wheel. Meet Gen Zers where they already are—on social media.

Recommendation

Partner with Gen Z to create new experiences. Use focus groups to gain insights into what appeals to this audience.

Explore different approaches like humor to draw interest and increase exposure to influencers. Integrate experiential products into your sponsorship lineup.

Since Gen Z already participates in fantasy and e-sports leagues and enjoys direct engagement via live streams on Twitch and Discord, partnering with providers on those platforms for college sports content will allow you to tap into already existing members of Gen Z on their own trusted platforms.



References

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About Mark Beal

Mark Beal is a leading Generation Z expert. He has authored *Decoding Gen Z*, *Engaging Gen Z* and *Gen Z Graduates To Adulthood*. After spending the first 25 years of his career in public relations and marketing with a focus on sports and entertainment, Mark now collaborates daily with Gen Z as an assistant professor of practice in the Rutgers University School of Communication and Information. Mark's Gen Z research has led to delivering keynote speeches to leading corporations, brands, agencies, conferences, trade associations, and pro and college sports leagues, teams, and executives.

To learn more, visit www.markbealspeaks.com

About LEARFIELD

LEARFIELD is a leading media and technology services company in intercollegiate athletics. The company unlocks the value of college sports for brands and fans through an omnichannel platform with innovative content and commerce solutions. LEARFIELD services include licensing and multimedia sponsorship management; publishing, audio, digital and social media; data analytics; ticketing, ticket sales and professional concessions expertise; branding; campus-wide business and sponsorship development; and venue technology systems.

For more information about opportunities to connect with Gen Z, contact us.