



Decoding Gen Z Identity Construction In Social Networks Through The Paradigm Of Branding

A Toolkit For Parents & Carers

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Abstract

Social networks play a significant and often monopolizing role in the lives of youth and provide spaces where they can express their individual identity and experiment with who they are and what they represent. This paper examines the evolution of social networks from play spaces to marketplaces; where self-expression is more about impressions, and the nature of self-identity fuses with the principles of branding. By examining the complex association between identity expression and branding within public and participatory networked ecosystems, this study scrutinizes the way children build ideologies of their own selves. The study culminates with a toolkit as a resource for parents and carers—applying the principles of brand strategy to help carers play a more meaningful role in constructing, nurturing, and protecting youth identity.

Keywords: Social media, personal branding, brand identity, self-identity, brand strategy, social networking, Generation Z

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Chapter 1.

INTRODUCTION

In 2018 a Vice Voices Future Census polled Generation Z—those born between 1995–2012—asking what had affected their lives the most. They all resoundingly answered: social media.

Dr. Uğur Gündüz, Associate Professor of Istanbul University in his article “The Effect of Social Media on Identity Construction” (2017) defines social media as platforms where all digital/virtual users with internet access can share content and express opinions about a topic, and where communication and interaction occur without any time or place limitation. Social media platforms facilitate the creation or sharing of information, ideas, career interests and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks. Boyd (2014) describes the evolution of social media from an esoteric jumble of technologies to a network of sites and services that are at the heart of contemporary culture. Branding consultant Alina Wheeler, author of *Designing Brand Identity: An Essential Guide for the Entire Branding Team* (2017), distills social media still further—classifying social media into defined categories, entertainment formats, and associated platform metrics (Figure 1).

Measuring Success		Social Media Categories	
Quantitative		Communication	
Fans/followers		Blogs	
Shares		Microblogs	
Likes		Forums	
Comments		Social networks	
Traffic/visitors		Collaboration	
Clicks/conversions		Wikis	
Views		Social bookmarks	
		Social news aggregators	
Qualitative		Reviews	
Engagement		Messaging	
Conversation quality		Chat rooms	
Fan loyalty			
Insights/research value		Entertainment	
Word of mouth		Photo sharing	
Brand reputation		Video sharing	
Influence		Livestreaming	
		Audio & music sharing	
		Virtual worlds	
		Games	

Figure 1: A breakdown of social media from “Designing brand identity: an essential guide for the entire branding team,” A. Wheeler, 2018, p 76. Copyright 2018 by Alina Wheeler. Permitted under Section 107 United States Copyright Act for purposes of scholarship and education.

The definitions of social media are vast and varied, and the term is often used interchangeably with social networks. However, this is not strictly true. One may consider an online social network as a social structure designed to facilitate personal connections and community interactions, as well as the website or application.

Social media comprises communication and publishing and offers users the ability to participate through different information formats, such as videos and photos. The depiction in Figure 2 as cited by Cristina Pierre, Editor and Co-Author of *Notcy Magazine* in Medium, visualizes the interrelation between social media and online social networks.



Figure 2: Web 2.0 Example “What is the Difference Between Social Media and Social Network?”.
 C. Meyer, 2018, Medium.

For easy framing, one might consider social networking as a subcategory of social media; online social networks require the Web 2.0 infrastructure of social media in order for users to share digital information “media.” For the purpose of this study we focus our attention on social networking sites (SNSs), particularly those more commonly used among Gen Z for personal use, peer-to-peer connections, and the dissemination of information. This would include popular sites such as TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook.

It is exactly this fusion between peer-to-peer communication (audience) and the ability to disseminate your own information (the media) that allowed online social networks to become the perfect ecosystems within which identity definitions could evolve. From a psychosocial viewpoint, social networks can be defined as “digital spaces” allowing users to manage both their network of social relationships—organization, extension, exploration and comparison; and their social identity—description and definition (Riva G., Wiederhold, B.K., & Cipresso, P, 2015).

Social networks have become intrinsically woven into the very fabric of youth lives in a far more significant manner than we'd first anticipated. We are now able to connect, create and share at an unprecedented pace, and SNSs engage millions of people around the world—especially youth. These platforms provide far more to youth than a mere infrastructure for sharing; SNSs are enabling youth to experience new modes of self-expression and opportunities to build and continuously evolve their sense of identity. As Manu (2017) notes, the human race is constantly repurposed by its encounter with technologies. We enhance and expand our social footprint at every given opportunity, and with it, our social capital, our worth, and self-esteem—gaining new meaning, intrinsic to who we are and who we want to become.

Alongside recognizing social networks as channels for Gen Z to express themselves wholeheartedly (which will be discussed in more depth in our environmental scan in Chapter 2), one should also recognize that this ever-present online participation by Gen Z within social networks brings with it an always-on audience, a hyper awareness that we are being watched, and instantaneous access to the lives of others. The opportunity for self-expression and the easy access to an audience accelerate the intertwining between self-identity and brand identity and tap into an already latent youth tendency to behave more akin to brands with carefully crafted personas. Within social networks, it is far easier to decide which features to emphasize within one's social identity, or personal branding, and how to frame those details (Riva et al, 2015).

Throughout this investigation we will examine the congruence between two sets of traits: self-image and identity, and brand image and brand identity—and their dynamic outcomes as a result of engaging within social networks. Ruvio and Belk (2013) define the self as the set of central values, goals, and commitments a person has, which are reflected in one's beliefs, dispositions, emotions, choices, and personal and group relationships with others. Aaker (1996) defines brand identity as a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain; these associations represent what the brand stands for. A study on brand identity by da Silveira, C.; Lages, C. and Simoes, C. (2013) articulates the parallel definitions of brand and self-identity as highlighted in Figure 3.

Prevailing Definitions of Identity

Discipline	Concept	Definitions	Dominant Status	Selective Sources
Branding	Brand Identity	• The brand's tangible and intangible characteristics	Static	Kapferer, 1986
		• A unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist spires to create and maintain	Static	Aaker, 1996
		• The distinctive and central idea of a brand	Static	de Chernatony, 1999
		• A milieu where marketing management and consumer commitment coexist	Dynamic	Brown et al, 2003
Social psychology/ social identity theory	Self Identity	• Involves multiple identities that emerge in different contexts and in different social roles	Dynamic	Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner
Sociology / social theory	Identity	• Socially constructed	Dynamic	Goffman 1959, 1967
Organizational studies	Organizational identity	• What is central, enduring and distinctive about an organization	Static	Albert & Whetten, 1985
		• A dynamic construct that involves interactions and interrelationships between organizations' insiders and outsiders	Dynamic	Giola et al, 2000
		• A dynamic process that unfolds over time and a source of stability for those who depend upon it	Dynamic	Hatch & Schultz, 2004
		• Collective-level phenomenon	Dynamic	Brown et al, 2006
Corporate branding	Corporate identity	• What the organization is	Static	Balmer, 1995; Cornelissen & Harris 1999
		• How a company chooses to identify itself to its stakeholders	Static	Zinkhan, Ganesh, Jaju & Hayes 2001
		• Societal-constituent perspective: the social space in which companies and social actors coexist	Dynamic	Handelman, 2006

Figure 3: Prevailing definitions of identity from “Reconceptualizing brand identity in a dynamic environment”, da Silveira et al, 2013, Journal of Business Research. Copyright 2013. Non-commercial research and educational purposes.

Upon review of these definitions one may surmise that youth could be more easily adopting and overlapping principles of both, due not only to environmental affordance (social networks), societal drivers (brand saturation) and personal values (self-expression), but due to the shared constituents of identity development made clear in the definitions in Figure 3. Self-identity and brand identity are both socially constructed and influenced by co-creation, and both are dictated by the foundational characteristics (inputs) that build identity conceptualization among youth.

This paper seeks to make sense of this reconstruction of identity through the lens of branding and uses the hypothesis that self-identity and brand identity have become fused within social networks. It also serves as an introduction to branding principles for parents and carers—principles traditionally limited to the marketing sector that will enable them to play a crucial role in co-creating with children the foundational characteristics that drive identity conceptualization. Certainly, very little airtime has been afforded to discussing the role parents and carers can play in helping children navigate the intricacies of a system originally designed to market commodities (branding) that has become part of the way children build their ideologies and experiences of their own selves. Hence, this study considers the following research question:



How Might Parents and Carers Benefit from a Better Understanding of the Paradigm of Branding in Order to Nurture, Preserve, and Protect their Child's Self (Brand) Identity Within Social Networks?

Upon conclusion we will answer this question and deliver a beta version of a practical toolkit that provides parents, carers, and youth a variety of brand frameworks to support identity construction—or rather, constructive personal brand building when presenting oneself within social networks.

1:1 Our Way Forward Together

Over the past few decades, there have been several thousand studies about the effects of social media on youth. And yet, somewhat paradoxically, we still have much to learn.

-Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017

Any parent reading some of the most recommended books on social media usage and impact among youth would be forgiven for needing to lie down in the dark at the end of their literary journey and cry in despair. As someone working in youth culture, branding, and digital media, this research presented me a personal opportunity to help many of the parents I met along my own journey into motherhood. In particular, one area of concern seemed to arise in all discussion groups: the digital chasm parents perceived opening between themselves and their offspring when it came to their children's overwhelming desires to be active across social networks, all day, every day.

Indeed, social media guidance books specifically aimed at parents seem to be in woefully short supply—guides to help them better understand the social networks that are the very conduits to the self-expression Gen Z so actively desires.

Few of the texts delve deeply into this area and pay attention to the close-knit fabric of self-expression and identity construction. Boyd (2014) gives only a small nod to the notion that intentionality and identity construction have become intertwined, noting that teens have grown more sophisticated in how they manage contexts and present themselves in order to be understood by their intended audience. Twenge (2017) barely gives identity a glance; instead, in her book *iGen* she cries out to readers, “our kids need help now,” ringing the alarmist bells. Mobile phones and social media have become an examination in obsession, she writes; social media and electronic devices are linked to higher rates of loneliness, unhappiness, depression, and suicidal risk. There is not a single exception: all screen activities linked to less happiness and all non-screen activities linked to more happiness. What features predominantly throughout the abundance of parental handbooks on social media literacy is a focus on privacy, addiction and obsession, social issues that arise when teens are online too much, sexual predators, and bullying. These issues are all cited frequently as potential side effects of teens let loose online unchecked. While I in no way wish to discourage this education, the challenge of reading only these accounts is that parents may react by banning social media participation altogether rather than engaging in understanding the behaviour and playing a more proactive role in their child’s life within these networks.

Rather than go down any of these well-trodden pathways and hotly debated topics, such as social networking, good or bad for kids; or alternatively, analyze the surface level behaviours—time spent, mobile phone usage—so often called out as indicative of social media’s negative impact on children, this research paper drills into a complex layer lurking beneath the surface of our understanding of social media’s impact on children. For what has come to be recognized and agreed by scholars is that the economic aspect of branding, such as receptivity and (as noted in Krämer & Winter, 2008) impression management, has become a major motive for actively participating in social networking sites. This paper presents a framework that allows us to take parents deeper into the intricate relationship between brand and youth identity, forced into unity by the seemingly ubiquitous nature of SNSs and their participatory and public character.

Our journey toward an answer will unfold over chapters as follows:

- Examination of the cultural and societal shifts shaping social network adoption and usage among youth, and identification of critical trends driving the intertwining between brand and identity.
- Mapping the journey youth took to move from passive consumers to active participants: creators, distributors and, ultimately, brands.
- Dissection of the resulting collision between brand and identity construction within social environments.
- The application of the language of branding and brand strategy to adopt a shared taxonomy for those who want to better understand youth identity construction.
- Beta version of a toolkit for parents and carers who want to protect and nurture their child’s identity and brand as it morphs and traverses global boundaries and territories in our networked society.

1:2 Generation Z Defined



Figure 4: Comparing the Cultural Eras Defining Millennials and Generation Z. Author, 2020.

Generation Z relates to anyone—loosely born between 1997-2012—ranging in age from 8-23 in 2020. However, it is important to note that defining a generation by a set start and end date is an arbitrary exercise rather than an exact science. The application of these ideas could apply to young at heart Millennials (an older generation born in the early 80s through the mid-90s) due to overlapping contextual forces affecting both generations. Alternatively, this analysis could apply within perhaps five years to the latest demographic to arrive, Generation Alpha, who are likely already making an appearance within social networks thanks to pictures and updates their parents share online.

The distinct difference is that Gen Z was the first generation of digital natives, born directly into the digital world. Members of Gen Z have never seen a world in which these devices and resources were not available, and they have been connected as long as they have been cognizant. Digital media is part of the taken-for-granted social and cultural fabric of learning, play, and social communication (Stald, 2018).

Gen Z grew up native to social media with access to an unfiltered world of celebrity, the availability of sophisticated personal branding tools, and a shift in values driving individualism and self-expression. Gen Z learned about the power of social profiles on sites such as Facebook and Instagram very early on in their adolescence, which has shaped their use and perception of social networks as they get older. Figure 5 highlights the plethora of social networks that have emerged during the Gen Z lifecycle and influenced Gen Z belief systems and perspectives

Social Networks Affecting Gen Z Life Course

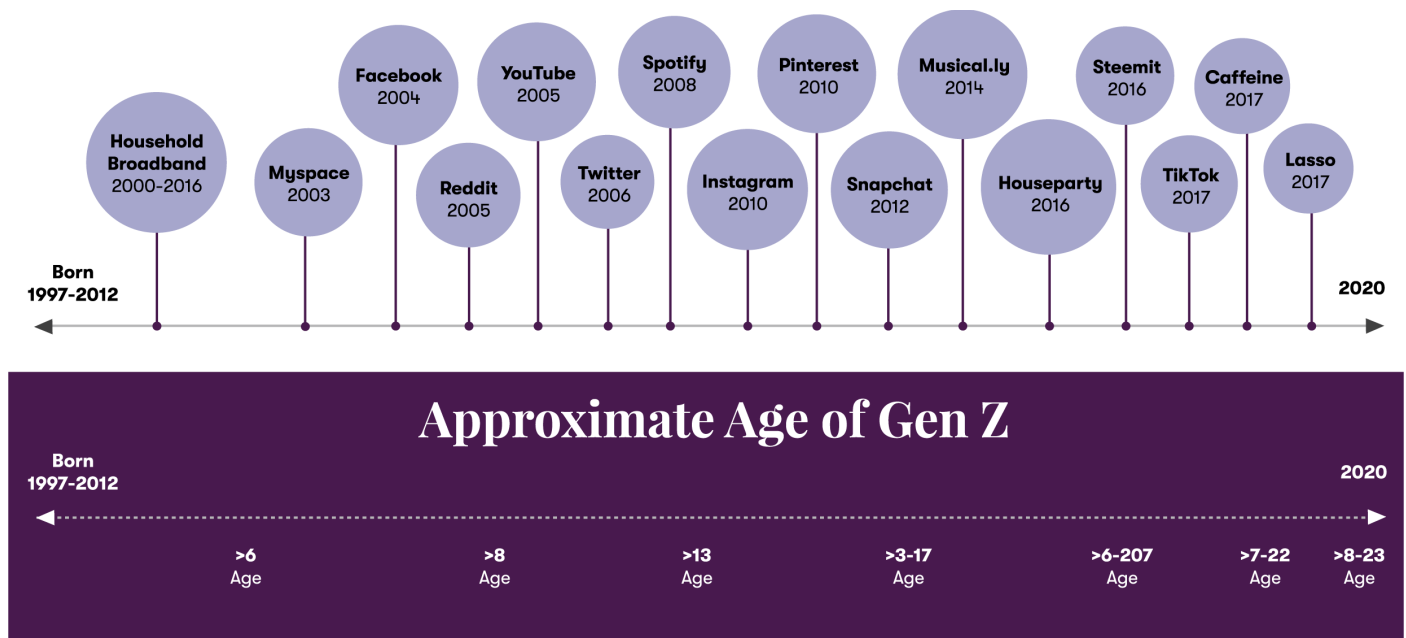


Figure 5: Social Networks Affecting Gen Z Life Course. Author, 2020.

Members of Generation Z were born into an age of rapidly changing technology and are still young enough to be influenced by their parents, making them prime candidates for the scope of this research. But as noted, readers should remain flexible in their understanding of this categorization; the terms youth and Gen Z are used interchangeably in this paper to more broadly describe the demographic. It will be more productive to consider the specific psychographics of individuals to determine who needs parental guidance and support in developing a social network presence.

1:3 Aims & Methodology

The majority of the research was conducted via environmental scanning and by analyzing multiple sources of information: current research papers, notable books, and authors across the fields of branding, identity, social media, and culture. This analysis was augmented by first-party data and proprietary research available through VICE's Youth Census, a bi-yearly survey of general youth populace, and VICE's audience and Vice Voices Surveys targeted to Gen Z, which includes a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative research conducted directly with Gen Z. This research is supplemented with third-party data from recognized research organizations and think tanks.

The analysis draws on methodologies and frameworks known to disciplines in foresight, digital theory, systems thinking, and brand and cultural strategy, to dissect the topic at hand. In particular, systems thinking tools such as influence maps and causal loop diagrams allow me to visually analyze for the reader how youth are functioning within social networks and to avoid compartmentalizing the relationship between youth and social networks as merely an exchange between participant and platform. This affords the reader a better understanding of the intricate dynamics at play when youth identity is interwoven with brand identity in such environments.

This analysis stands apart because it does not emulate existing texts or parental guides. Through this research readers should expect an analysis that guides parents and caregivers who wish to manipulate the why of the system within which their children are forming a sense of self and representation of their digital brand. This culminates in a beta version of a toolkit designed to introduce parents and carers to branding principles, methods, and frameworks they can apply to better understand their child's digital behaviour within SNSs, and to safeguard their self-representation. After our journey ends, the hope is that the toolkit will be a useful guide for those who want to play a role in protecting their child's brand.

Chapter 2.

WHERE UNDERSTANDING COMES FROM

Pop superstar Selena Gomez was asked,

“What do you think is the most pressing issue ... when it comes to our planet?”

To which she responded,

“I think our world is going through a lot, obviously. But for my generation, specifically, social media has been terrible.”

—USA Today

The vision of “media” as strictly print, broadcast, and film entities has evolved. Social networks have played a critical role in democratizing the media landscape, enabling consumers to become creators. In today’s world, youth are the media, curating their daily lives into text, photographs, memes, and much more. A select few can stand out from the pack, rack up millions of fans, become fledgling media empires and command significant sums of money. As a result, practices of self-branding have become a pervasive feature of both social and economic life for youth.

But, just how did we get here?

The following chapter will analyze a number of trends and underlying forces at play within the lives of Gen Z across their core values, culture, technological environment and governing structures, in order to demonstrate just how the impetus of this study—that youth are behaving like brands in social environments—came to be true. Furthermore, through this environmental scan and societal analysis the reader is afforded better clarity into why social networking has become so pervasive in the lives of Gen Z and just how it is we find ourselves in a society where youth are glued to their handsets and ever-present advertising means you cannot escape the inevitable clutches of “brand.”

2:1 A Fertile Environment

The 16 trends and youth mindset shifts described in Figure 6 are identified directly from first- and third-party research data that investigate the environmental and societal context of Gen Z lives, alongside a sweeping environmental scan of articles and news. Through this scan we can prioritize forces at play across society and culture, politics, the economy, environment, and technology, and directly trace the influences underpinning how and why Gen Z represent themselves within social media networks and the digital spaces within which they live. Each of the circles represent underlying currents that carers should note in order to understand the drivers behind high youth participation in social networks, resulting in the accompanying behaviour changes and the evolution of identity.

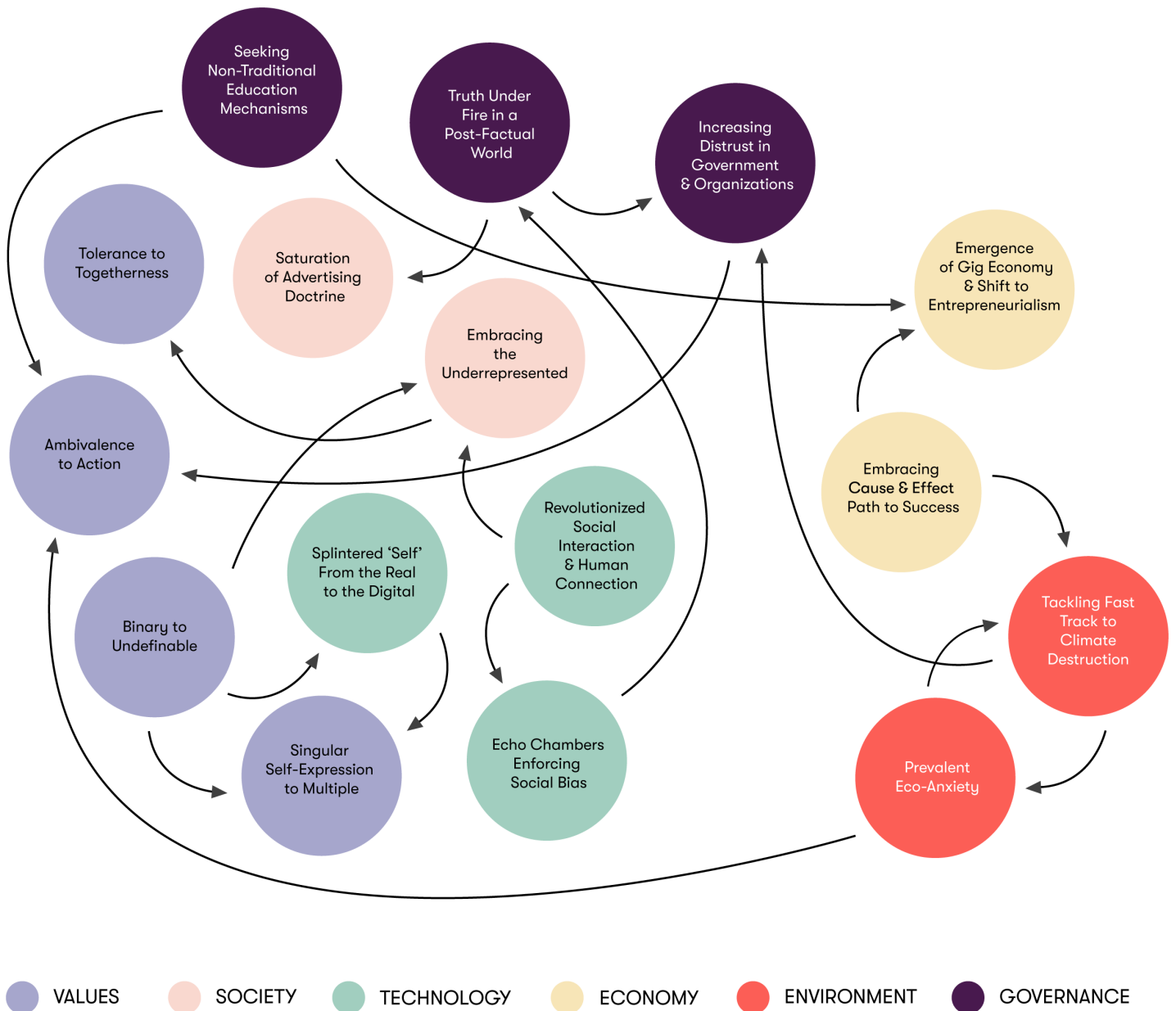


Figure 6: System Map of Forces Underpinning Youth Self Representation in Social Networks. Author, 2020.

The 16 trends and mindset shifts identified in Figure 6 have an immediate and direct impact on the evolving behaviour of Gen Z within social networks and speak directly to this research’s assertion that personal identity is the same as brand identity within these environments.

The arrows demonstrate the interconnected nature of each force: X influences Y and no trend has zero ripple effect. Key forces underpinning assertions throughout his study include:

The Evolution of Values Among Gen Z

1 in 2 members of Gen Z define their sexuality as something other than heterosexual

41% identify as neutral on a masculine/feminine scale

-Source: VICE Voices, Identity & Privacy

- **From Binary to Undefinable Identity:** Gen Z has a desire to express themselves in all forms and without restrictions. They understand identity is not a static entity. They do not endorse labels, borders, or binary choices, and most consider their own identities as fluid.
- **From Ambivalence to Action:** This generation understands the hardships faced by generations before them—their parents who experienced the impact of the recession, their Millennial siblings who started conversations around values, meaningful work, and being open-minded to change—and now they're acting on those learnings and becoming catalysts for change (Vice Voices Study, Gen Z, 2018).
- **From Tolerance to Togetherness:** In part accelerated by digital technologies and hyper-connected worlds, youth can see, hear, and join in with global netizens. They can form bonds and tribes locally and across borders to rally against societal wrongs.

- **From Singular Self-Expression to Multiple:** Like Millennials, Gen Z agrees they need self-expression to live a happy and fulfilled life, but they feel comfortable having multiple forms of expression and look for outlets that allow them to embark on continuous evolution.

Gen Z Indoctrination into a Society Diffused With Brand

- **Saturation of Advertising Doctrine:** Advertising, marketing, and branding have been persuading us and infiltrating our lives for years. Today, advertising remains a billion-dollar global market, and reaches us whether we're out of home, consuming our regularly scheduled cable shows or surfing Netflix. Wherever Gen Z are present, so is advertising.
- **Embracing the Underrepresented:** Social media democratized the idea of celebrity by allowing anyone to create and amass status. It also allowed anyone to become that spark to start a movement. Whether it's the #MeToo movement or Greta Thunberg—the catalyst for over one million students in more than 100 countries participating in School Strike for Climate—social platforms have provided mechanisms through which the underrepresented can find a voice.

The Unyielding Progress and Impact of Technology

- **Splintered “Self” From the Real to the Digital:** Gen Z are used to taking their “self” into multiple worlds and realities. Mediums, from virtual reality to augmented reality and AI, splinter “self” from the real to the digital and allow for newly imagined modes of representation to others.
- **Revolutionized Social Interaction & Human Connection:** Technology will continue to revolutionize social interaction, particularly among young people, in ways that remain to be seen and could be entirely unexpected. What can be anticipated is that there will be fundamental changes to the meaning of connection.
- **Echo Chambers Enforcing Social Bias:** Connected communities means Gen Z discovers and consumes content via social media in a filter bubble. Organizations and non-professional users alike have been documented to seek out people with similar emotions, thoughts and opinions by sharing on social communication platforms, thereby increasing their influence with like-minded users. (Gunduz, 2017)

Gen Z Belief in New Economic Models

74% of Gen Z believe creativity will be the most important skill in the workplace of the future

60% of Gen Z say they create their own wealth opportunities

-Sources: VICE Voices, Future of Work / VICE Voices 2018 – Financial Savvy

- **Embracing a “Cause & Effect” Path to Success:** Millennial dreams of “being discovered” by pop culture reality shows or gaining fame as a YouTube celebrity has given way to Gen Z’s determination to make it on their own terms and develop their own wealth opportunities. They desire no less level of success than their Millennial predecessors but believe their creativity and uniqueness will be the factors that drive it.
- **Shift to Entrepreneurialism:** Gen Z have moved away from the linear path to success: traditional education leads to job; job leads to money; money leads to material goods and ultimately happiness. Gen Z understands a person can pursue dynamic and multidimensional paths to success and foster a more entrepreneurial spirit than their predecessors.

Youth Demand for Change and Prioritization of Environment

- **Prevalent Eco-Anxiety:** Despite all their time online, Gen Z still cares more about the environment more than previous generations and feels an unprecedented urgency about many pressing issues—the environment being the top priority that they want companies to address.
- **Tackling Fast Track to Climate Destruction:** Climate change tops the agenda for Gen Z and has become a catalyst for them to create societal change and rise up as activists in pursuit of a cause.

Disillusionment in Existing Governance

98% of Gen Z say the education system has failed them in some way

1 in 3 of Gen Z say higher education will have less importance in landing a job in 10 years

-Sources: VICE Voices, Future Census / VICE Voices, Education & Work

- **Increasing Distrust in Government & Organizations:** Gen Z believe governments should prioritize citizens’ well-being over economic growth. They place little trust in government, political leaders, or corporations, believing they are far more interested in playing politics to maintain power, advance their own careers, and push their own agendas—rather than address the needs and desires of others.

- **Truth Under Fire in a Post-Factual World:** Gen Z have seen politics reduced to those who shout loudest, with social networks hijacked for the purpose of doing just that. This has created a ripple effect of continuous distrust in both the messages and the mediums.
- **Seeking Non-Traditional Education Mechanisms:** Gen Z no longer believe traditional forms of education are essential to establish a career or find happiness. Instead they view creativity and uniqueness as the ultimate path to financial security and the career of their dreams.

These significant cultural, economic, and political upheavals are ever-present in the lives of Gen Z. They were born into a society saturated with branding, marketing, and advertising. This environment has, in turn, driven youth to conceptualize themselves as brands and to think of their projected images in terms of brand management (Tokuhama, 2011).

The desire to participate in social networks can in part be considered a natural outcome of such changes within their lives: each network offers an environment within which youth believe they live unshackled from government control, where they are free to express their individual selves and express their beliefs and values. Each network offers an environment within which youth can express themselves and find a way to assert and retain personal agency and control within a larger

context of social, economic, and political uncertainty and flux (Khamis et al 2017). Social networks allow Gen Z to control their image and choose how they present themselves, which will be discussed in detail in the coming chapter.

2:2 Scrutinizing the Appeal of Social Networks

98% of Gen Z have at least one social media account (most have 4 or more)

62% of Gen Z say social media is their main source of news

-Source: VICE Youth Census 2018

61%

Would rather watch 10 hours of YouTube videos than 10 hours of TV

The democratization of media and the open doorway to creation presented by social networks has led to a new behaviour: youth are curating their lives daily. Market research firm GlobalWebIndex’s study, “Social Media by Generation,” noted that Gen Z had surpassed their predecessors’ daily activity on social media with 2 hours 55 minutes spent per day. Research conducted by the Pew Research Centre in 2018 found 45% of teens say they are online on a near-constant basis, a percentage most certainly to have increased by 2020. A study published in the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry (Boers E, Afzali MH, Newton N, Conrod P, 2019) noted that adolescents tend to spend a large portion of their day using social media, averaging around seven hours per day, as well as the association of screen time and depression in adolescence.

Indeed, being ever-present on social media appears to be an integral and inescapable part of their lives.

As highlighted in Figure 7, youth are highly active across a number of platforms. YouTube was most likely their first-ever social media platform, although networks such as Instagram and Snapchat have increasingly won favour with Gen Z versus platforms ranked highest by their Millennial predecessors, such as Facebook.

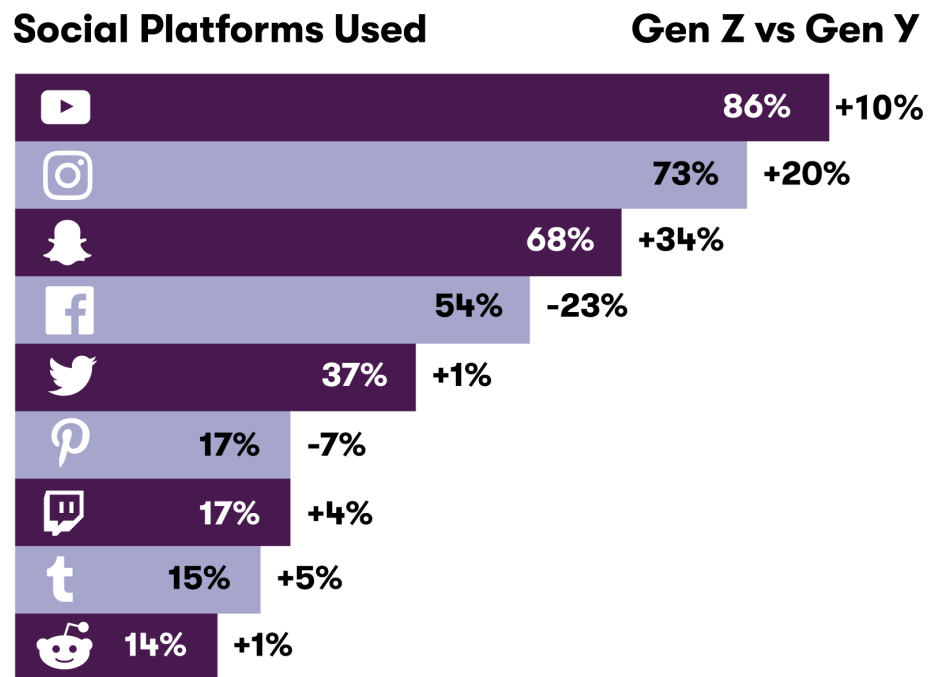


Figure 7: Social Media Networks Ranked in Order of Popularity Among Gen Z vs Gen Y. VICE Youth Census, 2018.

Rapid technological adoption of social networks gave Gen Z permission to share “life,” ostensibly from infancy, and permeates all social networks. As Belk (2013) notes, the digital world has dematerialized extensions of ourselves, such as possessions. He writes, “Today our information, communications, photos, videos, music, calculations, messages, ‘written’ words, and data are now largely invisible and immaterial until we choose to call them forth.”

Gen Z, born into a digital world, as discussed in Chapter 1, are far more likely to view digital “prints” and possessions as part of their extended self. As Figure 8 depicts (in no particular level of hierarchy), they are online every day, expressing themselves and communicating through multiple platforms with a virtually endless stream of images, text, and video in near real-time; actively making and sharing photos, videos, GIFs and memes across a variety of platforms, and using augmented reality (AR) and photo filters to enhance their outputs.

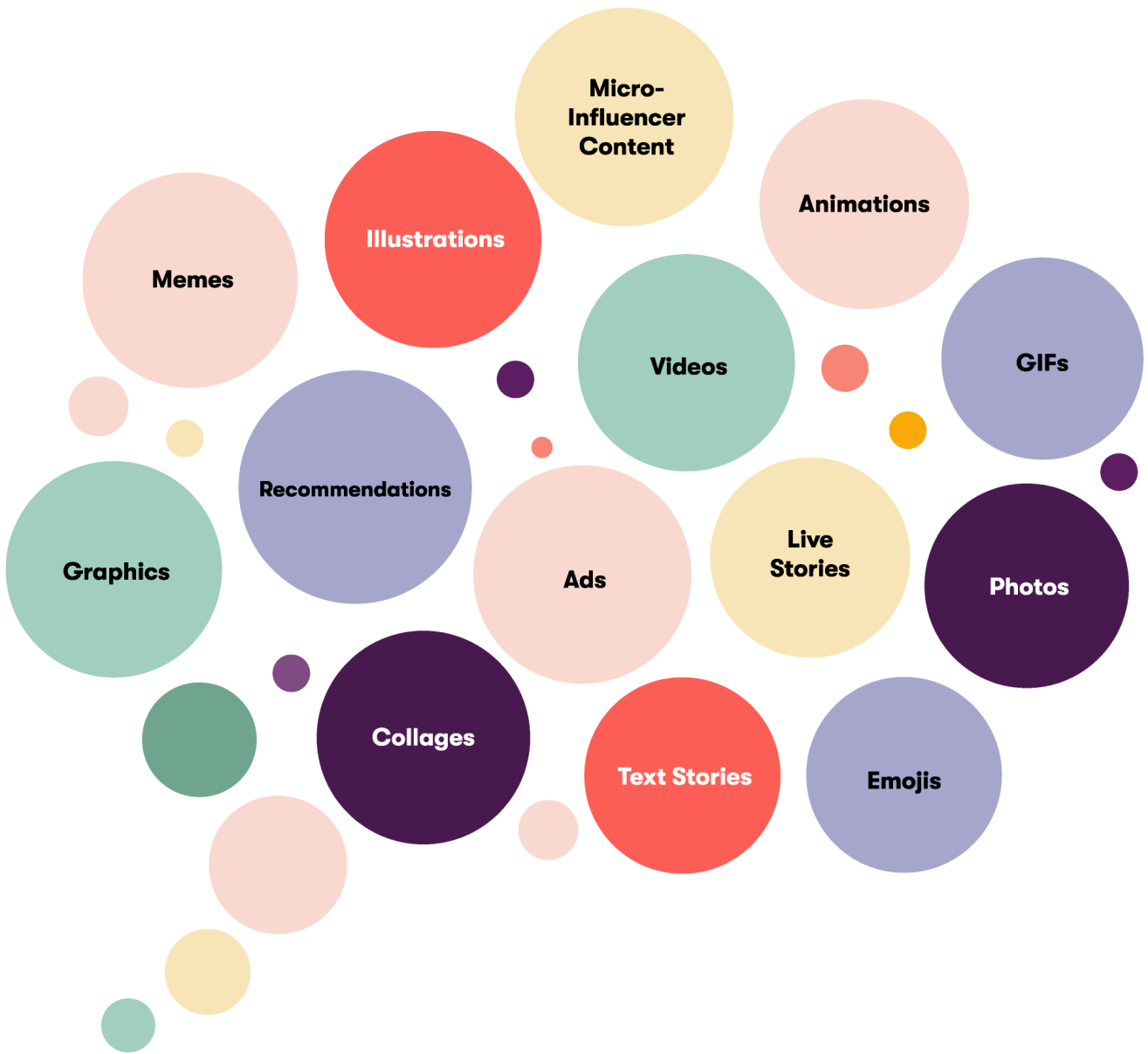


Figure 8: Top Types of Communication Across Social Networks for Gen Z. Author, 2020.

87% of Gen Zers consider themselves artistic, and over half of Gen Zers say their generation is more creative than previous generations.

-Source: New Beauty Developments, Stylus, 2019

Gen Z chooses more creative and purposefully crafted formats such as memes and GIFs versus Millennials' obsessively documented outfits, cars, vacations, landscapes or well-rehearsed digital self-portraits, or "selfies." A marked shift has taken place from oversharing, to being judicious in what's shared and why. Gen Zers are more selective and curatorial and this change has arguably pushed the characteristics of their social behaviour even further into the realm of branding: everything is planned, considered and delivered for impact. As noted in a research report from Barkley and Futurecast Getting to Know Gen Z: How the Pivotal Generation is Different From Millennials (2017) whether through their Instagram feed or by their gender expression, teens have the ability to decide who they want to be at any given point in time and how they want to share that image... Everything teens do is a reflection of this concept of curating their own identities. Gen Z's selfies are in the caption, not the picture—or in the tension between a flattering selfie and self-deprecating comment that demonstrates their wit, cultural clout, intelligence, and authenticity (Gil, 2018). They don't just want to stand out, they want to create personal brands that reflect who they are and their own values and beliefs.

Self-expression has never been so important, with 73% of Gen Z believing they need more self-expression to live a happy, healthy life.

-Source: VICE Voices 2018 – Health & Wellness

Social networks allow users to share formats (videos, memes), but it's the purpose of these formats that matters. Social communication platforms allow for sharing of opinions, emotions, and thoughts without censorship or restraint and within which contents are created by users (Gunduz, 2017). Social networks have become central to the idea of identity expansion from the real world to the digital world because they fulfill the underlying needs of Gen Z for self-expression and continuous real-time evolution. Social networks also provide windows through which Gen Zers can potentially fulfil the core desire identified in our environmental scan to bypass traditional jobs. They can demonstrate their own perceived unique creative skills and talents, alongside their values and who they are as individuals. When we look at which social media apps are becoming popular now, its platforms like TikTok, which offer easy entry into creativity and ways to edit short-form videos. Tik Tok rewards the creative, fun and unique, steering away from the cult of perfection often seen on other social platforms.

A Note on Authenticity

1 in 3 Gen Zers says, "I would rather be considered unique than real"—a major pivot from the Millennial generation.

-Source: Millennial Marketing, The Pivotal Generation Z

As a reaction to the perfectly polished, highly aspirational image that many brands and influencers have projected online, many younger consumers are now taking a raw approach to personal identity and self-expression that is more similar to real life (PSFK Labs's "Gen Z Is Using Social Media To Get Real"). But their images are still nonetheless carefully crafted, image-conscious, and "branded." With Millennials there was a big pushback against filters and Photoshop in advertising; but Gen Z accepts the curation and customization of images in ways that previous generations did not. Gen Z considers filters and editing apps as tools to make things more "individual" rather than "fake." In other words, Millennials focus on their exterior, surface level, while Gen Z care more about substance and authentically sharing inner lives, passions, and creative talents online (Gil, 2018).

2:3 Where Self-Expression Meets Economic Forces

Networking implies youths' ability to effectively tap social networks to disperse their ideas and media products (Jenkins, H., Clinton, K., Purushotma, R., Robison, A.J. & Weigel, M.(2006). Most any creator—whether media company, fan, academic, or activist—produces material in the hope of sharing it and attracting audience interest (Jenkins, 2013). While the original vision of social networks was to connect people with friends, today social networks offer a portal to the self-expression Gen Z desire in abundance. However, self-expression has also become intertwined with economic forces.

A few years ago, the term influencer made its way into mainstream English. This was the ultimate nod to the rising breed of social media personalities who have the power to affect purchasing decisions and people's lives—achieved via the practices under consideration. Anyone who has any clout in the attention economy (i.e., followers) on social media can proclaim himself an “influencer,” and we have seen a growing desire from youth to become just this. More than 76% of Gen Z say they follow an influencer on social media (Morning Consult's “The Influencer Report: Engaging Gen Z and Millennials”).

As Business Insider noted in their homage to Gen Z entrepreneurs, there are plenty to idolize, and all under 22: “From Teni Adeola, fashion designer and founder of the clothing brand Slashed by Tia to Taylor Frankel, who co-founded cosmetics brand Nudestix at 17; or Allan Maman and Cooper Weiss, founders of Fidget360, who gained viral fame (and made hundreds of thousands of dollars) by capitalizing on the fidget spinner craze in high school” (Tyler, 2018). Social networks provide a 24/7 platform into the seemingly idyllic lives of others, and this in turn increases youths' desire to achieve a similar social status (economic wealth and brand equity).

Self-Identity Is Brand Identity

42% of Gen Z says social media directly impacts their self-worth; 37% their happiness; and 39% their self-esteem.

-Source: Refinery29 How to Feel Better Study, May 2019

One key difference from the pre-digital era is the extent to which we now self-disclose and confess online, transforming the once semiprivate to a more public presentation of self (Belk, 2013). Social networking platforms allow users to share self-expression and identity, but these platforms also come with inherent attributes such as audience and influence metrics, which together enforce the evolution of self-identity to brand identity among Gen Z users.

Before social media became ubiquitous, an individual's sense of self was primarily built on what they were like as a person: how they dressed, spoke, and behaved in person. It was to a degree predetermined by where you were born, your family, and your “tribe.” Generations past did not have to consider how to continuously assemble their self-identity in great detail. However, for digital natives like Gen Z, digital connectivity across social media expedited the dynamic shift to building brand and brand identity. Today's teens see their personal identity as a curated composition in the real and digital worlds and use social networks as a way to showcase their unique personalities.

In order for parents and carers to begin supporting and protecting their children's efforts to meticulously curate their identity online, it is essential to better understand the journey Gen Z took to arrive at such a destination—and the complex system within which self-identity has morphed to brand identity. The following chapters will dive deeper into the role of youth as marketers of brands, explore the media distribution system they now occupy, critically examine more deeply the implications of thinking like a brand, and highlight the crucial intervention points for parents and carers who wish to support healthy brand development.

Chapter 3.

THE ANATOMY OF GEN Z SOCIAL CONDUCT AND THE ROAD TO “BRAND”

Once youth became creators within social networks, they entered a far more complex media landscape. In order to derive value within this setting, they began operating as brands. To make sense of our current state and understand waypoints in the system where parents can act, we need to breakdown their journey over time and within social networks.

3:1 Consumers to Creators

The smartphone allows us to create a narrative of our lives—to choose what to contribute, what to edit, which photos to control—and social media gives us the distribution mechanism that allows everyone to become both creator and broadcaster online. In this world, anyone can be a creative director, producer, director, distributor, influencer, brand, or fledgling entertainment company. As demonstrated in Figure 9, in today’s world youth are no longer passive receivers of entertainment content; they create and distribute content, build and engage audiences, and in some cases, monetize their outputs.

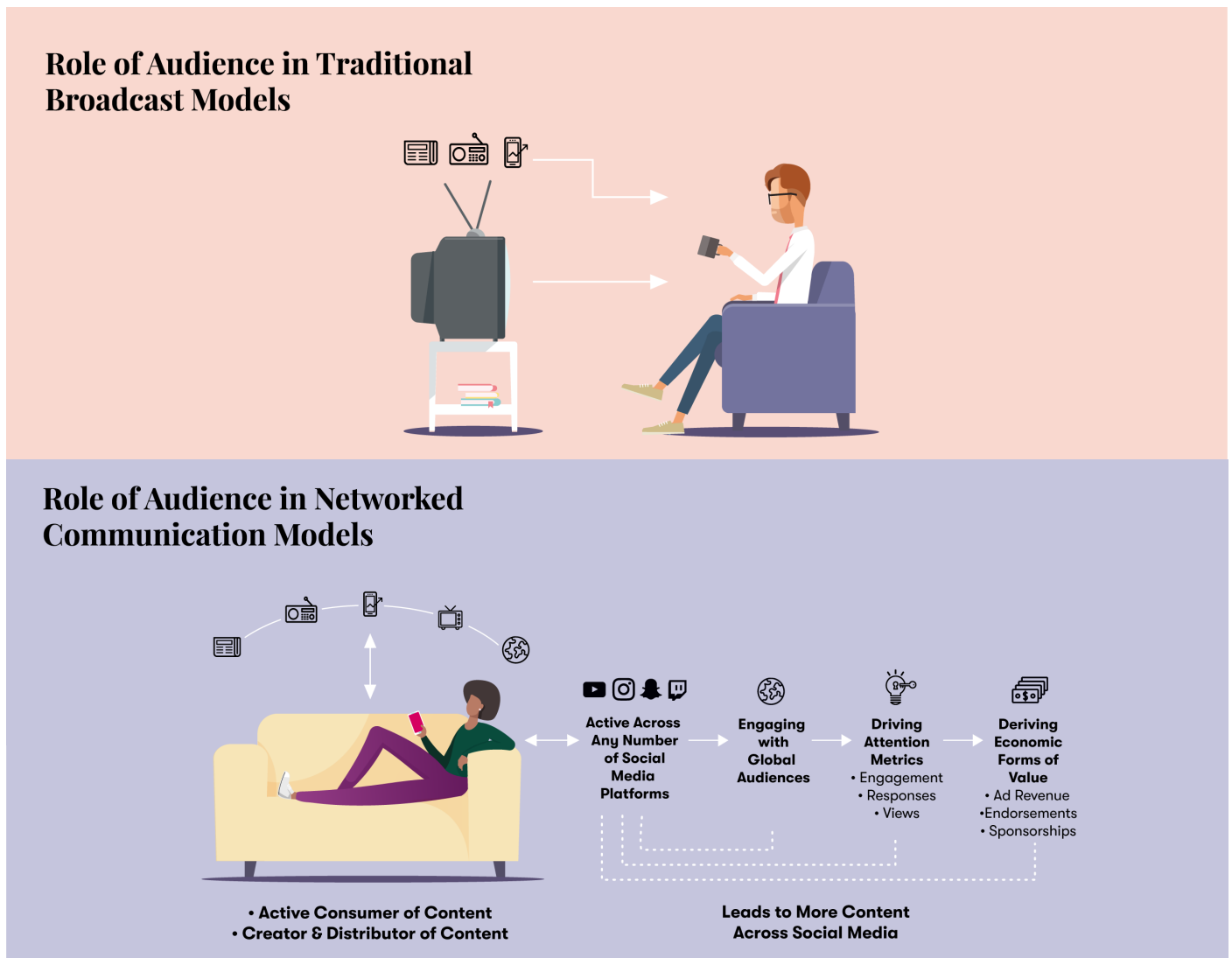


Figure 9: The Evolved Role of Youth Audiences Within Social Networks. Author, 2020.

One way to think about youth behavior in this regard is as independent media production companies operating outside of traditional network models. In the new model, visualized in Figure 9, each component—the active and participatory nature of social networks, engagement with audience, and economic forms of value—plays an integral role in driving the evolution to brand identity. For example:



- **The Role of the Social Networks: Designed to Drive Audience and Influence**

The internet became participatory and networked thanks to social networking sites. These behaviour platforms are stages on which individuals perform from their intrinsic motivation—because they want to be seen, they want to be heard, and they want to be measured on these performances by others (Manu, 2017). Each social platform makes it easy for the user to create content in different forms: photos for Instagram; longer-form content for YouTube; short-form content for Snapchat. What is common to all is that each platform has intuitively built ways for would-be creators to attract and amass followers, whether that's becoming a master at the art of hashtags to make content immediately searchable, creating engaging content that draws readers in, or directly commenting and engaging in other users' streams to drive likes for likes, or follows for follows.

- **The Role of Audiences: Destined to Affect Self-Identity**

Social media binds together communities that once were geographically isolated, significantly increasing the pace and intensity of communication and feedback. All across the world, new ideas, practices, and entertainment are accessible within networked media—and they all have the power to shape who we are and who we become. Young people's interactions and experiences with audiences can affect how they self-identify due to the nature of their interaction.

- **The Route to Monetization: Driving the Interplay of Brand Economics**

Social networks offer a route for Gen Z to bypass traditional roots to the job market in favour of embarking on their own entrepreneurial efforts. We live in a world where value is frequently created and discovered through a social filter. In such a world, many will only dabble, but some will dig deeper—and still others will master the skills that are most valued within the community (Jenkins et al., 2016). For those who master the skills, there are monetization opportunities to reward them for their ability to garner attention and media metrics—whether that be ad revenue, sponsorship, or endorsement.

3:2 From Creators to Entertainment Companies

As the boundary between entertainment companies and audiences fell away in part thanks to social networks, a newly constructed, purposeful behaviour took root. Gen Z evolved from being consumers to creators, whose remit continued to expand to a role spanning not only creation, but distribution, marketing, and value creation. Social networks afforded a new title: CEO of your own entertainment company.

To fully appreciate the comparison of youth behaviour to that of CEO of one’s own entertainment company, one can apply Jamshid Gharajedaghi’s iterative process of enquiry discussed in his seminal book *Systems Thinking: Managing Chaos and Complexity* (Figure 10). This systems model allows us to paint a holistic picture of youth behavior within the social network they operate, by examining multiple iterations of the function, structure, and process that social networks provide to youth in their newfound role as CEO for ME Inc., followed by context—why

it does what it does. As we view in a single window the multiple realities of the ecosystem, what is revealed is that the purpose at the core of the system (express yourself creatively) has evolved over time. As we traverse the interactions and continue outward, we reveal yet more dimensions and can identify clearly the evolution of function, structure, process, and context to building personal brand, marketing and measuring brand data—with the purpose of gaining recognition and influence.

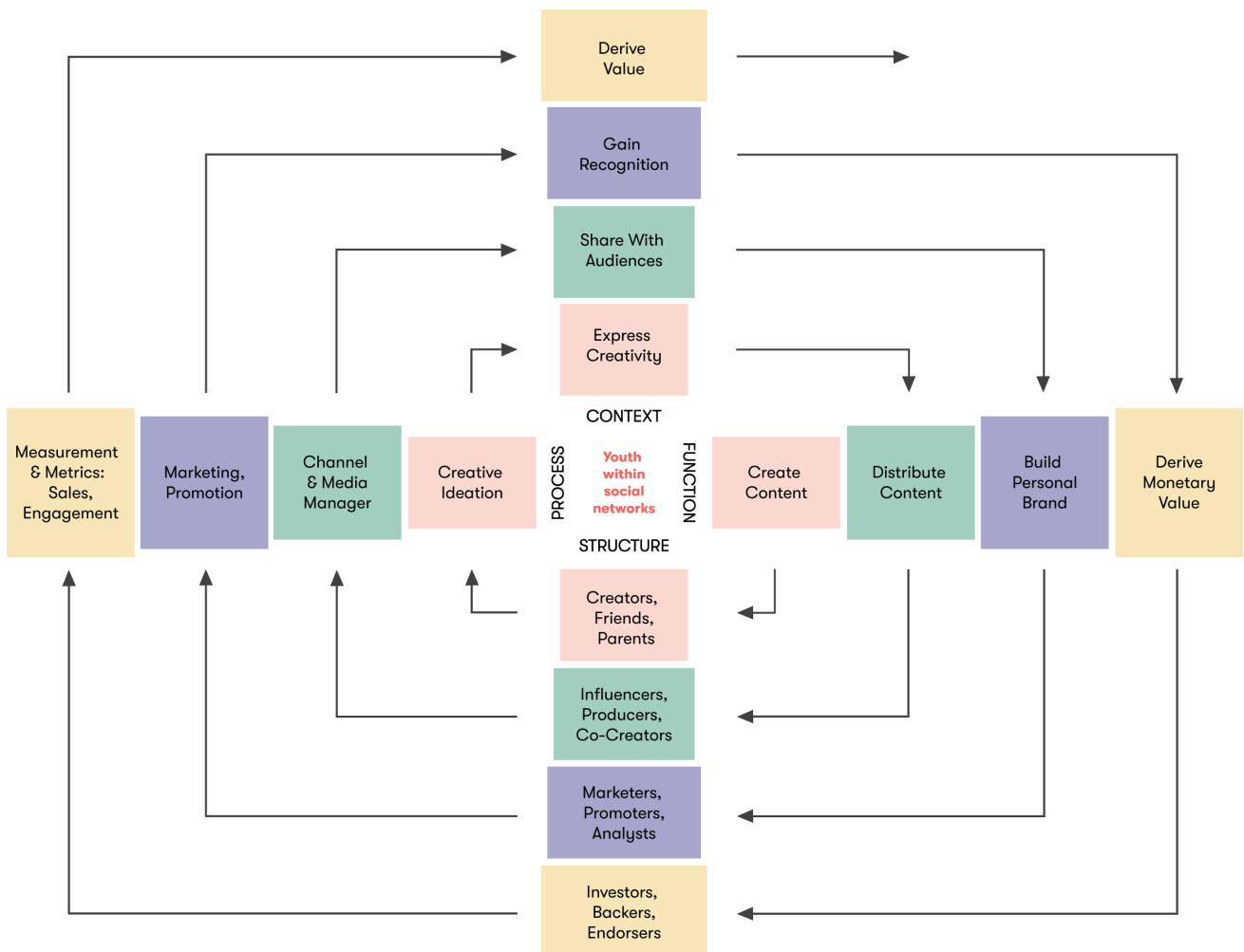


Figure 10: An Interactive Process of Enquiry: Examining Social Networks as a System To Understand Youth Behaviour Evolution. Author, 2020.

The key point to consider is that entertainment content no longer gets pushed to consumers from the top down as demonstrated in Figure 9. Rather, within the construct of the systems analysis depicted in Figure 10, youth (or anyone operating within a social network) can create, produce, and distribute their own content and access audiences. Thus, new distinct behaviours have been shaped through this evolution: marketing, monetization, and value creation. Gen Z have migrated from being creators of content to becoming marketers of their brand and, ultimately, seekers of value (whether

monetary or in other forms of validation discussed in later chapters). This migration supports at its core Gen Z desires for independence, entrepreneurialism, and expression, as discussed in the environmental scan in Chapter 2.

In its simplest form, we can distill the evolution into four main steps across the value chain for Gen Z as follows: create and produce the content; distribute it across social networks; promote it to build brand; and derive value from the brand clout.



Figure 11: Marketers of Brand and Seekers of Value: The Value Chain Continuum for Youth In Social Networks. Author, 2020.

Once we understand that youth are operating across an evolved value chain, that building brand and deriving value are intrinsic to the process, we find ourselves contemplating a new dimension of the system within which youth operate in social environments, and can ask ourselves—what is the impact of such an evolution?

3:3 Builders of Brand and Seekers of Value

Personal branding used to be individual monarchs. Now it's de rigueur whether you are a corporate exec, a design guru, an aspiring entrepreneur or a sales associate. We are all rock stars now.

-(Wheeler, 2017)

To build a brand is to decide on a statement you want to make. To think in terms of authentic branding is to deliberately craft an emotional relationship between you and your audiences, friends, followers, acquaintances, and people you don't even know. Self-branding, sometimes called personal branding, involves individuals developing a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). Indeed, the idea of personal branding is certainly not new, and associations have been made between the boundaries of market and self (Khamis et al, 2017; Whitmer, 2019), and as Whitmer (2020) notes, commodifying the self is almost ubiquitous in professional and creative circles through the language of personal branding.

Scholars link the emergence of self-branding practices to a famous 1997 article in *Fast Company* entitled "The Brand Called You" by Tom Peters, in which he declared "Here is what it takes to be the CEO of Me, Inc." In the article, he espoused the importance of branding and the necessity of a strategy to promote the brand called You; spawning an entire industry of self-styled gurus, agencies, and experts dedicated to self-branding.

Developing and promoting a brand called You is not necessarily a direct path to success, whether that be through clicks, likes, or commercial gain. Self-branding brings with it some behavioural costs and implications. Once a person begins to operate as a brand, the nature of their relationship with themselves and their own identity changes. As Whitmer (2019) notes, self-branding requires that individuals think of themselves as products to be marketed to a broad audience in the hopes of becoming more economically competitive: one creates material through which to build a reputation in the desire to ultimately capitalize on the effort and derive value from it. Branding is inextricably tied to marketing and becomes fundamentally intertwined with the principles and considerations of brand



strategy and brand management. Central to self-branding is the idea that, just like commercially branded products, individuals benefit from having a unique selling point, or a public identity that is singularly charismatic and responsive to the needs and interests of target audiences (Khamis et al, 2017).

New questions arise, whether consciously or not, such as: how do I continue to maintain my brand identity and stand out against competitors? How do I alter my image to court the audience favour I desire? The very nature of this questioning in turn affects the identity construction of oneself, as discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 4.

YOUTH IDENTITY DECONSTRUCTION: “I AM, THEREFORE I BRAND”

Once such questions become part of your doctrine and thinking, so the tenets of brand building become inextricably linked to the way youth think about and construct their own being (both within social networks and the real world). Self-image is constructed on brand pillars, encompassing both the tangible and intangible assets that demonstrate who you are at your core.

For the purpose of this research we’ll take a simple approach to the construction of a brand as shown in Figure 12. The diagram highlights three core building blocks of brand identity and addresses the interplay between these core areas: foundation and essence, voice, and image.



Figure 12: Three Pillars of Brand Identity. Author, 2020

In its simplest form, brand identity is a combination of your values, your brand message, and how you communicate that to your market:

Brand Essence (intangible)

Brand essence encompasses the heart and soul of a brand and the values the brand embodies. A fundamental understanding of brand essence is essential on any platform or medium. Voice and tone may change overtime, but the essence should endure.

Brand Voice

Brand voice is a tone or style that is immediately recognizable—almost a verbal logo. Whether the tone is serious or lighthearted, friendly or aggressive—it needs to be consistent. Youth trying to establish their brand voice may unintentionally adopt a version of a brand archetype—the jester, the health nut, the hipster, or the hero.

Brand Image

Youth are drawn to particular images and attitudes they wholeheartedly believe to be indicators of value. They aspire for consistency through the photos they pin on Facebook, Snapchat, or Instagram. And every text or email—every social media comment on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram—lets them express themselves in their own words and images, reflecting not just what they see but how they see it (Wheeler, 2017).

Elements of Identity Noted By Gen Z

Identity is not based on demographics; gender, sexuality and ethnicity all exist on a spectrum, not as restrictive data points. It’s their personalities, values and passions that define who they are:

Personality

Values

Hobbies/Passions

Ethnicity/Race

Age

Economic status

Sexual identity

Gender

Occupation

Figure 13: Elements of Identity Construct (Ranked in Importance). Cited by Gen Z, VICE Voices 2018, Privacy & Identity.

Understanding that youth identity is being built upon three core brand pillars, we begin to recognize that operands of branding face not only the task of constructing a suitable brand identity, but also the need to meet a number of challenges—such as gaining recognition, building awareness and, ultimately, equity. It is exactly at this point where youth motivations begin to deviate in some manner and where unintended consequences can manifest.

4.1 The Unintended Consequences of Self as Brand

“In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity.”

—Erik Erikson

As youth work to create an online identity, they become increasingly intertwined with the principles of branding and the need to develop a following. Krämer & Winter (2008) posit that it is possible to effectively use social networks to change our social identity (impression management) and it is also true that social networks allow participants to bring to the forefront those features and attributes they wish to associate with their identity. Social networks allow for hyper curation of the self (personal branding).

The very nature of branding means youth deliberately craft their identity and tend to be continuously concerned with their brand presentation. A byproduct of this process is unintended consequences characterized by shifting Gen Z behaviour patterns and value systems within their social environments:

- **Creation for Expression becomes Creation for Validation:** The act of creation is no longer only about creating content for fun or as a free creative expression; it is now linked to brand and value. Creation is planned, curated, and delivered in the knowledge that how you represent yourself through text or images is also a statement about who you are (brand).
- **Value of Self becomes Value of Self-Brand:** Within this context everyone is expected to self-brand in order to realize his or her fullest potential (Khamis et al 2017). This leaves those who do not wish to enter the world of marketing feeling they are lagging behind in their pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment.
- **Value of Social Connection becomes Value of Brand Equity:** Once youth progress from being creators to participating as brands in the attention economy, then their value is measured by the correct translation of brand values—to gain audience attention, validation, and engagement. It is not only about monetary gain, and it is no longer only about making connections. Value is derived from preserving brand equity at all costs.

A Note On Audience and Impact

As discussed in Chapter 3, audiences are destined to affect self-identity/brand identity, and the rules of social networks allow other members of a network to influence a user’s social identity (Krämer & Winter, 2008). Brand identity is not static; it continuously emerges as a dynamic outcome of social processes within each network, (von Wallpach, S., Voyer, B., Kastanakis, M.N. and Mühlbacher, H, 2017) such as perceived positive or negative interactions with audience, and the credence given to the data measuring such interactions. For example, the number of fans/followers, shares, likes, comments, traffic, visitors; or for those already monetizing through advertising: impression, clicks, or conversions to leads or sales. The effect on identity is unavoidable; the self has a psychological dimension, such as feeling the self as a part of a greater body, a sense of security, belonging to a social, emotional, or political body or a community with affective bonds of solidarity (Gunduz, 2017). Improvements in real-time data management within social networks gives users a clear understanding of their social media activities and access to such metrics as likes, shares, and sentiment. This, in turn, feeds into the co-creation of identity between youth online and their audiences (Figure 14).

Metrics for Brand Management:

Source: Prophet

Perception Metrics Awareness	Familiarity & Consideration
Are customers aware of your brand?	What do customers think and feel about the brand?
Saliency Brand recognition	Differentiation Relevance Credibility

Metrics for Social Media Engagement

Quantitative	Qualitative
Fans/followers	Engagement
Shares	Conversation
Likes	Quality
Comments	Fan loyalty
Traffic/visitors	Insights/research
Clicks/conversions	Value
	Word of mouth
	Brand reputation
	Influence

Figure 14: Metrics for Brand Management and Social Media Engagement from “Designing brand identity: an essential guide for the entire branding team,” A. Wheeler, 2018, p 111. Copyright 2018 by Alina Wheeler.

Youth are at a developmental stage where they are likely to be hypersensitive to their peers; the mass social connectedness of our world amplifies that sensitivity. This, in turn, has a powerful direct effect on their identity construction and self-branding. As Boyd (2014) notes, their self-preservation is constructed through what they explicitly provide, through what their friends share, and as a product of how other people respond to them. What social constituents want the brand to be and what the brand is, ultimately, tend to intermingle (da Silveira et al., 2013).

Paradoxically, the sense of their own free will that youth perceive when participating in social networks is illusory. Youth brand identity is influenced and directed by interaction with others. The causal loop diagram (CLD) in Figure 15 visualizes how the different variables within the relationship between participant (youth) and audience play out: the participant is subject to instantaneous reinforcing loops from both positive and negative audience sentiment. When you examine the image, you can see that positive audience sentiment leads to confidence and overall brand health, which is ultimately dictated by the relationship

between a brand and customers—or in this case, the youth and their audience. Brand health is the intersection of brand mission and values with the customer voice and perceptions in the market. In the same vein, negative audience sentiment leads to diminished brand health and confidence and, in turn, emotional volatility—which can often increase negative outputs and frustrations, thereby diminishing positive self-identity. While this is a fairly rudimentary depiction, it shows very clearly the direct through-line and the impact positive or negative audience feedback can have on the construction of positive identity:

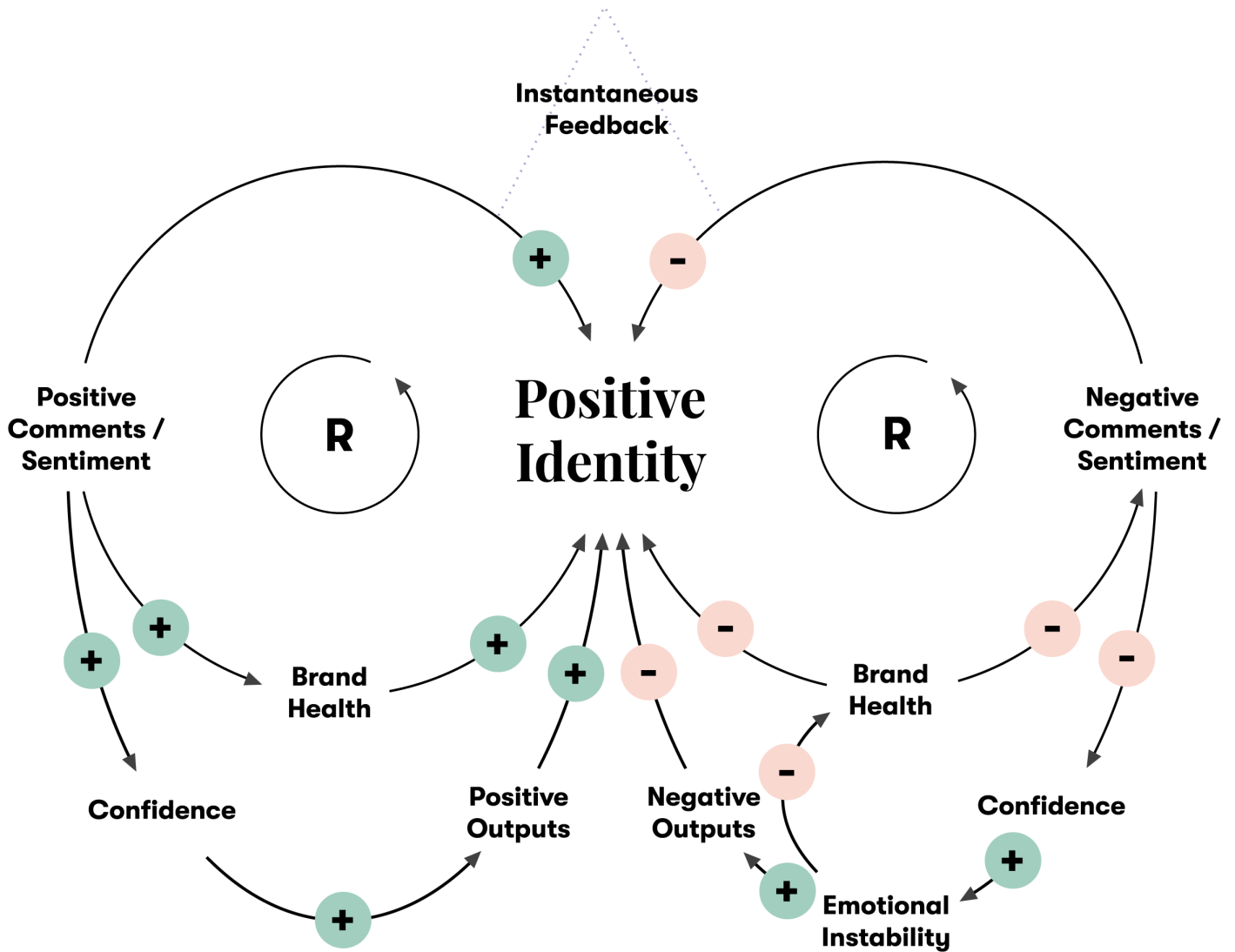


Figure 15: Causal Loop Diagram of the Dynamic Between Identity, Brand, and Audience. Author, 2020.

This interaction with audience delivers, as Belk (2013) coined, a nature of the self which is co-constructed with instantaneous feedback that can help affirm or modify one's sense of self. Gen Z, it seems, are caught in a loop. Indeed, according to Global Web Index's 2018 Report "What Does Personal Branding Mean to Different Generations?" Gen Z is likely more susceptible to this feedback than other generations, remaining more image-conscious and sensitive to others' opinions, and more likely to be swayed by other peoples' opinions—Gen Z (42%) versus Gen X (31%). What becomes apparent through this examination of audience and participant is that there are yet more unintended consequences resulting from the adoption of branding doctrine:

- **Social Validation Dictates Identity Value:** The metric of reward becomes recognition from those around you and those who follow you. The micro-dopamine rushes from positive feedback or the disappointment of negative (or no) feedback all play a part in gently shaping how young people construct their digital self and portray themselves online.
- **Sense of Agency is Illusory:** One might assume that operating as a brand conveys the ultimate power over one's identity. However, the opposite may actually occur. The causal loop diagram in Figure 15 shows that youth are operating in a kind of identity beta, iterating their way through life in a quest for digital dopamine hits. Youth can begin to lose the agency of assembling their identity, and instead may become more reactionary to the feedback around them.

- **Gulf Between Who I am/Whom I Portray:**

Networks of associations have the potential to create a discrepancy between a youth's actual self and their ideal digital self. In Manago, Graham, Greenfield & Salimkhan (2008) multiple theories from social scientists are discussed, including as early as 1959 when symbolic interactionist Irving Goffman theorized Individuals develop a sense of self from creating an impression they wish to give to others. Such theories support that youth may be tempted to construct a false self-presentation in order to gain the approval of their peers. Individuals may begin to reject aspects of their true self that do not meet the demands of their audience.

Only when we deconstruct brand identity in this manner can we recognize the limitations, implications, and consequences of branding. From here we can reconstruct identity through the paradigm of branding in order to demonstrate to parents and carers how to take on a new role—that of trusted brand manager. In the next chapter we will discuss the reconstruction of identity, critical intervention points, and the prominent role carers can play in nurturing that identity.

4:2 Youth Identity Reconstruction

The paradigm of branding does not allow a freewheeling approach; it is fraught with unintended consequences that need to be considered by anyone looking to protect and nurture a healthy brand identity within social networks. As parents and carers consider the new role of brand manager, they will have to monitor and influence youth actions that have the potential to shift the identity of the brand in unanticipated directions (von Wallpach et al, 2017).

When we re-imagine social network participation as intertwined with branding, we can better visualize the link between social connection and self-expression, brand development, and ultimately, identity configuration. Figure 16 visualizes key steps youth take within social networks, mapping the connective relationship between each key moment of participation. It also outlines the ensuing development of a personal brand and the factors critical to that development: essence, tone, and voice. By designing a new visual construct, we can identify for parents and carers where unintended consequences come into play, and crucially, identify intervention points where carers should place added emphasis to nurture and protect their child's brand identity.

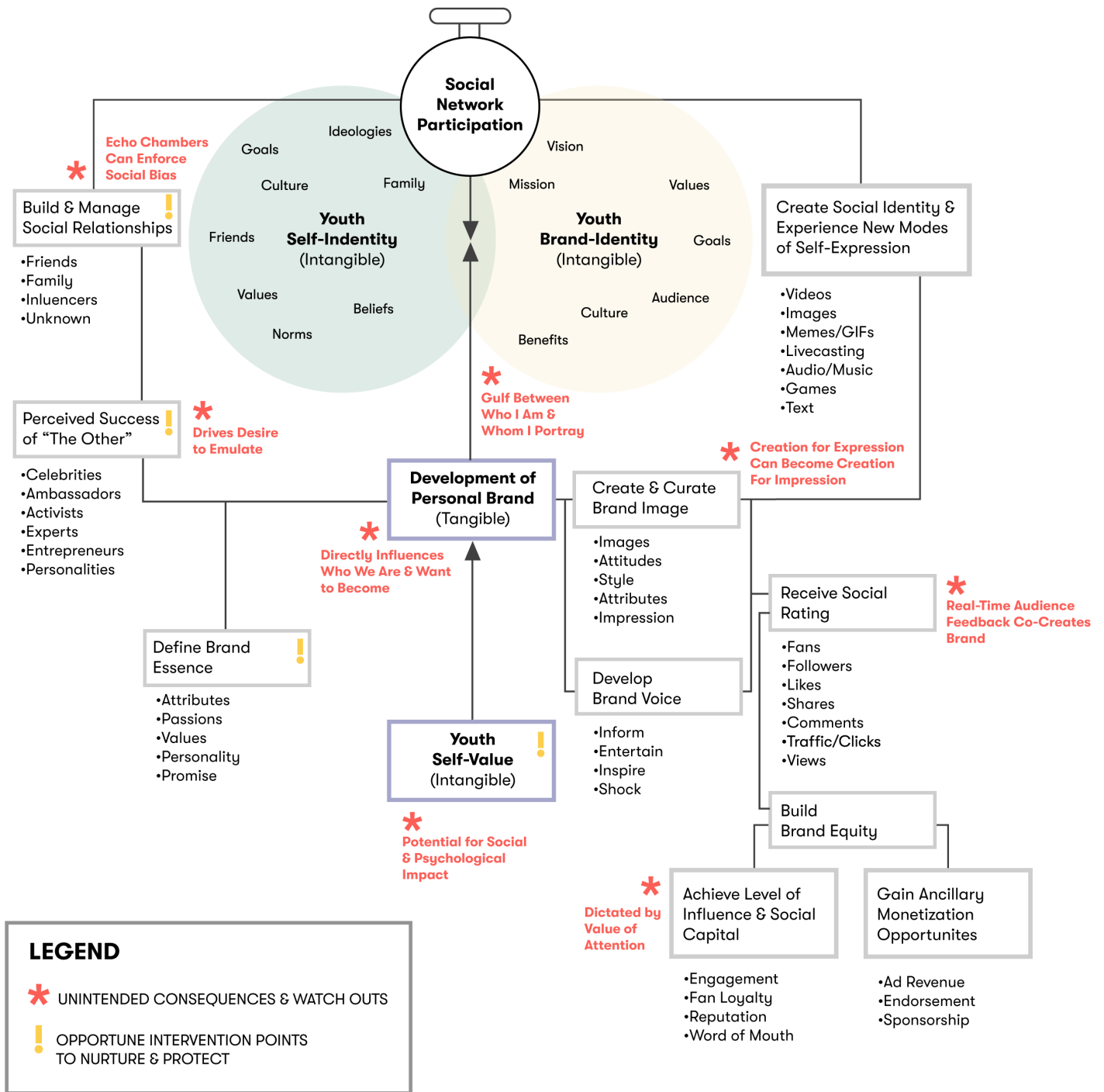


Figure 16: Identity Construction in Networked Environments Influenced by the Paradigm of Branding. Author, 2020.

Figure 16 illustrates the intertwining of self-identity and brand identity within the social network ecosystem and the commonalities between their construction. This influence map provides key answers to our research question: How Might Parents and Carers Benefit from a Better Understanding of the Paradigm of Branding in Order to Nurture, Preserve and Protect their Child's Self (Brand) Identity Within Social Networks? The map highlights several intervention points:

- **At the Construction of Self-Value:** In the new economic model of attracting attention, the desire for likes, comments, and clicks can sometimes supersede an awareness of other sources of value—friendship, family love, or even sporting achievement. A question for many parents should be, how do we liberate the youth user from these dopamine hits and encourage them to live free? We must continuously make sure that youth recognize they do not need digital validation to feel a strong sense of self-worth.
- **At the Selection of Which Social Relationships to Form and the Significance Placed Upon Them:** The rise of social media has embedded personal brand management—previously the purview of celebrities and other renowned figures—into the everyday customs of the emerging generations. At the same time, these platforms have made “fame” seem more accessible than ever before (Madden, 2017). As noted in Krämer & Winter (2008), the lack of distinction between strong bonds (e.g., real-life friends and family) versus weak bonds (online-only friends, casual acquaintances) is a potential problem. Obsession with “The Other” and following the lifestyles of the rich and famous may engender a sense of inadequacy; yet the gap between idealized online personas and the real-life people is often great. Parents need to help youth understand that digital representation does not mean there isn't a very real and very flawed human living on the other side of that image, with the same concerns and everyday issues they have.
- **Throughout the Ongoing Construction of Brand Essence:** The best brands stand for something: a big idea, a strategic position, a defined set of values, a voice that stands apart (Wheeler, 2017). A carer's new job is to ensure youth do not build brands that are all symbol and no soul. The scales of perceived value need to be in balance with real value and personality traits, beliefs, and attitudes. Understanding the importance of developing a purposeful brand truth has never been more critical for parents: youth are engaging 24/7 in a world where the attention economy has been driven into hyperdrive, plugging them into social networks structured to prioritize media metrics such as likes, comments, and clicks above all else. Once the youth has laid down a foundation, everything—including the corresponding voice and image—should come from this foundation and be a reflection of it at all times. Humour, style, and personal ideals influence every social media comment, text, or email (Wheeler, 2017).

In this final chapter we will summarize the implications uncovered from our investigation of the evolution of youth within social networks from creators to marketers and, ultimately, operands of their own brand. We will also present the beta version of a toolkit for parents who want to apply the principles of brand strategy in order to protect what we now understand as youth brand identity.

Chapter 5.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PARENTS & CARERS

This research seeks to present an accompanying source of advice to enhance a carer's understanding of children's online activities. In this case, we posit that Gen Z participation has driven the intermingling of self-identity and brand identity and ergo, the ultimate need to guard brand health. By applying one of the most powerful concepts in the world—branding—to understand children's online presence and digital identities, we can clarify parents' perception of how youth construct online identity in the social age and demonstrate how they, the parents, can play a critical and supportive role in its construction.

When we recognize that youth are not only creators and distributors within social networks, but marketers of their very own brand, then we can begin to ask deeper questions, such as: how can parents consciously create, nurture, and protect youth representation online? What role can parents play in the process of brand identity construction among youth? What can carers do as co-creators of the youth brand and as brand managers?

Parents are, after all, the ultimate brand champions and advocates for their child. And so, the beginning of a reimagined toolkit is born. It explains branding principles and strategies to present carers and parents with ways to better protect their kids' (brand) identity within social media environments.

5.1 In Beta: A Toolkit

Figure 16 in the preceding section identifies core areas for intervention and lays the groundwork for the construction of the following toolkit. The sections herein are directed at parents and carers, offering practical and tactical models to apply at key moments when parents can play a valuable role:

- **At the selection of social relationships**
- **Through the construction of brand essence**
- **On-going to instill better understanding of self-value and worth**

The toolkit also takes into consideration the environmental forces discussed in Chapter 2 and infuses exercises to co-create outcomes with Gen Z and allow for active participation throughout.



HOW TO...

**Nurture, Preserve, & Protect
Your Child's Self (Brand) Identity
Within Social Networks**

This toolkit was developed for parents and carers looking for novel approaches to support youth within social networks. It is in no way meant to supplant existing social media advice in reference to core concerns such as privacy, cyberbullying, time limits, or social etiquette. Rather, it is a companion guide to foster healthy online behaviour by examining what teens are sharing online and why. This guide introduces the notion of brand identity as a new way to think of youth representation within networked environments and provides practical brand strategy frameworks and questions you can use now to nurture, preserve, and protect your child’s brand identity as it traverses the world through Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, TikTok and many other social networking platforms.

The toolkit is organized into six sections:

1.

The Basics: The Building Blocks of Self (Brand) Identity

2.

Why It’s Time to Think Like a Brand Handler

3.

Which Way First? Lay the Right Foundation

4.

The Power of the Right Examples

5.

The Skinny on Social Networks

6.

Successfully Navigating the Long Road Ahead

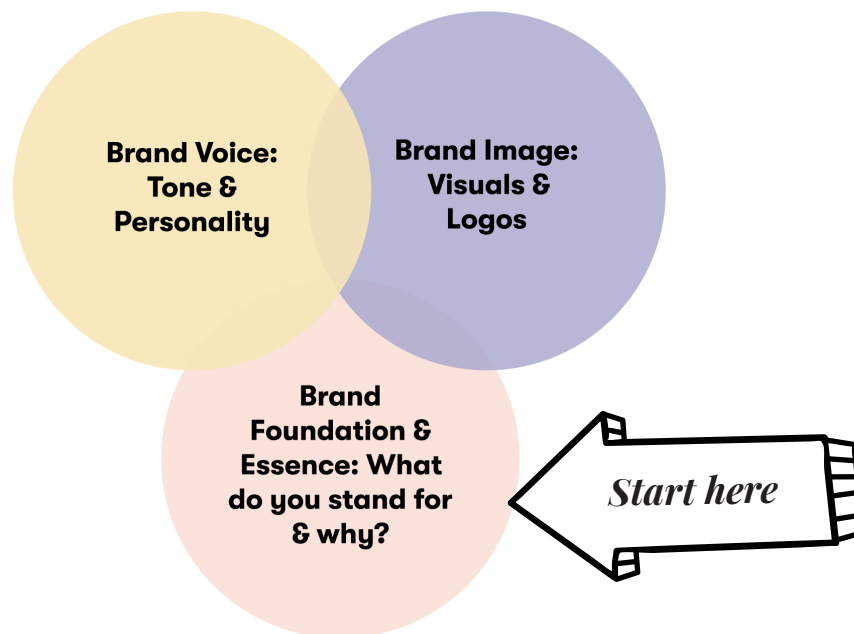
The toolkit is designed to:

Offer exercises and questions to help youth build healthy online personas and representations

Help carers recognize red flag areas, from whom to follow to what to share (or not) to which social platforms make sense for a particular child

Provide an empathetic approach to social media usage for parents, carers, and youth

The Basics: The Building Blocks of Self (Brand) Identity



While voice, image and essence overlap, the starting point is essence: The heart of the brand—its core, its foundation.

What is a Brand?

Don't think of a brand as a corporate identity, think of it as a living, breathing representation of your child and an asset that needs to be nurtured. A brand isn't only an image, logo, voice or slogan; these are just the outcomes and outputs of a brand's meaning and should be a reflection of it. The heart of a brand is its values and purpose, and the priority of any brand should be to build its essence first.

How Does the Notion of Brand Relate to My Child?

In the context of social media, anyone participating online—especially digital natives—youth are entering a world where communication between peers and acquaintances is instantaneous, and a continuous flow of content is expected. The ultimate sign of economic value within social media is likes, shares, comments, and audience (followers). Within this context youth aren't only presenting themselves freely and unabashedly, many are purposefully crafting their images in a way analogous to building a brand identity. Their digital identity and brand are a representation of who they are—their values and the purpose of their heart. Or at least they should be.

Why It's Time to Think Like a Brand Handler

Your child is busy building an online presence and building a brand identity. If you think about youth behaviour and presentation in these terms and understand that branding is about establishing a strong core proposition and integrity, then think of yourself as a brand strategist: a strategic partner to support, build, and nurture your child's brand identity across each social network. Think of this as Brand Management 101. Here is your role in three easy steps:

Brand Management 101

1.

Set guidelines
for acceptable
(self) expression

2.

Share expression
consistently

3.

Share to platforms
appropriate to that
child



As their strategic partner throughout the process, there are several principles for good brand stewardship to consider:



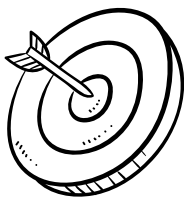
Don't dictate:
Explain, show & educate



Showcase best practices:
Demonstrate your own values & actions



Instill the right inputs:
Create a brand ambassador program comprised of people for your child to use as examples, ensuring their brand foundation and essence are aligned with that of your child's



GOAL:

Become a trusted strategic partner. Collaborate with your child in their identity construction across social networks.



Which Way First? Lay the Right Foundation

While visuals undoubtedly play an important role in branding, values should be the first priority to establish brand identity. Your role is to help your child craft a public identity that is an authentic reflection of who they are and aspire to be. Help them answer the questions “Who am I?” and “Who am I not?” and of course, “Who would I like to be?”

Brand Essence can include:



Mission



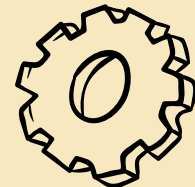
Vision



Values



**Key
messages**



**Guiding
principles**

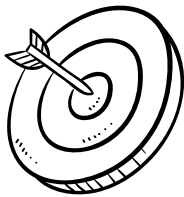
Remember, a brand isn't only an image, logo or slogan; these are just the outputs of a brand and should be a reflection of it. First, determine the essence and help your child paint a portrait to reflect their own “truth” better. Their digital presence should accurately reflect who we/they think they are as a brand, their brand “truth.”



ACTIVITY

To help children better articulate their brand truth and essence (what they stand for), think about some guiding questions to ponder with your child. Below are some questions to get you started; of course, you can tweak these to match the age and personality of your child to make this a fun experience for everyone.

1. *What are all the things that make up your unique identity?*
2. *What do you want people to know about you?*
3. *What do you want to be when you grow up?*
4. *What excites you?*
5. *What are you most passionate about?*
6. *What are your core values?*
7. *What actions are you taking to provide value to your family, friends, society, and others?*
8. *What experience do you want your friends, family, acquaintances to have with you online?*
9. *How would you like friends and/or followers to respond to you and interpret who you are?*



GOAL

Build the right foundation from the onset and worry less about the output.

The Power of the Right Examples

A brand identity isn't static. Youth's digital brand identity is co-created and molded by external factors such as culture and the people they interact with. So, ask yourself some key questions:

- 1. What are their cultural influences, and how can I understand them?*
- 2. Who are they learning from and following within social networks?*
- 3. What sources do they use for information and entertainment?*



Breakdown of what culture inputs can include:



Cultural contributions can come from a range of sources:



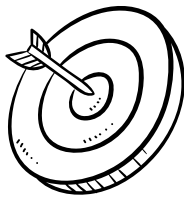
Good branding, brand strategy, and identity development is based on cultural understanding. Understanding cultural context is essential to ensure the brand adds value to the culture.

ACTIVITY

As a parent, develop a cultural understanding of your child's world and vice versa by embarking on the following:

Engage in cross-cultural research and check out the types of publications they are reading. VOX, BuzzFeed, Vice, and R29 are among publications that speak directly to the youth market.

Experience each social network. Of course, not every parent wants to be actively creating music videos on TikTok, but an exploratory tour of the platform can't hurt and only enhances your understanding.

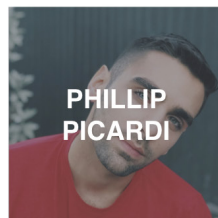
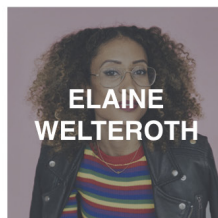
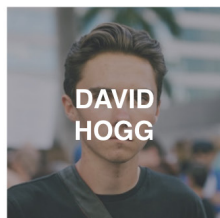
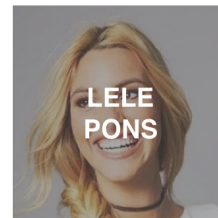
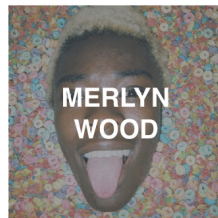
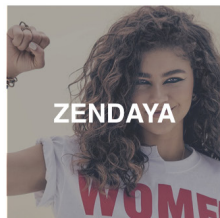
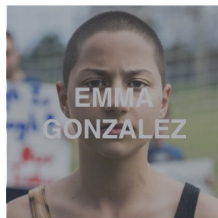


GOAL

Develop a cultural understanding of their world and the rich tapestry of interests and experiences that contribute to their identity.

Important: Ask yourself, who are they following and why?

Parents may not be familiar with the influences and talent playing a role in the lives of our children. Ask yourself how many of the faces and names below you're familiar with. All are cultural tastemakers in the lives of Gen Z.



With the swarms of information and channels available to us, it's hard not to be overwhelmed by so many influences and influencers feeding into the digital ecosystem. The value of engagement and views can be deceptive: people with demonstrable audiences and viewers are rewarded with a high degree of implied importance, regardless of the type of messages they are sharing or why their audiences are following them. Many youths are naturally inclined to follow sites, groups, or individuals based on popularity alone. However, not all influence is created equal; while many celebrities are influencers, not all influencers are celebrities.

An influencer can include:



Ambassadors & Activists

People who stand for a particular cause and contribute their voice to furthering that cause or mission.

Examples:

Elle Rose van der Burg, Age 19: Activist breaking transgender barriers
@baby_caramelle

Joshua Wong, Age 22: Pro-democracy activist



Experts & Entrepreneurs

Individuals with a particular skill, such as cooking, horticulture, or knitting. Individuals who turned their passions into full-fledged businesses. Their motivation is their passion, not fame.

Examples:

Kavya Kopparapu, Age 18: Founder & CEO of **Girls Computing League**

Brennan Agranoff, Age 20: Founder of **HoopSwagg**

Haile Thomas, Age 19: Health activist, vegan food & lifestyle influencer
@hailethomas

James Charles, Age 20: Beauty consultant YouTuber and make-up artist
@jamescharles



Personalities

Akin to a traditional “influencer” or celebrity with some subtle differences. These people demonstrate an authentic connection to their narrative and brand and don't deviate for dollar signs.

Examples:

Haley Pham, Age 18: Dancer, beauty and lifestyle personality
@haleypham

Luka Sabbat, Age 19: Actor, model and designer
@lukassabbat



Social media platforms have become the perfect instruments for personal branding and provide a wide range of tools for youth to create, shape, and market their brand. Each platform comes with its own features. It's worth understanding the inherent traits and characterizations unique to each.

ACTIVITY



Sit down with your child and explore with them their top five social networks. Find out why they participate, what they share, and who they follow. For example:

Name of Social Network	Common Participation Goals	Platform Characterizations	Key People I Follow
YouTube	Learning something new	Uploaded videos	Fiona Frills Emma Chamberlain
Instagram	Post cool pics of my life	Photo/video based visual depictions of "Life"	Hadids
Snapchat	Posting original videos		
Facebook	Check out group events		
Twitter	Friends' news feeds		

Successfully Navigating the Long Road Ahead

Your child's brand will be organic; it will grow and change as your child does. Good branding doesn't just begin and end. Astute project management can build confidence and consistency over time. Pay as much attention to the process as to the content because youth identities are under continuous evaluation, and we should expect these identities to evolve.

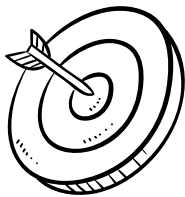
So, what does this mean? Have a brand status check-in periodically and consider "Where is your brand today?"



ACTIVITY

Continue to open up for an honest discussion with your child about who they are today, how others perceive them, and where they want to be.

Brand Desire vs. Brand Perception



GOAL

Pivot along the process as necessary to ensure optimal brand health.

Let's Keep Talking!

Begin the journey toward nurturing, preserving, and protecting your child's self (brand) identity within social networks by applying some of the core building blocks discussed here. Know this isn't the end. We will continue to expand this toolkit to provide more helpful frameworks for you to use. This document is a working prototype; we welcome your input, any feedback from the exercises, or advice on how to make this more useful. To contact us, email youthbrandbuilding@gmail.com

Chapter 6.

CONCLUSIONS

For many people—and especially those who work outside of the field of advertising—branding remains abstract, and it is not part of people’s everyday thinking. Not so for Gen Z, who were born into branded worlds and social network-rich environments that encourage the use of branding practices. Our earlier environmental scan identified the high saturation of branding doctrine in youth’s lives and the cultural forces and consumer shifts that enable the swift adoption of branding principles when constructing self-identity. Such forces include a core values shift among youth and inherent desires for individualism and self-expression, society’s high regard for influence and the economy of attention, and the sweeping disillusionment in establishments, whether it be government or traditional education, in favour of peer-sourced action, learning and self-made success. The core hypothesis of this paper, that self and brand identity are fusing in social networks is underscored by these societal changes and values driving the intertwining of self-identity and brand identity.

Further, it drew on disciplines such as systems thinking to avoid compartmentalizing social network exchange as between participant and platform, and instead presented a systems-based analysis of the ecosystem within which the fundamental shift to brand identity has taken place. Youth are no longer just going online to connect with friends or make new friends. They are going online to “market the bejesus out of your brand” (Peters, 1997). The influence map (Figure 16) is the culmination of these efforts and maps the connective relationship between self- and brand identity in social networks and key moments of participation. The map also highlighted two critical elements: 1) where unintended consequences come into play; and 2) intervention points where carers should place added emphasis to nurture and protect their child’s brand identity.

These insights provided the backbone for the creation of a toolkit for parents and carers, presenting a practical response to tackle these intervention points. Furthermore, the toolkit is a fresh approach to supporting healthy social media usage among youth. As we identified in our literature review, many current parental manuals and guidebooks regarding social media usage focus on the more typical parental preoccupations of controlling children’s time

within social networking sites or monitoring their activity. When parents evaluate social network use among youth through the paradigm of branding and adopt the understanding that marketing principles have become intertwined with identity construction, they can add another dimension to their support of youth. They can draw on strategies, principles, and tactics typically deployed in the field of advertising to present an additional layer of understanding, thus helping them benefit from the paradigm of branding to nurture, preserve, and protect their child’s self (brand) identity within social networks.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to a prototype of the toolkit and guide, in which we introduce the notion of brand identity as a new way for parents to understand youth representation within networked environments. The toolkit delivers practical brand strategy frameworks to help parents co-design a set of values and principles to support their child’s dynamic online building of self. In addition to formal research, the toolkit was built in part thanks to anecdotal conversations throughout my own journey into motherhood, during which parents asked directly for new strategies to bridge the chasm they perceived opening between themselves and their offspring, who seem to want to be active across social networks, all day, every day.

The Necessary Next Step

The hope is that the toolkit will become a useful guide for those who want to play a role in protecting their children's brand—to help it evolve through usage and feedback, holding its value and appreciation over time. Additionally, while this toolkit is aimed at parents and carers, it could certainly be a tool to support youth—many of whom are embarking on the mission of brand building with (or without) their parent's intervention. A second opportunity exists to design a toolkit specifically for youth, and certainly for those at the upper end of Gen Z who no longer have the same level of parental oversight as their younger cohorts.

Opportunities for Further Research

A number of parallel but complementary areas for investigation came to light during this research, but which ultimately sat outside the scope of this particular study. Ancillary routes to explore may include:

- The role of parents who not only wish to support youth brand identity, but to drive it— with or without the buy-in from the child in question
- The ongoing evolution of identity across emergent platforms such as augmented reality and how that might yet further influence self-perception.

My hope is that this current analysis provides parents and carers a useful new entry point for dialogue with their youth. It should be noted that this research is an exploration—one possible journey into understanding identity representation in the social media landscapes that youth may inhabit; and just one way to help parents feel less than ten steps behind when it comes to understanding how their children are living online.

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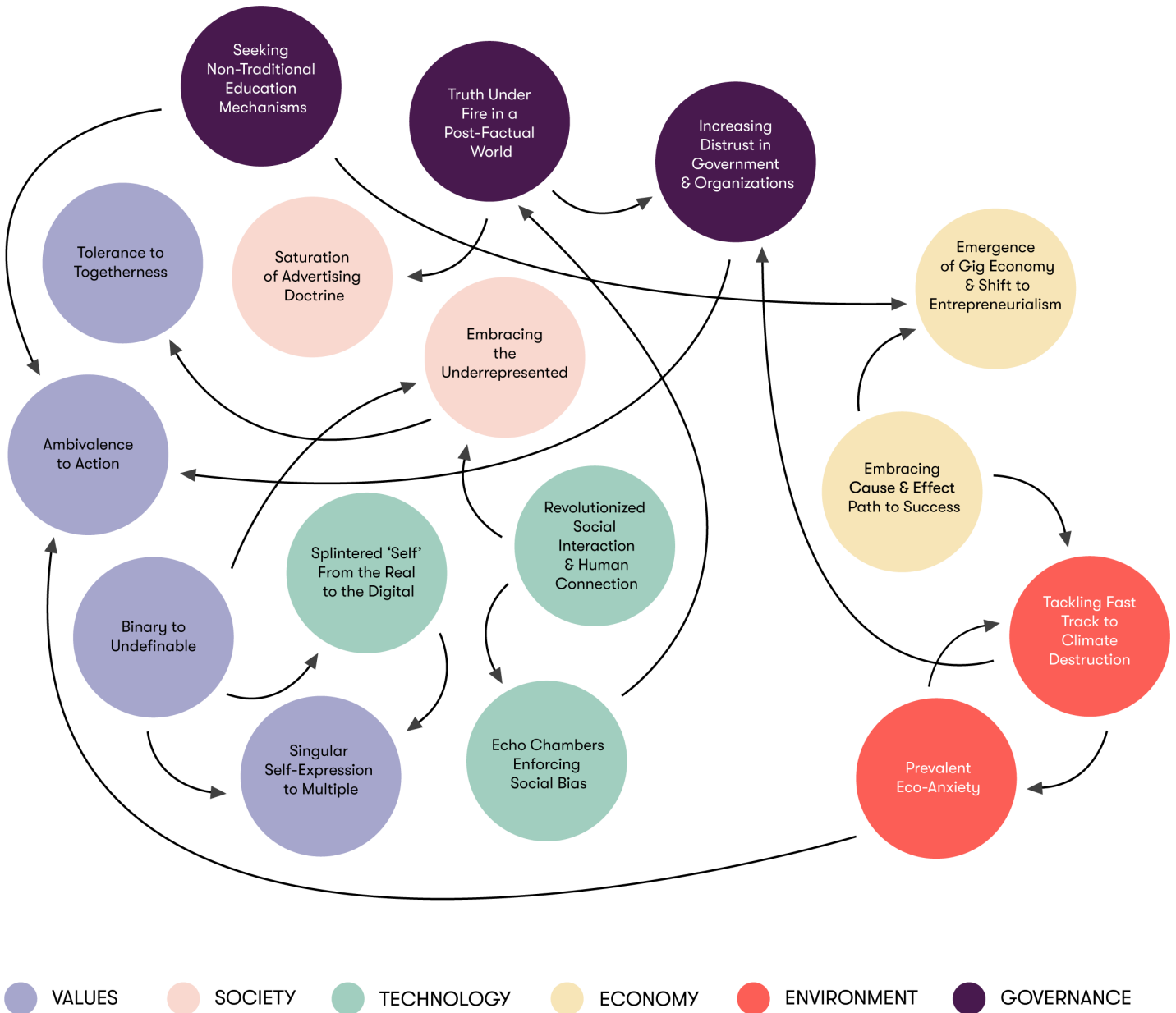
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Appendix

Appendix A: Key Drivers and Trends Underpinning Gen Z Social Media Representation

By identifying key drivers and trends taking place in the lives of Gen Z and within society and culture, politics, the economy, the environment, and technology, one is better able to understand the conditions under which the intertwining of self-identity and brand identity within social networks has manifest. Critical factors include:



The Evolution of Values Among Gen Z

- **From Binary to Undefinable Identity:** Gen Z has a desire to express themselves in all forms and without restrictions. They understand identity is not a static entity. They do not endorse labels, borders, or binary choices, and most consider their own identities as fluid.
- **From Ambivalence to Action:** This generation understands the hardships faced by generations before them—their parents who experienced the impact of the recession, their Millennial siblings who started conversations around values, meaningful work, and being open-minded to change—and now they're acting on those learnings and becoming catalysts for change (Vice Voices Study, Gen Z, 2018).
- **From Tolerance to Togetherness:** In part accelerated by digital technologies and hyper-connected worlds, youth can see, hear, and join in with global netizens. They can form bonds and tribes locally and across borders to rally against societal wrongs.
- **From Singular Self-Expression to Multiple:** Like Millennials, Gen Z agrees they need self-expression to live a happy and fulfilled life, but they feel comfortable having multiple forms of expression and look for outlets that allow them to embark on continuous evolution.

Gen Z Indoctrination into a Society Diffused With Brand

- **Saturation of Advertising Doctrine:** Advertising, marketing, and branding have been persuading us and infiltrating our lives for years. Today, advertising remains a billion-dollar global market, and reaches us whether we're out of home, consuming our regularly scheduled cable shows or surfing Netflix. Wherever Gen Z are present, so is advertising.
- **Embracing the Underrepresented:** Social media democratized the idea of celebrity by allowing anyone to create and amass status. It also allowed anyone to become that spark to start a movement. Whether it's the #MeToo movement or Greta Thunberg—the catalyst for over one million students in more than 100 countries participating in School Strike for Climate—social platforms have provided mechanisms through which the underrepresented can find a voice.

The Unyielding Progress and Impact of Technology

- **Splintered "Self" From the Real to the Digital:** Gen Z are used to taking their "self" into multiple worlds and realities. Mediums, from virtual reality to augmented reality and AI, splinter "self" from the real to the digital and allow for newly imagined modes of representation to others.
- **Revolutionized Social Interaction & Human Connection:** Technology will continue to revolutionize social interaction, particularly among young people, in ways that remain to be seen and could be entirely unexpected. What can be anticipated is that there will be fundamental changes to the meaning of connection.
- **Echo Chambers Enforcing Social Bias:** Connected communities means Gen Z discovers and consumes content via social media in a filter bubble. Organizations and non-professional users alike have been documented to seek out people with similar emotions, thoughts and opinions with themselves by sharing on social communication platforms, increasing their influence by constituting a community with like-minded users (Gunduz, 2017).

Gen Z Belief in New Economic Models

- **Embracing a “Cause & Effect” Path to Success:** Millennial dreams of “being discovered” by pop culture reality shows or gaining fame as a YouTube celebrity has given way to Gen Z’s determination to make it on their own terms. They desire no less level of success than their Millennial predecessors but believe their creativity and uniqueness will be the factors that drive it.
- **Shift to Entrepreneurialism:** Gen Z have moved away from the linear path to success: traditional education leads to job; job leads to money; money leads to material goods and ultimately happiness. Gen Z understands a person can pursue dynamic and multidimensional paths to success and foster a more entrepreneurial spirit than their predecessors.

Youth Demand for Change and Prioritization of Environment

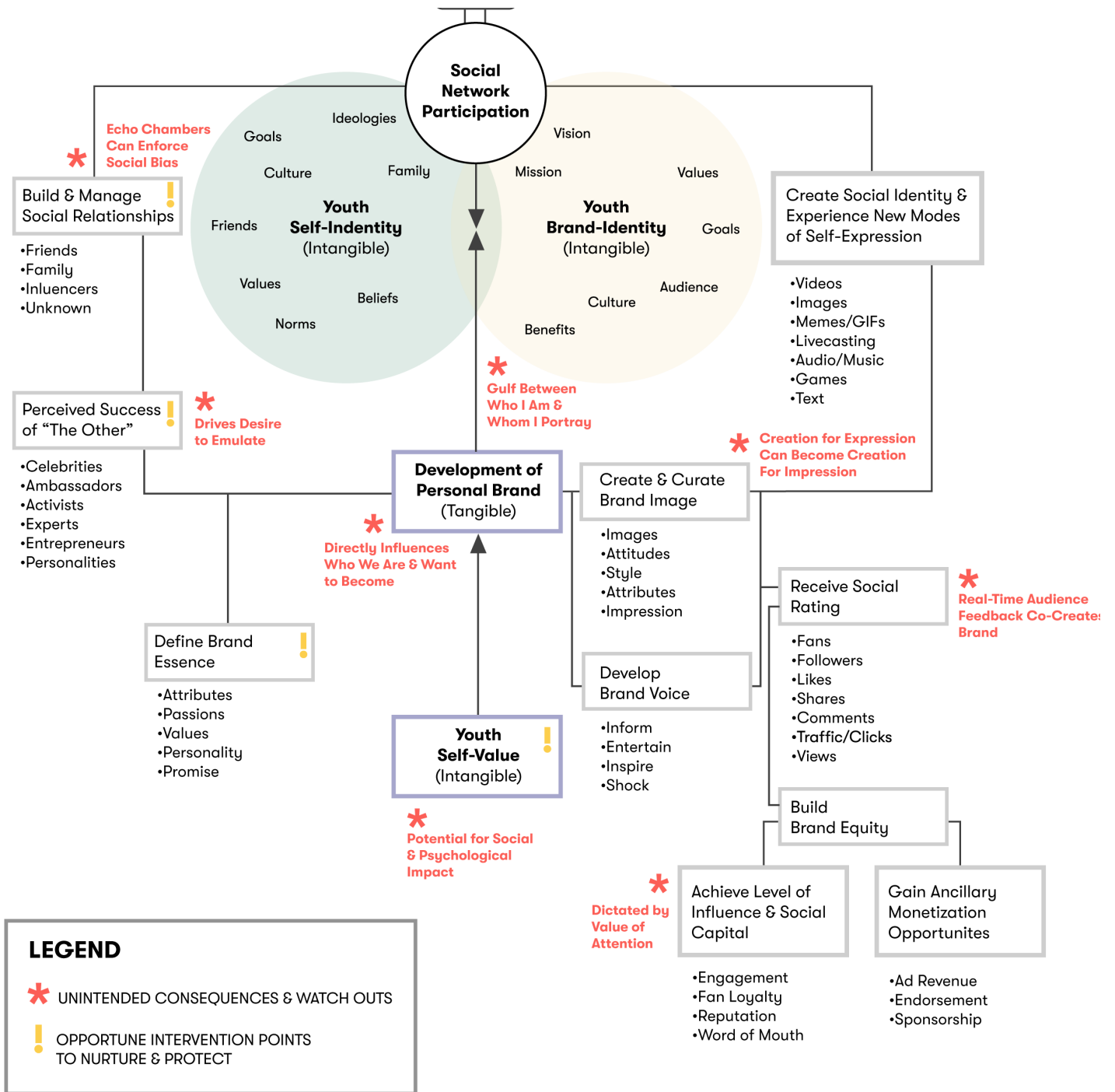
- **Prevalent Eco-Anxiety:** Despite all their time online, Gen Z still cares more about the environment more than previous generations and feels an unprecedented urgency about many pressing issues—the environment being the top priority that they want companies to address.
- **Tackling Fast Track to Climate Destruction:** Climate change tops the agenda for Gen Z and has become a catalyst for them to create societal change.

Disillusionment in Existing Governance

- **Increasing Distrust in Government & Organizations:** Gen Z believe governments should prioritize citizens’ well-being over economic growth. They place little trust in government, political leaders, or corporations, believing they are far more interested in playing politics to maintain power, advance their own careers, and push their own agendas—rather than address the needs and desires of others.
- **Truth Under Fire in a Post-Factual World:** Gen Z have seen politics reduced to those who shout loudest, with social networks hijacked for the purpose of doing just that. This has created a ripple effect of continuous distrust in both the messages and the mediums.
- **Seeking Non-Traditional Education Mechanisms:** Gen Z no longer believe traditional forms of education are essential to establish a career or find happiness. Instead they view creativity and uniqueness as the ultimate path to financial security and the career of their dreams.

Appendix B: A Systems Analysis of Identity Construction in Networked Environments

A systems-based analysis and influence map allows the reader to visualize the intertwining of self-identity and brand identity within social network ecosystems, the commonalities between their construction, and the connective relationship between each key moment of participation. This in turn allows for the identification of unintended consequences due to this participation, and intervention points where carers should place added emphasis to nurture and protect their child’s brand identity.



Appendix C: A Toolkit for Parents and Carers

A toolkit for parents and carers that provides guidance on seizing opportune moments to support and nurture youth brand identity in social networks through practical brand strategy frameworks and exercises.



HOW TO...

**Nurture, Preserve, & Protect
Your Child's Self (Brand) Identity
Within Social Networks**

This toolkit was developed for parents and carers looking for novel approaches to support youth within social networks. It is in no way meant to supplant existing social media advice in reference to core concerns such as privacy, cyberbullying, time limits, or social etiquette. Rather, it is a companion guide to foster healthy online behaviour by examining what teens are sharing online and why. This guide introduces the notion of brand identity as a new way to think of youth representation within networked environments and provides practical brand strategy frameworks and questions you can use now to nurture, preserve, and protect your child's brand identity as it traverses the world through Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, TikTok and many other social networking platforms.

The toolkit is organized into six sections:

1.

The Basics: The Building Blocks of Self (Brand) Identity

2.

Why It's Time to Think Like a Brand Handler

3.

Which Way First? Lay the Right Foundation

4.

The Power of the Right Examples

5.

The Skinny on Social Networks

6.

Successfully Navigating the Long Road Ahead

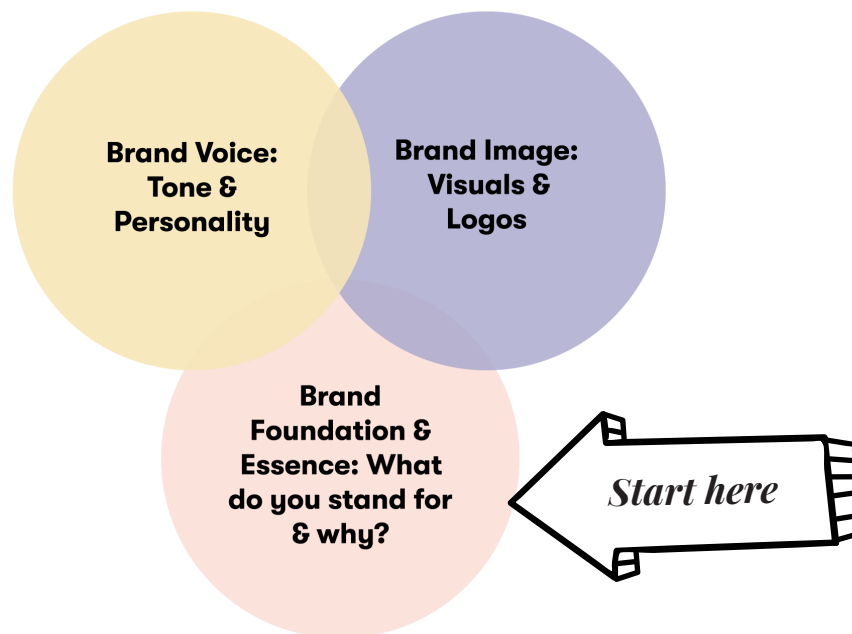
The toolkit is designed to:

Offer exercises and questions to help youth build healthy online personas and representations

Help carers recognize red flag areas, from whom to follow to what to share (or not) to which social platforms make sense for a particular child

Provide an empathetic approach to social media usage for parents, carers, and youth

The Basics: The Building Blocks of Self (Brand) Identity



While voice, image and essence overlap, the starting point is essence: The heart of the brand—its core, its foundation.

What is a Brand?

Don't think of a brand as a corporate identity, think of it as a living, breathing representation of your child and an asset that needs to be nurtured. A brand isn't only an image, logo, voice or slogan; these are just the outcomes and outputs of a brand's meaning and should be a reflection of it. The heart of a brand is its values and purpose, and the priority of any brand should be to build its essence first.

How Does the Notion of Brand Relate to My Child?

In the context of social media, anyone participating online—especially digital natives—youth are entering a world where communication between peers and acquaintances is instantaneous, and a continuous flow of content is expected. The ultimate sign of economic value within social media is likes, shares, comments, and audience (followers). Within this context youth aren't only presenting themselves freely and unabashedly, many are purposefully crafting their images in a way analogous to building a brand identity. Their digital identity and brand are a representation of who they are—their values and the purpose of their heart. Or at least they should be.

Why It's Time to Think Like a Brand Handler

Your child is busy building an online presence and building a brand identity. If you think about youth behaviour and presentation in these terms and understand that branding is about establishing a strong core proposition and integrity, then think of yourself as a brand strategist: a strategic partner to support, build, and nurture your child's brand identity across each social network. Think of this as Brand Management 101. Here is your role in three easy steps:

Brand Management 101

1.

Set guidelines
for acceptable
(self) expression

2.

Share expression
consistently

3.

Share to platforms
appropriate to that
child



As their strategic partner throughout the process, there are several principles for good brand stewardship to consider:



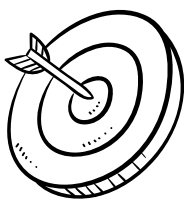
Don't dictate:
Explain, show & educate



Showcase best practices:
Demonstrate your own values & actions



Instill the right inputs:
Create a brand ambassador program comprised of people for your child to use as examples, ensuring their brand foundation and essence are aligned with that of your child's



GOAL:

Become a trusted strategic partner. Collaborate with your child in their identity construction across social networks.



Which Way First? Lay the Right Foundation

While visuals undoubtedly play an important role in branding, values should be the first priority to establish brand identity. Your role is to help your child craft a public identity that is an authentic reflection of who they are and aspire to be. Help them answer the questions “Who am I?” and “Who am I not?” and of course, “Who would I like to be?”

Brand Essence can include:



Mission



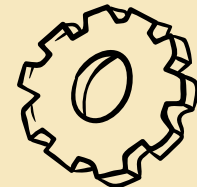
Vision



Values



Key messages



Guiding principles

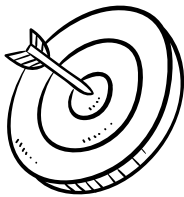
Remember, a brand isn't only an image, logo or slogan; these are just the outputs of a brand and should be a reflection of it. First, determine the essence and help your child paint a portrait to reflect their own “truth” better. Their digital presence should accurately reflect who we/they think they are as a brand, their brand “truth.”



ACTIVITY

To help children better articulate their brand truth and essence (what they stand for), think about some guiding questions to ponder with your child. Below are some questions to get you started; of course, you can tweak these to match the age and personality of your child to make this a fun experience for everyone.

1. *What are all the things that make up your unique identity?*
2. *What do you want people to know about you?*
3. *What do you want to be when you grow up?*
4. *What excites you?*
5. *What are you most passionate about?*
6. *What are your core values?*
7. *What actions are you taking to provide value to your family, friends, society, and others?*
8. *What experience do you want your friends, family, acquaintances to have with you online?*
9. *How would you like friends and/or followers to respond to you and interpret who you are?*



GOAL

Build the right foundation from the onset and worry less about the output.

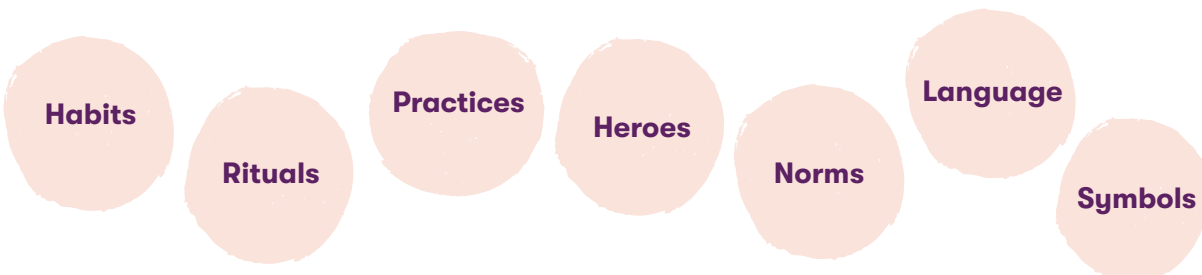
The Power of the Right Examples

A brand identity isn't static. Youth's digital brand identity is co-created and molded by external factors such as culture and the people they interact with. So, ask yourself some key questions:

- 1. What are their cultural influences, and how can I understand them?*
- 2. Who are they learning from and following within social networks?*
- 3. What sources do they use for information and entertainment?*



Breakdown of what culture inputs can include:



Cultural contributions can come from a range of sources:



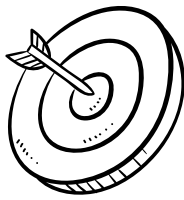
Good branding, brand strategy, and identity development is based on cultural understanding. Understanding cultural context is essential to ensure the brand adds value to the culture.

ACTIVITY

As a parent, develop a cultural understanding of your child's world and vice versa by embarking on the following:

Engage in cross-cultural research and check out the types of publications they are reading. VOX, BuzzFeed, Vice, and R29 are among publications that speak directly to the youth market.

Experience each social network. Of course, not every parent wants to be actively creating music videos on TikTok, but an exploratory tour of the platform can't hurt and only enhances your understanding.

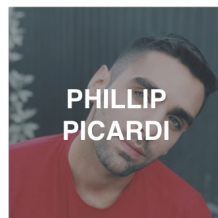
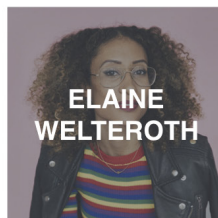
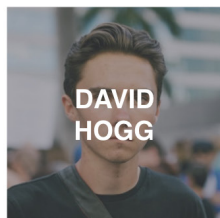
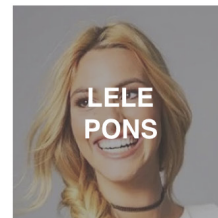
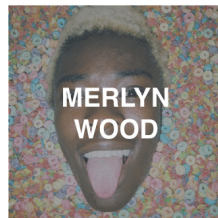
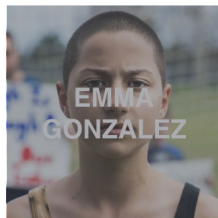


GOAL

Develop a cultural understanding of their world and the rich tapestry of interests and experiences that contribute to their identity.

Important: Ask yourself, who are they following and why?

Parents may not be familiar with the influences and talent playing a role in the lives of our children. Ask yourself how many of the faces and names below you're familiar with. All are cultural tastemakers in the lives of Gen Z.



With the swarms of information and channels available to us, it's hard not to be overwhelmed by so many influences and influencers feeding into the digital ecosystem. The value of engagement and views can be deceptive: people with demonstrable audiences and viewers are rewarded with a high degree of implied importance, regardless of the type of messages they are sharing or why their audiences are following them. Many youths are naturally inclined to follow sites, groups, or individuals based on popularity alone. However, not all influence is created equal; while many celebrities are influencers, not all influencers are celebrities.

An influencer can include:



Ambassadors & Activists

People who stand for a particular cause and contribute their voice to furthering that cause or mission.

Examples:

Elle Rose van der Burg, Age 19: Activist breaking transgender barriers
@baby_caramelle

Joshua Wong, Age 22: Pro-democracy activist



Experts & Entrepreneurs

Individuals with a particular skill, such as cooking, horticulture, or knitting. Individuals who turned their passions into full-fledged businesses. Their motivation is their passion, not fame.

Examples:

Kavya Kopparapu, Age 18: Founder & CEO of **Girls Computing League**

Brennan Agranoff, Age 20: Founder of **HoopSwagg**

Haile Thomas, Age 19: Health activist, vegan food & lifestyle influencer
@hailethomas

James Charles, Age 20: Beauty consultant YouTuber and make-up artist
@jamescharles



Personalities

Akin to a traditional “influencer” or celebrity with some subtle differences. These people demonstrate an authentic connection to their narrative and brand and don't deviate for dollar signs.

Examples:

Haley Pham, Age 18: Dancer, beauty and lifestyle personality
@haleypham

Luka Sabbat, Age 19: Actor, model and designer
@lukassabbat



Social media platforms have become the perfect instruments for personal branding and provide a wide range of tools for youth to create, shape, and market their brand. Each platform comes with its own features. It's worth understanding the inherent traits and characterizations unique to each.

ACTIVITY



Sit down with your child and explore with them their top five social networks. Find out why they participate, what they share, and who they follow. For example:

Name of Social Network	Common Participation Goals	Platform Characterizations	Key People I Follow
YouTube	Learning something new	Uploaded videos	Fiona Frills Emma Chamberlain
Instagram	Post cool pics of my life	Photo/video based visual depictions of "Life"	Hadids
Snapchat	Posting original videos		
Facebook	Check out group events		
Twitter	Friends' news feeds		

Successfully Navigating the Long Road Ahead

Your child's brand will be organic; it will grow and change as your child does. Good branding doesn't just begin and end. Astute project management can build confidence and consistency over time. Pay as much attention to the process as to the content because youth identities are under continuous evaluation, and we should expect these identities to evolve.

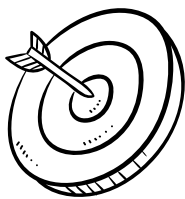
So, what does this mean? Have a brand status check-in periodically and consider "Where is your brand today?"



ACTIVITY

Continue to open up for an honest discussion with your child about who they are today, how others perceive them, and where they want to be.

Brand Desire vs. Brand Perception



GOAL

Pivot along the process as necessary to ensure optimal brand health.

Let's Keep Talking!

Begin the journey toward nurturing, preserving, and protecting your child's self (brand) identity within social networks by applying some of the core building blocks discussed here. Know this isn't the end. We will continue to expand this toolkit to provide more helpful frameworks for you to use. This document is a working prototype; we welcome your input, any feedback from the exercises, or advice on how to make this more useful. To contact us, email youthbrandbuilding@gmail.com