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Consumption Behaviors of Generation Z in the Global Creative Industries: Reflections from Sociological and Business Perspectives

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Abstract: The rapid growth of global creative industries has made Generation Z a central group of consumers. They are digital natives who value identity, inclusivity, and sustainability, and their choices influence both cultural and economic trends. While many studies examine Gen Z from either a sociological or a business angle, few combine these perspectives. This paper addresses that gap by using an interdisciplinary approach that links sociological theories of identity and cultural capital with business research on platforms, branding, and consumer strategies. The study reviews recent literature and develops comparative case studies across music streaming, fashion, gaming, and digital art, including NFTs. Cross-regional analysis highlights both global patterns and local adaptations in markets such as North America, East Asia, and China. Results show that Gen Z are not passive buyers but active participants who act as "prosumers," creating cultural meaning while driving new business models. They show strong commitments to authenticity and sustainability, though contradictions such as the fast-fashion "attitude-behavior gap" remain. The findings demonstrate the need for an integrated view of creative industries. They contribute to theory by linking culture and commerce, and to practice by offering insights for businesses and policymakers who must adapt to this generation's transformative role.

Keywords: Generation Z; creative industries; interdisciplinary approach; prosumers; sustainability

1. Introduction

The global creative industries are among the fastest-growing parts of the world economy, covering music, film, fashion, gaming, digital art, and cultural tourism [1]. Reports from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) show that the creative economy now makes up a rising share of global GDP and employment [2]. As Figure 1 shows, its share of GDP grew from 2.7% in 2015 to 3.1% in 2022, while its share of employment rose from 5.8% to 6.2%. These numbers reflect not only the economic but also the social importance of creative industries, as they generate both value and jobs around the world.

Received: 19 August 2025

Revised: 27 August 2025

Accepted: 20 September 2025

Published: 25 September 2025



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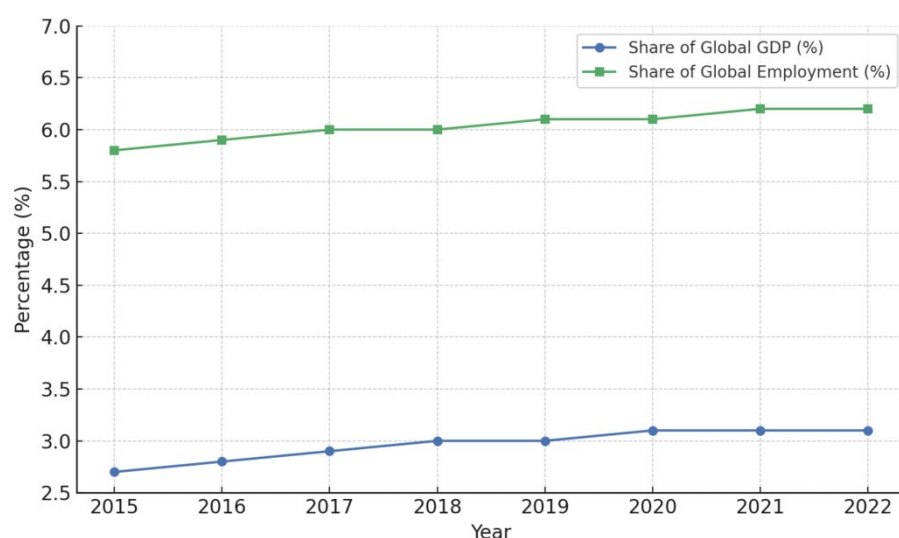


Figure 1. Global Creative Economy Growth Trend (2015-2022). Source: UNCTAD Creative Economy Outlook 2024 (via UNESCO estimates).

Within this setting, Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2010) has become the most influential group of consumers. They grew up in digital environments, move easily between cultures, and care strongly about identity, inclusivity, and sustainability [3]. These features make them both key drivers of demand and active participants in shaping cultural meaning. Understanding their consumption is therefore important for both industry practice and academic research.

Although many studies have examined Generation Z, the research is often divided. Sociological work tends to focus on the symbolic and identity-based side of consumption, while business studies highlight market size, strategies, and new technologies in creative industries [4]. Each perspective is useful, but they rarely overlap. This gap makes it difficult to capture the full picture of how Generation Z both shapes and is shaped by global creative industries.

This paper aims to close this gap by combining ideas from sociology with insights from business and creative industry research. It draws on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, Baudrillard's view of symbolic consumption, and Castells' theory of the network society, alongside studies of platforms, branding, and consumer engagement. In doing so, the paper shows how Generation Z's consumption is both a way to build identity and a force that drives new business models.

The study uses an interdisciplinary approach, including a review of academic and industry sources and comparative case analysis. Cases are drawn from music streaming (Spotify, TikTok), fast fashion and sustainable fashion, online gaming and virtual worlds, and new markets such as digital art and NFTs. Regional comparisons, including the United States, East Asia, and China, illustrate the balance between global patterns and local adaptations in Generation Z's behaviors.

The contribution of this paper is threefold. First, it adds to sociology by showing how generational consumption is tied to identity, symbols, and social hierarchies in global digital contexts. Second, it enriches business and creative industry research by demonstrating how consumer practices influence platforms, branding, and monetization. Third, it shows the value of interdisciplinary study by linking cultural and commercial perspectives.

In both academic and practical terms, the study highlights why Generation Z matters. For scholars, it provides a framework that connects culture and commerce instead of keeping them separate. For practitioners and policymakers, it offers insights into how Gen Z's demands for authenticity, inclusivity, and sustainability can inform strategy and regulation.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews related work from sociology and business. Section 3 explains the theoretical and methodological approach. Section 4 presents case studies from different creative sectors. Section 5 discusses the findings and their implications. Section 6 concludes with contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Related Works

2.1. Sociological Perspectives

Research in creative industries has shown that Generation Z is becoming an important group of consumers with a strong influence on markets. One example is their focus on value-based choices. As shown in Figure 2, recent data confirm that Generation Z remains the most willing to pay extra for sustainable products, with 73% indicating readiness to spend at least 10% more. Millennials follow closely at 68%, while 55% of Gen X and 40% of Baby Boomers report similar willingness [5]. Compared with earlier surveys from 2019 and 2021, all generations show rising acceptance of sustainable consumption, though younger cohorts continue to lead this trend [6].

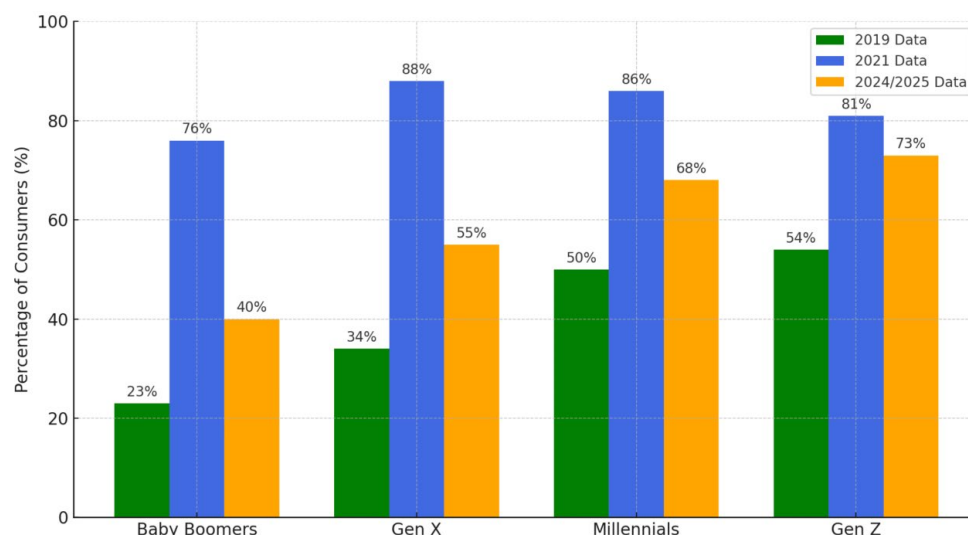


Figure 2. Willingness To Spend At Least 10% More For Sustainable Products (2019 Vs 2021 Vs 2024/2025).

Recent sociological studies describe Gen Z (born around 1997-2012) as very attentive to corporate ethics and social responsibility. A joint study by Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and Pompeu Fabra University shows that Gen Z cares much more than older generations about environmental, social, and labor issues [7]. This means they are not just passive buyers but can act as cultural change makers.

Gen Z's media habits also carry strong symbolic meaning. Euromonitor reports that their consumption reflects tensions between empowerment, self-expression, belonging, rationality, and retreat. Mintel finds that they are digital natives with high social and political awareness. They are practical but also demand authenticity, diversity, and inclusivity from brands. These findings connect with sociological theories such as consumption as meaning-making (Baudrillard) and identity construction (Bourdieu's cultural capital), showing why Gen Z should be studied through cultural and networked perspectives.

2.2. Business and Creative-Industry Perspectives

From a business viewpoint, Generation Z's market power is growing rapidly. Nielsen estimates that their spending power may reach US\$12 trillion by 2030, confirming their

importance in the global economy. Vogue Business notes their strong influence in luxury markets, with purchase decisions shaped by omnichannel retail and digital experiences.

To respond, businesses are adopting new strategies. A 2025 report stresses that social media and immersive digital tools, such as augmented reality and experiential retail, are vital to building Gen Z's brand loyalty [8]. This matches broader trends in the creative economy, where platforms are shifting toward consumer-driven ecosystems built on emotional engagement and digital interaction.

Empirical research supports these patterns. Theocharis shows that online brand experience, trust, and engagement significantly affect Gen Z's intention to buy sustainable tech products [9]. Another 2025 study in Portugal finds that Gen Z consumers are open to joining circular economy models, confirming that sustainability-based business models appeal to this generation [10].

2.3. Identified Research Gaps

Despite these contributions, important gaps remain. Sociological studies often focus on symbolic meaning and culture but pay less attention to industry structures, such as platforms and monetization. On the other hand, business research sometimes reduces Gen Z to market labels like "digital natives," without exploring their role in identity formation or social agency.

Another limitation is the focus on Western contexts. There is still little comparative research on Gen Z in regions such as Asia or Latin America, even though creative industries there are expanding quickly.

Finally, several studies point to a gap between Gen Z's values and behaviors. For example, the New York Post reports that although Gen Z claims to value sustainability, many still buy from fast-fashion platforms such as Shein. This "attitude-behavior gap" highlights the need to study the deeper social and structural reasons behind such contradictions.

3. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study uses an interdisciplinary design to better understand the complexity of Generation Z's role in the global creative industries. Because the topic has both cultural and commercial sides, the research combines sociological theory, creative-industry studies, and case analysis. The aim is to explain the symbolic meanings behind Gen Z's consumption and also to show how these practices change business models and global market patterns.

Methodologically, the study applies three strategies. First, it reviews recent literature in sociology, cultural studies, and business (mainly after 2023) to ensure relevance and updated evidence. Second, it develops case studies from different creative sectors, such as music streaming, fashion, gaming, and digital art, to illustrate how Gen Z's behavior appears across cultural fields. Third, it conducts cross-regional comparisons, focusing on North America, East Asia, and Europe, to highlight the balance between global trends and local adaptation. Taken together, these steps allow for a broad and balanced understanding that goes beyond a single discipline.

Theoretically, the framework combines modern sociological ideas with models of creative-industry economics. Recent research notes a "rational turn" in Gen Z's symbolic consumption, meaning they try to balance cost with cultural value, turning consumption into both a personal and cultural act. This extends earlier theories, such as Baudrillard's view of symbolic consumption, by showing that Gen Z does not just repeat cultural meanings but actively reshapes them. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital also remains useful, since younger generations continue to use cultural knowledge and taste to signal identity and social position.

The role of digital platforms is especially important. Studies on TikTok's recommendation systems, for example, show how algorithms influence cultural belonging and symbolic practices. In this sense, digital infrastructures do more than distribute content; they help shape identities and cultural markets themselves.

From the business perspective, Gen Z strongly affects branding, sustainability, and immersive experiences [11]. Theocharis finds that online brand experience, trust, and engagement are key factors in Gen Z's willingness to buy sustainable digital products [9]. This matches broader creative-economy theories on platformization, which explain how platforms like Spotify, TikTok, and Shein shape consumer access and engagement. Research on branding also shows that authenticity, inclusivity, and sustainability are now essential values demanded by Gen Z [12].

By combining these perspectives, this framework builds a cross-disciplinary model where consumption is seen both as identity construction (sociology) and as innovation in business models (creative-industry studies). Rather than treating culture and commerce as separate, the study shows how Gen Z's practices link symbolic meaning, cultural capital, and market logic within a globalized creative economy.

In the end, this methodology highlights the study's contribution: placing Gen Z's consumption at the intersection of sociology and creative-industry research, while offering practical insights for businesses and policymakers in a fast-changing global market.

4. Case Studies and Findings

4.1. Music and Streaming Platforms

Music is one of the clearest examples of how Generation Z is changing creative industries. Streaming services such as Spotify, Apple Music, and TikTok Music are no longer just channels for distribution; they have become central platforms that shape identity and social interaction. From a sociological view, music choices act as markers of belonging, taste, and lifestyle. Many Gen Z listeners create playlists to express their personalities, share songs with friends to show closeness, or adopt niche genres to mark identity. These practices confirm that music consumption is not only functional but also symbolic.

From a business perspective, algorithm-based recommendations are key. TikTok's short-video model shows how user-generated content can make songs spread globally within days. This highlights how Gen Z are both consumers and distributors, blurring the line between producer and audience. Subscriptions, micro-transactions, and personalization features increase revenue while keeping users tied to these ecosystems. Recent research shows that Generation Z places strong value on services that provide personalization and authenticity. McKee, Dahl, and Peltier highlight how Gen Z navigates the "personalization paradox," balancing the benefits of tailored digital experiences with privacy concerns. As illustrated in Figure 3, the streaming ecosystem forms a feedback loop in which Gen Z users consume and share music, algorithmic systems curate and recommend content, viral dissemination amplifies cultural adoption, and monetization mechanisms sustain the platform. This cycle demonstrates how users function simultaneously as consumers and producers ("prosumers"), reinforcing both cultural participation and business growth. These findings suggest that music streaming platforms, by offering customized and community-driven engagement, not only support identity construction but also create sustainable business models [13].

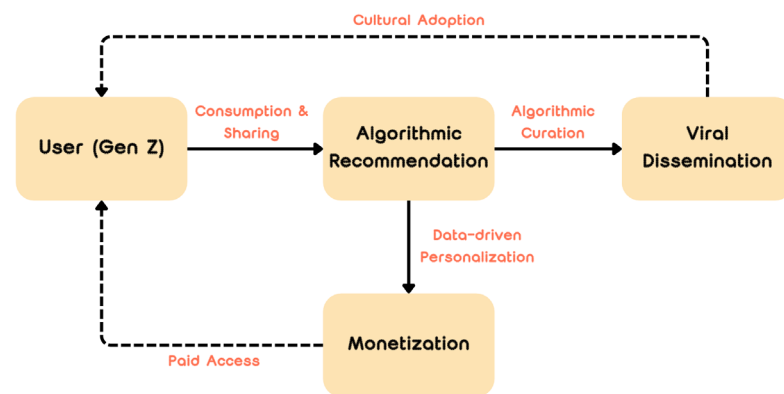


Figure 3. Music Streaming Ecosystem and Prosumer Dynamics. Author's schematic illustration.

4.2. Fashion and Luxury

Fashion consumption shows both contradictions and transformations in Gen Z's behavior. Sociological studies point out that clothing plays an important role in expressing identity, signaling cultural capital, and navigating social hierarchies. Surveys indicate that Gen Z consumers often value sustainability and inclusivity, citing ethical labor and environmental care as decisive factors. Yet behavior does not always match values: many still buy from fast-fashion brands like Shein because of low cost and convenience. This "attitude-behavior gap" shows how ideals and practical needs coexist.

In response, the luxury sector has developed new strategies. Brands such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton increasingly use omnichannel retail, augmented reality fittings, and collaborations with digital creators to attract Gen Z. These approaches show that Gen Z values digital experiences and authenticity as much as material exclusivity [14]. The growth of resale platforms and circular fashion also reveals how sustainability is now both a social expectation and a business opportunity. Luxury markets are moving toward models that combine exclusivity with ecological responsibility, rewarding brands that align with Gen Z's cultural values.

As illustrated in Figure 4, the attitude-behavior gap is visible in the contrast between Gen Z's strong endorsement of sustainable values (75%) and their continued reliance on fast-fashion purchases (62%). The figure highlights how aspirational cultural values coexist with pragmatic economic choices, underscoring the tension between ideals and everyday practices.

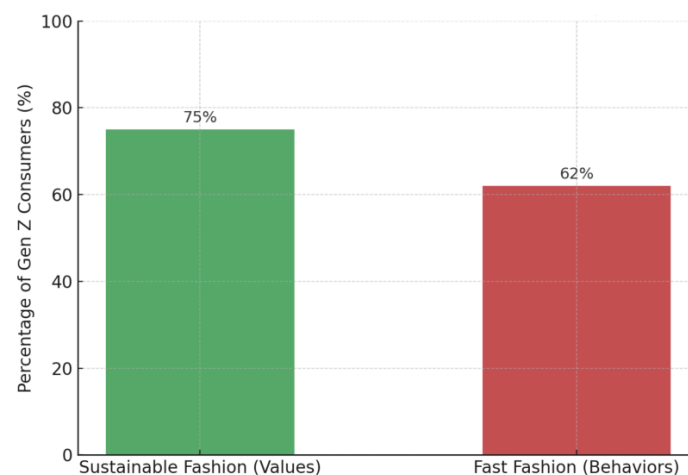


Figure 4. Attitude-Behavior Gap in Gen Z Fashion Consumption: Sustainability Values vs. Fast-Fashion Behaviors. Source: Data adapted from Deloitte (2023), McKinsey (2024), and New York Post (2024); author's visualization.

4.3. Gaming and Virtual Worlds

Gaming illustrates how Gen Z reshapes creative industries through interactive and participatory cultures. Sociologically, online games and virtual worlds provide spaces for socialization, identity play, and community building. Platforms such as Fortnite and Roblox are not only entertainment products but also cultural arenas where users design avatars, build spaces, and join rituals. This represents a "prosumer culture," where production and consumption merge [15]. In many cases, virtual identities are as meaningful as offline ones, strengthening gaming's role in building social capital.

From the business side, virtual economies generate significant revenue. Sales of skins, digital goods, and currencies reach billions each year. Roblox, for instance, continues to grow among users under 25, with profits coming from user-created content and community events. Fortnite's in-game concerts further show how gaming platforms now mix music, fashion, and art. These cases demonstrate that Gen Z's gaming practices not only reflect identity work but also drive diversification and platformization in global creative industries.

4.4. Digital Art, NFTs, and AI Creativity

The growth of digital art, NFTs, and AI-based creativity reveals the experimental side of Gen Z consumption. Studies since 2023 note that Gen Z acts both as cultural innovators and speculative investors in NFT markets. From a sociological angle, NFTs give young consumers new ways to express individuality and uniqueness. Buying digital collectibles or supporting virtual idols becomes a way to show distinction. The popularity of AI-generated art on platforms like MidJourney and Runway shows how Gen Z embraces technology both as creators and consumers, reinforcing their role as digital natives.

From a business viewpoint, NFTs demonstrate both opportunity and risk. Initial enthusiasm drove high prices, but later corrections showed the need for sustainable models linked with wider cultural systems such as games, music, and fashion. Increasingly, industries combine AI and blockchain to engage consumers. For example, K-pop agencies now develop virtual idols and AI-generated songs, targeting Gen Z's interest in novelty and interactivity. These trends show that Gen Z is not just buyers of cultural goods but also drivers of technological change in the creative economy.

4.5. Global vs Local Dynamics

Gen Z's consumption also reflects the interplay between global and local forces. K-pop is a strong example: groups like BTS and Blackpink reach global audiences through digital platforms while maintaining a Korean identity. Scholars describe this as "glocalization," where products are both global commodities and local cultural symbols. Fans worldwide engage in practices of belonging, activism, and solidarity, showing both cultural and social significance. At the same time, agencies combine local branding with international expansion through collaborations, tours, and fan platforms.

Other regions also show this pattern. In China, Douyin and Bilibili adapt global user-generated models but embed Chinese cultural codes. In Africa, Afrobeats music and digital art have gained global popularity, supported by streaming services and diaspora networks. These cases confirm that Gen Z's consumption is diverse, shaped by local identities within global flows.

4.6. Synthesis of Findings

Across the cases, several key themes stand out. First, Gen Z's consumption is symbolic and performative, linked to identity, cultural capital, and social belonging. Second, it is deeply shaped by digital platforms, which act as both cultural and commercial infrastructures. Third, Gen Z are active participants, producers, distributors, and co-creators, blurring the line between consumption and production. Finally, global-local interactions

show that while Gen Z is part of global cultural flows, their practices remain tied to local contexts.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate the value of an interdisciplinary view. From sociology, Gen Z's consumption reveals identity struggles and cultural negotiations. From business, it drives innovation in platforms, branding, and creative models. Combining these perspectives shows that Gen Z's role is not only cultural but also economic, making them central to the transformation of global creative industries.

5. Discussion

The case studies show that Generation Z's consumption in global creative industries cannot be explained by only one perspective. From sociology, these practices are ways of building identity, gaining cultural capital, and joining symbolic networks. For example, playlists, fashion choices, gaming avatars, and NFT collections are not just goods but also markers of belonging, authenticity, and individuality. At the same time, these practices are linked to larger forces such as algorithms, platform rules, and the growth of global markets.

From a business perspective, Gen Z is central to innovation in creative industries. Their role as "prosumers" blurs the line between consumption and production, pushing companies to rethink how they engage and earn revenue. Many platforms now rely on user-generated content, interactive marketing, and co-creation to capture Gen Z's cultural energy. This shows the close relationship between culture and business: identity work creates demand, while industry structures provide the systems through which identities are expressed and shared.

The integration of sociology and business also reveals tensions. On one hand, Gen Z expresses strong values of inclusivity and sustainability. On the other hand, their actual behaviors, such as buying fast fashion or speculating on NFTs, often conflict with those values. These contradictions expose social inequalities, including uneven access to digital tools and the persistence of global cultural hierarchies. Economically, they raise concerns about platform monopolies, insecure labor in creative sectors, and the environmental costs of digital consumption.

Despite these tensions, the discussion highlights the dual nature of Gen Z consumption. It is both a cultural practice of meaning-making and a driver of business change. Understanding this dual role is important for scholars who aim to connect theory across disciplines, as well as for policymakers and practitioners who must adapt to this generation's expectations. Gen Z is aspirational, practical, and transformative at the same time. Their influence will continue to reshape creative industries by linking identity, culture, and commerce in new ways.

6. Conclusion

This study explored Generation Z's consumption in global creative industries using an interdisciplinary approach that combines sociology and business research. The findings show that Gen Z is not passive consumers but active cultural participants. Their practices, such as identity expression through music, fashion, gaming, and digital art, both create cultural meaning and stimulate new business models.

The key contribution of this paper is its cross-disciplinary framework. By linking sociological concepts of identity and culture with business models of platforms, branding, and sustainability, the study offers a more complete picture of Gen Z's role in the creative economy. This integration helps overcome the limits of studies that focus only on either culture or commerce.

In practical terms, the results suggest that companies must design strategies that match Gen Z's expectations for authenticity, inclusivity, and sustainability. Policymakers, meanwhile, need to address inequalities in digital access and improve labor protections in creative sectors.

Future research should expand this foundation by using surveys and comparative studies across different regions, especially outside the West. It should also examine how AI-generated content and new digital infrastructures will shape cultural and economic practices for the coming generations.

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