



Misk مسك
مؤسسة محمد بن سلمان
Mohammed Bin Salman
Foundation

The Power of Youth Creation

How new generations are shaping culture in the imagination economy

Powered by

OLIVER WYMAN
A MARSH BUSINESS



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
--------------------------	----------

Youth As Catalysts For Change	6
--------------------------------------	----------

The Framing Forces Shaping Youth Culture	8
Social and Identity	8
Governance and Institutions	10

The Driving Forces Shaping Youth Culture	13
Technology	13
Economy	20
Media	28

Enabling a Youth-Led Future of Creativity and Innovation	35
---	-----------

Conclusion	40
-------------------	-----------

Sources	42
----------------	-----------

Foreword

In a world transformed by rapid innovation and constant cultural evolution, youth are not just participants in change; they are the main drivers.

Today, nearly 75% of young people say they want to be creators, paving the way for the “imagination economy,” where creation and distribution are open to everyone at unprecedented speed and ease, provided they have access to the right tools. The opportunity is vast: generative AI alone could add \$20 trillion to global GDP by 2030. Yet creative potential does not automatically translate into shared prosperity. It must be enabled by systems that make originality valuable, by safeguards that keep participation fair, and by pathways that turn cultural expression into livelihoods.

This report, developed by Mohammed Bin Salman Foundation (Misk) with the support of Oliver Wyman, explores how culture, innovation, and creativity intersect to shape the future. It shows that as execution is increasingly automated, advantage shifts to authenticity, judgment, and context, qualities deeply rooted in heritage and community. Culture is the driver, youth are its builders.

Our task is straightforward and urgent: enable young creators fairly, with access, skills, clear standards, and responsible platforms. Do this well, and we will see nations prosper, economies diversify, and societies reconnect with their roots.

Omar Najjar

Deputy CEO, Misk Foundation

Executive Summary

Gen Z is not waiting to inherit culture; they are shaping it. By doing so, they are turning identity, heritage, and digital fluency into new markets and movements. The Power of Youth Creation shows how creativity — not just technology — is the decisive lever of growth and inclusion, and what it will take for institutions and industry to keep pace.

Three conclusions stand out. First, technology has lowered barriers from coding to content, moving youth from passive consumption to active creation. However, trust, literacy, and equitable access determine whether these tools compound advantage or broaden opportunity.



Access as the multiplier

Generative AI could add **\$20 trillion** to global GDP by 2030,¹ yet half of the world's schools remain offline, a stark reminder that unequal access will limit potential unless connectivity and capability gaps close. Only when wide, inclusive access to the tools driving this new economy is available can the full potential of this innovation be tapped.



From AI to imagination infrastructure

We are entering a new economy coined “the imagination economy”. Here ideas are capital and AI is the execution engine. As execution is increasingly automated, the scarce skills are aesthetic preference, ethics, cultural literacy, and curation. Heritage, originality, craft, and local stories rise to elevated strategic importance that may unlock economic advantage.

Second, the economy is reorganizing around cultural value: gaming and user-generated platforms train production and entrepreneurship, while craft and heritage translate identity into premium demand. A young generation that has grown up amidst economic turbulence is keen to leverage the innovation available to them to express themselves and create: **75%** of Gen Z say they want to be creators.



Volatility to venture

A crisis-tested cohort is converting uncertainty into action: **52%** of Gen Z worry about financial security, yet **45%** already run an additional income stream,² from content to esports to micro-enterprise. The result is a real “learning-and-earning” economy built by youth.



Culture as economic strategy

From K-pop playbooks to artisan-brand partnerships, culture is translating into jobs, exports, soft power, and civic pride. Looking at South Korea's example, the country's exports of culture-related intellectual property, from music and film to games, more than tripled over the last decade to **\$10 billion** in 2024.³

Third, media power has redistributed from a few gatekeepers to millions of creators: influence now travels through curators and micro-communities, elevating diverse voices. Yet, algorithms and speed also compress attention, strain wellbeing, and blur lines between leisure, commerce, and civic life. These dynamics spark a desire for authenticity and community that can be observed in current consumer preference.



Influence fostering participation

Distribution has flipped: **82%** of Gen Z discover new products via influencer marketing, with 71% of that impact driven by micro-influencers.⁴ Culture now spreads through creators and communities, raising urgent questions about algorithms, mental health, and fairness.



Authenticity as advantage

Young consumers reward proof, not posture. **53%** of consumers are willing to pay **10%** extra for sustainable food and drink,⁵ signaling premium demand for credible, values-driven brands and institutions.

In summary, a new economy has dawned, where ideas drive value. As AI automates production, the advantage shifts to soft skills, judgment, and originality, elevating heritage and culture as strategic assets rather than nostalgia. This shows up in markets on two fronts: a surge toward creative industries and a clear ambition among youth to be creators; enabled by distribution at scale through influencers and micro-communities.

However, to unlock the full potential of young creators, equitable access to AI tools and strong guardrails are essential. The path forward is collaborative: governments, educators, platforms, and corporates must co-build ecosystems that pair access with ethics, so culture becomes both competitive edge and shared prosperity.

The report's recommendations are practical, such as: fund a youth-led city "story map" that brings local voices online and into classrooms; set up a national youth council to help write simple rules for AI labels and basic IP protection; and back small creator labs with micro-grants and clear contract templates so side projects can become real businesses. Steps like these are easy to start, build trust fast, and show how creativity can turn into skills, jobs, and pride.

The Misk Foundation's long-term commitment is to empower youth at scale. By convening partners, seeding capability, and championing responsible innovation, Misk aims to ensure young people are not merely visible in cultural and economic arenas but equipped to lead them. This paper offers a roadmap: treat culture as capital, design for inclusion and trust, and turn originality into shared value.



Youth As Catalysts For Change

Each generation reshapes culture with its values and ideas, challenging old norms and creating new ones. Culture has rarely seemed more fluid, connected, and open to reinvention than it does right now. Today's creative young people are harnessing digital technology and new economic models to drive culture change rapidly and in profound ways.

In this paper, we explore how young people are turning innovation into expression, expression into movements, and movements into lasting cultural change. We also seek to understand the forces that are influencing Generation Z as they reshape culture and create new norms.

Drawing on UNESCO's framing, we define culture as the shared values, practices, and creative outputs that organize social life, transmit identity across generations, and enable collective adaptation and innovation.⁶ In our definition, culture spans norms, narratives, and creative expression, including literature, music, design, media, routines, and rituals.

When we talk about youth culture, we refer to young people's shared experiences and distinct lifestyles, often shaped by how they spend their free time or relate to institutions. In a narrower sense, youth culture can define smaller, more independent communities that function outside traditional adult structures.

The idea of a distinct youth culture first gained prominence in 1950s America. Researchers described a "society within a society", with young people forming values, behaviors, and identities separate from those of adults. A large part of society considered this emerging youth culture to be a threat to established norms. While its behaviors and expressions were subversive at the time, they eventually became part of mainstream culture.

This pattern has repeated itself in each generation. Movements and cultural forms we today take for granted started as youth-led expressions. Consider music genres like rock 'n' roll, punk, and hip hop; artistic styles like graffiti and street art; and political and social causes like the

movements for gender equality in Latin America and climate protection in Southeast Asia. In each case, they were created by young people challenging the status quo and gained acceptance only after years of persistence.

This suggests that the energy, creativity, and imagination of today's young people will once again reshape culture to meet the needs of their generation. The accelerated pace of innovation means that this may happen faster in this generation than before. Take the example of drifting. Once an illegal street practice in the Gulf Cooperation Council region, it gained rapid acceptance as an official motorsport.

Influences shaping the youth today

Like all cultures, youth cultures are co-created and shared by groups with similar aspirations. They are, however, more dynamic than older cultural institutions. In a hyperconnected world, youth cultures are not only local but global, constantly shaped by technology, economics, politics, and social change. Thus, to understand how Gen Z is reshaping culture, we identify five key forces influencing young people.

Framing forces define the wider context in which young people grow up, build trust, and form their sense of belonging. We highlight two framing forces: the social and identity force as well as the governance and institutional force. We also focus on three driving forces where innovation and cultural impact are most visible: technology, economy, and media and pop culture.

The young people interviewed for this report have a strikingly clear view about what parts of the culture they would like to change. They pointed to the normalization of exclusion, whether based on race, faith, gender, class, or geography, and to outdated norms that restrict diversity and mutual understanding.

They called for stronger community and more inclusivity, values that are universal but nurtured locally. They also emphasized the need for increased empathy and mutual understanding. In the words of Karla Baños, an AFS Youth Ambassador from Mexico: "Every one of us is a human,

not a stranger." These views reflect the determination of the youth to renegotiate cultural realities they had no role in shaping.

We do not carry the same allegiance to outdated structures, and we are more willing to question why things are done a certain way. From climate strikes to education equity movements, young people have proven we can turn frustration into organized action. More importantly, youth carry the lived reality of intersecting injustices and the imagination to design alternatives. That combination of urgency and creativity gives us the credibility and the drive to demand cultural change that older systems have failed to deliver.

Rida Karim, founder of the nonprofit, Technology Youth Empowerment

Methodology

This report combines desk research and peer-reviewed studies with qualitative insights. For a quantitative backbone, it uses the Misk Foundation's 2024 Global Youth Index, a proprietary survey of over 41,000 young people aged 18 to 30 years across 40 countries.

Qualitative insights were sourced from expert interviews with government and corporate leaders, a recorded panel discussion at the AFS Youth Summit, and in-depth interviews with 15 of the 100 delegates at the AFS Youth Summit. The youth interviewees are also aged 18 to 30 years and most are from Africa, Central Asia, and Latin America.



The Framing Forces Shaping Youth Culture

What makes Gen Z different from those before it? Which realities and experiences led them to develop their points of view? To answer these questions, we look at the core factors that shape young people and the way they understand and enact culture.

Social and Identity

Belonging in a connected world

Demographics

Gen Z includes 2 billion individuals worldwide who were born between 1996 and 2010, accounting for roughly 26% of the global population. They are already making their presence felt in the workforce and electorate.⁷ The Middle East and Africa have especially high concentrations of Gen Z members due to the youthfulness of their population.

More than 60% of the population in sub-Saharan Africa and 55% in the Middle East and North Africa are under 30.⁸ In Saudi Arabia, for example, 63% is under 30.⁹ By comparison, this figure is 36% for the countries that are part of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.¹⁰

Gen Z is diverse. The oldest members are in their 20s, navigating careers, rent, and parenthood. The youngest are just entering adolescence. Across the age divide, Gen Z’s shared experience of constant disruption has forged a generation that is marked by resilience and restlessness.

They grew up under pandemic lockdowns, fears of economic collapse, war on most continents, and warnings of climate doom.¹¹ As the first truly digital native population, they grew up exposed to real-time reminders of how unstable the world can feel in their social feeds.

They are the first generation to grow up with the internet as a part of daily life. Today, 95% of Gen Z own or have access to a smartphone, and 84% consider it their most essential device.¹² On average, they spend over six hours online daily, nearly half of that on social media platforms that connect and exhaust them.¹³

Constant digital exposure has brought them closer to the world but has also contributed to an ongoing mental health crisis. Anxiety, burnout, and feelings of isolation are widespread. The same tools that give them a voice make them hyper-aware of injustice, crisis, and personal comparison. Still, they remain engaged and outspoken.¹⁴

In an era of what scholars call “networked individualism”, Gen Z identity often includes a layer of digital belonging, in addition to identification with home, school, or cultural heritage. Young people form networks based on rapidly changing interests rather than on fixed groups.

Accordingly, identity itself is increasingly part of youthful creative expression and shifts with fast-changing contexts. Culture is developing organically with less gatekeeping. Trends travel through online networks, get remixed across borders, and return as new norms in fashion, language, music, and civic expression.

95%

of Gen Z have access to a smartphone.

84%

say it is their most essential device. They spend 6+ hours online each day, nearly half of that on social media

Education

Gen Z is perhaps the most educated generation in history. They are more likely than Millennials or Generation X to finish high school and pursue higher education. In the US, 57% of 18- to 21-year-olds no longer in high school are enrolled in college, compared to 52% of Millennials and just 43% of Gen X at the same age.

Gen Z is not only pursuing formal education, but is also deeply engaged in self-directed learning. Members of this demographic use YouTube, TikTok, online forums, and open-access platforms for self-guided learning and creative experimentation.¹⁵ This generation is shaping not just how knowledge is acquired, but also how it is shared and valued.

Young people aspire to obtain formal qualifications as a foundation for the future. But they also use the internet to explore their personal interests. YouTube education channels illustrate their demand for a model that blends storytelling with education. This approach makes complex subjects engaging with titles like “What If You Never Stopped Growing?” or “How Far Can You Go Without Sleeping?”

A summary of YouTube’s top education channels in English below:

Name	# Subscribers (in Millions)	# Videos (in Thousands)
Bright Side	44.7	10.3
National Geographic	25.1	10.9
TED-Ed	21.8	2.2
Crash Course	16.6	1.6
Khan Academy	9.0	8.9

A highly educated and self-informed generation is making its presence felt in the civic realm. In 2024, a blockbuster election year when 3.7 billion people across 72 countries were eligible to vote, Gen Z’s voice shaped the debate.¹⁶ The next chapter will explore how this generation is shaping policy dialogue online and through tangible civic action.



Democratizing digital education in Saudi Arabia

Tuwaiq Academy in Saudi Arabia offers free, intensive bootcamps in high-tech fields like AI, game development, cybersecurity, and cloud computing. By mid-2025, more than 35,000 students graduated from the Academy, with over 80% securing jobs within six months.¹⁷ The Academy runs around 200 programs annually, co-designed with partners such as Google, Meta, Nvidia, and Huawei.

Beyond training, the Academy facilitates employment through thousands of job interviews and partnerships with 60 companies. Tuwaiq provides formal, credentialed pathways into high-demand industries while remaining accessible and democratized. Its success shows how innovative, digitally enabled models are setting new global benchmarks for youth learning.

INSIGHTS SUMMARY

Social and Identity: belonging in a connected world

Gen Z is the first generation to grow up with the internet as a part of daily life and one of the most educated cohorts in history. Coming of age in an age of technological disruption and financial crises, this generation is making its voice heard in the civic realm and its presence felt in every cultural sphere.

2 billion

individuals worldwide who were born between 1996 and 2010 are included in Gen Z, accounting for roughly 26% of the global population.

Members of Gen Z are more likely than those in the Millennial or Gen X generations to finish high school and pursue higher education.

Governance and Institutions

Building systems that enable youth agency

Policy advocacy

As the first members of Gen Z entered adolescence in the early 2010s, it became clear that this generation would be a force to be reckoned with in policy development and public affairs. These digital natives are already using social media and the internet to challenge politicians and other decision-makers.

They are influencing policy landscapes in numerous countries, whether at the polling station, on the streets, or through online youth movements that connect shared causes across the globe. Right across the world, youth see active citizenship as a responsibility, marking a generational shift from passive observation to active engagement.

In Saudi Arabia, for example, 84% of youth believe that it is important to express their opinion on community issues.^{18,19} Fifty-five percent claim to understand a great

deal or fair amount about how government policies are decided. And 40% report they have taken part in making decisions about issues concerning young people over the past year.²⁰

Policies partly determine whether youth creativity scales or stalls. Inclusive ecosystems for creativity — such as public funding, cultural rights, IP protections, visas and mobility, broadband access, and safe participation spaces — enable young people to move from online expression to real-world cultural projects.

UNESCO's 2022 *ReShaping Policies for Creativity (2022)* and UNDP's 2024 Human Development Report show that when institutions lower access barriers and co-design programs with youth, cultural participation and creative entrepreneurship grow more diverse, resilient, and equitable.



Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 encourages civic engagement among the youth

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 shows how governments can invite young people to shape governance through constructive participation. Youth councils and initiatives in culture, entrepreneurship, and heritage have provided spaces for dialogue between government and young people.

An example of this is Misk's Youth Impact Assembly, where Saudi youth and selected partners can shape Saudi youth policy recommendations. These platforms allow young people to contribute ideas, share concerns, and help design cultural projects that reflect local heritage and global creativity. Institutional reform is tied to youth input via engagements that blend tradition with innovation.

Shifting the political culture

Across Africa and the Middle East, young people are remodeling the political culture through digital expression. In Lebanon, for example, youth mobilized through Instagram and WhatsApp during the 2019 protests. Their use of graffiti, street art, music, and humor became widely shared symbols of social identity and unity. Despite a lack of formal political change, youth engagement reshaped how disagreement and public debate were expressed and remembered.

The Indonesian election in 2024 offers another example. Some 55% of the 205 million registered voters were under 30, also representing most of the country's active social media users. President Prabowo Subianto Djojohadikusumo, who had lost presidential elections in 2014 and 2019, understood how decisive their vote would be.

His presidential campaign featured TikTok video clips that presented him as a good-humored grandfather, fostering an image of authenticity and relatability. The strategy helped him win over Millennial and Gen Z voters and emerge victorious in the first round of voting.²¹

In Senegal, young people turned to social media to exchange ideas and engage around the presidential elections in March 2024. In a context of restrictions on political gatherings, digital platforms became a channel for political communication and voter information during the campaign, which culminated in the election of President Bassirou Diomaye Faye.²²

Recent events in Nepal illustrate the power of Gen Z when mobilized through digital platforms. The online campaign evolved into large-scale demonstrations amid longstanding governance challenges. After authorities restricted access to social media platforms, youth-led mobilization accelerated.

These examples show how online platforms are empowering young citizens to participate in shaping public discourse. There are risks, however, to online political engagement, including exposure to misinformation and an overreliance on image-driven policy preferences. This leads to our next discussion point: Gen Z's growing distrust in institutions.

Distrust in institutions

For Gen Z, digital platforms are the primary way they engage with politics. Following the news, debating policies, and spreading messages online fits into their daily routines, often on the same platforms where they share music, fashion, or personal updates. Personal and public life are blurring and civic engagement is an everyday experience.

The line between leisure and activism has faded. Entertainment is no longer an escape from reality because political debates, misinformation, and ideological divides follow young people into their hobbies and communities. The platforms that fuel their creativity and connection also expose them to manipulation and division, contributing to a sense of disillusionment.

Gen Z's political priorities



Gender and racial equality

Campaigns like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter show how personal experiences can be amplified into global collective action.



Civic engagement and policy advocacy

From the Arab Spring protests to mobilization around the 2016 US Presidential Election, social platforms enabled youth to organize and amplify voices while also exposing them to misinformation and polarization.



Climate activism

Youth-led climate strikes demonstrate how everyday civic action can achieve global visibility, yet also risk being politicized or dismissed.



Health and wellbeing

Online debates around COVID-19 and vaccination highlight how digital platforms inform and empower but also fuel fear and division.



Sports and activism

Even in areas once seen as neutral, from running clubs to major sporting events, youth have turned leisure into a space for statements on justice and equality. Examples of professional athletes include the Olympic Refugee Team where athletes compete under the Olympic flag, highlighting displacement and refugee rights.

Worldwide, there is an erosion of trust in public institutions, particularly among the young. The 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer, a survey sampling the responses of over 32,000 respondents across 28 countries, found that 58% feel a high or moderate sense of grievance towards institutions, governments, and the rich. “Gen Z is disproportionately aggrieved and disillusioned with traditional systems, as they see them as outdated, unequal, and unresponsive to their needs.”²³

Similarly, Oliver Wyman’s Gen Z report revealed that 39% of Gen Z are more likely to trust their employers than the government.²⁴ The same trend is evident in Misk’s Global Youth Index (GYI). Respondents reported that they had little trust that international organizations will address the global issues that are important to them.²⁵

Gen Z has low trust in governments, corporations, media, education systems, and even healthcare institutions. Yet this cynicism does not translate into apathy. When united by a shared desire for change, Gen Z is a formidable force in shaping cultural norms and public life. Members of the generation demand accountability, experiment with alternative systems, and are redefining the relationship between citizens and institutions. The following chapter will explore how this drive for impact connects with another powerful motivator: Gen Z’s aspirations for financial security and economic participation.

2/3

of Gen Z members worldwide worry that government and business leaders, journalists and reporters are intentionally misleading them.

50%

of Gen Z in Southeast Asia distrust traditional insurers because they are fearful of hidden clauses and high premiums.

50%

of American Gen Z members report having “very little” trust in Congress.²⁶

3%

of American Gen Z members report having a “great deal” of trust in Congress.

INSIGHTS SUMMARY

Governance and institutions: building systems that enable youth agency

Gen Z is influencing policy landscapes in numerous countries, whether at the polling station, on the streets, or through online youth movements that connect shared causes across the globe. Members of this generation have little faith in established institutions and a determination to reform old systems they believe to be unjust and dysfunctional.

45%

of youth in Saudi Arabia believe that it is important to express their opinion on community issues.

From Senegal and Lebanon to Indonesia and Nepal, social media and youth movements have helped to bring about political change.



The Driving Forces Shaping Youth Culture

Having discussed the framing forces that set the context for cultural change, we now turn to the driving forces through which innovation and creativity are directly shaping Gen Z culture.

Technology

Culture at the speed of thought

Takeaways

The imagination economy democratizes who can innovate, turning creative ideas into widespread economic value. To unlock the full cultural and economic upside, access must be widened to more young people across the globe.

As execution is automated by technology, originality, soft skills, heritage, and tradition will remain uniquely human advantages.

- Technological advances need trust to be valuable. Building digital competencies and collaborative governance are priorities to protect young users while unlocking innovation.
- Generative AI could add up to **\$20 trillion** to global GDP by 2030 through productivity, new business models, and creative output.

- A World Economic Forum survey finds that creative thinking, analytical thinking, and emotional intelligence are among the five most valued skills for employers and youth entering the workforce.²⁷
- Although **42%** of users have experienced AI providing inaccurate or misleading content, only **19%** check and click through sources of the output.²⁸

From knowledge to imagination

Gen Z comes of age when artificial intelligence, mobile devices, and social networks have erased barriers between idea and execution and when digital systems are the infrastructure of identity, community, and work. Ideas can be turned into realities almost instantly, creating new possibilities and raising questions about responsibility and innovation.

Technology is the ultimate enabler for young people who want to shape their society. It is no longer just a tool but also the brush they use to bring their ideas to life and the canvas where their creativity unfolds. For a generation that moves fluently between the physical and digital and the local and global, moving from inspiration to execution happens at the speed of thought.

This transition will mean that the youth may need to cultivate different skills to than their parents and grandparents. But these new frameworks will need to be rooted in heritage and tradition. Building trust through inclusive governance and shared values is more important than ever as societies strive to ensure that innovation benefits all of their members and young people in particular.

Human-centered skills are rising in importance as machines handle routine tasks.

WEF's "The Future of Jobs Report 2025"²⁹

The imagination economy as an opportunity for nations

The world is entering an imagination economy, an era where technology transforms creative thinking into value with less need for procedural or repetitive labor. Advances in AI, virtual reality, and computational design are driving this next wave of economic and cultural innovation.

Today, ideas are capital, and AI is the factory that brings them to life.

Ali Cheikhali, Google's AI strategy lead for Middle East and North Africa

New tools and platforms are democratizing creation in unprecedented ways. Almost anyone, regardless of technical skill, can bring their ideas to life using intuitive AI-powered tools. Swedish company Lovable, for example, provides vibe-coding tools that enable users to develop software products through simple voice and text prompts.

This means knowing how to code is less of a barrier to experimenting and developing ideas than it was before. Technology is no longer just about creating efficiencies, but also allowing more people to participate in economic and cultural creation. This empowers societies to innovate in ways that were previously unimaginable.

Economists forecast a windfall from this technological shift. Generative AI could add up to \$20 trillion to global GDP by 2030 through productivity, new business models, and creative output.³⁰

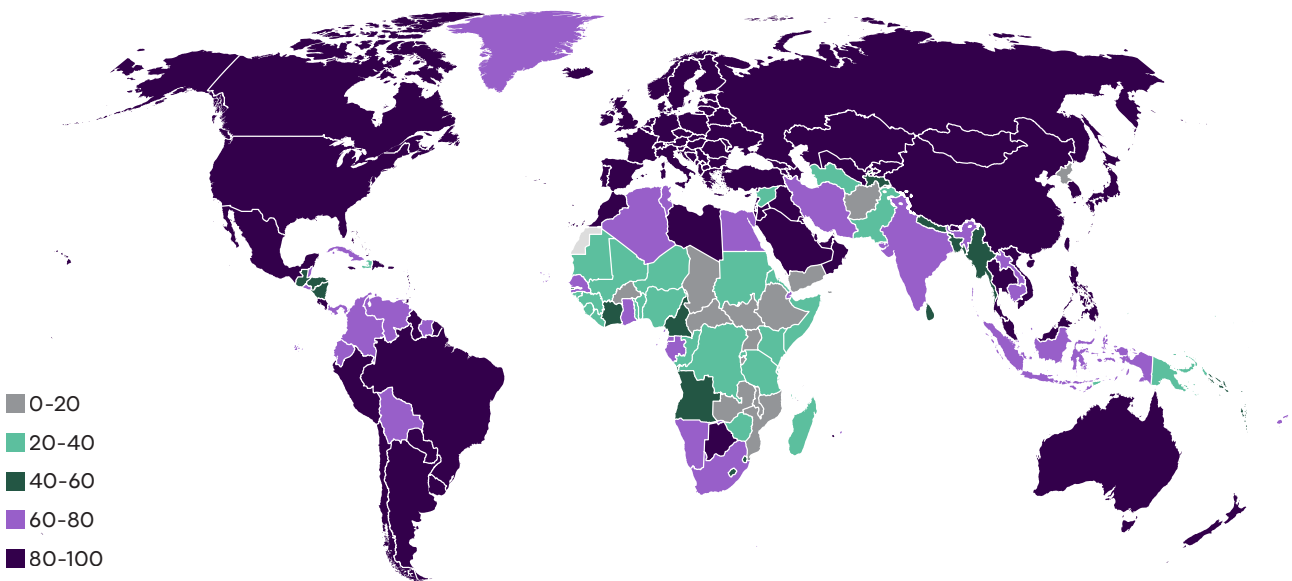
Along with this opportunity comes the risk of exclusion. The benefits of the imagination economy depend on people's ability to access digital technology and infrastructure. Half of the world's schools do not have internet access, a gap concentrated in Africa and Asia.³³ This leaves vast pools of creativity untapped, limits cultural diversity in digital content, and reinforces the dominance of western-centric narratives.

The digital divide within and between nations may deepen as adoption of new tools and platforms advances. Those left offline will not have the experience, skills, or

exposure to participate meaningfully in the emerging digital economy. For technology-driven prosperity to scale universally, institutions and businesses will need to strive for equitable access.

Broad, equitable access to AI and next-generation creative tools is not just a matter of fairness. It is the precondition for inclusive growth and a rich, diverse cultural future. Countries like Saudi Arabia, which have recognized their creativity as their new source of wealth, are creating a blueprint for others.

Exhibit 1: Individuals using the internet (%)



Source: ITU



Case study

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative moves beyond oil as the well of prosperity to embrace code, creativity, and imagination as the raw materials of its future. AI and digital transformation could add over \$135 billion to Saudi Arabia's economy by 2030, accelerating non-oil sector growth and creating tens of thousands of high-value jobs.³¹ The nation already ranks at the top of the Gulf Cooperation Council after the UAE for AI adoption, with 68% of Saudi workers using generative AI in some capacity at least once a week, well above the global average of 55%.³²

INSIGHTS SUMMARY

From knowledge to imagination

20 trillion

AI's projected boost to global GDP by 2030.³⁴

50%

of the world's schools are not connected to the internet.³⁵

The imagination economy radically democratizes who can innovate, turning creative ideas into widespread economic value, but to unlock the full cultural and economic upside, access must be widened to more young people across the globe.

Creativity, empathy, and context are key skills for the future

According to Stanford's latest AI Index Report (2024), AI has surpassed human performance in competencies such as understanding the English language, image classification, and visual reasoning.³⁶ This highlights the need for humans to differentiate themselves from machines.

Soft skills as infrastructure of the future

Technology is changing which skills are most valued. If the knowledge economy rewarded knowing how to do things, the imagination economy rewards knowing what to create and why it matters. WEF's Future of Jobs (2025) survey finds that "creative thinking, analytical thinking, and emotional intelligence" are among the top five most valued skills for both employers and youth entering the workforce.³⁷

In this new environment, soft skills such as creativity, context-framing, storytelling, and cultural literacy decide whether a product is used, a story is shared, and a brand is trusted. These proficiencies are no longer nice-to-haves, but economic drivers that will determine success and failure.

AI prompts are the new language of work. Only those who understand movements, references, and context will master it. In creative and technical work alike, those who can frame problems, curate aesthetics, and apply the right constraints will have an edge. The early results of a focus on these skills can be observed in Saudi Arabia.

The Ministry of Education has prioritized humanities, project-based learning, and intergenerational mentorship alongside technical STEM training in its national curriculum reforms. There are signs that this move is already helping to transition Saudi Arabia from an oil to an imagination economy. In 2024, 44% of graduates found employment within six months, up from 13% in 2016.

As this example shows, building soft skills in the youth requires action from government and an appreciation for cultural participation and creative action. Getting young people involved in cultural activities, creative projects, storytelling, and social initiatives helps them develop traits like empathy, adaptability, and ethical awareness. This, in turn, improves their employability.

This stands to reason because creative and interpersonal abilities are not developed in isolation, but through social experiences. Only by building these skills in the real-world

will today's youth be able to lead, curate, and innovate in a responsible manner in the emerging cultural landscape.³⁸

Cultural participation and experiential learning are often deeply rooted in heritage and tradition, forging a vital link between the past and future. In the imagination economy, creative action and cultural engagement can energize cultures and promote economic prosperity. The next case study highlights how heritage is driving innovation and national ambition in Saudi Arabia.

Tradition and heritage as sources of originality

Saudi Arabia envisions the past as a gateway to a prosperous future. Three-quarters of Saudi youth see themselves as key players in building modern identity while staying proud of their heritage, up from 48% in 2015.³⁹ This figure echoes the findings of Misk Foundation's Global Youth Index that 30% of Saudi youth participate in cultural activities at least once a month.

The Ministry of Culture has identified this cultural pride as a core strength and future advantage for the nation. Heritage, language, and tradition will not only be sources of national pride but strategic differentiators that infuse digital content with originality and cultural relevance.

Supporting youth in reinterpreting and revitalizing tradition through innovation offers Saudi Arabia a competitive advantage in a global digital marketplace. In harnessing cultural pride to drive growth of its imagination economy, Saudi Arabia can preserve its past and build a future on a foundation of cultural innovation.

Hind Alessa Senior Manager at Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Culture calls it "strategic authenticity". As Alessa said, "Youth are shifting from consumers to creators and entrepreneurs. Digital platforms are the new marketplaces where heritage and innovation converge to craft identities and incomes."

Her colleague, Talal Fahim, engagement innovation unit head at the Ministry of Culture, added, "Saudi youth can pair cultural pride with cutting-edge innovation to co-create a globally relevant and locally authentic cultural future." Examples of this innovation include projects like KOWN, which reimagines culture in the digital world; Dream Machine, which crowdsources collective creativity; and X-Learning which formalizes training in innovation methodologies.

Technology offers new ways to preserve, share, and renew tradition. Ithra, for instance, has digitized over 10,000 rare Arabic manuscripts and oral histories. These are now woven into interactive installations and multimedia projects that reach schoolchildren across Saudi Arabia.

Ithra’s digital archives and interactive museum experiences have contributed to 400% growth in student field trips since 2022. AI-powered personalization and gamification is getting young people excited about heritage education.⁴⁰

The Ministry’s Cultural Data Infrastructure project enables youth to build datasets, augmented reality trails, and cross-disciplinary exhibitions that merge history with AI-generated storytelling.

In Kazakhstan, youth-led startups use mobile AI and virtual reality to revive endangered languages and crafts. The goal is to preserve and remix tradition for a social-first, global audience. In the words of Fariza Fazyl, an 18-year-old student from Kazakhstan, “Technology will help us amplify the future value of heritage, not just memorialize the past.”

Nations can unlock new sources of growth while empowering youth to shape culture in ways that matter



Immersive cultural experiences

Developing AR/VR installations, virtual heritage spaces, and hybrid exhibitions that merge traditional knowledge with digital storytelling.



AI and cultural ethics

Building culturally-aware AI systems rooted in authentic local identity through local datasets, small language models, and ethical design frameworks.



Cultural data infrastructure

Designing knowledge management systems and cultural databases that preserve national identity while enabling future innovation.



Cross-border collaboration

Engaging in international residencies, hackathons, and cultural diplomacy that foster mutual enrichment and showcase creativity globally.



Physical digital integration

Blending smart heritage sites, AR cultural trails, and interactive museum installations with physical spaces.

INSIGHTS SUMMARY

Creativity, empathy, and context

Top-five future skills

Creative thinking and emotional intelligence rank among the most valued skills for employers and young people entering the workforce.⁴¹

Education outcomes matter

13%

of graduates in Saudi Arabia found employment within six months in 2016.⁴²

VS

44%

of graduates found employment within six months in 2024 following curriculum reforms that prioritized humanities alongside technical skills.

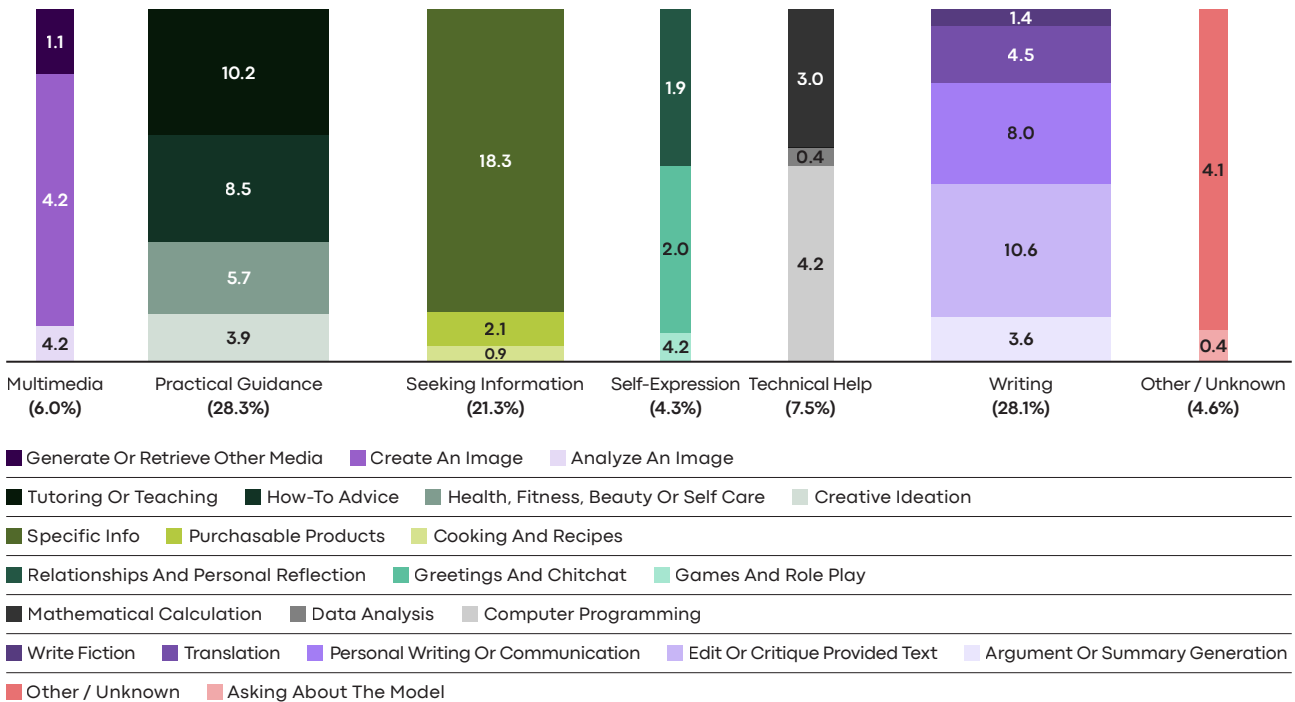
As execution becomes increasingly automated, human advantage shifts to originality, soft skills, and lived experience. These capabilities are best developed through cultural participation — such as storytelling, collaboration, and contextual understanding — using heritage and tradition as a distinctive creative edge.

Building trust and responsibility in a digital world

AI usage has moved from early adopters to the mainstream at remarkable speed, particularly among Gen Z. OpenAI’s analysis of the behavior of its 700 million active weekly users confirms that adoption has broadened beyond early users and that users are performing a wide range of tasks with AI tools:

- The gender split among ChatGPT users resembles the general adult population. Users with feminine names had increased to 52% as of mid-2025, up from 37% in January 2024.⁴³
- ChatGPT is experiencing especially rapid growth in low- and middle-income countries. By May 2025, ChatGPT growth rates in the lowest income countries were over four times higher than those in the highest income countries.⁴⁴
- ChatGPT consumer usage is largely about getting everyday tasks done. Three-quarters of conversations focus on practical guidance, seeking information, and writing. Coding and self-expression remain niche activities.⁴⁵
- The economic impact extends to both work and personal life. Approximately 30% of consumer usage is work-related and approximately 70% is non-work.⁴⁶

Exhibit 2: ChatGPT usage by task type



Source: OpenAI

Despite the high levels of adoption, users do not have complete confidence in AI. Although 42% of users have experienced AI providing inaccurate or misleading content, only 19% check and click through sources of the output.⁴⁷ Anxiety and excitement coexist, with many members of Gen Z feeling uneasy about AI, even as they rely on it to save time.

A survey by the Walton Family Foundation found that 41% of Gen Z respondents feel anxious about AI. They express strong reservations about replacing humans with AI. Just 5% say they would choose an AI doctor over a human.

AI tutors, currently the most accepted AI application, would only be chosen by 18%.⁴⁸

As the first movers on AI and skeptics about institutions, Gen Z will demand accountability and help set norms and frame policy for AI usage. Institutions can foster legitimacy and drive safer, smarter adoption of AI by inviting young creators to co-design standards and pilot projects. Youth co-design could take the form of advisory councils and public-private pilot-to-policy loops that translate good practice into standard practice.

The goal is not to slow down adoption, but to raise confidence and help users know when to trust or not trust the system. AI becomes even more powerful when end-users have the judgment to verify claims, understand limitations, spot synthetic media, and recognize when to escalate requests to a human.

Some of the guardrails that will build trust in AI include clear labeling of AI-generated content, youth-appropriate defaults, tests and audits of high-risk systems, and fast feedback loops between regulators and creators, and transparent impact reporting. Innovation must be balanced with safeguards that ensure AI supports people and culture rather than leaving them behind.

Responsibility and collaboration

Today's pace of innovation unlocks extraordinary opportunities, but it also heightens risk, and with it, the obligation to guide and protect users. Today, digital product cycles move in weeks while policy cycles move in years, creating a widening gap in which digital platforms can become de-facto rule-makers.

The challenge that policymakers face is to build responsibility into how innovation happens without slowing it down. The United Nations' 2024 "Governing AI for Humanity" report sets out a global governance framework that emphasizes collaboration to ensure AI developments are ethical, equitable, and aligned with human rights and sustainable development goals.⁴⁹

The report calls for multi-stakeholder engagement involving governments, industry, academia, civil society, and the youth. Examples of this collaborative approach include advisory councils where young people give input on AI policies; co-creation labs that unite students, engineers, and artists to build trustworthy, culturally relevant AI tools; and hackathons designed to promote ethical innovation and responsible deployment.

Global efforts like the AI for Good summit in Switzerland offer further opportunity for youth participation.⁵⁰ These initiatives allow diverse voices to influence the direction of technology, help build safer systems, and foster global cooperation. In countries like Canada, Brazil, and Japan, national AI strategies are linked closely to economic diversification.

These countries implement initiatives that combine regulatory pilot programs with rapid policy iteration.

Youth safety protocols and content provenance tools are co-developed with local platforms before widespread adoption.⁵¹ Such an approach treats innovation, culture, and governance in a holistic manner rather than treating them as separate tracks.

In the Gulf Cooperation Council, government ministries collaborate with cultural institutions to embed new digital capabilities within heritage, language, and societal norms from the outset. For example, the Dubai Centre for AI launched the Dubai AI Seal,⁵² a certification program to build trust in AI. In Malaysia, the AI Untuk Rakyat (AI for the People) initiative, launched a self-learning online program aimed at demystifying AI.⁵³

These approaches yield real trust and tangible impact that unite culture, youth, and government. They show how sound policy can accelerate responsible innovation while safeguarding communities. As Ali Cheikhali said: "In a world shaped by technology, embedding ethics and culture within innovation is essential, because speed without responsibility endangers society."

Trust among users, creators, and regulators alike is foundational in driving confident adoption. Without trust, even the most powerful technology risks rejection or misuse. Countries that pioneer responsible, inclusive approaches to AI governance will unlock innovation's full potential and help set new cultural norms.

INSIGHTS SUMMARY

Building trust and responsibility in a digital world

Adoption–trust paradox

42%

of users have experienced AI providing inaccurate or misleading content, yet only 19% report checking sources.

Need for media and AI literacy

41%

of Gen Z respondents report feeling anxious about AI.

Technological advances require trust to be valuable. Building digital competencies and collaborative governance is a critical priority to protect young users while unlocking the full innovative potential of AI.



CHAPTER SUMMARY

Ideas are capital and AI is the execution engine, but this promise is unlocked only where access to underlying technology exists. As execution becomes increasingly automated, the advantage shifts toward soft skills enabled by cultural participation, giving heritage and tradition a renewed strategic role. However, only nations that succeed in bridging the trust divide will be able to unlock this distinctive edge. On this foundation, the imagination economy links culture more closely to economic value creation.

The recommendations at the end of this paper call on education systems, industry, and institutions to embed cultural literacy in technology learning, build ethical guardrails for creative work, and develop spaces where young innovators can combine human insight with technological mastery.

The following chapter examines the interplay with Gen Z's economic reality: a security-first mindset, portfolio careers, the allure of entrepreneurship, and evolving spending patterns. It assesses how culture as capital reshapes career paths and income, and why consumption increasingly tilts toward authenticity. In sum, if technology makes everyone a potential creator, market dynamics determine who prospers and on what terms.

Economy

Culture as capital

Takeaways

In the context of economic turbulence, Gen Z craves financial security. Young people are turning volatility into agency through new ways of learning, working, and organizing in the hustle economy.

The same forces transforming work and production are also reshaping consumption, with young consumers gravitating to authenticity, sustainability, and community-anchored brands.

Culture is capital: platforms and craft ecosystems let youth convert creativity and heritage into livelihoods. Where ecosystems (training, fair standards, IP, market access) are in place, cultural innovation scales inclusively.

- The ILO's "Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024" report highlights that young people remain especially vulnerable to economic fluctuations, with one in five worldwide not in employment, education, or training.
- Consumers say they will pay around **10%** more for sustainable goods, yet purchase behavior often returns to convenience, trend velocity, and price sensitivity.
- Roblox paid nearly **\$1 billion** to its creator community in 2024, while Fortnite paid another **\$350 million**.

Youth and the new economic mindset

Generation Z has grown up in an era marked by unprecedented economic volatility and profound societal shifts, experiences that have deeply influenced their worldview, aspirations, and sense of security. This unique economic landscape provides essential context for understanding how young people today approach work, wealth, and cultural expression.

The first members of Gen Z were born in the mid-1990s when the dotcom boom was in full swing and were children when the bubble burst in 2000. Since then, the promise of technology-fueled growth and the threat of macroeconomic volatility have shaped Gen Z's economic outlook.

As the OECD's 2025 Economic Outlook notes, the economy continues to oscillate between rapid gains from new technologies such as AI and risks from trade shocks and financial instability.

One of the largest disruptions was the 2008 global financial crisis, a systemic shock that saw the collapse of major financial institutions worldwide.

The collapse of mortgage-backed securities triggered a crisis that destroyed trillions in household wealth and shook the confidence of millions, including families with Gen Z children. For Gen Z, this event seeded wariness about financial institutions and governmental economic stewardship.

The period following this crisis was characterized by quantitative easing and near-zero interest rates, which ushered in an era of cheap capital and consumer excess. Once again, the good times came to an abrupt halt in 2020. COVID-19 lockdowns shuttered businesses, supply chains faltered, and governments accrued substantial debt to finance relief.

Many individuals accumulated savings under lockdown because they had few opportunities to spend their money. But as economies reopened and restrictions on movement were lifted, inflation roared back and central banks worldwide reacted by hiking interest rates for the first time in more than a decade.

The ILO's "Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024" report highlights that young people remain especially vulnerable to economic fluctuations, with nearly one in five worldwide not in employment, education, or training. This underscores how structural uncertainty has become a defining condition of youth work and innovation.^{54, 55}

Economic turbulence has not affected all regions equally. The ILO's report shows that youth unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa remains among the world's highest at 25% to 30%, while labor market entry is constrained by gender gaps and informal economies.⁵⁶

Yet this structural instability has also nurtured a particularly entrepreneurial generation. Across the Middle East and North Africa, young people are increasingly steering toward self-employment, creative freelancing, and digital ventures aligned with cultural identity, responding to precarious markets by becoming self-reliant.

According to the OECD 2025 Economic Outlook, Asian youth are navigating fast but uneven growth. In Indonesia and South Korea, for example, Gen Z creators are monetizing design and content exports, converting uncertainty into a creative asset. Youth in both countries are embracing creativity and collaborative innovation to survive rather than seeing them as luxuries.⁵⁷

These regional differences show that economic instability does not just shape material conditions. It also transforms values and motivation. For many young people, insecurity fosters creativity, community-building, and an entrepreneurial drive to craft stability through imagination rather than inheritance.

The burning desire for financial security

In this context of economic turbulence, Gen Z craves financial security. According to Misk's Global Youth Index, 33% of youth respondents describe their household financial situation as difficult.⁵⁸ Oliver Wyman's Gen Z report reveals that 52% of Gen Z members worry about their financial security and stability, more than double the percentage of older generations.⁵⁹

Pandemics, recessions, and volatile markets during Gen Z's lifetime have shattered traditional economic assumptions as well as the monetary and psychological safety nets their parents took for granted. Unlike boomers and Generation X who experienced relatively steady economic growth during their formative years, Gen Z grapples with a world where prosperity feels precarious.

This reality is reflected in evolving definitions of success. In the United States, Gen Zers now describe an annual salary approaching \$600,000 as "successful," a figure significantly higher than the roughly \$180,000 benchmark set by Millennials.⁶⁰ This reflects inflation, volatility, and the effects of Gen Zers comparing themselves to others online. However, their expectations are unrealistic since the average annual income in the United States is just \$83,500.

These numbers also highlight the economic disparities between rich Western countries and the rest of the world. Recent analysis from OECD and UNECE 2024⁶¹ shows an average annual income of \$9,900 in Brazil, \$7,000 in Colombia, \$4,500 in Vietnam, \$3,500 in Egypt, \$2,650 in India, and \$1,250 in Nigeria. The latter amounts to only \$3.40 per day, just above the World Bank's definition of extreme poverty.⁶²

Gen Z's desire for financial stability coexists with sky-high aspirations. For that reason, many members of the generation are seeking roads to wealth and independence outside traditional employment. The idea of joining a company and staying for decades was once a ticket to middle-class security. But for Gen Z, this option is near obsolete.

Instead, nearly half (45%) of this generation engage in side hustles or careers with multiple income sources.⁶³ Combining entrepreneurial flair, creativity, and digital savvy, these ventures range from dropshipping businesses operated from home and monetizing personal content as influencers to professional gaming or esports participation.

This hustle culture embodies both opportunity and pressure. As Simon Luong of Oliver Wyman Forum puts it, "The new economy for youth is not about waiting for security but creating it proactively. AI and digital platforms have lowered barriers for individuals to build scalable, creative ventures, often from their bedrooms. This is a fundamental shift in economic agency."

The mainstreaming of hustle culture

Traditional media often mischaracterizes hustle culture as the mindset of ambitious urban and economic elites. In reality, it has become the default economic logic for much of Gen Z. According to Microsoft's Work Trend Index 2022, 70% of Gen Z say they are considering earning income outside their main job,⁶⁴ with nearly 45% already running side hustles.⁶⁵

In an economy marked by layoffs, rising living costs, and automation fears, hustling is as much survival strategy as passion project. Social media amplifies the hustle trend: curated displays of wealth and achievement create inspiration and pressure, motivating young people to monetize their skills, hobbies, and even identities.

Hustle culture is a global trend with local varieties. In each case, the logic is the same: rapid prototyping, low fixed costs, and audience-first validation. However, the cultural outputs are distinct. Youth-led businesses increasingly blend economic ambition with cultural or social impact, from sustainable fashion to wellness apps to micro-media platforms.

Key forms of hustle include



Digital entrepreneurship

Shopify, TikTok and Etsy shops selling niche products.



Influencer marketing

Micro-influencers (under 10,000 followers) earn \$10 to \$100 per post.⁶⁶



Gig economy work

Platforms like Fiverr and Upwork attract millions of Gen Z freelancers offering design, coding, or content services.



Creative monetization

Streaming on Twitch, running YouTube channels, or selling digital art on platforms like Gumroad.

In Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, government-led entrepreneurship initiatives have combined with high digital penetration to normalize hustle culture. According to Arab Youth Survey, over 53% of Gulf Cooperation Council youth want to start their own business, one of the highest rates globally.⁶⁷

The Japa mindset in Ghana and Nigeria sees youth target local markets and the diaspora with social commerce, event media, mobile money services, and micro-production studios. In Indonesia, a "busy but free" ethos blends multiple side engagements such as reselling, dropshipping, content production, and part-time platform work with work-life autonomy.

Super-apps and community learning circles that share toolkits and pricing templates are catalysts for hustle culture. In Latin America, a long tradition of informal work now intersects with digital creativity. Instagram storefronts, Mercado Libre shops, and TikTok or YouTube channels sit alongside street markets and neighborhood services. Collectives share equipment, space, and know-how.

Youth are shifting from consumers to creators and entrepreneurs. Digital platforms are the new marketplace and creative economy, where youth craft identities and incomes simultaneously. Through platforms like TikTok and Snapchat, young entrepreneurs sell niche brands rooted in modern values, blending heritage with innovation.

Hind Alessa, a Senior Manager at Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Culture

Hustle culture is deeply rooted in structural trends. Digital platforms are lowering barriers to entry and enabling global distribution. A laptop, a stable internet connection, and digital platforms are enough to launch a venture. Economic instability, from inflation to irregular work, pushes young people to diversify income. And social comparison, amplified by always-on visibility, raises aspirations and pressure in equal measure. Together, these forces explain why hustling has moved from exception to norm for many members of Gen Z.

More than just a financial behavior, hustle reflects a generational psyche and the rise of new cultural economic norms. As volatility becomes normal, resilience and improvisation become second nature. Authenticity, sustainability, and entrepreneurial creativity are the building blocks for financial security in an unstable world.

Hustle culture is a double-edged sword. It is empowering, offering autonomy, self-expression, and fast, practical entrepreneurial learning. But it can also mean overwork, anxiety, and blurred boundaries between work and life, especially when algorithms reward constant output. Getting the benefits without the burnout requires peer norms, basic protections, and clearer expectations from platforms and institutions.

Portfolio careers and flexible work models are changing the workplace. The traditional single-employer career is giving way to side hustles, freelancing, and hybrid arrangements. Gen Z values flexibility, variety, and independence above hierarchy or long tenure. Remote work and digital collaboration tools have normalized this fluidity, making careers without boundaries the standard rather than the exception.

Gen Z's evolving aspirations have important implications for governments and policymakers. Workplaces and educational systems will need to adapt to nonlinear careers with lifelong learning, digital upskilling tied to creative and technical practices, and adaptive frameworks that support portfolio careers. This can help the youth benefit from the upsides of hustling while mitigating the risks.

In summary, hustle culture turns cultural production into a core economic activity. Gen Z pursues flexible careers, embraces entrepreneurship, and prioritizes creative skills. For this generation, the future of work is not linear but hybrid, self-directed, and creativity-driven. These same forces are reshaping demand: as more creators build from heritage and place, consumers increasingly gravitate toward authenticity, sustainability, and community-anchored brands. The next chapter turns to consumerism, exploring how Gen Z's security-first mindset, portfolio work, and creator influence are rewriting what, why, and how they buy.

INSIGHTS SUMMARY

Youth and the new economic mindset

On a macro level, one of the risks of hustle culture is that it might exacerbate economic inequalities. Hustle culture may reward those with time, savings, networks, and reliable connectivity, while excluding peers who lack access. Equitable access to devices, broadband, and creative infrastructure will ensure that the benefits are shared more widely.

52%

of Gen Z worry about their financial security.

33%

rate their household finances as difficult.⁶⁸

45%

of Gen Z have an additional income stream, a scaled side hustle.

From consumption to creation

The same forces transforming work and production are also reshaping consumption. As more creators build on heritage and identity, young consumers gravitate to authenticity, sustainability, and community-anchored brands. This chapter explores how Gen Z decides what, why, and how they buy.

Consumerism reinvented: social, sustainable, and unequal

Whereas earlier generations prized status symbols defined by price and exclusivity, Gen Z looks for authenticity, sustainability, and cultural resonance. The Gulf Cooperation Council region, one of the world's largest luxury goods markets, offers a compelling example of how consumer sentiment is shifting.

The high-end market in the Gulf Cooperation Council has grown 55% since 2019.⁶⁹ But legacy status is no longer sufficient to win consumers' business. Arab shoppers are increasingly looking beyond heritage luxury, according to Vogue Business. Gen Z, in particular, is drawn to niche, value-driven, or sustainability-infused marques that speak to their individual identity.⁷⁰

Luxury today is defined by narrative, sustainability, and exclusivity by design rather than by price tag. A unique item, rather than an overexposed label, fuels youthful desire. Niche brands become status symbols not for their expense, but for their authenticity and resonance with shared values, especially on sustainability and social responsibility.

"Marketers have responded by adopting Arabic-first storytelling and personalized campaigns that reflect young consumers' values, because this cohort demands authenticity and cultural relevance," said Noof Khonji, advisor at the General Department for Innovation at Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Culture.

Sustainability has emerged as a key demand from the youth, pushing brands to formalize their environmental commitments. Regulators are tightening rules on greenwashing, for example, the United Kingdom's CMA Green Claims Code and new European Union measures.⁷¹ The direction of travel is toward stricter substantiation, clearer labels, and enforcement. There is, however, a clear tension in Gen Z consumption.

Eco-consciousness coexists with fast-fashion; sustainability and status-seeking often live side by side. A YouGov survey says that 53% of consumers are willing to pay 10% extra for sustainable food and drink.

Yet purchase behavior often returns to convenience, trend velocity, and price sensitivity.⁷² Studies of Gen Z fashion choices document this paradox.⁷³ Influencers may promote minimalist or slow aesthetics as a path to consuming less, yet these same looks often become status cues that reinforce trend-driven behavior.

These tensions become even clearer in the context of ecommerce trends. Most purchasing decisions in Saudi Arabia are influenced by online content and 99.6% of all generations are active on social media and smartphone penetration stands at 99.9%.^{74,75} In a context where digital influence is this pervasive, even anti-consumption aesthetics can quickly turn into new purchase triggers. NielsenIQ's latest research echoes this, finding that Gen Z is especially inclined to explore brands and chase novelty.⁷⁶

Saudi Arabia's e-commerce sector is projected to reach \$59.8 billion by 2025,⁷⁷ fueled by a digital native ethos where influence, authenticity, and community trump traditional advertising. Saudi research shows 94% of travelers discover new destinations through social channels, and the vast majority of electronics and fast-food purchases are prompted by influencer reviews or direct recommendations through Snapchat and Instagram.⁷⁸

Gen Z is reinventing consumerism, but inequality remains a concern. Access to digital marketplaces, sustainable goods, and niche brands is not evenly distributed. For youth in the Global South, affordability is a constraint. Surveys by World Data Lab from 2023 show that over 40% of Gen Z in sub-Saharan Africa live below the international poverty line,⁷⁹ making aspirational consumerism visible online but inaccessible in reality. This fuels frustration and sometimes drives risky behaviors like crypto speculation and high-interest lending schemes.

The emerging cultural economy

A decade ago, gaming and online creative pursuits were dismissed as fringe activities disconnected from economic or cultural value. Today they anchor youth economies. The spaces where Gen Z plays and builds are also where they turn digital creation and craft into cultural capital and viable work.

Gaming’s inflection point

The gaming industry eclipsed \$475 billion in revenue in 2024, with projections of steady 6.4% annual growth through 2030. The gaming industry is now bigger than film and music combined. Even more important than the scale of the industry is its evolution from a content market to a platform economy, where people do not just play but build.

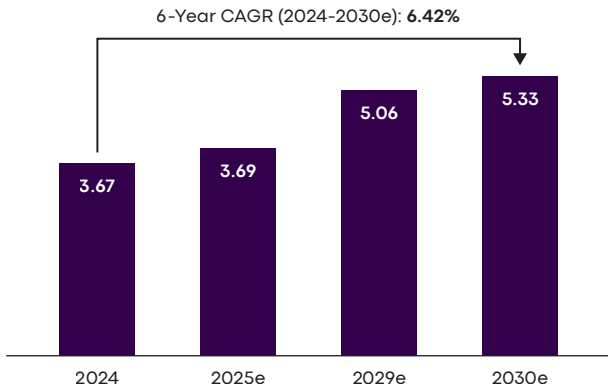
Gaming is a massive global business today. The GCC countries generated **\$3.67 billion** in 2024 revenues from **13 million** gamers. The biggest share of revenues came from Saudi (57%) followed by the United Arab Emirates (19%).⁸⁰

Africa’s gaming market recently topped **\$12.5 billion**, reflecting rapid mobile adoption.⁸¹ In Saudi Arabia, **67%** of the population (**23.5 million people**) identify as gamers. Gaming is no longer a subculture, but the default leisure and creative outlet for the youth.⁸²

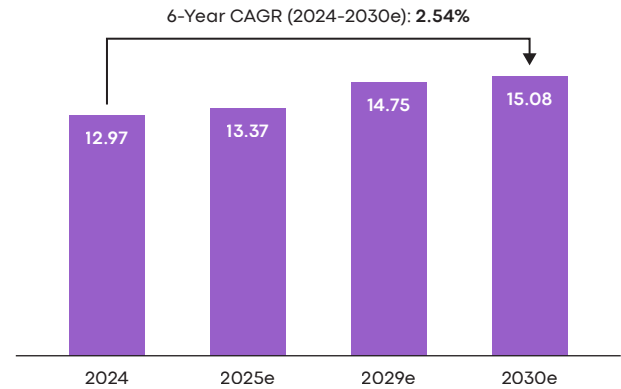
Platforms like Roblox, Fortnite, and Minecraft embody the shift from playing to creating. Instead of simply consuming content, young people customize avatars, design environments, and even build games within games. Teenagers learn to code, monetize skins, and manage digital communities long before they enter formal employment.

Exhibit 3: GCC games market

GCC games revenue (in \$ billion)



GCC gamers (in million)



Source: Statista

Youngest capitalists in the digital shopping mall



No platform illustrates the fusion of hustle, play, and consumerism more vividly than Roblox. With over **112 million** daily active users,⁸³ of whom **40%** are under 12 and **80%** under 24,⁸⁴ Roblox is a training ground for entrepreneurship. The platform allows anyone to create, share, and monetize their own games, experiences, or digital goods.



Teenagers orchestrate virtual economies, sell skins and access, and learn the mechanics of microtransactions before they sit their first high school exam. The social and economic model is appealing: minimal barriers to creation, instant rewards via Robux, the platform's proprietary currency, and a "digital mall without limits".



Minecraft lets players build their own worlds but has lighter, less structured ways to make money. Roblox, with its built-in marketplace and currency system, creates stronger earning incentives and sharper risks for young users. TikTok rewards reach, trends, and sponsorships, while Roblox teaches an assets-and-shops model where design, scarcity, and transactions matter. In short: Minecraft focuses on craft and community, TikTok on audience and virality, and Roblox on building plus retail.



Roblox is under scrutiny from researchers and journalists about the ethics and equity concerns its business model raises. The low Robux-to-USD conversion rate calls into question whether the platform is exploiting the work of its teen creators. Online safety and data privacy concerns are also prevalent.



For economists and governments, a policy question follows. Is the platform teaching the youth entrepreneurship or is it normalizing precarious work and glorifying hustle culture? Education systems of the future may need to pair digital creation skills with basic labor literacy (fair pay, IP, consent, time management) and digital rights to keep young users safe.



Governments and regulators are starting to step in. In September 2025, Saudi authorities required Roblox to suspend in-game voice and text chat and to strengthen Arabic-language moderation. More than **300,000** titles in certain categories were blocked for reasons of child safety. These steps underline the need for platforms to localize safeguards to cater to regional norms.



Culture on Roblox oscillates between imaginative play and brainrot, a concept that is explored later in this paper. One of Roblox's most visited games, Brookhaven, has logged more than **74 billion** visits and often has over **1 million** concurrent players. Players enact fantasy lives as baristas, immigration officials, or city dwellers in Brookhaven.⁸⁵ Elsewhere, the famed Shrek Line is an endless virtual queue for a pixelated celebrity hug.



Policymakers and society need to balance capturing the cultural upside of platforms like Roblox with minimizing the risks. Roblox teaches design literacy, collaborative building, and early agency. But it can also result in overwork, anxiety, and unequal rewards for those without time, money, networks, or reliable connectivity.



Getting the balance right means matching innovation with protections such as clear monetization terms, privacy by design, age-appropriate guardrails, and integrating labor, ethics, and IP literacy into youth learning. Only then will the mantra "anyone can create" mean a fair and safe balance between entrepreneurship, hobby and creative enablement.

User-generated content is already a substantial economy. Roblox paid nearly \$1 billion to its creator community in 2024, while Fortnite paid another \$350 million.⁸⁶ As such, gaming is rehearsal for Gen Z's broader economic behaviors: experimental, creative, and hybrid.

Game design harnesses a range of competences relevant to the modern world of work. It teaches systems thinking (how rules produce outcomes), iteration (rapid prototyping and feedback), teamwork (guilds, squads, co-dev), and creative authorship (world-building, narrative, music, visual identity).

Esports and modding communities model global citizenship at micro-scale: cross-border teams coordinate, form governance norms, run tournaments, raise funds, and enforce codes of conduct. These are skills that can be transferred into entrepreneurship, civic projects, and cultural production. This underscores why gaming is at the heart of youth empowerment.

Gaming illustrates how the barriers to entry are collapsing in creative industries that were once jealously guarded by gatekeepers. Just like digital tools let solo entrepreneurs launch e-commerce stores or YouTube channels, new engines like Unity and Unreal allow small teams, sometimes even just a single developer, to create commercially viable games.

In Southeast Asia, indie studios leverage low costs and regional fanbases to export anime and mobile-first experiences. In Latin America, Brazil's vibrant development scene leverages mobile payments and creator platforms. Across Africa, mobile-native studios are building culturally specific worlds for rapidly growing audiences.

Saudi Arabia captured 14% of the Middle East and North Africa's 2024 gaming revenues, generating \$2.1 billion. The Kingdom has positioned esports as a pillar of Vision 2030. The initiative aims to create 39,000 new jobs and contribute \$13.3 billion to GDP by the end of the decade.⁸⁷

Mega events like the Riyadh Esports World Cup, with prize pools exceeding \$45 million, highlight Saudi Arabia's grand ambitions for gaming. Major gaming players like Riot Games and Ubisoft have recognized the thriving gaming industry, investing in studios and training facilities in the Middle East.

The blurring of work and play is a template for a new digital-creative economy, where distributed creativity is turned into participation, income, and cultural capital. Esports could act as a form of soft power, projecting national identity, attracting tourism, and anchoring events that incubate startups and creative careers.

For governments, user-generated content and esports are compelling opportunities, provided they put the right policies in place to promote innovation, maximize cultural value, and minimize harm. Schools and youth programs could integrate game-making into curricula. Policymakers and platforms should strengthen digital ethics with clear monetization terms, age-appropriate design, data and privacy safeguards, anti-harassment norms, and ways to turn skills developed in play into accredited qualifications.

Creative economies

Gen Z's shift towards sustainable, values-led consumption is redefining what is produced and who benefits. This trend is creating new opportunities for youth enterprises and large companies alike. The demand for diversity and heritage that shows up in sustainable shopping is creating new value chains where culture itself is the differentiator.

Young entrepreneurs are transforming culturally and socially relevant work such as crafts, repair, regional food, and textile arts into meaningful economic opportunities. For corporates, this trend offers access to authenticity they cannot manufacture at scale. Tapping into communities, heritage skills, and place-based stories can become a competitive edge.

These brand-artisan partnerships show how this value can be created in practice:

- Dior is co-creating with master embroiderers from India's Chanakya School of Craft. The Chanakya School has trained more than 1,000 women, translating heritage techniques into global luxury goods.
- SOKO, a Kenyan B-Corp jewelry platform connects 2,500 artisans to international brands and marketplaces via a distributed digital factory model.
- Major retailers in the United States use the Nest Ethical Handcraft Program to source goods from home- and small-workshop producers across the Global South. The program adds safety, wage and transparency benchmarks to artisan supply chains.
- Artisans Angkor in Cambodia partners with travel retail and luxury boutiques to export crafts made using Khmer techniques.
- Loewe, the Spanish luxury fashion house, showcases seasonal capsules co-developed with Mexican communities at global fashion weeks.

To capture the opportunity, governments and brands will need to ensure that arts and crafts offer viable, aspirational careers. Work needs to be recognized with status, supported by training, and paid well enough to be economically viable. “Only when prestige and pay rise together will the youth see craft as a future career option,” explains Ayeh Naraghi, a former culture specialist at UNESCO and Executive Director of Alcove Advisors.

To scale value fairly, partnerships between large brands and small artisanal producers will need clear standards and public guardrails. Artisans, as the most exposed link in the chain, should be protected with transparent contracts, living-income pricing, safe production conditions, and IP attribution. Small producers can build collective negotiating power by forming associations and cooperatives. Stakeholders across the board will need to invest in long-cycle training so that techniques do not disappear.

Apprenticeships, quality standards, and local routes to market will all need to be established. Perfumery in France and leather craftsmanship in Italy offer models to emulate. Some luxury groups are already taking action. Chanel, for example, has created Le19M/Paraffection, a hub that supports 600 artisans producing components for couture and ready-to-wear.

Retail models like IKEA Social Entrepreneurship, which combines capability-building with multi-year purchasing, and the adoption of standards such as Nest’s framework

show how corporates can fairly cooperate with artisans. Policymakers can contribute with procurement incentives, fair-trade recognition, export support, and youth apprenticeships.



CHAPTER SUMMARY

Youth cultural economies are diversifying. Digital platforms, including the gaming examples discussed, teach production, audience-building, and monetization. At the same time, heritage and craft convert identity into premium market value. However, ecosystems spanning education, fair standards, intergenerational transfer, and safeguarded corporate partnerships are required. Only then can young people build livelihoods that are both creative and culturally grounded.

Nations and companies that back this shift will capture growth and trust as consumers move toward originality, sustainability, and meaning. Examples from the fashion and design industries show how distinctiveness pays, turning heritage into a 21st-century advantage.

This paper concludes with recommendations focused on enabling this shift through portfolio learning spaces, fair monetization models, and peer networks that connect talent and opportunity, helping build an economy where creativity drives sustainable and inclusive growth.

Media

Cultural influence as a driver of cultural diversity

Takeaways

K-pop’s rise, artisan-brand collaborations, and youth-led initiatives show that when work carries originality, care, and community ownership, it travels further and lasts longer, even in algorithmic environments.

Authenticity is the key to gaining the trust and loyalty of Gen Z consumers. Creators will win by showing sources, disclosing AI and sponsorships, crediting communities, and pacing output to protect wellbeing.

As production cost approaches zero, curation, credit, and context become the scarce skills.

- South Korea’s cultural-content exports approached **\$10 billion** in 2024.
- More than **80%** of Gen Z say they learn about new products via influencer marketing.
- Spotify removed **75 million** AI-generated spam tracks, a sign of how AI slop can flood content feeds.⁸⁸
- Language and humor are evolving: “Brainrot” (Oxford Word of the Year, 2024) and LLM-style phrasing are spreading into everyday talk.

Algorithms and fans as the new gatekeepers

Gen Z spends a big part of their time where culture is made: inside feeds, fandoms, and creator networks that reach globally but feel local and personal. Power has shifted from a few gatekeepers to millions of curators and influencers. This chapter shows how the redistribution of influence unlocks cultural diversity and why the digital self makes authenticity the most sought-after signal.

For most of the 20th century, big studios, labels, and luxury houses were the arbiters of taste and the curators of culture. But in the imagination economy, anyone can use digital platforms to show their ideas and products to the world, for example, a streetwear label in Riyadh, a weaver cooperative in Oaxaca, or a bedroom producer in Lagos.

Yet we do not live in a world without gatekeepers because algorithms on digital platforms determine which content and creators reach a wider audience. Social media platforms may lower the costs of publishing and distribution, but influence is not equal for all. Without clear rules, transparency, and protections, exclusion may prevail.

K-pop as a masterclass in digital influence

The rise of K-pop is a lesson in influence infrastructure. K-pop agencies made effective use of YouTube as the first truly global, free distribution platform to reach the world. K-pop exports South Korean norms like teamwork, training, and polished choreography, blending local styles and language with global genres.

High-frequency drops, behind-the-scenes logs, fan subtitling, and choreography practice videos helped to drive deep and continuous engagement with Korean pop music. Government support helped with training and exports, but the real momentum came from fans subtitling videos, sharing clips, organizing streams, and running fundraisers.

K-pop shows how unique local content combined with platform mastery can outcompete legacy giants. It also shows why public infrastructure and industry innovation are both essential. Public investment in schools, training, and export infrastructure laid the foundation for the private players and fandoms that scaled K-pop into a global industry.

The lessons from K-pop are equally applicable for Saudi streetwear, Indonesian craft cuisine, and Nigerian Alté. Cultures that codify their how and why, then design for the feeds, can play globally on their own terms. Governments can play a part by investing in skills and export scaffolding, and protecting creators with smart policy.

As influence spreads from a handful of gatekeepers to millions of creators, the imagination economy rewards diversity over homogeneity and authenticity over volume. K-pop shows the economic rewards for countries that get it right: South Korea's content exports (music, film, TV) approached \$10 billion in 2024.⁸⁹ BLACKPINK's 100 million YouTube subscribers and BTS's \$3.7 billion peak economic impact show how fan-powered media trump rival legacy industries.⁹⁰

The next chapter follows this thread further, examining Gen Z's search for authenticity. It highlights why authenticity underpins trust and value, and what it demands of creators, brands, and policymakers.

INSIGHTS SUMMARY

When local culture scales globally

Influence scales exports

South Korea's cultural-content exports (music, games, film, etc.) reached approached \$10 billion in 2024, illustrating how platform-era distribution converts local specificity into global value.⁹¹

Fan-powered scale

BLACKPINK's roughly 98.8 million YouTube subscribers and BTS's estimated \$3.6–3.7 billion in annual peak economic impact demonstrate how fan-driven media can rival legacy industries.⁹²

When distribution is participatory, specificity beats sameness. The growth playbook is clear: root in place, design for the feed, fund skills and export scaffolding, and add transparency guardrails so algorithms do not quietly re-centralize power.

Identity in the age of the digital self

For today's youth, media and pop culture are both global and personal. An Instagram trend, a TikTok sound, or a WhatsApp group can dictate the pulse of identity as much as a family, school, or neighborhood might have for previous generations. Young people are redrawing the lines between the private and public, the global and the hyper-local.

Gen Z yearns for both individuality and belonging. Many of the young people that were interviewed speak of their struggle to balance their desire for authenticity with the social expectations of curated perfection. The decision to post online, to refrain, or to present only what feels authentic has become an act of self-definition as well as a gentle resistance.

I post on social media, but only when I feel that what I am posting is authentic.

Henry Lliguicota-Lema, a 23-year-old engineer from Ecuador⁹³

In the words of Henry Lliguicota-Lema, a 23-year-old engineer from Ecuador, "I try to use more social media, or professional networking, to connect with other people. But I think that especially social media is too fake. It's like everyone is showing a great life where everything is perfect. That is not real."⁹³

It is the repeated experiences of institutional failure discussed in earlier chapters that has honed Gen Z's new instincts about who feels authentic, who engages, who admits they don't have all the answers. Accordingly, many young users struggle with the level of superficial content that platforms serve.

But they still prefer human voices over standardized corporate communication and ads. Authority has shifted from institutions to influencers, collapsing the distance between "advice" and "business". A dermatologist's Reels may become the trusted voice on skincare; a Riyadh food vlogger can swing reservations city-wide; a micro-influencer in Jeddah makes abaya silhouettes travel. A message from a person with a feed instead of a logo with a slogan feels like social proof instead of persuasion.

Differentiation amid template culture

A decade ago, Instagram proved how a platform can hardwire aesthetics into everyday life. High cheekbones, poreless skin, and cat-eye tilt leapt from filters to photo apps to dermatology clinics. What began as a visual mood introduced on a digital channel became a real-world body ideal.

And now, what started on social media is accelerating as AI shapes new aesthetics and makes it even easier to create content with potential for algorithm-driven sameness. AI slop is the new term used to describe low-quality content that is produced in massive quantities and in large volumes.

AI slop is already overwhelming music streaming services. In the past year, Spotify removed 75 million AI-generated tracks, nearly the size of its entire portfolio and introduced new filters and stricter rules.⁹⁴ This shows that when creation is cheap, the skill to separate signal from noise becomes a source of value.

Lena Hammerstingl, founder of NeueHaus, a network for creative talent focused on high-quality work, said, "The only way to avoid becoming a stylist for AI clichés is to know where ideas come from. Curation is not just picking pretty things; it's reference, context, and judgment."

In practice, curation differs from imitation on three fronts. First, it emphasizes reference. A strong prompt or edit embeds lineage such as movements, methods, and materials to get better results. Asking for "Bauhaus" only works if you understand its principles of function, modularity, clarity, and industry, not just the colors.

Second, it highlights context. Curators anchor originality because they know what a style stood for, who pioneered it, how it traveled, and what it signals now. Third, it embraces constraints. Great curators set limits on palette, pacing, and structure, so that their output develops a signature. This is why humanities knowledge and ethical literacy are power skills.

The most successful young creators have the creativity and digital skillset to separate the original from the derivative. They need to know who did it first, who did it best, and how to adapt with respect rather than appropriate. Technical fluency plus deep cultural knowledge are the new creative imperatives.

As remixes of original content, cultural knowledge, and AI assistance become the norm, authorship stretches from who rendered the file to who assembled, contextualized, and transformed the sources. In this model, curators are co-authors whose signature is judgment and interpretation, not just style.

Global examples of curation as craft

Japan

City pop revivals and Showa aesthetics spread globally through curated blends like original vinyl rips, typography, and urban nostalgia, all reframed for today's design and video essays.

Nigeria

Alté music and fashion scenes braid references from Lagos streetwear, Afro-fusion, and global art cinema. Curators create mood boards and visual grammars that brands now commission rather than imitate.

Brazil

Baile funk editors and filmmakers use archival footage, neighborhood color palettes, and local slang to resist generic global pop, making place a visible part of the cut.

Morocco

Photographers and stylists remix Amazigh patterns, Gnawa sound, and contemporary couture, documenting process and sources so credit flows back to artisans and communities.

Understanding curation as craft rewards young people who pair technical fluency with cultural literacy and gives brands new paths to authenticity. But curation also demands responsibility: clearer crediting norms, anti-greenwashing and anti-deepfake standards, and education that treats media making as both creative practice and civic act.

Influencers as the world's largest distribution channel

Social media is a powerful driver of commerce for small creators and large brands alike. In a 2024 Statista roll-up, roughly two-thirds of Millennials followed and purchased goods from brands' social accounts. Half of Gen Z reported following and purchasing from

influencers, compared to 11% of Baby Boomers. Six in 10 Gen X respondents said they followed and purchased from retailers' social accounts.⁹⁵

A recent study of Gen Z consumers found that 82% of respondents had learned about new products through influencer marketing.⁹⁶ This shows just how powerful influencer marketing is for this generation. Micro-influencers, with an average of between 10,000 and 100,000 followers, take the largest share of the influence at 71% of users.

The global influencer industry has more than tripled since 2020 and is projected to reach a value of \$32.5 billion in 2025.⁹⁷ For brands, that means creators are no longer a campaign afterthought but a key channel to market. They have risen to be the pipe through which discovery, trust, and purchase now flow.

There are several factors that drive consumer decision-making on social channels, including price and perceived product quality. Perceived authenticity, however, is proving to be the most significant factor. This underlines why creators and brands need to provide authentic content and avoid controversies, such as fake news, to maintain credibility with their audience.⁹⁸

The closeness that builds trust means that the backlash is severe when users believe that disclosures are unclear, claims are inflated, or content is performative. Credibility crises can snowball fast in the absence of transparency about conflicts of interest, swift corrections of inaccurate content, and proof to back up claims. Without those, authenticity is a style rather than a standard.

The focus on authenticity explains why micro-influencers outperform superstars with Gen Z. Their posts reflect environments and experiences their followers can relate to. They interact and reply to comments. They are open about their doubts and failures. And they build community and credibility, not campaigns.

That said, many creators struggle to maintain visibility and authenticity. Recommendation algorithms reward frequency, trend-riding, and certain formats, which can push creators towards homogenized content over authenticity and quantity over care. Smaller voices, local languages, and slower formats often struggle to surface. For creators, that may lead to mental health problems like burnout,⁹⁹ while for audiences it means narrowing viewpoints.

When creators act as lead curators for their communities, they also shape norms in day-to-day life, including cultural representation and health, sustainability and financial choices. Responsibility is thus emerging as an imperative in influencer marketing for the influencers themselves, the platforms they use, regulators, and policymakers.

Influencers who follow practices such as source checking, partnering with credible experts, elevating local makers, disclosing AI use, and refusing harmful products, can turn influence into a public good. Brands can reinforce this by co-creating impact goals, paying fairly, and supporting creator education on media literacy and ethics. Transparent ranking signals, fair discovery tools, and clear sponsorship labels from platforms can further help to build trust.

INSIGHTS SUMMARY

Identity in the age of the digital self

82.4%

of Gen Z say they learn about new products via influencer marketing.

~71.2%

of the impact is driven by micro-influencers (10k–100k followers).

Trust is the filter

In purchase drivers, perceived authenticity outranks other factors including quality and price.¹⁰⁰

Authenticity is key to gaining the trust and loyalty of consumers. Creators and brands win by showing sources, disclosing AI and sponsorships, crediting communities, and pacing output to protect wellbeing; platforms and policy should back this with clearer labels and ranking transparency.

The new aesthetics of memes and AI

Gen Z grew up with memes, so creating and sharing them is second nature. What started on old forums like 4chan and 9GAG as simple image jokes has become a fast way to spread ideas. On the Arabic internet, young people have long used Arabizi, a mix of Roman letters and numbers, to express themselves and keep conversations lively.

AI tools speed up this aspect of internet culture. Today, anyone can fabricate a short, catchy, semi-nonsensical video clip with a couple of prompts. The result is a new language of jump cuts, voice clones, overstimulation, and post-ironic humor that entertains and signals belonging.

Absurdity and escapism

Oxford's Word of the Year 2024, "brainrot" refers to "the cognitive decline and mental exhaustion experienced by individuals, particularly adolescents and young adults, due to excessive exposure to low-quality online materials, especially on social media."¹⁰¹ At first glance, this phenomenon would seem to encapsulate everything older generations fear about youth culture: excess, overstimulation, and the spread of low-quality viral videos.

But for Gen Z, brainrot means something more poignant and empowering. While academics worry about cognitive fatigue caused by endless scrolls of TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, young users have turned brainrot content into a creative playground and a coping mechanism.

Post-irony and brainrot

Post-irony describes humor that cycles past sarcasm into a tone where sincerity and mockery blur. Brainrot is the consumption of snackable, low-stakes clips that flood attention. This is not nihilism but do-it-yourself semiotics. The youth are rebuilding meaning from scraps they control. Localized examples include Indonesian posts that mash soap-opera melodrama with gamer overlays; Arabic TikTok blending Arabizi captions with slap-cut reaction chains; Nigerian skits that turn neighborhood scenarios into meme-literate morality plays; and Japanese kusoge (so-bad-it's-good game) aesthetics that bleed into TikTok edits with knowingly clumsy transitions.

Brainrot is not just about indulging in nonsense. It is also about rejecting the logic of a world where climate change, conflict, and rising costs dominate every headline. Gen Z uses rapid-fire editing, neon overlays, and relentless absurdity to find comic relief and doses of escapism amid the doom in their newsfeeds.

Brainrot's rapid cuts and silly punchlines are a vernacular born from overload. In a climate of rolling crises and institutional fatigue, absurdism is a way for Gen Z users to let off some steam. It is a rejection of tidy narratives and a way to channel anxiety into playful, shareable content.

In the chaos, users find both relief and a way to protest. The flourishing of brainrot recalls 20th century Dadaism, an anti-art movement born in Zurich amid the trauma of World War I. Dada used collage, nonsense poetry, and montage to attack the era's rationalism, which it saw as complicit in mechanized violence.

Brainrot is a way to reclaim agency over algorithms that demand attention, bond with peers through in-jokes, and prove literacy in the rhythms of the feed. Memes travel like playground chants, devoid of any singular creator and mutate to local flavors, whether they come from Britain or Bangladesh. Ballerina Cappuccina and Bombardiro Crocodilo originated in Italy and went viral on TikTok in 2025.

Gen Z users show their identity through cultural fluency — noticing references, following the edits, and adapting them to their own context. This creates a sense of belonging for a generation shaped by uncertainty. Even when it looks frivolous, brainrot trains fast pattern-spotting, group creativity, and a dark humor that enables young people to cope with stress.

MrBeast's content empire

In contrast to meme-fueled, absurdist culture is the phenomenon of MrBeast (Jimmy Donaldson) with his 435 million YouTube subscribers and an empire valued at \$5 billion. MrBeast built his reputation on outsized acts of generosity. In 2024 and 2025, his channels and charity initiatives distributed over 47 million pounds of food, delivered 40 million meals, and raised tens of millions of dollars for clean water and environmental causes.¹⁰²

According to commentators like the New Statesman, MrBeast's appeal is not just about the spectacle of his videos, but also his values. Each video showcases hustle, generosity, and measurable good. This "spectacle of

service" appeals to a generation who are drawn to creators that blend scale and substance, innovation, and tangible kindness.¹⁰³

His videos package good works in a way that feels sincere, even as his approach stirs debate about stunt philanthropy. MrBeast's videos often invite viewers to participate by funding campaigns or leveraging their own networks for change. The more engagement and views he generates, the greater the resources for giving back, and the louder the voice for the causes he supports.

Teen viewers see in MrBeast an agent of change. His hyper-capitalist means and altruistic ends map to a generation that is more fiscally conservative and achievement-oriented than stereotypes suggest. For many people in Middle East and Africa, his model where giving is transparent and collective feels both familiar and aspirational.

Creators in other parts of the world are following MrBeast's lead. Aaron "Murph" Murphy (Ecuador) mobilizes community builds, Andrew Kalawait (Indonesia) channels conservation and social impact storytelling, Dia Mirza (India) uses her platform for climate and public-health advocacy, and Charity Ekezie (Nigeria) counters stereotypes and spotlights women's livelihoods.

These creators are redefining digital and real-world philanthropy. Their work highlights the importance of authenticity and raises questions about changing norms of ethics, sponsorship, and community benefit. For brands and institutions, the lesson is to make their values visible, measurable, and delivered at scale.

Language, the daily echo of digital innovation

Gen Z's language is as shaped by digital culture as their sense of humor and their yearning for authenticity. AI tools, platforms, and moderation policies are changing how young people speak, type, and communicate online and in real life. Heavy users of large language models like ChatGPT are beginning to sound like their tools.¹⁰⁴ According to research from the Max Planck Institute words like "delve," "realm," and "underscore" are increasingly found in everyday speech.

Gen Z is picking up the language and shortcuts of AI platforms, creating a faster, more practical way to communicate. Phrases like "got it, send link" speed up coordination, but can feel informal to older generations.

The benefit is quick, agile communication. The risk is misread tone and fewer shared reference points across age groups.

Another example can be found in the codes and euphemisms social media users have developed to bypass automated content moderation. The verb “unalive”, meaning to kill, has migrated from niche use on TikTok and YouTube into the mainstream of social media and even into real-world conversation.

Linguists frame this as rational code-switching, but psychologists and sociologists worry about whether internet lingo blunts clarity and nuance about serious topics. Whatever your stance, AI tools and digital platforms are not just reflecting Gen Z culture. They are shaping it word by word.

The World Economic Forum’s Future of Jobs 2025 puts creative and analytical communication among the most valued skills.¹⁰⁵ This highlights why policymakers should adapt digital-competence frameworks to include tone calibration across audiences. This is not about policing slang but ensuring intelligibility between generations and across sectors.

Arabizi is a living example of pragmatic innovation in language. Born from Latin-only interfaces, it is now a stylistic choice that carries warmth, humor, and fast communication across Gulf feeds. Youth mix Arabic, English, and numerals without apology. Brands can earn credibility by meeting them there.

Platform dialects are not just shortcuts but also badges of belonging. They allow young people to signal their in-group knowledge and emotional stance. There is a trade-off. The more efficient the code, the easier it is to exclude outsiders. Education is necessary to foster an understanding as to why these codes exist and when to widen the circle with plainer language.

A practical step that educators can take is to build lesson plans that compare a creator caption, an LLM rewrite, and a heritage text; ask students to spot shifts in tone, diction, and cultural reference. That is one way to keep voice intact while using the tools that are changing speech and discourse.



CHAPTER SUMMARY

Media and representation are where Gen Z’s cultural power is most visible. Influence has shifted from a small number of legacy gatekeepers to millions of young creators who use platforms, fandoms, and micro-communities to export local culture, set new standards of authenticity, and turn taste into economic and social capital. When rooted in place and responsibility, this shift unlocks cultural diversity and explains why the new “digital self” makes trust and transparency non-negotiable.

Accordingly, brands and platforms should design for transparency and diversity, while policymakers must secure fair regulatory frameworks for creators. At its best, a collaborative ecosystem has the potential to make authenticity, plurality, and responsibility the baseline of tomorrow’s digital culture.

The recommendations in the following chapter aim to strengthen this cultural ecosystem by supporting youth-led media projects, promoting diverse storytelling rooted in local culture, and recognizing creators who model authenticity and responsibility as the foundation of tomorrow’s digital culture.

INSIGHTS SUMMARY

A new aesthetic: memes, AI, and meaning

Automation and attention

Spotify reportedly removed approximately 75 million AI-generated spam tracks, highlighting how automation can flood the attention space.¹⁰⁶

Evolving language and humor

“Brain rot”¹⁰⁷ and the spread of LLM-style phrasing into everyday speech signal a new digital grammar, carrying the risk of intergenerational comprehension gaps.

As production costs approach zero, curation, credit, and context become the scarce skills. Education should treat media-making as both a creative craft and a civic act — teaching reference, constraints, fair use, and tone — while platforms and policymakers enforce clear AI and advertising disclosures to keep meaning legible across generations.



Enabling a Youth-Led Future of Creativity and Innovation

People have always shaped culture through art, language, rituals, and everyday expression. Today, technology speeds up how quickly culture shifts, with norms, values, and ideas evolving in near real time. Digital tools give young people the power to become co-authors of cultural meaning rather than mere consumers of content, letting them bypass traditional cultural gatekeepers. In Saudi Arabia, 76% of youth already see themselves as co-shapers of modern national identity.¹⁰⁸

The boundaries between work, hobby, and self are blurring. A game can become a livelihood, a channel a business, and a portfolio of projects a career path. In this imagination economy, machines automate a lot of the work and people create value through human capabilities like originality, critical thinking, empathy, and cultural literacy.

Education in humanities, history, and ethics sets people apart in a world of mass production and AI slop.

The same tools that make creation easier can also lead to sameness. Navigating this tension has become an essential cultural skill. One useful approach is strategic authenticity, using technology to strengthen local identity, language, and heritage instead of smoothing them out.

Young people imagine a future where stability is earned and creativity has real-world impact. We organize our recommendations for creating this future around the five forces that shape culture: social and identity, political and institutional, technical, economic, and media and representation.

1. Social and identity

From audiences to co-creators

This report has shown that today’s youth see themselves as participants in shaping modern national identity. For them, creativity means both expression and participation. Yet while technology connects communities and lowers barriers to creation, it also fragments identity across digital and geographic lines. The challenge is to turn this diversity into collaboration rather than isolation.

What now?

Actions	Enablers
1. Create shared cultural projects that bring together local and global youth communities, such as digital story maps, neighborhood archives, and collective playlists	Government and Public Institutions, Cultural and Heritage Institutions, Local and Community-Based Actors
2. Integrate creative authorship into schools and youth programs. Rotating roles such as researcher, curator, and producer can help young people learn collaboration as a skill they can practice	Academic and Educational Institutions, Cultural and Heritage Institutions
3. Encourage youth partnerships to produce scalable initiatives that celebrate belonging while deepening pride in language and community	Academic and Educational Institutions, Nonprofit Organizations, Local and Community-Based Actors

How youth is driving change

Young people can lead these projects as designers, curators, and storytellers who translate shared memory into creative output. They will need access to community spaces, small project grants, and mentorship in creative collaboration to transform their networks into living cultural ecosystems.

2. Governance and institutional

Access and agency

Policy and infrastructure determine whether youth creativity grows or fades. Many young creators are early adopters of new technologies but remain excluded from shaping the rules that govern them. The result is a gap in trust between innovators and institutions. Unlocking cultural creation requires regulatory frameworks that evolve with youth practices rather than lag behind them.

What now?

Actions	Enablers
1. Establish youth councils that co-design guidelines for responsible innovation, including fair protection of intellectual property, transparent AI labeling, and ethical content standards	Government and Public Institutions, Nonprofit Organizations
2. Expand access to affordable spaces, broadband connectivity, and simple IP registration processes for young creators	Government and Public Institutions, Private Sector and Industry, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Ecosystem
3. Launch programs that test creative ideas on a small scale, such as digital festivals or youth-run media platforms, and use the lessons to inform national policy and investment decisions	Government and Public Institutions, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Ecosystem, Academic and Educational Institutions

How youth is driving change

Young people can participate as policy co-designers, advocates, and evaluators. They need channels to talk to government, accessible grants to prototype their ideas, and legal guidance to navigate IP and data rights. When institutions listen and support youth innovation, policy becomes a platform for trust and creativity.

3. Technology

Creative preference as a skill

Automation is transforming creative production. Tools can generate output instantly, but meaning still depends on human taste and judgment. In this new landscape, cultural literacy, ethics, and empathy are what distinguish quality from AI slop. The future of creativity will depend less on mastering tools and more on mastering context.

What now?

Actions	Enablers
1. Embed courses on cultural literacy, heritage, and humanities within technology and design curricula, so that young innovators understand the references and values behind their work	Academic and Educational Institutions, Cultural and Heritage Institutions, Government and Public Institutions
2. Promote trust and transparency in creative projects by asking teams to label synthetic content, cite sources, and include a human review checkpoint for sensitive material	Private Sector and Industry, Government and Public Institutions, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Ecosystem
3. Develop courses, workshops, and incubators on how to combine human oversight and technical proficiency with ethical reasoning and creative taste	Academic and Educational Institutions, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Ecosystem, Private Sector and Industry

How youth is driving change

Young people can act as ethical innovators who test and model transparent creative workflows. They need interdisciplinary mentorship that links tech and culture, access to shared digital tools, and recognition for projects that demonstrate responsibility as well as originality.

4. Economy

From jobs to portfolio careers

In the imagination economy, young people are redefining work. A game becomes a livelihood, a channel a business, and a set of projects a career. Yet most creative youth still face high entry barriers, limited financial literacy, fragmented opportunities, and few safety nets. Culture in motion depends on helping youth turn experimentation into sustainable livelihoods.

What now?

Actions	Enablers
1. Support portfolio learning environments like student clubs, community labs, and creator platforms where young people can test ideas and share results without financial risk	Innovation and Entrepreneurship Ecosystem, Private Sector and Industry, Academic and Educational Institutions
2. Develop open playbooks that offer transparent templates for pricing, contracts, and monetization adapted to local markets and languages	Innovation and Entrepreneurship Ecosystem, Private Sector and Industry, Media and Digital Platforms
3. Facilitate peer networks across regions so young entrepreneurs can exchange lessons on business models, funding options, and creative exports	Nonprofit Organizations, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Ecosystem, Private Sector and Industry

How youth is driving change

Young people are skilled portfolio builders and can lead by documenting and sharing their creative experiments. They need seed funding for prototypes, mentorship in business skills, and visibility to connect their work with markets. When these supports align, youth creativity becomes an engine of economic resilience.

5. Media and representation

The power of authenticity

In saturated digital spaces, visibility without context risks turning culture into noise. Youth are surrounded by content but hungry for meaning. The next stage of culture in motion lies in how well young creators can curate, contextualize, and credit what they share, transforming representation into education.

What now?

Actions	Enablers
1. Support youth-led media projects that highlight underrepresented voices, explain cultural relevance, and credit original sources to build shared standards of authenticity	Media and Digital Platforms, Cultural and Heritage Institutions, Local and Community-Based Actors
2. Encourage cultural institutions and media platforms to promote local language and storytelling formats, such as short video, interactive exhibits, or AR trails, that remix tradition with innovation	Cultural and Heritage Institutions, Private Sector and Industry, Media and Digital Platforms
3. Create fellowships and recognition programs for young curators and editors who model transparent and context-rich storytelling	Nonprofit Organizations, Academic and Educational Institutions, Cultural and Heritage Institutions

How youth is driving change

Young people can lead as cultural translators who bring depth to digital storytelling. They will need mentorship in fact-checking and media production, small grants for experimentation, and access to platforms that reward originality over volume. With this support, authenticity becomes their competitive advantage and a source of cultural pride.



An open, collaborative, and human landscape

Across the five forces, creativity and innovation give young people a way to shape culture. The cultural landscape that is emerging is open, collaborative, and shaped by human skill. Social innovation organizes people to collaborate digitally and globally. Technological innovation speeds up progress from idea to output and creative innovation adds judgment, story, and style. When these elements work together, and when access, safeguards, and recognition are in place, youth-driven creativity can lead to lasting cultural change.

The enablers

1. Government and public institutions

Shaping policy and infrastructure

- Ministries of Culture, Education, and Communications
- Local municipalities
- Public-private partnerships
- Digital governance entities

2. Innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem

Enabling experimentation, incubation, and scaling

- Entrepreneurship hubs
- Innovation hubs
- Accelerators
- Community organizations
- Tech development agencies

3. Academic and educational institutions

Building youth capacity and delivering learning programs

- Universities

- Tech institutes

- Educators

- Formal and informal education institutions

4. Cultural and heritage institutions

Preserving and reinterpreting culture in creative ways

- Cultural institutions

- Cultural entities

- Cultural and heritage institutions

- Museums and similar organizations

5. Private sector and industry

Providing tools, funding, and mentorship

- Private sector

- Investors

- Tech companies

- Creative studios

6. Media and digital platforms

Amplifying youth storytelling and creative exchange

- Media organizations

- Social media platforms

- Online learning platforms

7. Nonprofit organizations

Supporting youth creativity, education, and equity

- Philanthropic foundations

- NGOs

- Global youth networks

- International organizations

8. Local and community actors

Fostering participation, identity and collaboration

- Community leaders

- Local associations

- Neighborhood initiatives

Conclusion

Technology, economy, pop culture, and media are evolving at an unprecedented speed, molding the prospects and motivations of the youth and being shaped in return by Gen Z's behaviors and aspirations. As Gen Z changes the world through their consumption, creativity, and activism, there is a danger that policymakers, regulators, brands, and other stakeholders will be left behind.

Institutions must recognize both the agency of Gen Z in co-creating culture, redefining economic participation, and influencing the evolution of digital platforms as well as their vulnerability to the dangers of digital overload,

algorithmic bias, misinformation, economic precarity, and mental health pressures. In understanding this tension, societies and governments can collaborate with youth to mitigate risks and amplify positive outcomes.

By engaging with Gen Z, institutions can support digital literacy, foster entrepreneurial opportunities, safeguard intellectual property, and encourage authentic, inclusive cultural expression. This is an opportunity to not only protect the young from emerging risks but also to harness their creativity, insight, and sense of social justice to drive innovation, social progress, and economic growth.

Endnotes

- 1 Oliver Wyman Forum, 2025
- 2 Oliver Wyman Forum, 2023
- 3 International Trade Council, 2025
- 4 Li, 2025
- 5 YouGov, 2024
- 6 UNESCO, 2022
- 7 Yardi, 2025
- 8 OECD, 2022
- 9 Saudi Statistics Authority, 2022
- 10 OECD, 2022
- 11 Edelman, 2025
- 12 Yardi, 2025
- 13 Yardi, 2025
- 14 Blanchflower, D. G., Bryson, A., & Xu, X., 2025
- 15 Pew, 2020
- 16 UNDP, 2024
- 17 Gov.sa, 2025
- 18 GYI, 2024
- 19 GYI, 2024
- 20 GYI, 2024
- 21 FARAS, 2024
- 22 FARAS, 2024
- 23 Edelman, 2025
- 24 Oliver Wyman, 2023
- 25 GYI, 2024
- 26 Edelman, 2025
- 27 World Economic Forum, 2025
- 28 Martin, 2025
- 29 World Economic Forum, 2025
- 30 Oliver Wyman Forum, 2025
- 31 ITA, 2025
- 32 Oliver Wyman Forum, 2024
- 33 ITU, 2024
- 34 Oliver Wyman Forum, 2024
- 35 ITU, 2024
- 36 Stanford, 2024
- 37 World Economic Forum, 2025
- 38 Badaoui, 2024
- 39 Interview MOCX, 2025
- 40 Interview Talal Fahim, 2025
- 41 World Economic Forum, 2025
- 42 HCDP, 2024
- 43 OpenAI, 2025
- 44 OpenAI, 2025
- 45 OpenAI, 2025
- 46 OpenAI, 2025
- 47 Martin, 2025
- 48 The Walton Family Foundation, 2025
- 49 United Nations, 2024
- 50 International Telecommunication Union, 2025
- 51 World Economic Forum, 2025
- 52 Dub.Ai, 2025
- 53 Rakyat Digital, 2025
- 54 International Labour Organization, 2024
- 55 OECD, 2025
- 56 International Labour Organization, 2024
- 57 OECD, 2025
- 58 GYI, 2024
- 59 Oliver Wyman Forum, 2023
- 60 Empower, 2025
- 61 Worlddata.info, 2025
- 62 Hasell, J., Rohenkohl, B., & Arriagada, P., 2025
- 63 Oliver Wyman Forum, 2023
- 64 Microsoft, 2022
- 65 Oliver Wyman Forum, 2023
- 66 Stack Influence, 2025
- 67 Arab Youth Survey, 2023
- 68 GYI, 2024
- 69 Statista, 2025
- 70 Assomull, S., 2023
- 71 Gov.uk, 2025
- 72 YouGov, 2024
- 73 Blaazer, E. 2024
- 74 Datareportal. 2025
- 75 International Telecommunication Union, 2023
- 76 Nielsen IQ, 2024
- 77 MOCS, 2025
- 78 MOCS, 2025
- 79 World Data Lab, 2024
- 80 Statista, 2025
- 81 Statista, 2025
- 82 Saudi Vision 2030
- 83 Statista, 2025
- 84 Statista, 2025
- 85 Fandom, 2025
- 86 Johansson, 2025
- 87 Saudi Vision 2030
- 88 Spotify, 2025
- 89 International Trade Council, 2025
- 90 Hyundai Research Institute, 2018
- 91 Statista, 2025
- 92 Blackpink Instagram, 2025
- 93 AFS Summit Delegate Interviews, 2025
- 94 Spotify, 2025
- 95 Statista, 2024
- 96 Li, 2025
- 97 Statista, 2025
- 98 Li, 2025
- 99 Krishnan, M., 2025
- 100 Li, 2025
- 101 Yousef et al., 2025
- 102 Li, 2025
- 103 The Statesman, 2025
- 104 Wolfangel, E., & Jacobsen, 2025
- 105 World Economic Forum, 2025
- 106 Spotify, 2025
- 107 Oxford Word of the Year, 2024
- 108 Interview MOCX, 2025

Sources

Arab Youth Survey. (2023). Nearly half of Arab youth aspire to start their own business in the next five years. ASDA'A BCW Arab Youth Survey Middle East.

<https://arabyouthsurvey.com/en/nearly-half-of-arab-youth-aspire-to-start-their-own-business-in-the-next-five-years/>

Assomull, S. (2023, September 19). Arab shoppers are looking beyond heritage luxury. It's a big opportunity. Vogue Business.

<https://www.voguebusiness.com/consumers/arab-shoppers-are-looking-beyond-heritage-luxury-its-a-big-opportunity>

Badaoui, B. (2024). Cultural studies and soft skills: An integrated approach. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 6, 516–525.

<https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i3.1825>

Blaazer, E. (2024, November 18). The Gen Z dilemma: Eco-conscious but addicted to fast fashion. FashionUnited. <https://fashionunited.uk/news/background/the-gen-z-dilemma-eco-conscious-but-addicted-to-fast-fashion/2024110878495>

Blanchflower, D. G., Bryson, A., & Xu, X. (2025). The declining mental health of the young and the global disappearance of the unhappiness hump shape in age. *PLoS ONE*, 20(8), e0327858.

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0327858>

Datareportal. 2025. Saudi Digital Report.

<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-saudi-arabia>

dub.ai. (2025, August 19). Dubai AI Seal.

<https://dub.ai/en/ai-seal/>

Edelman. (2025). Gen Z & Grievance: A generation's response to a world under threat.

<https://www.edelman.com/hk/insights/gen-z-and-grievance-generations-response-changing-world>

Edelman. (2025). Edelman Trust Barometer 2025.

<https://www.edelman.com/trust/2025/trust-barometer>

Empower. (2024). Secret To Success Study.

<https://www.empower.com/the-currency/money/secret-success-research>

Fandom. (2025). Roblox Wiki.

https://roblox.fandom.com/wiki/Brookhaven_by_Voldex/Brookhaven_RP

LinkedIn. (2025). Jimmy Donaldson's profile.

https://www.linkedin.com/posts/mr-beast_so-far-this-year-beast-philanthropy-has-given-activity-7378454764998549504-X9I3/

Future For Advanced Research and Studies (2024). Generation Z's Impact on Global Elections

<https://futureuae.com/beence.php/Mainpage/Item/9274/emerging-power-generation-zs->

Gov.uk. (2025). Green Claims Campaign

<https://greenclaims.campaign.gov.uk/>

Gov.sa (2025, October 18), Tuwaiq Academy Launches over 200 New Programs.

<https://my.gov.sa/en/news/657489>

Hasell, J., Rohenkohl, B., & Arriagada, P. (2025, August 11). \$3 a day: A new poverty line has shifted the World Bank's data on extreme poverty. What changed, and why? Our World in Data.

<https://ourworldindata.org/new-international-poverty-line-3-dollars-per-day>

Hyundai Research Institute. (2018). The Economic Impact of BTS.

<https://www.hri.co.kr/kor/report/report-view.html?uid=30107>

International Labour Organization. (2024). Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024: Decent work, brighter futures.

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/GET_2024_EN%20web.pdf

International Telecommunication Union. (2025, August 29).

About us — AI for Good. ITU.

<https://aiforgood.itu.int/about-us/>

International Telecommunication Union. (Vanoli, C.). (2024, July 8). Giga: Connecting schools to the internet

<https://www.itu.int/hub/2024/07/giga-connecting-schools-to-the-internet/>

International Telecommunication Union (2025). ICT Data Hub. Individuals using a smartphone.

<https://datahub.itu.int/data/?i=28228>

International Telecommunication Union (2025). ICT Data Hub. Individuals Using The Internet.

<https://datahub.itu.int/data/?e=1&i=11624>

International Trade Administration. (2025). Saudi Arabia Country Commercial Guide.

<https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/saudi-arabia-digital-economy-0>

International Trade Council. (2025, August). South Korea Leverages Cultural Exports for Economic Growth.

<https://tradecouncil.org/south-korea-leverages-cultural-exports-for-economic-growth/>

Johansson, J. (2025, August 27). AAA studios face economic math that doesn't work, according to recent report. Eneba.

<https://www.eneba.com/hub/news/aaa-studios-face-economic-math-that-doesnt-work-according-to-recent-report/>

Krishnan, M. (2025, May 9). Influencer burnout is on the rise. A new mental health service wants to help. WIRED.

<https://www.wired.com/story/influencer-burnout-mental-health-service-creativecare/>

Lambert, S. (2022, March 31). A potted history of youth culture. North East Bylines.

<https://northeastbylines.co.uk/news/national-news/a-potted-history-of-youth-culture/>

- Li, R.** (2025). The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Gen Z's Online Purchase Decisions. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/387778483_The_Impact_of_Social_Media_Influencers_on_Gen_Z%27s_Online_Purchase_Decisions
- Martin, J.** (2025) The AI Trust Gap: 82% Are Skeptical, Yet Only 8% Always Check Sources. <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/ai-trust-gap-research>
- Microsoft.** (2022). Work Trend Index. <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/great-expectations-making-hybrid-work-work>
- Misk Foundation** (2024). Global Youth Index. <https://hub.misk.org.sa/insights/global/2025/global-youth-index-2024/>
- NielsenIQ & World Data Lab.** (2024). Spend Z <https://nielseniq.com/global/en/insights/report/2024/spend-z/>
- OECD.** (2025). OECD Economic Outlook: Interim report, September 2025 — Finding the right balance in uncertain times. <https://doi.org/10.1787/67b10c01-en>
- OECD.** (2022, June 23). Youth at the centre of government action. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/youth-at-the-centre-of-government-action_bcc2dd08-en.html
- Oliver Wyman Forum.** (2024). GCC Is A World Leader In AI Usage — But That Comes With Risks. <https://www.oliverwymanforum.com/artificial-intelligence/2024/mar/gcc-is-a-world-leader-in-ai-usage---but-that-comes-with-risks.html>
- Oliver Wyman Forum.** (2023). What Business Needs To Know About The Generation Changing Everything. <https://www.oliverwymanforum.com/content/dam/oliver-wyman/ow-forum/template-scripts/a-gen-z/pdf/A-Gen-Z-Report.pdf>
- Oliver Wyman Forum.** (2024). How Generative AIs Transforming Business and Society. <https://www.oliverwymanforum.com/content/dam/oliver-wyman/ow-forum/gcs/2023/AI-Report-2024-Davos.pdf>
- OpenAI.** (2025). How people are using ChatGPT. <https://openai.com/index/how-people-are-using-chatgpt/>
- Pew Research Center.** (2020). On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z So Far. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far/>
- Rakyat Digital.** (n.d.). Government of Malaysia. <https://rakyatdigital.gov.my/courses/ai-untuk-rakyat>
- Saudi Statistics Authority** (2023), Saudi Census 2022. <https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/statistics-tabs?tab=436327&category=417653>
- Saudi Vision 2030,** National Gaming and E-Sports Strategy. https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/svtpwvei/nges_strategy_en.pdf
- Spotify.** (2025) Spotify Strengthens AI Protections for Artists, Songwriters, and Producers. <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2025-09-25/spotify-strengthens-ai-protections/>
- Stanford HAI.** (2024). The 2024 AI Index Report. <https://hai.stanford.edu/ai-index/2024-ai-index-report>
- Stack Influence.** (2025). How Much Do Micro-Influencers Make in 2025. <https://stackinfluence.com/how-much-do-micro%E2%80%99influencers-make-in-2025/>
- Statista.** (2025, August 5). Luxury goods market in GCC — Statistics & facts. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/topics/11528/luxury-goods-market-in-gcc/>
- Statista.** (2025, July 16). Roblox user distribution worldwide in 2024, by age group. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1190869/roblox-games-users-global-distribution-age/>
- Statista.** (2025). eCommerce — Western Asia. Statista. https://www.statista.com/outlook/emo/e-commerce/western-asia?srsId=AfmBOoqf0fRY7ndvEaCAJ1aBdwlCSkYFvxz-WLihPLRriAQH_6RFDH6
- Statista.** (2025) Games - Worldwide. Statista. https://www.statista.com/outlook/amo/media/games/custom?currency=USD&token=0NsV9kt6RMS54GEX67ZyUXXF8nPI0yFzGd-1WTXtIPM3RJcWmO_kwyng8_90QcMh-jUNYf2PciwNurStoRPNr617k0uUk4Lsj_od9Hlw8US2TREMi_wgQ%3D%3D
- Statista.** (2025, August 1). Roblox global daily active users (DAU) as of Q2 2025. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1192573/daily-active-users-global-roblox/>
- Statista.** (2024). Share of consumers buying products on social media in 2024, by generation. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1273928/share-social-buyers-age-group-worldwide/?srsId=AfmBOoq5Mhly-mFl8tmnRlsjOFEzg2xxV-9c2fUr1SvrhWlfgNPP9Lw7>
- Statista.** (2025). Influencer marketing market size worldwide from 2015 to 2025 (in billion U.S. dollars). https://www.statista.com/statistics/1092819/global-influencer-market-size/?srsId=AfmBOorMy50D7K7iOt519f3tUscmFuM8PFDtI9i33hEpAdB_SOcf3uR
- The Statesman.** (2025). Want to understand Gen Z? Watch MrBeast. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/social-media/2024/01/understand-gen-z-watch-mrbeast>
- UNESCO.** (2022). Addressing culture as a global public good. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/>
- United Nations.** (2024). Governing AI for Humanity. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/governing_ai_for_humanity_final_report_en.pdf
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).** (2024). A 'super year' for elections. <https://www.undp.org/super-year-elections>

Vision 2030. (2024). Human Capability Development Program (HCDP) Annual Report.
https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/eucm4wtd/hcdp_annual-report-2024_-en.pdf

Walton Family Foundation. (2025). Gen Z Is Using AI — But Reports Gaps in School and Workplace Support.
<https://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/about-us/newsroom/gen-z-is-using-ai-but-reports-gaps-in-school-and-workplace-support>

Worlddata.info. (2025, October 15). Average income around the world.
<https://www.worlddata.info/average-income.php>

World Data Lab. (2024). Extreme poverty remains very high in Sub-Saharan Africa. Our World in Data.
<https://ourworldindata.org/data-insights/extreme-poverty-though-vastly-reduced-is-still-very-high-in-sub-saharan-africa>

World Economic Forum. (2024, February 3). This is how AI is impacting—and shaping—the creative industries, according to experts at Davos.
<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/02/ai-creative-industries-davos/>

World Economic Forum. (2024, August 3). How AI brings corporate might to small teams.
<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/08/how-ai-brings-corporate-might-to-small-teams-reshaping-business-for-all/>

World Economic Forum. (2025). Future of Jobs Report 2025.
https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_Report_2025.pdf

World Economic Forum. (2025). Advancing responsible AI innovation: A playbook.
<https://es.weforum.org/publications/advancing-responsible-ai-innovation-a-playbook/>

Yardi, S. (2025). Gen Z statistics 2025: Natives, age, population. Market.us Media.
<https://media.market.us/gen-z-statistics/>

YouGov. (2024). Sustainability premium: 53% of consumers willing to pay 10% extra for sustainable food and drink. <https://yougov.com/articles/49155-sustainability-premium-53-of-consumers-willing-to-pay-10-extra-for-sustainable-food-and-drink>

Yousef et al. (2025). Demystifying the New Dilemma of Brainrot in the Digital Era: A Review.
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/40149804/>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Misk

Omar Najjar, Mashael Alzoghaibi, Razan Alyamani, and the wider Misk team

Oliver Wyman

Seif Sammakieh, Ziad Zacca, Patricia Klimek, Maria Midiri, and the wider Oliver Wyman team

Ministry of Culture

Talal Fahim, Hind Alessa, Haya Shaath, Noof Khonji

Google

Ali Cheikhali

Neue Haus

Lena Hammerstingl

Alcove Advisors

Ayeh Naraghi



OLIVER WYMAN
A MARSH BUSINESS

About Misk

Established by H.R.H. Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Bin Abdulaziz in 2011, Misk Foundation is a non-profit organization devoted to cultivating and encouraging learning and leadership in Saudi youth for a better future for Saudi Arabia.

For more information, visit misk.org.sa

Follow Misk on X [@Misk_Global](https://twitter.com/Misk_Global)

About Oliver Wyman

Oliver Wyman is a business of Marsh (NYSE: MRSB), a global leader in risk, reinsurance and capital, people and investments, and management consulting, advising clients in 130 countries. With annual revenue of over \$24 billion and more than 90,000 colleagues, Marsh helps build the confidence to thrive through the power of perspective.

For more information, visit www.oliverwyman.com

Follow Oliver Wyman on X [@OliverWyman](https://twitter.com/OliverWyman)

Copyright © 2026 Mohammed bin Salman Foundation (Misk) and Oliver Wyman

This report was developed by Mohammed bin Salman Foundation (Misk) with the support of Oliver Wyman and is provided for general information purposes only; it does not constitute investment, legal, tax, or other professional advice and should not be relied upon as such. No part of this report may be reproduced, redistributed, or sold in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of Mohammed bin Salman Foundation (Misk) and Oliver Wyman. While Mohammed bin Salman Foundation (Misk) and Oliver Wyman have used sources they believe to be reliable and have exercised reasonable care in the preparation of this report, the information is provided “as is” without warranty of any kind, express or implied, and neither Mohammed bin Salman Foundation (Misk) nor Oliver Wyman undertakes any obligation to update it. To the fullest extent permitted by law, Mohammed bin Salman Foundation (Misk) and Oliver Wyman accept no liability for any direct, indirect, consequential, or other loss arising from any use of, or reliance on, this report or its contents. This report does not constitute, and should not be construed as, an offer to sell, or a solicitation of an offer to buy, any securities or other financial instruments. Any reproduction, distribution, quotation or public use of all or any part of this Report shall include a clear and accurate attribution in the following form — Mohammed bin Salman Foundation (Misk) and Oliver Wyman (2026), The Power of Youth Creation — and, where applicable, shall cite the specific page, figure or table; failure to include such attribution shall constitute a breach of the Report’s terms and may give rise to legal remedies.