



BEYOND SOCIAL MEDIA

Creating Meaningful Connections with Young Consumers

GALE
REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

As more marketers move away from an over-reliance on performance marketing, brands are now competing to reach young consumers through brand-forward tactics that increase awareness and build loyalty for the long-term.

For many, the first impulse is to focus on social media, where young people spend several hours per day consuming content from friends, creators, influencers, and brands. There's no denying it's a critical tool for reaching this audience. It's why U.S. social media ad spend is projected to reach \$219 billion in 2024, and why brands like Duolingo, with standout organic content, earn consistent praise from consumers and industry media alike.

But reaching young consumers today requires more than a top-notch social media strategy. It demands a holistic, social-first marketing approach, with integrated and consistent touchpoints both online and offline, research revealed.

To get a better understanding of what stands out to young consumers today, GALE surveyed nearly 2,000 U.S. consumers aged 15-29, asking them about the brands they see as showing up in interesting and relevant ways. In doing so, we identified four key characteristics of brands earning their attention:

1. Community-Centric
2. Engagement-Focused
3. Content-Driven
4. Relevant To Lifestyle

Here, we dive deeper on each of these characteristics and what they mean for marketers.



COMMUNITY-CENTRIC

Brands that stand out to young consumers today prioritize building a community both online and offline as a core aspect of their marketing and brand development.

When considering their favorite brands, 3 in 5 young consumers say they feel a sense of community with others who like the same brand. This sense of community is correlated with higher consumer satisfaction in their interactions with the brand. Specifically, 62% of those who feel a sense of community report satisfaction with online brand encounters, compared to 38% among those who do not feel a sense of community. In offline settings, 52% of those who feel community report satisfaction, versus 38% among those who do not.

Even more notably, those who feel a sense of community are more likely to perceive the brand as culturally relevant (84% vs. 47%), demonstrate loyalty to the brand (78% vs. 35%), and say that the brand adds value to their life beyond its core products or services (34% vs. 11%).

HOW AND WHERE ARE THESE BRANDS BUILDING COMMUNITY?

Young consumers report seeing these brands most frequently online — especially on social media — but also have a desire for offline engagement. While the majority are satisfied with offline interactions (48%), many have a desire to see more offline touchpoints, such as sponsored events or festivals (31%).

When asked about activities they don't currently see these brands doing but would like to, the top response was "hosting or sponsoring events." Meanwhile, only 8% have attended an event or experience created or sponsored by their favorite brand, suggesting ample opportunity for brands to address this desire if activations are designed with a deep understanding of the specific audience they are trying to reach.

In general, young consumers want brands to show up both online and offline. Though 15-18 year olds reported a slight preference for online engagement, responses were nearly split when asked if brands should prioritize in-person or online activity.

FIG 1: TOP BRANDS BUILD COMMUNITY
PERCENT WHO FEEL COMMUNITY WITH OTHERS WHO LIKE THEIR TOP BRAND

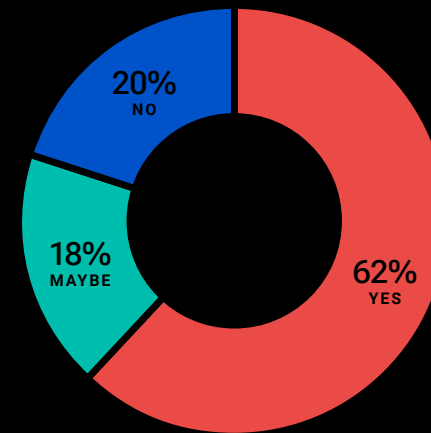


FIG 3: YOUNG CONSUMERS CRAVE MORE OFFLINE BRAND ACTIVATIONS

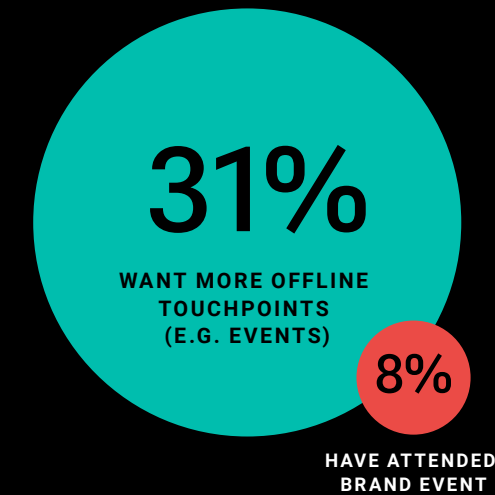
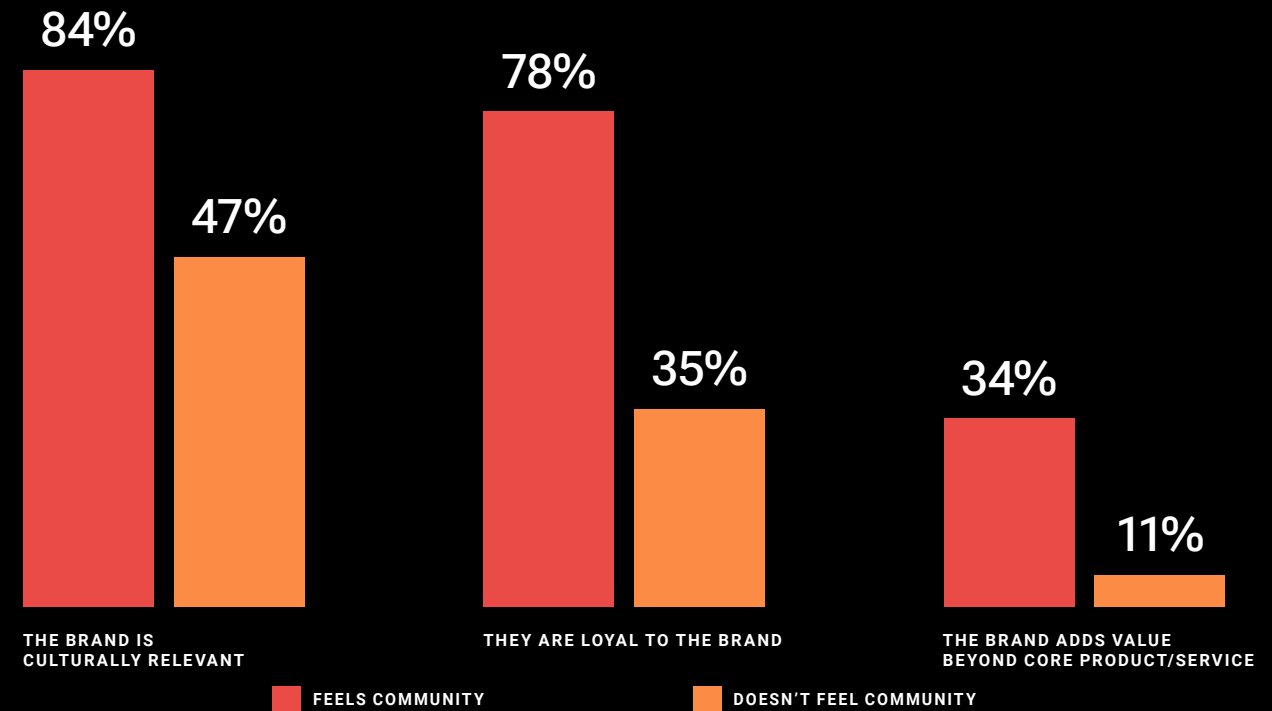


FIG 2: THE POWER OF FOSTERING COMMUNITY
OF THOSE WHO FEEL COMMUNITY WITH OTHERS WHO LIKE THEIR TOP BRAND VS. THOSE WHO DON'T, % THAT AGREE



NOTE: IN THIS REPORT, "TOP BRANDS" ARE DEFINED AS THOSE THAT YOUNG CONSUMERS PERCEIVE AS SHOWING UP IN THE WORLD IN INTERESTING AND RELEVANT WAYS.

**“ALL BRANDS NEED TO MAKE THEIR
CUSTOMERS **FEEL SOMETHING.**”**

– Research Participant

ENGAGEMENT-FOCUSED

To catch the attention of young consumers, brands must prioritize interactive and responsive engagement with them, encouraging conversation and participation with the brand that can extend to their personal communities.

When asked to identify the top ways a brand can stand out as one worth engaging with online, the leading response was, “They listen to ideas and feedback shared by their followers.”

However, when asked about the primary way they have proactively engaged with a brand, the number one response (41%) was talking about the brand with their friends. While some of this conversation might happen online, this also suggests a need for brands to be relevant enough to transcend consumer-to-brand digital interactions and become part of personal interactions offline.

This desire for online engagement to extend beyond digital platforms is supported by their top response to how they’d like to see brands they love most show up offline this year: 40% said creating ways for communities built online to gather in the real world.

On social media, many (28%) have liked, commented, or shared their top brand’s social media posts. However, only 8% have suggested an idea for a new product, offering, or experience the brand should create. For brands looking to spark engagement while fostering community, prompting these types of conversations could be successful.

FIG 4: TOP BRANDS FOSTER CONVERSATION
TOP WAYS YOUNG CONSUMERS HAVE ENGAGED WITH BRANDS



FIG 5: HOW YOUNG CONSUMERS WANT TOP BRANDS TO SHOW UP OFFLINE



CONTENT-DRIVEN

Winning in social-first marketing means prioritizing content that is shareable, engaging, and optimized for each platform. When content meets these criteria, consumers are receptive to its presence.

Young consumers most commonly recall encountering their favorite brands through content, both on social media (53% ads, 44% organic) and on television or streaming platforms (42%). The top reasons these consumers cited for finding a brand's digital content worthy of engagement were that it demonstrates a clear understanding of each digital channel and is entertaining.

For brands that meet these standards, volume isn't an issue. When asked how often they see their favorite brands online, 81% said anywhere from multiple times a day to a few times per week. 54% said they are happy with how often they see these brands, and 22% would be okay with seeing more.

Young consumers are also interested in seeing their favorite brands get even more creative with their content. When asked what actions they don't see these brands doing but would like them to, another top response (17%) was "creating branded content, like a mini series or documentary."

With all this in mind, however, brands must take caution to be smart and authentic with their content. On social media, 46% have unfollowed a brand at some point, with the top reasons cited being their content was no longer engaging, or they felt a misalignment in values.

FIG 6: YOUNG CONSUMERS SEE TOP BRANDS ONLINE FREQUENTLY

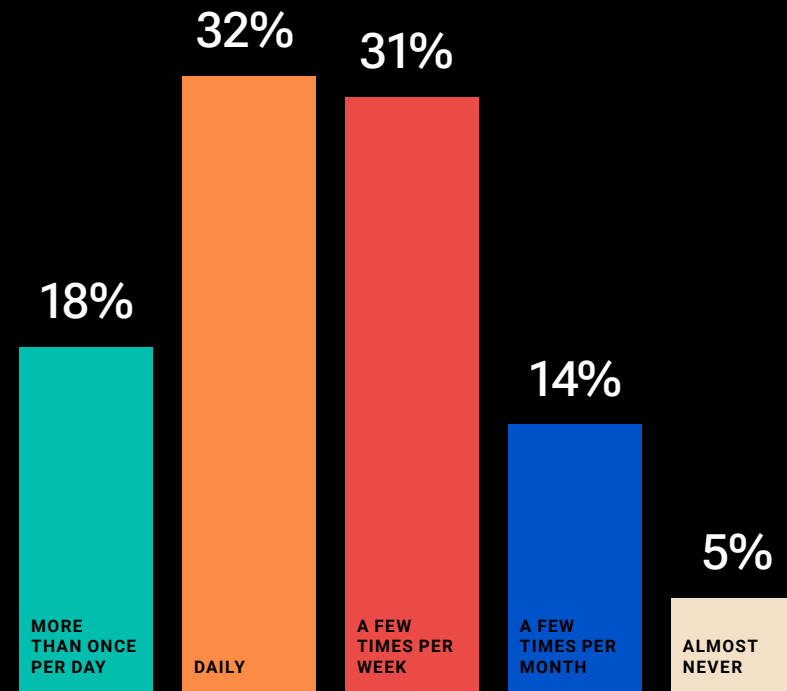


FIG 7: YOUNG CONSUMERS LIKE SEEING TOP BRANDS ON SOCIAL FREQUENTLY

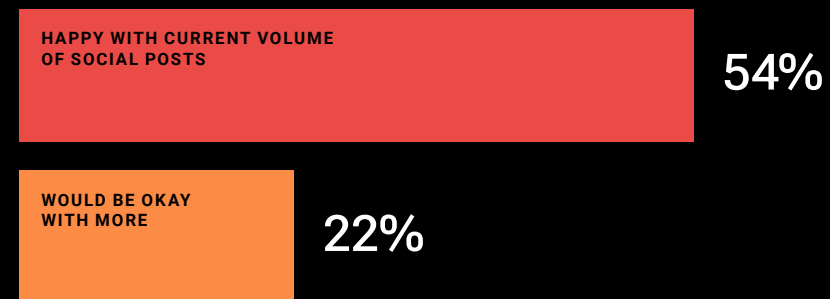


FIG 8: CONTENT MUST BE ENGAGING & AUTHENTIC
REASONS YOUNG CONSUMERS HAVE UNFOLLOWED A BRAND ON SOCIAL MEDIA

"THEY POSTED BORING CONTENT. I GOT TIRED OF REPETITIVE CONTENT".

"THEY BECAME EXTREMELY POLITICAL WHEN THEY WERE NOT A FORMERLY POLITICAL BRAND."

"EITHER THEY WERE TRYING TO BE FUNNY BUT IT CAME ACROSS AS CRINGEY, OR I DON'T ALIGN WITH THE BRAND STATEMENT ANYMORE."

RELEVANT TO LIFESTYLE

In line with all the characteristics above, young consumers emphasize the desire for brands to feel relevant to their lifestyle. This includes both relevance across digital, social, and cultural trends, as well as relevance to their personal identity and lives.

When asked about brands showing up in relevant ways, 81% say they seem to be ahead of trends or participate in existing trends in interesting ways – with the majority (58%) citing the latter.

While some (26%) feel that top brands are already adding value to their lives beyond their core products and services, more (54%) agree that brands *should* be adding this value.

HOW CAN THEY DO THIS?

Top responses suggest expanding their lives through interests, experiences, or connections, helping them feel happier or more confident, and supporting social issues.

17% say they have tried something new because of a brand’s involvement, suggesting opportunity for brands to provide ways to expand a consumer’s interests or hobbies to add value to their lives.

FIG 9: TOP BRANDS KEEP UP WITH & SET TRENDS
PERCENT OF CONSUMERS WHO AGREE...

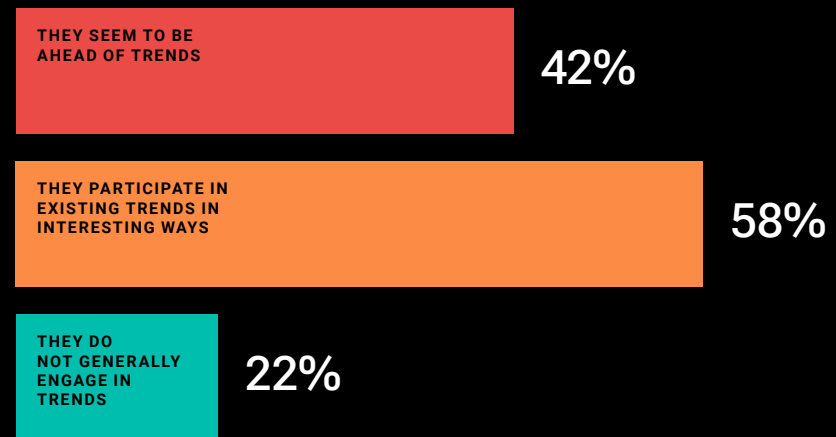


FIG 10: YOUNG CONSUMERS WANT BRANDS TO ADD VALUE TO THEIR LIVES BEYOND THEIR CORE PRODUCTS OR SERVICES
PERCENT OF CONSUMERS WHO AGREE...

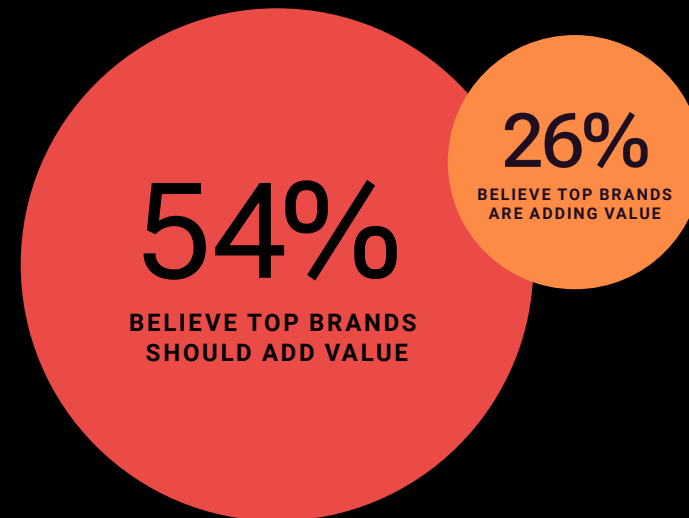


FIG 11: HOW BRANDS CAN ADD VALUE TO YOUNG CONSUMERS' LIVES

- "INTRODUCING US TO NEW EXPERIENCES OR PEOPLE."
- "HELP ME FEEL MORE CONFIDENT."
- "BY BEING INVOLVED IN THE COMMUNITY AND SPONSORING LOCAL ISSUES AND EVENTS."
- "I SHOULD FEEL LIKE THEY ARE A LIFESTYLE PRODUCT."

TAKEAWAYS FOR MARKETERS

To stand out with young consumers today, brands must take a social-first approach to marketing, prioritizing audience behavior and relevant trends. For these digital natives, social media remains a critical tool, but it's only part of the equation. Instead of focusing on a singular channel, marketers should:

- 01 Focus on building a community around their brand to enhance satisfaction and loyalty.
- 02 Engage actively with their audiences, both online and offline, and seek out and listen to their feedback.
- 03 Create diverse, high-quality content that aligns with their audiences' interests and is authentic to the brand.
- 04 Maintain relevance by keeping up with trends and contributing positively to consumers' lives and communities.

By integrating these strategies, marketers can effectively connect with young consumers and build lasting loyalty.

**“ALL BRANDS HAVE THE
POTENTIAL TO CONNECT
WITH PEOPLE IF THEY
KNOW THEIR AUDIENCE
WELL ENOUGH.”**

— Research Participant

GALE