

# DO YOU SPEAK GEN Z?

How Gen Z Talks To Each Other And How To Talk Back

AT

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# INTRODUCTION

At LERMA/, one of our agency's biggest talking points is our expertise in reaching our audiences in-language and in-culture. We aspire for our clients' brands to have fluid, authentic conversations (and connections) with them. This is especially important for our Omnicultural Hispanic audiences, who identify as 100% American and 100% Hispanic, and may live in two (if not more) different cultural tribes, communicating seamlessly in English and/or Spanish. The key for engaging with Gen Zers is not just about reaching them in-language, but also reaching them in-culture via channels that are in-behavior.

Great, but how can we relate to them authentically when the vast majority of people managing brands are a generation or more older? The purpose of this white paper is to equip readers with the basics to communicate naturally with Gen Zers and to help them avoid making mistakes; Gen Zers have put their own spin on language, evolving it in a way that leaves many of us scratching our heads in confusion. With significantly more tools and devices always at their fingertips, they can effortlessly communicate with someone a few inches or even a few thousand miles away. Their identity is inextricably tied to the Internet and digital media.

This report is based on 2019, 2020, and 2021 data and analysis from an ongoing collaborative research study conducted by LERMA/ and The University of Texas School of Advertising and Public Relations and designed to gain a more thorough understanding of the complexities of today's highly diverse multicultural society. Our ongoing research initiative started in 2016 with Millennials.

The new wave, "Gen Z Deconstructed," consisted of a nationally representative online sample of Black, Hispanic, Asian, and White Gen Zers between the ages of 18 and 23, and explored diverse topics that we will be covering in upcoming publications: political beliefs and attitudes, media behavior, communications, gaming, relationships with brands, dating, etc. A series of qualitative one-on-one interviews with Gen Zers and experts on various fields were conducted following the quantitative study to gain additional insights into survey findings. We incrementally fielded a nationally representative online sample that frames results in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.



BRUH	4.5%	VS.	9.4%
COOL	10.2%	VS.	9.8%
DOPE	7.7%	VS.	4.9%
DUDE	3.3%	VS.	4.1%
LIT	9.5%	VS.	12.4%
RAD	5.7%	VS.	7.8%
YEET	7.1%	VS.	7.1%

We asked Gen Z to list five of the coolest words/expressions and five words/expressions they believe are not cool anymore. Upon analysis, we divided the words into categories: the most popular selections, thematically, and a handful of definitions of Gen Z jargon.

To kick us off, there are a handful of words that are fairly controversial among Gen Z. They are divisive to the extent that they appeared in both data subsets, with some thinking them to be cool (the first percentage), and others not so much (the second percentage).

Because of this split, our recommendation is to use these words with care or simply avoid them to eliminate alienating some Gen Zers who may not look too kindly on these expressions. We should also note that the word "cool" appears in the subset. To follow our own recommendation, we too will avoid using it.

Many Gen Zers preferred words/expressions centered around positive emotions and empowerment. They may use these words as exclamations to affirmatively respond to statements they agree with or find value in. More importantly, these feelings evoke Gen Z's appreciation for the ideas and creations that they as individuals bring to the table.

### WHAT GEN Z SAYS

Previous generations used select words and phrases to describe their feelings, like calling something "the bee's knees" in the 1920s-30s, or "groovy" in the 1960s, to say something is excellent. Today's youngest consumers seemingly aren't using English or correct grammar at all, yet they are communicating in full sentences. To better understand an entire generation's communication habits and preferences, it's time to dive into the nitty-gritty details of exactly what they are saying to one another by examining their word choice.



On the other side of the spectrum, Gen Z's least preferred words include negative labels and swear words. Some of their selections speak to their greater readiness for social progress and acceptance. Additionally, their selections shed light on their desires and outright refusal to be boxed in.

"It's a generational thing," said Melissa, 23, a preschool teacher from Albuquerque. "We have the tools and language to understand identity in ways our parents never really thought about." At first glance, there appears to be more consensus among Gen Z's least preferred words versus their preferred words. This suggests a collective desire to rid society of negativity and inequities. The passion they hold for social progressivism and activism manifests itself in their actions as well as their language.

Taking a closer look at their preferred words, it is evident that their word choice conveys positivity. According to *BuzzFeed*'s 2020 report, Z: The E.T.C. Generation, whereas Millennials are optimistic and socially conscious, Gen Z is positive and activist in nature.<sup>1</sup> Their preferred words evoke emotions and feelings that they seek to experience in any given moment, not how they hope to feel in the future. It's about the IRL experience.

Gen Z is adamant about the way they seek to live their lives – freely and without judgment or mockery. However, such freedom challenges the norms set in place from even before Boomers (with whom Gen Z had a minor tiff with the popular "Ok Boomer"). These moments, whether carefully articulated or simply in their natural flow, show Gen Z bending language to change society's norms and erasing the labels that so often separate and restrict them, instead filling the gaps with positivity, affirmation, and truth. This sets the mood of Gen Z's ideology: You Do You.

Gen Z is unapologetically individual. Their recognition of self and others is carried through their word choice to connote acceptance of their peers and their lives, thereby eliminating a potential barrier that may stand between Gen Z's right to create and dream and to pursue their lives.

### **COOL WORDS**

AWESOME	16.0%
AMAZING	15.9%
EXCITED	15.7%
LOVE	15.4%
SWEET	12.2%
HAPPY	11.8%
BEAUTIFUL	8.0%
PROUD	7.6%
WONDERFUL	6.3%
EMPOWERED	4.5%

### **UNCOOL WORDS**

N WORD	24.1%
FUCK	18.4%
GAY	17.8%
BITCH	17.3%
FAGGOT	16.2%
<b>RETARD/ED</b>	14.0%
HATE/ERS	7.6%
UGLY	6.3%
SLUT	4.7%
WHORE	3.5%





The second piece of this analysis is arguably as educational as the first section: understanding what exactly Gen Z is saying. Below is a selection of popular Gen Z words/expressions and definitions based on their responses to our survey:

BET	To understand, to acknowledge.	
BOP	When a song, or album, is very good.	
NO CAP	No lie/not lying. To explicitly say one is telling the truth.	
DEAD	When one is acknowledging hilarity in a previous statement.	
DEADASS	Another way to express seriousness.	
FINNA/BOUTA	A quicker way to say "fixing to" or "about to," respectively; a way of saying that you are going to do something.	
FINSTA	Fake+ Instagram. A second, more private and relaxed Instagram account.	
FLEX	To brag about something. Often preceded by the word "weird," which then means to brag about something unnecessarily or out of the ordinary.	
FACTS	Used to agree with something, someone, or a statement. It can also be used to point out something as being factual.	
GUCCI	A slang term taken from the brand name to mean good, great, okay, awesome, etc. It is sometimes expressed as gucc or gooch.	

# **GEN Z DICTIONARY**

	HIGH KEY	Used to describe something that is very obvious. Opposite of low key.
	LOW KEY	Used to describe something that is not at all obvious. Opposite of high key.
	OOF	Verbalized to express discomfort. Yes, it's an onomatopoeia.
	<b>RONA/MISS RONA</b>	A less dramatic name for COVID-19.
/;	SALTY	Serious.
	SHOOK	Shocked, surprised, scared, or hesitant.
	SNACK	A compliment to someone who looks good enough to eat.
	STAN	A very big fan of a celebrity.
It	STONKS	An intentional misspelling of "stocks," usually said after gaining or losing money or anything valuable in a stupid way.
	TEA	The hot gossip.
	WHIP	Car.

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# HOW GEN Z COMMUNICATES

Now that we (may) have a somewhat better grasp of the words that Gen Z uses and which they would prefer to never use/encounter again, it's necessary to understand the precise ways in which Gen Z is most likely to use this language: via technology.

It's no secret that Generation Z is a technology native generation. They've grown up with one of the most powerful tools in the history of the world – the Internet (hence their alias, iGen). Over time, the Internet has always been present in the devices that Gen Z has come to cherish and seemingly has in front of their eyes every minute of every day. They constantly have a myriad of tools at their disposal to communicate whenever, wherever, however, and with whomever.



### **DEVICE DEPENDENCY**

In order to gauge Gen Z's relationships with their devices, we did some creeping. Kidding. We sought to identify their thoughts and sentiments when away from their beloveds.

It is important to note that nearly 97% of Gen Z, globally, owns a smartphone, according to a 2019 report by GlobalWebIndex and Snapchat. 78% of Gen Z considers their smartphone to be their most important device, versus 74% of Millennials.<sup>2</sup>

If we pinch two fingers to zoom out, we see that Gen Z, overall, skews slightly toward more positive feelings across most metrics when away from their devices. Notably, they are more likely to feel happier, more present, and empowered.

Together, those sentiments are logical, but things get interesting when one whips out a magnifier to inspect the differences across gender and ethnicity.

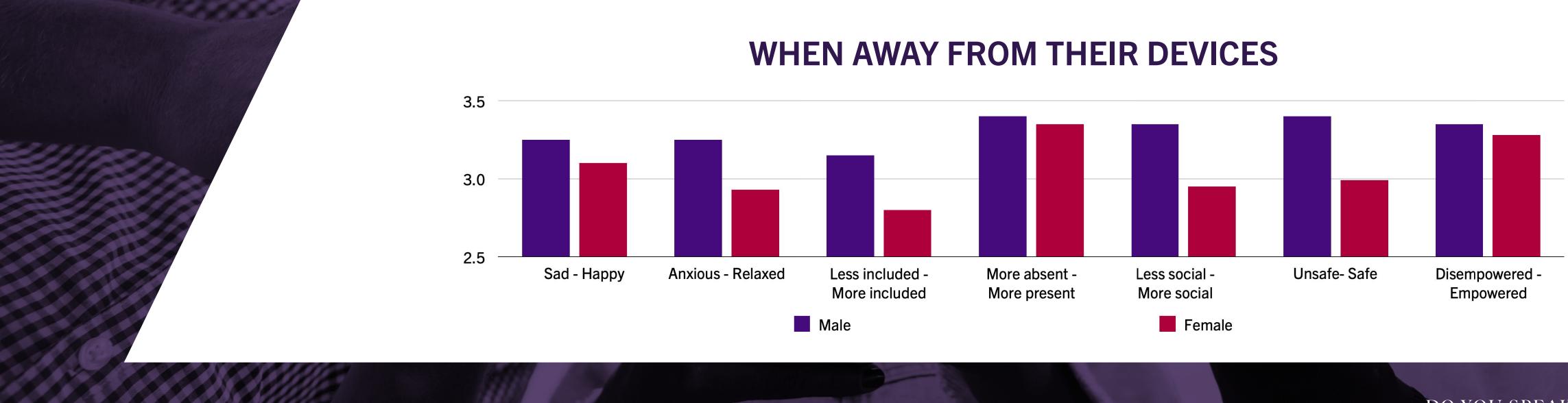


When away from their devices, Gen Z females are more likely than males to skew below the mean, indicating that females are more dependent on their devices for the purposes of socialization, inclusion, and safety.

"[My smartphone is] basically always on me, wherever I go. I even have the case that allows you to put your cards and cash on it because I'm always using my phone, so I have my wallet with me, too," said Gloria, 15.

"We are the best of friends we could possibly be. [My smartphone is] basically an extension of me. I'm closer with my phone, I guess, in ways than I am closer with my best friends," said Katherine, 15.

"I definitely rely on [my smartphone] heavily to provide me with all sorts of information or to get me through day-to-day life," said Elijah, 20.





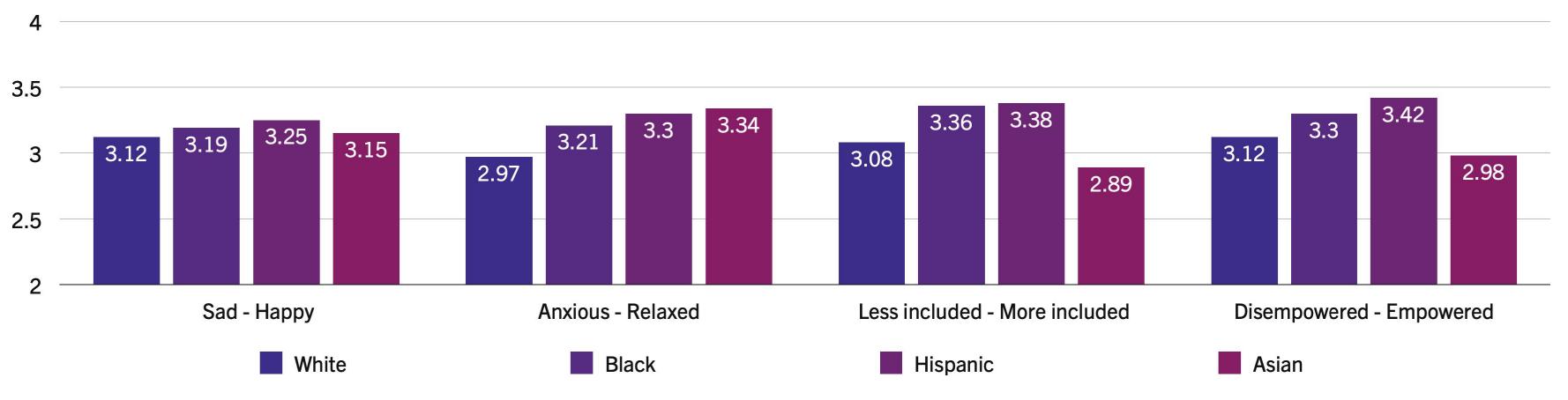


Across ethnicities, things get a bit dicier. We sought to divide the data into two lenses: 1) Feeling and Comfort 2) Experience and Sociability

Through the lens of Feeling and Comfort, most of the surveyed ethnicities skew toward positive emotions and feelings of generalized comfort when away from their devices, with a few exceptions. Viewing the first metric, all ethnicities skew to feeling happy, with Whites exhibiting the lowest deviation from the norm, suggesting that Whites are less likely than other ethnicities to be happy when away from their devices.

The averages become more varied with the next metric: Anxious vs. Relaxed. Whites skew below the average, indicating they are more likely to feel anxious when without their devices, whereas communities of color are more likely to feel relaxed. Interestingly, Hispanics and Blacks, whose populations tend to spend the most time on their devices, mobile especially, are more likely to feel comfortable when without their devices.

However, this metric of comfort is somewhat contradictory to the next: whereas Asians note feeling most relaxed, they are also more likely



### WHEN AWAY FROM THEIR DEVICES: FEELING & COMFORT

to note feeling unsafe. This may be indicative of Gen Z Asians using their devices to ensure their physical safety. In a similar way, Whites indicate feeling safer when without their devices, despite skewing toward feeling more anxious. The mind works in mysterious ways.

Lastly, all with the exception of Asians feel more empowered when without their devices. This may go hand in hand with the previous metric for Asians regarding their skewing toward feeling unsafe.



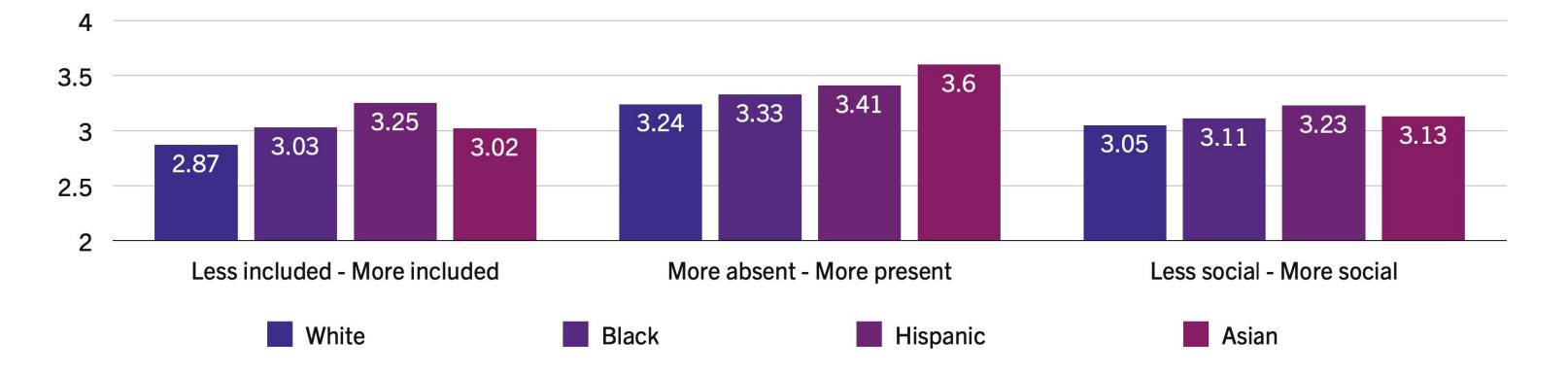
Through the second lens of Experience and Sociability, Whites' means skew below multicultural Gen Zers across all three metrics, indicating Whites are more likely to feel less included, more absent, and less social when without their devices. Altogether, this suggests that Whites, on average, are more dependent on their devices for the purposes of interpersonal engagement than other ethnicities. Alternatively, Hispanics are the only ethnicity to score substantially above the norm, which may be indicative of a decreased dependency on their devices for socialization.

Viewing the metrics individually, we see that Whites and Hispanics are the only ethnicities to be substantially different from the norm of

inclusion. Whereas Whites are less likely to feel included, Hispanics are significantly more likely to feel included when without their devices, a trend that is repeated in the final metric of indicating a greater likelihood of being more social.

Within the second metric, all ethnicities score above the norm, noting they would feel more present if they did not have their devices. And yet, they always have their devices SMH. Asians were significantly more likely to agree with this point; however, this must not be viewed in isolation. Along the final metric gauging Gen Z's perceptions of sociability, Hispanics were most likely to indicate feeling more social.

### WHEN AWAY FROM **THEIR DEVICES: EXPERIENCE** & SOCIABILITY



Gen Z views their devices as an extension of themselves, inextricably linked to their identities. On the flip side, without their devices, Gen Z overall is likely to feel more positively. When parsing out by gender and ethnicity, there are a few insights to note. Whites and females are more dependent on their devices for the purpose of socialization and experience compared to other ethnicities and males, respectively. And, Hispanics, despite being voracious consumers of tech, indicate feeling more social and present when away from their devices. Although brands may more effectively reach Gen Z through their devices, the brands that create experiences and build relationships beyond devices will forge more positive and engaging connections with Gen Z.



In fact, according to our survey, 66% of Gen Z indicated that technology and their devices help their relationships. There's minimal difference between gender and ethnicity in this sentiment.

Gen Z uses an abundance of channels to communicate with others. We explore how Gen Z opts to use their devices to interact with people across relationship dynamics in seamless, omnichannel, second-nature behaviors. In addition, we dissect the extent to which the message's tonality affects their preferred mode of communication.

### RELATIONAL COMMUNICATION

While it was entertaining to watch the participants squirm without their devices, our real interest in this survey lay in what Gen Z is like with their devices – namely, how they use technology to foster interpersonal communication and relationship building.

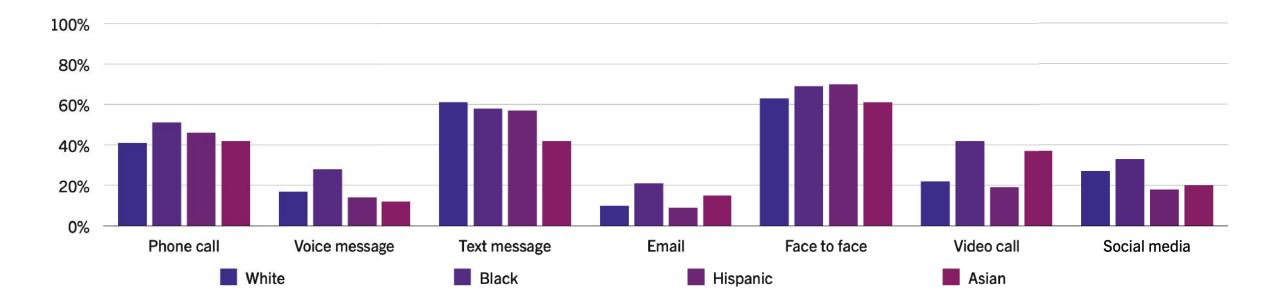


## **COMMUNICATING WITH THEIR PARENTS**

Overall, two-thirds of Gen Z cite communicating with their parents face to face a lot or a great deal of the time. That is, if Gen Z isn't giving their parents the silent treatment. In addition, a little over half of Gen Z claims communicating with their parents via text message a majority of the time. This also rings true for gender, with no significant difference from the average.

Viewing parental communication via ethnicities, there are a few findings to note. For instance, 41% of Blacks and 32% of Asians indicate using video calls a lot/great deal of the time to communicate with their parents, nearly twice as likely as Whites and Hispanics. This may be occurring on a combination of apps, such as FaceTime or Skype, as well as WhatsApp, WeChat, or even Houseparty.

### HOW MUCH DO YOU COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR PARENTS VIA \_?

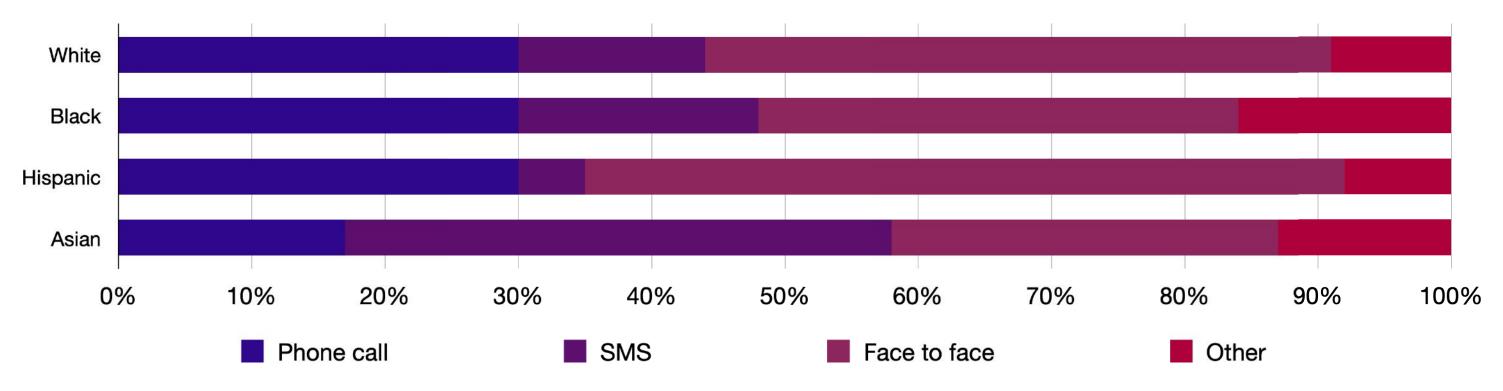


Another statistic of note is nearly one-third of Blacks and one-quarter of Whites communicate with their parents very frequently through social media. Are these Gen Zers meeting their parents where they are, on Facebook, or are they teaching their parents the social media platforms they consume, like Snapchat? And let's not forget fan favorites like TikTok, Triller, and Instagram Reels. When sharing positive news with their parents, exactly half of Gen Z prefers to communicate face to face. Otherwise, talking on the phone is a viable option – the listeners are still able to grasp the inflections in one's voice.

However, when communicating bad news, their preference for communicating face to face drops slightly. Understandable! Who wants to see their parent's look of disappointment?



### HOW DO YOU PREFER TO COMMUNICATE BAD NEWS TO YOUR PARENTS/FAMILY?



In looking at communication of good news, the only significant difference by ethnicity is that 60% of Hispanics prefer to communicate face to face. This is 10% higher than the Gen Z average and in tune with Hispanics' higher attachment to their families versus other ethnicities.

There are a few ethnic differences in bad news communication, which may be suggestive of cultural differences. Asians are significantly less likely than other ethnicities to communicate bad news via phone call and are significantly more likely to prefer texting their parents/family. Over half of Whites and Hispanics indicate preferring to share bad news in person. Now that's a rip the band-aid off approach.

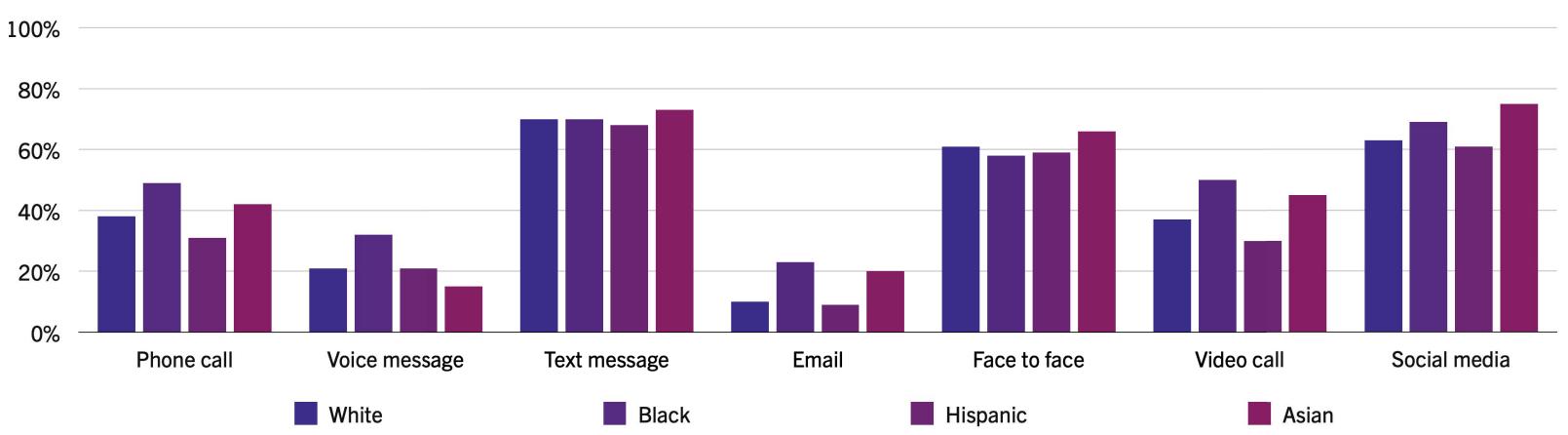


## **COMMUNICATING WITH THEIR FRIENDS**

Whereas Gen Z more frequently communicates with their parents in person, online engagement reigns supreme for connecting with their friends. Are we surprised? Compared to previous generations, nearly one-third of Gen Zers indicate that going online is the easiest way to make new friends, a statistic that skews greater among Whites and Hispanics.

Despite this preference, how Gen Z truly behaves with their friends is pretty evenly split. Nearly half prefer to engage online, such as

through social media, video games, or text. The other half of Gen Zers prefer friendships that occur IRL, i.e., face to face. With the Internet, Gen Z isn't limited to friendships within their local communities. Rather, their friendship opportunities span the entire globe. There are significant differences when it comes to gender. Gen Z males are slightly more likely to spend time communicating with their friends in person (66% vs. 57%) or via phone call (43% vs. 33%) than females.



### HOW MUCH DO YOU COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR FRIENDS VIA ?

There are quite a handful of differences upon examining friendship communication by ethnicity. Blacks and Asians are more likely to frequently use phone and video calls to engage with their friends whereas Whites and Hispanics are more likely to frequent texting, social media, and in-person channels.

No matter if Gen Z is sharing good or bad news, they still prefer to communicate with the basics: in person, via text, or phone call. This is also consistent across gender and ethnicity.

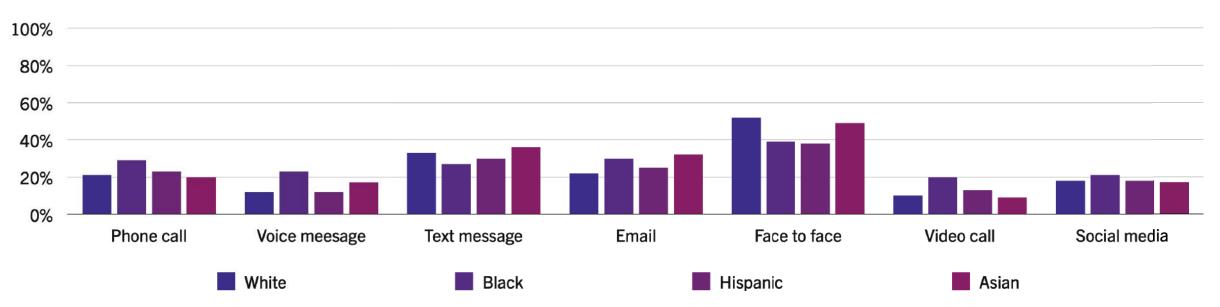


## **COMMUNICATING WITH COWORKERS**

It is important to preface this section with a note that the data frequencies were notably lower than other relationship dynamics, suggesting our surveyed Gen Z individuals may not have had work opportunities yet. No shame. The working world will come for them soon enough. Of those who have had work experiences, Gen Z indicates spending the most time communicating face to face or via text message. Voice messages are the least frequented means of communication with Gen Z coworkers. This also rings true for gender, with no significant difference from the overall outlook.

Altogether, it stresses Gen Z's preference to balance professionalism, tradition, and preference when communicating with their colleagues. This information is especially useful for HR and recruiters, who are in

### HOW MUCH DO YOU COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR CO-WORKERS VIA \_?



the process of hiring Gen Z and may find trouble communicating with them efficiently.

Whites and Asians are more likely to frequently communicate with their coworkers in person or via text message, similar to Gen Z overall. Blacks indicate more frequently communicating with their coworkers via phone calls and social media.

Like sharing good and bad news with their friends, Gen Z prefers to share positive and negative news with their coworkers in the same manner as they would with their friends – in person, via text, or phone call. There are no notable differences across gender or ethnicity.



## **COMMUNICATING WHEN DATING**

We know what you're thinking. Is dating really the right word to describe Gen Z's love lives? Some news organizations often describe Gen Z as the "hookup generation," whereas others suggest they are far more conservative than previous generations because they have fewer partners. What is undebatable is the context: they are the first digitally native generation coming of age during declining marriage rates and rising income inequality.<sup>3</sup>

Gen Z is more connected than ever, and with that comes the ability to do everything from have a conversation to a booty call all with the tap or swipe of a finger. So many options to get whatever it is they could possibly want has made Gen Z indecisive (or as indecisive as previous generations when they were their age and as inexperienced as they are) when it comes to meeting someone to date.

It goes back to the culture of progressive individualism that is Gen Z. For those seeking instant gratification, sexual pleasure may be up their alley. For others who savor commitment and trust, dating and a long-term relationship may be more apt for them.

"What we're finding is that young people are interested in love and are taking it quite seriously. There's a whole generation of people who are appreciating the extent of relationship diversity that's possible, and we're seeing more people being open and assertive about what kind of relationship they want," said Justin Garcia, a sex researcher who directs the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University.<sup>3</sup>



When it comes to the dating realm, technology is not giving them a layer of self-esteem or assuredness. A quarter believes that online is easiest to find one's significant other(s) whereas another quarter believes that friends of friends provide the easiest method. The remaining 50% of Gen Z is split among school, work, social media, events, and meet-up groups.

Yet, one place that the majority of Gen Z assuredly isn't is dating apps. According to our survey, only 30% of Gen Zers use dating apps. Dating app users skew male.

The real question is why this proportion is using dating apps. 33% indicate that "they prefer to meet people in person, but this is what everyone does now." Notice the irony of this...

The only relationship dynamic in which Gen Z is spending a good portion of their time communicating in person is with their PARENTS. Unless Gen Zers are ready for their parents to play matchmakers, they need to figure out what they want. To be fair, 30% of Gen Z dating app users indicate they are "more shy meeting/ talking to people in person," a statement which males and Hispanics are significantly less likely to select.

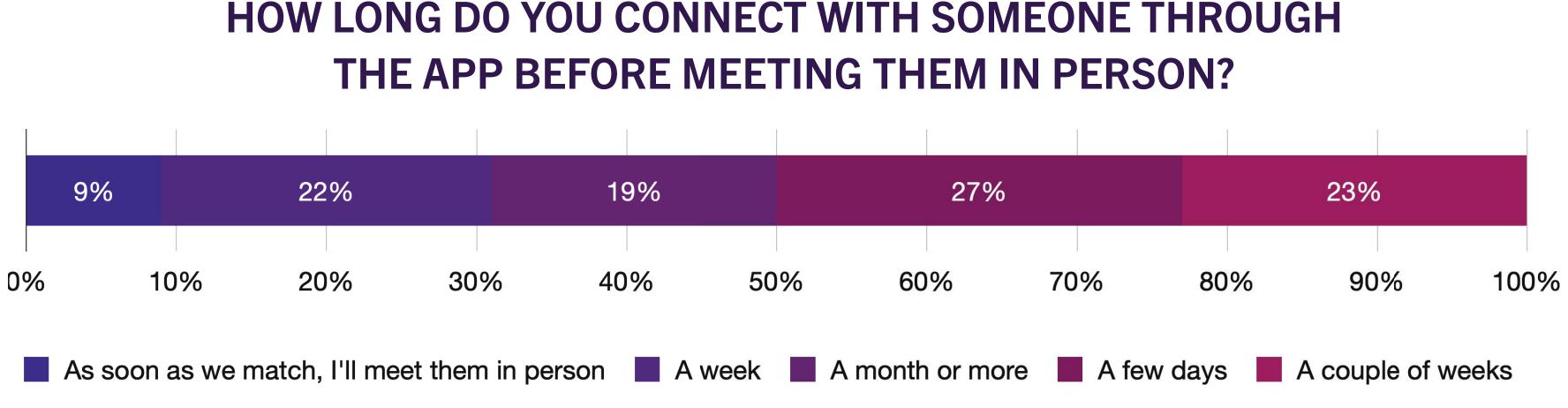
## WHERE THEY'RE LOOKING



## THEY AREN'T IN A RUSH

During COVID-19 and stay-at-home orders, dating apps such as Tinder and Bumble saw download and active use spikes, namely among Millennials and Gen Z.<sup>4</sup> As restrictions lifted, downloads and use diminished. Dating apps are working to retain the high use levels they saw from March and April 2020.

Exactly half of Gen Z dating app users are not in a rush; they prefer to wait at least a couple of weeks before meeting whomever they are chatting with IRL. 40% will connect in person between a few days and a week. Females and Blacks prefer to take things the slowest; they are significantly more likely to prefer to wait longer before meeting their dating app matches. Males and Hispanics seem to be more willing: they prefer a quicker turnaround to meet in real life.

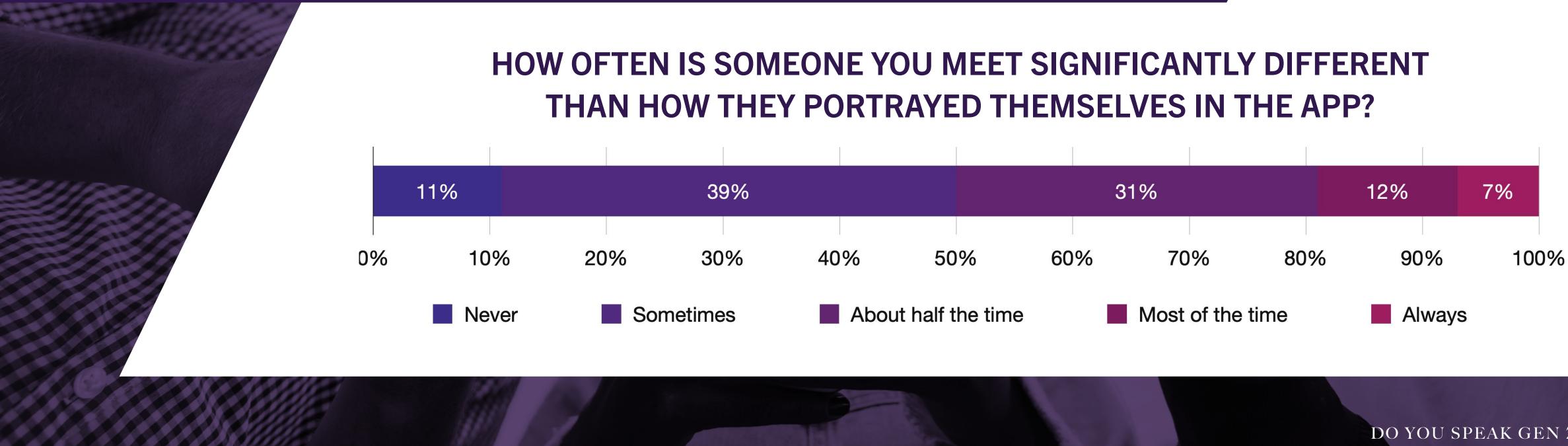




### **DEVICE DEPENDENCY**

Unfortunately, Gen Z cites they are sometimes met with disappointment on dating apps, in the form of people portraying themselves significantly different than they truly are. Sure, there are plenty of fish in the sea, but nowadays one has to watch out for catfish, unfortunate people/robots that are a complete waste of time. They give dating app users negative perceptions of online dating. There are significant differences across gender and ethnicity.

Yet, they remain positive. Match.com's Singles in America 2019 survey found that 70% of Gen Z and 63% of Millennials are looking to go steady in their relationships, and many are optimistic in their search for connection and/or love.<sup>3</sup>







### How Generation Z communicates is a factor of their drive to challenge norms set in place by generations before them and the technology that they have grown up with. Together, these work to inform Gen Z's perceptions of self and the world overall.

Their positive worldview comes through in their actions as much as their language and word preferences. Gen Z prefers to employ words that offer hope, cheer their peers on, and express tolerance and acceptance for what others bring to the table. However, that dream is incomplete without pressing backspace on the words that deride and divide. The Gen Z mantra of *You Do You* cannot function properly with language that places labels, builds walls, and restricts the freedom of individuality and expression.

# CONCLUSION

Beyond the messages that Gen Zers share with each other and the world at large is how they communicate, which is a factor of their interpersonal dynamics and relationship with technology. A staggering two-thirds of Gen Zers agree that technology enhances their relationships. However, they fully recognize that technology deters them from fully realizing their ability to be social, present, and included. These needs are vital for any effective and efficient communication. This paradox becomes muddled depending on the type of relationship. Gen Z prefers the age-old tradition of in-person communication with their parents, yet favors Internet-enabled engagement with friends and coworkers.

Meanwhile, technology is not changing Gen Z's approach to dating. Their potential romantic and/or sexual partners seemingly occupy a space between how Gen Z communicates with their parents and with their friends. While there's no exact method to their madness, one thing is clear: Gen Z is as much burdened by indecision and a lack of confidence as older generations in their pursuit of romantic relationships. They are just as inexperienced as the rest of us. These communication behaviors are authentically Generation Z, straight from the source. Sure, understanding what they are actually saying and how they communicate is admittedly tough. Reaching and engaging Gen Z in-language, in-context, and in-culture will not only enhance your messaging strategies, but also enrich your awareness of your own communication preferences. No cap.

### **METHODOLOGY:**

"Gen Z Deconstructed" is a collaborative research study that was conducted in partnership by LERMA/ and The University of Texas School of Advertising & Public Relations. The initial study was completed via an online national panel in December 2019 and a follow-up study was completed in May 2020, both among 2,500 Gen Z adults between the ages of 18 and 23 with representative national averages among Whites, Blacks, Asians, and Hispanics. A series of qualitative one-on-one interviews were conducted following the online surveys to gain additional insights into the findings. For more information on survey data, please contact Shannon Dunbar-Rubio at srubio@lermaagency.com or Matthew S. Eastin at matt.eastin@utexas.edu.

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This research report was written by Justin Rubenstein. The analysis team for this report was led by Quim Gil at LERMA/ and included Shannon Dunbar-Rubio, Carlos Rodriguez, and Justin Rubenstein. The "Gen Z Deconstructed" research initiative is led by Quim Gil and Shannon Dunbar-Rubio at LERMA/ and Dr. Matthew S. Eastin, Jung Ah Lee, and Fangxin Xu at The University of Texas at Austin School of Advertising & Public Relations.

### **ABOUT LERMA/:**

Based in Dallas, LERMA/ is a full-service branding and creative agency founded by Pete Lerma that is dedicated to crafting insightful and relevant communications for the multicultural market. Current clients include Anheuser-Busch, Interstate Batteries, Avocados From Mexico, Yves Rocher, Grupo Paisano, Ocean Spray, Southwest Airlines, The Home Depot, Tricolor, and The Salvation Army. LERMA/ can be found online at lermaagency.com and on Twitter at @LERMA\_AGENCY.

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The University of Texas School of Advertising & Public Relations defies categorization as a catalyst for growing exceptional communication specialists who are eager to enter the business world, as well as a Research 1 academic institution launching innovative scholars via the advanced study of advertising and public relations at both the Master's and Ph.D. levels. More information can be found online at http://advertising.utexas.edu.

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