

All Tomorrow's Stories

The future of representation
according to Gen Z Storytellers





we are social

We Are Social is a global socially-led creative agency, with unrivaled social media expertise. With 1,000 people in 15 offices spanning four continents, we deliver a global perspective to our clients in a time when social media is shaping culture. We make ideas powered by people. We understand social behaviours within online communities, cultures and subcultures, spanning the social and gaming landscape. We work with the world's biggest brands, including adidas, Samsung, Netflix and Google, to reach the right people in a strategic, relevant and effective way.



Wattpad's vision is to entertain and connect the world through stories. A leading social storytelling platform and home to a community of more than 94 million people who spend over 23 billion minutes a month engaged in original stories, Wattpad has democratized storytelling for a new generation of diverse Gen Z writers and their fans. Alongside Wattpad WEBTOON Studios, the company's TV, film, and publishing counterparts, Wattpad combines art and science to unearth incredible stories and cultivate the fandoms driving the future of entertainment. The company is proudly based in Toronto, Canada.

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Foreword

Wattpad and We Are Social have one key thing in common. We're both in the business of social storytelling.

Well, actually two things. We both believe representation is important. Vitality so.

Brands that build authentic representation into their marketing are better able to build meaningful and long-lasting relationships with their target audience. A [global study](#) found that 2 in 3 consumers worldwide choose, switch to, avoid or boycott a brand based on its stance on societal issues, such as underrepresentation. However, representation is about more than casting a diverse group of people in marketing campaigns. In fact, [research conducted with diverse audiences](#) in the UK shows that whilst diversity in advertising has gone up, the number of people from diverse groups saying that they feel represented has gone down. This striking stat illustrates that there is still a lot of work to be done in defining the future of representation.

We Are Social wants to show up for the full spectrum of British audiences, and honour our Diversity and Inclusion charter by consciously listening to underrepresented voices and experiences. We also have an ongoing ambition to create Ideas Worth Talking About for our clients, who are also asking for more diversity at every stage of our work together. That means representing our audiences, as they are today, in meaningful, honest and accurate ways.

So we wanted to find out – what exactly is it that needs representing? How good is brand representation of young Brits today? What are we missing out on? Where are we, as those entrusted with the budgets, falling short? And what can we learn by listening carefully to what British teens are saying, and the stories they are telling?

Mobbie Nazir
Global Chief Strategy Officer,
We Are Social



Our methodology

1,095 survey respondents from Wattpad's community

Collaborating with Wattpad gave us an amazing opportunity to connect with the next generation of audiences and creators. These young British people will not just be queuing up for the movies, and buying from brands whose adverts they love – it's quite possible they'll be writing those movie scripts, and directing those adverts themselves.

Rather than being a nationally reflective slice of their generation at large, our sample is representative of Wattpad's community, marking them as a leading edge panel designed to give a specialist view on

storytelling, representation, and how both will evolve in the future. For us, the panellists we met are not Gen Z vox populi, but Tomorrow's Storytellers – a role we are delighted to see them play in the story of this report.

Like Wattpad's community, our sample is predominantly female. Furthermore, Wattpad's community also has a greater share of under-represented voices than a nationally representative sample, and this is reflected in our research.

89%

of our sample is 16-20

79%

of our sample is female

29%

our sample are of diverse ethnic heritage

25%

of our sample are neurodiverse

14%

of our sample have a disability

10%

of our sample are non-binary

8 Gen Z Storytellers spoke to us at length in deep dive interviews



Warona (She/Her)
24, London



Ruqayah (She/Her)
23, Greater Manchester



Aamenah (She/Her)
22, Warwickshire



Ari (He/Him),
16, Torfaen



Jasmine (She/Her)
19, Wrexham



Hollie (She/Her)
21, Nottingham



Joerel (He/Him)
21, Luton



Stacey (She/They)
21, St Albans

And 1 expert, Jasmine Dotiwala, helped us put everything in context



Jasmine Dotiwala is a British broadcaster, producer, director and columnist with over 20 years of experience working with leading media brands, including Netflix, Channel 4, Sky, MTV, and the BBC. A champion for representation on our screens and airwaves, Jasmine developed the industry lauded, ground-breaking Media Trust broadcast trainee programme London360, whose diverse alumni (over 400 to date) have since taken up senior positions all across the UK's TV broadcasters and creative industries.



WHAT WE ASKED

What does representation mean to you?

We asked our panellists a lot of questions, but always opened with the same one: What does representation mean to you? And why is it important?

Did everyone come back with the same response? Absolutely not. And – in a report about doing representation better – the last thing we'd want to do is squash a load of unique and varied individuals into one homogenous mass with the same six opinions.

However, themes undeniably emerged. We've distilled the most pressing commonalities in what Gen Z Storytellers told us into the following big ideas.

Firstly, it's a right, not a privilege. And it's personal.

Representation is incredibly important. Gen Z storytellers are overwhelmingly aligned in this. They don't see better representation as a nice-to-have, but as a responsibility that all storytellers and creatives in power must take on.

And, as some of the brilliantly unpublishable responses captured in our survey made clear, they have limited patience for brands and creatives who fall short.

When we asked why representation is important, our panel of Gen Z Storytellers intrinsically linked it to the bigger-picture push for social justice. And largely, they shared a keenness to see this furthered in the private sphere – by brands and broadcasters

increasing their diversity and inclusion efforts to address inequality and oppression – as much as in the public sphere via legislation and political change.

Our in-depth interviews primarily focused on Gen Z Storytellers' own personal experiences, rather than broader political context. As a result, more of our time was spent discussing the impact of inadequate or absent representation on an individual, emotional level. As well as speaking directly to their own experiences in this regard, the Gen Z Storytellers we spoke with could empathise deeply with the personal impact of media storytelling, for good and ill, on people's personal happiness.

87%
of Gen Z Storytellers agree that
“the media and advertising has a
responsibility to be inclusive in
its representation of diverse and
minority identities”





“I would love to see people of all ages, races, abilities depicted as the hero... it sends a message across that you can be who you are and still be accepted in society... and the media has a huge role in doing that... conveying the message that you can be whoever you want to be and still be accepted.”

Ruqayah, 23, She/Her



“I want to see more normalised LGBT relationships, because normally they’re not allowed to be in relationships like everyone else. I want to see them having the same opportunities as everyone else.”

Jasmine, 19, She/Her



“I saw a Nike advert where a Muslim woman was playing football while wearing a headscarf. It made me feel warm as it’s normalising something which is normal to me, but not necessarily to others.”

Aamenah, 22, She/Her

It’s about taking ‘being seen’ and ‘feeling normal’ seriously

Our conversations with storytellers were full of empathy for the experience of feeling unseen – whether via their own lived experiences or those of their friends and peers. A big part of this revolved around the concept of ‘normal’ and the word ‘normalise’, which cropped up in these conversations perhaps more than any other. But what does it mean to feel normal? Or to normalise something?

‘Normal’ gets a bad rap. It’s associated with mediocrity and suburbia and repression. But, in truth, there’s nothing boring or inane about wanting to feel normal. Feeling normal doesn’t mean being conventional, or the same as everyone else – it just means feeling free enough to focus on the parts of your life that really matter. And for tomorrow’s storytellers, it’s vital.



“It’s an isolating thing to be poorly represented. It’s hard not meeting people like yourself, but to not even see them on TV can be even more confusing. A lot of my lack of representation isn’t visible, so I do have privilege in my circumstances. But with queerbaiting and such, sometimes it would just be nice to see a wlw (woman-loving-woman) relationship that isn’t based off stereotypes.”

Survey respondent, anonymous

It's a two-way street, as much about seeing others as being seen

The impact of diverse representation is often framed on an individual level; seeing 'someone like me' on a screen or a billboard. But for Gen Z Storytellers, diversity of representation is very much a two-way street: it's as much about seeing others' identities and experiences on screen and in the media as it is about seeing their own.

Many of our interviews explored the power of seeing your own identity well represented in the media. We spoke about the potency of representation as an undeniable psychological rebuttal to feelings of alienation, low self-worth, and in a much broader landscape of oppression. But our panel of storytellers was equally quick to flag the benefits of seeing identities outside of their own represented in the media we consume. A common feature of our in-depth interviews – all of which were with Storytellers from underrepresented communities – was how important it was to them to see others'

experiences represented extensively, along with discussing the precise challenges of being, for example, non-binary or Black or trans in today's media environment.

The overall findings from our survey panel – which, while statistically considerably more diverse than the population at large, skewed white, cis gendered and able-bodied – corroborate this concept. Gen Z Storytellers are voting with their wallets when it comes to the matter of representation at large. According to our survey, the storytellers we spoke to and surveyed have a "we all rise together" mindset, prioritising diversity of representation in marketing over seeing their own identity reflected. Gen Z Storytellers are more likely to buy from a brand that represents diverse identities and experiences – even if they don't belong to these groups themselves – than they are to buy from a brand that represents their own.

54%

of Gen Z Storytellers say they are more likely to buy from brands that represent their own identity and experiences in their adverts and on social media

60%

of Gen Z Storytellers say they are more likely to buy from brands that represent diverse and minority identities and experiences in their adverts and on social media - even if they don't belong to these groups

It's about learning, unlearning, and educating ourselves on diverse perspectives

From undergraduates protesting statues of colonisers to the thousands of Instagram accounts dedicated to social justice issues, Gen Z are frequently understood as the 'unlearning' generation. They are eager to question and challenge the orthodoxies around them, and diversify their own perspectives.

When we sat down with Gen Z Storytellers, it felt clear that this attitude is more or less intuitive. Learning about the diversity and nuance of other people's unique experiences isn't hard work, or hyper-serious, or a burden – rather, it's a smart

way to go about the world when you are curious, empathetic, and coming of age in a culture loaded with information and user-generated content.

So many of our panel framed diverse representation as a practical tool for everyday life learning – a way of studying how to be a better friend, a better writer, or a better member of society. They spoke of their desire to learn about people who have seen and experienced the world from a different perspective to their own – and in return, to feel more able to share their own unique experiences.



“I know a lot of people from different cultures, but I still find that [diverse storytelling] is really helping to expand my own knowledge further.”

Hollie, 21, She/Her

“The importance of representation is if you are not part of that group, you still get to understand that group's experiences and lives better. You understand what inclusive or exclusive language is. What inclusive behaviour is. What it looks and sounds like. For example, I'm not a part of the trans or LGBT community, but I worry about saying something hurtful – so, even if I don't belong to those groups, listening to stories about people in those areas helps me understand, and it educates me.”

Jasmine Dotiwala, media and inclusivity expert

They think brands and the media still have plenty of work to do

It's fair to say that Gen Z's storytellers are relatively underwhelmed when it comes to the standard of representation they see from mainstream media and brands at large. If our survey represented an overall health check for the state of representation in commercial storytelling, the patient – if not exactly dying – is hardly thriving, either.

While our respondents saw some media categories as doing better than others when it comes to representation, no single type of media had more than 70% of Gen Z Storytellers respond that it was doing representation 'well' or 'really well'. And on average, across all categories of media, only 36% of Gen Z Storytellers felt their own identities and experiences were represented.



“I feel increasingly annoyed and rather disappointed. Often angry, as I would rather no representation than poor, incorrect and stereotypical representation.”

Survey respondent, anonymous



“Food stores tend to make diverse advertising a bigger deal, an act of heroism, when it should just be second nature to advertise diversely.”

Survey respondent, anonymous

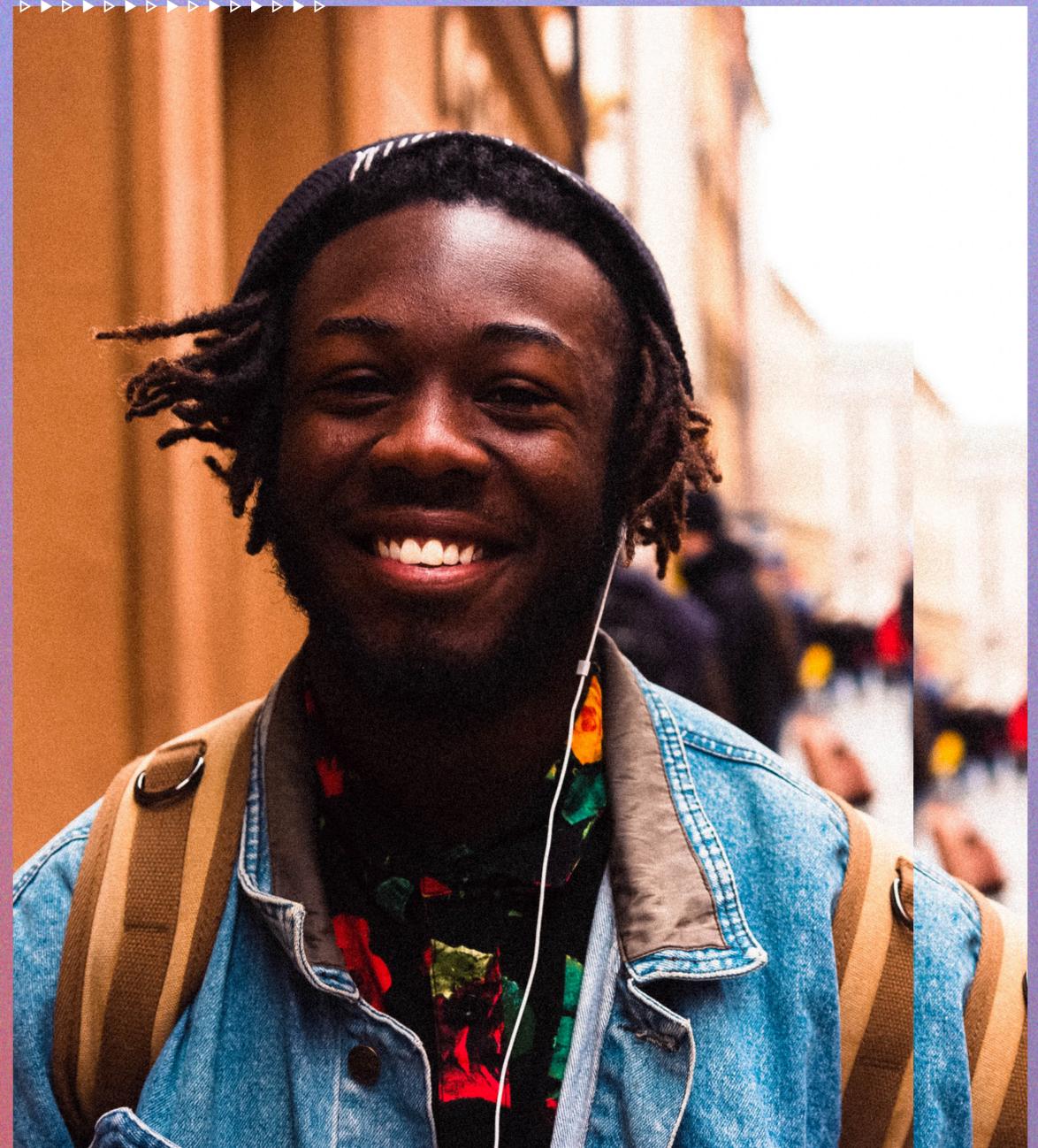


WHAT WE LEARNED

Four ways to do representation better

Doing representation well isn't necessarily easy or intuitive, and everyone working in the business of shaping and selling stories can benefit from listening to and learning from others. What we've distilled in the following pages are some of the most useful, practical and inspirational principles that speak to how to do representation, better. And while they are certainly learnings, these aren't lessons. We're sharing them as opportunities, insights and jumping-off points – as ways of sparking more vibrant, credible, creative and ambitious brand storytelling.

And while more inclusive representation is certainly the right thing to do, it also happens to be the smart thing to do. Diversity and inclusivity in all communication should be a strategic priority for brands looking to secure a impactful and resonant future in the social media landscape. Indeed, that future landscape is being created now, by a whole generation of creatives, influencers and storytellers reimagining what representation in storytelling looks and feels like. We've included some of their stories in this section as case studies.



1. Listen and Laud: Pass the mic to underrepresented voices

It may seem obvious: when representing others' identities and experiences, it's better to amplify those voices, instead of speaking over them. But it's something that Gen Z Storytellers feel is too often broken by media and brands.

They told us that good representation is fundamentally built on brands and media passing the mic, giving proper credit and recognition, and carving out space for people to speak for themselves.



“Stop saying that you’re speaking for the people and just hand them the microphone.”

Stacey, 21, She/Them



Having a voice is more important than just being visible

Representation is about more than being visible – it's about having a voice. For Gen Z Storytellers, representation means less if it's superficial. They might welcome the inclusion of more diverse faces and bodies to campaigns or TV casts, but if we don't hear from them, it's a job that's only been half done – and an opportunity missed both artistically and ethically.

The Gen Z Storytellers we spoke to felt most passionately about the latter; the moral principle of empowering the people you represent.

With their focus on representation as a valuable educational tool for promoting mutual understanding and connection, they are just as invested in what representation can say as how it looks. They want media and brands to use representation as a vehicle for people to speak their truth.

They are also conscious of the politics of

ownership. They emphasised how important it is for underrepresented groups to be given the opportunity to own their space, their voice and their stories, and crucially to be credited, recognised or financially compensated for their work. It's a cultural narrative we've seen steadily taking hold of the mainstream over the course of the past decade, as the growth of the creators economy has driven an increasing interest in the value of original voices and ideas, and an awareness of the ways in which they've been exploited.

Recording artists like NoName personify this shift. Not only was her 2018 album Room 25 released and funded independently in order to maintain integrity, but in October 2021, she opened the Radical Hood Library in Los Angeles – building public space for Black authors to be heard via books that are “damn near impossible to find in state libraries,” as she explained [on Twitter](#).



“Good representation is letting people decide how they want to be represented, rather than someone making decisions for them.”

Ruqayah, 23, She/Her



“From the beginning, I'm thinking about who is doing the representation. If you're having a diverse show, who's writing it? Who's in the green room?”

Warona, 24, She/Her



“A lot of the time, the “diverse” characters don't have presence and you don't get to hear their stories. It's really important you do hear their stories.”

Stacey, 21, She/Them

“Star Trek: Discovery introduced a non binary character who was non binary in real life. Their character was mostly seen with the show’s gay couple, and I think it’s good because they feel safe together, which is what happens in real life because they feel supported and trusted.”

Ari, 16, He/Him

Amplifying underrepresented voices doesn’t have to mean putting people in the spotlight

Jasmine Dotiwala spoke to us about the creative cost of failing to amplify and connect with diverse voices when attempting to tell diverse stories. Not only do you run the risk of inauthenticity, but you miss out on the opportunity to uncover unique creative ideas that can only come from lived experiences. She mentioned the [BBC series Jerk](#) – a comedy about being an unlikable man with cerebral palsy, written by Tim Renkow, an American comic with the condition – as an example of using lived experience as a direct route to distinctive and authentic storytelling.

It’s a good example of how empowering underrepresented voices to speak for themselves doesn’t necessarily mean using non-fiction and documentary approaches. Instead, it can form part of a broader creative process that gives lived experience and knowledge a central role.

The makers of Sex Education on Netflix, for example, have been committed to this principle. The show – which has just cast non binary actor Dua Saleh as its first non binary character, Cal – was namechecked numerous times by Gen Z Storytellers for its expertise in getting representation right.

And the real strength of Sex Education and Jerk is their authenticity; their ability to populate their storytelling with details and observations that ring true. It might be a marketing cliché that Gen Z audiences are attracted to authenticity, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t true. And when you consider that Gen Z are an audience who have grown up surrounded by original and credible first-person storytelling on social media, it’s not surprising that they can spot a fake a mile off.

LISTEN AND LAUD

Making it happen

► Get comfortable giving away creative control

Consistent messaging might be rule number one in marketing, but loosening the reins even temporarily on your brand can be a great way to invite diverse talent into your messaging and connect with a generation of remixers. Inviting more varied voices into your comms is a positive for creativity and cut through in a crowded social arena, where safe 'me too' brands get lost. Take the lead from organisations like [Brands Share The Mic](#), who "encourage brands to hand over their social channels to UK young Black talent."

The community believes that by curating diverse voices, you can make your brand not just more inclusive, but more creative, more dynamic and more interesting.

► Listen to communities to create authentic work

Giving someone a voice doesn't have to mean putting them in the spotlight. Draw on real conversations and experiences to create more authentic work. Starbucks did this with its #WhatsYourName spot, which was inspired by anecdotes of transgender people trialling their new names when they order a coffee there.

► Go out of your way to give credit

Recognise every collaborator, through clout, compensation and credit. Giving people props on brand comms is the easiest way to expand your reach and be meaningfully inclusive. Pay attention to the example set by creative voices taking action over being discredited, like the Black TikTok creators who went on strike after high profile white creators profited from choreographed dances that they'd created.



16 YEAR OLD POET ABI SIMMS BROUGHT HER LIVED EXPERIENCE AND UNIQUE TALENT TO LIFE IN COLLABORATION WITH CHARITY FOOTBALL BEYOND BORDERS

Trailblazer

Football Beyond Borders

Football Beyond Borders is UK-based charity that works with disadvantaged young people to help them transition into adulthood. When they launched a campaign in 2020 to raise awareness of their work, they chose to platform the unique voices of talented young creators to help them land their message.

The resulting project, [Football Beyond Bars](#), saw

two young creators, Abi and Yassin, invited to collaborate with professional filmmakers in bringing their own spoken word poetry to life in the form of short films. Abi, whose film 'Being Black and 6teen' explored young Black womanhood in South London in the wake of George Floyd's murder, went on to collaborate with Co-Op, creating spoken word poetry for their 2020 Christmas campaign [Everyone's Giving Double](#).

2. New Perspectives: Tell the stories currently untold

Endlessly curious about their own and others' experiences, Gen Z Storytellers are inclined to seek out content that widens their horizons, sparks their imagination, and deepens their knowledge base.

The issue, however, is that they don't feel confident in mainstream media and brands' ability to deliver on this. In their eyes, the storytelling powers-that-be aren't yet making the most of the source material available to them. They see a missed opportunity in the huge amount of authentic and fascinating stories still untold - especially those close to home.

It's an insight that can get obscured by toxic media narratives around clashing generational values. But, in truth, one of the central pleasures of diverse storytelling lies in its ability to unlock more exciting, more original, and more engaging storytelling.



Original and diverse storytelling is a crucial strategy for resonating with marathon scrollers

Figures on the amount of time we spend scrolling each day vary. However, one conclusion remains consistent – that Gen Z boast the highest screen time of any demographic. [One study by Adobe](#) reportedly concluded that their average daily time online clocked in at 10.5 hours; the vast majority of their time awake.

And Gen Z's marathon scrollers arguably haven't known a time when they weren't pawns in the attention economy – a place where brand loyalty is built primarily through engagement, rather than repeat purchase. This fight for eyeballs has spawned a content universe filled with all kinds of viral media and clickbait, but also seen a hugely renewed uptake of interest from marketers and strategists in the profound power of storytelling – which, at its best, is able to not just momentarily capture attention, but hold it too.

"Story is what brain does," summarises Will Storr on the findings of various evolutionary psychologists

in his book "[The Science of Storytelling](#)". Our brains, so the theory goes, are hardwired to seek out and pay attention to the narratives that resonate with us. Stories help us build empathy, understand the context in which we live, and develop a sense of our own identity and affiliations.

Telling more diverse stories and embracing more inclusive representation should be an obvious strategic priority for brands looking to build loyalty over the coming decades. The more stories you tell – about more people, more communities, more experiences – the more deep and abiding connections you make, and the more attention you hold. And with so many stories still untold (we've highlighted some of most notable gaps in representation that emerged in our survey on page 38), and so many communities and voices still underrepresented, there is an almost endless expanse of source material to draw upon and creative opportunities to embrace.



"I want to see lesser known parts of LGBTQ community. Generally main identities are represented, but things like asexual/aromantic aren't as well known about."

Hollie, 21, She/Her



"There's not enough friendship. There's so much romance, it's stifling. There should be more emphasis on other relationships in life. Celebrate the friendships. Even though there's romance, friends and family still exist and need to be developed."

Stacey, 21, She/Them



"If you feel the narrative is a well-trodden path, it's probably not the right one."

Warona, 24, She/Her

“A lot of cultures in Africa are underrepresented. There’s been a boom in Asian literature, but let’s not stop there. There’s a lot of places in Africa that each have their own stories to tell. People are grateful to see their home country mentioned in a story. People forget that certain places do exist.”

Stacey, 21, She/Them

If you aren’t representing them, Gen Z are confident they can find someone online who will

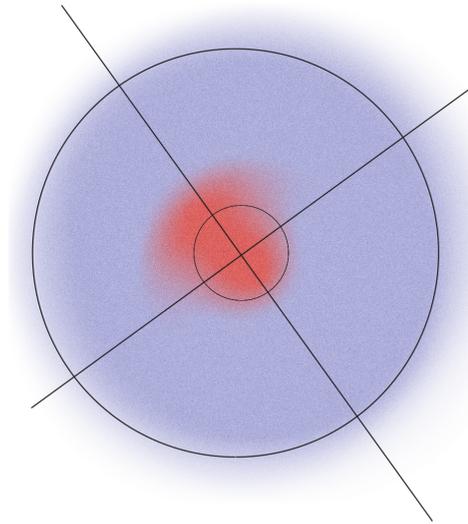
“You learn from the internet,” says Jasmine Dotiwala. “There are all these audiences not being represented that exist out there, and that’s why the audiences are haemorrhaging from public broadcasters to streamers – who have something about everything, and something for everyone.”

As our survey findings on page 38 make clear, Jasmine’s observation plays out in the opinions of Gen Z Storytellers at large. If younger audiences can’t find stories that resonate with them within traditional media channels, they’ll continue to migrate more of their screentime to social, where representation is significantly easier to find.

And that’s largely down to a vast and diverse ocean of creators, who are busily turning the attention economy of the previous decade into the hyper-personalised \$100 billion creator economy of the next. What’s the difference? “The Attention Economy monetizes an audience they speak to,”

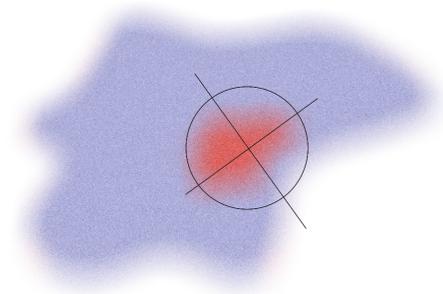
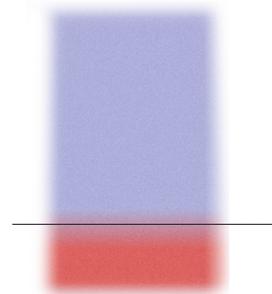
writes [Clara Bergendorff in Forbes](#), “while the Creator Economy turns that audience into a real asset: a community they engage with.”

Creators are building these communities of engagement along ever more diverse lines. Connecting deeply with a narrow and deep niche continues to offer a far more powerful and achievable social media strategy than attempting to be all things to all people, or achieving the elusive 100 million-view viral hit. From drag queen Anna Lytical [teaching coding on Instagram](#) to TikTokers like [Millennial Coach](#) specialising in financial advice for those who aren’t neurotypical, social media’s endless constellations of individuals and interests mean it’s easier than ever to find something that connects with your own authentic experience. It’s these deep and diverse connections that brands are competing with when vying for attention and engagement.



Only 15% of Gen Z Storytellers with a disability felt their ability was well represented in media and advertising

Only 15% of Gen Z Storytellers of diverse ethnic heritage felt their ethnic identity was well represented in media and advertising



Only 8% of Gen Z Storytellers who identify as non binary felt their gender identity was well represented in media and advertising



NEW PERSPECTIVES

Making it happen

► Go beyond 'girl meets boy'

Romance might be a staple of storytelling, but for a generation questioning everything about gender, sexuality and identity, a whole new world of relationships is waiting to be creatively explored. Gen Z Storytellers shared their desire for new and original relationship stories, representing queer love stories, friendships, asexual relationships and many more across the entire spectrum of human connection. Sex Education – a serial innovator in inclusive representation – was praised by audiences for its in-depth treatment of the friendship between Otis and Eric, which has been explored over multiple series and given just as much focus as any romantic plot.

► Look close to home

While other worlds and far-flung locations can offer amazing platforms for exploring identity, there's still a huge amount of untold stories closer to home. With only 8% of non binary respondents and 15% of those of diverse ethnic heritage feeling their identity was well represented in media and advertising, the opportunity for brands and creatives to create impact by telling the stories that diverse young Brits desperately want to see is huge. And the simplest acts of representation can have profound impact: Nigerian medical student and illustrator Chidiebere Ibe recently went viral when Twitter user Aliyah shared his illustration of a pregnant woman, with the caption "I've literally never seen a Black foetus illustrated, ever. This is amazing."

► Flip the script and explore joy

Given how representation of minority identities has been steeped in stereotype for so long, a switch in tone can be a powerful way of refreshing stories and creating more authentic, original representation. "I'd like to see more stories where Black people aren't villains or part of trauma porn," explains Jasmine Dotiwala. Bumble's #MyLovesBlack campaign channelled this energy, celebrating Black love by collaborating with over 30 Black British voices who reflected on what love means to them.



DISNEY PIXAR'S LOOP USED ITS HEROINE'S UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE AS A LAUNCHPAD FOR CREATIVE STORYTELLING AND AUTHENTIC REPRESENTATION

Trailblazer Loop

Disney Pixar's beautiful animated short, Loop, tells the story of a boy and a non-verbal autistic girl who are paired together at Summer Camp on a canoeing excursion. Initially unable to communicate with each other, they gradually find common ground. The film was celebrated for using the uniqueness of its character's neurodiverse perspective as a jumping off point for creative exploration,

which sees Pixar's luscious animation bring the character's rich inner world to life. "Loop revolutionises representation," wrote James Sinclair, founder of Autistic and Unapologetic, "by shifting angles and creating interesting points of view, giving audiences the full autism experience from the very first shot."

3. Create the Space: Cultivate spaces for your audience to be themselves, not just see themselves

As the social landscape sees content, conversation and community become ever more entwined, the question of what makes for responsible representation takes on a new dimension. The spaces in which storytelling takes place – whether it's Wattpad, a Discord server, or a virtual gig on Fortnite – are increasingly important.

Gen Z Storytellers are experts in seeking and creating spaces where they feel able to safely share their own stories, or learn from others' authentic representation. These spaces are theirs, and brands are expected to follow the rules.



In the era of 'anti-social media', small, inclusive spaces are growing in power

The Harvard Business review calls it 'the era of anti-social media': the steady migration of social media posts away from open spaces like Facebook newsfeeds and Twitter into increasingly curated niches. The prediction that public online spaces would effectively empty out as a result of this shift has been overstated in the past, but the trend does speak to the growing importance of smaller, more intimate spaces online when it comes to real conversation and deep engagement.

And its something brands need to take notice of if they plan to create real resonance and impact. From dark social platforms like WhatsApp to exclusive spaces like private Instagram accounts, or even just niche pockets of the internet with high levels of activity like YouTube comment sections, more attention and conversation online is being channelled into smaller spaces that pop up sporadically, formed around shared interests and social bonds.



"In terms of real life, I'm not comfortable opening up – but it's easier online when you're anonymous, and there's more people who share similar feelings."

Hollie, 21, She/Her



"I feel more represented on Wattpad as opposed to MSM. Young people are a lot more open minded, and there's a lot of content out there that you can relate to."

Jasmine, 19, She/Her



"Anyone can upload photos or climb ranks, so there's no barrier in that regard."

Aamenah, 22, She/Her

While social media offers more diverse representation than legacy media, when it comes to inclusivity, not all online spaces are created equal

While our survey found that, in the eyes of Gen Z Storytellers, the media has a fair amount of room for improvement when it comes to implementing responsible and accurate representation (see page 48), social media is undeniably leading the pack – with social media platforms far more likely to be seen as places Gen Z Storytellers feel represented than any form of legacy media. Almost 60% of respondents saw themselves represented on social media, compared to just 25% for TV news.

And the radically democratising impact of the internet and social media on media spaces can't be overstated, as previously underrepresented voices have found access to their own platforms, spaces, creative tools and audiences. "The internet has levelled the field in ways I could never imagine," said Jasmine Dotiwala, reflecting on the biggest changes she'd seen to diversity in the media over the course of her career. "The old gatekeepers just don't have the same power anymore. The middle men have been cut out."

But 'social media good, old media bad' isn't where the story ends. Gen Z, as the demographic who

spend the most time on social media, are also the most aware of its shortcomings. As we discovered in our conversations and survey data, Gen Z Storytellers are sensitive to the intricacies and dynamics of virtual spaces. In short, when it comes to representation, not all social media platforms are created equal.

Our panellists spoke of the difference between social media that fuels opposition and toxicity –namely platforms they perceived to be populated by older people, like Twitter or parts of Facebook – and the welcoming and mutually supportive spaces they frequented online that helped them open up and share in their own and others' stories, of which Wattpad was one. For them, the hostility, confrontation and call-out culture that characterises much of social media does not create safe spaces in which inclusive representation can flourish. Instead, they acknowledge the crucial roles of other community members, good moderation and anonymity in creating inclusive spaces where inclusivity and meaningful representation takes root.



"It's nice on Instagram because I'm following LGBT people who help other LGBT people and artists who are allies. It's a good example of community being important in representation."

Ari, 16, He/Him



"On Wattpad, there are strict guidelines. In the past year those guidelines have been expressed and put into action more."

Hollie, 21, She/Her

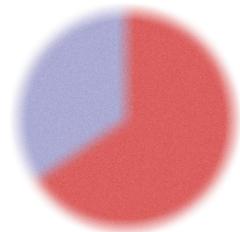


"I don't bother with Facebook or Twitter because it's so negative. On Twitter, people misinterpret you and can twist what you're saying."

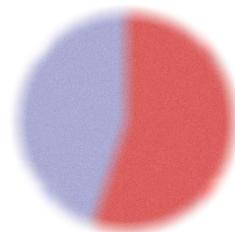
Ari, 16, He/Him

We asked Gen Z Storytellers how well represented they feel by the media

Highest scoring

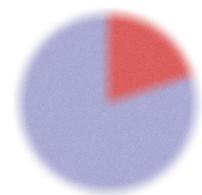


59%
of respondents feel represented on social media

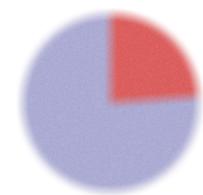


55%
of respondents feel represented in music and music videos

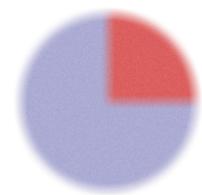
Lowest scoring



20%
of respondents feel represented in online and print news



24%
of respondents feel represented in gaming



25%
of respondents feel represented on TV news

Wattpad, TikTok and YouTube topped the polls when it came to the social media platforms that survey respondents felt they are 'represented' or 'well represented' on, with scores of 63%, 60% and 55% respectively.

CREATE THE SPACE

Making it happen

► Future-proof your social strategy with the creators of tomorrow's safe spaces

Private conversational spaces will make up a huge part of the internet landscape over the next decade, and many of them will be built and shaped by figureheads that will blur the lines between curators, commentators and moderators. This is exemplified by the social empires that have already been built by publishers like Diet Paratha and gal dem. Brands should be working with these diverse, social-first media outlets to build meaningful, identity-based communities now.

► Use anonymity to spark creativity

Anonymity online has a seedy reputation, but used correctly, it allows people to open up and share experiences in confidence – and creates rich opportunities for storytelling collaborations between audiences and brands. Sustainable brand Ocean Bottle asked their followers to anonymously share their guiltiest environmental secrets, and turned them into [a playful, imaginative animated film](#) for their brand awareness campaign.

► Build inclusivity into your media distribution plan

It's not always about just getting in front of the most eyeballs possible. Think about making spaces where your message and your storytelling can truly resonate. Not sure where to find them? Dedicating time to researching online cultures – or working with organisations like Word On The Curb, a multicultural media consultancy and part of the #YouTubeBlack Creator Class of 2021 – will pay dividends for brands looking to tell meaningful stories in the right social spaces.



OLONI HAS BUILT A MINI SOCIAL MEDIA EMPIRE ON HER ABILITY TO CREATE EXCITING AND WELCOMING SAFE SPACES FOR CONVERSATION TO FLOURISH

Trailblazer Oloni

British-Nigerian sex educator Oloni has grown a mini media empire out of her unique ability to create welcoming and fun online spaces for Black women to discuss their romantic sexual experiences – something not happening elsewhere in mainstream UK media. With over 400k followers across

Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and Clubhouse, Oloni's notorious Twitter threads featuring her followers' confessions have earned her spots on Saweetie's [Netflix](#) special, and a loyal audience for her Apple podcast [Laid Bare](#).

4. Lived Experiences: Remember – identity doesn't have to be central to be (re)present(ed)

Gen Z Storytellers have fluid, personal relationships with their own identities. They want to see representation on their screens that goes beyond box-ticking and stereotyping, and expands into deeper, richer and more nuanced storytelling.

And while sincerity of intent is welcomed when it comes to more inclusive storytelling from brands and the media, even the most earnest attempts at inclusivity can occasionally miss the mark. A desire for representation of marginalised communities and individuals doesn't mean audiences want to see someone's identity made central to every part of their story. There's still room for development in getting underrepresented voices and faces on screen, without falling into the trap of tokenism.



Gen Z storytellers are tired of tokenism

Growing up in an era where claiming diverse and inclusive credentials is largely embraced by brands and corporations, Gen Z's storytellers are well practiced in sorting the genuine inclusivity wheat from the performative chaff. In this sense, they are connecting with a growing criticism of tokenistic inclusivity efforts that is increasingly being voiced by campaigners, activist groups and academics. Dr Ella Houston, Lecturer in Disability Studies at Liverpool Hope University, called for advertisers to embrace "realistic and multifaceted depictions of everyday life" when representing disabled people in a [recent research paper](#) exploring their representation by consumer brands and charities. She pointed to the habit of putting a single, symbolic disabled person in adverts, with no context given to their existence beyond their different ability, by brands rushing to demonstrate their inclusive credentials at speed. As with the

common trope of [adverts casting people with an amputation or prosthetic limb](#) as a visual symbol of resilience and spirit, differently abled or otherwise underrepresented individuals are too often co-opted into brand comms to service an idea or message, in a way that flattens out their uniqueness and lived experience.

Brands doing tokenistic representation was a complaint that came up time and again in our research, with Gen Z Storytellers recalling numerous instances of inclusivity-washing that lodged in their memory. From one anonymous survey respondent: "Lots of high end brands tend to use one or two POC as well as a member of the LGBTQ+ community as their token person." Another called out Disney's tendency to claim supporting characters are gay without giving them any gay storylines, describing this as 'queerbaiting'.

“I think we’re seeing a lot of performative representation at the moment, so we’ve just got to make sure that everyone’s voice is actually heard.”

Jasmine Dotiwala, media and inclusivity expert

While bad representation is 'box tick-y', Gen Z resist rigid categorisation

The other risk faced by brands and media engaging in efforts to diversify their representation is the deadening effect of too much worthiness. A common theme of the complaints from Gen Z Storytellers about mainstream media representation was how frequently they pointed to characters from marginalised communities being depicted as being representative of a fixed identity – like being gay, or trans, or a disabled person – while other characters and storylines evolve around them.

For Gen Z Storytellers, this rigid approach feels out of step with their relationship with identity. While they might take the issues of diverse representation and of identity very seriously, it doesn't mean their identity is concrete or resistant

to play. This is a cohort that is celebrating the creative and transformative possibilities of identity, and encouraging each other to take the time to explore it for themselves – all with as little panic or pressure as possible. They also appreciate that a person's gender or sexuality or race or ability will profoundly shape some experiences, but not directly impact on others.

As a result, they want to see representation on screen that isn't just diverse and responsible, but nuanced, flexible, and relaxed. They don't want representation to ignore the realities of life within an underrepresented or marginalised community, but they equally don't wish to see it hyper-fixated on either. It's a careful balance to strike perhaps, but one that tomorrow's storytellers are already nailing.



“To be honest, I haven't seen that good representation of myself. In terms of my race, it's more abundant now. My nationality, not so much. My sexuality, hardly at all. I identify as a lesbian but I'm also asexual. There's fluidity in being non binary. It's quite generalised at the moment, and there hasn't been a deeper venture into it yet.”

Stacey, 21, She/Them



“It's anticlimactic, but I see good representation as embracing everyday life and everyday people.”

Warona, 24, She/Her



“I want to see more heroes that have ups and downs, have internal conflicts, and aren't perfect.”

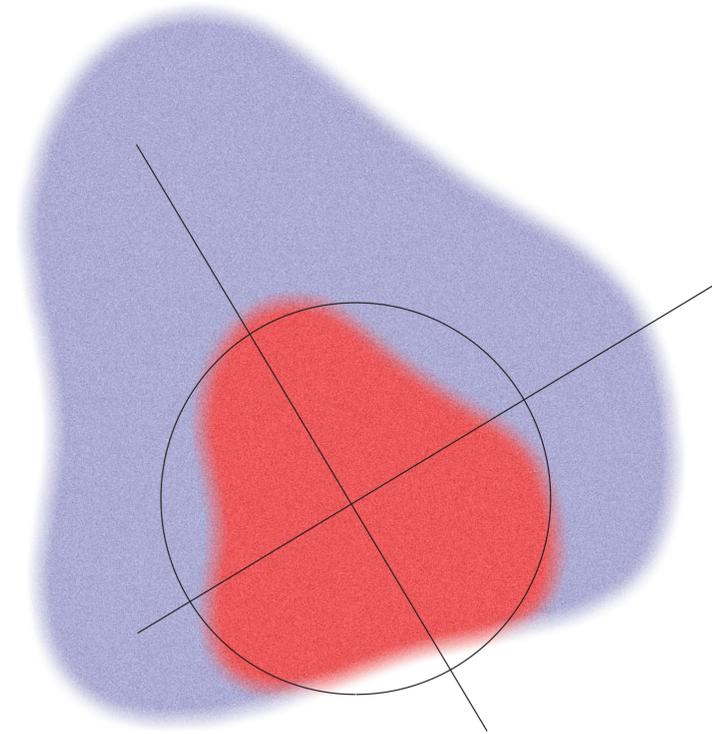
Hollie, 21, She/Her



“In the Netflix series Atypical, the main character doesn't identify as anything and dates both genders... It's a good example of exploring sexuality... I've always had people tell me that your sexuality isn't your only trait, it's a part of you, and it's good to see people in media are finally showing that.”

Ari, 16, He/Him

The kind of representation they want to see more of in media and advertising is “accurate representation of people like me” (45%), more so than seeing “more people like me represented in the ‘hero’ roles” (10%)



36%

of Gen Z Storytellers most dislike seeing their identity and experiences represented in the media and advertising as a stereotype

LIVED EXPERIENCES

Making it happen

► Show diversity within identities, not only diversity of identities

Identities are fluid and intersecting, and there's no one way to be anything. Take inspiration from the shifting, dynamic character development found in Michaela Coel's TV show *I May Destroy You*, which isn't tied to stereotypes or trite hero/villain arcs.

► Don't erase the reality of how identity shapes experience

Our panellists spoke of the importance of seeing underrepresented identities being allowed to 'step out of their box' and appear in just as many diverse storylines and contexts as their white, neurotypical, able-bodied cis co-stars. But it's equally important to not erase the way identity shapes individuals in a misguided bid for sensitivity. Maltesers' 'New Boyfriend' spot did a stellar job of getting the balance right, with their heroine with a disability telling an amusing story about how a physical spasm she experienced awkwardly interrupted a romantic moment.

► Prioritise diversity of representation year-round

Our respondents voiced concerns that cultural moments like Black History Month or Pride have been co-opted by brands for profit. Aesop is a great brand to learn from here: while they do participate in Pride month (most recently, they cleared their shelves of products for a limited time, and replaced them with educational reading around queer identity), the Aesop Foundation partners with a number of charities year-round to ensure they're consistently giving underrepresented voices a platform.



HBO'S WE ARE WHO WE ARE EXPLORED SEXUAL AND GENDER IDENTITIES WITH INTEGRITY, HONESTY AND LIGHTNESS OF TOUCH

Trailblazer

We Are Who We Are

From the acclaimed director of *Call Me By Your Name*, Luca Guadagnino, *We Are Who We Are* follows two teen characters as they explore their evolving identities, doing so without judgement, moralising or heavy-handedness. "Sexuality should be nuanced," said Warona. "There should be a spectrum of identity." She cited the HBO show, more specifically its ability to portray the fluidity of gender

and sexuality. "[*We Are Who We Are*] showed that nothing is black or white, with a diverse cast." The words of one of its protagonists, Jenny, capture its generosity towards its characters' evolutions: "I used to be a lot of things. And I stopped being a lot of things. Truth is, I don't know who I am anymore. But I like it here."

Get in touch

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