
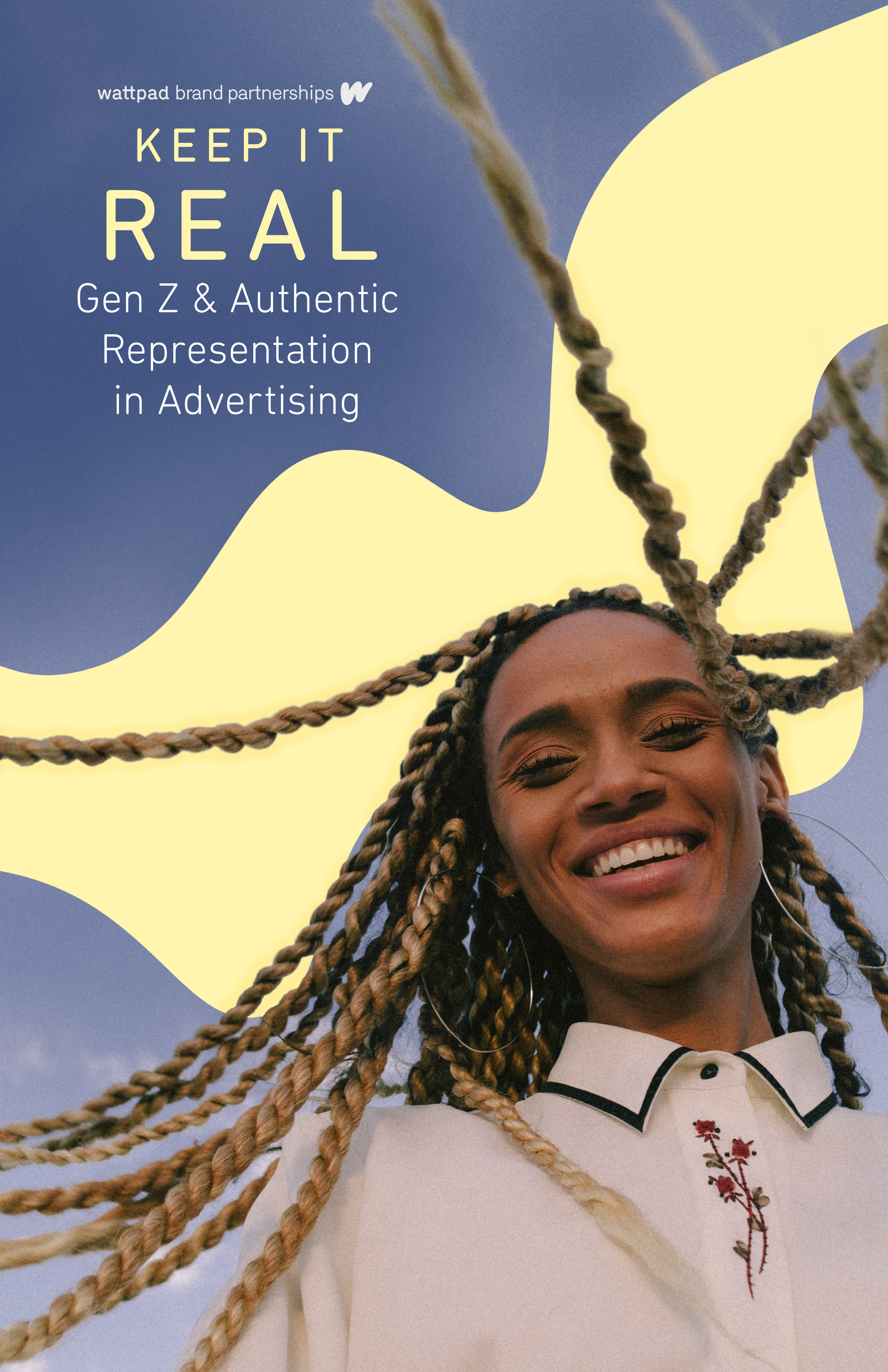


wattpad brand partnerships 

# KEEP IT REAL

Gen Z & Authentic  
Representation  
in Advertising



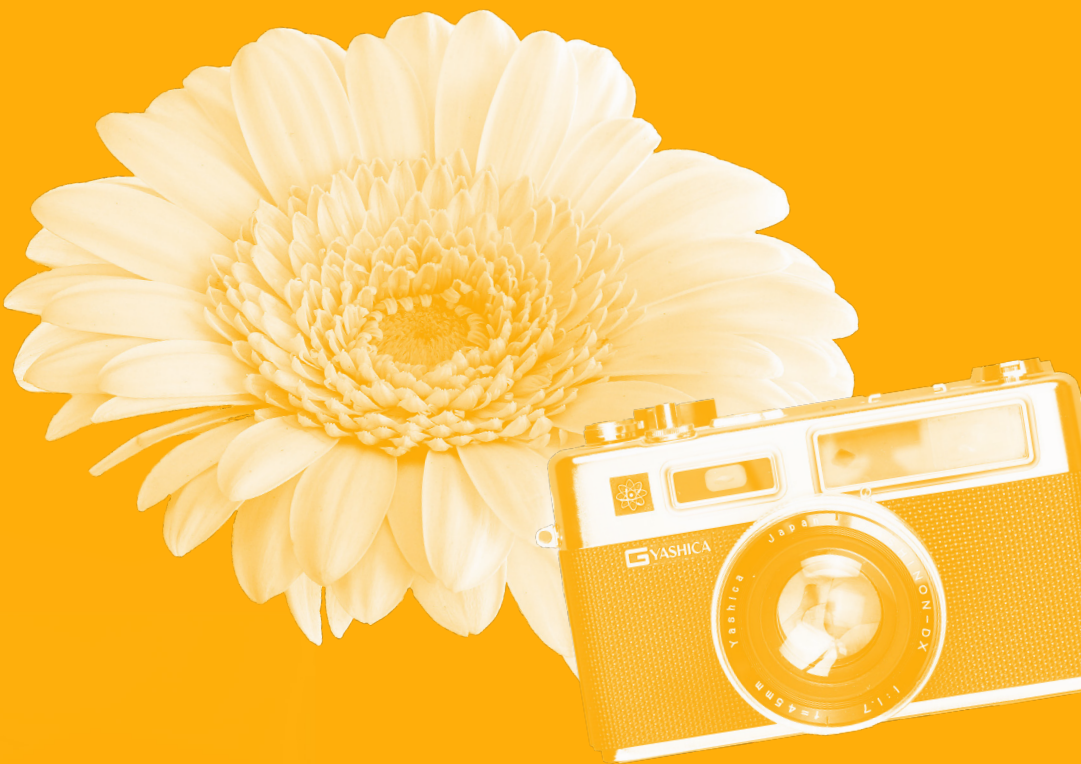


# Executive Summary

Gen Z, more than any generation before them, demands to be seen and heard. Since their coming of age, the fight for inclusive representation in media has become increasingly widespread. While many brands have navigated these calls for representation with ease, missteps have occurred. Gen Z, with their keen eye for authenticity, can spot tokenism from a mile away.

We wanted to uncover how brands can make representation feel truly authentic, so we called upon our youth panel, Generation Wattpad to provide perspective.

Nearly **400 members** from the community, aged 13-24, chimed back with their thoughts on how brands can sidestep stereotyping in favor of authentic representation.





# Executive Summary



**Gen Z wants to see an accurate reflection of their cohort in advertising.** Read: Not only cisgender caucasian folks. Gen Z are united in the belief that brands must do more to include minorities in their marketing, even if they don't belong to marginalized groups themselves. Furthermore, tone down the retouching! Gen Z additionally expressed a strong desire to connect to more natural and authentic people in advertisements. They want to see themselves on screen!

**Gen Z can spot inauthentic representation from a mile away, and it comes with a price.** Authentic representation matters and Gen Z are aware when brands aren't taking it seriously. In fact, they aren't shy about withdrawing support from a brand altogether when it mishandles representation in marketing. So what should you be on the lookout for before launching your next campaign? Stereotyping and tokenism. Avoiding the pitfalls of disingenuous pandering is imperative if you want Gen Z taking their purchase power to your checkout.

**Gen Z waves the LGBTQIA+ flag high and believes there's work to be done to foster a meaningful connection between brands and the community.** While Generation Wattpad acknowledged that it's important for them to see their unique identity represented in brand marketing, a sizable section reported a lack of sexual identities being represented in mainstream advertising. Pride isn't merely a month where brands echo support for the queer community, it's an ongoing commitment. With LGBTQIA+ empowerment being at the forefront of the cultural conversation, brands have a unique opportunity to support and empower their queer customers everyday.

Keep reading to find out more.



# Introduction

Gen Z’s commitment to tackling issues of inequality is strong. In their lifetime, brands have heeded the call of consumer demand for more inclusive advertising. While representation has increased, there have been missteps along the way. With the pitfalls of tokenism and stereotyping at risk of overtaking brand messaging, deeper efforts must be made in order for brands to rise up and provide support and representation to minority communities.

Fact: Nobody wants to feel like their unique and nuanced identity is being used as a pawn for corporate gain, and that’s exactly what brands are up against when conversations about increasing representation are mishandled. At the end of the day, Gen Z wants to see themselves represented for the right reasons.

The good news? Authentic representation is attainable to any brand that listens to their customers and enacts meaningful adjustments towards painting an accurate portrait of their community in their advertising.

We were curious to know how Gen Z believes modern marketing is aligning with their vision of authentic representation. We’re excited to share our findings.

# Methodology

## Listening & Learning from Generation Wattpad

All data in this report is the result of research with the U.S. members of Wattpad’s youth panel, Generation Wattpad. We conducted an online survey with 367 respondents, aged 13 - 24, between September 20th - 26th, 2021.

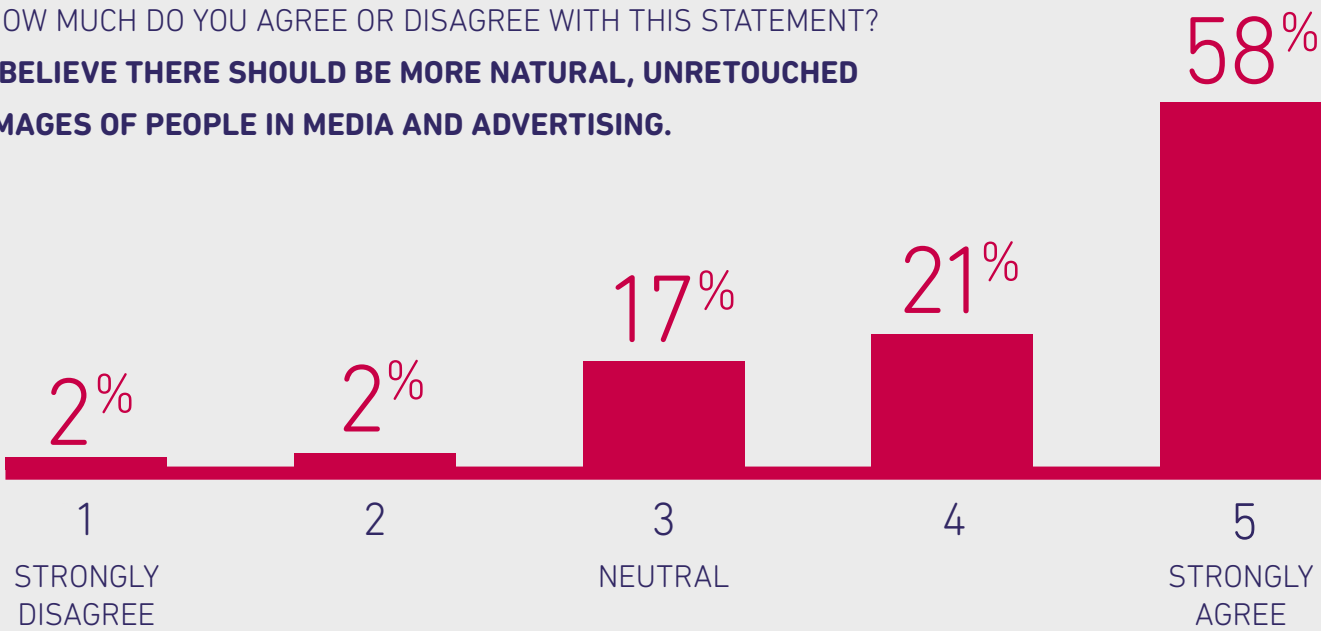


# Authentic Representation in Brands:

## *Au Naturel*

Aspirational hyper-retouched images are quickly becoming a relic of the past. In fact, 79% of Generation Wattpad agreed that they want to see increasingly natural, unretouched images of people in ads. Body type representation was a concern, with 36% reporting that they don't see their body shape or appearance in marketing.

HOW MUCH DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THIS STATEMENT?  
**I BELIEVE THERE SHOULD BE MORE NATURAL, UNRETOUCHED IMAGES OF PEOPLE IN MEDIA AND ADVERTISING.**



### What does “good representation” mean to Gen Z?

“I want to see more unfiltered bodies i.e. scars, stretch marks, cellulite. Actual plus size people, not just skinny tanned white models.”

“More ranges of tall and short people rather than average height. Different figures instead of just hourglass figures.”

“Real people rather than unattainable body expectations for both male and female bodies.”



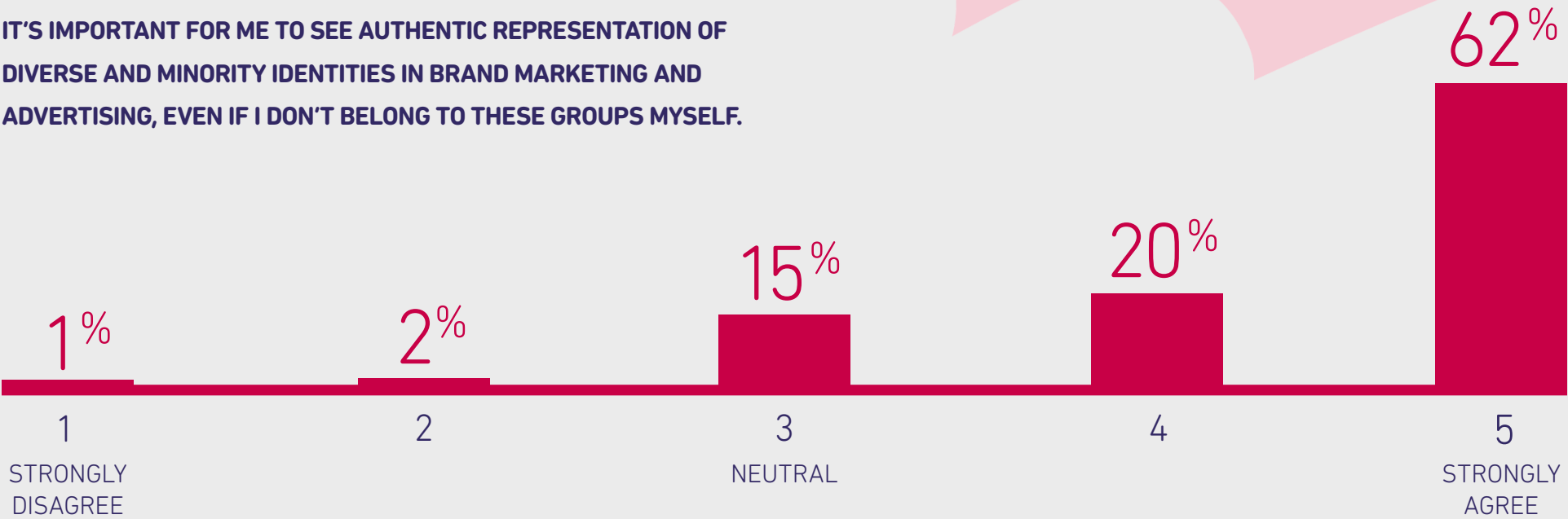
# Authentic Representation in Brands:

## *All for One and One for All*

### What does “good representation” mean to Gen Z?

Regardless of their individual backgrounds, a striking majority of 82% of Gen Z agreed it’s imperative that brands promote authentic representation of diverse and minority identities in their advertising, even if they don’t belong to these groups themselves.

HOW MUCH DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THIS STATEMENT?  
**IT’S IMPORTANT FOR ME TO SEE AUTHENTIC REPRESENTATION OF DIVERSE AND MINORITY IDENTITIES IN BRAND MARKETING AND ADVERTISING, EVEN IF I DON’T BELONG TO THESE GROUPS MYSELF.**



For instance, exploitative cultural stereotypes in media are quickly becoming a thing of the past, and Gen Z is calling on brands to focus on representing minorities in an inclusive and respectful manner.

“I wish that if people were to use Mexican culture that they would actually do research regarding the culture and not represent it the way the media has come to normalize it.”

“I would love to see a brand pull from each ethnic group and allow them to show their culture in the way it truly is, instead of how the media portray it to be.”

“More AAPI, and other minorities, not always just black representation.”





# Authentic Representation in Brands:

*All for One and One for All*

“  
More muslim  
and Indian  
models.  
”

“  
I want to see different body types in different ethnic bodies. I want to see black people with different bodies, Desi people with different bodies, Asians and Latinx and Indigenous people. I want everyone to be able to see themselves represented not only on TV and movies, but in books as well. It’s necessary because it’s an image that will be ingrained in their mind for a long, long time, that they are not alone and the world does want them to be there. ”

“  
I would like to see brands include different races like Native Americans, Black people, Mexican people, instead of just white people. I just feel that everyone should be well respected.”

“  
I see lots of representation of different ethnicities but I would like to see more of a broad spectrum of that. I want to see ethnicities other than white or black.  
”

## What does “good representation” mean to Gen Z?

The integration of “uncommon” ethnicities such as South & South East Asian, Indigenous, Arab, and Latinx, to name a few, remains lacking. Hyper-connected Gen Z feels a deep kinship to one another. In their minds, nobody wins if everyone doesn’t, hence their support for the representation of marginalized identities.





# Authentic Representation in Brands:

## *Mindful of Disability*

With regards to representing disability, Gen Z wants brands to swap their go-to inspirational messaging surrounding the incredible feats achieved by folks with disabilities, in favor of more authentic, everyday representation.

### What does “good representation” mean to Gen Z?

“

I would also like to see more representation of disabilities! More wheelchair users, more models with motor disabilities, more models with invisible disabilities like me.

”

“

I would like to see more people with disabilities in advertising, especially invisible disabilities to raise awareness.

”

“

I think people with disabilities need to be better represented. Oftentimes, if someone with a disability is featured in an advertisement or other methods of marketing, they’re being used as “inspiration porn,” which means they’re not really there because the company wants to be inclusive, but rather because the company wants to inspire able-bodied people. For example, if someone with a disability can do this, then a “normal” person can do it too.

”



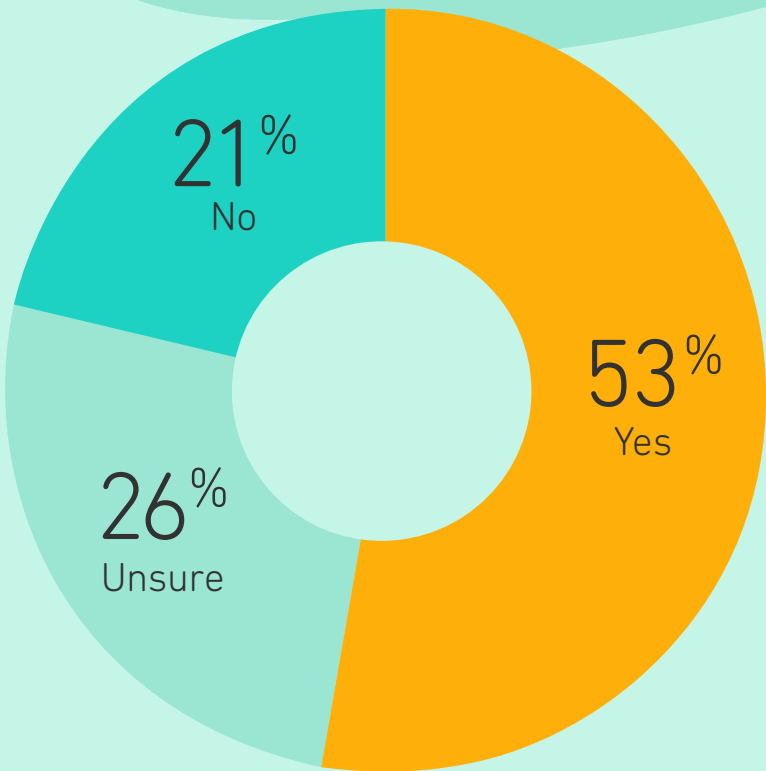
# Holding their Attention

## Do the Readings

Brands big and boutique are constantly vying for Gen Z’s attention. This, paired with the cohort’s passionate commitment to social equity, provides an avenue for brands to show Gen Z that they care and they’re taking matters of representation seriously. Issues like tokenism and stereotyping are rooted in both racist and homophobic histories, and Gen Z expects the brands they love to have done the readings and be just as devoted to the cause as they are.

With that in mind, it comes as no surprise that over half of our respondents reported that they have stopped supporting a brand due to the way that brand handled representation in their advertising. Unsurprisingly, these missteps are common amongst brands that have failed to address issues of representation at the company level.

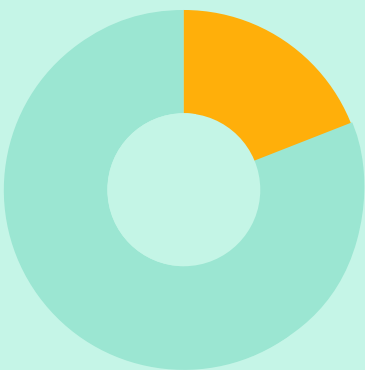
Have you stopped supporting any brands because of the way they handled representation in their marketing and advertising?



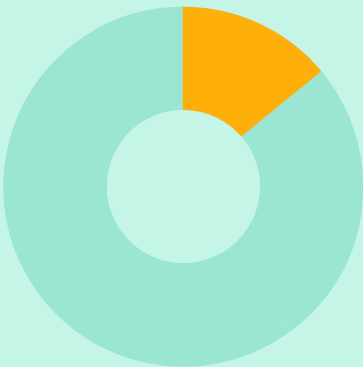
What did you dislike about the way they handled representation in their marketing and advertising?



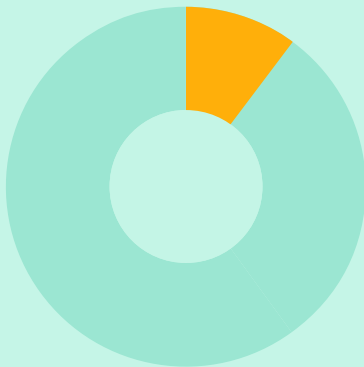
58%  
Stereotypical or inauthentic representation



19%  
No representation



14%  
Very little representation



10%  
Other





# Holding their Attention

## *Do the Readings*

How can a brand accurately represent and support a community when nobody in-house belongs to it? Gen Z believes that for brands, doing the work involves reexamining representation in the boardroom, not just on billboards. At the end of the day, it's never been more important for brands to listen carefully and learn from their customers, as skirting around these conversations doesn't fly with Gen Z.

“

Brands should include a variety of minorities to speak on their products

”

“

People who are part of minority communities should be involved in the advertising/marketing

”

“

Brands with authentic representation have diverse teams and leaders, especially with women of color in leadership or creator roles

”

Top 5 brands that have good representation according to Generation Wattpad

 **FENTY**

*aerie*

*Dove*





# Beyond the Binary

## *Typecast No More*

Gen Z has grown up in an entirely distinct cultural climate when it comes to gender, sex, and sexuality than their parents. Previous generations were hard pressed to find queer representation on their favorite television shows, and the characters that did identify as LGBTQIA+ were often regarded as offensive caricatures of the community. While strides have been made to increase queer representation in media, Generation Wattpad pointed out that even modern television falls short on representation for those who have the intersectional experience of being both LGBTQIA+ and an ethnic minority.

“

Represent the LGBTQIA+ without gay men being flaming and flamboyant all the time, or lesbian women being masculine and man haters. Different people exist and should be shown in all forms not just the ones that make the most money.

”

“

I want to see more black people who are part of the LGBTQ+ community.

”

“

Don't just use women in laundry commercials or makeup commercials, and show gay men that aren't stereotypical.

”





# Beyond the Binary

## *An Inclusive Spectrum*

While society has come a long way since those days, brands have the power and responsibility to increase authentic representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in the media.

With **33%** of respondents claiming that they do not see their sexuality well represented, the message is loud and clear. Beyond the binary of gay and straight exists a vast array of unique sexualities and gender identities (non-binary, asexuality, and pansexuality to name a few) that deserve more accurate representation.

Gen Z says they want to see more representation of different sexualities and gender identities in brand marketing and advertising: non-binary, transgender, queer, etc.

“

Show **non-binary people** of all ages and ethnicities

”

“

More obscure LGBTQ+ identities such as **xenogenders**

”

“

**Transgender identities** and other genders other than cisgender

”

“

Smaller queer communities like **genderfluid/ asexual**

”

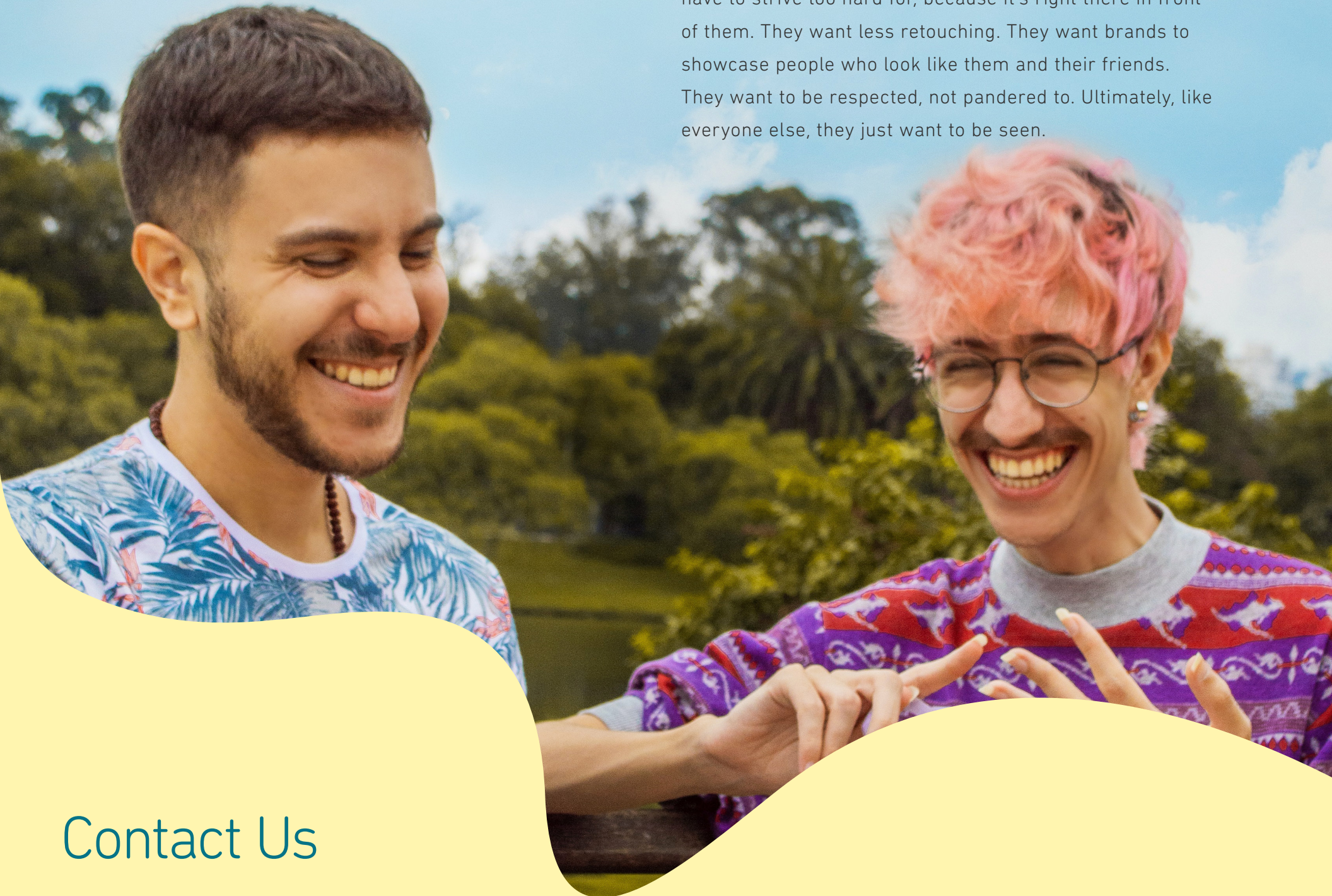




# The Moral of the Story

The future is bright, and Gen Z agrees. With 49% of Generation Wattpad feeling optimistic about the future of representation in brand marketing and advertising, it's clear that they've placed an inherent trust in brands to get it right. While having meaningful representation in the boardroom isn't always immediate, brands who are working towards a more equitable C-Suite are on the right track. After all, inclusivity behind the scenes is the driving factor that provides fertile ground for authentic representation to flourish.

Gen Z also shows us that authenticity isn't something brands have to strive too hard for, because it's right there in front of them. They want less retouching. They want brands to showcase people who look like them and their friends. They want to be respected, not pandered to. Ultimately, like everyone else, they just want to be seen.



Contact Us

Want to reach Gen Z?  
Work with a Gen Z-first company.

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