

Connecting with the disconnected youth. 3RC's learnings for brands

By [Kay Cheytanov](#), issued by [3RC](#)

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The youth are more disconnected than ever before. Cocooned in a bubble of social media, music, and podcasts but increasingly isolated from what's happening around them, their feelings, social connections, and brands.



We've all seen the youth walking around with AirPods in or headphones on, cocooned in a bubble of social media, music, and podcasts. As connected as they seem, they're more disconnected than ever. An existence brought on by the recent pandemic, when they were separated from friends, family, classrooms, and society. Now they traipse about, increasingly isolated from what's happening around them, their feelings, social connections, and brands.

The disconnected state of Gen Z concerns the whole world, and while it's easy to blame technology for widening the gap between the youth and the rest of the world, it isn't all true. The latest research from [Michigan State University](#) shows that it is disconnection and not teens' dependence on screen time that is the problem. Clearly these effects are here to stay, making it nearly impossible for brands to engage with this audience.

The basis of our learnings

In September 2022, 3RC facilitated 10 focus groups in order to gain insights into the Gen Z response to swivel.com, their digital platform. Each group was made up of 10 young individuals from different schools, different areas, and different economic backgrounds.

Interestingly, these sessions held the keys to an entirely different conundrum – how to connect with a disconnected generation. You see, 3RC had gained unwitting access to the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of the youth of South Africa, providing data that will prove invaluable in its ability to help brands connect with the disconnected.

1. Feelings of distrust

In 2018, the [Deloitte Millennial Survey](#) was released. This survey captured data from 10,455 millennials and 1,844 Gen Zers globally and shed light on a dark and foreboding pattern. Slowly but surely, we began to realise that this generation was less likely to believe that businesses could be ethical or even willing to improve society. As a result, the concept of brand loyalty had started its decline.

Echoing this sentiment, the responses in our focus groups revealed:

- Gen Z is wary of links, suspecting that they are always one click away from being hacked – you'd be better off using a QR Code.
- Gen Z is more interested in competitions that allow for several winners, rather than a single high value prize.
- Gen Z prefers instant gratification and doesn't see the point in doing something if it's highly unlikely that they'll win.
- Gen Z knows that nothing is free, and when asked to give their own data in order to engage, will rather not participate, regarding this as a cheap tactic to steal their personal details.

2. Digital natives in a world we're only visiting

According to Shaara Roman, founder and managing partner of [The Silverene Group](#), Gen Z are digital natives. Older generations have adopted as technology has been introduced, but this generation was born into it. This is their world and they have no difficulty traversing it.

Or so it would seem. Interestingly, our focus group data reveals that while they're always connected and on the latest trend, if asked to navigate your website, they're stumped. You might think it's because they have a short attention span and won't take the time to read through all the content, but it's more to do with the fact that everything needs to be spelled out, visually, in far fewer steps.

Essentially, they require a 'less is more approach,' making the key learning here that navigation is *KING*.

3. Did someone say attention span?

"TikTok has ruined our concentration forever," says one of the focus group attendees.

They aren't wrong. The internet age has changed the general attention span, affecting our memory, attention spans, and sleep cycles, altering human physiology through neuroplasticity, a phenomenon in which the brain changes its behaviour based on new experiences. To wit, recent studies conducted by the Microsoft Corporation on the effects of an increasingly digitised lifestyle on the brain revealed that people generally lose concentration after eight seconds.

It's true that Gen Z can process information faster, multitasking while they do it, but that doesn't mean that young people aren't struggling to concentrate on anything longer than a reel. As a result, Gen Z skims in order to consume content, frequently skipping over text and instead relying on visual storytelling snippets to learn about the world.

Storytelling is actually ancient in its ability to convey meaning, emotions, and information. There's little wonder that Gen Z is all over platforms like TikTok, where the old practice of telling stories is used to make them laugh, cry, learn, and explore their unique expressiveness.

If brands like Google don't evolve to what TikTok can offer, they will lose their audience who are actively seeking places to learn, tell their stories, and communicate thoughts and feelings in a way that is more visual and accurate.

4. The blurry line between truth and perception

This audience cares more about perception than truth. We know that they know the truth behind a can of sugary soda. They understand the risk of diabetes, the use of so many liters of water to create a single serving, and the pollution it causes. But if their favourite Instagrammer or TikToker drinks it, eats, or wears it, then truth takes a backseat.

We've always known that brand perception matters, but the importance of brand associations, such as influencers and celebrities with whom they've sponsored or partnered, has risen meteorically. These entities play a strong role in the line between truth and perception and can discredit your brand within minutes of posting the wrong thing.

You can't risk choosing a brand association based on followers alone. These parties need to honestly align with your brand and its values, use your product or service, and have a history that won't bring scandal to your door.

5. Gen Z's paradox

Gen Z is more progressive than older generations on issues such as gender and multiculturalism but is also more afraid to speak their truth for fear of being cancelled. That's the paradox of this generation – they are both tolerant of the new and different, and intolerant of beliefs they disagree with.

Originally, cancel culture was used as a means of holding brands and celebrities accountable for actions that aren't deemed socially accepted by withdrawing support en masse – as made evident by the cancellation of figures like J.K. Rowling, Ellen DeGeneres, and L'Oréal. It's no longer as noble and your brand could be cancelled faster than you can say, 'The Balenciaga Scandal.'

It's more important than ever to think twice before you post, get your facts straight before you take a position, and always be respectful – especially when you can't remain neutral and need to stand strong.

Above all, if you want your brand to stand out from the crowd, make a lasting impression, and avoid the death knell of irrelevance, you need to walk the line between keeping up and staying true – between staying woke and creating a unique, authentic brand that will stand the test of time. Somewhere along that line is a brand that is socially aware, credibly aligned with customer values, and trusted by consumers.

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