



The *Comeback* of the *Hangout*

HOW GEN Z IS REBUILDING SOCIAL LIFE
— STARTING WITH THE MALL

SUNNIE x *Westfield* RISE



Methodology

For this perspective, we combined in-person mall intercepts with national survey data to understand how Gen Z girls are spending time, connecting, and discovering in real-world environments, particularly the mall.

Partners

Westfield R.I.S.E

YPULSE

<h3>Research Design</h3>	<p>In-Person Mall Intercepts (Westfield Century City) On-site interviews conducted with Gen Z girls to capture real-time behaviors, motivations, and emotions tied to mall experience.</p>	<p>Quantitative Study (YPulse) Nationally fielded survey to validate and scale observed behaviors, attitudes, and preferences across young adults.</p>	<p>Quantitative Study (Suzy) Rapid-response national survey designed to pressure-test emerging hypotheses and uncover directional signals around mall behaviors among W18-29.</p>
<h3>Sample</h3>	<p>N = 86; W13-29, Fielded at Westfield Century City (Los Angeles): Participants represent active mall-goers — Gen Z girls currently engaging with the mall as a part of their real-world routines.</p>	<p>N=1,500; A13-39; National Sample: Quotas were set to ensure national representation by race/ethnicity, region and area. Results shown are based on a subset of W13-29.</p>	<p>N = 940; W18-29; National Sample: Quotas were set to ensure national representation by race/ethnicity, region and area.</p>
<h3>Fielding Date</h3>	<p>March 2026</p>	<p>March 2026</p>	<p>December 2025</p>



As *hangouts* declined, the need for *spontaneous joy* rose

Somewhere along the way, we lost the space to simply be together.

Over the past decade, third spaces declined, reshaped by rising screen time, canceled plans, and COVID. In 2023, the US Surgeon General released data showing that people between the ages of 15-24 spend 70% less time in person with friends than those of the same age did in 2003.

What disappeared was not just physical space, but social infrastructure: the spontaneity of unplanned moments, the energy of being around others, and the ability to show up, wander, and connect without a plan.

What Gen Z is craving now is not more structure, but the return of something simpler: real-time moments of joy — and spaces they can make their own.



For Gen Z, *joy is a choice*

Gen Z is navigating pressure from every direction. In fact, 7 in 10 young women say they feel as or more stressed than their peers and happiness among those under 25 has declined more than any other generation in recent years*. But they are reclaiming control in small, intentional ways. They are more deliberate about how they spend their time, who they spend it with, and where they choose to show up.

They are curating their feeds, setting boundaries, and choosing experiences that feel real and worth it. They're protecting their energy by opting out of pressure wherever they can.

As TikTok trends like #protectyourpeace, focused on protecting mental well-being through boundaries, and soft socializing—a shift toward low-pressure, in-person connection—continue to rise, Gen Z is actively creating space to re-engage with the world around them.



96% believe they have the ability to create moments of joy in their lives

78% of Gen Z girls are comfortable saying “no” to activities or commitments to avoid feeling burnout

75% are creating their own path, even if it defies expectation

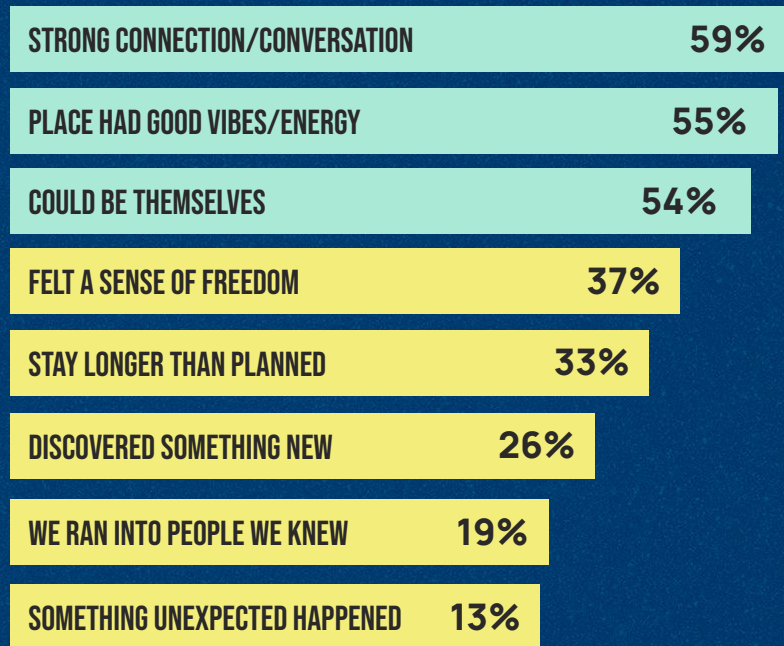


It's all *about the vibes*

GEN Z IS VIBE-CHASING. CONNECTION, ENERGY, AND FREEDOM TO BE THEMSELVES ARE WHAT MAKE A MOMENT ACTUALLY MATTER.



Think of a recent hangout with friends that you really enjoyed. What made it special or memorable?



} *More
than
HALF...*

Gen Z is *over fake connections*

After years of digital-first interaction, Gen Z is starting to feel the emptiness of constant overstimulation. In response, they're mastering the art of "nothing-maxxing" – building analog bags with puzzles, books, and sketch pads as an antidote to doomscrolling, and embracing "underconsumption core" to push back on excess. They're turning toward analog media, physical spaces, and real-world experiences where they can be fully present and engage all of their senses.

What they are seeking now goes beyond connection – they want energy, spontaneity, and moments that actually feel real.

Logging off has become a badge of honor – a new status symbol, an act of self-care, and a way to truly connect with the world around them.

76% say offline communities are central to their identity





Where the *group chat* goes *IRL* - *the mall*

Gen Z is bringing back “2015 mall dates” with friends, where the plan is simply to walk, snack, and see what happens. For them, the mall is no longer just a place to shop. It’s the offline group chat, a low-pressure space for real-time culture and real-time hangs where they can show up without a plan.

In an over-programmed life, that freedom matters. It offers a break from screens, a space to be present, connect, and reclaim unstructured time. In fact, **only 1 in 4 Gen Z females say they go to the mall with a specific purpose.**

73% say the mall is the top place to hang with friends

Meet the *new mall rat*

The mall rats didn't disappear; they evolved. In the '90s, mall rats were part of culture. Today, the Gen Z mall rat co-creates it.

Where the '90s mall rat sought freedom from parents, the Gen Z mall rat is seeking freedom from the constant scroll.



They prioritize it

90%

would choose
time at the mall
over time online

They feel it

86%

Of mall goers say
the mall provides
energy they can't
get digitally

They show
up regularly

67%

Visits malls at
least monthly*

They post up

62%

of mall goers spend
1.5+ hour per visit

If you took *shopping* out of the *equation*...

They would still come back for the experience. The mall is the one place where they can step into any vibe they choose, with friends or on their own. It's as much about connection and culture as it is about commerce.

"The quality time is everything. It creates memories and real connections"

K.T. (18, California)

IF YOU COULDN'T BUY ANYTHING AT THE MALL, WOULD YOU STILL GO?

YES – *for the experience*

43%

YES – *to hang out*

29%

MAYBE – *depends who I'm with*

20%

PROBABLY NOT

7%

DEFINITELY NOT 1%

} **72%**
would still go to the mall even if they couldn't buy anything

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Mall therapy — the *joy of the sidequest*

For Gen Z, joy is rebellion — and side quests are how they practice it. The mall is the backdrop for these spontaneous moments, where the original plan doesn't matter.

One minute they are line-dancing, the next flipping through a thriller, trying on five hats, or giving a stranger fashion advice— it's basically mall bingo, and they are making it up as they go.

Whether they are trying new scents, tapping into their inner foodie, or hunting for the perfect pair of sneakers, the mall is part therapy, part playground for joy.





How does *the mall* make them feel

The mall experience creates a high-vibe, low-pressure environment equal parts fun and freeing.

38%
entertained

37%
social/connected

35%
happy/uplifted

27%
relaxed

20%
inspired

“When I’m hanging out with with my friends at the mall, I feel energized, safe, and joyful. Overall I just get an instant hit of dopamine”

K.T. (17, California)





A discovery mode like no other

Whether in creator mode or offline, the mall is where Gen Z discovers – not through algorithms, but through experience.

It's real-life discovery: unplanned, social, and immersive – where they move through the world on their own terms.



Proof that the mall sparks curiosity
& action in the moment

92%

say that they're open
to discovering
something new at
the mall

Breaking out of the *algorithm* into *brand love*

Gen Z is looking to fall in love with brands, not just discover them. And increasingly, that happens in real life

The mall gives them the time and space to explore, try, and connect beyond the algorithm - turning moments of discovery into lasting brand love.

There is also something really fun about walking into your favorite stores; even if I don't buy anything, I still feel the same sense of excitement."

K.T. (17, California)



WHERE ARE YOU MOST LIKELY TO
DISCOVER A BRAND YOU END UP LOVING?

44% at malls / in store
combined

+10% more likely to discover a
brand at the mall vs. TikTok



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Try on every *version of you*

Gen Z is trying on different “cores,” from coquette to streetwear to corporate, moving fluidly between aesthetics and subcultures. It’s more than a filter, it’s identity in real life. They’re trying on new versions of themselves in real time, shifting identities as easily as outfits.

At the mall, they explore who they are without pressure or repercussions, free to experiment without committing. It becomes a space where identity is explored, tested, and expressed in motion, where no single version has to stick.



No *pressure*, just *exploration*.

89%

say the mall makes it easier to turn interests into shared experiences

86%

say the mall allows different interests and subcultures to coexist in one space

74%

say the mall is a place to explore and experiment with different sides of myself

I think what makes it so special is how easy it is. There's no pressure to do anything or be anything but yourself and it is a great way to bond with people and learn things about yourself and what you are interested in. You're laughing over nothing, trying things you don't need, walking around with no real plan, and that's the whole point.

N.H. (18, New York)

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The *mall of the future* looks like the *mall of yesterday*

When Gen Z imagines the mall of the future, they're not thinking sci-fi. They are bringing it back to something simpler: places to hang out.

But behind that simplicity is a connected ecosystem, where tech powers the shared experience.



If they *built it*...

The mall of the future is part discovery, part entertainment, part co-creation, and all parts community.

If you could design a new mall concept, what would you include?

Experience

- 46% want hangout spaces
- 42% entertainment & attractions
- 35% unique & destination-worthy food
- 29% live events + activations
- 28% want immersive experiences

Discovery

- 37% more local + independent brands
- 34% new stores/brands that rotate

Creation

- 33% want DIY/customization
- 21% content creation spaces

The *Brand Playbook*:
If you have a *Gen Z Strategy*,
you need *a mall strategy*





The Mall is where *Real Life Happens*

Despite being able to discover, shop and explore online, Gen Z is still going to the mall. The mall gives them something their screens cannot: full presence, real-world energy, and shared experience.

This is where brands move from seen to felt.

Brands that create unstructured, high-vibe, and participatory moments will become part of Gen Z's social infrastructure.



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The *Brand Playbook: Takeaways*

1. BRAND LOVE HAPPENS IRL

Brand love starts IRL. The offline group chat is where brands are experienced, shared, and remembered.



90% appreciate brands that create
real-world connections

[source: Hello Sunshine Insights, Joy is Rebellion Research Report, 2025]

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The *Brand Playbook: Takeaways*



2. CO-CREATION IS THE EXPECTATION

Gen Z wants to participate, not just purchase. The future of retail is collaborative.

1 IN 3 want DIY or customization in their ideal mall experience

The *Brand Playbook: Takeaways*

3. THINK IN ENERGY, NOT IN EYEBALLS

The mall is the sensory layer of a connected experience — where what starts on social comes to life in real time. Design moments that can be seen, touched, and felt with others, turning interest into something immediate and real.



74% say pop ups make a mall trip more exciting and worth it*



Compared to Millennial women, *Gen Z girls* are **1.7x more likely** to discover brands they love at the mall.

The *Brand Playbook: Takeaways*



4. PLAN FOR THE UNPLANNED

The magic of the mall is what you didn't come for. It's where spontaneous joy, unexpected discovery, and real-time moments take over. For brands, that means designing for discovery and rewarding curiosity.

83% are likely to try or buy something unplanned when at the mall

Until next time...

