

Getting social and getting real

Gen Z seeks connection and authenticity for nutrition and fitness brands—through social media

By Lily Hartman

The sports nutrition and fitness industry as we've known it is changing with the newest, most tech-savvy generation our world has ever known: Generation Z (Gen Z), who, as experts say, spend 4.5 hours per day scrolling their social media. Being the only generation in history who doesn't know a world without such technology and who grew up hearing about the benefits of exercise and health, it is no surprise that there is a heavy presence of health content on social media. As a matter of fact, *Fitt Insider* reports that 71% of Gen Z say they discover new information on fitness from social media. Clicking

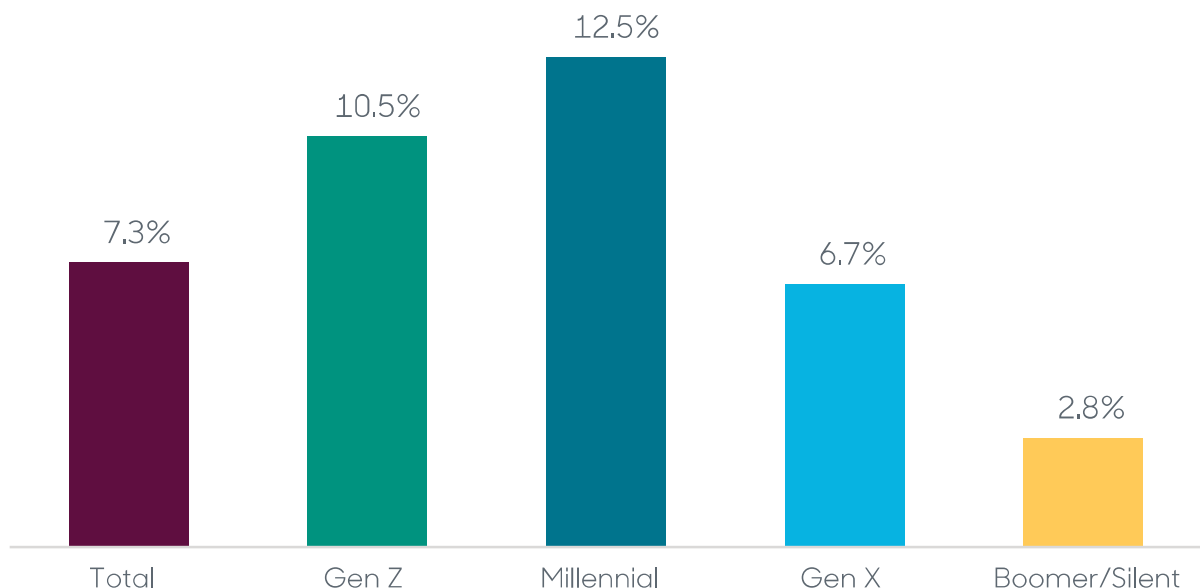
the search page on Instagram or TikTok to browse any health-related topic will reveal thousands of 'shoulder day' workout tips, healthy dessert-tasting oatmeal bowls, and 'What I eat in a day' carousel features and 60-second videos.

Hannah Bayer, a 23-year-old fitness influencer on both Instagram and TikTok, as well as brand ambassador for **Be Empowered Nutrition**, explains that she finds workout content inspiration from social media and then adds her own twist. "I usually go on TikTok right before I hit the gym and then I go through all of the trending videos and gym workouts," she says. Bayer creates

NBJ Takeaways

- » As the most digital savvy generation, Gen Z consumers find connection through their devices
- » Eco and social responsibility are baseline expectations for many young consumers
- » Landing on the right side of the body image message is crucial today

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Source: New Hope Network NEXT Data & Insights / NBJ survey conducted Q2 2021

a variety of video content to inspire her followers, such as, ‘What I eat at my 9-5’, motivational workout videos, self-help videos, and reasons to take certain Be Empowered Nutrition supplements.

Released in 2016, TikTok has been primarily dominated by Gen Z, with most users reported to be under 30, including teens and tweens. TikTok and Instagram offer users “low commitment” content options that allow for lots of views from a variety of content providers in a relatively short time, any one of which might hit the spot for exercise or food prep inspiration. With these popular and trending apps, this highly productive, hard-working and social media obsessed generation can easily access information about a healthy, convenient lifestyle at any time of day. With Gen Z, the sports nutrition and fitness industries are being shaped in different, and perhaps much better, ways.

But technology isn’t the only factor leading to this change. With COVID-19 causing people worldwide to stay home, the amount of time people spent scrolling social media apps has risen significantly. At-home workouts became the hottest trend, with use of virtual workout apps—many offered by fitness influencers on social media—growing by 50% in 2020, according to *World Economic Forum*. According to *Fitt Insider*, 65% of Gen Z rely on these apps for their workout routines, whether performed at home or their local gym. Influencer marketing is, thus, essential in targeting Gen Z.

Several media sources concur that as many as three quarters of Gen Z and Millennials follow some type of influencer. In addition, *inspiresport* reports that Gen Z attitudes are highly impacted by the influencers they follow on social media, with 52% of them saying they trust such influencers for quality product and service advice.

A high-profile example is Gymshark, a fitness apparel brand with most of its followers between 18 and 25, which shows how important influencer marketing can be. Many of the brand’s ambassadors are major fitness influencers on social media, including Whitney Simmons with 3.3 million Instagram followers, Steve Cook with 2.4 million, and Hannah Oberg with 2.2 million. Gymshark broke \$1 billion in revenue in 2020.

Even today’s influencers were influenced by influencers, Bayer says, “A lot of fitness YouTube influencers got me into working out and gave me the confidence I needed to get out there and put myself out there.” One of the influencers who inspired Bayer was Simmons, who has 2.08 million subscribers on YouTube.

Gen Z attitudes and trends

Tech-savvy Gen Z is changing the way wellness brands approach their marketing strategies. Even though they can be more cautious than previous generations with how they spend their money, Gen Z is still willing to invest in wellness brands that align with their personal values and give back to the community. Gen Z greatly values mental

trend. PLANTFUEL offers vegan protein powders, non-GMO, sustainable packaging, and gives back to the community with their partnership with One Tree Planted, a charity planting one tree for every product sold within their partnerships. “Everything we touch has to have some eco-friendly component to it,” says Brad Pyatt, the CEO and Founder of PLANTFUEL, who has regular contact with young people as a high school football and little league coach.

Erin Kenney, a registered dietitian, owner of **Nutrition Rewired**, and social media influencer with over 15,000 followers on both Instagram and TikTok, says, “A lot of people are going more towards plant-based and are still wanting to maintain adequate levels of protein.” Kenney shares easy and

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health, environmental health, and nutrition, being more invested in these elements than previous generations. Data shows that 80% of Gen Z intend to go meatless 1-2 times per week for environmental and health reasons. In addition, 72% of Gen Z say that mental health is their number one priority and 68% believe in the importance of eating a well-balanced diet, such as more protein, as well as less sugar, carbs, and meat.

With plant-based diets being one of the biggest nutrition trends among Gen Z in 2021, selling plant-based options is a direct route for supplement brands to connect with Gen Z. *Grand View Research* valued the 2020 global plant-based protein supplements market at \$5.35 billion, with a CAGR of 8.6% projected through 2028.

We are already witnessing several companies, such as **PLANTFUEL**—a supplement brand that primarily targets college athletes—jumping on the plant-based

delicious yet healthy recipes on social media pages and a website that draw in a lot of Generation Z followers and clients.

Gen Z concerns

With so much information on health and wellness at their fingertips, there are rising concerns about body image issues and eating disorders among Gen Z, and experts agree that TikTok is likely a contributing factor. Gen Z is constantly being flooded with content about the newest fads, diet culture, exercises, and people in eating disorder recovery—leading them to become more and more obsessed with being healthy. This type of content can especially be triggering for people struggling with body image. Such concerns increased even more during the pandemic COVID-19 due to the fact that more of Gen Z spent time on TikTok. Reports show that the annual growth rate of TikTok skyrocketed

85% in the United States in 2020.

"I think [body image issues and eating disorders] definitely increased because of social media," says Kenney. "They're seeing all of these other perfect feeds of people's bodies and that really plays into their diet choices and how they feel about themselves."

There has been a false idea that if you eat, exercise, and live the same way the influencers you follow do, you'll look just like them, Kenney says, but Gen Z is slowly beginning to move away from these trends due to their mental and physical exhaustion of trying to achieve the body they desire and ending up miserable.

Kenney, who specializes in mental health, digestive issues, sports nutrition, and medical cannabis, is very open about her own struggles with mental health and gut health. "I'm not afraid to talk about things that are uncomfortable that people aren't talking about, and I think I have an approach that is more welcoming," she says. "I'm non-judgmental, non-monastic, and people respond really well to that."

Gen Z marketing

According to *marketing charts*, 88% of Gen Z believe that authenticity and taking genuine interest in the content that an influencer posts is a key factor in determining whether they follow them. Be Empowered Nutrition, a company with 35% of their audience between the ages of 18 and 24, will only partner with influencers who have "actual influence" over people, says Elijah Maine, the CEO of Be Empowered Nutrition.

"With Gen Z, they really attach themselves to that social media profile and think that their self-worth is based off of those likes and those numbers," says Maine, who sees more value in an influencer being a good, genuine person than the popularity of their profile.

Bayer gets a lot of messages from her followers asking for supplement advice and often recommends Be Empowered Nutrition products that are tailored to their specific goals. Be Empowered Nutrition claims it won't sell a supplement to a potential customer without confidence that the consumer is at a point in their wellness

journey where the product is a good fit. On top of that, they are very transparent with what is in their products. "We don't want to feel like we're hiding something from the customer," says Maine.

Gen Z already wants to take supplements, Maine contends. "The trick is not to convince them to take your products. Make them *want* to take your products," says Maine. "You have to relate to them in some shape or form."

Whenever a customer purchases a product from Be Empowered Nutrition, they receive a hand-written note from every person in the office. Additionally, the company takes the time to learn something unique about each

says Pyatt. His 13-year-old son already weight trains 3-4 times per week and takes nutrition supplements regularly.

Gen Z supplement brands

So, what does the future of sports nutrition and fitness look like for this health obsessed, tech-savvy generation, as well as for brands seeking to market to them? Kenney believes that "If you are just up front and honest, and willing to be transparent about [your brand or content], I think people appreciate that and they're more drawn to it."

And Kenney isn't the only influencer who focuses on being transparent on her social media platform. Major influenc-

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customer by browsing their social media profile and mentioning it in the card. Maine explains how that card keeps people coming back, even though they don't emphasize that in the outreach. Bayer says she loves personalization and making someone feel special. "That would definitely keep me coming back to a certain company," she says.

That suggests brands wanting to target Gen Z will need to find fun, creative, and authentic ways to sell their products to appeal to this generation. "When it comes to the flavor profile, we try to mimic that of energy drinks," says Maine. "That relates it to the younger generation." In fact, reports show that one-third of people between the ages of 12 and 17 consume energy drinks regularly.

Pyatt is also witnessing more and more kids wanting to work out and take supplements, especially those around the ages of 12 and 13 years old. "They're lifting way earlier in life and they're going to the gym,"

ers like Simmons, who once only posted content about how to do certain workouts, now openly talks about her battle with anxiety, depression, and Psoriasis. Additionally, PLANTFUEL only partners with brand ambassadors who genuinely like their products. They plan on sharing more content about their athletes' personal lives, such as stories about overcoming personal struggles.

"A lot of the time, I get on my Instagram stories, and I just talk about some personal stuff," says Bayer.

With that, there are new perspectives being formed toward sports nutrition and fitness among Gen Z that supplements brands cannot afford to overlook. Gen Z is not a generation that can be manipulated into purchasing products through old ways of marketing. Instead, they want to see social media influencers and supplement brands present content and products that are simply one thing: authentic. 🌱