CONVERSATIONS WITH GEN Z™:
HOW THEY SHOP.
HOW THEY STYLE.
HOW THEY SPEND.

Today’s College Students Talk About Retail.
TODAY’S COLLEGE STUDENTS TALK ABOUT APPAREL SHOPPING

Generation Z, born 1996 or later and the generation now 23 years old and younger, continues to break the mold set by their Millennial predecessors. Their actions and preferences are uniquely their own and that couldn’t be truer when considering their retail shopping behaviors.

Contrary to popular myth, the 18-to-22-year old college-aged segment frequents brick and mortar retail to shop for clothing. Barnes & Noble College wanted to know what they seek out in retail environments, how they shop, and what they buy; so we decided the best way to find out was to ask them – directly.

OUR METHODOLOGY

We spent dozens of hours speaking with college students from across the country, engaging in robust, in-depth online discussions. Our enlightening conversations revealed specific retail experience “wants” and apparel preferences that have far reaching implications for all retailers.
To Gen Z, today’s retail experience has become an outlet for both self-expression and socialization. While some previous generations considered shopping to be a form of entertainment, others viewed it as a transactional means to an end. Gen Z chooses to interact with retail in its own way, consistent with this generation’s beliefs.

Gen Z encourages and respects individualism and believes that everyone has the right to be their own person, expressing him/herself however they wish. Retail shopping, and apparel choices specifically, provide a means for this generation to express its creative, social, and individual self.

Although this generation grew up online, they highly value rich in-person experiences that round out their lives and learning opportunities. Many look to retail environments in this light and choose to shop in-person with friends or chat with them digitally while they shop.

College aged Gen Zers also seek “instagrammable moments” to connect with their immediate social circles and those beyond. Retail done right helps satisfy this craving to connect with others in fun and unique ways.
Gen Z college students revealed what creates a rewarding and fulfilling in-store shopping experience for them. They described an environment that engages and energizes them, invites them to stay longer, and prompts them to purchase.

**IN-STORE IS INSPIRATION.**

Gen Z’s are inspired by creative displays, styled mannequins, and curated displays.

Little touches like arranging clothing and accessory collections on easy-to-access tables and frequently changing themes and merchandise go a long way with the Gen Z collegiate.

They love fresh and new styles, arrangements and pop-ups.

**IN-STORE IS EMOTION.**

College students love to shop, and they love the thrill of the hunt even more. Discovering a rare style find or a great bargain boosts their thrill-meter.

They want the instant gratification that only an in-store venue can deliver.

Connecting socially while shopping, whether it be with in-person companions or via social media with remote pals, enhances the emotional satisfaction of the shopping trip.

**IN-STORE IS MORE.**

Although online has its benefits, in-store delivers higher satisfaction because of its immersive, tangible nature.

Students want to see, touch, inspect, and try on clothes before they buy.

They gravitate towards inviting and alluring atmospheres with music, natural lighting, well-positioned mirrors, and uncluttered spaces.

Retailers who integrate technology into the experience receive added marks from Gen Z.
Gen Z is a confident lot and has adopted its own sense of style, with new fashion trends emerging on today’s college campuses. The trends we uncovered are linked to the uber trend of casual comfort. This group told us that comfortable, yet stylish casual dress is in and overdressing is out.

**HOW THEY STYLE**

Jean jackets, shorts, high-waisted jeans have all become integral components of this generation’s wardrobe. Casual and easy to integrate, their durability is an added plus in this group’s eyes.

“**DENIM BLUE HAS BECOME THE UNOFFICIAL COLOR ON CAMPUS**

“A lot of girls love wearing high-waisted jeans and jean shorts.”

“Jean jackets are everywhere.”

**MINIMALISM HAS GAINED MAXIMUM ACCEPTANCE**

Simple, classic styles are preferred, because they are easy to put together and can be dressed up with a jacket or accessories. Looser basic styles are chosen as they meet the comfort factor criteria. Darker muted colors can be worn in myriad of ways and be easily put together.

“I’m a fan of casual baggy.”

“A typical male look is something along the lines of khaki, black or gray shorts paired with a simple top which depends on their personal style.”

**VINTAGE IS NEW AGAIN**

There is a resurgence in popularity of vintage clothing on U.S. campuses. Many enjoy that some of the classic and distinct pieces from the past help them stand out and create their own distinct styles. Whether it be a Hawaiian shirt or an old hat, they feel vintage offers limitless fashion personalization options.

“Lots of ’80s trends are coming alive on campus.”

“I usually buy wacky windbreakers, old Dad t-shirts, vintage graphic tees, and anything else that catches my eyes while going through the racks.”

**ATHLEISURE DELIVERS THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS**

Most students on college campuses are in with the athleisure sort of appeal, as in leggings, sneakers, and other semi-athletic clothes, that are used as casual wear. I don’t see students dressing up. Students here are more laid back, but stylish.”

Above all, they choose comfort, but it’s got to be stylish! Athleisure provides comfortable, functional clothing that is still seen as stylish among their college peers.
HOW THEY SHOP

Whether it be in their campus store or in their favorite off-campus retailer, this demographic shops in a structured, organized fashion in order to quickly navigate to merchandise they are looking for.

First, they search by gender, then apparel type, and lastly, they focus on specific brands that appeal to them.

They value retailers that make the search experience effortless for them, allowing them more time to assemble their outfits, try on clothes, and chat with friends who are by their side or joining them online.

Within gender, students want a clear delineation of apparel categories (like t-shirts, jackets, collared shirts) to help them shop efficiently.

Students agree that organizing clothing by gender (women’s, men’s, unisex) is important to quickly find relevant items.

Once they have narrowed down to the appropriate gender and clothing category, Gen Z looks for displays of their favorite brands and curated inspiration tables.
The in-store experience is alive and kicking and is more relevant than ever with today’s 18-to-22-year old college student. Don’t be quick to abandon or scale back your retail strategy because retail continues to offer an abundance of opportunity. Instead, figure out ways to bring new life into it and keep it constantly fresh.

As you fine tune your brand’s retail strategies for the Gen Z demographic, we hope these insights will help your brand better appeal to and acquire lifelong brand loyalists.

**BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER. TURNING INSIGHTS INTO ACTION.**

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**READY TO GET STARTED?**

Consider these questions and thought-starters as you review your Gen Z retail strategy.

- **How fresh are your displays and fixtures?**
  Change should be the norm because this demo wants fresh inspiration.

- **How well do you integrate promotions and offers into every experience?**
  Gen Z are smart shoppers and love deals.

- **Do you entice and reward impulse purchases?**
  “Would you like to add a bracelet to go with that top? You could get it for 30% off.”

- **How easy is it for shoppers to navigate your aisles and find merchandise?**
  Remember how they shop. First by gender, then clothing category, then by brand.

- **Do you have comfortable and clean dressing rooms with helpful attendants?**
  Attention to this detail will go a long way.

- **Have you considered VR in-store?**
  Integrating the latest technology will help you stand out and drive sales.

- **To what extent does your employee training include ample tools and ideas to execute inspirational displays?**
  What happens in the field can make or break your retail experience.

- **Do you have a strong pulse on Gen Z’s preferred styles and trends?**
  Establishing a dialogue with your Gen Z shoppers will always provide valuable insights.
ABOUT US.

With 773 on-campus retail stores, a proprietary influencer panel of 15K college students and a national email network of 6MM+, Barnes & Noble College Insights is the leading authority on Gen Z college consumers, their parents and alumni. Through our custom quantitative and qualitative methodologies, we deliver strategic insights for our university partners and full-service research capabilities for brand marketers. We aren’t merely experts in the college market, we live the college experience every day.

READY TO ENGAGE IN-STORE WITH YOUR NEXT GENERATION OF LOYAL CUSTOMERS?
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