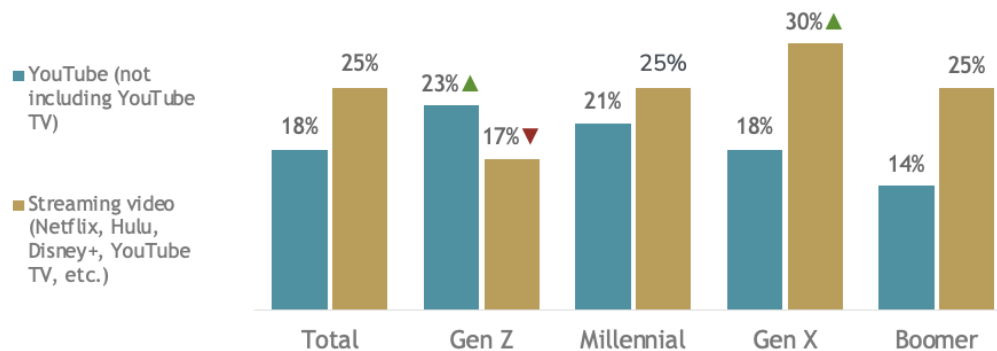


For Gen Z, IRL Streamers and Creators Are Replacing TV & Film

Collage research reveals a significant new trend: Younger consumers are now spending more time each day with YouTube personalities than studio-produced entertainment content.

In other words, for Gen Z, traditional television and film are now being overshadowed by the ongoing drama and excitement of their favorite raw, real-time personalities and interactive communities in the expanding universe of **IRL streaming** and content creation.

Gen Z is the first generation to choose YouTube’s user generated content over studio-produced content¹



Gen Z is now citing YouTube as their #1 daily media source over streaming entertainment services (e.g., Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, etc.) and linear/cable TV. Meanwhile, the opposite is true for older generations, with traditional entertainment content still the go-to for Gen Xers and Baby Boomers. Millennials, however, are beginning to look more like Gen Z in their habits and preferences and are becoming more equally split between YouTube and more traditional TV/film content usage.

So, this begs a double-click: what’s going on here?

¹ Collage Media Survey, June 2025. Arrows indicates significantly over/under Total population, 95% confidence interval.

First, let's look at the type of content most viewed on YouTube across generational cohorts.

What immediately stands out is that Gen Z and Millennials watch strikingly different content than older generations. But the two younger generations' have different preferences for the types of user-generated content they prefer. Gen Z opts first for funny and entertaining creators (even over gaming-related content!). Millennials far more frequently prefer music-related content on YouTube.

Gen Z and Millennials are more enthusiastic about most UGC genres than older generations - but Gen Z care most about personality-focused content²

	Total	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Boomer
Comedy and entertainment (e.g., skits, parodies, funny creators)		58.3% ▲	52.8% ▲	46.6%	37.6% ▼
Gaming and streaming (e.g., gameplay, streamers, esports)		55.5% ▲	41.6% ▲	18.7% ▼	7.0% ▼
Music and performances (e.g., music videos, live sets, covers)		54.6% ▼	68.3% ▲	66.0%	62.8%
Food content (e.g., cooking, mukbangs, etc.)		38.0% ▼	49.6% ▲	43.8%	41.4%
Lifestyle and vlogs (e.g., daily routines, soft life, parenting)		35.5% ▲	34.8% ▲	23.8%	15.1% ▼
Pop culture, celebrity and fandom (e.g., reactions, interviews, fan content)		32.7% ▲	33.2% ▲	24.7%	17.4%
Educational / how-to (e.g., explainers, documentaries)		31.5%	42.8%	38.0%	43.9%
Style, beauty, and fashion (e.g., tutorials, GRWM)		30.7% ▲	26.7% ▲	18.1% ▼	13.6% ▼
Hauls and product reviews (e.g., shopping, unboxing, product recs)		30.1% ▲	24.4% ▲	17.7% ▼	14.8%
DIY, home, and decor (e.g., crafts, makeovers, home inspo)		28.8% ▼	36.1%	35.7%	41.3%
Wellness and self-improvement (e.g., fitness, mental health, ASMR)		28.0%	33.8%	25.3% ▼	27.6%
Sports (e.g., live games, highlights, commentary)		25.9% ▼	34.3% ▲	32.7%	26.0%
News (e.g., breaking news, political updates, commentary)		21.4% ▼	40.6%	45.8%	48.6%

Going further, let's now investigate what's driving these preferences. We asked consumers about their motivation to choose YouTube for online video content and Gen Z's stand-out reason—significantly higher than older generations—is that **“real people create the content.”**

² Collage Media Survey June 2025. Multiple choice response; color coding indicates significantly over/under Total population, 95% confidence interval.

Gen Z gravitates toward authentic, grounded content creators³

	Total	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Boomer
There's a wide range of topics		56.6%	58.2%	62.3%	74.3% ▲
It's familiar		52.4%	52.8%	48.1%	45.8% ▼
Real people create the content		43.8% ▲	41.1%	36.5% ▼	40.1%
The algorithm shows me content I like		43.7% ▲	32.3%	25.7%	17.8% ▼
The website/app is easy to navigate		43.7%	43.9%	42.2% ▼	45.2% ▲
Long form videos are available		40.1%	35.8%	31.5%	24.6% ▼
I'm surprised by what I find		24.4% ▼	30.0%	33.0%	36.1% ▲
It's where I learn about new trends		23.0% ▼	27.8%	26.7%	25.8%
Video version of podcasts are available		20.7%	24.6% ▲	20.6%	19.2%
Videos lengths are usually short		17.6% ▼	24.2%	27.3%	36.7% ▲

This signals a culture-shaking trend taking place: younger consumers are choosing user-generated video content over content produced by the big studios and entertainment platforms because they are craving media that feels more authentic and relevant to their personalities and real-life experiences.

But YouTube, Twitch and TikTok creators have been around for quite a while. So, what exactly is shifting?

Previously, consumers were using social media as a mere side-dish to supplement their streaming service, cable TV, and film watching. Social media used to be what people did in liminal spaces: the car, in line, when a distraction was needed, or during a break in-between more important events. User-generated content also used to be mainly available as shorter form, snackable content.

But now, UGC has made socially-created content the entrée for younger consumers. It's why they're coming to the restaurant. It's also more longform than before, with creators putting out hours of content each day through livestreams, both live and recorded. Many of these creators are now live-streaming every day, oftentimes for hours on end. Some of them will occasionally stream for 24 hours straight, or even 30 days in a row, to build publicity.⁴

³ Collage Media Survey, June 2024. Multiple choice response; color coding indicates significantly over/under Total population, 95% confidence interval.

⁴ "Twitch star Kai Cenat can't stop won't stop during a 30-day stream," <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/24/1159063273/kai-cenat-subathon>

The constant availability of fresh real-time entertainment from their favorite IRL streamers, as well as the ongoing social moments and relationships built within them makes this content so enveloping for younger media users.

IRL streaming – or “in real life” streaming – is a developing category of content that grew from the modest beginnings of what is now referred to as ‘desktop streaming’ – which used to be people simply live-streaming their video game play. (*Wired* notes that IRL streaming actually debuted on Twitch in 2016 but [only started taking off in 2020](#)).

As streamers leapt from behind their computers to real-life settings (and many of them did become popular playing video games), they became ongoing, enticing, real-life-anchored soap operas for Gen Z, Gen Alpha, and even Millennials. Live-streamed content takes viewers with them through their friend hangouts, off-the-wall parties, in-person games and challenges they make up and play together. Their streams also include real and constructed personal challenges, like arguing over romantic dramas or lingering on-screen tensions between other internet personalities.

There are a multitude of IRL streaming communities and subcultures out there for viewers to choose from. The average 13-35-year-old tuning in to the world of IRL streaming might be most invested in the fun at the [AMP house](#) (Kai, Duke Dennis, Fanum, and friends) or the [FAZE house](#), or on [Cinna’s](#) stream. But let’s look at one exemplar at the top of the IRL streaming mountain to illuminate how influential this development is: and at the top of it lives Kai Cenat.

IRL streaming’s sudden outsized impact on media and culture

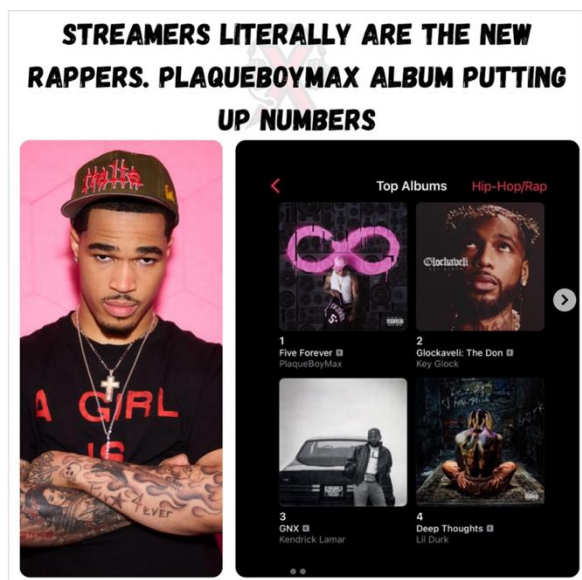
Kai boasts a staggering 13.3 million followers on his Kai Cenat Live YouTube channel, and 18 million followers on Twitch (including 727,000 paid subscribers). The last video posted to his YouTube Live Channel [raked in 1.19 million views](#) in just one day online. **That number that eclipsed the week’s average audience ratings** for MSNBC (958,000), TBS (678,000), and Discovery (640,000), and that competes with the ratings of ABC (at 1.39 million) and ESPN (1.68 million).⁵ But Kai achieves these numbers without a full studio, a script, or a gatekeeper; he does it with just a camera, some energy, and an internet connection.

Viewership numbers aside, the IRL streamer is a cultural powerhouse, responsible for a multitude of new social and cultural trends. They’re the source of recent slang trends like “rizz” and “W ____” [as a reference to whatever thing that is currently winning], or “[aura farming](#).”

⁵ [US Cable Network Broadcast TV Ratings](#)

Beyond the youthful circles of Gen Alpha and Gen Z culture, streamers are making names for themselves in mainstream culture too. They're hosting celebrities on their channels, elevating themselves to the same fame tier. Kai Cenat and Tylil, for example, recently appeared as guests at the [BET Awards](#). And they're even making #1 Billboard chart-topping albums, like PlaqueBoyMax just did with his recently released 'Five Forever' [a nod to his own streaming audience/community, which he named '5Star'].

Streamers are now so powerful as cultural creators that some of the biggest music artists, like Young Thug and Polo G, are considering becoming streamers, themselves.⁶⁷ Drake brought out several big streamers to his Wireless Festival last week, including DDG and Adin Ross.⁸⁹ Even Donald Trump appeared on Adin Ross's stream during his presidential campaign.¹⁰



Instagram page exoduxtv notes PlaqueBoyMax's debut album reached #1 on Apple Music for Hip-Hop/Rap and #5 across all genres.¹

Drama drives IRL streaming's entertainment dominance with younger viewers

One major reason that IRL streaming is such a powerful cultural force is the social drama. The average 13-year-old today is less likely to be reflecting on an episode of the latest Netflix drama, and more likely to be keeping up with the ongoing social relationships, feuds, and latest chapters of their favorite YouTube and Twitch streamers' lives.

And that's because the IRL streamer universe is a lot like the Marvel universe – there are ongoing characters that appear on each other's channels like crossover features. Recent significant moments include FunnyMike's [Streamers Prom](#) and Kai Cenat's [Streamers University](#). The latter brought in a reported 27 million hours of watch-time,¹¹ and each of

⁶ Young Thug Might Quit Rap to Become a Streamer: 'Y'all Live a Cool Life' [Complex](#).

⁷ Polo G Reveals Surprising Reason Why He Wants to Become a Streamer. [Hip Hop News](#).

⁸ Drake Invites DDG & Adin Ross To His Wireless Performance! [YouTube](#)

⁹ Drake Returns Robustly, with Reinforcements. [New York Times](#)

¹⁰ Trump's Big Day with Influencer Adin Ross. [YouTube](#)

¹¹ Kai Cenat's Streamer University hit 27 million hours of watch time, with Amazon and Netflix (maybe) salivating. [Tubefilter](#)

which assembled some of the biggest IRL streamers from across YouTube, TikTok, and Twitch.

But at the crux of this dynamic are the vibrant and charismatic individual personalities running these shows, and the ongoing dramas they spin into existence. PlaqueBoyMax's recent [In Too Deep](#) was an IRL streamer version of the salacious hit reality show 'Love Island.' Several dozen popular streamers attended this event, instigating a number of tense and hilarious moments to captivate viewers' attention. One IRL-streamer who was asked to leave the show because of tension with a contestant then posted to her own profile and planted the seeds of a new dramatic subplot. This is less a one-off example than a formula for propelling interest and viewership

It's the audience interactivity that creates community

IRL streamers are popular because they go beyond simply creating networks of viewers, to build interactive communities. Communities interact with creators and each other in live chats; an omnipresent, scrolling, often hilarious, live commentary in each channel. Each IRL streamer, then, creates their own niche social environment, each with a slightly different persona, feel, attitude, and slang. In this digital world, the IRL streamer is an entertainer, role model, and source of community for the audience.

Live chats also give fans the unique ability to (theoretically) communicate directly with their favorite personalities. Fans in the chat can shape the narrative, egg on conflicts or ship names. Fan-led interactivity, then, fuels moments that ripple through TikTok, meme accounts, and X. It's not uncommon for IRL streamers to respond to their audiences' commentaries, sometimes even telling them to take a step back because they're shaping narratives in ways that the streamers don't approve of.

Whether positive or negative, fans can become entangled with the personal lives of their favorite streamers. Traditional TV shows and films simply can't recreate the same level of intimacy and digital proximity.

IRL streaming is a multicultural landscape

Another reason that IRL streamers are beating studio-produced content with younger viewers is how visibly diverse and multicultural the scene is. Black and Hispanic representation among IRL streamers outpaces TV shows and films. That's because the democratic nature of social media and user-generated content creation welcomes in far more people than traditional media.

Greater diversity in streaming matches Gen Z's demographics—they're now the first majority-multicultural generation.¹² The current list of top IRL streamers on Twitch reveals 17/20 are from Black, Asian, Hispanic, or Middle Eastern descent.¹³ Personal

¹² Collage Custom Market Profiler; American Community Survey; 2023 1-Year Data

¹³ Most Watched IRL Streamers, Last 7 Days, [StreamsCharts](#)

representation means content that is more authentic and relevant to today’s growth audiences than the content available on studio-supported streaming services.

The shift in consumer demand for more varied entertainment personalities should certainly be heeded by media companies, but it also carries key implications across a multitude of industries. Some consumer-facing brands are already dipping their toes in and are reaping the rewards of engaging with audiences through their favorite IRL streamers.

Which brands are tapping into the IRL streaming trend and getting it right?

If we are going to spotlight one category, it’s safe to say that fast-food or quick-service restaurants (QSRs) have been the fastest to respond to this shift. This could be due to a natural synergy, though, as streamers routinely host mukbangs — livestreamed eating sessions — featuring giant orders from brands like **Wingstop**¹⁴ and **McDonald’s**¹⁵, often sponsored or independently coordinated. That Streamers Prom, mentioned earlier, was [sponsored by Popeyes](#). As part of the partnership, Popeyes rolled out the ‘orange carpet’ and published pics to its Instagram from the event (aside from catering the whole thing, of course).



A Popeye’s [Instagram post](#) around Streamers Prom showing IRL streamer Prom King and Queen, Tee Tee and Aries. (And note the user calling streamers the ‘new wave’ and ‘new celebrities.’)

These food-focused moments go viral because viewers have access to the same menus and can head out to satisfy that new craving. When Fanum devours 40 chicken wings on stream [while walking a treadmill](#), it’s an organically viral product placement that then lives

¹⁴ ‘Fanum shows Kai his Wingstop order,’ [Youtube](#)

¹⁵ ‘McDonald’s teases new chicken sandwich, collab with Twitch streamer,’ [PennLive](#)

inside the inside jokes of his community. That's likely to live on in the minds of viewers far more than a polished, scripted, high-budget commercial would.

What you can (and should) do to leverage streamer culture?

If you're in consumer goods, tech, fashion, entertainment, food, public service, finance, or even education, these creators aren't just influencers; they're cultural accelerants. Here are some principles to guide the crafting of your brand's strategy for integrating the streaming phenomenon, along with some creative starters for activating.

Connect with the streamer that matches your brand's personality and gives it a glow-up

There are many streamers who can get your brand attention, but not every streamer is the right ambassador for every brand. Some are certainly going to be riskier choices than others (and some are downright problematic). But there are plenty that are delightful and family-friendly, too. Do your research to make sure that your prospective brand ambassadors and content partners are well-loved by those in the know and don't have anything in their history that could harm your brand's image.

Focus on integrating your product/service inside the creator's livestream in creative ways

Your products and services can seamlessly merge with streamer content inside IRL episodes by bringing their livestream to your event. Brands can sponsor challenges, product drops, or on-stream bits that integrate naturally into that IRL creators' already planned livestream. Think: catering their *mukbangs*, providing their game-night prizes, or dressing them in outfits provided for one of their events.

Co-create with these cultural pioneers

Bring streamers into the design process for your partnership, whether that is letting them help co-develop an advertisement, an event, or even a new product SKU itself. A deodorant brand working with a creator to launch a limited-edition scent, perhaps by selecting and tinkering with scents live on-stream, could result in a product that sells out during pre-sales purely on hype and fandom alone. A brand can negotiate ongoing or building collaborations, by treating streamers like production partners.

You can't beat 'em, so join 'em

The online streaming world is more than a subculture or passing trend — it's a now-mainstream cultural movement. For younger consumers and especially for younger Multicultural consumers, IRL streamers are defining the culture at a pace and scale traditional media can't keep up with, as the personal dramas and personas overshadow the characters on their favorite streaming fictional scripted shows. Given the relatability

and cultural relevance of IRL creators, YouTube and Twitch have effectively disrupted the network/studio model with something younger generations find far more authentic and compelling.

This means that even entertainment companies and streaming services must find ways to leverage this shift rather than compete with it. The impact of independent streaming creators can't be overestimated. The streamers Gen Z watches shape their humor, style, politics, and worldview. Be assured that this trend will only keep growing. But partnering with IRL streamers also means entering their value system, so tread with care.

Despite the inevitable risk of engaging through a newer media ecosystem, the opportunity to build trust and engagement for your brand is unprecedented. Brands that energetically embrace the world of IRL streamers will grow for the future and find new customers for years to come.

About Collage

Collage is the only AI-enabled cultural intelligence engine that provides brands with curated, actionable, cultural insights to accelerate revenue growth. Only Collage fuses consumer, brand and industry insights from 26 billion primary data points to provide brands with unparalleled depth of insights on the why behind consumers' behaviors. The combination of the always-on, easy to use, updated daily tech platform with the best-in-class cultural strategists provides a unique competitive advantage for the world's leading brands. Collage enables marketers and insights professionals to futureproof their brands, identify and win with the fastest-growing segments, increase brand resonance and loyalty, and authentically activate across all the marketing levers. Founded in 2009, culture has always been at the company's core. Collage is a National Minority Supplier Development Council (NMSDC) certified minority-owned small business.