The Gathering Generation

The Evolution of Human Connection in the Age of AI

A NATIONAL STUDY BY CIVIC | 2026

Introduction

Community has been the backbone of society for as long as we can remember.

Our Moms, Dads, brothers, sisters, the aunts and uncles we saw on Thanksgiving and the people next door were our community. We felt close to them. And they were close by.

But more recently, we started to see shifts.

As the digital world – and our digital lives – grew and intersected with our "real" world, we saw our collective sense of community change – especially among younger people. Where we lived, it seemed, was becoming less important than what we were passionate about. And who shared our passions.

Civic wanted to understand the shift. Because we believe that redrawing the lines of community changes everything: how we live, how we connect with each other, how we govern and are governed and how we choose the brands that play an important role in our lives and world.

We conducted a major study – the first of its kind since the acceleration of AI – and learned that the generation that has been called "the loneliest" is defying that designation, shaping vibrant communities around shared passions and gathering at unprecedented levels in on- and offline settings. The rising generation is redefining community and rewiring the classic path of trust and influence in America; they trust their fellow community members as much as they do Mom or Dad. Unheard of even just five years ago.
And, contrary to some reports, they accept and use AI, some would say paradoxically, to help them connect with others.

Enter "The Gathering Generation" and a radical reordering that requires a new approach to reach and meet the expectations of the group that will soon represent half of the American population.

> *" The rising generation is redefining community and rewiring the classic path of trust and influence in America."*

The Gathering Generation is based on a comprehensive survey of 2,000 Americans* about community, technology, trust, influence and what it means for brands, marketers and communicators.

Key Findings

- Community is the backbone of society. Once built primarily around neighborhoods and families, it is increasingly shaped by people with shared passions, wherever they may be.
- 82% of Gen Z report trusting recommendations from a member of one of their communities as much as they trust a recommendation from family.
- 77% of Gen Z believe AI enhances human connection and community rather than eroding it.
- Trust has been rewired. Community recommendations are trusted more than every form of brand communication – including social content, influencer posts, advertising and news articles.

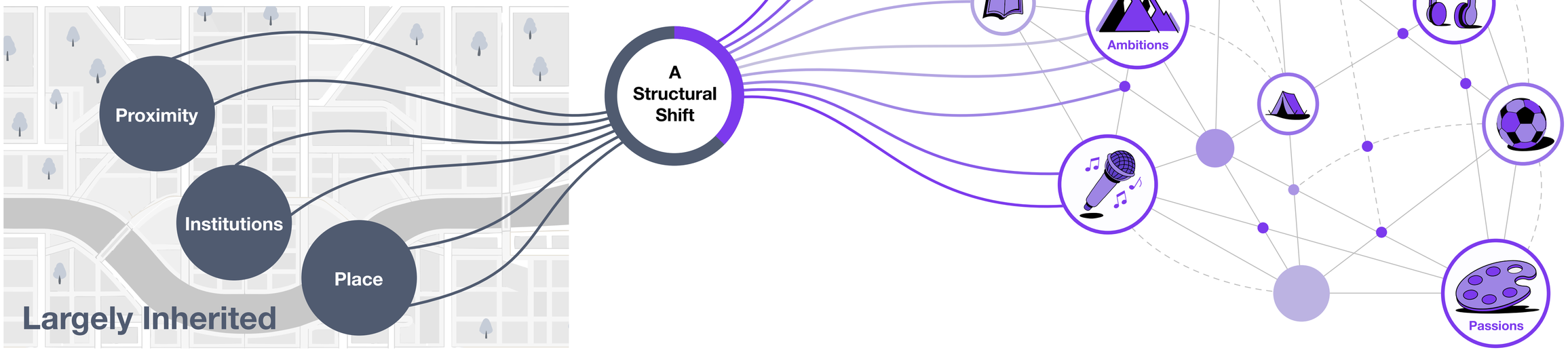
01

The Definition of Community is Moving from Inherited to Chosen

For generations, community was largely inherited through neighborhood, hometown, school, workplace or faith.

For younger people, community is increasingly chosen: the people who share their interests, values, passions or ambitions – wherever they happen to live.

This represents a structural change in how people find belonging and understand who they are.



02

Chosen Communities Are Becoming Central to Identity

71% of all Americans – including **82%** of Millennials and **79%** of Gen Z – said community has become more important or has always been central to their lives.

And the importance of community to Gen Z and Millennials is increasing at significantly higher rates than for Baby Boomers and Gen X (see table).

Roughly **50%** of Gen Z and Millennials consider membership in a fan community important to their identity, compared with **22%** of older generations. (Deloitte 2026 Digital Media Trends).

Community is no longer simply where people live. It is where they actively assemble around what matters to them.

The Evolution of Community and Identity

The Place of Community	Gen Z (18-29)	Millennials (30-45)	Gen X (46-61)	BBs (62+)
Community is not a major part of my life	7%	8%	13%	19%
Community used to be more important to me	14%	10%	19%	20%
Community is becoming more important to me	28%	28%	35%	22%
Community has become significantly more important to me in recent years	35%	39%	25%	24%
Community has always been central to my life	16%	15%	8%	15%
TOTAL	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

Fig. 1

03

Chosen Communities are Becoming a New Operating System for Trust and Influence in American Society

Trust in American institutions remains near historic lows: just **27%** (Gallup 2026). But Americans are not living without trust. They are finding it in communities formed around shared interests, identities and ambitions.

More than half of Americans now identify as **active members of three or more communities** – including **66%** of Millennials and **67%** of Gen Z. From Discord gaming servers to neighborhood running clubs, these communities create a layer of trusted relationships that is broader than personal circles, yet more credible than mass communications.

This finding is most striking among younger Americans: **82% of Gen Z reports trusting recommendations from a member of one of their communities as much as they trust a recommendation from family.**

Chosen communities are becoming part of the infrastructure through which trust is built, influence travels and decisions are made.



04

Community Filters Information and Shapes Decisions

Community is beginning to take over a function once held by media, advertising and other institutional gatekeepers: Deciding what deserves attention and credibility. This is part of what makes the new operating system valuable.

> *“ I bought a new e-bike recently.* ***I found out about it from someone in my biking community.*** *He was an active member of the community. I met him at least a dozen times and one day he brought this new bike to our rides.* ***I trusted this guy. I bought it and thanks to him I didn't even question it really.*** *I ordered it right away.”*
>
> **– Gen Z, Male, Tennessee**

78%

of all Americans turn to communities to decide what to buy, where to eat and how to spend their time.

90%

of Gen Z and Millennials use community to control which brand information reaches them.



05

Community Recommendations are Trusted Over Every Form of Brand Communication

Community trust and influence outperforms brand social content by **30 percentage points**, and ranks far ahead of influencer posts, advertising and news articles. Paid celebrity endorsements rank dead last, trusted by only **38%** of Americans.

> *" I feel like [community members'] recommendations have definitely influenced my ability to find things quickly without having to search a bunch of different websites. They are pretty honest.* ***I don't feel like they're a hundred percent salesing me all the time, so I do trust them."***
>
> **– Millennial, Female, Texas**

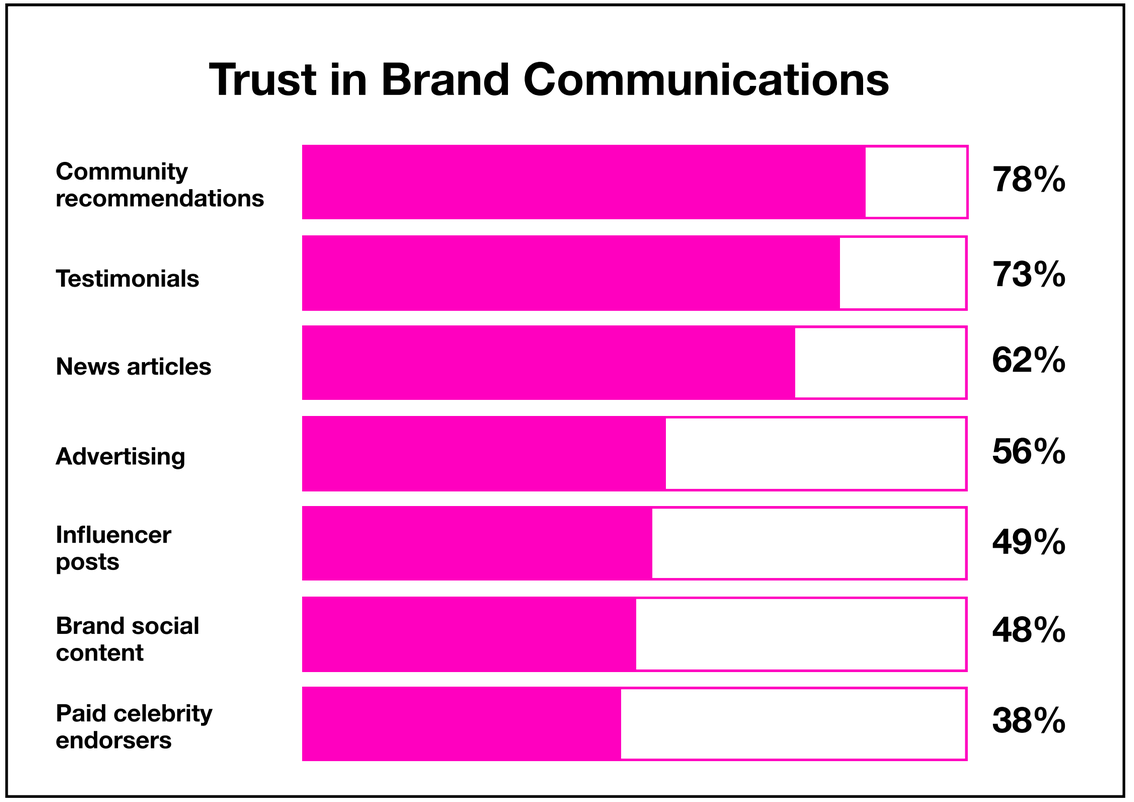


Fig. 2

06

AI Is a Force Multiplier for Community Formation and Human Connection

Much public discussion about AI and social life focuses on replacement: of chatbots in place of friends, or generated content in place of real, live conversation. Survey respondents said otherwise; that used properly, AI is a way to find people and communities, pursue interests, and have real-life experiences they wouldn't be able to access without it.

But all cohorts also made clear that they do not want AI to replace human connection. The rise of AI is not isolating Americans or pushing them out of digital life. It's helping them connect with each other in communities.

77%

of Gen Z and **75%** of Millennials say AI enhances human connection.

89%

of Gen Z and Millennials are comfortable with AI having a role in community.

80%

of respondents would leave a community if AI replaced human connections.

AI Community Connections in Action



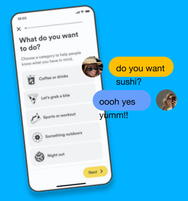
Synchrony

Recognizing the growing loneliness many autistic and neurodivergent individuals face as they transition to adulthood, Synchrony connects neurodivergent adults through interest-based matching algorithms and AI-powered social coaching for moments of uncertainty.



Ditto

Ditto matches college students for in-person dates based on preferences submitted by members – no swiping or chatting required. Using AI-powered orchestration, Ditto makes the match, picks the time and location, and sends it to users via ichat.



Bumble for Friends

Bumble for Friends (BFF) enables people to grow their friendship circles by matching people based on shared interests and facilitating in-real-life connections. Generative AI creates ice-breaker messages for users based on member profiles to accelerate connection.

AI isn’t killing human connection. It’s rewiring who Americans trust.

07

Lurking Is Out. Participation Is Reshaping Community and Creating a New Source of Influence

Among the most significant findings of The Gathering Generation is a radical change in the rules of community participation. For more than 20 years, Nielsen's 90-9-1 rule (published in 2006), held that **90%** of a community's members attend without contributing, **9%** contribute intermittently, and **1%** generate nearly everything the community sees.

Members of today's chosen communities have much different expectations. They've turned the "90-9-1" pyramid on its head. Growing up on social media, they expect to have a voice and a platform for participation. In fact, we found that **50%+** report active engagement within their communities, contributing ideas and content, influencing and leading.

The New Community Participation Paradigm

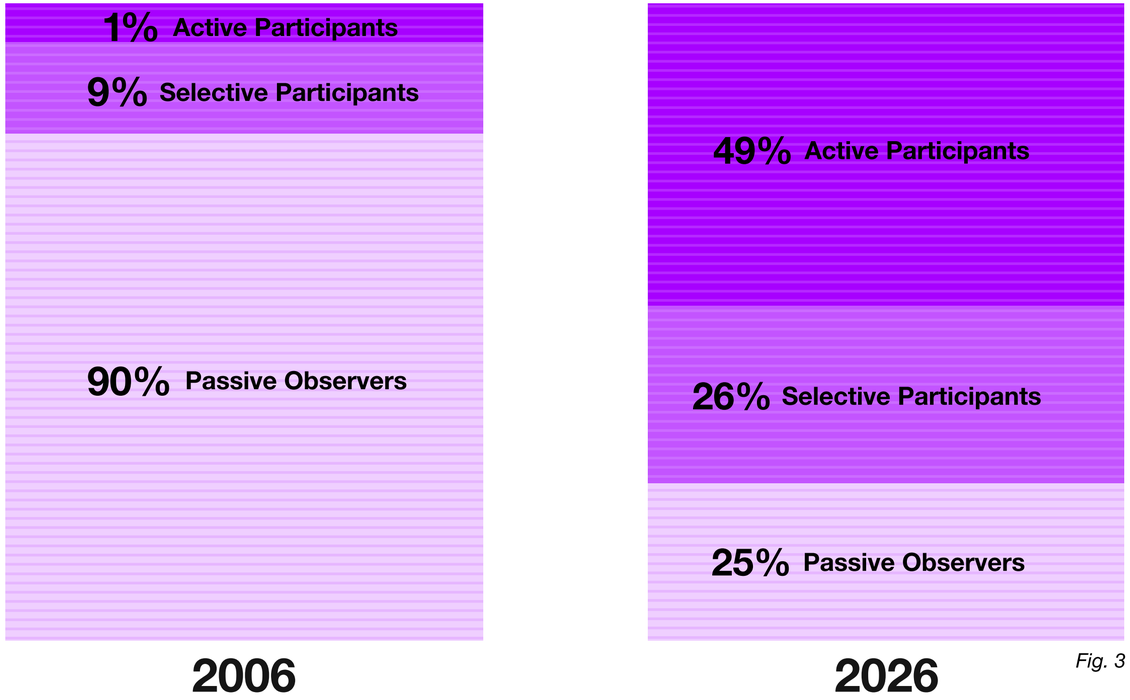


Fig. 3

Meet the New Community Participants









Four distinct archetypes and their distribution among Americans:

Ultras

Active in 4.9 communities, Ultras lead, organize and bridge across communities; they crave having roles to play

Engageds

Engageds are active in 3.7 communities on average and are contributing members to groups whose importance is growing to them.

Selective

Participating in 2.6 communities on average, Selectives have exacting standards for what makes community safe and trustworthy.

Passive Observers

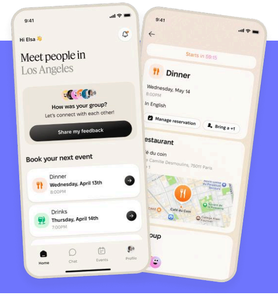
Community plays little to no role in Passive Observers' lives; they are followers and watch from the sidelines when present at all.

08

The New Liminal Life: Digital and Physical Connection Are Converging, Not Competing

Reports of rising analogism are greatly exaggerated

There is a narrative today that the younger generation is retreating from technology and embracing an “analog” life. The data tells a more nuanced story. **72%** of Gen Z respondents indicated a preference for in-person and digital experiences, only expressing a preference for in-person engagement when forced to choose. They are living liminally – moving seamlessly between digital and in-real-life, gathering where their communities gather and going where they go.



Timeleft

Timeleft uses machine-learning algorithms and a set of simple inputs – a few interests and personality preferences – to match groups of people for dinners and other in-person gatherings based users’ locations and budget.



Global Reddit Meetup Day ~ Seattle

09

Gen Z Is Tired of Being Hunted, but Ready to Be Gathered

The study suggests that marketers may need to reconsider the decades-old approach to targeting, identifying and capturing consumers based on traditional demographics and psychographic data.

The Gathering Generation finds that model is less effective as Gen Z's purchasing power increases. 86% of all respondents and 89% of Gen Z say the best brands are those that gather people around shared interests and values and participate, not hunt. And 81% of Americans believe it is important that the brands they buy from are actively involved in the communities they care about. The study finds that 55% of Americans have advocated for or defended a brand because of its community involvement; and that response is even higher among Gen Z at 65%.

Brands need to earn their way into a community by contributing value – before trying to promote anything. These "gathering brands" can be rewarded with advocacy, loyalty and purchases. 81% of Americans have taken at least one positive action because of a brand's community involvement. Among the most engaged community members (Ultra participants), 71% said they advocated for or defended a brand and 52% stayed loyal to a brand rather than switching to an alternative due to the brand's community involvement. 55% made a first-time purchase or bought more.



In Conclusion

For a very long time, community was defined by geography and mutual dependency – where people lived, their neighbors and close friends. Ask a group of Gen Zers (we did) what community means to them and not a single one will mention their neighborhood; for them community is about the passions they share, the things they like to do together and the people they want to connect with – in real life and in each other's virtual presence.

The rising generation wants to gather; their communities transcend borders – they are national and international and they comprise small groups and tens of thousands.

Communities matter today more than ever before not just because people want to connect, though they certainly do; communities matter because that's where people are getting the information they truly trust. The best new restaurant, a new hairstyle, the real story about why a plane flight is delayed and so much more.

At the same time, trust in traditional brand engagement – advertising, AI recommendations, celebrity endorsements and more – has plummeted. The new generation knows when it's being sold to, and they shut it out. The brands that recognize this and embrace gathering – by engaging communities and contributing real value – will drive growth that lasts.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Algorithms may determine what people see. Communities help determine what they believe.

That is because the most trusted influence does not necessarily come from the loudest or largest source. It travels sideways – from one person to another, connected by a shared interest, identity or ambition. The source is credible because it shares something with them, not because it speaks to millions.

It's important to note that these findings do not suggest that gathering has solved the loneliness epidemic. The implications of this report are more directly about communications, participation, trust and influence. And perhaps they offer grounds for optimism – that seeing a rising generation gathering more and more at least means more opportunities for recognition, relationships and joy – and those opportunities matter.

For brands, advertising and celebrity endorsements can still deliver reach. But reach is not the same as belief. A generation fluent in persuasion has become skilled at filtering it out. Brands can benefit from learning how to earn their way in by understanding the communities that already matter, contributing something genuinely useful and helping people do more of what they already value.

This report also raises questions that future research could pursue. What makes one community trusted and another merely popular? When does online participation develop into enduring human connection? How does trust travel within and between communities and how does it impact consumer behavior? These are just a few topics to explore in greater depth.

The next era of growth will belong to brands that stop treating communities as audiences to target and start contributing value.



About CIVIC

CIVIC is a brand communications, content and experience firm that works with some of the world's leading companies to help them drive growth through the power of community. The team delivers brand strategy, design, content, experiences and communications that create meaningful connections.

Longtime clients include Ford, Meta, Verizon, Sam's Club, L'Oréal, NBC Universal, Skydance, TikTok and Audible. Civic is a two-time Ad Age Small Agency of the Year, Campaign Agency of the Year finalist, PR Net 100 and has received honors from the Cannes, D&AD, Clio Music, Ex Awards, PR Purpose, Reggies, and Webby Awards.



The Gathering Generation study was conducted on behalf of Civic by Occula Group, a global market research and brand building firm and is based on a survey conducted among 2,000 American adults ages 18 and older from May 17 to 29, 2026. The margin of error for this study is ±2.2% and ±3.7% for Gen Z and +/-3.4% for Millennials. The sample includes additional Gen Z and Millennial respondents beyond a purely representative sample yields, bringing each generation to 685 and 810 respondents, respectively. The reported results are balanced to reflect a nationally representative sample of the U.S. adult population by age, gender, race and ethnicity, geography and education.

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