



# GenZ

REDEFINING  
AUTHORITY

Flamingo

**“We haven’t been afforded the luxury of being ignorant. We’re not especially political; we get exposed whether we like it or not. We’re forced to think about our future and how we’re going to fit into the world a lot earlier.”**

*Ife Grillo, influencer*





# Executive Summary

Gen Z are the first generation of true digital natives – the oldest among them were just 12 when the iPhone was launched. They've spent their entire lives online, and as a result, have been more intimately exposed to the failings of the powers-that-be to tackle world issues than any generation preceding them: from political scandals, to #MeToo to climate change; all have contributed to a breakdown in trust towards traditional political and civic institutions that has shaken many people's sense of structure and place. Authority isn't in crisis, but it's being questioned, reshaped and reformed.

But Gen Z have also grown up more empowered by media and technology than any other generation; their connectedness has allowed them to critique, debate, and question power, and to organise online to share ideas and solutions. Their simultaneous exposure to hierarchical frailty and ability to question it makes them a fascinating lens through which to understand how the world is changing. With traditional authority in question, Gen Z are effectively redefining it – both the way it's expressed and the way it's experienced.

Flamingo collaborated with research partners in Mumbai, Seoul, Shanghai and Mexico City to explore the context of shifting authority in their regions. We spoke to experts in authority and Gen Z influencers that are actively involved in creating new forms of authority. We combined qualitative insight, semiotics and futures analysis to understand what authority looks, sounds and feels like for Gen Z.

We identified five core needs that Gen Z have from authority: it must be enforced by the community; it must come from those that are open and show their vulnerability; it must be grounded in lived experience; it must be shared; and it must have personal utility. From these needs, we have outlined four key types of 'new authority': Establishment as Platform; Disruptive Utility; Singular Visionaries and Timeless Connection.

In this report, we describe these types of new authority, what underpins them, and which brands and organisations currently best embody them. We also offer guidance for how brands can start to understand the type of authority they hold, and what that means for how they communicate with Gen Z.



# Why Gen Z? Why authority? Why now?

By 2019, Gen Z will account for at least 32% <sup>1</sup> of the global population. They already represent up to \$143 billion <sup>2</sup> in buying power – and that's without accounting for the influence they have on household spending. Understanding them and their motivations is vital to the success of any brand.

**“Authority is not lost, or waning,  
but is proliferating and pluralising”**

*Authority Research Network* <sup>3</sup>

Before going any further, it's worth clarifying that we know no cohort behaves homogeneously – there's no value in attempting to summarise the experiences and attitudes of an entire generation in one snappy rule of thumb. But in order to make sense of something as fluid, complex and fast moving as culture, sometimes you need a heuristic, or mental shortcut. Generations are heuristics for change.

And Gen Z are particularly interesting for a number of reasons. To start with, they're the first generation of true digital natives. Millennials, in comparison, are digital emigrants: they travelled from the physical world to the digital world. A lot of the time they led the charge, but they weren't the first. They adapted.

Born after 1995, the oldest among Gen Z were just 12 when the iPhone was launched. Gen Z have spent their entire lives not only online, but their adolescence and emerging adulthood in the smartphone age. They are the true inheritors of not only the internet-enabled world, but what the World Economic Forum's Klaus Schwab calls 'The Fourth Industrial Revolution'; that is, the wave of innovation that followed the invention of the internet. This, says Schwab, is “characterised by a range of new technologies that are fusing the physical, digital and biological worlds, impacting all disciplines, economies and industries, and even challenging ideas about what it means to be human”. <sup>4</sup>

Gen Z have grown up in an age of unprecedented technological capacity; the ability to solve so many problems is more in our grasp as a human race than ever. And yet the world's problems can seem entrenched, intractable and overwhelming: food crises in China; political scandals; #MeToo; election meddling; climate change; Grenfell; the list of let-downs they've endured and observed is long and expansive. In the US, a study found that just 32% of Gen Z 'feel the country is headed in the right direction' <sup>5</sup>; in South Korea, Gen Z is known as 'The Sewol Ferry generation' – this refers to a disaster that saw a passenger ferry sink due to poor safety regulation, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of students and a wave of protests in the aftermath. <sup>6</sup>

**“Gen Z don't just rely on voting every five years, we don't rely on institutions; we say: 'I'll get things done myself.' If we want to see change in the community, we'll do it. We don't believe institutions will help us.”**

*Ife Grillo, influencer*





Things aren't necessarily worse than ever. But Gen Z are more intimately exposed, via their digital devices and platforms, to the failings of the powers-that-be to tackle these issues than any generation preceding them. Because of this, authority as we know it is in crisis. A breakdown in trust towards traditional political and civic institutions has shaken many people's sense of structure and place.

But Gen Z have also grown up more empowered by media and technology than ever; to critique, debate, and question that power, to organise online to share ideas, solutions; to feel politically, emotionally and practically empowered by their smartphones. A recent report found that 49% of Gen Z volunteer at least once a month, 20% plan on starting their own charity in the future and 39% consider giving to charity as a 'measure of success'.<sup>7</sup>

They are simultaneously more exposed to the failures of traditional authority than ever, and more equipped than ever with tools to respond to it, to challenge it, and to make it work for them.

**In short, Gen Z are a generation of concerned pragmatists seeking new solutions.**



**“We don’t need the media;  
we have social media,  
where we tell stories  
ourselves. What do we  
need MSNBC for? We have  
Facebook and Twitter.”**

*Kwame Rose, influencer*



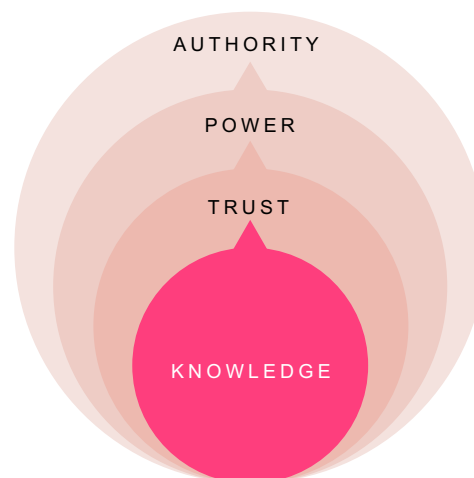
# Defining authority

Authority hasn't disappeared for Gen Z, but it is changing; it's going by different names. Before we could start mapping authority and collecting examples of how it plays out for Gen Z, we needed to truly understand it - to establish its constituent parts. We needed a working definition for our analysis – one that would be able to stretch to brands as well as more traditional examples of authority.

*“My authority is a different authority. I don't know if I am powerful, I don't really feel powerful; it's a kind of cultural capital or currency. If you can attribute cultural currency to a brand, that gives it power for young people.”*

*Elise By Olsen, influencer*

The Authority Research Network (ARN), which is a research collective spanning the UK, Ireland, US and Brazil, is working towards a broad new theory of authority as: 'forms of advice'. According to them, “authority works through the generation of openness, answerability and trust between participants. Authority needs to be given a broader definition than one of simple command/obedience. It might be understood more generally in terms of ‘a capacity to demand a response’.”<sup>3</sup>



We combined learnings from our expert interviews (one of the experts we spoke to, Dr Claire Blencowe, is a member of the ARN) and considered all the ways in which authority has been defined in the past. We found that all authority fundamentally works through the same three levels (albeit in different ways): it always starts with knowledge, is built through trust, and then ultimately possesses power.

## 1. It starts with knowledge

This can mean anything: being an architect; being a talented blogger; being a caring friend; being a politician. All of these are types of knowledge and every brand and individual possess a version of it. Knowledge is as relevant to brands and individuals as it is to teachers, libraries and books. It's about your core capacity; what is the foundation of expertise or awareness that makes you able to do what you do?

## 2. It establishes trust in that knowledge

Trust is vital because it is the context in which power and authority blooms – what makes your source of knowledge trustworthy, believable and worth adhering to? Trust isn't spontaneously given – it's earned over time. Trust defines the quality of your relationships with people.

## 3. It has power

Power is influence. It's about demanding a response; having people listen to you, and ultimately getting them to do what you would like them to do.

*“For Gen Z, the idea of authority is someone that tells them something they believe, that they trust, and that influences their behaviour.”*

*Christian Scholz, expert*

# Gen Z needs

Armed with a working definition of authority, we needed to identify the forces shaping it for Gen Z. From our conversations with experts and influencers and our integrated semiotics and futures analysis, we identified five distinct needs.

In order for authority to be meaningful, believable and powerful to Gen Z, it needs to meet at least one of the following needs:

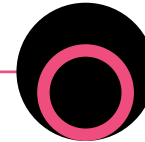
**To be enforced by the community**



**To come from those that are open and show their vulnerability**



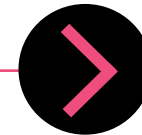
**To be grounded in lived experience**



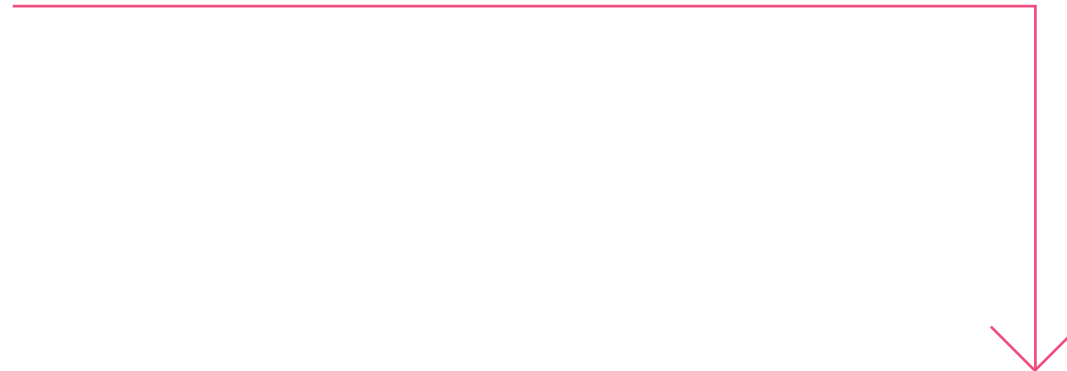
**To be shared between 'us' and 'them'**



**To have personal utility**



**Let's break these down.**





## Gen Z need authority to be enforced by the community

This generation feels largely misunderstood by institutions that are supposed to serve or speak for them, and are more vocal about calling out unfairness. Parties are constantly accountable to their group's moral code, and the responsibility for enforcing this lies with everyone.

*"The Hearing Voices Network has changed public discourse around mental health by creating new sets of knowledges and following procedures that enable them to build up this archive, which is beyond any one of them individually. Through risk taking and sharing experiences, they've generated something from nothing, which is really powerful and authoritative"*

*Dr Claire Blencowe, expert*

## Gen Z need authority to come from those who are open and show their vulnerability

In a social media-driven world, emotional honesty has become increasingly powerful, and speaking openly about struggles and flaws increases your relevance. Gen Z feel reassured when they see others triumph over insecurity or anxiety. Showing a fearless openness to be fully honest with those around you is more important, and more welcome, than ever.

*"You see people go crazy like Kanye. We appreciate them, seeing our favourite people break down. It's normal. As humans become more familiar with social media, we become more familiar with ourselves. It's giving us more access to these mythical figures we've never had before."*

*Kwame Rose, influencer*

## Gen Z need authority to be grounded in lived experience

Traditionally, knowledge has been granted and affirmed by institutions like universities. But for Gen Z, knowledge forged in the real world is more relevant, more useful and often, more accessible. Gen Z are drawn to people or institutions that can speak honestly, from first-hand experience. Theirs is a generation that seeks to amplify previously silenced voices.

*"Lived experience always outweighs the knowledge you can obtain from a professor. People are like: 'What the hell do I do with a college degree?'"*

*Kwame Rose, influencer*

## Gen Z need authority to be shared between 'us' and 'them'

Sceptical about traditional authority's ability (and willingness) to look after them, Gen Z assemble their own diverse communities and draw support from these instead. Growing up with technology that gave them the power to participate, they now expect (and want) to have a dialogue with 'the system' in order to create products and experiences that are more relevant to them.

*"Gen Z can work with institutions when the institutions are trying to work with them. It's not 'fuck the system'; we just need the system to prove why we should trust it."*

*Ife Grillo, influencer*

## Gen Z need authority to have personal utility

In Mexico, Gen Z are referred to as 'Generation Prepared'—but this description fits globally. The world is increasingly competitive and Gen Z are obsessed with self-improvement, particularly when it comes to education and work. They respect authority that is purposeful and pragmatic as this gives them tools to be active in a fast-moving world.

*"We see a lot of young designers being open to partnering with established people; they're happy to take the money from the system. It's a very positive thing."*

*Elise By Olsen, influencer*



# Building a framework for new authority

The five key needs describe what's shaping and driving the modern landscape of authority for Gen Z. When you then explore the various expressions of authority across culture – which we did via a semiotic mapping – a pattern emerges.

We observed that, broadly speaking, the characteristics of new authority can be described across two spectrums:

1. It's based on knowledge that ranges from stabilising to disruptive

2. It offers utility that ranges from primarily functional to primarily emotional

Put very simply, **stabilising** authority draws on timeless knowledge; it feels more established and static and its power lies in its ability to ground and reassure. Meanwhile **disruptive** authority is underpinned by visionary creativity. Vital, regenerative and creative, its power lies in its potential to effect change.

**Functional** authority is founded on practical excellence and utility; its unique source of power is its ability to facilitate multiple outcomes. At the other

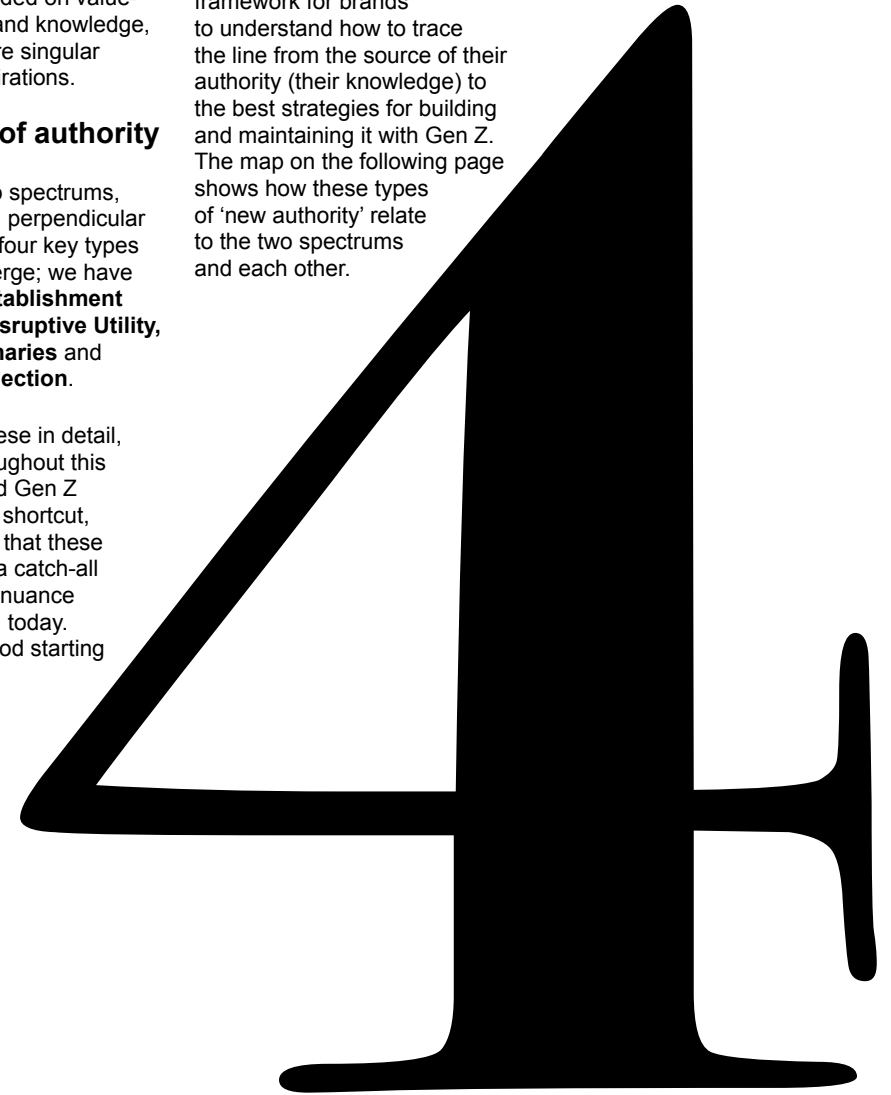
end of the spectrum, **emotional** authority is founded on value-based wisdom and knowledge, which can inspire singular visions and aspirations.

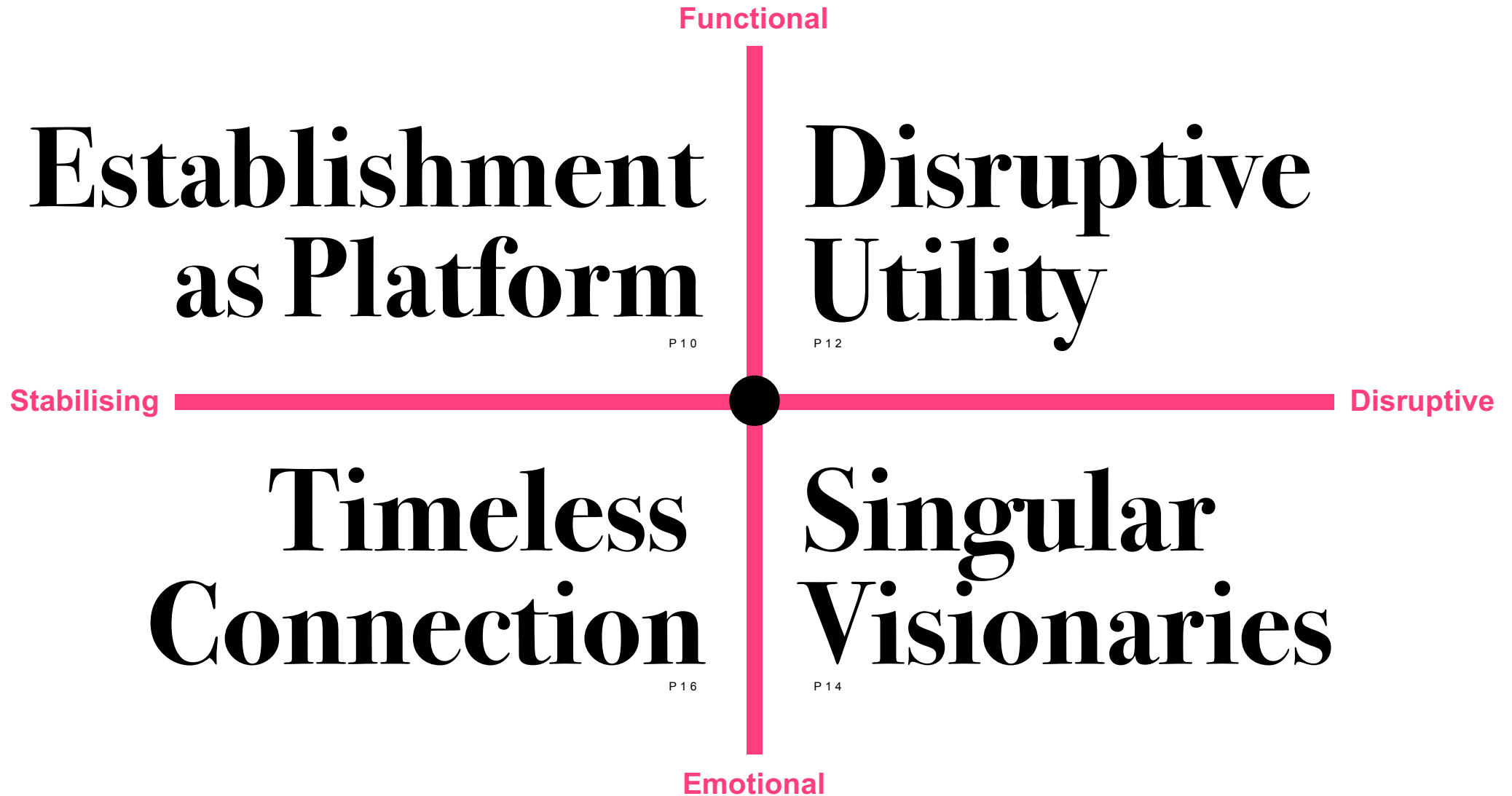
## Four types of authority

When these two spectrums, or axes, are laid perpendicular to one another, four key types of authority emerge; we have called these **Establishment as Platform**, **Disruptive Utility**, **Singular Visionaries** and **Timeless Connection**.

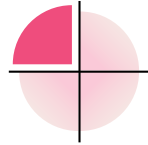
We'll explore these in detail, but, just as throughout this work we've used Gen Z as an analytical shortcut, it's worth noting that these spaces are not a catch-all for every single nuance of authority held today. But they're a good starting

point; they offer a strategic framework for brands to understand how to trace the line from the source of their authority (their knowledge) to the best strategies for building and maintaining it with Gen Z. The map on the following page shows how these types of 'new authority' relate to the two spectrums and each other.





# Establishment as Platform



**Establishment as Platform**, where functionality and stability meet, describes the space where old, traditional authority is made valuable. The problem with old authority is that it can often feel static and inaccessible to Gen Z, so the brands that best represent this type of authority are ones that can make their expertise useful and purposeful in a modern context.

## Who lives here?

**Educational institutions** would typically live in this space, but as we've already discussed, the current system feels outdated and anachronistic for Gen Z. Instead, services that give Gen Z access to traditional expertise from a trusted source, but in a way that's more intuitive to them, are gaining authority. For example, **EdX** offers courses from respected institutions like Harvard and MIT, but via a flexible online format that makes it easier for people to supplement their learning.

"The BBC isn't more legitimate just because it's the BBC. You don't get authority by title, you have to earn it. We'll work with them but only if we can define the terms. We don't have to work with them – big media have less power than they used to."

*Ife Grillo, influencer*

The **luxury** category is largely defined by heritage and craftsmanship so also fits well here; but its authority to date has been based on effectively telling people what they want. Authority in this space focuses on the needs of Gen Z and delivering against them in a way that they understand. **Gucci**, for example, offers Gen Z a cultural exchange by creating content – memes, brightly-coloured collections, bold logos, even fake severed heads on the AW18 catwalk – that live well on Instagram.

The **Google Arts and Culture Initiative** is a strong example of contemporary Establishment as Platform. This is Google's not-for-profit mission that captures high-quality digital versions of artworks around the world. The museums and institutions involved remain caretakers of their expertise, but by partnering with Google they are offering personal utility by making those artworks accessible. Through the Art Selfie tool – which allows people to upload a selfie, which is then matched to the artwork it most resembles – that utility becomes playful, too.

Meanwhile, the **Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences** (behind the Oscars) are not getting it quite right. The Academy had planned to launch a 'popular film' award this year, but the idea was poorly received and ultimately scrapped. The Academy had misjudged the nature of its authority. With ongoing issues around diversity on its judging panels, it needs instead to demonstrate to the next generation why it should be considered an authority on filmmaking; people don't need to be told what's popular – they can see that for themselves.

## The Golden Rule

**Be a caretaker of your knowledge, but not a gatekeeper of it. Use purposefulness and usefulness to build trust with Gen Z**



## Establishment as Platform

### Cha Kil-yong

One of a number of after-school internet teachers in South Korea who have reached celebrity status through their online classes that help students to excel in an intensely competitive educational environment. The local saying goes: 'children sleep in class so they can be awake for their after-school lessons.'

### Change.org

Particularly popular in India with an increasingly pragmatic and action-oriented generation of teens, the platform allows Gen Z to gain mass awareness and action for causes they personally care about.

### EdX

MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) like EdX help teens supplement their learning by giving them access to courses from prestigious and respected institutions like Harvard and MIT, delivered via a highly flexible and convenient online portal.

### Eu Yan Sang

A Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) offered in pill format in order to win over younger customers that are put off traditional medicine due to the hours needed to brew it themselves.

### Indio Beer

A popular beer in Mexico, it has retained its relevance with Gen Z against a shifting cultural backdrop by moving away from nationalistic branding, and encouraging people to propose their own versions of the packaging, resulting in a highly regionalised, diverse collection of expressions of Mexico.

### John Green

Having sold over 10 million copies of his 2012 novel (teen novel *The Fault in Our Stars*), author John Green turned his authority as a kind of wise older sibling of Gen Z into a huge educational social media following. His Crash Course series breaking the entirety of the history of the world into bite-sized chunks has racked up over 900 million YouTube views to date.

### Patanjali

An Ayurvedic home goods brand that is appealing to younger people by providing 'ancient wisdom in new packaging'; this is tapping into Indian hipster culture while also expanding online.

### TedEd

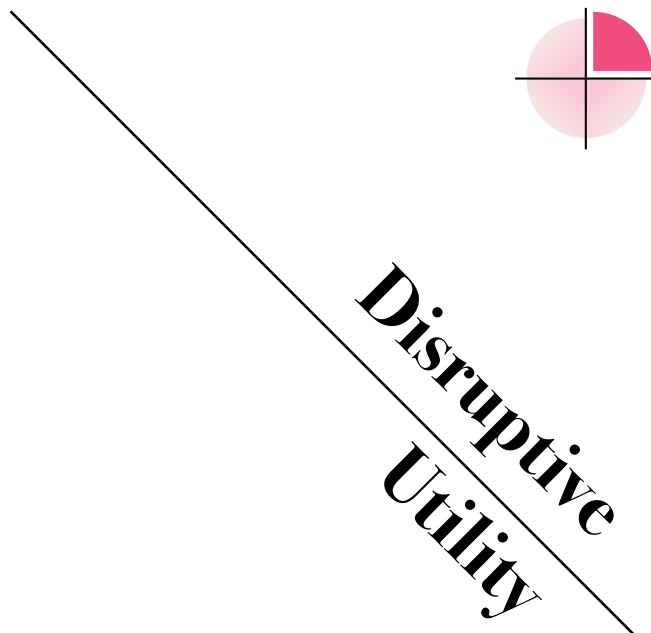
Providing a platform for inspirational speakers and teachers who adopt a less rigid, didactic approach to teaching and instead focus on building a compelling narrative through their own personal stories.

### U Can U Bibi

A hugely popular Chinese talk show that features eloquent debates between big and micro-celebrities alike; topics align with social media trends and can range from the poignant: *Should you have a career by 30, or chase your dreams?* to the weird: *What would you do if you found an alien egg?*







All of the quadrants we describe have utility for Gen Z; it's a core need that they have from any brand or organisation, so it's not the utility part that's differentiating here; it's the way that utility is delivered. Disruptive Utility is both functional and disruptive; it gives Gen Z access to functional tools with which they can create. Authority here comes from the provider being the first to offer this functionality, and allowing Gen Z to innovate in new ways.

Young people's use of technology today means that they have an expectation that they can actively participate in everything from politics to activism to art, and that they have some semblance of control. Brands that embody Disruptive Utility best are the digital platforms and social movements that help Gen Z to take that control, and that give them the practical – often digital – tools to build something themselves.

### Who lives here?

**Banking** has traditionally been opaque and inaccessible, but a number of fintechs are trying to demystify the industry for the next generation of spenders (and savers). **Monzo**, for example, has gained authority by sharing its power with Gen Z; it has involved them in building its product by crowdsourcing ideas for new features, so they feel both empowered and reassured that the product is rooted in their needs.

The power of this ongoing feedback loop can be illustrated by looking at what happens when it isn't used correctly; when **Snapchat** changed its algorithm and left users confused, its share price dropped 20% overnight (with a little help from Kylie Jenner). But Snapchat wasn't just irritating its users with this misstep; it was undermining its own authority as the tool that understands Gen Z conversation more than anyone else.

Meanwhile, the world of **e-commerce** has some interesting examples of Disruptive Utility. In a trickle-down effect from luxury, fashion brands have typically focused on telling people what they should be wearing. Now there are a number of community-based shopping platforms – like **Depop**, **YEAY** and **Little Red Book** in China – that live in this space. Rather than telling Gen Z what to wear, they help them to access the collective expertise of other like-minded Gen Z shoppers whose opinions they more implicitly trust.

*“Something I repeat to traditional fashion brands when it comes to reaching a young audience is to involve the young people themselves. If you can create a community and belonging as a brand, that is extremely valuable.”*

*Elise By Olsen, influencer*

Even social activism looks different for Gen Z. For this generation, it's no longer about organisations speaking on behalf of the community. Instead, authority is held by movements like **Pink Protest** and **#MeToo**, which use their platforms to amplify the voices of people with first-hand experience of those issues. In doing so, their messages feel genuine and representative. They fundamentally operate as tools, enabling multiple voices to not only be heard, but to speak louder.

## The Golden Rule

**You're only as powerful as the people using your product (when they're using your product). Tap into their collective expertise to avoid alienating them as you innovate.**



## Disruptive Utility

### Ant Financial (Huabei)

Formerly known as Alipay and currently used by 25% of Post-1990s Chinese teens – this online payment service has simplified application forms, offers generous credit loan services and encourages young people to take control of their spending – presuming they will be responsible with their own money.

### AwesomenessTV

An American media and entertainment company geared towards creating content that appeals to Gen Z – originally launched on YouTube as a place to showcase popular creators' content, before expanding into longer-form film and TV content.

### Depop

A curated mobile marketplace for 'creative' Gen Zs to buy, sell and discover unique pieces that fit with their desire to create an individually tailored look.

### KEEP

An app that offers hyper-personalised fitness and training plans, based on your own routine, goals and lifestyles.

### Mogujie

An online fashion retailer for girls that uses live-streaming to provide a shopping experience that mirrors in-store, where sellers offer styling and beauty tips and respond to real-time audience requests to try on different colours, sizes, etc.

### Monzo

A UK-based challenger bank that demystifies the banking sector through clear and direct communication and encouraging constant feedback and collaboration with users to build a bank that is rooted in human needs.

### Pink Protest

A community of activists that focus on equipping girls with the practical tools and platforms they need to turn grassroots movements into something more widespread (e.g. #FreePeriods to end period poverty).

### School of Doodle

An online space, by and for girl and gender non-conforming Gen Zs, that gives them the tools to turn creative potential into future success.

### Reprezent

The only UK station presented entirely by people under 25. DJs and presenters all work in the music industry, produce their own music, or run their own labels and club nights – meaning their sound is always on the cutting edge of music across a breadth of genres.

### Snow

Similar to Snapchat, this is an image-based messaging app in South Korea that is most popular with Gen Z, with particularly extensive filters on offer.

### Xiaohongshu

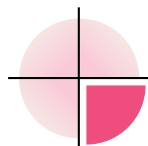
Also known as 'Little Red Book', this Chinese community-based shopping app makes celebrity and micro-influencer's blog posts and personal style pics directly shop-able, and provides guidance on the best international buys.

### YEAY

A video-first mobile marketplace, where Gen Z advertise products in vertical video to sell on their own behalf, or on behalf of brands.



# Singular Visionaries



This is where, in contrast to Establishment as Platform and Disruptive Utility, authority feels more emotional and human. Also disruptive, Singular Visionaries gain their authority to challenge the status quo and establish new norms through emotion-led stories that resonate with Gen Z's desire for openness and vulnerability.

## Who lives here?

Politics is a natural fit in this space, but we've already established that Gen Z feel alienated by traditional party politics today. Instead, there has been a surge of support for 'post-political politicians' like Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Mexico's President-elect) and American activist and politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. These politicians shy away from political jargon, instead speaking with honesty and passion about issues close to their hearts.

"The previous mayor [of Baltimore] – nobody could communicate with her. She was always at arm's reach. The new mayor is revolutionary; she's hiring young black men into her office. She invited 70+ grassroots organisations for a call to action breakfast."

*Kwame Rose, influencer*

This brand of radical honesty is also giving authority to those outside of politics. **Rupi Kaur** is an Instagram poet who talks with almost aggressive vulnerability about her experiences as a woman, while more mainstream celebrities **BTS** (a South Korean K-pop boy band) and Bollywood actress **Sonam Kapoor** are breaking industry norms in their markets by exposing their flaws in a way that gives them authority to establish new, aspirational norms for Gen Z.

While it's easy for people to hold this type of authority, there are also plenty of brands that are building authority through emotion-led narratives. The key here is that their message needs to be intrinsically linked to their product.

**Blume** and **Lola** are both female care brands, offering subscription products like sanitary wear and PMS oil. But they both have a mission to make puberty empowering for girls; their authority comes from highlighting their female-founder stories and using influencers to spread their messages, but always linking back to the usefulness of their products.

"Gen Z are more comfortable talking about mental health. When brands do it, it replicates our own conversations; we see them as friends. What you're doing relates to me and makes me see you as more human."

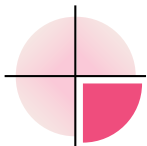
*Ife Grillo, influencer*

Similarly Rihanna's lingerie range, **Savage X Fenty**, roots its authority in the emotional utility of its products. Savage X Fenty doesn't have a particularly controlled aesthetic – it offers everything from nude underwear to lime lace to feather boas – but in its vast arrange of styles and sizes and its emphasis on suiting different skin tones, it brings to life the two key visions of Rihanna: not caring what other people think, and pushing inclusivity everywhere.

This is a really interesting example when compared to **Dove**, a brand that did incredible work with its Campaign for Real Beauty. This showed a brand tapping into singular visionary principles when Millennials were coming of age. But the message, at its core, was disconnected from the products themselves (if not from the product truth). What would the Campaign for Real Beauty look like for Gen Z?

## The Golden Rule

Your emotional and functional purpose must be seamlessly blended.



## Singular Visionaries

### Ader Error

While the biggest creative outlet from South Korea has arguably been K-pop, young Koreans are increasingly making themselves known through art, tattooing, indie music and, most importantly, fashion.

The collaborative team behind Seoul-based label Ader Error began by creating clothes, art installations for showrooms and photography.

### Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

A 28-year-old American politician and political activist, she was elected to the Democratic primary in the Bronx, New York – this has been described as the biggest upset victory in the 2018 midterm-election season.

### All India Bakchod

An Indian comedy sketch group that uploads videos on YouTube showing comedy sketches and parodies on topics such as politics, society, and the Hindi film industry.

### Arré

An Indian entertainment content platform based in Mumbai that offers a useful point of view on a number of controversial issues in India, including the prevalence of toxic fatherhood.

### Billie

A female-first American shave and body brand delivering premium quality razors and body care products at half the price. Fighting against category norms in which a focus on men has left women overpaying for their razors.

### Blume

A subscription-only service delivering female care products (tampons, pads, PMS facial oil) direct to women's doors. The brand's mission is to make puberty empowering for Gen Z girls, by debunking period myths at Blume University and working with young influencers to encourage people to talk about puberty more widely.

### BTS

The 7-member K-pop boyband currently 'breaking' America. Unlike most other K-pop stars, these boys have talked openly about the struggles they've faced in their career and the moments they've been tempted to quit.

### Chumel Torres

A new voice in Mexican media, Chumel presents a show on HBO where he's gained a large Gen Z following for his direct and humorous takes on the news, and heavy use of memes for sharing information.

### Glacier Girl

A social media influencer and environmental activist who campaigns about mental health and climate change, and who is "adapting the aesthetic of eco-friendly to appeal to the iGeneration".

### GullyGuyLeo

A 15-year-old UK social media influencer named Leo Mandella, who has become one of the most recognisable figures in streetwear – gaining over 300k followers and an invitation to present on Burberry's snapchat at its latest catwalk show.

### Happily Unmarried

An online retailer selling grooming products for women. Championing young Indian women who are resisting their parents' pressure to marry young and choosing to remain single for longer. 'For the girl who knows her mind'.

### Lil Miquela

A digital Instagram personality, who blurs the line between physical and virtual – she has become an authority on fashion, identity and gender.

### Lola

A subscription-only service delivering female care products (for periods and for sex) direct to women's doors. The brand is founded by women for women, and wants to provide Gen Z girls with the practical tools they need to improve their physical, mental and sexual health – e.g. through their 'first period starter kit' and guide.

### Lopez Obrador

Mexico's first left-leaning President, his support came overwhelmingly from young voters who were impressed by the consistency of his message and his fixation with fighting against privilege.

### Mushpit

A satirical fashion/political/feminist magazine with no advertising. Inspired by 90s/00s anarchic mag Cheap Date, Mushpit zine was born in a Dalston flat share and found its legs being sold on the dancefloor of The Alibi. Typically, each issue takes the theme of a particular crisis the editors are experiencing; there has been 'The Sell Out', 'The Confused', and even post-Brexit issue 'The Crisis'.

### Rupi Kaur

A confessional Instagram poet who uses the image-sharing platform to share short poems about her life, speaking with aggressive vulnerability and radical honesty about her experience growing up as an immigrant woman in Canada.

### Virat Kohli

An Indian cricketer that unites generations; known for his impeccable skill and candid aggression on the field. He is particularly popular with Gen Z for his tendency to embrace candidness over poise – talking openly and passionately about his failures and his successes, interacting with fans constantly via Instagram.

### Wang Ju

Pop star who has risen to fame through China's Produce 101 singing competition; Wang is not considered beautiful by conventional Chinese standards, but she has developed a cult following of fans who find her boldness inspirational.

### Yuya

The 'Zoella of Mexico', Yuya is a hugely popular social media influencer who feels both aspirational and approachable for her audience.



## Timeless Connection



**This space represents stabilising, reassuring authority, built from knowledge that is traditional, historical, feels timeless, and that fundamentally has an emotional purpose or function. This type of authority offers a port in a storm; in times of constant disruption and change, it draws upon wisdom that exists outside of the complexities and stresses of the modern world, allowing Gen Z to connect to deep, grounding values.**

### Who lives here?

Authority here is primarily reserved for loved ones. Given that digital relationships are now numerous but often shallow, Gen Z see the 'real' relationships in their lives as a point of difference – sometimes in positive, stabilising ways and sometimes as a source of tension. The relationship between parents and children is particularly interesting - it's shifting as parents are no longer seen as the holders of all knowledge, but as trusted, authoritative peers. Both they and their children are now exposed to much of the same information online, so the ideological chasm is narrowing and they are becoming more like allies – 58 per cent of UK children consider their parents to be their best friends.

Also in this space is Gen Z's revived interest in alternative spirituality - ancient-seeming wisdom like astrology updated for a social media generation. Where Millennials' interest in alternative practices was often rooted in an elitist 'Goop'-style shopping mindset, Gen Z take the stabilising authority of spirituality and put it to good, emotional use as a force for community and personal wellbeing in a radically inclusive way. Online witches, tarot readers or 'brujas' like Hoodwitch and The Mexican Witch fuse spiritual healing with intersectional politics and powerful emotional insight.

Of all the new types of authority, this is the most difficult to hold or replicate as a brand, as it's rooted in knowledge that is earned through deeply personal relationships or ancient wisdom – both of which feel sacred in a way that brands can find challenging to replicate authentically. However, there are plenty of ways in which brands can really benefit from a deep understanding of the dynamics and needs Gen Z have from authority in this space.

Notably, Pixar has been powerfully and sensitively reflecting the tension that global Gen Z feel between new and old authority and specifically, being caught between personal aspirations and family conventions. In creating *Coco*, an animated film that depicts the relationship between a young Mexican boy and his family, Pixar demonstrates that it understands family dynamics for a new generation of children, teens and young adults.

## The Golden Rule

**Brands must understand both the importance of this type of authority to Gen Z, and the way relationships are evolving. Operating directly in this space is difficult, but it's important to find ways to support and facilitate these relationships, celebrate Gen Z's unique experiences with timeless wisdom, and tell stories that reflect its importance.**

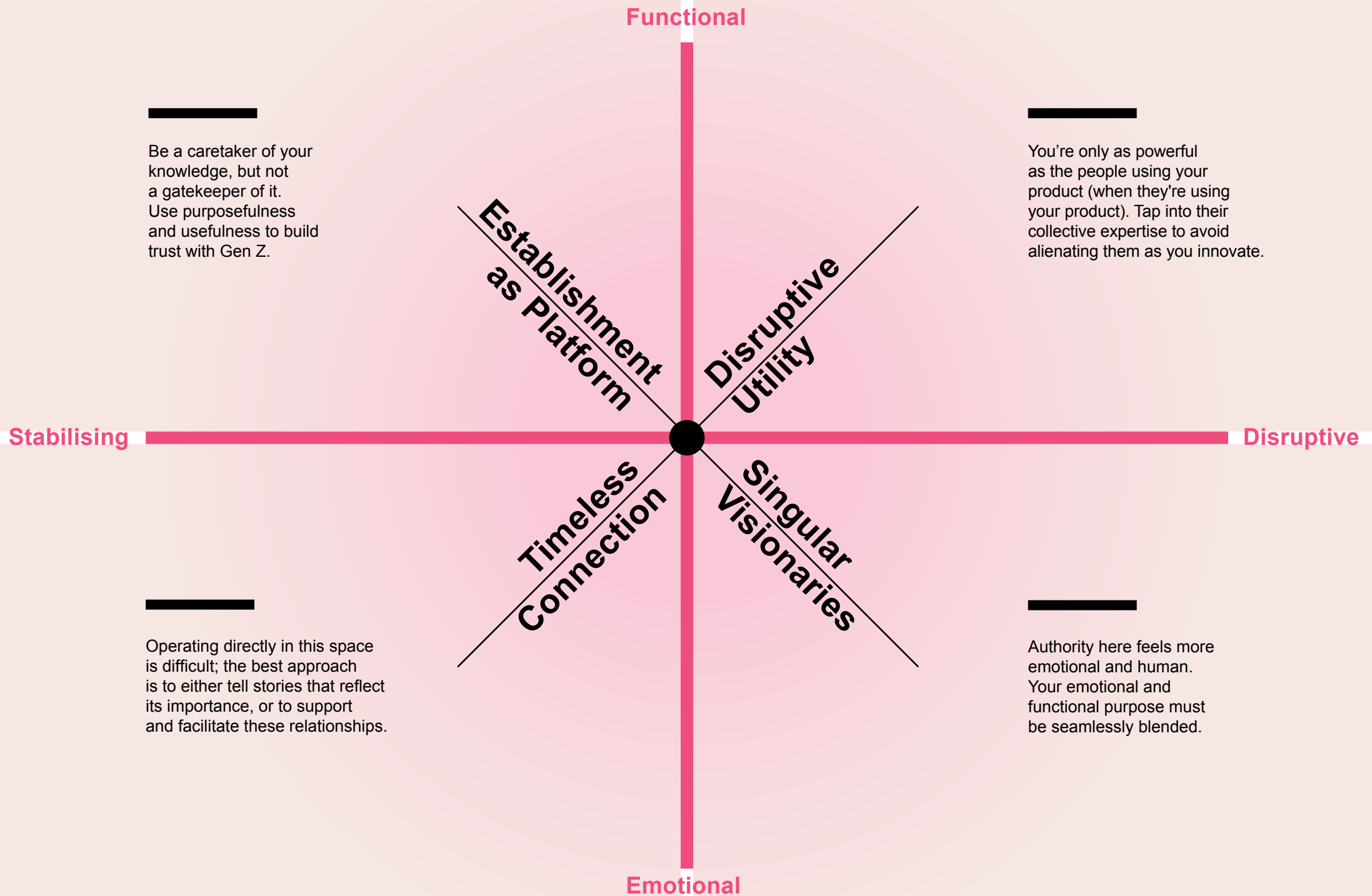


## Timeless Connection

### Coco

A Pixar animated film about a boy caught between his own dreams and his family's traditional conventions. Preceded by extensive ethnographic research, the story explores the dynamics within families as Gen Z try to overcome 'verticality' in Mexico without betraying their loved ones.





# What does this mean for your brand?

We now have an overview of Gen Z's needs from authority (and its component parts – knowledge, trust and power), and the different types of 'new authority' that exist in today's cultural context. We have also explored how some brands, organisations and institutions in different categories are already successfully embodying it.

Using this as a starting point, you can start to better understand and articulate your own brand's authority equity; that is, what type of authority you can (and should) embody, what 'golden rule' should be adhered to in this space, and how other brands are already bringing it to life.

Very broadly speaking, this boils down to two core principles:

## 1

### **Understand the kind of knowledge you possess**

Gen Z are a pragmatic, straight-forward generation – they don't want you to pretend to be something you're not. To authentically and effectively be a new authority, first you need to understand the foundation of your authority: your knowledge.

This starts with understanding where you sit on the map; is your knowledge timeless and stabilising? Or does it have the power to disrupt? Is it founded on emotional factors, or is it purely functional? The better you can define the type of knowledge you hold, the better idea you'll have of how it is useful to Gen Z, and how you should build on it.

## 2

### **Build power through trust**

For previous generations, trust in authority was often tacitly or explicitly enforced 'from above'. But for post-internet generations, and digital natives Gen Z in particular, trust needs to be earned.

Trust is earned with Gen Z through the functional or emotional utility of your knowledge. The next generation is asking: 'What do you enable me to do, to feel, to say, to achieve, that means I see you as an authority? How do you continually prove that to me?'

Using the map and these two principles, you can start to think about where your brand sits and how you can use this position to become a source of useful authority to Gen Z. You can also look at the few examples we've outlined of people and brands that are defining the space, and think about what it is about their knowledge that gives them authority, and how you might learn from their relationship with Gen Z.

If you'd like to deeply understand the kind of knowledge you hold, how that sits within your unique cultural context, and how you can use this understanding to build authority with Gen Z, **Flamingo** would love to work with you. We can help you explore this in more detail and create a unique, actionable strategy for your brand.



**“If a brand is completely neutral and has no opinion, then it’s not relatable. Every stance you take adds to your character and offers people something to relate to. But young people won’t be duped – they can tell if it’s just something you’re doing to sell more.”**

*Ife Grillo, influencer*



A dancer in a white tutu with long, flowing hair, captured in a dynamic pose against a black background. The dancer is in a crouched position, with one leg extended forward and the other bent. The hair is long and blonde, flowing upwards and outwards in a dramatic arc. The tutu is white and voluminous, with multiple layers of tulle. The background is solid black, making the dancer stand out. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the dancer's form and the texture of the tutu.

# Dig Deeper

# Methodology

At the preliminary stage, Flamingo's Futures team explored key drivers in the shifting definitions of authority, as well as emerging types of authority that connect with Gen Z. This was conducted in-house, and in collaboration with four research partners in Mumbai, Seoul, Shanghai and Mexico City, who explored the context of shifting authorities in their markets (and offered expert knowledge on the cultural context that framed those shifts).

The semiotics team incorporated this into a cross-cultural source list of brands relevant to Gen Z, in order to lay the foundations for our integrated mapping.

The Futures analysis was also fed into Flamingo Casting – our specialist recruitment team – to help them find experts on authority and leading-edge Gen Z influencers.

Our people insight team spoke at length (hour-long interviews) to all of these individuals. All strands of analysis were ultimately brought together to produce the final mapping of 'new authority'.

## Experts

**Dr Claire Blencowe**  
Professor of Sociology at Warwick University and member of the Authority Research Network – UK

**Professor Dr Christian Scholz**  
Academic and author - has conducted workshops worldwide to understand more about Gen Z and their needs from the workplace and the world – Germany

## Influencers

**Elise By Olsen**  
Youngest ever editor-in-chief [of youth culture publication Recens] – Oslo, Norway

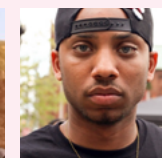
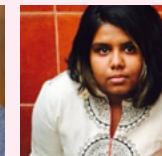
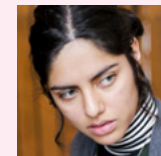
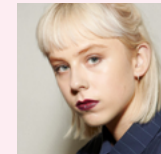
**Ife Grillo**  
Campaigner, poet, former youth MP for Shoreditch – London, UK

**Maria Osando**  
Founder of an inclusive modelling agency – Mexico City, Mexico

**Priyanka Paul**  
Illustrator, poet and feminist – Mumbai, India

**Lisa Ranran Hu**  
Young filmmaker [who has produced a documentary about the journey of a young transgender teen growing up in China] – Shanghai, China

**Kwame Rose**  
Social activist, writer, artist and musician – Baltimore, US



## Global Locations

The research partners, influencers (and their locations) were specifically selected to offer a global perspective:

The **UK** and **US** gave us a view on traditionally leading, anglocentric cities and youth cultures, while **Norway** is a progressive, liberal country (and home to the youngest ever editor-in-chief of a magazine).

**Shanghai** is a hub for exploring the future eminence of East Asian youth culture, while **Mumbai** offered perspective on the cultural capital of the world's largest democratic society.

With tech brands in particular aiming to find their next billion users in the Central and South Americas, **Mexico City** holds great cultural significance – and provided a unique perspective on relationships with authority.



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This report represents the foundational thinking to an executional framework that can help brands understand and harness their unique authority with Gen Z.

If you'd like to work with Flamingo to apply this to your brand, or would like to know any more about this or other Flamingo work, please contact us at [enquiries@flamingogroup.com](mailto:enquiries@flamingogroup.com)

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