

# **The 'Youth' in India : A Panoramic Overview and engagement strategy**

**By**

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Recently, in a sunny winter morning at Delhi I saw an impressive bunch of youth clad in all black discussing about “bird box”, a Netflix “original” and debating over the ‘fear’ of unknown. With my 2 decades of research on youth socio-psychology, youth brands and marketing strategies, I have noticed a steady, ever increasing affinity towards darker side of life which is becoming predominantly popular among youth. “Black” almost appears to be a compulsory ‘statement’ attire for both genders of urban youth. In a ‘colorful’ country like India, black is stereotypically considered as a color of ‘protest’, superstitiously ‘non-auspicious’ and a symbol of ‘darkness’. Ever wondered how this color is silently surging in popularity among youth (which is an absolute opposite to “all white” dress code of most of the politicians in India)! In fact, is it not that the “youth” is supposed to be a phase of life when human-beings are meant to be ‘colorful’, agile, fashionable and flamboyant rather than wearing “Dark”? If the data to be believed, around 65% youth between the age group of 22-25 in India show early signs of depression, claimed a study by ICICI Lombard (2017). According to WHO, India has the highest rate of depression with 36% of our population and majority of them are below 25 years. However, an IPSOS study (2018) has found India’s youth remain among the world’s most optimistic about current and future prospects. Let’s discuss this paradox at the later part of this article.

In a country where the word “youth” itself is diluted and brands are desperately trying to associate every product with younger generation, it is absolutely necessary to understand the very definition of this versatile cohort of population. The UN defines youth as those in the age-group of 15-24 years. The UNICEF defines youth in the age bracket of 15-30 years. India's National Youth Policy (NYP, 2003) considered all individuals in the age-group of 13-35 years as youth population. Though, the same policy in the year 2014, further reduced the age bracket of “youth” in India to 15-29 years which comprise 27.5% of the population. NYP stated that about 34% of India’s Gross National Income (GNI) is contributed by the youth, aged 15-29 years. As per the Guardian (2018) about 600 million people (more than half India’s population), are under 25 years old; no country has more young people than India. By 2020, the average age in India will be 29 and it is set to become the world’s youngest country with 64% of its population falling under the working age bracket. India is likely to have the world’s largest workforce by 2027, with a billion people aged between 15 and 64 (Bloomberg News). So, when the world is ageing, India is becoming younger!

In India, we have 3 age based dominant consumer cohorts as mentioned below:

**The Millennials:** This is the most talked about cohort of youth. According to Pew Research, someone born between 1981 and 1996 (aged 22 to 37 in 2018) are called millennials. The country's more than 400 million millennials account for a third of India's population and 46% of its workforce. They may be young, but they're already the chief wage earners in most households, with millennial income contributing to 70% of total household income. 190 million of 280 million households in the country have a millennial family member. Millennials are also much better educated than the rest. India will have 410 million millennials, who will spend \$330 billion annually, by

2020. That's more than the total population of the US, and more than the total number of millennials (400 million) that China has today (Morgan Stanley report, 2017).

**The Post Millennials or Gen Z:** Those born after 1996, i.e. those aged 21 years or below, are here referred to as the post-millennials or Gen Z of India. Population projections from the UN Population Division suggest that the Gen Z population already exceeds millennial population in India. According to a recent Bloomberg analysis, India's Gen-Z population will rise to 472 million next year, double that of China's. Gen Z is much focused than millennials. The YouGov-Mint Millennial online survey claims that though relatively older group of youth are more likely to use internet for work-related stuff and online shopping the youngest lot (generation Z) is more likely to use internet for education. Globally, on average, Gen Z uses their smartphones 15.4 hours per week—more than any other type of device. As “digital natives”, the Gen Z have a lot in common with millennials in terms of being tech-savvy and expecting a strong digital presence from consumer brands, but interestingly, they also show a great degree of variety in their preferences, research shows. For instance, a study by Accenture shows that Gen Z also have a liking for traditional methods of interacting with businesses, engaging with both offline and online channels. Globally, Gen Z is expected to account for \$29 billion (₹2 trillion) to \$143 billion (₹9.9 trillion) in direct spending by 2020. However, Both millennials and Gen Z seem to care less about brand loyalty compared to older generations, putting more value on the experience and product, and will quickly switch brands if they aren't satisfied. However, compared to millennials, Gen Z may have a lower tolerance for sub-par digital shopping experience. “Gen Z's low threshold for mistakes and ‘system issues’ will make millennials look like patient saints,” says an EY report. Both millennials and post millennials look for ‘instant gratification’ rather than long term ‘relationship’ with a brand.

**Gen X or the ‘shadowed’ generation:** With the ‘buzz’ on millennial and post millennial cohorts of youth, those in the age group of above 40s got shadowed by fashion marketers. As per the latest census data, 41 to 50 year olds, who fall in the Gen X category is the fastest growing population segment in India. While they contribute just 28% of the population, they contribute up to 42% of the population growth. A recent report by Nielsen says that the Gen X group is already a formidable force which marketers across sectors can no longer afford to ignore. According to the report, contrary to popular belief that the Gen X group is slow towards adoption of digital platforms and technology, this generation is actually fast catching up with the millennials. The Gen X group is actually spending as much time as the millennials on various financial apps such as mobile wallets, mobile banking and

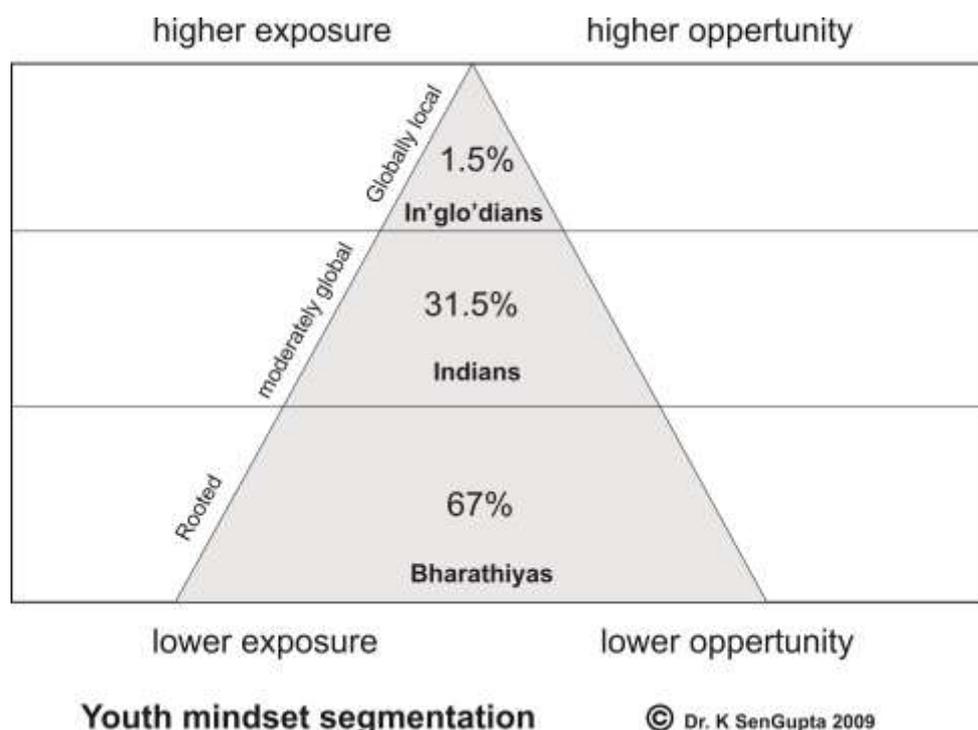
Internet banking. This cohort has money and much higher spending capacity than other generations. The fashion brands cannot afford to overlook this group.

However, as UNESCO defined, Youth is a more fluid category than a fixed age-group.

### **Youth mind-set segmentation- Bharatiyas, Indians and In'glo'dians:**

In the year 2009, I broadly divided the younger population of India into 3 socio-psychological mindsets and coined them as: Bharatiyas, Indians and In'glo'dians. This division is further cited in multiple books and articles by other scholars'. These mindset-categories are cohesively prevalent across the age-group of youth and are vital for understanding the Gen Next consumer behaviour of this subcontinent.

The **Bharatiyas** estimating 67% of the young population lives in the semi-urban and rural (R1, R2 to R4 SEC) areas with least exposure (ie. influence of globalization, social media etc.), opportunities and higher traditional values. They are rooted to tradition, culture and customs. Bharatiyas are least economically privileged, most family oriented Bollywood influenced generation. The **Indians** constitute 31.5% (A, B,C, D & E SEC) and have moderate global influence. They are well aware of the global trends but rooted to the Indian family values, customs and ethos. MGI India Consumer Demand research states that The Urban middle class (majorly the **Indians**) will experience unprecedented growth, expanding to 87 million households by 2025. This alone will be larger than the projected population of the United States in 2025. The **In'glo'dians** are minimal in number, has higher exposure and opportunity, adopts a trend faster and are the influencers for the trends introduced in social eco system. They are globally inclined and affluent enough to afford the contemporary fashion. In'glo'dians always need not have grownup as a creamy layer but "reached" in the creamy layer through various professional achievements. The In'glo'dians are basically the affluent (A1,A SEC) and marginal (1.5% or roughly three million) in number though they are strongly growing (70% growth rate). In'glo'dians consume most of the trendy & luxury items. They are internet savvy & the believers of global-village (a place where there is no difference between east & west, developing & developed countries etc.), highly influenced by the western music, food, fashion & culture yet Indian at heart.



**“desire”, relationships, parents and self-love:**

HT Youth Survey 2017 noted that today’s youth are self-centred, and will do almost anything as long as it benefits them. To top it all, impatience seems to have been woven into their DNA. “I will beg, borrow or steal to buy something I really want,” the Hindustan Times-MaRs Youth Survey recorded as many as 81.5% respondents as saying. While 68.3% youngsters confessed to doing things their parents would not approve of, as many as 66% confessed to lying to their folks. Nearly 80% of the respondents polled by the Hindustan Times-MaRs Youth Survey said they would do anything to win the approval of their friends. The survey also highlighted the widening generation gap between youngsters and older folk. As many as 75% of the respondents said they wouldn’t care what their parents thought as long as they did what they believed was right. In fact, a majority of the youth from Indian cities, say they will not let anything get between them and the object of their desire. Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in Delhi, along with the German political foundation Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, conducted an exhaustive Youth Survey and noted that 65% youth still live with parents. Another survey by InShorts (2018) published in News18 found out that 80 per cent of the millennials believe that the Indian society still considers live-in relationships a huge taboo while 47% find marriage better than living-in with their partner. Over 80% of Indian youth supports the concept of live-in and among these 26% would choose lifelong live-in relationship as a way of life if they can. A whopping 86% feels that lust is not the only factor that drives live-in relationships and 45% believe that live-in relations are to test the compatibility of a couple before they dive in to marriage. In fact, “Self love” is new

ideology among youth across India. According to a study by matrimonial website Jeevansaathi.com, 3 out of 4 youngsters up to the age of 24, followed by 65.9% individuals aged between 25 and 28 years are happy to buy a present for themselves on Valentine's Day. However, 90% of the individuals surveyed looked forward to surprises on the day, the survey said.

### **Instagram, Tinder and Netflix: The generation 'awe'**

The youth are constantly engaged with rapidly changing visual stimulators. Though youth in India are present in multiple social media platforms (85% of Instagram users also use Facebook; 71% of Instagram users also use Facebook) there is no doubt that Instagram is the most popular social media now among the youth. Livemint (2018) mentioned that the preference for Instagram among the younger generation might reflect an increasing urge for self-promotion. "Scrolling" or 'surfing' has become part of their visual consumption pattern, be it scrolling to look at fascinating visuals in Instagram, scrolling to find the partners/ 'one night stand' in Tinder or scrolling to binge upon the 'trending' seasons in Netflix. The visuals are becoming more 'unrealistic and surreal', 'mystic and gore', to bring in shock values and awe-factors to engage the youth as the attention span of youth are becoming shorter due to large number of content and activities available at their disposal. The average attention span of a millennial is a whopping 12 seconds (Forbes, 2017). 'Awe' is absolutely necessary to engage them. This can be through shocking videos, viral photos, protagonist statements, memes, offering 'memorable experiences' or exhibiting social concern. The Indian streaming market grew 116% in 2017 in terms of the number of subscribers, says Tim Westcott, global data provider IHS-Markit's research director of channels and programming. India accounted for about a percent of the 23.78 million members Netflix added worldwide in 2017 (IHS-Markit) and this year Netflix is targeting 100 million subscribers from India alone. Digital activism and Hashtagging have become the norm of day to appear 'unique' with protagonistic tendency. The youth in India thrives to become unique but ends up becoming a "global" stereotype, right from the way they stands, makes faces or communicates while posting online. Interacting devices are becoming smaller (TV screen to wristwatch screen). It is also to be noted that conventional social media (ie. Facebook) is passé and niche social media/ interaction channels are becoming more popular (Snapchat, Vine etc.).

### **The Youth Zeitgeists - Adulthood, bingeing, FLO, Ghosting, YOLO & FOMO:**

The zeitgeist or "spirit of time" for youth is dynamic and ever changing. Some of the 'trending' lifestyle patterns are mentioned below:

**Adulthood:** Urban dictionary defines “Adulthood” as the practice of behaving in a way characteristic of a responsible adult, especially the accomplishment of mundane but necessary tasks. Behaving like an “adult” is indeed a challenge for the youth, specially the millenials who grew in a pampered and over protective environment by their parents. To youth, ‘Being adult’ means respecting and practicing the stereotyped social systems and norms such as “going to office on time”, wearing “formal wear” etc. The ad of Tinder encourages youth not to behave like an adult with the tagline “adulthood can wait”.

**Binging:** Binge is to indulge in an activity, especially eating to excess, a form of continuous indulgence which has a tendency to become an addiction. The term is now extended into activities like watching internet soaps continuously or hopping as many pubs as possible in one night.

**YOLO:** this is an abbreviation of "you only live once". This is used, especially on social media, to mean that one should do things that are enjoyable or exciting, even if they are silly or slightly dangerous. Hence, this word evokes the feeling of ‘experiential living’.

**FOMO:** anxiousness on “missing the train” of excitement is a major cause of depression among the youth in India, thanks to continuous exposure of ‘breaking news’, ‘happening events’ and ‘chance of a lifetime’. FOMO is anxiety that an exciting or interesting event may currently be happening elsewhere, often aroused by posts seen on social media.

**Ghosting:** Relationship is a crucial issue for the youth. Ghosting is breaking off a relationship by ceasing all communication and contact with the former partner without any apparent warning or justification, as well as ignoring the former partner’s attempts to reach out or communicate. Though this term originated in 2011 but it has become a popular practice recently.

**FLO:** This word means a highly intelligent, amazing and beautiful girl who is loved by all, hated by none. It also means the progressive girl who always hooks it up because she got it like that.

### **mobile dependency and stereotyped perception:**

Though youth in India appears to be highly engaged with smart phones, the YouGov survey (2018) shows that 79% of respondents aged 60-65 need their smartphone the most. By comparison the results indicate youth are less reliant with 63% of those aged between 20 and 25 agreeing they couldn’t live without their phone device. The study highlights, for the vast majority of older generations, the connection smartphone devices offer is of major appeal with very few seeing them as a distraction. While larger proportions of the younger generation, particularly 15-20 year olds (27%), do see their smartphone as a distraction. The survey further reveals

that reading was the most popular leisure activity, with 58% of millennials and Gen Zers saying that they indulged in it regularly. This was closely followed by time spent online, 55%.

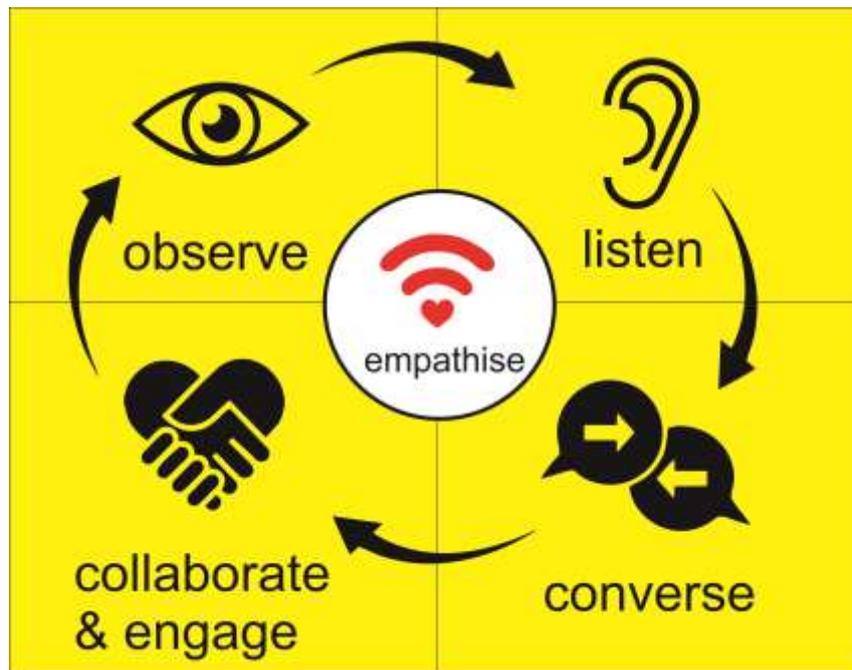
### **buying behaviour:**

HT Youth Survey 2017 exhibited that about 61.4% of the respondents trust brands for better quality, a belief that leads 29.3% to say they won't mind splurging on a good label. The style quotient lures 27.6% of them to buy expensive products. 99% respondents say they don't use top-of-the-line labels to show off. For a miniscule 0.9%, they buy products they feel aspirational. The trend is consistent among men and women. Multi-brand stores are preferred by 40.6% to shop for shoes and by 52.7% to buy denims. One-stop shops with a wide variety of brands and styles are important. At a time when online shopping is the buzzword, the HT-MaRS survey shows 54.9% prefer retail stores. Importantly, 57.2% of these respondents are women. A young female respondent mentioned that "Touch and feel are very important when I shop, so I prefer retail stores to online shopping. If the pricing advantage is taken away from online shopping I will always choose a brick-and-mortar store." Another study (Rajput & Khanna, 2014) mentioned that the young consumers are aware of most of the national and International brands and the young men are equally frequent in purchase and spending money as their female counterpart. The online shopping is steadily growing. Morgan Stanley in a recent report predicted that millennials may have the ability to buy Rs 16 lakh crore worth of goods and services online by 2020. Millennials will likely form 61% of India's internet base and 78% of its online shopper base.

### **Engagement model for Youth marketing:**

This youth engagement model is designed by me with 'empathy' as the core. My work experiences of over 2 decades with various international and domestic brands (ie. Nike, Nokia, Nippon, Mango, Zara, Skull Candy, BBC, BCL, Groupe Adeo, Coke, Facebook, Blackberry etc.), teaching in NIFT (and other institutions), working with Gen Next designers, design thinkers and mentoring the startups helped me shape this model of engagement. Must state that the experience of social work for underprivileged youth, through my charity organization (InkLink Trust) also contributed a lot to shape it up. If one wants to implement this model, they must remember to consider 'youth' as part of self. I always mention "don't see them as a client, be one of them!" The model is phased with 4 simple steps. 1. Observe their activities, relationship pattern, happiness quant, breaking point and understand the spirit of time. 2. Listen to them empathetically, allow them to express fearlessly and appreciate their views 3. Have a continuous positive conversation with them to understand their perceptions, barriers and distresses to become one of them 4.

Collaborate and engage them through various meaningful (short term) rewarding activities for themselves, society, brand and environment.



**Youth engagement model**

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Indian youth is indeed an optimistic cohort. Over 75% of Indian adults and 78% of Indian youth think their generation will have more positive impact on the world than their parents (IPSOS study, 2018). According to my doctoral research findings, the most preferred color of clothing among urban youth in India is black (28%). Akcay (2012), in his study of the influence of colour, ethnicity and gender of teenagers at USA observed that Black (followed by Blue) is the predominant product colour choice among all female and male teenagers of different ethnicities. In my study, the youth associated black with feelings such as Calm, Comfortable, Energetic, Exciting, Happy, Loved, Hopeful and Powerful. Black is also a protagonistic color (“cool” color to show “attitude”) as it is portrayed with negative connotations in the conventional social norms. Recently, in a study on Netflix I found, for youth the black and darker themes are considered as a route of escapism from today’s mundane over-chaotic world. Hence, as we understand a deeper meaning of black, a better observation and empathetic approach to understand youth psychology through their preferences in fashion will help fashion brands to engage youth in much immersive and meaningful manner.

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