FINAL CLIENT REPORT

RESEARCH AND DATA INSIGHTS

Team 2 | Breanna Palmer, Sadie Guffy, Alexia Galinsky, Sarah Lydon, Isabella Langfield, Melyssa Guzman, Gigi Wood, Jocelynn Dortch

Introduction

Our client, Rainbow Push Coalition, is a Chicago-based non-profit founded in 1996 by Jesse Jackson. The organization emerged from the social justice movement that grew out of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) Operation Breadbasket. The non-profit's focus remains on improving the economic conditions of Black communities across the United States, while also catering to and offering services to younger generations.

RPC's mission statement : "Our mission is to protect, defend, and gain civil rights by leveling the economic and educational playing fields, and to promote peace and justice around the world." (RPC, n.d)

This report will outline the research goals and questions our client brought to our attention, methodology, findings and limitations. In conclusion we will provide a workable survey, and social media strategies for success and final statements.

Research Question & Goals

Our client has identified a lack of connection with the Gen Z population in the city. The Rainbow Push team's current goals, which they've brought to our team, involve building engagement with Gen Z in faith-based and community initiatives and creating programming that aligns with Gen Z values, including authenticity, activism, and intersectionality. Based on this feedback from our client, we decided to focus our research on these three key areas:

- **RQ1.** Generation Z's reaction to social justice movements: How do they differ from previous generations? What causes do they care about? How do they show activism?
- **RQ2.** What values, messages, or visual styles most effectively capture Gen Z's attention and drive interaction on social media?
- **RQ3.** How can the Rainbow PUSH Coalition build trust and long-term engagement with Gen Z audiences through its digital presence?

To achieve the goal stated above, we must first address potential problem areas where Rainbow Push may encounter barriers when targeting this particular age group. Gen Z's distinct values and life experiences present unique challenges for organizations like Rainbow Push seeking to connect and engage with this demographic. These problem areas include:

- **Communication Gap:** Rainbow Push's traditional outreach methods may not resonate with Gen Z's preferred communication styles and platforms.
- **Generational Shift in Activism:** Gen Z expects immediate action, transparent leadership, and intersectional perspectives that may not align with traditional organizational structures.
- **Faith-Based Institution Skepticism:** Many Gen Z individuals view organized religion and faith-based institutions as potentially outdated or exclusionary.
- **Platform Fragmentation:** Gen Z consumes information across multiple, rapidly changing digital platforms, making consistent outreach challenging.
- **Authenticity Standards:** Gen Z has high expectations for organizational authenticity and can quickly identify performative activism or inauthentic messaging.
- **Competing Priorities:** Rainbow Push faces increased competition from numerous social justice organizations and causes vying for Gen Z's attention and participation.

Methods

Given our client's limited existing information and social platform presence, we employed both primary and secondary research methods to address our research objectives.

Secondary Research
Our secondary research was conducted through comprehensive literature reviews, Google Scholar database searches, and Brandwatch social media analytics. This research focused on key areas aligned with our research questions, including popular social media platforms among our target demographic, content consumption patterns, and the relationship between Generation Z and religious institutions.

Primary Research
For our primary research, we designed and distributed a survey using Google Forms. This survey aimed to understand how Chicago-area Generation Z individuals prefer to receive civic content, thereby informing the Rainbow Push Coalition's strategies for connecting and engaging with this target demographic. The survey comprised eight sections with 2-10 questions each, covering social media consumption, news consumption, and engagement with faith-based community events and organizations.

Survey Structure
The survey's eight sections were designed to comprehensively understand Generation Z's behaviors and their relationship with community and faith-based organizations:
Section 1: General Media Consumption - This section examines Generation Z's social media habits to help Rainbow Push develop an effective social media calendar, content creation strategy, and platform selection.
Sections 2-3: Community Content and Political Content - These sections provide coalition members with insights into Generation Z's priorities, existing knowledge base, and preferences for authentic engagement.
Sections 5-7: Awareness & Perception of Rainbow PUSH Coalition - These sections assess the organization's current reach and perception among the target age group and general audience.

Secondary Research Findings

Decades of research have highlighted a growing crisis surrounding civic responsibility and a noticeable decline in civic engagement among younger generations. However, participation in civic leadership has been linked to several positive outcomes, such as fostering a deeper understanding of diversity among college students, increasing their awareness of advocacy and activism, and better preparing them to drive change within their communities. Additionally, feeling connected to a community can enhance mental health, emotional involvement, and overall engagement, while also improving the daily lives of others. As political divisions intensify, there is a rising interest in promoting civic dialogue and encouraging meaningful, sometimes challenging, conversations on college campuses.

Research indicates that Generation Z is more civically active than previous generations (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, n.d.). In 2024, approximately 40.8 million Gen Z individuals will be eligible to vote in the U.S. (Medina & Suzuki, 2023). While voting is just one aspect of civic involvement, **Gen Z is also recognized for its strong social awareness and ability to leverage technology and social media to mobilize around important causes (Greenhow & Lewin, 2019).**

Participants in the Civic Leadership Assessment (CLA) were asked to share their personal definitions of civic leadership. Based on their responses, the researcher identified key themes that shaped a modern understanding of the concept. The students' insights revealed three central ideas: civic leadership involves sparking social awareness and driving change, connecting individuals and their passions, and fostering a mindset of service both personally and in others who aim to make a difference.

Themes from Student Perspectives
- Catalyst of Social Change: Requires courage and stepping out of comfort zones to understand community needs.
- Bridging People and Passions: Encourages mentoring and developing future leaders for sustainable impact.
- Culture of Service: Students want to address neglected community issues and create lasting change.

Secondary Research Findings

CLA participants identified several obstacles that hinder college students from engaging in civic leadership. These included:

- A lack of inclusion and welcome from the local community
- Negative stereotypes held by older generations
- Fear of peer judgment for being civically involved
- Lingering effects of COVID-19, such as social withdrawal
- Uncertainty about how to get involved or serve effectively

Although many students feel a strong connection to their university community, they often feel disconnected from the surrounding local area. Some expressed that they are seen more as economic contributors than as meaningful community members. Despite challenges, students also demonstrated resilience, with some noting that the pandemic opened their eyes to new ways of helping others and addressing local issues.

Civic leadership programs must adapt to reflect the passion and priorities of today's college students. While traditional standards still apply, effective programming should also respond to current societal issues and community challenges. Insights gathered over three years reveal how students understand and experience civic leadership, shaped by the examples and influences they've encountered throughout their lives.

Next Steps for Institutions

- Civic leadership programs must evolve to reflect current events and student interests.
- Programs should be inclusive, adaptable, and identity-aware.
- Institutions must model leadership behaviors and support students as change-makers.

Research shows that Gen Z relies heavily on digital technology, especially social media, for news and academic information. Most identify as social activists. Students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) expressed the highest concern for issues like racial justice, women's rights, gun violence, immigration, and human trafficking. Topics like LGBTQIA+ rights and climate change showed less variation across student groups.

Secondary Research Findings

Gen Z and the Future of Nonprofit Engagement
As traditional donor bases age, nonprofits face an urgent challenge: adapting to the values, behaviors, and expectations of Generation Z (born 1997–2012). This cohort is coming of age during a period of institutional distrust, financial insecurity, and digital hyper-connectivity, factors that significantly shape how they engage with causes. The following section synthesizes key findings from primary and secondary research, including the United Way Gen Z Activism Survey (2023), Claire Lewis's capstone report on Next Generation givers (2019), and insights from Blue State's analysis of younger donor behavior (Malloy, 2023).

Generational Shifts in Giving Patterns
Most nonprofit donations continue to come from Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation. However, the landscape is shifting. Millennials and Gen Z are less likely to give large financial contributions due to life stage and economic constraints. Instead, these younger donors prioritize volunteering, peer-to-peer fundraising, and supporting individuals directly over large institutions.

- Only 1 in 4 Gen Zers trust government leaders (Pew Research, 2019), and many carry skepticism toward large institutions.
- 61% of Gen Z volunteers at least once annually, compared to 27% who donate biannually, showing a clear preference for action-based support (Lewis 2019)

Values Driving Gen Z Engagement
Transparency, authenticity, and social impact are core to Gen Z's worldview:

- Transparency and visible impact are non-negotiable. Gen Z is unlikely to support organizations that don't clearly show how funds are used or the tangible outcomes of their work.
- They support causes over organizations. Campaigns centered on an issue, rather than the nonprofit's brand, are more compelling to this generation.
- They value peer validation, with many first hearing about causes through friends, influencers, or coworkers rather than traditional nonprofit outreach (Lewis, 2019; Malloy, 2023).

Secondary Research Findings

Digital-First Activism and Communication Preferences
Growing up online has shaped how Gen Z interacts with philanthropy:
- 66% of Gen Z activism happens online, such as social media campaigns, fundraising, or petition sharing (United Way, 2023).
- They are highly responsive to real-time, emotionally compelling content, especially following news events or social crises.
- Email remains a useful channel, but only if updates are frequent, concise, and action-oriented. Gen Z prefers at least bi-monthly updates (Malloy, 2023).

Cause Priorities Among Gen Z
Research consistently highlights the top causes that drive Gen Z involvement:
- Economic justice issues, including inflation, affordable housing, healthcare access, and food insecurity, are top concerns (United Way, 2023).
- Racial equity, LGBTQ+ rights, and climate change are also critical, reflecting a broader commitment to justice and systemic change (United Way, 2023).
- Moral and ethical alignment with these issues, not political allegiance, is the key driver for most Gen Z activism.

Implications for Nonprofit Strategy
To engage Gen Z meaningfully, nonprofits must shift from traditional donor models toward:
- Multi-channel, mission-driven storytelling that centers real people and real outcomes.
- Peer-led programs and ambassador-style initiatives that empower Gen Z to advocate within their networks.
- Flexible involvement options, such as micro-volunteering, recurring micro-donations, and digital community-building.

As Claire Lewis's 2019 capstone report emphasizes, nonprofits should "embrace time, talent, treasure, and ties" as engagement pathways, not just financial contributions.

Secondary Research Findings

Growing up during a time of intense social unrest—including systemic racism, political division, and the COVID-19 pandemic—has deeply influenced Gen Z's values and political perspectives. Events from 2020–2021, marked by protests, violence, and widespread polarization, have shaped their worldview and commitment to activism.

With over **74 million members**, Gen Z is the **most racially and ethnically diverse generation in U.S. history** and is on track to become **the most educated**. They are likely to be children of immigrants—**22% have at least one immigrant parent**, compared to 14% of Millennials. While currently still majority white, Gen Z is expected to become majority non-white by 2026 due to ongoing immigration trends.

Gen Z in the U.S. tends to be progressive and supportive of government action. Unlike previous generations, they are less likely to embrace xenophobic ideas or believe in American superiority. They are deeply aware of issues like racial justice, climate change, global conflicts, economic inequality, and societal well-being, and they often express concern about an uncertain future.

While both Gen Z and Millennials value universalism and kindness, Millennials lean more toward tradition and self-direction. In contrast, Gen Z places higher importance on stimulation, enjoyment, achievement, and equality.

The United Way of the National Capital Area (2024) surveyed 1,000 Americans, focusing on Gen Z's engagement with social issues. The results are highlighted below:
- Nearly one-third of Gen Zers (32%) are regularly engaged in activism or social justice work

(compared to 24% of Millennials.)
- Over half of Gen Zers (51%) have participated in rallies or protests to support specific causes or social issues, with a slight increase to 56% observed among those enrolled in college.
- 61% of Gen Z respondents volunteer their time to meaningful causes at least once a year.
- About one-third (33%) have engaged in political advocacy by contacting local or national politicians to lobby for a cause.

Secondary Research Findings

Growing up with smartphones and constant internet access, Gen Z has been immersed in digital technology from an early age. Most of their childhood moments have been shared online, making them the most digitally connected generation to date. In the U.S., they are online nearly constantly and are the most active users of social media among all age groups.

- YouTube is Gen Z's most-used social media platform, followed by TikTok and Instagram.
- Over 35% of Gen Z report spending more than four hours daily on social media (He et al., 2024).
- With a population of over 74 million, Gen Z are true digital natives known for their high technological fluency.
- Researchers predict that Gen Z will transform society through their unique relationship with technology and digital communication (Gibson, 2016).

Limitations

While our research aimed to provide actionable insights to help the Rainbow PUSH Coalition increase Gen Z engagement and better align its programs with this audience's interests, several limitations impacted the depth and specificity of our findings. Although we developed a comprehensive survey instrument designed to explore Gen Z's social media behaviors, awareness of Rainbow PUSH, and motivations for engaging with advocacy organizations, we were unable to distribute the survey due to time constraints within the academic quarter. As a result, we did not collect any primary data, which limited our ability to validate assumptions or capture audience-specific preferences through first-hand responses.

Even if the survey had been deployed, distribution would have been limited to DePaul University students and their immediate social networks. This would not have provided a fully representative sample of the broader Gen Z population, potentially skewing the results and limiting their generalizability for Rainbow PUSH's larger outreach efforts.

Without primary data, we were unable to segment the target audience by key variables such as geographic location, school affiliation, or interest in specific social justice issues. These segmentation points would have allowed for more tailored messaging strategies and platform recommendations to meet the distinct needs of different Gen Z subgroups. Such insights could have helped Rainbow PUSH better target their content, increase engagement, and grow membership among youth audiences.

Had the survey been distributed, we also anticipated potential challenges related to sampling bias and self-reported data. Our planned distribution channels, academic and social, would likely have overrepresented college students and excluded less-engaged or non-student youth. Additionally, as with any self-reported survey, responses would be subject to potential bias stemming from social desirability or inaccurate recall of digital behavior.

While these limitations narrowed the scope of our analysis and restricted our ability to provide highly targeted recommendations, our research still offers a strong foundation rooted in current trends in Gen Z digital engagement and attitudes around civic engagement. We recommend that Rainbow PUSH consider distributing the finalized survey in the future to gather primary data that will enable them to refine their messaging, grow their digital presence, and increase membership among Gen Z audiences.

Recommendations

Based on our research findings regarding Generation Z's media consumption preferences and civic engagement patterns, we recommend a comprehensive content strategy that leverages the platforms and formats most effective for reaching this target demographic. The following recommendations are organized around three core content approaches that align with Generation Z's documented preferences for authentic, educational, and participatory digital experiences.

Short-Form Video Content Strategy
Given Generation Z's demonstrated preference for visual, digestible content, Rainbow PUSH Coalition should prioritize short-form video content across platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels. This format allows for maximum engagement while accommodating the shortened attention spans characteristic of digital natives.

The organization should develop mini explainer videos, consisting of 30-second Reels that break down complex civic concepts such as gerrymandering or voter suppression. These videos should incorporate engaging visual elements, trending music, and Generation Z narrators to ensure cultural relevance and accessibility. By simplifying complex political and civic terminology, these videos can serve as educational entry points for young people who may lack foundational knowledge in these areas.

Additionally, behind-the-scenes content from PUSH events provides an opportunity to showcase the organization's work in real-time while maintaining authenticity. This content should capture organizing efforts, event setup, and genuine participant reactions, enhanced with trending audio and accessible captions. Such content humanizes the organization's work and provides transparent insight into civic engagement processes.

The Coalition should also utilize infographics and carousel posts for educational content, presenting information in visually appealing, easily shareable formats that Generation Z can quickly consume and redistribute within their networks.

Recommendations

Personal Storytelling and Testimonial Content
Personal narratives represent a particularly powerful tool for connecting with Generation Z, who value authenticity and personal connection in their media consumption. The organization should implement several storytelling initiatives to humanize their mission and demonstrate tangible impact.

A "Testimonial Tuesday" campaign should feature stories from students who have benefited from PUSH Excel scholarships, incorporating both quotes and visual elements such as photos or video clips. These testimonials provide concrete evidence of the organization's impact while creating relatable content for potential beneficiaries. The "Why I Push" campaign should showcase community members, interns, and volunteers explaining their involvement with the organization through 60-second videos. This approach allows for personal connection while demonstrating the diverse pathways through which individuals can engage with civic work.

Alumni spotlights represent another valuable storytelling opportunity, featuring individuals who began their civic engagement journey with PUSH as youth and have since become community leaders, educators, or organizers. These narratives provide inspirational examples of civic leadership development while demonstrating the long-term impact of early civic engagement.

User-Generated Content and Community Engagement
To maximize authenticity and community ownership, Rainbow PUSH Coalition should actively encourage and facilitate user-generated content creation. This approach leverages Generation Z's preference for peer-to-peer communication and community-driven content creation.

The "#MyPushMoment Challenge" should invite young people to share videos or photos documenting their initial involvement in activism, using the Rainbow PUSH hashtag to create a cohesive campaign narrative. This initiative not only generates authentic content but also encourages reflection on civic engagement journeys and creates a sense of community among participants.The organization should maintain an active reposting and resharing strategy, particularly highlighting TikTok explainers about social justice issues created by Generation Z followers. This approach amplifies young voices while associating the organization with youth-led educational content, reinforcing their commitment to supporting emerging civic leaders.

Through these user-generated content initiatives, Rainbow PUSH Coalition can foster a sense of community ownership while reducing the burden of constant content creation, creating a sustainable model for ongoing digital engagement with their target demographic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our work aimed to address a key business problem for the Rainbow Push Coalition. The organization struggles in three main areas: communication gaps with Generation Z, with this audience being underrepresented in Rainbow PUSH's digital following and content; platform fragmentation, where their current social content doesn't align with Generation Z's habits or popular platform behaviors; and authentic connection, as Rainbow Push needs to grow awareness, trust, and participation from this demographic.

Our group aimed to address each of these issues by first creating a survey for Rainbow Push to distribute on their social media platforms and throughout the community to gain a better understanding of the Chicago-area Generation Z audience and their behaviors and involvement with their community. This survey addressed several areas of our business problem, but most importantly, it allows our client to develop a clearer understanding of their target audience and how to proceed with engagement strategies moving forward.

Following this primary research, our team conducted secondary research to better understand this target audience and to better serve our client in developing authentic engagement strategies for success. The research we conducted drew from several reputable sources, including Brandwatch, Sprout Social reports, and Pew Research, among others. Our findings revealed critical insights across multiple areas.

Regarding context and purpose, we found that growing youth apathy has created a pressing need for programs that foster civic engagement. In examining Generation Z and civic engagement specifically, we discovered that this target group is socially conscious, tech-savvy, and actively uses social media for activism while cultivating a lasting culture of service. We found that Generation Z is diverse and values diversity, and they are highly conscious of important issues including racial justice and equality, climate change, global unrest and geopolitical crises, and economic disparities. Additionally, our research into the relationship between Generation Z and technology revealed several key insights about digital natives and their social media habits.

Based on these comprehensive findings, we developed several strategic recommendations for Rainbow Push to implement in their business strategy. These recommendations are designed to help the organization engage thoughtfully and authentically with this target audience while growing their reach and impact as an organization. Through the implementation of these research-informed strategies, Rainbow Push Coalition will be better positioned to bridge the communication gap with Generation Z and foster meaningful civic engagement among Chicago's young adults.

Citations/References

AMRA & ELMA. (n.d.). Top Gen Z activist influencers in 2024. AMRA & ELMA. Lammers, J. (n.d.). How Gen Z engages in activism online. American Student Assistance. Schaefer, A. (2025, March 21). Gen Z social media trends & usage. Sprout Social. Schaefer, A. (2025, March 21). Gen Z social media trends & usage. Sprout Social. Aubree Schaefer (2024) Gen Z Social Media Trends & Usage

Carnegie, M. (2022, August 7). Gen Z: How young people are changing activism. BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220803-gen-z-how-young-people-are-changing-activism

Buzzetto-Hollywood, N., Banks, T., & Hill, A. (2024). Informing academia through understanding of the technology use, information gathering behaviors, and social concerns of Gen Z. Informing Science: The International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline, 27, Article 12. https://doi.org/10.28945/5388

Headrick, J. (2024). A contemporary view of civic leadership: Understanding college student perspectives and addressing barriers of service and engagement. New Directions for Youth Development. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20604

Lammers, J. (2022, December 7). Career readiness: How can we impact millions of teens immediately?. ASA.org. https://www.asa.org/research/how-gen-z-engages-in-activism-online/#:~:text=Two%2Dthirds%20of%20Gen%20Z,aspects%20of%20their%20adult%20lives

Lammers, J. (n.d.). How Gen Z engages in activism online. American Student Assistance. Schaefer, A. (2025, March 21). Gen Z social media trends & usage. Sprout Social. Schaefer, A. (2025, March 21). Gen Z social media trends & usage. Sprout Social. Aubree Schaefer (2024) Gen Z Social Media Trends & Usage

Lewis, K. (2019). Engaging the next generation: Strategies for nonprofits to connect with Generation Z (Master's capstone project). University of San Francisco. Retrieved from https://repository.usfca.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2013&context=capstone

Citations/References

Malloy, A. (2023, February 14). What nonprofits can do to win over Gen Z. Philanthropy News Digest. Retrieved from https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/features/the-sustainable-nonprofit/what-nonprofits-can-do-to-win-over-gen-z

Schaefer, A. (2025, March 21). Gen Z social media trends & usage. Sprout Social. Schaefer, A. (2025, March 21). Gen Z social media trends & usage. Sprout Social. Aubree Schaefer (2024) Gen Z Social Media Trends & Usage

Team Allegiance. (2025, February 5). Gen Z surprising ways they are transforming fundraising. Allegiance Group. https://teamallegiance.com/resources/gen-z-surprising-ways-they-are-transforming-fundraising/

The Gen Z Activism Survey. United Way NCA. (2025, March 25). https://unitedwaynca.org/blog/gen-z-activism-survey/

United Way of the National Capital Area. (2024, March 5). The Gen Z activism survey. United Way NCA. Retrieved from https://unitedwaynca.org/blog/gen-z-activism-survey/