



# Gen Alpha Saves the Box Office?

How America's youngest moviegoers are  
shaping the future of the theatrical experience

# Gen Alpha is igniting Hollywood's second century

Movie theaters have not exactly had an easy ride over the past decade. The rapid growth of streaming coupled with the one-two punch of COVID followed by the strikes of 2023 led some analysts to question the long-term viability of theatrical as a distribution model for new releases.

Recently, however, the mood has started to shift. And that turnaround has been fueled, in large part, by Gen Alpha—kids and pre-teens who have been the driving force behind many of the biggest theatrical success stories of the past three years, from gaming adaptations like *A Minecraft Movie* and *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* to animated franchise installments such as *Inside Out 2* and *Despicable Me 4*.

Born between the early 2010s and today, Generation Alpha is the first generation raised entirely in the era of smartphones, streaming platforms, and algorithmic content discovery. For many, media isn't something you passively consume; it's something you remix, share, co-create, and use to spark conversations across group chats, game servers, and social platforms.

## METHODOLOGY

Unless otherwise specified, data in this report comes from two studies of approximately 6,100 US moviegoers (consumers who had seen at least two movies in theaters within the past six months), ages 6 to 60. These studies were conducted online in May and June of 2025, as part of NRG's ongoing research program tracking consumer interest in new theatrical releases. In some cases, simplified question wording was used for consumers under the age of 13. This data was weighted to reflect national demographics based on age, ethnicity, gender, and region.

Additional data has been drawn from NRG's *Franchise IQ* research, a tracking program that measures consumer attitudes toward entertainment franchises across TV, film, gaming, and other media formats. Where other data sources have been used, this has been noted in the footnotes.

With the oldest members of this cohort now on the cusp of teenagerdom, Gen Alpha is beginning to assert real influence over family viewing decisions and cultural trends. Predictions that these “streaming natives” would abandon theaters have proven off-base. Give them a franchise that feels like theirs and a screening that feels like a true event, and they will lobby parents, coordinate friends, and show up in force.

This report explores what theatrical moviegoing means to Gen Alpha in 2025. It draws on new quantitative data and cultural analysis to map out their habits, motivations, and expectations. From their craving for real-world social experiences to their enthusiasm for participatory fandoms, Gen Alpha's relationship with the movie theater is shaped by both digital fluency and a hunger for connection. For as much time as they spend glued to their screens at home, they still have a craving for spectacle. They still value togetherness. And they still appreciate the feeling of being part of something bigger than themselves.

With the movie industry now in its second century, it's more important than ever that we look to the future and identify the unique values and priorities of new audiences, rather than falling back on what's worked in the past. Understanding the mindset of Gen Alpha—and designing experiences that align with it—will be vital for guaranteeing the long-term sustainability of the theatrical model and unlocking the next chapter of the movie industry more broadly.





Defining generations

Currently, there is a lack of consensus among trendwatchers and cultural analysts around the exact age of Gen Alpha, and where in the early 2010s to place the cutoff date between them and Gen Z. This study uses the following definitions:

GENERATION	BIRTH DATES	AGE AS OF 2025
Gen Alpha	2013 onward	12 and under
Gen Z	1997–2012	Between 13 and 28
Millennials	1981–1996	Between 29 and 44
Gen X	1965–1980	Between 45 and 60

In this report, you'll find...

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- 02  
The factors that make a new release a must-see event for Gen Alpha
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Steve,  
Minecraft,  
Mojang Studios

## Despite growing up online, Gen Alpha still understands the value of real-world experiences

For better or for worse, today's young people live their lives through their devices. Research by Common Sense Media has found that kids between the ages of five and eight now spend about three and a half hours per day on their screens.<sup>1</sup> For teenagers, daily screen time increases to eight hours and thirty-nine minutes, close to half their waking hours.<sup>2</sup> NRG's own research, meanwhile, has found that digital forms of socialization—such as participating in group chats or hanging out in video game lobbies—now represent the primary modes of socialization for members of Gen Alpha, outside of spending time with friends at school.<sup>3</sup>

This doesn't mean, however, that Gen Alpha kids are unaware of the value of offline, real-world experiences. Far from it; by a margin of more than two-to-one, kids and teens say they prefer interacting with their friends in the real world over talking to them through a screen.<sup>4</sup> And almost half say that they're keen to spend more of their time participating in group activities with friends—such as going shopping together, playing sports, and, indeed, going to the movies.

If anything, the amount of time that members of Gen Alpha spend staring at their phones and tablets appears to have made them deeply appreciative of those moments that allow them to log off, disconnect, and enjoy the real-world company of friends and family.

**Gen Alpha shows a distinct preference for live entertainment experiences over their in-home alternatives, with the exception of music.** Importantly, six-in-ten say that they enjoy watching movies in theaters more than doing so at home—while just a quarter prefer the experience of watching from the couch. For context, that makes them 14 points more likely than Millennials to express a preference for theatrical experiences over streaming.

1. Mann, S., Calvin, A., Lenhart, A., and Robb, M.B., "The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Kids Zero to Eight," Common Sense Media, 2025

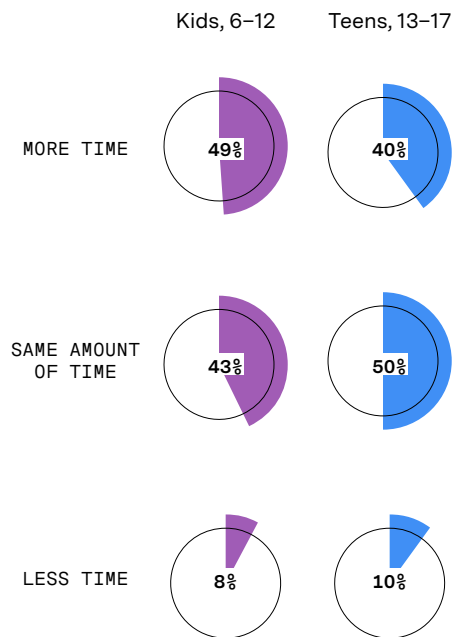
2. Rideout, V., Peebles, A., Mann, S., and Robb, M. B., "The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2021", Common Sense Media, 2022

3. "Growing Pains," National Research Group, 2025

4. "Growing Pains," National Research Group, 2025

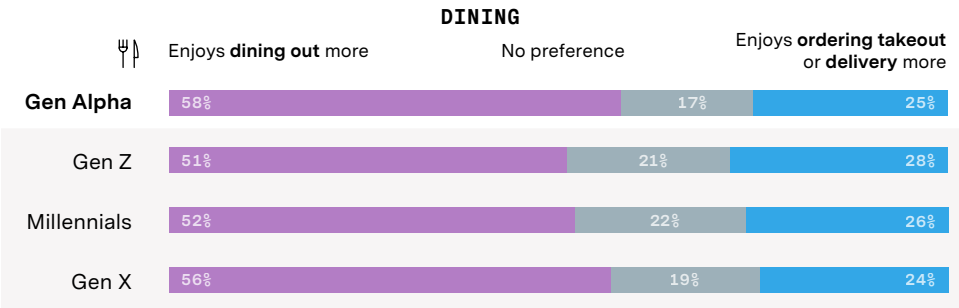
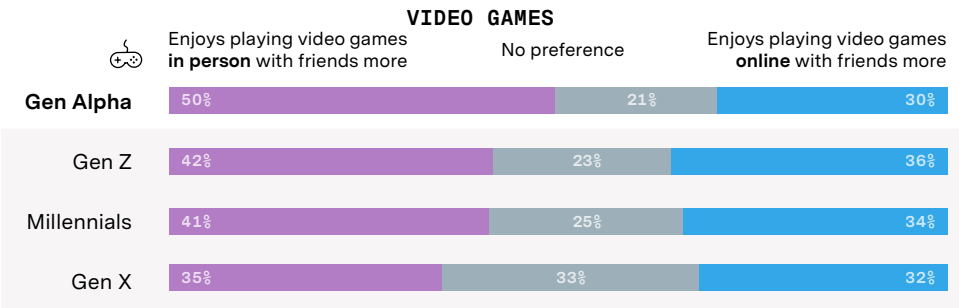
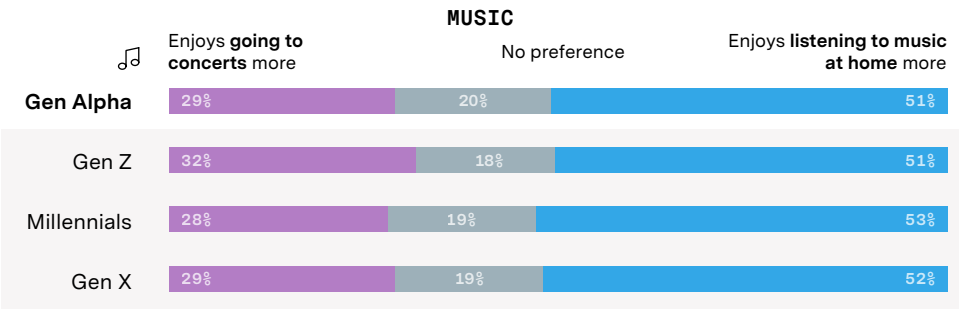
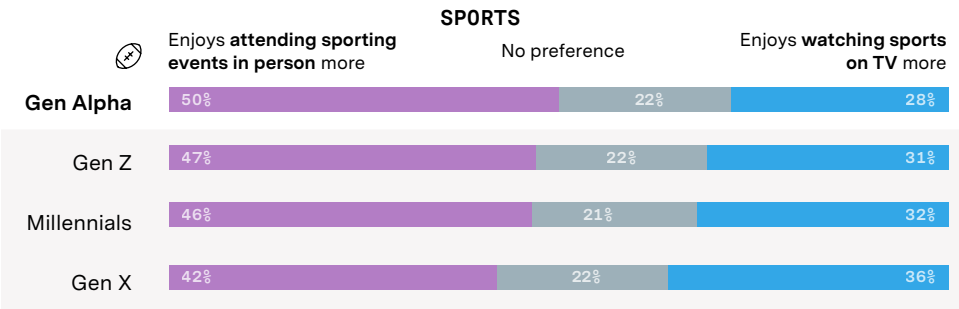
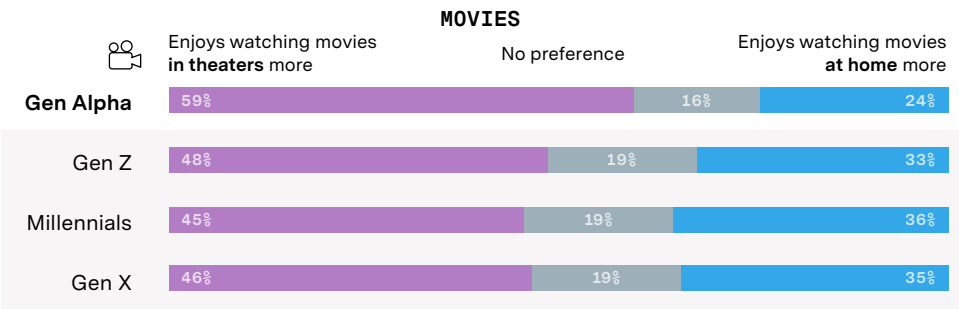
5. Data from NRG's Growing Pains study, based on a survey of 1,500 US kids and teens, conducted in December 2024

**Q: In the future, would you like to spend more or less of your time participating in group activities with friends?<sup>5</sup>**





Preferences for real-world vs. at-home experiences



And that makes sense, considering the different cultural context in which they’re growing up. Unlike Millennials and older Gen Z-ers, who can still remember a time when watching movies at home meant going through the hassle of buying or renting a DVD or VHS tape, Gen Alpha is growing up in a world where on-demand is the default. For them, there’s little novelty or excitement to be found in an at-home movie night. By extension, that makes the experience of physically leaving the house and going to watch a movie in theaters feel all the more special.

While there are certainly barriers to Gen Alpha’s ability and willingness to watch movies in theaters, the theatrical experience itself isn’t one of them. All signs suggest that, as today’s kids and teens grow up and gain the ability to make their own purchasing decisions, they will be a generation of keen moviegoers—at least to the extent that their schedules and budgets allow.





# Contrary to stereotypes, shortened attention spans are not a major obstacle to Gen Alpha's enjoyment of movies

Having dispelled the idea that Gen Alpha doesn't see the value in offline experiences, there's another myth about this generation that needs busting: namely, the idea that their attention spans have deteriorated to the point where they are unable to enjoy long-form content or sit through a movie without interruption.

Gen Alpha may gravitate toward scrollable, short-form content online, but there's little hard evidence to suggest this has had a lasting impact on their ability to focus and pay attention in other contexts. In 2023, for example, the Oxford Internet Institute conducted a study of the media habits of 12,000 children in the US and found no negative correlation between screen time and brain function.<sup>6</sup> This is still an area of ongoing debate within academia—but certainly, the picture here is far less clear than scaremongering headlines would have you believe.

Only 11% of the six- to twelve-year-olds surveyed for this research said that difficulty focusing was a factor that prevented them from seeing new movies in theaters—considerably fewer than the number who pointed to the cost of tickets (36%) or the limited availability of adults to accompany them (20%).

It's true that very young children may struggle to sit through longer movies. But that's a phenomenon that can hardly be considered unique to Gen Alpha; releases aimed at this demographic have always had to skew toward the shorter end of the spectrum. When looked at in the aggregate, Gen Alpha shows only a

moderate preference for shorter movies, compared to older audiences. Like other generations, their ideal movie runtime clocks in at just over two hours—only fractionally shorter than today's typical Best Picture nominee at the Oscars.<sup>7</sup>

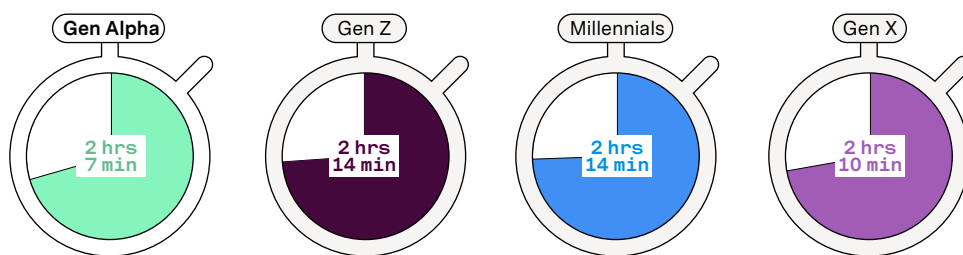
And while many of today's kids and teens have indeed become accustomed to using their phones in theaters, this too is not a trend unique to Gen Alpha. There's a widespread perception these days that theater etiquette is breaking down, and smartphone use is often identified as one of the clearest manifestations of this trend.<sup>8</sup> But young children aren't the only culprits. Over half of Gen Z and Millennial moviegoers with smartphones say that they've used their devices in

a theater, just barely lower than the percentage of Gen Alpha viewers who say the same.

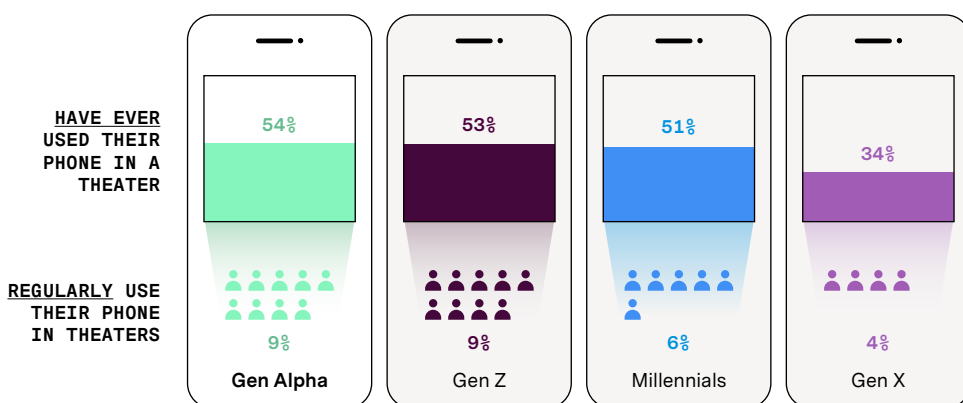
There may be some members of Gen Alpha—as there are now within every generation—who are entirely unable to tear themselves away from their phones and their tablets for the duration of a typical blockbuster. But they represent the exception, not the norm; fewer than one-in-ten kids under 13 say that they make a habit of using their phones in theaters. Most young people remain fully capable of giving a movie their undivided attention—provided that they're in the right context and the picture in question does enough to earn that commitment.

## Preferred length for movies in theaters

Mean of responses



## Phone usage while watching movies in theaters<sup>9</sup>



6. Amy Fleming, "All in the mind? The surprising truth about brain rot," The Guardian, January 29th, 2025

7. Nathaniel R, "Oh, the long-windedness of Best Pictures!," The Film Experience, February 2nd, 2025

8. Sean McGeady, "Is movie theater etiquette the worst it's ever been?", Time Out, March 31st, 2025

9. Based on a survey of moviegoing smartphone-owners, conducted in July 2025 as part of NRG's theatrical tracking program. Sample includes 137 Gen Alpha, 331 Gen Z, 270 Millennials, and 186 Gen X.

# For Gen Alpha, the social dimension of moviegoing is as much a driver as the movies themselves

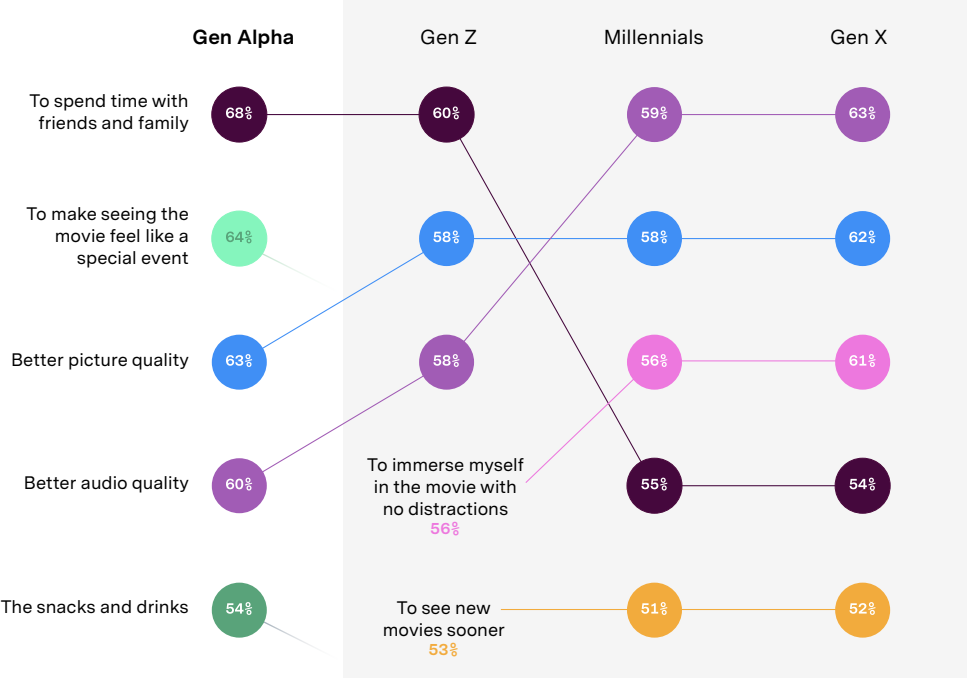
It’s clear that Gen Alpha possesses a deep and abiding love of moviegoing. But their motivations for going to the theater are not necessarily the same as those of previous generations. To bring younger audiences into theaters, it’s imperative that studios and distributors understand what it is, exactly, that this generation is looking for from the theatrical experience.

For Gen Alpha, moviegoing is a deeply social experience. Of course, this is partly a function of their age: young children rarely have the opportunity to see new releases on their own, so will typically be accompanied by their own adult family members or those of their friends. This social dimension of the experience, however, is more than just a necessity for Gen Alpha. Almost seven-in-ten say that

spending time with friends and family is an important reason for going to the movies in the first place, making this the most common driver of moviegoing for these viewers.

Older generations, by contrast, are more likely to say that they’re drawn to theaters for the technical quality of the experience—the fact, for example, that theaters offer superior sound and picture quality compared to watching at home. While these factors certainly matter to Gen Alpha as well, they don’t have quite the same relative weight. More than anything, today’s kids and teens go to the movies for the shared energy in the seats around them and the opportunity to create lasting memories with the people they care about the most.

**Top reasons for going to the movie theater**  
% selecting this as a “major factor” for watching movies in theaters





Gen Alpha wants going to the movies to feel like a true event. And it helps if you have plenty of people around you to experience that event with. More than half (55%) of Gen Alpha say they prefer going to the movies with a large group of friends, compared to just 31% of Millennials and 40% of Gen Z. For these consumers, trips to the theater often serve as anchoring events in their social calendars—essential rituals that bring together friends, siblings, and classmates.

While prior generations may have gone to the movies for immersion, escapism, or the allure of cutting-edge audio-visual technology, Gen Alpha prioritizes connection. In an age where many of their media interactions happen solo and online, the theater stands apart as one of the few experiences where they can plug in to something bigger: a group, a vibe, a cultural moment.

This framing of the theater as a social destination—rather than simply a venue for content consumption—has clear implications. The appeal of moviegoing lies not just in what’s on screen, but in what’s happening around it: the shared laughter during a funny scene, the group selfie in front of a movie poster, the popcorn spills and inside jokes that last longer than the runtime. These are the moments that make moviegoing memorable for Gen Alpha—and make them want to return.





# So, how can the industry effectively capitalize on Gen Alpha's interest in theatrical experiences?

To successfully bring these younger viewers into theaters, studios, distributors, and venues need to be mindful of **four key pillars**



## Facilitating co-creation

For Gen Alpha, there is no clear boundary between consumption and creation. They've grown up immersed in online fandoms that celebrate creativity and self-expression. They spend much of their free time on social gaming platforms that encourage players to design their own characters, experiences, and stories—and to share them with others.

Theatrical franchises, therefore, ought to tap into this passion for creativity, providing younger viewers with the chance to show off their personality and identity through a process of empowered fandom and co-creation.



## Leveraging community

Given Gen Alpha's interest in the social aspects of moviegoing, new releases need to be framed as shared community events.

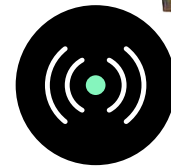
For this audience, talking about a movie with their online and IRL friends—before, during, and after the trip to the theater—is itself a hugely compelling part of the experience surrounding a new release. Movies that feel memeable and spur self-perpetuating cycles of buzz and engagement will be among those best placed to bring Gen Alpha viewers into theaters.



## Offering ownership

Gen Alpha is a generation that has sometimes struggled to define its own sense of a common culture. When everyone is plugged into hyper-personalized, algorithm-driven media echo chambers, it can be difficult to create a shared language built on common cultural touchstones.

So, when franchises come along that feel like they truly belong to this generation, Gen Alpha embraces them with open arms. And when these franchises make their way to the big screen, it feels to Gen Alpha like an important moment of cultural validation.



## Providing unique live experiences

Today's young people spend plenty of time on their phones and their tablets. So, when they go to the movies, they're not looking for an experience that could be replicated at home.

Instead, they're looking for multisensory adventures that make the trip feel worth it. The sights, the sounds, even the smells and flavors of the theater all have a critical role to play in satisfying younger viewers' demand for meaningful offline experiences. By leaning into these components of the moviegoing experience, theaters can build lasting memories, and encourage kids to lobby their parents for a return trip.



Omega, *Fortnite*,  
Epic Games

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# Franchises that lend themselves to co-creation are most likely to find theatrical success with Gen Alpha audiences

For Gen Alpha, fandom is participatory. This generation doesn't just want to watch movies and move on; they want to engage with the worlds they depict, remix their favorite moments, and share their interpretations with others. The franchises that are likely to have the most success in bringing Gen Alpha into theaters, therefore, are the ones that offer fertile ground for this kind of self-expression and creativity.

Social gaming franchises are at a distinct advantage here. Today's kids and teens chat to their friends about video games far more often than any other form of media.<sup>10</sup> And when kids are asked to name the specific franchises their friends talk about the most, it's games like *Roblox*, *Minecraft*, and *Fortnite* that top the list. Crucially, these are brands built on sandbox-style interactivity—giving players the tools to build, customize, and participate in the worlds they love.



Teknique, *Fortnite*  
Epic Games

No wonder, then, that *A Minecraft Movie* managed to bring younger audiences to theaters in droves, smashing box office records for a game-to-screen adaptation.<sup>11</sup> Much of that success can be attributed to the way in which the movie itself became an engine for content creation among *Minecraft*'s Gen Alpha and younger Gen Z fans, filled with viral moments that fans could film themselves—and their theaters—reacting to.<sup>12</sup> What's more, the movie was awash with Easter Eggs referencing famous players and streamers from the *Minecraft* community, further helping to foster a sense of communal ownership of the franchise among its audience.<sup>13</sup>

But it's not just gaming franchises that can spark this kind of participatory fandom and community engagement. Franchises like *Wicked*, *Squid Game*, and the *Spider-Verse* have inspired similarly vibrant fan communities, in part because they naturally lend themselves to commentary, remixing, and self-inserts: Are you a Glinda or an Elphaba? What events would you put in your personal *Squid Games*? What powers does your *Spider-Verse* OC (original character) have?

10. "Growing Pains," National Research Group, 2025

11. Lindsey Bahr, "A *Minecraft Movie* throws Hollywood a lifeline, raking in a massive \$301 million global debut weekend," *Fortune*, April 7th, 2025

12. Helen Bushby, "Minecraft Movie sparks raucous reactions from fans," BBC News, April 8th, 2025

13. Gaby Shedwick, "The 10 Best Easter Eggs in 'A *Minecraft Movie*,' Ranked," *Collider*, April 11th, 2025

14. Data from NRG's *Franchise IQ* tracking program, Q4 2024 and Q1 2025



Spider-Man, Spider-Man,  
Marvel Comics

## Top social franchises for Gen Alpha

Ranked based on percentage of respondents identifying this as a franchise "my friends are talking about"<sup>14</sup>

Franchises that originated as video game titles

01	02
<b>ROBLOX</b>	<b>MINECRAFT</b>
03	04
<b>FORTNITE</b>	<b>grand theft auto</b>
05	06
<b>POKÉMON</b>	<b>AVENGERS</b>
07	08
<b>MARIO BROS.</b>	<b>SPIDER-MAN</b>
09	10
<b>LEGO</b>	<b>MADDEN</b>
11	12
<b>SONIC THE HEDGEHOG</b>	<b>WICKED</b>
13	14
<b>SPIDER-VERSE</b>	<b>EA SPORTS FC</b>
15	16
<b>SQUID GAME</b>	<b>Five Nights at Freddy's</b>
17	18
<b>WEDNESDAY</b>	<b>AMONG US</b>
19	20
<b>STRANGER THINGS</b>	<b>BATMAN</b>



- FACILITATING CO-CREATION
- LEVERAGING COMMUNITY
- OFFERING OWNERSHIP
- PROVIDING UNIQUE LIVE EXPERIENCES

# To bring Gen Alpha into theaters, studios need to position new releases as unmissable community events

One of the reasons that younger consumers gravitate toward franchises that promote co-creation is that they help foster a sense of connection—building communities that span the gap between their digital and real-world experiences. This community-oriented mindset also reshapes how Gen Alpha discovers, discusses, and advocates for the films they love.

Social validation and word of mouth play a particularly important role here. Among Gen Alpha moviegoers, 38% say that “my friends are talking about it” is one of the top reasons they’d be interested in

seeing a new movie in a theater instead of waiting for it to come to streaming. Older consumers—especially those in their 30s and above—place far less of a premium on word-of-mouth when it comes to deciding what’s worth seeing in a theater.

On the other hand, Gen Alpha is less likely than older generations to be motivated to go to the movies by the cast of a new release or the director behind it. Although that could certainly change as they enter their teenage and young adult years and develop a deeper and more mature relationship with cinema as an art form.



## Q: Which of these factors would make you more interested in seeing a new movie in a theater?

% ranking each factor in their top 5 | Showing top 6 factors among Gen Alpha, out of 19 tested





Much digital ink has been spilled lately on “the death of the movie star,” the idea that celebrity actors no longer hold the ability they once did to get butts into seats on opening weekend.<sup>15</sup> There’s an emerging consensus within Hollywood that franchise characters, not the actors that play them, are the true stars of modern blockbusters.

In truth, the picture is more complicated than that, at least when it comes to Gen Alpha. Both actors and franchises can play a role in generating interest for a new theatrical release—but both are most potent when they’re able to function as engines of community engagement, giving younger consumers something to talk about, discuss, and dissect both IRL and online.

15. Scott Campbell, “From A-listers to IP: The slow demise of the movie star,” Far Out Magazine, March 24th, 2024

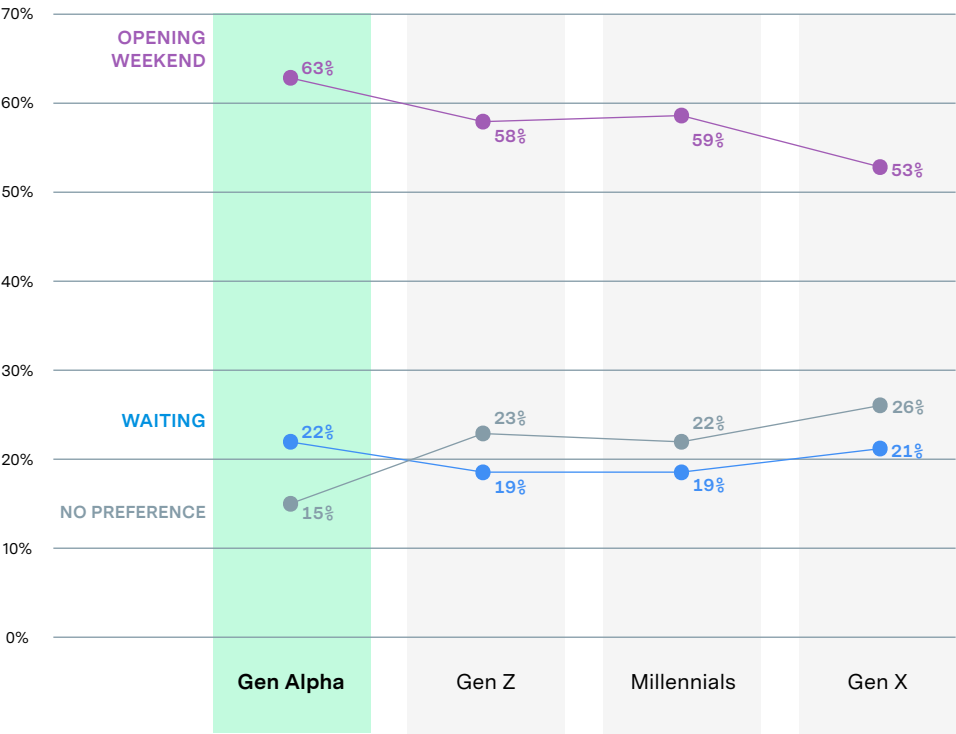


SpongeBob SquarePants, Nickelodeon

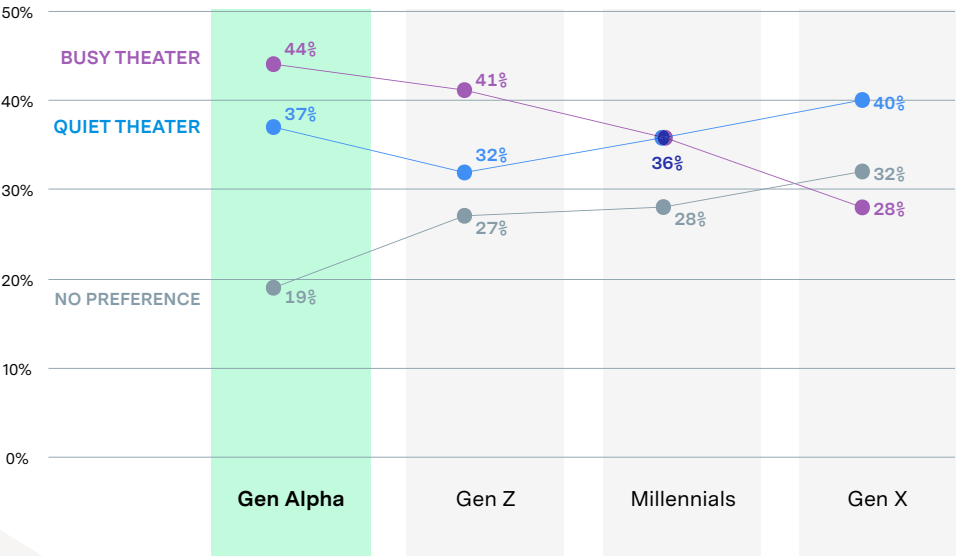


Roblox Avatar, Roblox, Roblox Corporation

Q: Do you prefer going to see a new movie on opening weekend, or waiting until it's been out for a while?



Q: Do you prefer watching movies in a busy theater or a quiet one?



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These attitudes underscore a broader shift in how Gen Alpha thinks about movies: not just as content to consume, but as cultural moments to be shared. More than six-in-ten Gen Alpha respondents say they prefer seeing a new movie on opening weekend—early enough that they can safely talk to friends or scroll through their feeds without worrying about spoilers. And a plurality say they prefer watching movies in a busy theater. In other words, they're actively seeking out the buzz, excitement, and energy of a communal viewing experience.

### Q: What actions do you typically take after watching a new movie in a theater?

Gen Alpha



By the same token, today's young people are drawn to films that lend themselves to social conversation and digital amplification. After watching a new movie, almost two-thirds of Gen Alpha talk about it with friends and family—and nearly a quarter post about it online.

While kids under 13 are, in theory, too young to be able to access most forms of social media, there's reason to think that many of them are doing so anyway. One recent study in the journal *Academic Pediatrics*, for example, found that 64% of 11- and 12-year-olds are using nominally age-restricted forms of social media.<sup>16</sup> And even kids who don't have their own social accounts may still participate in digital chatter through messaging apps or kid-friendly gaming platforms like Roblox.

For studios and exhibitors, there's a clear path forward for engaging this audience: position theatrical releases as true community events. Create stories that demand to be talked about. Craft moments that viewers want to share, meme, remix, and relive.

Already, studios have started tapping into the digital platforms that are the true engines of Gen Alpha culture. The recent live-action remake of *How To Train Your Dragon*,<sup>17</sup> for example, was accompanied by a tie-in mini-game on *Roblox*. And while many superhero movies have had their release supported by custom *Fortnite* skins, *The Fantastic Four: First Steps* went even further, providing players with a new in-game tournament, the Fantastic Four Cup, to compete in.<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, “community” can mean different things in different contexts. Sometimes, as in the case of *A Minecraft Movie*, it's about providing kids and teens with open-ended possibilities and an endless sandbox. Other franchises have found success at the box office because they serve as intergenerational touchpoints: properties that Gen Alpha feels a strong connection with, but that also resonate with their parents, older siblings, or caregivers. These titles allow moviegoing to double as a family event—building connections and a sense of community within the family unit.

And then there are the ironic faves: characters and franchises that bring fans and anti-fans together in shared appreciation of self-aware memes and in-jokes, blurring the line between mockery and earnest appreciation. The experience of being “in on the joke” can itself be an engine for building communities; and, given enough time, laughing at a franchise can easily turn into laughing with it. The fact that even *Skibidi Toilet* might be coming to the big screen suggests that Hollywood is fast becoming aware of the sway that these kinds of irony cults hold over many of today's kids and teens.<sup>19</sup>

16. Nagata, Jason M. et al., “Prevalence and Patterns of Social Media Use in Early Adolescents,” *Academic Pediatrics*, May–June, 2025

17. Queenie Wong, “Train a virtual dragon? Film studios turn to Roblox and other games to reach young fans,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 17th, 2025

18. Joey Morris, “Fortnite launches in-game Fantastic Four Cup,” *eSports Insider*, July 21st, 2025

19. Victoria Phillips Kennedy, “Michael Bay Skibidi Toilet adaptation officially in production,” *Eurogamer*, May 21st, 2025

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## Three approaches for building community around theatrical franchises



## Sandbox Stories

Whether through open-world gaming, viral fan theories, or TikTok remixes, these franchises invite audiences into their universes. They offer open-ended worlds, actively engendering a sense of communal ownership among their audiences through the promotion of self-inserts and online fan communities.



## Cross-Gen Connectors

These franchises bridge the gap between generations, creating a shared cultural moment for kids, teens, and the adults in their lives. They feel relevant to Gen Alpha, while providing their parents with the opportunity to indulge their nostalgia and pass on their own fandom to the next generation.



## Ironic Icons

These are the franchises that inspire collective fun, often at their own expense. Powered by memes, meta-humor, and satire, they become vehicles for humor, cosplay, and shared internet jokes. For Gen Alpha, being “in on the joke” creates a sense of belonging, especially when entire friend groups show up to the theater in costume or react to specific gags during screenings.

RECENT  
RELEASES**Wicked (2024)**

BOX OFFICE:

**\$756M**

*Wicked* demonstrated that even IPs that have never had a film, TV, or gaming adaptation can spark remix culture.

The narrative structure—centered around dual protagonists—lent itself to fan debate and personality quizzes. The franchise's distinct aesthetic and color scheme, meanwhile, helped to inspire fan art, self-inserts, and dress-up trends.<sup>20</sup>

**The Super Mario Bros. Movie (2023)****\$1.36B**

For the Gen X and Millennial gamers who grew up on classic Mario titles, the movie provided them with a vivid hit of nostalgia.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, it acted as a safe, shared entry point into the theatrical experience for their kids. It became a common “first movie in theaters” experience for young children, building on their relationship with the video games and positioning the franchise not as a retro revival, but as something fresh, fun, and distinctly theirs.

**Minions: The Rise of Gru (2022)****\$940M**

Much to the chagrin of some theater owners, this movie helped to catalyze the “Gentleminions” TikTok trend, where teens arrived in suits to cheer, chant, and turn screenings into social events.<sup>24</sup>

What began as a tongue-in-cheek meme helped to drive real-world footfall—a reflection of the fact that this supposedly ironic trend was also an opportunity to revisit characters that these teens had grown up with and had a sincere affection for.

UPCOMING  
RELEASES**The Legend of Zelda (2027)**

While it may not be a strictly social gaming franchise like *Minecraft*, *The Legend of Zelda* could follow in its footsteps when it comes to community activation.

Its sprawling mythology and expansive approach to worldbuilding have already generated decades of fan art, custom mods, and lore breakdowns on YouTube. Recent installments such as *Breath of the Wild* and *Tears of the Kingdom* have taken the franchise in an even more open-ended direction, helping inspire a new generation of fans to feel a personal stake in the success of the franchise.<sup>21</sup>

**Spider-Man: Brand New Day (2026)**

Spider-Man has long maintained his status as one of the most reliable superheroes at the box office—due, in part, to the character's strong cross-generational appeal.<sup>23</sup>

The previous installment in the series, *No Way Home*, heavily leaned into the nostalgia factor, bringing back characters from the Maguire and Garfield eras. By embracing the multiverse, the franchise has helped cement its intergenerational reach, giving different audiences the chance to build their own relationship with the character and find *their* Spider-Man.

**Shrek 5 (2027)**

It's been a decade and a half since *Shrek* last headlined a theatrical release. But in that time, the character has become the center of one of the internet's most pervasive irony cults, spawning countless parodies, fan edits, and even an annual festival in Milwaukee.<sup>25</sup>

The endless meme-ification puts the franchise in a strong position as it returns to theaters in 2027—giving Gen Alpha their first opportunity to experience the green ogre the way DreamWorks intended.

20. Erica Gonzales and Lauren Puckett-Pope, “Same Same But Different: Something Wicked This Way Comes,” *Elle*, November 18th, 2024

21. Kara Phillips, “The Tears of the Kingdom community is what made it such an unforgettable game,” *Techradar*, December 20th, 2023

22. Kyle Chayka, “The Stupefying Success of ‘The Super Mario Bros. Movie,’” *The New Yorker*, May 4th, 2023

23. Richard Craig, “Only 1 Marvel Character Has Out-Performed The Avengers At The Box Office (& He May Not Be Beaten),” *ScreenRant*, January 13th, 2025

24. Lewis Knight, “What is the Gentleminions TikTok trend and why are cinemas banning it?”, *RadioTimes*, July 8th, 2022

25. Matt Mueller, “The story behind Shrekfest, Milwaukee's strangest summer festival,” *OnMilwaukee*, September 3rd, 2022



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# Younger audiences are looking for theatrical franchises that they can feel a sense of ownership over

While Gen Alpha often enjoys content that bridges generational divides, many of their most passionate fandoms are rooted in the desire for ownership—for franchises that feel like they belong first and foremost to them. In a media landscape filled with legacy IP, younger audiences are constantly seeking out stories, characters, and worlds that reflect their identities, their humor, their platforms, and their cultural moment.

This is yet another factor that helped propel *A Minecraft Movie* to its record-breaking box office haul. Notably, *Minecraft* has one of the youngest-skewing fan bases of any franchise tracked by NRG. Members of Gen Alpha are more than twice as likely as older consumers to express affinity for the franchise; only *Roblox* and *Boss Baby* show a greater disconnect between younger and older audiences.

For *Minecraft*'s younger fans, this generational divide is a feature, not a bug. It affirms their sense of ownership over the world of the game—an ecosystem they grew up in, helped shape, and understand more intuitively than their parents ever could. Seeing that world on the big screen felt, to many, like a deeply personal moment of validation.

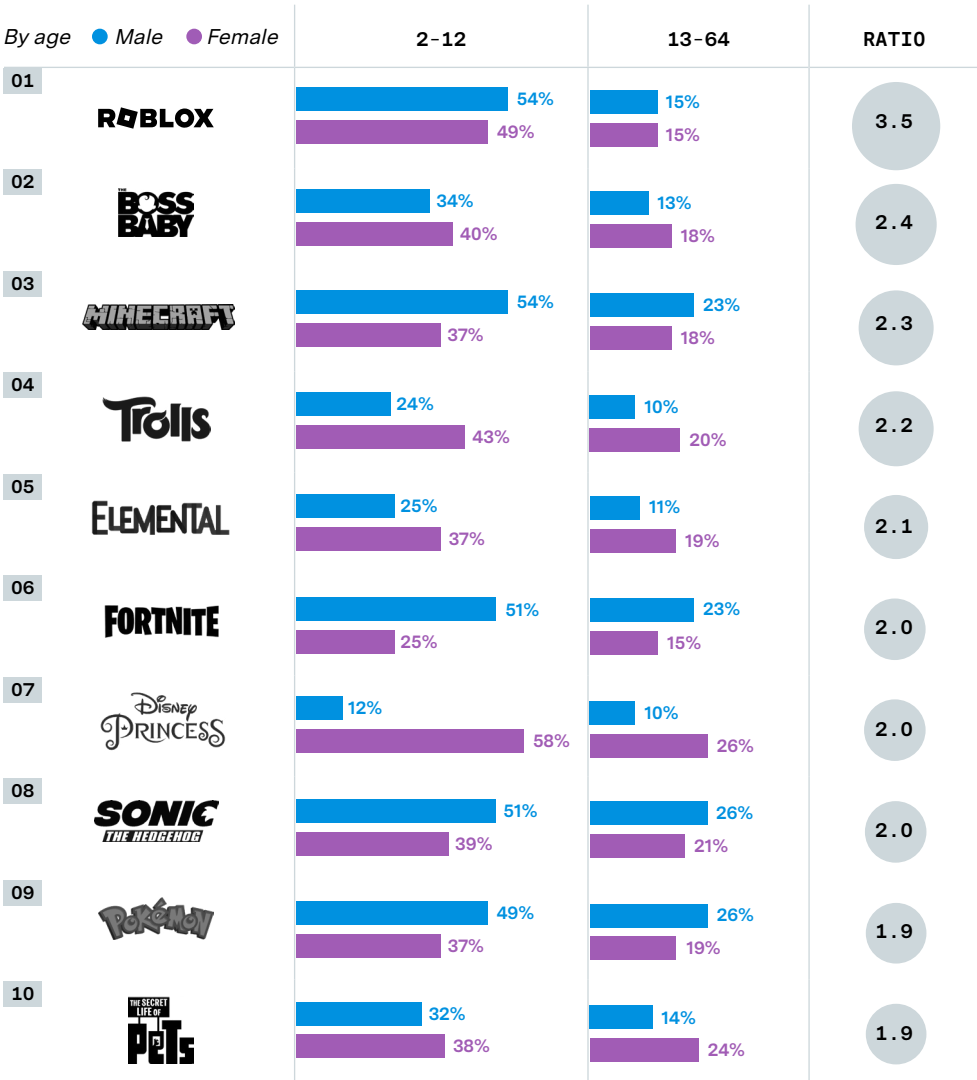
This desire for generational ownership shapes how Gen Alpha and younger members of Gen Z interact with theatrical extensions of their favorite IPs. For them, the appeal lies not only in seeing characters they love on the big screen, but in the validation that comes from seeing *their* culture spotlighted and celebrated in such a public, communal way. When a property like *Minecraft*



Freddy Fazbear & Chica, *Five Nights at Freddy's*, ScottGames

## Top 10 franchises with the youngest-skewing fandoms

Percentage of consumers identifying as fans of each franchise, ranked by ratio of fandom among consumers aged 2–12 to consumers aged 13–64.<sup>26</sup>



makes it to the big screen—a franchise they feel a uniquely strong attachment to relative to older generations, and whose cultural relevance they feel in some way responsible for—it's an emotional moment of generational affirmation.

For studios, the message is clear. To win with younger audiences, franchises must speak their language, honor their tastes, and—above all—give them space to participate, contribute, and claim ownership.

26. Data from NRG's Franchise IQ tracker; fieldwork conducted Q4 2024 to Q1 2025 for Gen Alpha, and Q2 2024 to Q2 2025 for other demographics. Includes only franchises with a minimum fandom of 15% among both audiences.

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# Theaters need to offer Gen Alpha **unique live experiences**—not try to replicate what they can get at home

For Gen Alpha, going to the movies is about more than just watching a film. It's about energy, ownership, and a shared experience—things that simply don't translate through a screen at home.

This generation is growing up with near-limitless access to content. They can stream a movie from bed, clip it into a meme by lunchtime, and watch the fan edit before dinner. In that environment, theatrical releases need to offer something categorically different.

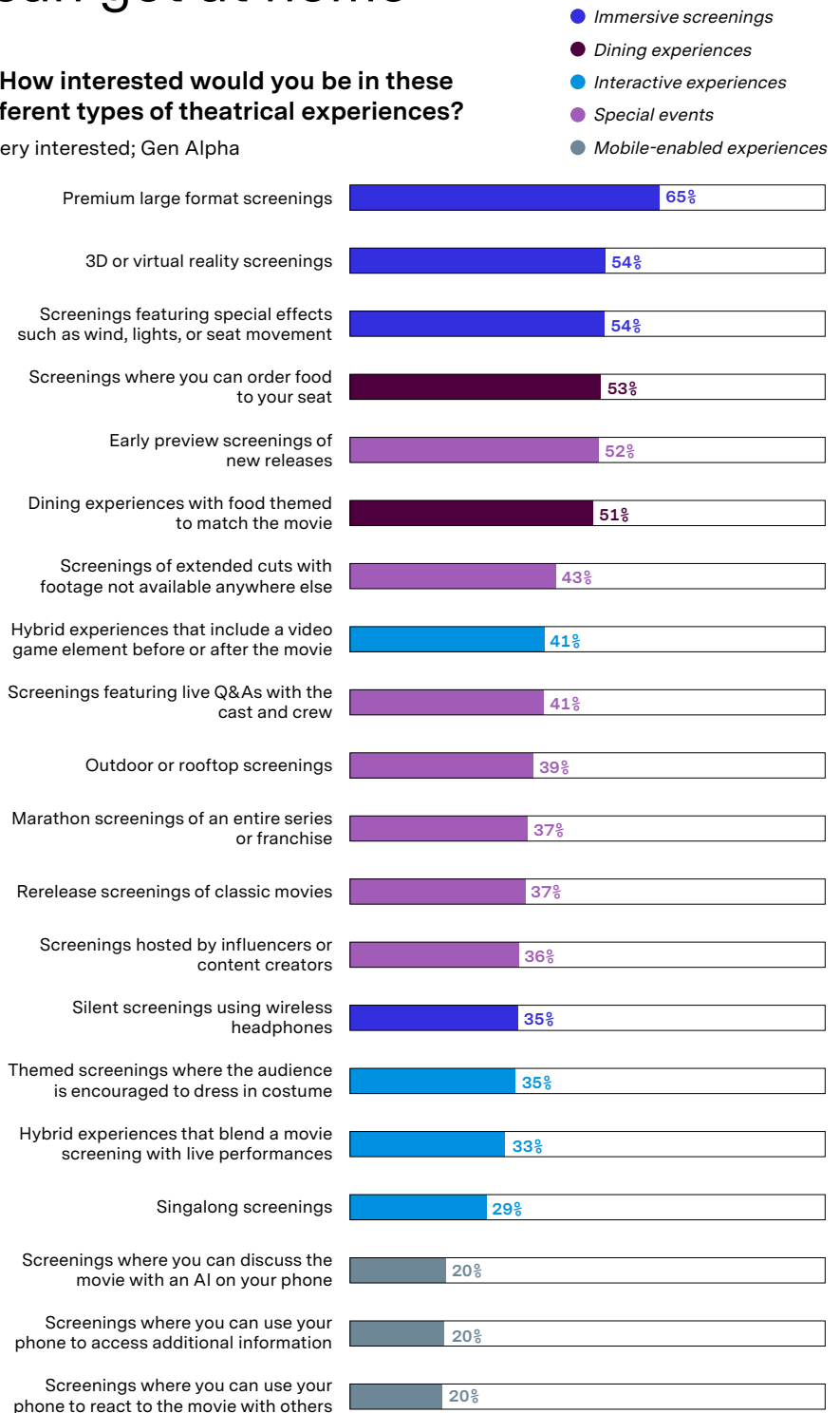
Recently, exhibitors and studios have begun experimenting with new types of theatrical experiences designed specifically around the sensibilities of kids and teens. Many of these experiments, however, have been premised on the idea that young people are inseparably bonded to their phones, and require theaters to meet them at that level. One recent trial, for example, involved an AI chatbot that viewers could interact with through their phones during a screening to access commentary and behind-the-scenes trivia.<sup>27</sup>

Those assumptions, however, don't reflect the reality of what members of Gen Alpha are looking for when they go to the theater. They're not asking for more notifications or app integrations. What they want are in-person experiences that feel heightened, special, and social. Experiences, in other words, that can't be replicated at home or on their phones.

<sup>27</sup> Jason Guerrasio, "Meta wants you to use your phone as a 'second screen' in movie theaters to interact with a chatbot," Business Insider, April 9th, 2025

## Q: How interested would you be in these different types of theatrical experiences?

% very interested; Gen Alpha



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Asked to evaluate different types of non-standard theatrical experiences, Gen Alpha expressed the strongest interest in formats that emphasized immersion, novelty, and physical presence. Two-thirds wanted to attend more premium large-format (PLF) screenings, while over half (54%) expressed an interest in 3D or VR experiences in theaters. Almost as many said they'd be drawn in by screenings that feature special effects like wind, lighting changes, or moving seats. These preferences point to a hunger for sensory engagement—moviegoing as an immersive experience, not just an act of content consumption.

Food can also play a key role in elevating the theater trip for younger audiences. Over half (53%) of Gen Alpha said they would be interested in screenings where food is delivered directly to their seat, and a similar proportion (51%) responded positively to themed dining experiences that match the movie's content. These kinds of offerings help to further “eventize” the theatrical experience, making it more shareable, more memorable, and more worthy of a special trip out.



By contrast, only 20% of Gen Alpha respondents expressed an interest in theatrical experiences that involved using their phone during the movie. **Despite the stereotypes about them, this generation isn't demanding that their devices be integrated into every one of their entertainment experiences.** When they go to the theater, they're looking for a break from that—something that feels real, collective, and present-tense.

Theaters will never be able to compete with streaming on convenience. What they can offer instead is a sense of occasion. For Gen Alpha, the draw of moviegoing lies in the buzz, the scale, the feeling of being in a space where something is happening.

And it's not as if theaters need to reinvent the wheel to offer those kinds of moviegoing experiences. Many of the formats that Gen Alpha is most interested in—PLF, 3D, food-to-seat, etc.—have been around in one form or another for years, if not decades. Getting younger audiences to the box office doesn't necessarily require radical innovation; rather, it's about taking these existing formats and making them more accessible, while marketing them more aggressively to kids and teens hungry for experiences that do more than simply try to recreate what they can get from their living rooms.





# Gen Alpha offers hope for the future of theatrical—if we listen to their voices and understand their values

Fortunately for studios and for theaters, moviegoing still holds tremendous value for Gen Alpha. They see it as a chance to spend time with friends and family, to mark an occasion, and to take part in something bigger than themselves. They respond strongly to films that generate buzz, invite participation, and allow them to feel a sense of ownership. And when the theatrical experience offers immersion, novelty, or a strong social dimension, they're more than willing to show up.

They may be a generation that is deeply attached to their phones and their tablets, but they haven't lost sight of the

appeal of real-world experiences. And despite media narratives about their dwindling attention spans, Gen Alpha remains fully capable of giving a movie their focus—provided the story earns it. They want theatrical experiences that feel worth the trip: bold, memorable, and different from anything they can stream at home.

At the same time, they're looking for content that reflects their sensibilities and cultural context. Often, the theatrical franchises that perform best with Gen Alpha are the ones that understand their passion for co-creation, connection, and community engagement.

These properties succeed, in part, because they let young audiences see themselves as insiders. The theater, then, becomes more than a venue; it becomes a platform for expression and belonging.

This generation is not disengaged; they're selective. They're looking for meaning, connection, and the sense that they're part of something exciting and relevant. Studios and exhibitors who understand that will have an edge—not just in bringing Gen Alpha into theaters, but in inspiring them to come back again and again.

## Five key recommendations for bringing Gen Alpha to the movies

### FOR STUDIOS

- 01 Build stories that invite participation and co-creation.** Invest in theatrical franchises with layered worlds, remixable characters, and flexible narratives that encourage creativity and fan expression.
- 02 Prioritize youth ownership when selecting IP.** Focus on properties that Gen Alpha already claims as theirs—especially those born from gaming, online communities, or youth-driven fandoms.
- 03 Meet Gen Alpha where they are.** Design campaigns that extend into the social gaming spaces where Gen Alpha spends time, encouraging user-generated content to build momentum around releases.
- 04 Position moviegoing as a shared generational ritual.** Emphasize togetherness, excitement, and in-person fun in marketing materials, making moviegoing feel like an experience worth planning around.
- 05 Embrace ironic fandom.** Give kids and teens the opportunity to be in on the joke, through theatrical franchises that live at the intersection of irony and sincerity.

### FOR THEATERS

- 01 Elevate the in-person experience with immersive formats.** Expand access to PLF and sensory-enhanced screenings, giving Gen Alpha the kind of spectacle that makes theatergoing feel unique.
- 02 Lean into themed programming and eventized screenings.** Host cosplay nights or fan-first showings that reflect Gen Alpha's ethos of engaged and empowered fandom.
- 03 Invest in food and convenience upgrades.** Offer in-seat dining and themed menus to further elevate the social experience for kids and teens.
- 04 Design theaters as social spaces, not just screening rooms.** Add photo booths, hangout zones, or post-movie activities that give groups of kids and teens more opportunities to make their trip to the movies feel like an event.
- 05 Avoid second-screen distractions during the main event.** Resist trends that integrate phones into the moviegoing experience. Gen Alpha wants theaters to feel immersive and in-the-moment, not like an extension of their feeds.

## PREVIOUS REPORTS



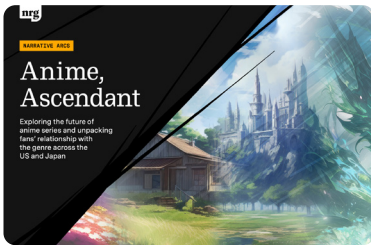
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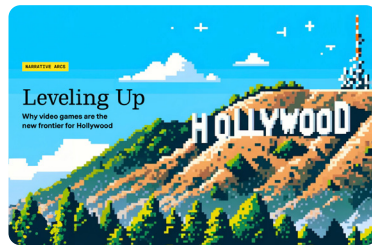
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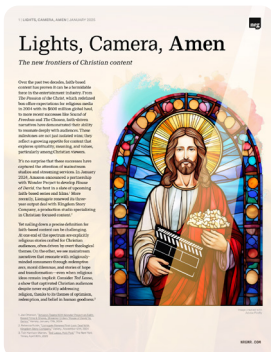
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