

Project Sigma

Engaging Malaysian Gen Z for News

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Foreword

As the media landscape rapidly evolves, ensuring that young audiences remain informed and engaged is more critical than ever. Project Sigma: Engaging Malaysian Gen Z for News represents a landmark collaboration between the Ministry of Communications Malaysia and Google to empower publishers in navigating this shift.

Over 10 weeks, six pioneering publishers have embraced innovation, experimentation, and collaboration to better understand and connect with Malaysia's Gen Z. This report highlights their journey, offering insights and strategies that will shape the future of journalism across the region.

We hope the lessons shared here inspire continued innovation and collective action to build a vibrant, resilient future for news in Malaysia and beyond.

"We are proud to partner with the Ministry of Communications, Malaysia on Project Sigma, which was designed to empower Malaysian publishers to effectively engage with Gen Z news consumers."

Kate Beddoo, Managing Director, News Partnerships APAC, Google

"Project Sigma, in collaboration with Google, has demonstrated that understanding and evolving with Gen Z news consumption habits is vital to the future of our news industry. We are committed to fostering partnerships like this to ensure Malaysian journalism stays relevant, resilient, and resonant for generations to come."

Datuk Fahmi Fadzil,
Communications Minister

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Why Gen Z Matters

“I only go into long-form content when I’m interested in a specific topic... [otherwise I] let things come to me.”

This quote, shared by a Gen Z news consumer, captures a fundamental shift in how young Malaysians engage with news today.

Malaysian Gen Z News Consumer

Introduction

Gen Z, born between 1997 and 2012, make up approximately 26% of Malaysia’s population.¹ As they continue to grow in influence and purchasing power, their preferences and behaviors will shape the future of the news industry. Unlike previous generations, they have grown up in a hyper-digital environment where news is encountered rather than actively sought out. Their consumption habits are driven by convenience, interactivity, and relevance, making traditional approaches to journalism increasingly challenging.

For Malaysian publishers, effectively engaging Gen Z is no longer optional. Building brand awareness, fostering loyalty, and innovating content formats for the Gen Z audience are critical to ensuring the long-term sustainability of journalism in the country. The future of news in Malaysia depends on a willingness to adapt, experiment, and meet Gen Z where they are.

Malaysia’s Gen Z at a glance

~9M

people¹

1997-2012

born between

99%

Internet penetration²

~3 in 4

get news from online sources, including social media

¹ [Understanding Malaysia’s Gen Z... And How To Reach Them](#), Nielsen (2019)

² [The Digital News Report 2024](#), Reuters Institute (2024)

Emerging Behaviors of Malaysian Gen Zs

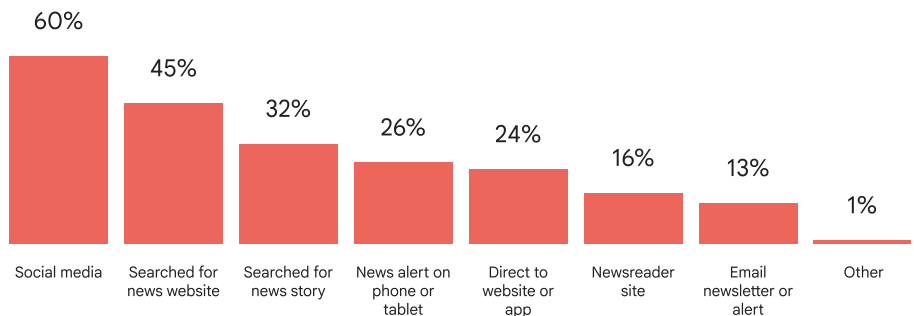
Snackable News Consumption, With Purposeful Deep Dives

Unlike previous generations who actively sought out news from traditional outlets, Malaysian Gen Z primarily encounter news through social media feeds and algorithm-driven platforms. The Reuters Institute found that 60% of Malaysian Gen Z reported coming across news via social media in the past week.

While Gen Z often consumes news incidentally, they are willing to engage more deeply when a particular topic sparks their interest. Casual consumption through short-form content is the norm, with 74% of Gen Z watching short-form videos weekly. The Next Gen News report, which explored how news consumption will evolve globally by 2030, also highlighted how convenience shapes Gen Z consumption habits, as young people increasingly prefer information-dense experiences that help them quickly identify topics of interest.³ To effectively engage this audience, publishers must create engaging, snackable content that serves as an entry point to deeper, sustained interactions.

Majority of Gen Z came across news via social media

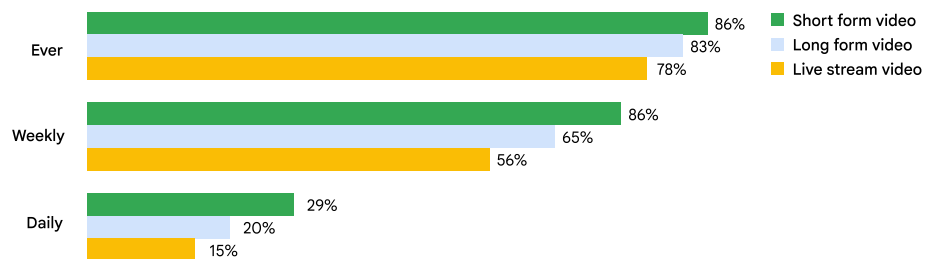
How many respondents came across news in the last week on the following platforms?



Source: Reuters Digital News Report 2024

Short form remains the most popular video format

How often, if at all do you watch the following?



Source: Reuters Digital News Report 2024

“Most of the time I really just rely on the algorithm, I don’t go out of my way to search for something.”

Malaysian Gen Z News Consumer

³ [Next Gen News](#), FT Strategies & Northwestern University (2024)

Trust Authentic Voices Over Corporate Messaging

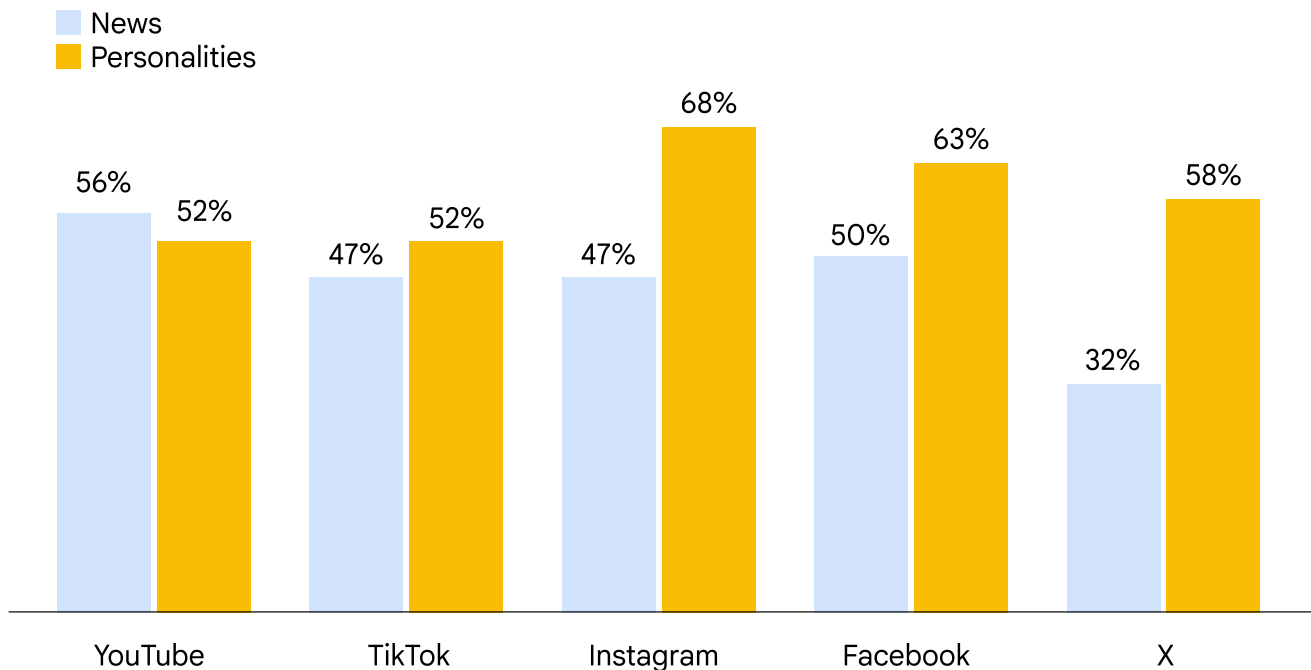
When it comes to news consumption, Malaysian Gen Z gravitates toward content that feels real, relatable, and personal rather than polished institutional messaging. Research shows that Gen Zs generally pay more attention to personalities, including influencers and celebrities, rather than established news brands when consuming news online. However, on YouTube, 56% of Gen Z still favors media brands compared to 52% who follow personalities.⁴

“I prefer listening to younger people talk because [they are] closer in age and [their] thoughts are similar.”

Malaysian Gen Z News Consumer

Gen Z pay attention to personalities more often than news outlets

When it comes to news, which sources do you generally pay attention to?



Source: Reuters Digital News Report 2024

Other platforms show a clear preference for influencers. The biggest discrepancies are seen on X and Instagram, where Gen Z significantly prefers following personalities over publishers. These findings are in line with broader research which asserts that younger news consumers have a desire to feel connected to the people they are receiving news from.⁵ For publishers, this trend underscores the need to adapt their approach by incorporating relatable storytelling and leveraging partnerships with trusted creators to maintain relevance among young audiences.

⁴ [The Digital News Report 2024](#), Reuters Institute (2024)

⁵ [Next Gen News](#), FT Strategies & Northwestern University (2024)

Prioritizing Mental Well-being

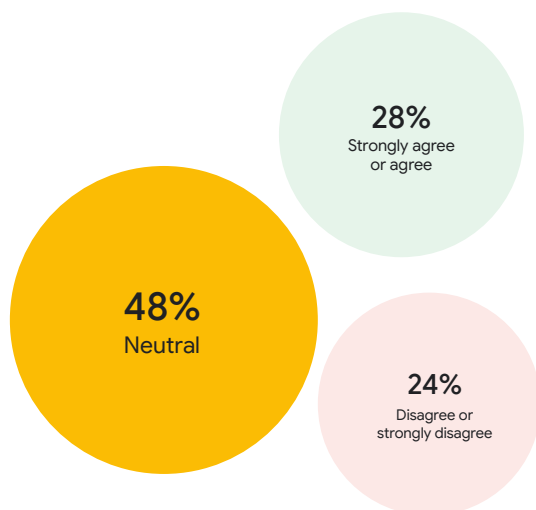
“On weekends, I try not to use [social media] too much. I try to do a technological detox on the weekends.”

Malaysian Gen Z News Consumer

Research shows that 67% of Malaysian Gen Z are conscious of their screen time⁶, with many actively implementing digital detox periods. This growing mindfulness extends to their news consumption, as a significant number intentionally avoid content that feels overwhelming or distressing due to its impact on their mental health. Approximately 40% of Malaysian Gen Z sometimes or often avoid news, with many saying that certain topics can be depressing and anxiety-inducing. Additionally, more than one in four Malaysian Gen Z report feeling worn out by the news cycle.⁵

Over 1 in 4 Gen Z feel worn out by the amount of news

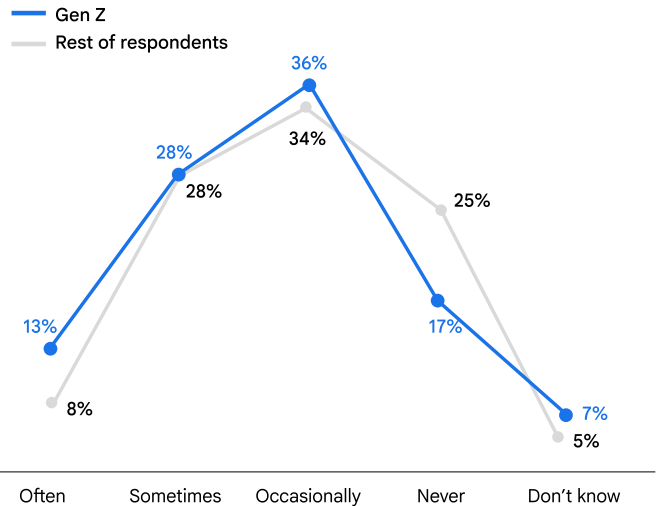
I am worn out by the amount of news there is these days



Source: Reuters Digital News Report 2024

Gen Z more likely to avoid news often compared to rest of population

Do you find yourself actively avoiding the news?



Source: Reuters Digital News Report 2024

The globally-focused Next Gen News report similarly found that young people are especially wary of consuming news content and topics that could negatively impact their mental health due to the relentless, non-stop nature of the news cycle. To cope, some have started setting boundaries on when and how frequently they will engage with news content, particularly on social media, or actively seek lighter, more uplifting content.⁶ If publishers hope to engage Gen Z effectively, they must find ways to deliver news that feels constructive and empowering, rather than anxiety-inducing. For example, publishers can offer solutions-oriented journalism, use clear content warnings, and balance serious topics with hopeful or inspiring stories.

⁶ [How Gen Z in Malaysia is Reshaping the World Through Technology](#), HP (2025)

Skeptical of Information Circulated

Growing up during an era marked by rampant online misinformation and disinformation, Malaysian Gen Z has developed a deep skepticism toward the content they encounter online, with 63% of young Malaysians expressing concern about distinguishing real from fake news online. They find it easiest to assess credibility on YouTube (61%) and most challenging on X (47%). This wariness is particularly pronounced when it comes to topics like health-related and war-related news, where the consequences of misinformation can be severe.⁷

Their skepticism goes beyond just spotting fake news. Many Gen Z consumers operate under the assumption that information shared online is rarely unbiased and often misleading. As noted by the Reuters Institute, “almost all young people believe that all information is put in the public realm for a reason, and is not to be trusted or taken at

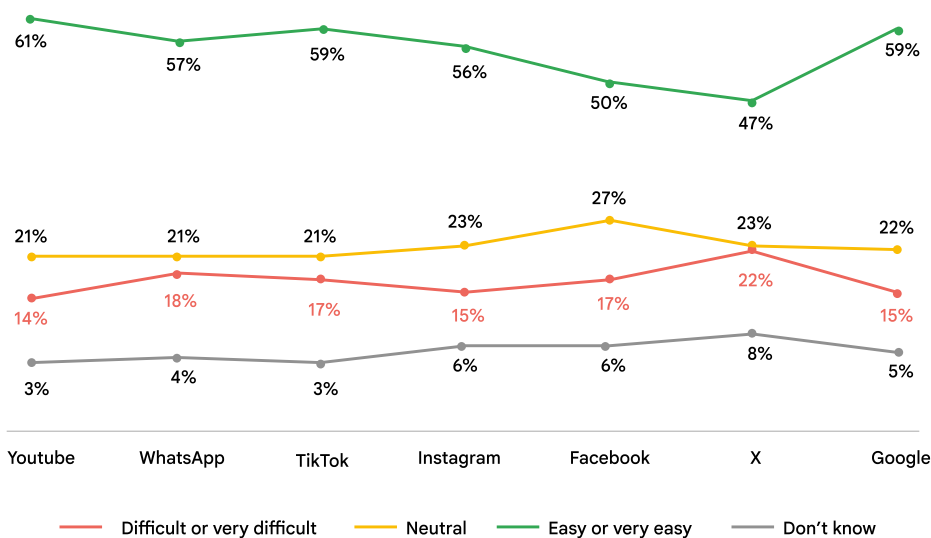
face value.” Publishers can signal transparency and credibility by clearly outlining their sources, explaining how stories are verified, being open about potential biases, and showing who is behind the reporting through bylines or journalist profiles. These efforts can help demystify the editorial process and demonstrate a commitment to honesty, which is critical for engaging a generation that questions everything.

“It’s important to fact check before brands post.”

Malaysian Gen Z News Consumer

Gen Z believe they can tell if news is trustworthy most of the time, however a notable portion still find it difficult

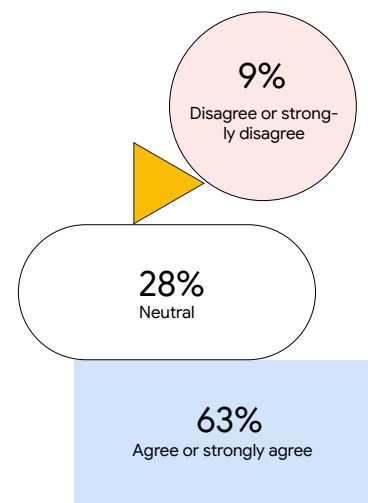
How easy is it for you to tell if news is trustworthy on the following platforms?



Source: Reuters Digital News Report 2024

Majority of Gen Z concerned about fake news and misinformation

Thinking of online news, I am concerned about what is real



Source: Reuters Digital News Report 2024

⁷ [The Digital News Report 2024](#), Reuters Institute (2024)

Preparing for the Next Generation

What's at stake

Key differences in Malaysia's Gen Z behaviors highlight the need for publishers to start preparing for the next generation of digital-native audiences. Without proactive efforts to reach and connect with Gen Z, publishers risk losing credibility, revenue, and long-term relevance.

01

Brand Awareness & Recognition

Unlike previous generations raised with physical newspapers, Gen Z has far less exposure to legacy media brands. With 60% of Malaysian Gen Z discovering news via social media, they increasingly encounter information through influencers and emerging platforms rather than directly from publishers. This shift puts traditional media in direct competition with agile content creators who are often faster, more relatable, and better tailored to Gen Z mobile-first, algorithm-driven habits.

02

Long-term Sustainability

As Malaysia's Gen Z – who currently make up over one-quarter of the population – begin earning significant income in the coming 5 to 10 years, they are set to become the primary revenue-driving audience for publishers. Globally, trends show that digital-native consumers increasingly favor subscription models, personalized content, and mobile-first experiences, meaning publishers who capture Gen Z loyalty now will secure sustainable revenue streams as older audiences decline.

03

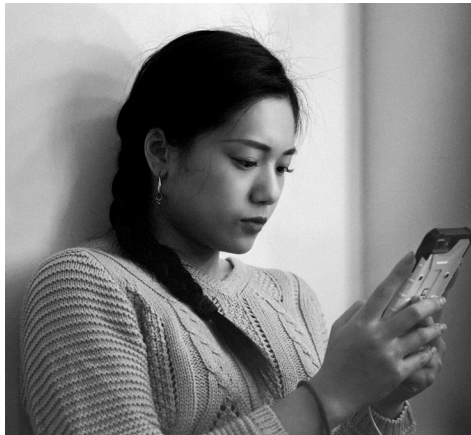
Culture of Innovation & Experimentation

The media landscape is evolving rapidly, with new platforms, technologies, and competitors constantly emerging. Building a culture of experimentation is especially critical for reaching Malaysian Gen Z audiences, whose media habits are shaped by constant platform shifts, hyper-personalized algorithms, and fast-changing trends.

Project Sigma

About

Project Sigma: Engaging Malaysian Gen Z for News was a 10-week program designed to help a cohort of six news publishers better understand Gen Z and their unique needs. Selected through an open call for applications, these publishers participated in a hands-on initiative delivered through a partnership between Google and the Ministry of Communications Malaysia. Over the course of the program, each publisher designed and launched tailored initiatives to reach and engage younger audiences.



Program Objectives

- Improve understanding of Malaysian Gen Z news consumers and their needs.
- Gain practical experience running guided initiatives.
- Convert Gen Z initiatives into an actionable report that can be shared with the wider news ecosystem in Malaysia.







Program Framework

1. **Implementation support:** Each participant designed and ran two Gen Z-focused initiatives over a 10-week period.
2. **Ongoing consultations:** Publishers met with a dedicated consulting team every week to share progress, receive support, and participate in sessions to discuss lessons learned.
3. **Initiative assessment:** Publishers analyzed the results and summarized the key insights from their Gen Z initiatives.

Gen Z Initiatives

Participating publishers were invited to design and launch initiatives to reach and engage Gen Z audiences. The initiatives spanned a wide range of efforts, including audience research, content format innovation, and the development of training programs. Below is a breakdown of each publisher's efforts and their impact.

Participating Publishers

	Astro Awani	Astro Awani is a Malaysian news outlet, known for its coverage of breaking news, politics, and business across television and digital platforms.
	Berita Harian	Established in 1957, Berita Harian is a Malay-language daily newspaper in Malaysia, providing news on politics, entertainment, sports, and lifestyle online and in print.
	Malaysiakini	Malaysiakini is an independent online news portal. Launched in 1999, it is known for its investigative journalism and political coverage.
	Sin Chew Daily	Founded in 1929, Sin Chew Daily is a Malaysian Chinese-language newspaper, known for its extensive coverage within Malaysia and the Chinese-speaking community.
	Sinar Daily	Sinar Daily is the English-language news platform of Sinar Harian, launched in 2021, focusing on social issues and current affairs.
	The Star	Established in 1971, The Star is one of Malaysia's English-language newspapers with a digital presence.

Astro Awani



Initiative 1

Bringing Gen Z Into the Heart of the Newsroom

To close the gap between journalists and young audiences, Astro Awani launched a series of immersive “Collision Room” events. Over eight days, Gen Z participants worked side by side with editors and reporters to pitch, develop, and publish stories on topics they cared about. By partnering with universities and youth groups across Malaysia, Astro Awani ensured a diverse group of voices were represented. The Collision Room enables senior newsroom leaders to actively mentor participants, fostering a culture of collaboration and making the editorial process more accessible and engaging for younger audiences, while also deepening their empathy and understanding of Gen Z perspectives.



[Activation events](#)

Initiative 2

Mapping Gen Z News Habits Through Research

Recognizing that meaningful engagement requires both interaction and insight, Astro Awani complemented its events with a nationwide survey focused on Gen Z news consumption habits. The research captured regional differences in content preferences, platform usage, and emerging trends among younger Malaysians. This combination of qualitative newsroom experience and quantitative data provided Astro Awani with a holistic understanding of how to adapt its content strategy to better resonate with Gen Z.



The team post in-person workshop

“The program forced us to think deeply on how to better understand Gen-Z, especially their media consumption behaviors.”

Shafizan Johari, Lead Editor,
Multimodality News Innovation

Results

- Newsroom confidence in engaging Gen Z increased by 24%, reducing uncertainty on how to approach younger audiences.
- The regional survey provided Astro Awani with data-driven insights on how to leverage new formats, such as short-form video, data journalism, memes, and GIFs.
- The combined approach of events and survey strengthened Astro Awani’s foundation for Gen Z engagement, equipping the newsroom with both practical experience and data-backed insights for future strategies.

Berita Harian



Initiative 1

Gen Z Vox Pop-Style Interviews

Berita Harian kicked off its Gen Z engagement by producing a series of Vox pop-style interviews, inviting young people to share their views on news consumption and content preferences. By giving Gen Z a direct voice, the team uncovered a strong preference for short, dynamic videos delivered in a relatable, unscripted style. This approach provided immediate insights into how authenticity and brevity drive attention among younger audiences.



[Vox pop-style interviews](#)

Initiative 2

A/B Testing Vertical Video Formats

Building on these insights, Berita Harian ran a series of A/B tests to refine its video strategy, experimenting with five vertical video formats. Alongside this, they introduced a new video content management system to enhance mobile playback. This structured experimentation helped the newsroom identify which formats best align with Gen Z mobile-first habits and preference for personality-driven content, laying the groundwork for a more agile, data-informed approach to video production.



The team post in-person workshop

“On behalf of REV Media Group, I can say that the program provided us with a framework to further understand our audiences and their preferences. As a news publisher, this will help us strengthen our brand.”

Fazrik Kamarudin, Senior Executive, Product Management & Team Coordinator, Digital News Video Production

Results

- Through 30 Vox pop interviews, 93% of Gen Z participants preferred short-form video over other formats, highlighting the importance of mobile-first, bite-sized content and 68% preferred KOL-led videos over AI-generated content.
- Additional polling of Gen Z participants revealed that 90% favored motion graphics over static infographics.
- These insights now guide Berita Harian’s long-term video strategy to better align with Gen Z evolving preferences.

Initiative 1

Highlighting Gen Z Journalists

Malaysiakini piloted a series of vertical videos featuring Gen Z journalists speaking directly to their peers about issues that mattered to them. Each video was produced in three formats – traditional long-form, a 4-minute version, and YouTube Shorts – to explore how format impacts engagement and retention. By closely tracking performance, the team gained valuable insights into which styles resonate most with younger audiences and how to adapt hard news for a generation that prefers quick, relatable content.

[Vertical video series](#)

Initiative 2

Gen Z News Lab for Two-Way Dialogue

Malaysiakini introduced the Gen Z News Lab, a hands-on workshop designed to connect journalists with younger audiences. Bringing together Gen Z participants and newsroom staff, the sessions fostered open discussions on media habits, trust, and content preferences. Participants also collaborated on content creation, offering new perspectives while learning about editorial workflows.



The team post in-person workshop

“Project Sigma helped us address the challenge of reaching Gen Z, a key issue we’ve identified, and now, we are able to execute a targeted strategy to engage this [young] audience.”

Azreen Madzlan, News Editor, KiniTV

Results

- Short-form videos outperformed traditional long-form content during controlled tests 88% of the time in terms of views and engagements.
- Soft news resonated more with Gen Z audiences, emphasizing the importance of presenting hard news in a more engaging and relatable format.
- 80% of participants reported they would fact-check news more often after the workshop.
- 75% of journalists who participated in the workshop said that they now feel more equipped to connect with Gen Z.

Sin Chew Daily

Initiative 1

Launching a mobile-first video experience

Sin Chew Daily introduced a vertical video player within their app to better reflect Gen Z mobile-first, short-form consumption habits, called “Infinite Scroll”. This feature served up re-formatted videos on trending news, lifestyle, and explainers in a fast, swipeable format. The team rolled out the player with a soft launch, using Google Analytics 4 analytics to track behavior and quickly iterate.



[Infinite scroll feature](#)

Initiative 2

Empowering journalists through Gen Z focused training

Recognizing that technology alone wouldn't drive engagement, Sin Chew Daily invested in upskilling its editorial and content teams across regional offices. Workshops on video production, storytelling, and SEO equipped journalists with the tools and mindset needed to create content that resonates with Gen Z. This initiative fostered closer collaboration between editorial and digital teams, building a more agile newsroom culture prepared to adapt to evolving audience expectations.



The team post in-person workshop

“Throughout this process, I have gained valuable insights into leveraging data for validation, understanding Gen Z behavior and preferences, and strategically executing transformation initiatives.”

Niki Yong, Digital Product Executive

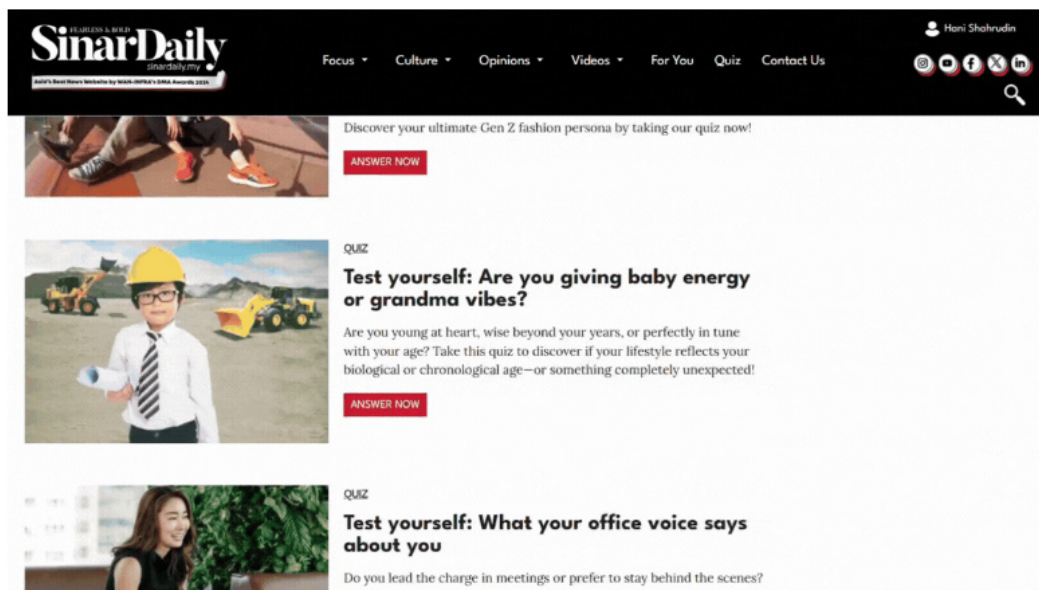
Results

- Infinite scrolling feature found a 94% increase in new users (18-24 age group) one month after launch.
- Android users spent an average of 38 seconds per session, and iOS users 28 seconds, both strong results for short-form video engagement.
- Targeted promotions increased engagement time from 15 seconds to 1 minute and 5 seconds, proving the impact of push notifications and in-app banners.
- 87% of participating editorial staff reported a clearer understanding of Gen Z news consumption habits, and 83% found the training applicable to their daily newsroom work, improving content workflows.

Initiative 1

Interactive Quizzes to Drive Engagement

Sinar Daily launched a series of interactive quizzes tailored to Gen Z interests, covering topics like identity, social media, and lifestyle. Designed to be fun and personalized, the quizzes encouraged sign-ups, allowing Sinar Daily to capture valuable first-party data on young users' preferences and behaviors. This digital initiative offered a scalable way to engage audiences while deepening understanding of what content resonates most.



[Quizzes on website](#)

Initiative 2

Building Brand Awareness Through Campus Events

To complement its digital efforts, Sinar Daily organized a series of on-the-ground events at universities and public spaces. These pop-ups featured activities such as treasure hunts, mental health sessions, and documentary screenings, aimed at fostering real-world connections with Gen Z. Partnerships with student groups and influencers amplified the reach, while the events encouraged app downloads and strengthened brand visibility among young audiences.



On-the-ground event

“Project Sigma helped us strengthen our target audience and boosted our visibility throughout the country and the region as well.”

Tasnim Lokman, Editor of Sinar Daily/
Head of Department for English News
Portal

Results

- Sinar Daily’s quizzes attracted ~7,700 total views, with a strong completion rate of 53% from those who started.
- Quizzes related to personal identity, social media, and work-life balance saw the highest participation, while mental health and finance topics had lower completion rates.
- The quizzes were most popular among female audiences (60%) aged 18 to 28.
- The initiative resulted in 700+ app downloads, driven by activations at universities and public spaces.

The Star



Initiative 1

Leveraging Gen Z Employees to Drive

The Star set out to rethink how it connects with Gen Z, starting with the young people already in its newsroom. The team invited Gen Z employees from across departments to pitch content ideas, suggest formats, and weigh in on how stories should be told. This internal collaboration led to the development of bite-sized, platform-native content and fostered a more agile workflow between editorial, content, and video teams, enabling faster, more effective production of youth-oriented digital content.



[Youtube Shorts series](#)

Initiative 2

Focus Groups to Understand Gen Z Habits

The Star also conducted a series of focus groups with young people from across Malaysia, including high school and university students and early-career professionals. These sessions explored how Gen Z consumes news, what content they trust, and what makes them stop scrolling. These sessions explored news consumption behaviors, trust factors, and platform preferences. The findings highlighted YouTube Shorts as a key channel for engagement, prompting The Star to adapt its content strategy accordingly.



Gen Z employees participating in focus groups

“[The experiment] matches some internal initiatives we wanted to work on, and this has helped to catapult it with guidance on how it can be done.”

Juliet Chow, Head of News Vertical

Results

- Total followers grew by almost 50,000 in 10 weeks and YouTube subscribers increased by approximately 1,500 after launching Gen Z-focused Shorts.
- The percentage of YouTube views from Gen Z (18-24) surged from less than 10% to 57% of viewers after targeted content campaigns.
- Short-form videos, tutorials, and lifestyle content were the most engaging formats, influencing The Star’s approach to digital storytelling.
- Gen Z participants highlighted trust and authenticity as key factors, emphasizing the need for transparent, credible reporting on social media.

Building a Better Future Together



As the media landscape evolves, effectively engaging Malaysia's Gen Z audiences will require creativity, collaboration, and resilience. No single publisher has all the answers, but by sharing knowledge, experimenting boldly, and embracing new technologies, the industry can collectively build a stronger, more vibrant future for journalism.

The work started through Project Sigma: Engaging Malaysian Gen Z for News demonstrates that innovation thrives when publishers come together to tackle shared challenges. By continuing to collaborate, learn from each other, and place young audiences at the center of publishers' strategies, we can create meaningful connections with the next generation and ensure a sustainable future for quality journalism.

Specifically, as they plan for the future, publishers should:

01 Invest in building relationships with Gen Z early

Meet young people where they are already. Gen Z doesn't discover news through traditional channels –they encounter it online. Publishers should prioritize mobile-first, short-form, and creator-led content to capture their attention and build trust.

02 Invite Gen Z to co-create your content strategy

The most impactful initiatives came from publishers who brought young people into the newsroom, through activation events and workshops or by integrating their voices into ideation and production. Gen Z aren't just an audience to be studied, they are willing partners in shaping the future of journalism.

03 Build a habit of experimentation, not just a product

Publishers who tested new content formats, A/B tested videos, or piloted new tech workflows saw stronger engagement and results. Gen Z will keep evolving and publishers must develop the capacity to evolve with them by embracing experimentation as a core newsroom mindset.

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the teams and leadership of our participating publishers – **Astro Awani, Berita Harian, Malaysiakini, Sin Chew Daily, Sinar Harian, and The Star** – for their dedication and collaboration throughout Project Sigma: Engaging Malaysian Gen Z for News. We would also like to thank our execution partner, **FT Strategies**, for developing the program content and consolidating research on the Malaysian ecosystem.

This program was made possible through the joint efforts of **Google** and the **Ministry of Communications, Malaysia**. Their collaboration and support have been essential in empowering publishers to start preparing for future news consumers.