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Kids World: Pop Culture for Alpha Consumers

Pop Culture & Media

Gen Alpha's unparalleled access to information has fostered a discerning taste in entertainment – as well as anxieties about current events. This closely connected cohort is flocking to content that offers digital touchpoints with the physical world, activates their creative agency, and empowers them to use their voices.

Summary

Phygital Natives: A Hand in Each World
Gen Alpha are searching out experiences that are enhanced by screens, not exclusive to them. Digital spaces that create new opportunities to connect with the physical world and 'IRL' (in real life) peers through mixed-reality adventures and digital hangouts are key to connecting with this cohort.

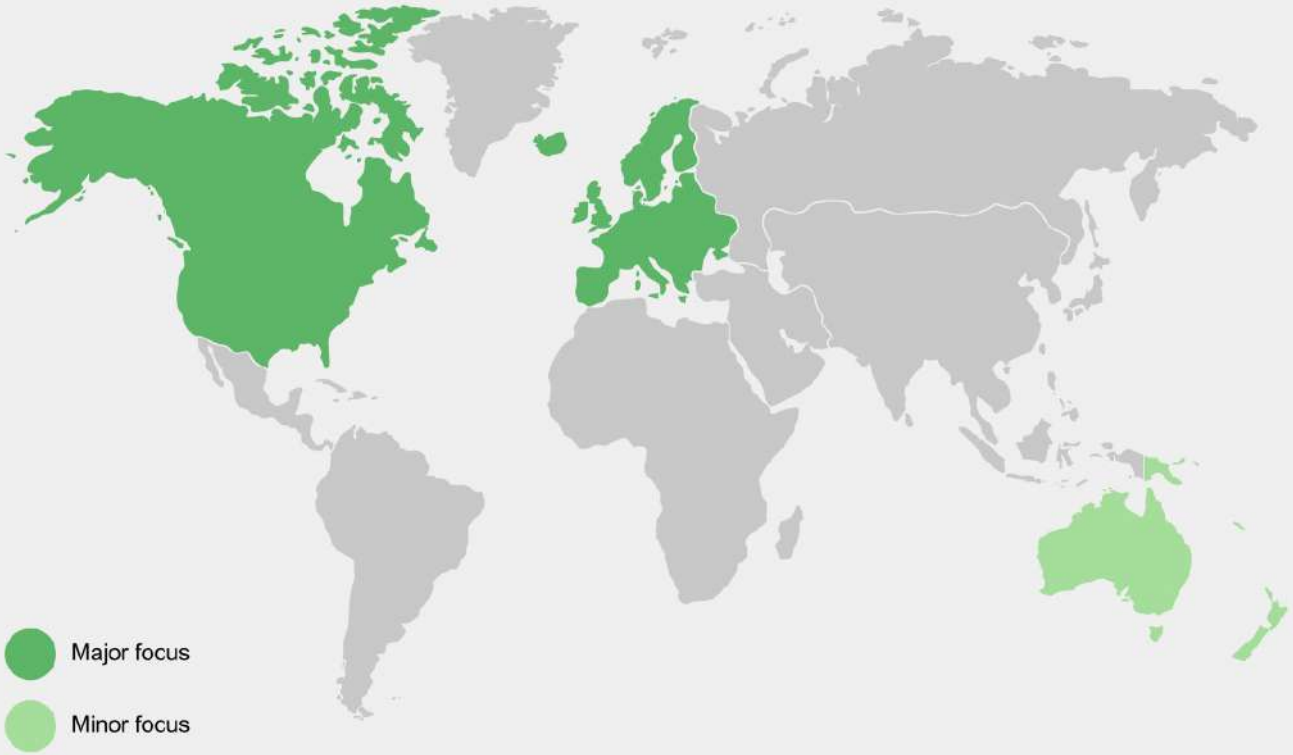
The Creative Imperative
From the performative creator ecosystem of TikTok to the game-crafting economies of Roblox, Minecraft and Animal Crossing, creativity is social currency for Gen Alpha – and some of them are already turning it into real cash.

Addressing Ambient Anxieties
Children's exposure to the news cycle has transformed. YouTubers talk about current issues, older siblings are engaged in activism, and even the gaming platforms where they hang out are **infiltrated by political hackers**. Brands can filter the flood of information to help kids manage anxieties around this coverage.

Screen Savers: Empowering Tomorrow's Heroes
Sixty-three per cent of Gen Alphas in the UK and US want to help save the planet (**Wunderman Thompson**, 2020), and only 11% think big companies can be trusted with that task (**Beano**, 2019). Driven by global crises, they're quickly claiming their agency – and brands have to keep up to stay in the conversation.

At A Glance

The Regional Focus of this Report – Global



Relevant Industries

- Advertising/Marketing
- Gifts/Toys
- Media
- Technology/Electronics

Trend Duration



Innovation Platforms



Key Stats

2x	Traffic on kid-targeted apps has doubled in the US and UK during the pandemic
$500m+	YouTube's revenue from children's media is estimated at between $500m and $750m per year
60%	Six in 10 three- to four-year-olds in the UK go online (on any device)
68%	The percentage of global teens who said they want their parents to be more involved in their online lives
62%	Two-thirds of Gen Alpha frequently see YouTubers behaving in ways they don't agree with

Phygital Natives: A Hand in Each World

52%	The percentage of US teens spending the same amount of time or more with their real-life friends during lockdown via Roblox, voice/chat programs and other gaming platforms
30%	An estimated three in 10 US kids aged 12 and under play online games every day
47%	The percentage of UK and US Gen Alpha kids who want to split their indoor and outdoor time evenly

Creative Imperative

86%	The percentage of Gen Alpha who say they use new technology to design, build, and make things
20%	One-fifth of Gen Alpha are making money off of their digital creativity
$1.5bn	The mobile version of Roblox alone has cracked $1.5bn in lifetime revenue
59%	The percentage of five- to 15-year-olds in the UK who play online games

Addressing Ambient Anxieties

70%	The percentage of US teens who report anxiety and depression as a major problem among their peers
350%	The number of children calling Canadian national hotline Kids Help Phone jumped by 350% in early March as they sought support in managing their fears about the fallout of Covid-19
85min	Kids aged four to 15 in the US, UK and Spain now spend an average of 85 minutes per day watching YouTube videos

Screen Savers: Empowering Tomorrow's Heroes

63%	The percentage of UK and US Gen Alphas who'd like to work somewhere helping to save the planet
11%	By contrast, only 11% of UK and US Gen Alphas think big companies can be trusted to look after the planet
40%	The percentage of six- to 14-year-olds in the UK and US who feel it's their responsibility to save the planet, rather than their parents' or teachers' to save the planet
6	Only six out of 50 leading shows for UK pre-schoolers feature BAME lead characters. No leads were people with disabilities

Phygital Natives: A Hand in Each World

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- **Kids Pioneer the Metaverse:** In our **Pop Culture & Media Mid-Year Review**, we've highlighted the dawning of the metaverse – a shared virtual world where people can interact, create, and even build businesses. This mode of interacting with online spaces is already the norm among Gen Alpha, thanks to gaming platforms like **Minecraft**, **Roblox** and **Fortnite**, which have become social lifelines during lockdown. Fifty-two per cent of US teens are spending the same amount of time or more with their friends online as they did face to face before lockdown (**Roblox**, 2020).

  US developer Epic Games' Fortnite is diversifying time spent on its servers with the May launch of Party Royale Island, where players hang out and brands host events (see **Culture Converges on Fortnite**). Meanwhile, Roblox partnered with Warner Bros to launch an in-game version of Wonder Woman's homeland to promote the movie franchise. **The Themyscira Experience** lets players train like the comic hero, and rewards visitors with movie-themed skins for their avatars.

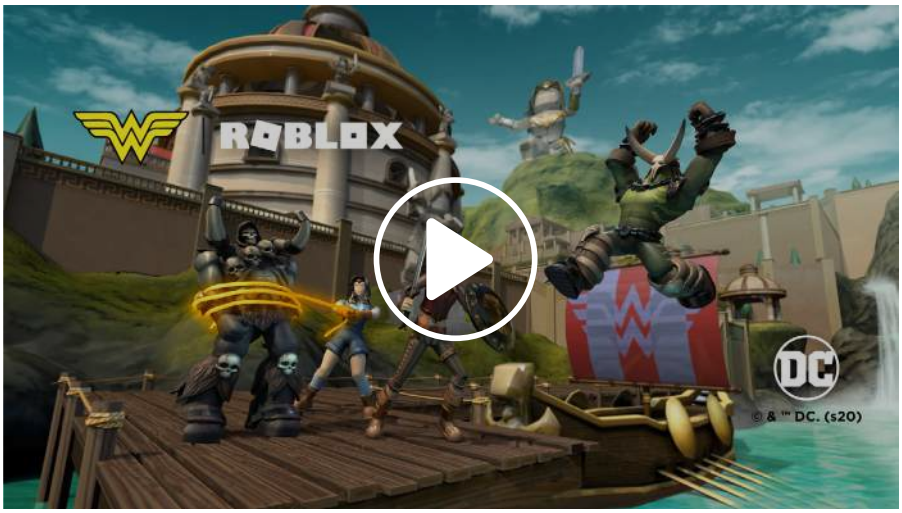
- **Prompts for IRL Interaction:** Forty-seven per cent of UK and US Gen Alpha kids like splitting their indoor and outdoor time evenly (**Wunderman Thompson**, 2019). Microsoft-owned game Minecraft has been letting kids build blocky digital worlds for others to explore for over a decade, amassing **126 million active monthly players**.

  The December 2019 release of its mobile augmented reality (AR) game **Minecraft Earth** has brought player creativity into kids' physical neighbourhoods. Builders can construct maps in miniature at home and then place them outside, using their phone's AR capability. Minecraft Earth hosts adventure events, where up to 40 players can come together in a safe public place to conquer a castle or solve a puzzle in huge life-sized maps through their phone screens.

  Brands in the geolocation gaming sector like Niantic are adapting to their audience's lockdown limitations by making more gaming elements available from home, and are even working on letting people virtually visit their favourite IRL locations.



© Fortnight

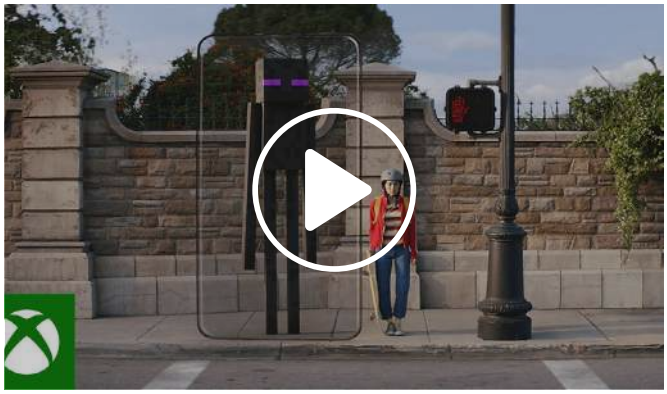


© Roblox

- **Phygital Episodes:** Research from the Lego Group finds 68% of UK kids want more toys that blend physical and digital experiences – although only 25% of parents agree (**Lego**, 2019). The Danish toy giant's **Hidden Side** Lego sets marry the traditional building bricks with a mobile online game. The series lets kids build multi-level story worlds, with sets like a haunted school, or a possessed fire truck. Each set unlocks a new part of an interactive story, while a companion **animated web series** further explores the stories behind the haunted locations.

  Once built, players scan their physical sets to turn them into a mixed-reality online game. 'Ghost hunter' kids solve puzzles and trigger story elements by interacting with moving parts of their sets, while chasing AR ghosts controlled by other players online around the toys in their home. This mode of play gives kids a hand in each world, moving frictionlessly between digital and physical.

  For more on how brands are adopting tech-enabled screen-free play, see Tech-Enhanced Interactive Play in **Kids World: Commerce for Alpha Consumers**.



© Minecraft Earth



© Lego



© Lego

The Creative Imperative

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- **Earning Creative Currency:** Creative drive is in Gen Alpha's digital DNA: 86% of the UK cohort say they use new technology to design and make things – and a fifth are already making money from their online hobbies (**Beano**, 2019).

  One such avenue of income is the kids' gaming sector, where crowd creation plays a huge role. Within the first 10 days of Nintendo's Super Mario Maker 2's release in June 2019, **players created two million levels**. Roblox hosts over 50 million community-created games, many of which have been **played more than one billion times**. Roblox gives shares of in-game purchases to their creators, and reported in August last year that it was on track to pay out $100m in 2019. Consumer spending on the game's mobile version alone is estimated to have surpassed $1.5bn (**Sensor Tower**, 2020).

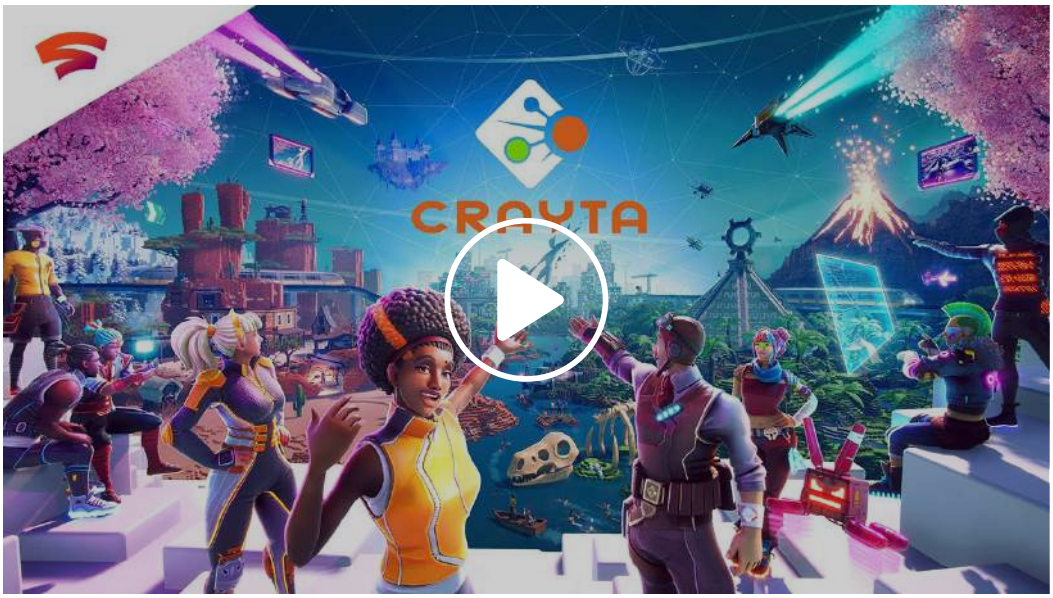
  "The next generation don't expect to passively consume content; they want to co-create, build and develop the content to get much more personalised experiences," said Jonathan Watson, chief product officer of UK market data analyst Kids Insights on its **July analysis** of online gaming. This breeds a cohort who not only connect with their peers through co-creation, but are conscious of their labour's value. This sense of agency will see Gen Alpha define the platforms they give their attention to, instead of being defined by them.

- **Team Building:** Cloud gaming service Google Stadia's Crayta – launched on July 1 – brings socialisation into the creative process by letting multiple players collaborate in real time. Previously, time spent building game levels or outfits was a solitary experience. Crayta will make the process – from placing pre-made assets to complex actions like coding original game architecture – a communal experience, with hands-on, in-the-moment teaching opportunities between players.

  For more on how brands are nurturing children's creativity, see Free Expression & Self-Steered Brand Experiences in **Kids World: Commerce for Alpha Consumers**.



© Roblox



© Crayta

Addressing Ambient Anxieties

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- **Taking Responsibility:** Four- to 15-year-olds in the US, UK and Spain spend 85 minutes per day on average watching YouTube videos (**Qustodio**, 2020). That share of attention has motivated kids' brands to grow their content offering on YouTube to reap the benefits of an online audience. In times of crisis, this audience becomes a responsibility.

German toy brand Playmobil reacted quickly to the Covid-19 crisis with its March release of a **video** on its YouTube feed. It features Playmobil robot figure ROBert explaining what coronavirus is, how it travels, and why humans should stay at home. The brand has since followed up with branded face masks and **praise for kids** for doing such a good job during lockdown.

Established news outlets are catching up. In April in the US, NBC News started releasing **twice-weekly online kids' editions** on YouTube, because the team was concerned about kids watching the TV broadcast along with parents during lockdown.



© Playmobil



© NBC News

- **Managing with Meditation:** US sixth-graders who received mindfulness training at school through non-profit **Calmer Choice** report feeling less stressed. Brain scans also show reduced activation of the regions that process fear when the kids viewed images of fearful faces (**MIT**, 2019).

  Content that makes mindfulness accessible to children is a valuable addition to the parent toolset. Disney addresses mindful minors with its **Zenimation** suite of short films composed of soothing soundscape moments from its library of animated features.

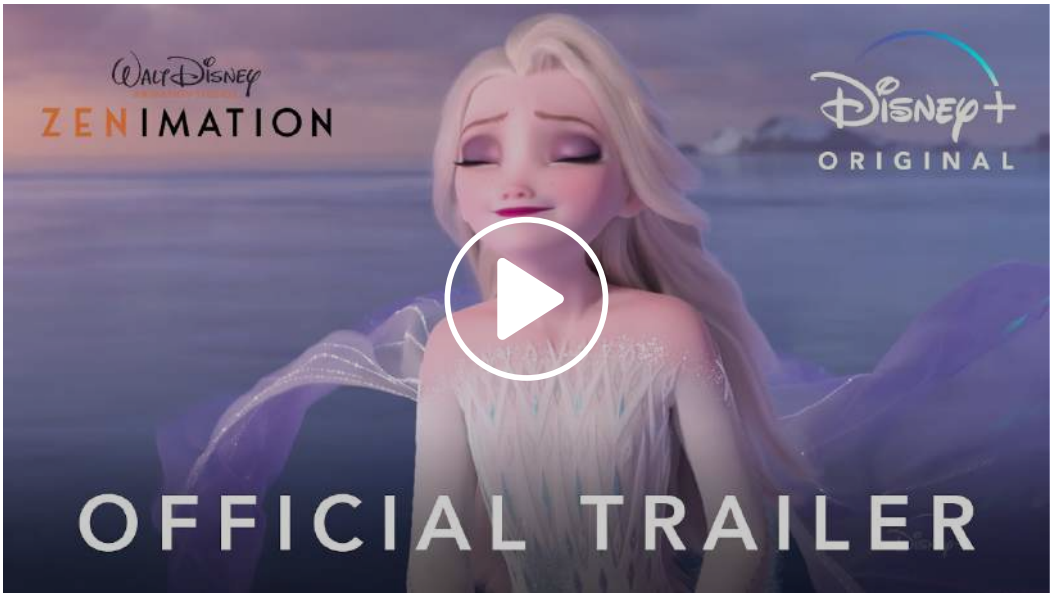
  Meanwhile, Sesame Street collaborated with meditation app Headspace for **Monster Meditation**, a web series that ties particular states of mental agitation to common situations in kids' lives. Established characters from the US kids' show demonstrate how meditation can help them: like energetic toddler Elmo going through calming exercises to help him fall asleep.

- **Gentle Gamification:** Gamification has a bad reputation over its connections to addiction. But in capable hands, it can be used as a high-impact tool to help kids form healthy habits.

  On May 7, UK children's network CBeebies launched **Your Mindful Garden** within its Go Explore app. At the start of the experience, children are asked to plant a digital tree. Each day, the app sets three tasks that introduce focus, creativity and calm. After completion, kids can unlock items to decorate their trees. This gentle gamification adds a tangible immediate reward that nudges children towards the long-term gains of daily meditation.



© Monster Meditation



© Disney+

Screen Savers: Empowering Tomorrow's Heroes

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- **Voices for Critical Kids:** The unprecedented variety of content in online creator ecosystems is fostering discerning tastes among Gen Alpha. Seventy-three per cent think it's important to question online info, and 62% frequently see YouTubers behaving in ways they don't agree with (**Beano**, 2019). As they constantly communicate with peers online, they quickly learn to take their own positions. Media outlets are catching up to vocal proto-activists and centring formats around kids' perspectives.

The **April 2020 edition of the New York Times for Kids** focuses on the pandemic, and foregrounds the voices of children from its community. "It became so clear that, since things change so quickly day to day and we never know what's happening next, the issue was going to be less explainers and analysis and more reflective [of kids' experiences]," kids section editor Amber Williams told Nieman Lab. To that end, the news organisation also hosted a live **Q&A for kids**.

On June 29, following its 8.46 minutes of broadcast silence on June 1 in memory of George Floyd (see **Brand Response to BLM Uprisings**), US kids' broadcaster Nickelodeon met its audience at eye level with Kids, Race and Unity: A Nick News Special. Hosted by US singer Alicia Keys, the hour-long presentation saw leaders of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement answering questions from real kids. It also highlighted teen activists fighting racial injustice, and offered tools for family conversations about race.



© ABC Me



© Nickelodeon

- **Opportunities in the Representation Gap:** There is still a long way to go towards fair representation in the media. Half of 12- to 15-year-olds in the UK say they've seen something hateful online about a particular group of people in the last year – up from a third in 2016 (**Ofcom**, 2020). The gaps still to fill in our narratives are opportunities to address children who don't see enough of themselves on-screen.

  Australian broadcaster ABC Me's four-part series First Day follows a young trans girl starting secondary school following the summer she decided to start presenting as a girl. The show scored ratings 25% above channel average among girls aged five to 12.

  Meanwhile, with public awareness of the anti-racism movement at peak around the BLM uprisings, which began in May, US anti-racism scholar and author of **How to Be an Antiracist** Ibram X. Kendi's board book **Antiracist Baby** quickly outsold its 50,000 pre-publish print run. This prompted its publisher to order 100,000 more copies before its June launch.

- **Hero Origin Stories:** Streaming platform Disney+'s unscripted series Marvel's Hero Project tells the stories of 20 US kids who are making a difference in their communities – from fighting childhood abuse to campaigning for kids with limb differences. Each child was inducted into the Marvel canon with their own superhero comic – the 20 special issues are available for free at **Marvel's digital comic store**.



© Marvel Hero Project



© Marvel Hero Project

Future Insights

Build Omnichannel Experiences
Gen Alpha are digital natives, not digital exclusives. Use screens to enhance physical spaces and encourage interactions with real people, like Lego's Hidden Side. Gen Alpha want to use digital experiences to connect to the world, not escape from it.

Create Platforms for their Point of View
Look to news formats like Nick News Specials that let Gen Alpha speak their mind, connect them with experts, and teach them how to take the conversation further.

Make Content Participatory from Creation
This cohort will not simply sit back and be served stories – they want to be handed the tools to participate and create experiences from the ground up. To keep up with Gen Alpha's sophistication around digital creative tools, your strategy for user-generated content has to be immediate, complex, and collaborative.

Extend your Reach with Diverse Voices
US Census data suggests Gen Alpha's arrival will contribute to the most diverse generation yet, with no one ethnic background making up more than 50% of the country's population by 2045 (**Hotwire**, 2019). Brand storytelling needs to reflect this diversity to connect with Gen Alpha now.

This is just a sample of the comprehensive Pop Culture & Media trends intelligence we offer.

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