

CRINGEY OR COOL?

What Teens Really Think About ***Trendiness in Ads***

New research reveals teens prefer authentic cultural connections over social media tricks—and they can spot the difference in seconds



The Tightrope of Teen Marketing

Nothing catches a marketer's attention quite like a shiny new trend. But trend hopping comes with significant risks, especially today, as viral moments catch fire and flame out faster than you can flick a BIC. A brand that gets it right lives to move on to the next big thing, but those that get it wrong are suddenly seen as “out-of-date,” “old,” or “cringe.”

In October, TeenVoice, a teen research and insights firm, surveyed 1,971 13- to 19-year-olds about brands' use of trends, breaking down their preferences, pet peeves, and the platforms they deem “cool.”

Key Takeaways

1

Cultural Trends Matter More: Teens prefer ads that align with broader cultural movements (like music) rather than fleeting social media fads. Trends like fashion and beauty resonate longer than transient elements like audio overlays and filters.

2

Strategic Tactics: Teens appreciate thoughtful use of trends, such as integrating trends into logos or viral recreations that feel natural. However, forced use of slang often backfires, as it can come across as trying too hard.

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Authenticity Is Key: Teens quickly reject ads that feel scripted, forced, or out of touch. For ads to resonate, product integration should be natural, the trend should align with the brand, and the tone should feel unscripted and genuine.

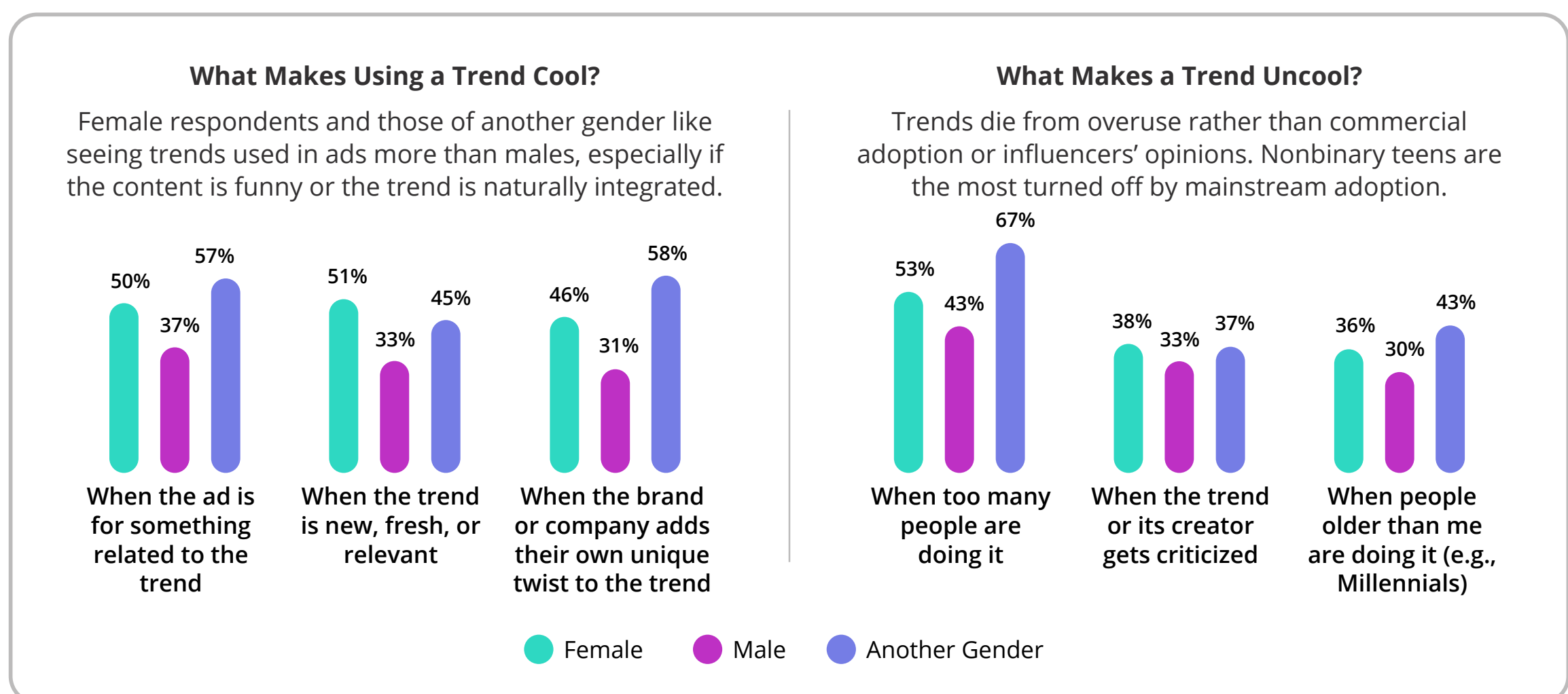
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Teen Involvement Is Crucial: Teens want brands to include them directly in the ad creation process to ensure authenticity and relevance. They believe that Gen Z input can help companies avoid appearing “cringe.”

From Enthusiasm to Eye Rolls

Teens' responses to brands' use of trends in marketing and ads ranges from enthusiasm to outright dismissal. Some teens appreciate the effort. "It's cool because it shows that the brand knows what's recent and how to [get] some people's attention," says a 14-year-old White male from Texas. But others, like this 16-year-old White female in Iowa, offer some pretty colorful critiques, "It's like your parent wearing a crop top," she says. "You can't stop them from doing it, but you don't have to like it."

Female teens consistently show higher engagement—51% enjoy it when brands use new and fresh trends compared to 33% of males. However, they're also more discerning critics, with 56% rejecting overly scripted content compared to 38% of males.



Cultural Connection Over Viral Tricks

While many marketing strategies focus on leveraging the latest TikTok features or Instagram filters, the data shows teens are increasingly drawn to broader cultural movements.

Music-related trends lead the pack, with 55% of teens responding positively, while only 25% appreciate video filters and 28% connect with trending audio overlays.

Some tactics consistently resonate: humor plays a significant role in teens' positive reception of trend-based ads, with females particularly favoring funny content (45%). Nearly the same number of teens think it's cool when brands change their logos to incorporate trends (48%) and recreate viral videos featuring their products (47%).

The use of slang is an “enter at your own risk” kind of situation. The data shows an almost even split, with 32% of teens calling it cool and similar numbers finding it cringe-worthy. “Who’s in charge of their marketing team?” asks a 15-year-old Hispanic female from Georgia. “I know young people are the main target audience, but like, using our slang is kind of desperate.” A 16-year-old Black female from Idaho agrees, saying that when companies use words like “sigma” and “demure,” it makes her wince.

Timing Is Everything

Trends are notoriously fleeting in the teen space, with certain types burning out faster than others. According to the respondents, beauty and fashion

trends stick around for one to three months, while social media filters, audio snippets, and dances have a shelf life of a month or less. This indicates that brands must act fast to catch a trend’s peak or risk being seen as old.

One significant insight from our survey is how quickly teens tire of trends once they hit the mainstream. **Oversaturation, association with older audiences, or being co-opted by influencers can rapidly make a trend uncool.**

“When brands use trends after they’ve been around for more than two weeks, it becomes old and it just seems cringey, like with the “very demure and mindful” trend, says a 15-year-old Hispanic female in Texas.

The Big 3 of Authenticity

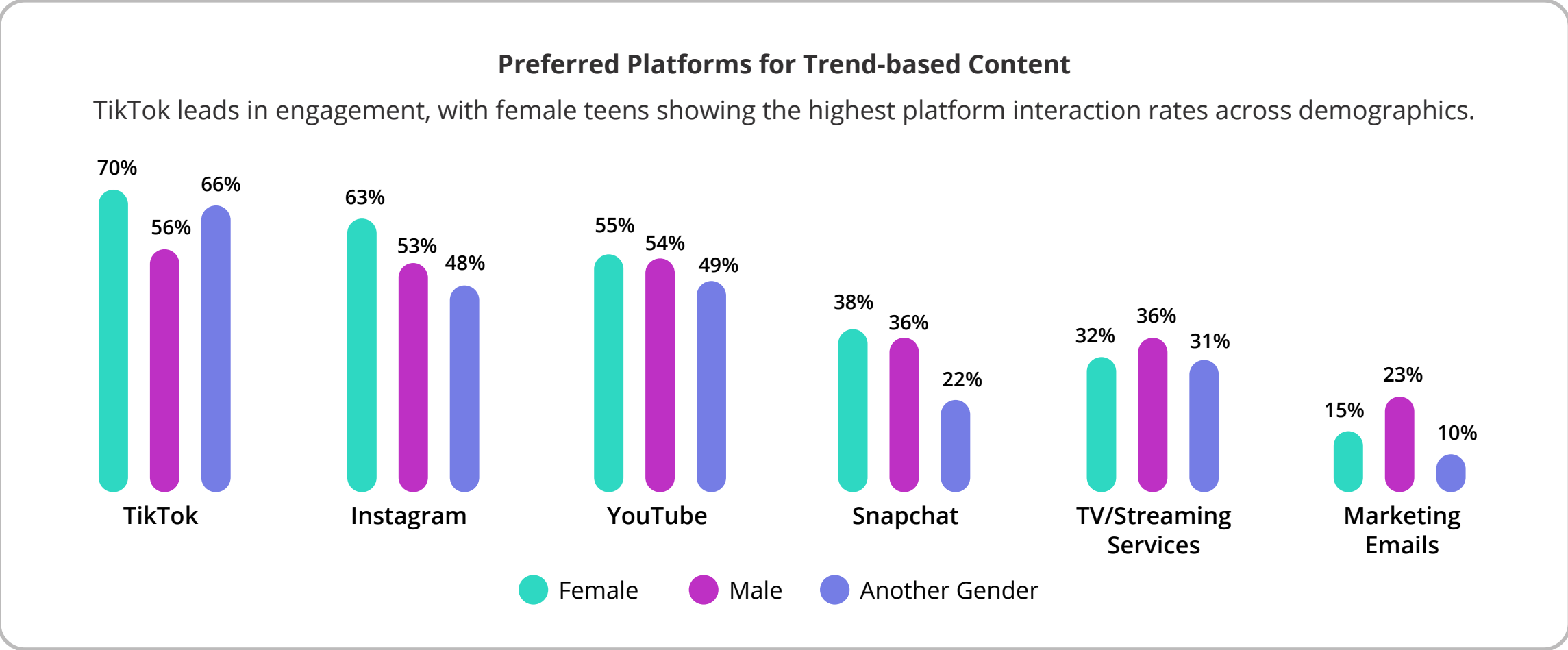
For trend use to feel authentic, the research identified three critical elements:

- ✓ **Natural Product Integration:** When brands force their products into trends artificially, 43% of teens react negatively. A 17-year-old White female from Indiana explains: **“I think it is out of touch or not cool whenever the trend isn’t relative to the item they’re trying to sell.”**
- ✓ **Brand Alignment:** Forty-two percent of teens dislike when companies use trends that do not relate to their brand identity. The expectations vary by industry—82% of teens expect entertainment companies to engage with trends, while only 56% expect it from financial services.
- ✓ **The Right Tone:** Teens sense when brands are pandering to them. A 17-year-old Hispanic female in New Jersey says she doesn’t like ads that are “...clearly written by old men that have no idea how Gen Z or Gen Alpha actually act.” Also, **anything that feels overly scripted is a big turn off,** according to half the respondents. As one 15-year-old White female from Idaho emphatically states: “Don’t use a script!! When it seems too rehearsed, it sounds like the seller is talking down to you in a condescending way.”

Where to Reach Them

The research shows clear platform preferences for trend-based content. TikTok leads with 65% engagement, followed by Instagram at 58% and

YouTube at 54%. Traditional channels lag significantly, with TV/streaming services at 33% and marketing emails at just 18%.



The Best Advice? Ask Teens Themselves

Perhaps the most useful piece of advice comes from teens themselves. “Don't just grab a random person and force them to do a TikTok trend,”

advises a 16-year-old male from Massachusetts. “Have a young kid watch the ad and tell you if it's cringey before posting. It's not hard.”

Want direct insights from teens?

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The TeenVoice Difference

TeenVoice goes beyond traditional research methods to capture the authentic voice of teens. At the heart of our methodology is EvolveMe, a dynamic digital platform where thousands of diverse teens actively participate in daily learning and research activities.

What makes our approach unique:

Living Research: Unlike one-off surveys, we maintain ongoing conversations with teens as trends and attitudes evolve

Natural Dialogue: Our interactive platform encourages honest, unfiltered feedback in teens' own words

Diverse Voices: We capture perspectives across age, gender, race, ethnicity, and geography

Real-Time Insights: Track emerging trends and shifts in teen attitudes as they happen

Deep Understanding: Uncover not just what teens think, but why they think it