

Navigating the Noise: The Quest for Meaning in 2024

Kaitlyn Tecklenborg

Some may refer to our current times as “skibidi Ohio,” terms that Generation Alpha uses to describe anything weird, crazy, and chaotic. Indeed, 2024 has its fair share of chaos and weirdness, especially in regards to the human experience. The phrase 'unprecedented change' to describe 2024 is seemingly inescapable, yet every period in history has experienced its own unique transformations. While technology plays a significant role in defining our era, it's not the sole unique factor. The human experience in 2024 is characterized by a paradoxical mix of hyper-connectivity and profound isolation, rapid information flow, and a quest for deeper meaning. That, and the adoption of “sigma grindset,” at least if we ask the youth.

From quickly fading slang to fleeting internet fads, the digital age has morphed cultural trends into brief spectacles that reflect our collective desire for novelty and instant gratification. Of course, it is not slang itself that makes 2024 unique. While perhaps the specific phrases we use are unique, the adoption of new slang with each year has occurred throughout history from phrases like “far out” in the 1960s, “gnarly” in the 1980s, and “lit” in the 2010s until now. The true difference today lies in the speed at which new slang emerges and old slang fades. Before the internet, slang spread slowly through word of mouth and media. Now, terms like “swag” and “YOLO” have been replaced by the likes of “rizz” and “sigma,” often in just months. Spend an hour with middle-schoolers, and you'll hear “skibidi,” “Ohio,” “NPC,” “rizz,” and “sigma” repeated countless times. This rapid evolution of slang, often only having nebulous meaning, mirrors our current condition: a constant search for something new and interesting at the expense of true substance. Similarly, trends follow the same pattern. In the mid-2010s, the Ice Bucket Challenge raised awareness for charity, but now trends like vandalizing bathrooms for TikTok views emerge with no apparent rhyme or reason. Simply, in this day and age we seem to be increasingly seeing loss of meaning in our cultural phenomenon in favour of speed and intrigue.

With endless streams of information at our fingertips, attention spans have plummeted, driven by an online world designed to deliver constant hits of dopamine at the expense of our focus and mental well-being. As a teacher, I confront the realities of short attention spans daily. Most of my students would struggle to focus on this essay without distraction. This issue extends to almost every task they engage in, from watching videos and movies to writing and playing games. It's not just disinterest; it's a manufactured short attention span and a propensity for quick boredom. The vast amount of accessible information makes it easy to lose interest and switch to something else. If something doesn't grab our attention within the first few seconds, we move on. Ironically, the time when we have the most information available is when our attention spans are too short to engage with it. This is largely due to social media design. To keep us hooked on our apps, social media platforms deliver quick dopamine hits. Platforms like TikTok, with short-form videos often just thirty seconds long, epitomize this trend. Endless content offers endless chances to capture our attention, and algorithms quickly learn what keeps us hooked. We become slaves to these algorithms, constantly seeking the next dopamine hit. This app design has unfortunate consequences for our mental well-being and productivity. Engaging with quick and shallow content erodes substance in our lives, leading to dissatisfaction and boredom. Moreover, our attention spans dwindle so much that every notification becomes a distraction, and we lose the ability to focus on tasks at hand. Clearly, 2024 is unique in this regard; never before has our environment so intensely impacted our focus.

Our times are characterized by an interesting blend of urgency and apathy, marked by growing existential dread as well as indifference toward climate change plus rising social justice movements amidst rapid information exchange. Indeed, most of us are well aware of the changes our planet is undergoing. As the climate heats up, leading to more disasters and hardships, many

feel powerless to affect change. What's more is that there are people that seem completely indifferent. Despite the world becoming less inhabitable, these people are more concerned with their next vacation and taking photos for social media. In contrast, others care deeply with some even choosing not to have kids to save them from a world of climate dread. Many of us find ourselves wondering whether our planet will even support our lives in the next fifty years and that sense of uncertainty is terrifying. On the bright side, technology and social change have given rise to many social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter and MeToo. Social media helps us to amplify our voices and spread the word in ways previously impossible. It is heartening to see the ways people commit to being good citizens and protecting each other's rights. Unfortunately, the speed in which information is spread can lead to dilution of social and political messages. It's a tight rope to walk as an online activist between getting the word out and maintaining the integrity of a movement. As we navigate this intricate dance of urgency and apathy, the challenge lies in harnessing the power of rapid information exchange to foster genuine change without losing the essence and integrity of our crucial movements.

In this era, times are defined by hyper-connectivity facilitated by our technology. The irony in this lies in a paradox wherein most of us feel more isolated than ever despite the constant potential and opportunity for connection. Certainly, technology has made it easier and easier to connect with people at any time and anywhere. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of Zoom exemplified this newfound connectivity, yet the experience often feels hollow. Zoom meetings, in particular, have become synonymous with awkwardness, characterized by turned-off cameras and prolonged silence among staring faces. Clearly, despite ease of contact from digital sources, we as people feel like there is something missing. It is truly a special kind of paradox to feel both that you have more chance than ever to connect with people, yet also feel

as lonely as you've ever felt. All this to say, 2024 sees us in a time where technological means of communication have replaced a great deal of real human interactions. Gone are the days where you could easily meet new people at in person events, instead we use online dating platforms like Tinder to meet and connect. You'll find now, stepping into a bar or club can evoke a sense of distance and disconnection from those around us. It can almost seem as if we have forgotten how to connect and create meaningful real life interactions and relationships. Obviously, the sense of community and interconnection one gains from in person social interaction is irreplaceable by technology, yet that doesn't stop us from still trying. Perhaps it is because we're so glued to our technology that we can't fathom how to connect without it, regardless, loneliness across the world seems to be at an all time high.

Just like social movements have been on the rise, so is mental health awareness. Now, we are at a place that is arguably the most well informed humanity has ever been about mental health and its importance. In fact, these days it's hard to go online and not see at least one post asking you to check in with yourself and your feelings. Awareness has even sparked a large boom in the wellness industry, with online therapy platforms, workbooks for every possible ailment, and even crystal healing for pets. At its core, the growing mental health awareness is rooted in what appears to be a population wide quest for authenticity. People, whether consciously or not, are more aware of the pitfalls of technology and they are seeking to remedy them. Many are seeking continually more genuine experiences and striving for mindfulness in a world of superficial online personas. In this, we begin to see how the world may continue to change and create an ever more unique human experience. As the search for authenticity and wellness continues, future trends will follow. Perhaps we will soon see a push towards distance from our technology as people seek to address the negatives inherent to it. As the world changes

and our experiences morph, so too do our values. It is my hope and expectation that widespread human values will start to trend towards genuine connection, feeling grounded in the present, and compassion for others. Of course, as trends and values shift the reactions to those follow like a pendulum. Soon we will see the reactions to our current times shaping a new human experience and following that, another reaction that will further shift our values. For now, let's just enjoy 2024 for what it is... "skibidi Ohio".