

The Cost of Keeping Up

How Social Media is Shaping Gen Z's Money Mindset





Gen Z is the first generation to grow up fully online—and it shows.

For this digital-native cohort, social media isn't just entertainment, it's a cultural GPS. It shapes identity, builds community, and sets the bar for what success, security, and self-worth should look like.

But behind the filters and financial flexes, reality bites. Young Canadians are entering a tough job market, where unemployment and underemployment are rising, and inflation keeps pushing the cost of living higher. Layer on student debt, and the path to financial independence and it's giving more maze than straight line.

To unpack the tension between curated lifestyles and real-life challenges, **RBC teamed up with Environics Research to survey over 1,000 Gen Z** (which, for this report, includes young adults ages 18-24 living in Canada).

The goal? Explore how social media is shaping Gen Z's money mindset - from spending habits and savings stress to big dreams and deeper anxieties. It all points to one key insight: the true cost of keeping up is more than just financial.

Turning Insights into Action

With expert tips from financial educator Melissa Leong, this report goes a step further, turning insight into action, helping students and new grads navigate the online world without losing their financial footing. Because real confidence starts with clarity.

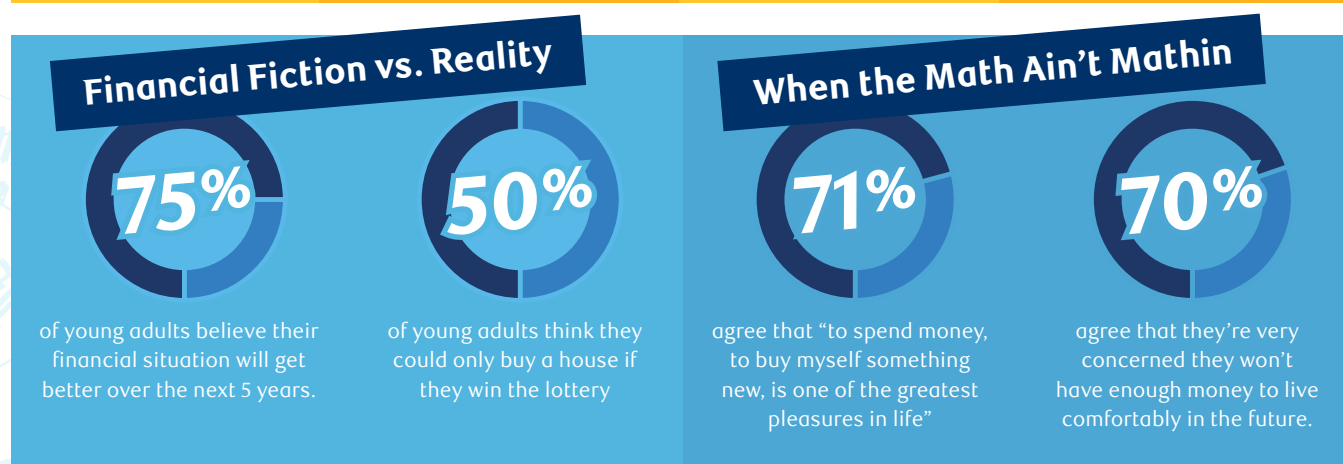
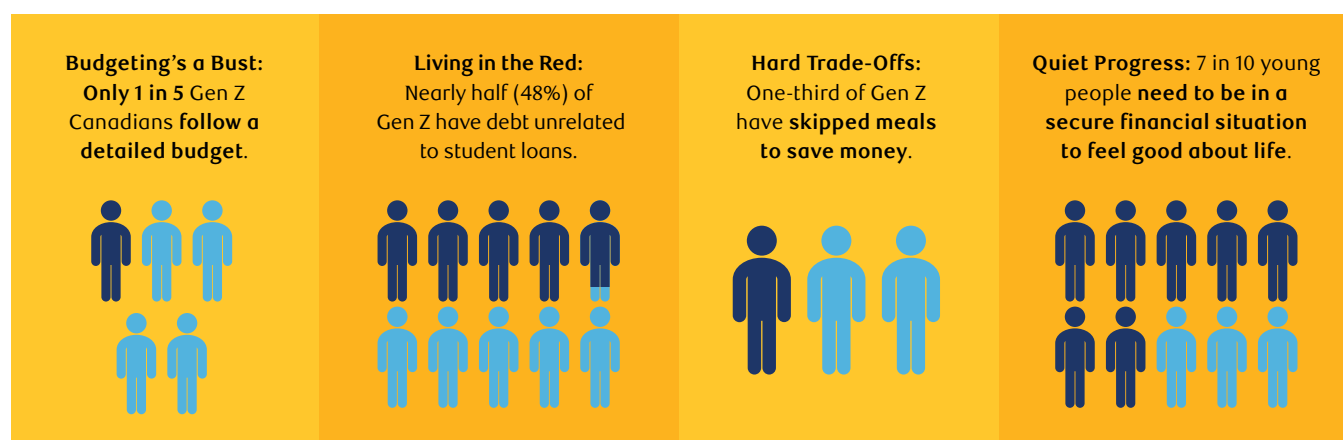
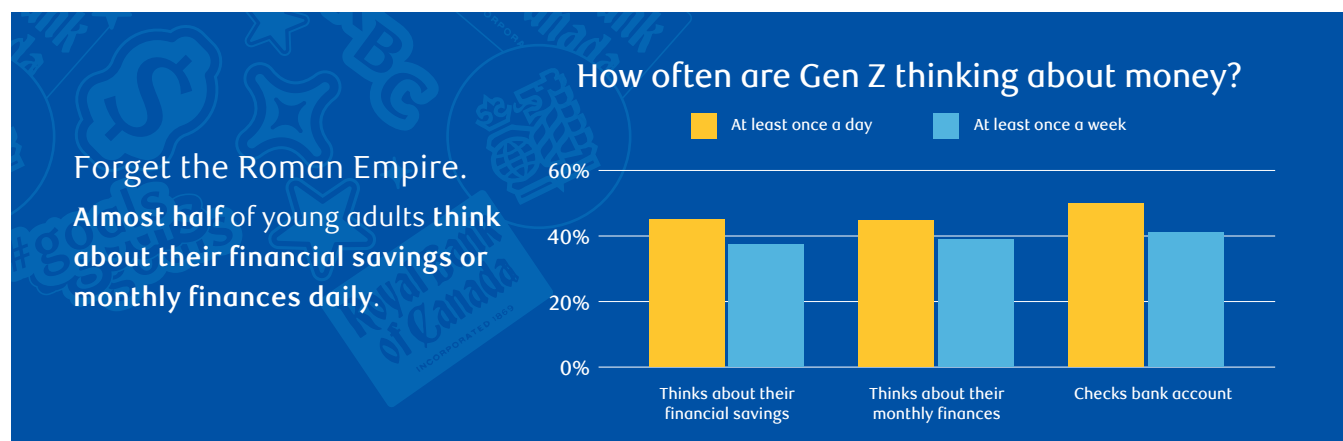


"Social media makes it easy to feel like you're falling behind — there's always someone with cooler clothes, better trips, or the latest tech. For young people already juggling school, rent, and rising costs, that pressure can feel relentless — but you're not alone."

- Melissa Leong, Financial Expert

SECTION 1

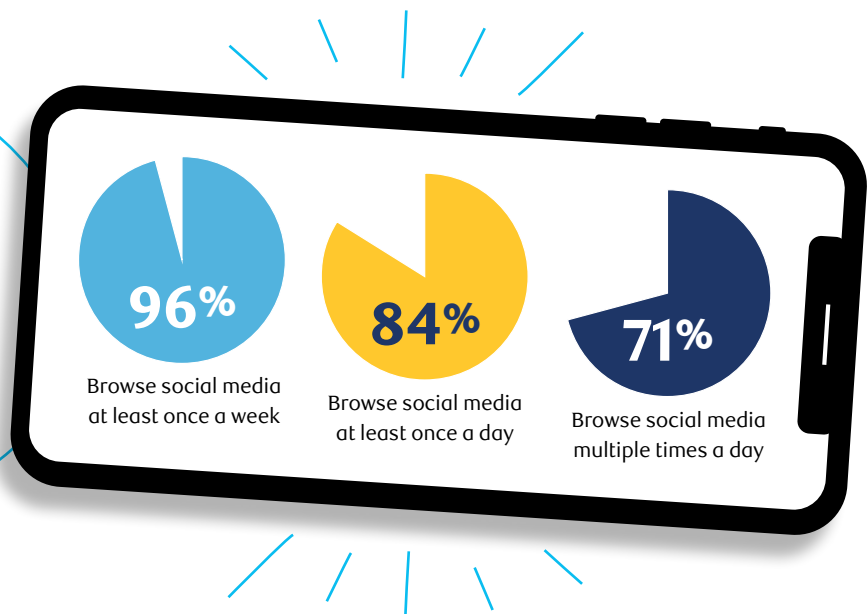
Gen Z's Financial Reality



The Social Media Ecosystem

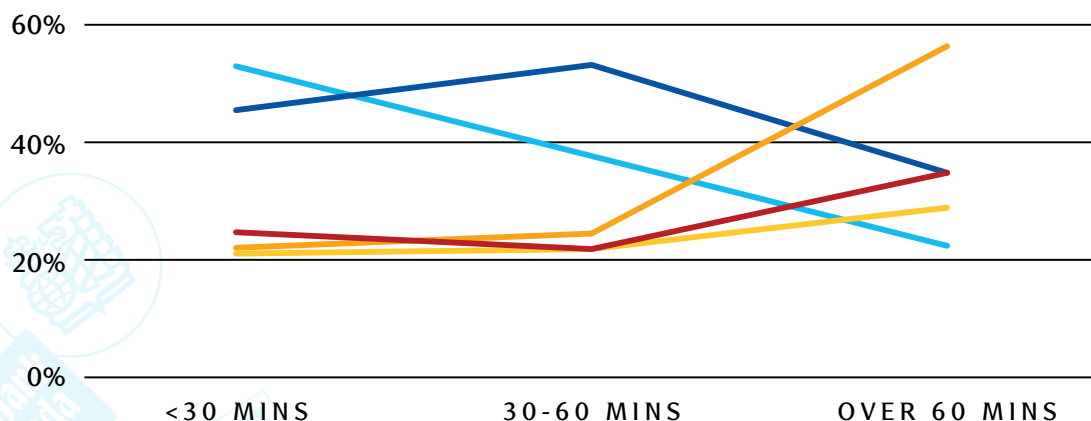


Social media is an inescapable part of daily life for young Canadians, defining how they connect, consume, and compare.



Social media delivers endless content and constant connection, but there's a steep trade-off. **After more than 60 minutes on social media, feelings of anxiety and jealousy increase, while all positive emotions drop significantly.**

Mindset After Time Spent on Social Media



The Financial Strain of Social Media



Far from harmless scrolling, social media too often leaves young Canadians feeling financially inadequate.

"I feel like I am financially behind for my age as others share how much they have in their savings and makes me doubt financial decisions I have taken in the past."

64%

of respondents sometimes feel financially behind because of what they see on social media

55%

of Gen Z say even when they're doing fine financially, social media can make them feel like they're struggling.

"Even though I am financially independent, social media makes me feel inferior and poor. It makes me want to go on trips or try out things that I can't afford."

"Seeing peers post about new gadgets or fashion sometimes makes me regret not spending money on such items."

36%

admit to buying something they've seen an influencer promote on social media, even when they couldn't afford it.

SECTION 4

An International Spotlight

When talking money feels ✨ too real ✨, the algorithm becomes the advisor.

Less than half (44%) of international students say they feel comfortable discussing money with friends. Compared to 55% of domestic students.

Where are they turning? Social media! 48% of international students say that most of what they know about finance was from online videos (YouTube, Fintok, etc.).

Social media is an inescapable part of daily life for young Canadians, defining how they connect, consume, and compare.

Domestic students (52%)

International students (60%)

I sometimes feel financially behind because of what I see on social media.
Domestic students (62%).

Domestic students (62%)

International students (68%)

I feel like I should be further along in life financially when I compare myself to people I follow online.

Domestic students (60%)

International students (55%)

Shifting the Money Mindset



“The good news is that with small steps, you can lock in on your financial wellness. From healthier screen habits to simple mindset shifts, these strategies can help you find a pause in the middle of all the noise.”

- Melissa Leong, Financial Expert



Press Pause

Seasonal feed cleaning. Every season, clean out your feed. Take the time to unfollow anything that sparks FOMO and instead focus on creators who actually teach, hype, or inspire you.

The two-day rule: Give your brain 48 hours to pause before hitting buy now. Park that ‘must-have’ item on a wishlist or a saved folder called ‘Do I need this?’ You’ll be surprised how often the urge fades.

Schedule time away from scrolling. Especially for international students, taking this time to review your budget and apply for scholarships or bursaries – whether it’s through international student offices, community associations or professional bodies – can have a major impact.



Lock In On Your Goals

Get clear on the “why.” Pull out the notes app, write down your goals and the reason behind them to make sure they actually matter to you and are not based on what you’re seeing online.

Make it bite-sized. Break big goals into small, achievable steps for quick and easy wins. Hot tip: automate those transfers when possible - reduce the mental load.



Get That Group Chat Going

Identify the friends in your peer group who share your money mindset. Studies show that people save more when they have peer support. Text a friend before buying something, or create a savings group where you check in once a week on your goals and cheer each other on. For international students, finding peers who are dealing with similar emotions is so valuable. Hearing relatable stories can broaden your financial picture and even give you tips on budgeting, saving and earning that are not on social media.

Celebrate your milestones. Tell your family or friends about a win. A simple tracker, progress bar - or even a note on your fridge - can go a long way.

RBC has the tools, products and track record to help you build your financial future.



EnviroNics Research, on behalf of Royal Bank of Canada, conducted a national survey examining how young adults in Canada aged 18-24 engage with social media and manage their financial and overall well-being. The results are based on an online survey conducted between September 6-16, 2025, among 1,018 Canadian residents aged 18-24. The sample is drawn from an online panel, and quotas were used to ensure the sample was representative by age, gender, region and student status. The final results are weighted to ensure the final sample reflects the actual distribution of the 18-24 year old population per Census data. As the survey uses a non-probability sample, no margin of sampling error can be calculated, per market research industry standards.