Snapshots Of Youth: The Lives Of Late Teens Across The World

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Candy is 18 years old and lives in Shanghai. Her favourite television programme is MashiMaro, a cartoon imported from Korea. Juergen is 17 and from Berlin. His favourite technology is the PC in his bedroom and he is fanatical about German hip hop. Maria from Mexico City loves the web for downloading music, chatting and fashion sites. She rarely goes out and tends to stay in her room with friends where she feels safe. Shinji spends a lot of time out of doors and loves window shopping in downtown Shibuya in his home town of Tokyo; his favourite gadget is his MP3 player. All these young people lead very different lives because of cultural and social circumstances, but they all listed Nike, MTV and Yahoo! among their favourite brands.

The brand choice and social behaviour of today's youth are driven by a desire for individualism in Australia, the UK, France and Germany, whereas in Japan, Spain, Italy, Mexico, Hong Kong and China, recognition of status and social acceptance are more important. The East–West divide still exists but the relative maturity and wealth of a country has more influence than geography in understanding how youth think and behave.

‘If everyone else in our group wears Nike and Reebok, I won't wear other brands. They will make fun of me like hell!’
17-year-old girl, Hong Kong

However, a recent global study into what influences the lives of young, urban opinion-formers reveals that history, economy and culture fade into insignificance in the world of global branding. The same names appear in Tokyo and Mexico as in Sydney and Berlin. This is not surprising for established, famous global names like Nike, Sony, Pepsi, Coca-Cola and McDonald's but nowadays many of the newer, less familiar international media, technology and fashion brands feature just as often.

These are just some of the findings from Snapshots of Youth, a study conducted by MindShare Worldwide to investigate the main influences on the behaviour and attitudes of young people across the world.

THE METHOD: A PICTURE TELLS A THOUSAND WORDS

Boys and girls aged 16- to 19-years-old, in ten major cities (Tokyo, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Sydney, Milan, Berlin, Madrid, Paris, London and Mexico) were given cameras and asked to photograph themselves, their bedrooms, favourite clothes, friends, brands and technology, together with places and items that are important in their everyday lives (see Figure 1).
They completed diaries to record media and social life and were interviewed to further understand social and media attitudes and behaviour. Each respondent has been recruited onto a private website through which further investigations are conducted by MindShare and its clients.

**GENERAL ATTITUDES – MORE SIMILARITIES THAN DIFFERENCES ACROSS THE WORLD**

When Oscar Wilde uttered his immortal words about youth being wasted on the young, he had a good point. In those days, young people had neither the opportunities nor the facilities to live life to the full. The same cannot be said today. Leading-edge, urban young people everywhere are active, open-minded, confident, sociable, creative and intelligent. They recognise that they are fortunate to be living in current times and, as a result, are happy with life, have an optimistic view of the future and an increasing global perspective.

Unlike young people in past decades, today's youth are not particularly rebellious or political. No respondents displayed any desire to change the world on ideological grounds nor do they have core beliefs that they feel should dictate how they live – they simply don't feel that there is much to be rebellious about. But while they may appear ambivalent towards ethical issues, there is an underlying trend towards campaigning that can be spread more quickly through the Internet – especially if supported by older opinion-formers and the media.

'I feel lucky with the way my life is at the moment and I am generally optimistic for the future.'
18-year-old boy, Madrid

Young lives are generally full of contradictions and appear somewhat hypocritical. While criticism is levied at some fashion brands for behaving irresponsibly in the labour market, their clothes are desired because they are well designed, cool and bring social acceptance. Drugs are generally considered to be bad but most use them and vegetarians wear leather. However, in Germany and the UK in particular, there is evidence of growing support for companies which show a caring attitude towards society and take world problems seriously.

'I know they make trainers in sweatshops but I don't lose any sleep over it.'
19-year-old boy, Paris

There is a strong carpe diem attitude, especially in Italy, Spain, France, Australia and the UK but there are signs that this 'seize the moment' way of life is also emerging in Asia. Many have seen the effects of working to 'have it all' on their parents' generation (e.g. health problems and a decline in family harmony through work pressure and stress). So this generation is seeking a balance between money and inner satisfaction. That is not to say that having money is not important – but it is no longer desired at the expense of a better quality of life.

However, although overall attitudes are optimistic, there is a high awareness of the problems and dangers facing individual countries and the world at large. Mexican youngsters are particularly worried about lack of safety, while the Japanese are concerned over personal financial security as Japan struggles through its economic difficulties and sees radical changes in parts of its traditional social structures.

Asians are anxious over not succeeding in the workplace and feel under intense pressure from parents. This is particularly strong in China where the one-child policy is recognised as having placed immense pressure on children to do well.
Europeans are the most fearful of loneliness, homelessness, depression and social isolation. They also expressed the greatest fear, with the exception of Mexico, of violence on the streets and the dangers of drugs. In addition, while there is universal appreciation of being able to lead a less restricted lifestyle, there are also fears (particularly in Italy and Germany) over the ultimate effects of a society without sufficient rules or structure.

The family is more important to this generation than the last. Parents are closer in mind-set, treated like peers and are often greatly admired both for their success and their understanding about what it is like to be young.

'I love to talk to my mother. She is more like my best friend. She gives me advice when I need it.'
16-year-old boy, Shanghai

However, spending time with friends is still regarded as the ultimate favourite time. Friends are fun to be with and are more understanding than anyone else, and can be tribally differentiated for different needs.

'Out of my five friends, one is a Barbie 70s mod, one is into Salsa, one is really caring, one is fanatical about Irish music, but we love each other. So one minute I am with my ska-punk friends and the next with my Salsa friends.'
18-year-old girl, London

Not surprisingly, most youngsters spend a significant amount of time outside the home hanging out with friends and enjoying cafés, fast food outlets, arcades and malls. Starbucks and Internet cafés are popular meeting places in most major European cities while tea-houses continue to thrive in China and Japan. Outdoor music is hugely popular in Sydney. The only exception is Mexico, where fears for personal safety impose restrictions on the amount of time spent out of doors.

When indoors, around three to four waking hours each day are spent in the bedroom either alone or entertaining friends. Bedrooms are generally cluttered in Europe and Australia and relatively sparse in Asia, but everywhere they are an identity statement displaying a montage of taste and personality. While enjoying this personal time, music continues to be a major form of entertainment. It is a recognised mood-enhancer and 'emotional foil'. It helps define personality and influences fashion and social life. But taste tends to be nationally driven particularly in the West which rarely, if ever, adopts popular music from the East. Apart from enjoying music, boys spend considerable amounts of time playing games on a computer or games consul.

'I have everything to hand and all my leisure activities are in one place: TV, PlayStation, guitar, hi-fi – everything I need except a fridge.'
16-year-old boy, Paris

Also not surprising is a continued passion for sport, evident across all countries with the exception of Japanese girls. Football is generally the overwhelming favourite but basketball is also very popular in Spain, Australia, China and Hong Kong. Striving for personal fitness is particularly important in the UK and Italy but overall, sport is about fun and intense experiences that can be shared with friends.

**MEDIA BEHAVIOUR – NOT MORE OF THE SAME BUT MORE OF SOMETHING DIFFERENT**
Youngsters are advertising and media junkies who haven't rejected marketing techniques even though they have a thorough understanding of them. They have high regard for stimulating and entertaining creative work, unusual, unexpected use of media space, sponsorship and personality endorsement.

They do not wish to be treated as mainstream consumers but prefer to be recognised as an important target group and singled out for appropriate communications. Companies which have made the effort to truly understand what it is like to be young nowadays are highly regarded. Those who hold up a mirror through the use of 'trendy young things' in advertising are seen as patronising and meet with disapproval.

It is stating the obvious to say that young people are different to adults – it is one of the rules of being young. But normally, as they grow up, they take on the characteristics of the previous generation and behaviour is repeated. The same cannot be said of young people today when it comes to media consumption. Behaviour is not only different to adults but it has also radically changed from previous generations of youth. These changes are so dramatic that media consumption patterns could look very different in future. Of course, people don't stop using media when alternatives arrive on the scene, they simply use them differently. Even so, some media could be under threat as effective and efficient advertising vehicles for reaching young people in years to come.

The media world has been totally transformed through the Internet and it takes up an increasing amount of time and attention. It is considered to be the most flexible form of media – a radio, video, post office and telephone all rolled into one. It is appreciated for its immediacy and its ability to 'spread the word', unite communities and accelerate campaigning. It makes other media appear slow and out of date.

'I can't go to bed without checking my emails.'
16-year-old girl, Hong Kong

'When I get back in the evening, my first reflex is to get online and see if I have any messages.'
17-year-old girl, Paris

'I had to stop because I was hooked and didn't sleep at all.' 17-year-old boy, Madrid
'I remember when I bought the computer. I spent 3 months non-stop connected to the Internet; I lost 4 kilos because I didn't even eat.'
18-year-old girl, Milan

'I don't want to receive any spam mail; downloading them is just a waste of time.' 18-year-old boy, Tokyo
'If you look at magazines or newspapers or watch television, when they appear they are already old-fashioned. It's over, everybody knows it and at that point it is no longer original.'
18-year-old boy, Sydney

However, Internet advertising is not always so popular. Banners are often irrelevant, 'pop-ups' are intrusive and there were numerous complaints of the time that is wasted downloading advertising that sometimes 'freaks out the computer'. Companies using the Internet for commercial purposes should inform, entertain and offer incentives/rewards for entering into a relationship.

Mobile phones are another transformation. They are a private and personal channel that is integral to everyday life. SMS messaging has revolutionised communications as they are fast, cheap and,
being portable, are often considered better than email. Once again though, in those countries where text is used for advertising, it is not always welcome. Jones (2002) explained clearly the driving forces behind text messages' popularity and some key insights into using them for youth communications.

Other research conducted by The London Business School shows that SMS advertising should be permission-based, precisely targeted and that messages should be sent only once to each recipient. There seems little doubt that these new media will succeed as advertising vehicles, providing that we listen to these views and don't destroy potential effectiveness through deluging young people with unsolicited and irrelevant messages.

These newer digital media channels are affecting the shape of media behaviour. Web radio has radically changed traditional listening behaviour especially in Asia, where radio is now considered old-fashioned. Print media too is moving from the page to the screen, as shown in Liz McMahon's (2002) article on 'Understanding the dynamics of youth readership' that featured the ongoing decline of youth magazine readership in the UK. One of the major differences with this generation is that youngsters have no need to print material in order to obtain a physical copy – they are totally comfortable reading on screen.

Television is still popular for relaxation and as a legitimate way of doing nothing, although most claim to watch TV less nowadays. It often fulfils a role closer to radio or CD player with channels like MTV providing a background when relaxing or unwinding.

Greater distribution of broadband connections is increasing the incidence of TV programmes being watched on a computer. Respondents in Spain and Hong Kong in particular claim that the Internet has replaced a proportion of TV viewing and everywhere it is a substitute for one activity or another. When respondents watch TV, many global formats feature on the favourites list (e.g. Reality TV, The Simpsons, Friends and Buffy).

'You just stare at the screen and don't even notice what ads you are watching, then an ad you really like comes on and you start watching again. If that ad doesn't come on, you just daze until the show comes on – you just zone out when you are vegging watching TV.'
18-year-old boy, Sydney

'Ninety-nine per cent of the times I watch TV is when I have nothing better to do.'
18-year-old boy, Milan

Outdoor media are among the most popular forms of advertising. Unusual use of space is particularly appreciated in Europe (e.g. graffiti, stencils, pavement advertising, moving images, stickers, flyers and 'wild posters'). But youngsters feel that advertisers are missing a trick in not targeting them better or not often enough out of doors where they are actively seeking stimulation and entertainment.

CONCLUSIONS

- The advent of new technology combined with the explosion in available, low-cost media and the phenomenal growth in instantaneous information means that the attitudes and behaviour of young people today are radically different from their parents and also to previous generations of youth. Today's young are accustomed to multi-tasking and use their media and communication devices simultaneously.
- The Internet in particular is having a dramatic and potentially long-term impact on TV viewing, radio listening and reading. The challenge is in understanding when teens are likely to be paying attention and what type of communications will cut through the clutter.
of messages to which they are constantly exposed.

- Teens nowadays are more sceptical and aware of the motivations of companies, advertising and brands. Their behaviour is often unpredictable and they are difficult to impress. At the same time they spend more money than ever before and are crucial to the success of youth brands today and all brands tomorrow.
- To place commercial messages where they are most likely to be noticed and acted upon means working harder to understand what is going to appeal, what will be dismissed and the reasons why.

REFERENCES


NOTES & EXHIBITS

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FIGURE 1: PHOTOGRAPH DIARY