Generation Z – Are They Really More Sustainable?

Today’s post-millennial teenagers have grown up with fundamentally different values, attitudes and consumer behaviors. They are the most self-aware generation yet, and marketing to this generation is the most ethical generation, but to what extent is this true for their fashion purchases? BoF Reports.

AMSTERDAM, The Netherlands - A report by The Center for Generational Kinetics last year shows that generation Z will become the fastest-growing generation in the workforce, which means that they will become a critical group in the buy force sooner than we might expect. Furthermore, research claims that critical differences with other groups might be highly relevant to identify consumer needs and expectations for the fashion industry. However, not much empirical research has been conducted on this generation, which makes it critical to get to know them better. More importantly, they are considered the most fashion-conscious generation and how sustainability is increasingly important for them. However, to what extent is this true for their fashion purchases? What problems do they encounter when making ethical choices?

Who is Generation Z?

What is interesting is that most companies addressing generation Z are often speaking of a set of universal characteristics to describe how all members think and behave, while this is highly doubtful in reality. Therefore, it is important to consider the knowledge given by these companies, yet maybe more important to use them as tendencies as opposed to facts or realities. For example, according to a report of Ernst & Young in 2015, members of generation Z are self-aware, realistic, innovative and self-reliant. However, even when they do share a set of values and common cultural experiences when growing up, people who belong to the same age group can differ in many ways.

According to researchers Johnson & Ein-Dar, especially young consumers make fashion choices as a form of self-expression, either making a statement of who they are or who they want to become. Hence, generation Z's possessions of products define them: first, because they spend time deciding, buying and using them, and secondly, because they see fashion products as an expression of their self-identity. In a study conducted by fashion graduate Queeny Cheung, it became apparent that price, quality and aesthetic were the most important motivations when making fashion decisions. Furthermore, sustainability became an increasingly important issue for generation Z as is commonly assumed, but this does not mean that they do not care about ethical practices. They just do not know how to access ethical products and feel as if they do not have the ability or resources to buy this type of product. More importantly, there are more problems they experience when making sustainable decisions.

Sustainable Fashion Consumption

Researchers assert that sustainable consumption is closely linked to consumer’s self-concept. There is much emphasis placed on self-expression and self-esteem, which then motivates consumers to showcase their values through their purchases and provide meaning to their lives and materials to obtain goods that can be found as expressions of their self-identity. In a study conducted by fashion graduate Queeny Cheung, it became apparent that price, quality and aesthetic were the most important motivations when making fashion decisions. Furthermore, sustainability became an increasingly important issue for generation Z as is commonly assumed, but this does not mean that they do not care about ethical practices. They just do not know how to access ethical products and feel as if they do not have the ability or resources to buy this type of product. More importantly, there are more problems they experience when making sustainable decisions.

A New Tool For Accessible Sustainable Shopping

As a solution to the issues that retain generation Z from converting sustainability concerns into their purchasing decisions, Cheung pitched the idea of an Instagram platform to show generation Z that being sustainable does not mean that you have to make drastic changes in your lifestyle, but rather small adjustments in your habits. This will be a small step towards changing the perception of the members in generation Z. Therefore, this platform will serve as an inspirational and sustainable shopping guide and help generation Z shop more sustainable.

The platform will present ethical fashion products from (fast-) fashion brands that are highly accessible for the target group. This results in higher awareness and consciousness when making fashion purchases. Furthermore, consumers will not find it troublesome to shop sustainable anymore, since they know most the brands. It is about guiding them through all the products and filtering the more ethical products, making it easier for them to make conscious decisions. Currently, lack of awareness about sustainable consumption makes ethical decision-making a very complex process for the consumer, resulting in consumers choosing for products that do not require complex decision-making.

In all, generation Z is a very young generation at this moment. They are still developing and exploring their identity, which means that there are lots of opportunities for brands to capture their needs and wants. Many brands can gain the advantage when it comes to the younger generation by understanding their values and motivations to make ethical decisions. Therefore, it is important for companies to prioritize the importance of sustainability and to make it an integral part of their brand identity.