

HEADLINERS

The MTV Generation?

Young people nowadays often get labelled the 'MTV generation' - they are seen as disengaged from serious issues and only interested in pop culture and celebrities. But is this fair? We asked delegates at an international peace conference in Egypt what they think.

Oliver, 20, Egypt

It's not true that young people are this 'MTV generation', that we are unconcerned with politics, but young people want to emulate their peers and celebrities. They are trying to get a relief from existing pressures because of the many issues young people are facing.

Mariam, 17, Cairo

Well I don't think it's fair to label everyone, but yeah there's definitely an MTV generation. Young people generally tend to follow the crowd, what's portrayed as cool and what's uncool. When people are insecure, and their life is empty and they're not engaged, especially with the education system, they tend to follow MTV and other popular shows. The reality shows on TV are really stupid, and the celebrities are bad role models.

Something has to be done with the education system to avoid disconnection. The media portrays people in politics as boring, with nothing going on in their lives. But people in politics are also people. They have a life and deserve to be portrayed as such.

Lauren, 19, USA

It depends on the country, but speaking of the US, yes it is a fair representation. The focus on pop culture is so strong among young people that they base their looks and lifestyles on celebrities and what they see through the media. It's all the women and fancy cars, and some people feel by watching that they may emulate them and become them. Young people having plastic surgery to look like other celebrities, it's crazy!

However we also see people who are trying to embrace different ideas and trying to change the world. I think young people need people to look up to, and something like MTV brings a common ground to relate to. A lot of the time there's not a lot of positive role models to follow, and only our celebrities to idolise. The fact that celebrities are role models now cannot be changed. We should use them to look up to; we have to use them, and try to integrate new positive role models, for they are the ones that drive change.

We would have to use the media to get that to change. Some people are already trying to change these views. For example using celebrities in campaigns like 'Vote or Die' (a youth voting campaign at the last presidential election), to give young people awareness.

Lorna, 22, Brazil

It is unfair to label young people the MTV generation. In Brazil, you have the choice between cultural programmes on TV which are rubbish and those which are not. Young people have the brains not to choose rubbish, but some people are unable to separate what is good from what is not.

Shaima, 18, Egypt

No it's not fair. The MTV generation may be a majority among young people, but some young people are studying and working, and it's unfair. We're not like that at all. There are lots of wars and issues going on today, and it's so negative we don't want to do anything positive, so people end up watching stuff like MTV, but that's not the case for all.

Ida, 18, USA

It's complicated. Yes and no, actually! There are a lot of people who watch MTV because they want to be cool, they want to be pretty. They will dress like celebrities, even talk like them. And then there are people who hate MTV, who are anti-MTV people and want to be different. They don't want to be conformist and would rather stand out. When it comes to pop culture people are just engaged like that.

For some young people, they're just not engaged with current affairs. It's perhaps from lack of family, not having siblings around and therefore not knowing how to fit in, and they took their cues on how to act like a teenager from TV.

A lot of work and a lot of education is needed to change this culture. It's interesting that we would still have to follow celebrities to make the media more positive. It's still very similar to MTV culture, even if they talking about climate change and politics and Hurricane Katrina. But this is what young people take the most notice of.

Sameth Mell, 24, USA

I think it depends on where you were raised. In Seattle there is definitely an MTV generation, and they are unable to go beyond that capacity. It's not fair, but they're not exposed to other mediums of information, just dominated by these forms of the media, and they are sedated this way.

I think that with the consumerism movement - this mass production movement, when you are exposed to all these media and ads every day, telling you what's hot and what you should be doing - young people start to disconnect from events globally and they are sedated, and they don't want to communicate about these issues. They stop caring. Even people who work with young people don't take them seriously and are also sedated by this consumerist culture. They so embedded in this system and are unable to change the system this way.

Jehad, 25, Palestine

I think that's right. Young people focus and look up to people on the TV - the famous, the Hollywood and Bollywood. It's not fair, to just have young people focus on music - people should pay more attention to people like us [the Palestinians].

Sarah, 19, Cairo

I don't think it's fair. It's far too generalising to categorise the world's youth into a USA music channel that promotes silliness, I think. None of the shows are meaningful, just how to find a date. It's not true; but this generation deserve this because this shallowness is in the air, and I think people should be more connected to current affairs. Some people are living on a dollar a day and some are just wondering if some guy is going to kiss them.

The more modernised countries get, the more spoiled we get, and we forget our rights. With these countries leading and others following, we are all full of consumerist ideas that are all based on the developed countries and their interests. In the 60s they were able to be more outspoken and we need this. Lots of young people are dissatisfied with what's going on, and with enough unity and objection things may change and become better.

Yara, 19, Cairo

No, I don't think so. We're more artistic, but it doesn't mean we're not into current affairs. We're perceived as that because many don't think young people can go beyond that and get involved in current affairs, but it's not the case. Some are ignorant and don't care, but some do care, they do try to make a difference and no one notices.

In Cairo it's hard for young people to mobilise, there aren't many organisations for them, and the media pins many bad things on young people unfairly. In Egypt young people have bad education and lots of negative influences. There's no space for sports, and an unfair exam system puts lots of stress on students, so they use MTV to unwind. An organisation like Headliners doesn't exist in Egypt and wouldn't be publicised that well. Young people feel that because they can't speak they can't participate.

About these interviews

These interviews were conducted by Headliners members Nina Osei-Armah, 18, and Tara Brown, 19.

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