

Globalisation and the Youth Culture - to engage them or not?

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Define the Youth Culture

Defining the global youth culture is a massive thought. Just define any youth culture and you will find that there are lots of sub-sections, sub-cultures, diversity, and you can multiply this a thousand times to try to begin to have a global perspective. Even then, you will still only have a vague picture of this 'mosaic' generation, the Millennial Generation. The UK, which is part of the western aspect of globalisation, is vastly different to that of the non-western cultures, but there are still important elements to consider, such as the tribal distinctions. Likes and dislikes, in music, upbringing, friendships, hobbies, etc.

To help us to get a handle on what we mean by the term 'youth-culture', we first need to define its age, and yes, this element affecting youth culture is moving towards a younger and younger age-group with every new generation. But for the sake of argument, we will need to be focusing primarily on the 11-21 age bracket, and here within this age category of young people we can see that there are so many different sub-cultures present.

Globalisation and its Impact on this Culture

We see the impacts include those of consumerism, family breakdowns, vast leaps in technology development, tribalism (wanting to know its roots), globalisation (one-world), moral decline, incarnational (living it out through public lifestyle and actions) and relational issues – both globally and locally.

Consumerism and young people today – the change that has taken place in society that marks a person more by what they wear and what they have, rather than by who they are. Included in this is the impact of advertising on young people. The term, 'we are family' – this is the most wanting generation for many years. There has been an enormous rise in child safety devices in the past few years. Implications on parents - the increasing interest from parents in the types of groups that their children are participating in has resulted in a closer screening of people working with the youth. However, on the plus side, this can also mean a tremendous leap forward in best practice.

The impact of divorce having its effects on young people - looking at the statistical evidence showing the negative consequences of parental divorce on the children.

Also, of course, there is the poverty verses the rich issue, which is intensifying. I believe this is due to the effects of globalisation. (Or could globalisation simply be a smoke screen and the truth being that this issue has always been with us?)

This generation has not known the world they live in without the technology, which for much of the time is taken for granted by the young people. Their world encompasses all the current developments in the latest technological trends – computers, mobile phones, DVD players, games consoles – all are a part of their everyday lifestyles, and in which they operate fluently. We can even see the level of their knowledge within these technologies far exceeding the knowledge of most of those within the previous generations. Their knowledge in the field of computers operates on a mosaic of different levels, and competent to switch between these levels, rather than in a linear (step-by-step) pattern, as would have been the case previously. The paradox of young people who are both globally connected and tribally prejudiced – two sides of the same coin - can be seen in the example of where great global unity as displayed within the recent World Cup, is compared to the ethnic rivalries that also took place during this competition. This generation is concerned with fair trade issues, they are aware of injustices in the world, but at the same time they are looking for the latest fashion, the 'must-have' mentality. We have seen that with this globalisation aspect, the world, our community, has

certainly not become a level playing field. There has been an increase in global travel – ‘the world is your oyster’. It is far more accessible, that is if you have the means to do so. Globalisation has probably brought together more people of mixed backgrounds and ethnic differences than ever before.

Because of the power and influence of the media and music industries, young people all over the world are watching the same films and listening to the same music. At the same time they are trying to find their place, to belong to a group where they are accepted, known and valued. The world has never been so fragile as it is now. There is fear in the lives of young people. They are longing for partnership, the right kind of partnership and want to see it modelled, rather than the mentality of living independently and totally self-reliant. They are individuals in their own right, but they are wanting to be part of something bigger. Traditionalism versus the new way of thinking – this culture is always looking to discover new ways of achieving their aims – quicker, easier and more effective than before. Resulting in an ever-accelerating pace of change.

Is Globalisation a Youth or just an Adult Thing?

We see that the current youth culture promotes a lack of personal (one to one) communication, in favour of communication on a group basis, a larger gathering of friends operating a ‘family’ mentality. However, the ‘best mate’ will always be needed, especially in a crisis situation. We see the rise of a network society and here young people are in their element.

I believe the young people have an attitude and a realisation of the ‘now’ only – they are not weighed down by a recognition of what has gone on before, unlike those of the previous generations, that can recall the differences between the modern and the passed ages.

What Young People Have to Say about This Issue and their World Views

We certainly live in a world of choice. This is a survey I conducted amongst a number of young people about their attitudes towards their world. Here are some of the findings:

“What is Globalisation? I haven’t got a clue! Is it something to do with the atlas?”

“I am well clued up on my culture. I have to know what’s going down in my neck of the woods, because faking it don’t last long and my mates will see right through my faking.”

“I have to be in the know. I have to know the latest text message, the latest web-site. What’s happening to my favourite musicians.”

“Just in England there still seems to be a north-south divide and cultures are incredibly diverse. I had a holiday in Scotland a while back, and aren’t those Scots totally different to us Southerners. So perhaps I don’t have to go too far to find my mission field.”

“Why doesn’t my church get involved in global mission? It is way behind the times. It reminds me of my grand-parents – slow, reliable, but certainly not with it.”

“I can’t remember the last time I spoke to anybody on my mobile phone – I just text them.”

“We make our own websites – that’s fun.”

“I have friends all over the world. Oh by the way, they’re not ‘virtual’ they’re real people – I think! I talk with them in the Cybercafe.”

“I’m not too sure there is a global youth culture. I just live from day to day and I think it is something that someone has invented.”

The youth culture is growing and seems to be largely based around the extreme scene – ie. BMX / Skateboarding, and music mainly Punk Metal. These areas seem very influential on the youth culture and I believe this is a global phenomenon, just look at what's happening in Japan and Uganda on the music scene. The youth of the nation are the next generation of leaders, politicians, medical staff, law enforcers, homeless and the needy, troublemakers. What happens to them now will affect their lives in the future. The generation before them has to get involved, to steer them in the right direction.

Young People and the Technical World

Good example of a young person enthused about mission but is prepared to offer his skills to serve others:

The account of Stephen Montgomery - one of *What 4*'s young people who served MAF in Uganda for six months, administrating the IT for the air base.

The technical world is quite daunting for those of us who have to make the decisions about young people, whether to involve them or not, but we need to realise that young people in this globalised world are more capable at dealing with this technology than we may ever be. Prayer, text and email all go hand in hand in this new age. Prayers are shared through text messages so that all their friends can pray – and do so globally. The whole thing of this new technological world is that access globally is easier and more instant than ever before. There has also been a huge growth in personalised websites designed by young people, in which they have a platform to share to a global audience on their interests and build a global network of contacts.

Something to live for – not just Prayer, People and Pounds

I guess this all comes down to a personal vision that is God-given for mission in order for young people to engage in this, but I believe that we as mission societies and churches have our part to play. Sam George, who I respect as a writer and a youth communicator likens this 'something to live for' issue as the real need within the hearts of the young people today, affecting the youth culture. Globalisation in its many facets and diverse interests are offering this youth culture all kinds of avenues for involvement. Young people are looking for something radical and extreme, something to live for. It is interesting that still 90 percent of all UK Christians come to know Jesus for themselves around the age of 17.

Here's a true story: Ahmed at 17 was shy and introvert preferring the solace of his room to the chatter of his friends. His father, a school teacher, said that Ahmed would spend his time studying to become a doctor. Ahmed's family hadn't noticed that he was beginning to change. He would spend his nights in the Mosque next door, and generally this was seen by his family to be a positive step forward. However, they were somewhat troubled when Ahmed started reading the Koran by candle-light every night without fail, and would often be heard chanting aloud from his room. Then one day Ahmed left home without a word. Three weeks passed and Ahmed telephoned his father to say his goodbyes. A few hours later security vehicles screeched to a halt outside their door bringing the news that their son had blown himself up at the army headquarters in Kashmir. The neighbours of this family were shocked that this young, quiet man had become a suicide bomber.

We see from the tragic events of September 11, that the attacks in America were not against globalisation, but an expression of this. Unlike the supporters of anti-globalisation, acts such as those we witnessed on that September day in America are changing the equation of globalisation as we have understood it so far. Terrorist networks and global capitalism are doing a better job in winning the allegiance of the young people around the world than the church. So what must the church do, and what message does it have for the emerging generations? Who will eventually win the battle for the souls of the emerging world? What can the church learn from the contemporary global trends? These issues should not be seen as hindrances but seen as opportunities for the church to seize. Look at the trends and then adapt these where possible, and where appropriate, in line with God's will.

We see that today's youth are looking for right things in the wrong places – just like their predecessors. The most basic pursuit remains the same throughout all generations. What young people really need is the radical re-ordering of the 'self' in light of their relationship with God. Young people continue to look for a 'God' who is big enough for them. In this fragile world – they need a sure foundation. Young people need a God who will turn their lives inside-out, and their world upside-down. They need a life worth living, a cause truly worth dying for, and a purpose larger than life itself adding a profound meaning to their global existence.

Why Bother to Engage this Culture?

Common traits of terrorists, include facts such as they are young and daring, possess professional qualifications and skills, are global citizens, fun-loving and determined. New recruits for extremist groups around the globe tend to be young single males. The recent news headlines confirm this. What makes youth volunteer young and ruthless, young driven into extremism, youth terrorists, child soldiers, etc? They include the poor, school dropouts, and university students, devout, but grown up in secular families with the sense of something missing in their lives. They also tend to be members of financially and socially marginalised groups of people. Today more than half of the world falls below the age of 18. United Nations reports that 85 percent of global youth population lives in the third world countries and is expected to rise to 89 percent by 2020. Teenagers in China alone exceed the total population of America. Islam is the second largest faith in the world with over 1.2 billion adherents, and it is the fastest growing religion. With high fertility rate and death of older men due to war, the Islamic population is mostly young. Close to 55 percent of them are under the age of 30.

Young People as Missionaries for the Right Reasons Make Good Candidates

So what can we learn from this as mission organisations and churches? In inviting young people to join you in your task, use biblical means not mere promises of excitement and fun. To produce missionaries, they need to know that they will face suffering of some sort, but use biblical truth to sustain them when the going gets tough. Let's not hold back from the idea of commitment as we prepare young people for mission. Christians from affluent countries are losing their ability to live with inconvenience, stress and hardship. Young people will not be able to stick with their commitments when they face struggles if we do not train and release them to do so. Will this mean that the West will disqualify itself from being a missionary sending region? I think we are seeing some worrying signs regarding this. This could be a crisis that missionaries and mission societies stand to face in the coming years.

Young people, like many adults, have to be missionaries for the right reasons, and we must release and trust, and help them to make a commitment that will stand the test of time.