

P r o g r e s s

Young people aren't all totally into 'stuff'

Combined youth spending power in the 11 major economies, including Australia, exceeds a massive US\$750 billion dollars per year. But recent national research shows that against a constant marketing onslaught, young people are beginning to show signs of consumer leadership. They seem to be becoming more aware of being a key part of the solution to over-consumption and its impact on global resources and are thinking about more sustainable ways of living.



With growing concern about consumption patterns in Australia, social researchers, such as Clive Hamilton and Hugh Mackay, are highlighting how over-consumption contributes to problems that not only affect our everyday lives, but impact on the entire globe.

On behalf of National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS)¹, and supported by Griffith University, the International Young Professional's Foundation (IYPF)², undertook new research into the influences on young Australian's consumption patterns and asked how young people can be supported to lead their communities towards more

sustainable consumption patterns. The results are reported in *Sustainable Consumption: Young Australians as Agents of Change*.

Young Australians represent a significant slice of consumption expenditure, as they do in most affluent societies, where they hold sway over the discretionary spending. And when young Australians spend, they buy distractions. Not bound yet to mortgages or major assets, it's clothes, food, entertainment and communications equipment that are popular purchases. Today, for example, teenagers in Australia lead the world in mobile telephone use, with at least 45 per cent of just the 13- to 15-year-old age group owning a mobile.

According to *Sustainable Consumption*, the consumption patterns of young Australians are consistent with the qualities of contemporary consumer society. Young people establish their own identities

through what they buy, and they seek social inclusion by purchasing the newest and 'coolest' products on the market. While young Australians are critical of the consuming desire, most nevertheless continue, following general peer and social behaviour.

The report is particularly critical of the role advertising and media play in promoting high consumption lifestyles. Young people are targeted by considerable amounts of product advertising annually, and often do not comprehend the extent to which the media develops – often strategically – conceptions of desirable lifestyles and personal identities.

However, the research indicates that an increasing number of young people are becoming conscious of the influence of the media in these matters – many have grown up aware of the strategies the media employ to influence them and the report

1. NYARS is a cooperatively funded arrangement between the federal, state and territory governments to facilitate nationally based research into current social, political and economic factors affecting young people.

2. The IYPF is a not-for-profit organisation of young professionals who work towards effecting positive change for future generations. See www.iyps.org/IYPF.html.



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identifies ways in which young people can and do use the media, in turn, to promote sustainable lifestyles.

Of those surveyed, many believed that their peers buy too many consumer products. While they were also critical of aspects of consumer culture, participants were not always critical of consumption as a way of life per se. Paradoxically, many young Australians are clearly unhappy and unfulfilled by consumer society. This point

Today's teenagers spend heavily on new technology, but there are signs that younger Australians are becoming more aware of the impact of their purchasing choices. (iStockphoto)

explains why many are seeking out alternative and, in many cases, more sustainable lifestyles.

'Young people increasingly understand the interconnectedness of our world and that what they buy, how they travel, and the energy and water they use, often has a negative impact on others and the planet. They are motivated to do something about it. They are realising that others are not going to do it for them and that they have to take the lead,' says Mr Cameron Neil, co-founder and CEO of the IYPF, an organisation that supports and promotes youth initiatives for sustainability.

The study identified a growing trend of young Australians trying to minimise their environmental impact through a variety of sustainable lifestyle practices: such as water and energy conservation, vegetarianism, downsizing and refusing to succumb to the stress of a hyper-competitive job market.

Encouragingly, young people appear highly concerned about the environment and the wellbeing of others, and accept their individual responsibility for sustainable consumption. On the flipside, *Sustainable Consumption* warns that a high level of social concern does not necessarily translate into personal action.

One innovative component of the report was a youth and sustainable consumption training initiative that provided young people with the skills to analyse their own consumption. This project is now a model for the delivery of others with the final objective of developing young Australians as effective participants and leaders in a more just and sustainable society.

Mr Neil says that there are plans to extend the capacity building program into a wider national training and grants scheme available to all Australian youth. This will bring together local, state and commonwealth agencies and youth and industry in a strategic partnership focused on real change initiatives and policy development.

The consumption problem is escalating. Since 1950 the global economy has grown five-fold. Consumption of water, grain, beef and mutton has tripled, and paper consumption has risen six-fold. But, thankfully, many governments and international organisations are increasingly recognising the value of policies that

promote sustainable consumption. Economic thinking is slowly evolving beyond the mantra of mandatory three per cent annual growth, and institutions are slowly starting to see over the horizon to the economic and social impact of today's relentless drive for profit.

But despite increasing policy attention on sustainable consumption, and research and program initiatives in many countries including Australia, there has yet to be a strategic targeting of the issue. The NYARS report reinforces that sustainable consumption in the Australian context requires rethinking about social and environmental costs of production, distribution, use and disposal of consumable products and services. It also means addressing this through more informed, responsible consumer choices.

Sustainable Consumption acknowledges that there is no magic solution to unsustainable consumption in Australia. Conventional policies such as encouraging environmentally and socially sound products and services, and promoting recycling and reuse need to be integrated with more innovative policies that recognise institutional, social, cultural and ethical factors. This way, individual consumer behaviour can be shaped, and the focus placed on wellbeing, rather than economic growth, as a measure of progress and success.

According to IYPF's Cameron Neil, the report 'is a great resource on how young people can act as change agents, how communities can support them to develop action competence, and what governments, businesses and the community sector need to do if they are serious about seeing a paradigm shift towards more sustainable consumption in Australia.'

● Lisa Ryan, Daniel Donahoo and Tomi Winfree on behalf of the IYPF Youth and Sustainable Consumption Working Group.

More information:

NYARS report: *Sustainable Consumption: Young Australians as Agents of Change*:
www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/aboutrfacs/programs/youth-sustainable_consumption.htm

International Young Professionals Foundation:
www.iypf.org/IYPF-projects.htm#YouthSC

IYPF are seeking innovative and socially responsible corporations to partner them in the Young Australians as Agents of Change initiative. Interested organisations can find more information on IYPF's website.

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