

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Gen Z is shifting fashion through empathy, awareness

June 7, 2021



This younger generation is reimagining newness in fashion to fit its needs and its values. Image credit: Depop

By NORA HOWE

Fashion brands need to start paying attention to the non-binary thinking of Gen Z consumers, according to joint research by online marketplace [Depop](#) and consulting agency [Bain & Company](#).

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Having grown up with digital technology in every facet of their lives, members of this cohort have developed a fluid way of processing information and culture, which has led to an inclusive approach to fashion and self-expression. In their "Futureproof" [report](#), Depop and Bain & Company examine how Gen Z is shifting the fashion industry through an empathetic lens.

This report is the product of quantitative and qualitative research including an October 2020 survey of 2,167 Depop users, all under the age of 24; on sustainability-related topics; one-to-one interviews with Depop users in the U.K., U.S. and Australia.

Driven by empathy

Insights compiled by Depop and Bain & Company were split into four sections, ranging from individually-focused concerns to collective behaviors: empathy and awareness; self-expression; exchange and interconnection; and reimagining newness.

Gen Z is deconstructing binary gender norms by showing sensitivity to gender-nonconforming people and by also neutralizing the gendering of emotions. This approach heightens Gen Z's awareness of human vulnerability for themselves and for others.

Three in four Gen Z consumers say their race, gender or sexuality cannot be easily categorized, and 60 percent say their identity spans race, cultures or languages.

Additionally, the interview subjects were more willing to recognize and discuss mental health as a common but highly personal aspect of the human experience.

Having been born into a global economy driven by digital platforms, this generation has adopted a unique relationship with social media. Interviewees expressed their appreciation for the exposure and connectivity that

comes from social media, but acknowledged the negative impact on society, such as data privacy and mental wellbeing.



Eighty percent of those shopping on Depop cite social media as a source of inspiration. Image credit: Depop

Compared to their millennial counterparts, Depop and Bain & Company suggest Gen Z takes a more authentic and spontaneous approach to social media, as they favor less filtered or curated digital content.

During a virtual session at Tinuiti's 2021 Social Media Advertising webinar on March 17, TikTok's Valerie Bartlett emphasized how the platform is a place users go to be their authentic selves, as opposed to other platforms like Instagram, where content is highly curated and glossy ([see story](#)).

With this sense of freedom, Gen Z fashion has become distinctively experimental, commonly mixing vintage pieces with streetwear. These consumers look to fashion brands for inspiration, but ultimately choose how to style themselves.

Gen Z's socially-empowered individuality has catalyzed their empathy and awareness of vulnerability into calls for action in the face of adversity. Seventy percent of Gen Z believe they can be part of a social movement even if they participate only through social media.

Digital platforms have blurred boundaries between commerce and connection, consumption and production, entertainment and entrepreneurship. Gen Z simultaneously consumes and produces, and exchanges ideas, products and services on platforms more than previous generations.

These consumers create where they seek inspiration; gain access where they share information; spend where they make money; and discover community where they generate business.

Although older generations may criticize Gen Z for an overconsumption of digital technology, Gen Z is actually ahead when it comes to the proportion of its members consuming out-of-home experiences more than once a week at 50 percent, compared to 45 percent of millennials and 30 percent of Gen X.

Spotlight on sustainability

When viewed through the lens of holistic empathy and awareness, profit, planet and people are not mutually exclusive to Gen Z. Interviewees expressed heightened awareness of how brands respond to relevant social conversations, both positively to authentic brand activism and negatively to tokenism and performative activism.



In February, online retailer Farfetch partnered with aftercare platform The Restory in new sustainability effort. Image credit: Farfetch

The survey of Depop users showed how much this generation's fashion purchases are influenced by the commitments brands make to social and environmental sustainability.

Earlier this year, online retailer Farfetch partnered with aftercare platform The Restory in an effort to sustainably extend the life cycle of luxury goods.

The program entitled "Farfetch Fix" provides services from The Restory which has cultivated a wide range of techniques offering aftercare and repair services to shoes, bags and leather goods. The partnership plays a part in the retailer's "Positively Farfetch" sustainability strategy ([see story](#)).

"Brands have a huge platform, therefore have a responsibility to do good," one U.K. Depop seller said. "I am more willing to buy from brands that take a stand."

Within the context of fluid self-expression and exchange centered on experimentation, authenticity and conversation, Gen Z is reimagining newness. For them, this means tapping into trends through archived or out-of-stock branded items, one-of-a-kind vintage, repurposed or recycled fashion.

Resale platform The RealReal partnered with Gucci to set up an online shop featuring pre-owned Gucci pieces from past collections until the end of 2020.

The curation selection featured Gucci pieces designed by house creative director Alessandro Michele, marking a key effort by the Kering-owned Gucci to participate in the circular economy ([see story](#)).

For fashion brands, a more open-minded perspective of newness may be the key to mastering mindful consumption, suggests Depop and Bain & Company. Future-proof brands will be those that listen to and learn from Gen Z, and then embody them in the platform economy.