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Teen Spirit
Words by M. Astella Saw and Anna Burstall

The stereotype of teenagers being hopeless, grumpy losers couldn’t be more out of date. We meet the new breed of entrepreneur

In Pennsylvania, US, Neha Gupta, then nine years old, earned her first $800 for charity by selling her toys at a garage sale. Now 19, and the founder and CEO of the not-for-profit organisation Empower Orphans, she has raised more than $1.5 million to help 25,000 children in India. In London, Nick D’Aloisio made headlines two years ago when he sold his news app Sumly to Yahoo for $30 million. He was 17 at the time. Flynn McGarry, a chef, hosts pop-up events for diners paying up to $180 each to try his langoustine tartare or Champagne-fermented turnips. McGarry began cooking for paying guests out of his mother’s Studio City, California, kitchen when he was 12; he’s 16 now. As tween and teenage members of generation Z – young people born between 1994 and 2010 – continue to develop apps, launch million-follower vlogs, create fashion collections and form not-for-profit groups, we’re likely to see more of these multihyphenates make the news. Together, they increasingly give form to the notion of entrepreneur.

Florint Derue, 18

Actionism is generally associated with students and older generations, but teens are now more politically aware than ever before. One of these engaged teens is Florint Derue, an 18-year-old from Paris who, along with fellow school pupil (Valentin Reverdi), founded news website Newsyoung. Launched in 2013, Newsyoung takes a youth-focused approach to politics, society and the economy. It was founded to bring together young writers and observers who had an interest in global issues but felt mainstream media wasn’t responding to their needs. Today, the Newsyoung platform has more than 50 members aged between 15 and 17, and is the world’s first global network of young journalists.

The small group of teenagers that started Newsyoung had to adopt quickly. “With no background in anything we had to learn by ourselves,” recalls Derue. “I had no clue what Wordpress or a PHP server was. But in a few weeks, thanks to websites and Youtube videos, I launched a website for the first time.”

The internet has undoubtedly given this generation of teens a huge advantage over their predecessors, but that doesn’t mean that they haven’t had to overcome obstacles. One hurdle that youth has always faced is being taken seriously. “Age is still seen as a form of weakness for some,” asserts Derue. “I was only 16 when I launched Newsyoung. I had to face lots of criticism from people who believed that without a degree, you can’t lead a media company.”

Are attitudes towards the teen entrepreneur changing? Derue believes they are. “Diversifying qualifications and meeting people are now a common thing for young people,” he says. “I think that teenagers are more aware about how the world works, and have a better understanding of how to get things done.”

Photography by Charles Delcourt

“Young people know they are staring down the barrel of a series of badly paid internships to find a job that no longer holds the promise of lifetime security”

Generation Enterprise

There have always been high-achieving teens. But members of generation Z appear to display particular entrepreneurial nous. Nearly three in four (72%) high-school students want to start a business someday, according to a 2014 survey conducted by consulting firm Millenial Branding. Three in five (61%) members of generation Z also say they would rather be an entrepreneur than an employee when they graduate from college. What’s causing this enterprising spirit? Experts say it’s a potent combination of powerful, popular technology and a sense of anxiety about an uncertain future. “Young people know they are staring down the barrel of a series of badly paid internships to find a job that no longer holds the promise of lifetime security,” explains Sara Feast, communications officer of the entrepreneurship division at the London School of Economics. “Traditional career paths have lost some of their appeal, and so young people are naturally more open to considering alternatives.”

Plus, in a world seemingly run by grown-ups for grown-ups, young people are embracing such alternatives in order not only to express but also to celebrate their agency. “Forty or 50 years ago, teenagers felt like their real lives were starting,” says Po Bronson, co-author of NurtureShock: Why Everything We Think About Raising Our Children Is Wrong “Teenagers today don’t feel like their lives have even remotely begun. They feel like they’re living in a practice world where you train for a future that never actually happens. With entrepreneurship, a vast majority of it might go nowhere, but at least you feel autonomy – you feel like you’re trying. Kids might have more of a sense of control by choosing a less scripted path for themselves.”
Digital Natives

“The internet has influenced everything we do,” says 20-year-old university student Pablo González Ruiz de la Torre, founder of Madrid-based organisation Pangea, which connects young people with opportunities across the globe via an app and a popular conference series. “Today we can code the next big thing from home or from school – that wasn’t possible before.” When González Ruiz de la Torre launched Pangea in 2013, the entrepreneurial initiative was meant to appeal to people aged 18-24. But he and his team soon learned that they had to lower their age limit – first to 14, then to 12 – thanks to growing interest from determined young entrepreneurs.

Technology has also made more tools and resources available to young entrepreneurs than could ever have been possible in previous generations. “It used to be that to start a business you needed infrastructure – an office to work from, room for stock, a budget for advertising,” explains Feast. “These aren’t things that your average young person has access to. But what many young people do have access to is a smartphone and apps – often free or with minimal cost – that give them access to marketplaces, international phone calls, secure payment processes and online storage. Consider Dropbox, Skype, eBay, Etsy, PayPal: essentially, you only need a computer and a credit card to start trading.”

Zora Sicher, 19

The stereotypical teen is often pictured as brooding and angst-ridden, locked into their bedroom writing tortured poetry. Nineteen-year-old photographer Zora Sicher displays all the creativity of an angsty teen – but none of the apathy.

“Being confident in my work and building connections little by little has helped a whole lot in starting my career,” states Sicher, who has already worked with industry giants such as Ryan McGinley and Mario Sorrenti, and shot for magazines like i-D and Beats.

Sicher sees the uncertainties her generation face as a positive. “I think young people are reassessing traditional career paths because we have access to a lot of different tools, platforms, and e-commerce that didn’t exist in the past,” she explores. “I think many young people are following their own leads instead of waiting for permission and veering away from the traditional path that society has always told us we have to follow to become successful in the world.”

In this respect, Sicher is definitely not an anomaly. She’s one of many teens who are taking a proactive approach to their passions and making their pastimes into something productive. What does this mean for the teen looking to start a business? According to Sicher, the perception of teens in the creative industry is changing for the better.

“I think that it’s kind of incredible because so many kids and teenagers have proved to people that they have refreshing views on the world,” she says. “Now there’s such a large acceptance for working in the photography and fashion industry as a teenager that people begin to take you even more seriously than you’d expect.”

Photography by Keith Morrison

“Young people are beginning to see their peers launch successful projects and companies before they have even reached the age where they can go to college or university.”
Entrepreneurs For Life

While not everybody can be an entrepreneur, an entrepreneurial approach to life is becoming more attractive to young people, who recognise that a lack of future job security, coupled with intense competition from their peers, increasingly requires a different approach to life than the usual preparatory triptych of school, internship and extracurricular activity.

"Those kids who sell their products to Yahoo for millions – they form a tiny fraction of 1% of teenagers today," explains Jason Ma, author of Young Leaders 3.0 and a mentor to enterprising teenagers worldwide. "That's not what's happening everywhere. But what I'm seeing is more kids thinking along a more entrepreneurial route. It's all about an entrepreneurial mindset, about those skills. Entrepreneurs are more creative, have better lateral thinking skills, more tenacity, more grit. And they're really good salespeople, too."

Indeed, in a 2013 survey conducted by Millennial Branding and Odesk, more than 90% of respondents, many of them millennials aged between 19 and 30, agreed with a generous understanding of the word 'entrepreneur' preferring the description 'a person with a mindset to see opportunities, take risks and make things happen' to 'a person who starts a company'.

Feast agrees: "Will these enterprising teens all be entrepreneurs in 15 years' time? I doubt it," she says. "Entrepreneurship carries a lot of risk, and people naturally become more risk-averse as they acquire the trappings of adulthood – mortgages, children, caring for elderly parents. What I do think is that there will be a permanent shift in the way this generation expects to work – more flexibly and perhaps with multiple careers throughout their working lives."

"More kids are choosing the entrepreneurial route. When it comes to building your character or building your story, an enterprising mindset is part of the equation."

New Workplaces

Even when employed, a large proportion of generation Z workers will expect to work like entrepreneurs: independently, and within a flexible environment that allows for collaboration and knowledge-sharing. Rather than constantly working within the same assigned team, generation Z employees are likely to reach out to like-minded thinkers and potential partners who express a desire to attain a similar goal or achieve a similar result.

This flexible approach may ultimately come to topple traditional workplace hierarchies, as enterprising and technologically savvy generation Z employees demand – and form – new models of employment based on skill sharing and partnerships.

Montréal-based consultant and writer Jon Husband coined the term 'wirearchy' to describe 'the two-way flow of power and authority based on knowledge, trust, credibility and a focus on results, enabled by interconnected people and technology'. He is among a number of future-of-work experts who believe that the prevailing top-down management hierarchy is on its way out.

The Entrepreneurial Equation

Unpredictable times require unpredictable thinking. And from an early age, these enterprising young people learn to invent, to fail, to adapt and to regenerate. They learn that the best way to make themselves heard is to participate, and to do it with their typical brand of adolescent exuberance. They learn to leap at opportunity, and if told opportunity does not yet exist, to create it.

"Teenagers today could still choose to be a lawyer, a banker or a consultant – that classic career path from the top universities," Ma says. "But more kids are choosing the entrepreneurial route. When it comes to building your character or building your story, an enterprising mindset is part of the equation."