

Selling Youth? Marketing and youth culture

*This article, first written for the Media Magazine in 2013, looks at the changing ways in which marketers are targeting young consumers. There's a longer, more academic version of this in my co-edited book *Youth Cultures in the Age of Global Media* (Palgrave, 2014).*

Who creates youth culture? Is it a spontaneous expression of young people themselves, or is it mainly an aspect of media and marketing? Does the market simply exploit and manipulate young people, or does it offer them opportunities to fulfill their needs, to express themselves, and to create their own identities?

We often talk about music artists selling out to commercial interests. But this seems to assume that youth culture comes from some kind of non-commercial space – that it arises 'from the streets'. It is assumed to be authentic, challenging and subversive until it is commercialized and made safe by the operations of the market.

However, research on youth culture suggests that it is inevitably commercial, and has always been so. This is very clear if we look at the origins of contemporary youth culture in the mid-twentieth century. The term 'teenager', for example, was invented by market researchers in the 1940s to describe a new age group of consumers they were interested in targeting. Young people in their teens had always been there; but they were not identified as a distinctive group until they came to be seen as a potential market.

It's possible to trace the emergence of the teenage consumer in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s, from the rise of fan groups like the 'bobbysoxers', who followed the popular singers of the day (like Frank Sinatra) through to the beginnings of rock and roll. We also see the first teenage magazines, offering girls in particular a whole range of consumer options in clothing, make-up, music and home decoration.

This phenomenon emerged a little later in the UK. A report called 'The Teenage Consumer' published in 1959 by the market researcher Mark Abrams was the first to identify this new market. Abrams focused particularly on the spending patterns of newly-affluent working-class consumers, which he described as 'distinctive teenage spending for distinctive teenage ends in a distinctive teenage world'.

Teenagers, Abrams argued, were a new and separate market, which adults (including companies and marketers) had to work hard to understand. Yet there were many commentators – including leading academics like Richard Hoggart – who looked on this commercial youth culture with despair. They saw youth culture as tasteless, superficial and consumerist, and just a slavish copy of American styles.

Since the 1950s, the youth market has grown significantly: it is now worth approximately \$200 billion a year in the US alone. Youth have become a very important 'niche market', who also set trends for both younger and older age groups. Over time, marketers have developed a range of new strategies to target them, but at the present time, there are significant changes under way.

Books on youth marketing tend to present today's young people as dramatically different from earlier generations; and they suggest that there are significant new generation gaps emerging. Young people – so-called 'Generation X' and 'Generation Y' – are seen as much more individualistic and independent than they used to be. As a result, they are perceived as an elusive market – as constantly changing, and difficult to reach. They are also, it is argued, much more knowledgeable and sceptical about marketing and advertising.

Technology is also seen as a significant factor here. Young people are described as 'digital natives', by comparison with their parents, who are 'digital immigrants'. This new 'digital generation' is somehow defined by its relationship with technology; and it is only through using this technology that marketers believe they will be able to reach them.

As a result of these changes, marketers have adopted a whole range of new strategies in order to target and engage young consumers. Especially for this age group, it seems that old-style advertising is dead. 'Mass marketing' – sending the same messages to millions of passive consumers – is no longer seen as appropriate for the more individualistic approach of today's teenagers.

These new marketing tactics are more pervasive: they are less visible and overt, and therefore much harder for consumers to identify, to 'filter out' and hence to resist. They are personalized, in that they seem to speak to your needs and desires as an individual rather than a member of a mass. And they are participatory: they aim to get us involved in a dialogue, to enable us to create and distribute our own messages, to feel as though we are the ones in charge.

The use of online media is the most obvious aspect of this. The phenomenal financial success of companies like Google and Facebook clearly depends on their value as means for marketing. Spending on online marketing overtook that for TV marketing in the UK back in 2009. The recent flotation of Twitter generated billions, despite the fact that the company has yet to make a profit: yet you can be sure it won't be long before it (along with other apparently 'free' services like Instagram and Snapchat) is being used to generate marketing revenue.

In some cases, the presence of marketing messages is fairly obvious – as in the case of Google ads and sponsored links. Companies also spend large amounts on search engine optimization, a technique which helps to ensure that your website will come out high on the list of search results. Even less visible is the process of data mining, whereby companies can gather information about what you are doing online: this information is often aggregated and sold, in order that consumers can be targeted with individualized advertising that seems to reflect their personal interests.

Marketers are also very active on Facebook and other social networking sites, not just with their own branded profiles, but also in circulating applications, competitions and other messages about what's currently 'cool'. Marketers have known for a long time that the most effective way of selling is through word of mouth: when a friend recommends something, you are much more likely to buy it than if you just see an ad. For marketers, social networking is the modern version of word of mouth: it's a

very effective way to embed marketing messages into the dynamics of young people's friendship groups.

The key thing here is that these messages appear to come, not from large and impersonal companies, but from peers whom you trust. This is also the case with viral marketing, where messages are distributed from person to person, often using mobile technology. Cadbury's 'gorilla' campaign from 2007 was a very successful example of viral marketing: while the ads were occasionally on TV, they were mainly viewed on YouTube and similar platforms, on the basis of personal recommendation. And of course for companies, getting consumers to distribute their messages for them is significantly cheaper than paying to buy lots of airtime or advertising space.

The next step on from this is user-generated marketing, where consumers actually create the advertising messages. Dorito's Crash the Superbowl competition in the US is a good example: consumers are invited to make their own Doritos ads, and \$1 million (plus a Superbowl screening) is offered for the winner. According to Doritos, this is all about 'sharing talent and creativity'; but of course it ensures that consumers (both the ad-makers and those who vote for them, in an X-Factor-style competition) will 'buy in' to their product. Similar techniques are being used by a growing number of brands, from Ford cars to Vans shoes.

Another increasingly important technique is experiential marketing. In relation to the youth market, this is probably most obvious in the commercial sponsorship and branding of music festivals. However, marketers are now creating their own branded experiences – events that are put on specifically to promote the brand, rather than the event coming first and the sponsorship following.

One example of this is T-Mobile's 'dance' campaign. TV ads showed groups of people apparently spontaneously breaking out into displays of co-ordinated public dancing in venues like Liverpool Street station in London and Heathrow Airport. Alongside this, other 'flashmob' public dances were put on across the country, all strongly branded.

Meanwhile, market research has become increasingly important in companies' efforts to target these elusive young consumers. Much more is being spent in this area, and market researchers are increasingly using new techniques to get up close and personal. They are visiting young people in their homes, observing them in their bedrooms, checking out the contents of their wardrobes; they are going shopping with them, and hanging out in the mall; and they are asking them to create video diaries about their intimate everyday lives.

Cool hunting is a technique that involves employing young people as informants to provide 'on the ground' information about trends within their friendship groups. This sometimes blurs with the use of brand ambassadors, where young people are paid to promote brands among their peers, ideally in subtle and unobtrusive ways. You might want to think about this the next time someone casually mentions to you about a new drink or a new clothing brand that's come on the market.

Finally, co-creation is a fairly new approach, in which consumers are invited (and paid) to work with market researchers to develop new product ideas. They attend

focus group workshops in which new ideas are brainstormed and developed – ideas which the researchers then take back (and sell) to the companies.

In different ways, these techniques all display aspects of my three 'Ps': they are pervasive, personalized and participatory. According to marketers, they are all about empowering young consumers. Marketing, they say, is no longer about faceless companies dictating to us – telling us what to buy, and what kind of person we should become. On the contrary, the consumer is now in charge.

On the other hand, we could argue that these kinds of techniques are much more subtle and manipulative – and much less visible and obvious – than traditional advertising. They are harder to identify, and perhaps harder to resist. They illustrate how commercial marketing has become much more deeply embedded in our private lives and our personal relationships.

So are young consumers just being duped and exploited – or are they being empowered and liberated? Personally, I do not regard young people as passive victims; but on the other hand, I don't think any of us is really in control, or completely savvy, about this. And that, of course, is one reason why we need more media education...

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