Networked Kids and the Formation of Contemporary Consumer Identities

Helene de Burgh-Woodman, University of Notre Dame, Australia

This paper investigates how terms like consumer, end-user develop resonance for the first generation of “kids” to grow up experiencing multiple marketing channels and networked information sources. Via a discourse analysis of focus group/interview data, the paper extends understandings of how kids negotiate the marketplace and enact complex identity-building practices.

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Hélène de Burgh-Woodman, University of Notre Dame, Australia

ABSTRACT
Identity building has a key role to play in understanding consumer relationships with the marketplace. As technology comes to define new terrains of identity building, it is of increasing importance to understand how media such as social media and the internet come to inform new kinds of engagements and identities. While research has paid attention to concepts of the digital self and on-line personae (Belk 2013; Shau and Gilly 2003), the question of when these identities begin to evolve and at what point in their lives people become aware of their personal agency in the marketplace as a result of these technologies is less clear. In this paper, it is suggested that terms such as consumer, end-user and audience, while sharing a common focus on the act of appropriating commodities and their accompanying marketing discourses, embody distinct meanings to young people or “kids” who use them to anchor their own consumption identities (Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe 2008) and assume power in the marketplace (Acuff and Reher 1997). Equally, this paper argues that these meanings link to a larger interpretation of the marketplace and consumer agency by the first generation of kids who have grown up with multi-platform technology such as the web and social media (Chester and Montgomery 2008). Therefore the central question this paper seeks to answer is at what point do these terms gain resonance for kids who appropriate the market through multiple channels and network their consumption experiences via technology? A stronger understanding of how increasingly technologically informed young consumers see themselves through these culturally embedded terms and the consequent impact on consumption practices sheds light on when (and how) market-based identities begin to form as these terms provide a roadmap or a “way in” to understanding identity formation and network building (Blais, Craig, Pepler and Connolly 2008). In doing so, this paper seeks to contribute to the increasingly nuanced dialogue in consumer research on how people, and in this context specifically young people, see themselves in relation to marketing discourse, the emerging stream of literature on web-based technologies is less clear. In this paper, it is suggested that terms such as consumer, end-user and audience more specifically directs us to the engagement with spectacle or visual content. While “spectacle” became laden with its own meanings in the work of the Situationists (Debord, 1995), in more contemporary contexts spectacles are endemic to an increasingly visual culture. As the following discussion demonstrates, these three terms (and the histories from which they hail) give rise to distinct interpretations and specific meanings.

METHOD
Two data sets were acquired for the basis for analysis. First, a focus group of twenty young people was conducted (Morgan, 1988; Stewart, and Shamdasani, 1990) in Australia. The age range was between eighteen and twenty years of age with an even gender split. The focus group was conducted at a University campus in familiar surroundings. The focus discussion lasted for three and a half hours. The discussion was semi-structured. The facilitator posed some initiating questions but free discussion was allowed to develop. Once discussion had evolved, the facilitator then posed specific questions. The discussion was audio-recorded with additional notes taken post hoc by the facilitator. Second, further phenomenological interviews (McCracken, 1988; Thompson et al, 1990) lasting between one and two hours interviews were conducted with ten additional participants to better explore the themes established through the focus group discussion. This interview method was selected in order to garner rich insight using participants’ own language and expression and was loosely structured around the topics and questions raised during the focus group. The focus group data and the interview data were transcribed, triangulated for thematic consistency and a discourse analysis was conducted (Caruana et al, 2008; Elliot, 1996; Hackley, 2002; Mituiss and Elliot, 1999; Parsons, 2010) enabling the examination of the powers, practices and discourses to which these terms refer for young people. Table 1 offers a summary of the analysis findings.
**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings confirm existing literature that suggests kids engage the marketplace for their own identity-making (Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe 2008), and indeed wield increasing power (Acuff and Reiher 1997) but further elucidates how this consciously occur and what potential forms it takes. The dominant interpretation of the term consumer resided in its implied meaning as a force for power in the marketplace. Generally, participants agreed that they became conscious of their roles as “consumers” as children – some mentioned as early as seven or eight years. This theme of early awareness suggests that exposure to markets through technology has the effect of accelerating the formation of multiple consumer identities which have been more understood as emerging through early adulthood. The term also referenced a source of empowerment (Shaw, Newholm and Dickinson 2006) and means of assuming agentic power in the marketplace (Denegri-Knott, Zwick and Schroeder 2006). For instance, several participants spoke of their “rights as a consumer” and demonstrated their knowledge of local consumer laws in relation to product quality and service:

P1: When I buy something, I expect it to be good, you know... I don’t just want something that’s going to break or whatever. So, if I get something and it’s bad, they’re [the company] gonna hear about it for sure. That usually works and I get a refund but if it doesn’t then I get the fair trading thing involved...

P2: Yep, me too.

P3: Yep, same. [Most participants nodded their heads in agreement]

P2: ‘Cos everything’s so expensive and like we work and everything so when you buy something...

P4: You sort of feel like the company should be good to you.

Facilitator: So you feel like you have the right to question companies as consumers?

P4: Absolutely [Collective agreement]

Facilitator: When did you start to feel this way?

P5: For ages, even when I was young... I remember as little kid I got this toy where it was “magic sand” and you could build things under water. But when you put in the water, it just collapsed. I went to my Mum and complained that it didn’t work and we should take it back. We went back to the shop and told them and I remember telling the woman there that the toy was bad and that they shouldn’t sell it. I was probably only eleven or twelve. [Collective laughter] I was really pumped up!

Their positionality as consumer enabled them to mobilise an assertive position in relation to the market, demanding accountability and responsiveness through a legal frame. Several participants spoke of their experiences with the office of fair trade after receiving faulty goods, using their empowered status as consumers to rectify the situation.

14: Like, I’m not afraid to go to a company and say “hey, your product is crap”. I’ve never been scared to do that. If they want my money then they have to do the right thing. If they don’t then I’m going to do something about it because they have to do something to make it right. I’ve always been like that and just because I’m only one person doesn’t mean they don’t have to do anything. It doesn’t always work the way I want but I will give it a go.

By assuming their consumer status, these participants exerted their power in their marketplace as equal agents. Interview participants nuanced this sense of power even more as some of them commented on their emerging participation on blogs, consumer community sites and online information sharing networks (Pitt, Berthon, Watson and Zinkhan 2002) to verify company credibility and product reliability.

The phrase “as a consumer” also prefaced several other statements about how these young consumers “kept companies honest” by demanding a certain level of service or after-sales responsiveness and thus flagging an ethical consumption orientation (Borgmann, 2000; Cherrier 2004): P18: I bought a CD player ages ago. I was probably around twelve or thirteen. It was ok but after a while it stopped spinning so we took it back to the shop. They said it was something I had done like because I was young I must have broken it... Dad and I had this big thing with the shop assistant because it was still in warranty and they had to fix it. Finally, they did and it was ok but we really had to argue. But, you know, companies have to do this. If they’re going to sell you something and then not look after you then you have to think about that company and whether you should buy more from them.

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### Table 1 Summary of characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Consumer</th>
<th>End-User</th>
<th>Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of product/service engagement</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of brand engagement</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of brand loyalty</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of political consciousness</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of ethical consciousness</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of perceived market agency</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Facilitator: Have you bought more products from that company?

P18: No [laughter]

P3: You have to keep companies honest. They make all this money off us and then when there's a problem they don't care. So, you definitely have to make them be honest.

This also flowed through to a sense of choice in relation to brands, products and alternatives such as anti-consumption (Cherrier, 2009, 2005; Penaloza and Price, 2003; Zavestoski, 2002) where to be a consumer meant to be a highly knowledgeable, active participant in the ethics and mores of the marketplace. For instance, two interviewees mentioned that they held companies to account, suggesting they “definitely wouldn’t buy from an unethical company” and that “everyone knows if a company is a bit shonky” because the internet provides that information. Again, the web had a significant role to play in networking individuals, organising them into consumption communities where information was co-opted.

Facilitator: So if you want to find out about products where do you look for information?

Several participants: The web [Collective agreement]

Facilitator: What sort of sites?

Several participants: Company ones but also blogs and user sites

Facilitator: Do you ask other people?

Several participants: Friends as well

P6: I have usually asked friends because they’re the same age as me and they use things for the same reasons so they look for the same things as me. We facebook about it and share information. It’s really helpful.

Facilitator: When did you start using the web and friends for information?

P6: For as long as I can remember. [Collective agreement]

Several participants spoke of their decision as consumers to buy eco products or to buy from “good” companies after talking online with other kids.

P11: When I was growing up, it was the whole Apple versus PC thing. I was a PC girl just because that’s what we used in school and all that. But when I went online and heard about how good Apple was I changed. I realised that Microsoft was not a great company and that their computers weren’t as reliable. The feedback from other kids my age definitely helped me go from PC to Mac.

Others spoke of their choices to change brands for product or service preference reasons. In all of these cases, the underlying empowerment derived from the status, and thus language, of the consumer identity enabled them to act as their own agents buoyed by backdrop information and networked consumer input.

The term end-user was strongly attached to a self-positioning as a participant in the production of innovation (Cova, Dalli and Zwick 2011). Collectively, the focus group agreed that they became conscious of their roles as “end-users” as older children around the age of twelve or thirteen on average when their command of technology became quite sophisticated.

P9: I have always been a computer nut even as a kid. I mean we’ve grown up with computers haven’t we? [Collective agreement]

It’s great keeping up with all the technology and with social media you can share all that knowledge with friends.

Unlike the term consumer, which was strongly linked to a sense of identity within the larger marketplace, end-user appears to reference a more intimate connection between a particular company’s offerings and the use-value derived by the individual. The company Apple was discussed at length as a prime example of a company perceived as innovative for the purposes of meeting the needs of the end-user several and participants had been “talking about them” online for several years.

P9: I’m loyal to Apple. I think their products are awesome... so much better than Microsoft. It’s like they really think about how we are going to use their products and it’s sort of more for us.

Facilitator: By “us” you mean?

P9: Us as in younger users

Underlying this dynamic was a focus on the self as a valuable entity, a driver of innovation by constantly demanding new products that work. In this respect, there was a sense of empowerment but of a more benevolent nature.

Facilitator: Do you give companies feedback?

P9: I definitely follow certain companies and give them feedback. I like different companies on Facebook and send them messages about their products all the time.

P11: Me too

P9: I’m fairly into P2P gaming and all the companies who do stuff for that really look for feedback from us. We’re all on user sites and blogs and facebook and all that. They know that they have a certain community that have good ideas and they should talk to them... and they do. Our feedback makes their stuff better and so, as end-users, we’re happy because we are getting the kind of innovations we want. It also means that we stay more loyal and we want to support the company because they’re supporting us.

Unlike the power derived from being a consumer, the empowerment of end-user flowed from a feeling of helping favoured companies become “even better”. Being an end-user meant offering support through purchasing followed up by feedback in order to “help” the company as one would a friend. Unlike the often-assertive identity assumed by being a consumer, the end-user identity meant being a positive force for companies and a driver of innovation (Banks 2009). Again, this connection as an end-user was established from childhood and worked via technology such as online consumer feedback sites, brand community sites and blogs.

Unlike the other two terms, audience connected more with passive visual spectatorship. Participants agreed that they became conscious of their roles as “audience” as children – some mentioned
as early as seven or eight years although this was nuanced by their acknowledgement that “audience” as children meant to watch a lot of television thereby suggesting more a passive visual spectator.

P7: I mean when you think about it we’ve been an audience forever. TV has always been around and when I was really little I watched cartoons and all that so yeah we’ve been audience for all our lives..

P13: But it’s still pretty boring… like most TV and even stuff you see on YouTube and that is pretty boring. So, even though you’re all audience it doesn’t really make it interesting. [Collective agreement]

P7: I hate ads.

The perception of advertising as spectacle (Debord 1995), a form of entertainment rather than a form of product or service information, was prevalent among all participants where the persuasive effects of advertising were undermined by the general perception that advertising, whether online or on TV, had limited appeal. The topic of poor advertising was covered at length where it became clear that “boring” or irrelevant advertising content was dismissed and “fun” or engaging content was regarded favourably. In a contemporary media landscape where advertising is endemic to all forms of engagement, whether it be on social media, online surfing or traditional media, these young people had developed effective self-filtering mechanisms against intrusive advertising. When asked to consider what being an audience meant to them, participants largely agreed that the term meant being passive or inert recipients of visual spectacle. Interview participants echoed this perception. When certain ads were discussed, it was clear that (as reception theory suggests) advertising content was not passively received nor did it remain uninterpreted. However, an emphasis on “not having to think too much” and just being “entertained” was the dominant element underlying one’s identity as an audience member.

When I come home from school or uni or whatever I just want to lie on the couch and watch TV or surf the web. I don’t want to have to think about stuff or be really focused. I just want to watch something that’s easy and entertaining...

In a world saturated by numerous media channels and content, having to consciously think about content was perceived as “too hard”. Instead being an audience member meant assuming the luxury of being passive, laid back and entertained from afar.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The present paper extends current understandings of marketing discourse by showing the extent to which kids increasingly engage the marketplace at a young age, network information to interpret marketing discourse and self-position accordingly as a consumer-agent, user or recipient of entertainment. Just as the term consumer has drawn from a long political, economic and marketing frame, these young consumers also see this term as underpinned by agentic power situated within a broader legal and economic context. Likewise, as the term end-user has emerged in parallel with an era of technological innovation, these consumers also link this term to their status as drivers of innovation – seen in largely technological arenas. Additionally, the connection between audience and spectacle has been long established. In this respect, the historical forces that frame these terms continue to influence people as they construct their identities in relation to the marketplace.

Another contribution to emerge is the impact of technology on how kids discover information, operate in a networked context and use multiple information channels to navigate the marketplace. As technology use accelerates and, as we see from this first generation of kids who have grown up with the net, social media etc., and greater access to personal feedback, formal data and general information becomes the norm, the sense of agentic power among kids will increase. Equally, the earlier acquisition of knowledge and engagement with the global marketplace will also enable kids to form clearer identities (such as end-user, audience, consumer) at earlier stages in their lives.

The findings presented here suggest that technology is having a radical effect not just on communication but on how early kids now assume their own identity in the market and, to this extent, marketing must re-consider the traditional view of young consumers. They are not just influencers, they are information-seekers and decision-makers in their own right who have the capacity to influence a wide audience of similarly engaged kids. From a marketing perspective, this forces a thoughtful consideration of how to communicate with such a connected audience who are willing to critique firms, develop brand loyalties based on the strength of their own relationship with the brand or product and forge powerful personal identities. This study drew upon a comparatively small number of participants and, as such, its findings need further confirmation to ascertain whether the outcomes indicated here are broadly reflective of the attitudes of young people both within and beyond the Australian context. Equally, given the work done on the impact of technology on the market, a study of young kids and their current market identities would further consolidate the emerging picture described here. Nonetheless, the findings presented here suggest a fruitful path forward for expanding knowledge of how kids appropriate technology and the market for their identity and agency assuming practices.

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