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Rejuvenated Territories of Adulthood

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper argues for the need to re-examine the often taken-for-granted notion of adulthood in consumer research. More specifically, I propose the concept of a rejuvenated adulthood at a time when traditional economic and social markers of adulthood are vanishing and marketplace institutions are promoting an *infantilist ethos* (Barber 2007).

Adulthood is defined historically and constructed socially and culturally. The current Western conceptualization of adulthood dates back to the eighteenth century with the Enlightenment movement viewing itself as the passage from childhood to adulthood, that is, from immaturity to maturity (Kant 1784). Adulthood thus becomes a synonym for rationality, responsibility, and free will (Stegner 1976). It also becomes synonymous with work, as society wants ignorant and vulnerable children to be educated (Locke 1693; Rousseau 1762). The growing role of institutions homogenizes this conceptualization of adulthood (Bourdieu 1980) and strengthens the view that adulthood is both the rational-legal and the traditional authority as defined by Weber (1919). Later on, the popular successes of developmental psychology (e.g., Piaget 1927) and psychoanalysis (e.g., Freud 1905) reinforce the legitimation of modern discourses and the adulthood/childhood distinction. One of the consequences is the particular attention accorded to the child, who becomes both a king and a target in a society that places its faith in the future (Gauchet 1985; Postman 1982). In this context, childhood is dedicated to the preparation of the adult's journey, which assumes the form of a pilgrimage and the pursuit of progress (Bauman 1996).

I suggest that this conceptualization of adulthood is challenged by the modern crisis (e.g., loss of institutional legitimacy, decreasing faith in the future and modern values). Various crises have led adults to lose their status in society and search for new non-modern, or postmodern, markers that could contribute to their re-legitimation. The consequence is a *detritorialization* of adulthood, which is today in search of legitimacy and authority in order to *reterritorialize* (Deleuze and Guattari 1980). One of the most visible indicators of deterritorialization is the increasing loss of traditional economic and social markers of adulthood. While work, marriage, and childbirth may still symbolize entry into adulthood (Shanahan 2000), they are postponed to an ever later age, thus letting appear a new life stage in psychology known as *emerging adulthood* (Arnett 2000). Côté (2000, 31-32) stresses that adulthood is today "more a psychological status than a social status [...] [and it is] based more on individual preferences than on social norms." Such indicators of deterritorialization should become even more visible in the future since ways to access traditional symbols of entry into adulthood are increasingly difficult to obtain due to the development of higher education, housing costs that overwhelm first-time homebuyers, or high unemployment rates (André 2010; OECD Report 2014).

It is difficult to identify new markers of a conceptualization that has not yet reterritorialized and that may never have lasting markers. However, it is possible to observe traditionally and socially non-adult elements that penetrate and help to reterritorialize adulthood, as they themselves are altered through relation. One of the best examples is found in the play element, and, more particularly, its evolution within consumer society. Highly visible today, the end of the work/life separation from play was first witnessed decades ago, with an overlap between consumption and play (e.g., Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Grayson 1999; Holbrook *et al.* 1984; Holt 1995; Kozinets *et*

al. 2004). In this playful consumer society, fun has become an imperative (Wolfenstein 1951) and allowed consumers, with the help of a predominant culture of leisure, to lose themselves in spontaneous play without shame (Giddens 1964). Today, consumers can party in an adult-sized playhouse, spend their spare time coloring to cope with stress, dress like superheroes in the streets of Cincinnati to stop the "bad guys," or run to flee zombies as if they were acting in the Walking Dead series. Play that was once ascribed to childhood alone (Wyness 2012) has now entered the domain of adult consumption and helps construct a new adulthood, as play is being altered within consumer society.

Play has been moving from ludus to paidia (Caillois 1958), from established rules of consumption to spontaneous desire to play with consumption. Paidia is visible when consumers decide to play with the rules instead of playing by the rules (Grayson 1999); when they reinterpret a brand's culture and symbols. Consumers can make mini-motos and simultaneously create new marketplaces (Martin and Schouten 2014); they can transform wooden pallets into home furniture or reverse the power of negotiation with websites like Napster. Many other examples of paidic play can be found: beer pong, paintball battles, flea markets, logo parodies, and so forth. These all have in common a preference for spontaneity as opposed to organization. Even ludic play that should be more organized by nature, such as Disneyland or IKEA, sometimes has its rules broken (e.g., Disneyland with the flash mountain game and IKEA with the Hide-and-Seek game).

Finally, why should we call this reterritorializing adulthood *rejuvenated adulthood*? First, the word, paidia, which has gained consumer society, is the Greek word for *children*. In other words, paidia is child's play. Second, civilizations have always favored one specific combination of play: competition and chance or simulation and vertigo (Caillois 1958). I suggest that our times are appropriate for a simulation-vertigo combination, as found in primitive cultures (Caillois 1958). The simulation-vertigo combination is a time for illusion and disruption with regular perception. It is the return of magical thinking and enchantment, harmoniously operated by Bauman's (1996) figures of the player, stroller, vagabond, and tourist. It also reveals today's nature of consumption, which is similar to the socially constructed image of childhood. Consumers blend fantasy and reality (Kozinets *et al.* 2004); they no longer test hypotheses but rather ensure that they seem plausible so that they become true (Eco 1990). More generally, marketplaces rely on illusion: a term that derives from the Latin and means *in-play* (Huizinga 1944), which obeys the logic of desire rather than the logic of truth (Freud 1913). A term that asks rejuvenated adults to enter a playful fantasy world previously entered only by children (Baudrillard 1981; Holbrook 2001; Ritzer 2010).

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