THE INTERNET: A CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION AGENT FOR TEENAGERS

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ABSTRACT

Young consumers unconsciously integrate the internet throughout their lives. By internalizing this technology as part of their lifestyle, its use becomes an instinct, and with this instinct comes a new set of beliefs and expectations about consumption. The purpose of this research is to explore how teenagers learn to be consumers while interacting on the internet. While there is a wealth of research on how children learn to be consumers, and it is well established that the main agents of socialization are family, peers, schools, and mass media, a question of contemporary interest is the impact of the internet as a socialization agent. This relatively new form of media is different to mass media because of its interactive ability, that is, the possibility of users interacting with a machine, virtual communities and individuals, globally. We used qualitative research in this exploratory study and through a series of interviews and observations, we discovered socialization of teenagers is not limited to the traditional sources, such as, family, friends and media, but extends to the virtual community on the internet. Learning to become consumers does not only occur through modeling, reinforcement and social interaction as posited by the social learning theory, but also participatory learning through discovery and construction, bricolage and play. These results provide academics with future research direction and hold important implications for marketers and social policy makers.

The acceleration of technology has helped define a new breed of consumers – "net generation" or "cyber-teens", terms used to describe adolescents of this generation who are computer savvy and techno-literate, and whose abilities often exceed those of their parents and their teachers. Adolescents constitute one of the fastest growing internet populations, with 77 million adolescent users expected to go online globally by 2005 (NUA Internet Survey 2001). This group of consumers spends more time online than adults and surpasses all other age groups in their use of chat, instant messaging and other new forms of electronic communication (Montgomery 2000).

It is the unique features of the internet as distinct from traditional media, together with the explosive adoption of this technology by teenagers that makes this research worthwhile. For example, the ability to access information easily from all over the world is very likely to change the way teenagers learn about consumer products and services; the ability to befriend and to interact with friends globally must also influence the way teenagers view the world.

The interconnections of global computer networks allow individuals on the internet to interact with multitudes of people. In addition to being a conduit for interaction with other individuals, the internet can also be used for machine interaction (e.g. Korgaonkar and Wolin 1999). Machine interaction involves individuals interacting with the hypermedia environment in order to access texts, audio and visual material in order to sate a specific information goal.

This environment incorporates interactivity between people and computers, and when using the internet individuals may experience a sense of being in a mediated world, rather than a real world environment (Hoffman and Novak 1996; Shih 1998).

The increasing use of the internet as a communication tool makes this a potentially strong agent of socialization. Adolescents experience the internet as a physical and social space, allowing people to talk, form relationships, discuss issues and work, play games, train, and perform many of the social tasks normally performed in the physical environment (Damer 1997). The ability to access rich and diverse information, to reach across communities and national borders enhances a young consumer's learning process. This resonates Moore's (1996) idea that learning involves getting one's ideas and opinions into social circulation, starting first with people known to us, such as parents and friends, but eventually flowing to people unknown to us.

Traditional learning theories of socialization assumes that the developing child is a passive recipient who is non-reactive in the learning process, that exposure to the socializing agent, such as media, directly influences attitudes (Moschis and Churchill 1978; Moschis and Mitchell 1986; Villani 2001). In the past, children and adolescents were limited in their choices of consumption decisions, these were left to the discretion of adults (e.g. editors and advertisers); and all young consumers were understood to react to information in a similar manner (Brown and Cantor 2000; Tapscott 1998). Contemporary theories of media effects suggest the contrary – that adolescents are active and motivated explorers of media (Valkenburg and Cantor 2001). The internet has created a new learning culture, which is social in nature, allowing adolescents to share, discuss, influence and learn interactively from each other and from the medium. Adolescents today learn not by merely observing and modeling, as posited by Bandura's (1979; 1986) social learning theory, but rather through a process of discovery and participation (Tapscott 1998). An important part of a child's developmental process is play and experimentation (Johnson and Yawkey 1988; Hodgkin 1985). The internet allows the adolescent to participate in the learning process, users are able to synthesize their understanding by trying things out. Such learning is intrinsically motivated by a desire to experience "flow" – a sense of relaxation and control, a time passing activity which is enjoyable and fun (Hoffman and Novak 1996; Novak, Hoffman and Yung 2000).

Another characteristic of importance is the view that the contemporary adolescent thrives in an environment that demands the ability to multi-task. They simultaneously surf the net, chat with friends, download music and play on-line games with others (Urban, Weinberg and Hauser 1996). Shih (1998) describes this form of behavior as bricolage, where information is organized through associations and nodes to fit an individual's own style of thinking and learning - without interference by the author of the information.

While there are studies that have examined adolescents' relationship with the internet (e.g. Eighmey and McCord 1998; La Ferle, Edwards and Lee 2000; Parker and Plank 2000), these studies have concentrated on the uses and gratification aspects of the net. The purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of *why* adolescents use the internet, and to explore this medium's role as an agent of socialization. We suggest that while the social learning theory provides a strong theoretical framework to understand how adolescents learn to be consumers, this framework needs to be updated to include the unique aspects of learning through the internet.

METHOD

As this is an embryonic area of research, the aim of this study is to generate a deeper understanding of this particular phenomenon. Thus the research design was based on in-depth interviews and observations with the intention of generating qualitative data.

A purposeful sampling strategy was used to gain participants for this study, that is, we only included adolescents who are actively involved in the internet, so that they can articulate their experiences (Eisenhardt 1989; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Participants chosen were adolescents aged between 13 years to 19 years who had a minimum of three years of internet experience and who currently had the internet connected in their home computer. The convenience sample consisted of 12 participants; seven males and five females. Five participants were Caucasian, five Asians, and two Pacific Islanders.

Each participant was interviewed in their own home, seated in front of their computers to allow demonstration if required, and this environment also assisted in eliciting previous internet experiences. One of the authors conducted all the interviews, each lasting between 40 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed, and notes were also taken to capture non-verbal aspects of the interview. The participants were also requested to go through the motions of a normal internet surfing day. Observations of these behaviours helped to verify what they have said and also provided a richer understanding of their experiences and actions.

At this exploratory stage, no hypothesis was formulated, rather the interviewer sought to encourage participants to tell stories about their past experiences and to express their thoughts, for example, how they use the internet, how they learn about various consumption skills, their attitudes and behaviors. Although the interviews were relatively unstructured, all interviews began with a general invitation to talk about their internet usage. An interviewer guide was used to ensure all issues of interest were covered.

The coding process consisted of several iterations and involved three coders. The goal was not to gain consensus or identical interpretations, rather the goal was for coders to supplement and contest each other's statements thereby strengthening the results of the study (Malterud 2001). Thus, rather than coding the interview transcripts independently to identify similar themes, the main coder provided her interpretation of the themes, and the other two coders commented on the plausibility of the main coder's interpretations (Wallendorf and Belk 1989). The themes were accepted only if all three coders agreed that it was a reasonable reflection of the data. The quotes noted in the findings represent recurring themes.

FINDINGS

The main issue of interest here is how adolescents learn whilst using the internet. We begin by briefly examining the functions of the internet to give us a framework to discuss how adolescents socialize. Our participants all agree that the internet is a social system which is a medium for fostering human interactions. It is also seen as a place and an object of consumption, that is, it is a set of services to be consumed (e.g. machine interaction).

As a social system, the internet is used mainly for social learning, communication, social relationships and to foster a sense of belonging through shared play and virtual club membership. It is a virtual space where individuals interact socially with others to share similar interests and where friendships are nurtured. Here social interactions are with people, although virtual, as opposed to interactions with the machine. The view that the internet is a place and an object of consumption is gained from participants referring to the net as a set of products and services. Here, the interactions occur between the user and the machine as

opposed to the user and another person or persons. As an object of consumption, the internet is seen as a means of relaxation and escape, a source of learning (information), and shopping.

The results suggest that adolescents learn to be consumers in a number of ways through their interaction on the net, specifically: word of mouth (recommendation), mutual learning or influence, construction and delivery, bricolage and learning from multiple sources. These results are discussed in detail.

Word of mouth

The majority of participants relied on word of mouth to learn about consumption. These participants considered that regular interaction with friends on the internet, and others in their virtual community, influenced their own attitudes and behaviors. Indeed, purchase choices are often made based on recommendations obtained via the internet.

> *Participant 5: I chat quite a bit with Johnny and one day he sent me a message saying, "Hey, you know that Sammy Chang has a new Album?" Then I say, "Really what song?" Then he either tells me what site to go to or he'll send them to me through ICQ and I will listen to them.*

Some participants noted that they based their purchase decisions solely on recommendations from virtual friends and friends with whom they meet regularly at school.

> *Participant 12: All the games that I played so far come from others' recommendations. I don't search the games myself.*

Word of mouth influence is magnified many times by the nature of the internet as communication may flow rapidly through a global community. Instead of one-to-one communication, the internet acts as one-to-many communication, and the flexibility and ease of communication and the absence of physical barriers allows information to spread quickly, and to a far wider audience.

> *Participant 1: I can tell everybody about what I have found out and some people are interested in it like some of my friends who also like F-1… I think Internet just makes it so much easier for me to share with others about what I know and vice versa I guess… it's so much quicker and you can tell the world … well, basically anybody and everybody about your discovery just simply through chatting.*

The significance of the net as a channel for word of mouth cannot be underestimated. While this may prove useful to the marketer if the recommendations are positive, it can be extremely damaging to one's brand if a negative word of mouth flows across the global community:

> *Participant 9: Whenever I want to buy something, I usually go to the auction site. I don't normally bid straight away, because the risk factor comes into play. I normally check out the products from some reliable sources first, such as the DVD Plaza website. At the site, I joined their discussion forum to ask them about the product and how good it is. For example, I wanted to buy Silence of the lamb from Kmart online because it is very cheap... Other more knowledgeable friends (met from the forum) told me it is cheap because, they want to get rid of the stock a new double disc version is due out next month… much better than this one... I didn't end up buying the DVD thanks to my friends*

Mutual learning and influence

Although word of mouth and mutual influence are very much inter-related constructs, for purposes of clarification they have been separated into two distinct themes. The intention is to better stress that word of mouth describes recommendations regarding purchase decisions, while mutual learning or influence refers to the occasions where participants are mutually influencing each other's values, beliefs and/or behavior – to the extent that they begin to share similar interests and opinions.

> *Participant 1: I discuss about the (Formula-1) driver that I like and compare him with the one that he (Net friend that informant shares his F-1 interest with) likes. I compare between their experiences and also the number of races that each driver has won before. I often say things like "my favorite racer won more races than yours" and he usually ended up agreeing with my choice in the end.*

Construction and discovery

Construction and discovery refer to the process of understanding gained through "trial and error". Instead of learning from instruction, learning is gained through experimentation:

> *Participant 7: I learn about the other bits and pieces, like searching, downloading, and stuff by myself. I have the habit of exploring by myself and try things out… I just click on anything that I felt might be relevant in my searching process and learn as I experiment new things.*

Bricolage

Our results concur with previous research, which note that individuals usually engaged in several activities simultaneously while surfing the net as opposed to doing one thing at time (Shih, 1998). This form of learning, known as bricolage, suggests that information is organized in a manner that fits each individual's unique style of thinking and learning:

> *Participant 3: Usually, when I play games like monopoly with people that I don't know and my friends saw me online so they ask me what I am doing and I replied and they will ask me whether its fun and things like that. So, I usually chat with my friends while playing games with other people.*

Multiple Sources

Participants gathered information from multiple sources, indicating flexibility and the resolve to resource different viewpoints for information regarding a particular issue:

> *Participant 8: My knowledge of music came from the online music teachers on guitar tab websites. I also learn about music by reading books and music magazines.*

DISCUSSION, FUTURE RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS

In this research we were specifically interested in the role of the internet as a socialization agent for adolescents. The internet provides an environment where adolescents can observe and learn attitudes and behavior, not only through frequent virtual interaction with known friends, both local and overseas, but also with global communities. The internet can be viewed as a virtual social system that allows adolescents to share their interests, express their opinions and form relationships and communities globally. These communities are drawn together because of mutual interest, and are not constrained by geography. This would imply that the socialization of teenagers is not restricted to the traditional sources of family, friends, school and exposure to passive media such as television. Rather, the active interaction allowed by the internet means attitudes may now encompass a global view.

These finding support theories of consumer socialization based on the social learning theory (e.g. Bandura, 1977; 1986; Moschis and Churchill, 1979) being a credible framework within which to explain how teenagers learn consumer skills. It is evident that consumer skills are acquired on the internet through modeling, reinforcement and social interaction, but the circle of influence is now wider, more global, and virtual. However, in addition to these

well recognized avenues of acquiring consumer skills, we propose three new additions, these are: participatory learning through construction and discovery, play and bricolage.

These three new aspects of learning appear to be of great importance in the teenagers' world, where these adolescents control their own discovery, and are actively learning, rather than passively imitating behavior. The aspect of participation, i.e. implying an active rather than a passive learner, is missing from the traditional socialization framework, and is an important consideration for future research. While there is considerable research documenting play as an important aspect in the development of young children, to date there has been limited attention paid to play's role in the adolescent's development as a consumer. Given the popularity of online family life games (e.g. Simm City), war strategy games, and avatars projecting virtual worlds, further research is needed to determine the consumer and social skills gained through such play. Adolescent engage in several activities simultaneously on the internet, and is able to assimilate a multitude and varied information. This implies a different style of learning and information processing than has traditionally been considered. This presents a rich and interesting avenue for further exploration of consumer behavior and demands future research attention.

Our findings have some important implications for both social policy makers and marketers. The internet is becoming an important avenue for reaching this consumer group, but its properties are different from those of traditional media, and the potential "dark-side" of utilizing the internet as a means of communication and information gathering deserves attention. Policy makers need to consider regulations and/or guidelines for marketers to avoid the misuse of the internet when reaching this group of consumers. Marketers need to be provided with a code of ethics, or at least guidelines, similar to those provided to advertisers of traditional media, regarding the appropriate forms of communication.

Teenagers today are active learners – marketers need to consider teenagers to be thinking young adults, and their communications ought to guide adolescents to make decisions regarding brand choice, without patronizing. The key is to present facts that will help this audience to make up their own minds. Marketers may also be wise to note the very high importance teenagers give to learning through word of mouth, and encourage positive word of mouth across the internet, perhaps, for example, by offering a free gift if one shares the website with five others.

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