

What created the millennial consumer?

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22 Jan 2016

You watch, say, *Blade Runner* again (and make sure you do, before the remake). Or the early, seminal *Star Wars*. Cherished movies. Still, it's difficult not to be struck by how quaint, and at times down-right wrong, their implicit predictions about the future are.

So *Blade Runner* displays a vid-screen public phone booth, not a smart phone. And a traditional newsagent selling traditional mags is no less traditional for their neo-futurist high-tech-porn covers. The *Star Wars* universe (for all it's a '*long time ago in a galaxy far far away*', the series is as futuristic as any sci-fi franchise) similarly seems, naively or blessedly, free of any vestige of social media - one can only imagine Darth Vader's Twitter feed, and shudder at the prospect of Jar Jar Binks'.



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Fact is, for those attempting to project forward in time, hardly surprisingly most get it wrong. From sci-fi speculators to conceptual and commercial "futuurologists", the future invariably takes wild twists unforeseen in our predictions.

Occasionally a few nail it.

"All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message." Marshall McLuhan was one of those few.

The original pop culture guru, and first to explore and predict the radical effects of technology on popular culture, he was a prophet to the age we live in now. He was matched in his prescience by a sixties contemporary in another discipline. While McLuhan in *'Understanding Media'* was upending societal views on where the persuasive power of the media lay, another theorist, Kenneth Keniston, in *'Youth and Dissent'*, was dissecting the changing stages from adolescence to adulthood.

The emerging trends Keniston identified 50 years ago - omnipotentiality (*'there's nothing I can't be'*), abhorrence of stasis (*'I must always be moving, I must never be still'*), and youth counter cultures - have become magnified out of all proportion in our own time.

The phenomenon of youth sub-cultures is worth a brief examination. Unlike earlier generations, for whom membership in an identifiable group meant adoption of an identifiable "uniform" and posturing (think hippies, punks, rockers, mods, rude boys, grunge, house...), sub-cultures today are both more fragmented and more eclectic.

Trends fracture and morph so quickly, and it's easier to respond via an online persona who quickly learns to display the right identifying in-speak and attitudes. Not to say physical fashion is not important, perhaps it's never been more so.

Things have, however, substantially moved on from a delineating and defining uniform. An image-canny Instagram influencer might project aspects of their identity through a range of costume changes that would previously have been mutually exclusive - spanning neo-punk, suit-and-tie chic, beach culture, sports fashion and festival boho - all the looks re-affirming together an aspirational lifestyle based on restless reinvention, reinterpretation and recreation of identity.

So youth culture flows back into Keniston's notion of omnipotentiality - *'I can be many things, to many people, across many platforms, and in many guises'*. There is, however, one significant change from previous youth movements - unlike the anti-capitalist hippies, brands have enormous potential to play a part in ongoing image/identity re-imagining within today's sub-cultures.

The Age of Aquarius of McLuhan and Keniston is now the age of Millennials - Gen Y - relating to the world and one another in ways vastly different to their parents, or any other generation in history. Inevitably there's been a rush to determine *how* best to engage this demographic as consumers. Although certain broad Gen Y defining principles have emerged, there are questions as to how these convert into marketing strategies. For years to come, Gen Y will be the increasingly dominant force in consumer spending. With a target market this important, it pays to take the time to really understand them.

In trying to predict Gen Y aspirations, attitudes and behaviours, we need to look not forward but backwards in time. We can only speculate on where they're going by examining where they've come from.

It's a common belief that technology alone was and is the making of Gen Y. In reality the technological revolution is just one of a number of driving forces. A coalescence of five inter-related dynamics shapes the Gen Y mindset - making it the uniquely different grouping it is.

Each one throws up issues to be addressed when engaging with this consumer demographic.

1. A shift in educational focus - from achievement to self-esteem

It's a characteristic of many social trends that they persist beyond their use-by date - just because they seem right and feel right. The notion that student self-esteem is a prerequisite for intellectual achievement (rather than an outcome) can be seen in those terms.

It has long been accepted as an article of faith that youth self-esteem is a benefit to society. When this premise was

applied to educational practice in the 1980s, it seemed a worthy and logical extension. Why wouldn't a focus on self-esteem in the classroom also carry through into improved student performance? This continues to be the common view and practice long after convincing empirical evidence (including the exhaustive review by Baumeister et al 2003) has refuted it.

Due to a shift in educational philosophy out of their control, this generation has seen a formative causal connection between achievement and self-esteem turned on its head - with predictable consequences (so they really can claim, in the face of older exasperation and accusations of generational entitlement and narcissism, '*it's not our fault!*')

The right to self-esteem irrespective of achievement, seeds the belief by Gen Y that they are living in a world of infinite possibilities. Moreover, these outcomes can be viewed and potentially enjoyed not as mutually-exclusive options, the choice of one logically excluding others, but as possibilities that can co-exist and be enjoyed jointly, as a kind of collective totality - Keniston's "omnipotentiality" with all limits removed.

Capitalising on this sense of entitlement of Gen Y is a marketing challenge, not a moral issue. If that sounds manipulative, consider how subtly attuned this generation is to spurious attempts at influence - how self-defeating this invariably proves. Any hint of manipulation is the kiss of death to a Gen Y targeted brand. It destroys the aura of *authenticity* that Gen Y demands.

The Gen Y sense of entitlement can only be engaged *aspirationally*, in what this generation feels they *deserve* - in a lifestyle, a form of expression, a statement of image, a reflection of style.

2. A parallel shift in vocational focus - from accomplishment to celebrity

When self-esteem comes first and the recognition of achievement comes cheaper than it should, other emotional factors also come into play. In the old order of things celebrity was a reward for accomplishment. Nowadays however, celebrity has *become* the accomplishment.

Never in human history has celebrity been so casually defined, nor so easily attained, by so many. With the advent of reality shows, bloggers and internet "influencers", and those famous for just being famous, celebrity now appears a realistic goal for the "ordinary" person.

Ten years ago a study by the UK Learning and Skills Council found that 16% of the teenage sample believed they would find their success in life through celebrity, and similar numbers would opt to drop out of education for a chance to be on TV. Does anyone believe these percentages would be anything other than greater now? Such is the ubiquity of the celebrity phenomenon that the term "celebritization" has been coined to label the process by which ordinary people are transformed into celebrities (Driessens 2013).

This is not a deliberate choice by Gen Y (or at least the majority) to mindlessly embrace celebrity over accomplishment. Rather it's a perfectly natural reading of the world around them. The figures who attract admiration, adoration even, aren't those who've excelled scholastically in a hard slog to the top. They are those in the media spotlight whose accomplishments are, more often than not, instant and popular and whose shininess overwhelms any sense of their triviality.

It's not the intention of this article to delve into the potential social dangers arising from these developments. Understanding the Gen Y consumer is our objective. And a peculiarity of this grouping is, if not a preoccupation with, at least a strong attraction to the concept of celebrity and its models. Not necessarily to the extent of foregoing educational opportunities and other career planning in pursuit of it, as the minority quoted above, but this is not the point. The line is now blurred between celebrity and accomplishment. The willingness to see one as legitimate as the other, is a deep seated belief within Gen Y that will affect behavioural choices - and not necessarily in an easily predictable way.

Enter our third dynamic, the psychological phenomenon of "modelling" - in a variety of forms.

3. Traditional "vertical modelling" in *patterns of maturation* (based on parents) is largely

replaced by "horizontal modelling" (peer group) and "diagonal modelling" (celebrities)

History has traditionally reinforced societies in which the young are nurtured to maturation. Parental influence at its best ensures a healthy continuity of individual and societal values. This tradition is not dead but it has been watered down substantially, with peer groups and favoured celebrities now the overwhelmingly dominant influences.

Gen Y will readily change lifestyle tastes - in bars and clubs, clothes, magazines, music - on the recommendation or behaviour of a friend or peer group. Examples of this "horizontal modelling" are everywhere and obvious. Major life changes on the other hand - shifting to a vegan or paleo diet, adopting specific social causes, even the kind of romantic partner to aspire to - these are more likely to be prompted by the actions of admired celebrities, in a form of modelling we've labelled "diagonal". The significance of their influence derives from their celebrity status and the accomplishment inferred from this.

It's the nature of these deeply felt but non-existent connections that provides a direct link to the fourth Gen Y dynamic.

4. The emergence of social media as social life

Has social media taken over social life or has social life absorbed social media? A chicken and egg question whose answer cannot be known. But the actuality is clear. It's on display in any Gen Y environment, irrespective of the subculture. For the observer, the wonder is that the manifestations of this play out so unselfconsciously by the participants - indicating just how solidly embedded it is in the mindset and lifestyle of this generation. *'It hasn't happened, if it hasn't been shared.'*

Social currency is as important to Gen Y as real dollars are to an economy. Also, as hard earned and easily lost. FOMO is real, not as a pathology but as an inescapable reality of digital life. *'I am my own best content'* - for better and for worse. Sharing is obligatory, liking is self-affirming, being liked is image-expanding, being followed is validating, following is time consuming, *'I am who I follow, I am who follows me, I am what I like, what I share, what I review and recommend...'*

The key factor here is that of relationships. Through the magic wand of social media, *unreal* relationships *become* real. Connections that don't actually exist acquire the traction and influence that real physical relationships can only aspire to - just ask any parent.

Marketers have been quick to pounce here. An unintended risk is that raised earlier, the surrendering of brand authenticity. Reaching too far is a common and fatal mistake when marketing to this generation.

5. Technological saturation from childhood - tech as both means and end

The means and ends of technology for Gen Y are now indistinguishable. Marshall McLuhan's provocative maxims - "the medium is the message / the medium is the message / the medium is the message" - have come full circle.

McLuhan saw technology not so much as the product of human ingenuity to make life easier, but rather as something that takes over life. It has become an inevitable, an inescapable force. Technology happens to us, and life is never subsequently the same. It's tempting to see this through the prism of one of speculative fictions most enduring themes. Out of control man-made forces, from Frankenstein through 2001's HAL to the '*Terminator*' series' Skynet, unleash havoc on human hubris. Our situation, though not so dire, is still strongly parallel. Technology really does invade life, and radically disrupts the way we do even superficial things.

Frank Herbert's sci-fi classic '*Dune*' redefines the old German concept of Spannungsbogen - "the self-imposed delay between desire for a thing and the act of reaching out to grasp that thing." In the novel's context, this was the virtue of patience, of forbearance. No longer. Tech, the internet and social media have eliminated this once-necessary waiting time. The inclination and its satisfaction have become synonymous and simultaneous.

From a consumer brand perspective, what matters here is the model that the most successful tech brands have managed to

establish.

Consumer brands want to position themselves as an extension of the Gen Y consumer's life/image/identity/aspirations...

The audacity of what the top tech brands have accomplished goes way beyond this (including, app developers, social media platforms, hardware and software companies, and games designers ...) In their must-have ubiquity, life-disruption and image-enhancement, they have succeeded in making the Gen Y consumer happy to see their own life/image/identity/aspirations as an extension of the brand's image.

This has been an enduring theme in *South Park*, in its ascent from fart jokes to precise and often prescient social commentary - recently in a three-episode story line (during Season 17) rolling together Black Friday, 'Game of Thrones' and the image-defining quandary of Xbox versus PlayStation, followed by an entire season (18) drawing all its plots from tech and hashtag saturation.

For consumer brands to achieve even a little of what tech brands have, this is really putting your product/brand at the centre of the consumer's life - establishing a connection that verges on and mimics the strength, loyalty and enduring nature of interpersonal relationships.

Similarities and differences

These five dynamics, arising and merging like an ocean wave, shape and propel Gen Y perceptions of the world and their lifestyle choices. Beneath the surface are currents and eddies - individual differences in personality, temperament, and experiences. These accentuate or moderate the prevailing trends and movements, giving this generation a heterogeneity within its similarities that complicates the task of consumer marketing.

We know Gen Y is not a homogeneous grouping, yet when it comes to targeting them there's a huge temptation to ignore the logic and treat them as such. Particularly when some consumer brands have been so staggeringly successful in appearing to do just that.

Planting the message - wide or deep

Through 50 years of "youth" generations and numerous slogan changes, Coca-Cola has overall maintained the same consistent theme. Life with Coke is... upbeat, alive, real, fun, *youthful*. This brand has jumped the fence, by not only linking the product with young consumer values, but persuading youth to transpose their personal aspirational values into the Coke message.

Barefoot Wine, the largest selling wine brand in the world, has done a similar thing differently. "*GET BAREFOOT and have a great time*". By touching so many Gen Y values in a clean and simple message, the Barefoot logo and theme have given rifle shot accuracy to an apparent shotgun approach.

Neither of these brands has ignored the heterogeneity reality of Gen Y. Rather, they have addressed it by side-stepping the problem, with a powerful, insightful and consistent message.

They have mastered the strategy of planting the message WIDE, by:

- Crafting a brand identity/aesthetic/message that targets as wide a range as possible of Gen Y values.
- Engaging the widest audience, not by being all things to all people, but seeming to be "the right thing to each individual".
- Ultimately, inducing the consumer to project their own image onto the brand.

Note the operative word is "planted". Rather than a hope-for-the-best scattergun approach, it's a calibrated and targeted game plan that succeeds in pitching to, and capturing, the broadest market.

This strategy of course is a lot easier said than done. And other brands have been successful doing the opposite - Planting the message DEEP:

- Targeting a small number of complementary Gen Y aspirational values.
- Crafting a brand identity/aesthetic/message tightly focused on those values.
- Establishing a clear style and personality likeness between target demographic and brand.
- Keeping the message undiluted.

Aspirational Values

Selecting the right Gen Y strategy for your brand - Wide or Deep - is a crucial and hazardous first step. How and what you then choose to target is equally crucial.

The range of values that motivate Gen Y is surprising. We've identified 20 distinct Gen Y *aspirational values* - all of them driven by the generational obsession with *image* and *identity*. These are flip sides of the same coin. Image is how the world sees me. Identity, how I see myself. This is the first generation in history that privileges image over identity.

Various subsets of these twenty aspirational values will need to be appealed to in brand marketing strategies. A complicating factor is that some values are complementary, while others seem mutually exclusive (such as "uniformity and tribal acceptance" and "maverick individuality"). But even these apparent opposites can be reconciled in the same social-media-constructed image, with the right message and brand resonance.

The analysis of a brand to establish the most pertinent and fruitful aspirational values to target, and the decision whether to go wide or deep, provide the essential structure of a Gen Y brand campaign.

Mistakes here will chew up a lot of time and money in attempts to get back on track.

Back to the future

Gen Y consumer choices fall within the confines of the dynamics that have shaped them:

- Self-esteem and its image and identity spinoffs.
- The pull of celebrity in all its varieties, from intimate social peer network to the world stage.
- The ubiquity of horizontal and diagonal modelling over traditional taste-shaping authority.
- The compelling role of relationships (real and imaginary) in social life and social currency.
- The saturation of technology in positioning and connecting a brand within the consumer's life.

They constitute the marketing universe within which we must operate. How significant the role of any one, can best be appreciated by imagining a successful Gen Y brand campaign without it.

Collectively these five provide the framework for an engagement strategy that unites Gen Y values and brand qualities within a consumer relationship.

Fifty years ago McLuhan and Keniston contemplated the future and got it right. They're still getting it right. Ignore the dynamic origins of Gen Y at your brand's peril.

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