Selling (digital) millennials: The social construction and technological bias of a consumer generation

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The Social Construction and Technological Bias

of a Consumer Generation

"You can no longer talk about youth movements and technology movements as though they're separate things." – youth marketing webinar panelist

"Young people have not simply adopted the Internet, they have *internalized* it" (Montgomery 2007: 8, italics original).

Among demographic concepts, the "generation" remains precariously situated: a product of subjective, collective memory as much as empirical, identifiable history. This article investigates how the advertising and media industries are conceptualizing and strategizing the "millennial" generation (also popularly known as "Generation Y," those U.S. teens and young adults born in the 1980s and 1990s) through a perceived technological intimacy. The research illuminates how millennials are "sold" in a double sense: both the online promotional tactics used to target a cohort so often decried as unreachable through traditional channels as well as the stereotypes spun about this generation's values and behaviors that, cyclically, legitimate the commercial work that is produced for them. I argue that marketers put forth a narrative about "digital natives" that recalls Gumpert and Cathcart's (1985) theory that the worldviews and relationships of every generation are influenced by the media ecology of their youth years.

From this "common sense" perspective emerging about millennials – that is, of a demographic "hyperconnected" and "empower[ed]" through technology – a variety of corporate strategies are emerging (Goodstein 2007: 177, 178). These strategies attempt to address the developmental needs long native to adolescents (i.e., identity, community, etc.) with the latest opportunities provided by user-generated content, online social networks, and spreadable media. By designing branded online spaces and flows for expression and interaction – and effectively monetizing the social Web – the mentality

and output of the advertising industry is being transformed. This points to a more flexible, collaborative media ecosystem than that of twentieth century mass broadcasting – an environment touted by marketers as more "democratic," yet, at the same time, one that erodes clear borders between commerce and sociocultural life and obscures the conspicuousness of the ad message from the audiences it courts (Author, 2013).

While marketers accumulate abundant information on Generation Y's connection to digital technologies, *scholarly* research on those efforts remains lacking; this project represents an exploratory effort to begin to fill that gap (Montgomery 2007: 26). Given that millennials retain an estimated $200 billion in annual spending power (and $10 trillion over their lifetime), their interest to advertisers can hardly be overstated (Yarrow and O'Donnell 2009: xvii). An inquiry into how these commercial interests construct and address this consumer generation through new media thus arrives at a timely moment – particularly given the increasingly unsustainable amounts of personal debt that young people are amassing (Draut, 2007). Moreover, this article raises concerns about the political potential of empowering technologies being hijacked for mere profit-making ends and whether youth identity and communities will be limited to consumerist avenues in that developing digital space.

<div align="center">Literature Review</div>

<u>Generational sociology</u>

Some contend that the entirety of American history can be divvied up into successive generational cycles (Strauss and Howe 1991). Edmunds and Turner (2002) define a generation as "an age cohort that comes to have social significance by virtue of constituting itself as cultural identity" (7); similarly, Bourdieu (1993) argues that

generations are more socially than biologically constructed. According to Mannheim

(1952), this social solidarity and collective consciousness derives from experiencing

historical events from a common chronological vantage point. Today, however, thanks to

the fragmentation of "mass society" into niche market segments, advertising and media

seem increasingly responsible for cohort-wide coherence (Edmunds and Turner 2002: 4).

Alanen (2001) usefully develops the social constructionist view of "generationing" as a

way to appreciate how the very act of identifying generations is a fluid, negotiated

process. This project thus seeks to understand how millennials are "generationed" by

commercial interests through a prism of technological bias. Moreover, it explores how

that purported "peer personality" – a cohort's "caricature of its prototypical member" –

contributes to advertisers exploiting new media formats and opportunities for brand

intimacy (Strauss and Howe 1991: 63). Whereas earlier American generations may have

forged their connections and identities through trauma and political upheaval – perhaps

producing a more durable self-consciousness from World War 2 or 1960s unrest –

commercial interests may well circumscribe millennials in the online worlds they inhabit,

limiting any collective sense of self to the consumer marketplace.

        Youth culture, youth markets

        Although youth marketing traces a long history, less scholarly attention has

focused upon its growth (Schor 2004). Osgerby (2004) notes that youth emerged as

commercially central in the post-war years when a demographic baby boom promised

lucrative opportunities as teenage culture was targeted by those eager to cater to "what

they saw as a new breed of affluent, young consumer[s]" (20). Just as in the 1950s,

marketers today still tend to use the most privileged youth as the representatives of their entire generation, ignoring the reality (and dismissing the utility) of those less well off.

This again points to the need to treat generational myths as precisely that; for as Hollander and Germain (1992) contend, segment creation (of youth, for example) is "an active effort to foster in consumers… an image of what they ought to be" (3). Similarly, as Buckingham (2008) notes, "These categories [e.g., generation]… are very quickly taken up by [marketers] as a means of describing and hoping to control what they perceive as a volatile and unpredictable market" (8). From the 1950s until today, countless agencies – several representatives of which were interviewed for this project – have sprung up to assist with that project of power: summoning into being the consumer subject's sense of self so as to activate commercial activity from him or her.

These efforts have ranged from George Gilbert's Youth Research Company pioneering the use of teens to poll friends on spending habits in the 1950s through to MTV and Nickelodeon employing ethnographic approaches in the 1980s and 1990s – thumbing through suburban closets and tagging along for mall visits (Osgerby, 2004; Montgomery, 2007). The commercial discourse surrounding "Generation X," the cohort preceding millennials, reflected a more pessimistic tone, with that demographic seen as elusive and cynical (Noble *et al.* 2009: 626). However, in the past two decades, increasing birthrates coupled with (pre-recession) roaring economies revived hype around youth consumers and cued opportunistic commercial scheming. Yet despite the fact that this "Digital Generation has become the most heavily researched demographic in the history of marketing," proclamations of panic abound from media and advertising leaders about their manageability (Montgomery 2007: 13). Rupert Murdoch, CEO of News

Corporation, offered an emblematic summation of the logic involved in trying to win them over: "We may never become true digital natives but we can and must begin to assimilate to their culture and way of thinking" (Watkins 2009: ix).

These aspirations might usefully be contextualized within wider strands of an ongoing consumer culture debate – for they suggest just how outdated the "mass culture" laments of old are when it comes to commercial engagement (Horkheimer and Adorno 1977). Engagement, after all, is a term that, in and of itself, suggests a more "participatory culture" era as compared to conceptualizations of the consumer as a mindless and passive receptacle. Those who celebrate the democratic, creative properties of new media are not wrong in diagnosing that optimism (Jenkins 2006; Bruns 2008; Shirky 2008). Yet, as this research shows, scholars might also take note of the ways that marketers are aligning themselves with that premise and co-opting that participation.

Digital natives

Gumpert and Cathcart (1985) propose that, "Different world perspectives and human relationships are as much a matter of media gaps as they are generation gaps" (23). In other words, each generation is supposedly equipped with certain media grammars and literacies in its youth; these are influenced by that era's media ecology and reflected in the values and habits – and ways of thinking, more broadly – of a given cohort. They contrast, for example, those born in the 1920s and 1930s – "who have learned to *process reality* in terms of a logically ordered, continuous and linear world produced by primarily a print orientation" – versus those "whose electronic orientation is to visual/auditory, discontinuous reality" (24, italics added). Similarly, they suggest, those millennials born into the digital world will inherently grasp that logic and behave

accordingly. Gumpert and Cathcart liken this to the bias of language an individual first

acquires as the sustaining lens through which she interacts with the social world: "Those

born into the age of radio perceive the world differently than those born into the age of

television" (29). It is not my intention here to litigate for or against such technological

determinism; rather, I will show how *marketers* subscribe to such a thesis in

characterizing their millennial targets as digital natives (the inherently empowered human

"products" of an interactive media environment).

Such "cyberkid" mythology – wherein youth is "the epicenter of the information

revolution, ground zero of the digital world" – can be traced back to 1990s Web coverage

in techno-utopian venues like *Wired* (Katz 1996). Rushkoff (2006) furnishes an early

version of this basic narrative: "Kids are natives in a highly mediated culture where

adults are still immigrants" (2). Prensky (2001) also advances the digital natives thesis,

arguing that technological change is remapping the very circuitry of how millennials

think: that they now require rapid interactivity and graphical interface, abhor top-down

exposition in favor of inductive discovery, and are equipped to multitask in a non-linear,

networked fashion. Yet perhaps the most influential figure in popularizing the notion of

a generation of young people growing up digital – that is, fast-moving, empowered, and

collaborative – has been Tapscott (2008), who argues for a series of behavioral contrasts

differentiating baby boomers (the "products" of network TV) from their uniquely tech-

savvy children (the "products" of the Internet).

Buckingham's (2008) edited volume examines the implications for character

formation, socialization, and politics as young people come of age with digital

technologies woven into the fabric of everyday life and how "prosumer"-driven, bottom-

up media are impacting their relationships. Stern's (2008) contribution to this collection – exploring how user-generated content offers youth a valuable platform for self-realization at an uncertain moment of life-transition – is a lesson I find that advertisers are keen to capitalize upon in their Web 2.0 designs. We ought to question the consequences of identity being channeled through digital branding schemes at such a critical developmental stage: If the nascent self is based upon mere marketed meanings, what happens when a young person can no longer "afford" them? Herring (2008), deconstructing the rhetoric about online youth, notes how "self-reliant and 'in charge'" they are cast by media producers – a theme echoed by the marketers I interviewed who similarly "exoticize [the digital native]… emphasizing its novelty, radical difference from what came before, and transformative potential" (74, 75).

In the commercial discourse examined here, technology is, indeed, regarded as liberating force for youth, though, as will be shown, it is liberation from an old regime of marketer power (that saw subjects more passively) and *into* a new, more interactive (read: "democratic") version wherein youth have the "means… to reach past the constraining influence of their elders to create new autonomous forms of communication and community" – within a branded space, of course (Buckingham 2008: 13). The fact that marketers draw upon the language of "liberation" and "democracy" suggests that the political potential of digital technologies might be usurped for mere consumerist ends.

Other recent scholarship on the emergence of digital natives has taken more of an ethnographic, functionalist approach to millennials' socialization, play, and learning (Mesch and Talmud 2010; Ito 2010); that youth might derive pleasure from the "opportunities to publicize and distribute their work to online audiences and to gain new

forms of visibility and reputation" now enters into marketer plans when courting this demographic (Ito 2008: 1). Part of the challenge, however, for contemporary advertisers is to figure out how to navigate these "networked publics," as boyd (2008) calls them, in ways different from the broadcast and outdoor promotional spaces afforded throughout the twentieth century. Moreover, as online profiles become the cornerstone of identity, digital natives appear increasingly lax about giving away personal data online and how it might be used by commercial interests (Turow 2006): "The digital age has brought about new incentive to reveal information about yourself… At no time in human history has information about a young person… been more freely and publically accessible to so many others" (Palfrey and Gasser 2010: 54). Some social critics charge that youth are being debased by all these technological changes (Bauerlein, 2008). Whether empirically true or simply "generationing," this work is meant to show the ways in which these narratives circulate in the advertising industry, what impact they might have on the digital campaigns being developed there and the media industries more broadly, and how this may, in turn, impact the political, social, and cultural potential of millennials.

<div align="center">Method</div>

As a study of the industrial construction of audiences (namely, "digital" millennials), this paper contributes to a tradition of media studies scholarship on cultural production (Hesmondhalgh 2007; Peterson and Anand 2004). It is an effort, not unlike Sender's (2004) work on the gay market or Davila's (2001) work on the Hispanic market, to draw out the thinking that circulates about millennials and how those digital native stereotypes inform the campaigns staged – an effort to see this cohort through the eyes of those tasked with "selling" them, both as a concept and in practice.

Advertising scholarship has less rarely gone behind-the-scenes like this – more often offering insightful readings of the final product (Williamson 1978), while failing to account for the assumptions of the producer of that commercial content. This has resulted in a tendency to focus on the advertising text itself rather than the "authors" of it, which I rectify here by shining the spotlight on the digital marketing creators of youth commercial culture (Soar 2000: 419). Much like Deuze (2007), I've sought to chart the "media logic" about millennials: This refers to the ways that cultural producers create their work in light of changing expectations about the roles of audiences. In keeping with the critical media industry studies research agenda that Havens, Lotz, and Tinic (2009) propose, I examine "how knowledge about texts, audiences, and the industry form, circulate, and change; and how they influence textual and industrial practices" (237).

The research has been exploratory, qualitative, and inductive – a first step toward opening a new front (advertisers' expectations and strategies) in an ongoing scholarly conversation about the relationship between millennials and technology. I attempted to contact, by e-mail, thirty-two individuals or companies that specialize in this particular consumer segment in the U.S. as identified in journalistic coverage or industry prominence. These contacts included agency CEOs, digital and integrated strategy directors, and research department heads involved with institutions as diverse as advertising shops and consulting firms; broadcasting networks, film studios, and music labels; social media and software companies; and apparel, automotive, and beverage brands – in short, any professional or employer with a vested stake in the millennial market who might be willing to speak with me. From this open inquiry, I secured largely one-on-one, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with fifteen (anonymized) participants

during phone calls that lasted, on average, forty minutes each; these interviewees ranged

from long-term veterans of youth marketing to millennials themselves hired for their

"native" insights.

Complementing this, I drew upon an assortment of business reports, company

websites, webinars, books, and dozens of magazine and newspaper articles in the popular

and trade press oriented to this nexus of millennials, marketing, and new media. (This

included all relevant coverage in *Advertising Age* in 2010 and 2011, which I read and

annotate weekly for stories relating to this subject.) More broadly, I was informed by

research conducted for a book-length project on nontraditional advertising that included

hundreds more articles and dozens more interviews (Author, 2013). These textual

materials helped me understand that common sense emerging in the marketing industry

about youth and young adults today. The central research questions included: How are

advertisers conceptualizing millennials as digital natives? How are those constructions

playing into new media strategies and tactics? And how might this inform the outlook of

the marketing industry toward a more flexible and collaborative output?

Analysis

The selling *of* the digital millennial

Millennials are inherently aligned with technology. Intimacy with the digital
world is one of the greatest strengths of their generation. Never having known a
world without digital technology, Millennials are the first 'digital natives' and
experience the world in a completely different way than previous generations.
They recognize the power and importance of social networks and utilize the
Internet as a trusted source and a platform for self-expression. In the eyes of the
Millennials, personal online networks hold as much importance and authority as
any conventional media channel. ("Marketing to Millenials")

The above passage, drawn from a report titled, "Millennials: Marketing to a

Different Mindset," embodies much of the narrative circulating about young people today

– chiefly, that this consumer demographic has been "rewired" in accordance with new

media technologies. Examples like this abound: An "Unmasking Millennials" global

webinar claimed that the single biggest factor that defines this generation and marks them

as different from predecessor cohorts is their technological savvy. Influential market

research studies have included a report announcing the arrival of "Digital Kids" (Schor

2004: 102) and another report that dubs millennials the "Technology Everywhere

Generation," because they "have innate ability to use technology, are comfortable

multitasking while using a diverse range of digital media, and literally demand

interactivity as they construct knowledge" (Bauerlein 2008: 73, 82). One president of

brand consulting firm explicitly echoes Gumpert and Cathcart's (1985) generational

theory in a post on her "Millennial Marketing" blog:

> Above all… Gen Y *is* unique… The thing that makes them unique, perhaps in all
> history, is access to platforms to broadly communicate and share their ideas. This
> ability alone may make the gap between Gen Y and earlier generations more
> striking than any previous gap, or possibly any to come… '*The digital revolution
> has not only given this generation of young people access to knowledge and
> information on an unprecedented scale, but it has also given them massive
> influence*.' Mobilizing that influence requires making it easy to access and share
> information with peers. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, topic-specific blogs, and
> opinion sites like Yelp are all ways to encourage Millennials to talk to each other
> about your brand. (italics original)

Note the language of political liberation here and note, too, how it's framed less for its

democratic potential and more for commercial exploitation. Just as this consultant

maintains the Internet represents the most important "shaper" of the millennial mindset,

another trade report fittingly heralds a new consumer altogether: "Consumer 2.0." Others

carry forward the evolutionary metaphor: "Technology… is reshaping the marketplace

because it is reshaping consumers *from the inside out*," writes Johnson (2006) in a book

on Generation Y marketing (5, italics added). Likewise, a report titled, "The Truth About

Youth," unknowingly evokes McLuhan's (1994) "media as extensions" notion:

> Technology, of course, is the great global unifier; it is the glue that binds this generation together… Compared in the past to an extra limb for young people, we believe technology has become even more fundamental… We all know how important technology is to young people, but a willingness to sacrifice one of their human senses to keep it shows just how intrinsic it has become… For young people, technology is more than a useful tool or an enabler. It truly is their fifth sense…. Technology enables young people to sense the world and make sense of the world.

A cable network's report on youth happiness invokes this even more simply,

quoting a 20-year-old emblematically: "I exist through my cell phone." In an interview,

one marketing agency research director adds:

> This technology is prevalent in their lives in a way that has just not been seen before in our existence. So it's key, you know, and there's been studies that say the smartphone is closest to the bed – it's the last thing they look at when they go to bed and it's the first thing they pick up in the morning.

> Similarly, a consultant on youth branding points out in an interview:

> [Millennials] basically look at technology as a toy, whereas I think adults… are little more wary… Just their perception of how empowering and how much fun technology is, I think, very different then it would have been for their parents… Technology [like that] is no different to them than turning on the electricity sort of. That really is just a matter of familiarity and you see it with babies who – literally like under one year old – who love to play with their parents cell phones, so of course when somebody, if you started at that age and you sort of innately figure out what certain buttons do and you don't have any fear about it, it's going to sort of change your whole perspective.

She adds that, at industry conferences and trade shows, conversations and programming

about millennials routinely evolve into conversations and programming about social

media. For more than a decade now, it seems, the received wisdom has been that, "The

Internet is the place to be if you want to reach kids," as one promotions director told

Advertising Age (Rosenberg, 2000). Yet this can be an increasingly vexing proposition:

"As marketers we're trained to develop and deliver a message but Millennials create their own messages and talk on their own channels… They communicate on a network nobody owns," claims the author of one generational study.

The anxiety about millennials' independence from traditionally proprietary communication networks dovetails with discourse that regularly declares them unreachable through traditional media channels. Interviewees describe millennials as extremely savvy and skeptical (with multiple references to their keen "bullshit detector"), "like gazelles, ping-ponging all over the landscape, eluding conventional and clumsy methods," and "incredibly adept at ignoring advertisements or fast-forwarding them or just not paying attention." Tapscott (2008) predicts that because millennials abhor one-way advertising, having been weaned on two-communication interactivity since childhood, marketers will have to " rewrite the rules" as illuminated here (186, 187).[1]

Broadly speaking, then, there seem to be two ways that marketing discourse constructs the millennial as technologically intimate: through networked hypersociality and participatory exhibitionism. For example, the marketing head for a youth agency volunteered this telling insight in an interview:

> In terms of self-expression, for the millennials, they've grown up and are now in this generation when they believe that anyone and everyone can be a star. You know: 'I am a celebrity for my five minutes or I can be an Internet sensation.' So that plays right into the self-expression – they feel very entitled to self-expression and making sure their voice is heard in a public setting, most often online in a social network.

A digital research director for a cable network echoed this in an interview: "If you're fourteen years old and you sign up for Facebook, you're asked to write a paragraph that's essentially your brand positioning statement: your identity." Managing favorites, photos,

and friends in that space, she says, "all adds up to, you know, a sense of a brand or doing

my own publicity, if you will, as a millennial."

In some ways, this networked hypersociality and participatory exhibitionism are

perhaps just the latest manifestations of more enduring phenomena of youth when it

comes to needs related to community and identity. Yet the interactivity endemic to

digital media use maps usefully (for brands) onto these same critical developmental

needs. I will now illuminate more concretely how marketers who "continue to probe the

psychological links between technology and adolescent development' are seeking to

embed themselves in that "communication structure" – and trying to buy their way into

that "network that nobody owns" (Montgomery 2007: 26, 108, 125).

The selling *to* the digital millennial

When marketers render millennials as technologically exotic – a cohort whose

very mindset has apparently been "rewired" by the digital landscape – it lends itself to a

different set of practices as had been the norm in an era of mass broadcasting. The cable

network digital research director describes this: "We embrace the transition that…

millennials are leading and we try to create products and experiences that reflect their

cultural reality, which now includes a blurred line between digital and quote-unquote real

life." Brands are scrambling to ascertain how to maintain and leverage those youth

relationships (and, more so, loyalties) through social media. Marketers seek, through

new media platforms, to weave brand messages into the "cultural dialogue" of youth, as

one teen marketing firm announces on its website; or, as an MTV vice president says of

their aim, "Social media is the telephone and we're the conversation." One report on

youth shopping thus emphasizes, "It [is] imperative for retailers to take advantage of a

new generation of Web technologies and speak the same language as the online wired

youth do to generate brand affinity with them as young as possible." They court digital

natives in two main ways that simultaneously exploit those developmental necessities and

technological capabilities: soliciting self-expression and cultivating community.

Campaigns and platforms that draw upon user-generated content submissions are

the industry's attempt at embedding commerce in that fabric of identity exploration that

takes place online: "building communication 'environments' around particular brands,

encouraging individuals to use them as a way of defining who they are to their friends

and acquaintances" (Montgomery and Chester 2009: S20). According to the marketing

head for a youth agency,

> As marketers, what we're just trying to do is make sure that our programs allow
> our consumers to participate, whether it's user-generated content or whether it's a
> chance for a shot at fame, even in a small respect. Even if it's just – to make one
> up on the fly – here's a brand, we're creating a theme song, you could win a
> chance to be the one to sing it in our commercial… I think everyone feels that like
> they genuinely have a chance to have their five minutes in the sun.

Soliciting such self-expression can take a number of digital forms, which are

fundamentally an effort at intertwining an emergent sense of self (and, for youth, this is

still at an embryonic, unstable stage) with *branded* identity. This is, of course,

problematic because it delimits the avenues for selfhood – otherwise rich in social

potential given the capacity of new media technologies – to an overriding *commercial* set

of alternatives (as opposed to other sources of identity). Another interviewee, a

marketing agency research director, details these possibilities:

> Make us a video, send us your best photos of you in product x, write about this
> and taking that content and using it in a campaign or in a contest… It's definitely
> interconnected: that need for self-expression and the need to put information out
> there is definitely well received by brands.

Examples abound of marketers capitalizing on the presumed exhibitionism of

digital natives. These include networks integrating viewer tweets into on-air

programming; digital firms designing the opportunity for uniquely personalized avatars in

branded online games; and Facebook brand management agencies recommending

questions and trivia status updates as social bait. Thus, they suggest:

> What's the best way to start a dialogue with your brand advocates? Ask a
> question, of course! Prompting users to share personal feelings and opinions
> engenders a feeling of trust – and lets your fans know you are always listening…
> Don't forget to give the fans their props by including a call-out to their name or a
> comment on their activity.

Strategies such as these are not only seeking mere trust, they're aiming to secure one's

identity as a product of the brand – an identity that, for young people, is still

developmentally in flux and can be lucratively exploited when routed through

commercial corridors online. More than ever, digital platforms are providing this

opportunity and advertisers are seizing it, as one white paper urges: "Campaigns need to

invite Millennials into the [ad] process and allow them to get involved with the brand on

a deeper level. User-generated ads, Facebook brand pages, Twitter, and a host of new

technologies have opened up the doors [to do that]."

To that end, marketers are equally evaluating new media opportunities for their

potential to carve out community within a branded space – a way of getting that

hypersociality assumed of digital natives to work for, rather than against, commercial

imperatives. Edelman, in a white paper on millennials and branding, terms this

"reverberation" – the constantly connected viral space of youth and the potential "impact

that Millennials can have on brands by communicating with their extended peer groups in

real time." Such "reverberation" logic enticed Ford to mount the "Fiesta Movement," a

millennial-targeted ad contest in which the automaker gave 100 young, Web-savvy

winners six months free behind the wheel of their new subcompact in exchange for

regular content posted about their impressions to YouTube, Flickr, MySpace, Facebook,

blogs, and so on.

According to one brand communication manager for Ford, the automaker opted

against mass media buys in favor of scheming socialization through digital flows thought

to be more "authentic": "We realize it's not what we're saying about Ford, it's about

what other people are saying about us" and that "the reason we turned to [the 100

participants] is because they have a valid voice in their community, and people trust what

they say and what they think" (Slutsky, 2010: 8). In an interview, he adds that applicants

for the program were scored for their "social vibrancy" – the calculated value, in other

words, of that networked hypersociality:

> We were thinking if we did this well and we got these hundred influencers out
> there talking about it and sharing content that it would eventually become a
> movement. That we would get consumers all across the country seeing, hearing,
> and talking about this vehicle and doing it all without any traditional media
> support. This was essentially a grassroots effort – it was an orchestrated
> grassroots effort, but it was grassroots nonetheless… These are all movements
> that use word-of-mouth to really get other people interested and talking about
> what you're trying to convey.

The "holy grail" for advertisers, according to the marketing director at an agency

that specializes in branded video distribution (particularly to 18-to-34 year olds), is just

that: commercials being widely shared (presumably, organically) online. Yet in pursuing

that viral space, he says in an interview, advertisers need to tread cautiously, for reasons

going back to issues of identity:

> People are increasingly defining themselves – defining their identity by what they
> share online… It's harder for someone to share a piece of content that's very
> heavily branded because you're clearly then, like, this mechanism for the brand

versus a mechanism for a piece of content. So I think the more it feels like content and less like a very straightforward brand placement, it's less cognitive dissonance for people to share… If you make it easy for people to show how this piece of content identifies who you are versus just kind of like being the amplification for an advertiser, that's where it sort of makes sense.

Videos that tend to be more heavily branded, he says, have a lower pass-along rate compared to those that feature "a lighter shade of branding." Thus, the unstated goal: blending in with "authentic" communal flows in the digital space, a term that several interviewees utilized (and no doubt betraying the reality that advertising is, ultimately, an ongoing challenge of overcoming an endemic *inauthenticity*). Yet this also points toward the possibility that the persuasive message will recede from view and occupy a space less identifiable as advertising to a young – and, thus, potentially more vulnerable – consumer. Similarly, another digital firm develops programs to embed brands within social applications, games, events, and communities – integrating advertising into "a stream of social activity" (what it calls, unsentimentally, "untapped inventory" available to client buyers) and "leverag[ing] naturally occurring activity" like online conversations where people might be more receptive to branding schemes. A marketing coordinator there explains:

> For us, it's more about figuring out, well, what kind of audience are you trying to reach – is it young girls? Is it young guys? And, then, what are those people doing in these different environments?... There's so many types of social activities even beyond personal gaming – sponsored communities that people are engaging in; people are taking polls; people are doing photo contests; they're sharing outfits – things like that. Any of these things… are opportunities for brands to get involved… We're able to piggyback off of sort of social and viral things that are already going on online. Instead of having to go out and find your own audience, there are tens of millions of people already doing these activities and because the games and environments are so dynamic because they're digital, we can put the brand into that almost seamlessly as it's happening.

Yet by seamlessly piggybacking on digital natives in this way, marketers are also

simultaneously guiding millennials into commercially circumscribed identities and

interactions and making it more and more difficult to imagine cultural spaces for youth

online that exist for something more than the accumulation of consumer debt.

    <u>"Empowered" consumers, "flexible" producers</u>

> I picture, like, my grandparents sitting there [at home], reading a newspaper; my
> parents watching TV and reading a newspaper; and my kids watching TV, using
> the Internet, texting on their cell phone, and creating content as they consume
> content. And that kind of evolution of media kind of plays into, like, how you
> market to them – if millennials are creators of content and not just consumers of
> content, earned media takes on a totally different definition for a brand… Now
> earned media is like: How do we get people to 'like' [on Facebook]? How do we
> get people to share? How do we get people to sell their friends? And millennials
> are probably our best bet to make that happen.

The characterizations of and promotional innovations aimed at millennials

portend the possibility of profound change in the advertising industry. This article has

demonstrated how marketers seem to subscribe to a theory that the media ecology of

youth shapes the values, thinking, and interactions (or, as McLuhan put it, "sense ratios")

of their generation (Gumpert and Cathcart, 1985). By buying into that digital natives

social construction, advertisers are, in turn, developing new strategies to sell through a

presumed technology intimacy, as evidenced by the quote above from the CEO of a

social media marketing firm.

One of the buzzword assumptions underlying these ideas and tactics is that of

advertisers facing a newly "empowered" consumer these days. In commercial discourse,

a series of binary contrasts round out this mythology: that marketers need to talk "with,"

not "at," consumers; that consumers, not corporations, "own the brand;" and that the two-

way interactive dialogue "pulled" by "active" audiences – as opposed one-way,

"interruptive" mass broadcasting "pushed" at "passive" audiences – will best facilitate

this exchange. A global marketing executive at Levi-Strauss claims:

> With millennials, we have to let go a lot. As a brand, I think we were a company,
> among others, who probably felt that tight control of the brand and saying what
> our voice is was crucial up until probably a couple of years ago. We're
> essentially a brand now that is based on co-creation, self-expression and
> originality. Our millennial customers are a big part of that.

Such a posture toward the millennial demographic redefines and increasingly

dematerializes the nature of the new media output for advertisers. They feel compelled to

create more "snack" or "bite-size" (as *Wired* put it), platform-agnostic, decentralized

digital content that is accessible on multiple screens (even simultaneously, as seen with

check-in apps, analogous to location-based social networking, for millennial-targeted TV

programming) (Miller 2007). This work seems "influenced by video-clip culture that is a

staple in the online experiences of many young people" and that "represents a new

cultural ethos and a profound shift in how we consume media – in smaller and steadier

portions and on smaller and more mobile screens" (Watkins 2009: 159, 161). If during

the 1990s, marketers sought to drive traffic back to a corporate homepage, today, this

branded content is expected to be more diffuse: "As more channels open up in terms of

communicating… there has to be more 'arms,' I guess, of the brand reaching out and able

to touch millennials," says a marketing agency research director.

Ford's approach embodies this, according to the brand communication manager

there: "[We need] to make every single piece of content that we produce… embeddable,

spreadable, shareable. We need to make our content live on" – in spaces not their own,

on that network endemic to millennials that "nobody owns." This, he explains, is

redefining Ford's role in culture:

It's about providing people with really interesting stuff to comment on, to like, to share with their friends – and we view ourselves as a media company essentially. Yeah, we produce cars, but we also produce content… With social media… think about all the channels… Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, etc. – those are all things that we have to manage now. So like a *New York Times* or an NBC, we are, again, cranking out content to a variety of platforms… This becomes more and more complex and more difficult to manage, the more platforms and technologies we see come into play, but the bottom line is that we have to basically be there in just about every fashion.

Such an assignment heralds the further breakdown of content and commerce: a digital landscape, trained on millennials, in which the advertising is made to be seamless and indistinguishable from those nascent institutions that carry it to audiences (user-generated content, social networks, and spreadable media) – a blurry world taking shape online that's analogous to the spread of product placement throughout broadcast media (Lehu 2007). Much as the "infomercialization" of all TV programming has been predicted because of that trend (Montgomery 2007: 238), the increasing "infomercialization" of interaction and expression amidst online networks might be anticipated as well. "People don't share ads," a digital workshop at Cannes declared. "People share content." Thus, ads must be self-effacing in nature – a lesson that Facebook's head of marketing knows well: "We are putting advertising back in the hands of the people, so ads are less like ads and more like content and information."

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

This paper has provided an initial foray into an underdeveloped research area: the digital marketing aimed at a generation of millennial consumers. Yet it would seem important to note that many of these online efforts also work in concert with other guerrilla marketing innovations being explored offline (Author, 2013). These include, among others, event stunts like a T-Mobile flash mob staged in a London train station,

various "graffadi" and corporate street art projects, and the increasing prominence of word-of-mouth advertising agencies like BzzAgent. Marketers seem to find value in social media and viral content for its ability to augment the buzz produced from those other "non-digital" programs. Going forward, it would be useful for scholars to ascertain how millennials themselves perceive these digital efforts – and, more particularly, how they decode the narrative of "empowerment" that tends to envelop this approach. Although the interviews conducted here have excavated the logic of commercial strategy in producing this advertising content and coordinating networked practices, future research might similarly undertake interviews with the "digital native" targets about such programs.

Such marketing raises several key concerns for the repercussions for young people and society at large. First, policymakers will need to evaluate regulating this trend toward blending commercial efforts indistinguishably into sociocultural life online; for a demographic target already burdened with massive amounts of personal debt, "ads that are less like ads" might impair sober, prudent consumer decision-making in that marketplace. Second, critics should to monitor the political consequences, conceived broadly, of this monetization of the social Web. On one hand, we have heard throughout the pretense of a democratic affect assigned to "liberating" new media technologies in the hands of young people; yet marketers, ultimately, seek not civic engagement but rather consumer activation through them. The advertising industry is right to be fearful of a generation that communicates on a "network that nobody owns," for such a network might serve public rather than private needs – that is, depending on the degree to which it is colonized by commercial interests seeking mere profit-making ends. Finally, questions

ought to be raised about how, as marketers adapt digitally, young people can still explore

their identity independent of the branded spaces and flows that are being erected there;

with millennials at a critical developmental juncture, the fact that their socialization

online is now targeted as ad "untapped inventory" could circumscribe that self-discovery

to purely commercial avenues. For as this cohort is "generationed" as digital natives,

marketers will continue to follow them down those new media channels, trumpeting

consumer "empowerment" while redefining what (and where) we know of advertising.

Endnotes

[1] It is important to remember, however, that conceptualizing digital youth as resistant to mass broadcasting solicitations is strategically useful for many of the sources consulted here, given that they seek to sell ad inventory in digital – not broadcasting – spaces. Moreover, as evidenced by labels like the "enigma generation" and claims that "almost everything written about millennials is wrong" and "whatever we know [about them now] is likely to change tomorrow" (comments made at a webinar), there is further strategic value in *mystifying* millennials if part of the services a firm offers is demographic *de*-mystification of that target segment. As Osgerby (2004) deciphers of this history of youth marketing, "Advertisers and market analysts had a vested interest in depicting the youth market as treacherous waters – as a sea of capricious consumers, where businesses would flouder without employing the navigational skills of accomplished specialists" (53). All of this serves as another reminder to treat such contemporary proclamations about youth (in this case, as digital natives) as functional constructions, as I have sought, not objective truths – for "the discourse of the 'digital generation'" illuminated here from marketers "is precisely an attempt to construct the object of which it purports to speak" (Buckingham 2008:15).

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