Socialisation through Consumption: Teenagers and the Internet

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Abstract

In this exploratory research we were interested in how teenagers consume the internet, and how these experiences help to shape them as consumers. Through a series of interviews and observations, we discovered that the internet provides an environment where adolescents observe and learn attitudes and behaviours within global communities, they learn to become members of global communities and, importantly, we learned that teenagers consume the internet as an experiential, rather than as an economic, activity. Interestingly, this research also demonstrated that adolescents' consumption of the internet promoted active, as opposed to passive, socialisation processes. We discuss the potential impact these findings may have for both the way researchers approach adolescents as a consumer group, and the implications for policy makers concerned with regulating marketing approaches to adolescent consumers. We conclude with possible future research directions of interest to academics.

Keywords: Adolescents, Teenagers, Internet, Consumption, Learning

1. Background

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 growth is reflective of a global trend, e.g. in New Zealand most teenagers have access to the internet (Hendery, 2003); and in Hong Kong, the internet has overtaken the television as the preferred medium among teenage boys (NUA Internet Survey, 2002). 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). Further, teenagers from Europe and US are predicted to spend US$10.6 billion in 2005 compared to US$1.2billion in 2001 (NUA Internet Survey, 2001).

While psychologists and family counsellors research and debate the social and psychological impact of technology and the internet on children, consumer behaviourists have generally not ventured far into this domain. Yet the internet provides many new and interesting opportunities for marketers. A thorough understanding of how it is consumed is of practical interest to managers, whilst the act of consumption is of interest to researchers because it offers the opportunity to explore socialisation of children as an active process. To date, the way children learn to be consumers has generally been considered as a passive process, that is, children predominantly learn through watching and modelling (Bandura, 1986), but with the internet, socialisation is more active because of the ability to interact virtually. While the process of active socialization can occur through many different ways, for example, when a child role plays with friends or care-givers, the internet presents an interesting context in which to consider the development of an active means of socialisation through consumption.

There is a wealth of research on how children learn to be consumers. It is established that the main agents of socialisation are family, peers, schools, and mass media (e.g. Martin and Bush, 2000; Moschis and Churchill, 1978; Roedder-John, 1999). A question of contemporary interest is the impact of the internet as a socialisation agent. This electronic technology is different to traditional mass media because of its interactive ability, that is, the possibility of users interacting with a machine, virtual communities and individuals, globally

(Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Shih, 1998; Steuer, 1992). The ability for virtual interaction means that the internet can act as a powerful socialisation medium for teenagers. The interactive ability of the internet, that is, the possibility of users interacting with a machine, virtual communities and individuals globally, means that their consumption experience of the internet is different to traditional media.

The finding from Forrester Research (2000) that young consumers unconsciously integrate the internet into their daily lives is reflective of previous research on the effects of television and socialisation (for example, Allen, 1992; O'Guinn and Shrum, 1997), which suggests that the television is such a common feature in our lives that it becomes very much part of our day-to-day existence. This ubiquitous nature of the television and its integration into our lives means that its "effects are often invisible", and "simply too immersed to easily observe its influence" (O'Guinn and Shrum, 1997). Similarly, the internet has overtaken the television as a powerful agent of socialisation because of its ubiquity. Many adolescents have integrated the internet as part of their daily existence and to a much higher intensity than many adults. According to a senior executive at Microsoft, this represents a discontinuous change in how adolescents behave. They view the internet as essential, with many adolescents being what the industry refers to as AORTAs – always online and real time available (Personal Correspondence, 2004). 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.

This research concentrates on consumer socialisation of teenagers, that is, we are interested in understanding how teenagers "acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace" (Ward, 1974, p2) through their interaction on the internet. Ward's (1972) definition and focus is adopted in our study, that is, our focus is on adolescents' socialisation, with the recognition that not all learning takes place during this period of time, for example, new roles adopted later in life, such as during early adulthood, may alter patterns of earlier learning. Secondly, our interest is on consumption-relevant skills, knowledge and attitudes, which is different to interest in other aspects of socialisation.

Adolescents are at the reflective stage of consumer socialisation. This stage is characterised by more complex and sophisticated levels of information processing and social skills than early childhood. Adolescents are more reflective in their reasoning, with an awareness of others' opinions, more focused on meanings of the consumer marketplace, are needing to shape their own identities whilst conforming to group expectations (see Roedder-John, 1999 for an in-depth review). The internet offers an ideal place for adolescents to explore, construct and discover meanings in consumption without boundaries and restrictions.

Using Bandura's (1986) learning theories as a platform to understand consumer socialisation, we explore how socialisation through the internet can be viewed as being more active than previously thought. The traditional learning theory which suggests a more passive approach to learning, is briefly outlined followed by a review of the literature on how teenagers experience the internet, which suggests a more active approach to learning.

2. Traditional Learning Theory

Traditional learning theories of socialisation adopt a perspective which assumes that exposure to the socialising agent, such as media, directly influences attitudes (Moschis and Churchill, 1978; Moschis and Mitchell, 1986; Villani, 2001). Such theories assume that the developing child is a passive recipient who is non-reactive in the learning process. For example, it is well established that consumer values are learned from a very early age, through interaction between friends, family, schools, neighbourhoods and significant adults (Kane, Taub and Hayes, 2000). Essentially, an individual's cognition, which includes their standard for performance and moral judgments, becomes developed through their observations and interactions with other people. That is, the process of learning consumer values occurs through modelling, reinforcement and social interaction (Moschis and Churchill, 1978).

Modelling: Bandura (1986) provides a strong argument for the role of modelling within the frameworks of social learning theory and social cognitive theory. This vicarious form of learning usually involves other people in a social setting, that is, children's and adolescents' attitudes and behaviours are formed by imitating behaviour. In addition to learning by observing people in a real social setting, adolescents may also model after people with whom they have no direct contact, such as movie stars and athletes, and events in television, film, music and print (Kane, Taub and Hayes, 2000; Martin and Bush, 2000).

Reinforcement: Reinforcement is often argued to occur in conjunction with modelling (Bandura, 1977; Lockwood and Kunda, 1997). While modelling often occurs because of an intrinsic desire to acquire observed behaviour, such learning may also be strengthened by direct reinforcement or consequences of a given behaviour (Moschis and Mitchell, 1986; Skinner, 1953). Positive reinforcement (e.g. social approval) from agents, such as the media or significant adults, helps adolescents to determine what are acceptable behaviours, values and attitudes in society. For example, a typical television commercial may depict a situation in which an individual gains social approval or avoids embarrassment by changing their behaviour, such as transforming from a pimply face to a clear face after using a particular pimple cream.

Social Interaction: Social interaction is often used to understand how children and adolescents acquire consumer related attitudes and skills through the influence of significant others, such as family and friends. As individuals interact frequently and directly as a cohesive group, similar attitudes and values are developed (Festinger, 1954; Homans, 1950). Alternatively, people who hold similar attitudes tend to interact more frequently with one another (e.g. Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Hendrick and Hendrick, 1992).

2.1 Learning to be Consumers on the Internet

Essentially, the internet is viewed by teenagers as a social place, where diverse communities grow like micro organisms (Rheingold, 1993). Thus, it seems probable that the internet's ability to provide access to rich and diverse information, and its ability to reach across communities and national borders, may enhance a young consumer's learning process. This possibility resonates with 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. In contrast to the traditional view on how adolescents learn, Tapscott (1998) suggests that adolescents today learn through a process of discovery and participation.

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 reject these arguments and suggest 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 rather than merely observing and modelling behaviour and attitudes. Further, there is a feeling of empowerment – this technology allows teenagers more freedom of choice often without the constraints of parental supervision and this allows them to select information and make their own decisions (Peattie, 2002).

Children learn many different skills through play and it is an important part of a child's developmental process (Johnson and Yawkey, 1988). Learning is best achieved by being in physical contact (or interacting) with the object of study (Hodgkin, 1985; Shih, 1998) and the internet provides a perfect opportunity for an adolescent to experience this and to actively participate in the learning process. Internet users are able to synthesize their understanding by trying things out, suggesting that learning on the internet is mainly experiential.

Shih (1998) describes a form of behaviour, called 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. It is essentially this type of behaviour, bricolage, which adolescents demonstrate in the interaction with the internet. The internet encourages teenagers to construct their own knowledge by integrating different bits of information from several sites and blending these with their own knowledge, suggesting that individuals construct their own meaning and make sense of the information in their own unique ways. 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). This form of participatory learning, through construction and discovery, adds another dimension to how adolescents learn consumer skills in today's interactive environment.

Adolescents' use of the internet also reflects the contemporary teenagers' ability to thrive 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).

From the literature review, it would appear that the internet has the potential to be a powerful shaper of consumer values and attitudes among adolescents. In

addition to the traditional socialisation methods of modelling, reinforcement and social interaction (Bandura, 1986), it could also be surmised that adolescents learn to be consumers through experiential consumption, that is, consumption is valued for its fantasies, feelings and fun (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). And, unlike traditional models of socialisation which consider the process to be passive, interaction with the internet appears to promote an *active* process of socialisation. This study adds to the literature by exploring the consumption experiences of adolescents with the internet, and how they learn to be consumers of this medium. Essentially, our aim is to explore the active socialisation processes that consumption of the internet facilitates.

3. Method

The literature review provided inspiration for enquiring into this under explored area. In addition, it provided a theoretical framework within which to discuss our results. Given the embryonic nature of this work, the intention is to describe and generate a deeper understanding of this particular phenomenon, rather than to be restricted by research questions or propositions. It was considered that this freedom of discovery would generate several avenues for future research, and facilitate an interesting discussion of results. Thus, an interpretivist approach was adopted with a research design based on in-depth interviews and observations. The intention was to generate qualitative data, which might then be generalised to theory (Glaser and Straus, 1967).

3.1 Sample

A purposive sampling strategy was used to gain participants for this study; following this strategy meant that it was necessary for all participants of this study to be actively involved in the internet, so that they could then articulate their experiences with the internet (Eisenhardt 1989; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Thus, 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.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, it was difficult to ascertain the number of participants required at the beginning of the data collection process, therefore we sampled to saturation (Glaser and Straus, 1967; Kvale, 1996). The sample was gained through a process of "snowballing" – getting to know the participants and having them introduce you to others who fit the necessary criteria to participate (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). In order to maintain diversity among the participants, different approaches were used to gain the sample, for example, personal contacts, posting advertisements in schools and through the internet.

The sample consisted of 12 participants; seven males and five females, four participants from each age group were of early adolescence (13-14years), middle adolescence (15-17years), and older adolescence (18-19years). Five participants were Caucasian, five Asians, and two Pacific Islanders.

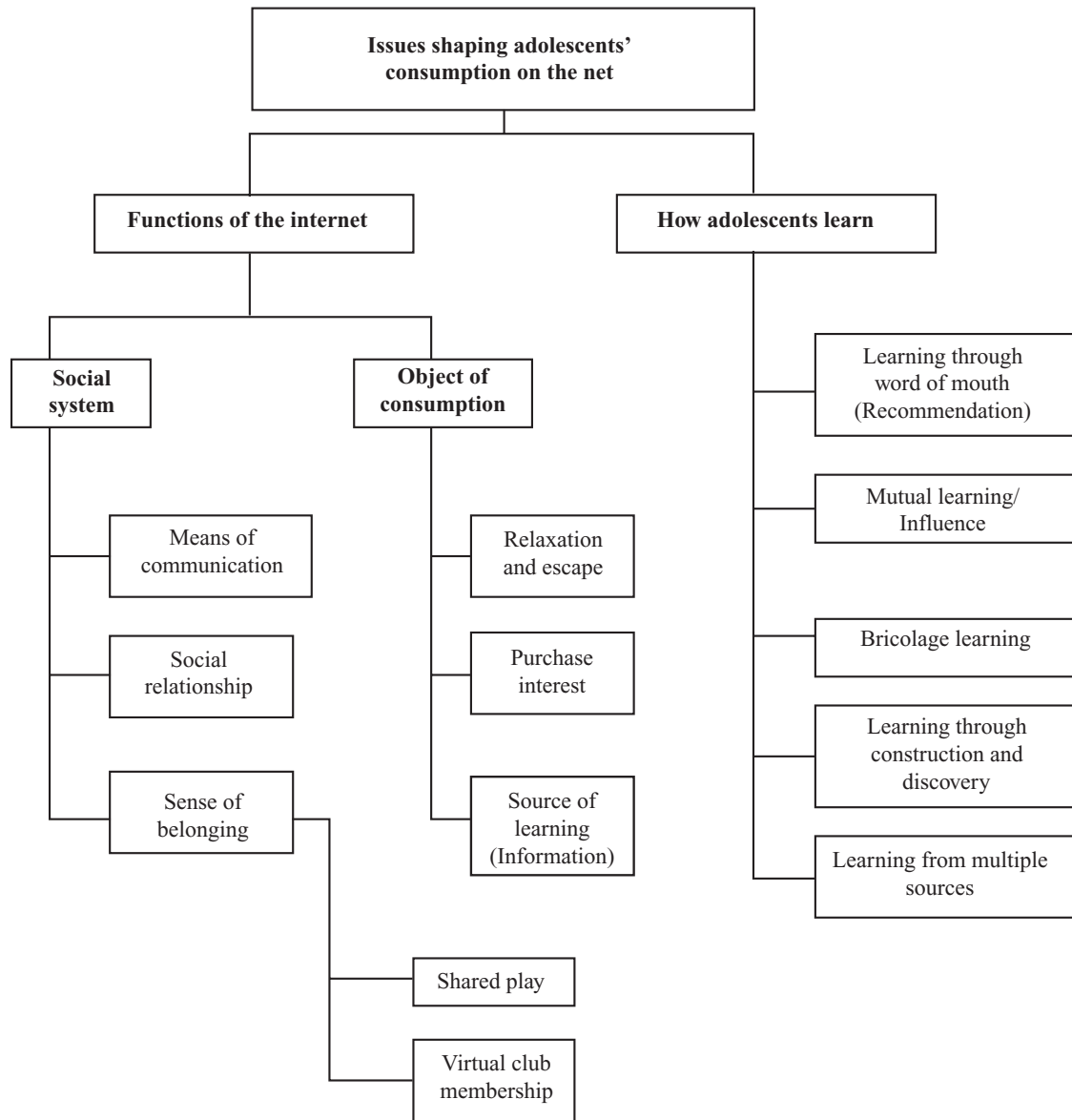### 3.2 In-depth Personal Interviews

Each participant was interviewed in their own home, seated in front of their computer to allow demonstration if required, and this environment also assisted in eliciting previous internet experiences. One researcher 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.

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 about the internet, for example, how they use the internet, how they learn about various consumption skills, attitudes and behaviours. Although the interviews were relatively unstructured, all interviews began with a general invitation to talk about their internet usage and an interviewer guide was used to ensure all issues of interest were explored. The interviews were concluded by asking each participant for their overall thoughts and attitudes about the internet, for example, what they liked or disliked about the net.

3.3 Observations

While the in-depth interviews focused on participants' past experiences, the objective of the observation phase was to validate what participants said they did by observing their actual behaviour. This occurred either immediately after the interview or during the interview, depending on the appropriateness of the situation. Participants were given two scenarios (school holiday or normal school day) and were requested to do what they would normally do when they log onto the net. Further, they were asked to explain their actions to the interviewer. Notes were taken during these observations and conversations were also audio-taped. During this

Figure 1: Major Themes

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                    │  Issues shaping adolescents' │
                    │    consumption on the net    │
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Issues shaping adolescents' consumption on the net

Functions of the internet

How adolescents learn

Social system

Object of consumption

Learning through word of mouth (Recommendation)

Mutual learning/ Influence

Means of communication

Relaxation and escape

Bricolage learning

Social relationship

Purchase interest

Learning through construction and discovery

Sense of belonging

Source of learning (Information)

Learning from multiple sources

Shared play

Virtual club membership

phase, websites mentioned during the interviews were visited to verify participants' stories. This also provided the researcher with the opportunity to gain a "hands-on" experience and facilitated a richer understanding of the participants' actions and stories. These observations lasted for about 20 minutes.

3.4 Coding Process

The data gained for this study were generated from the participants' experiences using the internet, and the purpose of the analysis was to identify common themes. A descriptive coding scheme was used to examine these themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994), whereby transcripts were organized by topics (based on the research questions), and the key expression or phrases were then identified within each topic. Iterative reviews of the key expression employed by participants for each topic led to the definition of the classes of themes.

The goal of the coding process 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.

The purpose of the first stage of the coding process was to ensure that the interviews contained themes that would inform our research objective. After completing three interviews, the main coder analyzed these three transcripts, and discussed the themes discovered with the second coder. This resulted in a refinement of the interview process, and a debate on themes discovered highlighted the need to conduct a second interview with two of these three participants. This first stage of coding was followed by three iterations. The first was undertaken following the second interviews of the two participants to ensure all themes had been captured and its purpose was to discuss the themes that had been identified, and to resolve any disagreements regarding themes. The second iteration was conducted in order to confirm the discovered themes and to ensure credibility. During this iteration, a third coder, who was not part of the research team, was recruited. The main coder independently coded all twelve interviews, she then provided the other two coders with a summary of the research background, coding instructions and a description of the themes. They were also provided with the main coder's thematic analysis, which contained all the themes identified and examples of quotes which corresponded to each theme. As noted previously, the objective is not to identify a "single truth"; rather the aim here is to ensure the plausibility of the main researcher's interpretations, together with the adequacy of the data for addressing the research objectives (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). All three coders then met to discuss and resolve issues of disagreement and to debate the discovery of themes that had not been identified by the main coder. Where appropriate, these new themes were included. The purpose of the third and final iteration was to confirm the themes that had been identified in the second iteration. Following the refinement of the definitions and the identification of all themes, the two coders who were members of the research team re-analyzed the transcripts and the thematic analysis for confirmation. Following this step, two participants were asked to review the final results to ensure they were an accurate reflection of participants' views.

4. Findings

Figure 1 depicts the themes identified in this research. The goal is to discover the issues shaping adolescents' consumption on the internet. Two main categories of interest here are the functions of the internet and how adolescents learn whilst using the internet. The themes identified under these two categories provide some preliminary answers about the experiential role of consumption among teenagers with the internet, and how this facilitates an active process of socialisation. First, we describe the findings relating to the functions of the internet, this is followed by the issue of learning on the internet.

4.1 Functions of the Internet

Our results revealed that the internet fulfils two major functions: 1) it is a social system which acts as a medium for fostering human interactions and 2) it is a place and an object of consumption, which we define as a set of services to be consumed (e.g. machine interaction). For all the participants, the internet is sometimes used as a means of connecting with others as well as for consumption purposes, that is, interaction is with the machine alone, although the degree where one function is used more than the other may differ between participants. These two functions and their themes are described next.

4.1.1 The internet as a Social System

Participants in this study confirmed previous findings regarding the use of the internet (e.g. Eighmey and McCord, 1998; LaFerle, Edwards and Lee, 2000; Parker and Plank, 2000). Essentially, 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 (Figure 1). These themes are categorised under *social system,* that is, a virtual space where individuals interact socially with others to share similar interests and where friendships are nurtured.

Social learning. The internet is a source of social learning where the connection with others provides an avenue for sharing ideas and information. Learning occurs when participants discuss project ideas with team-mates, exchange information on cultures with virtual friends across the world, and through the playing of games with these virtual friends as noted by one participant: "I chat with other people in the world to learn about their cultures and things that are happening

in their parts of the world." This clearly demonstrated active socialisation. These adolescents are involving themselves in their own learning by using the internet as a means of discovery and participation.

Means of communication. Participants in this study considered the internet to be an important means of maintaining relationships with their friends and relatives, both local and overseas. They described the internet as an instrument which facilitated several different forms of communication, e.g., email and chatting. Perhaps importantly, the internet is seen to supplement the telephone and face-to-face visits rather than to replace these more traditional forms of communication. For example, several participants noted that they would discuss games with friends whilst at school, and make appointments to meet online when they arrived home, or during the school holidays.

Social relationship. This theme describes the internet as a "companion" and a "friend" because of its ability to connect individuals and to encourage friendships. One participant noted that he is lucky to have the internet as his companion because it links him to many other people.

The internet is considered to allow individuals to obtain both social and emotional support, and to facilitate the building of stronger ties with distant friends and relatives because of its convenience, speed, interactivity and affordability. The internet is often regarded as an alternative, and a better method of communication than land mail and telephones, but used in a similar way - thus supporting more traditional views of socialisation processes. The internet is also a conduit for friendship with strangers from different parts of the world. In one case, emotional support was gained by a participant from a virtual friend he met on a random online chat. He felt that it was easier to share problems with people whom he has never met because he knows his internet friend would not be telling his friends about his problems. Interactions such as this go beyond passive socialisation where the 'model' may still be 'virtual' such as a movie star, and suggest active processes because there is two-way communication.

Sense of belonging. A sense of belonging and identity is gained from feelings of affiliation and connectedness through shared play. Participants often played online games to alleviate boredom and for entertainment. It is also through shared play that they learn to work in teams to solve problems. As the interaction through shared play

becomes more frequent, the affiliation between group members becomes stronger. These group members ultimately become the reference group for information, opinions and support. Affiliation and identity also occurs through membership in virtual clubs and communities. These communities provide fellowship among members with mutual interest and information of current events and new products. Again, this seems to suggest that the internet is being used in a similar way to more traditional game playing but, because of its nature, socialisation is more likely to involve active as opposed to passive processes.

The internet as a social system expresses social interactions with people, although virtual, as opposed to interactions with the machine. In using the internet in this manner, adolescents are certainly demonstrating active socialisation processes. They are in control of their own internet environment, and actively participate within these virtual social systems in a far more reactive manner than traditional models, which consider socialisation processes to be passive, allow. The extent of their participation is without boundaries – both in the sense of physical boundaries and parental control, and this give them a sense of empowerment, which adds another dimension to the traditional view of the socialisation process.

4.1.2 The Internet as a Place and Object of Consumption

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. Three themes were discovered under this category (Figure 1). These are relaxation and escape, source of learning (information), and shopping. In each of these categories the user is an active, motivated explorer of the internet, learning through discovery and participation. These themes are described next.

Relaxation and escape. Participants described the internet as a place where they can relax, seek entertainment and alleviate boredom; a place where they can escape from reality, as noted by one participant: "A world to go to when you are bored with the real one…"

Source of learning (information). This theme describes learning from users' interaction with the internet (not with people) to gain information from different sites, and through the downloading of files. The internet as a

source of information was mentioned by the majority of the participants, highlighting the importance of this theme. When asked to describe the internet in their own words, participants mentioned the internet as "a huge pool of resources", and "a collection of information", one participant compared the net to being "like a book without pages and dust".

Shopping. The internet is seen as a fun place to shop, in terms of both browsing in virtual shopping malls and actually purchasing something from the internet. Some participants described the internet as a better place to shop than the real shopping world because one can acquire products not available in real shops and one viewed the internet as being more economical than the real world. Further, shopping is simplified because of the ability to compare prices and brands without the barriers, both physical and virtual. The internet seems to be used more to gain information, through discussion groups and company sites, about products or brands than actually purchasing the items. Additionally, this activity can take place any time, without a time limit, and without being hassled by shop assistants.

The themes discovered under this category again reflect the notion of socialisation process being a more active one. Participants enjoyed using the internet to shop or to find out more information without intrusion from adults or shop assistants. There is a sense of freedom of being able to gain any kind of information and there is no fear of reprisals if they decide against a purchase decision or reject or react to their sources of information or opinions. Thus, it is suggested that this empowerment and ability to control their virtual environment encourages an active socialisation process.

4.2 How Adolescents Learn from the Internet

The second issue which informs our understanding of consumer consumption experiences is a description of how adolescents learn from the internet (see Figure 1). The results suggest that adolescents learn in a number of ways through their interaction on the net, and several themes emerged, specifically: word of mouth (recommendation), mutual learning or influence, construction and discovery, multi-tasking, and learning from multiple sources. Importantly, each of these involves the user to be reactive in the learning process.

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 behaviours. Indeed, purchase choices are often made based on recommendations obtained via the internet. Some participants noted that they based their purchase decisions solely on recommendations from virtual friends and friends with whom they meet regularly at school. 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. The significance of the internet 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. 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 and 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 behaviour – to the extent that they begin to share similar interests and opinions as noted by this participant: "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".

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

Multi-tasking. 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.

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

The teenagers in this study were very comfortable with this technology and were able to move effortlessly in their virtual environment. The internet is especially useful for adolescents because they are at the reflective stage of the socialisation process – this is when they develop a sense of identity, are reflective of others' opinions and it is when they begin to understand symbolic meanings of consumption (Belk, Mayer and Driscoll, 1984; Roedder-John, 1999). The internet encourages the discovery and construction of meaning because of anonymity and lack of boundaries. Thus teenagers are free to act as both opinion leaders and followers, and rather than passively modelling behaviour, are able to question and challenge opinions and behaviour, again suggesting an active socialisation process.

5. Discussion

In this exploratory research we were interested in consumption experiences of adolescents and how they learn to be consumers. Specifically, are adolescents socialised in this consumption through passive processes, or are more active processes responsible? The internet provides an environment where adolescents can observe and learn attitudes and behaviour, not only through frequent virtual interaction with known friends, both local and overseas, but also with global communities. When used in this manner, the internet conforms to the traditional models of socialisation as a passive process.

However, the internet can also 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 tend to be large, dispersed in space and time, and closely knitted, with members being heterogeneous in social characteristics, but holding homogeneous attitudes. These communities are drawn together through mutual interest, without physical constrains. This would imply that the socialisation 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, and strongly indicates that socialisation is an active process. This process is fuelled by a sense of empowerment and

freedom where in this virtual environment, there is no parental supervision, they are able to move anonymously if desired, and thus feel they are in control. An active socialisation process suggest that instead of passively absorbing and imitating behaviour, these teenagers are now willing to question and challenge attitudes and behaviour, as well as offer their opinions.

While consumption is traditionally viewed as an economic activity of creating, buying and using goods and services (Campbell, 1995; McCracken, 1988), our research suggests an experiential perspective on consumption may be more appropriate when exploring consumption on the internet. The experiential view stresses that consumption experiences lie beyond the realm of purchase decisions; the important aspects of consumption are "fantasies, feelings and fun" (Solomon, 1983, p.319). Teenagers in our study participated in activities available through the internet to form or to strengthen relationships either through virtual club membership, chat or play. Thus satisfaction is gained through shared emotions with others, the internet is just the "product" with the ability to provide this value. This concurs with Cova (1997), who suggests that forming social links with others through consumption activities is more important than the product itself. Further evidence suggesting an experiential perspective of consumption is the finding that adolescents control their own discovery, and construct meaning drawn from multiple sources of information, that they are actively learning, rather than passively imitating behaviour.

Essentially, it is through interacting with the internet that adolescents learn its potential, with each new interaction providing them with the opportunity to build upon their previous experience with the medium – whether as a social facilitator or as an information source. Our work with adolescents and the internet clearly demonstrates that adolescents are active and motivated explorers, keenly engaging with their own learning experiences. Whilst past literature has emphasised the passive processes of socialisation, the interactive nature of the internet – together with the adolescents' comfort with the technology appears to be facilitating a new mode of active socialisation unexplored in the consumer literature.

6. Implications

Our findings have some important implications for both marketers and social policy makers.

Teenagers today are active learners, not just passive recipients of information – marketers need to consider

teenagers to be thinking young adults, and their communications ought to guide adolescents to make decisions regarding brand choice, without patronising. 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.

Adolescents spend much of their time browsing websites for information, rather than with an intention to make an actual purchase. These information searches are motivated by a multitude of reasons from school projects to gaining product information before purchasing through a physical store. But, whatever the reason, businesses would do well to consider these teenage browsers as potential customers, and furnish their websites with as much information as possible about their brands. Further, they may wish to consider strategies to bring these information seekers back to their sites. One such strategy, is to provide links to other sites with related or useful information – perhaps, for example, a magazine targeted at teenagers could provide links to information related to health, beauty, music, social, cultural and political issues relevant to adolescents. Essentially, when it comes to using the internet as a medium, companies which market to teenagers in a manner that teenagers find engaging, are more likely to gain leverage in terms of awareness and preference when it comes to choice decisions, than companies which treat the internet in the same manner as more traditional media.

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, particularly when the audience is vulnerable adolescents. 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. Adolescents perceive the information gained from the internet to be extremely credible, and thus the potential to mislead

them is high. In addition, regulations need to be considered for developers of video games where product and brand positioning is frequently used within the game itself, and the question of targeting adolescents subliminally needs to be both voiced and addressed.

7. Future Research and Conclusion

A key finding of this study is that the interactive nature of the internet appears to promote active socialisation. This clearly demands further exploration to, for example, describe the conditions within which such processes are active rather than passive, give consideration to factors such as, age, gender and culture, and examine the implications active socialisation has on other types of consumption. Additionally, this study highlighted many themes that seem to indicate that teenagers' consumption activities are mainly experiential, rendering traditional economic views of consumption less appropriate. Thus, it is worthwhile exploring in-depth the experiential aspects of consumption of teenagers with the internet. Future research could involve delving into the meanings created and shared by adolescents through their social interactions within a global virtual community, because the breakdown of social and cultural barriers has important implications for research and marketing.

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 by adolescents through such play.

In conclusion, it would seem that as adolescents continue their interaction with the internet, it will continue to provide them with the opportunity to actively experience and learn about consumption. This learning may be social or individual but, whatever the nature, there can be little doubt that the internet is facilitating adolescents' learning in ways previously unexplored in the consumption literature. It is now imperative for researchers to consider the implications of internet as an active socialisation agent of consumption.

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