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2010-01-01

No Longer, But Not Yet: Tweens and the Mediating of Liminal Selves through Metaconsumption

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Recommended Citation

Cody, K., Lawlor, K., Maclaran, P.: "'NO LONGER, BUT NOT YET' – TWEENS AND THE MEDIATING OF LIMINAL SELVES THROUGH METACONSUMPTION", in Advances in Consumer Research Volume 38, eds. Darren W. Dahl, Gita V. Johar, and Stijn M.J. van Osselaer, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research

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‘No Longer, But Not Yet’ – Tweens and the mediating of liminal selves through metaconsumption

Abstract

Using the anthropological theory of liminality as a lens of analysis, the following paper outlines specific elements of a research project exploring the consumer culture of a liminal group – tweens. The lived experience of a tween is explored using a multi-method approach incorporating personal diaries, in-depth interviews and accompanied shopping trips. Outcomes of one aspect of this longitudinal research project – the theory of metaconsumption - are presented, suggesting an important divergent theoretical path from the 'effects' - dominated consumer socialization approach to researching young people and their relationships with consumption. We conclude that those in a shadowed reality, those social neophytes no longer children but not yet teens engage with consumption practices and spaces particular to those who must exist mid-way between two spheres of identity. Thus this shadowed reality, this socially indiscernible identity belies agentive consumption and active engagement with signifiers of a duality of mediated selves.

'No Longer, But Not Yet' – Tweens and the mediating of liminal selves through metaconsumption

Introduction

Marketing theory and research, in particular the vibrant tendril of consumer culture and consumer behavior research embodies a kaleidoscopic essence of cross-disciplinary infusion and hybridism. The origins of interpretive consumer research as outlined for example by Tadajewski, (2006), as well as contemporary theorizations (e.g. Arnold and Thompson, 2005) and empirical advancements (e.g. Kozinets, 2001) have been shown to embrace ontologies far beyond the scope of marketing's seminal mantras (e.g. Kotler et al, 2008). Rather than consequently exist as a diluted pseudo-discipline, consumer research has thrived in its plurality, with the work of those who seek to investigate and theorize upon the symbiosis between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic marketplace visibly nourished and revitalized by contributions from social sciences such as psychology, anthropology and sociology.

This paper attempts to harness one such untapped reservoir of potential empirical and theoretical advancement; the anthropological theory of liminality, attesting to the potential of this theoretical framework as a lens of analysis for consumption practices but also offering a divergent avenue of exploration and theorization in relation to consumer socialization. The interstices of socio-cultural organization have proved sources of fascination and powerful theory development in the fields of anthropology, sociology and psychology (e.g. Van Gennep, 1961; Turner, 1974; 1978; 1988; Freud, 1950; Foucault, 1977). Douglas (1966: 137) writes that within society, 'there is energy in its margins and unstructured areas'. Consumer culture research has hitherto acknowledged the fruitfulness of transitional phenomena, spaces and places, as well as the experiences of the individual or group in flux and evolution (e.g. Davies & Fitchett, 2004; Maldonado & Tansuhaj, 1999; Gentry, 1997; Schouten, 1991). But it is the heart of this transition that has evaded exploration, slipped beneath the radar of interest. The farthest realms

of the threshold may inevitably beckon, but the interim must be experienced to enact the resolution so often the focus of researcher's attentions. For many, the threshold is their current reality, their centre of nowhere.

This research focuses on the premise that for those whose sense of self is ambiguous, vague or blurred by the experience of standing mid-way between two symbolically-loaded social spheres of interaction, belonging to neither, but embedded in both, consumption practices and relationships with consumption take on a new meaning, a divergent core. Focusing specifically on the pre-adolescent or tween, who has come to represent the epitome of a categorical anomaly, a socio-cultural miasma (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Cook, 2004a), we set out to explore and theorize upon the dynamics of these liminars' relationships with and through goods and their associations. This paper presents one of the theoretical conclusions of this longitudinal research project – the theory of metaconsumption – which explores consumption within the tweens' liminal shadow of activity and regeneration which prepares these social neophytes for entry into a teenage world.

Everything and Nothing – The Theoretical Framework of Liminality

Defined by Turner & Turner (1978: p.249) as 'the state and process of mid-transition in a rite of passage', a 'moment in and out of time' (Turner, 1969: p.96), the liminal phase of a transition, represents an instance of incompleteness, when the liminars (the ritual subjects in this phase) 'elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space' (Turner, 1969: p.95). Understanding the attributes of liminal entities also serves to illustrate the core ideologies of the theory. One such attribute is structural and social invisibility, seclusion from the spheres of everyday life (Turner, 1967). In addition, ideologies of liminal theory espouse characteristics such as tabula rasa, symbolization of concurrent degeneration and gestation or parturition (Turner, 1967), heteronomy, silence, equality and obscurity.

Turner's (1967, 110) 'invitation to investigators of culture to focus their attention on the phenomena and processes of mid-transition' has resulted in contrasting disciplines welcoming

liminality and its constituent dimensions into their midst to enrich an understanding and analysis of many phases of cultural change. Several bodies of literature forming a hybridism of theoretical perspectives with liminality unite around a core trope of illness and loss (e.g. Little et al, 1998; Gough, 2005, Jones et al, 2007). In the context of these studies, the theoretical framework of liminality has added credence to instances where alliance with social categories and social structures is suspended and irrelevant. Anderson (2003), Campbell et al (2005), Landzelius (2001) and Waskul (2005) have engaged with contextual specificities such as implantable cardioverter defibrillators (ICDs), advertising, incubated pre-term babies and internet personas respectively in their integration of this anthropological theory of structural anomalies.

Contexts as disparate as place and space (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006; Matthews et al, 2000), performance (Dunne, 2002; Rill, 2006; Brown, 2007; Hooker, 2007), and Postmodernity (Bhabha, 2004; Zukin, 1991; Bettis, 1996) also highlight the infusion and contribution of many areas of socio-cultural research with ideologies of the liminal, adding vividness and analytical depth to contemporary lived experiences of socio-cultural evolvement and disruption.

Liminal Consumption

But what of liminal consumption? Have the ideologies of interim states been used as a lens of analysis for consumption practices and behaviours? Within interpretive consumer research's current brand of organization and theorization, CCT, liminal theory has been relatively underutilized as a theoretical lens through which to understand the consumption practices of those betwixt and between social categories or states of being. Schouten (1991) represents the inaugural integration of this anthropological perspective on mid-transition with individual consumption practices. Despite introducing a link between liminality and consumption, the overall emphasis of Schouten's (1991) research is divided between self-concept theories, role transitions, rites of passage and liminal ideologies. This multi-theoretical focus implies that less in-depth insights of specifically liminal consumption behaviours are garnished. Schouten (1991, 422) himself concludes that 'little is yet known about the consumption behaviours of liminal people'.

Despite focusing on a proposed relationship between liminal transitions, symbolic consumption and the extended self, the work of Noble & Walker (1997) gravitates around the notion of transitions as opposed to the state of liminality itself and additionally utilizes a positivist framework and quantitative methodology to align with its dissemination in predominantly psychologically oriented fields of inquiry.

Several other studies have approached the phenomenon of consumption in a liminal state (Hogg et al, 2004; Landzelius, 2001; Pavia & Mason, 2004). Although generating fascinating insights in their own right, these studies commonly relegate the liminal to a constituent dimension of a wider terrain of focus. It appeared that Schouten's (1991) cry to rally the troops towards explorations of this potential reservoir of symbolic meaning and consumer experiences had been relegated to the margins of interpretive consumer research. Thus this research aimed to explore the interweaving of consumption and identity amongst those whose sense of self is as much about past as future; selves that are embedded in what was, but concurrently gravitating towards what is to come.

Methods

In order to explore the interaction of liminal lived experiences and tween consumption practices, there were several methodological considerations and implications. Firstly, cognizant of the inherent ideologies of liminality, an instance of time deemed fundamentally disruptive or ambiguous in the life of a pre-adolescent was selected so as to capture lived experience of 'betwixt and between' at its most lucid. Therefore, a longitudinal study of a year was undertaken spanning the participants' final months of primary school and early months of secondary education in two Irish cities[1]. Three main sites of access were utilized; drama schools, personal contacts and primary schools.

Second, in line with Richardson's (1994) conceptualization of multiple methods within the interpretive domain as 'crystallization', this year-long exploratory research project was interjected at various points by a constellation of data collection techniques. A focal point of Richardson's (1994) theorization is the premise that 'what we see depends on the angle of our

[1] These stages of education correspond to junior and senior high school in the United States

repose' (p.523). Five data collection methods were employed; namely in-depth interviews (which were conducted at two separate intervals), personal diaries, accompanied shopping trips, e-collages and researcher diaries. Each method was chosen so as to reflect a divergent angle of repose on the lived experience and consumption practices of a liminar. However, due to space constraints, only interview data will be integrated into this paper.

Analysis of such a myriad set of data collection techniques required a specific combination of rigor and creativity. In line with the work of Strauss and Corbin (1998), a grounded theory process of analysis was used which proved 'mechanistic and indeterminate in roughly equal portions' (McCracken, 1988: p.41). Following this process of analysis which inherently involves stages of memo writing, axial coding and selective coding, core categories were developed around which the other categories and constructs revolved and offered explanatory power (Spiggle, 1994). This process of data analysis culminated in a stage of data interpretation in the manner of 'a hermeneutic circle' (Arnold and Fischer, 1994: p.63).

Research Findings and Analysis

The following section details one of the central findings of the first phase of data collection – during the last months of primary school – the theory of metaconsumption. Although the main focus of this paper is the metaconsumption theorized as reflective of the consumption practices engaged with by the liminal tweens, it is necessary to briefly ground this theory in the context in which it emerged. This contextual grounding lays the foundation for the emergence of the metaconsumption theory.

The Liminal Tween

As discussed throughout the literature review, the theoretical framework of liminality (Turner, 1967; 1969; 1974) was utilized as a prism for interpreting the cultural and social categorization of these ambiguously located beings. Due to space constraints there will be a brief delineation of one of the component concepts of the notion of the liminal tween; clashing age perceptions. This and many other instances of liminality that emerged throughout the data add empirical credence to the social invisibility experienced by these 'betwixt and between' girls. This sense of being

socially imperceptible would emerge as a focal point for the metaconsumption strategies engaged with by these interstitial consumers.

Clashing Age Perceptions

Established within the specific elements of Turner's (1967) theorization of liminality is acknowledgement of the ambiguity and indeterminacy that embodies the experience of one who exists as a miasma of socio-cultural categorization and perceptions. One of the most overtly liminal components of the tween identity was the tension experienced between their own conceptualization of how others in society should react to them versus the reality of their social positioning. Testament to the theorization that these girls are no longer, but not yet, their social and personal categorizations were often at odds with one another resulting in an acute sense of social invisibility and often darkness for the girls. Their sense of impending immersion into a teen sphere of social interaction was not matched with others' behaviors' towards them.

In the following interview excerpt, Elaine informs me that although she is given the responsibility of caring for her own brother and sister, many people outside of her family would consider her age far too young to be held responsible for their children. However she is quick to point out that she herself does not hold the same view.

E: *'but I am far more mature than a lot of 13 year olds I know…I think it is more to do with the fact that people hear 12 years old and they think oh that's too young to babysit children…*

K: *'and when do you think they would be okay with it….other people'*

E: *'I think at about 14 or 15 it is more acceptable, by other people, to be babysitting for children'*

Here Elaine finds herself grappling with her own sense of personal development and the views of those who ascribe to the wider social implications of age-aligned development, socialization and consequent competencies. She exists awkwardly at the threshold of what is deemed acceptable socially and how she considers herself personally; blurring boundaries, confusing classification.

In this marketplace example, Rachel highlights the tension she experiences between her own sense of distance from a child-like persona but concurrently other peoples' conceptualization of her as far removed from the realms of teen consumer autonomy.

K: *'and how do you decide what to buy….when you're shopping'*

R: *'well probably like….when my mother's coming down town with me…and it's like oh this is lovely and she calls over the shop assistant…then I feel like such a child and I'm like oh no I hate that and she's like oh yea this is lovely, try this on….and I'm like oh no…I hate this outfit…like I hate the pants or something…and then you know the way you wouldn't want to say it in front of the shop assistant and then you're just like…oh okay I'll try it on'*

Rachel's experience with the sales assistant exemplifies her occupation of or location in a category lacking boundaries or clarification and as a result her developing sense of autonomy and independence resides uncomfortably beside society's attempts to classify her as a child. Although understanding herself as a competent, self-knowing consumer, this is not how others behave towards her. Thus Rachel's experience of shopping results in a clashing of subjectivities owing to her existence as a 'betwixt and between' (Cook, 2004), exemplifying an interim subjectivity, a liminal self.

The Egocentric Tween

The incorporation of a theoretical perspective from the field of psychology was an emergent development following initial data analysis. Elkind's (1967) notion of egocentrism is considered by those specializing in the field of adolescent psychology, to be an under-researched idea, with constructive potential for anyone attempting to theorize on the lived experiences of young adolescents (Elliot & Feldman, 1990). In essence, Elkind's theory centres on the advanced cognitive capabilities of those approaching adolescence status in particular their increased ability to incorporate the perspectives of others into their own way of thinking and understanding themselves and the world around them. What differentiates adolescents however, and perhaps most pertinent to this research, is the tendency of this group to over-generalize and believe themselves to be the focus of most other people's attention all of the time akin to an 'imaginary audience' (Elkind, 1967).

Amanda's interview illustrates vividly her tendency to incorporate an imagined audience into her developing self-system. She explains that the impending move to secondary school has meant divesting herself of any stationary that would be considered young or child like, in the hope of avoiding what she imagines would be certain disdain and ridicule from her new class mates.

K: *'what else did you have to buy for secondary school?'*

A: *'yea like I used to have all these little parers*[2] *and little fancy girly parers but then I was like I'd probably get into trouble….people would be like 'why do you have that'…so I went for a plain pencil parer'…*

K: *'what would people think if you have a plain pencil parer?'*

A: *'if you had a big girl sittin up on the table they might be like hmmmmm…baby….*

Here Amanda is using the imagined reactions of her peers to alter her consumption repertoire and future buying habits. It is almost like how she envisages her class-mates reacting to her display of consumption objects, is harnessed and utilized as a gauge for what will be suitable to bring along to secondary school. At this point in time, Amanda has not yet experienced the social environs of secondary school at first hand. However her advancing cognitive abilities have allowed her to consider the perspective of those girls she has yet to meet, albeit to an exaggerated degree. Even something as seemingly unrelated to social judgments and ridicule as the theft of her MP3 player is reflective of the egocentric nature of Amanda's developing self.

A: *'I nearly made myself sick thinking about it….i dunno why I got so upset about it….'*

K: *'was it to do with losing your zen…or that it was robbed by someone….'*

A: *'I dunno…I guess it was a bit of both….i just dunno….i just cracked….i imagined everyone will think I can't look after stuff…'*

In this example it appears that what had unsettled Amanda so much following the theft of her MP3 player was less to do with the physical void of the item but more with what she imagined the incident conveyed to others about her ability to be responsible for her possessions. Egocentrically, she believes this mishap to be the sole focus of others' attentions.

Metaconsumption

As outlined above, the liminars' lived experiences are characterized by social ambiguity, categorical invisibility and an overt preoccupation with how they appear in the eyes of those

[2] Parer is an Irish slang word referring to pencil sharpener

around them. It emerged throughout the data analysis that despite their conveyed annoyance at their status as social non-descripts, their shadowed realities were a vital resource. As evidenced in the data, various consumption strategies were being utilized by the tweens in order to paradoxically evade definite categorization via consumption owing to their egocentric tendencies and fear of social reprisal, prior to a more assured and competent entry into teenager-hood. But concurrently these strategies enable the tweens to tentatively participate in the consumer culture towards which they know their imperatives must be oriented if they are to be accepted by friends and envisaged onlookers.

Regardless of contextual application, the pre-fix 'meta' denotes 'something of a higher or second-order kind' (OED, 2009). A relatively recent consideration within the domain of cognitive analysis is that of second order thinking; or 'thinking about thinking' (Keating, 1990). Metacognition is frequently studied within the realm of psychology as 'the ability to monitor one's own cognitive abilities and activity for consistency, for gaps in information that need to be filled' (Keating, 1990: p75). This theory appeared to have potential for application within the domain of this instance of consumer research. When re-appropriated to analyze the emergent consumption practices of these liminal tweens, the theory of metaconsumption emerged as a viable theoretical process. Fundamentally metaconsumption was envisaged as involving a variety of second order consumption practices; or consumption about consumption. Specifically these metaconsumptive practices focused on consumption mastery, regulation & monitoring of consumption experiences & knowledge for gaps that need to be filled, as opposed to tangible marketplace experiences.

During this liminal existence, these metaconsumption strategies, as will be outlined, served to realize the main preoccupation of a tween; remaining covertly active. It appears to be one of the primary preoccupations of the liminal experience, the main product of this ambiguous, obscure interval. Eluding definite categorization as either child or teen, the tweens channel this cultural anonymity into preparing for one of the most socially pertinent roles of their lives thus far; becoming a teenager. These metaconsumption strategies, as will be delineated, allow the girls to paradoxically both evade definite categorization via consumption prior to a more assured and

competent entry into teenager-hood but also enables them to tentatively participate in the consumer culture towards which their imperatives must be oriented.

Prior to outlining a selection of metaconsumption strategies, it is necessary to theoretically position metaconsumption in relation to consumer behavior research extant in the area of young consumers and consumption practices.

Consumer Socialization – A divergent path?

Despite the fact that 'a consumer culture of childhood stands as a ubiquitous fixture in public life' (Cook, 2004b: p1), there are few theoretical accounts of young people's specific negotiations and 'styles of agency' (James and Prout, 1996: p47) as they mediate the intricacies of their lived experiences and social contexts within contemporary consumer culture. Within the realm of children's consumer culture theorists, Martens et al (2004: p161) contend that 'relatively little is known about how children engage in practices of consumption or what the significance of this is to their everyday lives and broader issues of social organization.' The most widely accepted view amongst contemporary sociologists is that this subordinate theoretical positioning has its origins in the paradigm which has dominated the sociology of children and consequently consumer behavior studies with children, for decades; Developmentalism. Disseminated widely by the work of Piaget (e.g. 1955), the child is envisaged as an incomplete work in progress, evolving along a trajectory of cognitive capacity to a point of adult competence. Fundamentally this paradigm relegates the child's social world to inconsequentiality.

Within the sociology of childhood, these paradigmatic specificities became manifest in the form of socialization theory (e.g. Coley, 1998; Harris, 1995; Maccoby, 1992). In part due to its suggestion of the potential to influence or intervene at various stages of development (Gunter & Furnham, 1998; Mills, 2000) the theory of socialization has been applied to consumer research of children via a myriad of studies and theoretical advancements (John, 1999). The term consumer socialization was first introduced to the field of consumer behaviour by Ward (1974) and defined as: 'the processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to

their functioning as consumers in the marketplace' (p: 2). John (1999) presents the most comprehensive and thorough delineation of literature and theoretical developments in the consumer socialization of children, providing structure and summary to an increasingly expansive area of research. The recognition of brand names and advertising (e.g. Hogg et al, 1998; Achenreiner & John, 2003; Chaplin & John, 2005), and the influence of particular 'socialization agents' on children's growth as consumers (e.g. Dotson & Hyatt, 2005; Grant & Stephen, 2005; Ekstrom, 2007) represent the core focus of research in this area.

In other words, as represented in figure 1, children's evolving relationships with consumption have been predominantly conceptualized under the mantle of 'effects research'. However burgeoning research within children's consumer culture studies have begun an attempt to embrace an alternative perspective on young peoples' interactions and relationships with consumption practices.

For example Cook's (2008) concept of 'commercial enculturation' attempts to capture the 'variety of ways children come to know and participate in commercial life' (Cook, 2008: p9) by shifting the focus to 'how consumption and meaning, and thus culture, cannot be separated from each other but arise together through social contexts and processes of parenting and socializing with others.' (Cook, 2008: p9). Thus commercial enculturation espouses the notion that a more insightful perspective can be gained by viewing children as not so much socialized into becoming one kind of specific consumer as they are seen entering into social relationships with and through goods and their associations. There have been several key studies, as listed in figure 1, which align with such a perspective on children's interactions with consumption orienting from the premise that traditional theorizations via consumer socialization theory obscure fruitful ways of seeing consumer behaviour 'in expansive & nuanced ways' (Cook, 2008: p11). Thus from 'the effects' perspective consumption practices and the role of the consumer engage with fairly limited spheres of interaction, and are 'tied to market transactions, brand & products' (Cook, 2008: p11).

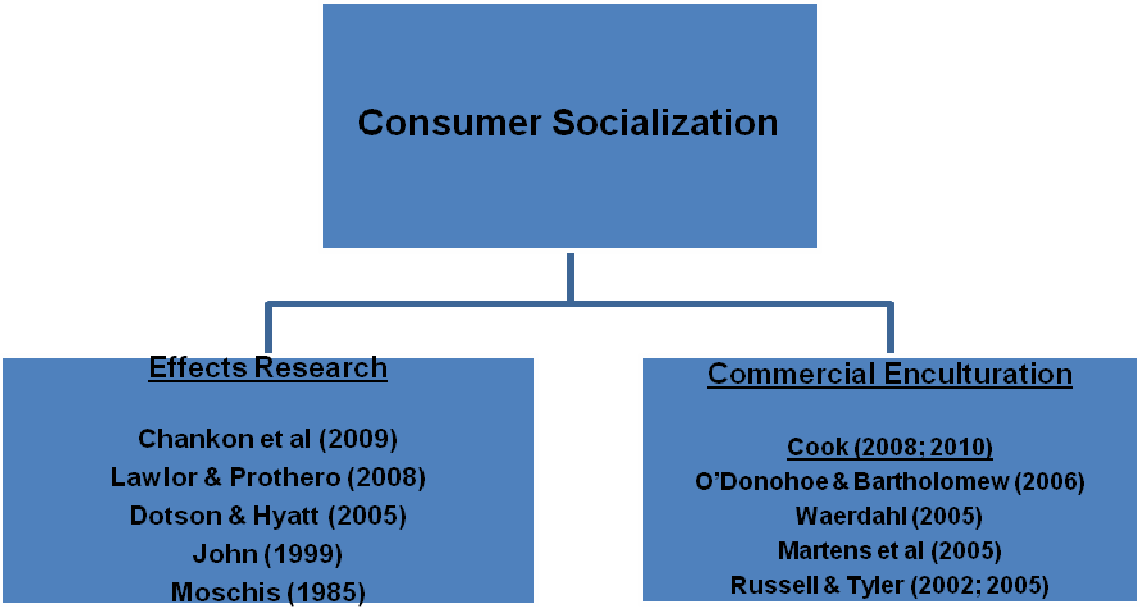

Figure 1

The metaconsumption practices outlined below highlight not a concrete socialization process of liminal tween to secure teenager, but rather an intricate interweaving of relationships between consumption and identities - past, present and future- as these social neophytes mediate the intricacies of their interstitial positioning.

Brand Apathy

The nexus of the metaconsumption strategy is thus the maintenance of an unobtrusive, yet concurrently burgeoning site of consumption, which the liminal period appears to represent for these girls. Several strategies had at their core the notion that any activity, which wrenched the girls from the comfort of their categorical ambiguity and assign them to either a child or teen status before they feel prepared, is detrimental. One concept reflective of the tweens' striving towards consumption practices that facilitate preservation of their social anonymity, for fear of premature emergence before their imagined audience, is brand apathy. Pervasive throughout the first interview data is a definite reluctance by the girls to express an alignment with or affinity to branded products for fear of making an error conducive to social exclusion and ridicule. Contrary to the abundant secondary research in this area (e.g. Siegal et al, 2004; Lindstrom, 2003b;

McNeal, 1992), the girls displayed a noticeable reticence when a discussion of brands and their importance to them arose.

In this example Nicola dismisses the notion that brands are important to her, but acknowledges that 'some people' like to revolve their consumption patterns around them.

K: *'so do you think brands matter to people your age?'*

N: *'well some people do…like they have to get all the brand….it doesn't matter to me'*

K: *'does it not…so what's important to you'*

N: *'just kind of if I like the top or not.'*

At this stage, she is still a novice when it comes to buying her way into the teen/consumption dialectic. By refusing to commit to an engagement with brand labels, she is not expected to know anything about them and thus cannot err in her discourse around brands and consumption. Her social status cannot be allocated and she can remain in the interstices of categorisation until such a time when she is equipped with enough social-kudos oriented information to emerge.

Another metaconsumption strategy seemingly utilized in order to convey a purposeful apathy about branded items is price preoccupation. There are numerous examples throughout the first interview data, which suggest that reverting to the reliable utilitarian justification of 'because non-branded things are cheaper', allays the possibility that their incompetence with consumer culture will be brought to notice.

Two excerpts from Rachel's interview add credence to the notion that apathy or resistance toward acknowledging the centrality of brands to their lived experiences is a strategic defense mechanism often couched in a fixation on value for money, designed to protect the shadow side of their being, their liminal regeneration.

K: *'and do you think brands matter to people in your class….well not just your class…but your friends….do ye talk about brands at all?'*

R: *'amm….not really….the main place that we go is penneys*[3]*….coz it's so cheap and it actually does have some nice clothes and stuff…and they just have everything at a really cheap price… and say if you went into somewhere else…like where would you go…am…really expensive like Pauls or somewhere….and you'd see the same string top or the same jumper for like fifty euro and like the one you could get in penneys would be like fifteen or twenty…'*

In this first passage, Rachel's attitude is analogous to the other tweens, in that she justifies her supposed detachment from branded goods by referral to the value for money at non-branded stores. However just minutes later, Rachel recalls the experience of buying a new outfit for her confirmation a couple of months previously.

K: *'and what other shops would you go to….say if you went in with your mum?'*

R: *'well radical*[4] *I bought my confirmation outfit in.*

K: *'what kind of outfit did you get?'*

R: *'well I got these grey bench combats….they're really nice and I got this tee-shirt and I love it I wear it all the time…and I got a bench hoody….and am its really cool you can put on the sleeve you can put your thumb through a little hole in it…its really cool…and I got my runners*[5] *there as well….they're van.'*

It appears therefore that Rachel's earlier expressed indifference to brands is not consistent with her behaviour. In this instance, when her mother's financial agency enters the equation, and Rachel has had a tangible experience with a brand, Rachel's priorities change and the non-branded shop doesn't get a mention. Rather she manages to list two big brands in her purchases. Surely if the non-branded store is such good value, her mother's financial resources would have gone a long way further? Clearly Rachel's interview, visible in part through this inconsistency, suggests that indifference is a defense mechanism. Expressing a detachment from the world of labels, logos and symbolism is less important a goal when resources not available to the neophyte materialize.

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[3] Penney's is a discount clothing and accessories store in Ireland

[4] Radical is a store in Ireland which stocks branded clothing and footware

[5] Runners is Irish slang for trainers/sneakers

Parody

Cognizant of the fact that the core of the metaconsumption strategy is its focus on existing without exhibiting, I was made aware of yet another component of this strategy during the accompanied shopping trips. This strategy centred on the agentive dimension of this liminal shadow in which the tweens exist; consumption strategies that evinced monitoring and acquiring of information and competencies needed when the time came to lead their liminal cocoon and embrace young teen identity.

During these shopping trips, the ambiguity and ensuing tension that the girls experienced in many of the shops seemed to stem from their recurring misallocation as a group or social category. At times the shops we visited were so beyond the realm of possibility for these girls on every level, while concurrently other stores evinced notions of a former childhood self that they were eager to forsake. In other words, it was palpable throughout these trips, that expressing interest in particular items was a risky, value-laden endeavor. Signaling interest in an item deemed 'inappropriate' in any dimension appeared to represent social suicide. I soon realized that these weren't just shopping trips, but opportunities to manage, protect and accumulate the knowledge that was expected of them as young, female consumers.

The concept of parody emerged as a means through which the girls could openly experiment with possible signifiers and configurations of consumption, but maintain a distance from any personal reflections ensuing because of these experiments at the same time. It allowed them to exist without exhibiting. During the shopping trip with three tweens for example, I witnessed firsthand the use of this strategy. On entering one particular store, the girls picked up random tops and skirts claiming 'this is so you' or 'this is my dream outfit'. I only realized after chatting to the girls later on, that this was a statement of sarcasm meant to denote that something was not to their taste and they weren't at all genuine in their sentiments. However although it was not genuine admiration they espoused, expressing opinions or preferences couched in parody or mockery, protects the girls' vulnerability at a time when their level of consumer experience is limited.

The Fake Facilitators

This concept refers to the conclusion that many of the girls chose to forsake a preoccupation with having the genuine brand and instead focused on manipulating and utilizing the sign value even associated with counterfeit versions to assert a provisional foot into the world of teen consumption. Therefore although many of the 'brands' they possess are in fact fakes, these products nonetheless facilitate a participation in a version of consumer culture, however diluted. This strategy allows for an engagement with the imperatives that dominate teen consumption but concurrently does not demand the resources only attributed to those of a more defined societal categorization such as finances, life experience or definite market place allocation. In this example, Katie is taking me through some of the possession in her room, including a fake Von-Dutch cap. Interestingly she herself points out that it is a fake.

K: *'What other brands do you use?'*

KL: *'von dutch…I got those in Majorca…they have lasted me two years now'*

K: *'wow…and do you have any other von dutch stuff….do you know much about the brand?'*

Katie roots underneath her bed

K: *'ooh a cap…do you wear that much'*

KL: *'yeah…its fake von dutch…but it's still von dutch'*

What Katie seems to mean here is that to others, it still appears to be Von Dutch, or at the very least she is appearing to others to be engaging with the brands that form the appropriate staple diet of any normative teen. The important thing for Katie then is appearances rather than authenticity. Appearances maintains the shadow side of their being so that they can incur as little anticipated social ridicule as possible while they experiment with the intricacies of the teen persona/consumption dialectic.

Rachel also displayed an affinity for the non-authentic version of some well-known brands.

K: *(reading diary)…Louis Vitton is one of my favourite designers. I love his bags….so which one is yours?'*

R: *'well I got the both of them off my next door neighbour (laughs), she got them…*

K: *'what do you like about those bags?'*

R: *'I think they look really cool…and I don't mind of they're fake…because no-one really knows'*

Rachel here articulates the key element of the fake facilitator concept, as a metaconsumption strategy. Counterfeit products allow the liminal tweens, despite their lack of agency as a socially ambiguous category, to engage with a desirable facet of consumer culture; the repository of symbolic meaning and social implications behind the Louis Vitton logo. Although the use of fake brands is not a consumption practice limited to this age group, the role that these brands play in the lived experience of a liminal tween is significant towards understanding how consumption is enacted during a time of social invisibility.

Discussion

This paper has described some of the constituent elements of metaconsumption; the proposed theorization of the liminars' consumption practices and a suggested diversion from 'the effects' perspective on young consumers' socialization. Being neither a child consumer nor a teen purchaser implies that there exists a gap between the self they were and the self they long to be and the liminal status that ensues. In addition, advancing cognitive capacities instill the tweens with a flagrant sense of trepidation regarding their neophyte-like social standing and potential public transgressions. Consequently they long to reside in the shadowed side of being, attempting to learn, monitor and accumulate socially oriented consumer knowledge, but all the while protect and maintain the anonymity that shields them from social scrutiny and insinuations. This intense period of second order consumption practices, or 'consumption focused on consumption' aligning oneself with the nuances and mores of the social sphere which will help sculpt their entry into teenager-hood, provides examples of a myriad consumption strategies and practices which further a theorization of liminal beings and their consumption practices. In addition, metaconsumption advances the burgeoning area of children's consumer culture research which attempts to explore the mediation of socio-cultural hierarchies and boundaries by young people via their relationships with consumption.

Thus this desire to exist without exhibiting is the core characteristic of the liminal existence and subsequently the theory of metaconsumption has an integral role in its manifestation. For example, the visible propensity of the tweens to convey decided apathy and even resistance towards branded consumption with the variant but related strategy of price preoccupation, was reflective of an effort to preserve the unspecific nature of their social categorization. Not committing to a brand meant not committing to an (unfinished) teen identity. This theoretical conclusion stands in stark contrast to the prevalent literature on branded consumption, whether conceptually, theoretically or managerially oriented (Lindstrom, 2003; McDougall & Chantrey, 2004; Elliot & Leonard, 2004) that convey brand-oriented consumption as a transparently positive and desired facet of tween consumer culture.

However it is equally as intrinsic to the liminal existence that this period of time is not entirely static. As theorized by Douglas (1966, p.137) in relation to interstitial existences 'there is energy in the margins and unstructured areas'. A degree of agency must become part of the metaconsumptive practices of the tween if they are to progress towards the essence of their teen identity (Jenks, 2003). Thus the concepts of the fake facilitators and parody encapsulate the covert but fervent accumulation of consumer-oriented knowledge and experience that concurrently embodies the liminar's 'betwixt and between' existence. For example, parody, akin to the foundational premise of the other metaconsumption strategies is both an enabling and a protective mechanism in that it facilitates the tweens' engagement with the appearance of teen consumerism but yet safeguards the anonymity necessary to prevent premature alignment with a teen identity that they are ill prepared for.

Cognizant of the tweens' concurrent engagement with and detachment from consumption practices, the liminal period is proposed to represent a fruitful darkness (Turner, 1967, p110). Akin to understudies waiting in the wings anxiously ingesting as much information as possible in order to better prepare themselves for the biggest performative role of their lives to date – which as of yet is just out of sight – the fructile chaos of the fruitful darkness facilitates a private rehearsal for what will eventually be a very public performance. The metaphor of the fruitful darkness embodies the concurrent darkness and energy, the restorative obscurity that epitomizes the liminars' experiences with consumer culture within the interstices of socio-cultural

categorization. Although at times the tweens appear passive or nonchalant about many of the signifiers of teen culture, this passivity appears to belie a fervent task. Turner (1967, p.102) similarly theorized when he claimed that during the liminal period 'his apparent passivity is revealed as an absorption of powers which will become active after his social status has been redefined…'

Conclusion

Schouten's (1991: p422) assertion that 'little is yet known about the consumption behaviours of liminal people' was one which had been tentatively approached amongst those exploring the intricate and fascinating interweaving of self and consumption. Research had been instigated and conclusions drawn in relation to consumers and transitions without in-depth focus of that interim period when transition is midway and individuals exist on a threshold blurring past, present and future. As articulated by Turner (1974: p13) it is 'in this gap between ordered worlds that almost anything may happen'. In addition, studies of young consumers and their interactions with consumption have been stifled by a fixation on 'effects' approaches to the detriment of interpretive explorations of the social relationships which emerge between young people and various realms of consumer culture and practices, cognizant of the boundaries and hierarchies which constitute their social world. There are many other areas within consumer culture theory which would reap the rewards of considering the liminal; that threshold existence which embodies both light and dark, stillness and energy, ambiguity and focus. Those experiencing the mid-state of transition have received sparse attention in the field of consumer research. This paper has begun addressing this dearth and by doing so has attested to the potential of the liminality theory itself.

'The Liminal status is a fructile chaos, a storehouse of possibilities, not a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structures, a gestation process'.

(Turner & Bruner, 1986: p42)

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