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The Role of Marketing in the Infantilization of the Postmodern Adult

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In a recent interview, Natalia Vashko, director of the television channel 2x2, stated: "We cater for young viewers, where 'young' has nothing to do with age, it's rather a lifestyle attitude" (Ivanova 2007). This statement, in my opinion, supports the thesis that being young today is no longer a transitory stage, but rather a choice of life, well established and brutally promoted by the media system. While the classic paradigms of adulthood and maturation could interpret such infantile behavior as a symptom of deviance, such behavior has become a model to follow, an ideal of fun and being carefree, present in a wide variety of contexts of society. The contemporary adult follows a sort of thoughtful immaturity, a conscious escape from the responsibilities of an anachronistic model of life. If an ideal of maturity remains, it does not find behavioral compensations in a society where childish attitudes and adolescent life models are constantly promoted by the media and tolerated by institutions. Numerous research studies confirm this thesis. For example, in a series of interviews with young adults in 1999, the sociologist Lynn White found a significant discrepancy between what is believed to be appropriate adult-like behavior and the manner in which adults actually behave. This confirms the thesis of Arnett (1997, 1998) in which adulthood, over time, has shifted from an idea to follow to an ideal, which is difficult to achieve. In the meantime, people in their thirties and forties are constantly subjected to incitements that awaken their inner child: in the proliferation of movies exalting the immaturity of kidults (Bernardini 2012); in television programs in which mature people enact childish stunts; and in Internet shows that, through the nostalgia effect, try to bring the user back to his early days.[1]

The Phenomenon of Infantilization

Infantilization is a fleeting phenomenon, and yet concrete at the same time; it creates controversy but seems accepted and metabolized by public opinion. We live in an era in which it is practically normal to refuse to accept one's own age, in which young people want to be adults and adults want to be young (Samuelson 2003). One sees the traditional stages of the life cycle, to which the social sciences still refer, progressively postponed and altered. The age of childhood has been shortened; adolescence today begins long before puberty and for many seems to last forever (Blos 1979; Arnett, 1998; 2003; Samuelson 2003); the boundaries of adulthood seem, by now, indefinable; and seniority, as a phase of life, is likely to become an individual concept. The media, markets and advertising play a fundamental role in this transformation of vital stages, gradually lowering, starting after the Second World War until the present day, the criteria of measurement of youth (Epstein 2003) and extending the possibilities of a young semblance to people who are older. One finds the evidence in favor of this thesis in popular culture. Newscasts give more and more space to broadcast news of color and crime; the language of politics has been simplified, depleted, and dogmatized and has lost the complexity of a typically adult morality; and video games and role playing games are becoming increasingly popular among adults. Each year, the most successful movies are cartoons or childish comedies and the same thing can be said for books (think of the Harry Potter or Twilight phenomena); and the clothing of adults has become a photocopy of clothing styled for the young. The adult uniform no longer exists: now, it is ordinary to encounter middle-aged individuals in blue jeans, an untucked shirt and sunglasses. Then there are

the fields of aesthetic surgery and beauty products, gradually grown over the past decades even in the recent period of economic recession. The increasing use of rejuvenating creams, Botox injections, and sexual enhancement drugs represent further evidence of a conscious and widespread escape from one's biological age. The actor-consumer of this system tends to childishness without pleasure, to indolence without innocence, dresses without formality, has sex without reproducing, works without discipline, plays without spontaneity, buys without a purpose, lives without responsibility, wisdom or humility (Linn 2004; Barber 2007).

Infantilization coincides with a kind of collective regression and may be related, in my opinion, to two interdependent factors: the main social phenomena that have characterized post-modernity and unprecedented market strategies.

Postmodernity and Immaturity

The liberal, liquid, individualistic and presentist connotations that gave shape to postmodernity seem to have gradually led to a real psychological rejection of the condition adulthood.

As observed by Jeammet (2009), an unprecedented and fragmented freedom of the individual characterizes our society, a freedom that has everyone choosing based on desires and ambivalent feelings, and fearing not living up to one's own ambitions. This a freedom authorizes any possibility – with the help of the media – but also entails frustration and anxiety, because everyone knows that he could never choose and try everything. Prohibitions and limitations have the advantage of allowing us to believe that our dissatisfactions could be attributed to them; knowing that we are the only builders of our own lives leads, instead, to a constant sense of insecurity. Freedom means also knowing that eventually you will have to make an account of things undertaken and successfully completed. This worries the adult and leads him to a psychological escape from his own condition by taking refuge in the world of young people where the possibilities are increasingly vast.

Our society is liquid (Bauman 2000); it has redesigned its temporal spaces according to the dimensions of speed and possibility and, as a result, youth appears to be the more efficacious model.

The evanescence of limits and conscience combined with freedom of choice also match with the obligation of the individualization of one's biography and the research of the biographical solutions best suited to resolve the systemic contradictions of the moment (Beck 1998). Authoritative guidelines are lacking; autonomy and self-determination of the individual are the bases for everything. In pre-industrial societies, on the contrary, at birth one entered in an organizing structure that was not considered resulting from cultural evolution but the enactment of a constant and unchanging nature. This guaranteed the social affiliation of the individual. Later, industrialization put in motion a process of acquisition of one's role for which one's identity was no longer given once and for all, but became the result of a choice. There is no longer a consolidated stratification; allocation has been replaced by acquisition and identity is given by the economic and employment role assumed by the individual and no longer by the ties of kinship. But it is only in contemporary society that certainties rarefy in relation to purpose (Bauman 2000). The person loses every identifying criterion; the individual is now called to choose and embody a model of stability in which to recognize himself without relying on a normative principle (Luhmann 1990). The individual discovers the unprecedented opportunity to draw his own social. This is a truly fascinating yet risky context. The vagueness, the unknown, and insecurity hide behind each potential decision.

Media communication comes to the rescue and becomes the primary vehicle for the dissemination of values, trends and guidelines that establish the symbolic universe of the individual's ethical choices. This communication, as recently ascertained (Bernardini 2012, 2013), legitimizes, on the one hand, immature and childish behaviors, and on the other hand promotes an unprecedented lifestyle that thirty years ago Laslett (1989) defined as youthfulness. Marketers and media have become obsessively devoted to the exaltation of youthful image in every aspect: clothing, physical form, and behavior. As noted by Bonazzi and Pusceddu (2008), media communication, and especially advertising, nowadays seems to promote a kind of collective regression: needs should be satisfied immediately because it is imperative to take here and now everything that life, or rather the consumer's society, promises to give us. And youth - like beauty, success and money - becomes an object that is possible to own, always. In other words, youth, a biological condition, seems to have become a cultural definition. One is young not because he is a certain age, but because he is entitled to enjoy certain styles of life and consumption.

Taking note of this new possibility, the media conveys a clear message: being adult is an environmental situation

that one can reject as neither attractive nor trendy. As a result, within the young adult a defense mechanism takes over against adulthood itself, which is simplistically viewed as a set of excessive responsibilities, a threat to existential possibilities and an unavoidable journey toward old age. Searching for immediate satisfaction, denying the future and living a perennial and undefined present appear both a more compelling proposal and a concrete possibility. In Freudian terms, it is the pleasure principle that dominates the reality principle. Past and future become nightmarish dimensions and are, therefore, removed: what remains is an attractive present represented as a place where immediate pleasure and the realization of the self as eternally youthful are possible. Therefore, the transition to adulthood may not be viewed as an authentic life option since it is the adult himself who proclaims it inadequate. Not only that: the adult who shuns his condition kills the aspiration of the youth to become an adult. It is a vicious circle where youth becomes the only real existential proposal.

Presentism, another phenomenon that characterizes today's reality, is a forced choice in the individual who does not want to clash with uncertainty. In a globalized and presentist society for which the here and now and the all at once are utmost values, the past must be zeroed from memory and the future must be ignored since it is predisposing to the life stage of old age. As observed by Rosa (2003), existence is no longer designed along a line that goes from the past to the future: decisions are made day by day depending on needs and desires related to the situation and the context. But the focus on the present cancels the future, the projects and the long-term commitments, the conception of a life based on duration, stability and irreversibility: fundamental indicators of the social recognition of the adult. Thus, a vision of an unstable and irresponsible pseudo-adulthood takes form. At the same time the youth loses that linear dimension that the concept of transition itself should evoke, the life-path becoming fickle and circular in nature. As the present is not lived and primarily represented as a preparatory dimension of the future (Leccardi 2005), in the same manner the existential phases of youth or of late adolescence are not only intended as a preliminary step of adulthood, but as a valid life option, regardless of one's age and social status. The contemporary adult can, therefore, choose to wear a mask and live without a concrete sense of time. He dwells in a universe where the diversity between youth and adulthood has been not only removed, but has become a characterizing element.

We can, therefore, affirm that a new figure is emerging, a youthful adult. An adult individual who lives in a state of continuous present, that chases the existential and aesthetic paths of the young people and blends with them in order to forget and disguise his age and, especially, the responsibilities and the preclusion that this entails. He is an individual who is not made, but is in the making. Whether he wishes it or not, whether he is conscious of it or not, he continues, potentially, to maintain a plurality of options, choices, and existential promises. His life never seems to appear perfectly deposited in its fundamental signs. This scares, confuses, and especially fascinates because "that which is not yet attracts more than what has been, because the expectation of a dream has more charm than its fulfillment, because that which is far away from the end helps to remove the awareness that is not given to escape it for eternity" (Bonazzi et al. 2008, p. 75). The youthful adult is a young man who has decided not to grow up and enjoys this introspective shortcoming: he lives an artificial youth with infinite potential, possibility of digressions and recoveries, and absence of the ghosts of what could no longer be. He denies his age to assume those characteristics incidental to the symbols of eternal youth, crystallized in timelessness devoid of planning and awareness (Bonazzi et al. 2008); in reality, he tries to hide from the world and himself the non-acceptance of the new image of self that time is creating in spite of him. It is an image that has to be removed, kept away from the consciousness because its acceptance would be the recognition of a continuous inner and exterior changing: a process that does not change him suddenly, but that in the course of time modifies those psychological and aesthetic traits used to recognize himself. An alteration difficult to accept since a form of the self that he does not want to see changed is now interiorized.

Infantilization as a Law of the Market

The youthful adult, archetypal figure of postmodern infantilization, may also be related to novel and stringent market strategies, complicit and consequent to the recent social phenomena just taken into consideration.

In a recent publication, Barber (2007, p. 3) introduces a concept apparently connected to such a figure, the infantilist ethos briefly relating the phenomenon of the prolonged adolescence with the global market:

> "(The infantilist ethos) is an ethos of induced childishness: an infantilization that is closely tied to the demands of consumer capitalism in a global market economy."

According to the scholar, the infantilist ethos is today strongly promoted in marketing and is effective in forming the ideologies and behaviors of current society that is so radically consumeristic, at least at the same level as the Protestant ethics were in forming the entrepreneurial culture of the first capitalist societies. The comparison of Barber, in my opinion, is more than just a simple provocation and could be a useful introduction to the understanding of the magnitude of the phenomenon. More than a century ago, Weber (1904) introduced the concept of inner-worldly asceticism, to which the origins of the capitalist spirit can be traced as consequences of the ethics of the Protestant sects influenced by the doctrines of Calvino, in particular by the dogma of predestination. This doctrine affirms that God, in his inscrutable will, has determined from eternity who will be saved and who damned. Up against the anguish arising from the uncertainty about their eternal destiny, believers have then to seek worldly success as a signal of salvation (Bagnasco et al. 1997). With this thesis, Weber has not only shown the importance that the Protestant religion has played in the promotion of the capitalist economy. He has also showed that capitalism and culture are much more bound together than the limitations imposed by the Economy, Sociology and Psychology of the time suggested. In the same way, we could now easily correlate capitalism with the phenomenon of infantilization and search in the contemporary economy for new evidence to confirm this argument. Many scholars (e.g., Bell 1996; Freidman 2005) consider that the end of the Protestant ethic has given birth to capitalism devoid of any ethics and morals. In my opinion, the question is another: what new ethic is today's capitalism based upon in order to survive? In the current hyper-consumeristic system, the inner-worldly asceticism no longer translates to the obligation to produce, but to the obligation to buy, consume and accumulate. Greed is no longer sin; avidity is, paradoxically, a form of altruism toward productivity and, therefore, toward the survival of the national economy. After 9/11, the President of the United States George W. Bush invited his fellow citizens to go to the mall and shop to demonstrate the force and the patriotic spirit of the country to Al Qaeda. In recent times of crisis, practically all the European leaders have asked consumers to consume.

Once, productivist capitalism sought to meet the real needs of people. Today, in a saturated market, it is necessary to create new clientele and, to paraphrase Marx (1867), imaginary needs. It is a well known logic of the market: as early as 1848, Marx argued that once the old needs are satisfied, the individual is brought to seek new needs. Or, more recently, Guy Debord (1967, p. 15) stated: "The satisfaction of primary human needs, now met in the most summary manner, by a ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs." My thesis is that the encouragement of regression of adults is, therefore, necessarily connected to the promotion of goods directed to a specific group of adults: youthful adults and adult-children, or rather the kidults (Linn 2004, Schor 2004, Aberdeen 2008, Bernardini 2012), which is a group that has been gradually created by the market itself. But why opt for a regression toward young or even infantile ages? Apart from the obvious reasons related to the aesthetic charm typical of the young, in my opinion there are at least three reasons.

Firstly, because the needs of children and young people are ideally and potentially infinite, while "the demand for adult services and goods has proven not to be endless" (Del Vecchio 1997, p. 19). If the adult can consciously assess the real need for an object, the youth rather tends to the accumulation of goods which are ephemeral, superfluous, devoid of any practical or utilitarian value; similarly the child evaluates only the ludic and playful aspects of the object and does not voluntarily limit the desire for new goods.

Secondly, the adult used to be a child and a teenager. The memory of those years is a heritage that is always present in the eyes of the consumer and can continually resurface when the market relies on the nostalgia effect. It is a simple stratagem, very common nowadays, in which the actor-consumer relives past experiences and regresses once again toward previous life stages. Think of the countless remakes or sequels of movies, cartoons and comics of the seventies and eighties, of the success of vintage products in the fields of fashion and furniture, of the influences of covering and disco music in the recording industry. As Gary Cross suggests (2008, p. 158) the search for nostalgia is a relatively recent phenomenon; it is the effect of a frenetic and uncertain society in which the consumer finds stability in the memory of past experiences:

> "(the phenomenon of the search for nostalgia) emerged fully only when people found an accelerating rate of change in many things so frustrating and alienating that they tried to capture the fleeting past in their ephemeral culture and goods. It may seem strange that we seek stability in what lasted only briefly when we were young, but, as we age, our experiences as children and teens seem to be timeless. It may seem strange that we tend to seek stability in what has lasted for only a brief time when we were younger, but, as we age, the experiences we had as children or teenagers seem to be timeless."

It is not, therefore, a simplistic inability to make new resolutions: actually, looking at the past is often more fruitful than imagining the future.

The third reason is purely demographic. After the baby boom years, the birth rate in the western world has progressively decreased and, as a consequence, the average age has risen strongly. In fact, the average age of the world's population has increased considerably in the last fifty years, and it is assumed that it will continue to grow. If in 1950 those who were fourteen years old or less made up more than a third of the world's population, today they are just 13.5%, and in forty years it is estimated that they will be 8.6%. In the United States the average age has increased from 25 years in 1960 to 38 years in 2012. In Europe the situation is even more dramatic: in France the average age is 39.7 years, in Spain 41.5, in Italy 43.7, and in Germany 44.3.[2] Italy, in addition to having the third highest average age in the world, is also the second country in the world with the highest life expectancy at birth, 82 years, preceded only by Japan.[3] Young people are elsewhere: in the Third World and emerging economies, but they do not yet constitute an approachable market. The population of North America, which is just 5% of the world, represents 31.5% of global economic spending. The European Union (6.4% of the world's population) represents 29%. In other words, 11% of the world's population controls 60% of the market. An important motivation for the constant promotion of infantilism by the mainstream media and marketing can be traced to this imbalance. As long as the Second and Third worlds are unable to afford ephemeral goods, they will not be a possible market for youthful goods, which must then necessarily be redirected to western societies, even if they're aged by now.

It was the sociologist Juliet Schor (2004, p. 9) who declared: "the United States is the most consumer-oriented society in the world and the architects of this culture [...] have now set their sights on children. [...] Kids and teens are now the epicenter of American consumer culture. They command the attention, creativity and dollars of advertisers. Their tastes drive market trends. Their opinions shape brand strategies." According to the scholar, the United States and the western world in general are going through a period in which the child and the teenager are the epicenter of the consumerist culture, influencing the media and forming needs and behaviors of a growing number of adults. Postman (1994) defines them as adult-children, Epstein (2003) as locked in a high school of the mind individuals, Tierney (2004) as adultescents, and Cross (2008) as boy-men. The concept is the same: husbands in their forties who spend hours playing the same video games that obsess adolescents; fathers verbally and physically involved in fist fights at their children's game; politicians and managers who behave like impulsive teenagers; young adults who live with their parents, watch cartoons and see in marriage and in parenting an obstacle to their independence; in other words, infantile adults and kidults unable to assume responsibilities. A multitude of actors are united by the same lifestyle, because, if adult cultures are pluralist and distinctive, the youth culture is extraordinarily universal (Barber 2007): it almost seems that all the Western middle-class young people live in a kind of parallel universe (Walker 1996). Returning to a strictly economic point of view: is this not the best target for a market that wants to sell identical products in necessarily different realities? After all, as McNeal said (1992, p. 250):

> "in general, it appears that before there is a geographic culture, there is a children's culture; that children are very much alike around the industrialized world. They love to play [...] they love to snack and they love being children with other children. The result is that they very much want the same things, that they generally translate their needs into similar wants that tend to transcend culture. Therefore, it appears that fairly standardized multinational marketing strategies to children around the globe are viable."

On the one hand, therefore, the logic of global capitalism (Greider 1997) provides for the ongoing capital investment in new factories and, consequently, an overproduction of goods in a saturated market. On the other hand, in these times of economic crisis as the economic boom years have ended, consumers have acquired a strong diversification in what they desire to purchase and are apparently less likely to buy goods that are not necessities. It is in this context that, according to many economists (McNeal 1992; Parmar 2002; Barber 2007; Grams et al. 2008), the child has acquired a new value as a consumer and has become the new target of marketers. The child is easily suggestible, tends to want objects that have no utilitarian purpose, is driven by individualistic, irrational and almost exclusively playful desires, does not take into account the needs of others and does not present a substantial diversification in tastes. My thesis, however, goes beyond this logic: the market has not caused production to deviate toward the child-customer, it has rather found the ideal customer in the irrationally consumerist nature of the child. The main target remains the adult for at least two reasons: his economic resources, and the massive and growing presence of adults in the total population. The promotion of infantilization by the market has this aspiration: to foster the regression of the desires of the consumer – which, as we have seen, is allowed in a post-modern scenario - in order to make them more compatible with a capitalist logic based on surplus production and equality of products.

This is the reason why, in economic circles, we are far from a trivialization of fashion, an infantilization of consumption, a dumbing down of the goods (De Conciliis 2008) and a leveling down of cultural products: the

purpose is not only to make them more appealing to adolescents or children, but to impose psychological and behavioral regression adults. Adolescents are the archetype of a capitalism that exalts hedonism, the centrality of leisure, spending instead of saving, selling rather than investing, and that has replaced the concept of serving society with the propensity to serve one's self. Children represent the model of the ideal consumer because they are emotional, egocentric, and impulsive. Numerous research studies can function as a frame to this vision: back in 1999, Ken Dychtwald noticed that Americans in their fifties buy more than 40% of the total of consumer goods despite representing less than 10% of the target of advertisements and television programs, the target being mostly directed at teenagers and adolescents. In a 2002 survey he edited, John Nelson ascertained that most of the Americans in their forties and fifties show interest almost exclusively for the same things that interested them when they were adolescents or young adults. And that, thanks to the economic power at their disposal, they can now afford to buy those goods, mostly ephemeral, that they previously yearned. A few years after, Leo Bogart (2005), throughout the analysis of a similar survey, affirmed that most of the interviewees in their forties and fifties expressed the desire to remain forever young and saw in the accumulation of material goods a practical expedient for the realization of such desire.

In conclusion, it seems clear that this socioeconomic interpretation is indispensable in the analysis of a phenomenon – i.e., the infantilization – that now affects society in all its structure. The promotion of infantilism to safeguard a globalized capitalism may be, therefore, taken as a primary component of the infantilistic transformation that the media and institutions have experienced, and must surely be taken into account in the redefinition of the adulthood paradigm.

Endnotes

1. For example the streaming Talking Classic, the Angry Video Game Nerd and the Nostalgia Critic jokingly review videogames and movies that have shaped the previous generations. At the same time, these venues promote exhibitions and events (for example the various ComiCon) in which a mainly adult target celebrates comics, cartoons and television programs of the past.

2. Source: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, United States, 2012.

3. Source: The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, 2012.

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