Culture Criminals: Social Media's Affront to Subculture and Design Management

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Due to the advent of the age of social media, youth culture, typically catalysed by media and fashion movements and bound by geographic location, is behaving in an entirely atypical manner, changing the way innovation is diffused among consumers. With this, the methods employed by marketing practitioners may be in danger of being rendered archaic as the innovations and trends that they pursue operate in an exaggerated and accelerated state of flux as the barriers between traditional subcultures collapse and merge, further challenging the functions of design management in a NPD project.

This paper aims to investigate these phenomena through primary research (based upon the findings of six case studies and ten in-depth interviews). A theoretical reworking of Roger's diffusion of innovations model illustrates the shortening of trends and the increase in velocity of tipping due to the wider population of innovators and early adopters that social media allows. This leads to the urgency of involving consumers in the process of innovation; and participatory design being an important aspect of NPD. The discussion implies that the function of design management should shift from acquiring marketing intelligence to facilitating the involvement of consumers in the process of innovation and NPD.

Keywords: *Youth culture, Innovation, NPD, Design Management*

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Introduction

"In the future, everyone will be famous for fifteen people"
(Momus, 1991)

Momus' take on Andy Warhol's famous quip is in the present age far more relevant than he would ever have known in 1991. More than a decade after it was written social media emerged as a juggernaut of communication and information exchange; terms such as 'tweeting' 'posting' and 'sharing' no longer immediately conjure images of birds, letters or charity, but of banal descriptions of an acquaintances meal-time activities, the intrusive display of another's holiday photos or the digital exchange of the days gossip. Frivolity aside, these activities serve as an example of how deeply engrained in the fabric of modern society social media has become, this in turn presents an enormous set of implications and opportunities for those that are willing, and able, to capitalise upon them, as well as threats and pitfalls for those engage with these platforms carelessly or not at all. Indeed, social media has been cited as a key tool in the overthrow of governments (ASMR, 2011), the orchestration of protest (Casciani, 2010), the chief tool of communication in the gathering of individuals for criminal civil disobedience (Douglas, 2011), an Orwellian means of generating mass hype and hysteria (Saarinen, 2012. VC, 2012), the golden goose of marketing, a threat to national security (Chieh, 2012), the saviour and downfall of economies (Shore, 2012) and the end of the concept of privacy as we know it (Rosenblum, 2007). Social media has made heroes, billionaires, celebrities, villains and so, so, much more yet it is still perceived to be in its infancy and it is with this that social media presents significant challenges to business and society. The argument presented here not only is social media allowing the development of new consumers, who bring with them an unprecedented wave of materialistic values (Chan, 2010) and distorted approaches to traditional market ambition (Kremer, 2013), it is presenting them with the platform to diffuse information across a vast geographic span, without physical boundaries, at such an accelerated pace that it is fundamentally altering the business and cultural landscape.

Design Management
The importance of embracing market intelligence into design process as part of the design management functions has long been recognised in literature, such as in Bruce and Cooper 1997, Topalian 1980, Cooper and Press 1995, Perth 2000 and Kotler 1984. In the design management conceptual framework proposed by Sun et al. (2010), design management is positioned within the industry's knowledge supply chain and is defined as

'the management of the interface between design practice and other industry forces'. Among the five key design management functions (line management of design teams, management of knowledge input, management of design output, managing the interface with substitute design products, and managing and repositioning entry barriers), the 'management of knowledge input' ensures that required knowledge is captured and available to inform design. Given that there is a trend towards an increasingly knowledge based profession, marketing insight is considered vital to a successful design project.

In NPD, market research is used at all stages of the product life cycle, from the conceptual stage to maturity, in establishing consumer needs, estimating demand, pricing, and shaping the specification of the product. Fain et al. (2011) considered that the more innovative the NPD projects are, the greater the need to integrate marketing functions within the project; and technical innovations are considered less important than they used to be, whilst industries depend more on their intellectual capital than on production capital alone. The role of design managers is therefore crucial in informing NPD by unveiling the trends and unmet needs of the market.

Rogers' Innovation Adoption Model
One of the frameworks that are widely referenced in the literature of NPD is Rogers' innovation diffusion model (1962), which explains how, why and at what rate ideas and technology infiltrate popular culture. It shows the change in the number of new adopters of a product over time, at different stages of the product lifecycle within a social system. Among these groups, the 'innovators' are the earliest users of the product/idea who welcome change. Innovators are risk takers, typically in their teens and twenties, extremely social and have close contact with other innovators. They tend to abandon a trend long before it reaches saturation where they leave behind the current dominating social climate and seek to generate new trends or recycle old ones. It is impossible to truly test a product or idea in a market, and thus reach the much more economically valuable majority of population, prior to release. Innovators provide value at this stage as they are required to spread initial influence until the trend 'tips' and thoroughly infiltrates public consciousness (Gladwell, 2000). It is these individuals who, despite only representing a small proportion of the population in the context of diffusion of innovations model, explore new generations of popular culture amongst consumers, and it is they who the majority of the

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population turn to for inspiration and new knowledge of trends and emerging culture. Because of their ability in predicting and dictating trends, this demographic is of particular interest to NPD in testing new ideas and exploring future trends.

Figure 1: Rogers' Innovation Diffusion Model (Rogers, 1962)

Youth Culture

A large proportion of the 'innovators' and to some extent 'early adopters' are young people, therefore the study of youth culture is extremely useful to design management. Youth culture was defined by Rice & Dolgin (2007) as *"the sum of the ways of living of adolescents; it refers to the body of norms, values, and practices recognized and shared by members of the adolescent society as appropriate guides to actions"*, and can be further broken down into distinct subcultures, each with their own beliefs, behaviours, styles, interests and values, the pursuit of which is highly linked to the exploration of self-identity and individualism in a social group setting (Brake, 1990. Muggleton, 2000. Bennett et al, 2004). From a marketing perspective youth culture represents an extremely volatile, vague, and less-than financially prudent demographic, yet it remains highly valued and sought after by marketing practitioners. The value of youth culture, as with over-arching subculture, lies in its ability to present business with new ideas and trends, offering, often through the process of 'coolhunting' (Gloor & Cooper, 2007), a yardstick of what is 'fresh' or 'emerging', and presenting businesses with creative ways to reach new demographics and focus marketing activity. Indeed the youth market should be of special interest to all NPD managers both due to its perceived ability to innovate and generate new trends that are inevitably adopted by different age groups and because of the fact that its inhabitants represent the future of consumerism.

The Challenge

The advent of social media has however dramatically transformed the traditional dynamics of subculture and, consequently, the NPD practices that surround them. Traditionally, subcultural groups within the youth demographic were extremely tribal, and often at odds with different groups whose values, appearance and interests did not mirror their own. These groups typically formed within local communities as the spread of information regarding new trends was restricted by the media that united them, be it specialist magazines, forums or a relatively disorganised internet that limited two-way, or communal, interaction. This led to the development of strong local physical subcultural communities or 'scenes' which slowly shifted over time and are a large factor in the development of local culture bound by geographical areas. However due to the advancement of social media platforms, it is now possible for an individual to follow a particular subculture, and remain as part of that community in a virtual world, exchanging media, ideas and imagery instantaneously, in real time, 24/7 (Krotoski, 2011), thus allowing individuals to draw influence from other cultures extremely quickly as information diffuses over a much wider geographic span without having to 'trickle' into areas that would previously be left untouched due to limitations in communication. Examples of this phenomenon could include the influence of Japanese youth culture upon the West in recent years (McGray, 2002. Koshikawa, 2003. Nagata, 2012. Ito et al, 2012), a move that began in the late 90's and was solidified by social media, highlighting the way, and ease, in which information spreads from continent to continent. Indeed to be immersed in any area of an extremely foreign subculture, to have a finger on the pulse of fashion anywhere from New York to Tokyo, in real-time simply involves being connected to the right people in the form of blog subscriptions.

Alongside geography, subcultures were typically catalysed by a musical and fashion movement, another area undergoing change, as it is argued that in the age of social media it is much more difficult to draw this link and that lines between different subcultures are becoming blurred as the characteristics that so set them apart mix (Kjelgaard & Askegaard, 2006). An example of this could include the way in which tattoos, piercings, hairstyles and other elements were traditionally associated with punk or alternative culture have been adopted by the mainstream consumers (Berkowitz, 2011. Asphodel, 2012). Big business took note, such as in the case of sportswear multinational Nike and New York based niche streetwear brand Supreme,

both of whom cater to a melange of skateboarding, punk, basketball and urban culture; elements that were traditionally socially diametrically opposed (Bakare, 2011). Given that subculture is no longer bound by geographical location, and its development is no longer fully catalysed by media, be it music, film, art or fashion, its reliability in predicting and mapping trends, fashions and subcultural movements is in question.

This paper aims to understand this challenge by:
- Unveiling new and/or confirming the assumed behavioural characteristics of the youth demographic in the context of social media, as described in the literature; and
- Relating the behavioural characteristics to Roger's diffusion of innovations model, to explore the impact of this challenge on the dynamics of innovation diffusion.

This paper then further explores the impact of the dilution of trends, fashions and subcultural movements on the practice of design management.

Methodology

The research comprised two stages. This first involved case study analysis of levels of consumer interaction with six brands regarded as drawing on high levels of consumer fanaticism in young consumers, namely Nike, Supreme, Apple, Blackberry and the three major computer games manufacturers (Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft). This stage also included a high level of interaction with social media in the form of blogs, forums, online communities, specialist consumer media and news feeds.

Following the case analysis, the line of enquiry was extended to primary research that took the form of ten in-depth interviews with a sample group, collected using the defined generalised group method. Phenomenological research is concerned with the study of experience and as such is intended to bring forth the views, perspectives, emotions and beliefs of the interviewee allowing the researcher to view the perspective of others objectively, gaining insight into their motivations and actions. The gathering of this research will be achieved through the execution of in depth interviews with consumers.

The sampling method used to select suitable participants for interview is the defined generalised group. Participants were assessed for suitability for interview against the following criteria:

- Holding an active interest in, being a user of, or self-defining as a 'fan' of one or more of the brands examined in the secondary research.
- Falling into the age catchment range of 16-34 as outlined by Viacom's research into 'youth marketing' (Viacom, 2008).
- Being a regular user of social media platforms.

The intention was to use this group to represent the 'innovators' and 'early adaptors' in Roger's model, overarching with the youth demographic in the marketing research context. Each interview took 45 minutes to one hour in length. In the interviews, the following three aspects of open-ended questions were used to collect Phenomenological data:
- Relationship with and attitudes towards the brands
- Relationship with and use of social media
- Key influences regarding lifestyle choices

As this study concerns young people, extra consideration was given to ethical issues. Research participants took part on a voluntary basis and consents were given. The participants were informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the data, what their participation in the research entails, and what risks, if any, were involved. Alongside interviews, the research process demanded the collection a significant amount of image data, the main precursor to this was that data was not to be placed in the public domain and the anonymity of respondents was respected.

Findings

The findings can be summarised as the following behavioural characteristics in comparison with the literature:

- Disposable Identities

The study reveals that the identities of the individuals represented in each of these cases are in a state of flux. The experimentation with image, culture, and the concept of the self, as part of a social group, is not new; and the formation of an identity is of course a core part of adolescence and early adulthood (Brake, 1990), though never before has youth and youth culture been subjected to the pressures, and competitive nature, associated with

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the juggernaut of global social networks and information exchange; pressures which threaten to create new generations of super-consumer.

This is consistent with the literature and is exemplified by the 'fake geek' debate that, in recent times, caused a large storm on social media channels (Letamendi, 2012). The dispute alluded to the allegations of 'hijacking' of comic book, computer game and film 'fandom' by young women who were perceived to have no interest in the culture that surrounds the media beyond a pretentious attempt at attention seeking, allegations stemming from those who refer to themselves as 'true' fans of the genres and a conflict which threatened to alienate newcomers (Brown, 2012. Hern, 2012).

Such accusations of a lack of integrity shown by increasing numbers of 'latecomers' or 'posers' were dominant themes of the interviews and extended beyond the realm of comic book conventions into every facet of subculture with several of the interviewees complaining of a huge influx in the last few years of consumers 'jumping on the bandwagon' of areas they had a strong personal interest in, consequently threatening their identities through misplaced association, a feeling commonly described in fanaticism literature. This is supported by the images collected, which provide detailed visual depictions of individual interviewees experimenting with dramatically different types of subcultural imagery in a relatively short space of time. The key feature of each is that the photographic record was produced not simply for personal reference, but for the benefit of the wider world, the social network. In the case of each participant there are countless jumps between different noted subcultural groups; including hip-hop, grunge, punk, emo, hipster and many more. Though each individual appears in some images to be modelling, implying that the pictures were not entirely for their own benefit, and it can be ascertained from the medium through which they were shared, the social network, that they intended to provide a visual record for other peoples reference, therefore it is impossible to ascertain his/her true cultural interests.

- Individuality

The most common recurring theme of the interviews was the importance placed upon the concept of individuality, or more specifically the concept of being recognised as a worthwhile individual as part of a group. So completely crucial was it that the majority of interviewees visually separated themselves from their peers that they would go to extreme or unusual lengths to purchase products that were difficult to attain in order to

achieve this aim. This provided a double boost for the sample group in that it offered a great deal of psychological stimulation both from the recognition they received from their peers as well as the affirmation of knowing that they owned a product that nobody else could get, as recognised in previous literature (Engs, 1987. Greenwald et al, 1988. Wong, 1997. Garbarino et al, 2010). This desire for recognition and affirmation, the drive to shine as an individual, whilst desiring to remain as part of a group, to belong, when coupled with a rapidly expanding social circle, both physical and digital, is a strong driving force in causing individuals to seek and explore cultures with which they are unfamiliar. These interactions are permitted by technological advances and media platforms that allow them access to a visual reference of anything in the world, instantaneously, thus providing them the opportunity to draw on an enormous range of sources for inspiration and chop and change their visual identity as they see fit.

- Cultural Gluttons
  This idea of 'disposable identities' is further facilitated by one of the key uses of social media by young people; the exchanging of media and information relating to it, be it music, film, art or fashion. This ease of access to different forms of media lowers the barriers of entry to subcultures, making it much easier for an individual to immerse themselves in a culture they are unfamiliar with without any real requirement to make a complete commitment to participate in it. To elaborate; traditionally being part of, or gaining entry to, a particular subculture required a measure of effort, an individual would have to physically leave the house, meet people and gather information, invest time and money and attempt to remain 'on point' as fashion changed by watching the people around you or drawing inspiration from magazines or the television. The advent of social media completely changed this dynamic as the information required to give an individual enough knowledge to at least feign interest in a particular subculture became freely available and required little effort to attain, as such information and media began changing hands with such velocity that the trends themselves have started to reach social saturation much more quickly.

Music, often a key catalyst of any subcultural movement, is a perfect illustration of this and is central to the phenomena (Corgan, 2012). One of the interview participants stated that:

"You used to have to pick a side with music, albums were expensive… If you spent £12 on that album you were getting into it… you took it home and listened to it again and again… because you couldn't afford another one… then that threw you off to other bands. You couldn't afford to wake up one day and say 'I fancy hip-hop today… or dance…' you had to find a genre, a scene, and stick to it… Now you can just go on YouTube and you can listen to anything with a touch…"

The same attitude applies to film, fashion, art and all printed media, with piracy becoming an unfortunate and wide scale by-product of the phenomena. Consequently, this disposable attitude to music, film, art and fashion by young social media users is threatening to create a generation of gluttonous consumers who are used to devouring media at no cost and on an extremely superficial level. Aside from the obvious issues presented to the entertainment industry by this, which have been extensively documented elsewhere, these issues pose an extremely strong set of challenges to wider business and society which will be revisited and explored with more depth later in this paper.

- Internet Famous

Another factor in the mechanics of this issue is the level of access that social media allows individuals to have to celebrities, leading to a crystallisation of the existing fascination that many have with celebrity culture whilst making it much easier to visually and culturally imitate celebrities as their lives are essentially tracked in real-time. Alongside this, social media is responsible for the development of the term 'internet famous', used to describe an individual, group or entity who achieve a level of fame or notoriety almost exclusively online, such as 'celebrity' bloggers or other personalities.

Impact on Cultural Diffusion

The findings led the researchers to consider how the observed characteristics of youth culture impact on the dynamics of wider popular culture. Based on Roger's model, the connectors come in the form of celebrities and bloggers (Recuenco, 2006) who have the potential for great influence in 'tipping' ideas by presenting them to innovators and early adopters who then diffuse the information to early and late adopters through social media platforms. Due to massive advances in methods of communication and the free availability of media, this can happen almost

instantaneously on an international scale. This led the authors to assume that despite the same rate of adoption and timeframe as the traditional model, the lifespan of the trend is shortened.

The sample population demonstrated that innovators and, to a slightly lesser extent, early adopters possess a strong desire to separate themselves from their peers and achieve this by seeking out and experimenting with new ideas and trends. As the information regarding new ideas, trends and fashions is so freely available, and is often presented directly to individuals on social media platforms and blogs this creates not only a very congested, and extremely fast, platform for innovation, it also gives individuals the opportunity to become innovators or early adopters extremely easily. This leads to a much higher population of early adopters than in the traditional diffusion of innovations lifecycle, heightened by the pressures placed on young consumers to distinguish themselves from others in ever-widening social groups, and as such the velocity of the tipping of a trend is greatly increased.

This is further complicated as innovators and early adopters are highly likely to 'dump' a trend or idea long before it reaches saturation and seek out and experiment with new ideas in order to further separate themselves and consolidate their position as innovators. This leads to the development of new trends whilst existing trends are in the ascension or approaching saturation amongst the early and late majority. These new trends are then adopted by the same early and late majority creating a highly fluid and accelerated pace of change.

These changes are illustrated in fig 2, characterised as:
- The advances of social media and the accessibility of information significantly shortening the lifespan of trend;
- A larger population of innovators and early adopters resulted in an increased velocity of the tipping of trends; and
- New trends emerging before existing trends ascending or saturating leading to the co-existence of multi-subcultures/glocalisation of subculture in the same space and time.

This phenomenon is referred to as 'hyper-trends' by the authors, the contemporary phenomenon of trends, fashion and ideas rising to popular public consciousness and falling out of favour at high velocity.
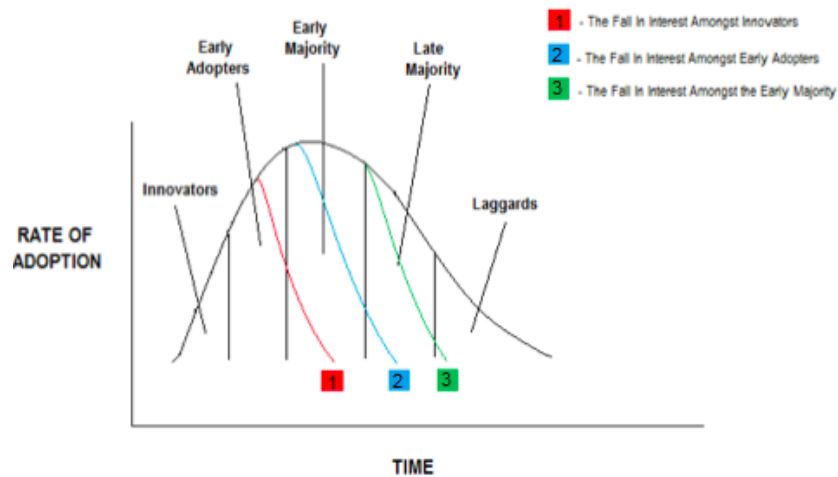
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Figure 2 Hyper-trends

Roger's model was criticized as it attempts to generalise an extremely complex social issue (McAnany, 1984). The authors acknowledge that the model developed in this paper shares the same problem. What it offers is an attempt to explain the merging and erosion of subcultures, as well as the appropriation of old subcultural styles as innovators are forced to draw upon wider sources of information to consolidate their position as innovators. Given this, this model, as with the original diffusion of innovations model, only serves as an illustration of the phenomena revealed within the study. The purpose of this paper is to explore the implications of the challenge on design management roles.

Implications for Design Management

The study has considered the communication and information exchange amongst young people alongside the issues with which they are faced as they attempt to develop their identities under a crushing weight of infinite information and free media. Alongside this, the study has established the understanding that the barriers between subcultures are eroding and merging, that geographical boundaries are falling leading to widening social networks and increased competition and pressure to achieve recognition as an exemplary individual as part of a social collective. The 'hyper-trends' model illustrates the way in which these factors, when combined, are

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leading to the development of an environment of disposable culture and identity.

This presents a challenging environment for design management. Given that the geographical boundaries of lifestyle demographics have eroded, the traditional marketing methodologies in identifying target user groups and in collecting marketing intelligence have become less effective. For example, the previously reliable practice of coolhunting (Gloor & Cooper, 2007) has become redundant as a rapid turnover of trends has led to a situation in which brands could be forced to constantly change their position to suit what is 'on point' in an expensive game of marketing cat and mouse. In such a turbulent, yet exciting, environment, the 'management of knowledge input' function (Sun, 2010) of a design manager is challenged as to how to ensure that required knowledge is captured and available to design.

This reinforces the integrity of consumers in the process of NPD and innovation. Instead of taking consumers as targeted market segments, a much more effective approach would be involving consumers into the process through co-creation, allowing consumers to form a community around it. A good example of this practice is Nike, who offer a 'personal touch' by operating in many independent subdivisions each catering to different clientele; such as Nike SB, who cater to the skateboarding and urban fashion crowd and Nike Football, who cater to sportspeople and fans as well as Umbro (who until very recently were a subsidiary of Nike), who operate an experimental concept, art and culture space in the centre of Manchester (Umbro, 2009).

Co-creation allows the transcendence of the traditional consumer/business relationship and the formation of a mutually beneficial existence that is truly embodied in a trend or movement. This is exemplified by popular fashion chain Urban Outfitters who, whilst operating as a multi-national chain, maintain strong cultural links with whichever location in which they sit through their policy of only hiring staff that hold interests and knowledge in local art, music and fashion subcultures. The brand subsequently allows a great deal of creative freedom to the staff that operate the store thus entrenching the brand in local culture with minimal effort or expense. This allows each local store alter its position with ease to suit new trends as it becomes a melting pot for popular culture.

The hyper-trends model also suggests the shortened lifespan of trends presents a challenge when products become so closely linked to a particular movement or subculture. When a trend falls foul of popular fashion it ceases to exist, as it no longer offers any cultural relevance, or becomes stigmatised, as it is associated with a particular 'type of person'. These factors can result in brands or products running the risk of being 'dumped' by their fans if they perceive a shift in values and integrity away from what they initially identified with. Examples include Burberry, heavily associated with 'chav' culture (Bothwell, 2005), Prada with football hooliganism (Hamilton, 2004), and Nokia's perceived lack of quality (Rushton, 2012). Involving consumers in the process of innovation enables designers to pre-empt and embrace changes in consumer attitudes, thus evolving with the trend.

Social media platforms offer a tremendous opportunity to interact with the consumer on a level never before experienced. The development of social media and online communities represents a huge shift in the traditional power-base from business to the consumer (Krostoski, 2011). It is now the consumers who dictate their own needs, offering self-initiated promotion of products they deem worthy through lateral diffusion (DeSanctis & Monge, 2006) and word of mouth, both digital and in person. Social media and online communities should be considered as a complex adaptive system (Miemis, 2009. Ramalingam, 2010), both highly fluid and susceptible to outside influence, with the users acting cohesively and in unison to accept or reject the messages they receive. Consumers, in particular the young consumers who represent the total of future business, are becoming more highly informed and as such extremely cynical of traditional 'pushy' methods, preferring to do things on their own initiative by seeking the information they desire, or being informed from trusted sources. As a result the traditional top-down NPD models are in danger of becoming archaic.

These developments offer an excellent platform to design managers for a complete reworking of the design process, if we return to the ideas of co-creation we can see that the NPD process can be conducted without boundaries in real time. The user is, on one hand the source of innovation and on the other, the evaluator of new products (Fain et. al 2010).

The role of a design manager in this sense is therefore to facilitate the involvement of consumers in the NPD and innovation process. Instead of attempting to access the consumer groups it is time to include them through

co-creation and participation. Only through these methods can design move from the adoption of current culture, whilst attempting to navigate the minefield of the hyper-trends phenomena, to the creation of current culture.

Conclusion

The research concludes that the advent of the social media age and its facilitation of the development of a new generation of young consumers who, through their interaction with ever widening social networks and their desire to express individualism through consumption, have eroded and merged the barriers between traditional subcultures. In turn, this behaviour has triggered an acceleration of trend cycles and an increased velocity of tipping in the context of the diffusion of innovations model. Subcultural and fashion trends disappear much more quickly, and have a far shorter shelf life, thus threatening the traditional innovation model as well as making the practices of design management different, whilst representing a shift in the balance of power away from business and into the hands of the consumer. Therefore, the paper suggests that instead of attempting to access the consumer groups it is time to include them through co-creation and participation.

Participatory design and co-creation have become an important aspect of NPD; and thus the function of design management has shifted from acquiring marketing intelligence to facilitating the involvement of consumers in the process of innovation and NPD.

It is recognised that the limited scope of the sample population may have limited the implications of the study; and the study attempts to generalise what is an extremely complex set of factors, influences and implications. However, presented herein is an exploration of an emerging topic. Much of the current research into the co-existence of young people and social media concerns the cultural dimensions of the relationship, such as the aforementioned safety, privacy and social issues. Very little current research considers how today's youth demographic will develop as consumers and what implications of this will be to innovation and design management practice.

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