PURCHASING THE CANADIAN TEENAGE IDENTITY: ICTS, AMERICAN MEDIA, AND BRAND-NAME CONSUMPTION

By STEPHEN GENNARO

Introduction

In 1973, anthropologist Clifford Geertz stated:

We live...in an 'information gap.' Between what our body tells us and what we have to know in order to function, there is a vacuum we must fill ourselves, and we fill it with information (or misinformation) provided by our culture.¹

Less than a decade later sociologist Raymond Williams wrote that the information provided by our culture (to borrow a term from Geertz) was “Advertising: The Magic System.” For Williams, advertising is not simply a means of selling but also “a true part of the culture of a confused society.”² Today, information and communication technologies (ICTs) along with the merger between the culture industries and big business have produced individuals with fragmented identities who are oversaturated with images, relationships, and information: in short, saturated selves.³ This dislocates the individual from conventional forms of identifying “who they are.” As such, the saturated self is a displaced individual who is also part of a larger Technological Diaspora, that is, those who search to redefine themselves in light of new ICTs and return to their homeland, their consumption-constructed nation, or the imagined community of youth.

The idea of an imagined community was first conceived in 1983, when Benedict Anderson, a former Professor of International Studies at Cornell University, published Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. In his work, Anderson chronicles how language formed nationalism and how nations were mere artificial constructs that bound people together — even when geographically disparate — through the idea of sharing similar cultural patterns (namely, language).⁴ The reconstruction of Anderson’s “imagined community” in the new millennium is produced by the culture industries of the media through the privileging of youth culture, which allows people from all geographic areas, age brackets, racial backgrounds, and economic conditions to share similar cultural patterns of consumption (or, at minimum, the desire for consumption) of products that make a person feel young. Whether listening to a popular radio station, skimming the pages of a fashion magazine, watching a television sitcom, or simply walking down a city street, the culture industries’ message is simple: (1) to be young is to be happy; (2) youth is “hip”; and, (3) the way to be young is to buy products that give you that youthful feeling.

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As youth search for acceptance during adolescence and continually look for a sense of identity and community, they rely (either consciously or unconsciously) on the culture industries for guidance. Young people find their identity in the mythical media creation of the imagined community of youth.\(^1\) The desire to be a citizen in the imagined community of youth, however, is not restricted to young people since the line between adulthood and adolescence has been blurred by the culture industries. As a consequence, the processes that have been attributed by psychologists to the stage of development in the individual's life referred to as adolescence are now life-long processes which leave that individual in a state of perpetual adolescence.\(^5\)

This article examines the emergence of perpetual adolescence as a growing concern in North American society. It looks at the ways in which American popular music, popular culture, and advertising influence and disturb the identity formation of teenagers by linking the rise of American big business and advertising over the last 150 years with developments in ICTs to illustrate how and why a distinctly youth focus arose in the media. While much has been written about young people and their relationship to the media, and, more recently, the phenomenon of childhood disappearing, no one has yet noted what is really happening is that the media is extending adolescence forever. Childhood has now replaced adulthood as individuals find themselves in a state of perpetual adolescence. Everyone enters childhood with their first purchase of a commodity, but now no one ever leaves it. Like the “Hotel California” in the 1970s Eagles pop music chart topper, “You can check in any time you want but you can never leave.” In this perpetual state of extended adolescence, there is no longer the “in-between period” separating infancy from adulthood; it is now the “in-between period” separating birth from death. Perpetual adolescence allows one to understand why fifty-year-old men buy Harley Davidsons and why thirteen-year-old girls wear thongs. It makes sense of the recent home renovation phenomenon and the brand-name craze of cultural commodities. In short, it helps one understand today’s postmodern-globalized society.

This article is also interested in the formation of a Canadian Teenage Identity, and how it is influenced consciously and unconsciously by American media and advertising. As a nation, Canada’s dependency on the United States for cultural artifacts, goods, services, and identities leaves the country in a precarious position. In many ways, the culture, cultural production, and the culture industries in Canada are merely local reproductions of larger American currents of thoughts, images, and actions. What then makes the Canadian Teenage Identity different from its American counterpart? Nothing. Previously, one might have argued Canadians have not become “American” because of their focus on issues of social justice, social welfare, and social responsibility. However, recent trends in Canadian society stemming from the country’s own period of adolescence, desire for definition, and push towards an active role in the global economy have placed Canada in a position where the difference between the two countries is disappearing rapidly.

In an era of global markets and the decline of the nation-state, the question arises, why study Canada as a nation and why discuss its search for national identity? Arguably one could say that Canada is no different than many countries that experience the push of American cultural industries. Two quick points need to be made here to explain why Canadian identity matters. First, even as the world is getting infinitely bigger (or smaller depending on one’s choice of metaphor) due to globalization and ICTs, the argument that the nation-state has been or is being replaced by international corporations only works on a political level. From a cultural standpoint, the nation-state, as a form of identifying one’s
self, shows no signs of decline. Whether using the American president or the golden arches as an example, American culture is always on display around the world. Microsoft, Starbucks, Nike, and Coca-Cola are all international corporations with no connection to the political governance of the United States, but it would be ludicrous to suggest that every time a person sees the logo or hears the jingle of these companies that America, and the ideals it promotes (freedom, democracy, liberty), are somehow not connected. The only thing globalization has done to change the role between nations and culture is perhaps to illuminate that the Nike swoosh and American flag are as connected to images of child labor, consumerism, and questionable foreign policy decisions (i.e., invading Iraq) as they are to rags to riches stories. Globalization has forced a re-examination of relationships between nations without dismissing the idea of nations, nationhood, or national identity. Second, it is precisely because the lines between nationhood and national identity have become blurred between Canada and the United States that Canada can be used as an example of an adolescent nation. While many nations have experienced a heavy influence from U.S. industries, no country has had to endure it like Canada. Canada is America’s most important trade partner to the tune of over $300 billion annually. The two countries share an economy, a border, a media, and except for healthcare, same-sex marriage, Cuban policy, tolerance of marijuana, and Iraq, they also share a culture.

This article also examines the North American Teenage Identity, in that American advertising, big business, and media are discussed, but whenever possible Canadian examples of media saturation are included. The North American Teenage Identity refers to young people who define themselves through the consumption of cultural commodities while at the same time including older North Americans who seek to be active citizens in the imagined community of youth by purchasing the same cultural commodities. When speaking of “purchasing of the Canadian Teenage Identity” it is as a player in these two North American phenomenons as well as referring to Canada as an adolescent nation in the global community.

The Imagined Community of Youth

Benedict Anderson asserts that the nation can be considered an imagined political community, and he linked this idea to the rise of, first, the printing press, and then, print as commodity, which allowed for ideas surrounding the nation to be circulated and exchanged. The availability of knowledge through print as commodity and the accompanying rise in literacy challenged (a) ideas surrounding divine monarchs and social hierarchies, (b) the notion of privileged access to truth in script language, and (c) the idea that history and cosmology were the same. The possibility of imagining the nation only arose once these three previously held “givens” in society had been undermined by the arrival of print as commodity.

In much the same way that the imagined nation arose out of the technological advancements in printing and the mass availability of print as commodity, so too did the possibility of imagining a community of youth arise from advancements in technology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Beginning with the railroad and telegraph, technological advancements fueled the rise of American big business. This led to advancements in mass-produced brand-name goods for consumption and an advertising business to sell them. The advertising business of the twentieth century would use additional technological advancements -from print as commodity to television- to segment the market-
place and create distinct consumers for distinct brand-name products. By the mid-twentieth century, the culture industries had produced a distinct youth culture, an "imagined community," through which all young people could find a common identity. As Anderson observes, "it is imagined because the members...will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." Brand-name recognition thus became the passport to an imagined community of youth.

New literacies are required to deal with advancements in ICTs. Anderson recognized this and believed that the key determinant in imagining a community was language. "As we have seen, it was precisely the sharing of language with the metro pole of a common language (and common religion and common culture) that has made the first national imaginings possible." In response to the new ICTs of the twentieth century, sociologists of education note that: "popular culture...helps children develop their own language, through which they are able to develop their own sense of identity and connection to the world...[it] has become a method of communication that enhances their idea of community." In response to advertisements, individuals shared the common language of purchasing and developed a consumption ethic that made the first imaging of a youth culture possible.

The Technological Diaspora

Technology has increased the number of relationships individuals engage in, the variety of those relationships, and the intensity at which they are engaged. When a person reaches the point of saturation, they become part of a larger group of unstable people, all suffering from the same ill effects of new technologies. According to social psychologist Kenneth Gergen

[n]ew technologies make it possible to sustain relationships — either directly or indirectly — with an ever-expanding range of other persons. Changes of this magnitude are seldom self-contained. They reverberate throughout culture, slowly accumulating until one day we are shocked to realize that we’ve been dislocated-and can’t recover what has been lost.

As a displaced peoples, dislocated from their conventional identification of the self by ICTs, North Americans in the new millennium are members of the Technological Diaspora. Unable to properly define who they are in the current ICT age, they struggle to return to their homeland. That homeland is the false nationhood of the imagined community of youth which is created by the culture industries to sell commodities.

Communications theorist and media critic Neil Postman correctly notes that: "American adults want to be parents of children less than they want to be children themselves." Adults, too, have been displaced from their homeland. Adults, too, are now more than ever a part of the Technological Diaspora, where those who are displaced yearn to return to the imagined community of youth which is created through the media’s privileging of youth culture. Every person in America lives within the marketplace. Each individual is a consumer and a purchaser of commodities. The American re-creation of the Athenian agora runs from coast to coast and some would even argue that it crosses the seas as an imperial force in foreign markets. The walls surrounding the marketplace are nonexistent as there is no real danger to the marketplace’s existence because everyone
lives and interacts within it. Every marketplace consumer in America is Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray, and the commodities of culture hide their secret portrait in the attic. Stay young, stay hip, stay cool are the messages of the cultural industries. Now, more than ever, Dorians everywhere are determined not to let anyone see their real portrait.

Could one imagine middle-aged men with ponytails and earrings in the 1950s? Today, young and old consumers buy Prada purses, Nike shoes, or Tommy Jeans because the culture industries make commodities to suit every price range. However, stop for a moment and examine a convertible car or a motorcycle, both advancements of technology that the media has associated with the youth market. As witnessed in the 1950s rock ‘n’ roll music, James Dean, early Marlon Brando movie characters, or the all-leathered Elvis in his 1968 comeback special, the biker and the rebel are young, indestructible, cool, and always drive a fast car. But who buys cars and motorcycles as commodities for consumption? Who purchases durable goods to signify their identity? Only those who can afford to, and that is why, with rare exception, the person driving the convertible is a balding, middle-aged man not a sixteen-year-old cheerleader, or why the person cruising on the Harley-Davidson is, with rare exception, not a part of a biker gang but a middle-class, corporate executive. The message is simple: Buy a Hummer...stay young.

Yes, North America today is a society of perpetual adolescents and nowhere is this more evident than in the emerging subculture of corporate chronicís. The drug culture has always been associated with youth culture. Often, popular memory originates this relationship between youth and drugs to the 1960s hippie culture. However, President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s spoke of “reefer madness” as a problem with youth and incorporated educational and vocational training into his New Deal programs in an effort to occupy youth with more productive activities than taking drugs. Furthermore, as social ecologist Mike Males notes, statistics indicate that drug use is not higher among young people. Yes, just as “some teenagers try to master the tasks of adolescence through escape-for instance through drug use or alcohol abuse,” many adults partake in this same exercise. This can explain why so many corporate chronicís, that is, young professionals, work from 9-5 and then smoke dope and play PlayStaion throughout the remainder of the day. It is no coincidence that the main demographic of video game consumers is the mid-twenties single male. Indeed, over eighty percent of the video game consoles purchased in North America in 2004 were bought by consumers over the age of eighteen. The average age of video game players was twenty-nine, and almost seventy percent of the market was male consumers. The corporate chronicís represent the same market value to the culture industries that teenagers in the 1950s did with rock ‘n’ roll in that they are willing to spend money to consume because they have disposable income and leisure time. The rigor of trying to cope with assimilation into society have led corporate chronicís, as dislocated individuals, to search for an escape. The result is the rise of a multi-billion dollar video game industry.

The Saturated Self

Kenneth Gergen’s thesis on the “saturated self” is perhaps one of the best ways to understand how the need for an imagined community of youth, a Technological Diaspora, and perpetual adolescence have arisen in today’s society. Gergen claims that the rapid development of new ICTs over the last century “immerses us ever more deeply in the social world, and exposes us more and more to the opinions, values, and lifestyles of others.” Gergen calls this process social saturation. “[A]s social saturation proceeds we
become pastiches, imitative assemblages of each other. In memory we carry others’ patterns of being with us.” In short, new ICTs (the telephone, television, and Internet) allow an individual to interact with more people, cultures, events, and places than ever before. According to psychologists, this poses a problem for adolescent development and identity formation since, “[o]ne expression of a successful mastery of adolescent issues is the formation of a viable and coherent sense of personal identity.”

In today’s society, the result of oversaturation is perhaps best described as the Hallmark syndrome, where an individual possesses preprogrammed social responses to the actions of others. Individuals know when to act happy or when to react sad. They know that they respond to death with grief and to a promotion at work with celebration. Advertisers and the media have taught us to buy a Hallmark card for every occasion lest we forget how to respond to every possible scenario. What began as oversaturation has resulted, arguably, in a loss of free will. Moreover, for psychologists, “[i]deity is the bridge between the self and his [or her] society. A coherent and viable identity allows the individual to realize drives and longings in societally [sic] approved ways, while giving the individual a sense of meaningfulness and self-continuity.”

What problem does this pose for individuals—both young and old—when the societally approved ways in which they deal with their drives are simply pastiches of media and social imagery?

Gergen’s ideas are perhaps most useful in describing the fragmenting of identity through a process which he terms “multiphrenia,” or “the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments.” In today’s society, this fragmentated and multiphrenic condition is encouraged upon our youth by dumping phrases like “extra-curricular” into their minds. Witness the large number of Canadian youth who work part-time or volunteer while attending school. According to Statistics Canada, in 2001, forty-four percent of all teenagers ages fifteen to nineteen had jobs, and in 2000, thirty-seven percent of the total youth population volunteered time to a charity or non-profit organization. Young people are told that universities do not simply look at their marks but at their “extra-curricular” activities as well, that employers look for well-rounded individuals, and that success is based on being multi-skilled and capable of multi-tasking.

As a result of society’s push for young people to become multi-skilled “multi-taskers,” adolescents define themselves by identity fragmentations. They are no longer simply: son, brother, student. Now they are: son, brother, student, cashier, volunteer, football player, swim team member, debater, chess enthusiast, Microsoft proficient, HTML knowledgeable, recreational softball player, group member, team player, television watcher, and commodity purchaser. A résumé is nothing more than an expression of multiphrenia, with the most impressive résumés coming from, and the best jobs going to, those who can best fragment their “selves.” We thus find ourselves in a society that values, privileges, and rewards fragmented identity.

This scenario is forced upon older people as well: “diversify your portfolio” is no longer a term that refers only to playing the stock market or economic interests. In today’s world, individuals are encouraged to “diversify their identity” by managing their identity as a broker would manage a portfolio. Here adulthood parallels adolescence in that “[a]dolescence is a time of trying out new roles, discarding old roles, and establishing a sense of coherence.” Thus, the multiphrenic condition of identity formation in the ICT age is just one way in which the adult acts like an adolescent.

One result of the multiphrenic condition is that an individual now requires “continual learning.” Continual learning is often a response to advancements in ICTs, a “re-skilling” to offset the “de-skilling” effects of technology. Of course the deskilling effects of tech-
technology is hardly a new subject; Marx himself spoke to the effects of technology in displacing the individual from their normal way of living.

In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing the way of earning their living, they change all the social relations. The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist.33

If Marx were alive today, he might add that the Internet gives one a global society with multi-nationals, or the television studio gives one a society with perpetual adolescents.

A recent example of the de-skilling effects of technology has been the change in the role of secretaries or executive assistants, who now require advanced computer skills in Microsoft Office in addition to the ability to type, or “take a letter” short hand. Or, what about the recent rage of Research In Motion’s cellular phone/web browser technology “the blackberry,” which in addition to being an electronic day-timer (or PDA) allows an individual to receive phone calls or e-mails anywhere at anytime, virtually eliminating any need for a secretary or executive assistant. Marxist economist/sociologist Harry Braverman spoke to the changes in labor patterns when discussing how mechanization changed the work force in the first half of the twentieth century. For Braverman, an increase in workplace technology and mechanization produced a need for skilled labor to perform those same tasks. Instead of requiring the skill to work a lathe, a company could now hire someone to push a button or supervise a machine performing the same task. Workers required a re-skilling, but one which was not empowering to the worker in that it only trained the worker in how to assist the machine as a passive supervisor rather than as an active worker.34 In North America in the twenty-first century, being a productive citizen, consumer, or employee requires an education on how to speak the digital language and the culture industries teach the lingo. The goal is to increase the amount of people need to know by oversaturating them with images and information.

Since most people no longer spend their entire working lives with the same company, being employable requires that individuals continually develop new skills through education and re-education.

More and more, workers and businesses are finding themselves displaced by technology. Their salvation lies in ongoing education so that their skills remain relevant to the current environment of rapidly changing technology and skill requirements especially due to computers.35

Learning becomes a life-long practice; it is no longer an activity confined to school. Learning the new literacies of the new technology becomes the ticket to better opportunities, both socially and economically, in the new millennium. Or, as sociologist Karen Sternheimer notes: “Critical media literacy skills are a contemporary necessity for living in our media saturated culture.”36 A focus on learning and developing tools through education, with which to use to create a “self” and integrate into society is just one more way in which adult and adolescent lives are now one in the same.

Less than two centuries ago, few people had any formal education. During the course of the twentieth century in North America public education was extended to the entire public,
but only while they were young. Eventually, that was not enough education, and society required individuals to get a high school diploma. As Braverman describes in the last chapter of *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, individuals with high school diplomas got better jobs and thus it became a social requirement, a rite of passage.\(^7\) But that book was written in 1974, and it was only a matter of time before the high school diploma was not enough education and society required that individuals get a university degree. Again, individuals were led to believe that the university degree was a guarantor of a better standard of living. Yet in 2005, getting an education now means getting a second degree, an MBA, a law degree, a Master's degree, or even attending a college program for a trade skill after finishing university. While Braverman suggested that the trend for extending the mandatory school age (that is how long society made its youth go to school) emerged out of World War II as a way to keep unemployment down by keeping a large portion of the population busy, it has had an even more staggering effect. Raising the age at which people finish school has now created a scenario in the new millennium where continual learning is required and therefore no amount of education is ever enough to properly prepare an individual for a life in the workforce. It is never a good enough time to graduate; education has made everyone unemployable. The only type of education necessary today is how to be a consumer and lessons regarding how to make purchases are taught at a very early age.

As such, the processes attributed by psychologists to the stage of development in the individual’s life referred to as adolescence—a desire for increased intimacy, emotional trial and turbulence, separation from parents and authority, and the formation of a positive self-identity—are now life-long processes. Furthermore, what had previously been seen as the symbols of the completion of adolescence—the ability to maintain a healthy, mature relationship with a member of the opposite sex, the ability to control sexual and violent urges, the ability to rationally distinguish between fact and fiction, and the ability to balance out the competing “selves” of an individual’s identity—are now life-long struggles.

**The American Agora**

Central to any discussion of perpetual adolescence is an understanding of the role of American big business and advertising in its creation. By connecting the rise of American big business to advertising in the second half of the nineteenth century and highlighting the importance of the establishment of brand-name products in the early to mid-1900s, the rise of rock ’n’ roll music at mid-century, and the emergence of media convergence at the end of the millennium, one can see how the culture industries created the *imagined community of youth*.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, technological development in America had made mass production of consumer goods possible. The newly mass-produced goods needed consumers and advertising emerged as the bridge between mass-produced goods and mass purchasing. Business historian Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., described the period before railways as a time of local markets and the general store that provided a small selection of goods; there were no branded, packaged goods.\(^8\) The transition from many small- or medium-sized companies to big businesses was made possible by the technological advancements of the railroad, telegraph, and radio, as well as changes in systems, such as the emergence of middle management and advertising. The goal of advertisers in the last half of the nineteenth century was to establish markets for goods by turning geographically separated cities into one unified marketplace.
Advertisers in the early twentieth century tried to carve out a market share of this unified marketplace by tailoring products and advertisements to consumers on the basis of gender, class, race, age, and other categories, such as the marketing of household appliances to housewives on the basis that they would “make their lives easier.” To distinguish and differentiate their product in the marketplace, companies began to aim for brand-name recognition. In fact, “brands that ranked first in their product lines in the 1920s and were still number one in their product lines at the end of the [twentieth] century included Ivory soap, Wrigley’s chewing gum, Coca-Cola soft drinks, Kodak cameras and film, Goodyear tires, Gillette razors, Campbell’s soup, Nabisco crackers, and Del Monte canned fruit.” The longevity of popularity enjoyed by some of the early twentieth century’s brand names gives further credence to the marketing ideas of the companies at this time, that brand-name packaging of items for individual purchase would drive commodities from the marketplace, in that, “once a brand gains a strong foothold, an unbranded product cannot compete as long as the branded item is maintained at high quality and reasonable cost.” As brands pushed commodities out of the marketplace, the brand names themselves, and later culture, became the commodities for sale.

As brand-name products emerged, brand-name recognition became the focus of advertising. The goal of brand-name advertising was not to create a direct link between the product and the consumer but to create a relationship of comfort between the consumer and the brand name. “That’s why most of us would feel more comfortable brushing our teeth with Crest toothpaste than a generic tube. We think we know something about Crest based on experience and advertising.” Brand-name awareness reaches its pinnacle once consumers can no longer separate a brand name from the product itself: witness Kleenex tissues or Scotch tape. Here the brand-name relation has become so ingrained in the consumers’ psyche that they refer to the product itself by the brand name of a company.

With the rise of branding, the focus of advertising was no longer on short-term sales but rather long-term customer loyalty. This change in industry mimics the words of Frankfurt School Social and Cultural Theorist Theodor Adorno:

> Ultimately, the culture industry no longer even needs to directly pursue everywhere the profit interests from which it originated. These interests have become objectified in its ideology and have even made themselves independent of the compulsion to sell the cultural commodities which must be swallowed anyways.\(^{52}\)

Imagine the surprise and delight of the advertising and big business world when it realized that they did not have to make commercials that even remotely spoke to their product anymore because brand-name recognition proved a better sales pitch than forced selling. The movement of the advertisers from a focus on immediate sales to a focus on brand-name recognition again falls in line with Adorno’s ideas concerning mass culture:

> All mass culture is fundamentally adaptation. However, this adaptive character, the monopolistic filter which protects it from any external rays of influence which have not already been safely accommodated with it reified schema, represents an adjustment to the consumers as well. The pre-digested quality of the product prevails, justifies itself and establishes itself all the more firmly so far as it constantly refers to those who cannot digest anything not already pre-digested. It is baby food.\(^{53}\)
Ah, the sweet taste of pabulum for the masses!

One of the areas of academic writing that Adorno is best known for is his work on the sociology of popular music. Here, too, Adorno believed that the culture industries were turning what were previously areas of artistic expression into nothing more than avenues for consumption. Popular music in the twentieth century, especially rock 'n' roll, has always been a site for identity formation, commodity consumption, and youthful expression. With the emergence of rock 'n' roll, advertisers were able to successfully target a specific demographic (youth) and create a brand-name relationship between young people and a brand of rock 'n' roll. Regardless of what adults had to say about rock 'n' roll, the music industry only cared about record sales. The newly segmented youth market became a mainstay in the American economic marketplace as seen in the rise of the annual gross revenue of the U.S. recording industry from $109 million in 1945 to $603 million by 1959, an increase of almost 600% over fifteen years, thanks in large part to Elvis-mania and American Bandstand.\(^4\) Rock 'n' roll's emergence in society following World War II was a case of "the right place at the right time" if ever there was one.\(^4\) Yet, rock 'n' roll's survival was based on the rapid emergence of excessive advertising to and a positive response from a distinct teenaged market.

Elvis Presley's early success was, in many ways, the result of the industry's commodification of Elvis and direct marketing to a distinct youth market. As such, the resulting youth market and rock 'n' roll music industry, which have been co-dependent ever since, owe much of their "rise to power" to their success in marketing Elvis. From the moment Elvis Presley's music was first heard on American radio (July 7, 1954),\(^5\) Elvis was targeted to and welcomed by youth (mainly young girls), and became a symbol of sexual rebellion. However, the early strategy of "selling Elvis" was different from anything prior in the music industry. The strategy behind Elvis' marketing employed by his manager, Colonel Tom Parker, was described by one of the Colonel's employees as follows:

The Colonel doesn't sell Elvis to the public, dig? He sells Elvis to the people who sell to the public, and those are the media people- the television and motion picture personalities, the executives, and businessmen who control the networks, the important radio people. It is an endless trip for the Colonel. Elvis, as a product, always in the state of being sold.\(^6\)

Elvis, not his music, was the commodity. The music was simply one of many venues through which "Elvis" the product was sold to the public.

Elvis's stature in the American youth market in the early years grew not simply through radio play and record sales (like most major artists at this time) but through a combination of radio play, record sales, television appearances (especially those on The Ed Sullivan Show), movies, and brand-name products, including socks, sweaters, lipstick, pencils, sodas, and pajamas. Elvis' brand products were being produced by all the culture industries and purchased in record numbers. "All told, the fan could buy seventy-eight different Elvis Presley products that grossed about $55 million by December 1957."\(^5\) Elvis thus became the first brand-name cultural commodity and the first example of media convergence.

*American Bandstand* continued the industry trend of the commodification of culture that had erupted with Elvis. On August 5, 1957, *American Bandstand* first appeared on American television to more than eight million viewers.\(^9\) The show relied on financing secured through an advertising contract with Beechnut Spearmint Gum, which was intent
on targeting the potential teenage audience. In the words of host Dick Clark, “teenagers have nine billion dollars a year to spend” and hence the show was focused, like its sponsors, on tapping into this new resource.\footnote{50}

The response to American Bandstand was overwhelming; it swept across American teenagers like an epidemic. American Bandstand received 45,000 letters a week, grossed $500,000 a year, and generated higher television ratings than the telecasts of its two major network competitors combined. It not only informed teenagers as to what songs, singers, and albums were cool but also initiated all the latest dance crazes, from the Twist to the Mash Potato.\footnote{51} Teenagers used this knowledge to purchase the newest records and learn the latest dances thereby asserting their distinct identity. “In the absence of major rock stars, and working within the new medium of television, the far sighted Clark had created a rock n’ roll that emphasized the audience as much as the music.”\footnote{52} The music industry had followed the trend of advertising in the twentieth century, which shifted from product-centered ads to consumer-centered ads. In the same way, Dick Clark and American Bandstand, looking to segment the music market and generate sales with a new youth market, advertised not product-centered music but an audience-centered music instead.

The privileging of youth culture and its connection to rock ‘n’ roll can best be summarized as created by advertising and validated by purchasing. In other words, the privileging of youth culture arose in the 1950s as advertisers looked to tap into a vast resource of money that resided with a growing youth population. As a segment of society, youth became validated as more than simply a subculture through consumption and purchasing as perhaps best evident by the survival of rock ‘n’ roll. Despite widespread adult disdain for the new music, it survived because of youth purchases of rock ‘n’ roll records.

Rock ‘n’ roll music offers an excellent introduction into the phenomenon of convergence and synergy. By discussing Elvis as the first example of media convergence, it has been suggested that Elvis used his television appearances to sell his music, his music to sell his movies, and his movies to sell brand-name products. Convergence describes how media corporations purchase stakes in multiple medias, while synergy describes how once they own multiple medias, corporations use one product to sell another. Much like Elvis or American Bandstand, the media conglomerates of the second half of the twentieth century also work using convergence and synergy. For example, while watching a television show on one particular cable channel, viewers are being sold products owned by other companies within that cable channel’s “im-media-te” family.\footnote{53}

At the turn of the millennium, the bulk of power of the culture industries lay in the hands of five multi-national media companies: Disney, News Corp, Viacom, Vivendi Universal, and AOL-Time Warner. In 2000, AOL-Time Warner, for example, owned magazines like Time, People, Sports Illustrated, cable stations like CNN and HBO, Warner Brothers Studio (film), Atlantic and Elektra music labels, Warner Brooks, AOL (Internet), three professional sports franchises (NBA, NHL, and MLB), and much more.\footnote{54} One does not have to be a conspiracy theorist to see the magnitude of convergence that controls the media. Under these circumstances, it’s often difficult to know where journalism leaves off and self-promotion begins.\footnote{55} The magnitude of convergence in North American society is best illustrated by the amount of television young people watch. A study performed by the Canadian government in 1996 discovered that by the age twelve the average child had watched over 12,000 hours of television, double the time they had spent in school by that age.\footnote{56}

A recent study in The Toronto Star shows the extent to which adults are also influenced by television. The article looks at several issues, most notably the rise in home improve-
ment reality shows, from Trading Spaces to Debbie Travis’ Facelift. According to the article, Canadian homeowners, in 2002, spent $23.4 billion on repairs and renovations, eleven percent more than in 2001 and nearly seventy-five percent more than in 1996.” The drastic rise in home renovations over the last decade highlights both the extent to which the television shows influenced the desire of its viewers to renovate and the extent to which adults look to television and media for ideas and identity. “Children’s play with particular toys or knowing about the latest fad is a way of creating a shared culture. Adults use consumption in the same way, of course, buying cars, gadgets, and clothes that indicate we are members of various groups.” Little kids, little purchases; big kids, big purchases.

It would be naïve to suggest that television and advertising have created passive consumers, uneducated, uninfluenced by outside sources, and apathetic to anything other than shopping. Family and friends play a pivotal role in informing young people about integrating into society. It is not only the media but family and peer groups that are influencing young peoples’ purchasing patterns and identity formation. As young people look to break their familial ties during adolescence, peers replace parents as the dominant source of information on how to manage one’s own identity. “Teenagers reach out to and are heavily focused upon others in their age group. As a result, much of their self-formation occurs in the context of relationships with other teenagers. They imitate and learn from one another.” Children identify themselves within their peer community through purchasing patterns. “Consumption is a social act; buying may be an individual activity, but the types of purchases we make can create a sense of shared identity.” The shared identity through purchasing is not an isolated phenomenon solely experienced by youth. Brand-name recognition is the pabulum of the electronic age, feeding the culture of perpetual adolescents as if they were perpetual infants. Adorno elaborates on this point when he states, “[i]t is no coincidence that cynical American film producers are heard to say that their pictures must take into consideration the level of eleven year olds. In doing so they would very much like to make adults into eleven year olds.”

What exists today then is a fragmented marketplace which focuses primarily on selling images and identities of “youth” to both young and old people alike. Although the advertising company benefits from the fragmented marketplace it always dreams of a unified, universal market, where all consumer demographics can be reached simultaneously. The ideal target audience of advertisers and big business is youth sensibilities with an adult wallet, the perpetual adolescent.

The rise of the saturated self parallels the development of segmented markets in advertising. Both developments stem from new ICTs of the twentieth century and can tell North Americans a lot about the society they currently live in. The Technological Diaspora — when aligned with the rise of American big business, advertising, television, and news media over the last 150 years together with the perseverance and dominance of an American capitalist market on both the national and international economic level — has produced a society that defines itself through its fetishization of character, purchases of commodities, and interactions with media interfaces.

**Canada as Adolescent?**

Nowhere are the ideas of the saturated self, the Technological Diaspora, and the perpetual adolescent more applicable today than in Canada. In much the same way that an adolescent looks for separation from its parents and acceptance from its peers, Canada
appeared to be in a similar position throughout the twentieth century as it tried to define itself through separation from mother Britain and approbation from the United States. Canada can be viewed as an adolescent country since it experiences the same anxieties, stresses, changes, and quest for identity as adolescents.

Much like adolescents, Canada has always struggled with its in-between identity: Not quite British dependent but not quite independent; not quite American yet not distinctly Canadian. Provincially, Quebec is not wholly French, but certainly not English. Globally, Canada is an “in-between” nation as well; not a powerful country in world politics, but still a “first world” country. Every year the United Nations ranks Canada one of the best places to live in the world and yet Canadians flock at the opportunity to move south of the 49th parallel. Lastly, Canada was a good enough friend to house all of the displaced Americans and those traveling on flights to and from the United States on September 11, 2001 and the days that followed but it was not a good enough friend to warrant any mention from President George W. Bush as he thanked America’s allies for their support four months later in his State of the Union address. Being “in-between” in so many different ways, Canada itself appears to house a multiphrenic identity.

This final section examines a case study, albeit a reified one, by applying the concept of what psychologists refer to as role change, to ask the question, does Canada represent a country in a state of perpetual adolescence on the global scale? Role change contains three stages: (1) role conflict, (2) role discontinuity, and (3) role incongruence. The continual struggle of Canadian governments, academics, and artists with their “many Canadian selves” in an endless search for a Canadian identity would suggest that this is the case.

Role change refers to the nature of adolescence as an “in-between period,” but also speaks to the way in which an adolescent tries to make sense of the many competing “selves” and the sexual and violent tendencies they are experiencing. Often, adolescents make sense of these changes either through imitation or role playing. This usually involves the examples put forth at home by their parents or in society, either through mass media icons or societal role models of teachers and educators. For Canada, the adolescent country, the example comes from its neighbor, the United States. It is not that Canada lacks a popular culture, rather it is that Canadians do not want Canadian popular cultural artifacts. It is not that Canadians do not have access to a Canadian identity, it is that they do not want one; they would rather purchase the American identity.

One component of adolescent role change is what psychologists characterize as role conflict. As discussed earlier, the saturated self takes on many roles, such as son, brother, boyfriend, and student. An unavoidable series of circumstances that all adolescents encounter is when two or more of these roles come into conflict with one another. For the adolescent individual, this usually involves a struggle between the competing interests of familial duty and peer pressure. For the adolescent country, the ongoing struggle sees Canada attempting to protect its own interests while trying to satisfy those of its American neighbors. As historian J.L. Granatstein notes, “Canadians...have been obliged to wrestle with their vastly richer and more powerful neighbor, so much so that they have come to define themselves not as they were and are, but in contradistinction from that great and grasping neighbor.” On a national level, Canadians struggle with role conflict, between neighbor and sovereign country and not only in an economic sense.

Another component of role change is discontinuity. This refers to a lack of order in the transition from one role to the next. With regard to perpetual adolescence, this is exactly
the difficulty in identity formation being discussed. For the adolescent individual, this transition could refer to the recent graduate who learns that a university degree does not guarantee him/her a job in the marketplace. Adolescent country discontinuity can be seen through the vast amount of money spent to maintain Canadian television programming even though it is more cost effective to carry simulcast American sitcoms, which generate higher ratings. “The top 20 programs in the Toronto market (audience share) in the spring 1998 were all big ticket American shows...and at least 2/3 of all shows watched by English Canadians are American.” This begs the question, in what way is the Canadian Teenage Identity shaped by media, if most of its media influences are American?

The third component of role change is incongruence. Here the adolescent is placed in a position that he/she is not properly suited for or is placed in a position that he/she would not have chosen for him/herself. For the adolescent individual, an example of incongruence would be when parents place unrealistic expectations on their children. For the adolescent country, incongruence can be seen through Canadian dependency on American cultural goods. Canadians are trained to be consumers and citizens through American media, but they are asked to be consumers with Canadian currency. The only remaining debate then is do Canadians choose to be the cultural dependent to the United States or are they simply passive consumers of American media messages and cultural imperialism?

As Canadians enter the new millennium and an era of technological advancement, globalization, and American corporate imperialism, understanding its relationship to these larger issues might help to explain Canada’s identity confusion. On the one hand, Canada appears open to lighter marijuana laws, same-sex marriage, free health care, and non-participation in the war in Iraq, but at the same time Canadians insist on shopping at the Gap or Walmart, buying coffee from Starbucks, watching American television, listening to American music, drinking Coca-Cola, eating at McDonald’s, and wearing Nike sneakers. Being a Canadian and being a teenager thus have a lot in common. This begs the question: Is Canada, as a nation, lost in an abyss of perpetual adolescence in the same way that its citizens are?

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined how the connection between American big business and advertising, together with the development of ICTs, led to a distinct youth focus in the media. American big business and advertisers, looking to sell products, offered an imagined community to the technologically displaced people in society, which allowed for the creation of identity through consumption. Focusing on the youth market and creating a mystique around youth culture has produced a lifelong period of adolescence. Advertisers want an adolescent mind with an adult pocketbook. As a consequence, the media has extended adolescence by creating children who want to be adults and vice versa. This is the cycle of perpetual adolescence.

While this paper has focused on perpetual adolescence as a North American phenomenon, it is not exclusively American or Canadian. Globalization has forced a re-examination of the relationships between nations, and suggests that not only goods and services, but culture as well can be bought, sold, traded, stolen, and co-opted in the international marketplace. Canada is no different from many countries experiencing the push of American cultural industries. In light of this, Canada serves as an excellent case study in the rise of perpetual adolescence outside of the United States. If current patterns of
“Disneyfication” or “McDonaldization” are any indication of what can be expected from the shrinking of the global community and the enlarging of global markets, then perpetual adolescence will not be an isolated phenomenon restricted to the geographical borders of North America but rather an epidemic in which the consumption of a fabricated youth culture will become the dominant way in which people everywhere identify themselves.

ENDNOTES


6 The terms “imagined community of youth,” “Technical Diaspora,” and “perpetual adolescence” are the author’s own terms. This paper looks at the “in-between period” sometimes called adolescence, childhood, the teenage years, or youth, and traditionally referring to age brackets beginning anywhere as young as seven and ending anywhere as old as twenty-four. In all cases, this period functions as the time when young people became socialized to their surroundings through interactions with the institutions of education and media. Using their interactions with media and education, young people develop new literacies to technologies with which to participate in the new adult world, and a new identity (a construction of self) with which to portray oneself to the new adult world.

7 The Eagles, “Hotel California,” Hotel California (Electra/Asylum 1976).


9 The history of the construct of “the nation” and the process by which communities are established across geographic, socio-economic, and cultural spaces serves as the focus of Anderson's study. The idea that imagined communities can also refer to any socially created category (i.e., gender, race, generations) and not simply the nation is raised by Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin who suggest that 1960s television had a similar effect in the creation of imagined communities that Anderson postulates the printing press did some


11 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 7.

12 For more information on technology as language or system, see Robert K. Logan, The Sixth Language: Learning a Living in the Internet Age (Toronto: Stoddart, 2000); Ursala Franklin, The Real World of Technology (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1990).

13 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 197.


15 The citizens of the imagined community of youth are not gender, class, or race specific. Although some have greater access to the technologies, and some are more likely than others to be discriminated against and prevented from gaining access, it is inconceivable to come across any individual in North America who is not in contact with the effects of “the system,” otherwise known as advertising. As Anderson states, when discussing the imagined community of the nation, “it is an imagined community because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal, comradeship.” Anderson, Imagined Communities, 7.

16 Gergen, The Saturated Self, 3 [emphasis added].


18 “Corporate Chronic” is the author’s own term.


20 Mike Males, in “Doped Duplicity,” and “Two-Fisted Double Standards,” in Ibid., 160-83 and 184-217, respectively, suggests that the percentages of adult and teenage drinking and drug use are almost identical even though the media presents these issues in a critical and heavily unbalanced manner against the youth. According to Males, the real issue with rising drug and alcohol use is not determined by age but rather by socio-economic standing, namely, poverty.


23 Ibid. In 2004, the estimated worldwide revenue of the video game industry was $24.5 billion.


25 Ibid., 71.


27 Ibid.
Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 74. Certainly there is a play on words here with schizophrenia.


The push for extra-curricular activities in university selection is not a Canadian phenomenon. A simple review of any North American university application package highlights how in addition to SAT scores, applicants are asked to write a letter of intention, list their work experience, volunteer experience, and other relevant information.

The idea of adults managing an identity portfolio came about in discussions with Steven Bailey, Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Humanities at York University, during the fall of 2003, while he acted as supervisor of the author’s Master’s Thesis.


The more science is incorporated into the labor process, the less the worker understands of the process; the more sophisticated an intellectual product the machine becomes, the less control and comprehension of the machine the worker has. In other words, the more the worker needs to know in order to remain a human being at work, the less does he or she know.” Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 425.

Logan, *The Sixth Language*, 203 [emphasis mine].


Ibid., 54.

Sternheimer, *It’s Not the Media*, 152.


Many factors have been attributed to the rise of rock ’n’ roll including: black and white soldiers fighting together overseas; the availability of low-cost radio stations as major media companies moved to television; the rise of the independent music label; the ASCAP and BMI scuffle; the rise of the disc jockey; the transistor radio; the car radio; the rise of the standard of living in middle class families (and thus teenage income and leisure time); the mass migration of African Americans to the north after World War II; the Civil Rights movement; and, the development of amplifiers and electric guitars. Each of these

46 Szatmary, Rockin' in Time, 43.

47 Jon Hartmann, an employee of Colonel Parker, quoted in Ibid., 44.

48 Ibid., 47.

49 Ibid., 55.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 This is a play on words between convergence and immediate family.


55 Ibid.


57 “Surfing the new you: TV shows sell the idea that we can transform ourselves. Why are so many people buying?” Toronto Star, January 10, 2004, L1, L4.

58 Sternheimer, It's Not the Media, 164.


60 Sternheimer, It's Not the Media, 164.


63 Taras, “Swimming Against the Current,” 199.