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# Teenagers And Brand Engagement In Emerging Markets

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## Abstract

This paper shows how research techniques were applied in an online environment to elicit deeper learning about brand and media engagement among teenagers. The paper focuses specifically on teens in China, Brazil, Mexico, and Russia (with some comparisons to UK teenagers), and demonstrates how market researchers empower companies to shape future strategies for innovation and growth by:

- Helping marketers understand the role of brand and the unwritten rules of brand engagement in those emerging markets which are of growing importance.
- Identifying the specific trends in young consumers' behaviors that predict societal changes in brand consumption.

The approach presented provides a new application to the study of brand engagement and trend research in a multi-country framework.

## Background

Looking into the future has always been what human beings like to do, whether they be ordinary citizens, business professionals, or government. Prognosticating the future may be an innate desire, certainly cultivated over time as we grow up. How many of us can truly admit not having tried to imagine and predict what it would be like to become our chosen hero of the moment, be that our teacher, a movie star, a fireman, a singer, a writer, and so on? When we think back to our childhood, which sometimes requires a lot of work (removing all the shields we have built over the years), we remember how we used to imagine ourselves “all grown up” and perhaps living a “successful life”, having

autonomy, freedom to choose, and most of all, making life our own via the mere power of choice, effort, and an applied mind. Yet, whatever our ambitions, whatever our aspirations, even then we were masters of anticipation, prediction, and intuitive “forecasting”. This natural aptitude, or instinct, was cultivated over time, during play, school, and work, until the moment when it became such an ingrained habit that we started seeking relief from it, by reading books on “detachment”, letting go of expectations, meditating, focusing on the present, and using a myriad of other techniques.

There is often disparity between what we imagine will happen and what does. This disparity haunts our personal lives, but no less our professional plans and lives as well. As adults, our minds always gallop ahead of our present, imagining, anticipating, and foretelling. Yet, despite our best attempts to be ‘forward looking’, which one of us can honestly say that we anticipated the impact of the Internet on our lives? Or the impact of the iPod (and, most importantly, iTunes)? And who can really tell the full impact of “consumer generated media” (CGM)?

The failure of prediction reaches far beyond the consumer, affecting business as well, despite the reams of business books, technical and trade journals, and of course the ever-present and ‘omniscient’ business newsletter. The success of some of today’s most celebrated companies is often best explained after its attainment, told in stories that seem almost to be manufactured to ‘fit the facts’. If truth be told, the leaders of these companies all too often admit that they did not fully grasp or anticipate where they were going, though they had a strong desire and a broad vision. Certainly, no one would be shocked by the “revelation” that reality is different from our imagination and anticipation. No one is shocked because this surprise about ‘how things turn

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out' is part of the human experience which we all share.

**S**o how do we get to teenagers and brand engagement? As researchers our mind is now acutely sensitive to the benefits of the scientific method and procedures, following the facts, and not extrapolating too far from them. In fact, often this adherence to fact as the guiding light is considered a key difference between "us" and our nemesis, the "management consultants". Management consultants are often portrayed as having a strong tendency to extrapolate to the extreme, using only those convenient pieces of data which fit their theory, whereas we, as scientists describe, not re-invent, reality. Yet, can we use the tools and techniques available to us in order to help imagine the marketing world of the future? Actually, maybe we don't even have to go that far, for that future is staring us in the face today. We just have to look to see it, the future, today.

So who did we look at in order to see the future most clearly? What magic lantern did we use? Our future isn't locked up in a crystal ball somewhere inaccessible, in a land of dreams. Our future runs among us. They're the teens, today's change agents. We're talking about teenagers who grew up with the PC, the Internet, the mp3 player, and many other high tech devices. We're talking about the teens who don't know, and perhaps can't even imagine, what it is like to search for information or study without Google and Yahoo. Our teens are far more comfortable with technology than most of us are, or even profess to be. These teen consumers are our easy-to-open window into a future where marketing, advertising, and media promotions will be more like a two-way dialogue, rather than a not-particularly-desired one-way message. In a few years from now, these teenagers will be the vocal majority. They will inevitably become the mainstream consumers of tomorrow, the future car buyers, home buyers, seekers and users of laundry detergents, and, of course, the proponents of anti-aging creams. By looking at the world of marketing and branding and media messages through the eyes of these teenagers, we can begin to imagine today what will move these consumers, what will gain their allegiance, what will capture their attention even for a moment, and maybe at times even their fancy.

But where can we best observe change, than in those

places where change gallops, the emerging economies of China, Russia, Brazil, and Mexico? Certainly, teenagers in these emerging economies have neither language nor tradition in common. Rather, teens in these countries seem to know that they are at the crest of change. Change is always fraught with errors, with creation, destruction, and re-creation, and therefore is very frightening for those of us who feel they have a grasp on the spectrum of good and bad that change inevitably brings. But, as teenagers, would we be so anxious? Or would we just be anxious to join in, to play our part, to say "here I am, I am part of this". Therefore, the choice was clear: we needed to observe teenagers in emerging countries, to learn as much as we could about what the future (i.e., the next few years) may bring, to help our clients adapt and re-invent their strategies in preparation for the new world which some have already dubbed "The Age of Engagement".

At this point it's necessary to explain what we mean by "emerging markets". Many definitions of emerging markets exist, and are often quite vague. For the purpose of this research we refer to Pearson's definition as: "Emerging markets...include those which have reached a minimum level of GDP and are in the growth phase of the development cycle but whose economies are particularly vulnerable to internal or external forces." For the purposes of our research, the countries that fit this description were then narrowed down further, using as a criterion the ability to reach consumers within the joint constraints of time-frame and budget. We hope that the strategy and insights in this paper will encourage other researchers to pursue a similar, if not deeper, investigation in the many highly interesting markets that were not examined.

### **What We Did (Method)**

The learning and the stories you will find in this paper were all obtained with the help of the esteemed colleagues who served as our eyes and hands in this project, the researchers who "talked" to the teenagers for almost two weeks, in their respective cities in China, Brazil, Mexico, Russia, and the UK. Some of these colleagues have children of their own, teenagers or younger, which allowed them to give an even deeper level of understanding to the stories they collected. Fur-

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thermore, the credit goes to the teenagers who willingly shared their lives, their minds, and their dreams with market researchers they did not know, and with other teenagers like them, all in the greater pursuit of a better world. Is this cynical? Not at all! Deep down all market researchers believe they will, or at least aspire to, make the world a better place by making market communication clearer, more useful, and closer to consumers' needs.

We screened young consumers, ages 15-17, in major cities in China, Brazil, Mexico, Russia, and the UK from Decision Analyst's online consumer panel (which counts over 6 million members in over 160 countries). The UK (clearly not an "emerging market") was included as point of reference and comparison, to highlight the differences between the brand and media worlds that teenagers live in. Thus, for example, we could compare Shanghai to London, to ground the results.

To qualify, all teenagers were screened for ownership of two or more devices such as a mobile phone with camera or video or music function, a digital camera or camcorder, an mp3 player, or a PDA. All spent over two hours a day on the Internet, from home, school, or other point of access. All were willing to put a lot of themselves into this project. One group was conducted each in China, Brazil, Mexico, Russia, and the UK in May/June 2006, each group consisting of 6 to 12 participants.

Time-Extended™ online qualitative was used as the method of choice for this project. This approach uses online communications between a formally trained moderator (expert of the local culture) and participants to conduct online group discussions. The method brings together a geographically dispersed group of participants, while also allowing them time to reflect on their answers and comment on the opinion of others. Additionally, people share their opinions without having to schedule a specific time or having to drive to a distant location—rather, they can participate at a time of their choosing, from the convenience of their computer.

Decision Analyst's trained online moderators used a bulletin board discussion to host the discussions, post questions and discussion topics on a daily basis. Responses

were made at a time convenient to the participant (but before the next scheduled posting day). Participants respond to the scheduled postings, are encouraged to read other participants' responses, and build upon them. Additionally, participants can post pictures, drawings, and other media for other participants to see, just like they would do on a "real" bulletin board. The group discussions took place over a 10-day period, including a weekend.

We instructed all participants to keep a diary of the brands they noticed in their day-to-day interactions, and to join other teenagers nationwide two to three times a day on a secure bulletin board portal. They could post their answers to the moderator's questions, as well as comment on the other participants' posts. The "discussion guide" comprised a series of questions as well as exercises, taking full advantage of the natural creativity and openness of young consumers (for example, one of the exercises involved creating the "perfect advertisement" for a jeans brand). The group environment and the natural familiarity that these teens have with the Internet and their PCs translated in very rich interactions, not only in terms of the ideas shared and the thought they gave to the answers, but also in terms of the richness of media they used to share their opinions (photos, alone or as a collage, music, short videos, many references to blogs and various web content, as well as some references to consumer-generated ads).

## **The Learnings (Insights & Trends)**

### ***Media Engagement***

Teenagers in Brazil, China, Russia, Mexico, and the UK live in worlds quite far apart geographically, but especially in terms of their upbringing, cultural traditions, accepted values, and the ways they communicate. Yet our research identified many important common factors.

### **The "connected computer" is the new TV**

Computers are supplanting the time spent watching TV and other activities. Most of the teenagers, across all countries, spend between 3 hours to 12 hours a day on their computers, particularly when connected to the Internet via broadband. In fact, computer and Internet are

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seen as an entwined service (referred to here as “connected computer”), and therefore the computers are used for work, rest, and play. With the exception of teens in China and Russia, there is high dependence on the connected computer for daily homework, with heavy use of search engines like Google and Yahoo! (especially Yahoo! Tarea in Mexico and Brazil), and some use of consumer content sites like Wikipedia.

Everywhere, the computer turned out to be an essential communication tool, with a heavy preference for instant communication and therefore immediate gratification, leading teens to choose SMS, MSN Messenger, various chat rooms, and Skype as the main tools for interaction, rather than more traditional email. These teens use the computer as a hub for their social networks.

The *connected computer* is the doorstep to the world, but also a way to customize the world to their needs. Teens watch the news that they care to watch, listen to the radio channels that meet their needs, share pictures of themselves (and picture diaries), and visit the websites that are relevant to them. Additionally, the computer is an entertainment center, where teens play the games or the music they download, watch DVDs, or literally turn it into a TV by adding a tuning card.

Finally, the *connected computer* functions as an alternative distribution channel, which allows savvy consumers to search about products and brands, to bid on the products of their choice, and to purchase at better prices and with less hassle than in stores. This particular application is not equally important in all countries, since as of this writing (2006) e-commerce is not yet popular in China and Russia.

It goes without saying that a life without this *connected computer* can be likened in respondent’s language to “not having potable water or electricity”, “misery”, “boredom”, and “like going back 100 years.”

TV-watching habits varied by country, as did the programs watched, and ranged from one to five hours of self-reported watching during weekdays. However, this “watching” time can be misleading, because it includes the time teens keep the TV on as “background noise”

when they do their homework. If they were actively watching, most frequently as a family activity in Mexico and Brazil, then most teens admitted to doing other things while the advertisements came on, such as taking a bathroom break, having a conversation, calling a friend, eating a snack, and so on. The only real attention was paid to the new advertisements, which appear to be “clever” and humorous, and are therefore worth watching, at least once or twice. TV advertisements are purely seen to be worth watching selectively, in terms of their informational value (about new products in categories of interest) or in terms of their entertainment value. By comparison, teens are very open to being exposed to advertising via sponsored website links when they are surfing, as these are seen to be *relevant, non-intrusive, and specific to their needs*.

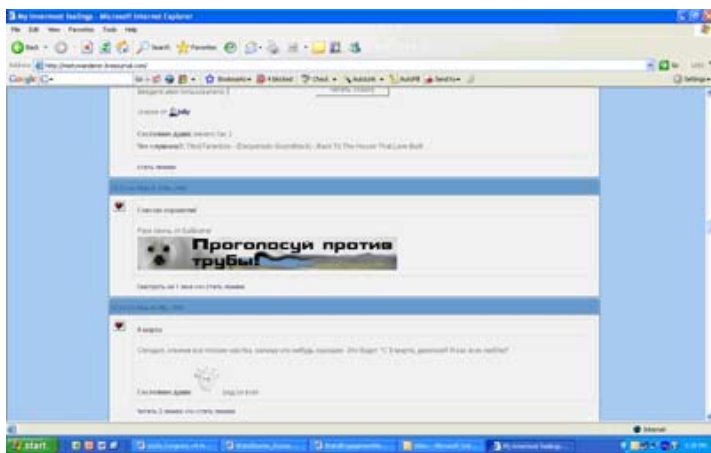
### **Blogs are controversial**

Teens’ perception and use of blogs varied by country. The teens who participated in Brazil and China largely described blogs as “old news”, “artificial”, a “plastic world”, and “boring”. They see blogs as saying almost the same, hard to read, and almost impossible to search (if they are mining it for specific information). Nevertheless, some of these teens kept their own blogs and most admitted to visiting their friends’ blogs.

By comparison, blogging appears to be more popular (or more “cool”) among Mexican, Russian, and British teens. Russian teens particularly mentioned livejournal.com and several kept their own livejournal blogs, a link to which they were keen to share. Mexican teens passionately followed blogs ranging from those of their friends’, to blogs that focused on celebrity gossip, photo blogs (fotolog.com was very popular), consumer-generated commentaries on new technology and gadgets, and movie blogs. Mexican teens also followed political blogs with great interest, which may have been particularly stimulated by the proximity of Mexico to the United States and by the imminence of local elections at the time of the research. Such ‘blog behavior’ showed a side of these teenagers who are keen to become involved in “adult life” and have an impact in decision making, and are therefore ready to challenge and re-create their own version of reality by drawing

from pop culture, the media, and current advertisements, to complain and be heard about the inefficiencies and inadequacies of society and government. Sarcasm and humor are the sharp tools of choice, and the blogs the medium to convey desire for change. Many teen blogs connect to sites such as elcerebro.com that uses CGM as a tool for political satire. For these teens blogs are a way to share and communicate who they are, what they believe, what they stand for, even though they realize that these websites can be controversial and often monitored by the government.

**Figure 1: Russian Blog**



By comparison, British teens behaved in similar ways, using blogs as a form of social interaction, connecting with friends (myspace.com), but also at times as a way to raise awareness for social issues they cared about (e.g., sharing information about companies involved in animal testing and other hot buttons), such as the example of KFC and animal treatment.

**Figure 2: British Teen Blog And KFC Brand Targeting**



### **Mobile phones and the 80/20 rule**

Despite the many features added by manufacturers, even these technology-savvy teens seem to limit most of their use of mobile phones to two principal functions: voice communication and “texting”. The importance of SMS among these teens, across all the countries examined, cannot be overemphasized: SMS was seen as a source of immediate access to friends, and as a way to limit and manage the otherwise expensive mobile fees. Price sensitivity emerged across the board, despite the fact that most of the teens interviewed owned some of the latest and expensive models of mobile phones. One consequence was the great effort to limit use of MMS and Internet surfing on their mobiles (except for the British teens).

All the participants reported that they owned mobiles with camera and/or video functions, games, some had radio or mp3 function, and most had Bluetooth. These functions were largely viewed as secondary and sometimes never used, since their mp3 player was preferred for music and video watching, and the video recorders on phones were perceived to be still low in quality. Interestingly, the alarm function was fairly popular, often serving as a second alarm; quite a few of these teens slept only 5 to 6 hours a night. However, the functions have an inherent “status factor” that makes them a must have, if only to show them off to classmates and peers. These extra features are therefore important, despite their limited use, for status rather than for function.

Regardless of functions used, all teens reported the mobile phone to be as important a daily companion to them as their computer. In fact, teenagers appeared to have a real attachment to their mobile phones and, by extension, their brands. Conversely, when the mobile phones failed their expectations, the failure turned out to be the event which assumed great significance and could literally create animosity towards the brand and its “lies”.

One example will demonstrate the point. Consider Chen Yue, a 15-year old teen in Shanghai, whose first association with the Siemens brand is “swindler”. Why such powerfully negative brand association? The answer lies in Chen Yue’s experience. Her latest mobile phone was a Siemens, which she used mostly to text her friends,

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only to discover that “The biggest ‘feature’ that this Siemens mobile has is that you cannot use punctuation when you send text message. It’s unforgivable!...I cannot send long messages, and I am always afraid that [my friends] don’t know what I say in the message or [that they] misunderstand me.” Stories like these underscore the need for companies to understand their teen customers, because negative feelings like Chen Yue’s can lead to damage that will cost much money (both in terms of lost sales and additional marketing investment needed to rectify the negative word of mouth).

**Figure 3: Chen Yue**



### **Dancing to my own tune**

Not too long ago American Express launched an advertisement (in the US) featuring the prominent US comedian Ellen DeGeneres walking through town with an mp3 player in her pocket and “dancing to her own tune”. The ad perhaps best exemplifies how these teens feel about their mp3 players and the importance of music in their lives. Most of us can look back and remember when music was constantly playing in our ears when we were getting ready for school, in the commute to and from school, at breaks, when studying, when eating lunch (parents allowing), and so on. However, the flexibility of dancing to one’s own tune is now multiplied geometrically by all the possibilities allowed by downloading individual songs and videos to the computer and transferring them to mp3 players. Almost all the teens who participated had an mp3 player (with the video iPod being the most popular choice everywhere but Russia and China) and used it several hours a day to listen to music, watch videos, store and look at pictures, and listen to radio downloads (podcasts). These features were particularly preferred in an mp3 player than a mobile phone due to the greater memory of the former and, therefore, the better quality user experience.

And what about those teens who had no mp3 player? The “worse case scenario” was one of having to listen via their computer, since they no longer really made use of CD-players or the ‘prehistoric’ tape recorders and cassette players they associated with their parents, the past generation. Teens’ attitudes were clear: having no mp3 player, unless the function were integrated into their mobile phone, would be a major inconvenience. In fact, in the views of some of teens who participated, not being able to listen to music while doing homework would seriously impact their mood and the quality of the output...maybe even their grades!

### ***Brand Engagement***

Brand engagement, the ability of the brand to interact with the consumer, to pull the consumer in, to become part of one’s life, is a hot topic in today’s marketing. A brand that engages has a better chance to beat out its competitors for the affection and loyalty of its consumers.

Let’s look at brand engagement in these emerging economies among our bell weather teens. First let’s look at the marketing terrain, so hotly contested today. What do emerging economies have in common? They are, by default, the focus of the marketing efforts of hundreds of multinational corporations who want to reap the benefits of the growing consumer spending. These companies want to establish their brands’ dominance, and ensure brand loyalty. How do they do it? The answer is obvious. The companies offer many alternatives to their customers, hoping to grab market share. The inevitable result is an increasing choice of products and brands available to consumers. More importantly, the consequence of that increased choice is the emerging importance of brands which perform two key functions. The first is the inward-directed function, the “simplifier” which makes life easier. The second is the other-directed function, the “status indicator” which presents the self to others.

A methodological note before we launch into greater detail: what is also interesting to note here is that the online technique generates a level of self-disclosure that is otherwise difficult to achieve during in-person in-

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interviews and in focus groups, particularly among teenagers. The participants become less conscious of the “research camera” being focused on them over the passing days, their hesitations drop, and they start treating the online bulletin board medium in a manner similar to maintaining their own blogs, private diaries that are not so private. Accordingly, these teens were forthcoming with brand stories and shared pictures, videos, ads, and images of the brands they connected with and of those they rejected, and shared feelings about these brands that they are unlikely to have verbalized before.

### **Brand as simplifier**

Let’s look at our teens in light of these two salient roles of brand. In its first role, as a “simplifier”, the brand allows consumers to make choices more easily, by serving as a symbol of certain key characteristics that matter most in consumer choice, and therefore allowing them to speed the choice process.

The power of these associations is well exemplified in the story shared by Analuisa, in Mexico City. Analuisa’s impression of Coke are derived from multiple sources: “When I think about Coke...I see an oasis of “relaxation”...either in my house or while running around...while in formal or casual dinners...If you look closely, everywhere you’ll stumble in someone with a bottle of Coke. I also associate the brand with popcorn and the movies, at the cinema, at home, in a family reunion...or a get together with friends.” The brand appears to be bigger than life, and surrounds her daily experiences: “Countryside or the city...you’ll turn...everywhere you look...there will be Coke...almost daily and in every store everywhere, no matter how big or small, there are ads of the brand.” She connects the daily exposure with the images internalized by the advertising that touched her “The image of a regular guy having a Coke...reviving the nearly dead flowers at the sight of his smile...or [the ad] of the ants that march to create a happy face...I also still remember the commercial that went something like...for the poor and the rich, for the single and married, Coke is for everyone”. The conclusion is very powerful: “If I do not drink Coke every day something is missing.”

**Figure 4: Analuisa**



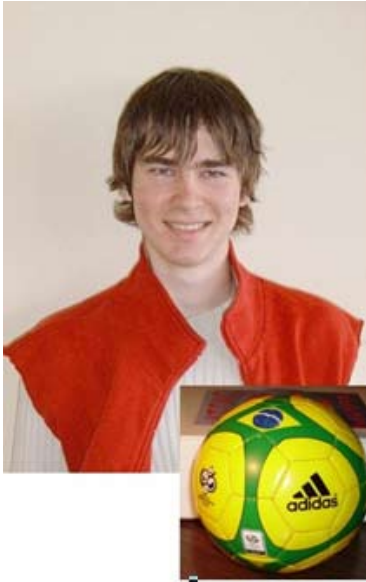
Additionally, each consumer experience accrues to the brand at the individual consumer level and therefore continues either to affirm the brand meaning or, in some cases, to reaffirm its changes over time. In this function, the importance of the brand is as a promise that can be relied upon, whether that promise be for quality, durability, fun, or something else that the consumer seeks.

One such example is presented by Ilya in Moscow, talking about his favorite sporting goods brand: Adidas. The brand experience for Ilya starts with a gift of an old pair of shoes: “I remember the moment when they gave me my first pair of Adidas soccer boots several years ago... They were so old! My uncle, a soccer player, used to play in these boots in a professional team... I used them for about 3 more years, 3 times a week at least – and they would never tear! That’s what I call real quality!”. It continues with Ilya building upon that early brand experience by purchasing it over time: “I have purchased many products of this brand – sports shoes, boots, a soccer ball and many others.” It is then reinforced by the receptivity to outside communications about the brand (advertisements, celebrity endorsement, website resources, international image), all serving to strengthen and validate the brand choice: “[Adidas] has earned a lot of respect, not only in Russia but all over the world, which makes me trust the brand and its quality....The information about new products I get from the salespeople in their stores but, even better, from Adidas official website... Also remember some ads... Here is the last one I recall: for their shoes with Clima cool and Clima cold systems... They were on the posters shown with sort of a nitrogen smoke coming out of their soles. Also I recall the old ad with the basketball players

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– Tracy McGrady I think...” The conclusion is predictable: “I’m totally satisfied with their quality and price and of course will be buying more in the future.”

**Figure 5: Ilya**



### **Brand as status symbol**

In its second role, the brand is an important signal to others inside and outside their peer group that they conform, that they are like them, or vice versa. This role has always been an important role for brands, but particularly so in emerging economies, where societies are more fluid and change is greater, so it is difficult to tell who is “in” and who is “out”. In this context, teenagers are less focused on rebelling against accepted social mores, though there is some of this always at play, and more focused on proclaiming their association with, for example, an upper middle class.

A good example is provided by Rodrigo, a 17-year-old in Rio de Janeiro and his experiences with the Lacoste brand. The feelings evoked by the brand are not only powerful but also very telling of the associated social status: “I imagine myself seating in a Paris Coffee, eating a croissant, impeccably dressed with a Lacoste shirt, looking at the people walking by. I remember people always complimenting on my style...I am always impeccable and very elegant... I feel very good about myself, with high self-esteem. I notice how people are always looking up to me.” Rodrigo’s explanation tells us how the key criterion in choosing the brand is the association

that wearers have elegance and good taste, all powerful symbols of social class and status: “Whenever I see someone dressed in Lacoste I know this person has elegance and good taste. I have bought and will continue to buy Lacoste products to keep up my collection.”

Over twenty-five “brand stories” were generated by the combination of the teen brand diaries, their choices and explanations surrounding brands they connected with and those that they did not, the photos they posted, the website links and CGM ads they shared. These brands encompassed local brands and multinational brands, and spanned many categories (e.g., food and drink, apparel, health and beauty products, electronics, white goods, automotives, restaurants, and airlines). Often they brands were ones with which these teens interacted in their daily lives; other times they did not personally interact with the brand, but some indirect brand encounter had marked their perception in ways that would impact future consumption choices. When we compare these stories, and extract the key knowledge that emerges, some lessons become clear.

### **Teens seek multi-sensory brand experiences**

When looking at the perfect brand experiences and the brand stories these teens describe, they involve many “layers” of experiencing the brand. They refer to looking at, smelling, feeling the product, experiencing the service, and investing all this with meaning.

Adrian, a 17-year old in Mexico City, tells the story of his personal connection with the BMW brand: “The only thought of this brand invades me with images of fast and elegant cars. Its logo, a stylized representation of an aircraft propeller, comes to mind. I remember each of the BMW that have been a part of my family. It hits me with sensations of high speed, swift moves, and precision. Fast and steady acceleration leading you to a secure journey, precise and reliable breaking system, seamless curves... I can still feel the fine leather, its smell, the texture of the exquisite interior materials... I frequently visit their website <http://www.bmwusa.com> and personalize my own future car toy.”

### **Brand connection is established very early on**

Many of the teens told stories that connected their

brands of choice with memories of their childhood. This was true regardless of the category, from automotive to air transportation, to clothing, to everyday foods. It seems likely that this brand connection (i.e., the connection of childhood and brand) will be continued and strengthened over time, creating a level of brand engagement that is difficult to alter.

Ana (São Paulo) tells us about her connection with the Nestlé brand. “Here at my house we love chocolate milk...so we always have a jar of Nescau”. Thinking of Nestlé brings out “feelings of completeness...well-being...harmony...being home snuggled-up (in my nest), drinking hot milk with Nescau or Nescafé. A collage of images of my tender childhood always around this brand. Nestlé is such a long established brand...I have grown-up consuming all its various products”.

**Figure 6: Ana**



### **One negative experience creates a long-lasting impact**

These teens have probably more power than their parents ever had to select the specific brands and products they want. They are very involved in the decision making process, and through their computers and the Internet are able to find information about brands and products that will help them to compare and contrast the pros and cons of most of what is available. However, they are also more likely to let one negative experience become the defining moment for the brand. The

Siemens experience that was shared earlier is only one of many examples brought forth by respondents. Most negative experiences relate to the brand letting the consumer down, not living up to its quality or service promise (implicit in the mind of the buyer), becoming unreliable and therefore associating higher risk with its purchase, or connecting the brand with less wanted roles or social status.

Dmitry’s story about Alcatel is a clear example of this: “I first saw a telephone with this name at my friend’s house. He bragged that this phone had a very cool voice-recording function. But his joy did not last too long. The phone started to malfunction, there were some glitches, and then the battery started to rapidly lose its charge. He had to recharge it every hour! So he brought it back... Some of my relatives also reported similar malfunctions with this brand of phones. So, now the company will not be able to do anything that would persuade me to buy their product.”

### **Word of mouth is extremely powerful among teens**

What must be of greatest concern to marketers is that many times it is not only a personal negative experience which will shape brand perception and choice, but also someone else’s experience (as in Dmitry’s case). Teenagers are highly networked, online and offline, and they are very apt to spread news about their brand encounters, whether good or bad. Furthermore, teens tend to be very strong in their opinions. Word of mouth can therefore be a very powerful marketing tool, but also a really hard enemy to fight when it takes a negative slant.

### **Social conscience matters**

Brands that are connected with positive action in the community earn goodwill and consideration, as well as positive word of mouth when they are perceived to be sincere in their effort. A brand’s socially responsible image will not make up for poor quality or other basic issues (i.e., it will not be part of “price of entry” considerations), but it is likely to generate interest and curiosity among teens, and may create that extra emotional connection which makes all the difference.

In this example, Dmitry tells us about the importance of social responsibility (as an added virtue) and one of his

favorite brands: LG.

“I often saw LG products at various stores with consumer electronics, talked with my friends about this brand and never heard anything bad about it. But most importantly, my dad, who works with electronics as a repairman, would never bring any LG products home, because these things would rarely break or burn. He really appreciated the quality of LG electronics... It is great that LG sponsors sport. Better still, they sponsor Russian sport as well. But if they sponsored the orphanages, kindergartens and hospitals, it would be absolutely wonderful – I would never buy any other brands, because I would know that part of my money goes to these institutions.”

**Figure 7: Dmitry**



Additionally, through their stories and pictures, teens shared how they want to know more about the brand's history, how the products are manufactured, and why they are better than their competitors, but also, what is the “brand vision”, how are employees being treated, “how do they contribute to making a better world”.

#### A little fun goes a long way

Teenagers appear to connect well with brands that they perceive to be the promoter of fun events, sporting events, or other social activities that they enjoy. Fun can create an important bond, almost a two-way relationship between the young consumer and the brand. The brand fulfills the consumer's need for fun and entertainment. In turn, the consumer returns the favor by

choosing the brand over others.

Andrey tells us about his experience of Samsung, now one of his favorite brands:

“When I think of Samsung, first things that come to mind are its logo, my cell phone, and the sports event (sort of Marathon) sponsored by Samsung in 2004, when I was going through my entrance exams to the University. It was a lot of fun – numerous contests, lots of music and sun! Although I didn't win in any of the contests, and didn't even get to make one free long distance call (one of Samsung's promotions, for which I would have to stand in a very long line) I still had so much fun – just from being in such a nice place, with its festive atmosphere! Summer, beautiful warm weather, young people in white t-shirts with the blue word Samsung on them, white and blue balloons; I've passed my entrance exams to the University and will study in Moscow... Nice!”

**Figure 7: Andrey**



#### Brands must not intrude

Regardless of the country, one message rings true: there are places where brands are not invited. These places are, however, happily quite rare, at least on a relative basis. Teens appear to be very comfortable being constantly exposed to media messages about brands, which they appear to subconsciously filter and often use to reinforce existing connections. Teens welcome creative

and humorous ads as a way to learn about new products, they welcome targeted advertising on search engines and blogs, they are receptive to outdoor ads and sponsorships, and even are positive to product placements in movies. However, teens positively reject a few things they consider to be intrusions. The worst culprit here is pop-up ads on the Internet, and particularly those which disguise themselves as a game or competition of sorts. Teens simply can't stand them, and these ad strategies generate a high of ill-will among those exposed to them. A second class of brand intrusion is represented by ad placements in cinemas. A final class of brand intrusion is excessively prominent brand presence at sporting events. This can be off-putting, in the same way that brand presence at religious or political events is seen as highly inappropriate. Being aware of these unwritten rules is important so that the marketer can avoid a possible consumer 'disconnect' with the brand.

### **Empowered consumers**

Teens want to have a relationship with the brand that can best be described as less top down and more equal. Throughout their writing they told us about wanting greater transparency, wanting a world where brands communicate their competitive advantages more clearly, where consumers can easily and simply compare the offering to the alternatives available, and where brands help consumers understand how their products make life easier or better through brand consumption. These teens also want a world where there is greater ability for consumers to experience any product before they purchase it, be it food or electronics, thus reducing consumer risk and elevating product quality. Finally, these teens described a world where it is easy to upgrade, replace, or renew supplies of the products of choice, instantly. Ultimately, they imagine a world where the consumer is king and brand experiences happen in their own terms, the way the teen, not the company wants it to happen.

### **Conclusions**

Ultimately, what have we learned from this brand journey? Using a combination of a bulletin-board platform, consumer online diaries, and by adapting some traditional offline techniques to an online framework, we

have observed teenagers in emerging countries who have been growing up with computers, Internet, mobile phones, and mp3 players. We have seen how they interact with these media and how they absorb information about brands through new and traditional media. Most importantly, we have learned what are key trigger points, which are likely to shape the future consumption for these young consumers. We have observed...

1. Clear trends towards greater interest in brand societal responsibility,
2. The power of brand as simplifiers in a complex world,
3. The power of word of mouth in an increasingly networked world,
4. The increasing appetite for multi-sensory brand experiences, including the desire to experience a brand via the fun events that it sponsors, and finally,
5. Both the desire that young consumers have for greater empowerment in brand experiences, and the de facto power that they yield because of the convergence of computers, the Internet, video and movie making/editing software, and blogs, which has turned these tech-savvy consumers into creators of their own "consumer-generated" brand messages.

These are still early times, and it is difficult to tell just to what extent these trends will change our lives, as consumers and as market researchers. Yet it is clear – marketers and brand managers who discount these changes as of little import certainly do so at their own peril.

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