

YOUNG CONSUMERS WITHIN A MARKETPLACE SURROUNDED BY TECHNOLOGIES: UNDERSTANDING THE DOMAIN OF TEENAGE CONSUMERS VULNERABILITY

Wided Batat, University of Lyon 2, France

ABSTRACT

Today's young consumers are facing a risk related to technologies usages. That's why it seems interesting to get a deeper understanding of young consumer weaknesses in the consumer society. In order to develop a better understanding of young consumers vulnerability, it is important to explore their perception of the areas and the behaviours associated with the vulnerable young consumers. In the marketing literature, consumer vulnerability has been defined in various ways (Baker *et al.*, 2005; Ringold, 2005); however, attaining consensus on a definition is difficult due to its complexity.

The focus in this paper is to determine the key themes of young consumer vulnerability and the characteristics within this vulnerable group. Indeed, there are a variety of populations and contexts not examined to date what may provide interesting insights to further understand issues related to young consumer vulnerability. An exploratory study carried out through observation and interaction with a sample of 20 adolescents (10 boys and 10 girls) aged 11-15 was considered to answer the research objectives. The data collected were analysed using the content analysis method.

The key findings of this research illustrate the domains related to the vulnerability of young consumers within a marketplace surrounded by technologies (Tapscott, 1998) as well as the behaviours associated with the vulnerable young consumers. Six dimensions linked to the young consumer vulnerability in the Web 2.0 society have been identified: (1) teenage low self-esteem, (2) lack of self-confidence among teenage consumers. The results show that today's teenagers have a strong lack of self-confidence, and they are easily influenced by external factors, (3) low level of consumption experiences, (4) peer group pressure. This social influence has long been recognized as an important force shaping young consumer behaviour. Reference groups may exert influence in a number of ways: by providing information in ambiguous situations, and/or enhancing adolescent's self-image, (5) the paradox of technology. The results of this research among teenagers aged 11-15 emphasized the vulnerable dimension of teens' usage of the Internet within their consumption experiences, (6) the power of unsafe online communities. The unsafe online communities and social networking websites (pornographic blogs, suicide community and anorexia websites) are very popular among teenagers aged 11-15 both male and female. Therefore, young consumer vulnerability is closely tied to identity and transformation. This situation is compounded by multiple factors including personal characteristics (self-concept); subculture norms (teenagers are afraid to be excluded from the peer groups); experiential conditions (consumption experience and knowledge) and contextual factors (Internet, online community). We believe that a first step in helping vulnerable young consumers develop abilities to handle peer pressure and risky online communities is to recognize these pressures and understand that they are largely self-generated and can therefore be self-managed. A second step is to provide young consumers enough accurate knowledge to develop an adequate picture of risks. Knowledge alone is not sufficient to ensure appropriate action, but it is a vital component to any program to enhance young consumers education and counteract social pressure. Thus, marketing and policy responses must be against promoting or facilitating learned helplessness, and for empowerment by assisting young people to develop skills that foster optimal functioning. Public policy should be based on young consumer subculture and his perspectives of vulnerability. The results of the study point out the need for changing the current focus on consumer education and consumer policy. A shift from the present emphasis on the vulnerable consumer to a more inclusive agenda would maximize the engagement of 'active' consumers in driving innovation and success in the economy at large. Therefore, consumer policy should focus on empowering young consumers and facilitate the movement away from vulnerability.

References Available on Request.