

CULTUREQ

November 2011

MILLENNIALS:

Rewriting our cultural story for brands -

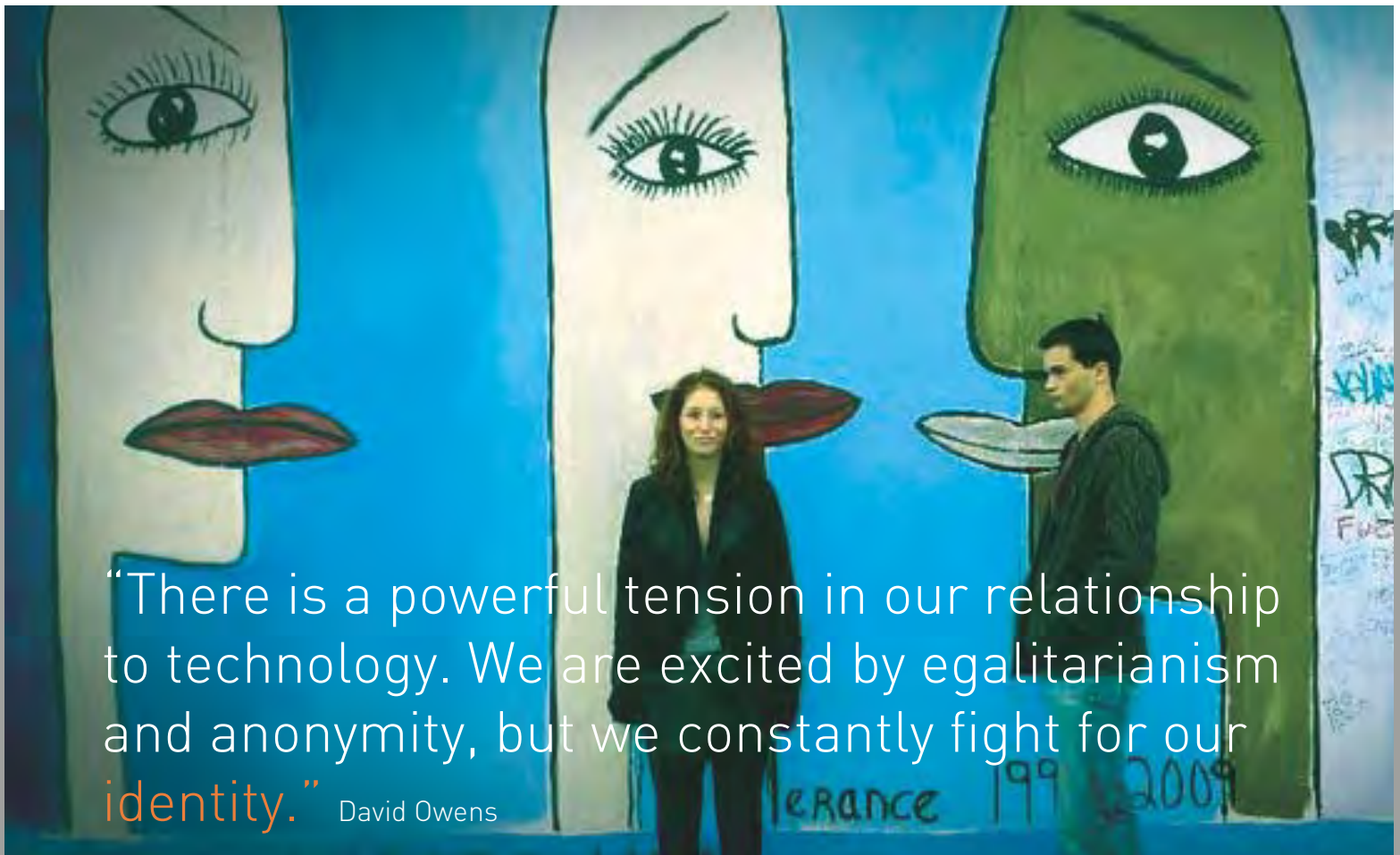
one mash-up at a time

TECHNOLOGY & GEN Y: TOGETHER SINCE DAY 1
THE TECHNOLOGY MYTH
A CULTURAL TIPPING POINT
BRANDS AND OUR NEW CULTURAL STORY

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“There is a powerful tension in our relationship to technology. We are excited by egalitarianism and anonymity, but we constantly fight for our **identity.**” David Owens

Technology & Gen Y: together since day 1

In the beginning, there was man and there was technology. They were two distinctive things. At first, technology was scientific - impersonal and complicated; functional and grey; raw and brutal. Today, there is little segregation between our lives on and off-line. Technology is as habitualized in our routines as cleaning teeth and putting on make-up.

It's as if human anatomy has somehow been changed forever; scientists even say our brain is being rewired. Blue tooth runs through our veins and technology is an extension of our fingertips. This is the world that Gen Y, also known as Millennials, has grown up in. They have only one reality. One which blends the physical with the virtual.

“I can't walk for five minutes alone without being on my phone.”

The technology myth

"Our generation likes to think that maybe we define technology, not the other way around."

A generational cohort is characterized by the coming of age events that shift social values and designate that group. Much has been said about technology being the essential element that defines Gen Y. But technological developments in and of themselves have not been life changing events for those born between 1980 and 1995. Perpetual development and advancement of technology have been constants in their lives. They've never known the world to be otherwise. In fact, many Millennials have told us they define how technology is evolving and being used; rather than the other way around. And, according to Pew, only 24% believe that technology makes their generation unique.

There is no doubt, however, that the World Wide Web, developed in 1990, has influenced Gen Y's world significantly. As TV brought Neil Armstrong's first step on the moon into our living rooms, the Internet has virtually connected Millennials with communities and people across the globe and placed them in the center of world events as they unfold. It has given Gen Y greater perspective, access to information and the ability to place their lives and life purpose in a larger context.



"Meeting new people and experiencing new cultures is a must for me, even if it's online. They help me understand myself...."



"I had an argument with my friend about what the cause of depression is. I think its inactivity."

Living with a shadow side

Overwhelmingly, Millennials are portrayed as leaders, optimistic, socially conscious, open to change, connected, confident, dedicated and driven. All valid and positive characteristics. Yet, they also have a shadow side and reflect the conflicted nature of the world we live in. For every characteristic that describes Gen Y there is an equal and incongruous aspect.

achievement oriented : discontented

"I didn't want to start [home]work, so I went for a run. I value my time running as it is my thinking time by myself...I always feel so good and healthy after a run and I feel like I've done something productive which is important here as one can waste days doing nothing here."

Accomplishment strongly drives Gen Y. From early on they were pressured to do the right thing and choose the right things to do. They filled their free time with activity after activity. Few want to miss out on anything and nearly all want to be seen as being productive. After all, they were subliminally taught that productivity matters most in today's world and is the key to success.

Yet, for all their focus on achievement a large number feel unfulfilled. Even before the crash, many of the oldest Millennials were discovering that their notion of success was elusive. And, given their natural state of busy-ness many Gen Yers are more comfortable with the processes associated with reflecting (keeping journals, having conversations about life purpose, going to seminars about balance) rather than with the empty time and space needed to connect with self and feel content in life.

idealistic : self-indulgent

"We're this twitter generation, and we think that everyone wants to hear what we have to say. And I think that it's a problem, and I think if its not dealt with properly we're gonna turn into this really self-centered generation."

As the greatest multi-ethnic generation living as citizens of a virtual, global community, Gen Y has an idealist's desire to right injustices and help those in need. They are highly civic-minded and simultaneously politically populist and conservative.

Seemingly at odds with this is their tendency toward self-obsession, a by-product of the psychology industry's push on self-esteem building, more casual family relationships, technology and consumerism. They redefine the boundaries of relationships to suit their own needs and enjoy the lens being placed on their lives. At its most extreme, Millennial self-centeredness manifests as entitlement and narcissism (think cult of celebrity, reality tv and one minute of fame). And, it's perhaps their inflated sense of self-worth that, in part, has made many of the eldest Millennials ill-equipped to manage their way in a declining job market.

"I was offered a secondment...and when it didn't go through I decided I had learned all I could in marketing so I quit."



with a shadow side

creative : security from structure

"I'm really into g chat. I think for studying, working on a group project, it's really easy to do that. Everyone can be doing different things in different places, multitasking, and you can still get the same message across...I love google docs, I do everything on google docs...(Jill) and I started to write a screenplay over google docs (over the summer), so that allowed for a collaboration."

As natural entrepreneurs, Gen Yers naturally share ideas, knowledge, opinions, experiences and learning and see their life as a narrative that others can contribute to. They are inventive, original and imaginative; even those who don't label themselves as creative express their inner artist through a variety of means (playlists, photographic montages, videos). To perform, however, they need the security structure provides.

Growing up with schedules, league tables and little free time, it's no wonder they also have a strong need for things you don't typically associate with creativity: prescriptive coursework, top 10 lists and roadmaps for activities. Without these and a full diary, they move out of their comfort zone and become frustrated, even more so than bored. **Although many say they want to be more spontaneous, their adventures tend to take place within defined boundaries involving the real or virtual support of their friends.**

dependent on others : individual

"Living without my parents has been a big step. I've thrown myself into a position of being responsible but I still have their back up when I need it."

Gen Y is psychologically and practically reliant on family, something which looks likely to continue as they age and isn't completely attributable to the recession. Interestingly, while they diligently seek to meet the expectations their parents, society and their peers set for them, they also shun the fixed labels these expectations traditionally have dictated.

"I feel my identity is fluid and that people who know me only know aspects of my identity."

With access to global culture, fashion, music, art and style each Gen Yer is singular, a fluid mash-up of different influences defined through the collective. Few, if any, have one style or label that defines them. They've learned to cut and paste on the computer and clearly apply this philosophy to so many other aspects of life. And, they are highly reliant on the opinions of virtual and real-life peer groups and the validation their endorsements bring.

shadow side

open & public : mistrustful

Gen Y seeks new experiences and openly posts and shares everything. The cult of reality tv has helped to make little in their lives seem sacred. Comfortably flashing their egos and alter-egos on screen, it's no surprise that adolescent and young adult Millennials rebel in a far more subdued manner than their Boomer parents did in the 60's and 70's.

"I've been to dozens of company presentations....I've learned never to look at the presenter but at the eyes of the employees. It's the only way to see through the company claims. Everyone says they are about the people."

Living in a culture of intense consumerism, however, they are cynical about corporate messages and politicians' promises. They accept little at face value and are adept at seeing through corporate claims, political rhetoric and marketing hype. They also know that with video recorders in living rooms, a camera on every phone, last night's exploits posted on Facebook and an audit trail on every keycard that we're all watching each other and eventually we'll see businesses, politicians and other people as they really are.

real meaning : contrived

"It's ok to have different friends for different reasons; the best friends serve more than one purpose."

With unlimited virtual access and knowledge comes a quest to discover what's genuine and true. Gen Yers value meaningful experiences, deep connections and earnest conversations with their closest friends. In the midst of all the busy-ness, they're seeking beacons to illuminate who they are and their place in the world and consider their inner circle as instrumental in helping them know their real selves.

Yet, they only reveal their authentic selves to a very select few. And, as products of celebrity culture, like the politicians and corporations they scorn, they too contrive their image, stylizing iPod playlists and SM profiles to project a personal brand. They choose brands deliberately to reinforce their image and many see friends, a large number of whom are easily replaced, as fulfilling purposeful roles. Being manipulators of identity themselves, they are keenly aware that corporations, nonprofits, celebrities, politicians and global leaders contrive "authentic" images for themselves and prefer transparency to claims of genuineness.

Beyond either/or into a new world of **also**

A cultural tipping point

Gen Y fluidly shifts from fulfilling others' expectations to creating their own story in the same manner that they effortlessly flow from physical to virtual reality and back again. And, in this way are reshaping our traditional cultural stories.

Cultural stories are societal narratives that act as the lens through which we see our world, our futures and ourselves. Historically, our story has depicted a world of either/or. A bipolar spectrum of seemingly opposite states. Either competition or collaboration. Money or Meaning. Love or Power. Sustainability or Prosperity. Clashing mindsets that are at odds with the spirit of the times.

Living comfortably with their shadow selves, Gen Y is unknowingly pushing society past the tipping point. Beyond the old world of **either/or** and into the new world of **also**, in which technology has enabled opposites to comfortably co-exist alongside one another. A world of co-competition, hybrid cars, mash-ups and a proliferation of adolescents and young adults with mixed racial backgrounds and religious affiliations.

Seeing things from the perspective of either/or is counter-productive in an era where custom playlists, mingled fashion styles, constant multi-tasking and the ability to simultaneously produce and consume media dominates the development of personal identity. For Gen Y many of society's longstanding rules, which they often see as impediments to achieving the next step and fulfilling their wants, are there to be conveniently mixed and matched at will.





Brands and our new cultural story

Brands are a mirror of people's perceptions, motivations and attitudes. They reflect a society's ideals, fears and frailties.

As society and our cultural story transforms, brand definition will inevitably shift from linear models that embrace logical and complementary attributes to richer ecosystems of more varied and even surprising human traits that traditionally have not been juxtaposed alongside one another, yet when combined are incredibly potent.

Many brands today already use visual and verbal language that is more like human expression. These brands are familiar to most people because they are shaping the conversations that define their categories or creating new categories altogether.

Not surprisingly, **Gen Y is drawn to brands that blend the virtual and physical worlds by replicating face-to-face and human dialogue. And, they find brands whose philosophies transcend the products and services they represent highly appealing.** The brands they name as leaders are distinctive but not necessarily off-beat. Many are seen as over-priced and even have some negative qualities or associations. But in our new cultural story, dichotomous characteristics sit side-by-side and make things more real. We've been told brands such as Apple, Innocent Drinks, Lulu Lemon, Nike, Spotify, Stella Artois, Ugg, J Crew, Old Spice, Google, Patagonia, Billabong and The North Face, to name a few, all do.

"My favourite brands are all brands I feel a deep personal connection to."

Historically, we have identified three characteristics with strong brands: relevance (meeting target audience needs), differentiation (distinguishable from competitors) and authenticity (honestly reflecting core strengths in branding and marketing). In the new Millennial world of **also** where relational interconnectedness far surpasses transactional engagement these qualities will morph.

FROM

TO

Relevant..... Engaging

Differentiated..... Fluid

Authentic Sincere

Engaging: Consistently collaborating with audiences, initiating dialogues not diatribes, meaningful interactions that set products and services in a larger context, having a point of view about topical issues, world events and the future.

Fluid: Utilizing the full range of brand expression, bringing out the diversity and incongruity of a brand's personality, being spontaneous and surprising, consistent but not about sameness.

Sincere: Honest claims, upfront about mistakes, not hiding behind words, people or PR, unafraid to live in a glass office.

"...The brands that can do more for me are the brands that I will consider to be my favorites... and my favorites are the ones I'll buy."

Brands are promises made real through delivery. They are not created through grand gestures but by the simple accumulation of every day acts of real people. When you flow these acts together you create a story. And when you mash a brand's narrative into other people's conversations you create a meaningful cultural story—one that's inclusive of more people. And, importantly, one that engages humanity.



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The learning herein is based on a deep-dive millennial immersion study, quantitative segmentation in association with client work (permission to use granted) and on-going discussions with and research into those born between 1980 and 1995. Onesixtyfourth is a brand strategy and planning consultancy. For more information on our work in monitoring culture and trends, brand strategy development or innovation, please email us at cultureq@onesixtyfourth.com or contact:

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