

"Following the yellow brick road" – young adults' experiences of the information super-highway

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Keywords

Internet, Marketing communications, Consumer behaviour, Lifestyles, United Kingdom, Young people

Abstract

This paper uses the metaphor of the movie classic the *Wizard of Oz* to represent the online experiences of young adults. Just like the twister that turns Dorothy's world upside, down the Internet has arrived to transform our black and white lives into the Technicolor hyper-reality of the Land of Oz. What are the consequences for young Dorothyies of today when they explore the yellow brick information superhighway? Phenomenologically informed qualitative research was used to explore the Internet experiences of older adolescents and young adults. The findings identify, financial, temporal, social, logistical and emotional barriers and indicate that although the Internet is an intrinsic facet of young adults' lives, it falls well short of an obsession. The implications are that marketing practitioners need to pay closer attention to the genuine fears and concerns directed at the Internet rather than assuming that young adults' responses are enthusiastic and positive.

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"The land of Oz"

The aim of this paper is to explore the realities that exist in the Internet experiences of young adults. The findings are presented using the metaphor of Dorothy's fictional journey through the land of Oz as depicted in the 1939 MGM musical *The Wizard of Oz* (Altman, 1987). Dorothy engages simultaneously in "a journey, a quest and an adventure" (Nallon, 1993). She is seeking information from the Wizard on how to return to Texas. However as she follows the Yellow Brick Road she gains friends (The Lion, The Tin Man and The Scarecrow) and before she can return home she has to acquire a broomstick from the Wicked Witch of the West.

Becker (1986) states that "using a metaphor is a serious theoretical exercise in which you assert that two different empirical phenomena belong to the same general class, and general classes always imply a theory". Metaphors also play a key role as a means of "representing and addressing an unknown field on the basis of an analogy with a more familiar field" (Palmer and Dunford, 1996). Dorothy travelled to Oz when a tornado or "twister" literally turned her world upside down; similarly the Internet has been viewed as a transforming technology that will revolutionise the world (Leonard, 2000).

This paper examines the experiences of young adults as they travel along the Information Superhighway just as the film follows Dorothy's journey along the Yellow Brick Road in search of the wonderful wizard whose magic will return her home. As Dorothy undertakes her journey she has to contend with many obstacles and at one stage she voices her fear of "Lions and tigers and bears – Oh My!" This paper will explore young adults' perceptions of the barriers that they encounter online. It presents the theory that these barriers can be conceptualised as financial, temporal, logistical, social and emotional and that they broadly correspond with the barriers encountered by adults.

The Internet twister

It is argued that the Internet and the young people that utilise it to the full will revolutionise the world. For example, Bill Gates has characterised young adults



growing up with the Internet as "Generation I"; a generation whose lives will be transformed as they adopt the new medium to access people, products and information (Leonard, 2000). Loader (1998) argued that the Internet will alter every lifestyle facet, including patterns of work and leisure, entertainment, consumption, education, political activity, family experience and community structures. As early adopters of new technology, young people are also viewed as the defining users of the digital media revolution. Tapscott (1998), who coined the term "N-Geners" to include anyone currently aged four to 24, described the phenomenon as "the louder echo" stating that "for the first time in history, children are more comfortable, knowledgeable and literate about an innovation central to society". He suggested that through the use of digital media, the N-Generation will "develop and superimpose its culture on the rest of society". Indeed, authors such as Klein (2000) suggest that the Internet is increasingly being used to resist the prevailing institutions and offer an alternative cultural capital.

Young adults are an important topic for research. Four main reasons can be identified for the importance of an on-going youth research agenda within the sphere of marketing and commerce. First, the lifestage from adolescence to early adulthood when young people seek to establish their own individual personas is a period of great transition with the formation of behaviour patterns, attitudes and values and hence the formation of consumption patterns (Fannin, 1984; Holbrook and Schlinder, 1989). Indeed many of these patterns are carried well into individual's lifetimes (Moschis and Moore, 1979). Second, young people are increasingly able to influence the purchase and decision making of others given their increased independence and consumption sophistication (Loudon, 1984; Zollo, 1995). Third, young people act as a barometer of social change in terms of their impact on society and surrounding culture (Widdicombe and Woffitt, 1995). Davis (1990) reinforced this by arguing that cultural changes emanating from young adults are in time found within mainstream adult culture. Finally, the "youth market" is an extremely attractive one to commercial companies because of the reasons mentioned above and the relatively high disposable expenditure consumed by today's young adults.

Recent government statistics indicate that penetration of the Internet by young adults is significant in the UK. The Office for National Statistics (2001) National Statistics Omnibus showed that 88 per cent of those aged 16-24 have accessed the Internet at some time; this represented a significantly higher level than of any other age group. In addition, the amount of young adults' time spent online continues to rise and the gender gap is closing (Hammond *et al.*, 2000). On the other hand, recent empirical research questions the notion that the Internet has become a universal obsession amongst young people (Byfield, 2000; Wyatt, 2000). This suggests that hyper-reality does not always match up to the hype as many young people have found to their annoyance and sometimes cost. Although they continue to participate in increasing numbers it is in a way that falls a long way short of a lifestage or lifestyle obsession.

There is a lack of empirical research into adolescent and young adults' Internet experiences. Existing studies seek to explain the attraction of the medium to young adults and categorise usage activity. For example, Lin (1993) suggested that young adults would be attracted to the Internet by a greater entertainment gratification, gained through the increased control offered by the technology. Moreover, Chou and Hsiao (2000) suggested that the most powerful predictor of young Internet addiction was the communication pleasure score. Usage activity was investigated by Teo (2001) who found that younger users tend to engage in messaging and downloading activities to a greater extent than older users, whilst La Ferle *et al.* (2000) concluded that entertainment and educational attributes were most important to teenage Internet users when comparing differing media choices.

Currently in the UK the requirements for Internet connectivity include access to computing equipment, time to learn the required skills and sufficient funds to pay for telephone access. Previous research studies have identified several barriers to Internet adoption and usage amongst adults. Katz and Aspden (1997) found that barriers to Internet usage amongst US adults were; cost, not knowing how to use, difficulty to access, too complicated to use and discomfort with sitting at a computer. In a later study into Internet usage for banking in Australia, Sathye (1999) found that barriers to Internet

usage were security, lack of awareness of benefits, price, difficulty in use, resistance to change and no Internet access. Hammond *et al.* (2000), in a UK study amongst users and non users, found that factors that stimulated usage included; an interest in technology; an interest in the benefits of usage, particularly information/time saving benefits; favourable attitudes towards technology and a preference for informational television programmes. All of these studies focused primarily on the adult population. There is therefore limited research into the barriers that are diminishing young adults' online experiences.

Specifically this study is directed at answering the following questions:

- Which factors do young adults report as stimulating their usage of the Internet?
- What are the barriers to Internet usage encountered by young adults?
- How do these barriers differ from those of adult users?
- What do young adults perceive as the unattractive features and benefits of the Internet.
- What changes would they like to see?

Methodology

Our interest lies at the older end of Tapscott's spectrum. We are most concerned with the period of life in which young people become increasingly responsible for their own independent affairs; financially, materially and arguably mentally. Therefore our sampling frame, defined in strict demographic terms is 15-24 year olds (Moschis and Moore, 1979). In recognition of the life changes that take place within this definition, the research will contrast the views of older adolescents who still attend school and live at home (aged 15-17), with younger adults who have left home and are currently attending higher education (aged 18-24).

The research findings are a combination of two independent preliminary research studies carried out by the authors and both are designed to establish the key dimensions of youth experiences of Internet adoption and use. The studies were exploratory in nature, a process that Robson (1989) describes as finding out "what is happening, seeking new insights, asking questions and assessing phenomena in a new light".

In contrast to much of the current empirical work carried out on consumer behaviour and the Internet, experiential qualitative data collection was chosen for both research studies. Burns (1989) quoted in O'Donohoe (2001) summed up qualitative research as "experiencing the experiences of others". Our intentions were similar in nature; to discuss, first hand, types of experiences, uses and consequent behaviours exhibited by young people in relation to the Internet.

To this end, our overall guiding methodology for both research studies was based on principles of phenomenology. This interpretative approach encourages the researcher to explore the participant's "lived in experiences" (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Phenomenology requires the researcher to suspend all ontological judgements in order to gain "common sense and practical reasoning" using language as the central medium (Goulding, 1998). The method also emphasises putting the experiences of the participant's foremost (Thompson *et al.*, 1989) thereby enabling "real life", first hand stories and narratives to be accessed. Given the dynamic and at times complex nature of young adults' lifestyles, phenomenology is an ideal framework to explore the depth of meaning required to gain a meaningful understanding. Although phenomenology is an emerging research method in the discipline of marketing, its use is by no-means unprecedented in the field of e-commerce consumption (see Gould and Lerman, (1998) for example).

The data collection instruments chosen for the exploratory studies were variants on the qualitative focus group technique. Focus group techniques dovetailed with our desire to achieve greater depth and breadth of information than individual interviews could hope for (Morgan, 1997). Focus groups can also offer the security of being in a group situation, particularly where participants are relatively homogeneous, thereby reducing feelings of intimidation which can occur in individual interview situations (Krueger, 1994). This is particularly pertinent when conducting youth research.

For the younger research study (participants aged 15-17), we utilised mini groups (usually involving three to four participants). This encouraged social interaction whilst still exploring individual comments and interpretations in greater

depth than large groups would allow (Robson, 1989). The sampling strategy was self selecting, designed so that each group contained "friendship triads", whereby each participant is on a friendship status with the other members of the group. This was used to minimise peer pressure (Krueger, 1994), which can threaten to suppress naturalistic feedback, particularly in more sensitive schools research. Smaller sized groups also allowed for discussion of topics that might normally be evaded (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999). Three mini group interviews were held in South West Scotland in November 2001. Discussions were typically one hour in length, to allow sufficient time for detailed feedback whilst fitting in with the scheduling of surrounding classes.

For the older research study (participants aged 18-24), the group size increased to four or five individuals. This was designed to reflect the increased sophistication and maturity we expected from older respondents. It thus allowed for a wider range of views whilst still conscious of the overall guidelines of youth research which advocate smaller group size. Given the older age of the participants, it was decided that there was no need for a sampling strategy based on existing friendship structures and so a convenience sampling strategy was adopted for the research. Two focus groups were conducted in March 2001 at the participants' place of study in Scotland.

A key aspect of the method was to encourage respondents to describe their own experiences of using the Internet in their own words. The participants largely set the course of the dialogue with few *a priori* questions concerning the topic. The desire was for the interviewer to be "a non-directive listener" (Thompson *et al.*, 1989), ensuring equality amongst participants and allowing for a wholly naturalistic account of their experiences.

Research findings – "somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue"

Just as Dorothy dreams of a place where she can escape to, away from the problems at home, so too do older teenagers. They use the Internet to escape from times of boredom, a place to go "when there was nothing else to do". Rubin (1981) referred to this as habitual

gratification, namely something to do to pass the time. The Internet is viewed by participants as an escape valve, offering the solution to occasional boredom and offering a window of escapism whereby users can lose themselves in a virtual world, at the touch of a button:

Sometimes when I have got nothing to do and the Internet is there. So it's just click and off I go (P, Male 15-17).

One of the most frequently cited motivations for logging on was to establish and maintain communication with friends and family, allowing an escape from loneliness and boredom and to keep important social networks going. Participants indicated that they had set times of the day when they knew that others would be online to respond to and so it became a habitualised part of their social lives. Rubin (1981) highlighted the ability of media to "talk with other people about what's going on" whilst Svennevig (2000) suggested that one underlying motivation may be to share experiences and ideas with others:

I always check my mail after dinnertime just before I do some work or go out. And it's usually at night-time – that's usually when a lot of other people are on (L, Female 15-17).

Clearly, given that our sample is drawn from those who are still in education, the need to use the Internet for academic purposes is frequently cited (La Ferle *et al.*, 2000). However, the Internet also plays an important role in escaping not just boredom, but the demands of academic study. Escapism can be manifested in usage behaviour that allows the individual to escape from conformity of everyday routines. One older female participant talked about physical freedoms and sense of comfort when using the Internet.

I think at home it's more convenient time-wise than at the university. You don't have to put your clothes on to go, you know you get changed and have shower and go out. So if you just feel at 3am you want to go on the Internet you don't have to go to an Internet cafe if you have it in the house (S, Female 18-22).

This reflected what Venkatesh (1998) called the "consumer freedoms ... and free abandon" in relation to virtual shopping.

In the land over Dorothy's rainbow "troubles melt like lemon drops". Similarly young adults in both age groups valued using the Internet as a place which helped them resolve decision-making problems they encountered in the real world. Internet

information allowed them to compare prices and to increase their knowledge of product offerings:

Finding these goods and services on the Internet, I just want to make sure that I know how much they really cost and whatever I am looking for when I go to the shop and talk about it I am not getting ripped off or that I do not know anything about it (TK, female 18-22).

The Internet was perceived to remove the restrictions of cost, time and place when communicating and seeking information. The younger age group emphasised the fact that the Internet was "more interesting" and a "lot different" than other media and that there still existed a novelty factor in the technology. In both groups, the universality of the Internet was emphasised and the fact that its versatility met many needs:

Just the fact that you can find absolutely anything on it. Anything you need, it will be on there (P, male, 15-17).

It is clear that for the young adults interviewed the Internet had many representations; it was viewed as a problem-solving resource; a place for making friends and as a source of stimulation.

Lions and tigers and bears. Oh my! ...

As her journey progresses Dorothy enters The Dark Wood and she articulates her fear of "Lions and tigers and bears". This research asked young adults to describe the barriers they encountered whilst using the Internet. These can be conceptualised as financial, temporal, social, logistical, and emotional. Emotional responses can be further classified as fear (which can be sub-divided into security and privacy fears), anger over invasion of junk-emails and online advertisements and distrust of interacting with a non-human. Adult barriers tend to revolve around issues of security, payment policies, cost, and difficulties of access (Hoffman *et al.*, 1998; Katz and Aspden, 1997). Few researchers have focused on the barriers associated with intrusive marketing activity.

Financial barriers

There was evidence that the younger age group, who access the Internet more often at home, are aware of financial barriers (reflecting parental concerns). They reported that their usage usually took place at "off peak

times" and in short bursts that rarely last more than an hour; one younger female participant recalled that:

I usually go on if I have got time after tea – short ten or fifteen minutes (S, female, 15-17).

For the older age group, usage was not restricted due to the availability of free university access. This resulted in different Internet behaviour where the Internet was used at certain times for specific activities:

You'll take e-mails in the morning, write a project in the afternoon, then use it for leisure activities in the evening (K, male, 15-17).

Several of the older age group stated that once free access was denied then they expected to change their usage patterns dramatically. They were convinced that the Internet was not yet irreplaceable in their lives and personal usage could alter once "normal" adult conditions apply. The issue of cost clearly grows in importance with increased financial responsibilities and age; Katz and Aspden (1997) highlighted cost as the most frequently cited obstacle for adult Internet usage.

Temporal

It was noticeable that the younger age group felt that the amount of time that they personally were willing to spend online was limited and that they struggled to fit the Internet around their many other activities. They also reported it as "time-wasting" and found it boring if used excessively. Again, the tendency was to use it in short bursts:

I just never really got into it since it started. I think it was because I was too busy doing other things. Like playing sport or going out and I didn't have time to sit down and look at Web sites and all the rest of it (J, male 15-17).

This contrasted with some of the older participants who used it as a background to other activities and remained online for extended periods of time:

I actually have a 24 hour connection at home and just sit there and have everything open, e-mail and sms's and chat rooms and what I'm actually researching and everything that's going on between the different things (D, male, 18-22).

In both age groups, speed of use was related to satisfaction:

It's slow because there are so many people on it at the moment. Especially with AOL, it takes me absolutely forever sometimes so I just end up switching it off because I can't be bothered waiting for it to load up (D, female, 15-17).

Bruce (1999) noted that the Internet is often referred to using the analogy of travel or road system, citing references to an information infrastructure (Dempsey, 1993; Kahin, 1995), an infobahn (Mitchell, 1995), an information superhighway (Koelsch, 1995) and a communication superhighway (Hearn *et al.*, 1998). This representation of the Internet has increased consumer expectations of quick, customised and effective communication (Van Doren *et al.*, 2000). Participants in the older age groups shared strategies as to how they could increase the speed of their Internet activities. There was also evidence of knowledge and expectations that the Internet will become faster to use.

Both sets of groups reported that pop-up adverts prevented them from efficiently accessing information, relating instances of "mouse-trapping" where a programme disables the back button on the Web browser so that is impossible to return to the previous site. It was felt that Internet advertising was not effective and that users had learnt to ignore it or discount it. This type of behaviour was consistent with the findings of Dreze and Hussherr (1999) who found that surfers purposely avoid online (banner) adverts:

So I think that is the reason why it doesn't really work is that people are so used to it – I mean the novelty of it, of advertising, wore off a long time ago so people just now are more focussed on what they are actually doing on a particular site and thus ignore advertising (K, male, 18-22).

However one participant in the older group felt that advertising in this way was acceptable because of the associated cost-benefit trade off:

If you want to keep the Internet free you have this. It is through this advertising that they get the funds (M, male, 18-22).

Existing research into adult views of online advertising remains inconclusive. Schlosser and Shavitt (1999) found equal numbers liking, disliking and feeling neutral about online ads whilst Bruner and Kumar (2000) suggested that positive associations grew with greater web experience. However, recent qualitative research by Rettie (2001) found adult users found Internet advertising "extremely annoying".

Social

The younger age group reported a conflict over phone usage highlighting that using the Internet for prolonged periods of time cut

them off from their friends and also caused problems with their parents. The lack of two lines in the family home remains an obvious barrier to usage. For the older age group, phone line conflicts with families appeared to be resolved but were replaced by conflict with flatmates.

We just all kind of share that one connection and do all our stuff. There are loads of points of contention because you have to fight to get on as well (D, male, 18-22).

Logistical

The location of the computer was a factor in determining usage patterns. For the younger participants, access was from the home in the majority of cases. School access was mentioned in the context of "classwork" use. Within the home the computer was located in either the bedroom, the study, the office or in the living room. Where the machine was located in a bedroom the participant felt a greater sense of ownership and this resulted in heavier access. Where it was in a shared space or an office or studies, patterns of access were more limited. This was illustrated when a participant described what happened when the computer was moved from his bedroom:

Other people have been using it more since it got moved downstairs. When it was in my bedroom, I used to just always use it when I wanted to. Since it got moved I haven't used it as much, other people having been using it more. In my bedroom, I used to be able to use it when I wanted to. But now as it's downstairs, I barely use it at all (Al, Male, 15-17).

In the older age group there were fewer comments about the specific location of the machine. A contrast was made between home and university use when considering cost of use but access problems were not reported. Domestic location appears to be an issue unique to the younger users and ties in the findings of Livingstone and Bovrill (1999) on conflicts over private versus public space in relation to new media.

Emotional

Fear of lack of privacy

Lack of privacy was expressed as a barrier to full usage by both sets of groups. Privacy fears included the fear of being watched and the invasion of privacy, caused by intrusive marketing initiatives:

There is always the chance that somebody is watching what you are doing. I don't know how they do it (L, female 15-17).

When you are logged on to the Internet there are loads of other people who try to get into your computer and like monitor you (TK, Female, 18-22).

Anger at invasion of privacy

In addition to the fear of lack of privacy, participants reported their anger at receiving unsolicited e-mails:

I just tend to ignore it but when it's actually targeted towards you then I think there is big issues of morality, invasion of privacy. I don't like it all, I don't like people knowing exactly. I feel quite paranoid that I might go I don't know into a company's Web site Morgan Stanley or something like that I did actually receive an e-mail from them, a targeted e-mail saying we see you are interested in this do you that we also do this and I think "No this is not good" (D, male, 18-22).

The issue of fears over privacy is well documented by Hoffman *et al.* (1998). Wang *et al.* (1998) called for a more consumer oriented privacy model to help "re-dress the balance and prevent users building up resentment of corporate marketing activity".

The response by users was either to delete the e-mail or sometimes to set up a "false" identity.

The thing to do there is to have multiple e-mail addresses ... I have another one that I never even look ... I never look at it so any junk gets thrown into this chasm and never seen again (D, male, 18-22).

Firat and Venkatesh (1995) referred the use of multiple identities blurring "the real and the unreal", between the real existence and an unreal hyper-reality (Gould and Lerman, 1998). This suggests that such practices have escapist gratifications, not just from the efforts of marketers, but from the realities presented by modern daily life.

Fear of lack of security

Amongst the younger participants, security fears (often influenced by parental concerns) were mentioned as restricting online purchasing behaviour. However in the older age group some participants were minimising the extent of their security fears saying that they did not have that much that could be stolen (reflecting their student status) and that they equated the same risk to using the phone:

I know that some people are worried about giving their details online but at the end of the day my argument is that you give people your details over the phone and anyone can listen in there as well. So I don't really have a problem with the whole security thing of the Internet (A, female, 18-22).

Distrust of the non-human

Fears of dealing with a non-human were also observed, especially in connection with online purchasing. This concurred with worries over mistakes in processing, problems over fulfilment of orders and a general concern about a lack of human skills involved in the online purchase processing.

You do want to know that someone is there, you are not alone sort of thing. That someone is actually interested in. That if you have a question they are going to answer it (L, female, 18-22).

At the heart of many of the mentioned fears is what Hoffman *et al.* (1998) referred to, in an adult context, as "consumers simply not trusting most Web providers enough to engage in relationship exchanges". Internet providers have not been able to reassure users sufficiently to allay the natural emotional concerns that young people possess.

Confidence

However, despite these barriers, the participants interviewed perceived themselves to be more advanced than their parents in their Internet usage, in line with the assertions of Tapscott's n-Gen. The younger age group shared the same experiences and in several cases acted as tutors to their parents. This suggests an increasingly sophisticated, if unconvinced and sceptical audience.

Behind the Wizard's curtain

In order to gain her passage home, Dorothy has to bring the Wicked Witch's broomstick to the Wizard, at this point Dorothy's dog pulls away a curtain exposing a white-haired, ordinary man who is controlling all the Wizard's special effects in the projected image. The young adults in this study described how they viewed online special effects as disguising the Internet's shortcomings:

[They] try to lure consumers by doing fancy online things. Because there are just somethings that no matter how technical no matter how good it gets informing the consumer it just doesn't work (K, male, 18-22).

Young consumers highlighted how the Internet failed to deliver on its promises, and in particular, low cost. There was consensus that the Internet provided access to "hard to find" goods but there was disagreement over whether it offered lower prices:

It may be cheaper than the base price but when you add on the Internet price and the postage and that, then it does get dearer (B, Male, 15-17).

Issue was also taken as to whether the Internet could actually replace the high street shopping experience. Internet shopping was characterised by one younger male participant as "shopping at its lowest form". Another sceptical female preferred the traditional pleasures of high street shopping:

I prefer to go to the shops. And like get out, into the fresh air rather than be inside and kind of claustrophobic. But I would rather get out and walk and go for a wander around shops ... I would rather go hunting ... (J, female, 18-22).

Kaufmann (1999) found that, in an adult US context, one quarter of all Web shoppers were found to be dissatisfied with their shopping experiences. Aware that technology is outpacing demand, our participants highlighted a general concern over the development of the Internet:

I think a real problem with the Internet now is that a lot of companies do things that are technically possible but not actually useful to people (K, male 18-22).

I think it is going too fast in that they are forgetting the fundamentals [they] ... need to consider what consumers want not what they are willing to put out on the Internet site (L, female 18-22).

The desire amongst young people was for the Internet to deliver on its current promises, not simply to create and heighten new expectations.

Discussion and conclusions: "there's no place like home"

These findings indicate that the Internet is very much part and parcel of young people's lifestyles. It offered a number of expected uses and gratifications, ranging from escapism to entertainment to a source of communication and community. It was also widely used for information sourcing and, in some cases, purchasing. However this research also suggests that the Internet does not dominate young adults' lives in the way that reflects the level of hype. For many participants it was a shoulder activity, adjacent and often secondary to more important activities and goals. These patterns of consumption are consistent with the conclusions of Livingstone and Bovrill (1999) that young people are

assimilating new media into the structure of their lives but "it rarely alters their ways of living".

The findings also highlight that young adults' enthusiasm and belief in the Internet is adversely affected by a number of factors. Beyond the disappointment that expectations do not match up to experiences (constrained by financial and social barriers), the problems created by increasingly aggressive online marketing efforts should be of most concern to marketing practitioners. A level of consumer frustration leading to cynicism is evident, arguably undermining the best efforts of online marketing communications strategies, and in particular online advertising, viral marketing and associated e-mailing practices. The fact that young people are recognised as sophisticated decoders of communication and advertising (O'Donohoe and Tynan, 1998) can only reinforce such barriers as methods of evasion become more complex. Young people may be "Net literate" but this does not seem to translate into "Net advocates", given their concerns. Each barrier in isolation may not be enough to quell their level of enthusiasm for the Internet. However, it is the combination of many barriers that we have identified that seeks to put doubt in the minds of the user and dispels the notion of the Internet as the revolutionary "holy grail". Although, Internet usage statistics may be rising, indicating the Internet is being assimilated into everyday life, it does not follow that levels of penetration translate into a universal enthusiasm for the Channel.

A number of academics have now started to highlight this ambivalence towards Internet use. The futura.com project (Byfield, 2000) and the work of the ESRC's Virtual Society? (Wyatt, 2000) both question the notion that the Internet has become a universal obsession. Svennevig (2000), from a media consumption perspective, found that there has not been an "unequivocal shift in time use amongst PC users and Internet users away from TV viewing".

These findings underline that the ever upward assumptions of Internet consumption are not to be taken for granted. The research suggests that young adults are beginning to look beyond the technology and that they, just like Dorothy's dog, are pulling away the curtain of the booth, revealing the levers that control the Wizard's special effects. Just as Dorothy discovered that the Wizard was an

ordinary man, so too are young adults discovering the corporate interests that are shaping their hyper-reality. Young people are not passive receivers of unsolicited e-mails and marketing activity, they react to the perceived growing intrusion with active rejection.

The implications for marketers working in an online environment are significant. Young people are their current and future prospects and carry adolescent attitudes and consumption behaviour forward in life (Moschis and Moore, 1979). The Internet is used for many marketing activities, from establishing new relationships to extending consumer loyalty. This research suggests that practitioners need to give greater thought on how to strengthen, not weaken mutual relationships with young adults' online. No doubt some barriers will diminish in size as the technology develops, the online experience improves and the costs reduce. However, there will still remain potential conflict between the Internet as the "personal space" of its users and the Internet as a "corporate tool".

A key component of the acceptability of online activity is trust. Hoffman *et al.* (1998) concluded that "the most effective way for commercial Web providers to develop profitable exchange relationship with online customers is to earn their trust". Although brand owners may be aware of issues to do with security/privacy (Bush *et al.*, 1999), there is little sign here that those fears are being addressed and the young people in this study related their fear and anger at the invasion of their privacy by advertisers. Trust can only be rebuilt if consumers expectations are met, not undermined (Bauer *et al.*, 1999). This issue should be particularly important given that it has been suggested that the Internet is increasingly perceived as "a potential substitute or complement for all the major categories of existing media" (Silk *et al.*, 2001).

This paper concludes that young adults are realising that the Internet is not able to meet their expectations and are clicking on "exit". We have shown that the Internet plays a wide and varied role in young adults' lifestyles. We have witnessed many barriers that may explain why the Internet has not become the one universal "hub" of their lives. Their expectations in many cases did not live up to their lived in reality.

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