Addressing Youth and Being Young: Investigating the ‘Bias of Youth’ in Irish Advertising

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Abstract
Advertising is a potent symbolic force that is intimately tied to youth culture. This paper examines what is referred to as a ‘bias of youth’ in advertising, suggesting that this manifests itself both ‘textually’ and ‘occupationally’. Bound to the emergence of consumer society, youth culture has been identified as a site of change and uncertainty associated with a more intense aestheticisation of everyday life. As theories of global transformation increasingly centre on consumption, the market as a conception of the world has gained currency. In particular, it is argued that an acceptance by advertisers of theories of global ‘flux’ which construct the marketplace as a site of transformation, compels them to disproportionately favour youth when attempting to capture the zeitgeist. In addition, it is suggested that these ideas have infiltrated the professional ideologies of advertising practitioners, so that occupational suitability is equated with physically being young. It is further suggested that the category of youth itself shows signs of ‘expansion’ and is therefore prompting a re-examination of our conceptions of youth and age.

Keywords
Youth; advertising; Ireland; Celtic Tiger.

Introduction
Advertising has long been a subject of considerable social and academic interest, frequently in the form of criticism of its putative effects. Amongst those considered most susceptible, and by extension most vulnerable, to the influence of advertising is the ambiguously defined category of ‘youth’\(^1\). This paper attempts to link textual and occupational fetishisations of youth in advertising. My suggestion is that the semiotics of ‘youth’ in advertising must be related not only to a general cultural preoccupation with youthfulness in a globalised consumer society, but also to professional ideologies and routines amongst advertising practitioners which equate occupational suitability (particularly ‘creativity’) with physically being young. Drawing on the work of Marianne Lien (1997; 2004) and in particular her notion of a ‘bias of temporality’ in marketing, I will suggest that an aesthetic (or ‘textual’) prioritisation of youth in advertising derives in part from the need to manage what is perceived by practitioners as an environment of constant change, which in turn acts to reinforce an ‘occupational’ bias of youth. In other words, not only does ageism infiltrate the very ethos and
productive logic of the advertising industry but it also constitutes an important dimension of the self-images or repertoires of belief (Cronin, 2004) of advertising practitioners. As Mahoney (2004: 46) states: ‘Advertising, after all, is obsessed with youth, and in turn, the make-up of agencies is skewed young’. In this paper, I partly draw upon empirical data deriving from in-depth interviews with agency practitioners working in the Irish advertising industry. However the work is also shaped in some measure by my own experiences, observations and tacit knowledge as a past practitioner in Irish advertising.

Youth, Modernity and the ‘Textual’ Bias of Youth in Advertising

The evolution of advertising to its present, ubiquitous form has been a gradual and incremental process that has developed in tandem with the advancement of ‘consumer society’ (Baudrillard, 1973). As practitioners, initially in the United States, developed more advanced techniques of persuasion and early signs of advertising’s nascent omnipresence became more pronounced, critics and commentators (such as Packard, 1957) expressed concern about advertising’s manipulative potential. In recent times, this has developed to include ‘mainstream critiques of consumer culture such as Klein (2000), Ritzer (2000), Schlosser (2002), and film documentaries such as “The Corporation” and “Supersize Me” (Kelly et al., 2005: 506). Against evaluating the ethics or morality of advertising in relation to the ‘young’, this paper examines the linkages between textual and occupational fetishisations of youth in advertising. In respect of the former, a predominance of youth representations and an under-representation of older people (in comparison to population demographics) in contemporary commercial advertising is revealed in various studies (Peterson and Ross, 1997; Peterson, 1995; Carrigan and Szmigin, 1999a, b; Carrigan and Szmigin, 2003; Bramlett-Soloman and Wilson, 1989; Zhou and Chen, 1992). While an argument cannot be made in precise terms, I will suggest that a more intense aestheticisation of the representations which accompany the circulation of consumer goods (Nixon, 1997) and the growth of an ideology of consumerism (Heath, 2001) manifested in ‘lifestyle’ have been important elements in this general shift. Moreover, I argue that late/post-modern theories emphasising societal ‘flux’ have been absorbed and perpetuated by the advertising community and partly explain the (double) ‘bias of youth’ in advertising. Given the paucity of research explicitly focusing on youth and advertising in Ireland, this section draws upon an assortment of international literature, encompassing studies of global consumer culture, cultural studies of youth and recent theoretical and empirical research on advertising. As such, this paper advances from a generalised discussion of advertising in a global economy to a narrower consideration of the views of Irish advertising practitioners in the next section.

Although ‘the ideological linking of family, consumption and television fostered the post-war process of modernisation’ (Bernold and Ellmeier, 1997: 198), youth culture was increasingly viewed as harbinger of change. Arvidsson (2003) suggests that in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s, the mass proliferation of consumer goods and youthful patterns of consumption were perceived as a threat to traditional values. Indeed, during the 1960s and 1970s, youth appeared to liberate class through style (Hebdige, 1979; Smee, 1997) and consequently ‘came to symbolise the radical transformations induced by a rapidly expanding consumer culture’ (Arvidsson, 2003: 80). Advertisers
recognised a powerful and untapped emotional territory in the uncertainty of youth and in response, advertising symbolism mixed messages of anxiety and aspiration – a combination that persists today (Corrigan, 1997). It appeared that in youth culture advertising had found a natural alliance: the apparent insecurities, aspirations and ‘openness’ associated with youth identities combined with a perceived need ‘to belong’ made young consumers disproportionately willing to invest economically and emotionally in advertising.

In youth culture, consumption invested the whole life of the individual. This indicated that consumer goods could be given meanings that went far beyond their actual uses; that they could be made to signify a particular way of life or, as the term would become, ‘lifestyle’ (Arvidsson, 2003: 118).

Married to its creative potency and vitality, youth culture during the 1960s and 1970s became increasingly politicised, capturing the attention of a budding ‘cultural studies’ field, chiefly associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University. However, advertising proved highly successful in reintegrating counterculture (Goldman, 1992) and translating value revolutions, such as the punk movement and feminism (Corrigan, 1997) into a new variety of lifestyle consumerism. As such, ‘youthful attachments to consumption and, so it seemed, to life in general, appeared to be spreading to people who were no longer young in a biological sense’ (Arvidsson, 2003: 116). By the 1980s, not only did global media (and advertising in particular) appear to have succumbed to an ideal of youth but this period also witnessed the widespread emergence of theories of ‘globalization’ and ‘post’ or ‘late’ modernity, heralding a period of extensive social and cultural change. Contemporary advertising aligned itself largely in reaction to (and acceptance of) these theories.

If Mort (1997: 15) observed that ‘consumption has loomed large in the historiography of most post-war Western societies’, I suggest that this idea gained increasing popularity in theories of modernity from the 1980s onwards. In accounting for the widespread transformations that have seemingly attended an era of intensified ‘globalization’ – ambiguously defined (see Van Der Bly, 2005) – theorists have tended to prioritise the realm of consumption (Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 1995; Slater, 1997). ‘Consumption is now taken as the crucial sphere where individual members of late modern society actively or reflexively express and construct ever more diverse, fluid, fragmented and hybrid identities’ (Preston, 2005: 62). Correspondingly, the breakdown of barriers implied by globalising market trajectories is held to intensify the individualisation of consumer society (Leiss et al., 1986; Beck, 1992) implying increased market dependency and an enhanced role for mediating institutions. With the apparent dominance of sign values (Baudrillard, 1998), marketing and advertising are not merely considered important but are afforded privileged status via their ability to link consumers to other cultural forms and hence, the boundaries between different categories within the mediascape become increasingly permeable (Falk, 1997). Going further, Wernick (1991) makes a compelling argument for the infiltration of a marketing and promotional ethos into all aspects of life giving rise to a culture of self-promotion.
With the apparent triumph of capitalism and the collapse of planned economies by the 1990s ‘the market as a conception of the world’ has gained ground internationally (Garsten and Lindh de Montoya, 2004: 5). Several commentators highlight what appear to be signs of transnational (Hannez, 1993) and transcultural (Nederveen Pieterse, 1995) alignment. Robins (1997) describes a growing sense of a ‘new world order’ and the emergence of ‘global tastes’ attributed to the transnationalisation of economic and cultural life. In accounting for this, Robbins (1997) ascribes considerable importance to the globalization of media, to which he attributes a postmodernist, expansionist logic: ‘Media geographies are thus becoming detached from the symbolic spaces of national culture, and realigned on the basis of the more ‘universal’ principles of international consumer culture (Robins, 1997: 33). In light of this, I suggest that youth as a primary ‘universal’ registers at the core of international consumer culture and transnational marketing efforts because, as De Mooij (1994) indicates, the youth market is increasingly considered ‘single’.

In this sense, youth culture represents the atypical ‘consumption community’ (Boorstin, 1973). This relates to my suggestion above that in view of apparent age-associated insecurities, youth culture appears to exhibit greater conformity (Sutherland and Sylvester, 2000) yet also, paradoxically, a greater variety of aesthetic expression. Thus, given the imperative by major consumer goods companies in the 1990s to promote most heavily those brands most likely to succeed in a global marketplace (Haden et al., 2004), it is perhaps understandable that those targeting ‘youth’ offered greatest appeal. As McRobbie (1994: 192) indicates: ‘the commercial requirement of novelty as a condition of profitability reflects precisely the uncertainty of subjectivity’. In addition, the ideals of youth – beauty, recognition, romance – afforded advertisers a wealth of creative possibility to captivate consumers. As ‘the internationalization of brands has been stimulated by the internationalization of media’ (De Mooij, 1994: 211), myriad consumer-touch points have been generated and mainstream audio-visual media is increasingly dominated by a “MTV aesthetic” (Dickinson, 2000) and the floating signifiers of urban youth culture. Indeed, it has become almost axiomatic that brands are considered ‘the preserve of young people’ (Harkin and Huber, 2004: 44). There is growing evidence, however, that candidacy for ‘youth’ is changing, incorporating the cognitively, as well as the physically young. Thus, as I suggest below, we may require an expanded sociological notion of youth and specifically one that gives greater attention to its psychosocial aspects.

In tandem with the advance of (global) consumer society, the advertising industry became increasingly professionalised. Nixon (1997), for example, suggests that Fordism and flexible specialisation (or post-Fordism) were important elements in the shift towards mass consumer marketing. With the end of the so-called ‘creative revolution’ of the 1960s in American advertising, a new era of management science was ushered in (Fox, 1990). However, by the 1980s, ‘creativity’ once again became a priority in advertising, with attention this time shifting to the so-called ‘second wave’ agencies arising in the UK (Nixon, 1997). Not only was ‘creativity’ considered the primary means by which agencies could effectively tap into the emerging ‘lifestyle’ ethos of consumers via an increasing use of attitudinal and psychographic data, but the language of flux also produced a change in the organisational structures and cultures of advertising institutions, which were adjusted to fit developing notions of ‘enterprise’.
(Rose, 1990; du Gay, 1997) and ‘flexibility’ (Alvesson, 1998). Thus, in addition to the centripetal aesthetic hold ‘youth’ appeared to exert on global consumer society, I suggest – drawing on the work of Marianne Lien (1997, 2004) – that notions of ‘flux’ and ‘change’ were absorbed by the advertising community, ultimately serving to reinforce a bias of youth in commercial texts. In order to remain ‘up-to-date’ marketers and advertisers did not look to ageing consumers but disproportionately fixed their gaze upon youth trends (Swayne and Greco, 1987).

Employing data emerging from eight months fieldwork in the marketing department of a Norwegian food manufacturer, Lien considers ‘the ways in which marketing mediates and reconfigures notions of time, change, consumption and consumers’ (2004: 48). Drawing upon accounts which seek to describe widespread experiences of change, such as Gidden’s ‘high modernity’ (1991) and Bauman’s ‘liquid modernity’ (2000), Lien establishes a platform from which to investigate the processes of modernity (theorised in these accounts) as enacted and experienced within the context of a marketing department. Chief among Lien’s observations is that marketing is biased towards future scenarios and change: ‘Repeated references to novelties, news, the future and anticipated change serve to constitute what I will refer to as a bias of temporality in marketing discourse’ (Lien, 2004: 49). Reconfiguring Lien’s ‘bias of temporality’ to investigate youth, I suggest that a heavily futurist orientation and focus on change when producing advertisements inclines advertisers to prioritise youth in their texts. In submitting to an ethos of constant change, unstable identities and endless wants (Campbell, 1987), consumer culture perpetuates a logic of disposability and an ‘aesthetics of ephemerality’ (Appadurai, 1996). O’Barr (1994) suggests that all advertisements contain ideology. Thus, advertising representations provide paradigms for relations between members of advertising’s intended audience as well as those defined as outside it (Frith, 1997). In the case of commercial advertising, I argue that the ideology of consumerism condenses into an ideal of youth at the representational level. Aging is arrested, ignored and resisted. My argument is not that a generally futurist orientation continually generates new kinds of appeals or techniques of persuasion but that the rhetoric of change and creativity – largely adopted to convince clients that ideas are contemporary and ‘up to date’ – drives advertisers to disproportionately draw from and subsequently appeal to youth. ‘Partly due to its constant promotion of novelty, advertising is imagined to be the sign of the times, representing the leading edge of social change’ (Cronin, 2004: 34/5). Advertisers desire to stay abreast of change and this pushes them to disproportionately consider youth when attempting to capture the zeitgeist; the apparent fickleness of youth tastes perceived as naturally aligned to the ‘creative’ imperatives of advertising. Furthermore, I suggest that professional notions of societal flux which help to anchor youth as a central aesthetic have in turn profound implications for industry mythologies, perpetuating a bias of youth in occupational terms. In the following section, I examine the linkages between textual and occupational fetishisations of youth via a discussion of interview work conducted with Irish advertising practitioners.
The ‘Occupational’ Bias of Youth in Advertising

One visiting an ad agency is always taken by the youth of its staff...ours is an occupation for the young (Kover, 1977: 36).

Carrigan and Szmigin (2003) suggest that advertising generally excludes older people (in representational terms) in favour of the youth market. In accounting for this bias, I suggested (above) that an explanation demands consideration of many factors, but is likely to include the following: a conception of youth as the pulse of modernity; the perceived aesthetic and creative potentiality afforded by youth appeals and themes; a demonstrable inclination on the part of youth to invest financially and emotionally in advertising derived, in part, from a putative insecurity and openness of identity; and an apparent synergy or affinity between global brands and ‘universal’ youth culture. In this section, however, I wish to examine a second (occupational) manifestation of the bias of youth, drawing from substantive studies of practitioners in advertising as well as incorporating some qualitative interview data deriving from my own research. While the empirical data included here is taken directly from interviews with Irish practitioners (using initials for the purposes of confidentiality and anonymity), the views expressed should be interpreted within the wider industry context discussed in the previous section.

However explained, it would appear that advertising has long been regarded ‘a business in which youth has a special kind of moral advantage’ (Tunstall, 1964: 17). Even today, Tunstall’s description appears to hold true. Denise DeMars, director of human resources and worldwide compensation director for Foote Cone & Belding in the United States, recently commented: ‘We have a higher [percentage of] Generation X in our demographics than the typical labour force’ (quoted in Noe, 2005: 28). Similarly, Mahoney (2004: 46), drawing on Bureau of Labour Statistics figures, suggests that more than fifty-nine percent of employees in the UK advertising industry are between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four. Unfortunately, there are no similar figures currently available from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) or the Institute of Advertising Practitioners of Ireland (IAPI). Nevertheless, my own findings offer some support to the proposition that ‘advertising is a young person’s industry’ (Powell, 2000: 212). While commentators and journalists (such as Mahoney above) argue that what I have termed an ‘occupational’ bias of youth operates in advertising, an adequate explanation for why this is so is markedly absent in these accounts. Bird (1993: 330), for example, blandly states that ‘the challenge and variety of work in the agencies appeal more to young people’. I want to suggest, in line with Cronin (2004), that advertising is constituted via ‘circuits of belief’ that flow between practitioners, clients, regulators, consumers and academics. In doing so, I will suggest that several of the abovementioned factors that can be used to explain the ‘textual’ bias of youth are also implicated in a corresponding ‘occupational’ bias. (In the language of ‘discourse analysis’, the metaphors and descriptions under the following headings might be described as ‘interpretative repertoires’.)
**Flexibility and Flux**

As suggested above, developments in British advertising in the 1980s which prioritised ‘creativity’ (Nixon, 1997) and sponsored emerging theories of ‘flux’ and globalization, generated organisational responses among advertising agencies worldwide that were based on ideas of ‘flexibility’ (to manage change) and ‘creativity’ (to harness change). In explaining his personal philosophy of how advertising should function, the following comment from an account planner in an Irish agency reveals an explicit belief in both flux and adaptive business:

*I think everyone should take an heuristic approach and the best people and the best companies tend to do that as well...nothing stands still so you need to have models that are fluid and I think that's pretty much our approach as well.*

(SB: Account Planner)

Organisationally, agencies have drawn much from management discourses which promote ‘flexible’ business (Alvesson, 1998) and models of ‘commercial enterprise’ (du Gay, 1996). As the above quotation implies, a language of ‘flux’ and ‘flexibility’ is evident in industry discourse. Beliefs, such as the ‘pace of social change [is] much faster than in any prior system’ (Giddens, 1991: 16) infiltrate advertising discourse and are evident in the writing of industry gurus and specialists. Theodore Levitt (1983), for example, has argued that companies that do not adapt to the new global realities will become victims of those that do. This resonates with a description of her work by an Irish account executive:

*I think you constantly try to improve and I think you’re in trouble the day you stop trying to improve, and I guess its constant change, constant innovation...I think it is about constantly, constantly looking at new ways of doing things.*

(DT: Account Executive)

Here again a language of flux is apparent. My suggestion is that a configuration of the market (and modernity) as a site of flux via the circulation of various discourses – academic, media, and industry specialists – is continually absorbed by practitioners and, as Lien (2004) notes, is increasingly useful when describing their dispositions, concerns and anxieties. I argue, however, that this futurist orientation compels advertising practitioners to increasingly look to youth culture as the site or ‘pulse’ of change and in doing so, reinforces an occupational bias of youth. Tunstall (1964: 17), for example, offers a direct correlation between the textual and occupational biases of youth, commenting: ‘most advertising is directed at younger rather than older people; advertising is obsessed with the new product, the new package, the new price, the new campaign; in turn it is generally agreed by young and old to be a “young man’s business”’. In a similar vein, the following comments from an Irish media executive construct advertising as a high-energy occupation that requires alertness and attentiveness and a competence in various skill sets, and consequently (he implies), is likely to prove too demanding an environment for older workers:

*I don’t know if older people could take the pace – computers, meetings, focus groups, pitches, search engines...I think it would probably be too stressful for them.*

(NW: Media Executive)
‘Technology’, it would appear, is a crucial factor in the above explanation. This can be linked to a much larger debate concerning the flexibilisation of labour markets and a general imbrication of ICTs in working life associated with post-Fordism and the rise of Knowledge Intensive Firms (KIFs)\(^2\), which arguably engender a more widespread occupational bias towards youth. In the above excerpts, advertising practitioners construct agency work as fast-paced, complicated and stressful, yet this is explained by a rationale for responsive and adaptive business in a world in which ‘nothing stands still’. Thus, flux is considered both a (market) condition and a necessary (organisational) response.

**Creativity and Connectivity**

Another fundamental explanation for the occupational bias of youth in advertising appears to rest in the industry’s demand for creativity. ‘Creativity, indisputably the least scientific aspect of advertising, is arguably the most important’ (Reid et al., 1998: 1). While the occupational bias of youth, I argue, permeates the entire advertising industry, there is considerable evidence to suggest that it is more pronounced among creative practitioners. ‘We continue to associate youth and hip with creative. Age, it appears, has more to do with the logic of the advertising industry than aging itself’ (Powell, 2000: 212). In several accounts, there is a sense that ‘creatives’ must either rise to the level of management by their late thirties or else run a high risk of redundancy:

> There is a strong prejudice in favour of working copywriters and artists (as opposed to administrators) being fairly young; but the demand for youth is no less insistent than the demand for experience. This means that around their early thirties creative people in advertising reach a watershed in their careers; if they do not hold senior positions by their late thirties they have little prospect of advancement (Tunstall, 1964: 74).

In accounting for the pronounced bias of youth among creative practitioners, I suggest that this can be explained by the perceived need for creatives to ‘connect’ with (youthful) audiences. As such, I argue that it has become near axiomatic in the advertising industry that creatives should not merely strive to understand youth but ideally, should be young themselves. In explaining this rationale, a representative of the Institute of Advertising Practitioners of Ireland (IAPI) suggests that a shared cultural language is fundamental:

> *By the dint of having to engage with a generally young audience... you need empathy, you need to understand cultural values, the way of life and above all you need to be able to speak the language – there is no point getting a sixty-five-year-old to do something for MTV.*
> (JH: IAPI Representative)

Expressing a similar sentiment, an Irish media director comments:

> *You know I’m not being ageist here but it’s not realistic perhaps to have somebody in their forties do commercials about the latest sexiest Nokia camera phones.*
> (PM: Media Director)
Research on creative processes in advertising remains sparse. However, some findings suggest that creatives attempt to connect with audiences by, for example, engaging in one-on-one dialogues with an internalised target consumer (Reid et al., 1998) as well as employing methods such as role-play and personification, which appear to better enable the creative to envision the world as consumers experience it (Lannon and Cooper, 1983). Du Gay (1997: 287) develops a notion of 'hybrid' work identities to explain the manner in which employees in service work are encouraged to take on the role of both worker and customer in the workplace. Applying this idea to creatives in advertising, I suggest that these practitioners are increasingly encouraged to adopt the position of the consumer, or more specifically, the 'target audience'. As a creative working in an Irish advertising agency describes:

*“A creative will always put himself or herself in the mindset of the person they are selling to.”*  
(DOD: Creative)

Nevertheless, practitioners imply that a close proximity between creatives’ ages and those of consumer audiences (who are generally viewed as young) is preferable because creatives will have a ‘natural’ understanding of their intended audience and thus, it is assumed, can develop more ‘authentic’ communication strategies.

*“Isn’t it much easier whereby they’re already within that sort of arena and they already have the passion?”*  
(PM: Media Director)

In the above quotation, the Irish media director intimates that a creative’s ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1984) is fundamental to his or her ability to produce meaningful and culturally resonant material. Indeed, the tendency for advertising creatives to draw from their private lives marks a significant point of departure between my own research and Lien’s (1997, 2004) investigation of marketing professionals. Lien suggests that ‘in the day-to-day practice of marketing, competence derived from the domestic sphere largely remains invisible or unarticulated’ (1997: 264 –emphasis added). In the case of advertising practitioners, the conventional modernist demarcation between public and private life becomes blurred. Indeed, I suggest that the more creatives appear to bring their private selves (taste in music, film, clothes etc.) into the work environment the more ‘genuinely’ creative and by implication, the more capable and ‘connected’, they appear.

*“You’re piecing little bits and pieces together, then you throw in, kind of, little bits of your own life experiences – books you’ve read, films that you’ve seen.”*  
(DOD: Creative)

As advertising creatives are typically young, their search for trends, fashions and styles ironically leaves them examining their own social circles. ‘Young brand managers work with young agency creatives and young media buyers to come up with campaigns. Inevitably, they end up positioning brands at the markets they know best: themselves’ (Wilson, 2000: 60). As this implies, the bias of youth is not only promulgated by agencies but also by clients who, in desiring an up-to-date brand and image, also tend to favour younger practitioners working on their accounts. As Keith Gould (1996: 20),
drawing on Richard Kurnit, notes: ‘...there is a premium on youth from the client’s standpoint. Clients want people on their business to be able to interact with consumers who they believe are all young’. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that creative practitioners are inclined to perpetuate this association and continually construct themselves and their work according to these industry norms and stereotypes. In a sense, creatives are regarded as the connective tissue to the youthful pulse of contemporary life and as such, they are expected to signify, indeed, embody or personify that pulse. Creatives are therefore known for their casual appearance and somewhat lackadaisical attitude towards ‘executive’ attire. They often listen to music while working and are prone to taking ‘inspirational breaks’ by playing pool and foosball\(^\text{13}\). However, with a certain informal flexibility and latitude comes a greater degree of uncertainty and thus, creative careers (that do not evolve into creative-management positions) tend to be short-lived. As an IAPI representative expresses it:

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\text{Advertising as an industry is like Quicksilver – I mean people’s reputations tend to be kind of like a wave in the sea if I can draw that analogy…creatives usually have a number of years in the sun and then they move out of focus and it focuses on somebody else.}
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\[(\text{JH: IAPI Representative})\]

It is therefore somewhat prudent that in advertising there is a constant search for ‘new talent’, notably in the numerous award shows aimed at young creatives such as the D&AD Student Awards and Canada’s National Young Advertisers Awards (NYAA). Likewise, the Yahoo! Sharpener Awards target budding creatives (in Ireland and the UK) and the Irish Shark Awards include a ‘Young Creatives’ award. Thus, rather like the talent-spotters and youth training schemes in sport, international advertising attempts to generate and cultivate a constant pool of talent from which to draw expertise. Furthermore, many of the larger agencies in the United States and Britain now operate trainee schemes for young graduates (Tunstall, 1964). While schemes of this kind do not as yet operate in Ireland, the Irish advertising industry has nevertheless developed close ties with certain third level institutions\(^\text{14}\) in devising courses with a view to students working in the Irish industry.

**A Sociable Occupation**

In addition to the above, there is some evidence to suggest that the occupational ‘bias of youth’ in advertising can partly be explained by a widespread belief that advertising is a ‘sociable’ occupation, as the following statement from an Irish account executive reveals:

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\text{I was very unmotivated when I came out of college and was trying to get into the real world, I think I wanted something that was as close to college as possible so… informal, fun, creative, dealing with a lot of people and unstructured.}
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\[(\text{DT: Account Executive})\]

Indeed, it can be argued that the ‘creative’ 1980s did much to promote the image of advertising as a fashionable, fast-paced and decadent business. In an article entitled ‘Cocaine in the Agency’ in Ad Forum (1984: 26), for example, Dick Stevenson suggested that the use of cocaine by advertising practitioners was partly attributable to ‘the fast-paced, high-pressured environment and the young, well-paid workers’. Such a description might now appear rather dated.
Nevertheless, associations of this kind persist to some degree and advertising people continue to describe their industry (and fellow workers) as fun and sociable:

*If you’re not having fun in advertising you shouldn’t be working in it actually.*

(BB: Creative)

Taken together, I suggest that the three factors above – flexibility and flux; creativity and connectivity; and sociability – offer a means of broadly explaining the persistence of an occupational bias of youth in advertising. There are, however, other possible explanations, not least the suggestion that younger workers generally cost agencies less than their more experienced peers (Newland, 1999). Equally, the career mobility which is evident in advertising (Tunstall, 1964) may dissuade older entrants. Kover offers other reasons, which include the somewhat dubious suggestion that advertising practitioners have ‘life expectancies ten years less than most other occupations’ (1977: 36). What is of fundamental importance to advertising agencies, however, is that they are perceived as fashionable and contemporary and their practitioners considered urbane and sophisticated. ‘Young, fresh and zesty is the image to which every advertising agency aspires’ (Powell, 2000: 212). In attempting to develop this association, agencies are typically located ‘at the heart of metropolitan life [thus cultivating]...an association of the agencies with modernity and urban sophistication’ (Nixon 1997: 215). My suggestion is that the construction of advertising as a knowledge-intensive, creative, flexible and sociable industry positioned at the forefront of cultural change not only biases agencies towards hiring younger people but also generates a tendency among practitioners (and creative practitioners in particular) to develop work-based identities and behaviours that conform to these norms. Clearly, this is not to imply that older workers are absent in advertising. ‘Of course, top management is usually forty-five, as are the telephone operators and the people in accounting’ (Kover, 1977: 36). Nevertheless, my argument is that an ‘ideal’ of youth permeates the industry at large, captivating older workers as much as young. Alvesson (1998), for example, notes that middle-aged men in Swedish agencies are referred to as the ‘lads’ or the ‘guys’. In cultivating an image of youthful industry, practitioners are compelled to construct themselves according to this ideal. Indeed, this belief is perpetuated and circulated in other discourses, such as recruitment notices. As Cronin (2004: 54) argues: ‘beliefs about advertising “substantialize” it and generate its social form’. In effect, my suggestion is that a belief (by practitioners and the public) that advertising is a young person’s business constitutes it as such. Youth is institutionalised and reified in advertising. What appears a reaction to the market manifests more deeply and is ingrained in the psyche of practitioners, particularly those responsible for ‘creativity’ in this field.

**A Note on ‘Expanded Youth’**

In advertising, youth is constructed as an infinitely changeable category which corresponds to Lien’s metaphoric structure of the market as a ‘flux of transformation’ (1997: 94). However, paradoxically, youth also provides a source of stability via its constant appeal. It is, to borrow from Gilroy (1997: 335), a kind of ‘changing same’. As consumers age, advertisers attempt to develop multiple points of engagement under the general auspices of youth. Hence, although practitioners generally continue to prioritise youth
when identifying a ‘bull’s-eye’ target audience, they increasingly do so in a manner that will not alienate older consumers (Silvers, 1997). Consequently, ‘youth’ becomes an expanded category in which demographics cede a certain amount to psychographics and youth becomes not merely an indication of age but increasingly also a ‘state of mind’\(^\text{17}\). In this sense, ‘people respond to advertisements and purchase according to the age that they feel and not according to their chronological age’ (Turley, 1995: 398).

Although the Irish ‘youth population’ is contracting (Decode Study, 2002), there is evidence to suggest that people outside of this narrow demographic, such as ‘the Pope’s Children’ (McWilliams, 2005), are increasingly adopting lifestyles and interests traditionally associated with younger people. Indeed, the ageing ‘baby boomer’\(^\text{18}\) generation appears to be dramatically altering the social character of Western countries. Employing data obtained from the Commission of the European Communities (1999), Carrigan and Szmigin (2003: 198) suggest that ‘between 1995 and 2015, the 20–29 age group [across Europe] will decrease by 11 million, while the 50–64 age group will increase by 16.5 million’. Writing about the rise of the ‘baby boomer’ generation in the UK, Harkin and Huber (2004) suggest that this group is inclined to reject many of the traditional associations of old age and instead, are re-appropriating aspects of youth culture. They point to a rise, for example, in gym membership, alternative mind-body exercises such as yoga and Tai Chi and a steady increase in the consumption of anti-ageing products and cosmetic surgery. Thus, Harkin and Huber conclude that: ‘youth culture and popular culture...has expanded its boundaries – and now increasingly extends to encompass people in their forties’ (2004: 50). This development has not gone unnoticed by marketers and advertisers. Referring to Ireland, Paul Moran, the Managing Director of Mediaworks (an Irish media advertising company), comments:

> The population in Ireland will begin to mirror European age trends in that we will have an older population, probably enjoying a healthier lifestyle. They are also likely to be more affluent than today’s 50 year-olds. Therefore, while a significant number of brands and media are today focusing on the under 35 year-olds, within the next three decades I would predict an increase in the number of brands (and subsequently media) chasing the ‘grey Euro’ (quoted in McWilliams, 2004: 36)

Given that ‘modern advertising concentrates at those points where the individual and society meet’ (Corrigan, 1997: 67) and taking into account Ireland’s ageing (yet cognitively ‘young’) population, one might hypothesise (in line with Moran above), that Irish advertising will increasingly depict older people engaged in activities, contexts and lifestyles formerly considered the preserve of the biologically young\(^\text{19}\). This is not to imply the obsolescence of demographics. Clearly, lifestyle and age, as has long been noted, are as much cultural and social constructions as biological approximations (Szmigin and Carrigan, 2001). Nevertheless, while I might agree with Frankel (1998) that the media is dominated by the young, I suggest that ‘youth’ demographically constituted does not make adequate allowance for its expansionist tendencies at the cognitive level. As the ‘baby boomer’ generation ages and given McWilliams’s prognosis on the lifestyle habits and self-perceptions of the ‘Pope’s Children’, it is likely that advertising will react accordingly.
Conclusion

This paper began with the suggestion that in constituting the ‘vanguard of a general reformation of consumer tastes...’ (Arvidsson 2003: 117), ‘youth’ has come to represent the symbolic heart of (global) commercial media. In identifying youth as harbinger of ‘consumer society’ (Baudrillard, 1973), advertisers turned their attentions disproportionately towards it. I have argued – drawing much from the work of Marianne Lien (1997, 2004) – that in doing so advertising exhibits a ‘bias of youth’, both textually and occupationally. In regard to the former, I have suggested that global advertising, captivated by the creative and aesthetic potency of youth and the apparent ‘openness’ of youth identities, combined with the dissemination of ideas of ‘flux’ and ‘uncertainty’ selectively appropriated from theories of (post)modernity and globalization, gradually gained currency in advertising and marketing discourses making the appeal to youth paradigmatic. Furthermore, I have argued that the popular appeal of theories of flux (combined with a need for ‘creativity’ and a notion of sociability) not only shaped the productive logic of advertising and inspired ‘flexible’ organisational structures, but gradually infiltrated the ethos and work-based identities of advertising practitioners. In effect, my contention is that professional notions of societal flux help to anchor youth as a central aesthetic, which in turn has profound implications for occupational mythologies. Thus, I have suggested that the semiotics (and fetishisation) of youth in advertising transcends a simple micro-macro distinction; it is evident in both the centrality of youth in global advertising campaigns and in the professional ideologies and routines of individual practitioners. As Cronin (2004: 76) suggests, the ‘flow of beliefs about advertising actively constitutes advertising’. In light of this, I have argued that in advertising ‘youth’ is institutionalised and reified, infusing the various discourses which collectively constitute this industry.

This paper has said little on the implications for the lives of young people and related policy and practice. However, it is unquestionably true that the apparent resilience of the youth fetish within advertising has clear implications for career prospects and personal security. Given that growth projections for the global advertising and media industries remain extremely strong (O’Brien 2005), it is likely that an increasing number of young Irish people will come to work in these industries. Many young people, as suggested above, consider advertising a creative and sociable industry yet such associations may allow work pressures and job insecurities to pass unnoticed. Writing about Irish software companies, for example, Greco (2005: 45) suggests that despite the rhetoric of flexibility, collaboration and autonomy, ‘new and different forms of inequality have come to surface in the industry’. On a broader note, my suggestion that we may require an ‘expanded’ sociological notion of youth to account for more youthful subjectivities among biologically older people has implications in respect of the dominant public values in Ireland’s burgeoning consumer society. A common critique centres on the perceived shift towards consumerist materialism and away from traditional values. For Bogle (1997: 85), ‘the dominance of a worldwide pop culture through which millions of the world’s youth tune into a universal sound, the sense of instantaneous wishes (food, sex, fun, entertainment) instantly gratified’ challenges traditional values and culture. Likewise, technological development is ambiguously regarded and tends to perpetuate a binary opposition between the elderly, who are often portrayed as Luddites, and the young,
who are considered the entrepreneurs of change. In distinguishing a society based on ‘transmission’ from one preoccupied with ‘communication’, Michael Cronin (2004) remains somewhat dubious about Ireland’s race towards technological modernisation. For Cronin, an ‘old grey man’ symbolises traditional Irish society and we can reasonably infer that leading the rush towards ‘communication’ society is the indomitable face of ‘youth’.

In the last ten years, there has been a remarkable shift in Ireland from what we might describe as a society primarily concerned with transmission to a society preoccupied by communication... So the last decade has seen Ireland link up with the rest of the world in communicative euphoria and position itself through education, training and investment on a map of global connectedness. Transmission is Myles na gCopaleen’s Old Grey Man muttering to himself about a world gone bad and the Irish who no longer have any claim to Save Civilisation (Cronin, 2004: 216).

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Notes
1 The definitional ambiguity surrounding the term ‘youth’ is highly problematic. Ford and Philips (2000), for example, define ‘youth’ as 11–19 year olds while for O’Connor (2006) ‘young people’ are those aged 14–17 years. Similarly, O’Donohoe (1995) examines interpretations of advertising among ‘young adults’, whom she defines as 18–24 year-olds while the Irish ‘Decode’ study (2002) uses the same age range to refer to the ‘youth market’ in Ireland.
2 I have labelled my work ‘productivist’ to highlight its focus on producers, rather than consumers, of advertising. The research is not entirely unique in this regard and follows a shift towards micro-orientated investigations of internal processes in marketing and advertising institutions (Lien, 1997; Miller, 1997; Nixon, 2003; Kelly et al., 2005). The research follows an interpretivist and constructionist epistemology and uses semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews (see Kvale, 1996) as the primary research method in generating ‘grounded theory’ (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In particular, I locate my work at the nexus of organisational culture and broader discourses of culture. Thus, rather like Negus (2002: 118), I wish ‘to emphasise how broader social divisions are inscribed into and become an integral part of business practices’. While I did not set out explicitly to focus on youth, the significance of this factor at both textual and occupational levels gradually emerged. This paper draws upon interviews conducted with Irish advertising practitioners during the period 2004–2006. Interviews were mostly conducted at the work premises of respondents and lasted approximately one hour. While the empirical research presented here is entirely qualitative, I believe there is ample scope for the incorporation of quantitative methods in future studies.
3 Here ‘practitioner’ refers to people working within advertising agencies (though I have also included the views of a representative of IAPI – the governing body of Irish Advertising). As Lien (1997: 51) highlights, an advertising agency is usually organised according to a basic internal division between the creative (copywriters and art directors) and the consultant (account managers, directors and planners) departments. Among Irish practitioners, these are generally referred to as the ‘creatives’ and the ‘suits’. In addition, a ‘media’ department may also be found in advertising agencies in which case it is generally deemed part of the ‘consultant’ side of the business.
I have worked as a media buyer and account executive in several Irish advertising and media companies (with international affiliation), which include Viacom Outdoor and TMP Worldwide.

‘Commercial advertising’ can be defined as: ‘advertising that involves commercial interests rather than advocating a social or political cause’ (Department of Advertising, University of Texas www.utexas.com).

Bennett (2006) suggests that the Birmingham Centre’s weddedness to youth was a product of specific ideological context. ‘Grounded in Marxist and neo-Marxist theories of class conflict and hegemonic struggle, “subculture” became a conceptual framework for studying the evolution of such traits in the context of late capitalism. “Youth”, as a disempowered yet highly resistant social group, provided the perfect vehicle for subcultural theorists to interpret popular music and its attendant visual styles as politicised resources in the power struggles that characterise late capitalist society’ (Bennett, 2006: 222).

One might draw support for Wernick’s (1991) proposition in noting the veritable explosion of ‘everyday celebrities’ and fame mania linked to the rise of reality TV programmes such as Big Brother (see Lavelle 2006). According to Mathews (2005: 7), ‘the ‘reality’ genre has become the postmodern TV format par excellence with its relentless focus on the ‘now’ and its endless possibilities for role play and parody’.

In the ‘global youth’ advertisement one frequently observes a confluence of youth and other social categories; gender, ethnicity, class etc. It is almost as if youth itself – its idealism, its vitality, its joie de vivre – can magically trump social divisions. The black and the white, the ghetto and the suburb, harmoniously coexist within the democratic horizons of transcendent and emancipatory youth. It is perhaps no wonder then that so many ‘multicultural’ brands (such as Coca-Cola, Tommy Hilfiger and Benetton) bypass the difficulties of univeralism/particularism in a simplified and idealistic appeal to youth. Giroux (2006) describes a ‘postmodern generation of (global) youth’ targeted by companies such as McDonald’s, Coca-Cola, Esprit, and The Gap. ‘In this scenario, youth may be experiencing the indeterminacy, senselessness, and multiple conditions of postmodernism, but corporate advertisers are attempting to theorize a pedagogy of consumption as part of a new way of appropriating postmodern differences among youth in different sites and locations’ (Giroux, 2006).

It should be highlighted that Lien’s focus is on ‘marketing’ as opposed to ‘advertising’ (which constitutes only one part of marketing communications). Thus, while I maintain that much of her analysis holds true for advertising, it should be noted that marketers are ‘clients’ of advertising agencies and thus are subject to a different (as well as similar) set of institutional and environmental conditions, imperatives and constraints.

As suggested above, I argue that ‘youth’ (broadly defined) has long operated as a kind of dominant aesthetic code in advertising. Nevertheless, as Klein (2000) indicates, the youth ‘market’ greatly increased with the rise of global brands in the early 1990s. Today (in the opinion of advertisers) ‘youth’ is textually hegemonic, as the following statement from a creative in an Irish advertising agency suggests:

\[\text{It’s become a young person’s world – hip hop, MTV, fashion, Hollywood, sex...maybe the world has always been a playground for the young. Everyone wants to be young and people just seem to have more power to be young these days. Sex and the City, Friends...these shows target older audiences but they are ‘young old’ if you know what I mean?}.\]

(BB: Creative)

In the above statement, the creative implies that the pulse of life has always been in youth, a view that perhaps would be shared by many people. However, she also suggests that youth as a market and, perhaps more importantly, as a concept in everyday life, has expanded. Her suggestion is that the world now seemingly empowers youth but furthermore, that youth exerts an irresistible force that captivates and appeals to all ages. Naturally, this comment (and indeed this paper) derives from a culturally specific conception of youth and we can reasonably infer that the world referred to above is the ‘Western’ world. Furthermore, the above statement presupposes that all those within the world (Western or otherwise) possess the power to ‘be young’ in these terms.

See Kelly et al. (2005) for a comprehensive account of the use of this method in exploring production processes in Irish advertising. Potter and Wetherell (1987: 138) define an interpretative repertoire as: ‘...a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterise actions or events’ (quoted in Kelly et al., 2005: 512).
12 *In contrast to bureaucracies, knowledge intensive companies promote time flexibility, collaborative work environments, immediate human relations, autonomy and performance-related career progression* (Greco, 2005: 45). While not all industries can be described as ‘knowledge intensive’, adaptability, versatility and flexibility are increasingly important across the board. As Keenan (2006: 6) wryly puts it; ‘in the workplace, the mantra of today is the need for constant change’. I would suggest that a perception persists that older people are ill-equipped to cater for change, particularly where technical skills are fundamental. Thus, it is perhaps rather obvious why the Industrial Development Authority’s ‘Young Europeans’ campaign ‘presented Ireland’s young, educated population as its greatest resource’ (Kelly-Holmes, 2000: 40). In as much as elderly people may feel alienated from the youthful aesthetics of commercialised media, it is also reasonable to assume that they may feel disempowered in an era of insatiable technological advancement. As Gellner (1983: 34) has expressed it: ‘A society has emerged based on a high-powered technology, and the expectancy of sustained growth...The level of literacy and technical competence...required of members of this society, if they are to be properly employable and enjoy full and effective moral citizenship, is so high that it simply cannot be provided by the kin or local units’ (quoted in Garnham, 2000: 91).

13 Several agencies in Dublin are equipped with inspirational/stress-relief devices such as foosball and snooker tables, though I would suggest that these are mainly symbolic gestures, the inclusion of which is arguably less to distract or amuse practitioners and more to reinforce the ‘contemporary’ and ‘hip’ image agencies strive to cultivate.

14 The MSc. (Advertising) course in DIT Aungier Street, Dublin, is perhaps the most developed course of this kind in Ireland. ‘The M.Sc. in Advertising programme is deeply informed by the Joint Advertising Education Committee which is the key body co-coordinating the educational interests of all the professional associations and stake holders involved in advertising in Ireland’ (www.dit.ie).

15 On www.jobs4u.com, for example, it is claimed that ‘advertising has a reputation for being a young person’s profession and candidates who are in their late twenties or older may have difficulty in finding a first job’.

16 This idea has been used by Paul Gilroy to express the countervailing forces of continuity and change in respect of ‘identity’.

17 A considerable number of writers, researchers and journalists have examined this phenomenon in recent years. In her study of MTV, for example, Hujic (1999) indicates that the music channel targets 16–34 year-olds. Thus, ‘instead of “young”, the MTV viewer is more appropriately described as “youthful”’ (Hujic, 1999: 164). Likewise, Flintoff (2006: 10) describes the lifestyles of those he refers to as ‘pioneers of prolonged immaturity’. As with ‘Generation X’ and the ‘Baby Boomers’, these people have been variously labeled ‘grups’ (a shortening of ‘grown-ups’), ‘yindies’ (yuppie-indies), ‘dadsters’ (dad-hipsters), and ‘seniors’ (scene-seniors) (ibid.: 10). Irrespective of the terms we employ, it is perhaps reasonable to argue that in certain respects, the time-honoured boundary between youth and old age has become somewhat hazy and its signifiers more diffuse. Teenagers increasingly dress, speak and behave like adults and conversely, adults often dress, speak and behave in the manner of teenagers. Perhaps recognising a lucrative niche, a vast ‘self help’ literature has grown in tandem with the increasing aestheticisation of everyday life and the pressures of perpetual youthfulness. Ray Sondra’s (1990) How to be Chic, Fabulous and Live Forever and Deepak Chopra’s (1993) Ageless Body Timeless Mind are two popular examples.

18 This ‘unusual demographic’, Harkin and Huber (2004: 11) indicate, refers to ‘babies born in the UK between 1945 and 1965’ and who are ‘now aged between 39 and 59’.

19 Drawing on international research, Turley (1995: 410–11) notes that strategies designed to avoid alienating older consumers can involve ‘transgenerational’ advertising appeals as well as the use of ‘reverse stereotyping’ whereby older people are shown engaged in activities commonly associated with considerably younger audiences.
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