

Reflections On The Year in Youth Culture



Blog by Anastasia Goodstein, 12/28/2006

It's that list-making time of year, so I'm going to contribute my own with four key trends or themes impacting youth culture this past year: Becoming totally wired, celebutante girls gone wild, the growing backlash against rampant consumerism and marketing to youth, and the rebirth of youth activism.

Becoming "Totally Wired"

If TIME's person of the year was YOU -- it seems like they left off the last two letters, "th." The explosion in user generated content has been largely driven by teenagers.

But what's more interesting than the scores of airband tributes or Jackass copycats on YouTube that may or may not be a threat to traditional television is how teens' embrace of digital technology is transforming the way that teens are teens and what this means to the adults in their lives.

Teens have always been connected to their peers -- now they're connected 24/7, texting in class, in the middle of the night, IMing while trying to study or leaving comments on each other's MySpace profiles. In addition to constant communication, teens are also using technology to explore identity joining specific online groups or communities, posting numerous self portraits, creating their own MySpace layouts, downloading their own personal ringtones or creating a fantastical avatar that can fly and shop for virtual clothing. The result is that youth culture is now totally wired, while adults are slowly playing catch up. Right now the majority of parents and teachers out there feel like they

are living in a different world than teenagers, yet they are being forced to react when bad things go down online. I'm confident that in 2007, this gap will narrow as adults begin to realize that ignoring what teens are doing with technology (out of fear or lack of interest) is essentially ignoring teens and abdicating their role as parents and teachers, mentors and guides.

Celebutante girls gone wild

The pornification of youth culture has been happening over the last couple of years with porn stars appearing in mainstream music videos, the Calvin Klein-kiddy pornesque ads from American Apparel, pornastic pop star poses on mainstream magazine covers like Maxim and Rolling Stone, and the omnipresent Girls Gone Wild ads on basic cable. But nobody does it better than Paris -- whose real claim to fame is not her Hilton lineage, horror movie roles or even a new CD, but her sex tapes, which continue to be some of the most searched for content online. In a way, Paris and her hard partying ways have inspired a whole posse of young pop starlets. And the proliferation of celebrity gossip blogs willing to post x-rated photos combined with the celebrity weeklies (now competing with these blogs) have kept this elite cadre of hard partying celebuitantes in the "news" constantly. A day does not go by when we don't read about Paris, Lindsay, Britney or Nicole. They have set the standard for pop stars gone wild with their DUI busts, rumored eating disorders and other pantiless escapades.

I think most teens are smart enough to roll their eyes at these girls, but if you browse through a bunch of teen girl profiles on MySpace and look at their photos, you can see the effect. They may not be official role models, but each of these girls is a multi-

platform brand complete with music, books, jewelry and other product extensions that reach millions of teen and tween girls. As long as there is an appetite for their antics, their reign will continue into 2007.

The growing backlash against rampant consumerism and marketing to youth

This generation is the most marketed to in history, from a much younger ages and on several different screens at home, at school and just about everywhere else. This year we began to see signs of backlash:

- The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood convinced Hasbro to shelve the Pussycat Dolls doll for tween girls;
- Organizations like The Spanish Association of Fashion Designers are forcing the modeling industry to up its weight requirements;
- Pressure from the federal government and health organizations over the childhood obesity epidemic is forcing the food industry to respond;
- Books like Packaging Girlhood slam marketing to younger children as have our nation's doctors;
- Religious movements like the fundamentalist Battlecry are targeting corporations like MTV;
- and even some teens are speaking out, like the girls in Pittsburgh who girl-cotted Abercrombie's t-shirt slogans and the teens behind the youth marketing debunking site Culture Spy.

As more of us skip over ads with our DVRs, marketers are being forced to create more integrated advertainment experiences. Look for organizations like Common Sense Media,

which just received \$2 million in funding from the Omidyar Social Venture fund, to lead the way in helping parents and kids navigate this new media and marketing landscape.

The rebirth of youth activism

Finally, in 2006 we saw a renewed interest in teen volunteering and community service as well as a renewed interest by companies in offering tangible ways for consumers to do "good." For today's teens being socially conscious is as much about volunteering locally, buying products that are sweatshop free or where the profits buy AIDS drugs in Africa as it is about taking to the streets. Technology has given organizers several new tools to reach this generation - MySpace was a huge catalyst in the massive turnout during the immigration protests nationally last year and text messaging (via Virgin Mobile) has already raised thousands of dollars for Stand Up For Kids, an organization that helps homeless and street kids. Websites like Youth Noise are connecting teen activists around the causes they care about. And old fashioned direct action is not dead either -- thousands of teens camped out in their prom attire in solidarity with Ugandan youth as part of an action organized by Invisible Children. GOOD Magazine launched this year, and environmental or "green" blogs, products and design are showing up everywhere. Even colleges are beginning to teach courses in sustainability.

On that note, here's to a happy and sustainable 2007.