

*Compulsive Consumption and Commercial Media:
Changing Attitudes to Spending and Saving
Among Maltese Youth*

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Abstract:

This paper explores changing patterns in young Maltese people's attitudes to spending and saving, and how they see their lives and opportunities as being different from those of their parents' generation. The paper suggests that many of these perceptions have been inflected by the increasingly global and commercialised orientations of the media environments inhabited by today's youth. It is because these influences are so often unexamined or misconstrued that more systematic and widespread programmes of critical media education are called for.

The fact that today's youth are living in media saturated environments makes it imperative that they should be helped to become better equipped to understand the language of the media – in terms of how, for instance, their own world views and “common sense” assumptions relate to the images and values projected and endorsed in commercial broadcasting and global media. This paper draws on comments made by a total of 195 Maltese teenagers and young adults in the course of focus-group interviews conducted in 2002 and 2003, as part of a national qualitative research project commissioned by the Broadcasting Authority (Grixti 2004). The interviewees came from different socio-economic and regional backgrounds, and the interviews were conducted in a variety of locations, including university, a range of schools, private homes, and different work places. The fieldwork for the larger project also included interviews with a range of advertising agents and media professionals.

The evidence from these interviews suggests that there is still a major gap in the area of education about the media, particularly in terms of providing children and young adults with the critical tools which will enable them to better understand how techniques of persuasion are pitched and how they work. For one thing, the interviews reflected very marked differences in the responses and attitudes of those who had been through a media education programme in school or at university and those who

had not. Further, though most of the interviewees considered themselves to be fairly sophisticated critics of the media, and though the levels of media awareness varied considerably, the comments of the majority suggest that their cultural values and aspirations are increasingly inflected by commercial imperatives and compulsive consumption.

“Streetwise and Fashion-conscious”

The introduction of pluralism in broadcasting in the early 1990s not only led to the increased availability of overseas programmes through Cable and Satellite to complement the already large range of channels transmitting from Italy, but presumably also (because there are now more local stations) to a cumulative increase in the number of such programmes broadcast through local channels. There has in fact also been a significant increase in the number of locally produced programmes since the arrival of pluralism. Citing NSO and Broadcasting Authority statistics, Borg (2003) reports that in 2001, 85 per cent of the production on Maltese TV stations was of Maltese origin (as compared with 43 per cent in 1994), and that only 15 per cent of productions on Maltese radio stations were of foreign origin. These figures, however, need to be read in relation to the dramatic increase in the number of TV and radio stations since the early 1990s. It can also be argued that the style and content of locally produced programmes, especially those aimed at young viewers, have taken on many of the characteristics associated with overseas products. The reach of popular music – on CDs, through radio and as accompanied by the visual images of MTV-type music videos – has also taken global dimensions.

When I asked two young University-educated professionals in their late twenties if they thought that Maltese young people have changed a lot over the past ten years, they both insisted that there have been quite dramatic changes since they themselves were in their teens. Today’s youngsters, they told me, are “all so savvy and they know what’s going on and they’ve got it right”. They cited Cable Television, MTV and foreign travel as key influences in the transformation of Maltese youth into a new breed of “more streetwise, more fashion conscious” consumers. Underlying these assertions about what it means for young Maltese consumers to be “savvy” and to “get it right”, was an implied association of the “new” with imported styles of dress, behaviour and consumption, particularly as encountered through television, MTV and the experience of foreign travel:

Nowadays the guys dress up even better than the girls. You see guys’ shops full of guys shopping. You see the guys with the weird haircuts. The girls now all look pretty similar. Even that has changed, for example, and that’s happened because of MTV, and I think one other reason, I don’t know why, but people seem to be travelling more. They seem to be going abroad more.... It’s easier to travel now ... younger people have more opportunities to work in some jobs, they save more.... And it happened in a very short time.

The increase in fashion consciousness among Maltese young men is thus perceived as a positive indication of their new location within a more globalised and “streetwise” context. It is also perceived as helping to distance them from more “old fashioned”

attitudes. In this respect, Maltese young men are following global patterns. Tim Edwards (1997: 73) describes this global trend as follows:

It has become more socially acceptable for men to be consumers *per se* and, more importantly, to be consumers of their own masculinity or, in short, to look at themselves and other men as objects of desire to be bought and sold or imitated and copied.

The perception of masculinity and male sexuality as consumer products reflects larger patterns of influence deriving from the predominantly consumption-driven orientations of global media entertainment (see Barker, 1997; Boyd-Barratt, 1998; Herman and McChesney, 1997; Real, 1996). Particularly in the fields of communications and entertainment, Malta is inevitably part of a process of globalisation that has been dominated by a combination of dramatic developments in technology, world-wide processes of deregulation in broadcasting, and the growth of massive multi-national media conglomerates which command interests that span a range of key media sectors and operate across the major world markets. The rapid rise of global commercial media all across the planet is, as Robert McChesney (2002) points out, closely linked to neo-liberalism and the neo-liberal “deregulation” of corporate activity:

Neoliberalism is often called “deregulation”, but that is inaccurate and misleading. There is still plenty of government regulation – try broadcasting on a channel licensed to a commercial firm – but the regulation is now conducted increasingly to suit the needs of the largest businesses instead of the general public. [....] The commercial media system is the necessary transmission belt for businesses to market their wares across the world: indeed globalization as we know it could not exist without it. A whopping three-quarters of global spending on advertising ends up in the pockets of a mere 20 media companies. (McChesney, 2002: 24-5)

These developments have given the leading world communications companies what Graham Murdoch calls “an unrivalled capacity to shape the symbolic environment which we inhabit” (Murdoch, 1996: 92). Such patterns of influence are often argued to be most pronounced with the young, and they are said to be particularly noticeable in young people’s styles of dress, modes of speech and in the types of films, TV programmes, video games and music which they find most appealing and claim as their own, and which appear increasingly identical in different parts of the world.

The homogenizing influence of youth-oriented media is thus frequently identified as a key feature of life in the global village – not least by those who own or run these media. According to Sumner Redstone, owner of MTV, for instance, “kids on the streets in Tokyo have more in common with kids on the streets in London than they do with their parents” (cited in Barber, 1996: 105); and for MTV’s chairman and chief executive officer, Tom Freston, “kids are not the same all over the world, but they resemble each other closely, more than any other generation in history” (cited in Rollin, 1999: 277). Since its first broadcasts in 1981, the US-based MTV channel has had a phenomenal global growth. By 1998, it was in 273.5 million households worldwide, only 70 million of which were in the US (Klein, 2000:120). In 1989, MTV was sending its English language programmes to twenty-five countries (Rollin,

1999: 277), and by early 1993 its global audience stood at nearly a quarter of a billion households, with over half a billion viewers in seventy-one countries (Barber, 1996:104-5). As Barber puts it

The numbers escalate day by day, eclipsing CNN, which, though it is in 130 countries, boasts far fewer viewing households and speaks to yesterday's generation of the over-forty's rather than tomorrow's of the under-thirty's. [...] Indigenous-language MTV programming is available in most countries, but [...] young watchers often prefer American, which is, after all, what MTV is promoting. (Barber, 1996: 104-105)

In *No Logo*, Naomi Klein (2000:120) notes that the New World Teen Study found that 85 per cent of the middle-class teenagers it surveyed watched MTV every day, and that TV was the single most significant factor contributing to the shared tastes of these teenagers. As Klein puts it, "global teens watch so much MTV per day that the only equivalent shared cultural experience among adults occurs during an outbreak of war when all eyes are focused on the same CNN images" (2000:120-1).

However, it is also worth stressing that it is misleading to think of this process as a simple "cause and effect" phenomenon – with one side (the Hollywood inspired media entertainment juggernaut) injecting its influence on an indeterminate mass of passive recipients (Maltese youth and Maltese culture more generally). For one thing, the "global mass media" in the fields of entertainment are actually made up of a complex and varied network of conglomerates and forces which are not exclusively American in origin or orientation. More importantly, when cultures come in contact the influence is likely to go in both directions, so that (as indeed is happening throughout the world) traditional Maltese youth culture is not so much getting replaced by global mass culture as coexisting with it and being inflected by it (see Appadurai, 1997; Kraidy, 1999; Strelitz, 2002; and Grixti, in press). Though it is heavily influenced by the commercial orientations currently dominating the global media, youth-oriented media entertainment is also strongly driven by the interests and input of young people themselves. The young play important roles not just in determining which particular media products, images and values they choose to endorse, but also in the production of such media images and values. It is usually young people of similar ages to their fans who become pop idols or adored film stars, and many of the most popular films and TV shows have young people, and young people's themes, as their focus. Local versions of programmes aimed at and presented by young people (as in MTV-style compilations) may indeed often look very similar to their overseas counterparts, but they are also very distinctly Maltese (cf. Van der Rijt et al, 2000; Fernandez, 2000)

But though it is misleading to ascribe the cause of changing attitudes and patterns of behaviour among the young exclusively to the media, and to commercially oriented, globally-inspired media in particular, the fact remains that there have been some very dramatic developments in the ways Malta's youth perceive themselves and their relation to their local and global environments. And it is also clear that the media have played and continue to play a very significant role in these developments. As my informants pointed out, MTV-type music videos and programmes have played a key role in the emergence and growth of new fashions, ways of thinking and modes of behaviour among Maltese youth. In the next section, I examine how these commercial

and consumption-driven orientations have been appropriated and internalised by Maltese youth – particularly as revealed in the ways they talk about the spending and saving of money.

Changes in Attitudes to Spending and Saving among Young Adults

According to figures published by the National Statistics Office in January 2004, over the period from 1994 to 2002 the disposable income of Maltese households increased by 49.8 per cent – from Lm732 million in 1994 to an estimated Lm1.1 billion in 2002. At the same time, there has been a 241.9 per cent increase in personal loans over the same period, from Lm149 million in 1994 to Lm0.5 billion in 2002. Since 1994, the total amount that the Maltese borrowed, on average, increased from 20.3 per cent of their total disposable income to 46.4 per cent in 2002. The amount borrowed for the purchase or finishing of dwellings doubled from 16.4 per cent of disposable income in 1994 to 33.5 per cent in 2002. According to the NSO, “Effectively this means that while the Maltese, on average, borrowed 16c on property for every Lm1 they earned in the form of disposable income in 1994, this figure went up to 34c in 2002. In terms of total loans, the Maltese borrowed an average of 20c for every Lm1 they earned in 1994, the figure rising to 46c in 2002” (*The Times*, 23 January 2004).

The dramatic changes in general attitudes to spending, borrowing and saving reflected in these figures are also borne out in the way Maltese youth speak about money and how they use it. One topic discussed in my interviews related to young people’s attitudes to spending and saving money. In each case, they were told that young people in Malta used to have a reputation for saving; did they think that this was still the case? The responses to this question revealed some striking patterns in ideas about consumption and spending.

Most said that young people today do not save. Indeed, several even found the concept of saving amusing, insisting that they have no idea where their money disappears to. “Money just flies out of your pocket,” as one 18 year-old student put it. 19 year-old Paul described how he was amazed to realise how much he had been spending when he lost his credit card and had to pay in cash: So I ended up asking my mum for money that week, telling her “I’ll pay you later!” And I realised how much I actually spend! What happens today is that when you go out you pay with your card and you don’t even see the money going out of the bank!

A frequent explanation for the decrease in saving habits offered by young people themselves is the argument that everything is now much more expensive, that there are many more consumer products available than in the past, and that money is both easier to come by and harder to hold on to. One key determining factor in this change which was cited by a number of interviewees was the liberalisation of economic policies which came about during the years following the change in Malta’s government in 1987. Several pointed out that many have got into the habit of living beyond their means, and that this can be attributed to the fact that it is so easy to borrow money from the banks. Joanna, a 25 year-old factory worker, insisted that there has been a significant change in spending patterns among the young in recent years. She spoke of her own experience, saying that she had not been able to save any money since she was nineteen, but that she had been in the habit of saving a lot before

then. Joanna was also convinced that the situation has also changed as far as her younger counterparts today (i.e. those who are around 16 years old) are concerned, in that they too no longer save as people of her generation used to. This was an opinion shared by many others, who insisted that today's youth live from day to day, that saving is less common than it used to be, and that it requires a type of sacrifice which many of today's youth are not willing to make.

These comments again highlight the increasingly globalised and consumption-oriented contexts in which young people live. For one thing, the demand for instant gratification is not limited to the young – it is much more widespread and probably applies to all age groups and strata of society. Indeed, the whole fabric of consumer-driven economies depends on its propagation and growth. It is also worth noting that young people in industrialised countries worldwide are marrying later than they used to in the past. Given this development, it is perhaps not surprising that Maltese youth (who like many of their foreign counterparts are postponing marriage plans till at least their mid- to late- twenties, and also later) should consider it preposterous to start saving for a home when they are still in their teens or early twenties.

The most widespread form of serious saving among the young in Malta has traditionally been in the area of saving to buy a house or set up home once a young couple decide to get married. This pattern is still noticeable in a large number of cases – except that marriage plans tend not to be made at as young an age as was often the case in the past. In a number of cases, patterns of spending and saving do change dramatically when young people decide to get married. Twenty-four year-old factory worker Cliff told me how he used to be constantly in debt through his Bank credit card, until he got engaged and started living with his fiancée. After that, he managed to save enough for his wedding in the space of one year:

Cliff: Now it's the same as if I were married. One pocket. There's the family to think of, sort of.

Interviewer: So you stopped spending?

Cliff: What spending?! I have the CID guarding me! (*laughter*)

But, as is suggested by the NSO figures about the doubling of amounts borrowed for the purchase or finishing of property since 1994 (cited above), this does not necessarily mean that young people are still depending as heavily on their own savings as they did in the past when they come to invest in property. Indeed, in a number of cases, rising costs and daunting expenses, as well as unwillingness to give up spending on entertainment, have led to a situation where several young people feel that getting married is simply not a viable option. One group of young manual workers in their early twenties insisted that today's young people want to enjoy what they earn. The high cost of living and low wages make saving hard, they pointed out; and “when you consider that you'd need a year's wages to buy a bedroom suite, it's simply not worth giving up everything for that – especially when you consider how expensive even a packet of cigarettes has become.” When I asked what they do when they decide to buy a bedroom suite, they replied that this was precisely why young people are increasingly choosing to live together without getting married:

Godwin: If you can't keep up with the high cost of living, you just live together! That way, first of all, you have no ties. Secondly, you spare yourself unnecessary expenses. Third, imagine if you've been engaged for four years and you've

bought a place to live, and then, heaven forbid, you break up – that’s all wasted money!

Sandra: And even if it happens after you’re married, it’s very hard to carry on...

Godwin: But it’s not worth it, it’s not worth getting married! Life is very expensive today, and you cannot keep up with today’s wages!

Sandra: Having a family is a huge responsibility, especially when you consider that it’s for life. It’s not worth committing yourself to that extent. There are so many things to do in life...

So what are the “many things in life” which young people like these do not want to give up? In some cases, it’s simply a matter of being able to afford fairly basic treats. According to 21 year-old Vincent, for instance, “In the past couple of years, life has gotten harder money-wise, I mean, you know I remember when Kinnie was 12 cents and that was fantastic!” But in most cases, the bulk of spending goes on entertainment, going out to places like Paceville, and expensive clothing. When I asked Cliff how he used to spend his money before he started to save for his wedding, his answer triggered further revelations from his fellow workers:

Cliff: Entertainment, travel, everything, clothes... Here in Malta, there are these blessed parties, where a ticket costs ten pounds. That’s how the young are today! That’s how they are! The more expensive things are because of the brand, the more they buy them! Wherever you go, it has to be high class!

Claude: Speaking for myself, I used to go out with my friends, and twenty pounds would always disappear!

Philip: In one night. You go to Paceville at around one in the morning, and you spend four hours there till five or six.

Cliff: Sometimes it costs you around eight pounds and you get nothing for that! Nothing at all!

Claude: A round of drinks often costs me LM14, but then everyone buys one round.

Others insisted that though not everyone spends the same amounts, a night out drinking at Paceville is likely to cost more than Lm20, particularly if there are many people buying rounds. Several said they spend their wages as soon as they get them, usually when they go out on the weekend. One 20 year-old male factory worker put it this way:

I don’t save anything at all, never! But you do feel that you’re not doing the right thing, but you know if you’re used to going out.... I mean, you spend all your money over the weekend... You get your pay, that is Friday, Saturday and Sunday, and that’s it, bye bye! Then you have to ask your mum for money, that’s what I do anyway!

Comments like these suggest that there has been a dramatic shift towards compulsive and conspicuous consumption among contemporary Maltese youth. One group of more media-conscious sixth formers saw this kind of thinking as an encroachment of capitalist (and particularly American) cultural values. Referring to Coke, Macdonald’s and to the proliferation of advertising billboards spreading “the culture of London and America” all over Malta, one young man in this group remarked that he wishes he could burn all “these symbols of capitalism” because of the negative effects they are having. “They make you wish for what you do not need,” he remarked. “You say, ‘Oh look, I don’t have that...’ So you’re always consuming, consuming”.

Spending Patterns among Younger Teenagers

Younger people are likely to have less money at their disposal, but here too the tendency to spend appears to be more common than saving. As one 14 year-old girl put it, "If I save anything, you can be sure that I'll spend it the next day!" Some did say that they save, insisting that when they set their minds on an object they want to buy, they do manage to save up. But on average, the most common response to questions about saving tended to be along the lines of that given by 15 year-old Chris:

If I have any money, I spend everything! I buy everything I see! It's like this, if I don't have any money, I hold back, but if it's in my hands, I just muddle along! It's always like that!

Many said that they can see themselves saving to buy a car, but they thought that the idea of starting to save for marriage at an early age was old fashioned – "We're different from those who came before us!" was the way one 15 year old girl put it. Another fourth former in a State area school described his attitude to saving as follows:

It's not that I don't save, I want to save, but I just don't manage it, because as soon as I save anything, there's bound to be something else cropping up. For example, if I save something this week, it's for nothing! I'll spend it anyway because something I need will break and I'll have to buy another one like it. That's how it is. But then, for example, when I get a job after my O Levels I will start putting something aside for a car, because having a car is a necessity!

One item which was frequently cited as a recurring expense was the mobile phone. Virtually all the young people I interviewed said that they own one, insisting that it's a necessity, that they use it mostly to organize meetings with friends, and that it is also essential for emergencies. According to 16 year-old Jennifer, mobile phones are "marketed in such a way that it makes you feel that you need it". Other recurring expenses cited by this age group were mostly related to going out and hanging out in Paceville. As 17 year-old Sandra put it:

Transport is always expensive. That's every Saturday. If you're going out, you'll spend a pound or so on transport. And then, obviously, you'll have a drink with your friends. I'm not saying a drink to get drunk, even though there are many who do this.... But you always have one drink, two drinks, socializing... It's expensive going out. It's very expensive! Or we make it expensive, anyway!

Other expenses associated with "socializing" included parties, eating out, buying drinks for friends, and going to the cinema, where ice cream and popcorn also added to the general costs. Cigarettes were also listed as recurring expenses by some of the older interviewees. Clothes were another major expense, for both males and females. Even among the 14 to 17 year-olds, several said they often pay for their own clothing, mainly because this allows them to exercise fuller control on the type of clothes they

buy; but for the majority in this age group, the buying of clothes is an item which their parents usually help to pay for.

Compulsive and Conspicuous Consumption

One recurring note in the focus group discussions was a sense that young people as a whole are very much aware of the fact that they are living in a consumption-driven environment. This is a point which is often noted by parents and those who work closely with the young. Commenting on her observation of spending patterns among university students, one university lecturer remarked:

You see a lot of young females, and a lot of young men in the last few years as well, becoming much more concerned with their clothes, and with their body image. This is following the same trend as the rest of the world, of course. But they've become much more conscious about what products they're using. I think people have become more consumer oriented, and more conspicuously so as well. They like to be seen to be spending. Young people especially.

In similar tones, an advertising agent commented that young people have become very concerned about being seen to be consuming the "right" product – which usually means the more expensive, imported product:

You have to push yourself a little bit further to prove yourself a bit more, with your Heineken bottle and your Marlborough Lights, and stuff like that. There's a lot of label consciousness.

In the course of interviews, young people often remarked that in order to be accepted by their peers they have to be able to show that they can spend – by buying the "right" brand of clothes, for example, or being able to pay for expensive rounds of drinks, or having access to the latest technology. Among the students, 22 year-old Kevin, argued that today's standards are very different from what they were in the past, and that you are considered strange if you don't have particular commodities, including things like a computer and the Internet. Similar ideas were expressed by 14 year-old Antoinette and Laura:

Antoinette: I don't think we go with the tradition of saving. I think we sort of cut that out. I'm always broke! Nowadays I believe that we're not spending our money only on our necessities. We're tending to take notice of more people around us, and if we don't have enough money to buy the things that the people around us are buying, we feel as though we are left out, in society, you know. And I don't think that's really good.

Laura: Nowadays people especially young adults and those are spending a lot of money, even like when you're eighteen, if your friend got a car, you feel you have to buy a car as well. And then after six months I know a person who got fed up of this car after spending a lot of money on this car and adding stuff on it. After six months he got fed up of it and got a new car! Even in mobiles, after a few months you get fed up with your mobile and you buy the latest mobiles.

Several commented that today's youth (including themselves) are "never happy" and that they "always want more". 25 year-old factory worker Joanna put it this way:

Today nobody is happy with what they have. Today you always want, want, want... As for me, I'm only interested in something until I get it, then that's it, I leave it!

When they were asked what kind of things they want, several interviewees indicated that the wanting is more important than the having. As 15 year-old Peter exclaimed:

Well! That's the odd thing! You're fed up of one thing, you've had enough of it, and you want to buy something else without knowing what it is! As soon as you buy one thing, you want to buy something different!

Comparison with Parents

The question arises as to how far these changing perceptions, ideals and patterns of behaviour can be related to changes in the Maltese cultural environment – particularly in terms of whether they can be linked to developments in broadcasting and the media, and to the increasingly "secularised" and commercially oriented inflections which characterise global media influences. In an attempt to unpack some of the key issues raised by this question, the focus group participants were encouraged to talk about how and to what extent they perceived the ways they are living today as different (if at all) from the ways in which their parents or grandparents lived when they were young. Do they think that earlier generations were any more or less happy than they are now, and if so, how and why?

One of the most common responses to these questions was the observation that earlier generations were happier with much less. Many believed (on the strength of what their parents had told them, presumably) that young people in the past led simpler lives and were happy to make do with what they had, however basic. I got the impression that many of these responses appeared to be repeating what young people had frequently been told by their parents, presumably when they were being too demanding and wasteful. Indeed, when I put this point to one group and asked whether such claims were true or simply what parents are always telling their children, one young woman commented that when she hears her grandmother talking she hears a very different story from the one she hears from her parents. A minority of interviewees also insisted that they did not believe that their parents were any more or less happy when they were their age, and that though new technologies have brought about many changes, earlier generations had their own worries as well as blessings.

But the majority of those interviewed were convinced that their parents had had happier youths precisely because they had fewer resources and comforts at their disposal. Many stressed repeatedly that young people today are never satisfied with what they have; all their toys or gadgets have to be bought (as distinct from being home-made as was the case in earlier times); they lose interest in what they have very quickly, and are constantly looking for something new, but without really knowing what they want. As 15 year-old Keith put it:

We're never happy with anything! We're never satisfied! But it was different in the past. My father used to play with a rubber ball. He told me, now you want leather ones! He said they used to be happy with anything they found. They used to play with anything, with marbles, with small bits of stone... anything! We're more advanced, I think, but we've advanced too far. We've got lazy and we're never happy with what we have.

Children in earlier periods were thus believed to have been better at improvising (e.g. by making their own toys), and because they had less, they were better able to appreciate what they did have and enjoy it. According to two male factory workers in their early twenties:

Cliff: They say they used to get pleasure out of the smallest of things!

Interviewer: But do you think this was really the case?

Cliff: I think it was, because the cost of living was lower, not like today...

Errol: There wasn't the type of entertainment which you get today, or things like that...

The difference was thus ascribed to changed conditions and easier access to resources, rather than to differences in predispositions. As one young woman put it, "If they'd had the things which we have today, they would have been like us – they wouldn't have appreciated anything!"

Many stressed that young people today have much more at their disposal and are much better off than their parents were at their age. According to 22 year-old Dave, "lifestyles have changed, you can't compare today's life with back then; basically life has just upgraded itself into another stage." For 16 year-old Jonathan, this has had both positive and negative consequences:

It's very different nowadays. Malta had many traditions which made it unique. It was something like living in another world. Now we have a total invasion of traditions. It's good and it's bad at the same time. It's good because we are moving on with technology and stuff. And it's bad because we're losing traditions with it.

Earlier generations were also believed not to have had as many worries and pressures as beset today's youth. A number argued that in the past the cost of living was not so impossibly high when compared to wages. It also cost much less for young people to enjoy themselves than it does today, and life for earlier generations was also less hectic: they did not have so much pressure to do well at school or to go to university in order to get a good job and earn a decent living in what is seen as an increasingly daunting and competitive employment market. According to one young woman, changed economic conditions mean that families no longer help out as much as they used to – simply because they cannot afford to or don't have the time. It was also suggested that personal relations in less complicated times were also less strenuous and difficult to manoeuvre. According to one 18 year-old female factory worker, for instance, the predominance of stricter moral codes in the past meant that partners could be trusted more than today:

In the past there wasn't so much confusion as there is in the world today.... How do I put it? You go out with someone, for example, and you keep worrying that he might go out with someone else behind your back and things like that. In the past they didn't do such things.

But though the majority believe that their parents were happier with less, most young people would not want to trade places with them; they cannot imagine living without the comforts and technologies which they're now used to. Only one or two said that they would choose to be born at an earlier age if they had the option.

Conclusion

Comments like those quoted above suggest that young people are trying to balance and come to terms with positions and world views which are inherently contradictory. On the one hand, they imagine (perhaps like their elders) that the past was somehow a Garden of Eden – a harsher place than the present, but one which was also blessed with greater innocence, simplicity and security. At the same time, they also see this place as forever alien and lost – one which, because they have tasted of the fruit of technological knowledge and global entertainment, they neither can nor particularly want to revive or revisit. It is a past which the young know to be mythical but whose soft-toned echoes continue to haunt. These contradictions partly account for their nagging dissatisfactions with their present conditions – the guilt and discomfort they sometimes say they feel because they cannot save; their insistence that they know that they are never satisfied.

These are dissatisfactions and nagging doubts that are not unique to the young. They are also apparent in the behaviour of other age groups and are in fact symptomatic of the commercial neo-liberal cultures in which today's young are forging their identities. Indeed, such cultures can only survive and flourish on the strength of the continued spread of such dissatisfactions and doubts. Blaming the young for being insatiable and constantly demanding instant gratification is like blaming them for having internalised the values which underscore the structures of most Western-style world economies in contemporary consumer culture. The world of commercial glamour and insatiable consumption is one where the promise of happiness has to be constantly deferred. As John Berger famously remarked over thirty years ago,

Publicity, situated in a future continually deferred, excludes the present and so eliminates all becoming, all development. [...] The act of acquiring has taken the place of all other actions, the sense of having has obliterated all other senses. [...] Publicity exerts enormous influence and is a political phenomenon of great importance. But its offer is as narrow as its references are wide. It recognizes nothing except the power to acquire. All other human faculties or needs are made subsidiary to this power. All hopes are gathered together, made homogeneous, simplified, so that they become the intense yet vague, magical yet repeatable promise offered in every purchase. (Berger, 1972: 153)

These ideas have long formed part of media education programmes designed to make young people aware of the ideologies inscribed in the prevailing images of popular commercial media. In the course of my interviews, I was struck by how young people who had been to schools with active media education programmes were consistently more critical and reflective about what they see in films and on TV. Though they were not immune to negative influences, they came across as being better equipped to understand and think through how their attitudes and behaviours might have been influenced or even moulded by the images and values which dominate the global and local media landscapes. Young people who had not experienced media education and media analysis courses tended to depend more on what they took to be “common sense” responses. Such responses can be easily appropriated and manipulated by professional image-mongers, and they are very frequently moulded by the popular media anyway. As such, they are usually little more than vehicles for unchallenged assumptions, unacknowledged prejudice and unfounded preconceptions.

There are, of course, much broader social and cultural transformations underlying the changing attitudes reflected in the comments quoted in this paper, and it would be a mistake to suggest that such transformations in value systems can be ascribed exclusively to the influence of new media and neo-liberal economics. But changing values are inevitably entwined with changes in lifestyle, and responsible decisions about the nature and desirability (or otherwise) of these changes will require better awareness of the forces which help to shape, endorse, propagate and reinforce them. The media do play a key role in this respect. Young people rightly want to be accorded greater trust and allowed to make their own judgments about their own lives and futures. They resent being nagged, whether by parents, teachers, broadcasters or health promotion campaigners. But in order to be able to make those judgments wisely, they also need to be better informed about the ways in which their opinions, beliefs and desires are constantly being courted and lured by commercial forces whose main concern is the nurturing of world views and life habits dominated by unrealistic and endlessly receding dreams.

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