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Lauren Russ-Constant

‘Shopping for Politics’: Does young people’s relationship with brands affect their relationship with politics?

This research paper will investigate whether young people’s relationship with brands affects their relationship with politics. In recent years the issue of youth political participation has become a highly contested one. It has become a circular discussion with no definitive answers. Between the ages of 18-24 young people experience a number of uncertainties, and they are now seeking structure in consumption. With the recent commodification of politics and the emergence of ‘political brands’, politics is now just another product on the shelf. This paper will adopt a qualitative approach that will take the form of 2 focus groups and 5 interviews. The findings suggest that political parties are, unbeknown to them, competing with brands for the hearts and minds of young people. Young people are looking for guidance, attention and control; brands now offer them that, subconsciously providing them with the crutch they need to be able to reject party politics.

Keywords: Politics, brands, young people, qualitative research



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INTRODUCTION

“The masses of America have elected Henry Ford. They have elected General Motors. They have elected the General Electric Company, and Woolworth’s and all the other great industrial and business leaders of the day. They do not vote with ballots, but with dollars and quarters and dimes. They do not vote, moreover, upon what candidates promise that they will do in the future... they confer leadership upon a candidate only if what he has done has proven satisfactory.” (Filene and Wood 1932)

In recent years the issue of youth political participation has become a highly contested one. Are youth apathetic? Or are they disenfranchised? Is it their fault? Or should we blame our political system? It has become a circular discussion with no definitive answers. In the game of life society has moved from the role of the caring warden, into the position of one of the players, it has become the prime source of surprise and danger (Bauman 2001) causing British youth chronic instability. Young people are looking for

attention, guidance and emotional stability, political parties no longer offer them that, brands do. Unlike party politics, brands have been recognised for giving young people a sense of power and control, as well as providing benchmarks for them to shape their identity (Schroeder et al. 2006; Galinsky and Rucker 2008), and their social successes haven't gone unnoticed. Branding and franchising have more recently permeated into politics (Marsh and Fawcett 2011), which has seen voters become consumers, parties become brands, and politics become a product. If politics is now positioning itself as a commercial activity, then "parties are brands" (Smith and French 2009 p.211) and they will start having to compete with existing brands for the hearts and minds of young people. Existing literature implores a top-down approach investigating the way branding affects politics, looking at campaign success, political strategies, and its impact on democracy. However prevailing academia fails to explore whether brands are now affecting politics from a bottom-up approach, from the perspective of the young voter/consumer.

This paper hopes to contribute to the existing debate surrounding young people and politics, changing the conversation by integrating the role of brands. More specifically this research will explore whether young people's (aged 18-24) relationship with brands, affects their relationship with politics. Much of the existing literature on youth political engagement is based predominantly on quantitative research, and this has gone on to shape the methodological approach undertaken by this study. Previous studies tend to impose very narrow definitions of 'politics' and 'engagement' and very few explore how respondents themselves understand and relate to politics (Marsh et al. 2007). As this investigation seeks to uncover a deeper understanding of young people's relationship with both brands and politics a qualitative approach will be adopted. This will take the form of two focus groups and 5 in-depth interviews conducted with 10 Bournemouth University students between the ages of 18-24.

This paper will start with a brief review and critical analysis of the existing literature, which will be categorised into 3 main sections; 'The Current Debate', 'The Existing reasons' and 'The Role of Brands'. The second section will discuss the methodological approach adopted by this investigation, and the reasons for this decision. Discussion here will involve the research design, sampling process and conceptualisation of the key terms. The subsequent section will identify and interpret the research findings and key themes. The final section will conclude this investigation, British young people keep being told how "apathetic" and "disengaged" (Phillips 1998; White et al. 2000; Henn et al. 2005) they are in regards to politics, but as far as this paper is concerned, not only is this incorrect, but it's also extremely detrimental to the future of British democracy. Young people are political, they are voting, but similar to the behaviour exhibited in the Edward Filene (1932) quote above, they are voting with their money and looking for proof not promises.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When 'youth' and 'politics' are mentioned in the same sentence, the phrase 'politically apathetic' usually doesn't follow too far behind. Young people are being hounded and criticized for their apparent 'apathy' but the findings initiating and supporting this view, are somewhat flawed. This section will provide a brief overview of the existing literature, highlighting some of the research inadequacies that this study hopes to rectify. The first section will briefly discuss the current academic debate regarding youth political engagement identifying some of the arguments that this study will be either adding to, or disagreeing with. The following section will then discuss three existing reasons

currently used to explain the increase in youth dis-engagement, highlighting the flaws, and the omitted presence of brands. The final section will discuss the role of brands, the risk they pose to 'politics', and the current weighted debate about the relationship between politics and brand

The Current Debate

Until fairly recently, the academic debate surrounding youth political engagement has relied heavily on quantitative analysis (Henn et al. 2005; Marsh et al. 2007). Much of the research was designed to uncover why the 'uninterested' and 'politically apathetic' youth (Phillips 1998; Henn et al. 2005) were the way they were, and whether their "heterodox views and habits" was making the 'generation gap' more marked (Phillips 1998). Attitudinal engagement was measured by voter registration and turnout, along with party membership figures (Parry et al. 1992; Phillips 1998), and it's the findings from these investigations that usually go on to inform this perception of 'youth apathy' (Kimberlee 2002). Whilst it is unarguable that youth voting figures are on the decline, the extent of participation, or non-participation at general elections is never entirely clear, making it almost impossible to quantify (Johnston & Pattie 1997 cited by Kimberlee 2002). Also as mentioned in the introduction, this quantitative approach often adopts a very narrow conception of politics (Henn et al. 2005; Marsh et al. 2007) undermining the validity of the findings. That said, the quantitative project undertaken by Pattie et al (2004) challenges this 'politically apathetic' view. They identify that young citizens haven't contracted out of politics, whilst collectivist forms of participation may have declined; overall individualistic forms of participation have actually increased (Pattie et al. 2004). This is a perspective supported by a number of qualitative investigations (White et al., 2000; Norris 2003; Henn et al. 2002; Loader 2007; Rossi 2009; Mycock and Tonge 2012), which have found that the picture appears one less of apathy or inactivity, and more of different forms of engagement (Marsh et al. 2007). Henn et al (2000) cultivates findings that are a great starting point for this paper, they conclude that young people are interested in politics, and if they are a generation apart it has less to do with apathy, and more to do with their 'engaged scepticism' about 'formal' politics. Norris (2003) supports many of Henn et al' (2002) conclusions but argues that there has been a diversification of the repertoires of political action. She believes that young people's political repertoires are different to other cohorts and one important characteristic of theirs is this increased engagement with 'consumer' and 'lifestyle' politics (Norris 2003). This section has briefly summarised the debate that this research paper will be entering into, whilst also demonstrating the discrepancy in academic opinion regarding young people's relationship with politics. It has also provided the context for the following section, which will be discussing some of the existing reasons given for the decline in youth political engagement.

The Existing Reasons

So whilst the 'apathetic' or 'different' debate rages on, what is the source of this apparent aversion to formal politics (Henn et al. 2005)? Drawing from both political science and youth studies Kimberlee (2002) identifies four broad explanations for young people's apparent lack of political participation; this paper will discuss three of them.

Youth Focused Explanation

The first is 'youth focused' and is the explanation that seems to inform most media discourses on non-participation (Kimberlee 2002). It adopts the belief that young people aren't 'engaging' with politics owing to their 'lifestyle' or personal characteristics, like their social class (Kimberlee 2002). Parry et al (1992) argue that young people tend to

face 'start up' problems due to their mobility and inability to develop a voting pattern. This is supported by Johnston & Pattie (1997) who believe that most youth voting abstention is due to involuntary, rather than voluntary factors; things like not living close to polling stations, or not being registered. It is unlikely that this 'youth focused' explanation is an adequate account for low political engagement, as it tends to locate the cause of non-participation within each individual, refusing to account for the role of other factors (Kimberlee 2002). This explanation also suggests that a mere increase of polling stations would upsurge 'participation' when arguably the issue lies not with convenience, but instead with making young people 'want' to vote.

Politics Focused Explanation

Directly disagreeing with the above reason is the 'politics focused' explanation. This suggests that the decline in youth political engagement and participation is instead a consequence of "the country's out-dated electoral institutions and the failure of political parties to attract young people" (Kimberlee 2002, p.88). Political parties also seem out of touch with the needs and experiences of the British youth (Henn et al. 2002) and many young people feel that their opinions are considered irrelevant (White et al. 2000). It is therefore conceivable that young people may be failing to vote, not because of start up, lifestyle difficulties, but instead because politicians are, for a variety of reasons, remote and irrelevant (Kimberlee 2002). The rejection of arrogant and self-absorbed professional politics might not be cynical withdrawal, but instead the beginnings of a legitimate opposition (Loader 2007).

Alternative Value Explanation

The final explanation that this paper will address is the view that "young people have adopted alternative values that are different to those of older generations" (Kimberlee 2002, p.90). It adopts the view that young people are rejecting orthodox, party based politics (National Opinion Poll Research Group 1995 cited by Kimberlee 2002) due to an increased interest in identity, environmental and human rights politics (Kimberlee 2002). Fornäs and Bolin (1995) accredit this generation with the potential to develop new forms of politics, which reflect the changing world in which they have arrived (Fornäs and Bolin 1995). It has been argued that the growing concern with identity politics is due to young people's 'inner-directed needs' which has seen a growing emphasis on 'inner growth', 'personal autonomy', 'empathy' and 'correctness' (Wilkinson 1994). According to Kimberlee (2002) young people have been seen as being at the forefront of this new politics', which has shifted the focus away from the class-structured politics of the past.

Whilst all have valid points, standing alone they are far too limited. Certain 'lifestyle' factors will affect youth participation and engagement, however class is no longer the most influential (Kimberlee 2002). Arguably the mobility and flexibility enjoyed by many young people (Johnston & Pattie 1997; Fornäs and Bolin 1995) does explain why the binding and somewhat limited nature of political parties may no longer seem attractive to them. Also these explanations address only the obvious, with no emphasis on influential factors outside of the political sphere, i.e. brands. This paper will argue that young people's rejection of political parties is not due to apathy or disinterest (Phillips 1998; Henn et al 2005), but is instead a form of political emancipation. Young people's lives are changing, they are reacting to the world, and as Fornäs and Bolin (1995) noted, are now developing new forms of politics.

Brands

As illustrated above, academic literature is starting to acknowledge the changing nature of politics with the move away from class-based politics (Kimberlee 2002) and the introduction of consumer and lifestyle politics (Norris 2003). Nonetheless it still remains somewhat undeveloped, as brands dominant role in the lives of young people has been largely overlooked in the debate surrounding youth dis-engagement. Whilst there is a considerable amount of academic work focusing on the relationship between branding and politics, as reviewed in the introduction it is very one-sided. This next section will discuss the increasingly affective relationship between brands and young people, and the weighted existing literature exploring the relationship between brands and politics.

The Power of Brands

As mentioned in previously, young people are experiencing a number of uncertainties leaving them with little sense of power or control (Kimberlee 2002), and according to Bauman (2001) this uncertainty generated anxiety is the very substance that makes individualised society fertile for consumerist purposes. Young people are now seeking structure in consumption as a means of dealing with low feelings of personal control (Cutright 2012), which has seen their attention divert away from politics and onto brands. Life turns into a shopping spree (Beck 1992 cited by Bauman 2001) and as party politics loses its authenticity and relevance, young people are buying into brands, and leaving politics on the shelf. According to Schroeder et al (2006) “a brand is a narrative entity that imposes itself as a natural source of ideological and biological power” that have the ability to govern the way we consider our daily universe and most of our daily actions. Dissimilar to political governance brands tend to work from below by shaping the context in which freedom is exercised (Arvidsson 2005). Holt (2004) believes that “customers flock to brands that embody the ideals they admire, helping them express who they want to be”, a similar criterion often adopted when joining or endorsing political parties. The social construction of political identity is further complicated for young people (Giddens 1991) as the old values and affinities associated with social class identity are being transformed and replaced with the prospect of multiple identities (Fahmy 2006). Young people’s disconnection with social class and political institutions means that they are now required to take more responsibility for managing both their lifestyle choices (Giddens 1991) and the construction of their identity. Political parties are no longer helping them with this, brands are.

Politics and Brands

For some, the connection between politics and brands may be considered a tedious one, and whilst there is a small amount of literature examining their relationship, as mentioned in the introduction, it is very one-sided. Brands are now providing young people with guidance, values, stability and control (Kimberlee 2002; Holt 2004; Cutright 2012), and whilst this may seem irrelevant to political parties and politicians, it is in fact affecting their relationship with young people. The commodification of politics has further positioned politics as akin to shopping, with parties transforming into brands (Smith and French 2009), forcing them to compete with existing brands for young people’s attention and support. Branding has permeated politics in a number of ways, all of which reinforcing this analogy between buying and voting. Needham (2005) recognizes the discernable similarities between elections and point of sale, which is grounded in the view that consumers now have knowledge structures of political parties, in the same way they have for brands (Smith and French 2009). Smith and French (2009) argue that political parties are brands because they act as brands to consumers, which is supported by a number of academic’s who also recognise the

existence of 'political brands' (Kavanagh 1995; Smith 2001; Needham 2006; Marsh and Fawcett 2011). Smith and French (2009) publically acknowledge political parties as brands, highlighting the benefits they provide to their consumers; community involvement, cultural identity, self-concept reinforcement and epistemic value, to name but a few. But in doing so they reinforce exactly what it is that 'political brands' aren't doing for young people, which may be why they are now turning to commercial brands instead.

Whilst some argue 'apathetic', and others argue 'different' there is an inarguable decline, or difference in the way young people engage with politics. Key reasons have been identified in academic literature however none seem to explore and acknowledge the significant relationship young people have with brands and whether it impacts on their relationship with politics. Brands are now shaping our ability "to look, fantasize, sympathize, or sometimes simply to act and feel" (Arvidsson 2005) and with the recent permeation of political branding, political parties are now having to compete with them. Brands are giving young people control, power and attention, politics and politician aren't. So it prompts the question: Does young people's relationship with brands, affect their relationship with politics? This research paper aims to achieve the following three objectives:

To understand young people's perception of party politics.

To explore young people's relationship with brands.

To investigate whether young people expect more from brands or politicians.

The next section will discuss how the methodological approach adopted by this paper intends to answer the proposed research question and three research objectives.

METHODS

To explore whether young people's relationship with brands affects their relationship with politics, a qualitative approach was adopted allowing the researcher to develop a deep, insightful understanding (Bryman 2008). As discussed previously, a critique of much of the existing literature on youth political engagement is that it adopts a quantitative approach, focused heavily on narrow, restricted conceptions of the 'political' (Marsh et al. 2007). This investigation wanted to really understand how young people themselves conceive the political, which means that no attempt was made by the researcher to define 'politics'. This section will briefly outline the research design, the sample used, and how 'politics' and 'brands' were conceptualised. It will also provide a detailed explanation of why focus groups and in-depth interviews were the methods chosen to investigate whether young people's relationship with brands affects their relationship with politics. This study wanted to uncover an authentic understanding of young people's relationship with politics and brands, so wasn't seeking a methodology that uncovered 'generalizable truths' (Marsh et al. 2007). This led to the use of two focus groups involving 10 respondents, and follow up semi-structured interviews with 5 of the participants.

Owing to the nature of this research project, it would have been impossible to obtain a completely representative sample of young people, however respondents were selected on their ability to add to the 'richness' of data collected (Barbour 2008). All respondents were university students aged between 18-24, and diversity was ensured across 7 variables: gender, age, hometown, race, degree, sexuality and class, which were self-identified (see Appendix D). As Patton (2002) stresses "Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects". To avoid imposing narrow conceptions onto

the respondents, the first questions asked in the focus group were used to elicit their definition of 'politics'. They were asked to describe their instant associations with the word politics, and were then invited to elaborate on these responses through the use of images (see Appendix F), an increasingly popular social research technique (Marsh et al. 2007). The respondents were asked to pick 5 images out of a potential 10 that they most associated with 'politics', both groups picked 4 of the same. They both selected a photo of British media, a picture of Ed Milliband, Nick Clegg and David Cameron stood together, an image of a voting card, and a road sign with the key parties pointing in different directions. The findings from this suggested that young people's definition of 'politics' is very 'party' based. Respondents were also asked to define what a 'brand' meant to them. Their responses were generic and basic; it was defined as 'a label' or 'name' with a 'bit of personality behind it'. They spoke about it from a very detached, rational perspective, which supported the hypothesis that young people are largely unaware of just how influential brands are in their lives.

Focus groups are a qualitative method that have recently gained in popularity in media and marketing studies, however are by no means a new technique (Bryman 2008). They were utilized by this study to elicit honest and valid responses to the proposed research objectives outlined in section 2.4. Similar to Henn et al' 2002 study which was investigating youth and political participation in Britain, the focus groups were used to uncover some of the deeper perceptions and meanings that young people attach to politics and political activity (Henn et al. 2002). Information rich cases (Patton 2002) were heavily utilized in these focus groups in order to enhance the richness of the data. Both focus groups had one participant who was currently doing a 'politics' degree, which added a very interesting dynamic to the discussions. The focus groups were also used to explore 'class collective identity' and whether it still exists for young people. They also investigated the way the respondents cope with uncertainties and disappointments, which supported Cutright' (2012) findings that consumption is now used to deal with low feelings of control. The respondents were also asked to list 3 characteristics that both a brand and a politician needs in order to be successful, which was completed individually at first, then discussed within the group. Not only did this question highlight the similarity in characteristics they now prescribe to brands and politicians, but it also enhanced the generalizability of the findings, as their individual responses were very similar. Similar to O'Toole et al' investigation into young people and politics in the UK, the data generated in the focus groups was followed up by individual in-depth interviews (Marsh et al. 2007). The interviews were used to strengthen the findings from the focus groups, which meant generating a deeper understanding of respondents 'perceptions', and expectations' of brands and politics, as well as their 'relationship' with both. The interviews were used to explore personal experiences in greater detail and the affect it has on their relationship with brands and politics. The interviews focused on eliciting biographical information like class and lifestyle, they were also asked about political and brand allegiances, their current life stage, buying habits, past experiences and family influences. The follow up interviews were used to solidify existing key findings, but to also investigate whether there were any 'group' influenced opinions. The interviews were semi-structured, so the researcher had an interview guide with a list of questions (Bryman 2008), but the interviewee could lead and direct the conversation. Respondent diversity was also ensured in the follow up interviews.

Whilst focus groups and interviews were definitely the method most suited to this study, there were a number of limitations, the first being the unrepresentative size

of the sample. Only 10 respondents were used, all of which were studying at Bournemouth University, which minimised the generalizability and reliability of the findings. The second limitation is that responses may have been influenced by the desire for moderator approval, and the fear of peer disapproval (Smithson 2000). The most intrusive limitation is researcher bias, which must always be acknowledged when utilizing qualitative research. Regardless of how impartial one tries to remain, personal opinions and experiences are likely to influence the research collection and interpretation.

Overall this methodology reflected the theoretical concerns with a lot of the existing literature. Qualitative methods were used to elicit, deep insightful understandings of young people's 'perception of party politics', their 'relationship with brands' and 'whether they expect more from brands or politicians'. Participant diversity was crucial, as although this study isn't focused on generating generalizable findings, it wanted to explore any shared or differentiating opinions that may be based on identity qualities. These methods were designed to explore the way young people conceive both brands and politics and whether they have any affect on one another, and the subsequent section will provide all the answers.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The findings from this paper suggest that young people are politically engaged, however they have employed a 'party' centric definition. Political parties are something they have become disaffected by, and their disengagement with them is not apathetic, but instead a conscious form of political rejection. Brands on the other hand offer young people attention, control and symbolic value, things that they are now no longer looking for from political parties and politicians. Does young people's relationship with brands affect their relationship with politics? In short, the answer to this question is yes. This section will identify 5 key themes, and pit the analysis within a discussion of the existing literature. The first theme explores young people's relationship with politics. The second theme explores their relationship with brands. The third theme discusses the declining influence of class boundaries and the increasing influence of brand choice. The fourth theme compares young people's perceptions and expectations of brands and politics. And the final theme highlights that young people are largely unaware of the relationship between their buying and their voting.

Their Relationship with Politics

Their Definition

The findings from this investigation oppose the conclusions from previous academic studies that explored the 'uninterested' 'apathetic youth' (Phillips 1998; Henn et al. 2005) and argue that their limited conceptions of the political are having a profound affect on youth engagement. According to 20 year old, Advertising student Jules, "*we will stand up for shit that we don't want to take, but we don't know that were necessarily being involved in politics.*" The creation and perpetuation of 'party' based 'youth apathy' has been internalised by many young people, where they themselves now measure their political interest and engagement, around this preconceived narrow definition of 'politics'. For 21-year-old Advertising student Jake, politics is like "*a really interesting series that I missed the first two seasons of and now there's no way for me to be involved*". For these participants politics means politicians and it's become a closed, London centred activity that they would love to be involved with, but can't. They see politics as an action in itself, the images symbolising racism; gay rights and personal protest (see Appendix F) were largely ignored when communicating their definition of politics, and

according to 21-year-old Advertising student Marissa “*you can switch on and off politics and mine always seems to be off*”. According to Jane who is a 21-year-old Politics student:

“I don’t think that people, when they think of politics, have a definition that they can go to, so they think of the House of Commons... and the party leaders”.

This narrow, predefined, party based conception of ‘politics’ is restricting young people’s perceived engagement with politics, heightening their political insecurities and extending the generation gap (Phillips 1998). The academic world propose the ‘youth based’, ‘politics based’, ‘value based’ reasons for the decline in youth disengagement (Parry et al. 1992; Wilkinson 1994; Johnston & Pattie 1997; White et al. 2000; Henn et al. 2002; Kimberlee 2002), but the findings from this study suggest that ‘academic based’ needs to be added to that list.

Party Politics

This narrow ‘party’ based definition is made more detrimental as this happens to be the main aspect of politics that many young people seem to reject. The findings from this study will go on to support Kimberlee’ (2002) ‘politics’ focused explanation. As discussed in section 2.2.2, Henn et al (2002) believe that political parties seem out of touch with the needs and experiences of the British youth, and according to 21-year-old Jane, “they don’t understand us, we don’t understand them”. This mutual lack of understanding creates an unspoken irrelevance, where young people are aware that they don’t serve the interests of politicians, but politicians then become as equally insignificant to them. This is then worsened as according to Jules:

“we feel like our voices aren’t being heard, but we have a lot to say, and what we do have to say is probably quite good, and they should listen to us”.

This opposes the ‘apathetic’ argument, and reinforces just how politically extraneous young people feel. Jules’ comment is also supported by White et al’ (2000) research, which found that many young people feel that their opinions are considered irrelevant, a factor that could very easily lead to political disillusionment. Thus supporting the notion that declining voter turnout is not necessarily due to an inability to get to polling stations (Johnston & Pattie 1997) or apathy, but instead could be a form of legitimate opposition (Loader 2007). Alongside politicians inability to understand young people and their perceived political irrelevance, political parties no longer provide clear identity value. 21-year-old Ellie who is a middle class Advertising student believes that:

“They aren’t staying true to their party, and are quite confused in themselves, and that’s why many people don’t have a strong attachment to them”.

If parties no longer know what they stand for, they wont be able to help young people shape their own identities. As discussed previously, Giddens (1991) notes that young people are now required to take more responsibility for the construction of their identities owing to their increasing disconnection with political institutions. According to the findings of this study, when young people think, ‘politics’ they think political parties, which unfortunately happens to be one of the main facets of politics that have disillusioned the British youth. This narrow conception means that young people internalise this ‘apathetic’ view, as they themselves don’t recognize that they are engaging with politics outside of this limited definition. This inhibits their political confidence, and essentially positions ‘politics’ as a taboo subject amongst the younger generation. Congruent with the ‘politics focused’ explanation (Kimberlee 2002), political parties ignore young people and cease to provide any identity value, forcing young people to look elsewhere.

Their Relationship with Brands

As touched upon in the introduction, anxieties and instability often prompt individuals to live their lives as a string of shopping expeditions (Bauman 2001), and with political parties increasing inability to satisfy young people's needs, they have moved on to the next best thing, brands

The Power of Brands

For this generation of young people "brands aren't lifeless discriminators, they're animate objects"(Advertising student Jake) and according to Belk (1988 p. 139) "knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves". Ellie believes that "you start to build affective feelings towards a brand" where it becomes so much more than just a functional product, and has the ability to govern (Schroeder et al 2006) young people's lives. During the follow up interview with Marissa, she was asked how she would feel if the brand she admired (which happened to be Nike), strayed away from its key values, her response was; "I don't think I would be able to trust them to help me on my self improvement journey". This single comment highlights the overwhelming amount of influence some brands have been ascribed, and supports Tuan' (1980. P472 cited in Belk 1988) observation that "our fragile sense of self needs support, and this we get by having and possessing things".

The Importance of Values

As discussed throughout, young people are now required to take more responsibility for the construction of their identity (Giddens 1991). This means that they are buying things that will stabilize and communicate the values they want to espouse as "people seek, express, confirm, and ascertain a sense of being through what they have" (Belk 1988, p.146). According to Jake he will only buy brands "that are congruent with my values", which means that brands are now having to make a concerted effort to appeal to young people's emotional needs as well as their functional ones. Marissa wouldn't want to "buy into something that didn't fit into my values" supporting Malar et al' (2011) findings that people buy brands that achieve self-congruence, and affirm their sense of self. For the respondents of this study, when they buy into brands, they are "paying for attention" and "to have something that I identify with" (Marissa). Young people should be able to identify with political parties, and apart from Ed who is currently studying politics, not one of them mentioned the identity value offered by political parties. The findings also suggest that, similar to the way Sut Jhally (2006) recognises advertisements ability to fill commodities with desired meanings; young people are now subconsciously injecting themselves into brands, filling them with their desired meaning, creating an interchangeable entity. When Jake was talking about one of his favourite brands Google, he mentioned that "in terms of personality as well, they're not very far from someone like me", and when Marissa was asked to describe what type of politician Nike would be she said "female". Whilst it would be impossible to make any profound generalisations based on these findings alone, throughout the 2 focus groups and 5 in-depth interviews, it is all too apparent that young people's relationship with brands is extremely complex, with young people putting as much meaning into brands, as they receive.

Discussion of Themes 1 & 2

The two themes above have addressed my first two research aims, as they have uncovered the respondent's perception of party politics, and also explored their relationship with brands. Owing to the elite, out-dated nature of party politics

(Kimberlee 2002) many young people are now consciously rejecting and disengaging with political parties. Meanwhile brands are offering young people attention and identity value, continually increasing their expectations, and then fulfilling them. The following theme will discuss the declining role of fixed class categories, and the emerging presence of class within consumption.

The Role of Class

In recent years the effect of class on social and political outcomes has become a highly contested subject (Marsh et al. 2007), and as discussed in section 2.1, the class-structured politics of the past seems to be declining (Kimberlee 2002). As consumption is now the basis of contemporary social cleavages and the chief source of individual identity (Pakulski and Waters 2006), Pakulski and Waters (2006) go so far as to argue that class no longer exists. This study rejects their notion that class is dead, suggesting instead that class is now being consumed, understood, and perpetuated through branded consumption. The research shows that not only are brands now shaping and fulfilling young people's expectations, they are also influencing the way young people understand social constructions, like class.

The Decline of Fixed Class Boundaries

In much of the existing academic literature, the respondent's class was often determined by their father's occupation (Marsh et al. 2007). Not only does this implore very old fashioned, patriarchal assumptions, but it also assumes that all young people identify to a class. As mentioned previously, this study wanted to avoid imposing any personal conceptions onto the participants, so they were asked to self identify, based on their decided variables (see Appendix D). Of the 10 participants, 6 identified themselves as middle class, 2 as working class, and 2 were unable to identify to any class. The findings suggest that for these respondents class is no longer a fixed category fundamental in the construction of their identity, but instead something attached to their upbringing, which can be ignored or changed. According to Ellie who self identified as middle class, "you never really attach that [class] to yourself, its more something that's projected onto you by other things". She went on to talk about how her parents are both conservative which she has politically challenged as "its embarrassing that we are that stereotypical". For 21 year old English student Bea who self identified as working class, she emphasised just how much she dislikes defining herself by class boundaries because, "I would hope, and I do believe that within our society now we do not have these strict class boundaries". Whilst the responses above suggest that for these young people, fixed class categories are no longer important in the construction of their identities, similar to Marsh et al' (2007) conclusions, this study will argue that whilst 'class' may not be a concept that young people use easily or frequently they still live and experience class, they just do it differently.

Buying Class

Marsh et al (2007) rejected most empiricist approaches to class; by arguing that class is not a fixed category but rather something we live. This study will add to that, suggesting as well as being something that we live, class is now also something that young people can buy. Berger (2008) talks about publicity and its promise of happiness as judged from the outside of others, and this study will draw parallels between that and the way brands work, except their promise is not one of happiness, but instead a desired class association. Bea believes that with some brands "you're buying into a lifestyle you wish you had, and by buying it you think you will have it". Brands are providing young people the physical access they think they require in order to become a certain type of person,

or live a certain type of lifestyle. For Jake, his clothes from Zara are “equipping me to move in the circles in which I see myself, its kind of an access thing”. Brands also allow young people to communicate a number of things about themselves all at once, and as discussed in section 2.4, class based identity and affinity, is being replaced with the prospect of multiple identities (Fahmy 2006). The consumer market is now offering young people choice complete with the reassurance that the choice is right (Bauman 2001).

As class is now ingrained within young people’s consumption habits, it means that young people cannot only buy their desired class, but they can also change it. This was demonstrated by Jake who self-identified as middle-class in the pre-focus group questionnaire, but in the interview disclosed that he’s actually from a working class background. His association with middle class was “*largely to do with the people with whom I associate*” similar to the reason he gave for buying clothes at Zara, which was because “*the people I associate with are likely to wear stuff like that*”. According to Bauman (2001), when long-term commitments are liabilities, the future can be grasped only as a succession of ‘nows’, and young people’s ability to buy and change their class is one of their ‘nows’. According to Marsh et al, (2007), in contemporary society class is a social construction, existing only in terms of our understanding of it and these findings show that young people now understand class not in predefined fixed categories, but instead in terms of the clothes people wear and the things they buy. This ability to use brands to create and communicate class equips young people with a sense of control, and the belief that they have the ability to change their future simply with their buying.

The Relationship between Brands and Politics

During the follow up interviews respondents were asked to listen to 5 statements and explain whether they related to either political parties or brands. This method was used to investigate the ideological and biological power offered by brands (Schroeder et al. 2006), and to also discover whether there was anything left that only politics could offer young people. The phrases were as follows:

1. I will pick a *INSERT WORD* that embody the ideals I admire and help me express who I want to be
2. *INSERT WORD* Influence the way I consider our daily universe and my actions
3. *INSERT WORD* provide extraordinary identity value because they address and support anxieties and values I may have
4. *INSERT WORD* tend to have clear and consistent values and beliefs
5. *INSERT WORD* gives me a sense of control

Of all 5 statements, political parties only gained the majority vote on the second phrase, and out of a potential 25 mentions, political parties were only selected as the missing word 4 times. According to the findings from this, only brands ‘give young people a sense of control’, ‘embody ideals they admire’, ‘help them express who they want to be’ and ‘have clear and consistent values and beliefs’. These findings highlight exactly what it is that young people are now receiving from brands instead of politics. This method also reinforced the similarity in the way young people perceive, and use brands and politics, as most of the responses required careful consideration, suggesting that neither brands nor politics ‘owned’ a specific benefit.

Young People’s Expectations

At different periods throughout the focus groups the respondents were asked what they ‘expected’ from both brands and politicians (see Appendix A). These were two identical questions that received polar opposite responses. The respondents expected consistency and sincerity from brands, as according to 21-year-old Dan you “*expect their*

values to always be the same, and expect them not to change". Bea accredited them with the ability to improve moods, as "you feel like its gonna make you feel better as you're improving yourself" and Ellie expected them not to change once you've made the "investment of the relationship." Brands are creating and maintaining connections with young people built on trust, and authenticity, which, unfortunately for politicians, is now something young people always expect. Owing to the importance young people currently place on trust, the first focus group expected nothing from politicians as they knew that "politics can be based on what multi-national corporations think" and "political thought is persuaded by somebody that owns all the newspapers" (Dan aged 21). This singular comment suggests transference in the way young people now perceive brands and politicians, with brands now considered the trust worthier of the two, and politicians being associated with the faceless power of multi-national corporations. According to Advertising student Marissa, "I think you give the same characteristics to politicians as you do to brands... and politicians become almost more like brands". The second focus group did have expectations, but they were unsatisfied expectations highlighting a number of politicians perceived failures. Jules expected "equal rights and representation", Jake wanted them to "do what's right for the country, the planet and people" and Tom wanted "pragmatism... in decision making". Brands seem to be shaping and fulfilling young people's expectations, selling young people the things they no longer receive from politicians, and in doing so, they continue to minimize young people's need or desire for politics.

Their Behaviour is Subconscious

For this generation of young people, brands have always governed the way they consider themselves and their daily universe (Schroeder 2006), and politics hasn't. Whilst this paper has discussed young people's 'engaged scepticism' (Henn et al. 2002) and their ability to create a new type of politics (Fornäs and Bolin 1995), their increasingly extensive relationship with brands isn't a conscious form of political liberation. In both focus groups the respondents were asked to define a 'brand', and in both sessions, the responses were very basic (see Appendix E for focus group 1 responses). Neither group explained the identity value offered, their expectations, or any of the other findings that have been discussed above. This suggests that young people are largely unaware of their complex relationship with brands, and it's only when they are pushed to talk about it, that they realise the influential role brands have in their lives. When young people buy the latest Nike trainers, or a Zara shirt, they aren't thinking about politics and the perceived failures of politicians, they are thinking about themselves and the maintenance of their identity (Schroeder 2006). They are buying brands that they trust, brands that have proved themselves and brands that embody the ideals they admire (Holt 2004), similar to the criteria adopted when voting for political candidates (Smith and French 2009). When asked to explain their relationship with both, "*I don't feel a connection between brands and politics*" (Bea) was mentioned more than once. Brands allow young people to act and think for themselves, they give them a sense of power and control (Cutright 2012), they offer themselves as an alternative option to politics, but this isn't a connection that has been made in the minds of the voter/consumer.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study suggest that political parties are, unbeknown to them, competing with brands for the hearts and minds of young people, which is a competition they are currently losing. The recent permeation of political branding, has further

positioned politics as akin to shopping, transforming political parties into political brands (Smith and French 2009). They now have to compete for young people's time and attention, and whilst they're ignoring and scorning young people (Kimberlee 2002), brands are raising their expectations and fulfilling them. Young people are looking for guidance, attention and control; brands now offer them that, subconsciously providing them with the crutch they need to be able to reject party politics. The findings from this investigation suggest that, brands are slowly replacing young people's need and desire for party politics. The purpose of this paper was to investigate whether young people's relationship with brands affects their relationship with politics, and this final section will present the overall conclusion, providing answers to the research objectives, as well as a retrospective evaluation of the study. In answering my research objectives outlined in section 2.4.1 the findings from this investigation disagree with Phillips' (1998) notion of 'political apathy' and instead support Henn' (2002) belief that they are 'engaged sceptics'. Throughout the focus groups and interviews, the respondents discussed the mutual lack of understanding between themselves and politicians and their ignored voices. The findings show that political parties are something that these young people disliked, distrusted, and are learning to live without. This significantly contrasted with their affective relationship with brands, which were described as 'animate objects' that help them with 'self-improvement' and stabilising identity. Their relationship with brands also permeated into the way they experience social constructions like class as consumption equips them with the power to control class, and communicate multiple identities, which supports the argument that the introduction of consumer politics (Norris 2003) has seen the move away from class-based politics (Kimberlee 2002). In regards to their expectations, they expect a considerable amount more from brands than they do politicians. When asked about brand expectations, respondents talked about trust, consistency and the ability to lift moods, in comparison to political expectations, which was met with extreme scepticism. Unfortunately this is a finding that can neither be supported nor critiqued by previous work owing to the lack of existing literature investigating this topic. As documented throughout, a qualitative research method was adopted in order to develop a deep insightful understanding of the topic. Whilst this has enhanced the richness and validity of the investigation, there are a number of limitations, and as discussed in section 3.7, the most prominent being the role of the researcher. This research topic was selected owing to personal interest, and regardless of how professional and detached one tries to remain, personal experience and opinion will have influenced the collection and interpretation of the findings. In order to overcome this potential restriction in future research, an external independent supervisor would be employed to help minimize the potential bias, which would involve regular meetings to discuss and analyse the emerging themes. These research paper findings are incredibly important as they oppose the view that young people are apathetic (Parry et al. 1992; Phillips 1998; Henn et al. 2005) and integrate the role of brands into the debate. This paper has used young people's voice to dispel this view of apathy, challenging the pessimistic literature capable of generating self-fulfilling prophecies. This investigation emphasizes the importance, relevance and validity of this research topic, which will hopefully ensue in a full-scale research study investigating the affect young people's relationship with brands, has on politics. A finding that I would like to expand on in the future would be whether these conclusions would differ cross-culturally. Young people are political, they are voting, but similar to the behaviour exhibited in the Edward Filene (1932) quote presented in the introduction, they are voting with their money and looking for proof not promises.

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