

The New Social Media – Generation “Like”

Thanks to social media, today’s teens are able to directly interact with their culture — artists, celebrities, movies, brands, and even one another — in ways never before possible. But is that real empowerment? Or do marketers still hold the upper hand? In *Generation Like*, author and FRONTLINE correspondent Douglas Rushkoff explores how the perennial teen quest for identity and connection has migrated to social media — and exposes the game of cat-and-mouse that corporations are playing with these young consumers. Do kids think they’re being used? Do they care? Or does the perceived chance to be the next big star make it all worth it?

The film provides a window on a world that many of those active in social-media don’t consider when they tap Facebook’s “like” button. In short, modern American companies are very carefully monitoring and in many cases monetizing “likes” of their customers - the consumers. Many – most? -- social-media users of all ages are oblivious to the engines of marketing that are roaring beneath their favorite apps. And if they do know, many apparently don’t really care.

In “*Generation Like*,” Douglas Rushkoff concentrates on the latest trends in the longtime quest to commoditize young people and their passions. The most shocking part of “*Generation Like*,” PBS’s new Frontline documentary about youth media culture, occurs when a bunch of teenagers confess they don’t know what the term “sell-out” means. This term, so vital to the identities of at least three generations that had come before them, didn’t register as something negative. In fact, it didn’t register at all.

The documentary explores the push and pull of modern marketing, which is pretty indistinguishable from internet culture. This, of course, is no coincidence. The show looks at everything from corporate sponsorship of YouTube stars like Baby Scumbag and Tyler Oakley to the average teen who’s fretting about the number of likes his Facebook profile picture might be receiving.

We’re all brands now, and this is meant to be terrifying. And it probably is. But the entire documentary is also liberally soaked with a kind of romanticization of the past; a struggle to understand how America could’ve produced such a nauseatingly earnest generation of tech-savvy sell-outs. Boomers, Gen Xers and even older Millennials are meant to be shouting, HAVE YOU NO SHAME, at their screens — without recognizing that perhaps the answer is both “no” and “shame about what?”

Douglas Rushkoff, host of the program and author of last year’s *Present Shock*, introduces us to a young woman who says she’s been working 4-5 hours per day liking and retweeting various forms of social media for the *Hunger Games*. “It makes me feel like a worker, but in the end it’s all worth it because I get more sparks,” she tells us.

Her “sparks” are social currency, a bit like the pumpkin points lampooned five years ago by The Onion — the same Onion started by a bunch of snarky Gen Xers in Madison and would evolve into a major media outlet now dependent upon likes and retweets to stay afloat. What does this

young woman get from her hours of clicks? Sparks. What do sparks get her? Recognition as a serious *Hunger Games* fan. And that's really all she wants out of that relationship.

This young woman isn't ignorant to the realities of this exchange. For the most part, she understands what's going on. And that's the interesting part. She knows what her efforts are providing both to her and the studio behind the *Hunger Games* movies. She just doesn't really seem to care. The question for the old people in the audience then is twofold: 1) Why should she care? and 2) Is this deceptive or manipulative when it's facilitated by an enormous media company?

"I do a lot of like brand integrations whenever it works, but I try to keep it minimal," YouTube star Tyler Oakley says to a room full of marketing professionals. "They can always tell if a YouTuber is like pushing something. So I try to keep it transparent and honest because they know it's my job and they know that I have to pay bills. They get that, so it's all good."

It's that matter-of-fact attitude that's so foreign to many of us over the age of 25 who are watching at home. "Selling out" has simply become "paying the bills." It almost feels like they're cheating. Who do these young punks think they are to just skip that step where you wallow in a pit of self-deception, rationalization, and guilt?

The director – Douglas Rushkoff - argues that he wants to make people aware of the secret power of advertising. "Today's teens don't need to be chased down by advertisers. They're putting themselves out there online for anyone to see. They tell the world what they think is cool, starting with their own online profiles." The purpose of the film is to show the architecture of this advertising so that people can make more conscious and willful decisions about how and what they do," Rushkoff argues. "For the young person watching this to say, 'OK. I could spend six hours a day retweeting things I get from "The Hunger Games" in order to get to be one of their top 1,000 Hunger Games" people. I can go do that.' But at least I want the kid to understand what is his or her role in this scheme. Where are they in it?"

"When kids live their lives on a platform that's created to do all the kinds of things that we're talking about here, they're living in that as their world, and they end up with some of these values embedded in themselves." In this world, Rushkoff argues that getting 'likes' is the way to get ahead, the way to leverage your network to make money. If you're doing it transparently and openly and authentically, this is not evil. This is life. When you're socializing and self-expressing and your sense of personal worth is also based in how many 'likes' you have, it's kind of important, I think, for people to understand not that this is bad, but for people to understand that they're living their social lives in a marketplace, and what does that do to the way you think about yourself?"

At best, "Generation Like" serves as a kind of snapshot of the second decade of the 21st century. But just as the media protests of 1970s culture commentators now seem old fashioned and quaint, one can't help but imagine a world two decades from now that's even more awash in *likes* and *retweets*. The children of today's teens will likely laugh at how unsophisticated and relatively unintrusive our social media appeared.

Nevertheless, this new Frontline documentary will be examined by budding marketing professionals, teaching aspiring YouTube stars and Marketing majors alike how the online marketing sausage gets made. Some kids will see it as a warning; still more will see it as a blueprint for success. Sure, everything is the worst in history. But it always has been that way. There's almost something refreshing about the way that many of these kids approach the seemingly insidious aspects of 21st century marketing. They seem less racked with guilt over the terrifying realities of the world. They aren't bothering to shout LET'S GET THIS DYSTOPIA STARTED, like I did at the screen. Because they don't even see it as a dystopia. But as always, only time will tell if they're right.

That the younger cohort has an evolving relationship with technology — and ostensibly fewer compunctions about privacy — hardly comes as a news flash. Still, Rushkoff finds several interesting points of entry into this multipronged topic, from the obsession with celebrity to the way sponsors crunch data in order to turn enthusiastic teens and young adults into apostles to help promote their brands. “You are what you like,” as Rushkoff puts it, and the copious amount of information available — as well as the eagerness of teens to promote something like “The Hunger Games” for the merest brush of personalized contact with the property — make it easier for companies to track and exploit every move.

If all that seems relatively benign — except perhaps for the crass commercialism of it all, and the layers of AstroTurf underlying what are supposed to be grassroots fans — Rushkoff closes on a particularly sobering and troubling note: A teenage girl who has developed an avid online following with the encouragement of her mother, who notes that her daughter’s “likes” pile up when she posts “full body” shots. So while there’s a case to be made for the democratizing aspects of the social-media revolution potentially eradicating some of those barriers erected to block access, as “Generation Like” illustrates, sometimes that just amounts to a fancy way of pimping out kids, even if they’re willing participant