COMING OF AGE IN CONTEMPORARY CONSUMER CULTURE: CONSUMPTION PRACTICES AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AMONG ADOLESCENT GIRLS

by

JENNA MARIE DRENTEN

(Under the Direction of Thomas Leigh)

ABSTRACT

In contributing to this emerging stream of consumer culture literature, the purpose of my dissertation is to explore the intersection between consumption practices and identity development throughout adolescence, specifically among teenage girls. To that end, this dissertation consists of two essays, each exploring the transitional role of consumption practices in adolescent girls’ identity development. The first essay explores adolescent identity tensions and coming of age consumption practices between childhood and adulthood. Data include written identity narratives and accompanying collages from 42 female participants. Based on findings, I develop a framework of tensions in liminal identity development and identify how market-mediated milestones play a role in negotiating such tensions. The second essay explores how social media (e.g., Facebook) serves as a platform for adolescent identity development through sharing consumption practices and performing market-mediated milestones online. This study employs a combined qualitative approach of visual photograph analysis and extended depth interviews. The data suggest that teenagers, both individually and collectively, display their identities and culturally shared meanings through mobile photo uploading on social media. Findings reveal identity-oriented characteristics of shared mobile photos and identity-oriented
motivations for mobile photo sharing. Each essay presents a thorough literature review, methodological approach, supporting empirical evidence, and discussion of the marketing contribution.

INDEX WORDS: Adolescent Consumers, Identity Development, Rites of Passage, Social Media
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Adolescence was long thought to be an American cultural invention as a by-product of industrialization (Hall 1905; Kett 1977). However, investigations of hundreds of societies confirm that adolescence is a universally recognized life stage, starting around or just after puberty, although with different markers, behavioral manifestations, and social attributions (Steinberg et al. 2009; Brown, Larson, and Saraswathi 2002; Schlegel and Barry 1991). From a consumer behavior perspective, adolescence represents the reflective stage of consumer socialization (i.e., 11-16 years old), which is characterized by abstract knowledge structures, heightened social awareness, and perspective-taking skills (Roedder John 1999; Ward 1974). Furthermore, adolescence represents a period of self-exploration and identity development as young people shift from childhood to adulthood; thus, the teenage stage of life is liminal, or transitional, in that teenagers are no longer children but not yet adults. Marketing scholars have had an ongoing interest in researching adolescent consumers (see Roedder John 1999). Despite the growing interest in researching young consumers, most consumer socialization literature is skewed toward understanding cognitive processes (e.g., children’s advertising knowledge, transaction knowledge, decision-making skills and strategies; Roedder John 1999), essentially discounting cultural socialization factors. Most scholars treat adolescence as a life stage, which young people just need to “get through” rather than examining the adolescence as a culturally significant and meaning-laden period of life within the overall life course. The sociocultural,
experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption are central to the consumer socialization process (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Modern adolescents have developed a culture of their own (Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995; Bucholtz 2002; Nelson and Nelson 2010; Schlegel and Hewlett 2011). Only recently have scholars begun to explore the nuances of adolescent consumer culture (e.g., Chin 2001; Cook and Kaiser 2004; Kjeldgaard 2009; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Schor 2004; Wooten 2006). Although the vast majority of adolescent girls in our society eventually navigate their passage from childhood to adulthood, few universally accepted benchmarks or markers guide their journey or indicate that they have accomplished their goal.

In contributing to this emerging stream of consumer culture literature, the purpose of my dissertation is to explore the intersection between consumption practices and identity development throughout adolescence, specifically among teenage girls. To that end, this dissertation consists of two essays, each exploring the transitional role of consumption practices in adolescent girls’ identity development. The first essay explores adolescent identity tensions and coming of age consumption practices between childhood and adulthood. Data include written identity narratives and accompanying collages from 42 female participants. Based on findings, I develop a framework of tensions in liminal identity development and identify how market-mediated milestones play a role in negotiating such tensions. The second essay explores how social media (e.g., Facebook) serves as a platform for adolescent identity development through sharing consumption practices and performing market-mediated milestones online. This study employs a combined qualitative approach of visual photograph analysis and extended depth interviews. The data suggest that teenagers, both individually and collectively, display their identities and culturally shared meanings through mobile photo uploading on social media.
Findings reveal identity-oriented characteristics of shared mobile photos and identity-oriented motivations for mobile photo sharing. Each essay presents a thorough literature review, methodological approach, supporting empirical evidence, and discussion of the marketing contribution.

Through the overarching lens of adolescent identity development, the organization of my dissertation is as follows. First, I present my first essay titled, “The Role of Market-Mediated Milestones in Negotiating Coming of Age Identity Tensions,” which addresses how consumption practices within the adolescent life stage play a role in identity development and identity-related consumption decisions. Next, I present my second essay titled, “Coming of Age in the Digital Age,” which addresses how adolescents utilize ubiquitous technology and social media to develop their identities through shared consumption activities. Finally, I provide a general discussion of overall contribution of my dissertation.
CHAPTER 2
THE ROLE OF MARKET-MEDIATED MILESTONES IN NEGOTIATING COMING OF AGE IDENTITY TENSIONS

INTRODUCTION

In the 1955 classic American film, Rebel Without a Cause, actress Natalie Wood portrays Judy, a tough-talking teenage girl who, much to her parents dismay, is in a fickle state between ‘little girl’ and ‘grown-up’. Her mother attempts to calm Judy’s frustrated father by saying, “She’ll outgrow it dear. It’s just the age. It’s just the age when nothing fits.” Like Judy, today’s modern young girls find themselves in a coming of age period, in which they are wedged between two statuses: child and adult. They have left behind the previous stage, yet they have not reached the new one. Anthropologists coin this transitional experience as liminal, which originates from the Latin term for “threshold” and describes the stage in rites of passage between separation and reincorporation (Turner 1987; van Gennep 1960). Turkle (1998, p. 71) suggests that “liminal moments are times of tension, extreme reactions, and great opportunity.”

Adolescence represents this liminal bridge between childhood and adulthood; however, recent studies suggest that the transition is becoming increasingly prolonged (e.g., young people are delaying historically adult-oriented experiences like marriage and parenting), stretching into at least the mid-20s (Arnett 2000, 2004). The delay in taking on adult identity roles is largely due to the postmodern diminution of shared communal structures (e.g., religious, ethnic; Firta...
and Shultz 1997), which typically guide coming of age rites of passage (see Van Gennep 1960). One of the consequences of this postmodern cultural shift is the degradation of widely accepted coming of age rites of passage (Deegan 1989, 1998; Mahdi, Christopher, and Meade 1996). For instance, Arnett (1998; 2001) suggests that intangible coming of age markers, such as accepting responsibility and deciding on one’s own beliefs, have tempered the importance of tangible rites of passage, such as completing one’s education and getting married. A primary goal of traditional rites of passage is to establish a relatively permanent identity status change; however, as Firat and Shultz (1997) state, postmodernism “encourages the experiencing of many different ways of being, not conforming or committing only to a single one” (p. 190). Thus, the postmodern marketplace liberates consumers from choosing a single self-identity. In line with this view, it is not surprising that young women in postmodern consumer societies are in a potentially prolonged liminal state. In the wake of extended liminality between childhood and adulthood, the question emerges of how consumption might stimulate or stifle coming of age identity projects among contemporary girls? The purpose of this paper is to explore the symbolic connections between coming of age liminality and identity-oriented consumption practices in postmodern society. First, I review literature on liminality and identity development, focusing on contemporary adolescent consumers in postmodern culture. Next, I outline the methodology of the study, which follows a unique qualitative approach including 42 participants’ identity narratives and corresponding identity collages for each of three discrete life stages (e.g., early adolescent, late adolescent, adult). Based on the data, I identify five areas in which liminality breeds tension in identity development: finding balance (tension between chaos and organization), expressing individuality (tension between uniqueness and conformity), asserting independence (tension between autonomy and reliance), managing self-control (tension
between restraint and indulgence), and developing human agency (tension between choice and chance). Further, findings suggest that consumption practices embedded within coming of age milestones help young people negotiate the paradoxical tensions present in the liminal stage between childhood and adulthood. Finally, I discuss the ways in which marketers might leverage liminality to support consumption-oriented identity exploration among adolescents.

COMING OF AGE LIMINALITY AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Rites of passage mark the transition from one social status to another and follow three specific stages: separation, liminality, and reincorporation (Turner 1987; van Gennep 1960). First, in the separation stage, participants and those around them recognize that a change in the usual sets of social relations is coming. Second, in the liminal stage, participants are in a period of uncertainty, between two different states, in which they engage in the activities and learning required to pass to the next stage. In the case of adolescence, young people begin their transition into adulthood by both symbolically and physically separating from their childhood roles through a series of transformative experiences. Upon completing the liminal phase, participants enter the third stage, the reincorporation stage, in which participants emerge with a new status represented through their attitudes, values, behaviors, and identities. For instance, the Satere-Mawe tribe of Brazil marks the transformation from boy to warrior by a ceremony in which young boys must place their hands inside woven gloves filled with bullet ants—an insect whose painful sting is thirty times worse than a bee sting. Each boy must keep his hands inside the gloves for ten minutes as fellow initiates and elders dance with him. This process is repeated nineteen more times in the following months and upon completion, the boy is considered a warrior in the eyes
of his tribe (National Geographic 2007). Such rites of passage provide individuals with a distinct transition from one status to another and help define their identities, their social roles, and their personal boundaries (Eliade 1958; Mahdi et al. 1996).

From a postmodern consumer culture in which preeminent rites of passage are ambiguous, adolescents may experience a prolonged, potentially unending state of liminality on her route toward adulthood. A liminal state may become more permanent, in cases in which the identity of a person is transitory by nature (e.g., a beggar, a monk or nun; Turner 1975). For instance, a young girl leaves middle school only to be thrust into the bottom social rung of high school. She finally graduates high school only to spend four years soul-searching in college. She graduates college and enters the workforce, but social expectations loom—marriage, children, career achievement, financial stability. At what point is she considered an adult? Further, is “adult” even a suitable identity status for which to strive? Completion of a prescribed rite of passage may not instantaneously result in status change; however, participation in the process helps young people recognize the growing expectations and responsibilities associated with their desired identity or status change.

Expanding upon van Gennep’s original conception of liminality, anthropologist Victor Turner suggests that liminality serves not only to identify the significance of in-between periods, but shapes human preferences, dramatizes life experiences, and enhances creativity (Turner 1986, 1987). Liminal states are “privileged spaces where people are allowed to think about how they think, about the terms in which they conduct their thinking, or to feel about how they feel in daily life (Turner 1986, p. 102). In this way, the liminal life stage between childhood and adulthood is innately characterized by self-reflection and identity development. A subjective evaluation of one’s liminal experiences is an essential part of developing the self-concept
(Bruner 1986, 1991; Bird and Reese 2008). Moreover, Turner (1974) states that liminal individuals are marginalized by society, by either being cut off from meaningful positions with the society or by being labeled inferior in the social class hierarchy. Postmodern consumer culture is characterized by social detachment and intense individualism (Cova and Cova 2002), which contributes to continual experimentation in the realm of one’s self-identity.

Turner (1967) invites “investigators of culture to focus their attention on the phenomena and processes of mid-transition” (p. 110). From a consumer culture perspective, it is not enough to identify the liminal occasions of adolescence, like one’s first car (e.g., representing freedom and independence) or one’s first love (e.g., representing sexual exploration and emotional involvement; Collins 2003). We must understand how young people react to their liminal experiences—how liminality shapes personality, human agency, and introspection (Thomassen 2009)—and how consumption practices help or hinder this process. As Rutter (2001) states, there is “a need to focus on the process of negotiation of life transitions, and not just their occurrence or the behavioral outcome that follows” (p. 7). For example, in and of itself, the American ritual of prom is unlikely to alter one’s life trajectory in any significant way, but in the context of adolescent identity development, prom might be viewed as a momentous and meaningful milestone, imbued with consumption practices and symbolic meanings. In consumer research, several studies touch on the concepts of rites of passage and liminality (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Banister and Hogg 2006; Landzelius 2001; Pavia and Mason 2004; Schau, Gilly, and Wolfinbarger 2009), but only a few studies to date explicitly investigate liminal consumption practices and processes (Cody and Lawlor 2011; Noble and Walker 1998; Schouten 1991). In particular, Cody and Lawlor (2011) examine the liminal consumption of tweens and suggest that marketing segmentation strategies that rely upon
boundary conditions (e.g., age limits) are inherently flawed, given individuals’ reluctance to commit to a single social category.

The marketplace encourages consumers to define themselves through branded products (Belk 1988). Consumer researchers have long held the notion that consumption allows individuals to construct, maintain, and repair their identities (Belk 1988; Berger and Heath 2007; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995; Levy 1999; McCracken 1986; Schau and Gilly 2003; Schau, Gilly, Wolfinbarger 2009; Schouten 1991; Solomon 1983) and consumer products represent meaning-laden signs and symbols attached to contemporary rites of passage (Mick 1986; Rook 1985). Liminality encourages consumers to continually redefine themselves. The question then remains, how do consumers exhibit identity-driven consumption when their identity is in a state of liminal flux? Previous marketing research suggests that consumer preferences and identities are likely to emerge and transform in response to major life events and transitions such as getting married or retiring (Andreasen 1985; Gentry, Kennedy, Paul, and Hill 1995; Mehta and Belk 1991; Mergenhagen 1995; Noble and Walker 1997, Schouten 1992, Schewe and Balazs 1992). As Moschis (2007) points out, consumers gradually change their identities to fit adopted or anticipated roles and engage in activities consistent with those roles. In particular, the modern marketplace has revolutionized female gender role expectations. For instance, the median age of first marriage among American women has increased by nearly six years between 1960 and 2010, from 20.3 to 26.1, respectively (U.S. Bureau of the Census). The cultural shift may be due a wider acceptance of premarital sex, cohabitation and birth control, and that young women also feel less rushed to have babies due to assisted reproductive technology (Arnett 2004). In highly industrialized societies such as America, rites of passage are less public and more variable. The age at which coming of age transitions takes place varies, as do the nature of the transitions. The
liminal period between childhood and adulthood may be traversed by changes in schooling, changes in family rules about autonomy, “first-time” experiences such as drinking alcohol, or initiation into a group (Delany 1995; Hoover 1998). In a culture in which it is nearly impossible to escape the marketplace (Kozinets 2002), consumption inevitably plays a symbolic role in this process. Moreover, the meanings of rites of passage and their associated symbols are only fully understood by and through cultural informants (Turner 1967)—in this study, adolescents. As Thomassen (2009) suggest, liminality makes sense only within social dramas as they unfold. Meaning, adolescents’ liminal experiences can only be understood by adolescents who are in the midst of the liminality.

As young consumers develop, they learn marketplace skills and knowledge through consumer socialization (Roedder John 1999; Moschis 1985; Ward 1974). Liminality provides a setting for consumer socialization, as modern adolescents try to figure out who they are and what their roles are in the world. In contributing to the marketing literature, the purpose of this study is to better understand the three way interaction between adolescent identity development, consumption practices, and liminality. Previous research largely focuses on major life transitions from childhood to adolescence (e.g., puberty; Sprinthall and Collins 1988; Simmons, Burgeson, and Reef 1988) or the primary transitions associated with achieving adult status (e.g., marriage, having a child; Smith 2003). In contrast, my focus is on the liminal period of time between childhood and adulthood and the role of consumption practices in identity development. The important distinction here is between identity progress and identity attainment. In other words, I am more interested in the progress toward adult status than the attainment of adult status itself.
METHODOLOGY

Here I present the methodological approach for data collection and analysis. Building on liminality as a theoretical base, I employ a unique qualitative research approach to better understand how young girls construct their identities through consumption practices. Namely, I examine self-identity collages and accompanying written narratives for three discrete life stages: early adolescence, late adolescence, and adulthood. The data were analyzed using the hermeneutical method to develop overarching findings based on emergent themes derived from the identity collage and narrative data.

Following previous self-concept research (see Chaplin and John 2005), participants were asked to answer the general question of “Who Am I?” through creating identity collages and accompanying written narrative summaries for each of three discrete life stages: early adolescence, late adolescence, and adulthood. Given that this study is focused on the progression and transitional nature of rite of passages experienced from childhood through adulthood, my targeted participant population includes female late adolescents, or who Arnett terms “emerging adults,” which is defined as the period of life between the late teens to mid-twenties. Late adolescents are in the prime of liminality, wedged between the teenage high school years and the forthcoming adult life stage. Late adolescents are able to reflect on their past experiences of early adolescence, share stories of their current identity transformations, and predict personally significant milestones in the future. Participants were recruited from business classes at a large public university in the Southeastern United States, and they received extra credit for their participation in this study.
Participants were asked to perform a creative task consisting of two parts: 1) constructing three self-identity collages and 2) writing an accompanying narrative summary for each collage. First, each participant was asked to create three collages: one representing her past early adolescent self-concept, one representing her current late adolescent self-concept, and one representing her future, adult self-concept. The past self collage was representative of the participants’ identities from five years ago. In other words, participants were instructed to take their current ages, subtract five years, and use that mindset to create the collage (e.g., where did you live?, who were your friends?, what were your hobbies?, what kind of clothes did you wear?). Participants were told that the present self collage was to be representative of how they currently identified themselves. The future self collage was aimed at representing predictions about each participant’s future identity in five years from her current age (e.g., where do you see yourself in five years?, what are your expectations of future?, what are your fears about the future?). The collages were limited to 8 ½ x 11 inches, but they could be made using any medium (e.g., ClipArt, magazine cut outs, typed or written words, personal photographs, images from the internet). Figure 2.1 provides examples of participants’ identity collages.

Second, each participant wrote a short narrative reflection summary about each collage, resulting in three collages and accompanying summaries per participant. Participants were told that their summaries should explain how their collages represent their identities at each point: early adolescence (past), late adolescence (present), adulthood (future). The method was designed to capture the transitional, liminal state in which adolescents operate by collecting collages and narratives reflecting each participant’s past, present, and future self.

In total, forty-two college females produced self-identity collages and corresponding written identity narratives. Thus, a total of 126 self-identity collages and corresponding narrative
summaries were produced. The participants ranged in age from 20-years-old to 23-years-old, with an average of 21-years-old. Therefore, on average, the past collages and written narratives represented the participants’ 16-year-old selves and the future collages and written narratives represented the participants’ 26-year-old selves. To ensure anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Table 2.1 provides a summary of participants and details of their collages and narrative summaries.

In order to understand market-mediated milestones within the context of each life stage (i.e., early adolescence, late adolescence, adulthood), I employ a hermeneutical approach of interpretation, as outlined by Thompson (1997). Marketing hermeneutics is the process of interpreting qualitative data in order to derive meaningful themes or patterns (Thompson 1997; Gummesson 2005). A cornerstone of hermeneutical analysis is the autonomy of the text, meaning that the text dynamically “assumes a life of its own” (Arnold and Fischer 1994). Hermeneutics is an appropriate method for the present investigation, given the autonomous nature of each participant’s narrative summary and accompanying identity collage. Another important aspect of hermeneutics in marketing research involves the hermeneutic circle, or the process of relating each part to the whole and consecutively, the whole to the individual parts (Arnold and Fischer 1994; Thompson 1997). In other words, the individual textual data sources are cyclically related to the collective set of texts as well as pre-understood marketing theory. In this study, the data were first analyzed within participant—the collages were analyzed per each participant, accounting for transition within each participant’s collages and accompanying narrative. Then, the collages and narratives were compared across participants by age group—the past collages were compared to one another, the present collages were compared to one
another, and the future collages were compared to one another. Therefore, interpretation of the data reciprocally develops a conceptual framework.

The collages and narratives were manually coded and analyzed in an initial step to identify market-mediated milestones at each life stage. The data were coded using constant comparative analysis in which data is related to ideas, then those ideas are related to other ideas (Riessman 2008). Code notes, theory notes, and process notes were kept in memos attached to the electronic data files to record potential relationship between codes and categories. The brand collage items were categorized into four general categories: brands and products, descriptive words, personal photographs, and other. The brands and products category was then broken down further into ten categories: food/drink (e.g., McDonald’s, Diet Coke, SKYY Vodka), entertainment (e.g., Jennifer Aniston, MTV, *Sex & the City*), athletics (e.g., Nike, Atlanta Braves), clothing/accessories (Express, J.Crew, David Yurman), beauty (e.g., Covergirl, Pantene Pro-V, Mystic Tan), general retail (e.g., Macy’s, Target, Walgreen’s), technology (e.g., Apple, Facebook, Verizon Wireless), household products (e.g., Tide, Tupperware, Pampered Chef), travel/tourism (e.g., Courtyard by Marriott, Delta Airlines), and durable goods (e.g., Lexus, Ski-Doo, Maytag). Table 2.2 provides the aggregated results from the coding of the identity collages for each life stage collage. In total, the early adolescent (past self) identity collages included 695 items, the late adolescent (present self) collages included 750 items, and the adulthood (future self) collages included 661 items. After analyzing the narrative summaries and identity collages, general themes were identified and further developed regarding persistent features of liminality and related coming of age consumption practices. Data analysis was deemed complete when a conceptually dense conceptual framework emerged.
FINDINGS

By contextualizing written narratives through the structural elements of identity collages, this study exposes adolescents’ conflicting coming of age identity processes and the ways in which market-mediated milestones move young people through the adolescent stage of liminality. During the process of aggregating and interpreting the data, themes emerged suggesting that the liminality between childhood and adulthood is characterized by five identity tasks in which paradoxical tensions arise: finding balance (tension between chaos and organization), expressing individuality (tension between uniqueness and conformity), asserting independence (tension between autonomy and reliance), managing self-control (tension between restraint and indulgence), and developing human agency (tension between choice and chance).

Table 2.3 provides the framework of liminal identity tensions identified in this study. Coming of age in postmodern consumer culture involves negotiating these tensions through consumption-oriented benchmarks, which I term “market-mediated milestones.” Market-mediated milestones refer to consumption-oriented incremental changes that can transform an individual’s self-conception. Although in the overall scheme of life, market-mediated milestones may seem trivial, to a young consumer navigating the liminal phase between child and adult, these subordinate milestones are culturally meaningful and central to their identity exploration processes. For example, in and of itself, the American ritual of prom is unlikely to alter one’s life trajectory in any significant way, but in the context of adolescent identity development, prom might be viewed as a momentous and meaningful milestone, imbued with consumption practices and symbolic meanings. The data suggest that today’s youth embrace contemporary market-mediated milestones to negotiate the paradoxical tensions embedded within the liminal period.
between childhood and adulthood. Given the liminal nature of adolescence, I contend that market-mediated milestones are transformative for conceptions of the self, as represented through symbolic consumption. In contrast to the traditional Van Gennupian conceptualization of rites of passage, market-mediated milestones do not necessarily mark a major transition from one social status to another, nor do they follow clearly defined stages (i.e., separation, liminality, and reincorporation; Turner 1987; Van Gennep 1960). Instead, market-mediated milestones represent achievable criterion by which adolescents solidify their adult self-concepts. Overall, the primary contribution of this paper lies in providing a framework of identity tensions which are negotiated through market-mediated milestones. The findings are supported here with illustrative examples from the identity collages and written narratives. While these liminal identity tensions are presented as distinct ideas, it should be noted that participants they are interdependent and highly intermingled. This supports the proposition that the adolescent identity negotiation process is not necessarily linear; rather, market-mediated milestones help adolescents navigate liminality through an organic and incremental coming of age process (see Figure 2.2).

**Finding Balance: The Tension between Chaos and Organization**

Finding balance in one’s life is a key identity task in the liminal life phase between childhood and adulthood. The data indicate that a tension exists between chaos and organization. Participants suggest that they embrace in the chaos of liminality but desire for more balance, organization, and stability in their lives. Many of the participants intentionally organized the layout of their collages, based upon the level of stress associated with each age. For instance, on
her past 15-year old-collage, Krystal states that the “images are somewhat scattered to show chaos and disorganization.” Her present 21-year-old collage is a bit more organized and straight than the last one,” and her future collage is straight and organized because [she hopes] to be more stable and balanced in five years from now.” Like Krystal, Jade also organized her collages deliberately.

**Jade (age 21, present narrative):** Today, I am twenty-one-years old, and my life is a mess. I have no idea where I am going; therefore, my collage is a scrambled mess. I am Alice in Wonderland falling through space. My life currently changes constantly. My life is not simple, but I like it complex.

In Jade’s narrative and collage, we can see her negotiating the tension between chaos and organization. She spends time reflecting upon the disorder of her liminal life state but ends with justifying the disordered life stage by stating that she prefers the complexities associated with her current identity. The liminal period between childhood and adulthood is characterized by chaos, stress, and anxiety, yet, a prevailing hope of the organized, balanced serene life waiting in the future. Interestingly, this hope for a structured adult future is almost chaos creating in the present self. For example, the market-mediated milestones that Laura associates with her future, such as marriage and childbearing, make her more likely to “live it up” in the present.

**Laura (age 21, present narrative):** I am currently 21 and although I should be focusing more on my future, I am having too good of a time with my friends during my last years of college. The word “SELF” towards the bottom of my collage describes my attitude these days. This is the last time in my life where I can focus on myself, because once I get married and start having kids, my life will not truly be my own anymore.

This “live it up” mentality is represented on Laura’s present collage pictures of branded alcohol like SKYY vodka and Malibu Rum and photographs of herself partying with friends. Interestingly, her future identity collage alludes to a sense of pulling herself together—of organizing, balancing, and perfecting all aspects of her life and leaving behind her chaotic
adolescent years. For example, Laura’s future identity collage includes words like “You’ve found a new happy place” and “Stronger than ever.”

**Laura (age 26, future narrative):** In five years, I am going to be 26 years old. At this time in my life, I hope to have accomplished many things, including landing a great job, finding love, being financially stable, and performing well in all areas of my life. Although material possessions are not the most important thing in life, my dream car is a black Ranger Rover. I hope to have the motivation and be successful enough in my job when I am 26 to buy one. I would also like to try new things, like training for a triathlon. Finding “Mr. Perfect” and being engaged would be nice, as well. All in all, I hope to find myself happy in five years, and I want to be able to share this happiness with someone that I love. I want to be confident and love myself, inside and out. Hopefully, I will have a balanced life between the workplace, the social arena, and my spiritual beliefs. I want to stay young, healthy, and strong.

Laura’s narratives encapsulate the freedom that young consumers feel to enjoy themselves during their coming of age years. They recognize their desire for balance and organization, but they suggest that it comes at the cost of their fun-loving, chaotic, youthful years. The consummate adult future self for which young girls desire is in direct contrast to the chaotic lived experiences which they are not yet willing to forfeit.

**Anna (age 26, future narrative):** This collage doesn’t really represent who I want to be as a person, but more of what I want to accomplish and aspire to do. My goal is to be a prominent name in the fashion industry. I absolutely love to travel, and I want to be successful enough where I can travel the world, especially Africa. I hope to be engaged in 5 years, but no younger than that. I want to master cooking and finally master my laundry without messing up a single piece of clothing. I want to have a balanced life of family, friends, business, and pleasure.

Anna indicates that her vision of her future self is represented by the series of market-mediated milestones that will grant her the “balanced life” for which she aspires. Her collage includes a diamond engagement ring from Tiffany and Co., a set of passports, and designer Chanel clothing. The products associated with the market-mediated milestones take on symbolic meaning and being to represent an exit from the liminal adolescent stage and an entrance into the
future organized adult stage. Liminality is characterized by chaos, but young consumers embrace it by dreaming of the tangible goods that might represent their future organized self.

**Gina (age 25, future narrative):** I included some cutouts of things such as a Blackberry, a Nissan 350Z, and a house. These are just examples of things that represent having my life together, finally.

The struggle for balance in one’s life can also be viewed as a tension between carefree enjoyment and adult responsibilities. Young consumers describe their futures as calculated, well-organized, and meticulously scheduled. For instance, Kimmie (age 26) includes a clock on her future collage, which she suggests represents time management and balance, and she writes in her future narrative that one of the most dramatic changes she anticipates in her life is an end to her “lively and free-spirited” present self.

**Expressing Individuality: The Tension between Uniqueness and Conformity**

Adolescence marks a time in which teenage girls grapple with who they are and how they want to be perceived by others. Evidence in the data suggests that a key tension in liminal identity exists in the realm of individuality, in which a conflict arises between uniqueness and conformity. In other words, young girls struggle between standing out from the crowd and fitting in with their peers, between following their own unique life path or conforming to social norms and expectations. For instance, Deanna (age 16, past narrative and collage) indicates that part of her early adolescent identity includes her “signature fragrance” Dolce Gabbana Light Blue, which she wore “so much it makes [her] want to vomit now.” Her adolescent sense of self is uniquely wrapped up in her physical appearance, so much so that others might recognize her by smell. However, Heather conforms to the fashion trends of her peers.
Deanna (age 16, past narrative): For fashion, I was really into just following the high school trends and wearing whatever is most popular. I loved wearing Abercrombie and Fitch and Hollister, but my style has evolved a lot since the past.

Meghan (age 16, past narrative): After school, my friends and I would go to our after school activities and then sometimes go shopping, usually to stores like Abercrombie and Fitch and Hollister.

Katrina (age 16, past narrative): I wore brands such as Abercrombie and Fitch and Hollister Co. I also started getting into the Victoria’s Secret PINK brand. It was just beginning to get popular at that point in time.

As the participants note, many of their favorite high school fashion brands like Abercrombie and Fitch and Hollister were considered trendy among their friends, not necessarily trend-setting. Young girls do not want to be perceived as “followers” but they also want to develop a sense of belongingness within their peer group. As the previous quotes suggest, shopping among adolescents is a group activity, and in order to identify oneself with a given reference group, teenage girls tend to conform to the fashion trends associated with their peer group. This tendency to conform to fashion trends persists into adulthood. Fashion brands like J.Crew, Banana Republic, and Ann Taylor were commonly featured on participants’ future self-concept collages, suggesting that young people on the threshold of adulthood already expect to adjust their personal brand preferences to match their expectations of adulthood.

Madison (age 26, future narrative): I will probably be wearing more J. Crew and other more sophisticated, conservative brands. CNN and other news channels will probably be of more interest to me at that time. My professional life will probably have me on the go drinking lots of Starbucks coffee and other caffeine-packed snacks.

It is critical to take into account the role of symbolic consumption practices within the liminal stage between childhood and adulthood. For instance, a young girl who once enjoyed shopping at Hollister, a fashion retailer catering to teenage girls, may now view the store as immature, as she takes on a more mature adult identity. Thus, the store itself does not change, but her evaluation of products from the store transforms to reflect her emerging identity. Using
brands more closely associated with becoming an adult woman mark a key market-mediated milestone among adolescent girls. The data in this study reveal that teenagers tend to follow general trends of their friends in the realm of fashion and accessories; however, the adolescent years provide a pedestal to experiment with creative self-expression through beauty brands and products. In this way, girls are bounded to their reference groups through their clothing, while they pursue a sense of creativity and individualism by experimenting with their physical appearance through beauty regimens (e.g., make-up, hair color) and body modifications (e.g., tattoos, piercings). Experimenting with one’s appearance through the use of different fashion and beauty brands allows an individual to negotiate the tension between uniqueness and conformity.

**Kimmie (age 16, past narrative):** I started to show expression through my appearance. I began finding my inner feminine side and began wearing my first real makeup: MASCARA!! My mom let me use hers at first and then finally bought me my own tube of Maybelline Great Lash mascara in the pink bottle – I thought it was the greatest thing ever!

**Anna (age 16, past narrative):** I remember that I began using real makeup and learning how to apply it, and I remember going to Target with my friends and buying my first makeup items. While I cannot pinpoint what exactly was the reasoning behind it, I only bought Maybelline brand makeup. I suppose the reason was because they had so many advertisements in Seventeen magazine and I remember the slogan, “Maybe she’s born with it, maybe it’s Maybelline.”

**Cate (age 21, present narrative):** I love being active and consider being called a tomboy a compliment. But this year in particular, I started getting in touch with my girly side. Perhaps because of this, I decided to paint my bedroom magenta. I have also started wearing makeup more often and have paid more attention to what I looked like.

Consumption and anti-consumption of particular products reflect an emerging self-concept (e.g., makeup and cosmetics reflect femininity and womanly beauty). The participants suggest that wearing make-up is a reflection of their emerging womanhood. Furthermore, they make a point to legitimize the make-up they began using as “real” makeup. These are not the toy
cosmetic sets that they played with as children. These are “real” makeup brands that they have seen in magazine advertisements and have watched their adult role models use. Interestingly, the participants’ future collages include significantly less beauty products than their adolescent collages. Girls in the liminal stage between childhood and adulthood struggle to express their individuality given the tension between uniqueness and conformity. For example, Summer describes how her liminal life stage has provided the opportunity to experiment with her appearance and express her individuality; however, as she transitions into adulthood, she feels the necessity to conform to societal expectations.

**Summer (age 21, present narrative):** I dyed my hair for the first time my Senior year of high school. It’s been every color under the sun: blonde, red, brown, black, even bright pink highlights. Recently, I went back to my “natural” color because I just started applying for internships and need to look professional.

As the previous quote suggests, young girls make adjustments in their appearance to reflect their adult coming of age identities. The uniqueness afforded in the liminal life stage is trumped by the pressures to conform to an adult identity—in Summer’s case, a professional businesswoman. It is just as important to examine young girls’ resistance to identity expectations, as it is to better understand their compliance toward such expectations. Anti-consumption, or “a resistance to, distaste of, or even resentment of consumption,” is symbolically related to self-concept factors (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy; Zavestoski 2002, p. 121) and undesired self-states (Hogg, Banister, and Stephenson 2008). The conception of anti-consumption begs the question, why might a young girl choose not to partake in modern market-mediated milestones. According to the data, milestones commonly associated with entering adulthood include entering the workforce, purchasing a home, getting married, and having children. The identity collages suggest that all of these milestones are embedded with consumption practices. For example, only one participant in the study was already married. Out
of the 41 remaining participants, twenty-seven include a diamond ring on their future self collages to represent their expected or hoped-for nuptials. Furthermore, many participants include specific brand name rings (e.g., Tiffany & Co., Tacori) and indicate that they purposefully selected the ring featured on their collages. Diamond rings are symbolically representative of the marriage milestone; however, in their narratives, the girls seemed conflicted toward their desire to pursue marriage or the necessity of marriage to express their entrance into adulthood. It is a conflict of should versus could; the young girls feel that they should get married but they could pursue other milestones instead or in addition.

**Deanna (age 26, future narrative):** In five years, I will be 26. I am nervous about all the change coming up for me, and how I don’t know exactly where I will be or what I will be doing in five years. Although my future is unsure, my collage represents what I hope will happen in the coming years. I know I should get married and have kids by the time I’m 30, but who are we kidding, these make believe timelines never work out as planned. Plus, I want to upgrade “Rhonda Honda” to a nice, new Benz for all my hard work, so I can’t have babies getting my leather seats all gross right away. I’d also like to travel, learn to be a gourmet cook, have dinner parties, and entertain my friends at my beautiful house (with a pool!). I would also like to take up golf. The picture of Jennifer Aniston is on my collage because that is who I’d like to be like (and look like at 40 too!).

Today, young girls in America have more opportunities and options for their futures than past generations. Having a career is not at the cost of having a family and vice versa. There are many different routes toward adulthood, and modern adolescents recognize that they can choose their own unique path. Nonetheless, female consumers still feel innately compelled to pursue traditional gender roles. For instance, the adult collages included more household products relative to the adolescent collages, suggesting that female consumers anticipate managing a household. Thus, the struggle between discovering one’s own unique path and conforming to social norms and expectations represents a key tension of identity in the liminal stage of life between childhood and adulthood. Traditional coming of age rites of passage are standardized and universally accepted within a culture. In contrast, modern market-mediated milestones may
feature traditional rites of passage (e.g., marriage) but the embedded symbolic meaning is defined by the individual based upon this juggling act between uniqueness and conformity.

**Asserting Independence: The Tension between Reliance and Autonomy**

Consumers’ lived experiences are embedded in interpersonal relationships (e.g., family, friends, coworkers, teachers, neighbors) throughout the life course. From an identity development perspective, one of the primary tensions in adolescence is the separation-individuation process in which adolescents begin to break away from their parents (Blos 1962; Kroger 1985). In line with this view, evidence in the data suggests that the liminal stage between childhood and adulthood creates a tension between reliance and autonomy in the realm of independence. In other words, adolescents begin to emotionally and physically distance themselves from their parents and guardians, while still maintaining a connection with them. They feel that adolescence is a period of testing limits, breaking rules, and enjoying freedom; however, they remain primarily dependent on the adults in their lives for providing structure, creating financial stability, and offering wisdom. Beyond their parents, young girls seek relationships with others (e.g., friends, boyfriends) in order to fulfill the need for human connection and belongingness. Peer groups serve as the primary social arena in which adolescents develop a sense of identity as they experiment with various social roles and make decisions about their present and future lives (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Marcia 1966, 1980). In this study, the participants describe the transitions in their interpersonal relationships and use phrases like “be my own person,” “independence is everything,” “99% financially independent,” and “free” to describe their coming of age identities.
**Gina (age 15, past narrative):** In terms of the people I surrounded myself with, I was very much friend oriented as opposed to family oriented. I was very social and all of my free time was spent with friends or making new friends.

**Gina (age 25, future narrative):** I included a picture of a family because I plan on being much more family oriented in the future because I feel that family is a very important support system and that everyone should have a stable relationship with their family members.

**Mallory (age 16, past narrative):** My collage representing myself from 5 years ago is centered around a picture of parents, since I was living at home and my life was centered around my family.

**Mallory (age 21, present narrative):** This collage is centered on my friends, since these are the people I spend most of my time with.

**Mallory (age 26, future narrative):** My family and friends will still be very important to me in 5 years. I cut out “love” because I want to love my life and the people in it, and it’d also be nice to be in love.

**Deanna (age 16, past narrative):** The picture on the bottom right is of my family. My little brother is 8 years younger than me, but we were always very tight. I also have an incredible relationship with my mom and dad. Five years ago, however, I was sixteen, living under their roof, and thought I knew everything. I was a typical selfish teenager who thought the world revolved around me. The girls in the upper left-hand corner were my group of best friends in high school. We called ourselves the A-team to let you in on how cool we thought we were. Haha, but we did have a blast!

**Deanna (age 21, present narrative):** Now that I am a senior in college, I believe I have done a lot of growing up. While still great friends with my high school group, I came to college and found new best friends and my boyfriend who have been there for me no matter what these past three years.

**Deanna (age 26, future narrative):** I hope to gain the wisdom my parents have, but I know that in five years I will not be on their level. I think technology will be the future of our world and want to keep as current as I can so I do not end up a dinosaur like my mom and dad.

The previous past, present, and future narratives track the transitions in the participants’ relationships. For instance, in contrast to her past teenage identity, Deanna’s future self-concept presents a level of respect for her parents, while also recognizing how she will be different from them in order to adapt to a changing technology-driven marketplace. Interestingly, Deanna makes no mention of her family in her present self collage or narrative. Evidence in the data suggests market-mediated milestones allow adolescent girls to symbolically establish a sense of bounded independence and negotiate the tension between reliance and autonomy. Such
milestones include earning a driver’s license, moving out of the house, and becoming financially independent. These mark formative moments in which young girls actively assert their independence within the liminal stage between childhood and adulthood. Two exemplary market-mediated milestones discussed here are earning a driver’s license and obtaining part time employment.

Overwhelmingly, earning a driver’s license seems to be a formative coming of age milestone among teenage girls. In America, most states set the legal driving age at 16-years-old, with some states setting the age as young as 14-years-old. Nearly all of the past identity collages include specific references to driving (e.g., a photograph of a car, a copy of a driver’s license, an automobile brand logo).

**Katrina (age 16, past narrative):** The first and biggest picture on my collage is of my first car; it was a Ford Mustang 1999 and dark green. It was my dream car and I got it for Christmas which was 3 months after my 16th birthday.

**Kaylee (age 16, past narrative):** Five years ago, I would have been 16. At that point in my life the biggest thing was gymnastics. I spent most of my time either in the gym or driving to and from the gym. I got my first car, a 1997 Grand Prix, after a particularly hard gymnastics practice and I loved it until the day I had to sell it.

**Deanna (age 16, past narrative):** I have the logo for “Honda” on my collage because for my sixteenth birthday I got a brand new red Honda Accord, which I lovingly named “Rhonda Honda” and still have to this day.

The data suggest that driving represents freedom and independence in the minds of adolescents. Access to a reliable transportation coupled with the prospect of the freedom to drive alone provides young people with a sense of bounded independence.

**Katie S (age, past narrative):** I turned 16 which marked getting my driver’s license and car. This was very important because it gave me a little more independence. I showed this [on my collage] with car keys and a Jeep Liberty, which was my first car.

**Julie (age 15, past narrative):** My birthday is in July, so like most fifteen year olds with a month until sweet 16th birthday, I could only think about the promise of my new black Ford truck, finally transportation! Unfortunately, the [picture of a woman speaking to a
police officer] in the top left corner shows exactly what I did with that new found freedom, and how I quickly lost my license.

**Kimmie (age 16, past narrative):** Five years ago, I was sixteen years of age. This was the best time of my life. However, this time presented some of the toughest times for me as well. My mother and I often bumped heads a lot. My father had just taken his first tour to Iraq, which left my mother and me to have it out all the time. Being the only child, my parents had such a tight hold on me, so getting my license gave me the freedom I needed.

**Anna (age 16, past narrative):** When I got my driver’s license and my first car, I hung out with my friends more and my life revolved around my high school, whether it was night classes, hanging out with friends, sports, or attending the football games on Friday Nights.

Driving changes the dynamic of adolescents’ relationships. They are able to meet up with their friends without adult supervision. They do not have to rely on others for transportation. In fact, those that get to drive earlier gain power among their peers in that they hold the keys, literally, to freedom. Nonetheless, the independence that accompanies driving is bounded in that parents set the rules regarding how and when their teenage children are allowed to drive; however, teen drivers are required taking on greater responsibilities (e.g., arriving to school on time, paying for gas and car maintenance, abiding by traffic laws). Obtaining a driver’s license allows young girls to begin establishing their independence, within the boundaries set forth by their parents. In this way, they begin establishing autonomy from their parents while still relying on them. Furthermore, driving gives teenagers the opportunity to secure part-time work, which lays a foundation for financial independence.

**Kiara (age 16, past narrative):** Five years ago, I was a student in High School. I had just gone to my junior prom and was reaching my senior year. I had just gotten my license, which is every 16-year-old’s dream—to be independent, have your own mode of transportation, and be free. I had just been given my first job as a cashier at Taco Bell, making $6.25/hour. I thought it was the greatest thing in the world. I got to eat all the Taco Bell I wanted and was getting paid to do so. I have always been a frugal spender; still, I thoroughly enjoyed going to the mall on weekend and going through the sales rack.
Cassie (age 16, past narrative): As most 16-years-olds, I passed my driver’s test and received my driver’s license. Once I obtained my driver’s license I was able to work part-time at Kmart pharmacy and babysit on the side. I remember being so excited to open up my Bank of America account and deposit my checks every two weeks.

Kelsi (age, past narrative): I included a picture of the Great Clips sign next to balloons. I was a receptionist at Great Clips and had to greet every customer with “Hi, welcome to Great Clips! May I have your phone number?” to which the reply was usually (in a very southern accent) “What for honey, you gonna call me?” I also had to blow up dozens of balloons every Saturday to entice people to get their haircuts from us instead of Wal-Mart.

Today, a substantial proportion of American high school and college students hold part-time jobs during the school year, and a large number of these young people work in excess of 20 hours each week (Staff, Messersmith, & Schulenberg 2009). While a first job as an ice cream scooper or a grocery store cashier may not prepare an individual for a lifelong career, part-time employment may have a formative influence on teenagers’ perceptions of customer service, expectations of employment, and activities as a consumer. Importantly, teenagers’ first jobs mark a crucial market-mediated milestone in which young people step beyond the role of consumer and enter the position of employee for the first time in their lives. Working outside of the home allows adolescents to participate in marketplace processes, apart from their parents. They feel a new sense of freedom, responsibility, and independence. Furthermore, according to the data, earning a paycheck spurs market participation in other areas, such as opening a bank account, getting a credit card, and purchasing a big ticket item. For instance, the future collages include more durable goods (e.g., automobiles, large household appliances) and travel brands (e.g., airlines, hotels), suggesting that these are luxuries that they will be able to purchase independently as adults. Teens who work part-time begin establishing their bounded independence through exhibiting financial responsibility; however, they may still rely on their parents or guardians for providing most essentials. For instance, Madison (age 16, past
narrative) states that in high school, she “loved Rock and Republic jeans, and tended to buy nicer clothes since [she] was still under [her] parents’ roof.” However, as Madison’s (age 21, present narrative) reflects on her current shopping habits, she notes that she “shop[s] at Target a lot for cheaper clothing since [she is] on a tight budget.” Learning to manage money and be truly self-sufficient is a slow process that takes place throughout the liminal stage between childhood and adulthood. Young girls oscillate between autonomy and reliance as they separate from their parents and depend more upon themselves. In the pursuit of independence, alternative relationships (e.g., romantic relationships, friendships) and group affiliations (e.g., sororities, athletic teams, faith-based organizations) provide the emotional support and social interaction once provided by their parents. Market-mediated milestones within their emerging peer groups then provide group affirmation to those who participate. For example, prom provides teenagers with an opportunity to receive group affirmation both with a social group (e.g., friends with whom they attend) and with their collective group of classmates (e.g., other high school seniors).

Negotiating the tension between autonomy and reliance is an arduous and often times emotional process. Some market-mediated milestones are rooted in affectively charged experiences (e.g., death of a loved one, first love, relationship break-up, parental divorce, loss of virginity, natural disaster). These milestones mark turning points in the adolescent’s life in which she must make emotionally charged decisions and healthily handle the consequences of potentially traumatic life transitions. For instance, a 15-year-old girl breaks up with her first love. As adults, we may look at this situation as petty, but for the adolescent girl, her first break-up represents a formative milestone for how she perceives close relationships with others and how she evaluates her own ability to persevere through a hardship.

Deanna (age 16, past narrative): I fell in love for the first time in high school, or what I thought was love until the boy (who was two years older) moved away to go to college in
Hawaii. We just couldn’t make the trans-pacific relationship work. Go figure. At the time, I was devastated. All I did was eat pints of Ben & Jerry’s, watch Sex and the City reruns, and cry. I thought the world was coming to an end, but now that I worked through it, it seems so silly.

**Katie S. (age, past narrative):** One really important event that I reflected in my collage was my first “serious” relationship. This helped me grow tremendously and I represented it [on my collage] with a beanie baby angel bear because it was the first gift he gave me when we were together. I think I still have it at home in a shoebox in my closet. I should probably get rid of that when I go home.

Consumption practices help young girls symbolically navigate the emotional experiences on the road toward becoming independent adults. Symbolic consumption or disposition of consumer goods provides a tangible way for young girls to mark their coming of age transitions. For instance, as Katie suggests that her first love is represented by tangible consumer product (e.g., beanie baby bear). Interestingly, she left the bear at her parents’ house as she left home for college, symbolically separating herself from this past identity but still having access to it through returning home. She evaluates the experience of her youth and recognizes the urge to discard this particular item that is not representative of her emerging adult identity. As young girls experience the ups and downs of adolescence, they learn to become less dependent on their parents and begin to become more self-reliant.

**Managing Self-Control: The Tension between Indulgence and Restraint**

The emerging independence discussed in the previous section leads to a tension in self-control between indulgence and restraint. As young girls establish the capability to make independent marketplace decisions, such as where to shop or dine, they take on responsibility for regulating their behaviors, such as eating, exercising, and spending money. This transition is particularly challenging for today’s young consumers who have grown up in an extremely child-
centered marketplace, which is reflected in consumer products (e.g., Cabbage Patch Kids, “Baby on Board” signs, McDonald’s Happy Meals), retail stores (e.g., market expansion Toys “R” Us, introduction of kid-oriented brand extension stores such as GapKids, Limited Too, and abercrombie), the media (e.g., a sharp rise in children’s movies, music, and literature, toy-based television shows such as My Little Pony and Smurfs, and kid-driven television networks including Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, and The Disney Channel) and consumer legislation (e.g., The Children’s Television Act of 1990, Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998). Young consumers’ decisions are often directed and regulated by their parents, but as adolescents begin to separate from the adults in their lives, parents leave self-control in the hands of their children. The following narratives reflect the tension between restraint and indulgence throughout the liminal stage of life between childhood and adulthood.

**Anna (age 16, past narrative):** Looking back at the sports I participated in, which were soccer and basketball, I realize how athletic and active I was then. Now, I am a member of [a local gym], but I have to drag myself to go. I suppose with the freedom of college also came the excuses to not go exercise.

**Anna (age 21, present narrative):** When I go to Kroger to go grocery shopping, there are certain essentials that I always buy: Ramen noodle coups, Crystal Light Lemonade Packs, and Swedish Fish. The truth has become evident in college that I hate to cook, and with easy-to-make items such as the soups I always eat, this drastically differs from how I used to eat in high school. My mom used to cook every night when I was living at home, but now that I am out by myself, I choose to save time cooking, and spend more time on other activities, such as jewelry-making, shopping, or studying. Unlike my active exercise schedule I had in high school, although I am a member of [a local gym], I have hard time making myself go on a daily schedule.

**Anna (age 26, future narrative):** When I’m 26, I definitely plan to make my health a priority by actually learning to cook nutritious meals and exercising regularly. I used to be so motivated but over the last few years, I haven’t been as committed to living a healthy lifestyle.

**Gina (age 20, present narrative):** My overall attitude toward things is to keep it casual and as stress-free as possible. The downside of that however is I have become much more lazy in terms of what I eat. I find I have less time for eating and more errands to run. In addition, I am a college student. So I typically eat whatever is readily available, cheap, and most of the time, unhealthy.
**Gina (age 25, future narrative):** I am determined to be healthier physically, not just for superficial reasons.

As Anna and Gina gained more freedom to make her own decisions, they began to recognize their shortcomings in the realm of self-control. Interestingly, like most of the participants, Anna and Gina indicate that their adult selves will be better at self-control and will be committed to a healthy lifestyle. One participant, Mia (age 26, future narrative) essentially sets herself up for failure stating that she “would like to weigh 115 lbs” as an adult, despite her assessment that such a goal is “definitely unrealistic.” In a way, young female consumers believe they have a right to indulge as adolescents because they are planning to be more restrictive as adults. For example, “junk food” brands (e.g., Cheez-It, Pringles, Edy’s), candy brands (e.g., M&M’s, Sour Patch Kids), and fast food brands (e.g., Taco Bell, McDonald’s, Dairy Queen) are clearly represented on the participants’ past and present collages but not at all on the future collages, which reflect healthy lifestyles. Partially, this is due to the fact that adolescent consumers begin to recognize how their bodies react to food and exercise.

**Meghan (age 17, past narrative):** Back then, I ate tons of junk food every day. I would go get my Starbucks in the morning, swing by Quicktrip and get a breakfast sandwich and go by Taco Bell or McDonald’s after school for a snack. Usually I would bring candy with me to school and eat it all day. Luckily, my metabolism was a little higher so I could get away with it!

**Meghan (age 22, present narrative):** I am still completely addicted to candy, namely sour punch straws, and I could happily live off of white cheese dip and sushi. Unfortunately, I’d be about 500 pounds if I did though!

**Meghan (age 27, future narrative):** This collage represents what my life will be like in five years. I plant to be living in New York City. My two New York food obsessions are Sushi Samba and S’MAC, a macaroni and cheese delivery service. Good thing I’ll have to walk everywhere in the city to burn off those calories – well worth it! Plus, I’ll never give up my daily Starbucks.

As Meghan indicates, she is beginning to notice changes in how her body adapts to her favorite foods. She hints at the necessity to find balance between indulgence and restraint when it comes to eating and exercising. The tension of self-control between restraint and indulgence
extends beyond food. For example, as the following quote suggests, Kelsey admits that she has little self-control when it comes to swearing and even recognizes it as one of her self-assessed faults. Nonetheless, she continues to indulge herself in it.

**Kelsey (age 21, present narrative):** I put the word “swear” on my collage because I swear too much. I consider swearing one of the many mistakes that I make but I am ok with mistakes as long as I recognize them and try to learn from them.

Like Kelsey, most of the participants recognize the mistakes of their past as important learning experiences that have shaped their identities. Evidence in the data suggests that such self-control “mistakes” represent market-mediated milestones. For instance, Ariel (age 21, present narrative) notes that “gaining the ‘Freshman 15’ was a turning point that made [her] focus more on exercising and eating right” and Jillian (age 20, present narrative) comments that she “made the mistake of maxing out [her] first credit card” in college and includes the phrase “scrimping and saving” on her collage.

**Jillian (age 20, present narrative):** I believe that I have changed a lot growing up from a 15 year old teenager to a 20 year old college student. I’ll never forget that awkward, tumultuous, early-teen phase, but am definitely glad it happened to help create the person I am today.

The tension between restraint and indulgence is evident in the liminal coming of age period between childhood and adulthood. Adolescents must learn how to assert self-control in the tempting consumer-centric marketplace. Liminality between childhood and adulthood provides a sort of trial and error period in which young girls alternate between restraint and indulgence, seeking the perfect blend of moderation.
Developing Human Agency: The Tension between Chance and Choice

The fifth and final tension identified by the data alludes to the role of human agency, which views people as capable of making their own choices and constructing their own life trajectories, within personal systems of opportunities and constraints. The liminal tension lies between choice and chance—in other words, young girls oscillate between believing that one has the power to choose her own destiny or that destiny is a result of fortuitous chance beyond the individual’s power. The human agency principle relates to concepts of goal setting and goals striving that are pivotal in consumer behavior (Bagozzi and Dholakia 1999) and consumer identity construction (Baumgartner 2002; Schouten 1991). Consumers have the innate power to pursue their goals (i.e., self-efficacy; Bandura 1986, 1997); however, their paths are influenced by their individual sets of external opportunities and constraints. Societal inequalities give some members of society more options than others. Essentially, liminal agency boils down to whether an adolescent girl believes that her future is internally or externally controlled.

Jade (age 26, future narrative): I hope to have a pretty stable life by then. I want to have a career and live in London. I will be driving a flashy, racecar and living in an awesome loft. I would love to continue traveling the world and collecting treasures and memories, learning about other cultures. I want to still be able to have a good time and not to take myself too seriously. I will have a golden retriever, and maybe I will have one. I will still be active in charities and I hope to be posh, collecting great works of art. But most importantly, I want to be happy. I want to be happy. I want to have good relationships and be on my way to making a family. I want to be in love and have all the pieces of my life falling into place. Knowing me though, my life will still be a complete mess.

Jade has great plans for her future self beyond her liminal years and a clear pictures of which market-mediated milestones she needs to achieve in order to reach her goals; however, she almost entirely discounts the likelihood of achieving these milestones by suggesting that she will self-sabotage her future plans. Many of the respondents suggested that they felt optimistic about
their own abilities to progress toward adulthood and achieve adult-oriented market-mediated milestones. In contrast, Jade recognizes her own undermining control over her future circumstances. She expresses desire for symbolic goods, like a fast sports car, while simultaneously suppressing any hope of attaining such things. Like Jade, Kimmie believes that her ability to traverse the liminal years of adolescence and enter into adulthood is in her control. Her future collage includes designer Prada handbags, healthy foods, piles of cash, Aldo shoes, and a diamond ring.

**Kimmie (age 26, future narrative):** After staring at my future self collage, there is nothing but wants. Likewise, with me being able to control my destiny, these wants will be attained. I truly believe that my happiness and success is in my own hands.

Not all participants are as confident as Kimmie in their own human agency. For instance, Gina (age 25, future narrative) writes, “My only fear is that I may not accomplish exactly what I set out to do,” suggesting that external influences may prohibit her from reaching her goals. Furthermore, many of the participants suggest that their futures lie in the hands of a greater divine being based on a particular faith or set of spiritual beliefs. Tension between choice and chance is evident here in that a young girl might plan her future but states that it is “in God’s hands”; therefore, she partially surrenders control of her life course to the chance of a divine being. Some participants present their adult identities and associated consumption practices as certainties (e.g., “I will get married,” “I am going to live in New York”) whereas others present them as possibilities (e.g., “I might drive a BMW,” “I hope to own a home”). Thus, an interesting contradiction exists both within and across participants, not in what they say about their future adult identities but in how they say it. The way in which young girls discuss their futures provides insight into the agentic forces perceived to be at work. In the data, girls who speak in certainties about their future market-mediated milestones imply that they are in control
of their own destinies, whereas girls who present their futures in terms of possibilities suggest that other forces may be at work. Importantly, speaking in certainties may be crippling for a young girls’ self-concept. In other words, if a girl does not achieve her goals, she blames herself. For instance, Julie (age 25, future collage) includes a quote on her future collage that states, “What screws us up most in life is the picture in our head of how it should be.” Along the life course, external factors may redirect one’s direction. By speaking in possibilities, instead of certainties, young girls embrace the liminal tension between control and chance; thus, they follow the postmodern trend of pursuing various identities.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study make both theoretical and practical contributions to the existing literature. Within the field of marketing, the consumer culture literature is steadily growing and making important contributions, but few studies to date have challenged traditions views of rites of passage in the postmodern era, particularly as they pertain to young consumers’ coming of age identity processes. This study unpacks the underlying tensions that characterize the liminal adolescent stage of life. Drawing from theory on liminality and adolescent identity development, the findings show that incremental market-mediated milestones serve as platforms by which young consumers might negotiate these identity tensions throughout adolescence.

The present study builds upon and extends previous research by identifying a richer, more meaningful set of sociological identity tensions motivate symbolic consumption practices in coming of age milestones. The findings illustrate that the liminality between childhood and adulthood is characterized by five areas of identity development in which paradoxical tensions
arise: finding balance (tension between chaos and organization), expressing individuality (tension between uniqueness and conformity), asserting independence (tension between autonomy and reliance), managing self-control (tension between restraint and indulgence), and developing human agency (tension between choice and chance). The interaction and negotiation between the identity tensions are central to understanding adolescent consumption decisions.

Consumption practices are embedded within market-mediated milestones and young consumers may initiate, intensify, or change their self-conceptions in anticipation of or in response to a milestone. For example, as the data indicate, girls anticipate changes in their fashion and style in order to match social expectations of entering the workforce.

This study makes a theoretical contribution in re-conceptualizing how scholars perceive the role of rites of passage in contemporary consumer culture. In contrast to the rigidly structured Van Gennepian view of rites of passage, market-mediated milestones serve as incremental, individualized markers along the way toward becoming an adult. Thus, coming of age identity development is a result of constant negotiation of the tensions embedded within adolescent liminality through market-mediated milestones. Furthermore, although there is some evidence that individuals in their teens and twenties agree on what signifies adult status (Arnett 1998, 2000, 2001, 2004), this study suggests that coming of age in postmodern America is an incremental, individualized, market-oriented process.

One of the primary differences between traditional rites of passage and market-mediated milestones lies in the nature of identity. Traditional rite of passage perspectives suggest that consumers traverse a stage of liminality in order to take on a relatively permanent, well-defined identity status. In contemporary culture, identity status change is liquid in nature. An individual may revert to a previous status or may quickly transition to yet another new status, given that
identity is a result of constantly conflicting tensions. For instance, as the findings suggest, a young girl is not automatically considered an independent adult as soon as she moves out of her parents’ house. She continues to struggle with the tension between separation from her parents and reliance on them. Thus, “becoming an adult” is in many ways an antiquated concept. Even in postmodern American culture, we see clear age group markers: birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age, death; however, in today’s society, division of age groups is ambiguous and timing of coming of age market-mediated milestones is less static. In other words, the boundaries between age categories have increasingly blurred, as too have the temporal rightness of life milestones. The social institutions upon which traditional rites of passage are based have changed; therefore, our conceptions of what rites of passage are today should change as well.

From a consumer behavior perspective, another primary difference between traditional rites of passage and market-mediated milestones involves the embedded marketplace products, which represent meaning-laden signs and symbols (Levy 1999; Mick 1986; Rook 1985). Such symbols are fundamental elements in the broader context of rites of passage and in the meanings of specific acts within each rite. Traditionally, the meaning of signs and symbols are decided upon by a particular subculture; however, the proposed conceptualization of market-mediated milestones suggests that the interpretation of these signs and symbols are highly individualized. The consumption practices embedded within market-mediated milestones are customized to the individual and therefore the symbolic significance of such consumption is open to interpretation. For example, for one young girl, wearing “real” makeup for the first time may represent conforming to gender expectation as a woman, whereas another girl may view it as an opportunity to express her uniqueness and creative identity. Meaningful marketplace objects contribute to building the coming of age identity of the individual adolescent. This supports the
postmodern perspective that “everything can be taken and assembled to the free choice of the individual” (Cova, 1991, p. 305).

The liminality of adolescence allows young female consumers "to play with the factors of sociocultural experience" (Turner 1985, p. 236). In this way, liminality provides the freedom to explore various identities, challenge sociocultural norms, and adapt to changes. From a marketing perspective, we often tout customer loyalty as the preeminent goal. However, the wonderful thing about young adolescent consumers is their adaptability to change and their willingness to embrace new experiences. They may not remain loyal to a few single brands; rather, they dabble in a multitude of brands as they attempt to figure out who they are and what their marketplace preferences might be. Thus, the liminality of adolescence becomes a primary source of marketplace experimentation. Marketing has the opportunity to leverage this liminality—to encourage young girls to explore a multitude of identity options and even create new social norms. In a sense, adolescence represents a road with multiple identity directions. Adulthood represents the selection and commitment to a single one. From a marketing perspective, encouraging consumers not to commit to a single pathway may be profitable. Consumers will be more likely to try new products, embrace changes in technology, and seek novel consumption experiences. Marketing practitioners may consider creating new market-mediated milestones for which consumers to mark their identity transitions. In liminality, the adolescent girl is forced to think about the established social norms as she prepares to re-enter that structure as an adult woman. The liminal adolescent learns what is expected of them while they are between the fixed states of childhood and adulthood. Furthermore, the data suggest that as identity tensions arise throughout adolescence, young consumer turn to the marketplace to
help them adapt. Advertising and marketing practices targeted toward adolescents should take into account the hopeful confusion of liminality.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

For young consumers, coming of age liminality represents a period meaningful identity exploration. This study represents the first step toward understanding coming of age market-mediated milestones and the identity tensions embedded within the liminal adolescent stage of life. Future research should further examine how such milestones play a role in identity development beyond the adolescent stage. In postmodern consumer culture, are consumers in a constant state of liminality in which they are continually assessing their identities? If so, how might the marketplace support consumers’ identity projects? Furthermore, although this study focuses primarily on adolescent girls, that is not to say that boys do not experience similar coming of age processes. Thus, future studies should explore gender differences, and on a similar note, age differences (e.g., early adolescents versus older adults). More qualitative research should be conducted as well as large-scale survey research. A large quantitative study may allow researchers to make a direct comparison between adolescent consumers who are just beginning their identity development and older, more experienced consumers who can retrospectively asses the market-mediated milestones of their pasts to examine potential generational differences with respect to coming of age consumption practices. For instance, are the identity tensions here relevant for older consumers who are entering retirement? Finally, given the transitional nature of identity over time, a longitudinal study is an imperative next step
toward understanding how adolescents negotiate their identities through market-mediated milestones and to exploring the role of identity tensions coming of age processes.
Figure 2.1 Identity Collage Examples

Participant: GINA
Early Adolescence (Age 15)  Late Adolescence (Age 20)  Adulthood (Age 25)

Participant: JILLIAN
Early Adolescence (Age 15)  Late Adolescence (Age 20)  Adulthood (Age 25)

Participant: KIMMIE
Early Adolescence (Age 16)  Late Adolescence (Age 21)  Adulthood (Age 26)
Table 2.1  Participant Demographics

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
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<th>LATE ADOLESCENCE</th>
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Table 2.2  Aggregated Results from Identity Collage Coding

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collage</th>
<th>Food/ Drink</th>
<th>Entertainment</th>
<th>Athletics</th>
<th>Clothing/ Access</th>
<th>Beauty</th>
<th>General Retail</th>
<th>Tech</th>
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Table 2.3 Framework of Liminal Identity Tensions in Adolescence

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<th>Basic Identity Task</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
<th>Underlying Tensions</th>
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<td><strong>Finding Balance</strong></td>
<td>This identity task concerns an adolescent’s ability to manage stress and create stability on her own life.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stabilty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Having it all together</td>
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<td>Stress-free and relaxing</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Managing responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ORGANIZATION</td>
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<td>Having it all together</td>
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<td>Stress-free and relaxing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Managing responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expressing Individuality</strong></td>
<td>This identity task concerns an adolescent’s goal of conveying her own distinctive character traits and qualities.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>CONFORMITY</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>UNIQUENESS</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CONFORMITY</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>RELIANCE</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AUTONOMY</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>RELIANCE</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AUTONOMY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Asserting Independence</strong></td>
<td>This identity task concerns an adolescent’s ability to separate from her parents and become self-sufficient.</td>
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Figure 2.2 Negotiation of Identity Tensions through Market-Mediated Milestones

**LIMINAL IDENTITY TENSIONS**
- Finding Balance: $\text{chaos} \leftrightarrow \text{organization}$
- Expressing Individuality: $\text{uniqueness} \leftrightarrow \text{conformity}$
- Asserting Independence: $\text{autonomy} \leftrightarrow \text{reliance}$
- Managing Self-control: $\text{indulgence} \leftrightarrow \text{restraint}$
- Developing Human Agency: $\text{chance} \leftrightarrow \text{choice}$
Giggling and chatter comes streaming through the dressing room door as three teenage girls stand inside, trying on dresses covered in rhinestones and beads. One of the girls pulls out her cellular phone and turns on the camera feature. Instinctively, the other two girls strike a pose alongside their camera-wielding friend as she snaps a digital photograph of their reflection in the dressing room mirror. With the touch of a button, the picture is uploaded from the girl’s mobile phone to her Facebook profile. Almost simultaneously, her online friends begin posting comments: “Cute dress!” “Looks great - you should definitely get it!” Thus, a consumption experience that was once only privy to the girls physically inside of the dressing room is now displayed for public viewing and feedback on the World Wide Web.

As the previous scenario demonstrates, by tapping just a few buttons on a cellular phone, a young consumer has the capability of sharing her small experience with the world. Mobile technology has become a primary tool by which teens behave in the marketplace, capture their experiences, and construct their identities. The percentage of teens (ages 12-17) that own cell phones has risen steadily, from 45% in 2004 to 75% in 2009 (Lenhart et al. 2010). Moreover, teenagers commonly use their cell phones to snap and share digital photographs, on both a small scale (e.g., peer to peer picture messaging) and a large scale (e.g., posting
photographs on social network sites). Users have the capability to snap a photograph and upload it to the web in real-time, regardless of location, as long as a satellite signal is available. Thus, adolescents today are not only connected, they are connected everywhere quickly. The purpose of this study is to explore how teenage girls utilize ubiquitous technology (e.g., camera phones) and social media (e.g., Facebook.com) to develop their identities through shared consumption activities. To this extent, the study aims to answer the following three research questions: what types of consumption activities are shared, how are consumption activities shared, and why are adolescent girls motivated to share their consumption activities? I focus specifically on teenage girls because teenage girls are more likely to use social network sites than teenage boys (i.e., 86% of girls ages 15-17 versus 69% of teenage boys ages 15-17; Lenhart 2009) and they commonly use the emerging technologies to experiment with their identities (Mazzarella 2005).

First, I review relevant literature on modern adolescent consumer culture; namely, I discuss online self-presentation and mobile photo sharing. Second, I describe the research design and data analysis methodology used in the study, which involves a multi-method approach of visual photograph analysis and autodriving interviews (Collier and Collier 1986; Heisley and Levy 1991; Kvale 1996). Data analysis follows a grounded theory approach based on constant comparative coding, as outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Third, I present findings from the data and discuss emergent themes and patterns as they relate to identity development and consumer behavior. Finally, I provide implications for consumer behavior research and marketing strategy.
MILLENNIALS IN A MOBILE MARKETPLACE

Adolescence (i.e., ages 11-18) spans the interval between childhood and adulthood (Steinberg et al. 2009), a stage in which they are highly motivated to manage their identities through consumption (Belk 1988; Weale and Kerr 1969; Wooten 2006). Many names have been assigned to this group, including Millenials (Howe and Strauss 1991, 2000), Generation Y, Echo Boomers (Alch 2000), Generation Me (Twenge 2006), iGeneration, Generation Next, Net Generation, and Digital Natives (Palfrey and Gasser 2008). Howe and Strauss suggest that Millennials is the most fitting name given that the members of the generation themselves coined the term. Today’s youth, or Millenials, are uniquely defined by their prolific use of mobile technologies and, generally speaking, are operating in a drastically different marketplace than that of their parents’ or grandparents’ generations (Palfrey and Gasser 2008; Strauss, Howe, and Markiewicz 2006; Twenge 2006). In addition, today’s young people represent a huge cohort (i.e., $76 million in 2000) and boast significant combined purchasing power (i.e., $600 billion; Kennedy 2001); hence, understanding how this economically attractive youth market operates in an evolving mobile marketplace is critical.

Mobile technology plays a key role in the lives of modern adolescents. In contrast to their parents, children born in America after the mid-1990s have never known a world without digital technologies (e.g., computers, the Internet, mobile phones, MP3s; Palfrey and Gasser 2008). As an anecdotal example, phrases like “Facebook me” and “Google it” have always been a part of Millennials’ vernacular. A rise in personal technology (e.g., computer based entertainments, television, mobile phones) mediates adolescents’ social interactions (Hawley 2011; Walther...
Emerging technologies distances adolescents further from traditional socialization agents, such as the family, and pull teens deeper into the modern youth culture where norms and trends are constantly shifting (Hawley 2011; Lee 2009). Thus, peer influence and one’s social identity is increasingly important in the new technology driven marketplace to which Millennials are accustomed. Furthermore, given the ubiquitous nature of mobile technology, most adolescents never leave the marketplace as it travels with them. Adolescents turn to the Internet for everything from gathering information about a new product to downloading new music (Tapscott 2009).

Social media, particularly social network sites (e.g., Facebook.com, MySpace.com), are changing the nature of how teenage consumers behave in the marketplace and communicate with one another (Boyd 2008). Social network sites allow individuals to create unique online profiles and define a list of other users with whom they can connect and communicate, as well as view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Companies are increasingly turning to social network sites to support their marketing efforts (e.g., Kaplan and Haenlein 2010), such as creating brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), conducting ethnographic marketing research (Kozinets 2002), and uncovering co-creation opportunities (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). Tech-savvy Millennial teens are a primary target for such digital marketing practices (Montgomery 2009). In recent years, the percentage of teens using social network sites has steadily risen to 73% (Lenhart et al. 2010). In addition, cell phone ownership has become standard among even the youngest teens, and teens are increasingly using their mobile phones to access the Internet and social network sites (Lenhart et al. 2010). Computer mediated communication liberates adolescents, particularly girls (Mazzarella 2005), to experiment with social skills and identities (Maczewski 2002; Calvert
2002; Valkenburg, Schouten, and Peter 2005). To that end, this review aims to extend our understanding of youth consumer culture and consumption by providing a link between teenage girls’ identity development and mobile photo sharing practices.

**Identity Performance through Social Media**

Teenagers are at a stage in which they are "about to crystallize an identity, and for this [they need] others of [their] generation to act as models, mirrors, helpers, testers, foils" (Douvan and Adelson 1966, 179). They grapple with the question, “Who am I?” and often define themselves through their clothing choices, unique jargon, musical preferences, extracurricular activities, and possibly most important, their group associations. The Internet offers adolescents many opportunities to experiment with their identities (Subrahmanyam and Smahel 2011; Turkle 1995; Valkenburg and Peter 2008). In particular, teenage girls are driven to the Internet because of relational and social factors, such as forming friendships and chatting with classmates.

The terms ‘identity’ and ‘self-concept’ are often used interchangeably yet without complete definitional agreement among scholars (Belk 1988; Markus and Nurius 1986; Turner 1987). An important distinction is that one’s ‘self” exists regardless of external cues or public demonstrations, whereas one’s ‘identity’ is based upon social relations and symbolic representations. Identity is often contextually dependent and validated through culturally shared meanings. For instance, when a teenager is at home with his parents, then his identity as a son is activated. He may watch what he says and keep to himself. In contrast, when he is in the school locker room with his peers, then his identity as a jock might be activated. He may joke around with his friends and use harsh language. Interestingly, adolescents’ offline social
networks are increasingly converging on online social networks. For example, two-thirds of teens on Facebook.com, a popular online social network, report that they are connected to their parents through the website. In fact, according to a Kaplan Test Prep Survey, 16% of teens state that befriending their parents online is a precondition of acquiring a Facebook account (Schaffer and Wong 2011). Although social networks like Facebook provide customized privacy options, the fact remains that the virtual world is becoming increasingly transparent. According to the same survey, 56% percent of teen’s give their parents full profile access (e.g., pictures, status updates, wall posts), while 34% deny their parents access by rejecting their friend requests.

Adolescents primarily develop their identities in the context of peer groups (Douvan and Adelson 1966; Erikson 1963). Teenage girls commonly look to others for guidance through social comparison. Social network sites extend one’s social groups to the Internet and provide a more extensive range of social comparison opportunities. Previous research suggests that online communication often happens in social communities that are separate from those in real life (Turkle 1995); however, modern social networks like Facebook tend to be a reflection of existing social groups. In other words, teenagers are acquaintances in real life before they become friends online. In any type of social interaction, individuals have the desire to strategically manage the impressions that other people form of them (Goffman 1959). Social network sites allow adolescent to signal their identities online by sharing personal information, including thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and preferences.

Social media (e.g., instant messaging, chat rooms) afford teenagers the opportunity to pretend to be someone else (Lenhart et al. 2010; Gross 2004; Valkenburg et al. 2005). Fewer face-to-face communication social cues (e.g., auditory cues, visual cues) are present on the Internet; thus, teens may be more likely to explore their identities online. Although there are no
apparent gender differences in the frequency with which boys and girls experiment with their identity online, they do differ significantly in the types of online identities they choose (Valkenburg et al. 2005). In recent years, the sexualization and commodification of young girls has been at the center of debates and discussion about the role of the media and consumption in adolescent identity development (e.g., Linn 2004; Schor 2004; Durham 2009; Oppliger 2008).

Mobile Photo Sharing through Facebook

Photographs are commonly used to recall memories, maintain social relationships, and express one’s identity (Van House et al. 2004). Today’s teenagers are increasingly turning to their mobile phones to access social network sites and upload photographs directly from their camera phones to the Internet (Lenhart et al. 2010). Young people send and receive about twice as many mobile images per month, compared to adults (Kindberg et al. 2005). By tapping a few buttons on a cellular phone, a teenage girl has the capability of sharing her small experience with the world. Mobile photograph uploading is fundamentally different from traditional digital photograph uploading on the dimensions of immediacy and mobility. Users have the capability to snap a photograph and upload it to the web in real-time, regardless of location, as long as a satellite signal is available.

The popular online social network Facebook.com serves as the primary social network site of interest in this study. Other social network sites, such as Flickr and YouTube, feature mobile upload options for photographs and videos; however, Facebook was selected based on the high rate of use among young consumers, with 71% of young adults maintaining Facebook profiles (Lenhart et al. 2010). Facebook’s mobile upload feature is only available to consumers
who own camera phones and additional cell phone data charges may apply. Users can upload photos from their mobile phones to their Facebook profiles in one of three ways: 1) by emailing photos to a personal unique Facebook email (e.g., user@m.facebook.com), 2) by using the Facebook application available on smartphones (e.g., iPhone, Blackberry, Android, Windows Mobile), or 3) by picture messaging (i.e., MMSing) photos to Facebook. These pictures are published in the “Mobile Uploads” album by default. Although the cost of each method may vary, mobile photograph uploading is available to any teenager owning a camera phone. Furthermore, Facebook users are able to post comments below their friends’ photographs.

Self-generated photographs make visible different aspects of the self (Harrison 2002); thus, identity is symbolically represented through visual images. Pictures capture significant life moments, portray important social relationships, and reflect people’s cultural and contextual shared meanings (Harrison 2002). Although identity and self-representations change over time, photographs are static in that each one captures a moment in time from the photographer’s perspective (Lorraine 1990; Noland 2006). Compared to traditional photography, online photographs can be shared with a wide audience. Mobile uploads differ even further in that they can be shared immediately. Given that teenage girls are at a stage of identity transformation and development, this study aims to explore this role of mobile photo uploads in developing one’s identity.

METHODOLOGY

Given the discovery-oriented nature of this project, this study employs a combined qualitative approach of visual photograph analysis and depth interviews (Collier and Collier
1986; Heisley and Levy 1991; Kvale 1996) in an analysis sequence of constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This research aims to explore how and why teenage girls use mobile uploading in their everyday consumption as well as understand the role of online mobile photo sharing in identity development. Therefore, sample recruitment focused on active adolescent female users of the mobile upload function on Facebook.com. Active users were defined as individuals who uploaded an average of at least four photographs per month. Informants were initially recruited from a local church organization. Sampling continued until the range of informants’ responses was no longer expanding, but became redundant and consistent with qualitative data collection practice. In total, a convenience sample of 13 adolescent girls was obtained; this sample size exceeds the recommendation by McCracken (1986) for generating emergent themes in qualitative research. The informants ranged in age from 15 to 18. About half of the informants attended an urban high school in an economically wealthy area, whereas the remaining half of informants attended a rural high school in an economically challenged area. The informants represented varying Facebook mobile upload activity levels. Table 3.1 presents the mobile uploading frequency of each informant. To protect the privacy of the informants, all data are reported using pseudonyms. Because all of the informants were teenagers, informed consent was obtained from each informant and her parent/guardian before inclusion in the study.

Qualitative interviews are useful for understanding cultural meanings and personal experiences from the informant’s point of view (Kvale 1996); hence, in the spirit of Heisley and Levy’s (1991) auto driving method, each informant participated in a depth interview centering around each girl’s mobile upload album(s) on Facebook. The informants granted the researcher access to their Facebook mobile upload albums prior to the interviews, producing a total of
N=2055 photographs and N=2356 comments. During each interview, the informant and the interviewer discussed the photographs together; thus, the teenage informants acted as “expert guides leading the fieldworker through the content of the pictures” (Collier and Collier 1986, 106). This photograph driven interview method allows informants to spontaneously tell stories about the photographs, explain the symbolic meanings of objects in the photographs, and provide a richer understanding of social, cultural, and contextual factors represented in the photographs (Collier and Collier 1986; Bamberg and Andrews 2004). A general semi-structured interview protocol (e.g., Table 3.2) supplemented the free association photographic interviewing method.

The informants were probed where appropriate and were encouraged to elaborate whenever they were discussing their shared consumption experiences and identity processes represented in their online photographs. In line with the constant comparative nature of grounded theory, the interview process resulted in new questions being added to the interview process as new themes emerged. The data were documented via field notes and subsequently transcribed into electronic journals.

I analyzed the mobile upload albums to identify recurrent themes and compare findings across informants. In accordance with the grounded theory approach, several different categories and sub-categories of data emerged during the open coding process, and axial coding linked these categories and sub-categories to dimensions of adolescent consumer identity construction as defined in the literature. To achieve respondent validation, I went back to several informants with tentative results to refine and confirm the findings.
FINDINGS

In the process of data analysis, themes emerged suggesting that social networks serve as a platform upon which adolescents are able to interact and negotiate their consumption experiences. Social networks enable image management and identity construction among adolescents. The data reveal that teenagers, both individually and collectively, display their identities and culturally shared meanings through mobile uploading. Here, I present the findings in two parts: identity-oriented characteristics of shared mobile photos and identity-oriented motivations for mobile photo sharing. The first part examines the identity-oriented characteristic of shared mobile photos: 1) edited self-presentation, 2) symbolic consumption, and 3) culturally situated social spaces. The second part proposes four primary motivations for adolescents to partake in mobile photo sharing: 1) audience feedback, 2) memory manufacturing, 3) relational reassurance, and 4) bounded rebellion. The findings are supported here with illustrative examples from the depth interviews and mobile photograph album analysis. While these themes are presented as distinct ideas, it should be noted that informants more typically related information about the themes in a highly intermingled fashion.

Identity-Oriented Characteristics of Mobile Photo Sharing

Edited self-presentation. Teens take on various identities throughout adolescence. Social network sites provide platforms upon which teenage girls can act out various identities. In this way, the social network is the stage and the adolescent is the actor. Through mobile photo
sharing, girls get into character (e.g., gender bender, rebel, tough girl, sex kitten), edit their performances, use props and costumes (e.g., brands, products, clothing), and shoot the performances on selected sets (e.g., retail store, school, bedroom). When a girl is in character, she behaves in accordance with the given personality and plays to the expectations of the audience. Thus, mobile photo sharing allows adolescent girls to adopt character traits, follow scripts, and create scenarios as part of their identity experimentations.

Each photograph uploaded to the social network offers a glimpse into the ever-evolving adolescent self-concept. Informants in this study showed an overwhelming propensity for uploading self-portraits, normally taken by holding the cell phone at arm’s length or by capturing one’s reflection in a mirror. Whereas adults may commonly turn the camera toward external stimuli (e.g., their children and grandchildren, landscapes and traveling), teenage girls appear to be the stars of their own shows on social networks. This supports previous scholarly work suggesting that adolescents are egocentric by nature (Elkind 1967) and increasingly narcissistic (Twenge 2007), particularly on social network sites like Facebook (Mendelson and Papacharissi 2010). Anne’s self-portraits reflect a wide range of identities. As she suggests, social desirability plays a role in the photos that she selects to upload. Mobile photo uploading offers a tool by which girls can strategically edit their social self-identities. As Anne points out, she takes multiple self-portraits, but only uploads the favorable ones. Thus, she deliberately creates and controls her self-identity. Prior to uploading, teens further edit their pictures using photo-editing mobile applications (e.g., PicSay for Android, Mini Paint for Blackberry, iCamera for iPhone), which contribute to purposefully creating an ideal self-image.

Lexi (age 15, comment): beautiful!! is it even possible for you to take a bad picture?
Claire (age 15, comment): girl, i just airbrush all my pics into gorgeousness… you know i don’t look this good in real-life. ;)
Lexi (age 15, comment): ohh puuulplease.
As Claire suggests, teenagers can create inauthentic or deceptive portrayals of themselves through mobile photo sharing. Previous research corroborates that individuals falsely portray their physical attractiveness online (Hancock and Toma 2009); however, an interesting finding from this study suggests that teenage girls are likely to use editing applications to create less desirable mobile photo uploads. For example, several of the informants posted pictures of themselves and/or their friends, using FatBooth, a popular face-distorting mobile application that adds a significant amount of weight to a person’s headshot.

Kimberly (age 16, interview): Oh my god, I am obsessed with [FatBooth]. I think it’s hilarious to see what I’d look like if I ever got fat. I used it on my Grandma the other day. I could barely breathe it made me laugh so hard! I used it on my dog too. I don't get what's so mean about it. It’s just meant to be funny. It’s not like I’m going around taking pictures of strangers calling them fat. Oh, but my friend David actually did get written up because he took a picture of this really fat girl in our class and posted it on Facebook saying that it was a FatBooth picture.

Theories of social identity and social comparison suggest that one’s self-concept is derived from membership in a given social group (Tajfel and Turner 1986) and that people evaluate their own opinions and behaviors through social comparison with other people (Festinger 1954). Obesity is viewed as a socially undesirable physical characteristic, and using applications like FatBooth reflect the in-group versus out-group prevalent during adolescence. One informant admonished the use of FatBooth saying that it is “no different than making fun of someone who is overweight. It’s like saying ‘Thank God I don’t look like you.’” Nonetheless, teenagers use mobile uploading to stretch the boundaries of social identity and group norms. For example, they use mobile uploading to experiment with their gender identities and highlight gender stereotypes. Like the FatBooth photos, the majority of gender bending photographs of themselves or their friends appears to be taken in jest and the comments that follow each photograph tend to be derogatory in nature.
**Kimberly (age 16, mobile upload):** A teenage boy is holding two grapefruits in front of his chest, suggesting female breasts.

**Kenlyn (age 16, mobile upload):** Two teenage boys posing shirtless. One is wearing a short jean skirt. The second is wearing pink plaid shorts.

**Anne (age 15, mobile upload):** Anne stands in front of the mirror wearing a team jersey and flexing her left bicep.

**Madison (age 16, mobile upload):** Two girls posing in a dressing room wearing men’s boxer briefs.

**Claire (age 15, mobile upload):** Claire is buried up to her neck in sand at the beach. The sand covering her body is shaped to resemble the male physique.

Before the advent of digital cameras or camera phones, roll-film cameras were the standard of personal photography. In contrast, today’s teenagers are growing up in a marketplace of digital technology. They have been raised to immediately view and critique their photographs—and consequently, they view and critique themselves. From a performance perspective, teens are essentially airbrushing and editing their own photos, which ultimately reflect their identity expectations. The data reveals that teenagers use their camera phones and mobile uploading to practice and perfect the physical presentation of their bodies. They practice facial expressions, flex their muscles, and pose for the camera, in order to gain a mastery over their bodies. On the one hand, a better understanding of which physical attributes are one’s best may enhance self-esteem. On the other hand, a constant critique of one’s physical flaws may deflate self-esteem. Despite technology’s capability of creating unblemished photographs, many of the informants posted pictures with self-deprecating captions and idealized image portrayal. Examples of such captions are as follows:

**Caitlin (age 16, photo caption):** seriously, i hate feet. my toes are totes (slang: totally) disgusto.

**Heather (age 16, photo caption):** I am fully aware of how fat my arms look; it’s cool.
Claire (age 15, photo caption): If only I were tan ♥

Jayma (age 15, photo caption): besties!!! ... i look rough but love you girls.

Girls use the social network as platform upon which they can experiment with new identities and gauge audience reaction. They can upload a self-portrait and immediately receive feedback, both solicited and unsolicited, from their peers. All of the previous captions were met with steadfast compliments and reassuring feedback (e.g., “omg, please! i wish i was as pretty as you on a ‘rough’ day!”). The characters that teenage girls portray on social networks are reflective of their emerging identities. Although family members, friends, and pets are also commonly featured in adolescents’ mobile uploads, these characters play a more supporting role to the individual lead performer. For example, Paige posted a picture of herself posing with four other girls in a mirror. Each of the girls had her own cell phone out to take her own picture. Even though the picture was meant to capture the collective group, each girl remained fixated on her own individual image, as captured with her own camera phone.

Finally, echoing the technologically driven marketplace to which today’s youth are accustomed, teenagers commonly use mobile uploading to post pictures of other digital media. In this way, teen’s identity projects are meta-mediated through technology. For instance, Kenlyn’s mobile upload album includes several photographs of her computer screen in which she captures a Facebook chat conversation with a friend or documents a Skype date with her boyfriend. Likewise, other informants uploaded mobile phone screen shots of text conversations and multiplayer mobile games.

Symbolic consumption. Symbolic consumption is integral to the creation and continuation of a stable, harmonious self-concept. Online social networks provide a platform upon which
adolescents can present identity formation processes through symbolic consumption practices represented in their mobile uploads. In particular, girls use consumer products as props and costumes while exploring different aspects of their identities through mobile uploading.

Evidence in the marketing literature suggests that consumer products reflect one’s identity (Belk 1988). Consumption and anti-consumption of particular products may reflect an emerging identity (e.g., make-up and cosmetics reflect femininity and womanly beauty) or loss of a past identity (e.g., ceasing to sleep with a baby blanket or stuffed animal associated with childhood). Furthermore, anti-consumption, or “a resistance to, distaste of, or even resentment of consumption,” is symbolically related to self-concept factors (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy; Zavestoski 2002, 121) and undesired self-states (Hogg, Banister, and Stephenson 2008). Through mobile uploading, girls demonstrate anti-consumption practices by posting photos in mockery of particular brands, services, or ideals. For instance, Madison posted a photograph of a President Barack Obama chia pet with the caption, “AFRObama. No you can’t.” The clear mockery of President Obama’s former campaign slogan (i.e., “Yes we can!”) suggests that Madison is symbolically disassociating from Obama supporters. Interestingly, Madison was not old enough to vote in the 2008 Presidential Election.

In studying symbolic consumption, it is critical to take into account the dynamic nature of the self-concept. Girls adjust their props and costumes to mirror the characters they want to display. For instance, a teenager who once enjoyed shopping at Justice, a fashion retailer catering to young girls, may now view the store as immature and childish, as she takes on a more mature identity. The store itself does not change, but her evaluation of the store changes to reflect her emerging identity. In this way, girls are torn between their past childhood selves and their emerging adult selves. Their mobile uploads reflect this state of liminality. For example, many of
the informants posted mobile photos of old photographs taken during childhood, thus incorporating their past selves into their emerging identities. Mobile upload albums reveal an oscillation between a childlike identity and a more mature, adult identity.

**Alyssa (age 18, mobile upload):** Alyssa posted a picture of chalk drawings that she and her boyfriend created on the sidewalk.

**Alyssa (age 18, mobile upload):** Alyssa posted a picture of herself carrying her 3-month-old nephew on her chest in a front-facing baby carrier.

**Anne (age 15, mobile upload):** Anne posted a picture of herself riding a rocking horse kiddie ride at Chuck E. Cheese.

**Anne (age 15, mobile upload):** Anne posted a picture of herself hanging upside down, suggestively wrapped around a metal firefighter-style pole.

In contemporary culture, the transition from childhood to adulthood is not instantaneous; thus, as evident in the previous examples, teenagers fluctuate back and forth between a youthful, past identity and a mature, emerging identity. Props and costumes are used to symbolically demonstrate these identity transformations. The transition from childhood to adulthood is largely marked by physical changes that adolescents experience as they go through puberty. Mobile uploading provides a platform for teens to instantly post evidence of their physical transformations (e.g., breast development). Teenagers post mobile photos on social networks to show off their developing bodies. For example, girls post pictures of themselves wearing cleavage revealing bathing suits and clothing. In this way, adolescents allow their online friends to partake in the transitional journey with them. Before, during, and after pictures remain posted so that the audience can easily watch the sequence of changes overtime. From a consumption perspective, physical enhancements such as tattoos, piercings, haircuts, surgeries, and hair coloring, are also shared through mobile photo uploading. For example, when Anne dyed her hair for the first time, she posted several pictures, including a picture of the hair color aisle at Target, a photo of the box that she chose, and before, during, and after pictures of her hair. In
particular, getting one’s braces removed seems to be a significant physical transformation in adolescence.

**Interviewer:** I see here you got your braces removed. (In reference to before and after pictures of herself on the day that she got her braces removed.)

*Krissy (age 17, interview):* Finally! I was so excited.

**Interviewer:** How long did you have them?

*Krissy (age 17, interview):* Four years. I had to have two surgeries, spacers, an expander, tongue spurs, and rubber bands – basically everything but headgear. It was awful. I took this picture while I was still at the orthodontist. I got them off in June so we weren’t in school and I wanted all my friends to see.

Mobile photo sharing allows teens to instantly share their symbolic consumption with a wider network of friends. In many cases, products serve as the impetus for uploading a photograph in the first place. The data reveal that girls feel more justified in uploading photographs in which they are posing with an object. Even the most seemingly mundane objects can be transformed into meaningful props, with which the girls can use in their identity performances. Common props and costumes featured in adolescents’ mobile uploads include awards (e.g., 4-H medal, pageant crown, MVP trophy) and achievements (e.g., earning a varsity letter, receiving a good report card), creative undertakings (e.g., playing guitar, baking a cake, practicing new make-up techniques, drawing a comic strip), cultural collectibles or celebrity promotions (e.g., Sponge Bob Square Pants, Elmo, Justin Beiber), food and beverages (e.g., McDonald’s Happy Meal, Monster Energy Drink, specialty cupcakes), and new or desired products and clothing (e.g., prom dress, nail polish). These props and costumes are used to symbolically convey one’s identity while simultaneously drawing the attention back to the actor, in this case, the teenage girl posting the photograph.

*Culturally situated social spaces.* Given that teenagers are not yet considered adults, they have less freedom to explore new locales; thus, they interact within a fairly limited set of social
spaces. Adolescent girls act out their identity performances within the boundaries of culturally situated social spaces, which are evident in their mobile uploads. Much of their time is restricted to day-to-day school interactions (e.g., classes, lunch breaks, athletic team practices). The data reveal that other venues of importance include retail environments (e.g., department stores, the mall), restaurants, entertainment settings (e.g., movie theatre, skating rink), community establishments (e.g., YMCA, church), and personal spaces (e.g., bedrooms, cars). Furthermore, dramatized shared identity performances appear to commonly take place in bathrooms—in school, at home, at the mall.

**Krissy (age 17, interview):** We’re not supposed to have our phones out during school but everyone does it anyway. Most of the teachers are cool with it as long as you’re not like texting during class or trying to cheat, but everyone has their phones out at lunch and between classes. We’re allowed to sit outside for lunch at the picnic tables but if it’s raining, me and my best friend always go pose for pictures in the bathroom mirror. It’s just something fun to do because school is so freaking boring.

As evident in the previous quote, bathrooms play a particularly important role in setting the stage for mobile uploading among girls. A bathroom is a venue of choice given its relative level of privacy and its presence of mirrors. Mirrors and other reflective surfaces (e.g., Christmas ornaments, chrome automobile accents) appear to be a key component in the mobile uploading process, and importantly, mirrors physically reflect an individual’s identity. In addition to inner identity transitions, adolescence is a period of immense physical transformation. As mentioned in the previous section, teenage girls embark on the often tumultuous and uncertain experience of puberty in which their bodies develop adult attributes. Mirrors allow girls to explore their physical self-images.

**Interviewer:** Tell me a little about this picture.

**Sherie (age 16, interview):** My friends were spending the night and we put on a ton of crazy make-up, like bright blue eyeshadow and stuff. Then we just decided to dress up in kind of, like, skimpy outfits and have a mini-photo shoot. We like to pretend we’re on America’s Next Top Model, so we do all these crazy poses and stuff.
Interviewer: Where were you in this picture?
Sherie (age 16, interview): We were in the bathroom. We took the picture in there so we could all see ourselves in the mirror. We took some in my bedroom mirror too, but I don’t think I posted those.

As Sherie suggests, she and her friends enact adult consumption practices such as wearing make-up and donning more revealing clothing. Moreover, by taking the photos in the bathroom, they can see their reflections in the mirror, allowing themselves to actively dramatize their facial expressions and poses. Dressing rooms, like bathrooms, are common locale in which teenagers directly dramatize their consumption experiences, likely due to the prevalence of mirrors and the opportunity to experiment with new identities.

Interviewer: These few pictures seem to be at the same place. Tell me a little about them.
Anne (age 15, interview): My friend Lindsay and I were in the dressing room at Charlotte Russe, trying to find something to wear to the Katy Perry concert. I tried on this purple leopard tube top thing, but we couldn’t decide if it was supposed to be a shirt or a dress.

Interviewer: Who made the comment on this picture? (In reference to the comment: “put that tongue back in your mouth..wearing a skimpy thing like that !!”)
Anne (age 15, interview): My dad. He’s dumb. He would die if I wore that out in public.

Interviewer: So, I take it you didn’t buy that outfit for the concert?
Anne (age 15, interview): God no! We were just trying stuff on for fun. We ended up making our t-shirts for the concert – they were amazing!

Interestingly, like Anne, many girls do not end up purchasing the items that try on or use in their mobile uploads. In this way, they can try on identities (e.g., try on a skimpy outfit, try on athletic gear) without actually committing each possible role. Anne was able to try on an outfit that she ordinarily would not wear. She then received feedback from others (i.e., her dad) and did not purchase the outfit. Instead, she selected to create a new t-shirt and wear shorts from her existing wardrobe, representative of maintaining her existing self-conception. Interestingly, although Anne recognizes her father’s disapproval of wearing revealing clothing in public, she essentially circumvents this rule by posting it to her Facebook page where all of her friends can
view it. Instead of telling his daughter to remove the picture, Anne’s father partakes in
dramatizing the consumption experience by posting a comment on the photo.

Facebook provides a platform upon which girls can discuss their experiences, share
consumption activities, and negotiate their identities. Mobile photographs taken in the
marketplace can spark brand discussions and word-of-mouth among adolescent consumers. For
example, in the following dialogue posted on one of Caitlin’s mobile uploads, Caitlin and Sarah
discuss their retail store preferences and shopping behaviors. Furthermore, Caitlin’s Facebook
friends can witness the interaction in real-time as it unfolds; thus, the conversation becomes
privy to a wider audience than would ordinarily be included in traditional face-to-face
communication.

Caitlin (age 16, mobile upload): Caitlin stands in dressing room wearing a casual
sundress. (July 11, 2010)
(caption): New fav dress. (: 
(comments):
Callie: cute dress(:
Brent: Beautiful dress 
Tori: this is cute! (: 
Sarah: i love ur dress!! :) 
Caitlin: thanks! i do too! it's pretty great. haha. (: 
Sarah: ha no prob. where did u get it? 
Caitlin: Aerie, in the mall of ga. (: 
Sarah: cool cool!! yea i love that store lol.. i have to go to mall of ga to get my
new ipod wendsday :) 
Caitlin: i do too! i love american eagle also. they're basically the same. haha.
that's cool. 
Sarah: ha yea same here..but i loooove Hollister 
Caitlin: haha, i bet. i just love the mall in general. (: 
Sarah: i just wish they weren't so expensive :/..but ha same here..i kinda like mall
of ga better tho,its bigger lol :) 
Caitlin: that's what i meant. haha. they have every store you could think of. haha.
Sarah: for real lol..just think about how big the mall of america must be..haha we
should go there!! 
Caitlin: oh honey! i'd have a major heart attack if i went there! hahah. we could
totally take a road trip it. (: 
Sarah: haha same here!! and yes we definately could :) 
Caitlin: it really would be fun! when i turn 18, we should definitely try and go!
Finally, vacations (e.g., spring break, field trips), destinations (e.g., amusement park, college football game, concerts), and significant events (e.g., prom, 16th birthday, graduation) appear to prompt an increase in mobile uploads. These ritualized events and novel places embody the exciting, potential identities to which teenagers may ascribe, opposite of the mundane, day-to-day identities to which they are accustomed.

Identity-Oriented Motives for Mobile Photo Sharing

Audience feedback. Girls are motivated to take part in mobile photo sharing because it carries an element of instant gratification—the audience can weigh in on the uploaded photograph as soon as it is posted. For instance, Karley posted pictures of her new pet pig and invited her friends to suggest names for him. Prior to the advent of camera phones and social media, personal photographs were printed as hardcopies and placed in photo albums. Today’s youth are growing up in a period in which consumption experiences can be shared with their network of friends as the experience progresses. From vacations and concerts to slumber parties and prom dress shopping, a wide range of consumption experiences are shared with a wider network of friends through social media. As such, teenager girls choose their mobile uploads purposefully, in anticipation of audience feedback, both positive and negative. Humor plays an evident role in mobile photo sharing. Teenagers upload pictures that they hope will be deemed entertaining and funny among friends. For example, Krissy posted a photo of a classmate drooling while asleep in class. She included a caption that mocked the classmate and encouraged her online friends to join in on the conversation. A camera in hand grants the young photographer an opportunity to be a cultural critic at the expense of others.
**Heather (age 16, interview):** I just take pictures of random people and funny stuff that I see. Did you see the one I posted of the mullet man at Wal-mart? I still laugh every time I look at it. I got a little worried after I uploaded it though, ‘cause I thought maybe he’d come hunt me down and attack me. I post a lot of embarrassing pictures of my friends too. They sometimes get pissed about it but I figure they can untag themselves if they want.

Mobile photo sharing grants the photographer immense social power. As Heather suggests, she not only critiques the shortcomings of strangers, she also sets out to embarrass her friends. Interestingly, although some of his friends respond with cries to remove the incriminating photos, none of them untag themselves, as she suggests they could. Thus, from the adolescent perspective, all publicity is good publicity. In fact, Heather continued in her interview to say that she and her friends make a point of trying to upload embarrassing pictures of each other—particularly of the opposite sex. In this way, mobile uploading provides a method of flirtation. Moreover, through the comment feature on Facebook, teens are provided with a platform through which to publicly voice their ridicule of one another and their condemnation of certain products and services. This supports previous research that finds peer ridicule to be a key factor in shaping adolescents’ consumption norms, social identities, and brand preferences (Wooten 1996). Facebook is a social network in which users can communicate back and forth. By posting a photograph, the floor is open to critiques. For example, in her interview, Claire talks about a picture that she posted of herself in a bikini, which prompted a negative response (i.e., “eww, gross.”) from a “friend” and subsequent back and forth online comments between the two of them.

**Interviewer:** I see here on this photo that you seemed to kind of get into an argument with a friend. What happened?

**Claire (age 15, interview):** Honestly, that girl was just jealous because I’m prettier than she is. She has some kind of secret problem with me and I am not all about playing those smart ass sarcastic Facebook games so I deleted her after that. [Torie clicks through to a mobile upload photo of a Facebook screen shot.] See, I left her this message before I deleted her, then I uploaded a picture of it because I knew she’d delete it. [The message
reads: “before i delete you, i thought i’d leave you a little message. i have never met anyone with the amount of immaturity you possess. you are a cruel, mean, manipulative girl. you use people and me. i appreciate that little comment you left me when you thought it was okay to blow up facebook talking shit. look in a mirror. being a fake bitch won’t get you anywhere in life. i know this comment will be deleted as soon as i press share because you have the balls to talk big when i can’t see, but you can’t take a dose of your own medicine. have a nice life “princess” and don’t ever contact me again. xoxoxo :D” (sic])

Claire may have been hoping for positive feedback on her photograph. Instead, the picture stirred social drama. By posting photographs online, girls open the forum for others to discuss and comment on the pictures. Some girls even explicitly ask for feedback. For the most part, audience feedback on teens’ mobile uploads are positive and reaffirming.

**Kenlyn (age 16, mobile upload):** Ellen posted a picture of herself trying on a long red evening gown.

- **(caption):** “Awww! i felt like a princess in this dress... and i LOVED it! ♥
- **(comments):**
  - Dawn: Awwwwwww girl u r beautiful!
  - Lizzy: work it :)
  - Sarah: Hot stuff!!! haha what is this dress for?!??!!??!!?
  - Tyler: DAMN
  - Keeley: your soo pretty! im jealouss! :(
  - Brittany: OH EM GEE! [Ellen] this dress is GORGEOUS!
  - Ellen: dawn: thanks sweetie!!! love yaaa! ♥
    - lizzy: OH YEAHHH! (: sarah: thankssss... and i was just trying them on. lol.
    - tyler: thankkkksss! (;
    - kenzie: awwwwh... thankss! you're pretty too! (: brittani: haa. thankssss! :D
    - renee: awwwwh. thanks sweet pea! ♥
  - Dawn: anytime babe:D love ya too
  - James: Anslee has a nice boo-tay :) haha
  - Ellen: hahaha... you would say that! thanks James.
  - Keeley: Awwh thanks [ellen](;
  - Ellen: you're welcome sweetieee! (: 

When asked about this photograph, Ellen mentioned that she and all of her friends, meaning her Facebook friends, loved the dress. She expanded her already positive opinion of the dress to include the others’ feedback, which resulted in increased desire for the dress. Teenage girls post
mobile uploads with the expressed intention of getting feedback from their friends. Moreover, this feedback loop appears to be reciprocal. As in Kenlyn’s case, she thanked and complimented those that complimented her, whereas Claire struck back against the friend that disparaged her.

*Memory manufacturing.* The data suggest that girls act out identity performances with the intention of creating memories—deliberately and purposefully. They foresee memories in the making. In other words, they create experiences for which they are already anticipating nostalgic feelings. By posting a photograph of a shared consumption experience, the individuals involved can immediately revel in the memory. Mobile uploads are typically uploaded immediately after the photographs are captured; in fact, evidence from the interviews suggests that photographs shared through mobile uploads on Facebook are taken for the sole purpose of uploading. In other words, the picture is taken with the deliberate motive of sharing it on the social network. Thus, to an extent, these captured memories are manufactured and mediated through technology.

*Anne (age 15, interview):* We about got kicked out of Party City the other day because we were putting on all the Halloween costume stuff they have in the back and the manager lady came back and yelled at us and told us that we need to stop treating the store like a playground. We just laughed. It was really funny.

*Interviewer:* Were you shopping for a costume?

*Anne (age 15, interview):* No. We had went over there to Old Navy and Rue 21 to look for clothes but we had to wait on my mom to come pick us up so we thought it would be funny to go take pictures of us dressed up at the party store.

As Anne suggests, the desire to take photographs was an initial impetus for the consumption experience. Mobile upload albums on Facebook act as instant scrapbooks, documenting the adolescents’ idealized experiences. The data reveal that very few mobile uploads depict negative events. Rather, nearly all of the photographs show pleasant and enjoyable experiences.

*Jayma (age 15, interview):* In middle school, I guess was in the preppy group or whatever, but when I started high school, all my friends started hanging out with Seniors and going to parties and doing drugs and stuff. So I stopped hanging out with them as
much, because I wanted to be good, but they are forever posting pictures of stuff they do together, and it’s just kind of annoying to have to see it on Facebook ‘cause you’re like, “Oh awesome, all of my friends are at the mall without me. Thanks for the invite, guys.” So yea, seeing other people’s pictures, of like what they’re doing, sometimes makes me frustrated because you realize that you were left out.

**Interviewer:** Well, it seems like you are having a lot of fun in your pictures.

**Jayma (age 15, interview):** I mean, I’m not going to post some picture of me like sitting at home alone, crying in a corner or something. I’m not that emo [slang: emotional]. I don’t really care if they don’t invite me, I just feel like—well really this one girl in particular, always posts pictures of all of them going to the movies or out to eat or something and I think she just does it on purpose sometimes.

Teenage girls desire to be portrayed as fun and exciting. To an extent, mobile uploads become a competition in which teens try to make their individual lives seem the most appealing, relative to their peers. It is worth noting that teens appear to be more likely to post negatively charged status updates (e.g., “fml” [slang: fuck my life]) on Facebook than they are to post negatively charged mobile photos. In general, the memories depicted in mobile uploads reflect generally happy and fun-loving adolescents. These photographs are almost immediately used to collectively reflect on teens’ shared experiences (e.g., commenting on the picture, viewing the photo online). The girls reminisce about a moment captured in a photograph and develop a narrative only understood by those who were involved in the photograph. In this way, teenage girls upload mobile photographs to preserve their histories, share their stories, visually demonstrate their ideal identities, and entertain their friends.

*Relational reassurance.* Relationships are paramount in adolescence. Peers and parents serve as the primary socialization agents in teenagers’ lives. Mobile uploads are a reflection of these relationships. For example, Paige has a mobile upload album almost entirely devoted to her best friend. Moreover, teens’ online friends comment with reaffirming statements (e.g., “i love us!” “OMG!!! we are soooo awesome :)) “don’t lie. you love me.”). Mobile uploading allows
teenagers to demonstrate the level of closeness they share with other individuals. Girls not only post pictures of the people who are important in their lives, but also of artifacts that represent those relationships (e.g., love notes, Valentine’s Day gifts, matching best friend bracelets). Relationships are reaffirmed by posting pictures and commenting on them.

Kenlyn (age 16, mobile upload): Kenlyn uploaded in photo in which she and six of her friends are piled on top of one another on a small couch.

(caption): “♥♥♥”
(comments):
Ashley: Tim’s face is a little too close to my crotch area haha and his tongue is out which makes it so much worse
Tim: omg only you would notice that u dirty hoebag jk
Tim: and ur wearin my hat fool
Ashley: Haha of course cause your nearest to me.....it's okay though we are besties so I can wear your hat:
Tim: ur right i totally forgot about that ur right lol but this is the snuggle train
Ashley: Hahahaha If That's What You Call It
Tim: that is the cuddle train lol
Ashley: Hahah Okay Hooker Now Text Me Back!!
Tim: ok you dirty whore lol
John: CUDDLE TRAIN!!!!!!!!!!!!! hell to the yeah
Kristen: ohh we all look so cute! :)

Interestingly, all of the above comments were posted the day after the photograph was uploaded, which supports the previous motive of manufactured memories. In this way, the teens immediately turned to Facebook to relive the events of the previous night and continue their bonding experience. Also, only individuals present in the photograph made comments on the picture; thus, the friends are reaffirming their social identity. The picture is important to each of them as members of a social group. Like the cuddle train mentioned in the previous quote, physical closeness (e.g., hugging, cuddling, kissing) documented in mobile uploads portrays the seriousness of relationships. This is particularly the case with romantic relationships, which begin to develop and take precedence during the adolescent years.
Interviewer: Have you ever deleted one of your mobile upload albums?
Claire (age 15, interview): No. Well not a whole album. I’ve deleted pictures before, like I posted a picture of my ex-boyfriend and I kissing and my mom made me take it down because she said it was “inappropriate,” since I’m friends with a lot of my relatives on Facebook. She said she didn’t want my Grandma seeing a picture of me making out. It really didn’t matter anyway because we broke up like a week later so I deleted all of the pictures that I had posted of us together anyway. Guys get super jealous if you have pictures of old boyfriends and stuff on your Facebook, so you have to be careful what you leave up. It’s stupid.

Ellen (age 18, interview): I was looking at this guy’s profile and I see he still has pictures of him and his ex. I thought, “Hmm, okay. Why are they still there?” I’m not his girlfriend. We are only talking, so I can’t really say anything, but if they have broken up, I don’t really understand what he is holding onto.

Adolescence is a period in which young girls commonly begin to explore their sexualities, and, in a sense, teenagers use mobile uploading as currency in relationships. The frequency of appearance and nature of the content demonstrate how meaningful the relationship is. When the relationship ends, mobile uploads can be symbolically dissolved as well. From family and friends to love interests and even pets, mobile uploads reflect the significant relationships in a teenage girl’s life. In and of itself, mobile uploading can establish the positive status of a given relationship, and relational bonds are solidified through commenting on the uploaded photograph.

*Bounded rebellion.* Mobile uploading allows teenage girls an opportunity to test the waters of risk-taking and rebellion. Although Facebook began as a venture targeted toward college students, it now caters to a wider market of consumers. All of the informants said at least one of their parents were friends with them on Facebook, and many of them were friends with aunts, uncles, grandparents, school faculty, church pastors, coaches, and other adults; thus, today’s young girls construct and deconstruct their identities in full view both their parents and their peers. Sometimes they seek approval from authority and sometimes they rebel against it.
Mobile uploading provides a platform upon which teens can act out rebellion within certain boundaries. For instance, teens use promotional products, such as a Marlboro hat or a Bud Light t-shirt, to symbolically represent their risky consumption behaviors.

**Ellen (age 18, mobile upload):** Ellen posted a picture of herself and her friends in the beer and alcohol aisle of the supermarket, despite being under the legal drinking age.

**Claire (age 15, mobile upload):** Claire posted a picture of the digital clock in her as it read 4:20, which refers to the cannabis consumption subculture.

**Alyssa (age 18, mobile upload):** Alyssa posted a picture of her friend playing Nintendo DS under the desk during their chemistry class.

Uploading photographs in which teenagers toe the line of rebellion allows them to experiment with their identities through bounded risk-taking. Madison posted a picture of herself and a friend standing next to a restaurant sign, which read “Now serving beer!” The photograph caption states, “Calm down, Mom. We are just kidding (sort of).” When asked about the photograph, Courtney said that she just likes to mess with her parents. In fact, her dad commented on the photograph, saying “ye root beer, ha ha.” As in Madison’s case, mobile uploading through social network sites may provide opportunity for parents and other adult role models to communicate with young people about their risky consumption behaviors. The social network site provides a captive audience for teens to perform their risky consumption behaviors and receive positive or negative feedback from their web of friends.

**DISCUSSION**

Drawing on previous research on adolescent identity and social media, the findings of this study provide a better understanding of the characteristics of and motivations for mobile photo sharing among adolescent girls. The social network site (e.g., Facebook) provides a
platform upon which teens can publicly negotiate their identities through the mediated interface of the Internet. They engage in deliberate self-presentation, they symbolically portray their identities through consumption, and they capture the photographs in meaningful social spaces. The data reveal that teen girls actively take part in partake in mobile photo sharing in order to gain audience feedback, manufacture memories, reaffirm relationships, and rebel within boundaries. The present study builds upon and extends previous research on adolescent identity and consumer behavior by identifying the process by which adolescents negotiate their identities through mobile uploading and the underlying motives for doing so.

The findings from this study lend support to the notion that ubiquitous technology and social media are fundamentally affecting the ways by which adolescent consumers interact in the marketplace. Social spaces that are traditionally thought of as private (e.g., bathrooms, bedrooms, dressing rooms) are willingly made public by teenagers eager to share their consumption experiences with their online friends. Young girls are using social media to gain feedback from their peers, and as evident in the findings, even from their parents. From an identity development perspective, adolescence is traditionally a period of life in which individuals begin to separate themselves from their parents and family and develop an identity that is more in line with that of their peers. This new age of mediated communication is creating a convergence of traditionally separate social groups. For instance, a teen girl may be Facebook friends with a wide range of individuals from varying social groups—her mom, her best friend from school, her science teacher, her soccer coach, her friend from summer camp, or her pastor. The traditional view of identity suggests that individuals will take on different identity characteristics depending upon their social setting; however, with all of their social groups converging online, teens who engage in mobile uploading through Facebook show evidence of
using the Facebook platform to test run identities regardless of the varied audience. In this way, Facebook provides a one-stop shop for identity feedback.

Consumption plays a key role in this online identity development process. Mobile uploading often takes place in marketplace settings (e.g., retail stores, restaurants) and consumer products serve as the justification or pretext for taking and sharing mobile photos. In this way, identity development on Facebook is performative in nature. For instance, a girl can try on a pair of high heel shoes at the store with the sole intention of taking a picture of the experience to share with her Facebook friends. Thus, the girl uses the product to create a memory of the experience without committing to the purchase of the product. It is important for marketers and retailers to understand how adolescents are interacting with their products for the purpose of identity construction in this new mobile marketplace. From a marketing perspective, if adolescents are simply using the marketplace as a stage upon which they can perform their identities through photo sharing a challenge becomes whether or not to embrace the trend (e.g., encourage and provide photo sharing opportunities) or attempt to circumvent it (e.g., prevent in-store photography).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study represents a beginning understanding of how adolescent consumers use social media to construct their identities. Online photo sharing is only one tool with which adolescents can create, edit, and negotiate their identities. Future research should examine how other social media tools may be different or similar to online photo sharing in the context of identity development. Furthermore, although this study focused primarily on adolescent girls, that is not
to say that boys do not use mobile photo sharing at all. Although they likely use it to a lesser
degree, the nature of their use may differ; thus, future studies should explore gender differences,
and on a similar note, age differences (e.g., early adolescents versus emerging adults). Finally,
given the transitional nature of identity over time, a longitudinal study is an imperative next step
toward understanding how adolescents use online social media to negotiate their identities and to
exploring the role of consumption and consumer products in this process.
Table 3.1 Informant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Date of First Mobile Upload</th>
<th>Total Number of Mobile Uploads</th>
<th>Uploading Frequency (per month)</th>
<th>Total Number of Comments</th>
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<td>Caitlin</td>
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<td>96</td>
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<td>December 2010</td>
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Table 3.2  Semi-Structured Interview Questions

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<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>General Interview Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency</strong></td>
<td>How often do you use your phone to take pictures?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When did you first start using the mobile upload feature on Facebook?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How often do you upload pictures to Facebook?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Subject</strong></td>
<td>Where do you normally take pictures that you upload to Facebook?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who do you normally take pictures of (e.g., friends, family, coworkers)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you normally take pictures of (e.g., food, clothes)?</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Experience</strong></td>
<td>Describe a typical experience in which you might take a picture and upload it to Facebook. What kinds of things go on?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Why do you use the mobile upload feature on Facebook?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What is your most memorable mobile uploading experience?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What is your worst experience with mobile uploading?</td>
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<td><strong>Reflections</strong></td>
<td>Describe your interaction with friends on Facebook after you’ve uploaded a photo.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What do you think you gain from uploading pictures on Facebook?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How long do you leave your mobile uploads up on Facebook?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do you ever get your camera phone pictures printed as hardcopies?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How do your mobile uploads reflect who you are?</td>
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<td><strong>Photograph Specific Interview Questions</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Mobile Upload</strong></td>
<td>Tell me a little about this photograph and what was going on when you took it.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Why did you decide to upload this photograph?</td>
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<td>Who was involved in taking this picture with you?</td>
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CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Taking both studies into consideration, my dissertation aims to better understand the coming of age consumption practices of adolescent girls. Adolescence is a tumultuous period of life for young consumers, but the marketplace helps them to explore and redefine their identities. Adolescents are constantly trying on new identities and rejecting old ones. As Essay 1 suggests, adolescents are in a liminal stage in which they embrace change and are willing to try experiences; thus, it is not surprising that they turn to modern technology like social uploading to demonstrate their coming of age identities. From a consumer behavior perspective, my research extends previous studies which explore consumer socialization from a sociocultural perspective; however, my dissertation marks one of the first projects to directly assess how consumption plays a role in the coming of age identity process throughout the adolescent life stage. Previous research primarily focuses on the attainment of a particular identity rather than the process by which the identity emerges.

A few general future directions and limitations should be noted. First, future researchers may want to delve deeper into individual market-mediated milestones such as an adolescent’s first part-time job experiences or an adolescent’s process of moving out of her childhood home. Exploring each of these milestones may provide key marketing insight into how consumption practices mediate the underlying identity tensions. Further, it may shed light on how young people approach first-time marketplace experiences, such as attaining employment or finding
alternative housing. As Essay 1 suggests, social media outlets such as Facebook provide a platform by which young people might share their coming of age identity projects. To that end, which other social media platforms might adolescents use to publicize their identity developments? Both studies call for longitudinal research to better understand the processes by which young consumers enter the adult world—that is, if becoming “an adult” is even a legitimate endeavor in postmodern consumer culture. Might liminality extend throughout the life course in which consumers are in a semi-permanent state of identity flux? If so, how might marketers address consumers’ ever changing needs? Furthermore, I recognize that my dissertation results represent an extremely Americanized perspective on adolescent coming of age practices and further still, my findings are only applicable to young female consumers. How do male consumers differ from their female counterparts? Overall, my dissertation provides a first step toward understanding coming of age and may provide the foundation for future marketing scholars to explore adolescent identity development and related consumption practices.
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