

## The Power of the Teen Consumer

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Companies understand that teens can make or break them. Why don't teens? Most teens don't realise the power that they as a market group possess. This translates into individual power as well: when teens complain, companies listen. Teens today are "better" consumers than any generation before them: they buy more and spend more. While this may be good for the economy, it may not necessarily be good for the teens. "Consumerism has killed the imagination of today's youth," says teen advocate and activist Wyell from The Valley, a teen leadership organisation in New York.

The idea that today's teens are replacing true individualism and self-expression with "expressing" themselves through the buying of consumer goods is a frightening one.



Some child psychologists say that teens and tweens are mistaking the veneer of sophistication they manifest through stylish clothes and hip music for the real thing. When teens feel "all grown up" and think that means having the latest iPod and camera phone, what will they be like as grownups? The fear is that they will never really develop the values and responsibilities that come with adulthood. In an age where youth is extended well into the 20s and even the early 30s, this is a real fear.

Adolescence is a very important time for self-development. Imagination is a strong force in most teens' lives, and teens are among the most creative people on the planet. They have energy, drive, passion and brilliant ideas... or do they? Now they're putting passion into making sure they have the right clothes, the right makeup, and the right stuff. Teens have always been concerned with appearance and 'fitting in,' but today teens have so much more money than previous generations that marketers have upped the ante and created a world where teens *can't*

fit in unless they buy, buy, buy.

According to Alissa Quart, author of *Branded*, 31 million teens now spend upwards of \$153 billion a year on leisure expenses (clothes, CDs, makeup, etc.). More teens are working jobs than ever before so that they have the money to buy stuff: 55% of American high-school seniors work more than three hours a day. What happened to carefree youth, and having time for leisure pursuits *other* than shopping?

Media literacy is so vital for today's teens: they need to learn that this culture of consumerism is *created*, not absolute. They can choose different realities, and they can choose not to *buy* into the world that companies have made to get their hands on teen riches. Companies and marketers are deliberately creating a culture of consumerism among teens, and teens can fight back. Teens have immense power as consumers, and it's time they realised it.

