

Postmodern Openings

ISSN: 2068 – 0236 (print), ISSN: 2069 – 9387 (electronic)

Coverd in: Index Copernicus, Ideas RePeC, EconPapers, Socionet,
Ulrich Pro Quest, Cabel, SSRN, Appreciative Inquiry Commons,
Journalseek, Scipio, CEEOL,
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Jacopo BERNARDINI

Postmodern Openings, 2014, Volume 5, Issue 2, June, pp: 39-55

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://postmodernopenings.com>

Published by:

Lumen Publishing House

On behalf of:

Lumen Research Center in Social and Humanistic Sciences

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Jacopo BERNARDINI¹

Abstract

Being young today is no longer a transitory stage, but rather a choice of life, well established and brutally promoted by the media system. While the classic paradigms of adulthood and maturation could interpret such infantile behavior as a symptom of deviance, such behavior has become a model to follow, an ideal of fun and being carefree, present in a wide variety of contexts of society. The contemporary adult follows a sort of thoughtful immaturity, a conscious escape from the responsibilities of an anachronistic model of life. If an ideal of maturity remains, it does not find behavioral compensations in a society where childish attitudes and adolescent life models are constantly promoted by the media and tolerated by institutions.

Keywords

Adulthood; kidult; Infantilization; adult; youthful; immaturity; postmodern; postmodernity

¹ Jacopo BERNARDINI - Postdoctoral Researcher, Department of Political Sciences, Università degli Studi di Perugia (Italy). Email Address: jacopower@yahoo.it.

Introduction

Contemporary societies are experiencing a new phenomenon, for which children and *teenagers* represent the epicenter of the consumerist culture, influencing the media system and forming wishes and behaviors of a growing number of adults: those who Postman (1994) defines *adult-children*, Epstein (2003) *individuals locked in a high school of the mind*, Tierney (2004) *adultescents*, Cross (2008) *boy-men*. The concept is useful to describe an increasingly recurrent reality: husbands in their forties who spend hours playing the same video games that obsess adolescents, fathers verbally and physically involved in fist fights at their children's game, politicians and managers who behave like impulsive teenagers, young adults who live with their parents, watch cartoons and see in marriage and in parenting an obstacle to their independence. In general, one finds infantile adults, unable to take responsibilities.

Therefore, the purpose of this essay will be to analyze the growing culture of infantilization that seems to have become one of the most recent hallmarks of postmodernity, making outdated and ineffective the *classic* paradigms of adulthood and maturation to which the social disciplines still refer to.

In fact, the postmodern adult is by now characterized by an unprecedented *infantilist nature*. He chases the aesthetics and lifestyles of young people, lives in a state of continuous present, postpones or eludes those stages that used to mark the social recognition of maturity as well as the responsibilities and the preclusions involved.

The *classic* paradigm of maturity, therefore, does not seem to find real behavioral compensations in a contemporary scenario that not only has reduced the sense of social disapproval, but in which infantile attitudes and adolescent life models are constantly promoted by the media and tolerated by institutions.

Throughout the course of the essay, these concepts will be examined in a concise measure, comparing them to some typical phenomena of the postmodern change: individualization, presentism and the reversibility of canonical indicators of adulthood.

Infantilization as a Law of the Market

As recently stated by Samuelson (2003), we are living in an era in which it is practically normal to refuse to accept one's own age, an era that is characterized by *young people who want to be adults* and *adults who want*

to be young. The traditional stages of the life cycle, to which the social sciences still refer, were progressively postponed and altered: the age of childhood has been shortened; adolescence today begins way before puberty and for many seems to last forever (Blos, 1979; Arnett, 1998; 2003; Samuelson, 2003); the boundaries of the adulthood seem, by now, indefinable; and seniority, from a phase of the life course, is likely to become an individual concept. In such a scenario, the media, market and advertising seem to have played a fundamental role in the transformation of the life stages, gradually lowering, starting after the Second World War, the criteria of measurement of youth (Epstein, 2003) and extending the possibilities of a young semblance to people who are increasingly older. The evidence in favor of this thesis is seen in popular culture: newscasts give more and more space to news of color and crime; the language of politics has been simplified, depleted, dogmatized and has lost the complexity of a typically adult morality; video games and role playing games - once a prerogative of youth - are becoming increasingly popular among adults; each year, the most successful movies are cartoons or childish comedies; the clothing of adults has become a *photocopy* of clothing styled for the young; and the fields of cosmetic surgery and beauty products have systematically grown. The actor-consumer of this system tends to childishness without pleasure, to indolence without innocence, dresses without formality, has sex without reproducing, works without discipline, plays without spontaneity, buys without a purpose, and lives without responsibility, wisdom or humility (Linn 2004; Barber, 2007). The postmodern infantilization coincides with a kind of collective regression, largely as a result of stringent market logic. The promotion of what Barber (2007) has recently defined an *infantilist ethos* is achieved by correlating the postponing of the canonic indicators of maturity with the global market.

The propensity of a capitalism - which is no longer productive - to shape new clientele and imaginary pseudo-needs (Debord, 1967) may therefore be connected to the gradual *creation* by the market itself of a new social figure: the infantilist adult or, as recently named in the American scientific production, the *kidult*. This figure is an archetype of an encouraged regression, to facilitate the promotion of goods which are only apparently addressed to young people and children. But why opt for a regression toward youth or even infantile ages?

There are at least four reasons. Firstly, the needs of children and young people are ideally and potentially infinite, while the demand for adult services and goods has proven not to be endless (Del Vecchio, 1997). Though the adult can consciously assess the real need for an object, the youth tends to the accumulation of goods which are ephemeral, superfluous, devoid of any practical or utilitarian value; similarly the child evaluates only the playful aspects of the object and does not voluntarily limit the desire for new goods.

Secondly, the adult *used* to be a child and a teenager. The memory of those years is a heritage that is always present in the eyes of the consumer and that can continually resurface when the market relies on the *nostalgic effect*. It is a simple stratagem, very common nowadays, leading the actor-consumer to relive past experiences and regress once again toward previous life stages. After all, as Gary Cross stated (2008), in a society as frenetic and uncertain as the postmodern one, the individual manages to find stability in the memory of past experiences.

The third reason is purely demographic. After the baby boom years, the birth rate in the Western world has progressively decreased and, as a consequence, the average age has risen strongly; it is assumed that will gradually continue to grow. In 1950 those who were fourteen years old or less made up more than a third of the world's population, today these are just the 13.5% and in forty years it is estimated that they will be only 8.6%.² In the United States the average age has switched from 25 years old in 1960 to 38 in 2012.³ Moreover, it is assumed that by the year 2050, in the United States, the number of people over seventy years old will be greater than that of *teenagers*.⁴ The European scenario reflects this trend in an even more obvious manner: in France the average age is 40 years old, in Spain 42, in Italy and Germany 44.⁵ Italy, in addition to being the third country in the world with the highest average age, it is also the second country with the highest life expectancy at birth - 82 years - preceded only by Japan.⁶ Young people are

2 Source: Statist Bureau; M. I. C., Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, United States (2012).

3 Source: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, United States (2012).

4 Source: US Census Bureau (2008).

5 Source: The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency (2012).

6 Source: Census of Gibraltar (2010).

elsewhere: in the Second and Third World, but do not yet constitute an approachable market.

The final reason is the standardization of the young lifestyle. As ascertained by numerous studies (McNeal, 1992; Walker, 1996; Barber, 2007), if adult cultures are pluralist and distinctive, the culture of youth is extraordinarily universal. According to a purely economic logic, therefore, the young - both real and presumed - represent the most profitable target since they allow the sale of identical products in necessarily different realities.

On the one hand, therefore, the logic of global capitalism provides for an overproduction of goods in a market which is, by now, saturated. On the other hand, in these times of economic crisis as the economic boom years have ended, consumers have acquired a strong diversification in what they desire to purchase and are apparently less likely to buy goods that are not necessities. And it is in this scenario that the child acquires a new marketing value and becomes the prototypic figure of consumption, endowed with several characters vital to the market: he is easily suggestible; tends to want objects that have no utilitarian purpose; is driven by individualistic, irrational and almost exclusively playful desires; does not take into account the needs of others and does not present a substantial diversification in tastes.

The market, however, has not deviated production toward the child-customer, rather it has found in the irrationally consumerist nature of the child the ideal customer. The main target remains the adult for at least two reasons: his economic resources and the massive presence in the population. The promotion of the infantilization by the market has this aspiration: to foster the regression of the desires of the consumer in order to make them more compatible with a capitalist logic based on surplus production and equality of the products.

Not only that. As recently shown (Bernardini, 2012), the economic promotion of an infantilist ethos has widely influenced the major social and mass media contexts. Television schedules, for example, have gradually lost their original pedagogic and cultural depth in favor of fun and entertainment; the movie industry is increasingly focused on *kidult movies*, sequels, remakes, comics and cartoon superheroes at the expense of the complexity of plot and dialog; in publishing one sees motivational books and novels apparently addressed to children or adolescents (think of the *Harry Potter* phenomenon); Internet use, by

adults, seems to be increasingly linked to ludic motivations, especially through social networks, while that of video games has assumed a nostalgic-escapist function that promotes the regression of the adult male to a utopian world of fantasy and virility, and to the consequent escape from family obligations and social responsibilities (Burrill, 2008).

In specifically institutional areas, the political debate is increasingly focused on individualism, privatization, narcissism and profit. Politicians, also, seem to have assumed, in the course of time, patriarchal and pedagogical roles towards the electorate and have dedicated more and more attention to appearance. Sporting events have gradually changed in favor of the pure spectacle; the banking system has perpetually simplified forms and language; the secularization has entailed a gradual revisiting of religious institutions in the direction of social disintegration and of individualism. Moreover, recent years have witnessed the proliferation of religious sects, Human Potential Movements, and N. R. M.,⁷ which combine myths and superstitions with modern popular culture, with a mostly sci-fi imprint, with the intent to foster the regression of the rationality of the believer to a typically infantile irrationality (Klima, 1999). Similar clues related to infantilizing practices can also be found in modern iconology and iconography, in language, in law enforcement agencies, in the management of hospitals and in the organization of events, as has been recently shown (Bernardini, 2012; 2013).

A Historical-Generational Question

According to some scholars (e.g., Mitchell, 2006; Cross, 2008), the *culture of immaturity* that has arisen in postmodernity must be connected to historical-generational motivations rather than economic factors. In support of this argument, they point out that the phenomenon of infantilization concerns almost exclusively people currently in their thirties and forties, those who once were labeled as *generations X* and *Y* and who were characterized by the significant

⁷ Human Potential Movements (HPM) indicates all those groups and movements that offer radical improvement of capabilities and potentials through techniques that are not mainly related to Christianity, nor to the oriental religions.

The initials N. R. M. (New Religious Movements) indicates religious faiths or recent ethical, spiritual or philosophical movements that do not belong to any official religious institution. Almost all of them emerged in the second half of the last century.

contrast of values and behaviors in respect to their fathers, the *baby boomers*. However, it is precisely in the generation of the economic and demographic boom that the main causes of the contemporary infantilization may be encountered: a generation that has preferred to reject and deny the culture of older people - the so-called *great generations* - and to exalt the value that the life stage of youth was acquiring, rather than creating a new and better meaning of maturity. Unlike their fathers, the *baby-boomers* have not been able to produce sufficient styles of maturity and have made a model of enjoyment and freedom out of the nostalgia for their youth (Cross, 2008). In rejecting the behavioral patterns and the traditional indicators of the *great generations*, they have left to their children a vague figuration of growth, maturation and adulthood. The intention was, undoubtedly, to become better partners and parents in respect to their own ones by refusing a culture based on authoritarianism, patriarchy and masculinity. However, they have not been able to propose an alternative model of maturity, one that the children could have followed or to which they could have, also, opposed, finding in the common refusal some sort of adult identity.

According to a purely historical prospect, therefore, the problem of postmodern immaturity rotates around three generational figures, and each is a party to it in its very own way. The years of economic and demographic boom have marked the definitive end of the Victorian patriarchate, the birth of feminism, the growth of technological innovation, and the overall rising of the level of education. Between the Sixties and the Eighties, the transition to adulthood of the post *baby boom* cohorts has been marked by a personal rejection of the previous values structure and, at the same time, by marketing that began to celebrate youth. Advertising strategies changed, and no longer promoted family responsibility, competence and machismo, but a young identity and personal wish. In parallel, the market proposed new consumer goods that promise detachment from the conformism and authoritarianism of the *great generations*, celebrating leisure, the vitality of youth, and the expression and the satisfaction of the individual. An economic counterculture is born which seems to attack consumerism in general, but that in fact rides the wave of the youthful rebellion to oppose the utilitarian consumerism of the Fifties and promote the very personal interests of the individual, which once were repressed.

These factors have led to two main consequences: the removal of social and individual attention from the two main canonical indicators of adulthood - work and family - and the abandonment of traditional ideals and models of family, work and community responsibilities, leaving to future generations a significant emptiness of values, especially regarding the concept of maturity itself.

A New Definition of Transition

The classic signs of adulthood and maturation, social ideals and models of the social sciences do not seem to take account of the recent processes of infantilization. Rather, they largely reference a specific historical period: the so-called *golden age* of Hobsbawn (1995), a time between the Second World War and the early Seventies during which the Western world has registered unprecedented economic and industrial growth. It is in this space-time frame that the *standard model of adulthood* (Lee, 2001) arises, a model that, even today, is strongly referred to despite being inadequate to contemporaneity. The entry into the adult age, classically, coincides with the crossing of certain thresholds: a steady job, stable relationships, independent living and parenthood. These social indicators of adulthood are, so far, firmly fixed in the structure of the evaluation and the social recognition of the western countries and provide those essential points of reference for the attribution of the status of adult. On a psychological level, the standard model of adulthood provides for greater self-understanding and self-confidence, resulting from the accumulation of experiences and skills and by the consequent social validation. The adulthood as a prototype of stability, experience and certainty has been preserved over time, but today this representation, from an idea, has been transformed into a *plain ideal* (Arnett, 1997). In fact, many studies have shown that the standard model of adulthood largely persists in Western societies in spite of the very different context in which it is inscribed today. It persists both as a social representation and as a paradigm in the social sciences.

The classic indicators of maturity, therefore, remain in the postmodern era. They have, however, been gradually delayed, rescaled in the social and individual value to them attributed, and increasingly relegated to an ideal and abstract level.

The end of formal education - first classic indicator that should be achieved in the course of life - has encountered a systematic

postponement in all Western societies since the Fifties. Along with this, in the postmodern context, education in advanced age has assumed a new role, both for the need of continuous training updates in increasingly specialized work and for individual maturation itself (Knowles, 1989).

Housing and economic independence are two indicators that, on the one hand, have experienced a gradual postponement over time and, on the other hand, have lost, in contemporary society, the disposition of stability. The *boomerang kids* phenomenon (Okimoto and Stegall, 1987; F. Goldscheider and C. Goldscheider, 1999; Mitchell, 2006) is more and more frequent: unlike their predecessors, the young adults of today often experience less permanence and greater movement inside and outside many work-related statuses and housing arrangements. The socio-psychological difficulties linked to the process of separation from the parent's house (Mitchell, 2006) and the birth of *semi-autonomous* residential accommodations (F. Goldscheider and C. Goldscheider, 1999) have increasingly encouraged the return to the parental home. Similarly, employment policies increasingly linked to precariousness and flexibility, and business hiring strategies increasingly based on apprenticeship and indeterminacy, have systematically questioned the characters of occupational irreversibility and economic stability during adulthood.

Also marriage and the construction of a family unit are classic indicators - through which the social recognition of adulthood occurs - that have undergone significant and continuous retardation. In the postmodern scenario, moreover, the centrality of such indicators is widely put into question. Not only has the systematic increase in the number of divorces and separations weakened the irreversibility of marital status, the gradual emergence of non-traditional forms of family is marking marriage itself as an *individual option* rather than a practical *social obligation*.

The Birth of a New Social Figure: the Kidult

Postmodernity is, therefore, going through a profound process of infantilization that virtually concerns every institution and area of interest and that has strongly influenced the value and timing of the major indicators of adulthood. The process of social changes related to the phenomena of individualism, presentism, globalization, multiculturalism and expansion of the dimensions of uncertainty and

speed has produced an unprecedented social figure - the *kidult*. He represents the prototypical image of immaturity, characterized by apprehension, insecurity, instinct, exploration and the inability to *love and work* (Freud, 1905). He is the emerging adult of Arnett (2003; 2004) who remains permanently caged in a life stage free from obligations and responsibilities, the *boomerang kid* that has made the affective, occupational and housing instability a choice rather than a constraint, the *homo ludens* predicted by Huizinga (1944), inclined to systematically take refuge in the dimension of *play*. He is an adult-child who shuns the social obligations tied to family and work, without feeling inadequate in the collective environment; aware that the canonic indicators of maturity that have characterized the previous generations are now fallen.

The *kidult* does not design his existence along a line that goes from the past to the future; rather, he takes his decisions *day-to-day*, on the base of needs and desires related to the situation and the context (Rosa, 2003). He lives an artificial youthfulness as *infinite potentiality*, he lives in a universe in which any valence to diversity between young and adult has been subtracted and in which, on the contrary, the lack of distinction between the two became a characterizing element (Bonazzi and Pusceddu, 2008).

The *kidult*, therefore, may be considered to be the evolutionary peak of the postmodern changes linked to the socio-media infantilization, to the weaknesses in adult value models as a historical-generational consequence and to the social and psychological reproposal of an infantilist and youthful *ethos*.

Profiling him however, is not an easy task. If academic studies in the field of cast are few, the ones on the phenomenon of *kidults* are virtually non-existent. In some historical, economic and sociological publications (Linn, 2004; Schor, 2004; Barber, 2007; Aberdeen, 2008) the phenomenon is briefly mentioned but never examined in depth; the press, on the contrary, especially in the United States, has tried to analyze it in numerous articles by correlating him, however, almost all the time with other events.

In other studies (Bernardini, 2012; 2013), such a figure emerged as characterized by the predominance - more or less clear - of some indicators of childishness on their antithetical compensations, which are typical of a standard conception of maturity. Below, the main ones:

- *Impetus vs. reflection*: Schueler (1995) has noted how the actions of many adults, in response to a desire, are not mainly affected by external factors that stimulate rational forces, but rather by *blind-forces*, essentially not influenced by the rational deliberation. The pursuit of desire, mainly guided by blind forces rather than by reflection, might represent a characteristic of the *kidult*: just like children, his actions will be frequently influenced by the impetus rather than by reason.
- *Dependency vs. independence*: as mentioned previously, one of the major breaking elements between the *great generations* and the *baby boomers* concerns the behavioral and educational conduct towards children. While the great generations accentuated the importance of role distinction and independence, the *post-baby boom* generations conferred a strong value on emotional investment by establishing an unprecedented meaning of interdependence. The absence of any real stimulus to seek housing and economic independence, the dilation of *baby talk*, the unconditional affective dedication devoid of an authoritarian model of adulthood to follow, are all factors that might gradually establish in the adult son a sense of psychological and physical dependence. In *kidults*, in particular, the sense of dependency prevails over the search for independence. It becomes an inescapable condition which jeopardizes the natural path toward autonomy and individual and social self-determination. This propensity certainly does not end within the family context, since the positioning of the child within the family can greatly influence his positioning within society (Hockey and Allison, 1993).
- *Doubt vs. certainty*: the contemporary time is inevitably marked by the dimensions of doubt and uncertainty. The young adult, in general, and the *kidult*, in particular, nowadays call into question those social stages that used to permanently turn him into an adult. Doubt constantly affects training, working and relational spheres; social conventions themselves are *interrogated* and no longer accepted as taken for granted.
- *The search for instantaneous pleasure vs. happiness in the long term*: back in 1992, George Loewenstein and Jon Elster examined a phenomenon which, in their opinion, was booming in those

years: the continuous search for the present and the consequent lack of concern for the future by adults. The thesis of *choice over time* takes form: the low households' saving propensity, the drop in long-term investment of small- and medium-sized enterprises, and the rise of public and private debt are interpreted as indicators of a pronounced and, in some ways, unprecedented propensity to *live* more and more the present and to not make investments in the future. Today this is a widespread phenomenon in which the adult individual, just like the child, privileges immediate gratification instead of future benefits and instantaneous pleasure instead of long-term happiness. A phenomenon that depicts a significant indicator of *kidultness*.

- *Egocentricity vs. self-abnegation*: the *kidult*, similar to the child theorized by Piaget, puts himself and his very own problems at the center of each experience, disregards the presence and the interests of others and is often convinced that everything is allowed to him. The reasons should be sought, once again, in the transformations of postmodern societies, in the development of individualism and secularization, but especially in the behavioral liberalism and the refusal of authoritarianism, para-educational models of the *post-baby boom* generation.
- *Right vs. obligation*: if, at a macro-level, the extent of egocentricity has increased, at a micro-level individual ambition has grown to the point that a job, today, not only must ensure a salary but also give satisfactions. The ambition and the egocentricity of the *kidult* may, therefore, result in an unprecedented form of presumption towards a society that, in reality, does not seem to follow nor direct him in his choices, but only suggest an infinite list of possible alternatives.
- *Narcissism vs. sociability*: in 1964 Erich Fromm widened the merely clinical concept of narcissism by gathering to it any form of vanity, self-admiration, self-satisfaction and self-glorification that affects the individual. The term then becomes synonymous of an asocial individualism in clear juxtaposition with the cooperation, devotion, and love toward neighbor. The phenomenon of narcissism is widespread today: Christopher Lasch (1991, p. 12) has even asserted that we are witnessing the birth of a new culture of *narcissism* and that this is bringing individuals to an

"egomaniacal, experience-devouring, imperial self regression into a grandiose, narcissistic, infantile, empty self." What is interesting is that Lash attributes the culture of narcissism to a circle of adult people guided by infantile attitudes, in other words those that today might be defined as *kidults*. Similarly Gary Chapman (2003, p. 81) saw in narcissism a triggering factor of the delay and the decay of the major indicators of adulthood: work and marriage. According to the author, the increasing delay with which young people enter into the world of work is due to their narcissistic presumption, while the constant increase in the divorce rate is the result of "narcissistically puerile and irresponsible attitudes that people bring to marriage."

- *Impermanence vs. stability*: as previously described, the contemporary socio-cultural context of the Western young adult has been defined by some scholars (Okimoto and Stegall, 1987; F. Goldscheider and C. Goldscheider, 1999; Mitchell, 2006) as a real *Boomerang age*. It is in this context that the *kidult* becomes what, more than twenty years ago, Okimoto and Stegall (1987) had labeled as the *boomerang kid*: an adult who denies the traditional stability of the family role and the housing situation and, rather, opts for temporary affective and housing solutions. He is the one who decides to go and live on his own, with his partner or with friends and then decides to return to the *family nest*; who prefers the temporariness of various cohabitations rather than the ostensible inalterability of marriage; he is also the one who divorces and gets married again. He is a proponent of increasingly frequent trends that seem now to have compromised the traditional linearity of emotional and family formation and of housing independence.
- *Insecurity vs. self-confidence*: the proliferation of the culture of immediacy has often led to a climate of constant uncertainty, concerning especially those who have built their lifestyles on the dimension of speed: the youths and the *kidults*. As seen before, in addition, the *kidult* is presentist: he focuses his attention almost exclusively on the *day-to-day* dimension and is unable to make long-term projections, a conduct necessary to overcome the insecurity and anxiety related to the vision of the future. We could compare him to the *no longer secure individual* of Wallulis

(1998), that is to say, the individual who has lost any kind of expectation towards the future, particularly in the employment and affective fields. As a consequence, marriage and work are no longer designed as safe and definitive *milestones*, but rather as precarious and provisional situations, as a *land* of probable disappointments and frustrations. However, the strong insecurity of the *kidult* is nothing other than the explicitness of a widespread trend. Several scholars (Beck and Gernsheim, 1994; Wallulis, 1998; Klima, 1999) have observed in contemporary society an increasingly wider sense of insecurity towards the future. A general lack of confidence which is nothing other than the direct consequence of the increasing demand for labor flexibility, the loss of expectations in a permanent marriage and the sudden inefficiency of the insurance state.

- *Individualism vs. community*: the infantilist orientation, like the ethics of consumption to which it is closely related, leads to a purely individualistic vision of life. That is to say, human beings are seen, first and foremost, as individuals and not as relatives, companions, lovers, citizens or members of a community.
- *Conformism vs. diversity*: the phenomenon of the *kidults*, from an economic point of view, has been seen as the ultimate consequence of the infantilizing process promoted by postmodern capitalism. The *kidult* is an adult who chases the standardized trends and desires of the youths; who suppresses the variety, the singularity and the distinctiveness of his own persona in favor of an extraordinarily universal youth culture; and who enjoys the same identical products, tangible or intangible, regardless of age and nationality. He is the *one-dimensional man* of Marcuse (1964), the symbolic product of an industry in search of a monopoly under which all of the mass culture is identical (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947).

The *kidult* exhibits characteristics closely related to typical phenomena of postmodernity. He is a figure that seems destined to occupy a fundamental place in the redefinition of the paradigm of adulthood and life course. He is a figure with which the social sciences must, necessarily, start dealing.

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Biodata



Jacopo Bernardini – Postdoctoral Researcher, PhD in Social and Political Theory and Research, Department of Political Sciences, Università degli Studi di Perugia (Italy). Email Address: jacopower@yahoo.it.