

Skaar, H. (2009). Branded selves – How children in Norway relate to marketing on a social network site. *Journal of Children and Media*, 3 (3), 249-267.

**Branded selves:  
How children relate to marketing on a social network site**

Håvard Skaar  
Research Fellow  
Oslo University College

## **Abstract**

Theories of branding and self presentation inform an ethnographic study of how a group of classmates aged 11-12 construct identities by use of the brands and branded resources made available to them on the social network site and elsewhere on the Internet. In the analysis these resources are categorised as space, texts and tools. In using them the young people adopt commercial strategies for presentation of the self. Generally speaking, these users relate their self presentation to brands and branded resources in two different ways: either as collectors or as elaborators. Simple collection of branded resources appears to need less work and be more convincing and more unassailable than elaborating them into their digital self presentations. This gives rise to a disparity between the rich range of attractive and stimulating resources provided by marketers and the level of creativity shown when young users draw on them. Social competition plays a role in reinforcing a uniform use of brands and branded resources. This raises the threshold for free development of individual creativity in the production of digital self presentations on the commercial website.

**Keywords:** social network site, brands, branding, children, ethnography, marketing, self presentation

## Introduction

During the past few years, use of so-called social network sites has been a rapidly growing trend in young people's communication on the Internet. Sites like Facebook, Myspace, Friendster and a number of others all have a structure that allows users to search and be searched in a network based on shared social or professional interests. Some of them, like Tagworld, Bebo, Mixi, Faceparty and Piczo, are directed towards children and adolescents. This article explores how marketing affects the way in which a group of 11-12 year old classmates uses one of these network sites.

The commercial interests involved in social network sites are obvious enough, although not always taken into consideration when these new practices are researched. Researchers and policymakers have acknowledged the need to address problems involved in children's exposure to online marketing (e.g. Fielder, Gardner, Nairn & Pitt, 2007; Nairn & Dew, 2007), and also emphasized the social consequences of these commercial pressures (e.g. Beer & Burrows, 2007). Despite this, we still find that children's and adolescents' use of social network sites is more commonly discussed in a perspective of liberation, participation and democratization (e.g. boyd, 2007; Jenkins, 2006).

These divergent approaches reflect a general debate in the research literature on children as consumers of new media. While a body of research reflects marketers' view of young people as active consumers with the freedom to make their own choices and also as an invaluable marketing resource in their ability to influence the choices of their peers and their parents (del Vecchio, 1997; Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003; McNeal, 1992), critics emphasize the manipulative strategies children are exposed to when their desire to choose for themselves is brought to an ever-expanding market (Linn, 2004; Schor, 2005; Seiter, 2005). Some researchers have worded these divergent views aptly and concisely by asking whether young peoples' consumption of new media makes them "Frontrunners or copycats" (Tufte, Rasmussen, J., & Bech Christensen, 2005). David Buckingham describes the debate as a polarization between "on the one hand, the critical view of children as passive victims of consumer culture; and on the other, the views of marketers themselves, who define children as much more active, competent and powerful." (Buckingham, 2007, p. 15). Claiming that this polarization is a simplification, Buckingham suggests that researchers tend to concentrate on "newer commercial strategies" such as "product placement, peer-to peer marketing, cross-promotion and viral and online marketing" (Buckingham, 2007, p. 21). The Piczo website is

based on these kinds of marketing strategies, which essentially give young people a more productive role than they have as consumers of more traditional media. An analysis of their Piczo production can therefore inform the debate outlined above.

## **Research question**

Piczo started out in 2004 as an arena where young people could share pictures and photographs. Today, Piczo offers them the chance to create “fully customizable personal websites that do not require any understanding of html code. Users share their life stories with friends by designing their sites with multiple pages featuring photos, graphics, guest books, comment boards, music, and more”(www.Piczo.com). Social connections are made explicit and social networking emerges when users subsequently link their Piczo pages to those of their friends.

In the study, the design and content of Piczo pages will be understood as young people’s self presentations. The notion originates from the work of Erving Goffman (1959) and reflects his view of identity as a product of our everyday social interaction. Goffman basically analyzes self presentation as part of face to face interaction, so here the notion must be qualified in a way that captures the specific nature of the self presentations on interactive web pages. Notably, it is precisely the deviation from face to face interaction which opens up children’s self presentations on the Piczo website to new kinds of commercial influence. Brands render these influences visible and traceable. Against this background the study sets out to answer the following research question: How does branding affect young people’s self presentations on the Piczo website?

## **Theory**

### **Brands and identity**

While the content and economic value of brands were previously closely related to the products they stood for, they are now increasingly detaching themselves from this material basis. The most successful brands (e.g. Nivea, Lee or Nike) have acquired a standing that gives them cultural influence and economic value independent of the products they represent. The consumers of these brands contribute to creating their position and value. Arvidsson (2006, p. 13) asserts that marketers’ ”brand management” is successful when it channels consumers’ voluntary work into creating added value or “ethical surplus” for the brand:

”Brands become valuable through their ability to manage and program human communication and appropriate the ethical surplus – the common – that it produces as a source of value.”

In his Marxist-inspired analysis, consumers therefore create economic value for the owners of the brand through the importance they attach to it.

In recent years cognitive approaches, where branding has been understood as a question of gaining effective access to the consumers’ minds ( Ries & Trout, 1980), have been challenged by socio-cultural approaches which naturally bring the consumers’ identity building to the fore (e.g. Belk, 1988). One strand of research uses psycho-sociological concepts to explain the relationships consumers form with brands (e.g. Fournier,1998). In this perspective, brands gain importance by becoming part of consumers’ lived experiences. Another strand of research explores how brands are used to build communities (Cova & Cova, 2001; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001) and thereby fulfil consumers’ social, mythological and even religious needs and longings (Muñiz & Schau, 2005).

Although brands’ increasingly intrusive role in our everyday lives has attracted criticism (Klein 2000) and mobilized a counterculture ([www.nologo.org](http://www.nologo.org), [www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org)), Holt (2002, p. 87) claims that such a counterculture presents no threat to branding. People have become well aware of the commercial interests associated with brands. As consumers, their only concern will be what contribution the brand can offer as they seek to develop their own identity. They will: ”look for brands to contribute directly to their identity projects by providing original and relevant cultural materials with which to work.” This study explores what cultural materials a group of 11-12 year olds find original and relevant on a social network site and how they choose to work with them. This socio-cultural approach can be pursued by using Erving Goffman’s notion of self presentation to analyze how children’s identity work relates to branding.

### **Self presentation**

By analogical use of theatrical terms Erving Goffman describes “the presentation of self in everyday life” (1959) as a perpetual process of social performance. If we adopt his framework the Piczo website can be understood as one of the stages where young people are invited to perform and thereby also to explore who they are. But Goffman is careful to emphasize that he uses the theatrical analogy only as a scaffold to illuminate the social basis for our structuring of the self. The basic point is that the self cannot be grasped as an autonomous entity but only as a function of roles performed in everyday interaction. Normally it is in our interest to avoid choosing the wrong role or exposing ourselves to rejection of our

performance. To be able to interact we must (at least seemingly) reach a mutual understanding of how the situation is to be defined, or else we will not know how to relate to the other participants and they will not know how to relate to us.

The purpose of the young people's self presentations on the Piczo pages will be understood here in accordance with an assumption underlying Goffman's dramaturgical approach to interactional order: "in all interaction a basic underlying theme is the desire of each participant to guide and control the response made by the others present" (Goffman, 1959, p. 3). To control the response means to make the audience buy into or accept a specific definition of the social situation. Actors achieve this through their "impression management". Impression management consists of the methods and techniques employed to maintain the impression of a role played out in a social situation.

### **Self presentation on the Internet**

On the Internet the self is presented without bodily presence. Goffman (1959, p. 22) describes the performance of roles as dependent on a setting and a personal front, which he further distinguishes as appearance and manners. For example, the clinical office, the stethoscope around her neck and her attentive look while we describe our symptoms all confirm that our interlocutor is playing out the role of a doctor. In her dramatic realization the doctor also tells us how she relates to the part, e.g. whether she is absorbed in the role as doctor or has chosen to perform the part with an ironical distance (1959, p. 30). Lack of bodily presence on the Internet means that presentation of the self requires resources to mediate not only the setting and appearance but also the manners, the dramatic realization.

Goffman (1963, p. 18) furthermore describes the social gathering as "any set of two or more individuals who are in one another's immediate presence". This simple and basic definition, which confines the social situation physically, does not apply to self presentation on a website. In his discussion of media and social behaviour Meyrowitz (1985, p. 7) claims that this is because the presence of media deprives us of the ability to have a physical "sense of space". While "Goffman (...) tends to think of social roles in terms of the places in which they are performed, I argue that electronic media have undermined the traditional relationship between physical setting and social situation."

Moore (2004) has criticised this claim from a phenomenological viewpoint, arguing instead that our perception is that of being several places at the same time. Continuing Goffman's theatrical approach to the analysis of young people's self presentation on a web site, the spatial situation might best be described as "distantiated" (Giddens 1990, p. 27-28).

The young people in this study present themselves to a handful of friends, but at the same time they may, at least theoretically, be presenting themselves to millions of unknown visitors as well. And as space is distantiated, so is time. There are no limits to when and for how long visitors engage in the social situations made possible by the young people's self presentations on web pages.

## Method

The study is based on downloading of web pages, observations and interviews with pupils and teachers in a 6<sup>th</sup> grade (ages range from 11- 12) primary school class in Oslo. The class had 23 (later 22) pupils, 9 girls and 14 boys, most typically from middleclass and lower middleclass homes. Around one half of the pupils were ethnic Norwegians while the other half had mixed or immigrant backgrounds. All but one of the 22 pupils in the class had Internet access at home, although with a variable degree of personal access. The first period of observation took place in 2005 at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, the second six months later. The pupils' activities were observed once a week during a three-month period. Some of the pupils were shown to be Piczo users, and they were interviewed about their production of pages as they appeared consecutively on the net. On this basis their literacy on Piczo pages was compared with their school based literacy (Skaar, 2008).

I continued observing the pupils' Piczo use for a third period of 12 more months. In the period of extended data collection I focused on the research question raised in this article. My presentation of the findings is not exhaustive but structured in accordance with this question.

The analysis is based on a constant comparative method where categories are generated and tested out in a move from small to larger data sets over time (Silverman 2005, p. 214). The self presentations on the two websites are the primary data sources. Interviews, observations and non-digital textual production give a real life background for understanding why the pupils choose to present themselves as they do in these two different web-based surroundings (see Table 1). Through the research project in which I myself am a participant, the users were also connected online through a school-based blog called eLogg (see Hoem & Schwebs 2006; Østerud Schwebs, Nielsen, & Sandvik, 2006). The total amount of data allows a comparison of the pupils' self presentations on the commercial Piczo and the non-commercial eLogg website.

The pupils' parents have given written consent to the research results being published in anonymized form.

Data	Number of informants	Volume	Analytical status	Analytical Procedures
Piczo pages	13/22	13 pupils producing between 5 and more than 100 pages	Primary	Pages downloaded, content (images, icons, audio, animations video clips and written text) contrasted to content on eLogg pages
eLogg pages	21/22	21 pupils producing between 7 and 18 pages	Primary	Pages downloaded, content (images, icons, written text), contrasted to content on Piczo pages
Interviews	20/22	Informal interviews in front for the pupils own web pages 4 hours of video recording	Secondary	Informal interviews video recorded, transcribed and interpreted
Classroom Observations	22/22	26 sessions of observation  60 pages of field notes  12 hours of video recording	Secondary	Interpretation of video recordings and field notes relevant for contextualization of textual production on Piczo and eLogg pages
Non-digital text production in the classroom	22/22	19 jotters, tests, writing and drawings	Additional	Compared to texts on Piczo and eLogg pages

**Table 1: Data collection and analysis**



## Findings

### **Branded space, texts and tools**

Primarily, the Piczo brand is not attached to users' self presentations but rather to the social situation in which the presentation of the self takes place. This naturally makes Piczo the paramount brand on the Piczo web site. Piczo profits from branding, as well as allowing other marketers to brand, the space, texts and tools their users need to present themselves on the website.

Erving Goffman suggests that by use of "frames" we relate the situations we define in social interactions to the surrounding social world. The space offered to Piczo users relates their self presentations to brands and commercially produced self presentations, e.g. the commercial personae exposed in adverts (see Cook & Kaiser, 2004) which inevitably become a point of reference, a frame, when users' own self presentations are related to the surrounding world.

In addition, Piczo offers its users textual resources for self presentation (e.g. writing, pictures, music, animations and video clips) which are, or include elements from, brands, promotion and adverts. Brands link the self presentations to products and/or to websites that have specialized in providing videos, animations and pictures for use on social network sites.

Finally, Piczo offers branded tools that enable users to integrate these selected texts or textual elements on their own pages. For example, users do not have to spell out "Welcome" on their pages, instead they can choose a "Welcome-sign" from the "textual elements" menu. The coding of the word is done, and at the same time thirty different choices of colour, background etc. are added. In other words, Piczo offers tools that allow its users "shortcuts" in the coding process, while simultaneously expanding the range of brands and branded texts. By their choice of these shortcuts, users inevitably attach their self presentations to brands, promotion and adverts.

### **Merge of commercial and non-commercial resources**

Branding in its current use is a term applied to much more than commercial marketing (Olins, 2000). For example, the data show that brands for football clubs are very common. The young people in the study may be fans of Norwegian or international football clubs but may also be active club players themselves. This means that the club's brand or logo can have both



is only one requisite for being able to present oneself as cool and fun on one's Piczo pages. The other factor is a social network making participation possible.

In this study one group of pupils presents itself on Piczo (13), another group does not (9). The use of Piczo corresponds largely to the pupils' social position in the class circle. After having identified, on the basis of interviews and observations, the class's most popular and hence trendsetting pupils, it was striking to observe that when the teacher one Monday morning encouraged the class to relate what they had done at the weekend, throwing the floor open to them, the pupils did so in exactly the same order as their social ranking in the class would indicate. The same order emerged in the pupils' Piczo participation. It had spread from one of the class's most popular pupils, originally introduced to Piczo by an older sister, to a cluster of correspondingly popular and tone-setting pupils and from there gradually to a cluster of pupils of intermediary standing. Conversely, Piczo use never reached those pupils who had greatest difficulty in asserting themselves and their social interests in the classroom context. In interviews, it became clear that this was either due to total lack of familiarity with Piczo, i.e. they were not part of the practice in any way, or because, although they knew about Piczo, they had insufficient social standing or interest to become Piczo users.

In comparison, the school based learning platform eLogg is based on principles designed to prevent this form of social selection. All pupils have equal access to the website because this is channelled through teacher-initiated writing tasks. Pupils' comments on each other must be related to the responses they publish on the website. In many cases this response is teacher-controlled. Nevertheless, these norms are exceeded in a way that allows the social hierarchy described above to manifest itself on eLogg as well as in the classroom and on Piczo pages. However, although it is the most popular pupils who get the most positive response to their eLogg entries, the social ranking in the class makes itself felt much more strongly on Piczo. On the commercial website branded resources become important means in the pupils' competition for popularity.

### **The struggle for coolness**

Both Piczo and eLogg encourage their users to complete a default profile headed "About myself" and the subordinate fields "interests" and "favourites". The way pupils choose to complete these three fields on eLogg and Piczo show that in the written mode the same interests are expressed on eLogg and Piczo (as they also are in the classroom and in interviews):

Myself (general categories)

Ethnic origin, age, place of residence, school, hair and eye colour, family situation, siblings, character traits (kind, lazy etc.), one's own and others' nicknames.

Interests: (general categories):

Sport, dancing, playing an instrument, singing, food, clothes, cars, drawing/writing/reading, sweets, shopping, collecting things (e.g. perfume, miniature figures), fishing, animals, computer games, TV, films, music, partying, friends, boys/girls

Favourites: ( general categories)

Sports champions, music stars, TV stars, athletics, TV series, films, books/book series and fictional figures from books/films/TV

The difference between the two websites is that Piczo also allows its users' to express their preferences and interest by use of branded texts and tools. During interviews, the pupils in the study give two reasons for producing Piczo pages: it is either "fun" or "cool". In comparison, they describe their production of eLogg pages in more moderate terms, the most typical being "ok". In the comments the pupils make on each other's Piczo pages, "fun" and "cool" are also among the main evaluation criteria. On the commercial web site they use brands to associate the self with fun and coolness inaccessible in their real life:

In RL, association is limited; consumers often run up against financial, space, or proximal limitations in associating themselves with brands. For example, consumers may feel Gucci expresses their identities but may be unable to own Gucci items RL. In personal web space consumers' brand associations are limited only by their imaginations and computer skills. They can literally associate themselves with any brand by digital appropriation and manipulation of digital symbols.

(Schau & Gilly, 2003, p. 400)

Piczo is a brand that gains in currency through users introducing it to each other (many to many) rather than by the marketers presenting the brand to a large public (one to many). This method of spreading a brand has been called viral branding (see Holt, 2004, p. 28). Since it is therefore important to gain access to trend-setting users, this form of marketing has also

sometimes been called "coolhunt" (Gladwell, 1997). Poutain and Robins see cool as "a stance of individual defiance" (2000, p. 18). When an 11 year old defies his parents and teachers, he is taking older children as his natural example. Those who introduce Piczo to the children in the study are older siblings and friends. For example, this is how one of the Piczo users describes how he came to choose a video clip from the TV series "South Park" to insert in his page:

**Int.** : (pointing at a video clip on the screen). South Park, where did you get that from?

**Tobias:** Different places, just. Can't really remember. But it's ... it's something my mates tell me about. I hear about it from the older kids. They know more about it, the teenagers there (on Piczo). Like, Peter gets to know about it from his sister...and Nicolay, he knows a lot of older kids and so on. I get it from Nicolay, he's in the seventh grade.

Belk (1988) claims our possessions reflect an extended self. Piczo offers the 11-12 year olds in the study cool and fun resources to extend their self into the realm of adolescence.

"Cool" is also how the marketers of Piczo and other products characterize their own activities when targeting young users (see Figure 3-4).

<p>HJEMMESIDEN HANS ER LITT KJIP, FORDI HAN ER MER OPPTATT AV Å SJEKKE UT DIN KULE PICZO-SIDE.</p> <p>SE ANDRE FORFRISKENDESANNHETER OG FINN MASSE MORO OG GRATIS ST.ESJ TIL DIN MOBIL PÅ WWW.SPRITZERZERO.NO</p>	 <p>NO SUGAR. NO BULL ***T.</p>	<p>THE REFRESHING TRUTH ON FRIENDS</p>  <p>MOBILE FILM RADIO</p> <p>NO SUGAR. NO BULL ***T.</p>
<p>"His homepage is a bit cheap because he is more interested in checking out your cool Piczo page.</p> <p>View other refreshing truths and find lots of fun and free stash to your cell phone on <a href="http://www.spritezero.no">www.spritezero.no</a>"</p>		<p>VIL DU HA SPRITE ZERO PÅ MOBILEN DIN?</p> <p>FÅ "THE TRUTH" DIREKTE PÅ MOBILEN DIN. SKRIV "TRUTH" OG SEND EN SMS TIL 2223. SÅ SENDER VI DEG EN LINK. HER KAN DU STREAME ELLER LASTE NED FILM DIREKTE PÅ MOBILEN DIN.</p>  <p><small>SPRITE OG MOBILEN VIL KOSTE SMS-TAKST. DU BETALER SIKKER FOR INNEKLASSIFISERT AV FILM PÅ 100K SEK PER 100. VAREMERKE, PÅLÆG OG/ELLER BILDE ER BEHOLDNINGEN TIL HUS. KONTROLLER PRISER MED DIN OPERATØR FOR Å FÅ DE SIKREDE.</small></p> <p><small>SPRITE AND SPRITE ZERO ARE TRADEMARKS OF THE COCA-COLA COMPANY. © 2006 THE COCA-COLA COMPANY.</small></p>

Banner advertisement on Piczo page linking to [www.spritezero.no](http://www.spritezero.no)

Figure 3-4

On eLogg the class teachers have laid down rules for how pupils are expected to behave towards each other. The intention is that everyone should be included. Piczo, on the other hand, constantly encourages its users to say which user pages they rate as being most cool. This competition is based on the divergence consumers strive for in identity-relevant domains, which also explains why too much popularity can make brands uncool (Berger & Heath, 2007). Based on the results of the children's own rating of each others' self presentations and other factors, Piczo offers the children what they need to be favourably rated themselves. In this way, Piczo lays the foundation for social competition among the children, based on the same mechanisms that make some brands attractive and others less attractive, some cool and others uncool.

### **Collectors and elaborators**

On eLogg, pupils' networks are predefined by the school community, while Piczo limits itself to offering young people the resources they need to create their own networks. By the way they use these resources, the Piczo users in this study can be divided into two categories: collectors and elaborators.

Elaborators use branded resources in active and continuing network building. Collectors do not. Elaborators hence produce more Piczo pages over a longer period of time than collectors, which give them an opportunity to gradually develop more skilful digital design (see also Skaar, 2008). This design reinforces their social position in the network.

Although the terms collectors and elaborators are used here to distinguish between two categories of Piczo users, they can also be seen as stages in the development of a practice. All elaborators began as collectors. To move from the one production mode to the other, however, requires time and effort. Elaborators are characterized by a lasting interest in designing self presentations that give them the best possible basis for social life on the Piczo website. Collectors, on the other hand, give up before they have succeeded in mastering the necessary skills for developing a Piczo design capable of convincing their peers that they are well worth relating to (see Table 2).

Schau and Gilly (2003:391) identify exploration of other selves, the desire to meet expectations based on increased exposure to feedback and to increase and display technical competence as motivating factors behind the production of self presentations on the web. In the case of elaborators all these three motivational factors are present, whereas one or more is missing in the case of collectors. Collectors' production of Piczo pages is therefore limited and their digital design less advanced. In interviews, they often report that they have grown

tired of producing Piczo pages. The most skilful Piczo users in the study, on the other hand, have a declared wish to become ever better designers of Piczo pages.

	Production volume:		Production persistence:		Production mode:	
	Less than 10 pages:	More than 10 pages:	Less than 12 months:	More than 12 months:	Collectors:	Elaborators:
Amina	X		X		X	
Nadia	X		X		X	
Safdar	X		X		X	
Kent	X		X		X	
Ann	X		X		X	
Hilda	X		X		X	
Tobias		X	X		X	
Benny		X	X		X	
Freddy		X	X		X	
Peter		X		X		X
Dorthe		X		X		X
Jenny		X		X		X
Henry		X		X		X
13	6	7	9	4	9	4

**Table 2: Production modes**

### **Two collectors' use of brands**

*Kent* was not among the first users of Piczo in the class. His opening page seems to consist of the brand "Surf Naked" and five links to pictures of himself, the family cabin and a few chosen peer group friends from school. Visitors to the site can rate these pictures in relation to the categories prettiest/most attractive, nicest, coolest, greatest, funniest and so on.

3773 Har vært på besøk :)

Meg

- Venner <3

- Bilder

- Extra



Kent's opening page



Collection of brands and funny pictures on Tobias' pages

*Figure 5-6*

The popularity contest makes Kent's website relevant to his social life. The brand is centrally positioned on his opening page, but it is the pictures of his classmates, girls and boys, which create the dynamics in the interaction taking place on the page.

Kent is among those who compose relatively few pages. After some time, interactive communication comes to a halt. A step forward would be to set up new pages, but Kent chooses instead to close down his site. He re-opens the pages some time later but without developing his digital design any further. Elaboration of the brands and branded resources does not interest him enough. Over the next few months, communication in his shoutboxes begins to dwindle before ceasing altogether.

*Tobias* was introduced to the possibility of making a self presentation of the first Piczo user in the class. Like Kent, he makes two successive versions of his web pages. The first time, he uses NIKE as his address. The Nike brand is also centrally positioned on his opening page. It can also be seen on several of the other pages where Tobias has collected brands and other texts he himself perceives as cool or funny. In the interviews, he explains what leads him to choose brands and branded resources on his Piczo pages:



I. Piczo is the name of the people who provide you with the pages to use. But they give you more than that, don't they? Ideas as to what you could put on your pages and so on?

T. Sure. You can find all sorts of things here. As soon as I went in, there were things like "Welcome" and "Enter". I get those from Piczo. There's one page you can go into which is...it's Piczo who's made it...

I. What about these ideas of Piczo's...do you think they're good?

T. Yes.

I. You think so? Because I can see here that you've got some (brand) names...Nike..and is that a brand you're specially keen on?

T. Mm.

I. Why do you like it so much?

T. Don't know.

I. It's just that you like it? You like Nike better than Adidas?

T. Yes. It's because...I've got lots of Nike things and...I just like it better.

I: Where did you get the Nike logo and stuff from, then?

T. Just on Google. You just ask it to search for Nike and up it comes.

His first self presentation attracts some negative feedback in the shoutboxes on the page. These negative comments have nothing to do with the brands and branded resources Tobias has collected on his pages, however, but concern the way he presents himself in what he has written under the heading "a little bit about myself":

Anonymous: Lol. You must have a small brain (A little bit about my self).

A few months later, Tobias deletes the entire contents of the pages he has made and leaves a new address:

Hi! My home page has now moved to the address "Jejeparty" because this page sucked.

On these new pages, Tobias's written description of himself is no longer there and there is only a completed profile list. His page design is more carefully thought through and is at a higher level. Tobias has developed his digital skills. For example, he has managed to

incorporate his own name in the logo of the football club he is a fan of. However, these new pages are also abandoned before they are completed. In the interview, Tobias says he is interested in meeting people on the web but that he has grown tired of making home pages. He prefers communicating on MSN: "I'll always be there, like". When he is interviewed together with a classmate, Tobias says he thinks writing is boring, both at school and on Piczo, but when interviewed alone he says writing's fun. When writing is meant to form part of Piczo page design, however, it dries up. Tobias, like Kent, remains a collector. He refuses to allow the digital design he has made on Piczo to be part of his life in the same way it is for elaborators.

### **Two elaborators' use of brands**

Henry is among the very first Piczo users in the class. He is highly productive and sets up a number of pages, both alone and together with others. Henry takes a keen interest in brands and consumer culture, an interest also clearly seen in his everyday school life. He refers to fashion magazines in class discussions, for example, and writes essays about Britney Spears in class tests. He also dresses in typical fashion clothes. On his Piczo pages, brands form part of his presentation of himself, his interests and favourites.

On a shared site, Henry and one of his friends proclaim their aspirations for a future as fashion designers and models. Together with his friends, he recreates himself through advertising aesthetics on his pages, and allows himself to be portrayed with branded clothes and personal effects. Brands are also found in his definition of the friends he makes pages with. Many of the pages have brand names as their address and a variety of brands are continually commented on and rated through the design of his pages (see Figure 7-8).

Briller

rd Bork

Channel briljense vant

Stem på den du liker

Selection	Votes
STAY REAL FRA NIVEA	20%
SHINE LIKE NIVEA BEAUTE	0%
DIOR BRONZE VOILE TEINTE	20%
MAX FACTOR HUPER SMOOTH	0%
MATT REFINE	0%
LORIAL INFALLIBLE	0%
ISA DORA HYDR A LIGHT	0%
ELISABETH ARDEN CERAMIDE PLUMP PERFECT MAKEUP SET 12	20%
CREAM MATT MOUS	0%
ELLER DOGÉN ( GUTT)	0%
<b>5 votes total</b>	

Small text: Poll generated by Pollhost. Your results are subject to error. Pollhost does not guarantee the content of polls created by Pollhost members.

Luxury Barbados Villas  
Rajan Services Luxury Villa Sales Rajan  
Services Luxury Villa Rentals

Field Day T-Shirts  
New 2006 Designs Are In! Free Survival  
Kit with each T-Shirt

Ads by Google

Rank

**Pollhost**  
Add a Pollhost poll to your website today. It couldn't be easier, and best of all our service is completely free!  
Instantly create a poll as a guest, or sign up for a free Pollhost account to create customized polls. Our service is very  
easy to use and you'll be running your own polls in no time. [Join Pollhost now!](#)

[Terms of Service](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Features](#) | [Join Free!](#)

Copyright ©2006-2008 Boardhost.com, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Rating: “The Chanel shades won”

“Vote for the sun cream you prefer”

Henry’s rating of branded commodities

Figure 7-8

Henry does not allow the brands on his pages to pass without comment, but evaluates them and makes them carriers of meaning in the interaction taking place on his web pages. He is very productive and has a declared ambition to go on developing his digital design. This ambition finds expression both in interviews and in the shoutboxes on the pages he creates. He sees becoming a better designer as a longterm project.

Jenny was not one of the early Piczo adopters, but once started she soon produced more pages than anyone else in the group. Initially she presented a large number of texts she had written herself before becoming a Piczo user ( e.g. an fictional interview with herself, a diary and various fictional stories), but gradually she went on to produce pages based on branded resources. This resulted in an extended use of branded resources, although brands in themselves do not interest her much.

Adding pages and making new sites at a very rapid pace, she soon asked for help and assistance from others in the local network: a network partly underpinned by other children’s interests in the production on her various sites. Some of her pages are copied “as is” from the Piczo network or elsewhere on the web, but generally her use of commercially branded resources results in a production that gives her a role as creator of fun in the Piczo network. Basically, these roles are based on her ability to show the others how to be inventive in their engagement with commercially provided resources on the net. She is also generous in her role

as provider of entertainment and fun. For example, after having produced a fan site for a young female actor, she finally gives it away to another girl in the network. Jenny engages the others by taking on the role as editor of her own magazine, or as head teacher of her own Harry Potter inspired “Witch school”(see Figure 9). But she also gets negative comments for these initiatives. For example, one anonymous commenter tells her to stop her silly games and “get yourself a life”. Another tells her that her pages are full of girlish silliness.



“Witch school”

”A lot of meaningless picture-bull, really...they are nice to look at (some of them) so to me it is just PICTURE CRAP!!!”

**Figure 9-10**

It is her creativity Jenny wants to present through her production of Piczo pages, not her consumer culture or use of brands. She also takes an expressly critical view of a digital design based on simple collection of brands and branded resources (see Figure 10).

As Jenny gradually abandons her own texts in favour of elaboration of branded resources, she simultaneously undergoes a development that makes the Piczo universe too limited and childish for her. She develops a digital design reminiscent of teenage social network sites such as Myspace. Her excellent expressive abilities allow her to be productive in a continuous dialogue with visitors to her site:

From the shoutbox on one of Jenny's pages:

**Anonymous commenter:**

**HOT OR NOT?:** NOT: Fergie actually ISN'T hot any more, pink is out (white's in), big beads are definitely out, small ones are in if they're real. LoL is right out, NO ONE says LoL! Orlando Bloom is lukewarm, but Johnny Depp... Yummy! Emma Watson is as far out as it's possible to be, and she's no good as Hermione... Black dresses are in, but otherwise black is out.. Piczo is out, Facebook is in. Manga is out, only 10 year old boys read it... Swearing is out, no one likes girls who swear (OK at football matches, ONLY). HOT: Pamela is actually in, after showing up in Borat. Mika's Grace Kelly is the 2007s' it-sound. Daniel "Radcliffe" is in, especially after the nude scenes: D:D Smoking seems to be in, I'm afraid, my dear....

**Jenny :** You really don't need to care about what **I** think! Maybe **you** think something different: for example – some people are fans of My Chemical Romance and other not, whatever turns you on!! And I think Fergie's music is good, even if **you** don't. Not everyone needs to be like **you** for everything to be OK!

Social network sites have been regarded as a place where people can profile themselves through their tastes (Liu 2007), but Jenny's response is only one of the ways in which she defends her own taste judgements. She gives her interests and favourites value and the power of persuasion mainly through elaborating her own Piczo page design. A growing number of her friends connect to her pages. More will come along now that she is developing pages in English as well as her Norwegian website.

## Discussion

How does branding affect young people's self presentations on the website?

Through use of branded space, texts and tools all the Piczo users in the study allow marketing to penetrate their private sphere. Overall, lack of bodily presence coupled with distantiation in time and space means that brands can be given a more important and central place in self presentation on Piczo pages than in real life or on the non-commercial website eLogg. In real life, bodily presence gives brands less room for play, since the most fundamental

communicative resources, such as speech and body language, cannot be branded. eLogg offers only non-branded resources and text is the primary mode of expression. This allows only very limited scope for using brands and branded resources. On Piczo, on the other hand, brands become an integral part of the young people's production of self presentations, and the branding of space, texts and tools is strengthened by simultaneous assertion on these three levels.

Goffman's starting point is self presentation face-to-face, not through new media. Goffman maintains that face-to-face impressions "are given and given off", which implies an asymmetry in the communicative situation. This asymmetry is created because in a face-to-face situation one cannot see oneself as the other does: one only controls the expression one *gives*, not the expression one *gives off* (Goffman, 1959, p. 7). When the children in the study present themselves to each other on Piczo, however, there is symmetry in the relation in the sense that the children, like everyone else, can consider their own mediated self presentation and hence expressions both given and given off. They can thus with greater ease than in real life present a "polished surface" as themselves. Extended opportunities to assume control over the way in which one appears also allow greater scope for dissimulation and manipulation. From that point of view, the cynicism of which Goffman has been accused when he sees identity as (calculated) role-play (see e.g. Lyman & Scott, 1970) has greater latitude on Piczo than face-to-face. Absence of physical presence and distantiation of time and space attenuate the user's awareness of emotional ties and commitments and encourages a greater degree of callousness in the role-play Goffman describes.

The study shows that the opportunity to produce a self presentation on Piczo depends on the pupils' social standing in the classroom. While the school-based website eLogg is structured and used in a way designed to prevent social exclusion, Piczo confirms and reinforces the dividing lines between the popular and less popular pupils in the class.

As confirmed on their pages and in interviews, the young people are Piczo users because they appreciate the freedom to make their self presentations fun and cool in an easy and convincing way by consumption of the branded space, texts and tools they are offered. Consequently, through their presentations of themselves they are also presenting brands and thus taking on the role as advertisers in the Piczo network. In view of this, Beer and Burrow's claim that "mundane personal details posted on profiles, and the connections made with online 'friends', that become *the* commodities of Web 2.0." (2007, p.3.3) seems over-restricted. Self presentations on Piczo pages also extend "the mundane personal details"

through a merge of branded and non-commercial resources which makes users' production of digital design profitable for marketers.

Under the Piczo brand, young people present themselves in a spatial context that makes them compete for attention with the eye-catching strategies of professional marketers. In "Gender advertisements" (1979) Goffman shows how gender in the advertisement is displayed in frames so that the images used reflect gender relations in concentrated and idealised form. This style of presentation is designed to have greatest possible public appeal. On Piczo, young people are given access to branded text and tools allowing them to present themselves in the same idealised way.

For marketers, the self with the highest value is the self that calls for attention and identification among the highest number of consumers. This self typically belongs to the athletes, models and artists from sports, music videos and TV series. Just as the most popular commodities become the bestselling commodities, the most popular selves become the bestselling selves. These bestselling and branded self presentations are, to echo Goffman, ultimately allowed to "define the situation" in the Piczo network.

Consequently, the children's use of branded resources to copy commercially produced fun and coolness enforced the social competition among them: "Just as not everyone can be upper class and not every one can have good taste, so not everyone can be cool. This isn't because some people are essentially cooler than others, it's because cool is ultimately a form of distinction." (Heath & Potter 2006, p. 196). But although the young people in the study are all obliged to relate to the branded resources and commercial strategies with which marketers capture their attention and admiration, they do so in different ways.

They can be divided into elaborators, who become skilful designers through persistent use of brands and branded resources on Piczo pages, and collectors, who do not. The elaborators produce self presentations that allow them to try out their aspirations as creators, models, designers and trendsetters in the interaction with their peers. They relate the commercially manufactured resources to their self presentations in ways that increase their ability to, as Goffman puts it, "guide and control the response made by the others present" in their Piczo networks.

Both collectors and elaborators are held up to ridicule for their self-made texts but not for their choice of brands and branded texts. By their straightforward use of brands and branded resources, the collectors make their own creativity less visible than the elaborators do. It is the young people's non-commercial texts which are denigrated and ridiculed by other Piczo users, not the commercial and branded texts they use to present themselves. Being an

elaborator raises the risk of being insulted online and elaborators must be self confident enough to withstand this pressure.

Whereas Kent and Tobias are collectors who relatively quickly abandon their Piczo pages, Henry and Jenny continue to design ever new pages. Through their elaboration of brands and branded resources, they succeed in making themselves attractive in social interaction with their coevals on the website. For Henry, Piczo is a place where he can position himself socially by cultivating his interest in brands and consumer culture. He defines himself as someone who aims to be a designer/model. He emerges a winner in the competition for attention in relation not only to his coevals but also to the marketers (He has designed cool Piczo pages more or less as the marketers suggest, in Figure 3-4.) Jenny uses the commercial resources to express herself within a pop-cultural universe that allows her to develop her own creative abilities. She is strong and self-confident enough to emphasize the value of her own elaboration of brands and branded resources by making denigratory comments on the collection of branded resources (See Figure 10).

## **Conclusion**

For the children in the study, their presentations of themselves on Piczo are primarily a matter of consolidating their position in the network of which they are already a part in real life. The social competition involved in Piczo interaction is reflected in the fact that it is the cool and trendsetting pupils in the class who first gain access to the network then gradually invite other classmates to join them.

In their presentations of themselves online, young people are free to choose non-commercial texts and tools instead of the branded texts and tools offered on the website. But being fun and cool in a universe defined by adolescents and professional marketers presents a difficult task for the 11-12 year olds in the study. In the Piczo network, professional marketers' resources and strategies are adopted by young people in the enforced competition to present themselves as attractively as possible. The study shows that in general terms this reinforces a tendency to social exclusion/inclusion, dissimulation and conformism.

Since marketers are professional experts at filling extended time and space with fun and coolness, it is very demanding for the young people in the study to create texts with equally great appeal. Only a very few elaborators manage this, either by presenting themselves through their consumer culture or by being a fellow-creator in the fictive pop-



cultural universes the marketers offer. For most of the pupils, however, the collection of branded resources appears simpler, more convincing and more unassailable than elaborating them in their self presentation. There therefore arises a disparity between the wealth of attractive resources available on Piczo and the level of creativity displayed when young people use them. Although there are many more possibilities, social competition helps to reinforce a uniformity in the use of brands and branded resources that creates a higher threshold for the free expression of one's own creativity on Piczo than on eLogg.

Arguing for a positive correlation between "good video games" and learning, Gee (2003) emphasizes that gamers not only consume but also produce. On Piczo pages users consume to produce. If the production of playing "good videogames" is a positive thing, can the production of Piczo pages be understood in a similar way? Isn't Piczo simply an excellent opportunity for young people to choose brands which, as Holt (2002, p. 87) puts it, "provide the most original and relevant cultural material" for self presentation? Presumably most people do not see any problem with this if marketers are working to combat famine in the third world or save the global system, but what if their products are unwanted or harmful? On the Piczo website young users are left with the responsibility of understanding and discerning the difference themselves. They are also left with the task of understanding the difference between selling a product and selling themselves. Although both possibilities are open, the choices made by the young people in this study show that in the dialectic between "impression management" and "brand management" it is much more challenging to grasp one's freedom than to be manipulated.

Many of the implications have yet to be researched. In this study, theories of identity and branding are used to define communication by a relatively small group of pupils on a specific social networking site. A qualitative study always leaves room for asking whether what "is found true of people in this study is likely to be true of any people placed in this situation" (Judd, Smith & Kidder, 1991, p. 317). Future research should examine whether the constructs and categories developed here can clarify how young people's identity work is conflated with marketing on the Internet in general. A larger sample would allow further investigation of young people's online branding of self presentations in light of their ethnicity, gender and other social background variables.

## References

- Arvidsson, A. (2006). *Brands: Meaning and value in media culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Banerjee, R. (2002). Children's understanding of self-presentational behavior: Links with mental-state reasoning and the attribution of embarrassment. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 48(4), 378-404.
- Beer, D., & Burrows, R. (2007). Sociology and, of and in Web 2.0: Some Initial Considerations. *Sociological Research Online*, 12(5).  
[<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/5/17.html>]
- Belk, R. W. (1988). Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15(2), 139-168.
- Berger, J., & Heath, C. (2007). Where consumers diverge from others: Identity signaling and product domains. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34(2), 121-134.
- boyd (sic!), d. (2007). Why youth [love] social network sites: The role of networked publics in teenage social life. In D. Buckingham (Ed.) *Youth, Identity and Digital Media* (pp.119-142). Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Buckingham, D. (2007). Selling childhood? Children and consumer culture. *Journal of children and media*, 1(1), 15-24.
- Cook, D. T., & Kaiser, S. B. (2004). Betwixt and between: Age ambiguity and the sexualization of the female consuming subject *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 4(2), 203-227.
- Cova, B., & Cova, V. (2001). Tribal aspects of postmodern consumption: The case of French in-line roller skaters. *Journal of Consumer Behavior*, 1(1), 67-76.
- Del Vecchio, G. (1997). *Creating Ever-cool*. Louisiana: Pelican.
- Fielder, A, Gardner, W., Nairn, A., & Pitt, J. (2007). *Fair game? Assessing commercial activity on children's favourite websites and online environments*. UK: National Consumer Council.  
[[www.childnet.com/publications/policy.aspx](http://www.childnet.com/publications/policy.aspx)]
- Fournier, S. (1998). Customers and their brands: Developing relationship theory in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 24(1), 343-373.
- Gee, J. P. (2003). *What video games have to tell us about learning and literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillian.

- Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gladwell, M. (1997). The Coolhunt. *The New Yorker*. March 17, pp. 78-88.
- Goffman, E. (1979). *Gender Advertisements*. London: The MacMillan Press.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Behavior in public places: notes on the social organization of gatherings*. New York: Free Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Heath, J., & Potter, A. (2006). *The rebel sell: Why the culture can't be jammed*. Capstone: Chichester.
- Hoem, J., & Schwebs, T. (2005). Personal publishing and media literacy. *Paper presented at 8. IFIP World conference on computers in education*. Cape Town.
- Holt, D. B. (2004). *How brands become icons: the principles of cultural branding*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press.
- Holt, D. B. (2002). Why do brands cause trouble? A dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29(2), 70-90.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Judd, C. M., Smith, E. R., & Kidder, L. H. (1991). *Research methods in social relations*. Fort Worth, Tex.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Klein, N. (2000). *No logo*. London: Flamingo.
- Linn, S. (2004). *Consuming kids: The hostile takeover of childhood*. New York: New Press.
- Liu, H. (2007). Social network profiles as taste performances. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 252-275. [<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue/liu.html>].
- Lindstrom, M., & Seybold, P. B. (2003). *Brandchild*. London: Kogan Page.
- Lyman, S. M., & Scott, M. B. (1970). *A sociology of the absurd*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- McNeal, J. U. (1992). *Kids as customers: A handbook of marketing to children*. New York: Lexington Books.
- Meyrowitz, J. (1985). *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social*

- behaviour*. New York. Oxford University Press.
- Moore, S. (2004). The doubling of place: Electronic media, time-space arrangements and social relationships. In N. Couldry & A. McCarthy (Eds.), *Mediaspace: Place, scale and culture in a media age*. London: Routledge.
- Muniz, A. M., & O'Guinn, T. C. (2001). Brand community. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27(4), 412-432.
- Muñiz, A. M., & Schau, H. J. (2005). Religiosity in the Abandoned Apple Newton Brand Community. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(1), 737-747.
- Nairn, A., & Dew, A. (2007). Pop-Ups, pop-unders, banners and buttons. The ethics of online advertising to primary school children. *Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice*, 8(5).
- Olins, W. (2000). How brands are taking over the corporation. In M. J. Hatch, M. H. Klarsen & M. Schultz (Eds.), *The expressive organization: Linking identity, reputation and the corporate brand*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Poutain, D., & Robins, D. (2000). *Cool rules: Anatomy of an attitude*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Silverman, D. (2005). *Doing qualitative research: a practical handbook* (second ed.). London: Sage.
- Ries, A., & Trout, J. (1980). *Positioning: the battle for your mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Schau, H. J., & Gilly, M. C. (2003). We are what we post? Self-presentation in personal web space. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 30(3), 385-404.
- Schor, J. B. (2005). *Born to buy*. New York: Scribner.
- Seiter, E. (2005). *The internet playground: children's access, entertainment, and mis-education*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Skaar, Håvard, (2008). Literacy on a social networking site. In K. Drotner, H. S. Jensen & K. C. Schrøder (Eds.) *Informal Learning and Digital Media*, Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Tufte, B., Rasmussen, J., & Bech Christensen, L. (2005). *Frontrunners or copycats?* Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Østerud, S., Schwebs, T., Nielsen, L. M., & Sandvik, M. (2006). eLogg – et læringsmiljø for sammensatte tekster. *Digital Kompetanse: Nordic Journal of Digital Literacy*, 1(3), 214-226.

