

Youth and Bernie Sanders: A Look at the Role of Demographics in Market Behavior

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In our discussion topic this week we were asked to address the roles that personal and demographic factors play in consumer/customer decisions to purchase a product or service, and how it is that these factors exercise their behavioral influence. While using the verb "purchase" is clearly meant to steer us toward an analysis in which the exchange is one commodity for another, namely money, I would like to take this in a very different direction. As a professional association representing the broad marketing industry, it is not surprising that the American Marketing Association provides an equally broad definition of marketing as "the activity, set of institutions and processes for creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large" (Jaworski, B. Lutz, R. Marshall, G.W. Price, L., & Varadarajan, R., 2017). I will use this opportunity to explore how demographics, specifically age in this instance, impact the marketing of ideas about who we are and what we should be doing as a society in the US at the end of the second decade of the 21st century.

In his campaign for the Democratic Party nomination for President of the United States, seventy-nine year old Bernie Sanders captured the overwhelming majority of the vote in the age demographic from eighteen to twenty-nine years old, winning two-thirds of the vote in this demographic in California, Maine, Vermont, and Nevada, and well over half the youth vote in almost every other state, including my own state of Virginia, where Bernie received fifty-five percent of the votes from young voters (CIRCLE, February 24 & March 3, 2020).

Why is it that his message appealed so overwhelmingly to youth voters, yet failed to resonate with older people? In his recent book, *Capital and Ideology*, well-known French

economist Thomas Piketty defines ideology as "a set of a priori plausible ideas and discourses describing how society should be structured". Following the assertion that "Every human society must justify its inequalities", he says that the current "justificatory narratives comprise themes of property, entrepreneurship, and meritocracy" (2020). His earlier magnum opus, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, was devoted to providing a thorough augmented rooted in extensive data that the present economic system tends towards ever increasing inequality (2017). The present work is devoted to exploring the historical relationship between inequality and its ideological justification.

In the market of popular opinion, ideology is what is being packaged and "sold". It forms the "common sense" of how members of a given society understand the world they live in. In the United States, the ideology of "free market capitalism" has been the unquestioned consensus since the very founding of the nation. The degree to which this consensus has been challenged has varied over the nation's history, with increased challenges occurring in the 1930s and then again in late 1960s and early 1970s, but that it was firmly established as the common sense ideology of the majority of the population has never been in serious doubt. Myriad are the ways that this "common sense" has been packaged and sold. It is presented unquestioningly in textbooks, media, political discourse, etc. During the McCarthy era in the 1950s, fear and intimidation were used to actively silence anyone who would question ideological orthodoxy (Storrs, L.R., 2015, July). This in part could explain the demographic characteristics of support for Bernie Sanders. Older voters are still deeply influenced and indeed cowed by the powerful marketing to which they have been subjected throughout their lives to be able to consider supporting a candidate who calls himself a democratic socialist.

For young people today, the world is a different place from that of their elders. With real wages not having risen since I graduated from high school in 1979, with the cost of education and the associated levels of student debt skyrocketing, and with the prospects for significant earnings upon completing an education lower than they have been in the nation's history, the future does not look bright, and young people know it (Levitz, E., 2020, February 15).

In marketing to older voters, neo-liberal democrats have been able to subtly play on fears from the past to keep them from voting for Bernie Sanders. These voters long for a return to the good old days of their youth, and that's just what the Democratic Party establishment have been effectively selling to them. Young voters are not buying it. Their personal experience tells them that they need to be offered real solutions to their very real problems before they will buy into what politicians are trying to sell them. I take comfort in the thought that despite the obvious power of ideology to influence how we view the world and what actions we take within it, real lived experience does play a significant part in how we understand the world.

For those under twenty-nine, whose lived experience has been of a failing economic system that does not provide solutions for their present or future needs, only a new ideology that speaks to their real needs will appeal to them. Politicians like Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, Ilhan Ohmar, Rashida Tlaib, and Pramila Jayapal, who are willing to challenge orthodoxy and confront an ideology that obviously has lost its ability to legitimize and explain, understand this. With any luck, time will be on their side.

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