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Marketing to children is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, historical studies suggest that children have been a key focus of interest at least since the inception of modern mass marketing (e.g. Cook, 2004; Cross, 1997; Seiter, 1993). Nevertheless, this activity is now occurring on a different scale, and through a wider variety of media. Marketers are enthusiastically courting child consumers, not only as a means of reaching adults, but also as a significant market in their own right; and they are doing so in more subtle and sophisticated ways. This development has generated a growing anxiety about the commercial “exploitation” of children.

In this article, I explore some ways in which the figure of the child consumer is now being constructed and defined. I begin by considering two contrasting constructions in contemporary discourses: on the one hand, the critical view of children as passive victims of consumer culture; and on the other, the views of marketers themselves, which seem to define children as much more active, competent and powerful. I argue that the debate in this area—like other debates about childhood, and particularly about children and media—is rather too simply polarised. In my view, we need to look beyond this dichotomy; in the second part of the article, I seek to identify some of the issues that researchers might address in doing so.

Constructing the Child Consumer: Critics and Marketers

In the wake of Naomi Klein’s influential *No Logo* (2001), there has been a flurry of popular critical publications about children and consumer culture: prominent examples include Juliet Schor’s *Born to Buy* (2004), Susan Linn’s *Consuming Kids* (2004) and Alissa Quart’s *Branded* (2003). The arguments in these publications are, by and large, far from new. One can look back to similar arguments being made in the 1970s, for example by groups like Action for Children’s Television in the US (Hendershot, 1998). However, there is a new tone of urgency here: these critics argue that advertisers and marketers are using increasingly devious and deceitful devices in order to reach children. Children are being targeted at a younger and younger age; and they are caught up in a powerful, highly manipulative form of consumer culture that is almost impossible for them to escape. According to the critics, this culture is actively opposed to children’s well-being and their best interests.

These books link the issue of consumerism with other well-known concerns about media and childhood: as well as turning children into premature consumers, the media are accused of promoting sex and violence, junk food, drugs and alcohol, gender stereotypes and false values, and taking children away from other activities that are deemed to be more worthwhile. Of course, this is a familiar litany, which tends to confuse very different kinds of effects and influences. It constructs the child as innocent, helpless and unable to resist the power of the media. These texts describe children as being bombarded,

assaulted, barraged, even subjected to “saturation bombing” by the media—not to mention seduced, manipulated, exploited, brainwashed, programmed and branded. And the predictable solution here is for parents to engage in counterpropaganda, to censor their children’s use of media, or simply keep them locked away from corrupting commercial influences. These books rarely include the voices of children, or try to take account of their perspectives: this is essentially a discourse generated by parents *on behalf of* children.

Meanwhile, there has been a growth in marketing discourse specifically focused on children. Again, there is a long history of this kind of material. Dan Cook (2004) has shown how the children’s clothing industry has historically attempted to articulate the child’s perspective, to construct the child as a kind of authority, not least by means of market research. More recent examples of such marketing discourse would include Gene del Vecchio’s *Creating Ever-Cool* (1997) and Anne Sutherland and Beth Thompson’s *Kidfluence* (2003). However, one of the most influential current instances is Martin Lindstrom and Patricia Seybold’s *Brandchild* (2003), based on a survey of more than 2,000 children worldwide conducted by the advertising agency Millward Brown.

Brandchild focuses on the relatively new category of the “tween”—which is itself a good example of how the market purports to have identified a new category of consumer, whose needs it then claims to identify and meet (cf. Cook, 2004). According to Lindstrom and Seybold, tweens are a digital generation, “born with a mouse in their hands”; and they speak a new language, called Tweenspeak. Yet they also have anxieties—and the stress of growing up, the fear of global conflict and so on, mean that brands are all the more important for them, because brands can help them to enjoy life despite their difficulties. Indeed, tweens are seen to have a “spiritual hunger” that brands and marketers alone can satisfy. The strategies these authors recommend to reach tweens are a long way from conventional advertising, and include peer-to-peer marketing, viral marketing and virtual brands. These are tactics that rely on the active participation of the peer group—and they are precisely those that alarm the critics mentioned above. For the marketers, however, these practices are all about empowerment—about children registering their needs, finding their voices, building their self-esteem, defining their own values and developing independence and autonomy.

The theoretical and methodological basis of this kind of market research certainly deserves critical scrutiny. However, the most striking aspect in terms of my interests here—and the most striking contrast with the critics of consumer culture—is the very different construction of the child consumer. The child here is sophisticated, demanding and hard-to-please. Tweens, we are told, are not easily manipulated: they are an elusive, even fickle market, sceptical about the claims of advertisers, and discerning when it comes to getting value for money—and they need considerable effort to understand and to capture.

As I have argued elsewhere (Buckingham, 2000), this idea of the child as sovereign consumer often slips into the idea of the child as citizen, as autonomous social actor; and it is often accompanied by a kind of “anti-adulthood”. This approach is very apparent, for example, in the marketing of the global children’s channel Nickelodeon (Hendershot, 2004). Significantly, children are defined here primarily in terms of being *not adults*. Adults are boring; kids are fun. Adults are conservative; kids are fresh and innovative. Adults will never understand; kids intuitively *know*. In the new world of children’s consumer culture, kids rule.

Polarisation and Paradox

These two perspectives thus provide quite contrasting constructions of the child consumer. On the one hand, the critics present children as powerless victims of consumer culture. From this point of view, the pleasure of consumption is something to be suspected, a matter of inauthentic, short-term gratification—unlike the authentic pleasures of human interaction, true culture or spontaneous play. This argument stands in a long tradition of critical theory, from Adorno and Marcuse (and indeed more conservative critics like F. R. Leavis and Ortega y Gasset) through to contemporary authors such as Stephen Kline (1993). One of the most evident problems with this perspective is that it always regards *other people's* consumption as problematic: the argument is informed by a kind of élitism, whereby largely white, male, middle-class critics have stigmatised the consumption practices of others—women, the working classes and now children (Seiter, 1993).

By contrast—and quite ironically—it is the marketers who emphasise the competence and autonomy of children, and who pay tribute to their sophistication. To be sure, there are definite limits to this: the power that is being celebrated here is ultimately no more than the power to consume. And of course, given the political pressure that currently surrounds the issue of marketing to children (most notably around so-called junk food), marketers are bound to argue that advertising has very little effect, and that children are “wise consumers”.

Yet by and large, this is what the academic research concludes as well. Academic work on advertising tends to confirm that children are not easily manipulated or exploited; that they can understand the persuasive intent of advertising from a young age; and that they are not merely helpless victims of consumer culture (e.g. Gunter & Furnham, 1998; Hansen, Rasmussen, Martensen & Tufte, 2002; Young, 1990). This aligns quite well with the emphasis on children's autonomy and competence that characterises contemporary research in the sociology of childhood. For some researchers at least, there is an alarming coincidence in this respect between their own views and those of marketers. Indeed, there are some surprising political alliances—or potential alliances—here. On the one hand, child welfare campaigners seem to share a common cause with the moral majority; while on the other, childhood researchers are making arguments that are very close to those of the marketers.

One of the recurring problems with this debate—as in other debates about media effects—is its tendency to displace attention away from other possible causes of the phenomena that are at stake. For example, there is a growing tendency in many countries to blame the media for the rise in childhood obesity; and this is an issue that is also becoming an increasing preoccupation for researchers (as Amy Jordan's contribution, 2007 this issue, shows). Yet there may be many other complex reasons for this phenomenon. In fact, poor people are most at risk of obesity—and that clearly has something to do with the availability and price of fresh food, and the time that is available to people to shop and prepare their own meals. The rise of obesity might also be related to the rise of “car culture”, and the fact that children (in the UK at least) are now much less independently mobile. The current British government is so preoccupied with pushing up educational standards that it has seriously reduced the amount of physical education in schools; and it has taken a documentary TV series fronted by a celebrity chef, Jamie Oliver, to expose the poor standards of nutrition in school meals. As with violence, blaming the media allows

politicians to displace attention away from other potential causes, while also being seen to be “doing something” about the problem.

The UK regulators seem to have concluded that the evidence on this issue is insufficient, and that there are significant difficulties in regulating or even banning “junk food” advertising—not least in defining “junk food” in the first place (Ofcom, 2004). The key point here, however, is that it makes little sense to abstract the question of children’s relationship with advertising, or with consumer culture, from the broader social and historical context. The growth of consumer society is a complex, multifaceted, long-term social development; and displacing broader and more complex problems onto the issue of advertising inevitably results in a neglect of the real difficulties at stake.

Ultimately, the limitations of this debate derive from broader assumptions about childhood. It seems to be assumed that there is a natural state of childhood that has been destroyed or corrupted by marketers—or alternatively that children’s “real” innate needs are somehow being acknowledged and addressed, even for the first time. It is believed that there is something particular to the condition of childhood that makes children necessarily more vulnerable—or indeed spontaneously more wise and sophisticated, for example in their dealings with technology; and that adults are somehow exempted from these arguments.

Aside from the sentimentality of these assumptions, this kind of polarisation fails to acknowledge some of the paradoxes here. For example, it is entirely possible that children (or indeed adults) might be active and sophisticated readers of media, but might nevertheless still be influenced—or indeed that an *illusion* of autonomy might be one of the prerequisites of contemporary consumer culture. On the other hand, the critics fail to acknowledge the difficulty that marketers have in reaching children—the fact that the market in children’s products rises and falls in unpredictable ways, and that the failure rate for new products is much higher in the children’s market than in the adult market (McNeal, 1999).

Theoretically, the question here is how we understand the relationship between structure and agency (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003). On the one hand, the market clearly does attempt to construct and define the child consumer: it offers children powerful definitions of their own wants and needs, while purporting to satisfy them. Yet children also construct and define their own needs and identities—not least by how they appropriate and use consumer goods. The paradox of contemporary marketing is that it is bound to construct children as active, desiring and autonomous, and in some respects as resisting the imperatives of adults, while simultaneously seeking to make them behave in particular ways. Structure requires agency, but agency only works through structure.

We also need to understand consumer culture—and indeed its historical evolution—in relation to other social factors. The market works through and with the family, the peer group and—increasingly—the school. We need to address how consumption practices are carried out in these different settings, and how they are implicated in the management of power, time and space. There is an agenda here for empirical research, which is beginning to emerge in recent anthropological work on consumer culture (e.g. Miller, 1998; Slater, 1996), but has yet to have much impact on the study of children’s consumption. In the following sections, I would like to suggest some ways in which these approaches might inform our analysis, in relation to four key issues.

Consuming Parents

In some respects, the very idea of children's consumer culture is itself a paradox. At least for older children, that culture is based around the peer group—and it can sometimes involve a subversion of the values of parents. Yet the symbolic resources with which that culture functions are not produced by children, but by adults. It is adults who ultimately provide children with the economic resources to participate in that culture. It is adults who buy, even if it is children who consume.

As I have suggested, critics of consumer culture often appear to voice *parental* concerns—even if they claim to do so in the name of children. Of course, the marketers revel in children's "pester power": the influence that children exert on adults' purchases is much more economically significant than what they buy in their own right. Marketers also know that the children's market is a dual market: they need to appeal to parents—or at least avoid alienating them—if they are to sell to children.

This raises questions about how children's consumption fits into the power relationships of the family. Many sociologists (e.g. Silva & Smart, 1998) have pointed to the democratisation of relationships within the family—a development that is partly about changing ideologies of childrearing, as well as a consequence of material changes (such as the reduction in the birth rate); and these developments are in turn reflected in the changing uses of the media within family life (Livingstone, 2002). Marketers also recognise this: James McNeal (1999), for example, describes the modern family as a "filarchy", in which much of the decision making has now been ceded to children.

However, we also need to explore the nature of parents' emotional investments in their children's consumption. The rise of the children's consumer market can be seen as a symptom of what Viviana Zelizer (1985) calls the symbolic "valorization of childhood" that dates back to the early years of the last century. More recently, Gary Cross (2004) has identified the tension between parents' desire to shelter the child, to use childhood as a place for pedagogic nurturing, and their desire to allow the child a space for expression, to indulge the freedom they themselves have lost—and of course both of these motivations can be commodified. As parents spend less and less time with their children (as a result of longer working hours, and increasing family separation), they may be more inclined to compensate by providing them with consumer goods. As this implies, understanding children's consumer culture should also mean understanding *parents'* consumer culture—and with some exceptions (notably Seiter, 1993), this is an area that researchers have tended to neglect.

Defining Age and Gender Identities

In some respects, it is easy to understand marketers' recurrent claims that the children's market is a difficult, even volatile one. This is at least partly to do with the fact that it is very segmented, not least in terms of gender and age. In some respects, these distinctions are created—or at least invested with meaning—by marketers; but they are not necessarily always easy for them to control or predict.

One of the most interesting aspects here is how age itself has come to be used as a symbolic marker. For example, it is possible to look back to the invention of the "teenager"—and more recently, to the emergence of the "tween"—which are themselves largely constructions of marketing. Daniel Cook's (2004) history of the children's clothing

industry in the US traces the gradual emergence of such age based distinctions, and the construction of new age-defined categories such as the “toddler” during the 1930s—distinctions that were manifested in the creation of particular product lines as well as in the design and layout of shops. On one level, this practice is sanctioned by the use of developmentalist discourses—the notion that children in particular age groups have needs that are distinctive to their physical or psychological stage. However, it also reflects imperatives of marketing: dividing children into a series of niche markets means that new products can be sold at different stages, while others are cast off or “outgrown”.

Of course, this perception of age differences is not simply produced by the marketers: children themselves are consistently calibrating themselves in terms of age; other social institutions, most obviously the school, help to define what it means to be a child of a particular age. To some extent, this age segmentation is effective, although in practice children often perceive it—and indeed act it out—in complicated ways. There can be a strong aspirational element here: children frequently aspire to consume things that appear to be targeted at a somewhat older audience. This is particularly an issue for children in the immediate preteen age group, for whom the category of the “teenager” is seen to embody a degree of freedom from adult constraints. On the other hand, there may also be an element of “regression” among some older children, for whom the “cuteness” of young children’s culture has an ironic appeal (Davies, Buckingham & Kelley, 2000). As this implies, identities are by no means fixed or given, but are constantly rehearsed, claimed, and performed in everyday life (cf. Butler, 1993).

The situation in relation to gender seems more straightforward. Particularly for younger children, this is a very polarised, “pink and blue” market, and there are significant risks for marketers in trying to cross the line, in order to appeal to both groups. It used to be the received wisdom among marketers that the way to succeed was to appeal to boys first—girls were quite likely to buy into boy culture, although boys were less likely to buy into girl culture (Schneider, 1987). Analyses of contemporary toy advertising would suggest that—despite decades of second-wave feminism—this polarisation continues to be the case (e.g. Griffiths, 2002). Nevertheless, there are products that to some extent seem to cross this divide—particularly those originating in Japan like Tamagotchis, Pokémon and YuGiOh; and when we examine phenomena like Bratz, there may be a sense in which “postfeminist” notions of “girl power” are starting to shift the traditional values of girl culture—even if boys remain mired in very familiar forms of masculinity.

Even so, we know relatively little about how children use such commodities in their play. Far from simply scripting predefined play scenarios, commercial culture offers children a range of symbolic resources that they can appropriate in diverse ways, via a form of “bricolage”. While the market may be playing some complicated games with identities, children are not simply its compliant victims—although this is not a wholly voluntaristic process either.

Class

As I have noted, criticisms of consumer culture often seem to assume that *other people’s* consumption is the problem; and they have often been marked by a kind of patrician distaste for the vulgarity of working-class culture. Yet without subscribing to this kind of élitism, it is important to recognise that the market is not a neutral mechanism, and

that the marketised provision of goods and services (not least in the media) may exacerbate existing inequalities.

Here again, there are empirical questions to be addressed, particularly in relation to children's peer groups. How do children use consumer goods—such as mobile phones—as markers of status and authority in the peer group? To what extent does knowledge of consumer culture function as a kind of cultural (or subcultural) capital for children? How do the hierarchies of taste and “cool” within the peer group relate to the hierarchies within adult culture (to do with gender and ethnicity as well as class)? And what is the experience of young people who are excluded from peer group culture because of their lack of access to consumer goods?

Within popular discourse, these issues are often represented via rather simplistic notions like “peer pressure”; but how “peer pressure” operates, particularly within diverse, multicultural settings, is a complex matter. There may also be situations in which peer pressure—or the hierarchies that operate in the peer group—actually work against consumer culture. As we discovered in our research on Pokémon, it is hard to predict how particular phenomena become “cool” and then abruptly cease to be so (Tobin, 2004); we also need to take account of the strongly anticonsumerist rhetoric of some forms of teen culture. Perhaps above all, we need to understand the consumption practices of children in disadvantaged communities, for whom “consumer choice” may be a fraught and complex matter; and in this respect, Elizabeth Chin's *Purchasing Power* (2001) provides a particularly important challenge to the idea that less wealthy children are somehow more at risk from the seductions of consumer culture.

Consumer Literacy

Finally, what are the implications of these debates in terms of social policy? New commercial practices—and the broader extension of neoliberal economics—raise new issues of ethics and trust, and pose significant problems in terms of regulation. Yet much of the academic research in this area is to do with traditional advertising. There is very little research on the newer commercial strategies that Lindstrom and Seybold (2003) and other contemporary marketers are promulgating, and critics like Quart (2003) are keen to condemn—such as product placement, peer-to-peer marketing, cross-promotion and viral and online marketing. These techniques are more subtle, less overt and visible, than conventional advertising; and there is evidence to suggest that children may be much less aware of what is happening here (Seiter, 2004).

In terms of policy, the emphasis is shifting away from governmental regulation towards a focus on “media literacy”. In the UK, the 2003 Communications Act created a new regulatory body for broadcast and telecommunications media, which was charged with a specific remit to “promote media literacy”. A cynical interpretation would see this as a matter of “passing the buck”: since government appears increasingly reluctant to regulate the commercial market, responsibility for regulation is passed down to consumers—although in this case, it is not always clear whether the consumer is the parent or the child. From this perspective, it is unnecessary to control advertising, because we have competent consumers who are perfectly capable of making up their own minds about what they should buy. However, this could also be interpreted as a democratising move: rather than paternalistically insisting that it will tell people what is good for them, government offers them a kind of autonomy, and the opportunity to make decisions on

their own behalf. Even so, this effectively makes individuals responsible for things that are not necessarily within their control—and which in practice they may not be willing or able to take responsibility for. In this respect, it could be seen as a strategy that is characteristic of modern forms of “governmentality” (cf. Rose, 1999).

As Sonia Livingstone (2006) has pointed out, this is problematic in a situation where many parents may be rather less “media literate”, or simply less engaged in new media, than their children. It is particularly difficult in the context of the broader shift (identified above) towards a democratisation of relationships within the family. As the preferred mode of childrearing shifts from an authoritarian to a “pedagogical” mode, based on reasoning and discussion, it becomes harder for parents to prevent their children from playing violent video games or surfing inappropriate sites on the Internet—particularly as parents are less likely to have the spare time in which to do so. This shift in the locus of control appears to place a burden on parents that many of them are not equipped or even willing to exercise.

This debate is also focusing renewed attention on the need for media education in schools. In many countries, there is a long tradition of such work, although in most cases it remains relatively marginal to the mainstream curriculum. As with research, effective practice in media education looks beyond the easy polarisation I have outlined: it is not a matter of protecting children from the allegedly harmful influences of the media, nor of merely celebrating their existing knowledge and sophistication (Buckingham, 2003). On the contrary, it seeks to bring about their more active and critical participation in the media culture that surrounds them. In an era where governmental regulation of the market seems to have become a political impossibility, media or consumer literacy represents at least a realistic alternative. The key questions for researchers to address at this stage are precisely what media literacy is; how it is used and developed; and in particular, how it might be more effectively promoted, both in and beyond formal schooling.

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