Rethinking the child consumer: new practices, new paradigms

Repensando a criança-consumidora: novas práticas, novos paradigmas

Repensando el niño-consumidor: nuevas prácticas, nuevos paradigmas

David Buckingham[1]

Abstract *Children's relationship with media and consumer culture has been the focus of increasing attention and debate over the past decade. Children have become more and more important both as a market in their own right and as a means to reach adult markets; while growing numbers of commentators have criticised the apparent "commercialisation" of childhood, calling for tighter regulation of marketing to children. This article seeks to challenge the terms in which the social issue of children's consumption is typically framed and understood, and the sentimental views of childhood that tend to inform the debate. It argues that we need a broader view of commercial activity, which goes beyond advertising or marketing; and that we need to understand children's consumption in relation to the consumption of parents, and indeed of the wider society. It pays particular attention to the changing role of media in this respect, challenging some of the more optimistic accounts of young people's uses of digital media, and considering the commercial dimensions of forms such as social networking and mobile technologies. Finally, it argues that we need to look beyond familiar dichotomies between structure and agency that continue to characterise both public and academic debate in this area.*
Keywords: *Childhood. Consumption. Marketing. Commercialisation. Media.*

Resumo *O relacionamento das crianças com a mídia e com a cultura do consumidor vem se tornando, nesta última década, um foco de atenção e de debate. As crianças ganharam mais e mais importância não apenas como um mercado em si, mas também como um meio de atingir os mercados dos adultos; e em paralelo,*

[1] Professor of Media and Communications at Loughborough University, UK, and a Visiting Professor at the Norwegian Centre for Child Research in Trondheim. His research focuses on children's interactions with media, and on media education. He is the author, co-author or editor of 26 books, including most recently *Beyond Technology* (2007), *Video Cultures* (2009) and *The Material Child* (2011).

*um número crescente de comentadores critica a aparente "comercialização" da infância, demandando uma mais rígida regulamentação do marketing direcionado às crianças. Este estudo busca contestar os termos em que a questão social do consumo das crianças é tipicamente apresentada e compreendida, e a visão sentimental da infância que tende a informar esse debate. Este estudo argumenta que precisamos ter uma visão mais ampla da atividade comercial, indo para além da propaganda ou do marketing; e que precisamos entender o consumo infantil em relação ao consumo dos pais, e também da sociedade em um âmbito maior. No tocante a este aspecto, este estudo destaca especialmente o papel da mídia, que está sempre mudando, e contesta alguns dos relatos mais otimistas sobre o uso da mídia digital pelos jovens, além de considerar as dimensões comerciais de formas tais como as redes sociais (*social networking*) e as tecnologias móveis. Finalmente, argumenta que precisamos olhar para além das conhecidas dicotomias entre estrutura e atuação que ainda caracterizam o debate público e acadêmico nesta área.*
Palavras-chave: *Infância. Consumo. Marketing. Comercialização. Mídia.*

Resumen *La relación de los niños con los medios de comunicación y con la cultura del consumidor se está convirtiendo, en la última década, en un foco de atención y de debate. Los niños han adquirido cada vez más importancia no solo como constituyentes de un mercado en sí, sino también como medio de alcanzar los mercados de los adultos; paralelamente, un creciente número de observadores critica la aparente "comercialización" de la infancia, demandando una reglamentación más rígida del marketing dirigido a los niños. Este estudio pretende contestar los términos en que la cuestión social del consumo en la infancia se presenta y comprende típicamente, y la visión sentimental de la infancia que tiende a informar ese debate. Además, argumenta la necesidad de una visión más amplia de la actividad comercial, que vaya más allá de la propaganda o del* marketing*; y de entender el consumo infantil en relación al consumo de los padres, y también de la sociedad en un ámbito mayor. En lo que toca a este aspecto, este trabajo destaca especialmente el papel de los medios, siempre cambiante, y responde a algunos de los relatos más optimistas sobre el uso de los medios digitales por los jóvenes, además de considerar las dimensiones comerciales de formas tales como las redes sociales (*social networking*) y las tecnologías móviles. Finalmente, argumenta la necesidad de ver más allá de las conocidas dicotomías entre estructura y actuación, que siguen caracterizando el debate público y académico en esta área.*
Palabras-clave: *Infancia. Consumo. Marketing. Comercialización. Medios de comunicación.*

Data de submissão: 27/04/2012
Data de aceite: 05/06/2012

Commercial marketing to children is by no means a new phenomenon. Indeed, historical studies show that children have been a key focus of interest at least since the inception of modern mass marketing (e.g. Cook, 2004; Cross, 1997; Denisoff, 2008; Jacobson, 2004). Nevertheless, in recent years children have become increasingly important both as a market in their own right and as a means to reach adult markets. Marketers are targeting children more directly and at an ever-younger age; and they are using a much wider range of techniques that go well beyond conventional advertising.

Marketers often claim that children are becoming 'empowered' in this new commercial environment: the market is seen to be responding to needs and desires on the part of children that have hitherto been largely ignored or marginalised, not least because of the social dominance of adults. However, critics have expressed growing concern about the apparent 'commercialisation' of childhood. Popular publications, press reports and campaigns have addressed what are seen to be the damaging effects of commercial influences on children's physical and mental health. Far from being 'empowered', children are typically seen here as victims of a powerful, highly manipulative form of consumer culture that is almost impossible for them to escape or resist.

In this article, I argue that we need to look beyond this rather polarized debate. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, I suggest that the terms of the debate itself are limited and problematic, in ways that reflect continuing difficulties in our conceptions of childhood. The debate about children's consumption rehearses binary views of childhood and conflates important conceptual distinctions that need to be maintained. Secondly, I argue that these views of children as consumers fail to address the ways in which consumer culture itself is currently developing and changing. I argue that the more ubiquitous and 'participatory' techniques that are now being used by commercial companies reflect a new construction of the child consumer. This new construction in turn requires us to rethink the terms of the debate, and some of the basic assumptions of consumer culture theory.

Constructing the child consumer: critics, marketers and academic theorists

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 Children* (2004) and Ed Mayo and Agnes Nairn's *Consumer Kids* (2009). Other popular books in this vein include discussions of children's consumption alongside broader arguments about the apparent demise of traditional notions of childhood – as in the case of Sue Palmer's *Toxic Childhood* (2006) or Richard Layard and Judy Dunn's *A Good Childhood* (2009). 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 United States (Hendershot, 1998); or to announcements of the 'death of childhood' that have regularly recurred throughout the past two centuries (e.g. Postman, 1983). Even so, there now seems to be a renewed sense of urgency in these claims.

Such books typically presume that children used to live in an essentially non-commercial world, or a kind of idyllic 'golden age'. Many of them 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, obesity, 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 conflate 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: they are being seduced, manipulated, exploited, brainwashed, programmed and branded. And the predictable solution here is for parents to engage in counter-propaganda, 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 parallel growth in marketing discourse specifically focused on children. Again, there is a long history of this kind of material. As Dan Cook (2004) and Lisa Jacobson (2004) have shown, the early decades of the twentieth century saw marketers increasingly addressing children directly, rather than their parents. In the process, they made efforts to understand the child's perspective, and began to construct the child as a kind of authority, not least by means of market research. In recent years, however, this kind of marketing discourse has proliferated, most notably in relation to the newly-identified category of the 'tween'. More recent examples would include Gene del Vecchio's *Creating Ever Cool* (1997) and Anne Sutherland and Beth Thompson's *Kidfluence* (2003); although perhaps the most influential account is Martin Lindstrom's *Brandchild* (2003), which is the basis of a major consultancy business that has effectively become a brand in its own right.

The most striking contrast between these accounts and those of the critics of consumer culture is the very different construction of the child consumer. The child is seen here as 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. 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 this idea of the child as sovereign consumer often elides with the idea of the child as a citizen, or an autonomous social actor, and with the notion of children's rights; and it is often accompanied by a kind of 'anti-adultism' – an approach that is very apparent, for example, in the marketing of the global chil-

dren's television channel Nickelodeon (Banet-Weiser, 2007; Hendershot, 2004). To use one of Nickelodeon's key marketing slogans, in the new world of children's consumer culture, *kids rule*.

These contrasting views of consumption are also played out in academic theories and debates. On the one hand, we have accounts that see consumption as a kind of betrayal of fundamental human values. From this point of view, the pleasure of consumption is something to be suspected, a matter of inauthentic, short-term gratification – unlike the apparently authentic pleasures of human interaction, true culture, or spontaneous feeling. 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 Zygmunt Bauman (2007) and Benjamin Barber (2007). For such critics it is generally *other people's* consumption that is regarded as problematic: the argument is informed by a kind of elitism, whereby largely white, male, middle-class critics have stigmatized the consumption practices of others – women, the working classes and now children (Seiter, 1993).

On the other hand, there are accounts that emphasise the agency of consumers – that is, their ability to define their own meanings and pleasures, and to exercise power and control. Such accounts were particularly prominent in 'postmodernist' Cultural Studies at the beginning of the 1990s (e.g. Fiske, 1990, Featherstone, 1991), although they have arguably resurfaced with some more celebratory accounts of fandom and so-called 'participatory culture' (Jenkins, 2006). Far from being passive dupes of the market, consumers are regarded here as active and autonomous; and commodities are seen to have multiple possible meanings, which consumers can select, use and rework for their own purposes. In appropriating the 'symbolic resources' they find in the marketplace, consumers are engaging in a productive and self-conscious process of creating an individual 'lifestyle' and constructing or 'fashioning' their identities. In the process, they are seen to be evading or resisting the control of what Fiske (1990) calls 'the power bloc'.

I have admittedly sketched these debates in somewhat stark and exaggerated terms here. Nevertheless, there is a clear polarization in accounts of consumer culture – and specifically of children as consumers – that replays a much wider polarization within the human sciences more broadly, between structure and agency. In relation to children, this typically results in a stand-off between two diametrically opposed views of children: the child as innocent victim *versus* the child as competent social actor. On the one hand, we have the call to protect children from exploitation and manipulation; and on the other, the call to extend their rights to self-determination and autonomy. In relation to children's consumption, this leads to a series of binary oppositions that tend to dominate the debate. Are children active or passive consumers? Are they knowledgeable or innocent, competent or incompetent, powerful or powerless?

Later in this chapter, I will discuss some of the more theoretical problems with this debate, and point to some possible means of moving beyond what has become a kind of conceptual *impasse*. First of all, however, I want to describe some of the ways in which the children's market itself is changing. In my view, these changes represent a different way of conceiving of, or constructing, the child consumer; and this in turn means that we need to develop different theories and methodologies for research. New developments in the children's market, new techniques and marketing strategies, and new discourses about the child consumer, seem to make redundant the binary oppositions I have outlined above, and require us to ask some new questions.

Children: a growing but uncertain market

Estimates of the size of the children's market are somewhat variable, and occasionally seem quite hyperbolic. Child marketing guru Martin Lindstrom (2003), for instance, suggests that children aged 8-14 in the United States spend around $150 billion annually, 'control' another $150 billion of their parents' money, and influence family spending of up to $600

billion a year. He asserts that children may be responsible for almost two *trillion* dollars of annual global expenditure. Figures for Europe tend to be more modest. In the UK, one annual survey of children's pocket money suggests that children aged 7-16 receive an average of €35 per month, making a total of almost €80 million – a figure that has increased by 600% over the past 20 years (HBOS 2007). The cost of bringing up a child from birth to the age of 21 is estimated to be in excess of €220,000, a figure that is rising significantly faster than inflation (Liverpool Victoria Friendly Society, 2010).

From a marketing perspective, children are generally seen to play three main roles. They are an increasingly significant market in their own right, through spending their own disposable income, gained from gifts and part-time work as well as regular allowances. However, they are also an important means of reaching adults: the influence that children exert on adults' purchases is more economically significant than what they buy themselves, and can include choices of holidays, cars, new technology and other expensive goods. Thirdly, they are seen as a future market – a 'market potential' - with whom companies wish to establish relationships and loyalties that they hope will be carried through into adulthood (McNeal, 1999).

Nevertheless, the children's market is significantly more volatile and uncertain than adult markets. The failure rate for new products is much higher here than in the adult market (McNeal, 1999); and while enormous amounts of money can undoubtedly be made from successful brands and product ranges, there is also a high degree of risk. The history of children's 'crazes' (such as Pokemon or Ninja Turtles) shows recurring patterns of rise and fall, which companies have significant difficulties in predicting or managing (Tobin, 2004). At the peak of a craze, desperate parents may queue for hours in toyshops to buy scarce merchandise; while a few months down the line, vast quantities of the same goods may be on their way to landfill. Even very well-established brands are not immune from competitive challenge, as the 'doll wars' between Barbie and the Bratz range have recently shown (Clark, 2007).

One approach that marketers have used in attempting to manage risk in the children's market is segmentation – although it is an approach that has some ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, segmentation provides a means for marketers to manage risk – to know and perhaps exercise greater control over potential markets; but the more segmented markets are, the smaller they become. The logic then points towards globalization: smaller national markets can be amassed into much larger markets if they are targeted on a global scale – although this in turn requires products to be produced for global rather than national consumption, which itself requires difficult calculations about cultural specificity (Buckingham, 2007).

Thus, gender differentiation is a key factor, particularly for younger children, where the market is heavily polarized into 'pink and blue'. There are significant risks for marketers here 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 boy-oriented products, although boys were less comfortable with products they perceived as too 'girly' (Schneider, 1987). More recent analyses of contemporary toy advertising would suggest that this polarization has been maintained (Griffiths, 2002); and some products (and indeed entire television channels) are sometimes developed in distinct 'boy' and 'girl' versions. Yet while critics argue that the market actively produces or at least reinforces these gender distinctions and identities, it would clearly be in the commercial interest of marketers to minimize such differences (and hence to maximize the size of the market) rather than to accentuate them.

Likewise, age differences are also highly significant, but complex to manage. Dividing children into a series of niche markets defined by age means that new products can be sold at different stages, while others are cast off or 'outgrown'; and the history of children's marketing has seen the ongoing construction of new age-defined categories such as 'toddlers', 'teenagers', and most recently 'tweens' (Cook, 2004). Yet children do not always 'act their age'. While younger children may well aspire

to consume products that appear to be designed for those who are older than them, older children are unlikely to wish to be associated with items that are seen as too 'childish'. Commercial goods serve as powerful but often very ambivalent markers of 'age identities' – although here again, it is often very difficult for marketers to manage and control the meanings that children produce.

New marketing techniques

Another way in which marketers have sought to manage risk in the children's market is through the use of new media and new techniques. Pre-eminent amongst these has been the rise of integrated, cross-media marketing – sometimes variously termed '360 degree marketing' or 'synergistic marketing'. This practice has been especially apparent in most of the leading children's 'crazes' and product ranges of the past thirty years: examples of current successes would include Disney's *High School Musical* and *Hannah Montana* and Warner Brothers' *Harry Potter*, as well as franchised characters aimed at younger children such as Bob the Builder and Thomas the Tank Engine. In each case, the core text or product provides the basis for an ever-expanding range of ancillary products and merchandise.

Of course, this is far from being a recent development. Disney is the best-known example of this phenomenon: right from the early days of the Mickey Mouse clubs (which began in cinemas in the 1930s, and came to television in the mid-1950s), merchandising has been an indispensible aspect of the enterprise, and has even sometimes served to keep the media production operation afloat (see Bryman, 1995; de Cordova, 1994; Wasko, 2001). Yet following the advent of so-called 'program-length commercials' on US television in the late 1970s – cartoons produced or commissioned by toy companies as 'shop windows' for their products – media and merchandising have become inextricably connected. The presence of such branded merchandise in so many media and market sectors – including not just toys, but also clothing, food, gifts and other

paraphernalia – effectively makes them impossible to avoid, generating a 'virtuous circle' of ubiquitous mutual promotion.

In this context, traditional advertising (for example on television or in print media) is gradually becoming redundant – and indeed goods such as Pokemon products were never advertised as such. Traditional advertising is now in decline, and an increasing proportion of marketing budgets is now spent on other forms of promotion, public relations and branding. Marketers are also developing a range of new techniques, many of which are particularly prevalent in the children's and youth markets (see Montgomery, 2007). These include the following:

- Product placement: not in itself a new strategy, but nevertheless a practice that is becoming more widespread in a range of media, and has recently been legalized at a European level (albeit not in children's programmes);
- Other methods of embedding commercial messages, for example through the use of advertising in computer sports games or online social worlds;
- Advergaming, whereby players are involved in games (most obviously on company websites) using commercial or branded imagery or content;
- Viral marketing, whereby commercial messages (in the form of e-mails or SMS texts or images) are forwarded from one user to another;
- 'Immersive' marketing and the gathering of personal data in online social worlds, both subscription sites and 'free' branded ones;
- Social networking - in particular, the use of 'applications' that involve users in competitions featuring branded products and services, the use of branded materials (such as 'skins' or backgrounds), and the ways in which users are invited to define and construct their personal profiles in terms of preferences for consumer goods;
- Sponsorship: again, a well-established strategy but one that appears to be becoming more widespread, not least as part of the wider privatization of public institutions, events and services (for instance in education);

- Peer-to-peer marketing, whereby opinion leaders are recruited and paid as 'brand champions' or 'ambassadors' who will actively display and advocate the use of particular products within their contact group (the ubiquitous display of logos on branded clothing might be seen as a 'softer' form of this practice);
- The commercial cultivation of forms of 'fan culture' that involve collecting commodities (often those with a market-induced 'rarity' value), or creating forms of fan 'art' (for example, creating and circulating re-edited video material);
- So-called user-generated content, in which companies recruit consumers to create blogs or online videos (or alternatively masquerade as ordinary consumers to do so) promoting particular brands or products.

These new techniques are fairly diverse, and some may ultimately prove much more successful than others – although the expenditure on such approaches is undoubtedly increasing quite significantly at present. However, they have certain qualities in common. For the most part, they are about *branding* – creating a set of values or emotions associated with the brand - rather than the marketing of specific products. Many of them depend to a large extent on the use of *digital media*, with its immediacy of access, its networking capacity, and its apparent 'youth' appeal, as well as its capacity for surveillance of consumer behaviour. Many are *'personalised'*, in the sense that they seem to appeal and respond to the individual's wants and needs, rather than addressing them as a member of a mass market. They are often *deceptive* or 'stealthy', in the sense that their persuasive intentions are not made apparent – for example through commercial messages being embedded in other content, rather than clearly identifiable, as is the case with television commercials or banner advertising online. Finally, many of them are *'participatory'* or 'interactive', in that they require the positive engagement of the consumer, who may be called upon to engage actively with the communication, to pass it on to others, or even to help create the message.

In all these respects, these new techniques reflect much broader trends in contemporary consumer culture, which apply to adults as well as children. Rather than adopting aggressive 'hard sell' techniques, marketers increasingly have to take account of consumers' scepticism and potential resistance. The consumer is defined and addressed, not as vulnerable and open to manipulation, but as 'savvy', sophisticated and discriminating. Again, there is a long history of this approach, dating back at least to the late 1950s (see Frank, 1997), but it has become increasingly *de rigueur* in the business. The aim here is not so much to sell specific products but rather to engage with consumers' sense of personal agency, and to create more intense forms of intimacy and 'bonding' in the relations between consumers and brands (Arvidsson, 2006).

Knowing consumers?

The increasing risks and uncertainties of the children's market also place a new premium on knowledge. Marketers can never be sure that they can fully 'know' children or predict their behaviour. As a result, a thriving research business has grown up around the children's market, which now seeks to access children's perspectives directly, rather than merely those of their parents. These 'commercial epistemologies' (Cook, 2000) often draw on the creative and ethnographic tools for accessing children's 'voice' developed within academic disciplines such as anthropology and Cultural Studies. For instance, researchers may visit children repeatedly in their homes, spending extended periods with them in their most private spaces, such as bedrooms and bathrooms. They film children playing with toys and engaged in other mundane tasks such as eating, using these methods because interviews do not always reveal behaviour which children are reluctant to admit (such as playing with toys they claim to have grown out of). In this way, researchers access new information that can be used commercially: for instance, seeing children playing with empty bubble bath containers inspired the redesign of packaging (Schor, 2004).

Likewise, in the practice known as 'cool hunting', young people may be recruited as 'consultants' to supply their own views on products and advertisements, or employed to track trends among their peer groups. For example, Dubit, a UK-based youth research company, has a website aimed at young people that pays them to answer surveys about new ad campaigns, technologies or products, alongside chat and games. Digital media also provide new means of gathering and accessing data about consumer behaviour. The practice of 'data mining' involves the gathering, aggregation and analysis of data about consumers, either based on their responses to online requests or questionnaires or (more covertly) through the use of 'cookies' that track their movements online. Such practices are widely used in social networking sites and online worlds, not only in online shopping or commercially branded sites. In these ways, the media that are often celebrated for their ability to 'empower' consumers also provide powerful means of surveillance.

Companies operating in this market typically claim to offer privileged insights into the views and perspectives of young people. Their research is often aligned with the rhetoric of 'empowerment' identified above: young people are frequently described as self-determining, autonomous and innately 'savvy' in their dealings with the commercial world. Children, we are told, want to be in control, to be 'listened to, heard, respected and understood': they must not be patronized. They can recognise when advertisers are trying to manipulate them; and while they are quick to adopt new trends, they are also quick to move on. As such, they are extremely powerful and influential consumers: 'they get what they want when they want it' (Sutherland and Thompson, 2001). This new rhetoric of the competent child consumer is also aligned with a familiar discourse about young people and technology. Children are represented as 'digital natives', who are 'born with a mouse in their hands', as Lindstrom (2003) puts it. As such, they can best be reached through the kinds of 'participatory' techniques I have identified above. While campaigners frequently express alarm about the deceptive and invasive nature of such approaches, for marketers they are a means to empower-

ment: they provide children with the means to register their needs, find their voices, build their self-esteem, define their own values, and develop independence and autonomy.

Yet while their methods and discourses might appear relatively innovative, the theories on which such companies draw to explain young people are often much more traditional: Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' and Piagetian developmental psychology are frequently cited, along with pop psychology and simplistic theories of generational change. For all the emphasis on novelty, marketers are also advised to address needs that are seen as somehow timeless and innate – needs for mastery, stability, fantasy, romance and rebellion, and so on. Children at different ages are seen to be 'looking for an identity', seeking 'to identify with a role model', beginning 'to develop and understand their personal power in the world' or seeking 'power, freedom, fun and belonging' – assertions that seem to do little more than rehearse commonsense truisms about childhood (see also Siegel et al, 2001).

Ethics and theories: beyond the binaries

These new practices undoubtedly raise new ethical questions. Regulations that apply to conventional advertising (for example on television) do not yet apply online, or to these more pervasive forms of marketing. Many new marketing techniques blur the boundaries between promotional messages and other content, making it possible to embed advertising in contexts where it is less likely to be recognised as such. They often entail the gathering, aggregation and use of personal data about consumers without them necessarily being aware that this is taking place; and children may also be encouraged or required to provide personal information about others, for example parents or friends, without their knowledge, raising significant concerns about privacy (see Buckingham et al., 2007; Livingstone, 2006; Nairn and Monkgol, 2007). 'Peer-to-peer' and viral marketing represent a modern form of 'word-of-mouth', although

they also depend on a degree of deception, whereby users (rather than companies) are seen as the authors or at least the distributors of commercial messages. There are also justified concerns that children are being recruited for market research at an ever-younger age, and that the aims of such research are not always clearly explained. There may be further violations of privacy here, as such researchers are increasingly keen on studying children in their 'natural habitat' of the home or the peer group.

These issues in turn raise new questions about children's understanding of commercial motivations and practices, and more broadly about their competence as consumers. Research has recently begun to explore how children engage with these new practices (e.g. Nairn and Dew, 2008) – although there may be little reason to expect that children are any less knowledgeable about them, or indeed more vulnerable to deception, than adults. There are justified concerns here; yet the issues raised also go beyond questions about children's competence, or lack of it. Children (or indeed adults) may be more or less knowledgeable about such techniques, but that knowledge in itself does not necessarily confer the power to resist them. Furthermore, the fact that children are now increasingly addressed and engaged as 'active' participants does not necessarily mean that they have greater agency or power.

As I have suggested, these developments can be seen to represent a much more general paradigm shift in the nature of consumer culture, away from a 'mass marketing' model towards one that is significantly more pervasive, more personalised and more participatory. In this context, consumers' agency itself is being produced and engaged in new ways. Easy oppositions of the kind with which we began – between active and passive, knowledgeable and innocent, competent and incompetent, powerful and powerless – no longer apply. We need to look beyond such binary thinking, towards a more complex understanding of children's consumer practices.

Ultimately, the limitations of much of the debate in this area derive from the broader assumptions about childhood on which it is based. 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 also 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 polarization 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 and choice might be one of the pre-requisites of contemporary consumer culture. *Activity* is not necessarily the same thing as *agency*. At the same time, we need to acknowledge the genuine difficulties, risks and uncertainties that are entailed for marketers in actually targeting children – and that the power of the marketers may also be more limited than is often assumed.

Theoretically, the question here is typically posed in terms of the relationship between structure and agency (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2003). On the side of structure, 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 on the side of agency, 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. As such, it is positively misleading to see this in terms of a simple *opposition* between structure and agency, or as a kind of 'zero-sum game', in which more of one automatically means less of the other. Structure requires agency, but agency only works through structure: each, in this sense, actively produces the other.

Consumption out of context

The other recurring problem with this polarized debate is its tendency to displace attention away from other possible causes of the phenomena that are at stake. This arises largely because children's consumption is removed from the social contexts in which it occurs – and indeed which it helps to produce. Much of the research in this area focuses on children's responses to advertising – especially television advertising – rather than on other aspects of marketing or of consumption. A great deal of it is also concerned with purchasing behaviour (or aspects of 'pre-purchasing' such as information-seeking, preference and choice); and relatively little with how children appropriate and use products in their everyday lives. As such, this work focuses on a relatively narrow aspect of the broader nexus of production, distribution, circulation and consumption.

Much of the research in this field has been conducted by psychologists, working within two main traditions: media effects and consumer socialization. Both approaches have been widely challenged on methodological grounds, which do not need to be rehearsed here. More significant in this context are the theoretical and political problems of these approaches. Effects research is self-evidently premised on a view of children's relationship with media as a matter of cause and effect. A classic behaviourist perspective (which is sometimes misleadingly termed 'social learning theory') conceives of this process in terms of stimulus and response – of which the most obvious example would be imitation. From this perspective, television advertising would be seen to produce direct effects on viewers – not only in terms of purchasing behaviour, but also in terms of attitudes and values. More sophisticated exponents of this approach posit the existence of 'intervening variables' (both individual differences and social factors) that come between the stimulus and the response, and thereby mediate any potential effects; although the basic 'cause-and-effect' model continues to apply. This kind of research implicitly conceives of the child consumer as a *tabula rasa* – a blank slate on which marketers inscribe their harmful mes-

sages. (For reviews of this kind of work, see Gunter et al., 2005; and Gunter and Furnham, 1998.)

By contrast, consumer socialization research tends to draw on frameworks from developmental psychology in proposing a sequence of 'ages and stages' in maturation (John, 1999; McNeal, 2007). From this perspective, children's development as consumers is related to the development of more general cognitive skills and capacities, such as the ability to process information, to understand others' perspectives, to think and reflect in more abstract ways, and to take account of multiple factors that might be in play in decision-making. Influenced by parents and peers, as well as media and marketing, children's consumer behaviour is seen to become gradually more autonomous, consistent and rational. This approach inevitably leads to a 'deficit model' of the ways in which children understand, interpret and act upon their world: they are seen simply in terms of what they lack. The view of socialisation here is fundamentally teleological: it regards development as a linear progression towards the final achievement of adult rationality. In common with developmental psychology more broadly, this approach also neglects the emotional and symbolic aspects of consumer behaviour, in favour of cognitive or intellectual ones.

Critics of this approach argue that a more socio-cultural account of consumer socialisation is required. Karin Ekstrom (2006), for example, proposes that consumer socialisation is an ongoing, lifelong process, rather than something that is effectively concluded at the point of entry to adulthood; that it varies among different social and cultural groups, and over time; and that it involves different life experiences and contexts of consumption. As such, there can be no single definition of what counts as a 'competent' consumer. Ekstrom also argues that children should be seen as active participants in the process of socialisation, not as passive recipients of external influences. Likewise, Dan Cook (2010) proposes that the notion of socialisation should be replaced by the notion of 'enculturation', which he suggests would help to move beyond the normative, monolithic approach of consumer socialisation research.

He argues that children are already implicated in consumer culture from before the point of birth; and that rather than seeking to assess children's knowledge in the abstract, we need to consider how that knowledge is used (or not used) in everyday social practice. Learning to consume is seen here not as a matter of one-way transmission from parent to child, but on the contrary as a process of negotiation involving diverse social agents, in which multiple meanings are in play.

As objects of psychological inquiry, children tend to be perceived and defined in particular ways here. The primary interest is in *internal* mental processes of cognition or emotion: the 'social context' is predominantly understood as an external variable or influence. Children are also conceptualised principally in terms of *development* – that is, in terms of their progression towards the goal of adult maturity. And methodologically, much of the focus is on what children *think* – or say they think, often in response to psychometric tests – rather than in what they *do*, or even on how their knowledge is used in everyday life. By and large, children are not seen here as independent social actors: as sociologists of childhood would have it, they are seen not as *beings*, but only as *becomings* (cf. Lee, 2001).

Politically, this kind of approach also feeds into a familiar game of 'blaming the media'. For example, there is a growing tendency in many countries to blame marketers and advertisers for the rise in childhood obesity; and this is an issue that is also becoming an increasing preoccupation for researchers (see Buckingham, 2009a, b). Yet there may be many other complex reasons for this phenomenon. In fact, poor people are most at risk of obesity – and this 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', the fact that children (at least in some countries) are now much less independently mobile, and the increasing privatisation of public leisure facilities. As with debates about media 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.

Consumption in context

The key point here is that it makes little sense to abstract children's relationship with advertising, or their consumer behaviour, from the broader social and historical context. Indeed, the distinction between consumption and the 'context' in which it occurs may itself be misleading: it might be more appropriate to regard consumption as a form of *social practice*, and as a dimension of other social practices, which collectively *construct* 'contexts'. In a capitalist society, almost all our social activities and relationships are embedded within economic relations. The children's 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, how they help to define the settings themselves, and how they are implicated in the management of power, time and space. In the process, we need to move beyond the notion of the consumer as a self-contained individual, and beyond individualistic notions of desire, identity and lifestyle, to focus instead on relationships and reciprocity.

Johansson (2010) points to Actor Network Theory as an alternative to this individualistic view, by virtue of its emphasis on connections, networks and flows. Agency is seen here, not as a possession of the individual, but rather as something that is exercised in specific situations and events, and via 'assemblages' of human and non-human actors (including objects, artefacts and texts, as well as people). In my view, this approach has much in common with the 'circuit of culture' that is characteristic of Cultural Studies (see du Gay et al, 1997; Buckingham, 2008), not least in that it moves beyond the dichotomy of structure and agency: power is not seen to lie either with consumers or with producers, but precisely in the interrelationships between them.

Anthropological and sociological studies of childhood have begun to address these dynamics in other areas of children's lives (see Qvortrup et al., 2009); and in some recent studies, this approach has begun to be applied to children and parents' everyday consumption practices as well

(see Martens et al., 2004). This work addresses central questions to do with the construction of childhood identities and the wider 'generational order', drawing on the Sociology of Childhood as well as on Cultural Studies and on anthropological studies of 'material culture' (see Buckingham and Tingstad, 2010; Buckingham, 2011).

One particular focus of interest here is how consumption produces and sustains hierarchies of status and authority in children's peer groups. Thus, some research shows how children's clothing purchases can be a site of anxiety about status and belonging as well as of play and creativity (Boden et al., 2004). 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 (for example, of class, ethnicity or gender)? How might such hierarchies work with or against the imperatives of consumer culture (for example, by rendering the 'cool' uncool overnight)? How do we interpret the anti-consumerist rhetoric of some forms of youth culture – and the ways in which it been appropriated for so-called 'ethical' consumption?

Another focus here is the changing role of parenting, and the social expectations that surround it. Gary Cross (2004) has identified the symbolic tension here 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. As parents spend less and less time with their children, they may be more inclined to compensate by providing them with consumer goods. As such, contemporary parenting is now increasingly implicated with the operations of the market – and yet parents often regard this with considerable ambivalence (Pugh, 2009).

Other studies have addressed the experience of young people who are excluded from peer group culture because of their lack of access to consumer goods (e.g. Chin, 2001; Croghan et al., 2006). Not all consumers are equally able to participate, since participation depends not just on one's creativity but also on one's access to material resources: the market is not a neu-

tral mechanism, and the marketised provision of goods and services (not least in the media and in education) may exacerbate existing inequalities. In this context, it is particularly important to understand the consumption practices of children in disadvantaged communities, for whom 'consumer choice' may be a fraught and complex matter. While many children may be able to access some aspects of the goods that become the *lingua franca* of children's culture – for instance, by being part of the audience for the advertising that surrounds them – their experience of the actual products is likely to vary widely with material purchasing power. Elizabeth Chin's work (2001) on poor African-American children usefully challenges the idea that less wealthy children are somehow more at risk from the seductions of consumer culture, exploring how their strikingly altruistic consumption practices - during a shopping trip she arranged as part of the research - are embedded within their social and familial relationships.

Conclusion

Children's involvement in consumer culture is a profoundly ambivalent phenomenon. Of course, there is always an economic 'bottom line': the global child market is a significant source of commercial profit – although, as I have argued, profit is by no means easy or straightforward to secure. On the other hand, the meanings and pleasures that consumer culture affords children – and the roles that it can play in the formation of childhood identities – are significantly more difficult to predict. The market clearly does have a considerable power to determine the meanings and pleasures that are available; but children themselves also play a key role in creating those meanings and pleasures, and they may define and appropriate them in very diverse ways. Despite the often melodramatic claims of campaigners and the generalised optimism of the marketers, the outcomes of children's increasing immersion in consumer culture are by no means the same for all. Seeing this in terms of a simple opposition between structure and agency is inadequate, especially in the

changing context of contemporary consumer culture. We undoubtedly need more adequate theoretical approaches; but we also need to account for the specificity of children's consumption practices in relation to the social contexts and circumstances of their daily lives.

References

Arvidsson, A. (2006) *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture* London: Routledge

Banet-Weiser, S. (2007) *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer-Citizenship* Durham, NC: Duke University Press

Barber, B. (2007) *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* New York: Norton

Bauman, Z. (2007) *Consuming Life* Cambridge: Polity

Boden, S., Pole, C., Pilcher, J., and Edwards, T. (2004) 'New consumers: the social and cultural significance of children's fashion consumption' *Working Papers: Cultures of Consumption Series* 16

Bryman, A. (1995) *Disney and his Worlds* London, Routledge

Buckingham, D. (2007) 'Childhood in the age of global media', *Children's Geographies* 5(1-2): 43-54

Buckingham, D. (2008) 'Children and media: a Cultural Studies approach', in K. Drotner and S. Livingstone (eds.) *Handbook of Children, Media and Culture* London: Sage

Buckingham, D. (2009a) 'The appliance of science: the role of research in the making of regulatory policy on children and food advertising in the UK', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 15(2): 201-215

Buckingham, D. (2009b) 'Beyond the competent consumer: the role of media literacy in the making of regulatory policy on children and food advertising in the UK', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 15(2): 217-230

Buckingham, D. (2011) *The Material Child: Growing Up in Consumer Culture* Cambridge: Polity

Buckingham, D. et al. (2007) *The Impact of the Media on Children and Young People* (review of the literature prepared for the DCSF Byron Review), at http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/byron-review/ (Annex G)

Buckingham, D. and Sefton-Green, J. (2003) 'Gotta catch 'em all: structure, agency and pedagogy in children's media culture' *Media Culture & Society* 25 (3): 379-399

Buckingham, D. and Tingstad, V. (eds.) (2010) *Childhood and Consumer Culture* London: Palgrave Macmillan

Chin, E. (2001) *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press

Clark, E. (2007) *The Real Toy Story: Inside the Ruthless Battle for Britain's Youngest Consumers* London: Black Swan

Cook, D. T. (2000) 'The other "child study": Figuring children as consumers in market research, 1910s-1990s' *Sociological Quarterly* 41 (3): 487-507

Cook, D. T. (2004) *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press

Cook, D.T. (2010) 'Commercial enculturation: moving beyond consumer socialisation', in Buckingham, D. and Tingstad, V. (eds.) *Childhood and Consumer Culture* London: Palgrave Macmillan

Croghan, R., Griffin, C., Hunter, J. and Phoenix, A. (2006) 'Style failure: consumption, identity and social exclusion', *Journal of Youth Studies* 9(4): 463-478

Cross, G. (1997). *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Cross, G. (2004) *The Cute and the Cool*, New York: Oxford University Press

De Cordova, R. (1994) 'The Mickey in Macy's window: Childhood, consumerism and Disney', in E. Smoodin (ed.) *Disney Discourse* London, British Film Institute

Del Vecchio, G. (1997) *Creating Ever-Cool* Louisiana: Pelican.

Denisoff, C., ed. (2008) *The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture* Aldershot: Ashgate

Du Gay, P. et al. (1997) *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* London: Sage

Ekstrom, K. (2006) 'Consumer socialization revisited', pp. 71-98 in R.W. Belk (ed.) *Research in Consumer Behavior, Volume 10* Oxford: Elsevier

Featherstone, M. (1991) *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* London: Sage

Fiske, J. (1990) *Understanding Popular Culture* London: Unwin Hyman

Frank, T. (1997) *The Conquest of Cool* Chicago: University of Chicago

Griffiths, M. (2002) 'Pink worlds and blue worlds: a portrait of infinite polarity'. In *Small Screens: Television for Children*, ed. D. Buckingham, London: Leicester University Press.

Gunter, B. and Furnham, A. (1998) *Children as Consumers* London: Routledge

Gunter, B., Oates, C. and Blades, M. (2005) *Advertising to Children on TV: Context, Impact and Regulation* London: Routledge

HBOS (2007) 'Pocket money rises 600% in 20 years', Press release http://www.hbosplc.com/media/pressreleases/articles/halifax/2007-07-21-Pocketmone.asp?section=halifax

Hendershot, H. (1998) *Saturday Morning Censors: Television Regulation Before the V-Chip*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hendershot, H. (ed.) (2004) *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids*. New York: New York University Press.

Jacobson, L. (2004) *Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century* New York: Columbia University Press

Jenkins. H. (2006) *Convergence Culture* New York: New York University

Johansson, B. (2010) Subjectivities of the child consumer: beings and becomings', in Buckingham, D. and Tingstad, V. (eds.) *Childhood and Consumer Culture* London: Palgrave Macmillan

John, D.R. (1999) 'Consumer socialization of children: a retrospective look at twenty-five years of research', *Journal of Consumer Research* 26(3): 183-213

Klein, N. (2001) *No Logo* London: Flamingo.

Layard, R. and Dunn, J. (2009) *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age* London: Penguin

Lee, N. (2001) *Childhood and Society: Growing Up in an Age of Uncertainty* Buckingham: Open University Press

Lindstrom, M. with Seybould, E. (2003) *BrandChild*, London and Sterling VA: Kogan Page

Linn, S. (2004) *Consuming Kids* New York: Anchor Books

Liverpool Victoria Friendly Society (2010) 'The cost of raising a child tops £200,000', press release, 23 February, at: http://www.lv.com/media_centre/press_releases/

Livingstone, S. (2006) 'Children's privacy online', in Kraut, R. Brynin, M. and Kiesler, S. (eds.) *Computers, Phones and the Internet* (New York: Oxford University Press

Martens, L, Southerton, D. and Scott, S. (2004) 'Bringing children (and parents) into the sociology of consumption', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4(2): 155-182

Mayo, E. and Nairn, A. (2009) *Consumer Kids: How Big Business is grooming Our Children for Profit* London: Constable

McNeal, J.U. (1999) *The Kids' Market: Myths and Realities*, New York: Paramount

McNeal, J.U. (2007) *On Becoming a Consumer: Development of Consumer Behavior Patterns in Childhood* Burlington, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann

Montgomery, K. (2007) *Generation Digital* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Nairn, A. and Dew, A. (2007) 'Pop-ups, pop-unders, banners and buttons: the ethics of on-line advertising to primary school children', *Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice* 9(1)

Nairn, A. and Monkgol, D. (2007) 'Children and privacy online' *Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice* 8: 294-308

Palmer, S. (2006) *Toxic Childhood* London: Orion

Postman, N. (1983) *The Disappearance of Childhood* London: W.H. Allen.

Pugh, G. (2009) *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children and Consumer Culture* Berkeley: University of California Press

Qvortrup, J., Corsaro, W. and Sebastian-Honig, M. (eds.) (2009) *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies* London: Palgrave

Schneider, C. (1987) *Children's Television: The Art, the Business and How it Works*, Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Business Books

Schor, J. (2004) *Born to Buy: The Commercialised Child and the New Consumer Culture*, New York: Scribner

Seiter, E. (1993) *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press

Siegel, D.L., Coffey, T.J. and Livingston, G. (2001) *The Great Tween Buying Machine: Marketing to Today's Tweens* Ithaca, NY: Paramount Market Publishing

Sutherland, A. & Thompson, B. (2003) *Kidfluence: The Marketer's Guide to Understanding and Reaching Generation* Y. New York: McGraw Hill.

Wasko, J. (2001) *Understanding Disney* Cambridge: Polity