

## **Children and consumer culture**

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Chan, K. (2013) Children and consumer culture, in Lemish, D. (Ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Children, Adolescents and Media Studies*, (pp. 141-147), Oxon, U.K., Routledge, ISBN 978-0-415-78368-2

Children represent three markets, a primary market with their own income to spend, an influencer market that gives direction to parental purchases, as well as a future market for all goods and services (McNeal, 1992). Parent-child relationship in western societies changes from authoritative to mutual understanding. Children's voices are taken seriously in family purchases (Valkenberg and Cantor, 2001).

### **The development of a children's consumer culture in the U.S.**

The development of children as a consumer market in the United States can be traced to the period 1890 to 1940 (Leach, 1993a). As mass production of consumer goods outpaced consumer demand, marketers looked to children as a neglected demographic group at which they could target their products (Strasser, 1989). Social transformations including the democratization of middle-class family life, the increasing salience of children's peer relations and group activities, and growing regard for the legitimacy of children's self-expression convinced marketers that children were an important consumer market (Jacobson, 2008).

That market witnessed explosive growth in the variety and supply of children's toys and clothing (Leach, 1993a), the establishment of children and teen's toys and clothing sections in department stores (Cook, 2004) as well as mail-order catalogues (Jacobson, 2008), the allocation of retail space for children's playgrounds to attract shoppers (Leach, 1993a; 1993b), the development of personalized customer relationship programs for young consumers (Formanek-Brunell, 1993), the publication of consumer magazines for children and teens (Jacobson, 2004), and the

promotion of products at schools through commercialized teaching materials (Manning, 1999). To gain access to the parents, marketers in the early 1930s used visual images that idealized the companionate family and associated their products with children's developmental needs (Jacobson, 2008). Advertisers positioned themselves as friendly advisors that helped youth succeed in the trials of peer culture. Advertisers offered young people tips on impression management and immediate solutions to their concerns about personal appearance and popularity (Jacobson, 2004).

In the new media age, marketers gain access to the juvenile market using digital tools including buzz marketing, developing web sites for children and sponsoring trendsetters to influence discussions in chat rooms (Jones & Reid, 2010). The prevalence of media in children's bedrooms and the omnipresent images of consumer goods for children are influencing their perceptions of a good life and well-being (Jacobson, 2008).

### **The global toy market**

Besides food and beverages, the first group of commercial products that a child comes into contact is toys. Infants are introduced to stuffed animals and mobiles at the crib. Toddlers learn to touch, feel, and play with play items (McNeal, 1987). Toys are part of the children's consumer culture as they are brought and consumed to display a certain lifestyle and identity (Bonderbjerg & Golding, 2004). Playing is an integral part of childhood. Due to the marketing efforts of a small number of mega-corporations for toys, a child's form of play changes from a spontaneous and unsupervised form to a commercialized and branded form. This results in bigness and sameness in children's consumer culture (Schor, 2004).

The following paragraphs identify the trends of the global toy market and discuss its impacts on children's consumer culture. The toy market worldwide is

estimated to have been worth about US\$83 billion in 2010, an increase of 5 percent over the previous year (NPD Group, 2011). The United States remained the largest toy market with US\$22 billion in sales, followed by Japan, China, the U.K. and France. Economic growth and the large child populations in those countries accounted for their market size. Toy sales in emerging markets including Brazil, Russia, India and China grew 13 percent, more than double of the growth of the global toy market. Analysis of 1,477 items requested by U.S. children as holiday gifts reveals that the most frequently mentioned were Barbie dolls and Lego blocks. This indicates that the children's consumer culture is brand-oriented (Getzier, 2011).

Marketers often position themselves and their products as children's allies (Cook, 2007). They have adopted child empowerment discourse that values children not as a vulnerable audience susceptible to exploitation, but as a group of knowing, active consumers who exercise choice (Kunkle & Roberts, 1991). The child empowerment approach leads to positive identification with children and adopting their point of view (Cook, 2007). In ads for children's products, child empowerment is typically communicated through the use of language that addresses children directly as "you" or "you and your family". Children are typically in the foreground of the visuals, which encourage children to experience the products or services before their peers. Children are the presenters in the advertising stories (Gram, 2011).

Marketers involve children in the design and of their products so as to recognize children's choices. For example, a candy producer allowed children to combine flavors in their own manner (Dahm, 2002). Internet technology has facilitated children's expressing their interests and choices in promotions through online platforms. Post-campaign studies have found that children participate with enthusiasm in such marketing efforts (Angrisani, 2002; Cuthbert, 2002).

The toy market witnessed a convergence of toy manufacturers, the media industry, and the high-tech industrial economy. Older children are now playing with mobile phones, internet, and online games. So, the media becomes the toy. The children's consumer culture is becoming global as the media and the contents creation process is being globalized (Bondebjerg & Golding, 2004).

### **Children and youth market segments**

The children and youth market is usually segmented by age, sex, and perhaps race or ethnicity (McGinnis, Gootman, & Kraak, 2006). For example, the online Toys "R" Us shop uses the 8 age segments: birth–12 months, 12–24 months, 2 year-olds, 3–4, 5–7, 8–11, 12–14, and "big kids" (Toys "R" Us, 2011). Marketing scholars and market research agencies have proposed alternative segmentations based on lifestyles, or the activities-interest-opinion framework (Wells & Tigert, 1971). Lauffer (2003) constructed four primary play dimensions of inner-directedness (playing alone), other-directedness (playing with others), playing in a reality context, and playing in a fantasy context. The four dimensions were used to define four discrete child mindsets: Achievers who were motivated by individual ability and success; Dreamers who were motivated by unstructured play and imagination; Leaders who were driven by goals and winning over peers; and Collaborators who enjoy interaction with peers and cooperation in a group (Lauffer, 2003). Lauffer further proposed that a child's mindset is influenced by the dominant culture of their country (Lauffer, 2003).

Narang (2010) collected psychographic data from 264 respondents aged 16 to 26 in India using Kahle's (1983) consumption-related List of Values instrument. The data resulted in four clusters: Get-going Adopters who were extremely fond of company, enjoyed excitement; and wanted to enjoy life to the full; Inner Value-oriented Conservatives who possessed a well-defined internal set of religious values;

Politics and Sports Enthusiasts who shared a keen interest in political activities and enjoyed various kinds of sports; as well as Independent Life Lovers who exhibited a strong liking for a lot of variety in their life and were serious about arts and culture (Narang, 2010). Narang compared these results with findings from psychographic studies of Chinese adults (Ma, 2004), and of adults from Thailand, Malaysia, and The Philippines (Ewing, de Bussy, & Leyland, 1998). Much similarity was found while the Politic and Sports Enthusiasts cluster was unique to the Indian youth.

While such segmentations attempt to classify children and youth into meaningful groups, we should not forget the underlying commonality among all children and youth. The children and youth consumer culture demonstrates increasing similarity in terms of technology focus, a deep interest in the process of becoming who or what they will be in the future, being experience-driven, and a desire to get connected with peers in physical as well as virtual communities (Ekstrom & Tufte, 2007; Gram, 2011; Stock & Tupot, 2006).

Children today are active internet users as well as consumers, and marketers are developing internet strategies to engage children and youth. Children willingly play online games on brand websites, download commercials and jingles, seek solutions to games or puzzles on product packages, create their own versions of brand-related content, and enroll as members or friends of their favorite brands (Jones & Reid, 2010). Integrating interactive content with product promotions supported by cartoon spokesmen encourages young consumers to develop a strong and playful connection with a brand. In this way, brands have been successfully woven into the everyday life of the children and the youth marketers are targeting (Chester & Montgomery, 2008).

Parents were aware of the symbolic meaning of consumption for children. They are eager to spend money on their children because they want them to have a sense of social belonging in terms of owning the right kinds of goods and living the right experiences. They worry that if their children do not have the right possessions they will look and feel abnormal (Pugh, 2009).

### **Consumption and identity**

Children perceive toys as possessions. What they own tells who they are. When children in mainland China were asked to draw pictures about a child with a lot of toys and a child with few, the drawings and the subsequent interviews demonstrated that the children most often associated toys with fun and excitement. They also perceived that having the right toys would help them attract friends, be successful, and enjoy self-confidence. Older children had a more complex association between toys and social significance. They perceived that more toys could bring more fun and more friends, but at the same time could also trigger selfishness, envy and arrogance. Older Chinese children believed strongly that having a lot of toys would have a negative impact on their schoolwork (Chan, 2005).

Brands are playing a role in defining, expressing, and communicating self-concepts among children and adolescents (Chaplin & John, 2005). A series of experiments with U.S. children and adolescents aged 8–18 found that self-brand connections developed with age. Children in middle childhood made a limited number of self-brand connections, and those connections were based mainly on concrete associations with the brands, such as owning the branded item. Adolescents demonstrated stronger self-brand connections, and those connections were based on abstract qualities of personality, user characteristics, or reference group affiliation (Chaplin & John, 2005). Children's immersive involvement with brands can affect

them socially and emotionally, as well as leading to endorsement of materialistic values (Marshall, 2010).

### **The Disney brand**

Children in the world are consuming branded goods produced by the major toy and media companies. Are their similar relationships with the product resulting in homogeneity of consumer values? This section uses Disney as a case study to answer this question.

The renowned Disney brand is one of only two of the top 10 global brands aimed primarily at children. McDonald's ranks no. 6 and Disney no. 9 (Interbrand, 2011). The Walt Disney Company is one of the world's largest media conglomerates (Siklos, 2009). Its promise of "magic and imagination" brought in net income of US\$4.8 billion in 2011 (Oregon Public Broadcasting, 2011). Disney is a leader in film production, television, travel, publishing and online media (Nigel Wright Consultancy Limited, 2011). It owns the ABC television network and cable networks such as the Disney Channel and ABC Family. It owns or licenses 14 theme parks, including its own parks in Los Angeles, Orlando, Tokyo, Paris and Hong Kong (Nigel Wright Consultancy Limited, 2011). A sixth Disneyland is expected to open in Shanghai in 2016 (TravelChinaGuide, 2011). The five Disneyland parks in operation are estimated to attract 84 million visitors each year (TravelChinaGuide, 2011). Disney products are available in more than 220 Disney owned or licensed retail shops in North America, more than 100 shops in Europe, and 40 in Japan (Disney Consumer Products, 2011). The Disney online store sells toys, dolls, home decorations, "art works" and collectables, as well as theme park products to every corner of the world (Disney Store, 2011).

Some scholars have criticized Disney for its worldview and values, including distorted female images and its potential negative impact on young children. For example, scholars comment that the female characters in Disney films are often weak, passive and highly dependent on the approval of (or even rescue by) the male characters (e.g., Bell, Hass, & Sells, 1995; Kasturi 2002). Baker-Sperry (2007) analyzed the text of Disney's official *Cinderella* story book and found the following themes: romantic love at first sight, the expectation that the females and not the males would take up domestic work, magical transformation, rescuer and rescued roles, the importance of physical beauty, as well as the lack of a pivotal male role. Martin and Kazyak (2009) analyzed Disney's G-rated films and found that heterosexuality was favored through portraying heterosexual romantic love as powerful and transformative, as well as through different ways of depicting men's and women's bodies. The sexiness of feminine Disney characters was always defined by the gaze of masculine characters (Martin & Kazyak, 2009). Characters in Disney's stores are instrumental in children's learning of sex roles. Gender reception studies found that Disney fairy tales provided the children audience with social meaning of romance and marriage (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Lee, 2008).

Wasko (2001) argued that Disney's extensive use of synergies such as licensing agreements for merchandize, vigilant protection of its copyright, and the straight control of its workforce helped to promote a deliberate and standardized vision of fantasy. However, its demand of commitment and sacrifice of workers in Disney theme parks and the extensive surveillance of park visitors were being criticized (Wasko, 2001).

Consumption of Disney products varies in different cultural contexts. Disney emphasizes fun and imagination, but it also pays attention to the needs and the cultural norms of the target market. In China, an emerging economy that places tremendous emphasis on education, Disney launched a chain of English language schools called Disney English. It was the first Western media company to operate a school in China (D'Altorio, 2010). There were 23 Disney English centers in China as of August 2011, and more were planned (Disney English, 2011). Chinese parents view English as a ticket to the world, and aspire to equip their children with fluent English as early in childhood as possible (The Economist, 2010). The strategy of positioning Disney products as educational tools helps Disney react to the stringent publishing rules and rampant [infringement of intellectual](#) piracy in China (D'Altorio, 2010). Because of China's restriction of foreign media, Disney was not able to start a television channel or distribute the full series of Disney movies (Areddy & Sanders, 2009). Thus, Disney English became an alternative for reaching child consumers and their parents. Chinese children attended Disney English classes as an after school activity. Disney characters, books, songs, TV shows and movies are incorporated as teaching materials. Classrooms are even named after Disney movie characters. Students who perform well are rewarded with stationary, flash cards and other items especially designed as incentives for the Chinese market (Areddy & Sanders, 2009). Parents trust the Disney brand because of its strong international image, and Disney English has developed an online "parent portal" to inform parents about the progress of their child and engage them in the learning process (Disney English, 2011). Parents are encouraged to log on to the portal to find ways to encourage their children to pick up the language (Areddy & Sanders, 2009). Chinese parents appreciate Disney

English's ability to engage children in learning English in a fun way, perhaps triggering a passion for English (Xiudadad, 2009).

Previously, the success of Disney cartoons in China brought criticism of cultural imperialism (Mufson, 1996). For example, Chinese people were not happy with the portrayal of the national heroine Mulan in Disney's film (Liu, 2009). Today, some parents worry that the over-emphasis on fun may erode Chinese children's commitment to traditional virtues of hard work, discipline and moral integrity (Mufson, 1996).

To conclude, children are recognized as important targets for commercial products and services. The development of the children's consumer market sometimes is criticized as commercialization of childhood. Using the toy market as an example, we identify that the children's consumer culture is moving toward brand and technology focus, homogeneity, and in multimedia formats. There is emphasis on market segmentation, meaning children of similar age, same sex, and similar psychographics are assumed to be attracted by a uniform product and benefit appeal. Review of children and consumer culture lead us to a question about how children of different cultures interact with brands with different consumer values. Further analysis can focus on the ways children in different cultures respond to marketing communications of leading global brands of interest to them.

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