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10 The consumer socialisation of children

This chapter examines several key themes in the research literature dealing with children and consumer culture. 'Consumer socialisation' refers to the concept of providing children with a group identity through consumption of brands. Through exposure to direct and indirect advertising and marketing practises across all media platforms children are socialised as consumers.

The research literature discusses a range of influences associated with the consumer socialisation of children and the starting point here is a recent review of twenty-five years of research on consumer socialisation of children (John, D.R. 1999). The role of children’s developmental stages in their ability to analyse persuasive intent in marketing discourse, the role of social development in children’s identification with ‘brands’, for example, how brands become symbolically important to children and how the ownership, display and knowledge of brand ‘meanings’ forms part of group identities, and marketers’ use of children’s developmental progression to tailor promotions that are designed to foster lifelong brand loyalty are discussed.

This chapter also examines indirect product marketing through the relationship between producers of children’s merchandise and the producers of children’s screen entertainment. This relationship may occur in the context of the placement of toys and other products in children’s story and game worlds, ‘branded’ game and internet environments, and ‘viral marketing’ techniques.

Consumer development

In her review of research on consumer socialisation of children, Deborah Roedder John analyses the two main developmental trajectories influencing the socialisation of children. The first of these is a ‘cognitive development model’. The second is a ‘social development model’ (John, D.R. 1999). According to John, each stage of a child’s development is characterised by particular cognitive and social characteristics, and each of these stages has implications for socialisation into consumer society. The first of these is the perceptual stage (children aged 3–7 years); the second, the analytical stage (7–11 years). In the third stage, the reflective stage (11–16 years), children are cognitively and socially sophisticated enough to reflect on material found in advertising and promotions. According to John’s review, children shift from a naively simple and trusting attitude towards the world (including advertising and marketing manifestations of the world) to an increasingly complex and sceptical (or even eventually cynical) worldview. The study suggests that children in the first two stages are the most vulnerable and open to persuasion by marketing and branding (John 1999).

Pimentel and Reynolds (2004) refer to the (industry) goal of ‘consumer devotion’. The goal is for brands to supply such central emotional and symbolic meanings to young consumers that they will continue to be influenced by these meanings throughout life. The operation of ‘consumer devotion’ is exemplified by one adult respondent who stated: ‘I was raised on Colgate and it worked for me throughout my childhood and adult life and continues to work. I have believed this all my life and I impart this on to my children’ (cited in Pimentel, R. & Reynolds, K. 2004: 23).
John also reviews the literature on how children develop as consumers. In the perceptual stage, she summarises, children take appearance as reality and do not attempt to see what might lie ‘behind the scenes’. Children believe that ‘ads are truthful, funny, and interesting’, begin to associate brand names with product categories, see retail stores as simply a source of desired items, have limited awareness of information sources and value the surface features of possessions, such as having more of something (John, D.R. 1999). Children’s trust and desire, John argues, make them potentially vulnerable to marketing. In the analytical stage, children have ‘a more sophisticated understanding of the marketplace, a more complex set of knowledge about concepts such as advertising and brands, and a new perspective that goes beyond their own feelings and motives’. Product categories or prices are conceptualised in terms of functional dimensions, ‘products and brands are analysed and discriminated on the basis of more than one dimension or attribute, and generalisations are drawn from one’s experiences’ (John, D.R. 1999).

Though more sophisticated, children at this developmental stage are more receptive to the social side of marketing: belonging to a group becomes important, and group membership may easily be demonstrated through the possession and display of branded objects that come to mark the identity of the group. Marketers aim to provide the group with an identity through the consumption of appropriate items. John argues that this may be powerful for adolescents in the process of identity development (1999).

Some scholars have raised concerns about consumer socialisation and increasing materialism; others have argued that consumer socialisation can benefit social relationships. John argues that one ‘of the most enduring concerns about consumer socialization is that our culture encourages children to focus on material goods as a means of achieving personal happiness, success, and self-fulfilment’ (1999). This materialism of the young is generally seen as harmful. Other studies have argued that possession of consumer goods is necessary for negotiation of identity in the social world (Bonner, F. 2000), and for the establishment and maintenance of relationships and in this sense may be seen as beneficial (Corrigan, P. 1997).

Researchers have also studied the influence of children on adult purchasing decisions. Children are not necessarily the final objects of child-centred marketing. Studies have discussed the notion of ‘pester power ‘or the ‘nag factor’ (Center for Science in the Public Interest 2003; Zanker, R. 1999), through which children influence adults to purchase the smaller child-relevant things they desire. However, there is some evidence that children can have an influence on the purchases of big-ticket items for the whole family, more so in the earlier stages of decision-making (John, D.R. 1999). In addition, Lindstrom (2004) suggests that even ‘when it comes to the choice of a car—more than 60 per cent of all tweens (8–14 year-olds) had a substantial influence on the final decision’. By targeting children, marketers may be able to gain some influence over the purchases made by adults, who might otherwise make different consumer decisions (Lindstrom, M. 2004).
Brand loyalty

In a recent quantitative study, market researchers examined children's spending power, media exposure, and identification with brand names. A survey designed to measure young people's attitudes toward and interaction with, various consumer socialisation agents and marketplace factors such as shopping and media use behaviours, was administered to 663 children (Dotson, M. & Hyatt, E. 2005). A factor analysis was then performed and promoting brand loyalty was found to be less predictable than marketers suppose. The researchers argue that gender and peer variables, time spent alone after school, amount of television viewing, and amount of discretionary spending, all mediate purchasing decisions and brand awareness. Children who spent more time after school apart from adult mediation, either shopping or watching TV, were more likely to be socialised to brand awareness. Children with more discretionary funds were more likely to purchase products (Dotson, M. & Hyatt, E. 2005). Though an accepted methodology in market research literature, it should be noted that results obtained by factor analysis are necessarily more hypothetical than those obtained when all variables can be observed directly.

Toys and children's culture

In his seminal, multi-disciplinary study, which included content and industry analysis together with analysis of children's play styles and cultural practices, Stephen Kline investigated the influence of the toy industry on culture produced for children (Kline, S. 1993). The study examined marketing addressed to children through both direct advertising and through the influence of the toy industry on the design and production of children's screen entertainment. The study argued that this influence has resulted in reduced quality and diversity in the production of US children's animation and narrative.

Licensing of 'brand' names associated with successful children's book and media texts and characters for the purposes of general merchandise and cross-platform adaptations (such as games) has also been researched. Branded 'spin-off' merchandise includes DVDs, games, books (movie tie-ins), magazines and, of course, toys (Fleming, D. 1996). Fleming's study examined the 'narrativisation' of toys in children's screen culture: the way in which products claim a place in children's 'story' repertoires. Both Kline and Fleming draw attention to the crucial economic relationship between merchandising and the commercial viability of children's screen entertainment production. The nature of this relationship may lead to community anxieties about the 'commodification' of children's entertainment fiction.

A more recent study reviews the growth in branded licensed merchandise for children inspired by books (Booth, E. & Hayes, D. 2005). The study argues that literary fiction is an art form that has always had a close relationship with the market, and that the full commercial value of children's books lies in the potential for interpreting their content and characters into diverse product categories. Another positive interpretation of the cross-platform commercialisation of cultural production is found in a recent book by Henry Jenkins (Jenkins, H. 2006c). Jenkins examines the way in which 'convergence' impacts on audiences, producers and content, arguing that recent media franchises like Survivor, The Matrix and American Idol, can make use of the new participatory culture of consumers for (industry) success and product exposure, and to facilitate increased pleasure on the part of users.
Internet marketing

In their study of children and computers, Wartella and Jennings (2000) show that ‘similar promises and concerns have accompanied each new wave of media technology... films in the early 1900s, radio in the 1920s, and television in the 1940s’. They suggest that there are regularly recurring cycles of praise and blame: ‘In general, proponents of media innovation argue that the new technology benefits children by opening up new worlds to them, while opponents argue that new media might be used to substitute for real life in learning ethical principles, undermining children’s morality and causing them to engage in illicit sexual and criminal behavior’. Their study argues that interactivity provides two things that at first sight appear entirely positive: a sense of community through interaction with others and a sense of control through the use of problem-solving software; however these communities are also vehicles for product marketing (Wartella, E. & Jennings, N. 2000).

Other studies have examined the phenomena of ‘branded environments’ (Montgomery, K. 2001) and the operation of covert ideology, or ‘hidden persuaders’, in product placement across a range of media and services (Schor, J. 2006). The term branded environments refers to internet communities organised under the auspices of a branded product: the boundaries and content of the interactive world are set by the brand, which becomes the ultimate mediator of relations between members of the community. As one advocacy publication argues, by ‘creating Web sites specifically for kids, companies can appeal to children early to foster brand loyalty. A key component of branded environments is the use of “advergames”, or Internet games that feature specific products. Advergames are very popular with children and, as such, are highly appealing to advertisers’ (Children Now 2005). Buying advertised products may lead to special privileges within the relevant branded space.

Research has also examined the online cultural exchange centred around toys (Buckingham, D. & Sefton-Green, J. 2004; Ito, M. 2006; Sefton-Green, J. 2004). Pokemon cards have been cited as the first major children’s collection object marketed through the internet, bringing thousands of new customers to the online auction and shopping website eBay (Seiter, E. 2005). Seiter’s study examines the relationship of toys and product marketing via the online role-playing game Neopets. The ‘persistent multiplayer online universe’ in this game is called Neopia and ‘has an inflation rate, a stock market, and possibilities for fraud. Pets hold bank accounts and can earn interest or buy stocks’ (Seiter, E. 2005). Points in the game may be gained through games of chance such as poker and roulette, while games points can also be gained through looking at advertising on the site: ‘a visit to a comparison shopping website, in which one required task is to get prices for three different electronic devices (digital cameras, MP3 players, and DVD players, for example) can earn a player 1,650 points’ (Seiter, E. 2005). Seiter sees these practices as akin to recruiting the next generation of gamblers, concluding that players of Neopets learn to take care of their pets, but in an atmosphere structured through consumerism and marketing.

The community aspect of online life also allows the flourishing of what Subramani and Rajagopalan (2003) call ‘viral marketing’ spread by ‘word-of-mouse’, which is the tactic of creating a process on an online network by which interested people can market to each other. ‘Viral marketing’ is clearly predicated on the trust that grows up between people on online communities:
Viral marketing is a powerful means for both marketers and recipients to benefit from the innate helpfulness of individuals in social networks. However, success hinges upon the recognition of the strong need for influencers to be viewed as knowledgeable helpers in the social network rather than as agents of the marketer (Subramani, M. & Rajagopalan, B. 2003).

Turow (2003) shows another way in which the trust of children may be seen to be exploited for gain by marketers over the internet. The web permits direct relations between children and marketers, and sophisticated online data gathering techniques allow complex consumer profiles to be generated. Turow notes that if even adults ‘freely give information about themselves to get information and material goods’ then children are likely to be more susceptible to the ‘naive release of information to Web sites … Take the example of a 14-year-old who reveals his parents’ favourite Web sites to a Web site for a “free” gift, not realising that his parents consider such data sensitive’ (Turow, J. 2003).

Chung and Grimes raise the issue of privacy for children occasioned by ‘datamining’ through information provided to web sites: marketers ‘mine’ blogs and forums written by children ‘for details about their private lives and consumer profiles’, by means of applications that sift through vast amounts of data looking for ‘otherwise non-obvious’ information, facts and/or relationships’. They see all this as a danger to the privacy and freedom of expression of children, and as risking the infringement of ‘children’s potential intellectual property rights and other authorship rights over the ideas, creativeness and cultural artefacts they continue to produce and distribute online’ (Chung, G. & Grimes, S. 2005).

**Sex, advertising and children**

Children may be exposed to advertising that appears to use sexuality as a marketing strategy. In a recent Australia Institute report, Rush and La Nauze (2006) argue that advertising and marketing may present children in a sexually suggestive way and seek to sell products to children using overt forms of adult sexuality. The study uses a content analysis methodology; effects on the audience are inferred from the nature of the media content itself, as in some of the studies on sexual media cited earlier in this review. Arguing from a developmental perspective, Rush & La Nauze (2006) suggest that the ‘slowly developing sexuality of children’ has been unnaturally hastened—leading to a rapid sexualisation, cultivated by electronic and print media images of clothing and cosmetics, in promotions targeted towards pre-teen children.

Examples of harm that may result as a consequence of early sexualisation suggested by the researchers include eating disorders, negative body image, increased attention-seeking and sexualised behaviour, the possibility of promoting sexual abuse and early onset of sexual activity, and preoccupation with sexualised appearances leading to displacement of activities that may provide more useful life skills (Rush, E. & La Nauze, A. 2006). Following Walkerdine (1999), Rush and La Nauze also argue for potential differences in effects due to socio-economic status. For example, they suggest that a sexualised body may be relatively more important as an element of capital, that is, what it can ‘get’ for you, for a working-class than a middle-class child. Potential harms, they argue, are greater for the working-class child, who may be lacking the protection of more extensive middle-class resources. As is the case with content analyses discussed earlier in the review, these effects are hypothesised from an analysis of the promotional discourse of the media texts, rather than measured in studies of how these texts are received by audiences.
The concept of cultural capital has been studied in relation to consumption practices. Other Australian studies argue that, in order to be integrated into consumer economies, all humans need in some sense to be socialised to consumption practices; for example, Corrigan argues that the historical tendency has been for consumption to spread to ever greater numbers of people, including children (Corrigan, P. 1997). This is a stance also favoured by industry bodies (Schor, J. 2006).

**Summary**

‘Consumer socialisation’ refers to the concept of providing children with a group identity through consumption of brands. Researchers suggest that children’s developmental stages affect their ability to analyse persuasive intent in marketing discourse, while their social development plays a role in children’s identification with ‘brands’.

Products can be promoted to children and adults through internet games and viral marketing techniques. In addition, there are opportunities for indirect product marketing through the relationship between producers of children’s merchandise and the producers of children’s screen entertainment.

Certain advertisements and other media content have been criticised for promoting unrealistic body images and allegedly representing children in a sexualised manner, while other researchers argue that socialisation through consumption practices facilitates social life in modern cultures.

The primary risk factors associated with marketing to children identified by researchers are age, gender and socio-economic status.

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1 Factor analysis is a statistical data reduction technique which is used to study the patterns of relationship among many dependent variables. It aims to discover something about the nature of the independent variables that affect dependent variables, even though those independent variables were not measured directly. Thus answers obtained by factor analysis are necessarily more hypothetical and tentative than is true when independent variables are observed directly. The inferred independent variables are called ‘factors’. Factor analysis is used in some of the social sciences, marketing and consumer behaviour research literature, and other applied disciplines, especially in those contexts where researchers seek to measure fundamentally unobservable variables such as intelligence and personality.

2 In a long career arguing for quality Australian programming, Patricia Edgar has made similar points about the poor standard of imported US programming for children. See, for example, her recent personal and industry memoir (Edgar, P. 2006).

3 See chapters 4, 5, 6 and 8.