

# Understanding the Child Consumer

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Over the past 2 decades, children's involvement in consumer culture has expanded markedly. Children spend more money, are more likely to be shoppers, devote more time to commercial media, and are more psychically attuned to brands than ever before.<sup>1,2</sup> Estimates are that between 1989 and 2005, children's own purchasing power rose from \$6.1 to \$40 billion and that in 2005, children younger than 14 years old influenced \$680 billion of parental expenditures.<sup>1,2</sup> The business press reports that 47% of parental household spending is now influenced by children, either directly or indirectly.<sup>3</sup>

The expansion of children's purchasing power and influence has led to rapid increases in marketing expenditures targeted at them, which were estimated to total \$15 billion in 2004.<sup>1,2</sup> The Kaiser Foundation's 2005 Survey of Children's media use found that children ages 8 to 18 spend a total of 6.5 hours per day with media, and their total exposure (which includes multitasking) is 8.5 hours.<sup>4</sup> Advertising is now widespread in schools, museums, zoos, supermarkets, airports, and other places that children frequent. Recently, marketers have gained unprecedented access to children's social worlds through widespread "peer-to-peer" (i.e., child-to-child) marketing.<sup>1,5</sup>

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## PARADIGMS OF THE "CHILD"

### The Vulnerable Child

A lively debate has developed about these trends. One position argues that the commercialization of childhood is detrimental to children.<sup>1,6,7</sup> Coalitions of parents, together with education and health professionals, are challenging food marketing practices, commercial presence in public schools, violence in media and toys, materialism, and excessive sexualization in media and other children's products. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychology Association have both passed resolutions opposing commercialization and advertising to children.<sup>8,9</sup> These groups argue that the pervasiveness and power of consumer culture is undermining the physical, emotional, and spiritual health of children. The activist groups span the political spectrum, from Ralph Nader-inspired organizations such as Commercial Alert, that argue marketing activity is "corporate predation,"<sup>6</sup> to conservative groups, such as the Motherhood Project, that consider sexualization, celebrity culture, and excessive materialism as antithetical to family values.<sup>10</sup>

Opponents of commercialization typically share a protectionist view, conceptualizing the child as vulnerable and in need of physical and/or emotional regulation by adults. One school, largely comprising developmentally oriented psychologists and education specialists, opposes all advertising and marketing to children on the grounds that children are conceptually unable to identify marketing, understand its persuasive purposes, and withstand its appeals. For these reasons, marketing is seen as inherently exploitative and unfair. Much of the research underlying this position was motivated by the possibility of government regulations on children's advertising in the 1970s. Although a number of countries regulated or forbade advertising to children younger than 12 years on the basis of this research, in the United

States, this discussion was short-circuited in the wake of a sharp rightward political shift in 1980.

Curiously, given the strong specificity accorded children in this literature, the conceptualization of children mirrors arguments made earlier about adults. In the classic consumer critiques, adults are thought to be manipulated by advertisers into self-destructive spending behaviors, caught in a fruitless cycle of desire, purchase, disappointment, and psychic failure.<sup>11–13</sup> In both the child and adult versions of this argument, consumers are unable to withstand the pull of advertising, which is seen as psychologically and economically exploitative.

A second, now large, body of literature is health oriented and includes studies on the marketing of tobacco, alcohol, and junk foods.<sup>14–17</sup> Although much of this research is agnostic about child exceptionalism, some studies note special risks to children, such as the persistence of eating habits gained in childhood, early onset of food-related diseases such as obesity and diabetes, or a link between early drinking and the likelihood of adult alcoholism.

A third body of literature addresses psychological issues such as the relations between violent media content and violent behavior, body images and disordered eating, and between sexualized media content and sexual activity in children and teens.<sup>18–20</sup> This literature also adopts a protectionist paradigm and identifies children as particularly at risk for harmful behaviors. Although the scientific research is less normative, the academic studies tend to be used by advocates who engage in moral critiques of sex and violence and see children as sacred and innocent, ripe for pollution by seductive, destructive forces, such as sexual desire or a taste for violence.

### The Empowered Child

Sociologists, anthropologists, and cultural studies analysts have taken issue with these formulations, arguing that they are biologically essentialist, “presocial,” or the latest example of a long history of unfounded “moral panics” among adults.<sup>21,22</sup> Authors writing from this perspective remind us that a century ago, adults thought comic books, dime novels, and the cinema would destroy the nation’s youths.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, many of the most influential analysts of children’s consumer culture in recent years are relatively sanguine about children and consumer culture.<sup>24–26</sup> Recent

theorizing has rejected the once-dominant mid-20th century critiques of mass culture, such as the classics noted above,<sup>12–14</sup> as well as those emanating from modernist, developmental paradigms that stress children’s deficiencies and inability to cope with consumer messages and products. An emergent interdisciplinary field of child studies is premised on views of children as agents, methodologies that attempt to capture children’s authentic voices (rather than adult interpretations), and rejection of a sharp dichotomy between adults and children. These sociological views are rooted in historical accounts that argue that childhood as we know it arose largely with modernity in the West.<sup>27</sup> It is, to use the standard term, as much a social construction as a biological or developmental category.

In the realm of consumer culture, the new sociological view stresses children’s agency as consumers, their creativity in making meaning, even with mass produced consumer items, and their evident ability to rewrite media scripts.<sup>25,28</sup> Analysts of social class interpret adult critiques as elitist, arguing that middle-class parents oppose branded toys, television, and fast food because its symbolic coding is low class or mass.<sup>26,29</sup> Other scholars identify economic sophistication among children as they trade and collect consumer items, budget their money, and shop.<sup>30</sup> This literature criticizes simple effects models that assume that one can extrapolate from ad exposure to consumer choice or from racist or sexist toys to the reproduction of these characteristics in children. Marketers themselves articulate some of these positions, defending their activities on the grounds that contemporary children are far more savvy than earlier generations, that children recognize deceptive advertising and are hard to manipulate, and that commercial messages empower them (see Schor,<sup>1</sup> Chapter 9 on marketers’ views).

As with the vulnerable child view, this paradigm also has its counterparts in theories of adults’ relations to consumer culture. In the fields of economics and political science, consumers are thought to be sovereign with respect to producers, and market competition ensures that companies satisfy consumers’ preferences.<sup>31</sup> Economists tend to see advertising as informational rather than preference forming, and more recently, the idea of “hard-wired” preferences is gaining credence. These rational agent theories suggest that consumers know and control their desires optimally and act to enhance their well-being. Marketing does

not affect tastes or manipulate people to act in self-destructive ways. Consumers rule and corporations obey.

A second paradigm of sovereign consumers, which has less to say about the power of corporations, posits a postmodern consumer, using products to construct identity in an active and self-determining way. A now considerable cultural and consumer studies literature emphasizes the creativity and agency of consumers, their ability to extract well-being and meaning, and from goods.<sup>32</sup>

#### The Third Paradigm: An Integrated Child and Adult Critical Perspective

A third approach recognizes the harms of consumer culture, but does not primarily identify them as stemming from deficiencies of the child. This perspective recognizes that modern and postmodern consumer societies do not always yield optimal outcomes. Consumer markets increase certain kinds of product options and choices, but they also have significant weaknesses. For example, consumer culture encourages phenomena such as status consumption, compensatory consumption, and the objectification of others.<sup>33,34</sup> Unlike that of the empowered child paradigm, the commercialization of childhood is seen as a serious threat to children's well-being, but not primarily because they are children. The harms of consumer culture are also thought to be affecting adults.<sup>1</sup>

One line of argument is an attack on the formulations of the liberal model. It posits an autonomous, asocial consumer whose desires are not driven by others' actions.<sup>34</sup> When this unrealistic assumption is dropped and consumers are understood to be influenced by others, such as in cases of status-consumption or bandwagon effects, the market is characterized by a collective action failure. Consumers get caught in a treadmill of buying, in which they need to purchase to keep up with others.<sup>35</sup> This "arms race" is self-defeating because once everyone keeps up, at the margin, goods do not yield benefits commensurate with the costs of acquisition, or their negative affects (such as adverse affects on health or environmental effects). There is too much consumption of these competitive private goods relative to competing activities and products, such as public goods, nonstatus products, savings, and leisure. Although economists have written about this problem for the adult case,<sup>33,35</sup> recognition of status consumption among children and adolescents is more recent.<sup>1,6,36</sup> Among youths, the problem has surfaced as excessive

attention to expensive fashion, lifestyle, and identity products. The ability of advertisers to symbolically code foods such as soda, candy, and fast foods as "cool" products that impart status to children means that food and drink are brought into the competitive nexus and overconsumed.<sup>37,38</sup>

A related problem is that a consumer-driven economy thrives when consumer desires are continually renewed and expanded. However, this requires a state of constant longing and often feelings of dissatisfaction with one's current spending.<sup>39</sup> Marketing and advertising urge people to want more rather than to experience contentment with levels of material affluence that are historically unprecedented and cross-nationally high. There is growing evidence that this yields negative psychic affects. For example, a large psychological literature shows that higher materialist aspirations undermine emotional and physical health and are correlated with depression, low vitality, risky behaviors, and other negative states.<sup>40,41</sup> Schor<sup>1</sup> asked whether these effects, originally studied for adults and adolescents, are operative for children. The research was a study of children ages 10 to 13 that measured not only material aspirations but also a broader concept called consumer involvement, which was a 16-item scale covering values and behaviors. The estimates from a structural equation model found that children with higher consumer involvement were more likely to be depressed, anxious, and bored; to have lower self-esteem; and to suffer from headaches and stomachaches. (There were no significant effects going from psychological states to consumer involvement or media use.) The size of the effects was large. Consumer involvement itself was partly explained by media exposure, both to television and other media. However, media use did not have a direct effect on any of the outcome variables. Its impact was seen only through raising the level of consumer involvement, which in turn affected rates of depression, anxiety, and so forth. This research is the first to ask how general involvement in a consumer economy affects children rather than about specific products or media use. Analyses of the subscales of consumer involvement found that the strongest factor was "dissatisfaction," which was measured by items such as "I wish my family could afford to buy me more of what I want," "I feel like other kids have more stuff than I do," and "I want to make a lot of money when I grow up."

The larger interpretation of these findings may be that the continuous commercial messages that children are exposed to affect their fundamental sense of well-being and that children with high levels of consumer involvement are at risk for a series of negative outcomes. Thus, although marketing may be manipulative, this perspective suggests that it operates by affecting an individual's basic sense of self, relationship to others, perceptions of adequacy, and the social context in which consumption takes place, rather than through a stimulus response model or a direct persuasion effect. This finding is consistent with an interpretation in Schor,<sup>33</sup> which is that adult television viewing increases consumption spending by artificially inflating perceptions of others' affluence. Thus, the processes (and harms) of consumer culture are seen to operate similarly for adults and children.

Finally, it may be worth noting an obvious point, which is that many of the products that have been linked to harm to children—junk food, tobacco, alcohol, drugs, dolls with unrealistic body shapes or inappropriate sexuality, and expensive designer fashion items—are also frequently problematic for adults. We, too, suffer from unhealthy consumption levels of the food, tobacco, alcohol and drugs, disordered eating, and excessive attachment to status items.

In sum, the paradigm being suggested is one that avoids the economic myopia, or boosterism, of liberal theory and the empowered consumer, but which also rejects the child exceptionalism of the protectionist approach. Consumer culture has significant harms associated with it. They are affecting children and parents alike.

Mental health professionals may wonder about the implications of this discussion for their practices. That is a complex question and calls for discussion within the field. However, two suggestions present themselves. First, I recommend the development of a standard set of questions about media and consumer involvement to be used in the initial data-gathering processes and interviews, a media and consumer culture "history." (The American Pediatric Association recommends that its members take a "media" history in addition to the standard history and physical examination.) The second is that if a practitioner suspects that a patient's problems involve consumer culture, a psychoanalytic assessment of the dynamics involving consumer culture activities be undertaken, to be followed by a graduated set of steps to

help the child and parents reduce and de-emphasize problematic or excessive consumption or activities. This is likely to have beneficial effects.

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