

Consumer kids - the influence of the commercial world on our children

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Abstract: *Marketing to children is big business and the commercial world has become an integral part of young people's everyday lives. This has raised concerns around the world, particularly by teachers who are faced with reconciling the values of profit-motivated consumption with those of socially-motivated education. This article considers some of the key issues and proposes an agenda for a robust, inclusive public debate.*

Background

There is no doubt that this generation of children are consumers, but the sheer scale of consumption may come as a shock. Globally the children's market is worth \$1.33 trillion – the equivalent of the entire GDP of India. In the UK alone we spend £100bn annually on our children (Liverpool Victoria, 2009). Regular pocket money and week-end jobs give our young people £12bn of their own disposable income but as family units become more flexible and complex, fewer children receive fixed amounts of weekly pocket money and more get ad-hoc handouts as and when they need or want something. In the UK, £2.1bn was doled out like this last year, much of it by grandparents (ChildWise, 2008). And of course this does not include the family items over which children have increasing influence. Teenagers often do the research and choose the model of TV, DVD, mobile phone or computer – after all, in many homes, they are the only ones who can programme these devices!

It is not surprising, then, that corporations are vying for a share of this rather lucrative pie. One marketing conference alerts potential attendees that "there's £5bn out there burning a hole in UK teenagers' pocket" whilst a leading research company promises advertisers that their database of youth behaviour statistics "helps users to target parental expenditure by focusing

on the key markets where kids pester the most” .

Commercialisation of childhood?

What has been referred to as the “commercialisation of childhood” is causing concern across the globe (Schor, 2004; Palmer, 2006; Mayo and Nairn, 2009) and in 2008 the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) invited an interdisciplinary team of ten academics led by David Buckingham of the Institute of Education to undertake a year-long review of the Impact of the Commercial World on Children’s Wellbeing. I was privileged to be part of this team and our report is due to be published in autumn 2009. When the findings are made public it is to be hoped that a robust public debate will ensue.

Teachers have been amongst the most concerned groups because they have witnessed first-hand pupils turning into consumers. Research in 2008 by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers concluded that their survey *“confirms the huge pressure on young people to fit in with their friends and peer groups. It is incredibly sad to hear how many youngsters are bullied or isolated for not having the same clothes or accessories as their classmates. Advertising and marketing have made our society increasingly image-conscious and our children are suffering the consequences.”*

Teachers are right to be concerned, particularly as children now spend twice as much time in front of a screen (TV, computer, phone, or games console) as they do in the classroom – time which exposes them to media and material which is almost entirely funded by commercial advertising and marketing of one sort or another (Fielder *et al.* 2007).

Yet adults, whether teachers, politicians, NGOs or parents, find it hard to put their finger on exactly what the concern is and why we are so worried. There is often the risk of “golden ageism” – of wishing for some idyllic commercial-free childhood from days gone-by which almost certainly never existed. Advertising, after all, is hardly new. But today in the USA there are schools which are sponsored by Pepsico and where drinking a Coca-Cola on school premises would merit a suspension. There is Channel One which broadcasts educational programmes in schools but only if children sit through a compulsory series of adverts first and school buses funded by marketing messages for soft drinks and confectionary pumped through the sound system. Most in the UK would agree that the use of educational space for such commercial targeting of young people is undesirable.

But what about the current UK practice of Disney providing High School Musical material for the dance curriculum in primary schools? On the positive side it makes it easy for the teacher and fun for the children. On the negative side it can encourage pupils to pester their parents for the multitude of merchandise which so far has earned Disney over 100 times

their investment in the film. “The great thing about having a hit like this” enthused one investment analyst recently, “is that there are many different ways of monetising that hit over and over.” (Fixmer and Hoffmann, 2007). Is it OK to sell space on the walls of the school corridor to advertisers (as happens in UK schools) to fund extra resources? And is it, for example, just as acceptable to advertise youth brands as helpline information? There are guidelines for marketing activity in schools, but they are very flabby and, most importantly, there has been no debate either within the education community or with the wider public about what commercial activity is and is not tolerable within our schools, or even how to go about making these decisions.

Perhaps, very fundamentally, the idea of children being trained in profit-motivated consumption practices sits uneasily with the idea of

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educating our young people for socially-motivated citizenship practices. The goal of the former is private financial gain whilst the goal of the latter is the public good. The former has a whiff of greed whilst the latter involves some generosity. Stephen Ball and Deborah Youdell (2009) have talked of the “hidden privatisation” of public education which has introduced a new vocabulary of

“competition”, “local economies of student worth” and “value” as distinct from “values”.

Marketing to children has also introduced a new vocabulary which tells young people that having the latest brands or sporting the latest hairstyle is their “right” because “they’re worth it” and encourages a culture that “you are what you own”. This, in turn sits uneasily with an agenda for “education without failure”, for those without the financial means to keep up with the trends are disadvantaged. In many ways marketing depends on failure. After all, you only need the product on offer if you are persuaded that something in your life is missing.

What do our pupils think?

But does the commercial world inculcate values of greed and failure wholesale into our young people? If we take the words of best selling song, “The Fear” by youth icon Lily Allen then we might well think so. “I want to be rich and I want lots of money. I don’t care about clever, I don’t care about funny. I want lots of clothes and **** loads of diamonds. I’ve heard people die when they’re

trying to find them...I am a weapon of massive consumption. It's not my fault it's how I'm programmed to function." Are our young people now programmed to want, get, have and acquire?

In a recent book (Mayo and Nairn, 2009), we approach this question from the child's point of view. The research thus draws from surveys, interviews and conversations with over 3,000 children of all ages and backgrounds. We discovered that things look rather different from this vantage point. Whilst for adults the commercial world and the non-commercial world are separable entities, this is simply not the case for children. Since birth this generation has lived in a seamless universe where toys, clothes and even food are licensed "properties" of global corporations. Sports such as football are giant businesses. The internet which has been so rapidly embraced by young people is funded almost entirely by marketing and advertising of one sort or another. And it is increasingly hard, in the virtual world, for children to know what is designed to entertain and what is designed to persuade. Indeed, during the DCSF review, the children we talked to had great difficulty understanding exactly what "the commercial world" is. It is simply the air they breathe.

This does not, however, mean they are "programmed to function" as unthinking consumption machines. In many ways children are very sophisticated. Some Year 6's we talked to displayed astute knowledge of

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business practice including appreciation of commercial pricing strategies and a precocious understanding of the laws of supply and demand. One boy, talking about Beyblades – the little spinning tops – told us *"...so they made them extremely expensive 'cause they (marketers) knew it'd go out of fashion soon so if they could quickly sell them now for lots of money then they would get loads."*

Other children talked about stashing their Lego and train sets in the attic because they knew they would have a rarity value in the future and some even talked about the relative merits of leaving their dolls in the boxes (rather than playing with them) to maintain the resale price. Some of the young people we talked to were inspired to become entrepreneurs and one now runs a highly successful software business which designs products to track online paedophiles. Others were simply scathing of marketing tactics to the extent that only about 30 per cent of children believing anything the adverts tell them.

But this doesn't mean that today's children are quite as "media savvy" as some marketing gurus would have us believe. Very many children are caught out every day by scams such as Jamster where children think they

have bought one ringtone on their mobile phone just to find they have signed up to a subscription service which wipes out their credit every time they top up. Others are disappointed by advertising promise. One seven year old boy told us about buying an Action Man. “... when they advertised them they showed them really, like in places that suited them, but when you actually got them, you didn't actually get the setting... it was just your bedroom.” Beyond this are the new immersive online marketing techniques which work implicitly in such a way that it is hard for children and particularly teenagers to mount any sort of resistance (Nairn and Fine, 2009).

Conclusion and steps forward

The commercial world is not a separable influence on our children that we can remove at will – it is an inextricable part of their everyday lives. But the commercialisation of childhood has happened quickly and rather covertly and we now need open public debate and discussion on how our society should manage the relationship between institutions for public good, such as our schools, and institutions for private profit, such as the corporations behind the brands our kids love to buy. We need to find ways to ensure that our children are not being educated as consumers at the expense of being educated as citizens. Although buying things to express your identity, group membership or even love has its place it will always be tinged by the uncomfortable juxtaposition of the success of the “haves” with the failure of the “have-nots”. Its place in an “education without failure” has limits which deserve exploration.

The debate over the commercialisation of childhood has so far been an extremely polarised one. Moral panic over the corruption of vulnerable youth faces down the celebration of the strong, emancipated child consumer. We need to move to a more inclusive approach. This is probably best done through coalitions of teachers, advertisers, parents, businesses, regulators, academics, NGOs and government. Such groupings are unusual but are forming already, for example the International Business Leaders Forum (www.iblg.org). And such gatherings should not forget representation from young people themselves. The National Children's Bureau, for example, already has an active Youth Panel – as does the DSCF. For, in the face of commercial pressures, children are neither the helpless victims some groups see nor media savvy experts the brand managers like to imagine. They, like adults, are feeling their way and making their own decisions about what they think is and is not acceptable practice in their world.

In writing our book we asked children to tell us how they believe marketers should behave towards them. They asked three things of the commercial world:

- please be honest and upfront with us about products and services;

- please treat us with respect and treat us seriously; and
- please protect us from inappropriate marketing and control advertising for products which are bad for us.

This is a pretty good start. There are other fundamental issues which could be added to the agenda for a public debate led by a co-operative of diverse stakeholders:

- *The internet.* Perhaps for the first time in history children know much more about a life-changing technology than adults. Teachers, parents and politicians must educate themselves about how the internet functions and how it is commercialised if they are to stay ahead of the game. It cannot be adequately regulated until concerned adults truly understand it.
- *Children's privacy.* The ways in which data is collected from children (by phone, by computer, in shops) is becoming ever more sophisticated. There are serious issues relating to the collection of children's data for marketing purposes which are currently under the public radar.
- *Children exposed to adult media.* Children spend a lot of time on websites which are meant for a general audience – which means the adverts served up to them are often of an inappropriate nature. In the same way, with the advent of the Personal Video Recorder and other recording devices the 9 o'clock watershed has become an anachronism. Regulating what children see and where has become a serious challenge.
- *Brand bullying.* Some food and drink corporations have taken on some responsibility for giving out healthy eating messages to children (e.g. signatories to the EU Pledge). Partnerships between schools and owners of desirable brands could lead to similar initiatives.
- *Permissible commercial activity in schools.* Finally and perhaps most importantly for schools, we need to decide what criteria should be used to decide when it is acceptable for businesses to be involved in education and when it is not. The current guidelines are not adequate.

There is much to be debated and much to be decided: so let the discussions commence!

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