



# The disempowering empowerment of children's consumer "choice"

## Cultural discourses of the child consumer in North America

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of the paper is to explore how discourses of children's empowerment through goods have emerged and function as a key narrative among many in children's commercial industries, particularly in the USA and Canada.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The central philosophical and theoretical approach guiding this inquiry rests on the notion that the "child consumer" exists as a rhetorical figure which has an existence that is as consequential as "real," biographical children. The child consumer arises from, and in many ways resides in, discourses produced by marketers, retailers, researchers and advertisers on the pages of marketing publications, often framing the imaginations and guiding the actions of advertisers, retailers, merchandisers and marketers. Articles from trade publications such as *AdWeek*, *BrandWeek*, *Brandmarketing*, *KidScreen* and *Progressive Grocer*, in addition to books written by marketers about the children's market since the 1990s, were examined.

**Findings** – Three key themes – choice, recognition and involvement – were found to be the most prominent in framing children's consumption as "empowering."

**Originality/value** – For scholars and practitioners, the paper offers an approach to understand corporate practice as moral practice by highlighting the ideological justifications presented in defense of promoting children's consumption in the last decade. It offers a cautionary tale about the power of capital to produce and deploy social meaning.

**Keywords** Children (age groups), Consumers, Culture, Canada, United States of America

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

The child consumer today appears as a contested figure on the landscape of consumption. It stands both for corporate exploitation and individual autonomy. Its apparent appetite for all things commercial has been seen, on one hand, as evidence of over-indulgence on the part of parents and, on the other, as the child's active partaking in the deserved pleasures of childhood and, to a less explicit degree, of consumer capitalism. Social critics from across the political spectrum decry the dangers lurking in cartoon narratives, breakfast cereal bowls and video games. Evangelical Christians and devout Muslims alike find the values inherent in children's commercial culture to be formidable foes to their teachings.

The child consumer, albeit troublesome, nevertheless continues to be a fairly productive means to open the family pocketbook. Unfettered by criticism, manufacturers, retailers and advertisers of children's goods forge ahead in the production new goods, spaces, images, media and enticements with unceasing deft and ingenuity. It is a market proven to be exceedingly lucrative, tripling in the 1990s, with estimates ranging from



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\$250 billion (USD) and upwards annually in total sales for children aged 4-14 in the USA alone (McNeal, 1999; Siegel *et al.*, 2001). These figures account not just for children's direct purchases from out-of-pocket allowances, but reflect their significant influence on family spending on everything from daily household items, to the choice of the family car, vacation location, hotel choice and big ticket items like refrigerators and stoves (Sutherland and Thompson, 2001; Guber and Berry, 1993; Acuff, 1997).

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The growth in the children's market throughout the 1990s and into the present day indicates a development beyond a simple increase in actual sales of goods. During this time, the interests of capital forged a new relationship with childhood whereby producers, marketers and advertisers were able to successfully position themselves and their products as children's allies. They did so, in part, by interposing their goods and, importantly, the social meaning of their goods and brands between parents and children in such a way that they could claim, like the Nickelodeon Network in the USA, that their "allegiance" was to "the kids" because "children come first" (Banet-Weiser, 2004; Hendershot, 2004; Schor, 2004).

This privileging of the child has taken many forms. In the discussion below, I examine one thread of the new relationship between capital and childhood which has arisen in the form of discourses of children's empowerment through goods. As a key, emergent narrative among many in the children's trade, particularly in the USA and Canada, "child empowerment" offers solace to parents, educators and any observer who may be concerned about the over-commercialization of childhood. In order to offer an analysis of discourses of "kid" empowerment, I will proceed as follows: I will first outline the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of a cultural approach to children and markets, discuss the "problem" of the "child consumer," and finally analyze examples of child empowerment discourses, which have taken from the marketing publications, with an eye toward uncovering their ideological power.

### **The discursive existence of children and markets**

It must be noted explicitly at this point that the "child consumer" to which I refer throughout this report should not be conceptualized by the reader as sentient being with a biography. It is not a living, breathing person, but rather a social construction – i.e. an assemblage of qualities, beliefs and conjectures concerning the "nature" and motivation of children regarding commercial goods and meanings (Cook, 2000a, b, 2004). As a rhetorical, figurative construction, this "consuming child," however, never exclusively inhabits rhetorical space. It is not a mere figment of language, yet "the child" never resides outside of language. It is never without elaboration and interpretation.

The "child consumer" which is at issue in the following discussion "lives" in many places. It can be found in the discourses of child psychology throughout the early twentieth century (Sammond, 2005; Rose, 1990; James *et al.*, 1998), in conceptions of "nation" (Libal, 2002; Hill, 2002) and in media portrayals which both depict and manufacture notions of "the child" (Seiter, 1993; Dornfeld, 1998; Buckingham, 2000; Banet-Weiser, 2004; Tobin, 2004). My research has examined how the child consumer arises from, and in many ways resides in, discourses produced by marketers, retailers, researchers and advertisers, all of whom have an interest in the children's market (Cook, 2000a, b, 2004). This "child" resides on the pages of marketing publications and in the strategies of media planners, often framing the imaginations and guiding the actions of advertisers, retailers, manufacturers, merchandisers and marketers.

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The rhetorical versions of the consuming child which can be found in these forums and activities are best regarded as cultural readings or cultural interpretations undertaken by interested parties, rather than “true,” “accurate” or “objective” knowledge about children and their consumption practices. What “the child” represents – how it is deployed to make arguments for and against commercial enterprise and the ways in which this construct draws upon extant discourses regarding the “nature” of childhood and the “nature” of markets – I contend, constitute an integral part of the market context of childhood (Cook, 2004, 2005; Langer, 2004; Buckingham, 2000). That is to say, markets involve something over and above the exchange of things and the calculation of value. Markets produce and reproduce social meaning – the meaning of things, of people, of exchanges, of the idea of the market itself (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; Kopytoff, 1986; Carrier, 1997; Slater, 1997) – and thus generate particular meanings surrounding childhood and the child consumer.

Markets of course do not independently and mystically carve out these definitions like a modified version of Adam Smith’s notion of the invisible hand. Rather, in this paper, I espouse and demonstrate a cultural approach to markets and their meaning (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986). I argue that what constitutes a “market” extends beyond acts of exchange and into the activities and discourses of those who participate in them and of those who observe and comment upon them who thereby have an active, visible hand in creating their varied meanings. These social actors – including, but not limited to, journalists, observers, retailers, marketers, advertisers, researchers, manufacturers and academic theorists – through their powers of description and definition contribute to the ongoing shaping of the boundaries and extensions of markets during particular historical times and in specific contexts. In the cultural approach, markets live in language, in signs and symbols, as strongly and tangibly as they do in shopping malls and on trading floors (Carrier, 1997; Slater, 1997).

The present concern here centers on how market actors both invoke and rely on cultural positions and identities – in particular that of the child consumer. To inquire about the social-commercial, discursive production of the “child consumer” is to confront marketing in terms of the politics of representation. That is, it examines how depictions of the “consuming child” have been fashioned and refashioned in ways that render marketing and advertising toward children appear as a benign, even compassionate, undertaking.

In this paper, I engage in such inquiry by examining some publicly available literature produced by those actively involved in the making of markets for children’s goods in the USA and Canada, 1995-2005, with the idea of interrogating a new and emergent discourse of child empowerment or, as many like to say, “kid” empowerment. I do not claim exhaustive, scientific representativeness in the discourses I examine below. I do claim, however, that the patterns and tendencies found in the use of “empowerment” with regard to the contemporary children’s market in North America typify and extend a longstanding marketing practice of describing children as free market actors (i.e. as consumers) which serves to make marketing to them a morally acceptable practice.

At issue here is how market professionals rhetorically frame children’s consumption in terms of personal empowerment. I ask, what meaning or meanings does “empowerment” acquire and impart when deployed in the service of developing

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and promoting children's products? How do invocations of "empowerment" function and what ends do they serve – strategic, moral, ideological – when children's participation in commercial markets is at issue? What relationships, if any, can be drawn between the commercial form of empowerment discussed in the kids' trade and other kinds of empowerment outside of the commercial realm? Before engaging these questions, it is first necessary to revisit the philosophical underpinnings of the dominant economic paradigm.

### **Free markets and free actors**

Free market ideology is simply that – an ideology, a belief system which presents the market and the logic of the market as natural and, indeed, even as divine (Frank, 2000). The notion of the "free market" stands on the construct of the formally free individual who makes choices according to an instrumental calculus of self-interest. Market exchange, in this conception, functions as an essentially neutral mechanism enabling free individuals to satisfy pre-existent needs and wants, constrained only by scarce resources like time, money and available goods. A key assumption of neoclassical economics is that individuals make choices in an effort to maximize their own benefit. Self-interested calculation of benefits defers to impersonal means of decision-making – such as cost-benefit concerns, marginal utility, price-value relations. The cost of acquiring a good or service, however, is not limited to the thing's price, but includes a more subjective calculation of value as well as the effort in acquiring it (e.g. travel, comparison shopping, etc. Slater and Tonkiss, 2001, pp. 47-54).

This familiar, well-worn portrait of the economic actor has endured many critiques. Max Weber (1947) famously pointed out that economic rationality is but one kind of rationality – instrumentally rational action – among several others and doubted whether a social order was possible if comprised of individuals who behaved only in this way. As an "under socialized" view of persons, some have called the model of rational, instrumental action "the most radical retreat from society" (Friedland and Alford, 1991, p. 232) brought on by neoclassical economists. Economists and organizational theorists have pointed out that all rationality is "bounded" by the choices available to and perceived by the actor (March and Simon, 1981) which are located in larger contexts of meaning and social value (Slater and Tonkiss, 2001).

Scholars have also brought a number of perspectives to bear on the free market model to question its universality and neutrality. Anthropologists offer several critiques, questioning the extent to which a commodity logic can unilaterally impose itself on non market-based societies and social forms. Gift exchange (Parry and Bloch, 1989) and non-monetary forms of currency such as cattle – famously discussed by Evans-Pritchard in his ethnography of the Neur (Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1997) – are but two ways that commodity and non-commodity intermix and can be said to have "biographies" and a "social life" (Kopytoff, 1986; Appadurai, 1986) beyond the confines of rational calculation. For economic sociologists, markets are embedded in social relations, not the other way around. Market activity takes place in the midst of social ties, both pre-existent and emergent, not despite them; social relations inform every economic decision and action at every point (Granovetter, 1973; Carruthers and Babb, 2000) often invoking and intertwining with intimacy and emotional life (Zelizer, 2005; Hochschild, 2003).

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A feminist critique of the neo-classical approach also calls into question the prevailing model of the economic actor, based on a “separative self,” for fostering a disconnected, disembedded posture toward social relations. This version of the self, argues England (1993), reinforces the existing system of gender relations in the way it favors personal autonomy to the exclusion of community. It is a self that performs market transactions as if unencumbered by emotional attachment to others, as if home and family were epiphenomenal (Hochschild, 2003).

Amoral, culturally indifferent, masculinist and socially disembedded, the standard version of the economic actor is, at once, a product of modernity and its vehicle. It calls forth and favors a particular posture toward the self – one that regards the self as an essence which is essentially co-terminus with the body. Here, in this construct, resides a specific kind of subjectivity – a bourgeois subjectivity where selfhood is by necessity autonomous, standing apart from the ties of kith and kin, of class and clan. Unencumbered in this way, as sociologists Simmel enthused (1978 [1900]), the modern subject is both liberated by and subjected to the “freedoms” of the market and the money economy. The idea of the “market,” Carrier (1997) makes abundantly clear, operates as a cultural model where notions of individualism and individualist choice constitute a “strong cultural thread” in British and American thought that “values individual identity and autonomy, celebrated as freely-chosen difference” (p. 3).

Ideologies of free markets and free actors have continued to flourish through the turn of the millennium and undergird the rush toward global commercialism. Often described as neo-liberalism, the “new liberalism” refers to the belief in the unfettered freedom of markets and the dominance of a “pure” market logic, unfettered by governmental regulation or collective, public oversight (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000). The neoliberalist attitude claims or, should I say, re-claims the market as moral force which should not be questioned or challenged but which would ultimately benefit all – what Frank (2000) referred to as “market populism.”

### **The problem of the child consumer**

Young children’s involvement in market relations is fraught with moral tension. The anxiety centers on basic philosophical issues concerning the composition of social persons *vis-à-vis* economic structures and the *locus* of power and decision of individuals. A young child’s ability to comprehend the value of goods, the value of money and the intent and nature of commercial messages remains problematic after over a quarter century of scholarly research (Martin, 1997; Schor, 2004; Linn, 2004). Children – when addressed as consumers and audiences for commercial media and messages – thus pose a fundamental challenge to the model of the economic actor that underlies neo-classical theory precisely because their ability to make informed and rational decisions remains in question.

The constitution of social persons represents the fault line in the moral economy of children’s consumer culture along which interested parties stake their positions. Elsewhere, I have examined how the child-consumer has been articulated in the advertisements of the children’s clothing industry’s trade press over much of the twentieth century (Cook, 1999; Jacobson, 2004), in the new size-style ranges of children’s clothing in the 1930s, particularly in the persona of “the toddler” (Cook, 2000a) and in the forms of expert and non-expert knowledge about “the child” that have been brought to the service of creating a children’s market since the early

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decades of the twentieth century (Cook, 2000b). In each of these, one pattern persists: the figure – that is, the discursive construct – of “the child” takes on the character of an individuated, nearly autonomous person, who is thought to exhibit pre-existent desire for things and who gains the social right and wherewithal to act upon those desires.

The strength of claims about children’s consumer autonomy and the ability to put them into large-scale commercial practice did not reach a critical phase in the USA until the 1980s and 1990s, in the wake of political conflicts over commercialism and children’s television. In the 1970s and 1980s, consumer groups – in particular, Action for Children’s Television (ACT) – lobbied the US Congress to regulate so-called “children’s” television, i.e. television intended for children’s viewing. ACT sought to limit the amount of commercial time during children’s programming, eliminate tie-ins between programs and children’s products like toys and making the distinction between a program and an advertisement explicit.

ACT and others eventually brought the issue to the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) which convened several hearings in the late 1970s which resulted in the adoption of standards to guide children’s television programming. Among these standards included:

- a limited number of commercials during “children’s” programming (most often Saturday morning television) to nine-and-a-half-minutes per hour;
- required “separators” to help children discern when a program ended and a commercial began (e.g. “We will be right back after these commercial messages”); and
- to stop airing what were perceived as “program length commercials.”

By the early 1980s in the deregulatory, pro-business climate of the Reagan Administration, the FTC reversed itself on these issues stating they were restricting free trade. After some political wrangling by ACT, some aspects of the earlier restrictions were put back in place with the passage of the 1990 Children’s Television Act – for instance, limiting the amount of “commercial time” per children’s television hour, but not limiting the program length commercial or product tie-ins (Hendershot, 1998, pp. 61-94; Kline, 1993, pp. 208-30).

This battle was fought over and won by free market principles and enjoined a model of the child consumer, not as a “special audience” that was vulnerable and susceptible to exploitation, but as a knowing active consumer and audience member who exercises choice and essentially has a right to do so (Kunkle and Roberts, 1991). It was a victory for those who espouse the ideologies of neo-liberalism and market populism over and against those who seek to keep children at a distance from marketing and advertising influences. At issue was the very definition of the economic subject itself and, more specifically, that of the child. It involved a clash of moral positions struggling to assert dominance of one kind of value, articulated in the register of commerce and freedom (i.e. commercial choice), over another expressed in the language of sentiment and protection (Zelizer, 1985; Cook, 2004).

The “new discourse on kid empowerment,” Schor (2004, pp. 180-1) rightly points out, is intimately tied to assertions about the market sophistication of contemporary children. Since, the 1990s, marketers have to come believe – or, at least steadfastly maintain – that contemporary children are better equipped to resist the power of

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advertising and marketing than their counterparts of several decades ago due to changes in family structure and to increased choices offered to them in the marketplace. In dual income families where children are left alone for period of time daily, it is argued, many must purchase their own things and sometimes do the shopping for the entire household (Guber and Berry, 1993). In addition, working mothers and divorced parents are particularly susceptible to increased consumption because parents are thought to alleviate their guilt (for being divorced, for being absent) by indulging children's requests for goods. Marketers also note that children have gained a voice in determining family purchases beyond goods for their own use. In many families, as marketers have found, children are consulted for their view about purchasing such big ticket items as family vacation destinations, automobiles and sometimes new houses (Guber and Berry, 1993; McNeal, 1992, 1999; Sutherland and Thompson, 2001).

In addition, marketers argue, the sheer abundance of goods and choices available to children has necessitated that children become savvy, discerning consumers:

Thirty years ago, only a handful of TV shows existed for the benefit of kids: "The Mouse Show," Mr Dressup, "The Friendly Giant," and "Romper Room," for instance. Contrast that with today's picks, which give kids a wide variety of shows and around-the-clock programming. The developing pop culture has allowed kids to think from the outset in terms of choice, and so they continue to expect more (Sutherland and Thompson, 2001, p. 71).

Putting aside the assumption that those shows existed for the "benefit" of children, more choices, regardless of the content and the source, must be positive in this view:

All this choice adds up to a generation of media-conscious kids. Instead of transmitting the idea that self-worth is something kids buy at the mall, our market-driven culture and multimedia world mean that kids learn early on how to interpret and react to a society that is falling over itself to cater to them . . . Kids may not be immune to marketing, but they are discerning. Having so much choice has contributed to this (p. 71).

Sutherland and Thompson here typify the neo-liberal attitude that market choice stands as the foundation of other key forms of action and knowledge regardless, it seems, of age, cognitive ability, income or culture.

The construction of the autonomous, savvy child consumer reinscribes the rational actor as the model of and for children's consumption. During the 1990s and continuing into the twenty-first century, this view of the child consumer has been ascendant, as partly evidence in the outcome of the battle over children's commercial television. Scholars, politicians and consumer advocate groups in the USA continue to challenge the problematic assertion that children, especially young children, can behave as cognizant economic actors. They charge that marketing and advertising to children is unethical business practice (Schor, 2004; Linn, 2004). From within the academic field of economics, the notion that the child consumer could stand as a counterpart to the rational actor finds no support (Levison, 2000).

When economic rationality is not a viable or reasonable expectation, as in the case of infants and young children, the balance tilts toward imbuing children's goods with "beneficial" attributes with a diminishing focus on children's "rationality." Thus, claims of "empowerment" – of empowering goods and empowering advertising and marketing campaigns – rise to meet the moral and ethical challenged posed in the marketing to young children. "Empowerment," as we shall see, renders direct

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marketing to children a morally defensible, ethically palatable and thus commercially actionable undertaking.

### **Modes of empowerment: transitive and intransitive**

Empowerment, put simply, is acquiring of power for oneself or making the acquisition of power possible for others. It may be thought of as both a process and an outcome (Braithwaite, 2000) and can be exercised in the context of social movements at the level of communities (Bunch and Frost, 2000). To be empowered or to gain empowerment implies that one had already been a state of disempowerment and that power in some form is to be expected, desired or deserved. Gaining choices previously unknown to exist or which were unrealized in practice is a common form of empowerment, as is having or gaining a voice in matters that were heretofore experienced as pre-given and essentially unalterable.

A crucial measure of empowerment involves the range and reach of these newfound “choices” and “voices.” I identify two basic modes of empowerment, transitive and intransitive, which refer to the extent or coverage that choices exercised or the voices realized can effect. Intransitive empowerment refers back to itself and to its original context; in a sense, it goes nowhere. Transitive empowerment moves beyond its origins to inform (or potentially inform) other contexts and other forms of practice. For instance, if a disenfranchised group gains the right to vote which then translates into collective demands for other forms of equality and voice in matters beyond voting, the empowerment may be said to have taken on a transitive form. The empowerment did not stop at gaining the ability to vote. If, on the other hand, the choice and voice gained through the ballot begins and ends there, then the empowerment – although no less “real” than the first instance – is nevertheless circumscribed and contained and is thus intransitive.

Whether any specific enactment of power can be described in terms of one of these modes ultimately involves an examination of specific contexts and practices. In making this distinction, I seek to call attention to the political-ideological uses of “empowerment.” For, to declare that one’s actions or, in the case of commercial discourse, that one’s products actively empower children is to claim for one’s company, brand or corporation a higher ability to impart the exercise of power to others. Empowerment thus involves a kind of self-empowerment for those who make the realization of power possible for others. The stronger that one can declare that “real,” i.e. transitive, empowerment has been gained or made possible for others, the greater the appropriation for one’s own efforts. If my toy or television cartoon is thought to empower a child, the stronger my position.

### **Marketing discourses of “kid empowerment”**

The tie between empowerment and children’s popular culture apparently was introduced through the “girl power” (or in the feminist usage, “grrl” power) phenomenon in the mid-1990s associated with Spice Girls, an all-female band. One media commentator noted that “girl power” was initially “used to express the empowerment and freedom of young females from gender stereotyping” and had been “quickly adopted by girls, and even more swiftly by marketers who want to get the attention of these young consumers” (Mesbah, 1998, p. 26). Here, “power” denotes something of a liberatory action – a “freedom from” certain kinds of feminine

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stereotypes – and, in this way, fits well with feminist analyses of girls’ use of popular culture (McRobbie, 1991). That is, pop culture here is understood to serve as a bulwark against larger, constraining narratives of femininity, and “girl power” in this context can be thought of as a transitive form of empowerment.

An investigation of child trade literature, including books written by marketers, advertisers and market researchers, reveals a plurality of rhetorical devices employed to fashion connections between products and empowering qualities[1]. More fruitfully conceptualized as comprising multiple discourses than a single one, “kid empowerment” has three basic features: choice, recognition and involvement. These features are interwoven by an underlying narrative – or, at times, an unspoken assumption – of liberating children from their powerless, circumscribed position in an adult dominated world.

### **Choice, recognition and involvement**

Liberatory overtones accompanied the migration of “power” from “girl power” into the more general realm of “kid empowerment” as marketers forged new iterations of the consuming child. The “liberation” is one where “kids,” by consuming the products promoted, would be freed from the yoke of adult rules, norms, forms of social propriety and the physical scale of the adult world. In positioning their products as beneficial and empowering for children, marketers do not simply take sides with them against adults. They positively identify with children by adopting their point of view and perspective on the world. To have a successful line of products, furthermore, marketers need to convey their empathy with children to children, a feat often accomplished in the design of the product itself.

Impact Confections provides an exemplary case. Steve Moskowitz, director of marketing, describes a new line of candy in this way:

Kids want to have their own universe, where the emphasis is upon them and where products are designed exclusively for them. Our product conveys this exclusivity to kids through shape, flavor and interactivity. Kids like to make decisions, but they live in a world where they can’t vote, they can’t drive, they can’t write checks the way adults do. So the method of empowering them is through candy, and through interactive candy that allows them to make their own choices as to how to consume it (Dahm, 2002, p. 16).

The candy products allow children to combine flavors in their own manner. Offered choices by the candy line not otherwise granted in the “adult” world, children are recognized *as* children, i.e. as having particular wants and desires. It is through the interactivity with and the combinatorial potential of the product that children are recognized as *kids* – i.e. as playful consumers who are distinct from adults.

Impact Confections offered choice within its commodity sphere in order to facilitate selection of its product. To have or make a choice, of whatever consequence or duration, tends to be a sufficient attribute for marketers to count the product-of-the-moment as among those thought to enable power. From getting a gift, entering a contest or picking among premiums, all such actions fall under the rubric of empowerment. (Haman, 1996, p. 30; Brandweek, 2001, p. 42).

Promotions where children can pick the outcome of a story or a new product extension often claim child empowerment all the while generating excitement, attention and “buzz” around the product. Put in the language of enfranchisement, children are often given the opportunity to “vote” on a promotion. Internet technology

has greatly facilitated the ability of marketers to involve children in choosing products or aspects of products, like M&Ms Global Vote for a new color of its candy (Angrisani, 2002) for which ten million votes reportedly were cast. Another similar success occurred in 2002 when Kellogg cereal teamed up with Cartoon Network in the Big Pick Breakfast promotion whereby children could cast ballots on which a new cartoon character would become a cereal. Tremendously popular with children, and the advertising industry as well, because the appeal was “all about kid empowerment,” the promotion won a Golden Marble Award in for “excellence” in children’s advertising (Cuthbert, 2002, p. 96).

The campaign, of course, was not “all about” empowerment. It also was about corporate profit, about agitating “buzz” around the product and about building brand equity. Claims to empowerment regularly function to provide a veneer or moral worth to practices which otherwise might be seen as suspect to parents and others. Campaigns which enjoin children to vote interweave the language and surface behavior of democratic participation with the organization and calculated self-interest of commercial enterprise. However, after a several decades of marketers cajoling children to vote for their “favorite” characters and products, and now offering youth and adults the ability to “vote” for their favorite singing and dancing stars on television competitions like American Idol, American electoral participation remains the lowest of any democracy. The intransitivity of the practice seems quite evident; it appears to extend only to the boundaries of the commercial context.

Equating child empowerment with product choice goes one step further for consultant Gene del Vecchio who encourages marketers to see that any action on the part of children with their toys or products as constituting personal agency. Paint ‘N Dazzle Barbie, for instance allows girls to color and decorate Barbie’s clothes. “Each girl could express her own sense of beauty and creativity,” he assures, noting that the product “allows control, expression, and individuality” (del Vecchio, 1997, p. 77). It is not difficult to imagine girls finding creativity with this toy. But for del Vecchio, it is the toy, the object itself, that empowers. The child is not expressing power through the object, but it receiving from the object. This world is animated as much by agentive goods (magical, fetishized) as with active kids. He applies this view to extreme micro-levels of choice, recognition and involvement: “Dannon’s Sprinkl’ins yogurt allows kids to add sprinkles to their yogurt. In a category of ‘do-nothing’ yogurts, this brand suddenly empowered a child with a small measure of control, and it was a success” (p. 78). It might not occur to del Vecchio and others who campaign for boundless children’s consumption that deriving pleasure or fun from playing with a toy or manipulating food product may not rise to the level of any kind of empowerment whatsoever.

The ideological function of “empowerment” becomes clear in instances like these when a claim can be made that any action whatsoever on the part of children who engage with a product constitutes the noble action of providing the powerless with choices. At times, claims of empowerment can be made by not only pointing to kids’ actions, but also to their derived identities as well. For instance, McDonald’s Corporation realized that children were “growing out” of wanting Happy Meals by the age of 7 or 8 because those meals carried with them a connotation of “immaturity.” The global food chain countered in 2001 by offering Mighty Meals for 8-10 year olds created to distinguish them from the younger set. According to the corporation:

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“The Mighty Kids Meal provides 8-10 year old kids with a menu option that empowers them to feel more grown up while enjoying their favorite McDonald’s food and toys” served with a “more mature looking” brown paper bag (*PR Newswire*, 2001). Empowerment, in this instance as in others, often is employed as mere rhetoric, a discursive currency offered with the intent of enhancing the position of those that dispense power through their goods, services and promotions.

Having children sit on market research “boards” provides another kind of moral cover for marketing efforts by offering the appearance of providing children with choice, recognition and involvement. Zone Brands of Atlanta convenes such a board to have tweens “interact with the brand and have a say in the decision-making process.” Conferring with tweens on their opinions, according to one market consultant, extends beyond the simple recording of preferences. Since, “most adults don’t take them seriously, tweens feel connected to brands that make them feel important and empowered. So, rather than telling them what’s cool, savvy marketers should shift the power into tweens’ hands” (Angrisani, 2002).

Here, providing voice and choice in brand development allows the company to claim an empathy thought unrealized elsewhere in tweens’ lives. Through consumptive involvement for a representative body like a “consulting board,” tweens’ lives, desires and wants are in this way “recognized” by the corporate structure. When such practices are challenged by consumer advocacy groups, as in the case of Proctor and Gamble in 2005, we are treated to a familiar refrain: “To be a member [of a board] is empowering for a teen. You have a voice that will be heard, and you get cool information before your friends receive it” (Horovitz, 2005)

## Conclusion

The language and practice of choice resonates strongly with everyday notions of freedom, in both the political and economic senses. Choice, as we have seen in the discourses of child empowerment, extends beyond the mere selection of an individual good and into the definition of being a functioning person in consumer society, whatever the age. Social personhood requires recognition by structures, or aspects of structures. At the most basic level, the simple act of offering children a choice, of whatever ultimate consequence or duration, serves to recognize children as beings worthy of having choice to consider. It is a view that parents, educators, scholars and politicians as well hold to varying degrees.

Commercial contexts, as I have argued elsewhere in detail (Cook, 2004, 2005), are integrally involved in the rising personhood status of children over the last century. Children are recognized by and in commercial arenas, have their own spaces and places, media and goods. As noted above, they sit on product development boards of corporations and serve as peer arbiters of such things as films and new products. Given these developments, one would be hard pressed to fail to see that children, at least on the collective level over history in the wealthy nations of the Global North, have indeed gained a measure of social power. The marketing sleight of hand comes into play in the way that the universe of options are defined by the brand, by the structure of the promotion or by the context of involvement. Children clearly have more product choices and more commercially relevant choices at their disposal than ever before. If there is a sense of empowerment that is evoked or experienced, is it of the intransitive variety as these “options” or “choices” refer back to themselves and

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encourage identifying the act of making decisions to be coterminous with the semantic universe of a particular product or brand.

Empowerment for the child most often begins and ends with the product itself, realized through the choices it offers, through the way its design “recognizes” or addresses the child as the user-consumer and through the way it necessitates the child’s involvement. As digital technology offers these “savvy” children the options, the power, to avoid advertising and marketing, it becomes a problem for an industry which claims to offer empowerment. *Kidscreen Magazine* (2004) reported the results of a study indicating that children are muting television commercials, chatting online between program segments and skipping pop-up ads on computer screens. As evidence that “kids want to act on media, not be recipients of it,” a brand manager of a gaming hub suggests that companies “capitalize” on these behavioral patterns. Companies should offer “branded tools” such as homepage templates, bulletin boards and fonts which will “empower kids to express themselves online, getting a brand out there to a wider audience at the same time” (Stewart, 2004). Empowerment apparently extends only as far as its promotional potential.

The recursive circularity of the “kid empowerment” loop may be its most fundamental feature: a sense of power is to be not only experienced through the product but also exercised on the product or brand. Paul Kurnit, a leading kid marketer, stated the matter clearly when saying that wireless internet technology will provide “new freedoms” for kids that will “enable access to commercial choices.” “Financial marketers, such as American Express, Visa and MasterCard, will empower them to spend” (Kurnit, 2001 p. 117). The ultimate commercial empowerment is to be able to behave as a consumer.

Through consumption, in this ideology, all else flows. This view deftly positions the child as an active, knowing consumer as it supports free market ideology and the idea of the autonomous person in neo-liberal capitalism all the while privileging the providers of power who stand the most to profit from intransitive empowerment. Selection among predetermined categories of intensely researched, extremely designed corporate-owned properties increasingly passes as “empowerment” and becomes the key mode of having and expressing social power. In doing so, it actively cultivates children’s disempowerment by equating “choice” with pre-given alternatives which are sponsored and configured by those who would benefit from *any* choice made.

#### Note

1. In addition to books, among the periodic publications reviewed: *AdWeek*, *BrandWeek*, *Brandmarketing*, *KidScreen*, *PRNewswire*, *Stagnito’s New Products Magazine*, *Progressive Grocer*.

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