



## Journal of Consumer Culture

### INTRODUCTION

# Beyond Either/or

DANIEL THOMAS COOK

University of Illinois

**CHILDREN'S CONSUMER CULTURE** occupies an ambiguous place in contemporary thought. It stands, on the one hand, as a ubiquitous presence in the everyday public culture of wealthy nations and, on the other, as a relatively neglected area of social research and thinking.

It is, indeed, nearly impossible to avoid encountering the goods, icons and media characters produced for children's use and consumption when one walks down the street, enters a school or supermarket, flips through a magazine, scans television channels or pays even scant attention to one's own children. We see inscriptions of consumer media culture painted on the walls of nurseries, sewn on school backpacks, emblazoned on the face-plates of mobile phones and encoded in the array of branded breakfast cereals strategically slotted at children's eye level in grocery store aisles. Yet, children's consumer culture remains on the sidelines of the study of consumption and society. It retains a kind of adjunct or sub-subfield status, whereby children's consumption represents a special case in the putatively more encompassing world of 'adult' structures and practices.

It might be objected that my characterization of the scholarly treatment of children's consumption as one of relative neglect is misleading, perhaps even irresponsible, if recent work within the field of consumer and media studies were taken into account. The number of books<sup>1</sup> and research papers devoted to the topic since the early 1990s is impressive, encouraging and continues to grow (for a review, see Martens et al., this issue; see

also essays in Jenkins, 1998; in addition, consult the references in the articles in this issue). Within the academic field of marketing and consumer behavior, the study of children's brand preferences, knowledge of commercial intent and 'consumer socialization' constitutes a steady line of research for over two decades (see Gunter and Furnham, 1998; John, 1999; *Journal of Consumer Research*, various issues).

Neglecting something, however, is not the same as ignoring it. Children's consumer culture is neglected in the sense that the insights derived from the ongoing study of it do not inform the study of consumption and of society generally. Its influence has been intransitive, often referring back to itself. A key source of this marginality stems from competing views of what kind of being a child is – socially, morally and analytically.

There has been, in recent times, an explosion of sociological and anthropological scholarship on children and childhood (see, for example, Adler and Adler, 1998; Cook, 2002; Corsaro, 1997; Holloway and Valentine, 2000; James et al., 1998; Jenks, 1996; Mayall and Zeiher, 2003; Qvortrup et al., 1992; Stephens, 1995; Thorne, 1993). These scholars rightly emphasize that children are agentive social actors in the here and now and not merely beings in the making who will become 'complete' persons at some point in the future. Children, in this view, creatively appropriate culture, including consumer culture, rather than having it imposed on them, although children's consumption is rarely acknowledged as a practice or social force worthy of much examination (recent notable exceptions include Buckingham, 2000; McKendrick et al., 2000; Zelizer, 2002).

Over and against this view (if the reactions of audience members at academic conferences offer any indication), the subject of children's consumer culture often evokes a moral concern about the intensity of marketing towards children and ways to combat it rather than a curiosity about the subject's conceptual and analytic import. This is an understandable impulse if we consider that perhaps nothing in our culture today garners the kind of guarded hypermoral intensity as when children and childhood are at issue. An initial response for many, it seems, is the protection of children from incursions, mainly of the violent or sexual kind. The marketplace is now widely recognized as a key site or conduit for these and other forms of invasion (invasions of fatness or vanity, for example) from which children must be shielded. Despite the spoken and unspoken cultural promises that unfettered consumption allows for self-creation and brings personal satisfaction (see Slater, 1997), there is lingering suspicion and concern that corporate ingenuity, sophisticated market research and the lure of the televisual can overwhelm even the most savvy child consumers.

A great deal of thinking about and research on children's consumption operates, often unreflectively, *within* a particular moral position whereby children are understood as essentially sacred beings who are in danger of being polluted. Those who fear the incursion of corporate meanings into childhood tend to see children as malleable beings, susceptible to influence, who must therefore be protected. This view resonates with several strands of cultural belief; namely, original childhood innocence, the temptations posed by the allure of things and a distrust of anything originating from the culture industry.

Those who invest themselves in the creative agentive child as a kind of bulwark against incursions of the market tend to substitute one kind of moral position for another. Childhood sacredness here emerges not from innocence, but is based on another kind of sanctity (i.e. that of a knowing, choosing self). It is the sanctity of personhood that serves as a counterweight against the overdetermined influence of the market. The knowing, choosing child can resist or enjoy the offerings of the commercial world. Individual choice is affirmed.

Academics tend to be split about whether it is children's choice or corporate power that drives kids' consumer culture, but with the scales tipped towards the corporate side. Parents seem to be in a state of ambivalence, struggling with satisfying children's desires while acting as gatekeepers. Significantly, it is advertisers and marketers who most vociferously favor and advocate the ascendance of the knowing, choosing child consumer, a figure that can be targeted with relative moral impunity (see Cook, 2000; Schor, forthcoming). As Beryl Langer demonstrates (this issue), corporate discourses about sacred childhood and children's choice often provide moral cover in the ongoing ideological struggle to leverage 'brand enchantment' on a global scale.

A third position, one that rejects the either/or structure of the problem, understands that the battles waged over and around children's consumer culture are no less than battles over the nature of the person and the scope of personhood in the context of the ever-expanding reach of commerce. Children's involvement with the materials, media, images and meanings that arise from, refer to and are entangled with the world of commerce figures centrally in the making of persons and of moral positions in contemporary life. The public battles over children's consumption (violent video games, sexy clothes, fatty foods, and so on) are, at base, battles over which model of the child – which model of the person – will prevail.

Moral ambiguity and moral ambivalence intersect at the heart of children's consumer culture because consumption renders personal agency

problematic when examined from the perspective of the life course. Given the current practice of cradle-to-grave marketing and the inundation of many children's lifeworlds with brands, icons and commodities from their first breaths, one might ask: at what point along the early life trajectory can it be said that children come to discern and thus to have a 'choice'? Martens et al. (this issue) provide valuable insight into how research on children and consumption has been conceptualized, finding that much of it obviates the consumer *practices* of children and parents. In this vein, we might ask: when does parental arbitration end and a child's volition begin? Where ends the market and begins the household? Are such distinctions worthwhile anymore?

If we approach consumption as a social form, in Simmel's sense (1971), then it becomes evident that it can be used for almost any social ends, including love and care (Chin, 2001; Miller, 1998). Yet consumption is not a mere conduit or a perfect medium; it has biases and properties. It is enmeshed in pecuniary relations, in the money economy. There is, thus, always interest and power behind the material productions and discursive machinations of children's goods and media. Corporate entities and individual persons are involved for profit and self-interest. They have agendas and perspectives that are often distinct from those of parents, educators and caretakers of children. Marketers and advertisers regularly invoke 'children's' best interests and their 'empowerment' as the altruistic motivations behind their actions (see Schor, forthcoming). Of course, economic motive and children's betterment are not necessarily or completely at odds; they can coexist and find rapprochement.

What has happened in recent decades, particularly in North America, Europe and societies deeply involved in the consumer build-up, is that the world created by and through consumption – the world of peer evaluations of children based on goods, media characters and product knowledge – is increasingly coming to stand for the norm to which children and parents must conform if they are to have a 'healthy' social life. Allison Pugh (this issue) brings this point home poignantly and sometimes painfully when seen from the perspective of low-income children. In many small ways in the everyday lives of the poor as well as the middle class, parents fret about letting their children's consumer display status lapse vis-a-vis others, lest they feel inadequate, put out and shunned. In this way, children's consumer culture has become an argument for itself, for its own centrality in daily life.

On the other side of the coin, following Simmel again (1978), we know that money allows for individuation and freedom. Children's consumer

culture has grown so dramatically in the USA, Europe and beyond in large part because children's consumer desires have become legitimized in practice, their expression commonplace. Once mainly confined to Christmas and birthdays, kids' goods and their expressions of desire for those goods have, in recent times, become deseasonalized and thoroughly blended into everyday existence. Cook and Kaiser (this issue) bring light to this idea in their study of preteen girls who reside in an ambiguous cultural space of sexuality and autonomy, whereby the ability to construct personal identity cannot be divorced from market availability.

It is beyond coincidence that the scholarly interest in children as meaningful, non-derivative social actors has arisen in tandem with the recent growth of the children's market. Children have become thought of and treated as agentive social actors (by marketers, parents and academics alike) in large part through their increasingly extensive participation in commercial life as consumers and beyond (Zelizer, 2002). What has come about historically, as my work (Cook, 2004) and that of Gary Cross (2004, this issue) show, is not merely a democratization of children's desires, but a privileging of them. The place and status of children, and the meaning of childhood itself, are now inseparable from such things as branding and investment.

The problematic of children's consumption cannot fruitfully be engaged with as an either/or proposition; rather, it must be recognized that commercially imposed meaning *and* personal identity creation blend together at the level of practice early in the life course and that this confluence supports consumer capitalism and its current globalizing hegemony.

The articles in this special issue give life and substance to the study of children, consumption and children's consumer culture by presenting several perspectives (structural, ethnographic, theoretical and historical) so as to avoid ossifying around a single viewpoint. Together, they offer a variety of entry points and pose a number of problems which, rather than inviting closure, hopefully incite questions, investigation and dialog.

### **Acknowledgements**

I'd like to thank George Ritzer, Don Slater, Jeff Stepnisky and the anonymous reviewers of the articles herein for their help in making this special issue possible.

### **Note**

1. Recent and forthcoming books testify to the growing attention paid to the area, for example: Buckingham (2000), Chin (2001), Cook (2004), Cross (1997, 2004), Hendershot (1998), Kenway and Bullen (2001), Kinder (1998), Kline et al. (2003), Linn (2004), Schor (forthcoming) and Steinberg and Kincheloe (1997).

## References

- Adler, Peter and Adler, Patricia A. (1998) *Peer Power: Preadolescent Culture and Identity*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Buckingham, David (2000) *After the Death of Childhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Chin, Elizabeth (2001) *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cook, Daniel Thomas (2000) 'The Other "Child Study": Figuring Children as Consumers in Market Research, 1910s–1990s', *Sociological Quarterly* 41(3): 487–507.
- Cook, Daniel Thomas (ed.) (2002) *Symbolic Childhood*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Cook, Daniel Thomas (2004) *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Corsaro, William (1997) *The Sociology of Childhood*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cross, Gary (1997) *Kids' Stuff*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cross, Gary (2004) *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gunter, Barry and Furnham, Adrian (1998) *Children as Consumers*. London: Routledge.
- Hendershot, Heather (1998) *Saturday Morning Censors*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Holloway, Sarah L. and Valentine, Gill (2000) *Children's Geographies*. London: Routledge.
- James, Allison, Jenks, Chris and Prout, Alan (1998) *Theorizing Childhood*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Jenkins, Henry (ed.) (1998) *The Children's Culture Reader*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jenks, Chris (1996) *Childhood*. New York: Routledge.
- John, Deborah Roedder (1999) 'Consumer Socialization of Children: A Retrospective Look at Twenty-five Years of Research', *Journal of Consumer Research* 26(3): 183–213.
- Kenway, Jane and Bullen, Elizabeth (2001) *Consuming Children*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Kinder, Marsha (ed.) (1998) *Kids' Media Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kline, Steven, Dyer-Witthoford, Nick and de Peuter, Greig (2003) *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Linn, Susan (2004) *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood*. New York: New Press.
- McKendrick, John H., Bradford, Michael G. and Fielder, Anna V. (2000) 'Time for a Party! Making Sense of the Commercialisation of Leisure Space for Children', in Sarah L. Holloway and Gill Valentine (eds) *Children's Geographies*, pp. 100–16. London: Routledge.
- Mayall, Berry and Zeiher, Helga (eds) (2003) *Childhood in Generational Perspective*. London: University of London Press.
- Miller, Daniel (1998) *A Theory of Shopping*. London: Polity Press.
- Qvortrup, Jens, Bardy, Marjatta, Sgritta, Giovanni and Wintersberger, Helmut (eds) (1992) *Childhood Matters*. Aldershot: Avebury.

- Schor, Juliet (forthcoming) *Born to Buy*. New York: Scribner.
- Simmel, Georg (1971) *On Individuality and Social Forms* (ed. Donald N. Levine). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Simmel, Georg (1978[1900]) *The Philosophy of Money* (trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby). Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Slater, Don (1997) *Consumer Culture and Modernity*. London: Polity Press.
- Steinberg, Shirley and Kincheloe, Joe (eds) (1997) *Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Stephens, Sharon (ed.) (1995) *Children and the Politics of Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Thorne, Barrie (1993) *Gender Play*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Zelizer, Viviana (2002) 'Kids and Commerce', *Childhood* 9(4): 375–96.

---

**Daniel Thomas Cook** is Assistant Professor of Advertising and a Sociologist of Consumption and Communication at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. His recently published book, *The Commodification of Childhood* (Duke University Press, 2004), examines the rise of the child as consumer in the 20th century. He is also the editor of *Symbolic Childhood* (Peter Lang, 2002). Address: Department of Advertising, University of Illinois, 103 Gregory Hall, 810 South Wright Street, Urbana, IL 61801, USA. [email: dtcook@uiuc.edu]

---