

# Endangered childhoods: how consumerism is impacting child and youth identity

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## Abstract

Modern-day children are immersed in cultures of consumption such that every aspect of their lives is touched by a buy-and-consume modality. In particular, children in North America are increasingly experiencing the effects of consumer culture at unprecedented levels of involvement. It becomes necessary, therefore, to examine the impact of consumerism in order to assess identity formation and development in youth. Young people are receiving an endless barrage of material messages encouraging purchasing behavior and consumption that impacts the self-image. Indeed, children from the ages of 4 to 12 have increasingly been defined and viewed by their spending capacity. Girls especially are targeted by marketers to sell them a whole line of products they ‘need’ to emulate a feminine ideal. There is mounting evidence to suggest that the structure of childhood is eroding and children are suffering from serious physical, emotional and social deficits directly related to consumerism.

## Keywords

childhood, children, consumerism, identity, health, media

## Introduction

In today’s world, we have engaged in a love-hate debate with media as far as children are concerned. On the one hand, media technology has been accused of interfering with and retarding children’s physical and emotional development. Many of these technologies, it has been argued, are harmful at a physiological level. Technology is also said to induce anomie and anti-social behavior as well as to be responsible for reinforcing hegemonic patterns like racism and sexism. On the other hand, technology has been praised for its advancement of children’s education. Computers and other electronics are heralded for

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enhancing learning at an unprecedented pace. Both of these arguments are based on the conception that childhood exists unaffected by cultural differences and social inequalities; this notion is in sharp contrast with the constructivist paradigm which suggests that context largely determines the nature of childhood for any given individual regardless of biological stages of growth. Yet, globalization of corporate operations and media has to a large extent infiltrated beyond differences of class, ethnicity and gender such that a discussion on endangered childhoods independent of these types of contexts is warranted. Indeed, it is the ubiquitous power of media and its concomitant consumerism that has spread across continents and cultures alike, infiltrating childhood with each pass. Consequently, many children are being deprived of a 'full' childhood or series of experiences that distinctly differentiates them from that of the adult world and meets their needs as children.

### **Consumer culture and children**

There is no disputing the fact that modern-day children live in cultures steeped in consumption driven by consumer behaviors and influenced by their outcomes. This is the case regardless of culture and geographical location though the extent of consumerism is particularly salient in the western world where the intensity remains relatively high. The drive towards materialism and consumption has never been so prevalent, affording such opportunity for expression and on some level satisfaction, as well as cause for concern (Kasser and Kanner, 2004). Consumption plays a major role in day-to-day living and leisure through the endless availability of technology in the form of television, computers, digital accessories and a wide array of goods. Children, especially in the past two decades, have experienced a barrage of media encouraging purchasing behavior and consumption in the same way that adults have. In particular, children from the ages of 4 to 12 are increasingly defined and viewed by their spending capacity. Childhood has essentially been co-opted by marketing conglomerates and now represents an enormously lucrative sector of consumer society to the tune of \$130bn dollars annually (Buckingham, 2000). In contemporary marketing, the desire to consume has been transformed into a set of timeless emotional needs all children are believed to possess (Linn, 2004). Now, media forces compete with adult caregivers in their ability to capture the attention of children and guide them accordingly. It is in this respect that childhood is endangered, pitted against the ubiquitous presence of media images and sound bites all of which persuade children to conform to a modality that is not necessarily in their best interests. At the heart of the struggle between childhood and consumerism child identity formation is at stake; the relentless bombardment of media messages that the self is predominantly defined by its capacity to consume begins at such an early age as to overtake many competing thought processes. Thus, the corporate producers of what Steinberg and Kincheloe (1997) refer to as 'kinderculture', the purveyors of consumer ideology, are constantly destabilizing the identity of children.

One of the more significant outcomes of consumerism has thus been the steady and relentless erosion of childhood whether it is measured in terms of health trends, consumer behaviors or accessibility to adult culture. There are many academics (Jenks, 2005; Kline, 1995; Linn, 2004; Polakow, 1992; Postman, 1994; Schor, 2004; Steinberg and

Kincheloe, 1997; Winn, 1983) who are concerned about the fact that childhood, at least as we know it in the West, is fading out altogether. Our cultural norms depend upon a belief system that verifies children and adults are intellectually, physically, emotionally and psychologically different, and children are incapable of making the same sorts of judgments that adults do. Close scrutiny of the media, particularly television, suggests that there is very little distinction made between adults and children. Kline (1995: 74) presented a compelling argument about how television is not only a significant socializing agent for children, it has become 'the undisputed leader in the production of children's culture'. The culture of childhood has an important play component which is impoverished and under-nourished by passive time associated with television, computers and other electronic media. Furthermore, play has become professionalized and tainted with adult cues, imagination and expectations; it no longer belongs to the creative mind of a child. Kline (1995) further argued that television advertising and programming commercialized childhood to such an extent that the images sold through advertising became the symbols of childhood.

Postman (1994) opined that television, in particular, presents information in a form that is undifferentiated and that is easily accessible. In other words, television, computers and video games do not segregate their audience, not unlike the conditions that existed in the 14th and 15th centuries. Until the invention of the printing press there existed no means for adults to harbor exclusive information. With the advent of print, children were shielded from adult information such that the two cultures could develop side by side with next to no crossover. The new media environment fronted by television provided everyone, simultaneously, with the same information. Since there is virtually nothing left that television has not aired, Postman (1994) concluded that we are a culture without secrets and therefore cannot nurture a culture of childhood. Indeed, there is no aspect of adult life, whether it be perversity, promiscuity, dishonor or confusion, that seems outside the realm of today's children (Winn, 1983). Television is an open-admission technology to which there are no physical, economic, cognitive or imaginative restraints – it makes no difference as to whether the audience is a six-year-old or a sixty-year-old. Television has made use of every existing taboo in western culture, dissolving the shroud of adult secrets. And according to Postman (1994), when adults' secrets are easily accessed childhood dissolves. Television programming is for the most part not governed by theories on child development or mediated by a child's parental figure. Rather, it is driven by a profit-seeking conglomeration with few regulations. Child's play, for example, is no longer a joyous expression with no specific purpose but rather has become integral as a money-making venture for adults; consequently, the child's view of or capacity for play inevitably erodes (Winn, 1983).

### *Constructing the tween*

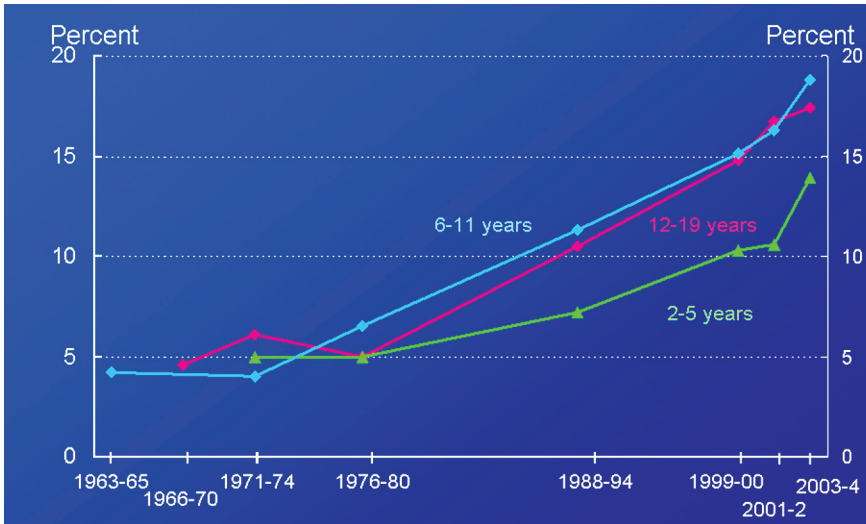
The social phenomenon of the 'tween' is one of the more striking examples of how consumerism has led to the erosion of childhood. The 'tween' category refers to children between seven or eight to 13 or 14 years. The tween has rapidly become a definable, knowable commercial persona and stage of youth since the 1990s (Cook and Kaiser, 2004). Nowhere is age compression (children getting 'older' at younger ages) marketing

more evident than in the 8 to 12 age range (Quart, 2003). Younger children are being enticed, encouraged and seduced into adopting an identity older than their developmental age. It is worth noting that in the US the income of the 36 million children in the 8 to 12 age bracket grew by 15 percent annually during the 1990s to \$31.7bn in 1999 (Rice, 2001). In addition, the 4 to 12 set annually influence \$565bn of their parents' purchases (Rice, 2001). It comes as no surprise, then, that marketers are clamoring for children's attention in a big way. In 1999, advertisers targeted more than \$12 billion to marketing campaigns aimed at capturing children (Rice, 2001). Marketers are hiring child psychologists and other experts to maximize their understanding of the segments and nuances of the youth market. Natural or not, by 1998 mega marketing campaigns were being designed to cater to the tween phenomenon. For example, the somewhat conservative McDonald's Corporation launched its 'Big Kids Meal', complete with its McWorld advertising campaign, aimed directly at tweens.

### *Gauging children's health*

Trends in children's health, including their physical and psychological functioning, are indicators as to whether or not a culture is having a salubrious affect. Additionally, negative health indicators are intricately linked to issues of identity. Addictive behavior for example, reflects internalized aspects of the self that are harmful. It can be argued that children who engage in drug use, alcohol and/or smoking must construct an identity that includes and justifies this type of lifestyle (Kilbourne, 1999). Marketers of such products are keen to 'sell' an identity with their goods, one that children will crave to adopt – a prominent and highly successful advertising strategy (Kilbourne, 1999). Consumerism fosters a culture that tolerates the negation of a positive self-image by attaching faux values to the core of an individual's identity (Barber, 2007). Disconnection and the insatiable desire to transform the self (the 'cool' craze) are two of the more insidious outcomes of advertising and the corporate agenda that have paved the way toward negative self-esteem and health outcomes in children (Kilbourne, 1999; Linn, 2004; Quart, 2003; Schor, 2004).

Statistics on children's health point to a disturbing trend – children are being robbed of their childhoods not only at an emotional level, but physically as well. Their health concerns are similar to those of the adult population in many respects. In North America by 2004, almost 20 percent of youth are overweight or obese; since 1980, obesity rates for children have nearly tripled and those for teens have tripled (see Figure 1). By the time children are in the 8th grade, 3 percent of them are smokers and that number quadruples by the 12th grade (Wallman, 2008). As well, children are drinking alcohol and taking illegal drugs at significant rates; 10 percent of 12th graders drink alcohol and 7 percent report that they have used illegal drugs (Schor, 2004). Rates of emotional and behavior problems among children from ages 4 to 15 soared between 1979 and 1996 (Kelleher et al., 2000). Also, childhood and adolescent depression is prevalent, frequently recurrent and highly impairing; depressive disorders occur in approximately 2 percent of primary school-aged children and between 4 and 8 percent of adolescents (Olfson et al., 2003). The average age for the onset of depression is now 14 and a half compared to 29 and a half in 1960 (Ben-Shahar, 2007). Finally, suicide rates for children aged 10 to 14 almost tripled between 1968 and 1985 (Goleman, 1995).



**Figure 1.** Trends in child and adolescent overweight

Note: Overweight is defined as BMI  $\geq$  gender- and weight-specific 95th percentile from the 2000 CDC Growth Charts.

Source: National Health Examination Surveys II (ages 6–11) and III (ages 12–17), National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys I, II, III and 1999–2004, NCHS, CDC.

### *The potency of television and advertising*

As Jhally (cited in Kilbourne, 1999: 64) writes, ‘to not be influenced by advertising would be to live outside of culture. No human being lives outside of culture’. Television is one of the more prominent media through which advertisers communicate to children. And children of practically all ages are being exposed. A recent study cited that 40 percent of three-month-olds are watching television (Zimmerman et al., 2007); on a typical day, almost 60 percent of children under two are also tuning in (Rideout et al., 2003). The exposure of American children and adolescents to television continues to exceed the time they spend in the classroom: 15,000 hours versus 12,000 hours by the time they graduate from school (Bar-on, 2000). In other words, almost three solid years will have been spent watching television. This figure does not include time spent watching videotapes or playing video games. To put it further in perspective, based on surveys of what type of television programming children watch, the average child sees about 12,000 violent acts, 14,000 sexual references and innuendos and 20,000 advertisements *annually* (Bar-on, 2000, emphasis added). Not surprisingly, the American Pediatrics Association recommends that children under two not watch television at all (Certain and Kahn, 2002). Research indicates that one-year-olds respond to positive and negative emotions on television (Mumme and Fernald, 2003); this makes them prime targets for manipulation, especially considering their cognitive capacity to mediate emotions is in its nascent state. Clearly, corporations, through advertising, aim to capture a child’s attention by powerful messaging, shaping attitudes, motivation, behavior and ultimately, one’s identity. Essentially, brand loyalty is sought from the cradle. For example, Public Broadcasting

Service, a US cable network, partnered their children's programs with the fast food industry to sell children food that is not good for them as part of a promotional strategy (Linn, 2004).

Twenty-five years ago, advertising to young children was largely discouraged because children were thought to be unable to view adverts critically or with a discriminating eye. A comprehensive review of the literature over the past 25 years by John (1999), however, reveals that by age five most children are able to discriminate between advertising and programming. A deeper understanding of the persuasive intent of the ads occurs by about age eight and it is also at this age that children begin to recognize that ads do not always tell the truth. One might conclude therefore, that advertising to children by at least age eight is justifiable. And while children exhibit skepticism about the purpose of the advertisements, their desire for advertised products even at age nine or ten remains strong (Schor, 2004). While advertising is not the entire story behind children's consumer expenditures, it is critical in understanding their relationship with consumer culture. Despite decades of research, what is clear is that the *effects* of consumerism, in which advertising plays an important role, are psychologically and physically harmful (Dittmar, 2007; Kasser et al., 2007; Kramer, 2006; Linn, 2004; Schor, 2004).

### *Usurping play*

Children's play is not only about how they create their culture, but about how they learn. Play comes naturally to children, as a means of self-expression to gain a sense of control over their world (Weininger, 1979). When children are flooded with stimuli from television, computer or video games, they have fewer opportunities to learn to initiate action or to influence the world they inhabit, and less chance to exercise creativity. Indeed, the cost is high as play is the mode through which children develop and form a sense of identity (Polakow, 1992). Consumerism has led to a host of seemingly endless needs for sophisticated electronic media technology, making it increasingly difficult to provide children with an environment that allows for creativity or original thinking. As children are assaulted by a stream of media messages, accompanied by a flood of accessories including toys, books, videos and clothing the time and space available for their own ideas and images cannot compete (Winn, 1983). While it is not new to see marketed paraphernalia accompanying a children's movie, what has changed is the scale. Today, massive marketing campaigns are used to incite children's interest in the purchase of everything from candy to clothing. The implicit, accompanying message is that children's creativity is simply not adequate – they are seen to 'need' the toys to fully experience their environment and develop in an optimal way. Consequently, children learn at an early age that conformity, defining self-worth by what you own, and seeking happiness through the acquisition of material goods are traits towards which to aspire. These are antithetical to creativity, characterized by originality and the capacity for critical thinking. A sense of self is shaped in numerous ways by creativity which is expressed as play, and when that is squelched, identity suffers (Leach, 1994).

### *Erosion of non-commercial space*

In North America, few places remain for children devoid of corporate influence, even schools. Public schools have been venues for at least some corporate marketing since

their inception. In the early 1990s, however, the scope of commercialization of schools began to sharply escalate (Molnar, 1996). Corporations began putting forth the message that they were ‘contributing’ to education, like those that market their products on ‘Channel One’ in the USA. Channel One is a daily in-school news and advertising program to which millions of children across the USA are exposed. In return for the use of video monitors and equipment, school officials promise marketers a captive student audience. Introduced in 1989, Channel One displays ads, camouflaged at times, to appear as public service announcements; among the advertised products are junk food, soft drinks, video games, movies, television programming and other products (Kilbourne, 1999). Defending arguments about the quality of Channel One’s news distracts from the real issue – a corporate intrusion into the lives of children using school time to promote consumer products. And when products are advertised in school, there is the expectation that what is being advertised is good for the students’ overall being (Schor, 2004).

### *Selling cool*

Suddenly, people are waking up in droves from the dreamland of corporate cool. We’re realizing that ever since we were little babies crawling around the TV sets in our living rooms, we’ve been lied to, propagandized, and told incessantly, day after day, that we can find happiness through consumption. That’s why, like rats in a Skinner box, we’ve kept on pressing that BUY button – millions of us marching in lockstep, all dreaming the same consumerist dream. (Lasn, 1998)

There is considerable effort by marketers to expose children to violence and sex through toys, video games and television (Kilbourne, 1999; Linn, 2004; Schor, 2004). The sex and violence inundating children on various screens exists not because parents, teachers or caregivers think such content is good for children, but because sex and violence have proven to be profitable attention-grabbers. The monetary potential that children represent can be worth a lifetime of brand loyalty and marketers will use ruthless tactics to ensure this comes to fruition. Advertising and marketing work to create a continuous need for products by exploiting children’s aspirations, whether for a certain body type, attitude or personality trait. Consequently, if media-created characters emulate the qualities children long for, the greater the likelihood that children will identify with them. Selling ‘cool’ is one of the more pronounced media campaigns that have dominated over several decades. Cool is now revered as a quality every product tries to be and every child needs to have regardless of age. The selling of cool can lead to the exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities, most visible in the marketing of violence and sex. After reviewing more than 1000 studies conducted over 30 years, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Medical Association, the American Association of Family Physicians, and the American Psychiatric Association issued a joint statement on media violence in which they reported a consensus in the public health community that children are particularly vulnerable in adopting aggressive attitudes, values and behaviors as a result of watching entertainment violence (Linn, 2004).

More often than not, children are learning about sex through the media. Sex or sexuality has been exploited since the beginning of advertising to sell just about everything. Children are bombarded with messages about what it takes to be attractive, how men and

women treat each other, and what is essential about being male or female. The groups most impacted in this regard are tweens. Like violence, visual images of sex and sexuality probably have more impact than content conveyed in language or the written word. CDs, television shows, and movies are rife with implicit and explicit sexual references, all of which have the capacity to influence a child's self-image and invoke negative behaviors potentially harmful to self and others (Kilbourne, 1999; Linn, 2004; Schor, 2004). It is worth noting that approximately 47 percent of high school students reported having had sexual intercourse (Wallman, 2008).

Ads for beer, alcohol, tobacco and drugs proliferate in venues that attract large numbers of children, and children are widely exposed to alcohol, tobacco and illegal drugs in television programs, films and music videos (Strasburger and Wilson, 2002). While there is significant public health concern about children's consumption of alcohol and tobacco, ads are designed to grab the interest of teens and tweens by exploiting the same vulnerabilities as ads for clothing – 'you need this product to be cool'. Research shows that children and adolescents are more likely to smoke, drink and use drugs when they are exposed to ads and programming depicting these products (Sargent et al., 2001). While it is difficult to identify the degree to which peers, parents or media influence negative health behaviors, there is clearly risk to children if food, tobacco and alcohol industries continue to be unregulated in their scope of advertising.

## **Consumerism and Identity**

Hence, consumerism has attached itself to a novel identity politics in which business itself plays a role in forging identities conducive to buying and selling. Identity here becomes a reflection of 'lifestyles' that are closely associated with commercial brands and the products they label, as well as with attitudes and behaviors linked to where we shop, how we buy, and what we eat, wear, and consume (Barber, 2007: 167).

At the start of the 21st century, young people are more about continuity than they are about change (Miles, 2000). Rebellion has given way to conformity by embracing the consumer culture ideology. Consumerism has increasingly come to affect mundane and everyday aspects of young people's lives. Children are constantly bombarded with messages to reproduce and uphold dominant power structures such as the corporation (Miles, 2000). Instead of empowering with freedom of choice, consumer culture represents an entrapment, an endless quest of acquisition tied to identity. Perhaps the most pernicious aspect of consumerism lies in the fact that much of its message remains out of the conscious realm because it is so ubiquitous (Dittmar, 2007). There is a close psychological association between identity and material goods in that goods communicate and symbolize personal and social identity to the self and others (Dittmar, 2007). In fact, coveted material possessions often play a positive role for identity maintenance and continuity. While consumer culture allows for the right of ownership to be exercised, it also perpetuates a number of myths particularly through advertising with the idealized references to the 'good life' steeped in materialism and the endless quest for the 'perfect body' as the second main target site. Many of us internalize these ideals and subsequently engage in negative comparison resulting in damage to both mental and physical health. Dittmar (2007: 25) described the process as follows: 'While people believe they are expressing their selves and attaining happiness they are, in fact, developing, monitoring, and molding

their identities with respect to unrealistic ideals promoted by consumer culture through advertising.' While not all media messages are taken at face value, it becomes difficult if not impossible, particularly for children, to remain untouched by the continuous exposure to these normative socio-cultural ideals portrayed by mass media as desirable and attainable. The quest for 'body perfect' is a good example of how the media creates ideals that are unattainable for the majority, leading to potentially damaging effects for girls and boys as well. Likewise, the material 'good life' in which affluence is associated with success, control, autonomy and happiness is continuously promoted by the media as the desirable ideal. Media therefore plays a significant role in how individuals construct their own version of material and bodily norms, and hence identity (Miles, 2000).

Corporations accrue immense profits from children's misguided search for identity and happiness through consumption. Giroux (2000: 17) expressed his moral outrage: 'Pornography is held up as an imminent danger to childhood innocence but nothing is said about corporations and their middle-class shareholders who relentlessly commodify and sexualize children's bodies, desires, and identities in the interests of turning a profit.' Materialism, epitomized by the unrealistic beliefs of money and material goods, can be labeled as *the* 'risk' factor in contemporary society because it makes individuals vulnerable to excessive, dysfunctional consumer behavior such as compulsive buying. As to how all of this applies to children, the detrimental motive of pursuing a better identity through material goods is already evident in childhood within consumer cultures. Despite all of the evidence on the importance of meaningful relationships in achieving happiness, children are led to believe cool supersedes pro-social behaviors. Sadly, this is reflected in the number one aspiration of children in the USA and the UK – the acquisition of wealth (Dittmar, 2007).

In consumer cultures, to define oneself to others, even to one's self, requires an endless, ongoing stream of consumptive experiences. Regardless of individual context, in late modernity we are increasingly what we consume and measure most of our success on this level (Fromm, 1976). Within capitalist cultures, others judge and are judged along a consumptive criteria. Hence, it can be argued that the discourse which includes 'socialization' has been applied as a means of obfuscating the processes of identity construction, and designed to mask or downplay the effect and meaning that consumption has, particularly concerning children. As long as children are touted as merely socialized consumers marketers have little accountability. To talk about socialization is to downplay the fact that choices related to consumption are not simply decisions about how to act, but also reflect one's identity. It is not difficult then to understand why many consumers would argue that they are fully aware of the omnipresence of consumption and despite this, are still in control, in charge (Kilbourne, 1999). Consumerism poses a mirage, a myth that one's locus of control is so internalized and identity so sustained that to be influenced by external forces in the market is minimally understood and believed (Kramer, 2006). Yet, as previously discussed, it is evident that consumerism plays a significant role in the development of identity and self-image (Benn, 2004).

## **Branding**

Over the last decade, the exponential increase in the intensity of marketing directed at children has led to a phenomenon known as branding. The intimate entangling of brand

and identity is nowhere more evident than in the experience of childhood over the last two decades. 'The colonization of children's lives by the entertainment product cycle has woven Disney, Hasbro, Mattel and McDonald's into the fabric of everyday life for urban children across the globe.' (Langer, 2004: 263) Children have been bombarded by brands defined by name products and intrusive and clever advertising strategies. As discussed previously, children as young as three can be avid consumers and devoted media watchers and by age five, many begin to show interest in brands and can recognize brand names in stores (Achenreiner and John, 2003; Kline, 2005). More specifically, conceptual brand meanings, the non-observable abstract features of a product, begin to be considered by children around the age of eight (Achenreiner and John, 2003). By age 12, children are able to think about brands on a conceptual level and begin to incorporate these meanings into many types of brand-related judgments (Achenreiner and John, 2003). As a child's identity goes through varying phases of change, it is unrealistic to assume that the child has the sophistication required to self-reflect on the true meaning and impact of brands on identity.

Branding goes much deeper than developing an affinity for particular brands, it also refers to the process in which children and youth consider their own characters and personae, brands onto themselves (Quart, 2003). Teen-oriented brands now register so strongly that an individual not only wears branded clothing, but strives to adopt the mask of the brand's aura in its entirety. In an intensely competitive market, branding the consumer is the linchpin process of carving out and acquiring market share (Preston and White, 2004). The brand and consumer identity merge with the result that children themselves are shaped into commodities imprinted with the brand of the media property. This degree of attention to children as consumers is a relatively recent development and is a result of a fundamental shift in the marketing of goods and services to children that took place in the early 1980s (Preston and White, 2004). Children are now perceived as encompassing three markets: influencing parental spending, significant spending power, and a future market in which to build early brand loyalty. Remarkably, specific brand names are likely to be among a child's first words. Other studies have suggested that by six months, children are able to recognize brand logos (Preston and White, 2004). Establishing brand loyalty at such an early age has powerful implications – more than half of the brands used in childhood continue to be used in adulthood (Pecheux and Derbaix, 1999).

The branding trend infiltrates on many levels. For example, corporations are hiring teens to be 'trend-spotters', insiders who advise on the current teen market (Quart, 2003). The outcome of such engagement leads '[teenagers to feel] that consumer goods are their friends – and that the companies selling products to them are trusted allies. [Tell] us how best to sell your products, they ask. If you do, we will always love you.' (Quart, 2003: 35) The use of peers to market to children/teens has become common and such promoting of consumer goods is now commonplace on the internet. The post-teen 'Britney Spears craze' several years ago is a good example of how powerful the presentation of these images can be. There are also 'cool hunters' – adults who market to adolescents – who survey the latest trends to acquire product marketing strategies (Quart, 2003: 41). Such youth participation can largely be explained as a concerted effort or longing for popularity and acceptance. Corporations seek to ensure that identity is found in the brand and guaranteeing that those brand-associated products will be hard sought after.

Product placement, whether it occurs in television programming or movies, has been taken a step further in the branding phenomenon. Marketers are aiming to capture the attitudes or beliefs of children/teens with a product to ensure branding is successful. As Quart (2003: 101) summarized, 'When aimed at a youth market, brand equity is about creating a permanent, positive association with the product, an effect one marketer dubs 'ever-cool''. Product placement pervades throughout all media from television to video games, aimed to harness children's/teens' desires for their ideal world – branded images they cannot resist. Quart (2003: 124) coined the term 'body branding' or 'branding of the flesh' in reference to the explosion in cosmetic surgery on teens aged 18 and under. Teens and children represent 306,000 of the 7.4 million plastic surgeries conducted in the USA. (Quart, 2003). The endless quest to transform physically, emotionally and psychologically are some of the outcomes of branding. Hence, identity formation is closely aligned with branded images that infiltrate deep into the psyche of children and youth. More specifically, brands can essentially perform two main roles for consumers' identity: an emotional role through providing a means of identification, and a social role through shorthand communication of who we are (Dittmar and Howard, 2004). According to Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998), brands are used by the consumer for both the construction and the maintenance of identity. Teenagers, in particular, may be highly motivated to use any material possessions available to create and communicate a sense of self.

Children also experience branding through contemporary consumer culture's obsession with celebrity (Boden, 2006). Popular culture influences interact with children in complex ways such as the 'clothing/body interface, altering children's self-styling and the presentation of their identity' (Boden, 2006: 289). Children are 'encouraged' by marketers to adopt any aspect of the celebrity's persona that can be sold for profit. The mechanism of identifying with a celebrity directly impacts the child's social identity or that aspect of the self that maneuvers socially. Boden (2006), using a qualitative study paradigm, observed that children's investments in sports stars and pop stars as commercial cultural icons can shape childhood identities. 'Children become exposed to the imagery of [celebrities] and [this] leads to a process of imitation, idealization and identification with or dissociation from a fashion typology or brand name.' (Boden, 2006: 296) It is through the process of consumption of celebrity paraphernalia that children develop a bond with the celebrity so much so that the child's identity may be reconfigured. And since the celebrity is almost always an adult the 'style of life' (cultivation of a particular look) that children adopt in today's highly commodified and media-saturated society inevitably has an affinity with consumer-based lifestyles of the adult world.

### *Gender and Identity*

Consumer cultures impact girls/women and boys/men in different ways though both of the sexes experience an onslaught of messages that uphold the ideals and body image very few can ever achieve. Children and indeed adults are all engaged in the continuous production of gendered identity via visual display. Appearance production is not an optional activity but is constituted of one's subjectivity or overall presentation of the self (Frost, 2005). There is no way out of socialized gendered identities that include visual aspects in consumer cultures, or in any culture for that matter. A set of meanings (imposed upon by culture) that an individual might see is grounded in their identity and attached

to the body and is not necessarily generated from within; it may be arrived at through interactive social processes (Frost, 2005). 'Appearance-obsessed, image-obsessed and self-obsessed, the socially produced subject of late consumer capitalism attempts to exercise control over [existence]' (Frost, 2005: 67) in the context of large, rapidly moving unknowable forces of, for example, globalization, by an over-emphasis on control of the personal sphere. For many and perhaps even the majority of women and girls in consumer cultures, appearance is paramount to their self-definition. Socialization begins early as there is virtually no escaping the ubiquitous presence of thin, muscular, attractive role models marketers choose to use as advertising tools to promote their goods and lifestyles. Mass media is without a doubt the most powerful and vociferous purveyor of the ideal, slender beauty culminating in 'perfection'. Girls in particular, are swamped by ultra-thin ideals not only in the form of dolls but also in figures that appear in comics, cartoons, TV, movies and all forms of advertising along with all the associated merchandising. The synergistic effect of such exposure can have a profound impact on a child's developing identity. The young girls/women are bombarded by the images produced through consumer capitalism such that their internalized standard of normal is ultimately based on an illusion (Frost, 2005). Girls learn to see themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated by appearance, as is characteristic of many women.

The world of a girl's/woman's senses, perspectives, and even future awareness is steeped in the context of consumerism (Little and Hoskins, 2004). Primarily, girls are told by advertisers that what is most important about them is their physical appearance (Kilbourne, 2004). This results in a preoccupation with how to improve the body and enhance attractiveness to become socially desirable. At the same time, while the cultural ideal is becoming progressively thinner, the body weight of women is increasing (Dittmar and Howard, 2004). Thus, it stands to reason that girls/women are likely to experience body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem and identities that reflect both of these phenomena. Dittmar et al. (2006) conducted a study to determine whether children as young as five to eight were impacted by the figure of the Barbie doll, historically the most popular doll of all time. 'Barbie' is so extraordinarily thin that her weight and body proportions are not only unattainable but are also unhealthy. The ultra-thin female beauty ideal for doll and bodies has been linked to the alarmingly high prevalence of negative body image and unhealthy eating patterns now commonly seen among young girls (Dittmar et al., 2006). To put the matter in perspective, fewer than one in 100,000 women have 'Barbie's' body proportions (Dittmar et al., 2006). The findings of the latter research project revealed that very young girls experience heightened body dissatisfaction after exposure to Barbie doll images. When exposed to a neutral control image, there was no effect. Dittmar et al. (2006) concluded that body image is highly salient for pre-adolescent children's self-concept. Barbie appears to have a strong and special role in girls' developing body image, so much so that exposure leads to detrimental effects when girls are young enough to identify with the Barbie doll (Dittmar et al., 2006).

### **Recent research on consumerism and children**

In her seminal study on media culture and children, Juliet Schor (2004), a recognized expert on consumerism, addressed the question: 'How does children's involvement in

consumer culture affect their well-being?' Four measures were used as indicators, those of: anxiety, depression, self-esteem, and psychosomatic symptoms. The results from Schor's study were significant in their importance and revelation; children who are more involved in consumer culture are more depressed, more anxious, have lower self-esteem and suffer from more psychosomatic complaints. It is fair to conclude that psychologically healthy children will be made worse off if they engage in consumer culture. Likewise, children with emotional problems can expect improvements by disengaging in whatever manner is possible from consumer culture.

Schor (2004) also found that children who spend more time watching television and using other media are more likely to involve themselves in consumer culture. The latter finding may be a result of the fact that TV induces discontent with what one has, with its emphasis on materialism, and it causes children to place greater emphasis on brands and products and imbibe consumer values. Also, in this study, higher levels of consumer involvement resulted in worse relationships with parents. And as children's relations with their parents are compromised, there is an additional negative effect on well-being. Schor's 2004 findings suggest a strong causal relationship between consumerism and negative physical and psychological health. The significance of Schor's study cannot be overstated – children who suffer from anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and problematic physical symptoms are children whose childhoods are endangered.

## Conclusion

As generations of children become socialized in consumer cultures their childhoods will have been so shortened that many will scarcely remember a time when they were not operating as a consumer. Children's identities have been inextricably linked to a corporate agenda that promotes and entices consumption. Children have been losing their grip on childhood as a result of the gradual but steady encroachment of media into every aspect of their lives. There is no doubt that childhood of the past was not so enmeshed with marketers' agendas. Though corporate interests in children had firmly commenced by the mid-20th century, more permissive regulations (especially under Reagan in the USA) resulted in a daily onslaught of advertisements that many adults, let alone children, could not resist. As well, the revolution in technology added to the venues in which marketers could attract the child consumer including: DVD players, computers, iPods, cell phones, Game Boys, etc. Media involvement manifests most powerfully through consumer culture and eventually invades the ongoing sense of identity that children develop throughout their childhoods. This dramatic cultural shift has led to a fiercely competitive market to capture children's attention. Intent on attracting 'cradle-to-grave' brand loyalty, marketers upped the ante, imposing their logos on the minds of pre-schoolers too young to even recite the alphabet. Under the dubious justification of 'empowerment' corporations were able to forge ahead with new goods, brands, and media with virtually unchallenged deftness and ingenuity (Cook, 2007). The message – 'you are what you consume' – has become the dominant ideology for both children and adults such that there is little distinction now between the two. Children's habits, attitudes and behaviors including the way they dress, the music they listen to and the discourse of childhood more and more resemble those of adults as they become acculturated to the same level of consumer involvement.

The depiction of the child consumer has been fashioned in a way that makes marketing and advertising toward children appear as a benign, even liberating undertaking. Ironically, since the 1990s marketers have touted the belief that children are better equipped to resist the power of advertising than their counterparts of several decades ago. They have argued that the 'free' market inherently teaches children to become savvy, discerning consumers. The discourse of empowerment, not unlike that of socialization, renders marketing to children a morally defensible and ethically sound undertaking. Indeed the language of choice resonates with everyday notions of freedom, and citizenship in the free world. The child consumer has been reconfigured to stand for individual autonomy rather than corporate exploitation. Corporations have thus successfully co-opted children's empowerment by equating 'choice' with the consumption of heavily sponsored products.

Since consumer culture is so dominant in the West, resisting and rejecting those aspects that are less than desirable is challenging, particularly after being socialized and steeped in the culture as a child. As Barber (2007: 167) delineated:

Branded lifestyles are not merely superficial veneers on deeper identities but have to some degree become substitute identities – forms of acquired character that have the potential to go all the way down to the core. They displace traditional ethnic and cultural traits and overwhelm the voluntary aspects of identity we chose for ourselves.

Thus, the process of 'branded identities' may partly explain why many children and even adults suffer under the illusion of free agency and are unable to detect the degree of effect that consumerism imparts. To be immersed in consumerism does not translate to awareness even if one protests to be in the know. It will, therefore, take concerted effort to muster a dissenting voice, one counter to the slow drip of implicit assumptions that keep the corporate market alive at a psychological level. Children are particularly vulnerable and generally unable to engage in self-reflection such that by the time they are adults the consumer ideology is well established as a foundation of identity.

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