

Knowing the child consumer: historical and conceptual insights on qualitative children's consumer research

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to offer a selective and necessarily truncated history of the place and use of qualitative approaches in the study of children's consumption in order to provide some depth of understanding regarding differences between and commonalities of approaches employed by academic market researchers, social science researchers and, to a lesser extent, market practitioners.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The paper examines key research statements about children's consumption beginning in the 1930s to ascertain the underlying conception of the child informing the work.*

Findings – *It is argued that there has been a displacement of psychologically oriented, developmental conceptions of the child with sociological and anthropological conceptions resulting in an acceptance of the child as a more or less knowing, competent consumer. This shift has become manifest in a rise and acceptance of qualitative research on children's consumer behaviour by social science and marketing academics as well as by market practitioners such as market researchers.*

Research limitations/implications – *Methods – here qualitative methods – must be seen as enactments of theories about conceptions of the person, rather than simply as neutral tools that uncover extant truths.*

Practical implications – *Attending to how one "constructs" the child may usefully inform debates about the harmfulness or usefulness of goods and messages directed to children.*

Originality/value – *This paper helps in understanding the long history of children as consumers, how they have been understood and approached by market and academic researchers interested in consumption and various ways conceptions of 'the child' can be used.*

Keywords *Qualitative methods, Market research, Children (age groups), Consumer behaviour*

Paper type *Research paper*

Qualitative research on children's consumer culture, behaviour and lives continues to gain adherents and favour among academic researchers, market researchers and practitioners. Observations of and interviews with children – now staple components of the services that market research firms offer – often inform merchandising, packaging, advertising campaigns and the creation and management of products and brands intended for children's consumption or use. Ethnographic studies, large and small, examining the place of goods in children's lives appear with some regularity in academic journals and on the lists of scholarly publishers.

Grouping research together under the rubric of the "qualitative" study of children's consumption, however, can elide key philosophical and epistemological differences in research practices and traditions. Indeed, within academic circles those who align themselves with the social sciences, like sociology and anthropology, differ from market researchers in terms of the nature, subject and purpose of research. A market researcher working for a firm who for instance is conducting a study of children's preferences for a particular product or brand may achieve desirable outcomes while never addressing the questions and literature that academic researchers are required to, in some minimal way,

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acknowledge. An academic researcher may expend some effort questioning basic terms like “child” or “consumption” in an effort to build theory that a market practitioner would most likely consider a waste of time.

In the following, I first offer a brief, selective and necessarily truncated history of the place and use of qualitative approaches in the study of children’s consumption in order to provide some depth of understanding regarding differences between and commonalities of approach employed by academic market researchers, social science researchers and, to a lesser extent, market practitioners. This historical treatment and subsequent discussion entail an examination of differing and changing views of “the child” – of who children are, or who they are said to be, socially and morally. I argue that a conception of children as active, knowing and non-derivative social actors has been emergent since the latter half of the twentieth century and took hold in both academic circles and the marketing world in the 1990s. This view contrasts with that proffered by standard developmental psychology in that it favors and ultimately legitimizes the child’s perspective and wants regarding goods and the commercial world. The rise and viability of qualitative methods in children’s consumer research (both academic and practitioner) both followed and underpinned this trend as researchers and firms increasingly sought to elicit the child’s view and voice regarding preferences and desires of all things commercial.

The developing child, 1910s-1950s

Children behaved and were treated as consumers well before any effort was made to systematize knowledge about their commercial behaviour and desires. In the first decades of the twentieth century in the USA, children’s goods comprised small, niche markets made up mainly of books (Kline, 1993), toys (which were often displayed seasonally and put away (Cross, 1997; Leach, 1993)), furniture and nursery ware and a growing industry of ready-made clothing for all ages of youth (Cook, 2004). During this time, a world of goods, spaces and iconography arose in department and dry goods stores in US cities that was increasingly directed to and oriented toward the “child consumer” (Cook, 2004; Leach, 1993).

Retailers, store buyers, manufacturers, advertisers and others helped build this child world largely by observing and attending to reports about the behaviour of mothers and children in stores, often making comparisons to how “things used to be.” These observations would circulate among store employees as well as among those in the dry goods trade by way of the trade press. The report of such commercial knowledge would often be shared in the form of anecdote and caricature, typified by this 1920 cheeky vignette from the trade paper, *The Dry Goods Economist*:

That woman rules in the world of fashion – a long-accepted adage – is now being challenged to-day. Thus one concludes as she watches prim little Miss Dorothy wandering about in the big store selecting her wardrobe. Mother apparently comes along just to pay the bills... Miss Dorothy goes to parties, just like mother. She knows what she likes, and mother lets her select what pleases her most, and so Miss Dorothy becomes Queen in her world of fashion (*Dry Goods Economist*, 30 October 1920, p 118).

In a context where the relative homogeneity of clientele in terms of social class and race could be assumed – the so-called “carriage trade” of urban department stores – this level understanding about mothers and children, and the social change implied in the story, appears to have been quite valid and useful for its time and purpose.

Personal observation and story telling of “consumers” or “consumer behaviour” – including of one’s own child (see Howell, 1930) – performed a function akin to market research at this time for those in the retail and manufacturing trades. As the market for children’s goods expanded and as the social position of children changed in an increasingly urban, diverse and expanding social order in the interwar period, new kinds of knowledge about who children are and how they are said to think and act at various ages came to exist beside and eventually overtake anecdotal and local forms of knowledge. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, child psychology gained in public popularity and could already be found as a

prominent feature in advice columns in parenting and child publications for the “progressive mother” (see Seiter, 1993, pp. 21-26; Rose, 1990; see also Newson and Newson, 1974).

It was a direct and logical step for manufacturers and advertisers to frame goods in terms of “scientific” theories about children’s growth and needs. The first step in systemizing knowledge about children’s consumer behaviour thus came with the application of psychological theories of development to commercial contexts. Notions of “child development” provided early marketers a template with which to translate a child’s changing, age-sensitive abilities into commercial action. In the 1930s, the work of E. Evalyn Grumbine, assistant publisher and advertising director of *Child Life* magazine, helped bring notions of development in conversation with commercial interest. She published articles that summarized or applied academic research on topics like color preferences, the penchant of children to collect things or to join clubs and effective advertising to children (see Grumbine, 1936, 1937). In *Reaching Juvenile Markets: How to Advertise, Sell and Merchandise through Boys and Girls*, Grumbine (1938) outlined six age stages from age 2-18 replete with suggestions for how particular goods and promotions fit with the characteristics found in particular age ranges. For instance, she relates the success of Cracker Jack popcorn snacks, famous for having a small toy in every package, to the essentially supposed “inherent” tendency of seven-to-nine year old children to collect and trade things (p. 36).

Child psychology, by virtue of its presumed status as “scientific” and hence “objective” knowledge about typical or normal development, supplied a basis to morally justify the emerging market for children’s goods. Fitting what were said to be children’s abilities with “appropriate” products and promotions would benefit children as well as promoters, according to Grumbine, because advertising would create campaigns from a “sound base of knowledge of the child.” Such efforts, she continued, can “contribute something of value to children during their formative years; at the same time they will secure better results from their advertising to boys and girls and spread much good will among parents and educators” (Grumbine, 1938, p. ix).

None of the research Grumbine cites and discusses could be categorized as market research *per se*. Children were not interviewed, observed or measured in any way for consumer research purposes. Her entire undertaking centered on extrapolating commercially relevant insights from psychology and applying them to theoretical children. The selective application of child psychology functioned in a way similar to the persona of Little Miss Dorothy, and other such constructions, in that each provided a model of “the child” that would animate and inform the creation of goods, retail spaces and promotional materials. The “child,” in both cases, serves as a conceptual currency that is traded among interested parties so as to produce a shared and thus workable reality even as it offered a morally acceptable way to “know” children for commercial purposes.

Throughout the 1940s and into the early 1950s in the US, no significant attempts were made to come to know the child consumer in terms substantively different than Grumbine’s treatment. One researcher did interview children about their knowledge of logos and followed up 12 years later (Guest, 1942, 1955). None of the logos was for children’s products.

The desiring child, 1950s-1970s

In 1957, youth marketing pioneer Eugene Gilbert published *Advertising and Marketing to Young People* wherein one can discern the outlines of a significant cultural shift in attitudes toward the relationship between children, youth and the consumer marketplace. Like Grumbine, he made some use of psychological and other literature to understand the “minds” of young people, himself refraining from conducting direct research with youth. Unlike her, he emphasized youth’s desires and their unique ability to introduce new items into the household – rather than simply their phase in the “developmental” sequence or the “educational” value of a product – as a key element in determining which goods and promotions were appropriate for young people (Gilbert, 1957, pp. 35-50).

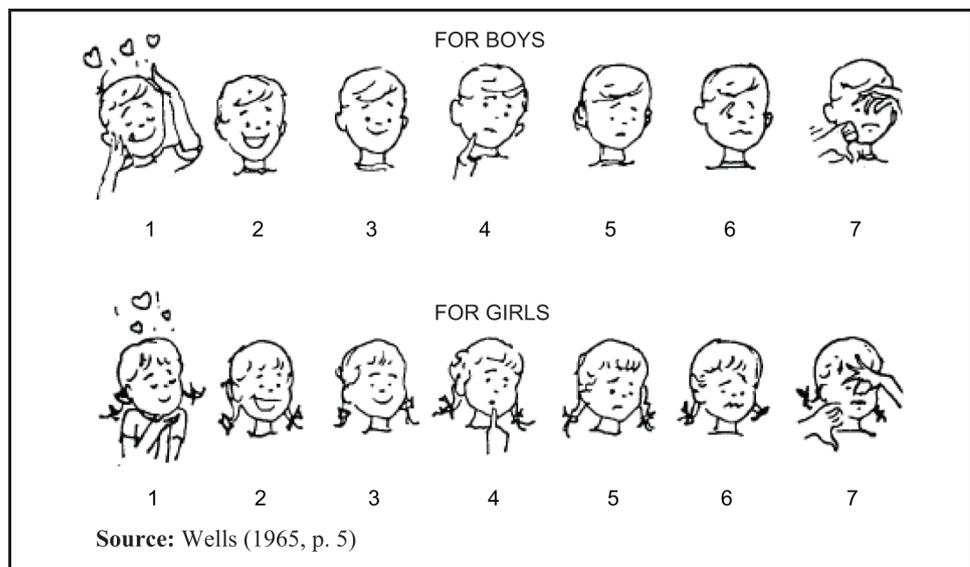
Situating children's and youth's desires at the forefront of consideration as Gilbert did marked a shift in the conceptualization of the child consumer, one that is part of a larger cultural transformation in the social understanding of children – initially white, middle-class children in particular. The shift in question arose in earnest in the 1920s in the US context and began to crystallize in the 1950s. It involved the acknowledgement and ultimate legitimization of the social personhood of children *vis-à-vis* adults by way of recognizing, even valorizing, the child's perspective (Cook, 2004).

Intimations of this cultural shift can be found in a number of places. In the early 1900s, Ellen Key (1909), in *Century of the Child*, called for children's self-determining rights. Examining popular, middle-class parenting literature in the 1920s and 1930s, Ellen Seiter (1993, p.22), noted a similar emergent belief in the growing authority of the "child-centered model" which, as she said privileges the "child's own desires" over those of the mother. Anthropologist Martha Wolfenstein (1955, p. 171) examined United States Children's Bureau parenting literature, 1914-1947, and found that a "fun morality" characterized a new attitude toward parenting in the 1930s and 1940s whereby mothers were advised to "follow" their children's impulses, not direct them.

This emergent ethos, whereby children's wants and desires are to be acknowledged and considered alongside those of adults, came to inform commercial approaches to and understandings of children. In the mid 1960s, a few marketing professors began to interview children directly about their knowledge of and preferences for goods. William Wells, of Rutgers University and consultant for the Benton and Bowles marketing firm, published an article "Communicating with children" in 1965 (Wells, 1965) in which he discusses problems in marketing communication with children, included among these are memory, rapport in the research situation and abstraction. Wells asserts that abstraction can become particularly problematic when advertisers are trying to test concepts and associations with young pre-school or early elementary school aged children. To assist in the process of accessing children's knowledge, Wells suggests using pictures whenever possible to make concepts as concrete as possible. He developed a pictorial scale, based on Likert preference scales, whereby the boy or girl could point to image that best represented their attitude toward the product or advertisement in question (see Figure 1).

In both subtle and explicit ways, how children understand the commercial world and how they experience it increasingly came to occupy a vital place in the growing field of children's consumer research. The focus on children's knowledge and perspectives did not replace developmental and psychological models, but tended to accompany and supplement them.

Figure 1 William Wells' "smile scale" used to elicit consumer preferences from children



Researchers – mainly academic researchers in the 1960s and 1970s – increasingly looked to children themselves to inform the general categories and phases of development. James McNeal (1964, 1969), Scott Ward (1974) and Ward *et al.* (1977) included children's experiences in different ways so as to construct models of what came to be known as consumer socialization (Ward, 1974; see John, 1999), or “processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace” (Ward, 1974, p. 2). McNeal, while recognizing age-related competencies, was particularly keen on conceptualizing children as “no different from other consumers” in the sense that they sought and gained satisfaction from the consumer marketplace – i.e. from both the product and from the act of purchasing (McNeal, 1969, p. 18).

Yet, even as children's perspectives – their views, preferences and feelings – acquired both cultural and commercial stature, direct research on children's consumer behaviour remained restrained in both the academic and business worlds throughout the 1970s and 1980s, when compared with what was to follow. This was a time when consumer groups in the US mounted public criticism about the nature and content of children's commercial television, in some cases influencing the enactment of regulatory law (see Jordan, 2008 for summary and analysis), and when images of “spoiled brats” and “nagging” began circulating and becoming part of a public discourse about commercialized childhoods. Hence, a good deal of academic research into the 1990s sought to influence social policy regarding children's media use and consumption (Jordan, 2008). Many efforts were directed toward uncovering the ways in which children came to understand, for instance, the persuasive intent of advertising or the value of goods (John, 1999). The general idea centered on devising instruments that could produce objective information about children's knowledge and competencies so as to be able to provide developmentally, hence morally, appropriate media and advertising (Jordan, 2008; see Kunkel and Roberts, 1991). Underlying these efforts was a belief that children should be allowed to be active in their engagement with the commercial world.

The rise of the knowing, active child

This admittedly abridged and selective history tells something of an uncomplicated story about the growing recognition and perhaps acceptance of the legitimacy of children's consumer desires on the part of parents and those interested in understanding and promoting consumer behaviour. Developmental psychology provided a template with which to organise and interpret children's actions and utterances in reference to an overarching trajectory of a linear movement toward adulthood and thus the increasing acquisition of competence thereby implied in this movement (see John, 1999). It dominated approaches to childhood – including research on consumer behaviour – well into the 1990s. It was in that decade that a significant epistemological break in the understanding of children and childhood took hold. The new approach to and understanding of childhood had moorings within and as well as outside of studies of consumption and consumer life.

In 1989, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, an agreement among most nations to recognize and treat children as persons with inherent rights. In that same time period of the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were also stirrings in sociology and anthropology – mainly in the UK and Scandinavia but also in the USA – of a distinctively new approach to children and childhood (Qvortrup, 1987; Thorne, 1987). Prout and James (1990), outlining a number of the key premises to this “new childhood studies,” emphasized that childhood must be seen as a social and historical construction – that its contours change over time and across cultural contexts such that one must not presume of it any essential meaning. Childhood, they argue, is not reducible to other social variables or institutions like the economy, polity or biology and hence it makes no sense to discuss “the child” as a stand-alone idea apart from culture, economy and history.

Childhood and children's cultures, James and Prout continue, are worthy of study in their own rights, never derivative of (but never completely separated from) adults and adult institutions. Children, thus, are to be understood as involved actively in the construction or creation of their own worlds and childhoods, and not passive recipients of adult meanings,

who are merely on their way to becoming full persons when they reach adulthood (see also Jenks, 1996; James *et al.*, 1998). This view explicitly questioned the one offered by general child development research wherein “the child” is conceived as a universal and generic figure who is incomplete in and of his or her self – never a being in the here and now but always on the path to becoming an adult[1], according to James and Prout[2]. Approaching children as beings in the here and now, who engage in the world and make sense of it in their own ways, requires that researchers develop techniques to enter these worlds.

Qualitative-interpretive research, including ethnography, has proven to be particularly well suited to the task of “knowing children” on their own terms in that it seeks to bring forth and analyze the actors’ views of the world. Hence, in the act and process of conducting qualitative research with children, their voices and views necessarily acquire a level of legitimacy. In the next and following sections, I discuss how this “new” view of the active child informed both market research and academic research on children’s consumer behaviour and culture.

Children’s market research and the new child consumer in the 1990s and beyond

Children’s market researchers, brand managers and advertisers and others in the 1980s found themselves well situated in a strong economic environment and a favorable social-moral climate as regards children and the commercial world. Since this time, market practitioners have pressed their efforts to devise and apply various research techniques in an effort to gauge children’s understandings of and feelings about consumer goods and messages. Gaining entrée into the child’s perspective since has become something of a gold standard of children’s marketing for those whose livelihoods depend on being able to see with “children’s eyes,” so to speak. Research conducted by practitioners for direct market application is, unsurprisingly, highly goal oriented to the extent that the findings are considered useful only if they make a path to increased sales of goods intended for children’s use.

The children’s market, for all of its long history, proved something of an enigma to many marketers and retailers in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite increasingly robust sales of children’s goods – estimated at as much as \$30 billion USD in 1995 (McNeal, 1999) – there were few ways to gauge with any confidence the role of the child directly in influencing parents, in making purchases on his or her own or how investing in brands and products at one point in time would translate into future sales and long-term, loyal customers (McNeal, 1992). The child himself or herself – as a consumer – also infused a measure of uncertainty as many product developers and entrepreneurs were unsure as to how to communicate with children of different ages with market messages. As well, the “reputation” of children as “fickle” and easily influenced added to the mixture of worries about the robustness of the children’s market generally, especially outside traditionally successful areas like toys, cartoons, candy and fast foods (McNeal, 1992; Guber and Berry, 1993).

In the early 1990s, James McNeal (1992), a marketing professor and pioneer in children’s market research, and Guber and Berry (1993), both of Children’s Market Research, Inc., published books touting the strength and possibilities of the “kids” market with particular emphasis placed on the promise of qualitative research. McNeal’s (1987) previous book used existing research to argue for the existence and importance of a children’s market in decidedly commercial, bottom-line terms. In *Kids as Customers* (McNeal, 1992), he made a strong claim for the *persona* of the child consumer (age 4-12), what he termed “Kid Kustomer,” whose time had come and is now worthy of recognition from marketers. Working within a general but flexible developmental framework, McNeal honed in on the child’s experience and knowledge in different contexts – like retail outlets – and at different ages.

Role-playing with children, picture drawing by children, focus groups, interviews, observation of children playing or of parents and children in retail stores comprise the core techniques McNeal discusses that can be brought to bear on the task of entering into children’s understandings. He is, for instance, particularly keen on the use of children’s drawings in response to the instruction of “(d)raw what comes to your mind when you think about going shopping” (McNeal, 1992, p. 47). By analyzing the images, McNeal found that

the supermarket was the most frequently conjured image, followed by specialty stores, discount stores and others, with the drugstore/pharmacy conspicuously absent (McNeal, 1992, pp. 47-50). He analysed, as well, the staging and sequencing of the shopping activities, the most frequently pictured shopping items, those drawn in most detail, the presence or absence of brands indicating brand awareness, as well as such things as the level of detail of the overall environment and the emotional tone of the drawings (McNeal, 1992, pp. 50-61). From these, McNeal demonstrated to would-be children's marketers that children do have knowledge of goods, shopping and brands which can be put to the use, if accessed properly.

Guber and Berry (1993), in a book intended to publicize their children's market research company, enjoin a task similar to that of McNeal's – i.e. convincing a skeptical audience of marketing and advertising professionals that knowing children's views through direct research can be profitable. Focus group research is central to the services they offer and they devote a chapter to giving tips on how to run focus groups with children and the insights that can be gained for market research (Guber and Berry, 1993, pp. 38-55). As they state:

The notion that children should be seen and not heard may have made for proper Victorian etiquette, but it's a formula for failure in marketing. If you take time to listen to children, you can come away with a terrific and original new product idea, product positioning, or advertising campaign (Guber and Berry, 1993, p. 38).

Noting that focus group research offers a way to “get a sense of the language kids use to describe your product” (Guber and Berry, 1993, p. 52), they caution about the generalisability of findings from small sample sizes. Guber and Berry nevertheless have quotes from children strewn throughout their text, giving clear indication that consulting children in groups or in one-on-one situations provides insight not otherwise available to market researchers.

Published a year apart, these statements confer something other than the market potential of children. What McNeal and Guber and Berry offer, rather, is a kind of cultural permission to market directly to children. It is a permission asked and granted foremost through the process of seeking to comprehend children's viewpoints and engage their desires in the act of research, rather than impose the consumer identity onto them. Certainly not entirely new – some practitioners had been attuned to children as consumers and as market research subjects in some manner since the 1970s (Kline, 1993; Jordan, 2008) – the approach taken by these authors symbolize a larger crystallization of the persona of the new child consumer. This is a figure who is not bound strictly or even primarily by developmental age or stage, but is understood as a market subject in the here and now. This view of the child echoes that of the new childhood studies discussed earlier and, while there is no sense that they were directly influenced by sociological and anthropological research, the confluence between social science and market research here is evident.

The emergent conceptual construct of the “child” at work here is that of a nascent, but natural, “little consumer” who is constrained by the fact of hers or his powerlessness. It is a child – a conception of a child – who, like the kindred conception of “economic man” in neoclassical economic thought – finds a measure of self worth and satisfaction through, not despite, the marketplace. Guber and Berry (1993), for instance, in response to criticism that marketing to children is tantamount to exploitation, respond in a classic way arguing that increasing numbers of children and changing conditions of households have “created a demand for new products to answer problems, provide solutions and add benefits to the lives of today's kids” (Guber and Berry, 1993, p. xvii).

McNeal (1992) likewise presents children's nature as congruent with the marketplace when addressing the issue of needs:

Kids do have needs that *must* be satisfied. In fact, as far as we know these are the same needs as those of adults. Given the chance, the child will select products and services that best satisfy their needs. (McNeal, 1992, p. 189, emphasis in original)

Hence, the task of the marketer, the qualitative market researcher in particular, is uncover children's ways of knowing and thus their “true,” un-coerced, unarticulated (and perhaps

previously unarticulatable) needs and desires so as to give the child the “chance” to select appropriate products and marketers the knowledge to offer products and services that satisfy these needs. The transition partly indicated by these writings turns developmental understandings on their side in that it is children’s “needs” that connect them with adults – that make them nearly full persons, if you will – and that the child his or herself can satisfy these needs “if given the chance.” The child merely needs to be liberated from its diminutive physical and social stature and subordinate position and treated as a person, a consumer.

Marketers flocked to help build this new construct of the child consumer like Amish to a barn-raising (e.g. Del Vecchio, 1997; Sutherland and Thompson, 2001) – and for good reason. Placing a knowing, active child at the centre of one’s efforts and industry provide moral cover against the ever-present threat of being seen as engaging in exploitative practices. If children’s expressions of desire are seen as legitimate, then the issue of “manipulation” diminishes accordingly. Since understanding children’s thinking and motivations arose as the key to sales and the ability to market to them, it stands to reason that anyone who could demonstrate that they have better, actionable research about children’s consumer knowledge and desires would be in a favorable competitive position.

In the 1990s and into the 2000s, a number of market research firms entered the “children’s knowledge” market, (e.g. Kidz Eyes, Geppetto Group, Just Kid, Wonder Group). Some advertising firms like Leo Burnett added their own research divisions devoted exclusively to children. Research teams expanded their repertoires beyond focus groups and sought “naturalistic” observations of children, with some researchers spending the night at girls’ sleep-over parties. Others had researchers observe young children bathe (with parents’ permission) to gain insights on the use of bath products and still others “hung out” with children in their rooms, discussing their clothes, music and posters and the like (see Schor, 2004 for reports on these activities). Each firm, in order to ensure its exclusivity, developed proprietary techniques of analysis and the detailed findings from studies often remained their property, making the inner world of children’s market research a bit opaque. The “child’s view” itself became a commodity. So deeply had the connection between the consumer market and children’s selves penetrated that marketers touted their wares not simply as satisfying children’s desires or answering a “need,” but as positively “empowering” children, sometimes to the point of absurdity (Cook, 2007; Banet-Wiser, 2007; see Schor, 2004 pp. 180-181)[3].

Qualitative market research on children has taken hold as an integral part of marketing practice in large part because it instantiates and enacts a conception of “the child” as a knowing, active being in the here and now. This conception, supported by middle-class parenting practices, international children’s rights movements and sociological and anthropological theory, carries with it something of a moral force to the extent that it treats the child as a person with desires and needs like anyone else. Issues of development here recede from the forefront of consideration in favour of observing, questioning and interacting with the child consumer in an effort to discern her or his wants as they manifest themselves presently. The child in this configuration stands as something of an authority on the content of his or her wants who of course must seek the cooperation of others.

Issues surrounding the developmental appropriateness of marketing and advertising to children have not disappeared, of course, but rather have shifted in response to the rising contemporary cultural dominance of “kid kustomer.” When children are understood to be at risk in some way from the commercial world – be it through harmful products or harmful messages – most often one finds a developmentalist argument underlying the concern. The extent to which children can understand commercial messages and their persuasive intent, and at what ages, has been studied and debated for decades (see Schor, 2006). When critics, legislators and consumer advocate groups make a distinction between adults and children regarding the impact of media and the commercial world, they also implicitly and explicitly posit children as vulnerable and some way in need of protection (Linn, 2004; Schor, 2004) – the polar opposite of the conceptualisation of the knowing, relatively competent child.

Academic research – children’s consumer culture

In contrast to market researchers and practitioners, who were in the forefront of children’s consumer research, academic researchers by and large were slow to pick up on the cultural and monetary significance of children’s place in the consumer world. Aside from McNeal, Ward, Wackman and Wartella, mentioned above, and those who worked on the “consumer socialization” paradigm in the 1980s and 1990s (see John, 1999 for a review), academic researchers (sociologists, anthropologists and communications scholars, mainly) did not begin to research and write about children’s consumer lives and behaviour in earnest until the 1990s, and then not significantly until the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The comparative lag in the 1990s in the recognition of young consumers as worthy of study by academics is especially curious given the increasing attention paid to children in sociology and anthropology as the “new” of childhood studies was taking hold. It would seem that, like many market practitioners, social researchers would adopt the view of “the child” as an active and knowing being and apply it to the commercial aspects of their lives through, most logically, the use of qualitative methods. With a few exceptions like Ellen Seiter (1993, 1999) and David Buckingham (1993), the academic response to the growing market for children’s goods and the growing visibility of the child consumer took a hard, critical turn whereby many saw the “culture industries” (e.g. consumer, media) as enacting unilateral and all powerful influence on children (see Kline, 1993; Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1997). Indeed, criticism of television and electronic media generally in the 1980s (Postman, 1982; Suransky, 1982) set the terms of the relation quite strongly by defining children as not-yet developed and hence vulnerable, with little ability to comprehend and thus stave off incessant, virtually all-encompassing commercial messages (see Buckingham, 2000 for a review and critique of this position). This kind of critique did not require consulting children about their own experiences and understandings as these were presumed in the structure of the argument.

Those who were studying children on their own terms did not consider consumer behaviour to any significant degree in large part, as I see it, because the new paradigm of childhood studies configured the active, knowing child within a liberatory framework. That is, the point of recognizing children’s voices centered on breaking the notion of the child out of the constraints of developmental psychology and also out of the hold of many traditional forms of subordination due merely to age. The key tenets and general thrust of this view of the child are nearly indistinguishable from how marketers were thinking about the child consumer, but this coincidence did not seem to merit attention from the childhood studies advocates. Detailed ethnographic studies of children’s lives, for instance, were quite silent on the place and use of popular, consumer culture therein (e.g. Adler and Adler, 1998; Thorne, 1993). The silence or gap here occurred most likely because many researchers simply were not attuned to see consumption and commercial-related practices as significant to children’s lives in meaningful ways, and certainly not as any sort of basis or aspect of liberation.

The kind of academic qualitative research on children’s consumer behaviour and culture that has taken hold since the turn of this century differs quite strikingly from that practiced by and for practitioners – a difference due almost exclusively to the divergent purposes motivating and informing the research act for each. The nature of the respective professional audiences and tasks contextualize virtually all aspects of research. Market researchers are hired by clients to test or measure particular products or concepts with particular users or groups. They work within the frame of a direct cost-investment-benefit calculus and within a conceptual-theoretical scaffolding whereby all activity and all derived concepts and insights are to be put to the service of increasing usability for the client who is seeking direction as to how to increase sales. “Knowing the child” through interpretive research techniques here means knowing the child in terms of consumer desires and behaviour that can lead to sales. All knowledge – both the child’s and the researcher’s – is subordinate to the ultimate effort of creating economically exchangeable values.

Academic researchers salute another flag. Guided most often by rather vague professional goals like “making knowledge public,” many need also to demonstrate their productivity to their institutions. The role and charge of a scholar to “produce knowledge” provides considerable leeway in terms of what kind of research to be conducted, its purpose and

“usefulness,” as well as the length and type of studies undertaken. This wide swath of purpose and direction, coupled with the need to address and contribute to extant knowledge of a field, has allowed the qualitative study of children’s consumption to be open to multiple influences and directions.

First, the choice of subject or population is not guided by their ability to purchase consumer goods. For example, anthropologist Elizabeth Chin (2001) conducted an ethnography of poor African-American children, mostly 10- and 11-year-old girls, in a US city. Her intent was to understand the everyday practices and contexts of these children in terms of their consumer lives and how these related to larger public discourses and stereotypes of the African-American “hyper-consumer” whose identity was said to be lost in big-name brands and who would acquire things through violence.

As a studious ethnographer, Chin spent considerable time with the children over the course of many months, most often in non-commercial, non-consumer contexts and activities. She had meals with them, celebrated holidays and special occasions with them, accompanied them around their neighborhood, spoke with them about many topics – including their knowledge of and fear about sexual predation on the streets as well as the finances of their families. What she found was that the children were too poor to purchase much of anything and, in an interesting stroke of inspiration arising from desperation, provided the children with \$20 USD to spend so long as she could accompany them when they did so. The children in the main, contrary to stereotypes, purchased things for their mothers or grandmothers and/or goods that could be shared among themselves.

In casting a wide net, Chin allowed herself to grasp the place or non-place of goods and consumer culture in the children’s lives by consulting their experiences. Market researchers do not attend to poor children precisely because they do not enter the realm of relevance of business interests and clients have no need to understand their specific needs and practices[4]. Other academic researchers interview and observe poor children and families, examining how the expectations of consumption and social display place pressure on households with single mothers (Power, 2005) and on children in the context of school and peer groups to demonstrate they “belong” (Pugh, 2009). Some address how the space of the school and school lunchroom and lunch time serve as significant opportunity for children to display or hide their various identities with regard to the goods and foods they have and how children identify each other according to the kinds of goods or media they consume (Thorne, 2005, 2008).

Most contemporary qualitative research in this vein seeks to understand how children make use of commercial goods and media (see Marsh, 2005; Willett, 2008; Gotz *et al.*, 2005; Ekström and Tufte, 2008) or how they behave or are treated in retail environments like stores and malls (Russell and Tyler, 2002) rather than how advertising and marketing interests use or manipulate them. In many ways, the clear trajectory of much of qualitative work on young consumers bends in the direction of the conceptualization of children as knowing, acting persons in the tradition of the new paradigm of childhood studies, but differs from this tradition in its general acceptance or acknowledgement of the place of consumption, goods, media and advertising in their lives. Indeed, there appears to be at present a rapprochement between some academic work and market research as scholars visit and research children’s rooms (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2005) and seek to understand children’s brand symbolism and relation to celebrities (Wicks *et al.*, 2007; Nairn *et al.*, 2008). The recognition of the significant integration of goods and brands into children’s experiences has led some to advocate the use of branded, commercial products – including digital media – in the teaching of literacy (Dyson, 1997; Marsh, 2000, 2005; Willett, 2008).

These convergences notwithstanding, academic researchers tend to take a constructivist approach to social life, more so than market researchers and their clients. Constructivism as a philosophical stance underscores social actors as creators of reality or realities in a stronger sense than simply making meaning out of the world that is given. It is a view that ultimately comprehends “the world” as something made in and through social relations (see Blumer, 1969). Hence, things like “the family,” “child,” “fairness,” or any such concept, make sense and have significance through the lived reality of persons; these do not exist outside of or apart from living, interpreting persons. For instance “family,” as Philips (2008) points out, is in part

fabricated through parent-child interactions in the process of shopping for groceries. Thorne (2008) similarly argues that social identities in a school setting – the “Pokemon girls” – do not exist outside of a web of interrelations that range from the immediate peer group, to gendered, economic and ethnic contexts, to global flows of capital.

Discussion and conclusion

The qualitative study of children's consumer behaviour and culture did not and could not take root until larger, cultural views recognized and accepted children as social persons, rather than as being largely derivative of overarching biological processes. Once children began to be seen as knowing, meaning-making beings, then a pathway opened to pursue inquiry into the dynamics and processes of children's actions and practices. Prior to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and to the articulation of the “new paradigm” of childhood studies, it was practitioners – those who dealt with the practical issues of securing goods and spaces for differently aged youth – who, over the course of decades, conceptualized and treated children and youth as knowing social actors.

Yet, the understanding of children as knowing, active social actors presents something of a moral as well as methodological conundrum. This view of children gives license to most any attempt to market to children, restrained only by the resistance of parents and sometime governments or consumer watchdog groups regarding the content of advertising. There have been, to be sure, attempts on the part of practitioners and governments either to curtail certain kinds of marketing toward children or, alternatively, to bring children into the process positively as “consumers” or “users” (Buckingham, 2005). The battle, it seems, continues to be waged over the definition of the kind of social and psychological being a “child” is.

The differences between marketers and academics are significant for many of the reasons outlined above. There is, in addition, a refusal on the part of those who have produced the goods and images and spaces of children's consumer culture to take much, if any, responsibility for the changing shape of childhood and the commercial landscape. They do not acknowledge this aspect of their actions in large part because they see themselves as individual enterprises and not part of a “children's culture industry” (Langer, 2004). The construction of the child consumer as an individualized market actor serves well to place any blame to be had either on the child or, more directly, on the parent – especially mothers who often bear the brunt of accusations for their children's consumer behaviour. Academics are guilty of painting all commercial practice and industry as a single, monolithic entity that acts in unison. Few social science researchers have looked into the dynamics of advertising and marketing (but see Sender, 2004; Davila, 2001; see also Cook, 2006 for a discussion of the attempts to gain the “inside view” of marketing), and even less into industries dealing specifically with children (but see Schor, 2004).

These differences in orientation will continue to inform what sort of qualitative research is done on and with children regarding their commercial lives. Should efforts be made to converse or perhaps seek integration or reconciliation, both marketers and academics will need to put their conceptual beliefs into action and attempt to see the world through the eyes of the other. In the meantime, it remains important to recognize the double-edged power of the conception of the “child” to provide moral and social permission to approach and treat children on par with adults as well as the concerns and conundrums such a conception entails.

Notes

1. Kessen, (1979, p. 819) made this point a decade earlier: “The child – like the Pilgrim, the cowboy, and the detective on television – is invariably seen as a free-standing isolable being who moves through development as a self-contained and complete individual. Other similarly self-contained people – parents and teachers – may influence the development of children, to be sure, but the proper unit of cultural analysis and the proper unit of developmental study is the child alone. The ubiquity of such radical individualism in our lives makes the consideration of alternative images of childhood extraordinarily difficult. We have never taken fully seriously the notion that development is, in large measure, a social construction, the child a modulated and modulating component in a shifting network of influences”

2. Certainly, figures like Piaget (1954) and Bronfenbrenner (1979), as well as Kessen (1979), bring social context and constructionism into their views as well. There is evidence recently of a rapprochement between some elements of the social constructionism of childhood studies and developmental psychology (Hogan, 2005).
3. For instance, Gene del Vecchio in (1997, p. 78) *Creating Ever-Cool* remarked in all seriousness that giving children the opportunity to add sugared sprinkles to their yogurt was a form of empowerment.
4. In a phone interview (5 May 2005) the head of a children's market research firm in the USA, who wished to remain anonymous, refuted charges that marketing food to children had any relation to the high obesity rates with low-income, racial minority children because "we don't market to them."

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