

THE COMMODIFICATION OF CHILDHOOD: TALES FROM THE ADVERTISING FRONT LINES¹

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IN THE LAST TWO DECADES, THE CHILDREN'S MARKET has expanded dramatically, in terms of both direct expenditures by children and their influence on parental purchases. This in turn has led to increased attention to children by marketers and to a process of commodification of both childhood, as a saleable cultural concept, and children themselves, who have become the objects of intense marketing activity. In this paper, I discuss three recent trends that illustrate the move toward increased commodification: the rise of naturalistic

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research methods to study children, the expansion of peer-to-peer marketing and other forms of grassroots marketing using children themselves, and a new discourse of “kid empowerment” employed by marketers.

Introduction

In the last ten years, the academic literature has taken note of the growth of commercial influences on childhood, with contributions such as Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg’s *Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood*, Stephen Kline’s *Out of the Garden*, Ellen Seiter’s *Sold Separately*, Henry Giroux’s *Channel Surfing*, Elizabeth Chin’s *Purchasing Power*, Henry Jenkins’ *The Children’s Culture Reader*, and Daniel Cook’s forthcoming *The Commodification of Childhood*.² Some of these texts explicitly address the question of the commodification of childhood, although the literature has yet to settle on a precise definition, and meanings and uses vary widely. Among marketers, the term commodification implies a process in which brand value is disappearing, and the product, increasingly unable to command a price premium, is degraded to the level of an unbranded commodity. In the academic literature, the term is sometimes used almost synonymously with commercialization, as in the notion that children are increasingly involved in consumer, or commercial, culture.

² Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe, *Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood* (Boulder: Westview, 1997); Stephen Kline, *Out of the Garden: Toys and Children’s Culture in the Age of TV Marketing* (London: Verso, 1993); Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Parents & Children in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Henry A. Giroux, *Channel Surfing: Racism, the Media, and the Destruction of Today’s Youth* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1997); Elizabeth Chin, *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Henry Jenkins, *The Children’s Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); and Daniel Cook, *The Commodification of Childhood: Personhood, the Children’s Wear Industry and the Rise of the Child-Consumer, 1917–1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). For a journalistic account of the commercialization among teens, see Alissa Quart, *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* (New York: Perseus, 2003).

I have in mind a more specific meaning, which comes from classical Marxian theory. For Marx, a commodity is not only bought and sold (as in the commercialization meaning), but also produced specifically for the purpose of exchange. Therefore, the status of commodity is not inherent in any characteristics of the good itself, but emanates from the social relations that govern its production and exchange. Is my sweater a commodity? If it is produced in a factory to be sold on a market, it most certainly is. If I knit it at home for myself, it most certainly is not. But if I knit the sweater at home for the purpose of selling it, it becomes commodified. (Labor power, readers of *Capital* will remember, is a peculiar commodity, because under capitalist social relations, it is sold on a market, but not necessarily produced for that purpose.)³

According to this notion, the commodification of childhood refers to a process in which the cultural category childhood is itself produced for the purpose of being sold. And while the notion that a cultural concept can be a product may involve an intellectual stretch, I would argue that this formulation is an insightful illumination of processes now at work in the field of marketing and advertising to children—what industry insiders call “the kidspace.” These industry professionals have become increasingly influential in the social, cultural, and economic construction of childhood. They affect children’s sense of identity and self, as well as their values, behaviors, relationships with others, and daily activities. They help shape the normative vision of childhood that is held by both children and adults. In this sense, they are creating, transforming, and packaging childhood as a productive cultural concept that they then sell to the companies who make the actual products that children buy.

When we conceptualize marketing to children in this way, it becomes apparent that marketers and advertisers are also involved in the commodification of children. This phrase ordinarily refers to a process in

³ Labor power is peculiar for other reasons as well, such as the fact that it is only a capacity to work. Once the labor process commences, labor itself is the relevant input. See Karl Marx, *Capital*, 3 vols., trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

which children are literally bought and sold, for example, into a state of sexual bondage or other forms of productive labor, such as plantation or factory work. But it is increasingly the case that advertisers and marketers are also involved in a different type of commodification: they are influential in actually producing children—that is, in raising, educating, forming, and shaping them. And they do this in a commodified form; that is, they produce children in order to sell them back to their clients. They create in-depth research that they then sell. They provide children with cultural products such as television programming, movies, and web content. They sponsor museum exhibits, school curricula, and leisure activities for children, all of which help to create children as social beings. Advertisers have even gotten into the business of structuring the form and content of social interaction and conversation among children, a phenomenon they benignly term “peer-to-peer marketing.” In the last fifteen years, advertisers and marketers have been extraordinarily successful in these endeavors. They have profited from an explosion of expenditures for, and, even more importantly, by children.

I have reached these conclusions on the basis of research carried out during 2001, 2002, and early 2003 in the advertising industry. I conducted interviews, attended industry conferences, shadowed marketers, participated in client meetings, and spent about two weeks as a visiting professor at an agency where I was attached to a group that handled a major children’s account. I read selectively in the trade literature. My aim in this research was to identify and understand how children are being marketed to and how that has changed over time. I took a broad-brush approach, looking across product groups, including toys and food. I investigated conventional advertising (e.g., television, print, radio, and web ads), looking specifically for the major thematic approaches in the messages. I also catalogued the wide variety of marketing and promotional activities that currently comprise the bulk of total marketing expenditures, including sponsorships and viral, stealth, peer-to-peer, and school-based marketing. I studied the transformation and expansion of research about children. In addition to conventional survey, interview, and focus group techniques, new methodologies such as ethnography, videotaping, diaries, and in-home and in-situ observation have become

popular.⁴ Three trends in the field of marketing to children help reveal the processes of commodification that are now occurring on a wide scale: the rise of naturalistic research, peer-to-peer marketing, and the new discourse on kid empowerment. These three trends represent only a few of the developments that are re-shaping childhood, and this account is more illustrative than complete. Nevertheless, they are key factors in the transformation of children's lives.

Accessing the Advertising Industry

As is well known, advertising is a field in which confidentiality is extremely important. Clients are typically very concerned about secrecy, and agencies are careful about sharing information with outsiders. Compared to other sites of market production, such as factories and offices, conducting academic research inside advertising agencies is relatively infrequent. Most research and findings about children are proprietary in order to protect the economic return that this information yields. The presence of controversy and debate about the entire enterprise of marketing to children also contributes to the secrecy that surrounds research on children. During the period of my research, various groups were actively protesting and organizing against the people I was attempting to study. Industry participants had good reason to be cautious about outside researchers.

Despite these factors, I did get inside a number of agencies and was able to arrange interviews with many practitioners. At times I was given confidential information. I gained access to a couple of client meetings and focus groups. I believe that my initial entrée, which occurred in

⁴ As a complement to this work, I conducted a survey of 300 fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-grade children. The survey data was used in the creation of a new scale that measures children's level of involvement in consumer culture. The consumer involvement scale was included in a structural equation model that tested the impacts of consumer culture on a variety of measures of psychological and social well-being. See my forthcoming book *Born to Buy: Marketing and the Transformation of Childhood and Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2004) for details on the survey and the structural equation model.

part because of my affiliation with a highly prestigious academic institution, led others to believe I was safe to talk to. I employed a snowball sampling technique, using the names of people I had previously interviewed in order to convince others to meet with me. This method proved reasonably successful. I also believe that I benefited from a generally positive and at times enthusiastic attitude toward academic researchers. This is especially true in cases where industry people hold Ph.D.s in liberal arts disciplines. Although I had considerable success in gaining access, it was not complete. Two of the firms I tried to penetrate, Channel One and MTV Networks, were relatively closed, explicitly citing their desire to avoid criticism. I was also unable to arrange first-hand experiences of certain research practices that I was interested in. I did not typically ask to see confidential material, knowing that it might raise red flags about my presence and that I would probably be unable to write about it in any case.⁵

The Rise of the Children's Market

During the last two decades, children have increasingly taken on the role of independent consumers with considerable purchasing power of their own. No official statistics on the volume of children's independent purchases exist. This is not surprising, given that children do not have legal rights over their "own" money. However, the field of marketing to children has relied heavily on soft estimates from practitioners. Paul Kurnit, one of the deans of children's marketing, with extensive experience in toys, food, and other children's categories, identifies two factors in the field's expansion:

[What's new] has been the recognition over the last 20 years that kids are a powerful, very influential market and that they are very brand-aware.... One of the fundamental changes has been the quantification of kid buying power,

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this paper are from interviews conducted by the author in 2001, 2002, or 2003.

which back in the '60s and even in the early '70s nobody was quantifying until guys like Jim McNeal came along.

As Kurnit notes, James McNeal, Emeritus Professor of Marketing at Texas A&M University, has been the field's most influential quantifier of children's purchasing power. McNeal believes that in 2002, children aged four to twelve made an estimated thirty billion dollars in purchases using their own money.⁶ His calculations suggest that direct expenditures rose from \$6.1 billion in 1989, to \$23.4 in 1997, to their current level.⁷ Teen spending is far greater. According to survey data from TRU, a market research company specializing in teens, the average 12–19 year old spent \$104 per week in 2001.⁸ Teen spending is important because the children's market has been growing alongside it, and because trends and styles now migrate quickly from adolescents to kids.

In addition to possessing greater purchasing power, children are becoming more autonomous and involved consumers. Six to twelve year olds are reported to visit stores 2–3 times per week.⁹ Time spent shopping by children has risen significantly in the last 20 years as they accompany parents to stores,¹⁰ and they are also shopping without adults. McNeal estimates that one in four make trips to stores alone before they enter elementary school and that the median age for independent trips is eight.¹¹ The growth of youth shopping is leading to changes in

⁶ This estimate is from private communication with James U. McNeal on July 12, 2002.

⁷ James U. McNeal, *Kids as Customers: A Handbook of Marketing to Children* (New York: Lexington/Free, 1992) 17.

⁸ Teen Research Unlimited, "Teens Spend \$172 Billion in 2001," www.teenresearch.com (25 January 2002).

⁹ Barbara White-Sax, "Wealthy, Savvy Kids Have Their Say," *Drug Store News* (7 June 1999).

¹⁰ Sandra Hofferth and John F. Sandberg, "Changes in American Children's Time, 1981–1997," *Children at the Millennium: Where Have We Come From? Where Are We Going?*, ed. Timothy J. Owens and Sandra L. Hofferth, *Advances in Life Course Research* 6 (New York: JAI, 2001) 193–229.

¹¹ James U. McNeal, *The Kids Market: Myths and Realities* (Ithaca: Paramount Market, 1999) 45.

retail environments, as merchants cater to younger patrons. Teen- and child-themed malls have begun appearing around the country.

Children have also become far more influential in family purchase decisions. According to McNeal, children aged four to twelve directly influenced \$300 billion of adult purchasing in 2002 and “evoked” another \$300 billion.¹² He estimates that this “influence market” is currently growing at 20% per year.¹³ Kurnit believes that the origins of children’s influence are more than 20 years old:

I would say the real watershed was in the eighties: the recognition that the influence chain between parent and child worked extremely well, that it was effective, that a direct message to a child could empower the child if the message was clear, simple and well-branded.

Since that time, children have been understood as important influencers of brand choice for a variety of adult products, including automobiles, hotels, tourist destinations, fast food, consumer electronics, and a majority of the in-home foodstuffs that are eaten by children. In response to this increased influence, manufacturers of these products have begun to advertise directly to kids. Research done by Nickelodeon finds that 89% of parents of 8–14 year olds report that they ask their children’s opinions about products they are about to buy for them.¹⁴ Children’s technological savvy and avid consumer information-seeking is another reason for their increased influence over parental spending. Market researchers report that many parents now believe that their children know more about products and brands than they do, and the parents rely on that knowledge.

¹² McNeal, private communication 2002. See also McNeal, *The Kids Market*, 96.

¹³ McNeal, as cited in Michelle Norris, “Buy, Buy, Baby: Companies Taking the Fight for Consumer Loyalty to Kids,” www.abcnews.com (10 May 2002).

¹⁴ Schoen and Berland Associates, Inc., a proprietary Nickelodeon study, untitled (2001).

Constructing the Kid Consumer

Companies' successes in both direct and influence marketing to children are partly due to a vastly expanded research effort. In the early days of children's marketing, most of the people who made commercials or crafted branding strategies relied on personal experience. They were parents and considered their own children to be good representations of the target audience. Today, most of the how-to books on children's marketing explicitly condemn such an approach and warn that it will lead to failure. Instead, they counsel, extensive research is necessary to succeed in this competitive market. The experience of Nickelodeon bears out this advice. The fabulously profitable Nickelodeon and the larger MTV Networks of which it is a part base their work on extraordinarily detailed, expansive, varied, and careful research. As Donna Sabino, a Nickelodeon executive who supervises research, explained to me, the network studies thousands of children every year, using every conceivable type of research—surveys, mall intercepts, intensive videotaping, focus groups, in-home observation, internet research, and online panels, to name a few of the types of research they conduct.

Perhaps the fastest growing component of research on children is naturalistic, in-situ ethnographic videotaping and observation. Detailed naturalistic research began with adults in the 1980s, as anthropologists migrated out from the university into advertising agencies. Ethnography is popular partly because it is able to go beyond the now-exhausted insights of the large-scale quantitative research that was done in the 1950s and 60s and partly because it is far less expensive. The popularity of naturalistic research is also due to the shortcomings of traditional interviews and surveys, which are conducted in artificial settings, are subject to various types of artefactual response biases, and do not examine how consumers actually live with or interact with products. Advocates for this daily life research also argue that they can uncover insights that consumers cannot or prefer not to articulate. This is an especially compelling rationale for children, whose ability to articulate their reasons for liking or disliking products is more limited than that of adults. Emma Gilding, the researcher behind AT&T's mlife campaign, and a leading practitioner of naturalistic research in New York,

contends that this method is far superior to traditional approaches: “It’s not research, we live with them...not anthropology, we’re in the frame.”

The pioneer agency in applying such techniques to children was Saatchi and Saatchi, who, in 1998, circulated an influential report on children’s computer use entitled “Digital Kids.” That study stationed anthropologists inside children’s homes to watch them as they used computers; altogether, they taped about 500 hours of children’s online use. Since that time, the use of intensive naturalistic observation has grown dramatically, and the range of observed activities has expanded markedly. Marketers are scrutinizing virtually every activity kids now engage in—from playing, eating, and grooming, to bathing—and virtually every aspect of their lives—from what’s inside their closets to how kids interact in the classroom and what really goes on at a tween girl’s slumber party. They are probing how kids talk about, and even how they use, drugs. Naturalistic research, with cameras, notebooks, and videotapes, is also occurring in retail environments, such as toy stores, clothing shops, and supermarkets. It is going on in public spaces, such as in playgrounds and on the streets. Noggin, a joint venture of Nickelodeon and PBS, set up shop for six months in an elementary school in Watchung, New Jersey to do preparatory research prior to launching its joint cable station.

Children are also being drawn into the process as researchers themselves. Levi-Strauss, the company that pioneered closet-peeping, was also one of the earliest to use children as consultants. In the 1980s, they hired Manhattanite Josh Koplewicz, who was ten at the time. Josh accompanied executives into stores to give his opinions on the clothes; he vetted styles that were in various stages of production and design and was periodically asked to comb the city for cool styles, which he recorded through photographs, interviews, and other documentary methods. Such practices have now taken root at market research firms all around the country. For example, The Strotzman Group of Southern California hires “kid engineers on staff” and estimates that they maintain an ongoing relationship with about 750 kids, ages 6 to 17. Doyle Research in Chicago has an extensive kid consultant program, in which children are used for brainstorming “Kideation” sessions to help with

product development. Most of the other major research firms and many of the “producing” firms, such as Nickelodeon and Microsoft, run some type of kid consultant program, using children extensively in research, product design, and evaluation.

With these types of methods, researchers can make the claim that they know children in ways that are far deeper, more sophisticated, and more profound than a past generation that relied on focus groups and standard surveys did. Today’s researchers “construct” children for their clients, who then use that construction as the basis of their strategies of communicating with children.

Peer-to-Peer Marketing

A second development is the development of what is alternately called “viral,” “buzz,” “stealth,” “street,” or “peer-to-peer” marketing. This strategy relies on creating a word-of-mouth advertising campaign that creates buzz, which in turn enhances the effectiveness of conventional ad campaigns. Buzz marketing has become standard for a large number of youth products, especially apparel, footwear, music, and consumer electronics. In a typical buzz campaign, the manufacturer will give or “seed” products with individuals. Converse was one of the first companies to begin product seeding, giving its shoes to inner-city athletes in the 1970s. Since then the process has intensified and expanded to other trendsetters, such as actors, performers, musicians, and a wider range of athletes. There are now whole agencies that specialize in this practice of “real life product placement” with celebrities and other influential people.

Product seeding has also migrated out to non-celebrities. In these campaigns, companies typically identify people they consider to be “trend-setting” individuals, give them samples of a product, and ask them to recruit friends. There are even agencies that specialize in finding these kinds of trend-setting (or “alpha”) individuals. One practice is to pay people to pose as ordinary consumers. For example, alcohol brands pay people to sit in bars and order their drinks, and then to talk to other patrons about them. Chat rooms are seeded with paid representatives to promote brands. The internet and email are full of these paid

communications. Movie, book, and music reviews are increasingly written by paid representatives of marketing companies.

While teens and young adults were the targets of many of the early viral campaigns, these techniques have filtered down to children. An example of peer marketing among children is the Girl's Intelligence Agency. In 2002, its first year of operation, the company had already developed a network of 40,000 girls who assist the company in testing and marketing products for its clients. GIA was founded by Laura Groppe, a former film producer and a feminist advocate for girls within commercial culture. (She's one of the few experienced feminists for girls that I encountered in my research.) Girls as young as six are recruited to become GIA "agents." Once accepted they become part of an online and daily life network. Profiles of agents are posted on GIA's website. Six-year-old "swimmergirl" lives in San Diego and loves swimming, cats, and chatrooms. Eleven-year-old "singsalot" loves fashion. The girls report going to Agent Kiki, a fictitious "older sister" type whose answers are written by GIA staffers, three to four times a week for style and fashion advice.

The GIA's trademark product is the Slumber Party in a Box, which takes place in what the company calls the "inner sanctum," that is, the girl's bedroom. GIA runs both "insight" (i.e., research) and marketing parties. Parties feature toys, films, television shows, health and beauty aids, and other products. The host girl (a GIA agent) invites up to eleven of her friends to the party, where they are given a sample of the product, which is then used (or watched) during the party. The party becomes an informal, intimate sales session. Sometimes parties are videotaped, and sometimes GIA staff attend, but many of the parties are run by the agent herself. GIA claims that each of the agents reaches an average of 512 other girls, in virtually every area of daily life. With their network of 40,000 agents, the company claims it can reach 20 million girls nationwide.

One piece of evidence for how far these kinds of efforts have infiltrated the mainstream of U.S. society is the kinds of institutions that are now participating in these marketing ventures. In my research, I uncovered recruiting programs for children to become market consultants through

Boys and Girls Clubs. Laura Groppe explained to me that she makes contacts with major organizations, which then “evangelize” for GIA. Groppe was unwilling to name these organizations, explaining only that they are “regional and national organizations that are pro-girl.” When I suggested Girl Scouts and national church organizations, Groppe did not disagree.

Buzz and peer-to-peer marketing are important examples of commodification because they rely on children to use their friends for the purposes of gaining information or selling products. (GIA’s network is called BFF—Best Friends Forever.) Similar practices include organizing kids into “friendship pairs,” where researchers tape conversations between friends, or the use of e-mail buddy lists for marketing. Throughout the world of kids marketing, using kids to recruit other kids is a rapidly growing practice. Indeed, a viral or peer-to-peer “roll-out” has become a standard element of marketing plans for many children’s products, with especially elaborate programs aimed at tweens.¹⁵

A major reason that peer-to-peer marketing is so widely used is that word-of-mouth from friends is one of the few remaining sources of credibility in a world over-saturated by commercial messages. It is assumed to be disinterested, objective, and pure, unlike ads, which carry the taint of deceptiveness or manipulation. But if the trend toward more word-of-mouth advertising continues, it is likely that people will learn to be more skeptical of it, recognizing that the purveyor of the advice may well be acting instrumentally. One result will be that this valuable type of consumer information will be corrupted. Another, more serious consequence is the corruption of the friendships themselves. Marketers are teaching children that their friends are a lucrative resource that they can exploit to gain products or money. But what we cherish most about good friendships is often their insulation from those types of pressures. Friendships are commonly thought to be one of the last bastions of non-instrumentality in our society, as money and

¹⁵ See Schor, *Born to Buy*, for a discussion of the viral marketing plan for Pox, a Hasbro electronic handheld game.

market values have become ever more transcendent and important. And that's precisely why the marketers are so keenly interested in them.

The New Discourse of Kid Empowerment

Intrusive research and peer marketing are practices that have the potential to become highly controversial, as are a number of other trends in children's marketing that I do not have the space to elaborate on here.¹⁶ These include the marketing of "cool," tweening or age compression, the anti-adult bias in commercial messages, in-school marketing, and the marketing of addictive products. Advertisers and their clients are aware of the potential for an anti-marketing backlash from parents and child advocates. Many know that in the last few years, the Annual Golden Marbles Award (a children's version of the industry's CLIO award) has drawn protests and that debate about the enterprise of marketing to children has been growing. Serious opposition to the promotion of violence, junk food, and in-school marketing has already surfaced. In response, industry insiders have attempted to create a defense of their activities based on a new discourse of "kid empowerment." One indication of how the critique of marketing has begun to gather force is that the 2003 Annual Kidpower conference included two sessions on how to respond to this opposition.

The notion of empowerment is a considerable departure from previous industry practice, which was to market to children mainly through mothers. Of course, there have always been some exceptions to this practice, particularly in candy and toy marketing, but they were the exception, rather than the norm. Marketing through mothers, which is called the "gatekeeper" model, holds that parents (in theory), but mothers (in practice), are responsible for ensuring children's well-being in the face of the consumer market. The gatekeeper era began in the 1920s and started to weaken in the 1950s, with the advent of the first television programming exclusively for children, but it was only in the

¹⁶ These are more fully discussed in Schor, *Born to Buy*.

mid-1980s or so that marketers consciously rejected a gatekeeping strategy in favor of direct marketing to children. Kurnit has been one of the industry's most vocal proponents of the decline of the gatekeeper model and the benefits of directly targeting children:

The expression in marketing was always “mom is gatekeeper.” And I’ve spoken recently that the “mom is gatekeeper” thing is over. A decade ago I called it “the unmanned tollbooth.” Today I call it “Easy Pass.” And to a large extent that analogy is really true. And it does relate to the fact that in dual-income families—and in 67% of families with kids, mom and dad are working—you’ve got kids who are increasingly home alone, latchkey kids. You’ve got the after-school day part, which is the fourth meal, and kids rule the kitchen, and all that kind of stuff. So there’s a level of kid independence today that is unprecedented. And so on some level the parent cannot have the level of control either over the TV dial or food that she once had because she’s literally not there.

Relying on these social trends, marketers are now arguing that children do not need protection from advertising. For example, the industry claims that earlier findings about children’s inability to understand and resist commercial messages are no longer relevant. This was a debate that raged in the 1970s and to a lesser extent in the 1980s. Marketers describe today’s children as savvy, not able to be manipulated, sophisticated, and worldly, with built-in “truth meters.” Child advocates pushing for stricter regulations are put down as know-nothings.

Indeed, some advertisers have argued that current industry practice is too protective of children. The anti-adult themes in kid marketing are justified as ways to empower children against an overly authoritarian adult presence. Commercial spots that portray adults as buffoons, out of touch, or objects of ridicule are pervasive. Industry proponents defend these messages as examples of “kid mastery,” which “level the playing field” and “empower kids.” Conservative cultural critics see them as treasonous. Of course, when things go wrong, advertisers continue to blame parents, and especially absent mothers. Food marketing

has become an especially contentious topic, as rates of overweight and obesity among children have skyrocketed, amidst a torrent of junk food marketing and deteriorating diets. Marketers point their fingers at parents, who they fault for buying junk food, not patrolling the kitchen, and taking their children too frequently to fast food outlets. “Just say no,” they counsel. At the same time, many of their most sophisticated approaches, they have explained to me, involve breaking down parental resistance.

Conclusion

The trends I have discussed (new research forms, peer marketing, and the new discourse of empowerment) are part of a new relationship between child consumers and the people who make a living taking money from them. On the one hand, kids are increasingly constituted as a market of empowered subjects: they have money, exert influence, and navigate consumer culture on their own. Marketers argue that we should treat them as functionally equivalent to adults in the liberal discourse of laissez-faire consumer policy, that is, as rational, knowing subjects who can act in their long-term interest. At the same time, these same people are constructing children as *marketable* objects, dissected and classified, and then served up to client companies. This knowledge enhances the power of those client companies to affect children’s everyday lives, by making their products and experiences ever more irresistible. Together, marketers and manufacturers are creating a powerful experience of commodified childhood.

Of course, that formulation is too simple. We are no longer living in a world of one-way interaction between producer and consumer in which, to use Douglas Holt’s words, marketers retain “cultural authority.”¹⁷ The relationship goes two ways. And after years of refinement, processes of naturalistic research such as cool-hunting, the

¹⁷ Douglas Holt, “Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectic Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 29.1 (June 2002): 70–90.

advent of peer-to-peer and street marketing, and the discourse of consumer empowerment have not only become very sophisticated, but have also led to a dynamic back and forth between marketers and their target audiences. This dialectical movement, or feedback loop, has been noted by Thomas Frank and Douglas Holt, who trace its origins to the decline of “cultural authority” in the 1950s,¹⁸ and by other analysts of popular culture. (Douglas Kellner was one of the first to write about it.) As Douglas Rushkoff observes in his plea to marketers to cease and desist:

It’s turned into a giant feedback loop: you watch kids to find out what trend is “in,” but the kids are watching you watching them in order to figure out how to act. They are exhibitionists, aware of corporate America’s fascination with their every move, and delighting in your obsession with their tastes.¹⁹

In the end, we are not only commodifying our children, which is the standard critique of consumer culture, but, even more powerfully, we are recruiting them to commodify themselves.

¹⁸ See Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997) and Holt, “Why Do Brands Cause Trouble?”

¹⁹ Douglas Rushkoff, www.rushkoff.com/essay/sportswearinternational.html. See the Merchants of Cool website at www.pbs.org for more on the feedback loop.