

SUMMARY REPORT

Bye Buy Childhood: A Report into the Commercialisation of Childhood



1. Target market: childhood

The term 'commercialisation of childhood' refers to the 'grooming' of children for consumerhood and the treatment of childhood as a marketing opportunity. Marketing is the term used for selling products or services, for example through adverts. Other marketing activities include the use of promotional toys, websites and PR campaigns. Most children are economically active - in the UK and Ireland many children receive pocket money and earnings from employment, which has created a lucrative childhood market. The growth and diversification of mass communication has created more opportunities to promote this market. Consumerism is now seen by many as part of the family ideal and adults sometimes seek to improve family life and the wellbeing of children through consumer goods.

2. Smart cookies: recruiting young brand ambassadors

Marketing is a legitimate industry, an important part of commercial survival and part of the creative landscape. However, the purpose of marketing is to sell, by creating an incentive to purchase. Some of the incentives and techniques used, as well as some of the products themselves, cause concern - especially those which appear to take advantage of, or exploit, children's natural willingness to trust. Young children are influenced by marketing from as young as 18 months and at this age can recognise a corporate label.

Key methods of persuading children to buy products or services include the use of premium offers and the use of promotional characters such as cartoons and celebrities, the latter being positively associated with children's attitude towards a product. The internet is a key tool for marketers - some websites collect information from children and young people directly or through tracking cookies, which then help marketers target children more effectively. Some websites recruit young people directly to take part in questionnaires and market products to their friends. 'Advergames' on the internet draw children to a product or brand through interactive entertainment and aim to initiate children into a brand and create a 'brand habit'.

Other tried and tested techniques of fostering brand loyalty include making the brand 'cool', 'fun' and 'popular'; using pop stars and celebrities; creating a product 'story' or a sense of community; offering a loyalty programme or using product placement. As well as targeting children directly and promoting 'peer to peer' sales strategies, marketers also target parents through their children, to sell them both children's and adult goods and services.

3. The impact of commercialisation on children

Many studies and observations have been made into how the commercial world affects all areas of a child's life.

Physical health: More than 2.3 million children in the UK are estimated to be overweight or obese and in Ireland 19% of children are overweight. The World Health Organisation has concluded there is a 'probable causal link' between persistent unhealthy food and drink marketing and weight gain and obesity.

Mental health and emotional wellbeing: One in ten children suffers a mental health disorder in the UK and one in 20 in Ireland. Whilst some doubt a causal link between commercialisation and mental health problems, there is an association between high media use, materialism and dissatisfaction, leading to poorer self-esteem. One key area of concern is the emphasis placed on physical appearance by the media in general. Children in the UK report that having the 'right' clothes is the third most stressful part of being a child, after tests and school.

Values: Linked to emotional wellbeing are the values we hold, especially about what we think will make us happy. The very purpose of marketing is to manufacture *want*, whether for a particular brand of everyday necessity or for the image that is associated with a particular brand. The development of materialism tends to occur in children around the ages of seven to 11, when they begin to understand how others see them.

Understanding and educational development: The media and commercial goods do provide developmental and educational opportunities for children. However, one recent study found that 22% of boys and 13% of girls have trouble developing speech and understanding others because of a television being on either most or all of the time.

Relationships: ‘Pester power’ has the potential to put stress on the parent/child relationship. Purchase requests made by children can result in disappointment when parents or guardians refuse. Refusal can lead to arguments and arguments increase when refusals increase. Such family conflict can lead to a lower opinion of parents.

4. The bottom line: sex sells

Sex is used in most forms of media in order to sell us an array of products entirely unrelated to sex or love. Parents are especially concerned about the scale and impact of sexualised media and advertising upon children - 80% believe that television, films, magazines and the internet make children sexually aware at a younger age than they would be otherwise. A Home Office review in 2010 found that there has been a dramatic increase in the use of sexualised imagery in advertising, including the number of sexualised images of children.

Sustained exposure to sexualised imagery can reinforce stereotyping of women, men and sex. Watching higher levels of sex on television may accelerate the initiation of sexual activity by young people. Girls, in particular, who absorb sexualised messages may internalise this objectified perspective - ‘self-objectification’ – which can lead to lower self esteem. There are regulations and guidelines in place, in the UK and Ireland, prohibiting the portrayal of children in a sexualised manner. Yet, the ‘drip drip’ effect of sexualised marketing and media content in general, and the blurring of lines between children’s and adult media are cause for concern.

5. Current regulations

Broadcast and non-broadcast advertising: The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is the UK's independent regulator of advertising across all media. Its role is to ensure that adverts are ‘legal, decent, honest and truthful’ by applying the Advertising Codes and working with regulatory bodies such as Ofcom. The section on children in the Codes is based on the principle that care should be taken when featuring or addressing children in marketing communications. The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) is the independent regulator for radio and television broadcasters in Ireland. Its scope includes the Children’s Commercial Communications Code, which governs any advertising and commercial promotion aimed at, or that might be of interest to, children.

Magazines: Advertising in UK magazines is also governed by the ASA, with guidelines stating particular care must be taken when marketing to or depicting children. The sexual content of teen magazines is self-regulated through the Teenage Magazine Arbitration Panel (TMAP).

Computer games: The Pan-European Game Information (PEGI) age rating system was created by the Interactive Software Federation of Europe in 2003. It is now the sole classification system for computer games in the UK and is also used throughout most of Europe.

Clearly there are guidelines that, if adhered to, can ensure responsible advertising to children - but it does rely on people to notice non-compliance and make the effort to complain.

6. Unsubscribing: bye bye commercialisation

There is no one neat answer to ‘ending the commercialisation of childhood’. A range of people need to take responsibility for ensuring that advertising seen and heard by children and young people is appropriate for their age and experience.

- ✓ **Individuals:** We can all reflect on our consumer habits, identify where commercialisation detracts from our wellbeing and make positive changes. We can all raise awareness of the issue, support children in dealing with it and put pressure on industry and political representatives to end the commercialisation of childhood.
- ✓ **Industry:** The manufacturing, marketing and retail industries can take an ethical approach to selling to children, whether through adherence to current regulations and guidelines or implementing new codes of practice, especially in relation to sexualised material.
- ✓ **Government:** Governments can help promote awareness of the issue and in particular can take further action to prohibit the ‘sex sells’ approach being aimed at children under 16, and prevent children from being exposed to sexualised media, goods and services aimed at adults.

For the full report, references & further details go to www.byebuychildhood.org or contact Mothers’ Union at: Mary Sumner House, 24 Tufton Street, London SW1P 3RB; +44 (0)20 7222 5533; or policy@themothersunion.org