In a consumer culture children can choose between lots of different offers. There is more behind it than just a mere marketing strategy: people express their own identity and manage relationships through their consumer behaviour.

Family life to a large degree revolves around consumption. Dialogues and negotiations occur around the dinner table, in front of the TV or the computer, in the car, when talking on the mobile phone and when sending messages with the computer or mobile phone. Children today become consumers at a very young age. Babies are exposed to purchases and consumption, brands, advertising, and media, and it is not uncommon for very young children to establish relationships to famous brands such as McDonald’s. Companies are very well aware of this, knowing that children are important customers not only today, but also in the future. If children are loyal to brands today, it is likely that they will prefer them also later in life. Consumers sometimes have longer relations to brands than to people. Recent publications discuss children as current and prospective consumers (e.g., Lindstrom, 2003; Quart, 2003; Sutherland/Thompson, 2003).

Children are current and prospective consumers

Children as well as parents learn to be consumers, acquiring the skills and knowledge to function as consumers in a continuously changing consumer culture. Also, children influence not only their own purchases, but the purchases of their parents and family (e.g., Ekström, 1995). Ward and Wackman (1972) called a child’s influence in a family “child power”.

Children influence the purchases of their parents and family

It is possible that some families living a hectic life allow their children influence because of a lack of time and feelings of guilt about not spending enough time with their children. Also, many families today have children relatively late in life and may therefore be in a better financial situation to allow their children to influence purchases. At the same time, it is also common for parents to shield their children from consumption opportunities, thinking that they are not yet mature enough to get involved and that they get too
much responsibility at too young an age.
The purpose of this article is to discuss children and parents as consumers in consumer culture. It is argued that young as well as old consumers are not only exposed to the “catwalk of consumption” (Hjort/Ekström, 2006), they also participate by negotiating identities, relations, and lifestyles through consumption.

By choosing to consume, families show who they are or would like to be

By choosing to consume commercial as well as cultural products, children and parents show who they are or who they would like to be. Some decisions involve a higher degree of social comparison than others, particularly products visible in public. There is no way to avoid participating, because the choice to resist also reveals preferences and identities. The degree to which consumers take part differs however, depending on their interest and opportunities or lack of such.

Consumption and identity

Family members negotiate identities, relations, and lifestyles through their consumption. Identity can be explained with a psychological perspective such as self-concept theory (e.g., Sirgy, 1982), which holds that our concept of self is based on how we perceive ourselves (actual self) and how we want to be seen (ideal self).

Possessions are part of the self and help to develop the self

Consumption is sometimes based on the actual self, while in other instances it is more oriented towards the ideal self. Possessions have in many ways become an “extended self”, suggesting that an object can become part of the self when an individual appropriates the object (Belk, 1988). Possessions are not only part of the self, but can also be seen as instrumental for the development of the self (Belk, 1988).

Identity can also be explained from a cultural perspective (e.g., Giddens, 1991). For example, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) discussed the ways things shape identities in our society. The degree to which consumers consciously use objects to express themselves can be related to how concerned they are about how others see them (e.g., Richins, 1999). It is well-known that young consumers are particularly sensitive to what their peer groups think.

Social comparison in consumer culture

Social comparison has probably existed in all times and cultures, but the forms vary. Veblen (1994/1899) defined “conspicuous consumption” as rich people’s desire to show that they can afford to buy luxuries. It is particularly noticeable among “nouveau riches” who want to display their social mobility and success with status products. Today, there are many different ways to display conspicuous consumption, some of which are subtle and require codes for interpretation, the meaning of which is restricted to a few well informed consumers. For example, brand-name clothes lacking a visible brand name are something only informed consumers can interpret the “right” way. Consumers can also seek status by purposely avoiding symbols of status. An example is removing labels on clothes and thereby showing the freedom to construct a desired identity.

Being unique and belonging at the same time

It appears as if the key to conspicuous consumption is to know the code to what makes it possible to “stand out”. By knowing the code, it is possible to be perceived as a unique individualistic consumer. However, adoption of a code can also illustrate conformity in a way that someone else has defined the code. There are 2 ways conspicuous consumption develops in relation to self-reference and dialogue with the socio-cultural context. Consumers may want to prove to themselves or to their social environment that they can consume conspicuously. Elliott (1995) discusses how the symbolic meaning of products can operate inwardly and outwardly. By inwardly, he means through construction of self-identity and self symbolism, and by outwardly he means through the construction of a social world and social symbolism. Bourdieu (1984) discusses how preference behaviors (e.g. food, clothing) are determined by class stratification. Gianneschi (2007) discusses the role of brands in identity construction among young Swedish consumers.

Keeping up with each other

Social comparison has been referred to as “the demonstration principle” by Duesenberry (1949) and is mirrored in the expression “keeping up with the Joneses”. Lately, Schor (1999) argues that “keeping up with the Joneses” is no longer enough in today’s society. Instead, we seek to emulate lifestyles of people higher up in social hierarchy and characters on TV, not only celebrities, but “ordinary people” participating in talk shows and reality shows who are role models. Another difference is that today’s global media industry makes consumption codes easily accessible to a large number of consumers. For example, new technology has made it possible for young consumers to be more aware of global trends and to keep up with each other. This differs from earlier times when goods spread from higher to lower social classes (Simmel, 1904), a process referred to as “emulation” (Douglas, 1996). There are also cases where goods have spread from lower
to higher social classes, for example denim jeans.

Trends spread globally across social classes

However, while we are witnessing trends that spread globally across social classes, the fact remains that not everyone has got the same opportunity to take part in consumer culture consuming products and media. This concerns not only children, but also parents. Living in a consumer culture can reinforce certain behavioral patterns. For example, Ekström (1995; 2007) found that family behavior among children’s peer groups had an affect on families’ purchases and consumption. For instance, parents interviewed mentioned that they had felt pressured to purchase a satellite dish, so their children could keep up with their peers in school.

Consumption is about inclusion, but also about exclusion.

Not being able to take part involves social and psychological risk-taking (Hjort/Ekström, 2006).

Keeping up with children and grandchildren

Children and parents influence each other. Early research focused on how parents yield to their children’s requests for products (e.g., Bercy/Polley, 1968; Ward/Wackman, 1972). Lately, research has recognized that children also influence products for the parents’ exclusive use (e.g., Foxman/Tansuhaj/Ekström, 1989; Ekström, 1995). Parents sometimes become aware of and learn about consumption from their children, for example regarding trends, new technology, and environmental issues (Ekström, 1995; 2007). Children contribute information in relation to purchases and afterwards when helping parents to install or use the products purchased. In some families interviewed, children seemed to deal more easily with technology than their parents (Ekström, 1995; 2007). Children may also play an important role in the diffusion of innovations to parents; parents may become aware of a product because they see their child use or own it. This can result in a “keeping up with the children’s” effect similar to the “keeping up with the Joneses” (Ekström, 2007).

Parents sometimes learn about consumption from their children

Today, there is a kind of social pressure to be child-oriented or modern parents who are influenced by their children’s purchases and consumption (Ekström, 2007). There is a lack of studies on intergenerational influence which take into account the ways grandparents and children learn about consumption from each other. Children can play an important role in the diffusion of technology to grandparents, for example mobile phones, Mp3 players, and digital cameras. The concept of “keeping up with the grandchildren” could also be used.

Living in consumer culture

There are different opinions about whether children should or should not be protected from consumer culture. Those who advocate protection argue that children do not have the cognitive ability or experience to understand advertising, so they make non-rational product choices (e.g.,
Armstrong/Brucks, 1988). It has also been discussed that TV commercials teach children materialism, impulsive choice, and immediate gratification (e.g., Armstrong/Brucks, 1988). There are also those who are against protection from TV commercials and argue instead that children learn to be consumers and that not all advertising is evil (e.g., Armstrong/Brucks, 1988). Instead, it can provide information of value and help children to make decisions – children can, for instance, learn values such as fairness from TV commercials (e.g., Armstrong/Brucks, 1988).

Discussions about the risks of living in a consumer culture have particularly focused on TV commercials. This is surprising since children are exposed to commercial stimuli in a number of different settings, in public as well as in private spheres.

**Risks of living in a consumer culture**

Living in a consumer culture involves exposure to product placement in TV shows and films and seeing advertising, products, services, and brands in public as well as private spheres. Children come into contact with brands at home, at school, at the shopping center, on TV, and on the Internet (e.g., on Facebook and MySpace). There is a need to consider the relation between children and advertising in different contexts (e.g., Seiter, 1993). It is surprising that the home and schools are often seen as sites protecting children from pressures to consume while markets endanger them. These worlds are interpenetrated when, for example, companies market and sponsor materials at school. Lately, sponsorship in schools has been discussed (e.g., Quart, 2003). It should also be recognized that this can influence not merely children, but also parents. Moreover, the debate regarding children and advertising has traditionally focused on products for the children’s own use and has not sufficiently considered that children are exposed to advertising directed at adults. Children are also confronted with advertising at other times than during children’s programs (Armstrong/Brucks, 1988). The regulation of TV advertising refers to children’s TV programs exclusively. Advertisements directed at parents sometimes include children, maybe as a strategy for creating attention both among adults and children. Even though TV commercials for children are forbidden in Sweden, children can still watch advertising for adults on TV. Finally, the effects of advertising are difficult to measure. Several researchers (e.g., O’Donohoe, 1994) have suggested that research should focus on what consumers do with advertising, rather than what advertising does to them.

**Consumer literacy**

Opinions on whether it is good or bad to protect children from consumer society are based on whether children are viewed as competent or victimized. I suggest that rather than seeing children or parents as victimized or competent in general, it is important to focus on their competence in specific situations. Also, a changing society with new products and new situations requires that children as well as adults continuously learn new competencies. Living in a consumer culture requires not only media literacy, but also consumer literacy. The needed skills to act as well-informed members of society have been studied within the context of consumer socialization. Ward (1974, p. 2) defines this as “the process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace.” Ward (1974) asserts in the same article that this is a life-long process. A majority of studies on consumer socialization have, however, focused on childhood and adolescence (e.g., Carlson/Grossbart, 1988; Moschis/Moore, 1981). One reason for this research orientation is that socialization is assumed to be strongest in childhood. But we need to expand research on consumer socialization to encompass all ages: children and parents are, as mentioned above, continuously exposed to new situations in life which require learning new competencies.

**Where do children learn about consumption-related matters?**

A majority of consumer socialization studies have focused on children learning consumption-related matters from their parents (e.g., Carlson/Grossbart, 1988; Moschis/Churchill, 1978) or from a few socialization agents such as family, friends, or mass media (e.g., Moschis/Churchill, 1978; Moschis/Moore, 1981). Only a few studies have considered TV as a socialization agent (O’Guinn/Shrum, 1997), the role played by department stores in consumer socialization (Holder/Omura, 1989), or the impact of retailers on children’s consumer socialization (Grossbart/Carlson/Walsh, 1991; McNeal, 1987). In order to understand children and parents in the different contexts in which they are consumers, different socialization agents need to be considered.
Conclusion

Living in a consumer culture involves participating in the “catwalk of consumption”. Consumption reflects who you are or who you want to be. Individuality and conformity appear to exist in parallel. Moral dilemmas and the ambivalence between good and bad consumption depend on how consumption is viewed and differs among individuals and different cultures. Children and parents participate in the catwalk – influencing each other and others. Rather than seeing them as either competent or victimized, there is a need to recognize that literacy differs in different situations. There is a need to listen to the voice of the consumer in order to understand what it means to be a consumer. Also, it is not sufficient to study only children, but we must include parents as well, since they share experiences and form alliances.

Children as well as parents need to develop skills to become critical consumers when choosing and interpreting products, services, advertisements, brands, and media. Also, a continuously changing society involves the learning of new competencies by children as well as parents. All agents of social change, consumers, educators, producers, marketers, media, and advertising agencies have a role in the development of consumer literacy. By seeing them as parts of a network of linkages and assemblages rather than separate entities, we are more likely to encourage dialogue. At the same time, it needs to be recognized that different agents have different powers. Finally, when discussing the development of consumer literacy, we need to build bridges between academic work, practitioners, and policy makers.

REFERENCES


NOTES


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