



Who Minds the Child?

The Negative Effects of Consumerism on Children

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Abstract

This paper summarizes literature on the deleterious effects of consumerism on children between the ages of 0-12 in North America. Consumerism refers to corporate power sustained within a neo-liberal economic structure that persuades the consumption of products by manipulation of media. Specifically, television, advertising, computers and all forms of digital technology have negatively impacted young children. A qualitative research study based on teachers' perceptions of the negative effects of consumerism on children's academic performance, social skills and behaviour is reviewed. The results of this study found that teachers perceived consumer culture to be profoundly detracting from children's growth in all areas examined. Children were less able to concentrate on academic work, displayed an increase in aggressive behaviors and had a marked decreased ability to positively interact with others.

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Corporate Takeover Of North American Children

Media Manipulation

During the past few decades, a growing body of research has shown that North American consumer culture has negatively impacted children's general development. Consumer culture, or consumerism, in this paper refers to corporate power sustained within a neo-liberal economic structure that persuades the consumption of products by manipulation of media. Many corporations, especially transnational corporations, have successfully expended considerable effort to solicit an audience that has no defense and no power to resist--young children. Child abuse is often restricted to a definition that includes the obvious examples of physical and emotional trauma, particularly those that are legally recognized. The central thesis of this essay argues that definitions of child abuse should also include the control and exploitation of children for the purposes of benefiting corporations. Corporations have created a market—told us what to think by bombarding our mental environment with an onslaught of advertising—and enticed children and their parents to believe that consumption is the key to happiness. Business has never been so profitable. Yet, the evidence is mounting that North American children appear to be under greater stress and in poorer mental health than ever. As an example, in 2000, epidemic proportions of children in North America, approximately 5 million, were prescribed behavior control drugs such as Ritalin (Degrandpre, 2001). In a research study that I conducted in 2002, elementary school teachers stated that children diagnosed with disorders often treated with Ritalin (attention deficit disorder) were really suffering from a social disease. There is overwhelming evidence in the literature that demonstrates how children's development is being threatened and undermined for the sake of corporate economic growth.

There are three central issues of seminal importance that address the connection between children and consumerism, the first of which relates to the explosion of digital technology and its role in the increasingly cult-like behaviors of corporations. While the ability of the corporation to influence what we as a society think has always been present, digitized systems have eased this process to a subtle and powerful science such that advertising does not simply provide choice about what is available in the market, it tells us what we “need” (Leach, 1994). We are told we must acquire money and consume to feel good about ourselves; if we are not clothed in the latest fashion attire, our identity is less significant. The corporate aim is to inculcate us for life, into whatever it is they sell by using sophisticated, psychological and emotional tools through a highway of technology (Lasn, 1999). The messages come to us through an ever-increasing maze of mediated delivery systems all of which are owned or influenced by corporations (Lasn, 1999). Consequently there has been a bombardment of the corporate message through digital technology combined with seductive advertising techniques that has proven more and more difficult for adults to resist—never mind children. Lasn (1999) refers to this process as a type of recruitment into a cult, the consumer cult, in which one is made to believe that consuming

is a panacea for all of our worries and unhappiness. While the term “cult” usually refers to a peripheral subculture, it is possible to conceive of a cult as considerably more widespread. He theorizes that as a society we continue to consume with increasingly wild abandon, brainwashed into believing that we are masters of our own destiny through the power of consuming, yet all the while slaves to corporate control. “Corporate advertising is the largest single psychological project ever undertaken by the human race.” (Lasn, 1999, p.19). The ubiquitous presence of advertising and our culture in all forms of media results in an alteration of thought processes similar to that of brainwashing.

The second issue follows on the first, in that delivery systems and sophisticated advertising techniques have increasingly been directed at younger and younger consumer targets. Singer (1995) studied the characteristics of cults, how they operate, recruit and maintain their members. She articulates that one of the most powerful and central means of maintaining individuals in a cult is through thought control, the manipulation and control of the mind unbeknownst to the subject. Furthermore, the purpose of thought reform is to move individuals “along the path of change that will lead them to serve interests that are to their disadvantage” (Singer, 1995, p52). Thought control is endemic in our society, and becomes more obvious as one examines the deliberateness with which advertising propaganda is used to mold and shape consuming behavior. Children have become such targets in the eyes of the corporations whose motivation is to recruit new consumers. Initially, advertising campaigns were primarily directed at adults, then teenagers, and preadolescent children. Now, children under the age of five are being assaulted by relentless propaganda through a variety of messages (Leach, 1994), delivered by the media. Children are being told what to think at a time when their brain is in a vulnerable developmental stage (Healy, 1991). Corporations are loyal to an economic model free of morals, one that must profit in the short term, regardless of real costs: financial, social or ecological.

The third and final issue relates to a societal responsibility to ensure the protection of children, particularly the protection of children’s minds, which are now under increasingly blatant attack by numerous corporations (Lasn, 1999). The most influential socialization that children experience is within the family. The parents within these families have also been indoctrinated into a consumer culture and therefore, are hindered in recognizing the dangers associated with it, failing to see the destructive impact on their children’s minds and freedoms. Schor (1998) documented the irresistible lure of shopping that the majority of middle to upper middle-class Americans succumb to. She notes how the culture of spending has intensified, how media exposure in the form of television programs has created a new frame of reference to aspire towards. As well, the proliferation of designer products as a measure of life style status and success has created a new consumerism built on a “relentless ratcheting up of standards.” (Schor, 1998, p. 5). Adults are caught up in a frenzy of consuming, seemingly out of control desperate to satisfy an urging, driven against their conscious will.

North American culture, the television, computer, video game, video and all other forms of controlled mediated analog and digital information exert major influence on children. The

electronic media is managed by a small number of corporations who determine the content of information delivered through the airwaves. For example, in the United States, ten corporations “own” television and print news (Bagdikian, 1997). The corporations, therefore, have direct access and control of an entire generation of “digital kids” using technological and psychological warfare. Technology has become a tool by which corporations deliver their propaganda with little to no regulation by governments.

In our current system of education, computers are part of mainstream curriculum, regardless of the age of the child. For example, it is common to see 4 year olds sitting at computer stations for adolescents, an ergonomic as well as educational disaster (Healy, 1998). Schools are enticed to promote software that has not been proven nor tested, the possible negative or positive effects on developing brains is not definitively known. However, there is evidence that early computer use can be damaging to young children’s minds (Armstrong and Casement, 1998). Some of the questions that need to be addressed are: Why risk experimentation on young children? Who perpetuated the belief that young children need computers to be successful? Corporations have both created and perpetuated a children’s computer market in order to reap massive short and long-term profits. Again, the corporation is motivated primarily by profit only, and not by any values, ethics or long-term costs. It is the children and to some extent their parents, unsuspecting subjects in a profitable experiment, who will assume all risk.

Although television is a 40-year-old technology, it has only recently been called to task by the collective force of the AMA, APA, American Academy of pediatrics and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. “The conclusion of the public health community, based on the over 30 years of research, is that viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, changes in values and behavior, particularly in children.” (Ritter, 2000, Oct/Nov., 32). Television violence and other forms of antisocial behaviour do internalize (Berry and Asamen, 1993). Franklin (1990) maintains that television does not allow for reciprocal communicative relationship and in the case of children, results in stunted social development. Technology produces a “pseudo reality” of images that diminish a human reality. Even further, McLuhan (1996) describes electronic media as a destroyer of identity through a “violent” imposition that renders one body-less, a mere extension of the medium. Advertising has slowly and methodically infiltrated into the world of children driven by corporate interests to create a lucrative consumer market. In 1960, “young consumers” were spending \$2 billion a year in the United States alone; by the end of the 1980’s, this figure had risen to \$6 billion. (Gunter and Furnham, 1998). Furthermore, it is estimated that children and teenagers influence some \$132 billion worth of household purchases (Gunter and Furnham, 1998). The introduction of designer children’s clothing is a good example of the manufacturing of the child as a consumer; examples include Baby Gap, Baby Guess, Jacob Jr., and Roots Kids. The blatant manipulation and sexualization of children in order to market their image as a commodity is evident, though not always considered by parents. Although the targeting of children in advertising is not entirely new, the current trend to promote consumerism to children between the ages of 0 to 6 is occurring at an unprecedented frenzy. For example, McDonald’s spends \$1 billion a year in advertising, much

of it directed at young children—to hook them for life on a diet deathly high in fat and dangerously low on nutrition (Lasn, 1999). Most children and even parents cannot protect themselves from that level of intense bombardment in the form of multiple repetitive messages, arguably a brainwashing of sorts. As Franklin (1990) describes it, the right to “our mental environment” has been usurped quietly, insidiously and without informed consent.

If the predominant cultural standard is to buy, consume, own and display commodities, discontent and disconnection are inherent phenomena in the life style. After all, media culture and cyber culture fosters self-indulgent, self-absorbed concentration. According to Putnam (1996), there is a negative correlation between the numbers of hours spent watching television and those spent in community activities. He also hypothesized that television viewing is associated with less social trust and group membership. According to this research, reduction in social engagement leads to a decline in civility. The middle-class and affluent, those who fulfilled the American dream for their children, suffer from an electronically induced anomie: lives brimming with technology, devoid of meaning. The technologically competent child can become a self-serving, narcissistic alien--alien from himself and those around him.

Corporations now own the mental environment, meaning they exert influence over our minds and thoughts, and encroach upon them with such force and power as to deny the presentation of an alternate view. Children, especially, are exposed to a flurry of images, sound bites and mental chaos through numerous media sources; a world that denies children an opportunity for peace, tranquility and reflection. Children have become increasingly dependent on the television, computer and all forms of electronic media that delivers digital messages as the means of occupying their time (Roszak, 2001). North American childhood has been radically altered by the infiltration of media including what children play with and how.

The Erosion Of Childhood Culture

We can postulate that any child will adapt better in an environment that is sensitive to his/her cultural needs--cultural needs as a child. What is meant by children’s culture? Children’s culture is made up of games, riddles, jeers, curses, ditties, oaths, pranks, tricks, songs and pacts (Konner, 1991). What children play, create, build, say, sing, and chant, given the time, environment and freedom, is children’s culture. Children’s play is not only about how children create their culture, it is about how they learn (Weininger, 1979). Play is the mode through which children develop their identity and form a sense of self (Suransky, 1982). Children do not distinguish work from play; rather the two are integrated as one praxis. This results in two important tenets by which to understand the needs of children according to prominent child advocates: 1) play should be left to children with adults fostering an environment favorable to authentic play and at times joining in at the child’s level; 2) work in adult terms, where the focus is on producing not process, is best left for late childhood or adolescents (Weininger, 1979; Leach, 1994). In contrast, the educational and cultural orientation of adults influences how children play (Klein, 1993).

Childhood and children's culture does exist at a universal level (Konner, 1991). It is created by and participated in by children, from birth to approximately age 12. Though children's culture has existed for centuries, it is currently in serious decline. Many might argue that this is not true, that children's culture and childhood is an "invention" of modern times (beginning around the 17th century). This notion has been used to rationalize the current deleterious state of childhood as acceptable because childhood is deemed to be infinitely malleable and changeable. For example, McDonnell (2001) states: "In medieval life, generational 'markers' – things that distinguished people according to age were almost non-existent" (p. 61). In other words, she contends that childhood did not exist as a separate stage of life as we understand it. She then proceeds with the notion that the current adultification of children is justified due to the fact that the separation of childhood from adulthood was a 'modern invention'. Additionally, she then introduces the notion about "emerging new relationships between the generations" (McDonnell, 2001, p. 187) and how the media culture and children must be accepted for what they are and who they are: "We can keep fighting the tide and trying to keep kids inside the walled garden of childhood, with ourselves as gatekeepers. Or we can work with them to try and understand and bravely face the future they're growing into." McDonnell relied on the findings of Aries (1962) to support her position.

In 1962, Aries wrote *Centuries of Childhood* along with a few other historians namely Lloyd de Mause and Lawrence Stone who wrote in kind. Their views were extremely influential and became a part of how childhood was conceptualized.

Orme (2002) contends that Aries' research was flawed and his findings somewhat meager, though his theory about childhood was accepted by many as fact. Not only did Orme (2002) strongly disagree (citing extensive current research and support from other modern historians who also refute Aries) with Aries, he maintained that childhood existed as far back as the 11th century and very likely long before that. "Childhood, then, was a concept—both as a single period from birth to puberty and as one divided into infancy and childhood, with adolescence as a further stage before. Aries' views were mistaken; not simply in detail but in substance. It is time to lay them to rest." (p. 10, emphasis added).

There are many who cite the alteration of childhood in North America and have been deeply disturbed by this phenomenon (Carpenter, 1996; Pearce, 1992; Gardner, 1991). The culture of childhood survival depends on adults understanding its importance and creating an environment that allows children's play to happen. Any loss of childhood culture must, therefore, reflect changes in children's play brought about by adults' needs (Carpenter, 1996).

The consumer culture, delivered through the media, is one that is produced for and imposed upon children, overriding many other cultural influences, including those shaped by parents and schools (Klein, 1993). Klein (1993) provides a compelling argument about how changes in children's play are being shaped by toy production companies resulting in the uniformity or "mass-marketing of play" (p. 147). Even within the school system, marketing practices aimed at children have infiltrated and invaded the classroom in the form of advertisements, free or

discounted products, with brand identification, direct sales of products and fund-raising activities (Richards, Wartella, Morton and Thompson, 1998). For example, 40% of U.S. middle and high schools now view Channel One “news” programming from K-III Publishing—with advertisements. Schools that adopt Channel One receive \$50,000 worth of free equipment from K-III Publishing, which is owned by RJR-Nabisco, a transnational tobacco company (Buckingham, 2000). In Canada, Youth News Network is now making its third attempt since 1993 to start a similar service (Mladen, 2001). We can only assume that these trends will continue and are likely to accelerate in a “free market”.

Today’s North American children experience their childhood as a function of two forces; its usefulness in producing a “successful”, productive future measured by monetary gain or ownership; and as a means of grooming the child to be a consumer. The first of these forces, producing a successful future, is not new, and in some areas of the world, has always been given precedence over childhood culture. What is new is the degree to which this has been adopted in North America. The literature (Leach, 1994; Gardner, 1999; Meyrowitz, 1985) indicates a trend toward a more rigid academic curriculum or “work”, and more adult-like behaviours being modeled for younger children—this at the expense of developmentally appropriate and important social and play time. The second force, the control of children’s minds by corporations is a global and cross-cultural phenomenon. It also tends to deter the creation of children’s culture by children. According to Walsh (1990), children are being imposed not only with the burden of adulthood at very young ages, they are being told what to think and how to play, thereby limiting their own creativity and abilities. Meyrowitz (1985) argues that within North American culture, the general suppression of children as a cultural presence has been eroding steadily and become homogenized or merged with adulthood. “The child” and “the consumer” have been carefully construed to be perceived as one persona, such that children’s desires for goods are presented as being pre-existent and natural (Cook, 2000). Manipulation of the term “free market” within a capitalist economy suggests that consumer desire is both natural and assumed. Therefore, corporations and advertisers justify their solicitation of the child consumer as a natural process, rather than that of manipulation (Cook, 2000).

The emergence of the child as a consumer prompted numerous research studies on the socialization of children functioning as consumers beginning with the seminal work of Ward (Ward, Wackerman & Wartella, 1977). The family has been identified as being instrumental in teaching children aspects of consumption such as price-quality relationships, learning to save money, understanding concepts such as comparative shopping and the ability to calculate consumer decisions (Pliner, Freedman, Abramovitch and Darke, 1996).

Television: An Adverse Socializing Agent

With the introduction of television, the impact of media as a societal influence, particularly concerning children, escalated dramatically. As a medium, television is a means through which

corporations are able to deliver their messages quickly, repeatedly and relentlessly. According to Mander (2001), television in general is “an instrument of mental cloning on a global scale, a means to control mental processes so they are merged with the larger corporate technological system.” Television dramatically shapes how children think, what they believe about themselves, adults and their culture. As young children are particularly impressionable, it is possible to alter their behavior and thoughts to such an extent as to influence their understanding of consumerism and solicit their compliance, to the extent that entertaining an alternate view becomes difficult to impossible later in life.

It is evident from the literature that television is without dispute, a major factor on children’s socialization, whether or not the researchers assume a pro-television (Gunter and McAleer, 1990; Van Evra, 1990) or con-television (Comstock and Scharrer, 2001; Meyrowitz, 1985) position. In North America, children between the ages of 2-11 on average view an inordinate amount of television, on average three hours per day (Comstock and Scharrer, 2001). Children spend more time viewing television than engaging in any other single activity besides school (VanEvra, 1990). Comstock and Scharrer (2001) summarized decades of research and espoused that there is ample evidence to suggest that both the amount viewed or what is viewed has adverse consequences for some children, including: the displacement of time that might be spent acquiring scholastic skills, decreased reading ability, the promotion of negative moods and behaviours such as fearfulness, reduced impulse control and attention span, reduction of play and imaginative processes, and the facilitation of aggressive and antisocial behavior.

By the time children have reached the age of nine or ten, the majority of the television they are watching is adult programming (Bogart, 1995). This has important implications with regard to both the content of programs viewed and advertisement exposure. A child watching adult programs observes commercials that are not intended for their viewing. Commercial content that is full of sexual innuendoes, both blatant and subtle, is just one of the problematic areas. It is fair to conclude that the imaginary world of television has the power to overwhelm the child’s understanding of the world around his/her. There is already substantial evidence that television viewing, particularly violent programming, is directly correlated to violent behaviour in children (Bogart, 1995). Research indicates that immersing a child in antisocial media content fosters antisocial behaviour. In fact, vulgar language on television has increased 47% in recent years (Shane, 2001). According to Shane (2001), it is no surprise then that research demonstrates exposure to profanity in movies, television and music is identified as a causal factor in the escalation of profanities amongst children (Shane, 2001). Additionally, exposure to media violence has been found to produce aggressive feelings or action and an increased tolerance for violence committed by others (Bogart, 1995).

It should be noted that those researchers attempting to reject the “myth” that television is indeed problematic and troublesome to children (Gunter and McAleer, 1990; Clifford, Gunter and McAleer, 1995) base some of their arguments on the assumption that children emerge from childhood influenced by television as well-informed adults. For example, Gunter and Furnham (1998) argue

“the research literature reviewed in earlier chapters would suggest that while children pass through a stage of vulnerability, they generally emerge from it as informed and knowledgeable consumers able to make their own minds up about what they wish to buy.” (p.173). Furthermore, these same researchers assume the position that shaping a child in the direction of consumerism is an inherent part of children’s culture. Indeed, many of the studies cited to support their positions have provided advertisers with valuable information about how to entice children into buying their products. VanEvra (1990) contends that due to methodological problems equivocal findings concerning child development and television cannot be established. After 40 years, concerns about children’s culture predominately framed by television have been reduced to a research debate, obfuscating critical issues about the negative impact.

Advertising To Children: Foul Play?

Historically, advertisements to children were directed through their mothers, as women became the key targets in the early stages of the modern consumer society due to their purchasing power in the family. Corporate advertising used the role of mother as a propaganda strategy to develop a culture of consumption with young children as the targets. Advertisers sought to commodify the social-biological role of motherhood through the creation of an infant/children’s department of clothing. The whole notion of mothers buying for their children out of “instinctive love” is one of the early examples of an ideology that developed around consumption (Cook, 1995). Clearly, the connection between mothers, children and consumption was deliberately constructed through the lead advertising campaign associating “universal maternal instinct” with consumer spending (Cook, 1995). The value of children evolved into a monetary measure, meaning their capacity to consume. The child and childhood have come to represent a consumer market, under the rubric of motherly love.

By the mid-1980s, corporations had understood that in order to increase profit marketing a brand rather than a product would be the ticket. As powerful manufacturers became burdened with employing too many people, and managing too much production corporations unloaded this millstone to the Third World labor market. Consequently, this structural shift enabled corporations to expand and develop at an unprecedented rate (Klein, 2000). Indeed, pay off has been enormous; branding has become an extraordinarily profitable strategy. Because children have no concept of the quality of a product, they are particularly prone to the sway of branding. What exactly is it that entices children? Children crave an image, popularity among peers, a belonging that becomes increasingly difficult for parents and educators to challenge.

The advertising campaigns used to deliver brand images use the discourse to convince children that the brand represents far more than a product; it represents success. Hence the extraordinary infiltration of “cool” associated with many corporate brands attempting to engage a young audience. The advertising industry’s rate of growth has been extraordinary to the extent that it has exceeded the growth of the world economy (Klein, 2000). The presence of brand advertising

occupies every imaginable space from benches in national parks to public washrooms to boxes of Girl Guide cookies to sidewalks, and even across the sky by hot air balloon or airplane. Every aspect of a child's life seems to be sponsored by a corporation. The surge of brand advertising from 1993 onward, according to Klein (2000), launched the beginning of a new era of the brand "comeback". For example, Nike exerted an extra 24.6% in to its ad budget and began to launch what Klein (2000) refers to as "lifestyle marketing". Developing a brand fetish was the end goal. The brand represented an experience or feeling, and evoked images of everything from success to ecological investment without ever addressing the efficacy of the product itself. Displaying loyalty to the brand was not only in the image of the logo, but also in its philosophy.

A young child cognizant of logo status is a new and disturbing trend. Some parents lament about how their children refuse to wear anything other than logo clothing. What characterizes advertising in the '90s is the attempt by corporations to ensure that the brand becomes the lived reality. It is not enough for children to watch television and see actors drinking coke in a commercial, now children are involved in developing Coke's next ad campaign in school as part of a so-called academic exercise (Klein, 2000). No longer is the brand a part of culture, it has taken over the culture. Furthermore, children's culture is embedded in the brand--the two are indistinguishable.

Television advertising is particularly intrusive, voluminous and insidious. Advertising accounts for about a fourth of the roughly 25 hours per week children spend watching television (Bogart, 1997). In an historic decision in 1982, the Federal Trade Commission in the United States forced the abandonment of the National Association of Broadcasters Code, which had limited the time devoted to advertising on television. This deregulation coincided with the introduction of the 52-second commercial unit and resulted in an explosion in the total number of its broadcast. As a result, in one year, the number of additional commercials per network increased by more than half an hour day (Bogart, 1997). Consequently, while children were exposed to an average of about 20,000 commercials per year in the 1970's, 30,000 per year in the 1980's, the numbers had reached 40,000 by the 1990's (Kunkel, 2001). These numbers are staggering and the possible effects are equally so. The economic market sustained through advertising in the amount of \$24 billion for children under the age of 14 and \$188 billion for families underscores the high stakes for corporate advertising.

More than 80 percent of all advertising to children falls within the following four product categories: toys, cereal, candy, and fast food restaurants-- a finding that has been consistent for two decades (Barcus, 1980; Kunkel and Gantz, 1992). The most common theme used as a marketing tool to children is associating the product with fun and happiness, rather than providing fact-oriented information (Kunkel and Gantz, 1992). Examples abound, including

Ronald McDonald, the infamous icon used to entice children to eat at McDonald's. It has been established that commercials for food are generally effective in persuading children to like and request the product (Gorn and Goldberg, 1982). The literature remains clear about the fact that a substantial portion of young children, particularly those below the age of five, are unable to discriminate between television programs and commercial content (Kunkel, 2001). According to

Kunkel (2001), numerous studies point to the fact that the age of the child is positively correlated with an understanding of an advertiser's persuasive intent, with seven to eight years the approximate point at which such ability typically develops (Ward, Wackman and Wartella, 1977). Furthermore, even if the data supported the fact that children comprehend the persuasive intent of advertising, it does not necessarily follow they will then recognize the bias inherent in such ads and therefore, view the appeal of the ad more skeptically (Kunkel, 2001).

The implications of these findings raise numerous ethical questions as to whether or not persuasive advertising in the form of television commercials targets children at an age of high vulnerability. There is no question that the intent of corporate advertising is to sell a product, and according to the literature, television commercials are highly successful in achieving that end with children (Kunkel, 2001). Not only are advertisements successful in generating consumer behaviour in children, some have suggested that children demonstrated an increase in materialistic attitudes as a result of television commercial exposure (Goldberg and Gorn, 1978; Moschis and Moore, 1982). It is worth noting that despite the fact that these studies were conducted 20 years ago, the numbers of television ads continued to rise. According to Klein (1993), it is rare that any public opposition to the over-commercialization of television in the form of advertising to children is expressed. Corporations have not only succeeded in convincing children of the need for specific objects of pleasure in the form of toys, they have done an equally convincing job with their parents. Finally, other adverse effects such as parent-child conflict over purchasing attempts may be contributing significantly to familial strife (Kunkel, 2001).

McLuhan (1989) stated that narcissism was the fastest developing social disease of the Western world. The origins of this phenomenon are partially uncovered in the media. Television commercials are designed to reinforce a self-centred, self-indulgent worldview in which the acquisition of commodities is deemed a norm, a fulfillment of need—"the cult of me" (Shane, 2001). For children, this message is particularly problematic due to their lack of social and emotional maturity. Egocentric thoughts and behaviors at the extreme can result in a lack of moral development (Coles, 1997). One of the deleterious effects of media on children may be on their moral development. I am not saying this as a moralist, but rather as an individual who believes that orientation as to what is right and wrong is part of "normal" mental health. Clearly, the majority of media content is lacking in lessons about ethics. Barker, a child psychiatrist for 30 years stated very clearly that sociopathic behavior in adolescents and adults develops in early childhood. Assumptions about children's mental-health as an anomaly, as a self-contained entity, deny the socio-psychological circumstances contributing to the phenomenon known as "juvenile delinquency" (Wertham, 1954). The question remains unanswered as to whether or not children develop psychological disorders as a result of media exposure. However, it has been established that deviant social and psychological behaviours can be induced, shaped and reinforced by observation. The media provides ongoing examples of violence not as an anomaly but as a norm in human relationships.

Klein (1993) presents a compelling argument about how television is not only a significant

socializing agent for children, it has become “the undisputed leader in the production of children’s culture”(p.74). As described previously, the culture of childhood has an extremely important play component, which is significantly impoverished and undernourished in television programs, as well as computers and electronic media. Klein (1993) further argues that television advertising and programming has commercialized childhood such that images sold through advertising become the symbols of childhood. As one former advertising executive described it: “The process of seeing children as a target market commoditizes childhood. Everything children are geared towards is tied to a profiting corporation.” (Smith, 2001, emphasis added). The corporate executive is concerned primarily with profit and self-gain. In the corporate world, children are more and more being seen as a type of mutual fund investment—growth that can reap a lifetime of return. Children have become a commodity themselves, a cloned economic unit, just as corporations intended. The advertising industry considers children fully-fledged consumers from birth; families with young children are the most lucrative consumer group. What do these cloned children look like? They are dependents on commodities to make them feel good accompanied by feelings of vague dissatisfaction. These children may be better dressed, look healthier, know how to read when they are four and play with creative, non-sexist, attention-grabbing toys. Yet they are creatures of television, computers, the toys they play with-- mass-produced recruits of corporations. The craving for a commodity becomes powerfully enticing as the child’s self worth depends upon the objects he/she is able to acquire. Marx first coined this phenomenon “commodity fetishism.”

Advertising convinces both parents and children that commodities positively define the self, a mass scale fetish. The relationships within the child’s world also become defined within the context of commercialism.

Digital Daze And Deceit

Technology in the form of computers and other digital systems has been marketed relentlessly as a cure all for existing economic, social and educational problems. Advertising campaigns from corporations have successfully convinced parents that children must be technologically adept. Consequently, a multibillion-dollar “high tech” industry that includes digital games, Internet use, pagers, cell phones, and an endless stream of upgraded software and hardware has proliferated. In particular, the Internet has become “the most direct mass merchandising vehicle ever invented” with much of the advertising directed at children (Bogart, 1997, p. xi).

The “new media” has been marketed as a replacement for the old. Yet, the trend seems to be that more and more media is being crammed into children’s lives, not a different media (Shane, 2001). In addition, digital technology has been heralded as an enhancement to children’s development, particularly their ability to “multi-task”, to engage in several activities at the same time i.e. read email, talk on a cell phone and watch a TV program concurrently. Yet, the multi-tasking argument is weak. Firstly, it takes little high order thinking to multitask using

digital technologies, which is why young children are able to engage themselves on a computer without adult supervision (Shane, 2001). Secondly, increasing numbers of children appear to be experiencing difficulty focusing and finishing a single task correctly as evidenced by the epidemic numbers of attention-deficit disorder and hyperactive-deficit disorder in children (Degrandpre, 2001). Many parents and educators have been deluded into thinking that the new generation of children who can manage computers and identify a mouse as the control of a cursor before they know it is an animal, are somehow smarter, more sophisticated, and better informed. What appears to be overlooked is the fact that whether a child is sitting in front of the computer or a television, exposure to corporate control and influence is still prominent.

As digital technologies replace existing systems, the few constraints that previously controlled and disciplined “information conduct” will be practically eliminated (Hamelink, 1997). Of grave concern is the fact that digital technologies have made the manipulation of data, images and sound so easy as to blur reality with little to no consequences (Hamelink, 1997). What is the effect of a cultural transformation to digital technology on children? Today’s children are being heralded as the digital generation, socialized and imbibed with a new discourse, a new mode of “digitally enhanced” consumer behavior.

Theoretical Framework: The Indictment Of Capitalism

Why have corporations become so powerful, controlling and manipulative as to abuse our most vulnerable citizens? Several different theoretical perspectives attempt to answer this question, including Chomsky's theory of thought control (1999), Feminist economic theory (1999), and Marcuse (1964) (critical theory). Within each framework, capitalism is charged with fostering gross inequity, abuse of power and the creation of a system that allows the media to propagate false assertions.

Illusions Of Democracy

The use of propaganda as a means of "controlling the masses" has been flourishing, cultivating and refining throughout the twentieth century in North America. The business community, through manipulation and cooperation of government, has successfully managed public opinion in line with its own best interests. That the management of democracy in the United States should go unchallenged for so long is reflected in the power and success of this propaganda. As Carey (1995) stated, management of public opinion in a so-called democracy became indistinguishable from a "totalitarian propaganda". The public relations industry from its origins early in this century successfully dictated the public mind. Business interests were linked to national interest and sold to the public by linking images of freedom, free enterprise and free market with capitalist practices and opportunism. Whether this was a campaign of deceit, persuasion, propaganda, or brainwashing, both Chomsky (1991) and Carey (1995) contend that a deliberate and calculated effort was exerted. According to Chomsky (1999), the U.S. government and business community employ the media as a tool to manage and control the masses; hence the notion of "manufacturing consent." What is extraordinary is the notion that democracy in North America is believed to exist (Chomsky, 1999). Carey (1995) provides a detailed description of the development of a "propaganda managed democracy," one in which corporate propaganda has been used as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy. Hence, the corporate consumer system has imposed its own domination of reality and its own definition of the "Good Life." The mass media have imposed a conception of reality which defines what happiness is, what the "Good Life" is, that which a human being is potentially capable of achieving. In fact, all that we hear, say and think. Observation alone shows they have been extremely successful. Throughout the twentieth century, corporations applied research techniques that were designed to reach the subconscious mind in the hopes of mass-producing customers just as they mass-produced products.

Neo-classical Versus Feminist Economic Theory: How The Child Is Priced

According to feminist theory, the economic system that allows for and justifies the manipulation

of children as consumers is embedded in patriarchal values and decisions (Waring, 1999). North American economics are based on a capitalist theory of the “free market”, the GDP, the GNP in which consumer spending is the grease for the national income wheel. Furthermore, the total amount of economic activity in the country is primarily determined by three factors: consumption, investment and government spending (Waring, 1999). The economy is considered to be doing well even when natural resources are being decimated, the work of many women is unrecognized, (Waring, 1999) and children as young as the age of two are being socialized to consume.

Neoclassical economists assume the individual operates as “rational economic man,” engaging with the world in order to maximize personal profit (Hewitson, 1999). Differences in gender are of little significance as the focus of this economic theory is on the individual, a disembodied and unsexed being whose primary function and drive is to fulfill consumptive needs (Hewitson, 1999). The metaphor of a pure market, the mainstay of neoclassical theory, one that is responding to supply and demand forces is a remarkably simple analysis as to how products and resources are valued; consumption begins to justify economic activity. Free-markets are seen as operating in isolation from a social context of any significance. The idea of perfect competition markets is based on the observation that supply and demand is a natural and unhindered process (Dawson, 2000). In order to work smoothly, the neoclassical model assumes that “rational” choice will guide individual behaviour, devoid of value judgments such that economic data represents an objective and accurate market analysis (Hewitson, 1995). Armed with mathematical modeling techniques, neoclassical economists argue that their paradigm is close to pure science, free of bias. Science is equated with power and control in a patriarchal society, overriding individual experience, which carries little to no credibility. In fact, the discipline of economics is a facade designed to safeguard wealth in selective hands. According to Waring (1999), sophisticated propaganda has been established to ensure that only an elite group of people can interpret and understand neoclassical economic theory. This exclusivity is used to disguise the flaws of the system and its disguise of meaningless terminology and depraved values. Additionally, Wearing (1999) refutes the notion that neoclassical economics assumes any objectivity by clearly demonstrating huge disparities in the differences between men and women both with regard to status and economic worth.

In contrast, feminist economics involves an understanding that all knowledge is value laden or subjective rather than neutral or value free (Aerni, 1999). This is an extremely important distinction from neoclassical economics in which the discourse negates all notions of right and wrong. While traditional economic theory emphasizes competition, control and production for change, feminist economic theory emphasizes cooperation, empowerment and production for social and political change (Aerni, 1999, emphasis added). Empowerment, an individual’s right to assert their needs and perspective contrasts strongly with corporate power, so often employed to dominate and control.

The neoclassical economics line of reasoning justifies the nurturing of children as consumers as a natural extension of the child’s innate being. Feminist economic theory provides a dramatically

different context with which to interpret the value of children. Namely, the social value of the child cannot be measured in terms of production without considering the moral welfare of the child. Just as the work of women is invisible in the world market economy (Waring, 1999), so is the psychological, emotional and spiritual value of the child. Just as natural resources are up for grabs by any corporation powerful enough to take them, so children have become a commodity for investors to access and exploit. The economic world of the consumer child illustrates how children have become valued only for their consumption capacity. While it is not a new phenomenon for children to be illegally exploited for economic purposes (prostitution, pornography and child industrial labor), what is new is a legal exploitation under the guise of individual and societal advancement.

Critical Theory: One Dimensional Culture

Marcuse (1964) captures the essence of cultural conformity in a theory which he refers to as “one-dimensional” society and culture, thus posing a plausible explanation as to how the media contributes to the elimination of childhood culture in the form of play and imagination. Critical theory poses several arguments about how control in advanced capitalist societies infiltrates its most vulnerable citizens, including children. In fact, loss of freedom is an outcome of technical progress and the suppression of individuality becomes a necessary byproduct of consumerism. In order to promote consumption, individuals must be convinced that they are all subject to material needs, the end goal of advertising. The irony of the loss of “rights and liberties” within capitalism is profound, considering that the discourse depends upon a belief in a free market (Marcuse, 1964, p. 1). Ironically, freedoms protected under democracies like freedom of thought, speech and conscience, have facilitated the exploitation of the individual by media within capitalism (Marcuse, 1964). When examining issues concerning children, freedom is, oddly enough, a word that is rarely associated with the rights of the child. More often, protection is emphasized as imperative. The manipulation of children’s needs has either been ignored or considered invalid within the context of mainstream culture (Kline, 1993). In understanding the notion of needs, Marcuse distinguishes between true and false needs, thus capturing the essence of my thesis. If false needs are those which “perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery and injustice” (Marcuse, 1964, p.5), it becomes easier to define and distinguish the results of corporate manipulation. His description that false needs will still be gratifying to the individual (euphoria is synonymous with unhappiness) accurately describes why children learn to believe that the material objects advertised on television will enhance their happiness.

It is clear that within a capitalist system powerful mechanisms of social control, derived through the media, are effective in shaping individual needs. Furthermore, people become one with the commodity-- self-identity and commodity are indistinguishable. The lifestyle and behaviors that children are exhibiting are in part, reflective of the type of advertising they are exposed to. In essence, the commodity becomes the agent of social control and any opposition to the status quo is easily eliminated. Consumerism is the ultimate exemplification of one-dimensional culture.

Marcuse contends that happiness within a capitalist culture is elusive. Although difficult to ascertain conclusively, it appears that the North American children show few signs of contentment. Marcuse put great emphasis on the notion that happiness is much more than a feeling; rather it is the state one can arrive at using rationale and reason. In the case of children, how can a two year-old reason about his/her needs and wants? Corporate advertising has assumed a rational form of thought for children, as mentioned previously in the discussion on mind control. At the same time, the discourse of capitalism is embedded in an image of freedom.

Who Minds The Child?

In answering the question “Who minds the child?” Chomsky (1991), Carey (1995), and Marcuse (1964) all hypothesized that capitalism or consumerism fosters a massive cultural cult, a type of “groupthink”. Ultimately, capitalism has urged a calculated campaign of social control of extraordinary proportion and power. Freedom of thought and expression is at the root of democracy. The power to control information and ideas is at the root of totalitarianism. Corporate values have steadily and quietly become dominant in our culture, ironically considered to be the bastion of free state. Significant portions of printed and broadcast ads are designed to promote politics and benevolent images of the corporation and to refute any thing that spoils that image. In 1886 in the United States, courts, in one of the most questionable acts in legal history, granted corporations all the rights and freedoms of an individual (Lasn, 1999). Before that time, corporations had limited power, by design, to protect the rights and freedoms of people. Since then, there has been a steady and relentless growth of power in the hands of a few. Examples abound, including \$44 billion in losses a year as a result of corporate crime in the U.S. (Bagdikian, 1997). Bagdikian (1997) contends that despite this, the courts have been lenient with corporations, claiming that many of the judiciary has been paid off with corporate perks.

A Research Study On Consumerism And Children

This research study, conducted in 2002, analyzed the ways in which teachers perceive the negative effects of consumerism on children. The data consists of interviews with four teachers in which their views on the impact of consumerism on children's academic performance, social skills and behaviour were discussed. This study explored the central question, "What are teachers' perceptions of the ways in which consumer culture have negatively effected children's academic performance social skills and behaviour?" Teachers have a prominent view of the development of children because of an exposure to high numbers of children and a role in participating in critical aspects of their growth. Cultural influences on children are observable and easily detectable by teachers within a school setting.

As outlined previously, numerous studies within each identified sector of the media (television, advertising, digital technology) have concluded that consumerism has deleterious effects on children. The research examined the synergistic effect of all aspects of media exposure on children under the rubric of consumerism, and is intended as a contribution to the ongoing exposure of the damage sustained to young children under corporate control from the vantage point of a cultural trend.

Methodology

Phenomenological qualitative research methods were selected for the design of this study in order to provide an opportunity to explore, describe and interpret teachers' experiences from their descriptions. Furthermore, the use of a qualitative study provided the latitude with which to develop a detailed analysis. The data for the present work comes from interviews I conducted in 2002 with four primary school teachers, with a minimum of five years teaching experience. I recruited individuals to be interviewed by contacting teachers who expressed an interest in the study based on personal connections, as well as teachers who were referred to me. The intention was to elicit information from teachers who had identified the negative effects of consumerism on children as both an area of interest and concern. Since no data on the subject existed, it was important to try to gain an understanding of what they saw as the relevant aspects. For this reason, the tape-recorded interviews were semi-structured, lasting an average of between one and a half and two hours, during which a list of topics and questions were used to help assure that the areas of interest were covered. Other topics relating to those outlined on the interview guide were pursued as they became relevant. The teachers received a copy of the interview guide two weeks prior to the actual interviews in order to prepare themselves for the discussion and to have the opportunity to give it full consideration. The interviews focused on issues having to do with the negative aspects of consumerism and children's academic performance, social skills and behaviour. During the transcribing and reading of the interviews, patterns and themes began to take shape. Each interview was read thoroughly several times and the most interesting or apparent themes were noted for each. In particular, the following codes guided the analysis

of each interview: academic performance, social skills, consumerism as a general category, play, television, behaviour, parents, children as consumers, it gender differences, childhood culture, electronic media. Similarities and differences across interviews were compared and noted in each of these general categories.

Data

Decline In Academic Performance

All of the teachers expressed consternation over a reduction in children's abilities to learn basic academic skills, particularly in the ability to work with instruction, to be taught. They attributed this in part to the numbers of hours spent in front of the television, computer and children's high exposure to advertising. Children no longer have to develop independent thought when they are bombarded with messages directing their every move. In 1964, McLuhan observed that media renders one inept, engulfed by the mindlessness of "mass entertainment". One of the teachers makes this point:

They don't spend enough time thinking about things, so academically when we work with them in different areas, they don't know how to think. We actually say that in our school, they don't know how to think. Part of the reason we feel is because they are sitting in front of the TV and someone else is doing the thinking for them and indirectly telling them what to buy, what to wear, what toys to play with.

At the same time because the curriculum has become more rigid, as a result of pressures from school boards and parents to ensure that children "succeed," many students are suffering from greater performance and behavioural difficulties. As one teacher noted, "Expectations that used to be at the higher grades, have been moved to even three grades down. The teachers are trying to force-feed the curriculum." Schools are being pressured to ensure that children abide by a curriculum that promotes a consumer lifestyle through the acquisition of academic information the. Teachers have become the taskmasters deemed to carry out this deed, instructed to ignore emotional and social development at the cost of academic performance.

Furthermore, because children are constantly stimulated with fast moving visual images through media exposure, their capacity to concentrate in the classroom has diminished. Children are quickly bored by a comparatively slower paced environment, and are easily distracted: "They are glued to these media; they're being trained to respond to these visual flashes. My impression is that the kids are somewhat different at school, they want to be entertained, visually and auditorially." Consequently, children struggle to maintain an adequate attention span.

Exorbitant amounts of time in front of televisions and computers reduces the child's capacity to engage in an interactive dynamic: "A lot of kids are exposed to a lot of media, so this input is coming in one-way. They don't know what to do on their own and this shows academically."

Franklin (1990) maintains that television does not allow for reciprocal communicative relationships and in the case of children, results in stunted social development. The comments cited above are reflective of this theory.

Lack Of Basic Social Skills

Basic social skills such as regard for others (including peers and teachers), politeness, manners and a capacity to get along in groups situations were considered by all of the teachers to be in decline among students: “The ability to get along, socialize has deteriorated over time. I saw a huge inability to get along, to play that I found rather frightening.”

One of the teachers felt that corporations are deliberately using the media to capture children’s attention, despite knowledge of the negative impact on a child’s development: “They want them to watch the billboards, they want them to watch these things in their school. They really want to educate the children how not to interact.”

The daily curriculum has been modified in order to accommodate the loss of social skills; rather than academic work or encouraging participation in play and games, teachers identified that much of their time has been focused on teaching basic manners and interactive skills.

They have lost a lot of those social skills. I find I have to teach those more now than ever before. Years and years ago, you didn’t have kids coming to school fighting over toys in the classroom wanting everything for them and not knowing different ways to solve a problem.

One of the outcomes of a consumer-driven culture is the production of images through the media that incite children’s desires and seek to foster needs regardless of the moral or social consequences. Children are naturally imitative as a result of their inability to discriminate; these teachers reported that media influence has been so powerful that regardless of the moral depravity of role models on television or film, children crave a similar self-image. One of the teachers cited the Brittany Spears pop culture craze in which children as young as five years old desire to dress in a similarly provocative style.

A Rise In Aggressive Behaviours

All of these teachers were consistently emphatic that both verbal and physical aggression amongst boys and girls is on the rise as a result of consumerism. One teacher commented:

I think the benchmark has gone up to what is acceptable in children’s minds, about what they think is hurtful. They really don’t understand after watching a lot of programs that what they do could hurt someone because they see it being done.

This teacher had 30 years of experience and consequently, was able to discern significant changes in children's behaviour over time. One of the other areas that she identified as having significantly changed amongst the girls was an interest in sexual behaviour: "I see six and seven year-olds strutting physically, showing off their clothes, wearing little halter tops and physically trying to present themselves as adult women." Another teacher, linking such behaviour directly to media images, echoed the same position: "It's a visual pollution. More and more scantily clad people, more and more sexual innuendoes all over the place. It's just inescapable and certainly that's got to have some effect."

There was general consensus that children's behaviours reflect materialistic values fostered through media exposure resulting in a compulsion to acquire toys and clothing: "Companies are trying to get kids to grow up really quickly and buy their stuff."

One of the questions asked during the interviews focused on the use of Ritalin in order to determine whether a decline in appropriate behaviours has resulted in an increased use of drug therapy. Two of the teachers commented on the prevalence of Ritalin and its connection to consumerism. They stated that the diagnosis resulting in the prescription of Ritalin is a red herring for societal sickness in the form of consumerism. Pacifying children with material possessions and fulfilling their demands in this area leads to a whole host of antisocial behaviours that eventually acquire a psychiatric label. As children "speed up", becoming uncontrollable, "the easiest solution is to medicate" rather than eliminating access to high-speed technology such as the Internet, television, video games and other electronic devices like Game Boy. This is both a shocking and extraordinary finding to consider. These teachers suggested that some psychological disorders have a direct causality to consumer culture, yet Children are being treated with drugs and socialized to be compliant consumers of prescription drugs.

Media Influence: Television And Commercials

Not surprisingly, there was considerable discussion about television, both the type of programming that children are watching and the number of hours of viewing. Specifically, teachers cited the accessibility of adult programming on television as highly problematic in the following ways:

Children know what adults do behind closed doors and it does not improve their behaviour; in fact, it scares the heck out of them.

Many of these young kids are exposed to all sorts of adult content such as violence, nudity, inappropriate vocabulary. They're so desensitized to these adult issues and situations that the reality and fiction are becoming meshed in their own lives. The kids are left to decipher through an enormous amount all alone, or with incorrect and damaging information from peers.

They see a driven existence, which equates contentment with body image, stock portfolios, a

choice of vehicle and physical/sexual prowess.

McLuhan (1996) attributes violence to a loss of identity as a result of media exposure, which occurs because of a failure to distinguish what is real. "It's why they have to kill in order to find out whether they're real. This is where the violence comes from. This meaningless slaying around our streets is the work of people who have lost all identity and who have to kill in order to know if they're real or of the other guy's real."

Due to the fact that children assume a passive role while engaging in television watching, two of the teachers attributed this phenomenon to a decrease in play, outdoor activity and social interaction. Furthermore, one of these teachers felt that children had become passive listeners as result of television: "their brains do not have the conditioning to be reflective or critical listeners." Finally, the issue of mind control and brainwashing of children by corporations was directly linked to television advertising by one of the teachers who expressed:

Advertisements directed at young children are pure brainwashing. There is no middle ground, they're not trying to give a choice to a consumer to buy the best product, they are not trying to sell something of benefit to the child, they are telling the child how to think at a very delicate stage of developmental growth so they can profit from that influence.

As a further example, three of the teachers linked obesity in children to the type commercials on television that "encourage" children to eat junk food.

Another example of the ways in which television suppresses children's natural impulses, is in the area of play. According to these teachers, children struggle with cooperative play, even requiring being taught how to play. Additionally, all of the teachers identified the toys of consumerism, such as electronic games, as detracting from social development.

A five year-old has trouble socializing at school, spending three hours playing with Game Boy, and wants to stay home and play Nintendo.

There are so many electronic devices at their disposal that the kids don't even need to leave home for entertainment or for that matter require a friend to play with. They play with their computers.

Each of these teachers also stated clearly that the forces of consumerism have molded children to play as corporations dictate, depending on the latest marketing campaign.

They advertise in a way to children that captures their physical senses, the excitement, the must have to be cool to be great with your friends. That's the level they sell it at. They don't sell it at any other depth.

Consumerism

When analyzing the synergistic negative effects of all aspects of media infiltration and consumerism on children, all of the teachers perceived the situation to be of crisis proportions. The consumer culture of children was described in terms such as “a poisoned environment, ” “manipulative, ” “mesmerizing, ” “numbing, ” and “brainwashing”. These teachers were adamant that consumerism was implicated in the many adverse effects on children’s development including: a shortened childhood, hyper-competitiveness, a reduction in family time, an increase in obesity, isolation, stress, distorting play, an increase in materialism and loss of identity.

Consumerism directly says be competitive. Some of the slogans preach if you lose, you’re a loser, win at any cost.

Play has really been decimated by consumerism because consumerism tells young children what to do, what to play with and how, which isn’t really true play.

It takes over their life, also the family. Instead of going outside to play, the family has been educated by companies to take them places like a video arcade. The kids are not playing, the families are not playing. So families are being educated to consume.

Companies are trying to get kids to grow up really quickly and buy their stuff.

Advertising has taught them what they should be like.

The single most negative effect of advertising children is the manipulation, the brainwashing that occurs at such an impressionable age that it becomes virtually impossible to separate from as they grow into adulthood. The fact that advertisers have such a strong influence on their lives is frightening. They are influenced as to what to eat, wear, listen to, and read. What is next?

Parents were perceived by these teachers to be caught up in the consumer cycle of earning more and buying more resulting in both a reduced interaction time with children, and inadequate teaching and modeling of basic social skills. Parents feel compelled to indulge their children with commodities in part to feel they are doing an adequate job, and also because of the demands placed on them by their children. Consequently, the nurturing a child requires from h/her family is transferred to an exchange of material goods. The relationship between parent and child is measured at a material level and perpetuates the cycle of consumerism at an intimate level of family life. The results are devastating at both ends: children spend considerably more time alone, attempting to bond with electronic equipment and parents suffer the emotions of guilt and stress. This summary is reflected in the statements gleaned from the interviews:

You are perceived to be a better parent if you buy your child things as seen on TV and clever commercials.

Parents struggle to keep up with their children’s materialistic demands and are working longer hours, therefore less family time spent together.

Children are also caught up in the role of consumer, acquiring both the means and desire to spend at younger ages although lacking the understanding of the implications of this behaviour. Three of the teachers were certain that children perceive themselves as consumers and are well aware of their buying power. Even beyond the capacity to acquire and spend money, children regard “ownership” as a measure of status. One of the teachers described a story of a child who could not speak English, yet was determined to acquire a sweatshirt with a “Gap logo across the front. The same teacher also defined how corporations, through advertising, are deliberately fostering a value of materialism in children.

The image is more important than how you react to another person. So if you wear the right thing and go to the right places, that is more important than how to be. You know you’re going to be liked if you do this. That’s definitely a false message.

Discussion

What can this analysis tell us about the negative effects of consumerism on children’s development? Though the small sample size used in this analysis means that these findings should be taken as tentative, many of these issues reflect a level of seriousness that commands our immediate attention. First, the evidence indicates that childhood has been radically altered for the worse by the influences of consumerism in terms of how children play, their relationships amongst peers and within the family. This reflects existing theories that have shown that childhood has been eroding and moving in a negative direction. In a recent publication, Orme (2002) refutes previous research claiming that childhood is a modern construction of the past 200 years. He proves that as far back as the Middle Ages, childhood was regarded as a distinct developmental stage, in which children were removed from adult experiences and responsibilities (Orme, 2002). Consumerism has fostered a culture for children and adults such that the lines are blurred. The data solicited from these teachers suggests that the “adultification” of children (children making adult choices before they have the emotional or cognitive maturity to understand those choices) has wide reaching detrimental consequences at the academic, social and behavioural level. The debate as to whether or not children are capable of maturing at earlier ages appears irrelevant upon closer analysis of the outcomes in this study.

Second, it is questionable whether parents, teachers and community members have greater influence over children than the media. The results of this study suggest a reasonable doubt as to “who is minding the children.” To complicate matters, adults in our society also succumb to the forces of consumerism. In fact, one of the teachers in the study acknowledged the infiltration of consumerism in her own life, although she maintained she was both a reluctant participant and a witness. Regardless, teachers clearly have to compete with the media in capturing children’s minds and imaginations— and it appears that they are being overpowered. Ultimately, media exposure denies children a choice about who they are and who they are to become. The intense socialization associated with the images of consumerism is proving difficult, if not impossible, for

many children to resist.

Finally, corporations are using the media as a means of shaping children to become consumers of various products and behave in certain ways—products and behaviours are not in the best interest of the child. In Denmark, the Marketing Practices Act severely restricts advertising to children (McDonnell, 2001). Why not similar legislation in North America?

One can go further and state that corporations are applying thought reform techniques similar to those used in cults. The most powerful and central means of maintaining individuals in a cult is the manipulation and control of the mind unbeknownst to the subject. The purpose of thought reform is to move individuals “along the path of change that will lead them to serve the interests that are to their disadvantage” (Singer, 1995, p.52). Finally, the easiest members to recruit into a cult—for life—are children (Singer, 1995). Given the data in this study, it is plausible to conceive that consumerism is a off euphemism for a cult. Lasn (1999) believes the evidence more than justifies using the term “cult” to describe the power that corporations have wielded to influence every aspect of our lives.

In order to consider the implications for practitioners, a discussion on the link between consumerism and psychopathy is warranted. Elliott Barker, a forensic psychiatrist, helped establish the Canadian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty To Children in 1975 in an effort to warn people of the dangers of inadequate early nurturance of children. Barker (1992) maintained that the people who commit crimes are rarely affected by how their victims feel; in fact, lack the ability to do so. He further found that the capacity to be empathic and affected by others’ feelings is developed before the age of three, after which it can never be learned. Barker (1992) insisted that a reduction of crime and mental illness could be achieved through increased awareness of the causal factors. In other words, a just and caring society depends upon the nurturance and caring of children. In contrast to the absence of evidence for hereditary factors in determining the status of hostility in individuals, the clinical experience of psychiatrist with children and adults repeatedly emphasizes the significance of conditioning influences and their basic importance in causing vulnerabilities to emotional disorders (Saul, 1980). Without the consistent presence of a “family”, it is extremely difficult for children to receive the level of nurturance required to produce mental health and stability. In a consumer society, parents are preoccupied with the acquisition of material possessions, a process that compromises family life in time and quality. Consumerism lures parents into believing that they need to be making more money rather than caring for their children. The social pressure to conform to the lifestyle of a two-income family, to measure up takes precedence over the true needs of the child.

Protecting children’s minds is the key component in countering corporate power and control. In 1953, Frederic Wertham warned of the dangers of media, particularly the comic-book industry and its deleterious effect on children. “What all the media need at present is a rollback of sadism [with respect to children].” (Wertham, 1953, p.361) Sadly, his remarks are more relevant today than they were in 1953. Eliminating corporate presence in schools, minimizing the amount of television, movies, Internet access, digital games and other forms of technology seem obvious yet almost

impossible to do when the caregivers of these children suffer under the same delusion. There is little optimism to express about the capacity to overturn cultural trends of such magnitude. Marshall McLuhan (1989), perhaps the greatest media theorist of our time, had this to say about digital technology and its effect on society:

What may emerge as the most important insight of the 21st century is that man was not designed to live at the speed of light. Without the countervailing balance of natural and physical laws, the new video-related media will make man implode upon himself. As he sits in the informational control room, whether at home or at work, receiving data at the enormous speeds-- imagistic, sound, or tactile--from all areas of the world, the results could be dangerously inflating and schizophrenic. His body will remain in one place but his mind will flow out into the electronic void, being everywhere at once in the data bank (p.97).

McLuhan provides a chilling analysis of the digital medium as highly toxic to adults, and with the addition of toxic content (such as repetitive senseless violence), a powerful synergistic force is created. If McLuhan had this to say about the mental effects of a digital medium on adults, comprehending the full impact (considering content as well) on children's developing minds is somewhat staggering.

Future Implications

The continued exploitation of children will be achieved using advanced psychological tools in the format of extensive propaganda. It will be delivered through an ever-expanding network of digital media, television, Internet, movies, magazines, computers and billboards, all of which will be under the control of fewer and fewer corporations. It will become impossible to resist for young developing minds that will not learn how to think or question--just consume. The current corporate economic model is non-limiting and self-destructing. Those who thrive on power and money have an insatiable appetite and will unrelentingly continue on a course of destruction without the foresight to recognize their own demise. The increasing levels of depression, anomie, violence and psychological disorders will continue to escalate as corporations consume each other in an economic quest to become ever larger until only one remains. The quest may be completed but there will be no victory, as a vanquished society collapses upon itself after reaching crises of unprecedented proportions at a human level. Western "civilization" will end, not because of atomic, environmental or biological disaster, but a digitally broadband broadcast cancer of the mind.

Epilogue

Implications For Child Welfare Practice

What then does a practitioner do when a new case of child neglect or abuse is presented? First and foremost, it is essential to recognize the culpability of corporations in the form of consumerism and spare the all too common litany of labels associated with individual pathology. There is a tendency for social service organizations to become isolated within their own mandate, sometimes losing track of the bigger picture. There needs to be a recognition and unification by diverse numbers of social activists who realize that fighting many single battles against the same enemy is not very effective. As each social organization struggles to rescue drowning victims from the same raging river, causal factors are never addressed, and the flow overwhelms resources. The field of child welfare is a particularly good example. The system is failing children and families by blaming individuals despite the fact that there is well-documented research indicating that children and families at risk are victims of a cultural phenomenon, namely poverty (Swift, 1998). How does this relate to consumerism? There is a direct connection between systemic poverty and consumer culture; that link is the privatization of the public sector. While the reasons for poverty are multiple and complex, undoubtedly the erosion of the welfare state at the provincial and federal level is a contributing factor. At the back of this erosion is corporate pressure to manage public sector services in order to create another level of consumerism previously available by virtue of citizenship (Finn, 2000). One of the outcomes of this process is an increase in levels of poverty as access to services diminish income. A recently published report funded by Health Canada, a positive correlation was determined between children who are poverty stricken and those who are neglected or abused (Philip, 2001, March 14). At the same time, the field of child welfare has become an adversarial arena of court battles in which individuals, rather than corporations, are held accountable for children's welfare or lack thereof. A detailed examination of the child welfare system in a litigious context reveals the direct effects of consumerism in the social work field.

Legal Culpability

The field of child welfare has always been guided, informed and influenced by the legal system. However, in the last 20 years, child welfare has become increasingly complex, legalistic, and court-dominated such that individuals are held legally responsible for child neglect and abuse. With the adoption of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982, the "rights of the individual" had never been more powerfully acknowledged in the legislation (Bala, Hornick & Vogl, 1991). Consequently, children and their parents were then afforded "due process", the right to challenge decisions made by child welfare workers and their agencies in an unprecedented manner (Bala, Hornick & Vogl, 1991). The presence of lawyers has grown in such numbers that many of the child protective agencies (CPA) employ a number of legal experts. Child welfare has traditionally been one of the most adversarial fields within social work practice, bearing the

often unpleasant and intrusive responsibility of intervening between children and their parents. The high profile of lawyers, judges and courts exacerbates the oppositional nature and tone that characterizes the field of child welfare. While social work practice within child welfare has been gradually moving from a clinical model towards a legal model over a 20-year period, there has been a renewed emphasis of this process in the last 10 years.

The Double-Edged Sword Of Shrinking Resources and Increasing “Accountability”

The neo-conservative agenda across Canada has been one of shelving local control strategies while retaining the rhetoric of “community input” in order to introduce a round of restructuring that has resulted in reductions or stagnation of funding to community services. In order to be effective, child welfare work depends heavily on availability of resources such as mental health facilities, shelters for women, family counseling, and treatment centers for substance abuse. As caseloads swell within the CPA, workers are stymied by huge waiting lists. At the same time, public services have been under fire to be more accountable, efficient and cost-effective. Meanwhile, at the federal level, the Liberals have been dismantling social policies aimed to preserve services in the areas of health care, housing, unemployment—safety net provisions originally designed to protect the living standards of the poor and most vulnerable (Pulkingham and Ternowetsky, 1999). All of these factors combined have had devastating effects on low-income single mothers and their children, those most likely to become clients of the child welfare system (Swift, 1998).

Social Workers Shift From Supporting To Policing

Child welfare workers are now spending an inordinate amount of time in court, sometimes one to two full days per week. Intrusive, oppositional interaction in an already intrusive system often results in a vicious cycle of court hearings, court orders and adjournments. Child welfare workers, some 70% of which are women, are placed in the awkward position of establishing their credibility in the objective, fact-finding atmosphere of the courts, a male-dominated world, by proving their ability to withhold subjectivity (Swift, 1995). The pressure to establish and maintain a modicum of professionalism in this context magnifies the child welfare worker’s preclusion to achieve compliance by families. Indeed, the structural organizations within some of the CPA’s are such that social workers have been hired strictly to fulfill administrative legal work. Furthermore, the disparity in power, position and authority between the lawyers and child welfare workers exacerbates differences in perception, the expediency of decisions and may thwart positive outcomes for a client by dispersing a collective spirit of resolution (Johnson and Cahn, 1995).

Strictly speaking, child welfare lawyers participating in family court civil proceedings are first accountable to the state, and then to the CPA who employs them (Bala, Hornick & Vogl, 1991). Consequently, a lawyer may present evidence as a “public functionary” contrary to the opinion of

the child welfare worker because they deem it necessary for the judge to review. In other words, no relevant evidence should be suppressed in order to “win” the case (Bala, Hornick & Vogl, 1991). Child welfare workers are then discouraged from challenging the legal direction adopted by a lawyer within a system that is upheld as “sacred” and law-driven, despite the fact that lawyers may and do get involved in case planning that supports unrealistic service goals.

With the combined effects of constraints imposed by paperwork, pressure from lawyers and the infiltration of a legal framework, child welfare workers have resorted to a regimental modality. Rapport has been sacrificed for administrative results. Rather than visiting with the child and family in their home, demands for action and the monitoring of behavior are secured in the most expedient manner.

Who Speaks For The Child In Court?

The role of counsel for a child has evolved with little guidance from the government policies (Bala, Hornick and Vogl, 1991). Generally speaking, courts almost always appoint representation for a child, particularly when requested by the agency or parents. Whether the child’s lawyer serves as an advocate, a “guardian”, investigating the best interests of the child, or a “friend-of-the-court”, assisting the court in its consideration of the best interests of the child, they assume a powerful position of the spokesperson for the child (Bala, Hornick and Vogl, 1991). Most children are relatively wary and fearful of court for the obvious reasons of the emotional stress experienced and pressures inflicted on them, sometimes in the form of family reprisal (Saywitz and Goodman, 1996). What of the children whose names are never mentioned in court? O’Donnell (1992) points out the propensity of the child welfare system to ignore children who are not represented in litigation and their subsequent vulnerability in receiving less service attention.

There are many situations in which the role of court is critical to the protection of children in face of criminal charges of parental neglect and abuse. In this area, the legal system has become caught in a double bind. On the one hand, children are often the only witness to the alleged crime and therefore must testify on behalf of themselves, and on the other hand, are easily discredited in court (White, 1998). Oftentimes, the court is then failing to achieve justice even in cases where criminal charges are pending; and in matters of civil concern, interpersonal conflict and tension between children and their families may be heightened rather than reduced by virtue of the dichotomous nature of litigious resolution.

Parents On Trial

Simply put, once a parent appears in court on a child welfare matter, the “odds” are against them. There is an underlying assumption by the court that if a protection agency has become involved with the family it must be for a good reason (Bala, Hornick & Vogl, 1991). The parent most likely

to be seen in court has a profile of being poor, female and a visible minority—amongst the most marginalized of social groups. Discriminatory class, gender and racial dynamics contribute to a systemically biased judgment of many parents, even before they enter the court. Many of these families do not have the personal resources to fully satisfy their court order as they often experience overwhelming obstacles associated with poverty.

Justice Defined As Prevention

While the presence of the court in child welfare has been gaining in momentum, efforts in the area of prevention have been waning. It is only when the child is in crisis and in “the system” that resources become available (Savoury and Kufeldt, 1997). It is confounding that failure, rather than prevention, predominates as the seminal tenant governing the child welfare system. Whether court represents the end or beginning of the struggle to “rehabilitate” a family, without resources to address emotional obstacles and financial limitations, the judge’s findings are served out of context. As Blome (1996) concluded, parents become the scapegoats for structural flaws, lack of funding and government commitment. Even further, parents become victims of corporate greed in the form of consumerism. Justice for children can never be achieved when the real “crimes”, poverty and social disadvantage perpetuated by consumer culture continue to prevail. Accountability for the protection of children must be acknowledged and assumed at the level at which the real injustice is occurring—corporate-driven consumerism.

Endpoint—Social Change

Social change, along with change in general, is constant. Our current social structure dominated by consumerism will change to something quite different, in time. The ways and means of that change—quickly, slowly, violently, peacefully, completely or partially—is something we should all take time to consider. It is within this broad consideration that some direction or positive action may occur. History, which is the study of change, will look back at this period of consumerism with fascination, at the very least. We can only speculate at what the eventual judgment will be, of the “age of corporate consumerism”, and the treatment of children in our care.

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Appendix A – Interview Questions

Consumerism—Corporate power sustained within a neoliberal economic structure (i.e. Ontario) that persuades the consumption of products through manipulation and control of all forms of media. Consumerism also incorporates the notion that happiness is directly linked to the consumption and use of specific products, and, specific modes of behaviour.

Consumerism

How has consumerism negatively affected children’s behaviour in the following three areas:

- Academic performance?
- Social skills?
- Behaviour?

Evidence is mounting that North American children appear to be under greater stress as seen in the increase in the use of behaviour control drugs such as Ritalin. Do you see a connection between this rise and the increase in consumerism?

Do children perceive themselves as consumers?

Are there gender differences in children’s responses to increases in consumerism?

Children’s Culture

How have children’s play behaviours changed?

As a result of consumerism and media influence do you think the culture of childhood has been negatively influenced?

In what ways are schools training children as consumers?

In what ways has the academic curriculum changed and what are the effects on children?

Media - Television

How do television programs and video movies negatively influence children’s behaviour, academic, and social behaviour?

How does direct TV advertising to children negatively influence children’s academic, social and overall behaviour?

How does adult Television viewed by children negatively influence them?

Children average 3 hours of television viewing per day: How has this negatively impacted children's academic, social and behaviour skills.

What is the single most negative effect of advertising to children?

Media - Advertising

Toys, cereal, candy and fast food restaurants make up 80% of TV advertisements: How has this negatively impacted children's academic, social and behaviour skills?

Media - Digital / Technology

How have the use of computers and other digital/electronic media (computer games and teaching software, video/computer games, walkman, electronic toys etc.) in schools, and at home impacted academic, social and behaviour skills?

Media - General

What part do you think advertising in general has played—meaning all forms i.e. billboards, electronic media, adult TV, magazines, public space advertising etc.—in children's attitudes?

In what way does media exposure influence children's behaviours?

Do you believe there is a link between aggressive behaviour and media exposure? Please elaborate...

General

Have you observed any broad change in any area of children's skills since becoming a teacher?

What, if any, changes in children's overall behaviour have you seen in your career?

What/who do you think is also responsible for changes in children's behaviour?

