

This Little Kiddy Went To Market: The Corporate Capture of Childhood

Sharon Beder, with Wendy Varney and Richard Gosden (2009).

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Twentieth-century psychologist Erich Fromm is perhaps best remembered for his criticism of modern consumer culture and his notion of the ‘marketing character’, representing those persons whose personal identity and sense of worth is determined not by any innate qualities but rather by the conspicuous possessions they own.¹ Fromm argued that this type of character orientation — and the market-driven society that actively encouraged it — was rather unlikely to be psychologically healthy or happy. Given the global spread of consumerist aspirations, it is hardly surprisingly that in recent decades researchers such as this reviewer and a score of others around the globe have empirically evaluated these criticisms of materialistic ambitions. However, for various reasons, much of this research and associated discussion has focussed on adult populations. With this in mind — and in true marketing speak *This Little Kiddy Went To Market* seeks to examine the effects of the corporate marketing machine on a consumer demographic that, in the public arena at least, has to date been largely uncharted: children.

Beder argues that children today in more affluent, consumer-driven nations somewhat ironically also present as being less psychologically healthy than those from earlier generations. For example, a UNICEF study looking at children’s wellbeing found that children in the United States and the United Kingdom fared more poorly than those from any other (affluent) nation in the study. Of particular concern were their relationships with peers and family. Perhaps not surprising then, suicide rates in the United States are the third highest cause of death for those aged between 10 and 24, while childhood depression is escalating in the United Kingdom. Australia is not left out here either: Beder cites statistics demonstrating the marked increase in suicide rates for Australian teens in recent decades. This message rings a bell for this reviewer — over five decades ago, Fromm made a similar assessment of (his) contempo-

rary society, arguing that some of the most prosperous nations also evidenced alarmingly high rates of suicide and homicide.²

The question, of course, is why has this occurred? Given the title of the book, it will come as no surprise that Beder places the blame squarely at the door of ‘corporate interference in children’s lives and psyches’ (p. 3). Beder initially cites the usual advertising and marketing influences that first come to mind for most, but this is later expanded upon to include the corporate invasion of schools, as well as the pathologising of what might be considered by some normal reactions by children and adolescents to what psychologists such as Fromm would deem less than healthy social contexts. At this point, though, it is perhaps best to address the next question that some potential readers might ask after reading even the book’s back cover: is there any compelling evidence for these claims? After all, it is one thing to perhaps cherry pick or frame any number of negative scenarios, but is modern consumer life really that bad? After all, surely everyone places children’s interests first?

First, let’s address the issue of psychological health and wellbeing as examined in this reviewer’s own consumerist studies of adults in Australia (and published in previous editions of journals such as this one). While marketers might have us believe that owning the latest conspicuous goods would likely be equated with happiness, research shows that materialistic aspirations are instead associated with depression, feelings of anger, and lower levels of life satisfaction, for example. A simple reason for this might be that in a constantly changing marketplace, where today’s ‘new’ is tomorrow’s ‘old’, for those people whose sense of worth and identity is based on what they own, then the unfortunate reality is that someone else will always have more, and moreover the ‘things’ you do own will often not hold their value for long. Trying to keep up with this consumer treadmill is likely then to induce feelings of helplessness and hope-

lessness — which underlie depression — in those persons as they continually strive to maintain status in the face of changing market trends. Trying to keep up with the Jones' may also lead to frustration, which is a precursor to anger.

Imagine, then, what effect marketing messages might have on children's minds, especially given the above references to incidences of depression and suicide. Beder notes that in contrast to previous generations, the majority of messages received by today's children are about selling, with the objective of producing conditioned, lifelong consumers. It is hardly a stretch to suggest that advertising jingles have become the nursery rhymes of the modern consumer age, providing a very shallow social and historical perspective for malleable young minds. According to Beder, children in Australia are likely to be exposed to some 30,000 television advertisements each year, and this is before other potential sources of advertising are added in, such as the internet and wireless technologies including mobile phones, Facebook, texting, and so on.

In this new age of commercial media saturation, Beder raises the obvious question of how children — especially those between the ages of two and five — can be expected to discriminate between what is consumption-oriented marketing and what actually represents the 'real' historical and social world they live in. After all, even many adults have difficulty discerning the two. It is important to consider here that a sophisticated armoury of persuasion techniques is being deployed against a demographic that, for the most part, is simply incapable of deciphering the true intent of the messages they receive. For example, Beder cites findings of the US Surgeon General asserting that children under eight cannot understand persuasive messages, and further that about half of these children cannot discriminate between advertisements and regular television programming.

Using similar techniques to those deployed against adults further strengthens the persuasive effects of advertising on children. These include using sporting role models and other celebrities to evoke a trust in authority; exploiting the undeveloped perceptual abilities of children by making products seem larger than they actually are (just as a box of breakfast oats intended for adults might be largely empty space); using the 'misdirection' of 'free' toys to redirect attention away from the actual product for sale, and using 'jargon and complex language to take advantage of a child's limited vocabulary' (p. 14).

In turn, these techniques are often intended to produce that most potent form of adult persuasion: a child's persistent nagging, also known as 'pester power'. The marketing messages, bright, cheerful, and tailor-made for toddlers riding at waist height in shopping trolleys, can be compellingly seductive for young minds on the lookout for fresh stimuli. Beder cites advertising

consultancies whose primary focus is not just selling products to children, but selling to adults *through* children. Manufacturers are advised to include images on their packaging showing children riding in carts, pointing at products, with the aim that those children be conditioned to make a connection with their products, followed by the desired behaviour to alert parents. Another technique is to use wrapping and adverts providing 'pre-packaged' arguments favouring a purchase decision: while this aims to do the thinking for both young and older consumers alike, it amounts to an open and outright deception of young minds lacking the cynicism, critical apparatus, and mental acumen one might generally expect of adults.

Furthermore, Beder notes that these influences are becoming harder to avoid, no matter how hard parents might try: 'Westfield shopping centres in Australia have installed screens on their rides that show children's television shows interspersed with advertisements' (p. 12), while store configurations in supermarkets have changed, placing biscuits and crackers directly opposite baby food, for example. This leads to another issue raised by Beder — the promotion of food for pleasure rather than for physiological health and sustenance. There is little doubt that such advertising messages are intended to form lifelong cognitive patterns and behavioural repertoires. However, given reports of increasing juvenile obesity in developed countries such as Australia, it is only reasonable that Beder question the ethics of these promotions. The same concerns are levelled at another issue that has been the subject for lively debate in Australia in recent times: that of under-age drinkers and 'alcopop' consumption. As Beder notes, numerous studies have found a link between exposure to televised alcohol advertisements and the likelihood of subsequent increased consumption by minors. Further, the sugar content of alcopops is likely to facilitate the transition from sugared soft drinks to alcoholic beverages.

Beder's discussion of the corporate incursion into school education is particularly sobering. For example, companies have the opportunity to promote their wares in schools via intermediary marketing concerns that blend brand information into neatly packaged, product-related, educational materials.³ This approach can be viewed as only a slightly more subtle, more sophisticated example of what already might appear on cereal boxes and the like, where in this case a 'problem' or 'issue' (such as personal hygiene) is accompanied by information — the 'solution' — that is for all intents and purposes linked to a manufacturer's product endorsement and expectation of a sale (in this case, say specific skin care products). Beder posits that government funding cuts to schooling in many English-speaking nations (including New Zealand and Australia) has facilitated this alliance between education and corporations. It is not surprising then that the corporate intrusion into

education extends into what are termed 'pouring rites', where food and beverage companies offer equipment and scholarships in exchange for exclusive rights to install their own vending machines and the like.

Given the effect of government funding restrictions, is it any wonder that teachers might feel it convenient (or even be instructed) to make use of 'free and unsolicited curriculum material from public relations firms, corporations, and industry associations' (p. 63)? Of course, this material is unlikely to be free of specific target product placement information, whether it is an exercise calling for children to determine how long it would take them to save enough from their allowances to buy a particular brand of sport shoe, or using the diameter of a well-known cookie when working fractions. At its worst, it can amount to purely self-serving, one-sided, corporate propaganda, even if a specific corporation's name does not appear on the materials. For example, aside from extolling the virtues of their own products/services (and perhaps being written by PR staff rather than appropriate scientists), corporate-driven educational packages may also seek to downplay any social or environmental impact that might usually be associated with them.

As a result, Beder argues that schools are no longer simply in the business of education, but fast becoming business institutions in their own right, with governance more akin to traditional corporate boardrooms with directors who might have little or no educational experience. This raises the further question of what sort of 'products' might such institutions aim to produce? According to Beder, an insight into this is provided by the widespread adoption of standardised testing, which is:

... very good for testing the sort of knowledge that can be drilled into students, rather than real learning. Because testing is most efficient and cost-effective when it requires short answers or multiple choice questions that are easily scored, the sort of knowledge it tests tends to be memory-based, or a contrived exercise in logic. (p. 91)

Such tests, with an emphasis on speed, are argued to be limited in that they cannot assess students' ability to think creatively or apply knowledge in ways beyond the limited scope of the answers provided. While some psychologists might object to this critique, the point remains that the aim of such testing is to evaluate who can produce the *right* answers (and how quickly), rather than *how* answers might be arrived at. After all, in day-to-day living, school graduates are rarely given a set of fixed responses to choose from, although marketers might wish that were in fact the case! Indeed, Beder maintains that there has been a systematic 'dumbing down' of education and a narrowing of the curriculum, with the aim of producing a class of compliant, conforming,⁴ incurious worker/consumers drilled in sterile 'facts' as well as the virtues of teamwork. Although this view is reminiscent of certain modern works of dystopic fiction (and echoes John Taylor Gatto's *The Underground*

History of American Education), when considered in light of Beder's thorough and comprehensive research, the previously mentioned concern that her thesis might be based on a cherry-picking of selected negative scenarios is increasingly difficult to sustain, and instead, a distinct and disturbing pattern emerges.

There is one other market that children have been targeted for that might concern some psychologists. In chapter 15, 'Controlling Wayward Children', contributor Richard Gosden writes of the pathologising of what some might consider to be normal behaviour and thoughts for children, given the social and educational contexts they find themselves in. Gosden suggests that the 'routine deception and manipulation of children and adolescents by corporate advertising, and the pressuring of children in an increasingly competitive schooling system' (p. 205) might have adverse reactions on those more sensitive. Given Fromm's concerns regarding the health of a market-driven society and the empirical research results noted above for adult populations, Gosden's premise may well have some substance, especially considering that a convincing argument has already been established by Beder that there may be a changing focus in modern schooling on building 'market share' rather than broadening the education or critical faculties of children.

However, Gosden goes a step further and asserts that 'It doesn't matter what type of reaction it is: whether it involves others or whether it's just a personal escape or misery, there is a psychiatric label and a very profitable drug treatment waiting for those who are discovered.' (p. 205). Thus, it is claimed that the marketing, profit-driven cycle has come full circle, with another ready solution to the problem. Regardless, there are abundant references available noting — and sometimes questioning the legitimacy of — the increasing incidence in recent years of children and adolescents diagnosed as requiring pharmacological intervention for attention deficit and disruptive behaviour disorders, for example. Indeed, psychologists might take pause here and give thought to exactly how diagnostic categories are actually arrived at for use in their standard professional clinical manuals, and further, the degree to which those same categories might be open to subjective interpretation. While assertions that such interventions might be more helpful in maintaining order in overcrowded and less than stimulating classrooms could be deemed outright cynical, (actual cases of mental distress notwithstanding) by and large, contemporary perspectives of mental health often equate to adjustment to society and acceptance by peers, and hence are arguably subjective estimates of conformity, as opposed to expressions of individuality.

In summation, in recent decades children have become a new focus for corporate marketing in all its forms, and it is not difficult to argue that the emphasis is

on producing avid consumers, not happy, well-adjusted children. Unfortunately, those same obedient consumers are less likely to develop into the independent, critical thinking adults that future healthy, sustainable generations will depend on. *This Little Kiddy Went To Market* is a must-read for parents, psychologists, and those who wish to be more informed about the modern corporate marketing agenda and its implications for our present and future. The book is relevant not just for Australia and other 'first world' nations, but also for 'developing' countries, as the very term 'develop' usually appears in the same breath as rising consumerism. Indeed, after reading *This Little Kiddy Went To Market*, those terms might be viewed somewhat differently by some. Finally, psychologists cannot ignore the ethical implications of

their talents being used to help produce the world of compliant, conforming, 'adult-children' consumers that is intimated in *This Little Kiddy Went To Market*.

Endnotes

- 1 See Fromm, E., (1955). *The sane society*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.
- 2 Interested readers might take the time to compare (combined) suicide and homicide rates with standard of living indices in corresponding OECD nations, as this reviewer did in his PhD 10 years ago.
- 3 It also brings to mind the 'pre-packaged' news segments that are widely distributed among media outlets.
- 4 Note that conformity is a cornerstone of Erich Fromm's (1955) 'marketing character'.