Special Session Summary  Kids, Causes, and Culture: Expansion of Commodities and Consumers in the 1990s

Daniel Thomas Cook, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

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**SUMMARY**

The papers in this panel explored three distinct arenas of social life that have encountered new and intensive forms of marketization in the 1990s. Daniel Thomas Cook investigated the new and contradictory notions of the “child consumer” that have come to occupy an increasingly central place in marketing discourse and practice. Cook detailed the schizoid character of the new child consumer through an analysis of market research reports and trade literature of several children’s industries. He discussed how the discursive transformation of children’s consumer identity made the boom in the kids’ market morally palatable and thus economically viable.

Inger Stole examined the proliferation of cause-related marketing, questioning whether the altruism behind such efforts is helped or hindered when subordinated to the ultimate goal of branding. Teasing out the differing public relations functions behind cause-related efforts, in particular that of American Express, Stole argued that this new marketing initiative serves to displace other, more effective and direct forms of philanthropy. Blurring the boundaries between consumption and charity may reinforce the corporate sponsor’s image at the expense of the groups in need of help.

Douglas Holt and David Crockett focused in the commodification of poor black urban neighborhoods, euphemistically termed “urban culture.” They delineated the idea of “strategic racialization” as the use of race to reference potent cultural sites used to add brand value. Pinpointing the rise of this phenomenon to late 1980s, Holt and Crockett gave a close reading of the of racialized branding in Mountain Dew television commercials. The authors noted the particular challenges facing marketers in articulating racialized value to such brands in a credible manner.

Panel discussion leader, Linda Scott, noted how all the papers took what seemed to be unconnected associations, images and practices and turned them on their head exposing unseen dimensions of ideology and meaning. She also remarked on the highly contextual nature of these investigations, calling for more research and thinking which makes use of social and political context in the investigation of consumption and consumer behavior.

"The Gift that Keeps on Giving: Cause-Related Marketing in the 1990s"

**Inger L. Stole, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign**

By most accounts, the coveted prize as “innovator” of cause-related marketing (CRM) goes to American Express. In 1983, the credit card company launched its frequently cited campaign to help restore the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. The company promised to contribute 1 cent for every card transaction and $1 for every new card issued during the last quarter of 1983 to the cause. While the restoration effort, which collected $1.7 million, was the immediate beneficiary, the 28 percent increase in use of American Express cards showed the financial institution to benefit as well (Andreasen, 1996; Weeden, 1996). The newly minted strategy was not lost on others, and by the early 1990s U.S. businesses were plunging into cause-related marketing on a grand scale. Between 1990 and 1998 the amount spent on such efforts rose from $125 million to over half a billion dollars annually (Bishoff, 2000/2001). By 1999, American businesses were spending $630 million on cause-related marketing (“Good deeds,” 1999).

What, exactly, is cause-related marketing? How did it develop and how does it differ from previous forms of corporate philanthropy? Who benefits from cause-related marketing? What are some of its advantages and what are some if its problems or shortcomings? Drawing on secondary literature, the study utilizes historical, economic and sociological frameworks to answer these questions. It traces the roots of cause-related marketing to the rise of corporate public relations in the early the 20th century (Marchand, 1987; Marchand, 1998; Ewen 1996) and teases out similarities between early forms of public relations, which rose in response to a corporate need to connect with publics beyond the mere point of purchases and service, and cause-related marketing of today. Having established a historical context for cause-related marketing, the study positions the phenomenon within the larger framework of what is commonly referred to as “strategic philanthropy” and explore how cause related marketing distinguish itself from its other forms. It also provide an overview of the techniques and strategies most commonly used in cause-related marketing campaigns.

Departing from recent studies concerning the effect of cause-related marketing on company sales and image (Barone, Miyazaki and Taylor, 2000; Till and Nowak, 2000; Bronn and Vrioni, 2001; Welsh, 1999, Webb and Mohr, 1998; Mizerski, Mizerski and Sadler, 2001), the study explores the broader, and more political ramifications, behind this marketing strategy. While cause-related marketing, at least at first glance, appear to be a perfect solution for financially strapped non-profit groups and large corporations alike, it also raises some important questions. What, for example, are the criteria used by business to determine issues that warrant cause-related attention? Do some social causes lend themselves more easily to cause-related marketing ventures than others? And what are some of the larger ramifications of trying to solve social problems through acts of consumption (Andreasen, 1996; Andreasen, 2001; Hutton, 2001; King, 2001; Polonsky and Wood, 2001; Pringle and Thompson, 2001; Pringles, 2002)?

**References**


“Contradictions and Conundrums of the Child Consumer: The Emergent Centrality of an Enigma in the 1990s”

Daniel Thomas Cook University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

The child consumer today appears as a contested figure on the public landscape of consumption. It stands both for corporate exploitation and individual autonomy. It’s appetite for apparently all things commercial has been seen, on one hand, as evidence of over-indulgence on the part of parents and relatives and, on the other, as the child’s active partaking in the deserved pleasures of childhood (and, to a less explicit degree, of consumer capitalism).

Since the late 1980s, the child-market has exploded. James McNeal 1999) estimated that children’s direct and indirect (i.e., influence) purchases tripled during the 1990s accounting for perhaps $30 billion in annual sales toward the end of the decade in the US alone. During this time, market forces have made inroads into children’s lives new ways. With the advent of school-based television network, Channel One, now in use in about 12,000 classrooms, many children experience commercials as a routine and unremarkable part of their daily lessons. In the 1990s, new licensing agreements, tie-in promotions and cross-branding of merchandise made logos and media characters ubiquitous and have worked to interweave previously disparate products—from fast food to film, from clothing to television shows, from action figures to greeting cards—into a single promotional mix. In addition, new child-targeted media like cable stations and the internet together with special sections of newspapers, new magazines, radio programs and stations have combined to increasingly delineate, and thereby deliver, “children” as a market.

Monetary measures and commercial innovation offer only a surface glimpse at deeper developments in the kids’ market generally, and in social understanding of “the child” more specifically. Underlying and supporting the growth in the children’s market has been an ongoing transformation of a quite fundamental kind—a transformation in the conceptualization of the kind of being a “child” is, particularly as an economic actor, i.e., as a consumer.

Beginning in the 1970s, consumer socialization emerged as the dominant paradigm to understanding the changing contours of children’s involvement in the market sphere over the early life course (John 1999). Consistent with an “ages and stages” template of growth, most consumer socialization research assumes an essentially linear trajectory of child development from less to more knowledgeable, from simple to complex information processors, from unskilled to skilled consumers (see Gunther and Furnham 1998). Since the 1980s, the working model of the “child consumer” informing marketing and advertising practice (but not necessarily the academic research) has gradually discarded a developmental or socialization approach—but not completely—in favor of treating and portraying children as “independent” consumers.

Most generally, the view of “the child” has been moving in the direction of seeing children as increasingly complete beings unto themselves, with pre-existent desires for goods and, importantly, with the socially adjudicated right and wherewithal to request, demand and/or purchase these goods. In short, “the child” has been emergent as more or less a full person, in the social sense, particularly in the realm of consumption (see Cook 2000).

The view of “the child” as autonomous consumer-person is not limited to market perspectives and discourse as evidenced, for instance, by the increasing role children play in family purchasing decisions. Children’s personhood status also cannot be divorced from their ever-intensifying role and posture as consumers. Yet, children’s identity as consumers is fraught with controversies and conundrums.

There has arisen a schizoid image of the child consumer. One the one hand, there is the view of the child as a purposeful economic actor who exhibits competence in information processing and consumer choice. This “child” is favored by those invested in selling to children and parents. Prior to the mid-‘80s, this view took the form of the “sophisticated” or “savvy” child who was portrayed in advertisements and discussed in the trades as a knowing consumer who makes informed choices about goods. By the 1990s, this view began to mutate into a discourse of child “empowerment” whereby “the child”—knowing or not, sophisticated or not—would gain social power through gaining access to specially-designed goods and entertainment. The implication behind this construction was that to deny the child goods was tantamount to disempowering her or him.

This new “child” has clashed with another set of dominant images—those of innocent, vulnerable children—who are subject to all sorts of dangers from the marketplace and beyond. Social critics and watchdog groups like Action for Children’s Television have made their presence felt in the political arena surrounding children and consumption. From this perspective, the tactics used by marketers—such as the media tie-ins, cross-branding and the
active cultivation of “pester power” by some—amounts to the exploitation of unknowing or less than competent consumers.

Drawing upon more than a decade of market research, trade literature and advertising campaigns from a variety of industries focusing on children’s direct and indirect purchasing influence—clothing, toys and food, in particular—this paper offers an interpretive analysis of the recent (1990s+) transformations in the depiction and definition of children as competent, knowledgeable consumers/audience members. In what ways has the transformation of children’s consumer identity made the boom in the kids’ market morally palatable and thus and economically viable?

The discussion offers a perspective which avoids an either/or understanding of the issues and instead focuses on delineating the conceptual conundrums involved in the ongoing battle over which model of the child will govern the place of children in an increasingly marketized world.

References

