



ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

Wait... Was I Supposed to Grow Up? Consumers' Adventures in Wonderland

Mathieu O. Alemany, CERGAM, Aix Marseille University, France

“Consumers’ adventures in Wonderland” reveals the influence of the inner child on behavior. By using a hermeneutic approach, I highlight an aspect of postmodern consumer that has never been studied in consumer research yet and puts forward what we can call “the reign of Homo puer” in consumer society.

[to cite]:

Mathieu O. Alemany (2013) , "Wait... Was I Supposed to Grow Up? Consumers' Adventures in Wonderland", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 41, eds. Simona Botti and Aparna Labroo, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1014520/volumes/v41/NA-41>

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at <http://www.copyright.com/>.

“Wait... Was I Supposed to Grow Up?” Consumers’ Adventures in Wonderland

Mathieu O. Alemany, CERGAM, Aix Marseille University, France

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Nowadays, one can buy colorful cake lollipops, shower gels made of “magical leaves”, to enter a store selling human size LEGO just next to sex toys, and to sleep in hotels offering Batman’s bedroom... all during the same day. Once settled in the comfort of Batman’s couch, television will broadcast wizards’ adventures and super heroes saving the world against aliens or monsters on television. Considering those movies as anthropological mirrors (Kracauer 1966/2004; Morin 1956/2005), one can see an imaginary world underlying consumer society where consumers believe in what we have been taught to be “unbelievable” or out of what scientists and modernists call disenchanting “rationalization” (Weber 1919/2007).

Wonderland in Alice’s Adventures (Carroll 1865/1998) is a place where one has to think differently and forget about logic or natural order of things. Postmodernism is Wonderland and challenges the ideas of rationalization, reality, or truth. As Levy writes (1974/1999, 245), “everywhere yearnings, aspirations, and interpersonal relations are laden with magical, superstitious, mystical, and religious significance, with private imageries, sentiments”. It is possible to attend a posthumous show of the murdered rapper Tupac or to see Thomas Edison presenting a new technology at an auto show. Science is no longer reserved for technical developments, but for illusions and reenchantment. It is a new approach to reality in which consumers can fulfill their need for “extravagant expectations” (Boorstin 1962/1992), so long as they believe all these illusions and accept Wonderland as a *serious* alternative to what modernism called “reality”. Like a child would do.

Consumers can sometimes be seen as children in their way of consuming (Belk 2000). One just has to look at the “Harlem Shake” meme. And if advertising is already tempting consumers to let the inner child out (McDonald’s, Volkswagen, Ford, Mercedes, Subway, Haribo...), consumer research has never really paid attention to this phenomenon.

We conducted unobtrusive observation on the internet. The two objectives were to make sure consumers feel sometimes like children, and to learn what “letting the inner child out” means to them. In order to do so, we selected 7741 comments to three Disney official messages which appeared on Facebook walls: “*What do you do first when arriving at Disneyland?*” (Disneyland Paris), “*When I first walk onto Main Street, U.S.A., I feel...*” (Disneyland California), and “*Why do we have to grow up? Walt Disney*” (Disneyland California). Disney was not suspected of censorship since negative comments appeared on walls.

Based on Geertz (1973), data were interpreted using the iterative process of the hermeneutic circle, that is going permanently back and forth between the whole and the parts (Schleiermacher 1938). By carrying out “a continuous movement between individual transcripts and the emerging understanding of the entire set of textual data [...] Provisional understandings are formed, challenged, revised [...] and gradually developed in relation to a broader set of theoretical concerns” (Thompson 2005, 237).

Findings provide evidence of the “*Homo puer*’s rise”, that is a kind of consumer who is neither an adult nor a child—in a modern sense, neither a completely rationalized mind nor a polymorphously perverse mind. He/she is rather someone using consumption as a gateway to a fantasy world, in a similar way World of Warcraft gamers create and customize their avatars before immersing in a virtual world and role-playing (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2008).

Homo puer is the result of Prometheus’ reign where Dionysus was not allowed: he/she is the adult who has stayed adult for too long, and who sees his/her inner child coming out with an unbounded—and sometimes destructive—energy.

By adopting *Homo puer*’s vision, postmodernism should be considered as “liberatory” (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Consumers act like children do when using transitional objects (Winnicott 1971/1982) or magic to get what they desire (Ferenczi 1955/1994). Consumption appears as a playful tool to customize constructed realities thanks to magic and imaginary. It is now a playground in which technological toys react to us, and allow to customize and expand the worlds—just like they change the nature of reality—according to our desires (Pesce 2000). Consumption has to be seen as a transitional phenomenon to “commute” between the several realities. And play is the key to such commuting.

What makes the *Homo puer* a different consumer is that he/she accepts his/her inner child and cannot live without it anymore. Consumer society relies on play, on illusion, and is “governed by a form of magical thinking” (Baudrillard 1970/1998, 31). Consumption became magical and made consumer society a Wonderland in which only *Homo puer* can have a fulfilling life.

We are far from the idea of an immature consumer who only wants to follow the pleasure principle. *Homo puer* could actually be the future psychological development of individual by representing the “higher and [more] complete man”, and a person born from the maturity of the adult man rather than an unconscious child one would like to remain (Jung 1952/2010, 95).

At a time when the Marketing Science Institute research priorities for 2012-2014 call for insight into people in their roles as consumers, or designing experiences, we consider this paper to bring a new perspective for consumer research and call for further research. It should be seen as an attempt to revise existing knowledge: What if hedonic consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) was one of the consequences of the *Homo puer*’s accession to the throne of consumption? Anthropomorphism (Aaker 1997; Fournier 1998; Kim and McGill 2011), extended self (Ahuvia 2005; Belk 1988), thematization (Firat and Ulusoy 2007; Ritzer 2010), desire (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003; Campbell 1987; Gould 1991), fantasy (Belk and Costa 1998; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Rook 1988), and related topics are all about making our imagination richer. And why make our imagination richer if we are not able to believe in magic and play with this imagination like children do? Consumers are now telling about their adventures in Wonderland, especially online. They are also redefining the status of adult. More than listening to them, we should take part and let our inner child out to really understand what being a consumer is when hyperreality makes consumption the key to endless possibilities and infinite worlds.

REFERENCES

- Aaker, Jennifer (1997), “Dimensions of Brand Personality,” *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34 (3), 347-56.
- Ahuvia, Aron C. (2005), “Beyond the Extended Self: Love Objects and Consumer’s Identity Narratives,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32 (June), 171-84.
- Baudrillard, Jean (1970/1998), *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, London: Sage.
- Belk, Russell W. (1988), “Possessions and the Extended Self,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15 (September), 139-68.

- Belk, Russell W. (2000), "May the Farce be With You: On Las Vegas and Customer Infantilization," *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 4 (2), 101-24.
- Belk, Russell W. and Janeen A. Costa (1998), "The Mountain Man Myth: A Contemporary Consuming Fantasy," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 25 (December), 218-40.
- Belk, Russell W., Güliz Ger, and Søren Askegaard (2003), "The Fire of Desire: A Multisited Inquiry into Consumer Passion," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 30 (September), 326-51.
- Boorstin, Daniel J. (1962/1992), *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, New York, NY: First Vintage Books.
- Campbell, Colin (1987), *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, London: Blackwell.
- Carroll, Lewis (1865/1998), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, London: Penguin Books.
- Ferenczi, Sándor (1955/1994), *First Contributions to Psycho-Analysis*, London: Karnac.
- Firat, A. Fuat, and Ebru Ulusoy (2007), "Living a Theme," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol.35, ed. Angela Y. Lee and Dilip Soman, ACR Film Festival, Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research, 878-9.
- Firat, A. Fuat and Alladi Venkatesh (1995), "Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22 (December), 239-67.
- Fournier, Susan. (1998), "Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 24, 343-73.
- Geertz, Clifford (1973/2000), *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Gould, Stephen J. (1991), "An Asian Approach to the Understanding of Consumer Energy, Drives, and States," in *Research in Consumer Behavior*, Vol. 5, ed. Elizabeth Hirschman and Jagdish N. Sheth, Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 33-59.
- Holbrook, Morris B. and Elizabeth C. Hirschman (1982), "The Experiential Aspects of Consumption: Consumer Fantasies, Feelings, and Fun," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9 (September), 132-40.
- Jung, Carl G. (1952/2010), *Answer to Job*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kim, Sara and Ann L. McGill (2011), "Gaming with Mr. Slot or Gaming the Slot Machine? Power, Anthropomorphism, and Risk Perception," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 38 (June), 94-107.
- Kracauer, Siegfried (1966/2004), *From Caligari to Hitler*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Levy, Sidney J. (1959), "Symbols for Sale," *Harvard Business Review*, 17 (July-August), 117-124.
- Levy, Sidney J. (1974/1999), "Myth and Meaning in Marketing," in *Brands, Consumers, Symbols, and Research. Sidney J. Levy on Marketing*, ed. Dennis W. Rook, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 241-6.
- MacCallum, Esther and Justin Parsler (2008), "Role-play vs. Gameplay: The Difficulties of Playing a Role in World of Warcraft," in *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, ed. Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 225-46.
- Morin, Edgar (1956/2005), *The Cinema, Or The Imaginary Man*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Pesce, Mark D. (2000), *The Playful World: How Technology is Transforming our Imagination*, New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Ritzer, George (2010), *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Continuity and Change in the Cathedrals of Consumption*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Rook, Dennis (1988), "Researching Consumer Fantasy," in *Research in Consumer Behavior*, Vol. 3, ed. Elizabeth C. Hirschman and Jagdish N. Sheth, Greenwich, CT: JAI, 247-270.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich (1938/1998), *Hermeneutics and Criticism, And Other Writings*, ed. Andrew Bowie, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thompson, Craig J. (2005), "Consumer risk perceptions in a community of reflexive doubt," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32 (September), 235-48.
- Weber, Max (1919/2007), "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, New York, NY: Routledge, 129-57.
- Winnicott, Donald W. (1971/1982), *Playing and Reality*, London: Routledge.