CHILDREN’S ENROLMENT IN ONLINE CONSUMER CULTURE

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Introduction

Contemporary Western society has become a mediatised world (Deuze, 2012; Hepp & Krotz, 2014) in which culture, lives, relationships, and social activities are affected by digital processes (Lindgren, 2017). Digital media have also become a big part of children’s culture and everyday lives (Giddings, 2014). Statistical reports show how Swedish children’s daily internet use is increasing, with toddlers as young as one year old participating online. Playing digital games, watching video clips on YouTube, socialising with friends, and using the internet for schoolwork are the most common activities that children engage in online (Davidsson et al., 2018; Livingstone et al., 2014). Children’s digital media practices and commercial culture are also intimately intertwined. Television programmes, films, computer games, and apps are linked to merchandising and advertising. Micro-celebrities, like influencers and YouTubers who are popular among children, are monetised by integrating advertorials and product promotions into their social media posts. Companies operate across many media platforms and markets, and success is measured by visibility in a range of media (Buckingham, 2011, p. 88). This assemblage of characters, programmes, advertising, video clips, food, toys, and clothing is fuzzy and creates a complicated media ecosystem of transmedia worlds in which it can be difficult to distinguish between the role of a consumer and the role of a viewer (Cook, 2009; Giddings, 2014).

Commodification refers to the process by which goods and services become exchangeable items, called commodities (Nutter Smith, 2015). Bauman (2007) argued that, in this society of consumers, commodification has incorporated all the domains of social life, and individuals are connected to the social world primarily by their capacity as consumers. He wrote, “To consume ... means to invest in one’s own social membership, which in a society of consumers translates as ‘saleability’: obtaining qualities for which there is already a market demand” (Bauman, 2007, p. 56). In this theory, people are both promoters of commodities and commodities themselves. Being a consumer and engaging in consumption is, therefore, something from which neither children nor adults can choose to abstain (Cook, 2013, p. 425).

Children unfold as persons in and through a consumer society, but they have been almost invisible in theories on the subject, and their role in consumer society is still unclear (Buckingham, 2011; Cook, 2009; Pugh, 2011). Discussions about children and consumption have long been characterised by moral panic and a dichotomised image of the child consumer as either naïve and in need of protection from a strong market or as a competent actor – a battle that has
existed in the study of media consumption as well (Buckingham, 2011; Cook, 2009; Sparrman & Sandin, 2012). According to Cook (2013), this type of social debate has less to do with consumption and more to do with the different ways of interpreting, understanding, and defining children and childhood.

This chapter focuses on children’s perspectives on commodification in their online activities and their enrolment in digital consumer culture. The chapter draws on consumer culture research and the concept of situated child consumption. Consumption is here regarded as a social and cultural practice, “inevitably embedded within everyday life and interpersonal relationships, and in wider social and cultural processes” (Buckingham, 2011, p. 37). Sparrman and Sandin (2012, p. 11) use the concept to emphasise the mixture of different practices, contexts, and social processes to which consumption (and media use) is always bound. In line with Cook (2010), the focus is on how children’s knowledge of consumption is used in everyday practice.

**Literature Review**

Much of the work on the commodification of children’s online activities has been conducted in relation to advertising in mobile or computer-based digital games. Many of these studies have used quantitative or experimental methods, focussing on advertising effects and advertising literacy. The primary assumption is that children are generally more vulnerable than adults to the effects of advertising (e.g., Rozendaal et al., 2011; van Reijmersdal et al., 2012). Studies have also investigated children’s understanding of advertising and brand placement in social games and their desire for the brands and items advertised in those games (Rozendaal et al., 2013). Martínez (2019) wrote that few studies have focussed on the child’s perspective on and engagement with advertising (see, for example, Marsh, 2014). Drawing on group interviews with 9- and 12-year-old children, Martínez (2019) analysed how children view and engage with advertising in free-to-play mobile games and what consequences this has for children’s gaming. The study asserted that playing free-to-play mobile games with in-app advertising is demanding for children and takes the form of a struggle. During game play, advertising interrupts moments of achievement, engagement, and pleasure, leading to a sense of resignation in the child. However, the study also showed how advertising-based revenue models make it possible for children to easily explore and play many different games in the first place (Martínez, 2019, p. 32; c.f., Marsh, 2010).

Willett (2018) explored children’s media literacy with a focus on commercial online game industries and related marketing, showing children are actively involved in cultures of consumption. Using a sociocultural approach, the study illustrated how a child’s understanding of the gaming industry is influenced by the individual’s surrounding context. According to Willett (2018), children who invest more in gaming, both in terms of time and money, demonstrated a larger awareness of the ownership of gaming companies and revenue generation.

Several previous studies have documented the role of consumption in online virtual worlds developed for children and how consumer ideologies are embedded in these sites (e.g., Lehdonvirta et al., 2009; Ruckenstein, 2011). For example, Wasko (2010) showed how online virtual worlds are a growing business area and a foundation for capitalist consumer culture. Focussing on textual analysis of the sites Neopets and Webkinz, she identified an ideology that encourages and educates children about the culture of consumption. Marsh (2010) explored children’s play in the online virtual worlds of Club Penguin and Barbie Girls. She showed how children use gaming sites to experiment with identity and to share social networks with peers and how boundaries between online play and offline play are challenged. However, the study also demonstrated how children relate to consumption in online worlds and how it becomes a part of their play. In a later study on children’s literacy practices in Club Penguin, Marsh (2011) stressed the need to explore further
the complex relationship between childhood and the commercial world and to develop strategies for children’s critical engagement.

Another area of concern related to commodifying children’s online activities is YouTube. Some research has concerned the ethical implications that arise from the commercialisation of children’s media and how children’s digital footprints on sites such as YouTube are shared with companies for analytics and advertising (e.g., Montgomery et al., 2017; Smith & Shade, 2018). Other studies have focussed on how YouTubers and micro-celebrities construct themselves and their relationships to the viewer (e.g., Abidin, 2017; Hou, 2019; Lovelock, 2017). Martínez and Olsson (2019) explored how children make sense of YouTubers as a phenomenon by analysing how a group of 9- to 12-year-old children constructed and negotiated with a YouTuber called Misslissibell from a tutorial video. The results demonstrated how the children made sense of Misslissibell in different ways, irrespective of age and gender. Some of the children demonstrated a critical view, talking about the video as advertising and the selling of brands, while others saw her tutorial video mainly as tips and informal learning. Using an ethnographic approach, Marsh (2016) followed a four-year-old boy and documented the phenomenon of unboxing videos – unpacking of commercial products – on YouTube. The boy found great pleasure in watching these videos and was not interested in purchasing the products, so it was argued that he took the position of a cyberflâneur, or one who wanders the internet without purpose. Marsh (2016) conceptualised children’s interest in YouTube – and in other online streaming platforms – as a growing peer-to-peer industry.

Methodology

The chapter draws on data from two different projects that focussed on sibling interaction and children’s everyday media practices in their homes. The larger project was a six-month media ethnography of Swedish family life (Ågren, 2015) focussing on people’s use of media rather than on the medium itself (Couldry, 2012). The aim was to examine how media both act as a resource for children’s play and shape it, and to investigate the significance of consumption in young children’s media use. The project included observations made by the participants with a video camera, as well as field notes and interviews, from six families in their homes. In total, the video recordings involved about 80 hours of videos from 14 children (eight boys and six girls) aged between four and nine years. The material was collected between December 2010 and December 2011 (Ågren, 2015). The smaller project investigated Swedish children’s experiences of the Pokémon phenomenon. For one month in 2016, observations and interviews with three sibling pairs (six children, aged four to nine) and their parents were conducted. The children and parents were followed outdoors in playgrounds and public spaces by the researcher while they played Pokémon GO, and observations and interviews related to the game took place indoors.

In both studies, families were recruited through snowball selection (Bernard, 2006). Two key informants listed other families they knew as friends and through workplaces. Ethical research considerations are of central importance in research involving children (Alderson, 2005; Farrell, 2005), and the projects were conducted in accordance with the Swedish Research Council (2011) guidelines for good research practice. The participants were informed of the study’s aim, the different data collection methods, the ways in which the data would be handled, and that their personal details would be anonymised. In most research parents give permission for their children to be involved in a given project, and children are then invited to contribute to the research process without further discussions of consent (Danby & Farrell, 2005). In these studies, special attention was given to informing children about the study and to getting informed consent directly from them as well, rather than from their parents only. The participants themselves chose their pseudonyms.
Both sibling interactions and interviews were transcribed in some detail to capture participants’ own perspectives on specific media phenomena. Excerpts illuminate the commodification of children’s online activities. The analysis was based on social interaction and meaning-making processes that took place with local media activities, but also extended to a broader societal context to show how social structure and social action are constantly interwoven in children’s lives. The analysis is presented through three different themes: consumer culture in and outside virtual worlds, children using advertising principles, and making sense of a digital commercial lifestyle.

**Consumer Culture In and Outside of Virtual Worlds**

This section discusses the meaning of consumer culture for children engaged in moderated virtual worlds. In this type of gaming site many users participate simultaneously, everything is happening in real time, and the world is permanent, regardless of whether the user is currently participating. There is a range of different virtual worlds, but Marsh (2014, p. 181) highlighted two features as central for sites aimed at children: the user creates an avatar – an online representation of the self – and locates that avatar in the home environment, be it an igloo, a treehouse, or something else; this avatar is then able to socialise with other avatars, primarily through online chatting or by meeting them in online games.

This chapter focuses on the virtual worlds of *Club Penguin*, owned by Disney, and *Club Panfu*, owned by Goodbeans. The excerpt presented comes from the larger study in which several children spent time on gaming sites (Ågren, 2015). Such sites are free-to-play, but the possibilities for interaction in the virtual world are limited: to get access to all functions, the players of both *Club Panfu* and *Club Penguin* need to be paying members. With membership, the player gets extra benefits, such as game money, special clothes, or access to areas of the virtual world that are not accessible to non-paying players. Membership can be paid monthly or yearly or can be a lifelong commitment. These sites claim to be advertising-free, but the non-paying members see advertising regarding the advantages of membership, such as the possibility of doing more things on the site, being able buy clothing or things for your avatar, visiting special places, or playing special games.

The desire for and importance of getting a membership was something that was clearly communicated by the children, both within the relationship between siblings and in their conversations with parents. The children demonstrated the affordability of membership, the increase in the interaction possibilities, and how membership was, in itself, a marker of a certain status, since some goods, pets, or clothes were available for purchase by members only (c.f., Marsh, 2010, 2011). The children also presented the frequency with which advertising occurred as an argument for the parents to invest in membership. None of the children reflected on the fact that the sites could have an underlying commercial ideology (c.f., Willett, 2018). Matilda (age 8), for example, received a lifelong ‘Gold’ membership at *Club Panfu* after pestering her parents for a long time. She said:

I can buy everything; I can do whatever I like. If you are not a Gold member ... well, then you cannot buy clothes or furniture and so on. Not everyone has the things my Panda does, and they think it is cool. That is fun of course. You feel a bit special when you can do whatever you like ... it is fun to be able to be whatever I want to be.

Featherstone (1994) argued that contemporary consumption culture is characterised by increasing options when it comes to choosing and displaying lifestyle. This is in line with *Club Penguin*’s special section for parents, which suggests that children would prefer a paid membership to have the opportunity “to explore exactly who they want to be”. Matilda also illuminated how her
Gold membership gives her a social position both inside and outside the game. Her peers talk about the things and clothes that her Panda-avatar has, both in school and in the virtual world.

Similar findings came from another family in which the oldest brother, Melvin (age nine), was the only one who had a membership. He was, like Matilda, a Gold member of Club Panfu. His sister, Susann (age eight), had quite recently joined the virtual world. With his Gold membership, Melvin could buy clothes and furnishings reserved for members only. When the siblings were playing together, it was common for Melvin to use the virtual commodities and the number of friends he had to tease his sister and position himself higher.

It should be emphasised that the children in the study mainly mentioned the fun parts of the virtual worlds, such as the shared community with their friends and siblings and the challenging and exciting games (c.f., Marsh, 2011, 2014). However, the results demonstrate how they all expressed an awareness that the conditions in the gaming sites differ depending on whether or not one has a membership. Pugh (2011) held that access to consumer culture has become central to gaining acceptance and social belonging in children’s peer groups. In her research she demonstrated how children use a form of facework: different strategies to avoid exclusion and to negotiate status and popularity. The virtual commodities in the game work similarly to material assets in social relations, indicating distinction and status between the players and making the owner of a membership exclusive and selected (c.f., Lehdonvirta et al., 2009; Wasko, 2010).

Children Using Advertising Principles

The next section presents examples of how children use advertising principles as a way of negotiating in their play and relationships. Data was analysed from the smaller project. During the summer of 2016, the phenomenon of Pokémon GO exploded in Sweden, as it did in several other countries (Hjorth & Richardson, 2017). Both parents and children downloaded the Pokémon GO app, wandering around in public spaces looking for Pokémons to catch. Three families were observed for a month, with the intent of understanding the transmediated universe of which the Pokémon phenomenon is a part. The siblings in this study did not just play the Pokémon GO app, they watched “Let’s Play” videos from other players on YouTube and followed the cartoon Pokémon XY. They also invented new songs from the YouTube hit I play Pokémon GO every day, drew Pokémon, explored the different elements of the overall Pokémon culture, made up new games and played with the characters (c.f., Buckingham, 2011; Giddings, 2014). The siblings also used the media worlds of Pokémon in their social interactions, both as a way to create community and as a way to mark their status and position within hierarchies.

In the first excerpt, Hugo (age four) is playing with his older brother Oskar (age seven). The boys have been outdoors, playing the Pokémon GO app with their mother, and when they arrive inside, they start to role-play with the Pokémon characters, playing different characters that battle with each other. This is like a form of wrestling and, since Oskar is older and stronger than his brother, Hugo soon suggests that they should play a different game. The new game proposed by Hugo is similar to the one they have been playing but, instead of being Pokémon, they will make plastic animals battle with each other.

Hugo: (in a complaining voice) I want to play Pokémon with the animals now!
Oskar: Nooo . . .
Hugo: YES! You told me we would do it later!
Oskar: Ok, but I know! We say that this [wrestling-game] is the commercial. If you look at it, you will get much more CP [combat power] later! Then you can fight much better later!
Hugo: No! I want to play [with animals] now! You said so!
Oskar: Yes, but now it is a commercial, and you cannot click it away. You have to look at it.
Lindgren (2017, p. 19) believed that, when we learn skills or attitudes connected to a certain medium, we are at the same time “socialised and acculturated into the symbolic environment of the medium”. To understand how different media are constituted, there can be an analysis of how language or culture are used to make sense of the world. Many free-to-play mobile games use revenue models based on advertising and in-app purchases that the gamer cannot avoid. Advertising is also often a way to offer new opportunities in the games, such as game currency or the possibility of moving to a higher level (Martínez, 2019). In the excerpt, Oskar uses advertising principles as a commodity — a resource for negotiating in his play fight with his younger brother Hugo. By claiming that the play is advertising, he establishes a condition — a trump card — that defeats all arguments: “this is advertising, you cannot click it away”, and his little brother just has to endure. Thus, Oskar demonstrates that he has an understanding of how advertising works and how things are imbued with monetary value. The excerpt also demonstrates how the line between online and offline are blurred in children’s media worlds (c.f., Marsh, 2010).

In the following example, Max (age eight) is also talking about advertising as a form of commodity. He plays a free-to-play game app on his smartphone and his younger brother William (age six) sits next to him, watching. Max has not been playing long before the game breaks for advertising.

Max: Ah no! Advertising! So annoying!
William: Yes! Shit!
Researcher: You don’t like it?
William: Sometimes I think it is fun. You can find new games that way.
Max: Yes, sometimes. But it interrupts ... The best thing with it is that you can say to mum that it is a lot of advertising and make her buy a new game (laughter).

Buckingham (2011) stated that parents’ roles in children’s consumption are complex and hold ideas about childhood and concerns about their own statuses as consumers and parents. Within dominant discourses, it is argued that children are influenced by advertising and its marketising role is highlighted. Many parents expressed a preference for games that are free from advertising and considered them to be of better quality, thereby presenting themselves as caring parents (Ågren, 2015). In the excerpt, Max expresses an awareness of these discourses. He states that he can use the advertising as a commodity or a resource by emphasising its negative value and thereby getting his mother to buy a game that he would rather have, which may have less advertising.

Taken together, the excerpts in this section illustrate not only that children are familiar with the arguments about advertisements’ negative effects, but also that they can elaborate critically on the topic. The children are not just aware of the commercial logic of advertising, but also its positive potential for the user. The examples highlight how consumption is not separate from a child’s world but is a part of how society and its norms and values work (c.f., Buckingham, 2011; Cook, 2009; Sparrman & Sandin, 2012).

Making Sense of Digital Commercial Lifestyles

This final section discusses findings that derive from both studies and addresses how children relate to online activities, such as watching YouTube clips or following influencers — two very common activities among Swedish children.

YouTube is a social media platform, owned by Google, with user-generated content consisting of video clips. The largest revenue resource for individual users, as well as for Google, is
advertising in the form of a commercial preceding a video clip or as a banner that appears during the video (Hess, 2015, p. 576). Frequent users who have become well known through their production of videos on YouTube can be described as micro-celebrities. These so-called YouTubers, or influencers, have gained a relatively large number of followers by uploading videos on a plethora of subjects, such as gaming (Let’s Play videos) or their lifestyles. Influencers have become a branch of marketing, and companies compete for collaborations with the people who have the most subscribers (Abidin, 2017). In such cases, it is obvious that celebrities do not just sell the products but are themselves the commodities (Martínez & Olsson, 2019).

Within the study with siblings, participants often looked at different video clips and Let’s Play videos on YouTube. It became clear that children’s play was a re-enactment of not only the games, such as Pokémon, but also of the video clips they saw on YouTube, which quickly rose in popularity and then disappeared to be replaced by the next internet sensation (Ågren, 2015). Children were not allowed to upload content on YouTube themselves, but they made many Let’s Play videos with their devices, and they also played at making videos. When out playing Pokémon GO, the brothers Max (age eight) and William (age 6) would meta-communicate what they were doing, as if someone was filming them. On one occasion, Max’s phone battery ran out. The hunt for Pokémons instantly switched to a role-play of the making of a Let’s Play video. Max said, “Let’s play that we are making a film instead. Because I do this Let’s Play video now, and then we can put it on YouTube, and I will become really famous and very rich (laughter)”.

What is demonstrated here by Max is something of which older children in the dataset were well aware: that videos on YouTube can provide a way to become well known and make money. In various situations, such as among friends or with a parent, they talked about different YouTubers and discussed their celebrity status and numbers of subscribers (c.f., Martínez & Olsson, 2019). Several children in both studies expressed a desire to become part of the industry and produce videos themselves. In the next excerpt, two sisters, Livia (age nine) and Rebecka (age seven), sit on the sofa watching the Swedish YouTuber Misslissibell as she makes a haul after a shopping spree.

Livia: This is so good! I also want to be a YouTuber. My absolute favourite is Therese Lindgren.

Researcher: Really? Do you want to tell me?

Livia: Yes! But then it’s important to look good and to work really hard. I look a lot at others, to get ideas about how to look and so on. You need to have the right angle of the camera.

Rebecka: (interrupts) But mum doesn’t like it when you look at her. Because it is too sexy when she makes a haul and shows her underwear (laugh).

Livia: (in an irritated voice) Ah, shut up! You’re so embarrassing!

Being a micro-celebrity or an influencer is something Livia has considered as a future occupation. However, she is also well aware of the requirements and conditions that come with the task. Through her observation of the importance of looking good, working hard, and keeping the camera at the right angle, she talks about herself as a commodity and demonstrates that she understands the importance of visibility and saleability of not just commercial products, but also of herself and her lifestyle. Buckingham (2011, p. 169) wrote that children’s peer talk, tastes, and preferences regarding different media simultaneously function as a way to perform identities. In the excerpt, Livia asserts how videos on YouTube are an informal learning environment for her and expresses an interest in taste and style (c.f., Martínez & Olsson, 2019). Willett (2011) argued that children have a good understanding of the discourses, norms, and values that surround them;
they are aware of the concerns around popular culture and media consumption and actively relate to these discourses in their play (see also Dyson, 2003). Buckingham (2011) further stated that childhood identities are performed in different ways in different contexts. Livia’s attempt to express herself in a more grown up way is negated by Rebecka reminding her of their mother, who is not fond of Therese Lindgren’s sexy approach when she is demonstrating underwear, believing that it is not appropriate for children to see.

The key argument in this section is that YouTube is a natural arena for today’s children, one they consider as a future profession in a way that many of their parents, who were born before the breakthrough of the internet, do not. The children demonstrate an awareness that a good video can generate new subscribers, and possibly celebrity, but that hard work is required.

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter has been to discuss children’s enrolment in digital consumer culture. The starting point was a consideration of children’s interactions and perspectives to illuminate how consumption becomes important and meaningful for children in their everyday lives. Deuze (2012) suggested that contemporary society has gone from a life with media to a life in media. For children, the world of media consists of constant movement: an assemblage of texts, games, social relationships, commodities, pictures, and music that are recycled and deployed as material for new activities, since what is popular today may change tomorrow (c.f., Marsh, 2016). The analysis demonstrates how consumption and consumer culture does not exist outside of everyday life or in specific areas; rather, it is a pervasive part of a child’s everyday life and something that exists both online and offline.

Children are consuming agents; they use the principles and rules that characterise different online activities as a resource for their own games and play and, in negotiations with parents or siblings, as a way to demonstrate their position in relation to other children or to construct and reconstruct performed identities. Their understanding of commercial intent in different online activities varies, with older children expressing greater insight into these questions (c.f., Willett, 2018). The studies further demonstrate how children are consumers of commodities, such as micro-celebrities, and also understand themselves to be commodities in terms of the conditions existing in a consumer society, such as visibility and saleability. The results show how children are well aware of the opinions of adults concerning advertising, consuming, and what is regarded as appropriate for children.

Taken together, such findings question the validity of describing a child as being either naïve or fully competent in relation to consuming. With the term situated child consumption (Sparrman & Sandin, 2012), the chapter brings attention to the inevitable aspects of childhood: the different practices, contexts, and social processes to which children’s consumption is always bound. Consequently, to understand children’s enrolment in digital consumer culture, the analysis must include their perspectives – how they relate to both the discourses that underpin cultural and social practices with media and those relating to childhood, and how they interpret and use related narratives and symbols in their everyday lives.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that consumption does not include everyone equally (Cook, 2009, p. 343). All families in the present studies can, in a broad sense, be considered part of the Swedish middle class. Buckingham (2011) stated that, since most media costs money, there are considerably more technical devices in middle-class homes than in working-class homes, which leads to different social groups living in different cultural worlds. Bauman (2007) used the concept of the flawed consumer and argued that the significance of being poor is, in a consumer society, no longer defined by a person’s work status but by their ability to consume. Children often use consumer culture to belong to a peer group (Pugh, 2011). An increased commodification of both online and offline activities in children’s everyday culture can lead to an exclusion of those children whose parents do not possess the financial means.
Notes

1 A Let’s Play video documents the play of a video or computer game, usually including commentary and/or a camera view of the face of the gamer.

2 A haul is a video in which a person discusses items, such as make-up or clothing, that they have recently purchased; it is important to note that many micro-celebrities have entered sponsorship deals and advertising programmes from major brands that are featured in these videos (Jeffries, 2011). To make a haul is similar to the phenomenon of unboxing videos, in which commercial goods are unwrapped (Marsh, 2016). Unboxing videos existed before haul videos became a trend.

References


