Consuming Children

Commercialisation and the Changing Construction of Childhood

A project description

David Buckingham & Vebjørg Tingstad[1]

Aim and summary presentation

"Consuming Children: Commercialisation and the Changing Construction of Childhood" is the title of a major research project that runs from 2006 to 2009 at the Norwegian Centre for Child Research (NOSEB) at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim[2]. The project aims to bring to bear insights and innovative methods drawn from the new sociology of childhood to analyzing children's changing status and experiences as consumers. This project is part of the centre's aim to establish a research group within the topic *Media, Consumption and Globalisation.* The project aims, through establishing a national and international interdisciplinary research group, to develop research-based insights about marketing to children, and to assess the role of commercialisation and con-

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[1] David Buckingham and Vebjørg Tingstad are directing the project which includes 6 sub-projects. This presentation gives an introduction to the project and a presentation of aims and initial plans for the various sub-projects. With the exception of the sub-projects 2 and 4, the sub-project presentations are written by the project leaders.

[2] http://www.svt.ntnu.no/noseb/Consuming/

sumer culture in changing the definitions and lived experiences of childhood.

Several governmental publications have recently focused on the role of commercialisation in children and young people's lives in Norway (BFD 2001, BFD 2003, BFD 2005). These documents assume that consumption is becoming a fundamental value in the lives of children and adolescents, and that advertising and marketing influence not only young people's consumption, but also their attitudes more generally, e.g. related to body shape, appearance, sexuality, drugs and violence. These concerns form part of an international trend, which calls for increased censorship, media regulation and media literacy (Buckingham 2000). However, the discourses of commercial marketing also draw on wider arguments that construct children as competent social actors with rights to participate in society and have a say in matters that affect their lives. These arguments have flourished during the last fifteen to twenty years both within childhood research and in international and national child policy (McKechnie 2002, Halldén 2003, Kjørholt 2004). Yet despite the scale of public concern about the apparent "commercialisation of childhood", there is still relatively little academic research in this field, particularly when it comes to contemporary forms of marketing such as branding, cross-promotion, sponsorship, product placement and peer-to-peer marketing. In cultural and educational research, and in childhood studies, there has been a tendency to neglect the unique issues and perspectives that arise when children become subjects (and objects) in consumer culture.

The present project seeks to integrate three aspects of this phenomenon, namely *marketing, the cultural product/text* and *the consumer* (Buckingham 2000), and to focus on children in two age groups that are currently a major focus of marketing interest. The coordinating research group consists of researchers from Media Education, Early Childhood Education, History, Media Science, Psychology and Sociology. Professor II at NOSEB, David Buckingham and Associate Professor Vebjørg Tingstad direct the project in cooperation with Senior Researcher Tora Korsvold and Associate Professor Ingunn Hagen (Media Science and Psychology, NTNU). The project includes the following sub-projects:

- Sub-projects 1 a, b and c are exploring the historical dimensions of marketing to children, the contemporary practices of the media, advertising and related industries, and the competing discourses on these issues that circulate within public and policy debate respec-

tively. Responsible: Tora Korsvold, Ingunn Hagen, David Buckingham and Vebjørg Tingstad.

- Sub-projects 2 and 3 are considering the nature of marketing to children in two age groups: preschoolers and "tweens" (aged roughly 8–12). Different types of products and issues are relevant to these age groups; but in each case, the project aims to explore the interaction between the practices of the industry, the nature of the products that are generated, and the ways in which they are used or interpreted by children. Responsible: Gry Mette Haugen, Ingvild Kvale Sørenssen, David Buckingham and Vebjørg Tingstad.

- Sub-project 4 will explore the implications of these developments both for media regulators and for educationalists seeking to develop forms of "consumer literacy" in schools. Responsible: the coordinating research group.

Introduction: commercialisation of childhood in modern societies

Just as teenagers were apparently "discovered" as a distinct consumer group in the post-war economic boom (Hebdige 1979), so children are now becoming one of the most sought-after targets for contemporary marketing. Reduced family size, the increase in divorce and single-parent families and the general (albeit unevenly distributed) increase in disposable income, combined with the new symbolic "valorisation" of childhood, have all given children greater say in household purchasing decisions. Surveys of Norwegian children's pocket money show a steady rise in their personal spending power (Brusdal 2001, Wærdahl 2003); and as advertisers have recognised, children also possess a form of "pester power" that exerts a significant influence on the purchasing decisions of others in the household. Retailers have accordingly become more "child-oriented" in their sales techniques; spending on advertising directed at children has grown exponentially; and there has been a marked increase in more general promotional activities aimed at children, not least in schools (Kenway & Bullen 2001).

For some, this process is little more than exploitation of childhood innocence: children, it is argued, should be kept free of the corrupting influence of consumer culture, since the market is inherently inimical to their

natural interests and needs (Kline 1993). However, others see consumer culture as potentially empowering for children: no longer restricted by the paternalistic imperatives of adults, children are now free to register their needs in the marketplace, and are increasingly seen as sophisticated, discriminating consumers (del Vecchio 1997). These competing definitions of childhood are apparent in many public policy debates, for example over the regulation of commercial content on children's television (Hendershot 1998, Buckingham et al. 1999), the "sexualisation" of children via media and consumer culture (Buckingham & Bragg 2004), and the role of advertising in childhood obesity (Ofcom 2004). In this project, we are drawing on theoretical analyses of the changing nature of childhood as a social phenomenon (Qvortrup et al. 1994, James, Jenks & Prout 1998). This approach involves a critique of essentialist and universalising notions of childhood, and the assumption that childhood and adulthood can be seen as separate, independent and belonging to different "cultures" (Lee 2001, Strandell 2002, Kjørholt 2004).

Issues and perspectives

The increasing scale of marketing to children can partly be seen as a consequence of the broader "mediatization" of contemporary societies (Thompson 1990). The globalisation of the media and cultural industries, combined with the advent of new technologies of production and distribution, has intensified the restless search for new markets and sources of profit. In this ever more competitive environment, children have become an increasingly important focus of commercial interest. Indeed, it has been argued that children are in the "avant garde" of consumption (Drotner 1992); they are often the "early adopters" of new technologies, products and cultural forms and they are particularly engaged by newer forms of marketing practice and, some have argued, particularly prone to be exploited by them (Linn 2004). This drive to maximise profit has several implications in terms of childhood identities. The children's market is highly segmented, particularly in terms of gender and age; and as the market has become more competitive, it has been increasingly subdivided into smaller "niches". Thus, despite decades of second-wave feminism, marketing to younger children still appears starkly polarised into "blue" and "pink" worlds (Griffiths 2002); while the marking of age differences has become increasingly apparent via the construction of new categories such as

"tweenagers" or "tweens" (Willett 2004, Johansson 2004). One crucial issue here is to study how marketing practices construct images of children's consumption as a question of individual and free choice, based on assumptions related to "the best interest of the child" (Article 3 in the UNCRC). According to neo-liberal trends in the welfare state, citizenship does not seem to be connected to solidarity, security and welfare in a society, but is rather turned into questions about the subject's individual "free choice" and self-realisation (Edwards 2000): it is therefore important to analyse how individualisation and fragmentation in separate niche groups emerge in children's peer groups. Marketers have responded to this fragmentation by seeking to amass markets on a global scale; and by the development of "synergies", whereby successful products need to be adaptable to a range of media platforms (television, computer games, print media) and capable of generating a diverse range of merchandise (toys, clothing, food, household goods). Nevertheless, products targeted at children have an increasingly short life-cycle, as the succession of "crazes" over the past twenty years has shown: the case of Pokémon, for example, illustrates the importance of global, multi-media synergies, but its rapid rise and fall also attests to the volatility of the children's market (Tobin 2004). Participation in consumer culture also serves as a powerful factor in children's inclusion within (or exclusion from) the peer group, not least in institutional settings.

The development of children's consumer culture has generated a considerable amount of debate. On the one hand, there is a growing body of specialists within the media and marketing industries developing the "art and science" of selling to children (e.g. del Vecchio 1997, Lindstrøm 2003, Sutherland & Thompson 2003). Marketers have co-opted arguments about children's rights, representing themselves as agents of children's empowerment, as against the interests of adults. To some extent, this discourse is an extension of "free market", neo-liberal ideology, with its characteristic emphasis on consumer choice; but it also reflects a post-romantic conception of childhood that has become increasingly prevalent, both in public policy and indeed in the sociology of childhood itself. On the other hand, there is a growing body of popular texts criticising the apparent "exploitation" of children by marketers and advertisers, and calling for children to be protected from consumer culture (e.g. Quart 2003, Linn 2004, Schor 2005).

The debate about marketing to children thus reflects much broader anxieties about the nature and definition of contemporary childhood. Is it indeed the case, as advertisers have claimed, that children today are "get-

ting older younger"? Does childhood now *end* at a significantly younger age than it did in earlier times? Does children's participation in a global, mediated consumer culture mean that the continuities between the generations are being lost? Are children no longer at liberty to enjoy a "natural" childhood, free of commercial influences? Or are they more critically aware, and more competent, in their relationship with consumer culture than adults tend to assume? These are important questions, but they tend to reduce the debate to a set of traditional dichotomies, in which children are either "competent" or "incompetent", "natural" or "corrupted", "victims" or "agents". In our view, it is now urgently necessary to ask new questions and develop new theoretical understandings of children's (and parents') roles in consumer culture. In exercising choice in the market place, children and parents have to address fundamental questions about ethics and trust, and learn to develop identity and solidarity in new ways. In addressing these issues, this project adopts a broadly "social constructionist" perspective that is characteristic of current research in the sociology of childhood (James, Jenks & Prout 1998, Lee 2001). We are concerned to analyse the diverse (and sometimes competing) discourses that are attempting to construct and define childhood in particular ways. In addressing gender issues in particular, the project aims to develop this relatively neglected area of childhood research (Nilsen 2003), regarding gender as a social and cultural construction with huge variations when it comes to structure and content (Thorne 1993).

Of course, the market is only one of several structuring forces that categorise, define and calibrate children; and we need to address the other factors (notably parents and peer groups) that mediate or intervene in this relationship. Children's identities are not wholly shaped and moulded by these "external" forces: they also actively negotiate with the various definitions of identity that are available to them, categorising and calibrating themselves and each other in the course of their everyday relationships (James 1993, Frønes 1995). Thus, what it means to be a "teenager" (or indeed a "tweenager") and a girl or a boy, is defined *both* by the market and by children themselves – and indeed within the family and the institutional settings. In analysing children's consumer culture, therefore, it is necessary to theorise the dynamic relationship between the structural forces of the economy and the autonomous agency of children themselves (Buckingham & Sefton-Green 2003).

The project seeks to highlight children's perspectives on social life, an approach central to recent work in the sociology of childhood, which em-

phasises the value of studying children "in their own right" (Alanen 1992, Solberg 1996, Qvortrup 1997, Kjørholt 2004). In seeking to address these kinds of questions, academic research necessarily has to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. It needs to develop an understanding of the changing economic and institutional imperatives of marketers and businesses; the strategies and appeals they use to target the children's market; the characteristics of products and media texts aimed at children, both in terms of representational content and aesthetic form; and the ways in which children interpret and use these products in their everyday lives. As such, a rounded analysis of children's consumer culture needs to draw upon approaches as diverse as political economy, textual analysis and audience ethnography; and it needs to situate this account and locate the analysis within a broader understanding of the changing nature of childhood and of children's social lives and relationships.

All these issues have a substantial relevance to public policy. Debates about media regulation, for example, have particularly focused on the need to protect children from "unscrupulous" or "exploitative" marketing practices; and Norway, like most countries, has well-developed guidelines and regulations on these matters, particularly in relation to advertising in "older" media. Nevertheless, the development of new, less immediately "visible" marketing strategies (such as product placement, cross-promotion and viral and online marketing) has led to calls for renewed regulation.

Sub-project 1: Selling childhoods: history, discourse and practice

This project is designed to provide an overview of the field of study, which will inform the more specific sub-projects that will run concurrently. It consists of three "strands" of research, as follows:

Sub-project 1 a: Selling childhoods and the history of marketing to children

Tora Korsvold & Linda Bomann
This project is exploring the historical dimensions of marketing to children. Empirical historical studies from other countries, like Dan Cook's study (2004) and Ellen Seiter's study (1993), have both shown us that

children have been in focus of interest since the start of modern mass marketing. Marketing to children is not a new phenomenon, but so far, we know very little about the raise of the *Norwegian* consuming child. Nevertheless, a modern consumer society took shape in Norway in the 1930s, on the threshold of the modern welfare state. Today consuming is a part of most children's and adult's everyday life. In Norway, as one of the richest countries in the world, children's access to toys, and also products like mobile phones, computers and TVs are extremely high, products which children own themselves.

However, consumption, in all its forms, is a diverse and complex phenomenon (Edwards 2000). The aim of this sub-project is not so much to investigate the rise of the Norwegian modern consuming child, but more to explore the emergence of *a modern consumer culture*. The aim is also to figure out some notions of the child, identified by studying selected historical sources.

Some questions directed to the historical sources could be:

- Which toys should small children play with, and why? What have been considered "proper toys" and not "proper toys"?
- What notions of child and childhood can be deduced from the historical sources – for example, the "happy child" or the "useful child"? What was supposed to be "in the best interest of the child"? Are children learning to be adults, or do they have the right to make their own choices?
- What is the nature of the appeals to the parents who buy the toys (such as educational values)?

Children of pre-school age, who for a long time have been a focus of marketing interest, are a particular focus of study here. As part of this project, a master student (Linda Bomann) is conducting a smaller historical case study of the firm "Proper toys" ("A/S Riktige Leker") founded in Norway in 1946.

Sub-project 1 b: Contemporary practices in children's consumer culture

Ingunn Hagen & Øivind Nakken

This sub-project aims to explore the contemporary shape of marketing to children. We are paying some attention to marketing publications, but our primary data source is interviews with key professionals related to products that are central in the lives of children, like toys, media technologies, clothing, and food. The main focus is on the Norwegian situation, but we are also addressing the global nature of a number of the products that are marketed and sold to children. We are focusing on contemporary cases – products and "crazes" that seem significant in the lives of our chosen segments of Norwegian children (preschool children and "tweens").

One of our cases is the Norwegian pirate Captain Sabretooth, who is very popular among Norwegian children, especially preschool boys (for a description, see Hjemdahl, 2003). The popularity of this figure – which has been developed into a strong multimedia brand – has lasted for almost 18 years. Our concern related to the Sabretooth phenomenon is especially how brand loyalty is created among children (and their families): for example through inclusion and creating identification, the use of integrated marketing (and also integration in children's everyday lives), and synergy of the production companies. Thus the case can illuminate mechanisms that may also be present in marketing of other products to children.

Over the longer term, we will also assess the changing methods used by companies in targeting child markets, such as viral e-mail, SMS, online competitions and marketing via schools. The major issues to be addressed here include: the strategies used by companies to brand and promote products; the use of media, and the role of "spin-off" marketing; the economic scale of the phenomenon; the ownership and management control of the companies concerned; the significance of multimedia "synergy" and global connections between companies; and the role of market research, and the practices it employs.

This research seeks to draw connections with relevant studies that have been conducted internationally, such as Wasko's (2001) research on Disney, Tobin et al.'s (2004) work on Pokémon, and Buckingham et al.'s (1999) on children's television in the UK. The analysis here seeks to address questions such as the following:

- What do marketers assume about children's characteristics and knowledge as consumers?
- How do they differentiate between different groups of child consumers (e.g. in terms of gender, age and social class), and on what assumptions is this based?
- How do companies gather information about the child market? What counts as valid knowledge?
- How are these activities regulated, and what assumptions about child consumers inform such regulatory practices?

Sub-project 1 c: Discourses of the consuming child

David Buckingham, Vebjørg Tingstad & Megan Sommer

This aspect of the research builds on the elements just outlined, and supplements these with an analysis of media coverage, public debate and policy discourse on this topic. The key issue to be addressed in analysing this material (along with the instances of marketing discourse considered under 1a and 1b above) is that of the constructions or definitions of childhood that are at stake here. This aspect of the research uses qualitative discourse analysis (Wetherell 2001, Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002) and it is intended to focus on visual representations (for example, in advertisements or television programmes) as well as written and spoken ones. The aim of this dimension is to provide a necessary degree of self-reflexivity that will inform and guide the more concrete investigations of sub-projects 2 and 3. Just as marketing to children necessarily entails constructing or defining childhood in particular ways, so too does the practice of childhood research; and an explicit awareness of this process should enable us to avoid some of the various forms of romanticising that often characterise public discourse about children. This sub-project is thus a kind of reflexive meta project – that is, one in which we are interrogating the assumptions and discourses about childhood that characterise the whole range of areas we are considering here, including not just marketing discourse but also policy, academic discourse, public debate, etc. The questions to be addressed include:

- To what extent, and by whom, are children defined here as competent or incompetent, as passive consumers or as active agents, as vulnerable and ignorant or as "savvy" and sophisticated?

- How do these competing discourses about child consumers relate to broader definitions and representations of childhood in the public sphere?
- To what extent are these discourses based on essentialist notions of childhood and adulthood as separate "spaces"?
- What evidence is adduced to support the various positions that are adopted?

Our thinking is that the specificity of these assumptions are thrown into relief by looking cross-culturally. So, for example, we are seeking to contrast the ways in which child consumers are defined in the context of Norway with a much more consumer-oriented context like the US and a "semi-regulated" setting like the UK.

As with the other sub-projects, we are seeking to approach this via case studies. We intend to focus on two to begin with (the first of which is being addressed by our MA student, Megan Sommer):

- The obesity debate. This is a "hot" topic in policy debates in many countries. To what extent is the commercial targeting of children precipitating a public health crisis? And to what extent might the regulation of marketing practices (e.g. advertising of "junk food", food labelling) be able to prevent this? This topic relates to children quite literally as "consumers"; and the debates that have been carried on (in the public media, in policy circles) raise fundamental questions about the relation between the state and the market, about the construction of children's "wants" and "needs", about relations between parents and children, and so on. They also raise questions about the relationship between academic research (which is actually quite equivocal on these issues) and the making of public policy (which needs to be seen to provide "solutions").

- Sexualisation. This is another "hot" topic in public debates: to what extent are the media and commercial marketing guilty of prematurely "sexualising" pre-teen children, particularly girls? Compared with obesity, this topic is less immediately policy-relevant, not least because it is hard to see what policy-makers might actually do about it. But even so, the debate raises some interesting questions about the construction of childhood ("innocence" versus "experi-

ence"), and about the role of marketing (corrupting the innocent?). This overlaps with sub-project 3, but our focus here is on the public discourse, not on children themselves. In each case, we are seeking to gather and analyse instances of public discourse – media coverage (TV as well as press, if possible), corporate publicity, political documents and statements, etc.

Sub-projects 2–3: Age-based case studies

As we have noted, the children's market is clearly segmented by age; and while this is a long-standing practice, there is evidence to suggest that it is increasingly important. To some extent, this segmentation is based on assumptions on the part of marketers about child development – albeit assumptions that are generally taken for granted rather than made explicit, let alone critically interrogated. Children do also clearly divide and define themselves in terms of age segments, although these are not necessarily the same as those constructed by marketers; and there may also be a degree of flexibility, or even "age aspiration", as younger children in particular frequently aspire to consume products that outwardly seem to be targeted at a somewhat older audience. Nevertheless, it would be false to assume that the market merely reflects children's current states or future aspirations. Indeed, it is possible to identify instances where the market deliberately seeks to alter existing age-based categories, or construct new ones. It has frequently been pointed out that the category of the "teenager" was itself a construction of the market, which can be traced back to market research conducted in the late 1950s (Abrams 1959); and a similar recent example would be the construction of the category of the "tween" – which refers to children in the pre-teen age group, who are defined as being "between" childhood and youth (Lindstrøm 2003). Similarly, as marketers reach out to hitherto untouched or relatively neglected markets such as kindergarten children, they also actively construct the meanings of age differences and categories (Cook 2004). From our social constructionist perspective, then, we are interested in how these differences are invested with meaning – for example, in how both marketers and children themselves define what it *means* to be a "tween". Each of our two case studies takes an age group where this process of definition and (de-) differentiation is in some respect changing or "under construction" – or indeed, actively problematic. In each case, we look at different types of products that are gener-

ally more salient for the relevant age group; and these raise specific issues in each case. Nevertheless, the overall analytical approach and the key research questions are shared in both the case studies. Our key questions in each case are therefore:

- How does consumer culture define or construct childhood identities?
- How do children describe themselves as consumers and how do they use the resources of consumer culture in seeking to construct their own identities?

In terms of the analysis, we intend to employ the multifaceted approach outlined above, focusing on the relationships between four main areas: 1) *Marketing discourse and practice,* 2) *Appeals to child markets,* 3) *The characteristics of the products or texts themselves* and 4) *Children's and (where relevant) parents' uses and interpretations.* In each case, we intend to obtain a broad picture of the field in question, before focussing on a limited number of specific case studies.

In analysing the appeals to child markets, we will consider representative instances of advertising and promotional materials, as well as shop displays, packaging and event marketing. We will seek to explore the ways in which children are represented here (Holland 2004), and the discourses through which the category of "childhood" is defined and differentiated. In analysing products and texts, we will employ a broadly social-semiotic approach (Hodge & Kress 1988), recognising the "multi-modal" character of these phenomena (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001). Our analysis will focus on the visual design of the material, the characteristic uses of language, and the "models" of child consumers that are represented. The analysis here will address questions such as:

- How do the design and language used in such materials attempt to create particular values (e.g. belonging, aspiration, "cool")?
- How do they define identities, i.e. what it means to be a child of a particular age, a boy or a girl, etc.?
- How are children and parents represented and addressed in these materials?
- How (in the case of products aimed at preschoolers in particular) do marketers address parental conceptions of education, child development and play?

- To what extent do children's products reflect national or Nordic identities, as against global identities?

In addressing the uses and interpretations of such products and materials, we will use samples of children and (where relevant) parents recruited via schools and kindergartens. We will target three specific socio-economic groups. We will use a range of methods to research the consumption practices of these children and families, including "consumer diaries" (using video or photography); narrative interviews with children, parents and friendship groups; accompanying families on shopping trips etc. We will focus on how children "customise" consumer goods, for example in the case of clothing, and how goods and related materials are displayed in the home (for example, in children's bedrooms: Mitchell & Reid-Walsh 2002); and we will study children's domestic "window shopping" via catalogues and the internet (Willett 2004). The analysis here will address questions such as the following:

- How do children and parents interpret the values and ethics of consumer culture?
- How do they perceive the move towards a "consumer society", and the gains and losses of this?
- Are there significant differences here in terms of social class?
- How do children define themselves in terms of age- and gender-based categories?
- To what extent do they recognise themselves in commercial appeals?

As we have noted, the "tween" is a category that has emerged in marketing discourse in the relatively recent past. What remains to be seen is how far children within this target age group actually recognise themselves as "tweens" – as having an age-based identity distinct from younger children, or from teenagers. To what extent does the marketers' construction of the tween reflect pre-existing needs and characteristics on the part of this age group – needs which may have been marginalised in the past? Or to what extent does it conjure this category into existence, in order to more effectively manipulate the potential market?

We suspect that that category of the tween is implicitly gendered – marketers rarely appear to speak of tween boys – although this itself may

be subject to change. Nevertheless, our main focus here will be on products aimed at the tween girl market, in the form of clothing, make-up and inexpensive fashion "accessories" of various kinds (Johansson 2004, Russell & Tyler 2004.) These products are typically combined into what might be called "identity ensembles" via particular popular music performers (Britney Spears et al.) and particular television programmes (particularly US-based dramas and shows such as *Idol*). There are also several websites particularly targeting the tween girl market (Willett 2004). The development of this market has raised specific issues around sexuality (Torrell 2004) and the construction of femininity. Consumer culture is seen to have promoted a "premature" interest in sex among pre-teen girls, and to have encouraged them to wear clothing that is seen (at least by some adults) as dangerously "provocative". As in other areas of media consumption (Buckingham & Bragg 2004), the issue of children's access to sexual knowledge raises broader questions about the "proper" place of both children and adults.

Here again, we will interview producers and marketers (20), and analyse specific artefacts (clothing designs) and texts (music videos). In investigating child consumers, we will use interviews alongside more participatory approaches, such as those involving written narrative, drawing or computer-based design.

Sub-project 2: Marketing to kindergarten children

Gry Mette Haugen

In this project, we are exploring marketing to preschoolers, specifically children aged 3 and below. In earlier times, this age group was seen as largely "safe" from the appeals of the market. Much of the appeal of earlier marketing was via the parent, and was often based on assertions about the educational value of play (and hence of toys) (Seiter 1993). In more recent years, there has been a new emphasis on targeting this age group directly, not least through the production of television programmes (and related merchandise) specifically aimed at them, and the growth of character licensing and merchandising. For example, the BBC production *Teletubbies*, which is aimed primarily at children under the age of two, has been massively successful in international markets, and was specifically designed to generate a range of ancillary merchandise. It also provoked a good deal of debate about its educational philosophy and values, reflecting the ways in which marketing to this age group has to reach compromises

between children's wants or needs and the values of parents, for example in relation to education and child development (Buckingham 2002).

In this sub-project, we aim to analyse the overall market for this age group, addressing the four dimensions considered above; and we are focusing specifically on television-related toys. This involves analysing examples of marketing appeals (advertising, cross-promotion); interviewing key personnel within the industry; analysing key features of the texts (programmes) or artefacts (toys); and observing and talking to children, interviewing parents and carers about how these products are used in the home or in kindergarten settings. The latter aspect will involve a degree of participatory observation and "action research".

Sub-project 3: Marketing and the construction of the "tween" consumer

Ingvild Kvale Sørenssen

The project aims to investigate two aspects of this age group as consumers: consumption as a part of an identity project and consumption within socialization. This then turns into two main research questions: (1) what does consumption mean in a social setting (in a socialization process)? And (2) how does consumption influence children's identity projects? Common for both themes will be the concentration on the children's own perspectives.

1. What does consumption mean in a social setting?
Consumer socialization is one aspect of children's socialization. This is a phenomenon that deserves to be investigated more closely (Cook 2005) due to the fact that children today are viewed as consumers with a substantial personal spending capacity by the marketers and are also to some extent responsible for directly influencing their parents' spending (McNeal 2001).

Subordinate questions/themes: The potential influence of the market on tweens consumer habits (competent vs. incompetent, structure vs. agency).

- The potential influence children have on the market (a two-way consumer communication).
- How do tweens construct and deconstruct meanings and discourses of what is "cool" and what is not? (Cultural and media literacy).

- How does, if at all, the marketing influence and play a part in the consumer socialization of children between 8 and 12 years old?

2. How does consumption influence "tweens" identity project?
With regards to identity projects and how tweens position themselves, one cannot choose not to choose (Kjeldsgaard 2006). What one chooses to consume or not to consume can be read as a symbolic and semiotic action. By consuming, or refusing to consume, certain items, one can position oneself in the social sphere, by either sameness or differentiation (Kjeldsgaard 2006, Brusdal 2005, Wærdahl 2005).

Subordinate questions/themes here are:

- Anticipatory socialization or delayed anticipation: are tweens preparing for something (adulthood, the teenage years) or postponing the preparation and concern of youth (Johansson, forthcoming, Wærdahl 2005)
- Gender and age issues in products; how is this portrayed by the producers and how is it executed by the consumers?
- Do tweens use brands as the producers intend or do they insert their own meanings?

By dressing oneself up in clothes, accessories, toys and other products one constructs an "identity ensemble" rooted in cultural and media literacy. It is possible to "shop" for one's identity, as consumer goods bear with them predefined meanings, a question then is: how are these meanings constructed? The main focus will be on tweens' own perspectives but both the producers/marketers and products will also be researched on hopefully shedding light on the question: Is there equivalence between the producer's constructions of the tween consumer; the nature of the product; and how the tweens themselves construct what it is to be a tween consumer?

To answer these questions, this sub-project is engaging in an ethnographic study with tweens, observing them over time to better understand their popular culture. Interviews in groups and one-on-one are being conducted, as well as shopping trips and other activities. In order to get the marketers' and producers' perspectives, interviews will be conducted with the producers and marketers of popular commodities identified by the

children. An analysis of the identified commodities will also be carried out.

Sub-project 4: Consuming children: new challenges for policy and practice

David Buckingham, Vebjørg Tingstad, Tora Korsvold & Ingunn Hagen

While all the sub-projects relate to specific areas of policy and practice, the final sub-project will address these implications by focusing directly on two main areas: public policy in the areas of children and families, education, and media regulation; and educational practice, particularly in schools. This sub-project will be conducted in the final year of the research.

In the area of public policy, we will review the different ways in which the figure of the "consuming child" has been defined in policy debate. This will entail analysing instances of policy discourse (as manifested, for example, in official documents, political speeches and legislation) in a range of domains. For example, we will explore how these issues have been dealt with in debates about the regulation of marketing appeals to children; the control of advertising, sponsorship and other explicit commercial content in children's television; the formulation of the school curriculum; and policy relating to specific areas such as the promotion of "junk food". This aspect of the research will entail a strong international dimension, since these issues are high on the public policy agenda in many countries, and also for international bodies such as the European Union and the United Nations. Here we will draw on previous research (e.g. Buckingham et al. 1999, Ofcom 2004, Lisosky 2001, Buckingham & Keys 1999), and on collaborative work with international partners. We will also undertake "fact-finding" trips to compare the situation in Norway with more tightly regulated national contexts (such as Sweden) and more deregulated contexts (such as the US). Our analysis here will draw on relevant work in the sociology of public policy, and the application of discourse analytic methods (Ball 1990). This work will be supplemented by interviews with policy-makers in relevant fields; and this will lead to a symposium in which key findings of our research will be presented, and responses sought from relevant public figures. Consultation with policy-makers will also be a major aim of our project advisory committee, to which we intend to recruit representatives of key government departments, NGOs and other relevant public bodies. In this sense, the project will seek,

both to analyse public policy in an academically rigorous manner, and to inform specific policy interventions.

The second dimension of this sub-project will be concerned with educational practice. Many policy-makers in this field are looking to media education – which includes the critical analysis of consumer culture – as a means of developing children's ability to cope with the range of commercial messages that are directed at them every day. Media education is a growing movement, which is receiving recognition among governments and from international bodies such as the European Commission and UNESCO (Buckingham & Domaille 2004, von Feilitzen & Carlsson 1999). This partly reflects an acknowledgment of the inexorable pace of technological and economic change, and the limited possibilities for state regulation of the market; but it also represents, in our view, a democratic rather than an authoritarian response to contemporary social change. This aspect of the project will survey current practice in this field in Norway, and set this in the context of these broader international developments, assisted by our international partners. We will consider how and where the analysis of consumer culture currently features in the school curriculum, and the obstacles (e.g. in terms of teacher attitudes, lack of training and teaching resources) that may prevent a more developed programme of media education. We will consider examples of good practice in this field, and look at what is known about the effectiveness of such initiatives. We will also consider the potential curriculum locations in which such issues might be considered (the teaching of Norwegian, social education, and others), and the possibilities for developing coherent cross-curricular policies in this field. We will particularly seek the collaboration of teachers and teacher educators in this aspect of the work; and we intend to convene a series of professional development workshops for teachers disseminating the results of the project as a whole, and considering the possibilities for implementing this approach in the curriculum.

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³ This list of references is identical with the list in the original project application. Some references in the list may therefore not exist in the present text.

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