

This is a peer-reviewed, accepted author manuscript of the following book review: Hamilton, K. (2012). *Understanding children as consumers*. International Journal of Market Research, 54(1), 149-150.

David Marshall (editor)
Understanding Children as Consumers
2010, London, Sage
262 pages
Price: £25.99 (paperback)
ISBN-13: 978-1-84787-927-1

This book takes as its starting point the active role that children play within consumer culture, focusing primarily on children between 8 and 12 years old. Previous work has focused on the practices of marketing to children and how children can be left vulnerable as a result. *Understanding Children as Consumers* differs from these other works because the aim is to “address the key issues and uncover what being a consumer means to children themselves” (p2). In other words, this book seeks to prioritise the child’s voice.

This is an edited collection comprising fourteen chapters written by a diverse line-up of international experts on children’s consumption. One of the strengths of the book is the interdisciplinary group of authors with perspectives from marketing, consumer research, developmental, applied and social psychology, modern history and organization studies. There is a unified structure with each chapter including aims, vignettes, discussion questions and future research directions.

After an introduction from the editor, the book is divided into four sections as outlined below:

Children as Consumers

The first two chapters are devoted to theoretical discussions relating to consumer socialisation. De la Ville and Tartas offer a critique of cognitive development frameworks and Ekström continues this theme focusing specifically on socialisation within families based on a typology of 10 family types in Sweden. In chapter three, the focus shifts to methodology as Davis provides practical advice for positivist and interpretive researchers for empowering children in the research process. This is an important chapter that reviews a number of effective methods for capturing the child’s voice.

Encountering Marketing

This section includes interesting chapters on a historical analysis of the children’s toy market (Cross), children and advertising (Young) and children’s understanding of money (Roland-Levy). However, in keeping with the aim of the book, the two chapters that stand out are those where we hear the child’s voice. Nairn explores the role that brands play in children’s everyday lives. In this chapter we learn what brands are important to children (interestingly various celebrities feature on this list), and the depth of children’s understanding of brands and the fashion cycle. Drawing on previous studies, Tinson and Nancarrow explore the shopping behaviour of children and raise some useful ideas around the concept of shopping savvy to show that children can have both economic and symbolic shopping know-how.

Kids’ Stuff

In this section, each of the three chapters focuses on a product that is associated with young children, including food (Marshall and O’Donohoe), the internet (Tufté and Rasmussen) and fashion (Piacentini). Each of these product categories is actively targeted at children and collectively these chapters hint at some of the problems of the commercialization of childhood. For example, we hear about children’s consumption of fast food, confectionary

and soft drinks, which calls to mind the resulting health implications. In relation to the Internet, concern is raised over the types of websites that children are accessing online with one of the vignettes highlighting how sex and porn make it into the top ten search terms for children aged between 8 and 13. Equally, in relation to fashion, young consumers are vulnerable to ridicule for making the wrong clothing choices. However, these chapters do not only present this critical side of the argument but follow a more balanced approach. For example, in a discussion on children's accounts of snacking, we learn that some children are able to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy snacks and we are reminded that children can be competent consumers within the media landscape.

Looking forward

The final section of the book contains two chapters on 'the ethics of marketing to children' (Todd) and 'children as "competent" consumers' (Kline). As well as discussing the "ill-effects" of marketing to children, Todd also considers the perspective that "children's vulnerabilities have been overstated and that children have the right to product information to make better informed choices" (p.225). Kline also offers an objective discussion concluding that "children must be regarded as neither victims nor possessing savvy – but rather as consumers-in-training, learning to behave in accordance with the variable standards established in the media-saturated family" (p.252). Such a perspective represents a step forward from previous works within this area which automatically assumes that children are vulnerable to corruption from marketing practices.

The book will appeal to researchers working in the area of children's consumption and undergraduate and postgraduate students studying both this specific area and consumer research more broadly. As documented above, there is a range of interesting and relevant material presented. However, given the overall aim of the book, there would have been potential for more of the chapters to emphasis children's experiences in the marketplace *from their perspective* to gain a greater understanding of children's agency within the consumption arena. Equally, a greater proportion of chapters based on the methodologies presented in chapter three would have been beneficial. Collectively the chapters are effective in highlighting a future research agenda, illustrating that although we have come a long way there is still much to be progressed within this research area, not least because of the ever-increasing sophisticated methods marketers are employing to target children.

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